

THE MYTH OF "POLITICAL MEMOIR:"
A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

by

HILARY CATHERINE LOUISE MASON
B.A., Carleton University, 1990

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of History)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September 1994

© Hilary Catherine Louise Mason

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of

History

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date

Sept 30, 1994

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between power and knowledge in the maintenance of a separate category of historical literature labelled "political memoir." It adopts a feminist definition of "political" and thereby challenges the fundamental dichotomy between personal and political upon which such a categorization depends. Feminist literary analysis is used to read the personal narratives of two women whose experiences would not normally qualify as "political," and two men whose experiences as diplomats place them firmly within the tradition of "political memoir" writing. The goal of such an analysis is to demonstrate both the myriad ways in which personal experience is political and the political implications of all personal writings. In this way, the thesis "deconstructs" the concept of political memoir and reaffirms the need for a fundamental restructuring of the categories into which historical analysis has been divided.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter One Knowledge, Power and Political Memoir	1
Chapter Two Negotiating Identity in Twentieth-Century France	22
Chapter Three Speaking With a Privileged Voice	53
Chapter Four Conclusions	66
Bibliography	73
Addendum	76

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. George Egerton for his constant encouragement of me to develop a feminist critique of the Political Memoirs project. Thanks are also due to Dr. Dianne Newell for her encouragement and for facilitating my completion of this work. I am very grateful to Dr. Joy Dixon for her willingness to step into a project in progress and for guiding my initial encounters with academic feminist theory. I especially appreciate that no matter how much red ink she spilled on my copies, she saved enough to add positive comments and useful suggestions.

A tremendous debt of gratitude is owed to the women of Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter for teaching me that "the personal is political," and in turn to Tamara Gorin and Belinda Shelton for working with me to live that politic. Over years of discussion, these women have contributed significantly to my ideas about politics and academics. By demanding that I work to include all I had learned as a political activist in my work as an academic, they gave me the courage to tackle this project.

Finally, I must thank the women graduate students of the UBC history department and the women in the main office for their support and good humour.

Chapter One:
Knowledge, Power and Political Memoir

The term "political memoir" has been used since the mid-nineteenth century to classify the personal writings of political leaders, politicians, military figures, diplomats and high level governmental bureaucrats or their close observers on the public events in which they were personally engaged. The place of political memoir as a category of historical literature has recently been reaffirmed by the publication of a series of colloquium papers, Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory, edited by George Egerton of the University of British Columbia. However, in 1994, in the light of the extensive work done in the past decade by feminists and postmodernists on the politics of gender and the relationships between power and knowledge, the time has perhaps come to reexamine the underlying assumptions in the definition of this genre: to consider political memoir as a myth which both results from, and contributes to the maintenance of, a particular sociopolitical order.

In order to consider "political memoir" in this sense, we need to examine the ways in which unstated assumptions in working-concepts shape the work we do as historians. The idea that the production of knowledge in our society is about who holds power, that knowledge functions to support power-interests and that dominant ideas are often internalized and subsequently self-imposed (normalizing) is by now familiar in academic circles. According to Susan Bordo, these ideas originated in the social movements of the

1960s, including feminism.¹ In academia, however, they are most commonly associated with such writers as Richard Rorty in North America and Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault in Europe.²

Each of these men has undoubtedly developed important theoretical tools for the critique of knowledge and power in society. Their writings, however, have been the subject of numerous criticisms for their androcentric bias and feminists need to consider seriously how we position feminist theory and movement³ in relation to these "schools" of thought.⁴ The most extreme statements of a postmodern position tend to view all knowledge creation as a dangerous power move, inevitably resulting in oppression and exclusion, and all attempts at social criticism in terms of categories such as "women," "blacks," or a particular

¹ Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Scepticism" in Linda J. Nicholson ed., Feminism/Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 137 and "Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body" in Caroline Ramazanoglu ed., Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism (London: Routledge, 1993), 182.

² Bordo, 138.

³ Feminist theorist bell hooks argues that the expression "feminist movement" should not be preceded by a definite article since no single unified movement exists. bell hooks in Mary Childers and bell hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class" in Marianne Hirsh and Evelyn Fox Keller eds., Conflicts in Feminism (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 79.

⁴ The expression "school" here is used with some reservation in as much as the intention of these writers was not to create a new theoretical system but to produce critiques of such disciplining parameters on thought. Nevertheless, for all its heterogeneity and looseness, postmodernism, has taken on the status of a theoretical position and people continue to take stands for, against or in compromise with it.

"class" as harmful, totalizing fallacies which deny the heterogenous aspects of the individuals these categories claim to represent.

In the United States, a similar (but different) criticism was delivered by women of colours who demonstrated the ways in which feminist movement had focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women in theory-building to the exclusion of women of colours.⁵ These women were, indeed, not represented by what white feminists were saying. Such an error, however, is not best rectified by denying the possibility of speaking about women. Instead, the stories and experiences of all women across race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, language, culture and time need to be gathered and considered so that real commonalities can be spoken of and differences can remain a source of strength in a common cause.⁶ To deny the possibility of speaking of societal macro-structures is not only altogether too easy, it is also profoundly disempowering to feminist movement.

Naturally, feminists have different opinions and judgements of postmodernism. Various negotiations of position, some with the explicit project of creating a postmodern feminism, have resulted in the exploration of many aspects of postmodern theory with the

⁵ The term "colour" is pluralized in order to reflect the diversity of peoples who face race oppression and the multitudinous ways in which this plays out according to skin colour, while acknowledging the unity of race oppression. I am grateful to Elvenia Gray, feminist transition-house worker, for this criticism.

⁶ Radical feminism holds that no single oppression can on its own ever be ended; all oppression must end: hence the aspiration to a common cause. See also Susan Bordo, 139.

intention of using the theory for the empowerment of (some) women. In the field of history, the most powerful argument in favour of the adoption of poststructural theory was made by Joan Wallach Scott in her book Gender and the Politics of History, published in 1988. Scott's argument is both eloquent and passionate. She writes with conviction and persuasiveness of the possibilities opened by poststructural analysis. By analyzing the discourses of gender in a specific place and period, historians can explore the ways in which "politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics."

Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies.⁷

With the aid of poststructural theory, Scott provides biting criticisms of the currently common definition of "the political" and of history as a "particular kind of cultural institution endorsing and announcing constructions of gender."⁸ Among her other essays, Scott provides an interesting rereading of E.P. Thompson's seminal work The Making of the English Working Class. In "Women in The Making of the English Working Class," Scott looks at the ways in which the discourse of gender with which Thompson worked - identified as the assumptions about women, their role and place in society - shaped ideas about class and made women's

⁷ Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 27.

⁸ Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, 26 and 9.

activism and interests seem irrelevant to Thompson.⁹

In Scott's hands, poststructuralism seems a powerful tool for feminist ends. Criticism of Scott's work, however, pointed both to a lack of an empowering concept of agency in the face of discourse theory, and to the ways in which many of the most powerful and insightful aspects of Scott's work arose from her failure to adhere strictly to poststructuralist theory in favour of a more empirical approach. Alice Kessler-Harris makes this point in her review of Scott's book:

In the end, then, Scott salvages deconstructive analysis for the historian by backing away from its extreme application. Indeed, while Scott defends her use of deconstruction by arguing for its capacity to expose suppressed meanings, the essays in which she illustrates the techniques suggest the eclecticism of her own approach.¹⁰

In a recent article entitled "Feminist History After the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," Kathleen Canning (with explicit reference to Scott's work) attempts a critical reworking of the concepts of "discourse, experience and agency" with the aim of "grappling with the poststructuralist challenge."¹¹ Canning's goal seems to be the adaptation of the tools of poststructural analysis in such a way that the door is opened to a combination of these techniques of discursive analysis

⁹ Scott, "Women in The Making of the English Working Class" in Gender and the Politics of History, 68-90.

¹⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, "Deconstructing History," rev. of Gender and the Politics of History, by Joan W. Scott, Dissent, 36 (1989), 276.

¹¹ Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience" in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 19 (1994), 369.

with the more traditional investigation of what people actually experienced and how they actively negotiated with the various competing discourses which sought to interpret/define their experiences.¹²

The study of the discourses of social reform in Weimar Germany which Canning provides to illustrate the approach she advocates is powerful. It is also empowering in that it demonstrates the power of historical subjects to recognize, negotiate and ultimately create discourse describing/defining their lives. It demonstrates organization and activism. Women are not portrayed as the (largely) powerless objects of discourse.

While Canning's work explicitly acknowledges a debt to works such as Scott's, it is questionable whether her work will be accepted among academic circles as postmodern or if she will be accused of trying to avoid the radical implications of post-structural theory. It can, however, be argued that this is a moot point. Feminist theory and analysis need not be held accountable to the writings of men (even postmodern theorists). Nancy Fraser, for instance, has pointed out the contradictory aspects of both Derridean theories and Foucauldian writings and the various and opposed interpretations which they make possible.¹³ Why should feminists negotiate with these contradictions when feminist

¹² Canning, 374-374.

¹³ Nancy Fraser, "Michel Foucault: a "Young Conservative?" and "The French Derrideans" in Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 35-54, and 69-92.

politics provides an evaluative principle arguably more liberating? If we consider instead how a theory or practice can be empowering to feminist movement, particularly to those with the least power, then questions of theory are held accountable to those who feminist theory by definition exists to serve. Susan Bordo's warning is particularly apt:

We need to consider the degree to which this [debate about method] serves, not the empowerment of diverse cultural voices and styles, but the academic hegemony (particularly in philosophy and literary studies) of detached, metatheoretical discourse.¹⁴

Doris Sommer identifies this privilege in a particularly humbling way in her article "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self:"

To doubt referentiality in testimonials would be an irresponsible luxury, given the urgency of the call to action. If the narrator has been raped countless times by Somoza's National Guardsmen ... or if she has followed the slow stages of her mother's torture at the hand of the Guatemalan army ... or had the baby in her womb literally kicked out of her during torture in a Bolivian prison, ... just to give a few examples, she might well wonder at the academic pause we take in considering how delayed or artificial her reality is.¹⁵

In the study of personal narrative, then, theory must serve to highlight rather than undermine or mask the politics revealed. Personal experience is both political and real.

In a chapter entitled "Struggle Over Needs: Outline of a Socialist Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Political

¹⁴ Bordo, 142.

¹⁵ Doris Sommer "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self" in Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck eds., Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 120.

Culture" in her book Unruly Practices: Power Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, Nancy Fraser develops a powerful critique of the discourses of social needs which takes into account the imbalance of power among the various contenders and values both individual initiative and the power of social movements to (re)act and create.¹⁶ Although informed by careful critical consideration of the works of numerous postmodern theorists, Fraser's work is in no sense accountable to those theories. Instead it is accountable to a specific feminist politic where theory is adopted and evaluated as a strategy. Approaches such as Fraser's and Canning's suggest a methodology useful for an analysis of personal writings which can value these texts as personal negotiations of multiple competing public discourses which shape personal identity and political thought.

In fact, knowledge production and control has been a long standing subject of feminist critical thought and the analysis of discourse is not necessarily different from the long standing feminist practice of examining who is saying what and in what terms. During the present wave of feminism, as women began openly to discuss the conditions of their lives in consciousness-raising groups, much of what had been said to be true by the church, the educational system, the medical system, the state, and academia (to name only a few examples) was called into question. Women's movement has challenged the interests which lurk behind various constructions of knowledge and women have acted to produce new and

¹⁶ Fraser, 161-187.

different kinds of knowledge. Such changes (challenges) have not gone uncontested and women have found that the means through which given meanings are maintained are as insidious and powerful as they are diverse: money and social inertia (frequently called tradition) are major blocks to change.

In the field of history, feminists have challenged the universal narrative of human progress which situates present day society as the culmination of a constant, ameliorative trajectory. The focus on western, middle-class man to the exclusion of women, the working class, and peoples of colours has been revealed to be deeply ingrained in the very way history has been conceptualized as a subject and hence in the methodologies it employs.¹⁷

Joan W. Scott, in an essay entitled "History in Crisis?," argues that the traditional focus on elites reflected the composition of academia itself and that the increasing democratization of education in the fifties and sixties resulted in the arrival of historians who did not identify with the traditional metanarrative. Members of the social elite were fallaciously portrayed as capable of "stand[ing] high enough to command an unrestricted view of the whole past" while newcomers were found to be either "partial" or even "interested."¹⁸ In other words, academics as part of the ruling class wrote a history that not only

¹⁷ For instance Joan Kelly, Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) or Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History.

¹⁸ Joan Wallach Scott "History in Crisis?" American Historical Review 94 (1989), 683-684.

was reflective solely of the experience of their own race, class and gender, but also claimed the right to speak for all and to judge the histories of others according to standards which had been created to guide the pursuit of a unified historical narrative. When the membership of academia began to include (some) others, the resulting proliferation of perspectives on the past, many of which were fundamentally incompatible, dismayed those in search of a unifying narrative - the history of the nation (or even the world).

The reservation of the label "political" for a minority of the population masks a project similar to that of the pursuit of a unifying metanarrative because it presumes that the important politics of an age were the preserve of an elite minority. In the expression "political memoir," the term "political" is not intended to describe the nature of a memoir as an actual object; that is, the criteria for labelling a memoir "political" are not about whether or not the memoir is political in its agenda or impact. (For some historians, the possibility of political intentions in memoirs constitutes one of the primary dangers of the use of memoirs written by former politicians and other high-powered officials.)¹⁹ Instead, "political" is used to identify the subject of the memoir: these are writings about "political" events and actions, where politics is implicitly limited to the domain of "high politics" or affairs of the state.

¹⁹ See for example Robert Young "Partial Recall: Political Memoirs and Biography from the Third Republic" in "Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory" ed. George Egerton. Ts, 63.

This limited and, arguably, dated definition of "political" remains entrenched in academia. Within the historical community, political history continues to be viewed as the study of the election and administration of government, public agitation for reform of government, the relationships between governments, and often the traditional branches through which government is administered (diplomatic corps, defense, finance, etc.): in brief, "high politics."²⁰ The feminist contention that the personal is political has seemingly had no impact.

Of course this is not true; it has had tremendous impact on the study of women and many historians continue to do interesting and valuable research demonstrating the political implications of women's writings and actions.²¹ That there has not yet been a corresponding adjustment in the way historians categorize their work testifies to the conservative grasp of habit and the fundamental link between the classification of knowledge and the exercise of power. We can and must change the way we speak about our work, and by implication how we think about our lives. Obviously, to advocate doing so is a political move; to neglect or

²⁰ An example of the maintenance of this conception of politics can be found in Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory ed. George Egerton. Of eighteen essays, twelve concern the memoirs of heads-of-state, politicians or diplomats; two are concerned with armed defense of the state; one with state-organized spying; one traces the tradition among political leaders in India; and two, written by women-as-observers, again concern affairs of state.

²¹ At the University of British Columbia, for instance, Pamela Boniface's 1991 MA thesis "The Personal is Political: Russian Schoolmistresses Speak for Themselves" is an important example.

choose not to do so when the implications of the traditional usages have been demonstrated is equally a political move.

Feminists have argued that the way in which a society structures its power relations is reflected in all aspects of the lives of all its members. The structuring of society on the lines of gender, race and class are the most obvious examples in our contemporary society and have resulted in a situation where a person's safety, freedom and options are significantly constrained by sexism, racism and classism. The everyday negotiations of power in personal relationships - how power is exercised and maintained or contested - are political events. By identifying the processes which support a political system in the relations in our everyday (personal) lives, we locate sites for (political) resistance and empower ourselves to rebel and work for change. Politics, then, is an intrinsic part of each and every person's daily life: in everything from our most intimate to our most formal and distant relationships we negotiate socially assigned roles, and hold ourselves accountable to, confront, or profit from the power derived from sociopolitical macro-structures. Conscious or not, these acts are political acts. Working with such a definition of politics, we would have to accept all historical studies as political in both subject and implication. Radical alterations in the categorical classification of our work would follow naturally from such a shift. Historians would remain free to study government and organized opposition to it, but would no longer work under the false pretence that they were studying the (only)

"politics of an age." Working with such a definition of political would enable historians to read for the politics of an age in all personal narratives.

The first criticism to be made, then, of the traditional usage of the term "political memoir" is that it perpetuates a view of politics which situates all power in the state and its activities. Furthermore, this leads to a distinction between those who were observers rather than participants in "political" events and results in a hierarchy of experience: some have political experiences and participate in political events, some do not and write instead as observers. There are many of us whose actions and experiences do not qualify as "political": we must begin our struggle for change by challenging the accepted parameters of what is political in order to demand and act for political change. If the actions and experiences of a few are privileged with the label of "political" then our vision of where and how to make change is limited by this linguistic move. The labelling of a body of writing as "political memoir" then, is conservative in its effect.²²

Language, of course, has the insidious ability to shape our thought if we are not constantly vigilant to its use and implications. This conservative definition of "political memoir"

²² In his essay "Findings and Conclusions" in Egerton ed., Egerton recognizes that political memoirs "[perform] an essentially conservative function by enhancing and legitimating the status and role of leaders." (349) This is a valid but different point from the one I have made here. Egerton is interested in examining the nature of the genre. I am interested in questioning the underlying assumptions and how they necessitate that "political memoir" as a category functions conservatively, even in the rare event of radical political content.

has been maintained even by those struggling to draw attention to previously neglected voices. Mary Jo Maynes uses it in "Gender and Narrative Form in French and German Working-Class Autobiographies":

Then, of course, came the great wave of working-class political narratives by the Communards involved in the insurrections of 1870-71. Some of these were fairly restricted political memoirs, but others were full-fledged autobiographies.²³

Maynes seems to label these writings "political" only because they contain information about the Commune uprising which comes within the traditional definition in terms of the effect on the state. Radical intentions are twisted and confined by the unquestioned parameters within which the study takes place.

The interested nature of the definition of "political" current in academic circles and in force in the labelling of historiography is an example of the ways in which knowledge produced in academia, funded ultimately by government and/or money interests (depending on the country) serves to maintain the status quo. The concept of "political memoirs" serves to limit the numbers of those who can speak with personal authority on politics. Academics, of course, can claim "professional" authority; and the rest of us can bark from the sidelines.

The observation that we are all "political" historians, in the sense that we are people with our own political views which perforce influence how we research and write history is generally

²³ Mary Jo Maynes, "Gender and Narrative Form in French and German Working-Class Autobiographies" in Personal Narratives Group ed. Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 112.

acknowledged with annoyance and quickly disregarded. Feminists cannot afford for such observations to be dismissed as truisms. They are fundamental to achieving meaningful change within academia. Those who succeed in pretending that their work supports no political agenda are those whose agendas are most linked with maintaining the status quo.

Feminist literary theorists have done considerable work in demonstrating the gender bias inherent in the classifications established by the literary canon. Traditionally, while some overlap between the two genres is acknowledged, the distinction between memoir and autobiography is defined as a difference of focus: the memoir is centred outward on others while the autobiography focuses inward on the development of the self.²⁴ The boundary between these related genres, however, is under siege, particularly from feminist scholars investigating autobiographical writings by women.

The notion of the self upon which the distinction is based has explicitly been that propagated by Enlightenment thought and the success and/or merit of an autobiography was, until recently, determined on the basis of the author's ability to trace the development of such an autonomous self. Literary theorist Sidonie Smith articulates the consequences of such assumptions:

Generic clothes have made the man, so to speak. Making men in specific ways, these practices reinforce dominant ideologies, official histories, and founding mythologies of the subject. In effect, the white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual human

²⁴ Roy Pascal Design and Truth in Autobiography, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), 5.

being becomes representative man, the universal human subject. "His" life story becomes recognizable, legitimate, and culturally real. Making representative men in this way, generic practices reinforce the subjectivities provided to those who do not share this set of identities. Moreover, they neutralize or suppress ideologies, histories, and subjectivities non-identical to those of the universal human subject.²⁵

In other words, a subjectivity which distorts and does not fit is constructed as universal. For women autobiographers, adherence to this concept of individuality has been virtually impossible, or has been approximated only at a very high cost. In "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," Mary Mason argues that the four archetypes for English-speaking women's autobiographies emerged in England during the early middle ages. In each, the author reveals herself in terms of her relationship to an Other: God, her father, her husband or her spiritual community.²⁶ A similar observation is made by Mary Jean Green in her study of women's autobiographies in Quebec. She finds "a focus on relationships with others rather than, as in men's autobiographies, on the development and successful accomplishment of the self."²⁷ This concern with self/other relationships need not suggest that two separate (gender) paradigms are required for the study of

²⁵ Sidonie Smith, "Whose Talking/Who's Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative" Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 18 (1993), 393. See also: Brodzki and Schenck introduction, 1-2.

²⁶ Mary G. Mason "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of women Writers" in Brodzki and Schenck, 22-23.

²⁷ Mary Jean Green, "Structures of Liberation: Female Experience and Autobiographical Form in Quebec" in Brodzki and Schenck, 1889.

autobiography. Instead, its persistence, as well as its evolution, in western autobiography suggests that the self/other relationship and how it appears in all personal writings can be used to understand the politics of gender (and potentially race and class) socialization in the period of its production.

Women autobiographers have begun to challenge the distinction between memoir and autobiography and by implication between self and other both incidently and intentionally. Simone de Beauvoir titled her four volumes of life-writing "Memoires," but (and) persistently described them as her autobiography. Literary critic Leah Hewitt offers an analysis of the self/other relationship in Beauvoir's narrative:

De Beauvoir's emphasis on the interconnectedness of the individual and society is signalled by a generic blurring: the terms "memoirs" and "autobiography" are interchangeable for her because her personal history and her role as historical subject become inseparable.²⁸

The focus of Beauvoir's autobiography, argues Hewitt, is not the self, but the life: a choice necessitated by her gender status in a society prone to see women writers as "mad" or "masculinized:" "The price of her 'right to speak' on her own behalf is alienation."²⁹

While the generic boundary serves as a location for negotiation and compromise for a writer with as much privilege in

²⁸ Leah D. Hewitt, Autobiographical Tightropes: Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig, and Maryse Conde. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 18.

²⁹ Hewitt, 20.

the world as Simone de Beauvoir, contemporary Asian-American author Maxine Hong Kingston chooses to frame her own "otherness" in western society by casting the story of her childhood in the genre of memoirs, presenting herself an observer and part-actor in a larger story of community. In The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts, Kingston consciously liberates herself both from the obligation to construct a unified self in the tradition of the western male model, as well as from the obligation to create a unified, linear narrative.³⁰ Lee Quinby argues that to disregard Kingston's generic manoeuvre would be to miss the radical implications of this move.

Unlike the subjectivity of autobiography, which is presumed to be continuous over time, memoirs (particularly in their collective form) construct a subjectivity that is multiple and discontinuous. The ways that an "I" is inscribed in the discourse of memoirs therefore operate in resistance to the modern era's dominant construction of individualized selfhood, which follows the dictum to, above all else, know thy interior self. In relation to autobiography, then, memoirs function as countermemory.³¹

Quinby's charge that the author's choice of generic form must be respected is worth heeding to a point. It must be remembered, however, that her demand is based on her study of the writings of a late twentieth century author who, for all her originality and brilliance, lives in a society where the level of popular consciousness about ideas and forms, and about relationships

³⁰ Lee Quinby, "The Subject of Memoirs: The Woman Warrior's Technology of Ideographic Selfhood" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson eds. Decolonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender Women's Autobiography (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 297.

³¹ Quinby, 298.

between oppressed peoples and dominant cultures, is quite high. Quinby's analysis is not necessarily applicable to the writings of all women in all times.

Many women have not had the privilege of living in a society in which ideas about the naturalness of the (white, middle-class, heterosexual) male norm, long taken for granted, are under siege. While women might have sensed the discordance between the story they were trying to tell and the forms they were trying to use, it is unlikely that they would have identified the source of the problem as the inappropriateness of the western (male) autobiographical model. Studying the blurring of generic boundaries, the transgression of limits, and the distortions resulting from attempts at generic adherence remains a potentially fruitful method for examining women's life writings.

Literary critic Ellen Peel has used this sort of approach to the writings of Doris Lessing. Peel argues that Lessing has formulated a radical critique of the notion of autobiography. In an article entitled "The Self is Always an Other: Going the Long Way Home to Autobiography," Peel examines what she calls the "approach/avoidance [to autobiography] pattern" in Lessing's work.³² Lessing begins works which would seem autobiographical, but redirects the focus to society and/or those around her. Peel explains:

In order to understand her statements [about the artificiality of writing about oneself], it is essential to understand that

³² Ellen Peel, "The Self is Always an Other: Going the Long Way Home to Autobiography" Twentieth Century Literature 35.1, 1.

she has increasingly come to challenge the very distinction between self and other. Her way of bridging the chasm between the two is to decide that no such chasm exists. For her, the self is always an other, even in ordinary biographies.³³

The political implication of Lessing's project then is a radical reconceptualization of one of the primary foundations of the power structures in contemporary society: the self/other paradigm. To rethink a concept of the self in terms of the various intersections with "otherness" would result in an understanding of society as fundamentally interdependent such that the interests of a self cannot be promoted at a cost to others. Clearly, then, the ways in which self and other are formulated in a personal narrative indicate a personal/political negotiation of this social dynamic. The relationship of author to text, and way in which the author has negotiated the theoretical border between autobiography and memoir will be integral to such investigation. In this sense, the expression "politics of memoir" suggests a myriad of power relationships and once again, "political memoir" focused on the public and "political" (in its traditional usage) locates itself on the "up" side of these relationships.

The establishment and maintenance of the genre of "political memoirs" has the effect of limiting the number of people who can speak from personal experience of the politics of an age. If we are to facilitate a reading of all personal narratives as political testimony, we as historians need to adopt a more sophisticated definition of politics such as that offered by feminism. This

³³ Peel, 5.

enables us to explore an individual's exercise of and resistance to power and the creation of self/other identities. We need to read texts as negotiations of, or conforming to, dominant generic paradigms. Historians can examine the ideas and factors which an author considers worthy of inclusion and those which are (perhaps surprisingly) excluded. We must consider both the author's explicit and implicit political purpose for writing the narrative and what that reveals about who they were in their society and what their society was like.

In the following chapters, the narratives of French feminist philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir, and French school teacher and grass roots activist Emilie Carles; and French diplomats Robert Coulondre and André François-Poncet, will be read with particular attention to the ways in which their texts reveal personal negotiations of socio-political macrostructures in twentieth-century France. Such readings will demonstrate the ways in which personal and political are fundamentally linked.

Chapter Two: Negotiating Identity in Twentieth-Century France

In traditional "political" history, the advent of the Third Republic in France in 1871 is said to have ushered in an era of both political change and long term structural political stability. Within the first ten years, "democracy" in France had been secured and grass roots organizing began the spread of Republican ideals throughout France.¹ Without dismissing the significance of the democratic structures put in place and of the reforms undertaken by the Third Republic, such sweeping praise must be tempered. These reforms did not fundamentally alter the condition of French women,² who remained ineligible to vote until 1944 when the Fourth Republic replaced the Vichy Regime. Patriarchy in the French family remained the foundation of the French state: basic rights to independence and self determination began slowly to be conceded to married French women only in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³ To look on the Third Republic as the regime which finally secured freedom and democracy for the French nation, then, would be tragically silly.

¹ See for example Gordon Wright France in Modern Times: From the Enlightenment to the Present 4th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 211-274; or Alfred Cobban A History of France Volume 3: 1871-1962 (Harmondsworth: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1965) 9-84.

² In any given society, women generally represent between 52 and 54% of the population. Generalizations about a society which are not applicable to over half of the population are obviously pointless.

³ Toril Moi, Simone De Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994) 187.

Nevertheless, republican reforms did have a significant impact on the lives of women. Some fundamental contradictions between republican goals and limitations on the freedom and equality of women resulted in small fissures in the patriarchal structure. Women from such diverse social and geographical backgrounds as Simone de Beauvoir (from the Parisian bourgeoisie) and Emilie Carles (from the Alpine peasantry) wedged themselves into these fissures, creating new possibilities for themselves and for those to follow. In their life narratives, these women give evidence of how they negotiated the contradictions between their prescribed social roles and their personal aspirations. These demonstrate both political resistance and compromise.

Perhaps the most significant of such fissures, particularly in relation to the lives of Carles and Beauvoir, were those produced by educational reform. In order to secure the new regime, republicans needed to secure popular backing for republican candidates and hence for republican ideals. In rural communities this would involve overthrowing long standing traditions. These included voting for the best known man in the district such as the local chatelain or other notable; or alternatively, as was a common practice under the Second Empire, selling votes under the direction of the local mayor or sub-prefect. In the event of two competing, notable candidates, local feuds and family loyalties were grafted onto the debate or long-standing animosities between villages or

regions became attached to the names of certain political groups.⁴

Conceived as a method of loosening the church's stranglehold on the minds of the majority of the electorate and of enabling them to grasp the issues at stake in democratic elections, the Jules Ferry Laws, introduced between 1879 and 1886, established an extensive public school system: primary education was made free and mandatory and *écoles normales* for girls were set up in each department to train women as school teachers.⁵ The reformers hoped that the new schools, by granting a degree of equality to all men, would quell the revolutionary appeal of the left and rally the lower classes to the patriotic cause.⁶

Bourgeois girls, as the potential wives and mothers of the republican elite, were also targeted by early Third Republic educational reforms. The *Loi Camille Sée*, passed in 1880, opened secular secondary education to girls while maintaining the traditional gender segregation of the Catholic system. Significantly, girls were to cease their studies one year shy of the prestigious *baccalauréat*. The establishment of these secondary schools in turn required the establishment of schools to train women to teach in them; hence the establishment of a parallel *Ecole*

⁴ Eugen Weber Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 241-277.; see also, Eugen Weber My France: Politics, Culture, Myth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 137-188.

⁵ Cobban, 25; such schools already existed for boys.

⁶ John E. Talbott, The Politics of Educational Reform in France, 1918-1940 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 24.

normale supérieure for women at Sèvres. Even this, however, was insufficient and for certain subjects women teachers still needed university training, which was accessible to them only with the *bac*. The Catholic school system initially filled this gap. In 1908, the state schools were authorized to prepare women for the *bac* as well.⁷

Both Emilie Carles and Simone de Beauvoir led lives which became possible for women only through these reforms. Neither, however, led the life or fulfilled the functions specifically envisioned by those who had introduced the new regulations. Each in her own way used her small advantages to make her own (unconventional) way in the world of early twentieth-century France. Both women's life narratives negotiate the (traditional) generic boundary between memoir and autobiography and draw on other stylistic strategies to develop important, non-traditional aspects of their stories. In both narratives, the relationships between the author and others are fundamental to the story of the self. Their personal narratives bear witness to their own resistance to and negotiation with the ideas in their community about women's sexuality, marriage, and motherhood as well as formal political institutions.

Emilie Carles (née Allais) was born in 1900 in the mountain village of Val-des-Près, 7 kilometres from Briançon in the Hautes-Alpes. She was the fifth of six children of peasant parents and was raised by her father after her mother was struck dead by

⁷ *Moi*, 42-44.

lightning when Emilie was four. Although all family members worked at heavy manual labour from dawn until dusk (with the exception of the mandatory school hours and weekly mass), they were relatively well off in comparison to others in their community. They were never hungry and they lived in the only *chateau* in the village.⁸ Nevertheless, prior to Emilie's mother's death, her father, Joseph Allais (who did not know a trade) smuggled sheep across the Italian border in order to earn income. After her death, he, like many others, stole wood from the communal forest.⁹

As children, Emilie and her elder brother would get up at five in the morning to do chores until school began and rush across town on their lunch break to tend flocks and haul water. Time for reading simply did not exist. The only entertainment afforded in such communities were the winter evening *veillées* when several families would gather under one roof and tell stories to keep warm and pass the hours until bedtime.¹⁰

Education beyond the mandatory and free primary education was virtually out of reach of the peasant classes. In Emilie's case, it was made possible by a scholarship from the state, her relative proximity to the town of Briançon, and her father's generosity in giving up her labour during school hours at the urging of the

⁸ According to Eugen Weber, "Village society ... distinguished between an ordinary cottage and a chateau with an upper story and a weather vane on the roof....," *Peasants* 245.

⁹ Emilie Carles, *A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France*, trans. Avriel H. Goldberger (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) 22-23, and 67.

¹⁰ Weber, *Peasants* 413.

departmental school inspector. Within the family, Emilie paid dearly for her privileges: the other children resented carrying the extra burden of work and her eldest sister, Rose-Marie, openly fought against Emilie becoming a school teacher while she herself was destined to become a maid in a bourgeois household.¹¹ For all her hard work, Emilie's aspirations could only be achieved at the expense of those around her.

In 1916, after the death of her elder sister and with both of her brothers away at the front, Emilie was forced to abandon her studies after earning her *brevet*; even the scholarship could not offset the cost of her lost labour. In autumn 1918, she decided to resume her studies and left for Paris. She worked as an *au pair* at a private catholic school from 7am to 10pm, except for her own class time, in exchange for room, board, tuition and 50 francs per month. Within a month of her arrival she learned of her elder brother's death in a German prisoner-of-war camp and returned to Val-des-Près to care for the family farm. She returned to the school the following October and earned her *brevet supérieur* (which normally required three years of study) by the following spring. She passed with distinction and received a personal congratulation from the examiners: a remarkable accomplishment.¹² The following year she earned her teacher's certificate, which entitled her to teach primary school.

Emilie decided to continue her studies the following year,

¹¹ Carles, 59.

¹² Carles, 77.

working as a teacher of Italian for 400 francs per month at a private school and studying for a *license* at the Sorbonne. Her goal was to become a "professor"; that is, a high school or university teacher. Due to over work and exhaustion, however, she soon fell ill with a pulmonary infection and was forced to return to her native mountain air; the only real cure according to the doctor. She worked as a primary school teacher in the department of Gap from 1923 until 1962.¹³

Simone de Beauvoir was also a teacher, or more accurately in French terms, a professor. She was born in Paris in 1908, the elder of two daughters of an upper middle class family whose fortunes were on the decline. By the time she reached secondary school the family's financial status had diminished to that of the petty bourgeoisie.¹⁴ Her father Georges was the second son of a comfortable middle class family. He was raised Catholic but was an atheist. Françoise de Beauvoir was a devout Catholic raised in a wealthy bourgeois family whose fortunes were lost around the time of her marriage. Under her direction, both Simone and her sister Hélène were educated in a private Catholic girls' school in Paris from the time of their primary studies through to the completion of their *bac*. Françoise personally attended nearly every one of her daughters' classes and censored the copious reading of the young Simone.¹⁵ Childhood was devoted to learning in school and in

¹³ Carles, 84 and 224.

¹⁴ Moi, 39.

¹⁵ Moi, 42.

church, to reading, playing, thinking, and winning the attention of adults.

Toril Moi's estimate of the importance of Beauvoir's particular family background and circumstance seems just:

As the daughter of a somewhat impoverished middle-class family living in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir was born into the very social group in which even a woman would have a real chance [and a real incentive in the lack of a dowry] to complete a career in higher education. However stifling she found her family, her specific social and geographical background in all likelihood was the *sine qua non* for her future career as an intellectual.¹⁶

In 1925, Simone and her childhood friend Zaza achieved the remarkable feat of passing both the Latin and languages and the mathematics *bacs* at the same time. Her next step was to prepare to teach secondary classes by obtaining a *license* and a teaching certificate so she enrolled in the Sorbonne. In order to protect her from the subversive influences of the university, however, her mother arranged for her to take the majority of her classes at Catholic institutes which would prepare her for the university exams. After her first year of study (1925/6), Simone took and passed the exams for three *certificats*: the *license* was composed of four and students generally prepared one per year (in exceptional cases, two).¹⁷

In 1926, she finally received permission from her parents to study philosophy, a discipline at which Catholics still looked askance. In the spring of 1927, she received her *certificats* in

¹⁶ Moi, 42-42.

¹⁷ Moi, 50.

the history of philosophy, general philosophy and Greek. Her initial intention had been to complete three more *certificats* in order to receive a double *license* in classics and philosophy. After completing the two required for her philosophy degree, however, she balked at the study of philology and decided instead to prepare her secondary teaching certificate at the same time as she prepared for the competitive exams known as the *agrégation*. In the field of philosophy she would take the exam set for the men but, as a woman, she would pass as a supernumerary candidate, meaning that she would not have the same right to a guaranteed job and would not, therefore, usurp the place of a male competitor.¹⁸

Beauvoir sat for the *agrégation* in the spring of 1929. As a student of the Sorbonne she was at a distinct disadvantage. The men's *Ecole normale supérieure*, from which the majority of candidates came, provided far superior preparation both inside class, technically, and in its general student life, culturally. Nevertheless, after only three years of tertiary study in philosophy, Beauvoir placed second in this nation wide competitive exam. First place was taken by a young man who had failed the exam the preceding year and therefore by that time had studied philosophy at prestigious Parisian *lycées* and the ENS for a total of seven years. Even so, the placement of these two candidates appears to have been the subject of some consideration by the examiners. Toril Moi cites the following passage concerning the philosophy examinations of that year:

¹⁸ Moi, 45.

Rigorous, demanding, precise and technically stringent, Gandillac [philosopher, member of the examination board] says, she was the youngest of the year: she was only twenty-one, and therefore three years younger than Sartre. [...] In any case two of the teachers on the board of examiners, Davy and Wahl, told me later that they had hesitated for a long time between her and Sartre for the first place. For if Sartre showed obvious qualities, such as a strongly asserted, albeit sometimes slightly imprecise intelligence and culture, everybody agreed that she was Philosophy [*LA philosophie, c'était elle*].¹⁹

Could the politics of gender in education in the Third Republic possibly find more eloquent voice? Beauvoir had secured herself a place among France's intellectual elite and secured the financial security of valuable teaching credentials but the decision of the committee was to have a permanent effect on her life: "second only to Sartre" becomes a recurring theme in the memoirs of her adult life.

It has been demonstrated in chapter one that the relationship between the self and others articulated in an autobiography is a potentially fruitful location for an examination of the politics of gender in a society. Furthermore, because the traditional literary canon has defined autobiography as a genre which traces the development of the unique self, generic conformities and transgressions in the crafting of an autobiography are intimately related to the self/ other relationships it explores.

Emilie Carles's life narrative, entitled *Une Soupe aux herbes sauvages* announces the author's personal and unique approach in its very title: an effect lost in the objectifying English translation

¹⁹ Moi, 31; italics in the original. Citation is from Annie Cohen-Solal Sartre, 1905-1980 (Paris, Gallimard, 1985), 116.

(A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France). The expression "a life of her own" is drawn from the autobiography: the author's future husband tells her that she has a right to "a life of her own." The effect of the substitution in the titling of the memoir is to draw the focus away from the author's creative naming of her life story and to credit her husband, at least to some degree, with her pursuit of her own, self-defined life. The title may well have been selected to echo the title of Virginia Woolf's novel A Room of One's Own.²⁰ The implication that Carles's work needed legitimizing through placement in a feminist tradition reflects a classist attitude on the part of the translator toward the author. Carles's metaphor is very clearly explained in her preface; she, like her wild herb soup, is a unique and delicately balanced product of the mysterious treasures of the Clarée Valley in which the village of Val-des-Près is located. The names of the herbs are given in the local *patois* and translated at the foot of the page; the words are explained to the reader but we lack a reference for them since they are unique elements of the geography and culture of the region. We have not used that language any more than we have lived her life. Instead, she offers us a taste, and the reader quickly discovers that the flavour of the narrative is rich and varied while ultimately mysterious.²¹ The self in Emilie's narrative cannot be revealed,

²⁰ I am grateful to Joy Dixon for pointing out this similarity to me.

²¹ Carles, 1-2.

only sketched and suggested. Her autobiographical project is as much a portrait of her time and place as it a story of her role in both its transformation and preservation: memoir and autobiography are linked like sides of a coin.

Carles's narrative is structured as a progression of tales. Each chapter reveals one or more thematic developments in her life and/or her society with references to past and present. Anecdotal stories about the people of her region are mixed in for good measure. The moment being narrated is illuminated by glances backward and forward in time.

Judging from the rhythm and style, her tale is recounted in the oral tradition of the evening *veillées* in which she took part well into her adult years. Because Carles was taken ill during the composition of her autobiography a large portion of the text was in fact "spoken" to Robert Destanque who transcribed it. It would be overly simplistic, however, to assume that this accounts for the narrative structure since Carles had been preparing notes for its composition over several years and had sufficient education and cultural exposure to have been able to select any one of numerous other strategies had they suited her. Both class and gender had made her a *raconteuse* in this tradition and while she had acquired knowledge and control of other voices through training, it was in this voice that she chose to tell her life story to the French nation. Whatever else she had become, she was first and foremost a *Briançonnaise* peasant and traditional autobiographical form, in its focus on the individual, would have constrained her telling of

her story and distorted the vision she wanted to share. One significant alteration is necessitated by the fact that the audience for this tale does not share the knowledge of her family and her region that a *veillée* audience would have had. She therefore introduces her family with brief sketches. Those most important to her tale eventually become the subjects of their own chapters: Catherine, her elder sister; Joseph, her elder brother; and Marie-Rose, her younger sister. Both François and Rose-Marie, the eldest brother and sister respectively, disappear quickly from the narrative. Their brief returns are not met with warmth and the sources of their character are not explored. Rose-Marie, for instance, is described as selfish and her petty fits of jealousy over both Emilie's schooling and marriage are both exposed. When Emilie mentions that Rose-Marie contributed to the cost of foster care for Marie-Rose's elder son, she does not mention her eldest sister's financial position as a single woman working as a maid (which a careful reader can infer from the text) and does not acknowledge the burden this would have represented.²² The region of Briançon which forms the backdrop of her tale is sketched as mountains, rivers, and pathways evoking a sense of rugged beauty.

The stylistic quality of Carles narrative will undoubtedly make her story a lasting favourite. It is at once autobiography, memoir, fable, oral narrative, and political manifesto. Published in 1977, it became an instant best seller "at all levels of society" and has been translated into German, Italian, English and

²² Carles, 47, 59, 157 and 122.

other languages.²³

Carles draws a portrait of herself through the development of self/other relationships on two levels: herself in the context of her peasant society and herself in relation to her father, Joseph Allais, and her husband, Jean Carles. In the first instance, she represents her life and actions as either typical or unusual for the *Briançonnais* peasants. Under the category of typical could be placed her near brush with death at the age of six when she fell out of a loft: her father instructed her sisters to give her tea and apply cold compresses and to order a coffin if she died. He then went on with his tasks which that day included going to market to buy the commune's bull. This incident opens the first chapter of her autobiography and serves as a pretext for explaining the prevalence and necessity of callousness in the face of children's deaths in peasant society, and indeed death in general, as well as for explaining the customs surrounding the purchase of the commune's bull. The title of the first chapter, "The Tree That Died for Want of Sap," describes her father's loss on her mother's death because of her material necessity to his life. Over and over throughout Carles's narrative, the story turns from Carles to her community, to her father or husband, or to her brothers and sisters; all elements in the circle that is her story.

Carles's relationships to her father and husband form the steady points of reference of her life story. She was first daughter and then wife. Until her marriage she devoted herself to

²³ Avriel Goldberger, trans., Carles, xi.

her father, whose fairness and morality she returns to in tale after tale. Small marks of kindness from him singled her out as the favourite: a few spare words above the necessary orders of the day or putting her share of meat on his plate so that he could trim away the fat which she could not stomach on her portion.²⁴ She postponed her studies in order to help him run the farm during the war, and tried to get teaching posts near Val-des-Près in order to be able to continue to help him. From one post, she regularly made the thirty kilometre trek by bicycle: teacher or not, she was a peasant daughter with a duty to her father.

Jean Carles, a working-class man whom she met on a train, urged her to believe that "[she had] a right to a life of [her] own."²⁵ After corresponding for many months the two met again and decided to marry. He is described as gentleness and generosity incarnate:

Jean was an extraordinarily considerate and attentive companion.... He was head over heels in love with liberty. For him there was nothing higher. He stood up for his ideas and was well informed.... Jean was an idealist, authentic, uncompromising; he was like my father in that respect, he too lived his ideas and would never have tolerated the slightest gap between what he said and what he did.²⁶

While father and husband continually take the foreground in the descriptions of worthy qualities and worthy deeds, it was in fact Emilie who looked after their needs and made possible their generosity. She, in her own actions, also embodied these ideals;

²⁴ Carles, 35-36.

²⁵ Carles, 147.

²⁶ Carles, 159.

she never takes the credit. As she draws her narrative to a close, she provides the following analysis:

Curiously, through our thirty years of married life, part of me had remained in the shadows. [Jean] shone, he was radiant, while I ... how shall I explain it? I walked in his footsteps. My children told me so one day:

"You know, Maman, we never set much store by you, because you followed so closely in Papa's wake that he was the only one we ever saw."

That was true, but I never suffered from it and I have no regrets; on the contrary, my happiness lay precisely in our communion. It made me all the stronger and more decisive with Carles gone.²⁷

While Emilie Carles was not astonished by her children's revelation, to the reader of her autobiography it seems astounding. For all her praise of Jean, it is clear that she was the steam engine that kept things running. After his death, in solidarity with his ideas and methods, in the name of her community, and for the sake of the countryside she loved, she organized and led a grass roots resistance movement against a proposed super-highway through the Clarée valley. The region was declared a protected site in 1990, eleven years after her death.²⁸

Carles's technique of self-revelation through an exploration of her relationships to her father, her husband and her community in no way hinders the presentation of her "self." It leaves the reader with a tangible sense of having known the woman, as well as we could from our distant perspective and forces her/him to acknowledge the necessary limitations of a reader's perspective. Her tales come through as confidences rather than meditations about

²⁷ Carles, 239.

²⁸ Goldberger, "Afterword" in Carles, 261.

the nature of her self. The self-revelation aimed at knowledge of the intimate interior self found in traditional autobiography seems neither desirable nor necessary. Furthermore, her strategy reveals a great deal about the construction of identity for peasant women in early twentieth century France. Such women did not exist as entirely autonomous individuals. To impose any other standard of judgement on Carles's autobiography would amount to comparing apples and oranges.

Self/other relationships also play a dominant role in Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography. When she sat down to write her own life narrative, she did so with the philosophical conviction that her "self" was fundamentally no different than that of a man. While well-aware of many of the social constraints on women in a patriarchal society (she had already published The Second Sex), she did not believe that this affected a woman's ability to conform to the aesthetic standards of her time.²⁹ She worked to cast her life story in the form of the traditional (male) autobiography and her narrative reflects the tensions between her considerable privilege in literary society and her relative marginalization in French society as a woman.

Following a fairly strict chronological order, Beauvoir's memoir traces in careful detail the development of her intellect and identity and her development as a writer. Of the two volumes of most interest for this study (there are four), the first, entitled Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter is the more successful in

²⁹ Moi, 195.

literary terms. The Prime of Life, which deals with the period from her first year as a tutor in Paris until the Liberation of the capital, drags along from year to year cataloguing times, places, activities and people. It does succeed, in its ambivalence, in expressing the frustrated sense of self with which she struggles throughout although it fails to fully reveal or explain the reasons for this frustration.

By dispensing with an autobiographical contract (a clear statement of the intention to tell the truth and a justification for telling the story in the first place) in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, Beauvoir is able to begin with her birth, and craft the story of her childhood as a coherent narrative developing towards a final goal. Beauvoir, the author, tells with irony the story of the devout and obedient Simone, the child, and marks the stages of her disillusionment. But her initial tale of emancipation through education and rebellion against Catholic bourgeois constraints coexists, in the end, uneasily with the story of Beauvoir the existential woman, meeting her intellectual pair or partner, Jean-Paul Sartre.³⁰ After detailing all of her studies and diplomas throughout the volume, Beauvoir fails to mention her success and her second place standing at the end of the oral examination for the *agrégation*.³¹

Instead, her tale of her developing intellect concludes with

³⁰ Moi, 23.

³¹ Simone de Beauvoir, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter trans. James Kirkup (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1970), 344-360.

her dramatic defeat in a debate with Sartre by the Medici fountain in the Luxembourg Gardens. Her tale of her development as a free and wilful spirit ends with the death of her dearest friend, Zaza. Throughout the first volume, Simone's will to independence is developed through her friendship with Zaza and succeeds in inverse relationship to the latter's growing helplessness in the face of her family's demands that she conform to her prescribed gender role.³² Throughout the following volumes, Beauvoir the intellectual woman, develops as a writer and thinker in constant relation to Sartre.

The dominance of this self/other paradigm in her memoirs speaks volumes about the political implications of the dominant social structures on the lives of intellectual women in France. In her "genealogy" of Beauvoir, Toril Moi subjects this relationship to careful, historically situated, critical attention. She outlines three important reasons for Beauvoir's casting of herself as Sartre's second. First is the explanation suggested by Beauvoir herself. Under patriarchy, a man, who would already enjoy more privilege than a woman, would have to prove himself superior to her in order to be her equal in a relative sense.³³ Second, the young Simone was trained from early childhood to seek and receive praise for being "interesting"; as she matures her formidable intellect becomes less valuable to her as a "desiring heterosexual woman."³⁴

³² Moi, 218.

³³ Moi, 18-19.

³⁴ Moi, 22 and 23.

Furthermore, to have defeated him in the debate, she undoubtedly knew, would have undermined her erotic relationship with him. Choosing to be his second in the philosophical field did secure for her a relatively powerful position. Most importantly, she could be valued as a woman and as an intellect.³⁵ Finally, Beauvoir casts her life in the philosophical terms of existentialism. In order to avoid the conclusion that she has lived "inauthentically," she needs Sartre to appear as the human manifestation of her childhood goals. Her place as second is freely chosen and reasonable.³⁶

On another level, Beauvoir's life narratives, for all their detail and commentary on her own thoughts, do not reveal much of her "self." They do reveal a great deal about the remarkable life she led with Sartre in terms of their personal and social habits, their travels and their theoretical progression on philosophical and political questions. Written under the judgemental eye of Sartre and for presentation to the French public (large sections of which were overtly hostile to her after the publication of The Second Sex) emotions and vulnerabilities are carefully guarded and critical distance from Sartre is not achieved.

Written in the early 1950s, neither of these volumes exposes the woman and it would be foolish to criticize them on this basis. Instead, their structure and contents are indicative of the possibilities Beauvoir believed existed for a woman of her stature and notoriety. The focus she requires as a woman on self/other

³⁵ Moi. 22-23.

³⁶ Moi, 29.

relationships exists in tension with her aspiration to write traditional autobiography. In the end, it is her life developing to the philosophical necessity of association with Sartre and her life with him that is the subject of her memoirs. Although trying to write traditional autobiography, Beauvoir stops short of self revelation and provides instead a portrait of the intellectual milieu of her times, travelogues of her trips with Sartre, and diary excerpts describing the fall of France in 1940. Her reticence is easily ascribable to her gender: activities and ideas, which would be applauded in a man, could be used as ammunition against a woman.

However, it is important to note that Beauvoir only censors herself up to a point. In their respective life-narratives, both she and Carles give evidence of their battles to defy convention and to live lives of their own choosing. On the subjects of women and marriage, women and sexuality, and mothering both women reinterpret and negotiate the ideas dominant in their societies. Traditionally viewed as the purview of social history, the power of society to impose norms on these aspects of existence and to punish those who do not conform needs to be considered as a political question. To the extent that the competing discourses on these subjects aim to define a subordinate role for women, particularly under the false pretence of revealing or supporting what is "natural," they have the effect of limiting the free and independent choices available to part of the population.

Catholic bourgeois society in Paris in the early twentieth-

century had very strict expectations regarding the regulation of women's sexuality, marriage, and reproductive capacities. Despite Beauvoir's conscious decision as a teenager to reject the church, her morality, she readily concedes, long remained steeped in the Catholic values with which she was imbued as a child. While she had decided at a young age that the arranged marriages conducted as property transfers which she saw in her society were wrong, as a young woman the institution of marriage remained a prominent element in the life she envisioned for herself.

Influenced by the romanticism of much of her reading material, she longed for a soul mate and became attached to her older cousin Jacques when she finished high school. With him she shared a passion for reading and a critical attitude to the society around her and while she knew he was not her ideal love match (she found him too cynical and resigned) she was pleased when she believed he had intimated in a letter that they would be married. Her own analysis of her attachment to him is particularly astute.

In truth, if I believed it [her match with Jacques] to be inevitable, it was because, without consciously realizing it, I felt it would provide the ideal solution to all my difficulties.³⁷

She was largely right: social acceptance, familial approbation, financial security, class status, and a degree of freedom to pursue her intellectual interests were some of the advantages a marriage to Jacques would have provided. That she loved him as a friend rather than a lover was a small matter in circles where she would

³⁷ Beauvoir, Memoirs, 209.

be fortunate to marry someone she liked at all and doubly lucky to be matched with someone who seemed to respect her mind.

Many passages are devoted to her self-doubts concerning, longings for, and meditations about Jacques.³⁸ By the time he returned to Paris (with his new wife, whom he had married for her dowry), Beauvoir had begun the independent pursuit of social and intellectual pleasures and was, she says, merely irritated by his betrayal.³⁹ Nevertheless, she does make the point of recounting how he ruined himself and his family through speculation and was eventually thrown out by his wife for being a drunkard and a womanizer.⁴⁰

Her relationship with Sartre, however, struck a different chord in her heart and her desire for a secure union (the traditional mark of love) was only overcome by intellectual conviction. The argument for personal freedom and sexual liberty which he presented to her was stronger than her attachment to her own emotional needs and she agreed to a sort of contract with him: for two years they would stay together and be monogamous, thereafter they would freely seek other sexual partners but they would remain one because of their close intellectual affinity and their resolve to tell each other everything.⁴¹

³⁸ See for example Beauvoir, Memoirs, 216-220, 242, 282, 288 or 318.

³⁹ Beauvoir, Memoirs, 346-347.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, Memoirs, 349.

⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir The Prime of Life trans. Peter Green (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 24.

To contemporary feminists, this argument is easily identifiable as the line of the sexual liberals; guaranteeing men emotional support from and sexual access to women in return for very little. Under patriarchy, such strategies have little liberating value. In the 1930s, however, such reasoning, in its very reversal of social expectations, would seem a radical rebellion; indeed had the arrangement better cared for Beauvoir's emotional needs and been of her own choosing (it was presented as her only option) it would have been a successful strategy of resistance to patriarchal norms.⁴²

The following year, when she nearly suffered a nervous breakdown in her anxiety over their imminent separation because of her posting to Marseilles, Sartre did propose marriage as a solution: state law forbade married couples from living apart and the state would therefore give them postings together. Beauvoir refused.⁴³ She knew Sartre's intentions for his life and refused to embrace a fallacy. This is an act of true resistance to the demands of her social milieu where marriage was largely a front and men's philandering widely accepted. As a woman living an increasingly public life, and as a writer exposing this life in her memoirs, Beauvoir offers an example of an alternative relationship, and her political act has a wide audience.

Charles's negotiation of the marriage traditions of her society was also an act of political resistance. Throughout her

⁴² Beauvoir, Prime of Life, 24.

⁴³ Beauvoir, Prime of Life, 65-66.

autobiography she denounces the arranged marriages, which allied families and consolidated property, prevalent in her community.

Usually the men arranged everything without consulting anyone. When they met at fairs, they talked about business, they talked about the future. Sacks of oats, breeding hogs, shearing sheep, arranging marriages were all alike - everything got tossed into the same bag.

"Say, you have a girl at home, I've got a son - why don't we marry them off? I've got a farmhouse, you've got the land. So if it's all right with you, let's draw up a contract."

That's what they said; then they drank on it, shook hands, and the deal was made.

For men and women alike, but above all for women, lives were broken by this custom.⁴⁴

Although neither the man nor the woman had control over the making of the match, once it was sealed, he gained control over her body, her property and her life. In story after story, Carles recounts the horrendous fates of many women, beaten to the point of death or madness, or forever separated from their true love, by this age old tradition. By the time she comes to the story of her own marriage, the reader is well aware of her reasoning and resolution on this point.

In 1927, she fell in love with Jean Carles, a worker from the *Midi*. A painter by trade when he arrived in Val-des-Près to ask her father for her hand, he immediately joined in with the haying, prepared a delicious meal for the family and later transformed the old chateau with whitewash and hand painted frescoes. Animosity between the peasant class and the working class, however, ran deep and although her father liked Jean, his decision was no. He instructed his daughter to make instead a match with a peasant boy

⁴⁴ Carles, 8.

with property.⁴⁵

Emilie rebelled, making use of all her arguments about the value of the man, the importance of love, and the dreadful fate of marriages of alliance. She concluded by telling her father that he would agree or he would lose her.⁴⁶ Unlike many peasant women she was not wholly reliant on her father and his property; she had a small bit of independence as a school teacher and in this case she used it to assert her will. Her father capitulated and she continued the fight against the rest of her family clan on the same grounds. She also refused to draw up the traditional marriage contract in which the worldly possessions of each were listed. To do so would have been humiliating to Jean who owned nothing and would have exposed his debts to her family. Marriage, argues Emilie, is about sharing and wealth is about something far greater than property:

Jean was authentic wealth, the only kind I had always wanted and never had. A head full of dreams, a smile laden with promises, a heart heavy with the goodness of the earth, such was the wealth offered and given me.⁴⁷

In many ways, she had broken free from the fate prescribed for peasant women in her society. As a school teacher she was a prominent person and her successful resistance to tradition and rejection of accepted values could not go unnoticed.

To a certain degree, the struggles of both Carles and Beauvoir

⁴⁵ Carles, 153-155.

⁴⁶ Carles, 155.

⁴⁷ Carles, 158.

to seize control over their intimate relationships and define them by their own standards is also a struggle for the right to control their own sexuality. Time after time, in both texts, the authors give evidence of the strict taboos and secrecy surrounding people's bodies in both peasant and bourgeois society in early twentieth-century France. Carles speaks of one newlywed girl's genuine surprise that her husband expected to be able to touch her.⁴⁸ She tells the story of her sister's death in childbirth when she refused to lift the sheet for the midwives to deliver the child: her husband was away at the front and no one else could convince her it was all right.⁴⁹ She recounts her distress when she was forced to leave her three year old niece in the care of her father; he could not imagine changing the little girl's clothes and simply refused to do so. Carles surmises that he had never seen a naked body in his life.⁵⁰

In Beauvoir's family, sexuality was a taboo subject and any passages in her reading material that her mother considered sexually suggestive were censored by pinning the offending pages together.⁵¹ Beauvoir recalls the scandal of women in low neck gowns and the suspicion that there was something mysterious in the sight of her mother's cleavage.⁵²

⁴⁸ Carles, 71.

⁴⁹ Carles, 52.

⁵⁰ Carles, 123.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, Prime of Life, 82-83.

⁵² Beauvoir, Prime of Life, 58.

One might expect that the author of The Second Sex would have devoted considerable space in her autobiography to the development of her own sexuality. In her theoretical work on women, she argued that the repression of women's sexuality was an important element of the oppression of women under patriarchy. As a woman writing in the 1950s, however, the subject of her own sexuality is self-censored. The society for which she wrote would have certainly misunderstood and sensationalized her sexual life; her authority as an intellectual woman would have been compromised. In this way, the memoir itself is misleading, presenting as platonic relationships that were actually sexual. Thus her fondness for Sartre's student Jacques Bost and her screaming matches and emotional breaks with her own former student, Nathalie Sorokine, seem somewhat odd.⁵³ The politics of women's sexuality in France in the 1950s is therefore reflected in these compromises in Beauvoir's text.

Beauvoir is unequivocal about her attitude towards children: she does not particularly like them, she did not want them, and had felt no loss at the prospect of not having them. The value placed on childbearing by her Catholic friends bewildered her; thus when Zaza claimed that having nine children was "just as good" as writing books, the teenage Simone was baffled. In a society which trained women to accept their life role as wives and mothers as natural and necessary, Beauvoir's decision not to have children takes on the significance of political resistance. She refused her

⁵³ Moi, 232.

socialization.

Carles, on the other hand, adored children and before her marriage even considered having one without a husband. Two factors dissuaded her: first, as an unwed mother she would lose her job and be forced back into a situation of dependence on her father; second, she read a popular novel about an unwed mother and was dissuaded by the suffering which appeared to be brought upon the child.

When she married Jean Carles, she was delighted that she would be able to have children of her own. Yet when the state finally stripped away the parental rights of her younger sister's husband -not for trying to burn down the house with his wife and children, but for exposing himself in public - she gladly took in her sister's four children despite the financial strain.⁵⁴ (Her sister had been committed to a psychiatric hospital by her abusive husband.)⁵⁵ Children - not necessarily one's own - are valued by Carles. She spent her entire pay cheque providing for her wards. When she was reproached by a cousin for spending money on her sister's children that she could have spent on her own, she defended her decision by arguing that her children's basic material needs were being met.⁵⁶ This shift in attitude from children as property to children as people with needs and rights was an important political resistance to the dominant social view of

⁵⁴ Carles, 152.

⁵⁵ Carles, 122.

⁵⁶ Carles, 173.

children. The lives of all the children under her direct care and under her tuition would have been affected by this political move.

Carles position as a teacher gave her the power to inculcate the children of several generations of the *Briançonnais* peasantry with her political ideals. If the educational reformers had hoped that the primary school system which they put in place in the late nineteenth century would serve to win peasant and working class loyalty and support for Republican candidates, they sadly underestimated the degree of independence exercised by women such as Carles.

First exposed to anarchist ideas during her stay in Paris, Carles went on to marry an anarchist worker with whom she shared readings and further developed her ideas. Distrust of government meshed well with her experience as a peasant. In her opinion, government officials at every level were out to line their own pockets and abuse their power over others. Candidates promised to help the peasants during the campaign in order to secure votes, but when asked for concrete help, protested that they were but one in six hundred in the assembly. She taught school children to always think for themselves and to question authority starting, in many ways, with her own.⁵⁷ She taught peasants to question the age-old antagonism between peasants and workers; she urged them to see each other as fellow slaves in a capitalist system which ultimately worked in favour of neither group.⁵⁸ In this way, she used the bit

⁵⁷ Carles, 227.

⁵⁸ Carles, 254-255.

of power she derived from the state to undermine its structure.

Carles's teaching bore fruit nine years after her retirement when she organized local resistance to the proposed super-highway through the Clarée Valley. All of the 16 farmers/property owners in Val-des-Près were former pupils and despite the lack of a tradition of peasant organizing and protest in the region, each of them, with their entire family, left their fields at the height of the haying season to parade in protest with their tractors through the streets of Briançon. Her leadership was powerful but the seeds which made it possible were those she had sown in the classroom over her many years of teaching.

Beauvoir, too, is scornful of the formal political structures of France. In The Prime of Life she recounts her and Sartre's radical disengagement from formal politics. While critical of the bourgeoisie and sympathetic to the worker's movement, they reasoned that as intellectuals from the middle class they should not join the communist party but should instead use their positions to speak sympathetically of it. Writing in the 1950s, Beauvoir was explicitly critical of her former attitude and identified that it came from a place of privilege and naïveté. In the 1950s when she began publishing her memoirs, she was actively engaged through her writing and publication with Sartre of Les temps modernes, the only French journal consistently publishing reports critical of French colonial action and policy.⁵⁹ She identifies this shift in her own attitude as the consequence of her experience during the

⁵⁹ Moi, 188.

occupation. Significantly, the only formal political movement Beauvoir ever joined was the women's movement. She joined in 1971, convinced that the promotion of the cause of women could not wait on, and furthermore might not be achieved by, class revolution. Only in this form did she come to trust formal political engagement.

The life narratives of Emilie Carles and Simone de Beauvoir bear witness to many other forms of political events in both their own lives and those around them. The examples studied here have been selected for their potential strength in demonstrating the political nature of women's personal resistance and acceptance of the ideas in their society. The politics of a society and the ways in which power is resisted cannot be studied solely through a focus on the traditional political elites and the formal structures harnessed to measure the agreement (acquiescence) of "the people." In their lives and in their creation of their texts, both Carles and Beauvoir negotiated the boundaries of women's identity and place in twentieth century French society. The myth of "political memoir" serves only to devalue the politics in the personal narratives of those who could not or would not join the formal political elite.

Chapter Three: Speaking With a Privileged Voice

The feminist deconstruction of the personal/political dichotomy effectively opens the way for reading all personal narratives for the gendered politics of the society in which they are produced. The narratives traditionally categorized as "political memoir" lose their exclusive claim to the status of personal political testimony. They can still be read for the personal perspective they offer on the events witnessed by the author but in a feminist analysis, the personal position of the author and the political implications of his/her testimony become the focus. Generic conformity, the presentation of the narrator and the transitions from personal observations to so-called objective analysis in the memoirs of two interwar French diplomats are all sites of the exercise of political power.

Ambassadors Robert Coulondre and André François-Poncet, who represented France in the 1930s, both published memoirs relating the events leading to the outbreak of war in 1940. Coulondre was posted to Moscow in 1936 and was transferred to Berlin in 1938 where he served until the outbreak of war. He published his memoir De Staline à Hitler in 1950. François-Poncet served as ambassador to Berlin from 1931 until his transfer to Rome in 1938. His memoir, Une Ambassade à Berlin, was published in 1946.

The standard route for access to the diplomatic service during this period was through study at the *Ecole libre des sciences politiques* in Paris, a private school staffed mainly by former

foreign service members, which specialized in preparing candidates for the very difficult and highly competitive exams for the diplomatic and consular services: *le grand* and *le petit concours* respectively. Candidates were tested on their knowledge of history, geography, international law, and a minimum of two foreign languages. Those who succeeded (the number of positions available varied from year to year) were sent on a three month probationary posting before returning for further written and oral tests. Those who passed were given a junior administrative posting and put on the payroll of the Quai d'Orsay, home of the French Foreign service. Such a process eliminated those without the financial resources and leisure to pursue the required studies: the effect was to limit membership in the foreign service to upper middle class men. The exclusion of women was made formal by law in 1929.¹ This was the route followed by Robert Coulondre in 1909.

The diplomatic corps also, in rare situations, recruited high level members of other branches of the French state bureaucracy or prominent politicians or businessmen for postings where unique skills or public image would be beneficial to a specific diplomatic goal. André François-Poncet, Deputy to the National Assembly for the Seine from 1924 to 1932, was recruited in 1932 for the French Embassy in Berlin.

¹ Robert Young French Foreign Policy, 1918-1945: A Guide to Research and Research Materials Rev. ed. (Washington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1991), 23; and Jacques Baillou et al. Les Affaires Etrangères et Le Corps Diplomatique Français Tome II 1870-1980 (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984), 417-419.

François-Poncet was a graduate of the prestigious *Ecole normale supérieure* and had passed the competitive *agrégation* exam in economics.² He was fluent in German and familiar with German culture. The Quai hoped that his prestige, talents and experience as under-secretary of state for national economy in the negotiations undertaken in Paris and London in 1931 with the German Chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, would enable him to work with the German government to find an acceptable solution to the debt repayment problem, thereby alleviating the German economic crisis and ultimately the right-wing, nationalist agitation.³

Of the two narratives in question, De Staline à Hitler by Coulondre conforms more strictly to the generic specifications of memoir writing. He writes about his own actions and events to which he was a personal witness. Significant developments in international relations such as the Munich Accords, in which he played no part, are reported from the distance of an Ambassador only partially informed by telegram by his own government.⁴ By his own admission, the opinions which he gives of such events are personal and largely speculative.⁵

Unlike the women studied in chapter two, Coulondre appears to

² See above, chapter two, for an explanation of the competitive *agrégation* exams.

³ Baillou, 416; and André François-Poncet Une Ambassade à Berlin (Paris: Flammarion, 1946) 23.

⁴ Robert Coulondre De Staline à Hitler (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1950) 154-155.

⁵ Coulondre, 8.

maintain a distinction between personal and political events, and presents only the latter. While these are indeed events in his life, their impact upon him is invisible. Respectful of generic boundaries, he begins his preface with a disclaimer:

Ceci n'est pas un précis d'histoire. Ce n'est pas non plus un journal. C'est plutôt un pèlerinage que je propose au lecteur, un pèlerinage diplomatique aux lieux où j'ai vécu les années les plus fortes et les plus secouées de mon existence, dans la Russie des Soviets et l'Allemagne d'Hitler, de 1936 à 1939.⁶

While he will personally guide the reader through this pilgrimage, as the bureaucrat who had stood there for the nation, and although he admits to the intensity of the experience, he offers only an official tour. The impact of such separation between personal and political events is the illusion that the author did in fact operate as a functionary unencumbered by personal political views or interests. In this way, personal evaluations of the impact of political developments appear to be true statements of national interest rather than the class bound biases that they are: Coulondre, for instance deplores the revolutionary agitation of the Communist Party in France for undermining the national interests of France.⁷ What version of the nation? Whose interests?

François-Poncet assumes a more lofty perspective than Coulondre in his own narrative, Une Ambassade à Berlin. Despite

⁶ Coulondre, 7. "This is not a short history. Nor is it a diary. Rather it is a pilgrimage that I offer to the reader, a diplomatic pilgrimage to the places where I lived the most intense and unnerving years of my existence, to Soviet Russia and Hitler's Germany, from 1936 to 1939." (my translation)

⁷ Coulondre, 39.

the assertion in his *avant-propos* that the time for writing the history of the Third Reich had not yet come, the majority of his text is written in the same style as an analytic history. Specific actions take second place to social trends and movements, and to economic and cultural factors. A distinction between personal and political is maintained in the extreme and in some sections the reader could conceivably lose sight of the author's own involvement. By avoiding the use of the first person singular pronoun in the vast majority of his text, he presents his analysis as objective. This would have been the voice in which he had been trained to speak as a *normalien*, and it is significant to the current study for precisely the power inherent in the claim to objectivity. In general, he seems to strain against the boundaries of the memoir genre in favour of writing contemporary history. He is willing to use the authority provided by his claim to personal experience of events to get his views published but does not accept the formal limitations of perspective. When François-Poncet does use the first person singular pronoun it is only to narrate his own dramatic actions, to claim important presentiments or to distance himself from diplomatic actions which later became notorious. It is significant that the only clear admission of a limited perspective in his text appears at the beginning of his chapter on the Munich agreements.

Je voudrais relater, maintenant, les souvenirs, impressions et réflexions qu'a suscitées et laissées dans mon esprit la Conférence de Munich (29 septembre 1938). C'est un sujet toujours brûlant. Je ne pense pas, cependant, que mon témoignage soit de nature à l'envenimer. En tout cas, c'est le témoignage d'un homme qui n'a été, dans l'affaire, qu'un

informateur, un intermédiaire, un assistant, un exécutant, qui n'a jamais été consulté, quand furent prises les décisions capitales et qui, par conséquent, ne plaide pas pour son saint.⁸

This passage marks the first appearance of the first person pronoun in fifteen pages. The fourteen pages that follow this declaration are once again filled with analysis of the situation, arguing in effect that the results of the Munich conference were essentially a foregone conclusion and that the western democracies did not have the power or the will to act. By claiming in the final line of the passage that he does not need to excuse his actions he underlines the conclusion that he is demanding from his audience: that an advisor is without real power and therefore without guilt or responsibility.

Both Coulondre's and François-Poncet's constructions of authorial voice and implicitly of self/other relationships are indicative of the enormous personal/political power these men held in twentieth-century French society. François-Poncet is largely above "I" and exists as an entirely independent, authoritative and supposedly objective voice. For Coulondre, the presentation of the authorial "I" is uncomplicated: he assumes that who he was and how he came to be in the position he was in requires no explanation.

⁸ François-Poncet, 314. "I would like to relate now, the memories, impressions and reflexions aroused and left in my mind by the Munich Conference (29 September, 1938). It is still a burning subject. However, I do not think that my testimony is of the sort to poison it further. In any case, it is the testimony of a man who, in this affair, was but a source of information, an intermediary, an assistant, an executor; a man who was never consulted when the main decisions were made and who, consequently, is not pleading for his soul." (my translation)

He opens the narrative with the story of his mother bringing him the telegram announcing his posting to Moscow while he was out hunting! He claims that he was "in no way prepared for [his] new functions" and that he knew "no more about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the USSR, than the man on the street."⁹ While he may not have had much specific preparation on the Moscow Embassy, as a trained diplomat he was far from unprepared and certainly far better equipped than the man on the street to access and assimilate any information available. Such false levelling would have hardly been deceptive for his French audience: as an Ambassador, he existed already in their minds as a cultural stereotype: well educated, extremely cultured, highly trained, white, male and upper middle class. Undoubtably, he was a far more complex individual than this, and the information about who he is and where he came from that is not exposed would surely affect how we read his testimony.

More pernicious still is the very real possibility that in Coulondre's mind, who he was in the world was of no importance; as a diplomat he would rise above the constraints of his own perspective and represent the interests of France. He intimates as much when he tells the Soviet Foreign Minister, Litvinov, that he is above ideological prejudices and holds no firm opinion of the Soviet Union either way; he was merely interested in a practical alliance which would benefit both nations.

Je suis venu ici, dis-je en substance à Litvinov, sans aucune

⁹ Coulondre, 12. (my translation).

prévention contre la Russie des Soviets, mais sans préjugé favorable non plus. Je suis, par contre, un partisan convaincu du pacte d'assistance, parce que je le crois un des éléments nécessaires à la sauvegarde d'une paix à laquelle nos deux pays sont également attachés. Votre sagacité, qui est bien connue, vous amènera, un jour ou l'autre, le plus tôt sera le mieux, à constater que je parle franc et que c'est mon habitude. Eh bien! voilà, je viens vous dire: si les choses continuent à aller de ce train, il n'y aura bientôt plus de pacte d'assistance.

.....
[I]l faut en finir avec l'ingérence soviétique en France. Ou elle cessera, ou le pacte d'assistance deviendra, à tout le moins, lettre morte.¹⁰

The unspoken assumption though is that an internationalist ideological body can be benefited as a nation: that is, that its security as a nation was more important than its goals as part of an international revolutionary movement. Coulondre's "practical" approach reveals a very real ideological foundation, a desire for the maintenance of the status quo in France and between France and her neighbours. By initially admitting the limitations of his own perspective and then denying the partial nature of his observations and actions, Coulondre achieves the same type of authority as François-Poncet. Whatever criticisms others may offer of the diplomacy of the French state, the effect of these narratives is to claim the authority to speak of what was "possible."

¹⁰ Coulondre, 31-32. "I came here," I basically said to Litvinov, "without any prejudice against Soviet Russia, but also without any prejudice in favour of it either. I am, on the other hand, a convinced partisan of the Assistance Pact because I believe it is one of the necessary elements in the preservation of a peace to which both of our countries are equally attached. Your wisdom, which is well known, will lead you, one day or another, the sooner the better, to see that I speak frankly and that that is my habit. And so! there, I have come to tell you: if things continue in this manner, there will soon be no Assistance Pact.[...] Soviet interference in France must end. Either it ends or the Assistance Pact will become, at the least, dead letter." (my translation)

In effect, what was possible, according to these men, is precisely what happened. They protest that personally they did all that was in their limited power to sway their own government to take a firmer line, yet assert over and over that such a line could not reasonably be followed: pacifism, communism and the forty-hour work week in France conspired against earlier action in the face of Nazism. Public ignorance and prejudice militated against a practical alliance with the Soviet Union. While they speak with unabashed self-righteousness as the representatives of a democracy, they argue, in effect, that the reliance of the democracy on public support prevented practical action. The cumulative effect of such claims then is to suggest that those who are best informed must be followed. Democracy is advocated in theory, but in practice, they suggest, the politicians and bureaucrats need greater freedom to act in "the best interests of the nation." Voters must abdicate their opinions and have confidence in their leaders.

Such leaders furthermore, according to Coulondre, must be practical men rather than idealists. Speaking of his first encounter with the Socialist premier Léon Blum he issues a warning to his early Fourth Republic readers.

Pour ma part, chaque fois que j'ai l'honneur d'être reçu par lui, au bout de très peu de temps je n'ai plus envie que de dire: <<Oui... oui... oui...>> Seulement, - l'odieux et inévitable seulement! - seulement passé le seuil le charme se dissipe au contact souvent brutal des réalités. Ah! si on pouvait mettre à la mode la politique <<abstraite>> comme Picasso l'a fait pour la peinture, il en irait autrement. Mais la France est une grande maison dont la président du Conseil est la *housekeeper* et je vois mal une maîtresse de maison servant une soupe <<abstraite>>, je vois surtout mal la

famille attablée prenant du poids à s'en nourrir.¹¹

Coulondre succeeds in making the goals of the Popular Front look absurd. The comparison with the painting of Picasso is in fact particularly ingenious. By the time Coulondre was writing, Picasso's work was being touted by intellectuals as brilliant and meaningful. Those who did not appreciate it were/are disparaged as lacking vision and imagination. They are vindicated in this homage to realism. Socialist theory, it is suggested, would have the effect of putting together elements that realistically cannot be brought together and twisting bodies and material in impossible ways. The common accusation against left wing movements, in fact, is that the theories are idealist. Coulondre's metaphor actually would work against all theory in as much as all theory is abstract, at least to a certain degree. If the word "ideal" is substituted for "abstract," the meaning is entirely different. An idealist painting has a much broader appeal and the family nourished on an "ideal" soup would do quite well.

The reference to the housewife is also doubly loaded. It constructs the French nation as in need of practical care for the provision of its basic needs. While the language of responsibility

¹¹ Coulondre, 14. "For my part, each time that I have the honour to be received by him, at the end of only a short time I only wish to say, "Yes... yes... yes..." Only, -the odious and inevitable only! - only past the doorway the charm dissipates in an often brutal contact with reality. Ah! if one could put into fashion abstract politics like Picasso has done for painting, it would be otherwise. But France is a large house of which the President of the Counsel [the Premier] is the housekeeper and I cannot well see a mistress of a home serving an "abstract" soup, and I really cannot well see a family at their table gaining weight by eating it." (my translation)

is employed, the message is one of dependence. Furthermore, a mother is not elected; she exists in a defined role that is socially naturalized and deviance from that role is construed as a prelude to disaster. His metaphor relies on a general agreement that a mother who thinks (abstractly) rather than simply following traditional practice will fail in her duties and starve her family.

Women are insignificant figures in both Coulondre's and François-Poncet's memoirs. Coulondre mentions his mother in his introductory paragraph in order to note her religious terror at the prospect of his assignment to the Soviet Union. The image is one of the son leaving home to protect his mother (and womenfolk in general) from an evil she can not really comprehend and irrationally fears. He mentions his wife when he talks about the difficulty of getting language lessons for both of them during their stay in Moscow. François-Poncet only mentions his wife in order to underline the complete audacity of the German media: to stir up anti-French sentiment, they were even vilifying the wife of an ambassador. In a valiant display of personal integrity, François-Poncet informs the German secretary of Foreign Affairs that he will quit his post if the attacks are not stopped.¹² Significantly, this is the only issue over which he threatens his withdrawal. Powerless to make anyone heed his warnings of the Nazi threat or to prevent any of the Nazi atrocities he abhors, he can still protect his wife. In a metaphoric parallel to his relationship as protector of French interests in Germany in his

¹² François-Poncet, 30.

public life, he is able to fulfill his role as the chivalrous protector of his wife in his private life.

Other than such brief appearances as accessories for the male ego, women are absent from these "political" memoirs. On the one hand this can be seen as a reflection of the political situation in mid-twentieth century France, where formal politics existed as a domain virtually closed to women. On the other, it underlines the fundamental problem with the traditional classification of "political" memoir; since the exclusion of half the population from participation in the formal political process is itself a political question, the definition of "political" memoir then paradoxically functions to exclude such aspects of politics.

The memoirs of Robert Coulondre and André François-Poncet represent a common approach to the traditional "political" memoir. They reflect and advocate a traditional liberal approach to politics and social change. The "interests of the nation" are silently assimilated with the interests of the French male bourgeoisie and define the limits of the possible in French politics and diplomacy. It is this aspect of the politics of personal narratives that a feminist approach to personal narratives uncovers. The veracity of the author's account of his particular actions is no longer of fundamental importance to a study of politics. It is in their representations of their own role, and their relationships to others that men of power reveal the politics of their society.

Chapter Four: Conclusions

Feminism is, by definition, a revolutionary ideology: its goal is to bring an end to the oppression of women. A considerable amount of feminist literature has been written demonstrating the complex and deep rooted functioning of this oppression in twentieth-century society. To reveal the mechanisms by which it is maintained, however, is insufficient. Feminist theory, research and activism must work consistently to undermine the foundations upon which such oppression rests.

While postmodern theory has been closely concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge production, this thesis has attempted to move beyond postmodernism to a self-consciously feminist approach. Theory can be, and is, borrowed from postmodern thinkers for the pursuit of feminist goals. In this way, in chapter one, the dichotomy of personal and political upon which the category of "political memoir" is based has been deconstructed to reveal both that the border between the two is profoundly political in its impact and implications and that neither category can be understood independently of the other. The literary canon is called into question for its traditional reliance on male norms in the definition, classification, and evaluation of literary genres. The long standing distinction between memoir and autobiography is criticized for the forced compartmentalization of the public and private which it implies. As feminist literary theorists have argued women, in particular, have regularly transgressed this

generic boundary in the crafting of their personal narratives. Men too must negotiate this distinction and to a large degree their successful separation of their public from their private life reflects their socialization to the power position of masculinity in a patriarchal society.

Chapter two demonstrates the political nature of women's so-called personal lives. By examining the life stories of both Simone de Beauvoir, a middle-class writer, philosopher and professor, and Emilie Carles, a peasant and a teacher, the political implications of personal negotiations with social roles and socio-political structures are demonstrated. In other words, the very notion of a personal realm is a political construct.

Chapter three complements and reinforces the points made in chapter two by demonstrating the ways in which a personal negotiation of gender and class socialization is implied in texts focused on providing personal testimony of involvement in "high politics." By examining the power assumed and the authority claimed in these texts, we return again to a study of the fundamental structuring of social politics along the lines of gender.

This thesis does not aim to open the category of "political memoir" up to a more diverse group than have traditionally found a place there. Any attempt to draw a boundary separating personal narratives into classes of "non-political" and "political" assumes that the author has the right to define the experiences of others. Since the personal is political, all personal narratives testify to

the politics of an age and the label "political" is essentially redundant.

The existence of several other particular types of personal narrative could be offered as evidence against the main argument of this thesis that "political memoir" in itself, as a classification of historical literature, functions to support a sociopolitical system hierarchically structured along lines of gender, race and class. These are "political memoirs" by women, "political memoirs" by revolutionaries and "political memoirs" with a considerable autobiographical content. Examples of all three of these types of "political memoir" can be found in Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory edited by George Egerton. The first two types support his claim of the ubiquity of the genre, while the latter supports his claim that in fact "political memoir" is a polygenre transgressing traditional generic boundaries.

Three basic forms of traditional "political memoir" by women are possible. The first is the testimony of a woman as a closely positioned observer of "high politics." Two examples are found in Egerton's collection; these are the memoirs of the wives and daughters of British diplomats, studied by Valerie Cromwell, and the *nikki* of Japanese women courtiers of the seventh century, studied by Joshua Mostow. Both authors seem anxious to "prove" that their subjects really do belong in the category of political memoir; evidence, it would seem, of the prestigious status of the

category.¹ Cromwell suggests (but fails to prove) that the women in question exercised some influence over the conduct of formal diplomacy. What is significant here is that the argument for inclusion maintains the traditional definition of politics. This is also fundamental to Mostow's argument. His essay is based on the goal to reclassify *nikki* as "political" rather than literary memoirs. "... I will argue that these memoirs are political, not only in the sense that all writing is political, but also in the sense that these works were specifically commissioned by major political figures, for specifically political reasons."² The implication is that the prestige and value of these works will be raised by the recognition of their "political" content.

If the argument of this thesis were that "political memoir" was a myth because it, by definition, excluded women then these essays would be sufficient proof of the fallacious nature of my argument. In fact, they do not in any way contradict the evidence provided or the arguments made. These women are only granted entry because of their status as observers of "high politics." As persons they are valued as observers rather than actors. The definition of "political" which is used masks their political agency. The classification of these memoirs as "political," then, still functions to maintain a limited view of politics and does not

¹ Valerie Cromwell, "'Married to Affairs of State': Memoirs of the Wives and Daughters of British Diplomats" in George Egerton ed. "Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory," Ts., 207-234; and Joshua Mostow, "Japanese *Nikki* as Political Memoirs" in Egerton ed., 106-120.

² Mostow, 107. (*italics in original*)

draw attention to the ways in which these narratives reveal the gender divisions of their society and the ways in which these texts negotiate these political aspects of their experience.

The two other types of "political memoir" by women which could be offered as counter evidence would be the memoirs of women who succeeded in traditional politics, such as Margaret Thatcher, or of those who were involved in "informal" political movement (that is, organized around a specific political goal, rather than for the attainment of formal political power) such as the women who organized and led the protests to save the forests of Clayoquot Sound here in British Columbia. In both instances, yet again, a traditional definition of politics would function as the standard of measure allowing their inclusion and other aspects of the texts would take second billing. The feminist analysis proposed by this thesis would remain pertinent and useful since even if such women were to explicitly deny the relevance of gender, their texts would contain information about how gender shaped their experience or how they managed to defy prescribed gender roles in some instances.

Essentially the same argument applies to the memoirs of revolutionaries. Milton Israel in an article entitled "Indian Nationalist voices: Autobiography and the Process of Return" examines numerous memoirs including those of Mahatma Ghandi. While these writings were used effectively to serve revolutionary political purposes, to distinguish them from other personal narratives as "political," still reinforces the concept of a political leadership class. In other words, it is the label, and

the distinction it implies, rather than the actual narratives which serves to reinforce a hierarchical perception of politics.

Finally, the fact that some "political memoirs" are also full fledged autobiographies, investigating the development of an interior self, does not change the fact that they are admitted to the status of "political memoir" because of the testimony they include of personal involvement in formal politics. A feminist analysis such as this not only admits, but also insists that memoir will include considerable evidence of the personal (because political) life of the author. It is indeed a "polygenre" as Egerton has claimed, but it is also a means by which many personal testimonies of political experience are denied the status of "political."

While the focus of this thesis has been on the functions and implications of preserving a category of historical literature labelled "political memoir," its larger purpose is to challenge a common approach to the study of history. The maintenance of a separate category of historical literature labelled "political memoir" is related to the maintenance of a category of study labelled "political history." And political history is related to the maintenance of patriarchy. The liberal paradigm which dominates much of present historical research would argue for a broadening of the scope of "political" to accommodate the malcontents. Ultimately, this is a patronizing stance; only a radical rethinking of our concepts will lead us to new visions of society. As Audre Lorde has argued, "the master's tools will never

dismantle the master's house."³ Feminists trained to the study of history need to carefully examine the techniques and assumptions we have been taught in order to ferret out those which will undermine our goals. Examining the politics in the life stories of women such as Emilie Carles may be one way of blowing up the dominant paradigm.

³ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Lorde, (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- Carles, Emilie. A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France. as told to Robert Destanque. Trans. Avriel H. Goldberger. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Coulondre, R. De Staline à Hitler: Souvenirs de Deux Ambassades 1936-1939. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1950.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter. Trans. James Kirkup. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1959.
- . The Prime of Life. Trans. Peter Green. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962.
- François-Poncet, André. Souvenirs d'une Ambassade à Berlin: septembre 1931 - octobre 1938. Paris: Librairie Flammarion, 1946.

Secondary Sources:

- Baillou, J., et al. Les Affaires Etrangères et Le Corps Diplomatique Français. vol. II. 1870-1980. Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984.
- Boniface, Pamela. "The Personal is Political: Russian Schoolmistresses Speak for Themselves." MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991.
- Brodzki, Bella and Celeste Schneck, eds. Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Canning, Kathleen. "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. 19 (1994), 368-404.
- Cobban, Alfred. A History of Modern France Volume 3: 1871-1962. Harmondsworth: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1965.
- Egerton, George, ed. "Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory." Ts.
- Fraser, Nancy. Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

- Hewitt, Leah D. Autobiographical Tighotropes: Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig and Maryse Condé. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.
- Kelly, Joan. Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Kessler-Harris, Alice. "Deconstructing History." Rev. of Gender and the Politics of History, by Joan W. Scott. Dissent 36 (1989): 274-277.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Evelyn Fox Keller eds. Conflicts in Feminism. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House." in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. By Lorde. Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984. 110-113.
- Moi, Toril. Simone De Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994.
- Nicholson, Linda J. ed. Feminism/Postmodernism. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1990.
- Pascal, R. Design and Truth in Autobiography. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Peel, Ellen. "The Self is Always an Other: Going the Long Way Home to Autobiography." Twentieth Century Literature 35.1 (1989): 1-16.
- Personal Narratives Group, ed. Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Ramazanoglu, Caroline, ed. Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism. London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1993.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. Gender and the Politics of History. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- . "History in Crisis?" American Historical Review 94 (1989), 680-692.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. Decolonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self Representation. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- . "Who's Talking/Who's Talking Back? The Subject of

Personal Narrative." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 18 (1993): 392-407.

Talbott, John E. The Politics of Educational Reform in France, 1918-1940. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Weber, Eugen. My France: Politics, Culture, Myth. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

----- . Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.

Wright, G. France in Modern Times: From the Enlightenment to the Present. 4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981.

Young, R.J. French Foreign Policy 1918-1945: A Guide to Research and Research Materials. rev. ed. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1991.

----- . In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Addendum

I'd like to begin this afternoon by citing a passage from Trinh T. Minh-Ha's essay, "Cotton and Iron."

"The to- and fro- movement between advancement and regression necessarily leads to a situation where every step taken is at once the first step (a step back) and the last step (a step forward) - the only step, in a precise circumstance, at a precise moment of (one's) history. In this context, a work-in-progress, for example, is not a work whose step precedes other steps in a trajectory that leads to the final work. It is not a work awaiting a better, more perfect stage of realization. Inevitably a work is always a form of tangible closure. But closures need not close off; they can be doors opening into other closures and functioning as ongoing passages to an elsewhere(-within-here). Like a throw of a dice, each opening is also a closing, for each work generates its own laws and limits, each has its specific condition and deals with a specific context. The closure here, however, is a way of letting the work go rather than of sealing it off. Thus, every work materialized can be said to be a work-in-progress. The notion of a finished work, versus that of a work requiring finishing, loses its pertinence. What needs to be reconsidered are these widely adopted and imposed forms of closure whose main purpose is simply to wrap up a product and facilitate its consumption. They create neither a space of serenity nor of fecundity for the mind and body to rest and grow; rather, they naturalize the zone of conformity, where freedom consists of filling to one's taste and monetary capacity, the pre-assigned slots."

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Cotton and Iron," When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1991), 15-16.

The thesis you have read, then, represents a moment in my negotiation of the training to professional history. A step back, (into my training), a step forward, (in my thought). I have deliberately retained a tension between we/they "the historians" which initially simply appeared in my writing. I like it because it represents not only the tension of a rite of passage such as a thesis defense but also my own continuing ambivalence about joining the ranks of "the historians."

That ambivalence was the source of the argument in this thesis.

I completed my course work in the spring of 1992. I also went on strike as a teaching assistant in solidarity with the university support staff in the month prior to the exam period. Frustrated and disillusioned, I left the campus and joined a feminist collective here in Vancouver. I spent the next eight months working as a "political activist." I also tried to begin work on my thesis. By this point, however, both training and experience in both these activities told me that this was not possible. Historian and political activist seemed incompatible.

My intention had been to look at a series of political memoirs produced by those who had held power in the years that led to the defeat of France in 1940. I wanted to look at the way they told the story in a postwar period of intense political restructuring. How did they use their memoirs to warn and educate their readership? And it's funny, as I rewrote that description, it struck me again as an interesting project. And yet there was something wrong and it took me until June of 1993 to actually say, "I do not agree with the way 'political' has been defined for the discussion of 'political memoir.'" The political events and actions all around me did not fit the definition. The flood gates opened. "Political" was exclusionary of my political experience

and made suspect the ideology with which I worked but not that of my masters. Angry, fascinated and resolved, I returned.

After a bit of reading and a bit of thought. I sat down and wrote the thesis you have read. And submitting it to you is a form of closure. But it does not mean this is all I think there is to say on the subjects of 'the political,' of 'memoirs,' or of their relationship to the way we define and study 'history.' Nor does it mean that this could form the core of a reworking and extension to a larger critique. Some of the ideas could be carried forward but even were I to sit down tomorrow to write a seventy-five page thesis entitled "The Myth of Political Memoir: A Feminist Critique" it would be a very different piece.

I like the first chapter. I would read more and try to better trace the evolution of feminist thought about the relationship between power and knowledge. I would go to the popular texts which have formed the core of feminist activist theorizing and try to draw out the theoretical arguments which have been ignored because they are not academically sanctioned or convoluted. I would look at feminist magazines and propaganda and make explicit the originality of feminist ideas about socialization as the power to define. But this would be a (worthwhile) project onto itself.

I think comparative studies are important and I like the idea of drawing together Beauvoir, Carles, François-Poncet and

Coulondre. The selection however, was not entirely consonant with my objectives and reflects the degree to which I remained tied to my original project. The comparative basis could have been much broader. If I had worked with a greater diversity of texts and included working class men and women, French colonialists and peoples who had been colonized by the French for instance, I could have begun to draw out more information from those texts and the texts I did study about the socialization and negotiation of ideas about class and race and strengthened my observations about gender. A larger sample base could have also led to interesting suggestions about the degree to which shared language does not necessarily mean shared, unifying discourse because of different geographical and social place. But then again, even these studies would have been suggestive (not conclusive) of socialized politics. The texts I have studied, have, I hope, allowed me to highlight and perhaps begin to rupture some of the fissures in the edifice of political history. And this would be a closure which would open up new possibilities.