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of the Feminine Body

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"An appearance walking in a forest the sexes burn": Autobiography and the Construction of the Feminine Body

Shirley Neuman

I. Absent bodies

Bodies rarely figure in autobiography. Even movie stars — those icons of an ideal body and of the material, emotional and sexual sustenance it can earn its keeper — tend in their autobiographies to minimize the significance of their bodies to their personal and professional lives. Once surgeons, cosmeticians, hairdressers, and fashion designers have reinscribed an idealized body on the matter these actress-autobiographers provide, they — or their ghost-writers — generally strive above all to demonstrate the spiritual quest behind their culturally produced and idealized bodies. The history of autobiography and of its criticism, which construe the self as individuated and coherent rather than as the product of social construction and as a subject-in-process, work consistently towards such repression of the representation of bodies in autobiography. Indeed, such representation, when present at all, is to be found almost entirely in narratives of childhood, where supposedly untempered bodies are (mis)represented, with Rousseauistic rather than Hollywood idealism, as uninscribed by culture.

We can cite many reasons for this near-effacement of bodies in autobiography, chief among them a Platonic tradition which opposes the spiritual to the corporeal and then identifies "self" with the spiritual. The same opposition informs the elevation of soul over body in Christian theology as it does the Enlightenment definition of "man" as "a thing or substance whose whole essence or nature is only to think, and which, to exist, has no need of space nor of any material thing or body" (Descartes 25). The corporeal functions as the binary opposite by which the spiritual is understood; it remains necessary to this understanding at the same time that it must necessarily be transcended in philosophy, and repressed in representation. Within this paradigm, the

tradition of autobiography, like many narratives of western cultures, has established access to public discourse about the self as synonymous with spiritual quest and has consequently repressed representations of bodies within the genre. Where women's autobiography is concerned, this synonymity functions as a double handicap. As Sidonie Smith points out, to write autobiography, a woman must enter the arena of public, intellectual/spiritual discourse, which is to say that, historically, she has had to transgress the cultural norms which defined her womanhood in terms of the private sphere (44-62).[1] Moreover, in a set of equivalences the Greek philosophers protested too much, and feminist philosophers and theorists have very often protested against, soul or intellect has more particularly been ascribed to men, matter or body ascribed to women.[2] A literary-philosophic tradition which identifies women as corporeal leaves the woman autobiographer in the position of identifying her self with her body, of creating herself through technologies of the body.[3] Contradictorily, a tradition of autobiography which identifies the genre with spirituality leaves the potential woman autobiographer in the position of either not writing at all, or of having to invent a self that is female and non-corporeal, which is to say, in the impossible position of inventing a self outside western cultures' inscriptions of femininity on and through her body.

Here I want to focus on two anomalous moments in contemporary autobiographies by women, moments when the genre's discursive repression of bodies is ruptured or exceeded; when a socially inscribed feminine body does become both subject of, and process in, the text. I take my conception of a feminine body from Elizabeth Grosz who dismantles the distinction between biologically sexed bodies and social gender in an argument that "It is...a matter of...a *social mapping* of the body tracing its anatomical and physiological details by social representations. The procedures which mark male and female bodies ensure that the biological capacities of bodies are always socially coded into sexually distinct categories. It is the *social inscription of sexed bodies*, ...that is significant for feminist purposes" ("Inscriptions," her emphasis).[4] While the biological, material characteristics of sexed bodies exist on a broad continuum, their social coding into the categories of male and female has the effect of polarizing differences at the

expense of the many possible positions along the continuum and of constructing gender relations in terms of heterosexual relations.[5]

Feminine bodies, then, are constituted in the social mapping of female bodies which are "*always already cultural*." Such a body, like all bodies, is a "threshold term between nature and culture, being both natural and cultural" ("Notes" 7, her emphasis).[6] It is what Grosz, re-fashioning Foucault to serve what she names "corporeal feminism,"[7] calls a "textualised body" ("Inscriptions"), one in which diet, adornment, exercise, surgery, gesture, pleasures, performances, idealizations all produce or inscribe it in such a way that it is not only controlled but is also made into "an *interface* between 'privatised' experience and signifying culture" ("Notes" 10). These "inscriptions" of a body, Grosz argues, are "directed towards the acquisition of appropriate cultural attitudes, beliefs and values," that is, towards the production of a body's "interiority" (10). These socially inscribed bodies stand where the subject of autobiography has always stood: as Stephen Spender put it, "An autobiographer is really writing a story of two lives: his life as it appears to himself, ...when he looks out at the world from behind his eye-sockets; and his life as it appears from outside in the minds of others; a view which tends to become in part his own view of himself also, since he is influenced by the opinions of these others" (viii). But where Foucault sees bodies as sites of ideological codification, Grosz would take us one step further and see bodies as produced by and productive of ideology and social power, as both "the means by which power is disseminated and a potential object of resistance to power" ("Notes" 12). Such bodies are not, of course, inscribed by and resistant to ideologies of gender alone; rather, their inscriptions are produced by and produce any number of intersections between gender and other ideologies such as those of class and race.[8]

By addressing anomalous moments when self-representations of a feminine body rupture and exceed the spiritual discourse of autobiography, I want to demonstrate not only the ways in which women autobiographers' representations of their bodies and of the "interiority" or psychic effects of those bodies are produced by ideology but to ask about the extent to which they are productive of ideology. My first instance, the conclusion of Kate Simon's

Bronx Primitive, records a decisive moment in the girl child's inscription by femininity. My second anomalous moment is provided by Violette Leduc. In three volumes — *La Bâtarde*, *La Folie en tête*, and *La chasse à l'amour* — she displays, more extensively and with greater awareness than any other autobiographer I know of, the effects on her creation of a self of the social inscription of her body as feminine.

II. "Lolita, my twin"

An account of growing up in a neighbourhood of Jewish, Italian and Polish immigrants, *Bronx Primitive* has much in common with both the bildüngsroman and with a dominant tradition of male autobiography which we might label "preludes," or narratives of "the growth of the autobiographer's mind": it chronicles first influences, the realization of the capacity for self-determination in the repudiation of a parentally chosen vocation, and an emergent sexual awareness. Men's "preludes" most often represent the adolescent's relation to his body as an unresolved oscillation between carnal longing and romantic yearnings which are confused and commingled with artistic aspirations. *Bronx Primitive*, however, gives us a much more physically terrifying view of the girl's development. The immigrant niece of Kate's father masturbates by rubbing herself against Kate's legs in bed at night; his immigrant nephew makes "night raids" (123) on her in which he stops just short of penetration; her breasts are "'felt up'" (158) by the barber; she is taken to the movies by a family friend and feels his hand trying to creep into her bloomers. Kate the child is clear-headed and resourceful before these attacks. She recognizes (perhaps with some help from the mature narrator of this autobiography) that her father knows about at least some of these assaults and is complicit in making her "a thing that had no feelings, no thoughts, no choices," "a 'street girl' for anyone in the Family" (173). She resists the nephew, refuses the invitations to the movies, defies her father's quasi-incestuous expectation that she become a concert-pianist under his management. She also resists the feminization of her flesh. In a move that one feminist critic has identified as the will among certain women artists to destroy the female body rather than "destroy her Self" by

identifying with "birth, belly, and body — all these synecdoches of femininity" (Export 7), she binds her breasts "tighter and still tighter" until she has "dug long cuts under [her] arms, the blood staining the ribbon" (Simon 145).

But all this clear-headed awareness about what is being done to her, all this resistance in both its resourceful and self-mutilating aspects, is transmogrified on the day that Kate can claim a more socially legitimating blood, the day "I had *achieved* my first menstrual period" (177, my emphasis). On that day, her mother bestows a gift with decidedly social meanings. She gives Kate her first "woman's dress," one of "thin voile...no collar...shaped, pinched in under my breasts, narrowing down to a waist, billowing out in a gathered skirt, covering my knees" (177-78). This "woman's dress" immediately overwrites the physiological fact of first menstruation by the social construction of femininity. In the passage which follows, that femininity produces Kate's pleasure in her own body and her identification of herself with it, it gives her a sense of power, and it idealizes her in a wide range of sexual and erotic encounters. She wears the dress to walk in the park the next afternoon:

> I heard little and saw less; aware only of the tucks on my ribs, the sloping seams at the sides, the swing of the skirt as it brushed my knees. I held my naked, collarless neck stiff and high.... My waist was a golden ring, my sides as I stroked them had the curved perfection of antelope's horns.... I approved of the taste of all the strokers and pinchers. I understood what they felt, felt it myself as I continued to stroke my superb sides. ...there was a boundless world of choices opening around me.... The next time Mr. Silverberg offered to take me to the movies I would suggest that we go to [a restaurant] first, like a real date, and push his hand away firmly when it began to crawl. Or let it crawl while I laughed at him.... The next time I went to Helen Roth's house, her high-school brother would kneel and lay at my feet a sheaf of long-stemmed red roses....
>
> I was ready for all of them and for Rudolph Valentino; to play, to tease, to amorously accept, to confidently reject. Lolita, my twin, was born decades later, yet a twin of the thirteen-and-a-half-year-old striding through Crotona Park, passing the spiky red

> flowers toward a kingdom of mesmerized men —
> young, old, skinny, fat, good-looking, ugly, well
> dressed, shabby, bachelors, fathers — all her subjects.
> As desirable as Gloria Swanson, as steely as Nita
> Naldi, as winsome as Marion Davies, she was, like
> them, invincible and immortal (178-79).

Kate Simon was in her sixties when she published *Bronx Primitive* and it is difficult to miss the irony half a century's vantage has introduced into this passage. But that irony, partly because it is so affectionate, does not hamper the identification that many women readers in western cultures will experience with the thirteen-year-old learning to identify her pleasure, her self, and her power in terms of her feminine body. Many of us will at some point have approved the taste of the strokers and pinchers even as we failed to relish and actively resisted the stroking and pinching. Many of us will have desired the tribute of some more or less sentimental, culturally approved symbol of love. And many of us will have identified with Hollywood's rhetoric of femininity as invincible and immortal while resisting the recognition that Hollywood cinema humiliates, subdues by marrying, or kills, with remarkable frequency, heroines who aspire to invincibility. In this we have only read in accord with the cultural codes of femininity which we have interiorized through their inscription on our own bodies.

Simon's irony never *forces* our reading beyond an affectionate amusement for Kate; however, a quality of indeterminacy in it does *allow* the feminist reader to intimate that to hear little and see less is *not* enabling. This reader will recognize that to tease, to accept or to mock the crawling hands — or, for that matter, the red roses — is not boundless choice, but merely making the best of a cultural construction of femininity that demands that women await overtures, whether they come from the boy next door, Valentino, or Humbert Humbert. And no feminist reader will fail to recall that Lolita spends more time crying or nearly catatonic with despair than she does reading comics, chewing gum, or painting her toenails. Nor are we apt to forget our last sight of this "nymphet" as a bedraggled, debt-ridden, pregnant seventeen-year-old.

Still, however ironic a feminist reading we give this passage, two facts resist that reading. We cannot ignore the

lightness of Simon's irony, which is to say, we cannot be certain how far her irony transforms the feminine fantasy of the young Kate into the feminist recognitions I have sketched here, an uncertainty that proves particularly unsettling given that the evocation of Lolita as Kate's twin is grounded on the narrator's identification with the point of view of Humbert Humbert, her molester. Nor can we escape the fact that the conclusions of bildungsromans and "preludes," by convention, intimate that the protagonist has achieved a sense of self and vocation. Simon leaves her Kate initiated into femininity, imagining herself and pleasuring herself through identification with her body as it is inscribed and conscripted by the ideology of femininity, an identification that is both self-creation and discovery of her vocation.

III. "An appearance walking in a forest the sexes burn"[9]

The structure of Simon's autobiography leaves her readers free, if they wish, to imagine that Kate goes on to exercise the power through and over men granted, within very precise constraints, to some women within an ideology of femininity; it leaves us free too to imagine that this concluding scene marks the end of young Kate's resistance to that ideology. In women's autobiography, as in their lives, the process of the inscription of the body as feminine, the resistance and dis-ease femininity generates, is sometimes particularly evident when an autobiographer's body has been judged, by herself or others, as ugly, or when there is residual conflict about the assumptions of heterosexuality on which the ideology of femininity is founded.[10] The remainder of my discussion here will focus on one such "ugly" body in autobiography, that is, on its cultural inscription as ugly, on the autobiographer's attempts to produce it as feminine and, finally, as heterosexual, and on the ways in which this textualisation of the exteriority of her body produces her interiority as subject. The body is Violette Leduc's.

In a history of representations of ideologically produced bodies, Leduc's autobiographies would stand at an instructive juncture. They are the product, at least in part, of modernists' concerns with masculinity, femininity and sexuality, concerns stimulated by both the women's

movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and by psychoanalysis. As Isabelle de Courtivron has pointed out, Leduc also stands between a "generation of French women writers who...had succeeded in conforming to established notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' literary styles — while disguising their own voices in ways that are only now being uncovered" and "post-1968 feminist writers" (57). Most of her writing was done as a protégé of Simone de Beauvoir, her staunchest supporter and most loved and admired friend, for whose sake Leduc claimed to have gone on writing (*Mad*, 45); de Beauvoir's trenchant analysis of how "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301) had been published in 1949, a time at which Leduc had published her first two novels but had not yet moved from autobiographical fiction to autobiography. The most intense and deliberative phase of Leduc's own "becom[ing] a woman," as it is recorded in the autobiography, was enacted in the late 1920s and early 1930s, just at the time when such arbiters of the beautiful as *Vogue* were shifting from portraits of society beauties to "how-to" articles and an image of "ready-to-wear beauty" (Lakoff and Scherr 82). This new direction formulated beauty as the means to wealth and status rather than as the effect of wealth (80). The fashion magazines' mixture of "lives of the beautiful and famous" and self-help-to-beauty articles promised "the reader the *possibility* of beauty" (81). That promised possibility, however, lays the ground for self-loathing: *not* to be beautiful is to fail to take advantage of possibilities, and is, therefore, a woman's own fault. In short, the representation of her body is more than usually ambiguous and shifting ground for a woman writing at Violette Leduc's historical juncture.

Leduc's self-representation dwells on her ugliness: she is thin, bony, flat-chested; her nose is too long, her mouth too wide, her eyes too small, and her hair too fine. She sees hers as a "thankless face" (*La Bâtarde* 41), a judgement frequently offered and corroborated by those around her.[11] In the three volumes of Leduc's autobiography, the inscription of Violette's body as feminine, because female, and as punishingly ugly, and therefore not-feminine, produces her self-loathing and her self-fragmentation: self-mutilating reactions to rejection — "If I were to mince my sex, if I were to serve it stuffed in an eggplant" (*La Chasse*

61) — are commonplace in this autobiography. Her efforts to produce her body consistently with cultural norms of femininity both obsess and disable her.

Birth, for Violette Leduc, marks the beginning of the socio-legal textualization of her body at the intersection of gender, class, and legitimacy. The title of the first volume of her autobiography announces this: she is *La Bâtarde*, "the unrecognized daughter of a son of good family" and the maid whom he seduced and then persuaded to leave without making her condition known. Throughout the three volumes which follow, variations on this socio-legal definition of Violette and ugliness are linked and mutually reinforcing, decisively so in the associative chronology which provides the context for Violette's mother Berthe's marriage. That chronology brings into implicit relationship three events: Violette's understanding that her stepfather wishes "in a vague way" that she did not exist as the visible sign of "the weight of a great love" (56); her first menstruation (57); and the knowledge that she "was ugly, that [her classmates] found it amusing" (58). What bastardy and the failure to meet the standards of feminine beauty have in common, over and over again, in this autobiography is a failure to be legitimate and a concomitant *déclassement*. That femininity might, to all social intents and purposes, wipe out the illegitimacy of Violette's birth is the hope with which her mother and grandmother present her body as a sign of the social class of the father whose name unfortunately does not stand behind this "façade":

> I am the unrecognized daughter of a son of good family. Therefore I must wear a medallion on a fine gold chain, embroidered dresses and long pantalettes, I must have a fair skin and silky hair in order to compete with the rich children in the town when my grandmother takes me out into the park. ...in public: the façade.... My mother and my grandmother...are attempting to ward off ill luck with talismans when they tie ribbons on their little girl. The park is the arena, I am their little torero, I must vanquish every well-fed infant in the town (27).

Standing in for the legitimacy of the father's name, the insignia of femininity in this passage serve to make the absent father present. They also construct Violette's body as

a site of class and gender ambivalence. Feminized, she is also a "torero" sent forth to "vanquish" the class from which the presence of her father's absence excludes her.

The extent of the psychic ravage inflicted in the inscription of Violette's body as feminine and her internalization of that inscription is indexed by the distance gone between her first and last erotic relationships. The first occurs when she is a schoolgirl of seventeen; the second when she is a woman of fifty-one. The first affair is with her schoolmate Isabelle and its description is characterized by an explicit lyricism. Secreted in Isabelle's cubicle, they are surrounded by the socializing agency of the school but they are unseen by it. Indeed, their desire is what cannot be seen within a sex-gender system indifferent to sexualities functioning outside the male-female opposition which grounds heterosexuality.[12] In their lovemaking it is as if their bodies had been — utopianly — uninscribed by gender. Violette's actions as she first prepares to cross the corridor to Isabelle's bed specifically attempt to repudiate inscriptions of femininity on her body. While thinking that "one's personality could be changed by wearing expensive clothes," she chooses to remove her silk nightgown bought in "a lingerie boutique," and with it the culture's injunctions to feminine self-improvement; she chooses to wear the "regulation nightgown" of the school which Isabelle also wears (82). Outside the representations of gender, these two are briefly free to invent their sexuality on reciprocal and new terms.

The distance the body inscribed by femininity must go from the lyricism, the reciprocity, and the pleasure which Leduc recreates in her description of Violette making love with Isabelle is measured by its contrast with the autobiography's concluding representation of eroticism, that in *La Chasse à l'amour* of Violette's affair with René. Here a woman waits. She obsessively keeps her hair and her make-up in order. When he comes, she cooks, wearing a "little apron" like her mother the maid did before her; although now she is the intellectual, he the workingman, still, "You, my mother, and your little white apron, you suffocate me" (*La Bâtarde* 24). She is careful to maintain a certain psychological space for him between her writing table and her bed all the while he folds his clothes on the chair she sits at to write. She interprets his behaviour in terms of what

"a man" does. She caresses him with what she describes as
an Oriental subtlety, identifying herself with the feminine as
exotic other. She feels "warmed and beautiful" (*La Chasse*
180). She is over fifty; she comes. The "ice" of the "more
than thirty years" (*La Bâtarde* 56) since she first associated
her stepfather's discomfort about her illegitimacy with her
ugliness melts. When he stays away, she trembles behind
her door counting the minutes, hours, days, weeks; she
seeks him without shame only to be turned out into the rain;
she cannot write; she clutches the "altar" (*La Chasse* 291) of
the chair on which he laid his clothes and stains the parquet
beneath it with her tears. She is ugly, she is old. When he
returns, she allows him to come upon her "in flagrant délit of
desolation" (287); she accuses; she demands explanations;
she weeps; she clutches his feet: she makes a spectacle of
her age, her ugliness, her grief, its excess. Her body — its
sobs, its gestures, its very fluids — is on display, part of a
performance demanding the catharsis of pity, love. She
speaks of loyalty, friendship; she accedes when he asks,
"What is this, your stories of friendship, of comraderie? A
man goes with a woman, it's simple. Now let's go to
bed"(270). She revenges herself for his failure to take her
out in public — is he ashamed of her figure? her face? her
age? — by staging herself as sexual prey over whom he and
his brother "fight to the death" (288); he tells her not to
worry about it. He has already told her that she "no longer
has a human face" (287). She is a woman in love. She is
"resigned" to losing him: she can keep him for "some
hours" only so long as she gives him her "velvet fingers, her
satin womb. It's rush hour, woman" (288). "Shall we go
to bed? René asks" (288). She becomes a spectacle to
herself: "Two acrobats rolled on the bed" (290). He does
not return.

From the adolescent's jouissance to the middle-aged
woman's experience of her sexuality as a loss foretold in an
enactment of feminine abjection: Violette traverses this
distance in a series of invitations and of losses each of which
stages her body as spectacle. *La Bâtarde* is clear that a body
socially constructed as the object of an other's gaze is a body
without freedom. When Isabelle visits Violette in her home,
Violette exults in their "freedom" from the fear of detection
by school monitors, but Isabelle knows that this is precisely
the moment at which they "aren't free" (104), that in the

bourgeois home and their planned excursions into the public world of fairs they are already constructed as gendered, embodied subjects. Violette's mother, Berthe, furthers that gendered social inscription. In a ploy which claims Violette for femininity, Berthe insists that Violette model a new dress, "encouraging [her] coquetry" so that she is "aflame" for the dress, for their "evening out" and "drawn closer and closer" to her mother (107), and farther and farther from Isabelle. That the rivalry between Berthe and Isabelle is a struggle over the inscription of femininity on the daughter/lover's body becomes explicit in the merry-go-round scene which ends the affair. Isabelle registers her recognition that she has lost Violette to her mother's injunctions in the name of femininity by forcing her to take up the feminine position of specular object: "she helped me into my seat on the outside horse — the outside one so that I could see, so that I could be seen." Where Isabelle avoids, rejects, the streamers both men and women are throwing at her, Violette becomes "entangled, enmeshed," in those thrown by one young man and directs back at him the streamers Isabelle commands her to throw (108). Violette has taken a decisive turn on the merry-go-round of the ideology of femininity/heterosexuality and the ways in which it inscribes her body and more often than not is interiorized as self-loathing.

The rivalry between Berthe and Isabelle over whether or not their daughter/lover's body will be inscribed as feminine tempts one to posit an unresolved oedipal conflict as productive of Violette's ambivalence about femininity and heterosexuality.[13] In the autobiography, Violette undergoes psychoanalytic treatment and she herself provides fragments of a conventional psychoanalytic narrative of pre-oedipal childhood, asserting that she wants to be her father rather than have her father. "I want to heal your wound, mother. Impossible. It will never close. He is your wound, and I am the picture of him" (*La Bâtarde* 24). The "wound" here is richly suggestive of exploitation of servant by master, of sexual violation and of the tearing of tissue in birth, as well as of grief, none of which precludes its also standing as an image of the mother's "castration."

Three circumstances, however, prevent what the psychoanalytic narrative terms a "normal" shift in the erotic object from mother to father. First, Violette lives in a world

bounded by her mother and grandmother, sharing her mother's bed until she is thirteen. That is, there is no father-figure whom Violette can take as erotic object and the pre-oedipal phase of erotic pleasure derived from contact with the mother's body is prolonged into pubescence. Second, Violette sees her mother as taking on through the process of mourning and remembrance, as well as through the dynamics of the single-parent household, the attributes of Violette's father. "'My mother is my father,'" she several times insists (*La Bâtarde* 51). Third, Violette experiences her expulsion from her mother's bed upon Berthe's marriage ambivalently. On the one hand, she feels it as a failure of femininity: "I thought...that I had ceased to be her daughter because I wasn't attractive" (54). On the other hand, she re-enacts the process of mourning outlined by Freud by which the individual preserves the love of someone she has lost by identifying with the lost other so completely that her attributes become part of the ego structure.[14] At the onset of menstruation, and displaced by Berthe's new husband, she appropriates her mother's "wound" and birthing; she creates herself by embodying her mother's visible and particularly feminine "shame": "My wound reopened. My wound: where you were torn out of me" (57).

The dynamic of sex-gender identification here is quite opposite, however, to that described by Freudian and neo-Freudian theories of psychosexual development. Jacques Lacan, for example, posits that a woman "finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of the one to whom she addresses her demand for love" (84). Since Lacan has already hypothesized the phallus as the "privileged signifier" of all desire (82), he is necessarily suggesting that a woman will find the signifier of her desire in the phallus and will therefore address her "demand for love" to one who "has" the phallus. The entire explanation assumes heterosexuality and, when Lacan goes on to hypothesize lesbianism as "follow[ing] from a disappointment which reinforces...the demand for love" (85), he again assumes heterosexuality as the prior and disappointing relationship. That is, he posits lesbianism as following from heterosexual disappointment.[15] This is precisely what Leduc does *not* outline as the process of her own gendered and sexualized subject formation. Violette is "disappointed" in first her mother, then Isabelle. That "disappointment" issues in her

first tentative and ambivalent heterosexual relationship. It also issues in a renunciation of the (impossible) attempt to create and embody the self other-wise than within the representations of femininity, a renunciation that is played out in the text of Violette's body itself "between the interlocking teeth of [the] double self-abnegation" (*La Bâtarde* 159) of her last lesbian lover, Hermine, and her first heterosexual lover, Gabriel. For Gabriel, she *performs* masculinity, dressing like a man, playing "little fellow." "I was his man, he was my woman" (188).[16] But because gender is "always already" inscribed on sexed bodies, Violette's performance of masculinity signifies differently from the masculinely inscribed male body's. Nor can it play out on heterosexual terrain the sexual politics of butch-femme roles, even if Gabriel does cooperate by wanting to wear a lily in his fly when they go out together (*La Bâtarde* 155). In this relationship, Violette is not the butch who, as Sue-Ellen Case puts it in "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," "proudly displays the possession of the penis" even though "there is no referent in sight." She neither passes as a man nor, like a butch, plays "on the phallic economy rather than to it" (64):

> I wanted to be the hard focus of attention for the customers in a café..., because I was ashamed of my face and because I wanted to force it upon them at the same time. I admit it: I wanted to be attractive to Gabriel. The necktie I wore: my sex for Gabriel; the carnation in my buttonhole...: my sex for Gabriel.... It was with a kind of fever that I bought...a pair of man's shorts, for a day's boating.... Ten years later he told me: 'Your shorts were too big. I was rowing. I could see' (167).

Far from suppressing femininity, Violette's masculine masquerade only makes the corporeal inscription of femininity more visible for it is motivated by her failure to meet the standards of the "beauty system" which is such a significant ideology of control in femininity.[17] Moreover it functions by an opposition in which, seeming to be a man, she displays herself the more obviously as not-male to a male gaze. Violette's specular position in relation to Gabriel, like her socioeconomic one, is part of the process and the result of her inscription as a feminine subject. She needs

Gabriel to construct her as feminine by being "there to look at me, to plead with his eyes.... No questions. Just the gaze" (159). So constructed, she is enrolled as "a member of that great band of women who were bought things by men" (126).[18]

With Hermine, Violette agrees that she "will be her baby, yes" (155). From the beginning of the relationship, Hermine requires from Violette the kind of femininity through which her mother had earlier reclaimed her from Isabelle. Visiting Hermine, Violette feels that "I *had* to get into bed, I had to powder my face, I had to wear a luxurious nightgown" (155, my emphasis). In Hermine's embrace and under her sponsorship, the "beauty system" takes over Violette's self-conception: "I wanted the impossible: the eyes, the complexion, the hair, the nose, above all the nose, as well as the self-assurance, the arrogance of the mannequins" (166) of *Vogue* magazine. Here there is nothing of the "ironized and 'camped up'" (Case 64) performance of butch-femme roles. Hermine does not play butch and Violette's inscription by femininity operates at a level of the real in which personal, social, sexual and economic independence are all finally forfeit.

The cultural script of femininity for which Hermine acts as producer is staged with particular virulence in two sequences in each of which Violette becomes the object of a masculine gaze, in each of which she is the consumer who is consumed. In the first, she enters a department store, hearing in her head the voices of her mother and Hermine enjoining her to "Be a woman," to wear "a hat, with longer hair, a cloche hat" (178). In a violent rejection of femininity that is also a capitulation to it, she steals knickers, powderpuffs, compacts, trinkets. She steals out of anger at femininity, *and* out of anger at her unfeminine ugliness, steals not only to "be a woman" but "in order to rob the other women of the things that made them feminine. Rape performed in a private darkness, for the others couldn't see me" (179). Women, however, are by definition seen; caught, and thoroughly frightened, by the store detective, she succumbs to Hermine's desire to buy her "heaps of things" — powderpuffs, underwear in every color in satin, silk, and voile. "She wants a woman, she shall have a woman and I shall have no reason to steal, I said to myself" (182). That this decision enrolls Violette in a whole new

socio-sexual economy becomes apparent shortly after when Violette first allows a man to pick her up. Femininity entails specularity, a fact Leduc here registers by again shifting into the third person; specularity entails a conscription into a social/political position that is a kind of prostitution, a fact she registers in Violette's disappointment: "She left him empty-handed. All she had wanted from him was a bundle of franc notes" (183).

In the second sequence, Violette is completely complicit in the production of her feminine body. Wanting "to be rejuvenated at the age of twenty-four" (*La Bâtarde* 190), she exercises to prevent a double chin and begins frequenting designer sales. Her skin is no longer hers since she has taken "the veil of coquetry" (201) but is instead engraved with the insignia of that coquetry: "Speak, mirror, say you're tired of copying me, say it's not...really a pretty sight to see a thigh in the grip of a suspender, squeezed by a stocking top.... If I could only sew my stockings with a running stitch into my flesh...." (201). What takes over is what Elizabeth Dempster calls the "economy of shame," by which even those who strive hardest for beauty must always fail before the idealized feminine body of cultural production. Violette's private mirror is "nice.... It takes, it gives back, love, always love" (204). In women's self-creation through the mirror, however, the mirror doubles as self and audience (La Belle 62). Thus, for Violette, the fashion designer Schiaparelli's public mirror, reflecting the judgement of the saleswoman, is "a vampire. I look terrible. ...I feel the pain of it in the entrails of my great mouth, my big nose, my little eyes. Pleasing others, pleasing oneself. Twofold bondage" (203). Caught in the double bind of self-love and self-loathing she has her hair dressed, at far too great cost, like Joan Crawford's and imagines herself "delivered" from ugliness, "reborn free" (215). "Here I am," she tells us, "being born in Paris," at the precise moment that a passing woman, one "all hips, with a face neither beautiful nor homely," turns and shouts words like "blows striking all over my body" (217-18). The words... "If I had a face like that I'd kill myself" (222).

In this economy of shame in which a Violette has become a trolloping "Lolette" (204) and still can't please, it is not primarily significant that Violette's erotic attachment is to another woman or that she is judged a failure by other

women. They mediate and help enforce the inscription of femininity but Violette's feminine body is not constituted in relation to them. The "economy of shame" is one in which the feminine body is constituted as presented to a male gaze. Violette's existence as feminine depends upon the gaze of men and upon their economic power. She knows herself as "feminine" when she walks her limbs oiled by exercise, her hairdo, her hat, her high heels, her designer dress, her makeup, on the streets and is accosted by men. In the culmination of this sequence, Violette simultaneously apotheosises herself as feminine body and prostitutes herself while a man watches her and her many reflections. She makes love to Hermine, for money with which she plans to buy a table, in a roomful of mirrors, before a man who has picked her up when she has been promenading her feminine goods. This set scene from pornography makes several points. In it Violette punishes Hermine by inscribing her body within the circle of that male gaze with which Hermine has helped so thoroughly to construct Violette's body. As revenge, it effectively signals Violette's "disappointment" in the lesbian love of Hermine which has conscripted her for femininity; from now on, she takes men as erotic objects. The distance between the two women and the man, whose reflection watching them Violette sees, but who never touches them, re-presents the feminine body as not-male and as specular construction. It enacts what Isabelle knew years before, that two women, their bodies brought within the purview of a man's gaze or the social order structured by that gaze "aren't free." The sum paid, which enables Violette as a consumer, designates her as consumed.

It also completes Violette's interiorization of the ideology of femininity/heterosexuality inscribed externally on her body. From now on, she will, however despairingly, however hopelessly, take as erotic objects men, however inappropriate they prove to be for her own needs. From now on, she must be seen to know she is loved. And if a male gaze should fail her, as it emphatically does in the case of the homosexual Jacques, whom she adores but who neither encourages nor gratifies her, she will imagine it into being in a paranoid fantasy of his setting spies on her every movement, leaving signs in every discarded cigarette pack in her path, taking time to himself peep at her most intimate life

through holes in her ceiling. From now on, she *will* be seen.

And yet: the "lovers" are unsuitably chosen, and Violette loves them in self-damaging ways. Her femininity serves her poorly and seems, at best, an ill-fitting costume. Wishing to please others, she seems not unlike the woman in Joan Riviere's 1929 case study who "assumed" femininity and wore it "as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to divert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (38). That it is in fact two women who enjoin Violette to adopt the mask of womanliness does not change this: rather it returns us to the fact that gender relations in western cultures are constructed in terms of heterosexual relations and that, in heterosexuality, femininity is understood by contrast and analogy with masculinity. Short of reinventing heterosexuality other-wise, or of finding means of representing other sexualities, the injunction to "be a woman," no matter who utters it, is an injunction to please men.

But if we step back from Violette's deflected lesbianism and recall the technologies by which she inscribes femininity on her body and interiorizes it in her psyche, we realize, as did Joan Riviere, that there is no difference between femininity as a more or less conscious masquerade and what Riviere terms "genuine womanliness," by which I take it she means femininity that represents a woman's "main development" rather than a compensatory strategy (38). As Stephen Heath so succinctly puts it in his re-reading of Riviere, femininity is itself a "representation, the representation of the woman" (53) in "subjection to men" (54). Because femininity is a representation, we are not, as later commentators from Lacan to Mary Ann Doane ("Masquerade Reconsidered" 47-48) have made clear, dealing with "real" femininity but with a representation which has real *effects.* In a social and political order in which women *are* subject to men — and we must remember the period in which Violette Leduc wrote, as well as her class, education, and femaleness — the only identity available to women, as Heath argues, is this masquerade (55). For Violette alienation — I quote Heath — "becomes a *structural* condition of being a woman.... Alienation is playing the game which is the act of womanliness and the act is her identity...., she *sticks* to it" (54, his emphasis).

Hence the specularity which characterizes so much of Violette's self-representation as she watches herself being watched (and judged) in the performance of femininity.[19] Caught up in the mirror game, Violette is a woman and is not a woman. She cannot carry off the masquerade, but she cannot give it up. For when the masquerade is so inscribed, sewn into the flesh as it were, no matter how obvious or crooked the seams, it cannot be unstitched.

IV. Except, perhaps, by autobiography?

I began by setting the mind/body distinction which has dominated thinking about the self in western cultures against the concept of a "textualised body" which cannot exist prior to culture and culture's representations of it and which, therefore, cannot be distinct from the mind in self-representation. I made reference to Elizabeth Grosz' suggestion that this culturally inscribed body is the site not only of the inscription of social power which the subject interiorizes as experience but also of possible resistance to that power and of counter-ideological inscriptions. And I went on to read moments when two autobiographers' bodies, conscripted into femininity, became recognizable as representations in a genre which, at least as it has been used by women, has traditionally not seen the feminine body. In *Bronx Primitive*, Simon does represent the feminine body but she also seems to subscribe to a notion of the "natural" child's body as preceding its cultural inscription as feminine. The encoding of Kate's body as feminine marks a definitive stage in her maturity, her discovery of a vocation, and her entry into culture rather than a process always already begun and continuing. If as feminist subjects we choose to read from both within and without the discursive space of the femininity within which young Kate comes to understand her world,[20] the structure of Simon's narrative, and perhaps even a certain complacency in her irony, do not allow us the certainty that she too is representing herself as both within and without the constructions of femininity.

Because Leduc's autobiography represents Violette's body as textualized from birth in terms of multiple ideologies, and because that textualization produces the gaps, as it were, between the corporeal inscription and its reception by those for whose gaze it is embodied, we can

push our questions further where her autobiography is concerned. Does Leduc, by writing autobiography, take Violette's body, written by cultural signification and medium for its internalization, and make it *produce* different cultural significations? Put another way, does this textualized body assume agency in the act of Leduc's writing autobiography? What does the act of writing over this already written body perform? The answer, I think, is as shifting and multiple and uncertain as Violette's feminine subjectivity itself.

Leduc does, of course, assume agency by daring to write about the body in a way that denies the mind/body distinction common in public and autobiographical discourse. More importantly, she does so by using the specularity that underlies the social construction of heterosexuality and femininity in order to rethink and make homologous the display of the self that informs autobiography and the display of the body that informs femininity. Like femininity, Leduc's autobiography begins and is sustained as an act of pleasing others: Violette begins writing fiction at the exasperated order of Maurice Sachs, and continues with fiction and then autobiography under Simone de Beauvoir's never-failing question, "Are you writing?" and with the assurance that de Beauvoir will read Violette's pages. In this her autobiography is a *dédoublement* with a difference of the process of the construction of Violette's body as feminine in the text. The feminine body and the text perform, Leduc hopes, to the same end — in the "present" of her writing, "May 15, 1961," she tells us, "I haven't changed; I still haven't overcome my desire to juggle with words so that people will notice me" (*La Bâtarde* 317). At the level of the representation of femininity in the text, noticing her, we readers become complicit in the specularization that constructs her feminine, textualized body in the text. Noticing or not noticing her, we become complicit in the economy of shame by which the feminine, textualized body in the text fails before the social construction of the ideal body.

Leduc, however, takes advantage of the gaps between the subject position of the autobiographer writing in the present and the subject position of Violette in the past about whom she writes. She is careful to foreground the contemporary Leduc, engaged in the act of writing her

autobiography, several times in the course of the three volumes. This Leduc is conspicuously present in the opening passages of *La Bâtarde* and in the closing of *La Chasse à l'amour*, both of which represent her as alone, sitting out of doors on an "uncorruptible" schedule each day, with "iron discipline" (*La Chasse* 401) writing the books we are reading. The economic independence which has made it possible to spend solitary summers in the rural village of Faucon by the end of the third volume is the direct result of the writing of the first volume. That is, Leduc the-subject-writing-an-autobiography is not self-identical with Violette the-subject-of-her-autobiography. Leduc displays the inscription of Violette's body by femininity and, in the ambivalences, griefs, conflicts, and masquerade with which Violette surrounds that inscription, displays the points of resistance to it. Violette is *within* femininity, but even there, in the anger with which vulgarity so often disrupts sentimentality and abjection in the narrative (recall that aside, "It's rush hour, woman"), and in the narrative display of the production of Violette's body as feminine, Leduc performs much more than the masquerade of her femininity. Standing within gender ideology, she also stands outside it, making visible the repressions, displacements, submissions, self-loathings, self-abnegations and abjections which are among its effects and which it represses. Writing autobiography, she undertakes to understand femininity with a double vision which lets her represent her entanglement and the net which entangles her. Both aspects of that doubled self-representation beckon the reader to gaze at the repressions which sustain the non-representation of bodies in autobiography, and to recognize the ways in which many autobiographers may be "an appearance walking in a forest the sexes burn."

NOTES

1. Carolyn Heilbrun has also addressed "the degree to which women [have] internalized the 'facts' dictated to them by male psychology" (19) and the extent to which this has prevented their writing "successful" autobiography. She also considers the forms of women's autobiography, emergent in the last few years, which have allowed women to articulate their sense of their selves.

2. See Spelman for a feminist analysis of the implications of Greek thought for the construction of femininity. Grosz, "Notes" 4-6, discusses its implications for our understanding of bodies.

3. On women's self-creation through identification with technologies of the body and with their mirror-images, see, respectively, Valie Export and Jenijoy La Belle.

4. More recently, Judith Butler has argued from the same premises. "To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?" she asks (8, her emphasis); "To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person?" (16, her emphasis). Butler describes gender as "performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. ...we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25).

5. Wendy Hollway, "Gender Difference and the Production of Subjectivity," in Henriques et al., discusses gender relations as founded on heterosexual relations. For discussion of her argument, see Teresa de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender" 15-17.

6. Butler comes to the same conclusion: "This very concept of sex-as-matter, sex-as-instrument-of-cultural-signification, however, is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that that distinction supports" (37).

7. Corporeal feminism: "an understanding of corporeality that is compatible with feminist struggles to undermine patriarchal structures and to form self-defined terms and representations" (Grosz 3).

8. See de Lauretis' reference in "The Technology of Gender" to "a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual, relations; a subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted" (2). On the subject of the self in autobiography as created at multiple, different, and specific intersections of gender, race, class, age, nationality etc. see my "Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Difference."

9. "An appearance walking in a forest the sexes burn" is Violette's description of herself at the moment, discussed below, when she enters the department store and begins stealing feminine "fripperies" (Leduc *La Bâtarde* 178).

10. For a reading of the ways in which the accounts of female psychosexual development proffered by Freud, Riviere, and Lacan are founded on an assumption of heterosexuality that serves to mask a primary homosexuality, see Butler 43-65.

11. One of many examples the autobiography offers occurs shortly after Violette has her nose shortened. She goes to a bar with a friend where they see Jacques Prévert, whose comment to a friend, as he looks

at Violette, they overhear: "'It's her mouth, her eyes, her cheekbones they should have fixed'" (*La Bâtarde* 460).

12. On the question of western cultures' "indifference" to lesbian sexualities which "are not recognizable as representation" by these cultures (de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender" 25), i.e., which cannot be seen within the processes by which these cultures produce gender see de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" and "The Female Body and Heterosexual Presumption." That Violette's next affair with Hermine *is* seen does not change the fact that lesbian sexualities are among those which cannot be seen. *What* is seen is the transgression of heterosexual codes, not the representation of sexuality which Hermine and Violette invent. Furthermore, Hermine is fired and Violette expelled from the school; that is, the school, as a social organization whose functions include the inscription of gendering, acts so as to make even the transgressive aspect of lesbian sexuality once again invisible to itself.

13. Leduc's first novel, *L'Affamée*, about her relationship with her mother, has in fact received an extended psychoanalytic reading by Pièr Girard.

14. Freud develops the concepts of mourning and melancholia in relation to the development of the ego in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) and in "The Ego and the Super-Ego (Ego-Ideal)" (1923). For an excellent summary, to which I am indebted, see Butler 57-65.

15. For a more extended discussion of Lacan's arguments about female hetero--and homo-sexuality, see Butler 43-50. I am particularly indebted to her trenchant question, "could it not be equally clear...that heterosexuality issues from a disappointed homosexuality?"(49).

16. All her "heterosexual" attractions are marked by such gender ambivalence. In these loves, however, Violette no longer displays masculinity; rather she projects femininity onto the "lover," whether the homosexual Jacques Guérin or the unambiguously heterosexual René whom she feminizes, in order to "reassure" herself, by dwelling on his lowered eyes, long lashes, contralto voice, and "weakness" compared to her "strength" (*La Chasse* 160-61).

17. I take the term "beauty system" from Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell's essay "The Beauty System" in which they analyze beauty as a system of culture determining the relationship between the sexes.

18. The need to be bought things figures as an aspect of Violette's femininity through most of her adult life. It is central in the relation with Hermine. From the wealthy Jacques Violette extracts purchases as testimony to the love he denies her.

19. Butler, 47-57, discusses the psychoanalytic interpretations of femininity as performance offered by Riviere, Lacan, and Heath. The criticism of western philosophical traditions which construct femininity as a specular image of masculinity has been most fully elaborated by Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. In film theory, a

consideration of femininity has been a major link between the instability of the subject positions of women and the problems that arise around women as spectators; see, particularly, the work of Mary Ann Doane. Two critics read femininity as capable of producing ideology: Mary Russo, who sees it as a strategy of Bakhtinian "dialogical laughter" (226) and Sue-Ellen Case, who interprets it in the context of butch-femme relationships as a send-up of heterosexuality. These last two readings, while enabling, are difficult to sustain before the obsessive self-loathing of Leduc's representation.

20.   Teresa de Lauretis defines "the subject of feminism" as characterized by "a movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centered frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable" ("The Technology of Gender" 26).

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On Sending Yourself:
Kroetsch and the New Autobiography

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June 4.

> No mail at all from you. None. I talk to
> myself. I begin to suspect I am writing these
> letters to myself, writing myself the poem of
> you. (Kroetsch, "Letters to Salonika" *Advice
> to My Friends* 53)

25/3/85

> This is a poem I didn't write. And not
> because I wasn't writing. And not because it
> isn't a poem. I'm beside myself. (Kroetsch,
> *Excerpts from the Real World* 24)

> I didn't mean to change. But he did.
> (Kroetsch, "After Paradise" *Completed Field
> Notes* 264)

In her reading of the notion of "self" in *Field Notes*,
Shirley Neuman argues persuasively that the relation of
autobiography to Kroetsch's texts is an ambiguous, difficult
one. Citing remarks Robert Kroetsch made on
autobiography in 1981, Neuman's 1983 essay follows the
"movement from what Kroetsch calls the '*language* problem'
of writing autobiography, through the definition of
autobiography as freeing us from Self, to the gloss on that
statement: 'Saying "I" is a wonderful release from I'"
("Allow Self, Portraying Self" 107). In a footnote to her
1984 essay, "Figuring the Reader," Neuman conjectures that
"[w]hat began as multiplication of the self in personae and
roles of the 'I' has become increasingly straightforward in
recent poems like 'The Frankfurt *Hautbahnhof* ' where the

'I' of the poem shares the undisguised anecdotes and experiences of its author" (194).

Kroetsch's recent texts continue to interrogate notions of "I," experience, and anecdote — the *autos*, *bios*, and *graphia* of classical autobiography. But asked in a recent interview with Kristjana Gunnars if "writing your poem with your life" meant writing "pure autobiography," Kroetsch replied:

> I have grave doubts about the whole possibility of autobiography. We're too busy lying to ever be autobiographical, I think. You write the poem with your life by not creating a safe boundary between poetry and life. (67)

While many theories of autobiography assume there is always a safe boundary between poetry and life, for Kroetsch, "[i]t would be nice if there sometimes were a clear boundary, but in fact the two keep spilling back and forth; exchanging" (Gunnars 67).

Sidonie Smith's recent study of women's autobiography locates three sets of assumptions upon which the writing and reading of autobiography have been based: one assumes autobiography is a subcategory of biography, that "truthfulness" in autobiography is "a matter of biographical facticity" (4); another agonizes over the questions inherent in self-representation: "autobiography is understood to be a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an 'identity' out of amorphous subjectivity" (5); a third attends to the function of reading in the creation of autobiography. Janet Varner Gunn argues that moments of reading "produce" the autobiographical text in a number of ways. The autobiographer reads his or her life and the reader of the autobiographical text rereads his or her life by association (8).

Compelling as our desire to represent ourselves remains, much contemporary thought participates in an equally compelling desire to eradicate the notion of self. Film theory has drawn our attention to the problematical assumptions underlying approaches to autobiography which conjoin the roles of author, narrator, and protagonist "with the same individual occupying a position both in the context, the associated 'scene of writing', and within the text itself" (Bruss 300). Elizabeth Bruss notes simply that there is "no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography":

> the unity of subjectivity and subject matter — the implied
> identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical
> autobiography depends — seems to be shattered by film. (297)

The "self" produced in film is dispersed across a range of positions, including those of the person appearing on the screen, visible and recorded, and the person filming the person on the screen, invisible, behind the camera's eye, and unrecorded (Bruss 297). Like many contemporary theorists of autobiography, including Michael Sprinker, Jacques Derrida, and Gregory Ulmer, Bruss assumes that "autobiography as we know it is at an end" and turns her attention to "autobiography as we do not know it" (Olney 22).

In a provocative essay entitled "The Post-Age," Ulmer describes Derrida's unknown version of autobiography in *The Post Card* as a "new autobiography" which "has little to do with confession or expression" (46). In Derrida's words, when I write (autobiography), "I address myself to you, somewhat as if I were sending myself, never certain of seeing it come back, that which is destined for me" (*The Post Card* 45). Kroetsch's most recent supplements to the continuing poem — especially *Advice to My Friends* and *Excerpts from the Real World*, recently collected with the earlier work in the outrageously entitled *Completed Field Notes* (1989) — offer other examples of autobiography as we do not know it, autobiography that has little to do with expression or confession.

Kroetsch's recent "autobiographical" texts both elide what Neuman speaks of as "the traditional distinction between the author (writer) and narrator (aspect of the written) in favor of writing" ("Figuring the Reader" 194) and figure a multiple subjectivity inhabiting the most seemingly "personal" of written forms: the journal, postcard, love letter, note. Because these forms of writing assume a "marginal status in the discourse of knowledge" and an "undecidability" because of their "informality" and "autobiographical component" ("The Post-Age" 41), they may be considered as letters, in Ulmer's sense. The letter's strategy, says Ulmer, is "disguised self-address." Like Derrida, who "writes the post cards to himself (the code is between me and myself) by means of 'apostrophe'" (Ulmer

42), Kroetsch suspects he is "writing these letters" to himself ("Letters to Salonika" 53). Kroetsch "sends himself" in writing only to "receive himself" as another: "we are not where we were" ("Spending the Morning on the Beach" 33). The "self" represented in the most recent long poems exists only in and as displacement: "What was it I said I said? I said to Laura" ("Delphi: Commentary" *Advice to My Friends* 104).

"The Frankfurt *Hautbahnhof*" is an especially powerful articulation of the writing of autobiography as a dislocating experience of the self "facing" a difference within — "I tried to reconstruct the occasion of my meeting with my double":

> 10 [...]
> The voice of that man who directed me onto the right
> train, the train that would take me to Koblenz, where
> I would then transfer onto another train and proceed to
> Trier, to give a talk on Canadian writing (and I gave
> the talk), had been exactly my own.

> 11
> like, I
> mean
> (*Advice to My Friends* 126-7)

For Kroetsch, "I" cannot be myself because "I" am constituted "like" a poem, "and cannot hear except by indirection. We can only guess the poem by encountering (by being surprised by) its double" (*Advice to My Friends* 125).

Many other poems in both *Advice* and *Excerpts* offer the poem as (always already) fictional postcard, love letter, journal entry. But consider first an even later poem, "Spending the Morning on the Beach," in which the speaker self-consciously considers

> The poem as quotation...
> The poem as evasion.
> The poem as resignation.
> The poem as a net
> that drowns fish.
> The poem as a postcard
> sent directly to the sun.
> The poem as POET TREE.
> (40)

The postcard poem as a place to "*hang* a self" (a "poet tree") offers a theory of autobiography which undermines traditional "confidence in the referentiality of language and a corollary confidence in the authenticity of the self" (Sidonie Smith 5). The new autobiography is, as Kroetsch's poems indicate, simultaneously self-affirming *and* self-effacing, in the most literal sense. As Paul Smith argues, "the 'me' can be written only as if it were somewhere else" (108). Written with/in the conventions of the "letter," these poems exploit what is always the precondition of writing autobiography — the absence of sender and receiver: "the text takes on a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author" (Olney 22).

Consider "Letters to Salonika," written by the poet "at home" (in his a/part/ment) to the absent beloved: "Sometimes I think this going away of yours has hurt me beyond all repair. I am not myself and cannot ever be again. I am my own emptiness, trying to fill my emptiness with words" (*Advice* 46). Or "Postcards From China," written by the poet away from home and sent back to his (he hopes) reading daughters. Or the ten parts of the prose poem *Excerpts from the Real World* made up of dated fragments, some of them written, Kroetsch says, "before the date got there because I couldn't wait" (Gunnars 57). These are all poem as "contrived diary" (Gunnars 57), cryptic postcard message, unposted letter, lost telegram, incomplete note.

Advice to My Friends and *Excerpts from the Real World* are letters, excerpts from the "real world" which, with recognizable names — Eli Mandel, Fred Wah, Smaro Kamboureli, Michael Ondaatje — dates — March, 1982, the spring of '76, December 6, 1983 — and places — Slocan Valley, Kootenay River, China — locate us in a real world only to dislocate us from the possibility of the real:

> if we could just get a hold of it,
> catch aholt, some kind of a line,
> if the sun was a tennis ball or something
> but it ain't, the impossible thing is the sun
> ("Advice to My Friends" *Advice to My Friends* 9)

If only, as an excerpt from *Excerpts* says, we could go "to a place where things are only what they are. Or, with the barest exception, something else, but only just something else, hardly;" a place where "words are not allowed at all" (63). To paraphrase a piece of advice in *Advice*, to desire an end to desiring language is to desire language (65).

Kroetsch's new autobiography makes fictions of autobiography and autobiography of fiction. In contrast to the usual autobiographical situation in which, as Ulmer says, "the author unwittingly reveals himself while attending to the presentation of information" ("The Post-Age" 46), the selves that are revealed in the "new autobiography" contradict one another and tell on each other:

> But I could see he had forgotten the year of his birth.
> He's showing his age. And then he added, suddenly,
> powerfully, "I've never been here myself." And the
> voice, Laura; you should have heard him. But I was
> puzzled by his statement. "I've never been here
> myself." And there he was, right beside me.
> ("Postcards From China" *Advice to My Friends* 82)

Even the Elias Canetti epigraph to *Advice to My Friends* locates the "I" in the third person: "I hesitated until he vanished from sight, then I started off, taking the same road as he." As Barthes directs us in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, "all this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel — or rather by several characters" (119). The singular "I" becomes literally unspeakable.

Consider the following transcription of the dialogue between Kroetsch and Gunnars I referred to earlier:

> KG: Are you then writing this poem with your life?
> RK: That's right. I think life itself is
> circumlocution.
> KG: Around what?
> RK: It's the unspeakable. If we're talking around
> anything, I don't like to name it, and I suppose it's
> the unnamable or the unspeakable. The only reason
> we like poetry is because it does attempt to deal with
> the unknowable. (56)

Kroetsch's words are not unlike those of Beckett's "character" in *The Unnamable* who says, "I like to think I

occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain. In a sense I would be better off at the circumference [...] From centre to circumference in any case it is a far cry and I may well be situated somewhere between the two":

> This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says [...] not listening to itself but to the silence that it breaks [...] is it one? [...] It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my wall, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I can't prevent it, from tearing me, rocking me, assailing me. It is not mine. (51)

As for Beckett, so too for Kroetsch: "I am in words, made of words, other's words" (*The Unnamable* 386); "I am my own emptiness trying to fill my emptiness with words" (*Advice to My Friends* 46). But Kroetsch's work stresses the play, not the anguish: "SELF-PORTRAIT OF POET or THROWING IN THE TOWEL, EH?" ("Spending the Morning on the Beach" 39).

Many of the poems in *Advice to My Friends* confront the ways we "are" in others' words by exposing the different "language code[s]" ("Mile Zero" *Advice* 34) within which our sense of "self" is articulated, the multiple fictions that make us real: "I find myself reading the old guys now" (*Advice to My Friends* 22). The "piecemeal sonnet[s]" (9) in the long poem "Advice to My Friends" locate themselves "piecemeal" within the colloquial discourse of the Western prairie farmer: "if we could just get a hold of it, / catch aholt, some kind of a line" (9); the sports commentator: "Morenz makes a breakaway down the ice. / He fakes to the left; he draws out the goalie" (13); the journalist: "In a delightful ceremony at the bride's / boarding house in Victoria, the nuptial / event is consummated. The family / of Mr. Morenz is not in attendance" (14). But the certainty of each mode of speaking is called into question by its interaction with the others. The lexicon of the hockey game, for instance — "player," "lines," "masks" — intersects with the lexicon of the poet: "The hockey player, the artist: they both have // strong wrists" (*Advice* 15). Each way of talking in and about the world rewrites the others.

Excerpts from the Real World is a particularly self-conscious meditation on the place of the subject of autobiography in what Derrida would call a post-postal era:

the "I" is "an echo without prior sound until you, silently, wrote, 'I am counting on my fingers to remember you.' If only you had got my name right" (69). The "I" is dislocated both by linguistic play — "Praxis makes perfect, you tell me. But I'm Dedalus on my feet" (45); "Two loves halve I, you wrote on your last postcard" (43) — and by the contradictory language codes within which s/he speaks:

> "But most of all I luv you cuz yr you." If you see what I mean. (29)

> But most of all I love you. The rabbits have no shadows of their own. The mirror falls into its own error. (31)

Excerpts repeatedly gestures toward the lack of presence of the speaking self: "Even as I lay down, I heard myself walking away" (31); "This is a poem I didn't write. And not because I wasn't writing" (24); "I did not intend to enter the story" (19). And perhaps most memorably, given the implied link between writing and subjectivity in the following metaphors: "I am a stranger's hand" (23).

The last poem in *Advice to My Friends* - "envoi (to begin with)" — offers a telling commentary on both *Excerpts from the Real World* and *Advice to My Friends*:

> There is no real
> world, my friends.
> Why not, then,
> let the stars
> shine in our bones? (143)

If this poem offers a "final" bit of "advice," what is it? How can we let the stars shine in our bones? One of the "Letters to Salonika" tells us that a letter is sometimes "a star that fell. Sometimes it is a rock, a stone" (59). Already the "envoi" sends us off to other letters. As envoi to *Advice to My Friends*, the poem literally prefaces ["(to begin with)"] *Excerpts from the Real World* in the *Completed Field Notes* edition of the long poems.

"Envoi (to begin with)" sends us off to many other letters, including Derrida's *La carte postale*, the lengthy first part of which (nearly half of the book) is called "Envois."

Alan Bass's translation includes a useful gloss on the word "envoi":

> *envoi, envoyer: envoyer,* to send, is derived from the Latin *inviare,* to send on the way...
> The noun *envoi* can mean the action of sending (*envoi de lettres*: the sending of letters), kickoff (as in the start of a football game), something that is sent (especially in the senses of message, missive, or dispatch), the concluding stanza of a ballad that typically serves as a dedication, the lines handwritten by the author of a book as part of a dedication, and, in the legal sense (*envoi de possession*), the right to enter into possession of an inheritance... *Envois* in the sense of missives or transmissions are *Sendungen* in German. Every possible play on *envoi* and *envoyer* is exploited throughout. For example, the English "invoice," meaning bill of sale, is actually derived from *envoi* (and *inviare*), thus linking the senses of sending, message, and debt. Both "invoice" and *envoi* are homonyms of "in voice" and *en voix*: the "*Envois*" are written in many voices... The reflexive verb *s'envoyer* is particularly important. It can mean to send oneself, transitively or intransitively.... In the latter sense, one might say that if one sends oneself, then one's en-voy (also *en-voi*) or representative has to be one's double or ghost.
> (xx-xxi)

Recall that the advice given in "The Frankfurt *Hautbahnhof*" concerns the possibility of "sending oneself," of being sent by a double, of writing autobiography:

> And when the man
> came up beside me,
> when he spoke
> over my left shoulder,
> telling me I was (I was
> surprised) getting
> onto the wrong train,
> pointing me right, I
> hardly noticed; I had
> no time, even, to say
> thank you   (Like the guy said.)
> (118)

To write this form of autobiography is to meet with the double which confirms, not identity, but difference within: "Like me, he was pushing a cart with his luggage on it. he was wearing a green corduroy jacket, like mine. he was slightly younger than I, but only slightly, a matter of a year or two" (121). But the doppelgänger, the "gone stranger" (121) is not me: "I never / wear a hat" (127).

The "new autobiography" interrogates the place of the subject of/in knowledge and considers subjectivity a textual site of contradiction. The usual situation of autobiography is re-versed and becomes what Manina Jones, borrowing from a quoted phrase in *Excerpts*, calls a "chaotic, strung-along multi-verse" (123). "The author" becomes *L'autre* ("I'm not myself today" [*Excerpts* 15]). Information is not "pre-sent": "Everything recurs (more or less). Consider, for instance, spring. Or transmission problems" (*Excerpts* 35). But the problems, in "transmission," the disjunctions between signifier and signified that keep us from telling, make it possible always to tell otherwise: "It's a kind of circular tension, where you're making an utterance that then turns around and utters against itself, makes fun of itself and it comes back full circle. Circular, as in circumlocution, and the silent poet somewhere in the middle, and you keep looking for him... The guy who goes out at night and digs holes — makes gaps" (Gunnars 57).

In an interview with Shirley Neuman, Kroetsch articulates the theory of this "new autobiography," the theory behind his practice of writing/letters:

> against the idea of truth I would posit the idea of play or game. Once you're into play or game you're so self-conscious of the artificiality of it. The more I write the more I do feel the business of being taken over at some point by language, or the form, the genre. ("Unearthing Language" 238)

In speaking, we are always already "into play or game." We construct ourselves and, in rereading those constructions, tell ourselves who we are differently: "Last night, late, the trees outside my window were holding hands. I miss you, apparently" (*Excerpts from the Real World* 30). The self is a "self-portrait," a "found object, signed by yours truly, as we all know...given a name by another, appropriated" ("Spending the Morning on the Beach" 36).

Both *Advice to My Friends* and *Excerpts from the Real World* are extended meditations on an unwittingly accurate observation Robert Brunne made in 1330: "bot as I herd telle I say myn auys" (*The Story of England*). The "advice" that I say is my own is always what I "herd telle": "(Like the guy said)" (*Advice* 118), "(and so the story goes)" (119), "[what happens / in the margin / is what happens]" (119). Like notation, giving advice is "prediction, / a saying (assaying) of / what will be said":

> (or so
> (the
> (story
> (goes
> (*Advice* 117)

The way the story goes is the way *we* go. But we are not completely "written" by the stories that tell us. As Poirier asks in "Writing Off the Self,"

> If it is agreed that human beings are a consequence of 'the arrangements of knowledge', and not the other way around, what then is to be said of the evidence that human beings have the capacity to wish themselves radically other than what they are? (120)

The new autobiography affirms the self in its desire to speak otherwise because it foregrounds the act of saying as always already a trying to say (assaying) that permits the possibility of change.

I cite the second half of Kroetsch's comments on autobiography, the first half of which Neuman analyzed at length, because they can suggest the theory of autobiography I find at work (/play) in Kroetsch's recent texts. He says,

> Autobiography, as I conceive it, is paradoxical: it frees us from self. Saying *I* is a wonderful release from I, isn't it? Language, then, as signifier, frees me into a new relationship with signified. Autobiography conceived this way can free us from solipsism, can free us from the humanistic temptation to coerce the world.
> (*Labyrinths of Voice* 209)

experience is possible on the basis of the stories we know. What the poet imagines are roads in China turn out not to be roads. He has no language for his experience and so does not have the experience: "I am in China without a language. What I saw from the sky was roads that weren't roads; I saw the irrigation system for watering the land and from up in the sky I thought I saw roads...and so in a sense they were roads" (*Advice to My Friends* 76).

China becomes a metaphor for the "experience" of the subject in language: "China is a garden and a maze" (*Advice to My Friends* 81). It is a place of dislocation, of vacillation, of Derridean *differance*. The "translator," Mr. Wong, exemplifies what can only be described as the ex/position of the subject, "in love with words and the way they try to buck him off" (78). The maze, the garden, the labyrinth, the place of self and other, man and woman, is the place within which we are all caught and yet the maze can potentially "tease us out of our habitual ways" (88). Even as the poet attempts to maintain identity, he finds "I was lost and I was trying to find a post office. I wanted to mail you a card I had written" (88).

If Kroetsch's poems are letters from the poet to himself, they are self-conscious struggles with the autobiographical "I," not as a present self, but as an always already "sent" or even "re-sent" (/"recent") self. The "I" of the poet is, as "he"/the father is at the end of "Delphi: Commentary," a story his "daughters" can *tell* their friends (*Advice to My Friends* 112). Created in the reception of letters, the "I" is both spoken by and speaks the writer as reader as writer. All we *can* give our friends is advice; we are stories; we tell (on) each other. As examples of the new autobiography, the most recent supplements to Kroetsch's continuing poem are, to borrow a linguistic innovation from Teresa de Lauretis, a(-)sendings which, by exposing the conventions of autobiography, challenge the possibility of sending a(-)self without sending another. They seek "to establish practices in which 'I' may no longer exist in the same way but nonetheless cannot escape my own participation" (Bruss 320). As Kroetsch acknowledged recently, "I like symbolic significance, but I also like the sense that we eat real carrots and we eat real potatoes, and one of the pleasures in life is fiddling around in the kitchen slicing onions" (Gunnars 61). In these poems, Kroetsch figures the contrary subject, "a

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subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted" (de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 2):

> RK: What's knowable is already boring in a certain way. We want to go to that edge, where something is still unknown. And we're still full of surprises, discoveries, impossibilities, and contradictions. (Gunnars 56)

As for de Lauretis, so too for Kroetsch; not only the fictions, but also the contradictions, make us real.

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Borders, Contexts, Politics: Mikhail Bakhtin

Robert Seguin

I will begin by wondering aloud whether or not it is wise to be suspicious of a thinker who does not rankle, unnerve, or otherwise upset virtually anyone. For indeed, Bakhtin is that rarest of thinkers, one who is congenial to just about everybody, whatever their theoretical or political passions. A Whitmanesque character — broad minded, big hearted, unfailingly generous, incorrigibly expansive and positive in his outlook — Bakhtin sometimes seems more American than Russian, something which might be a cause, but is more likely an effect, of his current popularity, a popularity whose contours and determinants it will be one of my aims in this essay to explore. The various appropriations and reaccentuations of his work that have occurred recently, and continue to occur, offer us a virtual object lesson in the phenomenon of the internal dialogization of the word, in this case the word "Bakhtin" itself, which today bifurcates ineluctably into two distinct yet inter-illuminating and mutually constitutive entities: on the one hand, Bakhtin the man, the theorist, author of certain texts (but which?), and on the other hand Bakhtin the site or space of ideological and political investment and struggle. Much of the controversy has of course centred on Bakhtin's own political valence, and how his theories might express that valence. In examining this situation, my guiding presupposition will be Bruce Robbins' recent polemical, though certainly not unprecedented, assertion that "political evaluation depends on *historical conjuncture*" (4), and, further, that "theory's ideological content cannot be politically decisive" (7). In the absence of any fixed standards of left vs. right, we must attend to the radically contextual nature of that thing we all too easily call politics, and look at the actual uses that are being made of a given theory within a context.

In the case of Bakhtin, I want to argue, even this word "context" is not capable of any straightforward kind of usage. What makes Bakhtin so interesting these days, what makes him so useful as a point of, sometimes confident,

often troubled, meditation on such a wide spectrum of issues, is the uncanny way his ideas have of inhabiting and problematizing the borders *between* contexts.[1] He demonstrates in many different ways how it is that contexts, and what is asserted to be within them, are themselves often arbitrary and willful impositions, so many lines of demarcation cut into a manifold heterogeneity. For example, regarding the acontextual undecidability of politics invoked above, Bakhtin again and again, as we shall see throughout this essay, forces those interested in such questions to examine the border between the "orthodox" and the "subversive," and how it is that a given idea or action might count as either one or the other in any given situation. The question, finally, of whether Bakhtin is in fact a Marxist, a liberal, a crypto-mystic, or some proto-postmodernist hybrid of these, is a question which I believe Bakhtin's thought actively and expressly tries to prevent us from answering. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of question which Bakhtin seeks to undermine.

Everything depends, it seems, on the sweeping and ambiguous claims Bakhtin makes for the novel and dialogism. Bakhtin is faced with the same contradiction faced by any Marxist who champions the novel, namely, how can a form of art which was at one with the coming to domination of the bourgeoisie in Europe be touted as being inherently politically progressive, even radical? This is a question which dogs most Marxist aestheticians, inasmuch as they historically have displayed an unparallelled fidelity to the great monuments of bourgeois art. This is especially striking in the case of Bakhtin, given his unswerving populist sensibility. Of course, he might argue that the novel is not essentially bourgeois, since he traces examples of it as far back as ancient Greece. Nonetheless, the historical conjuncture of bourgeois society and the novel as a dominant artistic form cannot be denied, something which Bakhtin really does not address. Some have suggested that Bakhtin does not deal with this aspect of the novel because the term "novel" is merely his code word for the process of social dialogism in general. Even so, he focusses upon actual novelistic examples, and for the purposes of our discussion we will interrogate Bakhtin on the novel as such, before moving on to larger questions concerning the nature of dialogism in general.

One might as well begin with Bakhtin's "enabling act," which is his rigid, one is tempted to say "non-dialogical," distinction between epic and novel. What are the stakes involved in this dichotomy? Bakhtin's characterization of the epic and the type of society to which it corresponds matches essentially Lukács's description of these, except that Bakhtin's evaluation of the epic and the epic past is dramatically opposed to that of Lukács.[2] That fall from a unified society into the alienation of modernity which Lukács treats with regret (and sees the novel as attempting to heal), Bakhtin celebrates as an opening of novelistic discourse onto the radical incompleteness and heterogeneity of the present. The epic is the language of being, the novel that of becoming. Reality in the epic is for Bakhtin irrevocably distanced and hierarchically valorized. It is the self-flattering language of the gods and the ruling classes.

The novel destroys this distance, bringing the objects of language closer both spatially and temporally. Bakhtin's discussion of this point recalls Walter Benjamin on the destruction of aesthetic aura by capitalist techniques of technological production and reproduction. The aura is that "unique phenomenon of a distance," that aloofness of the artwork, as both object and representation, deriving from the traditional cultic or ritualistic bases of art, bases destroyed by the advance of bourgeois society. The modern masses are themselves one product of capitalist modernity, something which allows Benjamin one of his infrequent, and characteristically ambivalent, populist moments. The decay of the aura, Benjamin argues,

> ...rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" both spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. (223)

Benjamin relates this desire to a "sense of the universal equality of things" on the part of the masses. Bakhtin, of course, locates the beginnings of the aura-destroying power of the novel in classical Greece (an odd point of departure for a populist!), but it is difficult not to perceive the inspiration for this view of Bakhtin's in his own experience:

and object which for Bakhtin is the virtual paradigm of monoglossia. With the succession of novelistic discourse that historical or temporal distance is abolished, only to introduce a new kind of distance. This distance results from the fact that novelistic discourse does not directly take the things and events of reality as its object, but rather *other words*, other languages. From the point of view of the novel, reality is completely mediated by language, and an unbridgeable gap between word and object makes its appearance. The myth of a transparently expressive language has been shattered. As Bakhtin asserts, "a distance arose between language and reality that was to prove an indispensable condition for authentically realistic forms of discourse" (60). The invocation of realism in this context is of course the surprise ending of this argument, as the ideologies of both realism and science alike would, one suspects, remonstrate in favour of the kind of discursive transparency associated with the epic. This paradoxical claim of Bakhtin's is one of his central and, I think, most interesting, and is played out on several levels.

What are the grounds for such an assertion? At one level, the passage above on laughter can be rather mundanely rewritten in terms of the creation of a "spirit of free inquiry." Bakhtin locates the precise classical locus of such a spirit in the Socratic dialogues. While in some ways obvious candidates for paradigms of discursive rationality, they are altogether much more slippery if you want to argue that novels/science are always on the side of the people. Not only did Plato have little use for "the people" as such, he was always careful to program the dialogues so that one voice emerged as the winner (though there are ruptures here, too — think of Diotima or Parmenides). Bakhtin does not mention the Sophists, who are the true dialogical counterparts to the pseudo-dialogism of Socrates and company, radically subverting as they did all the finalities of Platonic thought. The Sophists seem much closer to Bakhtin's ideal of a "parodic-travestying consciousness," than does Socrates. The fact that they were also essentially nihilists complicates matters.

Indeed, as the example of Benjamin makes clear, this ability to grab hold of the object and poke at it and pry it apart can be read as an expression of the will to power *par excellence*. This may not be a problem, if in fact it is merely

a matter of who is exercising this power over whom and for what. It is clear, though, that today we cannot be as sanguine about the inherent progressiveness of science as was Bakhtin. We can perceive in the passage on laughter itself that which mitigates against any caution on Bakhtin's part, namely a pervasive organicism. For what are these "zones of crude contact" into which the objects of the real can be brought via novelistic laughter, if not the proximity of the body itself? A kind of populist empiricism is at work here, guided by what might be called a principle of somatic verification. Again, what had been the purview of the epic — organicism — returns in an altered form in the domain of the novel itself. This limit value of the body is key for Bakhtin, and is the basis, for example, of his admiration of Rabelais. But, as Foucault has shown, the body is itself the product of the innumerable discourses and political technologies operating upon and actuating it. This is the further implication of Bakhtin's contention that the gap between language and reality is the necessary precondition for literary realism and science, in that this is one way of saying, as emphatically as any poststructuralist, that everything is "made" of language: the multiplicity of languages *gets at* the real precisely because that's all there is. This interpretation founders, in the case of Bakhtin, on the limit of the body, a naturalistic limit which places him firmly within the horizon of modernist thinking, troubling any easy appropriation of him as a proto-postmodernist.

The line between modernism and postmodernism is another one of the borders which Bakhtin's thinking inhabits and problematizes. This is one perspective critics and commentators have been unwilling to recognize or entertain, though I think the fact that his ideas are always already a way of at least implicitly staging the modernist/postmodernist debate is part of his current popularity. However, most would see him as unrelated to, or already beyond, such concerns. One exception to this pattern, and a hesitant one at that, is Robert Young, who was at once accused by Allon White of having participated in a "conservative rewriting" of Bakhtin's essential radicalism, indicating the sensitivity of those Marxists who remain committed to a subversive Bakhtin.[3] These writers are quite properly hesitant before such terrain, since it is precisely the complete and fantastic reversibility of nearly all of Bakhtin's major ideas which is at

issue. For example, laughter itself, which Bakhtin presents as a chthonic force, virtually an elemental power, rising up from amidst the lowly populace, a natural leveller of hierarchy and privilege. But he asserts, "it was Rome that taught European culture how to laugh and ridicule" (58). This didactic prerogative on Rome's part depended, of course, on the expansionist machinations of the empire itself. We must not forget that laughter is as often the laughter of the strong over the weak, of the victor over the vanquished, as it is the positive laughter of the unsubdued people.

I am not speaking, in this example, of any sort of dialectical reversal, of the chiasmus and the flash of light which purports to reveal the truth of the matter by an abrupt shift into a wholly different dimension. I am thinking rather of a more baleful process, one executed unwillingly but with a painful ineluctability, through the realization that all is complicit and that nothing is guaranteed. One is not illuminated so much as left with a bitter taste in the mouth. If the reader will forgive me a speculative pause, I think that this has to do with the kinds of lived historical inscriptions upon Bakhtin's thinking, which both link him to our own time and become something else yet again in that process of temporal migration. I have in mind simply the passage from the early days of the revolution — when a heteroglot and dialogically vibrant polity was not a theoretical construct or Utopian hope but rather an aspect of experience — through to the repression of Stalinism, where this reality was eradicated and its value ever more strongly reaffirmed. This historical experience for us becomes flattened out, its two distinct moments now simultaneous and coterminous within the printed pages of the Bakhtinian text. It begins resonating with that bourgeois liberalism which is the dominant ideological register in contemporary North America, in which everything is at once all freedom and all deprival, where "difference" is now the language of advertising, where one can say anything one pleases precisely because it doesn't matter what is said anymore. It is the way America, and bourgeois democracy in general, can seem at once infinitely plastic and variable, and the most impervious and implacable hegemony on earth. However, there is I think a way in which the very language of hegemony itself can

induce such resigned thoughts, and the reader is advised that I am sceptical about even my own pessimism.

This plays itself out at the level of the aforementioned "parodic/travestying" consciousness as well, the hallmark of a novelistic sensibility. Bakhtin agrees with Lukács in that the move from epic to novel is at one with the birth of a new kind of subjectivity in the West. Whereas for Lukács this is the alienated subject of modernity, forever in search of that unity with the object world which it has lost (hence the celebrated "transcendental homelessness" of the novelistic hero), Bakhtin presents an altogether more upbeat entity. The Bakhtinian subject, constituted in and through language, is internally striated, forever other to itself. Bakhtin is no contemporary of Derrida, but one can understand the temptation to make such connections: in Derrida, the subject, also mediated by language, can never be fully "present" to itself. Again, the structure looks roughly similar, but the valuations are reversed. It would be instructive to juxtapose here Paul de Man's discussion of the *ironic* consciousness as elaborated in Baudelaire and the French Symbolists, itself, like the parodic/travestying consciousness, essentially related to a comic perspective of the world. The ironic subject is founded upon an internal doubling of the subject brought about through the use of an ironic language which is employed in order to distance and differentiate the subject from the non-human world. Two moments are enacted: at first, the subject adopts an attitude of superiority toward this non-human world, a mystified attitude which is undercut when the ironic language produces a second subject, which is aware of the inauthenticity of the first. As de Man says, "the ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity" (1983b 214). The key here is that the ironic subject exists to distance the object world, and cannot bring it close, and that the subject is in no way redeemed through this ironic "fall": the subject remains locked into an instrumental and reified relationship with nature. This instrumentality may well be the essence of science, but Bakhtin wants to argue for something else.

Following Franco Moretti, this alternative may be characterized as the generation from within the ironic or parodic novelistic consciousness of a stable and complex

cognitive standpoint. The ideal, as Moretti says, is of "an attitude toward the world that is eager and adaptable, open, empirical, responsible. In a word: mature" (98). This is the essence of the shift from what Bakhtin repeatedly calls the "Ptolemaic" language of the epic to the "Galilean" language of the novel. Bakhtin has in mind, presumably, the principle of Galilean relativity, which first established the notion of different frames of reference for observers of dynamical events. In terms of the novel, the analog is with the idea of point of view, the multiplication of which is held to render up a fuller, more complete, and more cognitively satisfying version of the event in question. But this is not so clearly the case. As many modernist texts demonstrate, the proliferation of points of view leads more often to scepticism, indecision, and fatigue, than it does to epistemological stability. This culminates with the *nouveau roman*, where the very notion of point of view is exploded from within. As for science, we should be careful not to conflate this simply with the novel. The two domains are of course very different, but Bakhtin is adamant that the two are the product of the same conscious "set" toward the world. Thus, to evoke in passing now the tremendous role that uncertainty has also played in twentieth-century science is perhaps more than merely gratuitous.

The modernist novel does indeed seem to pose a problem for Bakhtin. More than this, typical examples of it contradict a number of statements by Bakhtin as to what the novel in fact is. For Bakhtin the novel is inherently not a high literary genre, but it is with modernism that the novelist first self-consciously defines the novel as a high art object. Bakhtin maintains that the language of the novel is essentially free from the empty tricks of aestheticism, from the "banal" playfulness of the art-for-art's-sake sensibility. Again, examples from Stein to Beckett to Duras might be cited in contradiction. Perhaps most damagingly, the inviolably heteroglot or multiply-languaged nature of the novel is forsaken by many modernist writers, as they intentionally try to reduce the number of languages and points of view in their texts. It is as if the radical modernity of Bakhtin (the revolution, Stalinism) opened up for him the historical possibility of perceiving the nature of the novel as it had existed up to his time, at the precise moment when the novel

itself was undergoing a fundamental historical mutation.
Once more, the owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk.

With respect to the modernism/postmodernism debate,
the key point about the parodic consciousness is in fact the
contemporary status of parody itself. For Bakhtin, parody is
the representation of a language from the perspective of
another language, which acts as the norm. This is indeed
how "images of languages" (the very raw material of the
novel) are formed. As Fredric Jameson has argued,
however, it is precisely in postmodernism that parody in the
artwork begins to break down, resulting in what is more
correctly termed *pastiche*: that is, a representation of a
language or style which is devoid of any critical impulse due
to the erosion of the ability to elaborate or maintain a
normative language.[4] It is parody "hollowed out," so to
speak. In this context, we might cite Bakhtin's own
intimations of this, the one and only time his vigorous
populism seems to waver a trifle: "in modern times the
functions of parody are narrow and unproductive. Parody
has grown sickly, its place in modern literature is
insignificant. We live, write, and speak today in a world of
free and democratized language" (71). Given both Bakhtin's
theoretical and historical position, this is altogether an
extraordinary statement. At once we are back with Benjamin
and the tensions between what might be called the entropic
and negentropic descriptions of liberal democracy. In any
event, the transformation of parody into pastiche is one
version of something we shall encounter again, namely
heteroglossia without dialogism.

It is time to confront these two terms. To do this, we
shall take a brief detour by first asking just what a novel is
for Bakhtin. It is a "system of languages that mutually and
ideologically interanimate one another" (47). In practice this
means the ceaseless articulation of new contexts for different
languages, a process of artistically structured quoting. The
novel is a citational machine. Unlike Derrida, Bakhtin does
not think that this imbedding of languages within languages,
contexts within contexts, renders problematic the
specification of the exact provenance of the various linguistic
fragments the novel employs. These languages for Bakhtin
comprise a fairly standard catalog: those of class, of
profession, of institution. So Bakhtinian analyses tend to
run something like this: "Here is the language of the

bourgeois journalist, from the point of view of the worker;
here is the language of the politician, from the point of view
of the clergyman," and so forth. So one way Bakhtin
"transcends" the dichotomy between formal analysis on the
one hand and ideological analysis on the other (one of his
principle stated goals) is simply to import social reality,
direct and unmediated, into the novel. Novels do not
"reflect" social heteroglossia, they rather *are* social
heteroglossia, filtered through such neutral containment
devices as plot and character. These devices seem to operate
only to the extent that they inscribe this heteroglossia in a
manageable form, such that you can carry it around with you
in your pocket or briefcase. Narrative as such is of no
particular interest to Bakhtin.

In this way, the novel can be seen both as a scientific
instrument — seismograph, interferometer, what have you
— and the readouts or printouts that this instrument
produces. They are thus condensations or, to use a different
language, reifications of a fundamentally irreducible and
heterogeneous linguistic polity (though to say this risks
positing a fundamentally unstructured field of social
discursivity, which would "postmodernize" things
unnecessarily). They thus contain within their own structure
as a printed book that dual movement inherent in language
which is the opposition between centripetal, or centralizing
and monoglossic, forces on the one hand and centrifugal, or
heteroglossic and carnivalesque, forces on the other. This
Bakhtinian dualism has been justly criticized by many as
simplistic and insensitive to the diverse forces of
hierarchization and exclusion at work in society, granting as
it does to language the kind of autonomous power,
associated with Saussure, that he is elsewhere at pains to
contest. The opposition can, I think, be framed in a more
suggestive manner by invoking the similar tendency Bakhtin
perceives with regard to science. The process of scientific
investigation for Bakhtin is associated with a critical, open,
and "Galilean" frame of mind and set of procedures.
However, scientific truth itself constitutes for Bakhtin a
privileged instance of the "authoritarian word," epic in its
origins and centralizing in its political thrust, which demands
one's unquestioning assent. What can be glimpsed here is
an after the fact process of legitimation, whereby different
institutional orders of society, for various ends, work to

reify and render unassailable what is in fact a much more unstable and heterogeneous thing. We are reminded of Bruno Latour's recent argument, that "nature" as such has no active role in the production of scientific knowledge, but is invoked, as the instigator and driving force, only after any given scientific controversy has been settled.[5] Finally, for a reverse, but parallel, image of the same process, this time in reference to language itself, we can think about what Barthes in *S/Z* called the proairetic code. "What is a series of actions," asked Barthes, strongly under the spell of Saussure, "but the unfolding of a name?" (82). On the contrary, Bakhtin would have to say, any name is the folding up of an action or series of actions. So, too, with the novel, as concept and as printed matter.

But after all, the novel can't really help it. If it is to be anything at all, it must have some determinate shape and limit. This then emerges as the principal tension for Bakhtin within the novel as a form. Or anti-form: Bakhtin sees the novel as a "genre" whose modus operandi is precisely the cannibalization and destruction of other genres, a literary *process* whose activities are always at one with the disintegration of other cultural spheres. Despite the troubles actual modernist novels present him with, Bakhtin's notion of the novel in general is supremely modernist, affording him an unlikely moment of agreement with Theodor Adorno. The novel, Adorno said, is "the nominalistic and therefore paradoxical art form *par excellence*" (287). Aesthetic nominalism, for Adorno, is indeed the eschewing of any general idea of form or structure, as the artwork attempts to constitute itself as a unique and purely contingent object. Needless to say, such nominalism for Adorno inevitably fails, with the particular inexorably passing over, as with Hegel, into the universal. So, too, with the novel: it renounces form in general by destroying all previous forms or genres through a will to hyper-inclusivity. Any given novel is an attempt to reinvent the very (anti)form at a purely local level, only by trying to draw *everything* into itself. The nominalistic impulse ends up reaffirming the universal. Bakhtin is fond of citing the Baroque novel, utterly interminable, ten-thousand-page plus affairs which could be ended only by authorial fiat. This drive — to be just one unique thing by being everything — is at the heart, for Bakhtin, of every novel. I have already noted the contiguity

of novelistic laughter with the Roman imperial will. I would maintain, in this context, that the novel, in its relation to the rise of bourgeois society, is in fact an instantiation of the bourgeois imperial will in its most universalistic aspect. As Bakhtin writes:

> To find oneself, to realize oneself in the alien, to heroize oneself and one's own struggle in alien material — such was the peculiar intensity of the Baroque novel. The Baroque feeling for the world, with its polarities, with the excessive tension of the contradictory unity permeating its historical material, squeezed out any trace of *internal* self-sufficiency, any internal resistance the alien cultural world (which had created this material) might offer; it transformed the world into an externally stylized shell for its own special content.\(387)

Hence both Lukács/ and Bakhtin agree, albeit in different ways, that the novel takes as its task the representation of totality.

What this passage also intimates is the extent to which the expansion of heteroglossia — that fount of many languages which is the essential social raw material of the novel — is dependent upon the expansion of Europe itself. It is hard not to think of any language — economic, political, scientific, cultural — which did not undergo exponential growth as Europe reached out to conquer the world. This is another area where Bakhtin's lingering organicism obscures more actively social processes. He speaks of primary "oceans of heteroglossia" (368), as if these somehow preceded the actions of the human beings who made them. Once again, heteroglossia is presented as a popular construction, at the service of the lower classes in their struggles against the elites, who know only centralizing monoglossia. I am tempted to say that on this one point Bakhtin is wrong: the ruling classes have always had more languages at their disposal, which can be adopted and discarded at will, depending upon the exigencies of the moment. This is what the institution of classical rhetoric is all about. Bakhtin cites approvingly several theories which trace the origins of the novel to a basis in classical rhetoric, a heteroglot basis which I would argue has absolutely nothing to do with primal linguistic oceans of any kind. Bakhtin's

organicism again becomes something else when it migrates to a postmodern America: cynicism.

Does this mean, finally, that heteroglossia, dialogism, and the novel are "really" ruling class tools? Let us not be too hasty. The nominalist impulse in Bakhtin's own thinking problematizes things, as it becomes clear that these general ideas begin to unravel as soon as one attempts to apply them.

With dialogism, much depends upon what you imagine it to be "doing" at the level of application with which you are dealing, of which there are several. At the molecular level is the phenomenon of the internal dialogism of the word or, better, utterance, which Bakhtin posits as the basic social unit of language. The utterance cannot be understood as a freestanding, monological artifact, since it contains within itself the interests and modes of address of its class and institutional setting, as well as those of its audience, whose reply it already anticipates. It is the unique outcome of a particular conjuncture of forces, spatially and temporally bounded and therefore by definition unrepeatable. This conception of the utterance recalls what Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* called the statement, a resemblance which is especially striking when Bakhtin instructs us to attend to "who precisely is speaking, and under what concrete circumstances" (340). While this remains a useful corrective to an abstract notion of the sign, an entity which some poststructural thinkers maintain has a kind of terroristic hold over us, there is a sense in which most people adopt this epistemological set toward language as a matter of course in their daily lives. I cannot help but think that most people are much more materialist, philosophically speaking, than theorists are willing to allow. More to the point, to show that utterances, and the languages and forms of life of which they are a part, are socially constructed and materially grounded, is, from a political perspective, not much of a victory, as Stanley Fish has of late been convincingly arguing.[6] Surely this is only a prelude to the much more crucial and difficult job of showing what is wrong with these languages and forms of life, and how they are to be changed.

Moving to another level of application, we have already seen the kinds of uses Bakhtin puts dialogism to in reference to the novel proper. What emerged was an interesting but

fairly vulgar stylistics of the novel which threatened to dissolve any idea of the novel itself as an even semi-autonomous cultural artifact (the nominalistic impulse in Bakhtin's thinking at work). The level of dialogism and the novel is, curiously, the one which seems to generate the least interest among Bakhtin's current champions, perhaps explaining why the claims made for it in this context stand as the most formulaic of the lot. For Ken Hirschkop, dialogism in the novel "lays bare" (101) the ideological devices of language, thus preventing the reader from adopting a contemplative attitude toward the text. Juliet MacCannell argues that the novel "lays open" (982) the values that went into its creation. At once we are in the presence of that great shibboleth, the one "automatic certainty" (99), as Franco Moretti says, of twentieth-century criticism, namely that the work of art defamiliarizes or deautomatizes our perceptions. This is, however, to posit certain acontextual guarantees which do not exist. Any defamiliarization (and it is never made clear exactly what is being defamiliarized) will occur only in certain contexts and under certain concrete circumstances. This "estrangement effect" imputed to the Bakhtinian critical process corresponds as well to the Althusserian notion of the cultural artifact showing off its own ideological contradictions. To the extent that most of Bakhtin's Marxist proponents are British, it is worth speculating whether Bakhtin is being looked to as a more flexible, populist rather than rigid and "scientistic" alternative to the Althusserian problematic, which continues to bulk much larger in Britain than in North America.

With the utterance and the novel we are still at the level of discrete, localizable events. The third and broadest level of dialogical application concerns those much larger, socially and institutionally defined and instantiated entities known as discourses (or "social-ideological languages," as Bakhtin calls them). It is here that we encounter the shift from Bakhtin as literary theorist to Bakhtin as social philosopher, which is the strong claim that many would wish to make for him. Two questions need to be confronted here: are social discourses inherently dialogic, the way the utterance is? And if they are, what does that imply? Against Bakhtin, Franco Moretti has posited an inverse relationship between heteroglossia and dialogism. That is, with the multiplication

of social discourses comes a reduction in inter-discursive dialogism (Moretti 194). While any utterance, looked at as part of a larger discourse, will itself be internally dialogic, the discourse as a whole will in operation either ignore or actively seek to exclude other discourses. This can be confirmed by any consideration of the explosion of specialized professional, institutional, and leisure or recreational languages over the past few decades, which, as social apparatuses, tend to be articulated in isolation from other discursive formations. That is, all discourses, not merely high ones, attempt to draw clearly, and police, their borders. The theoretical corollary here is Foucault's notion that discourses create their objects, objects which *do not exist* for other discursive orders. Beyond their narrow borders, silence reigns.

The exception is the discourse of political liberalism itself, which aims explicitly at the accommodation of multiple discursive positions. Are we approaching a zone where we can at last say that Bakhtin is ultimately a liberal? At one level, it is clear that dialogism plays a part in any conception of hegemony as it is currently understood, as Bakhtin's most astute Marxist defenders are themselves willing to admit. Indeed, following Gramsci, this is to a large extent how hegemony works: the asymmetrically situated ruling and subordinate ideologies negotiate with one another in a dialogical fashion. Dialogism enables both incorporation and resistance. In contemporary liberal democracies, however, this gives rise to the image of interest groups jockeying for position, fighting, and justifiably so, for a piece of the bourgeois capitalist pie, and all that goes along with it. In other words, there are some fundamental assumptions about the nature of this society, shared by the vast majority of the citizens, which are simply not on the dialogical negotiating table, as they would be for Gramsci: the primacy of private property, representative party democracy, the commodity form, and so forth. From this perspective, dialogism happily conforms to liberal notions of a pluralism of social discursivity.

Indeed, much rests upon just how agonistic an interpretation of dialogism you prefer. The uneasy division between liberalism and Marxism, the border which Bakhtin's thought perhaps most crucially inhabits, is energized and problematized particularly strongly with

precisely this issue. It is safe to say, I think, that those who interpret dialogism in accord with an academic and institutional setting, that is, in terms of a group of people espousing different theories and ideas and learning from each other in the process, are missing what Bakhtin is getting at. Bakhtin does not envision, as does Richard Rorty, an endless, open-ended conversation with neither winners nor losers. Dialogism is not the same as dialogue, understood as the slow commensuration of points of view, despite what many would claim. The numerous images of linguistic struggle in Bakhtin, the military metaphors, scenes of utterances battling on alien territory — all attest to the agon of dialogism which Bakhtin is proposing. So, if we move to the vision of gay and feminist groups struggling to obtain a social voice and adequate representations of their histories and identities, we are closer to what Bakhtin has in mind, though it is not at all clear that we are anywhere nearer a more authentically Marxist version of dialogism. The difficulty here points far beyond Bakhtin, to questions concerning the relationship between, among other things, sexism and racism on the one hand, and postmodern capitalism on the other, that is, whether they are structurally dependent upon one another or whether in fact capitalism (in theory, at least) can cheerfully do without them. More germane, finally, is the notion that social dialogism is never a given, but must always be the object of a political project. Hirschkop is right when he says that dialogism ultimately refers to the politicization of all social relations, both praxis and goal. Dialogism thus emerges, paradoxically, as at once the most complicit and compromised and the most resistant and Utopian of all of Bakhtin's ideas.

It is the astonishing way Bakhtin's thought has of living on borders which will, I think, always make it difficult to apply him in any practical sense. "To imitate or to apply Bakhtin," wrote Paul de Man, in an interesting though little discussed essay, "is to betray what is most valid in his work" (1983a 107). Like Nietzsche or Benjamin, Bakhtin is perhaps best sought as an object of restless meditation, troubling received ideas and categories, obliquely suggesting that all may in fact be *other* than the way it is presently conceived. This is a consequence, I suspect, of trying to remain faithful, as Brecht suggested, to the bad new days,

while secretly harboring an allegiance to what maybe, just maybe, were the good old ones.

NOTES

1. My use of a metaphorics of *borders* in this paper is indebted to Graham Pechey's essay "On the Borders of Bakhtin: Dialogization, Decolonization," *Oxford Literary Review* 9:1-2 (1988), 59-84.
2. For Lukács's position, see *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).
3. See Robert Young, "Back to Bakhtin," *Cultural Critique* 2 (Winter 1985/86), 71-94, and Allon White's reply in *Cultural Critique* 8 (Winter 1987/88), 217-241.
4. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984), 53-92.
5. See Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987), especially 63-102.
6. See, for example, the essays collected in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1989).

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Laws of Media: Vico and McLuhan on *The New Science*

Lorraine Weir

In his Preface to *Laws of Media — The New Science*, Eric McLuhan notes that he considered reversing the present order of title and subtitle (LM xi), thereby foregrounding the book's relation to Giambattista Vico's *La Scienza Nuova* (1744). Instead McLuhan chose to stress his father's discovery of the laws of the media, a no less Vichian move given the operations of the laws and Marshall McLuhan's resolution of them into Vichian poetic forms. Both Vico and McLuhan were rhetoricians who in the course of their work became metaphysicians. Both were students of history who of necessity became poets. Both were semioticians more or less *manqué*. Both meet now in chiasmic relation to Joyce who, transforming one,[1] becomes the foundation of the other. As McLuhan amplifies the genealogy in *Laws of Media*:

> Vico pursued the same course Francis Bacon had charted in the *Novum Organum*, the same course Joyce proclaimed in *Ulysses* as proper to the poetic sensibility: 'Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signature of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot....' Such men are not isolated eccentrics but links in a continuous tradition that extends from the present work back to the schools of manifold interpretation of the preliterate poets, including Homer and Hesiod. (LM 215)

Again near the end of the book McLuhan includes among the links in this "unbroken tradition" Bacon, Vico, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (LM 219).

Defining himself in a 1970 letter as "a metaphysician, interested in the life of the forms and their surprising modalities" (*Letters* 413), McLuhan like Vico sought "the

principle of complementarity inherent in all created forms" (*Letters* 370). Through metaphor and pun, "itself a metaphysical technique for 'swarming over' the diversity of perception that is in any part of language" (*Letters* 413), McLuhan sought, like both Vico and Joyce, to enter the *sensus communis* of the human race.[2] But where Vico's new science seeks to reorient human knowledge systems, to rethink the ontological encyclopedia, McLuhan's new science seeks to build "A sensus communis for external senses" (*Letters* 281) by studying the media. Since for McLuhan the media are the "electronic externalization of our senses,"through them "we encounter the *sensus communis* in collective form for the first time" (*Letters* 271). Using pun and metaphor as neural nets, McLuhan seeks to devise a rhetoric which operates as its target does, processing data — making *sense* — as "agent intellect" in Thomist epistemology does,[3] motivating the "human transformation of all phenomena into sense via the sensus communis" (*Letters* 386) of neural net processing.

Thus *Laws of Media* is like one of the brain's centres for such processing, the *corpus callosum* which bridges the two hemispheres of the brain just as that band of dense connective fibres "facilitates interplay between the two types of cognition of left and right brain" (LM 125). Like Vico, McLuhan seeks to devise a pedagogy which is grounded in a set of models of the operations of human language and cognition, and of our relation to the natural world. And like Vico, McLuhan discovers in the lexicon and logical operations of classical rhetoric a way of rooting his pedagogy in a neo-Aristotelian poetics and in a processual model. Like Joyce and Kenneth Burke, he grafts his rhetorical model onto a Thomist ontology of action and, also like Burke on *Language as Symbolic Action*, McLuhan devises a series of what he calls tetrads and what Burke condenses into neo-Aristotelian ratios in order to epitomize a set of perceptual relations. However, although imagery drawn from the *corpus callosum* or from perceptual processing might seem to be binary and fixed, in McLuhan's new science as in Vico's, *scienza* is an active principle embedding a processual model of knowing. Thus it is precisely the linking function of the *corpus callosum*, its engagement in an ongoing process of translation where no element ever comes to rest, that McLuhan is interested in.

Similarly, McLuhan situates 'percept' as ground and 'concept' as figure in a paradigm drawn from the classic Gestalt figure/ground reversal operation. Again it is precisely the moment of interface at the point of reversal — or what McLuhan refers to as "resonance"— that he is primarily concerned with, understanding dialectic to be in the same relation to grammar as concept is to percept. "Both grammar and dialectic are," he writes, "concerned with 'the word' *in* things: dialectic with the word or ideal thought in the mind, pure, before speech; grammar with the word in (informing) or even as things about us, outside the mind and body. The difference between them is exactly rhetoric, utterance, which thus belongs to grammar" (LM 10, f.2). Grammar operates language in the world; dialectic operates language in the mind. Through the study of rhetoric, one can thus arrive at an understanding of the word in the world, a relation which — given the tradition McLuhan chose to work in — parallels that between nature and technology, and between the grammar of the world and the grammar of the word.

Tracing the patristic roots of these correspondences, McLuhan cites Etienne Gilson's statement that "the fundamental agreement of natural and revealed knowledge was everywhere either stated or presupposed" in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and in particular of St. Augustine (LM 217). This neo-Aristotelian tradition of fourfold exegesis was concerned with textual levels known as the literal, the allegorical or figurative, the tropological, and the anagogical. To these textual levels McLuhan parallels the Aristotelian sequence of formal, material, efficient and final causes, noting that fourfold simultaneity is the key to the operation of both of these analytic and interpretive modes (LM 218). As McLuhan rightly points out, Vico's insistence upon the simultaneity of his four ages of man reflects this tradition as does his emphasis upon etymology and exegesis or, in terms of their corresponding master-terms in the quadrivium, of grammar and rhetoric (LM 128). Thus, as McLuhan stresses in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, "For Vico all history is contemporary or simultaneous, a fact given, Joyce would add, by virtue of language itself, the simultaneous storehouse of all experience" (LM 250).

However, in *Laws of Media*, more emphasis is placed on etymology and rhetoric than on exegesis and grammar. As McLuhan notes,

> Etymology is so crucial that it deserves a host of separate studies. Etymology reveals a process of transformation of culture and sensibility and is also a matter of retrieval and of structure: the ground pattern of forces at the levels of molecular and atomic structure. At and beyond this level lies the structure of experience of the utterer; so grammatical flips into rhetorical investigation. (LM 116)

Vico puts this and another of McLuhan's major points rather differently in one of the core axioms of his *New Science*:

> The human mind is naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to understand itself by means of reflection. This axiom gives us the universal principle of etymology in all languages: words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit. (LXIII 236, 237, p. 36)

Or, as McLuhan writes, media are extensions of the body and language is their currency. So for Harold Innis as for McLuhan, "The structure of man's speech ... [is] an embodiment of the structure of the world" (LM 37). "Through the drama of the mouth," McLuhan wrote in 1967 to Wilfred and Sheila Watson, "we participate daily in the total re-creation of the world as a process" (*Letters* 347).

This semiotic understanding of the operations of language processually mirroring the operations of the world is the beginning of the articulation of the "principle of complementarity in all created forms" which, as we have seen, grounds all of McLuhan's work (*Letters* 370). Through the analysis of clichés or media puns, McLuhan hoped to extend his study of the laws of the media to reveal the laws of consciousness defined as the "sum of all clichés of media or technologies we probe with" (*From Cliché to Archetype* 150). And through the study of the city in its pre-electric form, McLuhan hoped to discover the "sensus communis for such specialized and externalized senses as

technology had developed" (*Letters* 277) to that point. The city is the book of nature transformed, onto which we map our human cognitive operations. Thus for McLuhan as for Vico, "all human artefacts are extensions of man, outerings or utterings of the human body or psyche, private or corporate" (LM 116). Approvingly McLuhan cites Vico's great founding axiom that "the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind" (331, pp. 52-3). The study of human technologies is the study of the mind which operates as language does.

Like those contemporary neural Darwinists who discover the pattern of human evolution in the patterning of the brain, Vico sees all of human history inscribed on and in the body, and the stages of language acquisition as a model for the development of human language itself. McLuhan's metaphor of *Laws of Media* as a kind of verbal *corpus callosum* is therefore to be taken most literally for, resolved into tetrads or fourfold models of their operations, the laws of media are, like the operations of neural processing, to be understood as "speech, ... translations of us, the users, from one form into another form: metaphors" (LM 116). McLuhan refers to metaphor in the Vichian sense as the first stage of allegory and the foundation of "poetic language" which is to say the language of the first peoples to possess articulate speech (as opposed to earlier stages of language which in Vico are stages of only partly articulate communication, represented by hieroglyphs, emblems, heraldic insignia which with their military associations indicate that these were also stages of warfare, that is, of noise in the system).

For McLuhan it is metaphor which encodes the workings of the world, prime among them the workings of the media. In order to control the proliferation of metaphors which media generate and thus to control our own fate, a dictionary is needed together with the skills to use it. McLuhan's tetrads comprise a preliminary version of such a dictionary and his new science the vehicle of competence in the manipulation or, as McLuhan puts it, 'flipping' of figure/ground interfaces which consitutes the fundamental perceptual operation in his system. However, McLuhan's etymological assumptions are not fully evident until we

consider his adaptation of the Vichian basis for the composition of the "Mental Dictionary." Vico writes that

> There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern. This common mental language is proper to our Science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead. (XXII 161-2, p. 25)

So Vico resolves to use this "vocabulary" throughout his teaching machine, his *New Science*.

Using the language of human institutions to trace their origins inscribed within that language, Vico moves, in McLuhan's words, "from cliché to archetype," thereby pursuing the course of human history insofar as its traces are still evident in language. Given that his study is an etymological one, Vico seeks also to trace the "rise, development, maturity, decline and fall" of every nation's history/language and thus to write an "ideal eternal history" (349, p. 62) which is, on one level, the "Mental Dictionary." Because "the etymologies of the native languages also agree," Vico argues that "the histories of the institutions [are] signified by the words, beginning with their original and proper meanings and pursuing the natural progress of their metaphors" (354, p. 64). Thus for Vico as for McLuhan, the dawn of metaphor denotes the arrival of the figurative stage in language coincident "with the further development of the human mind [when] words were invented which signified abstract forms or genera comprising their species or relating parts with their wholes" (V 409, p. 90). Because the relation of metaphor or figurative languge to literal language is one of figure and ground, the study of the process and moment of interface or Gestalt transformation is also for McLuhan the study of institutional or, more

generally, cultural change within the larger paradigm of Vichian "ideal eternal history."

Precisely because of the fundamental importance of metaphor as a barometer of linguistic change, the study of the Mental Dictionary of one civilization or of a major paradigm shift will also produce, for McLuhan, a greater understanding not only of that time but also of its ripplings across the larger grid of human history. As Vico states, "Within Greece itself ... lay the original East called Asia or India, the West called Europe or Hesperia, the North called Thrace or Scythia, and the South called Libya or Mauretania. And these names for the regions of the little world of Greece were [later] applied to those of the world [at large] in virtue of the correspondence which the Greeks observed between the two" (742, p. 234). This is a kernel principle of what Vico terms "poetic geography" and what McLuhan, by extension, terms the Gutenberg galaxy with its emphasis on the transformation of the poetic speech of the first nations to the prosaic visual discourse of "old science" and back to the poetic speech — the oral, auditory, electronic world — of the twentieth century and the continuing tradition of new science. One world is implicated in the other, one a transform of the other in what Gregory Ulmer calls a "moiré effect."[4]

This element of Joycean epiphany or cognitive buzz is also crucial to the operation of McLuhan's tetrads themselves. They are "right-hemisphere in character, and each ... [comprising] two figures and two grounds in proportion to each other. This proportion of ratios is not made of imposed theoretical classifications [such as he believes semiotic modes of classification to be] ... but are structurally inherent in each of our artefacts and procedures. All four are processes" (LM 127) which are simultaneous, "inherent in each artefact from the start," and "require careful observation of the artefact in relation to its ground" (LM 99). Where Vico's four ages of human history were generated by "poetic wisdom" in its various guises including geography, metaphysics and logic, McLuhan's fourfold models are generated by what he calls "poetic science" (LM 224) and are presented and studied in the appositional form of poetry. "As utterances," McLuhan concludes, "our artefacts are submissible to rhetorical (poetic) investigation; as words,

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they are susceptible to grammatical investigation. [They] ... are verbal structures and poetic science in one" (LM 224).

The tetrads are symbolic models generated by McLuhan's four laws of media, each of which is framed as a question. They are as follows:
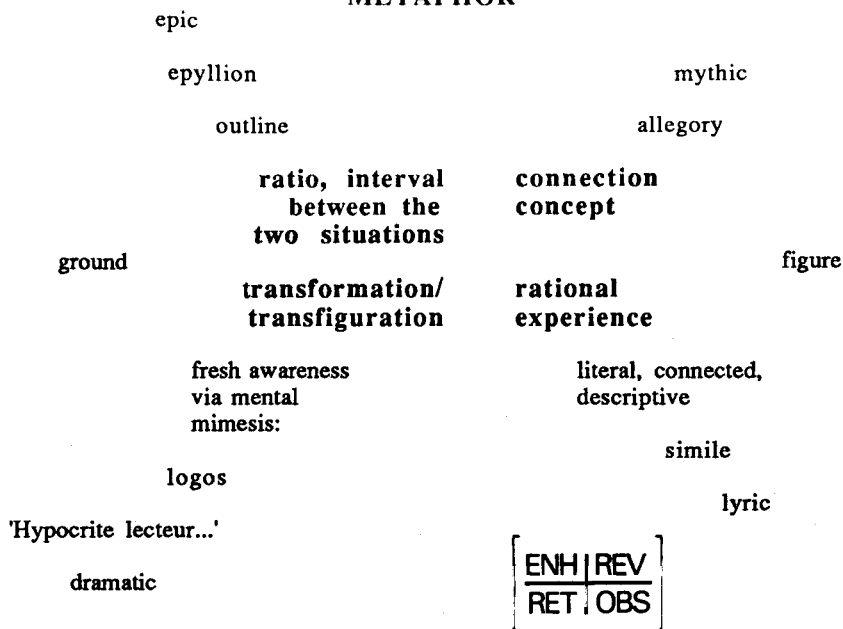
ENH (Enhances)	1.	"What does the artefact enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?"
REV (Reverses into)	2.	"What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new 'organ'?"
RET (Retrieves)	3.	"What recurrence or retrieval or earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?"
OBS (Obsolesces)	4.	"What is the reversal potential of the new form?" (LM 98-99)

Because metaphor is of paramount importance to both McLuhan and Vico, the tetrad for metaphor will provide a useful example of McLuhan's model. It is important to reiterate that metaphor, one of the three founding figures and tropes of classical eloquence (LM 231), is for McLuhan a "perceptual technique for seeing one whole situation *through* another whole situation" (LM 225). For Vico it is the most important of the figures and determines the operation of all of the others. According to the tetrad for metaphor (Figure 1), metaphor enhances "ratio, interval between two situations" and reverses "connection concept" while retrieving "transformation/transfiguration" and obsolescing "rational experience" or left-brain logic (LM 235). Or, the obsolescing of "rational experience" enhances "ratio" and reverses "connection concept" while retrieving "transformation/transfiguration." Or, the retrieval of "transformation/transfiguration" is an obsolescing of "rational experience" which results in the reversing of "connection concept" and thus enhances "ratio, interval between two situations." And so on through the various permutations of the model. McLuhan's glosses indicate the ground/figure coordinates which we have been 'flipping' or interfacing while performing the tetrad and also indicate
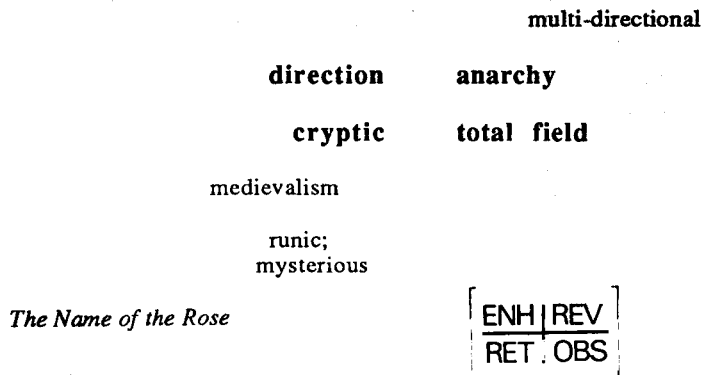
some of the offshoots or resonances available under these four coordinates in his new science.

The tetrad for "Semeiotics" (Figure 2) operates in the same way, indicating that semiotics enhances direction, reverses anarchy, retrieves the cryptic and obsolesces the "total field." (LM 136) Unlike some contemporary commentators, McLuhan is less concerned about the totalizing drive of semiotics than about its isolationist impulse toward the segmentation of systemic elements, thereby inhibiting the sweeping analytic of McLuhan's "poetic science." The self-correcting force of the tetrads may be evident in this example as well, for there is an apparent inconsistency between the obsolescing of "total field" and the reversal of anarchy, presumably into forms of order which might include "total field." Because of the association of field with mosaic and of McLuhan's rejection in *Laws of Media* of this governing metaphor of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, "total field" is opposed to figure/ground and concept to percept. Semiotics as a discipline is therefore itself a point of interface between McLuhan's two major texts and subject to a flicker or moiré effect which this tetrad reveals. Like the emblematic figures of Vico's frontispiece to the *Scienza Nuova*, McLuhan's tetrads thus resolve the laws — of media for McLuhan, of the cosmos for Vico — as processual events, emblematic performatives mirroring in their punning relationality the operations of media as world, world as media.

(figure 1)
METAPHOR

epic

  epyllion   mythic

    outline   allegory

        ratio, interval   **connection**
        between the   **concept**
        two situations

ground   figure

        transformation/ **rational**
        transfiguration **experience**

    fresh awareness   literal, connected,
    via mental   descriptive
    mimesis:

                              simile

  logos

                              lyric

'Hypocrite lecteur...'

  dramatic

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{ENH} & \text{REV} \\ \text{RET} & \text{OBS} \end{bmatrix}$$

(figure 2)
SEMEIOTICS

                              multi-directional

      direction   **anarchy**

      cryptic   **total field**

   medievalism

      runic;
      mysterious

The Name of the Rose

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{ENH} & \text{REV} \\ \text{RET} & \text{OBS} \end{bmatrix}$$

NOTES

This is a revised version of a paper given at the Canadian Semiotic Association conference at Laval University in June 1989. I am grateful to Fernande Saint-Martin for the invitation to participate.

1. On Joyce and Vico, see John Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1986) and Lorraine Weir, *Writing Joyce—A Semiotics of the Joyce System* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1989).

2. On Vico and the *sensus communis* see Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1981), 192.

3. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Q. 79, Art. 3-5.

4. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology—Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1985), 42.

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University of British Columbia

Humanities Conference

Women Imag(in)ing: Representation of Women in Culture, an interdisciplinary symposium that will be held at the University of Alberta, April 5-7, 1990. Keynote speaker: Catharine Stimpson; 28 papers by speakers from Canada, the United States, England, France and Australia (including, Patricia Clements, Linda Hutcheon, Mary Nyquist and Patricia Yeager), on topics in literature, history, the visual arts, theatre, film, and popular culture. For information contact Dr. Glennis Stephenson, Conference Secretary, Department of English, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2E5.