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Remaining Taboos in Recent Autobiographical Writing by Women

I think two important areas of taboo remain and continue to obstruct the writing of great confessional autobiography by women. These taboos concern (a) a woman writer's bad relationship with her mother and (b) her bad relationship with one or more of her children.

Luce Irigaray has written: 'In our society the mother-daughter relationship is a highly explosive nucleus. The dark continent of a dark continent.'⁽¹⁾ And Adrienne Rich has asserted: 'Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; whatever the individual mother's love and strength, the child in us, the small female who grew up in a male-controlled world, still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered.'⁽²⁾ Even more impossible to confess than such *under-mothering*, however, is the experience of having been *anti-mothered*. Instead of having felt cherished, nurtured, worried over, some women have grown up feeling emotionally neglected and even hated by their mother, terrified of her, kept hungry, battered, nearly killed. But for centuries special barriers have operated, forbidding women to confess to having felt un-mothered or anti-mothered. Shame at having failed to win a mother's love, shame for her that she could have failed so totally at loving - both of these have played a part in that long silence. More profound still has been a guilty, defensive protectiveness at work - guilt at having cost one's mother the pain of birth and protectiveness as though she were the one who needs to be mothered. Hence we find over and over again in women's autobiographical writing an unresolved, incompletely articulated tension between what a writer had actually felt in relation to her mother and what she claims to have felt and to feel. The writers have to seem to excuse and even champion their mothers while at the same time exposing them to the dislike of the world. Thus William McCarthy has noted of Mrs. Thrale in the late 18th Century:

'The object of her rage is her mother, and with excellent reason, yet she can never bring herself to say so outright. On the contrary, she is more apt to take pride in her daughterly obedience ("For true Love of one's Mother & real preference of her to all human Kind, I believe I am a singular Example!") and to insist that her mother is her best friend.'⁽³⁾

In the 19th Century Harriet Martineau's ground-breaking Autobiography, contains a devastating portrait of herself as a girl and young woman constantly afraid of her scapegoating, domineering, untender mother. But she could only tell her tale to the world posthumously, from the grave. And she still felt compelled to refer to her mother as 'my good mother, my kind mother'. Her estranged brother James later

disputed Harriet Martineau's portrait of that mother - but he had been a cherished son. Much later in the nineteenth Century Ethel Smyth' mother

`would frequently get up very early in the morning and make a pilgrimage round the children's bedrooms, accusing each in turn of having been spiteful to her, of having been unkind, of conspiring to humiliate her in public and similar imaginary crimes.... Ethel was her chief antagonist. ...She might enchant her daughter, drown her with tenderness and then, unpredictably, reproach her, shun her, try to force the child to take the place of the mother...." But, *and* therefore, Ethel `was, and always remained, devoted to her mother.'(4)

Kathleen Woodward's Jipping Street reveals a mother so embittered and hardened by her endless struggle with sickness and poverty that she can only tell her children she wished they had never been born. So uncontrollably violent was she that she battered and nearly killed her child:

`Once she split my head open; and again she threw a fork at me, which dangerously pierced my side` - nevertheless her daughter still has to defend her: `I have never felt a moment of animosity toward her, or been conscious of the suspicion of a feeling of bitterness. Her chastisement was, as it were, clean and honest, and in keeping with her nature.'(5)

The psycho-analyst Alice Miller would say that such a child was not free to feel its own pain, being forced to feel it must have deserved `chastisement` - even to being almost murdered.(6) A woman, it seems, can admit to anything except that she does not love her unloving mother.

Similarly, Maya Angelou insists in I know Why the Caged Bird Sings that she loves and admires her hard, glamorous, non-mothering biological mother Vivian. I agree with Stephanie Demetrakopoulos that Angelou's protestations of love, gratitude and esteem are disturbing and unconvincing in the context of all the repeated rejections, betrayals and shocking callousness from that same mother.(7)

In Zami, Audre Lorde's mother beats her from earliest childhood until late adolescence when a closed bedroom door is taken as an insufferable act of insolence. Finally, her mother threatens to hand her over to the police and the 17 year old runs away into the wilderness of New York but the mother makes no attempt to ask after her or find her. Nevertheless, again we get the litany of praise. 'My mother was a very powerful woman... I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry' and so on.

Given such compulsive evasion tactics and concealments from oneself, a perpetual tacking and tacking about, it comes as something of a relief, even a welcome shock, to read the direct, unselfconsciousness emotional truth-telling by forthright working class women in Dutiful Daughters(8) or Susan Chitty's malignant Now to My Mother or Kathleen Dayus' unqualified monosyllables: 'Our mum was also very cruel and

spiteful towards us, especially to me. ...we all lived in fear when she started to shout....We never knew what for at times, but down would come the cane from its place on the wall.'(9)

Only a few women poets seem capable of a comparable breaking of the taboo: 'Extraordinary women's autobiographies have ... been written in the form of the confessional in recent years, ... Especially important is the fact that women have found a frankly autobiographical 'confessional' mode for their poetry.'(10) One of the first of such poets was Anne Sexton:

I will speak of the little childhood cruelties
being a third child
the last given
and the last taken -
of the nightly humiliations when Mother undressed me,
of the life of the daytime, locked in my room -
being the unwanted, the mistake
that Mother used to keep Father
from his divorce.

('Those Times')

And: 'Oh sharp diamond, my mother!

I could not count the cost
of all your faces, your moods -'

(Christmas Eve)

And it is noteworthy that whereas in her prosework Zami, Audre Lorde had sought to justify and even make a heroine of her mother, in her *poetry* that same mother's emotional destructiveness is rendered without attempted qualification:

'Out of her womb of pain my mother spat me
into her ill-fitting harness of despair
into her deceits
where anger re-conceived me
piercing my eyes like arrows
pointed by her nightmare
of who I was not
becoming.'

('Story Books on a Kitchen Table'. 1970,
reprinted in Chosen Poems Old and New,
W.W. Norton, N.Y. 1982)

More recently still, Sharon Olds's 'The Forms' (1983) compares the self-sacrificing, child-protecting mother of the child's fantasy with the self-protecting, child-victimizing mother of her experience:

I always had the feeling my mother would die for us, jump into a fire to pull us out, her hair burning like a halo, jump into water, her white body going down and turning slowly, the astronaut whose hose is cut falling into blackness. She would have covered us with her body, thrust her breasts between our chests and the knife, slipped us into her coat pocket outside the showers. In disaster, an animal mother, she would have died for us, but in life as it was she had to put herself first. She had to do whatever he told her to do to the children, she had to protect herself. In war, she would have died for us, I tell you she would, and I know: I am a student of war, of gas ovens, smothering, knives, drowning, burning, all the forms in which I have experienced her love.

(Publ. in *The Dead and the Living*)

With terrible precision Sharon Olds later re-lives the specific, unforgettable episode of her mother's violation of her: in the poem 'What if God':

And what if God had been watching when my mother came into my bed? What would He have done when her long adult body rolled on me like a tongue of lava from the top of the mountain and the tears jumped from her ducts like hot rocks and my bed shook with the tremors of the magma and the deep cracking of my nature across -

... she said that all we did was done in His sight so what was He doing as He saw her weep in my hair and slip my soul from between my ribs like a tiny hotel soap, did He

wash His hands of me as I washed my
hands of Him? Is there a God in the house?
Is there a God in the house? Then reach down and
take that woman off that child's body,
take that woman by the nape of the neck like a young cat and
lift her up and deliver her over to me.

But even that horror and rage prove not to be the last word as "she" changes into "you" in Sharon Olds' 'After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes For My Childhood' where she confronts her own need for a mother unfit to be forgiven and finds that she is forced to forgive her and so re-make her idea of herself as well as her idea of her mother anew:

When you tilted toward me, arms out
like someone trying to walk through a fire,
when you swayed toward me, crying out you were
sorry for what you had done to me, your
eyes filling with terrible liquid like
balls of mercury from a broken thermometer
skidding on the floor, when you quietly screamed
Where else could I turn? Who else did I have?, the
chopped crockery of your hands swinging towards me, the
water cracking from your eyes like moisture from
stones under heavy pressure, I could not
see what I would do with the rest of my life.
The sky seemed to be splintering like window
someone is bursting into or out of, your
tiny face glittered as if with
shattered crystal, with true regret, the
regret of the body. I could not see what my
days would be with you sorry, with
you wishing you had not done it, the
sky falling around me, its shards
glistening in my eyes, your old soft
body fallen against me in horror I
took you in my arms, I said *It's all right,*
don't cry, it's all right, the air filled with
flying glass, I hardly knew what I
said or who I would be now that I had forgiven you.

The other taboo, that of confessing to a bad relationship with one's child, has proved even *more* difficult to break down in women's autobiographies. Parental love, wrote Spock, has two components - care and enjoyment. And whilst one of these, care, is given equally by all normal parents to all their children for as long as they live, no

parent can enjoy all their children all of the time because children are not equally enjoyable. However, not enjoying a child feels, to the parent, like not loving him or her. And so much of a mother's self-image is based on her idea of herself as a loving mother that any admission to herself, let alone to the world, that she may have failed to fire on all cylinders in relation to one or other of her children at some time, is asking her to risk breakdown. Hence, I believe, the *mauvaise foi* in so many women's autobiographical writings about motherhood. Either they try to avoid the subject of their own children altogether(11) - or they can only bear to recall the good bits, turning all the rest into a rueful survivor's joke – "One can laugh about it now, but at the time..."

The pain of failure in mothering is present, therefore, in very few autobiographical texts. It is there in Margaret Oliphant's tormented, self-questioning and God-questioning cry from the heart after the deaths of all her children, including her adult, fainéant sons;⁽¹²⁾ It is there, fleetingly, in Tillie Olsen's I Stand Here Ironing as the mother/narrator confesses to her failure either to prevent or heal the corrosive, jealous hatred between her two daughters; it is there in Alta's confession of frightening violence towards her child after having been deserted by the child's father (Momma); and Gina Davidson has recently published anonymous bulletins from the battle front with her daughter, "Treasure", admitting her own total lack of dignity, unequal emotional power, resentment, guilt, anxiety and fleeting, absolutely minimal moments of enjoyment, mostly memories:

'Today Treasure and I share a few elevated moments of culture and harmony. We are playing violin and piano together. Treasure has toiled away at the violin for years and now, several thousand pounds and five teachers later, we are reaping the benefits. It has been worth it, I think, as Treasure swans through some Schubert, her intonation spot on, her tone delightful. I feel I am accompanying her in a rather sensitive way.

"Play louder," commands Treasure. She has yet to master the art of being civil to her accompanist. I play louder.

"You're not playing loud enough." Treasure looks pained. She sees me as a saboteur. "You're just not playing as nicely as you usually do. What's the matter with you? Play louder."

I bang the hell out of the piano. “Loud enough?” I shout.

"No," screams Treasure. "You're doing it on purpose!"

I have often told Treasure that chamber music is meant to be a shared pleasure and at the first hint of abusive behaviour on her part, I shall leave the room. I rise from the piano stool.

"Where are you going? I am not being rude." Treasure speaks in a quiet, menacing way, rigid with repressed temper, her bow held like a chain saw. She grits her teeth. "I want to play the Mozart."

"All right." It is difficult to play Mozart while seething with hatred. We give up. We usually do. (Guardian, March 9, 1993)

Once again it is the women poets who have been most outspoken about their estrangement from their own children and confess to their own imperfect mothering. The first such admission was Shirley Kaufman's devastating 'Mothers, Daughters' published 1969:

Through every night we hate,
preparing the next day's
war. She bangs the door.
Her face laps up my own
despair, the sour, brown eyes,
the heavy hair she won't
tie back. She's cruel,
as if my private meanness
found a way to punish us.
We gnaw at each other's
skulls. Give me what's mine.
I'd haul her back, choking
myself in her, herself
in me. There is a book
called *Poisons* on her shelf.
Her room stinks with incense,
animal turds, hamsters
she strokes like silk. They
exercise on the bathroom
floor, and two drop through
the furnace vent. The whole
house smells of the accident,
the hot skins, the small
flesh rotting. Six days
we turn the gas up then
to fry the dead. I'd fry
her head if I could until
she cried love, love me!

All she won't let me do.
Her stringy figure in
the windowed room shares
its thin bones with no one.
Only her shadow on the glass
waits like an older sister.
Now she stalks, leans forward,
concentrates merely on getting
from here to there. Her feet
are bare. I hear her breathe

where I can't get in. If I
break through to her, she will
drive nails into my tongue.

'Mothers, Daughters' collected
in Rising Rides, ed L Chester
Washington Square Press, 1973

Although exhilarated and released by the power of Kaufman's truth-telling, I am still disturbed at her exposure of her child by publishing this poem about her under own name. My own parental ethic would dictate anonymity, avoiding the accusation that I was using a child to make my name as a writer.

There are, of course, many other sides to our emotional lives about which it is difficult to write honestly and analytically - the ebbs and flows in marriage and in friendships being just two. All that this paper has attempted to do is to highlight and juxtapose some of the powerful, poignant fragments of a Great Confessional that have only recently been written and to indicate some of the special difficulties encountered by some women writers when attempting such an enterprise. No woman writer has yet, in my opinion, completed an Autobiography to stand beside that of Rousseau or Herzen - although the total life-work of Alice Munro or Sharon Olds may yet constitute a comparable achievement.

References

1. L. Irigaray (1991), 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in The Irigaray Reader (ed.) Margaret Whitford, Oxford, Blackwell.
2. A Rich (1977), 'Motherhood and Daughterhood', in Of Woman Born, London, Virago.
Personally, I think Rich overlooks those women who *have* been mothered: V.W., Colette, Flora Thompson, Maureen Duffy, Alice Walker, Annie Dillard, Amy Tan, among countless others.
3. Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman, (1985), ch.1, University of Carolina Press.
4. Louise Collis (1984), Impetuous Heart - The Story of Ethel Smyth, London, William Kimber, ch.1.
5. Jipping Street, (1928), ch.1.
6. see The Drama of Being a Gifted Child (1983) and For Your Own Good (1987), London, Virago.

7. `The Metaphysics of Matrilinearism in Women's Autobiography`, in Women's Autobiography, (ed.) Estelle Jelinek, (1980), Indiana University Press.
8. ed. Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham (1977), London, Penguin.
9. Her People (1982), London, Virago, ch.1.
10. Carolyn Heilbrun (1985), `Women's Autobiographical Writing - New Prose Forms`, in Prose Studies, Vol.8, Part 2, pp.20-27.
11. The poet Fleur Adcock told the author that she had stopped writing about her son as soon as he grew old enough to read her work; the story writer Alice Munro told the author: "You write about your parents but not about your children; it's not fair - they didn't ask to be born to a writer."
12. Elizabeth Jay (ed) (1990), The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press.