Nan Goldin, self-fiction and ‘the necessary other’

I

§1 In Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical novel The Bell Jar, her protagonist Esther says of her friend Joan:

Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose.

‘I don’t see what women see in other women,’ I’d told Doctor Nolan in my interview that noon. ‘What does a woman see in a woman that she can’t see in a man?’

Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, ‘Tenderness.’

That shut me up. (Pl 210)

§2 In Ali Smith’s novel Like, close to the end, there is a story of two friends:

One of them has her head on the other’s chest.

I can hear your heart, you know, she says.

You can what? The other says, waking more clearly now, so that she is startled by how close they are, so close that she doesn’t know where to put her hands; there is nowhere safe to put them. But her friend doesn’t move, she stays with her ear pressed against her. (Sm 341)

II

§3 I begin with conversations between women and girls, characters in two novels. I do this to introduce the trope of sharing that shapes my thinking about self-fiction here. I take scenes that involve women listening to each other, sounding each other, searching each other’s hearts. From 1963 and 1997 respectively, they represent a span of the period I discuss. My subject is Nan Goldin’s installation and book-length project Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles which dates from 2003, and is occupied with the life of Nan’s sister Barbara who committed suicide in 1965. This work experiments with a dialogue between two lives, looking at the involvement of self and other in self-fiction. It is a hybrid work which has existed in spatial form within the installation, and which continues to exist as text and images in a plush, illustrated book (GoS). In these forms, the project opens questions about media multiplicity in self-fiction, in its move between text and image. It is the text’s opening of self-fiction to the narrative of the life of another, its use of media multiplicity for exploring a more ethical, shared relation of self to other in art, that interests me here.

§4 My quotation from The Bell Jar opens with an image of doubling where Joan is apprehended as an alter ego shadowing Esther. Joan is an intrusion. Esther edgily disowns her. Yet her curiosity about Joan and her trouble at their likeness inspires her to reflect on other relations between women. She engages her female doctor in a dialogue about what women see in each other. The doctor’s care in the exchange exemplifies the emotion she names: tenderness.
The word opens Esther to a different narrative. This narrative is key to my reading of Goldin.

§5 While Plath’s image of what women offer each other may be an illusion, one limiting perhaps in its tame reduction of eroticism, I want to claim here its queer efficacy and ethical value. Tenderness, an attitude at once affective and sensuous, attentive to vulnerability, indulgent, empathetic, enraptured, offers an intimate face to ethics. Tenderness offers proximity and risk, openness to damage. This is illustrated in the extract from _Like_. In each other’s arms, these girls are opaque to each other as they are also so close, not hearing each other’s words as they hear each others’ hearts. The glare of affection leaves nowhere safe.

III

§6 Nan Goldin is a photographer who experiments at the borders between self and other. She makes tenderness, vulnerability, openness to bruising – in friendship and in desire – her subject, her ethos. In claiming her work here as ethical and experimental self-fiction, I see her working, in the vein of French writer Christine Angot or photographer Sophie Calle, to make intimacy public, to use extreme emotional states, the real in art, to open our senses to newly configured ways of being. The challenge of such art, as imagined by Goldin, is its renegotiated relations to the other, its ethical avoidance of narcissism and finite introspection.

§7 In his introduction to the catalogue of her 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective, _I’ll Be Your Mirror_, David A. Ross writes: ‘Goldin’s work emerges from both collective memory and unfettered personal space’ (Go 15). Ross uses a vocabulary of sharing and of love as he describes the relation of her self to her work: ‘She reveals herself as a woman loved by her world, and unafraid to live her life as fully as she can. She shares her life with us, shares her need for a release, and her expectations of the sublime’ (Go 15). Ross sees that sharing existing between the photographer and her viewers. He writes: ‘we have an opportunity to engage the world constructed photographically from Goldin’s life, to both celebrate and mourn along with the artist, and to see ourselves in her mirror’ (Go 15). I am interested here in turning the mirror another way and looking at the relation of Goldin to the subjects she captures. There are permeable membranes, there is porous tissue, between the image and story of the other, and the fiction of the self. For Goldin, self and other are necessary to each other in self-fiction. She draws in (currently or once) living, autonomous others, whose quickness, whose pulse, opens and interrupts her art. Guido Costa, again adopting sharing as motif, writes: ‘Goldin’s work is driven by empathy, by the desire to share the other’s experience’ (Co 48). This empathy opens different ways of thinking about self-fiction and of the ‘necessary other’ in the telling of a story.
In the introduction to her edited volume *Intimacy*, Lauren Berlant writes:

I didn’t think it would turn out this way’ is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. *(Be 1)*

In thinking the affective, the erotic, Berlant imagines intimate relations fostered through a language that is minimal, expressive, word, touch, sense, trope. This affective intuition, almost speechless involvement, is a form of sharing, and as Berlant moves on, it is seen as a form of storytelling. In intimacy, the self is exposed to others, and made up with others, conjugated, in a narrative form. Berlant shows the story in intimate relations moving beyond self and other, and turning out to be unexpected, unowned, beyond control. She writes:

This view of ‘a life’ that unfolds intact within the intimate sphere represses, of course, another fact about it: the unavoidable troubles, the distractions and disruptions that make things turn out in unpredictable scenarios. *(Be 1)*

The story, evolved in intimacy, is not owned. It is aleatory, holding a life, intermittencies of its own. In intimacy, the scenarios we open each other to yield vivid, unexpected, sometimes bruising, sometimes ecstatic results. Where Berlant thinks of intimacy, interpersonal relations, as a story, I am interested in Goldin’s art, photography, her installations, her storytelling, as a form of lived intimacy. Her art is open to the live, the real, the affective. Art is seen here as a space of address, hospitality, exposed intimacy. As we tell stories to each other, we also tell each other’s stories. In telling the stories of others, Goldin’s work opens a new understanding of intimacy, sharing, self, ethics.

Influential on my thinking here have been works by Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler, Cavarero’s *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* and Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Cavarero’s account is on the side of tenderness. Butler embraces Cavarero’s thinking, yet shows that exposure comes with a risk, with opacity and unknowing.

For Cavarero, where philosophy can tell me *what* I am, the privilege, and advantage, of storytelling is to tell me *who* I am. What is seductive to me in her account is that I am not in control of, nor fully cognisant of, who I am, in my own terms. Rather, my story, who I am, is revealed to me by a narrator. With grace, Cavarero thinks through the uniqueness of each individual. She writes:

Every human being is unique, an unrepeatable existence, which […] neither follows in the footsteps of another life, nor repeats the very same course, nor leaves behind the same story. This is […] why life-stories are told and listened to with interest; because they are similar and yet new, insubstitutable and unexpected, from beginning to end. *(Cav 2).*

Her thinking pays attention to the living and the individual. She gives a sense of
the specific value of an infinite number of life-stories, making each story uniquely interesting. Like Berlant, Cavarero stresses too the ways in which each such life-story is new and unexpected, turning out in ways we might not at all expect.

§14 For Cavarero, integral to my sense of my story as unexpected, as unforeseen, is precisely the way it is revealed not in my own writing and storytelling, but in another’s narrative. I cannot see with my own eyes the design of my life. Telling the story of another becomes a means not merely of discerning that design, of tracing that pattern, but more obscurely, in deeper ways, of meeting a certain desire in that person to be told. For Cavarero, making a reading of Karen Blixen, the question: “who am I?” flows indeed, sooner or later, from the beating of every heart (Cav 4). This we see dramatized, in one sense, in the episode from Like. Cavarero continues, citing Hannah Arendt,

If leaving behind a design, a “destiny”, an unrepeatable figure of our existence, “is the only aspiration deserving of the fact that life was given us”, then nothing responds to the human desire more than the telling of our story. Even before revealing the meaning of a life, a biography therefore recognises the desire for it. (Cav 3-4)

§15 Storytelling meets then some deep-seated desire. This is a desire first of all to have one’s story told, for one’s life to exist as a narrative so that its pattern can be perceived. But further still it is a desire for another to play the role of narrator for that story. Inhering in this too, in ways Cavarero doesn’t bring out, is a desire to be given over to another, to be exposed to them, to be mutually involved in this act of storytelling. Trust, sharing, hospitality, opening, inhere in this. There is a necessity, a pleasure, yet also some danger and risk in this. We may wonder whether the storyteller can ever adequately respect or represent the fragility and the uniqueness of the story of another. Can it be respected as a living design? What about the pleasure in telling and the pleasure, more passively, in being told?

§16 Cavarero speaks of me receiving my own story from another’s narration. I am ‘a self now rendered palpable by the story’ (Cav 13). I am moved by my story. The story gives form to me, a living, tender, feeling form. I become through the story that which I already was. Yet receiving my story from another’s narration reminds me that I always appear to someone, that my identity constitutively exposed to others is also reciprocal and by extension ungrasped (Cav 21). For Cavarero: ‘Autobiography does not properly respond to the question “who am I?” Rather, it is the biographical tale of my story, told by another, which responds to this question’ (Cav 45). She continues: ‘the tale is existence, relation and attention’ (Cav 54).

§17 Looking at the affect that exists in hearing one’s own life story narrated by another, she tells a tale of Amalia and Emilia:

The first writes the story of the second because Emilia had continually recounted her story, in the most disorganized way, showing her friend her stubborn desire for narration. The gift of the written story is precisely Amalia’s response to this desire. Now Emilia can carry the text of her own story with her and reread it continuously – moved every time by her own identity, made tangible by the tale. (Cav 56)
§18 Cavarero’s account is expressly optimistic about the attention we may pay to others, about the care we may take. Her account is on the side of tenderness. I take it as prospective, hopeful, for conceiving art that responds to the living, the tangible and exposed. Yet other possibilities need to be shaded in. In Berlant’s words, intimacy and its narratives do not remain intact. If the optimism of Cavarero’s account dominates here, some opacity, from Butler, may make us sensitive again to the issues at stake.

§19 In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler argues that ‘ethical agency is neither fully determined nor radically free. Its struggle or primary dilemma is to be produced by a world, even as one must produce oneself in some way’ (*Bu* 19). She looks at this interaction between precariousness and agency, in order to think through responsibility and accountability, questioning:

Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself? (*Bu* 19)

§20 The subject who is not self-grounding is precisely, in part, opaque to herself. The position is not dissimilar to that of Cavarero’s subject who needs her story to be told by someone else. Looking towards answers to the question of whether opacity precludes giving an account of oneself, Butler again like Cavarero, thinks about the self not as isolated subject but as one in interaction with others. Yet, for Butler, each individual knows only an imperfect account of him or herself and of others. This is no impediment as Butler imagines ‘a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility’ (*Bu* 19). Key to this is an understanding of the opacity of the subject:

The opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge. Moments of unknowingness about oneself tend to emerge in the context of relations to others, suggesting that those relations call upon primary forms of relationality that are not always available to explicit and reflective thematization. (*Bu* 20)

§21 Butler continues this account of opacity, my unknowingness about myself, with relation to narrative, to storytelling:

The singular body to which a narrative refers cannot be captured by a full narration, not only because the body has a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection, but because primary relations are formative in ways that produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves. (*Bu* 20–21).

Butler’s account is in this regard more complex than Cavarero’s. For Cavarero, Amalia can tell Emilia’s story and can release it to her as a gift she can treasure. There is no real question of Amalia’s adequacy as narrator, of gaps or fissures in her account. Nor is there a sense that Emilia may misrecognise herself in Amalia’s account, aspire to it, or find it appropriative, faulty, missing in some regard. For Butler, as for Cavarero, relations with the other, the narrative relations, the care Amalia can take for Emilia’s story, are still generative, giving.
But there is no full narrative, either of oneself or another, and this is precisely because the self is exposed to others, open to others, formed by others, in ways that remain unfathomable. If she appends a shadowy basis to Cavarero’s thinking, Butler’s work is no less ethically generative. Our opacity to ourselves, my unknowingness to myself, for Butler, is the basis of my openness to others, openness to an account of a life that, if imperfect, is still attentive, is perhaps the more tender, moving, indeed, in all it lacks.

V

§22  
*I’ll Be Your Mirror* is dedicated ‘For my sister, Barbara Holly Goldin, May 21, 1946 – April 12, 1965’. In the pages of this retrospective catalogue, there is little emphasis on Barbara’s short life. Elisabeth Sussman, the curator, just makes brief mention of ‘the suicide of an older sister’ (*Go* 27). The life that is explored more fully in text and image in this 1996 work is that of Cookie Mueller, March 2, 1949 – November 10, 1989. Costa describes Mueller as ‘Nan’s closest friend for many years, perhaps even her muse and guru’ (*Co* 42). Discussing the series of photographs Nan arranged as *The Cookie Portfolio*, he writes ‘we are offered once again a very intimate, personal story, in which even the most shocking details are tenderly conveyed’ (*Co* 10). As Costa recognises, Goldin reveals the extraordinary and intense range of emotions attaching to Cookie for her, emerging initially from an artistic relation. She says, in a handwritten text included in *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, ‘Part of how we grew close was through me photographing her – the photos were intimate and then we were. I was outside of her and taking her picture let me in’ (*Go* 256).

§23  
There is something electric about Cookie, about the charisma of their intimacy. Goldin writes: ‘Cookie was a social light, a diva, a beauty, my idol. Over the years she became a writer, a critic, my best friend, my sister’ (*Go* 256). The queer fluidity of kinship, identification and desire witnessed so frequently in Goldin’s work is caught in her naming of these morphing, emerging roles, all seductive, all forms of love. Photography, which opened this unexpected intimacy with Cookie, is trialed as a means of pursuing that love. This becomes particularly poignant, raw and tender after Cookie dies of AIDS-related illness in 1989. Nan writes: ‘I used to think I couldn’t lose anyone if I photographed them enough. I put together this series of pictures of Cookie from the 13 years I knew her in order to keep her with me. In fact they showed me how much I’ve lost’ (*Go* 256).

§24  
Goldin’s words about photography and death here sketch the emotional history of the Cookie pictures and silently indicate their connection to the dedication of *I’ll Be Your Mirror* to Barbara Goldin. In his 2001 study, Costa tells a fuller story of Nan’s sister Barbara:

On 12 April 1965, Barbara, aged eighteen, decided to end her life violently, and it was as if life had come to an end for the whole family. Her parents refused to deal with the guilt and loss, and denial became a way of survival. The most important thing was that the neighbours shouldn’t know anything. They also tried to keep Nancy in the dark, telling her that Barbara had had a terrible accident, but sensitive and traumatised as she was, she immediately realised what had happened (*Co* 5)
§25 In various accounts, this trauma, and Nan’s survival, are associated with her departure from the family home and her turn to photography as idiom and medium. Costa himself argues: ‘This is perhaps the origin of her voracious appetite for the truth, no matter what, and her disregard for the fact that what is true can also be uncomfortable, tiresome, compromising’ (Co 5). This search for the truth offers an understanding of the support the medium of photography offers as means of documentation. Photography is a means to archive the past. But for Goldin, this is a very feeling archive. These documents of the real are taken with love. She says in conversation with David Armstrong and Walter Keller: ‘My work [...] come[s] from the snapshot. It’s the form of photography that is most defined by love. People take them out of love, and they take them to remember – people, places, and times. They’re about creating a history by recording a history’ (Go 450). She elaborates further on this affective dimension, saying, ‘For me it is not a detachment to take a picture. It’s a way of touching somebody – it’s a caress. I’m looking with a warm eye, not a cold eye. I’m not analysing what’s going on – I just get inspired to take a picture by the beauty and vulnerability of my friends’ (Go 452).

§26 Goldin’s comments on the Cookie Mueller pictures, and how they reveal to her all she has lost, open out the risks of this involved, empathetic means of imaging. Photography becomes less an act of embalming, and more a quickening of affect, and opening of an embrace that is unfinished, yet whose object, this loved other, is elusive. For Goldin, this affective act, this opening to others in images, is part of a process of ethical, painful, lovely self-fashioning. It is pursued in her photographs themselves in in their later arrangement in narrative forms. Self and other, subject and image, reach towards each other with tenderness, in an embrace where nowhere is safe.

VI

§27 Nan Goldin’s Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles, continues to exist in tangible form as a bilingual book published by Editions du Regard and the Festival d’Automne à Paris in 2005 (GoS). The book is a distinctive object. The deep purple cover is shiny and padded in such a way that the book takes on the touch, the feel, of an album, or a personal diary. This tactility, and the intimate scale of the piece, is enhanced by its compact size, 15 by 20 cm. Rather than a large-scale catalogue, this is a small prayer book or reliquary we can hold closely in our hands.

§28 After the title page, the first photographic image in the book, a double spread filling two pages with no text, is an image of Goldin’s book shelf with the following titles visible: Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy; Marta Moreno Vega, The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria; a collection of poems, Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times; The Institutional Care of the Insane in the United States and Canada; Jorge Amado, The War of the Saints; Sylvia Plath’s Selected Poems; Durkheim’s Suicide; Georges Didi Huberman, Invention de l’hystérie; and Fritz Zorn’s Mars. The following page is filled by a black and white snapshot of Goldin’s sister Barbara, Barbara in Mask, Washington D.C., 1953 by Hyman Goldin. The book is dedicated on its final page, ‘Always and above all for my beloved sister: Barbara Holly Goldin 1946-1965’.
This first image of Barbara holds the emotion and involvement of the work as a whole. The strongest sensation that comes for me derives from the image of masking. The mask that covers Barbara’s face from her forehead to her upper lip, edged in tape, flattens and deforms her features. The mask fits imperfectly, so Barbara’s eyes appear as dark cavities, sockets, with some bare life hidden. The tape of the mask would be low enough on her face to gag her, if her mouth were not slightly slack, dark where it is open. The mask appears to hide a deformity beneath, figuring Barbara’s face as withdrawn, damaged, remodelled. This is the effect of the imperfect fitting of the moulded matter of the mask and the skin of her face. The mask withholds the child from us, whilst the image seems to disclose, viscerally, the way she is restrained and smothered. The mask leaves, literally, no place for her to breathe.

In her recent volume of poetry Nox, also addressed to a dead sibling, Anne Carson uses a cover image of her brother with his face half covered by thick-edged goggles. Photographer and poet use family snapshots that in their quotidian register hold some point of disorganisation, of disquiet. The detail – the mask, the goggles – in both cases is proleptic, speaking to a future that has not yet occurred. In both these works of art, an artist speaks to and speaks for a brother or a sister who has died. The props in both these images, all too strongly score the other as opaque, covering the face, the figure, the mirror, identity. Yet something else too is at work in Goldin’s placing of this masked Barbara at the threshold of her book.

Barbara is waiting here. She is our masked guide to the Underworld of the book, its tragedy of suicide. She is our Sibyl. She seems to turn towards us about to take our arm. She is not an object we regard here, for all the strange fixing of her mask. She is a child prophetess, oracular. She is a seer. Her hair is floating in the picture, catching some movement, a turn, some transience and spectrality, despite the clay-like stasis of her face in its mask. Barbara as seer, as Sibyl, opens up this book as a project about accompaniment, about sharing. On the threshold here, unknown yet moving with us, she opens a space for self-fiction which is deftly involved with intimacy, with the earliest attachments of self and other, with the ways in which the story of the self and the story of the
other imply and overlay and hide each other. Nan tells Barbara’s story in this book. Nan is the necessary other who tells Barbara’s story, who discerns the pattern of her life, who responds to the proleptic detail in this early photograph. Yet essential to the ethos of the work, to its empathy, its instinctive yielding, its open doors, is the way in which telling Barbara’s story becomes a way of allowing Nan to tell a story of herself. It is as the two stories remain inextricable that the work is at its most innovative.

§32 This involvement is already there in the placing of the threshold image of Barbara. Initially it reminds me of images by Diane Arbus, in the black and white monochrome, the motif of the mask, the standing frontal pose, and the environment of 1950s suburbia. Diane Arbus is often cited as a point of reference for Goldin (Co 6; Go 30) and Goldin here seems to find one of her precursor’s images in her own family album. The image of Barbara also bears comparison with the idiom of Goldin’s own photography where, in her earliest work, as Elisabeth Sussman puts it, ‘in small black-and-white photographs and Polaroids, she captured the pulse of her own life’ (Go 27). After looking at the image of Barbara for a long time, I find it also begins to conjure self-portraits by Nan that appear further into the book, Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles. In Nan at the hospital, Berlin (1984), the bruising under Nan’s eyes and over her left eye socket, the shape of the damage here, inversely recalls the shading of the mask round Barbara’s eyes in the liminal image, as the geometric shapes of buildings, vehicles, lamps and trees are also there in the background. Nan is closer to the camera and her gaze is not blinkered. She lets herself open here between self and other as her image, her melancholy, the stray movement of her hair, calls up visual memories of her sister. Nan’s image and Barbara’s are blood-tied, symbiotic, moving forwards.

VII

§33 Following the image of Barbara in her mask, is a piece of text telling the story of Saint Barbara, locked in a tower, and awakened to Christianity. After Saint Barbara escapes from the tower she is captured, tortured, humiliated, flogged and mutilated but refuses to give up her faith. She is beheaded by her father. He is instantly struck by a lightning bolt and reduced to a small heap of ashes. Accompanying this text in Goldin’s book is a grid of nine images of the legend of Saint Barbara taken from different paintings and statues. If the books seen on Goldin’s bookshelf create a type of pre-history, a dialogic context, for the story of Barbara, this is further supplemented by reference to the grisly legend of the virgin saint. These intertexts offer so many modes of telling Barbara Goldin’s brief, desperate story, of showing what it shares with other histories.

§34 This sense of involvement was further enhanced in the initial installation (the work was shown subsequently at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York). The initial installation was mounted in the Chapelle Saint-Louis at the La Salpêtrière hospital in the 13th arrondissement in Paris (in Autumn 2004). Goldin’s installation, a reflection on the life and death of her sister and the presence of her own art in Paris, occupied for a while an institution and site of medical authority. La Salpêtrière is of course the hospital where Charcot first worked
with the women whose body language allowed him to theorise hysteria. This space of female malady, somatisation, and the talking cure, is re-entered by Goldin in her artwork, to produce a different, dialogic narrative of sharing. This installation space allowed a further dimension to the opening of narratives of Barbara and of Nan’s own life.

§35 Where Goldin works primarily as a photographer, questions of display and narrative sequence have emerged as important in her projects. This allows a sense of co-extension across her installations, exhibitions and book projects. This was witnessed initially in her creation of slide shows that curated a series of her images, edited with music, and in different sequences for different performances. Latterly this bid towards narration has been realised also in spatial terms in her practice of creating and exhibiting grids of images, where the field of vision is saturated with rich, echoing, inter-related forms. While the displayed, differing, sequential images of Saint Barbara recall Goldin’s own gallery grid practice, the volume that forms Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles itself opens up like a slide show. Initially it is a slide show of family pictures. Its idiom is first set in its black-and-white image of her parents in evening dress, accompanied by the text: ‘Mes parents se sont mariés le 3 septembre 1939, le jour de la déclaration de la guerre’. This story of love and war, of family enmity and loss, is shown through a series of syncopated images, snapshots in family album, and, in the installation forms of the project, in images literally projected onto a large screen. The installation and textual forms of the project thus mobilise various forms of domestic image-making and family archiving. The ethos of the project depends, nevertheless, on what this intimate history shares with public narratives, an issue that Goldin can illustrate with particular acuity in the literal space of the chapel at La Salpêtrière.

§36 As Goldin narrates: ‘Les ennuis commencèrent entre elle et sa mère, lorsque Barbara eut environ 12 ans. Elles se battaient sans arrêt et la violence régnait à la maison’. Barbara was sent to a detention centre aged 14: ‘Motif de l’hospitalisation: c’est vers l’âge de 12 ans qu’affichant une attitude de défi, elle entra ouvertement en rebellion – violence physique à l’encontre de sa mère, comportement sexuellement provocant et, je cite “mauvaises fréquentations”’. This is a narrative of the teenager whose anger, sexual freedom and autonomy opposed her to parental authority. In the context of earlier narratives of female dissidence and martyrdom it gains dimensionality, becomes differently tangible. Barbara’s story is told here in a significant public space; it is also squared against other narratives.

VIII

§37 In the first half of the book that tracks Barbara’s life, Nan herself plays a secondary role. We see her as a tiny child in Barbara’s shadow. Yet the involvement, often unwitting, of the two sister’s lives, in their shared context, and in their sibling inter-relation, is suggested from the start. Goldin writes, with tenderness, ‘Ma soeur m’apprenait à regarder le coucher du soleil. Elle avait l’habitude de laver mes cheveux. Elle jouait, à minuit, La Sonate au clair de lune, lorsqu’elle devait me garder. Elle aimait me materner. J’étais sa confi-
dente’. Her memories here seem to share the same affective terrain she has sketched in her words about Cookie Mueller. Her relation to Barbara is intimate, involved, shared, and, at least in retrospect, steeped in pathos. We see this tenderness to Barbara subtending the project and making it ethically possible. This fondness for her sister is Nan’s inspiration and it arranges the first part of the project and Barbara’s primacy therein. If Nan is secondary while Barbara is alive, the rupture of the sister’s suicide, the traumatic event the parents attempt to keep hidden from their surviving daughter, draws up the relations differently.

§38
At the centre of the book Nan cites words from Joseph Conrad found in Barbara’s purse after her death: ‘Droll thing life is, that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for futile purpose. The most you can hope for is some knowledge of yourself that comes too late – a crop of inextinguishable regrets’. In Goldin’s art, Barbara’s life posthumously takes a shape and pattern. The quotation seems obliquely to enable or presage her project. In this project, in its existence as ‘self-fiction’, Barbara’s life seems, obscurely too, to offer a pattern for Nan herself. She says: ‘Ma soeur m’avait dit que, d’après son psychia, je finirais comme elle. Je croyais que je devrais me tuer à 18 ans. Mes parents se mirent à me traiter comme Barbara’. After the project has looked frontally at the death of Barbara, taking us onto the train tracks where she died, images of Nan begin to surge forwards. The first images of Nan’s girlhood self show a child who reminds us of Barbara’s colouring, her expressions, her gestures, in the flesh. Where Barbara is absent, Nan pursues her story using her own image, and then her own images.

§39
The narrative of Barbara, the telling of her story, the figuring of its indelible imprint on the mind, self-identity and art of her sister, becomes imperceptibly a story of the awakening of an artistic consciousness. As the sequence of images continues, it shows increasingly familiar pictures from Goldin’s portfolio, including images of Cookie and self-portraits of Nan herself. The links are left tentative, but we are invited to imagine contact between the image and destiny of Barbara, and Nan’s life-art. Goldin’s own struggle with narcotics and self-harm finds its shadow, its precursor images, in the institutional spaces where Barbara was held against her will before her final escape and suicide.

IX

§40
Goldin’s work is not concerned with tracing any direct causational pattern of influence between Barbara’s life and her own. What her work does is to show those lives as inextricably involved, as touching on each other, and yielding to each other. The installation, the text, open spaces in which Barbara Goldin’s life may be remembered, in which its different facets may be reflected like so many images in a grid. With delicacy, Goldin gives that story a shape, a series of intertexts, a future destiny. In so doing, she lets Barbara’s story give a shape to her own, a shape that shows the involvement of life and art.

§41
In creating this narrative of Barbara, Goldin remains open to ethical questions. Goldin honours Barbara, attends to her story, as she opens out all the ways in which we did not expect it to turn out, and in which it remains opaque,
unknowable. She opens the intimate, the unexpected in her own story as we see
the interruption of Barbara’s story, its rupture of Nan’s. Barbara becomes in
this sense, despite her early death, a living muse in Goldin’s art, an other whose
unknowability, whose irrevocable loss, whose vivid, livewire suffering threads
nerves and arteries through Goldin’s projects.

§42 Goldin’s work is about sharing, telling us a story, but also about what she shares
with her sister and how this makes it possible for her to tell her story. In telling
Barbara’s story she tells her own, and vice versa. If this is self-fiction, it cannot
exist without the address to and gift of the other. Barbara lives as a muse in
Nan’s art. Nan is also Barbara’s ‘necessary other’. In art that meets the under-
tow, the pull of her tender emotions Goldin remains alive to the story of her
sister. Goldin imagines possibilities for tenderness, for a closeness that opens
onto a new unknowing in intimacy. Art here is opened to the random, the
unexpected, yet it is also seen to shape, to hold, to make available strongly
affective intimate and public narratives. Goldin in this work asks, I think, what
the body, affect, breath, heartbeat of Barbara can give to her art, and what she
in turn can give to her sister whose story she makes present, tangible, tender.

Emma Wilson
University of Cambridge

‘Quoted works’: