

*"Life Has Done  
Almost as Well as Art":  
Deconstructing The  
Maimie Papers*

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Autobiographical writing has been a central resource in feminist projects to reconceptualize both "history" and "literature" in terms that recognize women's contributions and the dynamics of gender relations. However, over the last decade or so, these projects of recovery have been challenged by the postmodern strategy of deconstruction whereby the status of historical or empirical "knowledge" is radically problematized.<sup>1</sup> Far from abandoning the personal and experiential records that autobiography offers us, however, some feminists have become fascinated with them as discursive constructions of self, pitting deconstruction against reconstruction, literary critical reading of genre against historical reading of experience.<sup>2</sup> But doubts begin to nag. How well, some feminists are asking, does postmodernist theory meet the needs of the oppressed?<sup>3</sup> Its invitation to deconstruct the subject can undermine the very terms of identity needed for self-representation. This chapter evaluates deconstructive methods by looking at how they might apply—or fail to apply—to a concrete example: the life and writing of Maimie Pinzer. Only by foregrounding individual histories can we really sense what is at stake in the larger philosophical exchange between postmodernism and feminism.

This analysis of *The Maimie Papers* is undertaken for two reasons. As the copious, intimate, and extremely powerful letters of a disabled, Jewish, working woman and ex-prostitute, they represent the kind of hidden history infinitely precious to many feminists and other radical

readers. In addition, *The Maimie Papers* require us to re-evaluate letters, and more specifically, letter-collections, as a form that has been unduly neglected in the study of autobiographical writings, particularly since, as this chapter argues, the epistolary life-story poses an interesting challenge to deconstruction.<sup>4</sup> My underlying suspicion is that theories that purport to do away with individualism are often disrespectful of their subjects' own terms of self-representation. But let Maimie Pinzer set the terms of the debate herself:

Goodness knows, I am old enough—but I do like to think I have some youth left and with [Miss Brown] it is impossible. For she condemns everything that has anything to do with life and the joy of living. She starts to talk—and it gives me a pain in the ear. Such platitudes and rot! As though any people can be classed off and nicely packeted away, according to a system. I know *every one* individual is different from any other person that has ever existed, for they have a different combination of things in their get-up. . . . She says, being a successful stenographer, I have proven I couldn't ever be anything else successfully. I like to tease her; so I say I expect some day to write short stories successfully—though to date I have never tried to write one single word. It gets her goat (to use the vernacular) when I say that—and I enjoy seeing her getting enraged at my impudence.<sup>5</sup>

#### What are *The Maimie Papers*?

The letters of Maimie Pinzer were “discovered” by the feminist historian Ruth Rosen in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College. They had been written to Fanny Quincy Howe, who had kept them for more than half a century, until her daughter donated them to the library in 1971. Rosen, with Sue Davidson, edited and published the letters in 1977.<sup>6</sup>

Maimie Pinzer,<sup>7</sup> born in 1885, was the daughter of lower-middle-class Russian-Jewish immigrants who had settled in Philadelphia. When she was thirteen, her father was brutally murdered, and she was forced to leave school to help at home. She began work in a department store and socialized with young men there. After staying out several nights with one of the boys she had met there, Maimie was arrested at the instigation of her mother, who then refused to come and get her daughter out of the police cell where she had been taken that night. Maimie ended up in the Magdalen Home, “a sort of mild reform school for girls that had gone astray,” and after her release

in 1899 worked intermittently as a prostitute until 1910.<sup>8</sup> By then she had lost an eye, probably due to syphilis, had suffered thirty-nine surgical operations, and was under treatment for morphine addiction. At this point, Mr. Welsh, a dubious Christian social worker, put her in touch with a wealthy Gentile Bostonian, Fanny Quincy Howe, as a possible patron with “moral” influence. Surprisingly, twelve years of intense and sustaining correspondence followed, although the two women met only twice. But Fanny Howe’s letters disappeared with Maimie Pinzer, in 1922. Philip Toynbee speculates that “from all that we learn of Maimie from this selection of her own letters . . . if there had been any hint of condescending patronage or sanctimonious reproach in Fanny Howe’s letters Maimie would never have bothered to write back.”<sup>9</sup>

During those twelve years Maimie Pinzer left her stolid husband to become the mistress of Ira, an infatuated Jewish businessman whom she eventually married in 1917. She tried to make good seeking secretarial work in New York and Toronto, established her own women’s stenography company until the war pushed her out of business, and finally ended up discovering what she said was her “lifework”: helping young prostitutes off the street. But this is to suggest a resolution, a happy ending, when the challenge of this story, both historically and aesthetically, is its denial of any such closure. The last, brief letter in the collection is dated four years after the rest, from a hotel in Chicago in 1922. This anti-ending—bristling with enigmas—is perhaps the most potent reminder that this is history, not fiction.<sup>10</sup>

Invoking history against fiction, however, is a dangerous move when dealing with autobiography. Autobiography’s intrigue is precisely its confusion of those disciplinary boundaries: a confusion that is particularly intense in a text with as much “literary” appeal as *The Maimie Papers*. Doris Lessing, comparing Maimie’s letters to Richardson’s epistolary classic *Clarissa*, says that “life has done almost as well as art.”<sup>11</sup> However it is precisely what lies trapped between life and art, history and fiction, that we most need to find terms for—that is, Maimie’s sense of self, her consciousness. Negotiating a space between the disciplines for that “almost art” is no simple matter. And if we then wish to “deconstruct” that sense of self, we will inevitably find ourselves deconstructing the disciplinary frameworks that define themselves through it. By moving between historical and literary critical perspectives on *The Maimie Papers* I hope to show the fascination of this tension between “deconstructing the self” and “reconstructing the past” and ultimately, that it can be part of the same interdisciplinary project.

*The Maimie Papers in Historical Context*

We are lucky to have a ready-made historical context for *The Maimie Papers*, since Ruth Rosen, the editor of the letters, used them substantially in *The Lost Sisterhood*, her book on prostitution in the so-called Progressive Era. Maimie's extant letters coincide with the height of the era and, as Rosen interprets them, they exemplify some characteristic tensions within prostitution and working women's lives at the time. The mania for reform that gives the period its name has been interpreted as a coming-to-consciousness of the effects of the rapid industrialization and explosive population growth, boosted by mass immigration, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> The middle classes swept into the burgeoning immigrant, working-class, and industrial communities to "clean up vice," pressed for protective legislation and set up social welfare organizations. Of all the social causes, the campaign against prostitution was the most fervent and widespread. For about twenty years, the reformers fought both laissez-faire government and the powerful interests in the trade who argued for "regulation" rather than "abolition," eventually gaining government support for abolition by 1916. The social significance of the era's reforms is still contentious. Did they provide much needed welfare? Or were they a complex apparatus of social control over the lives of the poor, deviant, or needy?<sup>13</sup> As regards prostitution, Rosen argues persuasively that prostitutes themselves gained nothing overall from the campaigns for reform.

Maimie Pinzer's experiences as both the recipient and the dispenser of this kind of proto-social work seem to exemplify the ambiguity and often utter futility of such reform efforts. The reasons why Maimie Pinzer entered prostitution tally very closely with what Rosen's critical review of the literature suggests made women choose to become prostitutes. Although most women entered prostitution for basically economic reasons, reformers' surveys suggest that a high percentage came from families distinguished not by their poverty, but by the experience at some point of a severe disruption of the family economy. Rosen argues further that considering that both prostitutes and non-prostitutes faced the same bleak occupational prospects—their economic and social mobility blocked by class, gender, and sometimes disability and ethnic identity—family instability may have been an important factor in women's decisionmaking. This certainly makes much sense of Maimie Pinzer's experiences subsequent to her father's brutal murder when she was thirteen. It also throws light on Maimie Pinzer's sense of never fitting into any circle, and her anguish when she writes of her estrange-

ment from her family. The fact that, as the letters attest, she fights against miserable impoverishment rather than return to prostitution makes their refusal to forgive or accept her harder still:

They all hate me, I must be somehow at fault or why doesn't one of them like me? . . . I've got 3 brothers, a mother and many uncles and aunts and I can't turn to one of them and my brother said he'd consider I'd done the family a kindness if I would get off the Earth.<sup>14</sup>

But as manifest as the tone of remorse is in *The Maimie Papers*, more so is Maimie's defiance and sharp-sighted criticism of "respectable" society's hypocrisy: a strain that Rosen identifies as a hallmark of the "sub-culture" of prostitution. Walkowitz pushes this further in her analysis of prostitution in Victorian England. Rather than stressing the negative effects of a "broken family home," she speculates that it may have been precisely the lack of strict family socialization that allowed girls to question their opportunities more boldly: sexual and social defiance finding an outlet in prostitution.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this, Rosen tells us that central to prostitutes' own perceptions of their lives was that the trade was a better option—"easier work"—than the common alternatives, factory work or domestic service. In Maimie Pinzer's early letters, the temptation to "go back" was particularly strong, as Maimie found herself trapped in a loveless marriage with the hopeless Albert, a bricklayer whom she had married for economic security only to find that the chronic unemployment situation meant she was more likely to bring in money than he. Maimie explains to Fanny:

I always felt that if a person sincerely wanted to work they could readily find work, even though it was not exactly the sort of work they prefer, and I still believe that, so the plain truth must be that I do not sincerely want to work . . . Of course, there is scrubbing of floors and dish washing to be considered—and since I wouldn't do that, it is plain to be seen I do not sincerely want to work . . . You know, Mrs. Howe, that I never had any luxuries, and been reared a domestic, that would not seem so absolutely not-possible, but I lived in a luxurious home until I was sixteen, and then for years after that had the easy life that immoral living brings, and I just cannot be moral enough to see where drudgery is better than a life of lazy vice.<sup>16</sup>

In the light of Rosen's and Walkowitz's historical accounts, it would seem that the tensions we feel so sorely in Maimie Pinzer's letters originate in historical conditions rather than in her individual char-

acter. If Maimie Pinzer's letters continually testify to her "outcast" status and the suffering that it caused her, then we can locate this in the historical moment in which prostitutes were made "an outcast group."<sup>17</sup> However, the symbiotic relationship between Rosen's history and her edition of Maimie Pinzer's letters invites us to contextualize Rosen herself, particularly in the way she "uses" the letters. Her formulation of prostitution as "not much different from the alternative" options facing working women stresses prostitutes' power within a limited set of choices. Using autobiographical sources, and especially direct quotations, allows her to render "agency" as a textual effect. The drawback is that it tends to elide the difficulties of resurrecting "voices" from texts that deconstruction has forced us to acknowledge. Let us take up her insistence on women's personal struggle, and move into the more dangerously tenuous evidences of past consciousness.

#### Redemption in the Promised Land: Models of Self

I consider the subjective dimension of the letters by looking at some textual characteristics of Maimie Pinzer's "autobiographical voice," specifically as she discusses her sense of identity. I try to focus this by comparing the letters to the autobiography of the contemporary Jewish woman writer Mary Antin. The publication of Mary Antin's autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) provoked Maimie to reflect on her own "story" as a Jewish woman of "humble origin"<sup>18</sup> and particularly, on her ambitions to write. These reflections are given an interesting twist when Maimie Pinzer meets Mary Antin briefly in 1912.<sup>19</sup>

*The Promised Land* told of the Antin's family's immigration to the U.S. in 1894 when she was thirteen, after escaping from anti-Semitic persecution in the Russian Pale. The book chronicles their struggles on arrival in Boston and Antin's eventually joyful acculturation during her adolescence. The book's publication crowned her success in escaping the "ghetto." Antin's autobiography is fascinating for the proto-modernist language of her description of "self-generation" as she insists that "I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell." While many have seen her autobiography as a sentimental glorification of the American Dream,<sup>20</sup> this exposure of the process of self-construction both represents and problematizes a political self-making as an American Jew. Her description of her self-generation—she even offers a kind of rebirth for her parents—acknowledges the traditional Judaic investment in the continuity of the people while adroitly inverting it, in a fascinating synthesis of the American and Jewish dreams.<sup>21</sup> Antin writes of her earliest memories of life in Polotzk:

Of the interior of the house I remember only one room, and not much of the room as the window, which had a blue sash curtain, and beyond the curtain a view of a narrow, walled garden, where deep-red dahlias grew. The garden belonged to the house adjoining my grandfather's, where lived the Gentile girl who was kind to me.

Concerning my dahlias I have been told that they were not dahlias at all, but poppies. As a conscientious historian I am bound to record every rumour, but I retain the right to cling to my own impression. Indeed, I must insist on my dahlias, if I am to preserve the garden at all. I have so long believed in them, that if I try to see *poppies* in those red masses over the wall, the whole garden crumbles away, and leaves me a gray blank. I have nothing against poppies. It is only that my illusion is more real to me than reality. And so often do we build our world on an error, and cry out that the universe is falling to pieces, if anyone but lift a finger to replace the error with truth.<sup>22</sup>

Antin's memory of the childhood garden is about the importance of her own perception in the most general sense. The dahlias of illusion are preferable to the poppies of truth. Yet it is notable that this evocation of a classic autobiographical trope—the garden of childhood—is twisted so that she is outside the “narrow walled garden”: it belongs to the Gentile girl next door. This fact, combined with her characteristic move into philosophical rhetoric, produces a disconcerting yet seductive tension between our sense of a child's and an adult's perspective. Her charming little-girl's self assertion (“I retain the right to cling to my own impression”) is arch and there is a whisper of cynicism in her adult conclusion that “so often do we build our world on an error.” I suggest that this passage implicitly represents the general tension in her autobiography between a desire for—or perhaps her forced acceptance of—historical continuity as a Jew and an assertion of radical self-making to the point of discarding the objective world, or her own past, for her “own impressions.”

*The Maimie Papers* is likewise a tale of self-generation after a forced break from the past. As the story of a second-generation immigrant, however, it is very much a disillusioned sequel in which self-construction is more like reconstruction, and this is reflected, at the level of form, in the difference between Antin's public and rhetorical representation, and the privatized realism of Maimie Pinzer's letters.

Maimie's description of meeting Antin provides a good point at which to compare their self-representations, especially since it elicited a

childhood memory that startlingly echoes the style of Antin's text. It appears to be Fanny Howe who was responsible for Maimie's introduction to the famous writer and it is quite clear that Maimie viewed Antin as a possible "contact." Maimie is apprehensive however:

I don't resent her wishing to know more of me or Ira or his family; still I feel much as I did when you wrote to me the first time . . . The fact she is one of my own race and from humble origin should make me feel she really is the sort I ought to like—but I am afraid she is not like "Mrs. Howe."<sup>23</sup>

These feelings are borne out in their eventual fraught rendezvous at Antin's house, and Maimie's account of it to Fanny is as poignant as it is witty. Antin was unresponsive to all Maimie's topics of conversation, especially those that touched on Antin's own origins:

I ventured further (thinking this topic—our Race—was her pet one, judging from a letter or two that she wrote me, and also from her stories), that I recalled when I was a little girl, how I had been given permission to pick some roses (one Sunday afternoon) in a well-filled garden belonging to a fine Christian gentleman who was friendly with me . . . I picked about ten roses—as much as I could then hold (I was seven or eight years old). And after about four or five such Sundays, he went with me into the garden, and asked me why I did not take a white rose or a pink one? And I said that I didn't want to pick them until they were ripe. For I no doubt thought they started white, became pink, and then red. I heard this story told by him to many visitors at his home after that; and in every case I heard comment which, even as a child, I remember, had great bearing on the fact that I was a Hebrew, and the brighter colours naturally appealed to me. Oh yes: it seems—though Mr. Webb explained, and I understood—I never wanted a rose other than a red one. And once—when the red were about gone—I refused any, rather than take the paler ones. I thought this might interest her. But she only commented that one's tastes were most likely the result of one's environment—and as I glanced about the room. I thought she had better have left it to the Race.<sup>24</sup>

Her suggestion that her refusal to pick any but the red roses signifies her "Hebraic" taste for bright colours, along with the evident "privilege" of being in this man's garden, exoticizes her in a manner typical of Antin's self-presentation. At the same time, in striking contrast to Antin's child-



hood garden, the anecdote is strangely evocative of fairy tale: there is the hint of a fantasy of plenitude in the characterization of the garden as "well-filled," and of herself as carrying "as much as she could . . . hold," and this is compounded by the symbolic testing of her identity as she chooses from the three colors of the roses. Maimie has never mentioned this mysterious Mr. Webb before (in the published letters) although it is interesting that his name echoes that of another "fine Christian gentleman," the social worker Mr. Welsh who took her up as a Jewish girl ripe for redemption. Furthermore, Maimie Pinzer's description of her relationship with Mr. Webb carries the latent sexualization of her references to Mr. Welsh. Roses are the age-old Christian symbol for love and femininity—the gradations of Mr. Webb's roses from white to pink to red are surely suggestive of the sexualization of innocent girlhood. The scene bears an obvious similarity to the Beauty and the Beast story, and we can develop this theme to see a kind of exchange between Maimie and the gentleman of her "self," but also particularly her sexuality, for a rose.<sup>25</sup> The implication that she is there on sufferance as a poor girl is underwritten by her Jewishness, and the sexualized language figures not only her gender but her racial and class "otherness" in the Christian bourgeois world.

To return to the encounter between Maimie and Antin, Antin refuses Maimie's description of her childhood garden as a token of their common identity. She certainly refuses to take up the hint that there may have been exploitation and oppression in Maimie's childhood "privilege," as there was in her own "exclusion" from the garden of her childhood. Maimie Pinzer's final acerbic parting shot that "glancing about the room, I thought she had better left it to the Race," is a cynical comment on Mary Antin's political reputation and on her own exoticized version of the redeemed self. In her detachment, and in Maimie's confidence to Fanny, she subverts the model of selfhood—a Jew redeemed by the American Dream—on which Mary Antin has made her name. But she also makes explicit the latent trouble of gender that Antin's autobiography attempts to ignore. The model of selfhood Maimie looks to remains Mrs. Howe, although on the way home, she feels that it is Fanny, as much as Mary Antin, who has inexplicably failed her:

The funny part of it was that somehow, the day we went, I kept you in mind and sort of expected her to be of your sort; and I felt downcast on my return, as though you had failed me.<sup>26</sup>

Redemption for both Mary and Maimie Pinzer, but far more quietly and completely for Maimie, is on terms that prevent their common

identification as Jewish women and point up the vulnerability Maimie Pinzer ultimately faces in her own possibilities for redemption through the writing of her life for Fanny Howe.

The kind of discursive analysis I have attempted here aims to give access to the more subjective dimension of the autobiographical text. But this presupposes a relation of text to history—as knotted up in the notion of selfhood—that can be picked apart. Maimie Pinzer, for whom a great deal hung on the possibility of a gap—or a space—between a self and its writings, was acutely aware of the limits of reading. Responding to Fanny Howe's suggestion that she should meet Mary Antin, she had written:

I will make this suggestion: You know her only from her writings, and while one's writings are generally supposed to reflect oneself, one's character, etc., that would not always prove correct, as some are very clever with the pen and would trick one. So until such time as either you or I meet her—if either of us ever do—suppose you do not tell her *all* about me—leaving out the ugly part, until you feel sure she would not condemn me.<sup>27</sup>

Let us now step into the gap between text and consciousness by asking who is the Maimie Pinzer we can know “only from her writings?”

#### You Know Her Only From Her Writings

I want to pursue our quest for Maimie Pinzer's consciousness in the light of the work of Julia Swindells, who has attempted to bring together poststructuralist, materialist, and feminist theory directly in relation to women's autobiographical writing. Swindells' premise, elaborated in her fascinating book, *Victorian Writing and Working Women* (1985), is that one cannot freely “invent” a self but must always negotiate it within given discourses and especially the dominant discourse. In her formulation, women autobiographers will be forced to negotiate “conflicting subjectivities.” Thus subjectivity is separate from the author (and plural) but is nevertheless a phenomenon that in the public domain of writing may be more or less available, and more or less appropriate to the writer's material interests, depending on one's position in the production of culture. When we read autobiography, therefore, we must look again to those ubiquitous textual “cracks”—though neither for precisely historical nor psychological information but rather as evidence of an intersection of different discourses, or “intertextuality.” This evidence tells us not about the writer

directly, but about the terms upon which s/he wrote. For British nineteenth-century working women autobiographers, these terms were severe:

For working women, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, the models of social advance . . . barely exist in any form, in the social formation. Neither can working women call upon a clearly defined class consciousness which unites the social group, working women. What working women autobiographers have to do therefore, given that absence . . . is to construct subjectivities by calling on particular representations, particular genres, in which women are at least visible, though frequently in a reified, idealised form.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike working men's autobiographies of the same period, therefore, which are "frequently organized around particular notions of advance in waged labor" or, stereotypically, the "rags to riches" plot, many nineteenth-century working women turn to fiction, melodrama, or romance, to represent their lives "as if 'the literary' itself is the key (possibly the only) means of construction of self."<sup>29</sup> This recourse to the literary is not only a search for available female models. Swindells' examination of the points in a text where such intertextuality can be found suggests that "it almost invariably means that experience has moved into the most fraught areas of sexuality, of 'women's issues' as that category allocated to women as not public, kept from articulation."<sup>30</sup> Just as women find it difficult to construct identities around a narrative of career, therefore, they also find the terms lacking for a public articulation of what is defined as "the personal."

The interest of Swindells' argument is that it is aimed not at evidently rewritten or fabricated "testimonies" of working women, but precisely at those texts we would wish to cherish as letting us hear, even if faintly, that voice of a sister in the past. This is where she draws attention to the popular view that the more literary an autobiography, the greater its individuality and authenticity. On close examination this is a paradoxical claim based on an assumption that literary discourse is less determined, more individually expressive than other discourses. What it conceals more fundamentally is the ideological nature of individualism itself. From this point of view, the frequency with which *The Maimie Papers* is compared to an epistolary novel, and a most individual one at that, makes it even more vital to place such an apparently authentic and remarkable document historically, as subject to the same restrictions as working women whose voices either did not survive, or did so

as the overt projections of reformers' moral concerns.<sup>31</sup>

In applying Swindells' theory to *The Maimie Papers*, the first point to note is that the letters were produced overtly as part of a reconstruction of Maimie Pinzer's identity, at least initially. In other words, the correspondence was initiated on terms which forced her to negotiate Christian, bourgeois and, in the case of Mr. Welsh, patriarchal judgements. Let us examine Maimie's second letter to Fanny Howe from this perspective:

I am not working at anything, and I am ashamed to admit it, for I always felt that if a person sincerely wanted to work they could readily find work, even though it was not exactly the sort of work they prefer, and I still believe that, so the plain truth must be that I do not sincerely want work. In my mind, I explain my inability to get work this way. I am not fitted for any work that is a trade, as stenography etc.; and as for the sort of work that a general education and some "horse sense" fits you for, I cannot work at that for that is almost always clerking in the public stores, and where they see me they will not employ me because of the appearance I present with this patch on my eye. I am invariably told that they will be glad to take me on when I—or rather my eye—"get well." Of course there is scrubbing of floors and dish washing to be considered—and since I wouldn't do that, it is plain to be seen I do not sincerely want to go to work. I could not need money any worse than I do, and yet I would not do work of that sort, so I must admit that I am not serious when I say I would do any sort of work.<sup>32</sup>

Maimie Pinzer is here talking of a painful, obviously pressing situation—being out of work—and yet what comes over is her own distance from that reality. "In my mind, I explain my inability to get work this way." The language also distances her from her disability, for which she suffers such serious discrimination ("the appearance I present") although she then collapses together this distinction between "appearance" and "mind" in the confusion of "I" and her "eye." The conversation between Maimie and Fanny/the reader is played out as the internal dialogue in Maimie's head. She thus appears to wrestle with her conscience rather than to demand or even merely express the need for money. More specifically, we could pick up the way that the meaning of the idea of "sincerity" fluctuates. The first time it is used it serves unambiguously to condemn Maimie's profession to be desperate for work, when she evidently has not found any. The aphoristic moralism of "if a person sincerely wanted to work" is echoed in her repeated conclusion

that she must not sincerely want to work. But a detachment has occurred: she applies the moral to herself but shows that it does not fit—the “plain truth must be”; “it is plain to be seen.” Her insincerity in saying that she would work at anything is transformed into her sincerity about being “above” scrubbing of floors and dish washing. Which is to say that she appeals to Fanny’s gentility through a subtle assertion of her own, crucially advanced through a moral rhetoric of truth and sincerity rather than of the issue at hand, work.

By the time Maimie meets Mary Antin in 1912, her relations with Fanny have changed, and it is important to bear in mind that the letters are written to a woman to whom Maimie professes great love. Nevertheless, those overdetermined appeals to sincerity, while not necessarily untruthful, are arguably part of a discourse that mystifies the social differences between the two women, as well as Maimie’s work, particularly when that work is prostitution. An overt case of this idealization is when Maimie does “drop back” into prostitution. Although the letters evidence her struggles, monetary and emotional, over the decision to leave her husband for Ira, her wealthier lover, the plot and the language make a dramatic move from realism to romance. Ira arrives with roses and a diamond brooch, transports her to a hotel suite in New York “almost like a doll’s house, it is so pretty and small.”<sup>33</sup>

We could liken the “plot” of *The Maimie Papers* to eighteenth-century epistolary novels, in which a female heroine suffers all sorts of social, but crucially sexual, indignities as a test of her virtue. After her rude expulsion (by the proverbial “bad mother”) from the comfortable life she’d had before the murder of her father, Maimie Pinzer is virtue besieged, having to negotiate the improprieties forced upon her because of her class, disability, and ethnicity, as well as her gender. However, if these produce possible examples of the intertextuality that Swindells identifies, Maimie’s accounts to Fanny are never programmatic, even in the early letters. Letter thirteen, for example, begins:

My trolley is twisted again; that is I am “off again,” and that means I can’t think but that everything is going to the bow-wows. I think it’s a scurvy trick on my part to write to you in this mood, but I can’t or won’t help it . . .<sup>34</sup>

She follows with a tale of her attempts to find the rent after learning that Albert, her husband, has been laid-off again. She ends up phoning one of her old contacts, but only dines with him. In the end, because she is hungry and unable to refuse the man’s attentions, she comes home sick, drunk, and remorseful:

If I was “blue” all week, last night’s sweet escapade has given me a monopoly on all the Blues in the world. Somehow I feel I ought not to tell you all this, for I think it will pain you, but then, I don’t want to keep that one ugly out. For I have said all along to myself that I was writing you—my other self—just as I would write were I keeping a faithful diary.

I would like to read your mind when you read this letter. I don’t think you would be angry, but still you might be disgusted. It surely doesn’t seem as though your and Mr. Welsh’s encouraging letters helped me much. Well, there is no use sitting here condemning myself. I am to you what I am to myself; so it is rank waste of time expressing my opinion of myself, when you know my worth—or, rather, worthlessness—just as well as I do. I wonder whether you knew I was off again, when you did not hear from me.

I will go to bed now, as it is twenty-five minutes of five and I am sleepy; but I wish I could end this appropriately—cleverly I mean—as you do in the letter in *The Opal*.

Perhaps after all I had better say goodnight.<sup>35</sup>

The slang (often self-consciously placed in inverted commas) and the exaggerated claim to own the monopoly of the world’s sadness give us a wry and worldly-wise Maimie, not altogether serious about her confession. But equally, the childlike appeals to Fanny’s all-knowing powers, and the painful redundancy of her honesty, counteract this detachment: “You know my worth—or, rather, worthlessness—just as well as I do.” Her wish—and inability—to find an end to the letter as “appropriate” as that as Fanny’s letter in her novel *The Opal* suggests the fragility of her narrative as much as it does the weight of discursive influence.

The problem of finding an appropriate ending is a good point at which to bring out the ambiguity of Swindells’ method of reading autobiography. Her suggestion that narrative advance in autobiography is dependent on discursive opportunity can lead to an extremely determinist view of culture. The logic of such a political deconstruction would read the brief, almost anonymous final letter of *The Maimie Papers*, dated tantalizingly four years later than the previous one, as the confirmation that, in terms of her writing to Fanny, no continuing story remains possible for this heroine. But instead we could see that last letter as the point at which Maimie is liberated from the reading of

her life, or at the least, the point at which history takes over and distinguishes itself from discourse. Consider the mysterious, almost inscrutable tone of her concluding paragraphs:

You haven't any idea of what I am thinking these days. I want to write you fully and ask your advice . . . but just now I can't go into it, except to give you a hint and ask you to think about it.

I want to go to school—i.e., I want to take up the study of something. I am fearful lest my equipment is inadequate. I haven't any idea of what I should aim for, and above it all, I am so afraid that I overestimate the worthwhileness of it. I haven't discussed this with Ira, mainly because in his estimation I know now more than anyone alive! However, I know what I have yet to know.

My love to you all,

Maimie.<sup>36</sup>

But it is this distinction of history from discourse that deconstruction, and its attack on the self, radically undermines. If Maimie cannot be anything other than a "textual effect" for present readers, the text in its opacity can have only one dimension, the ideological. To privilege the text to this extent, in other words, is to say that history and ideology are one and the same. In the case of autobiographical writing, it is to say that an individual in a position of powerlessness cannot truly be said to be able to "write history," becoming instead the poignant mouthpiece for their oppressors.<sup>37</sup> In my final section I will consider these implications of deconstruction by contrasting it with a different kind of textual analysis that may offer more positive terms for the relation of text, self, and history.

#### Possibility, History and *The Maimie Papers*

It seems obvious to me that the most vital and pressing part of the experience of reading *The Maimie Papers* is the sense of Maimie Pinzer changing, and more generally, of temporality in the narrative itself. However, the monolithic and deterministic story that emerged from my "scientific" reading of *The Maimie Papers* in the last section does not appear to encourage a sense of the historicity of the present. Could it be that there is a contradiction between the premises of a materialist discursive reading of history and its results? A muddle between determination and determinism? The attention to structure, linguistic

and political, that is the prerequisite of these approaches, can lead to a very static analysis. In response I want to argue that the sense of the self-in-history, rather than being a capitulation to a humanist and idealist notion of a coherent self, is a textual effect in its own right, indeed the primary textual effect of *The Maimie Papers*. Finding terms for this will therefore recognize the centrality of the text without sacrificing the radical effect of reading the letters, which is the apprehension of individual agency.

Throughout the letters we experience the turgidity, the tautness of a prose that follows, or so it would convince us, every tributary and twist of a geographically, economically, and emotionally unstable life. Its qualities are those of flux, process, contingency, surprise, paradox, irony. Yet these are inextricably bound to the concreteness of the plot which refuses schematization. Although we can identify discourses of martyrdom, literary genre, and maturation, partly as a result of the editing, the text that cries out for attention involves the movement between Fanny's and Maimie's "positions" as both ironic and unstable, and this is only one aspect of the irony and instability of the general relationship between the narrating and the experiencing "I." This is a chameleon relation that is intensified by the proximity in time between these two selves. Maimie Pinzer constantly rehearses the immediate past and projects anxiously or determinedly into the future. Furthermore this task of self-construction is endless: of course, what she plans or predicts does not happen, or it happens differently. She can write at one moment and not the next.

Dorrit Cohn's study of consciousness in narrative fiction, *Transparent Minds*, provides us with some terms for this kind of self-representation.<sup>38</sup> Cohn argues that first-person narration by definition projects an experiencing self which parallels the narrator's relationship to the protagonist in third-person narration. But in first person narration, evidently, the narrating self is linked existentially as well as functionally to the experiencing one. In *The Maimie Papers*, letters in which we feel privy to intense self-revelation or at least, continual self-presentation, these two selves appear very closely linked. This narrative effect becomes obvious when we compare the letters to Mary Antin's autobiography, in which the two categories of selves are set so far apart that they appear totally severed, as, moreover, the "present" Antin argues is her conscious strategy. Antin's younger "past" self is thus presented as if it were a character in a third-person narrative, indeed objectified to such an extent that the authorial self seems to be totally preserved from the reader, while the earlier one becomes a sounding board for the general philosophical reflections that sustain the autobiography. In *The*



*Maimie Papers*, the narrating self has no such structural privilege, and this is obviously one of the essential means by which we are convinced of both the letters' literalness and their psychological credibility. Retrospection, exposition, cathartic expression—there is constant variation in the intensity and temporality of this relationship between Maimie Pinzer writing and Maimie Pinzer living. This is partly to insist on the obvious fact that these are letters and we will experience them with all the contingency of the genre. The epistolary form, albeit within the overall economy of her exchange with Fanny, continually threatens any structure of advance that would situate the "I" through the abstraction of a literary genre. Furthermore, can we not help but feel that every part of the narrative is relevant in ways that exceed the terms of "identifiable" discourses—Maimie Pinzer's expenses; her love of her dog; the wonderful name of her dog, Miss Poke; the confrontation with her mother over whether using Listerine mouthwash was a "lewd practice?"

Yet there are difficulties with situating this brief discussion of the epistolary form of *The Maimie Papers* within my previous arguments about ideology and history. By countering the abstracting effects of the ideological reading I considered earlier, am I inappropriately comparing the structural characteristics of the text as a narrative, and the structural relations of its production? It is arguable indeed that the writing and the reading relations that produced the letters were schematic in a way that the plot is not. Yet, since both involve the application of literary critical technique to an historical text. I am bound to observe that the first offers a much more inclusive and representative description of the experience of reading the text than the second, which is so selective in its technique that we sometimes wonder whether it is necessary to have read the whole text in the first place. By denying the narrative its spontaneity and by culling discursive "instances" to serve as parables of cultural determination, we lose the most radical effect of reading the letters, which is the sense of the self-in-history. This evidently is not just a question of validating the lay-reader's response to the text. It is crucial to how we use the text *as* history, particularly in the still-burning question of retrieving past consciousness.

It is my conviction that what we could call the aesthetics of the letters ironically provides the strongest argument against the poststructuralist attack on history. This is because the passage of time is so strongly implicated in the letters and because, as narrative form, the letter-collection represents particularly clearly the tension between structure and anti-structure. If the epistolary form can become a test case for maintaining a structural analysis that resists closure or stasis, it

also inevitably returns us to what we know as history. These are the philosophical implications of my insistence that the narrating self remain in tension with the projected "self-written," that the "I" always extend beyond or behind the moment of its utterance. I am saying, in other words, that it is in recognizing individual consciousness in *The Maimie Papers* as a primary textual effect, that we find the grounds to argue that it be read as more than that: as a textual effect that can and should tell us about real struggles that are other than, or, extra-textual. How we then understand the nature of that reality is another debate, but one logical direction would be to follow on from anthropological perspectives to look at the role of form and story in everyday life.<sup>39</sup> At any rate this is to take the text's index of struggle more on its own terms. It is also to pay tribute to what we sense is precisely an existential investment in Maimie Pinzer's writing. *The Maimie Papers*, by representing to us a woman struggling with life and writing within the boundaries that history allowed her, reminds us that the point about history is that it could have been different. Perhaps it is appropriately ironic to finish by quoting Maimie on her difficulty in answering philanthropists' letters: "I have such a horror of writing to persons that I feel are not specially interested in me as a person, but in me as a *question* (if you know what that means)."<sup>40</sup>

### Notes

1. For an excellent introduction to the theory of deconstruction, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

2. See for example Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* (London: Routledge, 1988).

3. Linda Anderson, for example, has observed that the post-modernist theory of the "fragmented subject" obscures women's route to the decentered self and may be as much based on falsely universal claims as was the humanist Romantic self. At this historical moment, she suggests, feminists need to keep some notion of a unified selfhood as it is our primary interest to analyze the relation of subjectivity to the outside world. Linda Anderson, Women's Studies seminar discussion: York, 1989.

4. For exceptions, see Charles A. Porter, ed., "Men/Women of Letters," *Yale French Studies* (No. 71, Yale University Press, 1986); Elizabeth Goldsmith, ed., *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988); and Linda S. Bergmann, "The Contemporary Letter as

Literature," *Women's Studies Quarterly* (Fall/Winter 1989, Vol. 17), 128–39. The latter is one of only two articles to discuss *The Maimie Papers* in literary critical terms.

5. Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson, eds., *The Maimie Papers* (1977. London: Virago, 1979), pp. 186–87.

6. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, pp. xi–xii.

7. Maimie Pinzer is a pseudonym given by Rosen and Davidson.

8. She also worked in various secretarial jobs, as an actor, and as a nude model for art classes.

9. Philip Toynbee, "Sisters in Affliction," rev. of *The Maimie Papers*, ed. Ruth Rosen, *Observer*, 16 Sept. 1987: p. 36.

10. This is the end of the story in published form: Ruth Rosen in a letter to the author, Dec. 1993, told me that she has found only sparse and tenuous evidence of Maimie's subsequent life and no mention of further communication with Fanny.

11. Doris Lessing, "Doris Lessing on The Maimie Papers," rev. of *The Maimie Papers*, ed. Ruth Rosen, *The Literary Review* 5 Oct. 1979: pp. 4–7.

12. See for example Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1962).

13. Ellen Carol Du Bois, "Working Women, Class Relations and Suffrage Militance: Harriet Stanton Blatch and the New York Woman Suffrage Movement, 1894–1909." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74 (1), June 1987: pp. 34–59.

14. Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 161.

15. Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

16. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 3.

17. The phrase comes from Judith Walkowitz's study of prostitution in Victorian Britain, referred to above, although I think it is applicable also to prostitution in the Progressive Era.

18. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 114.

19. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (London: William Heineman, 1912).

20. Suzanne Koppelman chides Ludwig Ledwisohn amongst others for this criticism in Suzanne Koppelman, "Mary Antin," *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook*, ed. Jean W. Ross. Gale Research Company, 1985, pp. 225–32.

21. Suzanne Koppelman has traced other ways in which Antin reinscribed orthodox Judaic beliefs as American secular enlightenment in *ibid.*, pp. 225–32.

22. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 81.

23. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, pp. 113–14.

24. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 162.

25. I am indebted to Trev Broughton for this suggestion.

26. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 167.

27. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 114.

28. Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), p. 11.

29. Swindells, *Victorian Writing*, p. 140.

30. Swindells, *Victorian Writing*, p. 140.

31. The historian Anne Butler, for example, refers to "the frustrations" of dealing with "fraudulent memoirs piously written by non-prostitutes" and "tracts of reformed prostitutes" in Anne Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865–1890* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), endnotes.

32. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 3.

33. The implication of Maimie's reconstruction via writing her life for Fanny is ironically played out again between Maimie and Ira, where Maimie manages to inspire Ira to make a large sale for much needed money by leaving him a six-page letter of encouragement at the breakfast table, as well as reading him Fanny's novel. "Isn't that almost like a fairy tale?" she asks Fanny Rosen. *The Maimie Papers*, p. 92.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

35. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 32.

36. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 416.

37. See Swindells' suggestion that some discourses would be more "appropriate" than others for working women (for example, ones which would not reify or obscure their labor as their sex).

38. Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: The Representation of Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

39. For example, see The Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

40. Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, p. 285.