CHAPTER 15

Autofiction and Self-Portraiture: Jenny Diski and Claude Cahun

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Jenny Diski (1947–2016) was a British writer, principally of novels, memoirs, and essays, all of which drew upon her own life in some way. As she said in her final book, *In Gratitude* (2016), "I write fiction and non-fiction, but it's almost always personal. I start with me, and often enough end with me" (2016, 10–11). Claude Cahun (1894–1954), a French writer and photographer, is best known for the many photographic self-portraits she produced with her partner Marcel Moore, and she has been described as "the first example of a specialist, career self-portraitist" (Hall 2014, 243). In this chapter, I will argue that Cahun and Diski alike can be seen first and foremost as self-portraitists. In using this term, I have in mind not, in the first instance, the genre of visual art, but the literary self-portrait, as it has been defined by Michel Beaujour in his *Miroirs d'encre* (1980, published in English translation as *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* [1991]; subsequent references are to the latter edition). I will focus primarily on Diski's novel *The Dream Mistress* (1996a) and Cahun's most substantial written work, *Aveux non avenus* (1930), translated into

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English as *Disavowals; or Cancelled Confessions* (2007). While these two texts most obviously belong to the genre of the self-portrait, they also exhibit some features of autofiction, as this genre has been defined by Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the word in 1977, and others. It is my contention that self-portraiture and autofiction represent two poles in life-writing, which correspond to two different conceptions of the self.

The distinction between self-portraiture and autofiction has already been implicitly made by Philippe Gasparini in his essay "Autofiction vs. autobiographie," in which he describes "two main tendencies which share the field of contemporary self-writing," both of which arise from the recognition that "any autobiographical narrative tends to develop like a novel." The approach of autofiction to this recognition is to "assume and amplify the fictional compulsion of the narrative of the self." The other tendency is to "be careful, wherever possible, not to fall into the narrative" (2011, 18).[1] Gasparini's essay is most concerned with autofiction, and he does not name this second tendency. However, in its avoidance of a narrative, it corresponds to what Beaujour calls the literary self-portrait, of which he says: "The *absence* of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography" (1991, 2). In contrast, then, to autobiography, which gives us the continuous narrative of a self developing through time, the self-portrait is fragmentary in form, and its structure is spatial rather than temporal (105). This largely unacknowledged tradition of life-writing begins with Michel de Montaigne's sixteenth-century *Essais* (*Essays*) and includes Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1908), Michel Leiris's *L'Age d'homme* (*Manhood*) (1939), and Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*) (1975). Incorporating Beaujour's term into Gasparini's scheme, we can say that both self-portraiture and autofiction oppose autobiography's claim to present a truthful account of its subject, but whereas autofiction does so by foregrounding the fictionality of the self, self-portraiture highlights its fragmentariness and lack of a coherent narrative.

In its form, Cahun's *Aveux non avenus* is exemplary of the literary self-portrait, as it refuses to present a continuous narrative of its author's life. It comprises, instead, short texts and aphorisms, which move between the first and third person and in which Cahun assumes a range of personae. Furthermore, each section of the book begins with a photomontage—attributed to Cahun's partner and collaborator Marcel Moore—which brings together multiple self-portraits of Cahun. The fragmentary form of the text is echoed in the montaging of cut-up images. In her contribution

to this volume, Laura Marcus points out that, in the early twentieth century, "autobiographical texts, like biographies, began to incorporate a sequence of photographic images, providing visual representations of the writing 'I' and a visual narrative of the life being recorded" (311). Cahun's book subversively occupies this new, hybrid form to fragment and montage autobiography's continuous narrative, in both its textual and its visual elements. *Aveux non avenus*, therefore, looks like a literary self-portrait. However, it and Cahun's other work can also be read as autofiction, particularly in the way in which they challenge stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and race through Cahun's serial performances of her own identity. This performativity recalls autofiction's tendency to "assume and amplify the fictional compulsion of the narrative of the self." Doubrovsky defines autofiction as "Text/life: the text, in turn, operates in a life, not in the void" (1980, 90). Thus, another key characteristic of autofiction is that the self is reimagined not only in the text but also in the author or artist's "real life." We find this in the work of Cahun, whose self-construction is a process undertaken not only in the text, whether that be written or visual, but also in the real world which she and her readers inhabit. Elements of self-portraiture and autofiction are therefore co-present in Cahun's work.

The same can be said of Diski's writings. As these take the form of memoirs, and of novels which incorporate episodes from her own life, our first impulse is to read them as autofiction, as opposed to self-portraiture. However, while Diski does combine fiction and non-fiction, her texts do not take their charge from the boundary between the two, as Doubrovsky argues is the case with autofiction when he defines it as "text/life." Diski declares, by contrast, "I think it's a pity that the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy exists" (2020, 60), and she prefers to see herself as "a writer. Period" (Diski 2006, 1). Moreover, although Diski resembles an autofictionalist in writing fictional narratives, she does this only reluctantly, as she makes clear when she says, "I hate writing stories. I hate plot, I hate characters. I just know that I have to have them, or I think I have to have them, but they're not really what I want to be writing about" (1999, 47). What she really wants to write are "abstract shapes" (47). This phrase brings to mind the self-portrait, with its spatial structure, rather than autofiction, which embraces chronological narrative. It also recalls Cahun and Moore's photomontages, which take photographic images out of their temporal context, and relocate them in a new spatial arrangement.

The abstract shape of *The Dream Mistress*, Diski tells us, is that of "Chinese boxes," or "Patterns coming out of other patterns" (1999, 47).

In my discussion of Diski's work, I have chosen to focus on this novel in particular because it is an excellent example of a literary self-portrait and because it is the book in which I believe Diski explores most profoundly her own identity as a life-writer. We might call it a self-portrait of the self-portraitist as a self-portraitist. This self-representation is bound up with the importance of narcissism in *The Dream Mistress*. Narcissism is a central theme in Cahun's *Aveux non avenus* too, and Diski's and Cahun's explorations of this topic are similar. They also correspond to those of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, and in looking at Diski and Cahun alongside Kristeva, I will argue that self-portraiture arises from a different relationship between narcissism and creativity than the one which underpins straightforward autobiographical writing. This argument will then lead me to speculate further on the relationship between self-portraiture and autofiction.

Facelessness and Masquerade

Masks feature frequently in Cahun's photographic self-portraits; in one she is wearing a black cloak with many carnival masks pinned to it, and in another she places her own head behind a display of masks in the British Museum. She also dwells at length on the topic of masks in her writing. It is the subject of an essay entitled "Carnaval en chambre" (Bedroom Carnival) (1926), and in a passage of that essay reproduced in *Aveux non avenus*, Cahun speaks of "disguising my soul" with "masks […] so perfect that when their paths crossed in the grand square of my consciousness they didn't recognise each other." But then, she continues: "the make-up I had used seemed indelible. I rubbed so hard to remove it that I took off all the skin. And my soul, like a flayed face, naked, no longer had a human form" (2007, 14). The vivid image of Cahun's consciousness as a carnivalesque masquerade points toward a conception of her identity as both multiple and performative. Furthermore, the removal of her face with her mask undermines the very notion of the human self, which is insistently identified, in the Western tradition at least, with the face.

Cahun's linking of facelessness to masquerade is echoed in Diski's *The Dream Mistress*, in which a flayed face literally appears. At the beginning of the novel, the central protagonist Mimi encounters an unconscious, elderly female tramp behind a London cinema and calls an ambulance for her. One of the paramedics who arrives on the scene ironically names the tramp Bella (Italian for "beautiful") before she is taken to a hospital, where two

nurses cut away her filthy clothes, and then, in a surreal twist, proceed to remove the outer layers of her body, as Bella herself looks on from a disembodied point of view. Bella is entranced by what she sees and particularly by the tracery of nerves and blood vessels beneath her face. However, "[a] face without features offered no story, and above all else it was a story that Bella ached for. She closed her eyes on her anatomy and searched the darkness for something with a narrative. Something fit for a Bella without a past or future" (Diski 1996a, 17). There then follows, like a pattern coming out of a pattern, a story entitled "Mask," about another woman named Bella, who is also lying in a hospital bed. She, too, has lost her face, having been seriously injured in a terrorist bomb blast, and she is visited daily by the unnamed stranger who gave her the kiss of life, and who has fallen in love with her.

It is, above all, the centrality of facelessness in *The Dream Mistress* which makes it a self-portrait of a self-portraitist, for, according to Beaujour, "the self-portraitist's inaugural experience is one of emptiness, of absence unto himself" (1991, 4). Bella's facelessness is such an experience, which leads her to yearn for a narrative to fill the void. The story that performs this role is a fictional self-portrait, which serves as a mask for the tramp. This is not a mask which disguises a presence, but one which supplements an absence, just as Beaujour speaks of the self-portraitist as "[a]n awareness without a *self*, without a person. No sooner does a *person* appear than he is replaced by another mask among a host of possible masks: ancestors, contemporaries, fictitious characters whom I or others have created" (1991, 33, emphasis in original). In the self-portrait, the self can be presented only as a series of masks, so it is not surprising that a mask also features in the story entitled "Mask." When she leaves the hospital, the other Bella and the man who loves her move into a house from which all reflective surfaces have been removed because Bella refuses to confront the reflection of her disfigured face. The only mirror in the house is locked away in a cabinet, for use by the man when shaving, and Bella finally looks at herself in it when wearing a Pierrot mask she has been given by the man. If, as Diski says, the structure of *The Dream Mistress* is that of Chinese boxes, or boxes within boxes, then we can think of this cabinet containing a mirror as the central box, in which the self can be seen only as a mask.

In *The Dream Mistress*, the self-portraitist's inaugural experience of emptiness is figured not only as facelessness but also in Mimi's lack of knowledge of the tramp's life story. We are told: "The unknown distance trod between the tramp's conclusion and her absent story gave Mimi a

vertiginous sense that she might, for all Mimi could fathom, have been someone she had once known. Storyless spaces, like black holes, suck ferociously on whatever comes into their orbit in their need to be occupied" (Diski 1996a, 33). Specifically, the storyless space which the tramp represents for Mimi prompts her to recall her mother, Leah, who abandoned her when she was a child, and about whom she has heard nothing since. This recollection leads, like another pattern emerging out of a pattern, into the story of Leah after she left Mimi: following a nervous breakdown, she took the name Bella, and became a heretical nun. Bella's story ends with her as the tramp behind the cinema where Mimi found her at the beginning of the novel.

To complicate matters further, the author, Diski herself, is drawn into the masquerade which constitutes *The Dream Mistress*, for Mimi's childhood memories of her mother are, to a large extent, Diski's own. We know this because they are repeated in her memoir, *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), which was published a year after *The Dream Mistress*. In both the novel and the memoir, which Diski has described as "companion volumes" (2020, 60), the memories are accompanied by reflections on the nature of memory itself. For Mimi, memory is unreliable because it is "a contrivance, a picture created after the event, and with no more verisimilitude than any other fiction" (Diski 1996a, 34). There is thus a complete discontinuity between Mimi's remembering self and her childhood self: "It was not even that the child was *no longer* her. The divorce was more profound than that. She allowed that the child had existed, and even that she continued to exist in her own right, in the past, lodged inside Mimi's mind, but there was no umbilical connection between them" (34). This idea of memory accords with Beaujour's statement: "*A memory without a person*—do not all self-portraits tend towards the paradoxical status that clearly opposes them to autobiographies?" (1991, 33, emphasis in original). In the self-portrait, a memory is nothing but a mask supplementing the absence of that continuous person upon which autobiography depends. In this way, self-portraiture contrasts with autofiction, in which the fictional self as mask calls into question the identity of the self, but is not predicated on absence. In *The Dream Mistress*, a blank page is inserted before Mimi's memories to indicate that they, like Bella's story, are founded upon an absence and provide a narrative for a self "without a past or a future." In *Skating to Antarctica*, Diski reflects upon memory in similar terms to Mimi, and remarks that her attribution of events from her own life to her characters produces "proliferated mes; mes with their own

autonomy—at least within the confines of their story" (1997, 87). This description perfectly captures the driving force of self-portraiture: in the absence of a self, autonomous mes are endlessly proliferated, so a self-portrait is necessarily multiple, and essentially fictional. This proliferation of mes is brilliantly expressed in the name Mimi (pronounced "Me me"), which tells us, among other things, that this character is one of Diski's many masks.

This proliferation takes the shape of Chinese boxes because "no sooner does a *person* appear," in the form of a mask supplementing an absence, than it must be replaced by another mask, leading to a structure of one mask emerging from another. This same motif appears in Cahun's *Aveux non avenus*. In the text, Cahun writes, "[e]very living being—Russian doll, nest of tables—is expected to contain all the others" (2007, 103), and this nested structure is then represented visually in the final photomontage of the book (Fig. 15.1). The photomontage includes both a series of Russian dolls, in each of which is a fetus at a different stage of development, and an image which Lee-Von Kim describes as "two columns of overlapping faces—all Cahun, but some masked—sprouting from a single neck. Beneath each face lies another, a seemingly endless proliferation of selves" (2014, 118). Around this image are written the words, "Under this mask another mask. I will never be done taking off all these faces" (quoted in Kim 2014, 118). Cahun's performativity must be understood in relation to this structure: it is not simply a performance of identity, but a serial self-representation based on the understanding that, in the final analysis, the self is absent. Self-representation therefore always goes by way of self-cancelation. This distinguishes it from autobiography, which, in the genre of photography, would involve a faithful representation of oneself at different moments in one's life, and from autofiction, which does not foreground this structural relationship between self-fictionalization and self-erasure.

In the introduction to her book *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography*, Gen Doy writes:

> I began to consider whether Cahun's famous self-portrait photographs were not just about staging the self, or theatrical tableaux of femininity (as many writers have discussed) but embodiments of something much more fundamental to human beings: the possibility that the image is only a tantalising bait, to trick us—even Cahun—into thinking that we can represent ourselves. (2007, 12)

Fig. 15.1 Photomontage at the beginning of chapter IX, entitled I.O.U., of Cahun's *Aveux non avenus.* Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections

It is precisely this way of apprehending the photographic image which makes Cahun's self-portraits (literary) self-portraits, in Beaujour's sense. According to Beaujour, "The presence of a Self, unto oneself, which one could naively think of as constituting the illusory subject of the self-portrait, is but a lure, or its reverse side" (1991, 7). This suggests that the absence of the self unto itself is the real subject of the self-portrait. In Cahun's case, though, while her self-portrait photographs do embody this fundamental truth as their condition of possibility, it would be more accurate to say that the negation of self is their reverse side, while the image as lure or bait is the uppermost side. This accords with Kim's comparison of Cahun's work with Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, which Beaujour identifies as a literary self-portrait, and which begins with a series of photographs of Barthes at different stages of his life. Kim argues that "Cahun does not share Barthes's anxiety to rid himself of the image-repertoire. She sees in photography the potential to constantly revision herself" (2014, 124). In other words, while Barthes is an exemplary self-portraitist in his desire to avoid falling into the life-narrative which the image-repertoire produces, Cahun finds in the contingency of this repertoire the basis for her performative self-revision.

In Cahun's work and Diski's *The Dream Mistress*, the "image-repertoire" is figured as a masquerade, though Diski would seem to differ from Cahun in finding in these masks not so much the potential for constant revision, as a necessity which she cannot do without. The tramp Bella's yearning for a story to fill the void indicates that the need for a life-narrative is a psychological one as well as a technical one for Diski as a writer. Despite this difference of emphasis, both Cahun and Diski add a new dimension to self-portraiture by placing its reverse side, the "illusory subject," uppermost. In this way, the genre is broadened to include serial photographic self-portraits, and fictional and non-fictional life-narratives. These works remain self-portraits because they are founded on facelessness, or an absence of self. Despite their apparent continuity, therefore, Cahun's photographs and Diski's writings are radically discontinuous, just as Diski's memories, which we might be inclined to read as moments in the continuous story of a life, take the form instead of a proliferation of selves, each autonomous within the confines of her own story.

Self-Portraiture and Narcissism

The Narcissus myth first began to be used to describe a state of mind in the late nineteenth century, and, especially after the publication of Sigmund Freud's essay "On Narcissism" in 1914, quickly gained widespread currency, so much so that in *Aveux non avenus* (1930) Cahun could write, "[t]he myth of Narcissus is everywhere. It haunts us" (2007, 32). The aspect of this myth which we most associate with narcissism is Narcissus's falling in love with his reflection in a pool of water and drowning when he tries to kiss his image. In *Aveux non avenus*, Cahun remarks of this fate: "The death of Narcissus has always seemed totally incomprehensible to me. Only one explanation seems plausible: Narcissus did not love himself. He allowed himself to be deceived by an image. He didn't know how to go beyond appearances" (31). In this reading of the myth, Narcissus's fixation on his reflection detracts from what is most essential to his self-love: "Oh Narcissus, you could love yourself in everything […]. Can Narcissus die withered, he whose self-love is fulfilled in an egoism for two, for many, for all, in the universal orgy?" (31–32). For Cahun, true narcissism is a going beyond the image in the mirror, so that one loves oneself in everything; thus she writes, "'Mirror,' 'fix,' these are words that have no place here" (33). If we relate this interpretation of Narcissus to the practice of self-portraiture, we can say that Narcissus's deception by an image is equivalent to his capture by the image-repertoire, or his falling into a life-narrative. By avoiding fixation on a single mirror image, Cahun embarks, instead, on a continuous revisioning of the self through an interaction with others in "a universal orgy" within the image-repertoire. Cahun's self-portraiture is therefore of a piece with her articulation of a new form of narcissism, which she describes as "the neo-narcissism of a practical humanity" (32).

Tirza True Latimer notes that when Cahun and Moore published *Aveux non avenus*, "the thematic of narcissistic femininity" (2005, 87) was being widely deployed to denigrate female sexuality, in general, and lesbian desire, in particular. The re-envisaging of narcissism in *Aveux non avenus* is therefore a way of reclaiming it "as both a feminist and a homophile signifier" (92). According to Latimer, Cahun's photographic self-portraits achieve this by "pictur[ing] a particular collaborative mode of authorship" (96), in which Moore, who likely took the photographs, played an essential role. Latimer summarizes the nature of this collaboration as follows:

> Cahun's restaging of the narcissistic scene—the simultaneous evocation of both likeness and difference, the triangulation of a doubled internal image with an external point of self-regard (that of her lover's camera)—offers an alternative to representations of the same-sex partnership as a self-enclosed unit deficient in social or cultural meaning. (90)

Moore's involvement in the production of Cahun's self-portraits is crucial to their innovativeness because it introduces difference and multiplicity into a genre which is traditionally conceived primarily in terms of solipsism and self-regard. In so doing, the photographs perform a radical reconceptualization of narcissism, of which self-portraiture is taken to be a manifestation.

The "triangulation of a doubled internal image with an external point of self-regard," which characterizes Cahun and Moore's collaborative process, is echoed in Julia Kristeva's theory of narcissism. This theory challenges the commonly held view that narcissism is a state in which the subject enjoys a sense of plenitude and self-sufficiency, recalling the newborn child's blissful union with its mother. Kristeva contends that narcissism is, instead, a psychic structure which involves a "third party" who interrupts the "autoeroticism of the mother-child dyad" (Kristeva 1987, 22). The narcissistic subject is not a fully-fledged ego, but a pre-ego, and the mother is not an object, but an abject (Kristeva's word for that which is rejected or cast out in order for a self to come into being). Kristeva calls the "third party" the "imaginary father" (41) but because narcissism predates an awareness of sexual difference, this figure is not to be identified with the father as such. In Latimer's description of Cahun's "restaging of the narcissistic scene," this third party corresponds to the triangulating "external point of self-regard" occupied by Moore's camera. Like Kristeva, then, Cahun substitutes a tripartite structure for the mother-child dyad, upon which "representations of the same-sex partnership as a self-enclosed unit" are based.

According to Kristeva's theory, the act of separation of the child from the abjected mother, brought about by identification with the imaginary father, creates an "emptiness" which is essential not only for the child's sense of difference from the mother but also for all the other distinctions upon which symbolization is based. Without this emptiness, there can be no conceptualization of the world and no language. Kristeva then posits that narcissism arises as "a means for protecting that emptiness" (24). Following this logic, at the very origin of the self, there is a "zone where

emptiness and *narcissism*, the one upholding the other, constitute the zero degree of imagination" (24, emphasis in original). This "zero degree of imagination" is, I suggest, what Beaujour calls the self-portraitist's inaugural experience of emptiness. The self-portrait therefore emerges out of an elementary structure of the psyche, a "space of imagination," which, Pleshette DeArmitt explains in her commentary on Kristeva, "gives rise to necessary fictions that will form the core of an individual's identity" (2014, 59). In contrast, then, to the author of autofiction, who inhabits the boundary between fictional and non-fictional selves, the self-portraitist operates in a space where fictions of the self proliferate. Cahun, who seems to inhabit this "zone," is able to exploit its potential for continuous self-fashioning. However, this is also a place where identity is always on the point of falling into an abyss of emptiness. Thus, Cahun laments: "Why does God force me to change faces? […] Why am I unravelled the minute I close my eyes?" (2007, 34).

The separation of the child from the mother which forms the basis of Kristeva's structure of narcissism is also central to Diski's *The Dream Mistress*. In the novel, the tramp, the encounter with whom prompts Mimi to recall her mother, could not be more abject: she is "a diseased and broken specimen to which a healthy creature would give wide berth, refusing to recognize any semblance of connection with itself" (1996a, 5). In Kristeva's scheme, it is the child who must move away from the mother in order to identify with the imaginary father. In the child's imaginary, this is perceived as its having killed the mother in an act of "[m]atricide" (1989, 27). In *The Dream Mistress*, Diski posits a fundamentally different model of the mother-child relationship and therefore of subject formation, as Mimi does not leave her mother, but is left by her. Diski underlines the importance of this when she says that her "abandonment is absolutely essential to who Mimi is and what she can achieve" (1999, 46), and Mimi's memory of having been abandoned by her mother is crucial to her later sense of identity as someone who "did not think of herself as one who leaves, but as one who was left" (Diski 1996a, 48). Furthermore, Mimi does not mind being left on her own; indeed, she cherishes the space around her as "[a] cultivated void that required silence and inactivity to satisfy its emptiness" (93). The absences of those who have left her then become more "storyless spaces," which are a spur to Mimi's imagination. Her mother's absence coincides with that of the tramp and prompts her to spin the story of Leah changing her name to Bella and becoming a nun

given to deeply metaphysical speculation about the nature of God and language.

Leah's story is Mimi's, and, we presume, Diski's, fantasy portrait of her mother. In Diski's case, her mother Rene did not leave suddenly, as Mimi's did, but Diski went to live with the famous writer Doris Lessing when she was 15 and lost all contact with her mother at the age of 19. The details of this mother-daughter relationship are given in *Skating to Antarctica* and create many points of intersection between that book and *The Dream Mistress*. As well as being a story about the absent mother, Mimi's story of Leah is also a self-portrait, of both Mimi and Diski, the personal element of which is most evident in Leah's depression, which is manifested in an interior landscape "[u]nbounded and without signposts," an "empty panorama" (72). This landscape echoes, without being identical to, Mimi's cherished "void." Fittingly for a self-portrait of a self-portraitist as a self-portraitist, what the proliferated mes in *The Dream Mistress* share is an inaugural experience of emptiness. In Leah's case, this results in a form of depression resembling Diski's own, which she movingly describes in an essay on the subject as an inescapable space of "negative upon negative. Blackness ever blackening" (2014). In *The Dream Mistress*, then, there is no clear distinction between the story of the self and that of the mother. This confusion of selves reflects Kristeva's narcissistic structure, in which identity is expressed not as a unified ego, but in the interplay between three points, "enacted around the central emptiness of that transference [to the imaginary father]" (1987, 42).

Kristeva writes: "Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage" (1989, 5). This depression occurs because the origin of the self in matricide results in overwhelming feelings of guilt and mourning. These feelings are only overcome when the subject is able to negate the loss of the mother by finding substitutes for her in the signifying system of language (43). The depressed narcissist cannot achieve this because he or she is unable to get over the loss and remains in a state of perpetual mourning in which life lacks all meaning. The depression which the characters in *The Dream Mistress* experience is somewhat different. Because the emptiness at the heart of the novel is the consequence of abandonment by an unloved and unloving mother, rather than matricide, it lacks the affective burden of guilt and mourning which Kristeva sees as essential to the constitution of the subject. Quite the contrary, for Mimi, the absence of the mother comes as a welcome relief. Diski's female

characters are always in danger of falling into an abyss of loneliness and isolation, but they also have the potential to find in the void images and stories which satisfy their desire for narrative and self-representation. Their deployment of signs is a way of living with lack of meaning rather than a means of exorcising it, and so their creativity has an entirely different basis than the one envisaged by Kristeva. This origin of self-portraiture in a preoedipal conception of the self distinguishes it from autofiction, which can better be understood as foregrounding the relationship between the self and its reflection in the Lacanian mirror stage.

The difference between Kristeva's and Diski's understandings of the connection between narcissism and language comes into sharp focus in the final section of *The Dream Mistress*, which narrates the first dream Mimi has ever recollected. The dream is presented to us in the second person and the "you" addressed by the narrator travels across a vast ocean in a ferry, which stops at a brick tower in the middle of the sea. You and the other passengers then file through this tower, a kind of toll booth, in which you see a woman lying in a bed in a windowed alcove, writing in a notebook. When you ask the conductor if she is not distracted by all the people, he replies, "No […] That's the price for being in a room with such a view" (Diski 1996a, 186). This woman is the Dream Mistress of the novel's title. It is significant that she is a writer, for, as Beaujour says, "There is no self-portrait that is not of a writer *qua* writer" (1991, 9–10), and it is reasonable to assume that it is she who is writing the novel we are reading. We can compare this woman writer with Kristeva's description of the "negative narcissist," who creates within herself an "oceanic void": "In the midst of its lethal ocean, the melancholy woman is the dead one that has always been abandoned within herself and can never kill outside herself" (1989, 29). The Dream Mistress has much in common with this melancholy woman, but, for her, the oceanic void ceases to be lethal nothingness and becomes instead a mesmerizing view. It is then that writing, or the entry into language, can begin.

Diski has said of *The Dream Mistress*: "It's about pre-fiction in a sense […] It's daydreams spinning around in someone's head at that stage before I as it were take them and turn them into a nice neat novel with a definite story" (1996b). This pre-fiction corresponds to Kristeva's "zero degree of imagination," which involves not only separation from the mother but also primary identification with the imaginary father. Kelly Oliver, in her reading of Kristeva, describes this as "the originary identification that sets up all subsequent identifications, including the ego's

identification with itself" (1993, 77). At this early stage of the ego's development, "It is not one being imitating another, the child imitating its object. Rather, it is a reduplication of a pattern" (72). It is in this preoedipal space that the narcissism and self-portraiture of Cahun and Diski have their origin. In Cahun's photographic self-portraits, the reduplication of a pattern, by which the self is constantly formed and reformed, emerges in the complex interplay of self and other, as Cahun's self-representation is mediated through the gaze of her collaborator and lover, Moore. In *The Dream Mistress*, the reduplication of a pattern is perfectly figured by the sea, with its endless waves, upon which the Dream Mistress gazes as she writes. It is then no wonder that *The Dream Mistress* and *Aveux non avenus*, as self-portraits of narcissistic writers, both prominently feature the motif of Chinese boxes, or "[p]atterns coming out of other patterns," for it is this shape which most aptly captures the structure of a narcissistic subjectivity.

Naming: Self-Portraiture and Autofiction

According to Doubrovsky, "[w]hat characterizes autofiction is—Philippe Lejeune has posited this as a rule of autobiography—the identity of name between author, narrator, and character. This seems essential to me" (2005, loc. 2193). Autofiction is therefore the same as autobiography as Lejeune defines it in his influential book *Le Pacte autobiographique* (*The Autobiographical Pact*) (1975), but differs from it in declaring itself to be fiction, not fact. Consequently, whereas in autobiography the identity of name serves as a guarantor of the veracity of the narrative, in autofiction it functions instead to draw attention to the boundary between fact and fiction. The subject to which the name is attached is then posited as both real and fictional at the same time. One writer who has exploited this fundamental characteristic of the genre is Chloé Delaume, who, in her book *La Règle du Je: Autofiction: un essai* (which can be loosely translated as *The Rule of I: Autofiction: An Essay*, but which plays in addition on the French homophone je/jeu, I/game), accepts the identity of name posited by Doubrovsky as "the base rule, the constraint" of autofiction ([2010] 2015, loc. 151). Yet, in her case, the name "Chloé Delaume"—shared by author, narrator, and character—is a fictional one, which the writer adopted in place of her birth name, Nathalie Dalain. Delaume writes of her autofictional practice: "I reinvent my personality and my existence through literature, while reconstructing my real identity on the basis of a

change of name" (loc. 507). Autofiction then extends into Delaume's lived reality, as a "self-fictionalization" (loc. 477), which she declares to be "an act of resistance […] to collective fictions" (loc. 477–478) that impose narratives of the self upon us. In her hands, the tendency of autofiction to amplify the fictional compulsion of autobiographical narrative is politically inflected to become a form of "literary mythomania to counter collective fiction" (loc. 432).

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore also changed their names from Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe, respectively. Furthermore, Cahun, like Delaume, used her self-portraits to challenge prevailing constructions of gender, sexuality, and race. However, the manner in which this is achieved is different from Delaume's autofiction, in that, rather than creating an alternative fiction of the self, Cahun and Moore's photographs counter collective fictions by drawing attention to their constructedness and by producing a proliferation of selves. We see this in their chosen names. As Latimer says, "In the case of both Cahun and Moore, the alliterative initials C.C. and M.M. reproduce *themselves* (initiating self-generation, as it were) while investing each name with the character of a pair, a double pair—pair of lovers, pair of sisters" (2005, 74, emphasis in original). Their names therefore perform the doubling and redoubling which is fundamental to their collaborative artistic practice. The constructedness of the names is also highlighted in the fact that Claude and Marcel are traditionally men's names, adopted by these women as a challenge to fixed gender identities and roles. In their playfulness and artificiality, these "false signatures" (81) are as much an undercutting of the signifying power of the name as an act of self-fictionalization, and Latimer argues that "[r]enaming, unnaming, and refusing to be named or labeled afforded Cahun and Moore a symbolic means to unravel the familial and cultural nets that enmeshed them" (2006, 201). In line with the genre of the self-portrait, their adopted names are used to avoid falling into narratives of the self, rather than as a means of amplifying their fictionality.

In a masterpiece of economy befitting a dream, the self-generation and redoubling performed by the names Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore are perfectly encapsulated in the single name Mimi (Me me) of the main protagonist of Diski's *The Dream Mistress*. There are many other ways in which names and naming are central themes of both *The Dream Mistress* and *Skating to Antarctica*. We have already seen that Leah changed her name to Bella, and we are told that, from Bella's point of view, "Leah

Feldman was an *intimate* stranger whose summoning-up at the sound of her name came complete with a life of her own. Not Bella's, for Bella's life was relatively recent" (Diski 1996a, 71–72, emphasis in original). This difference between Leah and Bella echoes the discontinuity between Mimi's remembering self and her childhood self, which is itself reinforced by a difference of name, albeit more subtle, because as a child Mimi was known by her full name, Miriam. In *Skating to Antarctica*, we find that the author's name "Jenny Diski" is also an adopted one: as well as her first name being short for "Jennifer," which she was called as a child, "Diski" was a new name taken by Jenny and her husband Roger when they married. In reflecting on the appearance of versions of Jennifer in her novels, Diski says, "I'm free to play around with who Jennifer was, might have been, never could have been. Sometimes it seems that I can get closer to her, or an essence of her precisely because of the distance between us" (1997, 86). Diski's writing is not, therefore, an act of self-fictionalization, but the fictionalization of another (self), who can best be described as an "*intimate* stranger." The same doubling of self and other is apparent in the relationship between Cahun and Moore, and it is different from the autofictional performance of a self which simultaneously occupies both sides of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, thereby allowing an interchange between these two domains.

Although Doubrovsky is credited with coining "autofiction," the word is, as a contraction of "autobiography" and "fiction," to all intents and purposes the same as "autobiografiction," which, Max Saunders points out, was coined by Stephen Reynolds in 1906. When Saunders revives this term in his book *Self Impression* (2010), he claims that "autobiografiction is not a minor form at all, but […] is a very widespread and diverse practice" (179), which produced numerous innovations in life-writing and autobiographical fiction in the Modernist period. Many of the features which Saunders identifies as characteristic of this genre are also features of literary self-portraiture. These include multiplicity and masquerade. However, autobiografiction is more akin to autofiction in drawing its energy from the boundary between autobiography and fiction, as Saunders suggests when he writes: "autobiografiction can be seen not so much as a separate genre or hybrid of two genres, as an expression of the structuration of genres: a relationship between the fictional and the autobiographic that defines them as different from each other by means of a moving between them" (524). Autofiction is not the same as autobiografiction,

particularly in its positing of an identity of names, but, as "an expression of a structuration of genres," it might be thought of as its successor. Self-portraiture, by contrast, arises within a pre-fictional zone of the imagination which precedes the distinction between fact and fiction upon which autofiction depends and, while it exhibits similar characteristics to autofiction, these are expressions of a very different structure: Chinese boxes, as opposed to a boundary between genres. Autofiction and self-portraiture may co-exist within a single work, just as the different conceptions of the self upon which they depend co-exist within the psyche, but they will do so with varying degrees of visibility. In the case of Diski and Cahun, self-portraiture is very much to the fore and goes hand-in-hand with their characterization of a preoedipal form of narcissism.

If autobiografiction was a widespread and diverse practice in the early twentieth century, Cahun's *Aveux non avenus* gives us a hint that we can also find a figuring of self-portraiture in the Modernist imaginary. In the second photomontage of that book (Fig. 15.2), at the bottom center of the page, as though all the other self-portraits are emerging from it, there is a photograph of Cahun as a young girl, and she is wearing a Pierrot costume. Pierrot is a character who recurs repeatedly in Modernist writing and art. As a masked clown, s/he (androgyny is one of Pierrot's characteristics) is unique, both in that the mask is virtually featureless—a white surface, often with a single tear—and in that it is painted onto the face, from which it is indistinguishable. As Robert Storey says, "Pierrot's pathetic white face cannot be unmasked: creator and role are fused into a single character" (1978, 31). Jean Starobinski comments on the "virtual facelessness" (192) of these sad clowns: "It is only at the price of this *vacancy*, of this initial *void* that they can *pass over* into the meaning that we have discovered in them. They have need of an immense reserve of nonsense in order to pass over into sense" (Starobinski, quoted in Storey 1978, 192, emphasis in original). In this way, Pierrot perfectly figures and names self-portraiture, as a genre of self-writing which originates in emptiness, and is dependent upon the absence of the very self it sets out to describe. No wonder, then, that in the center of the nest of boxes within boxes which constitutes Diski's *The Dream Mistress*, what we find, in yet another echoing or redoubling of Cahun's *Aveux non avenus*, is a woman looking at herself in a mirror, wearing a Pierrot mask.

Fig. 15.2 Photomontage at the beginning of chapter I, entitled R.C.S., of Cahun's *Aveux non avenus.* Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections

Note

1. Translations from Delaume 2010, Doubrovsky 1980, 2005, and Gasparini 2011 are my own.

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