

Parker, R. and Pollock, G. 1981: *Old mistresses: women art and ideology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hilary Dickinson
University of Greenwich

SOME METAMORPHOSIS

Autobiographical writing across the disciplines: a reader. Diane P. Freedman and Olivia Frey, editors, 2003. London: Duke University Press; ISBN 0822332632, pbk, 424 pp., £18.50.

Even at the initial stage of glancing at the table of contents, I have to admit that this book took me slightly by surprise. It seems to me that in the current climate of auto/biography studies, a title featuring the words 'across the disciplines' offers the promise of an interdisciplinary or maybe even a radically transdisciplinary approach to the genre. But, as I say, a quick perusal of the table of contents put paid to any suggestion of that, as each contribution is categorized according to the author's 'home' academic discipline, from history and medicine to Africana Studies to mathematics, psychology and science. Such an immediate capitulation to the structures of the subject disciplines did seem a bit out of place as an organizing principle for a collection of autobiographical writings by people who are – almost to a person – in the act of bemoaning the straightjacketed self-discipline with which they are obliged to fall in line in the confines of the academy. In light of Paul de Man's notorious tirade against autobiography because of its innately undisciplined character (and glossing over for the moment what might have been his real motivation for doing down autobiography), such an endorsement of the structuring presence of the academic disciplines was a bit odd, to say the least.

However, other more welcome surprises were awaiting, first in the form of the editors' introduction, an uncommonly incisive and scholarly account of autobiographical *writing*, and one of the best I have come across during years as a reader and researcher in this field. The influence of subjectivity and life narrative as a platform for modern scientific inductive method was convincingly and concisely recounted, as was the eventual incursion of sexist language and social practices into the rhetorics of scientivism and normative (male) subjectivity. My only criticism here would be the wholesale condemnation the editors visit on Descartes as the one who intentionally and virtually single-handedly kick-started the oppression of women and non-privileged men in the first place in the manner of a favoured pet project, but then this unfair depiction of Cartesian autobiographical/philosophical writing is practically *de rigueur*

in the human sciences. I would encourage readers interested in redressing this specious attack on Descartes to read Susan Bordo's excellent and instructive *Feminist interpretations of Descartes* (1999), or for that matter to read the original writings of the man himself.

Unexpected pleasures also awaited, notably in the selections on writing and literature offered by David Bleich and Brenda Daly. Bleich's reflections on the slow pace of self-inclusion in academic discourse are engagingly filtered through his Jewishness and the memories of his parents who he describes as 'differently oriented as gendered people'. His recorded attempts at implicating himself into the scholarly arena as a teacher and researcher offer several suggestive insights both into the supposed sterility of the academy as well as the pseudo-Christian and masculine bias of the autobiographical genre as a method of self-examination. His convincingly sensitive renderings of the exemplary texts by Adrienne Rich and Andrea Dworkin show how he has allowed academic life to work on him, but in ways not restricted to the regulatory conventions of life in a 'discipline'. Rather, he has used their examples to open himself to the activity of writing and teaching – and indeed the activity of teaching writing – allowing them to affect him in ways beyond his personal control and beyond the boundaries of his individual academic career. Genuine metamorphosis in autobiographical writing is relatively rare, and is always a joy to witness, and to some extent it is apparent in these two selections. Daly's brave revelations about herself as an academic and incest survivor and her experience of working with literature and how it still offers the possibility of reconstructing the good life in the modern context are inspiring. In their way, these are revelations of truly epic proportions.

Unfortunately, this is where the surprises to be found between the covers of this book start to be rather sparsely dispersed. All the old familiar themes replete in autobiography studies are represented here: the epistemological problem of resolving the universal with the particular (Cone), the ethical necessity for the self to engage with the Other (Kaplan), and the frustrations of finding oneself caught between the individual and the institutional (Klass). Only Perri Klass, in her description of being a pregnant medical student, offers a glimpse into some of the gut-wrenching personal pain resulting from the real dilemma of studying something you know in your bones to be so far from lived and embodied experience. But somehow, and frustratingly, we get little sense of whether or not or how this has changed her as a doctor (or indeed as a mother). The reader gets the distinct impression that, following the resolution of this pregnancy in eventual childbirth, it was more or less back to business as usual for all parties concerned.

So, while there were positive aspects to this collection, I remain unconvinced about the 'across the disciplines' format as a basis for a collection of autobiographical writings. This is mostly because the best selections

were distinguished by their willingness to venture outside of the disciplines, or write across their boundaries or fossilized grains. Consequently they would not have been out of place in other and better collections on autobiography and the process of *education* (e.g., Michael Erben (1998) *Biography and education*) – rather than prioritizing the subject disciplines and thereby encouraging the tendency for some academics to indulge in the kind of self-narrative posturing to which they sometimes aspire and which is undoubtedly a presence in this book. But then again, there are signs of progress even on this front: at least in this collection, the contributors managed to restrain themselves and leave the baby photos at home.

Melissa Dearey
University of York

TRAUMA AND THE RECAPTURING EXPERIENCE

Lost in translation: a life in a new language. Eva Hoffman, 1991. London: Minerva; ISBN 0749390700, pbk, 288 pp., £7.99.

Lost in translation is the story of Eva Hoffman's shift between worlds, from her birth in Cracow, Poland, to her family's emigration to Canada when she was thirteen. It evokes the struggles of them all, but Eva in particular, to integrate themselves into the ways of a new continent. A tale of linguistic dispossession, it is Eva's attempt to recapture her experience of losing personal voice and identity through emigration.

In writing this, Eva is both blessed and cursed by the strength of her talents – especially the quality of her mind and ability to remember or recreate in riveting terms the life she left behind. She has an almost Proustian motivation (with less volubility) to locate real meaning in a moment or tiny action. It suffuses the scope and detail of her imagination/memory to fix the reader in different episodes or moments – contentment experienced through sunshine, the impact and sufficiency of memories at four years old, the customs, rituals and traditions of agricultural and urban Poland.

Above all she is driven by a need to pin down the truth or reality of things, in relation to the limitations or blessings of language. She understands and reveals how 'moving languages' traumatizes our sense of self and our world; the impossibility of words from one language to fully replace similar words in another; displacement and loss of reference points in emigration; and the most fundamental need for adequate language: 'I want my peace of mind back' (p. 128). Her truth-seeking determination permeates her questioning of time, reality and mortality, as she shifts gear linguistically through academic analysis, clear unadorned prose, lyrical evocation and quasi-poetry. Her duty to the truth is paralleled