

Preface



“Un livre est un ami,” wrote Michel de Montaigne a long time ago. In my experience, this still seems true: over these few years this book has acquired something like a friendly presence and substance. It has also demanded the care, the consideration, the love that we associate with friendship. It has kept me company, moreover, not because mine is a lonely life, but because so many voices and ideas that were shared with friends or colleagues have been woven into it. “How is your book?” they would ask, as if inquiring about a person’s state of health or mind. “Where are you with your book?” my daughter, to whom this is dedicated, would say. This book is also a friend because woven into its texture is the babbling and later the chattering voice of my son, Vahé, who grew up with it.

But it also has this special meaning and presence in my life because, as a book about literature and about my encounters with writing and reading minds (Sand, Eliot, Woolf, Flaubert, James, and Freud as well as some significant contemporary critical voices), it has achieved a unique feat that only the bond of reading can effect for us: “it has freed me from many things, in particular from the solitude in which every reading woman finds herself when she tries to comprehend in some measure what is happening to her.” This last sentence and the notion of the “bond of reading” are not of my own invention: these are the words of Michèle Le Doeuff, in *Hipparchia’s Choice*, and of Shoshana Felman, in *What Does a Woman Want?* It seems right that I should first

x
Preface

acknowledge the inspiration that they have brought to this project. Because of their books, I shared their thoughts even before I knew them, and I recognize now the intellectual debt I owe to each. It is because of their example, as philosophers and critics, that in this book I took the risk that I did—that I wrote as I did. As Virginia Woolf wrote: “The risk must be run; the mark made.”

My deepest gratitude—and this is not mere rhetoric—goes to my two teachers at the University of Geneva. Without George Steiner I would never have started this project, for which he has never since failed to provide me with ideas, further challenges, and intellectual instruments. He will recognize how often in this book I have tried to answer him, as if, sitting one on each side of a table in his Geneva office or Cambridge home, we were caught once more in our lively conversations—as in an agon upon which our destinies depended. Gregory T. Polletta has provided me, throughout these years, with his invaluable insights and criticisms. To him I owe my education in fiction—fiction as a “form of experience.” This book is my apprentice work—the result of his teaching, his guidance, and his support.

To Janet Beizer I owe a special debt: in giving me her generous confidence, she determined the fate of this text; this book now also exists as the record of a unique intellectual friendship. Peter Brooks will recognize as well, I trust, the place he holds in this text: his knowledge in a field that we share and his wonderful willingness to discuss a number of crucial critical questions have been a decisive influence.

This book carries as well the mark of several precious conversations with Jean Starobinski, Tony Tanner, Denis Hollier, and Peter de Bolla. Among my contemporaries, I would like to single out Edward Bizub, Yves Citton, Juan Rigoli, and Barbara Will who, as they shared some of my critical passions, helped me at some crucial stages of my work. My thanks also go to my colleagues in the English Department at the University of Geneva, particularly André Kaenel and Marc Redfield, but also John Blair, Wlad Godzich, and Richard Waswo. Michel Jeanneret, who has long been following my progress in the Faculty of Letters, has given me his generous and constant support and offered insightful critical comments in the earlier stages of this work. I thank as well Andrea Othon-Goin for her patient and tactful help as a research assistant and typist, and Kathryn Gohl for her admirable diligence and tact as a copyeditor. To Anthony Mortimer, the best of stylists, I have a special debt: he began long ago to teach me how to write an English prose that would not sound too French and ended up reading, pencil in hand, my entire manuscript.

xi
Preface

I am deeply grateful to my editor, Bernhard Kendler, for his unrelenting patience and for his wonderful willingness to carry on a transatlantic dialogue, as well as for his choice of readers. Martha Noel Evans, Ned Lukacher, Lynda Zwinger, and Marcia Ian have each, with their different and sometimes diverging comments, helped me give shape and clarity to this work. They should find, I hope, in this finished product a response if not some reward for their thoughtful and provocative criticisms and encouragement.

Part of the research and writing was made possible by a grant given by the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique. A very fruitful summer spent at the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth College, under the direction of Geoffrey Hartman, also made a decisive difference to my project. It reinforced the critical, theoretical, but also friendly ties with the American academic scene. That first prolonged stay in Hanover, N.H., set the pattern for regular exchanges with the United States; it led as well to a richly fulfilling stay at Yale University. As a result, this book hovers between two linguistic territories: it first took shape in French and was then rewritten in English, and, unless I have noted otherwise, all translations are my own. Materially as well as spiritually, the book is the product of many transatlantic exchanges. It is thus not only destined for my friends and colleagues in the English-speaking world; but, writing and rewriting it, I also had in mind my friends and students in Geneva.

E. E.

Geneva

