CHAPTER 10

Creative Feminine Nonfiction in the United States: A Model for French Feminists?

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Last summer, during an excursion in the Corsican hills, I was speaking to a friend of mine, who is a sociologist, about my future, both as an academic and as a mother of French nationality in the United States. Given the limited number of jobs as a professor and even as a lecturer, as well as my limited geographic flexibility (New York, Los Angeles, and New York again—since there was no question of a “commuter marriage,” a life in which my children and I would see my husband only on weekends), my chances of having a career in the field of French studies, the field to which I have devoted the last ten years of my life, are quite slim. My friend then asked me if I was a “traditional” woman, overlooking her career in the interest of her family. In a way I must admit, even with distaste, and without entering at present into the varied reasons for this choice, that the answer to this question is yes. But I must say “feminist” as well, in spite of the negative associations implicit in this term and the long-standing struggles that it evokes. Feminist in the sense that I am interested in and feel directly concerned with questions that are specific to women: to their situation and to their role in society, particularly where the work force is concerned in the Western world and, still more specifically, in France and in the United States. Furthermore, in spite of the negative connotations attached to the term “feminism” on the other side of the Atlantic, it appeals to many women still, and not only to those who are old enough to have led the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. “What is it, then, to be feminist today?” persisted my sociologist friend.
I explained that for myself the struggle in which to engage, or rather the domain in which these questions are posited, questions that are above all feminine or feminist, is the domain that is known in the United States as the “balancing act”: How best to reconcile time delegated to work with time delegated to the family. In other words, what should be done, and whose job was it, to allow women to find more balance between the public and private domain? Between time spent in one or the other? So that the allotment of time in these two spheres would harmoniously coexist and so that women would be fully and equally engaged in both? A utopia of “having it all”? Or, as my sociologist friend suggested, a more practical, or perhaps more optimistic, political agenda? And why not? What could be done so that women’s workdays would be more and more of a choice and less and less of a restriction (so that they could, as they wished, choose between part-time and full-time jobs, e.g.), and thus be more comfortable and, consequently, more productive?

Upon my return to Los Angeles, I pursued this train of thought with my friend and colleague who, like myself, was a French woman married to an American. And in this way, I began my research on the subject, only to find that my ideas and my questioning, far from being innovative, harbored an entire American literary movement—feminist, without a doubt—in any case candidly feminine.

There exists in the American literary field a genre that has no real French equivalent, at least not for the subject that interests me here: “creative nonfiction.” Neither fiction nor biography, this type of writing is not specifically academic, nor is it part of socioeconomic or scientific study. “Creative” it is, in the sense that as it draws from the author’s personal experience, it seeks to generalize ideas that are inspired by this experience, emphasizing others that are similar. It does not deny recourse to “serious” sources that are academic, quantified, but never an end in themselves. It is a sort of essay in which the “I” of the author, named and recognized, is not afraid to reveal itself and to assume its identity, to speak of itself and in so doing to make general claims. It is a question of evoking thoughts and debates that revolve around a theme that is defined by the experience of the author, so that a course of action may eventually be proposed. Creative nonfiction would be a type of “personal essay” offering universal claims along the lines of thoughts or experiences.

This type of literature is essential for understanding the thoughts that arise on the situation of women in contemporary American society. While discovering the immense bibliography on the question, it seemed to me that an actual genre of creative nonfiction existed