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Signature Pieces

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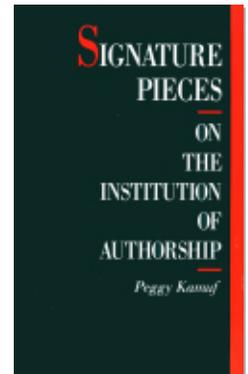
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Preface

Like most books, this one “began” before it began. Its several preoccupations—signature, authorship, the gender of the writer or writing— had been dogging me for a long time. In particular, I was pursued by a persistent dissatisfaction with the way in which these terms tended to get confused or even collapsed into one another by most discourse concerned with the relation between writer and writing, and especially between the woman writer and her writing. That relation continued to be thought largely according to notions of representation, expression, the fully present intentionality of a subject, and so forth. I had been convinced for some time by demonstrations, most notably in the writings of Jacques Derrida, that such notions contributed essential elements to the metaphysical construction of women’s exclusion, to the “phallogentrism” at the base of virtually all Western habits of thought. I was also convinced, therefore, that deconstructing this exclusion could not be a matter *only* of enlarging the field of expression to include “feminine” subjects, or writers, or writings. Unless this expansion is accompanied by a rethinking of some fundamental categories that have classified us *as* subjects, however discerning or changed the aspects of that subjectivity may appear, then the chances for displacement of the fundamental structures of exclusion are no doubt considerably lessened. Such rethinking, or rather thinking-beyond-the-subject, has been going on for some

time now in many quarters and in many modes. This book merely gathers some of my own (halting and insufficient) attempts to give it its chance.

That these attempts or essays have come together under the single or singular title of "signature" may seem somewhat arbitrary at first glance. But, I would argue, it is the place of the signature that has been largely ignored, elided, or simply filled in by the presuppositions shaping much past and present discourse about the writer in/and his/her writing. The principal reason for this neglect is that this "place" is not a place at all, but an always divisible limit within the difference between writer and work, "life" and "letters." Signature articulates the one with the other, the one *in* the other: it both divides and joins. It is this double-jointedness of signatures that will be lost to any discourse that continues to posit an essential exteriority of subjects to the texts they sign.

If we ask: What happens when someone writes his or her name in the mode of a signature? we may begin to see that this everyday occurrence is supported by immense conventional systems that tend to hide the precariousness of a general understanding of that act. For the most part, these conventions allow us to perform, in a more or less reliable manner, operations of identification, attestation, verification, attribution of responsibility, and so forth. Indeed, many social institutions thoroughly depend, in one way or another, on the reliable functioning of signatures, and whole areas of law can be said to be concerned almost exclusively with the rights and duties guaranteed by signatures (e.g., contract, property, and copyright law). The legal signature signals that, usually on a certain date and according to certain formalities, the subject named was present and assented to, accepted, affirmed some accord with another party. "The subject named" is thus first of all assumed to be present to himself or herself for the accord to have taken place between the identifiable parties to it. This accord presumes, moreover, that the signature represents a particular person, the bearer of a certain proper name and no other. It presumes, in other words, the possibility of singling out one subject from all others. But since names circulate within the

public domain of language, they can always be changed or borrowed or duplicated. Supplementary guarantees of the singularity of signature must therefore be given, such as the notion of the verifiable differentiation of its *mark*. When you sign, you do not merely write your name, which anyone could do in your place: you affix your name as a particular mark. The singularity of the autograph, however, cannot be absolute; on the contrary, verifiability or authentication relies on its reproducibility by "the subject named." If every time you sign your name, you deliberately make a significantly different mark, if no two of your signature acts resemble each other, then there is no telling after you have signed whether it was indeed you who signed. After a while, even you may forget having made some particular mark. Here the grounding assumption is that "the subject named" is not only self-identical with itself in the moment of signing but as well remains recognizably the same over time. By a seeming paradox, then, the singularity of the signature's mark depends on its limitation within recognizable parameters of reproducibility or iterability, which is to say of *generalizability*. The signature, therefore, is always detachable from the singular instance it supposedly designates. It can always be and in fact already has been detached from the signatory and expropriated by a field of general substitution. This is to remark that, within such a field of general substitution and exchange, "the subject named" is always finally a general subject, classified in a large but nevertheless limited number of ways. The particularization of this general subject through the functioning of signature is thus also always countersigned by the system of interchangeable likenesses, the system of the same in which singularity is but a necessary *concept*.

There are also, however, occasions when this conventional understanding is loosened and we are allowed to see the signature operating on its own, so to speak, as a particular use of the proper name. Such occasions are written works (literature in the general sense) bearing an author's signature which also make bare its uncertain operation. Yet the modern study of literature has largely contrived to look away from this exposed condition of the signature. To do so, it has dressed the signature

in various guises: psychological, historical, formal, ideological. Working together, these constructs have produced what may be called the institution of authorship, an institution that masks or recuperates the disruptive implications of literary signature. Our investment in this institution is massive. All sorts of values are exchanged within its construction. There are enormous profits to be had, of course, and questions of what returns to whom, who gets what return, and who has rights over what—all these basically economic questions agitate the scene of the signature but also inscribe its unsettling otherness within an economy of the same. It is finally to this economy that the greater profits return; anyone can hold shares in it for the price of *identification* with authors via their written representatives, foremost and most essential among which is the signature.

By shifting some of the accumulated weight of authorship on the way we read and the way we act on what we read, this book attempts to recover some of the pieces that have fallen into the cracks of the identificatory economy. Three leverage points are used: the example of Rousseau's signature as a particularly lucid experience of dissociation between author and text; the signatures of Baudelaire and Woolf as demonstrations of how a signature's gender can also be interrupted; finally, two moments in a recent (but also long-running) theoretical debate over authorship, intentionality, and reading by identification. The first part is to be read as chapters in what I initially call a history of Rousseau's signature; the second and third parts each pair two essays with results that I hope are illuminating for both even though they may be read separately.

Despite the apparent or implied continuity from one chapter to the next, these pieces are not forced into a whole or made to yield some general theory of the signature. Indeed, it is the very possibility of generalizing in this domain of the singular that has to be put in question, even as it is also the signature's lot to suffer the constraints of the general laws limiting its singularity. That double exigency has been the constant companion of these pages.

I refer to published translations whenever such works are available. In all other cases, translations are my own.

Parts of this book have previously appeared elsewhere. A somewhat different version of chapter 5, "Baudelaire au féminin," was initially published in *Paragraph* 8 (1986), edited by Diana Knight; a shorter version of chapter 6, "Penelope at Work," first appeared in *Novel* 16 (Fall 1982); chapter 7, "Floating Authorship," was published in *Diacritics* 16 (Winter 1986); chapter 8, "Pieces of Resistance," was originally a contribution to the volume *Reading De Man Reading*, edited by Wlad Godzich and Lindsay Waters and published by University of Minnesota Press (1988). I here thank all the publishers for their kind permission to use these texts.

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SIGNATURE PIECES

