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Autobiographical Voices

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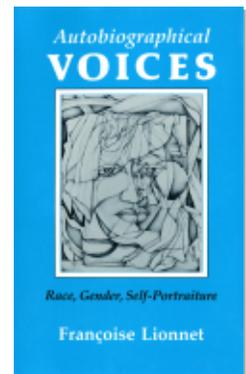
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Part I

Rereading the Past

One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly.
Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

This first section of the book will undertake a close reading of the *Confessions*, followed by an analysis of *Ecce Homo*. Its aim is to disclose some of the contradictions present both in the language of these autobiographies and in the critical reception they have elicited. In the case of Augustine, I am especially interested in showing that the dichotomy made by traditional criticism between form and content, artistic method and theological pronouncements, results in some misleading statements about the structural unity of the work. In a wonderfully clear and perceptive chapter of his *Augustine of Hippo*, Peter Brown, for example, defines book 10 of the *Confessions* as “the self-portrait of a convalescent,” engaged in a meditation on the mystery of man’s inner world, the sheer size of which was for him “a source of anxiety quite as much as of strength.” Yet Brown avoids dealing with books 11–13 altogether and resorts to spatial metaphors that are very much in the spirit of Augustine’s own prose but can hardly help clarify the function of a substantial part of the work (one-fourth of the whole, to be specific). Brown writes: “The remaining three books of the *Confessions* are a fitting ending to the self-revelation of such a man: like soft light creeping back over a rain-soaked landscape, the hard refrain of ‘Command’—‘Command what You wish’—gives way to ‘Give’—‘Give what I love: for I do love it.’” Augustine’s progress in self-awareness, his “therapy of self-examination,” as Brown puts it, does underscore a gradual movement from initial refusal or denial to greater acceptance of the word of God.¹ As Chapter 1 will argue, this movement is evident in the structure of the work itself. Analyzing this structure will bring into focus the nature of the reading process as it appears to be

¹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 177–81.

encoded within some sections of the *Confessions*, permitting certain conclusions about Augustine's act of (self-)reading and illuminating the subtle process whereby "woman" comes to represent to Augustine an aspect of the self which must be effaced, erased, obliterated, because it is none other than the "sinning self." Interestingly for us here, at the same time as he is discovering that "woman" must be evacuated from the "converted self," Augustine is attributing to God the kind of receptive, nurturing, maternal, and nonauthoritarian qualities normally coded as feminine in Western culture. Augustine's perception of God moves from that of an authoritarian figure who can "Command" him to that of a more generous one who will "Give." In his relationship with the transcendent Other, Augustine moves from an oppositional stance to a deferring and accepting one. As we shall see in Part II, this is a trajectory that will have to be reversed in the case of women writers. They must first learn to reject a tradition of passive acceptance of the other before they can become the agents of their own discourses, the subjects of their own histories. Meanwhile, they will also incorporate into their stories a radical rereading of the tradition they implicitly aim to transform.

For both Augustine and Nietzsche, life and literature are very closely related, but whereas Augustine must transcend his narrative impulse to accede to eternal life, to become the reader of God's word, Nietzsche sees narrative as the redemption of the past and his self as the sum of his literary output. Augustine is always writing toward (that is, loving) his ideal, transcendental Other—God. By contrast, Nietzsche sees himself as his own ideal reader: "Und so erzähle ich mir mein Leben [And so I tell my life to myself]," as he will proclaim in *Ecce Homo*.² This is the kind of grand solipsistic and tautological gesture of which Nietzsche is fond. He thereby refuses to allow for any possibility of domestication or appropriation of his words by an other. This attitude points to a form of "reaction" which, as will be seen, remains importantly dependent upon the Christian mentality it seeks to undermine. Nietzsche will denounce Christian self-abnegation while using all sorts of false doubles and adopting doppelgänger roles that simultaneously affirm and condemn the principles he puts forward. His symbolic use of women's

²Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: A. Kröner, 1964), 8:299; *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 221.

procreative powers stems from what Margot Norris has called "Nietzsche's biocentric premises," his conviction that animal vigor, the realm of the biological, is the only "real." In their creatural role as biological mothers, women are opposed to "cultural man," who is but a pretext, a means, for women's instinctual drive to give birth. Culture, for Nietzsche, is engendered by an imaginary lack that provokes a mimetic response, an identification with the other. Marryse Condé's representation of the impasse of mimetic identifications can be profitably studied as a dramatic portrayal of the cultural dead ends resulting from such an imaginary lack. As Norris argues, for Nietzsche, "mimesis acquires a negative value as inimical to the animal's power and to the body's life."³

Nietzsche's critique of the fundamental alienation involved in any kind of imitative cultural behavior thus yields the basis for the examination in Part II of the ambivalence that *métis* women writers feel toward their variously conflicting colonial heritages. It is by returning to the physicality of their experiences, to the racial and sexual characteristics of their bodies, that these women become able to create culture as well. In essence, they ground culture in the body, thus erasing the traditional distinctions between culture and nature, the life of the mind and that of the body. They thus implicitly adopt the Nietzschean principle underscoring the experiential *and* performative aspects of literature: self-writing becomes self-invention.

³Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 5, and see pp. 53–100 especially.

