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The Monster in the Mirror

In 1981, *Yale French Studies*, at the time the most prestigious American journal of French, published its first and, to date, only feminist issue. The volume successfully combines engaged feminist analysis with sophisticated literary and psychoanalytic theory. But the first sentence disturbs me.

YFS 62 (as I will henceforth refer to it) opens thus: "This is a very unusual issue of *Yale French Studies*, in that its guest editor is a seven-headed monster from Dartmouth."[1] The notion is quite funny: nonhuman it might be, but nonetheless Ivy League.

Seven Dartmouth faculty women edit YFS 62. The monster is a figure for the seven individuals working together as one body. Appearing in the Introduction signed by the editors, the image is a self-portrait and is followed by a glowing description of their collaboration. The editors are saying: we are horrifying, we are inhumanly ugly. This is an ironic way of saying: we are "very unusual," we are extraordinary, we are beautiful.

The image of the monster thinly disguises a monstrous narcissism. This reader, for one, recoils from such unseemly self-congratulation. The irony of this irony is that when the editors say they are ugly to mean they are beautiful, they become ugly.

But let us consider this vivid image as something more interesting than an infelicity of taste, as something even more interesting than a witty example of speakers betrayed by their own rhetoric. We will read this as a symptom, in the psychoanalytic sense, by assuming, as Freud does in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, that in every infelicity of language something is quite successfully getting said. In other words, I would like here to check my impulse to recoil and rather try to understand this monster, perhaps at the risk of encountering my own horror.

The monster represents the collectivity, a new kind of being in which seven individuals are neither totally merged nor totally separate. The first section of the introduction describes how, despite the "skepti-

cism" and "amazement" of their "male colleagues," collaboration was a totally positive experience— "productive," "rigorous," "audacious" (p. 3). Others warned them of inefficiency or reductive thinking but, as it turned out, there was nothing to fear.

The praise of collectivity ends thus: "We have not, of course, abandoned our 'individual' research; but we have found it enriched by the reverberations between the two styles of work" (p. 3). The word "individual" in this sentence is placed in quotation marks; "individual" research does not quite exist. The anguish a scholar feels about those writing on the same topic, or what Harold Bloom calls the "anxiety of influence," for example, bespeak the suspicion that individual work is at least irremediably uncertain if not downright impossible. The we who speaks for the collectivity recognizes that all research is in conversation with other research, so the boundaries which separate one individual's contribution from another can never be absolutely clear. This monster knows that.

But, if ultimately illusory, something called "'individual' research" nonetheless exists. And the purport of the sentence is not just to call individuality into question through its quotation marks, but to alert us to the deeper connections, the "reverberations" between individual and collective work.

Only one of the seven members of the collective, Marianne Hirsch, published an article in YFS 62. In her article, we find the word "monstrous":

> To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study the relationship between two separate differentiated individuals, but to plunge into a network of complex ties, to attempt to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being of *monstrous* proportions stretched across generations, parts of which try desperately to separate and delineate their own boundaries.[2]

"Monstrous" here refers to a "continuous multiple being," which is to say that *this* monster *too* represents a being whose multiple parts are neither totally merged nor totally separate. There are many different forms of monstrosity, but the same type figures in both the Editors' Introduction and Hirsch's text: a conglomerate being where boundaries between individuals are inadequately differentiated.

Hirsch's "monstrous" specifically refers to the mother and daughter who are not "two separate individuals" but a "double self." This

notion of the lack of separation between mother and daughter derives from feminist psychoanalytic theory. Particularly important is the work of Nancy Chodorow who—drawing on the English school of psychoanalysis called object relations theory—has posited that the female self is less individuated than the male self since, although both are formed in relation to the mother, the male self can use sexual difference to institute and insure differentiation.[3]

Whereas, in the Introduction, the monster is the sole hint of something frightening, in Hirsch's article the connotations of "monstrous" are amplified by the phrase: "parts of which try *desperately* to separate and delineate their own boundaries." Does the individual's text voice the need for individuation which the collective we suppresses in order to pronounce itself?

The adverb "desperately" also appears in Hirsch's description of a book by French feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray: "In *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre*, a lyrical and personal address to her mother . . . Irigaray pleads for distance and separation, laments the paralysis she feels as a result of the interpenetration between mother and daughter, calls *desperately* for a new kind of closeness possible only between two separate individuals."[4] Although Chodorow has made the most extensive theoretical contribution to the study of the mother-daughter bond, Irigaray's little lyrical text, explicitly speaking from the daughter's position, most effectively conveys the desperation of the daughter's situation.

The American translation of *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre* appears in a 1981 issue of *Signs* which also contains a review article on "Mothers and Daughters" by Marianne Hirsch. Discussing *Et l'une. . .*, Hirsch here uses the same adverb: "desperately trying to untangle herself from within her mother and her mother from within herself."[5] This review article begins and ends with Adrienne Rich and finds in Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born* the matrix of feminist work on mothers and daughters: "Rich's chapter on 'Motherhood and Daughterhood' contains, in fact, the germs of many of the other studies I shall mention in this essay" (p. 202). Rich's chapter is the mother text, "contains the germs of" the theoretical work which Hirsch applies in her contribution to YFS 62. It also contains the adjective "desperate": "Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery."[6] Writing from the daughter's position, Rich

articulates the same desperate need for boundaries as Irigaray a few years later.

The title of Irigaray's 1979 book—which I would translate as "And One Cannot Move Without the Other"—could recall the plight of the seven-headed monster. Alerted by the editors to look for "reverberations," I read Hirsch's article not merely as a separate contribution but also as a continuation of the collaborative text of the Introduction. Her elaboration of the daughter's bind may also give voice to the dilemma of the individual member of the collective. The female collective functions as nurturing and stifling mother, as body of monstrous proportions, whereas, whatever her reproductive history, the individual in relation to the collective plays the role of daughter.

This is, I believe, more than a clever analogy. According to Hirsch and Chodorow, any daughter, that is, any woman, has a self that is not completely individuated but rather is constitutively connected to another woman. The formation of groups of women draw upon the permeability of female self-boundaries.[7] The collectivity reactivates the mother-daughter bond. One monster cannot be separated from the other.

"To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study the relationship between two separate differentiated individuals, but to *plunge* into a network of complex ties" (YFS 62, p. 73, emphasis added). Although Hirsch here appears to be saying that in studying the mother-daughter relationship the object of study is different than one would suppose, this sentence also says: "To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study . . . but to plunge." The scholar is, so to speak, immersed in her work. The "being of monstrous proportions" threatens to envelop whatever would stand outside and observe.

The sentence then adds one more verb phrase: "To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study . . . but to plunge . . . *to attempt to untangle* the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being . . . parts of which try desperately to separate and delineate their boundaries." In "attempt[ing] to untangle," the student comes to resemble the "parts" which "try to separate and delineate." What she studies would seem to mirror her. And although not yet "desperate" herself, there is something threatening in the mirror.

Two sentences later, Hirsch writes: "This basic and continued

relatedness and multiplicity, this mirroring which seems to be unique to women have to be factors in any study of female development in fiction." Here we have a second figure for the mother-daughter bond: "this basic and continued relatedness and multiplicity," in other words, "this mirroring." If the relationship being studied is itself a mirroring, then when the scholar who "attempts to untangle" is reflected in the parts which "try to separate and delineate," she is both observing a mirroring and enacting one. When Hirsch writes that "this mirroring ha[s] to be [a] factor in any study of female development in fiction," we might take it to mean, not only does it have to be discussed, but that it has to be a "factor in any study," something that takes place in the study, something that happens to the student.

That "this mirroring . . . seems to be unique to women" then could lead us to pose some questions as to whether women's studies, studies by women, differ from those performed by male scholars in that women, based perhaps on our more permeable self-boundaries, tend to get entangled in a mirroring with the object of study. And, whether or not this is "unique to women," we might also go on to ponder the more epistemologically radical question of whether this is a good or a bad thing, which is another way to ask whether the monster in *our* self-portrait is ugly or beautiful.

(My emphasized use of the first person plural here, like the reference to "my own horror" at the end of the first section, is meant to mark, probably much too subtly, my own identifications and entanglements with the monsters I am studying. I call this piece "The Monster in the Mirror" likewise to signal where I locate the monster that disturbs me, that compels me to write this piece. This chapter is always also about the monster I observe in my mirror. When in 1983 I first tried to write this, I began to realize my resemblance to those figures who most repelled me. I tried to incorporate that recognition in my writing but, overcome by anxiety, I could no longer write. Everything I started would quickly boil down to writing about myself and to a particularly distasteful image of myself as totally trapped in narcissistic mirroring. In a last self-reflexive twist, writing about that became simply a reprehensible example of it. I would begin a paragraph and then throw it away, through ten or so false starts until suddenly I was pacing my apartment, screaming. In order to write, I gave up the idea of self-implication. I also felt that all the threads of what I wanted to say were entangled together and I could not separate them sufficiently to progress along any line of thought at all. I am sure that is one reason why the text I did finally write is so very fragmentary. In order to separate lines enough for articulation, I had to "perform radical surgery," detach ideas from their articulation to the whole.[8])

"Mirroring" in the mother-daughter relation is central to the article immediately following Hirsch's in YFS 62. Ronnie Scharfman derives the term "mirroring" from the work of D. W. Winnicott, an object-relations theorist: "Winnicott asks what a baby sees upon looking at the mother's face . . . 'ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself.'"[9] Scharfman describes an "unsuccessful mirroring bond": "When a mother reflects her own mood or the 'rigidity of her own defenses' rather than her child's, what the baby sees is the mother's face, and the 'mother's face is not a mirror.' The consequences are tragic" (p. 99).

Scharfman applies this theory to two Caribbean novels, finding in them examples of good and bad mothering. Of the mother figure (actually the grandmother) in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*, Scharfman writes: "grandmother is not other, but rather same. She encourages the narcissism which psychoanalytic theory assures us is fundamental to the healthy constitution of an autonomous self" (p. 91). I quote from her account of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "Self-absorbed, [the mother] is imprisoned in a destructive narcissism. [The daughter] . . . watches her look at herself in the mirror. . . . But she never sees herself reflected there. [The] mother's concern for [the daughter] is mainly as a disappointing narcissistic extension of herself" (p. 100). A daughter's narcissism is good; a mother's is bad.

At the beginning of the essay, Scharfman asks: "Is the kind of mirroring which this bond implies *reflected* in the writing itself, and, perhaps in reading as well?" (p. 88, emphasis added). Is mirroring *reflected*? Her answer is yes. Reading as mirroring turns out to be the final point of Scharfman's article: "a feminist aesthetic can . . . dramatiz[e] . . . the possible bonds between the text as mother, and the daughter-reader it produces" (p. 106).

The text will be mother. The question of mirroring is finally here a question about reading. The daughter-reader considers one of these novels a better "mother" than the other. She complains, for example, that Rhys's text "keeps us at a distance, rejects our efforts to be present

in it" (p. 106). A good text, like a good mother, will reflect the reader: the text will provide the reader's self-portrait. If the reader does not see herself but perceives something other, that will be tragic.

And so I want to recoil from this daughter-reader, her monstrosity yet another case of unseemly narcissism.

(As reader of YFS 62, I recognize myself in Scharfman's response to Rhys's novel. In 1979 I received a letter from seven Dartmouth women inviting me to contribute to a feminist issue of *Yale French Studies* they were editing. Jumping at the chance to be published in the top journal in what was then my field, I immediately sent them an abstract of a text on Irigaray and Freud. I never received an answer. This absolute lack of response was, for me, worse than rejection. Pointing to the editorial collective's self-regard, I am the disregarded daughter "watching her look at herself in the mirror." The seven-headed monster "rejected [my] efforts to be present in it." If I am particularly harsh on Scharfman, perhaps I cannot bear this reflection of my daughterly resentment.)

When Hirsch writes about the "parts" which "try desperately to delineate their own boundaries," the plural implies that both daughter and mother are anxious for autonomy. We tend however to think of "mother" not as one of the parts but as the whole monster. Actually, any mother is also an individual trying to untangle herself from the mothering web.

According to Chodorow, "male theorists ignore the mother's involvements outside of her relationship to her infant and her possible interest in mitigating its intensity. Instead, they contrast the infant's moves toward differentiation and separation to the mother's attempts to retain symbiosis."[10] When the theorist attempts to untangle the double being mother-daughter, he assigns the desire for autonomy (an attribute of both individuals inasmuch as they are individuals) to the daughter term and the desire for symbiosis (which both parts, inasmuch as they are connected, share) to the mother term. Not just male theorists, I would add, but any theorist who writes from a position of identification with the child rather than the mother.

In her contribution to YFS 62, Naomi Schor touches on the psychology of theory. Following Freud's lead, she links theory to paranoia. Rereading Freud's only case history of a female paranoiac, Schor reminds us that the female paranoiac fears another woman who resembles her mother.[11] Her feeling of persecution is the other side of "the daughter's bond with her mother": inextricably linked to the daughter's self, the mother is always there to witness. Paranoia, and theory which is its more socially acceptable form, thus bespeak a daughter's terror of the ubiquitous mother, a particularly desperate form of this terror.

A few years after YFS 62, Jane Marcus also psychologizes a certain "theory" as fearful need for separation from the mother.[12] In the same issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, and in much the same vein, Nina Baym expresses her distress that mother-daughter theory not only speaks from the daughter's perspective, but "provides testimony, often unwitting and in contradiction to its stated intentions, of the deep-seated hostility of daughters to mothers." She goes on to say: "If the speaking woman sees other women as her mother, sees herself but not her mother as a woman, then she can see her mother (other women) only as men or monsters."[13] The lack of agreement between the singular "mother" and the plural "men or monsters" probably arises from the very tangle Baym would untie, where it is difficult to see mother as "a woman," as an individual.

Baym's discussion of the matricidal impulse in feminist theory cites the feminist treatment of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*: "Who, after all, might Bertha Mason be—she to whom Rochester *is already married*? . . . another woman, who is made repulsive and ridiculous so that the reader must reject her; and is killed before the narrative is out, so that the daughter can replace her." A few years later, Gayatri Spivak likewise complains about the treatment of Bertha: "Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar . . . have seen Bertha Mason only in psychological terms as Jane's dark double."[14] In this landmark feminist reading, the "dark double," Bertha Mason is only a mirror or, perhaps more precisely, the monster in the mirror.

Around 1980, feminists identified with Jane, the exemplary daughter-reader. A decade or two earlier, Jean Rhys "was moved by Bertha Mason; 'I thought I'd try to write her a life.' *Wide Sargasso Sea* . . . is that 'life.'"[15] *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also the novel Scharfman resents for not mirroring her.

"There are, noticeably, many images of mirroring in the text."[16] Spivak and Scharfman quote the same one. In this passage, the speaker is "Bertha Mason" as a young white creole girl; the other girl is a little black servant: "When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. . . . We stared at each other, blood on

my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass."[17]

This white girl is the daughter of the narcissistic mother who will not mirror her. "What [her] mother cannot give, the girl seeks from . . . the faithful black woman who runs the household and represents the nurturing, maternal figure" (p. 101). Within the analogy of reader to daughter, Rhys's text is the bad, Schwarz-Bart's the good mother. The former "keeps us at a distance"; the latter "generously allows us . . . to incorporate it and assimilate it and make what use of it we may" (p. 106). Introducing the two Caribbean novels, Scharfman specifies that Rhys is white, Schwarz-Bart is black. I am somewhat troubled by the historical reverberations of the cold white mother, the generous black mother. I am more troubled by the assumption, here readerly, that good mothering is mirroring and that what we demand from a text is an image of ourself.

In her contribution to YFS 62, Spivak writes: "However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman?"[18]