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Janet Beizer, *Thinking Through the Mothers: Reimagining Women's Biographies*, Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2009. xii, 276 pp. footnotes, bibliography and index. \$45 (cl) ISBN 978-0-8014-3851-6

Review by Elinor Accampo, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

The title of this book derives from Virginia Woolf's observation in *A Room of One's Own* that "we think back through our mothers if we are women." [1] Woolf made this comment in the context of women writers of her own and previous generations who, unlike male writers, had no "great" predecessors—such as Balzac, Thackeray, Dickens, among others—to serve as models and inspiration. "What happens," Beizer asks, "...when there is no lineage of powerful precursor texts with which to do battle?" (p. 2) Women writers, she suggests, attempt to create a feminine literary lineage through a search for foremothers in feminist biography, in which maternal rhetoric becomes dominant. Woolf's sentence is taken to be transparent, and implies (especially if taken outside its full context) that women writers *only* have their mothers "to think through," and thus feminist discourse has had a tendency to "slide unthinkingly from mothers to female precursors" (p. 3). The problem Beizer addresses, therefore, is that mothers' lives are absent, unwritten, and largely unknown, as are the lives of "foremothers" that many feminist biographers and literary critics seek to reconstruct. To think through a mother in order to write the biography of a foremother leads to "nostalgic reconstructions" of irretrievable lives, as well as a search for the self and its biological origins. Biography and autobiography thus become one, a genre Beizer calls "bio-autography," "the writing of a self through the representation of another's life" (p. 3). This book is thus a critique of the maternal metaphor in biography, but it is also much more than that. The maternal metaphor is a manifestation of a broader genealogical and linear way of thinking, whose epistemological and ethical foundations Beizer wishes to unveil, critique and replace.

*Thinking Through the Mothers* is organized into seven somewhat independent essays (including an epilogue) that work through a series of problems raised by what the author calls "salvation narratives" in feminist biographies. Beizer states clearly that not all biographies fit into this rubric, and that she has deliberately chosen to critique those works that do exemplify the problematic of the maternal metaphor. Through the critiques she offers in each essay, she argues that the effort to reconstruct a foremother's lineage is fraught by the biographer's own disappointments with the silences and holes in the female past and the compulsion to fill these lacunae with her own desires and voice. In the effort to retrieve women's lives, biographers employ a "fetishistic logic" that mimes the patriarchal logic inherent in the methodological models of genealogy and the family tree. One particularly poignant metaphor she uses to dislodge this way of seeing comes from Julian Barnes's redefinition of a net: "Normally, you would say that [a net] is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could...reverse the image and define the net as . . . a collection of holes tied together with a string. You can do the same with a biography" (p. 17). [2] Rather than filling the holes with our own projections about lost lives, Beizer argues that we need to dignify and cultivate the gaps and simply listen to what the silences signify.

Beizer adheres to the premises of her own critique; her collection of essays is non-linear, and does not seek to reach any resolution other than to share with the reader her own experience at attempting to invent "nongenealogical metaphoric bases for women's auto/biographical recovery" (p. 7) She finds one

such base in Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's metaphor of rhizomes—horizontal stems rather than linear root systems and (family) trees. As they put it, a rhizome “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo* . . .”(p. 242). [3] As Beizer explains, “Rhizomatic thinking works laterally through the conjunction ‘and . . .and. . .and’, in opposition to the operation of aborescent thinking, which is rooted in history and filiation”(p. 243). This metaphor reveals the anti-historicist nature of the book despite the fact that its author is addressing the works and biographies of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers. Indeed, these essays contain little historical context, though they are quite thought-provoking for historians as well as for literary critics seeking to escape master narratives on the unstable ground of post-structuralism.

Beizer employs this lateral methodology in some manner for each of her essays, whose structure is often that of “concentric frames”: she addresses the original fiction or autobiography/memoir, the author's biographer, critics of the author, and literary theorists. Indeed, her analyses are informed by a large number and wide variety of theorists, including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Edward Said, and Judith Butler. Chapter one, significantly titled “Cat's Cradle: Transfiguring Women's Lives” analyzes the pitfalls of “salvation biographies.” One such work is Eunice Lipton's *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*, a book she believes exemplifies all that is wrong with the genre. Convinced that Manet's model in “Olympia”, Victorine Meurent, had to have been a brilliant painter in her own right with an interesting and satisfying life, Lipton set off to resurrect her past, only to find that her biographical subject remained largely invisible. Rather than accepting the holes and silences, Lipton's own desire and life story became collapsed into the biography she was seeking to write, in part because Meurent's absence made Lipton think of her own mother's absence.

Beizer interprets this association as a redemption of the mother who was “unknown and unfulfilled” as well as Lipton's self-legitimization as a daughter. Lipton's endeavor of discovery becomes the story of her own journey, and as such it is a “textbook example of a tradition of plot deprivation in women's lives,” (p. 16) an uncritical and sentimental mirroring of her subject. Drawing on James E. B. Breslin's work on biography, Beizer suggests that the biographer's identification with a woman whose life is irretrievable, represents a “mourning for women's place in culture” (p. 35). The cat's cradle, a metamorphosis of Barnes's net metaphor, offers an alternative: involving two or more players, the strings wave and unweave in a collaborative process: “. . . the tissue of desire, biography's text, become[s] a shriveled heap of rags. With such frayed bits of string and a knot we would net a school of fish or snare a bull, rescue lover or unkill life. In such a cradle, spun from the loose ends of our mothers' shrouds, we rock our dreams to sleep” (p. 40).

As with the loose ends of a mother's shroud, Beizer would like us to be satisfied with fragments of a life, free of presentist consciousness and sensibilities, and particularly free of a feminist nostalgia for a past that is irretrievable. Her method of reading across concentric frames works well in her second essay, “Unwrapping the Mummy: In Search of Kuchuk Hanem,” where she uses Francine du Plessix Gray's biography of Louise Colet (Gustave Flaubert's mistress) to analyze Colet's narrative account of her journey to Egypt. Beizer then reads this narrative against Flaubert's explicit descriptions of Kuchuk Hanem in his correspondence with Colet twenty years earlier and in his *Voyage en Egypte*. Her analysis also draws on Flaubert's literary critics, especially those with an orientalist approach to the exotic courtesan. The third essay explores George Sand's autobiography within the double framework of Hugette Bouchardeau's biography of Sand and Bouchardeau's memoir about her own mother. Beizer presumes a link between the two works. She uses the memoir to analyze Bouchardeau's interpretation of Sand's life and to critique it as a foremother salvation biography. An essay on Colette (chapter six) focuses directly on the writer's trilogy of “mother-texts,” but also opens with a concentric frame, an epigraph that is “four times removed from Colette and unrelated to her writing . . .” (p. 143). It is a quotation based on a journalist's account of Colette's adult daughter's childhood memory in Judith Thurman's biography of Colette. Beizer uses the epigraph to “emblemize the challenges and risks of

reading (for) the mother in any of Colette's three mother-centered novels, which have traditionally been assimilated by critics and biographers to Colette's own life story" (pp. 143-44). Thus each of the three essays that focus on women writers of the nineteenth century uses their fictional and autobiographical writings, biographies written about them, and analyses of literary critics and theorists to punch holes in the paradigm of salvation biography and produce new insights through a process of "unweaving," "unwrapping," and producing "loose ends."

Beizer's readings of Louise Colet, George Sand, and Colette against and across other texts and critiques yield fascinating insights. Her close analysis of Colet's travel narrative in conjunction with Flaubert's letters unveils a "fetishistic aspect" of their relationship in their respective searches for Kuchuk Hanem. She interprets Colet's nightmares and hallucinations as a reaction to Flaubert's explicit descriptions of his sexual activity with the castrated courtesan and argues that her narrative as a whole continually evokes absence and loss, which is itself a story of the excised clitoris. Flaubert's correspondence also constitutes a central aspect of Beizer's essay on Sand. Her analysis of their close friendship and mutual influence moves the themes of motherhood, maternal loss, and the attempt to retrieve a mother's life to a richer level. But Beizer's method of reading also allows her to discover a different thematic thread: birds metaphorically, metonymically, and mythologically run through Sand's autobiography and fiction and replace, Beizer argues, her genealogical maternal heritage. Reading across sources, rather than backward through mothers, Beizer is able to make connections otherwise not seen.

The essay on Colette, which constitutes almost a third of the book, is especially original in its approach to understanding the writer's deeply conflicted relationship to motherhood: Beizer uses Colette's own writing strategy of "deflection, modification, and circulation" to read her works "laterally for reverberations, recollections, and modulations" (p. 201). Working through Colette's relegation of both the maternal instinct and erotic passion to the banal, Beizer tries to take her analysis beyond a consideration of motherhood and her own revulsion toward her subject's lack of belief in anything but writing. She thus examines the decentering of love in Colette's works, quoting a poignant passage from *Bella-Vista*, which begins: "It is absurd to suppose that periods of empty love are blank pages in a woman's life. The truth is just the reverse" (p. 204).<sup>[4]</sup>

The essay on Colette is one of the most interesting and difficult in the book as Beizer grapples with her own feelings about Colette's absorption with work and "bad" mothering. Two-thirds through the chapter, in the middle of a paragraph, she suddenly interjects, ". . . I hesitate to proceed. At risk is my voice; that is, my literary-critical voice. With Colette as with no other writer, the validity and the value of every word I have to say is on the line" (p. 190). She then proceeds with a discourse on the ethics of literary criticism. As are the salvation narratives under her scrutiny, this book is a bio-autography in the sense that to some degree Beizer is writing her own story through the representation of biographies rather than through the representation of another's life. Two of the essays are overtly personal. Chapter four is a self-reflective critical assessment of the interpretation Beizer argues in chapter three concerning Huguette Bouchardeau's biography of George Sand and memoir about her own mother. Here she presents the dialogue from an interview with Bouchardeau in which she has the opportunity to ask directly whether the two books are in fact "twin mother books" and whether Sand was a "foremother" of the author, as Beizer had indicated. Had not Bouchardeau, like the other authors of "salvation biographies," written "her own mother story through George Sand's, in the larger context of exploring the search for feminine literary lineage . . ." (p. 114)? Bouchardeau's decidedly negative answers forced Beizer to enter a new level of self-reflection; she confronts directly her presumptions as a literary critic, and compares her dialogue with Bouchardeau to the dialogue in a psychoanalytic relationship. She also realizes that, as a critic of salvation biography, she became subject to its same traps. But rather than retracting her interpretation in the previous chapter, she leaves the two chapters juxtaposed, suspended in an unresolved dialogue.

The subject of chapter five originated with a request that Beizer contribute to a forum on adoption. Because she neither wished to expose her adopted daughter's life nor blur the lines between the professional and personal, Beizer at first resisted. But the invitation opened for her a series of questions about adoption, the nature of ownership, and of course, the meaning of biological and non-biological motherhood, storytelling, and life writing. Taking off on Virginia Woolf's meaning of the word "own" in *A Room of One's Own*, she examines the concept of ownership with regard to children, to biographical subjects, and to conceptions of the family. She also questions Americans' obsession with genealogy (without consideration that the French developed the same obsession far earlier). She uses the work of Judith Modell to note how open adoption (which permits two mothers) subverts the dominant ideology of the family by disassociating the definition of "mother" from its roots in nature. Other family structures—those headed by single parents, lesbian mother couples or gay father couples—hang awkwardly on the family tree metaphor.

Beizer closes the chapter with an admission that its "contradictions, hesitations, repetitions, inconsistencies cannot be smoothed without erasing [her] text" (p. 141). But both chapters four and five move her critical thinking forward, from "monologic" to "dialogic" and from genealogical (linear) to the rhizomatic (horizontal) thinking that enriches the subsequent essay on Colette. The Epilogue, "Books and Children: New Mythologies," addresses the relationship between mothering and writing (working) for women in general and for Sand and Colette in particular. It again raises the issue of how to tell mother stories without appropriating patriarchal methodological models and without doing violence to the truth by imbuing mothers with imaginary pasts. She points out that Woolf's quote about "thinking through mothers" has been misinterpreted. Understood in its full context, Woolf intended not to suggest that women writers look backward, but rather that they need to invent. Beizer suggests "recentering the lives of the disinherited in a temporally present, spatially horizontal mode" (p. 240), or using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "Nomad thought" instead of "arborescent" (family tree) thought, the latter of which has been central to the traditional Western novel and Western narrative. Nomad thinking is "mobile, fluid, antihistorical, and immersed in change." We need new modes and truths, Beizer argues, "that are relative, fresh stories that are fragmentary, and whose transmission can only be oblique, partial, mosaic" (p. 246).

As a historian with a background in empiricism and as a biographer of a woman, this reviewer found reading this book to be a daunting, difficult and rewarding task ("Did I write a salvation biography that was prey to feminist nostalgia?" I inevitably ask myself). Beizer states at the outset of her book that her concern is not biography in general, but a particular kind of biography from which she is seeking to define and address a problematic, and she chose her works accordingly. Nonetheless, her critique and her mode of reading and writing seem broader than that. One of the many provocative quotations she uses comes from Janet Malcom: "The letters and journals we leave behind and the impressions we have made on our contemporaries are the mere husk of the kernel of our essential life. When we die, the kernel is buried with us. This is the horror and the pity of death and the reason for the inescapable triviality of biography" (p. 197).<sup>[5]</sup> But might not the same be said of any effort to retrieve any aspect of the past, once an event is over and the people who experienced it are dead?

The post-modernist stance of this book might be off-putting to some biographers and historians—they may grow irritated that the essays end not with conclusions, but with contradictions, irresolution, or metaphor. Yet the honesty, self-reflection, and originality in this book make it worthy of a close read. Anyone attempting a biography will become more self-reflective and wary of falling prey to the need to fill gaps and silences with his or her own subjective desire. Scholars and casual readers of Sand, Colette, Flaubert and Colet will take great pleasure in the original and imaginative analyses of their respective works and lives, particularly in the insights that cross-reading produces. More than is possible to convey in the context of a review, this book also draws heavily on and is in dialogue with literary critics and theorists, who will no doubt find Beizer's arguments both intriguing and engaging. This book is well-researched, deeply thought, and in many parts beautifully, sometimes lyrically written.

## NOTES

[1] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1929), p. 79.

[2] Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 38.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 25.

[4] Antonia White, *The Collected Stories of Colette*, ed. Robert Phelps (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 559.

[5] Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 35.

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