Oedipus' Wake: The (Neo-)Masculinization of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century American Women's Memoir

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OEDIPUS’ WAKE:
THE (NEO-)MASCULINIZATION OF THE SELF IN LATE TWENTIETH-
CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN’S MEMOIR

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
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May 3, 2006
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Date Recommended 5/8/06

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Date 6/8/06
Acknowledgements

Crystal Fodrey and Catherine Altmaier deserve thanks for allowing me the
(probably slightly illegal) use of the technology required to work on this project at
my own home and not be forced to write a master’s thesis in one of the campus
computer labs. Crystal deserves a second thanks for allowing me to pick through
her library of memoirs and to make my own notes for this project in more than
one of her books—she will, like it or not, have a hard time forgetting me when
she returns to those in the future. To these two wonderful women, then, go my
sincerest thanks, and with them go many fond memories.
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Abstract

Without pretensions to exhaustiveness, this study briefly examines the mid- to late-twentieth-century flowering of western theory and criticism built around autobiographical writing and follows the feminist branch(es) of that theory and criticism through a reading of the following four memoirs: Autobiography of a Face by Lucy Grealy, All the Lost Girls by Patricia Foster, Lying by Lauren Slater, and Prozac Nation by Elizabeth Wurtzel.

Using both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as they relate to literature, I argue that the selves these four women write in their memoirs are not selves built around the model historically set for women by feminist criticism of autobiography. Instead, Grealy, Foster, Slater, and Wurtzel, each raised by a relatively ineffectual or absent father and a strong-willed mother, fashion autonomous Lacanian ‘I’s for themselves out of relationships with their mothers that more closely resemble the adversarial relationship Freud posited between fathers and sons than they do the communal and less autonomy-engendering mother-daughter relationships many feminist critics predict.
The ‘I’ cannot be conjugated without the world outside it . . .
— Herbert Leibowitz (5)

In autobiography the war is often a fight between parents and children, and the shape of the battle is whether the child can ever get free.
— Patricia Foster (Just beneath My Skin 86-7)
Introduction

In her 1998 comprehensive study of western memoir, *When Memory Speaks*, Jill Ker Conway distills the main thrust of the long-standing and male-dominated scheme of narrative in literature to be one in which the “hero [. . .] is vindicated by his successful passage through his journey of initiation and returns to claim his rightful place in the world of his birth. His achievement comes about through his own agency, and his successful rite of passage leaves him master of his fortunes” (7). The traditional male hero, in other words, discerns his identity by asserting it against potential threats and obstacles to his self-realization.

Conway goes on to describe how, as a rich history of religious writings from cloistered women was coming to a close in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “[t]he secular form of women’s narratives emerged in the bourgeois preoccupation with romantic love, marriage, family and property” (13). The “romantic heroine” of these secular writings, as Conway calls her, “has no agency, or power to act on her own behalf. Things happen to her—adventures, lovers, reversals of fortune” (14). The romantic heroine’s life is guided, at best, by the strong and benevolent will of a father or husband, or, at worst, by a supposedly blind fate that leaves her alone, powerless and penniless, and wretched.

Such is the stuff of the fiction of our collective western past. Kings rise to power, and their queens are fulfilled by bearing strong male heirs to the throne. Villains fall into infamy, and the women unlucky enough to have been duped into attaching themselves to those villains fall with them. Or those women remove
themselves by such wicked and foul machinations as divorce or so much exertion of will simply as to leave with no sort of official sanction, falling in either case to a station more despised than that of their former attachments. And it is precisely because of the inability of such a fiction to fulfill the narrative needs of a society as imbued with shifting, conflicting and co-existing mores as western—and particularly American—society has been for the past century that memoir and autobiography have become so necessary to our ever-expanding literary canon. We are loath to redefine our fiction so radically as to risk losing the more-than-two-millennia-entrenched archetypal male hero or the more powerful image, for being at least equally ingrained in one-tenth the time, of the romantic heroine. Instead, we relegate fiction to a world of its own and begin to look to reality, the reality that is all of the realities of every person dead or living, for more appropriate mirrors on our selves.

Autobiographical writing has of late become at least one of those mirrors. For women, especially, autobiography and memoir are now means not only of artistic expression, storytelling, and self-sharing, but also of modeling—for both readers and the authors themselves—the various selves which the authors have discerned, defined, and invented over the course of living and writing their stories. As opposed, though, to using a distinctly feminine discourse or creating their selves in a space of absolute alterity against patriarchal ideologies and writing practices of the past as some feminist theorists might predict, many women are writing their stories—composing their selves—by appropriating traditionally masculine modes of othering to their own ends. They write for their
audiences mirrors which show female selves literally put together using historically male instruction manuals.

Who says, though, that we as readers are even in search of self-reflection? Unless writers are of some breed other than human—which, in spite of some compelling anecdotal evidence to the contrary I have seen among my own small circle of writerly friends, I obstinately believe they are not—then the work that they do, the writing they produce, as with the life and work of most any person in a given culture, both projects something of the climate of their times and propels those times and the people who are a part of them to whatever is next. James Olney corroborates this view when he writes, specifically of autobiography, that its “great virtue [is] to offer us understanding that is finally not of someone else but of ourselves” (x). I find it significant, then, when Jill Ker Conway observes of the 1990s that “there has been an outpouring of autobiographical writing by women and men in their thirties and early forties, focused not on reflections about the unfolding of a long life but on urgent questions of identity and relationships to parents” (Memory 152). Ker Conway’s observation is echoed six years later by Patricia Foster in her book on her own and others’ autobiographical writings, Just Beneath My Skin:

What I want to suggest is [. . .] an argument [for memoir] based on the contemporary writer’s need to locate the self in a transient world—not just the political world of the twentieth century, but the world of personal identity in conflict with constant change. [. . .] Although the prevailing myth of the late twentieth century is one of social, economic, and political progress, the current memoir suggests a countermyth of private shame and disgrace, a narrative of breakdown and recovery, a spiritual longing for connection that goes unfulfilled. Often in the past fiction and poetry have diagnosed the culture’s ills, have told the hidden story of those
forsaken, mistreated, rejected, recounting tales of who we are and what we long for beneath our bank accounts and fashion statements. I suggest that an integral part of today’s diagnosis is being written as well through our society’s memoirs, its autobiographical essays of men and women who give shape to memory’s conflicted desires. (83-4)

Such a rush of writers bearing concerns of self-discovery is indicative of that concern being general within the social milieu in which those writers live.

Perhaps, though, people have looked ever to literature and art for life lessons. Classic morality plays offer some heavy-handed evidence of as much, but even such modern classics as Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady*, the story of Isabelle Archer’s self-defeating will for independence, and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the thinly veiled autobiographical account of Stephen Dedalus’ coming of age in a very conflicted turn-of-the-century Ireland, are only what their titles suggest: portraits. Those novels are portraits of characters making their paths through a world similar in kind to that of their readers. The novels and their characters are models to readers, for better or worse, of different methods by which one can negotiate this world, different ways of living.

Joyce was to go a step further in *Ulysses*, writing into existence a twentieth-century man, Leopold Bloom, whose negotiations with the world are more self-contained, both his self and those people and events with which he has to live more or less dependent upon his perception. William Faulkner, back in America and nearly contemporary with Joyce, pushed even deeper into the theme of perceived reality in books like *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In both of these books, Faulkner shows us Quentin Compson, a young Southern
man struggling not only with his own perceptions but also with the impossible
task of assimilating those perceptions with the intangible but nonetheless re-
externalized perceptions of his family and his unique Southern heritage. When
Quentin tries in Absalom to create from an outsider—his college roommate
Shreve—a sounding board for his self-making, the predictable result is simply
another perspective added to the mix in Quentin’s head, another kink in the line
he so desperately needs to see running straight through his life.

Isabelle Archer ends up Isabelle Osmond and miserable for it; Stephen
Dedalus ends Portrait full of promise and youthful tenacity, but reappears in
Ulysses a thwarted cynic; Leopold Bloom is ostensibly happy, though it is a less
than enviable happiness based largely on a (poorly) self-enforced ignorance of his
wife’s infidelities and a sense of marital and parental duty sprung in large part
from remorse over his son’s early demise; and Quentin commits suicide, thereby
bringing all the cacophony of competing realities in his world to a definitive
point. With Quentin’s end came also the wrapping up of any lingering doubts
about the demise of literary realism’s objective perspective and what should have
been the proleptical foreshortening of later debates over the possibility of a
guiding unified perspective of any kind. Quentin’s suicide was the death of
literary archetypes and their worldview. And, while Benjamin Franklin’s
autobiography may mark the beginning-point of the American autobiographical
tradition, Quentin Compson’s suicide was the birth-song of a need in this country
for the singular story of the individual: memoir.

The term ‘memoir,’ though, comes with some historical problems of its
own. Elizabeth Bruss sketches a history that points up the less-than-thoroughbred lineage of 'memoir' and of the genre the term describes:

Pretensions to aesthetic worth were alien to English autobiography throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and rare even into the eighteenth. The term most frequently applied to it, "memoir," had the connotation of informality, a casually constructed affair and not a serious literary effort. Although the term "biography" became current after 1680, it was not until 1809, when Robert Southey coined or translated the word for the Quarterly Review, that "autobiography" became a familiar designation in England. (7)

After its introduction, couched in the serious literary work of the Romantic movement, and after the rise of critical inquiry around the form, 'autobiography' became and still remains the favored term for literary critics to use in their studies. Bruss uses that term throughout her study—even in her title, Autobiographical Acts—as she discusses the blurring of whatever distinctions there might have once existed between autobiographical writing and fiction. For simplicity's sake and because it is not my intention here to enter the genre-making fray, the terms 'autobiography' and 'memoir' in the present study are understood as interchangeable and both representative of texts which fall under the broader designation 'autobiographical writing.'

In the first lines of her 1987 book, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, Sidonie Smith provides her estimation of the state of critical and theoretical work on autobiography at the time: "Suddenly everyone in the universe of literary critics and theorists seems to be talking about autobiography, a genre critics described until recently as a kind of flawed biography at worst, and at best a historiographical document capable of capturing the essence of a nation or the
spirit of an age” (3). With everyone in the critical universe talking, it is no wonder that Smith traces that confused and confusing discussion to the point where “some now question whether autobiography exists at all” (3). Assuming for the moment that those writings which can be called ‘autobiographical’ for dealing with the lives and selves of their authors do at least exist, and taking into account William Zinsser’s 1998 proclamation that “[t]his is the age of memoir. Never have personal narratives gushed so profusely from the American soil as in the closing decade of the twentieth century” (3), we are forced to address one obvious question: do the actual memoirs people have written and published adequately address the outdated fictional archetypes which preceded them? More specifically, do women memoirists achieve some semblance of control, self-identity and voice against their formerly proscribed roles as passive romantic heroines?

The answer to those questions is a definitive ‘yes.’ And ‘no.’

What follows is a defense of both that ‘yes’ and that ‘no’ by way of a discussion and analysis, first, of the history of the general criticism and theory around autobiography and memoir and of the more recent history of specifically feminist works on autobiographical writings and, second, of works by four late twentieth-century American women memoirists who address in their writing some of the issues around the questions of control, identity, and voice. Lucy Grealy writes in *Autobiography of a Face* of her struggles and triumphs after one-third of her jaw had to be removed at age nine because of a rare and particularly deadly cancer. Patricia Foster details her many ostensible failures and eventual strange
success at extricating herself from her parents’ middle-class neuroses born of their Southern blue-collar backgrounds in *All the Lost Girls*. Lauren Slater frees herself from her own pressured past via the extended metaphor (or is it?) of physical and psychological illness in *Lying*. Finally, Elizabeth Wurtzel tells of the dual task of becoming herself away from and in the wake of her parents and also of re-imagining herself as a woman living beyond depression in *Prozac Nation*. What will become clear by the end of this study is that some prominent contemporary feminist theories, built around historical views of women’s autobiographical writings, and the actual autobiographical writings women are producing, at least in the form of the four texts discussed here, have somewhere parted company.
Discussion of the Literature

A very brief history of autobiography in the west

Despite the ongoing and ever-more-complex debate over the title(s) and genre(s) of autobiographical writing, literary critics and historians are nearly unanimous in their dating of the beginning of western autobiography sixteen-hundred years ago. While Estelle Jelinek, in setting the background for her study, The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography, writes that “Georg Misch’s 1907 two-volume History of Autobiography in Antiquity traces the growth of the concept of individuality from the self-presentations seen in Egyptian inscriptions, through Greek love lyrics and Roman orations, to Augustine’s Confessions” (1), it is precisely at the point where Misch leaves off his study that most critics place the genesis of the western autobiographical canon. Philip Dodd, reaffirming his critical predecessors and contemporaries in 1987, writes that “autobiography [. . .] is often seen as a form of literature, with its own pedigree stretching back to St. Augustine” (61). Beginning with the (aptly labeled) confessional mode that St. Augustine’s Confessions introduced—and arguably perfected—the western literary canon can lay claim to myriad autobiographies and memoirs which define a number of different modes of the same.

Religious testimonies and similar confessional accounts that lead up to some pivotal moment of self-realization dominated the scene until Rousseau published his own Confessions. Helen Buss, commenting on the irony of the title
of Rousseau’s autobiographical work, notes that

Rousseau’s work is not a confession of sin for the purposes of subsuming his own desires and individuality into obedience to God [as Augustine’s is]. Rather, it is a detailing of rebellions against the prevailing ideology for which he feels no religious guilt; indeed, he insists on validating these rebellions as essential to the construction of his self as a secular being, capable of asserting his own will and way in the world. Rousseau marks the beginning of both the romantic ideal of the individual genius struggling for freedom from the constraints of traditional society, and the bourgeois ideal of the self-made man who makes his material way upward from rags to riches. (8)

The “romantic ideal of the individual genius” and the “bourgeois ideal of the self-made man” will come under serious scrutiny from later, feminist critics of autobiographical writings, but, for the moment, this is the point to which Rousseau brings us.

Sailing on to American shores—and more recent times—we encounter the interesting cases of Henry Adams and Vladimir Nabokov. Adams’ use of the third-person voice in *The Education of Henry Adams* provides him certain perspectival advantages rarely utilized by autobiographers before him. James Cox reads Henry Adams’ as

a model life, [...] that of a manikin—a figure in which clothing, outline, and pattern are everything, the life nothing but plastic and sawdust, an elusive and ironic joke at the center of education, which is at once history, the thought into which life has died, and art, the narrative upon which life is spent. Being a historian, Adams saw life as history; being an autobiographer, he knew that he had to make life art. Being these and being an Adams, too, he dared to identify his history with that of his country. (25)

In short, Adams wrote his life as writing demanded, not as fact dictated. Later, Vladimir Nabokov, born in Russia, but claiming the label ‘American’ because of his early move to and continued residence in the United States, would take
Adams' cue and write his highly self-conscious and overtly crafted autobiographical *Speak, Memory*.

The literary genealogy of this ever-growing and -shifting genre leads to the still-sometimes-debated blending of autobiographical writing with fiction, of history with art. John Hewitt traces the road leading to this twentieth-century artistic invention of self from a sociological perspective:

At the outset, it is argued, American society had many of the characteristics of the traditional [western European, pre-Renaissance] society, with the person firmly anchored in the fixed social world of the self-sufficient agricultural community. But the coming of the industrial age transformed the person as well as the social order. At first driven by an inner urge to excel in the emerging industrial society, people later became driven more by interpersonal considerations than a quest for mobility or achievement. [...] Self was transformed from an object spontaneously experienced in the round of everyday life to one cultivated for its own sake. And as the authority of tradition waned and the spontaneity of the self declined, men and women began to look for the anchor points of their lives within themselves rather than in social institutions. A concern for “sincerity” gave way to preoccupation with “authenticity,” the era of “character” vanished and that of “personality” arrived, narcissism became a form of psychopathology writ large on American culture, and the “therapeutic culture” triumphed. (6)

It should come as no surprise that, written in the late 1980s, Hewitt’s definition of where self-hood has so far ended up is a succinct portrait of yuppie-dom. And surely that portrait served its role for some portion of the population. But for non-yuppies—the vast majority of Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and anyone else something other than obviously Anglo-white, along with most any woman not ‘fortunate’ enough to have married a CEO—this portrait of individualism was wildly exclusionary and alien to their experiences of self-definition.

Turning back the clock to thirty years before the birth of yuppies in this
country, and retracing our passage across the Atlantic, we find one prominent
woman in France addressing the problem of the exclusionary politics of
gender(ed) definitions. Summing up in 1949 the situation she observed for many
women in both France and the U.S., Simone de Beauvoir writes in the
introduction to her study/memoir *The Second Sex* that

    if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: “I am a woman”;
on this truth must be based all other discussion. [...] The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of
form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes
is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents
both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common
use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman
represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without
reciprocity. (xxi)

The ubiquity of maleness and the space, “defined by limiting criteria,” reserved
for women in the realm of self-definition that de Beauvoir points up in 1949 are
precisely where feminist literary theorists and critics of autobiography take up
their discussion and, after a synopsis of the relatively short history of the theory
and criticism of autobiography generally, that is where we will turn our attention
next.

*The twentieth-century critical interest*

    In spite of autobiography’s at-least-1600-year history in the west, little
serious critical attention was paid to the genre until the twentieth century. The
most a curious reader could find in the nineteenth century were a few
bibliographies of biography/autobiography. Georg Misch, as noted earlier,
published just such a bibliography in his History of Autobiography in Antiquity. His study moved beyond pure bibliography, discussing the formal elements of ancient autobiography, but it did so primarily because those forms were other than the written word. That, what we might consider a ‘more conventional’ field of study, remained relatively untouched for another forty years. Looking back on earlier autobiographical writings in his 1950s article “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf claims of autobiography that it is “a work of art [...]. We may call it fiction or fraud, but is artistic value is real [...]. The literary, artistic function is [...] of greater importance than the historic and objective function” (43). Suddenly, autobiography found itself elevated to the realm of literature, of art. Commenting in part on the claim of Roy Pascal, one of Gusdorf’s critical contemporaries, that “writers know roughly what they expect to do if they write autobiographies” (2), Estelle Jelinek observes that Pascal “maintains that [...] autobiography is a retrospective, coherent, and holistic shaping, the imposition of a pattern upon a life” (2, my emphasis). Replace “a life” in that italicized phrase with the more general “material,” and a working definition for art emerges. And all art requires some measure of invention, a fact which leads to the next and perpetually lingering debate in the theory and criticism around autobiographical writings.

Whether or not autobiography can suffer ‘invention,’ how much invention is acceptable, and how an author—much less a reader—might ever truly know how much s/he is utilizing invention in autobiography are issues that dominated the scene for nearly two decades. James Cox, taking an inclusive stance at the
end of the 1980s, claimed that autobiography “is an attempt both to make and record a life. Some writers make more than they record, since the making may be all the record they have; others record more than they make. No autobiographer can avoid doing both” (9). A decade-and-a-half earlier, William Howarth was willing to lend the autobiographer more explicit control than does Cox. After splitting the autobiographical “character from the author himself” (365), Howarth contends that a “narrator always knows more than his protagonist, yet he remains faithful to the latter’s ignorance for the sake of credible suspense. Eventually, the reverse images have to merge; as past approaches present, the protagonist’s deeds should begin to match his narrator’s thoughts” (366). Many have, as Howarth does, appropriated terms and ideas from fiction to discuss autobiography, but Howarth crosses a line which others have avoided. His invocation of the “narrator’s thoughts” assumes some objective endpoint for autobiography. Paul John Eakin points up the inaccessibility of that endpoint, noting that “[w]hether the self, that ‘certain intricate watermark,’ is literally dis-covered, made ‘visible’ in autobiography, or is only invented by it as a signature, a kind of writing, is beyond our knowing, for knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language” (278). Kenneth Gergen, a sociologist concerned with how people develop and maintain a sense of self, agrees with Eakin. Gergen writes that an “individual’s manner of conceptualizing [his/her own] behavior [. . .] is vitally dependent on the linguistic system within his culture” (28). The argument here quickly becomes one born of structuralism, one in which ‘I,’ the self, has meaning only because of the other words associated, either negatively or positively, with it.
The point for the moment is that as soon as autobiography gained the serious attention of literary scholars, not unexpectedly, things grew complicated. The main complication was the immediate smudging of the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. This loss of distinction remains a new opportunity to some and a threat to others. As late as the spring of 2005, Aubrey Videtto, one of my fellow graduate students, was realizing the freedoms of this fictional-autobiographical mode. In the introduction to her creative nonfiction master’s thesis, as she was struggling to put into words her self and her experiences, Videtto writes:

I hadn’t even thought to write directly about myself because I didn’t think my life was very interesting and definitely not funny enough. I was no epileptic lying kleptomaniac Lauren Slater. I was no suicidal multiple sclerosis Nancy Mairs. But, then again, neither were they; for all of their crafty frankness, the Slater and Mairs of the page still have a non-stick coating that isn’t found on the originals. (2)

Realizing that others had come to believe in autobiography as a form which, according to Louis Renza, “transforms empirical facts into artifacts; it is definable as a form of ‘prose fiction’” (2), Aubrey found for herself the room for some fiction—or at least a little harmless fibbing—in her own autobiographical writing.

Bravely championing his own minority voice, Philip Dodd maintains a different view of autobiography. In his 1987 article, “History or Fiction: Balancing Contemporary Autobiography’s Claims,” Dodd writes that his “charge against autobiography-as-fiction, whether practiced by writers or celebrated by critics, is that autobiography becomes a safe and reserved space in which the harried self is released from the demands of history to become the product either
of art (conservative version) or textuality (radical version)” (65). While I can understand both the dying/dead sense of objectivity Dodd is trying desperately to cling to for autobiography and the motivation—fear of whatever might be beyond that objectivity—for doing so, I also believe that it is inevitable that a writer, no matter how fabulous she makes her autobiography, is in many ways bound to her social and temporal surroundings and will reflect them whether she means to or not. Except with the few hold-outs like Dodd, what remains the accepted rule at present—if there are any rules at all—about the literary study of autobiographical writings is that, as Timothy Dow Adams turns it, “the truth of one’s self can be very different from the truth of one’s life” (11).

All that said, the next step(s) for the criticism and theory around autobiographical writing was to be taken by any who were willing to carry the torch of their critical school into that still relatively dark continent. Feminist writers, critics, and scholars were and remain among the most intrepid explorers. Susan Stanford Friedman, looking back on the brief history of scholarly writing on autobiography, is critical of the fact that, “[f]or Gusdorf, the consciousness of self upon which autobiography is premised is the sense of ‘isolated being,’ a belief in the self as a discrete, finite ‘unit’ of society. Man must be an island unto himself. Then, and only then, is autobiography possible” (36). Friedman’s use of ‘man’ is no accident, and her critique centers around the same sense of women’s negative definition in autobiography in particular as de Beauvoir had outlined earlier in society in general. Estelle Jelinek, in her introduction to the collection *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, notes the gender of the
autobiographers previously used to define the genre when she criticizes Roy Pascal’s study, in which “for the modern period he examines all the major male autobiographies and includes the twentieth-century life studies by Freud, Trotsky, Yeats, O’Casey, Collingwood, Gosse, Churchill, and Gandhi, but refers only in passing to the autobiographies by Martineau and Beatrice Webb” (2). Jelinek picks up on Gusdorf's curious definition of autobiography, as well, writing that apparently “[t]he autobiographer is expected to ‘gather the different elements of his personal life and organize them into a single whole,’ to begin his life study ‘with the problem already solved’” (Tradition 5). As feminist theorists and critics realized what fertile ground autobiography provided for their study and their cause, many went well beyond critiquing past writings on autobiography and began to formulate their own theories specific to women’s autobiographical writing.

The feminist (mis-)appropriation

Though works within all literary genres are open to critical readings from any number of theoretical perspectives, autobiography, especially for its apparent youth and ambiguity of form and content, has been for the past half-century particularly susceptible to the divergent interpretations of different schools of criticism. And it is precisely for that ambiguity that autobiographical writing has proven attractive to many feminist scholars. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield write:
Autobiography makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary. This kind of disruptive interdisciplinarity, the challenging of traditional boundaries and definitions, has also been central to the feminist project [. . .], and autobiography provides a meeting-place for many different kinds of feminist approach. (1)

The site of multiple interpretations, autobiography can become either, as Cosslett, Lury, and Pennyfield say, a “meeting-place,” or it can just as easily become a battlefield, perhaps even one in which the losing combatant is autobiography itself.

Much of feminist scholarship on autobiography is based around both compiling fair and descriptive accounts of the actual autobiographical writings of women in the past and refuting the hegemonic dominion of phallogocentric definitions of autobiography that have dominated the history of the field. Estelle Jelinek sets forth as her explicit goal in her 1986 The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography, “to accomplish for women’s autobiography what Wayne Shumaker’s English Autobiography did for men’s autobiography thirty years ago: It documents the literary history of women’s self-writings, which contemporary autobiographers continue” (xii, my emphasis). It is enough for now to note Jelinek’s corrective intentions concerning the canon of autobiography. Jelinek continues in the same book her critique of the male-dominated position, noting that critics by and large still have certain expectations of a ‘good’ autobiography. It must center exclusively or mostly on their authors, not on others [. . .]. It should be representative of its times, a mirror of the predominant zeitgeist. The autobiographer should be self-aware, a seeker after self-knowledge. He must aim to explore, not to exhort. His autobiography should be an effort to
As with feminist critics before and after her, Jelinek is not accidental in her use of
the masculine third-person pronoun. The description she provides is of men’s
autobiography; and the fault of many who have discerned that description before
her is that they would make it prescriptive for all autobiographies.

The critique of masculine definitions of autobiography as exclusionary
can, of course, be expanded to encompass groups besides women which have
been stripped of a voice. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, in their introduction to
_De/Colonizing the Subject_, a collection of essays on the autobiographical writings
and practices of colonized and traditionally othered groups in the west, write that
“[s]ince Western autobiography rests upon the shared belief in a commonsense
identification of one individual with another, all ‘I’s are potentially interesting
autobiographers. And yet, not all are ‘I’s. [..] [H]eterogeneous ‘others’ are
collapsed and fashioned into an essentialized ‘other’ whose ‘I’ has no access to a
privatized but privileged individuality” (xvii). Watson and Smith’s collection,
which moves both deeper into and beyond the realm of women’s autobiographical
writings, is a good example of the progressive thought feminist critiques can
engender. And so long as they remain focused on what is wrong with the
previously established male-dominated canon of autobiography and the theories
around it, the arguments of feminist critics seem to remain strong and valid.

Problems begin to become apparent, however, when those critics make the leap,
implicit or otherwise, into developing their own prescriptive theories of women’s
autobiographical writing. As soon as they are penned, those theories prove
themselves just as limited and biased in their scope—albeit differently—as were their exclusionary masculine predecessors.

At least one theorist has coupled the freedom of autobiographical invention with a bit of word play to simultaneously answer literary critical schools built upon a history of masculine binaries and discern for women a distinct niche in the world of autobiographical writing: “Domna Stanton responds to the challenge of poststructuralism and postmodernism [. . .] by excising ‘bio’, that is the real life, from ‘autobiography’, to come up with two new formations, ‘autography’ and ‘autogynography’, which imply that women are free to write themselves without any presupposition of referentiality or truth” (Cosslett, Lury, and Pennyfield 7). This view of women’s autobiographical writing, though, damns that writing to a hyper-poststructural disconnected ambiguity in its effort to save it from a dominated and othered position. Liz Stanley picks up on this critique:

Stanton’s term of ‘autography’ is indicative [of one feminist approach to autobiography], with its excision of ‘bio’ as a supposedly naive referentiality. And yet the intractably inconvenient fact remains that people do indeed have lives in which things happen and the stories which are told about lives come from accounts of these things which happened. A feminist theoretic which denies or despises the necessarily referential basis of autobiography as life-writing as well as self-writing is in analytic as well as political trouble. (44)

Stanton’s terminology, in other words, moves in the direction of making women’s autobiographical writings irrelevant to anyone who might read them. The opposite problem occurs when, as I mentioned before, theories disconnect—via prescriptive definition—the idea of women’s autobiographical writings from the
actual writings and the women writing them.

There is a balance to be struck between these rather extreme critical positions on autobiography. And there do exist examples of explicitly feminist women’s autobiographical writings—by women who are perfectly aware of their feminist beliefs in their lives and in their writing—which do, in fact, manage to carry their meanings across very well to readers. Nancy Mairs, reflecting on herself as a woman writer in *Voice Lessons*, writes “I think of myself as a writer [. . .], I mean as a biologically female feminine woman writer” (6). There is little room for ambiguity of agenda in that statement; however, in the event her readers are not so quick on the uptake, Mairs describes her realization that “[t]he language a woman has planned to use to express her experience turns out [. . .] to depend for its very existence and efficacy on her repression” (*Voice Lessons* 5-6). Mairs, recognizing, believing in, and wholeheartedly subscribing to feminism’s ideologies and approaches to language, makes it clear that she is a consciously feminist woman writer.

But not all women writers are. And the theorist who takes on the task of writing prescriptively about all women autobiographers is one in trouble from the beginning of her/his work. Estelle Jelinek’s language in her introduction to *Women’s Autobiography* belies just such a prescriptive bias on her part:

[I]regularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters. The multidimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well, and so by established critical standards, their life studies are excluded from the genre and cast
into the ‘non-artistic’ categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other disjunctive forms. (17)

As a historical one, this view of the excluded woman is certainly correct and should be explored and challenged until as much correction of the ‘canon’ occurs as possibly can; but Jelinek’s assertion I quoted earlier that “contemporary autobiographers continue” this tradition of writing from the margins—from an othered position—is disconcerting.

Other critics have fallen prey to this same type of prescriptiveness in their work. Sidonie Smith, in Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body, writes that the masculine autobiography has “consolidated its status as one of the West’s master discourses that has seemed to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” (18). Historically, this is true; but to argue, especially implicitly as many feminist critics seem to—but because the implicit argument veils in art the ideology behind it—that the powerless, voiceless, and marginalized peoples and persons of history must be the models for their present-day (or future) descendants is to deny empowerment to the very people feminist criticism ostensibly seeks to aid in their flight from oppression. Reifying the agendas, practices, and even tools of resistance of the feminism of the past serves to reify for the present and the future the very problems those things were meant to address (and solve).

Susan Friedman writes that the male autobiographical tradition’s “emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities [. . . and that] the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the
construction of male and female gender identity” (34-5). Again historically, this
criticism of the masculine tradition’s marginalizing and limiting effects on
women’s autobiographical writings warrants active scholarly attention and
redress. But when that same marginalization is held over into the present and
works of autobiography by women are appropriated to a tradition within which
they do not properly fit by those who supposedly make it their job to fight that
oppression, the question arises: who is imposing a “group identity” and a
construct of “male and female gender identity” now?

The final chapter of *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* makes clear that,
for Smith, the only autobiographical works which remain properly feminist in
their approach and aim are “autobiographical manifestos” which “issue from
persons assigned to [an] anonymous collectivity who vigorously reject the
sovereignty […] and the dominance of the universal subject” (157). This view
does, in fact, serve well the political ends of feminism, keeping the focus not on
women, broadly, but on women and others marginalized and disempowered by an
oppressive othering force. In the optimistic view, this type of feminism
eventually brings about its own obsolescence—for, if a perfect success were ever
accomplished, there would be no more victims of “anonymous collectivity” to
empower. I do not suspect I will live to see that perfect success come about—and
I wonder about its perfectness—however, feminism has already met with
measurable success for its efforts. Perhaps because of that success, some women
are now free to write what I will call ‘post-feminist’ autobiographies. The term is
not at all meant to imply that the work of feminism is done, but that there exist
distinctions between work on and indicative of what feminism is accomplishing—the work of Smith’s “autobiographical manifestos”—and work that is representative of what has already been accomplished—the post-feminist.
The feminist movement(s) and feminist literary theory(-ies) have done and continue to do well their expressed job of uncovering the hegemonic power of a long history of patriarchal rule in the west and of pushing against power structures in service to that rule both in the present and in the reclamation/re-envisioning of women’s history. The success feminists have seen, though, and the new freedoms and identities women can now lay claim to because of that success, has opened a rift between a historical view of women’s autobiography—its contents, forms, and shaping theories—and similar studies of many modern and contemporary women’s autobiographies. Freed from many of the fetters of the past, some contemporary women’s autobiographical writings demand new critical approaches, approaches which may have little continuity with even their immediate predecessors and which are done a hindering disservice by the Janus-masked approach of some critics and theorists who would falsely preserve into the future the oppression of the past they fight against.

Lucy Grealy, Patricia Foster, Lauren Slater, and Elizabeth Wurtzel all present texts and selves in their memoirs that refuse to neatly conform to the model a feminist critic might prescribe for a woman writing in 1990s America. A convenient lens—because fruitful and because it is one so often utilized by feminists toward their own ends—through which to read these memoirs is that of psychoanalytic theory. The original, Freudian model of psychoanalytic theory serves to point up the strange position in which these women find themselves.
when faced with the conspicuous absence, not only of dominating and othering fathers in their lives, but of almost any fatherly presence. The later, Lacanian version of psychoanalytic theory, with its somewhat shifted focus that pays more attention to the mother and the development of both language and of a sense of self—the ‘I’ of the ego—as a result of and in defense against the child’s felt separation from the mother and the rest of the world around him/her, provides a model for looking beyond the Freudian failure and discerning just how these four memoirists do manage to develop their own ‘I’s. The picture that becomes clear from this psychoanalytic search through their autobiographical writings is that Grealy, Foster, Slater, and Wurtzel write their selves neither as others nor as fugitive women rebelling against a masculine tradition of othering, as contemporary feminist criticism might expect. In fact, the ways in which the four memoirists do define themselves are more in line with a traditionally masculine definition of self, the four women defining their selves as against their mothers, who take the place of the Freudian father.
Sigmund Freud, the grandfather of all later psychoanalytic theories, whether those theories in the main rebel against or try to maintain Freud’s original, places at the center of family life and of childhood psychological development the father. The father, for Freud, carries the authority of the household and the keys to progress through family life and into the world. The manifestation of this authority is the father’s penis. What later becomes a generalized phallus, a word the precise meaning of which is slippery at best in the writing of Freud’s followers, is in the family dynamic of the home still quite literally the male genitalia of the father. Male children, by navigating the Oedipal complex of eroticizing their mothers, so says Freud, learn to fear castration by noticing the mother’s lack of a penis and assuming that the father has removed one that was once in place. In this way, boys identify with their fathers and emulate them so as to make their way successfully through the world—meaning, so as to keep their penises and eventually usurp their fathers. Female children, navigating their own Oedipal complex and noticing their ‘lack’ similar to their mothers, long, apparently, for someone to fulfill them—meaning, for someone with a penis to stick close by—and learn to identify with and emulate their mothers, as their mothers have already attained fulfillment in the form of the father. The sexism of his system has been noted to the point that Freud’s name and the word ‘misogynist’ are practically synonymous, and it is not my goal here to prove what is by now self-apparent.
However obvious its flaws to us now, though, Freud’s Oedipal complex and all the psychology he built around it in his life provided and reflected the model for ‘normal’ human development in the western world for the better part of the first half of the twentieth century. Fathers were to work and maintain a hard and gruff façade, the definition of masculinity. Mothers were to stay at home, raise the children, and keep the man fed (not to mention fulfilled in other ways, whether they wanted to or not), to be demure and unassuming and always bow to their husbands’ wishes. Sons were to grow into men like their fathers, perhaps taking over the family business or firmly planting the family name in some formerly unexplored territory. And daughters were to grow to be wives, just as their mothers before them, and produce grandchildren. It was a bleak ideological system of human development and definition which Freud solidified in his theories. And it was one bound to buckle.

Using as support examples from the four texts on which this latter half of my study focuses, I contend that it is precisely at the point where the Freudian model seems strongest that such buckling occurs. Through the 50s, 60s, and 70s of the twentieth century, the four women discussed here lived through their childhoods—and they all did live—without the supposedly necessary force of the strong and virile hyper-masculine father. None of the women seem ever to have had much of a crush on their fathers, as Freud supposed daughters ought, nor do they show any signs—subconscious or otherwise—that they perceive in their mothers any particular lack. These women, who seem to have developed relatively well, at least well enough for each of them to have a book published
before reaching middle-age—in the cases of Elizabeth Wurtzel and Lucy Grealy, long before—simply did not develop along the Oedipal line Freud laid out for women.

Lucy Grealy writes in *Autobiography of a Face* of her ongoing struggle—from her ninth year of childhood through adulthood—with Ewing’s carcinoma, a cancer that took one-third of her jaw and required her to undergo laborious and painful radiation and chemotherapy treatments for a number of years as a child, as well as face the disappointment of multiple failed efforts at reconstructing her jaw line as an adult. Grealy’s mother figures prominently in her writing, as it is her mother who almost always takes her to her doctor’s appointments; her father, however, is apparent in the book almost exclusively as an absence. While Grealy was recuperating in the hospital after the initial surgery to remove part of her jaw, her father, she writes, “was the worst visitor. […] Sometimes he’d put on a surgical mask and make a joke about Dr. Dad, the same joke I’d seen dozens of other fathers make with their kids. Then, bereft of a vector, he’d sit down and stare intently at the drip of my IV” (59). After a number of visits like this from her father on his lunch break, Grealy decides to do something about the monotony. “One day,” she writes, “I heard his step echoing toward me [from the hallway]. Carefully, still not entirely sure what I was intending, I got into bed and closed my eyes. His loud breathing and hard-soled shoes entered the room. Silence stood over me for a minute or two, contemplating” (59). Not one for over-thinking a thing, Grealy’s father leaves the room just a few moments later. Grealy opens her eyes to find a note beside her bed: “Lucy, I was here but you
were sound asleep. I didn’t want to wake you. Love, Daddy” (60). Grealy’s next thought is that “I felt I’d let us both off the hook” (60).

The next time Grealy’s father shows up, it is only to leave again. She tells us that “only on the rare days when my mother was ill or busy would he take me in for chemotherapy” (84). And take her in was about all he would do:

Once my name was called he’d accompany me into the office and exchange greetings with Dr. Woolf, but as soon as I was asked to take off my clothes he’d turn to me and say “Right then, I’ll go get the car.” Perhaps in part he was embarrassed to see his daughter half naked, but I knew that he did not want to see me suffer.

He’d jangle the keys at me, just as he did with the dogs, for whom the level of excitement at that familiar sound approached heart attacks. He’d smile and announce, “I’ll be right back,” adding, “This way you won’t have to walk so far when it’s over. I’ll double-park right outside and come get you.” (84)

As a child, Grealy says she felt “no blame in those moments, no regrets, no accusations, not even despair,” even though, “[a]s an adult, I wonder how he could have left me alone in there” (85). These moments, moments that cause Grealy some pain and confusion as she reflects on them in her writing, define her father’s relationship to her throughout her memoir; Grealy’s father remains largely an absent and alien person to her.

Patricia Foster’s father, as she paints him in All the Lost Girls, is perhaps even more of an absent figure than is Grealy’s to her. Like Foster’s mother, her “Daddy had scratched his way out of [the] poverty” of the Alabama coal mines (30). After the two met and decided to marry, Foster writes, there was “no need to look back at those dank rooms, those lumpy beds, that mean-ass life, the faint brogue of Scotsmen swearing deep inside the mines. Together, they could turn to the future, carve out a middle class life of success and respect, money in the bank,
the gas bill always paid” (30-1). And such a life is what they achieved; or at least, Foster’s doctor father achieved that life—after all, her parents did meet in the mid-1930s, when women, especially Southern women, were expected to be little more than convenient and fashionable accessories to their husbands whenever they were not fraught with the work of keeping a house and raising a family practically by themselves.

Early in her childhood, Foster notices just what kind of a relationship her parents have—not to mention how her father understands his relationship with and duty to his children. Foster records early in her memoir her mother, with Foster, her sister, and her brother in tow, making a painful trip to her past, to visit her parents for a weekend. Foster’s father does not go on the trip, claiming he has an overwhelming amount of work to get done, making the trip even harder on Foster’s mother, who does not like to drive long distances. On the way home from the weekend trip, which Foster, beyond a tone-setting argument between her mother and her grandmother, barely describes at all, the crew stops at a filling station for gas and food. Beside another car at the station, Foster, her mother, and her siblings see her brother’s football coach,

his feet planted slightly apart like parallel planks of wood, his face a mask of soundless hilarity. What he’s laughing at is Daddy, trying to hide something—maybe a beer can in his pocket—as he gets out of the car. Behind him lurks “Goose” Murphy in a Schlitz cap and Ray Boussarge needing a shave. Daddy looks like a teenager playing hooky, all cares thrown aside. Beyond him, the smoke from the steel mills leaks suddenly into the air, an exhaust of white steam polluting the sky. (48)

Foster’s mother and father lock eyes for just one moment before her mother hurries the children into the car, gets in herself, and drives away. “No one says a
word about my father,” Foster writes, until some miles later when one word fills the car: “‘Poker,’ Mother mutters and stares straight ahead” (49). Nothing more comes of that incident; and yet it so powerfully defines the relationship Foster’s father has with his wife and children that his near-absence from the rest of the book seems as natural as Alabama sweat in July.

Lauren Slater is both more explicit and, because of the form of her memoir Lying, oddly more coy about describing her father. Slater writes in her memoir, as she phrases it, “a book in which in some cases I cannot and in other cases I will not say the facts” (219). She uses epilepsy—which she never explicitly admits is a real disorder she faces or just an extended metaphor—as a trope to convey the confusion, pain, defeats, and triumphs of her childhood. At the outset of her book, she proves herself a memoir artist, an inventor as opposed to a historian, when she describes her parents as “my mother and my father, both of whom I loved—that much is true—but my father was too small, my mother too big, and occasionally [. . .] I would also feel a lightheadedness that made my mother seem even bigger, my father even smaller, so he was the size of a freckle, she higher than a house, all her hair flying” (5). Reinforcing this image of a “too small” father, Slater spends all but one sentence of the next two paragraphs describing her mother’s dreams and desires, her unfulfilled hopes and her exaggerated life, and her apparent disappointment in marrying Slater’s father, whose description it is the job of that one sentence to cover: “My father was a Hebrew School teacher, and once a year he took the bimah on Yom Kippur” (5).

The next time Slater’s father appears in her writing, and one of the few
times she represents him in any kind of action whatsoever, is during a family trip to Barbados. Slater’s mother and father are discussing attending a New Year’s Eve banquet before leaving the island. Her mother wants to go to the banquet, where the main course will be lobster, a non-kosher food; her father, the orthodox Jewish Hebrew teacher, would much prefer skipping the meal. “We never keep kosher outside the house,” Slater’s mother says (14). “A fish with a shell,” she said. “It’s no different than fish without a shell, which God knows we eat enough of” (15). The scene proceeds:

“I don’t like it,” he said, but you could tell, anyone could tell, he didn’t know how to stand up to her. I hate to say it, it’s so politically incorrect, but I think if he’d been brutish, my father, she may have learned to love him.

“Lobster,” she went around saying. “Have you ever had lobster? Dipped in butter?”

She said it while staring up at my father, daring him to leap into the ring with her, but he wouldn’t. He had fair skin, freckled everywhere, and he spent a lot of time in the hotel, where the air conditioners shuddered and the sun came through the slats in bright chinks. (15)

Surprisingly, they do not eat lobster. But, not so surprisingly, it is because Slater’s mother is disgusted by the actual process of shelling and eating the meat, not because of her father’s religious objections.

Though the end result is nearly the same, Elizabeth Wurtzel writes in Prozac Nation of her father not as a small, ineffectual man, but as one who is more actively uncaring. The first example Wurtzel provides of her father’s nature comes during the account she writes of her initial experience with cocaine. As she begins to come down from the high, she gets the urge to call her father on the telephone, “if only to remind him that he still owed me my allowance from the
four years in high school when I couldn’t find him” (6). Representing yet another case of the absent father syndrome, Wurtzel’s father, when he is around, actively absents himself in the form of what he denies his daughter.

After her parents divorce and she is diagnosed with some type of depression—she has to suffer for years before a clear diagnosis and helpful treatment are devised for her—Wurtzel bounces between her parents’ homes for a short time and begins going through the rounds of various psychologists and psychiatrists. Wurtzel writes of the time she spent with her father when she was a child:

A daily Valium doser, my dad would spend most of our Saturday afternoon visits sleeping, leaving me to watch TV or paint with watercolors or call my mom to say, *Daddy won’t move, I think he’s dead.* (One time we went to see *The Last Waltz,* and he passed out. I couldn’t get him to budge, so we sat through the movie three times; I think this might explain my abiding crush on Robbie Robertson.) (27)

Though genetics apparently grant him the title, Wurtzel’s throw pillow of a ‘father’ never quite seems to earn such a distinction.

Later in Wurtzel’s life, her father re-marries and moves from her home state of New York to Florida. The problem with this, given the description of the man in the last paragraph, might not be readily apparent, but it is two-fold: 1) he did not tell Wurtzel that he moved, leaving her to find out for herself his whereabouts some years after the fact, and 2) with his move came a new job and, once Wurtzel found him, the possibility of his insurance covering her doctor’s bills; but he would not sign the appropriate paperwork. One of Wurtzel’s early doctors, Dr. King, “agreed to call my father and make arrangements, so that my
bills would be paid through IBM’s employee benefits office without my involvement” (116). Wurtzel calls this gesture “the nicest thing, I think, that anyone has ever done for me” (116). Unfortunately, even this glowingly nice Dr. King can have little effect on Wurtzel’s apathetic father. Just a few pages later in her book, Wurtzel writes of a phone conversation with her father. She asks if he has received the paperwork for her medical bills and he tells her he has. Wurtzel wonders aloud, at that point, whether or not her father is going to file the papers: “Remember how you promised you’d do that?” she asks, to which her father flatly responds “I did then. But I won’t now” (139). His rationale for not filing the paperwork—paperwork that would not cost him a penny, but would cover his daughter’s medical bills through his company’s insurance—is that Wurtzel has been “cold and nasty” to him (140). This from a man who abandoned his daughter without a word for the entirety of her high school years. Wurtzel poignantly comments that “the only contact my father had with his paternity was his ability to refuse to give me what I needed” (140). There is obviously, then, a kind of negative power in Wurtzel’s father not present in Grealy’s or Slater’s fathers, though present in a similar way in Foster’s. All of these women’s fathers as they present them in their memoirs, though, range at best from passive non-entities to strangely forceful empty spaces in place where fathers should be.

Lacking the strong masculine ‘I’ of the Freudian father to other and force boundaries on their selves, these four women are compelled to look elsewhere for external ego-making forces. Patricia Foster recognizes this need when she writes of her young adulthood in *Just beneath My Skin*:
I couldn’t be a hippie, an intellectual, or a hedonist [as she defines three of her friends]. In fact, I felt as if I had no form, no solid casting that surrounded me, holding in my identity. Instead, I was like one of those surrealistic sculptures I’d seen in Knoxville, lacking support and dripping into the landscape of something else in a kind of violent surrender. My dilemma was one of definition and I didn’t know the magic solution. (16)

No magic solution, the key to identity and self-hood which presents itself over the course of Foster’s and the other three women’s memoirs is not that it is held in, but that it is pushed outward to boundaries unestablished until bumped, unreal until the echo is accepted. Liz Stanley writes in 2000 of the still-prevalent model for autobiographical writings by men and women that, “while there is certainly recognition of differences and fractures within the self, this is still a Bildungsroman, a romance of self-progress and self-actualisation, impulses and urges to speak self, confess self, make self” (43). Stanley is leery of this lingering “Bildungsroman,” this “romance in the intellectual air” (43); but that romance, that drive toward unity of self, I see in process in the autobiographical writings of the four memoirists here, and necessarily so. Some sense of unified self is surely required, at least at the back end, for the undertaking of any autobiographical endeavor. Without a self to write and a perspective to write from, there is nothing to write and no voice for the words. The Freudian model for the development of (othered) self failing for all for of them, exactly how Grealy, Foster, Slater, and Wurtzel go about defining their selves is the subject of the next section.
The Lacanian Re-Invention:  
(M)others

Some would without hesitation call the demise of a Freudian psychoanalytic view of human development and actualization a very good thing. And, in many ways, it surely is. Constant change, hopefully representative of growth, seems inevitable when it comes to theories of what and who we are as humans and how we got to be that way. Hewitt describes just such a changing human scene from a sociological perspective:

The organic communities of the past provided encompassing worlds for their members. Although such communities engaged in various social, economic, and political relations with other communities, they sustained the everyday round of life for their members, who seldom had cause to look beyond local boundaries. Organic communities were key units in which individuals (or families) held membership, and their boundaries of territory and culture were also the boundaries of the self. (111, my emphasis)

With Hewitt’s “organic communities” past, people had to look for new boundaries on their selves. Freudian psychoanalytic theory provided at least one powerful model for those boundaries—the strong ‘I’ of the father. But with Freud’s fall from dominance, the search for boundaries was back on.

Recognizing both the limitations and the great possibilities within psychoanalytic theory, Jacques Lacan picked up where Freud and his contemporaries and early followers left off, revolutionizing and revitalizing the
field. Lacan’s re-visioning of psychoanalysis opened the field once more—and even wider—to literary theorists. Susannah Radstone discusses the relation between Lacan’s work and autobiography, specifically:

Under the impact [...] of Lacanian psychoanalysis, autobiographical criticism took up the notion of the subject’s illusory coherence, unity and autonomy. This idea of the subject’s illusory coherence stems from the Lacanian understanding of infantile development as founded upon the misrecognition of the mirror-stage. According to Lacan, the mirror-phase, in which the infant perceives itself as an ‘I’ depends upon a splitting between the ‘I’ which perceives and the ‘I’ which is perceived. Entry into language arguably reinforces this first split, since it necessitates a second division between the ‘I’ which speaks and the ‘I’ which is spoken of. (202)

Though she veers a little off-track as she progresses, Radstone is on the mark when she points up the division at the mirror-stage between a perceived ‘I’ and a perceiving ‘I.’ The child’s development of language, though, is entirely dependent upon that split—the split being, more generally, that of the subject child away from the object world—and only reinforces the “first split” peripherally, if at all.

Radstone continues:

The impact of this body of theory upon the study of autobiography brought about a thoroughgoing reconceptualisation of the relation between the author—the writing ‘I’—and the ‘I’ which is written about by that author. Once it had been posited that these two subject positions contradict, rather than mirror each other, it became impossible to argue that autobiography mirrored the experiences of its author: autobiography became, indeed, a ‘limit-case’ for poststructuralist theory, which sought to overturn the powerful realist notion of autobiography as mirror of the author’s soul by arguing that there is a contradiction between the self which appears in autobiography and ‘the self which is only partly represented there, the self which speaks.’ (202-3)

The “two subject positions” in Lacanian theory—the writing ‘I’ and the written
‘I’—do, in one sense, contradict one another; each tries to usurp the other’s predominance, the one as it attempts to circumscribe the other, and the second as it tries to hold sway over what is being written. Each ‘I,’ in other words, attempts to perform its own boundaries. However, the whole of forward drive in Lacan’s theories is built upon the individual’s desire to (re-)unify those two ‘I’s. According to Lacanian theory, it is entirely counterproductive to analyze the two ‘I’s as distinctly separate unless as a means of making progress toward unity. The mirror-stage is only a step along the progressive path of development, the threshold of the doorway to the symbolic order—the order of language. Perfect mastery of the symbolic order—purely in theory, as Lacan does not or cannot provide concrete examples of people who have achieved as much—leads to entry into what Lacan calls the real order, the order of re-achieved unity. The autobiographer, unless she is trying to make or prove herself psychologically backward and unhealthy, seeks this unity of self/selves in her writing. The “self which speaks” in autobiography only does so—as does any self-reflexive voice—in the service of unifying itself to the self about which it speaks. While there is a necessary disconnect between the two selves, and while the speaking self has a voice only because of that disconnect, it is precisely and singularly the bridging of that disconnect which is the motivation to speak or write at all.

Though often helpful in understanding the concept of self as it applies to both literature and life, Lacan’s theories—and the convoluted style in which he writes them—can be magnificently confusing. Briefly pairing two feminist critics who utilize psychoanalytic theories in their writing will demonstrate this
confusion. Susan Friedman, writing in a critical vein similar to Radstone’s, contends that “[t]o Lacan, the self constructed through language is also false, like the image in the mirror. This theory of the ego’s inherent falseness represents a departure from Freud. But like Freud, Lacan’s concept of ego formation is based on the assumption that the ego results from a process that moves away from fusion and toward separation” (37). Though the initial burgeoning of self occurs because of a move toward separation, that move is instantaneous and not ongoing. In Lacanian theory, the impetus of the self from the point of separation forward is toward a return to unity. Shari Benstock, picking up on this point and writing in almost perfect contradiction to Friedman about the same Lacanian drive, notes that “[t]he developing child drives toward fusion and homogeneity in the construction of ‘self’ (the moi of Lacan’s terminology) against the effects of division and dissolution” (12). While Benstock recognizes that autobiographical writing “bears the marks and registers the alienating effects of the false symmetry of the mirror stage” (12), she sees that such writing does so only because its nearly impossible goal is to overcome those “alienating effects”—to enter the real, as Lacan would say.

After a discussion of both the patriarchal control of the Name-of-the-Father—the phallus in Lacanian theory—and the Lacanian view of language development as dependent upon polarity and binary othering, Nancy Mairs provides a description of women’s language that deserves to be quoted at length:

[The male language of binaries] is not women’s language, since women, for a variety of reasons, live in a polymorphic rather than a dimorphic world, a world in which the differentiation of self from other may never completely take place, in which multiple selves
may engage multiply with the multiple desires of the creatures in it. Some theorists would claim that all subjects function thus. But as Julia Kristeva points out, female subjectivity, traditionally linked to cyclical and monumental time rather than to linear time, lies outside "language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun+verb, topic-comment, beginning-ending)." Possessing an "irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex and, as such, exploded, plural, fluid," a woman may be driven "to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and the emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract."

The difference that emerges here is not the polarity intrinsic in the dominant discourse, which reduces "woman to man's opposite, his other, the negative of the positive." No, this is an absolute and radical alterity that enfolds the other, as in pregnancy a woman's immune system shuts down in such a way that she shelters and nourishes, rather than rejects and expels, the foreign body within her: "Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on." Feminine discourse is not the language of opposites but a babel of eroticism, attachment, and empathy. (41-2)

Though she ends with a definition of "feminine discourse"—a relatively safe borrowing from the French feminists that is descriptive of a certain type of language regardless of who is using it—Mairs begins her discussion of women's writing with the more prescriptive term "women's language," potentially confusing the issue and falling into the same trap so many feminist critics do when discussing writing by women.

A key argument I have with Mairs revolves around the notion of othering, who does it, to what extent, and to what end. Returning to the language of Mairs' definition, I would point out that one cannot eroticize, attach to, or empathize with anyone or anything not first recognized as other. The physical—and, in America, usually ocular—longing for some physical form, the embracing of a similar form,
and the ability to recognize as similar to one’s own the feelings of that cognizant form all require first the recognition and acceptance of the form as distinct in and of him/her/itself and as separate from the equally distinct form of the perceiving ‘I.’ For these things to take place, there must of course first exist a perceiving ‘I,’ a necessary prerequisite Mairs overlooks.

In light of the absence of Freudian fathers—an absence which leaves the controlling space of the phallus an empty space that is not threatening for trying to contain the four women within a too-small circle, but threatening because it allows them no walls against which to push and define their selves—it is that recognition as other—that pushing to find the boundaries of self by distinguishing those of the other, followed by the acceptance or enfolding of that other which certainly can be read variously as “eroticism, attachment, and empathy”—which I read into the relationships Grealy, Foster, Slater, and Wurtzel build with their mothers in their memoirs. These women are not consigned by their fathers to the othered space of ‘not-I,’ but they also are denied in the same way of the historically identified tools for the construction of an ‘I.’ Those tools, though, they find ready at hand in their mothers. The mothers of these four women represent the dominant external forces in their lives, the forces which have the power, much as the Freudian father does, to other their daughters—an othering the response to which is akin to that engendered in boys out of their fear of castration in Freudian theory. Over the course of their writings, the four memoirists empower and define themselves by othering their (m)others instead of being othered by them. And it is no sin to other; in fact, it is suicide not to.
Lucy Grealy, coming from one of the most externally stable backgrounds of the four memoirists, finds her mother to be that strong force relatively shortly after she is diagnosed with cancer. The first time she goes for chemotherapy after a third of her jaw has been removed, Grealy recalls that her chemotherapist, Dr. Woolf, was “gruff and unempathetic. [...] His appearance didn't help. Tall, large-featured, and balding, he had a peculiar large white spot on his forehead, which caught the light in an unflattering, sinister way. His nose was tremendous, his lips invisible. He scared me” (74). Not one to have been scared of very much in the nine years she had lived up to that point, Grealy found in her fear a new experience. Her mother’s reaction to this doctor was to demean his bedside manner and judge him “incredibly rude” (73). Lucy, though, even before the first of the two giant syringes of medicine is attached to her arm at this initial meeting, “began to cry. Not loudly, not even particularly heartily, just a few simple tears, which were as accurate and prophetic as any I’d ever shed” (75).

The prophecy those tears held becomes clear over the next few pages of Grealy’s book, but it is preceded by an oddly Lacanian description of her first dose of chemotherapy. Shortly after Dr. Woolf begins the first of the two injections Lucy will come to expect and fear on a weekly basis, Grealy says she “began to grow warm, a caustic ache began settling in my elbow. For a split second, a split of a split second, the sensation was almost pleasurable, a glowing, fleshy sense of my body recognizing itself as a body, a thing in the world” (75, my emphasis). Such self-awareness reads like an internally felt, highly condensed and well-articulated passage through Lacan’s mirror stage. For an instant aware
of herself as a distinct being in the world, Grealy is pleased with the revelation. The pleasure, though, much like that of the child whose sense of unity in the imaginary order is lost at the mirror stage, is fleeting. Just after this initial "growing," Lucy begins experiencing the most horrendous pain and nausea, both of which she must sit through with her arm held rigid because of the medicine being pumped into it. Grealy spends the ride home from the doctor’s office, the long ride from New York City to the outlying suburbs, prostrate in the back seat of her mother’s car.

Once home, Lucy tries to eat some ice cream, mainly to satisfy her anxious parents, only to find that even ice cream offends her then hyper-sensitive stomach. As Grealy is emptying into the kitchen sink the few bites of ice cream she had managed, “[m]y mother put her hand on my head and tried to soothe me, and when I was done began to explain that there was no need to cry, that everything would be all right, that I mustn’t cry. [. . .] She went on to explain how disappointed she was that I’d cried even before Dr. Woolf had put the needle into me, that crying was only because of fear, that I shouldn’t be afraid” (78, my emphasis). Shockingly stoical, Grealy’s mother makes a snap analysis of Lucy’s tears and the fear which engendered them as fruitless and disempowering. Lucy says of her mother that this was “the truism she had grown up with: there was nothing to fear but fear itself” (78), and somehow the cold comfort of that aphoristic wisdom was to carry a person safely through all the bad times life might possibly foist upon her. Grealy, deeply affected by her mother’s words and the import behind them, “resolved never to cry again” (79).
As her treatment and her life progress, Grealy will continue to find in her mother both something akin to Lacan’s ‘Law,’ which he attributed, of course, to the father, and a sort of measuring stick, sometimes positively and other times negatively reinforcing, against which Grealy will judge her world and her own self-worth. After nearly three years of weekly doses, Grealy’s chemotherapy treatments finally come to a close, but she does not realize the fact of this ending until her mother points it out to her. She writes:

“Do you realize this is the last six weeks?” my mother asked late one Thursday afternoon while starting to prepare dinner.

“What?”

“The last set of shots. Only six more, and then all this will be over. What a relief. You must be overjoyed.”

I was shocked. Over? It was almost over? I looked at her, speechless. “Thank God for that,” I said, using a phrase she employed all the time. (136)

Having no words of her own about the end of what so far have been the most grueling three years of her life, Grealy appropriates her mother’s words, in much the same way as the Freudian son usurps his father, to describe her feelings.

The final chemotherapy treatment brings with it a strange success. Approaching the session as she had every one for the past three years, Grealy does not expect to find much difference in her ultimate trip to Dr. Woolf’s office. But something is different:

The hot flashes came, followed by the familiar nausea, and I painfully retched up nothing but the single Thorazine pill I’d been given an hour before. It was meant to help the vomiting, but every week I only threw it up, and there it was again, half dissolved, pinging into the basin. Slowly I realized that I wasn’t crying. These last few months I had hardly cried at all: it wasn’t that I actually cried less but that I controlled it more. Not crying had become the goal of my visits to the chemotherapy clinic. But now I felt absolutely nothing. My mother was praising me for being so
good. I looked at her and at the beautiful window behind her. Robotically, I looked back to my arm, to Dr. Woolf’s huge hands changing syringes. Nothing. I felt only a void. Even the usual pain floated around me. It seemed to belong more to the room than to me, and even then awkwardly, like a clumsy piece of furniture.

Not ever able before then to fulfill her promise to herself never to cry again, Grealy finally does relinquish her tears at her last chemotherapy session. With them go much of her sense of connectedness to the world outside herself, including that sense of connectedness and obligation to her mother. Something similar to Lacan’s mirror-stage takes place for Grealy on this, her last visit to Dr. Woolf’s office. She makes that necessary disconnect from the external world and becomes an observer, a labeler, a writer of her world and her self. And her mother, offering praise to her for “being so good,” becomes in that moment as much a part of the background to Grealy’s self as the window, Dr. Woolf, or even the pain from the medicine entering her arm. All of it Grealy suddenly perceives as nothing more than “clumsy piece[s] of furniture” outside herself.

A piece of furniture akin to the overstuffed couches which threaten to devour anyone who takes a seat, Patricia Foster’s mother threatens to dominate Foster’s home life and her internal life for the duration of her four-decade spanning memoir. Foster and her sister were both raised in the South, the latest in a long line of upwardly mobile ‘Southern ladies.’ Their mother, born into a coal mining family with little chance for escape until she went away to college, found there her then-medical-student, future-doctor husband. What social and material ground she felt she had gained in marrying a doctor, she was determined not to let go to waste in her daughters. She signed her daughters up for piano and dance
lessons, and she expected nothing less than perfection from them academically. Foster writes in *All the Lost Girls* of some of the thoughts she has as a child at night after her mother has tucked her and her sister into bed:

We know we are her work, her future, that we must never disappoint her but fill the gap of experience and perfection which has somehow eluded her. We turn out the light and lie still in the dark. Our future seems luminous, but full of hazard. What will happen, I wonder, if we don’t turn out the way she’s planned, if our lives aren’t the least bit miraculous, but ordinary, as commonplace as a penny? What then will she do? (133)

These fears of inadequacy felt so early in her life will continue to plague Foster as she grows older and will, to some degree, eventually come to actualization. While she is in high school, not performing academically up to her mother’s stellar standards and seeking some new way to impress her, Foster tries out for the cheerleading squad. The social crowd typically built around such an extracurricular activity is far better suited to Foster’s extravert sister, the sister who, with her continued success in music and dance that Foster herself has not been able to achieve, she is in fact trying to emulate with her tryout. Foster does not make the cheerleading squad and is sent into a depressed stupor upon learning as much. At home, while Foster is brooding in her room, her mother comes to her and asks what is bothering her. She asks “Are you worried about a test, something you’re supposed to present?” and all Foster can respond with is a flat “No” (194). Foster says that she wants to say “Mother, I don’t have anything that’s mine. I’m not sure what it means to be me,” but she cannot bring the words out (194). Having tried and failed for so long to live up to her mother’s standards, Foster finally finds herself at a loss as to exactly who she is.
After a failed marriage, more bouts of depression, and further trial-and-error attempts at living, and just as she is facing her then-teacher’s pronouncement to her of her lack of ability as an interior design artist, along with a serious case of acne and thinning hair due to her body’s changing hormones after coming off a particularly strong birth control pill, Foster finds herself turning to her mother for guidance. As she talks to her mother on the phone, Foster imagines “Mother’s face, cautious at first, her eyebrows drawn together in suspicious concern as I attempt to make the horror real, to pull her down with me into the damp basement of my despair” (259). Foster is caught in the misery of feeling herself “a failure, a loser, a woman who can’t draw straight lines” (259); she blames herself for everything ‘wrong’ in her life. As she details the problems she is facing, her mother’s responses grow less and less self-assured, and she becomes more sympathetic to her daughter’s situation. Finally, at the end of their conversation, Foster’s mother says “I’m sorry this is happening to you, honey, but please try not to worry” (259). Foster’s reaction is immediate and strong:

Relief floods through me. It’s not my fault. I’m not to blame. “Sorry this is happening to you,” Mother actually said, and I replay this sentence again and again in my head, sighing and repeating, I’m not the subject. I didn’t cause this. It’s not my fault. It will take only a few days to heal. And like a pricked balloon, all the rage leaks out as I crawl into bed, pulling the covers over my head, lying in the dark, waiting for the doctor’s appointment tomorrow, waiting dumbly for rescue. (260)

While she does not simply continue to wait “dumbly for rescue,” this scene is the turning point empowering Foster to do something beyond that. Her mother has given her permission, as it were, to be a victim, not to be accountable for the things in her life that happen to her and are out of her control. With that
permission in hand, Foster can go on to see herself, in part, as the victim of her mother and her mother’s upbringing. And, later, she can learn to empathize with her mother, to find in her a force to fight against and also a person worthy of her love, gratitude, and admiration.

After moving for a time into her parents’ house (again), Foster eventually finds the strength to strike out once more on her own. She decides to leave Alabama, this time, for Los Angeles. Foster writes of that exit:

I don’t think anyone fully resolves a troubled past. Certain pieces of the self come unraveled, never to be reclaimed. Other pieces are amputated, useful only with a prosthesis. New pieces come to fruition as if they’ve been grafted on and you wear them warily, hesitant of ownership. But some unflinching part of the self survives, wounded but hungry to define itself again and again and again.

That’s the part that got me out the door. (272)

And that part of her self is what saved Foster from the subtly suffocating influence of a mother who, just as Foster was preparing to move, proclaimed “I don’t want you to move so far away. [. . .] It’s just too far. You know how you always like to come home” (273). While empirically obvious that Foster often returned to her parents’ home over the course of her young adulthood, using that as a reason for staying close to home would be akin to expecting from women’s autobiographical writings in the present and future what the same has provided in the past.

Foster moves west. She enrolls in writing classes in which her classmates encourage her to “Do Alabama. [. . .] Tell your own story” (282). As is made obvious by her memoir, this is exactly what Foster eventually does. Given some temporal and geographical distance from the (m)other who had pushed her so
hard to fit a certain design, Foster learns to discern both her own identity and the self of the woman who helped make her.

In the prologue to her memoir, Foster writes of her mother’s 1997 confession/recounting of her most painful girlhood story. Her mother tells of a time in the woods of eastern Alabama when one of her older brothers, silently, quickly, and in a moment never told to anyone before, raped her. Foster is understandably dumbfounded, but she eventually finds words to ask her mother if she had ever told anyone before; specifically, Foster asks “You never even told your mother?” (4). Foster’s mother tells her no, she had never told anyone; “It wouldn’t have mattered. Nobody would have listened” (4). This confession Foster places at the head of her own story as a rationale for the writing that follows it. In her epilogue, also written about a late 1990s conversation with her mother, Foster tells of her mother asking her to “write a story and call it ‘I Love You, Mama, So Please Don’t Cry’” (307). Foster implies directly after narrating her mother’s request that All the Lost Girls is that story; but then, in the last line of the book, she apparently changes her mind. Realizing that, in fact, it is her mother’s story she has pulled away from, against which she has built her own, Foster writes at the end of her memoir, the story so much of which she has built around her mother: “But perhaps this isn’t my mother’s story at all” (308). Because she is eventually able to successfully build an ‘I’ which finds its boundaries largely against her mother’s desires and expectations for her daughters, Foster can grant herself a voice in which to tell her own story and a perspective from which she can then turn and view empathetically her now-
safely-distanced mother’s story.

Unlike Foster’s seemingly ever-physically-present mother, Lauren Slater’s mother appears in *Lying* as both larger than life and oddly silent backdrop to Slater’s own self—making her mother read as the most insidious ‘I’ of the four memoired mothers. In one scene early in the book, though, Slater does write rather explicitly of the relationship between herself and her mother before letting the latter fall into that backdrop. One day during her childhood, as her mother practiced “Three Blind Mice” on the piano she had recently bought and had engraved with her name, Slater claims to have experienced a case of hysterical blindness. She says that “as the mice were being blind, I went with them. My sight shut down; it was black; I could not see” (7). When Slater announces to her mother that she cannot see, her mother answers “Of course you can see [. . .]. You have two eyes. You can see” (8). Not quite so easily convinced, Slater continues with her entreaties that her world has gone dark. Determined to prove more perseverant than her daughter, Slater’s mother holds up her hand and asks Slater to tell her how many fingers she is holding up. The two seem to have reached an impasse when Slater says that she cannot see her mother’s fingers, but her mother will not be dissuaded. “How many fingers? *Think,*” she commands (8). Slater guesses two. Her mother’s response: “‘Exactly,’ she said, triumphant” (8). Slater comments on the scene that her mother “said *exactly* and the angles came back, as though her words determined the truth and not the other way around, the way it should be: something solid” (8). Lauren Slater’s story continues from there with the established threat of a mother whose dictatorial rule
is so internalized that it remains silent and hidden for much of the memoir.

Though the epigraph to the first chapter of her memoir—"I exaggerate” (3)—warns readers to be cautious of Slater’s storytelling, some parts manage to come across with the clarity of truth (if not fact). After Slater, with her mother, receives the first diagnosis of her supposed illness, Slater hears her mother whisper to a friend over the phone that “She has epilepsy. [. . .] She has epilepsy, but so did van Gogh, you know” (23). Slater’s mother, though able to admit quietly that her daughter is somehow different, is unwilling to recognize that difference as anything other than what would make her exceptional. Her mother’s recognition to others of Slater’s problem simultaneously comes off as a point of jealousy towards her daughter. Slater writes of her mother:

She practiced the piano and, even with my seizures, took me [ice] skating so I could be a skating star. One morning, though, before we dressed to go out to the pond, I saw her tracing [the electroencephalogram graph of] my brain’s undulations, those sleepy dips, those troughs filled with earth and snooze, sex and spasm, and I’d say she smiled then.

“You,” she said to me, all sweetness, “need to learn to pull yourself together.”

But she touched my head gently now, like it was hot, like it was cold, like it was warm, like it was whatever she was not, a wild and totally true world in there, a place she had forsaken for artifice, etiquette, marriage, mediocre love, and which I had returned to her; here, Mom; have my head. (23)

Jealous of her daughter for reasons beyond her illness but made real by it, Slater’s mother can only backhandedly chastise Slater for being different, for not being able to be ‘normal’ like she is. This is enough, though, to push Slater into lying, the title and the modus operandi of her memoir.

After writing of time spent with Catholic nuns who teach epileptic
children how to fall into a seizure without hurting themselves, of writers’
workshops at which she either seduced or was seduced by older men who were
teachers there, and of joining an alcoholics anonymous group under false pretense
just to have a supportive circle of friends, Slater admits in her afterword that
“Lying is a book of narrative truth, a book in which I am more interested in using
invention to get to the heart of things than I am in documenting actual life
occurrences” (219). This invention she uses to tell “the story of my past, of my
mother and me” (220). And, in the end, she has “told it all and it is a relief. A
relief to put it to rest” (220). Jill Ker Conway, in “Points of Departure,” an article
on the process of writing autobiographically, claims that “[u]ntil you put people in
your narrative you haven’t quite got them under control” (56-7). By writing the
story of her self as it developed in relation to her mother, Slater enables herself to
move beyond that relationship, to control her (m)other’s character enough in
writing to push away from her and live as the ‘I’ she has become, the ‘I’ she
creates in her memoir.

If the voice and authority of Lauren Slater’s mother were dangerous to her
for their subtlety, then Elizabeth Wurtzel faces the hazards of exactly the opposite
problem. Throughout Prozac Nation, Wurtzel’s mother is a present and felt force
that, as with the other three women, becomes essential to Wurtzel’s ‘self’-
development. From her very early childhood, after her father leaves her and her
mother to fend for themselves, the perpetually depressed Wurtzel feels that she
“could never lose my mind to the point where they’d have to send me away to a
loony bin or some place for juvenile defectives because my mother would not be
able to survive such a personal debacle” (53). Wurtzel identifies herself, much as the other three women in this study, both with and by her mother. Later in her memoir, Wurtzel recognizes the dysfunctional nature of her relationship with her mother, noting that “[s]he was the person closest to me, the only one I trusted, and we were in the most distorted, dependent relationship. I was completely wrapped up in a person who didn’t know me at all, like a claustrophobe who chose to live in a small dark cave, trying to whip the fear” (91).

Throughout her memoir, Wurtzel expresses her feelings that her mother does not know or understand her because her mother, much like Lauren Slater’s, refuses to recognize that there are problems beyond the scope of a person’s control, that, in Wurtzel’s case, she is clinically depressed and in need of serious help from outside to deal with that problem. In a scene late in the book, though—and one remarkably similar to Patricia Foster’s moment of empowerment—Wurtzel’s mother both reinforces the authority she has over her daughter and releases her from the sense of self-blame that has so effectively kept her from making much progress in coping with depression. Her mother is brutally mugged, and Elizabeth goes home from school to take care of her as she recuperates. At the end of one particularly harrowing day caring for her mother, Wurtzel apologizes to her mother for what she sees are her inadequacies as a caretaker, a daughter, and a human being. Her mother listens, for once sympathetic to her daughter’s needs, and allays Wurtzel’s self-loathing with the simple recognition that “there is something wrong with you: You’re depressed. That’s a real problem” (311). Before this—in fact, for the duration of the memoir up to this
point—Wurtzel “never felt I had a right to be depressed” (311). Her mother’s recognition of the problem, though, makes it “a reality [. . .] for the first time in a long, long time” (311). Empowered by the permission her mother grants her to have a real problem to face, Wurtzel can begin to break out of her repetitive self-destructive cycles of depression and define herself as a human being who is worth saving, worth making an attempt at getting better.

In a scene before the one in which her mother grants her permission, as it were, to be depressed, to be ill and need help, Wurtzel faces her mother after having just missed her grandparents’ visit to Harvard, where she goes to school, because of a night of drugs, drinking, and sex that led her to oversleep. Wurtzel’s hard lifestyle shows on her, and her mother accuses her of being on drugs. Wurtzel lies to her mother, saying that she missed her grandparents because “I was in the infirmary because I fell over the night before and had a concussion” (127). Not buying that trumped up story, Wurtzel’s mother perseveres in her interrogation: “You look horrible. Everyone else goes away to college and gains weight, but you’re skinnier than ever and it’s probably from drugs. [. . .] You barely eat” (127). Wurtzel finally offers to her mother that “Maybe I’m just depressed [. . .]. Maybe I really do need drugs to make me feel better, the kind that doctors prescribe” (128). At this point, Wurtzel’s mother sighs in resignation, and Wurtzel responds by doling out a grocery list of problems with her life, essentially blaming her mother and the rest of her family for what is ‘wrong’ with her. “I thought getting into Harvard would prove to you and everyone else that I was good enough,” Wurtzel tells her mother, “[b]ut now I just
hate everybody. I don’t care about anyone else because I’m so hateful” (130-1).

Her mother responds in a fashion that is, until the late recognition of Wurtzel’s depression, typical, with pity: "Oh, Ellie, I know,’ my mother says. ‘I know. And I’m so sorry’” (131).

In a pivotal scene mid-way through her memoir, Wurtzel writes about a birthday party her mother arranges for her while Wurtzel is working in Dallas. Her mother is in town visiting relatives and she organizes them all one night for a get-together for Wurtzel. But Wurtzel, not really wanting the party in the first place, shows up extremely late and drunk. Her mother “kept pushing me away, telling me she’d had it with me, telling me that she couldn’t believe what a rotten child I was” (165). Wurtzel’s response:

I kept saying, Mommy, Mommy, I’m so depressed, I’m losing my mind, please don’t push me away from you. And she would say, I can’t help it, you’ve pushed me away from you. And half of me thought, I’ve really fucked up this time, and the other half was a little angry at my mother for going through all this trouble for me when I hadn’t asked her to and yet again putting me in a position where I could only be the ungrateful child. (165, my emphasis)

Like a co-dependent high school couple, Wurtzel and her mother go back and forth this way throughout Prozac Nation, first one pointing the finger, then the other, in a cycle of blame not broken until that late moment when her mother recognizes Wurtzel’s depression as real.

Finally, after her mother’s recognition of her depression and after a late-in-the-book suicide attempt that becomes the doorway to healing for her, Wurtzel seems to settle in to a more or less normalized routine of Prozac, school, and a job. And it is that ‘normal’ Wurtzel, that self she finally establishes in
counterpoint to and in reaction to the permission provided by her mother, from whose perspective the book is written; it is from her perspective that, early in the book, Wurtzel understands that her mother has lived a somewhat disappointed life: “Instead of waiting longer to get married, our [generation’s] parents got divorced; instead of becoming feminists, our mothers were left to become displaced homemakers. [. . . My mother had] gone to Cornell to be an architect, but her mother told her that all she could be was an architect’s secretary, so she majored in art history with that goal in mind” (25). That “goal” ends in marriage to Wurtzel’s apathetic father, then divorce and single-motherhood. And Wurtzel, once she has defined herself against her mother and been authorized as an ‘I’ by her, can look back on her past with empathetic eyes, embracing her mother—as Patricia Foster does hers—from the perspective of the defined self she has become.
Conclusion:
Freed from Ambiguity

I have not set out in this thesis to argue that feminist literary theory is ‘wrong’ or a failure. On the contrary, the fact that Lucy Grealy, Patricia Foster, Lauren Slater, and Elizabeth Wurtzel have written post-feminist narratives of their selves and their lives speaks to the success feminism and feminist theory have seen. Were it not for the women who came before them—women writing their own stories and women writing about those writings—the four women discussed here would not have had available to them the space in which they have composed their selves and they would not have been able to utilize the formerly strictly masculine (and reserved for men) discourse of othering to aid in that process of self-definition. With those spaces and tools open to them, each of these women has been able to define her sense of self against the strong, potentially othering force of the ‘I’ of her mother and then write her story from the perspective she develops.

Because these four women have written their memoirs as they have, however, it is now dangerous to make a historical view of women’s autobiographical writings an essentialist and essentializing feminist argument by pushing that view artificially on the present and future. Though, as Diane Bjorklund points out in her study of autobiography and the selves represented in autobiography in cross-sections of history, “what we gain in abstracting from [. . .] autobiographies and looking for similarities is a bigger picture—the cultural and historical background of ideas about the self” (xii), what can be lost when that
abstraction is applied prescriptively are the individual selves around which it was initially modeled. Helen Buss notes this need for individuation, writing that women must “accept the multiplicity of the self while gaining a self that is empowered to act in both private and public worlds” (xxi). Grealy, Foster, Slater, and Wurtzel have written memoirs in which they define and accept their specific multiplicities. Representing those selves on the page, each of these women composes an autobiography that is valuable for, as Dow Adams says all autobiography is, “not its fidelity to fact but its revelations—to the writer as much as to the reader—of self” (170).

The work of feminism and of feminist literary theory is not done; there is still much progress to be made by women and other oppressed groups of people feminists strive to empower. The gains that have already been made, though, enable the explicitly feminist Patricia Foster to be “glad [. . .] that the world of men and the world of women still have nuances of difference. [. . .] I like that there is plenty of danger and silence in both worlds and that to cross boundaries is no longer a transgression, neither an act of power nor of powerlessness, but a choice” (177, my emphasis). This de-essentialization of gender—and thus of self—is one of feminism’s progressive accomplishments and deserves to be recognized as such. Women’s relatively newfound access to traditionally masculine discourse and self-making is something to be celebrated, for, as Jill Ker Conway writes in her introduction to Written by Herself, “[w]hile we know that no life flows along clear, logical lines of causation, we still crave such coherence, so that the well-written autobiographical narrative seems to free us momentarily
from ambiguity” (vii-viii). Grealy, Foster, Slater, and Wurtzel both free themselves from the ambiguity which threatens them—in the forms of their largely missing fathers and their powerful mothers—and provide for their readers contemporary models of self-making on which future selves can base the building of their ‘I’s.
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