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Vulnerability and life writing: Nancy Mairs's autobiographical essays

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Autobiography is often predicated upon a position of mastery, that of a subject taking stock of his life and reconstituting his identity through time (Gusdorf 35). The recent rise of disability memoirs calls into question this conception. Written from a vulnerable position, these texts put the body at the center of their investigations; they question the fiction of the independent self and invite us to rethink our whole notion of subjectivity.

This article will focus on the work of Nancy Mairs, whose autobiographical essays offer an interesting insight into the way vulnerability can shape life writing and redefine it as a genre. Born in 1943, Nancy Mairs discovered when she was in her thirties that she was suffering from multiple sclerosis, a degenerative disease that gradually deprived her of control over her body. Illness is not the only form of vulnerability which Mairs writes about, however; a dedicated feminist, she addresses the problem of patriarchal oppression again and again. This paper will restrict itself to the question of disability, although, as will appear, the two are often connected.

In her introduction to *Voice Lessons*, Nancy Mairs writes that she likes the essay "for its power to both focus and disrupt" (*Voice Lessons* 4). This form, which casts doubt upon the idea of truth and turns the thinking process into an exploration and an experience, plays a central role in her appropriation of the autobiographical genre. Through it, life-writing comes to be redefined in three interrelated ways.

In her work, Nancy Mairs takes issue with what she calls "patriarchal bifurcations" (*Voice Lessons* 114) and develops a form of writing which refuses to separate body and mind, and strives to undo usual hierarchies as well as linear narratives. She also approaches in a very personal way the question of the representativeness of the autobiographical writer, his/her position at the crossroads of the personal and the universal. Her vulnerable and marginal position as a disabled person becomes a vantage point from which she exposes the patriarchal beliefs shaping our society and the ableist[1] assumptions deeply embedded in our use of language. Finally and perhaps most radically, her essays call into question the autonomous, independent model of self which underlies our vision of autobiography and subjectivity in general; in her work, the "I" is radically decentered and envisioned relationally, as part of something larger.

[1] The concept of "ableism" was introduced by disability theorists in the 1980s. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as "discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities."

Against "patriarchal bifurcations": essaying the body

Writing the body

The most striking feature of autobiographies written by disabled writers is their intense bodily awareness. While one may not agree entirely with Thomas Couser's claim that "[u]ntil quite recently, life writing has participated in the general evasion or effacement of the body" (*Signifying Bodies* 10), one might point out, however, that it is often the desiring body that occupies center stage in autobiographical texts and that, in most cases, physical vulnerability is a temporary angle of approach to the world.

However, disabled writers do not merely invite us to a confrontation with the repressed–the body in general and their suffering body in particular—they also challenge our very way of envisioning the body. Such is the case of Nancy Mairs, whose refusal to separate body and mind, to consider the first as an opaque mass governed by the second stands in sharp contrast with a long tradition. In "Plunging in," the opening essay of *Waist-High in the World*, she asks this enigmatic question: "Who would I be if I didn't have MS? Literally, no body. I am not 'Nancy + MS' and no subtraction can render me whole" (*Waist-High* 8). The pun on "no body" highlights the impossibility to dissociate her identity from her disease and, therefore, from her embodied self. MS is not something that was added to a preexisting self; it became part of her identity, which grew and developed with it.

Emblematic of this binary vision which Nancy Mairs questions is the topic she was assigned for a conference: "conceptualize the body" (*Waist-High* 40). The slightly oxymoronic formula implies that the speaker can dissociate herself from her own body to think about it and, even more disturbingly, turn other people's bodies into an object of thought. If good health may deceive us into thinking that the mind controls the body, illness makes us aware of the interdependence of the two according to Nancy Mairs: "The body in trouble, becoming both a warier and a humbler creature, is more apt to experience herself as all of a piece" (*Waist-High* 42). Vulnerability thus performs a revelatory function, leading her to question false evidences.

This artificial division between body and mind is but one of many binary divisions which structure our experience. Nancy Mairs's rejection of what she calls "patriarchal bifurcations" (*Voice Lessons* 114)–body vs mind (*Voice Lessons* 114), ideas vs emotions (*Voice Lessons* 25), body vs spirit, creative vs academic writing, intellect vs desire (*Voice Lessons* 36)–lies behind her preference for the form of the essay.

Subverting hierarchies: The essay as embodied thought

R. Lane Kauffmann defines the essay as "a mode of thought poised between literature and philosophy, art and science, holding the antinomies of imagination and reason, spontaneity and discipline, in productive tension" (Kauffmann 68). This hybrid, unstable genre becomes for Nancy Mairs a possible place of "reconciliation" of body and mind, the concrete and the abstract. The essay can in fact be characterized as a place where thought experiments itself as it comes to life, not as something purely abstract, absolute, always there. With this genre, thought experiences its situatedness; the role of the body in the thinking process is made clear.

"On being a cripple," one of her most famous essays, is emblematic in that respect. In the opening lines, Nancy Mairs explains how it originated. She was in the women's room, thinking about writing an essay on disability, when her train of thought was suddenly brought to a halt by a bad fall:

> The other day I was thinking of writing an essay on being a cripple. I was thinking hard in one of the stalls of the women's room in my office building, as I was shoving my shirt into my jeans and tugging up my zipper. Preoccupied, I flushed, picked up my book bag, took my cane down from the hook, and unlatched the door. So many movements unbalanced me, and as I pulled the door open I fell over backward, landing fully clothed on the toilet seat with my legs splayed in front of me: the old beetle-on-its-back routine. Saturday afternoon, the building deserted, I was free to laugh aloud as I wriggled back to my feet, my voice bouncing off the yellowish tiles from all directions. Had anyone been there with me, I'd have been still and faint and hot with chagrin. I decided that it was high time to write the essay. (*Plain Text* 9)

The episode is by no means purely anecdotal or pleasantly provocative. The thinking process appears as something concrete, located, associated with a specific place. Disruption brings it to a halt but also stimulates it. Nancy Mairs refuses to separate the lower functions from the noble activity of the mind and shows that the body is deeply implicated in her reflection; the essay begins as abstract thinking but it is an incident that reminds her of her bodily condition that actually triggers the writing process. Her fall, probably caused by facilities ill-suited to her condition, implicitly brings to the fore the issue of accessibility, a most pressing one in her case.

The previous example shows the interdependence of body and mind, but in its selection of the women's room as the backdrop to her essay, it also highlights Nancy Mairs's rejection of usual hierarchies. Revealingly, she always takes ordinary events of her daily life as a starting point.[2] This complex blend of the concrete and the abstract, which incorporates the feminine world of domestic and family life, echoes her rejection of the mind-body dualism and of other

[2] See for instance "Illiteracy. July 16, 1987", a column about women's illiteracy inspired by Henrietta, her cleaner (*Carnal Acts* 34-38).

hierarchies. Refusing to hover abstractly over facts, the essay offers itself as an example of embodied thought.

Adorno writes that in the essay thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth, and that it is in its movement forward that it becomes true.[3] Calling into question patriarchal visions of truth, the essay becomes a methodology for Mairs, a way to overcome the dichotomies that divide our experience artificially and to promote a more inclusive vision of things and form of knowledge.

Against linear life narratives

The form of the essay also offers an alternative to the traditional chronological autobiographical narratives she feels uncomfortable with: "Although drawn to the autobiographical task, I do not wish however to produce an autobiography bound by the narrative conventions of temporal linearity" (*Voice Lessons* 115). In her essays, Nancy Mairs emphasizes the sense of temporal discontinuity and unpredictability she experiences in connection with her body. MS is a degenerative disease and her situation therefore keeps evolving: "I just get used to living one way when I shift to another" (*Carnal Acts* 21). This sense of temporal dislocation appears clearly in a passage in which she envisions the ethical implications of provisions she might consider making for a future self. Talking about her fear at the evolution of her disease, she writes for instance: "And now I am the woman I thought I could never bear to be" (*Carnal Acts* 16).[4]

This discontinuity of the self may explain why totalizing versions of identity offered by more traditional, linear autobiographical forms appeal very little to her. Everything is temporary and there is no final truth for Nancy Mairs; the essay, with its interruptions, its deliberate provisionality, becomes a more effective way of incorporating the body without giving in to the temptation of submitting it to some artificial teleological end.

[3] « Dans l'essai emphatique, la pensée se débarrasse de l'idée traditionnelle de la vérité. » (Adorno 14) « C'est dans son avancée, qui le fait se dépasser lui-même, qu'il devient vrai, et non pas dans la recherche obsessionnelle de fondements, semblable à celle d'un trésor enfoui » (Adorno 17).

[4] The same idea is also expressed in "On Being a Cripple": "Gradually I came to understand that the Nancy who might one day lie inert under a bedsheet, arms and legs paralyzed, unable to feed or bathe herself, unable to reach out for a gun, a bottle of pills, was not the Nancy I was at present, and that I could not presume to make decisions for that future Nancy, who might well not want in the least to die" (*Plain Text* 18).

The autobiographical essay as political statement

The writer as witness

In his analysis of the genre of the essay, Pierre Glaudes notes that one of its functions is to allow a collective voice expressing a "social truth" to make itself heard.[5] Making full use of this dimension of the essay, Nancy Mairs turns autobiography into a political form of writing, a place of intersection between the personal and the universal.

Autobiographers writing from a vulnerable position or belonging to what is called minority groups often speak on behalf of a community. Nancy Mairs's position is more complicated. Speaking as a disabled person, she introduces the reader to the reality and complexity of her condition but refuses to assume the position of a spokesperson: "I want to make clear that I speak as an individual and that I am not a representative of 'my kind' whatever you take that to be" (*Waist-High* 12). One of the reasons is the multiple forms disability can take: "I wouldn't presume to conceptualize their bodies," she says in "Body in Trouble" about people suffering from conditions she is not familiar with (*Waist-High* 43). The sentence reflects both Mairs's ethical reluctance to speak for other people and the danger of conceptual thought aiming at generalization and divorced from bodily experience.

The complexity of Nancy Mairs's essays thus lies in the fact that they tread a thin line between the personal and the collective. They make no claim to universality and remain deeply anchored in her point of view; sticking to her own experience appears to her as the best way to deliver some kind of truth. Nancy Mairs thus positions herself as a "witness" to quote her own words (*Carnal Acts* 77, *Waist High* 63). Metaphors linked to vision and point of view in keeping with this role run throughout her essays: "From my wheelchair, nothing looks the same. I occupy a world at the height of your navel; there is a world down there" (*Voice Lessons* 46). Her ultimate goal can also be stated in visual terms for her writing is meant to help "insert disability […] in our field of vision" (*Carnal Acts* 34).

Nancy Mairs turns her vulnerable position into a way to expose the patriarchal and ableist assumptions that influence our vision of life and of disability. Interweaving the personal and the collective, she uses her life to testify and to deconstruct prevailing views of disability. Her autobiography becomes a tool of cultural critique.

Rethinking disability

In her essays, Nancy Mairs calls into question the way people think of disability as a separate category. To a certain extent, her approach echoes the social approach fostered by disability

[5] « [C]'est aussi une tendance de l'Essai : faire entendre une voix collective, exprimer une vérité sociale » (Glaudes 146).

studies, which analyze disability not so much as an intrinsic difference but as something produced by social conditions. Rosemary Garland Thomson thus describes disability as "a cultural interpretation of human variation rather than an inherent inferiority, a pathology to cure, or an undesirable trait to eliminate." Disability studies thus find "disability's significance in interactions between bodies and their social and material environments" (Thomson 1557). In other words, society's incapacity or refusal to accommodate otherness plays a more important role in the production of disability than the impairment itself.

Nancy Mairs never plays down the difficulties inherent in her condition. Taking issue, however, with the unconscious association between disability and a deviation from the norm, she undertakes to normalize it. She refuses to define herself through her disease and repeatedly emphasizes in her essays what she shares with the reader: "In most ways I'm just like every other woman of my age, nationality and socio-economic background" (*Carnal Acts* 32-33); "I lead, on the whole, an ordinary life, probably rather like the one I would have led had I not had MS" (*Plain Text* 12). Using the word "ordinary" in unexpected association with disability, she turns the readers' perspective upside down, reversing the paradigms that structure their approach to reality. Addressing the absence of representation in advertising she also writes: "To depict disabled people in the ordinary activities of daily life is to admit that there is something ordinary about disability itself, that it may enter anybody's life" (*Carnal Acts* 33). The chiasmus (disabled/ordinary/ordinary/disability) creates a kind of mirror effect which reflects disability back onto those who do not want to see it. Disability is dismissed, hidden from sight because it forces us to become aware of our own vulnerability, the fragility of our condition.

Nancy Mairs's overall purpose is to make us aware of the fluidity of categories. This fluidity is best exemplified in the expression she uses to talk about people in good health, TAPs– "Temporarily Abled Persons" (*Carnal Acts* 34)–, which rejects the stark opposition between able-bodied and disabled people. Looking at disability forces the readers to reconsider their own condition, to become aware of their own vulnerability and question the line they draw between health and disability. Nancy Mairs thus keeps reversing the usual perspective on things to jolt the readers out of their mental habits; this defamiliarizing dimension of her work appears most clearly in her approach to language.

Investigating language, calling patriarchy into question

Language is the privileged focus of her investigations for power relations are embedded deep in it. Nancy Mairs often starts her reflection by pondering the meaning of words, redefining them and drawing vocabulary distinctions. The genre of the essay is by definition tentative; it circles around its object, never captures it completely. Language becomes a territory Nancy

Mairs explores, and her attempt to pin down the exact meaning of certain words turns into an experience which becomes the very substance of her essays.

In "On being a cripple," Nancy Mairs explains why she chose the unflattering word "cripple" to describe her condition:

> First, the matter of semantics. I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me. I choose from among several possibilities, the most common of which are "handicapped" and "disabled." I made the choice a number of years ago, without thinking, unaware of my motives for doing so. Even now, I'm not sure what those motives are, but I recognize that they are complex and not entirely flattering. People–crippled or not–wince at the word "cripple," as they do not at "handicapped" or "disabled." Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger. (*Plain Text* 9)

The selection of an unexpected, slightly quaint word becomes an act of self-assertion and a way to claim visibility through language; Nancy Mairs wants to create a moment of suspension which brings the fluidity of verbal exchanges to a halt and makes people think.

Her concern with naming is fraught with ethical implications. Nancy Mairs refuses to use fuzzy, politically correct expressions such as "differently abled" which hide reality as it is. In another essay, she dismisses the expression "physically challenged," detecting in it an evasion from the reality of our bodily condition: "We really don't want to confront the transformations of our bodies" (*Carnal Acts* 101). The word "transformations" is central here; the language we use to talk about disability should accommodate the fundamental instability, the vulnerability of our condition according to Nancy Mairs.

These lexical analyses often provide the sinuous line around which her essays develop to examine established truths and challenge commonly held assumptions solidified in language. Making full use of the essay's exploratory potential, Nancy Mairs calls the meaning of words into question, destabilizes established association between signifier and signified, and unpacks unconscious associations nested in some words. She emphasizes polysemy to expose the fragility of intellectual constructs. Language's apparent fixity reveals its fragility and the artificiality of the world vision it underpins. Examining the word "power," she writes for instance: "To have power is to alienate oneself however, because power is always power over, and the preposition demands an object" (*Voice Lessons* 41). Concepts are turned on their heads and reveal their unsuspected frailty in her work.

Doing away with the individual "I" of autobiography: A relational poetics

As Gusdorf explains in his seminal essay "Conditions and limits of autobiography," autobiography is usually predicated upon a vision of the self as an autonomous individual, an independent, self-contained entity (Gusdorf 29-31). Nancy Mairs's vulnerable position leads her to question this model of subjectivity and to emphasize the relational dimension of all lives.

Conceptualizing oneself through others: a family portrait

Nancy Mairs's essays in fact repeatedly show her conceptualizing herself through others. Her family loom large in her writings, which present the reader with a dense texture of interwoven lives. Her husband and her daughter reappear from one essay to the next and the reader becomes gradually familiar with her whole family. "My family has chosen to remain with me, and so when I write about living with MS, inevitably I write about their lives as well" (*Carnal Acts* 14). Their voices are incorporated in the form of quotations or of entire dialogues which disrupt the flow of her thought.

This, of course, is by no means exceptional in autobiographies, a genre in which the narrator's family usually plays a crucial role. What differs, however, is that Nancy Mairs is not trying to trace influences in her growth as an individual but to show the interconnectedness of all lives, the impossibility to envision one without the others. She always tries to understand who she is through an analysis of her interactions with her family. The individual "I" is never at the center; numerous essays are therefore dedicated to her husband, her children or her foster son.[6]

The complexity of the relationship between self and other appears in the following two quotations, which make clear that her sense of self as an individual is mediated by the presence of her husband: "George's presence roots me more deeply in my own experience" (*Carnal Acts* 74); in "Body in Trouble" she also writes, "In fact, he is at peace with my body in a way that I am not" (*Waist-High* 48). Ironically echoing in this essay the above-mentioned conference topic that made her so uncomfortable ("conceptualize the body"), she suggests the complex interweaving of body and mind, but also self and other, at work in the construction of self: "Our bodies conceptualize themselves but also each other, murmuring: Yes, you are there; yes, you are you; yes you can love and be loved" (*Waist-High* 50).

Writing as reconnection: the reader in the text

[6] See for instance "Ron Her Son", "A Letter to Matthew", "On Being raised by a Daughter" (*Plain Text*).

Writing about her conception of autobiography in *Voice Lessons*, Nancy Mairs protests against what she calls the "moldy" definition of the genre as the report of "the great deeds of great men" (*Voice Lessons* 107). Not only does such a vision bar women's access to this genre, but in its glorification of the individual "I", it also goes against the role Nancy Mairs assigns to autobiography, which is not one of separation but of "connection" (*Voice Lessons* 108).

Drawing upon Nancy Chodorow's idea that girls experience themselves as more connected to their mothers than boys and therefore do not feel the same need to define themselves as separate individuals, she writes: "The work I have chosen demands connection, not separation: writing, weaving and mending relationships, serving people in need. Fame simply wouldn't be of use" (*Voice Lessons* 108). Autobiography is not the place where an individual self reveals itself and tries to understand its uniqueness but a mirror for other subjectivities: "I want my 'life,' in reporting the details of my own life, to recount, at the level beneath the detail, the lives of others" (*Voice Lessons* 109). Nancy Mairs completely reverses the traditional function of autobiography as the narrative of an individual, exceptional "I"; self and other become indistinguishable in this conception.

Her relationship with the reader is particularly emblematic of the need for connection expressed in her essays. Her frequent addresses are by no means mere rhetorical devices meant to secure his attention. Addressing the reader in the preface to *Voice Lessons,* she writes, "you are […] [t]he 'you' of my 'I'" (*Voice Lessons* 10), thus revealing the impossibility for her to disentangle self and other, to conceptualize herself without another subjectivity. As she explains in *Carnal Acts*, one of the essays of this collection, "On Uttering the Unspeakable," was written as an answer to her readers' responses to *Plaintext* (*Carnal Acts* 10). Houses are privileged metaphors of self in Nancy Mairs's work; "*Mi casa e su casa,*" she notes in "Reading Houses, Writing Lives," remembering a song which children sang with their arms forming an arch (*Voice Lessons* 117). In her essays, the text becomes a hospitable structure welcoming both the texts of the past and the reader.

This appears quite clearly in "Plunging In," the first essay of *Waist-High in the World*: the book opens on a Nancy Mairs in the throes of a terrible writer's block. It is a phone call from a girl called Jennifer with MS symptoms asking for support which sparks off the writing process: resuming her work, Nancy Mairs decides that her next book will be precisely meant to help girls like her cope with the disease. Her essays are thus intensely dialogic; they grow out of interactions with other voices, with interruptions which paradoxically allow her to move on.

The reader is present at every stage of the writing process. Reflecting about the role of what she calls "the literature of disaster," Nancy Mairs writes that it is meant to "comfort" (*Voice*

Lessons 127). Space metaphors play a crucial role in her writings, which often describe disability as a foreign country. Her purpose is to provide a map or a Baedeker for the able-bodied reader who might one day be faced with same situation:

> In writing about my experience, I am, first of all, trying to make sense of it and to make it bearable for myself. But I am also trying to draw you into it, to carry you along through it, so that whatever extraordinary circumstances you one day meet–and you will because all creatures do–you will have, in some way, "been there" before. (*Carnal Acts* 5-6)

Interestingly, this relational dimension of reading works both ways: "your presence is especially vital if I am seeking [...] to reconnect myself–now so utterly transformed by events unlike any I've experienced before as to seem a stranger even to myself–to the human community" (*Voice Lessons* 130). The writer helps people who might feel excluded because of their condition to feel part of the human community; but the presence of the reader also allows her to reassert her link to other human beings. Subjectivity appears as the result of a kind of circulating movement: author and reader mutually constitute each other, through their interactions, as part of a community.

"[T]aking care": Dependence, interdependence and the reversibility of care

This interdependence is an often unperceived dimension of human relationships which Nancy Mairs's writings keep emphasizing. Making the most of the heuristic potential of the essay, of its exploratory and disruptive dimension, she invites us to see relationships we might consider one-sided as reversible. "On Being Raised by a Daughter" (*Plain Text*) shows how much her daughter made her what she is, thus reversing the usual vision of child-raising as a merely vertical relationship and decentering her from the position of the life-giver and agent: "I am not today the woman I would have been had Anne not been born one September evening nineteen years ago" (*Plain Text* 66).

Such is also the case of the relationship between doctor and patient: "too few doctors, it is true, treat their patients as whole human beings, but the reverse is also true. I have always tried to be gentle with my doctors, who often have more at stake in terms of ego than I do" (*Plain Text* 20). Reversing the way to envision the relationship between doctor and patient, Nancy Mairs positions herself as a subject. Her approach to care in her essays complicates the traditional binary opposition between an active giver and a passive receiver: "'But you take such wonderful care of me,' Georges demurs when I confide my sorrow. 'You make me feel so loved!'" (*Waist-High* 80). The shift from the passive to the active voice reveals the hidden reciprocity involved in this relationship: "Permitting myself to be taken care of is, in fact, one of the ways I can take care of others" (*Waist-High* 83).

It is mostly through writing, however, that she can claim an identity for herself as a caregiver: "Above all, I can still write, which for me has always been an act of oblation and nurturance: my means of taking the reader into my arms, holding a cup to her lips, stroking her forehead, whispering jokes into her ears… With such gestures, I am taking all the care I can" (*Waist-High* 84). In a striking metaphor which reflects her refusal to dissociate body and mind, writing becomes the way for her to perform these gestures from which she has often benefited and to bring comfort to the reader.

Because they are written from a vulnerable position, Nancy Mairs's autobiographical essays offer a different vision of selfhood. They question artificial distinctions between body and mind, and emphasize the relational, interwoven dimension of all lives, thus breaking away from the traditional vision of autobiography as the chronological narrative of an independent "I." Vulnerability becomes synonymous with a form of openness to otherness and the essay, in its rejection of totality and definitive versions of truth, the appropriate literary tool of this exploration. Reaching out to the readers, Nancy Mairs invites them to see her vulnerability as their own; no longer the narrative of an individual self trying to come to terms with her identity, autobiography expands in scope and becomes invested with an ethical dimension.

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