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Thinking Through the Mothers: Reimagining Women's Biographies (review)

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Comparative Literature Studies, Volume 48, Number 4, 2011, pp. 596-599
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/cls.2011.0050



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readers to believe that Borges was an island in Latin American literature. Indeed, the insufficient consideration of such a context mars an otherwise legitimate tactical use of Borges (the book is not part of the Latin American Literature and Theory series directed by Aníbal González). More broadly, one should also ask, why rupture and not continuity? If Borges anticipates the virtual, it is because he is steeped in Berkeley's idealism; if he evokes posthumanism, it is due to his flirtations with relativism and skepticism. The examples illustrate how it is just as valid to claim that Borges signals a breaking point in the history of Western thought or serves as a bridge between past and present.

Whatever its shortcomings may be, the book renders a valuable service by introducing a large readership to posthumanism. Additionally, several insightful readings, some of them mentioned here, will secure its place in Borges's library.

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Thinking Through the Mothers: Reimagining Women's Biographies. By Janet Beizer. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009. 289 pp. Cloth \$38.00.

Taking its point of departure in Virginia Woolf's famous claim, in a *Room of One's Own*, that "we think back through our mothers if we are women," Janet Beizer's *Thinking Through the Mothers* looks at contemporary women's biography through the lens of the maternal and in the light of its engagement with mothers, foremothers, and motherhood. The aim of the book is, according to the book cover's front flap, to "reinvent the means to represent the lives of precursors without appropriating traditional models of genealogy." Seeking alternatives to what Beizer terms "salvation biography," that is, the project of retrieving a precursor woman's life in the image of one's own desires and disappointments, the book examines what is at stake—on the life line—in women's writing of women's lives and explores new metaphors to write women's lives by: especially, fostering, adopting, and unowning.

Crucial to Beizer's book is its identification of the feminist narrative project of writing precursor women's lives into literary history as

“salvation biography.” Conjoining the story of one’s own life with that of another, “salvation biography” mirrors the one life in the other and reconstructs it in its own image. A kind of bio-autography that speaks of the writing subject’s desire for the lost (fore)mother and of her emotional investment, it attempts to retrieve, salvage, or resurrect what is, in fact, always already irretrievably lost. Typically representing the quest that led to the (fore)mother, salvation biography is a melancholic genre that is hopelessly belated in its inability to get over the loss of women in culture.

Beizer gives as examples of such “salvation biography” the art historian Eunice Lipton’s “biography manqué” *Alias Olympia* (1992), tellingly subtitled *A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*, as well as the French series of self-consciously reflexive late twentieth-century women’s biographies “Elle était une fois” (“Once upon Her Time”). The title of the series is emblematic of the problem at hand. As Beizer explains, “A collection that calls itself ‘Elle était une fois’ clearly aims to put the heroine back into the text by way of inserting her into the formulaic fairy-tale opening” (29). Reading Louise Colet’s quest for Kuchuk Hanem, “Flaubert’s courtesan” (as she has come to be known), as an allegory of what is wrong with contemporary women’s biography, Beizer shows its twin motivation of loss and recovery to inscribe a fetishistic logic and to be caught in mirror thinking.

If the project of contemporary women’s biography is doomed to fail as biography, how, then, is one to write a precursor woman’s life? Beizer proposes we abandon attempts to reconstruct what is irretrievably lost and instead confront “the story of a woman’s life as always already lost, and forever irretrievable within conventional frameworks” (36). To this end, she explores alternative methodologies, rereading George Sand’s *Histoire de ma vie* laterally through the lens of her correspondence with Flaubert, listening to the biographer’s voice, and developing new metaphors for the writing of the (fore)mother’s life. Thus, she develops the conceit of adoption to counter more genealogical models of relations across time and reads Colette’s *La naissance du jour* in tandem with *La maison de Claudine* and *Sido* to sketch the contours of a new critical aesthetic that she identifies, following Christopher Bollas’s object relations theory, as “transformational.” Locating the retrospective re-vision she critiques within a cultural context that is obsessed with the past as source of identity, Beizer closes her book by reasserting the need to devise alternative ways of dealing with it: “fostering the hollows and the holes while resisting the temptation to fill them; taking on absence, opacity, and lack, refusing silence our voice, but giving it our beating heart, and our ear” (251).

These, then, are the main metaphors of the new biographical writing that recognizes loss as “a constituent part of the life story” (25): not giving a voice but *listening* to silence, *fostering* loss, and *adopting* absence so as to attend to gaps and absences by taking care of them, not possessing or owning them. The metaphors are developed through a series of encounters that cause Beizer to rethink her developing project on the intersection of women’s biography and autobiography, in particular: Holly Laird’s invitation that she think about the connections between her academic project and adoptive motherhood and the voice of Sand’s biographer Huguette Bouchardeau as she came to hear it after repeated replays trying “to tease out some barely audible words” (113). We do not know whether Beizer eventually succeeded in identifying the words to complete her transcript of the interview. But she did learn to *listen* to Bouchardeau, attending to what she says and to what she does not say, to the sound of her voice and to the sound of her silence. This listening is mediated by the metaphor of fostering, which comes to Beizer through her rethinking of the maternal rhetoric that marks women’s auto/biography. Indeed, if biological motherhood is commonly associated with “one’s own” and hence with “a rhetoric of owning and an economics of possession” (130), would not adoptive motherhood, especially of the open variety, recognizing the interinvolvement of the child, its birth parents, and adoptive parents, offer an alternative to “proprietary” genetic parenthood? The metaphor of adoption is fraught, of course. As a practice, it has been contested for a while now, the large sums of money involved in international adoption potentially leading to corruption and child traffic. Also, the high costs of adoption make it ambivalently suitable for denoting the kind of “vital, evolving, unblooded connections” (123) Beizer seeks to substitute for the proprietary discourse of “one’s own.” Yet it gestures toward the need for conceiving relations of affiliation outside the familial and familiar model of the biological-genealogical, preferring (Deleuzian) rhizomes to the genealogical tree to think about the subject of life writing.

All this makes Beizer’s *Thinking Through the Mothers* a fascinating and erudite study of contemporary women’s biography that skillfully weaves theoretical reflections on the nature of women’s biography and the metaphors women write life stories by with close readings that deftly unpick French auto/biographical writings. The book is a pertinent critique of an ill-conceived feminist genre, inviting us to rethink our (feminist and new historicist but also personal) forays into a past that is irretrievable. As it questions the motives for doing so, Beizer teases out the implications for her own academic critical project and for scholarly writing in general. The title is aptly chosen: the book especially distinguishes itself by its self-reflexive

approach, re-presenting the process of thinking through the problem as Beizer revisits earlier assumptions and reexamines earlier positions and readings. The resulting juxtaposition of methods and approaches serves her attempt to devise alternative methodologies. It also remains exploratory, gesturing toward what the writing of women's life lines should be rather than defining what ultimately is still "a broad ethical and aesthetic shift that has yet to come" (211).

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Counterfeit Capital: Poetic Labor and Revolutionary Irony. By Jennifer Bajorek. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. 154 pages. Cloth \$50.00.

Counterfeit Capital examines the pervasiveness of the trope or mode of irony in nineteenth-century responses to capitalism's perfusion of the socioeconomy. The book's two principal foci are Baudelaire and Marx. Two studies that partially parallel Bajorek's would be Debarati Sanyal's *Violence and Modernity* and Jeffrey Mehlman's *Revolution and Repetition*. But only partially. Bajorek's study is more concerted and focused on *irony* than they are. Ultimately the progenitor of studies in any of these areas is Walter Benjamin, who is attended to and sometimes contested in Bajorek's book. Bajorek's critical examination of Benjamin's views on Baudelaire in her final chapter is particularly original and, I think, valuable. The relationship that Benjamin was the first to foreground between the coming of capitalism and Baudelaire's poetry here receives a remarkably insightful unpacking.

As Bajorek observes, "irony" has tended to be seen as irrelevant to political representation or the representation of politics. It has been thought to bear as its affective charge an attitude of *resignation* rather than one of *resistance*. Bajorek's study seeks to destabilize this conception of irony's limitation and to refigure its relationship to the political realm (understood in the broadest sense). Bajorek renews interest in the trope of irony by arguing that, beneath its protean figurality, irony exceeds "rhetoric" narrowly conceived to become something more insidious and infrastructural. It frames a view of the world. One wonders why there is no sustained discussion of the master ironist Flaubert; Bajorek might respond by saying that her interest