

## Autobiography and Fiction: Isabel Allende in/*and Paula*

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For non-fiction, personal history is a direct effort to find salvation and to make one's own experience come out right.

Kazin

To write is in some way to cut the seemingly automatic pattern of violence, destructiveness and death wish. To write is to put the seeming insignificance of human existence into a different perspective. It is the need, the wish, and please god, the ability to reorder our physical fate by mental means, a leap of imagination, an act of faith.

Kazin

Isabel Allende's novel *Paula* treats two topics of interest to contemporary feminist writers: the genre of autobiography and the construction of a female family romance. In so far as autobiography generally reflects the memoirs or story of a person's life inscribed by the same, why does a book entitled *Paula* narrate the life of Isabel Allende and the impending death of Paula, her daughter? How does that preeminent of relationships, the mother/daughter dynamic, frame the narrative of a mother's self-representation? Traditionally, autobiography has served as the male vehicle for self-expression, confession or justification which suggests further queries regarding Allende's appropriation of the genre in order to produce what Alfred Kazin calls an "epic of a personal struggle" through the process of witnessing and grieving her daughter's death. We suggest that the complex configuration of identity Allende elaborates as a link forged between intragenerational mother/daughter relations challenges conventional representations of self in fiction and non-fiction alike because of the extensive examination of the effect of death, mourning and healing on her life.

In this paper we will examine autobiography as it ineluctably relates to fiction, an implicit theme that dominates this text. Ancillary to the discussion of autobiography and fiction we note the mother/daughter configuration as it reconstructs traditional psychoanalytic family romance schema. In the attempt to repudiate the Freudian psychoanalytic prototype, certain ambiguities arise. Hence, on the one hand, the text can be interpreted, as a continuation of the traditional mother/daughter dynamic while in other respects, there is the gestation of a new developmental paradigm for individual identity formation.

Many modern feminist writers like Allende place emphasis on the promulgation of new formulations of the female family romance. The association between models of female family romance and female subject formation appears quite prevalent and convincing. This link stems from Freudian theories of early family dynamics as they influence and shape personality formation, and normally, are based on the male epigenetic model of development. Standard theories characterize development as a discrete series of stages through which the individual must pass in order to advance normally (Freud, 1905; Erikson, 1950; Sullivan, 1953; Alexander, 1963). In the view of these psychoanalysts, fluidity or interconnection between stages of development signifies retardation or regression. Thus many of these theories reject notions of continuity and emphasize rupture with the previous generation as necessary for "normal development." By contrast, Alexandra Kaplan, Nancy Gleason and Rona Klein (1985) argue that a basic affirmation of connection and continuity between relations plays a vital part in healthy development. In other work by revisionist psychoanalysts and feminist critics- Kristeva, Millett, Ellman, Janeway, Chodorow and Gilligan, there is an emerging consensus that dictates a departure from Freudian psychodynamic models and heralds the following, summarized by Marianna Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*:

The impetus to return to a pre-oedipal, pre-verbal moment of origin which, though virtually unavailable to language and memory, nevertheless is meant to provide an instrument for binding the fragments of self; the more or less successful displacement of fathers and other male figures from the 'feminist family romance'; the ideological implications of the specificity of mother-daughter bonding as basis for definition of gender difference; the continuous process of re-vision and therefore destabilization as a defining structure of both feminist plotting and subject-formation"(130).

We note a common denominator of feminist revisionist work posits a process of global reconstruction of female subjectivity and subject, based partially on the exploration of the interconnected nature of maternal and daughterly roles. This prominent correlation between maternal and daughterly roles pertains most directly to our discussion of *Paula*, as we shall see.

Much of the theoretical critique waged by a distinct wave of feminist psychoanalysts stipulates separation as the standard for adult womanhood. Following from this, notions of mother-daughter closeness and mutual identification are considered regressive or pathogenic rather than enhancing to the maturation process. Nancy Friday, Helen Deutsch and Marie Cardinal emphasize separation, independence, and a rejection of the maternal model because of an inherently contradictory position- powerful and powerless, and its threat to feminine development. Mother's narratives are perceived as ineffable and only through a distancing from the mother do these critics believe that one can reach a state of self-affirmation. For Friday, the most dreaded realization or pronouncement possible, "I'm just like my mother" is tantamount to crippling the separation/individuation process. Though molded by Freudian psychoanalytic plots and patterns, and inclined to embrace opposition between successive generations as the norm for mother/daughter subject formation, this work should not be dismissed completely for in one possible reading of *Paula*, the actual death of the daughter and the physical separation of daughter from mother allows for the emergence of Allende's self-representation in the form of autobiography. Yet with a strange twist and inversion of the paradigm, it is the death and silence of the *daughter* rather than the mother

which allows for maternal self-consciousness to be articulated. It is not the daughter's voice or separation that prompts self-definition rather the entire process focuses on the mother.

Another important component of some recent revisionist literary endeavors provides a forum, a space previously denied, for maternal discourse. In narrative, black American women writers of the 1960s, 70s and 80s most prominently give voice to the silenced and absented maternal story, while simultaneously stressing connection between preceding female generations and self perception (Hirsch 176). What occurs in Allende's writing though, is not only the presentation of the maternal story, but also, an all-encompassing focus on the mother/daughter relationship and a synthesis of both postures. Allende grants legitimacy to the experience and discourse of both mothers and daughters. If as Hirsch contends the "great unwritten story" in contemporary fiction will examine precisely that commingling as a "cathexis between mother and daughter," *Paula* falls under the category of a preliminary attempt at, and examination of, that heretofore "unwritten" text.

In *Paula*, Allende assumes both the maternal and daughterly position. By examining her own relationship with/to her mother and in turn, describing her role as mother to Paula, the book intermeshes the mother/daughter plot. In order to allow her maternal plot and discourse to surface, an exploration of her other relationships- with her own daughter and as a daughter must take place. Furthermore, the genesis of a feminist daughter, part of her aim, incurs an indispensable probing into the figure of the mother (Hirsch, 130). The question here is who is the feminist daughter? : Paula, the dead, voiceless offspring, or Isabel, the writer seeking self-representation as both mother and daughter? The totalizing and inseparable relationship Allende proposes between mother/daughter is paradoxical: on one level, it threatens to engulf and usurp the identity of one of the two individuals, while ostensibly functioning as the basis for self-consciousness. Furthermore Allende offers a picture of adult personality and mother/daughter relationships that is embedded in connectedness- a continuous entanglement. Yet the elimination of Paula's voice raises doubts as to the possibility of allowing subjectivity for both mother and daughter in the course of intertwining and revealing the maternal subject. Mother (Allende) is presented as woman, not as the normative "other," which precludes subjectivity for Paula or anyone else beyond the maternal body. Allende as daughter emerges only because she is part of the same split corpus of mother/daughter. Both discourses center in one body.

Paula purveys a pretext in every sense of the word for Allende. She is the ostensible, professed purpose for writing the book as well as a pre-text, the source, origin, the text that must be ineluctably considered before Allende's own story surfaces. However like a palimpsest, Paula's text must be erased, or more accurately, transcribed upon. The daughter's text that emerges in feminist writing of the seventies must be dismantled because its articulation rejects maternal subjectivity and insists upon detachment from the mother. Nonetheless Allende's autobiography culminates with the spiritual unification and coalescence of mother (Allende)/daughter Paula), even though physical disjunction occurs through death.

Allende's voice and perspective frame the discourse of the presumed principal subject of the text, Paula, whose discourse reveals scant details of Paula's actual life or psyche. Given that the daughter, the next link in the intergenerational narrative lies deep in a coma, the mother inexorably usurps her role and voice. Typically, in feminist writings, the daughter would have written her own life. However, in *Paula*, the death of the daughter curtails the gestation of that narrative. To compensate for Paula's death, a state of voicelessness, Allende rekindles the rupture in the female genealogy and narrative by appropriating Paula's place, voicing a discourse split and integrated between a mother and

daughter's view. She writes out of a need to give birth again, yet embraces a different kind of motherhood, which she can control. Thus as Anne Sexton says in "The Double Image" "I, who was never quite sure/about being a girl, needed another/ life, another image to remind me. And this was my worst guilt; you/could not cure/ nor soothe it. I made you to find me." Allende conceives and *mothers* this book in order to discover herself. With this birth, Isabel renders immortality to herself and Paula, and attains freedom and catharsis through her artistic creativity. It is sadly ironic that Allende, an author who seeks continuously to invigorate the intragenerational female bonds in identity formation should lose her own daughter in real life.

Paula's silence gives impetus to a linguistic, metaphysical/literary and temporal void, continuously alluded to in the text. The appropriation of the metaphor of a void introduces a strange and deep dimension to their adult relationship and communication. Paula becomes Isabel's mirror and a narcissistic extension of her mother's self-perception. Her coma signals a return to the pre-lingual and pre-oedipal stages. With the daughter's silence, the relationship returns to a state of origin, where language and memory do not exist, a time of mutuality formed between caregiver and child that is unspoken and intuitive. It is based on synchrony, a term psychologists use to describe the coordinated interaction between infant and caregiver, the meshing of a finely tuned machine or Schaffer's "patterned dialogue of exquisite precision," when primordial bonding results. Their bonding can be interpreted in part as a mother inclusive version of Luce Irigaray's 'parler femme': a specifically feminine speech. In Irigaray, as Hirsch explains, there is an exploration of the "territory of a 'parler-femme', the female labia speaking together in what is either a dialogue between female lovers or **the monologue of a double subject (I/you)** [which] make an effort to construct, through language, a different body and a different sexuality" (136 my emphasis). Irigaray forms and celebrates a double self, which in order to speak needs to undo subject/object division (137 Hirsch). For Irigaray, the mother and daughter are trapped and eternally separated, sister love replaces the mother's, however in Allende the lives are intertwined and the subject of Isabel or Paula is a double (I/you) inclusive of mother and daughter. Female speech and personality are depicted as products of interlocking relational and dependent traits and an interweaving of strength and weakness. Isabel can not accept the separation between herself and daughter and therefore appropriates the I/You model in order to integrate with Paula. "Sueño que soy tú Paula, tengo tu pelo largo... y tu anillo de casada, que uso desde que me lo entregaron en el hospital... me lo coloqué." Their union, like a marriage and a rebirth, transpires on the border of life and death, in a space shared by I/You. Speaking to Paula, advancing advice which Allende herself will follow, Isabel prompts: "Tú eres la protagonista de esta enfermedad, tú tienes que dar a luz tu propia salud, sin miedo, con fuerza. Tal vez ésta es una oportunidad tan creadora como el alumbramiento de Celia; podrás nacer a otra vida a través del dolor, cruzar un umbral, crecer" (211). [You are the protagonist of this disease, you have to give birth to your own recovery, without fear and with strength.] The text reflects their synthesis with the use of both first-person (yo) and second-person (tú) statements. Allende speaks directly to Paula, who in the text is really Allende seeking a sense of self and absolution from this terrible tragedy. They integrate after Paula's heart attack which spurs her coma- "desde ese momento la vida se detuvo para ti y también para mí, las dos cruzamos un misterioso umbral y entramos en la zona más oscura"(29). [From that moment on life stood still for me and also for you, the two of us crossed a mysterious threshold and we entered into the dark zone.] Reality is framed around the nexus of Paula and Isabel: "Solo existes tú, hija, y el espacio sin tiempo donde ambas nos

hemos instalado”(31). [Only you exist daughter and the timeless space where we have both implanted ourselves.]

A temporal void exists in the text both in literal and figurative terms as well. In one instance Allende personifies the void as herself-“¿Qué sucederá con este gran vacío que ahora soy?”(287) [What will become of this great void which I have become?]. Allusions to the “largo paréntesis”(31) which becomes a “brutal paréntesis”(261), or “inmovilidad” (181, 87, 261) that refers to a parallel situation between Paula’s physical handicap and Allende’s emotional state, or the wandering of Allende through the hallway of the hospital which she calls “ el corredor de los pasos perdidos” (85)- (a metaphor for her confused and depressed life) reinforce this theme. Time stalls further as long extrapolations depict life as frozen, immobilized and stagnant during this year-neither present, past, nor future exists: “Trato de no pensar en el mañana; el futuro no existe, dicen los indios del altiplano, sólo contamos con el pasado para extraer experiencia y conocimiento, y el presente, que es apenas un chispazo, puesto que en el mismo instante se convierte en ayer”(141). [I try not to think about tomorrow; the future does not exist according to the Indians from the altiplano, we can only be sure of the past in order to find wisdom and experience, and the present which is no more than a spark, given that in the exact instant it is, it is converted into yesterday.] The motif intensifies by the end of the book “las horas pasan inexorables, agotando el presente, ya es futuro”(300) [the hours pass inexorably depleting the present, it is already future] as death closes in on the two women. There is little reference to a specific date or time, with the exception of partially misleading chapter headings *Primera Parte: Diciembre 1991 - Mayo 1992, Segunda Parte: Mayo-Diciembre 1992* and finally, an *Epilogo Navidad de 1992*. With the passing of the proclaimed year of 1991-2 action traverses from the present anguish and concentration on Paula’s physical deterioration to the birth of Allende, fifty years earlier, as well as a sketch of her life through youth, marriage, and divorce. The effect creates a narrative, which spans over and through time, with events marking the passage of eras, instead of conventional temporal markers, such as day or date. Drawing on a technical recourse from her prose, time is measured by events, such as, Paula’s heart attack, the death of another patient, her move to Neurology or San Francisco. By dismissing chronological and linear structures, this convoluted and warped version of time attempts to demystify and postpone death. Like Scherezade in the *Thousand and One Nights*, Allende writes to suspend, defer and distract death, though unsuccessfully. Hence the text is structured around the related motifs of postponement, the workings of memory, salvation through writing, and the process of bereavement.

As the reading of the text proceeds, we embark on a voyage analogous to travel through a dark tunnel (262)-a regression into the past. The exploration of history delves deeply into scars that have marked Allende’s development (31). Temporal leaps that “pegan trozos” of a “realidad torcida” based on “recuerdos deformados” “sin exactitudes” resemble the process of remembering. Though Allende unabashedly discloses her misrepresentation of the past, labeling her life an “espejo de laberintos”(31), she also concedes that reality may be a relative concept- “ahora tengo más cuidado con lo que escribo porque he comprobado que si algo no es cierto ahora, mañana puede serlo”(193) [Now I am more careful in my writing because I have proven to myself that although something is not certain now, it may be tomorrow]. This fragmented and imprecise rendering of her self-portrait results in the blurring of reality and fiction, and further obscures the mimetic representation of her life.

Isabel/Paula’s text elicits a serious consideration of the distinction between reality and fiction. Most of Allende’s magical-realist novels explore the tenuous and transient dimensions of reality and fiction as delineations arise, are transformed and challenged by

socio-political incidents, personal/cultural myths and perceptions, and metaphysical postulations. Reality and fiction enter into play in our discussion of autobiography because the text begs the question of telling a true version of one's life. Just as Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground* claims: "A true autobiography is almost an impossibility...man is bound to lie about himself," or Freud's observation that "Whoever undertakes to write a biography binds himself to lying, to concealment, to flummery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, since biographical material is not to be had, and if it were it could not be used. Truth is not accessible: mankind does not deserve it," Allende examines her autobiography and suggests that the possibility of narrating a veridical account of one's life is sheerly speculative. Reality and fiction are inextricably related in the human mind since our only recourse is to memory, a shady and elusive friend. Furthermore in autobiography, especially if one is a creator of fiction, an author, the writing of one's life is tainted by an "exaltada imaginación"(277), which can allude to what truly happened, what might happen or what may have happened. Thus Allende's desire to "retornar al pasado verdadero y al pasado fantástico, recuperar las memorias que otros han olvidado, recordar lo que nunca sucedió y lo que tal vez sucederá"(181) [return to the real past as well as the fantastic past, recuperate memories that others have forgotten, and remember what never happened and what might happen in the future] shapes a narrative which is ambiguous as to its precise reflection of Allende's life. Similarly Wayne Booth in the *Rhetoric of Fiction* points out that no work can be written in complete moral, intellectual and aesthetic neutrality (330). Allende is aware of the melodramatic and exciting dimension of the story she elaborates, and even proffers that it may simply be the representation of an enhanced and exaggerated banal existence. In speaking about her fiction, she also admits that at times "las historias de los libros y los sueños eran más ciertas que la realidad"(301) [stories from books and dreams were more certain than reality itself]. Thus the meta-discussion of reality and fiction spur a conscientious reader to scrutinize this "autobiography" of a storyteller's life, challenging what really happened and what Allende may have embellished. Indeed as Kazin states the "naive wish to be wholly truthful fades before the intoxication of line, pattern, form" (89) for many an author.

The structure of this autobiography adheres in part to formulaic recipes for writing adventure novels. Allende specifically outlines a prescriptive list of elements necessary for writing a novel in several sections of her autobiography, which in turn she follows and includes in this text. William Matthews in *Autobiography, Biography and the Novel* claims that the autobiographer in making himself his own hero, sometimes tends towards the procedures of the novelist (presenting a hero of a novel of adventure)"(24). Not surprisingly, this *oeuvre* furnishes quixotic and hyperbolic descriptions of a fascinating life of love affairs, international travel, and even relays a scene of early sexual seduction. As the reader indulges Allende's sentimental and romantic recounting of her life, the dramatic and surrealistic coincidences that mark that story at times ring forth from some elaborate, flamboyant imagination rather than from reality. As a product of hindsight, a view of life emerges that allows for perfect romances of somewhat chivalric proportions to emerge. Her extramarital affair and capricious travels to Spain with her lover allude to an unrealistic, yet not impossible, recounting of events. Artistic license would seem to function at its peak. Nevertheless, although fanciful, the events blend perfectly, nearly magically, with the rest of the chimerical occurrences that shape her destiny. For Shirley Abbott, the events seem so improbable that the narrative turns from a non-fiction rendering into sheer "baroque" prose. The style evokes a "retrobaroque cadence, embellished with new age curlicues." For the most part, the storytelling quality so well perfected in Allende's previous novels tends to

obscure any direct similitude drawn to our strictest definitions of autobiography; the book undeniably presents an idealized portrait. Finally, there is another point which raises the question of fiction versus purely nonfiction in this text. Direct references to characters and historical events that appear in and sustain Allende's fictional world, bolster and skew the delineation *Paula* creates between actual real-life and fictional concoctions. The autobiography is literally filled with characters from her novels and vice versa. Therefore, one becomes keenly aware that Allende's characters are built primarily as imaginative equivalents of her real experience.

The theme of the ambiguity between reality and fiction plays an important role also in the configuration of mother/daughter spaces. Because Allende stipulates that she has been forbidden to write her own mother's life, one distinguishes a cliché and stereotypical depiction of that mother- "ella es todavía una enorme presencia protectora" (30). The image of the traditional nurturing mother who bonds naturally with her daughter clouds the issue of veracity versus fantasy. As the embodiment of the maternal nurturing imperative, other descriptions depict her mother as *the* love of her life who provides unconditional love. Reciprocally, fathers play limited if not purely gratuitous roles, absented both from her life script and *Paula's*. One could generalize that the memoir ennobles all the characters who witness *Paula's* impassive demise and that it excludes criticism. Therefore, if Allende's mother is acknowledged editor of her novels, how does that relationship shape this narrative? Knowing Allende's ties to her mother, the loyalty and allegiance espoused between the two, the text suggests an unspoken and unseverable link between that puissant relationship of daughter/mother and privacy/nondisclosure. The umbilical cord remains intact and the likelihood of truly writing her mother's story improbable. Thus we return to the locus of Allende writing as both daughter and mother in one corpus. Neither *Paula* nor Allende's mother's story emerges.

Given the difficulty and constraints of writing a mother's story, Allende still manages to posit a maternal/daughterly discourse. However, as noted before, it is *Paula's* death that spurs the entire autobiography, giving structure to its articulation. The autobiography examines the protagonist's grief and emulates that painful process. However the entire text does not have a negative focus. Through the reenactment of bereavement comes a sense of the restitution of control over one's life and a purging of the self. The reader with Allende may initially enter into this enterprise to suffer, but later we experience the epiphany Isabel claims. Writing and reading function as a catharsis and escape from reality, and yet paradoxically, they also serve as the vehicle for complete immersion in death. This baptism, in the waters of suffering, is essential in order to comprehend ultimately Allende's worldview. Her cosmovision predicates optimism and survival even in the face of a predominantly violent and destructive world.

Every death, especially one that threatens or changes the generational line, is potentially disruptive. This phenomenon is exasperated when the unexpected death is of a child who has lived long enough to have a distinct personality, where typically, the loss is devastating, for a parent whose hopes for the next generation are quashed. Nonetheless, psychologists contend that the process of bereavement must not be ignored and can bring relief. One can develop a deeper appreciation of oneself and the importance of human relations. Similarly, one gains an understanding of the value of intimate, caring relationships. According to Kathleen Stassen Berger, "death when accepted, grief, when allowed expression, and bereavement when it leads to recovery, give added meaning to birth, growth, development, and all human relationships." The writing of *Paula* seeks just such an end, and as in Allende's novels, her message appeals to the enriching potential of the negative

experiences endemic to our lives. Although confronted with the most devastating of situations, a daughter's death, Allende utilizes her writing to project a hopeful vision of humankind's salvation and perpetuation through an alternative perspective based on connection and love. *Paula* characterizes Allende's self core as one that only emerges out of the experience of a relational process. Fundamental to this view is the development of a relational sense of self-marked by mutuality and affective connection. By participating in and being in relationships an authentic source of self-esteem and self-affirmation arise as well as a hopeful view of the world. Therefore Adrienne Rich's assertion in *Of Woman Born* (1976) indicating the fundamental role daughterhood and motherhood play in women's identity and self-definition seem to be perpetuated through and in *Paula* for Isabel Allende.

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