

RODICA MIHĂILĂ

# TURNING THE WHEEL

THE CONSTRUCTION OF POWER RELATIONS IN  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY

EDITURA UNIVERSITĂȚII BUCUREȘTI  
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# INTRODUCTION

The idea of writing this book came to me two years ago when I returned to the United States after almost twenty years. I found a different America, where multiculturalism was no longer an academic invention of the generation of the 1960s - as some would have it, but a reality describing every American's effort to cope with the diversity of a country which had to keep its gates opened to the world if it wanted to remain faithful to the principles of its own making. I found a divided America and yet one closer to its original creed of individualism and equality by birth. Significantly, America was no longer talking about issues like the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, but about the Rodney King case, which involved racial consciousness and led to the Los Angeles riot in April 1992.

In universities the main battle field of multiculturalism in the humanities was, and still is, the canon. Those who first forced their way into the canon were women. Whether politically correct or not, the battle for the canon is ultimately a political battle for access to power. My inquiry into women's poetry is meant to document this empowerment.

In an amazingly short period of time, American women poets have produced a body of poetry which in its intensity, scope and variety is one of the most distinct, compelling and urgent voices of contemporary American literature.

I have written this book in recognition of their achievement and in full awareness of their undervalued claim to forge a female poetics, a new poetic language, a new literary tradition. The book is a critical endorsement of this claim. As such, it is also a book about women and power, about oppression, resistance and subversion, about marginalization and empowerment, about difference and homogeneity, about pluralism and multiculturalism.

By focusing on several representative poets and attempting a reading of individual poems as sites of power, produced by women poets who regard their art as the supreme form of empowerment (and in most cases also teach and write about poetry), the book tries to overcome the limitations imposed on the reading and evaluation of women's poetry by both traditionalists and radical feminists and to identify a poetics of empowerment which accounts for the compelling yet undervalued role played by contemporary American women poets in revitalizing postmodernist poetry and in remaking the literary canon.

The revisionary female voice became audible in postwar America in the late 1950s. This voice grew richer in intensity and inflexion as feminist philosophy and practice became themselves more vocal and better articulated. Ever since women's struggle for civil rights which reached a climax in the sixties, the newly acquired social and political conscience of women has energized American culture, particularly American literature. By the late 1970s it became

obvious that the rise of a whole constellation of women writers was the most notable change taking place on the American literary scene.

In the eighties, the growing sense of America as a multicultural society and the claims of various minorities to equal representation, brought women to a leading position among minorities by virtue of their multiple subordination and the unifying element of gender difference which overrides all other differences - of race, ethnicity, class, religion and age. In this respect, the contribution of American feminism to the construction of a multicultural vision of America and the vitality it has poured into American postmodernism cannot be overestimated. This project has provided the main guide lines for my inquiry into the achievement of the contemporary women poets.

Partly motivated by the pioneering character of this study in Romania, I prefaced my investigation with a general introduction to contemporary American poetry aimed to identify the main shaping forces of contemporary poetry and locate women's poetry among these forces. Following my argument, the chapter is divided into two distinct parts. The first one is grounded in a canonical view of American modernism and the main poetic trends or "schools" which carried into postmodernism the revolt against modernism's hegemony. Inquiry into the rise of postmodernism leads to the identification of a current phase of stagnation indicated by the proliferation of such experiments as concrete poetry, language poetry and the New Formalism. Pointing to this exhaustion of visionary resources, my introduction recommends women's poetry as the most dynamic and imaginative territory of the poetry being written today in America and locates it in relation to the mainstream of the American tradition. The second part of the chapter is an inquiry into the making of the new women's poetic tradition with reference to

poets belonging to all generations, from the modernists born in the late 19th century to the poets who began to publish in the seventies and eighties. The critical discourse addresses some of the main issues raised by Adrienne Rich, Suzanne Juhasz and Alicia Ostriker concerning this tradition and the affirmation of a female poetics.

As a force field of power relations, women's poetry has profitably genderized postmodernism. Even by refusing to be called "feminist," the female voice puts forth the postmodern feminist issues of difference and nonessentialism, of gender and the constitutive powers of discourse. In a genuine avant-garde spirit it creates new discursive practices and new technologies of subjectivization; it opens new fields of alternative signification; it invents a new poetics, which I have tentatively called "the poetics of empowerment," and it proclaims a new reader-response aesthetic highlighting the extraliterary component of the hermeneutic act and the intentionality of the poetic enterprise.

The approach to individual poets in this book has been shaped by my inquiry into some of the major issues confronting today's feminism, particularly the definition of power and self, the dynamics of power relations and the strategies of empowerment. In this respect the theoretical grounding of the book and its organizing principle are provided by a critique placed at the points of convergence between feminism and Foucault's theories about discourse, power/knowledge and self, explored in the chapter "Postmodern Feminism, Power and Subjectivity."

The critical discourse is oriented toward identification of a poetics of empowerment and discussion of the debatable issues of canon formation. The strategies of empowerment are examined

primarily at the level of the poetic language, and special attention is given to the politically relevant articulation of women's experience and the deliberate expression of a female consciousness through subversion of the patriarchal discourse and the binary oppositions it engenders.

The groundbreaking task of building up a woman-centered discourse able to sustain the equality of difference is discussed in close connection with the individual strategies of self-modelling, self-definition and identity formation. Such strategies as the rethinking of women's experience, the retrieval from oblivion of women's past through revisionary mythmaking, creation of a new symbolic, and the rewriting of women's experience by opening up its forbidden, silenced and suppressed zones are presented as dependent on the redefinition of gender, of the body and of sexuality as historical, cultural and political constructs, as open force fields of power relations.

I have limited my discussion to five poets: Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and Joy Harjo. In this way I hoped to avoid the trap of making only sweeping, unsubstantiated generalizations about women's poetry, which would only have stressed once again feminist politics, instead of feminine poetics. In each individual case I have tried to present the whole poetic career from the point of view of the construction of power relations by applying close reading techniques to poems which seemed to me supportive of my arguments.

Cutting across all the three postwar generations of women poets, the selection contains in itself a critical statement. I have chosen these poets because I consider them representative of a

paradigm of contemporary women's poetry which includes a wide spectrum of differences - differences of race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, age and religious belief, and differences in individual responses to feminism and political engagement - from Levertov's interest in larger humanitarian politics and Harjo's engagement in ethnic issues to Rich's leading role in the women's movement and feminist theory and Brooks's role of mother-figure for her race.

Brooks and Levertov belong to the first generation, for they both published their first book in the 1940s: Brooks as an African American modernist, the first African American to receive a Pulitzer Prize (1950), Levertov as a British "New Romantic," of Russian-Jewish and Welsh origin, who would discover the modernism of Pound and especially Williams when she came to live in the United States, at the end of the forties.

The middle generation, in which Levertov could also be included since she published her first American books in the 1950s, also includes Plath and Rich. The family background and particularly the relation with their fathers marked them both, though in different ways. Plath, of German and Austrian stock, would never be reconciled with her father's death when she was only eight. Reversing Levertov's itinerary, Plath married the British poet Ted Hughes and chose to live in England. Rich would find her father's charismatic but authoritative personality and the tension between her father's Jewish ancestry and her mother's Protestantism increasingly oppressive. Both Plath and Rich first wrote poetry in strong opposition to the limitations of the '50s. While Plath's confessionalism took her deeper and deeper into the self and she ended in suicide, Rich evolved toward a political and polemical poetry: the personal became the political.

Joy Harjo represents the third generation of poets, who started publishing in the late seventies and in the eighties. Her father was a Creek, her mother part French and part Cherokee, and she herself is a registered member of the Creek (Muscogee) tribe. Drawing on a non-Western culture and a "tribal aesthetics," her poetry provides a perfect insight into the idea of multiculturalism. My choice of a Native American to illustrate the power of ethnic heritage has been based on the multiethnic character of American Indian literature and on the important contribution to American literature made by its oral tradition, its imaginative language, and its stress on always placing man in the landscape. The postmodernist spirit underlying Harjo's artistic career manifests itself in her complex personality as a poet, painter, filmmaker and musician and in her avant-gard attempts at mixing poetry and prose, painting and music.

Despite their difference these poets have much in common, which makes their grouping even more challenging. All of them are mothers and all of them have made academic careers and at one point or another have been engaged in teaching poetry in various universities. For all of them, writing poetry, articulating the silence, "stealing the language," to use the title of Alicia Ostriker's book on the mechanisms of female poetics, has taken priority over every other concern. All of them regard their art as the main source of empowerment. Plath manifests her power in the redemptive act of killing and resurrecting the self; Levertov, in her capacity to encompass the polarities of the self and the universe in a poetry of praise for the wholeness of the world and the faith in survival; Rich, in the creation of a new language to express the female consciousness and the liberation of the female body; Brooks, in the reconstruction of a heroic history of her race; Harjo, in the retrieval

of tribal cultural heritage. All of them have made ample comments on their own art, on poetry writing, on literature and culture. From Rich's theoretical and critical studies and Levertov's essays on poetics and culture, to Brooks's public statements, Harjo's interviews and Plath's *Journals*, I have used their theoretical, critical and memorialistic writing as parallel texts in a continuous dialogue with the poetic text. Analysing the construction of power relations in their poetry I have tried to place them in the mainstream of American literature as major contributors to the American tradition.

Four of the poets in my selection are by now well established canonical figures. I chose them not because it was easier to walk on well researched ground, but because I could more convincingly point out in a culture which is still cautiously canonical the extent to which their difference and marginalization as women have contributed to the widely acclaimed uniqueness of their poetic achievement.

The paradigm this book poses points to further access to contemporary American women's poetry. Approached synchronically, the poetic construction of power relations in these poets belonging to various generations and backgrounds reveals an impressive number of shared themes and concerns which in many instances cross the racial and ethnic divide. Among them, the most common are themes of identity, self-definition and wholeness of identity, themes related to women's experience and to rediscovering and rethinking this experience, themes about the body and sexuality, ranging from victimization by the patriarchal order to angry resistance to and subversion of the roles and values ascribed to them by patriarchy as well as themes concerned with investigation of the

power field of relationships between man and woman, mother and daughter, woman and woman and the way in which awareness of race, class, ethnicity, religion, age and sexual orientation modifies these relationships.

Approached diachronically, the exploration of power relations and the strategies of empowerment evince the shift of emphasis from one generation to another and from the radical activism of the sixties to a postmodern feminism of various strands and orientations with psychoanalytical, poststructuralist and multicultural underpinnings. It is a shift from victimization-domination to struggle-resistance, from the subversion of patriarchal discourse and total rejection of the patriarchal order through the essentialist creation of a female tradition and a woman-centered discourse, to a poetry which has "memory and vision" and which makes a strong claim for the equality of difference and has an altogether new awareness of power relations.

Other critical and theoretical approaches to contemporary American women poets are suggested in the *Notes and References* accompanying the text and in an updated bibliography which also contains complete lists of publications for each of the poets discussed in the book.

Joining in the debate on postmodern feminism, I have tried to avoid the trap of emphasizing theory at the expense of poetry, as it seems to me that in spite of its range and artistry women's poetic achievement is still very little known - through no fault of the poets themselves. The strategies of empowerment which in each case opened my way into the individual poetic universe disclose the

tremendous energy, passion and talent that go into the making of women's poetry.

As Audre Lorde confessed: "[For us, women,] poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (*Sister Outsider*, p.37).

It is precisely this striving for "naming the nameless so it can be thought," or, in the phrasing of a Rich poem, the striving of "turning the wheel" of inherited meaning that gives beauty, fervor and distinction to the empowered voices of contemporary women poets.

# 1. Shaping Forces in Contemporary American Literature: Locating Women's Poetry

It has become common-place criticism to read contemporary American poetry as being shaped by the productive tensions created in the confrontation between two poetics and aesthetics designated by the equally vague and comprehensive terms *modernism* and *postmodernism*. Ever since the battle started in mid-century, the demise of modernism has repeatedly been announced in poetic and critical language. For some, postmodernism itself has succumbed in the meantime.

The most recent obituary of modernism appears in Jonathan Holden's challenging book *The Fate of American Poetry* (1991). Holden opens his chapter "The End of modernism" with the following statement: "We are witnessing in the 1990s, the final exhaustion of that poetic which, in American poetry, has come to be called 'modernist.'"<sup>1</sup>

It was a poetic informed, in his opinion, by three main elements: a *rhetorical* one, expressed in Eliot's theory of impersonality, a *political* one, evoked by the "elitism and intellectuality" of both Eliot

and Pound, and an *epistemological* one, incorporated in Eliot's definition of the subject matter of poetry as "consisting of synthetic 'art-emotions.'"<sup>2</sup>

Holden considers that the rhetorical component was subverted as early as the late 1950s by the rise of the confessional mode in the poetry of Ginsberg and Lowell, the political one has been "at least revised" by the replacement of the institutional authority of a "scholarly, tweedy professor figure" with "democratized" universities as "custodians" of poetry, while the third, the epistemological one, is still a kind of "modernist hangover," rooted as it is in the modernist influential dogma according to which there is no distinction between form and content, or to use MacLeish's famous formulation, "a poem must not mean/ but be."<sup>3</sup>

As an inquiry into the making of contemporary American poetry would indicate, the end of modernism in the 1990s is largely due to the new quality of the voices represented by women's poetry.

Considering the three main dimensions of the modernist poetic identified by Holden, the essential role played by women's poetry in the final collapse of modernism cannot be overestimated. Women poets have been the most devoted and, if we think of Plath, the most influential practitioners of confessionalism; by equating the personal and the political and by constantly subverting the canonical power relations they have certainly "repudiated" the political dimension of modernism; by exploring the relation between the body, power and knowledge they have created a female poetic which contradicts the epistemological assumptions of modernism.

## I.

The symptoms of a new period style or styles conveniently called postmodernist, became visible in American literature only in the early 1950s. Significantly, postmodernism, one of those proteic literary terms hard to define, yet so convenient for the humanistic scholar, was first introduced by literary critics in contexts meant to draw attention to *the links between various generations of modernists*. Anticipating a by now widely accepted paradigm of modernism having Pound and Eliot at the beginning, Hart Crane in the middle, and Lowell at the end, Randall Jarrell first used the term postmodernism in a review of Lowell's second volume of poems *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) to qualify Lowell's indebtedness to that movement. Similarly, Creeley and Duncan, two of the only three poets to use the term in the 1950s and 1960s, found it congenial to their tentative views on the stylistic connection between the poetry being written at the time and the poetic works of High modernism. It was Charles Olson, however, who first applied the term to postwar poetry in yet another sense, designating a radical shift in poetic sensibility and vision under the pressure of history, technology, and the ascendancy of the New Criticism. The two complementary perspectives of postmodernism as both continuous and discontinuous with the modernist tradition informed Olson's seminal poetic manifesto "Projective Verse" (1950) as, indeed, his whole poetic career, making it one of the first landmarks of American postmodernism.

For all the novelty and worth of its dialectic appraisal of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, Olson's revolutionary essay produced a rather late echo in theoretical and

critical studies; and when it did produce an echo, the evidence of discontinuity seemed in most cases more challenging. The first public performance of Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1954 and the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) - two poetic events which alongside Olson's "Projective Verse" mark the beginnings of postmodernism - were for almost two decades seen mainly as sharp breaks with modernism.

The continuities and discontinuities between modernism and postmodernism are indeed hard to pin down, particularly because of the historically adjustable critical perspective on modernism, and also because of the contemporary poets' inexhaustible individual means of concealing continuities. In a 1982 postface to his *Dismemberment of Orpheus*, speaking of the slight shift in his own view of the relation between modernism and postmodernism, Ihab Hassan makes the pertinent remark that: "There is already some evidence that postmodernism and modernism even more, are beginning to slip and slide in time, threatening to make any diacritical distinction between them desperate."<sup>4</sup>

However, irrespective of the historical instability of the two terms and the acceptance given to postmodernism as a period style, all critical attempts to define, describe or evaluate contemporary poetry have constantly taken modernism as their main point of reference.

Hassan's theory of postmodernism indicates the 60s as the distinct moment when postmodernism becomes more easily identifiable in contrast to modernism. In the conclusion of his provocative book *The Postmodern Turn*, an inquiry into the cultural field of postmodernism spanning more than two decades, Hassan contends that the American sixties, with all their "liberationist and

countercultural tendencies" may be regarded as "the energizing matrix of postmodernism, if not its origin."<sup>5</sup>

As Hassan argues, postmodernism emerged in "complicity with things falling apart," its two main constitutive tendencies, *indeterminacy* and *immanence* (fused in the term "indetermanence") pointing in the sixties toward either "artistic Anarchy," or Pop.<sup>6</sup> By *indeterminacy*, or rather *indeterminacies*, he means "a complex referent that these concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation," the latter alone subsuming various "terms of unmaking," such as "decreatio disintegration, deconservation, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, deligitimization... the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence," all of them expressions of the "vast will to unmaking," which affects the entire discourse of the sixties and makes everything questionable.<sup>7</sup>

*Immanence*, which Hassan describes by evoking such concepts as "diffusion, dissemination, pulsion, interplay, communication, interdependence," connected with the ideas of *language*, of *homo pictor* and *homo significans*, designates "the capacity of mind to generalize itself through its own abstractions and so become... its own environment."<sup>8</sup> Language changes nature into culture and culture into an "immanent" semiotic system.<sup>9</sup>

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It has become almost common practice with American critics to see the short history of contemporary poetry as a process of successive rejection and acceptance of predecessors. "The life of poetry", suggestively observed the poet John Brinnin, "moves in a dynastic succession. Poets become the ancestors of other poets in a series that reflects a cast of mind and a disposition toward language as surely as facial features identify members of a family."<sup>10</sup> Since the mid 1920s, for more than twenty-five years modernism came to be identified with the almost unprecedented authority which T. S. Eliot's criticism and his *Waste Land* exercised upon poets, critics and readers of poetry on both sides of the Ocean. It was particularly the acceptance and rejection of Eliot's theory of impersonality and his appraisal of metaphysical poetry turned into modernist dogmas, the endless reenactment of the old dichotomy between the classic and the romantic modes that have shaped the American poetry ever since the modernist revolution of the early twenties. For the first time the ascendancy of Eliot led to manifest forms of rejection and acceptance in the decade preceding the War, in conjunction with the English Romantic Revival and the growing influence of Auden. Such poets of the thirties as Stanley Kunitz, Karl Shapiro, Kenneth Rexroth and Richard Eberhart firmly opposed Eliot's authority. Others, like Schwartz and Roethke, rested somehow ambiguous in their response, while still others grew more and more impatient with his "crushing" influence, as Berryman avowed in a 1962 interview.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, however, Eliot's version of metaphysical modernism received its highest sanction from the first generation of New Critical poets including Ransom and Tate, who until their deaths in the seventies remained faithful to the poetic tradition they had been the first to consolidate. In the two decades following the

war, Eliot's metaphysical modernism as codified by the New Critics turned into the official period style.

Starting from the criticism of Eliot, Richards and Empson, in his groundbreaking book *The New Criticism* (1941) - a rather choosy rationalizing of the high modernist poetic practice - Ransom summarized his New Critical assumption and produced a generic model for an ideal poem, an autonomous work of art, a closed system of interrelationships generating its own meanings, an organism the main virtues of which were impersonality, intellectuality, formality and perfect self-sufficiency.

The New Critical poem was a perfectly polished poem of classical restraint and formalist grace, using irony, wit, paradox and mythical allusion as means to impersonality and moral judgment. At the same time, it abandoned specific romantic features of modernist poetry, such as the extreme ellipsis, fragmentation, and discontinuity of *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos* and the density of symbolism and overlapping myth in the *Waste Land* and *The Bridge*.

Ransom was supported in his enterprise by several other critics such as Tate, Winters, Blackmur, Brooks and Warren, all of them engaged in prestigious teaching careers and most of them in no less prestigious poetic activities as well.

The hegemony of the New Critical poem and, consequently, of Eliot's earlier criticism and partially of his poetic practice, spread rapidly through the agency of various English departments, where the syllabuses came to include all the writers indicated by Eliot's criticism, such as Dante, the Metaphysical poets, and Baudelaire, while the New Critics professed the orthodoxies of their own version of modernism, educating future generations of poets and readers in the same elitist, intellectual and formalist spirit.<sup>12</sup>

By 1950 the New Critical view point was shared by most English departments throughout the country. All members of the first generation of poets coming of age after 1945, including Lowell, Berryman, Wilbur, Jarrell, Cunningham, Tolson, Nemerov, Hecht and Hollander, were directly exposed to their overwhelming influence.<sup>13</sup> All of them, with the notable exception of Elisabeth Bishop who was never too much in the new critical sphere of influence, started their poetic careers by accepting the New Critical poem as the main poetic norm, which placed them together in what was later called "the second generation of New Critical poets" or the "middle generation".<sup>14</sup>

Under the dictates of the New Criticism their early poems were more or less inspired variations of formalist or "closed" styles, as Lowell's first volume of poems *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) fully proves. Viewed in retrospect the forties were a period of severe restrictions imposed on the poetic imagination, a period in which the institutionalization of the academic, formalist impersonal New Critical poem of neo-classical rigor leading to the imminent stagnation and crisis felt all through the fifties, made the postmodernist rebellion of the early fifties inevitable.

The movement toward personalization and open forms - two salient features of the postmodern achievement - was facilitated by other directions which became available in the late forties for those poets who could no longer cope with the dictatorship of the New Criticism.

Robert Frost, for instance, on his way to becoming America's "Poet Laureate," had always followed an independent line, and his volumes *A Witness Tree* (Pulitzer Prize, 1942) and *Steeple Bush*

(1947) revealed an altogether different modernity which would get wide critical acclaim only after Frost's death in 1963.

A new perspective opened on the very sacrosanctity of high modernism. In many respects Eliot's *Four Quartets* published in 1943 betrayed deep romantic propensities which contradicted Eliot's overt antiromantic criticism, part of his public image. A startlingly new face of Pound was revealed by his *Pisan Cantos* (Bollingen Prize, 1949), which inaugurated Pound's long preeminent impact on contemporary poetry. Compared to his earlier achievement, the Pound of the *Pisan Cantos* was an altogether different poet, who reinstated the imaginative self at the center of the poem and through juxtaposition, collage, free associations, a variety of voices and rejection of syntax, logic and rational ego, captured the flux of history, the contemporaneity of all time, and the ultimate identity of all languages in the fluidity of the poet's romantic sensibility, which alone attempts to bring order to a chaotic, fragmented world.

Pound's *Cantos* showed the way to a *poetry of process*, whose open form could accommodate as much reality as the poet's sensibility could possibly bear. Together with Williams's *Paterson*, they set an example for all the long poems in which postmodernists would excel: Olson's *Maximus Poems*, Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *Dream Songs*, Duncan's *Passages* and Lowell's *History*.

With the publication of the first three books of *Paterson* (1946, 1948, 1949), Williams emerged as a major poet and began to exert a growing influence on the poetry of the following two decades. *Spring and All* (1923) had ranged with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (1925), and Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923) among the main high modernist works. Twenty years later, Williams's *Paterson* revived the Whitman tradition which had largely been

overshadowed by the puritan tradition represented by Eliot's moral criticism in the twenty-five years of his ascendancy.

Very much like Whitman and Emerson before him, Williams regards poetry as the translation of experience into language at the moment of its occurrence, that is a highly personal language experiment, the noting down of perception. In his endeavor of democratizing American poetry, he brought it close to everyday speech and created a rhythm and a style which allowed him to encompass vast areas of experience and ultimately identify himself with the whole of America.

Although Eliot remains a still detectable shaping force in such poets as Nemerov, Wilbur and Moss, starting with the fifties the Pound-Williams brand of modernism initiated a re-orientation of poetry toward reinstatement of the Emersonian pragmatic view of poetry as experience, process, as individual language experiment. It liberated the poem from the strict censorship of the conscious ego, opening its form and making it into an expression of the total being.

The fifties and the sixties took an unprecedented interest in prizing and publishing such unduly neglected modernists as the objectivists of the 1930s (Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, George Oppen, Basil Bunting) and younger modernists like David Ignatow, who had all along taken Williams and Pound as their models. The first response to the new Pound-Williams challenge and the first rebellion against several New Critical dogmas came from the Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts institution founded near Asheville, North Carolina, in 1933.

During the early fifties, as chancellor of this avant-garde college, the poet Charles Olson brought together on the faculty the composer John Cage, the dancer Kerce Cunningham, the architect

Buckminster Fuller, the poets Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, John Wiener, and several other innovators in various artistic fields. Two journals, *The Black Mountain Review*, edited by Robert Creeley, and *Origin*, edited by Cid Corman, were active in publishing the literary productions not only of the faculty, but also of other poets who became affiliated with what was later called by Donald Allen "The Black Mountain School of Poetry."<sup>15</sup> Among them were Paul Blackburn, Paul Carroll, Cid Corman, Theodore Enslin, Le Roi Jones, three former students - Edward Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, John Logan - and Denis Levertov, perhaps the finest poet of them all.

In 1950 Charles Olson, the major figure of the group, published a theoretical essay, "Projective Verse," a poetic manifesto which marked the first sharp attack on the New Critical mode along the line running from Pound's Imagism through Williams's and Zukofsky's Objectivism to the total repudiation of closed systems in favor of open forms. In his endeavor to make of poetry an unmediated relation of man to experience (called by him "objectivism"), Olson gives a "kinetic" definition of the poem as being a process ("always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"), a "high energy-construct", whose form, never more than an "extension of content", is the expression of the entire organism.<sup>16</sup> The role of organizing the poetic substance which Pound ascribed to the "musical phrase," is ascribed by Olson to the poet's breath, as faithfully reflecting his various energy states. While his *ear* measures syllables imagined as points of intersection between various forces in the "field composition" of the poem, his *breath*, the measure of lines, takes the projective poet "down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from,

where, the coincidence is, all act springs" - in short, to the very sources of the being.<sup>17</sup>

The Black Mountaineers mark the beginnings of a wide postmodern open form movement, which under the invigorating impact of phenomenology, existentialism and Freudianism, will explore new territories, unknown to the past American tradition of open form. The contemporary open poem is infinite in its possibilities of incorporating experience and accommodating the self; it is spontaneous, uninhibited, utterly free, like Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), the most influential poem of the 1960s. In its freedom, such a poem violates syntax, makes full use of modernist collage, composite diction, free versification and special typography, creates a music which reproduces the syncopated rhythms and improvisations of jazz, moves rapidly and suddenly from one perception to another. In doing so it invites long compositions which break up the idea of linear time replacing it by the coextensiveness of all time and experience, like in Olson's *Maximus Poems*, Duncan's *Passages* and in Berryman's *Dream Songs*. Expressing the provisional unity of being at the moment of experience, the new all-inclusive organicity of open form substantiates the return of the poet to the center of his poem. The organic form poem thus validates the postmodern resurrection of romanticism by modernist means, which is one of the most salient features of postmodernist poetics.

Robert Duncan, a theorist of open form and a major poet of his generation, explains it in his poem "Poetry, a Natural Thing":

The poem

feeds upon thought, feeling, impulse,

to breed itself,

a spiritual urgency at the dark ladders leaping.<sup>18</sup>

Included in his volume of 1960 suggestively entitled *The Opening of the Field*, Duncan's generic definition, just like the title of his volume, epitomizes the change brought about by the 1950s, the rebellious and exciting formative years of postmodern poetry.

Not all the poets who contributed in the 1950s to the "opening of the field" did so by discarding rational forms in favor of open, organic ones. James Merrill, one of the most brilliant poets of today, has all along his career been faithful to his early allegiance to New Critical formalism, to Stevens and Auden, and he has never used open forms. Richard Wilbur, Richard Howard, W.D.Snodgrass, Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Caroline Kizer, have all shown marked preference for traditional forms while others adopted and modified traditional forms or invented new ones. In his *History* Lowell modified the sonnet form, Ashbery revived among other forms the comic sestina ("Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape") and the litany ("Litany"), Robert Morgan rediscovered a most demanding 16th century French form, the chant royal ("Chant Royal").

Yet, no matter if they accepted open form or not, all postmodernist poets have come to share more or less overtly one of the basic assumptions of contemporary poetry, which Olson's objectivism was first to formulate in theoretical terms: the poet's uninhibited self is the primary source of the poem, its subject and its speaker. To work with traditional forms and yet express the fluidity of the self and of its ever-changing relation to reality is then by far the greater challenge. The "balkanization" of American poetry in the 50s was a misleading phenomenon which tended to conceal the unitary nature of an on-going revolution in style under the evidence of a bewildering diversity of individual responses.<sup>19</sup> In this sense,

the by now traditional classification of the avant-garde postmodern poetry into Black Mountain, Confessional, San Francisco, Beat and New York, although convenient for the student of contemporary poetry, is utterly arbitrary.<sup>20</sup> It applies more or less extra literary provisional criteria to a poetry engaged in a stylistic revolution informed by a new mode of apprehending self and reality in a transformed universe.<sup>21</sup>

The term *confessional* was first used by Rosenthal in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, the volume which made public Lowell's divorce from Eliot's impersonal theory, but caught the critical eye only in 1967, when in *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War Two*, Rosenthal identified two major forces which in his opinion gave shape and direction to the romantic aestheticism of American poetry after the war. One was the Confessional Poetry of Lowell, Plath, Ginsberg, Roethke, Berryman and Sexton, which Rosenthal described as "one culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal self more and more at the center of the poem;" the second was the Projectivist Movement illustrated by the poetry of Creeley, Olson, Duncan, Levertov, Blackburn and Le Roi Jones.

Confessionalism is neither a school nor a movement, but a poetic mode promoted by Lowell, Berryman and Lowell's former students: Snodgrass, Plath and Sexton, inspired by a Freudian interpretation of the self reinforced by echoes of gloomy puritan views on man. Under stress of psychological and cultural crisis the confessional poem descends into the lowest reaches of the self to bring out shocking and humiliating details of private and family life hitherto carefully concealed. As if in search of a cure for his vulnerability, neurosis and even madness, the poet makes desperate

attempts to break through the boundaries that separate his self from the world. In its extreme manifestations confessionalism is a dangerous way of writing poetry, as the deaths by suicide of Plath, Sexton and Berryman seem to indicate. The confessional poems to endure are those in which the confession points beyond its private meaning to aspects in culture and society of which it becomes symbolic. This implies the poet's perfect control of his or her poetic means, as it happens, for instance, in Lowell's *Life Studies*, Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* (1964), Ginsberg's *Howl* and "Kaddish" (1961), or Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy."

Confessionalism has enriched poetry and poetic fiction. It abolished many of the old taboos, opened new fields of emotion and experience, created new imagery and vocabulary. Pure confessionalism did not survive the deaths of Plath and Roethke in 1963. Lowell and Berryman absorbed the confessional experience into more comprehensive and intricate works and so did Adrienne Rich, for instance, who evolved toward an autobiographical poetry which engaged her more convincingly in the public world of actuality. In the poems of the feminists of the 70s, the confessional mode is increasingly used to question the social and cultural construction of the category of woman, and the roles traditionally ascribed to women in a patriarchal society.

Under the guidance of Rexroth and Duncan, a most interesting fusion between the confessionalism of the Beat generation and the objectist poetics of the Black Mountain school took place in San Francisco during the mid and late 1950s, a period of great artistic creativity, generally referred to as *The San Francisco Renaissance*. The San Francisco homes of Rexroth and Duncan as well as Ferlinghetti's The City Lights Bookstore became the meeting places

for several enthusiastic young poets living in the San Francisco area. Among them were Gary Snider, Brother Antoninus, Gregory Corso, Philip Lamantia, Jack Spicer, Philip Whalen and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, soon to be joined by Allen Ginsberg who came from New York in 1953. Ferlinghetti's City Lights Publishing Company and various other small presses published their books, while their poems appeared in numerous magazines such as *San Francisco Review*, *Contact*, *Moby* and *Big Table*.

The short-lived *Beat Movement*, which found in Ginsberg its leader and in *Howl* its poetic manifesto and exemplary poem, was an outburst of radicalism, a bohemian revolt against the conventions and the value system of a repressive technological mass society, which equally manifested itself in shocking life-styles and emphatically confessional verse. Inspired by Eastern and Amerindian religious cults, by the poetry of Blake, Whitman, Rimbaud, Hart Crane, Pound and Williams, these poets of the "counter-culture ethos," as Perkins described them, were nature mystics and visionaries who cultivated extreme forms of romantic primitivism. Following the Emerson-Whitman injunctions, they saw themselves as prophets and spiritual leaders, who by the alchemy of words hoped to create a poetic vision capable of redeeming the world of the present.

The San Francisco Renaissance brought together the Beat and the Black Mountain poets in a joined attack against New Critical formalism, in defence of an open, *naked*, all-inclusive poetry, booming with energy and capable to express a new relationship between the self and the outer world. The effects of this coalescence, in spite of existing divergencies, cannot be overestimated. If in the early 1950s, Olson's objectism and his projective verse had gone almost unnoticed, the Beat extravaganza and the shocking

confessionalism of their orphic and prophetic verse drew public attention to the important changes taking place in American poetry. Among these changes, the most striking were confessionalism and open form as essential manifestations of a new romantic aestheticism: a perfect identification of the poet with his poem. As Gregory Corso explained: "Poetry and poets are inseparable. I cannot talk about poetry to you without talking about the poet. In fact I, as a poet, am the poetry I write."<sup>22</sup>

The last identifiable groups of poets in the postmodernist avant-garde, *the New York School* and *the Deep Image* poets, partake of a larger surrealist movement which extends well into the 1960s and the 1970s, evincing yet another peculiar feature of contemporary poetry, its *internationalization*.<sup>23</sup>

The central nucleus of *The New York School* - Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch - was formed when all the three poets were students at Harvard. Moving to New York, they were soon joined by other poets, among them James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Edward Field and Ted Berrigan. They all shared not only an interest in poetry, but also in the avant-garde artistic life of the city, particularly in abstract painting and in the theatre (the Living Theatre and the Artists' Theatre).

What the New York poets hold in common with the San Francisco poets is the same rebellious anti-formalism and the same capacity to surprise and intrigue the reader by the provocative ways in which they place their exacerbated egos at the center of their poem. But their cosmopolitan poetry remains aloof from the national and cultural crises and it never search for salvation in the mystique and the energy of a visionary imagination or an exalted rhetoric. Their poetry is no longer experience, but as Ashbery once said "the

experience of an experience," it is the X-ray of the poet's response to the reality of an instant, and the swift, whimsical passage of his sensibility from one response to another, as in O'Hara's "I do this I do that" poems, until reality itself is utterly deconstructed, even annihilated and negated. As Ashbery put it in his poem "Introduction:"

To be a writer and write things  
 You must have experiences you can write about.  
 Just living won't do. I have a theory  
 About masterpieces, how to make them  
 At very little expense, and they're every  
 Bit as good as the others. You can  
 Use the same materials of the dream, at last.<sup>24</sup>

The potentials of open forms are explored with a startling capacity of invention by the New York poets, but, paradoxically, so are the resources of highly restrictive traditional forms such as the vilanelle, the sestina, the chant royal, employed mainly for their parodic effects. The tone is often jocular, farcical, shamming buffoonery, comic (as in Koch's poems) or self-parodic (see O'Hara's "Personism: A Poetic Manifesto"). The reader is baffled by the outrageous dislocation of syntax and violation of punctuation, by the spontaneity and the rapidity with which reality is decomposed and images are juxtaposed in a surrealistic collage.

The two obvious influences on the aesthetic principles of the New York group were their association with action painting or abstract expressionism which employed nonrepresentational means to convey personal attitudes and emotions as well as the

experimentalism of the French symbolists, surrealists and absurdists. Following Rexroth's example, the San Francisco poets, Ginsberg in particular, had already attempted to incorporate within the tradition of Williams-Pound modernism several Romantic elements of the European modernist avant-garde, particularly Dada and the surrealism of the 1920s, which American poetry dominated by Eliot's preference for French symbolism had failed to properly counterpoint at the time. But owing to their unmediated contact with French poetry and culture, the New York poets could find stimulating examples not only in Rimbaud, Tzara and Breton, but also in the surrealist practice of their French contemporaries, such as Henri Michaux, Pierre Reverdy, René Char and Jules Supervielle.

Starting with the late 50s, the infusion of surrealism into American poetry came not only through French, but also through Spanish and South American channels. The work of Federico Garcia Lorca, Raphael Alberti, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz and Cesar Vallejo, inspired a poetry different in tone and nature from that produced by the New York group, but equally anti-formalist and anti-intellectual.

In Minnesota, taking the example of the Spanish surrealists, Robert Bly and James Wright inaugurated what Bly called the "movement to deepen association in poetry", to open "the corridor to the unconscious."<sup>25</sup> Taking the surface of things as a kind of springboard from which the poet can dive into the self, they attempted to regain in American poetry "that swift movement all over the psyche, from conscious to unconscious, from a pine table to mad inward desires, that the ancient poets had, or that Lorca and others gained back for poetry in Spanish."<sup>26</sup>

With the additional help of several European romantics and Oriental haiku poets, such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Georg Trakl, Basho and Issa Kobayashi (from whose poetry he has made exquisite translations), Bly has perfected a poetic method which he called DEEP IMAGE. It was a method meant to revive the American traditions of Transcendentalism and Imagism, fusing them into a most productive American variant of surrealism. The depth of images compensates for the failure of language to render the leaps taken by imagination into interior landscapes.

The surrealist poetics fosters a postmodern poetry of silence. The phenomenon is best illustrated by the poetic career of W. S. Merwin. "In an age when time and technique encroach hourly, or appear to, on the source itself of poetry", wrote Merwin in 1967, "it seems as though what is needed for any particular nebulous unwritten hope that may become a poem is not a manipulable, more or less predictably recurring pattern, but an unduplicatable resonance, something that would be like an echo except that it is repeating no sound. Something that always belonged to it: its sense and its confirmation before it entered words."<sup>27</sup> As an extreme limit of the solipsistic poetry of experience, the poetry of silence is, above all, the poetry of the primordial, the mythical, the archetypal, detectable in the simplicity of elemental things.

The infusion of surrealism into American poetry reached a peak in the "explosive" decade of the 1960s, when poetry itself became part of the struggle. It was a poetry of extremes - from a poetry of overt protest rooted in a new social and political consciousness to a poetry of hidden protest, in which the poet finds his weapon against or refuge from a hostile society in the paraphernalia of surrealism: the subconscious, dreams, archetypal images - the sources of his

antirational aestheticism. From different angles and with different means, the New York poets, and the Deep Image group - Bly, James Wright and Merwin, have been the first to contribute to the "domestication" of European, Spanish and South American surrealism, making of surrealism a hallmark of the American postmodernist revolution throughout the 60s and 70s. Some of the best examples are offered by the poetry of Louis Simpson, James Dickey, Galway Kinnell and that of a younger generation, including among others: Charles Wright, C. K. Williams, Mark Strand, Charles Simic and Stephen Berg.

Among the strategies devised to approach a bewildering reality, impossible to grasp and define by using New Critical models, were the re-appraisal of the romantic modernist avant-garde and the new interest in cultural and poetic models offered by South America and Europe, particularly Italy, Spain, Germany and Austria, as well as by Asia. Tibetan Buddhism in Ginsberg's poetry and Zen Buddhism blended with Amerindian myths and legends in Snyder's poetry, Japanese and Chinese echoes in the poetry of Lucien Stryk, represent as many individual searches for the poetic means by which the poet can discover, and then make meaningful or credible an otherwise meaningless reality. It is not by accident that the making of postmodernist poetry coincides with the translation by the poets themselves of an enormous quantity of verse from such a diversity of newly discovered or rediscovered cultural areas as made available by wide travelling and by the academic careers which most of them have followed.<sup>28</sup>

Robert Lowell sets an early example with his "imitations" and his "versions" of poems by Baudelaire, Kunitz translates Achmatova, Bishop translates Brazilian poetry, Jarrell, German poetic drama,

Wilbur, French poetry and drama, Snodgrass, Kizer poems from the Hebrew, Urdu, Chinese and Macedonian, troubadours' songs and Hungarian poetry, Levertov, songs from the Bengali, Levine, poems by Jaime Sabines and Gloria Fuertes, Stryk, Zen and haiku poems of China and Japan, Strand, Rafael Alberti, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Charles Wright, Montale and Dino Campana, Kinnell, Francois Villon, Yves Bonnefoy and Yvan Goll; James Wright (with Bly) Trakl, Vallejo and Neruda. And there are others, too, but none as prolific and versatile as Bly and Merwin, the leading poet-translators of today.

The rebellious spirit of the 1960s, which accelerated the process of internationalization in the poetry of the decade, discovered yet another outlet for avant-garde non-conformism in the so-called *concrete poetry*. The early practitioners of concretism, the Brazilian *Noigendres Group* including Augusto de Campo, Decio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campo, found forerunners in Mallarmé, Pound, Joyce, e.e.cummings and Appolinaire, and discovered parallels in minimal art, non-representational painting and musique concrete. A straight descendent from futurist and dadaist poetics, *concrete poetry* employs patterns of words and phrases in order to achieve a nonverbal communication, a visual equivalent of poetic experience, the poem-object, in which structure is contents. As Augusto de Campos explained: "The prismatic subdivisions of the Idea of Mallarmé, the ideogrammic method of Pound, the 'vorbivocovisual' presentation of Joyce, and the verbal mimicry of cummings converge into a new theory of form - an organo-form - where traditional notions such as beginning-middle-end, syllogism, and verse tend to disappear. They are supplanted by a poetic-

gestaltic, musicopoetic, poetic-ideogrammic organization of structure: CONCRETE POETRY.”<sup>29</sup>

Among the best American practitioners of concrete poetry are Mary Ellen Solt, Emmett Williams, Richard Kostelanetz and Michael Phillips. To this list one may add May Swenson and John Hollander, with their “shaped poems,” written as typographical varieties in more or less the same tradition. But the “vogue” of concrete poetry, just like that of *computer poetry* and *direct composition on tape recorder*, was ephemeral. It could hardly survive the two anthologies published at the end of the 1960s: *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, edited by Solt and Barnstone, and *Imaged Words and Worded Images*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz. Nevertheless, it furnished another illustration of the general direction followed by the mainstream of contemporary American poetry from rational, closed to more open, organic forms.

An easily detectable instance of the poet’s return to the center of his poem, is provided in the 1960s by *the poetry of social and political consciousness*, of which Lowell and Ginsberg produced some of the most provocative samples. The civil rights movement, the Black movement, city riots, students’ revolts, the women’s movement, the Vietnam war, nuclear and environmental threats and pollution, revived the poets’ concern with history and society and determined a social and cultural radicalism, which poetry did not fail to incorporate. The finest poetry of protest, such as written by Bly, Merwin, Ginsberg, Rich, Levertov, speaks in many voices and employs a wide gamut of poetic strategies, even when the protest is of the same nature and has the same target, as in the case of *the poetry against the Vietnam war* written by Lowell, Bly, Duncan, Merwin, Kinnell, Levertov, Balaban, and many others. Group-

identification on the common grounds of subject matter and poetic style becomes possible, however, in the case of the poetry written by women and African Americans, whenever that poetry refers specifically to the particular experience of those two minorities, whose consciousness is radicalized and often politicized under the growing influence of the Women's Liberation Movement and the Black militant movement of the 1960s.

Characteristically, *women's poetry*, or in a more accurate description, *poetry of women's experience*, tends to be confessional and sometimes feminist, though not always so. The radical feminism of Rich's poetry, for instance, is absent from the purely confessional poetry of Plath and Sexton, while, by comparison, Rich's poetry cultivates a mild confessionalism, which tends to verge on the autobiographical. Isabella Gardner, Denise Levertov, Karolin Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Diane Wakowski, and Marge Piercy, - all write about women's experience, but most of them refuse to be included in the category of women poets. They would rather be judged in their capacity of poets, pure and simple.

*The African American poets* fit much better in a category, particularly in the 1960s, when they seem to have found a common voice to document their racial identity, define their "blackness" and feel proud of it. For a long time the African Americans had tried only to "submerge" in the melting pot of American culture, and to express black experience in the conventional modernist style of the 40s and the 50s. Even when they complied to New Critical norms, the finest poets of the period - Melvin B. Tolson, Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker, Owen Dodson, and Gwendolin Brooks, the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize (for her second book of poems, *Annie Allen*, 1949) - brought to American poetry new ranges of

experience and emotion, enriched its poetic idiom and lent it a higher degree of orality. Langston Hughes, already at the top of his long writing career, set about to replace the rhythms of jazz and blues reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance, with the new rhythms of bebop and boogie-woogie.

The new social, political and cultural awareness, and the new militant spirit of the Black movement in the 60s and early 70s liberated African American poetry from the bondage not only of the well-written New Critical poem, but of Western tradition and white man's values, in general, revitalized it with the energy and freshness of African heritage, and brought to it the experience, the idiom and the rhythm of American black ghettos. With their outlandish emphasis on sound and gesture, African American poets create an avant-garde poetry which at the same time reverberates in and echoes the great postmodernist explosion of American poetry in the decade. The fusion of separatist ideology and postmodernist poetics in their most interesting poetic experiments is best illustrated by the challenging work of Imamu Amiri Baraka, regarded as the leading poet of the African American avant-garde.

For almost ten years, Black militancy united numerous poets from various parts of the country, in what was felt to be an avant-garde artistic movement. By the mid 1970s, however, the voices of protest had mellowed, the avant-garde spirit had lost its edge. What follows is a period of stagnation, when African American poetry disperses into smaller individual worlds and tamer individual voices that lack the compelling inventiveness and urgency of the previous decade. The poetic career of Nikki Giovanni, who made such a promising poetic debut in the 60s, fully proves it.

At about the same time, the first symptoms of fatigue and stagnation can be diagnosticated in the whole body of American poetry, indicating that the postmodernist style or styles, were slowly but indubitably approaching a mannerist phase.

By the end of the 70s, American poetry had lost all the leading poets who either by rejection or by acceptance had come to be regarded as founders and makers of postmodern poetry. Steven's death in 1955 was followed in the 60s by the deaths of Frost, Williams, Roethke, Plath (all in 1963), and Eliot (1965), as well as the deaths in the 1970s of Olson (1970), Pound and Berryman (1972), Auden (1973), and Lowell (1977).

Starting with the early 1970s, it became obvious that the avant-garde spirit was dying of the very excessive freedom which it strove to bestow upon poetry and poets alike. The "Opening of the Field" had been forced in the 1950s and the early 1960s by poets at Black Mountain, in New York and San Francisco. Their revolt against the New Critical orthodoxies had launched a romantic campaign for self-expression, experience, and open forms, which was soon enthusiastically joined by an amazing number of gifted poets from all over the country. Paradoxically, the very explosion of American poetry in the tumultuous 60s announced the end of an avant-garde which had replaced prescriptive New Critical modernism with permissive postmodernism. For, as Kostelanetz remarks, "once the majority has caught up with something new, what is avant-garde will, by definition, be some place else".<sup>30</sup>

As the excessive freedom in diction, meter, subject-matter, form and structure, as well as the absence of an all-encompassing metaphor to express the spirit of the times, make the appearance of another avant-garde an impossibility, the poetry of the 80s entered a

phase of stagnation not unlike the one which modernism knew before its expiation in the mid century. The breaking down of conventions has become itself a convention: the ideals of the postmodern revolution have turned into norms taught by postmodernist poets in colleges and universities. The resemblance with the terminal New Critical phase of modernism is all but striking. With the important specification that this time, in the on-going dialectical succession of classic and romantic modes, it is the romantic that is being defeated by the ambition of the self to encompass, understand, describe and then make meaningful the bewildering reality of the post-industrial world.

Some poets like Ginsberg, Simpson, Ignatow, Pinsky, hope to find salvation in the purifying vision of Whitman's heritage, although they are quite skeptical of its present validity; others try to impose at least some provisional order on the fluidity of the self and of reality by revitalizing traditional fixed forms, and still others, like Ammons, Ashbery and Merrill, three of the major poets of today, find refuge in the solipsistic poetry of dream and meditation.

Such anthologies as Jack Myers and Roger Weingarten's *New American Poets of the 80's* (1984) and *New American Poets of the 90's* (1991) give a fairly accurate account of the poetic scene in the last two decades. They convey a definite feeling that nothing really important has been happening in the field. It is a feeling which has been gradually taking shape since the mid 70s. As Wendell Berry remarked at the time: "Poetry remains a specialized art, its range and influence so constricted that poets have very nearly become their own audience."<sup>31</sup>

An almost similar remark is made in the late 80s by Joseph Epstein in his provocative essay "Who Killed Poetry?": "...poetry no

longer seems in any way where the action is. It begins to seem, in fact, a sideline activity."<sup>32</sup> Epstein identifies as a first main cause for poetry's loss of influence the kind of professionalism related to academic specialization and fostered by academic creative-writing programs and writing workshops. The second cause, in his opinion, is poetry's estrangement from telling stories, its failure to relate to people's lives and to "those larger truths about life the discovery of which is the final justification for reading..."<sup>33</sup>

In his characterization of American poetry of the last two decades Holden finds broader terms to explain the stagnation of poetry since the mid-70s as a reaction to the situation of poetry in the late 60s and early 70s.<sup>34</sup> The most important element, in his opinion, is the "democratization" which took place in the 60s under the combined action of anti-elitism and anti-eliotism and as a result of the unprecedented expansion of higher education enjoying the affluence of baby-boomers and the support of an affluent society. Holden argues that "virtually all the main trends in poetry during the late sixties and early seventies - stylistic as well as institutional - can be part or else entirely attributed to 'democratization.'"<sup>35</sup> The establishment of *The National Endowment for the Arts*, the rise of the university creative-writing programs, the high number of awards and prizes going to poetry, the attention poets received from university presses and from such programs as the "Poets-in-the-Schools," gave an impetus to poetry as never before. In his *Introduction to Contemporary American Literature: 1945-1973*, Ihab Hassan makes similar comments on the phenomenon.

Making a broad characterization of contemporary poetry, R.S.Gwynn argues: "If there is a main current in contemporary American poetry, it is probably indebted chiefly to the most

remarkable phenomenon of all those that have helped to shape the current state of the art - the rise of the university creative-writing programs."<sup>36</sup> Gwynn documents that in 1992, there were over three hundred writing-programs across the country offering degrees from BAs to PhDs. Referring to the negative effects of this proliferation, he concludes that "the workshop approach to poetry, with so many different hands whittling away at the original version of a poem, tends to remove vitality along with rough edges."<sup>37</sup>

The second element which explains the situation of poetry after the mid-70s is in Holden's opinion its "descentralization," the shift of poetic influence from the East coast, from Boston and New York, to the Midwest.<sup>38</sup> The process started with the reaction against the New Criticism, continued with the ascent of the Deep Image poetry of Robert Bly and James Wright and was completed by the rise of Iowa writers workshop, a highly popular program, the effects of which are suggestively evoked by Holden's comparing it with "a vortex that...spread copies of itself throughout the United States."<sup>39</sup> A last cause of "descentralization" is identified in the growing influence of the confessional and deep image (surrealist) modes, which did not require a specific cultural or historical frame of reference and therefore encouraged a superficial view of poetry. The tremendous popularity of poetry reading also contributed to a lowering down of poetic standards in favor of whatever the audience wanted to hear.

In the early 90s the characteristic poem in the mainstream of American poetry, whether narrative, lyric or meditative, is conversational in tone, employs open forms and free verse usually arranged in stanzas, middle-class domestic subject matters and extremely few tropes. Most poets no longer distinguish themselves

by their aesthetic orientation, but by sexual, gender or ethnic markers.

In *Sense and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984), Charles Altieri described the “dominant mode” of poetry in the early 80s as being represented by a poem in which the poet “places a reticent, plain-speaking and self-reflective speaker within a narratively presented scene evoking a sense of loss. Then the poet tries to resolve the loss in a moment of emotional poignance or wry acceptance that renders the entire lyric event an evocative metaphor for some general sense of mystery about the human condition.”<sup>40</sup> For Holden, ten years later, the dominant mode is basically “realist.” By which he means a mode “that is essentially egalitarian, university-based, middle-class, and written in free verse that has, by and large, vastly improved since the sixties, evolving into a flexible medley of older prosodies...”<sup>41</sup>

Within the large body of poetry in this tradition ranging a variety of poems by poets like Wendell Berry, Tess Gallagher, Brendan Galvin, William Metthew, Sharon Olds, Philip Schultz and C.K.Williams, further distinction can be made between women’s poetry and men’s poetry. For reasons of its marginalization, women’s poetry tends to be closer related to the personal and the social as well as to the historical and the political. Such volumes of the 80s as Carolyn Forché’s *The Country Between Us* (1981) inspired by her experience in El Salvador, or Carolyn Kizer’s feminist poems in *Mermaids in the Basement: Poems for Women* (1984) and Yin (Pulitzer Prize, 1985) may serve as perfect illustrations. Men’s poetry is one of “sensibility,” in which realism is more likely to take the form of local-color as in the poems of Louis Simpson, Richard Hugo, or the Southerner Dave Smith.<sup>42</sup>

The confessional mode of Lowell, Ginsberg and Snodgrass, of Plath and Sexton has strongly appealed to this large category of new realists like Sharon Olds, Rita Dove, Carolyn Forché, John Balaban, Alfred Corn, T.R. Hummer. In the most radical of them, the private disclosures of the 60s seem tame compared to the sexual explicitness of some of their poems written in the 80s and early 90s.

The "new ethnicity" of the 70's which by the late 80s had catapulted multiculturalism to national visibility, energized the voices of an important number of poets belonging to various ethnic groups. Among them, particularly poets from the four main minorities - African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and Oriental-Americans such as Rita Dove (1987 Pulitzer Prize receiver and current Poet Laureate of the United States), Ai, Angela Jackson, Simon Ortiz, Gerald William Barrax, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cherri Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Joy Harjo, Yusef Komunyakaa, Vikram Seth, a native of India, and many others.

From this well-travelled road of American poetry two side roads open into opposite directions. To the right, the poetry known as "New Formalism" and to the left, the so-called "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry."

The New Formalists such as Brad Leithauser, William Logan, Charles Martin, Judith Moffett, Marilyn Hacker, Molly Peacock, Marry Jo Salter, Gjertrud Schnackenberg and Timothy Steele, claim direct descentance from Eliot's metaphysical modernism. Their tribute to Eliot is acknowledged in the title of their journal, *New Criterion*. In their commitment to fixed poetic forms and to a subtle and carefully chiseled irony, they find inspiring models in the work of the academic poets of the 1950s, Hecht, Hollander and particularly Wilbur. In its attempt of restoring old hegemonies, their elitist,

conservative style is quite often interpreted as containing a political statement.

To the left of the political scale, the language poets, among them Bruce Andrews, Steve Benson, Charles Bernstein, Clark Coolidge, Alan Davies, Ray DiPalma, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward and Hannah Weiner, create a different kind of elitism. The anti-capitalist intention underlying their work is proclaimed in a rhetoric reminiscent of the modernist manifestos of the European avant-garde at the beginning of the century. "Let us undermine the bourgeoisie," writes Ron Silliman in his contribution to a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E symposium on "The Politics of Poetry," while on the same occasion Charles Bernstein defines language poetry as "'decentered,' community controlled,' taken out of the *service* of the capitalist project."<sup>43</sup>

Stressing the social and ideological dimension of the language construct, the language poets try to engage the reader in the deconstruction of the hegemonic power relation between writer and reader which implies the victimization of the reader by the authoritarian writer. The intended democratization of the reader-writer relation, however, is totally obstructed in the abstract language poem by the deliberate obscurity of the language experiment, which in some respects reminds one of the short-lived *concrete poetry*. Their deconstructive project makes of their poetry an ideal illustration of poststructuralist theories. In a frequently quoted passage from her essay "The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties," Marjorie Perloff, comparing the language poets with the avant-garde of the 1950s, writes: "For Olson and Creeley, 'Form is never more than an extension of content.' For the Language poet, this aphorism

becomes: 'Theory is never more than the extension of practice.'"<sup>44</sup> The subject is created "by the particular set of discourses (cultural, social, historical) in which he or she functions."<sup>45</sup> The promised democratization of the relation reader-writer ends up in the alienation of the reader.

## II.

In his prophecy of "the fate of American Poetry," Holden, fully aware of the standstill reached by the possibilities of formal innovation, predicts that, "the changes in American poetry will be in the domain of 'subject matter,' of 'content,' not of 'form.'"<sup>46</sup> In his opinion to recapture the attention of the audience poetry should adopt a "didactic" subject matter ("stories and ideas") without becoming "preachy" or "pedantic." The challenge confronting the American poets is "how to invent rhetorical tactics that might help American poets both to delight *and* instruct an audience other than that of an English department."<sup>47</sup> In the conclusion of his chapter on "The End of modernism" Holden writes: "To retrieve this subject matter will always mean going out into the 'objective' world, sitting 'down close to the idiot thing' and then discovering a rhetoric sufficient to treat of it. The enlarged content...will...dictate this rhetoric."<sup>48</sup> This is the only way to exorcise "the lingering phantom ghost of modernism," which as he specified from the very beginning is an epistemological one.<sup>49</sup>

In *The Fate of American Poetry*, the feminist poetic project of retrieving women's history and experience and creating a women's literary tradition and a female poetics is mentioned as the only one of all the cultural and poetic developments begun in the late sixties and early seventies which continued to gain critical and creative momentum after 1976.<sup>50</sup> However, the idea is completely abandoned in the discussion about the end of modernism and the future fate of American poetry.

Only seen as a whole against this general background of stagnation can women's poetry be understood as one of the main shaping forces of contemporary American poetry, the place where to look for action and for rich resources still to be discovered.

In the supposedly gender-free modernist view of literary history and criticism in which the widely accepted taxonomy of contemporary American poetry has been grounded, the specificity of women's voices wanes in the corridors of the powerful aesthetic and philosophic patriarchal constructs. The retrieval and the current location of these voices, though seemingly part of a political agenda, equally implies the identification of an aesthetic orientation and a poetic practice which have already transformed the landscape of contemporary poetry.

Suzanne Juhasz sites this specificity in the "double-bind situation" of the woman poet caused by the peculiar tensions in the lives of women as artists.<sup>51</sup> She describes it metaphorically as an "excruciating and irreconcilable civil war," between a woman's identity as daughter, sister, wife, and mother, and her identity as "poet," which functions within the boundaries of the masculine norms imposed on the definition and evaluation of art.<sup>52</sup> She distinguishes between several ways in which women poets have dealt

with their double-bind situation. Until mid-century, poets like Moore, eager for critical recognition, decided "to play by the boys' rules;" by mid-century poets like Levertov, Plath and Sexton, attempted, each in her way, to put their personal experience into poetry: Levertov, closer to a masculine tradition, by working her way from experience to more general truths or abstractions; Plath, by evolving from a "brilliant poetry of surfaces" to a greater reconciliation between herself and the world and Sexton, by depending entirely on her poetry for reaching out from her painful experience of womanhood to the outside world.<sup>53</sup>

A special triple-bind situation, involving combined race and sex oppression, is experienced, in Juhasz's opinion, by minority women poets, whose awareness of race oppression leads them to political poetry.<sup>54</sup> Finally, feminist poets like Rich, strive to find their own feminine poetic forms ("the articulation of the person speaking") to express their experience and thus define their identity as women.<sup>55</sup> Defining the feminine form that can be attained only by feminist poets, and is, in her opinion, characteristic of the new tradition of contemporary women's poetry, Juhasz writes:

"[It is] a voice that is open, intimate, particular, involved, engaged, committed. It is a poetry whose poet speaks as a woman, so that the form of her poem is an extension of herself. A poetry that is linked to experience through the active participation of the poet herself. A poetry that seeks to affect actively its audience. A poetry that is real, because the voice that speaks it is as real as the poet can be about herself. A poetry that is revolutionary, because by expressing the vision of real women it challenges the patriarchal premises of society itself. Revolutionary, too, because it does connect poet and poem and reader in an instant of light."<sup>56</sup>

At the end of the rebellious 60s, Adrienne Rich, the leading radical feminist theorist and one of the most accomplished contemporary poets, was already advocating the necessity of a woman's tradition. Her revolutionary essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," posits the need for re-writing, revising, re-constructing a new literary tradition. For, Rich argues, "to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination."<sup>57</sup>

Apart from Rich's own efforts reflected in her own poetry and essays, the work of recovery started in the year following the publication of her manifesto, with Florence Howe's breakthrough anthology of twentieth-century American Women Poets, *No More Masks*, a title taken from Muriel Rukeyser's poem "The Poem as Mask."

Written in 1968, Rukeyser's visionary poem condenses in the intensity and brevity of the poetic language the dilemma of the woman poet and indicates means and ways of liberation:

When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness,  
 it was a mask,  
 on their mountain, god-hunting, singing, in orgy,  
 it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,  
 fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love  
 gone down with song,  
 it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile  
 from myself.

There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory  
 of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the  
 rescued child  
 beside me among the doctors, and a word  
 of rescue from the great eyes.

No more masks! No more mythologies!

Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,  
 the fragments join in me with their own music. <sup>58</sup>

Twenty years later, the 1993 “newly revised and expanded” edition of *No More Masks* almost doubles the number of poets, renegotiates the boundaries of contemporary American poetry and suggests that women’s poetry has taken the dimensions of a literary movement.

Without any model to follow, the 1973 anthology, as Howe writes in the Preface to the 1993 edition, brought together poems by women “about” women’s experience, selected on the basis of their capacity of producing aesthetic pleasure while communicating exciting and new experience. The volume was organized into three sections marking the borders between roughly three literary generations: poets born between 1875 and 1920, between 1920 and 1940 and after 1940. The 1993 volume is still faithful to this structure, which functions as a kind of cultural and historical subtext for poetic texts which are in their turn, individually dated.

Establishing 1875 as an early date for the new 20th century poetic tradition, the reconstructive act becomes flexible enough to accommodate women poets who were instrumental in shaping the

destinies of modernism as the crucial phase in the coming of age of American poetry, such as Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Sara Teasdale, Marianne Moore and Louise Bogan. The great absentee is Elizabeth Bishop, who never gave permission to be anthologized as a woman poet.

The first part uses as epigraph the opening lines of Lowell's poem "The Sisters:" "...we're a queer lot/ We women who write poetry." Lowell's sisterhood in this poem significantly includes only Sapho ("nor Miss or Mrs."), Elizabeth Barret Browning ("Mrs. Browning") and Emily Dickinson ("Emily"). The whole poem focuses on the dilemma of a woman's identity as central to the woman poet:

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot  
 We women who write poetry. And when you think  
 How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.  
 I wonder what it is that makes us do it,  
 Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,  
 The fragments of ourselves. Why are we  
 Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,  
 With matrices in body and in brain?

(NMM, 8)

Neither Lowell nor Sara Teasdale or Louis Bogan could be comfortable in any of these two worlds.(NMM, xxxiv) However, by drawing special attention to the modernists women poets, the revisionary act points toward women's contribution to the modern emancipation of American poetry as well as toward a unifying

quality of women's poetry, which Rich interprets in *Of Woman Born* as residing in the body and which she describes as "gynocentric."<sup>59</sup>

A second important group of women poets among the pioneers, including Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard and Kay Boyle, develop in their poetry a social consciousness and address wide humanitarian issues.

Rukeyser sets an early model of activism and engaged poetry informed by a Whitmanesque spirit which aims at transforming the world. She was Jewish, a mother and a lesbian and her poetry thrived on her "difference." There is in her poems a woman-identified consciousness, an awareness of power and the body, and of the cultural and social construction of gender and sexuality. She renders this consciousness by employing various modernist techniques such as montage, stream-of-consciousness narrative, peculiar punctuation and special typography. In such poems as "Myth" and "Waiting for Icarus," she recreates a woman's mythology by re-writing myths from a woman's perspective. Her poetic career which spanned almost half a century, has inspired a long line of contemporary women poets who acknowledge their indebtedness to her poetry.

In the group of pioneers, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks inaugurate the tradition of 20th century African American women's poetry. Poet, but also novelist, essayist, critic and educator, Margaret Walker grounds her poetry in history and culture. When she addresses issues of racial and economic freedom, her public voice draws on the folk tradition of litanies, sermons, chants and ballads. She celebrates women's power coming from a heritage transmitted from grandmothers to mothers and daughters.

While Walker's various interests were wider than the poetic ones, Brooks, the first African American to be awarded the Pulitzer

Prize, has been identified as founder of the African American tradition in contemporary women's poetry. From her early modernist allegiances and her indebtedness to the Harlem Renaissance, her career evolved toward militancy, radicalization and black leadership. From the fixed forms of the sonnet, the ballad and conventional meter, her poetry opened to free verse and verse journalism, to the rhythms of jazz and blues. Her later poetry reflects a new conception on the artist's role in the community, with Brooks increasingly acting as a mother-figure for her race.

The strongest segment of contemporary women's poetry is represented by the middle generations, from women in their early fifties to women in their early seventies, whose poetic growth, in most cases, paralleled and sometimes intermingled with the growth of feminism in the late 50s and throughout the 60s. The rise during this period of what is called the third women's movement, women's liberation, acts as a catalyst of the female consciousness, no matter whether one embraced or not the feminist creeds. A brief examination of the social, cultural and political impact of the movement is therefore indispensable for the discussion of the direction taken by women's poetry in the last two decades.

The crescendo of social activism, the civil-rights and student movements stirred a new feminist spirit, particularly among white, middle-class, college-educated women reduced to submissive social roles by a cult of domesticity perfectly orchestrated throughout the affluent and tranquilized 1950s.

The nationwide success of the feminist movement, soon to be known under the name of Women's Liberation Movement, owed much to the popularity of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine*

*Mystique* (1963), a true feminist manifesto which challenged the social system premised on male chauvinism and the oppression of women. Friedan exposed "the feminine mystic" entrenched by the patriarchy in the 50s image of women as "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of boredom and kitchen, sex, babies and home."<sup>60</sup>

As the women's movement grew more radical, Friedan's call for feminist self-awareness and her "New Life Plan" for the re-education of the women deceived by the feminine mystique, was politicized by Kate Millett's theory of "sexual politics."<sup>61</sup> Exposing the mechanism of power-structured relationships between the sexes based on their biological differences, Millett investigates the patriarchal values underpinning the canonical writings by male authors and advocates the necessity of a gradual change in the socially organized attitudes toward women, claiming their access to all the avenues of power denied them in the past. Published a year before Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Mary Ellman's book *Thinking about Women* (1968) investigates negative women stereotypes in literature by men versus representations of woman in women's writing.

The feminists of the 1970s further elaborate upon the distinction between *sex* and *gender*, with *sex* denoting invariable biological differences, and *gender*, a social and cultural construct, the particular meaning that a particular culture and society attribute to sexual difference. The far-reaching effects of the new "politics of gender" purged of the radical overemphasis on sexual freedom in favour of a more obvious commitment to the goals of the civil rights movement, touched upon all aspects of American life, having important, even if sometimes hardly graspable, social, political, cultural, moral and emotional implications.

The identification by Ellman and Millett in the 60s of a "female aesthetic" is followed in the 70s by a growing interest in feminist theory encouraged by Rich's appeals and a massive infusion of French feminist theory. A parallel movement in feminist criticism, which Elaine Showalter, its leading practitioner, called *gynocriticism*, spurred the publication during the decade of several fundamental revisionary critical works which questioned the validity of the literary canon and helped identify a women's literary tradition. Among such works, Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own. British Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* as well as studies on women's poetry, as for instance, *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, edited by Gilbert and Gubar and Juhasz's *Naked and Fiery Forms*.

By 1980 feminist criticism had already become a challenging area of literary and cultural investigation, and new words and abbreviations like "chairperson," or "Ms." became part of everyday American vocabulary. Starting with mid-70s, women's movement is increasingly marked by issues of marginalized difference of race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The visible results of the victory won in the 60s, however, ran from increased political representation and the removal of important educational and job barriers to the growing influence of Women's Studies and the outstanding achievement of an amazing number of gifted women writers.

After the 60s, after the civil rights, the students' and the women's movements, after the anti-Vietnam war protests, women's poetry would emerge with unprecedented force. Those who made it

happen were mostly members of the middle generations. Most of them also engaged in academic and critical careers, winners of important awards, distinctions and prizes, they energized women's poetry and brought it to public attention. Between them, the best poets of this large group discovered confessionalism, brought it to perfection and particularly through the poetry of Plath and Sexton (1966 Pulitzer Prize winner), who also paid the generation's toll to death and self-destruction, scattered it worldwide.

Apart from being poets many are also literary critics, theorists and educators, as in the case of Rich, Levertov, Paula Gunn Allen, their books of cultural, literary and political critique being in several instances as influential as their best books of poems. They may be either political activists or what could be called engaged poets, committed to broad humanitarian issues, such as antiwar protests, human rights, concern with ecological threats and universal peace, as in the case of Rich and Levertov. They are the driving force at the core of contemporary Women's poetry as they set about the revisionary work of deconstructing and re-constructing the literary tradition, revising mythologies, rewriting histories, forging a language. They do no longer look only into their doubleness, but out at the world they wish to transform. They have "the will to change," as Rich entitled one of her volumes.

The difficulty of the task is suggested in Carolyn Kizer's provocative poem of the 60s "*Pro Femina*:"

From Sappho to myself, consider the fate of women.

How unwomanly to discuss it! Like a noose or an albatross necktie

While men have politely debated free will, we have howled for it,  
 Howl still, pacing the centuries, tragedy heroines.  
 Some who sat quietly in the corner with their embroidery  
 Were Defarges, stabbing the wool with the names of their ancient  
 Oppressors, who ruled by the divine right of the male -  
 I'm impatient of interruptions! I'm aware there were millions  
 Of mutes for every Saint Joan or sainted Jane Austen,  
 Who, vague-eyed and acquiescent, worshiped God as a man.  
 I'm not concerned with those cabbageheads, not truly feminine  
 But neutered by labor. I mean real women, like *you* and like *me*.

(*NMM*, 169)

Alicia Ostriker, a poet herself, identifies in the explosion of excellent women's poetry in the 60s and the 70s four specific elements organically interconnected: the quest for "autonomous self-definition" (definition from within) involving roles and female identity, the double self; "the intimate treatment of the body," the discovery of the body experience and its use as female identification; "the release of anger," and what she calls "the contact imperative," meaning by it women's "cravings for unity" and their sense of relationship."<sup>62</sup>

"Housewife," a poem by Sexton written in the early 60s exemplifies all these concerns, setting, as it were, the tone of the decade:

Some women marry houses.  
 It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
 a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.  
 The walls are permanent and pink.

See how she sits on her knees all day,  
 faithfully washing herself down.  
 Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah  
 into their fleshy mothers.  
 A woman *is* her mother.  
 That's the main thing.<sup>63</sup>

The terrifying release of anger in Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus," the anger in Rich's "The Phenomenology of Anger" or in Diane Wakoski's *The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems* dedicated "to all those men/ who betrayed me at one time or another,/ in hopes they will fall off their motorcycles/ and break their necks,"<sup>64</sup> is always associated with self-definition, body experience and one form or another of human relationship, as in Wakoski's poem "In Gratitude to Beethoven:"

I am like the guerilla fighter  
 who must sleep with one eye open for attack, a knife  
 or poison, a bamboo dart could come at any time.

No one has loved me without trying to destroy me,  
 there is no part of me that is not armoured,  
 there is no moment when I am not expecting attack,  
 there is no one I trust,  
 there is no love left in me that is not a wild flower.

The same association of love and relationship, the body and the integrity or the split in the self is expressed in less violent language

in the tightly controlled verse of Maxine Kumin, the Pulitzer Prize winner in 1973, as for instance in the poem "After Love:"

Afterwards, the compromise.  
Bodies resume their boundaries.

These legs, for instance, mine.  
Your arms take you back in.

Spoons of our fingers, lips  
admit their ownership.

The bedding yawns, a door  
blows aimlessly ajar

and overhead, a plane  
singsongs coming down.

Nothing is changed, except  
there was a moment when

the wolf, the mongering wolf  
who stands outside the self

lay lightly down, and slept.<sup>65</sup>

The emergence of a strong group of white, middle-class women poets like those already mentioned and still others like Marge Piercy,

for instance, was paralleled by the rise of an eminent group of African American poets including Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez and Lucille Clifton. Individually and as a group they have contributed to contemporary American poetry a new intensity, a new urgency of anger and a new tenderness. They have also contributed a new awareness of difference and a new freedom of expressing it in verse and essays.

With the black women poets in the 60s and the 70s American poetry gets an insight into the third-world and working-class issues and discovers new dramatizations of the personal as the political. Their poetry becomes a supreme act of empowerment. As Audre Lorde once said voicing the tensions in the soul of an African-American woman poet: "When I dare to be powerful - to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."<sup>66</sup>

Reading the poetry of Lorde and Jordan, middle-class, white women are likely to find themselves uncomfortable with the visibility and the re-orientation of the racial and class challenge. African-American poetry, particularly Lorde's, abolishes the white women's privilege of seeing the world in terms of sexual oppression, for in their case sexual oppression is always doubled and reinforced by the racial one, as in Lorde's powerful poem "The Woman Thing:"

.....

The hunters are treading heavily  
 homeward through snow  
 marked by their own bloody footprints.  
 Emptyhanded the hunters return  
 snow-maddened  
 sustained by their rages.

In the night after food they will seek  
 young girls for their amusement.  
 Now the hunters are coming  
 and the unbaked girls  
 flee from their angers.

All this day I have craved  
 food for my child's hunger  
 emptyhanded  
 the hunters come shouting  
 injustice drips from their mouths  
 like stale snow  
 melted in sunlight.

The woman thing  
 my mother taught me  
 bakes off its covering of snow  
 like a rising Blackening sun.<sup>67</sup>

The devastating anger of the poem calls to account all members of the dominant culture, women included, as in another of Lorde's poems significantly called "Power," occasioned by the death of a ten-year-old Black child shot by a white policeman later acquitted by a jury of eleven white men and one black woman:

The difference between poetry and rhetoric  
 is being  
 ready to kill  
 yourself  
 instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert off raw gunshot wounds  
 and a dead child dragging his shattered black  
 face off the edge of my sleep  
 blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders  
 is the only liquid for miles and my stomach  
 churns at the imagined taste while  
 my mouth splits into dry lips  
 without loyalty or reason  
 thirsting for the wetness of his blood  
 as it sinks into the whiteness  
 of the desert where I am lost  
 without imagery or magic  
 trying to make power out of hatred and destruction  
 trying to heal my dying son with kisses  
 only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.  
 But unless I learn to use  
 the difference between poetry and rhetoric  
 my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold  
 or lie limb and useless as an unconnected wire  
 and one day I will take my teenaged plug  
 and connect it to the nearest socket  
 raping an 85-year-old white woman  
 who is somebody's mother  
 and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed  
 a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time

“Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are.”

Such poetry bridges the gap between victimization/oppression and struggle/resistance and raises new questions about authority and voice largely invisible in white women poets.

The multiplicity of voices characterizes the poetry of all marginalized minorities, as if these voices were conjured up to legitimate their identity. Sometimes they are voices of places, voices coming from the racial and ethnic heritage. With African-American poets the urge to document poetry with names of places, with numbers and concrete environmental details reflects not so much the dominant “realistic mode” of American poetry as the affirmation of the denied identity and rootedness of minoritized ethnic voices. They can also be voices of new spiritual geographies or of old and new mythologies as in Lucille Clifton’s poem “crazy horse names his daughter:”

sing the names of the women sing  
 the power full names of the women sing  
 White Buffalo Woman who brought the pipe  
 Black Buffalo Woman and Black Shawl  
 sing the names of the women sing  
 the power of name in the women sing  
 the name I have saved for my daughter sing  
 her name to the ties and baskets and  
 the red tailed hawk will take her name and  
 sing her power to Wakan Tanka sing  
 the name of my daughter sing she is  
 They Are Afraid Of Her.<sup>68</sup>

There is in their poetry a permanent concern for passing on knowledge, for connecting with and handling down poetic and ethnic legacies, as in "Today Is Not the Day," the last poem Lorde wrote before her death in 1992:<sup>69</sup>

.....

Today is not the day.

It could be

but it is not.

Today is today

in the early moving morning

sun shinging down upon

the farmhouse in my belly

lifting the wellswept alleys

of the town growing in my liver

intricate vessels swelling with the gift

of Mother Mawu

or her mischievous daughter

Afrekete Afrekete my beloved

feel the sun of my days surround you

binding our pathways

we have water to carry

honey to harvest

bright seed to plant for the next fair

.....

This could be the day.

I could slip anchor and wander

to the end of the jetty

uncoil into the waters

a vessel of light moonglade  
 ride the freshets to sundown  
 and when I am gone  
 another stranger will find you  
 coiled on the warm sand  
 beached treasure and love you  
 for the different stories  
 your seas tell  
 and half-finished blossoms  
 growing out of my season  
 trail behind  
 with a comforting hum.

But today  
 is not the day.  
 Today.

April 22, 1992

\*

The poets of various ethnic groups, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, who started to publish in the late 70s or in the 80s, have built upon the tradition consolidated by the African-American poets. The breakthrough was marked in 1981 by *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, two of the most gifted Chicana poets and writers. A collection of poetry, stories and essays, *This Bridge Called My Back* signals a new approach to difference and female identity, utterly deuniversalizing in intention

and multicultural in spirit. The main link between all the “women of color” is their common experience of oppression and racism, as Cherrie Moraga points out in her Preface and in “For the Color of My Mother,” one of her poems included in the collection, where she stresses the connections between all women of color:

*I am white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother  
speaking for her*

as it should be  
dark women come to me  
sitting in circles

I pass through their hands  
the head of my mother  
painted in clay colors

touching each carved feature swollen eyes and mouth  
they understand the explosion the splitting  
open contained within the fixed expression

they cradle her silence  
nodding to me. <sup>70</sup>

The feminism of *This Bridge Called My Back* addresses issues of race and class as well as issues of sexuality and gender and it traces a clear trajectory from victimization/ oppression to struggle/ resistance. It also points to racial consciousness and lesbianism as the most radical forces in today's feminism. Nevertheless, in many respects this anthology is an exception, for the poets born after 1940

are more likely to affirm each her own difference and claim the equality of difference than get engage in larger public issues which cut across racial, cultural and class boundaries. Among the African-American, Chicana, Latina, Native American and Asian-American poets of today, the majority are women. In *No More Masks* their number equals that of the white women poets. They even outnumber the latter in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which illustrates the recent multicultural approach to American literature.<sup>71</sup>

The women poets born after 1940, therefore those who started to publish in the 70s and the 80s when the women's movement had already broken the ground for affirmation of the female identity, form a very large category. Among those who have received more constant critical attention and whose poetry has been more often anthologized are Carolyn Forché, Tess Gallagher, Louise Glück (1993 Pulitzer Prize winner), Judy Grahn, Marilyn Hacker, Sharon Olds, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Mary Jo Salter, Rita Dove (1987 Pulitzer Prize winner), Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Cherrie Moraga, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Wendy Rose, Leslie Marmon Silko, Cathy Song and Janice Mirikitani.

Despite their stress on difference and their appropriation of different cultural traditions which creates the false impression of "balkanization" of contemporary American poetry, most women poets in this category share similar strategies of poetic empowerment. With remarkable directness of language they articulate suppressed and taboo realms of female experience and re-write the body as both locus of domination and site of power and knowledge. "Black is beautiful" is a recurrent motif in African

American women's poetry. In Rita Dove's poem "The Great Palaces of Versailles," for instance, the reversal of power relations between white and black is achieved exclusively through reference to bodily functions:

*Nothing nastier than a white person!*

She mutters as she irons alterations  
in the back room of Charlotte's Dress Shoppe.

The stream rising from a cranberry wool  
comes alive with perspiration  
and stale Evening of Paris

*Swamp she born from, swamp  
she swallow, swamp she got to sink again.*

.....  
Beulah had read in the library  
how French ladies at court would tuck  
their fans in a sleeve  
and walk in the gardens for air. Swaying  
among lilies, lifting shy layers of silk,  
they dropped excrement as daintily  
as handkerchieves...

(*NMM*, 442)

The re-visionary work is a favorite strategy of empowerment with most women poets of the postwar generations. In Sharon Olds's poem "The Connoisseurs of Slugs," for instance, the feminist saying of the unsayable performs the toppling of sexual stereotypes. The

ironic “connoisseuse” is an empowered Eve who “would part the ivy leaves” and satisfy her pleasure:

When I was a connoisseuse of slugs  
 I would part the ivy leaves, and look for the  
 naked jelly of those gold bodies,  
 translucent strangers glistening along the  
 stones, slowly, their gelatinous bodies  
 at my mercy. Made mostly of water, they would  
 shrivel  
 to nothing if they were sprinkled with salt,  
 but I was not interested in that. What I liked  
 was to draw aside the ivy, breathe the  
 odor of the wall, and stand there in silence  
 until the slug forgot I was there  
 and sent its antennae up out of its  
 head, the glimmering amber horns  
 rising like telescopes, until finally the  
 sensitive knobs would pop out the ends,  
 delicate and intimate. Years later,  
 when I first saw a naked man,  
 I gasped with pleasure to see that quiet  
 mystery reenacted, the slow  
 elegant being coming out of hiding and  
 gleaming in the dark air, eager and so  
 trusting you could weep.

Reversal of roles and re-framing of women’s experience by re-reading or re-constructing female mythologies and fairy tales or re-

telling biblical stories and Greek myths account for much of the richness and freshness in women's poetry. The strategy is briefly explained in Gluck's poem "Mythic Fragment" from her volume suggestively entitled *The Triumph of Achilles*:

When the stern god  
 approached me with his gift  
 my fear enchanted him  
 so that he ran more quickly  
 through the wet grass, as he insisted,  
 to praise me. I saw captivity  
 in praise; against the lyre,  
 I begged my father in the sea  
 to save me. When  
 the god arrived, I was nowhere  
 I was in a tree forever. Reader,  
 pity Apollo: at the water's edge,  
 I turned from him, I summoned  
 my invisible father - as  
 I stiffened in the god's arms,  
 of his encompassing love  
 my father made  
 no other sign from the water.

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In the act of recovering and revising myths, histories and traditions, women's poetry exploits various forms of *storytelling* adjusted to the medley of women's voices from the past or the present which re-interpret women's experiences. An early example is given by Judy Grahn's successful volume *The Work of a Common*

*Woman*, where she explores ordinary women's histories to reconstruct the category of woman, as in this short fragment from the poem "Ella, in a Square Apron, along Highway 80:"

. . . Once,

she shot a lover who misused her child.

Before she got to jail, the courts had pounced  
and given the child away. Like some isolated lake,  
her flat blue eyes take care of their own stark  
bottoms. Her hands are nervous, curled, ready  
to scrape.

The common woman is as common  
as a rattlesnake.<sup>74</sup>

Quite often the narrative strategy counterbalances the intensity of the confession, as in Marilyn Hacker's poem "Nearly a Valediction:"

You happened to me. I was happened to  
like an abandoned building by a bull-  
dozer, like the van that missed my skull  
happened a two-inch gash across my chin.

.....

You were the weather in my neighborhood.  
You were the epic in the episode.  
You were the year poised on the equinox.<sup>75</sup>

Associated with the New Formalists, Marilyn Hacker often experiments with form, creating in her poems a tension between the speech of ordinary people and an elaborate fixed form. She is also the author of a verse novel, *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons*.

In much of women's poetry rhetorical and formal strategies reminiscent of modernist techniques involve the use of collage, of various media, juxtaposition of various types of discourses, often contradictory, of two languages (particularly in Chicana poetry), cross-generic experiments, alternation of prose and poetry. In the best poems written by women, the constant subversion of the poetic form is an unmistakable mark of the female identity.

An important group of poets associated with "language poetry" including among others Susan Howe, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Johanna Drucker, Carla Harryman, Diane Ward, Hannah Weiner, Erica Hunt, Harryette Mullen. They write an experimental poetry which aims to be free of the category of genre, but uses a feminist context. An illustration from Susan Howe's volume *Defenestration of Prague* exemplifies the feminist context by Howe's concern with masculine power. The source of power is constantly subverted by the instability and indeterminacy created in the poem by the positioning of the words on the page and an extremely loose syntax :

Transgression links remembering  
Dark spell

terror Ideal  
(spangs like stars)

Winter  
a wound to the sun

empty desolation of mortality

Old age of winter

(lean pallor

bone ghost)

plunder and massacre

Florimell embarks blindly

(being lost)

to interpret the world

chivalric courtesy

chivalric constancy

quelled liturgy

(double sense softly)

illusory sanctuary of memory

Seven men suggest an army

furious humor of cruelty

Fantasticity

nimble phantasma capering on a page

with antic gesture.<sup>76</sup>

Howe denies a gender-specific quality of writing, yet like all the other women poets she tries to relate to a feminine literary tradition. Her formal experiment finds support in the innovating techniques of Emily Dickinson's poetry. She acknowledges her indebtedness in her challenging book *My Emily Dickinson*.

Many poems written by women in the 80s and early 90s are dedicated to other women poets and writers - predecessors or contemporaries. Jean Valentine writes a poem in memory of Elizabeth Bishop, Sharon Olds dedicates her poem "Solitary" to Muriel Rukeyser, Denise Levertov inscribes "The Long Way Round" to Alice Walker and Carolyn Taylor, Diane Wakoski dedicates "The Girls" to Margaret Atwood and Cathy Davidson and Joy Harjo writes her poem "Anchorage" for Audre Lorde.

Women poets in the 90s seem very much aware of writing poetry within a literary tradition of women's voices. Twenty years ago when Rich launched her re-visionary project there was no such tradition. Only five years later Juhasz could already write a book about the development of the new tradition. After another ten years, Alicia Ostriker in her provocative study of women's poetry, *Stealing the Language*, identified in American literature not only a women's tradition but also "a literary movement, comparable to romanticism or modernism in our literary past," which, she believes, is "challenging and transforming the history of poetry."<sup>77</sup> She writes: "...as a feminist critic I have come to believe that there exists a body of poetry by women which illuminates the condition of women and therefore of humanity in an unprecedented way, and which is exciting enough as poetry, as art, not merely to be accepted into the literary mainstream but to influence the stream's course."<sup>78</sup> Throughout the book Ostriker stresses what she defines as "the adversary relation between the women's poetry movement and the 'larger' culture, derived from women's cultural marginality."<sup>79</sup> She conducts her investigation mostly at the level of poetic language and revisionary mythmaking presenting women's poetry as a major attempt to abolish the conventional division between life and art,

feeling and intellect, writer and reader. The whole study leads to identification of a female poetics which, using one of Rich's terms, Ostriker calls "gynocentric," that is, rooted in the female self and in the female body.

What may seem objectionable in this theory is not the idea of a women's literary tradition and its impact on contemporary poetry, but that of a women's literary movement comparable in effect with the two main forces that have shaped American literature: romanticism and modernism. A movement implies active participation, adherence to a programatic platform. A feminist literary movement would be a more appropriate term. Such a movement, which undoubtedly exists, cannot include, however, those not very few women poets whose contribution is essential in shaping the literary tradition, but who consider their struggle with words part of all poets' striving to achieve meaning rather than a woman's struggle to liberate herself from the patriarchal relations of domination and oppression inherent in man's language.

As an inquiry into women's poetry does not fail to indicate, the poetic self always grows out of or in response to the way in which the poet defines her female identity and faces as a poet the silences in which that identity has long been enwrapped. In this respect women's poetry is clearly identifiable and it is as such that their achievement has been making its most powerful impact on contemporary American poetry. Rich's "dream of a common language" of women may never come true because what she calls "the crucible for a new language" is "that *primary presence of women to each other*," which proves to have increasingly limited effects.<sup>80</sup> In a postindustrial, postcolonial and postcommunist world, where the forces of globalization and the growing awareness of

difference and marginalization tend to destabilize all boundaries and create numberless new force fields of power relations, it is very unlikely that "the primary presence of women to each other" applies to large categories.

Translating women's experiences into poetry cannot create a new language if it were only because women's poetry, and particularly feminist poetry, depends so much upon sharing these experiences with the whole humanity. But the coming out from silence, the intensity of women's voices documenting their marginalized experience and their wish of "turning the wheel" of the world and of poetry makes of women's work that unique poetic territory "where the action is," where meaning and form are constantly created in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the power relations within the poem.

## 2. Postmodern Feminism, Power and Subjectivity

As a critique of the various oppressive hierarchies that establish, maintain and reinforce women's subordination, feminism has long made of power and identity central issues on its agenda.

Unlike its French counterpart, Anglo-American feminism has found its theoretical arguments not so much in Derrida's linguistic deconstruction and Lacan's revisionist reading of Freud, as in several interrelated areas of major Foucauldian concern: his analysis of discourse and power, his critique of the rational subject and his attack on the unified subjectivity.

Starting with the early 1980s the growing interest in Foucault produced remarkable studies which marked the beginning of a theoretical line diverging more and more widely from the work of the French feminists.<sup>1</sup>

Diamond and Quinby distinguish four striking convergences of feminism and Foucault: 1) The identification of the body as the "site of power," and the "locus of domination" through which subjectivity and subordination are obtained; 2) The focus on the "local" and "intimate" operations of power rather than on the "supreme power of the state;" 3) The emphasis on the vital role of discourse as source

of hegemonic power and the potential power of marginalized and/or unrecognized discourses; 4) The critique of Western humanism's universalist perceptions of truth, freedom and human nature, based exclusively on Western male experience.<sup>2</sup>

Investigating the causes of Foucault's tremendous influence Biddy Martin comes to the conclusion that: "What is useful for us is the suggestion to be read out of Foucault's work that we analyze the historically and discursively specific ways in which woman has figured as a constitutive absence. To totalize or universalize Otherness as an answer to the question of woman is to leave ourselves with no possibility for understanding or intervening in the processes through which meaning is produced, distributed, and transformed in relation to the shifting articulation of power in our world."<sup>3</sup>

The feminist appropriation of Foucault through the genderizing of his theories is relevant to the discussion of contemporary women's writing as it casts light on the fruitful encounter between feminism and postmodernism as well as on the essential contribution of the feminist project to modelling the face of postmodernity.

Two of Foucault's books were particularly appealing to American feminists in the early 1980s, *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.<sup>4</sup> In both Foucault explores power and its manifestations in the institutional representations of totalitarian thought in Western culture, with particular emphasis on the relation of power to the body and to the production and control of sexuality.

None of Foucault's theories has served feminism better than his theory of power as applied to the concepts of the body and of

sexuality. The American radical feminists capitalized on his definition of the body as a cultural rather than a biological construct, on the idea of the body as produced by power, hence of sexuality as representing historically and culturally determined power relations. By the latter half of the 1970s, when feminist movement had already gained wide recognition, the grounding of the idea of the body and of sexuality in Foucault's theory of power opened a vast territory for feminist universalist views on domination and marginalization.<sup>5</sup> The limitation imposed on women's experience by the controlling images of sexuality has been identified as one of the main instruments of women's oppression. Significantly, the gradual radicalization of feminism in the 1960s under the impact of the civil rights movement and the anti-war protests, coincides with a sexual revolution with wide-ranging effects on American culture and society.

Without discarding the radical feminist premises of the universality and totality of the oppression of women, more recent poststructuralist feminists investigate the non-essentialist implications of Foucault's theory, stressing the concept of difference as fundamental to poststructuralist thought. They tend to explore Foucault's late works, in which he visibly shifts his focus from the sources of power to the relation of power to knowledge and subjectivity, and reformulates his definition of power in terms of processes and relations.

Power is neither "given" nor "exchanged," but "rather exercised," and "it only exists in action," contends Foucault, describing Power as an ever expanding force field of power-relations.<sup>6</sup> He constructs a strategic model of relational power in opposition to the conventional one of centralized and descending power. He calls the latter "juridical" as it is fashioned on the three

central elements of a legal transaction: *concreteness* ("Power is taken to be a right, which one is able to possess like a commodity, and which one can in consequence transfer or alienate," *repression* (the ways in which Power asserts its privileges, such as imposing and enforcing laws, punishing through isolation or marginalization, prohibiting transgression) and *centralization* (which refers to the dynamic of the power force from the center down to the margins).<sup>7</sup>

Foucault's "strategic" or "relational" power model replaces the idea of power-as-possession with that of power-as-process, power as a field of force lines or relations.<sup>8</sup> Not only is power as a force field "omnipresent," in the sense that it is operational in all reality, but beside being repressive it is also productive. It produces discourse. For, as Foucault observes, "[the] relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse."<sup>9</sup> To which he adds the idea that "power...cannot but evolve, organise and put into circulation a knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge," which conceal their sources as an effect of the repressive character of power.<sup>10</sup> In this sense knowledge cannot exist free of power relations, but at the same time power and knowledge imply one another. Or, as Foucault put it, "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor is there any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."<sup>11</sup> In other words, power not only controls and conditions knowledge, but also produces it. Foucault concludes that the production of truth is "thoroughly imbued with relations of power."<sup>12</sup> It is never independent of power or lacking in power.

It is precisely in this spirit of the relation power-knowledge/truth that so many of the contemporary women poets regard the creation of poetry, even more than poetry itself, a supreme form of empowerment.

In Foucault's model, instead of being centralized, power is heterogeneous and dynamic. It moves by employing various strategies of power relations such as displacement, investment, transformation, extension, and so on. Each force relation in the field creates resistance, but where the model predicated upon binary oppositions implies only one point of resistance, the force field of power relations allows for a multiplicity. As Foucault explains in his *History of Sexuality*, "these [points of resistance] play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network."<sup>13</sup>

The effects of this theory on current feminism cannot be overestimated. Engaged in building strength and cohesion into the feminist project and thinking exclusively in terms of negative hierarchical and oppositional definitions of power, earlier feminists - described mostly as white, middle-class and heterosexual - would focus less on repressive power structures in terms of their origins and their local, discursive and specific formations as Foucault did in his early work. Their activism inspired concerns about the effect on women of the genderized and universalized mechanism of domination-oppression.

The early makers of postmodern feminism lay heavy emphasis on power as repressive and prohibitory, on victimization and on what Foucault called "the technologies of domination" targeted at disciplinizing the body, at making it passive. In such an

interpretation women's empowerment depends either on the rejection of the binary oppositions of the patriarchal order through the subversion of the opposite term, or on women's ability of gaining control within the patriarchal power structure, thereby implicitly accepting it as such.

Foucault's later work, his field theory of power relations and multiplicity of points of resistance complemented by the idea of power as plural and productive, has proved beneficial for the poststructuralist supporters of difference and multiculturalism.

Inspired by his model Jana Sawicki posits "a radically pluralist feminism" as typical of the postmodern spirit and the identity politics of difference in the postindustrial society. Radical pluralism operates with a "relational and dynamic model of identity...constantly in formation in a hierarchical context of power relations," as well as with "an expanded sense of the political," which equally implies "plurality within and between subjects," and the politicizing of social and personal relationships.<sup>14</sup> Avowing knowledge of domination it challenges all hegemonic structures and represents society as "a dynamic, multidimensional set of relationships containing possibilities for liberation as well as domination."<sup>15</sup>

The proliferation of the strategies of empowerment addressing issues of struggle and resistance, both within and between subjects, claim for a more subtle articulation of women's experience from the historical and cultural perspective of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and third-world marginal positioning. One can add to the list the interesting perspective offered by the former communist countries, where by definition, the totalitarian state repressed all manifestations of difference.

Such strategies have drawn heavily on Foucault's critique of the rational subject and the unified subjectivity. According to Foucault, subjectivity as an open ended language construct becomes relative of the different subject positions in a culturally specific context. In his later studies, reconsidering his early theories on the relations between power and the body, he points out that the analysis of the modern subject should not consider only the techniques of domination but also the techniques of the self. As he explains: "If one wants to analyse the genealogy of subject in Western civilization, one has to take into account not only techniques of domination, but also techniques of self. One has to show the interaction between these two types of the self. When I was studying asylums, prisons and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on the techniques of domination. What we call discipline is something really important in this kind of institution. But it is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies. Having studied the field of power relations taking domination techniques as a point of departure, I should like, in the years to come, to study power relations, especially in the field of sexuality, starting from the techniques of the self."<sup>16</sup>

As Teresa de Laurentis was one of the first to point out, the notion of an identity genderized on biological distinctions, advocated by powerful voices such as Adrienne Rich's for instance, can only reinforce the status of women as passive victims of the patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> Seizing upon the shift in Foucault's analysis from emphasis on technologies of domination to those of subjectivization, de Laurentis calls for the re-modelling of women's subjectivity in a degenderized system of power relations.

In search for alternative ways of dealing with the backlash on feminism which became more strikingly visible in the closing years of the 80s, and for which radical feminism was partly responsible, there is a marked tendency among feminists in recent years to develop new technologies of the self and alternative strategies of empowerment.

As women's writing at its best more than proves, this is being done overtly or covertly, loudly or silently through the patient and unremitting subversion of the very foundations of the gender-based notion of power. To this patriarchal, dualistic notion maintaining women's subordination, they juxtapose a Foucauldian reading of power as self-actualization, ability, competence and energy as well as a re-positioning of the subject in the force-field of power relations.

Alcoff calls the definition of the subject through shifting positions in culturally specific and often contradictory contexts *positionality*. Reading positionality as the point where subjectivity and structure converge in the subject, she posits that "the position women find themselves in can be actively utilized...as a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place from where a meaning can be discovered (the meaning of femaleness)."<sup>18</sup> The construction of poetic meaning as a strategy of empowerment has provided the main criterion for the selection of the poets included in my study of contemporary American women's poetry.

In its critique of the essentializing tendency of radical feminism to overlook, conceal or suppress all differences among women for reasons of unity and strength as well as in its resistance to the spirit of globalization contained in the postmodernist discourse, poststructuralist feminism covers all the way from

victimization-domination to struggle-resistance. The evidence of difference discloses fissures and cracks in the ideal representation of sisterhood, as indicated, among others, by such titles of the last ten years as Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* or Betsy Erkkila's *The Wicked Sisters. Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord*.

In their investigation of the limitations of sisterhood, their reinterpretation of the mothering theory, and their analysis of power relations within the subject and outside it, not only between women and men, but also between women, such feminist critics and theorists as Gayatri Spivak, Annette Kolodny or Toril Moi would abandon the psychoanalytical instruments for an approach informed by the politics of difference - difference of race, class, ethnicity, faith, age and sexual orientation. As Spivak points out, the analysis of power relations should always be double focus: "[The problem is] not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?"<sup>19</sup>

Among the books published in 1994 the range of such an approach with its underpinnings of struggle and resistance rather than victimization and domination, is suggested by studies covering the whole spectrum of differences, from *The Lesbian Postmodern*, edited by Laura Doan, to Mary DeShazer's *A Poetics of Resistance. Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa and the United States*.

The way from domination-victimization to struggle-resistance, from determination to agency, from the passive body to identity politics, is nevertheless, a way between two poles which can at best only overwrite the boundaries of a world of binary opposition. In her recent book, *Engendering Modernity*, trying "to grasp simultaneously" these binary poles, Barbara Marshall posits a

relational theory of gender which recognizes the tensions created "between individual and society, between subject and structure," and allows her "[to reconceptualize] gendered (or classed or raced) identities as relationally and historically *interpreted* - multiple, often contradictory, and actively constructed according to certain historically available modes of interpretation."<sup>20</sup>

Reading gendered identities as interpreted identities she conceives of the content of gender as "infinitely variable and continually in flux," while "the salience of gender categories is persistent."<sup>21</sup> As she puts it, her analysis of identity formation and subjectivity rests therefore on "a recognition of the positioning of gendered subjects both materially and ideologically, yet always interpreted in terms of a gender polarity."<sup>22</sup> This approach allows her to "explore how the social relations of domination embodied in gender polarity become invisible, personal and seemingly natural."<sup>23</sup>

For a feminist activist like Adrienne Rich, undoubtedly one of the most influential contemporary poets, the success of the feminist project depends essentially on the construction of identities, on the strategies of empowerment. As she has warned more than once: "Breaking the silences, telling our tales, is not enough. We can value the process - and the courage it may require - without believing that it is an end in itself."<sup>24</sup>

Commenting upon the "strategic value for feminism of building identities," either through literature or through "feminist therapeutic practices," Jana Sawicki launches a number of questions which are relevant to some of the most pressing issues of current feminist debate in a postmodern and multicultural context: "Whose identity? To what end? Some women's voices are more authoritative than

others...What is the price of the authority that we do attain? How is it constituted? To what extent does it require identifying ourselves with capitalist or patriarchal forces? Does it reproduce and legitimize patriarchal discourses and practices? Does it suppress other voices?"<sup>25</sup> As for the strategic value of confessionalism, a favorite mode of women's poetry, she again asks questions which address the political effects of radical feminism, involving issues of power and identity: "To whom is one confessing? To what end?"<sup>26</sup>

This is a long way from Foucault. Genderized and politicized his theories have been given such a reading as to best serve the militant purposes of a radical strand in feminist criticism and theory of which many have become suspicious. In answer to a question about her general feelings on feminist criticism, Susan Howe, modernist poet of an older generation who has strived all her career to create a distinct American poetic voice close to the condition of music, said in a published interview: "I am very conflicted. I am wary of separation. Women's Studies, African-American Studies, etc. It seems to me only a further way to isolate texts that should be known by everyone. But then it may be a temporary necessity. I am troubled by some feminist criticism because in its stridency is only another bias. And in a strange sense it's still a male bias. Instead of questioning the idea of power itself, many women want to assume power. 'Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.'"<sup>27</sup>

Without taking art for ideology, far less for propaganda, women's poetry at its best has a distinct, compelling voice of its own, which grows out of each individual confrontation with issues of self, discourse and power.

Women's poetry provides a most challenging insight into the relational, plural and productive character of power and the process

of identity formation, partly because women's poetry with its marked postmodernist tendency of personalization, its long experience of marginalization, its great resources of tenderness and anger and its subtle knowledge of vulnerability and power is, to a greater extent than other forms of literature, an open ended language construct of subjectivity, a compelling exercise in self-modelling, in strategies of empowerment, in deconstruction and reconstruction.

### **3. The Dangerous Power of Confession: Sylvia Plath's Techniques of the Self**

In her autobiographic novel *The Bell Jar*, published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas two weeks before she committed suicide on February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath offers a retrospective view of her life which dramatizes her cravings for self-definition: "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a far purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was E. Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympian lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to

wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."<sup>1</sup>

In his short foreword to Sylvia Plath's *Journals*, Ted Hughes explains Plath's inner drama in terms which seem remarkably descriptive of the hidden driving force of her poetic creation. He speaks of her "day to day struggle with her warring selves," and reads the journal as a medium in the privacy of which "she fought her way through the unmaking and remaking of herself."<sup>2</sup>

Hughes inscribes Plath's life and death between the two extreme poles of this process of "unmaking and remaking herself." In his opinion she "was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and her writings. Some were camouflage cliché facades, defensive mechanisms, involuntary. And some were deliberate poses, attempts to find the keys to one style or another. These were the visible faces of her lesser selves, her false or provisional selves, the minor roles of her inner drama"(J,XIV).

By the time her *Journals* came out, the Plath cult had already reached a high tide. Her entire major work had been published: the posthumous *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971) following the two volumes already published during her lifetime, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). The year before *The Collected Poems* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in homage and recognition of her poetry as well as her tremendous impact on women's poetry everywhere.

Among the elements of surprise offered by *The Journals* and the earlier volume of correspondence *Letters Home* (1975), was not so much the image of the warring self of many selves as the obsession with power as regulator of the unmaking and remaking of the self.

At the age of 17, Plath writes: "I think I would like to call myself 'The Girl who wanted to be God.'" <sup>3</sup> She always felt the compulsion to make her way to power and fame through her writing. This compulsion was always accompanied by a maladive fear of failure and it may well have been the deep cause of her psychosis. Among the numerous examples offered by her Journal, the one from the entry of September 14, 1958, echoes most clearly her early statement: "I feel suddenly today the absence of fear - the sense of slow, plodding self-dedication. This book (*The Colossus*) led me through a year of struggle and mastery. Perhaps the book I am about to begin will do something akin. Smile, write in secret, showing no one. Amass a great deal. Novel. Poems. Stories. Then send about. Let no book-wishing show - work. I must move myself first, before I move others - a woman famous among women"(J,259).

Nevertheless, the following day the entry starts with: "Brag of bravado, and the fear is on. A panic absolute and obliterating; here all diaries end - the vines on the brick wall opposite end in a branch like a bent green snake. Names, words, are power. I am afraid. Of what? Life without having lived, chiefly. What matters? Wind wuthering in a screen. If I could funnel this into a novel, this fear, this horror - a frog sits on my belly"(J,259). In the end she concludes bitterly: "Hopes, careers...A purposeless woman with dreams of grandeur"(J,260).

Placed within the framework of binary oppositions, most feminist readings of Plath's poetry have tended to be done from the perspective of her oppressive fear or/and her forceful release of anger, stressing victimization-oppression and the conflict between a repressive public self and a dark, mysterious private self which nurture anguish and revenge.<sup>4</sup>

My reading of Plath's poetry from the viewpoint of the construction of power relations and techniques of the self within the poem has been supported by textual evidence and also by the centrality of the idea of power in Plath's life and poetic career. As her *Journals* and *Letters* more than prove, both as a woman and as a poet she was intensely preoccupied by the relation between self, power and knowledge. Her own definition of power in various stages of her creation evolved from the idea of success, approval, recognition, to tight control over the making of her poems and further to awareness of male domination, oppression by the patriarchal society and Nazi totalitarianism. Drawing on Foucault's analyses of discourse, power and sexuality as well as on his theory of the self, such a reading of Plath's poetry focuses on strategies of empowerment and techniques of the self which once again stress the uniqueness of Plath's poetic achievement.

Applied to an interpretation of Plath, Foucault's relational model of power as a force field with many points of resistance, his identification of the body as locus of power and site of domination, his definition of sexuality as a cultural and historical power construct and his view of power as both productive and oppressive emphasize Plath's cultural construction of female identity, her move toward an understanding of the self as agent as well as her deliberate use of different techniques of the self necessary for the construction of a gendered subjectivity.

Plath's dependence on literary success, on approval and acceptance, creates a paradoxical relation between the self on the one hand, and culture and society on the other.<sup>5</sup> As all her biographers have amply documented, in many respects Plath represented the prototype of the happy, bright, middle-class young woman in mid-

century America.<sup>6</sup> Well educated, Plath was a graduate of Smith College and for two years a Fulbrighter at Newnham College, Cambridge University. Happily married to Ted Hughes, at the time already one of England's most promising poets, she was also mother of two children (Frieda Rebecca, born in April 1960 and Nicholas born two years later). Recognized as a poet and writer since her college years, by the time of her suicide, in February 1963, she had already published *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1962) and the autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, which came out the month before her death, while another volume of poetry, *Ariel*, was ready for publication.

Inherent of a puritan work ethic, she is not only submissive, but also extremely hard-working. She calls herself a "perfectionist" (J,109). Ted Hughes describes Plath's style of education as "highly-disciplined, highly intellectual," and underscores the fact that "her whole tremendous will was bent on excelling... at no point could she let herself be negligent or inadequate."<sup>7</sup>

The other face of what seemed to be an American success story speaks of the loss of her father when she was eight and she needed him desperately, the hard struggle of her mother to keep up the middle-class standards and bring up two children, her suicide attempt in 1953, the torture of electroshock therapy, the twists and turns of the psychiatric treatment, a miscarriage with its sense of failure, the desperate anger of the betrayed woman and deserted wife when her marriage broke in October 1962; above all, it speaks about the constant fear of failure, of being unsuccessful, psychologically motivated to a certain point, but culturally and socially sustained and amplified.

The enactment of the American myth of success in the 1950s was strictly gendered. In attempting to be at the same time a successful writer and a successful woman who could fit in the stereotypes of the decade, she had to assume the costs of being a permanent trespasser and also the perpetual victim, the trespassed, two of the hypostases of the self which she explores in her poetry. The repeated act of transgression reinforces her anger to super human intensities.

Motherhood is one of the places where Plath best performs her drama of transgression. Her fears to cope with the demands of motherhood are in tensional relation to her dependance on motherhood for reassurance (her relation with her own mother) and to her dependance on it as a pre-condition of a woman's success story (herself as a mother).

In her journal she confesses that despite her "gross fear at having a baby" she will have children because, as she writes: "Every woman does it: So I cower and want, want and cower"(J,219). At the same time, however, she repeatedly affirms her commitment to a writing career, which she can hardly know how to reconcile with motherhood. In a 1958 entry of her journal she exclaims: "Oh, the desire to write a novel and a book of poems before a baby!" and in another, of July 1957, she writes: "All joy for me: love, fame, life work, and, I assume, children, depends on the central need of my nature: to be articulate, to hammer out the great surges of experience jammed, dammed, crammed in me over the last five years"(J,220,163).

The conflict engages social and cultural issues.<sup>8</sup> The idea of motherhood as a repressive socially and culturally constructed institution, clearly stated in *Journals* indicates as a source of Plath's

anger the social and cultural constraints on a career woman in the 1950s: "*Who am I angry at? Myself. No, not yourself. Who is it? It is [omission]...all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images. I do not seem to be able to live up to them. Because I don't want to. What do they seem to want? Concern with a steady job that earns money, cars, good schools, TV, iceboxes and dishwashers and security First*"(J,271-72).

A socio-cultural approach also casts light on the relationship between mother and daughter, with the daughter depending on her mother's authority and yet fearing her failure to live up to the mother's expectations which are also those of the society. As Plath confesses in her journal, "Yes, I want the world's praise, money & love, and am furious with anyone, especially with anyone I know or who has had a similar experience, getting ahead of me... Last night I knew that Mother didn't matter - she is all for me, but I have dissipated her image and she becomes all editors and publishers and critics and the World, and I want acceptance there, and to feel my work good and well-taken. Which ironically freezes me at my work, corrupts my nunnish labor of work-for-itself-as-its-own-reward"(J,303).

Before changing that, however, she must either accept the world, as she indeed tried to do in most of the poems of *The Colossus*, or reject it, which again she tried to do under the extreme form of a repeated death of the self in many of her poems, or finally make of her art a medium for a refashioning of the self so as to gain control of both the real and the art worlds. She achieved this last goal only when she was forced to think of her poetic self in terms of

a female identity still in need of naming. This happened in the *Ariel* poems. Genderizing her subjectivity in the process of remodeling the self, Plath opens her poetry toward a re-visionary interpretation of culture. In the new intensities of her anger, which totally annihilate fear, she breaks new poetic ground for women's experience, moves toward the creation of a new female mythology and a new symbolic, to a poetry of empowerment.<sup>9</sup> "Edge," the last poem she wrote, three days before she took her own life, speaks at last about the accomplished task:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,

One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.

She has folded

Them back into her body as petals

Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed  
 From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
 Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.  
 Her blacks crackle and drag.<sup>10</sup>

Plath's road to accomplishment started with *The Colossus*. Containing poems written between 1956 and 1959, this book has both the challenging novelty of a first volume and the derivative undertones of the poetic apprenticeship. The dominant models are Thomas, Roethke and Stevens, but several other voices can be detected, such as those of Eliot, Frost or Auden; the main poetic concerns are related to the definition of the creative process and the work of art through exploration of the nature of all creative arts, and the inquiry into the individual's relation to the universe, particularly the surrounding animal and vegetal world.

What distinguishes the volume is the perfect command of craft and the resourcefulness of diction, revealing Plath's modernist training, her high professionalism and also her ambition to write accepted and acclaimed poetry. Obeying the modernist poetic norms, she carefully tries to avoid the direct expression of personal experience and quite often adopts the detached stance of the poet whose art imposes order on a meaningless reality. In most cases personal experience is documented by moments of perception occasioned by the assault of external objects on the poet's senses.

Poetry emerges from the impact between the object and the poetic imagination, the poetic process parallels the process of imaginative assimilation-identification. Quite often internalized personal experience, usually involving pain and frustration, is projected in figures taken from Greek mythology. The persona of the poems only reluctantly identifies herself as a woman, and the pervasive presence of the consciousness of herself as a poet-artisan is skilfully dissimulated by the repeated questioning of her poetic powers.

The oblique way of introducing such intimate aspects of personal experience, as for instance, the relation of causality between her search for a distinct poetic voice, her constant fear of poetic failure and her psychosis, is one of the main poetic strategies in the poems of *The Colossus*. In "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," for instance, with the astonishing abruptness with which she usually passes from one image to another so as to suggest the fragmented quality of experience, Plath relates her "ars poetica" to the imaginary presence of her therapist:

The vaunting mind  
 Snubs impromptu spiels of wind  
 And wrestles to impose  
 Its own order on what is.

'With my fantasy alone,' brags the importunate head,  
 Arrogant among rook-tongued spaces,  
 Sheep greens, finned falls, 'I shall compose a crisis  
 To stun shy black out, drive gibbering mad  
 Trout, cock, ram,  
 That bulk so calm  
 On my jealous stare,  
 Self-sufficient as they are.'

But no hocus-pocus of green angels  
 Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye;  
 'My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,  
 And that damn scrupulous tree won't practice wiles  
 To beguile sight:  
 E.g., by cant of light  
 Concoct a Daphne;  
 My tree stays tree.(66)

The dynamic of the poems written between 1957 and 1959 indicates a gradual shift of focus from the object (the work of art and the natural world) to the subject (the human being in general, or the artist). This inward motion into the self underlying the highlighted opposition between the endurance of the work of art and of the world of nature as well as the transient character of human existence, increasingly involves preoccupations with death and the body engaging a more personal confessional tone as the "I" of the poem starts its search for self-definition.

The deliberate use of naked autobiographical details in the last poems of this period, particularly in "The Colossus" and "The Beekeeper's Daughter," both of which lay open the relationship between father and daughter, marks a turning point in Plath's poetry as well as the rise of a most powerfully distinct female poetic voice.

In both poems, the daughter's dependence on her father's love indicates the ready acceptance by the self of its 'natural' identity as well as the unquestioned acceptance of the patriarchal representations of the masculine and the feminine: man's power and knowledge, woman's submission and tender devotion.

In "The Beekeeper's Daughter" a poem which prefigures the bee sequence in *Ariel* and offers an important contrast to "Daddy," the daughter wishes to replace in her love for her father all women,

including her mother. Love between man and woman is presented here as a total subjection of woman's self:

Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,  
 You move among the many-breasted hives,  
 My heart under your foot, sister of stone.

.....  
 Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg  
 Under the coronal of sugar roses  
 The queen bee marries the winter of your year (118)

In approximately the same tonality, "The Colossus" is a more powerful poem, which explores the relationship between father and daughter from the perspective of the daughter's artistic self. The work of art, her poetry, is a reconstructive and restitutive act of love, which takes infinite devotion and painful labor:

I shall never get you put together entirely,  
 Pieced, glued, and properly joined.  
 Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles  
 Proceed from your great lips.  
 It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
 Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.  
 Thirty years now I have labored  
 To dredge the silt from your throat.  
 I am none the wiser.(129)

Mention of the Orestia and the Roman Forum in the fourth stanza announces the vengeful inflexions of her future poems and also provides for her poetry a historical and cultural heritage with roots in ancient Greece and Rome:

A blue sky out of the Orestia  
 Arches above us. O father, all by yourself  
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.(129)

At the end of the poem the rise of a new, independent self is indirectly connected with poetry and death, a reading validated also by the comparison with the symbolism of "the stones" and "the marriage" in "The Beekeeper's Daughter:"

The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.  
 My hours are married to shadow.  
 No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel  
 On the blank stones of the landing.(130)

The radical changes operated in Plath's poetry by her urgent need for self-definition are announced by the last poem - or rather group of poems - in *The Colossus*, entitled "Poem for a Birthday." Recalling the circumstances in which Plath set about writing these poems Ted Hughes argues: "She was reading Paul Radin's collection of African folktales with great excitement. In these she found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures, where the most unsuspected voices thrived under the pressures of a reality that made most accepted fiction seem artificial and spurious. At the same time she was reading - closely and

sympathetically for the first time - Roethke's poems. The result was a series of pieces, each a monologue of some character in an underground, primitive drama."<sup>11</sup>

Echoing the generic title of Dylan Thomas's "Poem on His Birthday," Plath's series of seven poems dated November 4 1959, indicates their direct relation to her birthday in October, a month mentioned in the opening stanza of the first poem significantly entitled "Who." The underground drama is her own and it involves very precise autobiographical elements which all affected her poetic career, making her urgent need for self-definition an indispensable condition of her art. During this period her response to the demands of her art is sharpened by her participation in the writing workshop at Yaddo. Her pregnancy and the relationship with her mother raise questions about her role of future mother. In addition to all this, the terrifying experience of the electroshock therapy accounts for much of the dramatism and violence of her desperate search for self-definition.

In "Poem for a Birthday" the self provides its first narrative. The central poem, "Maenad" starts with the declaration of past identity indicating submissiveness, confidence in the father-figure and in the mother's role:

Once I was ordinary:  
 Sat by my father's bean tree  
 Eating the fingers off wisdom.  
 The birds made milk.  
 When it thundered I hid under a flat stone.(133)

The next stage in the evolution of the self is the awareness of change: "Mother keep out of my barnyard,/ I am becoming another." It is precisely this on-going process of becoming, of a dramatic self-modelling, that is the driving force of Plath's poetry. The desperate cry: "Tell me my name," in the end of the poem, designates naming as a major strategy of becoming.

The exceptionally powerful, disruptive and disquieting process of naming is given shape and direction by Plath's attempt to gain control over the infernal predicament of her psychosis. Her poetry records in a bewildering kaleidoscopic fashion the rapid succession of selves inhabited by the poet in her search not so much for the true self as for confirmation of her power "to do it again!". In this, her poetry is quite unique. It goes far beyond the poetic strife between a public self and a private one. Her poetry documents her fear of the extinction of the self.

In "Who" her fear of the loss of the poetic self is translated into a hunger for the memories and dreams which her electroshock therapy has stolen from her:

The month of flowering's finished. The fruit's in,  
Eaten or rotten. I am all mouth.  
October's the month for storage.

This shed's fusty as a mummy's stomach:  
Old tools, handles and rusty tusks.  
I am at home here among the dead heads.(131)

The proliferation of images related to eating in this poem reinforces the opposition body-soul which Plath is incapable of transgressing:

I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,  
Without dreams of any sort.

Mother, you are the one mouth  
I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness  
Eat me. Wastebasket gaper, shadow of doorway.(132)

In "Witch Burning," the sixth poem in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence, the terror of electroshock therapy is for the first time presented as a victimization of the self by an intolerant society:

In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks.  
A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit  
The wax image of myself, a doll's body.  
Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard for witches.  
Only the devil can eat the devil out.(135)

The last stanza speaks of her fears of losing her poetic self:

Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days  
I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.  
My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.  
I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.(136)

It is quite remarkable that in her poetic exploration of this new territory of experience she never resorts to the Christian myth of martyrdom and resurrection. The power comes always from within and it is connected with her poetry as a reconstructive act of "mending" and "gluing," of putting together the pieces. In "The

Stones," the last poem of the sequence, her return from hell is a strange rebirth in a desacralized world, as suggested by her description of the recovery: "Dark as a foetus I suck at the paps of darkness" and her definition of love: "Love is the uniform of my bald nurse./ Love is the bone and sinew of my curse"(137).

The image of the whole society as both a hospital and a repair shop, "the city where men are mended," "the city of spare parts," emphasizes her role of sacrificial victim and performs a diagnosis of the culture:

This is the city where men are mended.

I lie on a great anvil.

The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll

When I fell out of the light. I entered

The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.(136)

An important technique of the self in Plath's strategy of empowerment is to provide the self with the alternate perspective both of the subject, the agent, and of the object, the other. Quite a few poems can be thus paired, as for instance "Pheasant" where the self is the trespasser and "Rabbit Catcher," where it is trespassed. In many respects "The Stones" can be read as pairing with "The Colossus." In "The Stones" the mind is mended through technology; in "The Colossus" the poetic self is performing the art of mending through imaginative action. In both cases the success of the mending depends on the acceptance of men's rules.

The ending of "Poem for a Birthday" associates the idea of physical mending with the recovery of the poetic powers and defines the creative process as a painful act of reconstruction, an idea earlier suggested by the use of "to construe" in the final stanza of "Witch Burning:"

The vase reconstructed, houses

The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.

My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.

I shall be good as new.(137)

The ironic, bitter "I shall be good as new" hides scepticism and provides a final cultural commentary on the culture and the reassuring American myth contending that there is always a new beginning.

Plath's journals, her letters and her novel do not indicate that she really doubted her poetic powers, and contrary to possible speculations it does not seem likely that she took her own life because of a loss of these powers.<sup>12</sup> In the extremely productive months and days preceding her suicide she wrote some of her most beautiful poems. The question, of course, remains whether her poetic powers could really keep pace with the ambitions which were constantly nourishing her fears.

"Stillborn," a poem written in 1960, immediately after the birth of her daughter and the publication of *The Colossus*, voices her dissatisfaction with her earlier work ("These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis"), and her new awareness that the deeper she probes

into terrifying territories of experience, the more is her identity as a poet dependant on her capacity to articulate a distinct female consciousness.(142) The poems written after *The Colossus* reflect this gradual change.

The poem "Tulips" written in 1961, after a miscarriage and an appendectomy, is one of the first critiques of the patriarchal construction of femininity and implicitly, of Plath's former acceptance of the submissiveness, passivity and of what she now sees as the Christian hypocrisy on which this model rests. In the hospital atmosphere associated with the masculine rule of "the city where men are mended," the old identity of the speaker appears as a purely social and cultural male construct:

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.  
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses  
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.(160)

The woman's awakening to a new consciousness is rendered in images suggestive of baptism and purification:

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat  
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.  
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.  
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillow trolley  
I watched my toasot, my bureaux of linon, my books  
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.  
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure. (161)

The birth of her second child in 1962 and the gradual dissolution of her marriage convinced Plath of the impossibility of living up to the expectations, codes and representations of her father's world and still be a poet. Increasingly she moves toward a poetry which re-evaluates woman's position in a man-dominated world.

In *Three Women. A Poem for Three Voices*, written for the BBC, three women in a maternity ward - the wife, the secretary and the girl - represent three different types of experience and three different ways of conceptualizing the female identity. The poems opposes pregnancy emblematic of female creativity to masculine "flatness," which fathers "ideas, destructions,/ Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks."(177)

Significantly, the second woman's miscarriage causing agony over her failure to become a mother, makes her accept the condition of marginalization, or as she puts it: "I shall be a heroine of the peripheral." On leaving the maternity ward she is happy to re-enter the reassuring possession of her old identity:

I am not ugly, I am even beautiful.

The mirror gives back a woman without deformity.

The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.

I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.

I draw on the old mouth.

The red mouth I put by with my identity.(183)

Her conclusion: "The body is resourceful."

*Three Women* posits the question of motherhood more openly than Plath ever dared or wished to do before. Just as her correspondance and *Journals* return over and over again to her relationship with her mother, her poetry abounds in images connected with her contradictory, tensional relation to motherhood.<sup>13</sup>

Fears of poetic failure are always represented in images echoing failed motherhood, sterility, miscarriage, as for instance in "Stillborn" and "Barren Women."

The birth of a poem is often compared with the birth of a child, and uterus and foetus images abound almost in mimicry of Dylan Thomas's use of womb-tomb imagery. Nevertheless, when she speaks in poem after poem about the birth, or rather rebirth, of the poetic self, her discourse takes on celebratory inflections reminiscent of Whitman's "brag" and the ritual of resurrection invokes cosmic, supernatural powers. In "Lady Lazarus," for instance, the self is a miraculous phoenix bird which revengefully threatens men: "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air"(247).

The poetic self is never born of woman. A passage from her journals, where Plath recalls images of her rebirth during one shock treatment that went wrong, casts further light on the imagery of the poetic self's rebirth and her ambiguous relationship to motherhood. She writes: "...electrocution brought in, and the inevitable going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name, being born again, and not of woman"(J,113).

The growing recognition of the victimization of women and of "the name tag" ("Tulips") attached to them by a man-centered culture as well as of women's infinite resourcefulness gives a new voice to Plath's anger as she is no longer a prisoner of the "dark house" of her singular experience but rather shares in the experience of other lives.

She starts her poem "Elm" (1962) by declaring herself free from fear:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:

It is what you fear.

I do not fear it: I have been there.(192)

The liberation requires "radical surgery" which leaves the "docile" body as projection of man's desire "diminished and flat." The poet's anger at man's betrayal discloses new faces of the dark, mysterious self and breaks the taboos which envelope woman's sexuality:

I am inhabited by a cry.

Nightly it flaps out

Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing

That sleeps in me;(193)

The woman-centered valorization of femaleness expressed in representations of the female body as site of power as well as in the unrestrained manifestation of female sexuality call for a new symbolic. In most cases Plath creates a new symbolic by borrowing traditional symbols and imagery of femininity from male discourse with the obvious intention of overwriting them from a female perspective.

The sexual symbolism of flowers in Plath's poetry, which invites parallels with the use of flowers in Georgia O'Keeffe's

paintings, provides an excellent illustration. In "Poppies in July," for instance, the conventional sexual symbolism of poppies is expressed rather overtly and is related to taboo areas of women's experience such as menstruation, rape or defloration:

Little poppies, little hell flames,

Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.

I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

And it exhausts me to watch you

Flickering like that, wrinky and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.

Little bloody skirts! (203)

Plath's verse moves slowly but unflinchingly from victimization toward an aggressive revengefulness. The assault upon all the bastions of male dominance, among them motherhood, the body and sexuality, is precipitated in the fall of 1962 by the deterioration of her marriage, which called in her poetry for a redefinition of her identity. In her journal Plath writes: "I have hated men because I felt them physically necessary; hated them because they would degrade me, by their attitude: women shouldn't think, shouldn't be unfaithful (but their husbands may be), must stay home, cook, wash"(J,290).

The vengeful female self at war uses as a main strategy of empowerment the identification of personal victimization with the

devastating suffering and loss of the humanity produced by the repressive and destructive male power taking the form of mechanisms of war or of Nazi totalitarianism. The projection of female victimization into the nightmare of the Holocaust or Hiroshima and further into the existence of a cosmic evil which must be exorcised gives a much wider scope and deeper resonance to such poems as "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever 103°."

In poems like these not only is the female subjectivity historically and culturally constructed, but it also acquires the power of agency. The relation between woman's victimization and the great global conflagrations is not a trivialization of human suffering, as Plath does not speak in these poems about her limited, strictly private experience, but about hierarchical powers of domination and oppression! The fake autobiographical detail is meant to catch the reader into the spell of a real confession when in fact the confession is elaborately staged. The confessional mode becomes another strategy of empowerment. In killing the memory of her father, the speaker of "Daddy" symbolically turns her revenge against all manifestations of oppressive patriarchal power, starting with God and ending up with the principle of evil, of which the Holocaust was one of the most staggering. Speaking to her father in a dramatic monologue, she completely identifies with the Holocaust victims.)

I thought every German was you  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.(223)

The vampire legend used in the scene of exorcism at the end of "Daddy" fuses myth and history in a confirmation of the power of the vengeful woman's agency:

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
 And the villagers never liked you.  
 They are dancing and stamping on you.  
 They always *knew* it was you.  
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.(224)

Apparently the same hypostases of male power are exposed by the female self in "Lady Lazarus," the generic name "the enemy" designating God (the divine father), the speaker's father, the Nazis and Lucifer. The first line proclaims the subject as agent ("I have done it again!") and equates her experience with that of the Holocaust victims. She describes herself as

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
 Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
 My right foot

A paperweight,  
 My face a featureless, fine  
 Jew linen.(244)

The voice of the speaker is angry again, but this time the poetic discourse is conceived as a scathing critique of a spectacle culture, meant to extend the responsibility for evil to the whole society - "the peanut-crunching crowd." From the very beginning the intention of

re-writing male-centered mythology is suggested by the title. The whole poem is conceived as a sideshow in a Circus performance put on by the "I" of the poem who tries to attract the crowd:

The big strip tease.

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands

My knees.

I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.(245)

The cultural construction of femininity is illustrated here by "the big strip tease," the commodification of the female body as object of desire. The direct address to Herr Doktor and Herr Enemy as if they were the reader, emphasizes the reader's complicity, the idea of collective guilt and again that of femininity as a power construct:

So, so, Herr Doktor.

So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.(246)

In a world where God, Lucifer and the Nazis are one and the same and the mystery of existence can be perceived only as the sensational, the miracle of resurrection is performed by a vengeful woman. The phoenix bird image at the end of the poem proclaims the triumph and the endurance of the female principle. "Lady Lazarus" is an example of Plath's art at its best. Personal pain and intense anger are kept under control by the evocation of the Nazi atrocities, and the whole emotional impact is augmented by the light, mocking tone.

The victorious self-at-war emerges in a startlingly new guise in the bee sequence poems ("The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings" and "Wintering"). These poems resume the symbolism of "The Beekeeper's Daughter," but to an altogether different end, that of proclaiming the victory of the feminine principle over the masculine one. The poems are part of Plath's ambitious mythmaking project as a main strategy of empowerment. In a female-centered mythology the swarm enacts the myth of endurance and survival. In the poem "Stings" for instance, the metamorphosis of the bee queen suggests the regenerating force of the female principle. The speaker's identification with the queen gives her power to break with an oppressive, humiliating past:

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,

Honey drudgers.

I am no drudge.

Though for years I have eaten dust

And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,  
 Blue dew from dangerous skin.  
 Will they hate me,  
 These women who only scurry,  
 Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

It is almost over.  
 I am in control. (214)

At the end of the poem, the awakening in spring of the warrior queen "with her lion-red body, her wings of glass" provides a wonderful cosmic image for the victory of the feminine principle over the masculine one:

Now she is flying  
 More terrible than she ever was, red  
 Scar in the sky, red comet  
 Over the engine that killed her -  
 The mausoleum, the wax house. (215)

Another remarkable instance of re-visionary mythmaking which again proclaims the power of the feminine principle questioning the very authority of God, is the poem "Lyonnesse." The sunken island "Lyonnesse" brings to mind the legendary Atlantis. Its inhabitants waited in vain for God's help.

It never occurred that they had been forgotten,  
 That the big God  
 Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip

Over the English cliff and under so much history!

They did not see him smile,

Turn, like an animal,

In his cage of ether, his cage of star.

He'd had so many wars!

The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.(234)

The poems in the *Ariel* volume converge toward an apotheosis of the female body liberated from the "eely tentacle" of male domination. The last stanza of "Fever 103<sup>o</sup>" a poem conceived like so many others as a dramatic monologue with the man a silent imaginary listener, describes the transforming process of the female consciousness and projects it into the image of a "pure acetylene Virgin:"

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.

All by myself I am a huge camellia

Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,

I think I may rise -

The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene

Virgin

Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,  
 By whatever these pink things mean.  
 Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him  
 (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) -  
 To Paradise.(232)

The same upward apotheotic movement, which re-writes the story of death and resurrection in pagan, female-empowered language marks the end of the beautiful poem "Ariel:"

White  
 Godiva, I unpeel -  
 Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I  
 Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.  
 The child's cry

Melts in the wall.  
 And I  
 Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
 Suicidal, at one with the drive  
 Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (239-40)

Plath is not in search of identity, of the real self, as she never doubts that her real self is that of a poet.

She is rather interested in a permanent subversion of the constraints imposed on the self by the social norms and taboos as well as in the construction out of suffering and victimization of a female poetic self. With amazing versatility and compelling imaginative power she documents the unmaking and remaking of the female self in the process of writing its own narrative of cosmic dimensions. In Plath's poetic self, of gigantic proportions, Whitman's heroic ego found its female counterpart. In a world of an indifferent God, a vengeful female poetic self performs a recurrent act of death and resurrection which is not redemptive, but fiercely punitive. It does not bring the forgetfulness of forgiveness, but the torment of remembrance. Its purpose is to keep alive the memories of victimization. The identification with the universe is not through celebration of the life force, but through anger and rebellion. The power of Plath's confession contaminates the reader with cosmic anger, which ultimately is an affirmation of the exceptional power of art.

## 4. The Power of Here and Now: Denise Levertov's Poetry of Experience

At the opposed end of the same visionary tradition to which Sylvia Plath belonged, Denise Levertov is among contemporary American women poets the exemplary "poet in the world," to use the title of one of her most challenging books of essays. Her poetry of praise and survival takes its power from the high intensity with which the poet experiences the world and from the responsibility and craftsmanship with which she orders it in her art.

A poet highly aware of the polarities of the world, of which the titles of such volumes as *The Double Image*, *Here and Now*, *Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* and *The Jacob's Ladder* are indicative, she painfully deplores in Plath and Sexton the confusion between creativity and self-destruction.<sup>1</sup> She is willing to see the universal and personal duality as paradoxes of the world's perfect wholeness and thus to restore for the humanity what she calls in her poem "To Rilke," her poetic mentor, "the enabling voice/ drawing the boat upstream."<sup>2</sup>

Author of more than twenty volumes of poetry three books of essays and two of translations, Levertov offers the example of a

semicentenary poetic career remarkable for its longevity, impressive range and productivity. Even more remarkable is the strikingly new quality of the voice she has contributed to American poetry's sustained re-negotiation of its place within the Western cultural tradition.

Among contemporary women poets Levertov's poetry enacts a unique type of power relations constructed within the dominant culture which strangely reverse the dynamic of Plath's life and career. While Plath chose England for the authority of its traditions, Levertov chose America for its teeming diversity. While Plath invented "differences," like her supposedly Jewish origins, to conceal the inability of retrieving wholeness in her art as in her life, Levertov's life has virtually been made of "differences." By rejoicing in her difference she has learned to rejoice in life.

Levertov was born in Essex, England, was privately educated, served as a nurse during World War II, published her first poem in 1940, when she was only seventeen, and her first book, *The Double Image*, in 1946, two years before she came with her husband, American novelist Michael Goodman, to live in the United States. She inherited her father's strong mystical leanings coming from his Hasidic ancestry and his later conversion to Christian faith as well as her mother's "Welsh intensity and lyric feeling for nature." (*Essays*, 258) As she confesses in her "Autobiographical Sketch" (1984), "...the cultural atmosphere of our household was unsupported by a community... My parents - he a converted Russian Jew who, after spending the First World War teaching at the University of Leipzig (though under semi-house arrest as an 'enemy alien'), settled in England and was ordained as a priest of the Anglican Church; she

was a Welshwoman who had grown up in a mining village and later in a North Wales country town, and subsequently travelled widely - were exotic birds in the plain English coppice of Ilford, Essex.” (*Essays*, 258-59)

Levertov speaks of the strong tradition of social activism and concern for humanitarian problems which her family cultivated: “Humanitarian politics came into my life early - seeing my father on a soapbox protesting Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia; my father and sister both on soapboxes protesting Britain’s lack of support for Spain; my mother canvassing long before those events for the League of Nations Union; and all three of them working on behalf of German and Austrian refugees from 1933 onwards. When I was 11 and 12, unknown to my parents (who would have felt, despite their liberal views, that it was *going too far*, and was inappropriate for my age, as indeed it was) , I used to sell the *Daily Worker* house-to-house in the working-class streets off Ilford Lane... on Saturday mornings.” (*Essays*, 262)

Significantly, Levertov’s recent volume of *New & Selected Essays* (1992), which summarizes her poetics and traces her spiritual quest and her poetic itinerary, ends with the major statement made in her “Autobiographical Sketch” about the centrality of doubleness in her life and about the affirmation of difference as being a source of empowerment in her art: “Among Jews a Goy, among Gentiles (secular or Christians) a Jew or at least a half-Jew (which was good or bad according to their degree of anti-Semitism); among Anglo-Saxons a Celt; in Wales a Londoner who not only did not speak Welsh but was not imbued with Welsh attitudes; among school children a strange exception whom they did not know whether to envy or mistrust: all of these anomalies predicated my later

experience. I so often feel English, or perhaps European, in the United States, while in England I sometimes feel American - and certainly as a poet have been thought of for decades as an American, for it was in the United States that I developed... But... these feelings of not-belonging were positive for me, not negative...I experienced the sense of difference as an honor, as a part of knowing (secretly) from an early age... that I was an artist-person and had a destiny." (*Essays*, 260)

When she came to America she had already published a volume of poetry and her literary allegiances had long gone to the 17th century metaphysical poetry, to Wordsworth's meditations, to Chekhov and Pavese and particularly to Rilke, who would remain her acknowledged mentor. In her own words she was "a British romantic with an almost Victorian background."<sup>3</sup>

In his anthology *New British Poets* (1949), Kenneth Rexroth placed Levertov as the youngest poet in the group of "New Romantics" including Dylan Thomas, George Barker and Kathleen Raine. Ten years later America was already claiming her as her own.<sup>4</sup> In his avant-garde anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, Donald Allen included her among the Black Mountain poets, a grouping which was later on consecrated by Rosenthal's influential study: *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* under the name "The Projectivist Movement."<sup>5</sup> The following year Rexroth praised her in *Assays* as "the most skillful poet of her generation."<sup>6</sup>

Levertov has repeatedly described herself in her poetic guise as "a stranger," "a traveler" or "a pilgrim" eager to explore the visible and invisible face of the world she loves and praises. And she

describes her poetic journeys in the world as ultimately a pilgrimage to what she calls in her poem "To Rilke" the "imperative mystery," "the shimmering destination."

The nature and direction of the journey are further explicated in her three books of essays *The Poet in the World* (1973), *Light Up the Cave* (1981) and *New & Selected Essays* (1992). Originating in a permanent dialogue with her creation, these books on poetry and poetics, on the nature of the creative act, the relation between art and life, the role of the poet, the artist's engagement in his or her times, and many other related topics, document the underlying intention of Levertov's project. As she contends in *The Poet in the World*, bridging outer and inner experiences, her poetry of the world's interrelatedness and wholeness draws on the role of the poet as "participant," rather than "observer" and on "the theme of a journey that would lead from one state of being to another...the sense of *life as a pilgrimage*."<sup>7</sup> The idea is restated twenty years later in *New & Selected Esseys* where she explains that her goal as a "reading writer" is "a poetry, that, while it does not attempt to ignore or deny the ocean of crisis in which we swim, is itself 'on pilgrimage,' as it were, in search of significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events: a poetry which attest to the 'deep spiritual longing.'" (*Essays*, 4)

Levertov has always encouraged a thematic rather than a chronological reading of her poetry. The structuring of her volumes around dominant themes already hinted at in the titles, her method of publishing in the same volume poems from different years, and the writing of twin or paired poems in different volumes across great intervals of time also invite such a reading. Controlled by the purposefulness of the journey, the dominant concerns of her poetry

grow in response to the events that shape each postwar decade in America's history. As a distinct cultural and political force field of power relations, approximately each decade operates a readjustment of the poetic means and a reassessment of the poet's role in the world.

The volumes of the "tranquilized fifties," *Here and Now* (1957), *Overland to the Islands* (1958) and *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1959) to *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), still very much concerned with the same problem of doubleness as *The Double Image*, include lyrics of individual experience of everyday life with numerous references to the American location. To forge an American idiom capable of expressing the new American experience, Levertov resorts to numerous sources, from Emerson and Thoreau to the modernism of Pound, H.D. and especially William Carlos Williams. Through Robert Creeley she becomes acquainted with the experiment of the Black Mountain poets, Creeley and Duncan, and with Charles Olson's theory of the "Projective Verse."

The problems of a poetic form best fitted to translate the cohesiveness of the world disclosed in experience, that is the balance between form and content, have remained a constant preoccupation throughout her poetic career. Nevertheless, the poetry of the explosive 60s and early 70s, from *O Taste and See* (1964) through *The Sorrow Dance* (1967) and *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970) to *Life in the Forest* (1978) reflect her increasing engagement in the social and political turmoil of the decade, particularly her antiwar activism.

Throughout the 70s and the 80s she keeps on exploring from a womanly perspective a broad spectrum of issues from the facts of homely experience, from aging and loneliness to racial and social inequities as well as world atrocities: the Vietnam war, the

dictatorship in Chile and the drama of El Salvador. In such volumes as *Candles in Babylon* (1982), *Oblique Prayers* (1984), *Breathing the Water* (1987), *A Door in the Hive* (1989) and *Evening Train* (1992) she continues to perform her role of an engaged poet and maintains her interest in womanly experience, but the journey takes more overtly the form of a personal pilgrimage. Her humanitarian compassion, her love of the world and her engagement in the problem of the world are increasingly permeated by religious faith. The frontiers between poetry, prophecy and survival begin to blur.<sup>8</sup> Engagement becomes enfaithment.

In her introduction to *New & Selected Essays* Levertov acknowledges that at the beginning of her career she was drawn to "the shape," "the structure or technique of poems" rather than to *what* they were saying. (*Essays*, 2) The same formal concerns opened her to Williams's poetry whom she designates as "the primary influence" on her at the time when she came to the United States.

Interested in the relation that Williams's objectivism established between the form of the poem as object and the immediacy of experience, Levertov praises Williams for "providing for himself and others a context of objective, anti-metaphysical aesthetic intent in order to free poetry from the entanglement of that sentimental intellectualism which only recognizes the incorporeal term of an analogy and scorns its literal, sensuous term." (*Essays*, 44) Williams's perception of images as the "incarnation of thought," (his famous dictum: "No ideas but in things") provided Levertov with a method of approaching experience for what it is and in doing

so to transcend it, to evoke the interconnectedness of life concealed under the surface of the object.

The same preoccupation with the relation between poet, poetry and experience draws Levertov to Duncan, Creeley and Olson. In Olson's projectivism she discovers the idea of "COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza."<sup>9</sup> She is also interested in Olson's definition of the open poem as that which takes its shape from the rhythm of perceptions and, according to Olson, "from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes."<sup>10</sup>

When she entitles her first American book *Here and Now* Levertov's reference to Emerson and the poetry of experience as being central to the American visionary tradition is inescapable. Her most ambitious project is to strike the right balance between her transcendental leanings and her formalist allegiances in a poetry of experience which she tentatively calls "organic poetry." She explains "organic" or "exploratory" poetry as "a method of appreciation, i.e. of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories."(*Essays*, 67-68)

She indicates three main stages in the creation of such a poem. First, the experience itself, "a sequence of constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest" to make the poet speak; second, the moment of contemplation, of meditation, when "the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience," and the culmination of his contemplation which is a "moment of vision," when the "correspondence" between all the elements of his perceptions "occur as words."(*Essays*, 69, 69)

Levertov finds support for her definition of poetry as experience and revelation in Rilke. In "The Poet in the World," she quotes extensively from Rilke. For Rilke just as for Levertov, "...verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings... ;they are experiences."(Essays, 131) In order to write a poem, the poet must accumulate experience, contemplate it in his memory until the first word arises in his imagination and triggers the whole mechanism of the poem. It is a purely romantic theory, which Levertov tries to reinvigorate in a renewed emphasis on form and its dynamic relation to content. Starting from the observation that "content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be given form," she reaches the double conclusion that form is a condition of art and "form is never more than a *revelation* of content." (Essays, 67,73)

As evoked by her poetics, the paradigm of the exploratory poem is centered on sensuous perception, or a succession of perceptions, which disclose the object by always aiming at what lies hidden beyond its surface. Rosenthal's early critique of Levertov's poetry valued it precisely for being able "to catch the essential details of sensuous experience and to relate them so as to organize a world of insight and of emotional response with great economy and objectivity."<sup>11</sup> More recent criticism describes her poetic method as "magical realism."<sup>12</sup>

In the act of looking at the world with a different eye in order to discover its mystery of wholeness, Levertov rehearses in poem after poem the double role of the poet as poet-in-the-world and as creator-in-words, as "seer, namer and prophet." This preoccupation and this role eclipse by far all the rest. "Illustrious Ancestors," for instance, provides an excellent example of *ars poetica*:

**The Rav**

of Northern White Russia declined,  
 in his youth, to learn the  
 language of birds, because  
 the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless  
 when he grew old it was found  
 he understood them anyway, having  
 listened well, and as it is said, 'prayed  
       with the bench and the floor.' He used  
 what was at hand-as did  
 Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations  
 were sewn into coats and britches.

Well, I would like to make,  
 thinking some line still taut between me and them,  
 poems direct as what the birds said,  
 hard as a floor, sound as a bench,  
 mysterious as the silence when the tailor  
 would pause with his needle in the air.

(CP, 76-77)

Using the biblical image of Jacob's dream of a ladder set up on the earth and reaching to heaven so that "the angels of God" could ascend and descend on it, Levertov describes in "The Jacob's Ladder" the nature of the creative process, the making of the poem and the ascending dynamics of her poetic enterprise:<sup>13</sup>

The stairway is not  
 a thing of gleaming strands  
 a radiant evanescence





In "September 1961," a wonderful poetic tribute paid to the inspiring examples of Pound, Williams and Hilda Doolittle, Levertov reaffirms the role of the poet and the nature of poetry as a verbal construct of the imagination which fuses the outer and the inner experience:

This is the year the old ones,  
the old great ones  
leave us alone on the road.

The road leads to the sea.  
We have the words in our pockets,  
obscure directions. The old ones

have taken away the light of their presence,  
we see it moving away over a hill  
off to one side.

They are not dying.  
they are withdrawn  
into a painful privacy

learning to live without words.

They have told us  
the road leads to the sea,  
and given

the language into our hands.  
 We hear  
 our footsteps each time a truck  
 has dazzled past us and gone  
 leaving us new silence.

But for us the road  
 unfurls itself, we count the  
 words in our pockets, we wonder

how it will be without them, we don't  
 stop walking, we know  
 there is far to go, sometimes

we think the night wind carries  
 a smell of the sea...<sup>16</sup>

Levertov's successful attempt to simultaneously absorb and then reconcile in her vision the Transcendental mystical assumptions underlying American romanticism as well as the Modernist formalism of Williams and Pound which substantially contradict those assumptions, accounts for what Albert Gelpi identifies as *the centrality of Levertov's poetry in the entire American literary tradition*.<sup>17</sup> Hart Crane, before her, had also tried to reconcile in his art Transcendental mysticism and Modernist experiment. He paid it with his own life. "The Broken Tower," the last poem he wrote

before his suicide, projects his magnificent failure in the powerful image of the “antiphonal carillons” of the bells which “break down their tower.”

The critics who first placed Levertov’s poetry in the mainstream of American literature have paid little or no attention to her gender. Or if they have, it was only for praising the masculine qualities of Levertov’s writing. The general tone and spirit of this approach is summarized in a now frequently quoted passage from Rexroth’s fundamental work, *American Poetry in the 20th Century*, with its genderized distinction between women’s poetry of “neurasthenia” and men’s poetry of “meditation,” “contemplation” and “vision:” “The contrast between Denise Levertov and the women poets of the early part of the century is startling. In comparison with her poetry, theirs makes being a woman in itself at the best a form of neurasthenia. Denise Levertov writes at ease as a woman about love, marriage, motherhood, deaths in the family. The universal round of domestic life is transformed by the sensibility and moved into the transcendent setting of ‘wholeness, harmony, and radiance,’ yet this is only a portion of her work, a group of subjects lying naturally to hand and left easily for other subjects as diverse as can be - poems of social protest, of nature, of meditation and contemplation, of vision.”<sup>18</sup>

Starting with the late 70s such critics as Sandra Gilbert, Suzanne Juhasz, Alicia Ostriker, Marjorie Perloff, Linda Wagner Martin and Deborah Pope, have tried to discuss individual aspects of Levertov’s poetry in the context of women’s writing.<sup>19</sup> So far, however, a book-length study is still missing.

Levertov herself has made a feminist approach difficult. Under canonical pressure and uncomfortable with the stridency of quite a few feminist voices, many women writers, particularly those who have already received critical sanction, were reluctant to identify the womanly dimension of their writing.<sup>20</sup>

In a brief "statement" entitled "Genre and Gender v. Serving an Art (1982)," updated through inclusion in the *New & Selected Essays*, Levertov dismisses gender as totally irrelevant to the aesthetic condition of art. After she declares: "I don't believe I have ever made an aesthetic decision based on my gender," and defines an "aesthetic matter" as "a matter of the relation of form to content," Levertov refers to women's poetry in terms of the dichotomy "subject matter"/"structure" denying any relation between them. Strangely limiting the topics of women's writing, Levertov argues: "...if, for example, a woman poet writes poems on what her female body feels like to her, what it's like to menstruate, to be sexually entered by a man, to carry and bear a child and breast-feed it, her *subject matter* derives directly from her gender; but it will be the *structure* of the poem, its quality of images and diction, its details and its totality of sounds and rhythms, that determines whether or not it is a poem - a work of art." (*Essays*, 102,103)

Justly warning against the use of poetry as "a vehicle, like a bus," to communicate ideas or experience, she nevertheless concludes with a statement which resurrects the spirit of high modernism and its definition of poetic meaning: "A poem, like any other work of art, must have the potential of becoming wholly anonymous through accidents of history and yet retaining its numinous, mysterious energy and autonomy, its music, its magic.

That is what I mean by the transcendence of any inessential factor - including gender." (*Essays*, 103)

Coming from the poet-in-the-world, who has repeatedly emphasized the importance of "political poetry," of "a poetry of engagement," the arbitrary limitation of what might constitute the subject matter and the manifestation of gender in women's poetry is regrettable. Coming from the poet who has dedicated a life-time to make readers aware of the revelatory powers of poetry contending that "form is never more than a *revelation* of content," (*Essays*, 73) the arbitrary separation of form and content, structure and subject in the case of women's poetry seems at least an inconsistency. As poets like Adrienne Rich, for instance, have proved in theory and poetic practice the making of a female poetics and the invention of a female poetic language could be, indeed is, a real aesthetic challenge as much as it is a social and political one.

An inquiry into the construction of power relations in Levertov's poetry lead to certain interesting conclusions regarding the way in which the female identity reflects upon the kind of "exploratory" poetry merging inner and outer experience posited by Levertov's poetics as well as upon her "engaged" poetry. It shows above all how much the world of polarities which her poetry aims to contain in a non-conflicting state and ultimately to transcend draws on the basic division between the masculine and the feminine principles.

As Levertov has indicated, she has learned not only to live with difference, but to rejoice in it, to make of her difference a source of poetic strength. How could she sustain her vision about the wholeness of the world if she remained entangled in the peripheral space of marginalized difference? Only reconciling herself with her

own difference she can devote herself to the world, reach out to the whole world and fulfill the role of the ideal poet, "the poet in the world."

Levertov's acute awareness of doubleness, more easily noticeable in the first four volumes, is patterned upon a binary world governed by the masculine-feminine opposition. Most of the poems in her volumes of the 50s point to the split this opposition engenders between the social and cultural construction of the category of woman in the patriarchal society and the woman's inner self concealed behind her passive acceptance of her subservient position. The incarceration of women within the rigid boundaries of the masculine construction of the feminine, is suggested by the narrow, closed spaces where women spend their domestic lives: the sitting-room in "Something to Wear" the kitchen in "Dogwood," a stuffed, small room with an airshaft in "Mrs. Cobweb," a bed-room in "The Absence," or an oppressive room from which the woman can escape only in her imagination in the poem "The Room."

Their failure to speak, to articulate their silence isolate women even more than walls. The impossibility of communication deepens the male-female split. In "Love Poem" the woman-speaker feels she is "a sick part of a sick thing" and the communication between her and her lover is achieved only on a physical, subhuman level:

Maybe I'm a 'sick part of a  
sick thing'

maybe something

has caught up with me

certainly there is a

mist between us

I can barely

see you

but your hands

are two animals that push the

mist aside and touch me.

(CP, 35)

In a world of doubleness where reason and action are masculine, women's passivity is only an apparent acceptance of their subservient positions. Their eagerness to fit the ascribed roles and please the dominant male figure is pathetic and speaks without ostentation about victimization. Women appear totally deprived of the possibility of choice and of the will to change, even though they are always aware of the gap between their two separate selves, like the speaker in the poem "The Wife."

A frog under you,  
knees drawn up  
ready to leap out of time,

a dog beside you,  
snuffing at you, seeking  
scent of you, an idea unformulated,

I give up on  
trying to answer my question,  
Do I love you enough?

It's enough to be  
 so much here. And  
 certainly when I catch

your mind in the  
 act of plucking  
 truth from the dark surrounding nowhere

as a swallow skims a  
 gnat from the  
 deep sky,

I don't stop to ask myself  
 Do I love him? but  
 laugh for joy.

(CP, 114)

The woman's silent commentary on the oppressive relations of marriage are expressed through her projection of herself into images taken from the animal world: in relation to her husband she is as unobtrusive, speechless and insignificant as a frog, as devoted and reliable as a dog, she is the gnat supplying food for the swallow.

The poem is a poem of experience, with reference to one of woman's main socially and culturally constructed roles, that of wife, and implicitly to her place in the institution of marriage. It is a poem of now and here, which Levertov brilliantly fuses into one word: "nowhere" as if to provide a setting for emptiness and absence, between "to seem" and "to be." As in the previous poem the communication between man and woman occurs, if at all, only at the

physical level, with the wife totally estranged emotionally (as cold as a frog, “ready to leap out of time,” a dog which could always become vicious). The mist between the two lovers in the previous poem turns here into deep darkness.

The woman’s subversion of the male subject strikes at the core of the authority granted to the male principle: the rational mind (“I catch your mind in the/ act of plucking/ truth from the dark surrounding nowhere”). In a total reversal of the power relations, the woman is the one who is closer to truth, as she is able to question the nature of power, the authority of the male principle, while the man totally ignores the truth about her. What keeps her from answering the question which persists throughout the poem is her speechlessness (“an idea unformulated”). The final “laugh for joy” could be interpreted both as bitter irony and as expressing woman’s capacity of rejoicing in her communion with all the universe, since her own fate resembles so closely that of a gnat skimmed by a swallow “from the deep sky.” Like so many other women in Levertov’s poems she seems to simply rejoice in being a woman.

In most of the poems inhabited by women, the roles and values assigned to them in a patriarchal society reinforce the idea of doubleness, of repression; passive acceptance emphasizes the force of the male-projected female stereotype.

In “The Lovers,” conceived as a dialogue between she and he, she acknowledges the male-construction of the feminine as source of doubleness and dependence:

She: Since you have made me beautiful  
I am afraid  
not to be beautiful.

The silvery dark mirror  
 looks past me: I  
 cannot accept its silence  
 the silence of your absence...

(CP, 44)

The isolation of woman, the impossibility of communication, the silence marking the split are again questioned by the woman in the poem "The Marriage (II)." The poem starts with the affirmation of the woman's wish to speak and ends with her wish still unanswered:

I want to speak to you.  
 To whom else should I speak?  
 It is you who made  
 a world to speak of.  
 .....  
 Speak or be silent: your silence  
 will speak to me.

(CP, 47-48)

In the poem "The Third Dimension" the split in the woman's self is presented as an act of violence by men against women, and it is again related to the problem of truth:

Who'd believe me if  
 I said. "They took and  
  
 split me open from  
 scalp to crotch, and  
  
 still I'm alive, and  
 walk around pleased with

the sun and  
all the world's bounty."...

The generic "they" is identified in the parallel between "the roadmen" cracking stones and the speaker being "cracked open" by love:

If the roadmen  
  
crack stones, the  
stones are stones:  
  
but love  
cracked me open  
  
and I'm  
alive to  
  
tell the tale - but not  
honestly:  
  
the words  
change it. Let it be -  
  
here in the sweet sun  
- a fiction, while I  
  
breathe and  
change pace.

(CP, 46-47)

The power of poetic language to create form and invent an object in Williams's fashion cannot annihilate the violence of the opening stanza, which sends the poem out in the world. The hope of using poetry as cure, of creating a new reality through the words of

the poem and thus bridge the split is overtly expressed in “the words change it” and “I breathe and change pace.” The speaker is not in the real world, but on the well-traveled road of the poetic quest for words.

While in most poems the male-female division of the world is explored within the limited space of a one to one relation, there are poems like “The Long Way Round,” dedicated to Alice Walker and Carolyn Taylor, where the subordination of women cutting across race and class boundaries is explored at the level of the entire patriarchal society. The limitations imposed on women in the man-centered world are imagined as a huge swimming pool where women of all races, united in the sisterhood of their womanness, are swimming under the supervision of a man. The white coach becomes a symbol of oppression not only of women by men but also of all races by the white man:

Swimming, we are, all of us, swimming  
 in the rectangular indoor claustrophobic pool  
 - echoing, sharply smelling of chlorine,  
 stinging our eyes -  
 that is  
 our lives,

where,  
 scared and put off our stroke  
 but righting ourselves with a gasp  
 sometimes we touch  
 an Other,

another  
 breathing and gasping body,  
 "yellow," but not yellow at all,  
 "black," but most often  
 brown; shaped like ourselves, bodies we could  
 embrace in relief, finding  
 ourselves not alone in the water.

And someone,  
 some fool of a coach,  
 strutting the pool's edge, wading  
 the shallow end, waves his arms at us,  
 shouting,  
 "If you're White  
 you have  
 the right of way!"<sup>21</sup>

Florence Howe identifies the theme of the divided self (split into two or even three "sisters" or women) as an extremely productive one in women's poetry from Elinor Wylie to recent poems by Colleen McElroy, Linda Hogan, and Lucille Clifton.<sup>22</sup> Levertov's poems of divided self usually deal with two kinds of divisions: one, between the social, cultural and historical construct of woman, the traditional gender roles and values, and woman's hidden, unvoiced self, what she feels she really is. This division is not represented by two different women living in the communion of a sisterhood, but rather through an inquiry into the relationships between men and women. As already shown, the woman accepts with passivity the

artificial boundaries of her gender roles. She does not make public her victimization, but she is fully aware of it.

In *A Separate Vision* Deborah Pope dedicates a chapter to Levertov, in which she discusses in detail the issue of the split-self in Levertov's poetry. She considers that even though Levertov as a poet may struggle against "the enervating or limiting influence of gender role," as "a mother, wife and woman in her society, she is also powerfully drawn to it."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, in poems like "The Third Dimension," for instance, she seems perfectly aware of the split, but as a poet she thinks she may very well deal with these limitations.

This attitude is even more clearly evident in those poems where the two selves are identified as two different women, possibly sisters: one standing for the domestic, traditional self and the other for the artistic self. An early pattern is established by the poem "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman:"

The earthwoman by her oven

tends her cakes of good grain.

The waterwoman's children

are spindle thin.

The earthwoman

has oaktree arms. Her children

full of blood and milk

stamp through the woods shouting.

The waterwoman

sings gay songs in a sad voice

with her moonshine children.

When the earthwoman

has her fell of the good day  
 she curls to sleep in her warm hut  
 a dark fruitcake sleep  
 but the waterwoman  
 goes dancing in the misty lit-up town  
 in dragonfly dresses and blue shoes.

(CP, 31-32)

The earthwoman, the domestic self, fulfills the traditional roles of women: she is a good mother, she cooks and takes good care of her house. Her house is "warm," her sleep is "sound," her source of strength is her rootedness in the earth symbolized by her "oaktree" arms. The waterwoman is the artistic self associated with images indicative of feminine imagination: water and the moon. Incapable of fulfilling the roles of the domestic self her main preoccupation is to sing songs. Her condition of an "outcast" is marked by the shocking eccentricity of her clothes and her habits. The artistic self is not bothered by being an outcast but rather by the quality of her songs, her "thin," "moonshine children." The opposition gay songs-sad voice points to the failure of relating form to content.

After almost twenty years the pattern of the two selves reappears in the poem "In Mind." While in the earlier poem the two selves were separate, in this one they coexist in the same mind indicating a split self. The domestic self evokes some of the earthwoman's qualities. She is "smelling of grass," she is "kind and very clean without/ ostentation." She is "a woman of innocence," but "she has no imagination."<sup>24</sup> In contrast to her, the artistic self associated again with the moon and strange clothes defies the traditional values attached to woman:

And there's a  
 turbulent moon-ridden girl  
  
 or old woman, or both,  
 dressed in opals and rags, feathers  
  
 and torn taffeta,  
 who knows strange songs -  
  
 but she is not kind.

The ambiguity of the last line indicates a possible tension between the two selves.

In "An Embroidery (I),"<sup>25</sup> a poem using a folk tale about two sisters, Rose Red and Rose White, and Rose Red's betrothal to a bear, the two selves are again dramatized. They are also united in the idea of sisterhood:

Together Rose Red and Rose White  
 sing to the bear;  
 it is a cradle song, a loom song,  
 a song about marriage, about  
 a pilgrimage to the mountains  
 long ago.

The song contains both selves. The "cradle" suggests motherhood, "the loom," artistry; "marriage" points to domesticity, "pilgrimage," to exploratory art.

The poems dealing with the artistic self outnumber by far those dedicated to the juxtaposition of the domestic and the artistic selves. The split in the artistic self is not caused as in the case of some women poets, by their inability to cope with the traditional domestic roles, but rather by the difficulty of defining herself as a poet. As Sandra Gilbert has argued, the solution Levertov finds to a split self which troubles so many confessional poets is simply to invent two second selves which are equally indispensable to the wholeness of being.<sup>26</sup> In the poem "The Wings," for instance, the two second selves are represented by two wings: a black one, felt as "a hump" on the speaker's back, "black inimical power," and an imagined white one, "a fountain of light."<sup>27</sup> The poem ends, however, ambiguously with an unanswered question:

Look inward: see me

with embryo wings, one  
feathered in soot, the other

blazing ciliations of ember, pale  
flare-pinions. Well -

could I go  
on one wing,

the white one?

As Deborah Pope demonstrates in her study of Levertov, the split-self in her poetry is always connected to "the crisis of women's

language.”<sup>28</sup> Two poems which Pope calls “of resolution” of the poetic self, “The Goddess” and “Song for Ishtar,” indicate as source of power, the poet’s responsiveness to experience, and her ability to encompass in the language of poetry the interconnectedness and the wholeness of the world.

In “Goddess” the poet achieves this task only with the help of the muse, the archetypal feminine, who throws her out of her isolation in the “Lie Castle” and forces her to experience the world:

There in cold air  
 lying still where her hand had thrown me,  
 I tasted the mud that splattered my lips:  
 the seeds of a forest were in it,  
 asleep and growing! I tasted  
 her power!

A silence was answering my silence,  
 a forest was pushing itself  
 out of sleep between my submerged fingers.

I bit on a seed and it spoke on my tongue  
 of day that shone already among stars  
 in the water-mirror of low ground,  
 and a wind rising ruffled the lights:  
 she passed near me returning from the encounter,  
 she who plucked me from the close rooms,

without whom nothing  
 flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,  
 without whom nothing  
 speaks in its own tongue, but returns  
 lie for lie!

(CP, 111)

Similarly, "Song for Ishtar," the Babylonian goddess of love and fertility, drawing on an old folk legend about women impregnated by the moon, celebrates wholeness of experience and woman's creativity:

The moon is a sow  
and grunts in my throat  
Her great shining shines through me  
so the mud of my hollow gleams  
and breaks in silver bubbles

She is a sow  
and I a pig and a poet

When she opens her white  
lips to devour me I bite back  
and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire  
we rock and grunt, grunt and  
shine

(TS, 3)

"Song of Ishtar" with its rich sensuous images of physicality and sexuality is part of a series of poems in which powerful body images in association or in contrast with feminine symbols such as the moon, water, flowers, night, the earth, serpents, evoke an awareness of the female body as source of power and knowledge. In

*Stealing the Language: The Emergency of Women's Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker includes Levertov together with Rukeyser, Plath, Sexton, Rich and Lorde in what she calls the "gynocentric movement." The name is meant to designate their efforts of transforming traditional poetics by siting spirituality within the body's sexuality and representing the body in the process of getting aware of its power and its intelligent creativity.<sup>29</sup>

Levertov's poem "The Mutes," for instance, which comes closest to the formulation of a female poetics, can be read almost as an illustration *avant la lettre* of Foucault's theories about the relation between the body, power and knowledge. The poem centers upon a woman's experience, which by its nature allows of a broad generalization. The poem starts with the speaker's perception of that experience:

Those groans men use  
passing a woman on the street  
or on the steps of the subway

to tell her she is a female  
and their flesh knows it,

are they a sort of tune,  
an ugly enough song, sung  
by a bird with a slit tongue

but meant for music?

Or are they the muffled roaring  
of deafmutes trapped in a building that is  
slowly filling with smoke?

(SD,46)

The train of thoughts triggered in the woman's mind by this experience argues for a redefinition of sexuality as liberation and questions the opposition mind-body, by claiming the body as a source of power and knowledge:

Such men most often  
look as if groan were all they could do,  
yet a woman, in spite of herself,

knows it's a tribute:  
if she were lacking all grace  
they'd pass her in silence:

so it's not only to say she's  
a warm hole. It's a word

in grief-language, nothing to do with  
primitive, not an ur-language;  
language stricken, sickened, cast down

in decrepitude. She wants to  
throw the tribute away, dis-  
gusted, and can't,

it goes on buzzing in her ear,  
it changes the pace of her walk,  
the torn posters in echoing corridors

spell it out, it

quakes and gnashes as the train comes in.

Her pulse sullenly

had picked up speed,

but the cars slow down and

jar to a stop while her understanding

keeps on translating:

'Life after life after life goes by

without poetry,

without seemliness,

without love.'

The idea of "knowing in the flesh" relating birth (the birth of a child or a poem) to knowledge is developed in "The Long Way Round." The body's power and knowledge is presented in this poem as cutting across all racial and social divides:

I came to know,

in the alembic

of grief and will and love,

just barely to know, by knowing

it never

ever

would be what I could

know in the flesh,

what it must be to wake each day

to the sense of one's own beautiful  
 human skin, hair, eyes, one's  
 whole warm sleep-caressed body  
 as something that others  
 hated,  
     hunted,  
             haunted by its otherness,  
 something they wanted to see disappear.

(*LF*, 54-55)

Significantly, "The Mutes" appeared in the volume which marked Levertov's real plunge into what she called "engaged poetry," or "political poetry," the same volume which contained some of the strongest protests against the Vietnam war uttered by the American writers.<sup>30</sup> Criticized by many, *The Sorrow Dance* and the following volume, *Relearning the Alphabet*, with their underpinnings of political engagement and "revolutionary poetry," have been praised by feminist critics like Suzanne Juhasz as effective because the new territory of experience Levertov explores broadens her woman's perspective on society and poetry; and, conversely, her woman's perspective provides deeper knowledge of this territory.<sup>31</sup>

The female perspective is implicitly highlighted in *The Sorrow Dance* by the dedication to the memory of Olga Levertoff and the inclusion in the same volume of "The War Poems" grouping and the elegiac "Olga Poems."

The engaged social consciousness underlying the "Olga Poems" draws on Olga's activism. Discovering through her sister's commitment her own revolutionary pathos, Levertov defines in these poems her poetic enterprise as revolutionary, dedicated to perpetual

change. Through art's power of ordering experience her poetry aims to offer a new understanding of life and of the mysteries of existence:

But dread  
was in her, a bloodbeat, it was against the rolling  
dark  
oncoming river she raised bulwarks, setting herself  
to sift cinders after early Mass all of one winter,

...To change,  
To change the course of the river! What rage for order  
disordered her pilgrimage - so that for years at the time  
  
she would hide among strangers, waiting  
to rearrange all mysteries in a new light.

(SD, 55)

In "Stepping Westward" the idea of political engagement as source of empowerment for the woman poet is explicitly related to a definition of woman capable of encompassing the polarities of the universe ("ebb and flow," day and night) and of human nature. This leads to a definition of the woman poet as a "poet in the world," who *rejoices in being a woman and derives her powers from being one*:

If woman is inconstant,  
good, I am faithful to

ebb and flow, I fall  
in season and now

is a time of ripening

There is no savor  
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be  
what, woman,

and who, myself,  
I am, a shadow

that grows longer as the sun  
moves, drawn out

on a thread of wonder.  
If I bear burdens

they begin to be remembered  
as gifts, goods, a basket

of bread that hurts  
my shoulders but closes me

in fragrance. I can  
eat as I go.

The journey westward is the journey of life to transcendence, but it is also a journey toward a New World.

The most anthologized of Levertov's Vietnam poems, "Life at War" derives its force, urgency and intensity from the female perspective incorporated in the making of the poem. Anticipated by the title, the conflicting duality of the humanity on which the poem is built is documented by a female witness who already has knowledge of the oppressive effects of power structures. In a masterful rendition of an ineffable feeling echoing Emily Dickinson's art, Levertov starts the poem with a stanza which substantiates the feeling of disaster with experience related to women's traditional roles and activities:

The disasters numb within us  
 caught in the chest, rolling  
 in the brain like pebbles. The feeling  
 resembles lumps of raw dough

weighing down a child's stomach on baking day.

The inquiry into the nature of power (war, Man, God), knowledge and the body evinced by the destructive mechanism of war is performed from a female perspective in conjunction with the attack against the authority of the masculine rational subject in a phallogocentric universe:

the knowledge that humankind,  
 delicate Man, whose flesh  
 responds to a caress, whose eyes  
 are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of birds,  
 whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,  
 whose understanding manifests designs  
 fairer than the spider's most intricate web,

still turns without surprise, with mere regret  
 to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk  
 runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,  
 transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,  
 implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

We are the humans, men who can make;  
 whose language imagines *mercy*,  
*lovingkindness*; we have believed one another  
 mirrored forms of a God we felt as good -

who do these acts, who convince ourselves  
 it is necessary; these acts are done  
 to our flesh; burned human flesh  
 is smelling in Viet Nam as I write.

(SD,79)

If men only “imagine” *mercy* and *lovingkindness*, which together with “revolutionary love” are Levertov’s prescribed cures to violence, disaster and infustice, it is women, with their bodies - life-giving and thus knowledgeable of life mysteries - that can give whatever is needed, above all, joy and love, for a peaceful world:

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space  
 in our bodies along with all we  
 go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence  
 day and night,  
 nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,  
 nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,  
 the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

Sandra Gilbert identifies as the “central truth” of Levertov’s aesthetic “the truth of the joy and the pain born from revolutionary love,” which fuses the terror of the Vietnam brutalities and Olga’s passion.<sup>32</sup>

In an essay of 1989, Levertov, still actively engaged in public issues such as social justice, ecology and peace, develops a definition of a “poetry of peace” in keeping with her visionary exploratory or organic poetics: “If a poetry of peace is ever to be written, there must first be first this stage we are just entering - the poetry of *preparation* for peace, a poetry of protest, of lament, of praise for the living earth; a poetry that demands justice, renounces violence, reveres mystery.” (*Essays*, 170-171)

The poem “Making Peace” in *Breathing the Water* (1987) is an example of the perfect fusion of the poem with the world. The making of peace as a powerful creative act, “an energy field more intense than war,” is described in terms of the making of a poem, which from the words of the world creates a vision - the unique light of “forming crystal:”

But peace, like a poem,  
 is not there ahead of itself,  
 can't be imagined before it is made,  
 can't be known except  
 in the words of its making,  
 grammar of justice,  
 syntax of mutual aid.

A feeling towards it,  
 dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have  
 until we begin to utter its metaphors,  
 learning them as we speak.

(*BW*, 40)

In "Work that Enfaiths," an essay written in 1990, Levertov describes the step from the thought of a poem to actually writing it as "moving from intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith." (*Essays*, 249) It is a very accurate description of the itinerary followed by her own poetry. In her journey of art she has never doubted the final destination. She has rather been interested in the journey as such, in the landscapes and the life along the road, in how she should adjust her pace. The concern with the nature of the journey becomes evident from her first American volumes and it remains a major motif and recurrent metaphor of her entire work. In "Overland to the Island," a poem of the 1950s, the journey at the level of here and now is suggested by such lines as "the Mexican light on a day that smells like autumn in Connecticut" and the presence of a dog which serves as vehicle for the metaphor of the journey ("Let's go - much as that dog goes, /

intently haphazard”).(CP, 55) The dog’s roving along the road describes the poetic journey undertaken in each poem, the growth of the poem from the raw materials of perception and everyday experience, the role of the imagination, the tenacity of purpose, the vitality of movement, the openness to change, the capacity of adjustment:

Under his feet  
rocks and mud, his imagination, sniffing,  
engaged in its perceptions - dancing  
edgeways, there’s nothing  
the dog disdains on his way,  
nevertheless he keeps moving, changing  
pace and approach but  
not direction - ‘every step an arrival.’

“A Traveller,” a poem included in *A Door in the Hive* continues to present the poetic journey as direct involvement with experience. The main difference is the absence in of the identifiable here and now. Time and space become projections of the “I” of the poem. What matters is the choice. The poem begins with a hypothetical “if:” “If it’s chariots or sandals,/ I’ll take sandals.” and it ends with a re-affirmation of the choice: “I’ll chance the pilgrim’s sandals.” (DH, 6) The religious frame of reference set by the “pilgrim sandals” is extended to the power relations built in the contrast chariots-sandals (the Roman Empire-the first christians) although chariot here is also a male image of physical force. Like the dog “dancing edgeways” along the road, the speaker who chose the humble condition of the pilgrim and the sideway paths, draws her power

from her distance from the physical center of hierarchical power (male or state) with its connotations of violence and ephemerality:

but I want to go  
 a long way  
 and I want to follow  
 paths where wheels deadlock.

And I don't want always  
 to be among gear and horses,  
 blood, foam, dust. I'd like  
 to wean myself from their strange allure.  
 I'll chance  
 the pilgrim sandals.

The patriarchal center of power structure represented by “gear and horses” is rendered inefficient by the speaker’s will to “wean” herself “from their strange allure.” The source of her empowerment as woman and poet is the choice of religious faith (“the pilgrim sandals”).

As the volumes of the last decade have proved, Levertov increasingly thinks of her poems as “written on the road to an imagined destination of faith.” (*Essays*, 249) The journey of art is the journey of enfaithment. This is not the poet’s solitary search for wholeness of being, for perfect union with God, but a visionary act of profound human engagement. As she confesses, her poetry is not only the experience of “faith that *works*,” but also of “work that enfaiths.” (*Essays*, 248,249) It is equally a poetry of engagement and enfaithment, or rather of engagement through enfaithment.

Levertov hopes that her poetry of praise would help the readers



## **5. The Power of Language: Adrienne Rich and the Aesthetics of Activism**

In a review of Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature*, Adrienne Rich wrote: "If someone were to ask me, 'What do you hope for in a feminist book?' I would say: 'A book which demands of us activity, not passivity; which enlarged our sense of the female presence in the world; a book which uses language and sensual imagery to impart a new vision of reality, from a woman-centered location; a book which expands our sense of the connections among us in the bonds of history; a book which drives us wild, that is, helps us break out from tameness and repetition into new trajectories of our own.'"<sup>1</sup>

Rich formulates her creed of activism in her volume of selected prose 1966-1987, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. In the spirit of her dualistic vision she predicates it on the historically active character of women's culture as opposed to the passivity of men's culture. "Women," Rich argues, "have been the truly active people in all cultures, without whom human society would long ago have perished, though our activity has most often been on behalf of men

and children... [But] to name and found a culture of our own means a real break from the passivity of the twentieth-century Western mind.<sup>2</sup>

Grounded in women's victimization and anger, her call for activism is a call for radical change, for the dismantling of the patriarchal order "Both victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought." (*OLSS*, 49).

If looking back at the impressive literary achievement of American women in the last four decades or so one can safely call it the Renaissance of women's literature, then it is equally correct to admit that in the voice of Adrienne Rich the age has found its Emerson and Whitman.

Widely recognized, even when not acclaimed, as the most outstanding contemporary feminist poet-critic of America, Rich has played the central role of "seer, namer and prophet" for American feminist writing, theory, criticism and literary history, to which she added that of leading feminist activist and spokesperson for feminism as a political and cultural movement.

It has become a common place of criticism to view her remarkable poetic and critical career closely interwoven with the rise and growth of feminism as a political movement. Her formulation of activism, which opposes women's culture of activism to men's culture of passivity, may provide a useful additional commentary as it casts light on her broad understanding of feminism not only as a political but also as a cultural revolution, addressing issues equally related to the content of power and the quality of life on the planet.

Infusing into her poetry the radical feminist awareness of the personal as being political, she becomes a witness of the age, a "seer" documenting her social and political analysis with the evidence of hers and other women's lives. In so doing she breaks away from the formalism and aestheticism of the modernist tradition in which she was trained as a poet, forcing an opening toward a feminist aesthetics of activism and a poetics of empowerment.

To approach Rich's poetry via a radical feminist iconoclasm is both dangerous and misleading. It is dangerous, because the false impression of an ideology-substitute that such an approach may create, can obliterate the beauty and uniqueness of the poetry and alienate the reader suspicious of propaganda. It is misleading, because it belittles the tremendous impact of feminist writing on postmodernism and blurs the ties between the postmodern feminist discourse and a tensional visionary-pragmatic tradition which marks the emancipation of American literature in the mid-19th century and which has so profitably been revived by postmodernism with its various technologies of the self grounded in the language of experience.

The objectives of Rich's enterprise and the essentials of her aesthetics are repeatedly stated in her numerous essays, reviews and speeches, many of them collected in such volumes as *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (1979), *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1986* and *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993). They reflect, in Rich's own words, "problems of language and power; how the unspoken becomes the unspeakable; the concealments and thefts of language which beget powerlessness; the university as a seat of power; the unmasked

questions of civilization; the silences of history and literature; the possibilities of re-naming, re-defining, and re-shaping culture when women become namers, definers, and shapers"(OLSS,17-18).

Rich's re-visionary feminist project of creating a woman-centered discourse follows two directions: one refers to poetry as the site where language can best exercise its power of transforming the patriarchal representation of woman; the other deals with the revision of history (literary history, but not only) involving the retrieval, interpretation and construction of a female tradition which can dislocate and replace old patterns of thought.

Forging or retrieving or inventing a woman-centered discourse, the central task of Rich's activism and her main strategy of empowerment, rests entirely on the interpretation of power as a language construct. Rich thinks of language as "a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess (though we were its inventors, and though individual writers like Dickinson, Woolf, Stein, H.D. have approached language as transforming power)."<sup>3</sup>

Her aesthetics of activism is built on a definition of a "poetry of experience" which must bring together poetic discourse, power and consciousness in an unrelenting effort to transform and transcend experience. In a frequently quoted passage from "Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman" Rich defines poetry in the following terms: "Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male to female pronouns, in the relationships between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension... Poetry is above all a

concentration of the *power* of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe"(OLSS, 248).

Speaking of poetry's power of presenting in sensuous form "forces we can lay claim to in no other way," she specifically designates poetry as a main domain of feminist activism: "Think of the deprivation of women living for centuries without a poetry which spoke of women together, of women alone, of women as anything but the fantasies of men. Think of the hunger unnamed and unnameable, the sensations mistranslated"(OLSS, 248-49).

The choice of vocabulary in Rich's long definition of poetry echoes again the pragmatic theory of art underlying Emerson's definition of poetry as experience and of the poet as a "namer, seer and prophet," as well as Whitman's definition of the poet as a "translator" of reality. The lineage becomes even more evident when Rich speaks of the "subversive function of the imagination to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives" in order to "transcend and transform reality"(OLSS, 43).

The idea of "transforming power" is undoubtedly new, but as long as the whole discourse is located within the confines of classical dualism, poetry can at best reveal new mechanisms of masculine domination and feminine victimization. The success of the poetic enterprise still depends on the gift of the poet to trade in the same old words, the feminist production of poetic truth being still far away from the political representation of women in a multicultural society.

The centrality of the idea of "transforming power" in Rich's career has formed the object of many critical scrutinies. Her interrogation into the power relation defining femininity has been

repeatedly discussed in relation to French theories, particularly those of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, or the marxist orientation of the 1960s. Surprisingly, very little has been said about the intersection between Rich's and Foucault's analysis of discourse and power, their theory of the disciplined body and Rich's response to Foucault's attack on the unified subject, which deprived individuals of their roles as agents. At a time when feminist theory produced numerous books on Foucault and feminism, in studies of the same period dealing, directly or indirectly, with Rich's treatment of power and her activism, Foucault is hardly ever mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

While Rich's early essentialism, her insistence on the unity and importance of physicality and her exclusive emphasis on victimization-oppression dictated by the concrete circumstances of the feminist movement in the 1960s run counter many of Foucault's arguments, her critique of the role of mother as cultural institution created to support male domination in *Of Woman Born* and her analysis of "compulsory heterosexuality" as an institution powerfully affecting "mothering, sex roles, relationships, and societal prescriptions for women," share Foucault's conclusions on sexuality as representing historically and culturally determined power relations.<sup>5</sup>

The impact on American postmodern feminism of the Foucauldian shift of focus to power as dynamic, plural and productive and to subjectivity as representing a culturally specific conglomerate of various subject positions was not lost on Rich either. Her evolution from an essentialist vision of victimization-oppression to an awareness of *difference* with its history of struggle and resistance, reflects a complex process of self-definition, a subjectivity that is no longer white, heterosexual and middle-class

but Jewish, lesbian and feminist. In her provocative essay "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984) she voices her need of "locating" herself as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian and a feminist in place, time, cultures, classes and movements as well as the feminist need of political focus to discern within the field of differences.

In her recent book *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, in section XXV, "To Invent What We Desire," in answer to the question "What does a poet need to know?" she admits that "to mis-take, to mis-prize, your own life and its landscapes, to imagine that poetry belongs by right to others (of another culture, gender, class, century) and not to you, means falling - if not into silence - into language others found in struggle with their own conditions.<sup>6</sup> Commenting on June Jordan's statement that a poet needs to find "the intimate face of universal struggle," Rich also admits that "to track your own desire, in your own language, is not an isolated task. You yourself are marked by family, gender, caste, landscape, the struggle to make a living, or the absence of such a struggle. The rich and the poor are equally marked. Poetry is never free of these markings even when it appears to be." (*Notebooks*, 216)

What then is left of her creed of poetic activism? In the same chapter, on the margin of Audre Lorde contention that "Poetry is not a luxury. Poetry is activity and survival," Rich notes that "this in itself can be an activity of keenest joy," - the joy of "something written down that remains." (*Notebooks*, 215) The echo of Nietzsche's concept of "tragic joy," so often alluded to by Yeats in his poetry, is here inescapable.

Even the failure of Rich's radical feminism to produce the woman-centered discourse unless one accepts her lesbian articulation of female identity as "that primary presence of women to each

other... which is the crucible of a new language," indicates women poets' commitment to changing inherited meanings, to offering an alternative vision.(*OLSS*, 250) The poet's keen awareness of Power underlying all patriarchal structures as well as her struggle to master the power of language - first, to simply articulate women's experience, next, to transform and transcend it - gives specificity and beauty to Rich's poetry. Developed into an aesthetics of activism, the obsession with power documents not only the artist's progress, but also the major issues which have confronted American feminist movement in the postwar years.

Several elements of Rich's biography have proved essential in shaping her career. As she admits in her autobiographical essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), her problems of identity have been complicated from the start not so much by the fact that her father was Jewish and her mother gentile, as by the fact that her father, a distinguished, intelligent, cultivated and charismatic doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital, brought up as a Southern christian gentleman, identified himself as a scientist and deist rather than a Jew. He and his wife, a gifted concert pianist who gave up her career when she married him, offered their two daughters the perfect example of a privileged American conservative, middle-class family.

In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* Rich speaks of her relation with her loving and lovable father as being an ambivalent one, particularly because of the pressure his perfectionist demands put on his extremely intelligent daughter, whom he wanted to raise up like a son: "The investment in my intellect was egotistical, tyrannical, opinionated and terribly wearing. He taught me, nevertheless, to

believe in hard work, to mistrust easy inspiration, to write and rewrite... He made me feel, at a very young age, the power of language and that I could share in it."<sup>7</sup>

Her marriage in 1953 to Alfred Conrad, a divorced Jew and a Harvard professor, who would commit suicide in 1970, though seemingly expressing resistance to her father's authority, placed her in the same type of conformist, conservative family structure and cast her in the stereotype roles of dutiful academic wife and mother. Before she was thirty, she had given birth to three sons and she had published two volumes of poetry.

The first one, *A Change of World* (1951), written when she was a senior at Radcliff, brought her the Yale Younger Poets Award, and an introduction by W.H.Auden, who patronizingly remarked that "The poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that, for a first volume is a good deal."<sup>8</sup>

Shaped by the modernist influence of Stevens, Yeats, Auden and Frost, the poems echo, nevertheless, a long apprenticeship in "memorizing and writing imitations of Millay's sonnets," as well as "attempts to imitate Dickinson's metrics and verbal compression," recorded in Rich's private notebook.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their acceptance of the patriarchal power structure, the poems subtly explore what Elaine Showalter called "a double-voiced discourse," containing a "dominant" and a "muted" story.<sup>10</sup> The dominant one foregrounds the feminine stereotype of passivity, submissiveness, dependence and restraint, while the muted one, with roots in Greek mythology, speaks about strategies of empowerment through artistic creation and the conflict between this kind of

powerfulness and the powerlessness imposed on women by the patriarchal order.

In a poem like "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," for instance, the double-voice discourse of power - juxtaposing positive values of creativity and negative values of domination and submission - brings forth the victimization of woman. The dominant story explores the traditional theme of the eternity of art versus the mortal condition of the artist by adapting it to a domestic situation: an ordinary woman presented in the traditional role of submissive, dutiful wife, creates a work of art in a piece of handicraft. The techniques employed are mainly modernist echoing Stevens. The detached, impersonal tone, the perfect control of form, the ordinariness of the domestic episode are contrasted with the elegance and virility of the tigers.

The poem is dominated by the dazzling description of the tiger tapestry, which totally overshadows the imagined death of Aunt Jennifer in the last stanza.

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,  
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.  
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;  
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool  
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.  
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band  
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
 Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
 The tigers in the panel htat she made  
 Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.<sup>11</sup>

The muted story is the story of Aunt Jennifer's victimization. It is contained in her restraint, in her passive acceptance of the roles and values enforced upon her by the patriarchal order. In all the three stanzas her presence is associated with fear: the absence of fear only in the imagined world of art in the first stanza ("they do not fear the men"); the "fluttering fingers" in the second stanza and the "terrified hands" in the third one.

The generic source of fear related to men in the first stanza, turns more specific in the next two stanzas, where the woman, captive in the confines of marriage ("Uncle's wedding band") fears her own desires ("terrified hand... still ringed"). Aunt Jennifer's victimization by the sheer force of male domination is suggested by such words as "massive weight," "heavily," "ordeals," "mastered." The choice of vocabulary in the last stanza echoes Yeats's sonnet *Leda and the Swan*.

There is however a third voice in this poem, utterly subversive, which prefigures Rich's feminist project of creating a woman-centered language and tradition. This third voice belongs to the poet who tells the story of her aunt, who imagines her death and pours life into the splendid tigers by using "words," the words of the poem, not merely "hands." Aunt Jennifer will die in oblivion because she accepted the passive role of a victim and never understood her own power. The sexual connotations of the prancing tigers as projected desire juxtaposed to the brutality of the marital relations in the

second stanza can only enrich the documentation of victimization. Rich's more ambitious future project of reconstructing the Western cultural tradition from a woman-centered perspective makes a wonderful debut in this poem with the feminist appropriation of Blake's concept of the imagination embodied in the powerful image of the tiger in *Songs of Innocence*.

In spite of the subversive intention of many of her early poems which my reading of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" attempted to illuminate, Rich's first two volumes remained largely indebted to her conservative literary and intellectual training. They are mostly indoors poems of domestic life, inhabited by static figures imprisoned in the close spaces of a carefully arranged decorum, strongly marked by the poet's detached, almost scientific, impersonal, interest in recording the results of her observations. Put under magnifying lenses her samples of women's existence reveal the imprint on women's lives of the patriarchal paradigm of femininity highlighting dependence, restraint and passivity. In the postwar world of change women merely accept changes, they are no agents of change. Rich was still searching for a voice of her own.

Speaking about her first volumes Rich admits: "What I did write was unconvincing to me; my anger and frustration were hard to acknowledge in or out of poems because in fact I cared a great deal about my husband and my children"(OLSS,43). Dissatisfied with what she had written, Rich described the poems in her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*, as "mere exercises for the poems I hadn't written." In the feminist aesthetics she developed in her mature poetry, Rich assigns to the imagination a much more active role. The imagination has "to transcend and

transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives"(OLSS,43).

In 1963, after six years of poetic silence, when confused and frustrated by the demands of her roles of mother and wife she could no longer articulate her experience, Rich finally published a new volume of poems, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, her feminist breakthrough.

The "snapshot" quality of the ten loosely connected free-verse sections of the title poem, indicative of Rich's divorce from a carefully wrought formalist art, substantiates the poet's urgent need to relate herself to a common female consciousness which had yet to be defined. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" she explains the origins of the poem: "The poem was jotted in fragments during children's nap, brief hours in a library, or at 3:00 A.M. after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, nonfemale. Until then I had tried very much *not* to identify myself as a female poet"(OLSS, 43).

Nevertheless, Rich is still reluctant to use the pronoun "I," and she could hardly have used it when she decided to operate from behind a camera. Between its first word, "you," and its last word, "ours," the poem moves from the particular to the general, from the second person singular in the first section, through the "she"-s of the following eight sections, to the "we" of the last two sections.

The parallel with Whitman seems again inescapable. The main strategy he used in creating the poetic equivalent of a cosmic

consciousness was a similar movement from the particular to the general, but in his case the movement was from "I" to "we," the process of accretion through accumulation being conditioned by his personal identification with the universe he was reaching out to. He could do it because he believed in the oneness of the universe and in his consciousness as a reflection of that oneness.

In Rich's poetry, the common female consciousness is a consciousness of power. It grows out of the victimization and anger experienced by women, both of which, as she argues, "have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought." (OLSS,44) Reaching out to that consciousness then is a matter first, of identifying those sources by documenting victimization, and next, of understanding women's power to reject the oppressive patriarchal system. Translated into feminist politics this means activism, translated into the terms of Rich's aesthetics, it means a re-visionary art, informed by the compulsion to "repossess," construct or invent a woman-centered language, history and tradition.

As all her critics agree, in developing her notion of female consciousness and the strategies of empowerment, Rich draws on the feminist existentialist ideas of Simone de Beauvoire's *The Second Sex* (1949) which describes the difference between man and woman as based on two different kinds of power. As Homo faber "man learns his power" in action, his is "the reign of time manageable as space, of necessary consequences, of the project, of action, of reason," which imposes as sovereign the male principle of "creative force, of light, of intelligence, of order."<sup>12</sup> Woman, on the other hand, "was bound to the region of irreducible duration, of contingency, of chance, of waiting, of mystery" and therefore

"condemned to play the part of the Other...to hold only uncertain power: slave or idol, it was never she who chose her lot"(SS,71).

Rich's feminism, like de Beauvoir's, rests on the idea that women, like men, must "learn" their power, they must understand their victimization and become aware of their own power before they can dismantle the patriarchal power structures.

"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" abounds in violent images of domination-victimization and is imbued with the poet's anger. The first two sections juxtapose mother and daughter in their different responses to the imposed roles and codes that circumscribe their existence. The repressed mother, "once a belle in Shreveport," has been entirely depersonalized, turned into a man-projected stereotype, her mind "moldering like wedding-cake,/ heavy with useless experience, rich/ with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,/ crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge/ of mere fact" (OLSS, 49).

The daughter hears the voices of anger urging her to resistance and rebellion, but incapable of understanding her power to break the confines of conformity, she ends up thinking that she has lost her mind.

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink  
 she hears the angels chiding, and looks out  
 past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.  
 Only a week since They said: *Have no patience*

The next time it was: *Be insatiable.*  
 Then: *Save yourself; others you cannot save.*  
 Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,  
 a match burn to her thumbnail.

or held her hand above the kettle's snout  
 right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels,  
 since nothing hurts her anymore,  
 except each morning's grit blowing into her eyes. <sup>13</sup>

The women who really interest Rich though are writers and women of intellect, those who may be tempted to share in the male cultural tradition instead of building up a tradition of their own. The poet warns against such dangers: "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters./ The beak that grips her, she becomes." For the first time Rich develops an aesthetic of activism: the personal is political, the distance between literature and politics is questioned and denied, women's empowerment is seen as depending essentially on the construction of a woman-centered discourse, history and tradition.

Her own poem is a courageous attempt to challenge the great Western tradition. The numerous literary allusions and the quotes from Cicero, Horace, Diderot, Johnson and Shakespeare used in the fashion of a long modernist poem like *The Waste Land*, instead of creating the impression of the simultaneity of great art reveal a disparaging, condescending treatment of women. In its parody of styles and poetic forms, in forcing a woman's perspective upon famous texts written by men, as for instance "*ma semblable, ma soeur!*", the poem is also subversive. Moreover, it attempts to build a women's tradition by summoning up the voices of Mary Wollstonecraft, "a woman, partly brave and partly good,/ who fought with what she partly understood," Emily Dickinson, whose strong impact on Rich can be felt beyond section four organized around Dickinson's verse: "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - ," and Simone de Beauvoir, whose ideas on male/female power and female



The dimensions of the struggle to attain the new female consciousness, the striving of becoming, the power of transforming, of naming the unnamable and thinking the unthinkable contained in the apotheosis of Rich's feminist vision is suggested by the fragmentary, jotty quality of the lines and by the lack of punctuation and the descending form of the finale reminiscent of the graphic of Emily Dickinson and yet so different in the materiality of its ascending movement. One cannot fail to see however, that women's freedom (the new woman), comes from above, from the sky rather than from the women themselves.

"The Roofwalker," the last poem in the volume, inspired by and dedicated to Denis Levertov, reiterates the struggle of breaking away from the patriarchal construction of the female:

A life I didn't choose  
 chose me: even  
 my tools are the wrong ones  
 for what I have to do.  
 I'm naked, ignorant,  
 a naked man fleeing  
 across the roofs.

*(Snapshots, 63)*

As Deborah Pope argues in her inspiring study of isolation in contemporary American women's poetry, in "The Roofwalker" as the final poem of *Snapshots*, "Rich at last abandons enclosures, the conventional 'blueprints' of women's lives, abandons the grating intimacy of the 'old consolations,' and sets off with heady freedom, alone, to go beyond lives she can no longer live in."<sup>15</sup>

By identifying herself with the naked builder "fleeing across the roofs" the poet suggests the breaking away not only from her previous work, an unlivable house she herself constructed, but also from her old biologically and socially marked female identity: she is a naked, ignorant, fleeing man.

As the first statement of Rich's aesthetics of activism made at a time when the feminist movement was still searching for its voice, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* is both a feminist and a poetic breakthrough. Rich herself valued it as: "The book...in which I was changing my forms, changing my structures, writing about women's lives, writing about my own life directly and nakedly for that time and for me at that time."<sup>16</sup>

With the civil rights and women's movements gathering momentum, with race and city riots, students' revolts, antiwar protests and a wave of political assassinations, the 1960s radicalized Rich's feminism and politicized her poetry in the sense of a more open and passionate involvement in the political events that were bringing women into the first line of the struggle for social and cultural change.

The involvement in radical politics, particularly in the anti Vietnam War movement, accentuates the poetic intensities of the three volumes published during the decade: *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969) and the remarkable *Will to Change* (1971). Never comfortable in her use of "I," she concentrates on the "we" of the female consciousness, experiencing intense moments of crisis in her exploration of the relation between language and power, between literature and political engagement. In "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" her desperate outcry: "This is the oppressor's language/

yet I need it to talk to you" states her moral dilemma as well as her ordeal as a poet.<sup>17</sup>

At this point she also tries to define theoretically her meaning of "activism" and of "political poetry," equating activism with the will (or power) to change, and political poetry with the poetry which enacts the will/power to change, the process of becoming, whether inside or outside the self. Typically for Rich's poetry, with few exceptions, before being anything else the enemy will always be man.

In the seventies, already an influential voice in the international feminist intellectual movement, Rich becomes increasingly engaged in questioning the relation between power and the body as well as the disciplining effect a culture can exercise on the body, the subject of Foucault's analysis during approximately the same period.

In "Tear Gas," a poem written in 1969, she declares:

...I am afraid  
of the language in my head  
I am alone, alone with language  
and without meaning  
coming back to something written years ago:  
*our words misunderstand us*  
wanting a word that will shed itself like a tear  
unto the page  
leaving its stain

Trying every key in the bunch to get the door even ajar  
not knowing whether it's locked or simply jammed from long disuse

· trying the keys over and over then throwing the bunch away  
 staring around for an axe  
 wondering if the world can be changed like this  
 if a life can be changed like this  
 .....

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind  
 My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding with every  
 act of resistance and each of my failures...

(PSN,139-140)

Locating the will to change in the body, Rich makes of lesbianism a major form of activism.

In *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), the volume which won the National Book Award in 1974, an award which Rich shared with Lorde and Walker in symbolical refusal of "the terms of patriarchal competition," explores again the theme of men's violence and women's anger - this time from the perspective of a female consciousness reinforced by its lesbian and radical political commitments, or, to use her own words, "a female consciousness which is political, aesthetic, and erotic, and which refuses to be included or contained in the culture of passivity"(OLSS, 18). The poems evolve toward positive action and a philosophical reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine in the androgynous ideal. Predicated on action the poems no longer focus on static figures trapped in all sorts of enclosures. They get out into the open where life happens, searching, discovering, questioning and recording with an archeological passion for reconstructing the blank spaces on the map of experience. The motif of the journey and that of the quest probe physical endurance and genderize the notion of

heroism. Rich's persona assumes the guises of the explorer, the pioneer, the scuba-diver, the researcher. Her rich and powerful imagery attempting to document life is wide in range including astronomy, physics, urban and domestic scenery, historical records, surrealist images of dream and fantasy

Perhaps one of her most anthologized poems, "Diving into the Wreck" is a poem which attempts to create an androgynous world where the notion of power that marks the difference between the masculine and the feminine is completely relinquished. It is the world of the ocean, where the "I" of the poem, a scuba-diver, descends to explore a wreck. Since Rich's personae are usually women, the reader may well assume that the diver is a woman and therefore that the poem narrates a female quest at the end of which one discovers the androgynous ideal. The reference to the "book of myths" in the first and the last but one line of the poem indicates the poet's intention of using the theme of the quest to re-write the male tradition so as to include women. As Alicia Ostriker observes, when heroes like Odysseus, Hercules, Aeneas, Christ or Dante descend to Hell, the downward movement is always followed by the upward movement of the ascent.<sup>18</sup> In Rich's poem there is only the descent, - an eternal return which can be related to what Ostriker identified as a down motion in women's poetry expressed in the "Demeter-kore model of returning and reviving."<sup>19</sup>

The preparations for the descent introduce the insigns of a power-structured world:

First having read the book of myths,  
and loaded the camera,  
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,

I put on  
 the body-armor of black rubber  
 the absurd flippers  
 the grave and awkward mask.

(PSN, 169)

Descending into the ocean is a journey of initiation which one has to take alone. The body disciplined by the control of power must learn "alone" how to exist in a world where power has an altogether different meaning.

First the air is blue and then  
 it is bluer and then green and then  
 black I am blacking out and yet  
 my mask is powerful  
 it pumps my blood with power  
 the sea is another story  
 the sea is not a questionsion of power  
 I have to learn alone  
 to turn my body without force  
 in the deep element.

The wreck has multiple layers of signification, but whatever it may stand for - the poet's deepest self, language, civilization, knowledge - it represents failure and it calls for exploration and restoration:

I came to explore the wreck.  
 The words are purposes.

The words are maps.  
 I came to see the damage that was done  
 and the treasures that prevail.  
 I stroke the beam of my lamp  
 slowly along the flank  
 of something more permanent  
 than fish or weed

the thing I came for:  
 the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
 the thing itself and not the myth  
 the drowned face always staring  
 toward the sun  
 the evidence of damage  
 worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty  
 the ribs of the disaster  
 curving their assertion  
 among the tentative haunters.

The task though can be fulfilled only through the androgynous harmony of the masculine and the feminine. The wreck is the evidence of the failure of the masculine principle:

I am she: I am he  
 whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes

we are the half-destroyed instruments  
 that once held to a course  
 the water-eaten log



No one had imagined us. We want to live like trees,  
 sycamores blazing through the sulphuric air,  
 dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,  
 our animal passion rooted in the city.<sup>20</sup>

Articulation of lesbian experience continues to remain central in *The Dream of a Common Language*. Yet in this volume as well as in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) Rich addresses a much wider range of women's experience. Her essentialism and transhistorical investigation of women's relations and women's histories, either individual or collective, is subordinated to the rethinking of history, to the identification, construction or creation of a female tradition, to forging a new symbolic and to producing what Liz Yorke calls "a disruptive, critical or transformational mythology."<sup>21</sup>

Above all, there is "the dream of a common language, the constant preoccupation of constructing a woman's language, of writing the body and writing experience by finding new ways of naming the world, by purging words of their old meanings and infusing into the language the connotations of women's experience - in a word, by making language connect women in their commonality.

The opening poem of *The Dream of a Common Language* suggestively entitled "Power" tells the story of Marie Curie's martyrdom and gives again a definition of women's power:

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:  
 she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness  
 her body bombarded for years by the element  
 she had purified.<sup>22</sup>

The source of her power, the element she has purified, causes her death, but she denies the danger as she needs time to carry out her experiments.

She died a famous woman denying  
 her wounds  
 denying  
 her wounds came from the same source as her power

There are, however, very few instances in Rich's work when women become martyrs. As the 70s were coming to a close and the feminist movement under the control of white, middle-class, intellectuals, enjoyed growing recognition and influence, Rich, with renewed interest in the gratifications of shared love, begins to question the relation between poetry and politics. In the poem "For Ethel Rosenberg," part of the "Turning the Wheel" sequence, for instance, she openly doubts her early activist idea according to which the personal was political. She imagines Ethel Rosenberg in the privacy of her thoughts, tired with politics, aware of the passage of time, wishing for a life of her own:

bored to the marrow of her bones  
 with "politics"  
 bored with the vast boredom of long pain  
 small; tiny in fact; in her late sixties  
 liking her room her private life  
 living alone perhaps."<sup>23</sup>

In "Turning the Wheel," despite the wish to discover the old culture of the Hohokan Indians and the American Southwest, between continuing her solitary journey to the canyon and returning to a reassuring love relation, the poet chooses the second alternative:

Today I turned the wheel refused that journey  
 I was feeling too alone on the open plateau  
 of pinon juniper world beyond time  
 of rockflank spread around me too alone  
 and too filled with you with whom I talked for hours  
 driving up from the desert...

(WP,59)

"Turning the wheel," the refusal of the journey, is a symbolic act pointing to a turn of direction in Rich's poetry away from the essentialist search for a female consciousness toward the concreteness and the intensity of individualized existence and particularized relationships.

The power to turn the wheel and refuse the journey grows from within the poetic self and from within the substance of the poem and it is in no way related to political partisanship. Rich's activism has often taken her to the battle field of politics, made her a prisoner of a fixed binary world where the enemy was always male while the "I" of the poem taking upon herself communal responsibilities existed mostly as "we." Yet Rich's activism also made her aware of the power of poetic language in a way which distinguishes her among the contemporary poets and places her in the main stream of the American poetic tradition. It equally encouraged in her "the will to change" and the power of "turning the wheel." In this respect her

recent volume of poems *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1992) gives a full measure of her ambitious projects and the difficulties of accomplishing them.

Reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's preference for geographical titles, the book is grounded in Rich's compulsion to document and make credible various aspects of social evils affecting the lives of marginalized people. Building upon the idea of difference as location she

relates herself to herself and the others as well as to history and to the American literary tradition. By using the Whitmanesque catalog technique she merges broad social generalization with lyrical meditation. The poem "Dedications" (1990-1991) is a kind of ars poetica in which the catalog technique helps the poet dramatize the approach to the main issues of an aesthetics of activism presenting them under the form of a dialogue between herself and an imaginary reader.

The approach to the relation between writer and reader in women's poetry diverges from the modernist complicity meant to engage the reader in the construction of the artistic illusion, to make him or her part of the game, thus emphasizing the artifact dimension of art. On the contrary, the confessional mode of women's poetry extends to the reader the poet's compulsion of total involvement with her life. The reader is asked to assume the role of witness. Rich's intention though is not confessional; she is a poet of ideas. Her intellectual poetry does never rely on the mere power of confession, but in her aesthetics of activism, the involvement of the reader becomes essential for the poetic enterprise. With Rich the reader is obliged to do more than witness the confession. The reader is forced



## **6. The Poet as Warrior: The Consciousness of Race in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks**

For reasons of their double, sometimes triple marginalization, African American women poets, individually and collectively, create a perfect illustration of a poetry which fully explores the interplay of power relations. In other words, their poems are almost without exception power fields with a multiplicity of points of domination and resistance describing the various aspects of difference created by race, gender, class, sexual orientation and age. In most cases in their poetry the construction of power relations has a strong political motivation, and the aspects of resistance and struggle tend to be more frequently and systematically exploited, as race always comes first in the hierarchy of marginalization. In this respect each of such remarkable contemporary African American women poets as, Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, Toi Derricotte, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, Pinkie Gordon Lane, Audre Lorde, Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez, Margaret Walker and Alice Walker may serve as a case study of poets as warriors, each using different weapons in a battle which is never quite the same.<sup>1</sup>

At the head of these generations of women poets marked differently by their experience of history and their approach to issues of representation and difference, Gwendolyn Brooks, with virtually no African American tradition to draw on, has proved not only the genius of creating a tradition but also an extraordinary dynamism, flexibility and capacity of change. As she has been negotiating the boundaries of race, class and gender under the changing socio-cultural and political circumstances as well as the changing literary fashion of more than half a century, she has produced a poetry which for its vitality, novelty and accomplishment has secured for itself a central place in contemporary American literature.

Long included in the literary canon as the most important African American poet of the postwar period, in the years that passed since the publication of her first volume, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Gwendolyn Brooks has become an almost legendary figure in the black community.<sup>2</sup> In 1987, in honor of her seventieth anniversary, more than seventy writers brought her homage in a volume edited by Hake Madhubuti significantly entitled *Say That the River Turns: The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks*. By now nearing 80, she has already inspired several biographical studies, among them most notably D.H. Melhem's *Gwendolyn Brooks. Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (1986) and George Kent's *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* (1990).

Author of more than twenty books, the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize (1950), poet laureate of Illinois since 1968, when she succeeded Carl Sandburg, the first African American woman to be appointed consultant in poetry to the Library of

Congress and elected member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the recipient of more than seventy awards and honors, Brooks has obviously become herself an institution. For the AfricanAmerican community of writers and intellectuals, particularly for the younger generations, she serves as inspiration and symbol. For greater America she is striving to mediate and facilitate cultural perception and thus strengthen in the national consciousness the still fragile interracial link. As she has repeatedly stated during her numerous poetry readings in schools, colleges, prisons and rehabilitation centers across the country, her major poetic goal is “to speak our own observed and experienced truths” and “to share poetry with people.”<sup>3</sup>

Thinking of poetry in terms of the truths of experience, Brooks views her art as an ongoing process in which meaning is equally created in the “delicious agony” of distilling experience as well as in the extraordinary variety of the act of reading.<sup>4</sup> In “Winnie,” a poem dedicated to Winnie Mandela, she defines her art in words echoing Whitman:

My poem is life, and not finished  
It shall never be finished.  
My poem is life and can grow.

The open-ended organicity of her poetry places it in the main stream of American poetry and its tradition of the poet as hero, a tradition she enriches by bringing to it the African American consciousness.

Trained at the school of modernism, the goals Brooks set for herself as a poet were those of universality, impersonality and craftsmanship. In absence of a black feminine poetic tradition to

draw on, the appropriation of modernism by the Harlem Renaissance in the poetry of Langston Hughes, Brooks' mentor and early model, offered her a place in which she could articulate her voice. While passing for compliance, Brooks's early project of working within the norms of the dominant culture, seemingly addressing the white readers, proved to be an efficient strategy of subversion and empowerment.

"But silence is a *place* in which to scream!" exclaims the speaker of the poem "In the Mecca."<sup>5</sup> The construction and deconstruction of power relations in Brooks's poetry reproduce the dynamics of the scream in its progress from silence and invisibility to resonant and proud affirmation.

The emphasis of high modernism on formal precision and the role of craftsman and "catalyst" ascribed to the poet by an impersonal theory of art, prompted Brooks to work within the challenging tradition of fixed poetic forms such as the sonnet and the ballad. Her first two volumes, *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen* (1950), which brought her the Pulitzer and an entry to the American writers' Hall of Fame, were praised precisely for their role of catalysts in the merging of cultures as well as for their capacity of pouring black experience into the matrix of traditional Western poetic forms. In the poems included in these volumes the personal was approached as illustration of the general, a universal *we*, an instance of humanity.

"kitchenette building," the opening poem in *A Street in Bronzeville*, sets up the tone and the thematic range of Brooks' poetry for the next decade:

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
 Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong  
 Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."  
 But could a dream send up through onion fumes  
 Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
 And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,  
 Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,  
 Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,  
 Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!  
 Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,  
 We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

(SP, 3)

The poem uses a generic *we* and deals with problems of identity and location on a spiritual and cultural map of America. The poetic text functions as a bitter commentary on some of the Puritan clichés of American culture and the principles on which the concept of American democracy is built: "all men are created equal,... they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,... among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."<sup>6</sup> Her later poetry is a re-writing of *The Declaration of Independence* from the perspective of the Blacks.

The first line posits the idea of equality by birth and questions the Puritan dogma of God's inexorable justice and the Puritans' self-projection as God's chosen people which informed their sense of

mission and inspired the American dream. The location of the speaker's "I" and the poem's "we" in the force field of power relations is deliberately rendered ambiguous by the inclusion of both a female and a male perspective ("feeding a wife," "satisfying a man"). Seemingly reluctant to speak in the voice of a black woman poet, Brooks negotiates for the Blacks an identity in the universal category of "gray" people, a poetic response to Eliot's "hollow men."

At the surface level "kitchenette building" resort to several of Eliot's modernist techniques as well as his insight into modern human condition as illustrated particularly in "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Prufrock's metaphysical questions "Do I dare disturb the universe?/ In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." as well as his hesitations: "And should I then presume?/ And how should I begin?" are reconstructed in the African American consciousness in the long question which starts in the second stanza "But could a dream..." and ends in the fourth with "Even if we were willing.../ Had time.../ Anticipate a message, let it begin?" The answer to this question: "We wonder. But not well! Not for a minute!" is an ironic answer to Prufrock's philosophical musings. Echoing Eliot's refrain: "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo," the woman speaker in Brooks's poem wonders: "But could a dream .../ ...Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms."

Yet the whole poem conspires against the Eliotian belief in the stability of hierarchical authoritarian order, whether represented by religion and church, by the Western tradition or by authoritarian government, as indeed it subverts the very idea of impersonality and hierarchical authority which underlies Eliot's poetic and critical discourse.

In Brooks's poem a deliberate ambiguity meant to support the impersonality or the universality of the speaker's voice is created by the double male-female identity suggested by the scraps of every day language, "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man," which replace Eliot's literary allusions. However, just as the words "things" and God's "involuntary plan" indicate the racist biblical interpretation of the Blacks' place in the act of creation, the voice of the poem becomes easily identifiable as female.

Starting with its title which delineates a woman's place in the geography of the household, the poem focuses on the location of the black woman in the force field of power relations. The hierarchical power structures range from divine power in the first line, the power of state; of economic and social domination and oppression suggested by the word "rent" and the symbolism of the kitchenette building, to male power and, implicitly to woman's subordination as indicated by "feeding a wife" and "satisfying a man." Treating power as a force field with many points of resistance, Brooks avoids the trap of the ideological simplification of the racial oppression.

As the poem unfolds, the woman's territory expands far beyond the narrow limits of the diminished kitchen; the kitchenette takes possession of the building, sending everywhere the "onion fumes," the smell of "fried potatoes," the odor of "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall." The expansion of the woman's territory transforms her into a symbol of her race, while her experience of the various manifestations of power transforms her into a fighter. Significantly, it is her territory that turns into the battleground for the fight between "the white" dream and the smell of the darker colored "fried potatoes" in the second stanza. The idea of the woman's fight with the corrupted version of the dream as a

confirmation of her power, is resumed in the optative statement of the third stanza, "even if we were willing to let it in," where the woman's power over the dream is underpinned by qualities of motherhood ("warm it," "keep it clean").

The diminished dream of the female "I" hidden behind the generic "we" of the poem constructed like the "we" in Eliot's "Prufrock," is to get into the "lukewarm" water of the bathtub. In Eliot-like fashion Brooks explores simultaneously the opposite connotations of the symbolism of water. The "lukewarm" water in a bathroom used by several families, like the diminutive "kitchenette," points to the social and economic effects of oppression and marginalization, while the hope of getting in it suggests the water of renewal, fertility and vegetation, the baptismal water, connected in a very subtle way with water as symbol of femaleness.

The three line final stanza of "kitchenette building" calls again to mind the last three lines of "Prufrock:" "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/ By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us, and we drown."

The movement here is a descending one describing the trajectory of a hopeless life. In Brooks there is an ascending movement of hope. She seems almost to have written the poem as if in response to Eliot while trying to invent an African American poetics.

My reading of "kitchenette building" as a poetic subversion of the aesthetic foundations of the modernist poetics, has been encouraged by Brooks's more recent formulation of her poetics which pleads for a poetry in which meaning is created as much in the poet's act of distilling experience as in the individual act of reading.<sup>7</sup> It posits that from the beginning of her career she rooted her poetic voice in a female-centered racial consciousness, making of

the ordinariness, endurance and resistance of African American womanhood a staple of black experience. Her major role in American poetry can best be judged in the light of her pioneering struggle to create a distinct African American woman's poetic voice, to become what her mother predicted: "the *lady* Paul Laurence Dunbar."<sup>8</sup>

As none of her critics fail to point out, Brooks's poetic career has followed closely the growth of the African American political consciousness in the postwar years. The volumes of the 40s and the 50s, including her novel *Maud Martha* (1953), which center on African American womanhood, are read as marked by the integralist impulse of the consumer society and by Brooks's modernist creed. The rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 50s is reflected in *The Bean Eaters*, in which Brooks maintains the centrality of women's experience, but denounces racial injustice in more compelling and powerful language, opens her poetry to the rhythms of black speech and black music and starts cultivating free verse and open forms. She also develops an interest in the historic event and the raw facts of actuality leading to her verse journalism and political verse in such volumes as *Riot* (1969), *Family Pictures* (1970), *Beckonings* (1975). The impact of the riotous 60s, and particularly of her contact with the Black Arts Movement and black nationalism, as well as her visits to Africa, radicalized her views and her art. The changes are first seen in the volume *In the Mecca* (1968) where her attention starts focusing on heroic male figures of the black community and the revival of an ethnic heritage which includes heroic endurance, strength, pride and humanism. Her volumes of the 80s such as *The Near Johannesburg Boy* (1986), *Blacks* (1987), *Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle* (1988) and the long poem

*Winnie* (1988) increasingly reflect her activism and her concerns for an art which should express the consciousness of the race.

A closer inspection of her poetry may lead to the conclusion that from the very beginning these concerns have been at the core of her poetic enterprise. Despite her emulation of the great modernist masters, particularly Eliot, even in the three volumes prior to *In the Mecca*, Brooks unmistakably identifies herself as a black woman poet. She also establishes herself as a poet who draws on modernist techniques in order to present a microcosm of urban black experience as it is shaped individually and collectively. To the modernist formalist challenge she responds with a novatory use of the rhythms of blues, spirituals, jazz and black speech within the limitations of the fixed forms of the sonnet and the ballad. To the modernist concern with the city she contributes, in Harlem Renaissance fashion, the exploration of the Negro ghetto in an imaginary Bronzeville, a poetic replica of the South side of Chicago. The volumes written after her conversion in the late 1960s to black nationalism and separatism, while shifting focus and perspective, never leave the inside of the black urban community. Her ambitious life-time project of articulating a communal voice and vision to express the consciousness of the race challenges similar modernist projects of producing the modern American epic featuring the poet as hero, from Pound's *Cantos* to Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and Williams's *Paterson*.

The organic growth of Brooks's poetry pointing toward an African American epic is capable of including a wide range of topics based on a woman's inside knowledge of black experience. Among them are black identity and marginalization, life in the inner city, poverty, homelessness, depravation, drugs, incest, child abuse and

abortion, codes and conceptualizations in a male-dominated world, religious beliefs, love, endurance, hope and courage, black pride and black power.

Brooks's modernist allegiances, her avowed poetic aspirations to universality repeatedly stated all through the 50s and early 60s, have determined several critics to read her pre-Mecca poetry as being informed by the integrationist assumptions of the postwar affluent consumer society, addressed primarily to a white readership and therefore failing to deal with the African American perspective. In his Preface to Brooks's autobiography *Report from Part One*, Don Lee writes: "Her work in the late Fifties and early Sixties like that of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison appealed to a wide cross-section. The mood of the land was integration. Come melt with us was in the wind at that time... However, a close reading of Indian history in America or their own history in America would have wiped those illusions out completely. But, even then the 'I'm a writer, not a black writer' madness was in the air and along with it existed other distortions and temptations that forever kept the writers from dealing with their African or African American perspective" (*RPO*, 19).

In Brooks's case, however, the poetic reconstruction of the African American urban community through an accumulation of individual voices, portraits and stories is aimed not so much at documenting and promoting an integrationist project as at identifying the power relations of marginalization and questioning their validity from the view of a woman-centered race consciousness. Indeed, as her poetic voice grows in intensity and authority, the subversive intention of her work becomes more visible and disruptive, but this does not alter the fact that it has been there all the time, targeting the whole mechanism of marginalization.

The early image of the poet-warrior figuring highly in Brooks's African American poetics appears in the fourth sonnet of "The Womanhood" section of *Annie Allen* as an Avenging Angel fighting for the vital space of African Americanism:

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string  
 With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note  
 With hurting love; the music that they wrote  
 Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing  
 Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing  
 For the dear instrument to bear. Devote  
 The bow to silks and honey. Be remote  
 A while from malice and from murdering.  
 But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate  
 In front of you and harmony behind.  
 Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.  
 Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late  
 For having first to civilize a place  
 Wherein to play your violin with grace.

(SP, 54)

The retrieval of the African American ethos is turned into a main strategy of empowerment in the subversion of an oppressive power system. Paradigmatic of all hierarchical power relations of domination, God himself becomes subject of subversion. In a poem like "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," for instance, the critical inquiry into the nature of absolute power is predicated on the juxtaposition of God's power at the center of all creation and the power of warm feelings of human community and friendship which

as Brooks remarked after her visit to East Africa (1971), is part of the African ethnic heritage suggestively expressed in such simple human gestures like “profound handshakes”:<sup>9</sup>

I think it must be lonely to be God.  
 Nobody loves a master. No. Despite  
 The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright  
 Determined reverence of Sunday eyes.

Picture Jehovah striding through the hall  
 Of His importance, creatures running out  
 From servant-corners to acclaim, to shout  
 Appreciation of His merit's glare.

But who walks with Him? - dares to take His arm,  
 To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,  
 Buy him a Coca-Cola or a beer,  
 Pooh-pooh His politics, call Him a fool?

Perhaps - who knows? - He tires of looking down.  
 Those eyes are never lifted. Never straight.  
 Perhaps sometimes He tires of being great  
 In solitude. Without a hand to hold.

(SP, 8)

The multitude of voices and masks in Brooks's poetry substantiated by a diversity of dramatic, narrative and lyrical forms document various instances of oppression and deprivation generated

by their protagonists' location in the force field of power relations. As such the poems also represent points of resistance, overt or covert critiques of the dominant culture, the dominant patriarchy, the corrupted dream and the failed democratic ideal, for their meaning always grows out of an expressed or implied opposition between the white center and the black periphery.

In various degrees, the connection between the personal and the political is always built in the poetic discourse. Even when not directly expressed, "American dream" representations are always present in the subtext functioning as evidence of the violence of the system.

In "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," one of the five individual portraits in *A Street in Bronzeville*, the conflict between the pursuit of the American dream and the reality of his everyday life and racial identity which denies him from ever reaching that dream renders Smith's struggle to achieve social success in the ghetto totally futile, grotesque and ultimately pathetic:

He loiters.

Restaurant vendors

Weep, or out of them rolls a restless glee.

The Lonesome Blues, the Long-lost Blues, I Want A

Big Fat Mama. Down these sore avenues

Comes no Saint-Saëns, no piquant elusive Grieg,

And not Tschaiakovsky's wayward eloquence

And not the shapely tender drift of Brahms.

But could he love them? Since a man must bring

To music what his mother spanked him for

When he was two: bits of forgotten hate,

Devotion: whether or not his mattress hurts:

The little dream his father humored: the thing  
 His sister did for money: what he ate  
 For breakfast - and for dinner twenty years  
 Ago last autumn: all his skipped desserts.  
 The pasts of his ancestors lean against  
 Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.  
 Hundreds of hungers mingle with his own,

(SP, 16)

In a poem like "Negro Hero" the seemingly local oppressive power relations generated by isolated social cases are expanded into a more visible national forefront. The poem is dedicated to Dorie Miller, a World War II hero killed in the South Pacific after he had already been decorated with the Navy Cross for his valor during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>10</sup> Though decorated he is still treated as a "Negro" and made to work in the kitchen of the severely segregated ship. When he again saves the ship at the cost of his life, he does not do it for the white crew ("...it was hardly the Enemy my fight was against/But them..."). He does it for the American dream in which he still believes. His conflictual relation to the idea of patriotism is projected in the image of democracy as a white, welcoming lady who is hiding a knife under her sleeve:

Their white-gowned democracy was my fair lady.  
 With her knife lying cold, straight, in the softness of her  
 sweet-flowing sleeve.  
 But for the sake of the dear smiling mouth and  
 the stuttered promise I toyed with my life.

(SP, 20)

In an imaginary return to America the black hero is confronted with a violent denial not only of his civil rights but also of his humanity:

(In a southern city a white man said  
 Indeed, I'd rather be dead;  
 Indeed, I'd rather be shot in the head  
 Or ridden to waste on the back of a flood  
 Than saved by the drop of a black man's blood.)

(*SP*, 20-21)

**Ironically, he still believes in "a part of their democracy:"**

Naturally, the important thing is, I helped to save them,  
 them and a part of their democracy.

Even if I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to do that for them.

Total skepticism, the loss of the dream, the negation of any possibility and wish of integration or communication are expressed in the jazz rhythms of the poem "We Real Cool:"

We real cool. We  
 Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
 Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
 Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

(*SP*, 73)

Terse in form and sound, drawing on black speech and jazz, the poem illustrates the defiant, cool, deliberately nonconformist attitude of the young pool players who chose the destructive lifestyle and mythos of the black street gang. The final rapping “we” which breaks each line creates a sound equivalent of their perilous existence and diminishes their adolescent arrogance. Truncated, their thoughts betray vulnerability. The last line, “Die soon,” suggests the brevity of their lives being implicitly a warning against the danger of nihilism as a defense mechanism against society.<sup>11</sup>

Though men are usually victims of the physical violence which illustrate the violent nature of the oppression, women have better, more ancestral knowledge of victimization and oppression. The difference is dramatized in Brooks’s entire work. In “The Ballad of Rudolf Reed,” for instance, the protagonist pays with his life the all too American wish of buying for his family a decent and safe place to live, away from the city slum. When the white neighbors, who had repeatedly thrown stones at his windows, hurt his daughter Mabel, Reed’s human dignity and sense of responsibility for his family urge him to act:

He ran like a mad thing into the night.  
 And the words in his mouth were stinking.  
 By the time he had hurt his first white man  
 He was no longer thinking.

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man  
 Rudolph Reed was dead.  
 His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse.  
 "Nigger - " his neighbors said.

(SP, 112)

The accusing silence of the "oak-eyed mother" at the end of the ballad enhances her stature as healer and symbol of unflinching strength and endurance:

Small Mabel whimpered all night long,  
 For calling herself the cause.  
 Her oak-eyed mother did no thing  
 But change the bloody gauze.

(SP, 112)

The centrality of womanhood and motherhood in Brooks's poetry creates easier access to mechanisms of power relations and to strategies of empowerment drawing on the important role of the mother figure in the African American community. The strongest indictment of the violence of the system is uttered by the voice of a mother who killed her unborn children ("the mother"). The poem starts with a powerful epigrammatic line reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's strikingly powerful first lines:

Abortions will not let you forget.  
 You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
 The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair.

(SP, 4)



Almost fifty years after Brooks wrote this poem, Toni Morrison exploited in her Pulitzer novel *Beloved* (1987) the 19th century drama of a slave woman who killed one of her children in order to rescue her from becoming a slave. In an alternative reading, however, the poem could also indicate an inquiry into the double nature of power, destructive and productive, as well as the identification of the female body as both site of power (the role of black motherhood in the family and the community) and locus of domination by patriarchy (the causes which make the mother resort to abortions).

The authority of questioning all systems of domination as a main strategy of empowerment in some of Brooks's finest poems is made possible only because through the controlling vision of her poetry she relates to American culture as a woman. In doing so she supplies for a wide cross-section of the society a common ground of confrontation and/or of possible links, as for instance in the memorable poem "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," where a shared maternal feeling determines a white mother not only to understand the pain of the black mother whose innocent son had been killed by her husband, but also to condemn and hate the criminal husband.

The racial issue is never abandoned, but it never takes the naked form of confession, of personal statement. In "A Bronzeville Mother," where she uses for the first time as poetic subject a real racial conflict which took place in Arkansas in the fifties, anger and hatred are mediated by the same symbolism which designates love and the crossing of the racial boundaries by the commonality of women's experience of motherhood and also of marginalization by

patriarchy. The flower of magnolia, a symbol of the Old South, becomes in the end of the poem a symbol of women's empowerment across races and classes:

She did not scream.

She stood there.

But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,

And its perfume enclasped them - big,

Bigger than all magnolias.

(SP, 80)

As Betsy Erkkila points out, Brooks's use of the bond between a black mother and a white mother as "a source of revolutionary power against an oppressive white/male system" marks her shift of focus from integrationist to an "interracial sisterhood," and anticipates the work of many contemporary women writers, among them Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to many other women writers, like Plath for instance, Brooks never acknowledges any conflict between her roles of mother and wife and that of a poet. Neither does she seem to be embarrassed by the color of her skin. In the opening paragraph of the *Report from Part One* she writes: "When I was a child, it did not occur to me, even once, that the black in which I was encased (I called it brown in those days) would be considered, one day, beautiful. Considered beautiful and called beautiful by great groups. I had always considered it beautiful. I would stick out my arm, examine it, and smile. Charming! And convenient, for mud on my leg was not as annunciatory as was mud on the leg of light Rose Hurd. Charm - and efficiency." (RPO, 37)

As she always keeps a distance between herself and her poems and her particularizations are illustrations of larger truths pointing to the whole community or to universalization, the search for identity is primarily a search for a place on the map of America, informed by a female-defined race consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

The women populating Brooks's poems, particularly before the 1970s, never complain against the roles assigned to them by society and culture. Instead, they despair about the absence of a decent space of existence, they experience the drama of not belonging. *Space* and *color* are two recurrent elements of Brooks's poetry which act as instruments of constructing and deconstructing power relations from the perspective of a female-defined race consciousness. They are both major elements of racial discrimination. The African Americans cannot claim "The land was ours before we were the land's"; neither are their returns to Africa real homecomings, as Brooks herself realized when she wrote in her *Report* after the first visit to Africa: "THE AFRICANS! They insist on calling themselves Africans and their little traveling brothers and sisters 'African Americans' no matter *how* much we want them to recognize our kinship." (*RPO*, 130)

Poem after poem in the woman-centered pieces of *A Street in Bronzeville* relate identity and race consciousness to a female-marked space. An often anthologized poem, "a song in the frontyard," constructs identities and subverts constraining order within the perimeters of the front and the back yards. The submissive "good girl" is imprisoned within the confines of the front yard standing for repressive social codes and conventions:

I've stayed in the front yard all my life.  
 I want a peek at the back  
 Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows.  
 A girl gets sick of a rose.

(SP, 6)

The subversion of traditional symbols of femininity, like the rose, as well as the revaluation of others, like the weed, anticipate the concern of contemporary women poets with the creation of a new feminist symbolic. Sylvia Plath's poppies and Alice Walker's petunias are among the best illustrations. The last stanza of Brooks's poem the transformation of traditional symbolism takes place in the back yard and the back alley as identity-forging places:

And I'd like to be a bad woman, too,  
 And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace  
 And strut down the streets with paint on my face.

Another poem, "hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven," speaks of identity and the victimization of women and conditions the black woman's empowerment by the possession of a place of her own:

My Father, it is surely a blue place  
 And straight. Right. Regular. Where I shall find  
 No need for scholarly nonchalance or looks  
 A little to the left or guards upon the  
 Heart to halt love that runs without crookedness

Along its crooked corridors. My Father,

It is a planned place surely. Out of coils,  
 Unscrewed, released, no more to be marvelous,  
 I shall walk straightly through most proper halls  
 Proper myself, princess of properness.

(*SP*, 5-6)

Like the “gray” people in the “kitchenette building” the hunchback girl is equally a victim of God’s planning (her hunchback/race) and of the constraints imposed by society (“scholarly nonchalance guards upon the heart” and “crooked corridors”).

In the poem “vacant lot” the loss of the African home is related not only to racial marginalization but also to sexual oppression:

Mrs. Coley's three-flat brick  
 Isn't here any more.  
 All done with seeing her fat little form  
 Burst out of the basement door;  
 And with seeing her African son-in-law  
 (Rightful heir to the throne)  
 With his great white strong cold squares of teeth  
 And his little eyes of stone;  
 And with seeing the squat fat daughter  
 Letting in the men  
 When majesty has gone for the day -  
 And letting them out again.

(*SP*, 11)

The relation between racial and sexual politics is even more evident in Brooks's use of skin color to define not so much inter- as intra-racial power relations of male domination.<sup>14</sup> The traditional female beauty of the race expressed in the "sweet chocolate" skin color in "The Anniad" section of *Annie Allen* or simply "chocolate" in "the ballad of chocolate Mabbie," is despised or berated by black men in accordance with an oppressive hierarchy of colors which reproduces the white-black interracial relations of domination and oppression.

Chocolate Mabbie is left by her black boy friend for a lighter skinned girl. The description of her boy-friend and his new love serves as an objective correlative for her emotions:

Out came the saucily bold Willie Boone.  
It was woe for our Mabbie now.  
He wore like a jewel a lemon-hued lynx  
With sand-waves loving her brow.

(SP, 7)

In "The Anniad" the black man of a lighter color berates the "sweet chocolate" beauty of the black girl, just as he berates the purity of her soul and of her body:

And a man of tan engages  
For the springtime of her pride,  
Eats the green by easy stages,  
Nibbles at the root beneath  
With intimidating teeth.  
But no ravishment enrages.  
No dominion is defied.

(SP, 39)

The metamorphoses of blackness in Brooks's poetry mark various stages in the awakening of the racial consciousness. As Brooks moves from an integrationist to a radical view on how African American issues should be solved, the "gray" people of "kitchenette building" turn into the "yellow" faces of *The Bean Eaters* who have lost all hope in ever being part of the American dream. In a bitter contrast across time with Tennyson's *The Lotus Eaters*, in a life of total poverty the only consolation of the "old yellow pair" of bean eaters at the "fringes" of society is remembering, remembering old faces of poverty and deprivation:

And remembering...

Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,

As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that

is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,

tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

(SP, 72)

Triumphant Black becomes the proud symbol of the power of the race only starting with the poems included in the "After the Mecca" section of *In the Mecca*, a breakthrough into a new awareness of the poet's role in forging the consciousness of the race. Brooks had already acquired a public militant voice. "The Sermon on the Warpland," the first of the two sermons at the end of the volume, uses as epigraph a quote from Ron Karenga: "The fact that we are black is our ultimate reality" and is a celebration of black power as a new divinity at the center of the universe. The poem starts with a separatist call with biblical underpinnings: "My people, black and black, revile the River./ Say that the River turns, and turn the

River..." It is a cosmic, Luciferic call to the overthrowing of the very principle of hierarchical, oppressive authoritative power:

Say that our Something in doublepod contains  
 seeds for the coming hell and health together.  
 Prepare to meet  
 (sisters, brothers) the brash and terrible weather;  
 the pains;  
 the bruising; the collapse of bestials, idols.<sup>15</sup>

The collapsed divine order will be replaced by a new Church of black love, unity and permanence:

Build now your Church, my brothers, sisters. Build  
 never with brick nor Corten nor with granite.  
 Build with lithe love. With love like lion-eyes.  
 With love like morningrise.  
 With love like black, our black -  
 luminously indiscreet;  
 complete; continuous.

This extraordinary change in the scope, vision and tone of her poetry occurred in 1967. It reflected the radicalization of the Black Movement in that explosive decade and it was precipitated by Brooks's contact with Black Power and the Black Arts Movement (also called the Black Aesthetic) at the Second Fisk University Writers Conference in Nashville. There she met influential Black writers and artists activists such as Amiri Baraka, John Killens, Hoyt Fuller and Ron Milner. In her *Report from Part One* she calls the

conference “a turning point” in her life and she admits that “Until 1967 my own blackness did not confront me with a shrill spelling of itself. I knew that I was what most people were calling ‘a Negro’...Suddenly there was New Black to meet.” (*RPO*, 83,84)

From now on her writing is totally dominated by the figure of this New Black. In the *Report* she writes: “There is indeed a new black today. He’s a tall-walker. Almost firm. By many of his own *brothers* he is not understood. And he is understood by *no* white. Not the wise white; not the Schooled white; not the Kind white.” (85) The New Black serves as a model to construct in her poetry heroic figures that would fit in the new mythology of Black Power. The monumental stature of Malcolm X in the poem with the same name, combines force, maleness and charisma:

Original,  
Ragged-round.  
Rich-robust.

He had the hawk-man’s eyes.  
We gasped. We saw the maleness.  
The maleness raking out and making guttural the air  
and pushing us to walls.

And in a soft and fundamental hour  
a sorcery devout and vertical  
beguiled the world.

He opened us -  
who was a key,

who was a man.

(*IM*, 39)

The mythmaking project is in fact a debunking of the myths of Western culture, their re-writing from the view point of a new African American consciousness. In "The Leaders," for instance, Brooks includes on the list "Harry Belafonte, King,/ Black Jesus, Stokely, Malcolm X or Rap." and she adds "Bungled trophies./ Their country is a Nation on no map." (*IM*, 45). In "Gang Girls," "Mary is/ a rose in a whiskey glass." (*IM*, 47), and the poem "As Seen by Disciplines" in "The Blackstone Rangers" section of "After Mecca" introduces the disciples of the New Jesus as members of a street gang: "There they are./ Thirty at the corner./ Black, raw, ready./ Sores in the city/ that do not want to heal." (*IM*, 44)

"Raw" like "black" becomes a favorite word in the new poetic discourse. In the poems "The Chicago Picasso" and "The Wall" paired under the title "Two Dedications," she contrasts two kinds of art, "cooked" high art, "a requiring courtesan," and "raw" art, the art of the people, for the people, about the unsung heroes of the community, art as represented by the Wall, a mural on a slum building in Chicago "communicating black dignity." (*IM*, 42) It is a monument worshipping Black Power:

"black boy-men./ Black/boy-men on roofs fist out 'Black Power!'"

"The Wall" is the new *ars poetica* of an artist engaged in the difficult task of forging a new consciousness, a new mythology, a new prophecy. In the *Report from Part One*, Brooks suggests the difficulty of the task: "I - who have 'gone the gamut' from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun - am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress. I have hopes for myself." (*RPO*, 86).

The split in the volume *In the Mecca* between the woman-centered poems in the bigger "In the Mecca" section which segregates women into motherhood, and the heroic, men-centered ones praising the New Black in "After the Mecca," indicates the determination of Brooks's poetic self to inhabit a consciousness which is primarily racial. As she has moved into the public space of political activism, her poetry has become more dedicated to constructing a heroic mythology of black male power. She sees Black woman's role exclusively as supportive of this power. In one of her interviews in answer to the question: "Does the black woman have a special responsibility to be independent, to redefine her role in life?" she refers, among other issues, to what she feels about the women's movement: "I think Women's Lib is not for black women for the time being, because black men need their women beside them, supporting them in these very tempestuous days" (*RPO*, 179). As she pleads for control and leadership, she increasingly assumes the role of a female preacher and that of a mother figure for the black community. The quiet, enduring heroism of black womanhood has been turned into a myth of the poet as hero, as spiritual leader of the race.

Ironically, this takes Brooks full circle back to the white man's tradition. As with most American poets, in Brooks's case the break away from the modernist boundaries was marked by a rediscovery of Whitman, or rather of a romantic tradition which placed the poet at the center of the universe. The intended organic growth of her work into an epic of the urban African American community, having as hero the poet engaged in the search for the word to express the consciousness of the race, is highlighted by Brooks's actual presence in the public space of identity politics.

It is the merit of such powerful poets like her to have enriched the Emersonian triadic definition of the poet as seer, namer and prophet with the qualification of “doer.” As a doer she has dedicated herself increasingly to the young, to whom she also addressed her most recent book *Children Coming Home* (1992).

In her major role of poet-warrior she urges them, and through them the future of the race, to keep up the spirit of the battle:

Say to them,  
 say to the down-keepers,  
 the sun-slappers,  
 the self-soilers,  
 the harmony-hushers,  
 “Even if you are not ready for the day  
 it cannot always be night.”  
 You will be right.  
 For that is the hard home-run.

And remember:  
 live not for Battles Won.  
 Live not for The-End-of-the-Song.  
 Live in the along.<sup>16</sup>

## **7. Walking Boundaries: Ethnic Heritage and Self-Definition in the Poetry of Joy Harjo**

The rebellious 1960s which brought with them an acute awareness of difference and identity politics, opened a new chapter in the history of ethnic representation. The further emphasis of the 70s on ethnicity has proved essential in forging the multicultural consciousness of the late 80s and early 90s which has been changing the face of American culture more than any other postwar development.

The impressive number of women writers belonging to various ethnic groups who have largely determined the disruptive changes operated in the literary canon in the last two decades shows to what extent feminism has played the essential role of catalyst in this process. Even a summary look at the influential standard anthologies of American Literature, such as the Norton series for instance, indicates that the single important revisionary shift of focus has been produced in the representation of women and ethnicity, and that in most cases ethnicity is represented by women: Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Wendy Rose, Linda Hogan, Lorna Dee Cervantes,

Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Cathy Song.

Women writers have been particularly instrumental in the Native American Renaissance taking place in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The political dimension of the phenomenon is inescapable. By the end of the 60s the only Native American writer to have received public recognition was Scott Momaday whose novel *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the 1968 Pulitzer Prize. By the end of the 80s, American literature featured a remarkable section of Native American writers including mostly women, among them Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo.<sup>2</sup> Their early affirmation in the 70s occurred in the context of the growing influence of the feminist movement all through the decade as well as of the Indian struggle for tribal self-determination which reached a high point in the 1973, with the American Indian Movement's sixty-seven-day standoff with government soldiers at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Drawing on the strong oral tradition of stories and songs in Native American culture, most women writers started their careers with volumes of poetry, yet they later resorted more often or even exclusively to prose as a medium more suited to the storyteller. Silko's first volume, *Laguna Woman* (1974), a book of poems, was followed in 1977 by her novel *Ceremony*, which established her reputation as prominent prose writer while Erdrich's first published volume, *Jacklight* (1984), remained so far her only book of poetry. Explaining her option Erdrich writes: "I began as a poet, writing poetry, I began to tell stories in the poems and then realized that there was not enough room in a poem unless you are a John Milton and write enormous volumes of poetry. There was not enough room

to really tell the story. I just began to realize that I wanted to be a fiction writer; that's a bigger medium, you know. I have a lot more room and it's closer to the oral tradition of sitting around and telling stories. But I think in the book you try to make the language do some of the same things, metaphysically and sensuously, physically, that poetry can do."<sup>3</sup>

Joy Harjo, a member of the Creek (Muscogee) tribe, who published her first volume of verse, *The Last Song*, in 1975, one year after Silko's *Laguna Woman*, has remained faithful to her poetic call, despite her many other artistic and literary preoccupations as painter, musician and educational TV filmmaker. Her volumes of poetry also include *What Moon Drove Me to This?* (1979), *She Had Some Horses* (1983), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), and a book of combined media, *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989), in which she merges prose poetry and visual imagery taken from the work of photographer Stephen Strom.

In "Writing with the Sun," Harjo indicates as the main shaping force of her poetry her ethnic heritage "as a Muscogee woman from Oklahoma, of a people who were exiled from their homelands by people who spoke his [the English] language."<sup>4</sup> As with all Native American writers, owing to the multiethnic character of Indian culture, identification of the tribal background and geographical location becomes a prerequisite of the critical approach to Harjo's literary production. A half-breed, like most contemporary Native American writers, Harjo, a registered member of the Creek tribe, was born and raised in Oklahoma, but attended high school at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, and received her

bachelor of Arts degree from the University of New Mexico, where she is now a professor of English.

She describes herself in terms which highlight the walking boundaries of her identity: "I am from Oklahoma. But that isn't my only name. I am a Creek and other Oklahoma/Arkansas people. I am a woman, many women. The namings can go on and on and it is frustrating to name someone or something, when in the real world all is in motion, in a state of change."<sup>5</sup> Oklahoma and New Mexico provide the geographical setting of most of her poems, while their spiritual and psychological underlying structure is deeply indebted to the Creeks' cultural heritage and their history of proud resistance to the Americans' repeated attempts to chase them away from their ancient homelands of Alabama and Georgia.<sup>6</sup>

In "Writing with the Sun" Harjo places the emergence of her poetry in the larger context of the Native American Renaissance, and of the rise of the ethnic consciousness in the 1970s. As she writes: "When I came to poetry it was through the struggles of tribal peoples to assert our human rights, to secure our sovereign rights as nations in the early seventies. It was the struggle begun by my grandmothers and grandfathers when they fought the move from our homelands in the Southeast to Indian Territory. This, too, was my personal struggle as a poet. It was in this wave of cultural renaissance for Indian peoples in this country that I heard the poetry that would change me... This poetry named me as it jolted the country into sharp consciousness." (WS, 73) This was the poetry of Simon Ortiz, Leslie Silko and Scott Momaday, which she describes as being deeply rooted in the land: "[a poetry] of this land, a land that mothers all those who step out onto the earth from between their mothers' legs. The land had fed each of us, clothed us, blessed us."(WS, 73)

Poetry, as Harjo emphasizes in all her interviews and essays, was her way out of a silence which expressed an identity "eaten up by fear" in a predominantly white world in which her parents' divorce and the difficulties her mother encountered in her single handed struggle to raise her children did nothing but accentuate the racial split.(WS, 72)

Throughout her poetry the land plays a central role in the process of self-definition implying the negotiation of boundaries between two worlds sharply divided culturally and historically and a self divided by the multiple marginalization of its difference of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

At the surface level there is the "Promised Land" of contemporary America, present in the contemporary setting of Harjo's poems and marked by the itineraries of her speakers' numerous journeys across the country. This land is constantly juxtaposed to an Indian land of traditions, myths and legends, the realm of the storyteller. Its recovery in the poetic act of naming by memory and also by the self's emotional investment in the actual land makes possible the tribal survival and the wholeness of the self.

The projection of the self as one in a long line of tribal survivors is performed within the boundaries of the Creek lands, as the poet announces programmatically in the title poem of her chapbook *The Last Song*:

it is the only way  
 i know how to breath  
 an ancient chant  
 that my mother knew  
 came out of history

woven from wet grass  
 in her womb  
 and i know no other way  
 than to surround my voice  
 with the summer songs of crickets  
 in this moist south night air

oklahoma will be the last song  
 i'll ever sing.<sup>7</sup>

As the bond between the earth, creation and power only hinted at here suggests throughout her poetry, the retrieval of the ancestors' land implies not so much a reconstruction of the past through myth and legend as the recovery of a sacred ancestral vision of the universe. It is a vision drawing on the Creek cosmology centered on the belief in a source of all life as a formless spiritual force which permeates the whole existence, blurring the frontiers between the animal and the human worlds, between humans and other creatures. Among its most powerful manifestations are the sun, as symbol of light and life-force, the earth, symbolizing fertility and strength and several animals, such as the bear of the snake, which symbolize the earthly force of wisdom and ruling authority. The view of life as a cyclic continuum of a harmoniously connected universe in permanent transformation by the agency of legendary persons or animals speaking human tongues, informs a celebratory culture, which praises change and a perpetual motion of renewal.<sup>8</sup>

The recovery of this vision, indispensable to Harjo's entire poetic project which negotiates the borders of her own identity and that of her race in a changing world of renewed affirmation of

difference, depends on the empowerment she hopes to get from that earth as symbol of life-force vitality and fertility associated with creation, birth and womanhood.

In "Writing with the Sun" she describes the rise of her poetry from this particular kind of earth-centered vision, in which the land preserves the imprint of the prehistory and history of her people as a warrant of their survival: " Everything merged those early summer mornings... There was a stillness at that hour throughout the land, as the damp earth shivered in anticipation of the sun... In this time of peace, of refuge, I would dig to smell and touch the dark earth near the foundation of the house, that which was mother to my spirit. I would make things of the earth, and sing - my own gift to the struggle as was the chirruping of the birds, the rhythmic clip of insects, the arabesque of the dragonfly - who all wished to be named morning... That combination of voices was poetry, and therein was my first understanding of poetry. All living things were linked by this transformation, from the cadence of a wind through the flowering bushes to the natural dips and curves of the earth traveling out in all directions from the center of the world." (WS, 70)

The emphasis on earth as a repository of "songs," of "stories," is a red thread running through all her poetry: "I loved to travel the earth, the earth that fed me with stories," confesses Harjo in "Writing with the Sun." (WS,71) The interrelationship between her poetry ("song" and "story") and the Indian land is rendered vivid in a unique combination of sound and image in the volume *Secrets from the Center of the World*, which re-maps the world identifying the Indian country as its new center.

Containing thirty prose poems and thirty landscape photographs, the book starts with a statement of centrality requiring

an adjustment of vision: "My house is the red earth; it could be the center of the world. I've heard New York, Paris, or Tokyo called the center of the world, but I say it is magnificently humble. You could drive and miss it. Radio waves can obscure it. Words cannot construct it, for there are some sounds left to sacred wordless form."<sup>9</sup> The rest of the book documents this statement building toward an enactment of the spirit of the place. The overall intention is explained by Harjo in the poetic preface to the volume: "All landscapes have a history, much the same as people exist within cultures, even tribes. There are distinct voices, languages that belong to particular areas. There are voices inside rocks, shallow washes, shifting skies; they are not silent. And there is movement, not always the violent motion of earthquakes associated with the earth's motion or the steady unseen swirl through the heavens, but other motion, subtle, unseen, like breathing. A motion, a sound, that if you allow your own inner workings to stop long enough, moves into the place inside you that mirrors a similar landscape; you too can see it, feel it, hear it, know it."(*SCW*, "Preface").

The movement of the book is circular, like the movement of all Harjo's books. The last poem, in conjunction with a photograph of the majestic Indian red mesas, confirms that the reader has accomplished the journey to the new center of the earth enjoying its uniqueness: "It is an honor to walk where all around me stands an earth house made of scarlet, of jet, of ochre, of white shell. It is more than beautiful at the center of the world." (*SCW*, 60) To sustain this conclusion the book has explored what John Scarry describes as a network of relationships between humans and other life, between past and present, and between the cosmic connections of an "unimaginable distant past and an equally mysterious future."<sup>10</sup> Via

memory, the poet's combined with that of the artist, brings all these relationships together in a simultaneity of past and future, of dreams and reality, as for instance, in the following poem: "Moencopi Rise stuns me into perfect relationship, as I feed a skinny black dog the rest of my crackers, drink coffee, contemplate the frozen memory of stones. Nearby are the footprints of dinosaurs, climbing toward the next century." (SCW, 12)

Thriving on Indian cosmology, Harjo's poetry could easily have turned into the romantic infatuation of the poet mastering the fearful force of the universe. Instead, in poem after poem, her vision supported by a new understanding of power occasions a most challenging critique of the relations of domination-marginalization which extend to present day America. Subject to a continuous transforming motion, the land in her poetry becomes a vast force field of power relations in which she dramatizes a many-voiced marginalization - her search for identity as an American Indian, woman and mother, as well as the sacred dimension of the Indian survival. In an interview given in the early 80s, defining her responsibility as a writer Harjo says: "I feel strongly that I have a responsibility to all the sources that I am: to all past and future ancestors, to my home country, to all places that I touch down on and that are myself, to all voices, all women, all of my tribe, all people, all earth, and beyond that to all beginnings and endings. In a strange kind of sense it frees me to believe in myself, to be able to speak, to have voice, because I have to; it is my survival."<sup>11</sup>

All Native American writers address the issue of cultural heritage. Most of them do it by exploiting the rich Indian oral tradition with its emphasis on the cultural and social role of the storyteller which helps them reconstruct the past. Permanently

“traveling in and out of the two worlds,” Harjo seems to be more interested in documenting the world of the present. (WW, Striving to redeem the present she resurrects a vision of the past patterned on the harmonious interrelations nurtured by the Indian cosmology. Many of her poems are, in her own words, “about trying to find the way back” to “a different place, a mythical place,” which she further describes as “a spiritual landscape that Oklahoma is part of.” (WW, 56) As she confirms what her poetry confesses, the return always occurs on a mythical level: “I always see Oklahoma as my mother, my motherland. I am connected physically; there is a birth cord that connects me;” the Creek heritage provides “the undelying psychic structure, within which is a wealth of memory.” (WW, 56,57)

Harjo’s first two volumes abound in contemporary journeys across the North American continent and in precise references to cities like Chicago, Kansas City, Albuquerque, Gallup, or whole regions like Oklahoma and New Mexico, while starting with *She Had Some Horses*, the journeys often take place in an interior landscape. The overall intention seems to be that of documenting the American Indians’ present marginalization, to establish a negative symbolism of the city, to detect in their dispossession of the land the main cause of their decay and to discover in the memory of their bond with the land and cultural heritage kept alive by songs and stories, a future promise of their survival.

Numerous departures and images of airports reenact the intentionality of the poetic act, marking the starting point of a return pattern. As in “3AM,” modern American technology (the Albuquerque airport) and the moral foundations of the American consciousness fail to help the Indians get to their destination:

3AM  
 in the albuquerque airport  
 trying to find a flight  
 to old oraibi, third mesa  
 TWA  
 is the only desk open  
 bright lights outline new york  
 chicago  
 and the attendant doesn't know  
 that the third mesa  
 is a part of the center  
 of the world  
 and who are we  
 just two indians  
 at three in the morning  
 trying to find a way back <sup>12</sup>

"Trying to find a way back" turns out to be an impossibility in postindustrial America. The only accomplished flight is that of the imagination which knows that "...third mesa/ is part of the center/ of the world." It is however a return to the landscape of memory, the perception of the self:

and then I remembered  
 that time simon  
 took a yellow cab  
 out to acoma from albuquerque  
 a twenty-five dollar ride  
 to the center of himself

**3AM is not too late  
to find the way back**

The speakers of Harjo's poems are always trapped in the enclosed spaces of busy cities, narrow streets, crowded bars, crummy apartments, stuffy rooms. Quite often they are preys to alcoholism, gambling, drugs and violence. Her last two volumes, *She Had Some Horses* and particularly, *In Mad Love and War*, with its more openly manifested political stance, point an accusing finger at the causes of the ethnic disaster. In "Autobiography" the Indians are "the stolen people of a stolen land," and "trespassers in the promised land;" in "Deer Dance" they are "Indian ruins" and "broken survivors," "dispossessed people" in "Grace" or "those who were never meant to survive" in "Anchorage."<sup>13</sup>

Particularly in the poems of these last two volumes, Harjo's perception of "the night/ of a split world" ("Legacy") and her negative image of the city as symbol not so much of the technological age as of white America, offers a re-interpretation of the notion of wilderness as basic element in the American myth of mission - the "errand into the wilderness."<sup>14</sup> The land as wilderness which was conquered by the first colonists out of fear, is imbued in Harjo's poetry with the life-force of the whole creation which poetry re-creates in the act of naming and remembering the land. The land is the female body, woman giving birth and passing the Indian heritage down from one generation to another, securing the survival as in the almost didactic poem "Remember:"

**Remember the sky that you were born under,  
know each of the star's stories.**

**Remember the moon, know who she is. I met her  
in a bar once in Iowa City.**

**Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
and the giving away to night.**

**Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of  
her life, and her mother's, and hers.**

**Remember your father. He is your life, also.**

**Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth  
brown earth, we are earth.**

**Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have  
their tribes, their families, their histories, too.**

**Talk to them,  
listen to them. They are alive poems.**

**Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the  
origin of this universe. I heard her singing Kiowa war  
dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central once.**

The recovery of the ethnic heritage is again possible only in the landscape of the mind, as part of the process of the poet's self-definition:

**Remember that you are all people and that all people  
are you.**

**Remember that you are this universe and that this  
universe is you.**

**Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.**

**Remember that language comes from this.**

**Remember the dance that language is, that life is,**

**Remember.**

Opposed to the transfigured land illuminated by the tribal vision retrieved by the poetic imagination, the city, as Harjo describes it, becomes the really threatening wilderness, "a wilderness of concrete and steel, made within a labyrinth of mind." (*WW*, 64) In "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars (for we remember the story and must tell it again so we may all live)," a powerful poem dedicated to the memory of a young woman martyr, member of the American Indian Movement, who was found killed by a bullet fired at the back of her head by "unidentified" murderers, the poet juxtaposes the image of the land of "the dappled stars" with that of the "steely cities:"

You are the one whose spirit is present in the  
dappled stars.  
 (They prance and lope like colored horses who stay with us  
 through the streets of these steely cities. And I  
have seen them  
 nuzzling the frozen bodies of tattered drunks  
on the corner).  
(*IM*, 7)

In "Deer Dance," a poem which tells the story of a young American Indian strip-tease dancer, a "Buffalo Calf Woman come back" in a cold, sordid bar, the city is symbolized by "the bar of broken survivors, the club of shotgun, knife wound, of/ prison by culture..." while the girl represents "the end of beauty," "deer magic" and "the myth slipped down through dreamtime." (*IM*, 5) The two notions of wilderness are juxtaposed again in "For Alva Benson, And For Those Who Have Learned to Speak," where "the ground still

spoke beneath/ mortar and concrete,"or in the story of the sunken  
 "Anchorage," where:

Once a storm of boiling earth cracked open  
 the streets, threw open the town.  
 It's quiet now, but underneath the concrete  
 is the cooking earth,  
 and above that, air  
 which is another ocean, where spirits we can't see  
 are dancing            joking            getting full

The characteristic Harjo landscape is animated by motion and an Indian ancient spiritualism kept alive by the oral tradition. Space extends to cosmic proportions, the American landscape becomes the inner landscape of the soul, the journeys across the continent turn into inward journeys of the self to the sources of the power represented by the Native American heritage.

Harjo makes her poetry innovative and compelling, particularly because she reads the tribal heritage as woman-centered and woman-transmitted, thus making of it a supreme form of poetic empowerment. Without retelling creation myths in which women are "repositories and transmitters of culture,"(WW, 5), she explores the representation of the land as woman, and tells stories of women in contemporary America that are meant to equally emphasize the nature of their marginalization and of their inherent power.

While in order to deal with her "otherself" Harjo invents in *The Moon Drove Me To This?* a persona, Noni Daylight, to travel freely in space and time and to take upon herself some of the fears and pains produced by a split world and a split self, in *She Had Some*

*Horses*, the woman speaker, crossing the border which divides the land of the Indians appears to be able to contain and master the oppositions of a highly polarized world which mark her multiple marginalization.

The title poem, one of the most anthologized of Harjo's poems, works its way through an accumulation of overlapping, often violently clashing images to document the depths of women's marginalization, their lives on the border, and further identify the Indian land as represented by woman:

She had horses who were bodies of sand.  
 She had horses who were maps drawn of blood.  
 She had horses who were skins of ocean water.  
 She had horses who were the blue air of the sky.  
 She had horses who were fur and teeth.  
 She had horses who were clay and would break.  
 She had horses who were splintered red cliff.

She had some horses.

She had horses with long, pointed breasts.  
 She had horses with full, brown thighs.  
 She had horses who laughed too much.  
 She had horses who threw rocks at glass houses.  
 She had horses who licked razor blades.

She had some horses.

(*SH*, 63)

Investigating the paradoxes of woman's existence the poem elaborates on the idea of women's fears and silences as well as on their victimization by acceptance of their marginalization through socially imposed roles and values:

She had horses who whispered in the dark, who were afraid to speak.

She had horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who  
carried knives to protect themselves from ghosts.

She had horses who waited for destruction.

She had horses who waited for resurrection.

She had some horses.

She had horses who got down on their knees for any saviour

She had horses who thought their high price had saved them.

She had horses who tried to save her, who climbed in her  
bed at night and prayed as they raped her.

She had some horses.

As the obsessive refrain “she had some horses” suggests, women’s power of living on the border and bridging the polarity of the world and of the self draws on their deep knowledge of the equality of difference and perfect equilibrium of the Indian mythical world. Used by Harjo in many other poems, horses combine here traditional western symbolism indicative of sexuality and Native American spiritualism pointing to the spirits existing everywhere in the Indians’ sacred and harmoniously related universe. The refrain changes significantly in the last line of the poem:

She had some horses she loved.

She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses.

In the poems of *She Had Some Horses* women only begin to acquire a vague awareness of their power. They timidly try to overcome their fears and silences as Harjo herself better articulates her search for identity. As she confesses in an interview, her stories, usually about contemporary women, are mostly imagined, because she likes “to add” to real stories, to “often make them larger,” so that some women may become “composites of many women” she knows. (WW, 62)

Told in the voice of an impartial observer, the poem “The Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor” is a perfect illustration of the technique Harjo uses to reach her goal. The young Native American woman hanging in space from the 13th floor window of an East Chicago ghetto thinking that in death “she will be set free,” could be any oppressed woman whose speechlessness is the result of unnamed fears.<sup>15</sup> The observer who has the double perspective of somebody watching from the crowd down in the street as well as that of a camera eye placed in the consciousness of the woman, extends her nightmare and her speechless despair to a large category of women cutting across racial divide:

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window  
on the east side of Chicago is not alone.  
She is a woman of children, of the baby, Carlos,  
and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest.  
She is her mother's daughter and her father's son.  
She is several pieces between the two husbands  
she has had. She is all the women of the apartment  
building who stand watching her, watching themselves.

(SH, 22)

The ending is deliberately an open one. After her whole life unfolds in her mind, "Her teeth break off at the edges./ She would speak." Nevertheless the question still remains whether the woman will let go and fall from the 13th floor or she will reconsider her life, "claim herself again," and climb back through her apartment window:

The woman hangs from the 13th floor window crying for  
the lost beauty of her own life. She sees the  
sun falling west over the grey plane of Chicago.  
She thinks she remembers listening to her own life  
break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor  
window on the east side of Chicago, or as she  
climbs back up to claim herself again.

The unnamed woman's story has the power of suggesting any woman's struggle against speechlessness, fear and despair, thus reaching out, like many other Harjo poems, to a pan-Indian and further, to a universal female consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

Asked by Laura Coltelli whether she can see any connection between feminism and tribal heritage, given the fact that some Indian cultures are woman-oriented, Harjo emphasized the importance of "the earth as woman" in some tribal cultures, the idea that women are generally recognized as "physically, electrically more grounded, in tune with the earth," but also the fact that many of the old values "have evolved, or devolved, into male-centered, male-dominated cultures, following the pattern of the dominant Euro-culture that is American." (WW, 60) Instead of "feminism" she thinks that the term

“empowerment” might better describe a corresponding concept in the tribal world, where women share the responsibility of the survival of the race.

Harjo’s last volume *In Mad Love and War*, reflects a new face of her personal struggle for self-definition as a Native American woman poet. The voices of her poems become more angry, the personal merges with the political, in the force field of power relations the attention is no longer exclusively focused on domination and victimization, but increasingly on forms of struggle and resistance. The poet acquires the larger consciousness of women everywhere confronted with similar forms of marginalization, and the courage to affirm her difference. Significantly, in the book’s acknowledgement she thanks Audre Lorde, “for her warrior self, her fierce and tender poetry,” and she includes in “The Wars” section a quote from another poet warrior, June Jordan. In “City of Fire” the speaker relates the separate worlds of women’s experience by pouring into them the revolutionary fire of her passionate commitment to changing the world. The old imagery of her poetry is imbued with new connotations:

I am a house with many rooms.  
 There is no end.  
 Each room is a street to the next world.  
 Where live other cities beneath  
 incendiary skies...

(*IM*, 41)

The end of the poem leaves no doubt about Harjo’s new poetic voice, and the new sisterhood in which it is grounded:



associated here with the survival of the race and the creation of the poem through woman's self-sacrifice:

And the ground spoke when she was born.  
 Her mother heard it. In Navajo she answered  
 as she squatted down against the earth  
 to give birth. It was now when it happened,  
 now giving birth to itself again and again  
 between the legs of women.

Or maybe it was the Indian Hospital  
 in Gallup. The ground still spoke beneath  
 mortar and concrete. She strained against the  
 metal stirrups, and they tied her hands down  
 because she still spoke with them when they  
 muffled her screams. But her body went on  
 talking and the child was born into their  
 hands, and the child learned to speak  
 both voices.

The earth represented as a woman's body will continue to supply stories, to keep life going: "And we go on, keep giving birth and watch/ ourselves die, over and over./ And the ground spinning beneath us/ goes on talking." (*SH*, 34)

The recovery of the ethnic heritage, of a tribal vision as a means of empowerment, is done through exploration of the Indian oral tradition. It involves resurrection of songs and dances, as well as of storytelling drawing on memory as a link between generations, on the forging of a new language able to re-create the world through

naming and on the audience's active participation in the creation of meaning.

Referring to the Native American writer's inherited role of story-teller, Momaday distinguishes as the most important common denominator of the writer and the storyteller the fact that "[each] is concerned to create himself and his audience in language." (*WW*, 93) Harjo's project of creating a language capable of expressing the tribal vision, "the spirit of the place," is closely related to her own search for self-definition. She builds the woman-identified, land-centered language of her poetry against the male-centered English language with its static emphasis on nouns. (*WW*, 62-63) It is a language born of a combination of sound, image and motion which energizes the process of naming. Such images as the earth, the sun, the moon, water, trees, animals and birds coming from the depth of the mythical Indian past keep changing their shapes and significations. The poet's ambition is to recover the songs of the earth in the interrelation of all elements of existence, in continuous motion and process of change. In "Bird" she speaks of the poet's aspiration of capturing the music of the interrelated universe as a supreme poetic aspiration: "We are chords to/ other chords to other chords, if we're lucky, to melody." (*IM*, 21) In "Bleed Through" she offers a perfect sample of a new and compelling poetic language based on synaesthesia which create powerful visual and sound effects in an attempt to transcend words:

What attracts cannot naturally be separated.

A black hole reversed is a white-hot star,

unravels this night

inside a song that is the same wailing cry as blue.

There are no words, only sounds  
   that lead us into the darkest nights,  
 where stars burn into ice  
   where the dead arise again  
   to walk in shoes of fire.

(*IM*, 36)

The ongoing process of change in the balanced world of the Indian past is paralleled by the transforming power of poetry. In the prose-poem "Transformations" the speaking "I" explains a poetic mechanism informed by the transformative vision of the unity of the universe: "...I know you can turn a poem into something else. This poem could be a bear treading the far northern tundra, smelling of air for sweet alive meat. Or a piece of seaweed stumbling in the sea, Or a blackbird, laughing. What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else, if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live."(*IM*, 59)

Adrienne Rich praised "Transformations" for being "a claiming of power, the power of the poetic act, the courage and grace and knowledge it takes to reach, through the right words, the right meanings into that place in the other where the most precious animals live."<sup>17</sup> From its vantage point on the border between more than two worlds, Harjo's poetry forging its own language "out of language of exclusion," reaches out to a unity of the world and of the self, which can be attained only by recognizing their infinite diversity. As a poet and activist for ethnic rights, Harjo feels it her duty "to educate people to the diversity within themselves and the diversity of America."<sup>18</sup> In doing so her poetry touches upon the very soul of today's America.

## EPILOGUE

This is the place in my book which was for a while held by a much longer epilogue entitled "Silent Voices: The Subversion of Power in Contemporary Romanian Women's Poetry." It was a chapter which I had written before most of the others and my intention was to open through it a cross-cultural view meant to highlight the construction of power relations in women's poetry and the idea of gender as a historical and cultural construct with stress on the political dimension.

After a semester spent at Duke University in the fall of 1994, mostly teaching and discussing Romanian and American contemporary women's poetry, I have decided to withdraw it from publication. Teaching is itself a form of learning. As I was teaching for the first time these two poetries and I could see the impact the Romanian poems had on my audience, I knew that my chapter was much too narrow for the intensity and importance of the Romanian women's poetry, for its force of fusing the human and the poetic truth. I realized that my disproportionate treatment of the two poetries would condemn Romanian women's poetry to a new kind of marginalization, a cultural one, when my intention was precisely to show how these women poets broke the boundaries of marginalization and how the articulation of their silence was a constant poetic subversion of the force lines and the power structures of the totalitarian regime.

The way in which Romanian and American women's poetries illuminate each other deserves the space of a whole book which in my mind I have already written. In anticipation of that book I shall end this one with a poem by the Romanian poet Ana Blandiana:

Sometimes I dream my body's  
 Caught up in wrinkled nets,  
 And pulled through snow  
 On the frozen shining shore  
 Of a clear sea,  
 I never see the fisherman  
 Yet I know he's your father.  
 And my body, a richer  
 Catch.  
 I dream wistfully of that morning of death  
 A purity of peace that's strange to me  
 Where you no longer reach me  
 And I no longer call for you  
 And everything sleeps with open eyes  
 And only light in light, an echo  
 Will stir a fragile curse -  
 Untangle the nets,  
 To slip again  
 Into that pure and timeless water.

*("Sometimes I Dream of my Body")*

Translated by Andreea Deletant and

Brenda Walker

## NOTES and REFERENCES

### 1. Shaping Forces in Contemporary American Poetry: Locating Women's Poetry

1. Jonathan Holden, *The Fate of American Poetry* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), p.51.

2. Ibid.

3. See Holden, Ibid., pp.51-52.

4. Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus. Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p.263.

5. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 215.

6. Ibid., p.45.

7. Ibid., p.92.

8. Ibid., p.93.

9. Ibid., p.172.

10. John Brinnin, "Phases of my Work", in *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Howard Nemerov (Forum Lectures, 1969), p. 95.

11. "Yeats somehow saved me from the crushing influence of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot," said Berryman in "One Answer to a Question", *Contemporary American Poetry*, p. 122.

12. Ransom taught at Kenyon College, Tate at the University of Minnesota, Winters at Stanford, Blackmur at Princeton, Warren at Louisiana State University, Minnesota and Yale.

13. Lowell and James Wright were educated at Kenyon College. Berryman was on faculty at Minnesota when Warren and Tate taught there too, Jarrell and Dickey studied at Vanderbilt University, the alma mater of the New Criticism; Jarrell taught at Kenyon among other colleges, and Donald Hall graduated from Stanford.

14. See David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987); and Donald Barlow Stauffer, *A Short History of American Poetry* (New York: E.P.Batton & Co.,Inc.,1974).

15. When Donald Allen compiled his anthology *The New Poets of America* (1960), dividing the 44 poets included in his book into three main groups: The Black Mountain School, San Francisco Beat and the New York School, he used more or less extra literary criteria to put some kind of order in a poetry seemingly out of control, which he obviously treated as an early avant-garde of the postmodernist movement.

16. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," reprinted in *The Avant-garde Tradition in Literature*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1982), pp. 248-256.

17. *Ibid.*, p.256.

18. Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co.,1960), p.12.

19. The remark belongs to Daniel Hoffman, who contributed the poetry sections to *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,1979).

20. Allen's classification has greatly influenced the perception of contemporary American poetry, and it has been taken as such by most critics, among them Daniel Hoffman in *Harvard Guide*, and Ihab Hassan in *Contemporary American Literature 1945-1972*. Although partially accepting the traditional classification of contemporary American poetry, some critics improve it by adopting more literary, aesthetic criteria. Perkins, for instance, approaches contemporary poetry from the premises of a period style, Karl Malkoff in *Escape from the Self: A Study in Contemporary American Poetry and Poetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), from the premises of the poetic self, and Hoffman resorts to more convenient general categories such as "Schools of Dissidents", and "Dissidents from Schools".

21. M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War Two* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 27.

22. Gregory Corso, "Some of My Beginning ... And What I Feel Right Now", in *Contemporary American Poetry*, p. 217.

23. Term used by A. Poulin Jr. in "Contemporary American Poetry: The Radical Tradition", *Contemporary American Poetry*, Fourth Edition, ed. A. Poulin Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), pp. 685-703.

24. John Ashbery, *A Wave* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), p. 24.

25. Robert Bly, "Looking for Dragon Smoke," in *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, ed. Stephen Berg & Robert Mezey (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969), p. 161.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

27. W.S. Merwin, "An Open Form," in *Naked Poetry*, pp. 270-271.

28. Among the fifty-one poets included in Poulin's anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry*, thirty-seven have embraced academic careers.

29. Augusto de Campos, "Points-Periphery-Concrete Poetry", in *The Avant-garde Tradition in Literature*, p. 266.

30. Richard Kostelanetz, "Introduction: What Is Avant-garde?" in *The Avant-garde Tradition in Literature*, p. 3.

31. Wendell Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," *Hudson Review* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 12,16. Quoted in Jack Myers and David Wojahn, eds., *A Profile of Twentieth-*

*Century American Poetry* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p.254. Henceforth quoted as *Profile*.

32. Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" *Commentary* 86(August 1988):15.

33. *Ibid.*, p.19.

34. See Jonathan Holden, "American Poetry: 1970-1990," in *Profile*, pp.254-274.

35. *Ibid.*, p.255.

36. R.S.Gwynn, "Introduction," in R.S.Gwynn, ed., *American Poets Since World War II Dictionary of Literary Bibliography. Third Series*, vol.120 (Detroit, London: Gale Research Inc., 1992),p.xiv.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Joseph Holden, *Profile*, p.256.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Charles Altieri, *Sense and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.10.

41. Joseph Holden, *Profile*, p.273.

42. See *Ibid.*, pp.262-265.

43. Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 (October 1979). Quoted in George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.xi.

44. Marjorie Perloff, "The World as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties," *American Poetry Review* 13, no.3 (May/June 1984):18.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Joseph Holden, *The Fate of American Poetry*, pp.59-60.

47. *Ibid.*, p.60.

48. *Ibid.*, p.63.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, p.27.

51. Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms. Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1976), p.2.

52. *Ibid.*, p.4.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, p.205.

57. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), p.43. The essay was originally a paper presented at the Modern Language Association forum on "The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century," in 1971. It was first published in *College English* 34(October 1972):18-30. Hereafter quoted as *OLSS*.

58. Muriel Rukeyser, "The Poem as Mask," in *No More Masks. An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets. Newly Revised and Expanded* (New York: Harper, 1993), ed. with an Introduction by Florence Howe, p. xxvii. Henceforth quoted as *NMM*.

59. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976).

60. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Bell, 1963), p.62.
61. See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970).
62. Alicia Ostriker, "The Nerves of a Midwife. Contemporary American Women's Poetry: 1977," in Alicia Ostriker and Denise Hall, eds., *Claims for Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), pp. 312, 322.
63. Anne Sexton, "Housewife," *All My Pretty Ones* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962), p.37.
64. Diane Wakoski, *The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems* (Simon & Schuster, 1971), unnumbered page. The poem "In Gratitude to Beethoven" is included in the volume *Inside the Blood Factory* (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), p.27.
65. Maxine Kumin, "After Love," in *The Nightmare Factory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p.59.
66. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider. Essays & Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), p.44.
67. Audre Lorde, *Undersong. Chosen Poems Old and New. Revised* (New York and London: Norton, 1992), pp. 30-31.
68. Lucille Clifton, "crazy horse names his daughter," in *Next: New Poems* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1987), p.48.
69. Audre Lorde, *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance. Poems 1987-1992* (New York, London: Norton, 1993), p.57.
70. Cherrie Moraga, "For the Color of My Mother," in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone, 1981), p.12.
71. Paul Lauter ed., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Second Edition*, 2 vols. (Lexington, Massachusetts: Heath, 1994).
72. Sharon Olds, "The Connoisseuse of Slugs," *The Dead and the Living* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975, 1983), p.51.
73. Louise Glück, "Mythic Fragment," *The Triumph of Achilles* (The Ecco Press, 1985). Reprinted in *NMM*, pp.358-59.
74. Judy Grahn, "Ella, In a Square Apron, Along Highway 80," *The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry of Judy Grahn, 1964-1977* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1978), p.63.
75. Marilyn Hacker, "Nearly a Valediction," *Going Back to the River* (Vintage Books, 1990), p.63.
76. Susan Howe, *Defenestration of Prague* (New York: Kulchur, 1983), p. 29.
77. Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language. The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p.7.
78. *Ibid.*, p.13.
79. *Ibid.*, p.239.
80. Adrienne Rich, "Power and Danger," *OLSS*, p.250.

## 2. Postmodern Feminism, Power and Subjectivity

1. Among the works that trace the way of this independent poststructuralist development one of the most challenging, *Feminism and Foucault. Reflections on Resistance* (1988), edited by Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, reunites the most influential shorter studies of Foucault and feminism produced in the 1980s. It was shortly followed by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Jana Sawicki's *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body* (1991), Lois McNay's *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (1992), while some of the most provocative work in the field has continued to be published in specialized journals. An impressive number of books apply his definition of power and its appropriation by feminists to the study of literature, combining linguistic deconstruction with a cultural and/or a sociological perspective.

2. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds. *Feminism and Foucault. Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. viii-ix.

3. Biddy Martin, "Feminism, criticism and Foucault," in Diamond and Quinby, eds., *Ibid.*, p.16.

4. The concerns with the ways in which society exercises power over the individual by "disciplinizing" the body, therefore the relation between power and the body and the idea of the body as the site of domination on which Foucault focused in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) are further developed in his unfinished *History of Sexuality* - Vol.1: *An Introduction* (1976); Vol.2: *The Use of Pleasure* (1984); Vol.3: *The Care of the Self* (1984).

5. More than one writer has remarked the "torrent" of books on sexuality and gender produced since the late 1970s. Among them, Sherry B.Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (1981); Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (1987); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

6. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p.89.

7. *Ibid.*, p.88.

8. Descriptive terms used by Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault. Feminism, Power and the Body* (New York, London: Routledge, 1991).

9. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p.93.

10. *Ibid.*, p.102.

11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p.27.

12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. vol 1. p 23

13. *Ibid.*, p.95.

14. Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, pp.8-9.

15. *Ibid.*, p.9.

16. Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude" in M.Blonsky ed., *On Signs: A Semiotics Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.367.

17. See Teresa de Lauretis, *op.cit.* For a reconsideration of Foucault's theory of the self and the formulation of a postmodern feminism see also Lois McNay, *op.cit.* For the

biological essentialism in Rich's feminist theory and her use of biology as the essence of "femaleness," see *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1977), where she explores "physicality" as "our bond with the natural order," and "the corporeal ground of our intelligence," thus establishing a direct relationship between biology and consciousness. (p.21).

18. Linda Alcoff, "Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: the identity crisis in feminist theory," *Signs*, 13 (3):433. For a discussion of gender, feminism and postmodernity from a sociological perspective see Barbara L. Marshall, *Engendering Modernity. Feminism, Social Theory and Social Change* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994).

19. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," in Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Theory. A Reader* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.39.

20. Barbara Marshall, *op.cit.*, p.115.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Adrienne Rich, quoted by Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, p.106

25. Jana Sawicki, *Ibid.*, pp.106-107.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Susan Howe interviewed by Edward Foster, *Postmodern Poetry. The Talisman Interviews* (New Jersey: Talisman, 1994), p.59.

### 3. The Dangerous Power of Confession: Sylvia Plath's Techniques of the Self

1. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.80.

2. Ted Hughes, "Foreword," in Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, eds. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982),p.XV. Henceforth quoted as *J*.

3. Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*, Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 40. Henceforth quoted as *LH*.

4. For a discussion of the shift of emphasis in Plath criticism from the early pathological interpretations of her poetry to the more recent formalist approaches, see Linda Wagner Martin, ed. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston: G.K.Hall, 1984), particularly Wagner's "Introduction" and Sandra Gilbert's "In Yeats' House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath." In a most challenging recent reading of Plath's work, Steven Gould Axelrod reaches nevertheless the conclusion that Plath's poetic practice, her approach to the creative act and her way of writing poetry have led her to suicide. See his *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). For an excellent inquiry into Plath's female poetics see Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*.

5. In her provocative book *Revising Life. Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), Susan Van Dyne's reading of

the *Ariel* poems stresses Plath's "dynamic" relation to her culture, the definition of her female identity as "subjectivity in process," achieved through the proliferation of masques and performances.

6. Among the numerous biographical studies of Plath, five book-length biographies discuss from different, and often contradictory, perspectives Plath's life and death with the obvious intention of highlighting their relation to her poetry and her culture. The first of these books was Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), which used as point of reference the chapter on Plath's suicide Alfred Alvarez had included in his book *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Random House, 1972). The other four biographies have been published in a span of four years, starting with Linda Wagner-Martin's well-informed and introspective study *Sylvia Plath. A Biography* (New York, London: Simon and Schuster, 1987). All of them, including Ann Stevenson's *Bitter Fame. A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (1991) and Paul Alexander's *A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (1991) have drawn upon the newly published *Journals* and letters. As Janet Malcolm argues in her discussion of Plath's biography "The Silent Woman," the numerous versions of Plath's life show that "In death as in life, [Plath] raises uncomfortable questions about her identity - and about the nature of biography itself" (p.85). See Janet Malcolm, "The Silent Woman," in *The New Yorker* (August 23 & 30, 1993):85-159.

7. Ted Hughes, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin, 1966*, p.I. Quoted by Eileen M. Aird, *Sylvia Plath* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), p. 6.

8. For a discussion of the effects on the female identity of motherhood as a socially and culturally constructed institution see Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

9. In *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker argues that revisionary mythmaking does not necessarily imply the replacement of the familiar interpretations. Revision may "release meanings that were latent but imprisoned all along in stories we thought we knew" (p.235).

10. Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes, (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 272-73. All quotations from Plath's poetry are taken from this volume, if not otherwise specified.

11. Ted Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," in Charles Newman, ed. *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 192.

12. In her book *Women Poets and the American Sublime* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Joanne Feit Diehl, one of the most inspired Plath critics, supports the theory that the causes of Plath's death should be looked for in her art.

13. See Shelley Orgel, "Sylvia Plath: Fusion with the Victim and Suicide," in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 43 (1974): 262-287. Orgel posits the central role played by maternal fantasies in Plath's suicide. The argument can be extended to her life as well.

14. For an enlightening reading of "Poppies in July" see Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987), p. 17.

#### 4. The Power of Here and Now: Denise Levertov and the Poetry of Experience

1. See her essay "Anne Sexton: Light Up the Cave (1974)" in Denise Levertov, *New & Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992). Henceforth quoted as *Essays*.

2. Denise Levertov, *A Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions, 1989), p.3. Henceforth quoted as *DH*.

3. Denise Levertov, "Denise Levertov," *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove, 1960), p.441.

4. About Rexroth's early interest in Levertov's poetry see Denise Levertov, "Author's Note," in *Collected Earlier Poems: 1940-1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. viii, ix. Henceforth quoted as *CP*.

5. M.L.Rosenthal, *The New Poets*. In the same chapter, he included also Paul Blackburn and Le Roi Jones.

6. Kenneth Rexroth, *Assays*(Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1961), p.190.

7. Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.63. Henceforth quoted as *Poet*.

8. Levertov's essay "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival (early 1980s) in *Essays*, pp. 143-54.

9. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.16, 19.

10. *Ibid.*, p.19.

11. M.L.Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p.192.

12. James E. B. Breslin, "Denise Levertov," in *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993),p.7. Breslin quotes Levertov as declaring to Walter Sutton in an interview that she was attracted by Stevens's "sense of magic" in his early work, and that she thought an ideal poet should combine Williams's "realism" and Stevens's "illusionism." See Walter Sutton, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," *Minnesota Review*, 5(October-December 1965): 335.

13. Jacob's dream mentioned in *Genesis* 28.12.

14. Denise Levertov, *The Jacob's Ladder* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.37. Henceforth quoted as *JL*.

15. In an explanatory note Levertov indicates as her source The Venerable Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, and John Richard Green's *History of the English People*, 1855, which she read as a child. See Denise Levertov, *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987), p.86, n65. Henceforth quoted as *BW*.

16. Denise Levertov, *Poems 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions, 1983), p.30.

17. See Albert Gelpi, "Introduction: Centering the Double Image," in *Denise Levertov*, pp.3-4.

18. Kenneth Rexroth, *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), p.163.

19. See Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms*; Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*; Marjorie Perloff, "Beyond *The Bell Jar*: Women Poets in Transition," *South Carolina Review* 11, 2 (Spring 1979); Deborah Pope, *A Separate Vision: Isolation in Contemporary Women's Poetry* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Linda Wagner Martin, ed., *Denise Levertov: In Her Own Province* (New

York: New Directions, 1979) and *Critical Essays on Denise Levertov* (Boston: G.K.Hall&Co., 1991).

20. After a long talk with Denise Levertov at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee in the spring of 1974, I was left with the definite impression that for her it was of crucial importance to be considered first and foremost a poet who in everyday life happened to be a woman.

21. Denise Levertov, *Life in the Forest* (New York: New Directions, 1978), p.55. Henceforth quoted as *LF*.

22. See Florence Howe, "Introduction," in *No More Masks!* p.lii, liii.

23. Deborah Pope, *op.cit.*, p.86.

24. Denise Levertov, *O Taste and See*, (New York: New Directions, 1964), p.71. Henceforth quoted as *TS*.

25. Denise Levertov, *Relearning the Alphabet* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.33. Henceforth quoted as *RA*.

26. Sandra M. Gilbert, "'My Name is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition," *Contemporary Literature*, 18, 4(1977), pp. 443-57.

27. Denise Levertov, *The Sorrow Dance* (New York: New Directions, 1967), p.11. Henceforth quoted as *SD*.

28. Deborah Pope, *A Separate Vision*, p.120.

29. Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, p.88. See chapter 3: "Body Language: The Release of Anatomy" (pp.91-121)

30. See Denise Levertov, "The Poet in the World (1967)," *New & Selected Essays*. She published *The Sorrow Dance* three years after The United States' active involvement in the Vietnam war. Levertov went to Vietnam in 1973.

31. Levertov argues that "poetry is intrinsically revolutionary" (*Poet*, p.106). See Suzanne Juhasz, *op.cit.*

32. Sandra M. Gilbert, "Revolutionary Love: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Politics," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 121, 2 (1985), p.349.

## 5. The Power of Language: Adrienne Rich and the Aesthetics of Activism

1. Adrienne Rich, "Review of *Woman and Nature* by Susan Griffin", in *New Women's Feminist Review* (November, 1978), 5.

2. Adrienne Rich, *OLSS*, p.13..

3. *Ibid.*, 247. For a study of the idea of "transforming power" as the basis of Rich's aesthetics see Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1986).

4. In such excellent books as Keyes's *Aesthetics of Power* or Liz Yorke, *Impertinent Voices. Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), Foucault is not even mentioned, while in Betsy Erkkila's *The Wicked Sisters. Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) there is one reference to *Madness and Civilization* in a chapter about Emily Dickinson.

5. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.23.

6. Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York and London: Norton, 1993), p.215. Henceforth quoted as *Notebooks*.

7. Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), p.113.

8. Adrienne Rich, *A Change of World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951), p.11. Henceforth quoted as CW.

9. Adrienne Rich, *OLSS*, p.40. For excellent studies on Rich and Dickinson see Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters*, and Wendy Martin, *An American Tryptich: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

10. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.34.

11. Adrienne Rich, *Poems. Selected and New: 1950-1974* (New York: Norton, 1975). Henceforth quoted as PSN.

12. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1961), p.70.

13. Adrienne Rich, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962* (New York: Norton, 1963), p.21. Henceforth quoted as *Snapshots*.

14. See Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters*, p.66.

15. Deborah Pope, *A Separate Vision*, p.139.

16. Quoted by Pope, *Ibid.*, p.140.

17. Adrienne Rich, *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (New York: Norton, 1971), p.15. Henceforth quoted as WTC.

18. See Alicia Ostriker, "Her Cargo and the Common Language," *The American Poetry Review*, vol.8, 4 (July-August 1979).

19. Alicia Ostriker and Donald Hall, eds. *Claims for Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), p.333.

20. Adrienne Rich, *Twenty-One Love Poems* (Emeryville, Ca.: Effie's Press, 1976), I.

21. Lyz Yorke, *Imperunent Voices*, p.16.

22. Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of A Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), p.3.

23. Adrienne Rich, *A Wilde Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* (New York: Norton, 1981), p.26. Henceforth quoted as *WP*.

24. Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991* (New York: Norton, 1991), p.26.

## 6. The Poet as Warrior:

### The Consciousness of Race in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks

1. In their introduction to the groundbreaking anthology *All the Women are White*,

*All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982) the editors, Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith point out the absence of black women from "most of what passes for culture and thought" in the United States. (p. xvii)

2. Among the most distinguished prizes and honors mention should be made of her two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Frost medal, the Shelley Memorial Award, the first Kuumba Award, the National Endowment for the Arts Lifetime Achievement award in 1989, the National Endowment for the Humanities Award for the 1994 Jefferson Lecturer, the highest honor bestowed by the government for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities. In 1990 she was the only American to receive the Society for Literature award from the University of Thessaloniki. In May 1993, The Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Culture" was inaugurated at Chicago State University, where Brooks is Writer-in-Residence.

3. Quoted in *Portsmouth Herald*, April 27, 1993, p. B3.

4. Quoted by Mike Dewey, "Pulitzer Winner Shares Fruit of Labors" in *Wooster Daily Record*, January 21, 1994.

5. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems* (New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row, 1963), p.26. Henceforth quoted as *SP*.

6. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (New York: F.S.Crafts & Co., 1935), p.100.

7. In one of her comments at a poetry reading Brooks described the writing process as "delicious agony" involving "personal distillation" and "responsible observation." (*Wooster Daily Record*, 1/21/1994). On another occasion she said that "she respects other interpretations of her work, and takes them not as mistakes, but as alternatives." As she put it, "Do you think it's necessary for a reader or a teacher to know exactly what a poem means?...I think that's often impossible." (*Portsmouth Herald*, April 27, 1993).

8. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One* (Detroit, Michigan: Broadside Press, 1972), p. 56. Henceforth quoted as *RPO*.

9. Speaking in *Report from Part One* about her 1971 trip to East Africa, Brooks repeatedly points out the human warmth of the African brothers and sisters, the "profound handshakes, handshakes of earnest fellowship." (*RPO*, 96) See the whole section "African Fragment" dedicated to her first contact with Africa. (pp.87-130)

10. See D.H.Melhelm, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), pp.34-36.

11. Gary Smith, "Brooks's 'We Real Cool'," *Explicator*, 43: 2 (1985 Winter), pp. 49-50.

12. Betsy Erkkila, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

13. In her interpretation of *Annie Allen*, Erkkila speaks about a female-centered racial consciousness. *Ibid.*, p. 202

14. See Erkkila, *Ibid.*, pp. 188-90.

15. Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 49. Henceforth referred to as *IM*.

16. Gwendolyn Brooks, "Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward," in *Family Pictures*, (Detroit, Michigan: Broadside Press, 1970), p. 23.

## 7. Walking Boundaries:

### Ethnic Heritage and Self-Definition in the Poetry Of Joy Harjo

1. See Duane Niatum, ed., *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988); Alan R. Velie, *American Indian Literature* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1991); *The Lightning Within: An Anthology of Contemporary American Indian Fiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

2. The most comprehensive and best documented study of Native American women poets is Nora Harwit Amrani, *American Indian Women Poets: Women Between the Worlds* (New York: Vantage Press, 1993). I have not made references to it in my discussion of Harjo as I had access to the book only after this chapter had already been completed.

3. Laura Coltelli, "Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris," *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p.45.

4. Joy Harjo, "Writing with the Sun," in *Where We Stand. Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, ed. Sharon Bryan (New York, London: Norton, 1993), p.73. Henceforth to be quoted as *WS*. The volume contains a series of essays by women poets indicative of the relationship in their poetry between gender, the sense of empowerment and the ethnic tradition.

5. Joy Harjo, "Interview by John Crawford and Patricia Clark Smith," in *This Is About Vision. Interviews with Southwestern Writers*, eds. William Balassi, John F. Crawford, Annie O. Eysturoy (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), p.171.

6. The Creeks, a powerful tribe of the Muskogean language family, come from the Southeastern culture area covering the territories of today's Alabama and Georgia. Supporting the British, they fought against the Americans in 1813, but were massacred by General Andrew Jackson's troops. Forced to gradually surrender their lands, in 1828 they had to move to Oklahoma which was then Indian Territory. Together with four other so-called "Civilized Tribes" they established a form of self-government resembling that of the American states. See Dan Georgakas, *The Broken Hoop: The History of Native Americans from 1600 to 1890, from the Atlantic Coast to the Plains* (New York: Doubleday, 1973). Interesting for its emphasis on cultural history is Theda Perdue, ed. *Nations Remembered. An Oral History of the Five Civilized Tribes, 1865-1907* (Greenwood, 1980).

7. Joy Harjo, *The Last Song* (Las Cruces: Puerto del Sol, 1975), p.3.

8. For the formation of American Indian religious belief see Don Rutledge, Rita Robinson, *Center of the World: Native American Spirituality*, (Borgo, 1992). For the relation between vision and culture see Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981).

9. Joy Harjo and Stephen Strom, *Secrets from the Center of the World* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989), p.2. Henceforth quoted as *SCW*.

10 John Scarry, "Representing Real Worlds: The Evolving Poetry of Joy Harjo." *World Literature Today* (Spring 1992): 288.

11. Joy Harjo quoted in Laura Cotelli, *op.cit.*, pp.55-56. Henceforth quoted as *WW*.

12. Joy Harjo, *What Moon Drove Me to This?* (New York: I.Reed Books, 1979), p.43. Henceforth quoted as *WM*.

13. Joy Harjo, *In Mad Love and War* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p.14, 5, 1; Joy Harjo, *She Had Some Horses* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1983), p. 15. Henceforth quoted as *SH*.

14. See Perry Miller's interpretation of the Puritan mission in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1956).

15. See Nancy Lang, "Twin Gods Bending Over: Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory," *MELUS* (Fall 1993): 41-50.

16. See Joy Harjo's comments on "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor" in *WW*, p.62.

17. Adrienne Rich, "In Mad Love and War," *Ms.*, 2, 2(Sept-Oct 1991): 73.

18. Joy Harjo, "Interview," in *This is About Vision*, p.174.

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