

Newton, Esther. 2000. Margaret Mead
Made Me Gay: Personal Essays,
Public Ideas. Durham: Duke U. Press.
High School Crack-up

1973

This paper grew out of an odd discomfort which several women friends and I experienced while reading *Zelda*, the biography of Zelda Fitzgerald (Milford 1970).¹ Zelda was diagnosed as mentally ill and confined for many years in various institutions. But her letters seemed coherent and insightful, rather than what we thought of as crazy (confused, deluded) ravings. The fact that a supposedly hopeless schizophrenic was writing clear, if angry letters, let alone a novel, was very unsettling to us.

As I was puzzling over Zelda's life, I was reading *The Four-Gated City* by Doris Lessing (1969). Lynda Coldridge, one of the central characters, went insane shortly after her marriage and was hospitalized. Later, she lived in the same house with her husband, but insisted she was too "ill" to be touched by him. Whenever her husband suggested that Lynda should become his wife again, her response was another "psychotic" episode, and back to the hospital.

When I counted up female characters (created by women authors) and women authors or artists who went insane and/or attempted suicide, besides the two mentioned above, my list included Sylvia Plath (insanity, suicide); Virginia Woolf (insanity, suicide); *The Snake Pit* (Ward 1946; insanity); *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (Green 1964; insanity); Jill Johnston (insanity); Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* (Chopin 1972 [1899]; suicide); Marilyn Monroe, Janis Joplin, Diane Arbus (the photographer) (all suicide); Yvonne Rainer (the choreographer and dancer) and Dorothy Parker (suicide attempts).

There were also some exceptions: Anaïs Nin (although she suffered from serious depressions), Gertrude Stein, whose case is suggestive and needs further thinking out, and Valerie Solanis. Some of my women students said that *The Scum Manifesto* (Solanis 1971) sounded crazy to them, but we all agreed it was coherent. It is this kind of craziness that I want to talk about: craziness that sounds lucid. *The Scum Manifesto* is like a flaming descendent of Zelda's letters to Scott, so I'm back where I started.

I found a suggestive interpretation of insanity in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* by Laing and Esterson (1970). The book opens with the same question I had been asking: "Are the experience and behavior that psychiatrists take

as symptoms and signs of schizophrenia more socially intelligible than has come to be supposed?" (13). The authors explore the problem by interviewing eleven schizophrenic hospitalized women with their families. Simply, the authors concluded that much of so-called schizophrenic behavior is a predictable and purposeful response to certain techniques of mental torture. The families keep saying over and over to the interviewers: "I don't know what happened to her. She used to be, before her illness, happy, cheerful, no trouble to anyone, obeyed all our commands" and so on. This is normality. To be ill is to be miserable, unhappy, quarrelsome, disobedient, have sexual fantasies, to blame, reproach, want to get away from family-husband, try to kill herself, and so on.

Laing and Esterson suggest that the schizophrenic women are most crushed when considered most normal by their families, and most alive when considered most "crazy." Caught in an intolerable, frozen normality, these women resorted to behavior that was then labeled insane, basically an attempt to leave the scene of the action, the "real" world, and retreat to an interior monologue. By the time I finished the book my head was spinning, not with the supposed insanity of the women, but with the insanity of their families, any family, *my* family.

Perhaps the women artists are symbolizing, and living out, the general condition of women, except that the artists tend to be crazy-suicidal rather than crushed-normal for two reasons. The first has to do with the occupational hazards of writing and creating. To write authentically, a person has to look inside herself, set up an interior monologue similar to that of the schizophrenic women. Perhaps what they find is their ground-up rage and confusion. Second, becoming an artist, becoming recognized, separates women from the "normal" world of other women. When you read the lives of women artists, you see a variety of ways, some more successful than others, in which these women tried to adapt to their special status. (For instance, Gertrude Stein wrote in her early novel, *Q.E.D.* [1971], "Thank god I was not born a woman.")

I don't want to be what parents, men, the "real" world say I am or should be. But I don't want to be "crazy" or kill myself, either. This means accepting all my past selves: the me who tried and failed to be "normal," the me who went "crazy" and came back. We women want to define ourselves, and change the "real" world to our world. The craziness in my own past is not so painful to me as it was, and writing about it may speak to the experience of other women.

For two months before and after my sixteenth birthday, I kept a journal. When the journal began, I was functioning "normally" in the "real" world:

I was dating boys, eating dinner with my family, going to school, getting good grades, and doing my homework. In the journal I recorded my inner thoughts and daily concerns. My secrets included increasing signs of "madness": outbursts of rage, staying more and more in my room, self-hatred, self-mutilation, and confusion. In the last entries I was no longer able to keep my "madness" secret.

I grew up in New York City during the 1940s. My environment was upper middle class, Jewish, and liberal to radical. I was sent to a small progressive school that pushed the latest techniques in education, among them a less rigid notion of sex-role stereotyping than was then common.

When I was twelve, my mother, for reasons of her own, took me out to Palo Alto, an upper-middle-class suburb of San Francisco, where we both lived with her mother.² By the time I was sixteen, I had suffered through four years of public schooling and had arrived in the junior year of Palo Alto High School. "Paly" seemed to me like a concentration camp, yet I had internalized most of its values and blamed myself mercilessly for my inability to "really" fit in. My mother, too involved in her own troubles and fearful that I would move back East with my father, did not encourage my feeble efforts at rebellion. My girl friends, never having known anything different, were more effectively resigned, that is, more "normal" than I.

My high school offered basic training in oppression: child oppression (all teachers were superior to all students), sex oppression (all males were better than all females), popularity oppression (a student caste system modeled after but different from the class oppression in the adult world), and race oppression (blacks and Mexicans were simply not social persons).

Child oppression: The school was compulsory, regimented, competitive, and effective. Children were at the mercy of teachers, whose rule, however, was disguised as benign, "in our interests," and so on. Student government was a puppet popularity poll with no power; this may have been just as well, considering the values of the students. And of course all children (but girls more than boys) were controlled by their parents, on whom they were financially and emotionally dependent.

Sex oppression: As far as the school was concerned, boys and girls were technically equal. However, sex-role differences were strictly enforced in toilets, dress regulations, athletics, shop versus cooking, and so on. From the student viewpoint, boys and girls lived in two completely separate worlds. Male domination was unquestioned. Inter- and intrasex behavior were endlessly discussed and rigidly controlled down to the smallest and most personal detail. Heterosexuality was the only acceptable sex (although some boys, I now suspect, exploited others homosexually). From the girls' perspective, boys in-

habited a mysterious, glamorous, free, and of course superior world. To gain access to this world, via a boyfriend, was *the* goal of existence. Not to have a boyfriend was the worst possible fate.

Popularity oppression: The caste system was an outgrowth of male domination, for it was based on a hierarchy among boys; a girl was ranked according to which caste of boy she dated. Beyond the pale were those girls who were said to fuck "anybody." Fucking even a popular boy made a girl lose her reputation. Most girls who were said to fuck, whom we discussed in giggly whispers, were working-class or Mexican girls.

The upper caste of most popular boys consisted of the good athletes, who were also "handsome" and "good dressers." The middle caste was made up of the majority of boys who weren't popular but who didn't stick out either. The lower caste were called the "queers": these boys were physically handicapped, grossly "emotionally disturbed," the overly studious, the antisocial and obvious sex-role deviants. The black and Mexican boys were not categorized at all.

The girls' hierarchy was exactly parallel, except that membership in the popular caste was not based on any form of achievement, but on dating the popular boys. This depended on clothes, looks, and a mysterious something called "personality." A girl's "reputation" was her assessed value in the caste hierarchy.

When I say caste, I mean just that. There was no *open* dating or socializing between the castes, and it was extremely difficult to change your caste position. The lower castes were required to avoid and defer to the upper ones. The system was enforced by a sadistic system of social control, involving restriction of information, the power, through student government and influence, to define who was who and what was what, ridicule, gossip, and occasionally physical force.

The dating system embodied the miserable status of the female students. To begin with, boys did not need to date; they could maintain respect and even be popular without dating at all. Dating for girls was mandatory; a girl had no social personality if she did not date, she was simply a social reject. So most girls were obsessed with dating and crushes, that is, were "boy crazy." But girls could take no initiative in getting dates. They strove to be "attractive" to boys, but the boy had to make the first move. Girls were not supposed to phone boys or ask boys for dates. Even the power to refuse boys who asked them was limited by the need to date anyone. Once on a date, girls were supposed to "keep a boy interested," that is, to be sexually available, but not to "go too far." A girl who did this got a bad reputation. On the other hand, a girl who would not "put out" at all, who was "frigid," also got a bad reputation.

"Normal" behavior for me meant being who the school wanted me to be:

bright, obedient female student; who the other students thought I was: a big, awkward, badly dressed, too studious girl hanging desperately onto the tag end of the middle caste. And who my mother and grandmother thought I should be but wasn't: a bright, charming, helpful, cooperative daughter and granddaughter. My family, like most, had many of the elements that are supposed to produce the "normal"/"crazy" woman. Mine, however, was also culturally deviant, because I lived with my mother and grandmother and there were never any men in the house. My father, long divorced from my mother, lived far away in New York. I was entangled in a power struggle between them and terribly mystified as to what was going on and where my loyalties should lie.

Who did I think I was, in the middle of all this? I didn't know. I kept referring to my other life in the East, where I returned each summer and where I was more respected. I was almost – but not totally – overwhelmed by the negative judgments that were imposed on me. The only sources of support were good grades, occasional comfort from one or two girl friends, and extensive help from one woman teacher. In short, like the families of the schizophrenic women, the "real" world insisted that I was the bad one, *they* were all fine.

The journal, although the only ear I trusted completely, showed my secrets to be full of mystifications, obsessions, confusions, and fantasies, as well as many authentic insights about which I wasn't any too confident.

School, where I got good grades, was even so a source of confusion:

I didn't do one lick of homework this weekend, and it was a great mistake, I'll really be sorry. What's the matter with me?? Have I no will power? I wish I could quit school. It seems so unrealistic, so far from life.

The journal is mainly concerned with boys, the power struggle with my mother, and girl friends. My fantasies about boys were obsessive. I listed over and over again my various crushes on boys I hardly knew, against a background of my current crush on another boy I hardly knew:

I knew it. It turned out that John was at Performers on Friday. He played a big old solo. I probably could have had him all evening. Of course he won't show up again for months. And I was at Miss White's! Oh well, it's probably just as well. There is no doubt that I am attracted to him, and there's no sense fanning the flames that can only lead to hopelessness. Poor John, he doesn't realize what a little love could do for him. I guess it's not my problem. I wish it was.³

In between this kind of thing are wistful references to relationships with boys in the East, some of which seemed more "real" to me. As to the boys I

actually dated, I was sadly analytic, but had no answers to the questions raised by my experience. Notice how many "guesses" I had to make:

In the middle of the 8th grade I met Paul at [dancing school]. From the moment I met him I was out to get him. I liked him at first I guess. But I guess for my ego I was just determined to get him. And I certainly did. For a year we went together, and for the last two months of it we went steady. I knew I didn't like him when I accepted his offer to go steady. I mean I liked him but not sexually. He bored me, for my mind outstripped his by about fifty miles. He was smart, but I was smarter. Furthermore, my personality was much stronger and more forceful. I gave in to him a lot to try to hide this, but it really was pathetically obvious.

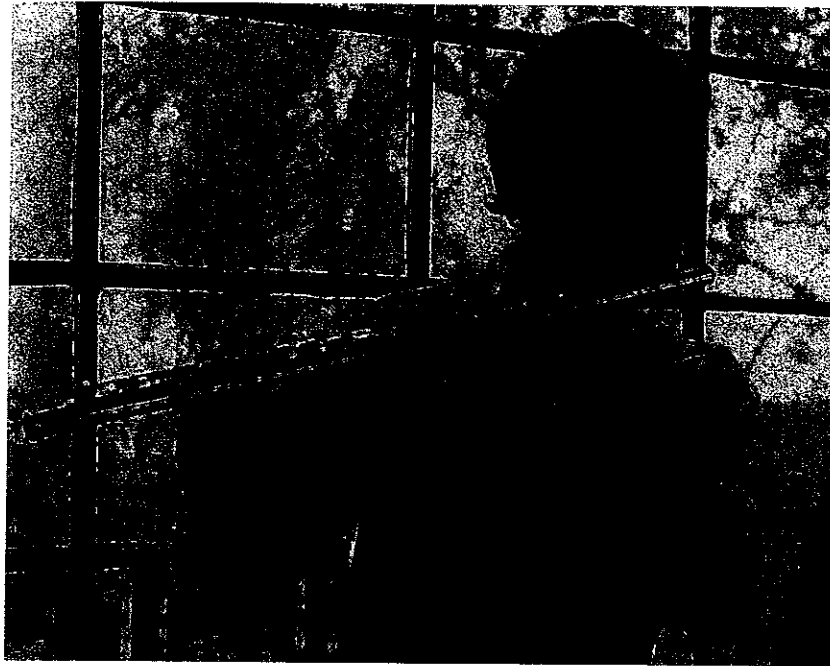
Also, he never kissed me. We held hands and danced close, but he never kissed me. I guess he would have gotten around to it eventually, but he was scared I guess. And I don't think the match was too popular with his friends. He was really pretty cute, and I guess everyone wondered why he was going with me. The only reason that I went steady with him was that I wanted to find out what it was like to go steady, and there was so much security in it. Also going with him brought my reputation up a lot.

And again:

I have just spent a more or less enjoyable evening with Ed. Ed really is a nice boy . . . but for some reason I don't go for Ed in a romantic way. I feel sorry for him, because he really likes me.

I wonder if he dreams about me the way I dream about boys I like? It is a rather frightening thought. With Ed, everything is so false. That's the way it has been with almost all the boys I have ever known. There have been damned few exceptions. . . . I never really fell for Paul, and he was one of the first on my list of lies. Poor boy, I fooled him so shamefully. I am such a sham, and why they don't realize it I'll never know. . . . Bob was and still is the best example of sham. Now I am beginning to think that he was fooling me as much as I was fooling him. Isn't it ridiculous. But he wanted something, sex. That isn't what I wanted, but it's what I wound up with.

I had moments of painful clarity about the popularity caste system, and how angry I was about it. But I had largely accepted its negative view of me. Nor did I question male superiority, confining myself, consciously, to envy of the popular *girls*.



Palo Alto misfit, about 1954.

Fighting with my mother reached a peak. I was striving for a degree of autonomy that threatened her need to keep me with her. At the same time, I felt terribly guilty and confused about our fights. The events in the drama were complicated. Mothers, it seems, have more power to make us "normal"/"crazy" than any other person. I think I see better now what the "real" world had done to her. I can afford this luxury because she no longer has the power (or burden) of being responsible for my life. One fight may give some of the flavor, if not the substance. One of the issues was the use of her car. In California it is impossible to get anywhere without a car, but bicycles were socially taboo:

Last night the car only set it off. The spark was: I said rather cuttingly that there was nothing to do around here but brood. At this point my mother started fooling around with her wispy hair, and looking very smug. "You are much too given to brooding," says she in her most superior. I cannot really explain why this made me so furious.

I could not have managed without my girl friends, but some of my friendships were not so friendly:

This deal with Anne is really beginning to reach the ridiculous stage. And I am beginning to hate myself more than Anne or anyone else. I am acting like a first class hypocrite. And I can't really figure her out. I don't know how much she likes me, or if she does at all, or if she is completely out for herself. One thing is sure, she hurts often, and with an apparently clear conscience. She makes an ass out of me with John. I think the only real solution is to try to keep away from both of them.

But:

Actually it's a good thing for me that she is there, because she is the only one I can go around with during lunch. Of course she's in the same predicament, but she can always cup it up to ["brown-nose"] someone. And I hate myself for cutting her so much to Cassandra while still being friendly with her. I am doing just what I hate and complain of in others. I wish I could get out of this mess. But I don't quite know how.

At the same time, I sometimes felt attracted to my girl friends, which scared me to my roots. This subject was absolutely taboo, so whatever I felt was *my fault*. There was no way to find out what others felt. After a fight with Anne, mentioned above, I wrote:

Either she adores me, or she needs a friend or she admires me. I suspect it's a little of all three. I don't think she will stay mad. If I were a boy she would go ape over me. I have just come to an important point. She knows, and I know, that something is sort of odd about our relationship. I wonder sometimes if I am a homosexual. If I am, then why do I get crushes on boys?

Later on, a crush on an older girl was rationalized away:

I have figured out my "thing" about Judy. I don't really think of her as a person, but as an impersonal symbol of the kind of intellectual, intelligent person I wish I were. She is just a symbol to me, and I don't think of her in terms of reality, but in terms of an idea or ideal. I feel better now that I have it straightened out in my mind.

The shadow fell in secret, on November 29, 1956, the day after my sixteenth birthday, a month after I began the journal:

After school I went to the dentist and got lots of Novocain. When I came home my jaw was completely out. I decided to take a razor blade and find out how much I couldn't feel. . . . I gashed myself quite deliberately in the chin. In fact, I carved it quite carefully. I passed it off pretty

well as an accident with my mother and others. And I satisfied all my desires . . . after dinner my mother and I went to see *The Desk Set* which was very good.

During the Christmas vacation, the power struggle between my mother and me climaxed. I wanted to fly back East to visit my New York friends and my father, a distant and forbidding figure who nonetheless financed my summer and holiday trips out of Palo Alto. My mother, for reasons she would not discuss, tried to prevent me from going, perhaps she sensed that in spinning out of control I would pull away from her orbit. In the end, my father sent me the money and I went against my mother's wishes, having what I thought was a wonderful time with both male and female friends. When I got back, I found I could no longer live in the "real" world of Paly High. I wrote that "everything hurts," that there was nothing real in me but a "small shrine at the center, very small and very strong."

Tonight I sat down on the couch and as I sat back I accidentally leaned against the dog. I turned around to say "excuse me" and out of a clear blue sky she bit me on the nose (that was what was sticking out I guess). I grabbed her neck and started to shake her. Suddenly I let go as tears came to my eyes. I don't know why. She didn't hurt me much. All of a sudden I felt terrible. I staggered upstairs and fell on the floor crying and sobbing. I guess the dam just broke or something. I cry pretty often alone, but I die when I cry in front of people. I even feel guilty crying alone. I keep wanting to drive my fist through a window. I have a very strong wish to do it. Partly for attention and partly to hurt myself. I wish I wasn't so God damn alone and confused and crazy.

That night I dreamed a long and terrible dream, of chasing and being chased, and in the dream I had a beard. For a moment when I woke up, I wasn't sure whether I was a boy or a girl. In the last paragraph of the journal, I reflected on an appointment with the hairdresser the next day:

My hair gives me a sense of camouflage and protection. I am torn between a desire to have it cut short, and a desire to keep up pretenses as much as possible. I don't know how I'll have it cut. I am feeling so defiant, I feel like having it all cut off as short as possible, just to show that I don't give a damn. There's more to say, but to hell with it.

In the next few days I began to break windows in the house, threaten my mother, drink to unconsciousness, fly into uncontrollable rages and tears, and more. My mother threatened to commit me to a local hospital. If she

had, perhaps I would have wound up like the schizophrenic women in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Luckily, through the intervention of a sympathetic woman teacher, I was sent to an analyst instead. With the help of the analyst and the teacher, I was able somehow to get through the rest of the school year, although there were frequent outbursts of my "sickness."

At the end of the year, I went back East and never lived in California again. My father sent me to a boarding school, where the "real" world was less destructive. Things were better for me then, but there is no happy ending. There will never be peace between me and the "real" world until the "real" world makes more space for me and for all other women.