



FEMININE & WOMAN'S SELF CONFIDENCE

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ABSTRACT

This self-confidence reduces in men the universal human fear common to all human beings, and increases in them the arrogance necessary to aggress upon life. It shapes and controls fear in a very particular way, pushing it back, creating a space filled with light and air around the human spirit in which the illusion of omnipotence is permitted growth. It is a quality developed only by occupying a miniature universe in which one experiences oneself as a superior being. To a very large degree the superiority that men experience comes directly out of their relations to women.

INTRODUCTION

As Virginia Woolf remarked so dryly and so succinctly:

“Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle....[For how else] is he to go on giving judgements, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up, and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and dinner at least twice the size he really is?”

The irony, then, is that the maleness of experience which has indeed contributed so very much to the growth of human consciousness is dependent for its very life on the spiritual purgatory of women.

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What, then, is the femaleness of experience ? Where are the compositional elements of a female's sensibility to be found ? Under what conditions does that experience and that sensibility become a metaphor for human existence, thereby adding, as the maleness of experience has added, to the small sum of human self-awareness ? These are questions we are only just beginning to ask, ideas we are only barely beginning to articulate.

It is believed that the growth of a genuine female sensibility, like the growth of a genuinely experiencing woman, is a generational task and will be a long time in the making. Rarely in the work now being written by women does one feel the presence of writers genuinely penetrating their own experience, risking emotional humiliation and the facing down of secret fears, unbearable wisdom. Rarely is femaleness actually at the centre of the universe, and what it is to be a woman used effectively to reflect life metaphorically. What is more common is the painful sight of writers still in the fearful grip of female anger and female defensiveness; even as Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot perhaps were.

There are works, however, which one feels the heroic effort stirring : works in which the writer gropes magnificently for 'her' sentence. One of the finest of these – chronologically not a contemporary – is Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, published in 1899, and only recently 'rediscovered.' The story of this extraordinary novel is, briefly, as follows : Edna Pontellier, a twenty-eight-year old American married to a Creole businessman and the mother of two children, is spending the summer at Grand Isle, an island off the coast of New Orleans where wealthy Creole families of the 1890s go on vacation.

Between Edna and her husband – the rich, kindly, authoritarian Leonce – there exists an enormous gulf of spiritual and emotional sympathy of which he seems entirely unaware, and which she herself observes as though from across a great distance. But, then again, her entire life is observed as though at a great distance blurred and without the sharpness of reality. Her marriage, her children, her memories of her family in Kentucky, her early fantasies - all have the quality of dream and accident; nothing moves, nothing speaks, nothing makes deep sense. There is at the centre of Edna's being, an awful stillness: a female stillness that is seen as a kind of swollen reflection of the emotional inertness of Anglo-American middle-class life.

In this, her twenty-eighth year, Edna is roused from her interior silence. A friendship that has formed with young Robert Lebrun, the son of the family running the hotel at which the Pontelliers are staying, flames into open sensuality. Her desire for Robert – which remains unacknowledged and unconsummated – mingles brilliantly with the sensuality of all about her that for the first time in her life penetrates her skin, her flesh, her thought. She feels sun, wind, and sea as never before; always afraid of the water, she now learns to swim and experiences the sea in an act of narcotic daring; lying at midnight in a hammock she defies her husband's order that she come at once into the house, and realises that for nearly the first

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time she is acting consciously, not automatically; from out of nowhere she finds herself saying to one of the Grand Isle wives, “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to understand.”

Abruptly, Robert Lebrun leaves for Mexico. The summer ends and the Pontelliers return to New Orleans. But Edna is a changed woman; bit by bit, the ‘awakening’ she has undergone begins to dominate her life. She stops receiving guests, she ignores the house, forgets the children, spends hours painting, reading, thinking, walking, no longer hears her husband’s voice. She is mesmerised by the growing discovery within herself of a separate, conscious spirit now making demands on her.

When her husband goes off to New York on business, she moves out of his house and rents a tiny one of her own. Desire becomes an instrument of self-awareness; she responds to the advances of Arobin, a local Don Juan. Her hunger, now articulated, grows with inordinate speed. They become powerful, complex, demanding and yet oddly sorrowful, tinged with a sense of foreboding.

Robert Lebrun returns, and she forces a declaration of love out into the open between them. Lebrun, who is agonised by his desire for her, is nevertheless frightened by the extraordinary quality of Edna’s new independence. He does not understand what she means when she tells him that now she belongs neither to her husband nor to him, but only to herself. As they are about to consummate their love, Edna is called away to attend the lying-in of a friend. When she returns to the house, Robert is gone. “Goodbye”, he has scrawled on a scrap of paper. “Goodbye because I love you.” She sits up all night, thinking. In the morning she takes the ferry to Grand Isle. She takes off all her clothes, on the beach where only last summer she first came to life. She stands for a moment naked in the wind and sun and then she walks into the ocean.

It is only in the very last paragraphs of the book that the force of Kate Chopin’s sensibility reveals itself. As Edna walks across the beach towards the ocean, which she now associates with freedom and self-discovery, she recalls her thoughts of the previous night :

She had said over and over to herself: “Today is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else.”.... Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and hand never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realised that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who



had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them.

What Edna has seen in the night is the elusiveness of life, the power and insatiability of spiritual hunger, the meanness and smallness that is our socialised lives. She has looked into the future with a clam now drained of all conflict, and she has seen the men replacing one another, and the hunger of consciousness driving her on. For these men-Arobin and Rebert – have helped arouse in her a wildness of longing that far surpasses them, a longing they can never satisfy, that nothing and no one can ever actually satisfy; for no ordinary human and no civilised circumstance is equal to the demands of that hunger one it is unleashed in a person of spiritual dimension.

Edna has put her mouth to the primitive sense of spirit – freedom and spirit fulfilment – that haunt the human soul, and now that she has tasted of that exotic food, life without it would indeed be unendurable, a slavery of the soul. On the other hand, she cannot go back, cannot pretend to the old ignorant life; she has lost forever all hope of peace.

The swift visionary quality of Edna's insight – the sheer explosiveness of it – is directly proportionate to all the years of suppressed consciousness that have gone before it. If she had been a man, pursuing life at a normal rate of developing consciousness, Edna undoubtedly would have arrived at the age of sixty in possession of the same human despair. "For this ? Is this what it was all for ?" But as she was a woman – steeped in silence and unconsciousness nearly all her short life – the insight, when it came, came with pressure – cooker force; suicidal force. This perception is the power that irradiates The Awakening. This is experience transformed. This is femaleness used as a metaphor for life. This is the female sensibility in its most fully realised state.

In our time we have the novels of Paula Fox and the plays of Myrna Lamb as fine examples of the femaleness of life operating to illuminae human experience. Paula Fox creates out of Sophie in Desperate Characters and Annie in The Western Coast two protagonists whose significance lies in the womanness of their beings. Indeed, womanness is the compelling element in both novels. To deal with only one: Desperate Characters is a story of contemporary disintegration; a tale of human life sacrificed to the brutal disintegration of the city even as the souls of a man and a woman trapped in the equally brutal disintegration of an empty marriage are also being sacrificed. Jake and Sophie, a pair of well to do New Yorkers, live in comfort in a fine house in Brooklyn.

Once an actively liberal lawyer, Jake is now financially settled and spiritually confused. Meaning has slowly ebbed from his work as well as from his marriage. Between him and Sophie there exists an uneasy truce. Their life together is marked by emotional silence, the



death of passion, mutual suspicion. Inertia propels them forward. The city pushes in on them. Bit by bit, incident by incident, one feels Jake and Sophie surrounded by the filth, the menace, the hideous fear of civilisation breaking down what is the daintiness of New York. Dread overtakes their lives, the city threatens and isolates them at every turn.

Seeking release, they drive out to their house in the country – only to find the place horribly vandalised. In a anguish of helplessness Jake takes Sophie against her will. There is no escape for these two; neither without or within. For, clearly, the paranoia justifiably induced by the city is more than halfway met by the emotional desolation of their interior lives. A tension is created on which is balanced the two forms of deterioration. It is this tension that makes Jake and Sophie desperate characters.

What is most remarkable in *Desperate Characters* is the way in which the femaleness of Sophie's intelligence is made to operate. It is, essentially, Sophie's story that is being told; it is through her eyes, her thoughts, her experience that we see everything. Sophie is the ultimate woman; she sees all, understands all, records all, and does nothing. Her intelligence is trapped, inert, non-operative. She observes with the dignified paralysis of a categorical spectator. The choices of her life have rendered her incapable of action; she can only be acted upon. She experiences her life as though at the centre of a void with the antennae of her observations surfacing only for a quick look around. Every now and then, desire struggles towards motion, but soon enough it dies down, overcome by the vast disconnectedness of her being. Life is a series of single shorts for Sophie; the camera of her soul can register only the separate image.

The sense we have is contemporary life of being trapped in our cities, trapped in our technology, trapped in emotional death, unable to make the separate parts of ourselves cohere becomes very powerful when seen against the trapped inertness of Sophie's intelligence. For what Sophie communicates is a sense of inescapable destiny; the natural fulfilment of the abdicating self that is femaleness incarnate. And what Paula Fox communicates is that femaleness is the best possible representation of the spiritual abdication that is modern life.

The plays of Myrna Lamb come directly out of the American feminist consciousness. Written in a stripped, metaphorical, surreal language, the plays, properly speaking, have a single subject – the corrosive antagonism at the heart of all sexual relations between men and women. Lamb's plays-nearly all of which have been produced in New York – appear in a collection called *The Mod Donna and Scyklon Z*. The best of these are *But What Have You Done for Me lately ?* and *The Mod Donna*. The first – a remarkable piece of agitprop theatre – is about a man who awakens to find himself in a silent, empty space. Something is wrong, terribly wrong; he can't quite tell what. A woman enters, dressed in doctor's white. She speaks, he speaks.

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Slowly, the man makes an incredible discovery; he has been impregnated. The woman is in a position to grant him an abortion. The man pleads desperately with her to do so. The woman becomes his interrogator. The empty space becomes a laboratory courtroom. What follows is trial and indictment. (The effect of the reversed position is extraordinary, similar to that of a white man turning black or a psychiatrist being confined in a mental hospital. He says, "I don't believe it. I can't believe this nightmare." She says, "Well, that is how many people feel upon learning these things." He says, "Do you know that I want to kill you? That is all I feel. The desire to kill you." She says, "A common reaction. The impregnated often feel the desire to visit violence upon the impregnator).

Gradually, it is revealed that the woman and the man were youthful lovers, that he impregnated and abandoned her, that he went on to become an important public figure (who is actively opposed to legal abortion), that she nearly died in childbirth, never let another man touch her again, and has clawed her way up, bitter and traumatised, to this moment. The speeches she delivers glitter with hatred and survival. The speeches he delivers cringe with fear and the consequence of emotional ignorance. The entire play is a spectacular exercise in the art of sexual vengeance, comparable to Duerrenmatt's *The Visit*.

The *Mod Donna* circles closer, approaching the genuine target of Lamb's central insight; the obsession with sexual desirability that characterises women's lives – its meaning and its consequence. Two couples – Donna and Charlie, Jeff and Chris – Play a weird game of sexual musical chairs. Chris, driven by dissatisfaction with her waning desirability, makes Jeff take Donna into their marriage. Donna, driven equally by the dissatisfaction of her 'unused' desirability, consents to joint the menage a trois. The three live together, Donna and Jeff sleeping together, Chris watching and commenting. Donna's husband, Charlie, who works for Jeff and is humiliated by him, hates, loves and is bewildered by Donna. He wants for her to come back, not knowing what else to do.

Ultimately, Chris and Jeff betray Donna, going off to Europe by themselves, leaving her pregnant with the baby the 'three' of them have begotten. In a final paroxysm of rage, jealousy, and frustration, Donna provokes Charlie into murdering her. The entire action of the play is a result of the manoeuvrings of the two women. As their speeches mount from self-deception to irony to rage, the obsessive psychic question that holds each of them in bondage – Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all? – stands surrounded by a fury of self – hatred, a fury that this after all, only this, should be the question of her life, and thus the source of her inescapable destiny, for the questions one asks determine the destiny one receives.



Each, then, moving with mad logic in an indisputably mad set of circumstances, thinks to cheat destiny at its own game, imagining that sexual manipulation will end sexual definition. The transparently murderous irony is of course, the point of the play.

Myrna Lamb's work is, in three important respects, comparable to the work of Norman Mailer, and the comparison is here worth making. First of all, the power of her work- as with Mailer's resides in neither her characterisations nor her dramatic plots, but rather in the force of her language. It is there, in the language, that the sensibility exists. It is there, in the shape and rhythm of the words and the sentences that the story is being told. As the work moves closer to the bone, the language dives deeper and deeper, mounts higher and higher. We are caught in its anguish, impelled by its insistence, instructed finally by its pitch. What is actually happening to the characters is revealed to us by what is happening to the language.

Second, Lamb's language again, as with Mailer – has a runaway quality to it: she does not always have her hands on the controls. Sometimes the language soars, sometimes it bucks and swerves, sometimes it sinks like a stone. But whatever it's doing whether it's hitting the target or ricocheting off the walls – Lamb, like Mailer, is right in there with it, lurching, lunging. flying along, write and language tied together, chasing down experience bulling somehow towards the secret centre of things.

Third, it is this compulsion to chase down experience, to penetrate the centre that powers the work of both writers. Mailer is driven by his vision of things. Not only must he be true to what he sees, but he must keep going until what he sees is true. He is thus forced to take emotional risks, to act with an emotional boldness that, win or lose, is exultant in its honesty. At her best, Lamb exhibits this same capacity for emotional risk taking, this same need to press forward until naked sight brings us to the only honesty possible.

The importance, of course, of thus comparing Norman Mailer and Myrna Lamb lies in the fact that Mailer's vision is entirely a product of the male sensibility, as is Lamb's of the female sensibility. What he digs and digs for, forever trying to root out, is the maleness of things. In the course of so doing he transforms his maleness, and it becomes an imaginative recreation of the life we are living. Myrna Lamb, in reaching for her femaleness, is involved in the selfsame act of re-creation. What she is doing is precisely what Virginia Woolf said would have to be done if every a first step was to be taken towards a generation of great women writers.

The novels of Joan Didion, Anne Roiphe, Lois Gould and the Englishwoman Margaret Drabble seem to be works very much in the grip of the awful power of lingering defensiveness and conflict too dreadful to bear.



The most celebrated of these writers is Joan Didion and the books that made her nationally famous is *Play It as It Lays*. Didion's great talent lies in her ability to evoke the stunning abstractness of southern California "dying in the golden light." Her images of people alone on freeways, beside mansion pools, in supermarkets at three in the morning, at despairing beach parties, on blistering streets with curlers in their hair and wedgies on their feet, are remarkable and compelling. And indeed, much of this sense of things pervades *Play It as It Lays*. The scene is movie people Los Angeles; the character is Maria Wyeth; model, actress, semi-estranged wife of a movie director, mother of a retarded child; the atmosphere is California drift. Maria drifts through the days of her life awash in a sea of empty friendships and corrupted emotions. Sex, drugs, abortion, and death roll themselves back. Frightened of everything under the L.A. sun, suffering nameless dread and severe withdrawal, she feels safe only when she is driving along the freeway. Nothing connects, nothing holds. People, scenes, events present themselves, one by one, before the camera's eye of Maria's attention; the camera strains to focus; misses; next please. Disconnected is not the word for Maria. Chloroformed is more like it. People in the book keep asking Maria what she is thinking. "Nothing", she says. The people respond variously with cynicism, anger, awe. They think she's holding out on them. The reader, of course, knows better. The reader knows Maria speaks the truth, for that is what the book is all about: nothing, nothing, nothing. Maria knows what nobody else knows that it is all nothing; that we go on 'playing it' exactly as though we did not know it is all nothing.

The vision of nothingness haunts this century, and it is not uncommon that the vision finds expression through the portrayal of a woman breaking down in the face of the void. Nearly always, the breakdown is one of silence and withdrawal accompanied by irrational behaviour that is never illuminated, never explained. Inevitably, this silence is imagined as having at its source some spiritual mystery, a deeper power, a secret heart of knowledge. Very quickly we are in the presence of a primitive myth, the belief in the magical properties of 'strange' (that is, unreal) beings such as madmen, saints, idiots – and women. The important thing about this myth is that it is created and used almost solely by men in the ascendancy who are very far from mad and very far from silent. Knowing less than nothing about the silence or madness of women, they have used this conceit as a foil for their own often grandiose notions of existential angst, and its usage has degenerated into hack formulas for those who have a vested interest in the most cliché ideas of grief and madness in the modern world.

In our own time, the absolutely best place to find a superabundance of these significantly crazy ladies is in the movies, and in no movies more so than those of Michelangelo Antonioni. Put them all together and Antonioni's moves spell Monica Vitti, eyes rolling in her head, hand stuffed wildly in her mouth, mute as the tomb, tiring blindly at her Givenchy dress while any number of men implore, "What's wrong? Just tell me what's wrong!" and the existing meaning of it all suffocates the moviegoers in their seats.

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Maria Wyeth could have been written by Antonioni for Monica Vitti, so much a creation of that same usurped vision of contemporary torment does she seem to be. which is not to say that thousands of women are not actually living out Maria's life; it is only to say that neither Maria Wyeth nor Monica Vitti tells what it is like to be inside their heads. Coming from these two it's only hearsay. We are unable, through Maria and Monica, to hear these women speaking in their own voices or to feel them moving at the centre of their own experience. What we hear and feel are the sounds and movements of puppets whose strings are manipulated by the fantasies of men.

One cannot escape the sensation, while reading *Play It as It Lays*, that Maria's language was not her own: that her telescoped responses and significant silences had been placed in her mouth and behind her eyes by a generation of literary references created by an experience that was not the primary experience of the author. Thus, the story of Maria's life fails to become a convincing portrait of emotional removal, on the contrary, the story itself becomes an act of emotional removal. One feels oneself in the presence of a writer who believed it good to be told she wrote like a man, and has- with the tools of talent and intelligence knocked that belief into place; a shield between herself and her work.

Lois Gould's novels, which have been described as 'bitchy', 'tough', 'honest', are an interesting variant product of the same kind of dishonesty that plagues *Play It as It Lays*: the dishonesty of defensiveness. Gould's novels do not actually tell stories; they fuse in the mind into one long monologue being spoken by an upper middle-class New York Jewish woman who "knows the name of everything" and has a justifiable grudge against everyone. This poor little rich girl has met with coldness and malice everywhere, and has survived only through the use of irony. Her voice is brittle, hard-edged, vulnerable and mean spirited. She indulges in a stream of confessional details about her (mainly sexual) life, which is meant to be brutally honest. Very quickly, however, one perceives that the honesty is only a fashionable honesty; one whose limits have been set well in advance, and will in fact expose neither protagonist nor author to any unexpected emotions or insights. The honesty is a ploy: the more she reveals, the more she conceals. Behind the toughness is a swamp of self-pity, an overpowering conviction of worthlessness. The writer-heroine is sealed defensively inside the toughness – and she'll be damned if we get in there inside that fortress. From this kind of writing we can learn nothing; nothing about ourselves, or the world around us or what it means to pass through life as a woman.

And then there is Anne Roiphe's *Up the Sandbox*. Written with grace and intelligence, this book has been hailed as a work that comes to realistic grips with the emotional social bind of women's lives. It is nothing of the sort. What it is, though, is an important instance of the overwhelming fear with which a writer who also happens to be a woman begins to even sniff

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out the meaning of her own experience. The facing down of that far is the point at which the female sensibility begins to grow, the point at which one begins to “come to grips” with one’s subject. Up the Sandbox is a work in which fear is capitulated to rather than faced down; the lack of courage is fatal; it results in a dishonest book.

The story, very briefly, is as follows: Margaret is an intelligent, educated young mother and wife. Her husband is a graduate student at Columbia. They live a shabby-genteel life on New York’s Upper West Side, waiting for the husband to finish his studies so life can improve. The husband, of course, is not really, certainly not solely, waiting. He is doing: it is his doing that declares a period of suspension for both of them. But Margaret, she is waiting. She tries to convince herself that the raising of this child is the equivalent of her husband’s work; that it is, in fact, life itself; that, therefore, the sensation of waiting for her life to begin is an illusion. But it doesn’t work, the energy inside her remains muffled, trapped, alive, and insistent. This imprisoned energy is the subject of the book, and it is what Anne Roiphe does with it that turns Up the Sandbox into a Ladies Home Journal story. Instead of gathering force and bursting through to whatever is on the other side, the energy of her protagonist leaks out in safe little puddles, its pressure defused in a series of park-bench fantasies. The fantasy life, to be sure, is rich, funny, clever; but in the end cowardly and self-defeating, shabby in its emotional use of self-deception. The chapter headings clearly indicate whether this is a ‘fantasy’ chapter or a ‘real’ chapter. The final chapter is headed ‘fantasy, and in it Margaret discovers that she is pregnant again. In reality she is, of course, pregnant..... The reader has been had. The book stands revealed as one in which neither author nor protagonist ever had any intention of moving into the eye of the conflict that continues to hover like an anxious shadow at the side of the head rather than directly face-front.

For a clearer view of the intelligent and talented avoidance of conflict there is the work of Margaret Drabble, a remarkably prolific Loandoner whose novels are popular. Very well written and generously sprinkled with insight, these books nevertheless remain, ultimately, women’s magazine fiction. The Garrick Year and The Millstone are two examples. In the former, a young woman named Emma is married to a young man named David. She is beautiful and genteel, he is Welsh and an actor. They both speak the bright, hip, suspicious language of sophisticated Loandoners, and have in fact married each other in an effort to “chain themselves to wildness”; in other words, to keep alive their capacity for honest emotion. Inevitably, she has babies and their life revolves about his career. The story centres on a year in the provinces during which David flourishes on the stage and Emma declines in boredom, jealousy, and a growing fear about the peripheral quality of her own life. In a wonderfully perceptive passage Emma watches David on the stage and understands what acting means to him.



As I watched him, I saw at last why we were here.... why he had been willing to submit me to unlimited boredom....In the last scene of the play he had some lines that came clever to him than anything I had ever heard him say on the stage before.... All he wanted from life was to be able to express, like this, to a mass of quiet people, what he felt himself to be. It was not merely pleasure that he had there on the stage; it was sense of clarity, a feeling of being, by words and situations not of his own making, defined and confined, so that his power and his energy could meet together in one great explanatory moment. It was not enough for David that I should try to understand him or that his friends and employers should understand him, for we subjected him, by the pressure of our needs and opinions, to amorphous confusion; what he wanted was nothing less than total public clarity.

What is developing, of course, is Emma's realisation that she needs the same thing. What happens, of course, is that after a lot of funny, English-ironic tumbling about, Emma has an abortive affair with the director and David is caught in humiliated confusion on a pile of packing boxes with the company sexpot. The supporting palyers disappear, David and Emma fall into each other's arms, she realises she can never escape her marriage, he offers her a new life; a trip to the East Indies where he will make a film. The last passage is full of wisdom about snakes in the Garden of Eden, but the story could easily have appeared in McCall's.

It is, however, in *The Millstone* that the emotional cowardice which is the key to all these novels is to be found. Rosamund, a rising young academic, lives alone in London. She hangs out with writers and actors and is considered a swinger. Each of her boyfriends thinks she's making it with someone else. What no one knows is that she is a virgin. Determined to rid herself of her archaic condition, she sleeps one night with a man she barely knows, and becomes pregnant. She decides to have the baby alone, unaided, without the knowledge of the father.

The novel is the story of Rosamund's pregnancy and the first traumatic year of her baby's life. The writing is perceptive, detailed, and indeed a universe forms around Rosamund's clarifying emotions. But what is at the heart of it all is that Rosamund wants this baby because she feels only the baby can love her uncritically and, therefore, only with the baby can she risk revealing her own hungry need.

The need to love, the fear of risking that need, the dominating power that fear has over us – this, ultimately, is the crucial and determining element in all our behavioural constructions. The need is primary, the fear is infantile, the dominion is the crippling yoke from beneath which we must struggle our entire lives. We struggle, not against the need but against the fear, by attempting to own ourselves, and to bring to our lovers not our fears but our fulfilment.

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What has ever marked 'women's fiction' is capitulation to the fear rather than a noble depiction of the struggle to conquer the fear. What makes of Colette a great writer is the courage and density with which she describes the struggle. What makes of Didion, Roiphe and Drabble lesser writers is the meekness with which they elevate necessity to a virtue.

Ultimately, our art is a reflection of the progress of our desires chained to our fears. The meaning of a social movement is that it rises directly out of a gut need to defeat the ascendancy of fear. That need becomes an idea which takes hold slowly, and slowly forces emotional – hence cultural and political - change. The novels described are, as yet, for the most part dominated by fear. As the balance shifts for women – whose struggle towards selfhood is beyond question, the newest incarnation of the primitive terms of conflict that is the politicalness of life – as they move closer and closer towards their own experience, impelled now by need rather than dominated by anxiety, so will the female sensibility grow, and the novels that will then be written out of that developing sensibility will, at one and the same time, become a reflection of and a guide to the true politicalness of contemporary feminism; the recapture of the lost, experiencing self.

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