

Review: Escape and Exile

Reviewed Work(s): Fugitive Spring: A Memoir by Deborah Digges; Shared Lives: A Memoir by Lyndall Gordon

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the day to see if she felt it was "true" or not. I wish Siegel had speculated or investigated a bit further how many of Lawrence's occasional essentialist pontifications about female nature—female "being" vs. male "doing"—may have come from living with Frieda, his "Queen Bee," as he frequently called her, to her amusement and satisfaction, in his letters and travel books.

At any rate, Frieda's grown daughter Barbara remarked that Lawrence lacked "the ordinary man's domineering dependence on his womenfolk, but could mend, cook, and find his possessions." By his actions, Siegel concludes, Lawrence "challenged not only the separate gendering of each role [housework and writing] but also the prevalent idea that the two roles were mutually exclusive."

A WORKING-CLASS OUTSIDER to the literary establishment (and valued by Virginia Woolf for that very quality), Lawrence increased his marginality by focusing on subjects traditionally associated with women writers—relationships, emotions, nature, religion, families, baking bread—as opposed to war, politics, the professions, social issues, science, crime, business, adventure. Further, he turned to women writers for his models. George Eliot's influence on Lawrence is well-known, but Emily Brontë's is not; and Siegel sees much of Lawrence's work as a rewriting of *Wuthering Heights*. From his first novel, *The White Peacock*, to his last, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence returns to the powerful woman who must choose between a man aligned with nature or a man aligned with conventional civilization: the "male characters are pure symbolic representations of the contending forces always, always within women." As Siegel points out, Lawrence's women are never stereotyped as symbols of nature; in fact, they are often linked with quest imagery, like the women on the Brangwen farm in *The Rainbow*, who look outward toward knowledge and growth while the men content themselves with the cyclical, physical life of the animals and the seasons.

Siegel's chapter on *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *The Story of an African Farm* (all of which Lawrence read and responded to in his work) sets these novels in conversation with each other as much as with Lawrence and is especially revealing on Eliot's "rewriting" of the Brontës, with its un-Brontëan idealization of female renunciation. In fact, in her discussions of Lawrence's contemporaries (Woolf, Mansfield, H.D. and Nin) and of his female successors (Lessing, Bowen, Stead and Welty), Siegel does as much to link these writers with each other as to Lawrence. This wonderful conversation of stories with other stories is

largely her point—that is, that Lawrence can be seen to link women writers with their own tradition through his engagement with it, or at the very least that he has been rewritten or challenged or built upon by women writers just as inevitably as *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* are.

Siegel's readings of individual novels aren't always mine. I particularly disagree that the virgin's love for the gypsy could ever lead to "a satisfying union"; Lawrence's best touch of realism—apart from making clear that the gypsy never makes love to Yvette—is the gypsy's disappearance, his ordinary name and note, and Yvette's reaction: "her young soul knew the wisdom of it." And the clear but necessarily dense passages on current feminist theory may slow the non-specialist reader down (though they are rare and brief and serve as a useful introduction to the central issues at stake in feminist literary criticism). But Siegel conveys a rich sense of a complex, living tradition and Lawrence's place in it. Lawrence, in fact, more frequently created women characters who claimed and used their own anger effectively than did the great writers who preceded him—the Brontës and George Eliot, as Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, more often killed off the angry double of the central woman character in order to distance themselves from her.

In any case, Siegel argues, it makes no sense for women who resent being categorized as "Other" to reduce Lawrence to a stereotyped "Other" speaking for the patriarchy without giving fair hearing to all the voices in his fiction. Nor does it make sense for feminist critics to limit their understanding of women's literary traditions by ignoring Lawrence's role in those traditions. If Leavis and Moore—by ending Lawrence's marginal status, canonizing him as part of the "great tradition," and thus making him an authority figure women had to reject or rebel against—are more responsible than Kate Millet is for feminist dismissals of Lawrence, we need to look beyond them to Lawrence's fuming against conventional morality, to his insistence that women should be defined neither by motherhood nor marriage, to his high valuation of female anger and female sexual fulfillment, and to his scorn for Christian resignation and self-sacrifice.

Lawrence wanted female readers; he wanted them to take him seriously. But he neither expected nor demanded their agreement or submission. Feminists should approach Lawrence always aware that what he most valued and tried to include in every novel was their fierce and equal opposition, a loud smart female voice challenging him, pushing his thinking and writing ahead—a good fight. ♦♦

Escape and exile

by Jeanne Schinto

Fugitive Spring: A Memoir, by Deborah Digges. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, 221 pp., \$20.00 hardcover.

Shared Lives: A Memoir, by Lyndall Gordon. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, 352 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

WHEN SHE WAS A CHILD growing up in Jefferson City, Missouri, the poet Deborah Digges fell through the ice in the pond behind her house. The ice gave way under her, she writes in her affecting memoir, *Fugitive Spring*, "until it opened like a door."

I don't remember being cold or afraid that I might die, but rather the way the sun looked from under the ice, like a dirty paper lantern over a weak bulb, and the sound of my voice under water, changed but familiar. I would try that again in the tub or hear it years later in dreams about my children when I was away from them. And I remember one other thing. Each time I grabbed for a hold, the ice came off in my hands, as though the ladder I climbed were sinking, rung by rung. (p.24)

It is her father who saves her, reaching down into the hole and pulling her out by her hair—a rebirth of sorts. And it's appropriate that he, Doctor Sugarbaker, has been the instrument of it. He is, after all, the life-giving physician, who will later work on his own parents' cancers and give them each another twenty years; the ambidextrous surgeon who once sewed part of his own index finger back on at the kitchen table.

But Digges, the half-formed girl who secretly urinates standing up, gradually discovers that she has been saved to continue life in a prison. She is being raised to conform to strict standards and rules that do their best to erase what she calls the "particularly you." For this reason, the book is obsessed with images of incarceration. At the edge of town, for example, there is the prison farm whose inmates are bused to the Sugarbakers' orchard every year to pick apples; in their cages at her father's cancer clinic, there are the experimental rats Digges and her nine siblings take care of; there are the needy inmates at the women's prison where Digges goes with her mother to teach a Bible class; and there is the convent built at the edge of their acreage, thickly walled. One day, Digges hoists herself up on the wall, walks along it and peeks over. "It was beautiful in there," she writes. "Everything had been sodded or seeded and there were lilac and



Deborah Digges.

azalea bushes blooming and roses climbing trellises...." Is the wall keeping her out or in? When Digges' breasts bud she realizes, to her dismay, "I was a girl for sure, limited to it, like discovering my exoskeleton"—another sort of cage.

She becomes keenly aware of her prison bars while bumbling through her eighth-grade home economics class. The poet Digges renders the experience vividly, for, as she says, "you remember the settings for the deaths of your beliefs." It baffles Digges that she is such a dunce at cooking, sewing and *Seventeen* magazine-style teenage charm. How will she ever grow up to be a "church-going, law-abiding woman" like her mother? She is put at a table with the other failures—hoody girls, smart-mouthed smokers with hair teased so high "you could make out the domes of their skulls." Why does she feel such an affinity for them and for others so unlike herself? Why does she identify with boys and even with one of the prison-farm inmates who escapes but is captured in the Digges' orchard and led away in handcuffs? Digges, too, is wearing handcuffs—except hers are wrist corsages.

But a tale of painful confinement always implies hope for a glorious escape, and Digges the able storyteller does not disap-

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point us. Though we follow her through a disastrous early career as a college student; pell-mell down the aisle into an ill-considered marriage to an Air Force draftee; and into immediate motherhood, which at first makes her feel like a maternal fraud—Digges, in the end, manages to loosen her bonds and re-ink the outline of the erased “particularly she.” She does it with a poet’s pen.

As Digges so powerfully, movingly—and modestly—tells it, she was aided by the times. Born in 1950, she came of age in the late sixties when “we’d all gone unpredictable on one another.” She also actually credits her rigid upbringing with making her what she is today. The crowded household, the constraints, the early confusions of gender identity “made for the continuous cultivation of a secret life and a sense of peculiar anonymity which, in the long run, I have come to understand as the source of my writing.” Along the way Digges learns, as we do with her, that she was wrong to believe “nothing in my background said I could, or even should, attempt this thing so foreign to me, the poem.” In fact, everything points to it. And even she herself comes to admit it: “I’d spent, by then, twenty-two years learning how to make myself heard [in such a large family]. What better way than to adopt a medium as silent, as cold, and as abstract as language?”

A gliding lesson Digges receives as a gift on her 25th birthday produces the epiphany she’s been preparing herself for all along. This, we understand, is her true rebirth. By then, she could “go days...without thinking of my family, the house on Main Street, the orchard.”

The fugitive is a free woman at last.

IF DIGGES WRITES MAINLY about her family, Lyndall Gordon writes mainly, lovingly, about her friends. In fact, at the outset of her bold and idiosyncratic memoir, *Shared Lives*, this literary biographer of Woolf and Eliot tells us she believes she has actually produced the biography of a dear companion

who died young, a woman named Flora who grew up with her in the fifties in Cape Town, South Africa. It will also be, says Gordon, “an authentic record of a group of women who met in 1954 at the age of twelve at a girls’ school.” “We were the last virgins,” writes Gordon of these young women, two of whom, like Flora, died tragically young.

Gordon writes about her girlhood friends exactly as if they had just as much “public importance on the stage of history” as certain familiar figures. It is her aim to begin excavating “the unrealized possibilities” of all women’s lives “that lie unnoticed behind the silence...in the outback of history, biography, and memoir, the standard records of the past.” The only true history is personal history, Gordon believes, and no wonder, considering the South African chronicle she was taught, filled with “fictions of heroes and conquests.” The result is a tale Gordon chooses to tell not only through her own richly rendered memories, diary excerpts, and letters, but also through letters written to her by these women over 30-odd years.

This patchwork quilt of voices lends the book a raw, even ragged quality, but also an authenticity rarely achieved by the lone memoirist singlehandedly trying to reconstruct every player’s words and feelings. What it really amounts to is a unique art form, Gordon’s alone, perhaps to be perfected by others who will imitate her. The scrapbook narrative is especially suited to Gordon’s purposes because her settings are so varied: she literally covers the globe with her story, for both she and many of her friends were, as she says, “forced into exile and scattered widely in England, America, Israel, Canada and Australia.” Hers is a universal story:

“Girls are always the same,” said my mother, “though fashions change. When Auntie Isabel went to Good Hope, a generation before mine, she also read stories under the desk. Different stories, of course: her favorites were *The Bridge of Kisses* and *The Way of a Man with a Maid*.” Auntie Isabel, my grandmother’s sister-in-law, still breathed the heavy aroma of romantic emotion. At family gatherings, she was much in demand for nostalgic songs which she sang in a tiny voice but with great verve and jingling of bracelets as she played the piano. Not beautiful, but exquisitely presentable, she dressed her corseted figure in dainty muslins and pressed you to her perfumed bosom. “Lovey ...,” she would say, with a yearning break in her voice. Years later, when I got engaged, she gave me some very unromantic advice. Drawing Lovey into a corner, she pleaded in her usual breathy way: “Don’t ever refuse your husband.” She nodded wisely. “That’s all.” (pp.59-60)

It’s important to know that Gordon’s forebears were Jewish immigrants from Europe—as were Flora’s and the others’, though their families arrived much later. In fact, Gordon’s might have left Russia in the 1880s for someplace like Wisconsin except that “gold was discovered on the great reef beyond the Vaal River and it occurred to them to go there instead.” In South Africa, “being immigrants, they had more than the usual incentive to become adroit at games of social acceptance.” Gordon forgives her own grandmother her bigotry for this very reason, but is herself determined to bury the legacy of hatred. Indeed, the most personal part of the memoir tracks Gordon’s own social transformation and flight from a culture where all the worst human tendencies to “anthropological rigidity” had become so grotesquely exaggerated.

“It is impossible for any outsider to understand fully the rights that governed our lives,” she writes,

...all the more primitive for the fact that they were, for the most part, unstated—imprinted in preverbal habits of mind, deeper than language, and therefore unquestioned. The obsession with group-

identity in South Africa extended far beyond the racial divides that excited international attention: each group closed off from others, and none more exclusive than Jews who, anyway, looked upon themselves as a Chosen People. In this they were mirrored by Afrikaners, who had seen their Great Trek into the interior in terms of an exodus to a promised land, and imagined themselves, too, the People of the Book.... Within this group nothing could have been stricter than the rites to do with women and marriage.

(pp.5-6)

To break chains like that is no small feat, but Gordon and her friends attempt it. Some succeed better than others. Instead of growing up to be the “lovely girl” who would be married off at 21 and spend her days as just another pampered white woman lounging on the beach and “throwing huge parties at a word to servants,” Gordon becomes her mother’s “impossible daughter.” Later still, she will get her doctorate in literature at Columbia and become a perpetual applicant at academia’s door, one who will not be discouraged even as offers come for her husband from Oxford, Farmington, Indiana and Harvard. “At Columbia,” says Gordon of her years there between 1965 and 1973, “you could be a mistress, a mother, or a freak, but not a colleague.” Meanwhile:

Every college in the Boston area rejected my applications. They all sent their regular rejection letter: a routine discourse of regret. The parrot-faced Nobel Prize-winner who wished to employ my husband shook his multiple chins at me in his Beacon Hill drawing-room, graced by his young Italian wife. “You’ll come [shrug], and eventually you’ll find something,” he said with marked lack of interest. A wife’s pretensions to a future should not interfere with arrangements. (p.214)

After a decade-long search, Gordon finally received what she calls “a proper host,” at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford, where she is a fellow and tutor today.

Like Digges’ work, Gordon’s is set against a background of tumultuous political times. While the would-be poet in America slowly comes to terms with the anti-war movement and other upheavals of the sixties, Gordon is awakening to the hateful world of “the fantastical programmes of apartheid” that went into practice starting in the early fifties.

No matter where she goes, whether to Israel, New York or the UK, Gordon meets history head-on. “When Kate Millett called the first women’s liberation meeting at Columbia,” she writes, “the huge auditorium was so crowded that women seemed to hang from the ceiling. I stood with Rachel on a bench, squeezed against a wall.”

Like Digges, too, Gordon finds an eloquent and necessary voice. “You know that our correspondence is something more than a mere transmitting of words,” Gordon’s cherished Flora writes to her in 1959. “It’s almost a giving of pieces of our very self to each other. I don’t regard you as a separate individual now but as part of me. You’re more than just a friend, you’re... It’s difficult to explain...”

Digges says almost the same thing about her family:

You might say I’d had a very long childhood, a childhood I couldn’t help but confuse with my brothers’ and sisters’. Even now, whether I look ahead of me to Eva, Gena, Rena, Paul, and Everett, or behind me to Connie, David, Beth, and Steve, it is sometimes hard to distinguish what happened to whom. (p.165)

This mingling of our lives with the lives of others is something women do well, instinctively perhaps, and often to a fault. For Digges and Gordon, the result was growth and benefit. Read either of these impossible daughters, and see how best this sharing of lives is done.

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