Literary Identification from Charlotte Bronte to Tsitsi Dangarembga

Green, Laura

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Green, Laura.
Literary Identification from Charlotte Bronte to Tsitsi Dangarembga.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24240.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24240

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=858889
Coming Together

GEORGE ELIOT, SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR,
AND TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

In the narratives discussed in this chapter—two partly autobiographical novels, George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1859–60) and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), and one volume of autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1959)—relationships of identification within the narrative, among characters, raise ethical questions about the responsibility of the self toward an other that also echo in the relations between the authors and their readers. In the work of these authors, the negative eligibility of a fictional character for identification suggested in *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace*, Catherine Gallagher’s analysis of the eighteenth-century novel—the fictional protagonist as a “nobody” with whom, therefore, anybody can (potentially) identify—is transformed into something more complex and conflicted. Each of these characters is emphatically a somebody else, located in a thickly described context, furnished with a plot that emphasizes causality, understanding, and the challenge of maintaining an ethical relation to another.

Not only does Eliot, for example, do everything she can to give Maggie Tulliver or a Dorothea Brooke the weight of a somebody else, but she also makes the difficulty—and the necessity—of identifying with anybody else’s story and shar[ing] anybody else’s sentiments” (C. Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story* 172) the central conflict of their narratives of formation. The realization, as Eliot famously puts it in *Middlemarch*, that the other has “an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must
always fall with a certain difference” (*Middlemarch* 173), both beckoning in its equivalence and unreachable in its difference, is central to the formation of the protagonists of each of these narratives. The protagonist of each begins as a dutiful daughter (a “jeune fille rangée,” or well-behaved girl, in Beauvoir’s French title), in a cultural context in which the daughter’s duty is specifically that of the maintenance and continuation of the values of her family, clan, and class. These values must be upheld in the face of both competing internal desires (romantic, financial, or social) and external forces of historical change: the evolution, in early nineteenth-century England, from an agricultural and mercantile to an industrial and capitalist economy; the relative decline, in early twentieth-century France, in the power of the Catholic bourgeoisie; the increasingly cracking fault-lines of colonial rule in 1960s Rhodesia in *Nervous Conditions*. In each case, the protagonist’s conflict is routed through an intimate relationship with a counterpart—Maggie’s cousin Lucy Deane in *The Mill on the Floss*; Simone’s best friend Zaza Mabille in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, and Tambudzai’s cousin Nyasha Sigauke in *Nervous Conditions*—who represents an alternative trajectory of female formation. This counterpart not only serves as an object of identification in the service of the protagonist’s self-construction but also, as their trajectories proceed in parallel and at cross-purposes, comes to embody the challenge of ethical responsibility toward the other. The conflict represented in the relationship between them—between identification as primarily self-affirmation and identification as the anchor of an ethical orientation toward the other—is echoed in the relationship between readers and authors, that is, in the reception of these texts.

As an element of narrative structure, the relationship between the protagonist and her counterpart in these texts signifies in multiple registers. Most simply the pairings represent allegorically divisions that exist within the psyche or situation of the protagonist: in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Lucy and Zaza embody an untroubled relation to femininity that Maggie and Simone can neither fully dismiss nor fully attain; in *Nervous Conditions*, contrarily, Nyasha manifests overtly the rebellion that Tambudzai strives to repress. Maggie, Simone, and Tambudzai are all in more straitened material circumstances than Lucy, Zaza, and Nyasha. In each narrative the relationships between the two women encompass the blend of emulation, rivalry, and desire that constitutes identification in its fullest sense. These relations of identification are always represented from the point of view of the protagonist (which is part of how we recognize her as the protagonist). But the relationship between the
two women is not simply that of protagonist and foil, with the counterpart highlighting aspects of the protagonist’s formation. Rather, the self-other relationship between the two women bears the ethical weight of the narrative; morally and psychologically, it is the story of the protagonist’s formation.

Each narrative concludes with the protagonist’s acknowledgment of responsibility toward her counterpart based on her identification with the counterpart’s struggles: Maggie sacrifices her own love—and ultimately her life—rather than enjoy it at Lucy’s expense; Simone dedicates herself to a struggle against the family structure that she holds responsible for her friend’s death; Tambudzai asserts herself against Nyasha’s father, the family patriarch, to get her troubled cousin the psychiatric help that she requires. The inherent self-referentiality of relations of identification in each case—“the detour through the other that defines the self” (Fuss 6)—is brought into confrontation with the countervailing ethic of altruism, of orientation toward the other. However, the gestures toward the other are not easily undertaken or necessarily successful: Maggie all but destroys Lucy’s life before giving Stephen up; Simone cannot save Zaza’s; Tambudzai supplants Nyasha in Nyasha’s family and cannot arrest her mental disintegration. To the extent that the counterpart’s tragic narrative is incorporated into that of the protagonist as a sign or cause of her own development, this incorporation demonstrates the appropriative violence of identification and of a subjectivity built on lost objects.

I have adopted the term “counterpart” (semblable), which Jacques Lacan uses to describe the role of the other in a child’s identification with his or her siblings, to describe these texts’ other women, who as cousins or peers bear a similarly lateral relationship to the protagonists. As Dylan Evans explains,

The term “counterpart” . . . designates other people in whom the subject perceives a likeness to himself (principally a visual likeness). . . . The emphasis here is on likeness; the child identifies with his siblings on the basis of the recognition of bodily similarity. . . . It is this identification that gives rise to the “imago of the counterpart” (Evans 28).

In the essay by Lacan to which Evans refers, “Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l’individu,” the counterpart is represented particularly as belonging to what Lacan calls the “intrusion complex [complexe de l’intrusion],” which “represents the experience that brings into being the primitive subject, most often when he sees one or another of his coun-
terparts participate with him in domestic life, in other words, when he recognizes his siblings. . . . The critical point revealed by these investigations [into sibling rivalry] is that jealousy, at its roots, represents not an active rivalry [rivalité vitale] but a mental identification” (Lacan, “Complexes” 35–36; my translation). In “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan equates the counterpart with the aspirational vision of his or her own body that the infant beholds in the mirror: “The imago of the counterpart is interchangeable with the image of the subject’s own body, the specular image with which the subject identifies in the mirror stage, leading to the formation of the ego” (Lacan, “Mirror Stage,” 28). In the narratives I discuss here, the “likeness” between protagonist and counterpart is based on their shared gender; the lateral structure of the sibling relationship is echoed in the relationship of cousin or best friend. But a cousin or a best friend is not quite a sibling, and the distinction both allows for and circumscribes the emergence of erotic attachment. The possibilities and frustrations of the notquite—oscillations between sameness and difference, distance and desire—mark these relationships. The relationships between Maggie and Lucy, Simone and Zaza, and Tambudzai and Nyasha, all include physical and emotional intensifications that interrupt or pose alternatives to heterosexual pairings, but unlike the novels by Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, and Jeanette Winterson that I discuss in Chapter Three, none of these narratives consciously foregrounds such alternatives, and none of these protagonists defines herself as lesbian or queer. Further, the plot structure of heterosexual female rivalry remains to some degree in place for all of them, however strongly they resist it.

It is on account, rather than in spite, of this irresolution that these narratives can productively be viewed through the lenses of contemporary queer theory, particularly in its psychoanalytic inflection, which has done so much to make such oscillations visible even—and perhaps especially—when they cannot be stabilized in one libidinal posture (homo- or heterosexual) or one form of cathexis (identification or desire). Judith Butler, for example, asks, “What is to restrict any given individual to a single identification? Identifications are multiple and contestatory, and it may be that we desire most strongly those individuals who reflect in a dense or saturated way the possibilities of multiple and simultaneous substitutions. . . . Insofar as a number of such fantasies can come to constitute and saturate a site of desire, it follows that we are not in the position of either identifying with a given sex or desiring someone else of that sex; indeed, we are not, more generally, in a position of finding identification and desire to be mutually exclusive phenomena” (Bodies that Matter 99). The possibilities
of fluctuation that Butler identifies here—of “multiple and contestatory” identifications; of “multiple and simultaneous substitutions” subtending our responses to others; and of the mutual implication of the “phenomena” of identification and desire—are central to the relationships of protagonist and counterpart in the narratives I discuss in this chapter.

In thus bringing to bear a psychoanalytic schema, I do not mean to suggest that any or all of these authors construct their characters primarily as psychoanalytic case studies. But they do, within the norms of their particular historical moments and cultural contexts, emphasize the intricate relationships for their protagonists between demands perceived as internal (emotional, affective) and those perceived as external (familial, religious, institutional). Maggie Tulliver—driving nails into the “Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes . . . the trunk of a large wooden doll” (Eliot, MoF 28); pushing her cousin Lucy into the mud; forming an attachment to Philip Wakem, the son of her father’s enemy; gliding down the river with Stephen Guest, “hardly conscious of having said or done anything decisive” (467)—is certainly readable as a pre-eminently Freudian subject avant la lettre. Her ego, her rational and socially-directed mind, seems under siege by the barely containable countermovement of unsocial hostilities and desires signified for Freud by the id, and constantly chastened by the socially sanctioned ethical norms that he identifies with the superego. In The Mill on the Floss, the intensity of Maggie’s psychological conflict comes close to overwhelming its repeatedly asserted ethical signification (e.g., that “faithfulness and constancy mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasantest to ourselves” [475]) and her ability to function as a moral sign in a providential plot. In other words, The Mill on the Floss takes a long step toward the Freudian shift of emphasis from the ought of the deontological individual to the is of the psychological subject, and (as a result) from the strains of allegorical and providential character construction that linger within Victorian fictional realism to the Modernist emphasis on affective and subjective elements of character interaction.²

GEORGE ELIOT

DARK WOMAN, DUTIFUL DAUGHTER

The beginning of such a shift is evident, for example, in the use Eliot makes of Thomas à Kempis’s account of the progress of the Christian soul, De Imitatione Christi, for humanist rather than doctrinal moral ends. In
her representation the text is not homiletic but a relatively unmediated form of life-writing, “written down by a hand that waited for the heart’s prompting . . . the chronicle of a solitary, hidden anguish, struggle, trust and triumph . . . a lasting record of human needs and human consolations” (Eliot, MoF 291). As Eliot displaces moral conflict from an arena of doctrinal or theological to one of psychological struggle, Freud will relocate it still more deeply within human consciousness. In Freud’s schema of consciousness, it is the superego—an authority that “retains the character of the father” and is later reinforced by “the influence of authority, religious teaching, school, and reading” (Ego and the Id 30)—that takes on the function attributed by Eliot to Thomas à Kempis’s Christian humanism (which itself is in contradiction with Maggie’s parental authorities—her father’s desire for vengeance, her mother’s reverence for social convention). Each re-interpretation significantly lessens the deontological impact of such authority. It is precisely the resistance to “[patriarchal] authority, religious teaching, school, and reading” that becomes a source of struggle in the two twentieth-century texts, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter and Nervous Conditions, that, as I argue, share a narrative pattern and set of ethical concerns with Eliot’s. In Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, Simone, enjoying the privileges of her family’s bourgeois status, both identifies with her book-loving father and then, as she sees the stultification and breakdown of Zaza, comes to resist the family system of which he remains the head. In Nervous Conditions, a number of characters, including Tambudzai, her mother, Mai, and Nyasha, at different times experience psychological breakdowns. It is Nyasha who most clearly evinces colonial subjectivity as a “nervous condition,” but Tambudzai’s narrative also emphasizes the social and material oppression underlying the novel’s psychological disorders. Beauvoir cites Eliot and The Mill on the Floss, along with other French, English, and American works, as formative; while Dangarembga does not allude to Beauvoir or Eliot specifically, her protagonist is represented as reading classic English literature, and the novel’s title and epigraph, adapted from Jean-Paul Sartre’s introduction to Franz Fanon’s polemic The Wretched of the Earth (1961), link her to the intellectual heritage of Sartre and Beauvoir. With all their differences, then, these three narratives of female formation share an organizing structure that magnifies both oscillations of identification and desire within each character, and the binarization of the female role (dutiful/rebellious daughter) within each social context, by recasting and repeating them between protagonist and counterpart.
In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie, as a narrative reader, models for the authorial reader the pitfalls of literary identification and the difficulty of moving through identification to sympathy and change, whether in fictional, personal, or social narratives. In a scene of reading at the center of the novel, Maggie refuses to finish another novel, Madame de Staël’s novel *Corinne* (1807), loaned to her by her would-be suitor, Philip Wakem:

As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I’m determined to read no more books where the blond haired women carry away all the happiness. . . . If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora Maclvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. (Eliot, *MoF* 332)

In the passage in *Corinne* to which Maggie refers, we learn that the narrative reader within Staël’s text—Corinne’s half sister Lucile—is “very engrossed in her reading” (*Corinne* 317) but not what the book is, and Lucile lays it aside when she meets Oswald, whom she will marry. The figure of the narrative reader here does not oppose but opens into the trajectory of the heterosexual romance plot. Within this fictional plot, to which Maggie objects but which she also, as she puts the book down, repeats, the reward for female conformity is the attainment not only of the subjective state of “love” but also, more important, its public coordinate in marriage; the punishment for female eccentricity or rebellion, on the other hand, is a loss of love and social death (exile, ostracism) or actual death. Maggie recognizes in *Corinne* a fictional counterpart; her anxious disavowal of Staël’s plot reminds us that these outcomes were already axiomatic to nineteenth-century novel readers, even those whose circumstances, like Maggie’s, limited their access to books. Indeed, Maggie correctly imagines *Corinne*’s outcome: The eponymous dark-haired protagonist, who has achieved fame as a poet and orator, loses her lover, Oswald Nelveil, to her more domesticated, conventional half-sister Lucile and dies of grief. Despite warning echoes, however—of her cousin Lucy’s name in that of Staël’s character Lucile; of the relation of half-sister in that of cousin; of the book eternally unfinished in Staël’s novel and in Maggie’s hands—Maggie is less astute about her own implication in social and fictional norms. When Philip imputes to her a desire to “avenge the dark women
in her own person” she backs away from her original identification with Corinne—“Philip, that is not pretty of you, to apply my nonsense to anything real” (Eliot, MoF 333)—and shifts questions of identification from sororal likeness to other “dark women” to more general sympathy for them: “I thought you wanted to remind me that I am vain, and wish everyone to admire me most. But it isn’t for that, that I’m jealous for the dark women—not because I’m dark myself. It’s because I always care the most about the unhappy people; if the blond girl was forsaken, I should like her best” (333). Maggie acknowledges her desire for attention (which she shares with Corinne, the poet and performer) only to disown it; she disclaims a primary, narcissistic identification (caring about Corinne because she is “dark [her]self”) in favor of what sounds like an other-directed sympathy (“car[ing] most about the unhappy people”). Although this shift aligns Maggie with Eliot’s explicitly favored ethical modes, of renunciation and sympathy, it proves difficult for her to sustain, partly because Maggie herself is one of the “unhappy people.” The remainder of the novel’s plot is driven by Maggie’s increasingly frantic oscillation between other-directed and self-directed impulses, between renunciation of pleasure and a desire to be happily beloved. This ambivalence ends only as the two impulses are united in death; sacrificing herself to rescue her brother Tom, Maggie earns again the long-withheld regard of her earliest beloved object.4

As Staël’s Lucile is Corinne’s counterpart, so Lucy, in The Mill on the Floss, is Maggie’s. Although Lucy is a secondary character, from the beginning of the novel, the reader is invited to view the two girls as a study in contrast. The narrative contrast is often overtly presented, through other characters’ points of view, in terms of their appearance or behavior. The narrator, however, also alerts the reader (though not the other characters) to the emotional and psychological implications of Maggie’s relation to Lucy. Eliot’s “authorial reader,” in Rabinowitz’s terms—one who accepts “the author’s invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers” (Rabinowitz 22)—must share with Maggie what the elders of the Dodson clan largely do not: a sense of the self as structured by conflicting and ambivalent motivations. (Eliot takes pains to establish the literal-mindedness and obtuseness of the Dodsons. For example, she observes, of Mrs. Tulliver’s failed attempt to dissuade lawyer Wakem from purchasing Dorlcote Mill, that “fly-fishers fail in preparing their bait so as to make it alluring in the right quarter, for want of a due acquaintance with the subjectivity of fishes” [Eliot, MoF 254]). For the authorial reader that Eliot could hypothesize based on her contemporaries, the vocabulary for representing that con-
flicted interiority would have been essentially ethical or theological; for the reader of our own day, it may additionally or instead be, as mine is here, psychoanalytic. Whatever the vocabulary, however, the authorial reader then or now responds to a call to distinguish between surface and depth and to understand that the “subjectivity” of the other will always be both difficult and necessary to imagine.

Contemporary readers may, for example, see in the oscillations of Maggie’s relation to Lucy ambivalent shifts between identification and desire and between sympathy and rivalry. These oscillations appear within a single paragraph in the narrative introduction of Lucy:

Certainly the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous and to superficial eyes was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie, though a connoisseur might have seen “points” in her which had a higher promise for maturity than Lucy’s natty completeness: it was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten. . . . [Lucy] looked up with shy pleasure at Maggie, taller by the head, though scarcely a year older. Maggie always looked at Lucy with delight. She was fond of fancying a world where the people never got any larger than children of their own age, and she made a queen of it just like Lucy. . . . only the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy’s form. (Eliot, MoF 61)

The emphasis on vision here recalls the spectatorial emphasis of Lacan’s description of the counterpart (which itself recalls the visual emphasis of Freud’s formulation of the discovery of sexual difference). But the look here, and its conclusion in favor of Lucy’s femininity, are located within “superficial eyes” (my emphasis). The clear caddishness of the position of a “connoisseur” evaluating the girls’ “points” as if they were horseflesh simultaneously raises the possibility of and warns the reader away from such a schematic and superficial reading. As Tess Coslett points out, Mrs. Tulliver is also prone to this way of contrasting the two girls—“Our first introduction to Lucy is through Mrs. Tulliver’s perception of her as the ideal daughter, the image against which Maggie is measured and found wanting” (24). The fact that a comically imperceptive character such as Mrs. Tulliver continually recurs to this external contrast (“I’m sure [Lucy’s] more like my child than sister Deane’s, for she’d allays a very poor colour for one of our family, sister Deane had” [Eliot, MoF 43]) should alert us to its inapplicability. As the passage’s free indirect discourse moves from both of these dismissed spectatorial points of view into Lucy’s (“shy pleasure”)
and then Maggie’s (“delight”), the emphasis turns from contrast to mutual admiration, and finally, finishing in Maggie’s consciousness, to a possessive identification (“the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy’s form”) that is, however, also a form of rivalry: There can, after all, be only one monarch. Subsequently, a competition for Tom’s attention (anticipating later competition for Stephen Guest’s attention) tips the balance back toward heterosexual rivalry. “I wish Lucy was my sister,” Tom tells Maggie (86), who avenges the insult by pushing “poor little pink-and-white Lucy” into the mud with a “fierce thrust of her small brown arm” (101). “Anger and jealousy can no more bear to lose sight of their objects than love,” Eliot observes (sounding rather Freudian), “and that Tom and Lucy should do or see anything of which she was ignorant would have been an intolerable idea to Maggie” (100). Turning the initially “pink-and-white” Lucy even darker than Maggie’s own frequently remarked-on “brown” self, Maggie moves from projecting herself into Lucy’s exalted position to debasing Lucy to her own degraded one. Tom punishes her with “two smart slaps” on the offending arm. Maggie’s aggression toward Lucy here and Tom’s response to it prefigure her later treatment of Lucy (in running away with Stephen) and the dragging of her own reputation through the mud. The apparently passing references to Maggie’s arm—aggressive, “brown,” subject to Tom’s punitive attention—recur more forcefully later in the figuration of the erotic attraction of Maggie and Stephen largely through a focus on their arms.

From its beginning, then, the relationship between Maggie and Lucy is one in which imitation and attraction, mirroring and opposition, are thoroughly entwined. When the two are brought together again as young women, after Maggie has been earning her living teaching and Lucy occupying herself as a dutiful and cherished daughter at home (with Maggie’s now-widowed mother as her housekeeper), all but engaged to Stephen Guest, the same oscillations reappear. Maggie and Lucy admire each other’s contrasting qualities: Maggie finds Lucy a “dear tiny thing” and appreciates her enjoyment of “other people’s happiness” (Eliot, MoF 373), while Lucy reciprocally is drawn to Maggie’s passionate enjoyment of music, so that on one listening occasion she “could not resist the impulse to steal up to her and kiss her” (417). Lucy is described by the narrator as “loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them” (370); while Maggie muses, “I don’t enjoy [other people’s] happiness as much as you
do—else I should be more contented. I do feel for them when they are in trouble; I don't think I could ever bear to make any one unhappy; and yet I often hate myself, because I get angry sometimes at the sight of happy people” (373). While Maggie’s self-assessment is accurate—she does indeed both resent Lucy’s happiness and suffer in causing her sorrow—the narrative attribution to Lucy of “care and vision” seems ironic, since the pleasure that she supplies for Maggie, in the person of Stephen, is one that Lucy never anticipated and cannot enjoy. (Lucy’s obliviousness to the state of feeling between Maggie and Stephen, though apparently testifying to her naïve goodwill, might less generously be viewed as manifesting the privileged ignorance of the powerful; much as Lucy admires her cousin, it never occurs to her that Maggie could be a rival.) Maggie’s abortive, semi-voluntary flight with Stephen down the river Floss repeats more dramatically her childhood attack on Lucy, though it reverses, and transforms into metaphor, the sullying effects of that scene. The attraction between Maggie and Stephen and her subsequent renunciation of him in favor of Lucy’s claims provide her with the opportunity first to “avenge the dark women” by knocking Lucy from the ranks of “happy people” and then, once Lucy has been “forsaken,” to demonstrate her sympathy with the unhappy ones. After Lucy recovers from the illness caused by this betrayal, she visits Maggie secretly; the two women cry in each other’s arms and part with “a last embrace” (511)—Maggie’s last embrace with anyone before her death in Tom’s arms. As in the childhood scene, Maggie reduces the distance and difference between herself and Lucy, first by usurping her position as Stephen’s queen, and then by sharing in Lucy’s misery in his loss.

These oscillations complicate the completion of the heterosexual romance plot. Consummation of most of the romantic couplings that have surfaced throughout the narrative (between Maggie and Stephen, Maggie and Philip, and implicitly Lucy and Tom, who has loved her silently) is made impossible by the deaths of Maggie and Tom. True, the novel does conclude with a vision of a heterosexual couple, presumably a reunited Stephen and Lucy: “One [man] visited the tomb [of Maggie and Tom] again with a sweet face beside him—but that was years after” (Eliot, MoF 522). But the periphrastic, and therefore vague, phrasing of this vision, along with the ineradicable taint of infidelity on Stephen’s part, suggest a narratorial reluctance to cede the novel’s conclusion to a conventional, exogamous heterosexuality; instead the novel’s two concluding couples are implicitly incestuous (Tom and Maggie) and shopsoiled (Stephen and Lucy). \(^8\)
Further, the scenes of mutual admiration and passionate reunion between Lucy and Maggie in Book Six adumbrate possibilities of a same-sex desire counter or alternative to the energies of the heterosexual couple. Such representations of emotional intimacy between women in Victorian novels, as Sharon Marcus has argued, are not *prima facie* evidence of the undermining of heterosexual convention, because female friendships in these novels are not only compatible with but also productive of marriage bonds: “In the plot of female amity, love between [female] friends develops the emotional disposition necessary for companionate marriage” (87). In suggesting that Maggie Tulliver is an exception that proves this rule, Marcus says that the novel emphasizes “contrasts and rivalry” between Maggie and Lucy and that Maggie in fact “lacks female allies” (80). But as my reading has suggested, the novel also emphasizes identification and desire between the two women, whose final meeting is one of mutual comfort and forgiveness. “When I come back, and am strong, they will let me do as I like. I shall come to you when I please then,” Lucy tells Maggie (Eliot, *MoF* 510). Cosslett, in a discussion of female friendship that anticipates aspects of Marcus’s argument, considers *The Mill on the Floss* an example of, rather than an exception to, the centrality of women’s relationships to heterosexual closing unions. As she points out, Lucy’s visit of reconciliation to Maggie “sets a seal of approval on Maggie’s action in leaving Stephen—it does restore Lucy to her, and win Lucy’s admiration. . . . As in *Middlemarch* and *Aurora Leigh*, a scene in which two women affirm their friendship, and one gives up a man to the other, is necessary before the final male-female coming together. Instead of the man choosing between the two female ‘rivals,’ it is the women who arrange between themselves who is to have him” (Cosslett 36–37). In the absence of Stephen himself, this act of “arrang[ing]” also seems to cement the bond between the two women. Since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s identification of the “between men” narrative triangle, in which women function as often expendable conduits for an array of male homosocial relations, critics (beginning with Sedgwick herself) have agreed that no simple gender reversal for this structure is possible, because “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 25). Nevertheless, over the outcome of the Maggie/Stephen/Lucy triangle hovers the faintest ghost of a different conclusion, in which the disappearance of the unworthy male suitor (Stephen departs for Holland in the aftermath of the boat-trip) enables
a newly strengthened ethical and emotional bond between two women. (This ghost also hovers over the rapprochement between Esther and Mrs. Transome in *Felix Holt*, and takes on substance in Romola’s rescue of Tessa in *Romola*.)

But the novel’s resistance to the triumph of the heterosexual couple and of female rivalry is truncated. If Maggie escapes the conventional outcome of heterosexual coupling, she does so by fatally recommitting herself to her family of origin, both immediate (Tom) and extended (Lucy). Maggie’s flight with Stephen Guest, who can offer her “love, wealth, ease, refinement, all that her nature craved” (Eliot, *MoF* 458), expresses her desire not only for attention and admiration but also for the escape from a closed society offered by exogamous marriage. In the end, however, she turns away from the deracination expressed not only by Stephen’s last name but also by his association with cosmopolitan mercantilism (when we first meet him, he is wearing “attar of roses,” an imported product) and back toward the autochthonous, literally stifling embrace of her family, as represented by the passionate “clasp” in which she and Tom drown. At the same time, because one woman’s death secures the other’s marriage, the structure of a plot of female formation based on division rather than identification remains in place. (Later in Eliot’s career, the conclusion of *Romola* dispatches not one but two male objects of desire [Tito Melema and Savanarola] to death, and brings Tessa, Romola, and Tessa’s children together as a kind of counter-family. But Tessa’s helplessness and dependence on Romola, exacerbating the class difference between them, positions her more as a third child herself than as a possible object of desire or romantic attachment for Romola.)

Maggie’s end suggests a cautionary conclusion about reading and identification. The reader of Maggie’s narrative, Eliot suggests, should think twice if she is tempted to feel that she may do better than Maggie in altering the conventional outcome of gendered social narratives. After all, to disavow a similarity to Maggie is, paradoxically, to identify with her by repeating the error that Maggie makes about Corinne. The moral of this *mise-en-abîme* seems to be that authorial readers equate reality with narrative freedom at our peril. We are not entitled to assume, because the realist novel gives fictitious form to social conventions, that social conventions are therefore fictitious, in the sense that we may alter their plotting at will. Indeed, as I have just suggested, Eliot herself, like Maggie, remains unable entirely to escape the overwhelming binary logic of a construction of femininity in which the attainment of conventional womanhood—here, as in *Corinne*, the achievement of heterosexual love and marriage—
demands the sacrifice of alternative modes of desire and achievement. She consistently returns to the female protagonist/counterpart structure in her novels, varying outcomes but always conforming to an either/or logic that pivots around one character’s renunciation. The protagonist is ultimately identified with the roles of both the dutiful daughter (the one who devotes herself to familial and endogamous claims) and the passionate nonconformist. Her capacity for passion is transformed over the course of the narrative into a passion for duty; and by the novel’s end, the counterpart becomes narratively marginalized as a repository for disavowed desires less easily assimilated to the ethical scheme (e.g. for social advancement or sexual conquest). As the conclusion of The Mill on the Floss demonstrates, for a fictional character, diegetic survival isn’t everything: Lucy lives within the novel, but Maggie lives beyond it, an object of identification for future readers who also serves as a warning of the dangers of identifying with fictional lives.

This ending has, however, been notoriously unsatisfying to readers and critics from Eliot’s time to our own. Eliot’s contemporaries—particularly male reviewers—were troubled by Maggie’s attraction to Stephen Guest. “The hideous transformation,” fulminates Algernon Charles Swinburne, “by which Maggie is debased—were it but for an hour—into the willing or yielding companion of Swinburne’s flight would probably and deservedly have been resented as a brutal and vulgar outrage on the part of a male novelist. . . . But the man never lived, I do believe, who could have done such a thing as this” (Carroll 165). Leslie Stephen, in his volume on Eliot for the “English Men of Letters” series, suggests the potential intimacy of the reader’s bond with both Eliot and her protagonist: “The novelist speaks for us because he speaks for himself” (88); and “if the test of a heroine’s merits be the reader’s disposition to fall in love with her (and that, I confess, is my own), I hold that Maggie is worth a wilderness of Dinah [Morrises]” (89). But this very bond gives Maggie’s subsequent behavior the flavor of a personal betrayal: “We might even have forgiven [Maggie] if, after being a little overpowered by the dandified Stephen, she had shown some power of perceiving what a very poor animal he was. The affair jars upon us, because it is not a development of her previous aspirations, but suddenly throws a fresh and unpleasant light on her character” (103). Swinburne’s and Stephen’s reactions evidence the intermingling of impulses to “be” and to “have,” the possibilities of ownership and loss, that mark identification.

For many twentieth-century readers, the problem with the end of The Mill on the Floss, and with the outcomes for many of Eliot’s female pro-
tagonists, is different one. Eliot’s repeated representation of specifically female experience and betrayal made her an important writer for second-wave feminist criticism beginning in the 1970s. But the distance between the success that Eliot found in unconventional paths of love and work, and the sufferings she visited on protagonists such as Maggie who sought the same, seem to obstruct routes to identification with author or protagonist and undermine the social critique that a feminist reader might hope to find in the protagonist’s life story. In Kate Millett’s resonant phrase, “‘Living in sin,’ George Eliot lived the revolution as well, perhaps, but she did not write of it” (192). The ambivalence of Eliot’s relationship with Victorian feminism has been well canvassed, but what interests me more here is her concomitant ambivalence about her own position as a public object of emulation. Her reticence suggests that part of what she fears about political pronouncements is the way they might fix her as a member of a class rather than an exceptional individual. “The peculiarities of my own lot have caused me to have idiosyncrasies rather than an average judgment” (Eliot, Letters 4: 364) she insists in a letter on the topic of female suffrage, and it is a claim that she makes, in different words, many times in the letters.

She finds more inviting direct correspondence with many of her most admiring readers, female and male, such as the young Scotsman Alexander Main. In Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s account: “After Alexander Main entered into correspondence with her, Marian wrote to him that he was ‘a friend of the only sort I now desire much to acquire: one who takes into his own life the spiritual outcome of mine’ (5:229). Such a definition of friendship—as a kind of extraphysical fertilization of the younger by the elder—makes it clear that what she valued most was the private absorption of her narrative voice” (241). In Main, Eliot could see her “spiritual” legacy reproduced, in all its individual “idiosyncracies,” by a kind of introjection. At the same time, Eliot gave her blessing to Main’s plan to produce a compilation of quotations from her work, The Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings of George Eliot (1872)—a much more public projection of that legacy, circulating precisely the voice of “pronouncement” that Eliot elsewhere eschews. Contemplating the dubious literary merits of this project, Bodenheimer concludes, “The key to the episode remains ambiguous: Marian’s desire to cultivate reverence in the ‘affectionate labours’ of the young is supported by her unacknowledged yearning to be heard as the preacher lurking within the artist” (247). Bodenheimer’s terms, “The artist” and “the preacher,” both, of course, refer to public identities, but “the artist” in this sense names the author in her apparently more intimate, reciprocal relationship with a reader, while “the preacher” invokes
a more impressively large but less directly reachable audience. For Eliot, as for many of the writers in this study, a balance between reciprocity and control, between inviting readers’ intimacy and becoming subject to readers’ projections and expectations, remains an elusive goal.

### SIMONE DE BEAUVOR

**MY FREEDOM, HER DEATH**

*The Mill on the Floss* is often called Eliot’s most autobiographical novel; some of her own childhood circumstances and early intellectual development are clearly visible within the narrative of Maggie’s formation. Eliot was dubious about nonfiction life narrative—biography and autobiography—and even in her fiction eschewed the autodiegetic voice developed so powerfully by Brontë and Dickens. To say, as Eliot does in “The Natural History of German Life,” that “art” is “nearest” to life is also to acknowledge that the two are not identical. As Janice Carlisle points out, in this definition Eliot “avoids the more radical claims that her fiction would like to suggest: that art is experience, that aesthetic apprehension is coterminous with life” (*Audience* 23). It is, Carlisle argues, the gap between the ideal and the actual relation between life and art that generates, for mid-Victorian novelists including Eliot, what she calls the “analogical” bonds among readers, authors, and characters to create a “linked chain of morally forceful relations” (25), and bring about the moral transformations that justify the practice of realist fiction. Eliot’s purpose as an author is not to solicit a reader’s direct identification with her own experience, which in any case she understood as exceptional, but to create narratives that enable the reader to move through identification into a relation to an other recognized as an other.

As Eliot was an iconic English Victorian female intellectual, also read and admired on the Continent and in the United States, so Simone de Beauvoir was, in Toril Moi’s words, “the emblematic [European] intellectual woman of the twentieth century” (1). Like Eliot, Beauvoir was a successful novelist—her second novel, *The Mandarins* (1954), won the Prix Goncourt. Unlike Eliot, however, she regarded fiction as but one mode of representing experience and “life,” and it was her memoirs, as well as her persona as a public intellectual, that captured the imagination of several generations of English, American, and European readers in the mid-twentieth century. Describing the gestation of *The Mandarins*, itself a highly autobiographical novel, Beauvoir suggests that “one of the essential purposes of literature” is to capture the multifariousness of lived experience:
to make manifest the equivocal, separate, contradictory truths that no one moment represents in their totality, either inside or outside myself; in certain cases one can only succeed in grouping them all together by inscribing them within the unity of an imaginary object. Only a novel, it seemed to me, could reveal the multiple and intricately spun meanings of that changed world to which I awoke in August 1944. . . . We were intellectuals, a race apart with whom novelists are advised to have nothing to do. . . . [But] after all, we were human beings, just a little more concerned than most people with giving our lives an integument of words. . . . I felt situated at a point in space and time at which each of the sounds that I could draw from myself had a chance to awaken echoes in a great many other hearts. (Force of Circumstance [hereafter FC] 263)

The goals of Eliot’s and Beauvoir’s fictional realism clearly belong to the same tradition; Beauvoir, like Eliot, aims for a form of “amplifying experience . . . and extending our contact with our fellow-men,” an ethical act aimed at inspiring ethical action in others. But their moral orientations—Eliot’s deontological humanism, which stresses the suppression of the self in relation to the claims of the other, and Beauvoir’s Existentialism, which emphasizes the autonomy of the self as the basis for the relation to the other—differ in their evaluations of the self–other relationship and, as a result, in how they represent this relationship through textual relations of identification.

As Ursula Tidd writes, “The ethical parameters of the Self–Other relation were a source of philosophical concern to Simone de Beauvoir from the beginning of her career. All of her literary and philosophical writing can be described as marked by a concern to map an ethical relation with the Other” (163). For Beauvoir, however, the existence of the self is always the starting point for the relation to the other, and as a result, in her writing, she is always the fundamental subject of representation: “Whether it is a question of a novel, an autobiography, an essay, an historical work or no matter what, the writer attempts to set up communication with others by the uniqueness of his personal experience” (All Said and Done [hereafter ASD] 115). Autobiography, a more unmediated form of representation because it need not provide the “unity of the imaginary object” of fiction, becomes her preferred mode of communication.12 “[My autobiography],” she asserts in a typical pronouncement, “is not a work of art, but my life with its enthusiasms and disappointments, its convulsions, my life attempting to express itself and not to serve as a pretext for elegance” (FC 1: vi–vii). At the same time, however, she acknowledges the structural
fictiveness of all self-representation that many theorists of life-writing have noted. Indeed, her readers’ failure to recognize the gap between life and life-writing often irritates her—an irritation that, characteristically, she records, noting for example that readers of *Force of Circumstance* “did not fully realize the distance that lies between the flesh-and-blood writer and the character he brings into existence by the act of writing—a character endowed with a fictitious constitution” (*ASD* 115). In Beauvoir’s writings, events seem less to occur then to recur: represented and rerepresented in fiction and in memoir, their initial representation and their reception becoming the retrospective subjects of further representation—a *mise-en-abîme* more dizzying than Maggie’s. But Beauvoir and Eliot both assume that the ideal approached, however unevenly, by different forms of representation is the author’s communication of lived experience that both possesses “uniqueness” and may “awaken echoes3 in . . . other hearts”; that both resists mere imitation and offers opportunities for the potentially transformative experience of identification.

That tension between the unique and the common is, as Cathe-rine Gallagher points out, “coiled at the heart of the novel genre,” since “the founding claim of the form . . . was the insistence that the referent of the text was a generalization about, and not an extra-textual, embodied instance of, a ‘species’” (“George Eliot” 61). Certainly *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* unlike *The Mill on the Floss,* seems to offer precisely an “extra-textual, embodied instance,” as suggested in the name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist: Beauvoir’s memoir undertakes to narrate not the plots of fictional characters but the lives of real persons. But if autobiography may resemble fiction in creating characters “endowed with a fictitious constitution,” this resemblance is particularly pronounced, according to Beauvoir, in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter:*

> All through my childhood and my young days, my life had a distinct meaning: its goal and its motive was to reach the adult age. . . . For my people and for me, my duty as a child and an adolescent consisted of forming the woman I was to be tomorrow. (That is why *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* has a fiction-like unity lacking in the later volumes. As it does in novels dealing with apprenticeship to life [*les romans d’apprentissage*], in that book time runs straight on from beginning to end.) (*ASD* 14)

In this account, her life story has the “fiction-like unity” of a novel of formation not because Beauvoir has retrospectively “endowed” it with that
unity but because autobiographical fidelity demands that the memoir be novelistic, since the young Simone conceives of her life in novelistic terms. The fictional conception, in other words, precedes the non-fiction representation of the memoir. This intermingling is emphasized by those parts of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* that take the form of a reader’s memoir.

Thus, one model of “fiction-like unity” for Beauvoir is *The Mill on the Floss*, the reading of which is represented as a central moment in Simone’s youthful intellectual formation. Maggie Tulliver as an adolescent identifies with the protagonist of *Corinne*; so Simone, though with greater confidence in herself, identifies with Maggie Tulliver:

George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* made an even deeper impression upon me than *Little Women*. I read it in English, at Meyrignac, lying on the mossy floor of a chestnut plantation. Maggie Tulliver, like myself, was torn between others and herself: I recognized myself in her. She too was dark, loved nature, and books and life, was too headstrong to be able to observe the conventions of her respectable surroundings. . . . The others condemned her because she was superior to them; I resembled her. . . . [But] I couldn’t see myself dying of solitude. Through [Maggie], I identified myself with the author: one day other adolescents would bathe with their tears a novel in which I would tell my own sad story. (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* [hereafter MDD] 140)

As Christina Angelfors observes, “Il semblerait donc que la fiction offre à la jeune Simone de Beauvoir de meilleurs modèles d’identification que la réalité. De là à transformer la réalité en fiction et elle-même en un personnage de cette fiction, il n’y a qu’un pas” (“It would thus seem that fiction offers the young Simone de Beauvoir better models of identification than reality. From there to transforming reality into fiction and herself into a character in this fiction is but a step”; 68). In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir aims to reformulate, not reject, the conventions and the outcome of the novel of female formation with which Maggie identifies in *Mill on the Floss*. To a point, she is successful. Rebellious Simone, unlike Maggie, avenges the “dark women”: she reads what she wants to read, negotiates the plot of heterosexual romance without losing her intellectual or sexual freedom, and survives to write her own story.

In this sense a generic distinction between novel and memoir re-emerges as important: The detailed account that Beauvoir provides in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* of her youthful intellectual development casts that development, retrospectively, as the root of her historical status as a cel-
ebrated intellectual woman; her attainment of that status is simultaneously the narrative’s *raison d’être* and the story it tells. The memoir asserts, by its existence as well as in the events it narrates, a potentially redemptive distinction between literature and life, or convention and action. By producing hundreds of pages on the subject of her own intellectual development and transgressive life choices, Beauvoir makes her autobiographical rejection and revision of feminine plots explicitly available to a variety of readers in a way that Eliot does not. By making her own experience simultaneously the subject and object of representation, Beauvoir aims in the act of producing autobiographical writing to correct and transcend not only Maggie’s plot but also Eliot’s pessimism about altering it.\textsuperscript{14}

If the turn from fiction to autobiography cannot guarantee a move from representation to truth, however, so too—as Eliot warns at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*—it cannot guarantee a transformation from oppression to liberty. Cultures like genres have discourses, including discourses of gender, that constrain individual will and action. Like *The Mill on the Floss, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* intertwines the narrative of the survival of one woman with that of the death of another—in this case, Simone’s best friend, Zaza Mabille.\textsuperscript{15} To the extent that Simone’s relationship to Zaza is in part a rewriting of the Maggie/Lucy plot in *The Mill on the Floss*, Beauvoir’s narrative does not escape the gender conventions of that plot. Beauvoir’s relationship with Sartre will, as she insistently represents it, attempt to recast the conventional heterosexual plot, but this volume ends with their relationship barely begun. The conclusion of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* instead highlights Zaza’s death and Simone’s guilt over it. Simone as protagonist evades the murderous intention of revenge that haunts Maggie, but her narrative does not evade its outcome, expressive at once of a homicidal rage (inasmuch as the “other” woman is destroyed) and a suicidal desperation (inasmuch as Beauvoir represents this “other” woman as an avatar of the self). *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* certainly pushes much further than *The Mill on the Floss* in its representation of female homosocial and homoerotic relationships, and thus in its challenge to the heterosexual plot; but that challenge comes at a cost that haunts both the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and Beauvoir as a writer.\textsuperscript{16}

Simone’s childhood reading of *The Mill on the Floss* escapes an otherwise stringent parental supervision: “Sometimes, before giving me a book to read, my mother would pin a few pages together; in [H. G.] Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* I found a whole chapter placed under the ban” (*MDD* 83). After Simone reads *Silas Marner* at school, however, her mother buys
her a copy of *Adam Bede*, unaware of its plot of unwed motherhood and infanticide. Simone conceals Eliot’s unsuitability, reading *The Mill on the Floss* in English, in the summer, alone in the woods, when she has begun to lose her religious faith. What Simone reads is a description of a social order different from hers, belonging to another country, century, and class of people, yet recognizable enough to allow her identification with Maggie’s own struggles as a dutiful daughter. Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, applying Althusser’s theory of the social reproduction of ideology specifically to literary production, emphasize that it is the location of literature within national linguistic and educational practices that enables it to reproduce the dominant bourgeois ideology (96–97). Simone’s mother’s attempted censorship extends such practices into the home, but Simone’s reading of *The Mill on the Floss*, taking place outside of the schoolroom, the family home, and the national tongue, places her identification with Maggie in a context of transgression—just as Maggie’s reading of the borrowed *Corinne* (also, for Maggie, a foreign text, though a translated one) represents a transgression against the familial strictures embodied in her brother, who has forbidden her to meet Philip Wakem. As Beauvoir observes, such transgressions are limited: “As for the rest, my freedom consisted of accepting the lot laid down for me, and of accepting it cheerfully, even zealously. My piety had ardour in it; and straight away I became the best pupil at the Cours Désir. . . . I was passionately devoted to books. I loved my father and my father loved books: he had filled my mother with a religious respect for them. They satisfied my curiosity—a curiosity that was active in me as far back as I can remember and that has never faded” (*MDD* 7). Beauvoir writes elsewhere of her adolescent reading that it was “the key that opened the world to me. It foretold my future: I identified myself with the heroines of novels, and through them I caught glimpses of what my life would be” (*ASD* 138). In identifying with Maggie she is interpellated as a particular kind of female subject—the “dark” or rebellious woman. The literary characteristics of that figure, though certainly not transcultural or transhistorical, are constant enough from Victorian, Protestant, petty bourgeois, provincial England to 1920s Catholic, bourgeois, provincial France to make Maggie recognizable to Simone—just as Corinne, incarnating the values of yet another culture, time, and place, is recognizable to Maggie.17

As is the case for Maggie, Simone’s parents’ reduced circumstances, and the attendant loss of a promising dowry, necessitate her planning for work rather than marriage (see *ASD* 12). The young Simone, however, has more opportunities than Maggie (including the opportunity of a university
education) and is both a more naïve and a more aggressive reader than Maggie. If she disavows her likeness to Maggie less sharply than Maggie does hers to Corinne, that is partly because she does not hesitate to engage in some enthusiastic misreading. First, Simone, already losing her religious faith, ignores the growing Evangelical fervor that causes Maggie (as it had caused Eliot in her own youth) to reject novels entirely because they might “make [her] long to see and know many things” (Eliot, MoF 402). Simone consistently understands Maggie as less ambivalent in her resistance than Maggie conceives herself to be. This (mis)interpretation allows Simone to continue to identify with Maggie even when their values are not shared. It also means that that identification is already being routed, covertly, through author rather than protagonist, since Eliot, in writing a novel, seems to have transcended Maggie’s ambivalence about reading one. Second, Simone’s interpretation of Maggie’s death is strained: Maggie dies not of or in solitude, but as a result of her decision to attempt to rescue her mother and brother. She dies in the latter’s arms, and the novel memorializes sister and brother with the biblical David’s epigraph for the warring Saul and Jonathan: “In their death they were not divided” (657). Maggie’s death thus turns her away from the artistic isolation that Simone envisions and back toward not only the Bible but also the embrace of her family of origin, the Dodsons. Eliot represents this return as a tragic but transcendent reconciliation; by contrast, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter ends with Simone not only about to leave her own family but also repudiating the family of her best friend, Zaza, who has succumbed, like Maggie, to the family’s fatal clasp.

Simone’s final misrecognition lies in extending to her identification a transitive power: “Through [Maggie],” she writes, “I identified myself with the author” (MDD 140). She assumes that, just as Maggie’s fictionality makes her available to Simone’s appropriation, the author’s biographical existence makes her a representative of relatively unconstrained historical agency. In the second volume of her memoirs, The Prime of Life (La force de l’âge, 1960; trans. 1962), Beauvoir acknowledges this conversion in discussing her difficulties in writing her first novel: “I passionately wanted the public to like my work; therefore like George Eliot, who had become identified in my mind with Maggie Tulliver, I would myself become an imaginary character, armed with beauty, desirability, and a sort of shimmering transparent loveliness” (441; my emphasis; hereafter PL). In Memoirs, then, for the first but not the last time, Beauvoir imagines herself transcending the distinction between representation and action: “My life,” she declares, “would be a beautiful story come true, a story I would
make up as I went along” (169). Such an assumption is consistent with Beauvoir’s later commitment to Existentialism, with its emphasis on individual agency; in the identification with Eliot, however, it is ironic as well as astute. It is astute because in leaving behind her birth identity as provincial, pious, petit-bourgeois Mary Anne Evans to construct a series of new identities—first as the free-thinking Anonymous, translator of Strauss and Feuerbach and editor of the Westminster review; scandalously as Marian Eliot, novelist and moralist; and most conventionally as Mary Ann Cross (the name sharing space with “George Eliot” on her tombstone), wife of John—Eliot certainly also “made her life up as she went along.” It is ironic because the ontological status of Simone’s object of identification, “George Eliot,” is more necessarily a construction even than is usual for that elusive persona, the implied author. The name is a public fiction whose announced gender is at odds with the gender of the biographical person to whom it is attached; and the “real” name used, for example in signing her letters, by the person behind the pseudonym—Marian Evans Lewes—is equally fictitious, with no legal, and only a precarious social, existence.19

Just as Maggie Tulliver’s moment of identification with the fictional Corinne is elaborated in her relationship with Lucy Deane, so too Simone’s recognition of herself in the fictional Maggie and the autobiographical George Eliot is both subordinated to, and elaborated in, her relationship with Zaza. Zaza, the daughter of a large Catholic family wealthier and more socially prominent than Simone’s, joins her class at school when Simone is ten. Immediately, she becomes an object of identification for Simone: “In Zaza,” Beauvoir writes: “I could glimpse a presence, flashing as a spring of water, solid as a block of marble, and as firmly drawn as a portrait by Dürer. I compared this with my own inner void, and despised myself” MDD 112); “I loved Zaza so much that she seemed to be more real than myself: I was her negative; instead of laying claim on my own characteristics, I had to have them thrust upon me which I supported with ill grace” (113).

This relationship between a “negative” or inchoate self and a “solid” counterpart might be read psychoanalytically to suggest that Simone’s relationship with Zaza represents an iteration of her connection to her mother. Catherine Portuges, for example, analyzes “the formative influence of Simone de Beauvoir’s relationship with her mother—and the mothering elements of other, subsequent attachments—on her own psyche and view of women” (110); and Alex Hughes reads Zaza as an image of “the phallic mother . . . the one means by which Simone hopes (errone-
ously) to elude the mother-related anguish evoked in Part I whilst avoiding the ‘exile’ to which she knows definitive mother/daughter separation condemns her” (126–27). But reading Zaza as an avatar of the mother can have the effect of displacing the libidinal energy of the Simone–Zaza coupling chronologically and developmentally backwards; emphasizing the maternal relation has the effect of disavowing Beauvoir’s childhood and adolescent representation of desire for Zaza herself. As Beauvoir remarks defensively in another context, “In the eyes of (psychoanalytic) doctrinaires, adult relationships are nonexistent: they take no note of that dialectic process which from childhood to maturity—starting with roots the deep importance of which I am very far from misconceiving—works a slow transformation upon one’s emotional ties with other people” (PL 443). Although psychoanalytic readings capture the aspects of the relationship between Simone and Zaza that mark it as a rehearsal of a foundational scene of identification, in other words, they obscure those aspects that make it available to interpretation as itself a foundational scene of homoerotic desire—in this text, a potential and, as we will see, ultimately foreclosed, path out of the mise-en-abîme created by literary identification. Indeed, Simone’s early identification with Zaza is inseparable from both desire for her and aggression toward her; their relationship exemplifies the mutually constitutive, rather than oppositional, relationship of identification and desire emphasized by current queer theory. As Judith Butler argues, for example, “To identify is not to oppose desire. Identification is a phantasmatic trajectory and resolution of desire; an assumption of place; a territorializing of an object which enables identity through the temporary resolution of desire, but which remains desire, if only in its repudiated form” (Bodies 99). This combination of identification, desire, and aggression will lead Simone, at the end of the narrative, to take on a guilt caused by her assumption of Zaza’s “place” as the surviving and flourishing female subject.

Beauvoir’s revised plot thus more thoroughly than The Mill on the Floss blurs the boundaries between identification and desire, challenging, though not abandoning, the requirements of the heterosexual romance plot. Although Beauvoir did have sexual as well as emotional attachments to some women, a lesbian or even bisexual sexual identity was never part of her public presentation, and on occasion she categorically denied it. Nevertheless, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, particularly by contrast with The Mill on the Floss, certainly undermines the opposition between identification and desire that structures a more general narrative of heterosexual identity.20
Initially, Simone’s attraction to Zaza, like her identification with Maggie, seems to have its basis in the kind of “jubilant” identification with an aspirational version of the self that Jacques Lacan discusses in “The Mirror Stage.” Zaza is Simone writ large. “Zaza, like myself, liked books and studying,” Beauvoir writes:

In addition, she was endowed with a host of talents to which I could lay no claim. Sometimes when I called [at] the rue de Varennes I would find her busy making shortbread or caramels. . . . She used to hectograph a dozen or so copies of a *Family Chronicle* which she edited and produced herself each week. . . . She took a few piano lessons with me, but very soon became more proficient and moved up into a higher grade. . . . [W]hen the first fine days of spring came along . . . Zaza would run into a field and do the cartwheel, the splits, the crab, and all kinds of other tricks. . . . In everything she did, she displayed an easy mastery which always amazed me. (MDD 93)

If Zaza displays tomboyish “mastery” of gymnastics, she also incorporates intellectual achievements (the production of the *Family Chronicle*) and more conventionally domestic accomplishments (cooking, playing the piano). She both more clearly repudiates conventional femininity than Simone, and more closely attains it. With her established familial and personal position, she represents the subject who can afford deviations from the norm precisely because she is confident in being its incarnation.

In the remainder of the narrative, however, the *mores* of Zaza and Simone’s social world, Simone’s own attitude toward Zaza, and Beauvoir’s retrospective narrative will all conspire to deprive Zaza of her display of “easy mastery.” Zaza’s apparently effortless incarnation of both feminine and tomboyish attributes exceeds the boundaries of the mastering identification that Simone can feel with literary others such as Maggie. Her relationship with Zaza threatens from the start to tip from the mode of pleasurable recognition into more disruptive modes of disavowal, aggression, and desire. She repeatedly asserts her independence from and impregnability to Zaza: “Love is not envy. I could think of nothing better in the world than being myself, and loving Zaza” (MDD 96); “If it had been suggested that I should be Zaza, I should have refused; I preferred owning the universe to having a single face” (114). As Alex Hughes points out, Simone imagines Zaza’s death twice before it actually arrives, suggesting a wish-fulfillment fantasy: “For all her idealization of Zaza, Beauvoir’s narrator/heroine is manifesting . . . an implicit but powerful need to remove
a resented obstacle to her own autonomy” (128). If Simone’s submerged hostility toward Zaza has psychoanalytic antecedents in familial structures of identification, it also has literary precedents in Maggie’s disavowed aggression toward Lucy—pushing her into the mud as a child and eloping with Stephen as a young woman.

If Simone’s hostility toward Zaza is not quite acknowledged as such, the intensity of her desire for her friend is at first also unintelligible to her: “Zaza was my best friend: and that was all. In a well-regulated human heart friendship occupies an honourable position, but it has neither the mysterious splendour of love, nor the sacred dignity of filial devotion. And I never called this hierarchy of the emotions into question” (MDD 94). Nevertheless, Simone soon realizes that “I loved Zaza with an intensity which could not be accounted for by any established set of rules and conventions” (118). She fetishizes objects associated with Zaza: “I could touch all the objects that were expressions of her presence; but they did not give her up to me.” Since “we both kept well within the bounds of modesty, for we were both of the opinion that our innermost feelings should not be exposed” (118), Simone cannot know whether Zaza shares her feelings, and she suffers because Zaza remains unreachable: “I would not even admit to myself with what fevered torment I paid for the happiness she gave me” (120). What Simone “will not admit to herself,” the “intensity which could not be accounted for by any established set of rules and conventions,” may be read both as homoerotic desire and as a strong identification that embodies her passion for her own existence and autonomy. Her portrayal of her willful ignorance of her own feelings and of Zaza’s echoes a claim Freud makes in “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman.” He expresses his astonishment that human beings can go through such great and momentous phases of their love-life without heeding them much, sometimes even, indeed, without having the faintest suspicion of them: or else that, when they do become aware of these phases, they deceive themselves so thoroughly in their judgment of them. . . . One must agree that the poets are right who are so fond of portraying people in love without knowing it, or uncertain whether they do love, or who think that they hate when in reality they love. It would seem that the knowledge received by our consciousness of what is happening to our love-instincts is especially liable to be incomplete, full of gaps, and falsified. (153–54)

Fondling objects associated with Zaza, using the florid language of love poetry—“mysterious splendor,” “fevered torment”—and stressing her
own conscious ignorance of her feelings, Simone does, indeed, appear to be “in love without knowing it.”

As the memoir draws toward its conclusion, however, difference is reinforced against both identification and desire. Simone is headed to university; Zaza, whose mother has forbidden her further study, struggles with the expectation that she make an arranged marriage within the Catholic bourgeoisie. It is at this moment of divergence that Simone’s passion for Zaza receives its only physical recognition. One evening Simone watches her play a Chopin piece, “this passionate music which really expressed [Zaza’s] true self,” and reflects:

There was that mother and all that family between us, and perhaps one day she would disown her real self, and I would lose her. I felt such piercing sadness that I got up, left the room and went to bed in tears. The door opened; Zaza entered and came over to my bed, leaned over me and kissed me. Our friendship had always been such an undemonstrative one that her action filled me with joy.  (MDD 281)

The scene recalls a similar association in *The Mill on the Floss* between music and erotic longing, when Philip Wakem plays the piano for Maggie, Lucy, and Stephen:

The thought that Stephen knew how much she cared for his singing, was one that no longer roused a merely playful resistance. . . . But it was of no use: she soon threw her work down, and all her intentions were lost in the vague state of emotion produced by the inspiring duet—emotion that seemed to make her at once strong and weak, strong for all enjoyment, weak for all resistance. . . . Poor Maggie! She looked very beautiful when her soul was being played on in this way by the inexorable power of sound. You might have seen the slightest perceptible quivering through her whole frame as she leaned a little forward, clasping her hands as if to steady herself. . . . Lucy . . . could not resist the impulse to steal up to her and kiss her. (416)

In both cases, desire—Simone’s for Zaza, Maggie’s and Stephen’s for each other, potentially Lucy’s for Maggie—comes up against specifically familial obstacles to its realization. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the silent kiss has no sequel, but when Simone leaves Zaza, she has “decided to fight with all my strength to prevent her life becoming a living death” (282)—from the stifling Catholic-bourgeois conventions of the world of the Mabille family, with its arranged marriages and distrust of the intel-
lect, particularly in women, which is also near, but not quite identical, to the strictures of Simone’s own family.

Simone’s rage at the Mabilles, contrasted with her growing attachment to Jean-Paul Sartre, reproduces a conventional strategy of the heterosexual romance plot: A potential critique of the compulsory quality of heterosexuality in general becomes a critique of particular enforcements (by family or church) of specific heterosexual arrangements—here, the arranged marriage. (Eliot’s representation of Dorothea’s misguided motives in marrying Casaubon in Middlemarch, contrasted with the apparently redemptive marriage to Ladislaw, follows this pattern.) Simone’s attitude somewhat resembles Philip Wakem’s toward Maggie, when he brings her books and upbraids her for “narrow self-delusive fanaticism” (Eliot, MoF 427). As a woman Simone cannot fully or finally, in Beauvoir’s conception, take on the role of rescuer with success (a disability that she shares with the feminized Philip Wakem), and the relationship between Simone and Zaza, despite its intensity, never seriously challenges the narrative power of the heterosexual plot.

Instead, as the memoir draws to a close, the two women begin to occupy roles both parallel (progressing toward heterosexual partnerships) and divergent (Zaza overcome by the demands of conventional femininity, Simone successfully fighting them). Once out of her charmed adolescence, Zaza becomes both the representative and the victim of conventional femininity, torn between her sense of duty and her potential for self-expression:

Doubtless it was her Christian duty to obey her mother in everything; but . . . by allowing herself to be diminished and her intelligence to be misused, was she not acting contrary to God’s will? . . . She was afraid of the sin of pride if she surrendered to her own judgment, and of being cowardly if she gave in to pressure from outside. (MDD 276–77)

Zaza’s struggle recapitulates Maggie’s arguments with Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest about what Eliot calls “the great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty” (MoF 497). Beauvoir maintains that “Zaza and I agreed on almost everything” (MDD 281), but Simone consciously resents Zaza’s continuing familial attachment and religious devotion: “I could no longer accept such a division of personality. By not coming over to my side, Zaza was throwing in her lot with enemies who were set on destroying me, and that made me feel resentful towards her” (287). Yet Beauvoir recognizes her younger self’s own continuing attachment to one central value—female chastity—of her clan: “Sexual taboo
still haunted me to such an extent that I longed to become a drug-addict or an alcoholic, but never for a moment did I contemplate sexual indulgence” (308). If she does not experience herself as subject to “division” in the way that Zaza is, the reason is partly that Zaza enacts that conflict for both of them. In doing so, however, she begins to embody precisely that aspect of bourgeois female subjectivity—the equation of moral action with social convention—that Simone has become determined to disavow.

In their last summer together, the two women both find male suitors—for Beauvoir, Sartre, and for Zaza, “Jean Pradelle” (the name Beauvoir gives to Maurice Merleau-Ponty). In one scene, the two women and Pradelle go boating together, recapitulating the setting of the abortive elopement of Stephen and Maggie. As the relationship between Zaza and Pradelle proceeds toward the conventional conclusion of romance, Simone, despite her interest in Sartre, is represented, though briefly and benignly, as a rival who must be overcome. An occasion arrives on which Zaza confesses her happiness that “for the first time . . . she had not felt like an intruder with Pradelle and me. . . . The same day, Pradelle told me how highly he thought of my friend. . . . One of my dearest dreams was about to be realized: Zaza’s life would be a happy one!” (MDD 330). After this climax, Beauvoir writes, “I still went out frequently with Pradelle and Zaza, and now it was I who began to feel I was an intruder” (332). Pradelle has assumed the role of Stephen Guest—a catalyst for exogamous heterosexual desire—and Simone and Zaza contract into the roles of Maggie and Lucy.

To a greater degree than Eliot, Beauvoir complicates the representation of female rivalry: Simone’s description simultaneously opposes the two women, makes them parallel, and finally collapses them into one. Each at some point feels herself to be an “intruder” in the other’s relationship with Pradelle, so that even their opposition stresses their likeness; then, in a remarkable elision, Zaza’s happiness becomes Simone’s dearest dream. This substitution begs the question of whether Zaza’s happiness will in fact interfere with Simone’s dreams, either by removing Zaza as her companion or by arrogating to Zaza the narrative outcome of a successful heterosexual union. Simone, meanwhile, begins to find her own happiness with Sartre, who “corresponded exactly to the dream-companion I had longed for since I was fifteen: he was the double in whom I found all my burning aspiration raised to the pitch of incandescence” (MDD 345). This description makes clear the extent to which this heterosexual doubling both inherits and replaces the earlier, now disappointing, bond with Zaza.21 At the same time, however, it demonstrates Beauvoir’s refusal to
observe conventional oppositions between, and gender assignments of, identification and desire. Within both relationships, identification and desire seem virtually inseparable, and Zaza’s ultimate unsuitability as a reflection of “burning aspiration” emerges from the socially determined stunting of her own ambitions rather than from an essential (feminine) deficit.

Simone’s dream of Zaza’s happiness does not come true: Pradelle’s passivity and parental opposition undermine the relationship between Pradelle and Zaza. Zaza succumbs to a mysterious illness that Beauvoir represents as the somatic manifestation of thwarted desire:

The doctors called it meningitis, encephalitis; no one was quite sure. Had it been a contagious disease, or an accident? Or had Zaza succumbed to exhaustion and anxiety? She has often appeared to me at night, her face all yellow under a pink sun-bonnet, and seeming to gaze reproachfully at me. We had fought together against the revolting fate [le destin fangeux] that had lain ahead of us, and for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death. (MDD 360)22

In these, the last words of the memoir, the jaundiced Zaza grotesquely recalls the “light-complexioned” heroine on whom Maggie Tulliver could not quite imagine exacting revenge. Simone does not cause Zaza’s death, but she is unable to save her. In that death, the two women are divided. The dutiful daughter’s memoirs can be written only when the dutiful daughter—the role that Zaza has taken over—has been expelled from the text. In All Said and Done, Beauvoir reflects, “From the time I was sixteen my own family filled me with a longing for escape, with anger and resentment; but it was through Zaza that I discovered how odious the bourgeoisie really was. . . . For me Zaza’s murder by her environment, her milieu, was an overwhelming, unforgettable experience” (9–10), and one that echoes through her life and work.

Since Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter is the first of four volumes of autobiography, however, Beauvoir’s narrative only pauses, rather than ends, with Zaza’s death. In her preface to The Prime of Life, Beauvoir explains why she decided to continue the project:

When I had completed my Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter no voice spoke to me out of my past, urging me to continue the story. . . . [But] little by little I became convinced that, from my own point of view, the
first volume of my *Memoirs* required a sequel. There was no point in having described how my vocation as a writer was acquired unless I then went on to show its realization. (5–6)

This description casts Beauvoir’s “vocation as a writer” not in Eliot’s hieratic vocabulary but rather with an emphasis on self-determination and worldly activity. The “sequel[s]” that Beauvoir produces—four further volumes of memoir as well as autobiographical narratives such as *America Day by Day* (1948; trans. 1952), *A Very Easy Death* (1964; trans. 1983), and *Farewell to Sartre* (1981; trans. 1986); the collections of letters to Sartre (1990; trans. 1991) and to Nelson Algren (1997); and interviews, including those with Alice Schwarzer collected in *After the Second Sex: Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir* (1983; trans. 1984)—seem to embody Beauvoir’s triumph over Maggie Tulliver’s unfulfilled trajectory, through demonstration of her “vocation as a writer” and as exhaustive records of material activities of writing, travel, political resistance and erotic intimacy.

One result of this textual productivity is that, as Toril Moi observes, “Simone de Beauvoir” becomes for her readers more than usually a textual figure: “The intertextual network of fictional, philosophical, autobiographical and epistolary texts that she left us is our Simone de Beauvoir” (4). This textual “Simone de Beauvoir” becomes a complicated object of readerly identification. “Many readers,” Beauvoir observes in *All Said and Done*, “turn me into an image and at the same time identify themselves with me” (116). But Beauvoir strains against her readers’ expectations that her female protagonists—whether the autobiographical “I” or fictional creations—will embody the most vigorous, successful, emancipated aspects of their creator and will thus offer positive objects of identification. Instead, Beauvoir’s fictional female characters, like George Eliot’s, are often limited by their gender roles and participate in their own confinement or destruction. Thus with the publication of *Les Belles Images* (1966; trans. 1985), an attack on “this technocratic society” in which “no character could speak in my name [because] in order to display [this world] I had to stand back and view it from a certain distance” (*ASD* 122), readers were “disappointed . . . that they could not identify themselves with any of the characters” (123). Beauvoir’s next novella, “The Woman Destroyed,” a grim study of a “emotionally intrusive” (124) housewife who falls apart when her husband leaves her, indicts its title character as much as the straying husband for her habits of dependency and helplessness. On its publication, Beauvoir writes, “Immediately I was overwhelmed with
letters from women. They identified themselves with the heroine. . . . Their partiality made it evident that as far as their husbands, their rivals and they themselves were concerned, they shared [the heroine’s] blindness. Their reactions were based upon an immense incomprehension” (126).

In the exasperation that such readings provoke in Beauvoir, she may be forgetting her own enthusiastic identification with Maggie Tulliver. Yet the thrust of Beauvoir’s complaint is that for such readers self-recognition becomes a reification (“they would like to think that I am immutably dedicated to serenity,” she grumbles [ASD 116]) rather than a starting point for self-projection onto and intervention within a world historical stage. Some readers do respond in this way, however; as a result of the writing of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir claims, she received “numberless testimonies” from women who “have found help in my work in their fight against images of themselves which revolted them, against myths by which they felt themselves crushed; they came to realize that their difficulties reflected not a disgrace peculiar to them, but a general condition. . . . If my book has helped women, it is because it expressed them, and they in turn gave it its truth” (*FC* 1: 192). Beauvoir’s conflicting responses to her readers’ identifications—finding them sometimes misguided and sometimes “expressive”—are echoed in readers’ identifications themselves. In the film *Daughters of de Beauvoir*, which is made up of interviews with feminist scholars and authors influenced by Beauvoir, Ann Oakley expresses a nuanced view of such conflict: “A lot of her own autobiography is an attempt to present a rational view of her life, to make it into a project without contradictions, in which she does achieve this aim of being independent . . . [but] perhaps it is as much the contradictions that we identify with, because we feel them, and we live through them, and we can’t find a solution either” (Sutton, n.p.). Beauvoir’s memoirs, and Beauvoir as a female intellectual, no longer have the centrality they had just before and during the period of second-wave feminism, but the questions of identification they raise—in particular its trajectories and effects—remain salient.

In the political upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly the brutal French reaction to Algerian anti-imperialism, Beauvoir herself finds that national identifications, as well as gender identifications, have conventions that are not easily rewritten or disavowed: “Whether I wanted to be or not, I was an accomplice of these people I couldn’t bear to be on the same street with. . . . I needed my self-esteem to go on living, and I was seeing myself through the eyes of women who had been raped twenty times, of men with broken bones, of crazed chil-
dren: a Frenchwoman” (*FC* 2: 91). Beauvoir again draws on the power of authorship both to distance *herself* from, or reformulate, the identity of “a Frenchwoman” and to call attention to the experiences of the others through whose eyes she imagined herself being called to account. Most notably, in 1960, at the instigation of the French activist and lawyer Gisèle Halimi, she intervened in the case of Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman imprisoned as a bombing suspect and tortured by French military forces. The case became a *cause célèbre,* and Beauvoir contributed an introduction to (and was the co-author of record of) Halimi’s book about the case.\(^23\) But in this case, as well, Beauvoir’s relationship to the female subjectivity she hoped to “express” invited resistance as well as assent. Mary Caputi writes, for example, that “Ultimately, Halimi was unhappy about her collaboration with Beauvoir. . . . Halimi detected detachment on Beauvoir’s part, and a tendency to treat the case in abstract terms . . . hers was not a hands-on approach that showed deep concern for another’s concrete situation, but an abstract appraisal of the situation at large” (120). In Caputi’s interpretation, Halimi is disappointed that Beauvoir chooses a philosophical distance—“abstract appraisal”—over a more direct identification with “another’s concrete situation” (125). Caputi defends Beauvoir’s involvement with the Boupacha case, arguing that her actions “remain true to her ethical mandate that, because each is bound to all, we must intervene in the fact of political struggle. We are responsible toward those who cannot enjoy the freedom, choice, and responsibility that are open to us, and we must extend the giving gesture toward the other” (125). But it seems difficult to deny that the object of that “gesture” may well register her construction as “the other” as something less than a gift—an identification imposed, and felt to be false.\(^24\)

In *The Mill on the Floss,* Maggie Tulliver, the reading girl, becomes trapped in a circle of representation and identification, helpless to read differently or, therefore, to be differently read. Beauvoir writes to elude this trap, aiming beyond the narrative horizon altogether, toward the vanishing point at which experience and its representation become one. But her desire for unmediated communication leads inevitably and paradoxically to a dizzying proliferation of texts. She can never stop producing texts that comment on, repeat, and revise each other, since even texts that have the stylistic markers of direct address (memoirs, interviews) become, once published, representations in which “the I that speaks stands at a distance from the I that has been experienced” and thus open once again to the appropriations, enthusiastic or hostile, of readerly identification.
I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my cal- 
lousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I 
feel many things these days. . . . Therefore I shall not apologise but begin 
by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's 
death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. (Dang­
garembga, Nervous Conditions 1)

Anybody may blame me who likes, when I add further, that, now and 
then, when I took a walk by myself in the grounds. . . . I longed for a 
power of vision which might overpass that limit. . . .

Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as 
men feel; . . . they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagna-
tion precisely as men would suffer. (Brontë, Jane Eyre 114, 115)

“I was not sorry when my brother died”—the striking opening sentence 
of Nervous Conditions sets the novel’s plot in motion. From this opening, 
the protagonist, Tambudzai (generally called Tambu) backs up to “[recall] 
the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother’s death, the events 
that put me in a position to write this account” (Dangarembga, Nervous 
Conditions [hereafter NC] 1), and then moves past that death to its liber-
ating effect on her. The novel recounts Tambu’s early efforts to pursue her 
formal education, which founder on the inability of her parents, sunk in 
rural poverty, to cover her school fees and on their conviction that because 
Tambu is a girl, her “sharpness with books is no use because in the end it 
will benefit strangers” (56). (The position that Tambu’s father takes here 
is similar to that of Maggie Tulliver’s, who admires his daughter’s clev-
erness but can only think it wasted: “It’s a pity but what she’d been the 
lad—she’d ha’ been a match for the lawyers, she would” [Eliot, MoF 19]. 
The two fathers also resemble each other in their fecklessness and inabil-
ity to provide for their families.) Tambu’s brother Nhamo is unsympa-
thetic to her position—he steals the corn that she grows to raise money 
for school fees—and his own education alienates him from his family and 
makes him a “stranger to [her]” (55). Nhamo’s death (of an unspecified 
illness contracted at the Mission school run by his uncle, Babamukuru) 
allows Tambu to succeed to his privilege of living with Babamukuru’s fam-
ily and attending his school. The novel recounts the effects of this social 
transformation and of Tambu’s new intimacy with her rebellious and skep-
tical cousin Nyasha, who challenges Tambu’s strong identification with the values embodied in the hard-pressed gentility of Babamukuru’s family and the colonialisit education of the Mission school. Because the novel (unlike *The Mill on the Floss* or *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*) covers only two years of Tambu’s life (beginning when she is thirteen) political conflict remains only incipient and largely invisible to Tambu herself, who is “young . . . and able to banish things” (203). Like Beauvoir, Dangarembga cannot contain the narrative of formation within a single iteration, because for both, formation is not a final occurrence but a series of re-formations or transformations. *Nervous Conditions* thus ends, like *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, with a gesture toward future action: “Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me . . . whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume” (204). That volume becomes the novel’s sequel, *The Book of Not* (discussed in the next chapter).

From the opening sentence unfolds not only the novel’s plot but also its complex, cross-cultural web of authorial echoes and identifications. One set of echoes and identifications points to psychoanalytic discourse and discourses of third-world solidarity. *Nervous Conditions*, the novel’s title, is an adaptation of a phrase from Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s study *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). This epigraph connects Dangarembga to Sartre, Beauvoir, and their engagement with resistance to French colonialism, as well as to Fanon himself. At the same time, Dangarembga chose the title before she had actually read *The Wretched of the Earth* (Zwicker 10), and she redirects the male-oriented focus in Fanon’s writing toward a female protagonist, and its Francophone context to the specificities of British imperialism in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. Thus the title and epigraph are not straightforward references or homages but challenges, like the challenge that Caputi attributes to Gisèle Halimi in dialogue with Beauvoir, to colonialist intervention in anti-colonial struggle and to the role of gender in that struggle.

A second set of echoes and identifications thus points to the aspects and interpretations of novels of female formation that have challenged structures of male dominance. Like Simone’s confident assertion that “I couldn’t see myself dying of sorrow,” Tambu’s refusal to mourn her brother’s death invokes through denegation the fictional and social conventions that represent women as subordinated by sibling or romantic relationships with men. For example, the strong causal relation suggested between the
death of her brother Nhamo and Tambu’s resulting access to an education that enables her to become a speaker or author might recall the fraternal determination of girl-children’s fates happening just offstage in the lives of so many of Jane Austen’s protagonists, who, because of patrilineal laws of primogeniture and entail, are equally disinherited by the presence or the absence of brothers. Tambu’s defensiveness about her unfeminine “lack of feeling” also echoes and reverses Jane Eyre’s dare to “anybody” to blame her for her unfeminine excess of passion, as her effort to continue her education echoes Jane’s “long[ing]” for a greater “power of vision.” Most directly, in the context of the argument of this chapter, Tambu’s assertion may recall Maggie Tulliver’s contrasting sorrow over her lost relationship with her brother and her eagerness not only to mourn for but even to die with him.

The novel’s opening paradoxically functions, at least for English and American readers, to invoke familiar novelistic traditions amid unfamiliar cultural details. Some readings of the novel have emphasized its defamiliarizing functions. In an introduction to the American edition, Kwame Anthony Appiah posits that readers respond to the first sentence of the novel “in the light of the knowledge that the speaker, like the author, is a woman,” and asks rhetorically, “Isn’t there something especially shocking—something inhuman, unnatural—in a sister’s coldness in the face of a brother’s death?” (iii). But Nervous Conditions was first published by an independent feminist press, The Women’s Press, in England (and by another feminist press, Seal, in the United States), and for many of its first readers in England and the United States, familiar in 1988 with several decades of feminist criticism and literature, any shock would as likely have registered as recognition and even (shockingly) pleasure. Both responses would arise from identification with the speaker’s rejection of womanly tact and empathy, and from anticipation of the representation of a recognizable theme of twentieth-century women’s writing—the covert or open expression of women’s anger at or resistance to masculinist or patriarchal traditions—within a cultural context (that of Zimbabwe [then Rhodesia] in the late 1960s, just before the struggle for independence) probably new to most such readers. In “Cosmopolitan Reading,” from which Appiah’s introduction is drawn, he suggests the possibility of a more ethnocentric (Western) reading of Tambu’s assertion: “You will probably find that your reading of the sentence is conditioned, too, by the thought that its author is an African woman, writing in the latter half of the twentieth century: for this will mean that you draw on a ‘knowledge’ that women are not well treated in Africa, so that a sister’s hatred for her brother . . . is perhaps
in these circumstances more natural than a brother’s would be” (208). Appiah seems concerned that readers will judge Dangarembga as an angry writer—or, perhaps even worse, judge that her anger is “natural” to her national situation. I am suggesting that some feminist readers might experience the representation of a “sister’s hatred for her brother” as an occasion for identification rather than for such distancing and condescending presuppositions.25

Within colleges and universities in the United States, the novel rapidly entered a pedagogical canon as an exemplar of African literature recognizable and teachable as the familiar, classroom-friendly genre of the coming-of-age story:

*Nervous Conditions* has much to say to a first-year American college student in its story of a young person leaving home to obtain an education, a person who is eager to abandon her old life and develop a new self, a person who simultaneously finds herself homesick, nervous, awestruck, and skeptical upon entering a strange place. The transformation that Tambu envisions herself undergoing when she leaves home is not unlike the intellectual and physical liberation anticipated by many American college students. (S. Gallagher 63)

Critical attention to the novel, emphasizing feminist or postcolonial approaches singly or in combination, has also often started from a consideration of the novel’s relation to the Bildungsroman tradition.26 Many critics have read the novel’s relationship to that tradition as most significantly one of contestation. Hershini Bhana Young, for example, argues that

*Nervous Conditions* . . . shows the inadequacy of the bildungsroman form in a colonial context by pointing to the impossibility of the typical, eventual full integration into familial, religious, and educational systems. . . . Finally, the bildungsroman’s linear structure in which the protagonist comes into consciousness is disrupted. *Nervous Conditions* does not tell a progressive story where Tambu grows to become more aware of her self and the institutions around her. Rather, the narrative is repeatedly interrupted by the voice of an older, more overtly politicized Tambu, who responds to and frames the responses of the less experienced Tambu. (136)

Joseph Slaughter, in a nuanced analysis of the relationship of *Nervous Conditions* to the Bildungsroman tradition, also suggests that the novel’s
“apparent generic conventionality” as a narrative devoted to “performing its traditional social work of demarginalizing the marginal subject—of enfranchising the individual as the normative, national citizen-subject” (229) is in fact a “literary feint, a preamble to a story of Bildung that remains unwritten—a process that is, the novel seems to suggest, systematically unwritable for a Shona girl in colonial Rhodesia and unassimilable to the conventions of the idealist Bildungsroman, whose democratic norms of citizenship do not match the forms of social and civil participation available either to the marginalized black majority generally or to native women specifically” (230). Certainly the narrative withholds, or at least defers, the representation of the historical events that have fostered the retrospectively narrating Tambu’s more disenchanted and “overtly politicized” point of view. If this deferral, however, “makes readers responsible . . . for articulating the relations that an aphasic Tambu could not and for disabusing themselves of hyperbolic, ahistorical fantasies of unilateral self-determination” (245), it also has an arguably more “conventional” rhetorical effect: to allow the reader to inhabit, and perhaps even to identify with, the limited and partly uncomprehending point of view of Tambu as she experiences the events whose political and historical significance she cannot yet interpret.

In both Young’s and Slaughter’s readings, analyses of Dangarembga’s complex address to the authorial reader risk overstating the univocality of earlier conventions of the Bildungsroman tradition and underestimating the extent to which Dangaremba adopts rather than diverges from those conventions. For example, the presence of an older, wiser narrative voice that “responds to and frames” the impressions of the “less experienced” self is a feature that Nervous Conditions shares with the first-person narratives of both David Copperfield and particularly Great Expectations. The older Pip frequently interposes observations on the moral error of his earlier self; close to the novel’s end, for example, he reflects, “We owed so much to Herbert’s ever cheerful industry and readiness, that I often wondered how I had conceived that old idea of his inaptitude, until I was one day enlightened by the reflection, that perhaps the inaptitude had never been in him at all, but had been in me” (480). For readers of both Dangarembga and Dickens, furthermore, such interruptions surely foster rather than disrupt the sense of a progressive story. Gesturing toward the future anterior, they remind the reader that the events being recounted will have transformed a callow subject protagonist into a more mature narrator—one who has undergone what Tambu calls a “process of expansion” (Dangarembga, NC 204). And events in Nervous Conditions in fact unfold
with more linearity than do those in, say, *David Copperfield*, in which hidden plots distinct from David’s development periodically burst into his own narrative, causing extended flashbacks and recalibrations of meaning and value (e.g., the Doctor/Annie Strong/Jack Maldon and Steerforth/Little Em’ly/Ham Peggoty triangles). If the time period covered by *Nervous Conditions* is more truncated and its ending less conclusive than those of many Victorian novels of formation, its concluding emphasis on the “process of expansion” that Tambu continues to undergo does suggest a trajectory of linear progress. It is also the case that in many of the apparently “linear” Victorian novels, such as *The Mill on the Floss*, *Villette*, and even *Great Expectations* as Dickens first conceived its ending, “full integration into familial, religious, and educational systems” turns out to be impossible for a protagonist even within the context of Victorian narrative and colonial power.

I would describe what Dangarembga does in *Nervous Conditions* less as critique or defamiliarization of the tradition of the narrative of female formation than as its use and extension in the only way a genre can ever remain alive—through continuing adaptation and redirection across time and place. Dangarembga frequently cites her readerly and authorial identification with this tradition and her commitment to producing new possibilities for the kinds of identification that it sponsors. When writing *Nervous Conditions*, for example, she “had been reading all the English classics, and you know how they give you a real sense of the time, of the passing of time and it just seemed to me that, well, there were people living in Zimbabwe or Rhodesia, and nobody knew about them, and if nobody set it down, then nobody would know about them” (George and Scott 311). This lack, Dangarembga suggests, has important implications because “with all the things you read, with everything that you’re taught, you construct a kind of cognitive map for yourself that is comfortable. . . . I do think *Nervous Conditions* is serving this purpose for young girls in Zimbabwe. They call me on the telephone, you know, just to talk to me” (George and Scott 312). Like Beauvoir, who was “overwhelmed with letters from women” when she published *The Woman Destroyed*, Dangarembga registers the urgency of her readers’ identification with both character and author; unlike Beauvoir, however, she does not regard them as having misread her text. To recall Diana Fuss’s summary of identification as “the detour through the other that defines the self,” in *Nervous Conditions*, the tradition of the English novel of formation, particularly female formation, provides one “detour through the other”—one point of literary identification—through which Dangarembga finds a narrative
means to help her protagonist, and through the protagonist her readers, define a self.

The traces within *Nervous Conditions* of that tradition have the effect, I have suggested, of making the novel more welcoming to readers who may be less familiar with the social context of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. That does not mean that the English novel of formation is the single or predominantly significant context for the novel or an analysis of it. The literary filiations that Dangarembga invokes, both within *Nervous Conditions* and in interviews discussing its composition, reflect a complex literary location and web of authorial identifications. Influences cited by Dangarembga run from schoolroom reading that included “the English classics: *Wuthering Heights* and *Romeo and Juliet*”; through African-American women writers, including Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, who spoke to Dangarembga’s later “quest as it were for the kinds of literature that I could really relate to, that could teach me something about myself and why I was and where I was and so forth” (Wilkinson 194); through black and white African authors, including Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Doris Lessing (195); to coming-of-age narratives such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (197).

The diversity and national range of these literary connections is not a utopian expression of multicultural reading practices but on the contrary the result of Dangarembga’s location within and response to conditions of white Western domination of culture industries as well as other aspects of colonial society, including the imposition on African nations of a Eurocentric colonial education system; colonial and postcolonial oppression and resistance in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe; the resulting rise of postcolonial nationalism; and the domination of literary markets by Western metropolitan centers, which shapes the publishing opportunities of writers from formerly colonized countries. The colonial education shared by Dangarembga and her characters Tambu and Nyasha, including their reading within and outside the classroom, intertwines inextricably conditions of oppression and those of expression. Dangarembga, for example, traces her generation’s lack of a “cognitive map” to the operation of the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau, sponsored beginning in 1954 by both the colonial and the mission authorities, which “published all the African writing [i.e., in two native languages, Shona and Ndebele]. And they would only allow tales of traditional witchcraft, wives poisoning their husbands, you know, that kind of thing” (George and Scott 312). In this context it is worth remembering that although Simone de Beauvoir read
The Mill on the Floss in English, it was available in French; in stepping across a national border into another national literature, she was nevertheless remaining within a shared European literary tradition already being constructed as such by the beginning of the nineteenth century; a tradition materially as well as thematically subtended by a shared history of colonial conquest. Dangarembga and Tambu, however, could not have read the “English classics” in Shona. Tambu’s literary education, both formal and informal, likewise works to assimilate her, as her English-educated aunt and uncle have been assimilated, to colonialist ideologies of African inferiority, even as it speaks to her essential desires for knowledge and for an escape from her parents’ grinding poverty.

Within the novel, as I have suggested above, Tambu does not fully develop a consciousness of this colonial context. At the outset she is thrilled to be at the mission school,

meeting, outside myself, many things that I had thought about ambiguously; things that I had always known existed in other worlds although the knowledge was vague; things that had made my mother wonder whether I was quite myself, or whether I was carrying some other presence in me.

It was good to be validated in this way. Most of it did not come from the lessons they taught at school but from Nyasha’s various and extensive library. I read everything from Enid Blyton to the Brontë sisters, and responded to them all. Plunging into these books I knew I was being educated and I was filled with gratitude to the authors for introducing me to places where reason and inclination were not at odds. It was a centripetal time, with me as the centre, everything gravitating towards me. It was a time of sublimation with me as the sublimate.

(Dangarembga, NC 93)

The ironies of the young Tambu’s enjoyment will be apparent to some older readers—Enid Blyton’s books are a byword for the overt racism and Anglocentric complacencies of some pre-1960s English children’s literature, and Brontë’s novels, in which the African continent appears only as a fever-dream, represent most women outside of white, Protestant England as metaphors for victimization. To some degree the distinction that Tambu perceives between “lessons they taught at school” and “Nyasha’s extensive and various library” is false, since in both cases the “lessons” are those of a colonialisit curriculum. Even on their own terms, the traditions of representing girls and women that she is encountering have not
always suggested, at least to feminist literary critics, that “reason and inclination” are easily reconciled. But as a young reader, Tambu—like Simone de Beauvoir reading *Little Women* or *The Mill on the Floss*—is not fully attuned to the national or literary histories, or even the nuances of the gender ideologies, in which these apparently questing and adventurous individual protagonists are embedded, and this lack of contextual knowledge perhaps produces some lasting as well as an illusory confirmation of self.

Only in the last sentence of this passage does a skeptical older voice seem to shadow the young Tambu’s excitement, playing on the accrued meanings associated with the abstract noun “sublimation” and its adjective and verb forms. Tambu experiences a moment of “sublimation” presumably in the sense of “elevation to a higher state or plane of existence; transmutation into something higher, purer, or more sublime” (*OED*, “sublimation,” def. 5a), with herself, as the “sublimate,” a “refined and concentrated product” (*OED*, “sublimate,” def. 1b). The concept of sublimation, however, includes more sinister implications—“converting a solid substance by means of heat into vapour” (def. 1a)—being, in other words, vaporized. The “sublimate” remains as a solid mass, but a virulent one: “mercury sublimate,” the topic of *OED* definition 2, is a “violent poison.” In *The Book of Not*, Tambu will discover some of the obliterating and poisonous aspects of her transformation; in *Nervous Conditions*, Nyasha warns her of them: “She could not hide, did not even try to hide, her disappointment when I told her how thrilled I was [about the opportunity to attend a convent school] . . . . It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. . . . The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves” (178–79). Perhaps the Freudian implications of “sublimation,” which involves the redirection of self-gratifying instincts toward socially recognizable and acceptable behaviors, also hover, reinforcing the suggestion that Tambu’s transformation involves forms of loss and redirection that are not entirely under her control and that may serve others’ interests rather than her own. “Sublimation” in this sense is close to a synonym for Althusserian interpellation. Tambu’s feeling that “everything is gravitating towards me” parallels Althusser’s description of being “hailed” as a subject and, as with interpellation, what she experiences as individual recognition is in fact subjection to her role in a patriarchal, colonialist, and racist society.

Nyasha, by contrast, thoroughly understands this subjection and rejects the roles of the dutiful daughter and the reading girl. Nyasha, who
has spent five years in England, where her parents have been studying for their MAs, has forgotten how to speak her native Shona, sneaks cigarettes, uses tampons, and dances with boys; she argues continuously with her parents, rejecting both the patriarchal rule of Babamukuru and the anxious subservience of her highly educated but deferential mother, Maiguru; and she questions the status quo both personal and public. She might initially seem to a Western reader a more familiar rebellious adolescent, preoccupied with personal autonomy and with a budding sexuality. But her rebellion is also against Western imperialism, whose systemic and hegemonic features are much more apparent to her than to Tambu. Although the Blytons and Brontës that Tambu reads are Nyasha’s, she dismisses them: “When I tried to describe to Nyasha a little of what was happening in my world, she laughed and said I was reading too many fairy-tales. She preferred reality. She was going through a historical phase. . . . She read about Arabs on the east coast and the British on the west; about Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (Dangarembga, NC 93). Since Nyasha is clearly interested in the “reality” particularly of colonial or imperial aggression, her reading is also founded on a kind of identification, but with national rather than individual narratives. It might also be viewed it as an instance of “disidentification” in José Muñoz’s sense, “a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (11–12).

When Nyasha does read a novel, her shocking choice is Lady Chatterley’s Lover, which her parents censure for its sexual impropriety. Nyasha, however, minimizes its significance: “I’ve read everything in the house that you say I can and there’s not much of a library at school. What’s all the fuss about anyway? It’s only a book and I’m only reading it” (Dangarembga, NC 75). Nyasha’s offhand dismissal of the impact of novel-reading recalls Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s assertion that “If no girl was ever ruined by a book, none was ever saved by one either” (Ruined by Reading 114). But Nyasha, for all her precocious analysis of historical narrative, like Maggie Tulliver underestimates the power over her of existing, socially (and literally) sanctioned plots, particularly those that divide the dutiful and “decent” from the rebellious daughter. For all her sophistication, she, like Tambu, has not yet lost the belief that there might be “places where reason and inclination were not at odds.” In The Second Sex, Beauvoir argues that “it is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self-justification through transcendence—the very submission of women is proof of that statement. What they demand today is to be recognized as existents by
the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life” (73). Nyasha’s understanding of herself, like that of Beauvoir’s insurgent woman, is existentialist: Taking herself to be primarily a human and historical, rather than female and familial, individual, she sees her behavior as rational, not rebellious, and miscalculates (as Beauvoir does not) the opposition it will arouse. Whether opining airily that her mother “knew that tampons were offensive, that nice girls did not use them [but] would be pleased enough to know we were not pregnant to provide” (Dangarembga, NC 96) or disputing her father’s censorship of her reading, she misreads gender codes as rationally disputable. That misunderstanding leads her to violent conflict with her father (she punches him in the eye when he accuses her of “behav[ing] like a whore” [114]), anorexia, and mental breakdown: by the end of the novel, while Tambu has triumphantly matriculated at the Sacred Heart convent, Nyasha has been institutionalized and drugged into lassitude.

Before her breakdown, however, it is she who most often causes Tambu to question her own dutiful role. When Tambu moves in to go to Babamukuru’s school, the two girls become immediately intimate despite their differences:

In fact it was more than friendship that developed between Nyasha and myself. The conversation that followed [on her first night with Nyasha] was a long, involved conversation, full of guileless openings up and intricate lettings out and lettings in. It was the sort of conversation that young girls have with their best friends, that lovers have under the influence of the novelty and uniqueness of their love, the kind of conversation that cousins have when they realise that they like each other in spite of not wanting to. You could say that my relationship with Nyasha was my first love-affair, the first time I grew to be fond of someone of whom I did not wholeheartedly approve. (Dangarembga, NC 78)

As this passage suggests, the relationship between Tambu and Nyasha, like those between Maggie and Lucy and Simone and Zaza, confounds distinctions among affective ties: friendship, family connection, and romantic or sexual attraction. Like those, too, it incorporates bonds of identification (the subjective interpenetration of “lettings out and lettings in”); desire; and repudiation (“lik[ing] each other in spite of not wanting to”; “not wholeheartedly approv[ing]”). Later, after Nyasha stays outside too long after a dance talking, alone, to a male friend, she has a vicious, bruising fistfight with her father. Tambu comforts Nyasha by “climb[ing] into her
bed, where we cuddled up to each other and fell asleep.” As with the kiss that Zaza bestows on Simone and the tearful embrace that Lucy and Maggie share, this moment of same-sex physical intimacy is associated with an outbreak of female desire that, despite its heterosexual object, is transgressive in its challenge to the dominance of the male-headed family of origin. The reaction of Nyasha’s mother, who was “not very pleased the next morning when she found us in bed together, but . . . could not mind that Nyasha was beginning to feel better and so nothing was said” (119), offers the novel’s only indication that physical intimacy between women might itself be perceived as transgressive.

Indeed, faced with the double bind of female sexuality in a patriarchal context—the demand for a total submission to heterosexual hierarchy coupled with the interdiction of any display of interest in sexuality—Tambu simply absents herself: “As far as boys were concerned, I was obviously uninterested,” she asserts (Dangarembga, NC 94); marriage is something that she considers “in an abstract way . . . a very good idea” (180) while noting with distaste its invocation as a curb on her ambitions. She remains, we might say, focused on identification—who shall I be?—not as a form of, but to the exclusion of, desire (whom shall I have?). Although the more forward Nyasha also teaches Tambu to use tampons; comments on her appearance; and encourages her to attend a school dance, beckoning her toward greater (hetero)sexual sophistication, her greatest influence on Tambu remains intellectual: “I tried hard to understand, because Nyasha was very persuasive and also because I liked to think” (160). For her part, although she mocks Tambu’s ambition to attend the Sacred Heart convent, Nyasha is equally driven by her own studies: “She worked late into the night to wake me up regularly and punctually at three o’clock with a problem—a chemical equation to balance, the number of amperes in a circuit to be calculated, or an irregular Latin verb to be conjugated. . . . ‘I have to get it right’ she would whisper with an apologetic smile” (200). Like that between Simone and Zaza, the relationship between Tambu and Nyasha is a complex blend of emulation and rivalry, desire and identification, attraction and recoil, all both intellectual and physical.

In the end, however, the relationship between Tambu and Nyasha, like the relationships between Zaza and Simone and (to a degree) Maggie and Lucy, cannot overcome a narrative structure of splitting and rivalry between protagonist and counterpart. As Tambu takes over the role of the dutiful daughter that Nyasha rejects, she visibly usurps her place in the family:
I could see that my uncle was growing more and more disappointed with his daughter. . . . Beside Nyasha I was a paragon of feminine decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to. . . . Above all, I did not question things. . . . I was not concerned that freedom fighters were referred to as terrorists, did not demand proof of God’s existence nor did I think that the missionaries, along with the other Whites in Rhodesia, ought to have stayed home. As a result of all these things that I did not think or do, Babamukuru thought I was the sort of young woman a daughter ought to be and lost no opportunity to impress this point of view upon Nyasha. (Dangarembga, NC 155)

We might recall that Maggie Tulliver’s understanding of duty, too, involves a renunciation of over-ambitious “think[ing] and do[ing].” She has given up books, she explains to Philip, because reading “would make me in love with this world again, as I used to be; it would make me long to see and know many things—it would make me long for a full life” (Eliot, MoF 306); when Philip persuades her to borrow his books, she ends by wondering whether “what you call being benumbed was better” (335). For Tambu, unlike Maggie Tulliver, academic achievement is part of the dutiful daughter’s role. But as suggested by her sardonic summary of Babamukuru’s negative ideal of conduct—based on “all these things that I did not think or do”—that achievement functions not to encourage intellectual discovery or independent thought but to serve a kind of “benumbed” conformity.

Nyasha takes a mistakenly magnanimous view of this pernicious contrast and “would agree that, apart from being a little spineless (which she thought could be corrected), yes, I was an exemplary young lady” (Dangarembga, NC 155). While Tambu puts on weight in her uncle’s well-stocked household and starts menstruating, Nyasha becomes bulimic and anorexic and increasingly at odds with her father’s patriarchal regime. Brave as she is, Nyasha—like Zaza and Maggie—finally cannot sustain the conflict between her own desires and familial duties and values. She does not die, but she breaks down completely, raging in the girls’ bedroom, “shredding her history book between her teeth . . . breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot” (201). Tambu also has a moment, earlier, of psychosomatic revolt, when her uncle insists on sponsoring a belated, and therefore humiliating, wedding for her parents: “The morning of the wedding, I found I could not get out of bed. I tried several
times but my muscles simply refused to obey the half-hearted commands I was issuing to them” (166). But if this “half-hearted” rebellion mimics Nyasha’s refusals of Babamukuru’s authority and adumbrates her later breakdown, the severity of that breakdown enforces a cleavage rather than a parallel between protagonist and counterpart: Tambu’s triumphant journey to the Sacred Heart convent is parallel to Nyasha’s traumatic trip to a psychiatric clinic in Salisbury.

As in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter and The Mill on the Floss, the moment of separation is marked by a final, brief intensification of physical intimacy. “‘Can I get into bed with you, Tambu?’ [Nyasha] whispered, but when I rolled over to make room for her to climb in she shook her head and smiled. ‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘I just wanted to see if you would let me.’” When Tambu nevertheless attempts a comforting touch, it backfires, providing the “trigger” for Nyasha’s rage (Dangarembga, NC 200). The force of Nyasha’s knowledge and anger, reflected in her repetition of the phrase “I’m not a good girl” (200, 201) cannot be corralled into a soothing homosociality or solidarity or made into an exhibit for the power of sympathy. Unlike either Eliot’s heroines (Maggie, Dorothea, Dinah) or their anti-heroic counterparts (Lucy, Rosamond, Hetty), Nyasha is neither self-subduing nor repentant. Like the fever that consumes Zaza, Nyasha’s internal struggle instead seems to become increasingly solitary and isolating, even as Tambu, like Simone, sees her own fate as linked with that of her counterpart: “If Nyasha who had everything could not make it, where could I expect to go? . . . Nyasha’s progress was still in the balance, and so, as a result, was mine” (202). Though Nyasha does not die, she haunts Tambu as Zaza haunts Simone. By the end of the narrative “I was beginning to have a suspicion . . . that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the ‘Englishness’ of [the Mission and then of the Sacred Heart convent]. The suspicion remained for a few days, during which time it transformed itself into guilt, and then I had nightmares about Nhamo and Chido [Nyasha’s brother] and Nyasha two nights in a row” (203).

Throughout most of the narrative, however, the stakes are too high for the young Tambu, just starting on a path that she believes will take her far from the poverty of her parents’ home, for her to entertain any such “suspicion.” She cannot identify with Nyasha’s active disidentification with all of the available daughterly roles. In this sense, Nervous Conditions is as much about resisting knowledge and experience—of sexuality and of colonialisit racism—as about acquiring it. Tambu clings, however precariously, to the conventional position of the reading heroine of the novel of formation, for whom books and education still promise liberation compat-
ible with innocence. In her second year at the mission school, nuns from the Sacred Heart convent, “a prestigious private school that manufactured guaranteed young ladies” come to examine the girls for the “two places [available] for all the African Grade Seven girls in the country” (Dangarembga, NC 178). On this occasion

Of course I was chosen first to recite a poem.

“Hamelintown’sinBrunswickbyfamousHanoverCity,” I began, raising a gasp of admiration from my class, who knew I was bright but not quite that bright, not bright enough to have learnt such a long poem, one they had never heard of before, and recite it so well. . . .

Mr. Sanyati told us that the nuns had come all the way from their own mission to have us write this test and herded all the girls in Grade Seven A into the classroom to answer questions about Louisa M. Alcott and *Little Women*, to multiply seven acorns by twenty-three acorns by forty-eight acorns by no acorns and to pick the odd item out in a set of gumboots, galoshes, snow shoes and bedroom slippers. (177)

Such ironized exhibitions of Eurocentric pedagogy are frequent in post-colonial coming-of-age narratives that recall experiences of colonialist education. In a scene from Jamaica Kincaid’s novel *Lucy* that I discuss below, ten-year-old Lucy recites Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” for “an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils,” who “stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me.” If Lucy’s audience is as impressed as Tambu’s, however, her own attitude more closely resembles Nyasha’s scorn for “fairytales”: “I was then at the height of my two-facedness. . . . And so I made pleasant little noises that showed both modesty and appreciation, but inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem” (Kincaid, *Lucy* 18). Tambu, by contrast, embraces the identity of the good student and is thrilled to find that she has “performed brilliantly in that entrance examination, thereby earning the privilege of associating with the elite of that time, the privilege of being admitted on an honorary basis into their culture” (Dangarembga, NC 178). Once again, Dangarembga does not overtly distance the older narrating voice from the younger Tambu’s enthusiasm. The exploitation and injustice in this colonial educational structure must be inferred by the reader from the passage’s unmarked dissonant information—the admission to Sacred Heart of only two “African” (that is, Black) students from among “all the African Grade Seven girls in the country”; the repetition of words—“privilege,” “elite,” “honorary”—that mark social hierar-
chies and inequities; and the ostentatious Eurocentrism and scorn for local geography displayed in the list of objects (acorns, gumboots, galoshes, snow shoes, and slippers) among which students are asked to make fine discriminations.

Tambu’s choice of poem likewise might cause the authorial reader unease, even if it impresses her narrative audience. Dangarembga withholds the poem’s title and author, perhaps separating the anglophile sheep from the merely anglophone goats among her Western readers: Robert Browning’s “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” is a less widely known poem than Wordsworth’s “Daffodils,” and even readers who can call to mind all or part of “Daffodils” are unlikely to have the same familiarity with Browning’s poem. Tambu does not explain how she chose the poem, but her high-speed gabble suggests that she may not fully have taken in its dark story: swindled out of payment for ridding the town of Hamelin of a plague of rats, the Piper uses his enchanting music to lure all the townsfolk’s children away. Nevertheless, the Pied Piper’s plot is a familiar nursery tale, and many authorial readers will perceive, at least, that Tambu is reciting a poem about promises broken and children lured away from their village homes. Such readers are invited to make a connection that Tambu does not, between the poem and the bitter response of Tambu’s mother to Babamukuru’s intervention: “What will I, your mother, say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? . . . I’ve had enough, I tell you, I’ve had enough of [Babamukuru] dividing me from my children” (Dangarembga, NC 184). Tambu is neither unobservant nor disloyal, but she refuses to allow herself to notice such dissonant resonances: “If you were clever, you slipped through any loophole you could find. I for one was going to take any opportunity that came my way” (179). Only at the end of the novel does she begin to doubt Babamukuru and the patriarchal regimes of power—both African and colonial—within which he attempts to maintain his standing. Even then, the white colonial power standing behind him remains less visible to her than her familial relationships.

Like Simone’s narrative in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, however, Tambu’s story does not end with the end of this novel, but continues in its sequel, The Book of Not (discussed in the next chapter). Like Simone, Tambu will find that politics and national history do not keep their place on the far “horizon” of experience but explode into her most personal relationships and choices; the ethics of the self/other relation, adumbrated and begun by the relationship between protagonist and counterpart, cannot be confined to the private relations of family and to dilemmas of
personal morality. Under the pressures of world war and of the violent collapse of European colonialism, the two twentieth-century narratives breach the boundary between personal and public narrative that *The Mill on the Floss* maintains largely by evacuating public or historical events. On the one hand, *The Mill on the Floss* is itself a national tale that consciously locates itself within not just passing but historical time, and not just English but European time. Beryl Gray asserts that “[Eliot’s] presentation of St Ogg’s and its inhabitants depends as much on the implications of her perspectives of the Rhône and the Rhine, on her allusions to Aristotle, Sophocles, and Homer, on her application of Greek and German mythology, and on her engagement with the German cultural historian, Wilhelm von Riehl, as it does on the sense of an intimately-recollected past that, in turn, recognizes the abiding spiritual, local presence of Roman, Saxon, and Dane” (138). On the other hand, the actual narrative of *The Mill on the Floss* is profoundly insular. (Tellingly, Gray’s essay concerns Eliot’s engagement not with history *per se* but with a pan-European discourse of *natural* history, a “culturally boundless” range of “animal analogy and animal metaphor” influenced by such figures as Riehl, Goldsmith, Buffon, and Pliny.) This is the novel in which the narrator asserts that “the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history” (Eliot, *MoF* 385); if the narrator can see Maggie’s historical connection to the German peasant as well as to the spider and the toad, these wider views are not present to Maggie, trapped in the narrow ambit of the novel’s *histoire*.

As Neil McCaw observes, “Eliot narrates a landscape that is peculiarly English. Her liberal philosophy may seem to offer itself as inclusive to people of differing cultural backgrounds, and her scientism implies a universal historical process, yet it is notable how quintessentially English the novels are” (11). The modern world of intercontinental trade and empire, of desires gratified by the multiplication of consumer goods rather than intimate relations, all implied by the busy wharves of Stephen Guest’s father and Stephen’s exotic scent of attar of roses, is, from Maggie’s perspective, a faint and ultimately injurious rumor.  

*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *Nervous Conditions* also “narrate landscape[s] that are peculiarly” national, but the nation is not evident to their young protagonists as such. Practices, languages, ideologies that bespeak the nation are omnipresent, embodied within familial relations and naturalized as a transparent medium in which individual life takes place, more or less invisibly to their young protagonists, though not necessarily to the authorial reader (and certainly not to the critic or teacher). In identifying, and identifying with, narratives of national struggle rather
than remaining within relations of personal identification, Nyasha is exceptional; she provides a narrative audience for Tambu’s naivety that also functions to clue the authorial reader in. But her illness lends credence to Eliot’s connection between unhappiness and history: subdued at the end of the novel by doses of Largactil (Thorazine), she might well echo Stephen Dedalus’s assertion that “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to escape,” an early adumbration of colonial/postcolonial alienation.

Despite the generally tight focus on private, protagonist-counterpart relations that render national identity seamless because invisible, moments of sudden fissure appear in both twentieth-century narratives. For Simone, recognition of her parents’ intellectual inconsistency or cowardice, and most strikingly the suffering of Zaza, makes the conventions of bourgeois, Catholic subjectivity visible and despicable; for Tambu, the education that begins to divide her from her family of origin, the occasional glimpses of white society as an occupying force, and Nyasha’s dramatic enactment of self-division point toward the ultimately untenable status of Babamukuru’s assimilationism. Most important, unlike *The Mill on the Floss, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *Nervous Conditions* are not concluded stories, but first entries in multipart narratives, whose future volumes will project their protagonists into a world-historical stage, in which the ethics of self–other relations can no longer be contained within the context of individual, or even familial, morality, and in which the historical domination of African countries by European ones will have a decisive and, for Tambu, despoiling effect on those relations. In such contexts, as I will argue in the next chapter, identification may prove an inadequate or unattainable ground for such relations.