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READING SPACES

Nancy K. Miller

“But enough about me, what do you think
of my memoir?”

In the early fall of 1990, a *New Yorker* cartoon showed two men in hard hats chatting in a lumber yard. One says to the other, “Well, Al, the sixties was *peace*. The seventies was *sex*. The eighties was *money*. Maybe the nineties will be *lumber*.”¹ Throughout the nineties, like the hard hats, media pundits searched for the right way to characterize the decade. Presidentially speaking, if the eighties were Reagan and corporate greed, the nineties were Clinton, the stock market, and Internet mania. (Maybe Clinton IS Reagan, as *The New York Times* has recently speculated.)² Of course, the Clinton era will go down in history not just for the halcyon days of an endlessly touted national prosperity and the birth of dot-com culture, but also for a paroxysm of personal exposure: making the private public to a degree startling even in a climate of over-the-top self-revelation. If Clinton’s performances stood the feminist dictum of the personal being the political on its head, the impulse of ask and tell was in no way unique. And not being shocked was, well, very nineties.

In academia, going public as a private subject was equally in vogue as a kind of fin-de-siècle gasp of self-exploration, with roots, arguably, in an earlier feminist critique of universal values. Personal criticism and autobiographical acts—sometimes described by the neologism “autocritography”—flourished in the 1990s, only to be diagnosed at one point by a disgruntled self-designated feminist critic as the “nouveau solipsism.”³ Perhaps not surprisingly, the popularity of what was sometimes labeled confessional criticism was matched only by a high-minded resistance to it that often took the form of rather personalized attacks on its proponents. But on the more positive side, a shrewd critic of shifting academic trends has recently recast the vogue of personal criticism as the “new belletrism”—a mode of writing keyed to a “reconfiguration of audience and audience expectation.”⁴ On this

reading, the new belletrism represents a “*journalization* of academic criticism” produced by a post-Theory generation of cultural critics (429). Moving along parallel tracks, the academic field of autobiography studies has generated a staggering amount of critical literature, including an MLA division on Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing, which in turn has resulted in a significant degree of legitimation in the university—albeit to mixed reviews: for some a cause of celebration, for others an occasion to mourn the loss of literary standards, critical objectivity, and philosophical rigor. Belletrism, of course, with its overtones of stylish self-indulgence, is a dubious distinction for this last group.

Since the accusation of “nouveau solipsism” was a poison arrow directed (though not solely) at me, I’d like to reopen the discussion starting from a pointedly different view of what’s at stake in self-writing today. And here I’m going to move away from criticism produced for the academy to writing designed, like that of belletristic criticism, for a less specialized audience, that of memoir readers. At the risk of earning this charge of solipsism, not to say wound licking, I will refer briefly to my work on contemporary memoirs, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death*.⁵ It was the work on this (very nineties) book which convinced me that like personal criticism, the genre of the memoir is not about terminal “moi-ism,” as it’s been called, but rather a rendez-vous, as it were, with the other. (There would be an essay to be written here about the use of French terms—nouveau solipsism, belletrism, not to mention memoir itself—to cast opprobrium upon what appears to be an American emotional style of self-reference.)⁶

In the memoirs I consider—Philip Roth’s *Patrimony*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *A Very Easy Death*, Susan Cheever’s *Home Before Dark*, to name the better-known examples—the author, typically a writer who has entered middle age, revisits the experience of losing a parent, often through a long illness and a prolonged period of caretaking. In these narratives of loss, there are always quite distinctly at least two subjects: the writing child and the dying parent. It became clear to me after being immersed for several years in the world of memorialization that this relational model binding self to other historically has shaped the narrative of most autobiographical experience, beginning with St. Augustine and Monica, whose death, we might say, engenders the *Confessions*. (Fortunately the relational bond does not require death in the formation of autobiographical subjectivity!) Feminist literary critics and theorists argued persuasively that this sense of relational identity characterized women’s lives in general and life writing in particular; I believe this is largely true. Still, it’s no less true, I want to suggest, that in postmodern culture the writing autobiographical subject—female or male—always requires a partner in crime.⁷ Put an-

other way, it takes two to make an autobiography, to perform an autobiographical act.

Now what if this relational mode that I kept finding wherever I looked within autobiographical texts was also the model of relation that organized the experience of *reading* of autobiography itself?⁸ I want to consider the kinds of bonds and desires that connect readers to the contemporary memoir, which may well be the most important narrative mode of our contemporary culture—written in English, at least. In other words, what seems to be going on between memoir writers and their readers is a relational act that creates identifications (which include disidentifications and cross-identifications), conscious or unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience. Although some degree of identification is typically present in reading prose narrative—fiction or non-fiction—memoir reading can't do without it. That's the claim I am making in this essay. While I'm out there on the precarious limb of interpretation, I'll make a corollary and even less provable claim: it's precisely the heightened process of identification that sends readers to the biography section (which is where you have to go to find autobiography) in such large numbers. (The other side of this desire is the author's wish to be—somehow—encountered in this way, found on that particular shelf.) I may be wrong about this operation in the case of every reader or writer, of course, but in the main, I think, this story of reading is not completely without merit. At any rate, this is *my* modus operandi and perhaps what follows will persuade you.

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How do you remember your life? How can you even tell it's your life, and not that of your tribe? In *The Woman Warrior*, her classic memoir about growing up Chinese American in postwar California, Maxine Hong Kingston puts the problem this way: “when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?”⁹ How, I ask myself in translation, can I separate the story of my life from that of any nice Jewish girl who grew up middle-class in New York in the 1950s? Like the movies, other people's memories sometimes overwhelm your own—if you're not careful to remember the differences.

I confronted these issues a few years ago when I tried to write a memoir. I still have a file of color-coded folders in my drawers, containing as many drafts as the rainbow, but I never got it right. Mainly the memoir suffered from the habits of a long academic life. Beyond the pull of the CV, I found myself irresistibly drawn to what in grad-

uate school we were trained to call the intertext: the world of other texts like the one you happened to be reading that sit in your head like books shelved in the library stacks. How could I write about me without invoking the literary culture that had nourished me to support the experience of my wannabe memoir? But here's where the syndrome reveals its double edge. When you read the lives of others, you can't help but remember your own: your parents, your love affairs, your ambitions. The traffic of egos, we might say, moves along a two-way street.¹⁰

In this kind of reading what matters is what's kept alive—or produced—in the exchange. Such an exchange is what follows: a performance on the page reading-memoir-writing along these lines. My goals are two: first, to offer a defense against the charges of navel-gazing regularly leveled against the genre; and second, to suggest that however solitary, memoir reading, like memoir writing, participates in an important form of collective memorialization, providing building blocks to a more fully shared national narrative. Since the connections between a reader's life and a writer's text are often more easily seen in the case of memoirs that emerge from the experience of a generation, I've chosen memoirs from a generation that almost overlaps with my own: Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* and Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones*.¹¹ Both tell a coming-of-age story in Manhattan during the 1950s, when New York, especially Greenwich Village, was home to an astonishing number of ambitious young people seduced by the same dream.

In her prizewinning 1983 memoir, Joyce Johnson wittily relates the adventure of a rebellious female adolescent who fell in with a group of writers who were about to become very famous. Here's a shorthand version of how Joyce met the Beats.

In 1951, after graduation from Hunter College High School, a competitive school for girls, Joyce, then Glassman, set out for her freshman year at Barnard College. She was not quite sixteen. Her parents lived around the corner from the Barnard Campus on 116th Street and so she lived at home, not in a dorm, which cramped her sexual style. Restless in school, and avid for experience, Joyce scandalously escaped from parental control by moving out to live on her own without finishing her senior year. But here's the thing that made her more than just another female rebel without a cause. Fixed up on a blind date by Allen Ginsberg, a former Columbia student, Joyce met Jack Kerouac, another Columbia boy, and for a while became his girlfriend; Joyce was with Jack when *On the Road* was published in 1957. Joyce walked at midnight to the newsstand with Jack to read the review that brought him fame and put the word Beat into media currency. The sub-title on the cover of Johnson's memoir when it was republished

in paperback in 1990 emphasizes that connection: *A Young Woman's Coming of Age in the Beat Generation*.

When I first read *Minor Characters* I had an eerie tingling of identification, of me too and what if. . . . Six years after Joyce headed for Barnard, another rebellious middle-class girl, me, followed those same steps and the same logic (though I was, I confess, already sixteen). I lived eleven blocks further south on Riverside Drive and lived miserably at home while at school. I too had gone to horrible Hunter College High School. Like Joyce I knew, by the time I was a senior, that what I wanted to learn was not to be found grubbing grades in our all-girls' school, and that "Real Life" (as she named the universe of her desire) was elsewhere. "Real Life," Johnson quips, was "not to be found in the streets around my house, or anywhere on the Upper West Side. . . . Real Life was Sexual" (31). This Real Life was the opposite of what my parents called the Real World, by way of discouraging any fantasies of sexual experience. This Real Life, which my parents (like Joyce's) strenuously inveighed against, sent the curious downtown in disguise on the subway of desire that takes you to the Village.

Now if I had only gone to Barnard six years earlier, would I have run into Jack Kerouac instead of my Columbia boyfriend? Hung out with Ginsberg and the Beats? Written a famous memoir? How much more exciting life might have been, if only. And sometimes you come close. You narrow the degrees of separation. (A friend of mine, who went to Barnard around the time that Joyce and her pals did, likes to tell a story about being introduced to Kerouac at the home of a Yale professor while she was in graduate school, but turning down Jack's casual offer, without preliminaries, to "go upstairs.")

It's kind of like prescription drugs: she's the brand name, you're the generic. Still, am I so wrong to be seduced by the resemblance? Set Jack aside, for the moment. I recognize myself fleetingly but intensely in Joyce's most important woman friend in the memoir, Elise Cowen, whose sad story closes the volume. Elise hooks up briefly with a sensitive young man, Keith Gibbs, a student of Lionel Trilling, a would-be poet with "the wisp of a little mustache" (265). Keith Gibbs! I scrawl in the margins. I knew him too! I dated his brother. (Lots of exclamation points on these pages.) Anyway, Keith found Elise appealing. "He came upstairs with her that night" (266), Johnson writes of the first meeting between the two on the Lower East Side.

I knew Keith Gibbs slightly because I hung out briefly with his younger brother, Tam. The Gibbs brothers were from California, which gave them an ineffable glamour in New York. Like Keith, Tam had a wispy mustache beneath his snub nose, which he used to stroke provocatively. Tam wore cowboy boots and at the Folksinging Club played folk music on the guitar while he sang and looked deeply into

your eyes. One day, after an informal concert at the club, Tam offered to give me free guitar lessons—in his room. I wanted to play too, even if I couldn't sing. Folk music seemed irresistibly sexy in 1957, like disco in the 1980s, only in reverse garb. You'd pull on your jeans—not yet a designer item but rather the mark of some small claim to rebellion—a pair of dirty sneakers, possibly torn in a couple of places, a black turtleneck, and head down to a concert at Carnegie Hall. Preferably at midnight. My parents vetoed the private lessons.

Anyway, Elise and Keith briefly live together in Berkeley, and in a letter Elise tells Joyce of their plans to go to Mexico, a favorite Beat destination. They never make the trip, and a few years later Elise kills herself in New York, jumping from the window of her parents' apartment. During one of the druggy downtown years before her suicide, she had typed Ginsberg's *Kaddish* for him. Elise ends up a character both in Joyce Johnson's memoir and in Allen Ginsberg's journal, where she gets added to his list of the dead. "Elise was a moment in Allen's life. In Elise's life," Johnson remarks sadly, "Allen was an eternity" (82). And remembers the doomed practice of loving the wrong man—even if he was an amazing poet.

"Alone / Weeping / I woke weeping / Alone / In black park of bed" (271). A friend of Elise found these lines in a notebook after her death. The dark misery of the lines seems familiar. While still in high school, I had composed a sequence of cinquains called "Reflections at Sixteen." One of them sounds remarkably like Elise's lament. "Sitting / In the waiting / Room of Life, I wonder: / Will love come in time to save me / From night?" (If publishing this isn't bravery, what is?) Like Emma Bovary, who, when young, read many books that had set her yearning, holed up in the tiny maid's room of my parents' apartment, I too was desperately waiting for something to happen. I check out my scars, the traces of my own death wishes, but I'm also caught up in another kind of identification. All these girls draped in black, waiting. Looking back, I suddenly feel close to these girls dying from love, or wishing to; the frustration or the madness of not knowing what to do with their ambition and anger.

This is why sometimes I can no longer tell what's my life and what's the memory bizz.

Over and over again *Minor Characters* lures me into pathways back to my past life that I had consigned to oblivion and now find hard to resist. This also makes my own experience feel more meaningful: not "merely" personal but part of the bigger picture of cultural memory. For despite the unmistakably generational resemblances, this shared feeling is not simply the literal biographical hook of coincidence—hey, I knew him too—that condenses the degrees of separation. Rather, this is the memory of the zeitgeist at work, the sprawl of cultural memory that pulls your personal reminiscence into its domain.

When you read a memoir that has already given a life something like yours a shape, the shape and ethos of a generation—in my case, Manhattan, the 1950s, places where I went to school, Barnard, Columbia—it gets harder to hold onto your sense of self-possession; the boundaries of your past self may start to blur around the edges.

But paradoxically, this loss can produce a gain: you can seize what it is that escapes the grid. Another's text can give you back your life. Memoir reading works like a kind of interactive remembering—where the screen prompts the construction of memory itself.

For instance, in her narrative of a girl's apprenticeship to writing, which *Minor Characters* also is, Johnson revisits a creative writing seminar at Barnard with Professor X. As she describes him, X is a "middle-aged man, who no doubt wishes he were standing before a class at Harvard. . . ." "How many of you girls want to be writers?" he asks in a "tone as dry as the crackers in the American cultural barrel" (84). All the hands go up, including some sporting engagement rings. It's 1953. "The air is thick," she writes, "with the uneasiness of the girl students." At the sight of this avowed nervous collective female ambition, Professor X hits his stride. How wrong they are. If they were going to be writers, they wouldn't have signed up for his class. They wouldn't even be in school. "You'd be hopping freight trains, riding through America" (85). The hands go down. You have to get going if you want to write the great American novel, hit the road like Jack, not sit home like a modern-day Penelope—or Joyce.

Four years later, at Barnard in Freshman English, I encountered Professor Y, who adopted a subtler style of discouragement. At the end of the year I went to see Professor Y. He had given me an A- for the last exercise of the year, a short story in which I don't lose my virginity. (My parents, like Joyce's, exhorted us to preserve our virginity with an almost maniacal intensity.) I wanted to know how to become a writer. "Read the Russians and keep a diary," he replied, with one of his famously ambiguous smiles. I already had started a diary; I spent the summer reading the Russians. Was "read the Russians and keep a diary" a way of saying it's not enough to have a sensibility, a sex life, and a wish to be a writer? The suspicion killed my ambition. I didn't take courses in creative writing. Instead I transferred my desire for self-expression to foreign languages. Not Joyce. Wanting to be the heroine of her life, and not just another Barnard girl sneaking around having sex behind her parents' back, Joyce moved out of her parents' house and into a room of her own. To write a novel? Perhaps first to have the experience—then to make some kind of new meaning of it on paper. "As a writer, I would live life to the hilt as my unacceptable self, just as Jack and Allen had done." She would describe "furnished rooms and sex" (156)—too boldly, she thought, for the domesticated pages of *The New Yorker*.

The real question was whether there was anything to become—and how.

In *How I Became Hettie Jones*, we get an idea of what road a girl could take to becoming someone, a woman she herself might want to know—eventually. “Meet Hettie Cohen” (1). That’s the first line of the memoir. Like Joyce Glassman, Hettie Cohen, another nice Jewish girl, enters college in 1951, though more radically leaving home to do so, and returns ready for a life in New York—a life with a job, yes, but also a question. “What should I do now,” she asks, “What should I do now to make myself happen? What’s next?” (27). Hettie was determined to escape the fifties plot scripted for talented girls.

In 1955, Herman Wouk, author of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Caine Mutiny*, published another bestseller called *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *Time* magazine, who put him on its cover, applauded the values it celebrates: chastity before marriage, home, husband, and children. A nice Jewish girl, Marjorie Morgenstern, longs to become Marjorie Morningstar, the actress; after a fling with Mr. Wrong and a “career” in the theater, she ends up as Mrs. Milton Schwartz, wife and mother of four. From the Bronx to Central Park West to the wealthy suburb Mamaroneck, this route was not what Hettie Cohen had in mind. She was moving in the opposite direction, leaving suburban Long Island for the Village to do theater, and, as she puts it, make herself “happen.”

In 1957, the effects of Marjorie Morningstar’s story are eponymously attached to that stairway to oblivion: the marriage plot. As Hettie remembers it, the lawyer she is dating already sees her fate writ large: “‘Don’t kid yourself,’” he warns, “‘the Village is okay now, but you’ll end up in Mamaroneck with Marjorie Morningstar, wait and see’” (26). The girl with dreams to be on stage herself and the lawyer who rides a motorcycle are sitting in their café not far from the place where the movie version of the novel—starring Natalie Wood and Gene Kelly—had been filmed. What’s your life and what’s the movies? Sitting at Rienzi’s, a popular coffee house in the Village, Hettie Jones is troubled by the prediction. “People had warned me, but no one had ever presumed to predict me. What did he know that I didn’t?” (26). A close friend of Hettie’s from their days of shared struggle in the Village, Joyce reflects on the anecdote in her own memoir: “Ambitious young men of the fifties,” she observes, “often evoked the wayward Jewish princess of . . . Wouk’s bestseller” as a way of proving your desires “inauthentic,” talking you out of them (226–27); it was as though they knew better than you ever could what you really wanted and could prove it (in this art they resembled the parents of the girls who took their own ambition just a little too seriously).

Rereading my diary, I discover that one evening, that same year, after a concert at Town Hall, I sat at the same coffee house with a boy

from Yale, with a camel's-hair coat, called Eddie; I express my doubts about Rienzi's, "a touristy place in the Village." "Lots of pseudos," I note with condescension, "but 'nice.'" By the following week, Eddie's fate was sealed. "I'm kind of disgusted with Eddie. He thinks he's an authority on everything. Damn, I'd like to tell him a thing or two." And then the killer touch: "I'll never kiss him." My mother, however, adopting the line of *Seventeen* magazine, urged me to keep dating him—"It's good experience," she'd say.

I seem to be following Hettie around in her life, the way I did with Joyce. Soon Hettie's lawyer is history; she's fallen in love with the rising star poet, LeRoi Jones, and suddenly wants a baby. "I didn't think," she writes, looking back, "about how this decision might affect my own ambitions" (60). Even more than marriage, babies change your life. Not having them too. And it's here that my story splits off from Hettie Jones to pursue a completely different direction, even if, as I discover, a decade later we both shopped at the same store in the East Village. You might think knit dresses a pretty tenuous thread for holding separate lives together in memory, crafted in the pages of other people's books. It is and it isn't.

The path of identification provides one of the major byways along which interactive remembering moves. You follow the threads that take you back, even if *then* there was no story, just the loose threads you see now woven into a readable fabric, material for another story: your own. Of course I've stacked the deck here by taking examples from the old neighborhood; it would have been more surprising had I found *no* connections to someone who went to the same schools I did, hung out in the same bars, crossed the same streets. But as we've just seen, too, I part company with Hettie when Cohen becomes Jones and a mother. And once again, in retrospect, my life has another kind of clarity: I didn't do that particular fifties thing; I went to Paris instead.¹² In other words, disidentification turns out to be as important in the self-reconstructive effect of memoir reading as identification.¹³

I've been emphasizing the ways in which autobiographical identification (and alternately, the splitting off of disidentification) passes through the proximity of shared experience; how when I read the memoirs of women whose lives were marked by the cultural template of the 1950s, I feel that the book has been written for me, just as Maxine Hong Kingston specifically addresses the Chinese Americans like herself whom she imagines reading *Woman Warrior*. In fact, the question from the memoir with which I began is directed to the readers with whom the writer shares an ethnic legacy: "Chinese-Americans," she asks, "when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese. . .," how do you know how you became who you are, what's you and what's the movies? But as we know, the audience for *Woman War-*

rior has readers across the globe who do not share in this cultural memory, this social history.¹⁴ Yet that difference in no way prevents them from taking an intense pleasure in the pages of this book.

So what happens when beyond even disidentification there seem to be no commonalities between your life as a reader and the writer's, when it's another zeitgeist entirely? What have you to do with a woman who had an affair with her father, a man who was a sexual addict, fill in the blanks with the person most unlike you that you can imagine? If the task of memoir is to pull away from the face you see in your mirror to contemplate a face that doesn't look like yours, what does it take to make an intimate connection? Put another way, can we respond only to memoirs written by our twin, as though we had been separated at birth?

Paradoxically, identification can also mean the desire to "allo-identify," to read yourself across the body or under the skin of *other* selves, people who are nothing—seem nothing—like yourself—to time travel, to get away, to take a much needed vacation from . . . you (whoever that is).¹⁵ Finding losing, losing finding. Who's who? But whatever the modality, the experience passes through acts of memory—the author's and yours, and through the passage between the two. In the back and forth between what's on the page and in your head, your "you" becomes text.¹⁶ So to complete what I suggested at the start about memoir writing as a dialogue with the intertext, I will add now the proposition that the desire at work in identification is not so much an act of mirroring—despite the well-known seductions of that metaphor, and indeed I succumbed to it myself—as the figure, and a social figure, of translation—with the emphasis falling on the "trans." The same "trans"-fer of relation that inhabits the heart of metaphor and the unconscious; of crossing boundaries. (Perhaps not surprisingly, *Woman Warrior's* last line evokes the possibility of translation: from the music of the barbarians to the songs of the Chinese.)

Like the passion for biography, the memoir craze feeds the hunger for a different, or at least a more interesting, life through literature—even if the memoirs describe a life, like those of biographies, plagued by suffering, illness, obsession, or madness. But with this twist—however hellish the lives, told in memoirs they give you just what your unrecorded history lacks (and that the novel used to offer): a narrative through which to make sense of your own past.

Which brings me at last to my title, and the question of genre and aesthetics it poses: me and my memoir. I'm willing to stand guilty as accused. But I inserted myself into the memoirs of others for a good cause. And I did so in part to ponder once more in passing the numbingly familiar question: why do so many people write and read memoirs today? There have been a variety of unsatisfactory, if not entirely false, answers—it's the well-worn culture of "me," given an expansive

new currency by the infamous baby boomers who can think of nothing else; it's the desire for story killed by postmodern fiction; it's the only literary form that appears to give access to the truth; it's a democratic form, giving voice to minority experience in an anti-élite decade; it's a desire to assert agency and subjectivity after several decades of insisting loudly on the fragmentation of identity and the death of the author. It's voyeurism for a declining imperial narcissism. It's the market.

Difficult to think of a modern genre that has come in for the kind of rhetorical abuse that memoir seems to inspire. Postmodern fiction, perhaps, at its beginnings; feminist writing; confessional poetry, when done by women. I'm not alone in thinking that the predominance of women in the memoir bizz may also have something to do with the genre's disrepute.¹⁷ Oddly, the genre whose project—like that of the memoir—is attacked at the roots is the eighteenth-century novel (also associated with women). Like the memoir, the very grounds of the novel's existence are put into question from the start: should readers believe that the letters put before them are true? In the case of memoir, it's the reviewers, who like the poetics and censors of another era police the arts. They seem to hate the form from its foundations, decrying its necessary component—the self. A recent diatribe published in *The Nation* declares war: “The memoir trend is not just a publishing ruse to get more people to buy more books. It's an intellectual fraud, a cultural fraud, a fraud perpetrated by us, in the end, upon ourselves and our past.”¹⁸ Flaying practitioners of the genre who privatize both history and memory, the journalist ends with his definition of what makes memoir a genre with a legitimate right to exist: “We arrive at a curious, unexpected truth: that the purely personal is not the stuff of the memoir but its enemy. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that the memoir does not have to be a symptom of our cultural decline, or our withdrawal, or our fading ability to imagine and create and then give form to our creations. . . . The trick is to embrace history, not oneself” (33). But as I hope you've seen, on my reading, the work of memory can't help being historical.

What's wrong with embracing oneself? In seventeenth-century France, Pascal famously diagnosed the matter in his analysis of human misery: “The self is hateful.” (“*Le moi est haïssable.*” Here we go again with more bad news from the French.) Why? Because, Pascal says, “it is unjust in itself, to the extent that it makes itself the center of all.”¹⁹ This founding injustice is not a correctable flaw, however, because the delusion that the self matters above all is a symptom of what happens when man lives without God. It may seem farfetched to reach back to seventeenth-century religious debates to make this point, but the utter conviction of the inherent inadequacy of the self—that entity that says “I” believing in the importance of his reality—that emerges from

this credo, comes close to the almost religious fervor that underlies contemporary attacks on the literature of the self.

Does memoir really give narcissism a bad name? Or should we take it more seriously?

Here's my idea. One of the meanings of the word memoir—which as you all know comes from the French *mémoire*, the word for memory—is memorandum. And this meaning surfaces in another French expression that has passed into English: the aide-mémoire. Something that helps memory, again memorandum. I want to propose, then, the notion of memoir as prosthesis—an aid to memory. What helps you remember. In this sense, what memoirs do is support you in the act of remembering. The memoir boom, then, should be understood, not as a proliferation of self-serving representations of individualistic memory, but as an aid or a spur to keep cultural memory alive.²⁰

We are witnessing a very powerful anxiety about memory, about remembering, very particular to this fin de siècle: about gathering the testimony of the last living survivors of the Holocaust. In *Testimony*, analyst Dori Laub makes a provocative claim, suggesting that the so-called “culture of narcissism” (famously diagnosed by Christopher Lasch in 1978) may be understood as a “historical diversion, a trivialization . . . a psychological denial of the depth and the subversive power of the Holocaust experience.”²¹ We may also be witnessing a kind of unconscious apocalyptic fear of erasure that comes with millennial, not to say Internet fever. Put another way, memoir is the record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in a post-modern world. Maybe it's not so surprising that we seem to need memoirs now, at a moment when a large segment of a booming aging population is literally stricken with Alzheimer's (the subject of John Bayley's recent *Elegy for Iris*) and when we are experiencing a kind of metaphorical Alzheimer's about, as ex-President Reagan put it, where the “rest of us” is—a kind of Anglo-American anxiety about the end of a certain idea about life.

Memoir paradoxically is the most generous of modern genres. Indeed, the point of memoir—when it succeeds—is to keep alive the notion that experience can take the form of art and that remembering is a guide to living. Toward the end of Stendhal's novel about self-transformation, *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel, the young hero, surveys the astonishing distance he has traveled, and reflects upon his brilliant career. “My novel has ended,” he exclaims almost sadly (though its final chapter was to surprise him). What is life beyond the novel, even, as Julien adds, one for which he deserves, he feels, “all the credit”?²² At the end of the twentieth century in American culture, looking to novels as a way of rereading your life sounds anachronistic (even mid-century, Hettie felt that way about the plot of *Marjorie*

Morningstar).²³ In the nineties, the novel gets parceled out into movies, sitcoms, and most of all, memoirs. If, like Julien Sorel's, my novel is over, my memoir isn't. I'm still looking for a way to have my life turn out better on paper, if not in life. If you can't change the history of past events, you can supply a different interpretation—a better one—to its outcome thus far.

Johnson concludes *Minor Characters* with a double image: the first of herself, the girl, at twenty-two, dressed entirely in black “like Masha in *The Seagull*—black stockings, black skirt, black sweater—but unlike Masha, she's not in mourning for her life.” She regrets nothing about those years of excitement and passion, especially not her “seat at the table in the exact center of the universe,” as she puts it, “the only place in America that's alive” (276). She does not even regret, she says, the fact that women had no voice at that table then as long as she speaks of it now: Elise's poetry in homage to Pound, “and the poems Hettie kept mute in boxes for too many years. . . .” This act of breaking the silence is not meant as the final word and the paper journey has to end somewhere. The last lines of the book offer an image of memory working itself out temporally, in a musical metaphor: “I'm a forty-seven-year-old woman with a permanent sense of impermanence. If time were like a passage of music, you could keep going back to it till you got it right” (277). Of course time isn't a passage of music and there's no way to get it completely right. It's no wonder that just as you might think you've gotten to the bottom you discover that every memory trunk has fake bottoms. But you still need it to travel.

As for me, I devour memoirs the way some people read detective stories or thrillers. After all, there are crimes, mostly of the heart, and mysteries. Memoirs provide me with suspense of a different order. Will she stop falling in love with the wrong man, get a better job . . . sit down and write her poetry, her novel, or her memoir? Will you? You think, OK, her life is populated by famous and semi-famous people; her life is glamorous or tragic. Your father wasn't a writer or a crook, just a lawyer or a businessman. Your mother didn't drink or suffer from tuberculosis. You didn't grow up in Ceylon, or, closer to home, Texas. You are not now, thank God, dying of breast cancer, or AIDS. But still, you can't help returning to your own life as if there were some magical, meaningful thread leading from the memoir writers to you. The six degrees of separation that mark the distance from your life to another's are really, as it turns out, degrees of connection. And my memoir is about you.

Notes

1 This cartoon of 3 Sep. 1990, is the point of departure of an essay of mine called “Decades,” in which I revisit the decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties to my evolution as a

- feminist critic (in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn [London and New York: Routledge, 1993]). I conceived this essay in 1999 looking back at the waning decade, and the cartoon still seems apposite, even as I revise, moving into the new millennium.
- 2 8 Feb. 2000. "‘For Bill Clinton to be taking credit for this economic boom we’re experiencing is like the rooster taking credit for the sunrise,’ said Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, the Republican majority leader" (1).
 - 3 "Autocritography," a term coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and developed by Michael Awkward in *Scenes of Instruction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). "Autocritography . . . is an account of individual, social, and institutional concerns that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns" (7). See Daphne Patai, "Point of View," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 Feb. 1994): "I doubt that I am the only one who is weary of the nouveau solipsism—all this individual and collective breast-beating, grandstanding, and plain old egocentricity" (A52).
 - 4 Jeffrey Williams, "The New Belletrism," *Style* 33:3 (Fall 1999): 414–42; 417. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
 - 5 Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1996; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
 - 6 The possibilities of understanding personal criticism as a national style were suggested to me by a faculty member at Cambridge University, who commented in 1990, after a lecture in which I explained and defended this genre, that perhaps being "personal" was in fact being American.
 - 7 On the relational model of autobiography, see my "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography," *differences* 6 (1994): 1–27; and Paul John Eakin’s *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).
 - 8 Even Paul de Man, who doesn’t believe in autobiography as a distinct genre, believes that—as does Jacques Derrida. "Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution." DeMan continues in this vein about the "substitutive exchange that constitutes the subjects," and its "specular structure," but I might as well confess here that I’ve never completely understood exactly who these two subjects are—I’d like them to be the not-yet-dead author and the living reader who connect and yet remain separate enough to recognize their differences. "Autobiography as De-facement," *Modern Language Notes* 94:5 (1979): 919–30; 921. Or as Derrida puts it, riffing on the power of Nietzsche’s "ear" to seduce (women), and the question of signature: "It is the ear of the other who makes me who I am and who constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography." *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken, 1985), 51. It might seem odd to reach back to these high theory moments, especially to hijack them into another kind of argument with very different stakes, but I think they help provide a kind of genealogy to the performative model I’m interested in sketching out in what follows.
 - 9 Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Knopf, 1976; reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1989), 5–6.
 - 10 This back and forth is an effect of what Susan Suleiman, in *Risking Who One Is*, has called "the autobiographical imperative," a "‘strong’" reading experience that often results in autobiographical writing (200). Suleiman comes to this concept from her own experience of reading autobiographical works of writers whose war memories of the Second World War come close to her own. "What exactly am I looking for, and finding, in these works? I did not lose a parent during the war—yet I recognize the stories all too well. They could have been my own" (207). *Risking Who One Is: Encounters With Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994).
 - 11 Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters: A Young Woman’s Coming of Age in the Beat Generation* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990). Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Penguin, 1991). Subsequent references to both of these works are cited parenthetically in the text.
 - 12 In a discussion at the Humanities Center at the University of California at Davis, it was suggested to me that this kind of selective reading was something like the way people read

- their horoscope: it's your sign, so you figure it has something to do with you. You take what applies—the description of your love life—and set aside what doesn't: the warning, say, about your finances. I'm grateful to Sharon O'Toole Dubois for this analogy about how you necessarily join others (maybe it's their finances) when you try to find out about yourself.
- 13 A perfect example of how this works appeared in a review of Lennard Davis's *My Sense of Silence: Memoirs of a Childhood With Deafness*. "There are many moments like this—details of a life that effortlessly brings to mind emotionally equivalent details from our own lives. I especially loved his description of his mother's voice. 'It had the quality that a coin has as it spins on a glass table top. It almost squealed, yet beneath was a silver hum.' My mother isn't deaf, but her voice to me as a child was equally distinctive." *The New York Times Book Review* (8 Mar. 2000): 42. This is the basic trope of "emotionally equivalent details" which makes disidentification a bond: Not X but like X, rapprochement through the work of metaphor.
 - 14 Of course this question of audience is always, as we used to say, plural. *The Woman Warrior*, published in 1976, at the height of the literary production of second-wave feminism, also seemed addressed to that audience—many of whom grew up in the 1950s. In a 1989 interview with Bill Moyers on Public Television (*World of Ideas*), Kingston explained that some of the choices she made in that book about the uses of the legend of Fa Mu Lan were entangled with the ethos of seventies feminism. Kingston said that she would tell the story differently in a post-feminist, post-Vietnam perspective. At the beginning of the interview, Moyers observes that *Woman Warrior* is one of the books most taught on American campuses.
 - 15 "The paths of *allo-identification* are likely to be strange and recalcitrant. So are the paths of *auto-identification*," Eve Sedgwick writes in "Axiomatic," the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 59. Sedgwick builds on the remarks she made in "A Poem Is Being Written" about "identifications *across* definitional lines" to suggest how fraught identifying "as" or "with" can be (see below). Were I to try and develop the *unconscious* patterns of these identifications in narrative, this would be a place to begin. As does Shoshana Felman—a great resister of "getting personal"—when she argues that despite "the contemporary literary fashion of feminine confessions and of the recent critical fashion of 'feminist confessions,'" "none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an *autobiography*." Felman moves from here to the notion of a "*bond of reading*" not unrelated to the one I've been suggesting, but one that would entail a double "*missing*"—of oneself as a woman, and of the other. Again, were I to go down this road, I'd have to speak of "*misidentification*" as well as disidentification—and to the notion that often you get somewhere only by . . . mistake, thanks to your unconscious. Another essay. Shoshana Felman, *What Does A Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 15.
 - 16 It's the challenge to find—and write—your own story through acts of memorialization that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick conjures at the end of "A Poem Is Being Written": "Part of the motivation behind my work," she explains in a final note, "has been a fantasy that readers or hearers would be variously—in anger, identification, pleasure, envy, 'permission,' exclusion—stimulated to write accounts 'like' this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those" (*Tendencies* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1993], 214).
 - 17 Carolyn G. Heilbrun acutely makes the case in "Contemporary Memoirs: Or, Who Cares Who Did What to Whom?" arguing against the diatribe published in *The Nation* cited below. "Because many current women's memoirs deal with questions that society has preferred to leave unexamined, some of these memoirs shock us, and, becoming best-sellers, provoke male disgust and impatience." *The American Scholar* (Summer 1999): 41.
 - 18 Patrick Smith, "What Memoir Forgets," *The Nation* (27 Jul.–3 Aug. 1998): 30. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
 - 19 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 1126. My translation.
 - 20 In "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy" (*New German Critique* 71 [Spring–Summer 1997]), Alison Landsberg develops the notion of what she calls "*prosthetic memories*" to argue for an experiential model of approaching the memorialization of the Holocaust. Is it possible, she wonders, to pro-

- duce a “bodily memory for those who have not lived through it”? This is how she reads both Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and the visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Landsberg is interested in promoting “mass cultural technologies of memory” and “sites of production of ‘feeling’” in order to bring about greater understanding of the Holocaust (66). In my model, in the case I am trying to make for the memoir, the text produces not a vicarious bodily memory, but rather a process of remembrance—by proxy—that puts memory of the self into motion. Is reading the memoir of another like taking “an identification card which tells the story of an individual during the Holocaust” (77)? Or does the older technology of print maintain a mental protection that keeps the distance alive?
- 21 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 74.
- 22 Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1964), chap. 34, p. 442. Translation mine.
- 23 I’ve been surprised and slightly baffled to see Stendhal’s novel crop up in just this way in Francine Prose’s perverse *Blue Angel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), where the main character, a writer, who has been trying to finish a novel called *The Black and the Black* gets seduced (in part) by a student writer’s passion for the original: “I love how Stendhal gets, you know, like, inside and outside Julien at the same time, so you can imagine doing what Julien’s doing, and meanwhile you’re thinking you would never do something like that” (38). Stendhal is also referenced in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* as a way of trying to understand a piece of behavior as being . . . French (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000). Could the nineteenth-century realist novel be making a comeback?