Women's Autobiography As Counter-discourse: the Cases of Dorothy Livesay and Yu Loujin

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ABSTRACT

This essay compares two women's autobiographies, *A Chinese Winter's Tale* (Yu, China, 1980) and *Right Hand Left Hand* (Livesay, Canada, 1977), two ground-breaking works. The focus is on three innovative dimensions of these two works which the author suggests may be intrinsic to "woman's autobiography" as a kind of genre: (1) the need to tell a woman's story, coupled with the hybridity of generic forms; (2) a mixture of gender-related masculine and feminine styles; (3) a boundary-crossing or boundary-free blending of private and political subject matter. These two autobiographies, while employing Maoist (Yu) and Marxist (Livesay) discourses, differ radically in purpose: while Livesay wants to remind her Canadian readers of their socialist-feminist legacy from the 1920's and 30's, Yu criticizes the politicization of everything in China to the neglect of private life and sexuality. Nonetheless both writers worked out, independently of one another, powerful means to challenge the patriarchal norm for autobiography writing.

KEY WORDS

woman's autobiography
gender-related style
reconstructive prose
blending
generic hybridity
patriarchal norm
retrospective prose

Published respectively in China in 1980 and in Canada in 1977, *A Chinese Winter's Tale* and *Right Hand Left Hand* were both instantly acclaimed as literary landmarks. Even though the Chinese work was condemned in China by political authorities and conservative critics for the presence of explicit passages about sex, it was nevertheless a work that attracted deservedly tremendous popular attention. "Yu Loujin is undoubtedly the most notorious woman writer to have emerged in China since the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution," one critic concludes (Minford 1986, vii). And the translation from Chinese into English in 1986 by Rachel May and Zhu Zhiyu constituted proof that it is of considerable value for the English readership. *Right Hand Left Hand*, by contrast, fared far better with both Canadian critics and general readers. As Lee Thompson declares, "If *Right Hand Left Hand* was innovative as social history, it was also a groundbreaker in the realm of female autobiography" (1987, 134).

In this paper, I focus on what I consider to be the three innovative dimensions of women's autobiography that contribute to their respective success: first, the need to tell a woman's story, coupled with the hybridity of generic forms; second, a mixture of gender-related masculine and feminine styles; and finally, a boundary-crossing or boundary-free blending of private and political subject matter. The combination of these triple fine qualities not only distinguishes the two works from conventional and male autobiography, but also makes them well worth exploring in much greater detail and celebrating as monumental literary achievements in the twentieth-century history of women's autobiographical writings in English and Chinese.

I

Both *Right Hand Left Hand* and *Winter's Tale* are marked by an accentuated female voice clamouring to be heard. At the same time, the female narrator/autobiographer resorts to all possible printed data to lend force and credibility to her autobiography. Letters, newspaper clippings, essays, reconstructive and retrospective prose, lyric and narrative poems, paintings, pictures, addresses, all contend and complement one another in a mosaic that bursts open conventional confinements of linear, single-voiced verbal narration.

Anyone who opens the early chapters of *Right Hand Left Hand* is immediately dazzled by its various typographical arrangements and variety of genres that seem quite an anomaly initially. But Livesay's purpose is to provide a large quantity of published material in all forms to recreate the sense of the decade between 1928-1939. She refuses to allow this part of her life to be silenced or forgotten, since Canadian critics in general have relegated the influence of politics to the margins (McDonald 1987-88). On the very first page, Livesay unabashedly proclaims:

> I was born in Winnipeg, on October 12, 1909, in a snowstorm. . . . No companion women poets were born until the end of the First World War: P.K. Page, Miriam Waddington, Ann Wilkinson, Anne Marriott, Margaret Avison and Phyllis Webb. So until they began to make their mark in the forties, I always had the feeling I was struggling alone to make a woman's voice heard. (*Right Hand Left Hand* 19)

The passage expresses forcefully her need as a woman writer and poet to speak, Both in the early thirties, and later in the 1970's when she did manage to publish the book-length memoir. Traditional Canadian male discourse has not only marginalized women's autobiographies,

but also dominated the mode of writing autobiography.

An early feminist critic and writer, Livesay overwhelms the reader with an array of authentic materials collected from her past publications. Significantly, the latter take many generic forms, encompassing poems, essays or articles, paintings, pictures, and newspaper clippings. Even the typeset speaks volumes for the unconventionality and genre-crossing nature of Livesay's style. Let me quote from the page on the book's "Conventions":

> The author's commentary is typeset in Garamond Italics.
> News articles, pamphlets and letters are set in Times Roman and have bylines accompanying them.
> Stories, plays, and poems are set in Andover Roman with titles italicized. . . .
> (*Right Hand Left Hand* 18)

Ironically, the setting up of these very rules in the "Conventions" is not conventional at all. Livesay's autobiography benefits enormously from her multiple innovations in the visual arrangements and typesetting of the book.

Also experimental is the way Livesay pulls together her materials in book form and comments retrospectively on them. She juxtaposes them, giving each item equal and valid status. Unlike traditional, and especially male, autobiographies which usually re-order and make sense of past events with a single, teleological, unified point of view or vision, Livesay simply gathered previously published materials and place them in a collage-like manner. To be sure, one can detect an autobiographer/narrator and a necessary process of sorting things out. However, nowhere does Livesay attempt to give the impression that meaning can be obtained in the book's linear, chronological, and progressive order, since this is a traditional male way of deleting and editing (Fiamengo 1994, 232). Rather, each bit of information in *Right Hand Left Hand* is placed before the reader without apparent emphasis or privileging. All pieces thrive in a polyphonic

mode of co-existence. As a result, the reader is to decide upon the significance of each item—be it a poem or a newspaper clipping—and each item is as alive and meaningful as it was when first published.

At first glance, *A Chinese Winter's Tale* does not seem as radical as *Right Hand Left Hand* in breaking away from tradition in the matter of printed form. But closer scrutiny reveals something unconventional right from the start. First and foremost, Yu defies the old requirements of autobiography as dictated by time sequence. Emotions, especially love, fear, and frustration, seem to constitute the overriding factors. Thus, the first chapter is a flashback, not chronologically arranged; for the same reason, several chapters following it take the form of framed stories told by the narrator to her second lover. Indeed, this patient listener becomes a mirror image of the general reader.

Furthermore, the ensuing six chapters, with "Memories" as a heading and presented in a rather truncated and discontinuous form, certainly do not necessarily guarantee a linear and full narration, the hallmarks of male autobiography (Egan 1994, 229-230). Here, Linearity is broken down; complementarity or supplementarity of narrative voices takes over. Without much ado, Yu leads the reader directly into her personal secrets: Among these six chapters, three (Chapters 2 to 4) are about the keeping and loss of the diaries written respectively by the heroine and her nationally well-known brother, Yu Louke. In fact, the attempt to keep writing diaries—to tell a story different from the officially sanctioned one—at great personal risks can be interpreted as foreshadowing the danger inherent in her present writing of autobiography.

One has the further impression that what appears most clearly to the author at the moment of recounting her story is represented, while other unimportant details have been left out. In addition, she includes her much-admired brother's diaries as an authenticating element, thereby adding a powerful moral force to her own autobiography. Furthermore, quite a few family pictures are strategically placed to reinforce the authenticity of her lived experience. Other supporting documents and evidence of real-life situations can be found in letters

(84; 94, 147, 150-51), which often reveal innermost thoughts, as well as in emotionally charged or lyrical poems (103; 147; 158; 162) quoted from others or composed by herself (13, 60, 110-113; 114; 116-117; 123-25), in modern vernacular or semi-classical Chinese.

The richness and variety of these different printed materials definitely enhance the texture and substance of a rebellious and thinking woman's tribulations and transformation.

Therefore, Yu's chosen autobiographical form calls into question the conventional Chinese—and predominently male at that time—way of writing autobiography. The intensely personal quality of her story challenges the then prevalent mode of autobiography as a mere reflection of collective or national history, with the glorification of the Party and the socialist teleology as the *sine qua non*. As a matter of fact, Yu herself has unequivocally commented on her work as "literature of truth" ("Introduction" ix). No official records or history can replace her own version of the truth. Indeed, her autobiography seriously challenges the existing history of the Party, written in a single-voiced, often authoritarian manner that admits no other contentious voices or differing interpretations.

In brief, *Right Hand Left Hand* and *Winter's Tale* by Livesay and Yu Loujin create a heterogeneous, explosive, and almost encyclopedic form that exceeds the Dos Passos-like photographic realism. In effect, they approximate the Bakhtinian notion of novelistic genre inclusiveness (1981, 3-40), since the two autobiographies become a genre capable of accommodating a variety of discourses—fictional, poetic, historical, personal, and political.

II

Secondly, these two autobiographies employ a host of appropriate literary devices by defying the traditional definition of masculinity/femininity. On the level of syntax, long, well-structured, hypotactic sentences suggesting an ordering reason reminiscent of masculine control and rigidity combine artfully with short, fluid, flowing, and even "ungrammatical" ones.

Let us examine the salient features of syntax first. Livesay's autobiography is obviously marked by the language of Marxist discourse on class, politics, and economy, since it covers, among other times, the period from the early 1930's to the late 1950's when Marxism was in vogue on the Canadian political scene. An apt example would run as follows:

> This is a familiar middle-class point of view, since day-to-day existence for people comfortably off is not a struggle. Their conflict is an internal one. And it is also true that the thousands of middle-class people today who come face to face with economic insecurity do not find poverty the most appalling aspect of their situation. (175)

By appropriating the formal Marxist class discourse, she fully articulates her sociopolitical thought: her ideas are complex and sophisticated, so is the syntax.

The Chinese woman writer, Yu, writes in a superabundance of "Maospeak," something that renders the English translation a particularly difficult job (see "Introduction" and "Glossary"). In retrospect, the Maoist discourse in a perverse way "trains" or conditions Yu to be politically vocal and ideologically sensitive. She is able to employ much of the jargon to good artistic—usually sarcastic or parodic—effect:

> As from that moment, I was formally declared an Enemy of Society! I no longer had any freedom in life, I was only free to be the victim of Proledic! Three years of Labour Cure was what they'd given me! (38)

The cluster of political and ideological jargon, all translated into capitalized and abbreviated phrases, would baffle many a foreign scholar or reader. But that was the way in which even ordinary Chinese people's language was politicized and jargonized to the extreme. And by simply using this "Maospeak," Yu holds it up to ridicule.

In sum, both Livesay and Yu are well capable of articulating sociopolitical thoughts in a logical, analytical manner and in the vocabulary of a higly specialized and formalized discourse. But as female writers, they also excel not only in creating disjointed, fragmented sentences, but also in evoking lyrical images. Thus, like Julia Kristeva in composing "Stabat Mater", the two female writers place two different modes of writing side by side.

This combination of two modes of writing is most obvious on the level of imagery and symbolism. The characteristic example of Livesay's imagistic poem wrought in disjointed syntax might be "Rain in April":

> Give us rain in April; for rain is harsh
> Reveals the sidewalks where we tread
> Cracked, and caked with mud. It blows and beats
> Against the worn-out shutters and the walls,
> It sweeps away the lethargy of spring.
>
> We must be bolder now; sharp, and more cunning.
> The winter was so cold it numbed us rather,
> Left us frightened for the tasks of spring.
>
> Give us rain in April; rain will seek
> Our very roots. Our understanding trembles.
> We must thirst for our own travail, grow
> Through our own hunger to the final fight.
> Give us thirst and hunger! Rain, defy us,
> Sting us into movement, into pain.
>
> We must be made ready, as the fields prepare
> For May, and the flowering of our may-day hour—
> For the sweep from uncertain April into red growth,
> For the bursting of our shackles, into power! (70)

Here, matural images of rain and flowers mingle seamlessly with

those of political struggle for power. There is no easy separation of the natural and the socio-political. In fact some of Livesay's friends advised her to give up politics and devote herself totally to poetry, for they believed politics might turn her poetry into propaganda (cf. 100-103 on Louis Kon). However, Livesay does not consider politics and poetics to be in conflict with one another; she remained adamantly a political being, and tried to persuade Raymond Knister, another Canadian writer, to blend lyricism with politics in his novels (48-58). Such are her poetic and political mind and style that both stubbornly resurface in her autobiography.

Yu is also gifted with an undeniably strong lyric voice similar to Livesay's. In *A Chinese Winter's Tale*, the short poems are interdispersed here and there pepper and punctuate her prose with intense personal feelings and emotions. Because of the terseness and classical taste, her poems remind one of Sappho resurrected. Apparently, culture (remember it is the Cultural Revolution that is under attack) bears the brunt of her poetic assault. The moment she goes back to Nature, she cannot help bursting into lyricism and even rhapsody, often with traces of the sentiments of classical Chinese poetry. In nature, she finds hope and solace; in nature, she rejuvenates her body and soul. The patriarchal order enshrined in the Chinese culture she refutes and criticizes with vehemence. Notice, for example, how her images of mother/nature and father/culture converge, mix, and clash in the passages and poems on the night scene or moon-lit landscape. Indeed, Yu's profound love for nature is epitomized in so many lyrical passages on the moon (34-35; 78-79; 98; 106; 133) that one sometimes wonders the book might not be a collection of poems.

But her nature imagery is far from being just idyllic, pastoral, or strictly personal. In the context of Chinese literature in Mao's heyday, the moon in her autobiography is undoubtedly the direct opposite of the red sun (or Red Sun) as an official and exclusive symbol for Mao Tse-tung. Interestingly and courageously, Yu further works her martyr brother into her semiotic system to subvert dominant Maoist symbolism:

> My brother has become a god, an immortal. I see him every day. I don't feel he's the slightest bit dead. He is there in Nature—in the blue sky, the sunshine, the pine forests, the evening clouds . . . he seems to be in all natural things. (98)

Notice the sanctification and deification of her brother at quick intervals. And this deed arrives at the very expense of all the imagery and symbolism for Mao created for identical purposes. In Yu's new system of imagery, then, the joining of nature and her elder brother culminates in a pantheism of nature bred out of the blood and flesh of Yu Louke, now resolutely replacing Maoist monotheism—or Maoism properly named.

Given the historical background, this elegy and eulogy of her brother constitute nothing less than a direct refutation of Mao "the great leader" as an unquestionable/unquestioned object of worship in Mao's carefully orchestrated personality cult. In Yu's poem, her brother takes over the role of a national hero. Here, Nature symbolizes what is decent, good, and beautiful; Culture, or the Cultural Revolution, on the other hand, means cruelty, persecution, and even death. Since Mao is portrayed as and rigidified into a never-setting red sun in the dominant ideological discourse, Yu has definitely done an ingenious job of reversal by singing the praises of the moon. It is worth mentioning that years later, Zhong A Cheng was to imitate or emulate Yu by evoking rich and recurrent images of a vicious sun in *King of Children*, again as an indirect but unmistaken attack against Mao and accompanying images and symbols.

To sum up, both Livesay and Yu are adroit in intermingling the masculine with the feminine styles and images. Their skilful use of natural imagery and symbolism also adds much poetry and power to the normally rather dry and factual autobiographical mode.

III

Finally, the two women's autobiographies defy conventional definition as merely private history or personal family saga. Their works can be taken as different things at different times. Now a historical "record", now a highly personal account, now a political indictment, now a revelation of innermost feelings and thoughts, the autobiographical impulse produces works that are the genuine voices from the kitchen and the bedroom and of economic exploitation and sexual oppression therein; they invite the reader to political/sexual voyeurism; they tear to tatters any pretence to traditional and patriarchal sense of decency or propriety, moral or social.

It is true that both *Right Hand Left Hand* and *A Chinese Winter's Tale* can be reasonably studied as valuable historical records; but, beneath that surface lie many intimate details about the writers' private life that many others would not dare to bring into the light in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Initially, Livesay reveals her love affairs in Paris, but this proves only a prelude to her unreserved exposal of her privacy. To demonstrate further her rebellious spirit to fight for women's liberation from society's restrictions, she includes a sizable picture of herself, naked to the waist. The caption sounds more like a manifesto than a description: "The topless thirties; Dorothy Livesay (lying down) with Jinnie Morton (right) and a friend". Indeed, Livesay's boldness in publishing her picture worries her friends even in the seventies after the peak of the second wave of feminism. In an interview Livesay mentions this, but she refuses to be intimidated into covering her breasts in the printed medium. She was also painfully aware of the fact that her leftist comrades were patriarchal, and that they held double standards:

> Such were the dichotomies I found in male-female relationships in the thirties. In theory, we were free and equal as comrades on the left. In practice, our right hand was tied to the kitchen sink! (124)

Only a pen dipped in heavy and bitter personal experience could have written such poignant sentences; the exclamation mark reinforces her point.

While Livesay focuses on the kitchen and the "topless" upper body to examine women's oppression by patriarchal values and "comrades" in the Canadian society of the thirties, Yu, with the same degree of feminist spirit as Livesay's, describes in daring details the lower body and scenes of the bedroom. In China it is often said that revolution stops at the bedroom door. For thousands of years in Chinese patriarchal history, politics can be talked about, but not sex. Even in Mao's Cultural Revolution, nobody had the courage to cross that boundary. But Yu does. What follows is an originally heavily expurgated version of the wedding night that warrants lengthy quoting:

> Before I could gather my wits about me, the whole weight of his body was pressing down on top of me; two large rough hands were gripping my head. Oh God, his sticky tongue was frantically trying to push its way into my mouth! Oh God . . . I struggle with all my might to turn my face away, but I couldn't escape his "passion" however hard I tried. I felt a sudden pain in my crutch, as if I'd been brutally attacked . . . This indescribable agony only lasted about a minute, when suddenly he loosened his grip and collapsed onto the pillow, panting convulsively . . . I was about to put on my clothes and go and rinse my mouth and wash myself, when I suddenly caught sight of a wet patch of blood on the bed—I was horrified! (102-103)

The taking of her by force (read: rape) is all directly presented to the reader. It seems that only by exposing, with necessary, vivid, and concrete details of sexual acts, can the full implications of sexual domination and oppression be explored. This passage amounts to a microcosmic version of the majority of Chinese women living behind closed doors.

The same passage originally deleted by the editors also indicates the censorial mind typical of the Chinese government. But Yu insists on showing the sexual taboos and utter ignorance of even married people:

> Please do not leave out one single word from this paragraph. I shall bear the responsibility for the work. Previously *Dang Dai* [*Contemporary Times*] deleted this paragraph, and I have been unhappy about it. If you editors are not poisoned by the reading of it, how can you assume that readers will? (translation mine)

Elsewhere, Yu makes her point more forcefully against strict censorship over references to sex and sexuality:

> If you must insist on removing this passage, I would rather the book was not published at all. *You* have read it with the greatest interest and not been poisoned, so why are you worried about the ordinary reader being "polluted"? (quoted from "Introduction" xvi)

She does not allow the sanitization imposed by the editor. Indeed, she goes further in reacting with justified indignation against the then nationally mobilized campaign against the so-called "spiritual pollution". Nor does she spare the Chinese society at large:

> Surely our society ought to take some of the blame for all this? We are like simpletons as far as sex was concerned—so naive about sex for people of our age! Surely we should have been taught something about it, as part of our general knowledge? (106)

Politics is imposed upon the Chinese population, but sex is completely forced out of the curriculum. Yu's outcry goes beyond the level of individual experience; it has profound and extensive implica-

tions for the Chinese nation as a whole. Yet in her time, she was the one who dared to shout out of the Chinese "iron house", in a loud call to save the women, if I may adapt a phrase from Lu Xun, China's most celebrated writer.

It needs to be said that most of Livesay's Canadian female contemporaries remained private voices, never able to transcend the personal and private to reach the social and political (cf. Vulpe 1994, 157-158). But Livesay stood out by virtue of her shattering of boundaries: For her as well as for Yu, the personal is the political, and the private, the public, since both the Chinese and Canadian male-dominated societies have indeed mangaged to relegate women's life to limbo. In Livesay's and Yu's critical paradigm then, any trivialization of the personal and private at home is tantamount to the denial of women's lived experience. Going public and revealing their intimate lives are some of the strategies employed by women's autobiography (Potvin 1989 7-8). The inclusion of concrete and intimate domestic and marital details is not intended to appeal to prurient interest; it serves well the purpose of exposing hypocrisy and sexual inhibitions.

In conclusion, since I do not intend to equate the two autobiographies under discussion in all respects, some words on stylistic and cultural similarities and differences are in order. First, both works turn personal histories into a specifically women's story, or her-story, with a feminist perspective and an irrepressible urge to break silence; both exhibit the versatility of the autobiographers as poem, prose, and essay writers. In addition, both display the carnivalesque spirit in challenging the traditional printed form: Livesay is bent on breaking the linearity of the book by inserting layers of published data, while Yu is more acutely unsatisfied with the unitary model of creating meaning by imposing a neat and chronological order and development. Yu challenges this model by rearranging events and framing her stories.

On the other hand, owing to technological advances in the English-speaking world, Livesay is blessed with various typesets which she brings to effective use for different printed materials. Yu, thanks to the visual nature of the Chinese language or charcters, conjures up

an abundance of images mainly through words associated with nature to challenge and subvert Maoist imagery, symbolism, culture and patriarchal code.

Finally, though both employ respectively a Marxist and Maoist discourse, their purposes differ drastically. Livesay strives to revive especially the forgotten twenties and thirties (the first wave of feminism), the political decades and the political part of herself, simply because the Canadian public has largely forgotten the materialist or socialist-feminist legacy and trivialized the political dimension of women's lives. By contrast, Yu sharply criticizes the politicization of everything in China to the woeful neglect of sex or private life. This deed was performed single-handedly, without any immediate feminist ancestors known to her, since Ding Ling as a Chinese feminist writer in the thirties may be too distant a memory or inspiration because of the absence of the second wave of feminism in China in the 1970's, a time when the Cultural Revolution was raging instead. Yu's work also adumbrates what is currently (in the 1990's) the increasingly explicit and detailed representation of sex and sexuality in recent works by female Chinese writers such as Zhu Lin.

However, even though *Right Hand Left Hand* and *Winter's Tale* are not related in any way, they both worked out, independently of each other, powerful means to challenge and change the rigidity in and norms for autobiography writing. In the final analysis, the three chief innovative artistic and political features and qualities discussed above should secure Dorothy Livesay and Yu Luojing a well deserved niche in the hall of literary fame.

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