

READING LIFE WRITING: AN ANTHOLOGY

Marlene Kadar, ed.. Toronto: Oxford
University Press, 1993

by *Miriam Jones*

With regards to *Reading Life Writing*, the parts, though individually moving, are not greater than the whole: for with them, Marlene Kadar builds a argument for the expansion of the definition of the genre of "life writing." The texts are grouped under sub-genres as examples which exemplify, as well as strain against, definitions. Throughout, Kadar relates her commentary and her selections to feminist theory and practice: indeed, she writes that the collection "has always been considered a feminist project."

The texts are balanced between the expected canonical choices, such as Augustine, Samuel Pepys and Virginia Woolf—choices which establish generic parameters—and texts from more marginalized traditions which question those parameters. The collection goes beyond the conventional notions of biography, memoirs and letters to include what she terms "blended genres" categories such as "fictionalized letters." To those who assume that life writing is distinct from fiction inasmuch as it transparently attempts to evoke someone's lived experience, it may startle to find included texts such as Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. But part of Kadar's stated project is "to probe the assumption that autobiographical documents are 'true,'" and to reflect on modes of reading. She writes that the Life Writing project is the construction of the self, which indicates that the definition of the genre should include any conflation of literature and life. As well as playing with autobiographical formulae in his novels, Kadar tells us that Defoe was something of a picaro himself. He is the literary subject as well as the author and narrator. Metafictional writing, then, can be read as life writing because it abolishes distance between narrator and author. Indeed, Kadar asks if we cannot read all writing as life writing? Initially a daunting question, this possibility becomes more feasible as one moves through the anthology, and one of the reasons is the deftness of the

choices. In the notion of a genre-across-genres, some readers may fear a lack of critical focus. But this collection, as a totality, points to elements in each of the texts that would not have been readily apparent had they been read in more conventional generic contexts.

Life writing, potentially subversive of genre itself, is an appropriate form for the intersection of the political with private life. Slaves, women, dissidents, and others living under scrutiny and without access to publishing have at least had access to personal writing. With many of the writers represented, writing about their own lives comes to be indivisible from writing about their community: Kadar refers to Françoise Lionnet's term "autoethnography" to indicate this reclamation of heritage. As Shmuel Goldman, whom Barbara Myerhoff interviewed for her text *Number Our Days*, says:

Now there are some people...who you will hear say, Jewish is not a real language....Nonsense. Jewish we call the mama-loshen. That means more than mother tongue. It is the *mother's* tongue because this was the language the mother talked, sweet or bitter. It was your own...it had words in it that could be used differently for the inside sweet world and the hard world outside.

Goldman speaks of loss and devaluation as well as of self-protection and belonging. Myerhoff, an anthropologist, chose her subject for personal reasons: her dead grandparents had never told her about the shtetl. This life, then, while ostensibly Goldman's, is also obliquely her own.

Many of the selections indicate the circuitous routes to power women have been obliged to take. Even as relatively privileged a woman as Virginia Woolf uses the homely form of the letter in order to present theory in *Three Guineas*. Politics are in effect syphoned into a "safe" form, as in the case of Sor Juana de la Cruz, the 17th-century Mexican nun who defends her right to education to the Bishop of Puebla in a carefully-worded letter: "The first...[obstacle to responding] has been not knowing how to reply to your most learned, prudent, pious, and loving letter," she begins.

One of the most persuasive arguments

about women's use of life writing as a form of personal and political self-expression arises, paradoxically, from the number of fiction writers and poets who recreate life writing genres in their texts—such as Beatrice Culleton in her novel *In Search of April Raintree*, where a Native girl who commits suicide is given a voice when her journal is interpolated into the narrative. Kadar comments on our lack of knowledge about women's lives, and her project is a kind of reclamation in the tradition of feminist scholarship, as much as are some of the texts from which she draws. With reference to medieval mystic Margery Kempe she writes that the theme of needing to find meaning, though often opaque, is repeated throughout. It is in the construction of the self in the light of this notion that one of the major interests of the collection lies. Or perhaps more simply, it comes down to Shmuel Goldman's *mama-loshen* in the face of the "the hard world outside."

ROMANTIC CORRESPONDENCE: WOMEN, POLITICS AND THE FICTION OF LETTERS

Mary A. Favret. Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1993, 268 pp.

by *Katherine Binhammer*

Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female—Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

As Jane Austen's comment underscores, the genre of letter writing has frequently been identified as a female form. Many texts by feminists and literary historians have explored and analyzed the relationship between the epistolary form and

women's writing, from Ruth Perry's initializing book, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (1980) to Olga Kenyon's recent anthology, *800 Years of Women's Letters*. We can now add to this list Favret's original study of English women's letter writing of the Romantic period.¹

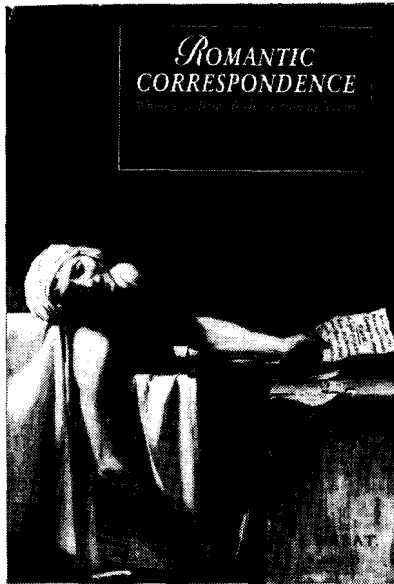
The identification of letter writing as a female form stems from women's historical marginalization from the public sphere. Women writers, impeded from occupying the authoritative voice of philosophy or science, retreated into the softer, more feminine space of familiar letters and epistolary fiction. Certainly, this "fiction of letters,"—the phrase Mary Favret uses to designate particular theories of the letter—bears itself out in the reality of women's writing in the eighteenth century. The vast majority of epistolary novels were written by women. But most scholarship on the association between women and letters concentrates on the eighteenth century; in fact, many traditional literary critics assert that the epistolary genre ceased to exist after the emergence of Romanticism. Mary Favret's book is a refreshing revision of traditional feminist and literary interpretations of women and letters, as she provides an interesting new twist on why and how women wrote letters. Favret's text challenges two basic assumptions concerning women's epistolary fiction: 1) that women's epistolary writing disappeared with Romanticism; and 2) that women employed the letter form only to explore private, romantic or domestic themes. She writes:

This book attempts first to revise the familiar fiction of the letter in literature and, second, to demonstrate how the sentimental fiction of letters disguises, in part, a revolutionary politics.... We accept too readily the notion that the letter allows us a window into the intimate, and usually feminine, self.

In contrast to the feminization and domestication of the letter genre, Favret wants to show how women used letters for "political agitation or propaganda in a particular historical moment defined by revolution, reaction and Romanticism."

Favret's revision begins with her choice of primary sources. The tradition of the "sentimental fiction of letters" concen-

trates on women's epistolary novels, for example Fanny Burney's *Evelina*. In contrast, Favret works on texts not usually considered part of the canon of women's epistolary writing: Helen Maria William's *Letters from France*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden*, Jane Austen's use of the letter in her novels and



Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Her readings of these works are innovative and insightful.

One might think that at this point in feminist scholarship it is impossible to say anything new about Mary Wollstonecraft but Favret manages to do just that. Instead of reading *Letters from Sweden* as personal, familiar letters that reveal Wollstonecraft's "true self," Favret reads them as public and political: "When we avoid the inclination to read the letter as an intimate, sentimental and properly 'feminine' genre, we can see that Wollstonecraft is testing a new rhetorical strategy for her political philosophy." Not that Favret denies the sentimental and personal aspect of Wollstonecraft's letters—rather, she is more interested in reading the letters as "traveling between the two spheres of 'home' and 'business.'" Instead of analyzing the *Letters from Sweden* as either simply personal or only political, Favret makes the argument that Wollstonecraft writes between the two, merging the private and the public spheres.

The most fascinating revelation in Favret's text, though, comes not in her comments on the four women writers but

in her historical discussions of the development of the British Post Office, the political use of letters through corresponding societies, and the use of letters in espionage. Placing women's epistolary writing within the context of these historically specific phenomena changes the way in which we read Williams, Wollstonecraft, Austen and Shelley. The exchange of open letters between English radicals and French Revolutionaries through such associations as the London Corresponding Society resulted in the implementation of the conservative Traitorous Correspondence Bill of 1793 which empowered the government to open private letters at will. Within this "fiction of letters" the epistolary genre emerges as a "medium of collective political activity." Williams' *Letters from France* are then seen, not as a sentimental and personal commentary on the French Revolution, but as a daring political act.

Favret concludes her book with a discussion of the rise of the modern post office. A nationalized postal system resulted in the movement away from familiar letters and towards a "fiction of correspondence" concerned with commerce and imperialism. As Favret writes, "The penny post changed more than the price of postage throughout Great Britain. In announcing the reform, the queen was endorsing a revision of correspondence authored by imperial interests and social engineers." Once again, it is Favret's historical analysis, her contextualization of letter writing within such social institutions as the British Post Office, her refusal to reduce letter writing to a domestic, private form, that makes the familiar topic of "women and letters" new again.

¹Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980); Olga Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters* (Phoenix Mill, England: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1992). See also Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) and Elizabeth Goldsmith, ed., *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989).