THE PERSONAL ESSAY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A GENDER AND GENRE APPROACH

Isabel Durán
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

ABSTRACT

The personal essay as autobiography is the generic landscape I will traverse along these lines. Within that field, I do a gender-oriented comparative analysis of four books that can be read as autobiography, although they really are written as personal essays, a genre of life writing described as "a self-trying-out; a testing of one's own intellectual, emotional, and psychological responses to a given topic." I explore recent hybrid autobiographical volumes written by Spanish Rosa Montero (*La loca de la casa*), Canadian Margaret Atwood (*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*), Mexican-American Richard Rodriguez (*Brown: The Last Discovery of America*) and European-born, Jewish-American George Steiner (*Errata: An Examined Life*). Bringing into my trans-national analysis the works of two men and two women allows me to do a reliable comparative reading of a number of genre/gender oriented issues.

KEY WORDS: Personal essay, life-writing, autobiography, women's writing, gender studies, Rosa Montero, Margaret Atwood, Richard Rodriguez, George Steiner.

RESUMEN

El ensayo personal como autobiografía es el paisaje genérico que recorreré en estas líneas. En concreto, me propongo hacer un análisis comparativo de cuatro libros que pueden leerse como las autobiografías de sus autores, aunque están escritos como ensayo, incorporando en mi análisis aspectos doblemente genéricos (tanto de género literario como de género sexual). El "ensayo personal" es un género autobiográfico descrito como "un ponerse a prueba a uno mismo"; como "un testado de nuestras respuestas intelectuales, emocionales y psicológicas ante ciertos temas. Exploro, entonces, volúmenes recientemente publicados por la escritora española Rosa Montero (*La loca de la casa*), la canadiense Margaret Atwood (*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*), el mexicano-americano Richard Rodriguez (*Brown: The Last Discovery of America*) y el judío George Steiner (*Errata: An Examined Life*). El incorporar a mi recorrido transnacional las obras de dos hombres y de dos mujeres me permite hacer un fundamentado estudio comparativo de algunos temas relacionados tanto con los géneros literarios como con el género sexual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ensayo personal, escritura autobiográfica, autobiografía, escritura de mujeres, estudios de género, Rosa Montero, Margaret Atwood, Richard Rodriguez, George Steiner.

> Almost all essays begin with a capital I —"I think," "I feel"— and when you have said that, it is clear that you are not writing history or philosophy or biography or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but it is *primarily an expression of personal opinion*.
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> Virginia WOOLF, "The Decay of Essay Writing."

In 1988 I began to do research for my doctoral dissertation on "Female Versions of Autobiography" and my point of departure was, as could not have been otherwise over twenty years ago, Estelle Jelinek's pioneering volume *Women's Autobiography*. In some ways, Jelinek's introductory essay "Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition" was the female-written, gender-oriented counterpart to Philippe Lejeune's universalistic essay "The Autobiographical Pact." If Lejeune established some conventions and norms that every text accepted under the rubric of "autobiography" had to comply with,[1] Jelinek's ground-breaking essay also listed some thematic, formal, stylistic and identitarian characteristics that could be verified in most women's autobiographies —in contrast to men's. Thus, according to Jelinek, women's autobiographies emphasized to a much lesser extent the public aspect of their lives, the affairs of the world or even their careers, and concentrated instead on their personal lives —domestic details, family difficulties and people who influenced them. On the other hand, while men, Jelinek proposed, tended to idealize their lives or cast them into heroic moulds, or tended to project a self-image of confidence, women's self-image was projected in a variety of forms of understatement. Finally, while men shaped their life-stories into coherent, chronological and linear narratives, irregularity, fragmentation, disconnectedness and lack of linear chronology informed self-portraits by women. These forms, Jelinek contended, were analogous to the fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of women's lives.

Ten years after Jelinek's essay was published I was already contesting it in my study of the autobiographies of Mary McCarthy, Gertrude Stein, Maxine Hong Kingston and Lillian Hellman. Of course, dozens of monographs and volumes published in the past twenty-five years about women's life-writing have shown how all the features once claimed as hallmarks of women's autobiography can be challenged as gender essentialism from within feminist theory. It is interesting, then, that almost thirty years after Jelinek's essay we are invited to keep re-considering "Life Writing and Gender," even if in our supposedly post-feminist era we have critically assimilated that the new geography of identity insists that we think about

[1] Lejeune's well-known definition from the 1970s of "pure" autobiography: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality." It has to elicit what Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact," whereby the reader "agrees" that the protagonist represents the author because he/she bears the same name as the author —a name that can be "certified" as referring to the real person it is known to represent.

men and women writers in relation to a fluid matrix that has substituted the outworn male/female binary. Given the case, however, it is clear that the debate around "genre and gender" is all but closed in the field of autobiography studies; it is clear too that this is not a static conversation but one that can and must be revisited and revised. Because the new subgenres that have attracted critical attention —autoethnography, autopathography, autothanatography, biomythography, postcolonial autobiography, disability, survivor, trauma autobiography, and other kinds of scriptotherapy, homosexual autobiography, immigrant and intercultural autobiography; academic autobiography, performative autobiography, to name but a few[2]— claim so much for theoretically generic approaches, as they do for gender-focused critical analyses within the specific subgenre.

"The personal essay as autobiography" is, thus, the generic landscape that occupies these pages. Within that field, I will be doing a gender-oriented comparative analysis of four books that can be read as compilations of essays on specific literary and cultural issues that at some point "get personal," to use Nancy K. Miller's expression, but also as "Personal Essays," a genre of life narrative "that is literally a self-trying-out; a testing of one's own intellectual, emotional, and psychological responses to a given topic" (Smith and Watson 200). As Smith and Watson put it, "since its development by Montaigne as a form of self-exploration engaging received wisdom, the personal essay has been a site of self-creation through giving one's perspective on the thoughts of others" (200). I shall come back to generic issues in the folds of this essay.

I belong to that side of feminism that believes that men also have a gender, which explains why I have opted for the four books that constitute my textual corpus. If I wanted to do a comparative gender approach, my corpus had to be of at least four authors; two men and two women. Moreover, if the subgenre under scrutiny is a hybrid form between autobiography and cultural essay (mixing different tones and "voices": the confessional, the locational, the academic, the scholarly, the political, the religious, the prophetic, the narrative, the argumentative, the anecdotal, the conversational), I wanted my map of analysis to also be as mixed, open and comprehensive as possible, and not to reduce it to the Anglo-American sphere. Finally, chronological vicinity is important in comparative approaches, in order to reach sound conclusions. So, my four texts belong to the closing decade of the twentieth century, in order to be able to establish some possible "generational tendencies" within the writing of personal essay.

Thus, I will be exploring recent hybrid autobiographical volumes written by Rosa Montero (*La loca de la casa*),[3] Margaret Atwood (*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*),[4] Richard Rodriguez (*Brown: The Last Discovery of America*)[5]

[2] For definitions of these terms, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

[3] All the translations of this book from Spanish into English are my own. Future references to this book will appear in the body of the text with the initials "LLC."

[4] Future references to this book will appear in the body of the text with the initials "ND."

[5] Future references to this book will appear in the body of the text with the initial "B."

and George Steiner (*Errata: An Examined Life*).[6] These texts were produced in very different parts of the world but within a time span of only six years (1997-2003); moreover, their authors are well-known, award-winning, established best-selling writers in their own countries, but they are also internationally renowned (especially George Steiner as a critic and Margaret Atwood as a novelist). But, apparently, those are the only bridges one could build between them. Thus, any attempt at doing a joint analysis of such a textual corpus is a risky adventure, for we are here mixing gender and sexuality (male, female, homosexual), race and ethnicity (white and coloured), religion (Catholic, Jewish, Protestant), as well as national cultures.

Rosa Montero is a Spanish novelist, a journalist and a biographer acclaimed for many novels —*Beloved Master,* and *The Cannibal's Daughter* among others; Margaret Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, and literary critic best known for some of her novels —*Surfacing, The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle*, and many more; Richard Rodriguez is a gay, Mexican-American (arguably Chicano) writer and journalist, best known for his (in)famous controversial autobiography *Hunger of Memory*; George Steiner is a European-born, Jewish-American literary and cultural critic, essayist, philosopher, translator, novelist and academic whose critical work on the relationship between language, literature and society (*Language and Silence, In Bluebeard's Castle*, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*) has become landmarks of twentieth-century humanism. Normally, these four authors would be studied in different groupings: "women's autobiography," "Chicano autobiography," "gay autobiography," "Jewish memoirs," "Hispanic life-writing" could be some of the possible critical boxes. As Shirley Neuman has pointed out, the simultaneous appropriations of and challenges to the dominant humanist and poststructuralist theories of autobiography have led to a plethora of poetics of the genre, which all seek to describe how particular identity groups function in the discursive creation of the 'self' in autobiographies/memoirs by women, ethnic or religious minorities, homosexuals and so forth. The problem with these theories of group identity is that they are constructed around a very specific and monologic category, and therefore tend to be reductive in that they engage in an "essentialism of otherhood," and in that they do not consider differences within hegemonic or non-hegemonic identity.

There is, of course, an ethnic and a national identity, just as there is a gender identity, as writers and thinkers have proclaimed for many millennia. Is literature an expression of national, racial, sexual and gender identity? Of course it is, but with some nuances, and this is what we seem to forget: that autobiographers have a gender, a sexual inclination and an ethnic or national origin, but they also have a social class, a specific *zeitgeist*, a cultural training, a profession, a psychic mood, a generation and an existential atmosphere that shape their identities as individuals and create links with other individuals across and beyond the boundaries of gender, race and nationality. Such a new geography of identity demands that

[6] Future references to this book will appear in the body of the text with the initial "E."

we think about writers in relation to a fluid matrix instead of man/woman, white/colored or gay/straight binary oppositions.

As Rosa Montero explains in one of her chapters,

> I probably have a lot more in common with a Spanish man of my age, born in a large city, than with a black South-African woman of eighty who has lived under the apartheid. Because the things that separate us are many more than those that link us (LLC 171).[7]

So, I am deliberately going to depart from some of the enclosed territories that some literary studies have created of late. Of course, I could "get personal" and justify what could be judged as an eclectic and arbitrary selection, on the grounds that these four books have affected my ways of looking at autobiography in a very deep manner —both as a teacher of autobiography and as a critic; they have ratified my natural tendency towards a transnational appreciation of literature and a de-ghettoized classification of authors and genres. But, there is much more to it. These four books belong to that very open and comprehensive "genre" situated at the crossroads between intellectual life-writing, the autobiographical or personal essay, personal criticism and scholarly memoir. All four authors share a version of life-writing as "odysseys of a mind." That is, their hybrid texts deal not so much with an eventful life, but with the life/development/progression of the mind; of their thoughts and ideas; of their writing and that of others; of their cultural and intellectual influences; of their sense of identity; of their ideological views and opinions. Thus, their radiography of a mind becomes, by extension, that of a cultural landscape.

I would argue that these books do not join in the ever-growing list of scholarly or "academic autobiographies," if only because their authors (except for George Steiner) are not academics in the proper sense of the word (they do not teach on a regular basis at an academic institution). So-called academic memoirs focusing on issues of the academy written by academics with influential scholarship have been read as new approaches to the discourse of intellectual history and culture in our age, but also as the substitute for the fairly exhausted genre of the academic novel.[8] According to Eric Leushner the last two decades have witnessed the blooming of a genre that is making headway in supplanting the academic novel in terms of being a window into the academic's office. In fact, feminist critic Nancy K. Miller begins her own academic memoir *But Enough about Me* by aligning the vogue in academic

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[7] "Lo más probable es que yo tenga mucho más que ver con un autor español, varón, de mi misma edad y nacido en una gran ciudad, que con una escritora negra, sudafricana y de ochenta años que haya vivido el *apartheid*. Porque las cosas que nos separan son muchas más que las que nos unen."

[8] See, among many, Elaine Showalter (*Faculty Towers)*, Nancy K. Miller (*But Enough about Me)*, Paul Fussell (*Doing Battle*), Frank Kermode (*Not Entitled),* Terry Eagleton (*The Gate Keeper*), Edward Said (*Out of Place), Alice Kaplan (French Lessons*), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*A Dialogue on Love*) or Shirley Geok-Lin (*Among the White Moon Faces*).

memoir, noting some of its other names, such as "autocritography" and "new belletrism." These autobiographies, Miller points out, appeal at "the desire to read about someone like oneself, someone else who has experienced graduate school, the job market, departmental and university politics, the conference scene, teaching, tenure, and post-tenure, although perhaps someone who is unlike oneself, tenured or launched into the galaxy."[9]

These books of essays are not, however, clear cases of "Autocriticism" either. In autobiography studies this term has recently been used to refer to autobiographies written as theory; that is, to autobiographical narratives which arise from, or speak to, the theoretical foci of cultural studies (literature, feminism, queer theory, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, postcolonial studies, trauma studies, etc.). Autocriticism would include those autobiographies which are in themselves of theoretical import to the discipline, or which develop insights into the theory they frame or from which they arise. Although Montero's and Atwood's books would partake of some of these characteristics, three of my four authors are just writers, and only Steiner is a scholar and a literary theorist. So, whatever theoretical notions may have wandered into their books, they have entered them by the usual writerly methods, which, as Atwood puts it, "resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests" (ND xix).

Nor are we here discussing obvious instances of what Nancy Miller herself terms "personal criticism"; that type of criticism that entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism, or self-narrative woven into critical argument. Because, according to her definition, personal criticism, more often than not, includes self-representation *as political representativity* (the critic gets personal with the intention of "speaking as a" or "speaking for"); it is often located in a specific voice marked by gender, color, and national origin (the personal is the political); and, finally, one could argue with Miller that the efflorescence of personal criticism has to do in part with the gradual waning of enthusiasm for a mode of theory whose authority depended on the evacuation of the very social subjects producing it (the personal is the theoretical). In such cases of personal criticism, the self-figuration, or self-disclosure functions as a kind of internal signature or authorial autograph. In my case here, Montero, Atwood, Rodriguez and Steiner do not do cultural criticism with a personal voice that becomes representative,[10] nor are they intentio-

[9] In his review of Elaine Showalter's book *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005), Eric Leuschner even categorizes four types of Academic Memoir, roughly corresponding to the academic career: 1) the type of life history as told from the retrospective vantage of post-tenure or retirement, where the academic longs for a past time before the university became corporatized or theorized; 2) those which are essentially childhood memoirs; a *bildungsroman* structured around the making of the academic celebrity; 3) the third type focuses on the day-to-day life of an academic; and 4) the fourth type of memoir recounts the academic career that didn't make it.

[10] In fact, not only here, but in his previous autobiographies, Rodriguez makes constant claims to the uniqueness of his voice; to the fact that he does not speak as a Mexican-American:

nally creating new theoretical postures, even as they are not just leaving a personal imprint in what is first of all a critical essay. Instead, the "subjects" whose names appear on the book cover (Atwood, Montero, Rodriguez and Steiner) create certain "personae" that wander through specific literary, cultural and ideological terrains of the past and the present, always making reference to a "self" that informs the argumentative, narrative, descriptive, philosophical, informative or even emotional routes that they have decided to follow.[11] In other words, they are *using* the essay mode to explore their inner selves —as individual men or women; as writers; as intellectuals; as cultural critics; as prophets; as public commentators; as autobiographers.

Having clarified that these four books are renovated versions of the classical personal essay, we now must turn to what Montaigne, the inventor of the genre, and Virginia Woolf, one of his most fervent followers, have taught men and women essayists since the sixteenth century. In spite of the publication of essayists as influential as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau or Florence Nightingale, the essay was understood up to practically the twentieth century as an exclusively masculine genre. The double inheritance of the informal, personal essay of Montaigne (1580-88), together with Francis Bacon's more rational essays (1612, 1625) would only be extended years later when William Hazlitt opened up the mythical area of both literary giants, signalling Addison and Steele as their heirs. The essay in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its pragmatic and empiric approach in the Anglo-Saxon world, would keep pointing at a humanistic universe in which women had no room of their own and probably no room whatsoever.

However, Virginia Woolf came along and took over, and, in spite of the fact that most of her essays were scattered and neglected during her lifetime, feminism has declared her *the* quintessential woman essayist. So that if the essay had been until her lifetime a masculine genre, feminist criticism has considered it, since Woolf, the ideal vehicle for women's personal expression. As Rachel Bowlby puts it, "it is as though the thorough masculinization of the tradition of essay-writing, as opposed to the tradition of novel-writing, would then give all the more force to Woolf's own takeover of the genre for unfemininely feminist concerns" (Woolf xxvi). As a matter of fact, women activists have always called for a written form that would resemble spoken language; a form that would invite communication, connection, dialogue; a form, in sum, that would be a direct, comprehensive and vehement form of discourse that would celebrate the use of personal voice and be flexible to adapt to different forms and styles. And that is, precisely, what the personal essay is. It has

"Mistaken, the gullible reader will take it that I intend to model my life as a typical Hispanic-American life. But I write of one life only. My own" (7).

[11] Barry N. Olshen proposes three terms in theoretical approaches to autobiography: "subject" (a center of awareness; what would have been called 'autobiographer' in a more confident age); "persona" (the autobiographical ego, the textual signifier or literary subject, entirely constituted by discourse); and "self" (a kind of subjective structure maintaining the subject's sense of his/her own identity, and his/her sense of unique, persistent, cohesive being).

been said that the essay fixes its attention on a very small spectrum of subjects, on details; or, according to Adorno, that the essay is constructed as a network of interconnections rather than as a straight line of causes and consequences. Essays emphasize process, rather than results; they are mimetic: they are the expression of the author's experience. It then follows that the essay is the perfect means of expression for women's and feminist projects.

All this, however, remains somewhat moot, because to define the essay has been the ambition of many men and women of letters, from Lukács up to Adorno, through Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley's well-known definition of the essay: "a literary device for saying almost everything about anything." Huxley, however, proceeds to give a very accurate guidance on the subject, because "a collection of essays" (which is what we are discussing in these pages) "can cover almost as much ground, and cover it almost as thoroughly, as can a long novel." Huxley presents the three-poled frame of reference in which most collections of essays fall: the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists, Huxley continues, "are at home and at their best in the neighbourhood of only one of the essay's three poles." There are the predominantly personal essayists, who write fragments of reflective autobiography and who look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description; there are the predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme, and, to Huxley, the most richly satisfying essays are those which "make the best of all the three worlds" in which it is possible for the essay to exist (v-vi). We shall return to these three poles later.

And what did Virginia Woolf have to say about essay-writing and about her master, Montaigne? After declaring that only Montaigne's essays are "*an attempt to communicate a soul*," she proclaims that "this taking of oneself, following one's own vagaries, giving the whole map, light, color, and circumference of the *soul* in its confusion, its variety, its imperfection" —this art belongs to one man only: Montaigne (Woolf, 56). Decades before any theories of autobiography and of self-writing had appeared, Woolf was very clear in her belief that "We can never doubt for an instant" that a book of essays (in Montaigne's case on issues as diverse as books, cruelty, death, glory, desires, honor, affection, fear, philosophy, imagination, teaching, pleasures, crying, solitude, sleeping, vanity, smells, age, praying, intoxication, love, lying, laziness, cowardice, Seneca, Raymund Sabunde, and so on) —that book "was himself" (Woolf 57).

It is not surprising, then, that in "The Decay of Essay Writing" Woolf states that the essay as a form practised by the French genius is in decay, because it has become too egoistical: "The essay, then, owes its popularity to the fact that its proper use is to express one's personal peculiarities, so that under the decent veil of print one can indulge one's egoism to the full. You need know nothing of music, art, or literature to have a certain interest in their productions, and the great burden of modern criticism is simply the expression of such individual likes and dislikes" (Woolf 7). If such essayists, she believes, stopped writing about "the great mysteries of art and literature" and wrote instead about "that single book to which they alone

have the key" (that is: their field of personal expertise), they "would write of themselves —such writing would have its own permanent value" (Woolf 7).

Thus, it seems clear that both my women authors are direct literary daughters (as essayists) of Virginia Woolf, in so far as their books "are themselves" while they write "about that single book to which they alone have the key": Montero and Atwood, as Woolf the essayist at her best, write about themselves while writing about literature and (partly) about women and feminism, the two most celebrated and acknowledged topics of Woolf's essays. Similarly, it is clear that both my men authors are the sons (as essayists) of Montaigne, since their books are also themselves, in so far as, while writing about a broader variety of subjects than their female counterparts (besides literature), their essays are an attempt to "communicate a soul" —understood as an intellectual, emotional, and ideological trajectory.

Going back to Huxley's "poles," I would argue that regardless of the amplitude or the more reduced nature of their topic, and regardless of their gender, my four authors "make the best of all the three worlds." As we shall see, their collections of essays are as private and emotional in chapters focusing on personal "anecdote and description" (first pole), as they are objective in the scrutiny of other authors' literature and thoughts (second pole). We could even argue that both the men and women I consider here become "*abstract-universal*" (third pole) in some sections of their literary, religious, historical or ideological argumentation.

1. MOTIVATIONS

We are now ready to broach the first "gender and genre" issue. Why do men and women write personal essay and not pure, classical autobiography? Or put another way: do men and women choose the essay form for different reasons? The answer to the second question would be a definitive "no": there is no difference in men's and women's motivations for choosing the essay form. I shall outline some of these motivations, but let us first give a brief description of each of the four books, always bearing in mind that, although we can catalogue them as "personal essays," all four celebrate the complete freedom of subject and narrative. They are all "brown" books, to use Rodriguez's metaphor, in that they are "mixed, confused, lumped, impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and the fluids of generation are mixed and emotions are unclear" (*B* 197); they are books that "extol impurity," that eulogize the constant use of allusion, irony, paradox "—ha!-pleasure" (*B* xi). And pleasure is what a book of essays should give, according to Woolf's view of "The Modern Essay": "The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give *pleasure*... Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end... The essay must lap us about and *draw its curtain across the world*" (Woolf 40).

Atwood's and Montero's volumes belong to the tradition of books written by novelists about the writer's profession, a tradition that has been very fruitful in the Anglo-Saxon letters, from Henry James to David Lodge to name but a few eminent examples. Likewise, Hispanic letters offer examples, from Baroja and Ortega to the essays of Torrente Ballester and Vargas Llosa. So, these two women writer's

books belong to that lucid self-reflexive tradition, to which they add a new freshness and passion in their very personal and subjective revelation of the mysteries of literature even as they are exploring their own personal mysteries.

Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead* consists of an introductory chapter, followed by six titled chapters that begin with an abstract noun written in italics (*Orientation, Duplicity, Dedication, Temptation, Communion, Descent*). The chapters are followed by notes[12], a bibliography, acknowledgements and an index. The book follows the formal strictures of an academic publishing, since it grew out of the series of Empsom lectures that Atwood gave at the University of Cambridge in 2000. Montero's book, by contrast, was written as a book, and the essays that compose it are nineteen untitled chapters. Moreover, it concludes with a "Post-scriptum" that affirms that everything said in her volume about other people is true; that is, that it corresponds to documented verifiable truth. However, she cannot say the same of the narrative parts that concern her own life, since "all autobiography is fiction and all fiction is autobiographic, as Barthes used to say"[13] (*LLC* 273). This quotation itself makes it clear that Montero is not trying to be rigorously "academic"; that is, she does not feel compelled to provide sources of her references, in a bibliography or in footnotes. Conceptually a more "postmodern" version of the personal essay, or of autobiography, she describes her own book as "mestizo" (*LLC* 180), as a deliberate blurring of genres.

Turning our attention now to the two men's volumes, Rodriguez resembles Atwood's in the sense that it also consists of a short number of titled chapters ("The Triad of Alexis Tocqueville," "In the Brown Study, the Prince and I," "Poor Richard," "Hispanic," "The Third Man," "Dreams of a Temperate People," "Gone West," "Peter's Avocado") which provide an initial idea of the topic dealt with in each chapter; Steiner, on the other hand, opts for untitled numbered chapters, but his book, more academically conceived, also provides a thematic index.

So, why the personal essay form? Two of our writers give us very specific answers that explain their choice, but these answers could be ascribed to all four of them. The reason is no other than that given by Henry Adams, a master of the autobiographical genre, in *The Education of Henry Adams*: distance. All four authors seek the same objectifying distance as Adams, even though their essays are written in the first person singular.

In the last chapter of *La loca de la casa*, Rosa Montero tells us a story —one of her many narrative digressions— that novelist J.M. Fajardo told her, and that he himself had heard from another writer, Cristina Fernández Cubas about a cloistered nun and a woman who lived opposite the nun's convent, in the third floor of an apartment building. Julia, the woman, used to buy homemade cakes from the

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[12] As many as 227 notes —not many doctoral dissertations have such number of notes. Moreover, some of the notes are of the "for more on this subject, see..." type, which gives the essays an even more academic appearance. But just an appearance.

[13] "Toda autobiografía es ficcional y toda ficción autobiográfica, como decía Barthes."

nuns every Sunday, so that she became friendly with the porter nun, although, of course, she never saw her face. Thirty years went by and one afternoon Julia's doorbell rang. It was the porter nun, the visitor announced with a voice that sounded very familiar. "I'd like to ask you a favor," said the nun. "Could I sneak a look from your balcony?" A very astonished Julia walked the aged nun to the balcony, came out with her, and both women stood there, several minutes, staring at the convent. "Beautiful, isn't it?" said the nun; after which she went back to her convent, probably not to abandon it ever again (*LLC* 269-70).

This story may serve to explain the largest voyage a human being can embark on; but, for Rosa Montero, it is the perfect symbol for what happens when one writes novels —and, I would add, when one writes autobiography. Writing a novel or any kind of autobiographical text implies daring to go on that phenomenal path that distances you from yourself and allows you to observe yourself at the end of the trip from a balcony, "in the convent, in the world, in the whole." And, once one has done this supreme effort of self-understanding, once one has touched for an instant the vision that both completes us and strikes us like lightning, "we unwillingly return to our cell, to our enclosed individuality, and we try to accept our own death" (*LLC* 271).[14]

Distance, then, is partly achieved through the use of symbols or representational synecdoche. It is as if, wishing to contradict Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," these twenty-first-century post-postmodern writers deliberately dismantled the command that there must be an identification between author and narrator. As Montero stresses again and again, "to reach the largest distance possible between you and what you tell is the wisest position for a writer to adopt." The writer must assume that what he narrates only "represents" him or her as a human being, in a deeply symbolic manner,[15] "but all of that has nothing to do with the anecdotes of your little life" (*LLC* 267).[16] That is a second key to their motivation in choosing the essay form: following in the tradition of Montaigne, my four writers do not wish to be confessional or testimonial, nor are they interested in seeking the events of their "little li[ves]." They are interested in exploring what *represents* them; be it specific writers and writing in general, or religion, or the "last discovery of America," or music, or hotels, or sex, or love, or an invented twin sister... "The noise of one's own life always tampers with oneself. This is why one must take a distance"[17], says Montero (LLC 268). And, Richard Rodriguez, in the preface to his book, explains why *Brown* completes a trilogy: "I believe it is possible to describe a single life thrice, if from

[14] "Regresamos renqueantes a nuestra celda, al encierro de nuestra estrecha individualidad, e intentamos resignarnos a morir."

[15] Which is what James Olney also said over thirty years ago, if more theoretically oriented.

[16] "Alcanzar la distancia exacta con lo que cuentas es la mayor sabiduría de un escritor; tienes que conseguir que lo que narras te represente... pero todo eso no debe tener nada que ver con lo anecdótico de tu pequeña vida."

[17] "El ruido de la propia vida siempre entorpece. Por eso hay que alejarse."

three isolations: *Class*. *Ethnicity*. *Race* (*B* xiv). Because those are the issues that symbolize or "represent" him as a human being —note that there is not, yet, a volume dedicated to sex or sexual orientation as an identity mark, though he has been invited several times to write a "gay autobiography."

I would finally suggest a third motivation, besides distance and representation. And it has to do with autobiography and ethics. In his book *The Ethics of Life Writing*, and in several of his articles preceding that book, Paul John Eakin explains how life writing, in the information age, has meant the transmission of more and more personal information, often quite intimate, with less and less restraint. At the same time, he identifies three primary "transgressions" for which self-narrators have been called to account: "(1) misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth; (2) infringement of the right to privacy; and (3) failure to display normative models of personhood." Telling the truth, respecting privacy, and "displaying normalcy" (whatever "normalcy" means), all signal and underwrite "the prerequisites in our culture for being a person, for having and telling a life story." If narrative is indeed an identity content, Eakin proceeds to suggest, "then the regulation of narrative carries the possibility of the regulation of identity —a disquieting proposition to contemplate in the context of our culture of individualism" ("Breaking" 113-114).

If that is the present situation, it seems that my women and men essayists have decided to avoid problems vis-à-vis the ethics of life writing, and have chosen different paths where they can feel free from having their identity "regulated." Montero, for example, openly plays and puns with transgression number one, "misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth," and not only in the "Postscriptum" mentioned above, but also in several other instances. Chapter 8 of *La loca de la casa* is devoted to the narration of an (apparently) autobiographical event of her childhood. When she and her twin sister Martina were eight years old, Martina disappeared one day while they were playing in the street, and was missing for three days. When she reappeared, no one gave Rosa any explanations; and the mystery of that disappearance has remained silenced and obscured to this day. Moreover, Montero mentions Martina several other times in different chapters, basically to point out the differences between what Kate Chopin would call the "mother woman" (Martina) and the "artist woman" (Rosa Montero herself).[18] So, when the reader has naively assumed that Martina exists and that Rosa Montero the author ("subject") has a twin sister, we read that Martina *may be* the fictional sister of the fictional "persona" Rosa: "let us suppose for a moment that I have lied and that I have no sister whatsoever" (*LLC* 266). In a a clear breaching of the autobiographical pact with the reader, Montero hints that she *may have invented* the whole incident of the mysterious disappearance. At that point in the book this reader felt tempted to become a truth-searcher and discover if Rosa Montero really has a twin sister called Martina. But I gave up immediately, when I read:

[18] See Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*.

> Well, even if that were the case, that chapter about my sister's absence and the family silence surrounding it would be the most important for me in this entire book, the most revealing, the one that would have informed me of the existence of other abyss-like silences in my childhood; quieted holes that I know do exist, but that would have been out of reach had I relied only in my real memories; since real memories aren't totally reliable anyway (*LLC* 266).[19]

No theoretician of autobiography could have put it more eloquently: sometimes our imagined fictions are more real than autobiographical "truth."

Second transgression: "infringement of the right to privacy." After Lejeune and Elizabeth Bruss,[20] it must be assumed that if one writes a traditional autobiography, the autobiographical pact grants the reader the right to expect the truth and nothing but the truth, even if that truth may interfere both with the author's and with the others' right to privacy. Richard Rodriguez knows this very well, for after the publication of *Hunger of Memory* he was attacked on at least two sides: Chicano critics disavowed the book because its author did not comply with the agenda of Chicano politics, and gay critics disavowed it because Rodriguez did not use its pages to come out of the closet.[21] But this is not new: many essays have been written on *The Education of Henry Adams*, to give but one example, expressing the critic's surprise if not disappointment at Adam's omission of some twenty years of his life from his narrative.[22] So, the question is: does a writer have the right to choose what he or she wishes to keep private, or do readers and critics have the right to demand that an autobiographer discuss aspects of his or her life that hold special interests for them? The personal essay mode solves the problem: one writes of what one chooses to write and there is no Lejeune pact involved and no "ethical betrayal" (Eakin, *Ethics* 10). There are no autobiographical obligations imposed on the writer and no expectations from the reader. Rosa Montero is very aware of this when she says:

> It's not easy to let the crazed woman in the house run freely... one's *daimon* may feel jammed for fear of what your relatives may think or feel when they read you. Mothers, fathers, wives and husbands, children, often impose, if unwillingly, some sort of anxiety, some censure on one's reveries... The author must come out of himself and examine his own reality from afar, with meticulous detachment. Be-

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[19] "Pues bien, aún así, ese capítulo de la ausencia de mi hermana y del silencio familiar sería el más importante para mí de todo este libro, el que más me habría enseñado, informándome de la existencia de otros silencios abismales en mi infancia, callados agujeros que sé que están ahí pero a los que no habría conseguido acceder con mis recuerdos reales, los cuales, por otra parte, tampoco son del todo fiables."

[20] Bruss, Elizabeth, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976).

[21] In his book *Gay Lives*, Paul Robinson laments not having been able to include Rodriguez's autobiography, and he asserts that, because Rodriguez is gay, he "owes us a gay autobiography" (403).

[22] The period in which his marriage ends with his wife's suicide. In fact, all sorts of psychological, social and narratological theories have been provided to explain that omission.

> cause he does not write so that the others understand his position in the world, but to try and understand himself (*LLC* 268-9).[23]

And, finally, let's comment on Eakin's third infraction: the failure to display normative models of personhood. With this last rule, Eakin argues, it's not so much a question of what one has done but of what one *is*: one is judged by others to be lacking in the very nature of one's being. In his essay, Eakin refers to mentally disabled autobiographers whose selfhood is claimed to be diminished or absent ("Breaking" 119). Of course, this is not our case, but this last transgression could also be applied to other ways of "being." In the academic world —especially in the United States— it seems that political and academic correctness prescribes certain ethical postures on autobiographers, concerning the group identity they "represent"; certain ways of "being" in the world. It would be considered "the norm," then, for certain groups of readers that a brown Chicano write as a representative of "Chicanismo," that an exiled Jew provide personal, if lucid and intellectually sophisticated, testimonial arguments on the exiled condition or the Holocaust; or even that a woman autobiographer write as a feminist. Group-identity politics also imposes its regulations, and punishes its deviations from the norm. But, again, my four essayists have their own rules, and the personal essay form provides them with the freedom to express their very personal point of view, regardless of what "normalcy" would indicate. Considering what could be understood as "writing and ethics" this is what Margaret Atwood has to say:

> If you're an artist, being a good man –or a good woman- is pretty much beside the point when it comes to your actual accomplishments. Moral perfection won't compensate for your badness as an artist (*ND* 113).

In all cases, however, they pay just tribute to the essay form as "essai" —Montaigne coined the word for the genre which he initiated; as "trying out"; as a constant self-interrogation and self-questioning that seldom results in clear-cut answers and are, more often than not, replied just with hypotheses or suggestions. As Woolf said of Montaigne, "'Perhaps' is one of his favourite expressions; 'perhaps' and 'I think' and all those words which qualify the rash assumptions of human ignorance. Such words help one to muffle up opinions which it would be highly impolitic to speak outright" (Woolf 60). As a matter of fact, one of Atwood's most and dominant persuasive devices is the rhetorical question that she uses almost too recurrently. Because Atwood, as her companion essayists, does not seek to provide answers or solutions but to ex-

[23] "Conseguir que la loca de la casa fluya con total libertad no es cosa fácil... el *daimon* puede verse apresado o agarrotado... por el temor a lo que puedan pensar o entender tus familiares cuando te lean. Las madres, los padres, las esposas, los maridos, los hijos, imponen a menudo, sin querer, una ansiedad, una censura sobre la ensoñación...El autor tiene que salirse de sí mismo y examinar su propia realidad desde fuera, con meticuloso desapego. Porque no escriben para que los demás entiendan su posición en el mundo, sino para intentar entenderse."

plore the parameters of some interesting questions (what she calls "conundrums") that concern writers and readers and that concern her as a human being. The same idea is expressed in Rosa Montero's rejection of what she calls "militant writing," because, as she puts it, "one writes in order to learn, to know; and one cannot initiate a journey of self-discovery carrying along ready-made answers" (*LLC* 172).[24]

There would be many examples of their rejection of "normative models of personhood," but let us restrict the scope to the topic "women and feminism." In her chapter entitled "*Temptation*," on the moral or social responsibility of the writer, Atwood directly touches upon this issue. So, while at one point she seems to adopt a stance of "feminist normalcy," explaining to her readership how

> Women writers weren't included in the Romantic roll-call, and never had a lot of Genius medals stuck onto them; in fact the word "genius" and the word "woman" just don't really fit together in our language, because the kind of eccentricity expected of male "geniuses" would simply result in the label "crazy," should it be practiced by a woman. (*ND* 100)

At another point she uses a detached, ironical tone when talking about what she calls the "F-word." Firstly, she satirically wonders how being an "F-word female" should influence one's wardrobe choices: "if the wardrobe matter is all that frivolous, then why have so many earnest commentators made such ideological heavy work of it?" (*ND* 107), and then she puts forward the characteristically "women writers conundrum":

> If you are a woman and a writer, does the combination of gender and vocation automatically make you a feminist, and what does that mean exactly?: that you shouldn't put a good man into your books, even though you may in real life have managed to dig up a specimen or two?" (ND 107)

No reply is provided, of course. Nor is any reply necessary. Likewise, in her chapter devoted to the moral and social commitment of the writer (*LLC* Chapter 5), Rosa Montero openly states that, from her view point, the famous writer's commitment should not be understood as putting one's work *for* the cause. For her, "pamphletary utilitarianism" is a treason to the profession. And she continues:

> I detest utilitarian and militant narrative; the feminist, ecologist, pacifist novels, or whatever other -ist one may think of. Because writing in order to transmit a message is treason to the principal function of writing; to its real sense, which is to search for meanings (*LLC* 172).[25]

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[24] "Se escribe para aprender, para saber; y una no puede emprender ese viaje de conocimiento llevando previamente las respuestas consigo."

[25] "Detesto la narrativa utilitaria y militante, las novelas feministas, ecologistas, pacifistas o cualquier otro *ista* que pensarse pueda, porque escribir para dar un mensaje traiciona la función primordial de la narrativa, su sentido esencial, que es el de la búsqueda de sentido."

This is exactly the same as Atwood's attitude when she explains, in her satirical mode again, that when she is asked to participate in "The Writer and Society" type of panel discussion, which assumes that the writer ought to have a function in relation to everybody else, she "wants to run a mile." Because such utilitarian vision of literature considers the artist not as "good" or "good at," but as "good *for*" (in the sense of good for other people); as "the slave of somebody else's lamp" (*LLC* 107).

2. THEMATIC CONTENT

After this essayistic rambling (one tends to adopt the mode one is analysing), let us move on to the second "gender and genre" issue. Do men and women essayists write on different issues and topics, such as the private vs. public sphere, domestic vs. worldly concerns, emotional vs. rational approaches, and personal vs. professional focus traditional issues? And the answer, in this case, is "yes"... and "no."

The answer is "no" because both our male and female essayists focus their essays on professional aspects, leaving domestic, personal, and intimate anecdotes almost totally out of the panorama. For example, Steiner's daughter Barbara is mentioned in *Errata* but just as an acclaimed philologist, that is, a colleague. We also know that Steiner has a wife called Zara because she is mentioned in passing once or twice. Nevertheless, these exclusions do not prevent Steiner from subtitling his book "An Examined Life." Rosa Montero, for her part, only mentions a sister who (probably) is not a real sister, and a Hollywood actor lover from her early twenties (he may never have existed either, for this story is told thrice, in three different chapters, with different endings; which, again, celebrates the inevitability of "design" in autobiography writing).[26] Rodriguez's family in totally left out of this volume that is only concerned with such "familiar" issues as "race" and "America" —although he dedicates his book to his lifelong companion, Jimmy, and publicly declares his love for him— and we only get some hints of Margaret Atwood's family life in the first chapter. If we turn to the "Life of author" entry in her book's index pages, we can see the following subentries: childhood, parents, high school, early writing and reading, university, first publications, entering the literary circle. But these entries are all located in the first 30 pages out of 180. And she leaves us there, when she turns twenty-one. And yet, we close all four volumes feeling that we "know" Margaret, Rosa, Richard and George well enough; that we have heard their voices; that we can describe what they think, even how they feel about many of the most important concerns of their lives. And that is something we cannot say of many classic autobiographies.

[26] I am here using the word "design" as it was used by Roy Pascal.

Moreover, if "love" is a typically "female" subject, then our two men essayists have feminized their table of contents, for they assign love a starring role in theirs and everybody's lives. This is Steiner discussing love:

> Love is, in varying intensities, the imperative wonder of the irrational. It is non-negotiable [...] To shake, in one's inmost spirit, nerve, and bone, at the sight, at the voice, at the merest touch of the beloved... to transform one's existence... in the cause and consequence of love... is to partake of the most commonplace and inexplicable sacrament in human life (*E* 188-89).

Exactly the same abstract and universalistic mode of discourse is used by Rosa Montero when raising the theme:

> To talk about literature, then, is... to talk about love, for passion is the greatest invention of our invented existence; the shadow of a shadow; the sleeping one who dreams he's dreaming. (*LLC* 16).[27]

And Richard Rodriguez, after prefacing his book with the thought that "the word race encourages me to remember the influence of eroticism on history. For...within any discussion of race, there lurks the possibility of romance" (*B* xv), he closes his book with the sentential "By brown I mean *love*" (*B* 225).

But, as I said, the answer is also "yes," because the scope of the books' interests is much narrower in the case of the two women. Again, both our women authors are direct literary daughters of Virginia Woolf, in so far as they write about "that single book to which they alone have the key." And they talk, widely, about imagination too ("the crazed one in the house"). But, of course, one can be as abstract and universal in writing about writing, as in writing about Judaism, nationalism, music or race.

Atwood and Montero touch upon a number of fundamental questions related to writing and to the position of the writer; why a writer writes, and for whom; and what is writing, after all. They also coincide in writing about the duplicity inherent in writing; the problems of art vs. money; the problems of art vs. fame and social relevance; the nature of the triangular relationship between the writer, the reader and the book; and about the idea that "all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (*ND* 156). In Montero's words this is expressed as: "We novelists, incontinent scriveners, shoot and shoot words, unceasingly, against death" (*LLC* 31).[28] Both women probe their lives and work

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[27] "Hablar de literatura, pues, es [...] hablar del amor, porque la pasión es el mayor invento de nuestras existencias inventadas, la sombra de una sombra, el durmiente que sueña que está soñando."

[28] "Los novelistas, escribanos incontinentes, disparamos y disparamos palabras sin cesar contra la muerte."

along with those of many other writers and bring in myths, fairy tales, stories, legends, writers' mini-biographies, quotes from now and then and whatever else may feed their narratives.

In order to compare the thematic scope and concerns of the female writers with that of their male companions, let us consider the book titles, since Rosa Montero, explaining the genesis of book titles, defines the finding of an appropriate title as a sort of epiphany, or "the fiery tongue of the Holy Spirit" (*LLC* 235)[29] that clarifies the writer and illuminates what she is doing.[30] Not unlike Rosa Montero, who has chosen a dead writer's quote to entitle her book, Margaret Atwood also pays homage to dead writers in her title, *Negotiating with the Dead.* It is Atwood's contention that all writers learn from the dead, from the work of writers who have preceded them (probably, the "others" to whom the book is dedicated). Moreover, all writers feel judged and held accountable by them —because the dead control the past, they control the stories and also certain kinds of truth. So, writers will have to deal, sooner or later, with those from previous layers of time: "they will all have to go from now to once upon a time; from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept" (*ND* 178).

If we now turn our attention to our two men's titles, we perceive that they are both one-word titles with one single powerful and symbolic word. *Errata* and *Brown* precede subtitles that give us a more concrete perspective of the themes: "An Examined Life," and "The Last Discovery of America," respectively. In his title, Steiner may be paying homage, or he may be "negotiating with" another dead writer, Benjamin Franklin, who, in his *Autobiography* also confesses his "errata" to the world, but rushes to clarify that those "errata" were subsequently purified and expiated. Although he "examines" his life with the precision of a therapist (examining his thoughts, his writings, his teaching and influences, his beliefs and perplexities, his achievements but also his failings), he is probably being guided by Heidegger's *dictum*, "He that thinks greatly must err greatly," the sentence that closes the book (*E* 190). Within this anatomic scrutiny of a mind, Steiner writes thrilling essays, mixing the personal and the analytical voice, on the classics; on his anti-theory academic positioning and all the problems it has brought him; on comparativism and his personal literary canon; on university and teaching; on Judaism and its "strangeness"; on music and language; on translation and languages; on the mass media; on politics past and future (he even prophesizes at one point); on his teachers and literary influences; on his favourite places to get lost in the world; and on religion. Thought, ideas, culture, literature, art, in Steiner's case, are not just an experience: they are life itself.

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[29] "La lengua de fuego del Espíritu Santo."

[30] As a matter of fact, when she was in the initial stages of *La loca de la casa* she had thought of writing an essay about literature, about her profession, about narrative. But when St Teresa of Avila's quote crossed her mind as a possible title, she discovered that, in fact, she was writing about *imagination*, and about madness (as fantasy); the kind of madness that every writer must entertain in order to be creative (*LLC* 235-6).

Steiner, like Rodriguez, is not a favourite with critics. He knows that very well, and, in some ways, this autobiography is also an "apologia pro vita sua," that is, a defence of his traditional humanism and of his many controversial attitudes. Fellow professors have discarded or ignored his work, while plundering shamelessly his bounty, especially from *After Babel*, his work on the theory of translation. Moreover, Steiner knows that theoreticians consider his work "archaic impressionism" (*E* 6), however, he does not hesitate to proclaim that:

> The humanities are susceptible neither to crucial experiments nor to verification. Our response to them are narratives of intuition. In the unbounded dynamics of the semantic, in the flux of the meaningful, in the uncircumscribed interplay of interpretations, the only propositions are those of *personal choice, of taste*, of echoing affinity or deafness [...] In humane letters, "theory" is nothing but *intuition* grown impatient (*E* 6).

The sustained eloquence of Steiner's declamatory style that gained him the reputation of one of the great rhetoricians of our age, is more than evident in this proclamation that puts him on the black list of Eakin's third ethical "transgression," that of not displaying "normalcy." After all, it is "the norm," as a scholar and as an intellectual, to be very theoretical these days. Only the personal essay form allows Steiner to pick what he chooses to discuss, following his "intuition," relying on his "personal choice and taste," without having to be obedient to written or unwritten prescriptions and pacts.

I turn to *Brown* at last to raise yet another thematic gender issue: the mind/body and male/female dichotomies; dichotomies which are totally dismantled by Rodriguez. Rodriguez uses the body as the site of cultural critique, and his skin color becomes the all-encompassing metaphor that gives the title to his book.[31] In the third volume of his autobiographical trilogy, as in some parts of his first memoir, *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez explores the very materiality of his skin as a source of his political consciousness. Indeed, his brown skin becomes the leitmotiv, the trope and the analytical point of departure for *Brown*. Rodriguez undertakes the task of finding the answer to the question of whether color colors thought; in other words, does he have brown thoughts? (*B* 33). Being brown and thinking brown is, basically, being tolerant, open, sensual, on the move, in-between. Richard is neither black nor white racially; neither man nor woman sexually; neither Mexican nor American ethnically, so he defines himself as brown, and places at the core of the book his idea that "the future is brown" (*B* 35) since Hispanics are browning America that traditionally has chosen to describe itself as black-and-white (*B* xii).

What Rodriguez discusses in *Brown* is the theme that has occupied him in many other essays, lectures and interviews: the illusion of ethnic purity and authenticity. His challenging de-romanticizing of ethnicity proclaims that what makes

[31] More on Rodriguez's use of corporeal metaphors in Isabel Durán, "The Body as Cultural Critique in American Autobiography," *South Atlantic Review* 70.1 (Winter 2005): 47-70.

him brown is that he is "made of the *conquistador* and the Indian" (*B* xii): a reminder of conflict; but also of reconciliation. Brown is also a gay relationship. Brown is a proclamation against orthodoxy and in favor of contradiction; brown is diversity, impurity; brown is an exciting mixture of thoughts, cultures and races, neither black nor white and always changing. Rodriguez seems to state that it is not any *a priori* cultural difference that makes ethnicity, when he emphasizes his multiethnic Spanish-Indian-African background. One is led to think that his version of Chicano identity may be seen as the vanguard of a future American melting-pot identity, which he calls brown (Sollors xviii).

So, "yes," there is a gender difference if we consider quantitatively the variety of topics that Rodriguez and Steiner approach, and measure them against those discussed by Montero and Atwood. This does not mean, however, that our two women writers do not "draw their curtain across the world." They do; indeed, they do—if around the world of universal literature. And yet my comparison may not be entirely valid, for we have two women who are primarily novelists set up against two men who are primarily scholarly essayists. So, here, instead of using the traditional dichotomy men/women we ought to be using the less "normative" and more "intuitive" type of descriptive classification of writers that is provided by Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin, via Rosa Montero's essay in the fourteenth chapter of her book. There are, Montero says paraphrasing Berlin,[32] two types of writers: the "hedgehogs," and the "foxes":

> The former roll themselves up and always ruminate around the same topics; while the foxes are itinerant animals that advance non-stop throughout different topics... I must confess I consider myself a hundred per cent fox; from the truffle of my black snout down to my little playful legs (*LLC* 166).[33]

This rather anti-theoretical and personal classification is not evaluative in any way. A fox-writer need not be better than a hedgehog-writer, since meditating once and again on a specific topic need not be repetitive, but, on the contrary, enriching. It is no wonder, then, that Montero chooses Proust as a prototypical hedgehog; "always crouched in his eternal hypochondriac bed; always traversing the paths of his one and only work, ...the marvellously monumental *À la recherche du temps perdu*" (*LLC* 166).[34] Likewise, Steiner and Rodriguez are "hedgehog-writ-

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[32] Although Montero's book does not provide references, it's easy to infer that she is referring to *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1953).

[33] "Los primeros se hacen una rosca y siempre le dan vueltas al mismo tema, mientras que las raposas son animalejos itinerantes que avanzan sin parar por asuntos distintos... Debo confesar que yo me considero una raposa al cien por cien, desde la trufa de mi negro hocico hasta mis patitas andariegas."

[34] "Siempre hecho un ovillo en su eternal cama de hipocondríaco, siempre deambulando por los alrededores de su única obra... la monumental y maravillosa *En busca del tiempo perdido*."

ers," since in *Errata* and *Brown* they rehearse most of the characteristic ideas and problems explored in earlier books, which explains the masterful handling of the ideological, intellectual and philosophical questions that have always concerned them. On the contrary, our "female fox writers" have always jumped from novel to novel, discovering new and unexpected landscapes in each one of them. And their book of personal essays is another of those landscapes, one devoted to "writing."

3. STRUCTURE

The last "gender and genre" issue will be devoted to a discussion of formal structure. Do men and women write different personal essays? Here again the answer is "no." Jelinek says in this respect, let us recall, that if men shape their life-stories into coherent, chronological and linear narratives, irregularity, fragmentation, disconnectedness and lack of linear chronology informs self-portraits by women. But this does not apply to the essay-as-autobiography form. As I pointed out before, men and women both tend to write in a way that is, precisely, irregular, fragmented, and disconnected. Personal essay writing is consciously exploratory, seeming to move from one point to the next in a tangential fashion rather than develop logically in the scholastic form of the argument. The essays depart from a predictable expository or analytic step, wandering off into sidelines, digressions, small autobiographical stories, myths and legends that may then illuminate the starting point in an unexpected way, "off the beaten track" (Bowlby in Woolf xii). Chronology does not exist in any of the books I consider here, nor is the organization of chapters sequential in any manner. The tone tends to be fresh and colloquial; the voice, direct, conversational and dialogical; the style is ironic, persuasive, free from the imposed rigours and ornamental (or jargon-ridden) eloquence of standard cultural or academic essay writing.

So, we are in all cases talking about hybrid forms of writing that link the personal essay and creative writing (all four authors use metaphor, symbol, allusion, irony, hyperbole, and all sorts of literary tropes, more appropriate of creative writing than of critical discourse); or we can talk about flexible intertextuality between autobiography and other genres such as historiography, autofiction, biography, personal essay and lecture. We could even argue, from an essentialist perspective, that we find, in all four volumes, resonances of what is usually attributed to the social construct of "the woman": the unsystematic nature of the essays, their spontaneous and almost accidental nature, their mixture of anecdote, description and opinion, their opposition to doctrinal and disciplinary thought, their focus on personal experience, their cultivation of diversity, their emphasis on issues connected with the author's life, and so on.

I would venture the proposal of an organizational gender difference, even if it does not neatly apply to absolutely *all* the essays that compose each of the volumes. Still, this difference applies often enough to enable me to reach a provisional conclusion. Because the two women I consider here write essays on their field of expertise ("writing" is their profession), they tend to write following a *deductive*

method. They start off with the expert's general assertion, and then proceed to the exemplification of that assertion in concrete cases: in their own writing, in other writers' or readers' cases, or in particular characters and novels. Thus, when Rosa Montero digresses about how fame and success can destroy a writer, she says: "all of us (writers) do need public recognition; and not only to keep on writing, but to keep on *being*. What I'm saying is that a writer who has failed usually becomes a monster, an insane and ill person" (*LLC* 80).[35] After this generalization has been further elaborated, she proceeds to give examples of particularly "needy" writers that were the victims of either failure or excessive success, such as Melville, Robert Walser or Truman Capote.

The same process of reasoning is followed by Atwood. In *Negotiating*, every general opinion, assertion or comment is rigorously —and playfully— supported with examples and illustrations from writers—legends, poems, quotes, myths, fragments of stories or abstracts of novels or plays). In chapter 4, she discusses the intersection of art and power and their moral and social responsibility, and she starts off with the presentation of her themes, questions or conundrums:

> Are you your brother's keeper, and if so to what extent, and are you willing to mangle your artistic standards and become a Pulpiteer, a preachy manipulator of two-dimensional images, in order to ram home some —usually somebody else's— worthy message or other? And if you aren't your brother's keeper, then, does your inaction lead to societal crime? (*ND* 102)

After she has provided some tentative answers, she proceeds to illustrate her views, in this particular case with three fictional characters: The Wizard of Oz, Prospero, and the actor Henrik Hölfgen in Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto*. It seems as though both writers are learning about their own topic *as* they write, and once they come up with a new idea or opinion, a hypothesis or a comment about writing and writers, the proofs of what they say tend to proliferate.

On the contrary, when examining some of their concerns and opinions on which they cannot be too assertive —either due to their magnitude, or to their controversial nature—, Steiner (certainly), and Rodriguez (only at times, since he is much more eclectic and random in the presentation of his thoughts), tend to follow the *inductive* type of reasoning, that is, they make their generalizations based on individual instances and observations of recurring phenomenal patterns. Thus, among the many issues Steiner raises there is religious faith. In the last chapter of *Errata*, Steiner tries to "clarify his (religious) perplexities" (*E* 180), which are those of an "adult, rational intellect, at the end of the millennium" (*E* 175). In order to do so, he starts by listing the attractions of atheism, including Darwinism. Then

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[35] "Lo cierto es que necesitamos cierto reconocimiento público; y no sólo para seguir escribiendo, sino incluso para seguir *siendo*. Quiero decir que un escritor fracasado suele convertirse en un monstruo, en un loco, en un enfermo."

follow the attractions of faith, among them, art inspired by faith, and the company of a list of overwhelmingly distinguished intellectuals who were, according to him, believers in a divine presence—Socrates, Plato, Augustine, but also Einstein and Wittgenstein. Finally, based on all of those observations, he ventures his own position: since proving the existence of God rationally can be misguided, and thus, belief is not evidential, the only honest posture is that of the agnostic; the "I don't know" that has become the established church of modernity (*E* 184).

But this difference does not imply in the least a self-image of confidence vs. a self-image of understatement. Our four authors, regardless of their sex, never play the game of political correctness but ride alone, sometimes writing a lonely line of individualism, where they picture themselves as singular or even outlandish; sometimes participating in a communal "we": which is not a "we, women" vs. "them, men," but rather we, writers, we, thinkers, we, teachers, we gays, we, Americans, we, Canadians, we, Jews, we Catholics, we the people of brown America.

4. CONCLUSION

It was my intention from the beginning of this essay to show how "gender and genre" studies can be thrillingly alive if one includes into them female writers in comparison with male writers. So, do women and men write different autobiography-as- essay? In most cases, they "don't." If we believe, with Philip Lopate, that "through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader" based on the "core supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience" (xxiii), then it is of "shared" human experience we should be talking by now. However, as Atwood would put it, "I have no answers. But I've indicated some of the possibilities, some of the dangers that may lurk; some of the conundrums" (*ND* 122).

"Literature professors and the rest of the academia," Rosa Montero believes, "have invented a bunch of classificatory labels that, I'm sorry to say, are awfully boring" (*LLC* 220).[36] So, apart from Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog/fox classification of writers, she invites us readers to follow her along the path of alternative classifications, provided by writers instead. One of them, which was suggested by Italo Calvino, is that of "flame writers" vs. "crystal writers." The former are emotional; the latter are rational. But, of course, this brings resonances from the male/female or the reason/emotion binarisms. So, I feel more inclined to use the next two classifications that Montero suggests: the first, based on another animalistic metaphor, was proposed by Spanish writer Juan José Millás who distinguishes "insect writers" from "mammal writers" (*LLC* 221). Applied to their works, a "mammal novel" (or autobiography) is a monumentally long one, full of detailed description and incident.

[36] "Los profesores de literatura y demás eruditos universitarios han inventado montones de etiquetas, en general, con perdón, aburridísimas."

An "insect" would be a perfect creation, short, sharp, apparently simple, essential, a creation where nothing is redundant. Without any sort of hesitation, *La loca de la casa, Negotiating with the Dead, Errata* and *Brown* are "insect autobiographies."

But Montero provides us with yet another categorization of her own that is more applicable to the kinds of texts I have been discussing in these lines. She divides writers into two categories: the "memorialists" and the "amnesic writers" (*LLC* 222). The former, boasting of their good memory, are probably nostalgic of their past, their childhood, and tend to indulge in a floridly reminiscent and descriptive style—Tolstoy would be an example. The latter, on the contrary, are unable or do not wish to remember; their memory resembles "a poorly erased blackboard," and usually write in a sharper, more concise style. They tend to concentrate "in the atmospheric, in sensations, in action and reaction, in the metaphoric and the emblematic" (*LLC* 223)[37] —the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* would be an example. Montero declares herself of the amnesic type; and I would say that the other three writers are much more "amnesic" than "memorialists." They are not interested in lengthy narrations of the events of their past lives, nor in florid descriptions of their early years. Instead, they have opted for a testing of their intellectual, emotional, and psychological responses to their chosen topics. They would rather concentrate in the "errata" or the "brown" (the metaphoric and emblematic), in negotiations with "the dead" or in the study of creative imagination (the "atmospheric"). And in so doing, they concentrate, metaphorically, in themselves.

I started this essay with a quotation from Virginia Woolf's "The Decay of Essay Writing" and, after having shown that personal essay writing is not in decay in the twenty-first century, but very alive and full of creative energy, I will quote her again, describing Montaigne's volumes of essays, for Woolf's lines dedicated to the French essayist could also be a description of the four books I presented here:

> In these extraordinary volumes of short and broken, long and learned, logical and contradictory statements, we have heard the very pulse and rhythm of the soul... Whence this overmastering desire to communicate with others? Is the beauty of this world enough, or is there, elsewhere, some explanation of the mystery? To this what answer can there be? There is none. There is only one more question: "*Que sais-je*?" (64)[38]

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[37] "Se concentran más en lo atmosférico, en las sensaciones, en la acción y la reacción, en lo metafórico y emblemático."

[38] As editor Rachel Bowlby footnotes, "What do I know" is the motto that many consider Montaigne's central question, from one of his essays, "Apology for Raymond Sebond."

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