Freudian Slips
Gossy, Mary

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Epilogue

“sangre en las manos”

This book has been mostly a traditional academic effort—I wrote it to help insure that I would not perish in the tenure process—and, despite some radical opinions and interpretations expressed in it, it follows, more or less, the norms of academic critical writing in the United States in 1995. In the middle of its writing, however, just after the first anniversary of my mother’s death from lung cancer, which itself interrupted my ability to write, I had a dream that slipped in and wanted to interrupt its canonical progress.

I am writing this part of this book with a fountain pen. Although this is my normal method of composition, I found during the writing of *Freudian Slips* that I was incapable of putting pen to paper. For the first time I composed a book entirely on a computer, a practice I had formerly detested. But, when I decided to make notes toward this conclusion today, I found that it was easy and necessary to do so by hand.

The dream came when I was, in terms of the total length of the project, halfway through the writing of the book. Instead of traveling from New York to New Jersey to see my psychoanalyst, I had arranged for a telephone conference so as not to lose most of a day’s writing to the commute. I told her the dream, which I had had the night before, over the phone, and I am indebted to her for insisting, once again, upon the personal and the obvious.

I dreamed that I was in a classroom and that I was standing at the blackboard. I was the professor (I am a professor), but the other people in the room were not subordinate to me. I was espousing one of my favorite theories, that all traditional narrative depends somewhere upon a dead woman. I wanted to write on the blackboard, “All narrative has blood on its hands.” I don’t know if I wrote those words down in English or not. I do know that, because the class was made
up of both English and Spanish speakers, I did what I sometimes do, in real life, when I am putting up a new and difficult concept or word: I wanted to express it in both languages, and so I began writing in Spanish with chalk on the blackboard. I could feel the chalk on my hand.

The first word on the board was *sangre*, the Spanish word for “blood.” Next I wrote *en*, “on.” I was about to write *sus*, when I remembered that in Spanish “its,” “your,” or “my” hands are “the” hands, so I began to write *los*, the masculine article. Before I wrote more than *l*, though, I remembered that, although *mano*, hand, ends with an *o*, it is a feminine, not a masculine, noun. I finished writing *las manos*, relieved that I had gotten it right.

I learned Spanish in the classroom; no one in my family used it, but my mother did tell me that she had studied it for a year or two in junior high school. In fourth grade I was moved from my regular elementary school to a program for gifted children called “Opportunity.” Our small city in Pennsylvania had decided that this group would start the study of foreign languages in fourth grade, instead of seventh grade, as was then the custom. There was a Spanish teacher available, and so we began to learn Spanish from a patient, smart woman. I continued with Spanish all the way through high school, not consciously out of love but mainly because the wisdom emanating from the guidance counselor’s office was that, the more years of language we had, the better were our chances of getting into a prestigious college and of being awarded financial aid.

As it turned out, I was accepted by the only place I applied to, one of the Seven Sisters women’s colleges. I wanted to be an archaeologist, so I took no Spanish my freshman year. Nevertheless, the rigorous language requirement (two years of two languages or one language to the most advanced level of literature courses) hung over my head. We had to take Greek if we wanted to major in archaeology. Unfortunately, my dreams of the Aegean faded as I sank into the whirlpool of Greek verbs, and I had to withdraw from the class. The next year, I reasoned, I would start Spanish again and keep going with it until I fulfilled the requirement.

About this time my best friend and I were reaching our maximum moment of symbiosis. She had a strong family and cultural background in Spanish, and her urgings, combined with my affection for and identification with her, led me finally to choose to major in Span-
ish. I was good at literary analysis and progressed in my knowledge of Spanish renaissance prose. I went to Spain for the first time in the summer of my junior year. While I was there, my paternal grandmother (the one who quoted Goethe), who had been in many ways the most stabilizing and reliable fixture of my youth, died. I could not get a ticket home for the funeral, so I burned candles in a parish church in the Madrid neighborhood of Chamberí instead.

My senior year passed in a haze of overwrought emotion and academic overwork. Shortly before graduation I ran into my old Greek teacher, who asked what I had majored in. When I told her Spanish, she said, “I wouldn’t have thought that languages were your forte.” I won a prize in literature and planned to go to graduate school in medieval studies (I had since learned Latin and French) after a year off. When that time came the Ivy League medieval studies department I had applied to could not match the huge (it was the beginning of the 1980s) grants that two other Spanish departments offered, so I went off to Harvard to study the literature of medieval and renaissance Spain.

Many of my friends there were feminists from the French section—it was a Romance languages, not a Spanish, department. After working as a research assistant for a professor who was finishing a book on French feminist theory, the idea occurred to me to do a study of some important works of the Spanish renaissance from the perspective of mostly French feminist theory. No one had ever done this, so it struck me that it might be “the original contribution to knowledge” that a dissertation was supposed to be. Unfortunately, the brilliant and kind male luminary I had gone there to study with died suddenly of a heart attack. Another Olympian, who left the university to retire soon after, called the work “derivative.” The only other person in the program told me that it was impossible to write such a thesis in that department at that time and that maybe I should consider doing a dissertation on the love letters of Lope de Vega, which was, according to him, a better topic for a woman.

I fled to the best reader of texts I knew, with whom I had a connection by way of the comparative literature program. She said that she would direct the thesis, and she did. Having worked with her helped me get a job at an East Coast research university. I published the thesis as a book, and now I teach graduate and undergraduate courses in Spanish literature, comparative literature, and women’s
studies. So, like many of the characters in the anecdotes in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, I am a person of academic background, and my discourse participates in some structures of authority.

Also like those other persons of academic background, my profession offers me endless opportunities to commit slips—most of my courses are taught entirely in Spanish, and I sometimes find myself committing slips on easy constructions—or correcting myself just in time. Of course, like every other nonnative and native speaker, I also commit errors of ignorance. But here I’m writing about slips, that is, mistakes you make when you know better. Nancy K. Miller writes about a somewhat similar set of circumstances in her essay “The French Mistake.”

Miller mentions the specific anxiety produced in the non-native French speaker around the issue of making gender mistakes. She tells the story of a lecturer who says “le forêt” (instead of la) in his talk. The audience is mortified. Years later Miller decides to tell the anecdote to another group of people. But when she gets to the punch line she herself can no longer remember whether it is le or la forêt. She confesses her problem to the group after “having made—while speaking English—a gender mistake” (51). Why was Miller telling the anecdote in the first place? She says that she does not know. But from experience I can say that one does derive a secret, aggressive pleasure from other peoples’ mistakes; it grants a paradoxical kind of authority to one’s own: this is why I am telling Miller’s story of her own mistake made while telling the story of someone else’s. Also, terror consoles itself with (it doesn’t love) company.

Le or la? It is as though much of the category of gender brings back its total arbitrariness: is the forest masculine or feminine? . . . I am having a full-fledged gender panic attack. (51)

Anxiety fills the article(s), and at one point Miller says that, when she was teaching French in high school, she got “through the day alternating between Valium and Ritalin” (54). The themes of error, gender, and anxiety permeate the essay, and they are present in my dream as well, along with more ominous currents. If it was masochistic for Miller to put herself through what was for her the misery of speaking French, then it is also sadistic to recount the errors of others; even without naming them, there is pleasure in turning them on the spit of correction.
It is possible to make gender mistakes in Spanish, but generally it is harder to do than in French, for example, because gender is more clearly marked in more Spanish nouns than in French ones. Almost every Spanish noun that ends in o is masculine; almost every one that ends in a is feminine. Words that end in a and are masculine are more frequent than those that end in o and are feminine. So, my dream had to work hard to produce its dilemma.

Another point of difference between Spanish and French is one allied to gender; Spanish and French have different political valences in the academic culture of the United States. Even at the most elementary level of literature classes in Spanish, it is almost certain that there will be many students who are native speakers of Spanish. This semester, for instance, at Rutgers, I have thirty-one students in my section of the introductory course "Main Currents in Spanish Literature," and about a third of them are native speakers with varying degrees of competence in writing and reading Spanish; in other words, I have freshmen who are "better" (because of their definition as "native," as opposed to "nonnative," or even the strange term "near-native," speakers) at some aspect of my subject that I am. Having students who are better than we are is sometimes a dream of professors, who envision a brilliant graduate student, perhaps, in this role, a freshly minted peer who can teach us as much as we could teach her or him. But the quotidian reality of a student who is technically better (in terms of accent, perhaps) is probably only the fate of teachers of and in foreign languages. The political difference between French and Spanish in most areas of the United States (leaving aside parts of Maine or Louisi-
a, where, e.g., there are many native French speakers) is based on this difference—that a nonnative professor of Spanish is much more likely to find herself in an economy in which the claim to authority is more problematic than in other classroom situations. The benefit of this is that, if it can be accepted as a reality and not avoided or repressed, it can make for a more dialogic classroom environment, one in which learning, rather than authority, is the paramount concern.

Another difference that distinguishes Spanish from French is historical. English-speaking North Americans have a long history of colonizing Spanish-speaking Americans. English is the language of power in the United States. This historical reality metamorphoses in a classroom such as the one that I have described. Native speakers of Spanish, even if they are not the majority of the students, occupy a position
of authority because it is easier for them to speak up, because they know the language of authority. Paradoxically, it is the language that the non–native Spanish-speaking professor is using and upon which basis they will be graded; it is the language of their value in a particular academic market called the Spanish class. The non–native Spanish-speaking students find the balance of power in the classroom, then, not against them—but, probably for the first time, not in their favor. They look at me and see an Anglo professor, but the professor is speaking the language of a group that they see as other in a way that a white Anglo college student does not see a French person, or the French language, as other. The native Spanish speakers find themselves in a position in which their discourse is valued as authoritative within a system that elsewhere perpetuates its disenfranchisement. The Anglo students learn that they must use the language of an other in order to claim a new kind of agency. So, the particular political value I have noticed in my classroom at Rutgers is that all the students can learn that discourses of authority, like gender, are not natural but, rather, arbitrary, that everyone is entitled to work their way through their errors and to make meaning.

This is why, when I am teaching and find I have to introduce a new term, like genre, for example, I sometimes write the word in both English and Spanish on the blackboard. Genre is an interesting example, because it is a French word that has passed into English with only a specific literary meaning; in Spanish, género keeps the double meaning of "genre" and (grammatical) "gender" that the French word has. In my dream I don’t know if I was teaching a Spanish class, but I do know that, for me, all teaching has become a bilingual, and often a multilingual, experience. One language is not enough to respond to the realities and demands of any pedagogy, precisely because of the way that using more than one language, from more than one position in political hierarchies, rebuilds structures of power.

I am a white person from a middle-class family who has benefited from the financial support of wealthy private institutions and I have a strong investment in the reconfiguration of power. I know what it is to be oppressed and limited because of the ways that I do not fit in with or cannot accept established definitions of femininity, for example. To put my authority, such as it is, into discourse in more than one language effects the kind of remaking of relationships that I have
been describing. So, in the dream, to write in Spanish is a way of inscribing that new relationship.

Needless to say, all of this talk of the political leads to the personal, and sangre (blood) is the most personal thing of all, especially for a woman. This blood also marks a connection with the theoretical argument of this book, which is that Freud writes his theory of para-praxis over the bodies of women. In the aliquis chapter, the first one that treats the misquotation of a literary text in a foreign language, the slip is traced back precisely to a woman’s blood, to her menstrual period. Most of my book is about how Freud writes around and about women, but I think that my dream might be a useful way of seeing how a woman writes about herself. I wanted to write that “all narrative has blood on its hands,” because it is written over women’s bodies, but all that came out in Spanish was “sangre en las manos.” While I was writing the main part of this book, it must have occurred to me that not only does narrative have blood on its hands but so does theory. And I was writing theory about women’s bodies.

The interesting thing about the construction “sangre en las manos” is that it does not specify whose hands the blood is on. True, I had thought it was on narrative’s hands, but what I wrote meant more than that: it could mean, blood on narrative’s hands, blood on someone or something else’s hands, or blood on my own hands. I mentioned earlier that, while I was dreaming that I was writing, I could feel the chalk on my hands. Chalk dust is as dry as—a bone. It is so much the opposite of the feeling of blood that it begins to coincide with it.

It—bone and blood on my hands—seems that there is a deadly feeling about writing. In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life this feeling surfaces in reference to the anekTode—the story of analytical mastery that is underlain by death. The use of Spanish in the dream helped me to inscribe the association of death and writing without necessarily including myself in it. But the ambiguity of the construction did not absolve me, either. (I should note that I am on the thirteenth page of my handwritten text.) The Spanish made it easier to think that my own hands were not bloody, but the trace of responsibility remained.

To have made an elementary mistake like the ones I thought of but did not write—mistakes of pronoun, gender, or idiomatic expression—is part of the activity that is called, in English, “murthering,” or “butchering,” a language. I wish I could say here that what I almost
butchered was a foreign language, but the rest of this book would put the lie to such an assertion: any language that is called foreign leads back immediately to the body of the mother. And, as I mentioned earlier, my mother had learned a little Spanish in high school, so my mistakes would have butchered a mother tongue. Writing *sangre en las manos* in Spanish may have been an attempt at distancing myself from this murderous atmosphere, but it leads right back to that original female body.

Writing in any language may feel murderous. Writing for publication, in particular, may carry this affect, because it is a way of putting one’s discourse out in public, away from the safety of home. And the writer may feel that she goes traveling faraway, wherever her writing goes—maybe even too far, or so far that she will not be able to get back. Freud discusses a similar sensation in his late essay “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.”² Freud had longed all his life to see the Acropolis, but when he finally arrived there he could not believe it; it was “too good to be true” (242).³ He had traveled such a long way, or come so far in life, that he felt the need to deny his own progress: “It seems as though the essence of success was to have got further than one’s father, and as though to excel one’s father was still something forbidden” (22:247). His travels gave him the sensation of having gone too far from whatever part of his identity was bound up with his father. This sensation is close to a fear of having lost the father forever because of something that one has done; that is, it is akin to childhood feelings of omnipotence, in which the child believes that his or her thoughts and wishes can kill. The childish feeling says, “My father is gone because I have left; by leaving I have eradicated him, and now I can’t get him back.” There is a fear that going away will destroy the father. But a paradoxical remnant of the effect of his experience, one not discussed by Freud, is that it insists on calling the father to mind, of reminding Freud of him just at the moment when he fears he has lost him. In terms of learning foreign languages, which is a way of leaving behind the *father* tongue, a similar situation might apply.

I wonder where Freud’s mother is in this essay; he does not mention her, perhaps because she was not a part of the associations that surfaced in his self-analysis. But a woman’s body is emphatically present in my dream. Writing in any language can seem like going too far; sometimes using a foreign language can be a way to try to get away, to go further, but other times it is a way to stay at home or to
deny having made the trip. The phrase "sangre en las manos" makes both a departure from and an encounter with that female body possible. There is a fear that the process of writing has murdered it, but no murder has occurred: at least in the dream the phrase is correct. There was a fear that error would murder the language, but that did not happen. And it is important to remember that, despite the feeling of guilt, in terms of a woman touching a woman’s body, having blood on your hands does not have to mean that you have killed anybody. In fact, it is very difficult to inhabit a female body and not have bloody hands. Women’s hands are bloody on a more or less regular basis, for a big part of their lives, as we attend to the flow of blood of our menstrual periods. A woman who touches her own vulva, or those of other women, is going to have bloody hands.

The fear of writing is like the fear of murdering what you touch. English idiom tells us that, if we have blood on our hands, then we are guilty of murder. What we have to remember is that our hands were bloody before the idiom was invented, but not because of murder or castration. The menstrual blood that appears in the aliquis chapter, like the blood on the hands in this dream, leads back to an original female body that makes sense before and after castration, or before and beyond a patriarchy that seeks to confine it in its own definitions. It is a mother’s body, but it is also our own. We will not kill ourselves or our mothers if our writing stays connected to the everyday experience of living in a female body. If Freud was right that women invented the art of weaving on the analogy of their pubic hair, then it is possible, too, that women were the first writers, because of their unavoidable proximity to that indelible marking substance, blood.

Hélène Cixous and others have proposed an écriture féminine, a writing with and of the female body, as a way around discourses that control and oppress it, but that project has fallen victim to a kind of mysticism and obfuscation. I am not suggesting writing with bodily fluids. I am suggesting that women may write in ways that do not repeat the murderous stylitics of patriarchy, and that a way to do this is to describe and insist upon the everyday experiences of being in a female body, as both subject and object, in writing, in as many languages as we are able.

Mano may look like a masculine noun, but it is not. To write may seem like an activity that belongs to someone else (sus) or that pertains and can only pertain to the masculine (los) and irrevocably leads to the
murder of a female body that exceeds the grammar of femininity. But the idea that my reading and writing will somehow be deadly to me or other women or that the hand that writes cannot be mine—_mano_ ends in _o_, so it must be masculine—is contradicted by the action in the dream. Theorizing, like dreaming, is a kind of wish fulfillment that can affect daily reality. In the dream I write, and no one dies; I fear error, but I make more sense than I ever expected to because of it. "Sangre en las manos" can be read as the practical epigraph to a theory of feminist meaning.