Telling Lives

TOWARDS A THEORY OF FEMINIST BIOGRAPHY

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What exactly is a feminist biography, and what is its project? Since roughly 1970, with the publication of Nancy Milford's *Zelda* (Epstein 336, Heilbrun 12), women have begun telling the stories of each other's lives in biographies in increasing numbers, reclaiming lost pasts, recreating their foremothers, and revising traditional stories of women as seen through the lens of a feminist consciousness. One critic announced this increased interest in women's individual histories as "the emergence of a motivated subgenre powerful enough to have an impact in literary history" (Epstein 336). This paper attempts to define, in some measure, the project of feminist biography as it differs from more traditional forms of biography and to investigate the problems of its practice. What new models do feminist biographers offer, and what pitfalls do they encounter? Does the genre become further complicated or clarified by the addition of a feminist perspective? Does the new lens suddenly focus the field of vision so as to restore and reflect women's (or men's) lives, or does this new angle distort and obscure them once again? When focused upon women, is feminist biography an act of rescue or yet another appropriation of their lives?

For the purposes of this article, "feminist" will be defined in Nancy Miller's words as "a self-consciousness about women's identity both as inherited cultural fact and as process of social construction" and as a "protest against the available fiction of female becoming" (Heilbrun 18). Biography will be defined as both the complicated record and construction of one person's life by another, and here will focus on feminist biographers writing about women. First, this paper considers feminist models of biographical representation which privilege subjectivity over objectivity and value "women's culture," or private culture, alongside public or "male" culture and the conflicts these models produce, and second, it considers how feminist biography recovers a female history of contradiction, embodying as it does "exceptional" lives.

As a genre poised between fiction and fact, biography has long proven to be a problematic form of representation. Whose story gets told--the author's or the subject's? All biographers, feminist or not, must seek a critical balance between the evidence a life offers and the assumptions she or he makes about that life. This "critical balance" is no easy target, for what determines the "proper distance" from one's subject? William Zinsser comments in his introduction to *Extraordinary Lives*, a collection of six biographers' essays on biography:

> *...can the biographer trust his objectivity after years of round-the-clock living with a saint who turns out to be only human? ...The relationship between the biographers and his subject is the most intimate one in the world of letters, both affectionate and adversarial, as delicately strung with tensions as a long marriage"* (18)

Both the essays within this book and those by feminist biographers in Ascher, DeSalvo, and Ruddick's *Between Women* speak of the troublesome love-hate relationship between writer and subject and the difficult tension between intimacy and objectivity. With too much closeness, the biographer risks adulation or narcis-

sistic identification; with too much distance, she or he risks not maintaining what one feminist biographer called the "disciplined empathy" (Hall 26) essential to recovering a life.

For some biographers, feminist biography offers a revalorization of the biographer-subject relationship, invoking the writer's subjectivity as a source for insight rather than as a hindrance to "objective truth," unlike its traditional predecessor. Elizabeth Kamark Minnich, in a review essay on three feminist biographies on Simone de Beauvoir, Olive Schreiner, and Hannah Arendt, calls this new model "friendship" and sees this "reciprocity" between author and subject as a source for understanding and connection to both women. Minnich writes:

> *An achieved and genuine reciprocity between subject and author on the model of friendship precludes suppression of self in the name of a falsely abstracted nonrelational objectivity not only for the author, but also for readers of the biography. If a biographer has struggled with her relation to her subject such that, finally, the relation informs the biography and is available within the text to help us interpret the life as written, it should be easier for us, the readers, to achieve...a relation of mutuality, equality, and familiarity with our foremothers [which may allow] ...a new relation...of woman to woman across time and cultures, helping to create the public space so long denied us.* (287-88)

How does "relational objectivity" manifest itself? Carol Ascher's biography of Simone de Beauvoir foregrounds the biographer's subjectivity by writing her struggle with de Beauvoir directly into her text. In the center of her biography, Ascher writes an open personal letter to de Beauvoir, struggling to make her relationship to de Beauvoir a reciprocal one, writes Minnich. In other words, Ascher will not make de Beauvoir into a role model or mother figure in order to fulfill her desires, nor will she uncritically accept what de Beauvoir writes at face value (289). In an unusual approach, Ascher places her conflict with de Beauvoir directly before the reader's eyes. In her biography,she writes:

> *In your relationship with Sartre can the reader really be expected to believe that the two of you have "only once gone to sleep at night disunited"? After all your descriptions of bewildering, lost, or angry days, isn't this an example of the idealism you yourself rail against? It is as if you must put a stamp or seal on your memories in order to go on. But the seal simplifies the honest profusion of your life, and draws me to focus on its apparent dishonesty rather than on the wonderful honesty of the remainder of the passages.* (Minnich 289)

According to Minnich, Ascher's efforts lead us to give up "awe" for "friendship" with her subject (290), and Minnich finds in Ascher's efforts "a struggle to admire as an equal" (290), the precondition of friendship.

By maintaining such an equality, not of lives or experiences but in the balance of the conversation between the two by Ascher's blatant positioning of herself in the text, Ascher may give the reader a more complicated version of de Beauvoir, one that allows the reader access to her subject in a way other biographies might not. Of course, such authorial intrusion risks other problems such as diverting the focus from de Beauvoir where it properly belongs and resting it too much upon Ascher whose life we may or may not want to read about. Ascher herself questions her effort, yet feels the risk was worthwhile. She writes:

> *Sometimes I wince at whatever aesthetic judgment allowed me to place [my personal letter] there, whatever I thought of its value as truth. Why couldn't I have written a book whose clear, sleek surface lay unbroken, invulnerable, unruffled by the squirms of a conflicted "I"? The "I" of a woman still seems so much more naked on the page than that of a man. ...But then I imagine a new aesthetic...in which people, including myself, are more at ease with closeness, with uncertainty about truth, and with the confusing mix of subject and object that constitutes what is finally there to be seen....* (Between Women 102)

Echoing Ascher's discomfort, Minnich also comments, "the level of self-consciousness is almost too much," finding Ascher's efforts made her feel somewhat "claustrophobic" (291). But

in some senses, we always read the story of the author as well as the story of biographer even when she or he attempts to write an "invulnerable" or "unruffled" work. Perhaps making the two voices more distinct as Ascher attempts to do actually allows the readers, the subject, the writer, and finally, the text, more freedom. While Ascher's aesthetic form clearly poses new questions, its feminist premise of mutuality and equality challenges the clean subject/object division of traditional biography.

The foregrounding of the biographer's subjectivity which Minnich found valuable (while problematic) in Ascher's work is also emphasized by Belle Gale Chevigny, a biographer of Margaret Fuller (Between Women 357). Chevigny speaks candidly of the hazards, especially for feminists seeking role models, of excessive identification with one's subject when writing a biography (359). While admitting this problem is not peculiar to feminist biographers, she writes that:

> *the...stress that feminist theory has laid on the personal, the confusions about the role of the personal in our theory, the urgency and the fervor associated with a movement to redress historical and current injustice--all make feminist biographers of women more susceptible to uncritical identification.* (359)

While critical of the problems associated with identification, Chevigny, like Minnich, sees the biographer's subjective involvement as creative and further finds such an "embrace" between author and subject as potentially enabling to both.

While doing her research on Fuller, Chevigny found that "Being accurate about Fuller became identical with caring for her" (368) and at first, because of her belief in Fuller's "right to speak for herself" (369) born out of Chevigny's respect for her, she felt committed to "treat interpretation as speculation and offer multiple interpretations when possible" (369). As gaps in the historical record created silences, and contradictions became apparent, Chevigny found herself relying more and more on her "intuitive understanding and...privileged sense of familiarity" (369), both grounded upon an empathy she still finds appropriate. But later, giving a talk on Fuller once the book was published, Chevigny experienced an overwhelming fear she had appropriated Fuller's life, somehow had taken responsibility for it in a way that was "a trespass or usurpation" (371).

Chevigny believes she found in the biographer-subject dyad a reproduction of the mother-daughter dyad and its obstacles as outlined by Nancy Chodorow's theories in The Reproduction of Mothering. She writes:

> *Our difficulty in knowing our mothers dominates us as daughters and, to some extent, blocks our growth and self-knowledge [according to Chodorow]. I am convinced that when, as daughters writing, we are moved to study a foremother, we are grappling with some aspect of this ignorance which is so costly to ourselves.* (372)

Chevigny believes her interest in Fuller had as much to do with her own personal development as it did with her professional interest, an intersection she doubts is uncommon for feminist biographers. The danger of such grappling, as Chevigny sees it, is that feminist biographers risk creating "maternal, mirroring sanctions and precedents" (372) in their biographies.

While cognizant of its risks, Chevigny finds in the biographer-subject connection a positive effect. She writes that unlike common familial experience in which nurturing and authority often divide along gender lines, and unlike social experience afterwards which continues the split, Chevigny believes the "experience of women writing about women" through which both women "authorize" each other provides an alternative model which does not split those aspects of the self in two (373). For Chevigny, both women, the biographer and subject, are "surrogate mothers," validating each other's autonomy without the conflicts that afflict the biological bond (373). Separation, afforded by the distance of time and history, the difference in backgrounds, the use of documents instead of conversations, makes the processes different ones.

Whether Chevigny's experiences mirror those of other feminist biographers or not, or whether or not one accepts Chodorow's theories, seems irrelevant to the validity of her warnings. Since the genre began, biographers of both genders have spoken of being haunted by their subjects, almost as if they were living presences in their lives. "When I taught Emily

Dickinson's poetry at Yale in the 1930s, I had no idea she would one day run my life," writes Richard B. Sewall (65) in *Extraordinary Lives.* Writing any kind of book has often been likened to giving birth to a child--whether by male or female authors. Giving "birth" to a "life" in a biography, especially when that person is no longer available for rebuttal or comment, and when the author who writes this book or this life often regards it as part of his or her self-expression of his or her life, clearly always risks that appropriation will accompany rescue. Perhaps, given the silence about women's history and the renewed desire among biographers, historians, sociologists, and other feminist scholars to recreate that history and find foremothers for female experience, feminist biographers need to be particularly sensitive to the peril of creating role models rather than representing their subjects with all their rich human ambiguity and ambivalence. Perhaps, as Chevigny argues, when both author and subject are women, a greater vigilance about psychological enmeshment accompanies the biographical project; but this seems to suggest women's inherent capacities for autonomy are more problematic, or least more complicated, a risky conclusion itself. Possibly what feminist biography contributes is that a greater awareness of one's subjectivity allows both a rich interpretative context and carries with it a fierce need for vigilance in seeking the problematic "truth" for all biographers. Chevigny writes:

> *How can we be sure that this giving and gaining of autonomy in the act of biography, does not distort our subject? We cannot be sure. Our interpretation will surely bear the mark of ourselves. But we will distort our subjects proportionally less as we recognize our identification and use and then move beyond it.* (374)

Identification endangers the project, then, when it remains uncritical, violating the individuality of both author and subject when their differences remain unexamined.

Feminist biography--because as a genre it participates in the traditional transmission of culture and by its nature focuses upon exceptional women rather than female life--risks promoting patriarchal codes of value,emphasizing public achievement over personal life, thereby reinscribing the hierarchy which has placed women at the bottom. One way to alter this practice and offer a new biographical model involves a reinterpretation of the categories that constitute female life. Feminist biography, argues Deborah Kaplan in "The Disappearance of the Woman Writer: Jane Austen and her Biographers," needs to examine the relationship between public and private in women's lives since women have long dominated the private sphere and centered their attentions there. We must decode the private world of "woman's culture," Kaplan suggests, in order to fully understand women of the past, privileging the relationship between public and private in biographies as it was not in their lives.

In her article, Kaplan demonstrates how three nineteenth century biographies align women with the private sphere and the private sphere with insignificance (130). Kaplan states that all three biographers orchestrate the disappearance of the woman writer by taking a woman with public achievements and asserting she should be admired for her private life, her domesticity (132)--(a gesture Elizabeth Gaskell repeats in her biography of Charlotte Bronte as well). One Austen biographer writes: "[Austen's] intellectual qualities did not prevent...attention to the most domestic duties" (140). Further, writes Kaplan, these biographers believed that "domesticity was a sphere without incidents" (130), and hence read Austen's life as one in which "nothing happens."

What kind of disruptive force does feminist biography offer to this hegemony? Kaplan argues that feminist scholarship changes the nature of the questions historians ask of woman's experience, challenging the cultural codes by which biographies are written (145). Recent biographies of Austen also fail, says Kaplan, because they build upon the nineteenth century valorization of domesticity and fail to evaluate her life "from a woman-centered point of view" (144). Kaplan writes:

> *If the term domesticity has conveyed women's experience as other--as that which is not-men and not-history--the revisionary concept of woman's culture expresses the difference rather than the negative otherness of women's experience. It illuminates women's alternative values and desires, their self-assertiveness, and their awareness of their ties to other women.* (144)

If we accept this revalorization of women's experience, of Austen's domestic life as "woman's culture" rather than as "uneventful life," Kaplan advocates that we will understand Austen differently as a writer because of our increased regard for what her private writing, her letters or poetry, which she wrote for "woman's culture" rather than for the public, meant to her. While Austen recorded little about her novel composition, she wrote a great deal about how she composed letters and how she felt about them (145). Perhaps an analysis of how these public and private writings intersect or contradict each other might inform us about who Austen as woman, as writer, and as a person inhabiting both public and private spheres really was, says Kaplan. Of course, this raises the question, do we, as feminists, value Austen's private achievements as much as her public ones? But, at the very least, even if Austen's public works should prove more compelling than her private ones, such analysis challenges the public/private divide of patriarchal practice, stressing connection rather than division.

Whether feminist biographers heighten their own subjectivity to find the "truth" of a woman's life or refocus the direction of their projects by emphasizing "women's culture," feminist biography faces a contradiction in its project as it retrieves women's lives. Almost by definition, women chosen by biographers have lived exceptional lives, that is, they have trespassed onto male terrain, garnering power in the public sphere in "male" professions or generating scandal for not behaving "as women do." When seeking a female "tradition," then, what one finds, as Myra Jehlen has written, is:

> *not actual independence but action despite dependence--and not a self-defined female culture either, but a sub-culture born out of oppression and either stunted or victorious only at often-fatal cost.* (Heilbrun 17)

A "rescue" of a woman's life understood in these terms becomes a reconstruction of the split that afflicts women who dared to challenge male definitions of their lives. The split can be either psychological, that is, her self-division about her "roles" or identity because she is a woman, or social, that is, her physical separation from other women or from "female" life. The effort to understand a woman's life becomes, of necessity, an effort to understand the forces which kept her in self-division: consigned to and defined by the private sphere, yet driven to act in the public one; a woman who palpably affected history often, by historical definition, is not a "woman." In this sense, her history tells us not who we were, but rather who we were not, which she by her "exceptional" life demonstrates. Collecting the "facts," then, on such women must entail a willingness to read the contradiction their lives embody and a commitment to their representation. While on one level such a biography contributes to women's history, on another the subject, by her very achievement and autonomy, steps outside any tradition that could be called female. The biographical subject represents only herself, or the fiction of herself created by the biographer, but she does not represent mainstream female life, because, bound by patriarchal norms, ordinary women stood outside cultural life and discourse.

Yet despite these difficulties, for many feminist biographers, feminist biography achieves several goals. The individual lives retold in texts do allow a recovery of our foremothers whose lives were unrecognized, erased, forgotten, or misrepresented--however imperfect. The biography itself, by its existence in the public domain, breaks the silence about individual women's experiences, adding to the collective history of women. Further, feminist biography helps redefine both literary and historical stereotypes by describing how women have been confined, constrained, defined, and contained by male definitions of who or what "woman" must be at any moment in history (Trofimenkoff 4). Finally, as feminist biography recovers the particulars of one woman's life and analyzes the patriarchal codes through which that life has been lived, it not only tells women's her-story but also changes his-story.

Turning back to the question with which this article began, "is feminist biography an act of appropriation or an act of rescue" the answer, like many contemporary answers, embodies a paradox. As women's lives are retrieved from history and told with all their complicating contradictions, they speak against and rewrite our patriarchal past. When doing so, feminist biographers will uncover women who, in order to be remarkable, denied or betrayed their allegiances to other women. In the pursuit of a tradition, feminist biographers may discover

a tradition of exceptions, but in so doing, they will uncover what some real women really did as well as how they were historically constructed. As biographers find women of the public sphere, they can try to break the silence of "woman's culture" in the private sphere to hear what it has to tell. Whether they work with the classical model of objectivity, placing themselves as much as possible outside the text, or a feminist model of friendship or reciprocity, or any model that heightens subjectivity or a self-conscious authorial presence in the text, they will have to balance evidence and intuition, vigilant against reinscribing the patriarchal crime, that of imposing their own feminist views or ideology or seeking to fulfill their own desires or needs through the other woman. The theory of feminist biography, like feminist theory in general, encodes no finite set of beliefs or values, but it does offer a new perspective on a genre that has traditionally been defined by and controlled by and used by men to advance their purposes. As women retrieve women's lives and record the conflicts that being woman in a man's world entails, Perhaps they will empower us to redefine "woman"; perhaps their modeling will alter literary history and thereby help change our world. In the words of feminist biographer Jacquelyn Dowd Hall:

> *I suspect, in any case, that second readings come with the territory of feminist biography. We have challenged the illusion of objectivity and given up on the arrogance that we can, once and for all, get our foremothers right. That leaves us with a wonderful freedom. At each new stage we are free to reenvision and revise.* (35)

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I
startle
the haired earth
walk
the paved road
a flea
on a scar
on an old dog's
back.

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