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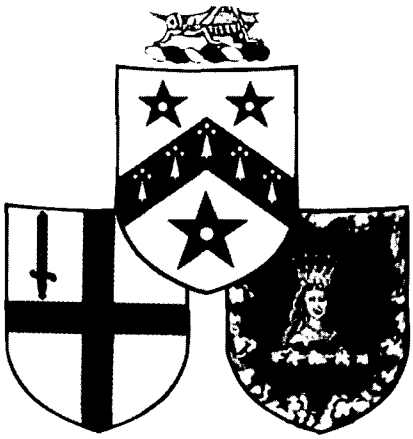

IS LETTER-WRITING LITERATURE? AND WHAT ABOUT DIARIES?

A Lecture by

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Is Letter-Writing Literature? And what about Diaries?

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Gresham College is a special institution that allows us to think about things that we would not normally put to ourselves. This is particularly the case for academics with the Gresham remit to speak about leading edge research to a genuinely open and public audience. Terrifying yet exceptionally important. In my own discipline of rhetoric and literature I cannot think of another place where this is the stated purpose. Newspaper reviews or television chat shows have the air of being highly structured events that lack any sense of intellectual danger. Since I started these lectures over a year ago, I have been struck by the way that some of the most outrageous academic propositions appear nothing more than practical to this audience.

In this lecture, my claim is that there is a world of difference between what writers say they do and what academics say writers do. And further: that if we think more carefully about what some writers are saying about their practice at the moment, we may be able to open up areas of interaction, communication and value that we have not previously noticed. I would like to think about the fact that so many people write creatively, yet so much of what they write does not get counted as 'literature'. Does that matter? Well, yes, I think it does. No piece of writing, if it is doing anything interesting whatsoever, can avoid doing something different in the text. If we could find our experiences or feelings or ideas written down in the way that appropriately matches our own, there would be no need to write (although there may be a need to repeat!). It is the diversity of human beings that propels us to write, and to write differently from anyone else. Hence, the reader must learn to read differently – sometimes only a little differently and sometimes a lot. No piece of writing can be read without some work on the text, and we have to have good reasons to commit ourselves to that task. In our society, the label 'literature' is one of the words we have agreed to place on writing that we think is worth that labour. Without the title 'literature' we do not often get around to valuing the writing.

This week I would like to spend some time reading from texts on the edge of the 'literature' exclusion zone, mainly, but not exclusively, by women. And in my next lecture, in February, I will turn to texts not even on the margins, but right outside the exclusion zone.

Critics tell us that writers are authors: they have authority. Their work is unique, an act of genius revealing universal truths, and in the process creating great beauty that is recognisable by all (once the critics have explained it). But few writers at all ever say anything remotely like this in their letters, diaries or autobiographical accounts that we have available. In effect, most writers demonstrate in their private correspondence that they often work with other people, such as a friend, husband, mother and so on – frequently trading ideas and drafts, incorporating elements from letters into their texts. It is rare to find even a glimpse of the idea that the poet reveals universal truth or beauty, indeed they sometimes speak of being 'taken over' by their characters, and are bewildered about who their audiences really are. The sense we get of writing from the writers' point of view is not one of authority, but of questioning, of the writing voice as varied and variable in time and space. Truth and Beauty: the words recall us to Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which end with that desolate picture of never-achieved humanity, arrested forever without completion in action, on the urn, isolated as it is from any sense of the urn-maker.

Keats provides a good example of what I am referring to. His letters are profoundly engaging, yet I remember being told rather sternly that they were not suitable for literary analysis. But, why not? Just because they were merely letters meant that academics could argue that the kind of care usually taken with 'literary' texts had not been taken here. It may be that the focus on the unique individual voice is not there, and that there is a shift to the interaction between the writer and reader, but people cannot simply 'put themselves on the page'. No matter what they write, they always select if not choose the appropriate words, and that will happen with a letter just as much as any other writing. Keats used his letters to ask for advice on poetry he was writing and included a lot of verse, but in a sense that is a red herring. More subtly inbuilt into the texts of many prose sentences are phrases and

lines that form the basis of the verse, and which in themselves ask for an engagement into structure and the tension of the language.[1]

The position of the writing voice is never so problematic as when found in first person accounts: Diaries, letters, autobiography, autography, and the first-person narrative itself. Even the lyric 'I', seemingly so stable, is usually being contested. These texts always have that extra edge or frisson of claiming that they have to be believed because they are in the first person. At one point or another they claim an intimate relation. But, do we trust the voice? the narrator? the writer? I would suggest that readers read other people's letters to get a sense of the variety of relationships in which individuals engage. They read diaries to reach toward the real person who writes, even though that person can never be 'all there'. At the same time, people write diaries and letters, as other texts, because, as Nicole Brossard tells us, through the act of writing we can 'write ourselves into being'.[2]

Collections of letters attest more than most documents to the variability of people's lives and identities. If the letters are familiar and voluntary, we rarely write to two different people in exactly the same way, although I can remember that when I was an eight year old schoolgirl required to write three letters a week, I would copy huge sections from one letter to another. And letters have for centuries been the way that men and women coped with the growing diversity and vastness of our lives. Even though, until this century, literacy rates for women were lower than those for men, the Paxton Collection of fifteenth century letters contains many by women at a time when women wrote more infrequently than they do now. Indeed, letters were one of the few forms in which women could write and express their opinions without fear of criticism. Dorothy Moore, one of the most important intellectuals of the seventeenth century, wrote entirely in letter form. In the following letter she addresses Lady Katherine Boyle, her closest friend yet social superior. Here she pours onto the page the extraordinarily testing experience she is going through of giving up her vocation to work for Christ by finding a place in the protestant ministry for women, to marry John Drury, a leading ecumenical leader of the time:

> UNDATED [Nov 1644]?: To Katharine Boyle
> Madame
> this weeke I received 2 Letteres att once from you and with them comfort and its contrary, the first I take from seeing you continue ine the unspeakable favour of them, the other from my apprehenstion of your being indisposed, then which nothinge can add greatter affliction to my trouble but our wholle life heere must bee spent in submission to his will who orders all things acording to the Councell of his owne will; and that is in the highest wisdome and goodnes to the creattures and this certainly my desires and resolutions stand for and yett Madame my practice of it is soe slender and performed with soe much difficulties for the most part, as did I not know that foul coruption may and does lodge in the Heart of Gods child, as well as his free grace I should absoluty conclude my selfe noe member of Christs body, which yett I dare not doe not withstanding my desperatte wickednes. I have beene putt upon the tryall of a very greatt submission, which truly as I might well forsee it, and take tyme to resolve it, I cannot but say for my one condemnation also, that I did apprehend it enough to have forced mee to take up the best Armour against it, which was a firme resolution to follow Gods Councell in it, the striving for which hath certainly brought on mee such fitts as I am not sure to bee read off, which shewes my abominable basnes that would contest in such a way upon a feare (having more cause for that than formerly) as to bring myselfe into misery, before I saw my error, and all this when I made myself believe nothing was more precious to me then the Knoledge of Gods will in all things that I might observe it, tho wholly difficult Its true my ill diet And solitarines helpt me to my infirmity but thos fell in upon my not heeding any thing butt my thoughts soe as to declare the Truth, inward worcking of mind (which I canot call trouble because it was soe finely trimmed as that I preceaved not it) hath altered my health strangly and of latte with such variety as is sometymes leazing on me with such stupidnes as neither minde or body move to any action whatsoever which putts

[1] See for example *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821, Volume Two 1819-1821*, ed H.Rollins (London: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 78-9, for phrases incorporated into the 'Ode to Indolence'.
[2] N. Brossard, 'Tender Skin My Mind' trans. Dympna Borowska, in ed. Women and Words Collective, *In the Feminine: Women and words/ Les Femmes et les Mots.* (Edmonton: Longspoon, 198) p. 180.

such a separattion betweene God and my Soule as these fitts are 1000 Millions worse than sownds truly of latte [torn] been soe as my life was a most vntollerable burden. I doe not thinke possible that any can [torn] imagine this Affliction but those that have sufferd in it, I shall ever begg my Lady [torn] Wimbeltons pardone for my not being [torn] to judge of her condition with more charity than I did, well finding now [torn] in those fitts have noe command nor power of thems: sure it was the same ill spiritt that posessed Saul which hath governed mee lattly, of which I am now free I blesse God and this weeke past have had good health but my brest and bellie soe swelled as I am a Monster my spleen swells and paines me and noow which was not formerly soe and thus my body is distempered and so indeed is my inclination and affections to the purpose of his owne Glory and this hee will doe certainly for them who with hope and against hope cast thems: upon him. so mutch of this my resolution I must say that others may see if my health permitt to goe further then a resolution, but that I cannot now being in some distemper and then I dare not command my body and therefore I am constrained att an Instant to conclud tho I intended (without your unkind speeches) to givue you in this Paper a very long discourse, but with beging with my heart to heare of your health I professe to live and dye most faithfull

Madame
your Lad.
most humbly affectionatte
servant
D. Moore[3]

Although this is a familiar letter, not one of her formal arguments, the reader can mark and feel the torrent of confusion, pain and self-reassurance, that characterises her dilemma. Without such testimony we could never have any sense of the import of this kind of religious vocation, or even of the possibility that such a thing would have been imaginable during the period, or of the rather curious tension between social standing and emotional intimacy that letter-writing can transcend.

Virginia Woolf, nearly three centuries later, recognises that tension in countless delicate shifts in tone and control. Look for example at two letters written on the same day, while she was ill. The first is to Lady Robert Cecil:

My dear Nelly,
It was very nice to get your letter, which confirms me in my belief that you have inherited the letter writing gift, along with your castles, and makes me think twice before I demolish the Nellies and the Castles.
I'm now condemned to lie in bed for 2 or 3 weeks, until my heart gets right, which the influenza has put wrong. So letters are more than ever needed. I can't say that the disease is good for the brain.
I read two lines, and go off into a trance, quite pleasant, like an animal in a hot house.
I've been reading the life of Lord Salisbury. I find is absorbing. What a queer character – I'm reminded, oddly, of my father. And Lady G. writes like twenty able men crushed into one. As hard as a paving stone. I means this complimentarily. When will the 3rd Vol. come out? Yr. V.W.

The second is to Lytton Strachey:

Your correspondence is about the only bright spot in my day so please continue. My lethargy is that of the alligator at the Zoo. And the alligator doesn't have very clear ideas of Racine. A.B.W. in the Times almost suffocated me by saying that Moliere, Don Juan, is tedious twaddle. Surely it is the best of the lot – so I seem to remember. Then that Mule, Alice Meynell, says that Jane Austen is a frump, and the Mr Patmore is equal to Milton and that Tristram Shandy should be read in Prof. Morley's edition with every 10th page cut out. There can't be anything left to castrate of Meynell, or I should do it myself. Alligators can't endure the moders – Peacock is what I like. You don't know how good he is –

[3] From the Hartlib Archive, University of Sheffield.

> Crotchet Castle –surely nothing survives except the perfection of prose. And you read Miss Sinclair! So shall I perhaps. But I'd rather read Lytton Strachey. Well, if you do come it will be something to look forward to. Clive is suspended above me, like a Cherub, all bottom and a little flaxen wig. Roger looms in the distance, so let me know which day. The infirmity of this handwriting is *not* entirely heart disease: I am reduced to a fountain pen. And you make them work.....Yr. V.[4]

In spite of the heart disease, Woolf carefully picks the correct register for the relationship; she makes each feel as though they alone are the one who has helped her through the day; and she caresses each, a gentle stroking of their sense of self, by giving them the story they each most want.

This ability to make the writer immediate on the page, yet to alert the reader to the variability of the writing self, is found throughout her letters. One of her favourite correspondents was Roger Fry. Listen to the immediacy of the opening of the following, dated October 17th, 1921:

> My dear Roger,
> Your letter arrived precisely one hour ago, and here I am sitting down to answer it. Whether the answer will be sent is, of course, another matter. Your last – slightly tipsy, very brilliant, sympathetic, inspiring and the best you ever wrote, -- sent me flying to the inkpot, but when I read my production and compared it with yours my vanity as an author refused to be pacified. I can't endure that you should write so well. If you want answers let your letters be like bread poultices: anyhow I tore up what was, I now think the best letter I ever wrote. Would you like it if I dashed off a little sketch of the eclipse of the moon last night, which entirely surpassed your great oil painting of the Rape of Euridyce – or whatever it is? ... (p.484)

But did she really write a wonderful letter that she then 'tore up'? or is she saying so as a device to speak to him about the brilliant nature of his writing? or is this not rather over the top – perhaps she is gently teasing him for his own excesses? The possibility of all these writing stances is partly what engages the reader in the text. It is a shame that letter-writing is dying out, drifting down the telephone, despite the temporary reprieve of e-mail.

Diaries usually give us far more of a sense of a coherent self if only because of the illusion of privacy. Reading a diary we reach toward the real person who writes, we fill in the blanks of the text more generously than when reading a collection of letters, because we often put ourselves in the position of being the person to whom the diary is addressed. The diary is another form that has served women well, frequently acting as a place for spiritual self-examination in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and gradually becoming more experiential. Margaret Hoby, at the end of the sixteenth century, and in the first few years of her third marriage, devotes her diary to an account of her daily service to God. She says, in September 1599:

> The Lordes day 16
> After I had praied priuatly, I went to church and, from thence returninge, I praised god both for the inableinge the minister so proffetably to declare the word as he had, and my selfe to heare wth that Comfort and vnderstanding I did : after dinner I walked with Mr Hoby till Catzhising was done, and then I went to church : after the sarmon I looked vpon a poore mans Legg, and after that I walked, and reed a sarmon of Geferd vpon the song of Salomon : then I examened my selfe and praied : after supper I was busie with Mr Hoby tell prair time, after which I went to bed :[5]

Clearly this account tells us much about the time but, in a sense, the cumulative effect of the lists of activities that builds up through the diary is far more telling. We become sensitised to small changes in

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[4] *The Question of Things Happening, The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol II 1912—1922*, ed N. Nicholson and J. Banks (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976), pp. 504—5.
[5] *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady: The Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599-1605*, ed J. Moody (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), pp, 17-18.

the routine, at the same time as we are caught tautly into that habitual, rarely varying lifestyle. The editor notes that Margaret Hoby's barrenness would have been perceived by her as a punishment from God, and these entries carry with them a sense of duty that feels heavy, as if loaded with guilt. The almost imperceptible changes become charged with light, with the possibility of relief. And I do wonder why she stopped keeping the diary. Hoby was married for many more years. Perhaps its weight became too burdensome a reminder of her fallen state.

The capacity for the diary to act as a place to sort out one's life by sorting out one's words carries on to today. If we stop briefly in the nineteenth century to listen to Margaret Dickie Michener, a Nova Scotian, we hear the same process. She kept a diary from 1850, starting when her husband of only a year had to leave to work elsewhere. Her brisk, lively prose is full of energy. On September 27th, 1850, she writes:

> Maria came in this evening and we have been taking turns reading aloud from a book called 'The Young Emigrant'; it is about two families who move to Ohio. It shows how many difficulties the first settlers have to encounter in a new country.

On October 2nd she writes:

> How changed are all my prospects. What shall I write? I know not what to say or think. My beloved Simeon is not more! Can it be possible I will not see again, or hear his sweet voice? I went to Mary's last night to wait till the mail would come in. Ezra went over and returned with three letters. I got a light and saw that two letters were for Maria. It was with fear and trembling I read my letter from Simeon; he was in quite good spirits when he wrote but not too well. I found Curry had received Maria's letter but Simeon did not get mine. I read my letter to Mary and Ann, and then in haste went up to Marcia's where Maria was. The road never seemed so long before; I could not go fast enough. At last I gave her the letters, wishing yet dreading to know the contents. I told her to read the latest one first. I arose ready to start at the news she looked; I saw her drop the letter and I went into the bedroom as I wished to hear no more. I knew Simeon was dead yet dared not ask.[6]

The physical detail of her movements is extraordinary, especially since she writes on the same day that she learns of the death. It conveys a sense of surreal detachment, as if she sees herself from without, because she has been driven out of herself by shock. Nestled at the centre of the account is that tiny note, that her husband did not receive her last letter before he died, as if her final chance to speak to him has been thwarted. Two months later she is attending at the house of a neighbour whose child is terminally ill, and writes:

> Saturday night I went to stay the night [at Mrs. Holmes']; about half past eleven the child died in my arms. It was the first time I had ever seen one die; it sank away so gently I hardly knew it was gone. I thought how sweet to die and be at rest from the tumult of this world. Dear little babe, it looked more beautiful in death than when living, for it was a great sufferer. Mrs. Hicks and Jane Lynch sat with me. Mrs. Hicks is a widow for three years. She has six children. I feel a nearness to widows. (p. 114)

And we watch the strategies that she is devising for dealing with the death of her husband laid out in the soft consideration of this dying in her arms. It is a death she still has not come to accept for she still distances herself from 'widows'; she is only 'near' them, not yet ready to become one of them. At the same time, we also hear the undercurrent of another realisation, in that proximity of Mrs Hicks the widow, with Mrs Hicks the mother who has six children, that Margaret Michener will have no children by whom to remember her husband.

There is a fine line between diary and autobiography, except that the latter is usually explicitly for public consumption. It is helpful to remind ourselves that diaries were often circulated among friends

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[6] *No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women 1771-1938*, eds M. Conrad, T. Laidlaw and D. Smyth (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1988), pp. 109-110.

until earlier this century, and were like letters, being a way of continuing relationships across distance. Autobiographies too, were, and are, often written for spiritual reasons. In distinction to the 'lives' of great people, the tomes of national importance that seem to pick an all too selective way through the minefields of life, many life stories are written almost as confessions, and certainly for family use. These life writings are more a diary, a report on one's life, a site for reminiscence, relishing, and maybe regretting, the way that past memory comes close in the final years of life. Ever since, and probably before, John Bunyan, this kind of life story has been written in English. David Vincent has compiled a list of the accounts held by the British Library, but until recently they rarely got into print. Many are of a kind, spiritual examinations from modest people, making a peace with themselves or God. One that I edited lifts several devices directly from Bunyan, testifying to the genealogy of these texts and the way that they self-consciously learn from each other just as do canonical traditions.[7]

However, one of the difficult aspects to this kind of writing is that people often do not find the appropriate style or tradition for the experience around which they want to write. Life writing is perceived to transgress decorum, to be naïve or simplistic, if not downright clumsy. Over the past fifteen years, there has been an upsurge of interest in local, situated autobiography, and this has been aided by the availability of cheap printing that has made the circulation of this material more possible. But it frequently falls into the category of bibliotherapy, another much maligned area marginal to 'literature'. Bibliotherapy takes very seriously Brossard's comment, cited above, that we 'write ourselves into being'. It works with the basic premise that writing and reading do help us sort out events in our lives, and then allow us to move on. Its most extensive use has been in the treatment of trauma, the soldiers returning from 'peace-keeping' duties in Somalia for example, the after-effects of road accidents, survivors of child abuse, and the impact of wider, possibly insidious, social violence.

Some of this material is too painful to repeat. I would risk traumatising my audience if I selected portions out of the carefully structured contexts of writing in which they are conveyed. Yet some of you will be familiar with the literature of abuse which, since it began with no formal models to help it, produced early material that hovers, terribly, on the borderlines of pornography. In other words, some texts read like pornography, an advocation rather than a critique; because the writer has consciously or unreflectively chosen to use the main literary genre for sexual violence. But over the past two decades the writing has developed techniques that work against such ambivalence, in the process also becoming less terrifying.[8] It is rare to find a book as balanced on the edge of what can and cannot be said as Benjamin Wilkomorski's *Fragments*,[9] a searing account of a child survivor of the Nazi concentration camps.

One powerful collection of life stories, written in many genres, is *Writing the Circle*, texts by First Nations women in western Canada which make claim to tell the self of people who have never put themselves into published words before. What is particularly interesting is the nature of the self that is told, for it is rarely unitary. Lee Maracle has said of the stories:

> We have become: The veil of silence in the world of literature is removed by the relentless march of words contained in this anthology. Sketches of our lives, passionate visions outlined in poetry, and analytical essay bring the reader from an ancient past into the painful and inspiring present. We are visible at last.

Thomas King writes:

> The voices of Native women in this anthology transcend western literary genres and carry us to worlds and realities – traditional and contemporary, spiritual and secular – that have been all but invisible...[10]

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[7] P. Hudson and L. Hunter, 'The Autobiography of William Hart, Cooper, 1776-1857', *The London Journal*, Vol 7, No 2, Winter 1981, pp. 144-160.

[8] See for example, E. Danica, *Don't, A Woman's Word* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), and J. Williamson, *Cry Baby*, 1998.

[9] B. Wilkomorski, *Fragments*, 1998.

[10] *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*, comp and ed J. Perreault and S. Vance, pref E. LaRocque (Edmonton: NeWest, 1990), back cover.

Invisibility and silence are swept away by the sheer volume of the collection, story after story putting into place a lost piece of life that needs valuing. Writer after writer gives testimony to the fact that they are writing not only, or even primarily, for themselves, but for their communities. They dedicate their texts to their families, their teachers, their neighbours, their tribes, their children, the future of First Nations people. The stance is one that derives straight from the organisation of First Nations society, and from the communal role of the storyteller. The voice of the writer may be direct and immediate but it is not only the voice of the private individual. Robin Melting Tallow writes 'The Patchwork Quilt', a story about herself but also a story which teaches the reader what they find there:

> Sometimes, late in the evening, my husband and I would lie together in the darkness of our bedroom. It was never completely dark, because I was afraid of the dark, and each night my fear would become a point of dissension between us. However, he would eventually relent, and I would turn the closet light on. If I closed the door all the way, there wasn't enough light, and if I left it open there was too much and he couldn't sleep. So we would compromise, and I would prop the closet door open with his cowboy boot. After our customary disagreement was settled, we would pull the comfort blanket over us, right up to our eyes. The blanket was really a patchwork quilt made for my husband by his mother for his thirty-ninth birthday. Our girls had christened that precious quilt 'the comfort blanket', because it had brought them comfort on the days they were sick and during times of sadness. With only my eyes visible, I would snuggle up to him, resting my head between his shoulder and his arm and we would lie quietly, lost in our own thoughts and dreams. Eventually, we would take turns talking. Usually one of us had something on our mind that needed discussing, and I would always feel so safe in his arms under that blanket, with my three inches of light gently playing on the bedroom floor. Our hopes and fears found refuge in the room from ridicule or laughter. Sneaking a look at that dusky room from the shelter of my bed, I could see the outline of the desk in the left-hand corner of the room, and I would feel pride because I had saved for months to buy it for him and he was overjoyed to have a private place all of his own, and to the right I could make out my old stuffed lion sitting on the laundry basket and my tired old red Teddy bear limply propped on his back. I was relieved to have some sort of visible evidence that I had once been a child and that it wasn't just some trick of my imagination. Lying there beside him it was hard to believe that I was not a young woman any longer. I felt robbed. Childhood had stolen by me so quickly that I could hardly remember it. I could scarcely believe myself at times. I had actually begun to day-dream about grandchildren. I didn't want to be a grandmother, not yet, anyway. Imagine some cute little creature calling me granny. However, I do believe that the maternal instinct has a mind of its own and that this entity had begun to toy with my heart and soul. I longed to hold a tiny, bundled, sweetly powdered form in my arms once more. But, a crazy thought struck me and made me giggle out loud (which caused my husband to give me one of those looks). How could I tell my grandchildren that I was afraid of the dark. This was ridiculous. I could just imagine them taunting me, 'Granny's afraid of the dark, granny's afraid of the dark!'
> OK, I thought, so I am getting slightly ahead of myself. Maybe I can still squeeze in a few more years of being Mom and that 'sexy lady' (some days). Looking at my husband's profile, I felt a warm tenderness surge through my body and I realized that I really was too young to make love to a man by the name of grandpa. Now, if only the kids will co-operate!.(pp.203-4)

On one level this story is simply a description; on another it is an intensely condensed autobiography. At the same time it is a subtle rendering of a wedded life, that conveys the negotiations between the husband and wife while underlining the present moment of concern, what she presently has on her mind. Rather than talk to her husband about it, she talks to us, takes us on a journey through end-of-the-day tiredness, toward that borderland of dream and wishing where she sees herself as a grandmother – thereby implicitly past the immediate responsibility for her own children, which would be a relief. And then, her humour breaks through, her sense of reality comes striding in, to remind her that she has so much more yet to do. The words take us forward on a second wind of prosody that carries her own renewed energy to the point where she can contemplate making love. She is too young to feel old, she is too unlearned to be as wise as a grandmother, she is still in the middle of life and must find the energy for it. After all, it was not until his thirty-ninth birthday that her husband's

mother made him a quilt. Of course, another reader will take away another reading, and this one tells you much about me. In fact it probably tells you more about me that about the writer, which is an effect that I'll return to in my next lecture.

In the conventional world of publishing, writers are usually placed by publishers as individuals. That whole round of interviews, awards, rewards and so on, is geared to the packaged writer. Yet the voice of the writer frequently speaks of a disparate identity. If the line between diary and autobiography is fine, that between autobiography and fiction is close. All writers use their own experiences to write, and women writers in particular have turned to fiction and short story as appropriate generic forms for writing themselves into existence. It is a commonplace that the short story is dominated by women writers, and is the main focus for women readers, partly, it is argued, because women have fewer coherent periods of time in their day. One only has to think of Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf herself, Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood or Alice Munro, to recall the broad scope of women short story writers today. If I could look briefly at a story by Alice Munro, the title story from *The Progress of Love*,[11] we can see her experimenting with identity, with the saying of self, almost as if the conventions around her are not sufficient to tell the story the way she would like.

'The Progress of Love' starts with a moment in the first person narrator's life, her name is Phemie, when her father rings her to let her know that her mother has died, and the reader initially assumes that this is the present day. Yet even within this opening section, the chronology shifts us forward so that we hear Phemie speaking of her father later on in a nursing home. The second section moves into memory of her mother, and the third into a memory of the house where she lived as a child, both of these memories are anchored to a more recent present by intercut comments from her father and her ex-husband. Possibly we should be warned by that comment from the ex-husband because we know from the opening that Phemie has been divorced for some time, and in the time of the fourth section we find the chronology shifted even further forward, to the father 'as an old man', and the fifth brings us to the point when she is dating other men, post-divorce. In the sixth section of the story we are taken firmly back to a childhood event, the arrival of aunt Beryl at the farm, for which Phemie is redecorating her room with cornflower wallpaper. This is interrupted by a story from the early life of her mother and aunt Beryl, about the apparently tragic suicide attempt of her grandmother on finding out about the affair her husband is having. We then return to Beryl's visit, during which she tells her version of the suicide story: that it was a 'set-up' and not serious.

Despite all the shifts in time we have already progressed through, the reader is then exposed to even more as Phemie then moves the present day forward to the point when she has a steady boyfriend who goes with her to look at the old farm, many years after she left. Several people have owned it, including a hippie commune which has painted sexual slogans all over the walls. But then Phemie finds her old bedroom, and on the vandalised wall she can see the cornflower wallpaper which affects her hugely. Her boyfriend assumes it's all the 'sexual shenanigans' that have upset her, and she is angry about his presumption. The experience sends her back again to the memory of Beryl's visit, and the reader begins to recognise that it is the visit to the farm that is probably the present time, since the memory of Beryl picks up from where it left off: with another story told two ways. Her mother had inherited money from her grandfather, which she had then burned. Phemie remembers this as a visual event with her father standing beside her mother at the stove, supporting her decision – which incidentally also makes it impossible for Phemie to realise her dream and train as a teacher. But Beryl 'corrects' this memory, saying that Phemie's father had in fact not been there at all. The different way that people remember the past is shown to shape their future.

More than this, Phemie recognises that we have a choice in how to do so, that she has a choice to take her boyfriend's comment differently, for 'Moments of kindness and reconciliation are worth having, even if the parting has to come sooner or later'. Munro builds this first person voice wandering through a maze of time and memory. As we follow it we may feel as though we know the narrator, but there is never the sense that we are reading about the writer, although there's an indication of the writer's sensibility. What we watch is the voice writing the narrator/character into existence before our very eyes, making choices within the fluidity of memory and time, recognising the way that memory reflects need, what we need to remember to make the present possible. This is not the I-narrator of

[11] *The Progress of Love* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987).

dramatic monologue where the 'character' is well-defined yet reveals, inadvertently, more about themselves than they would necessarily like. The narrator's voice is many-sided, self-conscious, enacting the progress of recognition in a patchwork of memories.

In this, Munro demonstrates, as do many women short story writers, a playing with a sense of self, an inhabiting of many bodies at the same time in the first person. Among the more formal experiments with this sense of self, we might look at the work of Claire Harris whose verse narrative *Drawing Down a Daughter* dislocates the speaking voice/narrator/writer so fully that it is difficult for the reader to put a finger on who the 'self' might be.[12] The strategic evasion of 'self' is one of the key areas of postmodern writing, often attempting to evade social responsibility. In contrast Harris is keen to explore the impossibility of saying her particular self within a traditional literary culture. However, the diaries, letters, autobiographies, and even fictions, that I have mentioned above all deal with the same difficulty.

I would like to conclude with a brief look at the developing genre of autography: a strategy that Jeanne Perreault illustrates as a kind of culling from autobiography. If autobiography allows one to write oneself into being, autography turns that being into knowledge that can be shared by many people. Autography requires a more self-conscious turning of our actual voice into 'selves' that work as topic, or agent, or performance.[13] Yet it retains the proximity of the speaking of the narrator with the writer. When Daphne Marlatt writes *Ana historic*[14] in three voices from three different generations of women, there is a sense in which the reader reads all three as part of the writer, simultaneously reading them as exemplary of particular historical responses to women who are trying to say their selves. In contrast to Munro who casts the various women in her stories as people who help Phemie learn, Marlatt creates a speaking voice whose character is made up of all the women in the novel: as if the entire history of women is coursing through the blood of one.

In the recent work *Taken*,[15] set largely against the backdrop of the second World War in the Pacific, Marlatt extends the movement into the 'ghosts' of energy that each person's contact with another leaves in the biochemistry or memory of the body. A constellation of voices in the past, of mother, father, grandparents, friends, those who escape and those who are taken, circulate around the woman narrator as a child. They form an evanescent character that gradually coalesces around the nodal point of the adult speaker. The story from the past, of her mother's separation from her father during the war, is overlaid onto her own present day separation from her lover. And as she speaks herself into a way of recognising not merely the memories and mementoes of her mother, but the way her mother (and father) are ghosted into her own actions, she also speaks herself into a place in which her lover too has become ghosted into her continuous present. The writer here is a varied and variable voice, in process, responding to different need, and generating a range of different values, all of which come into place at resting points in the novel, points at which the reader recognises identity.

None of the examples I have chosen presents the writer or narrator as a unique and stable voice, generating truth and beauty, although the short story genre would certainly yield some instances where this might be the case. Instead, these diaries, letters, autobiographies, autographies, work to point the variability of self, the questioning and ambiguity of identity, in which the speaking voice not only asks the reader, but also itself, what is trustworthy. And while these are for the most part texts by women, who may have good reason to believe that the traditional literary forms do not appropriately fit their needs, I suspect that all writers would connect with the processes illustrated here. They are not the canonical critical ends, but they inscribe a whole world of other experience that readers can appreciate and learn to value. In doing so, they will also learn to value these elements in their own lives.

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[12] *Drawing Down a Daughter* (Fredricton: Goose Lane, 1992).
[13] *Writing Selves: Contemporary feminist autography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) p.101.
[14] *Ana historic* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1988).
[15] *Taken* (Toronto: Anansi, 1986).

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