Hecate, Oct 2000 v26 i2 p176

'Inventing Beatrice': Writing an Auto/biography.

Jill Golden.

'Mob' was the name adopted by a group of young women who were Arts students at Melbourne University between 1928 and 1935. They saw themselves as 'a slightly chosen race of free and original spirits', resisting the conventions of their time and place. I have written the story of one of those women, who became my mother. On the basis of extensive letters and diaries I imagine and plot what she and 'Mob' did, thought, felt and said. I also ask myself: what was untold/untellable in the lives of these particular women? In this paper I focus on lesbian love, and the self-surveillance of its boundaries amongst the women. I discuss the use and/or abuse of letters and diaries in the writing of an auto/biography. I also examine my own writing processes- the questions that came to the surface as I recreated a life story through the particular lens of the mother-daughter relationship.

I want to position myself at the outset as an auto/biography writer with academic interests, rather than the reverse. This is not a theoretical paper. It deals with the process of using diaries and letters to write a biography of my mother, which simultaneously became a kind of autobiography. It is a movement from silence to narrative. It is a story about the construction of identity, and in particular about being female in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s.

I first outline the circumstances that made the writing of my mother's story possible. Then I discuss two issues: first, my understanding of what was untold/untellable in her letters and diaries, with some focus on lesbian love and the self-surveillance of its boundaries by the women concerned; and second, questions I encountered in the writing process, around appropriation, representation and ethics, and struggles with the old autobiographical 'I'.

These questions were intense for me because of the fracture and alienation that marked my relationship with my mother while she was alive. The recovery of the young woman she had been in her twenties, before she was my mother, became for me a personal quest that culminated in my book *Inventing Beatrice*.

Inventing Beatrice

I am searching for my mother. Not the frail old woman we daughters found on the morning of July the first, 1994, when she did not meet us at the coffee shop. We found her curled up in her own bed, in her own house, her body barely cold. She had died in her sleep (the doctor said) and probably did not know what was happening.

I had made my peace with this old woman, though we never said so in words. Words about love were always too hard between mother and daughter, even at the end. There was no controlling their meaning and the fearful complexities of their past.

Golden, Jill 2000. "Inventing Beatrice": Writing an Auto/biography. 'Hecate', vol.26, no.2, 176-185.

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

Only Topsy, the dog, could give and take love as if it were uncomplicated, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Each time I came to visit from Adelaide, the rules for Topsy were softer, and she with her huge brown eyes was more in charge, though she was still shut in the laundry at night. She seemed to have melted the hard knot that was tied for my mother between love and control. That 'hard knot' is my perception, of course, my need (still) for words to understand her. Or myself. I know the padlock on the tongue that stops words from being spoken. I think she knew it too.

I am searching for the young woman who became my mother. I call her B, because this is the name she chose for herself. Only her Pa and Mother continued to call her Beatrice. Her daughters, when the time came, called her Mum, but to her grandchildren and her friends, and to herself, she was B.

In the drawer beside her bed we find a small pile of notebooks neatly slipped into an old, just-right-size plastic bag. With them is a business card, slick on one side with the name of a 1992 Balmain land agent. On the plain white back--in the wobbly letters of her old age--our mother has printed 'DIARIES'. At first all we notice is that they begin in 1928, and cover about eight years. She has been re-reading them, we think. Perhaps she has done that many times over the years. Should we read them or destroy them? Perhaps she has left them for us. A legacy.

When I start to read the diaries it is as if B is talking to me, now that she is dead, about things that she could not speak about while she was alive. I have no sense of intruding, though parts of the diaries are very private.

Soon I start to search for B in the memories of those who have outlived her--women now in their late eighties. There's Ruth who lives in the USA, and Florrie in Melbourne. They were girls together at Melbourne University in 1928, part of a group who called themselves the Mob. There's Josie, one of B's three sisters-in-law. Other relatives live in Sydney. I write, I visit. I am given more diaries and letters, and more stories. I catch glimpses of B-shifting glimpses of someone who is struggling to become the person she might be, struggling also to be a good daughter and later, a good wife a good mother.

In this story I call my mother Beatrice. Beatrice as I knew her was a silent woman. Her silence was of course culturally appropriate for a good woman (though at times it was also an embarrassment, when she was expected to speak and did not/could not). My father was the talker in the family, and the one whose decisions counted. My mother's silence, however, was not only compliant. It was also a defence, and a weapon, in a very unhappy marriage.

For the thirty years between their divorce in 1964 and her death in 1994, Beatrice maintained a silence about her life as a young woman, about her marriage, and about her children's early years.

After her death we found a hoard of diaries and letters from the 1920s and 1930s. These were the years when Beatrice was a Melbourne University Arts student of great promise, one of a group of close girl friends who called themselves 'Mob' and who saw themselves as a slightly chosen race of free and original spirits.

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

The discovery of this young Beatrice-so remote from the mother I knew-set me on the quest to understand her in her own terms, moving both through and beyond the narrow prism of daughterhood. Doing this, as you might imagine, roused contradictory emotions. It felt like a transgressive act; but at the same time it felt like the fulfilment of a mother's legacy to her daughters-as if I were able to complete a task that she wanted done but found too painful to face during her lifetime.

Beatrice records in her diaries some of the conflicts she experienced between her desire to be a good daughter, and her desire to live as an autonomous person. These conflicts are embedded in cultural constructions of female goodness (probably for most Australian women of her generation, and beyond). In her case they were made particularly visible by the fact that her father was a Methodist minister (patriarchal authority spoke not only as a father, but as the representative of God) and also a neurotic invalid (someone whose need for care was insatiable). Beatrice found it easier to reject her father's Christianity than to resist his incessant demands on her emotions, time and energy.

At Melbourne University Beatrice wrote an English honours thesis on Katherine Mansfield. Through this work, she began a correspondence with a woman artist named Dorothy Brett, a friend of Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence, who was then living in New Mexico. The ideas of these three creative 'modern' people seemed to offer Beatrice an alternative way of living a life, superior to that of her own family-a life based on freedom, love, and equality between men and women. But for Beatrice, negotiating the tensions between freedom, love and equality, in a world where she was embodied female, proved an impossible task.

Two sites of conflict, around family and church, where the construction of identity was struggled over on a daily basis, are very visible in Beatrice's diaries. The confusion in her lived experience is articulated. I want to explore another site of conflict which was much more hidden-hinted at in private, but not recorded in her diaries.

Beatrice was a shy girl. The young women in 'Mob' were her first close friends. Here was a safe space away from family in which another subjectivity and desire, around sexuality, could be negotiated. This could not be spoken about openly at the time. Nor, for Beatrice, could it ever be acknowledged to her own children. The importance of 'Mob' was concealed under silence and secrecy. 'Mob' simply disappeared for sixty years.

In the last years of her life, Beatrice meticulously sorted out all her photos and labelled them for us with names and dates. But it was only after her death that we found photos of the women in 'Mob', carefully put away in a separate envelope. There were eight simple snapshots-on a holiday, on a boat. Nothing remarkable-except that these were the happiest photos of Beatrice I'd ever seen. I wanted to ask: Why didn't I ever see you like that?

I felt cheated by not being able to ask about the photos, and 'Mob': not being allowed the stories of where and when and why. Why didn't she share them with us? None of our business, I suppose. And the habit of not speaking can be too hard to break. But that was not the whole answer. Silence was a self-protection. 'Mob' were (I think) too

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

important to be talked about to anyone who might not understand. Now, if I wanted to understand I had to become involved. I had to open myself to imagining Beatrice's realities, instead of imposing my own.

As I pursued my quest I gained more fragments of information about 'Mob', with access eventually to letters and diaries from four more people. Ruth, one of the surviving 'Mob' women, had gone to live in the USA in 1941. I visited her in 1995 (she was eighty five years old), and we read her diaries from 1930. Between the pages were three letters from Beatrice. I read them out loud. They're almost love letters, Ruth whispered.

The power of love between women has been a vital strand of my life too. I found myself drawn to imagine the love amongst 'Mob', to speculate, to search for every clue that would tell me more. Were they lesbian? What was the meaning, for these women, of their love of each other? Beatrice is silent; but silence is never complete.

From Ruth I discovered that the centripetal force for 'Mob' was an intelligent and attractive girl named Delia. More than sixty-five years later Ruth wrote to me about Delia with deep affection.

> I was in love with her & my life depended on her loving me back.
> First I had her to myself, but not for long! But this went so deep that
> I loved her all my life--& she did return it but not so exclusively, until
> the day she died. I got back to Australia in 1978 on a visit, & went
> directly to her house where she was keeping herself alive waiting for me,
> dying of lung cancer--& she died that night.

But 'Mob' was not a group of satellite girls around one central love object. They were all friends of each other, and love meant a particular set of ideals about intimacy and unselfishness--that happiness came from sharing the beloved, not from exclusive possession.

The boundaries between love, its physical expression and the naming of it, are fuzzy for these women. The words in letters and diaries seem to be open at one level, but are seldom explicit. No one uses the word 'lesbian'. In 1995 Ruth wrote to me

> All I know is that for me Delia was the only member of 'Mob' that I had
> those feelings for or acted out with--I was pretty naive & was once laughed
> at for saying--in a group of us--that 'You didn't really know a person
> until you'd slept with them'--and all I really meant was--slept in the
> same bed with, which we often did, staying overnight.

The laughter marks an unspoken knowledge that the young women all share, the boundary of a double edged silence around women who love women. That cultural silence allows them a safe space, a kind of innocence in which they can explore passionate friendships. But it also denies the legitimacy of their love.

Surveillance is subtle; fear of abnormality is the shadow side of their love. Ruth wrote in her 1930 diary: Sometimes I get unpleasantly creepy about the way I love Delia, and afraid it isn't natural. Physical aspect, I mean, of course--though they're

almost in possible to distinguish. I'm awfully muddled.

A year later (in 1931) Ruth recorded a long talk with Delia which put many things--everything--in place. This to my great relief--the physical side/worry settled. Delia says she can't lose control or give in with Nettie. Has to be strong for two. I kissed Delia a good bit & put my arm around her--that's all.

Ruth is very unusual in recording her feelings (privately), and in being able to talk to her mother about Delia and 'Mob'; even about her jealousy towards Nettie. She notes in her 1930 diary

> Mum says Nettie most probably satisfies Delia so completely--with her adoration--she doesn't need anyone else. She says Delia's attraction to us might be just physical. Not really love at all. It's a horrible thought.

The area of lesbian relationships, of sexuality, and of silence, is one where Beatrice's story overlaps with my own. When I was that age, in the 1950s, sex and bodily functions were taboo subjects for nicely brought up girls. At the all-girls' schools I went to, and the girls-only camps where I spent my holidays, having a crush on another girl or teacher was almost obligatory. For some, it was the emotional centre of life, and deeply serious. But neither the concept of lesbian love, nor the word itself, was available. Lesbianism was the silent/silenced, the unspoken/unspeakable secret, embodied nevertheless in everyday lives.

Silence around lesbianism is one powerful means of controlling women. The breaking of that silence by women is both an act of rebellion and a survival strategy.

But the breaking of silence between mother and daughter is not an easy task. Beatrice did not talk to her children about love.

So I have to speculate--did Beatrice think of love amongst women as a freak stage to go through on one's way to meeting a man? Certainly the man she married, my father Tom, thought so. In due course Tom had sex with no less than four of the women in 'Mob'. He saw himself as a cock amongst hens: bringing these young women to a healthy maturity.

One day in her old age Beatrice stood beside me in my kitchen and said: 'When Tom and I first met, he was interested in me and my friends because he thought we were lesbian.' I had never heard my mother use the word lesbian before. I thought her tone meant--'He was wrong.' I thought she was prying into my private life. My defensive hackles rose and I did not ask her to explain, or to tell me that story. I refused to be interested, and changed the subject.

The forty years of silence between us was insurmountable.

But other words, in letters from Delia, became available to me. In 1935, after spending two intimate weeks with Tom in Sydney, Delia continued an argument with him by letter. She wrote about the love relationships she had had with two of the women in 'Mob', Connie and Ruth. Love and sex between women is for once written about frankly. Delia will not accept Tom's diagnosis of 'Mob' as a freak stage but tries

Golden, Jill 2000. "Inventing Beatrice": Writing an Auto/biography. 'Hecate', vol.26, no.2, 176-185.

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

to explain the meaning for her of each relationship. She describes her love for Connie as a heightened intensity of living and says, Do you think I'd have bartered that for a few orgasms—especially since those between female and female have always felt like a substitute, almost a pretence?

When she comments about herself and Ruth, Delia says: When I think back carefully I conclude that I did have orgasms, though not as often as she. I've always had a bias against inter-feminine orgasms.

At the heart of Delia's writing about 'Mob' (for the most part sensitive and intelligent) lies the unexamined assumption that sex between women is only second-best (a substitute, almost a pretence) even when it is grounded in deep love. Heterosexual sex is REAL sex, the measure by which, finally, Delia judges her maturity. She will not disparage her love for women by calling it a freak stage, but like others in 'Mob' she assumes it will be outgrown. Her thinking seems old-fashioned in the nineteen nineties, though doubtless many people would still hold the same view. Delia at least understands her sexuality as fluid and changing, contingent not fixed.

The women in 'Mob' are emotionally and physically and intellectually attracted to each other. But their attitudes towards lesbianism show how firmly they are positioned within dominant heterosexuality. They understand love of women as immature, and it is unthinkable for them-as a slightly chosen race of free and original spirits-to remain in what they consider to be an immature stage.

With hindsight I came to understand why my relationship with my mother was so difficult. In *Inventing Beatrice* there is Mob-talk about Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale,' and I am able to make connections.

Of course as an English major of the old style I've read Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale'-the story about Griselda. I've got B's battered copy of the *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (its spine lost) with her name in it (Queen's College, 1927) and 'The Clerks Tale' heavily annotated in her small neat writing (not like her, to do that). My name (1960) is written in pencil underneath hers. In this story, the Marquis wants to test his wife's love for him, so he has each of their three children taken away at birth by a brutal servant, who says that they will be killed. Griselda does not utter even a murmur of protest but gives up each baby as proof of her love for her husband and obedience to his will. She is finally divorced and sent home barefoot to her original hut, all without complaint. The Clerk concludes his tale by saying that this story is really not about husbands and wives, but a parable of the perfect relationship between God and man. Chaucer's Envoy to the tale is an ironic commentary on its doubtful morality.

The story had a sinister appeal to me as a twenty-year-old. In spite of the disaster of my parents' marriage--or was it because of it, because I knew I'd be a better wife than my mother was?-I believed in perfect love between a man and a woman. The Griselda story is absurd, but it also has a weird logic. It is the logic of patriarchy at its most basic.

I had always known that we three girls were sent to boarding school for three years, when Polly was seven, I was five and Rose, three years old. I have memories of that

first day at St Johns, and later. But we seldom talked about boarding school once we were allowed home. I cannot say that I thought about it much as I grew up, or about the effect it might have had on us all, until my own daughters reached those ages. Then it became a sharp and nagging question. I gradually realized that I would never have-could never have-made a choice like that, if I had had any choice at all. Not only because it was so obvious that they would suffer, but because I knew that I would suffer too. I could not imagine how B brought herself to do it, though her doing so made it possible for our father to go to post-war Italy and do important and 'manly' work (we knew) for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). According to our father, B even saw boarding school as better for us than living at home.

In my early twenties, armed with D. H. Lawrence and Psych 1, I had decided that B was sexually frigid. That explained why the marriage failed. In my early thirties, as a young mother, I saw B's sending her children to boarding school as a sign that she was inherently lacking, as mother as well as wife. It was still all her fault. It was only B, not our father, that I blamed. If I kept on choosing to be not like her, I'd be fine.

So it was only in 1995, a year after B died and we'd had time to read all the letters, that Rose and I realised there was more to the story. She and I had (still have) no memory of it. When she was less than one year old, and I was not yet three, nor Polly five, we were sent away to strangers in the 'country' (that is, the then outer suburbs of Sydney) for more than two years. B visited us weekly or fortnightly, on Saturday afternoons. Our father was absent. Folly knew this, because she remembered; but she has lived in England all her adult life, and the subject had never come up.

Rose read the letters first, about three hundred of them. When she told me about them over the phone from Sydney we both howled. When I read them myself I howled again, and for months I could not talk about them without floods of weeping. My body was gripped by the familiar fearful pain of abandonment. A recognition.

And later--my body is swept by murderous rage. When I try to describe it I have no words. The most violent words in the end are only words and I want something lethal. I want poison and sharp knives and twisted guts and tears and horror. I want to smash and crush and break her--vomit and spew and shit her out of my life. My rage appals me. I wait for the sky to shatter.

In the scale of the horrors and suffering that the twentieth century has inflicted on children, our pain--mine, and Rose's, and Polly's is no more than a speck. But there is something in that repeated event that will not let me rest until I understand it better. Child victims of war and genocide and famine most often have parents who are victims with them. Our parents were not victims. They saw themselves, and were seen by others, as models of intelligence and moral righteousness who loved their children. Yet they chose to send us away for more than five years of our early childhood.
No mother I have spoken to can imagine herself doing that--if she had any choice at all.

What did they think they were doing?

What did they think they were doing?

Golden, Jill 2000. "Inventing Beatrice": Writing an Auto/biography. 'Hecate', vol.26, no.2, 176-185.

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

Trying to find answers to those questions became another compelling motive in my writing.

I want to turn now to issues that I encountered around the process of writing Beatrice's/my auto/biography.

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf writes about the imperiousness of the autobiographical 'I' in the texts of men/'man'. That 'I' is logical, male, boring--and a block to creative energy. In the shadow of that 'I', Woolf says, all is shapeless as mist. To trace female subjectivity the masculine autobiographical 'I' must somehow be crossed.

To write this story I needed to make a crossing through the conventional 'I' of autobiography--or, to take another of Virginia Woolf's metaphors, to dissolve the hard shiny nut that is so often taken to represent a 'self'. Amongst other things, I had to pay particular attention to pronouns. What was I able to do with Beatrice's diaries and letters?

My dilemmas began with the first words on the first page of Beatrice's first diary, an account of a 1928 Easter outing with her parents. I needed a context for this outing. I did the research, made the visits, that would fill in the details of time and place. I kept the diary entry in the Beatrice-first-person-I', expanding it with all the details I could find.

But the story of a mother is also the story of a child's (a daughter's/my own) discovery of her mother. I have pages and pages of Beatrice's tiny faded writing to see and touch. I can read her words, though they are often brief and opaque. But how can I imagine her life, knowing that my understandings of her are deeply shaped and flawed by my own childhood? My love is ragged, my memories often painful and guilty. How can I write in her first person, as if I know her meanings? I must extricate my authorial 'I' from hers. So I invent the character Beatrice, whom I write about in the third person, as 'she'. This Beatrice of course at times speaks in the first person—another 'I' to braid with the first two. The child Jess (both myself and not myself) is also present.

Through this complexity of 'I's I want the unspoken--the perhaps unspeakable—to be heard. Not as The Truth (hers or mine), but as many ways of seeing our different truths. So that those big soft words like forgiveness and love and healing can find a shape that is specific to the silenced remnants of our selves.

I search for metaphors for what I am trying to do.

My image of Beatrice is like the crystal that hangs at the window in my room. Most of the time it's just a lump of glass. But each mention of her name in other people's letters and diaries is a flash of sunlight that strikes one facet, and sends dancing colours across my walls. The rainbow disappears, but I've seen it.

Or, another metaphor:

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

Beatrice's words in her diaries are like the grains of crystal in a kit I once gave my daughter. When I add the right solution they grow and blossom into unpredictable, fascinating shapes.

But I must also use the third person pronoun-she-to remind myself with every sentence that what I write can only be fiction. The Beatrice of my story is an invention, not my mother.

The silence around lesbian sexuality shaped the choices made by Beatrice/my mother. She was willing (as I in turn was also willing) to believe that love of women was a freak stage to be passed through on the way to maturity.

Because she also fell in love with a man and experienced heterosexual desire and had children whom she loved, she understood herself to be mature and 'a good woman'.

She and I in turn were both complicit in maintaining the cultural silence around female sexuality. I'm not arguing that either of us, at the time, could have understood it differently or acted differently. That part at least of our subjectivities was compliant to the dominant discourse of patriarchy. Men were the important ones, and a woman was good enough only in relation to a man. To put it another way, for the women in 'Mob' the subjectivities provided in relation to the regulatory power of modern social apparatuses remained within the domain of patriarchy.

For me there is a clear link between this belief-that men and their choices were what really mattered-and our parents' joint decision to send the children away so that our father could live his life just exactly as he wished.

In contemporary Australia the voicing of lesbian experience, in part through the telling of life narratives, has made it possible for some women, some of the time, to take up different subjectivities. In writing my mother Beatrice's auto/biography I could be seen as appropriating her story and invading her privacy. I say in my defence that the continuing movement from silence to narrative is a necessary strategy for survival at this time, in this place. The defence, the weapon, the protection of silence that was both forced upon and necessary for Beatrice, is still needed by many women. Sometimes their voices can at last, and should, be heard. Beatrice's diaries-her gift and challenge to her daughters-opened up one possibility for this to happen.

Golden, Jill 2000. "Inventing Beatrice": Writing an Auto/biography. 'Hecate', vol.26, no.2, 176-185.

This is the author's version of an article published in 'Hecate'. Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au