Formations of feminism

Political memoirs of the Left (II)

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'Spot the difference' is the game, whenever the subject of gender crops up. I play it myself, usually trying to combat the clichés to which it gives rise. This is the danger that stalks feminism: the threat of banality – its impact fading with repetition, its complexities and nuances submerged by anxious attachments to sexual difference as the bedrock of identity. Since, even today, intimacy is still imagined as a feminine preserve, the popularity of memoir writing is itself a sign of women's cultural influence. If political pursuits and purposes are not prominent themes in the current memory boom, they are in even shorter supply when women reminisce. But where and when women do record lives of dissent and struggle, whether focusing upon their own feelings or not, private lives often edge outwards, throwing fresh light upon the ways in which we are defined by and help to define the worlds we move through – engaging, retreating, disavowing, making do. For those concerned with the intricate ways in which power relations shape personal lives within the Left, the political memoirs of women militants immediately predating the second-wave feminism that took root in Britain the 1970s are of particular interest. Those now available to us are written by women who often felt themselves to be (and identified with) outsiders, although they are, unsurprisingly, relatively privileged women – these are not the words of those who confronted the toughest challenges of class and racial hierarchies.

Another good communist

In 1989 Yvonne Kapp, at eighty-six, began and completed her autobiography, *Time Will Tell*.* Just like a woman, it would seem, she embarks with excessive modesty: 'My reminiscences lack gravity … partly out of sheer laziness … [they] rely upon my fallible, fitful and selective memory, fully aware of the pitfalls that presents.' Moreover, just like the political memoirs of the men I have considered,[1] Kapp is wary of the temptations of autobiographical self-indulgence, while knowing about its satisfactions: 'The gratifications of chattering about one's childhood, to indulge long cherished resentments, paranoia, self-pity, self-love and pure swank, must account for the lasting appeal of psychoanalysis' (17). What follows, after her tales of a conventional Edwardian childhood, are vivid reconstructions of Kapp's engagement in twentieth-century politics – elegant and witty from beginning to end. Their zest resonates with Raphael Samuel's nostalgic memories of the older working-class Party men from his childhood: 'completely untroubled by doubt, but brave, selfless and with a redeeming London wit'.[2] A strange harmony, it might seem, when Kapp was neither working class nor male, but rather raised as a 'lady', moving from her elite girls' school in Harley Street to Swiss finishing school, remaining all her life erudite and refined, though certainly a 'good Communist' for over sixty years.

Kapp's memoir covers her journey through the heartlands of Bloomsbury sexual bohemianism and Parisian chic couture in the 1920s, her work with Basque and Jewish refugees in the 1930s (when she published four successful novels under the pen name Yvonne Cloud), employment as a lone woman at the centre of trade-union politics in Britain in the 1940s, the pursuit of field work in the East End of London after the war, later editing and translating Bertolt Brecht and other Communist writers, followed by a decade of research and the writing, by then in her seventies, of her scholarly, much acclaimed thousand-page biography of Eleanor Marx. Along the way, Kapp was busy raising and supporting her daughter, for the most

* Yvonne Kapp, *Time Will Tell*, Verso, London, 2003. xv + 296 pp., £15.00 hb., 1 85984 510 X. Page references appear in brackets in the text.

part as a single mother, engaged in complex triangular love affairs with women and men, and becoming – as her friend and former lover Quentin Bell records – 'magnificently active' in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) from 1936 onwards. It seems extraordinary that in the ten years she lived after completing her memoir, she could not find a publisher for it. But in the 1990s, as backs turned firmly against those whose lives had found meaning and purpose in activist Left politics, the times were not receptive to her story. The publisher that commissioned her book, Virago Press, turned it down in 1990; and even the Communist Party publisher Lawrence & Wishart rejected it. Having become affiliated to *Marxism Today*, they were perhaps unsympathetic towards the memories of staunch old-timers, a number of whom were by then hoping in vain to publish accounts of their political journeys.[3]

Born into an affluent German-Jewish family in London in 1903, Kapp caught TB as a child, spending much time alone in bed, away from school, often away from her family, always reading, writing from the age of seven – kicking off with a tiny collection of comic verses. A frail but apparently rebellious child, she was early on in conflict with a domineering mother, a woman, we are told, with 'all the makings of a colonial governor', but only two children and a few servants to bully: 'her despotic sway … needed larger fields of operation' (46). By adolescence, the daughter would feel a 'suffocating sense of injustice' confronting parental restraint, an emotion also experienced when informed of her 'immutable inferiority' at synagogue:

> There I learnt from the prayer-book that while boys, who sat downstairs, gave thanks to God that they had not been created female, girls, who sat in the gallery, could only thank Him for having made them according to His will. This attestation from on high of second-class status deeply impressed – and depressed – me. The Lord's less than halfhearted appreciation of his female creation struck me as rather shameful: if he thought so poorly of us, why on earth have bothered in the first place? (34)

Still in her teens, she ran away from home, earning her living from the age of eighteen. Marrying Edmond Kapp, a Jewish artist and musician thirteen years her senior, the following year, estranged her for years from her implacably disapproving parents:

> The generation gap, much talked of in the years after the Second World War was nothing compared with the chasm that opened between the young and their elders during that earlier conflict [the First World War] when all values and assumptions, even behaviour patterns and social norms, were in flux (51).

Kapp settled cheerfully, if impecuniously, into the 1920s' bohemian world of intellectuals and artists, nomadically on the move, often living in houses owned by more affluent friends, in Bloomsbury, on the Sussex coast, in East Anglia, Capri and the Riviera. At odds with their reputation today, she writes of the great kindness of certain famous writers, especially of D.H. Lawrence and Rebecca West (though West disapproved of her friends, with their 'vows of unchastity'). She accepted her husband's casual couplings with any women he fancied – 'he had taught me that it was idiotic and petty-minded to object or take it seriously' (103) – although not without pangs of jealousy and distress. She even consented to his abandoning her for long periods, after the welcome birth of their daughter in 1924, but not without succumbing to bouts of depression. With gaiety all around, 'who … had ever heard of helping out young mothers?' she asks (118). 'I must say I was very miserable … alone with a small baby … it wasn't very good', she would later confide (accompanied by peals of laughter) to the feminist historian Sally Alexander, who interviewed her in the early 1980s.[4]

She was rescued from sporadic bouts of isolation when offered her first well-paid job as Literary Editor for *Vogue*, in Paris in 1927 (on Rebecca West's recommendation), where she lived in somewhat guilty luxury for a few years, before orchestrating her departure, angered by the pittance paid to clerks and typists. Back in England, she lived for a while near Cambridge, close by the charismatic, philandering, Marxist scientist J.D. ('Sage') Bernal, who believed science and Marxism would bring prosperity and peace to all humanity:[5] 'our two families were inseparable, sharing children, husbands, wives, seaside holidays and cars' (142). She also wrote her first novel, *Nobody Asked You*, which – with characteristic resourcefulness – she ended up bringing out herself (with the Willy-Nilly Press she set up for the purpose) after its original publishers, informed it was obscene, backed out at the eleventh hour. Its huge financial success was guaranteed, she tells us, once a review in the *Observer* had declared it 'shocking' (159).

A little less reticent than the male memoirists I have covered (at least, that is, until she joined the Communist Party), Kapp touches lightly on her own sexual desires and experiences, discovering soon after puberty 'that people of either gender could arouse the strongest emotional and erotic response' (59). It was

a happenstance that certainly made her suited to the mores of her bohemian scene, whether forming relationships with Bloomsbury dandies, such as Quentin Bell, or with extraordinary women, such as Nancy Cunard. The breakdown of her marriage (for which she takes the major blame) came after its light-hearted intimacy had dimmed following an abortion, on her husband's insistence, which left her at death's door, infertile and sad. She had hoped for many children: 'the consequences of this episode were far-reaching' (121). She writes sympathetically of her husband's frequent anguish and depression, suggesting that he, like so many of his contemporaries, had been permanently damaged by the nightmare of his experiences in the Great War. Emotionally muddled and miserable after the collapse of her marriage in 1930, Kapp entered Freudian analysis with Adrian Stephen, Virginia Woolf's brother. Soon after, she sought out Melanie Klein, thinking that her daughter might also benefit from analysis following her parents' divorce. But on learning of Kapp's guilt-free 'love affairs' with women, Klein 'with voluble discourtesy' refused to analyse her daughter, leading Kapp to reflect that it was she, perhaps, who was 'more in need of therapy' (147).

Growing alarm at widespread unemployment, poverty and the menace of fascist governments installed in Europe, soon eclipsed both the giddy hedonism and the gloomy confusions of the emancipated 1920s. Like many others, even within her liberal, bohemian world, Kapp began reading Marx, taking an interest in Communism and the Russian Revolution, at a time when some thought it provided the last chance of defeating the combined threats of poverty and fascism.[6] It was the historic disasters of the 1930s that soon made politics – not literature, aesthetics, the claims of motherhood, or romantic adventures – Kapp's primary passion, the permanent centre and source of meaning in her life. Harry Pollitt persuaded her of the importance of joining the Party when she encountered him in 1936, on a boat returning from a trip to the Soviet Union. The next twelve months, meeting and working with the London poor for the very first time, tramping the streets to raise money and arms for the Republican government fighting Franco in Spain, organizing a concert at the Albert Hall to bring Basque refugee children to Britain, set the pattern of her new life thereafter. From then on, the love of useful work and of comrades kept her forever grounded and busy, except for a short period in 1940, when Party membership led to her dismissal as assistant director of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, and briefly outlawed her from paid employment altogether. However, by 1941 (with Stalin now in alliance with Britain) she was back as sole research officer for the Amalgamated Engineering Union, writing humorously in her memoir of how she handled the hostility she encountered as the lone woman in that chauvinistic stronghold of male craftsmen. Until 1946 she was supported by its president, Jack Tanner, becoming his speech writer and confidante, so attuned to his rhetorical style that he refused to read her scripts before delivering them: 'He was … the only member of the Executive Council, I believe, who, unlike God, did not hold women in contempt but genuinely liked and respected them' (227).

There was always more than one way of living as a communist, and Kapp took some of her bohemian past into her new life, as well as remaining close to certain non-Party friends, one of whom, the children's writer Kathleen Hale, would write, after seventy years of friendship: 'She can be fiery in defence of her beliefs, which are intense, but she also has a delicious and infectious sense of fun.'[7] Once a Communist, however, Kapp never shifted her loyalties again, although she wrote movingly (quoting Browning) of the need to rethink everything following Khrushchev's revelation of the full horror of Stalin's rule, in 1956: 'We had to take new bearings. Though we were not deflected from our course, it marked a turning point. "Never glad confident morning again"' (265).

Never glad confident morning again; but never, either, confused attachments or belongings again. In her sixties, Kapp, who had never passed an exam in her life, transformed herself into an amateur historian and began her ten-year research on Eleanor Marx. The biography was a homage to her classical Marxist heritage, as much a hagiography of Engels and Marx as of Eleanor herself. In one way or another, it drew on her whole accumulated experience and, she declares, 'left me wonderfully enriched' (286). This eternal optimism of the spirit finds her closing her own memoir welcoming change in Russia, with the advent of Gorbachev. She is refreshed by the thought that she has finally learnt in old age that despite 'what appear to be sudden dramatic spurts, the march of history is unconscionably slow'; but, she quickly adds, 'a love of justice and a belief in the potential for human progress is inextinguishable' (288). History has, for the moment, for most people, extinguished that once seemingly inextinguishable feeling of hope that brought so many out, with their 'lighted candles in Wenceslas Square' – the image with which Kapp signs off, in November 1989. What this memoir suggests to me is a little less sanguine: there is no steady forward march either of history or of people's hopes for greater egalitarianism; but, at particular moments in history, in specific settings, a belief in justice and better lives for all is implanted in the consciousness of certain people, forever.

For all her political commitment, humanitarian compassion and belief in equal pay for women, Kapp remained deeply sceptical of, and cut off from, second-wave feminism, although she was far from actively hostile to it. She recognized the reality of the social and cultural subordination of women; indeed, throughout her long life she confronted the distinct humiliations, harms and burdens of women's lot. Yet she did not address them as specifically political issues. Her memoir divulges her own feelings and emotions, but only up to a point. She is candid about the delights and hazards of her bohemian life, but once she casts its frivolities behind her on joining the Party (including any sense of achievement from her four successful novels), the serious business of politics mutes out personal concerns, as though the two are necessarily at odds with each other. Her lesbianism is attributed no significance. We learn that, approaching ninety, to her 'astonishment', she still has both 'the satisfactions of work [and] the miraculous and surpassing happiness of love' (287). But a veil covers her intimacy with Margaret Mynatt, her lover, comrade and collaborator for over forty years (up to her death in 1977), as well as her falling in love again, late in life, with another woman comrade, Betty Lewis.

Quite at odds with the feminist sensibility of the 1970s and after, Kapp never identified *as* a lesbian. This kept feminists aloof from her, and her distanced from feminists. She alarmed Sally Alexander, for one, with her challenging question when they met: 'Why do all you girls hate men? What dreadful things have men done to you?'[8] Moreover, she insisted then that Alexander delete from her notes all reference to her sexuality, her abortion, or any other intimate detail. Fortunately, in her memoir a few years later, she felt able to be just a little more forthcoming – old age, it seems, as well as greater awareness of the changes feminism had wrought, gave her more licence. I differ from feminists who would criticize Kapp for failing to affirm the delights and dangers of her dissident private life more publicly. After all, she never identified specifically as a Jew (the only one in her exclusive school during the First World War, and one who lost close relatives in the Holocaust), as a single mother, or as a female worker in the male world of trade unionism: all experiences that no doubt informed, but were submerged by, what she believed to be her all-embracing identity, *as* a Communist, in the struggle for a better world – different, but not so different, from Hobsbawm, after all. The time for taking a stand on the politics of personal life had yet to come, and would throw up its own dilemmas.

From ambivalence to anger

Although today passionately hostile to them, the one-time communist who did capture the interest of second-wave feminists was Doris Lessing. Born in 1919, as a young woman she joined a small Communist Party group formed in Southern Rhodesia in the early 1940s; she rejoined the CP for a few years in London, the following decade. It is tempting to attribute the dramatic contrasts between the political reminiscences in her autobiographical writing – very much a memoir of the whole person – and the other political memoirs I have considered so far to Lessing's determination to write *as* a woman. It was certainly as a woman that she addressed the ties between the personal and the political, in a way not seen before. Added to the beauty, skill and intelligence of much of her writing, it is this that made it so popular with second-wave feminists, born a generation after her. She reflected so many of their preoccupations. However, gender is not all that is at issue in her two memoirs *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*,* though it enters in distinctly troublesome and disquieting ways.

There are surprising overlaps as well as disparities with the accounts of other memoirists in Lessing's musings on CP membership in the 1940s and 1950s. They are all the more compelling about the nature and significance of Communist affiliation given her later position as a scathing apostate, one whose commitment – though she was erratically involved for almost two decades – was, she tells us, for the most part always ambivalent. Hobsbawm and Kapp joined the Party in Britain to defeat fascism and work for peace and prosperity. In Southern Rhodesia, Lessing joined for much the same reason, 'because of the spirit of the times, because of the *Zeitgeist*' (*UMS,* 259). In the early 1940s her friends were those same predominantly Jewish refugees fleeing fascism in Europe – just like the young Hobsbawm, but without access to a British passport – who ended up in Africa. They were, she tells us, 'by definition political' (*UMS*, 269).[9] They were hardly wrong to blame the capitalist world for failing to prevent the ongoing slaughter of the Second World War. It had failed to support the democratic government of Spain against fascist forces, failed to oppose Hitler's military aggression until too late, failed to respond to the plight of the Jews in Germany: 'Communism was being born in storms of blood and fire and bullets and explosions, and illuminated by the shells of Hope' (*WITS*, 240–41).

In Africa, it was also the Communist groups, like the one she joined for two years in 1942, that were responsible for distributing information about the wretchedness and 'idiocies' of race relations in Africa, enabling her to express her revulsion at the ubiquitous racial injustice (one she had felt since childhood), causing 'all kinds of useful yeasts and ferments to start working' (*UMS,* 367). After rejoining the Party a decade later, Lessing corroborates other writers' view of its significance, especially for working-class members, 'who found in Communism a hope, a way of life, a family, a university – a future' (*UMS,* 284). One reason people found it so hard to leave the Party, she reflects, was that there were so many 'generous, kind, clever' people in it (*WITS,* 56). This memory, repeated several times in her two autobiographical volumes, sits oddly alongside the scorn she expresses, especially of comrades in Africa, as 'the embodiments of envy, vindictiveness, ignorance', not to mention the chilling, repellent depiction of communist men in her fiction. This seems to have no parallel in her memoirs – not even in the accounts she provides of her second husband, Gottlieb Lessing, despite her encouragment of others to assume he was the loathsome prototype whose legacy had put her off Communism for good: 'I was married to a 100 per cent communist and, believe me, that cured you fast!' (*UMS*, 301).[10] In fact, she joined the CPGB many years *after* initiating the separation from Gottlieb Lessing. But, then, her current mantra that she has 'never' been a feminist sits oddly alongside her second preface to *The Golden Notebook*, written in 1971: 'To get the subject of Women's Liberation over with – I support it, of course, because women are second-class citizens, as they are saying energetically and competently in many countries.'[11]

Where Lessing's autobiographical writing is so different from other political memoirs is in her frank portrayal of her most intimate thoughts and feelings, which are not abandoned as she ages. Bodies, sex, desire, relationships, pleasure, loneliness, confusion, pain and sorrow lace her memoirs throughout. As we've seen, rarely a hint of such things creeps into the men's narratives, including that of Italo Calvino, even though he was, like her, first and foremost a literary figure, a novelist (albeit of a very different ilk). But Lessing's reminiscences are not written primarily as political memoir, which is just as well, since her political commentary is consistent only in its ambiguities and contradictions. Even within one moment, for instance, trying to clarify her views to her friend Edward Thompson in 1957, her letters are extraordinarily confused and confusing: 'What I feel is an immense joy and satisfaction … that people all over the world care enough for their fellow human beings to fight for what they feel, at the time, to be justice.… But what has this got to do with political attitudes?' (*WITS*, 196).

Lessing's chronically incoherent political ideas and attachments ensure that her undisputed strength as a writer has never come from her assessment of world affairs, or of those who fight for justice and equality – despite constantly drawing upon periods of her own active engagement in just such politics. Rather, her evocative force – whether in fiction or autobiography – has always been her incisive personal voice, drawing upon her own experience to recount dilemmas which appeared emblematic of the life of a woman to a multitude of later readers, who would use them politically: the resentful daughter of a harsh and demanding, distressed and needy mother; the bored wife of an uninspiring, uncomprehending husband;

* Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (hereafter *UMS*), Flamingo, HarperCollins, London, 1995. 419 pp., £7.99 pb., 0 00 654825 3; Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography. 1949–1962* (hereafter *WITS*), HarperCollins, London, 1997. 369 pp., 0 00 255861 0. Page references appear in brackets in the text.

the guilty parent, struggling to combine childcare with writing and other passions of the heart and mind; the anguished older woman, facing the fearful horror, the appalling pain, of ageing. Yet, for all its idiosyncratic intensity of feeling, Lessing's autobiography is nevertheless gripping in its struggle, however equivocally, to depict a whole social reality, which encompasses the ambiguous place of the political in her unfolding story.

This is where it anticipates so many of the quandaries of the next generation of militant feminists, dilemmas that Sheila Rowbotham later captured, as we will see, in her memoir of the 1960s. Lessing's analysis of women's anomalous ties to politics also explains her love–hate relationship with second-wave feminism. 'We' tended to love her, even though, for reasons I'll come to, she says she always hated us: 'I have nothing in common with feminists. They never seem to think that one might enjoy men.'[12] The enjoyment of men, it must be said, is hard to find in any of Lessing's novels, or her memoirs – another reason, ironically, for her appeal to the generation of feminists stealing up behind her. One of the main criticisms of her ground-breaking book *The Golden Notebook*, when published in 1962, was that, as she later admits, 'the men characters were so unpleasant'. Indeed they were, notwithstanding their creator's shrug: 'I could not see this' (*WITS*, 359). Lessing almost invents man-hating feminism, yet, in what Freudians might aptly see as a peculiar form of splitting, she hates her own invention.[13] Interestingly, Lessing's resentment of that younger generation of women is played out again at the other end of the line, as youth turns to age, and another generation of women have emerged once again to mock the 'moralism' and 'man-hating' of presumed dour, outdated feminists (for all the overtly hostile hum of sex-war cliché in much of their popular humour, as young women seek out 'sex in the city'). The antagonism between different generations of women can be harsh. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Under My Skin opens with Lessing's account of her childhood and schooling in Southern Rhodesia, noting along the way the impossibility of honest autobiography, not least in the chasm that separates a child's sense of time ('where the end of a day could hardly be glimpsed from its start') from an adult's (*UMS*, 109). Despite her pleasure in the untamed landscape she explored with her brother, she was miserable for much of her childhood, eager to escape it as soon as possible, 'there are so few [memories] that are jolly, pleasant, happy, even comfortable' (*UMS*, 38). She was constantly embattled with an unhappy mother presented as an energetic disciplinarian, chronically scolding, hostile towards the black servants, living in a lonely African wilderness in thwarted, miserable exile from the crisp, clean English world she loved. She listened to the querulous, self-pitying sorrows of her ill and abstracted, crippled father, with his bitter memories of World War I, as each new farming venture failed around him: 'We are all of us made by war', Lessing wrote of her generation, 'twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it' (*UMS*, 10). 'All my childhood, every minute', she writes, 'I waited to be grown up.'[14]

Leaving school at thirteen, Lessing educated herself from that time onwards, fleeing from home altogether in 1934 to earn her living, at fifteen. The book that then most stirred her with its 'substance of truth' was written by the white South African socialist, suffragette and crusader for peace and racial tolerance, Olive Schreiner. *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which she read at fourteen, 'became part of me, as the few rare books do … I had only to hear the title, or "Olive Schreiner", and my deepest self was touched.'[15] Within a few years she was married and had given birth to two children, in her early twenties. It was from here that her public political journey began. Whatever the *Zeitgeist* in the 1930s, however, with Left and Right so sharply etched the world over, the reason Lessing (as distinct from other women of her time) was attracted to political life in the 1940s was not only her determined flight from the fate of her mother, but, equally, her flight from the life of *all* women of her day, whom she saw as resentful, frustrated, discontented, while caring for husband and children – just as she was at the time. She soon felt compelled to abandon both. Women terrify her, with their 'women's talk', forever complaining about husbands, children, money, servants. Lessing 'simply refused' to allow herself to be become 'trapped', to turn into one of those 'nagging white housewives', forced to accept a role where she just could not feel authentically herself (*UMS*, 205, 230–32).

All Lessing's writings from the late 1940s through to the 1960s dwell upon the differing phases of womanhood that she found so distressing. She depicts the plight of a young married woman, facing the unbearable condescension of male gynaecologists, amounting at times to cruelty; feeling completely abandoned on giving birth in hospital in the mid-twentieth century: 'The babies were a nuisance, and so, too, were we, the mothers.… I lay sore and forlorn, longing to hold the baby' (*UMS*, 218). She captures the isolated anguish of older mothers who, having surrendered

their careers and creative interests to care for home and children, are left feeling unwanted and useless once their children leave home – just like her own mother, whom she can hardly bare to think about: 'She could have lived another ten years', she says of her mother's premature, lonely death, 'if anyone had needed her' (*WITS*, 196). These are precisely the issues feminists would politicize and seek to transform just two decades later: if 'the personal is political', it becomes a site of struggle and change. How very puzzling it seems, barely credible even, that Lessing, so sharp and discerning about women's lives and feelings, should vehemently denounce rather than embrace feminism when it came along, with all its principled seriousness and determination to improve the lot of women. Instead, she turned away, publicly proclaiming feminists 'avaricious', 'vindictive', guilty of an 'efflorescence of crude stupidity' (*UMS*, 248, 410; *WITS*, 347).

The mystery of Lessing's scorn resonates with the feelings of certain other women who had also managed, against all odds, to become professionally independent (to a limited degree), successful (in certain respects), despite all the hurdles and heartaches: the blanket sexism, the sexual harassment, the backstreet abortions, the abandonment by lovers, the betrayal by husbands – despite, in short, the many costs and frustrations they faced, usually more or less alone, with next to no support from other women at the time, before the re-emergence of a campaigning feminist consciousness. 'It is certain', Lessing observed in 1968, 'that public women attract a certain kind of spite, of bitchiness, from both men and women'.[16] With heroic exceptions, this often made younger women a source of envy and anguish to successful older women. Younger feminists, with all their complaints, could not appreciate (it might seem) the stoical route to individual survival and success of those older women who were not able to turn to a movement to assist them as women: 'I sometimes wonder why it is that our lot – my peers – would rather have died than ask our parents for support, and left home the minute we could, only to be succeeded by one generation and then another whose only idea is to prolong dependency as long as possible' (*UMS*, 203). (This is a most peculiar perception of 'my' generation, which – coming of age in the 1960s – were notorious for leaving home quite as fast, and going just as far, as our legs could take us: fame or fortune the last thing on our minds.)

Lessing's generation of professional women, who after 1945 often did have to be especially tough to have any authority in the workplace, or the public arena, might now feel their lone battles unappreciated by younger feminists collectively complaining about each and every obstacle in their path. To some, it must have seemed that the protesting women who followed in their footsteps were made of weaker stuff, our words too expedient, our successes – if we had any – too easily achieved. Moreover, younger women (rather than the men who have disappointed them in life) become the perfect targets for women of a certain age – especially when, as Lessing likes to depict herself, they still love and desire younger men.

So adept in her portrayal of feelings, Lessing captures exquisitely the overwhelming pain that can devastate an older woman gazing at a younger woman, all the more so when she – like Lessing – has been seen as beautiful. Lessing's grief is triggered by her recollection of the narcissistic joy she once found in her own strong, young body. Her writing here contrasts so sharply with the memoirs of the men I have considered (in *RP* 121) that it is worth a closer look: 'is there any pride fiercer than a young woman's? … I used to stand among people, knowing my body was strong and fine, under my dress, and secretly exult.' In both her novels and memoirs, Lessing thrills at the thick, glossiness of her youthful pubic hair, 'growing three perfect little swirls' (UMS, 203–4). Recalling that same pleasure in bushy pubic hair, reading other older women mourning of the loss of it, suggests to me that 'bushiness' serves as one symbol of a young woman's own 'phallic' power. (I see them on marches, as I write this, cheerfully pitting their own 'Good Bush' against the current US President's 'Bad Bush' – perhaps more than just a weak pun.)

The pain, the shock and the horror of ageing that suffuse Lessing's memoirs start early, in her late thirties. It emerges in counterpoint to encounters with younger women, as when Lessing muses upon the 'pretty girl of twenty', who coolly and deliberately displays her beautiful breasts – and then back to the author: 'Pain was slicing through me for what I had lost. And, too, because I knew that I had been every bit as arrogant and cruel as that girl' (*UMS*, 205). It is my strong impression that young men do not threaten older men in quite the same way. After all, it is women, as Lessing comments, with weary resignation, who lose their men to younger women; it is young women who successfully pursue them. Via a Darwinian riff, we learn that it is 'female ruthlessness', the 'unregenerate' nature of young women, that causes the heartbreaking unfairness older women suffer: 'it comes from a much older time than Christianity or any other softener of savage moralities' (*UMS*, 206). In the 1950s, with

Lessing in her thirties, the group of leftists and writers to which she belonged changed rapidly: 'The wives and girlfriends who had shared early hard times and acted as agents and counselors, even earners – *out*' (*WITS*, 128, emphasis added). Although probably herself the most successful member of this group, as a now ageing woman she too was, in a sense, out: abandoned by the two great loves of her life in those years.

Adding a pinch of Freudianism to her Darwinian mantra, men are doubly exonerated for the pain they cause women: 'It seems to me that men have to fight so hard to free themselves from their mothers, but then circumstances and their natures make their wives into mothers, and they free themselves again' (*WITS*, 130). With eyes so open to, heart so wounded by, what she sees as women's inevitable lot, Lessing could never accept it – could never become a feminist. Her desires, her identifications, her attachments, lie with men, and men alone – never with that abjected mother.

Such is her struggle against the sorrows of the older woman, facing life alone, that, following her rejection by Clancy Sigal at thirty-nine, she describes herself as for a short while sliding into alcoholism, 'feeling abandoned, unloved, unwanted' (*WITS*, 262). It seems to me that such sorrow not only feeds Lessing's fear of younger women – as the source of her annihilation – but sets off her growing estrangement from political affiliations more generally. The futility of generational confrontation soon becomes her reason for rejecting politics itself, as a 'sad, bad, stupid cycle' of the young turning against their elders: 'About politics there is nothing to be done finally but laugh' (*WITS*, 206, 186).[17] Or cry, one feels. As a source of strength, politics failed her. In the end she found consolation for the disappointments of both sex and politics in spiritual guidance, in the Sufi teachings of Idries Shah. Lessing's autobiography closes with her encounter with an 'unlikeable young woman' (with a baby in a pushchair) who comes knocking at her door, a single mother, 'demanding' money from her, and displaying bitterness and 'rancorous envy' towards her (*WITS*, 364). The rancorous envy she experienced coming from young women would seem, at the very least, to be mutual.

Lessing did not write the third volume of her autobiography, closing the second volume in 1962, when she was in her early forties, only halfway through her life. Instead, she decided to substitute a fiction, *The Sweetest Dream*, to revivify her reminiscences of the 1960s and beyond. Here, her ongoing contempt for utopian visions, or other political ideologies, leftist or feminist, is absolute. She ridicules and stereotypes them all. Crafting a situation which parallels her own in the 1960s, the only likeable character is the long-suffering, dignified older woman, Julia, who struggles to put up with the selfish and insufferable behaviour of the motley young crew she shelters in her large household: her disturbed communist son; a neurotic, resentful, fantasizing earth mother; assorted spiteful, deluded, prattling female zealots. One reviewer, Hywell Williams, sharing my view that the novel is a truly reactionary work, commented: 'This is emotion recollected in hate.… [It] is a woman thing – but emphatically not a feminist thing.'[18]

As chance would have it, I was one of the young women Doris Lessing encountered briefly in her middle age. I met her (with my baby in a pushchair) when I took over the lease of her flat in Maida Vale in 1970. I was at the time much too shy, lost and bewildered (as a single mother, newly arrived in London) to make the most of the encounter. She seemed to me eccentric: moralistic about the threatening ways of the young, while expressing concern for the stray cats of the neighbourhood. We surveyed each other with mutual incomprehension, although I continued to enjoy and admire her books throughout the following decade. I have sometimes wondered whether I was the 'unlikeable young woman' she depicts (arriving as she is leaving her flat), but I have been told of other feminists of my age who met her, who also wonder the very same thing.[19] A composite picture, no doubt.

In writing her life – the unfolding and wrapping up of her sexuality, the rise and fall of her political dreams – Doris Lessing's autobiography is undoubtedly the most compelling of those I have examined. It touches me deeply. It was always going to be harder for women to stay enmeshed in political life on the Left, especially if and when they found themselves alone, unpartnered. Until very recently the Left's bedrock was a labouring man, a fighter. Hobsbawm commented that Brecht's 'great elegy' on the professional

revolutionary, written in 1930, spoke to his generation of Communists as did no other: 'I ate meals between battles/ I lay down to sleep among murderers/ …We, who wanted to prepare for kindness/ Could not be kind ourselves.'[20] Lessing quotes these same lines, but with understandable disdain. Their message, born of revolutionary times, hardly spoke to women, who could not, following their precepts, live out social existence as a woman at all – least of all without those lovers and companions male revolutionaries so rarely lacked; let alone if they sought personal freedom and literary success as ardently as Lessing did.

The surprise, given her abiding ambivalence towards politics, is hardly her desertion of the Left; it is more that she supported it for as long as she did. Her repudiation of feminism in recent decades is no more astonishing, given her flight from politics and the anguish aroused in her by younger women. But, as Lessing the good writer suggests, the political intentions of authors are hardly all there is to a book, which is usually richest and most productive 'when its plan, shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't any more to be got out of it'.[21] This is certainly a strength in her own early novels and stories.

Phallic mother

Lessing claims to be angry that *The Golden Notebook* became the 'Bible of the Women's Movement' (*WITS*, 315). Her compass is, reliably, awry. It was not so much Lessing as Simone de Beauvoir who, in the beginning, supplied the text, set the goal and lived the life (or so it seemed) of an independent, politically committed woman, helping to inspire women the world over to think again about their own emancipation. 'Women, you owe her everything', declared those who like to see individuals embodying the spirit of history, in this case the French scholar Elisabeth Badinter, joining the five thousand who attended Beauvoir's funeral in Paris in 1986, on her death at the age of seventy-eight.[22]

For all the controversy it would engender, nowhere more viciously than in France, only rarely in history have books had the impact, the long slow burn, of *The Second Sex*. Selling 22,000 copies in the week it was published in 1949, it is still selling, still debated, more than fifty years later. It is not an easy read, but one maxim crystallized out of the ink that was spilt to fill the hundreds of pages Beauvoir penned on the situation of women, drawing upon a medley of historical, philosophical, psychological, anthropological, biological, biographical and economic research: 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.' In that becoming, readers learn, woman is installed in her condition as 'object and prey' for man, never as 'sovereign subject'. Women have yet to be recognized by men as 'free and autonomous', like them. Beauvoir's goal is to establish that a woman's behaviour is not dictated by her physiology, but rather 'shaped as in a mould by her situation': her grasp upon the world, the world's grasp upon her. Hardly anticipating all the criticism in store, Beauvoir did gesture toward the age-old dilemma confronting 'an emancipated woman', who must refuse 'to confine herself to her role as female, because she will not accept mutilation', while being aware that 'it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex'.[23]

More significantly, and just as she intended, Beauvoir's life itself became a public attempt to transcend that dilemma. She was legendary as she lived it, even to women who had not read a word of her books. Beauvoir's symbolic presence as 'liberated' woman, *choosing* to pursue a free and independent life, was uniquely significant for many of the postwar generation of women I knew. Her four autobiographical volumes,* her various polemical novels (each one written as a commentary on her life and times), the postwar media attention on the King and Queen of existentialism (Jean-Paul Sartre and herself), the lasting glamour of Parisian bohemia, all made her early on an iconic figure.

In almost identical words, one early second-wave feminist after another recorded Beauvoir's impact on their younger selves: 'I was seized by a desire to imitate her' as a teenager in Canada in the 1960s, Lisa Appignanesi recalls. '[We] were grateful, regaled, awe-struck and disturbed.… [Her] denunciations opened windows on to a great gale of air. We shouted *yes*.' Sylvia Lawson remembers her delight on discovering *The Second Sex* as a young middle-class mother in my own home town, Sydney, in 1960, immediately sharing her reading with friends. 'For us, the young women in the 1960s who became the Women's Liberationists of the 1970s her life was truly exemplary, to be pondered and explored for clues [on] how to live differently', another Australian, Ann Curthoys, notes; 'she demonstrated an art of living'. Yet another, Margaret Walters, adds: 'It helped me make sense of

* *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), trans. James Kirkup, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963; *The Prime of Life* (1960), trans. Peter Green, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965 (hereafter *PL*); *Force of Circumstance* (1963), trans. Richard Howard, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968 (hereafter *FC*); *All Said and Done* (1972), trans. Patrick O'Brian, Paragon House, New York, 1993 (hereafter *ASD*).

my confused and isolated depression.' 'It was a siren call', Kate Millett claims, alighting upon *The Second Sex* in New York in the 1960s. '[She] indicated a new and transformed possibility – the movement from passivity into freedom', Sheila Rowbotham agrees, in one of the founding texts of British feminism. Judith Okley broadens the picture: 'I was fortunate in receiving the testimony of some women from the Third World', recording favourable responses to *The Second Sex* in India and the Middle East.[24] I could go on.

'Idealized mother', maybe, as Appignanesi suggests, but – archetypically – a never less than difficult one: for many, morphing from idol to irritant when feminism reinstated itself as a collective force and an analytic framework in the 1970s. Many feminists rather quickly decided to condemn Beauvoir to the dustbin of history, despite once having turned to her for inspiration. Germaine Greer, to whom I will return elsewhere, was one. She declared her 'repellently male-oriented', although, in *The Female Eunuch*, Greer all but paraphrased her – it was, of course, Beauvoir who saw femininity fashioned as 'intermediate between male and eunuch'.[25] In the cruel combat soon conducted by feminists in France, the Lacanian Antoinette Fouque later referred to her 'feminism of non-difference' as 'the master trump card of gynocide'![26] Irigaray said much the same thing. Only a generous soul like Angela Carter could more gently tease Beauvoir with her 'thinking woman's' question: 'Why is a nice girl like Simone, sucking up to a boring old fart like J-P?'[27]

For my purposes here, exploring Beauvoir's legacy seems indispensable, despite her being French and hence coming from a distinctly different cultural context from the other writers I consider. (She spent only a brief time in Britain, where she was distressed by the absence of good cafés and the dull nightlife.) Like those of Kapp and Lessing, her life was indeed idiosyncratic, yet her themes remain emblematic of the volatile ties binding the personal to the political. Beauvoir had a singular impact on my generation of feminists, as well as an enduring interest in the role of identity and attachments in sustaining lives of political commitment. She expressed both a lifelong determination to seize the moment, living fully and freely in the present, while deploring hypocrisy, injustice and exploitation, and a resolve to chronicle all the 'enthusiasms and disappointments' of her life in the hope that they might provide a model and resource for others (*FC*, 6). In so doing, she highlights the difficulties of any such project, including my own, of focusing on certain autobiographical reflections to ponder the mutability of radical passions. She lived her politics so personally: frequently self-critical, forever engaged (at least from her thirties onwards) in exposing and supporting those struggling against colonialism, exploitation and cultural denigration, emphasizing (from her forties onwards) that much that she wanted to say was linked to her 'condition as a woman', throwing her weight behind women's liberation and all its activist campaigns when it took off in the 1970s. She also wrote poignantly (from very early on) of her fears of the fate of the ageing woman. How puzzling, it might seem, that the very women most indebted to Beauvoir's insight and fortitude would later become so annoyed with her. Lessing became cross with feminists, who would echo her own criticisms of men and their mores, but feminists became cross with Beauvoir, who had virtually founded and later signed up to their cause. Why? Precisely *because of* all the contradictions she so unashamedly exposed when making her private life public. Yet these are the very contradictions that sustained her intellectual endeavours and political engagement in the first place.

Movement between exposure and evasion, documentation and delusion, haunts attempts to make the personal political, or to describe political life personally. But the fissures in Beauvoir's biography are formidable and threatening. The woman who valued her 'independence' above all else, urging women not 'to take shelter in the shadow of men',[28] was resolutely determined to see herself as the subordinate half of a couple: 'far from feeling embarrassed at the thought of his superiority, I derived comfort from it', she claims (*PL*, 26). The expounder and zealous critic of woman's definitive 'Otherness', the symbolic subordination of the 'feminine', more or less uncritically idealized the 'masculine', cherishing the esteem of men: 'I was encouraged to write *The Second Sex* precisely because of this privileged position. It allowed me to express myself in all serenity' (*FC*, 199). Her inexhaustible repackaging of the background, context, successes and failures of her life, *all* framed around Sartre, not only omit her own lesbian encounters, but race her readers onwards, with her both seeing and not seeing the ways in which she misconstrues her everlasting 'oneness' with Sartre in the process – the 'guarantee', as she says so often, of her self-worth, her happiness. 'Very conveniently I persuaded myself that a foreordained harmony existed between us on every single point', we read at one moment (*PL*, 143). At another, she frets, 'When I said "We are one person", I was dodging the issue.' She even wonders, when most devastated by Sartre's perpetual philandering, 'whether the whole of my happiness did not rest upon a gigantic lie'; only to

continue obdurately reinstalling that ubiquitous 'we' on the very next line, undaunted by doubts, displacing all impediments to unity with her chosen double (*PL*, 260–61).

It is this tireless labour of alliance which underwrites both her power and her pain, leading others (one of the first being Margaret Walters) to suggest that her rigorous self-examination might itself have helped her sustain a kind of self-evasion: 'We see that she spent a lifetime working out and on her relationship with one man – but that relationship is an absence at the heart of her story.'[29] 'Lies, all lies' is the even more disparaging title a later British feminist, Mary Evans, provides for her chapter on Beauvoir's four volumes of autobiography, suggesting that they are better seen as 'exercises in concealment rather than revelation'.[30] Beauvoir is certainly an absence at the heart of Sartre's story, where she receives not a mention (not even in the dedication) in the only autobiography he ever published, *Words* – an account of his childhood delusions and delights, as the idolized only child of a young and beautiful widowed mother. Always, he tells us in his memoir, 'running from the past', thinking only about the future, the adult male philosopher nevertheless did 'like and respect the humble and dogged loyalty that some people – especially women – preserve for their tastes, their desires … their determination to remain the same amid change, to safeguard their memories, [or] to take … an early love with them to their graves.'[31] As well he might. In the two central memoirs of her adult life (from the age of nineteen to fifty-three), Beauvoir reveals just what such dogged loyalty cost her – so frequently fluctuating between elation and desperation as she wrestles with, and later denies, appalling loneliness during long absences from Sartre. It was what it cost her, as Toril Moi concludes, to become the woman admired by the whole world 'for her independence'.[32]

Absence and evasion there surely is in Beauvoir's memoirs (which appear to devote more space to Sartre than to herself), yet it was a strategy that served as constant motivator and trigger for her life's work. Beauvoir does not want to *be* Sartre, she does not ever compete, but believes she must *have* him. Fantasizing completeness through him (knowing and not knowing the infantile, illusion-ridden nature of that fantasy), it worked for her, although not without anguish. The torment is hardly surprising, when her 'little absolute being', as she sometimes addressed him in letters, could proudly affirm that he had 'no Super-Ego': 'I became a traitor and I have remained one.… I am already betraying myself, in the heat of passion, by the joyful anticipation of my future betrayal.'[33] Sartre, they both agree, could never 'grow up', declining most of the usual responsibilities of adulthood. It may be wild analysis, but we might here benefit from a psychoanalytic framing, to suggest that Beauvoir's belief in her 'little absolute' both encouraged his pretensions to, and her desire for, phallic grandiosity – the power attributed to the father, who had never been present in Sartre's life to protest the pretence. Discussing his writing, Sartre will tell Beauvoir in his final years that it was she who gave him his power to resist any and all criticism: 'You gave me confidence in myself that I shouldn't have had alone.'[34] And it was he, not she, who faced breakdown, as a young man in

his late twenties (hallucinating lobsters walking close behind him); he who moved restlessly from infatuation to infatuation, never able to lose himself in sexual engagement ('I was more a masturbator of women than a copulator'), or feel overwhelmed by the beauty of the world; he who had a shorter life, dying after a decade and more of ravaged health exacerbated by drugs and alcohol. Men do suffer, both despite and because of all the indulgences they receive as superior beings. It was a superiority which Sartre himself never consciously sought, at least over other *men*: 'A whole man, made of

all men', was what he said he struggled to be, 'worth all of them, and any of them worth him'.[35]

The 'betrayal' that confounded many feminists in Beauvoir's erection of Sartre as the bulwark of her life, accompanying her idealization of what she saw as 'masculine' self-sufficiency, has to be placed alongside the strength she undoubtedly derived from it: the courage to write and to act in conditions requiring extraordinary levels of bravery. During the 1940s' Vichy government in France Beauvoir called for sexual information, contraception and abortion rights for women, at a time when one woman was guillotined for performing abortions and people were sent to jail merely for conveying contraceptive advice. When abortion was still illegal in the 1970s, she allowed her home to be used as premises for the termination of pregnancies.[36] The publication of *The Second Sex* in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1949 (the magazine founded by Sartre, herself and Merleau-Ponty in 1945) detonated thunderous blasts of obscenity against her throughout France: 'Unsatisfied, cold, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother', she reports (*FC*, 260).

The following decade Beauvoir expressed her ongoing grief as she and Sartre were increasingly isolated and attacked, eventually facing bomb threats and briefly forced into hiding, for their staunch support of Algerian militants fighting for independence from France. For years Beauvoir wrote of her distress trying to expose and put an end to her fellow citizens' complicity in the rapes and torture of Algerian militants by French authorities: 'I had been labelled … anti-French. I became so. I could no longer bear my fellow citizens.… I felt as dispossessed as I had when the occupation began' (*FC*, 381). It was only in the early 1960s, when calls for an end to the war in Algeria eventually gained wider support in France, that her intense sorrow over that battle (like a 'personal tragedy') began to lift. As huge marches calling for 'Peace in Algeria' took over the streets of Paris, she finally wrote: 'And how good I felt! Solitude is a form of death, and as I felt the warmth of human contact flow through me again, I came back to life' (*FC*, 619–20). So hell is not always 'other people', whatever her loyalty to Sartre and his aphorisms![37] Her radical activism increased with age. Beauvoir spent the last fifteen years of her life fighting primarily for women's rights, but her sustaining illusion – of unity with Sartre – continued.

If the power and authority Beauvoir felt she gained from her sense of merging with Sartre would come to puzzle some feminists, it was only after the image of the independent woman she evoked had already served to inspire a multitude of women the world over. Moreover, it was precisely the ways in which she could be described as a 'phallic woman', wanting to be both woman and man, to see and do everything, that enabled so many women to feel empowered by her courage, in times when women's autonomy was still barely thinkable. As she suspected, it would be her autobiographical writing, where 'events retain all the gratuitousness, the unpredictability and the often preposterous complications that marked their original occurrence', that women read most avidly (*FC*, 511). *The Prime of Life* sold 40,000 copies in advance of publication, and women would later congratulate Beauvoir (to her consternation at the time, so appalled was she by the Algerian war): 'It's bracing, it's dynamic, it's optimistic' (*FC*, 665). For all her interest in truth, however, Beauvoir soon realized that 'self-knowledge is impossible, and the best one can hope for is self-revelation' (*PL*, 368). It was a productive hope, for tens of thousands of female readers. (Hoping for self-revelation could perhaps serve as the motto for what is distinctive about women's political memoirs!)

Hurtling from unlimited passion for universal freedom and full humanity into recurrent despair at the state of the world and the vicissitudes of life, what else sustained this exemplary activist and intellectual woman? In adulthood, she always had a network of close, enduring friendships with women, often younger women, and just a few men. At fifty-three, Beauvoir completed her third autobiographical volume with words of intense anguish, utterly devastated by her long-held fears of ageing: she loathed her appearance, grieved over the absence of a man, had lost hope of ever again even 'feeling any new desires', certain that only calamities could now befall her. 'Memories grow thin, myths crack and peel, projects rot in the bud', she mourns. 'If this silence is to last, how long it seems, my short future' (*FC*, 673). Ten years later, she had not found a man, but she had found a new joy, new love, a new sense of unity even, with a woman – Sylvie le Bon, thirty-three years her junior – new projects and a new identification, with feminism. 'Today I've changed', she would say, 'I've really become a feminist.'[38] She was busy meeting feminists from all around the world. *The Second Sex* sold 750,000 copies, in the year it was reissued in the USA, exactly twenty years after its first publication.

Meanwhile, eyeballing her horror of her own ageing, she embarked upon her second major piece of theoretical research, into the social situation of the aged, for *Old Age*, published in 1970. Once again,

Beauvoir identifies the way in which a marginalized Other (the Old) is contrasted with a norm (the young and male). Again, too, she argued that the disparaged meanings attached to this marginalized other are not fixed in the body, but a product of cultural neglect and disparagement: 'man never lives in a state of nature', but rather grapples with an existential situation imposed by his own society. However, just as Beauvoir always idealized and to a large extent identified with the masculine, so too has she always idealized and identified with arrogant youth. On the one hand, she declares: 'We must stop cheating [and] recognize ourselves in this old man or that old woman.'[39] On the other hand, it is she herself who expresses in so much of her autobiographical writing her abhorrence of the ageing body, especially the ageing female body; who in her fiction evokes the ageing and abandoned woman with so little sympathy; who pictures herself always only as a young woman; who works, even in sleep, to deny her age: 'often in my sleep I dream that in a dream I'm fifty-four [which at the time she is], I awake and find I'm only thirty. "What a terrible nightmare I had" says the woman who thinks she's awake' (*FC*, 656).

Tellingly, whereas Lessing in her novels pours scorn on young women's dreams, Beauvoir reprimands the ageing woman for her delusions.[40] Finally, just as her culturally disdained female self did not confront but rather insisted upon her unity with a man, so her ageing one will not criticize but rather establishes a new unity with a younger generation (a woman and movement), making her also young, as well as old:

> The better I knew Sylvie, the more akin I felt to her … all this gave me a certain feeling of being reincarnated.… There is such an interchange between us that I lose the sense of my age: she draws me forwards into her future, and there are times when the present recovers a dimension that it had lost. (*ASD*, 63–4)

She had pulled it off again, identified with the otherness of the youthful other, to escape the plight of the old she worked both to expose and to decry.

This avatar of women's autonomy was the last person who could live unpartnered; this polemicist against the plight of the elderly liked to surround herself with youth; this feminist, who enjoyed the friendship and love of women, never spoke openly of her lesbian experiences (though she certainly publicly supported lesbians). She needed and found close friends, her alternate 'family', and functioned best with a small group or social movement to support her. This was the source of her intellectual and political strength. She muddled through her contradictions, exposing rather than denying them, much like the rest of us, but better than many.

> I am committed to looking reality in the face and speaking about it without pretence: and who dares say it is a pretty sight? … It is just because I loathe unhappiness and because I am not given to foreseeing it that when I do come up against it I am deeply shocked or furiously indignant – I have to communicate my feelings … it is because I reject lies and running away that I am accused of pessimism; but this rejection implies hope – the hope that truth may be of use. And this is a more optimistic attitude than the choice of indifference, ignorance or sham. (*ASD*, 462–3)

Whatever paradoxes sustained her labours, it was a valuable, courageous, if impossible, commitment.

Battling for words

'A persistent intimation of having arrived just a little too late remained with me', Sheila Rowbotham wrote, after meeting the pioneers of the New Left, already rent by division, in the early 1960s.[41] This might surprise her first feminist readers on the Left, for whom, for a while, she often was 'it', the place to begin. (Certainly, she was for me, even before she became my closest, most lasting English friend.) Actually, she nearly did miss out altogether, and were she to join the trauma-trail searching for events on which to lay her miseries down, she could pick out her own beginning. She was told that she was conceived as a 'mistake' by a frail mother, who had had a mastectomy in her forties, to a father well into his fifties: her mother tried to buy quinine to abort her, later hurling herself downstairs, without managing to induce a miscarriage.[42] However, nothing could be less in character than for Rowbotham to use her parents, or any intimate attachment, as scapegoat for her own predicament. Confounding Virginia Woolf's myopic predictions about which women of the future were likely to seek intellectual freedom from men's cultural dominance, she was the daughter not of an educated man, but rather of an overbearing, dogmatic Yorkshire father, suspicious of books (a salesman for an engineering firm); a man with whom she was in perpetual conflict from early childhood, in 'open battle' from adolescence.[43] Although later, struggling to understand her enduring resentment of this stubbornly suffocating patriarch ('whose love choked at the source until its only expression became either possessing and controlling or protective'), she reached out to grasp the experiences that might have so trapped and enraged him, concluding: 'Bitter the death of a father I

never really met.'[44] Luckily, though the father growled, the mother giggled or sighed: 'Time is on your side', this much loved, elegant, mischievous woman would say, having taught her daughter early on the secrets of small subversions of domestic patriarchy.

The only child at home, for a while a gang leader, bossing, directing and fighting her lower-middle-class playmates, in Harehills, Leeds, by the age of seven Rowbotham was regarded as too rough and 'common' by local children's mothers, when her family moved to slightly more affluent Roundhay, leaving her (like Kapp and Lessing in childhood) largely on her own, lonesome, forced to turn inwards to fantasy playmates for her elaborate escapades. 'This "Common" lodged inside me – the lost good times.' A skinny, sickly, bronchial child, she was mocked for her Yorkshire accent when, aged ten, she was packed off alone for the mountain air of Switzerland with older, southern children: 'It's alright for other people to have regional accents, but not for oneself', the sympathetic teacher in the Alps puzzlingly explained. Shortly afterwards, she was sent to a Methodist boarding school in East Yorkshire (again for its healthy air), from which she emerged at seventeen an existentialist – having read Wollstonecraft, Schreiner, Camus, Sartre, Beauvoir, and found an early champion and mentor in a radical, ironic history teacher, who could laugh at the trappings of power. Dressed in black, hair bouffant, fearful of the dangers of sex, yearning for its delights, she was eager for the attention of wild boys: 'I'm a psychopath and I come from Bradford', a leather-clad youth yelled at her. She 'grinned a welcome. It was 1960.'[45]

Forty years later, Rowbotham published her memoir of the 1960s, *Promise of a Dream*.* The legacy of this tumultuous decade, a time when prosperity and transformation seemed equally pervasive, was by then a battleground. Today, it arouses fondness or loathing, but most often dismissal as the last moment of irresponsible, self-absorbed dreamers. Rejecting such dismissal, Rowbotham offers a wry, witty, but always serious appraisal of her hectic route through the decade, knowing it provided the backdrop for her own and others' lasting radicalization. 'Retrieval has become an act of rebellion', she writes, when radical ideas and fashions once inspired by genuinely egalitarian movements are later repackaged – commodified, sanitized, toothless (xv). Trained as a historian, she returned to her diaries, interviewed friends and acquaintances, read everything she could until, 'drowning in memories', she recaptured her often fraught embrace of the seditious 1960s. Like all these memoirists, however, she is well aware of the traps and distortions of memory. Her midnight salvage proves a lonely, bewildering, often disturbing process, rendering the familiar unfamiliar, as she sifts through relics for 'evidence' to narrate 'the tangle of coincidences which contribute to the particular fatality of living a life' (xvii).

The fundamental threat, or exhilarating promise, which feminism offers those it ignites is that of transgressing the barriers between public and private. Rowbotham's memoir embraces that challenge in ways not quite seen before: not to lose herself in politics (like Kapp), to disown it (like Lessing), or to provide her own life as exemplar (like Beauvoir), but rather to resurrect her young selfhood in order to grasp the emergence of a whole social movement of women. Women such as her, caught between vibrant cultural change and political action to eradicate newly visible inequalities, violence and inhumanities, near and far, were bound to feel a queasy disorientation in relation to the subservience expected of them – and, just sometimes, desired as well – in fulfilment of their 'feminine' destiny. Adept penmanship, Methodist missionary zeal, perennial introspectiveness, fanciful retreats, all made Rowbotham a key – if surprising – catalyst for other women at that moment: surprising because she was particularly attuned to hearing dissident mutterings, out of kilter with or suppressed by the single-minded folk she admired who got things done; invaluable because she could express the contradictions and doubts of political lives, just when a rising constellation of women was eager to hear them.

Rowbotham depicts herself as a confused teenager in the late 1950s, determined to break out of the invasive patterns of passivity and hypocrisy, surrounded by silence, ignorance and prejudice, with no guidance, resources or protection for doing so. She gives an extraordinary account of her thoughts at seventeen, physically overpowered but fighting off an attempted rape, while still a virgin travelling alone in France in 1960, her aggressor an Algerian, during the battle she supported for the independence of Algeria. Although determined to recover from the ordeal by engaging in freely chosen sexual contact, she remained for several years comprehensively ignorant about everything to do with sex, still wondering what exactly it was several years after becoming sexually active within the beatnik haunts of the Latin Quarter, Marseilles, Formentera and London: 'I was not the only one steering without

* Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, Penguin, Allen Lane, London, 2000. 262 pp., £18.99 hb., 071 399446 0.

a compass between the dreaded Scylla of frigidity and the humiliating Charybdis branded "nymphomania"' (48).

Nor was she the only one, on arriving at Oxford in 1961, to discover its cunning ways of putting down anybody who is not upper class. The ex-public school boys then identifying as 'revolutionaries' often proved as complicit as others with the Oxbridge mode of maintaining England's ruling elite. Once again, the Yorkshire accent evoked smirks and mimicry, deepening a defiant sense of pugilistic Northern pride – the sly return of the spurned paternal adversary. Her irritation at the male-student sniggers regularly greeting female students aroused further anger. This was a time when women numbered but a quarter of the student population at Oxford. They were still barred from its Student Union (which Rowbotham hated anyway, as the place to advance careers) and subject to harsh paternalistic absurdities in its women's colleges (which enraged her) – especially after a fellow student caught in bed with her boyfriend at St Hilda's was expelled (and subsequently refused entry to other universities), while her lover was merely 'rusticated' for two weeks for his escapade. Worst of all was the desiccated diplomatic history she was expected to study, as if being prepared for a life in the Foreign Office; detached from social history, it left her bored and despondent. She was rescued from these tribulations by the kindness of the older Left historians she managed to encounter, mostly former CP members, who were more interested in people without power. These included Richard Cobb, Bridget and Christopher Hill and, most crucially, Edward and Dorothy Thompson, who became almost surrogate parents after the death of her mother, quickly followed by her father, in her early student years.

These mentors offered her a non-dogmatic Marxism, which seemed engagingly self-critical, ironic and open, expressing the culturally creative intellectual life of the New Left. The Thompsons, however, remained affectionately scornful of her ongoing ties to the more mystical, introspective counterculture of the 1960s, with its unstable mix of hedonism, music and contempt for greed and competitiveness; later, they also opposed her involvement in the militancy of the decade's closing years. Rowbotham's socialist leanings were strengthened at nineteen after meeting the young Marxist economist Bob Rowthorn, who – raised by a single mother and aware of Beauvoir – supported women's emancipation: '[he was] a man who loved me patiently until I had orgasms and who resolutely bullied me into Marxism'.[46] He introduced her to (then still illicit) ways of obtaining birth control, as well as the new generation then (as now) in control of *New Left Review*: Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn. However, it was the broad-based, direct-action politics of CND that attracted her, with its looser style of organizing, that soon reappear in struggles against homelessness, campaigns for user-controlled local resources and, from around 1966, the flowering of the counterculture and underground press, combining psychedelic visions with anarchic politics.

Nevertheless, on moving to Dalston, East London, in 1964, she joined the Hackney Young Socialists the year Harold Wilson's Labour government assumed power, heightening hopes for social reforms and cultural change. There she encountered, in continued action replay, the venomous sectarian combat between differing Trotskyist factions working as 'entrists' inside the Labour Party. 'United Front, *yes*; Popular Front, *no*', the member from Militant explained when she joined, warning her against his enemies from Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League: 'I blinked, trying to concentrate. It would be easy to get this the wrong way round, and his tone suggested the consequences could be dire' (89). Scrutinizing the battle of dissenting certainties, she was quickly an expert on the ritual differences between rival Trotskyist sects, admiring their tenacity (always angry, acerbic, alert for betrayal), even while appalled by their arrogance and dogmatism (which served primarily to drive away any working-class youth they managed to recruit). It was the beginning of a permanent aversion to vanguardism, a conviction that it was not the most effective, least of all the most creative, way of winning people for progressive ends, while sowing the seeds of potential intimidation or abuse. Several short satirical efforts at illustrating this over the years would culminate in her influential critique of Leninism in 1979, in *Beyond the Fragments*, with its call for solidarity between differing campaigning movements, creating immediate but short-lived impact, in by then already harsher times.[47]

From the late 1960s, Rowbotham was swept up in the extraordinary activism of the moment, supporting the surge of trade-union struggles (from fishermen in Hull to women sewing machinists at Ford), befriending and supporting Third World radicals, immersed in the Trotskyist-led Vietnam Solidarity Committee against America's war in Vietnam. All the while, she retained her links to the counterculture, the radical edge of the now internationally celebrated vibrations of 'Swinging London', inspiring her later venture into Agitprop.

Much of this time she was also nursing serial heartaches, experiencing the pain of both rejecting and

being rejected, after separating from Rowthorn, her panicky feelings over 'dependency' generating ambivalent terror and anger (feelings she later connected to reliving battles with her father). She endlessly mulled over the differences, similarities and heartache, seemingly intrinsic to heterosexual passion: all her goals for autonomous, mutual loving, stymied by experience, by internal inconsistencies. In stumbling diary jottings and subsequent reflection, she puzzled over her own sexual energy, at odds with itself, in battles over identity and unity, reason and passion. Meanwhile, the chronically niggling frustrations and humiliations that she knew sprang from her situation as a woman remained quite separate from her political activity: her anger hearing sexual denigration directed at women, outbursts when socialist men dismissed shared housework as 'utopian', an abiding sense of being cut out of men's conversations, rendered invisible, except when being chatted up. These irritations merged with the grief she had felt when her mother lay dying, speaking bitterness over the constraints of her life; a narrowness she saw again in the lives of her women neighbours in Hackney and in the limited horizons of her students, the apprentice hairdressers in the FE college in East London where she was teaching.

In hindsight, Rowbotham saw herself feeling 'profoundly disjointed and askew' by the close of 1967, brooding increasingly in her diary on the intolerable way men perceive (and overlook) women. But it would take a few more years for her to find the right words to explain why she felt so 'struck with the tragedy of the sexual divide and the way it had hobbled me'.[48] 'Feminism', as she first understood it, did not attract her: it was associated with women's formal rights in the public arena, of little relevance to the personal conflicts then distressing her. This lack of fit included her initial glance at Juliet Mitchell's important early theorizing of women's 'overdetermined' subordination in terms of four separate structures, 'production, reproduction, sex and the socialization of children', in *New Left Review* in 1966:[49] 'Adamant that I didn't want to be like a man, the evident contradiction in how to be a woman kept making me question my own emotions and relationships' (159). One new term she heard, 'male chauvinism', would continue 'to churn around' in the back of her head: it was used, extraordinarily then, by an American Leftist after a VSC meeting, sympathizing with her over all the other men 'shutting her up', when she offered suggestions for raising money (162).

However, with the pace of political life becoming even more frantic, it sidelined 'mere' personal frustrations. The year 1968 kicked off with the shattering of US military morale following the relative success of the NLF's massive Tet Offensive in Vietnam – heralding their eventual victory and igniting revolutionary spirits across the globe:

> Beyond party and beyond sects, Vietnam came to symbolize a wider humanitarian struggle between the just and the unjust. Vietnam was to be my generation's Spain and the suffering of its people became imprinted on our psyches. (171)

As in the 1930s, the world polarized, it seemed, into Right and Left. On the one side, the mainstream media were near universally hostile to protesters; Harold Wilson refused to criticize the US Army's intensified bombing of Vietnam; Enoch Powell was inciting racism and encouraging the National Front with his 'Rivers of Blood' speech, blaming immigrants for Britain's economic decline. On the other side, the first New Left reappeared with a fresh edition of the *May Day Manifesto*, discussing the meaning of work and the nature of communications under capitalism, challenging Wilson's worship of modernization.[50] But their intellectual labour was

eclipsed by militancy on every side, as anti-Vietnam War marches grew larger around the world.[51] In May, students in Paris occupied the Sorbonne. To the amazed horror or delight of a watching world, revolt spread to 9 million French workers, who, for a few months, expressed solidarity with the students facing police attacks, demanding change.

In June 1968 Tariq Ali and a number of other radical writers and designers founded the Left newspaper *Black Dwarf*. It was certified radical and non-sectarian, under the banner: 'PARIS, LONDON, ROME, BERLIN. WE WILL FIGHT. WE SHALL WIN.' As protest spread, Rowbotham's diary records her feeling a new 'sense of significance' outside herself. She even briefly joined the Trotskyist International Socialists, abandoning some of her inner journeys for outer ones.[52] She travelled England with the *Dwarf*. Copies disappeared fast at campuses, whether in Hull, Essex or Bristol, where students were in 'occupation', demanding greater democratic control over both educational structures and curriculum (demands which ultimately met with at least some success). To her surprise, and exceptionally then for a woman, she was invited to write for and join the editorial board of *Black Dwarf*. But when she tried to speak at the founding of the Revolutionary Socialist Students' Federation in London, in a miniskirt, she was blasted with the full force of 'revolutionary' sexism:

> To my horror, as I walked to the mike, I was greeted by a tumultuous barrage of wolf whistles and laughter. I remained frozen for what seemed like an eternity.… I had ceased to be an individual and had become an object of derision. It was like a living nightmare. Stubbornness kept me in front of the microphone… Somehow through the whistling and laughter I managed to speak about [the underfunding of] further education. (188)

Some things never change – the class-based underfunding of FE colleges, I mean. Public guffawing watching a young woman try to address a meeting would, within a few short years, be frozen in the throats of men – whatever she was wearing.

Militancy was being forced upon women; a box reopened, the spirit of feminism flew out – although, in Rowbotham's reminiscence, for a while the meetings between women occurred mainly in the toilets, and she herself would end up, repeatedly, silenced by left comrades, feeling once more stifled and 'annihilated by the way men behaved' (190). She expressed these frustrations in a poem the following year, 'The Sad Tale of Nobody Me' (1969): 'who told me to paddle my own canoe/ into the sewer/ of once begun'.[53] In 1968, Nobody Me was getting into further trouble with the ever more militant Male Somebodies, as the supposedly non-sectarian *Dwarf* was cleft by enmities, once Tariq Ali joined the Trotskyist International Marxist Group (IMG), which heightened Rowbotham's aversion to self-appointed vanguards, leading others formed only in their own image. 'Students the New Revolutionary Vanguard', the Dwarf declared (forgetting the question mark) (191). She was equally dismayed by proposals for pin-ups to adorn the *Dwarf*, penning her own riposte on men wanking in the revolution: 'Let us stick cunts/ On our projecting egos/ Calling this comradeship/ And the end of exploitation.'[54]

Rowbotham escaped these tensions, forming a group she called AgitProp, working with her friend John Hoyland (also on the *Dwarf*), to bring a more radical aesthetic into political actions. Making their colourful mark in intricate displays and dynamic poster presentations on demonstrations and at festivals, they nevertheless found that most campaigning groups had little interest in linking politics with art, being too attached to their thick black lines and white, wordy leaflets (182). That year she managed to turn around the attitudes of some of the young apprentice engineers she was teaching, who had earlier supported Enoch Powell; this confirmed her sense that political polarizations are more complex than they might seem – on both sides. She recalls not only the 'unrelenting hatred' in the eyes of some fascist supporters of Enoch Powell picketing an anti-racist march, but the upper-class scorn in the voice of a Notting Hill 'Situationist', sneering at dockers supporting Powell.

Rowbotham remained on the *Dwarf* just long enough to write and solicit articles for an issue (this time encouraged by Tariq Ali) heralding *The Year of the Militant Woman*, which appeared in 1969. As in her teaching job, it enabled her to reach beyond the radical student milieu, writing of Rose Boland, who spoke of wanting 'recognition' as much as better pay for women working at Ford, and of Lil Bilocca's campaign for trawler safety after the death of forty Hull fishermen. Rowbotham always emphasized that working-class women were pivotal in initiating women's liberation; it was they who provided the early role models, alongside Vietnamese women guerrilla fighters. Preparing for that issue of the *Dwarf*, she read other attempts at combining the personal and the political, in Beauvoir and Lessing, later concluding: 'I had *become* a woman..… As the words splattered out on the pages, it felt as if I had reached a clearing' (209). The words she wrote, addressing equal pay, child care, contraception, the demeaning of women's

bodies, included little things, such as 'not wanting to be … sent off to make the tea or shuffled in to the social committee'. But women were also insisting on something much less tangible: 'a smouldering, bewildered consciousness with no shape – a muttered dissatisfaction – which suddenly shoots to the surface and EXPLODES' (211).

Many women quickly found their own way onto the clearing she had reached. 1969 was the year the tall, flauntingly sexy Australian Germaine Greer (then working with the radical porn magazine *SUCK*) was busy writing *The Female Eunuch*, which, both despite and because of its snipes at women and feminism, would become an instant bestseller in mainstream culture, popular with both men and women. It was the year the first Women's Liberation group appeared in the UK, in North London, including some young Americans aware of the women's groups formed the previous year to confront sexism in Left groups in the USA. The first National Women's Liberation Conference in the UK was set in motion for the following year, after Rowbotham announced a meeting (again to guffaws) for those interested in talking about women, at one of Raphael Samuel's History Workshops. Just for a change, as she later wryly notes, the assertive predictions of a Left paper 'had been vindicated by history' (252). 1969 *was* the turning point in the rebirth of the 'militant woman' in Britain. Summing up her views in a 1969 article for *Black Dwarf*, 'Cinderella Organizes Buttons', she realized she could not bear to defend her views before what would be a largely hostile editorial group. Instead, she wrote a letter of resignation, suggesting that to understand why she found it hard to discuss what she had written on women, the men should spend two minutes 'imagining they had cunts'. 'This is outrageous', they all agreed; the silence her words briefly evoked was one of embarrassed anger, not creative compliance. It would take twenty years for her novel challenge to become commonplace – if only on 'Queer' platforms in academia.

1969 was also the year Rowbotham began writing her first book, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, seeking to understand how, historically, women had managed to educate themselves and fight for better lives, their collective action often emerging out of initially spontaneous forms of resistance. Her editor at Penguin, Neil Middleton, remarked that he'd never met a writer who wrote so well, but who 'was so unconfident'.[55] Part of that book, completed in 1971, would be separated off and published as *Woman's Consciousness: Man's World* (1973), one of the founding texts of socialist feminism. The times were just right for her thoughts to inspire women around the world. Having always stressed her indebtedness to others, her former lover Rowthorn had joked that others could now take heart from her, since they would realize that anything she could do, they could do too. Not so much vanguard, one might say, as vigilant forager: 'I seemed often to bumble along almost unconsciously into doing a lot of things in my life which have then connected me to some radical mood in the culture' (247). When that mood began to change, a decade later, the audience for her style of politics began to evaporate, even as her own thoughts shifted to embrace new challenges.

Generational histories, temporal belongings

Rowbotham's abiding legacy is both her struggle for words, and her suspicion of them: 'As soon as we learn words we find ourselves outside them.… There is a long inchoate period during which the struggle between the language of experience and the language of theory becomes a kind of agony.'[56] Reviewing *Promise of a Dream*, the smart but cynical Jenny Diski echoed the current sentiments of her former surrogate parent and mentor Doris Lessing, when she saw in it no more than evidence of banal generational fighting: to be young is, ineluctably, to be opposed to the old. Meanwhile, she suggested as her own lasting lesson in disenchantment, the world takes 'not a blind bit of notice' anyway, but goes on its way impervious to the struggle between age groups, whose 'cycle of anger, action and failure is as inevitable as hormone fluctuation'.[57] She could hardly be more wrong. The world takes all too much notice of generational stirrings, ever watchful for ways to contain and commercialize the creative resistance of its young critics.

When the women's movement ran with the slogan of the American New Left 'the personal is political', it had excellent reason for doing so. Hidden cruelties and violence were rife in the domestic 'haven', hypocrisy endemic to sexual life. The 'freedom' masquerading as 'revolutionary' was blatantly sexist (while veiling a host of other ingrained pecking orders). There was little that was unchallenging about centring attention on personal life and intimate experience when most women had yet to learn that their bodies, sexuality, intellect and inclinations were not inherently ludicrous, unless hidden or mimicking those of men. Moreover, it accompanied an overly moralistic disapproval, not encouragement, of using that personal voice for self-promotion. Women who had wanted to get a sense of themselves as autonomous agents in the world of the

1960s had metaphorically to switch sex to do so, as almost all of my generation recall.

However, what was beyond words yesterday, may be cliché today; the silent scream, once heard, can be isolated to mute out other signs of distress, even those once perceived. New ways of talking and organizing pioneered by Women's Liberation, which at first felt so fragile, did eventually succeed in pushing women's interests onto mainstream political agendas, especially where occupational openings were expanding for some women. But they could not forestall the appearance of new modes of manipulation, often of a curiously self-righteous kind, as orthodoxies congealed.

Whether the insights individuals take with them from one period to the next are helpful, and for whom, depends on the possibilities for translation between differing landscapes and the figures in them. While political parties always hand down memories (albeit often self-serving and distorted), nonaligned activists and thinkers, especially prevalent from the 1960s, have *only* our snatched and fleeting reconstructions. Here, personal narratives of political journeys become most valuable. In the women's memoirs, for all their idiosyncrasies (and access to the privileges of Western women), I sense more background nuance and foreground uncertainties than I do in the men's. It is certainly a cliché, but they expose secrets of love, loss, loneliness, anger and longings, which shift significantly as time passes, and minds and bodies age and weaken. From their stories it is easier to divine movements between resistance and accommodation, despair and renewal, in both personal and political life, than it is from the narratives of those for whom 'politics' involves the classification of life neatly into loyalty and betrayal, success and failure. I am uncertain how age figures in the men's memoirs, learning little of the impact of generational histories and tensions, as the men seem to remain more solidly at the centre of their specific domains, the 'young Turks' who challenge them, perhaps, more often departing to create their rival camps.

Grasping more clearly today much that I never understood, or sought to understand, about repetitions and denials of fissures and follies on the Left, the transmission of generational histories appears more important than ever. Older radicals and younger rebels have equal need of such history. At a time when ageing is increasingly disdained as intolerable, it becomes almost subversive to celebrate the particular experience and self-reflective knowledge it may at times bring with it. Intergenerational affinities can curb the stabilization of stereotypical age roles: the confidence, anger and cynicism of young critics; the resignation, disillusionment and bitterness of old-timers. And such affinities are not necessarily as difficult to construct as we are led to expect. Since identifications are largely fantasmatic, we can be – in a sense, we cannot avoid being – young and old at the same time. Lessing rejected politics, partly, as I see it, because she turned her back so determinedly on any affirmative identifications with a younger generation. Beauvoir, in contrast, launched herself into just such identifications and affiliations. Interestingly, Rowbotham points out that in 1969 just a few women who were much older appeared at planning meetings for the Ruskin conference:

> This generation were like political grandmothers to us, closer to our wavelength than the political mothers – the left women in the generation which preceded ours. Formed by the thirties and forties, they would often remonstrate with us for identifying as 'women'. They had their own struggle to be independent, political activists and saw the 'women' tag as restrictive; to us it was liberatory. (252–3)

Older people's identification with the young is often disparaged as a 'disavowal' of ageing. But we can, and we do, have a more complicated relationship to time than this, never more so than on our political voyages.

Notes

1. Lynne Segal, 'Lost Worlds: Political Memoirs of the Left in Britain', *Radical Philosophy* 121, September/October 2003, pp. 6–24.
2. Raphael Samuel, 'Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism', Part Two, *New Left Review* 156, March/April 1986, p. 35.
3. Personal communication from Sally Davidson and Nick Jacobs. Kapp's memoir, it should be noted, was significantly revised and edited by Charmian Brinson, before it was accepted by Verso.
4. Quoted in Sally Alexander, '"I Have Always Been a Writer" – Yvonne Kapp: Writer and Socialist', in S. Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, Virago, London, 1994, p. 189.
5. J.D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science*, Macmillan, London and New York, 1939.
6. See Quentin Bell, *Elders and Betters*, John Murray, London, 1995, p. 11.
7. Kathleen Hale, *A Slender Reputation: An Autobiography*, Frederick Warne, London, p. 126.
8. Alexander, *Becoming a Woman*, p. 184.
9. Some later travelled on to the USA or Australia, like my own grandparents, who had passed that way a little earlier, fleeing the conscription of Jews in Vilnius.
10. Lessing on her second husband is quoted in Barbara Ellen, 'From Feminist Icon to Male Champion', *Observer*, 9 September 2001, p. 2.
11. One of many places Lessing denied ever being a feminist was in conversation with Barbara Ellen, ibid. The back

page of the collection in which this preface was most recently published has a 'Note from the author' asserting 'I have changed my mind about politics since I wrote these essays.' Paul Schleuter, ed., *Doris Lessing: A Small Personal Voice – Essays, Reviews, Interviews*, Flamingo, London, 1994.

12. Quoted in Ellen, 'From Feminist Icon to Male Champion', p. 2.
13. It was my friend Barbara Taylor who pointed out this Freudian reading to me.
14. Doris Lessing, 'My Father', in Ursula Owen, ed., *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters*, Virago, London, 1983, p. 79.
15. Doris Lessing, 'Afterword' to Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm'* (1968), in Shlueter, ed., *Doris Lessing*, pp. 162–3.
16. Ibid., p. 182.
17. Much like Jenny Diski (mentioned below), who was once fostered by Lessing when, for several years in the 1960s, she became a 'housemother' to various young waifs and strays.
18. Hywel Williams, 'The Dream Is Over', *Guardian*, 22 September 2001, available online http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,555617,00html.
19. In personal conversation with Sarah Benton.
20. Eric Hobsbawm, quoting Brecht, in his *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, Penguin, Allen Lane, London, 2000, p. 139.
21. Doris Lessing, 'Preface to *The Golden Notebook*' (1971), in Schleuter, ed., *Doris Lessing*, p. 46.
22. Quoted in Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1990, p. 617.
23. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. H.M. Parshley, Picador, London, 1988, pp. 295, 29, 328, 643.
24. Lisa Appignanesi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 2; Sylia Lawson, *How Simone de Beauvoir Dies in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002, pp. 153–4; Ann Curthoys, 'Adventures of Feminism: Simone de Beauvior's Autobiographies, Women's Liberation and Self-fashioning', *Feminist Review* 64, Spring 2000; Margaret Walters, 'The Rights and Wrongs of Woman: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau and Simone de Beauvoir', in *The Rights and Wrongs of Woman*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 351; Kate Millett, quoted in Penny Forster and Imogen Stubbs, eds, *Daughters of de Beauvoir*, Women's Press, London, 1989, p. 22; Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 10; Judith Okley, *Simone de Beauvoir*, Virago, London, 1986. p. ix.
25. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 295.
26. Quoted and discussed in a fascinating reflection of the Beauvoir's legacy, p. 151; Fouque quoted in Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 553.
27. Angela Carter, 'Colette', in *Nothing Sacred*, Virago, London, 1982, p. 176.
28. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Frechtman, Citadel, New York, 1976, p. 37.
29. Margaret Walters, 'The Rights and Wrongs of Woman', p. 369.
30. Mary Evans, 'Lies, All Lies: Auto/biography as Fiction', in *Missing Person: The Impossibility of Auto/biography*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 40.
31. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p. 148.
32. Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p. 252.
33. Sartre, *Words*, pp. 15, 148.
34. Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre,* André Deutsch, London, 1984, p. 168.
35. Sartre, *Words*, p. 158.
36. Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 187.
37. A famous line from Sartre's play *No Exit* (1944).
38. De Beauvoir, 'Today I've changed – I've really become a feminist', *Seven Days*, 8 March 1972.
39. Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, Penguin, Harmonsworth, 1977, p. 12.
40. Lessing, *The Sweetest Dream*, HarperCollins, London, 2002; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*, Fontana, London, 1971.
41. Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, Penguin, London, 2000, p. 64.
42. Sheila Rowbotham, 'Our Lance', in Owen, ed., *Fathers*, p. 208.
43. Sheila Rowbotham, 'Revolt in Roundhay', in Liz Heron, ed., *Truth, Dare or Promise: Reflections by Daughters*, Virago, London, 1985, p. 208.
44. 'Our Lance', p. 216.
45. 'Revolt in Roundhay', pp. 193, 196, 210.
46. Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness*, p. 17.
47. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments*, Merlin, London, 1980.
48. Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness*, p. 20.
49. Juliet Mitchell, 'The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review* 40, November/December 1966, pp. 11–37.
50. Raymond Williams, ed., *May Day Manifesto*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968.
51. Although, interestingly, at its height, in London in late 1968, and seen as huge, the Vietnam solidarity march was less than a tenth – at 100,000 – of the largest march against invading Iraq – at over one million – in 2003.
52. Sheila Rowbotham, 'Diary in the Life of Sheila Rowbotham', in *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings of Sheila Rowbotham*, Virago, London, 1983, p. 47.
53. Ibid, p. 53.
54. Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Role of Women in the Revolution Defined by Some Socialist Men', pinned up in the *Dwarf* office in Carlyle Street in 1968, reprinted in Lillian Mohin, *One Foot on the Mountain,* Onlywomen Press, London, 1979, p. 210.
55. Sheila Rowbotham, 'Remembering 1967', in *History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967–1991*, History Workshop, London, 1991, p. 6.
56. Rowbotham, in *Dreams and Dilemmas*, p. 33.
57. Jenny Diski, 'A Long Forgotten War', *London Review of Books*, 6 July 2000, pp. 9–10.