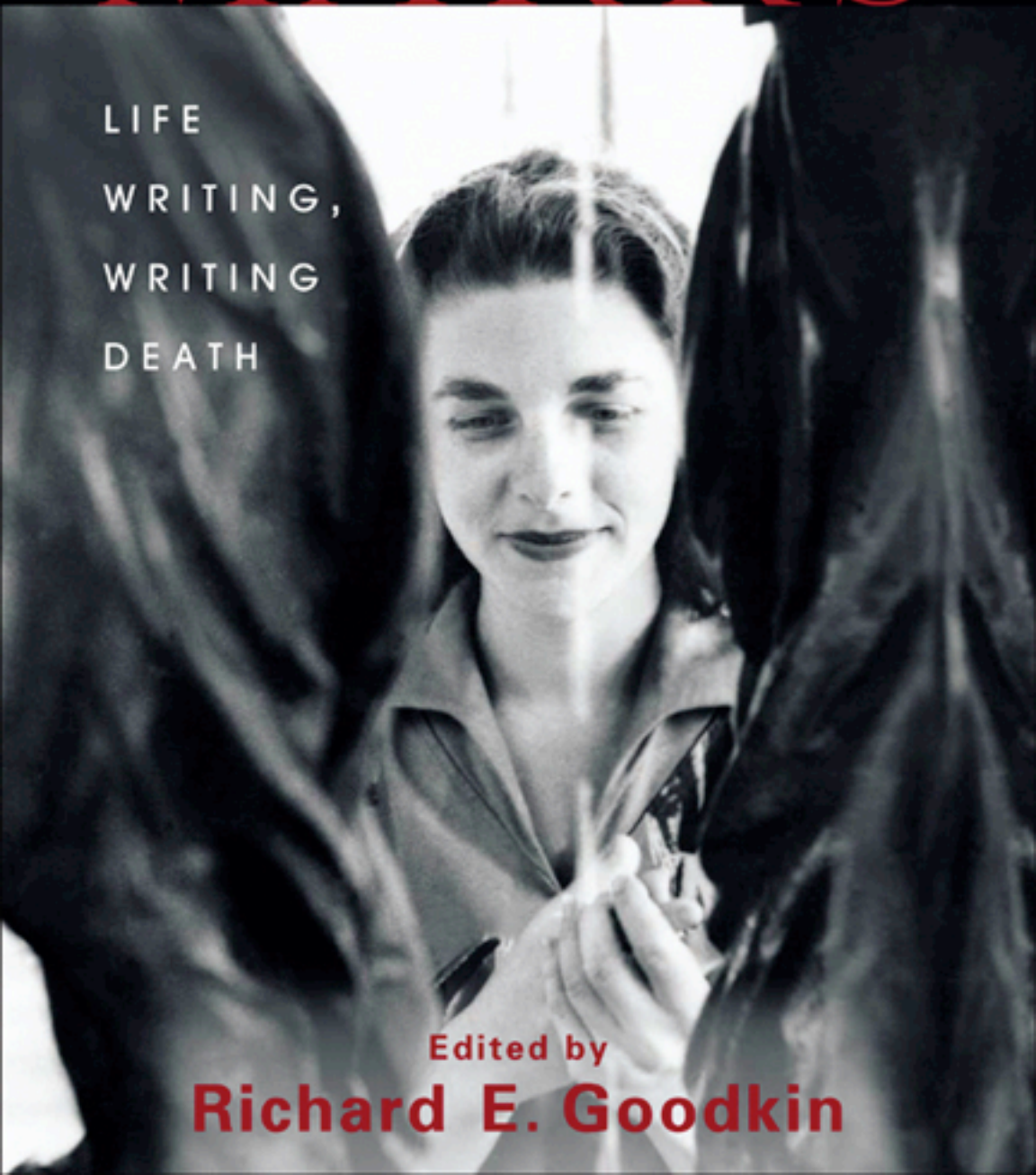
In Memory of

ELAINE MARKS



LIFE WRITING, WRITING DEATH

Edited by

Richard E. Goodkin

IN MEMORY OF ELAINE MARKS

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Life Writing, Writing Death

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Contents

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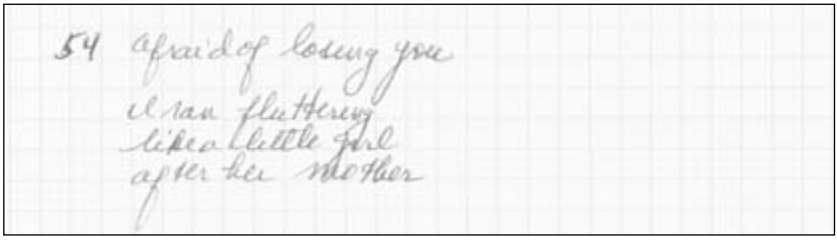
Two of the contributions to the volume are modified versions of previously published materials. Isabelle de Courtivron's "The Story of a Woman's Life in and through Time" is adapted from "Mid-Life Memoirs and the Bicultural Dilemma," which appeared in *Sites: The Journal of Twentieth Century Contemporary French Studies* 4.1 (Spring 2000: 159–69).

My thanks go to the editors of *Sites* for permission to print the essay (www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17409292.asp). Nancy K. Miller's "Childless Children: Bodies and Betrayal" is adapted from chapter 2 of *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). I thank the editors of Oxford University Press for granting permission to print this article. Thanks also to Brown University Library for granting permission to reproduce Elaine Marks's handwritten copies of Sappho's poetry that open and close this volume.

Finally, special thanks to Dr. Marianne Schwob-Ferrara, Elaine Marks's partner, for her gracious support of the project from start to finish, and particularly her willingness to give me access to all of Elaine Marks's papers. I would also like to thank Martine Debaisieux and Brigitte Ozzello, along with Marianne, for agreeing to have Elaine Marks's papers donated to the Feminist Theory Papers Archive at the Pembroke Center of Brown University, where they are presently housed. It is my hope that future scholars will make use of these fascinating notebooks and other materials so vividly evocative of the extraordinarily rich and original mind and spirit of Elaine Marks.

IN MEMORY OF ELAINE MARKS



Sappho, fragment 54, translation by Mary Barnard, copied by Elaine Marks into a notebook in 2000 or 2001 (reproduced by permission of Brown University Library).

Introduction

On Mortality and Natality

RICHARD E. GOODKIN & ELAINE MARKS

Death of the Gods

> But when a belief vanishes, there survives it—more and more vigorously so as to cloak the absence of the power, now lost to us, of imparting reality to new things—a fetishistic attachment to the old things which it did once animate, as if it was in them and not in ourselves that the divine spark resided, and as if our present incredulity had a contingent cause—the death of the gods.
>
> Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

Elaine Marks's death on October 6, 2001, marked the passing of an era. She embodied qualities, both intellectual and personal, that were very much of her generation: a feminist unapologetic about her fondness for the writings of dead European males; a teacher, colleague, and scholar whose generosity and engagement with the work of others (as well as her own) made her students and younger colleagues wonder how she ever found time to sleep; and a free thinker who was so deeply iconoclastic that she felt unembarrassed about being a traditionalist when the spirit moved her. On the other hand, as the above epigram taken from Marcel Proust—one of the dead European males whose writing Elaine particularly loved—might suggest, what her survivors experience in remembering her is not only—or primarily—the loss of a representative

of a particular moment in American academic life, but that of a unique and irreplaceable individual; the going out of a spark. When, in the concluding pages of *Swann's Way,* Proust's narrator talks about returning as an elderly man to the Bois de Boulogne, where as a teenager he was infatuated with the elegant Madame Swann, he wonders if he can ever find a way to explain to those who did not know the woman the qualities he valued in her: "Could I even have made them understand the emotion that I used to feel on winter mornings, when I met Madame Swann?" Proust's narrator recognizes that the lost "divine spark" that his memory attributes to Madame Swann is actually to be found (or rather no longer to be found) in him, but this logical realization does not prevent Madame Swann from becoming the epitome of all that he valued and has now lost. Five years after the death of Elaine Marks, as her friends, colleagues, and students continue to mourn her, I have no doubt that many of us feel something quite similar about the loss of this teacher, critic, scholar, collaborator, and human being extraordinaire.

Among the various goals that motivated me to edit a volume of essays in memory of Elaine Marks, perhaps first and foremost is to have this tribute to my much beloved colleague evoke, on the one hand, her intellectual and academic *rayonnement*—the way her writing, speaking, and teaching radiated throughout the Franco-American world of letters—and, on the other, her uniqueness as a human being, an individual. To this end, my decision to conjoin two themes, life writing and writing about death, as the organizing principles of the volume, although it is inspired by what I see as the two central thrusts of Elaine's work, also reflects my own double ambition for this book. My intent has been not only to erect the kind of monument in words that a festschrift traditionally offers as a marker against the dangers of forgetfulness but also to be true to the spirit of the living Elaine Marks, whom some readers will have known and others, alas, will not.

For those who did not know her, then, a few words about her life are in order.

Born in New York City on November 13, 1930, Elaine Marks grew up both on Long Island and in Manhattan. Her mother, Ruth Elin Marks, was a singer and vaudeville performer, her father a businessman. By her own account Elaine was deeply influenced by her mother's love of music, foreign languages, and performing, and she traced her passion for French in part to listening to her mother sing in that language when she was a child. Although Elaine avoided walking directly in her mother's footsteps—she claimed not to be able to carry a tune or tell a

joke—one of the qualities most appreciated by her students, colleagues, and friends may well have come from Ruth: her ability to captivate an audience in any venue, however formal or informal, whether classroom, lecture hall, conference room, or living room.

Elaine was educated at the Walden School in Manhattan and attended Bryn Mawr College (A.B., 1952), where she met Germaine Brée, one of the most prominent scholars of French literature in postwar America, who would play a key role in her life, both personally and professionally. Elaine did her graduate work in French literature at the University of Pennsylvania (M.A., 1953) and New York University (Ph.D., 1958). She held faculty positions at New York University, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and the University of Massachusetts–Amherst before coming to the University of Wisconsin–Madison as a full professor in 1966. Elaine moved around a great deal in the 1970s, largely for personal reasons, including her marriage to Richard Tedeschi, who was on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. In 1980 she returned to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she spent the next twenty years, retiring in 2000 as Germaine Brée Professor of French. During those two decades, she served at various times as the director of the Women's Studies Research Center, as the first chair of the Women's Studies Program, and as the chair of the Department of French and Italian. In 1993, she was elected president of the Modern Language Association. In the course of her long career she received many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the University of Wisconsin–Madison Chancellor Award for Excellence in Teaching, a Distinguished Alumni Award from New York University, and the *Palmes académiques* from the French government.

About a year after the death of her partner of many years, Yvonne Rochette Ozzello, in 1999, Elaine retired in late 2000 and moved to Dallas to be with her new partner, Marianne Schwob-Ferrara. In early 2001, she was diagnosed with lung cancer. She died of pneumonia in Dallas on October 6 of that year.

In the spring of 2001, after Elaine fell ill, I was fortunate enough to be able to tell her about the volume I intended to edit in her honor and to receive her assistance in putting together the present list of contributors. "Honor" turned to "memory," alas; she died before the project had fully taken shape.

I thus found myself mourning my friend's loss at the same time as I struggled to find a framework that might do justice to her multifaceted work. Elaine Marks's academic interests were quite broad and included

women writers, French feminism, questions of sexuality, Jewishness, and the death of God. She penned single-authored books on Colette (*Colette,* 1960), Simone de Beauvoir (*Encounters with Death: An Essay on the Sensibility of Simone de Beauvoir,* 1973), and the Jewish presence in French literature (*Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing,* 1996). She edited or coedited influential volumes on Simone de Beauvoir (*Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir,* 1987), homosexuality (*Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts,* with George Stambolian 1979), and French feminism (*New French Feminisms,* with Isabelle de Courtivron, 1980). What might connect these varied interests? Although Elaine Marks's approach to literary texts was influenced by a number of critical currents—in particular feminism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism—she resisted being identified with any one school and was adamant in her eclecticism.

At pains to discover a single link among these different components, I decided that finding two common threads was the best I could do. On the one hand, Elaine had an abiding love for biographical and autobiographical texts of all sorts; she found writing about people's lives as enthralling as becoming a part of the lives of friends and colleagues and discovering what made them tick. Her study of the representation of sexuality in literature, for example, was certainly related to her amazement about the countless ways this central aspect of human existence played out in individual lives, including her own. On the other hand, as a number of the articles in this collection allude to, Elaine had a self-avowed fascination with death that started in her early childhood and that deeply affected her work. In the 1993 Modern Language Association presidential address she delivered in Toronto, "Multiplicity and Mortality," she stated that the writers who most captivated her were linked together by a common preoccupation with death. Even her interest in Jewishness was secondary to "an obsession with death and absence to which the Jewish story became attached," as she herself observed.[1] *In Memory of Elaine Marks: Life Writing, Writing Death* is not, of course, a biography, but it is my hope that these twinned themes may combine to create a more vivid, personal picture of the honoree of this volume than is sometimes the case with collections of this sort.

Once I had decided on the framework of the volume, I decided to keep the organization of the articles flexible, both to avoid imposing artificial resemblances and to reflect the gracefulness and variety of Elaine Marks's own writing. Part 1, "Life Writing Death," joins together

the three articles that most directly address the relation between the volume's twinned themes: a letter about (and to) Elaine coauthored by Evelyn T. Beck and myself; Martine Debaisieux's multilayered analysis of Marks's complex relation to maternity; and Isabelle de Courtivron's essay on women's literature of aging in France and America. In the second part, "Death of the Other, Death of the Mother," Nelly Furman's analysis of the crucial importance of otherness, both psychologically and linguistically, is grouped with three essays on the death of the mother: Annie Jouan-Westlund's comparison of the mother-daughter relation in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Annie Ernaux; Nancy K. Miller's discussion of how childlessness affects the mourning of one's own parents; and Lawrence D. Kritzman's consideration of questions of mortality and maternity in the work of Jacques Derrida. Part 3, "Geographies of Life and Death," focuses on lyric poetry, with Tom Conley's interpretation of Ronsard and Susan Lanser's reading of Elizabeth Bishop, both of which explore the geography of the body and of mourning. And the final section, "Signing Off: The Individual Lost and Regained," includes David Harrison's study of the "feminine signature" in Saint-Simon, my own essay on Proust and La Bruyère, and a lecture given by Elaine Marks entitled "Teaching Mourning and Desire in French Literature."

These articles exemplify a wide range of rhetorical strategies for expressing the authors' relations to Elaine Marks's own work, some drawing upon it very directly, others less so. Several of the essayists take Elaine's scholarship as an object of scrutiny in itself. Some read texts or discuss issues she herself wrote about in the light of what she had to say about them. Still others are inspired by her in a more indirect (but not necessarily less essential) way. This is not only how things happened to turn out, it also exemplifies one of the miracles of the academic life: the effect one has on others, in particular as a teacher but also as a speaker and a scholar, takes many forms, all valid expressions of the sometimes vague but always valuable notion of collegiality, the intellectual and personal impact we have on each other.

Finally, I have allowed myself the luxury of Elaine's posthumous collaboration by framing the collection with two pieces of her own writing, both previously unpublished. This introduction concludes with a talk she gave at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1991; the volume closes with a lecture she delivered at the MLA Convention in San Diego in 1994.

Where to Begin?

> I would like to speak passionately in favor of a "polymorphously perverse" humanities curriculum, one that incorporates literary studies *and* cultural studies, that encourages glossophilia *and* rants against monolingualism (perhaps the most pernicious disease of the United States academic establishment), that focuses both on language *and* social critique, on the unconscious *and* the non-conscious of texts, on temporality *and* synchrony, on mortality *and,* in Hannah Arendt's word, "natality," the being born into a community.
>
> Elaine Marks, "For a 'Polymorphously Perverse' Curriculum"

How to write about the death and life of one who wrote so eloquently about life and death herself? The chiasmus—death-life/life-death—is intended, as a marker of the temporal reversal implied by all retrospection: while Elaine Marks's fascination with death, as she so movingly explains in her 1993 MLA presidential address, "Multiplicity and Mortality," grew out of her early life experiences, we cannot now approach the problem of paying homage to her life and her work without first recognizing the barrier of death that separates us from her. Perhaps that is what all mourning is about: crossing the boundary of death in the goal of getting back, in one way or another, to a life that has been lost in itself but not erased from one's own. So, just as I turned to Elaine so often in life—for friendship, guidance, support, and collegiality; for a shared love of literature's unsurpassed beauties and life's marvelous absurdities and the abiding, logic-defying value of both—I turn to her once again in death, as my first collaborator for this work presented in her memory. The title of this introduction, "On Mortality and Natality," comes from Elaine's words quoted above, taken from a talk that she gave at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1991 and that I have reprinted as part of the introduction on the theory that no words of mine could introduce Elaine more aptly than her own.

Mortality and natality—in this case the word order is Elaine's—are indeed at the heart of Elaine Marks's lifework, which focused not only on the existential solitude and angst of the human condition—as she herself put it, on the foreknowledge of "being dead forever and ever"—but also on the various communities into which mortals can choose to be born through the communications and commonalities implicit in the study of literature.[2] Elaine Marks was suspicious of categorizations and totalizing definitions, but perhaps one way of making

sense of her multifaceted intellectual and personal career is to speculate that she responded to the *singular* with the *plural:* while the monolithic awareness of death that came to her at a very young age and never left her was—as she herself would be the first to admit—essentially unanswerable for one whose militant atheism precluded the remotest possibility of an afterlife, she adamantly insisted upon finding meaning—or rather meanings—in life. And that insistence led her to any number of "natalities," being born into communities of all sorts.

And yet, as is reflected in a number of the more personal essays in this volume, even though Elaine Marks was a great believer in the importance of communities, her skepticism about identity—her refusal to define herself, and others, in any essentializing way in terms of a single or a small number of criteria like ethnicity, sexual preference, ideological stance, or critical school—was also undoubtedly a function of her relation to her mortality, her own "encounter with death," to paraphrase the title of her book on Simone de Beauvoir, which remained a very individual one. To her way of thinking, communities of many kinds could certainly help to give life meaning, but no community could ever directly remedy the essential solitude of the mortal condition. In this light the title of Elaine's MLA address, "Multiplicity and Mortality," sums up a basic tension in her life and career: however individual mortality might be, a strong awareness of it often pushes us toward others; but however meaningful are the communities thus established, they can never change the fact that we die alone.

Natality and mortality also defined Elaine Marks's approach to literature. On the one hand, she reveled in the various intellectual and personal exchanges fostered by the reading and analysis of literature, and through her teaching and a dazzling array of professional activities she established deep connections to other scholars, connections reflected by the fact that her work engages and draws upon a wide variety of critical approaches. On the other hand, she resisted identifying with any single critical approach, and there was no kind of work on which she placed greater value than the essentially solitary task of the humanities scholar/critic, for whom the blank page to be written upon evokes the kind of grappling with and wresting meaning from one's contingent, mortal state as it does for Stéphane Mallarmé, one of Elaine's favorite poets.

Indeed, after myself staring at a blank page headed by the single poignant word "Introduction" for many long months, I decided I needed Elaine's assistance, and in May 2004, upon the kind invitation

of Marianne Schwob-Ferrara, I flew to Dallas to go through her papers. Help came in the form of an unpublished presentation that Elaine gave in 1991, "For a 'Polymorphously Perverse' Curriculum," a talk that dramatizes in a few short pages the courageous and life-affirming stances that my irreplaceable friend and colleague embraced throughout her long career.[3] I am most grateful for the opportunity to print it here.

If I had the luxury of composing my introduction bilingually, in imitation of the opening paragraph of Elaine's MLA presidential address, I would now move into French and write: "Je donne la parole à Elaine Marks." Loosely translated, this phrase means "I turn the floor over to Elaine Marks," but its literal meaning is one I savor: "I give speech to Elaine Marks." What would make this introduction "polymorphously perverse" in a manner I hope Elaine would have appreciated is the internal contradiction that it embodies and that we, the contributors to this volume—her colleagues, students, and friends, her heirs in the deepest and most spiritual sense of the term—all embrace in our own individual ways. For Elaine Marks is the one who has given speech to us.

Elaine Marks, "For a 'Polymorphously Perverse' Curriculum"

Let me begin by presenting my own contradictory positions in relation to curricular reform. I remain "true" to my old, unflagging love for the "masters" of European literature, philosophy, and painting in whose patriarchal and/or phallogocentric written and visual texts I came to love languages, literature, and so-called high culture. I am also committed to my "feminist"—that is to say, political—convictions about the necessity of analyzing literature as an institution, of studying non-male and non-European writers and writing traditions, and of locating in all texts non-conscious presuppositions structuring representations of othering, whether of race, class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Personally, I live comfortably with these contradictions. I expect, however, that some of you may find my comments for this evening a bit outrageous.

My title is taken from the second essay on "Infantile Sexuality" in Sigmund Freud's 1905 *Three Essays on Sexuality.* Sigmund Freud, as you know and will hear shortly again, is almost always provocative and rarely "politically correct."

It is an instructive fact that under the influence of seduction children can become polymorphously perverse, and can be led into all possible kinds of sexual

irregularities. This shows that an aptitude for them is innately present in their disposition. There is consequently little resistance towards carrying them out, since the mental dams against sexual excesses—shame, disgust and morality—have either not yet been constructed at all or are only in course of construction, according to the age of the child. In this respect children behave in the same kind of way as an average uncultivated woman in whom the same polymorphously perverse disposition persists. Under ordinary conditions she may remain normal sexually, but if she is led on by a clever seducer, she will find every sort of perversion to her taste, and will retain them as part of her own sexual activities. Prostitutes exploit the same polymorphous, that is, infantile, disposition for the purposes of their profession; and, considering the immense number of women who are prostitutes or who must be supposed to have an aptitude for prostitution without becoming engaged in it, it becomes impossible not to recognize that this same disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic.[4]

"Children," "an average uncultivated woman," and "prostitutes" are Freud's specific and typically misogynous examples of what he defines in the last sentence as "a general and fundamental human characteristic." I will not discard Sigmund Freud because of these biases, but rather I will use what I find attractive in the concept "polymorphously perverse" and in the notion of "seduction" as potentially important elements in the pedagogical, educational situation in the United States today. "Polymorphous" denotes having or assuming many forms, "perverse" denotes turning the wrong way, contrary to accepted standards or practice. In psychoanalytic terms "polymorphously perverse" is used to describe someone who exhibits infantile sexual tendencies in which the genitals are not yet identified as the sole or principal sexual organs nor coitus (heterosexual intercourse) as the goal of erotic activity and which are a basis for pregenital libidinal fixation.

I would like to speak passionately in favor of a "polymorphously perverse" humanities curriculum, one that incorporates literary studies *and* cultural studies, that encourages glossophilia *and* rants against monolingualism (perhaps the most pernicious disease of the United States academic establishment), that focuses both on language *and* social critique, on the unconscious *and* the non-conscious of texts, on temporality *and* synchrony, on mortality *and,* in Hannah Arendt's word, "natality," the being born into a community. I would like to speak passionately in favor of curricular discussions that focus less on *what* we read and more on *how* we read, on the effects and the limitations of our reading practices. I would like to speak passionately in favor of a moratorium on

such monologic fixed expressions as Eurocentric and Afrocentric, expressions that erase differences of language and culture among European groupings and among African groupings, and that attribute blame and/or power to one or another badly defined and rigidly identified region. I would like to speak passionately about the need to read together theoretical texts with historical, fictional, and filmic narratives, for example to read Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man in conjunction with African-American literature and women writers, to read Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva with philosophical and theological texts, as well as with Hollywood films.

Freud writes of "shame, disgust and morality" as "mental dams against sexual excesses." In the same vein, although ever mindful of the danger of analogy, I would write of mental dams in our institutions of higher learning against textual excesses, our puritanical reactions to overreading, to playing with the signifier, and to liking, even taking pleasure in, more than one way to be textual. I would propose a curriculum that does not separate curricular reform from pedagogical reform, that simultaneously encourages critical thinking, promotes social change and awakens desire.

I will conclude by quoting two fragments written by the French, North African, Jewish, woman writer Hélène Cixous, in which the "polymorphously perverse" I am groping towards is admirably suggested: from "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), the sentence "Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts"; and from *The Newly Born Woman* (also 1975), the French portmanteau word "Juifemme," from "je suis femme" [I am woman], "je jouis" [I know sexual pleasure] and "juif" [Jew]. Writing or repeating "Juifemme" will not bring about social change. But if language play gives pleasure, and if pleasure in language is a key to understanding the power and the effects of language, then we may be on our way.

NOTES

1. Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor,* 153.
2. Marks, "Multiplicity and Mortality," 368.
3. Elaine gave this talk in March 1991 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison under the rubric "Controversies in Curriculum Reform." I have not printed the part in which Elaine gives a description of her course on French and Italian Jewish writers of the twentieth century, as she later discusses this course, which she had not yet given, elsewhere in published materials.
4. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* 7:191.

PART ONE

Life Writing Death

"Juifemmes"

EVELYN T. BECK & RICHARD E. GOODKIN

Dear Richard,

I've been having a hard time writing anything for the collection you're putting together in honor of Elaine Marks, and this surprises me. I was so sure I'd have so much to say and no trouble saying it. The minute I was asked to contribute I knew what my theme had to be—our mutual interest in "Jewish presence," and the meanings we made of our shared Jewish identity, not in any way that is specific to French literature, but to our lives, to our friendship of over twenty-five years. Immediately I reread Elaine's Jewish book, *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing,* and directly thereafter, the small, barely hundred-page book she sent me years ago, Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat,* a post-Holocaust book of witnessing we talked about in some detail. Elaine sent it to me because it was deeply disturbing to her, and she wanted to hear my response to this story that Kofman told with "lucidity unclouded by insight," as Ann Smock so aptly describes the writing in her introduction. Elaine particularly wanted my opinion because as a child I had lived under Nazi rule and had lost a deeply close relative (my grandmother) who, like Kofman's father, was murdered in Auschwitz.

The book troubled both of us, not because Kofman ultimately rejected her father's Judaism, but because of the way she brutally rejected her (in all senses) impoverished Orthodox Jewish mother who tried (unsuccessfully) to beat her into loyalty. Kofman had been seduced into the beauty of French culture by the Christian "mother" who had sheltered her till the end of the war. In all the years I knew

Elaine, she never said a word about the possible resonance of this tension in her own life; not until *Marrano as Metaphor* did her own choice of French over Yiddish ever come up.

In some matters Elaine was immensely outspoken, especially when she was fighting for something she believed in at the university or in the MLA. She was especially forthright in her writings; it was she who first gave me the insight that what a person chooses to work on tells as much about him/her as about the subject s/he is researching. But as I have come to realize, outspokenness is not the same as speaking the deeper pains, the wounds we hide. And these we never quite managed to speak to each other.

Perhaps, then, it is not entirely surprising that even after a third rereading of Elaine's book I still could not write a word. But I ask myself: why this silence? It may be that the deeper story of our friendship lies in the space of that silence, bound to the deeper story of our separate Jewish journeys that both brought us together and at times drew us apart.

Yours,
Evi

Dear Evi,

I wonder which silence it is that you are having trouble breaking through. Although you start out speaking of your own silence, you go on to say that in all the years you knew her, Elaine "never said a word" about the possible resonance of the tension between Frenchness and Jewishness in her own life. So when you ask, "Why this silence?," I am not sure which one you are referring to, yours or hers.

Perhaps the two go together. Five years after her death, are you not still intimidated by her silence, fearful of broaching a topic that she, for reasons of her own, never brought up with you, in spite of your shared interests?

Is silence not the starting point of all death writing—not only the silence implicit in the separation brought about by death, but also silence as the retrospective realization of things left unsaid? Perhaps your silence and Elaine's give us the opportunity to reflect upon the importance of writing "before death"; both spatially before, in front of or in the face of death, and chronologically before, in the sense that all death writing—and perhaps all life writing—is an expression of mortality. A whole school of criticism has been launched by the notion of writing "after Auschwitz"; are we not all writing "before death"?

The prospect of mortality—our own, and others'—forces us to speak up, to define ourselves, whether individually or in terms of a community. It forces us to look back, to do various forms of summing up, and to look ahead to our own deaths in a way that most people resist during the course of their lifetimes. I believe that one can become closer to a loved one in some sense after her death, and even have a keener perspective on the ways her life relates to our own; that writing death and life writing can interact. For us who are writing Elaine's death after the fact, the question then becomes: How can the speech of mourning make up for the silences of life? What do you have to say to Elaine in death that you couldn't or didn't say to her in life?

Yours,
Richard

Dear Elaine,

I never had the courage to tell you that in reading the preface to your only Jewish book, the one in which you outline all the steps in your journey to writing about Jewish themes, I felt left out. But in rereading the last chapter of your book, titled with Cixous's wonderful portmanteau word, "Juifemme," and relishing the complex poetic resonances you so beautifully play with and develop, I began to understand more fully why it may be that my part in your journey to Jewishness (which you wisely differentiate from Judaism) is not acknowledged. I was particularly struck by your speculation, "I wonder if perhaps I came to French to escape or to hide from Jewishness and from Yiddish" (146).

Those words struck a chord and inspired me to lay out this letter to you in a way that parallels the structure of your last chapter. I, too, *juifemme,* but of a very different kind.

The Personal

You and I came from different sides of many tracks. I from an unglamorous part of Brooklyn, you from what we used to call "the city" and Long Island, where the rich Jews lived. I was not just an immigrant, I also carried the taint of the Holocaust. My father had been in Dachau and Buchenwald and had somehow, miraculously, escaped. We left everything we owned in Vienna, including extended family whom we never saw again; we escaped to Italy and were rescued by the pleadings of the mother of distant rich American

relatives from Long Island who knew my father from the shtetl. They disdained our rough edges but tolerated us. We came to the United States without money. I lived at home while attending Brooklyn College, from which I wasn't allowed to graduate until I had passed the remedial speech exam where they cleansed my speech by getting rid of my "dentalized" "t"s and the "g" sound in Long Island, so I didn't say "lawn guyland." By the time I met you, I myself had been married and divorced, with two children, had earned a Ph.D., and had shaken some of the Brooklyn from my being, but still, it lingered, no doubt about it.

When I first met you, Elaine, you were wearing a long fur coat, mink I believe, and you carried yourself like a lady. You spoke like a lady too, your English not quite American, a hint of Europe in its tones. You were a Bryn Mawr graduate, with roots in Paris. To me, you exuded money and privilege. You represented the rich American Jews (the "real" Americans) who had looked down on us "greenhorns" to whom the old world still stuck in Yiddish. You had written on Beauvoir, I on Kafka and the Yiddish theater. I knew you respected my work, but in your presence I often felt awkward, much younger (although you were only three years older than I), as if I were once again the refugee child, getting hand-me-downs from strangers, waiting for hours to be treated at a free clinic for the poor. When my insecurity got the better of me I would make fun of your diamonds and furs, and you would rightly chastise me and I would apologize. I finally learned to relax with you, to see past the sartorial differences, and we became close, often sharing intimacies.

And yet, one day, when we were having lunch together, as we so often did, out of the blue you observed that our friendship was "atavistic." I was startled and didn't know what to make of that remark. I think I laughed and never questioned your meaning, but the uneasy resonance of those words has never left me. Nearly thirty years later I still wonder if it was meant as a negative judgment or a positive acceptance of our easy intimacy. According to the dictionary meaning of the word, I was a "throwback" and represented something you had long ago left behind, and yet you clearly welcomed me into your life. I now think our bond represented the kind of friendships we had as girls, uncomplicated by academic rivalry. But I also wonder now if the taint of death I carried from my close call in the Shoah as well as the taint (and the warmth) of my work with Yiddish did not also remind you of early familial roots about which you were

ambivalent, as you so openly admitted. "Why I love French may be as relevant to this chapter, and indeed to this book . . . as how I am Jewish. I suspect that in my imaginary, French has been for a very long time the antithesis of Jewish, and particularly, of Yiddish" (*Marrano as Metaphor* 146). The split between *Rue Ordener* and *Rue Labat* was also yours.

To bring you more clearly back into my life, I have lately been rereading the books you gave to me over the years, each one inscribed in what I have elsewhere called "an elegant hand with its curlicues and squiggles, instantly recognizable upon arrival." You clearly composed each message with deliberation and care. For *Homosexualities and French Literature* you signed "with Loves," "s" underlined for emphasis (calling to mind your *French Feminisms,* a word I believe you were the first to use in the plural to deconstruct its perhaps inevitable homogenization). For *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* (the story of a "lifelong [lesbian] relationship between two prominent women") you playfully signed "Ms. Marks," clearly delighted at the coincidence of names.

The Political

I did not think there would be any surprises for me in your writing, but in fact, I was surprised by your stating quite emphatically, in "Lesbian Intertexuality," "There is no one person in or out of fiction who represents a stronger challenge to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to patriarchy and phallocentrism than the lesbian-feminist. . . . The most subversive voices of the century are, and will be, in their texts" (369–70). You were here speaking most immediately of texts by Monique Wittig (who you would be sad to hear died quite suddenly not long after you did), especially *Le Corps lesbien* where, you argue, Wittig "has transformed the image of Sappho by associating Sappho's verbal power with the physical power of the Amazons. Wittig has abandoned any attempt to insert Sappho into male culture."

You may wonder why the strength of your assertion should surprise me. While it is true that you were eager to drive with us from Madison to Chicago to attend the first Lesbian Writers Conference organized on the principles of lesbian-feminism, you felt curiously out of place among the "lesbian-feminists" who peopled the conference. Only after rereading the "Juifemme" chapter of *Marrano as Metaphor* did I fully appreciate why the movement itself could never be "your

thing" and why you once said to me with great passion, "I am a lesbian *and* a feminist, but I am not a *lesbian-feminist*." And here, I think, is the crux of a deep divide based on our different histories. As an American Jew, you had the luxury of refusing to be defined by any single category; you could afford to have what you called a "belonging sickness" à la Derrida. I could not. As a Jew who had been slated for annihilation I needed to feel the support and shelter of like-minded people I believed I could trust (although of course this turned out to be a utopian belief that was often disappointed), as I spelled out in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology,* where I quoted Kurt Lewin (who had himself been at risk in the Holocaust): "It is not the belonging to many groups that is the cause of the difficulty, but an *uncertainty of belongingness*" (xx, emphasis mine). I deeply regret that we never pursued these differences more openly.

I understood your world view even more fully when I reread your book on Beauvoir, where you argue that she saw the world doubly—as absurd and contingent, but also open to meaningful change by collective, purposive action. In "The Corset and the Corpse" chapter in *Marrano as Metaphor,* you once again point to this duality in Beauvoir's vision: "On the one hand, there is in her novels, memoirs, and essays a constant awareness of Memento mori, and on the other hand a dedication to the urgent need for social change" (106). You believed her writing was stronger when she did not try to fight against her darker vision, which was what also interested you the most. I, on the other hand, had taken the path of "movement, commitment, activity" as you referred to this dimension. You were certainly a strong supporter of feminist political goals, and I clearly remember that you and Yvonne sometimes joined us at marches and rallies (for women's right to choose abortion, for the ERA, and in support of gay/lesbian liberation). While your passionate engagement with lesbian texts was never in question and you would never deny the nature of your relationship with Yvonne, you were shy about "being out" in language. I wonder whether this was the residue of earlier years, when it was not only unacceptable but considered pathological for a woman to desire another woman, but you never spoke of your reasons. I remember once when I was on my way to see a mutual colleague and announced that I was planning to come out to him, you said to me, laughing wickedly, "Be sure to tell him Elaine Marks is one too!" I, on the other hand, newly "out" at forty was committed to the politics of visibility.

Here our roles were reversed: Had you perhaps suffered from a labeling that had been as toxic to you as my having been singled out as a Jew had been to me? At the height of the women's movement, which supported lesbian liberation, "coming out" publicly as a lesbian did not feel dangerous to me, especially not among the radicals of Madison, Wisconsin. It was invisibility and the erasure of differences that seemed dangerous—is that not what Hitler was trying to accomplish? For this reason, I could never agree with your final reflection that "In all honesty, the *Je suis* (I am) that we understand but neither hear nor see matters more to me now, and always has, than what we hear and see in *Juifemme*" (153). While at first reading, this confession seemed like an odd ending to a book about Jewish presence, it made perfect sense to me once I placed it in the context of your ongoing preoccupation (you yourself often referred to it as an obsession) with the inevitability and finality of death and loss.

The Poetical

In your honor I had thought to write an explication of Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat,* which I carefully studied in the context of her companion volume, *Paroles suffoquées* [Smothered Words], but no matter how often I reread Kofman's texts, I found I had nothing new to say. Although I had agreed with Smock that *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* was "unclouded by insight," I could not agree with her implied judgment that the text would have been marred by "a sense of understanding or ultimate resolution" (xii). In fact, it is the complete absence of any attempt to understand herself, her seemingly complete lack of empathy for the child she was, that I find most disturbing. In someone who was so closely tied to psychoanalysis, I find this refusal of insight distasteful. It feels to me as if Kofman were punishing herself for abandoning first her biological mother and, ultimately, also Mémé.

> For several years I cut off all contact with Mémé; I can't stand to hear her talk about the past all the time or to let her keep calling me her "little bunny" or her "little darling." When, later, I do come back to see her, I always bring a friend.
>
> She died recently, in a hospice in Les Sables. . . . I was unable to attend her funeral. But I know that at her grave the priest recalled how she had saved a little Jewish girl during the war. (84–85)

I also did not agree with Smock that Kofman was one of those children "whose salvation required them to forsake the teachings of their parents"; at least that is not the sense that Kofman conveys (xi). While Sarah may have been seduced by Mémé to become her child, stolen by Mémé right from under her mother's nose, she seems to have no empathy or understanding for her mother's plight.

The way Kofman describes the process of her shifting loyalty makes it seem as if she went quite willingly. Of course, that is often the perspective of the abused. It is easier to think you went willingly than to recognize that you were powerless. I remember that Kofman's "lucidity unclouded by insight" disturbed us both.

According to Smock, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* was Kofman's "only piece of sustained narrative writing" in which she was able to break an "old silence," although she had begun the process in *Paroles suffoquées*, where she had for the first time included some "footage," I want to call it, about her father's murder in Auschwitz. This she does with clinical precision, even including a page copied out of Serge Klarsfeld's documentation of her father's arrest and deportation to Drancy in a convoy of 1,000 on July 16, 1942. Later she records the details of what she learned from a survivor about how he was killed—beaten on the head and buried alive (smothered) because he refused to work on the Sabbath, because in spite of everything, he still had faith in his Jewish God. In the two texts that open these old wounds of loss, Kofman seems to be mimicking the neutrality she attributes to Klarsfeld, the "neutral" voice that she believes is the voice of affliction. "This voice leaves you without a voice, makes you doubt your common sense and all sense, makes you suffocate in silence" (10–11). Or perhaps she was simply trying to implement her idea (following Blanchot) of "écrire sans pouvoir," "writing without being able to write, writing without power" (*Smothered Words* xiv). Perhaps Kofman shared your view, Elaine, that writing and reading could not change the world, could only help us to accept our own mortality. As you know, I do not hold this belief.

As you also well know, Elaine, my own father survived Dachau and Buchenwald. I too lived with "smothered words" that hung in the air of our home but could never be spoken. His humiliation, the physical and psychic wounds he suffered, erupted only in my father's rages—they had no name, no obvious source. Similarly, the murder of my grandmother (my "other mother"), who had insisted that we leave without her, who was left behind (abandoned?) because she could not

get a visa, was a wound we were not allowed to touch, let alone speak. Perhaps I find Kofman's seeming distance from herself repugnant because it represents the shadow self I lived with for many decades. For me, looking directly into the pain has turned out to be healing in ways that simply narrating my story as if from a great distance could never be. I used to introduce myself by omitting the core experience. ("I was born in Vienna but grew up in Brooklyn.") To open and cleanse the wounds I had to expose the deep shame that had been festering there.

Years after my parents' deaths I found a letter my father had written in Italy shortly after he was released from the camps. It described the nightmare journey of his transport to the camps. His voice was not neutral, the imagery bloody and very "in your face."

> What I now saw and was made to feel on my own body mocks all description. . . . When I saw these streams of blood, each of us became panic-stricken. These were not human beings, these SS people, but like wild starving animals they fell upon us poor men huddled together and began to work us over with their rifle butts and bayonets. . . . I have seen much in the 12 months I spent in both concentration camps, Dachau and Buchenwald, observed and suffered it on my own body, but more than anything else this calamitous trip from Vienna to Dachau will remain in sorry memory. All night long we were forced to beat each other and at each station the SS who accompanied us were given bottles of schnapps to drink so they wouldn't flag in torturing and beating and finally also murdering us. On this transport 12 Jews were shot, murdered without any reason, and more than half the transport were beaten till they were crippled, some of their eyes were poked out. . . . The walls of the train were literally smeared with blood, blood and sweat were running from virtually all of the prisoners—sweat and blood—it ran and ran. . . . The Nazi thugs were wearing leather gloves so that the Jewish blood mixed with sweat would not stick to their hands when they beat the people. At the time I was not capable of thought, but when I think back now I wonder . . . were these SS also people made of sweat and blood as we poor prisoners? Did they have wives and children? (Max Torton, 1939 letter, my translation)

My father, though not a rabbi, was an observant, believing Jew, but he placed survival above allegiance to his God, for which I am forever grateful. Kofman's father had allowed himself to be deported to protect his wife and six children, but his religious beliefs led him to

his death. I don't know why or how I, like you, Elaine, became an atheist, but for me, to name myself always a *Jewish* atheist seems very important. While I am not quite comfortable with your deliberately provocative image of Marrano as metaphor, I myself do exemplify your point about the many Western assimilated Jews who insist on keeping hold of their Jewishness. Where we agree is that there isn't (and shouldn't be) just one kind of Jew, one definition of Jewish. What is it that Kafka said? Something to the effect that he could have nothing in common with the Jews—he had hardly anything in common with himself. The deconstruction of "Jewish" and "Lesbian" that were part of my mission in putting together *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology,* did lead to greater awareness of Jewishness, but ironically, it also resulted in the building of more lesbian/gay/bi/trans centers of Jewish worship. It is a source of anger for me that a return to Jewish identity almost always ends in some form of institutionalized prayer.

Because mothers are so central to the Kofman text I have been dwelling on, it seems fitting to bring my own mother (whom you once met in Madison) into this letter. Years after she died, I found that in spite of her silence, she had needed to and did write out her pain. Among her papers I found this poem that takes the form of prayerless prayer. I preface the poem with the same quotation from *Paroles suffoquées* that you used to frame the *Cendres Juives* chapter, but I am here replacing her father with my grandmother, my mother's mother. I write it in my mother's voice: "Because [she] was a Jew my [mother] died at Auschwitz: how can one not say it? And how can it be said?"

Where are you mother?
Did you die in your own bed?
Abandoned and disappointed
yet luckier than others who had first to
endure hell's tortures
before death took the handiwork from the
tormentors?

Did you freeze to death somewhere on
Poland's cold roads?
Did hunger's need lead you to your home?
Or most terrible of all,
My heart can hardly grasp it
did the murderers
push you into the GAS?

Where are you mother?
calls out in me and
no one can answer!

Irma Torton (my translation)

For years I avoided "knowing" anything (to the extent that anything could be known), or even thinking about what had happened to my grandmother, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors, friends who were lost in the war. I couldn't even comprehend what had happened to me. I had great difficulty placing myself in time. Could it really be that we left Vienna only at the very end of 1939, when the doors to almost everywhere were already closed? How on earth did we get four visas to escape to Italy at a time when the lines at the embassies seemed to be miles long (as depicted in the photos I eventually saw at the Holocaust Memorial Museum)? I could not locate myself in the Nazi flag–festooned streets of Vienna where I lived for an entire year after my father had been arrested, although I knew I had been kicked out of kindergarten—at five I must have retained some memory of this trauma.

Kofman had used actual quotations from Blanchot and Antelme as buffers for her father's story in *Paroles suffoquées.* Unwittingly, I made use of Kafka, whose Jewishness pervades his fiction but never surfaces as historical reality except in the private writings. But in my Kafka research, in which I "discovered" the origins of the opening scene of *The Trial* in one of the Yiddish plays he saw over and over again, I was working out my own history, though at the time I had no idea this text had anything to do with my own life. "Josef K. was arrested one day without having done anything wrong" by two warders dressed in identical suits. This scene parallels the scene of arrest in one of the Yiddish plays set at the time of the Inquisition, when a hidden Jew who has been denounced is arrested by two officials. The scene (minus the buffoonery of Kafka and the Yiddish theater) is identical to the scene of my father's arrest by two members of the Gestapo which I witnessed. My father had done nothing wrong, but he was a Jew.

Like you, Elaine, in later years I turned from the Yiddish of my New York adolescence to the German of a forgotten childhood, the "mother" tongue that I had to relearn and which never again felt entirely comfortable in my mouth although I became a professor of German (and comparative literature as a buffer). Years later I was invited to Germany to speak about Eurocentrism, to which I added

racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia, but before I could make the trip, I began to choke on German words. Madeleine Dobie, the translator of *Paroles suffoquées,* quotes Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* in which he "describes the feeling of choking or suffocation experienced by the survivor when he or she tries to speak of the camps" (xxiii). I had *not* tried to speak, in fact, I had worked hard *not* to speak, and I was choking.

So, Elaine, I see that what I have put together is a plea for the breaking of silence. I was immensely influenced by the words uttered by Audre Lorde when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and realized she might die of it (which she did a decade later). She implored, "Your silence will not protect you. You will die whether you speak or whether you remain silent." With your constant awareness of the presence of death in life, you surely already knew this. With the hindsight that speaking to you across the barrier of death has given me, I might add that I now realize that avoiding speaking of our differences—which we both did in life—will not now bring you back, whereas, paradoxically, facing and assessing them might.

Yours,
Evi

Dear Evi,

I was very moved by your letter to Elaine. The issue that seems to separate you is one that is central to the relation between life writing and writing death: the link between tradition and mortality. Traditions (Judaism/Jewishness, or Frenchness, or Americanness, etc.) and communities (feminism, lesbianism) are ways of giving life a supra-individual meaning; both presuppose a certain number of values shared by all people within the group, values that precede and survive the individual historically and that transcend her or his own individual existence at any given moment. And indeed, one of the greatest sources of consolation for the loss of one's individual life is, for many people, the feeling of belonging either to a tradition or to a community, or both: for these people, the sense of continuity and meaning at the collective level somehow makes up for the potential sense of meaninglessness that a contemplation of one's own death can bring. This is certainly one of the reasons why people who have had direct experience of the atrocities of war so often need to be with others who share that experience in some way.

But as you have pointed out so eloquently, Elaine, although she was fascinated and at times obsessed by death and mortality, had mixed feelings about traditions and communities. It seems to me her ambiguous attitude toward "belonging" was across the board, to such an extent that it became part of her personal trademark—you know that better than I, undoubtedly, having known her longer and in more different academic and personal contexts. I agree with you that to some extent such a position might well be a result of privilege—the I-wouldn't-be-a-member-of-a-club-that-would-have-me-as-a-member position is generally held by people who could, if they wished, belong to any number of clubs.

And yet, whether in spite of or because of her refusal or inability to "belong," Elaine herself did find—and she was particularly interested in writers who found—*individual* strategies against mortality, or at least against the sense of futility that an unmediated pondering of mortality can cause. But those strategies were, indeed, personal, particular, and idiosyncratic rather than traditional, general, or collective.

Isn't this, perhaps, where you two differ? Couldn't the differences in your positions—on Jewishness, on lesbianism, on feminism perhaps—be related to these two strategies of coping with mortality? Belonging to a group can give one meaning; can *not* belonging to a group give one meaning? Or even, can a refusal to soften the blow of mortality and the deep solitude it implies not become a kind of meaning? Perhaps this question may be analogous to Ann Smock's conclusion about *Rue Ordener, Rue Rabat* that the text would be marred by "a sense of understanding or ultimate resolution"; it seems to me that more than anything else Elaine resisted giving a false resolution or false hope where she found none. I am convinced that this was one of the things that even from her position of militant atheism she admired about Judaism's attitude toward death as opposed to Christianity's: by not dwelling on an afterlife or on seeing lost loved ones again after death, Judaism seemed to her much truer to the pain of loss. She seems to have found any discourse of transcendence of death through the immortality of the soul or through God unconvincing at best, hypocritical at worst. And at times she found other forms of resolution similarly unacceptable, preferring to relish the paradoxical, the irreducible, the resolutely non-generalizable.

One of the central themes of your letter is that Elaine was outspoken on certain matters but didn't speak, or was reticent, about

others. Her reticence was probably related to her iconoclastic, non-joining impulse, her insistence on maintaining individualism and idiosyncrasies, but it also might imply any of a number of unvoiced feelings—shame, defiance, complacency, a desire to assimilate to a larger community, or not to assimilate to various marginalized communities to which she might have belonged. Probably we will never know for sure. That Elaine was ultimately more interested in the *je suis,* in being, than in any source of identity colors her entire life, including her attitude toward mortality. As we look back on her legacy, does this crucial aspect of her life and her work not color how we mourn her and how we receive that legacy?

What remains to be said is what you see as Elaine's legacy to you. In spite of the differences that separated you in life, which are brought out so beautifully in your letter to her, how might her death—and more specifically your writing about her death—bring you closer?

Yours,
Richard

Dearest Elaine,

My mourning has in it a touch of melancholia—I cannot help but imagine what you might say were we having this conversation now, as I wish we could. But for me, this letter provides the possibility of a working through, brought about by the need to accept the finality of your loss.

Given our similarities and differences, here is how I see your legacy to me.

First there is the legacy of your scholarship and your generosity in sharing it so personally. Through your many presentations, I learned how to read (and eventually to teach) the writings of French feminist theorists, for which nothing in my own education had prepared me. You stirred things up when you brought Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous to campus and later, when a bunch of us followed you to New York City for the big Simone de Beauvoir conference, you introduced us to the Psych et Po people who nearly seduced all of us (including you) to come to France and serve Cixous as her other groupies did—we barely got away. Our mutual love of Gertrude Stein also remains a legacy. And it was you who introduced me to the Amazonian images of women created by Baroness Tamara de Lempicka, whose work we both admired. I think of you each time I look through the oversize folio of her paintings I bought some years ago. As I have already

stated, I am certain it was you who first articulated the idea that what or whom scholars choose to research tells us as much (if not more) about the researcher as about the topic being researched. I always quote you on that one.

Second, in addition to the substance of your passionate scholarship, there is your way of looking at the world, with irreverence, using tradition against itself with audacity. You could break an intellectual taboo without fanfare, as when you asked why lesbian relationships should not include mother/daughter, daughter/mother strivings? Why couldn't these roles shift back and forth over time and be seen as a strength of woman/woman relationships rather than a pathological weakness? Another of your methodological legacies is the respect you gave to gossip and the "unprovable," as when, in your essay entitled "Lesbian Intertextuality," you wrote with a kind of wry wit, "Space must be allotted for rumor" (354). Your legacy strenuously warns against rigidity and oversimplification. You modeled offering iconoclastic ideas and elegant ways of presenting them. There is a kind of bravery in your work and a deep respect for that which you would not yourself produce.

It is this aspect of your legacy that gives me the confidence to use this unorthodox form for my contribution to this volume, which is meant to honor you and your work. You yourself provide a model in your introduction to the *Homosexualities and French Literature* anthology you put together in 1979, where I found words that would support the hybrid form produced by the intertexuality of this letter:

> There are no universally applicable conventions about how discussion of our topic is to be conducted, no unquestioned standards and values, no established distance from which to make judgments. It is for these reasons that we have designed a book that itself transgresses boundaries and presents a variety of discourses from the theoretical and scholarly to the personal and polemical. (30)

I've deliberately saved for last the one aspect of your legacy I have not taken on, and that is your preoccupation with death, although this may sound strange, since I have myself taught courses on Death and Dying in Modern Literature (perhaps sparked by your book on Beauvoir and death?). It is true that like you, at a very early age I was obsessed with and terrified by the concept of "being dead forever and ever." And like you, I came to that idea through the death of a beloved grandparent. But I found that giving in to these thoughts—which I

could (and did) easily induce—overwhelmed me with terror, and over time I worked hard to let go of that obsession. Perhaps this difference in our responses helps to explain the different kinds of *Juifemmes* we later became.

But in spite of having focused on our differences in this letter, I feel strongly that what bound us was far stronger than what separated us. Although the loving bonds we forged are far more elusive and remain harder to describe, they are as real. This mutual recognition of the "other" in ourselves is probably the source of the "atavism" you saw in our friendship. I observe with interest that having written this letter, having spoken what had been unsayable in life, I no longer believe you meant "atavistic" to be negative. I close this letter with a surer sense that this was simply your way of saying that our bond need not be, perhaps could not be, explained. Writing to you has felt good, so I will surely return to it. Now I wish I could remember the many different playful ways you signed your letters, but most often it was simply "Love, Elaine," so I'll take my cue from you. Missing you.

Love,

Evi

"Memoirs of an Indocile Daughter"

Encounters with Elaine Marks

MARTINE DEBAISIEUX,
TRANSLATED BY RICHARD E. GOODKIN

In her study at home, Elaine Marks used to work facing a 1945 portrait of Simone de Beauvoir at the Café de Flore, a pen in her right hand and a cigarette in her left. Superimposed on this photo is the title of a lecture Elaine gave at the University of Maryland on October 6, 1988, at 7:30 p.m.: "The Corset and the Corpse: Questions of Life and Death after Auschwitz." Whereas fifteen years earlier, on the cover of her book *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death,* the critic's name was clearly separated from and visually subordinated to the author's, on the poster, the way the names are printed puts the two women on the same level. And within the reflection of the frame, it is as if their images were being called to overlap.

A biographical coincidence: Elaine Marks died on October 6, 2001, the anniversary of her talk on "Questions of Life and Death" announced on the poster, a few minutes before the time scheduled for the lecture. She died of pneumonia, like Simone de Beauvoir.[1]

> Since childhood, Sigmund Freud has been a constant figure in my affective and intellectual life. . . . The earliest ontological experience that I remember occurred at the age of four.
>
> Elaine Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor*

> Freud invites us to distrust our memories. . . . The clarity of memory is the sign of its hidden significance.
>
> Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography*

Throughout her career, in her teaching as well as her research, Elaine Marks had a strong affinity with autobiographical writing. This intellectual interest is apparent as early as her doctoral dissertation, which retraces Colette's "intriguing" life. Literary interpretation and personal curiosity seem to merge in this study, published as *Colette* in 1960. Three years later, Elaine makes her debut on the academic scene with her first lecture, "Memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir," which presents the author she is conducting research on for her second book, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death* (1973). Until the publication of her last book, *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing* (1996), Elaine continues to favor autobiography as a subject of analysis in her courses, her lectures, and her articles.

Elaine Marks tries her own hand at personal writing at the end of her career. Indeed, her talks and later critical writings are strewn with autobiographical bits and pieces. In 1993, as president of the Modern Language Association, she devotes her inaugural speech, "Multiplicity and Mortality," to a rather precise retrospective of her intellectual path, adopting a position of exemplarity in her reflection on mortality. She takes up and develops certain details linked to childhood memories the following year, when she receives the *Palmes académiques*. This attempt at—or temptation of—personal writing is elaborated upon in more precise terms in *Marrano as Metaphor.* Elaine begins the preface with a reference to her work and her teaching of the preceding three decades, and gives a detailed account of the stages that have led her to the present project (xiii). In spite of its title, the first chapter, "Theoretical Considerations," once again opens on a personal note when the author mentions the "interminably renewed seduction" that *La France* operated on her and connects this "enduring love affair" to her family origins (1). The final chapter, "Juifemme," takes the form of a "confession" that gives free rein to intimate details about her family milieu, habits, values, and beliefs. In particular Elaine Marks stresses Freud's influence on her childhood (143–46). This long passage concludes with the evocation of a memory linked to the image of her mother, immediately following an allusion to her funeral. In the concluding sentence of the book, Elaine Marks seems to be acknowledging that when all is said and done, the Jewish question has become for her a pretext for speaking of herself: "In

all honesty, I must conclude that the *Je suis* (I am) that we understand but neither hear nor see matters more to me now, and always has, than what we hear and see in *Juifemme*" (153).[2]

I propose to examine a crucial scene repeated with significant variations in the three biographical fragments I have just mentioned. Facing the difficulty of taking the writings of a friend as an object of analysis, I will adopt the critical distance and the perspective of suspicion Elaine evokes in her discussion of her own reading of Simone de Beauvoir: "Once the story is written down it makes little difference whether it was invented by the author or lived through and told. In both cases, the facts which we confront are verbal" (*Encounters with Death* 101). On the one hand, I will do my best to reconcile Elaine Marks's experience as an autobiographer with her experience as a reader and critic of Simone de Beauvoir; on the other, I will attempt to interpret the stages that lead Elaine as a daughter to substitute herself for a twofold maternal image.

The Grand Piano: Intimations of Nothingness

—Why? the child asked.
—Music, my love . . .
The child took his time, the time to try to understand, did not, but admitted it.

Marguerite Duras, *Moderato Cantabile*

I could see nothing in common between the ruled manuscript paper and the keys of the instrument.

Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

Elaine Marks begins her presidential address at the 1993 MLA Convention in Toronto under the signs of maternal filiation and recitation, two terms that will be central to my analysis. Indeed, to borrow her own term, she "recites" the name of Germaine Brée among those to whom she is paying homage, that is to say, "those teachers and mentors, female and male, who seduced [her] *literally and figuratively* into loving literature in general and French literature in particular" (367, my emphasis). Elaine recalls that she is succeeding Germaine Brée, who stood in the same place at the podium as president of the MLA in 1975. Highlighting this relation of filiation could hardly be seen as gratuitous on the speaker's part, as she had just been introduced with her official academic title: "Elaine Marks, Germaine Brée Professor of French and Women's Studies."[3]

In order to contextualize the theme she has chosen, Elaine Marks then comments on several quotations drawn from the 1944 presidential address by Robert Herndon Fife. She ends her introduction with a warning:

> I now take leave of Fife, but I take his nightmare with me as I attempt to convince you of the double danger that confronts us and the serious consequences we face for our "souls" and for the "soul" of the humanities if we allow ourselves to be devoured by the disease of monolingualism and by the equally devastating disease of indifference to our mortal and bounded state. ("Multiplicity and Mortality" 368)

This solemn, resounding rhetoric makes way for a change of perspective in the following paragraph as Elaine presents a personal snapshot, as striking as it is unexpected. To start a retrospective of her career, Elaine Marks, dignified president of the MLA, momentarily projects an image of herself as a little girl.

> I remember sitting at my mother's grand piano when I was about six, two years after the death of my maternal grandfather, and trying to come to terms with the words *being dead forever and ever.* I did not succeed, but the words have remained with me and, I suspect, have directed my intellectual itinerary during the past fifty-seven years. (368)

The mention of the piano following on the heels of the allusion to Mr. "Fife" no doubt keeps us in the realm of music, which transcends the threat of monolingualism through its universal expressivity. Next comes the list of authors who correspond to what the "narrator" spontaneously felt at a very young age, then a cursus vitae that starts with her experiences in elementary school and traces her itinerary all the way to the end of her career at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

In *Marrano as Metaphor,* Elaine Marks repeats her childhood memory, and in particular the phrase "dead forever and ever," a metaphysical scale that will be her basis for interpreting other melodies dealing with being and nothingness:

> The earliest ontological experience that I remember occurred at the age of four, at the time of my maternal grandfather's death. I was sitting at the piano and saying over and over again: "Dead forever and ever," and trying to comprehend "forever." (153)

The age variation—six as opposed to four—is striking in two texts written more or less in the same period. This uncertainty might be

attributable to a blurred temporality linked to precociousness, as is further demonstrated by the return of the phrase "I have always . . ." in "Multiplicity and Mortality" ("the authors for whom I have always felt the greatest aesthetic and emotional affinity . . ." [368]; "I have always considered language . . ." [369], etc.). Without going into Freud's theory of the screen memory or the deformation that this psychic process implies, for the moment let us simply quote Simone de Beauvoir: "at four, one revisits what one was at two, at ten . . . etc., and at my age I am still revisiting what I have been" (interview, in Jeanson, *Simone de Beauvoir* 252).[4]

A second episode of childhood memory is to be found in the speech Elaine Marks gives at the Maison Française of the University of Wisconsin–Madison when she is named Officier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques in May 1995. After mentioning the names of teachers who inspired her love for French—a list corresponding to the one she recited in her presidential address in Toronto—she tells this story:

Mais avant les professeurs, il y eut la mère. Ma mère, pianiste et chanteuse, chanteuse de vaudeville, chaque soir de mon enfance, me bordant dans mon lit, murmurait en français: "Je t'aime comme de la crème, je t'adore comme de l'or." Souvent, assise au piano, elle jouait et chantait deux chansons dont les paroles m'ont suivie et poursuivie ~~toute ma vie,~~ "Parlez-moi d'amour" et "Plaisirs d'amour": "Plaisirs d'amour ne durent qu'un moment, chagrins d'amour durent toute la vie." C'est en grande partie la voix de ma mère en français que j'entends quand je récite, comme je le fais souvent, mes vers préférés: "Mort j'appelle de ta rigueur qui m'a [*sic*] ma maîtresse ravie."

[But before the teachers, there was the mother. My mother, a pianist and a singer, a vaudeville singer, used to murmur in French when she tucked me in each evening of my childhood: "I love you as I love cream, I love you as I love gold." Often, seated at the piano, she would play and sing two songs whose words have followed and pursued me ~~my whole life,~~ "Speak to me of love" and "Pleasures of love": "Pleasures of love last only a moment pains of love last one's whole life." To a large extent it is my mother's voice in French that I hear when I recite, as I often do, my favorite lines of poetry: "Death, I ask indulgence from your rigor, who has *(sic)* ravished my mistress."][5] (unpublished manuscript)

First of all, one might well wonder the extent to which Elaine might be harking back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his *Confessions* refers to the "lovely caressing words" and to the love songs intoned by his aunt, a substitute for his deceased mother: "Several of her songs have always remained in my memory; . . . some of them come back to me now that I

have lost her" (11). Philippe Lejeune notes about this passage: "When texts and voices have been erased . . . all that will remain will be to *write* and to *sing*. . . . This word, heard long ago, is no longer anything but a memory; to give it back presence, to make of it a living word once again, the only solution is to utter it again oneself" (*Le Pacte autobiographique* 110–11). To take Lejeune's statement a step further, let us point out that the image to which Elaine returns again and again, the piano, also implies that of the keyboard, and thus condenses music and writing.

Even if we suspect that this childhood memory is mixed up with literary memory in Elaine's text, the evocation of the bedtime song deserves closer scrutiny of its particular terms. Placed under the sign of repetition and quotation, by its very form the reminiscence would appear to anticipate the evocation of the piece of poetry that concludes it. Indeed, after the all-important term, "my mother," has been emphasized, the quotation of the mother in the second sentence is composed of a juxtaposition of two fragments of six syllables each: "Je t'aime comme de la crème, je t'adore comme de l'or" (in this intimate context, unlike formal poetry recitation, the mute "e" remains silent). This gives the mother's words the majestic rhythm of the Alexandrine, which is quite in keeping with the quotation of poetry that ends the passage. The text is also made poetic by numerous appositions, with particular reliance on graded parallelisms that create a crescendo effect: la mère / ma mère; aime / adore; crème / or; jouait / chantait; suivi / poursuivi; moment / vie (and, if one includes the part crossed out by the author, toute ma vie/ toute la vie).

Unlike the anguish associated with bedtime in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, when Marcel as a boy is uncertain whether his mother will (too rapidly) kiss him good night, the ritual of the bedtime scene in Elaine's memory is foreseeable—"each evening"—and its expression reassuringly invariable. The mother's word is limited to two loving comparisons entrusted to the little girl in an intimate tone ("murmurait") suggestive of pillow talk and in a foreign language, which only strengthens the sense of complicity between mother and daughter. A binary juxtaposition is used to mark the mother's musical repertory, "Parlez-moi d'amour" and "Plaisirs d'amour." In fact, the gradation of the expression of love in words ("aime" / "adore"; "crème" / "or") may well correspond to a "degradation" of the evocation of love in the two songs—juxtaposing the modern and the ancient—about which Elaine remains relatively discreet.

As opposed to the words that begin the song "Plaisirs d'amour," which date back to the eighteenth century, the words of "Parlez-moi d'amour"—a song Lucienne Boyer first performed in 1930, the year of Elaine Marks's birth—are conspicuously absent. The refrain of the song states: "Parlez-moi d'amour / Redites-moi des choses tendres / Votre beau discours / Mon cœur n'est pas las de l'entendre / Pourvu que toujours / Vous répétiez ces mots suprêmes / 'Je vous aime.'" [Speak to me of love / Tell me tender things again / Your fine words / My heart is not weary of hearing them / Provided that you repeat, always, / These ultimate words / "I love you."] The words create an effect of mise en abîme in relation to the repetition of the tender words pronounced every evening by the mother. The following couplet of the song makes use of a libidinal synesthesia, "Your voice with its *caressing* sounds," reminiscent of the "small *caressing* words" evoked by Rousseau. But the haunting nature of this memory for Elaine, who perhaps counters its effects by the gesture of crossing out ("followed and pursued me ~~my whole life~~") might be explained to some extent by the implications of the rest of the song, in which love is reduced to a love of words and a desire for repetition: "Vous savez bien / Que dans le fond je n'en crois rien / Mais cependant je veux encore / Ecouter ce mot que j'adore." [How well you know / That deep down I don't believe a word of it / But even so, I still want / To listen to this word I adore.]

The allusion in this first song to an "oath that reassures me" even in the absence of true belief is more explicitly dramatized in the second song that "pursues" Elaine, "Plaisirs d'amour." Here, Sylvie, the (mother) mistress, betrays her oath: "I will love you." Without having revealed the content of these songs that haunt her, to some extent Elaine gives her version of the story—of *her* story—through Villon's words, an expression of the despair of abandonment and irremediable loss: "Mort j'appelle de ta rigueur qui m'a ma maîtresse ravie." Here again, a brief contextualization is enlightening: this rondeau from the *Testament* expresses the passage from symbiosis ("Deux étions et n'avions qu'un cœur" [We were two and had but one heart]) to the relics of memory ("que je vive sans vie / Comme les images, par cœur" [let me live without life / Like images, by heart]) (88).

There is another noteworthy effect of parallelism in this passage. Perhaps in conformity with the precedence established by the opening sentence ("but *before* the teachers, there was the mother"), the narrator's favorite line of poetry inverts the two agents (*m'a ma* maîtresse); "mama[n]" is placed before the polysemic "maîtresse" [mistress]. What

is associated with the (school) mistress is the experience of reciting poetry, an apprenticeship that allows the author to get back her "ravished" mother. In the sound of her own voice, Elaine tells us that she hears her mother's. Paradoxically, in the act of repetition, the daughter replaces the mother at the same time she brings her back to life, thus defying fate's "rigor" (see Villon) by the repetition of words. By assimilating her mother's voice to utter the lines of poetry she will later learn, the daughter affirms her own identity and reacts to the threat of a potentially "ravishing" or "engulfing" mother ("I love you *like cream*") who, via the lyrics she used to perform, continues to "pursue" her child ([her] whole life).[6] What is needed, then, is to substitute other words and to fend off the threat, whether that of seduction by the "phallic mother" or on the contrary that of unfaithfulness in love and unreciprocated pleasure (wife "ravished" by the father?) through the death of the "mama mistress" [m'a ma maîtresse] implied by the Villon line Elaine "prefers."[7] Furthermore, the choice of the octosyllable, which clashes with the Alexandrine line uttered every evening by the mother, can also be envisioned as a betrayal in language, an attempt at differentiation by the daughter who in her very recitation takes on a different rhythm from the one in which the maternal discourse, bearer of the first offerings of love, is remembered.

This brings us back to Elaine's other childhood memory, in which she displaces and condenses elements of the passage we have just examined. "I was sitting at the piano and saying over and over again, *Dead forever and ever* and trying to comprehend 'forever'" (*Marrano as Metaphor* 153). Here, the daughter has clearly taken the mother's place at the piano and her obsessive discourse—presented as a personal intuition and not as repeated words—evokes a disappearance, a "crossing out" that remains enigmatic even though it could be read as a matricidal phantasm in which the term of nonreturn seems essential. But is there a way to escape the power of memory, words inscribed in the deepest part of our consciousness that bring back the mother's presence? In this light one could see a gesture of exorcism on Elaine's part when, revising her childhood memory, she crosses out and seeks to eliminate the phrase "my whole life," thus creating an infraction on narrative logic that risks lending a beyond-the-grave perspective to this autobiographical discourse. The abolition of temporal precision, not replaced by an expression such as "up to the present day," is all the more reassuring in that, by preserving the verbal tense ("have followed me and pursued me"), the revised version seems to imply that the maternal ascendancy has now passed.

The context of the memory of the bedtime scene in *Marrano* is revealing: it directly follows precise allusions to the mother's burial in which the daughter assumes her identity in a transgressive stance.[8] Nevertheless, this passage remains ambivalent when one observes a Freudian slip that seems to deny the desire for separation: Elaine changes a letter in the name of the city in New Jersey where Beth El Cemetery is located. Might she have been influenced by the legend of the Babylonian lovers Pyramus and Thisbe when she substitutes Piramus for Paramus? Indeed, in adapting the legend from Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* the twelfth-century Norman poem has Thisbe, lying on the dead body of Pyramus, lamenting their cruel separation and vowing to be buried in the same tomb.[9]

The terms used to evoke the memory of the bedtime scene in *Marrano* include several variants:

> When I was a child my mother, who was a singer, sang frequently in French (and also in German, Italian, Russian, English, and Yiddish). I remember specifically her singing "Parlez-moi d'amour" (Speak to me of love) and reciting almost each night at my bedside: "Je t'aime comme de la crème, je t'adore comme de l'or" (I love you as I love cream, I love you as I love gold). When I was a child, French was the language of desire and of love. (146).

In this excerpt—which repeats the phrase "when I was a child" like a refrain—the "every evening" of the preceding version becomes "almost every night"; the expression of love loses its intimate and personal side and resembles a cliché by being "recited" rather than "murmured." The mother is no longer said to be a pianist or a vaudeville singer; to compensate, she becomes a polyglot, a contrast that protects the child from a different threat related to being "devoured" (Elaine's term), that of monolingualism, to which Elaine refers in the passage of "Multiplicity and Mortality" which precedes this memory. The musical talents are in fact moved up into an earlier paragraph in which the mother's gifts are simply part of a family tradition: "On my mother's side of the family the women, my mother and her sisters, had all been on the stage: acting, singing, playing the piano, and dancing" (144).[10] Moreover, the first song quoted in the other version, "Plaisir d'amours," is eliminated so as to emphasize ("I remember specifically") the second one, "Parlez-moi d'amour," a song that, as we have seen, substitutes the experience of an endlessly repeated discourse of love for the actual lived experience of love.

The two childhood memories evoked and repeated by Elaine Marks focus on the grand piano. It is fair to assume that if as a child, whether

four or six years old, she is seated at the piano, it is because she is learning how to play, to "repeat" her scales, so as to follow a family tradition. But this is a tradition she will break with by finding her own desire and pleasure in the French language and in literature; these domains will allow her, in the course of her academic career, to perform the nuances of the refrain that obsessed the little girl, a refrain associated with the silent instrument and the death of the (maternal) grandfather: "Dead forever and ever."

For Elaine Marks, this piano, which she inherits upon her mother's death and contemplates on a daily basis while she "composes" her autobiographic fragments, has become an altarpiece of memories, an object that remains present when the entire family has passed away. Even if it now simply stands as a piece of furniture in her house, time could be erased and beings resurrected, provided that someone sat down at the keyboard and took the place that the mother used to occupy on the piano bench. As a memento (mori), the piano would replace the photo albums that are the starting points for autobiographical narratives such as Simone de Beauvoir's in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* or Georges Pérec's in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance.*

Exorcising Death with Words

All of Simone de Beauvoir's writing may be seen as a desperate effort to "exorcise death with words."
Elaine Marks, *Encounters with Death*

Writing is the opposite of making something present.
Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons*

The quick parallel we drew to Rousseau's *Confessions* suggested that beyond their potential for a psychoanalytic interpretation, the autobiographical fragments Elaine Marks presents might also be resonant on an intertextual level. Our task now is discussing in greater detail this influence of literary memory on personal phantasm by rereading the study Elaine devotes to her favorite author, whose own work is dominated by autobiographical tendencies. The theme of quotation and recitation that we noticed in Elaine's childhood memories becomes dominant in *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death.*

This critical work is structured in quite an unusual way: each chapter opens with a series of long passages translated from Simone de Beauvoir's works, sometimes stretching across four or five pages. Elaine

gives the originals of these quotations in an appendix that is no less than forty pages long. My analysis will focus on the choice of excerpts used to introduce chapters 2 and 4. In the way they intersect with the images and concerns Elaine expresses by the formula "I remember," these passages could be an illustration of Michael Sheringham's statement on what motivates autobiography: "Remembering is as much an activity of concealment and displacement as of preservation" (*French Autobiography* 320).

In chapter 2, "The Old Jacket: Intimations of Nothingness," Elaine presents us with three versions (six, if one counts the French versions in the appendix) of a childhood memory of Simone de Beauvoir's. In this phenomenon of repeating the same anecdote in a different framework, we observe a technique similar to the one Elaine uses to narrate her own childhood memory. Significantly, she opens her study of Simone de Beauvoir with a hint of intimacy by quoting a then-unpublished work, "L'Enfance de Françoise Miquel" [The Childhood of Françoise Miquel], which the author gave Elaine when she interviewed her in Paris.[11] This long passage is repeated in the following excerpt from *L'Invitée* [The Guest]; aside from the omission of two sentences from the introductory and concluding paragraphs in the second version, these excerpts are completely identical. The final fragment, a selection from *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* concisely recalls the incident related in these two narratives:

> I have related elsewhere how, at Meyrignac, I stupidly gazed at an old jacket thrown over the back of a chair. I tried to put myself, as it were, inside the jacket, and say: "I am a tired old jacket." It was quite impossible, and I was panic-stricken. In the darkness of the past, in the stillness of inanimate beings, I had dire forebodings of my own extinction; I conjured up delusive fallacies, and turned them into omens of the truth, and of my own death. (*Encounters with Death* 14)

In her commentary on the passage chosen to open her study, Elaine refers to Françoise's "first metaphysical experience" as a "moment of heightened awareness" (15). "[Françoise] is already, at the age of six, an antimystic, as her model and creator, Simone de Beauvoir, is to this day" (19). The critic specifies that the child intuitively "envisages being and nothingness exclusively in terms of language" (18). In light of these remarks, and in order to gain a better understanding of other parts of the textual commentary, let us recall certain terms from Elaine's childhood memory that run parallel to her interpretation of the experience of young Françoise:

I remember . . . *trying to come to terms* with the words *being dead forever and ever. I did not succeed.* ("Multiplicity and Mortality" 368, my emphasis)

Language is the only means that Françoise possesses of holding on to her world or of *attempting to come to terms* with new and strange experiences. . . . *the defeat of language* is total. (*Encounters with Death* 19, my emphasis)

The juxtaposition of the two experiences might justify the change of register in Elaine's commentary when she surprisingly abandons the literary critic's voice in favor of the psychologist's by noting:

It might be suggested, too, that the child who has undergone this kind of metaphysical initiation will never be quite as *docile* as the child who has not, and that this experience, *if it does indeed take place,* will be the central experience of the entire life. (*Encounters with Death* 21, my emphasis)[12]

On the one hand, Elaine's commentary on Françoise's experience and the transformation it implies could mask a personal confession, insofar as she reveals elsewhere that her own ontological crisis has conditioned her thought "during the past fifty-seven years" ("Multiplicity and Mortality" 368). On the other hand, the concessive clause "if it does take place" brings a new perspective on the memories of the six-year-old girl, inviting the reader to suspect an element of fantasy in the Françoise episode—as well as in Elaine Marks's personal reminiscences. Furthermore, the critic also seems to be speaking both about herself and about Beauvoir's character when she goes on to explain that such an experience implies a previous detachment from the structures imposed by family and religion.[13]

Let us now quote the end of the passage taken from "L'Enfance de Françoise Miquel" to refine the terms of the parallel: "Everything began spinning in [Françoise's] head as it did when she had a fit of anger and found herself, exhausted from crying and shouting, sprawled out on the floor. She went into her mother's room, took the book she had come for, and ran downstairs and out into the garden" (*Encounters with Death* 13). In referring to this passage, Elaine makes a comment that one may find surprising: "We are never told how [Françoise] feels." Moreover, her analysis overlooks an important detail: this episode of existential crisis is resolved through the quest for a book. Now, is it not a similar leap into literature that we find in the passage where Elaine tells of how she failed to "come to terms" with the experience of "non-being" (and where, indeed, "we are never told how [young Elaine] feels")? The evocation of the childhood memory in "Multiplicity and Mortality" is immediately

followed by a veritable library list, that is, a long inventory of the authors—twenty-two in all—who helped Elaine delve into (and better understand) her existential doubt. The analogy is still more obvious in what follows the episode as it is presented in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter.* Indeed, as abruptly as Elaine Marks does in her text, the narrator who has just alluded to the memory of the old jacket launches into a long retrospective of the readings of her youth, also in the form of a list (71–77). In this way, the movement "from anguish to flight" that Elaine perceives in young Françoise intersects with the reconstruction of her own experience and its failure. In both cases, "an anguished encounter with death is followed by a return to the human community" (*Encounters with Death* 19), more precisely to the intellectual community.

Chapter 4 of Elaine Marks's book on Simone de Beauvoir is entitled "The Death of Others: Initial Encounters." The quotation that opens the chapter corresponds to the very beginning of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas:* "I knew a child who cried because his concierge's son was dead. His parents let him cry and then they became annoyed. 'After all the little boy was not your brother.' The child wiped his eyes. But it was a dangerous precept. Yes, it is useless to cry over a stranger. But why cry over one's brother" (*Encounters with Death* 32). This event is developed in the long episode from *Le Sang des autres* that immediately follows in Elaine Marks's chapter and details the child's psychological experience. Elaine gives a third transposition of this anecdote by quoting a passage from *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* which makes it clear that the death of the servant Louise's baby corresponds to an experience of Simone de Beauvoir as a child.

In *Le Sang des autres,* the narrator, Jean, recalls an episode from his youth: "I was eight years old when for the first time I came face to face with the original evil" ["mon cœur a connu le scandale"]. His mother informs him of the death of Louise's baby, a revelation that deeply upsets the young boy in a way similar to Françoise's reaction in the episode just analyzed. "I was crying, Mother was talking, and the baby remained dead. In vain could I empty my money-box and Mother could sit up for nights together: *it would always be just as dead*" (32, my emphasis).

In the narration of what follows this episode, one can see a meaningful coincidence with the memory recounted by Elaine in "Multiplicity and Mortality" and in *Marrano:* the association of the piano with mortality. Having just become conscious of the irreversible character of death or, to borrow Elaine's terms in her own existential discovery, of the implications of "being dead forever and ever," Jean takes refuge

under the piano: "He had drunk his soup and eaten all his dinner. Now he was crouching under the grand piano" (33). It is precisely while he is under the piano that the images of death and mourning assail him: "He had dug his nails into the carpet. Louise's baby is dead. He forced himself to visualize the scene: Louise sitting on the edge of the bed, crying. . . ." The narration continues in the first person. "I slipped out from under the piano, and in bed I cried myself to sleep" (34).[14]

In this inverted, nightmarish version of Elaine's bedtime scene, the juxtaposition of the piano and the bed (where the mother sits alone and the child sleeps alone) confirms the phenomena of condensation and displacement that may have given rise to her childhood memory. To take the analogy further, two quotations that follow the narration of the death of Louise's baby in the critical essay deal with the deaths of Simone de Beauvoir's grandfathers.

Furthermore, in the conclusion to the chapter "The Old Jacket: Intimations of Nothingness," the critic recognizes that "[Françoise's experience] plays the role in the world of Simone de Beauvoir similar to the role played by the good-night kiss in Proust's novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It is present even when it is absent, as a necessary foundation—psychological and metaphysical—for the structures and images that come later" (21). This connection between the two scenes, which a priori seems somewhat arbitrary, can be taken as an indication of a contamination of Elaine's recollections of her own childhood by literary memories: it might even justify the connection between the memory of the existential experience of "being dead forever and ever" with that of the mother's presence each evening at her bedside.

Encounters with Simone de Beauvoir

> Through the heroine, I identified myself with the author.
> Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

> The guy who wrote *La Nausée*, that's who I wanted to be.
> Serge Doubrovsky, *Le Livre brisé*

In her critical commentaries on Colette and Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Marks clearly opposes the two women authors to whom she devoted the greater part of her career.[15] Simone de Beauvoir seems to have filled in a perceived gap, something lacking in Colette. In the first chapter of her study of the latter, Elaine clearly states: "Colette felt no estrangement from the world around her, no anxiety. . . . There is no metaphysical

anguish in Colette's world" (*Colette* 8–9). More specifically, Colette excludes any reflections about death from her writings: "Death, suffering and illness are all foreseen, and are dismissed as uninteresting. 'Death does not interest me—not even my own.' Only life is interesting" (215). What holds Elaine's interest—or rather her curiosity—in Colette's work is a moral imperative applied to daily experience, far from any existential speculation. It is significant, if we recall the representation of the critic's childhood memory, that she condenses Colette's message into a word that "pursues" the author her entire life, all the way up to her death; a word Colette's mother used to repeat: "This moral imperative is contained in the word '*Regarde*,' which meant to Colette, look, feel, wonder, accept, live. It was *the word most often used by her mother,* Sido, and it was the last word which Colette uttered before her death" (9, my emphasis).

If Colette's experiences remain somewhat distant from Elaine's ontological preoccupations, Simone de Beauvoir's are much closer to them.[16] In addition, the critic's quest to understand her new intellectual passion more clearly is helped along by having direct contact with an author who grants her several interviews. Elaine's affinity to Simone de Beauvoir is also reinforced by a common experience: they are both politically engaged teachers. In *The Prime of Life,* Simone de Beauvoir—a philosophy teacher from 1931 until 1944—states: "It seemed important to me to rid [my pupils] of a certain number of prejudices, to warn them about the hodgepodge that is called common sense, to give them a taste for truth" (110). Similarly, Elaine Marks seeks to "provoke students into an awareness of their precarious situation in the world" ("Multiplicity and Morality" 370; *Marrano as Metaphor* 13). This is in fact the position she adopts in her presidential address in Toronto: putting the convention room on a par with the classroom, she concludes her presentation to the assembly by recalling our mortal condition, "a pressing message that is also a banal truth" (373). In spite of these commonalities of thought and experience, Elaine Marks's relation with Simone de Beauvoir's writing is ambivalent to say the least, especially in the book she devotes to the author.[17] On the level of the volume's conception, a rather flagrant attempt at appropriation can be seen. By contrast, on the level of actual interpretation, Elaine definitely takes her distance from Simone de Beauvoir's thought.

Elaine Marks's reticence in accepting the title of her book, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death,* may be indicative of a certain uneasiness about her identity as a critic. In different versions of her curriculum

vitae, she transforms it systematically into *Encounters with Death: An Essay on the Sensibility of Simone de Beauvoir.*[18] It is true that the juxtaposition of the two parts of the "real" title can be somewhat confusing. On the book's cover, Simone de Beauvoir's name dominates Elaine Marks's by its position at the top of the page, the size of its characters, and its color contrast. The title alone, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death,* might pass for an essay—even an autobiographical work—by Simone de Beauvoir, all the more so as it is very much in keeping with others of Beauvoir's, like *All Men Are Mortal, The Coming of Age,* and *A Very Easy Death.* In the title Elaine substitutes for the official one, Simone de Beauvoir becomes more clearly an object of study, by way not of her sense but of her sensibility. This corresponds to the critic's point of view—a combination of psychologist and analyst.

I have already mentioned the unusual prominence and placement of quotations in the book. To some extent the chosen passages compete with the critical commentary, going so far as to dominate it at times. For example, chapter 8 presents ten pages of quotations and six of commentary. Elaine Marks justifies her strategy in the first paragraph of her preface: "Lengthy quotations from Simone de Beauvoir's writings open most of the chapters of this book. They are intended to make the book self-sufficient and to enable the reader to follow the argument more easily. The physical distance between the text and the comment is thus considerably reduced. The translations that are not followed by an English title are mine" (n.p.). Thus Elaine Marks intends to assure the autonomy of her book, to make it self-sufficient, by including an unusually large number of quotations. It might be pointed out that as a result, Simone de Beauvoir's writings also acquire a certain autonomy by being kept separate from the critical discourse. One may wonder whether the effect of Elaine's strategy is not to bring the text closer to the commentary but rather to emphasize the distance between the two by their physical separation. This phenomenon is given even greater stress by the presence, at the end of the book, of the notes section that gives the original versions of the anthologized texts, uninterrupted except for two critical references.

In several sections of the appendix, Elaine Marks also spurns the conventions of literary criticism. Inserted between the conclusion and the bibliography is a page entitled "Simone de Beauvoir" consisting of two quotations and a kind of identity card ("Name: Simone de Beauvoir. Date of Birth: January 2, 1908. Place of Birth: Paris, France"; the list continues with "Marital status," "Profession," "Mother's name," "Father's

name," etc.). The first quotation is taken from Alain's *Propos de littérature:* "In the same way George Sand, whose life, like all lives, was mediocre, misshapen, and incomplete, was able to create the unique figure of Consuelo, a model in whom every woman finds something to imitate and every man the means to understand and to love every woman" (128). The second quotation takes up the idea of the exceptional in the universal: "Her life was a failure, like every life, but on a grand scale" (Maurois, *Lélia*). By omitting the second part of Maurois's title—the full title is *Lélia ou la vie de George Sand* [Lélia; or, the Life of George Sand], Elaine plays on the confusion between Sand's novel and Maurois's biography.

Aside from the fact that these two female writers have often been associated, the choice of two reflections about George Sand rather than about Simone de Beauvoir might be explainable in terms of the relation between music (singing and piano-playing) and the discovery of existential anguish in Elaine Marks / Simone de Beauvoir: indeed, in Sand's novel, Consuelo—a model for all women—is an Italian singer haunted by visions of her late husband. In this novel organized around song and voice, Sand states: "Music is a more complete and more persuasive language than speech" (385). Moreover, *Consuelo* is composed to the beat of a piano, the rhythm of George Sand's passion for Frederic Chopin, who had moved in with her.[19] It is interesting to note that the polysemic phrase "on a grand scale" in the second quotation once again fits into a network of musical terms.

The list of Major Works juxtaposed to this page is limited to a choice of Simone de Beauvoir's texts; Elaine Marks refers the reader to the work of another critic, Serge Julienne-Caffie, for a more complete list of primary texts. The lack of references to any other Beauvoir commentator in the bibliography is somewhat compensated for by the following section, "Word Portraits," a series of nine quotations taken from critical texts and interviews that help paint a physical and spiritual portrait of the author.[20] Next comes a "Résumé," a section whose title does not give a very clear idea of the content: a three-page biographical narrative of Simone de Beauvoir's life. Thus, Elaine becomes a biographer; she rewrites the author's life in her own way, "based on the first three volumes of her memoirs" (134).

If at the level of the conception and the structure of *Encounters with Death* Elaine Marks apparently attempts to appropriate the author, her judgments on Beauvoir tend toward rejection and condemnation. Elaine's main reproach to Simone de Beauvoir is that she does not go

far enough. The terms "escape" and "inability" are recurrent in her comments. For example, we read: "The inability to relate to past feelings in the present, the abrupt exclusion of an entire region of sensibility, can only result in a drastic reduction and simplification of the human case. Simone de Beauvoir's naïveté is the manifestation of the either-or malady, as is the weightlessness of so many of her moral assertions and those of her characters" (119). The conclusion of the study states: "The body of her writing is a 'meditation on death.' . . . Her evasions are attributes of her conditioning. It is viscerally impossible for her not to erect some line of defense" (126–27). More specifically, in the analysis of the death of Louise's baby, which we saw in counterpoint to Elaine's own memory, we find the remark "the inability to confront an experience that does not directly touch the feelings is a psychological and an intellectual limitation. It involves, as well as an excessive egotism, a dangerously restricted perspective" (43). Might we read between the lines and say that the remedy to this would be the immediate ontological experience of the piano, in which Elaine, rather than wasting time on description, cuts directly to essence: "to be dead forever and ever"? The general implication of the essay on Beauvoir would be that the critic—adopting now the perspective of a psychologist, now that of a philosopher—takes on the task of filling in the gaps left by Simone de Beauvoir's work, of making us understand what the author is unable to show us. In spite of it all, Beauvoir's text undeniably serves as a basis for Elaine Marks's reflection.

At the end of *Encounters with Death,* Elaine introduces the concept of model, but with a certain uneasiness insofar as it is associated with a question of unrecognized and/or refused identification. In the penultimate chapter, "The Death of Mother," Elaine Marks scolds Simone de Beauvoir for not seeing the supreme model she is conforming to: "It is almost as if Simone de Beauvoir were ashamed to admit consciously both the process of identification and the degree to which she identifies with her mother" (107). These terms seem meaningful for an interpretation of the critic's ambivalent feelings toward the literary figure of Simone de Beauvoir, given the obvious indications of an intellectual symbiosis. Elaine utters another reproach related to the context of influence, one concerning Beauvoir's attitude toward her readers. Here we find another evocation of the limits of the metaphysical argument:

"My own story" is at the origin of Simone de Beauvoir's vocation and a definition of her entire writing career; a metaphysical exhibitionism, an attempt to

expose her being to the widest possible public. This mania for image-making has detrimental effects on exploration, analysis, lucidity, and on literary creation itself. . . . The ideal reader is an alter ego, Simone de Beauvoir contemplating Simone de Beauvoir. When Simone de Beauvoir is not engaged in telling her own story, not creating her image and receiving its salutary reflection, she falls apart. (115)

It would appear that through the comments and judgments expressed in *Encounters with Death,* Elaine wishes to emphasize for her reader that she will not fall into the trap set by Simone de Beauvoir, that she refuses to become this "alter ego."

Several critics have pointed out Elaine's hostile position in her book on Simone de Beauvoir.[21] What we might draw from this lack of "docility" expressed in *Encounters with Death* is an attempt to put a maternal literary model to death. Is the concluding chapter, "The Death of Simone de Beauvoir," not a way of digging the author's grave? This intellectual "matricide" is not completely separable from a desire to outdo the mother, sometimes expressed in terms of a humanitarian mission. As a general rule, presenting Simone de Beauvoir as a countermodel, revealing the ins and outs of her thought, might be seen as a strategy that allows the critic to discover her own intellectual identity. But just as Elaine observes that she continues to hear her biological mother's voice in her own, little by little she will be led in her own "recitation" to become reconciled with the image—"ravishing" as well—of the author who obviously had the greatest influence on her thought and even, we may venture to say, her childhood memories.

In her more recent writings on Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Marks revises her hostile position toward Beauvoir, first becoming more lenient toward her, then recognizing her admiration. That the author's image has evolved a great deal since the 1970s, her name now associated in the public eye with the feminist revolution, must not, of course, be overlooked.[22] But it would appear that beyond these considerations of reputation, Elaine's change of attitude includes a more personal dimension. In the 1987 article "Transgressing the (In)continent Boundaries: The Body in Decline," she assesses her position in *Encounters with Death:*

I argued that Simone de Beauvoir was obsessed with mortality. I attempted to describe how this obsession took the form of exploring encounters with death at the same time as these encounters were aborted by the construction of an ideology that emphasized commitment to a cause. In the dialectical movement between mortality and commitment, mortality was, temporarily at least,

subsumed and obliterated. . . . In 1985 I take up some of my earlier positions and argue, but differently, that even though Simone de Beauvoir's texts do not go as far as I would have liked them to go, they do go further than most. (186)

Nine years later, the chapter on Simone de Beauvoir in *Marrano,* "The Corset and the Corpse," marks an even more radical reversal: "There is in her novels, memoirs, essays a constant awareness of memento mori, and on the other hand a dedication to the urgent need for social change" (106). As if she had forgotten her former accusation, Elaine Marks writes:

There has been, during the second half of the twentieth century, a *massive flight by most isms,* including feminisms, away from Heideggerian anguish and care as categories of fundamental human beings. *Simone de Beauvoir has not fled.* To the contrary. . . . A similar investment in questions of life and death can be found today only in texts by theologians. (107, my emphasis)

It is worth noting that these two statements relate to two of the main themes presented by Elaine as representative of her own itinerary:

In the late 1980s, while working on a book manuscript entitled "The Jewish Presence in French Writings," I began to notice another change of direction in my thinking: *a movement away from isms* and ideological investigations . . . a movement marked in the classroom by the desire to teach mortality *and* community, intellectual pleasure *and* social commitment. ("Multiplicity and Mortality" 372, emphasis in the original)

Ironically, a reading of these passages seems to imply a complete position reversal: it is apparently Elaine who is escaping here, not the woman she accused of the very same action. Her position shift might help to explain the absence of references to *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death* in *Marrano as Metaphor,* in the chapter on Beauvoir as well as in the bibliography, as if to make a disclaimer about an earlier judgment. The omission is all the more surprising since the Jewish question is dealt with in chapter 6 of *Encounters with Death* ("Death and the Occupation"). In contrast, Elaine includes all the works of Simone de Beauvoir in her bibliography, as opposed to a highly selective list of other references: twenty-seven titles for Beauvoir and only three for Freud, for example, who is nonetheless presented as "a constant figure in [her] affective and intellectual life" (*Marrano as Metaphor* 143).

The combination of these factors leads us to recognize a progressive but ambiguous identification in Elaine Marks's relation to Simone de

Beauvoir. Moreover, the critic recalls this process in the introduction to her edited volume, *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir,* published a year after the author's death in 1986: "To the degree that her life, as she wrote it, has become exemplary, Simone de Beauvoir has succeeded in accomplishing, through her writing, the goals she defined in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter:* 'Through the heroine [Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*] I identified myself with the author [George Eliot]'" (10). It would however appear that this identification between Elaine Marks as a reader and Simone de Beauvoir (or, through her, characters like Françoise or Jean who are in the throes of existential crises) can be clearly stated only after the model's death. In an interview for the *Capital Times,* a Madison newspaper, six weeks after Beauvoir's death, Elaine Marks has come a long way since she showed her reticence as a critic twenty years earlier by picking apart the flaws in the late author's thinking; now she is glorifying her: "I don't think there is any question that Simone de Beauvoir was the most important woman writer and thinker of this century, and perhaps of all time. . . . She is one of the most important role models women have ever had."[23] In response to the journalist's inquiry as to whether Beauvoir was indeed a "role model" for her, Elaine recognizes that she was: "Very definitely—she certainly affected my psyche and self-image. The impact she had on me is enormous" (Stockinger, "French Writer Beauvoir" 17).

But my real rival was my mother.
Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

At gatherings of family and friends, my mother, as story-teller, was the central figure.
Elaine Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor*

At the end of *Marrano,* Elaine Marks considers her love for French in relation to the evocation of her childhood memories with a parallelism of cause and effect: "When I was a child my mother, who was a singer, sang frequently in French. . . . When I was a child French was the language of desire and of love" (146). This passage refers us to a postscript, the last words Elaine Marks publishes before her death, in which as an only child she recognizes a sister (soul): "This chapter was written before I had read Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons.* On the last page of her 'memoir' she asks the question: 'Why did I hide in French?' (216). I

suspect that for Alice Kaplan, as for myself, French was both a hiding place and a 'coming out'" (*Marrano as Metaphor* 162).

Elaine's comment allows us to revisit the crucial scene of the piano in Simone de Beauvoir insofar as it is emblematic of the process of "hiding" and "coming out." Let us recall the circumstances: for the first time the narrator, Jean, experiences the "scandal" of death and escapes from the table where he is being forced to eat. "Now he was *crouching under the grand piano; . . .* He looked at his mother. . . . He had dug his nails into the carpet. Louise's baby is dead." Then, moving into the first person as if the existential experience ("her death enters into my life, but I do not enter into her death") had given him an identity, the narrator continues: "*I slipped out from under the piano,* and in bed I cried myself to sleep" (*Encounters with Death* 33–34, my emphasis).

In conclusion, then, an entire network of displacements and condensations complements the analogy Elaine herself establishes between (love for the) Mother and (love of) French. A third term, the piano, is associated not only with Ruth Elin Marks but also with Simone de Beauvoir, whose work, we might speculate, is like a "grand piano" Elaine slips under and hides, "her nails dug into the carpet," in order to reflect on existence, to "encounter death" in many forms. When she "slips from under the piano," however, it is not to "cry herself to sleep." On the contrary, she comes out of her hiding place to take the place of her mother—sitting at the piano—to perform, in her own way, the tune that expresses a universal anguish and to share her own message about "multiplicity and mortality" as a "wake-up call" for her audience and readers. But also—should the musical instrument remain silent—"amid the pressure and the pains of living, to advocate the multiple pleasures of the word" ("Multiplicity and Mortality" 374). If the refrain "dead forever and ever" that Elaine repeated as a child seated at the piano seemed so unfathomable to her, perhaps it is because her intuition already gave her a glimpse into the salutary and paradoxically threatening power of art, whose forms of expression, by their very seductiveness, never stop "following" us, "pursuing" us, and leaving us at a loss.

It is this message she shares with us by calling Proust back to life when she recites a passage from *A la recherche du temps perdu* to conclude her speech "Multiplicity and Mortality." Here are the final words: "After the glowing center from which they emanate has been extinguished, be it called Rembrandt or Vermeer, they continue to send us their own rays of light" (374).

Postlude: Playing with/on the Grand Piano

> But I finally gave in: I could finally play the scale; but I felt I was learning the rules of *a game,* not acquiring knowledge.
>
> Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*
>
> (my emphasis)

> Françoise [Simone's mother] played the piano. Georges [Simone's father] recited passages from *Cyrano. . . .* In this *playful* atmosphere, Simone grows and flourishes.
>
> Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Simone de Beauvoir*
>
> (my emphasis)

Elaine loved quotations. A highly resonant line from Paul Valéry's *Cimetière marin* is inscribed on her tombstone: "Tout va sous terre et rentre *dans le jeu*" [Everything goes under earth and goes back *into the game*]. Even if the memory of Vinteuil's sonata in Proust implicitly informs my discussion, it is a passage from a contemporary of the author of *A la recherche du temps perdu,* Romain Rolland, that I would like to present as my final homage to my much-missed friend who—now it is my turn to recognize filiation—also played a maternal role for me. The excerpt is an episode from the childhood of Jean-Christophe, a rebellious and unyielding boy raised, like Elaine, in a family of musicians but, unlike her (and young Simone[24]), musically gifted:

> He is alone. He opens the piano, brings a chair up to it, squats on top; his shoulders barely come up to the level of the keyboard. . . . His heart is pounding as he presses down on a key with his finger; sometimes he raises it back up after pushing halfway down and lets it rest on another key. Do you ever know what is going to come out of this one, rather than that one? . . . Suddenly the sound rises up: there are deep one, sharp ones. . . . They are like spirits. How they can be so obedient, how they can be contained in this old crate, that is what can't be explained! . . . Their voices swell; they scream with rage, sometimes with gentleness. Christophe loves this game so much. . . . In this way the child strolls through the forest of sounds, and he feels around him thousands of unknown forces, which spy on him and call to him, to caress or to devour him. (58)

NOTES

1. Elaine Marks, "Simone de Beauvoir," *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* 43. For more details about Beauvoir's death, see also Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 614–15.

2. The term is borrowed from Cixous. "I understand the word Juifemme as used by Hélène Cixous to be a conscious attempt to write against the fixed ethnic and gender meanings of fundamentalist or identity politics" (143).

3. From Elaine's initiation into the writings of Colette and Simone de Beauvoir as a student at New York University, Germaine Brée remains an essential figure in her intellectual life as well as a constant presence in her intimate life. On the professional level, their paths crossed at Bryn Mawr College, New York University, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. It is worth noting that the "daughter's" adoption of the "mother's" name juxtaposed with her own in the professional world is not without consequence in this age of electronic research: any search for the name of Elaine Marks inevitably leads to the name of Germaine Brée.

4. See Freud, "Childhood and Screen Memories." For a discussion of the Freudian theory in relation to autobiography, see, for example, Sheringham, *French Autobiography,* 297 ff.

5. Elaine Marks modifies the conjugation implied by Villon's apostrophe: "m'as ma maîtresse."

6. The phenomenon of the absorption of food is indeed connected to Elaine's second ontological experience relating to death, about "bacon," for which she had "an inordinate fondness": "my attempts at comprehending where the taste went when it was no longer in my mouth, the complete absence of what had been so overwhelmingly present" (*Marrano as Metaphor,* 153).

7. Elaine Marks uses the term "phallic mother" herself in referring to her mother (*Marrano,* 144). From this perspective, let us recall the ambivalence of the French verb "poursuivre" [pursue], which can mean "to attempt to catch up with someone who is trying to get away"; "to attempt to be granted sexual favors" ("Petit Robert" dictionary). For a study of the mother/daughter relation in this context of seduction/matricide, see, for example, Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender,* and Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis.* See also Alex Hughes, "Murdering the Mother in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,*" and Alice Jardine, "Death Sentences: Writing Couples and Ideology."

8. "The rabbi, hastily found for the occasion and coached by me on what not to say, called for someone to read the graveside Kaddish. I am an only child, divorced and unmarried, and I stepped forward with the righteous gentile woman with whom I live" (*Marrano,* 146).

9. In Théophile de Viau's play *Les amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé,* the reuniting of the lovers in death is linked to digestive assimilation. Believing the lion has devoured Thisbé, Pyrame asks him to devour him in turn: "Mon âme avec la sienne ainsi se mêlera" [Thus will my soul be mixed with hers] (5: 1). An interesting detail is that Elaine Marks died on October 6, 2001, twenty years almost to the day after the death of her own mother, Ruth Elin Marks, October 9, 1981.

10. Ruth Elin Marks, Elaine's mother, is one of the two Corelli sisters whose career on the New York vaudeville stage spanned the 1920s; she also performed at Carnegie Hall as a pianist. Elaine's maternal grandfather was first violin with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. (I am grateful to Marianne

Schwob-Ferrara for having confirmed these biographical details.) Elaine did not share the family talent for singing and music.

11. See preface, n.p. The two unpublished chapters from *L'Invitée*—"removed by the author on the advice of Brice Parain"—have since been published in the appendix of *Les Ecrits de Simone de Beauvoir,* 275–316.

12. A review of the book in the *New York Times Book Review* comments on this tendency: "What the book lacks as literary criticism it makes up in its individual perception of the writer: one can detect the contours of a psychological study Marks seems about ready to write" (May 6, 1973, 42). Significantly, the book is classified under the rubric "Death—Psychology" in the Book Review Digest.

13. Among other signs of the family's nonconformism, the conclusion of *Marrano* emphasizes the fact that "*The Future of an Illusion* (1927) was the Torah in our house" (145).

14. The scene is brought up again later in the novel: "One night, under the piano, he had dug his nails into the carpet, and that bitter thing had been in his throat; but he was only a child, he had wept and gone to sleep" (*Encounters with Death,* 56). Shortly after the reference to the death of Louise's baby in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* Beauvoir returns to the image of carpeting to allude to a developing awareness of mortality: "One afternoon, in Paris, I realized that I was condemned to death. I was alone in the house and I did not attempt to control my despair. I screamed and tore at the red carpet" (138).

15. Simone de Beauvoir remains in Elaine Marks's critical repertoire for her whole career. A chapter of *Marrano* is devoted to her. In 1999, Marks lists under research in progress a book project entitled "The Death of God: From Fin-de-Siècle to Fin-de-Siècle" in which she planned to include Simone de Beauvoir.

16. Germaine Brée herself, who introduced Elaine Marks to Colette's work and to Simone de Beauvoir's, remarks: "No literary personality could be further removed from Colette than Simone de Beauvoir. . . . There could hardly be a more striking contrast between the scope and literary quality of their works" (*Women Writers in France,* 53).

17. Another noteworthy detail: whereas Elaine Marks's mother makes a name for herself in vaudeville, Simone de Beauvoir's father is fond of pantomime and comedy (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* 33–34; Francis and Gontier, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 21–22).

18. See also the biographical summary on the cover of *Marrano.* To this date, the website of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has kept this variation (http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/frit/French/Faculty/Faculty.html, accessed March 2004).

19. In *My Life* George Sand describes Chopin's anguish and his fear of death when he is seated at the piano (231–33).

20. This lack is in spite of the fact that about a dozen critical studies on Beauvoir had been published since 1960.

21. Another expert on Simone de Beauvoir, Elizabeth Fallaize, notes: "The tone of [Marks's] 1972 study is at times overtly hostile. . . . Beauvoir is accused of narcissism, naivety, arrogance, and lack of imagination in relation to the suffering of others" (132). Toril Moi also remarks: "[Marks's] study also amounts to a scathing condemnation of Beauvoir herself. As her argument proceeds,

consciously or unconsciously, Marks's tone becomes increasingly hostile. . . . Beauvoir is egocentric, emotionally and intellectually inadequate, and prone to hysterical and ideological distortions of reality as well" (86).

22. Taking stock of Simone de Beauvoir's impact and contradictions in the final words of the biography she devotes to her, Deirdre Bair sees in the author "a mother of us all" (618).

23. Elaine Marks also mentions in her article on the author in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that "she may be the best-known woman writer of all times" (43).

24. "My scales and Czerni exercises were always a scramble, so that in the pianoforte examinations I was always near the bottom" (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* 68).

The Story of a Woman's Life in and through Time

ISABELLE DE COURTIVRON

In an essay published in 1995, Elaine Marks cautioned against a recurring opposition in feminist texts between what she defined as the poetic and the political:

> Feminist discourses, in concert with other politically tendentious discourses, tend to direct arguments and select theories that will help protect the concepts of social change and female agency. Feminist discourses are legitimately fearful of universalizing language, but these discourses run the risk of ignoring theories that are suspicious of progress and social change, theories that attempt to come to terms with human situations and questions for which there are neither practical solutions nor logical answers.[1]

Marks called for a "double vision," a double strategy, one that acknowledges both poetic and political practices. In her view, not only was it essential to live with contradictions, but it was also salutary for feminist inquiry. Although she did not articulate the difference between the poetic and the political as a French versus American one—and indeed she quoted a number of writers and critics who didn't line up along such simplistic national lines—she was nevertheless attentive to the cultural specificities that structured this opposition. This essay attempts to shed light on certain differences between French and Anglo-American cultural attitudes as they relate to the ways women on both sides of the Atlantic experience and respond to the aging process.

For Elaine, for me, for many other "Women in French" of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, our relationships to literary heroines and to women writers changed over time, as did the ways we read their texts, both critically and autobiographically. Most of our "life passages" were analyzed through the grid of writers' experiences as they problematized these in fiction, essays, poetry, and autobiography. When it came to the later part of the existential journey, however, it was almost easier to deal with the subject of death, for in a way it was more philosophically weighty and more romantic—not to mention more abstract at the time—than with the subject of aging. Colette offered one of the few examples of women authors who had written about midlife and older years so intimately, but the reality of it still seemed far away for many of us. Thus it was not until reaching the proverbial "dangerous age" and studying closely what women writers have had to say about this ambiguous phase that I began to detect a number of new and clearly delineated cultural differences between French- and English-language women writers. I would like to suggest that exploring these may shed further light on the conflict between "the question of power and the question of being" that, as a feminist with a bicultural vision, Marks encouraged us to resolve by embracing the vibrant contradictions in our lives.[2]

Particularizing the Experience of Literature

At every stage of my life, I have turned to women writers as models and countermodels.

George Sand was one of the earliest in this series. As I emerged from my French "jeune fille rangée" upbringing, Sand represented the free spirit, the androgynous, liberated woman, the energetic revolutionary, the indefatigable *provocatrice* of her milieu, the sexually active and socially defiant figure whom I could admire at a time when I was in my twenties and when intellectual and sexual challenges dovetailed with the energy of the sixties. I became less enthusiastic when I delved into *Lélia.* I read the novel as a cautionary tale, a concession by Sand that autonomy and intellectual endeavors could transform a woman into a passionless being, as if it were the inevitable punishment for usurping the masculine freedom to love, to work, and to write.

Nevertheless, I went on to graduate school in the United States, where I resolutely moved into my Anglo-American feminist phase. These were my Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Marilyn French, Gloria Steinem, Erica Jong, and Doris Lessing years. *The Female Eunuch* and

Sexual Politics provided the analysis; *The Golden Notebook* provided the narrative. Anna and Molly sitting in their London flat, referring to themselves as "free women," represented a completely new category in which women, no longer defined by their relationship to men, observed the institution of marriage from "the safety of the sidelines." Doris Lessing had created the first contemporary women characters to whom I could fully relate. Like Sand, she was unafraid to show the high price paid for this freedom. She chronicled the uncompromising, neurotic hyper-consciousness of her heroines; the fragmentation of their lives symbolized by Anna's four notebooks; their insecurity; the raw, tentative, unfinished nature of their "pioneering" existence; their tense and conflicted relationship with men; and, most of all, their loneliness. But she also focused on friendships between women in ways that I had never found in any other book, friendships based not just on common rebellion but on boundless discussions, on the incessant exchange of words and ideas. In their conversations I saw the reflection of those I held daily with my own friends. For years, I would follow Martha Quest, then Anna Wulf, and finally Kate Brown, through various stages, crises, and epiphanies. But although they never ceased to reassure me that I was not alone, their frightening experience of mental disintegration (and ultimately, that of Kate Millett's heroines as well) sometimes seemed as discouraging as Lélia's fate.

As I neared the age of thirty, Simone de Beauvoir began to prevail. I admired her cerebral commitments, her political principles, her pioneering and controlled feminist analysis, her refusal of marriage and motherhood, the way she lived out her ideal of balancing freedom and companionship in her relationship with Sartre. My rebellion against my milieu, my education, and my family; my belief in the intellect, in "projects" and in transcendence; and my scorn for tepid compromises in any domain closely resembled hers. Only gradually did I begin to read between the lines and to balk at her distrust of the female body and at her adherence to a reductive version of the intellectual. Having been an inspiration for me during the glorious and Manichean years of my more youthful rebellions, Beauvoir's life project increasingly began to appear as denial. As I gradually acknowledged the inevitable complexities and ambivalences that dominated so many aspects of my own life, intellectual as well as emotional, I hungered for ways to deal with these, not to repress them as I felt Beauvoir had done.

So, in my forties, I turned to Colette. Her need for passion and the resulting temptation of submitting to a lover's will initially made me

wary; yet I began to recognize that what drew me to her was her lucid acceptance of contradictions. As I read and reread her books, I understood that they were all about negotiating solitude. Although her writings were inhabited by dogs, cats, lovers, fellow artists, a mother, and a daughter, she was constantly in search of a delicate equilibrium between the self's need for solitude and the self's need for others, between the enslavement of passion and the reconciliation with the autonomous self. I admired Colette for being unafraid to reveal her vulnerabilities and her fragilities and at the same time for refusing to capitulate to them. It seemed to me that she embraced rhythms, emotions, and forces she could not control, that she accepted love, need, loss, and the inevitable changes they wrought but that she always deftly guided such changes into forces of self-renewal.

Yet the cultural duality of my own life made Colette's model only partially acceptable. It resonated with my French side. But my American side resisted turning love and desire, or the loss thereof, into the only markers of a woman's life. After all, the enduring fascination with this writer on both sides of the Atlantic stems from precisely such ambivalence.

Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Doris Lessing—these writers hovered around the younger women we once were, infiltrating themselves into our conversations over the years. We sought in the apprenticeship of literary women the lessons that we could not learn from the generation of our mothers. And, indeed, they were as real to us as our own mothers, because in many ways they provided a striking counterpoint to the latter's more confined lives. Even when we became a generation of orphans, these writers continued to make us feel that we were still daughters and always would be. All those books read over the years from our intimate literary pantheon showed us how to live. Yes, there were many men writers too. I remember devouring *War and Peace* on a Spanish beach when others were focusing on their tans, I was mesmerized by Patrick White's incandescent *Voss* and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* when I lived alone on top of a mountain one winter in Switzerland. I read all of Dickens when I lived in England trying to become Doris Lessing. I read D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Wolfe, Theodore Dreiser, and John Updike when I first entered graduate school, as an antidote to those refined French classics that I was meant to dissect with a deconstructionist scalpel. I read Basho, Mishima, and Natsume when I was in Nara, in the hope of becoming a Buddhist. I read García Marquez and Carlos Fuentes before heading off for

Mexico. Proust taught me the power of memory, Montaigne the courage of self-confrontation. The complete list of my own intimate literary pantheon would be a very long one indeed. But as I look back, it is clear to me that it is primarily *women* writers who have been my guides, my mentors, and my models, and that it was the challenges, the exhilaration, and the difficulties of their search for freedom that, as I got older, I hoped to learn from and emulate.

I was always captivated by narratives of liberation. As Phyllis Rose suggests, the literature of women's lives is a "tradition of escapees" *(The Norton Book of Women's Lives)* and the title of Jessica Mitford's memoir *Daughters and Rebels* could indeed define most of the texts in this tradition. For a long time, my fascination with these colorful and painstaking journeys led me to focus exclusively on the more youthful rebellions and the arduous process of escape of their narrators, but it obscured the open-ended continuation of each individual trajectory. Indeed, I did not give any thought to what would happen after one escaped—or even what that term really meant.

"Et maintenant, que vais-je faire?" (Apologies to Gilbert Bécaud)

Eventually, however, the "escapees" stopped writing about liberation and began to explore midlife dilemmas. So as I neared fifty, it became quite evident that in their descriptions of this part of the existential journey the perceptions and attitudes of French and Anglo-Saxon women clearly outweighed the similarities. But first, the similarities—for virtually all personal narratives by women that deal with aging, whether written in French or in English—exhibit similar patterns. They begin with the shock (Beauvoir would say "le scandale") of turning fifty—which, in previous generations, would probably have been thirty, then forty. It is a marker that brings with it the twin realizations of invisibility and mortality or, as Phyllis Rose puts it, "the fear of the unlived life."[3] What follows this jarring awareness is often described by women writers as a "pause." The narrator reaches a summit (sometimes a plateau) from which she can look both backward and forward, gauging how far she has climbed and with what difficulty, and from which she can scrutinize with lucidity what lies ahead. Some narrators focus on the horizons ahead, eventually referring to the rest of their lives as the second act, or a new beginning. In their case, the pause serves to free them from social expectations and lets them harness their

newly found energy toward the future and the world. Others, looking inward, linger nostalgically on the paths already traveled: for these writers, the pause is a first step on the road back, as they prepare themselves for detachment and poetic serenity.

The pause that follows the initial shock of recognition is, I found, where cultural differences clearly appeared: the particular theme of "le retour" was more pronounced in French texts (as in the euphemism "le retour d'âge"?), whereas the "new beginning" version tended to occur more often in English and American texts.[4]

Here is Beauvoir, at fifty: "To grow old is to set limits on oneself, to shrink. . . . I have lived stretched out toward the future, and now I am recapitulating, looking back over the past."[5] And Colette: "Everything is much as it was in the first years of my life, and little by little I recognize the road back."[6] On the contrary, Gloria Steinem asserts: "From this new vantage point, I see that my notion of age bringing detachment was probably just one more bias designed to move some groups out of the way" and adds: "the older I get the more intensely I feel about the world around me."[7] Carolyn Heilbrun writes: "The turning point of fifty, I had become convinced, ought to form as vital a milestone in a woman's life as graduation, promotion, marriage, or the birth or adoption of a child. . . . I wanted to urge women to see this new life as different, as a beginning, as a time requiring the questioning of all previous habits and activities, as, inevitably, a time of profound change."[8]

The narrator's confrontation with her mirror is a recurring topos in the midlife memoir, regardless of generational differences and of which side of the Atlantic it is written. But the reaction to being or, more accurately, no longer being an object of desire and the awareness of new social and sexual invisibility are construed either as cruel or as liberatory phenomena, depending on specific cultural parameters. In other words, these depend both on the construction of femininity of a particular society and the degree to which a woman's identity has been invested in the latter. In this respect as well, two distinct patterns tend to predominate, neither of which is particularly reassuring to this middle-aged Franco-American reader of women's texts.

In Doris Lessing's classic text *The Summer before the Dark,* Kate Brown, a forty-five-year-old wife and mother who is left on her own for the first time during one summer in London, undergoes a major physical and mental breakdown. This crisis has to do with her loss of identity when she realizes that her own image has always been fashioned by others' expectations; her growing rage is primarily generated by what

she understands to be the artificial constructs of femininity that have defined and alienated her. She realizes that when she loses a great deal of weight, dresses carelessly, and stops dyeing her hair, she becomes invisible to men:

> A woman walking in a sagging dress, with a heavy walk, and her hair—this above all—not conforming to the prints made by fashion, is not "set" to attract men's sex. The same woman in a dress cut in this or that way, walking with her inner thermostat set just so—and click, she's fitting the pattern.
>
> Men's attention is stimulated by signals no more complicated than what leads the gosling; and for all her adult life, her sexual life, let's say from twelve onwards, she has been conforming, twitching like a puppet to those strings.[9]

Although Kate Brown has an affair with a younger lover during this crisis, it serves only to fuel her hostility toward men in general. Her anger echoes that expressed by a number of contemporary American and British writers who in the 1990s began to focus on the subject of menopause, not always literally (though a great deal of ink has been spent on the pros and cons of hormone replacement therapy), but as a metaphor. Only after this stage, they suggest, can a woman be "free at last" (including from what British writer Eva Figes calls "foolish longings"). Germaine Greer sees in menopause the revenge of the female eunuch: "Many women realize during the climacteric the extent to which their lives have been a matter of capitulation and how little of what has happened to them has actually been in their interest . . . to be unwanted is also to be free."[10] Gloria Steinem embraces this point of view: "I am also finding a new perspective that comes from leaving the central plateau of my life, and seeing more clearly the tyrannies of social expectations. . . . Though this growing neglect and invisibility may shock and grieve us greatly at first and feel like 'a period of free fall' to use Germaine Greer's phase, it also creates a new freedom to be ourselves."[11]

I, for one, was always suspicious of even the most self-assured of these calls to celebrate "cronehood," for they simultaneously condemned the unfair social phenomenon which dictates that women become "unwanted" after a certain age *and* glorified this invisibility because it meant we were no longer subject to men's objectifying gaze. The implication is that women have been so sexually victimized that we should celebrate when we reach the age where we become sexually retired; *but* at the same time, that we should continue to condemn this retirement as yet another unfair social conspiracy on the part of a sexist society. Unlike Germaine Greer, I do not look back bitterly on my

woman's past as "hunted and harried" nor ahead apprehensively to being "trampled and jostled" unless I espouse cronehood.

While exasperation and anger at having been objectified for decades then suddenly discarded propels a number of American and English feminists toward the next activist phase in their lives, French texts throughout the twentieth century tended to negotiate this transition in a very different manner. In their case, the emphasis on elusive and delicate issues connected to the waning of desire, pleasure, and seduction leads to combat against the self rather than against the world, and tends to result in the passive (poetic?) acceptance of feminine "destiny."

The classic model of the "no-longer-young" woman remains Léa in Colette's *Chéri,* which was adopted in the 1990s by a generation of popular writers who could have been her granddaughters. The end of Léa's affair with her young lover precipitates the painful renunciation of sexuality, but it also makes way for a resolute peace of mind in the novel's sequel, *La Fin de Chéri.*

"I haven't taken too long to understand that an age comes for a woman when, instead of clinging to beautiful feet that are impatient to roam the world, expressing herself in soothing words, boring tears and burning, ever-shorter sighs—an age comes when the only thing that is left for her is to enrich her own self," writes Colette in *Break of Day.*[12] Very much the Frenchwoman steeped in a culture of seduction, she saw the waning of romantic obsessions (even if this was an unwelcome process) as a signal to cross over the threshold into another, more peaceful, life. From here on she intended to stop concentrating on "those pleasures we lightly call physical" and to focus on earthly pleasures of a different sort. This solution may have seemed plausible, and even admirable, at the beginning of the century: after all, women had fewer options and shorter life spans. Yet the French granddaughters of Colette continued to accept, with considerable chagrin but with similar serenity, the waning of their desirability as a "natural" phase. Indeed, one could find echoes of the traditional Colette model in best-selling texts published throughout the 1990s in France, for example, in Claire Gallois's *Les Heures dangereuses* or Noëlle Chatelet's *La Dame en bleu.*

Gallois's narrator, who has just turned fifty, bemoans the unfair situation, in which women at her age are no longer considered desirable even though they still desire. A divorced woman with a grown son, she is involved simultaneously in two passionate love affairs, both with married men. One of them is ten years younger than she, handsome,

intelligent, and unable to stay away from her, physically or emotionally. Most of the narrative revolves around the familiar Colettian dilemma: To be acutely aware of the approaching if unjust social destiny but to squeeze pleasure until the last drop; to remain lucid about this unavoidable situation and attentive to its compensations; to love and understand men enough not to begrudge their own limiting realities; to build up plenitude so that when the moment to step back has arrived it brings with it the challenge of elegantly negotiating this turn rather than bitterly decrying it or shrilly proclaiming it. She ends this feminine swan song with a very Colettian spin: "I remain *poétique,* that is to say, preoccupied with the beauties of existence."[13] Very well; but the obvious point begs to be made: if and when her lover finally does go away, what will Gallois's narrator do with the rest of her long life?

Noëlle Chatelet's *La Dame en bleu* attempts a symbolic answer to this very question. Solange, an attractive, divorced, fifty-two-year-old Parisian, has an exciting job, a supportive daughter, many friends, and, of course, a skilled and passionate lover. One day, after a quasi-mystical encounter with an old woman in the street, she decides to anticipate old age before she is forced into it. Gradually, she discovers the joys of slowing down, frees herself from her enslavement to the world of appearances and the fast social and professional track, stops wearing makeup, throws away her fashionable clothes (which, in true *Liaisons dangereuses* style, she defines as her "battle gear"), pins her hair back and stops dying it. She gently turns away from her uncomprehending lover: "Feeling melancholy, Solange? Absolutely not. She is pleased that all this madness of love has existed in her life—she is even proud of it—but she is much happier now that it is over, finally over."[14] Soon thereafter, she enters an idyllic retirement home where she gives herself peacefully over to the comfortable, amused, and detached observation of minute daily events.

The loss of social and sexual "visibility" is thus interpreted and resolved in different ways, depending on a particular woman's culture. Colette-like, Chatelet's narrator fantasizes over creamy hot chocolate and buttered toast in the cocoon of an aesthetic and sensual (if totally unrealistic) old-age residence, while Alix Kates-Shulman, who spends her fiftieth year on an island in Maine, proudly survives on beach plants; reads by the light of a kerosene lamp in a sleeping bag; takes sponge baths; does without septic tank, electricity, or telephone; has a baseball bat ready to ward off potential aggressors; and weathers

hurricanes fearlessly.[15] In both cases, these rituals usher the narrators into their middle years and ultimately toward a new form of independence. But they do so in very different modes.

Indeed, French women tend to wax poetic, fatalistic, and serene; Anglo-Saxon women tend to wax angry, energetic, and political. The Americans turn the phenomenon into a lesson for a collective "we." Deconstructing the mechanisms of this latest patriarchal plot, they get mad, then get busy. French women, meanwhile, tend to philosophically acknowledge their "destiny," resist it as long as they can (which means remaining desirable for as long as possible), then set about searching for new forms of affective and sybaritic stability.

Unlike Colette, who asked man to be her friend once her militant life was over and to peacefully coexist with her into old age, Erica Jong writes: "At fifty, the madwoman in the attic breaks loose, stomps down the stairs, and sets fire to the house."[16] Gail Sheehy, during a mystical journey up the proverbial mountain, suddenly feels a surge of energy: "I couldn't wait to get back to my laptop, my writings . . . my passion."[17] To Simone de Beauvoir's long list of "never agains," to her lamentation at the age of fifty-two that "I shall live for a long time in this little landscape," to Gallois's protest that "No one will ever fall in love with me again. I know it all too well, from here on everything will lead to farewells," Letty Cottin Pogrebin responds: "I want that passion. The fire in the belly that makes a person ignore all the reasons *not* to do something. The energy that keeps one barreling toward the goal. The wild, sure sense of what has to happen next. The strength to stay up all night and get it finished. The talent to persuade. If I cannot add years to my life I can add life to my years. . . . If I can stuff my days with meaning and mindfulness, I should be able to keep my eyes on the prize and off the hourglass."[18] Maya Angelou, in *Even the Stars Get Lonesome,* sums it up with that most familiar of American slogans: "Mostly, what I have learned so far about aging, despite the creakiness of one's bones and the cragginess of one's once-silkened skin, is this: do it. By all means, do it."[19]

Self-Sacrificing Mistresses versus Midlife Militants

It is tempting, of course, to fall back on the familiar explanatory dichotomies and to suggest that if "Anglo-Saxon" women seem quick to erase the body and the flesh with which they were never wholly comfortable, to turn away from desire and invest their newly released energy into

fresh battles (as Francine du Plessix Gray writes, "free to be heard rather than seen"[20]), it is because they share the legacy of Puritanism; and to conclude, on the other hand, that French women—who are the inheritors of a long tradition of *libertinage* and have been historically locked in the prison of *féminité* and the myth of *séduction*—become resigned to putting down their weapons when they are no longer considered "women" and to seek solace in lyrical passivity and alternative sensual delights.[21]

More enlightening, I think, have been the debates surrounding *Les Mots des femmes,* Mona Ozouf's 1995 book on *la singularité française.* In it, Ozouf makes a claim for the exceptional harmony between the sexes in France, an assertion that is taken seriously to this day by a number of French men and women alike and is often, and predictably so, opposed to the specter of the "war of the sexes" that allegedly rages in the United States. But it is not so much Ozouf's polemical stance that interests me here; what I find revealing is that despite her opposition to the dreaded gender "differentialism" of American feminists, Ozouf systematically weaves through her ten portraits of famous French women the suggestion that women's relationship to time is gender-specific. As Lynn Hunt points out, Ozouf's biographical sketches demonstrate that women do not master time but rather accept it by knowing it in intimate ways.[22] This position, which Eric Fassin judiciously identifies as the "naturalization of feminine destiny," provides an important clue as to why French women find it more noble to "renounce" and American women to "combat."[23]

In her discussion of Ozouf's controversial book, Hunt unpacks the cultural differences at work in the opposition between French and American historical attitudes toward the self. The widely shared American mentality, she writes, is anti-historical, voluntarist, and self-obsessed and inevitably results in the opposition between control and victimization, between autonomy and constraints. If one takes this argument further, it stands to reason that not only gender but aging would be considered by American feminists as a predominantly social construction to be exposed and opposed. This would explain why so many recent midlife writings in the United States, be they autobiographical, fictional, or scholarly, espouse pedagogical as well as political goals. Morganroth-Gullette's call to arms, in *Declining to Decline,* is the latest and perhaps most extreme example of this approach: "Age Studies names the interdisciplinary movement that wants to disrupt the current age system in theory and practice. . . . I envision the anti-middle-ageist

movement crossing boundaries—racial-ethnic, male/female, gay/straight, privileged/immiserated, left/right—uniting people by presenting them with credibly self-interested causes for forming coalitions."[24]

At the same time, this historical difference in mentalities would also account for the much vaunted "exception française." After all, if French women elegantly accept inevitable "natural" renunciation at the age when they "cease to be women," then there is no reason to become angry at the other sex, nor to gather in interest groups or classrooms or courtrooms to critique and protest against arbitrary social dictates. If French women accept unquestioningly "l'ordre des choses," even when it benefits men primarily, then surely harmony is bound to reign.

Nineteenth-century French literature has bequeathed a gallery of memorable, self-sacrificing, mature mistresses who release their young lovers after having educated them, at which point their own lives end—often literally. In Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps* (1923), the eighteen-year-old heroine, who has been seduced by the sixteen-year-old narrator, suddenly turns away from him in despair because she is "too old for him." She explains that fifteen years hence, her youth will be ending while his will be in full flower (in fact, she conveniently dies long before this dire prophecy can come true). To a large degree this paradigm, and its attendant consequence, that men who remain men when women are no longer women will therefore necessarily be unfaithful, has continued to be profoundly internalized by both sexes in Gallic society (see, for example, Françoise Chandernagor's sad narrative in her 1998 best-seller, *La Première épouse*). Meanwhile, in the United States, feminist writers attempt to impute life cycles to patriarchal conspiracies and to define themselves as "victims of age ideology," as if physiology, mortality, and time played absolutely no part in our life trajectories.[25]

This poignant opposition between the poetic and the political, then, seems to leave little room for any bicultural resolution, for the double vision, the double strategy, and living with contradictions that Elaine Marks called for. Or does it?

But Wait . . . !

When, withstanding what Eva Hoffman calls "the assault of parallel visions," I hovered toward that fateful "fear of fifty" phase, I reached the discouraging conclusion that there seemed to be no viable model for

women of "a certain age" on either side of the Atlantic.[26] Now it occurs to me that perhaps I was not sufficiently attentive to a number of important clues. First of all, I focused on the internalized *discourse* about middle age and especially about that most symbolic number, fifty, a time when all of the cultural messages do indeed lead one to conclude that "for women, aging casts its shadow earlier than for men."[27] In addition, I did not sufficiently decipher the paradoxes and mixed messages that were present in many of the narratives I had been reading and that discreetly subvert their rhetoric of renunciation. For example, I had not questioned why Colette would write that great goodbye to femininity entitled *The Break of Day* in her fifties, when she had recently met Maurice Goudeket, a man sixteen years younger than she, who would become her third husband and with whom she would live happily for the rest of her life. Nor, by taking too literally Beauvoir's conviction that after the age of forty women should be ashamed to fall in love because they are henceforth relegated to the "country of shadows," did I linger on the fact that as she neared forty-five she embarked on a liaison with Claude Lanzmann, who was seventeen years younger than she. As for the more contemporary autobiographical fiction, I was taken in by Claire Gallois's poetic ode to sexual retirement, and by her imaginary goodbye letter to her lover Michaël, which echoes Renée Néré's last letter to Maxime in *La Vagabonde.* After all, I now realize, she may actually believe in the principle but nowhere in the text does Michaël actually leave the narrator except in her imagination.

In fact, and until they reach the frontiers of serious illness and death, when the confrontation with mortality takes over from the desires of the mind and of the flesh, there is really no "last word" by women writers on the subject of love, romance, sexuality, and aging. For no matter how definitive their midlife pronouncements may sound and no matter how authentic these may indeed be at the time they first confront such a destabilizing issue, few have adhered permanently to either the noble early retirement of the senses and emotions or to the resolute conviction that these should be sublimated in productive manner. And a number of them have added postscripts once their fictional or autobiographical protagonists are safely past that "dangerous age."

Take *La Femme coquelicot,* for example, Noëlle Chatelet's 1999 sequel to *La Dame en bleu.* Its seventy-year-old heroine, Marthe, has settled peacefully into widowhood and into the little puttering life of her fictional predecessor, "la dame en bleu." When she falls in love with an "older man," her entire life is turned upside down. Their relationship is

a romantic, sexual, and satisfying one, which awakens her to colors, scents, sounds, tastes that she thought she had given up forever. Or take Doris Lessing in *Love, Again* (1996), a novel whose protagonist, Sarah, is an older version of Kate Brown. Sarah also is a widow, sixty-five years old, and true to the Anglo-Saxon model I have sketched out earlier, leads a life not of peaceful retreat but of useful activities. She has not been romantically involved for twenty years, a relief, she thinks, because given the anguish that this state entails "Thank God it can never happen to me again."[28] One summer, though, she finds herself attracted to a succession of much younger men and engages in a terribly jarring fight against her own "reckless desire," against submerged fantasies that she defines as an illness that takes over her life and forces her to reexamine her past. Interestingly, however, it is the men who are initially attracted to her, it is they who fall deeply for her and pursue her, they who are brokenhearted by her ultimate refusal of what they offer her. In this narrative then, Sarah may be a woman in her late middle age but she is by no means an invisible one. Neither to the men who are drawn to her, nor to herself as she scrutinizes, with no small amount of pride, her reflection in the mirror. Like sixty-five-year-old Hermione in Marilyn French's *My Summer with George* (1996), Sarah realizes that the longing for love, romance, even passion never dies out completely and certainly cannot be contained by age-appropriate attitudes conveniently dictated by society and too often obeyed by women.[29]

So yes, the pathway to fifty tends to vary according to culturally specific modes for French and for Anglo-American heterosexual women. But once they have passed this stage, a common quality prevails: it is their formidable ability to lucidly confront the realities without giving up the longings, thereby balancing out the irrevocable loss of youth and the inevitable confrontation with mortality.[30]

NOTES

This essay takes its title from Elaine Marks's "Juifemme" in Rubin-Dorsky and Fisher Fishkin, *People of the Book.* It is a modified version of a previously published essay: "Mid-Life Memoirs and the Bicultural Dilemma" that appeared in *Sites: The Journal of Modern and Contemporary French Culture* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2000).

1. Elaine Marks, "The Poetical and the Political," 286.
2. Ibid., 278.
3. Rose, *The Year of Reading Proust*, 33.

4. I am aware that I am making broad generalizations about "French women" and "Anglo-Saxon women," when in fact I am limiting myself to a handful of mostly white, heterosexual women from France, the United States, England, and Australia. However, since this essay is autobiographical, I have chosen to discuss authors with whom I personally identified, and thus whose work had the most impact on me.

5. Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance,* 655.

6. Colette, *Break of Day,* 9.

7. Steinem, *Moving beyond Words,* 249.

8. Heilbrun, *The Last Gift of Time,* 1. Granted, there are differences in generations among Beauvoir, Colette, Heilbrun, and Steinem, but this does not seem to affect the general cultural patterns that I am exploring.

9. Lessing, *The Summer before the Dark,* 186.

10. Greer, *The Change,* 254.

11. Steinem, *Moving beyond Words,* 250.

12. Colette, *Break of Day,* 34.

13. Gallois, *Les Heures dangereuses,* 242, my translation.

14. Chatelet, *La Dame en bleu,* 41, my translation.

15. Kates-Shulman, *Drinking the Rain.*

16. Jong, *Fear of Fifty,* xxiv.

17. Sheehy, *The Silent Passage,* 253.

18. Pogrebin, *Getting over Getting Older,* 311.

19. Angelou, *Even the Stars Get Lonesome,* 24.

20. Du Plessix Gray, "The Third Age," 188.

21. For one of the more chilling examples of this, see Françoise Giroud's acknowledgment to the much younger Bernard-Henri Lévy that women who are no longer desired should be able to become men rather than continue to live for so long like zombies! (*Les Hommes et les femmes,* 197).

22. Hunt, "Time, Constraint, and the Lives of Women," 128.

23. Fassin, "The Purloined Gender."

24. Morganroth-Gulette, *Declining to Decline,* 17.

25. Ibid., 15.

26. I nod here to the title of Erica Jong's memoir. It should be obvious that many of the feminist baby boomers of the 1960s turned fifty in the 1990s, which accounts for a great deal of attention being paid to middle age and women during that decade.

27. Woodward, *Figuring Age,* xiii.

28. Lessing, *Love, Again,* 40.

29. Carolyn Heilbrun tries but does not completely convince herself or her reader that such a plight should be left to the young *(The Last Gift of Time).*

30. In fact, in several of these texts it is the men who are the more fragile characters. Sarah's male counterpart eventually commits suicide, like Chéri. It should not be surprising, then, that *Love, Again* is dedicated to a number of writers including "the incomparable Colette in *Chéri.*"

PART TWO

Death of the Other, Death of the Mother

The Disease of Monolingualism

NELLY FURMAN

In the nineteenth century, a new technology, the mechanization of the printing press, made new forms of communication possible through cheap, easily reproducible print productions: newspapers, maps, directives, books, and especially novels. Literary criticism became a feature in the press, and literature entered the university as a new field of study. The prolific literary critic and first university professor of literature in France, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, coined the term *tour d'ivoire,* or "ivory tower," to describe the poet Alfred de Vigny's aristocratic attitude and detachment from everyday reality. In the United States today, the ivory tower most often refers to a view of the university as a place preoccupied with lofty intellectual considerations and hence far removed from practical problems, social tensions, and political issues. This is not to say that there are no political activities on university campuses—in the era of the Vietnam War, some American university campuses actually became battlegrounds—but in the American cultural imagination, the university is a place of retreat that allows for meditation and discovery unfettered by the constraints of practical reality. The humanities in particular are considered fields of aesthetic pleasure where social and political events are represented, as opposed to experienced, and therefore kept at some distance.

And yet, as Benedict Anderson, Martha Nussbaum, and others have demonstrated, novels, for example, are not just objects of reading pleasure but cultural operators that have played a fundamental role in the construct of the nation-state and the modeling of its citizens.[1] Beyond any specific social or political issue described in novels, it is the reading

process itself that forges communities. By reading newspapers and novels, people could imagine others like themselves living beyond their immediate social community. Hence the importance of understanding the function of language as an internal medium that cements a community and language as a means of communication between communities. Translation is one common path between communities; another path is learning a community's language and culture in order to share in it. Each option elicits distinct psychological, ethical, and social questions. In our electronic age and new world order, large and small nations are linked globally by English, and as a result languages other than English appear condemned to become endangered species. It is, then, the ecology of languages in this new global environment that requires the attention of those in the ivory tower who study domestic and foreign cultural signs.

In her 1993 presidential address to the members of the Modern Language Association meeting held in Toronto, Canada, Elaine Marks starts with these words:

> *Mesdames et messieurs, chers amis, chers collègues,* ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues, I had hoped that the various Canadian laws concerning the obligatory use of both French and English on commercial products, in official government documents, on street signs in the province of Ontario, and in some schools would carry over to the 109th convention of the Modern Language Association and, for the occasion, to the whole of North America. For instance, I would have welcomed the obligation to deliver my address in French and in English, not translating sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph but using both languages in individual sentences, so that my salutation this evening would have been "*Mesdames* and gentlemen, dear friends *et chers collègues.*"[2]

Consummate pedagogue that she was, by mixing English and French Elaine shows us that one can use a foreign language as a mode of inclusion: her opening line "*Mesdames et messieurs, chers amis, chers collègues*" is easily perceived, even if not understood, and then immediately translated to embrace everyone in the audience. When she comes back to French at the end of her introductory paragraph, her blending of French and English has suddenly become less immediately comprehensible. Why are the expressions *Mesdames et chers collègues* in French, while "gentlemen and dear friends" are in English? Why not the reverse? Why not put the traditional first two words in French and "friends" and "colleagues" in English? Or do the reverse? While these options may have had specific meanings for Elaine, for us they function

as demonstrative tools. In changing places, in being repeated differently, the clear, seemingly transparent French and English words suddenly take on a new dimension: they seem less immediately understandable. And although they are rather banal introductory phrases, they speak to us differently; they interpellate us in an unexpected manner, anew.

These introductory remarks illustrate major aspects of linguistic communication: to begin with, the difference between language as a system, *la langue,* and what since Ferdinand de Saussure has been called *la parole,* that is to say a subject's individual interaction with *la langue. La langue* is a system of internal differences in which phonemes and graphemes combine and produce words and differentiated concepts, whereas *la parole* introduces differences between individuals in their discrete, specific uses of *la langue.* Second, we have Elaine's contention that if she were under the obligation of delivering her address in French and English, it would not have been a translation as such, but a mix that would respect the uniqueness of each language. In her first sentence to this introductory paragraph, we have the example of a translation, while in her concluding sentence the same French and English phrases listed at the start are set side by side in a new configuration, this time without translation. While we might be able to infer the meanings of the French clauses, in translation we cannot apprehend their expressivity. For the expressivity of a language is not limited to its referential or conceptual dimensions; it includes, in addition to the markings of an individual's *parole,* the inscriptions of cultural memory, as well as affects of the graphic and sonorous materiality of the language itself. Hence, the translatable meanings of a language either fall short of or go beyond the embedded traces of personal, cultural, and material expressivity one finds at the junction of an individual's *parole* and a *langue.* Expressivity embodies the untranslatable that remains imprinted in the original utterances, or the original text.

Of course, the untranslatability of even the most banal phrases was the political point Elaine was demonstrating through these introductory bilingual phrases. The increasing pressure toward eliminating foreign language requirements and the trend toward studying foreign literatures in translation concerned her deeply: "The . . . nightmare that haunts me is that English translations of other literatures are increasingly becoming and will continue to be, acceptable for students of literature." The study of foreign languages and cultures was her life as much as it was her trade. Thus, she called on us to fight to keep alive the

study of foreign languages and literatures, not, as one might have expected, simply as a pedagogical tool for honing skills or for some sort of comparative understanding of societies. Rather, in a more radical manner, Elaine's appeal was for us to study foreign languages and cultures as a palliative for our human condition, as a means of survival in a temporal world. "I think," she tells us, "that we write and read not to change the world but to sharpen, to deepen, and to expand our awareness of being in the world and having to take leave of it."[3] Language appears here as a heuristic tool of discovery, making it possible to apprehend the world around us, "to expand our awareness," and to understand and accept our earthly temporality.

Through writing and reading language, we are "expanding our awareness of being in the world," Elaine reminds us, for reading and writing are not simply methods of communication allowing us to reach others; rather, these activities create within each of us intellectual and emotional openings that allow us to understand and welcome the other and to discover the other within us. Unlike the old dream that a shared *lingua franca,* such as Esperanto, would make the immediacy of communication the key to peace among people, Elaine fears on the contrary that a global language, by making other languages and cultures obsolete, will make respect for and love of otherness and differences obsolete as well. Thus, while it may be a useful means of communication, for Elaine the tendency toward English monolingualism, far from being a cure for world peace, appears rather as the symptomatic evidence of a fatal disease: "I attempt to convince you of the double danger that confronts us and the serious consequences we face for our 'souls' and for the 'soul' of the humanities if we allow ourselves to be devoured by the disease of monolingualism and by the equally devastating disease of indifference to our mortal and bounded state."[4] Here again, language and death are intrinsically linked.

Scholars of twentieth-century French literature, as Elaine Marks was, share a contemporary understanding of the relationship between language and death. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Sigmund Freud observes a one-and-a-half-year-old child who, when his mother leaves the room, throws a wooden reel with a string attached to it away from him, over the edge of his cot, while emitting a sound that recalled the German word *fort,* meaning "gone," then retrieves the reel with "a joyful *da*" meaning "there." The *Fort-Da,* as it is now known, enacts a play of disappearance and return accompanied by a vocalization that illustrates one of the functions of language as the expression of loss and

recovery, as a means of mastery over the pain of loss.[5] In this regard, language is the very mark of absence. Maurice Blanchot, one of France's most influential contemporary novelists and literary critics, in a famous essay on Kafka entitled "L'Œuvre et l'espace de la mort," argues that writing, like all art forms, is an attempt at understanding death and, through this attempt at facing death, having control over oneself:

On ne peut écrire que si l'on reste maître de soi devant la mort, si l'on établit avec elle des rapports de souveraineté. Est-elle ce devant quoi l'on perd contenance, ce que l'on ne peut contenir, alors elle retire les mots de dessous la plume, elle coupe la parole; l'écrivain n'écrit plus, il crie, un cri maladroit, confus que personne n'entend ou qui n'émeut personne. Kafka sent ici profondément que l'art est en relation avec la mort. Pourquoi la mort? C'est qu'elle est l'extrême. Qui dispose d'elle, dispose extrêmement de soi, est lié à tout ce qu'il peut, est intégralement pouvoir. L'Art est maîtrise du moment suprême, suprême maîtrise.

[One can write only if one is in control of oneself in facing death, if one establishes one's sovereignty over death. When death is that which makes us lose composure, that which we cannot contain, then death pulls words away from our pens, cuts off our voices; the writer no longer writes, he cries out, a clumsy cry that no one hears, or a cry that moves no one. Kafka feels here deeply that art has a relation to death. Why death? For death is the limit. The one who controls death, controls the limits of the self, is linked to everything he attempts, is fully empowered. Art is mastery of the ultimate moment, ultimate mastery.][6]

Unlike a cry that is simply the expression of pain, communication requires a reaching out beyond the self to address another. This is what Roman Jakobson calls the phatic aspect of the function of language.[7] Infants for example communicate before they are able to send or receive information per se, and adults often use banal phrases such as "Hello!" "Yes?" "Do you agree?" to check whether communication is actually taking place. In the *Fort-Da,* language is the expression of the pain of loss and the tool of its recovery, it is an effort at self-mastery and hence mastery of the self. This is the process through which we learn to communicate in our native tongue.

To acquire a second language, on the other hand, is to put one's self at a loss. It is to give up mastery, and through the acceptance of self-loss, to open oneself to the other, and to our own mortality. Learning a foreign language is thus not simply learning about the other, understanding external differences between cultures. More pertinently, it is a confrontation with ourselves, our own differences, our internal alienations, and our own mortality.

As I was rereading Elaine's presidential address, I was intrigued by her insistence on linking language and mortality, and her insistence and my curiosity pushed open the gates for my own personal work of mourning. As a friend and colleague called upon to pay tribute, I was given the opportunity through the bond of reading and writing to continue to speak with Elaine, with my readers, and within myself. Words came rushing in, the most usual, common terms of bereavement, those expressing sympathy and empathy to family, intimate friends, close associates. But how could I, writing in English, engage in a dialogue with Elaine's admonition not to fall prey to monolingualism, and support, as I fully do, her opinion that writing and reading sharpen and deepen "our awareness of being in the world and having to take leave of it"? Doing homage to Elaine, then, requires a comparative English and French approach to the expressions of bereavement.

"Sympathy," "empathy," and "compassion" are three terms of bereavement of Latin origin used in French and in English, but used differently. To expose similarities and divergences between two terms, to apprehend the specificities of two words and explore their usages, one needs a fulcrum, a tool with which—or a point from where—it may be possible to observe and compare differences. This third instance, the marker of the point from where I can attempt to analyze cultural differences, is here represented by the word "compassion," a Latinate word composed of *com,* meaning "with," and *passio,* meaning "suffering." The word is spelled the same way in French and English, and dictionaries in the two languages define the word in similar terms: sharing the feelings of another. The words "sympathy"/*sympathie* and "empathy"/*empathie* share common Greek and Latin origins and are analogous in appearance, with only a slight change in spelling: the last letter "y" in English becoming "ie" in French. And yet, in spite of their common root, and visual and aural resemblances, these two terms are used very differently in the two languages. English speakers readily voice their commiseration and compassion and express their emotion with either "sympathy" or "empathy." The two words in English are closely related, testifying to a "sameness of feeling; [an] affinity between persons or of one person for another; an action or a response arising from this; an agreement in quality; a mutual understanding" (*Webster's New Unabridged Dictionary,* second edition). They refer to the "ability to enter into another person's mental state, feelings, emotions, etc.; especially,

pity or compassion for another's trouble, suffering, etc." In "sympathy" the first syllable *sym* means "together" in Greek, while *pathos* refers to feelings; thus to have "sympathy" is to echo or resonate emotionally with someone else's feelings. The "em-" of "empathy" means "in, into" in Greek, hence, in accordance with its etymology, "empathy" is more precisely "the projection of one's own personality onto the personality of another; the identification of oneself with another." This kind of identification can lead to a mental disorder known as *pathetic fallacy,* the projection of one's own personality onto a person or an object with the attribution to the person or the object of one's own emotions, responses, et cetera (*Webster's New Unabridged Dictionary,* second edition). Rather than giving clinical definitions of sympathy and empathy, I mean to place them as markers at opposite ends on the continuum of compassion, to call attention to the ethical issues they can raise. In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions,* Martha Nussbaum reminds us that "compassion . . . includes a judgment that the other person's distress is bad" and that "compassion requires, then, a notion of responsibility."[8]

In French, bereavement can also be expressed by heartfelt sympathy, *l'expression de ma douloureuse sympathie,* but the word *empathie* is curiously absent in French, not only from the lexicon of grief and emotion, but also from usual conversation. The word *empathie* does in fact exist in French, but it is a specialized term used almost exclusively in psychology to name the feeling or experience of losing one's identity in another being or an object, in short, to become intimately fused with that other. In French *empathie* refers essentially to cases of identificatory projection or fusion categorized as forms of psychological disorders. In these cases, language is either dismissed as not true to the other's subjectivity ("what s/he really means to say is . . ."), or conversely embraced as transparent ("I know what you mean"), perpetuating the illusion that language is transparent and that thoughts and emotions are exactly alike for each party. What Elaine calls "the disease of monolingualism" is, I believe, akin to the process of projective identification, or pathetic fallacy, in that it denies the referential realities, the cultural specificities, and the emotional dimensions of the other's life, the other's culture, the other's social communicative skills, as well as his or her personal idiom. Monolingualism is a fatal disease because it erases differences and obliterates the particulars of another's existence and experience; it is thus for Elaine the marker of the death of other cultures.

Equally at ease in English and in French, in France and in the United States, Elaine eschewed translation in favor of cross-cultural interaction.

Her work situates itself at the intersection of cultural differences, at the border between groups, in the space of an encounter, at the boundary between the accepted and the rejected. From the erasure of women from cultural history to the marginalization of gays and lesbians, the scourge of AIDS, or the haunting memory of the Holocaust, Elaine's work has always recognized differences and comprised death. Anchored at the crossroads of cultural spaces, she has opened for us the gates of displacement and transposition, thus leading to the questioning of accepted concepts and values. On the edge, at the point of separation, at the bar between being inside and/or outside lies the possibility of transgression. "Transgression," as she and George Stambolian explain in the introduction to *Homosexualities in French Literature: Cultural Context / Critical Texts*, can be used as a tool of discovery, as well as a tool of self-discovery:

> We would propose, however, that the finest achievement of the French writers derives from their profound understanding of the value of homosexuality as a transgression. Homosexuality tends to move through definitions and across lines of conceptual demarcation. Because it perpetually questions the social order and is always in question itself, homosexuality is other. The French have perceived in this otherness a privileged instrument for analysis, a question to raise questions. Their works can therefore be seen as so many demonstrations of the uses of homosexuality—to discover the laws of love and jealousy, to explore sexual differences, to test morality and metaphysics, to examine the validity of psychological concepts, to expose social and political myths, to reinterpret literary conventions, to pose the problems of authenticity and sincerity, to chart the secret channels of desire.[9]

If in the 1980s, on U.S. campuses "French feminism" was perceived as theory in opposition to experience, culture in opposition to political action, this is because at the center of the Franco-American divide there is a different understanding of the cultural and political dimension of language. The 1970s and 1980s produced remarkable work with great impact in both the cultural and social spheres on both sides of the Atlantic. From reproductive rights to civil unions, many of the legal questions raised then have now become civil law, or are under discussion, in parts of the United States and the European Community. But in general, and with all the exaggerations and errors that such generalities involve, in the 1970s American feminist scholars studied language to show evidence of social prejudices, whereas French feminist scholars conceived language as the cultural operator of sexual difference and their prejudices. American feminists looked at the representations of women in

literature and art, studied "tag questions" as indicative of powerless speech, or proved the effects of the generic masculine.[10] For American feminist scholars, language mirrored women's social status and was used to show evidence of social discrimination. French feminist theorists, however, worked on changing the language system to reveal its encoded prejudices, and they did so by displacing accepted syntax, exploding standard concepts, reorganizing the order of discourse. For the French feminist theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, writing was a form of radical political action, not because they dealt directly with social causes, but because they focused on exposing and exploding the cultural system itself. French feminist scholars—Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva—were, in the wake of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's work, less concerned with sexual difference as indicated by anatomy or biology than with the structuring of sexual difference through language. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, the unconscious is the locus of desire, and the unconscious, according to Lacan, is "structured like a language."[11] Hence difference and the vectors of desire follow the process of linguistic differentiation where sounds or letters are distinguished by a process of comparative oppositions: bat/cat/fat, etc. Similarly, feminine and masculine are not the markers of females or males, women or men, but simply culturally validated indicators in a system of oppositional differences. Unveiling and then displacing oppositional differences became the hallmark of French feminist theory. Elaine placed herself at the junction between American and French feminist political action: "I try to merge the erudite and the practical or, in words borrowed from Hélène Cixous, the poetical and the political."[12]

Reading cultural signs of gender differences extends beyond the limits of the body to studying divergent paths of sexuality. In *The Newly Born Woman,* Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément conceive of *l'écriture féminine* as a form of writing that explores subjectivity and the unconscious of feminine sexuality. In their view, feminine sexuality is an inclusive sexuality that accepts "the other sex as a component" and celebrates its own by not suppressing its bisexuality.[13] For Hélène Cixous, as for Luce Irigaray, feminine sexuality is not simply directed to the masculine other but splits itself also toward the feminine self. Besides its importance in the feminist debates of the 1980s, French feminist theory has also been very influential in the field of lesbian and gay studies. French feminist theory is at the core of the work of Eve Sedgwick, Diana Fuss, David Halperin, and others. For Halperin for example, sexuality

is not an anatomical fact but a cultural construct: "Sex has no history. It is a natural fact, grounded in the functioning of the body, and, as such, it lies outside of history and culture. Sexuality, by contrast, does not properly refer to some aspect or attribute of bodies. Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect. Sexuality then, does have a history."[14] Elaine Marks and George Stambolian's 1979 *Homosexualities and French Culture* thus anticipated by over a decade the explosion of research and scholarly works in gay and lesbian studies.

Elaine was at the forefront of intellectual and social trends because, like the French writer Colette, whom she particularly admired, she was alert to the present, aware of the flutter of life around her. And while she celebrated life in its abundance and multiplicity, she was always also aware of its ephemeral nature. In a very moving passage of her presidential address, Elaine recalls one of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* that she read as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, one that accompanied her all her life "as if it were," she tells us, "inscribed in that part of the mind which forgetting can never reach." It is one of Pascal's most poignant texts:

> Qu'on s'imagine un nombre d'hommes dans les chaînes, et tous condamnés à la mort, dont les uns étant chaque jour égorgés à la vue des autres, ceux qui restent voient leur propre condition dans celle de leurs semblables, et, se regardant les uns et les autres avec douleur et sans espérance, attendent à leur tour. C'est l'image de la condition des hommes.
>
> [Let us imagine a certain number of men in chains, and all condemned to death; some are slaughtered each day in sight of the others. Those who remain alive see their own condition in that of the others and, looking at one another with sorrow and without hope, are awaiting their turn. This is the image of the human condition.][15]

The pathos of the human condition is not only our inability to save others from death but our understanding that death befalls us all. To witness the death of others allows us to mourn and through the act of mourning internalize our own mortality by looking at "one another with sorrow and without hope." Elaine goes on to comment that when she read this text in 1949, she may not have noticed the rhetorical emphasis put on sight, from the "Let us imagine" to the insistence on seeing and looking at those around us. And yet, her own work, starting with her very first book, a study of Colette published in 1960, points to the importance of sight as a means of discovery for understanding

Colette's vision as a form of moral imperative: "There is no metaphysical anguish in Colette's world, as there is no deep concern with the violent political upheavals and catastrophes of this century. There is always, however, an implicit moral imperative, applicable, not to groups of men or to their salvation, but to the individual in his everyday existence. This moral imperative is contained in the word '*Regarde*' which meant to Colette, look, feel, wonder, accept, live."[16] To read, as Elaine observes, is to find beyond what is stated or occluded "the moral imperative," the ethical responsibility conveyed by the text to the reader. Being aware of the world around us, placing the individual at the center, are for Colette, as well as Elaine, the call to responsibility for oneself and toward others.

Elaine was in Paris in 1986 completing articles on the history of French women writers when she found herself "both looking at and being confronted with a considerable quantity of material in books, journals, weekly and biweekly magazines, newspapers, and television in which the *Jewish question* figured prominently."[17] In the eighties, French intellectuals and the political establishment started to engage in a retrospective analysis of the war years and confront France's participation in the deportation of its Jewish population to Auschwitz. Interpellated by her Parisian experience, reacting to what she saw and felt, Elaine once again used lived experience as a heuristic device for her scholarly pursuits, and in her last years she wrote on the secular cultural legacy of France's Jews. After the homosexual, after the feminist, the Jew became for Elaine the figure of the transgressive other that allows a questioning of established social constructs from the position of the other. In *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing,* Elaine discusses and quotes at some length contemporary French philosophers, particularly Emmanuel Lévinas. In her undergraduate years, as we saw, Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century apologist for Christianity, influenced her; in the 1990s, her attention turned to Lévinas, the twentieth-century apologist for a return to the religious sources of Judaism. Pascal and Lévinas belong to a French philosophical tradition that has flourished throughout the ages in the margins of Cartesian thought, the central myth of French culture. For René Descartes, the founder of Cartesian rationalism, methodical concentration and systematic scientific inquiry could lead to the discovery of evident truths. This form of inquiry dispenses with questions regarding language itself, or tension between language and thought. In opposition to the Cartesian system of pure logic and its reliance on a linguistic system of

rigorous definitions, Pascal and Lévinas belong to a philosophical tradition that includes in the discovery and understanding of knowledge such variables as experience and feelings. Thus for Pascal, as well as Lévinas, philosophical inquiry includes investigation of the very modes of expression of philosophical inquiry. Descartes's approach, modeled after mathematical reasoning, pays little attention to language, including the language of philosophy itself, whereas Pascal and Lévinas question language and its relation to thought.

Pascal, playing on the multiple meanings in French of the word *sens* (defined as feeling, i.e., sensorial knowledge, meaning, and direction), tells us that "Les mots diversement rangés font un divers sens et les sens diversement rangés font différents effets" [Words arranged differently produce a different meaning/feeling, and feelings arranged differently have different effects]. For Pascal then, words and feelings follow homologous processes whereby not only things have meaning, but the order of things creates meaning. Lévinas, in a passage quoted by Elaine, underscores the force of sensory awareness, more precisely optic and sensory perception, as means of understanding and communication that exceed semantic explanation, and go beyond rational discourse: "What we expect from a return to Hebrew learning is that we will receive the light of the world through Hebrew, through the arabesques that are often drawn by the square letters of the prophetic, talmudic, rabbinical, and poetic texts, in the same way as we receive light through the stained glass windows of the cathedrals or through the poetic lines of Corneille, Racine, or Victor Hugo."[18] For Lévinas, language in its visual characteristics, as in its poetic and sonorous materiality, makes us comprehend and perceive the world through our culturally molded subjectivities. Personal experience in and through the specificity of a culture makes our individual linguistic *parole,* in speech or writing, unique. The articulation of a language by the individuality of an oral intonation, or the specificity of a written style, is what Roland Barthes called the "grain of the voice."[19] Translation will therefore always fall short of, or exceed, the many effects of an utterance, or a written text, in its original language. Languages can no more be substituted for one another than one person's death can prevent someone else's.

From Simone de Beauvoir to Colette, from *Homosexualities in French Culture* to *New French Feminisms,* Elaine's studies alternate between attention to the individual and the importance of the collective, the importance of the universal and the needs of the particular. Moreover, it is a debate that echoes differently on the two sides of the Atlantic. The French Republic that emerged from the Enlightenment opted for a

universalism that erases distinctions among its citizens as citizens, whereas the American republic sees itself as one nation of many individuals, *e pluribus unum,* where plurality is still acknowledged in the singularity of the nation. Elaine's understanding of French universalism in opposition to American individualism provides, with all the exaggerations such generalizations present, another marker in the Atlantic divide. Born in America and imbued with American culture, yet fully cognizant of French history and culture, Elaine had the kind of bifocal view, split eyesight, *double regard,* that allowed her to "look, feel, wonder, accept, live" on both sides of the Atlantic, and be equally at ease in Paris, in New York, and in Madison, Wisconsin. Her awareness of the specificity of cultural signs made it possible for her to speak of each on his or her terms and to each within the space of a shared cultural frame of references. From French culture to American culture, or from American culture to French culture, Elaine was not a "translator" as such, but a go-between, that it to say a reader of cultural signs that she made relevant to her audience precisely because they addressed issues that were common to the two cultures, and yet distinctive in each. Translations may convey valuable information, but they cannot transmit the cultural elements that explain the importance of this information in the originating culture. Languages carry traces of the historical experience of a people, but a translation, to be effective, speaks to the targeted readers in their cultural space, so that aspects of the cultural dimension of the original texts disappear in the new cultural environment of the translation.

As the example provided by Pascal's *Pensée* showing us men witnessing the death of other men makes clear, we are individuals who share a common fate. In witnessing the death of those who stood before us, we are made aware of our commonality, as well as our individual destiny, which, although universal, is nonetheless experienced by an individual person. In her attempt at making sense of the phrase "*being dead forever and ever,*" Elaine touched upon the essence of death itself: its incomprehensible, uncontainable eternity, and language's inability, even in metonymic elongation, to account for a time beyond the limited temporality of its own presence. Death, like language and time, at one and the same time joins us and separates us.

In contemporary French usage, there are two terms applied to the political sphere: *la politique* and *le politique.* The first, which is a feminine noun, designates the political arenas where legislation and action take place. It is very much a cognate to the English words "politics" and "political" in their reference to governmental policies, parties, or public

issues. But the second French word, *le politique,* a masculine noun, once only used to speak of politicians, now refers to another aspect of the "political" sphere, not that of predefined issues such as those relating to labor, education, health, taxation, et cetera, but rather new areas of social concern affected by power relations, such as gender and ethnic inequities, sexual discrimination, and so forth. Elaine was a political activist in all senses of the word, not only concerned with the issues debated at the local and national levels, but involved in that other political world, that of personal experience and cultural prejudice. A feminist of the 1970s and 1980s, she embraced the American slogan that "the personal is the political." Recounting her own intellectual and pedagogical *cursus vitae,* Elaine reminds us that she was always focused on "questions of inclusion and exclusion."[20] To be "political" is thus to feel interpellated by the world we inhabit, to be aware of the people and cultures around us, and be responsible for them and answerable to them.

For Lévinas, answerability to and responsibility for another, like death itself, cannot be delegated:

> It is I who support the Other and am responsible for him. . . . My responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me. . . . Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, *humanly,* I cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for every one, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject.[21]

Witnessing and bearing witness to the death of others, as the men depicted in Pascal's *Pensées* remind us, is to acknowledge our human finitude and our human solidarity. In Lévinasian terms, it is a call to responsibility:

> La mort d'autrui qui meurt m'affecte dans mon identité même de moi responsable. . . . C'est cela, mon affection par la mort d'autrui, ma relation avec sa mort. Elle est dans ma relation, ma déférence à quelqu'un qui ne répond plus.
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> [The death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible I. . . . That is it, my being affected by the death of the other, my relationship with their death is in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds.][22]

NOTES

1. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* and Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice.*
2. Marks, "Multiplicity and Mortality," 366.

3. Ibid., 368, 369.
4. Ibid., 368.
5. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* 32–38.
6. Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire,* 107, my translation.
7. Jakobson, *On Language,* 75.
8. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought,* 314.
9. Stambolian and Marks, introduction to *Homosexualities and French Literature,* 25–26.
10. See the chapters on these questions in McConnell-Ginet, Borker, and Furman, *Women and Language in Literature and Society.*
11. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan,* 48.
12. Marks, "Multiplicity and Mortality," 367.
13. Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman,* 84.
14. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" 416.
15. Pascal, *Pensées,* 130, my translation.
16. Marks, *Colette,* 9.
17. Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor,* x, italics in original.
18. Quoted in *Marrano as Metaphor,* 120; originally from Emmanuel Lévinas, "La renaissance culturelle juive en Europe continentale," 25.
19. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 267–77.
20. Marks, "Multiplicity and Mortality," 369.
21. Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity,* 100–101.
22. Lévinas, *Dieu, la mort, et le temps,* 21, my translation.

As She Lay Dying

Writing and the Mother/Daughter Dynamic in Beauvoir and Ernaux

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Over the past forty years, women have evoked and analyzed their relationships to their mothers in a number of French and Francophone texts. Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Cardinale, Luce Irigaray, Annie Ernaux, Jeanne Hyvard, Elise Turcotte, and Nancy Huston are among the best-known women authors who have ventured in this direction. Published in 1964, *Une mort très douce* (translated as *A Very Easy Death*), is Simone de Beauvoir's account of her mother's losing battle with intestinal cancer, a *récit* completed in the weeks following her mother's death. In this cathartic enterprise, the daughter-narrator pursues an answer to the question formulated in the opening pages of the book's final chapter: "Pourquoi la mort de ma mère m'a-t-elle si vivement secouée?" (146) ["Why did my mother's death shake me so deeply?" 102].[1] In a letter later sent to her lover, Nelson Algren, the author confides her sorrow and describes the last days she lived beside her dying mother: "Elle a été plus près de moi pendant ce mois qu'elle ne l'avait jamais été depuis ma petite enfance" ["She felt closer to my heart than she had ever been since my early childhood"].[2] The passing of one's mother is never an insignificant event; in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, it inspired her to produce a text in which she not only attempts to clarify her relationship with her mother but also ends a lifetime of maternal silence by giving her mother a voice.

More than twenty years after the publication of Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce,* the French novelist Annie Ernaux's mother passes away. The date is April 7, 1986, coincidentally one week before Simone de Beauvoir's death, on April 14. Following in Simone de Beauvoir's footsteps, Annie Ernaux embarks immediately on the difficult task of writing about her mother's death, composing *Une femme* (translated as *A Woman's Story*) between April 20, 1986, and February 26, 1987. In it, she explicitly refers to the temporal coincidence between the two deaths: "Elle est morte huit jours avant Simone de Beauvoir" (105) ["She died eight days (i.e., a week) before Simone de Beauvoir," 91], thus drawing the reader's attention to various parallels between the two writers—personal, as they face the deaths of their mothers, and textual, as they write in the immediate aftermath of their loss. Beyond a mere evocation of the daughter's sadness, grief, and desire to bring the mother back to life in writing, these two texts explore a relationship to the mother that simultaneously affects the lives and works of Beauvoir and Ernaux.

In her book *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death,* Elaine Marks raises an interesting paradox regarding Beauvoir's negotiations of the death of individuals around her. According to Marks, Beauvoir's numerous and obsessive encounters with death are a means of avoiding direct confrontation with her own mortality. In the first volume of Beauvoir's memoirs, the tragic death of her friend Zaza was followed by a moral debt, a "raison d'être" that motivated Beauvoir's autobiographical writing. Yet, on the one hand, according to Marks, this goal of writing, a writing against death, did not enable Beauvoir to identify with her friend and confront her own mortality. On the other, Marks admitted that the encounter taking place in *A Very Easy Death* was "more direct and more profound" and that "Simone de Beauvoir is involved as she never was before."[3]

Since Marks's influential study of Beauvoir's works, numerous critics have stressed the reparative function of *A Very Easy Death,* arguing that the death of Beauvoir's mother sharpened the author's confrontation with mortality and allowed her to reassess the mother-daughter relationship.[4] The following comparative analysis investigates the ambivalent relationship of the authors with their mothers at the moments of their deaths. Most studies exploring the mother/daughter relationship in *A Very Easy Death* and *A Woman's Story* focus on the identification between mother and daughter and evoke a dialog with death and the dead. Incorporating Marks's argument on mortality and recent works on motherhood in women's writing, this article investigates the

daughters' encounters with the death of their mothers and suggests that the written accounts of their experiences reveal a mother/daughter separation at the heart of their writing enterprise.

For Beauvoir and Ernaux, the mother's death offers the chance to take stock of feelings toward the mother during her lifetime and after her passing. For both authors, the relationship they had with their mothers affects the grieving process. A striking similarity between the two texts is the daughters' surprise when they feel great sorrow at the death of their mothers. Beauvoir did not expect to be so affected by the death of her mother. She anticipated that she would react much the same as when her father passed away: "Quand mon père est mort, je n'ai pas versé un pleur. J'avais dit à ma sœur: 'Pour maman, ça sera pareil'" (43) ["When my father died I did not cry at all. I had said to my sister: 'It will be the same for Maman,'" 31]. In the same manner, Ernaux writes: "Quelquefois je m'imaginais que sa mort ne m'avait rien fait" (62) ["Sometimes I imagined her death would have meant nothing to me," 50].[5] Elaine Marks makes a connection between Beauvoir's indifference to her father's death and his own indifference to it.[6] To their surprise, Beauvoir and Ernaux are more affected by their mothers' deaths than they had anticipated: they both fall apart, with uncontrollable outbursts of tears. In the middle of a card game with Sartre, Beauvoir begins crying hysterically: "Soudain, à onze heures du soir, crise de larmes qui dégénère presque en crise de nerfs" (43) ["Suddenly, at eleven, an outburst of tears that almost degenerated into hysteria," 31]. According to Elaine Marks, Beauvoir's mother was not indifferent to her own death and her refusal to die caused her daughter to feel momentary compassion: "From the moment that Simone de Beauvoir realizes that her mother does not want to die and is afraid of dying, Françoise de Beauvoir is transformed from a prig and a bigot into a suffering human being."[7] Marks's interpretation is certainly validated by the passage describing Beauvoir's unconscious process of identification with her mother:

> Cette fois, mon désespoir échappait à mon contrôle: quelqu'un d'autre que moi pleurait en moi. Je parlai à Sartre de la bouche de ma mère. . . . Et ma propre bouche , m'a-t-il dit, ne m'obéissait plus: j'avais posé celle de maman sur mon visage et j'en imitais malgré moi les mimiques. (44)

[This time my despair escaped from my control: someone other than myself was weeping in me. I talked to Sartre about my mother's mouth. . . . And he told me that my own mouth was not obeying me any more: I had put Maman's mouth on my own face and in spite of myself, I copied its movements.] (31)

Ernaux's reaction to her mother dying is not so dramatic. She anticipated her death over a period of eight years as she watched her gradual physical and mental decline due to a debilitating illness. However, the author describes her state of helplessness at the loss of her mother; she finds herself unable to function properly in her daily life, with everyday tasks requiring her to stop and think (20). When she is preparing a meal, for instance, she can't remember what to do with the vegetables she just peeled. This lapse of memory links Ernaux's grief to her mother's first symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. The author opens *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* with the following statement: "Ma mère a commencé de présenter des pertes de mémoire et des bizarreries de comportement deux ans après un grave accident de la circulation" (9) [My mother started to lose her memory and to behave strangely two years after a serious car accident].[8] After her mother's death, the daughter was temporarily affected by the same symptoms as her mother. Even reading was impossible (20). Literature had always been extremely important in the life of the daughter, who was to become a writer. During her childhood, reading was a mutual passion, a special bond between mother and daughter.[9] The mother's absence momentarily prevents the author from enjoying reading, a pleasure largely instilled by her.

Shortly after she describes her inability to read following her mother's death, ironically, Ernaux notes that she was able to write the first sentence of her book only three weeks after the funeral: "Ma mère est morte" (21) ["My mother died," 11].[10] The mere fact that Beauvoir and Ernaux began composing *Une mort très douce* and *Une femme* shortly after their mother's deaths points to writing as a painful, difficult, and necessary expression of mourning for both daughters. The difficulty of writing about the mother has to do with what is at stake when a woman writer decides to take on this charged topic. Nancy Chodorow's psycho-sociological study points out the symbiotic nature of the relationship between a mother and her daughter, a process of assimilation that becomes problematic in writing.[11] As Marianne Hirsch explains, the mother/daughter connection is at the origin of writing for women writers whose texts typically offer two voices, the daughter's and the mother's. The problem with this point of view remains that one speaks for the other: "To speak for the mother is at once to give voice to

her discourse and to silence and marginalize her."[12] For Beauvoir and Ernaux, writing about their mothers and bringing them to life through their words shortly after their deaths presents a challenge. For Marianne Hirsch, the daughter's writing reflects her own perception of her mother.

In *Une mort très douce* and *Une femme,* the daughters' written perceptions of their mothers are affected by the authors' writing practices. Beauvoir and Ernaux belong to different generations of writers, and as such, it is not surprising that they use words differently. This generation gap may account for the stylistic difference separating the two texts. Beauvoir favors a chronological narrative with a few exceptions, such as the lengthy digression describing her mother's life, or an occasional philosophical reflection on death or religion. However, these passages do not disrupt the structure of the text: the biography is placed squarely in the middle of the text, with the thoughts on death and religion reserved for the end. The typography in Ernaux's book shows an interrupted narrative where blank spaces abruptly cut into the middle of paragraphs. The visual discontinuity of the narrative could reflect disturbances in the brain activity of the suffering mother, her inability to produce speech, and the narrator's struggle to incorporate the events with continuity. On the other hand, similarly to Beauvoir, Ernaux dedicates a long portion of her book to a chronological account of her mother's life, which follows her through birth, marriage, motherhood, and old age.

Contrary to Beauvoir, Ernaux was influenced by the nouveau roman and favors objectivity over subjectivity.[13] She writes with a neutral style that reflects more closely the event being represented. Beauvoir's text is largely introspective, and what happens to her mother is analyzed and used to raise general and ethical issues such as death and suffering. Ernaux's introspections are linked to her writing project. The story of her mother's death is closely connected to a recurrent meditation on writing: "Je vais continuer d'écrire sur ma mère . . . c'est une entreprise difficile" (22) ["I shall continue to write about my mother . . . it's a difficult undertaking," 12]. The anguish of death that strikes the mother parallels the anguish of writing for the daughter: "Avant-hier seulement, j'ai surmonté la terreur d'écrire dans le haut d'une feuille blanche comme un début de livre, non de lettre à quelqu'un, 'ma mère est morte'" (21) ["It was only the day before yesterday that I overcame the fear of writing 'My mother died' on a blank sheet of paper, not as the first line of a letter but as the opening of a book," 11]. Beauvoir's

anguish is linked to the fear of facing death, which she sees as universal: "Nous assistions à la répétition générale de notre propre enterrement. Le malheur, c'est que cette aventure commune à tous, chacun la vit seul" (143) ["We were taking part in the dress rehearsal for our burial. The misfortune is that although everyone must come to this, each experiences the adventure in solitude," 99–100].

Another example of stylistic differences between the two authors is their choice of tenses. In her precise depiction of her mother's disease, Beauvoir uses the simple past tense, often creating a sense of disjunction between the informality of speech and a more tradition-bound style: "Maman répéta plusieurs fois ces derniers mots, elle ajouta: 'Si je n'y étais pas arrivée, j'étais foutue'" (19) ["Maman repeated the last words several times: she added, 'If I had not managed to get there, I should have been done for,'" 14]. This quotation shows the gap created by a daughter expressing her mother's death. Beauvoir seems to gloss over the event stylistically with the simple past tense, but the different register of language ("foutue"), spoken by the mother and not the author, clearly shows the stylistic disconnect between the mother's suffering and the words chosen by the daughter to describe her fate.

Choosing a writing style to faithfully represent the (m)other is of particular importance to Ernaux. She believes that literature is used by the upper class to control the lower class. Her ideological standpoint explains her mistrust of words, a recurrent theme in her works, as Christian Roche has explained: "l'écriture, l'utilisation sophistiquée de la langue pour décrire la situation des ses parents, court constamment le risque de la trahison, c'est-à-dire de la mise en distance, de la séparation des liens naturels" [Writing, the sophisticated use of language to describe the situation of one's parent, constantly runs the risk of betrayal, that is of creating a distance and separating natural ties].[14] Through a cold, so-called factual "I," Ernaux attempts to not betray her social milieu. In her recent article entitled "Le fil conducteur qui me lie à Beauvoir," Annie Ernaux recognizes that Simone de Beauvoir was an inspiration for her but maintains that she was never tempted to imitate her style, simply because their approaches to literature did not have the same origins: "Je n'écris pas depuis le même lieu que Beauvoir" [I do not write from the same place as Beauvoir].[15] Using the example of Oscar Lewis's book *The Children of Sanchez,* Ernaux shows that their respective writing naturally differs because of their distinctive social backgrounds.[16] Her approach explains the "mise en question permanente d'un langage qui véhicule, de façon invisible, les hiérarchies, le

sexisme" (5) [permanent questioning of a language that supports in an invisible fashion hierarchies, sexism] that marks her writing. On the other hand, "la façon dont Simone de Beauvoir évoque l'écriture dans son autobiographie . . . [et] sa façon de travailler . . . manifestent une indifférence à l'écriture comme *matière*" (5) [The way Simone de Beauvoir considers writing in her autobiography . . . (and) her way of working . . . shows an indifference to writing as a subject matter itself].

Beauvoir was often accused of showing coldness and lacking emotion toward her mother in *A Very Easy Death.* According to Elaine Marks, this characteristic stems from the author's ideological position rather than her compassionate feeling for her dying mother. To illustrate this idea, Marks opposes the author's reaction to that of her sister, Hélène. The latter experiences the passing of her mother with her heart, whereas the former analyzes it with her mind. Beauvoir treats her mother's passing from a philosophical perspective, depicting her mother as a woman of "bad faith," unaware of her disease. She makes her mother an example of the revolting destiny shared by a group of women. As Marks explains: "Simone de Beauvoir is separated from her experiences by the language she uses. . . . When she comes to the last part of her récit, the summing up, she feels obliged, certain laws of composition oblige her, to draw relevant conclusions and she falls back again on a language that does not relate to the facts of her experience. . . . What has occurred, then, in *A Very Easy Death,* is not essentially different from what occurred in the other encounters with death; the encounter is followed by an evasion."[17] The reader of *A Very Easy Death* is, however, often struck by the realistic description of the illness and treatment. Beauvoir describes the decaying body of her dying mother with surprising objectivity: "ce squelette habillé d'une peau moite bleue" (76) ["that skeleton clothed in damp blue skin," 53], "deux litres de pus dans le ventre" (42) ["four pints of pus in the abdomen," 30], "le bocal plein de matières jaunâtres" (39) ["the jar full of yellowish substance," 28].[18] Following narrative conventions, Beauvoir is able to express what "cannot be put in writing."[19] In so doing, as Marks points out, Beauvoir reveals that she has been moved and wants to move her reader as well. One could also suggest that the shocking reality she faces while observing her dying mother calls for a new register of words and forces her to transgress her own style.

On the formal level, as we have seen, Beauvoir's and Ernaux's texts reflect differently on the loss of the mother. In the process of writing about death, however, both authors are naturally drawn to reassess

their mothers' lives as well. Annie Ernaux's and Simone de Beauvoir's mothers suffered from and died of different diseases. Françoise de Beauvoir died of an intestinal cancer that was diagnosed only shortly before her death. Her failing body did not prevent her from having a sharp mind until her passing. Ernaux's mother, on the other hand, suffered from Alzheimer's disease, a long, debilitating illness that deeply and irrevocably affected her consciousness. In her book, Simone de Beauvoir uses the corset as a metaphor for the physical constraints imposed upon her mother when she was a young woman: "Maman est entrée dans la vie corsetée des principes les plus rigides: bienséances provinciales et morale de couventine" (46–47) ["Maman started life corseted in the most rigid of principles—provincial propriety and the morals of a convent-girl," 33]. Endowed with a lively intellect, sharpened by her rigorous upbringing, Françoise de Beauvoir fell victim to a cell disorder, having lived her entire life in a caged, trapped body.[20] Ernaux's mother, on the other hand, is depicted as a woman who suffered from a lack of education in her small provincial town in Normandy. As a result, she set her hopes on having her daughter fulfill her ambition to become a cultivated person. Ironically, in the evening of her life, she gave way to a disease that attacks the nervous system and progressively degenerates the mind. Beauvoir's mother had a keen mind. She would have been capable of understanding her illness and imminent death if her cancer had not been hidden from her by the doctors and the family. Ernaux's mother, on the other hand, had no choice. The nature of her disease prevented her from understanding what was happening to her. One could conclude that it is almost as though the social, intellectual, and economic contexts that determined their existence affected their deaths. In other words, both women died as they lived.

When Beauvoir and Ernaux revisit their mothers' lives, they are unable to separate their mothers from their social backgrounds, which are radically different.[21] Beauvoir's mother was raised in a Catholic bourgeois family whose declining wealth was a source of social embarrassment. She never worked outside of the home in her life and took advantage of her widowhood to travel, doing as she wished, until cancer finally forced her into the hospital. Beauvoir's overall impression of her mother's childhood, "Je ne pense pas que ma mère ait été une petite fille heureuse" (45) ["I do not think my mother can have been a happy child," 32], could apply to her entire existence. Her mother's lack of affection from her own parents in her youth explains her failure to achieve a satisfactory emotional life as an adult. Growing up as a young

ambitious woman ("'J'aurais voulu être une exploratrice,' disait-elle"(48) ["'I should have liked to be an explorer,' she used to say," 34], Françoise ends up marrying an unfaithful husband and plunges into a life "corsetée des principes les plus rigides" (47) ["corseted by the most rigid of principles," 33]. She accepts her husband's infidelities with resignation: "Elle continuait à dormir à côté de l'homme qu'elle aimait et qui ne couchait presque plus jamais avec elle: elle espérait, elle attendait, elle se consumait, en vain" (51) ["She went on sleeping beside a man whom she loved, and who almost never made love to her: she hoped, she waited and she pined, in vain," 36].

For Ernaux, summarizing the life and personality of her mother is a difficult task: "Pour moi, ma mère n'a pas d'histoire" (22) ["For me, my mother has no history," 12]. This remark is a statement about her social class: due to her meaningless existence and social background, her mother has no place in history. The word "histoire" also refers to the life story of this working-class woman, which has yet to be written.[22] When Ernaux strives to bring her mother back to life in writing, she chooses to start at Yvetot, a provincial town at the center of the author's family history. In contrast with Françoise de Beauvoir, who was educated in the protected environment of the convent des Oiseaux, Annie Ernaux's mother enjoyed a less restricted childhood in the countryside. Later, forced to cut short her schooling in order to make a living as a factory worker—already an improvement over farm labor—she cherishes the dream of becoming "une demoiselle de magasin" (a salesperson). This contrasts sharply with Beauvoir's mother, who never worked outside of the home: "Il est dommage que les préjugés l'aient détournée d'adopter la solution à laquelle elle se rallia, vingt ans plus tard: travailler au dehors" (50) ["It is a pity that out-of-date ideas should have prevented her from adopting the solution that she came round to, twenty years later—that of working away from home," 35]. Ernaux's mother sees work as a means to escape from her social condition. The joint ownership of a "café-épicerie" with her husband in the small town of Yvetot enables Ernaux's mother to leave the rural environment and adequately support her family.[23] However, when she succumbs to Alzheimer's disease, she is condemned to dependence, ending her hard-working life by relying on others for all of her needs.

In both cases, there is a similar obligation to conform to the rules set by their respective social classes. For her part, Françoise de Beauvoir seems to accept the role of the neglected bourgeois wife, whereas Ernaux's mother

S'est efforcée de se conformer au jugement le plus favorable porté sur les filles travaillant en usine: "ouvrière *mais* sérieuse," pratiquant la messe et les sacrements, le pain bénit, brodant son trousseau chez les sœurs de l'orphelinat, n'allant jamais au bois seule avec un garçon. (33)

[My mother tried to live up to the best possible image people could have of her kind: "Factory girls *but nonetheless* respectable." She went to mass and to holy communion, embroidered her trousseau at the local orphanage run by nuns and never went to the woods alone with a boy.] (23)

In *Une femme,* the narrator further notes: "Pour une femme, le mariage était la vie ou la mort, l'espérance de s'en sortir à deux ou la plongée définitive" (35) ["For a woman, marriage was a matter of life or death. It was either the hope of making it work together or else hitting rock-bottom," 24]. In this statement, Ernaux eludes to a general truth in a specific social context. For a woman like her mother, marriage was her only way out. In the same manner, when Simone de Beauvoir describes her father's unfaithful behavior, she writes: "Je ne blâme pas mon père. On sait assez que chez l'homme l'habitude tue le désir. Maman avait perdu sa première fraîcheur et lui sa fougue. Pour la réveiller, il recourait aux professionnelles du café de Versailles ou aux pensionnaires du Sphinx" (51) ["I do not blame my father. It is tolerably well known that in men habit kills desire. Maman had lost her first freshness and he his ardor. In order to arouse it he turned to the professionals of the café de Versailles, or the young ladies of the Sphinx," 36]. This candid reiteration of a preconceived idea about love and marriage could be seen as ironic coming from the author of *The Second Sex.* It is nevertheless a clear indication of a common perception at the time when Françoise de Beauvoir was married.

As they encounter the physical degradation and subsequent deaths of their mothers, Beauvoir and Ernaux are forced to see the maternal body fully disclosed.[24] As a result, they realize that during their lives, sexuality was a major taboo. Beauvoir's use of the corset metaphor to summarize her mother's life characterizes the repressed sexuality of her restricted bourgeois milieu. When Ernaux first views her mother's corpse, she describes her as "recouverte d'un drap jusqu'aux épaules, les mains cachées. Elle ressemblait à une petite momie" (11) ["A sheet covered her body up to her shoulders, hiding her hands. She looked like a small mummy," 1–2].[25] The resemblance between the corset and the mummy is striking; although one is used in life and the other in death. The veil of the shroud and a restrictive piece of underclothing

are used to make the body disappear; both refer indirectly to suppressed sexuality. Describing her mother's life, Ernaux clearly indicates the moral principles by which she was raised and the ultimate taboo of her education: to get pregnant. A real "malheur" (calamity) vaguely referred to in the text is linked to "un refus du corps et de la sexualité" (62) ["The denial of one's body and sexuality," 50–51]. Michèle Bacholle comments on this issue: "Pour cette mère liée par les traditions anciennes, non seulement la sexualité est-elle tabou, mais en parler l'est aussi" [For this mother who is influenced by old traditions, sexuality is not only a taboo, speaking about sexuality is also a taboo].[26] Ernaux compares censorship and repressed sexuality to a mutilated body: "Furtivement, je confonds la femme qui a le plus marqué ma vie avec ces mères africaines serrant les bras de leur petite fille derrière son dos, pendant que la matrone exciseuse coupe le clitoris" (62) ["Fleetingly, I confuse the woman who influenced me most with an African mother pinning her daughter's arms behind her back while the village midwife slices off the girl's clitoris," 51]. Beauvoir hints at the same speech prohibition in *A Very Easy Death:*

> Je la revois un matin—j'avais six ou sept ans—pieds nus sur le tapis rouge du corridor, dans sa longue chemise de nuit en toile blanche; ses cheveux tombant en torsade sur sa nuque et j'ai été saisie par le rayonnement de son sourire, lié pour moi d'une manière mystérieuse à cette chambre d'où elle sortait; je reconnaissais à peine dans cette fraîche apparition la grande personne respectable qui était ma mère. (47–48)
>
> [I see her again as I saw her one morning—I was six or seven—barefoot on the red carpet of the corridor in her long white linen nightgown; her hair fell in a twist on the back of her neck and I was struck by the radiance of her smile, which, for me, was associated in some mysterious ways with that bedroom she had just left; I scarcely recognized this brilliant vision as the respectable grown-up who was my mother.] (33–34)

This description of the mother appearing, almost miraculously, is the sketchy portrait of a woman who has just experienced sexual pleasure. Nothing is revealed but everything is simply suggested. The sharp contrast between the virgin-white gown and the deep red of the carpet is worth noticing. Her usually corseted mother appears in this instance in a pure and natural fashion: her long hair is freely falling on her bare neck. She has a smile that betrays the reason for her happiness, but the overall vision of the daughter is dreamlike, making sexual intercourse seem like a rare and almost imaginary event.

As they point out their mothers' conformity to the expectations of their respective social classes, Beauvoir and Ernaux not only disapprove of the way they lived, to some extent they also refuse to accept their deaths with the same resignation. This idea is illustrated by the numerous clichés on death, aging, and the medical perception of death in both texts. In *A Very Easy Death,* the narrator shows no surprise when she hears of her mother's fall: "Il y avait eu un temps, pas bien lointain, où elle se flattait de ne pas paraître son âge; maintenant on ne pouvait plus s'y tromper: c'était une vieille femme de soixante-dix-sept ans, très usée" (12) ["There had been a time, not very long ago, when she took pleasure in the thought that she did not look her age; now there could no longer be any mistake about it—she was a woman of seventy-seven, quite worn out," 10]. Further on in the text, seemingly insignificant comments foretell the fateful ending of the book: "Elle ne passera pas l'hiver" (16) ["She will never get through the winter," 12]; "Somme toute, elle avait l'âge de mourir" (16) ["And after all, she was of an age to die," 12]; "Elle pourra reprendre sa petite vie" (20) ["She will be able to potter around again," 15]; and, to better summarize, it: "à quatre-vingts ans, on est bien assez vieux pour faire un mort" (151) ["at eighty you are old enough to be one of the dead," 105]. The last cliché is challenged by the narrator, revolted by the injustice of death. The preceding clichés are integrated in the narrative as a voice of resignation to the human condition in general and the destiny of this woman in particular.

In *A Woman's Story,* Annie Ernaux opens her narrative by relying on the nurse's words, another cliché often used to diminish the tragedy of death: "Votre mère s'est éteinte ce matin, après son petit-déjeuner" (11).[27] The verb "s'éteindre" reminds the reader of the epigraph in *A Very Easy Death* by Dylan Thomas, challenging the common perception that old people should die "gently": "Old age should burn and rave at close of day."[28] The reader knows that Ernaux's mother died from a long and painful disease and that she did not pass away quietly, without suffering, as indicated in the nurse's choice of words. In her book, Beauvoir objects to the same misuse of language: "Les docteurs disaient qu'elle s'éteindrait comme une bougie: ce n'est pas ça, pas ça du tout a dit ma sœur en sanglotant" (126–27) ["The doctors said she would go out like a candle: it wasn't like that, it wasn't like that at all, said my sister, sobbing," 88]. Like Beauvoir, Ernaux does not accept death as a fate, and at the end of the funeral, she writes: "On me disait, 'ça servait à quoi qu'elle vive dans cet état plusieurs années.' Pour tous il était

mieux qu'elle soit morte. C'est une phrase, une certitude, que je ne comprends pas"(19) ["They said to me, 'What was the point of her going on like that.' They all thought it was a good thing she had died. The absolute certainty of this statement is something I cannot understand," 8–9].

While challenging clichés about death that would make their mothers' deaths more acceptable, Beauvoir and Ernaux refuse to treat their mothers as ordinary old people by trying to reveal their unique identities in their writing. The difficulty Ernaux has grasping and summarizing the life of a woman who she claims has no story—"Pour moi, ma mère n'a pas d'histoire"—also refers to the author's search for her mother's identity. Beauvoir uses the word "maman" throughout most of her text, whereas Ernaux prefers the expression "ma mère."[29] Although some critics see this distinction as a sign indicating Beauvoir's closer bond with her mother, what seems to matter, in the end, is that neither of these names constitutes a civic identity.[30] Whether called "maman" or "mère," a woman loses her identity through marriage and motherhood when she takes on the name of the husband and father and embraces the role of wife and mother: "La mère est privée enfin d'une *identité personnelle;* sans accès direct à la sphère sociale, coupée du politique et de l'économique, elle n'est plus que 'maman,' 'la mère,' une automate qui répète, aveugle, les gestes quotidiens" [The mother is eventually deprived of a personal identity, without direct access to the social sphere, cut off from politics and economics, she is only "mommy," "the mother," a blind robot who repeats the gestures of everyday life].[31]

Paradoxically, Beauvoir becomes fully aware of the individuality of her mother during her funeral when she is called by her civil name, even though it is her married name that is pronounced during the ceremony: "'Françoise de Beauvoir'; ces mots la ressuscitaient, ils totalisaient sa vie, de l'enfance au mariage, au veuvage, au cercueil; Françoise de Beauvoir: elle devenait un personnage, cette femme effacée, si rarement nommée" (144) ["'Françoise de Beauvoir'; the words brought her to life, they summed up her history, from birth to marriage, to widowhood, to the grave; Françoise de Beauvoir—that retiring woman, so rarely named—became an important person," 100]. Even if naming brings her to life, it is striking that Beauvoir uses the word "personnage" instead of "personne" (a linguistic distinction lost in the English translation) as if this identity "retrouvée" remained fictitious and constructed.

Interestingly enough, as they write about their mothers, Beauvoir's and Ernaux's efforts to find their mothers' identities result in the assertion of their own separate individual selves. In her excellent article "La Vieille Née: Simone de Beauvoir, *Une mort très douce,* and Annie Ernaux, *Une femme,*" Catherine Montfort argues that in both texts, daughters symbolically give birth to their deceased mothers through writing. Montfort unfolds the process of inversion and fusion through which the daughters become the mothers of their mothers.[32] A close reading of the dreams depicted by Ernaux and Beauvoir in their respective texts nevertheless suggests that the writing process reveals a detachment from the mother, a necessary condition for the daughter in order to assert herself as a woman and a writer. At the end of her book, Simone de Beauvoir refers to a dream that she had in which her mother blends with Sartre:

> Elle se confondait avec Sartre, et nous étions heureuses ensemble. Et puis le rêve tournait au cauchemar: Pourquoi habitais-je de nouveau avec elle? Comment étais-je retombée sous sa coupe? Notre relation ancienne survivait donc en moi sous sa double figure: une dépendance chérie et détestée. (147)
>
> [She blended with Sartre, and we were happy together. And then the dream would turn into a nightmare: Why was I living with her once more? How had I come to be in her power again? So our former relationship lived in me in its double aspect—a subjection that I loved and hated.] (102–3)

This passage shows the symbiotic relationship between the author and Sartre applied to the author's relationship with her mother in early childhood. It is possible to speculate that the comparison with Sartre, with whom Beauvoir had a relationship based on freedom and autonomy, dreadfully reminds her of her suffocating dependence upon her mother as a child.[33] The fusion rapidly changes into separation. During the funeral, Hélène de Beauvoir speaks to her sister: "'La seule chose qui me console,' m'a-t-elle dit, 'c'est que moi aussi je passerai par là. Sans ça, ça serait trop injuste!'" (142–43) ["'The only comfort I have,' she said, 'is that it will happen to me too. Otherwise it would be too unfair,'" 99]. These words reported by the narrator are followed by a commentary on solitude, a feeling everyone has to face when it is time to die. Hélène simply expresses what she feels, a sense of communion with her dying mother and a desire to be with her after death, whereas Simone refers to death as a "solitary adventure": "Nous assistions à la répétition générale de notre propre enterrement. Le malheur, c'est que cette aventure commune à tous, chacun la vit seul" (143) ["We were taking part in

the dress rehearsal for our burial. The misfortune is that although everyone must come to this, each experiences the adventure in solitude," 99–100]. When Hélène sees her eventual death as an opportunity to reunite with her mother, Simone sees death as a necessary detachment from her. Elaine Marks explains that Beauvoir's reaction is connected with the lie that conceals Françoise de Beauvoir's disease: she lived her life in bad faith and therefore died ignoring the cause of her suffering.[34] Switching from the individual "ma mère," to the universal "nous," "tous," and "chacun," the narrator uses the verb "assister à" and the words "répétition générale" to indicate her status as an outside observer who was never completely able to identify with her mother, her suffering and destiny.[35]

Symbolically, when it is time to share the deceased's possessions, Hélène sees the black ribbon that belonged to her mother and says: "C'est idiot, je ne suis pourtant pas fétichiste mais je ne peux pas jeter le ruban" (140) ["It's so stupid and I'm not at all a worshipper of things, but I just can't throw this ribbon away," 98]. Simone, on the other hand, considers her mother's meager possessions as "orphelins, inutiles, en attendant de se changer en déchets. . . . Inutile de prétendre intégrer la mort à la vie" (141) ["orphaned, useless, waiting to turn into rubbish. . . . It is useless to try to integrate life and death," 98]. For Hélène, the ribbon is an umbilical cord connecting her with her deceased mother, but Simone judges her sister's behavior as irrational: "Que chacun se débrouille à sa guise dans la confusion de ses sentiments" (141) ["Each must manage as well as he can in the tumult of his dealings," 98]. Françoise de Beauvoir's waking nightmare that occurred at the end of her life reiterates how differently the two daughters feel about their relationship to their mother: "J'étais dans un drap bleu, au dessus d'un trou; ta sœur [Hélène] tenait le drap et je la suppliais: 'ne me laisse pas tomber dans le trou.' 'Je te tiens, tu ne tomberas pas,' disait Poupette" (90) ["I was in a blue sheet, over a hole; your sister was holding the sheet and I begged her, 'Don't let me fall into the hole . . . ,' 'I am holding you; you will not fall,' said Poupette," 64]. The narrator interprets this dream as her mother's unconscious rejection of her impending death. But the sheet that she is holding on to, as if she was holding on to life, is also the one that she uses to hold on to her daughter Hélène, a clear sign of bonding between mother and child. Simone does not appear in this dream; and when she offers to sleep at the hospital at her mother's side, Françoise turns her down and confides that her presence scares her.

In Ernaux's book, it is the daughter who has a dream about her mother:

Pendant les dix mois où j'ai écrit , je rêvais d'elle presque toutes les nuits. Une fois, j'étais couchée au milieu d'une rivière, entre deux eaux. De mon ventre, de mon sexe à nouveau lisse comme celui d'une petite fille partaient des plantes en filaments, qui flottaient, molles. Ce n'était pas seulement mon sexe, c'était aussi celui de ma mère. (104)

[Throughout the ten months I was writing this book, I dreamed of her almost every night. Once I was lying in the middle of a stream, caught between two currents. From my loins, smooth again like a young girl's, from between my thighs, long tapering plants floated limply. The body they came from was not only mine, it was also my mother's.] (89–90)

It is tempting to see in this passage a desire to mingle with the deceased mother, particularly since the narrator explicitly states: "Il me semble maintenant que j'écris sur ma mère pour, à mon tour, la mettre au monde" (43) ["I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into this world," 32]. This remark confirms Luce Irigaray's comments on the mother/daughter relationship: "Quand l'une vient au monde, l'autre retombe sous la terre. Quand l'une porte la vie, l'autre meurt" [When one is brought to this world, the other disappears. When one carries a child, the other passes away].[36] The metaphor of the stream is recurrent in a number of women's texts evoking the mother. Lori Saint-Martin analyzes this metaphor in the works of Francophone Canadian writer Gabrielle Roy, who presents her mother as a river: "Elle était *comme une belle rivière,* semée, tout au long de son cours d'obstacles: *rochers, écueils, récifs,* et elle en venait à bout, soit en les contournant, et en s'éloignant par le rêve, soit en les franchissant au bond" [She was *like a beautiful river,* sprinkled with obstacles along its course: *rocks* and *reefs* and she managed to bypass these blocks through dreams or leaps].[37] In Gabrielle Roy's books, the mother stream undoubtedly refers to a source of reassurance, and the water constitutes the object of inspiration for the daughter's writing, but in Ernaux's dream the stream refers to both fusion and separation. A careful interpretation of the narrator's dream should take into account the main theme in Ernaux's works: the socio-cultural uprooting and displacement she suffers, engendered by her passage from the lower, "dominated" class to the upper, "dominating" one to which she belongs as a writer. Shame, culpability, and betrayal are the author's most important motivations in her attempt to rehabilitate her family and their environment. Her position

"au milieu d'une rivière, entre deux eaux" could refer to her being torn between two social milieus, the stream representing the passage of time and change in life. The "plantes en filaments" could also relate to the filiation and the issue of origins visually represented as floating down the current. It is interesting to note that the child's genitals, almost asexual and therefore not capable of bringing any "malheur," appear in the dream with the mother's. Rather than a wish to become one with the mother, this passage indicates a separation between the symbiotic childhood of a close mother/daughter bond, clearly indicated in Annie Ernaux's previous books, and a womanhood derived from the past but removed from the original social background. Ernaux concludes her book with the following words: "J'ai perdu le dernier lien avec le monde dont je suis issue" (106) ["The last bond between me and the world I came from has been severed," 92].

Although *Une mort très douce* by Simone de Beauvoir differs stylistically from Annie Ernaux's *Une femme,* the two texts reveal the same ambivalent relationship between the daughters and their deceased mothers characterized by a sense of bonding and detachment. It remains true that both authors brought their mothers to life through their writing, but unlike most texts dealing with the same theme and mainly focusing on mother/daughter identification, Ernaux's and Beauvoir's texts suggest instead a dissociation that is at the heart of the authors' writing projects. As they symbolically bring their mothers back to life in their books, their texts reconstruct and reiterate the disappearances of their mothers, the last bond between themselves and their past, their womanhood and their rejected social background, in order to assert themselves as women writers. For Simone de Beauvoir, writing about her mother's death takes the form of a strong ideological standpoint on death and on the bourgeoisie. For Annie Ernaux, the récit is a form of debt paid to the social origins she left behind when she became a writer. At the end of *Une mort très douce,* the author mentions the folding screen that separates the living from the dead in hospitals.[38] In *Une femme,* the daughter/narrator evokes a fleeting and ghostlike vision of her mother floating away as she dies.[39] These visual representations of loss and separation, appearing as their mothers lie dying, reveal the mother as the necessary and vital bond that each of these daughters has to sever in order to fulfill her own quest for identity as a woman and a writer.

NOTES

1. Translations from Beauvoir's and Ernaux's books are taken from the translated versions written by Patrick O'Brian and Tanya Leslie; page numbers are given for these translations. All other translations provided in this article are my own.

2. Beauvoir's letter is quoted in Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 569; translation is from *A Very Easy Death,* 102.

3. Marks, *Encounters with Death,* 112.

4. One of the most recent studies supporting this view is Susan Baindrigge's *Writing against Death.*

5. The use of the verb *imaginer* shows that that idea was both fictitious and unrealistic.

6. "And yet when Georges de Beauvoir, deeply shocked by the defeat of France and the Occupation, died quietly in July 1941, Simone de Beauvoir was but little affected; her father's indifference to *his* death may be largely responsible for her indifference to it" (Marks, *Encounters with Death,* 101).

7. Marks, *Encounters with Death,* 104.

8. This text, published almost ten years after *Une femme,* is based on the diary she kept during the period of her mother's disease, from 1983 to her death in 1986 (my translation).

9. In *La femme gelée* (23–25), Ernaux describes her relationship with her mother during her childhood and her special bonding with her based on their passion for books.

10. Critics have commented on the similarity between this opening and the first sentence of *L'Etranger* by Camus. Although the author has never explicitly claimed any connection, one could see a similarity between Meursault's difficulty in analyzing and comprehending his predicament and Ernaux's difficulty in grasping and writing about her mother's death.

11. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering.*

12. Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot,* 16.

13. In an interview given to Michelle Bacholle for *Sites,* she said: "As a narrator, I belong to the dominating world through my culture but through my origins to the dominated. . . . I strongly realized that I belong to the dominating through my writing and at that point [from *Des armoires vides* in 1974] I became distant, cold, insensitive and objective" (Bacholle, "Interview with Annie Ernaux," 144–45).

14. Roche, "Trahison et Littérature," 136.

15. Ernaux, "'Le Fil conducteur' qui me lie à Beauvoir," 5.

16. Sanchez's book describes the disastrous socio-economic conditions inflicted on the Mexican people. Ernaux, in "'Le Fil conducteur,'" writes, "J'ai alors compris que Beauvoir ne s'était pas installée dans le livre d'Oscar Lewis parce qu'elle n'avait aucune possibilité d'identification avec le monde décrit et qu'elle n'imaginait pas qu'on puisse en avoir. En d'autres termes, sa distinction littérature/document ressortait, en toute inconscience, à une lecture de classe" (5) [I understood then that Beauvoir had not penetrated Oscar Lewis's book because she was not able to identify with the world described in the novel and

that she could not imagine that anyone would. In other words, her distinction between literature and document became apparent, unconsciously, and emerged from a class reading].

17. Marks, "Encounters with Death," 140–42.

18. In her 1988 article "The Body in Decline in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*," Elaine Marks rethinks her 1973 interpretation of *A Very Easy Death* and writes: "*Une mort très douce* . . . is a text that transgresses the (in)cont(in)ent boundaries" (142).

19. Marks, "Encounters with Death," 153.

20. Françoise de Beauvoir was educated in the convent des Oiseaux. This was a well-named place, since the phrase might be seen as referring to a bird cage in which daughters of bourgeois and aristocratic families were taught the principles that defined the role attributed to bourgeois women at that time.

21. Annie Ernaux confirmed the class differences that separated her mother from Simone de Beauvoir's in her recent article "'Le Fil conducteur' qui me lie à Beauvoir": "Ce livre [*Une mort très douce*] me saisit et l'écriture m'en paraît juste et bouleversante, me transportant dans le temps où ma propre mère ne sera plus, même s'il n'y a rien de commun entre la mienne et la sienne" (4) [This book struck me and the words seem right and moving, taking me back to when my own mother was gone, even if my mother and hers do not have anything in common].

22. Drawing us back to the first part of this study, the word "history" could allude to the fictitious quality of the narrative constructed by the author about her mother's life, an option clearly rejected by Ernaux.

23. Ernaux's parents owned a small grocery store and café; her father served the customers in the café while her mother kept busy in the small grocery store.

24. In Beauvoir's text, the daughter finds her mother's nudity both repulsive and sacred (26–27). In Ernaux's, the same vision makes the daughter cry: "Allongée par dessus les draps, en combinaison; les jambes relevées, montrant son sexe. . . . Je me suis mise à pleurer parce que c'était ma mère" (95–96) ["Her knees were up, showing her private parts. . . . I started to cry because she was my mother," 82]. At the end of the text, the mother's nudity reappears in a dream where the daughter and mother are both floating naked in a river (104).

25. Ironically, the English translation of "momie" is "mummy," spelled like the British version of "Mommy."

26. Bacholle, "Passion simple d'Annie Ernaux," 127.

27. Tanya Leslie's English translation, "Your mother passed away this morning, after breakfast" (1), loses the connotation of a quiet and easy death in the metaphor of the burning candle.

28. "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light" (Dylan Thomas).

29. The word "maman" is only capitalized in the translated English version.

30. Catherine Montfort and Liliane Lazar share the closer-relationship opinion in their comparative studies of both texts by Beauvoir and Ernaux.

31. Saint-Martin, "Le nom de la mere," 77.

32. Montfort, "La Vieille Née,"358.

33. "Possessive, dominatrice, elle aurait voulu nous [Simone de Beauvoir et Hélène, sa sœur] tenir toutes entières dans le creux de la main. Mais c'est au moment où cette compensation lui est devenue nécessaire que nous avons commencé à souhaiter de la liberté, de la solitude" (54) ["She was possessive; she was overbearing; she would have liked to have us (Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène, her sister) completely in her power. But it was just at the time when this compensation became necessary to her that we began to long for freedom and solitude," 38].

34. Marks, "The Body in Decline in *Adieux*," 140.

35. This interpretation is much like the conclusion drawn by Lori Saint-Martin in her article "Le nom de la mère," where she notes: "La fille écrit pour se démarquer de sa mère, pour ne pas devenir mère à son tour mais aussi pour lui donner une voix" (82) [The daughter writes to distinguish herself from her mother, not to become another submissive mother, but also to give her a voice].

36. Irigaray, *Et l'une bouge pas sans l'autre*, 22.

37. Quoted by Lori Saint-Martin, "Le nom de la mere," 83.

38. "Dans les salles communes, quand approche la dernière heure, on entoure d'un paravent le lit du moribond" (135–36) ["In the public wards, when the last hour is coming near, they put a screen round the dying man's bed," 95].

39. "Son image tend à redevenir celle que je m'imagine avoir eue d'elle dans ma petite enfance, une ombre large et blanche au dessus de moi" (105) ["I see her more and more the way I imagine I saw her in my early childhood: as a large, white shadow floating above me," 91].

Childless Children

Bodies and Betrayal

NANCY K. MILLER

> But incontinence is not only *old* sexuality. It is also a *new* continent to be written and a new continent to be explored. But that continent lies beyond the borders, and those who move beyond run the risk of being accused of acting in violation of the laws of the fathers and of the mothers. . . . In 1954 Sartre is said, by Simone de Beauvoir, to have exclaimed: "La littérature, c'est de la merde." Simone de Beauvoir's example indicates how unpalatable it is to reverse the terms and exclaim: "La merde, c'est de la littérature."
>
> Elaine Marks, "Transgressing the (In)cont(in)ent Boundaries: The Body in Decline"

At the end of her last book, *Marrano as Metaphor,* a study of the Jewish presence in French writing and, as she will add, "by extension, . . . in myself," Elaine Marks explains that she came to "questions of Jewishness through the Shoah." But she is careful to clarify the genealogy of her thinking: "It would be more accurate to state that in the beginning was an obsession with death and absence to which the Jewish story became attached." Marks then offers a very brief autobiographical account of how, early in her life, the presence of death made itself felt. She recalls sitting at the piano at age four on the occasion of her maternal grandfather's death and trying to understand what it meant that her grandfather would be gone forever. She interprets this memory, and

another childhood memory of tasting bacon, as the first signs of a self-conscious awareness of "being" and "not being" (153)—a preoccupation that antedates for her what it might mean to be Jewish or to be a woman.

Certainly, Marks's preoccupation with death is central to her reading of Simone de Beauvoir's work as early as 1973. And Marks returns to that vision in the essay about *La cérémonie des adieux* from which I have drawn my epigraph. She also revisits Beauvoir's body of autobiographical works to trace the evolution in Beauvoir's writing and (by extension, as she might say) her own as a critic about death, sexuality, and aging. In Beauvoir, Marks finds a literature of witness, a radical attempt to see beyond the acceptable boundaries of representation, to uncover the ontological loneliness at the heart of the human condition. More simply, or at least more specifically, Marks reads in the farewell to Sartre an anxiety about the end of life—and discovers something akin to a literary solution. Put another way, Marks finds in Beauvoir a way to imagine some protection for the writer who, like Beauvoir and Marks, has not reproduced, has not produced a child. Who will care for the writer who leaves no child behind? Or is it that a writer herself without a child (me) imagines that this is what Marks reads in Beauvoir?

Life writing is often a literature about the death of parents and about questions of lineage and genealogy. It is the subject of my book *Bequest and Betrayal,* from which the present essay is adapted. Memoirists who bear witness to the shock of losing one's parents, even late in life, situate themselves in a chain of family resemblance. But in the case of childless children, the chain is broken. If I resemble those who come before me, my parents, who resembles me? If I take care of them, who will care for me? In Philip Roth's *Patrimony,* the story of his father's final illness and death, and Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death,* her memoir about her mother's, that question surfaces directly and indirectly as the authors grapple with the unexpected intimacy of a father or a mother's vulnerable body, a body no longer bounded by propriety, a body that leaks and eliminates, that does the body's private work, its business, out in the open.

Writing about despair and confusion, even jotting down telegraphic shards in my diary, always feels like a small gesture toward clarity and hope. Writing anything in those moments seems to arrest the free fall of

anxiety I find so paralyzing. At a particularly low point in my father's decline I wrote an essay that I called "My Father's Penis." Although its pretext was the feminist discussion of the great penis/phallus question (how can you tell the difference, or can you?), its stakes were personal: my attempt to make sense of a life that had stopped, or so it seemed to me, making sense. A lawyer and intellectual (self-styled), my father could no longer read or write, no more than he could get himself to and from the bathroom on time, or sometimes at all. When I first read Philip Roth's *Patrimony* in early 1991, my father had died and I was still living out his death as a kind of daily dullness. I felt that I joined some piece of Roth's desire to account for the experience of living with and through a father's death.

Roth isn't the first contemporary author to make autobiographical literature out of a parent's intimate suffering. In *A Very Easy Death* Simone de Beauvoir detailed the unfolding drama of her mother's death from cancer. I read Beauvoir's memoir before my mother's death from cancer, Roth's in the aftermath of my father's losing battle with Parkinson's. But books and deaths rewrite each other. When I revisit my father's last years, scenes from *Patrimony* become part of my home movie. When I think about what my mother's death meant to me, *A Very Easy Death* supplies a guide to the maze of emotional contradictions I still get lost in. But for me, deeper claims link these two memoirs, whose authors are both childless. The biography of a dying parent written by an author without a child can make autobiography a surprisingly painful journey. Writing about these books now as a reader without a child, I read, perhaps too autobiographically, looking for the effects of that story—between the lines.

As the book's reviewers unfailingly pointed out, *Patrimony* takes its title from a scene in which Herman Roth is convalescing at his son's house in Connecticut. Having been constipated for several days following a hospital stay during which he has undergone a painful biopsy for a brain tumor, the father suddenly loses control of his bowels, dramatically soiling himself and the bathroom in the process: "I beshat myself," he explains. After cleaning up his father's body, the son warily confronts the side effects of paternal disarray:

> The bathroom looked as though some spiteful thug had left his calling card after having robbed the house. As my father was tended to and he was what counted, I would just as soon have nailed the door shut and forgotten that

bathroom forever. "It's like writing a book," I thought—"I have no idea where to begin." (173)

Although *Patrimony* doesn't begin here, the memoir is inseparable from this scene in the bathroom. To shut the door on the bathroom would mean not only not writing the book but forgetting that writing in some way always begins just there, in the spectacular but nonetheless ordinary mess of human life. So a writer has to remember the bathroom and return there in memory because that is where the material is. And there is a reward for going back into the room to finish the job:

> You clean up your father's shit because it has to be cleaned up, but in the aftermath of cleaning it up, everything that's there to feel is felt as it never was before. It wasn't the first time that I'd understood this either: once you sidestep disgust and ignore nausea and plunge past those phobias that are fortified like taboos, there's an awful lot of life to cherish. . . .
>
> And why this was right and as it should be couldn't have been plainer to me, now that the job was done. So that was the patrimony. And not because cleaning it up was symbolic of something else but because it wasn't, because it was nothing less or more than the lived reality that it was.
>
> There was my patrimony: not the money, not the tefillin, not the shaving mug, but the shit. (175–76)

This is Roth's double paradox: *Patrimony* is not what is preserved but what is returned, not getting but giving. *Patrimony* sounds metaphorical but it's literal: what you see is what you get. Not because it was "symbolic of something else but because it wasn't." The point of this patrimony is its "lived reality." But can the lived reality of cleaning up your father's shit ever be detached from what it symbolizes? Roth's patrimony comes to mean reversing the flow of care between generations; returning, in some sense, the unreturnable, the incommensurability of parental devotion—symbolically, as literature.

After the accident, while helping Herman bathe, Philip observes his father's penis: "It looked pretty serviceable. Stouter around, I notice, than my own. 'Good for him,' I thought. 'If it gave some pleasure to him and my mother, all the better'" (177). Comparing penises, measuring the distance between the child's view and the adult's, Roth recalls seeing his father's penis when he "was a small boy," when he used to think "it was quite big." Looking at his father in the tub, it turns out that he "had been right." A glance at a father's penis produces a glimpse of a boy's future.

Roth doesn't just glance at his father's penis, he memorizes it:

I looked at it intently, as though for the very first time, and waited on the thoughts. But there weren't any more, except my reminding myself to fix it in my memory for when he was dead. It might prevent him from becoming ethereally attenuated as the years went by. "I must remember accurately," I told myself, "remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me." *You must not forget anything.* (177)

Unlike the first scene in the bathroom, which leads backward to connection, contemplating the father's penis here rehearses future separation and death: The father's penis stands in for the father as a body (his physical and generative presence—"the father who created me") but also as the father's law, the voice of authority: You must not forget anything. (These become the last words of the memoir.) The commandment underlying all the others. Jews are told to remember and not to forget; part of what you remember has to do with where you come from, the literal and figurative body.

Patrimony gets written in the space between two contradictory injunctions: not to forget and not to tell. When Philip puts Herman to bed for a nap after his accident, he promises his father that he won't "tell the children" (Roth's nephews) or Claire (Roth's wife): "'Nobody,' I said. 'Don't worry about it. It could have happened to anyone'" (173). How to tell without telling? For a writer, especially a Jewish writer, not forgetting anything entails putting memory into language; it's a form of covenant with major Old Testament antecedents. But that compulsion to record and bear witness collides with another biblical injunction—the one that forbids looking upon the father naked (as Ham discovers Noah lying famously drunk in his tent, and by telling his brothers, earns the father's curse). By including the plea for paternal privacy in his violation of it, Roth makes clear what side he has to be on. To separate from the other, father or mother, requires the enactment of one's own difference; the more likeness is asserted, the more difference is displayed. In this sense, betrayal—as an act of differentiation: there are two of us—seems to come with the territory of the family memoir. This is where I come from but not what I am.

Patrimony is the narrative—Roth calls it "a true story"—of a father's dying and of what the legacy of that event turns out to mean for him. More than inheriting the father's stories or cleaning up the shit, patrimony seems to mean reconstituting through memory what connects generations. A framed photograph of the Roth men on vacation, posed in a row of descending size, occupies the center of the cover; the image separates the name Roth from the title of the memoir. Wearing a

sleeveless undershirt, Herman, looking straight ahead, is standing behind his sons, his arms hanging at his sides: not touching. In front of him is Sandy, the older brother, with his hands resting on the shoulders of his little brother. Low man on the totem pole, Philip, age four, looks out of the portrait, away from the camera. Roth reads the portrait from the bottom up: "The three of us rise upward to form a V, my two tiny sandals its pointed base, and the width of my father's solid shoulders . . . the letter's two impressive serifs. . . . There we are, the male line, unimpaired and happy, ascending from nascency to maturity!" (230).

The story of *Patrimony* is the unfolding narrative of illness and death; it is also the record of a discovery. Losing a father turns out to mean feeling ordinary things, wanting ordinary things—the objects, for instance, that represent him: that attach to, derive from, his body (this is the dictionary definition of patrimony, before the shit). The banalities of autobiography. What's yours, your father's, your grandfather's?

Roth explains that after his mother's death, when he was discussing his father's affairs, he had renounced his share of the estate. Now that his father's death looms, the gesture suddenly seems as wrong in its effects as it was generous in intention: "I felt crushed for having done it: naive and foolish and crushed" (104). This realization comes at almost the dead center of the book.

> I wanted the money because it was his money and I was his son and I had a right to my share, and I wanted it because it was, if not an authentic chunk of his hardworking hide, something like the embodiment of all that he had to overcome or outlasted. . . .
>
> Didn't I think I deserved it? Did I consider my brother and his children more deserving inheritors than I, perhaps because my brother, by having given him grandchildren, was more legitimately a father's heir than was the son who had been childless? . . . Just where had this impulse to cast off my right of inheritance come from, and how could it have so easily overwhelmed expectations that I now belatedly discovered a son was *entitled* to have?
>
> But this had happened to me more than once in my life: I had refused to allow convention to determine my conduct, only to learn, after I'd gone my own way, that my bedrock feelings were sometimes more conventional than my sense of unswerving moral imperative. (104–5)

While bearing witness to a parent's dying, *Patrimony* and *A Very Easy Death* also tell the story of a coming to terms with one's own conventionality in the face of that common experience. The power of this realization derives in part from finding oneself confronted as an adult—Roth and Beauvoir are in their mid-fifties when they face their parents'

deaths—with the contingency, somehow avoided until then, of the physical bond between generations. A parental body in decline reminds us of the founding ordinariness of life that is lodged in the body itself. This is a knowledge which not having children, and not living the implacable domesticity that daily care for them as bodies entails, manages to forestall for a very long time. The demands of the dying parent's body mark the end of deferral. But paradoxically, this revelation turns back on itself and exposes conventionality's ultimate condition: the plot of generations. Parents, children, parents, children, grandparents.

Patrimony ends on a dream about the rule of generations, or rather on a waking reading of its significance.

> In the morning I realized that he had been alluding to this book, which, in keeping with the unseemliness of my profession, I had been writing all the while he was ill and dying. The dream was telling me that, if not in my books or in my life, at least in my dreams I would live perennially as his little son, with the conscience of a little son, just as he would remain alive there not only as my father but as *the* father, sitting in judgment on whatever I do.
>
> You must not forget anything. (237–38)

It bothers some readers that Roth admits, almost in passing, to have been writing his memoir while his father was dying. The word Roth uses to characterize this lapse in taste is "unseemliness." But if, as his dream tells him, appropriating a father's suffering for his own professional requirements is wrong, it is at the same time the thing that gives the suffering its due. For if the ultimate commandment of filiality is not to forget, then the will to record answers to a higher law. But who decides what should be recorded? What weighs heavier in the balance, a father's desire for privacy or a son's need to tell, to reauthor himself? Perhaps, to grow up. You know you're still a little son when you believe in the father's law and break it. That's the story patriarchy (patrimony) keeps alive.

Canonically, autobiography charts a journey out, the emergence from the zones of everyone's obscurity into a singular public identity: leaving home, becoming a writer (the story told in *The Facts,* for instance, or through Beauvoir's multivolumed memoirs, of being unlike everyone else). For these writers the autobiographical act embedded in the portrayal of the other folds back on itself into homeliness, dailiness, the commonest places. But not only. For if the memoir is bound to the deployment of these recovered values (one's "bedrock feelings"),

writers both embrace them and remain elsewhere in the acts of authoring their books.

> A woman is her mother. That's the main thing.
> Anne Sexton, "Housewife"

Like Philip Roth, Simone de Beauvoir composed her death memoir well into a distinguished writing career and as an adult child who by her notoriety had shocked but certainly also impressed her parents.

A Very Easy Death opens with Beauvoir in Rome learning by a phone call from a good friend in Paris that her mother has had an accident. For both writers the narrative of decline involves a pulling back from the displacements of a certain chosen glamour to the physical demands of a parent's failing body. Beauvoir and Roth are forced to think about home, even if they don't literally return there. Beauvoir's account of her mother's illness—from the apparent simplicity of a broken hip to the hopeless complexities of misdiagnosed intestinal cancer—is rooted in the scene of the clinic, and the drama of the "easy" death unfolds from the confines of the hospital bed. Her mother's history, which this enforced return to the maternal orbit seems to require, is a biography constructed from the sight of that body in pain.

By calling his father's story *Patrimony,* Roth highlights the task of cleaning up his father's shit. As we saw earlier, he also insists on our taking this act in without any symbolic coin, but the language works against it: In our vernacular, being full of shit, like taking shit, is a matter of words. What cleaning up a parent's shit makes shockingly visible is our need for some things to remain a matter of words. When words like shit become lived realities, the relation between words and things is inverted. Cleaning up shit requires not thinking of the task as taking shit. On the contrary. Real shit has a lesson to offer about our attachment to our parents' bodies, especially when we rely on the integrity of their bodies for our ideas about who we are. Real shit brings home our need for this unchanging relation, which is experienced both in real time and in memory. If we have the slightest doubt about these body boundaries, the spectacle of the parental body out of control removes it.

We can read Beauvoir's encounter with those boundaries in a scene that offers an asymmetrical counterpoint to the second bathroom episode, in which Roth compares penis proportions with his father. For Beauvoir the comparable revelation—but are son/father, mother/daughter alignments ever truly analogous?—comes early in the

medical narrative. One day, while Beauvoir is visiting her mother in the clinic, the physical therapist, in reaching for her mother's leg, uncovers her mother's body below the waist:

> Maman had an open nightdress on and she did not mind that her wrinkled belly, criss-crossed with tiny lines, and her bald pubis showed. "I no longer have any sort of shame," she observed in a surprised voice.
>
> "You are perfectly right not to have any," I said. But I turned away and gazed fixedly into the garden. The sight of my mother's genitals had jarred me. No body existed less for me: none existed more. As a child I had loved it dearly; as an adolescent it had filled me with an uneasy repulsion: all this was perfectly in the ordinary course of things and it seemed reasonable to me that her body should retain its dual nature, that it should be both repugnant and holy—a taboo. But for all that, I was astonished at the violence of my distress. My mother's indifferent acquiescence made it worse: she was abandoning the exigencies and prohibitions that had oppressed her all her life long and I approved of her doing so. Only this body, suddenly reduced by her capitulation to being a body and nothing more, hardly differed at all from a corpse. (19–20)

There is no easy female equivalent of patrimony, since matrimony leads away from the mother and since it's always less clear what, under patriarchy, a daughter can inherit from her mother, let alone pass on or return. What does the scene of a mother's bodily suffering mean to a daughter's idea of herself? "Why," Beauvoir asks in the final chapter of this painful portrait, "did my mother's death shake me so deeply?" (102). This is not a question Roth asks himself, since the answer seems self-evident: I have lived this loss as my father's son. A father who is not myself, but like myself. For daughters, the loss touches on the problem of analogy itself. How am I like? Am I, in fact—my mother? For daughters, separation from the mother emerges from a founding confusion of boundaries.

Roth admires the hardiness of his father's penis, but Beauvoir is repelled by the sight of her mother's genitals. When she sees her mother's bald pubis, she averts her gaze. Seeing her mother embodied "as a woman" ruptures any conventional bonds of female continuity; to be of woman born is not necessarily a comfort. She looks, and looks away. Unlike Roth, Beauvoir does not compare herself to her mother as a woman. Beauvoir's life project refused the entire legacy of female identity. She revolted against the concept of Woman and the price of embodiment. For Beauvoir, being embodied was women's unenviable fate. If, in her famous formulation, one is not born a woman but rather becomes one, Beauvoir sought to escape the ground of that becoming.

By not having children and by living the life of the mind, a life shared with Sartre, Beauvoir tried to outplay the laws of gender. So when the author of *The Second Sex* looks at her mother, she begins by a disavowal. She looks away. Her own belly, pubic hair, genitals are not sites of complicity and identification with her mother as another woman. The points of connection—and disconnection—are those of the spirit, sometimes the spirit of the body. Beauvoir approves of her mother's lack of shame.

Beauvoir's vision of her mother, not unlike her *Second Sex* analysis of woman in Western culture, is dual: cherished and reviled, sacred and repugnant. The illness revives that double bind, the figures of the two mothers:

> The "Maman darling" of the days when I was ten can no longer be told from the inimical woman who oppressed my adolescence; I wept for both of them when I wept for my old mother. I thought I had made up my mind about our failure and accepted it; but its sadness comes back to my heart. There are photographs of both of us, taken at about the same time: I am eighteen, she is nearly forty. Today I could almost be her mother and the grandmother of that sad-eyed girl. I am so sorry for them—for me because I am so young and I understand nothing; for her because her future is closed and she has never understood anything. But I would not know how to advise them. It was not in my power to wipe out the unhappinesses in her childhood that condemned Maman to make me unhappy and to suffer in her turn for having done so. For if she embittered several years of my life, I certainly paid her back, though I did not set out to do so. (103)

The photographs embody the divide that separates the two women, mother and daughter, but also splits each pair in two: the good mother and the bad, the dutiful daughter and the rebellious one. Their story is one of failed connections between generations of women. Even in the present tense of writing, incomprehension remains. I would not know how to advise them: Two women who don't understand each other, who are destined as women to miss each other. Each one longs for the other's recognition; each withholds it because of her history, her childhood unhappiness. *A Very Easy Death* is in part the drama of how that recognition belatedly takes place: two women giving up their war, a war not of their own making.

In *Patrimony* the photo chosen to represent the "male line" is a single photo, in which the dominant image is that of visible connection and jubilation, V for Victory. What Roth comes to see—to want to see—in his father's illness is how much joins them still: "I could even believe

(or make myself believe) that our lives only seemed to have filtered through time, that everything was actually happening simultaneously, that I was as much back in Bradley with him towering over me as here in Elizabeth with him all but broken at my feet" (231). Commenting on the photograph, Roth describes his desire to "join the two fathers and make them one," the father of memory in the picture and the father now "all but broken" at his feet.

Patrimony's cover announces a nostalgia for connection and identification alien to Beauvoir. She chooses not one photograph but two, two images of division to represent her relation to her mother (her sister does not figure in the scene: not the female line). In a rare play on maternal identity, Beauvoir imagines herself as her mother's mother and her own grandmother. But this is not a happy solution: even in her fantasized wisdom, she is powerless to make the images speak to each other. What is the female equivalent of patrimony? French feminist Luce Irigaray stages it this way in an imaginary dialogue between mother and daughter called "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other": "With your milk, mother, I swallowed ice" (60). Nurturance does not come naturally. When Beauvoir looks back over her childhood and adolescence, she sees disconnection and repudiation. Getting even. Settling scores.

If Roth longs to close the gap between his father and his self, Beauvoir needs the distance of the gap to survive. Beauvoir, whose strength (but also weakness) as a writer has always been her absolute determination to see the truth—in this case her belief that family sentiment is based largely on ideologies of repression—resists the lure of filial piety. It is true that by bringing her internal conflicts to light, the illness produces a mother Simone finds it easier to love: "She had an animal passion for life which was the source of her courage and which, once she was conscious of the weight of her body, brought her towards truth" (104). But if Beauvoir feels more comfortable with this vision of her mother—a mother made more attractive (less other) by the intensity of her physical desire for life (the "truth")—like Roth she is finally moved beyond the expectations of her daughterly performance by the facts of her mother's broken and defeated body: "My despair escaped from my control: someone other than myself was weeping in me" (31). Who is this someone other in herself? Who am I, faced with my mother's suffering?

One piece of that puzzle of identity can be found within the question *A Very Easy Death* asks without ever answering: "Why did my mother's death shake me so deeply?" Building on Freud, critic Kathleen

Woodward argues that while the death of a father is the most significant event in a man's life, "the most excruciating test to which a woman can be put is the loss of her child." And she concludes, provocatively: "Beauvoir suffers here as if from the death of the child she never had" ("Simone de Beauvoir" 103). What does it mean to experience the loss of your mother as though it were the loss of a child you never had? This is not a figure of substitution—the parent in the place of the child—but a redoubling: losing the parent after losing the child one never had. The imaginary mourning attaches with extra poignancy to the present drama; imaginary loss comes to rework the real one. The double loss requires a double mourning. It's at least in part because of this imaginary loss (never admitted: I imagine it in Beauvoir's place), I think, that Beauvoir has so much trouble answering her own question.

This notion of a double mourning also surfaces in *Patrimony.* The writer undergoes an emergency quintuple bypass in the course of his father's illness and suddenly invokes the complexity of familial bonds across genders. Imagining that he is giving suck to "his own newborn heart," he feels himself "androgynously partaking of the most delirious maternal joy." Roth revels in his transgendered status: "I was as near to being the double of my own nurturing mother," he explains, "as . . . I had come to feeling myself *transposed,* interchangeable with . . . my failing father" (226). For Roth, gleefully changing places within the familial scenario as if in a fiction of his own design, nurturance is not threatening but cause for narcissistic jubilation: the ultimate fantasy of self-creation. For Beauvoir, however, the breakdown of roles engendered by compulsory caretaking produces an unexpected panic. Metaphors of nurturance, thoroughly denounced (perhaps autobiographically) in *The Second Sex,* are lined with violence in the death memoir where—repelled by her mother's helplessness and the pleasure her mother seemed to take in being dependent—Beauvoir nonetheless respects the ethics of requital. The collapse of the body and the decorum of its functions marks the divide and the passage of the child into the role of protector:

> Mademoiselle Leblon and a red-haired nurse tried to put her on to a bed-pan; she cried out; seeing her raw flesh and the harsh gleam of the metal, I had the impression that they were setting her down on knife-edges. The two women urged her, pulled her about, and the red-haired nurse was rough with her; Maman cried out, her body tense with pain.
>
> "Ah! Leave her alone!" I said.
>
> I went out with the nurses. "It doesn't matter. Let her do it in her bed."

"But it is so humiliating," protested Mademoiselle Leblon. "Patients cannot bear it."

"And she will be soaked," said the red-head. "It is very bad for her bed-sores."

"You can change the clothes at once," I said.

I went back to Maman. . . . "You don't have to bother about a bed-pan. They will change the sheets—there's no sort of difficulty about it."

"Yes," she replied. And with a frown and a look of determination on her face she said, as though she were uttering a challenge, "The dead certainly do it in their beds." (54)

From this perspective we may understand Beauvoir's image of someone other than herself weeping inside her as the mother she never wanted to be weeping for the child she said she never wanted to have. Perhaps what Herman expresses in "Philip is like a mother to me," the comment he makes as his son bathes him, is also that fantasized maternity: the other in himself Philip might have wanted to be. Perhaps, finally, threaded through these memoirs of another's dying is the story of a double loss: a childless writer confronted with the story of what didn't happen.

Beyond the lost mother or father, and the end of parents altogether, the memoirs invoke a style of emotional being in the world gone forever. They record the traces of a double mourning: as if for the child one never had, as if for all one would never be. Because the story of generations is already moot, parent and child remain locked forever in nostalgia's embrace for all they both were and never were to each other. There is in this version no second chance.

Unlike Roth's passion for identification (maternal or paternal) in *Patrimony,* Beauvoir's aim in *A Very Easy Death* is to keep the story of her disconnection from her mother straight: "Generally speaking I thought of her with no particular feeling" (102). But her experience fails to sustain that conviction.

I talked to Sartre about my mother's mouth as I had seen it that morning and about everything I had interpreted in it . . . that did not want to admit its existence. And he told me that my own mouth was not obeying me any more: I had put Maman's mouth on my own face and in spite of myself, I copied its movements. Her whole person, her whole being, was concentrated there, and compassion wrung my heart. (31)

My mother, myself. It's hard to tell the difference when your body defies the divide. The truth implicit in that involuntary knowledge of

what binds bodies together in spite of themselves is what drives the narrative and undermines its authorial will to know. We may not be, the sight of a parent's suffering teaches us, who we think we are. As Beauvoir concluded about the photographs, the pact that linked the two women was one that involved a compulsion, if not a commitment, to pay the other back. She bears witness to the knot of recrimination that mounts upward in the chain of generations: negative requital. If her mother, because of *her* mother, condemned Simone to unhappiness, Simone, by her own account, certainly paid her back. But when her body takes over, retribution ceases.

Nonetheless, by virtue of Beauvoir's autobiographical style (which embodies her ideological astringency), that convulsive experience of compassion is never completely severed from her will to erase its effects. So Beauvoir writes in the memoir's final pages:

> In spite of appearances, even when I was holding Maman's hand, I was not with her—I was lying to her. Because she had always been deceived, gulled, I found this ultimate deception revolting. I was making myself an accomplice of that fate which was so misusing her. Yet at the same time in every cell of my body I joined in her refusal, in her rebellion: and it was also because of that that her defeat overwhelmed me. (105)

Throughout the dying, the relationship lives on in Beauvoir "in its double aspect—a subjection that I loved and hated." That double feeling is embedded in the deepest folds of the memorial project. Beauvoir writes:

> I had grown very fond of this dying woman. As we talked in the half-darkness I assuaged an old unhappiness; I was renewing the dialogue that had been broken off during my adolescence and that our differences and our likenesses had never allowed us to take up again. And the early tenderness that I had thought dead forever came to life again, since it had become possible for it to slip into simple words and actions. (76)

This tenderness, which Beauvoir sees as being released by the simplification of her mother's life and language through illness, in turn releases Beauvoir's compassion and produces her dedication. Although her judgment of her mother's life as a life remains harsh, it is neither uncomprehending nor unforgiving; and the daughter, devastated by the childlike voice of her mother's suffering as a person, is saddened, moved, and shaken by the misery she is unable to relieve. "How completely alone she was! I touched her, I talked to her; but it was impossible to

enter into her suffering" (81). Nonetheless, despite the emergence of this unexpected reconnection, the lesson moves out from her mother and herself to the universal always close to Beauvoir's heart. "All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation" (106).

Given Beauvoir's vision of the world, the death pedagogy in *A Very Easy Death* reaches for generalization and, in some important ways, resists the lessons of Roth, who in *Patrimony* comes to embrace the truths of conventional wisdom. Beauvoir learns instead that the clichés of human destiny—"He is certainly of an age to die"—are false. "I too made use of this cliché," Beauvoir writes, "and that when I was referring to my mother. I did not understand that one might sincerely weep for a relative, a grandfather aged seventy and more" (105). Her mother's agony teaches her that the commonplaces fail to render another reality: the feelings of attachment that live on in us, whatever we think we may have done with them. These feelings are as involuntary as the suffering that produces them. Beauvoir's new understanding is the knowledge that typically drives the memoir of a dying other. Like Roth's discovery that he wanted, was entitled, to inherit from his father, Beauvoir's discovery of the lie behind the commonplace—"of an age to die"—comes as a shock. For an intellectual like Beauvoir, who thought she had solved the mind/body problem through voluntary acts of self-transformation, when the truth masked by cliché emerges in her face, it throws her entire system out of control.

Both *Patrimony* and *A Very Easy Death* chart in detail the story of bodies that no longer know themselves and whose subjects have lost control over their own narratives:

> I looked at her. She was there, present, conscious, and completely unaware of what she was living through. Not to know what is happening underneath one's skin is normal enough. But for her the outside of her body was unknown—her wounded abdomen, her fistula, the filth that issued from it, the blueness of her skin, the liquid that oozed out of her pores; she could not explore it with her almost paralysed hands, and when they treated her and dressed her wound her head was thrown back. She had not asked for a mirror again: her dying face did not exist for her. She rested and dreamed, infinitely far removed from her rotting flesh, her ears filled with the sound of our lies; her whole person was concentrated upon one passionate hope—getting well. (76–77)

This peculiarly inhabited dispossession, in part created by the plots of a technology not dependent upon human subjects, is perhaps the cause for the strangeness of these accounts, their modernity and their

familiarity. What is the appropriate way to write and then to read the signs of bodies pushed to their limits by science, age, and illness? Beauvoir offers one model. As Elaine Marks puts it, "replicating her position as an intimate observer and helpless witness" Beauvoir creates a space that allows readers to both identify with and distance themselves from the experience ("Transgressing the (In)cont(in)ent Boundaries" 200).

When Roth contemplates his father's penis, "the one bodily part that didn't look at all old," he deduces his mother's pleasure, conventionally, from its size. "If it gave some pleasure to him and my mother, all the better." In that sense, re-creation of the father (the son's authorial project) entails re-membering him: seeing his father's penis anew, revitalizing its claims to masculinity. Beauvoir looks at her mother's naked belly, written over with the marks of age, and looks away as though it were no longer a sexual body; she gladly goes out, at the nurse's request, to buy her nightdresses that won't irritate bedsores. But later in the memoir, when the daughter returns to her mother's body, now beyond shame, through the narrative she has constructed of her parents' marriage, she returns to the time of that body's sexual life in order to imagine the mother's desire, the scene of a pleasure that Roth, bonding with his father, takes for granted.

> Her senses had grown demanding; at thirty-five in the prime of her life, she was no longer allowed to satisfy them. She went on sleeping beside the man whom she loved, and who almost never made love to her any more. . . .
>
> When after my father's death, Aunt Germaine hinted that he had not been an ideal husband, Maman snubbed her fiercely. "He always made me very happy." And certainly that was what she always told herself. (36, 38)

"I do not blame my father," Beauvoir declares in the midst of this dark maternal biography. Does this mean she blames her mother or just that she forgives her father? How can a daughter know what her mother never admitted to herself?

Thinking about his parents' marriage, Roth recalls a conversation with his mother a year before her death in which she told him that she was thinking of getting a divorce, that she was fed up with Herman's interrupting her, shutting her up in public. Roth observes how little a boy brought up as a "good boy in a secure, well-ordered home—and simultaneously as a good girl" knows about the "inmost intertwining of mother and father's life together" (38). As a "good girl" (or boy), Roth guesses nothing about what goes on between his parents; as a grown son, however, he assumes that his mother's pleasure is subsumed by

his father's penis. Beauvoir worries as a daughter about the curtailment of her mother's pleasure, just as her mother worries about the expansion of hers. Beauvoir explains how little her mother really knew about her daughter's life; she hoped Simone was a "good girl" but ultimately was forced by her books not only to recognize that this was an illusion but also to tolerate her disillusionment because, as a successful author, the former good girl had become the "family's breadwinner—her son, as it were" (68). Son or daughter, mother or father, without turning to fiction, there is no secure knowledge of the other's sexuality, even—or especially—when it is confessed.

The biography of the dying other is as much about what we can't know as what we do. In its final moments, the declining parental body insists on the necessity of separation, on the limits of the truth.

In the penultimate chapter of her memoir, Beauvoir speculates about what would have happened if, on the one hand, her mother's cancer had been diagnosed earlier, and if, on the other, the doctors hadn't operated (they had promised not to) and kept her alive for another month of pain. The reprieve produced by the useless operation, Beauvoir concludes, resulted in an unexpected benefit for her: being saved ("or almost saved") from remorse. This period allowed Beauvoir and her sister, by "the peace that our being there gave her, and by the victories gained over fear and pain" (94), to redeem in their economy the neglect they had visited on their mother during the last few years of her life. Still, the lesson for Beauvoir remains that of loneliness: "The misfortune is that although everyone must come to this, each experiences the adventure in solitude. We never left Maman during those last days which she confused with convalescence and yet we were profoundly separated from her" (100). The consciousness of a double solitude and the tenderness restored by this adventure of death underwrite perhaps the only but hardly minor irony of this searing book (probably Beauvoir's greatest literary work) marked in its title, the easiness of dying: "A hard task, dying, when one loves life so much" (79). Every easy death is never not also a hard death. "Dying is work," Roth writes in the last pages of *Patrimony,* "and he was a worker. Dying is horrible and my father was dying" (233). Beauvoir's memoir ends on a generalization: "All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident" (106). Roth's ends on an injunction, ostensibly addressed to himself, but doubtless to the reader as well: "You must not forget anything" (238). But what to do after the remembering?

Autobiography is often seen as the history of a becoming—attaining freedom, finding a voice, getting published—and an overcoming, of obstacles, crises, incapacities. Here the autobiographical narrative, by its focus on the failing other, provides the account of an undoing, an unbecoming. That's one side of the story. The other side of the story has to do with the gain offered by that loss.

It cannot be an accident of biography alone that the intense, ambiguous, and twenty-five-year friendship with Sylvie le Bon, a woman thirty years younger than Beauvoir, began at this juncture in Beauvoir's life: "It was her mother's death that brought us together," Sylvie explained to biographer Deirdre Bair (506). The two women always hotly denied that any maternal component on either side played a role in their relationship. "My own mother was quite enough for me, thank you," Beauvoir stated firmly. "And as for children, I knew from my own childhood that I did not want them. I had no vocation for such things." Sylvie le Bon is as clear. "Neither of us had any taste for motherhood or family ties" (509), the younger woman asserted unequivocally. Nonetheless, Beauvoir legally adopted le Bon, making the younger woman her daughter and heir. Whatever the motives or pretexts—primarily the need for Sylvie to have legal responsibility for Beauvoir as the aging writer's health dramatically failed—the effect was to create a bequest that countered after the fact the "as if" of maternal loss (grieving as if for the child she never had). Instead, Beauvoir left behind, with a formidable literary legacy, a woman who resisted the plots of biological reproduction Beauvoir herself had refused in her life. Beauvoir invents Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir, her literary executor, and creates a new story—whose truth remains veiled—of love between two women of different generations.

In her analysis of *La Cérémonie des Adieux*, Elaine Marks comments on Beauvoir's use of the phrase "Sylvie and I," which she interprets as an act of linguistic self-reference through which Beauvoir produces "another, like herself, a double." This doubling, which Marks finds elsewhere in Beauvoir's work, "is one of the ways in which writing, for Simone de Beauvoir, is a means of salvation" (197). The same is true, I would suggest, for Elaine Marks, who, like Beauvoir (and Colette, another prolific French writer who fascinated Marks), through writing

left many versions of herself, her thinking, and her endless fascination with our being in the world—"witnesses by adoption," to adapt a term of Geoffrey Hartman's from another context.

The child she leaves behind is the four-year-old at the piano contemplating the meaning of life and death through the word "forever."

Jacques's Complaint

Derrida, Mortality, and the Maternal

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The themes of death and mortality were central to the writing and teaching of Elaine Marks. In her 1993 presidential address, "Multiplicity and Mortality," she explored how the erudite and the practical framed her preoccupation with the anxiety of death. She explained that the writers for whom she always had the greatest intellectual and emotional affinity were those who struggled with what she characterized in her childhood as the meaning of being "dead forever and ever": "I have always considered language and literature, history, and philosophy to be about being dead forever and ever. I think that we write and read not to change the world but to sharpen, to deepen, and to expand our awareness of being in the world and having to take leave of it."[1]

In her final book, *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing,* Marks explored other ways of figuring identity in order to get beyond the bad bedtime story of what has become the fundamentalism of identity politics. The last chapter of that book explores Jewishness, the autobiographical mode, and, once again, the question of mortality. Here she was drawn to the work of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. "Deconstruction is haunted by death, temporality, and mourning."[2] What she found most appealing in the work of Derrida might be called "life writing" or bio-graphy, a life inscribed in writing. Derrida's text *Circumfession* allowed Marks to find a mirror against which she could weight her own anxieties. The philosopher's preoccupations

with what she termed "mal de l'appartenance" or "belonging sickness" and the fear of death reflected a figure with whom she could identify.

Analogously, when I was a student of Elaine Marks at the University of Wisconsin–Madison starting in the late 1960s and under the influence of her teaching of Sartrean existentalism, she provoked in me an awareness of the precarious nature of the human condition. The essay that follows functions as a living will that reflects the living presence of Elaine Marks, her "hauntology," as I too attempt to read literature and confront the enigma of death, as I "essay" myself in Derrida's text.

Derrida's *Circumfession,* a somewhat atypical text, explores the topoi of identification, mortality and the maternal through a rhetoric of self-portraiture that is articulated in fifty-nine fragments.[3] These narrative self-reflections are part of a book by Geoffrey Bennington commissioned by Seuil's "Ecrivains contemporains" series.[4] Typographically situated above the ongoing, albeit fragmentary, inscription of Derrida's writerly self-imaging, Bennington delineates what he terms his "Derridabase," a study of the major theoretical topoi found in his work. *Circumfession* becomes the corpus, the rhetorically embodied life of Derrida scattered in the fragments in lower case that intermittently enter a dialogic relationship with and critique of Bennington's text. As Bennington engages in what Derrida once described as the theological project of knowledge, the self-portrait's contrapuntal texture destabilizes this attempted totalization through a rhetoric of alterity. Bennington's text makes Derrida's corpus a "proper body" and in the process attempts to reify it by having it undergo a *rigor mortis* of sorts. Just as in the act of circumcision, what has been excised from Derrida's scriptural corpus is the life-giving force of the blood that has flowed. This challenge to the propriety of the proper name "Derrida" as well as to the Derridean corpus engenders an awareness of the possible threat to his vitality.

Derrida's self-portrait plays on the con-fusion created between the confession drawn from Augustinian tradition (the conscious avowal of guilt) and the symbol of the circumcision, the mark of difference inscribed on the body of the Jewish male, signifying identity, separateness, and loss. Derrida draws upon an intertext found in Genesis 17, where circumcision is enjoined by God upon Abraham and his descendants as the penultimate obligatory act of adherence to Judaism.[5] Functioning as the sign of the covenant sealed in the flesh *(berit milah)*,

circumcision marked the body of the Jewish male as exemplary and unequal to that of the non-Jew. This ritualistic practice gives birth to a Jewish subject through an indelible mark left on the body of an Other; in the course of this ceremony, the mohel bestows a proper name on the child. The idea of identity, following tradition, is constructed in and founded on Jewish law. As a result, Jewishness is the effect of a particularistic and exclusionary procedure that differentiates Jews from all others. We must remember, however, that for Derrida the blood shed as a result of this ritual is that which is in excess of any symbolic mark.

If in its ceremonial practice circumcision enacts a loss that paradoxically signifies the blood of lineage or the idea of belonging, the "cutting" that metaphorically realizes the circumcision within the Derridian text represents an act of violence (among other things, *violentia* can mean "to go beyond limits"); it produces in its reinscriptions a series of cuts that allow an exiting from the economy of the same. The self-portraiture in *Circumfession* not only enacts the image of wandering in the desert which may be regarded as a trope for deconstruction, but it also traces the figure of a Jew through the wound of writing. The writing, like the figure of the Jew, is destined for a nomadic existence. "The desire for literature is circumcision," declares Derrida (78). Represented under the sign of a cut, circumcision makes identification the contour of periphrasis or the result of differences derived from the order of the same.

> Circumcision, that's all I've talked about . . . yes but I have been, I am and always will be, me and not another, circumcised, . . . across so many relays, multiplied by my "culture." . . . CIR.CON.SI imprints itself in the hypothesis of wax [*cire*], no, that's false and bad, why, what doesn't work, but saws [*mais scie*], yes and all the dots on the i's, I greatly insisted on it elsewhere . . . but that's really what I was talking about, the point attached and retained at the same time, false, not false but simulated castration which does not lose what it plays to lose and which transforms it into a pronounceable letter, i and not I, then always take the most careful account, in anamnesis, of this fact that in my family and among the Algerian Jews, one scarcely ever said "circumcision" but "baptism," not Bar Mitzvah but "communion," with the consequences of softening, dulling, through fearful acculturation. (70–73)

To turn around the wound is therefore to turn around one's self, which paradoxically puts forth an image that resists representation. The use of spatial metaphors in the text, through images of circuitous movement, produces an iterability that is representative of Derrida's *jouissance.* "We must through this turning around, in it, rediscover the indefinitely

reactivable enjoyment [*jouissance*], what makes one want to write and to come at the moment of itching the effect of circumcision to share it with others" (236). The penetration of the wound, translated by the reference to itching, foregrounds the paradoxical pleasure resulting precisely from aggravating it.

Derrida's text distances itself from the ancient Judaic tradition whereby circumcision is a ceremony in which a proper name is bestowed on the child as representing the so-called identity of its bearer. However, the textual circumcision at play here functions otherwise, for it portrays a splintering of the subject that is the result of metonymic contamination. If the act of naming is indeed the sign of the proper, the mark inscribed on the Derridian corpus is drawn into a system of differences that encircles and situates an ontologically challenged self on the periphery of a void. "Circumcision remains the threat of what is making me write here, even if what hangs on it only hangs by a thread and threatens to be lost" (202).

In *Monolingualism of the Other,* Derrida suggests that the telling of a life story can never be made whole by assigning it an essentialized identity. Instead it is subject to a differing and deferred image of self: "In a common concept, autobiographical anamnesis [unforgetting] presupposes identification. And precisely not identity. No, an identity is never given, received or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures."[6] Interestingly, Derrida's identification with Judaism is articulated in light of its Christian other. The reference to the assimilation of Algerian Jews, through the use of a Christian idiolect, bears witness to a cultural amnesia. Here Judaism is imbued with and mediated by Christian ritual, which paradoxically produces a dis-affiliation that characterized the life of crypto-Jews, or Marranos. The estrangement from origins, often associated with deconstruction, rhetorically enables the textual corpus to project the image of an artificial limb of sorts, a prosthesis resulting from the injury that is circumcision. Beyond that, the cloistering of Jewishness and the reference to the suppression of Derrida's Hebrew name—"Elie"—foregrounds the paradox of belonging as non-belonging. The concealment of the Jewish self enacts a narrative hauntology beyond the parameters of the definitional. It bears witness to the Jew as always already other than himself and translates the ambivalence that the mark of circumcision has become.

The birth of the subject that circumcision is supposed to ritualistically enact ironically produces in Derrida's text a series of identifications

derived from the transcription of the differences within the self. The blood that is the result of the outpouring of circumcision represents an ontological evacuation of sorts; it can only be compared to the liquid emanating from the flow of Derrida's pen-syringe that produces a simulation of being: "It's me but I'm no longer there" (12). Whereas circumcision is traditionally conceived as the mark of the proper, Derrida's challenge is to write "an unnamed or unrecognizable text," one that he describes as "an idiomatic and unreadable . . . piece of writing," flowing from the site of the wound (194).

Although Derrida's text tropes on Augustine's *Confessions,* the quasi appropriation of this genre suggests neither an avowal of sin nor an encomium of God's omnipotence. Instead of assuming a Christian confessional mode, the rhetorical acrobatics of Derrida's text transcribe a circumfessional rhetoric in its periphrastic peregrinations. Like Augustine, Derrida confesses to an absolute Other who is the address of his sorrows. "I address her as [I address] my God, to confess" (57). Evoking the name of Augustine's mother, Monica, Derrida's engagement in a maternal death watch takes places at a distance not far from Santa Monica and recalls his childhood home of the rue Saint Augustin in Algeria. Georgette Derrida is narrated by a son for whom the mother trespasses the boundary between life and death.

Circumfession is written under the cloud of the mother's imminent demise. Interestingly, at one point in the narrative, death and circumcision are represented in a quasi-analogous way, for Derrida compares the rabbi's "ritual ripping of the mourner's apparel with the ripping of the skin" by the mohel's knife. Jacques's complaint, if you will, at least by implication, is one of becoming victim or, as he suggests, "as I am someone that the one God never stops de-circumcising" (224). To be sure, Derrida's narrative reenacts the abject scene of the mother's deathbed, which bears witness to her bedsores and blood. This recalls the son's own pouring of blood resulting from the act of circumcision and the outpouring of ink from the writer's pen-syringe. Described as a protean victim, the object of Derrida's metaphorical circumcision bears an eternal scar that will not heal and that is an endless act of atonement implying a similarity between "Yom Kippur" and "Yom Coupure" (Day of Atonement and Day of Incision) (246). Ironically, even though Derrida's mother has not yet died, his confession for her performs an act of mourning for a death which is yet to come and which, as he suggests, renders his writing "in alliance with death, with the living death of the mother" (7).

In the course of the narrative, the mother is ultimately held responsible for the circumcision, by Derrida's imagining this "cruelty as basically hers" (13). The mother is guilty of a crime perpetrated in the name of the father. Circumcision, a ritual renewing alliance for and by the mother, is foreshadowed in the book of Exodus when Moses' wife, Zipporah, circumcises their son in order to save him from God's wrath. "Then it happened at an encampment on the way, the Lord met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a piece of flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his [Moses'] feet with it saying: 'A bridegroom of blood are you to me.' So he let him alone. At that time she said 'a bridegroom of blood in reference to circumcision'" (4:24–26). Curiously, in Derrida's recounting of this tale his narrative, at times similar to a Freudian model, borders on representing the image of a symbolic castration. "Zipporah circumcises her son with her teeth by biting off the foreskin" (68). In the biblical text we are told that Zipporah took a stone made of flint and severed her son's foreskin. Perhaps Derrida's transposition of the Exodus narrative here plays on one of the Christian Latin's etymological meanings of the word "severing": *severe,* to nurture. This might suggest that the orality imparted by the mother is but a symptom of the son's paradoxically motivated feeling of *jouissance.* "The supreme enjoyment for all, first of all for him, me, the nursling, imagine the loved woman herself circumcising (me)" (217–18).

Let us remember that in Exodus Zipporah is represented as a heroic figure, a woman who circumcises her son when Moses fails to do so. Moses claims an inability to speak on behalf of the Israelites because he is "slow of speech." In a way, Zipporah's disfiguration of her son enables her to protect her husband from God's anger, and, accordingly, this suggests both a submission to God's will and the expression of female omnipotence.[7] With this in mind, in his rewriting of this particular circumcision narrative Derrida suggests that the Hebrew word "milah" can signify either the term circumcision or mean "word" itself. Moses' failure to speak, as Kelly Oliver suggests, may be understood as the consequence of what may be read metaphorically as his "uncircumcised lips or his lack of words."[8] However in Derrida's narrative "milah" may be seen as a trope for that which produces the incision or the wound that is the writing of the text.

Another detail in the Zipporah narrative affects the *topos* of circumcision in Derrida's text, and this may suggest its relationship to the figure of the maternal. It has been noted, according to Eilberg-Schwartz, that

the reference to Zipporah's taking of her son's foreskin and the touching of Moses' feet may in fact be a metaphor for the touching of the genitals. If the flowing of the blood of circumcision is an acknowledgment of God's omnipotence, then submitting to the will of God is both a sign of submission and a challenge to masculinity.

One might thus deduce from this story that Zipporah is empowered by assuming the *akedah,* or duty, ascribed to Moses. By keeping the covenant as an Israelite woman, she protects her husband from further shame by recognizing a power greater than herself. When Zipporah tells Moses, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me," she suggests that he belongs to her as a result of foreclosing on the possibility of divine retribution. By becoming a man of God and accepting the rule of law, Moses may preserve his masculinity through the sacrifice of the son. In the name of divine omnipotence, Zipporah forces her husband to obey, which paradoxically becomes his salvation.

As in the biblical exemplum incarnated in the figure of Zipporah, Derrida's representation of the mother in *Circumfession* functions in an oxymoronic way, for she is seen as the instigator of violence and the source of a highly eroticized figure of nurturance. Beyond that her heroic act not only renews the *akedah* or the keeping of the covenant, but it also renews the marriage alliance between man and woman.

To be sure, in Derrida's text the *topos* of erotic cannibalism becomes associated with the figure of the mother, who is assigned the role of realizing the writer's fellative desires. As Derrida rewrites the ritualistic narrative found in Exodus, Zipporah circumcises her son, as previously stated, but in Derrida's version she severs the foreskin with her teeth. "'You are a husband of blood to me,' she had to eat the still bloody foreskin, I imagine first by sucking it, my first beloved cannibal, initiation at the sublime gate of fellatio, like so many mohels for centuries had practiced suction, or *mezizah,* right on the *glans*" (69). What is striking here is the manner in which the mother's tongue marks the son's body and makes it the object of her desire. This writerly fantasy symbolically reaffirms the continuation of Jewish lineage through a "linguistic ejaculation," allowing the filial subject to partake of language.

> Imagine the loved woman herself circumcising (me), as the mother did in the biblical narrative, slowly provoking ejaculation in her mouth just as she swallows the crown of bleeding skin with the sperm as the sign of exultant alliance, her legs open, her breasts between my legs, laughing, passing skins from mouth to mouth, like a ring, the pendant on the necklace round her neck. . . .

> I do not have the other under my skin . . . the other holds, pulls, stretches, separates the skin from my sex in her mouth opposite or above me she makes me sperm in this strange condition. (217–18, 229)

Literally, the mother tongue lives on in traces as it is identified with the body so that the maternal becomes an object of erotic ambivalence. The mother who wishes to make the son's body "proper" also charges it with libidinal energy and threatens it with the possibility of withdrawal. By aligning desire with circumcision, Derrida's text suggests that writing (literature) generates enjoyment which results from the incisions of the mother tongue. The separation resulting from the mother's impending death threatens the son with becoming "a more and more dead desire" (243).

Throughout *Circumfession* "blood" takes on a polyreferential value; it acts as a bond between mother and son and suggests a free-floating pain that undergoes a series of metonymically related transformations. In the case of Derrida, the name of the mother lives on in traces inscribed on the body and imprinted on language, since the ritual of circumcision conjoins blood with language in the name of the male child. Circumcision appears as a wound inflicted by the mother that the son carries on his body and that he is destined to experience as the relinquishing of the self to the other. When Derrida writes that his mother speaks for him, he communicates the irony of turning around the wound.

Circumfession is a text that Derrida describes as depicting "the death agony of the mother" (120). The primitive man he has been for fifty-nine years, so he claims, has ignored the reality of death or perhaps he has only seen it as a mimetic response resulting from the introjection of the gaze of the other. If, as Derrida suggests, the date evoked by the reference to his age of fifty-nine foregrounds a singularity, it is one associated with the discovery of the word "dying" and its relation to the "experience of the wound." "She will never have known that my fear of death will only have reflected her own, I mean my death for her whose anxiety I perceived each time I was ill; and doubtless . . . all the time . . . and if my mother thus carried my fear of death, I fear dying from no longer being scared of death after her death" (211–12). Quite clearly Derrida's fear of death is integrally related to the mother's fear of her son's mortality; paradoxically he fears dying from the very absence of his mother's fear. "I fear dying from no longer being scared of death after her death" (212). What emerges from his grief is the paradoxical

mourning resulting from the anticipation of his own death. The potential loss of the maternal object reverberates and thus becomes a mirror of self-loss articulated through the *mater* of the text. The death he sees in the mother reflects the death he sees in himself: "I have no memory that my mother noticed anything, any more than she will ever have known that my fear of death for her whose anxiety I perceived each time I was ill . . . my mother thus carried my fear of death" (211–12).

From Derrida's perspective, one dies for someone and one cannot imagine death without the other's bereavement. Death therefore requires witnessing, so that without the other to inherit the mourning resulting from death, the deceased would be robbed of a future. Derrida's complaint within this context is that the mother's demise robs him of the identificatory pleasure necessary for keeping the wound open and maintaining the blister that is the symptom of the erotic and the inscription of the maternal.

At the time of the writing of *Circumfession,* Sultana Esther Georgette Safar Derrida suffers from Alzheimer's disease and is unable to recognize her son. In a way, Derrida writes *Circumfession* as an attempt to offer a gift to his mother. By making reference to his own lost Hebrew name, Elie (Elijah, the prophet who condemns the Israelites for breaking the alliance with God), Derrida performs a scriptural circumcision as recognition of the need to re-member.

In a eulogy written for Roland Barthes in 1980, Derrida suggested that it is only in us that the dead may speak and that this mimetism is always already a response to the figure that we mourn.[9] In mourning, says Derrida, "we weep precisely over what happens to us when everything is entrusted to the sole memory that is 'in me' or 'in us.'"[10] Yet if we bear this in mind, is Derrida's anxiety of anticipation, his effort to make his not yet absent mother present, to identify with her in order to let her speak within himself, an act of duty or one of betrayal? "Now she is becoming—I'm with her this 18th of June—what she always was, the impassability of a time out of time, an immortal mortal, too human inhuman, the dumb god the beast, a sleeping water in the henceforth appeased depth of the abyss, this volcano I tell myself I'm well out of" (80). Indeed Derrida's "mummification of the mummy" has rendered his mother dead by posthumizing her alive.[11] "I have been haunted by the word and image of mummification, as though I were proceeding with the interminable embalming of Mother alive" (260). Derrida gives himself to the other through a cryptic incorporation which, far from

being a psychopathology that devours the lost object, sustains the possibility of its living on as the specter of desire. "I love the triumph of her [his mother's] survival" (232).

If the dead can survive within us it is only by re-membering the Other. What summons Derrida is a haunting to which he responds in a performative way. By remembering what has not yet been forgotten, he has engaged in a reparative process of sorts, for as Hélène Cixous suggests, "to begin (writing, living) we must have death."[12] Writing thus becomes an exercise in the possibility of survival by making the circumcision the embodiment of life itself. "The intense relation to survival that writing is, is not driven by the desire that something remain after me . . . to live today, here and now, this death of me . . . finally reveals the truth of the world, such as it is, itself, i.e. without me, and all the more intensely to enjoy this light I am producing through the present experimentation of my possible survival" (191).

Derrida's death, metaphorically speaking, is perceived as resulting from the death of the (m)other. *Circumfession* thus becomes an exercise in living and perhaps a lesson in learning how to survive when confronted with mortality. "If this book does not transform me through and through, if it does not give me a divine smile in the face of death, my own and that of loved ones, if it does not help me to love life even more, it will have failed" (77).

In Derrida's self-portrait, the "I" coincides with a figure of suffering that can be traced to the symptoms of trauma.[13] "One always confesses the other, I confess (myself) means I confess my mother" (147). The subject is represented as a "symptom" of the other: "for 59 years I have not known who is weeping my mother or me" (263). Pain takes shape through the identification and transference that coalesces in the relationship established among self-portrait, trauma, and the maternal. "I," Derrida states, "I have a pain in my mother." If circumcision is the sign of an unassimilated memory, then the desire to repeat can be perceived as a displaced remembrance of things past; it is a fiction that keeps the wound of the trauma alive and underscores the singularity of the writing subject. "The circumcision of me, the unique one, that I know perfectly well took place, one time, they told me and I see it but I always suspect myself of having cultivated, because I am circumcised, *ergo* cultivated, a fantastical affabulation" (60). In Derrida's text, the simulated memory of circumcision converges with images of the mother's blood. To be sure, in the slippage of the text the pain associated with circumcision is displaced onto the figure of the mother, who is subsequently

associated with a childhood injury fallen upon a cousin and images of her own menstrual blood. This recollection reawakens the original pain, whereby the wound returns like trauma and repeats itself.

> The first I remember having seen with my own eyes, outside, since I was and remain blind to that of my seventh or eighth day, which happens to be the day of my mother's birth, July 23, that first blood that came to me from the sex of a cousin, Simone 7 or 8 years old the day when the pedal of a toy scooter penetrated her by accident, *Verfall,* with the first phantom sensation, that algic sympathy around my sex which leads me to the towels my mother left lying around, "marked" from red to brown, in the bidet when as I understood so late, she was having her own "period." (108)

The phantom memory of the pain in his penis is activated by a recollection of the accidental penetration of his cousin's sex (like the circumcision, which took place on the seventh or eighth day following birth) and this functions as a photographic negative waiting to be developed. This painful memory foregrounds the traumatic discomfort that in fact he has never consciously felt. It substitutes itself for the mother's pain of childbirth. By recalling itself, the reinscription of the circumcision recuperates an unassimilated self-image, as evidenced in the iterability of the wound. The circumcision is not just what simply marks, but it is also what affords the fragmentary remembrance of things past and the anticipation of the future. The self-portrait engages the writer in an endless series of peregrinations, genealogical filiations resulting from a certain sense of haunting. "A long sentence, hardly a sentence, the plural word of a desire toward which, from always, all the others seemed, teemed confluence itself, to press itself, an order suspended on three words, find the vein" (10).

By invoking anamnesis, the forgetting necessary for remembering, the text opens an aporia motivated by a violated mourning and the defiling of the sacred time of birth by the pain of anatomical mutilation. This displacement does indeed more than simply marginalize the pain of the mother, for Derrida's re-membering of her body is marked by the impropriety of blood-stained towels. The mother's blood, which has passed from red to brown, translates a feeling of abjection that is the result of the dissolution of the body and a prefiguration of the bedsores and scars to which he more recently bears witness.

What the mother represents anatomically, through the bedsores and such, is the trace of circumcision, a reflection transposed from the son's body. The mother becomes the object of a paradoxical gesture of

gratitude that simultaneously gives and takes away so that she may not die alone. Realized discursively, the son's act of mourning, his anxiety of anticipation, enables identification with the lost object as living on rather than assimilating the separation produced by the penultimate circumcision resulting from the severing of the umbilical cord. The endless re-circulation of the self, "turning around the wound," forecloses on the possibility of the death of the Derridean subject while at the same time reflecting the slow deterioration that is the undoing of the mother. Derrida's text engages rhetorically in a paradox whereby life is imbricated in death and vice versa.

The relay power of the son's body is engendered by a metonymic displacement, which re-covers the haunting pain of circumcision through the sacrificial relay of the maternal. The tortured subject phantasmatically substantiates interchangeability between mother and son whereby the endurance of the other is but a shadow of its imagined self: "In the writing of a circumfession for the death agony of my mother, not readable here, but the first event to write itself right on my body" (120). Interestingly, the son displaces the position of the mother; by appropriating her demise as his very own, he makes the crisis of his survival a phenomenon mediated by the writing of the confession. But the guilt in question translates the passion of testimony as sacrifice functioning also as the request for a pardon. "Even when I address myself to her without her hearing to tell her that I am betraying you, I ask your pardon" (155). The plea for pardon, for confessing the mother, results in a circumnavigation that is the cutting out of truth. If, as Derrida claims, "a circumfession is always simulated," it is because it revolves around the mother who is paradoxically sacrificed in order to survive (24).

> I confess my mother; one always confesses the other. I confess myself means I confess my mother. I own up making my mother own up. I make her speak in me, before me, whence all the questions at her bedside as though I were hoping to hear from her mouth the revelation of the sin at last . . . everything comes down to turning around a fault of the mother carried in me . . . the fault will remain as mythical as the circumcision will, do I have to draw you a picture. (147)

Implicated in a kind of symbiotic dependency, the so-called self is that which is reiterated by the other than itself. By giving himself over to the other, he is implicated in a repetition compulsion, which marks what may appear to pass as the same as being thoroughly different. For being *coupable* [guilty/cuttable]—both in the sense of fault and the cutting that marks circumcision—is, pardon the pun, a double-edged sword,

for the fault that kills also imparts to him new life as a "subject configured by the knife of this economy" (56). The narrative is increasingly marked by the ambivalence of the excluded son, who contemplates suicide as a phenomenon played out rhetorically through the paradox of giving and taking life simultaneously: "I don't take my life, mais je me donne la mort [I give myself death]" (53). The double bind constituting Derrida's family romance recalls his analysis of the autobiographical route of Nietzsche he describes in *Otobiographies*, where death is in life and life is in death: "Insofar as I am my father I am dead, I am the dead and I am death. Insofar as I am my mother, I am life that goes on the living woman. I am my father, my mother and I . . . death and life, the dead and the living and so on."[14]

Being the orphaned son, without a core, allows Derrida to look to the future and find hope and promise in the figure of Elijah and the metaphor of the Sabbath without end, representing both Talmudic and Augustinian traditions where the Seventh Day is depicted as an aporia in the continuity of creation. Like Elijah—the guardian of circumcision and the most eschatological of the ancient prophets—to whom he relates through the semantic contiguity of his given name, Elie, the figure called "Derrida" assumes the image of a messenger (an *angelos*) wandering incognito as a nomad. The invisible presence of Elie-Elijah draws attention to what Derrida terms "the eschatology of circumcision." The image of the scar (from the Latin *eschara*) emblematizes the prophetic discourse that breaks open the language of the text through the violence of separation and miraculously projects the image of a future *(avenir)* that is infinitely deferred *(à venir)*. In effect, the possibility of revelation is suggested in the outpouring of blood. The crime of writing in the name of the mother enables a self-mutilation that suggests the uncut will be cut off. "I am also the mohel, my sacrificer. I write with a sharpened blade. If the book doesn't bleed, it will be a failure" (130).

In the course of the narrative, Derrida recounts a dream that he attributes to his mother in which two blind men are fighting and assault Derrida. These two men threaten Derrida's "uncircumcised sons." The image of blind men, of course, is a culturally loaded symbol even if one wishes to avoid the infelicities of an overdetermined Oedipal narrative. Yet if for just one moment we conceive of the blind men as figures of circumcision, might we then ask whether it is a sign of the mother's anxiety concerning Jacques's not making his sons "properly" Jewish or whether, in the end, Judaism is literally always already associated with injury and trauma? Like Moses', Derrida's failure to inscribe

the signifier of difference on the sons' anatomy paradoxically undercuts their singularity and condemns them to assimilation. But couldn't this failure to circumcise his sons, mediated by the dream life of the mother, simultaneously announce and renounce a sense of guilt posing as a mere fiction? Can this trauma of singularity engender a paradoxical opening for the desire not to be seen that is the symptom of a painful youth living under the Vichy laws? Derrida abruptly offers "the return of a family" as hermeneutic center of the dream. But it also perhaps suggests the Marrano-like representation of being marked as a Jew by a psychic wound secretly internalized. *Circumfession*'s goal of "not seeing myself being seen" can only be realized through an erasure of the self resulting from the act of violence that is assimilation.[15] The mother's dream foregrounds the function of vision itself: to be seen, perhaps, as the "last Jew." Yet it is only through a ghostly simulation, accessible beyond the limits of life itself, that history intersects with self-portraiture and allows the subject to be read retroactively. The undifferentiated difference, emblematized by the two uncircumcised sons, suggests that the nonviolence of the father cannot be overcome and escape the circumvention of the same. Jewish self-disclosure thus falls short of the mark and is ultimately subject to the return of the (m)other. The maternal figure haunts the identificatory fantasies of the desiring son and this ultimately threatens him with the possibility of being unable to assume this role. In *Glas,* Derrida declares: "I am (following) the mother. The text. The mother is *behind*—all that I follow, am, do, seem—the mother follows."[16] Perhaps the double meaning of the dying mother's remark, "Qui suis-je?" [Who am I?/Whom do I follow?], projects the anticipatory anxiety of the son, who, in the absence of the mother, is threatened with the loss of the mother tongue and the salvation that is the mark of circumcision. "I confess my mother, one always confesses the other, I confess (myself) means I confess my mother means I own up to making my mother own up, I make her speaking in me, before me" (147).

NOTES

1. Marks, "Multiplicity and Mortality," 369.
2. Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor,* 124.
3. I have drawn on some of this initial material from my essay "Critical Reflections: Self-Portraiture and the Representation of Jewish Identity in French," in *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture and the "Jewish Question" in French.*

4. Derrida, *Circumfession.* All references will be to the Geoffrey Bennington translation and will hereafter be indicated in the body of the text.

5. And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep My commandment which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you must be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. . . . My covenant in your flesh shall be an everlasting covenant. And a male with foreskin, who has not circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off" (Genesis 17:9–15), in Alter, *Genesis,* 73–74.

6. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other,* 28; hereafter cited in text.

7. I have greatly benefited from Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's analysis of the complexity involved in interpreting the Zipporah narrative. See *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism.* "The image of Zipporah . . . serves two contradictory functions. It indicates the threat men perceive of women stepping in the place they have vacated. But at the same time, it is an ideal image of an Israelite woman. Israelite women are in danger of losing their men to God. But God will leave their husbands intact if as mothers they condone the genital disfiguration of their sons and acknowledge that Israelite masculinity has been sacrificed to God" (161).

8. "Could it be that God means to punish Moses for his hesitance to serve Him? Perhaps Zipporah's ritual circumcision of Moses is also meant to address his uncircumcised lips." Oliver, "The Maternal Operation," 57. Oliver draws this assumption from Harold Bloom, *The Book of J,* 247. Oliver's reading of the maternal in Derrida's text looks at it essentially as a psychological case study. In spite of engaging in a "feminist" reading of the text, Oliver draws on phallocentric models drawn principally from Freud and Lacan (i.e. castration anxiety), which paradoxically overdetermine her analysis. If, as Derrida claims, "literature is deconstruction," one must be cognizant of the rhetorical play in the text or the unresolved tensions or aporia that the deconstructive performance foregrounds.

9. Derrida, "Roland Barthes," 49–50.

10. Derrida, "Mnemosyne," 33.

11. "The little boy who weeps for his mum is guilty of mummification." Krell, *The Purest of Bastards,* 196.

12. Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing,* 7.

13. For a discussion of trauma in *Circumfession* see Robbins, "Circumcising Confession," 20–36. Unlike critics such as Robbins and Oliver, I do not consider the text to be an autobiography but rather a self-portrait. With this in mind, I adopt the theoretical stance of Michel Beaujour in *Miroirs d'Encre,* where he states that in autobiography: "I will not tell you what I did, but rather I am going to tell you who I am" (9). Whereas autobiography, following Beaujour, proceeds linearly or can be reconstructed so in recounting a life story, self-portraiture takes shape through a semantic contiguity that develops from the repetition of certain key topoi. I have situated Derrida's text within the rhetoric of self-portraiture. In this regard see Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Giant.*

14. Derrida, *Otobiographies,* 62.

15. Robbins, "Circumcising Confession," 36. On the question of the Marrano in French literature and its relationship to the question of anti-Semitism, see Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor.*

16. Derrida, *Glas,* 116.

PART THREE

Geographies of Life and Death

Ronsard on Speed

"Ciel, air, & vens . . ."

TOM CONLEY

Places Writing Lives

For Elaine Marks literature was, as went the last line of Baudelaire's translation of the artist's last words in Poe's "Oval Portrait," *la vie elle-même.* Literature was life itself: Elaine Marks invented the vital spaces of her days and years by living her reading. To live was to write, and to write was to feel and touch the fragile beauty of the world in which we live. When she stared at the gelid surface of Lake Mendota in the middle of winter, its expanse of ice and snow extending from the south toward Picnic Point and the distant northern shores beyond, she saw the landscape through the words of Mallarmé's sonnet, "Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui" [The virginal, the lively, and the beautiful today]. When, years later it seemed, spring came to Madison in the month of May, only days after the melting of Mendota's waters, she would gleefully quote Victor Hugo's "Le Satyre" to tell us that the sudden change was indeed "La palpitation sauvage du printemps" [The wild throbbing of spring]. When, time and again in Paris, she turned from the Boulevard Saint-Germain, the wide avenue on which she had been strutting with the ghosts of Jean-Paul Sartre and Marguerite Duras, and then meandered down the rue des Saints-Pères, she often passed by the Bibliothèque de l'Histoire du Protestantisme. There she

was suddenly transported back to the Wars of Religion and trembled in her memory of Ronsard's *Discours,* the polemical rhapsodies that turned a poet-lover into an indomitable warrior, and that made her think twice about the meaning of *engagement* for the existential writer. And as she continued along the street, going by the Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées, she imagined herself rolling on the roads that engineers built for the carriages that took Voltaire and Rousseau to and from Paris and the Jura mountains along the northwestern border of Switzerland.

Elaine was a pilgrim for whom literature was a breviary, a love, and a geography. Life-writing, one of the themes of this volume, can be understood to include the spaces and places people invent in their sentient lives through their animated and vibrant commitment to literature. Requiring extensive training and years of labor spent in libraries, the commitment is rewarded by unforeseen epiphanies that take place when the poetry one loves, that one carries neither in books heaped in a satchel or backpack nor in the memory seen on the screen of a laptop, ripples through our bodies. The poem and the body meld into the impressions of the place one happens to be passing. These moments and sites in which we find ourselves lost, possessed by poetry, cannot be monitored or controlled. They are not the privilege of the literary tourist or the historian of poetic conventions. They bring the life-writer to an enthralling edge where what matters is a sudden and intense, immediate and compelling capture and release of the body in space and words. The life-writer often feels the moments and sites over and over again, in an invigorating continuum of repetition and difference, in which variation meshes with memory, reiteration, and reinvention.

In her address that celebrated the end of her tenure as president of the Modern Language Association, Elaine Marks dared to avow that a certain number of poems had determined her life. The students in her courses on poetry—the author of this essay among them—knew well that Poe and Valéry were pole stars in her travels and navigations. Readers of *French Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present,* an anthology that Elaine edited and that formed generations of students of literature, knew that Apollinaire, Saint-John Perse, Desnos, Ponge, Jacottet, Bonnefoy, and Char figured in her pantheon of modern masters. Until that speech few were aware that her life had been written, too, by poets of earlier and more obscure ages, which reached back to the Troubadours but were especially marked by the bards who fashioned new lyrics during the growth of print culture. Included were the Villon of the poem

that Clément Marot called "La Ballade des femmes du temps jadis" [Ballad of the women of former times] and the Ronsard of the *Amours,* especially the sonnets attesting to the speed of life passing so rapidly that the names applied to the topoi associated with life's ephemeral nature, *carpe diem* and *ubi sunt,* seemed to be (as they still and always are) light years away from the body that feels the impact of passage and of loss. Elaine admired the seductive poet who forever begged his coy mistress to come with him to see a rose unfolding its delicate petals in the warm light of dawn. She loved no less the flower—"Comme sur la branche au moys de mai la rose" [As on the branch in the month of May the rose]—battered in rain and cold and withering on the very branch of its line. At the end of her life she gaily, even laughingly anticipated how she would be "sous la terre et fantôme sans os" [under the earth and a ghost without bones], becoming for those who knew her a fleeting incarnation of poems with which she brought to us, her children, the writings of our lives.

In what follows, in homage to the memory of Elaine Marks, I should like to see how Ronsard might have been an embodiment of the life-writer whose poems invent spaces and become lives in and unto themselves, in other words, objects that, as we read and carry them in our lives, become events we relive and sustain when we think about them wherever we are; when, over and again, with fabulous variation, we read and teach them to ourselves and to our kin. The stakes are to see how the poem turns what is given in a neutral and geographical way as a place, a place-name, a toponym—*lieu-dit,* a common place, or a topos—into a site in which we get lost within the writing of the poem. Life-writing begins when the geography represented in the poem becomes a lyrical space in which the very character of the writing co-extends with its field of reference. When the geography of the poem overtakes its own toponyms, and when the latter—which we continue to know insofar as they are referring to real places—turn into these enthralling edges of new registers of experience, we are, all of a sudden, captives of life-writing.

Of Earth and Beings

Such is what Ronsard offers in what seems to be a textbook sample of a simple *sonnet rapporté,* a poem designed to put forward in its first two quatrains the elements of what will be brought back in an accelerated enumeration in the final tercet.[1] Ronsard's variant on the model treats

of places dear to the author, of his own origin. The sonnet appeared in the first (1552) and second (1553) edition of the *Amours:*

Ciel, air, & vens, plains, & mons decouvers,
Tertres fourchus, & forets verdoiantes,
Rivages tors, & sources ondoiantes,
Taillis rasés, & vous bocages vers,
Antres moussus à demifront ouvers,
Prés, boutons, fleurs, & herbes rousoiantes,
Coutaus vineus, & plages blondoiantes,
Gâtine, Loir, & vous mes tristes vers:
Puis qu'au partir, rongé de soin & d'ire,
A ce bel œil, l'Adieu je n'ai seu dire,
Qui pres & loin me detient en émoi:
Je vous suppli, Ciel, air, vens, mons, & plaines,
Taillis, forest, rivages & fontaines,
Antres, prés, fleurs, dites le lui pour moi.[2]

[Sky, air, and winds, plains and uncovered mountains,
Forked hillocks, and flourishing forests,
Twined shorelines and wavy springs,
Pruned thickets and you green groves,
Mossy lairs half-open to the air,
Meadows, buds, flowers, and bedewed grasses,
Winey slopes, and flaxen flatlands,
Gâtine, Loir, and you my sad verses:
Upon my departure, gnawed by worry and ire,
To this lovely eye, I knew not how to say farewell,
Which near and far holds me in thrall:
I beg you, Sky, air, winds, mountains and plains,
Thickets, forests, shores and fountains,
Lairs, meadows, flowers, say it to her for me.]

The poem stages a scene of separation, known well in modern literature running from Montaigne to Proust or in a critical canon from Lacan to Barthes, in which the voice of the text writes of the almost originary pain and trauma of breakage by which the speaker tells how he or she is awakened into subjectivity. For the author of the *Essais,* the separation from Rome, Paris, and his friend Etienne de la Boétie, three nourishing beings, leads the writer to make antiquity no different from the recent memories of his frightful separation from his father.[3] For Marcel of *A la recherche du temps perdu* the event of being torn from the landscape is devastating but vital to a reparative and generous act of writing.[4] Following the lead of Montaigne, Lacan tells us that the handsome fragility

of our lives is affirmed when we realize that *séparer* is the same as *se parer,* that to be separated is tantamount to being decorated.[5] Roland Barthes reminds us that we rehearse the event of birth into life when we wave goodbye to our friends who waft kisses to us from the windows of the trains that leave the platforms of the railway stations on which we stand immobile.

Ronsard is no different. "Puis qu'au partir, rongé de soin et d'ire," he says, expressing angry confusion over his lover's departure, avowing that he is unable to look straight in the eye of the object of his affections when he bids her adieu. He cannot find the words to say goodbye to an unnamed lover (who goes by Cassandre elsewhere in the collection) but replaces them with an unparalleled motion of writing that seems to accelerate as it goes. Ronsard is on speed. It comes with the words that follow in the final tercet after an arrest, suspension, and mystic rapture by an image, a moment of self-mirroring—the writing of the poem itself—*qui pres & loin me detient en émoi.*

In what might be one of the first critical editions of French literature, in his gloss of the sonnets, songs, and odes of the *Amours,* Marc-Antoine Muret sums up the poem in few words, unlike what he does elsewhere in copious commentary on the sources, vocabulary, and mythic personages inspiring many of the other poems. He merely states that the poet is "contraint quelque fois de prendre congé de sa dame, & n'aiant pas le pouvoir de lui dire Adieu, il prie, toutes les choses qu'il voit, de le lui dire en son nom" [sometimes constrained to take leave of his lady, and not having the power to bid her farewell, he begs all the things he sees to bid her farewell in his name].[6] For Muret the implied psychodrama of separation prompts an appeal on the part of the poet to have the things the poet *sees* in his midst *speak* in his place. Ronsard, he implies, can animate the world about him by naming it but cannot find the words fitting for separation. Muret indirectly avows that the elements the poet sees in the field of his gaze, except for the *bel oeil* of the beloved that leaves him speechless, will, if they respond to his entreaty, release speech, yield emotive meaning, and, ultimately, speak for him on his behalf.

The poet finds *other* words, the names that describe his *terroir,* to inspire the world to say what he cannot. He hopes that the fragments he discerns in a landscape will speak silently and graphically, like hieroglyphs, in the absence of his voice. The self, the *moi,* is evacuated when it begins to move and multiply, growing out of emotion, *émoi.* The self dissolves into the words depicting the landscape that he takes to be

both his own—it is marked by toponyms he has known from his earliest childhood—and belonging to an overriding Nature that in other poems he fills with mythic creatures reaching back to antiquity.[7] What is at stake for the poet is having the words that could be marshaled to describe any landscape apply to himself and his own milieu. The substantives become the raw matter of a topography, that of Ronsard's Gâtine and Loir (1. 8), the place-names that figure near the visual axis of the poem.

On first glace "mons decouvers," "tertres fourchus," "forets verdoiantes," "rivages tors," "sources ondoiantes," "taillis rasés," "bocages vers," "antres moussus," "herbes rousoiantes," "coutaux vineux," and "plages blondoiantes"—all formulas coined to motivate the elements of a landscape by attaching an ostensively natural and appropriate adjective to the substantive—figure in an idiolect that here and elsewhere in the *Amours* reattaches the signature of the poet to the world from which he shows that he is separated. But, prior to being identified on a map of the Touraine, are mountains always "uncovered"? Are hillocks forever "forked"? It is a fact that forests are "flourishing"? Do shorelines find themselves "twined"? Are thickets "pruned"? Groves "green"? Lairs "mossy"? Grasses "bedewed"? Slopes "winey"? Flatlands "flaxen"?[8] If they are not, or if the descriptives attached to the nouns are of a signature of his own, the landscape will have spoken for the poet *before* he asks them to do so in the name of his beloved. Thus the poem will have responded to the question before it is posed.

It can be said that the formulas are Ronsard's insofar as the sonnet betrays the dilemma of being separated from itself and its author, located anywhere and everywhere in the world at large, and belonging to a topography that might and might not be rooted in the place where the poet situates it. In current manuals of cosmography the first sentences of Ptolemy's *Geographia* were illustrated by a similitude that compared the construction of a world map to the portrait of a human being and a landscape or city-view to any of its isolated details. A French translation of Pieter Apian's *Cosmographie,* published two years before the first edition of Ronsard's *Amours,* asserts,

> La consummation & fin de la Geographie est constituée au regard de toute la rondeur de la terre, a l'exemple de ceulx qui veulent entierement paindre la teste d'une personne avec ses proportions. Chorographie . . . est aussi appellée Topographie, elle considere seulement aucuns lieux ou places particulieres en soy-mesmes, sans avoir entre eulx quelque comparaison ou semblance a l'environnement de la terre. Car elle demonstre toutes les choses, & a peu pres les moindres en iceulx lieux contenues, comme sont villes, portz de mer, peuples, pays, cours des rivieres, & plusieurs autres choses, comme edifices, maisons,

tours, & autres choses semblables. Et la fin d'icelle s'accomplit en faisant la similitude d'aucuns lieux particuliers, comme si un painctre vouloit contrefaire, un seul œil, ou une oreille.[9]

[The achievement and end of Geography is constituted in regard to the earth's entire fullness, following the example of those who wish to paint in its entirety the head of a person with its proportions. Chorography . . . is also called Topography, it only considers various places with their own peculiarities, without establishing among them any comparison or similarity to the earth as a whole. For it demonstrates all things, even, nearly, the smallest contained in these places, as are cities, seaports, populations, countries, courses of rivers, and several other things, like buildings, houses, towers, and other like things. And it accomplishes its goal by creating a likeness of various particular places, as if a painter wished to picture a single eye, or an ear.]

Between the sentence defining the ends of geography and those of topography, Apian inserts a rectangular woodcut, containing two spheres of equal radius. Within the circle on the left, below a printed title outside of the frame stating that the projection is "La Geographie," is an image of the world seen from north (bottom) to south (top). On a *mer oceane* float Europe, Asia, and Africa (dominated by the image of the Nile and three tributaries), Taprobana, and even Antarctica. Within the circle on the right, below the printed title "La similitude d'icelle" [The similitude of Geography] is a portrait of a man in profile, who strangely resembles contemporary images of Christ, who looks to the left and seems to be contemplating the world map on the other side of the frame. Below the paragraph describing the ends of topography is another, slightly longer rectangle, in which almost three-quarters of the space encloses a view of a city built upon an island floating on water. It is identified as "La Chorographie." To the right, on the other side of a vertical line that marks the left-hand edge of the remaining space of the image, is an ear (above) and an eye (below), the latter apparently looking at the city-view to its left.[10]

Located in the construction is not so much the relation of cosmography to the art of the portrait—or of topography to details contained in either of the encompassing parts of the images—as the reign of confusion implied by the drawing, one in which it would be impossible to attach parts to a whole, if indeed a whole there be. The world map is seen as a cut or a fragment taken from what is greater than what is framed, while the portrait to the right is autonomous if, say, it were taken to resemble a figure struck on a medallion. The city seen in the view occupies the sum of the island that is shown and thus floats without any mooring. The same can be said of the eye and ear that become islands

or even, if they are studied for their erotic ridges and folds, "mossy lairs" that have no analogues in the portrait of the man next to the world map. In both the text and the image of Apian's similitude it is averred that no "comparison or similarity to the earth as a whole" can be seen in "various places with their own peculiarities." The construction of the text and image beguiles the reader and spectator to construct analogy where it is shown to be tenuous and even unlikely, even if, at the same time, its effectiveness as a memory-image is indelible. Like a poem, the similitude does things other than what it states it is doing.

It bears directly on the life-writing of Ronsard's sonnet. The incipit, graced by a majuscule C (shown again, in the twelfth line, when *Ciel* returns in the second enumeration) forms an open totality, an open O, that implies a sum of things infinite, a centurial ideal. The sky of the incipit stands over what the rest of the line distinguishes as pieces and parts—air, wind, plains, mountains—of the world below or adjacent to it. The enumeration leads to the presence of concealed worlds and of revealed landscapes, that is, of details of a picture that may or may not bear on a totality in the self-contained world or topographic picture given by the greater form of the sonnet: *mons decouvers* [uncovered mountains] reads in the graphic matter as might an accidental line of mountains visible on a horizon, but its homonym in the vocal register, *mondes couvers* [covered worlds], signals that entire geographies, greater wholes, might be hidden in the words that follow. Mountains shown to be uncovered reveal greater worlds covered. The spacing of the letters and words mobilizes the image they make of a landscape as it might be drawn or engraved in a woodcut.

In turn, the mimetic register of the sonnet is transformed into the vital drive of writing. The "forked" hillock is split when the referent is seen through the word both as a knoll cut in half by a depressed line and as divided into two equal parts that mirror each other *(ter-tres)* and anticipate the image of the "fo*re*ts v*er*doian*tes*," while the echo of "worlds" in the opening line can only make the earth, or *terre,* emerge from the incipit of the second line. The *forets* splitting out of *fou*rchus would be branches ramifying from what, in Ronsard's typical idiolect, would be an apical origin, a site of division and growth that thrusts forward. The bending shorelines seem vagabond, and the springs at the origins of the waters (*ond*oiant*e*s) of the rivers shimmer and flow before they reach their name. Pruning the trees in the thickets seems to generate groves that are poems in themselves, *bocages vers* [green groves / verse groves], that give rise to fabulously erotic sites, frothy and mossy

lairs whose openings dilate and pulsate in the midst of flora, moistened with fluids of desire, and that redden and blush.

The origin and effect of the landscape are found in the strange combination of *coutaus vineus,* hillsides cut by the veined lines of rivulets in the flesh of the countryside or else, too, slopes cultivated with grapevines that ramify no less than the branches and rivers figured just above. *Coutaus* would also be the pruning shears or the knives the laborers use to cut and manage the stocks, branches, and tendrils of the vines. Or, too, they might be the burins and blades that incise woodblocks on which the scenes are printed and reproduced. If so, they qualify as an image, common to woodcut illustrations of landscapes in the 1550s, of a stylized sign, based on the transformation of a drawing of a stock into a graphic figure, a process by which a mimetic form turns into a stenographic mark, a *festina lente,* a sort of ampersand of the kind that marks the sonnet twelve times. The description contains the image of a miniature flourish of straight and curved lines approximating the vine and its support.[11] The fields that seem to whiten in the sunshine, *plages blondoiantes,* require Muret to note that the adjective Ronsard has coined to describe the undulating landscape merely means "covered with already ripened wheat," in other words, stalks bearing tips and seeds that promise procreation and production.

The elements of the description, ten couples of substantives and adjectives, converge toward the toponyms *Gâtine* and *Loir* on the left side of the eighth line—a border, an edge, even a boundary in the scheme of quatrains and tercets marked by the indentations of their incipits—and on the right, before the narration of the sonnet begins, the poet appeals to (or even interpellates) his own poetry: *vous mes tristes vers.* These verbal couples, each a detail that comprises the general and a local character of the landscape, move in rapid enumeration toward the placenames located near the center of the virtual map of the poem. They are no sooner assimilated into "you my sad verses" than the region is metamorphosed into the poet's own tropes. The formula inverts an order that had become routine in the first seven lines of the exposition. For the first time the poem puts, like a cart before a horse, a modifier in front of what it modifies. The reversal in the pattern of the enumeration is all the more striking, in view of the dazzling combinations and the speed of their exposition, than it would be if *mes tristes vers* were taken at face value, which would suggest the idea of poetry malformed, maladroit, or of melancholic bent. Nor does the expression yield signs of affected modesty unless, of course, antithesis or irony might be implied as a ruse,

a way of beguiling the reader through the radiance and glory of the enumeration that leads to a falsely disparaging description of the verse.

The landscape becomes the poet's property at the turning point of the poem. The region is transformed into the verse itself, and the implied reader who is captured by the poet (*vous mes . . .* , or "you my . . .") also falls under the spell of his lines *(vers)*.[12] At the juncture of the second quatrain and the first tercet it is not clear if the story he tells about his inability to bid adieu to his beloved is addressed to a reader, to himself and his own verse, to the landscape, or to everything and everyone at large. In the second tercet he now begs twelve elements—not listed in the order they had been enumerated in the quatrains above—to listen to the poem which has confined them. The first four *(ciel, air, vens, mons)* reiterate the gist of the incipit. *Tertres* gives way to *plaines; taillis* jumps ahead in the list, in place of *rivages* (that now soon follows) and *sources* becomes *fontaines.*

Bocages is left aside, possibly because the image is already suggested by *taillis* and *forets,* or perhaps because "bocages vers" had already signaled the totality of the sonnets themselves in the forest of *Les Amours.* Implied is the suggestive allusion to a grove of trees as a poem, indeed as a sonnet, marked off and drawn according to the way its squarish shape as a block of words on a page might resemble the sight on a map of a grove of trees in a greater pasture of rolling hills or flatlands.[13] Surely the formula at the end of the first quatrain anticipates the "vers" or the poem itself as it is announced at the end of the second. But the *bocage* can also be a unit of cultivated land and language somewhere between "poetry" and a "poem," analogous to "geography" and "topography" in Ptolemy and in Apian's emblematic memory-image.

This is all the more true if the reader keeps in mind one of Ronsard's comparisons of verse to field and forest, taken from the preface to his posthumous complete works of 1587:

> Poëme et Poësie ont grande difference.
> Poësie est un pré de diverse apparence,
> Orgueilleux de ses biens, et riche de ses fleurs,
> Diapré, peinturé de cent mille couleurs,
> Qui fournist de bouquets les amantes Pucelles,
> Et de vivres les camps des Abeilles nouvelles.
> Poëme est une fleur, ou comme en des Forés
> Un seul Chesne, un seul Orme, un Sapin, un Cyprès,
> Qu'un nerveux Charpentier tourne en courbes charrues,
> Ou en carreaux voutez des navires ventrues,

Pour aller voir auprès de Thetis les dangers
Et les bords enrichis des biens des estrangers.[14]

[Poem and Poetry have a great difference.
Poetry is a meadow of varied mien,
Proud of its possessions, and rich with its flowers,
Mottled, painted with a hundred thousand colors,
It provides bouquets to virginal lovers,
And feeds the swarms of new Bees.
Poem is a flower, or, as in Forests
A single Oak, a single Elm, a Fir, a Cypress,
That a wiry Carpenter turns into curved plows,
Or the arched planks of stout ships,
To go visit the dangers in Thetis's realm
And the shores enriched by foreigners' goods.]

Here, akin to the Saussurian linguist's distinction between speech *(parole)* and language *(langue),* a poem is an instantiation, a not-so-arbitrary tree that can be cut and fashioned for strategic ends, while poetry is inferred to be a commanding forest of many species from which a given type can be cut, drawn, and fashioned according to the will of the poet. The grove would be a collection or a single volume of poems that the author cultivates by cutting, planting, pruning, and shearing.[15] In respect to Ronsard's figure of the forest that serves to theorize his poetry, the sonnet certifies that "vous bocages vers" becomes "vous mes tristes vers" and that the one formula and the other indeed do dissolve into the movement of the accelerating enumeration of the last tercet.

The cornerstone or defining edge of the poem is *moi,* the last word, the keystone that responds first to *émoi* just above, stabilizing the expression of distress in line eleven and also arching back to *Ciel* at the opposite side of the poem. In the same fashion *decouvers,* the end of the first line, corresponds to *antres,* the substantive that marks the beginning of the last line. If these words are considered plot points in the cartography of the poem, they can also, given the gusts of air that seem to blow across the text, be compared to wind roses or even wind heads that allow the reader to look upon the text from each of its four cardinal angles.[16] The sky is at the top before the text gives way to worlds and mountains, then to the landscape, before ending with the immanence and transcendence of the *moi.* And *antres* would be a tiny entry, a lair into which the eye can peer to see the poem whose greater sum is anticipated in *mons decou*vers.[17]

The reader is invited to see the landscape-sonnet from different angles but also, at the same time, to feel the wind of its inspiration. A dilemma for the poet and painter of the Renaissance has always centered on how to represent wind. A painting could simulate movement only through effects of shading and slight distortions brought to vegetation. Leonardo da Vinci noted that boughs of trees and leaves needed to be bent in an atmosphere where "clouds of fine dust [are] mingled with the troubled air."[18] For the poet, the task was less evident. How could writing embody movement where words would otherwise only refer to atmospheric turmoil? Ronsard responds to the challenge by deploying at least two graphic strategies. In the italic font of the first two editions of the *Amours,* the letters seem to be pushed over and to bend back under the thrust of a force that pushes them down.[19] "Ciel, air & vens" is especially effective because the poem begins with convection and winds that blow over the landscape. The aeolian thrust of the words pushes the reader ahead.

And so also do the ampersands that stud the poem as they do no other piece in all of the *Amours* of 1553. The ampersand is in a cascade. The reader sees "air, & vens," "plains, & mons," "fourchus, & forets," "tors, & sources," "rasés, & vous," "fleurs, & herbes," "vineus, & plages," "Loir, & vous," "soin & d'ire," "pres & loin," "mons, & plaines," and "rivages & fontaines." Each is part of a construction implementing graphic signs that seem to belong to a speed-writing, an elegant stenography in which a typographic letter takes the shape of a *festina lente,* a form in which a single letter ties the serpentine flow of a curved line to the straight and anchored aspect of an orthogonal trait. Everywhere the sonnet "makes haste slowly." The ampersand signals how the poem changes speed, driving forward under the propulsion of wind from the left, but also slowing down or being tempered by the comma stops set in front of each of the first eight inscriptions. The ampersand appears to cut the poem in half in the middle area (11. 2–4 and 7–8, after the fourth syllable, and 1. 1, after the third and sixth syllable), to give the appearance of a separation and division that exists within the poem, before the same letter scatters in the tercets.

Throughout the poem the ampersand suggests that its printed writing belongs to the arts of furrowing, grafting, cutting, incising, and drawing that are coordinated with both respiration of the poet and the rhythms of his body with the world at large. The rhythm is nonetheless predominantly visual, graphed according to spacings and intersections of letters and words. If indeed the sonnet is composed as a

picture according to perspectival composition and thus, as might an emblematic image, marks a vanishing point within and among its signs, it would emerge among the ampersands between either—or both—*cousteaus vineus* and *plages blondoiantes* (1. 7) and *Gâtine, Loir* and *vous mes tristes vers* (1. 8).[20] In this way the sign figures in a visual rhetoric that centers the interest of the poem on its own geography. The poetic space of the sonnet is made visible where the verbal and visual tensions originate from each of the four angles at the corners of the poem. The point of intersection of the imaginary diagonals that begin and end at the corners would be the site of an enigma set at once in a central area at or about their crossing. The ampersand is seen in this zone and, furthermore, it seems to be inscribed elsewhere over the greater landscape of vocables.

Where the ampersand suggests that the poem is based on an additive composition, of endless movement, *et* + *et* + *et* . . . , arrested only by the confines of the rectangular form, *Gâtine* and *Loir* anchor the text in a topography given by their reiteration in other poems and, perhaps, the memory of the way the place-names are attached both to cartographic representations and to the milieu itself. A sense of locale is underscored by similar formulas in ambient poems ("o coutaux plantureus" [sonnet 55], "antres & prés, & vous foréts" [sonnet 63], etc.), such that "Ciel, air & vens" merely links together, for an instant, a number of the elements that comprise an open totality.

The poem can be read as a piece of life-writing to the degree that it plots a poetic geography both in the stakes of the writer's life and times and, no less, in its construction of a lived space that is at once the poem and its vital biological relation to the poet, that is, to Ronsard as we imagine him through our own rapport with his strange language and deceptively familiar geography. It is known that Ronsard and his cohorts of the Pléiade "sought to bring classical culture to France as a way of increasing their own cultural capital."[21] They could advance themselves, historians write, by attaching themselves to a *terroir* that would become part of their own merit and signature. In the same line of reasoning, Ronsard affirms a national cause with universal claims through the welter of figures that tie the topography of local character and landscape to a geographic whole, to a world that will soon be seen both in atlases and in the poet's future tomb, a folio edition of his *œuvres complètes.*

Yet, despite what would seem to be the geographic investment in Ronsard's aims to curry favor at the French court and to plant himself in a pantheon of poets born in France and descending from the likes of

Pindar and Virgil, in the *Amours* we cannot fail to imagine the topography of the author's Gâtine and Loir through the kind of life-writing that Elaine Marks embodied and personified for her readers and students. Ronsard represents and invents space in his lyric as no poet had ever done. He speeds over and about it in ways that tell us how we, too, produce and foster the illusions we need in order to feel we belong to the world about us. In her teachings and writing about poetry, Elaine Marks did for our generation what Ronsard had done for his legions of readers, which include our teacher, a fervent admirer of the *Amours*, whose words and memory are graven in the landscapes of our lives.

NOTES

1. Ronsard here displays a model for other users. The most remarkable *sonnet rapporté* in the production of the Pléiade may indeed be Etienne Jodelle's "Myrrhe brusloit jadis d'une flamme enragée," in his *Contr-amours,* as François Rigolot notes well in *Poésie et Renaissance,* 220–21. Christofle de Beaujeu engineers an extraordinary inversion of the form in "Ganymède, Uranie, Io, Laède, Léandre," in Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani's edited collection, *Anthologie de la poésie amoureuse de l'âge baroque,* 73–74.

The heading for this section is taken from the observation of Proust's older narrator in *Combray,* who, in casting a backward look at his childhood, notes: "la terre et les êtres, je ne les séparais pas" [earth and beings, I did not separate them] (*A la recherche du temps perdu* 1:155).

2. Buzon and Martin, eds., *Ronsard & Muret, Les Amours, leurs Commentaires,* 99 (translation mine). Based on the *Amours* of 1553, this edition includes both the poems and the commentary supplied by the humanist Marc-Antoine de Muret. The poem can be downloaded in the original typography of the 1553 edition from the "Gallica" website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ (last consulted June 12, 2006). See also Henri Weber and Catherine Weber's critical edition of Ronsard, *Les Amours,* 43, 534. They speculate that the poem is inspired by the movement of Astemio Bevilacqua's sonnet "Herbe felici et prato aventuroso."

3. "Nous remplissions mieux et estandions la possession de la vie en nous separant," writes Montaigne in the *Essais,* 977 (while the presence of the father is noted on 996).

4. The older narrator of *Combray* fathoms his past, castigating himself by noting, "Et la terre et les êtres, je ne les séparais pas." Again, for Proust's elderly narrator reminiscing about Combray, life itself was the illusion of the land and not the separation from it. In his past life the narrator would have wished to meld with the *terroir* of his youth in loving any of its representative peasants, thus being charged with "cet émoi nouveau" [this new excitement] that made the landscape and beings look all the more desirable to him (*A la recherche du temps perdu* 1:154).

5. Montaigne's words on self-styling are in "De l'exercitation" (*Essais,* 378–79).

6. In Buzon and Martin, *Ronsard & Muret*, 99.

7. Rigolot, in *Poésie et Renaissance,* notes that "le paysage du Vendômois natal offre aussi ses prés, ses vignobles et ses antres sauvages. Les chênes et les lauriers n'y sont plus de froids emblèmes mais retrouvent la verdeur 'naïve' de la Nature. La géographie lointaine d'Homère et de Virgile redevient familière" (193) [the landscape of the native Vendôme region also offers its meadows, its vineyards and its wild lairs. Oaks and laurel trees are no longer cold emblems there, but rather reassume the "naive" greenness of Nature. Homer's and Virgil's distant geography becomes familiar once again].

8. Translation is made from Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611), a dictionary in which all of the descriptives of the poem are found.

9. Apian, *Cosmographie,* 4 (translation mine).

10. The woodcut was a celebrated memory-image of what might be called "ut pictura geographia." A fairly close reading of this passage is offered by Lucia Nuti, "Le langage de la peinture dans la cartographie topographique," 54–55.

11. Père François de Dainville shows how, in his *Cosmographia* of 1550, Sébastian Münster used his own figurative representation of vines to produce a sign "that reduced it to the stock attached to its stake," in *Le Langage des géographes,* 327 (fig. 47). Elsewhere Dainville describes it as might an emblematist a *festina lente:* "a kind of snake or zigzag around each pole, or little Saint André's crosses below which a line of shade is drawn" (209).

12. Every student of poetry knows Emile Benveniste's remarks about how shifters betray relations of power, presence, and absence. Suffice it here to recall how, during their seasonal campaigns to raise money, announcers on National Public Radio assert, "we are funded by you our listeners."

13. Dainville notes that in French *bois* generates diminutives similar to *silvula* in Latin. *Bocage,* he adds, is "a diminutive of forest" and has always connoted a charming and agreeable place (195).

14. In Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes,* 2:849 (translation mine).

15. The metaphor applies well to the shape of each of Ronsard's volumes in the perspective of their evolution in the composition of the oeuvre. Some pieces are cut away, others added; almost every poem is manicured and retouched over the course of the author's career.

16. Christian Jacob notes that, in the case of mnemographic maps that bear wind heads along their borders or in the spandrels, viewers are enabled to look at the projection as they might from the wind head's point of view but also discern their own capacity to see the work from all sides and altitudes in the same blow. Wind heads give the viewer a sense of the multiplicity of ways that a spatial representation can be beheld (*L'Empire des cartes,* 153–54). A similar observation can be made about how we can draw words at the edges of the poem across its surface in order to survey it, if only as an essay, as a way of seeing the poem from different perspectives.

17. The *antre* could resemble an eye socket. Such is the image given in Gilles Corrozet, *Hécatomgraphie,* in the emblem entitled "Secret est à louer." In "Une histoire taillée en images," 90–92, I have juxtaposed the isolated eye in Pieter Apian's illustration of the similitude of "cosmography/portraiture:

topography/detail" with the outline of the *antre,* or lair, from which emerges a giant snail (or pupil of an eye) in Corrozet's emblem.

18. Leonardo, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci,* vol. 1, entry 470 (236). The observer of popular culture witnessed, at the time of the Apollo mission, the difficulty that American emissaries to the moon had in displaying the flag to the faraway public. The voyagers needed to find a strut to prop up the limp and useless cloth. The fantasy for many viewers of the Apollo mission was that the resourceful astronauts used a wire coat hanger to make the emblem of America stand aloft and proud on a breezeless and barren terrain.

19. See Henri Meschonnic on Claudel's *Locomotive:* "Claudel et l'hiéroglyphe ou la Ahité des Choses," 102–3.

20. In my *L'Inconscient graphique,* chapter 4, I read two poems (*Amours* 60 and 90 of the 1553 edition) according to this mode of composition.

21. Hampton, *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century,* 161. Hampton argues compellingly that for the poets, especially Du Bellay, a crisis of social identity leads to the creation of a "*national* character" (190).

The Art of Finding

Reading as (a Very Easy) Death

SUSAN S. LANSER

We write and read not to change the world but to sharpen, to deepen, and to expand our awareness of being in the world and having to take leave of it.

Elaine Marks, "Multiplicity and Morality"

At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that I came to questions of Jewishness through the Shoah. It would be more accurate to state that in the beginning was an obsession with death and absence to which the Jewish story became attached.

Elaine Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor*

In December 1999, just a month after the death of Yvonne Rochette Ozzello, her partner of twenty-five years, Elaine Marks and I shared a hotel room at MLA. Before she'd finished unpacking, she handed me a copy of Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art," which she was reading every day. It was the only writing that consoled her, she told me; its deceptive matter-of-factness about "the art of losing" stirred her outrage less for her own bereavement than for the cheated future of Yvonne. Two years later I would be stunned to find myself reading that poem at a memorial for Elaine herself. Stunned because her illness, so astoundingly ill-timed (she called it "a reversal of fortune" when she sent the

news), seemed, to evoke Simone de Beauvoir's words, "as violent and unforeseen as an engine stopping in the middle of the sky."[1] Stunned because I must have come to imagine that if someone spent so much of her life stopping for death, then death would not stop for her. Stunned because of the all-too-real prescience in that eerie moment at Yvonne's funeral when, standing next to the space carved out for the coffin, Elaine announced that she was standing on her own grave and might well fall into the rain-soaked earth.

Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle has remained a touchstone as I speculate in this essay—truly an *essai*—about the relationship between reading and death, about reading as an art of losing and finding—that refuses either to accept or to deny the insult of "being in the world and having to take leave of it." Unlike Elaine, I have not consciously been writing death into my scholarship, although, having lost my mother in childhood, I have long recognized that death has been writing me. My bond to Elaine's preoccupation with mortality was often ambivalent and its expression indirect, evoked most explicitly through our shared preference for Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce.* In tribute to Elaine's more ruthless gaze, I want here to ask how reading may offer "a very easy death" in both the innocent and the ironic senses of Beauvoir's title phrase.

This confrontation with the ways in which I read for and against death also moves me reluctantly closer to Elaine's literary views. Courageously faithful to shifts in her own perceptions, Elaine tried in the 1990s to swing the pendulum of literary studies away from infidelities she had not foreseen when the "new French feminisms" were among her guiding interests. My enduring attachment to the conviction that "we write and read . . . to change the world" has made me uncomfortable with some of Elaine's later pronouncements about the purposes of literature. She herself worried about "being accused of participating in a conservative political agenda" when she sympathized with Harold Bloom's argument that the "Western Canon" does not make anyone a better human being, that reading literature can only help us toward a "solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality."[2] I remember Elaine's remarking to me twenty-five or so years ago that feminist theory had not come to terms with death. I do not know what she thought a feminist approach to death would look like, but she was certainly warning that if feminism were to hold the sweeping explanatory power we were giving it, then it would also have to cast a new light on mortality.

In the wake of Elaine's challenges, then, this *essai* forces me to confront the split between my faith that literature can "change the world" and my awareness that reading and writing are also acts of deep personal longing. Joyce Carol Oates once remarked that "so primary is homesickness as a motive for writing fiction, so powerful the yearning to memorialize what we've lived, inhabited, been hurt by and loved, that the impulse often goes unacknowledged."[3] I recognize this longing not only in the fiction and memoir I occasionally write, but even in my scholarly penchant for certain forms of narrative history, in my choice of particular tropes and sentences, in my attachment to certain words whose shapes and sounds have taken psychic contours. My reading is likewise shaped by a longing for what was (or never was), for the illusion of presence that language, as absence, paradoxically seems best able to give back to us. In her last book, Elaine identified "the obsession with death and absence" as a primal state to which, for her, the story of the Shoah "became attached." I ask myself now what kinds of stories have become attached to my own—and perhaps *our* own—less unflinching but always lurking sense of loss. I want to ask these questions not only about devastating villanelles like Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" and explicit narrative encounters like *Une mort très douce,* but even about the popular fiction that we blithely call, perhaps *à tort,* "escape."

The Art of Losing: "One Art"

> The art of losing isn't hard to master;
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster.
>
> Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
> of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
> places, and names, and where it was you meant
> to travel. None of these will bring disaster.
>
> I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
> next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
> some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
> I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.[4]

Like Dylan Thomas's more famous villanelle, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," from which Simone de Beauvoir drew her epigraph for *Une mort très douce,* Elizabeth Bishop's poem makes death into an "unjustifiable violation" and unnatural act.[5] This sense of violation comes gradually and perhaps unexpectedly to "One Art." Taken on its own, the first tercet is downright cheerful, suggesting that loss is somehow natural, residing in the "intent" of "things," merely befuddling. But the vague and perhaps inconsequential "things" lost in this first stanza lead inexorably to worse losses, from the replaceable "keys" to the irreplaceable "mother's watch" to "loved houses" to the very earth (rivers, a continent), until the singular and most terrible loss of a beloved person, the "you"—a woman in Bishop's case as in Elaine's. The losses are progressive in intensity as well: disorienting in time (the watch) and place (keys, houses, continents), they also demand that one "practice losing farther, losing faster," as loss heaps upon loss. And the tight form of the villanelle suggests the inseparability of every loss from the smallest to the most serious: every loss is Loss.

That death is never mentioned in "One Art" allows the poem its lighter opening but also its fiercer impact, opening its ironies to every form of leaving and being left. Death, abandonment, one's own false moves, might be equally disastrous; the poem does not tell us why the speaker is bereft: she simply "lost"; "things" simply "went." Leaving and being left are indistinguishable and their agency unclear. In an age of anxious jokes about "senior moments," one can also read in the poem the horrifying spectre of the loss of mind, as miscellaneous objects disappear, then the proverbial keys, then access to one's own history ("my mother's watch") and one's ability to remain at home, the loss of one's entire geography and finally of one's relationships. Whatever the source to which we attribute the losing, by the time we reach the poem's end we not only know what loss looks like but have been led to taste its bitterness: we too have lost everything, lost "even you."

Yet, devastating as loss is, we are enjoined to *learn* to lose by practicing; indeed we must "lose something every day." With unsettling irony, the poem suggests—and will later only half recant—that we can manage loss by doing it. As losing takes on magnitude and intensity, repetition becomes the necessity that, however, cannot really confer control. Thus

the deceptive "no disaster" in the first tercet yields in the third to a more ominous "none of *these* will bring disaster," and what "isn't hard" in the second and the fourth stanzas is only—and only ironically—"not *too* hard" in the last. Rereading the poem makes ominous even the first use of "no disaster," for the choice of that dire word suggests that disaster does loom over the most ordinary misplacements and displacements of daily life. And Bishop's villanelle introduces tension through half-rhymes (master/fluster/last or) and uneven meter (the trochaic "master," the hard-to-scan "two rivers, a continent"), down to the final stanza, which opens with the rhyme most straining to both eye and ear (master/gesture), completing a line that is also nearly incapable of being rendered in iambic pentameter.

In restoring poetic harmony, the final couplet of "One Art" stresses not only the intimate bond between disaster and mastery but the necessity—underscored by the italicized, capitalized and exclamation-pointed "(*Write* it!)"—to turn what "looks like" disaster into art. In the same moment (the last line) that we lose everything, then, we also find the key to "the art of losing" that is the poem itself. But why *one* art? Is loss "no disaster" because it is bound to happen? Can what "looks like" disaster be distinguished from it? If we master disaster, have we not lost everything anyway, by having become so practiced in the art of losing that we will not become attached? For to live is to lose; in the words of Mary Oliver's "In Blackwater Woods," to "live in the world" means "to love what is mortal, . . . knowing your own life depends on it," and then, when the time comes, "to let it go."[6] If to live is to attach, then to live is to court disaster—all the more if, like Bishop—and Elaine Marks—one does not see (as Oliver does in "Blackwater Woods") "salvation" beckoning across the "black river of loss." "One Art" may be suggesting that truly to master the art of losing would *itself* be a disaster, for this mastery would demand that we deny the magnitude, the unacceptability, the irresolvable irony of loss. The contradiction is visible in the root meaning of the word "dis-aster," which situates the unexpected misfortune not in ourselves but in our stars: dis-aster, an unnatural instance of the natural. The villanelle's incantatory prosody emphasizes this circularity through its structured repetition; the very recurrence of its key words and phrases tell the tale: "the art of losing," "hard to master," "disaster," "lost." If there is an art of losing, its mastery lies in words. That at its last moment the poem can apostrophize a "you"—can speak to the lost one—suggests that even the "you" who has been lost in life can, in some attenuated sense, be found again in art.

In her own repeated reading—and, one could add (by handing copies to her friends), "teaching"—of "One Art," Elaine Marks was not making sense of death. On the contrary, she, like Bishop, was affirming its *non*-sense, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's insistence at the end of *Une mort très douce* that no death is natural, that every death is an "unjustifiable violation" and a "horrible surprise" inflicted by life upon the living and the dead.[7] "One Art" thus evokes for me not only Elaine Marks's stance toward death but her way of reading in full view of it. In her repetition of this villanelle, Elaine was substituting the poem for her losses, but her purpose was clearly not one of closing off; her comfort, such as it was, lay in keeping vivid, through the performance of the poem, the transgression death represents. This is not the coming-to-terms of religious acceptance but a stirring of awareness by reenacting the encounter with the unacceptable. The reading itself becomes both a practice in the art of losing and a way to "master" loss: in repeating the poem, we rehearse the bereavement that the reading can nonetheless not dissolve or resolve.

It may be worth mapping this way of handling death onto Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia. Freud understood mourning as a process of grieving that accepts the absence of the one lost, while melancholia introjects the lost person as a way to keep from giving that person up. In a sense, reading "One Art" as a way of encountering loss is neither mourning, a working through, nor melancholy, a refusal to let go; it is rather a project of grieving for which resolution is *willfully* refused, not denial but bold confrontation with the irony that death exists: a way to work through the death of a specific person while nonetheless refusing to accommodate the fact of death. Poised *between* mourning and melancholia, the reader stares death in the face, facing the loss but refusing to forgive it.

The Solace of Anguish; or, Death by Villanelle

When Elaine handed me "One Art," a poem I'd read before but long forgotten, I remember being both stunned by its power and dismayed by its refusal of relief. In part because "One Art" never speaks explicitly of death, Bishop's poem leads me from one kind of reading to another: from a state analogous to Roland Barthes's notion of *plaisir* (pleasure) into a state that bears some inverse resemblance to what Barthes called *jouissance* (ecstasy). In *Le Plaisir du texte,* Barthes distinguishes two kinds of texts, or ways of reading them: the *texte de plaisir,* which produces comfort, an untroubled satisfaction tied to culturally conventional

works and reading practices, and the *texte de jouissance,* which elicits a more intense ecstasy but creates a disruptive tension that also unsettles us. In relation to "the art of losing," I would substitute for *plaisir* a notion of *soulagement* (a solace that is also a relief) and for *jouissance, angoisse* (an anguish that also stirs anxiety).

These quite distinct reading effects are not, however, stable differences that reside in texts, though texts clearly attempt to configure them. Because each of us reads through our personal as well as cultural history, a single text may slip—or slip us—from one mode to another, or produce a moment of *angoisse* that can either stop us cold or be recuperated into *soulagement.* Different texts, different moments in the same text, the same text at different moments may offer one or both effects, as the absence that is language evokes both the illusory presence of representation and a present of our own. To appropriate Barthes's words, our ways of reading operate upon "a very delicate blend of biographical, historical, sociological, and neurotic elements (education, social class, childhood experience, etc.), which I sort out in the conflicting game" of (cultural) *soulagement* and (non-cultural) *angoisse.* Such a reading practice, says Barthes, honors the *consumer,* "whoever (s)he may be, to whatever class, whatever group (s)he belongs," trumping Kantian and even post-Kantian aesthetics in a valorization of the individual reader that Barthes believes has "enormous, perhaps even devastating" consequences for literary theory.[8] For reading effects are not subject to empirical prediction, aesthetic valuation, theoretical prognostication, or even individual consistency.

In order both to illustrate and to complicate distinctions between what I am calling the *texte de soulagement* and the *texte d'angoisse,* it may be useful to contrast "One Art" with two other villanelles about death. The first, Nicholas Gordon's web-published "Weep, Weep Within Me, Darling," strikes me as bent upon producing solace by recuperating a particularly disturbing death:

> Weep, weep within me, darling. There's release
> In tears, in sorrow, in love that brings such pain.
> You live inside of me, so rest in peace.
>
> I know that like a sea you cannot cease
> To crash against my heart, again, again.
> Weep, weep within me, darling. There's release
>
> From all the cruelty of your short lease,
> The unimagined hell of the self-slain.
> You live inside of me, so rest in peace.

I was cut off from you and could not piece
Together bows that lay beyond your rain.
Weep, weep within me, darling. There's release

In knowing that your love, like magic fleece,
Will warm me through the winters that remain.
You live inside of me, so rest in peace.

My love for you, dear mother, will increase
As more and more your will I will unchain.
Weep, weep within me, darling: there's release.
You live inside of me, so rest in peace.[9]

If this is not a poem of the caliber of "One Art," it is also not a wholly simple one. Here it is the bereaved who exhorts the suicide mother (the "self-slain") to grieve. In a kind of fetal role reversal, the son allows the mother to "crash against my heart" and "weep within me," effecting in turn a symbiosis in which the mother's love "like magic fleece, / Will warm me." Death here is salvation; it restores the mother from whom the child "was cut off." Death thus becomes not only the suicide's best hope, but also the son's, who has reclaimed the mother and whose love for her "will increase" as he "unchain[s]" her "will." "Weep, Weep" seeks not only to offer comfort *for* death, in other words, but to create comfort *from* death: death becomes the solution rather than the problem, the happy ending ("rest in peace") to a life of psychic turbulence. It is not accidental, I think, that, both visually and aurally, this poem is far more conventional than Bishop's, neatly scanning and neatly rhymed.

But readers are resistant and perverse. I cannot take, and cannot imagine Elaine Marks taking, comfort from this text that works so hard to produce *soulagement* from suicide. I recall the epitaph Elaine chose for her gravestone—"Tout va sous terre et rentre dans le jeu."[10] Solace, such as it is, lies in joining the game that is the way of earth, or in acknowledging that it is not peace that one recovers but "the emptiness at the heart of all things," to quote Elaine in another context.[11] She would have been more attuned to the famous villanelle from which Simone de Beauvoir took her epigraph to *Une mort très douce* and which I want to contrast to both "Weep, Weep" and "One Art" as a kind of mixed poem poised between *soulagement* and *angoisse,* offering anguish *as* solace against death:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.[12]

Formally, this villanelle is even more predictable than "Weep, Weep." Repetition is fairly firm and fixed; we do not see here the shifts of meaning that emerge through the recurrent phrases of "One Art." The poem's message therefore does not significantly alter from the first stanza to the last; the more intimate last stanza intensifies but does not change the wish that the poet's father will "rage against the dying of the light." If there is destabilization, it comes from the line "Curse, bless me," which transfers the burden of the rage the son wishes for his dying father onto his surviving self. In this sense, the poem stands in inversion to "One Art": the surprising pronoun in "Do Not Go Gentle" is the "me" of the final stanza, as it is the "you" of "One Art." In spirit, "Do Not Go Gentle" seems to me to offer the obverse of the epigraph Elaine chose for *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death:* the passage from François Villon's *Grand testament* reminding us that death claims everyone, "de quelconque condition" [of whatever condition], whether wise or foolish, poor or rich, noble or villainous: "mort saisit sans exception" [death seizes without exception]. What Villon inscribes as a kind of poetic justice—death as leveler—Thomas takes as the injustice life inflicts upon old age, and then offers up the poetic "leveler" of rage to counterbalance the inevitability of the dying light.

I can remember a time when "Do Not Go Gentle" was for me a *texte de soulagement*, offering the triumphant reassurance that one can stand in existential resistance to the inevitability of death. Yet when Yvonne

Ozzello knew she was dying in the spring of 1999, what I remember admiring was her calm adjustment to this inevitability, her ability to speak about it matter-of-factly as a sad necessity, a premature ending to a life happy in love and work. Judging from Elaine's affinity to "One Art," this was not a response Elaine shared. Nor do I know whether Elaine herself went gentle; the end, it seems, was quick—not unlike the easy death of which Simone de Beauvoir writes with admixed acknowledgment and irony.

For while "Do Not Go Gentle" exhorts the dying, over whom the living arguably have no rights at all, "One Art" leaves both speaker and reader troublingly, unaccountably among the bereft. This is the poem that gave Elaine solace—the solace of raging against the dying of another person's light. It has taken me these several years of living with "One Art" to share Elaine's preference. What pulls me and may have pulled her is the poem's deceptiveness. Because "One Art" does not mention death, because it charts progressive losses, because its message remains so resolutely unresolved, the first two tercets of Bishop's poem might well seem to be offering a kind of conventional comfort: we lose things, we lose them every day. But the third tercet begins to destabilize this comfort, and by the fourth and fifth we are trapped in a vertiginous whirlwind of loss that has speeded out beyond control. If at the beginning we can savor the lost things—the keys, even "my mother's watch," experience the wistfulness of losing things by finding them in the poem—when we lose houses and continents and rivers, the text has unsettled this comfortable way to live with loss, evoking losses of a magnitude that opens an abyss for which the best answer, perhaps, is to read the poem again. As a *texte d'angoisse,* "One Art" creates the experience of an easy death only in the ironic sense that Beauvoir comes to: that there is no such thing either for the dying or for the bereaved, that "it is useless to try to integrate life and death and to behave rationally in the presence of something that is not rational."[13] Where "Do Not Go Gentle" offers a sincerity of rage, "One Art" provides only an ironic access to mastery, eluding the possibility of heroic if futile rebellion that provides a kind of comfort in the Dylan Thomas poem.

As I consider the writings about death that I have found most powerful over the years of my adulthood—that is, the years when sentimentalized love stories (like *Love Story* and *Terms of Endearment*) became painful not because they evoked death but because they covered it over, I can see that most of them offer me an opportunity to move between *soulagement* and *angoisse,* now stirring and now quelling my

confrontation with the inevitable and unacceptable fact that I and those I love will die. What I have most cherished have been not whole texts but fragments, fragments that come close, I think, to the epigraph from Villon that Elaine Marks chose in 1963: Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods," Virginia Woolf's poignant recognition that "the beauty of the world which is so soon to perish, has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder,"[14] the passage in Harriet Doerr's *Consider This, Señora* that sits on my computer monitor: "Our lives are brief beyond our comprehension or desire. . . . We drop like cottonwood leaves from trees after a single frost. The interval between birth and death is scarcely more than a breathing space. . . . An individual life is, in the end, nothing more than a stirring of air, a shifting of light. No one of us, finally, can be more than that. Even Einstein. Even Brahms."[15] For me, these bits of text stir anguish and solace—or anguish as solace—depending on how, in a given moment, I am navigating the "black river of loss." In reading them, I orient myself to life and death in the unsettling transfiguration of the text. Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* also carries that power for me despite or perhaps because of my difficulty in identifying with a daughter alienated from her mother unto contempt. What holds me to the book is my shock that Beauvoir is so surprised by her mother's mortality, a surprise that echoes my own ten-year-old's disbelief that I could lose my mother but that seems, perhaps because I have lived with that loss for most of my life, bizarrely innocent in an adult. What holds me too is Beauvoir's powerful insistence that there is nothing natural about death—even though there is, of course, nothing less unnatural. But what has also come to hold me—and here I probably depart from Elaine rather dramatically—is a form of light fiction in which I had no interest until I reached my fifties and which I can now see as yet another way to find, through reading, a very easy death.

Deathly Fictions

Despite Elaine Marks's penchant for poetry and my own attention here to the villanelle, it is prose narrative to which Elaine's "obsession with death and absence" and my own more attenuated draw to death have been most frequently "attached." For realist narrative offers us an art not only of losing but of finding—and does so particularly, I think, through the formal elements of plot and place. Peter Brooks has famously argued that we are always "reading for the plot." In so doing,

we involve ourselves with both temporality and causality and with their interrelationship. Narrative, Brooks observes, allows us to repeat the childhood game of loss and recovery, of *fort* (away) and *da* (there) that Freud argued takes the child "beyond the pleasure principle" in an attempt to ensure that what is lost will be restored, if not directly then through a substitute. Even where the plot offers only loss, the text and our ability to return to it provide a substitutionary recovery. If we agree with Walter Benjamin that we seek in narrative the knowledge of death that life denies us, then we can argue that the game of losing, and in some sense finding, is also a way to encounter death.

Because it is oriented in recognizable time and place, realist fiction makes the game of lost-and-found particularly vivid and sometimes particularly personal: the narrative creates actual or imaginary places that we can invest with our own desires. In producing a world, the novel or memoir also produces the place in which not only characters but readers dwell: a text can evoke a literal place already beloved or can, through repetition, create within the fictive world a place that comes to feel like home. I want to speculate that quite mundane narratives set in recognizable space allow us to enact in different ways the problem of "being in the world and having to take leave of it." If I've lost "two cities" or "a continent," I may well be able to recapture them in print.

Nowhere is this double dynamic of loss-recovery *(fort-da)* and realist detail more comfortingly enacted, I suggest, than in the detective or mystery novel, a genre that has become extremely popular among literary critics as it has worldwide. Detective fictions enact a particularly extensive if not intensive art of finding easy death. The murdered characters in most detective novels are not characters to whom we become attached. Usually they die close to the beginning of the novel; rarely do we gain access to their thoughts and feelings; sometimes they are manifestly unlikable. And although the dead are of course not resurrected, they *are* recovered in a very crucial sense: by learning how a person died and whom to hold responsible, we experience death as wholly *knowable,* as the result of a series of specifically human moves. We thus also experience death in the detective novel as *unnatural*—just as Beauvoir claimed all death to be, as someone's fault, rather than as the random, natural, inevitable experience it usually is in life. Moreover, the detective novel allows the good world to be restored to order by the identification and arrest (or death) of the criminal. Detective fiction thus lets life resume its comic (in Northrop Frye's sense) order; if the

victim of the crime is *fort,* the cause and the culprit will, by the last page, be *da.* In a sense, the detective story is not about losing but about finding, and less about Death than about *a* death that makes dying itself a danger but never an accident.

The very predictability and safety of the detective novel also allows us—or at least allows me—to savor its usually quite detailed relationship to place: I can dwell happily on bits and pieces of a familiar setting precisely because the outcome—the *fort-da*—has been assured. Hence perhaps the popularity of detective fictions set in favored cities: San Francisco, Paris, London, Boston, Venice, New York. Having become during the past decade a listener to detective novels on tape during long drives and shorter walks, I was listening to a quite mediocre mystery novel as I walked through Harvard Yard during my first year living in Cambridge after two decades in Washington—a displacement in middle age (my last, or next-to-last, of three loved houses went!) that has been no less difficult for my having chosen it. The mediocre novel happened to be set at Harvard, and I just happened to be walking by the edifice known as Memorial Hall when the narrator began describing that building and naming the very street on which I live. That momentary conjunction of text and life inordinately pleased me, for I could recognize as familiar—indeed familiar in text in a way that connected me to a larger and public world in which I had been feeling lost. I can remember too my pleasure at different moments in reading a novel set in my hometown of Chicago, or in cities I have loved: Paris, London, Venice. Significantly, I have less interest in novels about Boston now that I feel at home, and though while I lived in Washington I was never drawn to novels about it, I took significant pleasure in listening to *Murder in Foggy Bottom* this year as a way to recover a cityscape loved and lost.

I am speculating that the blend of easy death and familiar setting makes the detective novel a particularly soothing way to encounter death or at least *a* death. Even more rewarding and currently extremely popular are detective series, which offer the return of the now-familiar detective(s) in their now-familiar ambiance but with a new *fort-da* game to play, the outcome of which will once again assure us that dying can be explained. And if we finish one book—itself a little death—and grieve the loss, we can find another in the series and repeat the experience in a way that feels both comfortingly familiar and challengingly new. As Robyn Warhol recognizes in *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms,* such serials have the double effect of being

always open-ended, hence always promising something still to come and thus creating agitation, and at the same time creating through their repetitions "a soothing effect that readers call 'calming' or even 'boring'"—a *texte de soulagement.*[16]

Why are so many literary scholars today—including (by my anecdotal evidence) large numbers of feminists—aficionados of the detective novel, although some admit it openly while others remain ashamed? In a fine essay published a few years ago in *Feminist Studies,* Anna Wilson notes that the lesbian detective novel has replaced the coming-out story as the most popular form of literature among U.S. lesbians.[17] She speculates that this replacement stemmed from the desire for characters (in this case, lesbian characters) with power to set the world aright. I suggest that a similar move may be happening among scholars of literature, for the detective novel in its pleasurable forms is convention-bound to offer us the certainty of finding the killer(s) along with the certainty of the finder's mastery. Moreover, today's finder is likely to be a man or woman who is personally fallible (ourselves?) but who nonetheless is professionally always successful, always right. What better antidote to our postmodern anxieties about fixed truths and scholarly mastery! Here we can enact the art of finding not only a missing person or a killer but a lost way of work and life. This need for certitude is doubtless true of readers in general, for whom the losses of the past century—both literal and epistemological—might well lure us to seek the comfort of familiar places in which murders are outed, crimes punished, and deaths explained. Here is the art of losing beautifully mastered indeed. But it's worth remembering that even detective novels can move us from *soulagement* to *angoisse:* when, as in a couple of Elizabeth George's novels, the victims are children; when a solved mystery nonetheless leaves unsettling traces in its wake, as is the case with some of Ruth Rendell's novels when she writes as Barbara Vine; or simply when a story for whatever reason comes too close to home. Deathly fictions become deadly in such instances: no story is safe for everyone.

Losers, Keepers

Except for an adolescent flurry of Nancy Drews and a dissertation year relieved by Agatha Christies, I used to consider detective novels boring and trivial. That for the past decade I've been reading them avidly—or, more accurately, listening to them on tape while saving my limited reading time for sterner fare—does not fully separate my habits from

Elaine Marks's use of "One Art." For all its reassurances, detective fiction has also become for me a quiet practice in the art of losing; to read mystery novels is indeed to "lose something every day." Especially when located in a familiar setting, the mystery novel provides a way to live with death without thinking much about it, while also returning "home" to places I have loved and creating new attachments. (My passion for the television drama *ER* even after the show's quality began to wane probably serves similar purposes: in the emergency room, too, one loses someone every day, usually in a distanced way but sometimes in a way that leaves viewers anguished—or angry—and bereft.) And when even a trivial kind of fiction evokes something directly in my history, I experience what Virginia Woolf described in another context as a "sudden splitting off of consciousness" when the ground I took for granted slides away and I am left face to face with my abandonment.[18] A plot can simply come too close for comfort; a loss that replicates my loss is not likely to be an easy death. And for each of us there are plots that one cannot face in reading: I once found myself unable to finish reading José Saramago's terrifying fantasy, *Blindness,* about a seemingly contagious loss of sight.

I do not know whether Elaine Marks read detective novels; I have some recollection that she was a fan of Simenon, but it seems likely that most of the mystery novels I and my friends read avidly would have seemed to her even more escapist than Simone de Beauvoir's evasions, of which Elaine was so critical, the "lines of defense" she saw Beauvoir constructing in her attempts "to exorcise death with words."[19] It was in *Une mort très douce,* Elaine wrote, that Simone de Beauvoir came closest both to confronting death without flinching and to "suffer[ing] for someone other than herself."[20] Perhaps these are related, just as they are related in Elaine's way of reading Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle less for her loss than for Yvonne's. *Une mort très douce* does become a *texte d'angoisse,* inscribing a death that "shakes" Simone de Beauvoir "deeply" because it forces her to confront her mother's psychic importance in her life. And thus, "although I was not with Maman when she died," Beauvoir reports, "and although I had been with three people when they were actually dying, it was when I was at her bedside that I saw Death."[21]

Because the mystery novel denies this intimacy with the dying and thus with death, I've found that its very solace also dissatisfies, leading me back once again to the riskier, writerly, *texte d'angoisse.* I have been drawn back to facing and finishing Saramago's *Blindness.* Like the "two

edges" that Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*—one of laughter, one of anguish—my way of reading death seems now to require both solace *and* anguish—the balancing of texts that reassure with those that destabilize, texts that make death knowable with those that unravel all certainties except the certainty that, to evoke Harriet Doerr again, "an individual life is, in the end, nothing more than a stirring of air, a shifting of light." Reading daily as I die, dying daily as I read, I find in the interplay of solace and anguish the "one art" that enables me to lose and find again.

Whether in unwitting tribute to Elaine or because her death altered my own sense of mortality, Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle has now become a cherished if disturbing text. In recalling the losses I have lived through, it may be arming me for the losses—and the Loss—I will be unable to avoid. As I move toward what can only be the last third of life even if my years are very long, I begin to recognize that although I continue reading and writing to "change the world," I too am sharpening my "awareness of being in the world and having to take leave of it." But reading is a very easy death.

NOTES

1. Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death,* 123.
2. Bloom, *The Western Canon* (1994) quoted in Marks, "Feminism's Perverse Effects," 164.
3. Oates, in her review of John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest.*
4. Bishop, "One Art," in *The Complete Poems,* 178. Copyright © 1979, 1983 by Alice Helen Methfessel. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.
5. Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death,* 123.
6. Oliver, *American Primitive,* 83.
7. Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death,* 123.
8. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte,* 99, 94, translation mine.
9. Gordon, "Weep, Weep Within Me, Darling," www.poemsforfree.com/weep.html. Gordon's site includes several villanelles about death, of which the most charged is the angry "You Killed Yourself and Didn't Think of Me." Reprinted by permission of Nicholas Gordon.
10. The line is from Paul Valéry's poem "Le Cimetière marin."
11. Marks, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 108.
12. Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," in *The Poems of Dylan Thomas,* 207–8. Copyright © 1952 by Dylan Thomas. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
13. Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death,* 113–14.
14. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* 17.
15. Doerr, *Consider This, Señora,* 194.

16. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry,* 76.
17. Wilson, "Death and the Mainstream."
18. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* 101.
19. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life,* quoted in Marks, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 11. Marks uses the term "evasions" on 127 and *passim.*
20. Marks, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 102.
21. Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death,* 119, 122.

PART FOUR

Signing Off

The Individual Lost and Regained

The Feminine Signature

Saint-Simon, Elaine Marks, and the Esprit Mortemart

DAVID HARRISON

Elaine Marks did not include the Duc de Saint-Simon in the list of writers with whom she felt an "aesthetic and emotional affinity" ("Multiplicity and Mortality" 368–69). Saint-Simon himself might have agreed with this decision: "Je ne fus jamais un sujet académique" (8:666) [I was never an academic writer], he declares at the end of his voluminous *Mémoires,* suggesting that he lacks the refinement of authors like Racine and Sévigné.[1] Yet Saint-Simon nonetheless explores ideas that are at the heart of Elaine Marks's work—memory, mourning, death. In particular, his treatment of the famous *esprit Mortemart* brings together the notions of "life writing" and "writing death" in an especially original way. The *esprit Mortemart* is a mordant wit that enlivens the conversation of its bearers and confers on them a kind of immortality. Paradoxically, however, the *esprit* also embraces death, through its gallows humor and its pleasure in killing people with malicious words. As Elaine Marks herself pointed out to me, at the center of *esprit Mortemart* is, literally, "mort," or death.

Furthermore, the play of life and death within the *esprit Mortemart* reveals a proto-feminist side to Saint-Simon's writing that intersects with Elaine Marks's feminist literary criticism. For the *esprit* and its most famous bearer—the Marquise de Montespan, mistress to Louis XIV—call into question paternal authority in its various linguistic manifestations,

especially that of authorship itself. To enter Montespan's circle of wit means adopting a collective sense of humor that no one jokester can claim to have invented. Saint-Simon's own affiliation with the Mortemart clan suggests that his text is "signed" not with his ducal patronymic but rather with the spirit of women whose conversational style he has learned to imitate. Thus if it is common, indeed banal, to view Saint-Simon as one of the most conservative writers of the French literary canon—someone who defends the "law of the father," and thus the law of canon-formation itself, with exceptional vigor—then the *esprit Mortemart* counters this view and bestows on the *Mémoires* a feminine signature.

My understanding of the "feminist" spirit within Saint-Simon relies on the dual definition of the term that Elaine Marks provides in her essay entitled "The 'Feminist' Inquiry in French Studies." Here, Elaine describes feminism as both "political" and "poetical": it takes account of the real-world lives of women in a given historical context, yet it also examines the production of sexual meanings within language. Saint-Simon's text certainly embraces politics, for it contains enormous historical information about the lives of women and indeed approaches history in a way that privileges women's domains of power at court. Yet this political history is also poetical in its play with language. Saint-Simon's unpredictable syntax and his startling changes in emotional register—what Sainte-Beuve referred to as the *Mémoires*' "confusion naturelle"—greatly affects the text's meaning, to the point of calling into question the author's rigid moral outlook.[2] I wish to examine how the playfulness of Saint-Simon's language, especially when he describes Madame de Montespan or his own family history, often conflicts with, or even contradicts, the overt messages that the language conveys. Saint-Simon's poetics, in other words, clash with his politics. Such an interpretation may irritate those who wish to read Saint-Simon in a more traditional manner, but I think that it is precisely such playfulness that Elaine enjoyed and that marked her own feminism. Thus I hope that my examination of the *esprit Mortemart* gives homage to Elaine's "marks"—the feminist signature that her work bears.

Writing and the Feminine: *Mémoires*, Mothers, Montespan

Saint-Simon's text—if not his political and social outlook—is overshadowed by his father, Claude de Rouvroy. Claude is responsible for gaining the hereditary title of "Duc de Saint-Simon" from Louis XIII as

a reward for his valiant service to the king; he therefore bestows on his son, Louis de Rouvroy, both the name "Saint-Simon" and the aristocratic privileges of being a *duc et pair.* Louis de Rouvroy's allegiance to these ducal privileges, as shown by his numerous quarrels over court hierarchy that are recounted in the *Mémoires,* demonstrate his respect for his paternal inheritance. Indeed, Saint-Simon's distaste for Louis XIV, whose reign he views as a series of attempts at degrading the caste of dukes in favor of the bourgeoisie, could be interpreted as an idealization of his father and of Louis XIII.[3]

Yet the actual writing of the *Mémoires* seems to have been inspired by Saint-Simon's mother, Charlotte de l'Aubespine. Because of Claude's advanced age at the time of his son's birth in 1675, the young Louis de Rouvroy is taught by his mother that he needs to rely primarily on himself if he wishes to advance in the world: "Ma mère me répétait sans cesse la nécessité pressante où se trouverait de valoir quelque chose un jeune homme entrant seul dans le monde, de son chef, fils d'un favori de Louis XIII, dont tous les amis étaient morts ou hors d'état de l'aider, et d'une mère qui . . . mariée à un vieillard, n'avait jamais vu que leurs vieux amis et amies, et n'avait pu s'en faire de son âge" (1:19) [My mother unceasingly reminded me of the pressing need to make something of myself—I, a young man going into the world alone on his own initiative, the son of one of Louis XIII's favorites, whose friends were all dead or out of commission, and of a mother who, . . . married to an old man, had only known their elderly friends, and had never been able to make any friends of her own age]. "I, a young man going into the world alone on his own initiative"—this sounds more like a man with no title at all than an aristocratic oldest son whose social role is guaranteed by birth. Referring to his father, Claude, as "un vieillard" [an old man], Saint-Simon suggests a kind of sexual impotence that reinforces Claude's political impotence. He thus figures as a debilitated father from the very beginning of Louis de Rouvroy's life: the son inherits the father's name but is nonetheless a kind of orphan, "going into the world alone." From this isolation, Louis de Rouvroy begins writing history, in the hope that this activity will prove his worth: "[Ma mère] s'appliquait à m'élever le courage, et à m'exciter de me rendre tel que je pusse réparer par moi-même des vides aussi difficiles à surmonter. . . . Cette lecture de l'histoire et surtout des Mémoires particuliers de la nôtre . . . me firent naître l'envie d'écrire aussi ceux de ce que je verrais, dans le désir et dans l'espérance d'être de quelque chose, et de savoir le mieux que je pourrais les affaires de mon temps" (1:20) [(My mother)

took pains to raise my spirit and to inspire me to do something with myself that would allow me personally to compensate for the chasms that were so difficult to overcome. . . . The reading of history and especially of memoirs of our (French) history . . . engendered a desire to write memoirs about that which I would see, in the hope and wish to become something, and to understand as best I could the events of my era]. Louis's desire to "become something" by writing memoirs reveals Claude's inability to secure his son's political future. Claude's name, "Saint-Simon," is an insufficient guarantor of social status, and must therefore be supplemented, in this case by the production of a text. In this sense, the *Mémoires de Saint-Simon* differ from other aristocratic memoirs of the same period, such as those of the Cardinal de Retz, in which the writer's identity is established by a steadfast familial legacy or an unambiguous omen. At the beginning of Retz's *Memoirs,* the author confidently tells his reader:

> Je sors d'une maison illustre en France et ancienne en Italie. Le jour de ma naissance, on prit un esturgeon monstrueux dans une petite rivière qui passe sur la terre de Montmirail, en Brie, où ma mère accoucha de moi. Comme je ne m'estime pas assez pour me croire un homme à augure, je ne rapporterais pas cette circonstance, si les libelles qui ont depuis été faits contre moi . . . ne me donnaient lieu de craindre qu'il n'y eût de l'affectation à l'omettre. (1–2)
>
> [I descend from a family illustrious in France and ancient in Italy. On the day of my birth, a monstrous sturgeon was caught in a small river that passes through the estate of Montmirail in Brie, where my mother gave birth to me. Since I do not prize myself enough to believe that I am marked by divine omen, I would not recount this episode, except that the slurs that have since been made against me . . . led me to fear that I would be seen as affected if I omitted it.]

Unlike Retz, Saint-Simon starts life with great doubt about his future and no "monstrous sturgeon" as a portent of success. Thus, for him, life-writing serves as much to create an identity as to transmit a familial legacy. The writer seeks not just to pay homage to his father's patronymic but to overcome the chasms of that name and imbue it with a meaning that it lacks.

We might understand these family dynamics in terms of the homonyms present in the name itself. Within "*Saint*-Simon," there is the presence of the "sein," the maternal breast that nourishes Louis de Rouvroy and guides him toward becoming the future writer. But there is also the presence of "seing" [signature], attached permanently, as it were, to a condition of uncertainty over its possession: "si mon" [if my]. "The signature, if it be mine": such is the situation of Louis de Rouvroy,

whose inheritance of "Saint-Simon" comes with an insecurity over the power of the father's name and who needs to write as a means of surmounting that insecurity. The act of writing constitutes the mother's signature, the "sein" that lies behind the verbal glorification of paternal, ducal privilege.

One sees a similar feminine signature in the *Mémoires*' approach to history, with its emphasis on portraiture as a means of understanding the actions of historical figures. In his prefatory *avant-propos* to the *Mémoires,* Saint-Simon explains that the author of "histoire particulière" [specific history], interested in documenting the events of his own era, must take care to reveal the intimate details of each person's character and the relationships that bind that person to other individuals: "C'est ce qui rend nécessaire de découvrir les intérêts, les vices, les vertus, les passions, les haines, les amitiés, et tous les autres ressorts tant principaux qu'incidents des intrigues, des cabales et des actions publiques et particulières qui ont part aux événements qu'on écrit" (1:6) [This is what makes it necessary to uncover the interests, the vices, the virtues, the passions, the hatreds, the friendships, and all the other forces, both major and incidental, that guide the intrigues, the cabals and the public and private actions that contribute to the events that the historian describes]. In other words, the historian must chronicle not just the official acts of the state, but also the more private passions that lie behind such acts. Faith Beasley has demonstrated that this style of historical writing was practiced by La Grande Mademoiselle and Madame de Lafayette, among other women authors, as a way of reorienting historical depiction away from the male domain of military battles and toward the more female court life and *galanterie.* Beasley sees the portraiture of "l'histoire particulière" as a feminist project, and one could argue that the same applies to Saint-Simon's enterprise, which he also refers to as an "histoire particulière." Indeed, Beasley's description of Lafayette, in which the novelist "privileges the internal dynamics of court and creates her historical atmosphere by highlighting personalities," could just as easily refer to Saint-Simon.[4] Writing in the 1740s, Saint-Simon could thus be said to continue a tradition established by seventeenth-century women writers, with signatures like Montpensier, Motteville, Scudéry, and Lafayette. Like his own biological mother, who encouraged him to write, these women authors could be called the linguistic and stylistic mothers to Saint-Simon's text.

Madame de Montespan further demonstrates the maternal underpinnings of Saint-Simon's writing. Montespan is related to Saint-Simon via his mother, and this maternal connection is underscored by

Montespan's indirect role in inspiring Louis de Rouvroy to write memoirs.[5] In the 1670s, when Montespan was at the height of her influence at court, and Louis was born to the elderly Claude and the youthful Charlotte, Montespan invited Charlotte to serve as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Marie-Thérèse. Claude, however, refused to let his wife serve. As the story is recounted in the *Mémoires,* Claude responded peremptorily to the invitation, writing a note to Montespan that "À son âge il n'avait pas pris une femme pour la cour, mais pour lui" (1:83) [at his age he had not taken a wife for the court, but for himself]. Saint-Simon closes the anecdote with Charlotte's discovery of her husband's act: "Ma mère, de retour, apprit la chose par mon père. Elle y eut grand regret, mais il n'y parut jamais" (1:83) [My mother, on coming home, learned of the news from my father. She regretted it strongly, but he never appeared at court].

The episode of the aborted invitation to join Montespan's circle, narrated by Saint-Simon with obvious sympathy for his mother, evokes the profound sense of alienation and loneliness that would lead Louis de Rouvroy to become a writer. Undoubtedly, had Charlotte accepted Montespan's offer, the young Louis would have eventually benefited from his mother's proximity to the royal mistress, perhaps even receiving an important military or administrative function. Instead, Claude's obstinate separation from Madame de Montespan ultimately damages his son's chances for worldly success and makes him turn toward writing as a compensatory activity.

Moreover, Claude's explicit antithesis—"a wife for himself" as opposed to "a wife for the court"—suggests an implicit threat posed by Madame de Montespan. Montespan represents the pleasures of court life, which could be seen as competing with the responsibilities of marriage. Charlotte's attachment to Montespan therefore risks detaching her from her husband, through either marital infidelity or simply neglect. As a result, Montespan poses the menace of an onomastic desertion—the possibility that Charlotte, the Duchesse de Saint-Simon, will no longer be defined uniquely by the name of the husband she has wedded but will instead become inserted within the "intrigues, the cabals and the public and private actions" that define court activity and court history. The dual definition of the word "femme" [woman/wife] underscores Claude's anxiety, and its sociolinguistic consequences, when his reply is read in the original. "Il n'avait pas pris une femme pour la cour, mais pour lui": this could be understood as saying that "he didn't take a woman to be part of the court (and hence part of its

network of relationships) but to be his wife (and hence subjugated to his name)."

Montespan therefore represents an attraction to Saint-Simon's mother but a menace to his father. This familial conflict explains Saint-Simon's ambivalent treatment of Montespan in the various portraits of her that are scattered throughout the *Mémoires.* On the one hand, Montespan is depicted as the procreator of the infernal "bâtards" (her illegitimate children by Louis XIV), whose names and power subvert Saint-Simon's ducal privileges. In this role, Montespan underscores Claude de Rouvroy's political isolation. On the other hand, Montespan is the disseminator of the *esprit Mortemart,* whose subtlety and charm Saint-Simon overtly admires and more tacitly wishes to imitate. In this capacity, Montespan reminds us of Charlotte's encouragement to Saint-Simon to "do something with [him]self" by writing memoirs.

The portrait of Montespan inserted into the chronicle of 1707, at the time of her death, illustrates Saint-Simon's ambivalent attitude. At the center of this portrait is a discussion of Montespan's repentance after her fall from favor in 1691. "A la fin, Dieu la toucha" (2:969) [In the end, God touched her], Saint-Simon proudly announces, going on to detail Montespan's penitence for her sins of adultery. The tone here is somber and pious, in keeping with Montespan's newfound devotion. Taking on a rigid *directeur de conscience* reputed to be Jansenist, Montespan renounces court life—which revokes Claude de Rouvroy's separation from court. Furthermore, Montespan asks forgiveness from her estranged husband, donates her time and resources to the poor, prays continually, and inflicts pain on herself with iron-studded jewelry: "Elle portait sans cesse des bracelets, des jarretières et une ceinture à pointes de fer, qui lui faisaient souvent des plaies, et sa langue, autrefois si à craindre, avait aussi sa pénitence" (2:971) [She continually wore bracelets, garters, and an iron-studded belt, which often left her with wounds, and her tongue, which in the past provoked so much fear, also had its penitence]. The list of torture devices ends with mention of her tongue, that is, her speech. With this tableau of renunciation, where Montespan is silenced and contemplating eternity, the portrait should reasonably end.

Yet Saint-Simon continues, and in so doing he depicts Montespan as very different from the contemplative ascetic. For despite her self-imposed discipline, Montespan retains the grandeur that marked her time at Versailles: "Parmi tout cela, elle ne put jamais se défaire de l'extérieur de reine qu'elle avait usurpé dans sa faveur, et qui la suivit

dans sa retraite. . . . Elle parlait à chacun comme une reine qui tient sa cour, et qui honore en adressant la parole. . . . Elle en fut toujours de la meilleure, avec des grâces qui faisaient passer ses hauteurs, et qui leur étaient adaptées" (2:971–72) [With all this, she could never rid herself of the appearance of a queen that she had usurped during her time of favor, and that followed her into her retirement. . . . She spoke to everyone like a queen holding court, and who bestows honor by speaking to you. . . . She was always the best of company, with charms that forgave her haughtiness, and accommodated it]. Montespan's penitence therefore appears mitigated, for she still has the "haughtiness" of a queen. Montespan remains a "usurper," a woman who has taken the name of queen away from its rightful owner, Marie-Thérèse, and appropriated it by virtue of her own regal behavior. Here, then, is precisely the onomastic danger Claude de Rouvroy fears, the weakening of established names and titles that define aristocratic power. Yet Saint-Simon seems anything but condemnatory, admiring Montespan's "company" and her "charms."

Saint-Simon then launches into a tribute to Montespan's wit, sabotaging the previous glorification of her repentance:

> Il n'était pas possible d'avoir plus d'esprit, de fine politesse, des expressions singulières, une éloquence, une justesse naturelle qui lui formait comme un langage particulier, mais qui était délicieux, et qu'elle communiquait si bien par l'habitude, que ses nièces et les personnes assidues auprès d'elle, ses femmes, celles que, sans l'avoir été, elle avait élevées chez elle, le prenaient toutes, et qu'on le sent et on le reconnaît encore aujourd'hui dans le peu de personnes qui en restent: c'était le langage naturel de la famille, de son frère et ses sœurs. (2:972)
>
> [It was impossible to have more wit [*esprit*], more subtle manners, unique expressions, an eloquence, a natural precision that suited her as if it were a personal language, but that was delicious, and that she transmitted so well by habit, that her nieces and the attentive people surrounding her, her maids, those women whom, although not family members, she had raised in her company, all took it on, and that one feels and recognizes still today in the few people who remain: it was the natural language of her family, her brother and her sisters.]

One cannot help but be struck by the radical change of tone, coming after the prior discussion of Montespan's punishment. The abrupt syntactic shifts and spasmodic rhythm of the dependent clauses suggest that Saint-Simon's enthusiasm, if not his desire, is roused when describing Montespan's language. Montespan is now unshackled from her torture devices, and the theme of dispersion replaces the earlier one

of constraint: Montespan's language diffuses out to all the people who surround her, as if by osmosis. Indeed, the contrast of the two passages and the order in which they appear within the portrait (where suffering precedes glory) arguably evoke a Christlike analogy: the stigmata of the penitent Montespan disappear and give way to resurrection, in which her voice continues to live and is perpetuated by the apostles who surround her. This notion of an afterlife is underscored by Saint-Simon's sudden use of the present tense: "that one feels and recognizes still today in the few people who remain." Montespan's language therefore overcomes the isolation of her self-inflicted punishment, just as Saint-Simon's own writing overcomes the "chasm" of his paternal isolation from courtly society.

That Montespan's *esprit* is transmitted by "habit" rather than bloodline suggests a subversion of traditional means of inheritance. Rather than descending through familial lines demarcated by patronymics—as Saint-Simon's ducal title descends from father to firstborn son—the *esprit* of Montespan passes to future generations through continued exposure to its form. One cannot "inherit" the *esprit Mortemart;* one must learn it, in the same way that Louis de Rouvroy learns to "become something" by his exposure to history and memoirs.[6] Indeed, in the same way Saint-Simon's education is driven by his mother, so the Montespan wit appears to be propelled by women. Most of the people who acquire the trait, according to Saint-Simon's description, are women: Montespan's nieces and maids and "those women whom, although not family members, she had raised in her company." This latter phrase gives to Montespan a veritable maternal role vis-à-vis her ladies-in-waiting, but one that underscores its novelty compared to other mothers. Montespan has "raised" her ladies, in the sense of teaching them a certain verbal style, but nonetheless they are not family members; she did not give birth to them. Montespan is a mother, but one who transmits wit rather than a patronymic.

A subsequent portrait, inserted in the chronicle of 1715, evokes an even greater feminist role for Montespan and her language. Here, her portrait is interwoven within the larger, more detailed description of Louis XIV that marks the king's death: she is, as it were, subordinated to the man with whom she was associated. But, in a subtle gesture of revolt against this male figure, Montespan pushes aside the king, through her particularly adept use of language:

La cour de Mme de Montespan devint le centre de la cour, des plaisirs, de la fortune, de l'espérance et de la terreur des ministres et des généraux d'armée, et

l'humiliation de toute la France. Ce fut aussi le centre de l'esprit, et d'un tour si particulier, si délicat, si fin, mais toujours si naturel et si agréable, qu'il se faisait distinguer à son caractère unique. C'était celui de ces trois sœurs, qui toutes trois avaient infiniment, et avaient l'art d'en donner aux autres. On sent encore avec plaisir ce tour charmant et simple dans ce qui reste de personnes qu'elles ont élevées chez elles et qu'elles s'étaient attachées; entre mille autres on les distinguerait dans les conversations les plus communes. (5:537)

[The court of Madame de Montespan became the center of court, of pleasures, of fate, of the hope and terror of ministers and army generals, and the humiliation of all of France. It was also the center of wit [*esprit*], and of a turn of phrase [*un tour*] so distinctive, so delicate, so subtle, and yet so natural and so pleasant, that it distinguished itself by its unique character. It was that of the three [Mortemart] sisters, all of whom had it in infinite measure, and had the art of giving it to others. This charming turn of phrase is still felt, with pleasure, in the few people that they raised in their company and to whom they had attached themselves; among thousands of others they would distinguish themselves in the most banal conversations.]

Madame de Montespan, rather than Louis XIV, stands at "the center of court"—a reversal of sexual roles that probably explains Saint-Simon's complaint that the situation constituted "the humiliation of all of France." Whatever dudgeon Saint-Simon feels, it is quickly swallowed up by the hyperbolic praise of Montespan's *esprit,* where the repetition of the intensifying "so" ("so exceptional, so delicate, etc.") serves to underscore the immeasurability of her wit. Once again, Montespan's language seems to overcome the barriers of time and space—not simply because this description appears in the text at a moment eight years after her death, but also because Saint-Simon stresses the immediate presence of her wit ("[It] is still felt . . ."). Indeed, the use of the conditional in the final clause extends the life of Montespan's *esprit* into an unlimited future: her turns of phrase would be recognizable in perpetuity.

By contrast, the children of Montespan and Louis XIV, whom one might traditionally view as her legacy to the future, figure as a death-like curse. Saint-Simon refers to them as the "funestes suites" (1:10) [fatal succession] and, later, as "fatal" excesses of power (5:536). What troubles Saint-Simon is less the out-of-wedlock births than the creation of titles and privileges for these illegitimate offspring. The bastards form a caste of "néant" [nothingness] that has metamorphosed into a group rivaling the most ancient aristocratic families. The bastards have benefited from noxious language—"des brevets, des déclarations, des

édits enregistrés" (5:591) [titles, declarations, and recorded edicts]—that raises them above Saint-Simon, further degrading the position he should command.

Madame de Montespan therefore represents both life and death for Saint-Simon, according to two different versions of motherhood. As a biological mother, she threatens his political authority, since her children are surpassing the status of the established dukes. But as a spiritual mother, transmitting an eternal wit outside of traditional family lineage, Montespan provides a model of elegant conversation that helps Saint-Simon's project of "becoming something" by writing memoirs. Politically, Montespan accentuates the insecurity of Saint-Simon's ducal patronymic; poetically, however, she strengthens his text by offering him the "signature" of the *esprit Mortemart.* We might consider the style of the *esprit* as a "seing" [signature], that is, a particular way with words that marks a text. It is also a "sein" [breast], in that it nourishes future generations of writers and speakers. Saint-Simon, whose very name bears the phonetic trace of both of these ideas, could be said to adopt this feminine signature in his own text. But in order to do so, he must die.

Death of the Author: The *Esprit Mortemart*, Originality, and Laughter

Saint-Simon probably had no actual contact with Madame de Montespan, because by the time he arrived at court, in December 1691, she had just left Versailles to begin her forced exile. This loss of favor figures as a kind of death *avant la lettre.* Indeed, Saint-Simon reports Louis XIV as saying that, with Montespan's departure from Versailles, he considered her dead: "Depuis qu'il l'avait congédiée, il avait compté ne la revoir jamais; qu'ainsi elle était dès lors morte pour lui" (2:976) [since he had dismissed her from court, he had never planned to see her again; therefore she was, from that moment on, dead for him].

This social death is precipitated by Montespan's cruel wit, which she turns against everyone, including the king himself. In the 1715 portrait of Montespan, Saint-Simon notes that the royal mistress has a "dangerous" sense of humor, for she mocks the court with abandon:

Pour Mme de Montespan, elle était méchante, capricieuse, avait beaucoup d'humeur, et une hauteur en tout dans les nues dont personne n'était exempt, le Roi aussi peu que tout autre. Les courtisans évitaient de passer sous ses

fenêtres, surtout quand le Roi y était avec elle; ils disaient que c'était passer par les armes, et ce mot passa en proverbe à la cour. Il est vrai qu'elle n'épargnait personne, très souvent sans autre dessein que de divertir le Roi, et, comme elle avait infiniment d'esprit, de tour et de plaisanterie fine, rien n'était plus dangereux que les ridicules qu'elle donnait mieux que personne. (5:537–38)

[As for Madame de Montespan, she was mean, capricious, moody, with a haughtiness about everything that reached the sky and from which nobody was exempt, the King as little as anyone else. The members of court avoided walking beneath her windows, especially when the King was with her. They said that it was like "passer par les armes" [passing before the artillery] and the expression became a proverb at court. It's true that she spared no one, very often with no other goal than to entertain the King, and, since she had infinite wit, turns-of-phrase, and subtle jokes, nothing was more dangerous than the mockery that she doled out better than anyone.]

Montespan's wit functions as a kind of weapon, assailing the courtiers who are forced to walk beneath her windows as if running a gauntlet. Later in this portrait, Saint-Simon suggests that Montespan's sharp tongue drove Louis XIV into the arms of a new mistress, Madame de Maintenon:

Les humeurs de Mme de Montespan achevèrent l'ouvrage. Elle en avait beaucoup; elle s'était accoutumée à ne s'en pas contraindre. Le Roi en était l'objet plus souvent que personne; il en était encore amoureux, mais il en souffrait. . . . Parvenue à ce point, Mme de Maintenon fit à son tour ses plaintes au Roi de tout ce qu'elle avait à souffrir d'une maîtresse qui l'épargnait si peu lui-même, et, à force de se plaindre l'un à l'autre de Mme de Montespan, celle-ci en prit tout à fait la place. (5:545)

[Madame de Montespan's humors [*les humeurs*] were the final straw. She had many humors; she was accustomed to not holding them back. The King was more often the object of them than anyone else; he was still in love with her, but she caused him pain. . . . Madame de Maintenon, having risen to a point of intimacy with the King, complained to him about her own suffering under a lady [Montespan] who hardly spared the King himself, and, by virtue of complaining to each other about Madame de Montespan, Maintenon took her place.

Thus Montespan's exile is almost a kind of suicide, the result of her unceasing need to mock others, including the man to whom she owes her social prominence.

The *esprit Mortemart* is therefore intimately connected with death, as the name "*Morte*mart" would suggest. On the one hand, the *esprit*

contains such malicious violence that it kills its victims with nearly the force of a firing squad. On the other, the bearer of the *esprit* risks awakening the hatred or vengeance of others, thereby forcing her or him into the social death that is retirement from court.

In an interesting parallel, Saint-Simon suggests a similar tension at work within his own writing. In the *avant-propos* to the *Mémoires*, Saint-Simon asks whether a historian can justifiably write about his era, when such writing necessarily requires the exposure of hidden crimes and the belittling of otherwise eminent historical figures. Saint-Simon argues that the historian must only publish his work long after the historical actors have died: "l'histoire n'attaque et ne révèle que des gens morts, et morts depuis trop longtemps pour que personne prenne part en eux" (1:16) [History only attacks or exposes people who are dead, and dead for too long a time for anyone to take offense on their behalf]. Furthermore, the historian cannot publish his work during his own lifetime. Instead, "Son ouvrage doit mûrir sous la clef et les plus sûres serrures, passer ainsi à ses héritiers, qui feront sagement de laisser couler plus d'une génération ou deux, et de ne laisser paraître l'ouvrage que lorsque le temps l'aura mis à l'abri des ressentiments" (1:16–17) [His work must ripen under the safest lock and key and in this way pass on to his heirs, who will wisely let more than one or two generations slip by and not let the work appear until time has sheltered it from resentful feelings]. Thus the historian who chooses to write in the biting style of the *esprit Mortemart* must, like Madame de Montespan, leave the scene. Which is exactly what Saint-Simon did, purposely keeping his memoirs unpublished before his death.

But the *esprit Mortemart* also signals the "death of the author" in the sense that Roland Barthes uses this phrase, namely the inability of any one person to claim individual ownership or originary status over his or her words. The *esprit* is a collective enterprise, much like an early-seventeenth-century literary salon. The social, rather than individual, quality of the *esprit Mortemart* is shown by the fact that Saint-Simon frequently refers to it as belonging to a circle of people. We recall from an earlier portrait how Saint-Simon describes Montespan inhabiting "the center of court" as well as "the center of *esprit*" (5:537). A "center" suggests a constellation of elements, with each one bearing a relationship to the others. Moreover, Montespan is usually mentioned in conjunction with her two sisters, the Abbesse de Fontevrault and the Marquise de Thianges, as if description of the wit could not be limited to one person: "C'était celui de ces trois sœurs, qui toutes trois avaient infiniment, et

avaient l'art d'en donner aux autres" (5:537) [(The esprit) was that of the three sisters, all three of whom had it in infinite quantity, and had the skill to give it to others].

The seeming contradiction between the *esprit*'s "unique character"—a term that suggests restricted ownership—and its ability to be "give[n] to others," and hence not proprietary, is resolved when one considers it in terms of seventeenth-century salon society. As Joan DeJean has written:

> It was thus an accepted maxim of salon society that someone whose incomparability was a "reputation justly dispensed" could in turn assign a share in this status to others. It was also accepted that incomparability defined someone's essence, that it functioned as a *nom (d'auteur).* "Incomparable" and "inimitable" were thus the collective names of salon writers, signatures that identified a particular conception of originality by acknowledging that the individual voice was also a collaborative production. An "author" wrote with a single voice; salon writing was "inimitable" because it resulted from the combined forces of collaborators.

One could say the *esprit Mortemart* obeys the same laws that govern the salon: it is a "unique" signature that comes from the work of many people and can be shared with others. As such, it confounds the modern notion of authorship, providing instead what DeJean describes as "a concept of authorship not based on a signature with a unique, stable referent."[7]

To get a feel for Saint-Simon's own participation in the *esprit,* and thus his assumption of it as an authorial signature, one must look at passages describing Madame de Montespan's children. With this later generation of Mortemarts, many of whom Saint-Simon actually knew during his time at court, the writer will occasionally cite an insult that one of them flung at someone else. For example, in the chronicle for 1695, Saint-Simon recounts a dinner party at which the Duchesse de Chartres (fifth child of Montespan and Louis XIV, and wife of the future regent) calls her half-sister, the Princesse de Conti, a "sac à guenilles" (1:263) [sack of old rags], in reference to Conti's frivolous companions. The term so stuns Conti that she can say nothing in response; according to Saint-Simon, she does not benefit from "les mêmes armes" (1:263) [the same weapons] as the Mortemart family. In the chronicle for 1714, the Duc du Maine (oldest son of Montespan and Louis XIV) calls his cousin Madame la Princesse "une happelourde" (5:132) [a piece of costume jewelry], by way of suggesting that her intelligence and distinction are

negligible. In both cases, metaphor gives the insult a particular bite: each one takes the listener outside of the context of court society and places her or him in a more vulgar, pedestrian universe, where one would not expect to find either the Princesse de Conti or Madame la Princesse.

Such metaphors are legion in Saint-Simon's own portraits, which rely on precisely the same comic technique employed by the Duchesse de Chartres and the Duc du Maine.[8] As Dirk Van der Cruysse has shown in his study of the portraits, Saint-Simon's various comparisons and metaphors often refer to the third estate, thereby satirizing the appearance or the pretensions of court aristocracy.[9] The Marquis de Pompadour, for example, has a face like a "crieur d'enterrement" (3:151) [funeral crier], the Duchesse de Luxembourg has the air of "ces grosses vilaines harengères" (2:44) [those fat, ugly fish-mongers], while the Comtesse de Charlus has the look of a "crieuse de vieux chapeaux" (7: 377) [old hat peddler]. Alternately, Saint-Simon will introduce some plebeian object into the portrait, thereby suggesting the mediocrity of the subject to whom it is applied: Châteauneuf is judged as useless as "la cinquième roue d'un chariot" (1:724) [the fifth wheel of a hay-wagon]; the Marquis d'Usson is "fait comme un potiron" (2:631) [built like a pumpkin]; while the Maréchal d'Estrées is said to speak like "une bouteille d'encre qui, renversée, tantôt ne donnait rien, tantôt filait menu, tantôt laissait tomber de gros bourbillons" (2:296) [an overturned bottle of ink—sometimes nothing came out, sometimes it dribbled, and sometimes it oozed thick glops].

Saint-Simon's imitation of the Mortemart wit implicitly suggests that the *esprit* is not limited to the biological descendants of Madame de Montespan. Indeed, the portrait of the Marquise de Castries, Montespan's niece, demonstrates how the esprit passes from one speaker to another, suggesting a shared language between the Mortemarts and Saint-Simon:

> Mme de Castries était un quart de femme, une espèce de biscuit manqué, extrêmement petite mais bien prise, et aurait passé dans un médiocre anneau: ni derrière, ni gorge, ni menton; fort laide, l'air toujours en peine et étonné . . . Elle savait tout . . . avec ce tour unique qui n'est propre qu'aux Mortemart. . . . charmante quand elle voulait plaire, plaisante naturellement avec la dernière finesse, sans la vouloir être, et assenant aussi les ridicules à ne les jamais oublier . . . sans aucune galanterie, mais délicate sur l'esprit et amoureuse de l'esprit où elle le trouvait à son gré. (1:353)

[Madame de Castries was a fourth of a woman, a kind of fallen cake, extremely small, but very thin, and would have passed through a puny ring: no rump, no bust, no chin; very ugly, always looking pained and startled . . . She knew everything . . . with the unique turn of phrase [*tour*] that belonged only to the Mortemarts . . . charming when she wanted to please, naturally amusing with the greatest subtlety, without wishing to be, and also flinging out the gibes in an unforgettable way . . . with no love affairs, but refined in her wit and in love with wit when she found it to her liking.]

The depiction of Castries as a "fallen cake" is an early indication of Saint-Simon's ability to "fling out the gibes" in the same manner as his subject. However, it is the later metaphor—the "puny ring" through which Madame de Castries could pass—that better demonstrates the assimilation of the Mortemart wit by Saint-Simon. For the roundness of the "ring" captures the implicit roundness in the French word *tour,* referring to the Mortemart turn of phrase.[10] Saint-Simon also suggests that Madame de Castries appreciated others who showed her same verbal talent—she was "in love with wit when she found it to her liking." The ring, then, suggests an attempt by Saint-Simon to show himself worthy of such appreciation, and in this sense constitutes a true "engagement ring" with the Mortemart clan.

This imitation and assimilation of the *esprit Mortemart* illustrates Roland Barthes's thesis in "The Death of the Author." According to Barthes, writing is an activity that relies on idioms and cultural codes that have been established in advance, so that the writer borrows from the past and reproduces its language rather than originating a new one:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. (146)

If Saint-Simon "dies" as an originator of his malicious humor, he nonetheless "lives" as an author in DeJean's sense—one who participates in a collective, collaborative wit whose memory is transmitted through the *Mémoires* and that invites future readers to adapt it to different circumstances. Put another way, what dies is the power of a certain name—the name of the "Author-God," or the father—as a unique

source of meaning, in favor of a different name, whose power is precisely its multiplicity of voice and signification. The *esprit Mortemart* is an "esprit de mort" [spirit of death], in one sense, but also a spirit of eternal laughter, in another sense: a kind of "esprit [de se] mar[rer]" (a spirit of having fun, laughing).[11] Both senses are phonetically present in the name itself, joining "mort" and "mar."

How appropriate, then, that in its most textually elaborate manifestations, the *esprit Mortemart* laughs at the death of an authorial, paternal figure. Three examples—that is, three deaths—prove this point. In 1709, Madame de Montespan's nephew, the Duc de Mortemart, is dying. He is estranged from his father (Montespan's brother, the Maréchal de Vivonne) because Vivonne believes the Duc de Mortemart to be the fruit of an adulterous relationship by his wife. As the family stands around the quickly fading Mortemart, Vivonne makes a mordant (and morbid) observation: "Toute la famille était là, désolée. M. de Vivonne, après un long silence, se prit tout d'un coup à dire: 'Ce pauvre homme-là n'en reviendra pas; j'ai vu mourir tout comme cela son pauvre père'" (3:365–66) [The whole family was there, despondent. Monsieur de Vivonne, after a long silence, suddenly took it upon himself to say, "This poor man will never survive; I saw his father die in exactly the same way"]. Despite Saint-Simon's later comment that Vivonne's remark provoked a scandal (3:366), the writer clearly does everything he can to give as much humor as possible to the joke. The introductory depiction of the family, standing "despondent[ly]" by the bed, builds up tension in the atmosphere, so as to make the final release all the more comic. But what is funny is the fact that Vivonne admits to his own cuckoldry; his verbal outburst suddenly, strangely, makes us reassess who is the "father" of the Duc de Mortemart, since it is not Vivonne. Vivonne, aided by Saint-Simon, provokes laughter by conjuring the death of his own paternal status—his authorship of the Duc de Mortemart—while simultaneously noting the death of the "true" author of the Duc.

In another form of parricide, the Duc du Maine makes a joke at the expense of his dying father, Louis XIV, and Saint-Simon shows a certain complicity with this "bastard" jokester. In the 1715 chronicle of Louis XIV's final days, Saint-Simon remarks that the King's physician, Doctor Fagon, was so incapable of reversing the gangrene that was spreading up Louis XIV's leg that he was pushed aside in favor of a visiting doctor from Marseille, who offered the King a magic elixir. Fagon's submission to this charlatan provides comic fodder to the Duc du Maine (and Saint-Simon):

Fagon, accoutumé à régner sur la médecine avec despotisme, trouva une manière de paysan très grossier, qui le malmena fort brutalement. M. du Maine . . . raconta le soir chez lui parmi ses confidents, avec ce facétieux et cet art de fine plaisanterie qu'il possédait si bien, l'empire que ce malotru avait pris sur la médecine, l'étonnement, le scandale, l'humiliation de Fagon pour la première fois de sa vie, qui, à bout de son art et de ses espérances, s'était limaçonné en grommelant sur son bâton sans oser répliquer, de peur d'essuyer pis. (5:601)

[Fagon, who was accustomed to having despotic rule over the medical world, found himself face-to-face with a kind of vulgar peasant, who brutally mistreated him. Monsieur du Maine . . . that night, in his quarters, told his closest companions—with that facetiousness and that art of clever joking that he possessed so well—about the authority over medicine that this Marseille lout had seized and about the shock, scandal, and Fagon's humiliation for the first time in his life, he who, having reached the limit of his knowledge and his hopes, had crawled away like a snail on his cane, muttering something, without daring to reply for fear of suffering worse injury.]

As with the Maréchal de Vivonne, Saint-Simon judges Maine's levity indecent. Yet the fact that Saint-Simon reports Maine's insulting remark in indirect discourse shows his cooperation with the joke: he assumes a greater share of the insult's creation than if he had simply quoted Maine's words directly. Furthermore, Maine's version of the Fagon story corresponds to Saint-Simon's own impish account (narrated a few pages earlier), confirming that Maine's humor, no matter how inappropriate, is shared by the writer. Thus, Saint-Simon's sarcastic coda to the story ricochets back to himself: "Ce bon et tendre fils leur fit de cette aventure le conte si plaisamment, que les voilà tous aux grands éclats de rire, et lui aussi, qui durèrent fort longtemps" (5:601) [This good and tender son (i.e., Maine) made such a funny story of this incident, that suddenly everyone laughed heartily, and he as well, and it lasted a very long time]. Maine is obviously, in the writer's eyes, less than a "good and tender son," but the recording of the malicious joke by Saint-Simon shows that he, too, has a part in this filial infidelity and that he guarantees it to "last a very long time."

But it is the death of the Dauphin (also known as Monseigneur) that best demonstrates the Mortemart capacity for whistling through the graveyard and Saint-Simon's eagerness to join in on the tune. Neither Saint-Simon nor the Duchesse d'Orléans (daughter of Montespan and Louis XIV) stands to gain anything from Monseigneur should he inherit the throne. Hence when he falls sick to smallpox, Saint-Simon and the

Duchesse both take a cruel joy in the possibility that he will expire. In the middle of his illness, Monseigneur seems to make a recovery, prompting Saint-Simon and the Duchesse to show an incongruous sorrow:

> [La duchesse d'Orléans] et moi, nous lamentâmes ensemble de voir Monseigneur échapper, à son âge et à sa graisse, d'un mal si dangereux. Elle réfléchissait tristement, mais avec ce sel et ces tons à la Mortemart, qu[e] . . . il ne restait plus la moindre pauvre petite espérance aux apoplexies, que celle des indigestions était ruinée sans ressources depuis la peur que Monseigneur en avait prise, et l'empire qu'il avait donné sur sa santé aux médecins; et nous conclûmes plus que langoureusement qu'il fallait désormais compter que ce prince vivrait et régnerait longtemps. . . . En un mot, nous nous lâchâmes, non sans quelque scrupule qui interrompait de fois à autre cette rare conversation, mais qu'avec un tour languissamment plaisant elle ramenait toujours à son point. (4:62–63)
>
> [The Duchesse d'Orléans and I both lamented seeing Monseigneur dodge, at his age and with his blubber, such a dangerous illness. She remarked with sadness, but with the piquancy and tone of the Mortemarts [*ce sel et ces tons à la Mortemart*] that . . . there no longer remained the slightest hope for a stroke, that indigestion was out of the running since Monseigneur had begun to fear it and had given the doctors authority over his health; and we concluded more than languorously that from now on we had to expect that the prince would live and would reign for a long time. . . . In a word, we let loose [*nous nous lâchâmes*], not without some qualms that occasionally interrupted this unusual conversation, but she, with a turn of phrase that was languidly funny, always brought us back to the point where we had left off.]

In this passage that continually plays on the contrast between death and emotional gaiety, and between survival and despondency, Saint-Simon appears to delegate responsibility for the macabre jokes to the Duchesse d'Orléans, with her "piquancy and tone of the Mortemarts." After all, she is the one who nostalgically lists the maladies previously suffered by Monseigneur, which now seem unlikely to finish him off. Yet the use of indirect discourse and the repetition of the first-person plural ("*we* concluded . . . *we* had to expect . . . *we* let loose . . .") indicate that Saint-Simon is no mere spectator to the Duchesse's verbal improvisation. Indeed, the incongruous link in the first sentence between the verb ("lament") and its object ("seeing [him] dodge such a dangerous illness"), foreshadows a similar construction made by the Duchesse, where she links "hope" with "a stroke."[12] Saint-Simon, as narrator, creates the same sort of joke as the Duchesse, showing that he, too, has her "turn-of-phrase."

On a metaphoric level, the death of Monseigneur symbolizes the way Saint-Simon's comic signature is a collective one, tied to a certain kind of authorial death. The passing of "Monseigneur" is also, in a sense, the demolition of *mon seigneur*—"my lord" or "my god" who, like Barthes's Author-God, stands as the ultimate originator. Instead, what takes its place is a shared sense of humor that passes, as it were, through a number of different individual voices.

Life writing / writing death: long live the *esprit Mortemart*.

NOTES

1. All translations of Saint-Simon are my own.

2. Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, 2:6.

3. Guy Rooryck has gone so far as to describe the *Mémoires* as a work that is guided by the "parole du père" (*Les "Mémoires" du Duc de Saint-Simon*, 69).

4. Beasley, "Rescripting Historical Discourse," 520–26, 528; Saint-Simon, *Mémoires* 1:6.

5. Saint-Simon's maternal grandmother, Eléonore de Volvire, is a first cousin of Madame de Montespan, making Saint-Simon her first cousin twice removed.

6. Van Elden notes how a later descendant of the Mortemart clan, Louis II de Rochecouart, Duc de Mortemart, completely lacks the sensibility of Madame de Montespan. Biology, therefore, is not destiny when it comes to the *esprit Mortemart*. See *Esprits fins et esprits géometriques*, 70.

7. DeJean, *Tender Geographies*, 125–26, 95.

8. Van Elden notes that this similar sense of humor appears to mitigate the distaste Saint-Simon otherwise has for the Duc du Maine: "Bien qu'il ait toutes les raisons pour haïr le duc du Maine, Saint-Simon ne peut pas s'empêcher de goûter cet humour méchant dont on sait qu'il n'en était lui-même pas dépourvu. Le plaisir malin avec lequel il cite les 'mots plaisants' de son ennemi le prouve clairement" (57) [Although he has every reason to hate the Duc du Maine, Saint-Simon cannot help but appreciate Maine's spiteful sense of humor, which, as we've seen, Saint-Simon himself did not lack. The mischievous pleasure with which he quotes the "amusing words" of his enemy clearly proves this point].

9. Van der Cruysse, *Le portrait dans les "Mémoires,"* 220.

10. Alain Rey notes that the noun *tour* derives from the verb *tourner* meaning "to move (something) in a circular movement" ["déplacer (qqch.) dans un mouvement circulaire"] and that in the mid-seventeenth century it acquires the sense of "une façon originale de présenter sa pensée . . . et pour la manière dont on use du langage" [an original way of presenting one's thoughts . . . or the way in which one uses language]. See Rey, *Le Dictionnaire historique*, 3:3442. Of course, the Mortemart *tour* is one whose "originality" is collaborative, constantly turning back, in a circular motion, from listener to speaker.

11. The verb "se marrer" is posterior to Saint-Simon, appearing in French at the end of the nineteenth century. However, its earliest meaning suggests an

affinity with the macabre *esprit Mortemart;* as Alain Rey notes, *se marrer* was first used to mean "rire de qqch. qui n'appelle pas le rire en général" [laughing at something that would not generally call for laughter]. The Mortemart wit does precisely this, mocking death—*se marrer de la mort.* See Rey, 2:2148.

12. Van Elden notes: "Tout comme la plupart des autres plaisanteries des Mortemart, celle-ci semble basée sur un contraste choquant: 'espérance'/ 'apoplexies'" (61) [Exactly like the other occurrences of the Montemarts' humor, this one appears to be based on a shocking contrast: "hope"/"stroke"].

Moribondages

Reading Proust and La Bruyère with(out) Elaine

RICHARD E. GOODKIN

Moribondage: A Matter of Life and Death

Like Marcel Proust, one of her favorite writers, Elaine Marks had a lively preoccupation with death.[1] Proust, it is well known, spent a great deal of time in his later years announcing his imminent demise, either out of sincere belief or as an excuse to shun social obligations in favor of the solitary hours he spent writing *In Search of Lost Time*.[2] This dying-man-who-cried-wolf phenomenon inspired his friend Laure de Chevigné, one of the probable models for the Duchesse de Guermantes, to invent the term *moribondage:* "One of Proust's excuses [for not having sent *The Guermantes Way* to Madame de Chevigné as soon as it appeared] was that he had been 'moribund.' *Moribondage* was a word that Madame de Chevigné had coined, on the analogy of *vagabondage.* She used to reproach him with thinking too much about his health, studying his symptoms, coddling himself, not taking enough exercise; and this was one strand in the 'infernal misunderstanding' [between them]."[3] Madame de Chevigné's dismissal of *moribondage* is in a long aristocratic tradition of disdain for excessive self-involvement—as opposed to concern for the good standing of one's name and lineage—but what to her looked like simple self-indulgence was something far more complex.

My premise is that Proust's *moribondage,* like Elaine Marks's fascination with questions of mortality, was less an attitude toward death than

an attitude toward life colored by an abiding awareness of death. In these pages, I will attempt to pay homage to my very dear and sorely missed friend and colleague by studying Proust in conjunction with another author she herself associated with him in her notes to a course she gave several decades ago, as well as two questions central to her work. The other writer is the seventeenth-century moralist La Bruyère, author of *Characters,* a remarkable compendium of character portraits and observations of human psychology that influenced many subsequent novelists. In Elaine's notes on La Bruyère's *Characters* for a survey of French literature that she taught at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, probably in the 1980s, she wrote in huge letters, "Read *Characters* for Proust," and as we shall see, the link between the two writers has been pointed out by a number of critics, including Elaine's beloved friend and mentor Germaine Brée.[4] The critical questions I will examine in bringing together these admittedly very different writers are, on the one hand, the representation of human character and human existence implicit in the notion of life writing, and, on the other, writing about death, including, in Proust's case, the death of God.

A first indication of how these two quite discrete domains might be fruitfully considered in tandem comes from discussion questions Elaine noted for the Proust unit of a course she taught on the contemporary French novel at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst in the 1960s: "What is the meaning of a human life that is inserted between two voids? A universe without God." "What is the value of human experience?" On another page of her notebook, under the rubric "characters," she observes "the ambiguity and the mystery of the characters—Nothing explains them in a satisfying way."[5] Elaine's query about the meaning of a human life "inserted between two voids" allows me to approach the intertext between Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and La Bruyère's *Characters* with the following questions. How might the "mysteries" of human character be related to the central mystery of human existence, the lifelong preoccupation with our mortality that distinguishes us from other animals? And what might *moribondage* have to teach us about mourning the loss of a loved one?

Proust and La Bruyère: Establishing the Intertext

In an early essay, Germaine Brée points out that among the first character portraits Proust wrote as a young man, all but a few "seem very close to La Bruyère: the portrait, 'Oranthe,' is a true pastiche of La

Bruyère."[6] More recently Roger Francillon, whose insightful analysis of the relation between Proust and La Bruyère elaborates on the connection suggested by Brée, uses the fact that La Bruyère alone of the moralists appears on a list of the young Proust's admired authors to infer "a preference of the young Marcel for the author of the *Characters* not only on a stylistic level but also in relation to the moralist that Proust was his whole life long."[7] Francillon stresses that in the social worlds of both writers, individual characters are seen as fundamentally constrained by the conflict between their complex psychological makeup and the oversimplified roles society attributes to them:

> The central theme of Proust's "Fragments de comédie italienne" is the clash of individual personalities with the stereotyped images that society fashions for them and that no one can overcome. Thus the social world is implicitly compared to a theater in which the roles are attributed ahead of time. While "comédie italienne" suggests an association with commedia dell'arte, where the actors can improvise on the preestablished boundaries of a given scene, the theater of society has no room for that kind of freedom. On the contrary, everything in the social world is limited by passions or social obligations. We are not far from the world of La Bruyère's *Characters*.[8]

In her analysis Germaine Brée also highlights the importance of general psychological laws for both of these writers:

> These "characters" or "masks" of the young Proust . . . indicate a strong imitation of La Bruyère in the style, and an already prominent taste for moralizing that is apparent in the tendency to formulate psychological generalizations stated in the present tense. . . . The use of the maxim is one of the defining features of *In Search of Lost Time.* Already in "Fin de la Jalousie," Proust characterizes as a "law" one of those generalizations—psychological moral truths or fundamental social truths—so important in the formation and the evolution of the characters of *In Search of Lost Time,* which have not yet been thoroughly studied: "The psychological *law* of his inconstancy is as impossible to break as the physical laws of weight or death."[9]

What Brée associates with La Bruyère's early influence on Proust is the sense of social and psychological determinism that is one of the most pervasive themes in the moralist's observations about human character and that will also permeate *In Search of Lost Time.* La Bruyère identifies a series of social types, and once we have grasped their essence they seem largely predictable, not only because of his attempt to systematize character and concomitant tendency to generalize but also because of his characters' inability to change essentially, conditioned by the social network in which the parameters of their roles have been

clearly delineated. La Bruyère, Proustian *avant la lettre,* frequently sounds the theme of human infidelity and capriciousness—as self-serving narcissists, most people seem to adopt whatever beliefs are profitable to them at a given moment, and even one's more admirable impulses are "intermittent," to borrow a term from Proust. But La Bruyère also repeatedly illustrates the idea that hypocritical social climbers, for example, will never be anything but hypocritical social climbers and that they will always remain different from more virtuous, contemplative types.

As for Proust's characters, in spite of their instability, one might argue that they don't fundamentally change either, or, if they do, our perception of them changes far more as surprising features of their characters are brought to light. While La Bruyère's focus is on the characters whose portraits he sketches, Proust's is divided between the complexity of characters and the bewilderment of those—who are, after all, also characters—observing them. Getting to know others is presented as an endless process, an activity without closure. External appearances or social positions may evolve quite radically—Odette de Crécy's metamorphosis into Madame Swann and then Madame de Forcheville is perhaps the finest example of this—but underneath it all characters remain largely themselves, although what exactly that is is rarely, if ever, clear. Proust's narrator, Marcel, spends so much of the novel discovering new and previously unsuspected sides of many characters, the theme of the unknowability of others so widespread, that their "mysteriousness," to borrow Elaine's term, becomes almost banal.

Unlike Balzac, for example, Proust rarely if ever gives the reader the idea that uncovering a hidden facet of a character completes the portrait. The unmasking of Jacques Collin, alias Vautrin, in Balzac's *Old Goriot* is presented as the revelation of an essence and as such is quite distinct from the way Proust unmasks his own characters:

> The police chief walked straight up to Collin, and the first thing he did was to give his head so violent a slap that he knocked off his wig and restored his face to its full horror. Collin's head and face, framed by short, brick-red hair that gave them a frightful character mixed with shrewdness, in harmony with the upper part of the body, were comprehensibly illuminated, as if the fires of hell had lit them up. Everyone understood Vautrin, his past, his present, his future, his implacable doctrines, the religion he had made of his own pleasure, the kingdom built on the cynicism of his thoughts and his acts, the power of an organization prepared for anything.[10]

All that remains before Vautrin/Collin can exit the scene and the novel is for him to bow coquettishly to Eugène de Rastignac, so as to reinforce the previous implication that he is in love with the young man, before being taken away by the police: at least as far as this installment of *La Comédie Humaine* goes, he has nothing left to reveal to us.

By contrast, Proust systematically presents his revelations as partial and momentary: the discovery of Odette's or Albertine's relations with women, far from being the end of their characterization, will yield endless further revelations, each of which shows readers that any earlier conclusions they might have drawn were premature and incomplete. Balzac, in "dewigging" Vautrin, creates a veritable *coup de théâtre;* Proust's outing of the Baron de Charlus or Robert de Saint-Loup is merely the *scandale du jour* in a novel in which we come to expect the unexpected.

Indeed, the connection between psychological laws and death that Proust makes in the passage quoted by Germaine Brée suggests that the limitations of character and character representation are analogous to the limitations imposed by death. Given that the notion of a final transcendence or establishment of meaning at death is lacking in Proust's work, death is simply the last event—but as inconclusive as the others—in the mysterious story of a human life. If the need to characterize—to search for psychological systems and explanations of others—is at the heart of both Proust's and La Bruyère's observations, perhaps the unstated premise of both writers is that we are pushed to characterize others in some general, predictable way that might lend permanence to the perishable nature of all human existence, but that viewing characterization as a form of closure is no less artificial than the desire for a transcendence of mortality that underlies society's assignation of clear roles to individuals. Here is how La Bruyère expresses the impact that an awareness of mortality has upon one's conception of human character:

> How could someone even with the rarest talents and the most outstanding merit not be convinced of his uselessness, when he considers that in dying he leaves behind a world that takes no notice of his loss, a world where so many people can be found to replace him? ("Du mérite personnel" 1, 48)[11]
>
> In a hundred years the world [*le monde*] will survive intact: it will be the same theater and the same decorations, it will no longer be the same actors. All those who rejoice in a favor they have received or are saddened or dejected by one they are refused, all of them will have disappeared from the stage. Others are

already advancing toward the stage, people who are going to play the same roles in a similar play; in turn they too will disappear; and those who do not yet exist will one day no longer exist: new actors will have taken their places. How can we use a character from a play as the basis for anything! ("De la cour" 99, 208)

La Bruyère raises a heartfelt protest against the kind of substitutability and loss of individuality that exclusive faith in generalization might lead to. He recognizes that society, as a guarantor of continuity between generations, treats individuals in terms of functions, but he also understands that while individuals who play particular roles can be replaced when they die, the summation of their various social functions—or, for that matter, of all the categories into which society might pigeonhole them—is not equal to their character. In other words, while "a character from a play" might seem insubstantial from the point of view of the theater of society, which knows that understudies are waiting in the wings to take up a given role at any time, from the point of view of the actor this revolving-door view of character does not do justice to the individuality brought to each role by each player. While no one would claim that the various people lumped together in a single category, however detailed—left-handed blond Olympic sprinters, tall nearsighted Italian Freemasons, dyslexic overweight Catholic diplomats—are indistinguishable, La Bruyère here suggests that an extreme belief in categorization might lead one to overlook their differences, to reduce the individuals involved to a series of roles or functions. Thus in spite of his emphasis on social types and his reliance on generalization as a necessary element in characterization, La Bruyère also periodically reminds readers of the existence of a private domain in which individuals feel or wish to feel themselves unique and irreplaceable, unknowable in a positive sense.

Proust, developing his characters in an era when the importance placed on the private domain and on the subjectivity of the self has eclipsed the primacy of social norms, spends the greatest part of his novels revealing the particularities of individual characters. Society's effect on individuals is still perceived as powerful, the articulation between public and private a constant source of conflict, paradox, and suffering, particularly in Proust's treatment of love, but while the social roles attributed to individuals are accorded a good deal of attention, they ultimately take a back seat to the subjective and individual perspectives of the characters. For example, Swann and Marcel first perceive Odette and Albertine, respectively, in social settings that are crucial elements of their appeal, and both men expend a great deal of

energy trying to categorize the objects of their affections in terms of social categories. And yet these loves of social origins quickly yield to antisocial impulses, as each man attempts to wrench his mistress from the social setting in which he met her, as if out of mistrust for the limited accuracy of any social labeling.

In particular, if Marcel imprisons his young mistress, Albertine, in his apartment, it is because of his frustration at not being able to give her an identity, which in his mind would tell him if not what precisely she is doing at every moment, at least the sort of things she might or might not do, and with whom. Having a generalized idea of her character would be one way of filling in the epistemological gaps created in Marcel's mind when the lovers are physically separated: even if he could never assume he knew everything Albertine did or whom she saw, he would trust that whatever she did was consistent with his image of her and he would cease being obsessed by her movements. But since he never is able to generalize his lover in this way, her imprisonment becomes a metaphor for the artificial stabilization of the unknowable:

> As I listened to Albertine's footsteps with the consoling pleasure of thinking that she would not be going out again that evening, I marvelled at the thought that, for this girl whom at one time I had supposed that I could never possibly succeed in knowing, returning home every day actually meant returning to my home. The fugitive and fragmentary pleasure, compounded of mystery and sensuality, which I had felt at Balbec, on the night when she had come to sleep at the hotel, had been completed and stabilised, filling my hitherto empty dwelling with a permanent store of domestic, almost conjugal, bliss that radiated even into the passages and upon which all my senses, either actively or, when I was alone, in imagination as I awaited her return, peacefully fed.[12]

Rather than a smooth articulation between the public and the private worlds, Marcel's love for Albertine is the locus of a constant struggle, for in Proust the social world cannot be domesticated or privatized without an intensely antisocial impulse toward isolation. Albertine's ungraspability is "solved" by her imprisonment to the same extent that a fortresslike identity one attributes to others solves the problem of their unknowability.

How Not to Mourn I: La Bruyère on the Use and Abuse of Social Identity

Although as a classical moralist La Bruyère is himself often categorized as a writer who puts faith in categories, in fact his relation to general

laws is quite ambiguous, his combination of generalization and particularization one of the most startlingly modern elements of a work that has been a touchstone for French novelists since the eighteenth century. To understand how La Bruyère's vision of human character may have influenced Proust, we must first examine how the earlier writer questions the value of generalization in character representation. This is an issue I believe would hold great interest for Elaine Marks, who spent much intellectual and personal energy challenging the validity and limits of categorizations—relating to gender, ethnicity, belief system, or anything else—and demonstrating that straitjacketing others into an excessively rigid identity, however convenient that might be, places severe restrictions on how well one will ever come to know them.

In his discussion of the early modern French novel, English Showalter sees La Bruyère's *Characters* as straddling the general and the particular:

> Classicists like La Bruyère, Molière, and Lesage tended to group individuals, and to minimize the differences; "les grands, les femmes, les esprits forts" [the powerful, women, great thinkers] might conveniently classify large numbers of people with many common characteristics, and "le misanthrope, l'avare, le bourgeois gentilhomme" [the misanthrope, the miser, the bourgeois with aristocratic pretensions] might name a universal type. The authors who presented them, however, knew that each representative had his own individual characteristics, and the art of Molière or La Bruyère or Lesage consists in preserving just enough of the individuality to make the character live, while bringing out fully his type. A very slight increase in the attention one pays to the individuality can transform this classical aesthetic into a Realist aesthetic. The eighteenth century did more or less just that. The number of types seems to proliferate; this tendency is obvious already in La Bruyère.[13]

One of the aspects of La Bruyère that may have contributed to his affinity with Proust is his simultaneous use and questioning of the limitations of categorization in character representation. This may be one reason La Bruyère's influence on Proust is greater than that of, say, La Rochefoucauld, whose work Proust also knew well but whose tendency to overgeneralize disturbed him.[14] In his school notes to La Rochefoucauld, the young Proust wrote: "La Rochefoucauld. A single fundamental inclination: self-love. The problem is: are there not in us two love principles, selfishness and altruism? Sometimes all one sees in La R. is a kind of misanthropy taught by life."[15]

According to La Bruyère's own comments in his introduction to the *Characters*, his occasional long-windedness, another quality that distinguishes him from La Rochefoucauld and that may have endeared him

to the notoriously wordy Proust, results from his refusal to limit himself to general truths:

> Moreover it is not maxims that I have wished to write: they are like laws in morality, and I confess that I have neither enough authority nor enough genius to play the role of legislator; I even know that I have probably sinned against the convention of maxims, which is that, like oracles, they must be short and concise. Some of these remarks are, others are longer: one conceives of things in different ways, and one explains them with quite different turns of phrase, by a general truth, by reasoning, by a metaphor or some other figure, by a parallel, by a simple comparison, by an entire fact, by a description, by a painting: that accounts for the length or brevity of my reflections. ("Les Caractères ou Les Moeurs de ce siècle," 20)

La Bruyère would be the first to admit that presenting categorical statements is faster and easier than developing nuanced arguments: "To say of a thing in all modesty that it is good or bad, and the reasons why it is such, requires good sense and expressiveness, a difficult business. It is quicker to make a pronouncement, using a decisive tone of voice that seems to prove what one is positing, that the thing is either detestable or miraculous" ("De la société et de la conversation" 19, 114). But he defends his right to take a bit more time than might be expected in delving into the complexities of human character, not only because when one is presenting ideas "one explains them with quite different turns of phrase," some of which are time-consuming, but also because the process of coming to know others—and especially of revealing the individual beneath the social mask or identity—is slow and painstaking.

Indeed, to know people quickly, La Bruyère suggests, is to know them poorly: "One must not judge people as one judges a picture or a figure, on a single and first viewing: there is an interior, and a heart one must delve into. A veil of modesty covers merit, and a mask of hypocrisy hides evil. . . . It is only little by little, and flushed out by time and opportunity, that perfect virtue and consummate vice finally come to show their true colors" ("Des jugements" 27, 319). The inner complexities of individuals are such that one cannot know them synoptically, "on a single and first viewing." Even though La Bruyère is limited to relatively short character sketches rather than lengthy novels better suited to character development, he states that knowledge of human character takes place in human time and is thus subject to the same limitations—partiality, variation, the possibility for error—as everything else that develops diachronically. The inner truths of others are slow to reveal themselves to us, and we are slow to perceive them.

Arriving at a deep perception of others is an arduous task not only because others do their best to present the world with an advantageous picture of themselves, but also because it is far easier for us to associate them with a simple, coherent image than to account for their complexities and contradictions:

> Weak men! A powerful man says of *Timagène,* your friend, that he is a fool, and this man is mistaken. I don't ask you to reply that Timagène is an intelligent man: simply dare to believe that he is not a fool.
>
> The same man proclaims that *Iphicrate* lacks courage; you have seen him carry out a fine action: fear not, I grant you dispensation from having to tell about it provided that after what you have just heard, you still remember having seen him do it. ("De la cour" 78, 202)

It is difficult to maintain a clear view of someone's character when presented with counterevidence, to maintain one's belief in Timagène's intelligence and Iphicrate's bravery in the face of claims that the one is stupid, the other cowardly. The warning given to readers here is quite radical, for it is not social, but cognitive: rather than asking his readers to defend their views of their friends' characters aloud, La Bruyère simply asks them not to indulge in internal revisionism by changing their own opinions. Although La Bruyère says that the comment about Timagène's foolishness is mistaken, the fact that he does not pronounce either for or against the proclamation of Iphicrate's cowardice indicates that the thrust of his comments is less about whether individuals can be contradictory than about the difficulty of perceiving contradictions in them.

In his most moving defense of the particular, La Bruyère reverts to an elegiac mode that is very close indeed to the world of Proust: "Each hour in itself, and in its relation to us, is unique: once it has passed by, it has perished in its entirety, millions of centuries will not bring it back. The days, the months, the years sink away, and are irrevocably lost in the abyss of time" ("De la mode" 31, 374). La Bruyère's poignant vision of the ephemeral nature of all things human is astonishingly close to the sensibility of his twentieth-century heir, his observation that each particular moment, like each particular individual, is sui generis and hence ultimately unrepresentable anticipating Proust's self-consciously doomed attempts at capturing the full reality of both moments and individuals.

And in this plea for the value of the particular, La Bruyère has hit upon one of the differences between a social and an individual perspective on mortality. As we have seen, La Bruyère is keenly aware of the

callousness of the theater of society in assigning the roles of the deceased to other actors, and it is true that the accumulating losses that constitute any human life may also lead an individual to experience life as a play in which the roles others play for one are always the same and only the actors change. Just as Platonic and Christian conceptions present spirit as something eternal that survives the body, losing those who have played important roles, good or bad, in our lives prods us to search for the precise meaning of those roles in the absence of the people who embodied them. If in high society the roles individuals play are general and transferable and transcend the characters playing them, individuals, too, ask what role lost loved ones played in their lives and search for a meaning that survives the individual. But while the theater of society finds other actors to play the roles vacated by those who have died, the death of loved ones does not necessarily push survivors to find substitutes to play those roles or even to accept the idea that the roles themselves might supersede the individuals playing them. La Bruyère seems to suggest that even on a social level, to accept substitutions as completely satisfactory is to deny the particular value of the departed.

That, of course, is precisely what the society of the court is designed to do:

> The great and powerful [*Les grands*] are so fortunate that they never in their lives suffer the annoyance of lamenting the loss of their best servants, or of people who have distinguished themselves in their domains and from whom the greatest pleasure and usefulness have been drawn. The first thing that flattery knows how to do after the death of these unique, irreplaceable people is to find weak points from which, it is claimed, their successors are exempt. Flattery makes assurances that the people taking the places of others have all their ability and enlightenment but none of their flaws; and this style allows princes to take consolation from the mediocre for the loss of the great and the outstanding. ("Des grands" 11, 212–13)

The idea that the aristocracy is no more inclined to mourn others than to indulge in *moribondages* about themselves—because functions and titles survive, the loss of individuals is to be taken in stride—continues even into the twentieth century; Proust's Guermantes are incapable of comforting their dying friend Swann, for example, dismissing his announcement of a fatal illness as a kind of *moribondage:* "'You, now, don't let yourself be alarmed by the nonsense of those damned doctors. They're fools. You're as sound as a bell. You'll bury us all!'"(2: 620). We should not be surprised that Proust, writing in a period when subjectivity is primordial and vestigial Ancien-Régime social formulas

are seen as rigid and constrictive, would present a satirical portrait of insensitive aristocrats for whom arriving on time for a soirée is more important than consoling a dying friend: "Placed for the first time in her life between two duties as incompatible as getting into her carriage to go out to dinner and showing compassion for a man who was about to die, she [Oriane de Guermantes] could find nothing in the code of conventions that indicated the right line to follow" (2:618). But it is more striking that in the seventeenth century La Bruyère would so clearly reveal the moral diminishment caused by society's ways of protecting the high and mighty against mourning. La Bruyère's observations about the general human inability to mourn indefinitely—"One does not have in one's heart the means to cry forever or to love forever" ("Du cœur" 34, 95)—are taken a step further here, since the "grands" do not even begin crying, let alone stop. And this turns out to be a step too far. By fully and immediately accepting the substitutes offered in the place of those who have died, "les grands" deny their uniqueness. This is tantamount not to mourning them but to forgetting they ever existed.

How Not to Mourn II: Proust and the Madness of the Particular

To a large extent, the tension between the general and the particular that we find in the work of La Bruyère can be accounted for by the distinction between social and individual or public and private. At some level La Bruyère is not saying much more than that our social personae—our public "characters"—are limiting and misleading, that they don't fully account for an individuality and a particularity that are actually not La Bruyère's focus, but that he recognizes as important elements of human character: though quite a banal idea today, this is actually a rather novel one in the seventeenth century. By contrast, Proust's acute awareness of the unquantifiability of character—the difficulty of representing or knowing others—problematizes the tension between general and particular from the opposite direction: his inability to accept generalization in characterization leads to what might be called the madness of the particular. Although Germaine Brée is correct in her observation that Proust's novels are saturated with general psychological truths, they never reach the truth of individual characters. On the one hand, lovers like Swann and Marcel seem desperate to find a generalizing concept or label to attach to their love objects in order to give them stability and validity. On the other, in the absence of such quantification, their

love objects are perceived as being in a constant state of flux, which the lovers believe results in their own obsessiveness, although it would be just as accurate to say their obsessiveness is its cause.

If love adds up to more than the sum of all the particular moments two people spend together, both Swann and Marcel find it difficult to do the math. When they are with Odette and Albertine, respectively, they know where their mistresses are and are bored with them: the women are available but have no value. When the ladies are elsewhere, they become interesting but inaccessible. That in Proustian love greater value is given to absence than to presence—the two men love their mistresses most when they can't have them, or are separated from them and know or imagine them to be with others—is not in itself an original conception of love; what is peculiar is that the lover's absence does not lead to the kind of stabilizing abstraction or essentialization that is commonplace in definitions of love since Plato. In other words, the empirical reality of Odette and Albertine, the security given to Swann and Marcel by their presence—however poorly each man understands the precise value of his mistress's feelings or his own—is not complemented by an epistemological reality, a knowledge that in their absence the women will not suddenly become utterly other (lesbian, debauched, plotting to run away with someone else, etc.). Only physical presence, although boring in itself, compensates for ignorance of the other. To let others go in all serenity would mean trusting that one knows them well enough to generalize about what activities they are or are not likely to indulge in elsewhere. And this Swann and Marcel cannot bring themselves to do.

Proust thus makes it clear that one is destined neither to know every particularity about a love object nor to be able to characterize another fully or globally, a dilemma to which the parallel love stories of Swann and Odette and of Marcel and Albertine bear witness. When Swann looks back on the years he wasted trying to chase after an Odette he has never come to know in any fundamental way, he muses that she was not even his type: "To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type [*genre*]!" (1:415). Swann's problem is moving from the inexplicably seductive particularities of a woman who is not his type to a general, totalizing image of her that might make sense of the attraction. In the absence of such an image, her charms ultimately fade away, as if Swann's inability to attach a label to them allowed them to dissipate into the temporal flux

that comprises day-to-day experience, and by the time he marries her, his love for her is a thing of the past.[16]

As for Marcel, his obsession with Albertine is linked to his inability to idealize her, or at least to make his various momentary idealizations of her coalesce into a single stable idea, and this makes of her in his mind a "fugitive" (3:86), an infinite series of uncapturable individual experiences, desires, and potential infidelities rather than a single entity or identity:

> I possessed in my memory only a series of Albertines, separate from one another, incomplete, a collection of profiles or snapshots, and so my jealousy was restricted to a discontinuous expression, at once fugitive and fixed, and to the people who had caused that expression to appear upon Albertine's face. I remembered her when, at Balbec, she was eyed with undue intensity by the two girls or by women of that sort. . . . [W]ho knows whether, once my back was turned . . . she would not respond boldly to the advances of the two girls? (3:145–46)

Albertine's unknowability and Marcel's unreasonable possessiveness go hand in hand, each feeding the other: it is because he cannot turn Albertine into a single portrait that his jealousy becomes "discontinuous," reduced to testing each image of Albertine separately for signs of infidelity. The Albertine Marcel perceives at any given moment risks becoming transformed into a radically other Albertine as soon as Marcel's back is turned.

It is not surprising, then, that the stabilization process by which Albertine becomes artificially tamed or domesticated by Marcel is presented not as a process of coming to know her but rather as a recognition that he never will know her. Albertine is imprisoned in Marcel's apartment not as a known quantity but rather as a talisman, a therapy, a remedy to soothe his anguish:

> Had I not detected in Albertine one of those girls beneath whose envelope of flesh more hidden persons stir, I will not say than in a pack of cards still in its box, a closed cathedral or a theatre before we enter it, but the whole vast ever-changing crowd? Not only all these persons, but the desire, the voluptuous memory, the restless search for all these persons. . . . Albertine, in my eyes, [had] the plenitude of someone filled to the brim by the superimposition of so many persons, of so many desires and voluptuous memories of persons. . . . [H]ow have we the heart to go on living, how can we move a finger to preserve ourselves from death, in a world in which love is provoked only by lies and consists solely in our need to see our sufferings appeased by the person who has made us suffer? (3:89–90)

Albertine's presence becomes not a sign of familiarity but rather a hedge against mortality:

> The image which I sought, upon which I relied, for which I would have been prepared to die, was no longer that of Albertine leading an unknown life, it was that of an Albertine as known to me as it was possible for her to be (and it was for this reason that my love could not be lasting unless it remained unhappy, for by definition it did not satisfy the need for mystery), an Albertine who did not reflect a distant world, but desired nothing else—there were moments when this did indeed appear to be the case—than to be with me, to be exactly like me, an Albertine who was the image precisely of what was mine and not of the unknown. (3:69–70)

That "other" is reduced to a reinforcement of "self"—"an Albertine who was the image precisely of what was mine"—indicates that the other has become part of the fortress against death that the self is endlessly attempting to construct. In claiming that he "would have been prepared to die" for an image of an Albertine who desired "to be exactly like me," Marcel makes a metonymic substitution of cause for effect: such an image of Albertine is not one he would die for, but rather is precisely designed to prevent him from dying.

Thus it is not only Marcel's relation to Albertine in general, it is more particularly his knowledge of her—his perception of her as a "character"—that is colored and limited by his fear of death. As long as Albertine functions merely as the purveyor of a source of solace similar to his mother's bedtime kiss, her role limited to helping him survive the anguish of his mortal state, he can perceive her in no other terms. As we shall see, Marcel's hyperawareness of his own mortality is not the same thing as *moribondage,* for in his treatment of Albertine as merely an irreplaceable remedy for his suffering, he particularizes her so desperately that he views her solely through the eyes of his own mortality, not of hers. He, a mortal, perceives her, but he does not perceive her as a mortal as well.

Marcel's utter failure at understanding Albertine foreshadows his inability to memorialize her once she has died, the reason he ultimately forgets her rather than truly mourns her being that he can no more represent her after death than he could know her while she was alive:

> For the death of Albertine to have been able to eliminate my suffering, the shock of the fall would have had to kill her not only in Touraine but in myself. There, she had never been more alive. In order to enter into us, another person must first have assumed the form, have adapted himself to the framework of

time; appearing to us only in a succession of momentary flashes, he has never been able to reveal to us more than one aspect of himself at a time, to present us with more than a single photograph of himself. A great weakness no doubt for a person, to consist merely of a collection of moments; a great strength also: he is a product of memory, and our memory of a moment is not informed of everything that has happened since; this moment which it has recorded endures still, lives still, and with it the person whose form is outlined in it. And moreover, this disintegration does not only make the dead one live, it multiplies him or her. In order to be consoled I would have to forget, not one, but innumerable Albertines. When I had succeeded in bearing the grief of losing this Albertine, I must begin again with another, with a hundred others. (3:487)

The slow and excruciating detachment process implied by the presence in the narrator's mind of "innumerable Albertines" corresponds to the kind of reality-testing Freud sees as an integral part of mourning; in Freud's view each particular memory and experience shared with the lost loved one must be "corrected" by the reality of his or her death: "Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists."[17] What is striking in Marcel's non-mourning of Albertine is that this process of detachment from particular memories is not complemented by the formation of a more generalized and idealized image of Albertine:

If I found it difficult to imagine that Albertine, so alive in me . . . , was dead, perhaps it was equally paradoxical in me that this suspicion of the misdeeds which Albertine, stripped now of the flesh that had enjoyed them, of the mind that had conceived the desire for them, was no longer either capable of or responsible for, should excite in me such suffering, which I should only have blessed could I have seen it as the token of the spiritual reality of a person materially non-existent, instead of the reflection, destined itself to fade, of impressions that she had made on me in the past. (3:499–500)

To feel suffering for the "spiritual reality of a person materially non-existent": this is an excellent definition of another indispensable stage of mourning, one that generally follows reality testing. In this stage, the mourner, faced with the final realization that the deceased cannot be brought back to life, searches for the "spiritual reality"—essence, idealization, transcendent meaning—that survives the material absence of the lost loved one. In Marcel's case, however, the suffering he feels for Albertine does not reach this stage of generalization: his suffering is limited to the memories of a series of particular impressions she made on him while she was alive. And as he himself recognizes, those memories

are as "destined to fade," are as mortal and perishable, as the being who inspired them.

Thus Marcel's overattachment to Albertine, his reduction of her to a balm for his suffering and an outlet for his possessiveness without ever understanding her on her own terms, ironically leads to her flight and her death. He is punished for not having known her in life by not being able to mourn her in death:

> And where I had been wrong was perhaps in not making a greater effort to know Albertine in herself. . . . I had long considered only the different positions that she occupied in my memory on the plane of the years. . . . I ought to have sought to understand her character as that of an ordinary person, and thus . . . might have avoided prolonging between us . . . the conflict which had led to her death. And I then felt, together with an intense pity for her, a sort of shame at having survived her. . . . I had dreamed of being understood by Albertine. . . . One wants to be understood because one wants to be loved, and one wants to be loved because one loves. The understanding of others is a matter of indifference to us and their love importunate. My joy at having possessed a little of Albertine's intelligence and of her heart arose not from their intrinsic worth, but from the fact that this possession was a stage further towards the complete possession of Albertine. (3:505–6)

Marcel recognizes his inability ever to establish the distance required to know Albertine in herself, not without any consideration of his own perspective—that degree of detachment would be pointless and impossible—but at least with consideration for something other than his own needs. To value Albertine as a talisman without which he cannot go to sleep is to deny her even a hint of the generality required to explain how his own view of her might relate to another person's—including, of course, her own view of herself. While La Bruyère, writing from a social perspective, implies that to lay too great an emphasis on the roles or functions others have played in one's life does not allow one to remember them in all their individuality, Proust, writing from a more intimate, individual perspective, suggests that if one attributes only a unique, one-of-a-kind, and non-generalizable value to those one loves, one can only drive them away. This is what happens with both Gilberte and Albertine, and Marcel is reduced to trying to remember them without ever having known them. La Bruyère deals with the danger of not remembering the particularities of individuals, Proust with that of only remembering them.

It might therefore appear that while La Bruyère speaks of the difficulty of mourning others in an uncaring world determined to replace

and forget them, Proust implies the difficulty, for a character who cannot detach himself from others enough to get to know them on their own terms while allowing them to live and breathe, of doing anything but mourning them. But in fact mourning is neither simply forgetting nor simply remembering: it is detaching oneself from lost loved ones enough to commemorate their lives, to reach a meaningful remembrance and representation that allows one to let go of them—to "forget" them in a very particular sense—without entirely losing them.

For Proust's narrator, the discovery that as a mortal one needs to relate to others as mortal in themselves, as losable—perhaps even lost—is the essence of *moribondage. Moribondage* is the awareness that one inevitably loses—or more precisely, can never capture—others in all their particularity. It is a realization that the only way to "have" others at all is to accept the need to represent them; that incorporating their mortality into one's view of them may be a more productive reaction to a hyperconsciousness of one's own mortality than a frenetic attempt to grasp hold of them as a protection against death.

This is one of the countless ways of approaching the famous experiences of involuntary memory that frame the narrative. As has been observed by a number of critics, in establishing an analogy between material sensations experienced at a distance of many years, the narrator makes a timid step toward generalizing the particular: the madeleine episode is both a letting go of the particularity of the past experience and a partial recuperation of it through the general. The "same" taste of a madeleine dipped in linden tea when Marcel is a grown man cannot be identical to what he experienced as a child, but to say that one sensation is like another is to go beyond the particularity of either. Analogously, as a character whose attachment to others is so strongly particularized that he cannot even begin to know them, Marcel's experiences of loss eventually create a distance between himself and the very individuals he is so passionately drawn to. And that distance from others, while it can no more save him from death than his earlier attempts to imprison them, paradoxically allows him to "have" them as representations of what he has lost, or more precisely of what he was never able to have.

Judgment Day: Truth Comes at the End, or Does It?

Perhaps the single greatest distinction between Proust's and La Bruyère's depictions of character stems from the fact that La Bruyère's observing persona is not himself characterized to the same extent that

Proust's is. More specifically, a great deal of the characterization in Proust is given through the eyes of a man infatuated by many of the personages being depicted—not only Gilberte and Albertine, but also Odette and the Duchesse de Guermantes—while La Bruyère's observer, although a part of the society he is describing, is clearly somewhat detached from it. Albertine is an extreme case, but Marcel's desperate desire and ultimate failure to capture her is emblematic of his relationship to the world. What he must learn, then, before he begins to characterize others is a kind of La Bruyère–like detachment. The particularizing self, the anguished self that relates to others as irreplaceable totems, never completely disappears, of course, but it coexists with an observing self that can look at the world from a distance, as if absent, and that can find its value in its absence. This is certainly not an unusual gesture in aging characters, whether fictional or not, and there is no proof that Proust's depiction of Marcel's evolution is directly indebted to La Bruyère's detached observer; still, it is very much in the same spirit.

In one of the rare passages of the *Characters* in which La Bruyère's observer gives an extended depiction of himself, he presents himself paradoxically, as both visible and transparent:

> I go to your door, *Clitiphon;* my need of you chases me from my bed and my room: if only I were neither your underling nor your pest! Your slaves tell me that you are not to be disturbed, that you cannot give me an audience for a good hour. I come back before the time they indicated, and they tell me you have gone out. What difficult task do you carry out, Clitiphon, in the innermost recesses of your dwelling, that keeps you from hearing me out? . . . O important man, weighed down by your affairs, when in turn you need something from me, come into the solitude of my study: the philosopher is accessible; I shall not put off seeing you to a later time. You will find me poring over Plato's books that deal with the spirituality of the soul as distinct from the body. . . . Enter, all the doors are open to you. . . . One sees the money handler, the businessman, in his lodgings only with difficulty: what have I said? one doesn't see him at all; for to begin with it is too early to see him, and soon it is too late to see him. The man of letters on the contrary . . . is seen by everyone, both at any hour and in any state, at the dining table, in bed, naked, dressed, healthy or ill: he cannot be important, and he doesn't wish to be. ("Des biens de fortune" 12, 137–38)

If La Bruyère paradoxically defines his observer as both completely visible (accessible) on the one hand and invisible (transparent) on the other, his (dis)appearing act is a commentary on the emptiness of society's notions of "being seen." Clitiphon's self-commodification, according to the rules of supply and demand—the harder it is to get to see him, the

greater his value will appear to be—is in keeping with the courtly norms of Versailles, but La Bruyère is probably also making a larger commentary, not necessarily limited to a single culture, on the wisdom and detachment of the philosopher who doubly refuses to participate in the self-marketing process. On the one hand, La Bruyère's philosopher can be seen at any time, but on the other, because his concerns are not with the material world of presence but rather with the immaterial world of spirit—the reference to Plato here is quite pointed—he is never really visible at all. To be unimportant on the stage of society's theater is to be both seeable and unworthy of a second look; but it is also having freedom to judge oneself—and others—on a different scale of values.

The topos of the detached sage who withdraws from the very society he or she once inhabited but now views under the light of eternity is to be found throughout Western literature, in philosophers ranging from Plato to Saint Augustine to Pascal and novelists from Lafayette to Rousseau and beyond, but while both La Bruyère and Proust constantly point out the world's triviality and its flaws, they leave little doubt of its abiding value for them. La Bruyère reveals the moral blankness behind society's brilliant façade, but at times he also delights in the façade and even hides behind one of his own. As for Marcel, when by his understanding of others he "X-rays" them—to borrow a phrase Françoise uses in speaking of Marcel's mother's talent for reading people's minds—the revelation of their artificial poses is expressed with great affection. Like medical X-rays, Proustian X-rays reveal the fatal flaws that will eventually do individuals in—his depth perception is also a death perception—but Proust (difficult to distinguish from Marcel in this instance) loves his characters because he sees them in the light of their—as well as his own—mortality, in all their endearingly precarious and perishable glory.[18]

This reading dovetails nicely—too nicely—with the received wisdom that in Proust, truth comes at the end, that before undertaking his novel, the narrator experiences a radical revision of everything he had previously believed. But a number of critics have pointed out that the cycle's Bildungsroman structure, however tempting, is deceptive; La Bruyère helps us understand why.

As Roger Francillon observes, the idea that truth comes at the end is a recurrent one in both Proust and La Bruyère:

> Tension and punch lines are likewise specific characteristics of the style of the *Characters.* In the Proust fragment quoted above [from "Snobs" in "Fragments de comédie italienne"], Proust proceeds in the same way as his model: the

phrase "she is a snob" [*elle est snob*] that concludes the text recalls the phrase "he is rich" [*il est riche*] that punctuates [La Bruyère's] famous portrait of Giton.[19]

Just as the portrait of Elianthe in "Snobs" is puzzling—why does she drop her friends and chase after people who show no interest in her?—until the final, lapidary revelation of her snobbery, some of La Bruyère's most famous portraits, including the twinned character sketches of Giton and Phédon that conclude the long chapter "Des biens de fortune," invite readers to search for an explanation behind the traits listed before their explanation is given. In the case of Giton and Phédon, the former plump and smug, the latter haggard and apologetic, the key to the differences between the two is not given before the final words of each portrait: "he is rich," "he is poor." Proust will also use this technique in *In Search of Lost Time,* for example in the famous portrait of Legrandin in *Swann's Way,* which, although it doesn't end with the phrase "he was a snob," postpones that explanation of Legrandin's mysteriously haughty behavior for nearly ten pages.[20]

But does the truth of characters really come at the end? If we limit our perception of others to the clear establishment of a series of social types, we might respond in the affirmative, but even La Bruyère calls this idea into question in those passages of the *Characters* in which he speaks from a more intimate, lyrical perspective, and the perception of others is most certainly not limited to social types in Proust. No final, generalizable understanding of the people Proust's elderly narrator has loved comes rushing into his head when he stumbles on the uneven paving stones in the courtyard of the Guermantes residence and has his final epiphany about art, and in fact the truth of the various characters to whom he has been so desperately attached never does become all that clear. At some level the aging Marcel is as morose a figure as the little child in Combray. All that happens when Marcel's morbidity is transformed into *moribondage* is that the characters for whom he has felt love—which Proust and La Bruyère agree in presenting as one of the most fleeting and perishable of human emotions—are recognized as having an enduring value that can be neither accounted for nor questioned, the very definition of the sacred.

Death of the Gods, Birth of the Sacred

The generalizing moments in Proust—the experiences of involuntary memory that frame the narrative but that diegetically both come in the

later years of the narrator's life—are presented as the starting points of writing. But rather than the meaning of life in the juxtaposition of past and present, which a number of critics seem to believe Marcel has discovered, I would suggest that all he claims to resurrect in the end is the value of the past: not *what* the value of the past is, but *that* the past—or more precisely the present in all its particularity, destined at every moment to become past—has abiding value. The madeleine episode allows for only a short epiphany—the second and third tastes are disappointing—but it leads to a novel-length meditation on the Combray of the past relished as past.

A passage at the end of *Swann's Way* eloquently expresses the fertile awareness of perishability that defines *moribondage.* Proust's middle-aged narrator takes an autumnal walk in the Bois de Boulogne, and this leads him to reminisce about similar walks he used to take as a youth. Observing the changes that have taken place in fashions and manners in the past thirty or so years—large lady's hats replacing small ones, gentlemen now going bare-headed, and automobiles standing in for the elegant carriages of the late nineteenth century—leads him to contemplate the transitory nature of any given moment, a contemplation that is a novelistic exemplification of the ideas of La Bruyère we have been discussing:

> The idea of perfection which I had within me I had bestowed, in that other time, upon the height of a victoria, upon the raking thinness of those horses, frenzied and light as wasps on the wing, with bloodshot eyes like the cruel steeds of Diomed, which now, smitten by a desire to see again what I had once loved, . . . I wished to see anew. . . . Alas! there was nothing now but motor-cars driven each by a moustached mechanic. . . . I wished to hold before my bodily eyes, to see whether they were indeed as charming as they appeared to the eyes of memory, little women's hats, so low-crowned as to seem no more than garlands. All the hats now were immense, covered with all manner of fruits and flowers and birds. . . . And seeing all these new components of the spectacle, I had no longer a belief to infuse into them to give them consistency, unity and life; they passed before me in a desultory, haphazard, meaningless fashion, containing in themselves no beauty which my eyes might have tried, as in the old days, to re-create. They were just women, in whose elegance I had no faith, and whose clothes seemed to me unimportant. . . .
>
> How horrible! I exclaimed to myself. Can anyone find these motor-cars as elegant as the old carriage-and-pair? (1:459–60)

It is difficult not to think of La Bruyère's image of the actors on society's stage being swept away by the passage of a hundred years,

but while La Bruyère does not envision an entire century as altering society's "decor," the mere generation that separates Proust's young narrator from his aging counterpart has placed an entirely different world before his eyes. Perhaps time moved more quickly in the twentieth century than in the seventeenth, but a more fundamental difference is operative here as well. La Bruyère's observations about the transitoriness of actors lead him to conclude that it is foolish to place much stock in individuals: "How can we use a character from a play as the basis for anything!" He also puts himself in the shoes of the individual who realizes he is replaceable and is "convinced of his uselessness." But Proust focuses on the individual experiencing the loss of others, whether literally—losing people to death—or figuratively—losing them as they once were. He suggests that the individual people and the individual sensations of one's youth are not fully translatable to functions, at least where the heart is concerned. The head may well understand that small hats have no greater intrinsic value than large ones, but the heart refuses to let go of the idea that only hats of the type Odette Swann might have worn can be considered elegant. Presumably Proust's narrator knows that those younger than he might well "find these motor-cars as elegant as the old carriage-and-pair," that automobiles can easily play the same function for someone born thirty years later than he as the old carriage-and-pair played for him. But his heart refuses the substitution.

He expresses this refusal not in general but in particular terms; by trying to get his reader to understand how Madame Swann was, for him, the embodiment of female elegance:

> My consolation is to think of the women whom I knew in the past, now that there is no elegance left. But how could the people who watch these dreadful creatures hobble by beneath hats on which have been heaped the spoils of aviary or kitchen-garden, how could they even imagine the charm that there was in the sight of Mme Swann in a simple mauve bonnet or a little hat with a single iris sticking up out of it? Could I even have made them understand the emotion that I used to feel on winter mornings, when I met Mme Swann on foot, in an otter-skin coat, with a woollen cap from which stuck out two blade-like partridge-feathers, but enveloped also in the artificial warmth of her own house, which was suggested by nothing more than the bunch of violets crushed into her bosom, whose flowering, vivid and blue against the grey sky, the freezing air, the naked boughs, had the same charming effect of using the season and the weather merely as a setting, and of living actually in a human atmosphere, in the atmosphere of this woman, as had in the vases and jardinières of her

drawing-room, beside the blazing fire, in front of the silk-covered sofa, the flowers that looked out through closed windows at the falling snow? (1:460–61)

In this lyrical tribute to the "lost time" when Madame Swann took wintertime promenades through the Bois de Boulogne dressed in a season-defying manner reminiscent of her apartment, we may find a key to Proust's entire enterprise. Amidst the many grand philosophical and aesthetic questions that his multifaceted novels raise is the humbler one, no less poignant for being so simple, that his narrator brings up here: can he make people who never knew Madame Swann "understand the emotion that I used to feel" in seeing her, an apparition of feminine elegance, in the Bois de Boulogne? Can his story allow others—people who possibly were not even alive at the time he frequented the Bois in hopes of catching a glimpse of her—to grasp her value, the irreplaceable role she played in his life? And as this complex, metaphor- and image-laden sentence, a microcosm of the novel itself, attests, the answer, if there is one, will come not through a general notion of elegance or other abstractions easy to bandy about, but through the particulars that were imbued with value at a very specific time of his life and that he now understands will always be sacred to him. Instead of being given a theoretical explanation of Madame Swann's charm for the narrator—her gracefulness mixed with a sense of irreverence, her tendency toward incongruity—we are given precise details that encapsulate those qualities: feather-bedecked woollen cap merging high and low fashion, springlike violets against the grey winter sky defying the elements.

Proust concludes *Swann's Way* with an apology of the particular that is once again reminiscent of La Bruyère:

But it would not have sufficed me that the costumes alone should still have been the same as those in distant years. Because of the solidarity that binds together the different parts of a general impression that our memory keeps in a balanced whole of which we are not permitted to subtract or to decline any fraction, I should have liked to be able to pass the rest of the day with one of those women, over a cup of tea, in an apartment with dark-painted walls (as Mme Swann's were still in the year after that in which the first part of this story ends) against which would glow the orange flame, the red combustion, the pink and white flickering of her chrysanthemums in the twilight of a November evening. . . . And I should have required also that they should be the same women, those whose costume interested me because, at the time when I still had faith, my imagination had individualised them [*les avait individualisées*] and had provided each of them with a legend. . . . The reality that I had known no

longer existed. It sufficed that Mme Swann did not appear, in the same attire and at the same moment, for the whole avenue to be altered. The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years. (1:461–62)

Each hour in itself, and in its relation to us, is unique: once it has passed by, it has perished in its entirety, millions of centuries will not bring it back. The days, the months, the years sink away. ("De la mode" 31, 374)

The narrator's desire to recreate a past moment leads to a spiral of discontent: fashions can be duplicated, but that is not enough. The narrator wants to have tea with one of the women he sees in the Bois, as he did with Madame Swann; they must have tea at the same time, on a November evening; he wants this new lady's apartment to be decorated in the same way that Madame Swann's was. And even that would not be enough: he wants the woman to be Madame Swann. And even *that* would not be enough, for he wants her not as she is now, but as she was then.

The key term in this passage is "individualisées." Proust seems to be saying that once one has individualized others, their value can never be fully generalized, either for others or for oneself: in fact Madame Swann would no longer seem the same even if she were to reappear, for Marcel is no longer the same. Individuals are ultimately sui generis, unquantifiable; to borrow La Bruyère's term, "unique." One's feelings toward them may change. Given the impermanence of the human heart, one may stop loving them. But one can never fully let them go: "But when a belief vanishes, there survives it . . . a fetishistic attachment to the old things which it did once animate, as if it was in them and not in ourselves that the divine spark resided, and as if our present incredulity had a contingent cause—the death of the gods" (1:460). The idea that Marcel has a fetishistic attachment to the inaccessible and particular world of the past to which he attributes an ultimately ungeneralizable value is central to *In Search of Lost Time.* And the extraordinary observation that people chalk up their own disillusionment with life to the death of the gods brings us back to Elaine Marks, who did not have time to complete her book on that very topic—*The Death of God* was a project she had been working on for several years at the time of her own death—and to whom those whose lives she touched have a similar

attachment and wish only that she might appear again in our midst as she once was.

She will not. The paradox of mourning Elaine is such that while I could not have read Proust and La Bruyère without her, reading them with her has only made me more acutely aware of being without her. For my only wish now is that she might be able to be here again to read these words.

There is no final truth to be stated about Elaine Marks, whose charisma, like that of an Odette Swann, can no more be forgotten by those who knew her than it can be properly explained to those who did not. While for Elaine Marks God was most certainly dead, she was just as firm in her belief that the search for meaning in—if not for the meaning of—life in general and other human beings in particular was alive and well. As Mallarmé implied, to establish a totalizing truth about another is to erect his epitaph, something that Elaine, as much as she loved Mallarmé, did her best to avoid doing. Her view of human beings as contradictory, paradoxical, and unseizable in their complexity was not a source of anguish for her, but a source of affirmation of the value of life: perhaps her fascination with death, which permeated her entire intellectual life as she portrayed it, was related to the fact that she saw individual lives as open-ended and infinitely ambiguous. Death didn't seem to her like a natural closure because life was so resistant to closure, so that the death of the body took on a rather arbitrary value. Her love for stories and languages, her gift for writing and interpretation, her endless fascination with and concern for other human beings were all about infusing mortal existence with meaning. *Moribondage,* seeing oneself and others not only as mortal but also as valuable in their mortality, is a gift unavailable to the immortal gods. In the end, it is a sacred gift reserved to living and dying beings like Elaine Marks.

NOTES

1. In Elaine's presidential address to the MLA in 1993, Proust is in fact one of the writers she mentions as sharing her "obsession" with the idea of "being dead forever and ever." See "Multiplicity and Mortality," 368.

2. I have used a more literal translation of the title of Proust's cycle, *A la recherche du temps perdu,* than the more frequent *Remembrance of Things Past,* which, while a lovely tribute to Shakespeare, completely deforms Proust's intentions. He himself was horrified by the title chosen for the English translation, which he learned of shortly before he died.

3. Bibesco, *Proust's Oriane,* 63. The original French title is *La Duchesse de Guermantes Laure de Sade, comtesse de Chevigné.*

4. I am very grateful to Dr. Marianne Schwob-Ferrara for allowing me free access to Elaine Marks's papers, which have now been donated to the Pembroke Center at Brown University.

5. The notes, like most of Elaine Marks's notes for courses, were in French: "Quel est le sens d'une vie humaine qui s'insère entre 2 néants? univers sans Dieu." "Quelle est la valeur de l'expérience humaine?" "l'ambiguïté et le mystère des personnages—Rien ne les explique de façon satisfaisante."

6. Brée, "Une Etude du style de Proust," 402. This and all translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

7. Francillon, "Proust und La Bruyère," 53.

8. Ibid., 58.

9. Brée, "Une Etude du style de Proust," 403–4.

10. Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*, 231.

11. La Bruyère, *Les Caractères.* Chapter headings are followed by La Bruyère's numbering of the texts and then page numbers. Further references will be given in the body of the text.

12. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past,* 3:52–53. Further references will be given in the body of the text.

13. Showalter, *The Evolution of the French Novel,* 50–51.

14. Francillon points this out: "In our eyes La Rochefoucauld's influence on Proust is very much smaller than La Bruyère's" ("Proust und La Bruyère," 61).

15. Quoted in André Ferré, *Les Années de collège de Marcel Proust,* 243.

16. For a more detailed discussion of the problem of the general and the particular in Swann's relationship with Odette, see my *Around Proust,* 67–79.

17. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* 14:255.

18. "Madame knows everything; Madame is worse than the X-rays" (*Remembrance of Things Past,* 1:58).

19. Francillon, "Proust und La Bruyère," 60.

20. The initial snub from Legrandin, who refuses to return Marcel's father's greeting at church, is announced on 1:129 of the Moncrieff-Kilmartin translation; after further strange behavior on Legrandin's part, the explanation is finally given on 1:140: "In a word, he was a snob."

Teaching Mourning and Desire in French Literature

ELAINE MARKS

I am fully aware of the apparently conservative ideology and program that inform this paper. Although I will not mention the multimedia classroom, nor the concerns voiced by Sven Birkets in his recent book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age,* I do recognize both the possible benefits and the anxieties related to our entry into the high-technology era. My purpose here, however, is not with how to handle or think about what is new, but how to do better or even differently what we do when we assign literary texts to be read by students and when we present, discuss, and teach them in a course that introduces literature written in French.

All the words in the title of this forum, MLA Teaching Forum, "Introduction to Literature in Foreign Language Programs," could bear considerable glossing. The most important for me is the word "introduction." I retain from *Webster's Third New International* the first obsolete definition: "a preliminary step: preparation." I also retain from Webster's: "initial instruction: a first lesson," "an initial anticipatory, explanatory, or promotional statement or set of remarks."

This paper is a prelude to what I hope will become a broader and considerably longer project, whose tentative title, in the wake of Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons,* is "French Teachers." The projected "ideal" and future book will bring together my abiding interest in French literature, autobiographical and biographical writings, pedagogical questions informed by the connections between desire, reading, teaching,

Elaine Marks, 1990s

and learning, and a study of the effects produced on readers in a variety of reading and studying situations by specific literary texts, including Marcel Proust's novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*], better known in English translation as *Remembrance of Things Past.* I hope to be able to raise those questions that will bring me closer to understanding why Proust's novel, for example, has had such an enduring impact on me and on so many other readers since its publication between 1913 and 1927; why it is not only a great novel, a revered classic, but also a thesaurus of human behavior and experiences, a source of revelations about human feelings and the world.

For this paper today, the hope of understanding is not less, but the focus is more modest. My question is how to introduce literary texts in French, how to prepare students to "experience" the kind of personal and intellectual understanding and pleasure about which the narrator writes on more than one occasion in *Swann's Way,* the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time.* My interest in the Proust text is not, as it was for Paul de Man in his essay on "Reading (Proust)" in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), in gaining "access to whatever Proust may have to say about reading," but rather what Proust may have to tell us about the impact of reading on the narrator, Marcel. My concern, therefore, is not only with the text but also with the reading situation. Who introduces the narrator and our (my) students to a particular text? What are the conditions of this introduction? What is the site of reading? What are the sites of discussion? And if I am not reading Proust on reading for the reasons that Paul de Man read Proust, neither am I reading pedagogically in the same way that Paul de Man reads as he tells us so explicitly in his essay "The Resistance to Theory," in the *Yale French Studies* issue *The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre* (1982):

> Overfacile opinion notwithstanding, teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved. The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly not personal; analogies between teaching and various aspects of show business or guidance counseling are more often than not excuses for having abdicated the task. Scholarship has, in principle, to be eminently teachable. (3)

I am not in complete disagreement with Paul de Man. How can one quarrel with the need to teach figures of rhetoric or narrative strategies? But I do challenge the opposition he affirms between "an intersubjective relationship between people" and "a cognitive process." I would

argue that both are necessarily and optimally involved in the teaching of literature. If I were to follow the didactic words of a "master" in the matter of how and why to teach literature, I would rather follow the invitation of Serge Doubrovsky in his presentation on "Qu'est-ce qu'un professeur de littérature essaie d'enseigner?" [What does a professor of literature try to teach?] in his introduction to the volume *L'Enseignement de la littérature* [*The Teaching of Literature*], published in 1971, co-edited with Tzvetan Todorov and based on a symposium at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1969. In this presentation, Serge Doubrovsky insists on the following:

> Whoever would equate the knowledge of an art with the knowledge of the internal laws of its functioning and the relations of external causality that govern the art would miss the essential: the intimate experience which is also the ultimate meaning of this kind of expression. I think one has to say it loudly and clearly, that in a period dominated by theoretical obsessions, the aesthetic experience, as etymology suggests, is of the order of feeling. . . . Whatever the breadth of his or her knowledge, a professor of literature is not a scientist: his or her teaching is not a sum of information. The truths that the professor transmits, the professor conveys them, and they can only be transmitted through the professor. They are not to be found in the results communicated, but rather in the very act of communication. (19–20, translation mine)

Serge Doubrovsky's argument carries him to Proust's text and to the very same passage I had in mind when I began thinking about how to focus this presentation. This passage occurs towards the beginning of *A la recherche du temps perdu,* when the narrator describes and analyzes the effects produced on him, as a child, by his mother's reading aloud to him in his bedroom from George Sand's novel *François le Champi.* Nothing, at first glance, could be further removed from the classroom situation than this scene, in which the child, unable to fall asleep, waits up for his parents who are entertaining guests in the garden, and is rewarded for his neurotic misbehavior by his mother's decision to spend the night in his bedroom. "Ce que je voulais maintenant c'était maman" [For what I wanted now was Mamma], writes Proust's narrator, and what he is given, through Mamma, is literature. During this night, different from all other nights, his mother reads to him from George Sand's novel about a young orphan boy and the miller's wife who takes him in, protects him, and later marries him. Certainly the classroom with twenty or more students is not a bedroom with male child and mother, and yet, as all teachers know, the classroom with teacher and individual students is often the scene of what Freud calls the process of transference. I would argue not only that it is, but that we as teachers

should tell our students that this is part, and an important part, of what will take place between them and the text, between them and the teacher, when we introduce them to literature in French:

Mamma sat down by my bed; she had chosen *François le Champi,* whose reddish cover and incomprehensible title gave it, for me, a distinct personality and a mysterious attraction. I had not then read any real novels. I had heard it said that George Sand was a typical novelist. This predisposed me to imagine that *François le Champi* contained something inexpressibly delicious. The narrative devices designed to arouse curiosity or melt to pity, certain modes of expression which disturb or sadden the reader, and which, with a little experience, he may recognize as common to a great many novels, seemed to me—for whom a new book was not one of a number of similar objects but, as it were, a unique person, absolutely self-contained—simply an intoxicating distillation of the peculiar essence of *François le Champi.* Beneath the everyday incidents, the ordinary objects and common words, I sensed a strange and individual tone of voice. The plot began to unfold: to me it seemed all the more obscure because in those days, when I read, I used often to daydream about something quite different for page after page. And the gaps which this habit left in my knowledge of the story were widened by the fact that when it was Mamma who was reading to me aloud she left all the love-scenes out. And so all the odd changes which take place in the relations between the miller's wife and the boy, changes which only the gradual dawning of love can explain, seemed to me steeped in a mystery the key to which (I readily believed) lay in that strange and mellifluous name of *Champi,* which invested the boy who bore it, I had no idea why, with its own vivid, ruddy, charming colour. If my mother was not a faithful reader, she was none the less an admirable one, when reading a work in which she found the note of true feeling, in the respectful simplicity of her interpretation and the beauty and sweetness of her voice. Even in ordinary life, when it was not works of art but men and women whom she was moved to pity or to admire, it was touching to observe with what deference she would banish from her voice, her gestures, from her whole conversation, now the note of gaiety which might have distressed some mother who had once lost a child, now the recollection of an event or anniversary which might have reminded some old gentleman of the burden of his years, now the household topic which might have bored some young man of letters. And so, when she read aloud the prose of George Sand, prose which is everywhere redolent of that generosity and moral distinction which Mamma learned from my grandmother to place above all other qualities in life, and which I was not to teach her until much later to refrain from placing above all other qualities in literature too, taking pains to banish from her voice any pettiness or affectation which might have choked that powerful stream of language, she supplied all the natural tenderness, all the lavish sweetness which they demanded to sentences which seemed to have been composed for

her voice and which were all, so to speak, within the compass of her sensibility. She found to tackle them in the required tone, the warmth of feeling which preexisted and dictated them, but which is not to be found in the words themselves, and by this means she smoothed away, as she read, any harshness or discordance in the tenses of verbs, endowing the imperfect and the preterite with all the sweetness to be found in generosity, all the melancholy to be found in love, guiding the sentence that was drawing to a close towards the one that was about to begin, now hastening, now slackening the pace of the syllables so as to bring them, despite their differences of quantity, into a uniform rhythm, and breathing into this quite ordinary prose a kind of emotional life and continuity. (Moncrieff and Kilmartin translation, 1:44–46)

Such is then the scene of reading between mother and son in Proust's novel. I quoted it in its entirety because I wanted you to note several aspects of the scene: the details of the setting; the child's introduction to the novel and to the narrative devices used by the novelist; the impact on the child of the mother's reading; the narrator's analysis of the impact; the narrator's analysis of the theories that direct the mother's manner of reading; the importance of the effects produced on the child by the sound of the word "Champi"; the narrator's naming of his pedagogical role, at a later date, in relation to his mother. I quoted it in its entirety because in so doing I hoped to replicate in some small measure the effects on an audience of reading aloud. I also quoted it in its entirety because it seems to me to be an ideal opening text to assign for an introductory French literature class, not merely for a paper about such a class. Alas, however, I had to quote it in English translation today; but those of us who teach French know that our students, male and female, are in a French literature class because of a strong, almost obsessive passion, not necessarily for literature, but almost always for the sounds of French.

Desire and mourning are what dominate in this passage, desire and mourning for the mother, desire and mourning displaced from the mother onto George Sand's novel, *François le Champi,* and also reproduced in the story of *François le Champi.* Desire and mourning are feelings and concepts that organize what literary texts are most often about and what the reading experience most often elicits in readers. But desire and mourning are also for our students in introductory literature classes among the most difficult and frightening feelings to articulate in public. The study of a passage such as the one I have just read aloud, a passage that describes and analyzes an introduction to literature, can teach students how to translate their reading experience into a

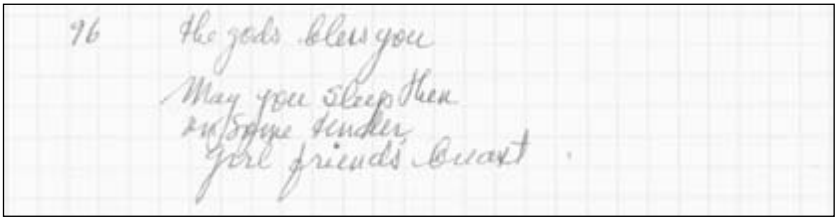
privileged moment in the classroom. But this teaching can only occur with adequate and generous assistance from the teacher. By adequate and generous, I mean that the teacher must be willing to communicate, to perform desire and mourning, perhaps to become the object of the students' desire and mourning. This passage from Proust illustrates and supports Serge Doubrovsky's contention that literature in the classroom is carried by the teacher, actor and whatever else, a human presence, bearer of the text in a unique manner. As in Proust's text, the mother, then the narrator, are bearers of George Sand's text. Desire and mourning are carried by the "French teacher" (for example the narrator's mother) and in back of the French teacher looms the presence of the author-narrator, "Marcel Proust," the ultimate French teacher.

I think it is important for the "French teacher" in the French literature classroom to accept the awesome responsibilities that go along with "introducing" French literature. These responsibilities include more than teaching the appropriate terms and concepts for the study of narrative, poetry, theatre, and the essay, more than teaching the appropriate contexts: linguistic, historical, social, philosophical. All of the above goes without saying. But what we have sometimes lost, whether deliberately or unconsciously, whether as part of our greater sophistication in the analysis, decoding and deconstructing of texts, are the depths of feeling that literary texts can arouse as we and our students read, whether alone or in a classroom. In Proust's words again: "all the joys and sorrows in the world, a few of which only we should have to spend years of our actual life in getting to know, and the most intense of which would never be revealed to us because the slow course of their development prevents us from perceiving them" (92).

My goal then is to teach openness to the kind of reading and the recognition of the effects of reading about which Proust's narrator writes. In order to do this, in order to alert students to the possibility of such feelings being aroused in them, it is important to prepare the terrain and to show them the way. Proust's passage, particularly in French, is an excellent introduction to an "Introduction to French Literature." It points to the teacher as the bearer of the text and suggests that the effects produced on the child (or the students) by the reading are displacements of desire and mourning for the mother (or the teacher). The teaching of French literature is thus inseparable from the recognition of desire and mourning in the triangular relationship that brings together the student, the teacher, and the literary text.

NOTES

This paper was given on December 28, 1994, as part of a teaching forum entitled "Introduction to Literature in Foreign Language Programs" at the 1994 MLA Convention in San Diego.



Sappho, fragment 96, translation by Mary Barnard, copied by Elaine Marks into a notebook in 2000 or 2001 (reproduced by permission of Brown University Library).

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This bibliography is not exhaustive. I have not included book reviews or short encyclopedia articles, and there may be publications of which I am unaware.

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