The Theory and Practice of Counting Stitches as Stories: Material Evidences of Autobiography in Needlework

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Those who undertake to write a life are often confronted with a potentially discouraging lack of traditional textual materials with which to work; not all subjects thoughtfully leave behind a wealth of journals and letters, the preferred sources for mainstream biographers. The life-writer’s challenge is to seek out and read the available non-verbal texts with which people create a life record, whether or not those people ever take up the pen. Biographers must be as imaginative and innovative as our subjects who unreflectively provide traces of all kinds in their wardrobe trunks, their recipe boxes, their tool kits, their photo albums; all their things become potential text for us to read. Leon Edel has charged that “biography has lacked the courage to discover bolder ways of human reconstruction” (24); the task demands broader parameters than the traditional biographical method has had the imagination to encompass. One of the obvious difficulties has been a disciplinary lack of respect for some sources; or more accurately, a refusal to consider certain materials as sources at all. Pierre Bourdieu notes that “there exists a hierarchy of legitimate objects of study” (1); he succinctly and eloquently observes that there has been a systematic “banishing from scientific study certain objects held to be meaningless, and excluding from it, under the guise of objectivity, the experience of those who work in it and those who

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are its object” (1). The paradox for biographers of women is that our subjects often have not had access to the production of many of those “legitimate objects,” and so we are compelled to legitimate other objects in order to study our female subjects; obviously, we cannot both study them and remain traditional practitioners of the discipline. Once we choose to realign biographical perspective and disrupt the constraints of disciplinary tradition, Elizabeth Cohen’s “conceptual whole” (85) becomes more possible.

Rozsika Parker’s stimulating history of embroidery, The Subversive Stitch, complains that “The iconography of women’s work is rarely given the serious consideration it deserves […] One reason why the subject matter of embroidery is summarily dismissed is that embroiderers employ patterns” (12). The obvious response to this dismissal is to point out that novelists and poets and landscapers and automobile manufacturers employ patterns as well; yet no one is dismissive of the images and symbols found in literature; surely the choice between an English country garden or a Japanese Bonsai landscape tells us something about the person who chooses those surroundings; and we are all familiar with the theory that you can tell a lot about a man by the kind of car he drives. There is choice within the confines of pattern, and within those variations it is possible to move closer to an understanding of the subject as an individual. Parker cautions that

the meanings of any embroidered picture have to be carefully considered within their historical, artistic, and class context. What a picture conveys often relates to the needs of a woman’s class as much as to her experience as a woman at that time. (12)

Historically, at least since the seventeenth century, embroidery has been an indicator of class because women with the leisure time to embroider were not women who had to concern themselves with providing warm socks and mittens. Those distinctions are somewhat blurred now, and even though socks and mittens are readily and inexpensively available, many women continue the tradition of knitting for other reasons; the use of patterns is
immaterial in this instance, and what matters to the researcher is the reason for the subject's choice to knit and for whom to knit. What Parker theorizes about embroidery can in large part be extended to include any needlecraft, and the critical skills necessary to the study of literary texts can be utilized to good effect in their examination. The connections are already strong; stitchery has a noticeable presence in literature as a kind of supporting text within the text. Consider, as an initial example, the story-telling value of weaving to be found in Ovid's narratives of Arachne, Philomela, and Penelope.

Arachne engages in a skill contest with the goddess Athena. Her competition piece consists of Jupiter transformed into a bull, an eagle, a swan, a satyr, a husband, gold, a flame, a shepherd, and a snake, in order to copulate with and impregnate as many mortal women as he has costumes. The tapestry also depicts Neptune disguised as a bull, a river god, a ram, a horse, a dolphin, and a bird for the same purpose; and includes Phoebus as a hawk, a lion, and a shepherd, Bacchus as grapes, and Saturn as a horse, all concealing themselves in other forms for the sake of rape or fornication (Ovid 137). In short: Arachne's tapestry is a metahistory of women repeatedly deceived and violated by disguised gods; she conflates the events into one visual experience which can be envisioned as a kind of Mardi Gras tableau on Noah's Ark, compounding the impact of her statement by challenging the linearity of verbal telling. Later in the *Metamorphoses*, Philomela is repeatedly raped by her brother-in-law, who cuts out her tongue when she threatens to tell her sister (149). Deprived of speech, she employs another language "to communicate the facts to her sister" (Evans 235). She "set up her threads on a barbarian loom, and wove a scarlet design on a white ground, which pictured the wrong she had suffered. When it was finished [. . .] the servant carried the tapestry to Procris [. . .] When the cruel tyrant's wife unfolded the woven cloth, she read there the unhappy story" (Ovid 150).

While Arachne mediates the stories of women through time
by rupturing chronology, Philomela tells her own immediate and intimate story; Arachne acts as a theoretical biographer and historian by bringing narratives together within the metaphor of carnivalistic violation while Philomela simply but skilfully relates, emphasized by the astuteness of her dichromatic choice, her literal physical violation. Penelope is a more subtle weaver who works all day on a shroud for her aged father-in-law and then unravels it at night in order to postpone giving her response to the insistence of her abundant suitors that she choose one of them as her second husband (Evans 213). Her refusal to complete the burial cloth bears witness to her unwillingness to remarry and, although unreadable on its own, its existence punctuates and underscores the facts of the case by providing a kind of artifactual support which allows for the possibility of a psychological intimacy with her.

James Olney explains that, “What one seeks in reading autobiography is not a date, a name, or a place, but a characteristic way of perceiving, of organizing, and understanding, an individual way of feeling and expressing that one can somehow relate to oneself” (37). The metaphorical connotations of Penelope’s chosen project, in the context of her very particular circumstances, can be considered in conjunction with her delaying strategy in a way that permits readers to intuit other, less tangible, things about her. The classical ideal of the faithful and ever-hopeful wife she may well be; but in her choice of needlework pattern, she declares that marrying one of her potential spouses would be the same as going to the grave. Instead, she refuses to complete the symbolic shroud. A couple of millennia later, the trope still functions. Charles Dickens, like Ovid, knew the documentary value of needlework when he created Madame Defarge for A Tale of Two Cities. According to her husband, “if madame [his] wife undertook to keep the register in her memory alone, she would not lose a word of it—not a syllable of it” (107) and yet she is not created as a character who merely has an impressive power of recall. What she knows about enemies of the Revolution must be turned into text, must be transformed from thoughts into things because the concrete-
ness of things makes them less mutable, and therefore more trustworthy proofs. The permanence of the yarn is attested to by her husband who promises that “Knitted, in her own stitches and her own symbols, it will always be plain to her as the sun [. . .] It would be easier for the weakest poltroon that lives to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge” (107). Dickens’s inclusion of linguistic terminology such as “letter” and “erase” in place of “stitch” and “ravel,” to call the self-described “shrouds” of Madame Defarge a “register,” demonstrates the ease and understandability with which forms of communication can borrow from each other. Madame Defarge worked her testimonies in a coded system, “her own symbols” her husband called them, and she did so as an act of translation from one patterned way of recording to another. The good citizeness stands as a more likely defendant in a state trial for political subversion than does Flora Brovina, who also has engaged in political knitting. Ms. Brovina is a Kosovar-Albanian woman tried in Belgrade for “fomenting terrorism by allegedly organizing [. . .] the making of sweaters and masks for members of the KLA” (Kirka 19).

What I am engaged in is a kind of myth-making; I posit the idea that since, according to Roland Barthes, “myth is a system of communication [and] [. . .] a form” (109), then the system of communication we begin to see in needlework is also mythic; and Barthes says further that “mythology [. . .] studies ideas-in-form” (112), I suggest we consider a mythology that studies the narrative qualities of the form and content of needlework. Certainly, the model of the stitching woman is a male-authored model; but Ovid and Dickens, misogynists both, are not stupid misogynists. Rather than credit them with the ability to create ex nihilo, I grant that they had brilliant ability to observe and to describe; not that Ovid actually saw Arachne weaving her theoretical web, but that he saw women weaving and working and knew a good narrative device and sociological phenomenon when he saw one.

The twentieth-century novel Like Water for Chocolate is the
story of Tita, a woman who has to suppress her sexual passions throughout her adult life. One of the outlets she finds is the creation of evocative food; but the other, with which she occupies herself “through night after night of solitude and insomnia” (Esquivel 244–45), is weaving an “enormous bedspread” (244). It is the overwhelming size of the blanket that makes the most powerful point about Tita’s life because it stresses the duration of her self-denial: “it covered the whole ranch, all three hectares” (245). It is fascinating, to recall Penelope, that Tita dramatically uses this weaving as her own shroud when her beloved dies; she wraps herself in it and eats candles which then combust with the force of her memories and desire (245). Add to this the fact that Laura Esquivel coopts the model and astutely writes the weaving as a bedspread instead of a shawl, and the story skillfully joins theory and practice.

Life-writing theorist and practitioner Helen Buss stresses the importance of considering “what forms of showing and telling [. . .] have been available as a means of expression” (13) for women. Proene read Philomela’s tapestry and Madame Defarge read her so-called shrouds in the same way that we can read Tita’s bedspread; needlework has always been a form of self-writing and should no longer be overlooked. Things have secrets to tell, and as the historian R.G. Collingwood says, “Anything is evidence which allows you to answer your question” (281). The November 1999 issue of National Geographic contains two items which speak to the timelessness and versatility of stitchery as a communications tool. One short piece previews Hidden in Plain View, a book that links slave-made quilts to the Underground Railroad through the code of patterns; each pattern had specific meaning and was displayed to publicize announcements and warnings for escapees (Hidden Meanings n.p.). The lengthier Geographic piece notes:

With no written language, the Inca used textiles to record information. Clothing revealed where people were from and where they stood in society. Unfortunately the elaborate codes contained in the patterns may never be fully understood. (Reinhard 5)
Anyone familiar with European villages knows that the ornamentation on traditional costumes is distinctive from one village to the next, even if they are only a few kilometers apart; thus they help to locate origins. All these elements of story need to be placed in context, and a beautifully tailored shirt, perfect pleats, or a pair of Argyle socks have little to reveal when taken in isolation. But quality of materials, sizes, occasions for wear or gift, and provenance are all parts of the story. Not all projects have the same widespread historical importance as the so-called Bayeux Tapestry, but they still are fraught with significance and meaning.

A Christmas stocking (see Plate 1) decorated with a child’s name has talismanic significance because Grandma made it; its meaning for the critic is, in part, the information that the stocking maker valued traditional Christmas ritual. There is added meaning for the biographer in the knowledge that the grandmother made and the child kept the stocking. A sampler with the epigram “Home, Sweet Home” (see Plate 2) and the formulaic presence of the alphabet stitched across the bottom potentially escapes the curse of patterned obscurity because of the icon of the particular house worked in the middle of the piece. Step-by-step examples of buttonholes, mending, and basting stitches indicate that the stitcher is formally trained rather than home taught (see Plate 3); a series of mounted samples of assorted fancy stitches, such as hemstitch and Holbein, indicate that the training included not only practical but also decorative work. Subsequently, a researcher can investigate what institutions provided this particular training, establish enrollment, dates of tenure, program completion, and so on. An innovative crewel piece can reveal that the stitcher has a sense of whimsy and creativity (see Plate 4). The fact that a stitcher made reusable shopping bags (see Plate 5) (dubbed Grandma’s save-the-world bags by my son) tells the reader there is an environmental conscience at work. Mittens, scarf, and a toque reveal that the knitter has people who live where it gets
cold (see Plate 6)—and a closer look reveals that the mittens have been darned; we mustn’t overlook the obvious: geography and migration are important. Overalls don’t indicate a child’s gender, but they do indicate practicality because of their fabric’s durability (see Plate 7). Home-made child-size chaps demonstrate the stitcher’s willingness to undertake the less practical kind of clothing project (see Plate 8). Unworn mitts show us the knitter’s foresight and anticipation (see Plate 9). A crocheted bedspread reveals patience and the ability to undertake and to complete long-term work (see Plate 10). A Halloween costume may tell us that the costumer enjoyed the fun of the occasion (see Plate 11), and considered the warmth and safety of the trick-or-treater. A Superman costume can show problem-solving ingenuity starting with blue pajamas and red jockey shorts (see Plate 12), and exquisite skill in fashioning the “S” emblazoned on the chest. Finally, when we know that the same stitcher (in this case, my mother) produced all of this diverse work, we have compiled a respectable bit of information both for formulating a personality profile and for pursuing further research.

These texts do not stand alone and tell a whole story but no text does, nor even does any collection of texts. They do, however, help to construct a version of the story that approaches thoroughness. Carolyn Heilbrun declares that “biographers of women have had not only to choose one interpretation over another but [. . .] actually reinvent the lives their subjects led, discovering from what evidence they could find the processes & decisions, the choices and unique pain” (31) of these women. What women have constructed with their needleworking skills helps biographers to reconstruct the lived life. Darned socks and smocked dresses are materials that can add dimensionality, that can give shape to the days and put color and texture into the black-and-white narrative pages of a finished biography. Biographers would do well to live by Phyllis Rose’s caution that “if you do not appreciate the force of what you’re leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you’re doing” (quoted in Heilbrun 30).
WORKS CITED


Plate 11.

Plate 12.