

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON
*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of
a Girlhood Among Ghosts*
New York: Knopf, 1977. Pp. 209.

In the first chapter the author records the thoughts, feelings, and inner images of a man (a certain "b") who is standing on the deck of a ferry boat and waving to a woman, "a," in a yellow raincoat. In the following chapter, the author registers—also from the first person point of view—"a"'s memories, reflections, and inner debates thus shedding some light on the relationship between herself and "b." Later on, the other two characters are introduced; "c," a "real spinster" (p. 4) whom "b" meets abroad, and "d," a friend of "b" who gets involved with "a" after "b"'s departure. The fifty-two sections of this book—which are divided equally among the four characters—include nothing more than the introspective reactions of these four people to external stimuli, as well as their very subjective impressions of the things and persons that surround them and the past incidents which occupy their memory. The endless number of images and ideas that go through the minds of the characters are recorded in full details no matter how illogical, irrelevant, or inconsistent they might sound or appear to the outsider. In fact, no fable, story, nor plot is to be found no matter how hard we try.

There is no doubt that the nonuniform style of this work (see pp. 33-34 for highly lyrical passages, and p. 14 for factual and narrative parts) and its peculiar syntax which oscillates between tradition (p. 30) and experiment (p. 27), increase its subtle and esoteric nature. But as the case with the "new" and "new, new" novel, Mark Insingel's experimental work could not be rationalized or explained simply because its author has no certain message to convey and no well-planned story to narrate. All he has is a variety of situations, attitudes, and eventualities presented in a way which—according to the author's very subjective feeling—stresses and enhances their human relevance thus making them part of the reader's "experience."

Only readers who have the patience and tenacity needed to grapple with this kind of controversial writings would appreciate Mark Insingel's work. After a thorough examination of *A Course of Time* one has to welcome it as a worthy addition to the fast growing canon of experimental and heterodox narratives.

S. Elkhadem

In autobiography, the told story often is accompanied by the untold one. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the idea of autobiography is accompanied by the vision of the stuttering girl, the woman of whom nothing is known, the girl who refuses to speak, the girl with the cut tongue the one whose throat hurts, the one who quacks like a duck, and the one who talks so much that she is considered mad. Even as Kingston gives a voice to her own life, she is also offering us their suppressed collective biographies, a record of their lives that she has intuited from her own participation in their defeated silences. To do this, Kingston, an American of Chinese descent, must absorb and synthesize the experience of her two cultures, and come to understand her alienation from American life and the particular cruelty towards women in Chinese culture as two central metaphors for the general human experience. *The Woman Warrior* thus enlarges on the autobiographical genre, making it include not only the actual events of her own life, but also the reconstructed stories of the past that she can only approach through the powers of a sympathetic imagination.

Starting with the image of the abandoned and suicidal aunt, who gave birth to her illegitimate baby in a pigsty and drowned herself in a well, the book moves to the images of superwomen: the mythic woman warrior herself, Fa Mu Lan, about whom the narrator learns in her mother's chant, and the mother herself, Brave Orchid, a seer who has led two complete lives: a doctor in China and a mother in the United States. These chapters, devoted to strong women, are interspersed with chapters about women who could not cope: her aunt, Moon Orchid, who goes mad after coming to America, and the author herself, a prototypical silent Chinese girl, for whom the act of writing itself constitutes a convincing heroism.

The narrator is a traveler in a world of ghosts—the white Americans, the Chinese Americans who have forgotten their origins, the actual supernatural beings who inhabit the dead and the inanimate—

all of whom must be combatted with a special conjuring.

The author's quest, as a half-ghost herself, is both to be accepted by her large and diverse family, and to make sense of the social norms of the Chinese culture, and still to be able to assert her own worth and identity. To do this, Kingston superimposes the heritage of the past on her own historical present with her unique blend of history, myth, Americana, childhood memories, movies, scenes from pre-Revolutionary China (as her mother experienced it), and even a few glimpses of post-Revolutionary China (mainly from letters her parents get from indigent relatives).

The opening chapter, "No Name Woman," gives a history to an aunt of whom her family never speaks, the first of many ghosts demanding to be flesh. Wounded by a repressive culture, the victimized aunt gives way to the woman warrior herself, who rages across China to get even with anybody who hurts her family. In a later chapter, the woman warrior will return to the narrator in the form of a doll from China, but her mother, Brave Orchid, a real shaman, is Kingston's best subject. Brave Orchid haunts her children like a ghost, and like ghosts, they rarely visit, though she longs to know more of their lives, just as they long to understand hers. She "talks-story" so well that her daughter often has trouble sorting out her own reality from her mother's acts of the imagination.

Brave Orchid's sister, Moon Orchid, a new arrival "At the Western Palace," is another victim, abandoned by her husband, and brought to America by Brave Orchid. But Moon Orchid's strength cannot match the inequalities of her new culture: she is too old and backward for this hard new world.

The sections keep retelling the same "talk-story," trying to wind it ever-tighter, to compress it more fully inside a replica of itself, as in a series of Chinese boxes. The last section, "Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," is still concerned with not being able to talk—another version of Moon Orchid's story, or the narrator's childhood, the little Chinese girl trying to make herself speak. Linear progression is sacrificed to the continued repetition of the old stories. Yet the lips of the half-ghost not only flesh the old traditions and memories, but give new utterance to them.

This memoir is a poetic, thoughtful, wonderfully subtle reclamation of self, an important book, setting a high standard for autobiography. More than personal history, it is a personal mythology.

Elizabeth Fifer

HARRY STEINHAUER, Ed & Trans.

Twelve German Novellas

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. Pp. 618.

Harry Steinhauer's anthology *Twelve German Novellas* is a revised and enlarged edition of his earlier book *Ten German Novellas* which was published in 1969. In his 15-page introduction Professor Steinhauer traces and analyzes the historical development of the European short fiction beginning with Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Cervantes's *Novelas Ejemplares*, and the contes of Voltaire and Diderot leading to the German novella of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. German writer-critics such as Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Goethe, and Paul Heyse are mentioned and their theories about the novella are then briefly discussed.

After summing up the twelve most common demands made by literary theorists on the novella (p. xix-xx), Steinhauer concludes that "there is no inherent, magical character in literary materials that predestines them to become a novel, a novella or an anecdote" (p. xxi). Therefore a common denominator must be found elsewhere, and Harry Steinhauer suggests that German scholars "adopt Anglo-American usage, which classifies prose fiction with a yardstick . . . for classification by size is widely used in both nature . . . and in culture" (p. xxiii). This is reminiscent of an earlier statement made by Professor Steinhauer in his article "Towards a Definition of the Novella": "What, then, is a novella? I would say: it is a narrative of medium length (i.e. between the novel and the