

## Reply to My Father: Confessions of a Feminist Critic · Paula Marantz Cohen

LET ME BEGIN by assigning what follows to a genre that I will call “confessional criticism.” It seems time that this genre were formally acknowledged and named since its practice appears to be a growing trend in feminist literary circles. Open any recent work of criticism by a woman and you are likely to find, either as part of the introductory matter or scattered throughout the theoretical argument, “confessions” on the part of the author to having been a girl once: to having dressed Barbie dolls or baked cookies with grandma.

Almost twenty years ago, a Yale undergraduate named Joyce Maynard made a brief reputation writing social criticism that drew upon her female coming of age in the '60s. Her first piece appeared as a cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*. My friends and I were contemptuous of that piece, of what we referred to as “that girl’s wallowing, confessional style.” She made all of us look bad, we thought. But I see now that our scorn was less for what Joyce Maynard wrote than for how it was framed. The critical scaffolding that supported her observations was too weak and she lacked the proper “serious” credentials.

But the genre of confessional criticism has been perfected since the appearance of Joyce Maynard’s cover story. It has gone on to be practiced by the most theoretically advanced academic feminists (finding special favor among literary theorists). Thus Helena Michie, a feminist scholar and author of *The Flesh Made Word* (a study of the physical representation of women in Victorian novels, published by Oxford University Press and employing the methodology of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis), begins her book by explaining that it had its source “on a beach on Long Island, New York, where, stretched out on a lawn chair carefully watching my stomach for signs of sunburn, I first read *Middlemarch*.” Long Island, beach, lawn chair, stomach, sunburn: these are the signifiers of a life “behind” criticism that Michie calculatedly constructs and allows us to glimpse. The portrait of a vain little girl has been properly framed by (and grown into) the serious adult critic. A more sustained case of confessional criticism, and the most amusing I know, is Rachel Brownstein’s *Becoming*

*a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels*, in which she explains the influence of nineteenth-century novels on her life as a lower-middle-class Brooklyn girl in the 1940s. Like Michie, Brownstein places her girlhood memories in the frame of her present voice as a serious adult critic, providing an avalanche of plot detail in her discussion of the novels—no one could ever accuse her of not doing her homework.

Other examples of confessional criticism? Patricia Meyer Spacks is mistress of the classroom confessional, framing her students wrenchingly “felt” responses to literature by her own wise, always professional presence (“Everyone was startled, then shamefaced. Yes, they admitted, they recognized the immediate applications of Ellen Willis to their own lives . . .”). In a recent issue of *PMLA* (the dominant institutional journal for literary criticism), there appears an essay on “recipe exchange” in which the author confesses to liking to cook and begins by sharing her own recipe for “summer pasta” (the “Works Cited” page for the article lists two editions of *The Joy of Cooking*). But let naive readers beware, the frame is formidable. The essay forces us to take it seriously through the sheer relentlessness of its academic prose. It has all the lightness of a collapsed soufflé.

Of course, for the quintessential example of confessional criticism, we must harken back to Virginia Woolf. She was a pioneer of the genre long before Joyce Maynard, and a far more adept practitioner even then. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf framed her confessional narrative as expertly as any contemporary feminist critic. For all of its whimsy and its domestic detail, Woolf's essay is laced with impeccably erudite references to literature, and it delivers its personal observations through an elaborate fictional persona.

In short, an examination of a sample of confessional criticism shows it to be a genre of apparent ambivalence. At once daring and retiring, it is a dramatic gesture that edits itself—an attempt to expose and confront that always manages to remain detached. This may lead one to assume that in such writing something is being held back, that some true confession or spontaneous outpouring is being repressed. But such an assumption ignores the conventions of a genre that works by producing this impression. For confessional criticism is not like the female fiction of the last century which feminist critic Elaine Showalter has described as involving an interplay of “dominant” and “muted” story-telling (an interplay in which

our job is to exercise our keenest critical sensibilities, to press our ear to the text, so as to hear the muted story). Confessional criticism is different from traditional women's writing in that it operates *knowingly*; it involves an interplay between continually changing positions involving what is "dominant" and what is "muted." Another feminist literary critic, Nancy K. Miller, has maintained that female writers bring an "added emphasis" to "common texts": "a modality of intensity and stress . . . a way of making a common text one's own." In confessional criticism this emphasis must be understood as a stress moving back and forth between two kinds of always competing common texts. For women writing criticism, the common texts are both the masculine critical texts (texts that are common insofar as they are established or canonized) and the feminine confessional texts (common insofar as they are associated with the unliterary aspects of daily life, texts whose basic conventions we learned from the magazines on the supermarket stands and in the beauty parlors whose articles flaunted titles like "Confessions of a Teenage Hooker" or "How I Lost 60 Pounds"). What is being confessed in confessional criticism is no less constructed and artificial, no less learned from our life as readers, than what is being asserted from the detached viewpoint of standard critical rhetoric. These confessional texts, once allowed *entrée* into academic discourse, are not muted. They assert themselves, sometimes stridently, sometimes seductively, attempting to elbow aside or to insinuate their emotional appeal against the conventional critical texts that are always attempting to suppress them. For this reason, theoretical discourses on "women's topics" like Harlequin romance novels, recipes, gossip and so forth (and here I would include the female literary tradition itself) ought to be properly categorized within the genre of confessional criticism even when they avoid the first person pronoun. For they involve the same dynamic outlined above: of a "low" form of discourse (associated with our feminine "real" lives) battling for priority against a "high" form of discourse (associated with masculine authority and knowledge), the two flip-flopping in an eternal wrestling match.

To anchor the two discourses in a stable way is impossible. At best we can produce a series of shifting emphases that find a responding vibration in our readers. Beyond this provisional sense of a new pattern shared, confessional criticism is only an incitement for more such criticism. Michel Foucault (would it be confessional criticism were the name of an eminent male

philosopher not invoked for the frame?) has argued that it was the rite of confession (the discourse of common people framed by the authority of the church) that incited the discourse on sexuality by which we as modern selves have located the center of our mystery. In other words, a confessional criticism brings its own repressions into being, tantalizing by its ability to hide something else, to pose some other riddle, to make manifest some new veil to be lifted. Feminist critics therefore have their work cut out for them.

But on to my story . . .

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My father is a scientist by training. After spending his years “at the bench,” he went on to serve as director of a succession of corporate R&D programs. He now owns his own chemical company that he hopes when he retires to sell for a small fortune. The route his life has taken expresses his values: he prizes the scientific method, the hierarchical approach to success, the bottom line. Had he had a son, he would have expected him to take his own achievements a step further: to win a Nobel Prize (in chemistry or physics) in his mid-thirties, become CEO of, say, Dupont in his forties, and to wind up his career as a top Presidential advisor or cabinet member. He would say that he wanted the same for me. But cues of my childhood argued otherwise.

My mother, my sister, and I were clearly grouped together in my father’s mind in a way of which he was hardly aware. When he was displeased with one of us, the sense of our conglomerate likeness, our amorphous Otherness to him, bubbled angrily to the surface. At those times—most typically when my mother had failed to buy enough food for a dinner party (my father liked to entertain lavishly and my mother perversely—or perhaps it was her job to do the preparation and this was one of her silent and unconscious means of rebellion—tended to buy short), he would explode at the three of us, sitting meekly before the insubstantial plate of shrimp that we had helped to arrange. “You people don’t know how to do things right,” he would lash out, or “I’m fed up with you people.” Despite the ostensibly gender-free “you people,” I knew that what linked me to my sister and mother in these moments of dissatisfaction in my father’s mind was my sex. There was a certain ineptitude basic to my nature that would,

hard as I tried to be like him, come to the surface and plague him.

What reinforced my sense that I was part of a group unlike my father was my inadequacy in math and science. I did well enough in these subjects and tended even to get “A”s, but my comprehension was limited; I could not get beyond the memorization of the formulas. My eyes would almost instantaneously glaze over as he began to explain to me the nature of alternating currents, or formulas for velocity, or for calculating the mass of a cube. Looking back, it is hard for me to say whether my incomprehension was a function of mental limitation or whether it was subtly connected with the way my father explained these concepts. For even when I questioned him, it seemed to me that he retained a stubborn opacity as though he were talking to himself. His explanations seemed to exist only to remind me that I was destined to be ignorant of really “hard” things.

When my achievements happened to please him, my father liked to boast that I was raised like a boy—a comment that in itself speaks volumes. Another phrase he liked was that “I was his little entry in the race of life.” Only recently did I notice that the phrase harbored the insidious adjective “little” and the adjective was retained long after I was grown. It is true that he has never ceased to be ambitious for me, to push me toward opportunities, to belittle my fears. But those fears came not just from my mother, an ambivalent achiever if there ever was one, but from my father’s implicit notion of the social role he expected me to play even as he pushed me to achieve. For what my father valued above all in my mother, my sister, and me that as clearly marked us as Other as our ineptitude in certain matters of science and common sense were all those talents that dealt in impressions and imprecise calculations: writing, painting, dance, conversation—a veritable repertoire out of Jane Austen. Certain of these accomplishments were cultivated through lessons, but the most essential were not teachable in classrooms and were fostered in me unaware as I found myself placed in the position of facilitating the harmonious understanding of those around me. So complete was my initiation in this role that I felt inept and frightened in situations where no conflict existed for me to mediate, where I was expected to present myself, simply and straightforwardly, without the friction of other viewpoints to subdue and synthesize. At home, I was mostly in my element, for it seemed that my parents fought so that I could help them make up. I was always introduced at their cocktail parties and

expected to produce a nice impression—which meant asking good questions of the pompous men and admiring the outfits of their wives. As I grew, my mediating function grew more sophisticated and ingenious. I became adept at sensing the gaps that existed between people and at filling these in. This meant that I became good, if not at story-telling, then at transitions, if not at speaking, then at listening. I excelled at art, drawing likenesses that elicited wonder (my sister became an adept caricaturist), making landscapes and still lifes that could decorate bare walls, and of course making myself as attractive as my native endowments permitted (the emphasis in our household was on what one did with oneself: one complimented a woman by saying she had style or flair, not that she was pretty—that took no work). Most of all, I was expected to be sensitive to language, for it was through this means that I could sense out the desires of others and minister to their needs. My mother likes to tell the story of how her own father, who resembled mine in his admiration for feminine sociability and charm, was sitting in a restaurant with a friend, when their two wives joined them. The women had had a hard day, were tired and less eager to draw out the men than usual. My grandfather grew annoyed. “*Mach frilach, Viber*” (“Make merry, wives”), he instructed them. The phrase remained with my mother and was passed on to me as the answer to the riddle: what do men want from women?

My training in “*mach frilach*” ultimately led me to major in English, where I tended to complete others’ ideas in seminars, take ideas to another level of abstraction, and help sketch in the opposing point of view. My contribution, invariably, was contextual rather than initiating, although in time my sense of context became so acute that it often served as an initiating principle in itself (a point I will return to). It led me on to graduate school and into a career as a university critic and teacher where I mediated texts and students. In the classroom and on department committees, I operated uncannily as I did in my own family. I helped to get people to see the other side or tried for some synthesis of points of view, while always noting the nuance of the personal behind the general—the exaggerated liveliness of X’s manner, the tension in Y’s greeting—and set to work interpreting these signs and smoothing them out. I was drawn to academic life because it allowed me to be feminine in ways that I was taught were acceptable, to put into effect the qualities my father had encouraged me to cultivate, and to deepen and extend their application beyond the realms in which my mother had exercised them.

My mother, a high school French teacher, worked right through my sister's and my growing up despite the frowns of our suburban neighbors. She called herself a feminist before her time, but the perception in the household (as promulgated by my father) was that, as a teacher, she still did women's work. (To do him justice, my father grew immensely proud of my mother as years went by as she became the acclaimed French teacher of the community and steadily drew in a paycheck during his periods between jobs.) But it was true that my mother's fear of risk, her desire to have everything under her control, and her insatiable desire for admiration were qualities that easily adapted themselves to the larger (but not too large) sphere of her workplace. Although my mother's rebelliousness took the form of scorning cooking and sewing (which she nonetheless did—for who else was there to do these things?—but drew solace by priding herself on doing them badly), she transformed the site of the local high school where she taught into a kind of alternate household: her tapes, her folders of Xeroxed quizzes and homework sheets, her confrontations with students, and her elaborate, trivial relations with colleagues existed in our mind as a kind of variation in another key on her life at home with us. It was not that she was domestic at school or teacherly at home, but rather that she saw no gap in the two lives. She stretched them to include each other, to make one large circumscribed space. The seven-minute journey between home and work was as automatic to her as her two pieces of buttered toast in the morning, and we seemed to grow up as much in her high school classroom, with its posters of Sartre, Yves Montand and Degas's ballerinas, as we did in the split-level in which my sister and I shared a bedroom. It was my mother's job which ultimately became the model for what I could do, and with the same mix of caution and ingenuity that she had brought to her work, I stepped into the currents of an academic career. Like my mother, I chose to be a teacher, only I bypassed the high school for the university. Like her, I also chose to work with language. But rather than, as she had, studying the subjunctive and irregular verbs of another language, mired as it were in the particular, I chose to delve more deeply into my own and be carried into the realm of "big ideas." The role of literary critic, in what it offers me, seems a metaphor for the way I took my mother's path and extended it, but without really swerving from an essentially feminine course.

Despite its history as a male occupation, the practice of criticism is femi-

nine insofar as the field has traditionally conceived of itself as subordinate: the critic acting as an interpreter, a mediator, for someone else's words or work. It seems to me significant, however, that at a time when traditional gender roles are beginning to be redefined, women are increasingly drawn to a critical practice that is on its way to freeing itself from its subordinate status. In a postmodern climate, it is not that the critical text is now allowed to be more artful than it once was (although that may superficially appear to be the case), it is that the artistic text to which the critical text had traditionally subordinated itself is being understood to be more like criticism—more of an exercise in textual interpretation in its own right. When all discourse is seen as interpretive, the artistic text and the critical text achieve equality or, if anything, the heightened awareness associated with criticism gives it priority over an art that remains anchored to traditional attitudes about creativity and originality. Criticism, in other words, is emerging as a form of discourse where women can continue to perform the mediating role to which they have been raised, and yet be released from subjugation to an authority that had trivialized that role—made it seem pleasing and helpful, but not really important.

Men like my father, of course, cannot be expected to recognize the significance of this change. Concerned as he is with the creation of new polymers and with the annual report of his company, he cannot understand that my ability to write an article like this one, that discusses not Milton or Wordsworth, but criticism itself (in a form at odds with the conventional forms of academic discourse), is extraordinarily empowering. If I were really to show myself “powerful” and “realize my potential,” he'd have me earn an M.B.A., start my own consulting firm. For my father, it is all a waste. “She's so smart,” he likes to say, “she would have been so successful in business.” He fails to realize that “smart” for him in respect to me is a euphemism for charm, tact, diplomacy, and that those qualities of mediation are precisely what led me to embrace a life in criticism, the one field where I could give the qualities a self-sufficiency that business would never have allowed me. For in criticism such qualities are made to do brainwork, to develop a “scientific” depth and elaboration. Perhaps the more logical route for someone like me would have been to have become a painter, a creative writer, or even a doyenne of interior design. But I too much admired my father's rigor of mind, was too much a product of his analytical mode and linear ambitions to let the artist in myself develop. (By the



same token, my identity as a critic may also be understood as a function of cultural forces, discussed above, that have discredited the idea of art as a spontaneous, original expression.)

What is the anatomy of the feminist critic as my own experience leads me to understand her? She exists in two kinds of relationship to her father (and the father, for many of us, may more persuasively exist in the guise of a graduate school advisor or an influential male critic or school of thought): she is his imitator (seeking to cultivate his masculine qualities of mind) and his complement (his mediator, formed to supply him with entertainment, charm, feminine agreement). Taking advantage of this dual relationship, feminist critics have brought to bear our father's aggressive and entrepreneurial spirit to the practice of criticism: we have managed to enter the firm but also to begin to transform it. To extend the analogy of business, we are employing new forms of production and a more lateral, less hierarchical approach to decision-making. Even where we get caught in the quicksand of old forms of power and hierarchy, there is still a slippage in our authoritative stance, a mutation in our adoption of the rationalist, scientific method.

The two faces of feminist criticism may be expressed in other ways as well. We were drawn to criticism in part because it ministered to our feminine sense of not wanting to get dirty. We could bypass the mess of the real chemicals, and the headache of precise calculation. (In thinking of our father's work, my sister and I always omitted the laboratory. Our vision of him was of his spending his day before a polished walnut desk, thinking up ideas. It is a vision that my life as a critic has uncannily fulfilled.) At the same time, our preference for discourse — for books over beakers — can also be interpreted as a profound delight in freedom over constraint; for criticism lets us move back and forth between positions, to weave quixotic, idiosyncratic arguments. These two impulses — on the one hand a finicky sense of wanting to stay clean and proper that is connected, I suspect, with a certain intellectual laziness (a tendency that makes us take longer to complete our dissertations and to so often serve slavishly as the good-little-girl disciples of famous critics) and, on the other, a passionate desire to use ideas for their own sake and to make them our own — are two of the seemingly contradictory aspects of feminist criticism.

But feminist criticism is also an extension of our mother's work and, in

this sense, it merges the choppy, back-and-forth motion of our relationship to our father with an essential smoothness, continuity and expansiveness. The feminist critic extends her mother's life (whether that life was confined to kitchen and nursery or stretched to include some other job site) into a broader arena, an arena that is no longer restricted to men. Although feminist criticism may choose to present itself as a subset of postmodern criticism, such separation no longer denotes inferiority. If anything, feminist criticism is the power center of postmodern criticism, although I prefer to argue that all authentic postmodern criticism — and the worst of it as well as the best of it — can be termed feminist criticism (which, if an earlier claim in this essay is accepted, means that all postmodern criticism is also confessional criticism). I make this claim because postmodern criticism, it seems to me, is a practice that is both limitless in its scope and fundamentally domestic in its nature. Its practice is also its epistemology — namely that we are fated to remain always inside the domestic space of language, only that space stretches (rather like my mother's relationship to the high school where she teaches) to include everything.

This, then, is the dual parentage of feminist criticism. Its relationship to a father differentiates it and makes it derivative; its relationship to a mother gives it the potential for encompassing everything, for swallowing up all difference, for becoming not only all criticism but all discourse and, if discourse determines our sense of what is real, of who we are, then all life. To take a more restrained line, feminist criticism is feminine discourse grown up and afforded some degree of influence over culture. It is not that the ideas being propounded are necessarily new. Many of these ideas have found expression throughout the history of both Eastern and Western thought in the work of Confucius, of Martin Buber, of Gregory Bateson — to name a few male thinkers whose basic principles coincide with the most profound aspects of feminist thought. What is new is the way these ideas seem finally to have found a platform through their association with women at a moment when women's role in the family and in culture at large has begun to de-rigidify.

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In closing this essay, let me simply assert an awareness of where I stand or perhaps, better, of where I don't stand — of shifting ground. I have written

something here that is both academic-critical and women's magazine-confessional, and have done so with a very calculated sense of audacity—knowing that it isn't too audacious really—and liking the middle ground: the risk and the safety. Is it through such tentative violations as these that women are redefining critical writing? Or is it simply a case of women coming to inhabit the spaces of a genre undergoing upheaval, of our mediating the passage to a new form for theoretical discussion? It hardly seems to matter, since what is emerging are new values that are making feminine qualities—charm, tact, gossip, nurturance—less marginal and decorative, less to be separated off as secondary (as style and content become less capable of being distinguished). And these values, while they are being most self-consciously reclaimed in academic discourse, are not confined to this realm. As the nuclear family breaks down and relational configurations become more varied and multiple, the authoritative presence of the father in determining value becomes less. Women, in their interpretive, mediating capacity, are therefore likely to be the most adept practitioners of and the most conspicuous models for a process of making and unmaking meaning that may serve as the basis for the civilization of the future.