

WRITING AND READING WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

Fatmagül BERKTAY(*)

"The likeness of a man in all the truth of nature..."
(J.J. Rousseau)

To take oneself up and bring oneself to language, to give the self a narrative in the search for self-inscription and subjectivity, to write an autobiography... But is there an essential, unified, continuous "self"; and can it be captured and "mirrored" in all its truthful likeness in writing? Is autobiography so transparent that it becomes a replica of the life in question through which that life may be perceived undistorted? Or is the autobiographical self merely a fictional construct produced in and through language?

These questions involve a review of our beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, self, and language - beliefs which are derived from the Enlightenment and are often taken for granted within, and serve as legitimation for contemporary western culture, as Jane Flax puts it⁽¹⁾. The existence of a stable, unified and transcendent self that could be known through consciousness - a form of "reason" capable of privileged insight into its own processes and into the "laws of nature" -, and which the right use of "reason" would lead to the acquisition of "true" knowledge about, are among the maxims which postmodern discourses have sought to "deconstruct". This tradition of the Enlightenment, perhaps best captured in Hegel's formulation that "consciousness of self is the birthplace of truth", also conceived of language to be in some sense transparent, so that there was an assumed correspondence between "word" and "thing"; objects were not seen to be linguistically (and therefore also socially) constructed, but to merely **made present** to consciousness by naming and the right use of language⁽²⁾.

Feminist notions of the self, knowledge and truth are too much in contradiction with those of the Enlightenment to be subsumed within its ca-

(*) İ.Ü. Edebiyat Fakültesi Felsefe Bölümü Araştırma Görevlisi.

(1) Jane Flax. "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory". *Signs*, Summer 1987, p. 624.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 625.

tegies. Feminist theorists have begun to deconstruct Enlightenment notions and to reveal the effects of gender arrangements that lay beneath their "neutral" and universalizing facades. Feminist critiques of the masculine tradition of the autobiographical genre, with their focus on the long-neglected autobiographies of women, play an important part in this "deconstruction" process.

As Brodzki and Schenck point out, "the masculine autobiography... assumes the conflation of masculinity and humanity, canonizing the masculine representative self of both writer and reader."⁽³⁾ Thus it has taken as its first premise the mirroring capacity of the autobiographer - his universality, his representativeness, his role as spokesman for the community. This "radical individualism" was at the foundations of the emergence of the genre. The Enlightenment meant belief in man, in his significance, and also belief in Reason - concepts closely linked to the rise of the European bourgeoisie - and autobiography was a significant element of its process of self-assertion and self-realisation: "Autobiography justifies the particular as against the general, but also seeks for 'law'."⁽⁴⁾ Arguing in a similar vein, Georges Gusdorf notes that the conscious awareness of the singularity of each life and the emergence of the individual who starts to counterpose himself to all others, was the product of the Industrial Revolution⁽⁵⁾. Without this consciousness of the self as opposed to others, autobiography was impossible. This individual could, then, look at and within himself as an isolated, self-directed unit whose life was a sequence of acts of will of a continuously developing and progressive nature, and could know his self, recaptured through consciousness; his life-writing, then, would be a retrospective construction through language, a mirror where the "self" and the "reflection" would coincide⁽⁶⁾.

The very concept of an individual identity - an "I" that is central of any text purporting to be about the self - raises different issues for women than it does for men, as Nancy Walker argues: "Whereas the white, male, heterosexual 'I' can assert that it is somehow impersonal, that it represents cultural and aesthetic values, the female 'I' reflects instead the instability of the

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- (3) B. Brodzki and C. Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines - Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Cornell University Press, 1988, "Introduction", p. 2.
- (4) Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, p. 51.
- (5) G. Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (J. Olney, ed., Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 21 and 31.
- (6) S. Benstock, in her essay "Authorizing the Autobiographical" (*The Private Self*) criticizes G. Gusdorf for overlooking the most interesting aspect of the autobiographical: "the measure to which 'self' and 'self-image' might never coincide in language." (p. 15) However, although Gusdorf maintains that autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image, he also says that the autobiographical self is a fictional construct, a work of art and therefore its significance should be sought beyond truth and falsity: "Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes to be and have been," (My emphasis. G. Gusdorf, *Op. cit.*, p. 45).

'self', as the woman occupies the marginal position of 'other'⁽⁷⁾. Therefore, it is only natural that women's autobiographies should display a different orientation toward the self and others from the "typical orientation". Women's autobiographies reveal that women's place within culture, the place from which she writes, is produced by difference and produces difference. It is more difficult for her to believe in a self that can exist before writing, a self that is unified and continuous; whereas for man autobiography is "neither fiction nor history, but each man's metaphor of his self - **the predetermined self-image** that shapes both the content and form of his life and his life study"⁽⁸⁾.

The male autobiographer could claim to be a representative of his time and believe that he was mirroring his era; he therefore felt that he had a "social obligation" to write his life, thereby contributing to the history of patriarchy. The female autobiographer's marginality, on the other hand, in a male-dominated culture, and her social, political and psychic fragmentation, situates her life-writing in "difference" and "otherness". She can claim to represent neither humanity nor her time. Therefore she seems to exploit difference and change over sameness and identity, as Benstock puts it, because she has no investment in creating a cohesive self over time⁽⁹⁾. And since she does not "go" anywhere, her sense of life is not teleological: there is no point of arrival; she can neither transcend herself nor attain to some authentic fullness of being⁽¹⁰⁾.

Women's autobiographies reveal that the notions of the Cartesian self as rational, whole, autonomous and volitional are social and ideological constructs rather than eternal verities. A human subject is constituted by history, culture and language; and the cultural constructions of self and gender intermingle with the individual subject's interest and engagement in taking up the particular discourses available at given historical moments. This reformulated "self", then, is a product of specific discourse and social process; insofar as subjectivity is a social construct which is constantly being reorganized, it leads to a vexed and complicated relationship between the lived experience and its representation. The intersection between social relations and individual subjects perpetually shifts and changes to produce an inconsistent and contradictory subject; therefore, the autobiographer can never write the "image-double" of his life; instead, in referring to himself he creates himself at every moment afresh within the text⁽¹¹⁾. This marks the

(7) Nancy Walker, "Wider than the Sky", in *The Private Self* (S. Benstock, ed., Routledge, 1988), p. 274.

(8) J. Olney, cited in E.C. Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 3.

(9) S. Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical", in *The Private Self*, (S. Benstock, ed., Routledge, 1988), p. 15.

(10) L. Anderson, "At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography", in *Women's Writing* (M. Monteith, ed., The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 60.

(11) L. Anderson, *Ibid.*, p. 59.

impossibility of autobiography's own dream: "what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction."⁽¹²⁾

Feminist criticism of the masculine tradition of autobiography can be regarded in one sense as fitting into the postmodern discourse of French critical thinkers (J. Derrida, M. Foucault, R. Barthes, J. Lacan, etc.) who tell us that the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end a matter of text. An example in point is **Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes** - where the phrase "by roland Barthes" is as much a part of the title as is "Roland Barthes". Here the autobiographical relation between the author and subject, text and life as purely textual, is non-coincident and open-ended. As Brodzki and Schenck point out, any pretense toward discovering, capturing, or restoring an ego is absent, because the subject is merely an effect of language⁽¹³⁾.

But then the emphasis French critics place on the centrality of language is also problematical. Thinking only in terms of texts, signs or signification as in the claim that nothing exists outside of a text, implies a denial of the existence of the variety of concrete social practices that enter into and are reflected in the constitution of language itself. This neglect of concrete social relations - power relations included - leads, among other things, to obscuring relations of domination and the effects of gender arrangements. French critical theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis both maintain that gender is a symbolic construct; this tends to repress the social dimension of gender by collapsing the social into the symbolic. Feminist theory may enter into and echo post-modernist discourse in many respects, but it cannot afford to neglect either the concrete social relations or the specific power and gender relations inherent in them. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it, "the death of the subject and the author may accurately reflect the perceived crisis of western culture and the bottomless anxieties of its most privileged subjects - the white male authors who had presumed to define it ... [but] there remain plenty of subjects and authors who, never having much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, much less in the name of the culture as a whole, are eager to seize the abandoned podium."⁽¹⁴⁾

Women's autobiography as the genre of the oppressed

Life-writing for women can be a way of defining and presenting themselves to a world they can assume to be alien or hostile to their experiences and aspirations. They do not write their life as an ever-developing success

(12) S. Benstock, *op. cit.*, p. 11

(13) Brodzki and Schenck, *op. cit.*, "Introduction", p. 5.

(14) E. Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women", in *The Private Self*, p. 67.

story of an individual genius; neither do they pretend to speak for their era - the relationship in which they stand to society deters them from making any such claim. They bring into their writing the insecurities, failures and details of their domestic life. Autobiography serves them as a means for creating images of "self", for finding a "voice" through which to express that which cannot be expressed in other forms. Nancy Walker argues that overtly autobiographical forms such as letters, journals and diaries, when the writer is female, provide insight into the tensions between private and public, "self" and "other" that have been especially problematic for women⁽¹⁵⁾.

As for what autobiographical forms women most prefer, here we come up against a revealing point in itself. Dailiness matters to most women, and as Esther C. Jelinek puts it, dailiness is by definition never a conclusion but always a process, which may account for the repetitive, cumulative and cyclical structure of women's life-writing. Women lack the "essential and inviolable self" of the Western masculine ideal that unifies and propels the narrative. As such, women's life-writing, in their form, tend to be like the stories that they tell: they show less a pattern of linear development towards some clear goal⁽¹⁵⁾. And diary is perhaps the ideal form for the verbal articulation of dailiness. It is kept whenever the author can fit a time for writing into her daily routine, and it is finished when the pages run out, **not** when some conclusion is reached. They go nowhere and attain nothing, but they help the diarist to become immersed in herself, her thoughts. According to Linda Anderson, diary allows the woman to remain hidden while providing her with a place to actualise her interiority and create herself for an "other", even if that "other" is also herself. The act of keeping a diary and having in the back of one's mind, at least that it may eventually be published one day, means that the life of the diary keeper (and her diary) will one day come out of the private world where it traditionally belongs and into the realm of the public.

This tension between the public and the private in women's lives is evident even when the women in question are famous and successful in the public world. Jane Marcus, referring to women who were marked in public as the first women of achievement in their fields, comments that "to write they resigned from public discourse into private discourse", and they wrote their memoirs in the fear and knowledge that the public world and patriarchal history would erase their names and works: "What seems significant is not the female struggle to enter male public discourse... but the recognition of the inability of that discourse to include their voices in its history."⁽¹⁷⁾

(15) Nancy Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

(16) E.C. Jelinek, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

(17) Jane Marcus, "Invincible Mediocrity- The Private Selves of Public Women". in *The Private Self*, p. 119.

A search for self-knowledge and a quest for presenting a self-image in a bid for posterity runs through women's autobiographical writing as well. But women's life-writing has its own specificity, emanating from the particular conditions within which it is produced, and reflects the tension between the desire for autonomy and independence and the reality of subordinate status. Women seem to handle this tension by drawing on "others" while presenting their self-image; this "other" is sometimes other women, sometimes a social class, a racial or ethnic category. For those outside the dominant group, identification with community is all-pervasive for the unalienated self in life and writing. Many scholars have pointed out that the importance of group identification repeatedly surfaces in women's and minority groups' autobiographies. This communal identification enables these individuals to move beyond a position of alienation within the dominant culture, and allows marginalized individuals to embrace alternative selves constructed from **positive** (and more authentic) images of their own creation⁽¹⁸⁾. Such images do not come from within the individualistic, isolated self; therefore, Susan S. Friedman concludes that women's autobiography, contrary to the masculine individualistic tradition, is possible only when the individual does not feel herself to exist outside of others: "women's sense of self exists within a context of deep awareness of others."⁽¹⁹⁾

This merging of the individual with a collective group identity is well reflected in Black women's autobiographies. In Black autobiography, as in any other, the central aim remains the promotion of an authentic self-in-writing; but that self now originates from a source other than the alienated self within the dominant culture, and it leads women to explore there their sense of shared identity with their own colonized subgroup.

One feature of feminist autobiography in particular - the wish to set an example by one's life-writing - can also be interpreted as a way of linking oneself to others. When individuals are deeply committed to a particular change (in this case women's liberation) it is only natural that they should want to write about it. These writers have an awareness of their own worth, an awareness that their lives and what they have to say is valuable. They want to communicate and to share their insights with other women experiencing similar circumstances. The feminist autobiography, like all other, is an act of transcending obscurity and an exploration of identity. But whereas "great men" feel a "social obligation" to contribute their autobiographies to the history of patriarchy, feminist women feel the need to contribute to the struggle **against** patriarchy by setting their lives as an example, thereby enabling and empowering other women. This is what also makes them pay

(18) Nellie Y. McKay, "Race, Gender and Cultural Context in Zora N. Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*", in *Life/Lines*, pp. 175-76.

(19) S.S. Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves", in *The Private Self*. Julia Swindells brings a similar argument in the context of working class autobiographies in the Victorian England. See J. Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women*, Polity Press, 1986.

tribute to the sources that have enabled them to emerge as individuals capable of leaving some mark, some trace, some inscription upon the world⁽²⁰⁾. They use their autobiographies to show that they were women for whom relationship and community were very important. This can be well traced, for example, in Lillian Hellman's memoirs where she "invites the reader into a world of 'others' who, as they come together in her memory, become significant in the articulation of her 'self'. They are mirrors in front of which Hellman's self tries to create its own reality."⁽²¹⁾ In this way, the "mirror" that reflected a preconceived and predetermined self is displaced and radically transformed.

Virginia Woolf once proposed a theory of autobiography as the genre of the oppressed; this marked the beginning of a feminist critique of patriarchal categories. It is obvious that this critique, in the way in which it challenges and contributes to the deconstruction of the notions of self and individuality inherited from the Enlightenment, has its place within the postmodernist discourse. But because of its gender awareness it cannot and does not declare the "death of the author", nor can it neglect the social and gender dimension of the writing and reading process.

The significance of gendered reading

All writing is a form of construction, intended to relate not merely to oneself but also to an assumed reader. Virginia Woolf claims that the site of autobiography is in the reading process itself: Centered in the commonality of collective reading experience, the writer makes a self⁽²²⁾. To read a woman's autobiography is to read the inscription of a female self: a cultural fabrication that names itself as such... The historical truth of a woman writer's life lies in the reader's grasp of her intratext⁽²³⁾. And learning to read a woman's autobiography also necessitates a re-vision of the concept of selfhood so as to incorporate the significance of collective identities of the individual. For although a woman's life story is unique, it also reflects her interaction with the cultural meanings of Woman and Otherness which patriarchy has confined her to, as well as with these aspects of identity she shares with other women⁽²⁴⁾.

(20) In a similar vein, Doris Sommer who studies Latin American women's testimonials comments that, "they are written from interpersonal class and ethnic positions but the narrator's relationship to her social group is as a particular individual. Therefore, she represents her group as a participant rather than as an ideal and repeatable type." "Not Just a Personal Story" in *Life/Lines*, p. 129.

(21) M.K. Billson and S.A. Smith, "Lillian Hellman and the Strategy of the Other", in *Women's Autobiography*, p. 163.

(22) Jane Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

(23) Nancy K. Miller, "Writing Fictions: women's Autobiography in France" in *Life/lines*, p. 61.

(24) S.S. Friedman, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

We are faced, therefore, with the need for a "gender-marked reading": a practice of the text that would recognize the status of the reader [as well as the writer -FB] as a differentiated subject, a reading subject named by gender and committed in a dialectics of identification to deciphering the inscription of a female subject. This reading necessitates another sort of "pact" different from the conventional "autobiographical pact" which demands that autobiography be an "explicit project of truth telling" - a pact of commitment to decipher what women have said (or perhaps more important, left unsaid) about the pattern of their lives⁽²⁵⁾.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas by Gertrude Stein, who had a "modernist suspicion of identity", is quite relevant in this context. This puzzling text is Stein's self-portrait framed in Alice B. Toklas' narrative which allows her to reject the conventions of self, identity, and chronological time. As Brodzki and Schenck put it, "her radical textual practice defines itself in the very terms of modern art: subjectivity cannot be totalized and regularized; it does not move fluidly through time; the surface of the thing can be approached in successive images, or still lifes, which are more disjunctive than synergistic... What Stein frames in fact is a **refusal** to frame identity, conventionally and mimetically understood."⁽²⁶⁾

By this strategy of impersonation Stein is able to protect her intimate life from public scrutiny, and it is at this point where reading for the "unsaid" becomes important. The reader must struggle through Stein's techniques of omission, camouflage and conscious detachment to piece together the facts of her emotional and intimate life. The book is at once autobiography and fiction, as its contradictory title implies: "Throughout, **The Autobiography's** whimsical, self-interrupting, repetitious stylized prose marks it as a piece of admitted and self-conscious artifice."⁽²⁷⁾ Stein's strategy of writing replaces singularity with alterity, provides a mode of resisting reification and essentialism, and allows for more radical experimentation in autobiographical form⁽²⁸⁾, all of which testify to the place Stein retains for herself within the female autobiographical tradition.

The fascination of autobiography lies in its open-endedness that requires readers to continue the experience into their own lives as the text of another's life sends us back to our own. Through autobiographies, both writers and readers come to "know" life. It is not necessarily or primarily an intellectual or scientific knowledge but an intuitive knowledge that is as real and valid as any other, a "knowing through the imagination, a sudden grasp of reality through reliving it in the imagination, an understanding of the feel of life, the feel of living."⁽²⁹⁾ It is not the factual truthfulness, which "in fact"

(25) Nancy K. Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56 and 61.

(26) Brodzki and Schenck, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

(27) James E. Breslin, "Gertrude Stein and the Problems of Autobiography" in *Women's Autobiography*, p. 160.

(28) Brodzki and Schenck, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

(29) Roy Pascal, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

(!) can never be attained, that makes autobiography for us a valuable source of experience; it is how autobiographers perceive themselves and their life, the self-image they **want** us to see, that offers us unparalleled insights into the mode of consciousness of others. Stein claimed that selves could not be interiorly known but only represented visually and textually. But just as Picasso's portrait of hers gives the inside by way of the outside, we still get from her autobiography a glimpse of who she was. Beyond any "truthful likeness" to life, autobiography has to give us that unique truth of life as seen from the inside - a "truth" which is complex, fluid, ever-changing, changing and rendering itself through reading as much as in the initial writing act. That is its ultimate fascination.

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