

PREFACE

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Writing, gender, history. These three concepts frequently lie behind the most varied instances of expression, ranging from recent wars to modern cartography, and including more subtle –but regrettably, commonplace– forms. Three key words to understand the cultural processes which shape contemporary society and which underlie the discourse, words and images that surround us.

In one way or another, our personal circumstances are continually shaping our cultural and intellectual universe, and no piece of academic work is ever born of indifference, but rather of an eagerness, of an inquiring mind, of something that either concerns us or appeals to us, and for which we feel a pressing need to know more, to investigate in order to comprehend. By employing study methods free of essentialist doctrines, the authors whose essays we publish examine and discuss the ways in which autobiographical experience and history shape gender in the written text. As intellectuals, writers have an important role to play in balancing the power/knowledge relationship and questioning the ahistorical nature of cultural mythology (as Roland Barthes maintained).

Writing that re-appropriates the first-person *I*, making it both subject and object of our own discourse, thus refuses to remain invisible and breaks with the feeling of «foreignness» in a cultural environment we supposedly identify with. Julia Kristeva, author of *Extranjeros para nosotros mismos*, dedicates a section of her book to the role of silence –and its significance– in the life of a «foreigner». This term can be interpreted in several different ways, either literally or by giving it another connotation. For example, we could apply the term to a woman living in a culture run along masculine lines, and whose language not only does not belong to her but is in effect a foreign language: a language she knows perfectly and which she has had to learn and use at school, at work, in everyday life, but which is not hers. A language that traps her in thought structures which do not allow her to express herself fully and which compel her to keep silent –and not always in the metaphorical sense. Sara Suleri, a

writer of Anglo-Pakistani origin, expresses –in an autobiographical text– this feeling of partial alienation, as follows:

«To a stranger or an acquaintance, however, some vestigial remoteness obliges me to explain that my reference is to a place where the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant. By this point admittedly I am damned by my own discourse, and doubly damned when I add yes, once in a while, we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance»¹

The silence that Kristeva refers to becomes an absence which she defines as «... a silence that empties the mind, only to fill it with feelings of suffocation and oppression»; thus it represents the foreigner's prison, the cage of the animal that leaves its territory in search of freedom, only to find a different culture that –with language as its weapon– imprisons it within the confines of silence. For Kristeva, the inability to speak out is the result of this silence imposed on an identity that finds itself on the margins and which, for this very reason, becomes an absence, a lack, something that is *not*:

«Not only has silence been imposed on you, it was already in you: your refusal to speak out, your long-cherished dream coupled with an anguish that stubbornly remains unspoken, your proud and tortured discretion, a blinding light. Nothing to say, nothing, nobody on the horizon. And an impenetrable lack of fulfilment: cold diamond, carefully protected secret treasure, unattainable. Not to say anything, nothing should be said, nothing can be said»²

If we consider studies of the autobiographical genre, we can see how writing offers an acceptable answer to the dilemma faced by Kristeva's «foreigner». The extensive Feminist literary theory concerning the use of autobiographical writing is based on solid premises. If «Literature is political», as Fetterley once declared, then autobiographical accounts have a fundamental role to play in the necessary re/defining of the ontology of feminine identity, while the choice of texts and the critical stance taken are in themselves autobiographical acts which, in turn, may result in hybrid forms of autobiographical narrative.

Judith Swindell, in *The Uses of Autobiography* (1995), stresses how the autobiographical genre is representative of the need of the first-person narrator to express the desire to fight, the tension, the rebelliousness, and the protest, and in general terms, the conflicts that arise between our conscience and the world around us, between people and the ideological construction(s) that shape their lives. In this same volume, Laura Marcus highlights a number of very interesting ideas. The «democratization» of the autobiographical genre (13) has become a reality, since autobiographical writing has redefined and

1. SULERI, Sara: «Excellent Things in Women», in *Meatless Days*, London, Flamingo, 1991, p. 1

2. KRISTEVA, Julia: *Extranjeros para nosotros mismos*, Barcelona, Plaza & Janés, 1991, p. 25.

incorporated life stories, as well as rethinking «memoirs» (memory work, 13). The incorporation of accessible narrative techniques that have not traditionally belonged to literature, has introduced an element of «literary hybridism» which, I believe, helps to illustrate and encourage the different ontologies of *self* that appear in autobiographical accounts in a deeper and more meaningful way.

One of the points that strikes me most about Markus's essay is the relationship that she draws between autobiography as a literary genre and its intrinsic capacity to bring together different disciplines: here, the interdisciplinary nature of much autobiographical writing echoes the new trends in cultural criticism and exemplifies a «...more conceptual approach» (16) to the rewriting of subjectivity, the notion of collective memory, and confessional literature (or testimonies). Another area that has complicated –or enriched– the literary panorama through its hybrid stance, is that of posthumous auto/biographical works, or those that play with autobiographical and biographical elements.

The articles that make up this edition of *Feminism/s* all spring from the ineluctable question marks raised by the words *writing*, *gender*, and *history*. Literature, clearly understood as the result and product of a particular historical and socio-cultural context, here becomes the medium through which we can question the power/knowledge relationship and the discursive practices that enclose identity within the limits set by the essentialist notion of what it means to be a woman or a man. The thoughts and ideas put forward in these articles also draw their inspiration from the historical moment in which we live, as well as from the need to reread the way feminine identity is represented in the autobiographical genre. We hope that the essays featured in this edition will meet the aims and expectations of our readers.