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VERSIONS AND SUBVERSIONS: FORMAL STRATEGIES IN
THE POETRY OF CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN WOMEN

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VERSIONS AND SUBVERSIONS:
FORMAL STRATEGIES IN THE POETRY OF
CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN WOMEN

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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Versions and Subversions: Formal Strategies in the Poetry of Contemporary Canadian Women

Abstract

This study is an investigation, through the work of selected Canadian women poets, of how contemporary women poets adapt or transform genre and the formal strategies related to genre to suit their varied and often new purposes. It is a selective and analytical study, not a comprehensive and descriptive one. Though concerned, when it seems appropriate, with critical theory, it is functional in approach.

The main premise on which the study is based is the view that writing literature is always an act of imitation with variation; a second, narrower premise is that women poets now stand and have always stood in a special relation to the forms and conventions of literature. The purpose of the study is to investigate how this relation is worked out functionally in the making of poetry. The key concept in the argument is the notion of fiction as a way of describing the formal function of content. The refashioning of traditional fictions and the discovery for poetry of new or previously ignored fictions is a central strategy in the works of the poets selected for study.

There are five areas of investigation, with a chapter given to each one. The first chapter discusses the relation of contemporary women poets to fictions of muse and vocation,
as demonstrated in new versions of a traditional genre: the orientation or crisis poem, in which the poet establishes his or her relation to the poetic vocation and the fictions which sustain that vocation. The second chapter looks at the ways in which classical mythology, perhaps the most important source of particular and paradigmatic fictions in our literary tradition, has been adapted, subverted, or transformed by the poets under discussion. Chapter Three is an exploration of the ways in which some of these poets use fictions derived from North American Indian lore, and considers why these fictions, and the genres and formal strategies associated with them, are particularly useful to women poets. The fourth and in many ways the central chapter looks at the domestic as a source of fictions for women poets; it explores the adaptation of traditional genres to suit these fictions and the invention of new modes arising out of this context. Chapter Five turns to the woman's body as a presence in contemporary poetry by Canadian women and discusses the relation of women poets to the dominant erotic tradition in English poetry, the creation of new modes, and the adaptation of old modes to the woman poet's projection of the fictions of her own body into poetry.

This study is an investigation of one particular instance, of contemporary importance, of the renewal and modification of a poetic tradition through a historical novelty: the assumption by women of the authority of authorship. Its
interest lies in its articulation of the ways in which new voices, adapting old fictions and introducing new ones, can enrich and enlarge the poetic tradition.
For a thousand years
in a thousand cities
we have lived in
images dreamed by
others, we have been
lamp-lighters in houses,
bulb-changers in
apartments, spinners
of wool in tents, weavers
of linen in cottages,
and foreladies of
nylon in factories.

We were always
the floor-washers and
the jam-makers and
the lullaby-singers,
yet our namelessness
was everywhere and
our names were written
always in wind, posted
only on air.

Now the winds blow
old images off the
mind's pages and we
are no more the fact
in the picture but
the hand making the
picture, we are no more
the watery song above
the wind's waters but
the source of the waters
flowing back to the waters.

Our voices have healed
from the fever of silence,
they bring from the waters
the health of the morning,
we are mapping adventures
by the light of the future,
we are carving our names
in time's forest of stone.

Miriam Waddington, "Women"
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Introduction

In The Madwoman in the Attic, a study of nineteenth-century literature by women, the authors, Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, ask: "What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are ... both overtly and covertly patriarchal?"¹ Poetic genres, they contend--citing erotic poetry, the bardic ode, and the pastoral elegy--"have been even more thoroughly male than fictional ones."² "As we have noted," they say,

women writers frequently use ... and subvert male tradition or genre. Consequently, we shall see over and over again that a "complex vibration" occurs between stylized gestures and unexpected deviations from such obvious gestures, a vibration that undercuts the genre being employed.

Though "undercutting" is only one of the many effects available to women writers, it is this "complex vibration" and the deviations that bring it about which will be analysed in this study.

The wide premise on which my discussion is based is the notion that genres are in a functional sense persuasive or coercive, that genre and style exert a certain force on the writer, that writing literature is always an act of imitation with variation. This view, a commonplace of contempor-
ary criticism, is held in one form or another by Paul Fussell, 4 Harold Bloom, 5 and Gilbert and Gubar. 6

My second, narrow premise is that women poets stand in and speak from a special relation to the forms and conventions of literature; the nature of this relation is involved in historical circumstances, has changed, and will continue to change. This view, now so widely accepted that it amounts to received opinion, as been variously stated by such critics as Virginia Woolf, 7 Annette Kolodny, 8 William Morgan, 9 Susan Juhasz, 10 Dorothy Smith, 11 Elaine Showalter, 12 and Mary Ellman. 13 Smith states the case in its most general terms, arguing that women have "historically and in the present been excluded from the production of thought, images, and symbols in which their experience and social relations are expressed and ordered. . . . The universe of ideas, images, and themes—the symbolic modes which are the general currency of thought—have been either produced by men or controlled by them." 14 Morgan maintains that the whole tradition of culture, "like the governmental, religious, educational and social traditions of which it is a part," has operated by and large "according to male norms and has excluded, distorted, or undervalued female experience, female perceptions, female art, and female scholarship and criticism." He holds that it is fraudulent to present as human a literary and cultural tradition that is a "history
principally of male activity, analysed and evaluated according to male perceptions and norms. ... Showalter affirms that a woman studying English literature is also studying a different culture, to which she must bring the adaptability of the anthropologist." Ellman compares women attempting to write about themselves to "people looking for their own bodies under razed buildings, having to clear away debris."  

My concern, like Showalter's in her study of women's fiction, is not with an "innate sexual attitude" but with the "ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has transplanted itself into literary forms in a specific place and time-span, and how this awareness has changed and developed, and where it might lead." How women writers function in and around and outside of the available conventions of literature is, as Showalter says, "the product of a delicate network of influences operating in time" and expressing themselves in "language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page."  

Eli Mandel, in an essay on regionalism in Canadian literature, distinguishes between

... the nature of forms and their source, or more accurately, their location. Examine their nature and you move into the realm of the ideal. Look at their location and you see them in an historical context, in a given place and time. The first is the formalist approach; the second the radical.
This study combines both approaches, considering genres both as tradition has defined them through changing use in relation to definition and source, and as women poets have modified them in a particular time and place: Canada, the twentieth century, and what Marian Engel has called the region of being female. Mandel intends "radical" in its root sense, but it is here intended in both senses, because the influence of women writers on poetic genres has in many cases been consciously subversive. Indeed, the term "female subversion" is now a commonplace in discussions of the ways in which women writers handle genre and convention.

As will become clear in particular instances, subversion in this context is not primarily derivative and destructive, but innovative. As Suzanne Lamy, Quebecois feminist and writer, says, women "subvert traditional forms and genres, even breaking down the barriers between spoken and written language through the introduction of such forms as 'litany,' 'discussion,' and bavardage (idle chatter)." This activity, which begins as marginal, can become a source of renewal to the main tradition.

Mandel speaks of form, not subject, but through the concept of fiction, which is central to my approach, it is possible to talk about the formal function of subject matter. Laura Riding in her discursive work *The Telling*, Gilbert and Gubar in the book already cited, and Nicole
Brossard, a Quebec feminist writer, in an article, all make fiction, or plotting, story, or telling, central to their concern with women's writing. Riding speaks of the "half-world, formed of its self-doubling" created by the "man-part."

All available versions of our material and spiritual history are, she says, stories told to us by our "man-magisters." Women up to now have, she declares, lived, out of love and necessity, in "man's self-reflecting half-world"--the world, as Morgan and Smith agree, of all discourse. Riding sees women now stirring to complete and thereby transform the half-world of man's discourse by telling their half of the whole story: out of their "garrulity of heart (which is but a cheerful defiance of free souls offered to their confinement)" will come their version, a telling which will make the human story whole. 24

Gilbert and Gubar contrast the two types of women found in male fictions: the storyless female, who listens but does not tell, the type of Goethe's "eternal feminine," a Penelope or Solveig who wait in suspended animation while their men invent stories, act them out, and tell them; and the opposite type, the "plotting" female, a creature of dangerous stratagems and wiles, like Snow White's stepmother or Circe or Becky Sharp. 25 Then they go on to consider what stories women have to tell and how they go about telling them in literature.
Nicole Brossard talks of the shape words take "when they emerge from our mouths, born of our fictions." She sees fiction as the mode through which what women feel and experience can be externalized, socialized. Fiction is, she says, "the text of the fabular anecdote," or "the novel in the feminine," a way of giving the lives of women "credence in the cultural and social sphere." Women, through writing, can leap from the private, the fiction as anecdote, to the public, the fiction as literature.  

Riding is a practical visionary who anticipates the transformation of society through the completion of discourse which will come about with women telling their stories, their versions. Gilbert and Gubar are literary critics intent on discovering and revealing ignored, neglected fictions in women's writing, so that the story of literature may be more truly told. Brossard sees women's fictions as vehicles for revealing the truth about women's lives, the substance of what Catherine Kizer called "the world's best kept secret." Brossard combines both of the meanings of "fiction" as it will be used in this study: fable or invention—the formal means by which experience is transformed into poetry—and "version," the transformation of private anecdote into public statement to which perspective, detail, voice, and rhetorical skill give coherence and authority.
Chapter I is a discussion of fictions of muse and voca-
tion, through what I call the orientation poem: the crisis
poem in which the woman poet establishes fictions of muse
figures and of the relation between her self as woman and
her self as poet. Chapter II is an exploration of the ways
in which fictions from classical mythology have been adapted
or subverted or transformed in selected poetry by contempo-
ary Canadian women poets. Chapter III is an investigation
of the ways in which some of these poets use fictions derived
from Indian lore, the matter of North America. The final two
chapters discuss sources of fictions which particularly per-
tain to women: Chapter IV, the domestic, traditionally at
the base of the hierarchy of literary kinds, but a powerful
source of fictions for women; and Chapter V, woman's body,
traditionally enmeshed in threads of male discourse, but in
contemporary women's poetry the source of a wide range of
revealing fictions.

Elaine Showalter has said:

As scholars have been persuaded
that women's experience is
important, they have begun to
see it for the first time. With
a new perceptual framework,
material hitherto assumed to be
non-existent has suddenly leaped
into focus... As the works
of dozens of women writers have
been rescued from the "enormous
condescension of posterity," and
considered in relation to each
other, the lost continent of the
female tradition has risen like
Atlantis from the sea of English
literature.
My work is part of the contemporary endeavour by women and men to build the perceptual framework that will make visible the writing of women. It is also my contribution to what Laura Riding calls the "telling": the completion, the making whole and wholesome the half-world of male discourse. Donald Davie, writing of Ezra Pound, says:

> All the traditions are precious; they do not compete; and none of them is ever lost beyond recovery, though other rhythms detectable in politico-economic history may work out so that in certain ages some valuable traditions of responsiveness can be recovered only by isolated individuals going painfully against the grain of their lives.  

Davie wrote this without the tradition of women's writing in mind, but it is a message of reconciliation and hope which applies to women writers as it does to other traditions which have so far been marginal to the dominant tradition.
Notes

Introduction


2 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 68.

3 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 80.


9 William Morgan, "Feminism and Literary Study: A Reply to Annette Kolodny," Critical Inquiry, 2, No. 4 (1976), 807-816.


14 Smith, pp. 353-355.

15 Morgan, pp. 810-811.

16 Showalter, p. 10.

17 Ellman, p. 200.

18 Showalter, p. 12.


24 Riding, pp. 46-47, p. 52.

25 Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 20-44.

26 Brossard, p. 21.


28 Showalter, p. 9.

Chapter I
Fictions of Muse and Vocation: the Orientation
Poem as an Expression of the Relation of the
Woman Poet to Poetry as Vocation and Craft

Poetry is a mode of orientation toward language and through language toward life. And in one sense every poem is an orientation poem, expressing a stage in the changing relation of the poet to language. But some poems are explicitly concerned with the poet’s sense of vocation, and for women poets, who write out of a broken tradition, the orientation poem in this precise sense is of particular importance, because through such poems the woman poet establishes her relation to her vocation and to the main tradition.

The orientation poem does not follow a formula; it can work through a variety of fictions, but it is identifiable by its concern: to explore, in a poem, the source of the poet’s authority as a writer. Hence this mode, as practised by women poets, is of central importance to any exploration of what is different or problematical about the relation of the woman writer to the main tradition. The dominant fiction of the Muse as source and inspiration, in European literature, involves a female figure whose relation to the poet is usually erotic as well as inspiring. For a woman poet to find her
place in relation to such fictions is a problem. The question to be asked and if possible answered is the one posed by Gilbert and Gubar in their study of women in nineteenth-century English literature: "What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are . . . both overtly and covertly patriarchal?"\(^1\) The orientation poem by a woman poet implicitly or explicitly addresses itself to this question. What Cora Kaplan calls "the particular sexual resonance"\(^2\) of the fictions in which women have imagined themselves as poets is the subject of this chapter.

Some poems written by seventeenth-century women poets will provide a glimpse of the origins of the tradition of the orientation poem as written by women poets. From these poems can be derived four modes of adaptation, which lend themselves to expression in a variety of fictions. The substance of this chapter will be an examination of selected orientation poems by twentieth-century Canadian women poets, in the light of these modes of adaptation.

The set piece in which an author apologizes for his poems is a very old convention and there is in seventeenth-century occasional verse a marked strain of self-depreciation. But the prologues and introductions in which women writers of that time excused themselves for their effrontery in daring to put pen to paper have a sexual resonance which
is unmistakable. In these lines from Anne Bradstreet's "The Prologue" we clearly hear a woman poet struggling to reconcile her sense of poetic vocation with her "womanhood":

From school-boys tongue no rhet'rick we expect
Nor yet a sweet Consort from broken strings,
Nor perfect beauty, where's a main defect:
My foolish, broken, blemished Muse so sings
And this to mend, alas, no Art is able,
'Cause nature, made it so irreparable.

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A Poets pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on Female wits:
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'll say it's stoln, or else it was by chance.

Let Greeks be Greeks, and women what they are
Men haye precedency and still excell,
It is but vain unjustly to wage warre;
Men can do best, and women know it well
Preheminence in all and each is yours;
Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours.

Besides expressing the difficulty of aspiring to competence when one is theologically defined as impaired, and of daring to write when one is socially defined as preeminently fit for domestic tasks, Anne Bradstreet suggests one of the dilemmas facing the woman writer: should she do well, it is assumed that the work is not her own. Anne Killigrew, writing later in the century in England, boldly elaborates this difficulty in "Upon the Saying that my Verses Were Made by Another": 
The envious age, only to me alone,
Will not allow what I do write, my own;
But let them rage, and 'gainst a maid conspire,
So deathless numbers from my tuneful lyre
Do ever flow; so, Phoebus, I by thee
Divinely inspired and possessed may be,
I willingly accept Cassandra's fate,
To speak the truth, although believed too late.

Her poem, which begins with an invocation to the "Sacred
Muse, Queen of verse" and a vow to surrender herself com-
pletely to the consuming fire of poetry, ends with a reas-
sertion of her sense of vocation, through the image of
Cassandra. Along with Sappho, Cassandra is one of the
models which women poets invoke as exemplars. The fact
that the first was a suicide and the second mad becomes
part of the tradition.

Anne Finch's "The Introduction," though the last written,
is the best known of these early apologias by women poets.
In fact, since it was cited by Virginia Woolf in A Room of
One's Own, it has been used repeatedly either as an epigraph
or for the purposes of analysis. It begins with an elabora-
tion of, and implicitly a protest against, received opinions
about women, goes on to a substantial and vigorous appeal to
antique precedents, and moves to a resigned and diminished
conclusion:
How are we fal'n, fal'n by mistaken rules?
And Education's, more than Nature's fools,
Debarr'd from all improvements of the mind,
But to be dull, expected and designed;
And if some one, cou'd soar above the rest,
With warmer fancy, and ambition press't,
So strong, th'opposing faction still appears,
The hopes to thrive, can ne're outweigh the fears,
Be caution'd then my Muse, and still retir'd;
Nor be displis'd, aiming to be admir'd;
Conscious of wants, still with contracted wing,
To some few freinds, and to thy sorrows sing;
For groves of Lawrell, thou wert never meant;
Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content.

Each of these fragments from seventeenth-century women poets provides an emblem of the various fictions of adaptation to the writing of poetry to be found in orientation poems written by twentieth-century Canadian women poets.

Bradstreet's "broken, blemish'd muse" may be taken to represent maiming or mutilation, a fiction found in orientation poems by Anne Wilkinson, Pat Lowther, and Phyllis Webb.

Killigrew's evocation of Cassandra suggests the muse or poet as Sibyl, speaker of ambiguous truths, a figure who dominates the poems of Jay Macpherson. Finch's "contracted wing"--a small audience and a narrow range of song--is an emblem of the "poetry of retirement" with which Finch is associated; but it can stand, too, for the notion of "retreat" in women's poetry: a common fiction of adaptation within women's poems, and an even commoner concept in commentary on women poets. There is a fourth category: fictions of manifest wholeness, where hiddenness, deformation, and hermetic speech have been abandoned, but there are no early precedents
or exemplars of this kind, though it does occur, increasingly, in twentieth-century poetry.

These categories are not mutually exclusive: gnomic or sybilline utterances are a kind of concealment or retreat; retirement, often called "cutting oneself off from the world," can be seen as mutilation or impairment of the whole person. Nor are these fictions peculiar to women poets. There is a long tradition of poetry of retreat written by men, from Cowley's secular pastorals to Herbert's devotional retreat, through Shelley's poet "hidden / In the realm of thought" to Hopkins' religious retirement or the alcoholic retreat of a Berryman. Riddling or kenning, too, is a shared mode, from Tiresias, through the fools of Shakespeare, to cryptic Henry in Berryman's Dream Songs. What is worth exploring is the particular sexual resonance of these fictions as used by women poets.

Fictions are never entirely self-engendered, especially in the arts, which are a shared enterprise. The fictions of retreat and impairment in early women writers were the result of social and literary decorum often defined prescriptively as peculiar to the female sex. The very act of writing was itself something to be concealed, like a vice or a deformity. The poems of Bradstreet and Finch were at first published anonymously, and there is a long history in women's writing of the use of male or androgynous authorial names. Women
hid behind their books; they were invisible. The fiction of gnomic and sybilline speech, on the other hand, provided for women poets a way of coping with the prohibition that women cannot become writers and remain women, since to speak riddles is to speak without revealing oneself, and besides, the Sybil provided an illustrious exemplar.

All of these fictions are a response to the cluster of prohibitions and definitions which aroused in would-be women writers a complex of feeling which Gilbert and Gubar—adapting Harold Bloom's phrase—call "anxiety of authorship": "a radical fear that she cannot create, that . . . the act of writing will isolate or destroy her . . . (that) she cannot 'beget' art upon the (female) body of the muse." But, once the taboo of silence has been broken, and if the anxiety of authorship can be overcome, the problematical can be a source for poetry: poems can be engendered by the predicament. The orientation poem is created out of the crisis of the encounter between the anxiety of authorship and the imperative need to write poems.

Some poems by contemporary Canadian women poets are orientation poems in the sense described and use various forms of the fictions I have designated: retreat, impairment, riddling, and, rarely, fictions of manifest wholeness. To begin with, there are two poems by Wilkinson and Lowther, meditations on the poet's vocation and task, which are
centrally concerned with the situation of the poet's sex, perceived as predicament or conflict: "Lens" and "Angel."[9]

In Wilkinson's "Lens" the sustaining fiction is the analogy between writing poetry and seeing—with the natural eye and, by extension, through the camera: an analogy which provides Wilkinson with her metaphors and to some extent with her diction. The dialectics of the poem are poised on the opposition between the woman's impaired eye, which is "weak / and veiled with milk" and the "working eye" which is

... muscled
With a curious tension,
Stretched and open,
As the eyes of children;
Trusting in its vision
Even should it see
The holy holy spirit gambol
Counterclockwise,
Lithe and warm as any animal.
(9-17)

"My woman's iris," she says, "circles / A blind pupil,"

but

The poet's eye is crystal,
Polished to accept the negative,
The contradictions in a proof
And the accidental
Candour of the shadows ...
(20-24)

"The poet's daily chore," she says, "Is my long duty; / To keep and cherish my good lens ..." Throughout, she uses the personal possessive "my" in speaking of "my woman's eye" and "my woman's iris," while "The poet's eye" and "The poet's daily chore" are generalized and made impersonal by the definite article. Perhaps the bridge between the two is the
phrase "my working eye." "The poet's daily chore" becomes her "long duty"; her dedication echoes the vows of marriage: "To keep and cherish." Her woman's eye is weak, "veiled with milk": mother's milk, the milk of human kindness which nourishes the very children who are described as having eyes "Stretched and open." This milk, flowing, forms cataracts over her woman's eye, producing the "blind pupil" which her iris circles.

The central image in the poem is at first organic and symmetrical: two eyes, one crystal, polished, the other milk-blind. Then it becomes Cyclopean, technological, transmuted into the "eye," the lens, of a camera. The sense of impairment—blindness in one eye—though strong at first, becomes peripheral as the image is transformed into the camera's one eye. What the single eye of the camera and by analogy the eye of the poet can do is to preserve: it transfixes, stops time, so that the past becomes a series of "stills," meaning both something motionless and something which is still there.

The poem is about safe-keeping, and its strategy is containment: "camera" means "room"; film has edges; developing occurs in a dark-room; death, in the poem, is disciplined by the "foolscap stage." The world of the poem, though complete, is static and two-dimensional. For all the brilliance of its finish, the surfaces of the poem are flat,
like the surfaces of "stills"; they lack depth, binocular vision. In its images of containment--camera, dark-room, still, foolscap stage--the poem is an example of the strategies of confinement and diminution in women's poetry: to capture all of life in a series of static snapshots is to contain and to reduce in size. In its opening image of milk-blindness in one eye, it is related to impairment. The premise of the poem is that the woman, as woman, cannot be a seer or poet. Eve, an image of women, is in the poem, but the woman poet can only see through one eye, fly with one wing. To be human and blind in one eye is an impairment, shutting out certain kinds of vision. Wilkinson, out of this sense of radical handicap, has made a poem of brilliant finesse and controlled violence.

Like "Lens," Lowther's "Angel" focusses on making poetry as seeing. But if "Lens" is about the craft of poetry as containment, "Angel" is about the futility of building structures for containment: there are no safe places, no safe-keeping, in "Angel." It is, however, like "Lens" in one crucial way: in the conflict in the poem between the woman as woman and the woman as poet. The poet's being as poet is embodied in the figure of the angel-muse who, though male, is not related to the poet erotically. Rather he is possessor, incubus; protean, omnipresent; an imperative which exists beyond any conceivable edge. Not even voice, he is pure presence:
That frowning angel toys with me, hides in the eddies of my mind, lurks beneath the babble of bubble syllables, waits behind protozoan-chain of thought. If I, riding a dolphin-joyous metaphor or clinging to swift shape of memory, shaft into darkness that monstrous angel rises sudden as a shark (1-7).

He is outside stratagems, beyond "my governing and my evasions," a creature "neither born nor spawned / but grown like coral," secreted from "infinite lives and deaths / into this sudden dumb integrity, / this stark angelic incubus."

She has

. . . worked rites of exorcism against him, have made magic lattices, rings, pentagrams, have wished for a bubble of safety to carry me through food and bed and poetry. (15-19)

But her containing structures fail her; his eyes

. . . tear the floating webs of words I have created; they break the delicate shells I have secreted, slowly, painfully, to house my loves. (51-55)

Neither will he be placated by the annihilation of boundaries, by a receptivity which risks everything and withholds nothing. The poet has "assimilated / spring," "opened my thighs to gold," used her lover's sex "for a divining rod to the very source / of love":

...
And I have accepted all that love is, the ruthless hand
in my guts, the rearranging,
breaking and remaking,
the flowing of myself
in tortuous dry channels
over and through rocks;
And have not kept an essence of myself like a still walled
pool (27-30).

But this organic openness works no better than her earlier
artifice. The angel is not banished, "he rises out of some-
one else's poem / fits his face on the moon's dead face, /
mocks me in mirrors."

His eyes are holes beyond which there are no horizons;
they have not pigment, muscles, lids;
they are organs of pure perception,
ravenous, engulfing.

and always, like Eden's fiery-sworded guard,
he damns me for my sin
of growing likes
and muscled iris in my eyes
and jeers me that my Eden was not this
difficult flowering. (46-9, 55-60)

In a sense, "Angel" is a new version of the traditional
poem in which the poet expresses his or her inadequacy as a
vessel for the muse. Her ambivalence and terror are tradi-
tional: the muse is power, numen, and the poet, in this
convention, has always experienced awe when confronted with a
muse figure. Nor is the metaphor of the poet as seer new.
But in "Angel" as in "Lens" this image is handled in terms of
a conflict or polarity which in "Lens" is specifically re-
lated to gender and in "Angel" has some sexual resonance.
In "Lens" the woman's eye is "weak," "veiled with milk," and its iris "circles / A blind pupil": blinded, implicitly, by mother's milk, the woman's need to succour and nourish. The poet's eye, in contrast, is "crystal / Polished" able to "accept the negative" and "the contradictions in a proof." In "Angel" the muse has eyes which are "holes beyond which there are no horizons; . . . they are organs of pure perception"; the woman is damned for her "sin / of growing lids / and muscled iris in my eyes." In "Lens" the contrast between the two kinds of eye is presented specifically in terms of gender; in "Lens" the conflict can be seen in terms of the poet's being human, male or female, but accompanying images in the poem tend to give the conflict a sexual dimension.

The conception of poetry is different in the two poems. "Lens" focusses on the idea of the poet as shaper, who preserves experience in "stills," static encores; the virtue of the poet's eye is that it can frame contradictions. In "Angel" the notion of the poem as artificer, safe-keeper, is presented as an evasion: there are no horizons to the Angel's eyes. But though "Lens" focusses on poetry as craft, "Angel" on poetry as mystery, both poems state the conflict between the poet as person and the demands of the poetic vocation in images which have sexual overtones, and both poems see the woman as inadequate to the poetic task.
In keeping with the lavish style of her poem, Lowther rejects the idea of confinement; she has not kept herself "like a still walled pool"—a variant of the traditional image of the woman as hortus conclusus, intact. In "Lens" the poet accepts confinement for the sake of control and safe-keeping. But, though she has sacrificed one eye for the sake of the poem, she is herself the vessel for the transformation through which the "stills" or poems are made, and her victory, though limited, is triumphant: on the "foolscap stage," the white page on which poetry is written, even death can be commanded.

These are twentieth-century poems written in a time when the image of woman as poet has some substance. There are precedents and exemplars; so the anguish of the conflict between gender, as socially defined and subjectively experienced, and poetic vocation has lost some of its intensity.

Two poems by Phyllis Webb can be read as orientation poems: "Poet" and "Poetics Against the Angel of Death." The first is like "Angel" in its acceptance of the poetic vocation as ordeal, the second like "Lens" in its focus on poetry as craft.

"Poet" elaborates the fiction of religious retreat as a metaphor for commitment to the poetic vocation. It begins with a series of aggressively declarative statements:
I am promised
I have taken the veil
I have made obeisances
I have walked on words of nails
to knock on silences
I have tokened the veil
to my face
mouth covered with symbol - (1-8)

"Taking the veil," in the poem a metaphor for accepting the
poetic vocation, is in a religious context a synecdoche for
the nun's marriage to Christ, the Bridegroom. The figure is
traditional and specifically female. In the poem it in-
volves a muffling of natural contours, a hooding of the face.
Mutilation is there, in miniature, a domestic sample of
blood:

I have punctured my fingerbase
to fill one thimble
with blood for consecration
in a nunnery. (9-12)

"Poet" is a kind of inventory, a checking back to see if the
ritual gestures were made as prescribed. Appropriately to
the governing fiction, the images of ordeal are often lin-
guistic, expressed in terms of "words," "verbs," "the word":

I have walked on words of nails
to knock on silences

I have faced each station
of the cross and to each place
have verbs tossed free

... ...

and I have paced four walls
of this cell, I have paced
for the word . . . (4-5) (13-15) (18-20)
The poem ends enigmatically in an image of continuing conflict with a presence described through synecdoche:

... I have heard the tallest of mouths call down behind my veil to limit or enlarge me as I or it prevails.

In its governing fiction of confinement, the cutting of the self off from the world, "Poet" is linked to the tradition of retreat, though there is a stridency in the tone which undermines the convention even while using it. Maiming is there, too, in the obliteration of the contours of the face by the veil and in the tiny blood sample. In its allusiveness and the enigma of its resolution it is linked with the sybilleine tradition in women's poetry.

"Poetics Against the Angel of Death" is concerned with a crisis for the poet in her choice of form, and the rejection of a rhetorical tradition in which she can find no place for her own voice:

I am sorry to speak of death again
(some say I'll have a long life)
but last night Wordsworth's "Prelude" suddenly made sense—I mean the measure, the elevated tone, the attitude of private Man speaking to public men. Last night I thought I would not wake again but now this June morning I run ragged to elude the Great Iambic Pentameter who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress because I want to die writing Haiku or, better, long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!

(1-14)
"Poetics" is an account of a crisis in the poet's relation not only to form but to a whole tradition: a crisis followed by a despair which is dispelled by her discovery of an alternate tradition which includes her voice. The tradition that she rejects, or that as she sees it excludes her, is the dominant tradition in English poetry, expressed theoretically in Wordsworth's statement that poetry is the voice of a "man speaking to men" and in practice in the use of the iambic pentameter. For Webb, the second part of the rejection follows from the first: if poetry be defined as a man speaking to men, how can a woman be a poet? She can either despair and die or find other forms, an alternate poetic. The poem is about her discovery of this other poetic.

Formally, "Poetics" refers to or obliquely imitates the substance of the poem; it is a kind of sonnet, a distorted echo of the tradition she is rejecting. And the lines in which she names her chosen alternatives approximate the forms she chooses: lines 11-13 are haiku-like, and the final line—if one reads "Yess!" as a response to both suggestions—is almost a sapphic. Both the haiku and the sapphic line are syllabic, in contrast to the iambic pentameter, which is based on stress. The haiku is associated in its origins with Japanese court poetry written by women as well as men, and in twentieth-century poetry with the Imagist movement, in which H. D. and Amy Lowell played a prominent part. Sappho,
credited with the invention of the line that bears her name, is the prototypical woman poet, the figure most often invoked as exemplar by women poets, from Anne Finch in the seventeenth century to Jay Macpherson in the twentieth.

"Poetics" records the triumphant discovery of a life-giving alternative: a narrow escape. It moves from a fancied death towards openness and affirmation: "Yes!"
The exuberance of finding a poetic for a woman to speak through is expressed in the sweep and scope of the final line. She "runs ragged" around the rugged rock of the great tradition and finds her own measure and tone in haiku and sapphic.

Jay Macpherson's early collection The Boatman contains some poems which can be read as orientation poems in the sense that they elaborate fictions of voice, tone, and vocation, but such a reading has to be undertaken guardedly, within the governing fiction of the whole sequence. The title, The Boatman, comes from the last group of poems in the collection. The boatman is Noah, and the ark, emblem of containment as a way of coping with peril, is an icon for the book, which contains paired poems. But the organizing myth, which provides the poet with the two voices that speak the poems, is the story of Philomel and Procne, nightingale and swallow. The contrast in tone between the two versions of the paired poems is justified by the fiction that Philomel tells one version, Procne the other. Philomel provides the main voice, her
sister swallow the.under or counter song. The story of Philomel embodies all three of my governing fictions of adaptation: she suffers maiming when her tongue is cut out; her transformation into a bird is a protective covering in itself, and the nightingale is a bird which sings at night, in covert glades; and the nightingale cannot speak directly: when asked the name of her ravisher, Tereus, she can only cry "Tereu."

Macpherson's poems are cryptic, often only fitfully clear for all their surface finesse, playing hide-and-seek with the reader, but the fact that they are often knotted little labyrinths to which we are not given the clue only places them more decisively in the tradition of the poet as sybil, deeply committed to ambiguous speech. The poem-epigraph at the beginning of The Boatman is an exercise in this gnomic mode, a covert declaration of one possible orientation toward poetry:

No Man's Nightingale

Sir, no man's nightingale, your foolish bird,  
I sing and thrive, by angel finger fed,  
And when I turn to rest, an Angel's word  
Exalts an air of trees above my head,  
Shrouds me in secret where no single thing  
May envy no-man's nightingale her spring.
This tortuous little poem, with its arch echoes of Auden and Coleridge, cannot be construed with certainty because its syntax is radically ambiguous and because we have no way of knowing to whom the poem is addressed. It can in a sense be read as a variation on a mode which Bernikow associates with the tradition of women's poetry and which, she suggests, may constitute a separate genre: an elaboration of the "I am not yours" formula, a declaration of independence. This reading gives it some accord with Webb's "Poetics Against the Angel of Death," also a kind of declaration of independence. But the strongest presence in the poem, created by the imagery of pastoral retreat, is a sense of retirement, hiddenness, which is congruous with but different from reading it as a lyric of assertion of independence.

This emphasis fits the impression gained from the first part of the collection—that the pervasive muse figure which haunts the poems is caverned and cloistered. She is "locked and lost," a "lost girl gone under sea"; prototypically she is Sibilla, mute now, her shrine abandoned, unasked the questions she could answer. Sometimes there is a fugitive sense of a possible wakening, as in "The Caverned Woman":

Her lap is sealed to summer showers,
Ice-bound, and ringed in iron hold:
Her breast puts forth its love like flowers
Astonished into hills of cold.
Not here the Sun that frees and warms,
Cherishes between fire and flood:
But far within are Seraph forms,
Are flowers, fountains, milk, blood. 17

In contrast to Philomel's tone of plangent lamentation,
Procne, the swallow, who sings the poems in section III of
The Boatman, is bold and impertinent, as the contrasting
quatrains of this poem-epigraph suggest:

While Philomel's unmeasured grief
Poured out in barren waste
Raises a tree in flower and leaf
By angel guardian graced,

Her sister, snug in walls of clay,
Performs as she is able:
Chatters, gabbles, all the day,
Raises both Cain and Babel. 18

The subversive cast of Procne's versions of the stories
Philomel has already told is suggested in the last line.
Procne raises gossip, the diurnal chatter of females (she
gabbles all day, while her sister sings at night) to
artistic and even political importance. Yet the frame for
the total collection is orthodox, as this poem-epigraph
shows:

Take not that Spirit from me
That kindles and inspires,
That raises world from water,
The phoenix from her fires,
Sets up the ravaged nightingale
To bloom among her briars.

Sweet Spirit, Comforter
That raises with a word
The swallow in her house of mud,
True but absurd,
Allow a babbling bird. 19
The kindly Spirit which encloses and allows the voices of both nightingale and swallow is, of course, the Holy Spirit as muse and inspiration. But within the orthodox frame, the two images of the poet are still consonant with the modes of adaptation described earlier: the nightingale is "ravaged" and the swallow is small, insignificant and circumscribed.

It is not until Macpherson's second collection, Welcoming Disaster, published some twenty years after The Boatman, that the caverned female muse figure emerges and is confronted by the poet in a recognition poem, "Hecate Trivia":

Here in a land of faultless four-leaved clovers,
Learning from books how, back before our windows,
Mirrors, your dusty forks were where uncanny
Worlds faced each other,

We, where our fathers banished wolf and Indian,
Vainly regret their vanished sense and vigour:
Now in our cities take a last, last stand with
Rat and with cockroach.

Goddess of crossways, three-faced, was it you my
Muse all this while? you are the last who hallows
Contents of pockets, broken dolls, dead puppies:
Queen, garbage eater.

Hecate, as Triple Goddess, was sometimes called Hecate Tri-formis, but as Hecate Trivia (three ways) she presided over crossroads and was called the mistress of the three realms of earth, heaven, and sea. In this sense, she would stand at the point where the three realms meet, "where uncanny / Worlds faced each other," which is also the crux of choice, where all the alternatives are clear. This poem occurs in the context of a poem series about a search downwards and backwards, which is also a search for lost knowledge. Thus
Hecate Trivia has to be learned about from books; the dusty crossroads at which her likeness stood has been replaced, in late twentieth-century urban Canada, by the "faultless four-leaved clovers" of complex traffic intersections. This sense of contrast between the urban present and a more natural past, which can only be vainly regretted, continues in the second stanza. We are survivors, associated with those other abhorred survivors, gleaners of the leavings of our cities: rat and cockroach. In their ancientness and ignominy, these creatures are linked with the goddess as "garbage-eater."

"Trivia" is, of course, related to the word "trivial," meaning commonplace or trifling, and Hecate Trivia as muse "hallows" the commonplace, and is nourished by life's discards.

The recognition scene in the third stanza is both discovery and acknowledgement: "was it you my / Muse all this while?" She is an integrating image because in a sense she embodies both Philomel and Procne: the serious / lyrical strain and the playful / subversive. By hallowing "Contents of pockets, broken dolls, dead puppies," she enlarges the scope of poetry, making it allowable to speak of what Macpherson calls elsewhere in the series "Child's losses, loves buried, griefs you'd call forgotten." The search backwards for the goddess has made available the buried life of childhood. In her completeness as Queen and garbage-eater, and in her stance at the open crossroads rather than in a covert
glade, Hecate Trivia as muse in this poem is a fiction of manifest wholeness, unhidden, unimpaired.

Despite this recognition, Macpherson is still committed to symbolic structures of often opaque complexity, but there is one formal difference between this volume and her earlier one, a new direction which can be associated with her acknowledgement of the triple muse: her declared decision to write sapphics: "Searching my soul, I find a fell -, fierce -, fearsome - / Yen to write sapphics." In her final "Notes & Acknowledgements" she adds a characteristically arch disclaimer: "Sapphics likewise impure, stemming / From the hymn-tune known as Flemming." Nonetheless her choice of this long syllabic line does link her with the ur-tradition of women's poetry, and with the quest on the part of women poets which Webb's "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" explores: the search for alternate forms.

"Woman On / Against Snow" is a later orientation poem by Pat Lowther. Based on two sources, an Inuit myth and a documentary account of an Inuit woman, it elaborates, in terms of the making of poetry, the motif central to the myth: the transformation of mutilation into sustaining creation. There are many versions of the myth, but the basic events are constant. Some Eskimos are out in a kayak in the water. A storm rises. Nuliajuk, a girl, is thrown into the water; when she tries to climb back into the boat, the people who threw
her in cut her fingers off, joint by joint, as she clings to
the edge of the kayak. The joints fall into the sea, and
become the creatures of the ocean on which men feed, and
Nuliajuk becomes a sea spirit who presides over the sources
of life. The companion source for the poem is a documentary
account by Samuel Hearne describing a young Inuit woman
living in complete isolation, sustaining herself by snaring
small game, and contriving besides to ornament the clothing
she stitched. 28

In Lowther's poem, the motifs of cloistered solitude,
diminution and mutilation are not abandoned but transformed
into images of creation, through the fictions of making
beautiful garments, carving an animal shape out of bone, and
making poems. Nuliajuk is the paradigm of creative trans-
formation, but in the poem her image and the image of the
abandoned woman merge into one figure who is also the speak-
ing poet, the one who makes poems out of her own isolation
and suffering. The poem is an enquiry, through small,
exemplary narratives and songs, into the necessity of poetry
and the conditions for writing it. So Hearne's commentary
on the isolated Inuit woman, which forms the second stanza of
the poem, is thus crucial to the argument:

"It is scarcely possible to conceive
that a person in her forlorn situation
could be so composed
as to be capable of
contriving or executing
anything that was not absolutely necessary
to her existence." (19-19)
But the poem replies that "The first / last human is / poet / shaman," that poetry is in fact "absolutely necessary / to her existence." (29-31)

The fourth and fifth stanzas can be heard as spoken by the poet's persona or by the woman in Hearne's documentary account:

Give me a bone for my hunger
Nuliajuk
I will turn it in my hand
till it speaks
I will call from it
shapes, faces,
with my ulo
I will call from it
your creatures Nuliajuk
I too castaway
I mother
midwife
in the absence of the people
I speak with the world (34-47)

There is no conflict in these lines between the woman as castaway, mother, and midwife, and the woman as artist. In this stanza the artist is the carver, who calls forth living shapes from bone; in the next stanza, the image of the artist is domestic:

Give me blood for my hunger
Nuliajuk
when I have drunk
I will save a little
a thought will come to me
to help my clothing be beautiful
in the absence of the people
I speak with the world (48-55)

But, whether carving or embroidering garments, the making of art is a way of diminishing isolation, of "speaking with the world."
In the next stanza, the artist is the poet, who responds
to her sense of her own littleness and nothingness by making
poems:

she hears the whole night
name her,
Small Small
Here-by-chance
Belonging-nowhere-meaning-nothing
She says stubbornly nothing
but poems come from her hands:
she finds food. (61-68)

The transformation of Nuliajuk's severed fingers into living,
sustaining creatures is an analogy for what the woman artist
does:

As Nuliajuk's severed fingers
came to life
took shapes and senses
the woman's hands
leather and bone
brown patient angels
work ritual (69-75)

Finally the woman alone becomes an image of human response to
nothingness:

The white world circles
blank as a zero.
In the centre of white
a dark speck, living.
She is the pupil of that eye. (86-90)

The woman / artist is the seeing centre of the world. The
poem is thus a celebration of the vocation and the task of
the poet. Through the myth of Nuliajuk and the account of the
abandoned Inuit woman, the poet has contrived a complete
fiction of the transformation of mutilation and isolation,
into poetry, a work accomplished by the woman artist not in
spite of but in virtue of her being mother, midwife, and outcast.

Even though it insists on an image of composite wholeness, Lowther's poem is still centred in ordeal, albeit an ordeal transformed into the making of art. In contrast, Elizabeth Brewster's "To the Male Muse," while clearly an orientation poem, is easy-going and ironically playful. It is an artfully colloquial exercise in an old mode which, as the title suggests, she is adapting to the situation of the female poet: the ode to the muse. Her self-definition in the poem is diminishing—the muse has a lot to put up with—but this can be taken as the traditional self-deprecation of the poet in this genre. The relation between poet and muse in the poem is erotic, again a traditional motif in this mode, but their affair is conducted with an easy familiarity which suits the fiction that they are old, habitual lovers, but which gives a new twist to a tradition which habitually set the muse above the poet. Robert Graves would not address the White Goddess in this informal manner:

What other friend or lover, after all, would have been so faithful (more or less) as you have been all these years?
Putting up with my long monologue about myself, the endlessly accumulating details, the turn and return on the same themes. Putting up with my restlessness, my moves here and there, always to boring places. Sackville instead of Bangkok. Saskatoon instead of Athens.

Oh, I'll admit. I've been jealous of you at times, You take other girls to fancier restaurants Show off more for them Use a smoother line (I suppose you know I like something simple: there's no point trying new tricks when I like the old ones just as well) (1-3, 6-24)

As these lines covertly show, Brewster is using the ode to demonstrate and define her habitual tone—bantering, ironic, with the occasional grudging lyrical note—her persona—plain Jane, laying it on the line—and the range of her subjects, her preference for the home-grown over the exotic: "Sackville instead of Bangkok / Saskatoon instead of Athens."

Her stylistic preference is made clear too: something simple, old tricks instead of the new. All of these matters form the usual substance of the complete orientation poem. What is notably lacking in this poem is the sense of crisis, conflict, or ordeal to be found in the poems in this mode already discussed. Brewster's doors are open; the muse comes and goes; she has domesticated him:
Sometimes you've deserted me
as sometimes I've deserted you.
I can't complain.
Neither of us is the marrying type.
But you come back.
You know you're comfortable with me
and that I drop everything and everybody else
whenever you ring up.

In spite of anything I may have said
all my love letters
have been written
to you. (25-32, 35-38)

Brewster's "For the Male in Search of the White Goddess"
is another muse poem, spoken this time from the point of view
of the female muse, and, like "To the Male Muse," it is low-
keyed, a kind of deliberate de-fusing of the explosive power
of these old fictions. They have their uses, she seems to
be saying, but let's be sensible about it:

Containing both, being neither
untouched virgin
nor harlot in a red dress

I am myself, individual,

never "just like a woman"
though certainly female.

if you want to call me a goddess
I don't object
though nobody else has called me one

(nor a bitch-goddess either)

I know I'm human
unfashionable
unadorned
am only beautiful without clothes
(1-14)
For all its moderation of tone and the absence of the rhetoric of the manifesto, this poem is a rejection of the persona of the muse in its extreme, romantic form, a statement of her disinclination to act out stereotypes, and a declaration of her sense of self: human, individual, female. There is an openness and quiet strength in her rejection of outmoded fictions which is tacitly subversive. As a poet committed to the middle voice, she tends either to reject the extremes of fiction which that range of voice cannot handle, or, as in the two poems cited, to domesticate and normalize such fictions; she is a leveller, a deflater. As for mutilation, incarceration, and riddling speech, the fictions which have characterized the attempts of women poets to imagine themselves as poets, she is, in these two poems, clearly whole, moving easily in or out of doors, and above all a plain speaker.

Once the threshold into speech has been crossed, any fiction is useful to the poet, including the fictions of concealment, impairment, and riddling, which have been the object of examination in this chapter. Brewster's poems suggest that it is possible to use old fictions without being locked into their imperatives. Margaret Atwood was quoted recently as saying that the women's movement in its current phase has shown that it is possible to be a woman writer without suffering. One can only assume that she
meant without suffering as-a-woman. And yet a recent poem by Atwood uses a powerful fiction of poetry-as-mutilation, an image quite stunning in its archaic brutality:

The old queen's head cut off at the neck, then skinned and emptied, boiled, coated with plaster, cheeks and lips dyed red, bright stones in the eyes

After this transformation she can sing, can tell us what we think we need to hear

This is 'poetry', this song of the wind across teeth, this message from the flayed tongue to the flayed ear.

If fictions like the definition of woman as unsuited by nature to the writing of poetry are used as gags to silence women, then the scope of poetry is narrowed. Once such fictions become suspect, there is a transitional period during which they become themselves the substance of poetry. Now that the woman poet is no longer a freak in society, preoccupation with limiting fictions like the ones which have been the subject of this chapter will probably diminish. Fictions of muse, which have to do with the mystery of the sources of poetry, a perennial subject, may change, but they will not disappear. The orientation poem, too, which is the poet's exploration of her relation to language and the traditions of her craft, may, as we have seen, appear in different guises, but it is a genre essential to poetry and will last as long as poetry is written.
Notes

Chapter I

1 Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 45-46.


5 Woolf, Room, pp. 88-91. Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 7-14, By a Woman Writt: Literature From Six Centuries By and About Women, ed. Joan Goulianos (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974). The title, and one of the epigraphs is taken from a poem by Anne Finch, and pp. 70-85 are devoted to selections from her work.


7 Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 48-49.


9 Pat Lowther, "Angel," This Difficult Flowering (Vancouver: Stone House, 1968), pp. 25-26. Line references for quotations from the poem are given in the text. It is interesting to note that the title of this collection is taken from the final line of "Angel."


It seemed appropriate to delay the discussion of Macpherson's sibyl poems until Chapter II, where they will be considered, along with sibyl poems by other poets, in the context of classical mythology.

Macpherson, Boatman, poem epigraph, p. 1.


Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all
But will its negative inversion, be prodigal . . .

It is arguable that Macpherson's poem echoes fragments of "Kubla Kahn," in particular the pastoral passage in the first stanza:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. (8-11)

and the last two lines of the poem:

For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

This poem can be viewed, too, in the context of the long and varied tradition, in English, of poems about nightingales, from Prior and Finch to Keats and Shelley and beyond.

Bernikow, p. 11.
17 Macpherson, Boatman, p. 42. The poem is quoted in its entirety in the text.

18 Boatman, p. 30. The poem as quoted is complete.

19 Boatman, p. 20. The poem as quoted is complete.


21 Welcoming Disaster, p. 31. The poem as quoted is complete.

22 Mary Daly, GYN/ECOLOGY: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 77-79.

23 Welcoming Disaster, p. 21.

24 Welcoming Disaster, p. 27.

25 Welcoming Disaster, p. 63.


28 A fragment of the Hearne journal is quoted in the article by Carpenter, p. 206.

30 Elizabeth Brewster, "For the Male in Search of the White Goddess," *Sometimes*, p. 110. Line references for quotations from the poem are given in the text.


Chapter II

Versions of Classical Mythology: the Adaptation and Transformation of Canonical Classical Fictions by Contemporary Women Poets

Although twentieth-century literature by both men and women is marked by an ironic, subversive relation to the forms, fictions, and ideologies of tradition, some woman writers have gone about this task in ways which are identifiably different.

The cluster of fictions which make up classical mythology has been centrally important ever since vernacular European literature began in the various story-cycles of romance. The twentieth century, through the work of Frazer, Murray, and Harrison, saw the reinterpretation of classical myth through the new insights of anthropology, and such writers as Lawrence, Eliot, Joyce, and O'Neil adapted classical fictions to suit their purposes in the light of these new insights. But though Eliot and Joyce were formally innovative, and Lawrence original in the aspect of classical mythology which he chose to emphasize, the ideological burden of their fictions is not basically altered: Ulysses is still essentially patriarchal, centered in the quest of father for son, and Lawrence's attitude to the Bemeter-Kore myth is coloured with patriarchal anxiety. It remained for women writers to adapt classical fictions in a genuinely iconoclastic way.
The inversion of crucial fictions, with potentially momentous consequences for literature and society, is not new. Jane Harrison cites the transformation of the Pandora story under patriarchy, an alteration so thorough-going and long-lasting that most of us know only the received version. This is not to suggest that the purveyors of story cause the shift in values which the new versions display; they reflect and consolidate it. But the fact that altered versions are being devised suggests a major change in values.

In matriarchal theology, Harrison says, Pandora represents "the earth as Kore." Earth-born, she gives to humankind the earth's bounty. But in Hesiod's telling of her story, an account marked by "the ugly malice of theological animus,"

woman, who was the inspirer, becomes the temptress; she who made all things, gods and mortals alike, is become their play-thing, their slave, dowered only with physical beauty, and with a slave's tricks and blandishments. To Zeus, the archpatriarchal bourgeois, the birth of the first woman is but a huge Olympian jest... So the great figure of the Earth-goddess, Pandora, suffered eclipse: she sank to be a beautiful, curious woman... 1

Hesiod's altering the myth of Pandora to suit patriarchal ideology is an example of one of the options open to those who set out to change received versions of traditional fictions: he retains the central figure, Pandora, the first woman, but alters the story to fit the emergent theology. New versions do not always have to be invented; there are usually variants of
any given myth, though they may be designated apocryphal in relation to the canonical version. An instance of this is the apocryphal story of Helen in Egypt, first given literary form by Euripides, and significantly again in our century in a long meditative narrative poem by H. D.² The promulgation of an alternate version provides a shift in emphasis which implicitly expresses a shift in values. Related to this is the shift in emphasis to a part of the story which is canonical but neglected, as in Elizabeth Brewster's stressing Psyche's ordeal, in her retelling of the myth in "In Search of Eros."³

A second strategy for the undermining of received versions of myth is to retain both the central figure and the story core, but to deflate or undermine the significance of the story by altering tone and perspective through various devices traditionally available to the poet: irony, ludicrous exaggeration, faux naïf tone, and sarcasm. An example is Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song," which tells that famous story from the point of view of the siren.⁴

Both these strategies, associated with changing attitudes toward traditional story and its iconography, Annette Kolodny subsumes under the term "inversion":

² H. D. is Harold Bloom.
On the one hand, the stereotyped, traditional literary images of women . . . are being turned around in women's fiction, either for comic purposes, to explore their inherent absurdity, or, in other instances, to reveal their hidden reality, though in new ways . . . On the other hand, there is a tendency to "invert" even more generalized traditional images and conventionalized iconographic associations so that they come to connote their opposites.

Atwood's handling of the Circe/Penelope pair in the "Circe/Mud Poems," 6 which falls within my second category--the retention of characters and story with a radical shift in point of view--is a striking example of "inversion" as defined by Kolodny, because of its undermining of the values traditionally associated with the two figures.

There are two other options open to the poet who wants to use old fictions in new ways. One is to do what Gwen Hauser does in her "Diana Poems": 7 choose a figure from a familiar mythology and exploit the qualities traditionally associated with the figure, but in a new context. The other is to select from pre-classical myth a fiction which does not carry the burden of patriarchal ideology. This Jay Macpherson and Elizabeth Brewster do in their retelling of the myth of the Sumerian-Babylonian goddess Inanna. 8

The question of the poet's ideological involvement in the project of subverting received fictions is one which cannot be answered with any certainty, with only the texts of the poems as evidence. They may be purely literary exercises.
Viewing them in this way, one would have to say that the poet's project is to make poems and her strategy to exploit the possibilities available to her in the altering of traditional fictions. In Hauser's "Diana Poems," the rhetoric of the poems makes the poet's ideological commitment clear; but in Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" it is impossible to say with certainty whether the poet's main interest is in subverting mythological structures or in exploring the relation between men and women through the ironic use of traditional fictions, or both.

But it may be unnecessary to differentiate between the ideological and the literary, because in the well-made poem the two will be integrated. For example, the telling of the story of the pre-pantheon goddess Inanna may be ideologically attractive because she is a powerful figure from a pre-patriarchal cycle of myths; it is also an attractive literary project because in the telling the poet does not have to struggle against received versions. On the other hand, a poet like Margaret Atwood, who has perfected an ironic voice and who excels in turns of wit, may be attracted precisely to the inversion of the values associated with Ulysses, Circe, and Penelope.

It is certainly true, on the evidence of the poems, that an increasing number of twentieth-century women poets are interested in reworking mythological fictions which centre on
the figures of women, whether to invert received versions or introduce pre-hellenic fictions. And they are attracted especially to those female figures who are, in their fictions, centres of power, even if—indeed, sometimes precisely because—their power may be thought to be malevolent, as in the case of Circe, or diminished, as in the figure of the sibyl.

The sibyl is a useful instance, because she has been granted a prominent place in twentieth-century literature thanks to her presiding role in *The Wasteland*. And all three of the poets whose work provides the substance for this chapter have written poems to or about her. In the macaronic Latin and Greek epigraph to Eliot's poem, the Cumaian Sibyl, imprisoned in a jar suspended in air, replies, when asked by children what she desires, "I want to die."

She exists in familiar Eliot territory: the shadow land between the desire and the spasm, despairing, but powerless to act out her despair. In recent feminist criticism, and as early as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, she appears in quite other guise, as a potent image of lost and scattered, but reclaimable, wisdom.

Both these versions of the sibyl, and some of the range in between, occur in the poems at hand, but the first of Jay Macpherson's two Sibylla poems in *The Boatman* is closest to the image invoked in *The Wasteland*. In accord with the
organization of her collection around the Philomel-Procne myth, discussed in my first chapter, there are two Sibylla poems, one spoken by Philomel, one by Procne. The difference in tone between the two voices--mediated through diction and cadence--is established in a poem-epigraph which describes the two contrasting literary modes which the two voices employ:

While Philomel's unmeasured grief
Poured out in barren waste
Raises a tree in flower and leaf
By angel guardian graced,

Her sister, snug in walls of clay,
Performs as she is able:
Chatters, gabbles, all the day,
Raises both Cain and Babel.

The first stanza describes the pastoral lament. The mode alluded to in the second quatrain is difficult to define, but "Chatters, gabbles" suggests a low mimetic style, and "Raises both Cain and Babel" suggests subversion, a bouteversement of established order. The distance between Philomel's lament over the dwindled and silenced Sibylla and Procne's pert celebration of precisely the same event might be compared to the difference, in Elizabethan poetry, between a praise and a contempt, both purely literary modes which could be applied with decorum to the same subject.

It is Philomel, not Procne, whose voice has precedence in The Boatman, which is ideologically orthodox. Philomel's lyrical lament is a commentary on the received version of the story of the Sybil:
Who questions now, who offers thanks, who grieves?
No memory lingers
In the sand I run between my fingers,
In the whirling leaves.

Where is your god, Sibylla, where is he
Who came in other days
To lay his bright head on your knee
And learn the secret of Earth's ways?

Silence: the bat-clogged cave
Lacks breath to sigh.
Sibylla, hung between earth and sky,
Sways with the wind in her pendant grave.

The image elaborated in this poem of the ancient prophetess
silenced, diminished, in limbo, is consonant with the image
in the epigraph to The Wasteland. In contrast, Procne's poem
flouts the pieties of the received version:

God Phoebus was a merry lad,
Courted my mother's daughter:
Said I, "To swim I'll be quite glad,
But keep me from the water."

He swore he'd break my looking-glass
And dock my maiden tresses:
He told me tales of many a pass,
All of them successes.

There's other ways to catch a god
Who's feeling gay and girly
Than tickling with a fishing-rod
Among the short and curly.

I took his gift and thwarted him,
I listened to his vows, and
Though looks are gone and eyes grow dim,
I'll live to be a thousand.

I'm mercifully rid of youth,
No callers plague me ever:
I'm virtuous, I tell the truth--
And you can see I'm clever!
This ribald celebration, an accomplished exercise in subversive story telling, does not alter the facts of the story, but only the attitude toward it. By cutting her losses and counting her blessings, Sibylla, in Procne's version, has turned a lament into an occasion for rejoicing. To borrow from the title of Macpherson's later collection, she welcomes what to others may appear to be a disaster—her loss of youth, beauty, power and companionship—and thus turns her story from the tale of woe of a loser to the tale of triumph of a winner. It is this shift in point of view which acts subversively, because it undermines the values enshrined in the canonical version.

The subversive voice is still an undersong in *The Boatman*. In contrast, the text of Macpherson's second collection, *Welcoming Disaster*, is, as the title suggests, consciously subversive of received versions and values. But, besides being brilliant, often outrageous essays in the iconoclastic mode, the Procne lyrics—randy, colloquial, impertinent, sacriligious—set a tone and style which Margaret Atwood uses in her "Songs of Transformation" in the *Circe/Mud Poems*, the series which is central to my present argument.

Atwood's early poem, "A Sibyl," from her first collection, *Circle Game*, evokes and elaborates in a contemporary context the *Wasteland* image of the Cumaean Sibyl. The
Voices of the children are in the poem, but diffused; they
do not put the question. The sibyl is in her jar, as in the
received version, but not suspended between earth and sky—a
location which, though inconclusive, is somehow cosmic and
therefore prestigious. Atwood’s sibyl lives "on my shelves"
where "the bottles / accumulate":

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my sibyl (every woman
should have one) has chosen
to live there
thin green wine bottles
emptied of small dinners
ovaltine jars, orange-brown
emptied of easy sleep
my sibyl crouches
in one of them
wrinkled as a pickled
baby, twoheaded prodigy
at a freakfair
hairless, her sightless
eyes like eggwhites
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I stand looking
over the fading city

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she calls to me with the many
voices of the children
not I want to die
but You must die
later or sooner alas
you were born weren’t you
the minutes thunder like guns
coupling won't help you
or plurality
I see it
I prophesy (8-34)
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The tone is at once elegiac and flippant. The sibyl represents
a dead end and most of the omens are on her side, but the poet
can ignore her for now:
The thing that calls itself
I,
right now
doesn't care
I don't care

I leave that to my
necessary sibyl
(that's what she's for)
with her safely bottled
anguish and her glass
despair.  (66-76)

In this poem the familiar image of the sibyl is invoked
as a symbol of contained despair. She is somewhat diminished
by her everyday surroundings—she's part of the domestic
clutter—and the final lines even suggest that she is a bit of
a poseur, theatrical in her circumscribed and brittle distress.
She is the surrogate sufferer or alter-ego, the dark double of
the "I" who speaks the poem and who is determined to go on
enjoying herself on rather shaky foundations. Atwood relo-
cates and thereby dislocates the received version, so that the
sibyl becomes an image of closet hopelessness, the dark spirit
in the gothic domestic interior, nasty and threatening, but
walled up. This sibyl is an embarrassment, but also a
familiar and necessary spirit. She is still, in her comic
degradation, an image of truth, since she pays attention to
what the poet chooses to ignore: mortality.

Elizabeth Brewster, in contrast to the dereliction of
the image of the sibyl in Atwood's poem, takes the fiction
back to the sources of power in the first stages of the story,
before the incarceration. She tells the canonical version of
the story, but chooses an earlier part of it, thus altering
the image. Her poem, "Prophetess," is not, like Philomel's,
a lament for lost powers, nor, like Procris's, a raucous,
strident declaration that she got the best of a bad bargain.

It is an invocation of the sibyl as muse and inspiration:

I came before, oracle,
but only to the edge of the cave.
I was afraid to go in
and you were sleeping too deeply
for my voice to bring you out.

But now I am ready.
Now I will sink down again
into that darkness,
drown if necessary in the wells
of your quicksand eyes.

Speak, sibyl, with your high
ancient voice
the twittering
of dead swallows;

speak rhymes and riddles
and cracked wisdom;
tell me the world's fortune;
tell me my own fate;
tell me your most true,
most beautiful lies.

The fact that this part of the fiction is now—and only
just now, as the last two lines of the first stanza indicate
available to a late twentieth-century woman poet, suggests a
kind of poetic energy which can reclaim life-giving fictions
and find in them renewed sources of poetry. As long as the
icon of the silenced, wind-swayed, incarcerated, death-longing
sibyl was in the foreground, it was impossible to see the
other, earlier sibyl. She has been sleeping deeply, the poet
says, but now the poet's voice can bring her to life. Brewster has not altered the story, but by drawing attention to a different segment of it she has transformed the emotional and ideological burden.

Margaret Atwood's series, the Circe/Mud Poems, is central to any investigation of the subversive, retelling of classical fictions by contemporary women poets. The "Songs of the Transformed," which stand as a kind of proem to Circe's version of Odysseus' quest, are lyrics from the mouths of a variety of outcasts and underdogs who hint and threaten at the turning of the worm, in stanzas which are sinister, macabre, and plaintive by turn. "Siren Song," one poem in this series, is an example—like the Procne lyrics in The Boatman—of subverting the romantic associations surrounding a mythological fiction, not by changing or fragmenting it, but telling it from a different point of view, in a different tone. Like the arch, raucous lyrics in Jay Macpherson's counter-songs, the story is told from the point of view of the subject, in this instance a siren:

This is the one song everyone would like to learn: the song that is irresistible:

the song what forces men to leap overboard in squadrons even though they see the beached skulls
Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you,
Come closer. This song

Is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
You are unique

At last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time. 16

The comedy in "Siren Song" is created by the distance
between the traditional idea of irresistible, doomed seduc-
tion in a heroic context, and the ludicrous image of the
bored and restless creature in a "bird suit," "squatting,"
"looking picturesque and mythical / with these two feathery
maniacs." The song is a burlesque of the rescue myth in
which hero rescues a maiden-in-distress, and an ironic com-
mentary on the romantic craving for uniqueness. Like
Sibylla in The Boatman, this girl squatting in the bird suit
is, appearances to the contrary, a winner, as the wry final
lines indicate: "Alas, / it is a boring song / but it works
every time."
This comment suggests, too, that the fiction in the poem is different from what the opening lines lead us to expect. The siren's song certainly undercuts and deflates the tone of the myth, but the story is left intact; and what seems, at first, to be a cry for escape from the constraints of story, turns out to be another version of the received myth, a version which fulfills precisely the traditional function of the siren's song. The imperatives of the myth are left intact, but the effect of the witty, savage little poem is to dispel the romantic frisson which still hovers around the tale of the siren's song. The paradox that story is coercive but dependable, imprisoning but somehow reassuring, underlies the ironies of the central series, the "Circe / Mud Poems."

Circe, the persona who speaks this series, is one of the prototypes of the plotting female, the woman who devises scenarios and makes things happen instead of waiting at home like Penelope or Solveig to hear the stories which returning heroes will eventually tell. In the patriarchal tradition, she is seen as scheming and destructive, but in Atwood's version she is benign: her design is to humanize Ulysses by releasing him from the imperatives of his myth. Both this aim and her sense of control are expressed in the opening poem:
Men with the heads of eagles
no longer interest me
or pig-men, or those who can fly
with the aid of wax and feathers
or those who take off their clothes
to reveal other clothes
or those with skins of blue leather

All these I could create, manufacture,
or find easily: they swoop and thunder
around this island, common as flies,
sparks flashing; bumping into each other,
on hot days you can watch them
as they melt, come apart,
fall into the ocean
like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes.

I search instead for the others,
the ones left over,
the ones who have escaped from these
mythologies with barely their lives;
they have real faces and hands, they think of themselves as
wrong somehow, they would rather be trees.

Ulysses is a specific instance of the hero burdened with
the paraphernalia of his heroism, and the "Circe / Mud Poems"
are an iconoclastic commentary on one of the central fictions
of our literature: part of the matter of Troy, the great story
hoard provided by the Homeric poems. In European literature,
the figure of Odysseus, along with Helen, is the most crucial
of all the characters from the theatre of the Trojan war. He
was many-sided in character and his wanderings episodic and
varied; but the type of Odysseus which has dominated English
literature is not the wily, worldly-wise politician of
Shakespeare's Troilus but the quest hero celebrated by
Tennyson and more recently by Wallace Stevens.
Atwood's version of her chosen episode from the *Odyssey* represents a radical change in emphasis in terms of the values which the male quest story has been taken to embody. Circe, the enchantress, speaks the poems: spell-binding incantations designed to disarm the man, to extricate him from the absurd and destructive imperatives of mythology, to reclaim him for human meanings. The "Circe / Mud Poems," like the earlier Atwood poem "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy," are subversions of the heroic stance, rejections of mythological paradigm, because such preconceived structures are not only restrictive but also destructive. Circe's words to Ulysses make this clear:

One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat, your killer's hands, your disjointed body, jagged as a shipwreck, skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed, scorched, thirsty, the usual, pretending to be--what? a survivor?

... your mind, you say, is like your hands, vacant; vacant is not innocent.

... There must be more for you to do than permit yourself to be shoved by the wind from coast to coast, boot on the boat prow to hold the wooden body under, soul in control

... Don't you get tired of wanting to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying *Onward*?
Ulysses, trapped into making gestures dictated by imperatives which no longer make any sense, if they ever did, is both absurd and dangerous, and these poems are ruthless comic exercises to contrive an escape route, to get outside of story. The poet can counter the distortion imposed by mythological patterns through subversion, irony, parody, ridicule, and attention to alternatives. But given language, its syntax and its history, the pursuit of reality through language will always be a process, never an arrival. Even within this poem-sequence, which renders an attempt to undermine the rigidities of mythological paradigm, a residual anxiety about the enduring power of the imperatives of story is expressed in one of the prose pieces which counterpoint the poems:

It's the story that counts. No use telling me this isn't a story, or not the same story. I know you've fulfilled everything you promised, you love me, we sleep till noon . . . But I worry about the future. In the story the boat disappears one day over the horizon, just disappears, and it doesn't say what happens then. On the island that is . . . Am I really immortal, does the sun care, when you leave will you give me back the words? Don't evade, don't pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and the story is ruthless.

The tension between the desire to be free from the imperatives of story, and the assertion that the story is ruthless, is resolved in the final poem in the sequence, which follows this prose piece; this poem asserts in metaphor
not the abolition of story but the possibility of really new, unknown, untried versions, so that story is not abandoned, only transformed. The text is in italics, which suggests that it is a coda or commentary on the whole preceding sequence:

There are two islands at least, they do not exclude each other

On the first I am right, the events run themselves through almost without us,

we are open, we are closed, we express joy, we proceed as usual, we watch for omens, we are sad

and so forth . . .

The second I know nothing about because it has never happened;

this land is not finished this body is not reversible. 22

This possibility of novelty, of something which "has never happened," in contrast to the sad proceeding "as usual" in the known version, is elaborated and celebrated in the final poem of the book in which the "Circe / Mud Poems" appear. In this poem, "Book of Ancestors," imposed paradigms are rejected in favour of improvisation:
So much for the gods and their static demands, our demands, former demands, death patterns obscure as fragments of an archeology, these frescoes on a crumbling temple wall we look at now and can scarcely piece together

History is over, we take place in a season, an undivided space, no necessities hold us closed, distort us.

Once you have escaped the tyranny of mythological patterns, it is possible to make the same gestures, use the same words, but with different meaning, as when, in the fiction of the poem, the man's body is curved in the ancient pose of the sacrificial victim, but there is no altar, no spectators, his vulnerability has a different meaning:

\begin{quote}
\textit{to take that risk, to offer life and remain alive, open yourself like this and become whole.}
\end{quote}

(60-62)

The Circe/Ulysses pair is part of a triad the third member of which is Penelope, and one of the most subversive gestures in the "Circe / Mud Poems" is the dethroning of Penelope, a central icon in the patriarchal quest story--be it Odysseus's or Peer Gynt's--in which the male goes off on adventures while his wife waits at home. The hero's adventures, though they usually have a noble goal, invariably involve sexual dalliance on the side. The icon of the passive,
faithful, long-suffering and long-trusting wife is one of the most persistent in our literature. It is essential to this figure of womanhood that she be static and storyless while her husband or lover is mobile and the centre of a variety of plots or stories. Nothing is allowed to happen to Penelope, nor can she initiate any action save the staying power of maintaining the status quo at home. Even the stories she weaves on her loom as part of her delaying tactics are de-created at night.

This image appears twice in the "Circe / Mud, Poems": once in the archaic generalized fiction of the mud woman, once individualized as Penelope. The emblem of the fertile earth mother as clay fetish has appeared before in Atwood's poetry, in Power Politics, and this link is appropriate, because the "Circe / Mud Poems" can be read as a sequel to the earlier work, a further exploration, through the fiction of Circe and Ulysses, of the relationship between a man and a woman. In both instances the poet is considering various personae available to women in the theatre of sexuality, and in both the poem and the prose piece the image of archaic fertility is evoked, only to be—not without a certain ironic ambivalence—rejected. In Power Politics:
I could grow bark and
become a shrub

or switch back in time
to the image left,
in cave rubble, the drowned
stomach bulbed with fertility,
face a tiny bead, a
lump, queen of the termites.

In the "Circe / Mud Poems" this image is elaborated into
a story "told to me by another traveller, just passing
through":

When he was young he and another boy con-
structed a woman out of mud. She began at
the neck and ended at the knees and elbows:
they stuck to the essentials. Every
sunny day they would row across to the island
where she lived, in the afternoon when the
sun had warmed her, and make love to her, sink-
ing with ecstasy into her soft moist belly,
her brown wormy flesh where small weeds had
already rooted. They would take turns, they
were not jealous, she preferred them both.
Afterwards they would repair her, making
her hips more spacious, enlarging her breasts
with their shining stone nipples . . . Is this
what you would like me to be, this mud woman?
Is this what I would like to be? It would be
so simple.

Within the fiction of the poems in You Are Happy this option
is implicitly rejected in favour of mutuality. And with her
goes the male image which corresponds to her: the man as
sexual conquistador, who subdues and occupies the woman as
territory.

This archaic, promiscuous torso devised by men to be
passively compliant with their sexual needs is not unrelated
to the figure of Penelope. The faithful wife of the wandering
hero is the mud-woman/earth mother at a later stage in her history, when the relation between patriarchal political power and property demanded that she be sexually faithful so that a man could be sure that his own son would inherit his land and goods. This paradigm of conjugal virtue, who has been extolled down the ages as a model of wifehood, gets her come-uppance in one of the "Circe / Mud Poems":

When you look at nothing
what are you looking at?
Whose face
dissolving like a paper plate?

It's the first one, remember,
the one you thought you abandoned
along with the furniture.

Meanwhile she sits in her chair
waxing and waning
like an inner tube or a mother,
breathing out, breathing in,
surrounded by bowls, bowls, bowls,
tributes from the suitors
who are having a good time in the kitchen

waiting for her to decide
on the dialogue for this evening
which will be in perfect taste
and will include tea and sex
dispensed graciously both at once.

She's up to something, she's weaving histories, they are never right,
she has to do them over,
she's weaving her version,

the one you will believe in,
the only one you will hear.
This poem is a brilliant example of "inversion": not altering the story, but through the selection of detail and the choice of tone, diction, and figures of speech, turning an icon of traditional virtue into an image both ludicrous and sinister.

Jay Macpherson's poem series Welcoming Disaster is iconoclastic in three ways: in its explicit rejection of certain classical myths, in its choice of the pre-hellenic three-fold goddess as muse, and in its selection of the pre-hellenic ordeal story of Inanna as narrative base. The poems in the sequence, as the section headings indicate, delineate an ordeal-initiation: Invocations, The Way Down, The Dark Side, Recognitions, Shadows Flee, Epilogue. They can, like the "Circe / Mud Poems," be read at a personal, psychological level, but in the context of this study they are treated as fictions abstracted from the personal matrix, and related rather to the literary tradition.

The stylistic strategy in this collection, as in Macpherson's earlier sequence The Boatman, is to devise enigmatic linked symbolic structures, and the mode is still hermetic, though in "First and Last Things" and "Notes and Acknowledgements" she does attempt to give us some clues.

Metrically she uses, as before, a variety of traditional rhymed stanzas, but the long second section, "The Way Down," and one poem in the final section are written in sapphics. Characteristically she issues a disclaimer in her poem-
epigraph, stating that her sapphics are "impure, stemming /
From the hymn-tune known as Flemming"; but her "fell -,
fierce -, fearsome - / Yen to write sapphics" can be seen as
a metrical strategy corresponding to her reaching back to
the story of the ancient female goddess Inanna as narrative.
Sapphics place her in the tradition of female poets, the
progenitor for whom, in the European line, is Sappho.

In *The Boatman* the story of the Ark is the containing
fiction, the Procne-Philomel story the operational one;
similarly in *Welcoming Disaster* the containing form is the
imprisoning uroboric circle formed by feeder and devourer,
and the functional, organizing myth is the story of Inanna.
The goal of the poem series is to break out of this sinister
closed circle and to rescue and redeem those things which
have been excluded from it; the strategy is to use the
descent/ascent story of Inanna as a paradigm of the rescue
operation. The poems which do not deal directly with this
fiction do so obliquely, since they have to do with the
recovery of what has been lost--dead loved ones, or the
buried memories of childhood--and with reversals of various
kinds.

The pattern of the Inanna myth is familiar, but the
details are not, so it is perhaps appropriate briefly to tell
them. The reasons for the descent of Inanna from the great
above to the great below vary in different versions. Mac-
pherson tells us that she has used a conflation of the Sumerian and Babylonian stories. In some versions, Inanna goes down to rescue a brother, child, husband, or lover. In one translation of the Sumerian account she descends to witness the funeral rites of Gugalanna, husband of her sister Ereshkigal.28

From the "great above" she set her mind toward the "great below";
The goddess, from the "great above" she set her mind toward the "great below";

My lady abandoned heaven; abandoned earth, to the nether world she descended.

The Sugurma, the crown of the plain, she put upon her head,
The wig of her forehead she took
The measuring rod of lapis lazuli she gripped in her hand,
Small lapis lazuli stones she tied about her neck,
Sparkling..., stones she fastened on her breast,
A gold ring she put about her hand...

With a pala-garment, the garment of ladyship, she covered her body,
Kohl which..., she daubed on her eyes.
Inanna walked towards the nether world.
(1-2, 4, 10-15, 17-19)

She dispatches her messenger Ninshubur, "carrier of true words," (l. 24) to cry out for her in the house of the gods, the house of Enlil, god of air, and entreat that she not be put to death in the nether world. When Inanna's sister Ereshkigal hears of her coming, "Her face turned pale like a
cut-down tamarisk, / While her lips turned dark like a bruised kuninu-reed." (l. 90) Inanna enters and has to endure without question the ordinances of the nether world. Stripped of her garment of ladyship, her lapis lazuli, she is hung naked from a stake for three days and three nights. Minshubur at her behest arouses the concern of the high gods, who are concerned anyway, because since Inanna descended to the land of No Return, all procreation has ceased and the world of generation is dying. So the god of air fashions two creatures from the dirt under his fingernail, and, giving them the food of life and the water of life, instructs them to sprinkle these sixty times upon the seemingly dead body of Inanna. This they do and Inanna arises and ascends. She gives Minshubur, her "carrier of true words," credit for her return.

Macpherson tells her dense, ambiguous version of Inanna's ordeal in "First and Last Things," the second poem in the section called "The Way Down." Within the fiction of the poem sequence, these stanzas are a set piece of instruction to her companion teddybear:

**First was Inanna, lady of the living,**

She sold to hell, to save her skin, Damuzi --Child, little brother--status mixed, but most her First love, her shepherd.

**How came a Hell, if she was first? that's easy--**

Hell was Breshkigal, her sister--her, then;

Where is he now? he had a sister too, it

Seems, Geshtinanna:
She, skilled in words, in dreams, and self-forgetful, 
Offered herself for him—he let her do it—
Flutes played, Inanna ran his this-year’s bath, laid 
Out his rebirth suit.

Four, are there? No, my ted, I guess just us two: 
All of these ladies I am, so my mother
Was before me: you, doll and god, my first love 
—Last, too, most likely.

This little catechism, containing a list of characters and a 
highly condensed narrative, delineates a complex family 
romance which, the poet tells us, represents her own arche-
typal predicament. She is destroyer, doom, and rescuer all 
in one, and her companion doll is child, brother, and lover 
all in one.

The greatest risk the poet takes in Welcoming Disaster 
is the elevation of a childhood toy, her teddybear, to the 
status of psychopomp, whose destiny is an apotheosis into 
world-tree and constellation. "He is the Tammuz of my song, / 
Of death and hell the key," we are told in "Surrogate." And 
in "Messenger":

Down he went, and found a boat 
On the darkness set afloat: 
Tadwit, my perduring friend, 
Where will you adventures end?

Take me, guide of souls, with you, 
Paddled in your ghost-boat: 
Through the waters deep and wide 
Bring me to the other side.30
"Transformation" describes his apotheosis:

Tadwit is the world-tree made:
I, reposing, in his shade,
See through leavel the heavens, where
Whirls in play a smallish Bear,
Bright, immortal, close and dear
As the eye's crystalline sphere.
Punished giants, monsters dim--
All the heavens turn on him.31

As a literary device, this elevation of the trivial can be linked with certain motifs in folk tale and romance, in which heroic deeds are done by the nominally insignificant, and tiny creatures of nature come to the aid of a desperate heroine and help her to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. The poem "Palladia and Others" is a clue to the reasons for the poet's turning to this convention and it occurs in the sequence immediately before "Hecate Trivia," which I interpreted in my first chapter as a recognition poem in which the poet chooses the neglected three-fold goddess as her muse. This recognition is essential to the larger project of the poem series: the descent into the past, the self, the netherworld, to recover what was lost, locked up, rejected, and bring it to light by means of words; for it is Hecate Trivia who "hallows / Contents of pockets, broken dolls, dead puppies."

Before she can be seen, the Classical pantheon has to be got out of the way, a task which is accomplished in "Palladia and Others," which also provides the clue to her choice of a teddybear as soul-guide:
Stranger—I doubt your father was an oak-tree,  
Mother a rock, nor were you dropped from heaven  
Mystic, untouchable--so like me I guess you're  
Human-descended.

Still, you call up veiled statues, secret cities,  
Mazes that grant to few conditioned entry,  
Ivory heights whose walls when one assails them  
Shine but prove bruising.

Too-sacred persons I've adored before you,  
Crept to their shrines with apinful, cautious offerings:  
Under their altar found, asleep or hiding, their  
Small fuzzy brothers.

These proved approachable--you might say, playful:  
Liked what was offered, showed no circumspection,  
Raised no obstruction: I with them concluded  
Private arrangements.

Come, man of stone, of ivory, of glass, with  
Me just this once--to this sharp brink: peer over:  
See, in their hell, in perfect circle lie the  
Feeder, devourer.'

It is significant that Pallas Athene is the only deity  
referred to in the title "Palladia and Others" because this  
poem is a prelude to the recognition of the three-fold  
goddess, and, as Jane Harrison tells us, Athene was the  
goddess chosen to join the patriarchal pantheon in an il-  
lustrious manner, just as her sister Pandora was vilified  
and demoted. Of the fiction of Athene's birth from the head  
of Zeus Harrison says:
it remains a desperate theological expedient to rid an earth-born Kore of her matriarchal conditions . . . It is all unreal, theatrical show, and through it all we feel and resent the theological intent. We cannot love a goddess who on principle forgets the Earth from which she sprung . . . Politics and literature turned the local Kore of Athens into a non-human, unreal abstraction.33

The "too sacred persons," "non-human, unreal abstractions," are rejected in favour of "their / Small fuzzy brothers" who are not part of the hellish circle created by feeder and devourer: the symbiosis between worshipper and false idol "of stone, of ivory, of glass." The alternative--hidden, small, alive, approachable, childish--is the kind of thing which the muse as garbage eater might pull out of her pocket.

It doesn't matter that Tadwit, the teddybear, is not alive, as the "small, fuzzy brothers" are, because he is a domestic, nursery image--one of the dolls who, the poet says, consoled her on her nursery floor--and small children do not distinguish between the animate and the inanimate. Insofar as the poet's journey into darkness is a descent into her childhood, her unconscious, to find and name her "First loves and oldest," her teddybear is a suitable guide. If we find it hard to envisage him as "the Tammuz of my song, / Of death and hell the key," that may indicate that our responses are locked into kinds of decorum which it is precisely Macpherson's
intention to overturn and defy by flouting them. This bouleversement of literary decorum is accomplished under the aegis of Hecate Trivia, "queen, garbage eater," and to her realm a teddybear is as good a guide as any. His presiding presence in the poems as

Guide to dark places--finder of lost direction--tearspring-diviner, and where the word-hoard lay

is—as much as the denouncing of the classical pantheon, the invocation of Hecate Trivia, the use of Inanna's ordeal as frame—a mark of the poet's subversive intentions.

_Welcoming Disaster_ is an intricate symbolic structure; Macpherson's poems are covert and gnomic. Elizabeth Brewster's _In Search of Eras_ is, in contrast, openhanded and translucent. Whereas Macpherson chooses to polish and display archaic metres, Brewster has an easy command of the range of canonical styles of today: low mimetic, colloquial, relatively unembellished. While Macpherson's commitment to her poems is emblematic, Brewster's is reflective, narrative, and expressive. Her poetry—based on the domestication of the extraordinary; she has neither Atwood's link with the symbolist tradition, nor Macpherson's with the emblematic. Though she writes out of a very clear hierarchy of values, sometimes, as in "Disqualification," made wryly explicit, there is in her poems a levelling sense of wonder, so that everything is as extraordinary as everything else.
A close reading of the "Inanna" section of In Search of Eros does not sustain a sense that Brewster is writing in a deliberately subversive way. Nonetheless, in invoking the "unknown goddess" and in writing of the ordeals of Psyche and Inanna, she is turning her attention to significantly neglected matters and redressing a balance. "Death of the Gods" and "To the Unknown Goddess," the first two poems in the "Inanna" section, are companion pieces: the first a kind of introit, beginning in uncertainty and ending with an invocation; the second an elaboration of the invocation into a naming of a sacred presence. There is a movement from tentativeness in the first poem, the approach to the sacred, to confirmation in the second, the confrontation with the sacred. "Death of the Gods" begins:

Who was the last person to say a prayer
to the old gods, to Jupiter or Diana,
Ceres or Venus? And did whoever said it
say it with belief, or only as a sort of charm
half remembered from childhood?
did someone say to her (I know she was a woman)
"You mean you still believe
all those old stories?"

But somewhere in the country
in a hovel under the trees
some old crone dying in her bed
whispered a name she had heard in childhood
to protect her from the dark,
from the shades of the underworld;
and the goddess of hearth or orchard,
or moon or love or wisdom,
came and took her hand, 
descended with her into the shadows, 
and (except by the lips of lying poets) 
was never called back again.

Could you still be called back, 
anient gods and goddesses?
Or have you slept so long 
with no cries from your children 
that there will never again be a morning for you?
Deities with so few petitions 
might well be the most easily secured, 
the best listeners.

O seaborn Venus, heavenly Juno, 
O dark Persephone, daughter of the Earth, 
from where you rest in the arms of death I call you.36

Through the fiction of the old crone who still remembers 
and whispers the sacred names, the poet establishes her own 
authority, as a woman poet, to call forth the old deities. 
This she does in "For the Unknown Goddess,"37 which is both 
an ode and an invocation, suggesting an opening out and a 
restoring of balance. The opening lines suggest an ideo-
logical turning away from the patriarchal god, toward the 
great goddess in one of her manifestations:

Lady, the unknown goddess, 
we have prayed long enough only 
to Yaweh the thunder god.

Now we should pray to you again 
goddess of a thousand names and faces 
Ceres Venus Demeter Isis 
Inanna Queen of Heaven 
or by whatever name you would be known. 
(1-8)
The central stanzas are a periphrastic calling of the goddess in her various guises:

you sho sprang from the sea
who are present in the moisture of love
who live in the humming cells
of all life
who are rain
with its million soft fingers

and who are the earth
you with your beautiful ruined face
wrinkled by all
that your children have done to you
(9-18)

The final lines reinforce the turning, and spell out its implications:

we invoke your name
which we no longer know

and pray to you
to restore our humanity
as we restore your divinity.
(23-27)

There follows the seemingly playful "Moon," a commentary on the legend of Diana and Actaeon, which, like many of Brewster's poems, touches with very light fingers a kernel of violence. "Inanna," the next poem in the series, is a paraphrase of the Sumerian text in a series of imperatives, which is unusual in Brewster's poems; her syntax usually involves the more tentative moods. But since the imperatives in this poem are already accomplished—-they describe a prescribed ritual which took place in illo tempore—-they lose some of their imperative force and read like an incantation:
When the goddess Inanna
descends to the underworld
she must take off her crown
and go without pride
she must take off her jewels
and go without adornment
she must take off her clothes
and go without veils
the queen of the sky
must sink into the ground
the queen of the sunrise
must swallow darkness;
the queen of life
must remove her gown of flesh
and sleep in dust.

Brewster evokes the rediscovered gods and goddesses in
her poetry easily, unprogrammatically. But poetry is a way
of drawing attention to, by paying attention; and it is
clear, in "For the Unknown Goddess," that Brewster views
this paying attention as having ideological implications:
if we restore her divinity, she will restore our humanity and
make us whole. In this poetry, archaic, exotic fictions like
the story of Inanna insinuate themselves into our every-day
minds without fanfare and without surprise. But the fact
that she speaks quietly makes her not less subversive than
Atwood or Macpherson, only more subtly so.

In the poems just cited from the "Inanna" series, the
poet is invoking the archaic, half-forgotten goddesses not to
elaborate their fictions but rather to establish their
presence and power. In the title poem of the series "In
Search of Eros," in contrast, she takes a canonical myth, the story of Psyche, and alters our perception of it in two ways: first, she focuses not, as is usual, on the forbidden vision of Eros, which shows us Psyche as an overcurious, meddlesome wench, but on its aftermath, Psyche's pilgrimage to regain Love, which shows what a spunky, determined, adventuresome, inventive girl she is; second—typical of Brewster's domestication of myth, her bringing it all back home—she sets the ordeal of Psyche in the winter in a Canadian landscape, with crusted, drifting snow, scattered farm houses, and bears. She quite freely alters and embellishes some of the details of the ordeal with folk-tale motifs, of which the most striking is the account of Psyche making a ladder from the skeleton of a dead bird and courageously using one of her own fingers as the last rung. Her heroine is not the foolish simpleton of the popular version of the tale, example of curiosity, that well known womanly vice, but rather a sturdy, dauntless girl, who initially wants knowledge, has the courage to look for it, and shows by her devotion and resourcefulness that she is worthy to be Love's wife. Brewster omits, significantly, the detail in which—as we have the story from Apuleius—Psyche falls prey to another womanly vice, vanity. In general, though Brewster's narrative form is traditional, her selective re-telling of the story is subversive in its emphasis, deletions, embellishments. Psyche, in Brewster's poem series, is
the opposite of the passive, storyless Penelope, who abides at home waiting for her husband's return; she is herself a plotter, an actor, who makes things happen and accomplishes tasks: in a word, a heroine.

Very different from Brewster's deliberate but unemphatic retelling of the stories of Inanna and Psyche is Gwen Hauser's "Diana Poem No. 1." Hauser is a political poet, left-wing and feminist, and the decorum which governs her poetry is determined by her persona as ranter or street-poet, using on the one hand the rhetoric of the manifesto and on the other the politics of the visionary. She is thus both colloquial and prophetic. "Diana Poem No. 1" uses the fiction of Diana to encompass both these stances. It invokes Diana's numinous power and also sets her firmly in a contemporary context.

Hauser takes the figure of Diana and lifts her out of her traditional story altogether, using her familiar image to drive home contemporary lessons:

at precisely 5:00 P.M. today i met Diana she was walking down fourth avenue protecting a drunken Indian woman from a policeman--i recognized her by her shield and dagger--the first time i met Diana she was driving a taxicab all over New York, the next time i met her she was taking a machine-shop course on welding, applying for a job as crane-operator, talking to a friend in a gay bar, trying to get together an 'all-woman's rock band . . .

i saw her again today in a vision
next time i saw Diana
she was standing on a hill
high above the sea
playing a song
on her mouth-bow
turned lute:
"There's going to be a
new day coming
going to be some changes coming

Venus rules and Mars is running
the moon is rising
as the sun turns black
the bull from the sea
is coming back (1-12, 33-41, 46-50)

The lifting of a familiar figure from his or her context
and placing him in an incongruous one is a very old rhetorical
device. What is new about Hauser's poem is that she uses the
traditional figure of Diana in order to elaborate fictions
which are deliberately subversive of patriarchal authority.
She takes to an extreme and uses more stridently the trans-
formation of known fictions, as the basis for poetic invention
in the service of a subversion of received values, both
literary and social.

The transformation of myth, the fragmenting, reordering
and subversion of received fictions, is related to the
general question of the status of story in contemporary
literature. There is a pervasive ambivalence in modern
writers about fiction as story. Yet even the stratagems for
the subversion of traditional fictions depend on the existence
of story. Narrative is prior to lyric because story is
implicit in syntax, and lyric is always tangential to story, even if the story is not known. As Atwood makes clear in "Siren Song," the attempt to outwit story becomes another version of it. As Circe says in Atwood's version of that story, "In the story you leave, and the story is ruthless." Story can be subverted, refashioned, stood on its head, fragmented, but it cannot be abandoned. Moments of escape from story—epiphanies—are transient, pauses in story.

Story in contemporary poetry tends to be tentative, immanent, fragmented; the authority of the narrating voice is—through an even subtler fiction—rejected; but the story is still there, because it inheres in language and in time.

With regard to story, Atwood says in a recent poem, "A language is not words only, / it is the stories / that are told in it, / the stories that are never told." If language is not to become a repository of absences, of things not said, it must be continuously replenished by the poet's refashioning and inventing stories. With regard to the transformation or subversion of myth, Roland Barthes argues in Mythologies, "It is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes to escape from its stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth..." The major power of myth is, he says, "its recurrence." The negative diction of his rhetoric—"stranglehold" and "prey"—suggests that this power of myth is to be lamented. But if
myth is transformed from within in full consciousness of its power to recur, this very power can be an opportunity for the writer. The history of literature might be said to be the history of the transformation of fictions. Just as the myth of Pandora was decisively transformed by Hesiod, just as Athens was preempted by the patriarchy in the Homeric Hymns, so now myths are being renewed and refashioned in a way which exploits precisely what Barthes laments: the power of myth to persist and recur, or as Wallace Stevens says, 'our inability to live our lives without major fictions.'
Notes
Chapter II


6. Atwood, You Are Happy, pp. 29-44.


10. Macpherson, Boatman, p. 30. The poem-epigraph is complete as quoted.


12. Boatman, p. 21. The poem is complete as quoted.


15 Atwood, You Are Happy, pp. 29-44.

16 You Are Happy, p. 28-39, ll. 1-6, 10-27.

17 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 38ff.

18 You Are Happy, p. 47, ll. 1-7, 12-25.


20 You Are Happy, p. 50-51, ll. 3-6, 19-21; ll. 1-6, 16-19.

21 You Are Happy, p. 68.

22 You Are Happy, p. 69, ll. 1-10, 17-20.

23 Atwood, "Book of Ancestors," ii, ll. 1-14, You Are Happy, p. 95.

24 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 38ff.


26 You Are Happy, p. 61.

27 You Are Happy, p. 65. The poem is complete as quoted.


29 Welcoming Disaster, p. 22. The poem is complete as quoted.

30 Welcoming Disaster, p. 45, ll. 1-8.
Welcoming Disaster, p. 46. The poem is complete as quoted.

Welcoming Disaster, p. 30. The poem is complete as quoted.

Harrison, Prolegomena, pp. 30-33.


In Search of Eros, p. 87.


In Search of Eros, p. 51. Line references for quotations from the poem are given in the text.

In Search of Eros, p. 52. The poem is complete as quoted.

In Search of Eros, pp. 37-41.

Hauser, Fascist Branding Poems, pp. 29-32. Line references for quotations are given in the text.

You Are Happy, p. 68.

Atwood, Two-Headed Poems, p. 54.


Chapter III

Indian Fictions in Poetry by Contemporary Canadian Women: Persona, Occasion, and Formal Strategies

The use of material drawn from native Indian culture, the matter of North America, goes back to the beginnings of poetry in Canada. Joseph Howe's Acadia, printed in 1874, though written earlier, delineates a twin image of the Indian as noble savage and as violent wildman. Charles Mair's poetic drama Tecumseh centered on the historic events in which the great chief was involved. Duncan Campbell Scott wrote documentary romances evoking images of the Indian. Isabella Valencey Crawford developed a sinuous, kinetic style which renders, through Indian fictions, her sense that nature is an animated, numinous presence, subject to transformations. Pauline Johnson, half Indian, wrote lyrics which honour the paraphernalia of the Indian—canoe, tomahawk, feather, teepee—but in her poems the emblematic power of these images is rinsed off in the wash of her derivative lyrical style.

It is none of these poets, but rather the west coast painter and prose writer, Emily Carr, who is an important precursor of and a powerful presence in contemporary Canadian poetry. In order to understand the nature of Carr's influence, it is necessary to consider the historical
context for the contemporary use of Indian fictions, which are both a source of power and a matrix for new poetic conventions of persona, voice, and story.

It is arguable that the turning to native aboriginal material in the literature of both the United States and Canada in the 60's and early 70's was related to the ecological movement. The idea of the Indian as a human being living in harmony with nature, propitiating the spirits of the creatures he destroyed for food and shelter, and husbanding nature's resources, had imaginative power as an embodiment of the ideal of "living lightly on the earth." The fact that this image of the Indian is linked with the notion of the "noble savage" extolled in Joseph Howe's poem attests to the tenacity of Edenic aspirations in Romantic and post-Romantic literature but does not diminish the importance of the image.

Contemporaneous with the ecological movement, two other emergent ideologies were able to find a focus in the image of the Indian as outsider: the concept of "dropping out"--an attempt to give some social substance to the sense of cultural alienation--and the new wave of feminism, associated with the notion of women in our society as non-inheritors, non-participants. Barbara Godard's comment on Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* confirms this view: according to Watson, she says, the novel deals with Indians as alienated, having lost their own language, their own mediating rituals.
Alienated, they have only the fragments of experience left, fragments that have hardened into cliche . . . But the Indians are not alone in this situation. All minorities feel this linguistic alienation, women above all among these marginal groups. The Indians are an objective correlative for Watson's own mistrust of language.

The not unrelated image of the Indian as seer and shaman is one example of the contemporary preoccupation with aboriginal figures as sources of esoteric knowledge. This fascination with the Indian as one who has access to half-lost truths is not limited to women writers but Indian lore provides fictions which are specifically female and therefore useful to women writers. Canadian art and literature has provided women with an exemplar who used some of these fictions in her art: Emily Carr. Catherine Ross, in her article "'A Singing Spirit': Female Rites of Passage in Klee Wyck, Surfacing and The Diviners," says that in these three works a ritual encounter with Indian culture prepares the central character to understand her role as woman and creatrice. Contact with the Indian culture releases deeply buried sources of power that white culture fears and denies. In Klee Wyck Emily Carr sees three different versions of the totem D'Sonoqua . . . and from D'Sonoqua learns the mystery of her own womanhood.10

Ross's commentary makes clear the assumed link between the Indian as one who lives wisely with nature and one who has access to mysteries. "White establishment culture," she says, "has withheld something each central character needs to know in order to become a complete woman."
To penetrate to the deepest sources of power, each must learn a new secret language unknown to the civilizations who try to regulate nature with their technology. Klee Wyck shows the many contrasts between the language of the totems and the language of the white missionaries and surveyors who came with their clocks and geometry to teach "time and obligation." 11

Ross analyses Carr's encounter with D'Sonoqua as an initiation ordeal, an encounter with the sacred. It is not the objective but the imaginative and functional truth of Carr's account which is germane here.

Carr's influence on certain contemporary women poets can be established through specific texts and her vision of D'Sonoqua can be read as an encounter with the muse figure whom Jay Macpherson calls "Hecate Trivia," the three-faced goddess of Macpherson's poem by that name. In classical terms she is called Hecate Triformis, and Carr's vision is sequentially three-fold. 12 She is first seen carved "out of, or rather into, the bole of a great red cedar," with fixed stare and projecting lips, in her aspect as the "terrible one." Several years later, she is found again, her eyes "filled with stare." "The whole figure expressed power, weight, domination, rather than ferocity." Now we find out her name: D'Sonoqua, the wild woman of the woods. Her cry is a long vowel, she lures children away, but a small bird nests in her mouth cavity and a cat sleeps between her feet.
In her third manifestation she is benign, lovely, "A singing spirit, young and fresh . . . Across her forehead her creator had fashioned the Sisheutl, or mythical two-headed sea-serpent."13

The usefulness of the vision of D'Sonoqua to Emily Carr is clear: it meant that the rain forests were not alien but filled with a supernatural female presence who had manifested herself to the artist. Carr has now herself become a precursor and a mediating figure; a recent anthology of poems by west-coast women was called D'Sonoqua and Ingrid Klassen, in her preface, links the choice of a title with Emily Carr:

In her book Klee Wyck, Emily Carr saw three different versions of the totem D'Sonoqua--"The Wild Woman of the Woods," D'Sonoqua of the pursed lips and speaking mouth . . . This anthology brings together the work of many diverse writers in one collection. What these poets have in common is that they believe in the power of language . . . 14

D'Sonoqua is mouth, voice, and she is always associated with place. It is the sense of shared place which pervades "Skookumchuck," Susan Musgrave's poem about Emily Carr:

I guess it's in my blood
to want to be like Emily Carr. I don't know much about her but we've been to some of the same places.
I'm in love with a man I'll never meet.
Indian Jimmy from Nanookish . . .

Emily and I shared him for a while--
I know that. He was impossible to paint
and what's more she found the forest
a deeper attraction.

. . . .

She paints
the unexposed skin,
the masks behind
loss. My notebooks
have been empty
up until now . . . 15

This is a crisis poem, with Emily Carr as a presiding figure
with whom the poet shares a sense of place. Indian Jimmy
was Emily's guide to places, places like the forest where
she saw D'Sonoqua, and for Musgrave, who can't maintain
steadfast contact with Jimmy, the guide, Emily becomes an
image of access to Indian material. Thus the poem, a declar-
ation of her felt link with Emily Carr, is also a statement
of the legitimacy of her tentative claim to the same places,
the same material. She uses Emily Carr in a very traditional
way to authenticate her own poetic search.

And what do these places and this material provide for
contemporary women poets? Any given mythology makes available
a powerful and specific allusive shorthand and a range of
voices and fictions. For women poets, most of them from western Canada, Indian lore has offered a shaman's bundle of the preliminaries to poetry: fictions as stories, figures, images, places, a rich variety of voices or personae, and, formally, models in the choice of genre. For the poets discussed here it is some variant of one of the aspects of D'Sonoqua which provides the dominant voice: Old Woman, Sea Witch, Copper Woman, Old Grandmother. These fictions of female power are associated with places: the Sea Witch cries where the tide comes up, D'Sonoqua is in her woods, Old Woman is sweeping the beach with her bone-broom.

The genres derived from Indian sources are not new: they are typically lullabies, complaints, spells, love songs, laments, elegies, celebrations—kinds familiar in the European lyric tradition. Some of these modes, like spells and lullabies, are closely linked with the oral tradition, with which women's literature is already associated. The result is a poetry functional in its occasions, efficacious as magic is, expressive as laments for the dead and celebrations of the new-born are expressive: a poetry of gesture: blessing, curse, incantation, birth-song, death-song. For the poets to be discussed the Indian sources provide a setting, a rhetoric, and personae which cut through the isolation of the solipsistic twentieth-century lyric. The poet is provided with an alternative to the fiction of alienation, the
subjectivity of the lyric voice is given a context in a real or imagined community, and the discontinuous intensity of the lyric is given continuity.

Cam Hubert is perhaps best known as the author of "Dreamspeaker," a novella about a boy, alienated from his own white society, who is rescued and helped by an Indian wiseman and his mute companion. The Indian figures in this story as both outsider and healing shaman. Hubert has also written translations or adaptations of Nootka songs: renderings of an original into the idiom of twentieth-century lyric poetry, just as earlier versions of the same sources were rendered by the Canadian Constance Skinner into the more embellished idiom of late Victorian convention. But Hubert takes a crucial step which such poets as Skinner did not.

In her long poem series "Old Woman" she uses a fiction derived from Indian lore, and rhetorical devices derived from Indian sources, to write a poem which is new: a rendering, not of a Nootka original, but of her own contemporary sense of being a woman, mediated through the fiction of Old Woman. This sequence, in fifteen parts, is a paradigm of the poem which develops by presenting Indian fictions in their original context, and then transforming and adapting the original fiction to a felt present situation. "Old Woman" begins
From the eye of the raven
Old Woman came

From the mind of the eagle
Old Woman came

From within the oyster shell
Old Woman came

From the fin of the salmon
Old Woman came

From the mouth of the halibut
Old Woman came

From the tooth of the whale
Old Woman came

From the belly of Old Woman
Old Woman came (1-16)

This kind of parallel structure in English always has an incantatory, liturgical effect, which Hubert uses to give the first section of her poem an air of the hieratic, a recitation of First Things, an effect which is enhanced by her choice of iconic details: eye of raven, fin of salmon. This cadence is picked up intermittently throughout the series, in less rigid form, and returned to at the end. The rest of the poem moves for the most part in the patterns of contemporary verse forms, loosely accented and closely linked to speech. But the initial parallel lines and their lingering as an under-rhythm which occasionally surfaces give the series formal strength.
Section ii establishes other legendary figures--Raven, Heron, Magpie--in their heraldic stances, as part of the context out of which Old Woman came. Parts ii to viii elaborate aspects of the fiction of Old Woman: first, her regenerative powers, which link her, through the serpent imagery, with D'Sonoqua:

...Old Woman knew and her skin split
she came renewed from her old shell

...and she knew; man could never be renewed without her (45-46, 53-55)

Second, her power as creator of the world:

...She brought land from water
her hands skilled and sharp
her words emblazoned in fire
across a sky of milk
from her breasts dripping above the earth
and we drank (72-79)

Sections v, vi, and vii describe the manifestations of her presence now, her locale, her functions, and her gear:

...At night an old woman
rises from the sea
clutching her bones become a broom
she sweeps the sand

At night an old woman
moves through the sedge grass
searching souls for her basket
and tears to quench her thirst
She calls you and the ravens answer
leading you always to sweet water

... she calls and the cormorants hear
skimming across the wave-tips
(B4-91, 100-101, 104-105)

Section vii elaborates her association with tides and the
moon:

She is woman
is a shell
filled slowly
by the moon
(120-123)

Section viii is a catalogue of what she knows:

Old Woman knows
the weeping of the barren womb
Old Woman knows

Old Woman knows
the demanding heat become ashes
Old Woman knows (150-155)

Parts ix and x describe a conflict between an unnamed man and
woman, in contemporary idiom, and in part xi the two fictions--
the frame legend of Old Woman and the contemporary story of
the two lovers—are brought together; and one of Old Woman's
prescribed functions, weaving nets out of grass and kelp,
becomes a device in the contemporary story:

Old Woman hears them
lost at the moss borders
weeping their damp lament
She moves along the strand
her needle and awl
held tightly, flowing
toward each separate wave,
weaving grass and kelp,
forming mesh and net
to hold them

She throws her net
they cling to its safety
not thinking it a cage
(249-251, 256-265)

Part xii is an invocation of Old Woman, a plea for her inter-
cession, expressing a longing that she will use her power to
move out of her own fiction and into the speaker's present
dilemma:

Old Woman help me
bring water
for me
the dust fills my mouth
dust of promises
choking me

... ...

Old Woman hold me
chase fear
from me
this one has hurt me
with lies
bruising me

Old Woman help me
that one has torn me
he has entered me
left someone inside me
eating my head
bleeding me
Old Woman become me
fill my bones with your marrow
fill my veins with your blood
fill my eyes with your gaze
that I not thurst
or burn
or fear
Old Woman
become me (270-275, 282-302)

Part xiii returns to the contemporary fiction, a narrative
of mixed longing and misunderstanding. Part xiv is a lyrical
evocation of a past in which a different kind of love would
have been possible under the power of Old Woman:

A century ago your touch
shook the dream rattle,
the daemons fled, awed by
a woman happy in her nakedness.
Raven laughed perched atop the magic box
where once the moon was stored

That summer had us dancing
naked in the long grass

At night we moved in rhythm on the bed
the hours passed like herons in flight

Tonight the bed is empty
the moments ticking the endless night
and on the beach the heron
stands with his eyes
closed (335-343, 346-350)

Part xv is a kind of cento of all the preceding parts,
restating in a fragmented, condensed form what has gone
before, and concluding with a complete reiteration of the
first poem in the series, concerning the genesis of Old
Woman.
The series is thus formally traditional: it is a circle or a ring, ending where it began. Generically, too, it is not new: rhetorically it is based on the trope of transumption, which involves the surrounding of one fiction by another prior fiction, or the dependence of a new fiction on an old, making possible patterns of sustained allusion. What is new and interesting about this poem and others like it is the fact that the framing fiction is derived from Amerindian lore. Its scope derives from the transumptive method of intermingling two fictions; its power and detailed vividness in large part from these qualities in the original fiction.

In the context of this study, it is of particular interest that the surrounding fiction is the story of Old Woman, whose presence dominates the poem. The modern narrative is about helplessness, and she has power; about ignorance, and she has knowledge; about loss, and she knows no loss, only transformation.

Similarly, in Susan Musgrave's *Songs of the Sea-Witch*, one of the manifestations of Old Woman is used to provide a variable persona for the speaking poet, and a context which is a series of linked fictions rooted in place, both of which give substance and some continuity to what would otherwise be a series of discontinuous personal lyrics. The fiction of the Sea-Witch thus provides both coherence and graphic detail. "Songs of the Sea-Witch" is also the title of the central lyrical sequence in the collection, and "The
Night Passage," which immediately precedes the "Songs," makes it clear that the Sea-Witch is an alter-ego or double for the poet:

She comes here,
out of the water, gathering poison
idly
to feed
to different fish.
Trees root at her ankles
from every wind—
she is mistress of nettles
tearing her eyes in the dark to find
her blood run wild with knives: she is
the goddess of thorn.

But we are dead,
together—I can hear her
breathe in stone, the breath of
death-rot that rides out to the
dark unwilling foam.
Arm in arm with the sea
so I pass the night

as she, in her last bare dance
swings in her eyes
the weight of tides
and stalks in my shadow, promising
what she kills.

Yet the presence of the sea-witch does not dominate this collection, though the fiction of her voice is central to it.

The sense of locale is not strong in these poems either, though such titles as "At Nootka Sound" and the images of kelp, ocean, and fish attest to it.

It is not until Grave Dirt and Selected Strawberries that Musgrave's use of West Coast Indian lore helps to bring
her poetry up out of the somewhat nebulous underground or underwater world in which a good deal of it had taken place. 23

This lore gave her local habitations and names, and through such figures as Old Woman and the Sea Witch she could express her obsessions with love and death in new and particular ways. The variety of fictions and genres provided by Indian sources—playful, sinister, sexual, graphic—helped her to develop her own wit and inventiveness.

The poems central to this phase in Musgrave's poetry are the "Kiskatinaw Songs," adaptations or imitations of Indian originals. 24 The question of the authenticity of the renderings or their relation to putative or known sources seems, in the context of this study, to be irrelevant.

Such earlier adaptations of West Coast Indian songs as I have looked at—by John Swanton, Franz Boas, and Constance Skinner—are characterized, like Musgrave's "Songs," by the use of parallel structure, refrain, question and answer patterns—devices long associated with oral literature. 25

Earlier renderings are often more embellished, but this is a reflection of period style. The only previous version I have found that may come from the same source as one of Musgrave's poems is certainly more leisurely and prolonged:

Whence have you fallen, have you fallen?
Whence have you fallen, have you fallen?
Did you fall, fall, fall, fall,
from the top of a salmonberry bush?
Did you make up your mind
  to fall into the cradle
  to fall into the cradle
  to fall in from the top of a spruce-tree?
  to fall in from the top of a salmonberry
  bush?26

Musgrave's "Cradle Song" is more terse, varied, and iconic,
pulling in images from a wide range of Indian lore:

  From the rib of a
  Dog-shark
  I fell in

  From the bone of a
  Killer-whale
  I fell in

  From the heart of a
  humming bird
  I fell in

  From the spine of a
  Sea-egg
  I fell in

  ...

  From the eye of a
  Sea-raven
  I fell in

  From the throat of a
  fish-hawk
  I fell in

  From the gullet of a
  Black-shag
  I fell in

  From the shroud of my
  Grandfather
  I fell in27

It is important to ascertain whether or not a model or
"original" exists, because, once you get the hang of it, the
elements which go to make up an occasional song in the Indian manner can be fabricated and endlessly varied. In fact there now exists a contemporary genre which could be called a poem in the manner of a west coast Indian song, just as, say, in the nineteenth century there existed a genre which was an imitation of the ballad: a literary and sophisticated adaptation of certain elements from a mode arising out of an oral tradition. Musgrave's poems in this manner are, like their models, precise in their occasions, in a ritualistic or functional way: "Counting Song," "Netmaker's Song," "Song at Parting," "Lure." This preciseness of occasion, together with the vividness of detail derived from Indian sources and the charm of a specific moch-archaic manner, make the poems in Grave Dirt stronger, more varied in mood, and more graphic than the poems in her two earlier collections. The adapted Indian fictions still allow the poet to express her obsessions, but in new and varied ways. "Transformation Song," for example, one of the Kiskatinaw Songs, combines the images of death and the bride--one of Musgrave's favourite pairs--in a dialogue in the archaic manner:

Grand-father, rise up
Spread leaves
Over me.
That man's tongue
Was a spear that cut
Into me.
What sort of spear, Grand-daughter,
What sort of spear?

Ashes to animal
It could be that
Grand-father, rise up
Spread earth
Over me.
That man's eye
Was a fire that burned
Into me.

What sort of fire, Grand-daughter,
What sort of fire?

Ashes to animal
It could be that

If we look at Musgrave's poems diagrammatically, the
Kiskatinaw Songs occupy a place parallel to the earlier
sections of Cam Hubert's "Old Woman" poem series, the parts
in which Hubert tells and elaborates her version of the source
story. Many of Musgrave's subsequent poems which make use of
Indian fictions do so indirectly in a manner comparable to
the central sections of "Old Woman," in which the fiction of
Old Woman is interwoven with personal and contemporary
fictions. Musgrave, after the Kiskatinaw Songs, makes the
Indian material her own—not exclusively hers, and not her
only source of fictions—but an important source, centered in
a sense of stories and images rising out of a shared,
familiar place—the west coast and its islands—and in the
persona of the Sea Witch.

In her next collection, The Impstone, there are a number
of poems in the section "Archaeologists and Grave Robbers"
which weave Indian fictions into contemporary poems. The
title poem in this section is an ode to Old Woman in the
guise of a disinterred Indian woman:
Old woman-witch
they opened you.
Your secrets
fell out,
for ever out,
into that silence.

They wanted to
reach you--
to label the
blank times.
For all your dead
each seed is
counted;
too many
to gather
too little
to leave behind.

Musgrave is more of a grave-robber than an archaeologist. Her
time is night, and she does not want the secrets of the old
woman-witch wrested from her in order to "label the / blank
times." "Kung," "Lure," "Dead Eagle," and "Yatza" are poems
in which Indian fictions and the sense of place are integrated
in a balanced way into new fictions, and "Yatza" shows, too;
the influence on Musgrave's poems of the rhetoric of Indian
songs: the simple parallel structure of the stanzas, the
casual unemphatic stance. The genre, too, shows the influence
of Indian song: "Yatza" is a naming song and a song of origins.

I'd say that
seaweed is where
you come from.
long green
waterweed
person, kelp-brother
to the codfish
turned
belly-up.
I'd say your grandfathers were birds who flew out of darkness. Their bones mark the channel now—you can see them if you wait for low water.

I'd say your father was an eagle—chipped a raven out of stone. She was your mother. Your sisters scuttled like giant crabs, but you swam like an otter from the sea-egg that was you.

....

I'd say they'll wait for you, for the beak of the night to open. They'll hear your voice on the turning tide.

Such an image as "the beak of night" demonstrates how Musgrave has integrated Indian sources into her own inventions, so that the Indian fictions provide a powerful frame or code which can be evoked by a reference to any single part of a very complex system of myth. Her use of it in this analytical or abstract manner, based on synecdoche, is akin to the emblematic tradition of Indian graphic art, in which Raven could be identified by his eye alone, Beaver by his mouth, Bear by his ears, Killer-whale by his dorsal fin: every animal and fish in the heraldic system was recognizable by its own particular iconic detail.
In Musgrave's recent collection, *A Man to Marry, A Man to Bury*, Indian lore has become only one of the various sources upon which she draws. But the influence of Indian models on her style remains in her use of simple declarative sentences, often parallel in structure. The sense of place is strong in Section Five, "Salmonberry Road," which is dedicated to Clooose and Whyack, settlements on the west coast of Vancouver Island. And one of the variants of the Sea-Witch turns up in "Whyack, Village of Witchcraft":

Marilyn saw them first,
weird women by the graveyard
opening the guestbook.

She told them
we weren't visitors,
we were planning to leave immediately.

The old houses facing the sea
are forgotten;
in every window a widow, in every grave a reason.

In the final section of the book, "Even in the Ordered World," there is one poem which integrates perfectly a personal occasion and the kind of structure and lore which Musgrave worked out from her adaptations of Indian sources in the *Kiskatinaw Songs*. In genre it is related to the earlier songs: it is a counting song, reckoning the nine months of gestation, and a transformation song, about the mutations of pre-natal development. The stanzas are clearly parallel, and at the centre of each is a place name, and an image derived
from the totem system of the west coast Indians. It is an elaborate, polished, ritual occasional poem, a demonstration of everything Musgrave learned from Indian models and adapted to her own use:

The first month is over.
A spirit smiles in the
Woman's bed--his two teeth
like a little walrus!
Crow on Tow Hill
flies up laughing--
joins your small hands to mine,
your dark eyes to mine.

The second month is over.
A seed wakes from sleep in the
woman's house--the man is hauling up halibut.
Whale at Nai-Tas-Cudley
dives down flashing--
joins your soft breasts to mine,
your smooth lips to mine.

The third month is over.
Blood gathers, drop by drop--the kayak-man's oars are red with blood.
Otter off Rose Spit
swims out crying--
joins your sad ghost to mine,
your sorrow to mine.

The fourth month is over.
Bones dance in the woods--the white-bone edges are red with blood.
Eagle at the Oeanda
soars up singing--
joins your quiet song to mine,
your silence to mine.
The fifth month is over.
A heart beats in the night—
Spirit, Spirit, Spirit!
Seer at Yagan Village
lies down sleeping—
joins your long journey to mine,
your dreams to mine.

The sixth month is over.
A shape shifts in the dank roots,
trembles into life.
Bear at Gul-Ah-Yonun
wakes up hungry—
joins your warm thighs to mine,
your round belly to mine.

The seventh month is over.
A name is found— for the rain,
for the wind, for the earth.
Frog at Cleet-Ots-Unas
leaps up dancing—
joins your black shadow to mine,
your magic to mine.

The eighth month is over.
A voice fills up the whole sky—
Ay! Yai! Ya!
Octopus at Hoyagundla
sinks down smiling—
joins your gentleness to mine,
your secret to mine.

The ninth month is over.
A child is born:
listen, listen, listen!
Raven at Kliki Damen
flaps off croaking—
joins your own life to mine,
your whole life to mine.36

Marilyn Bowering's The Killing Room combines many of the
elements made familiar by Musgrave's work:37 the spirit of
place, the fascination with death, the presence of a powerful—
and sometimes sinister woman-witch, and fictions--both images
and stories—from west coast Indian lore. Like Musgrave's poems, Bowering's renderings or adaptations of Indian sources show a rhetorical influence from Indian songs in their casual, declarative syntax, their parallel lines or stanzas, and their use of refrain.

Bowering attempts in her poems to establish a fiction of relationship to the Old Woman figure as numen and muse, in order to explore her felt dilemma as woman/poet. The authority of Old Woman as the Wild Woman of the Woods—one of the aspects of D'Sonoqua—is established early in the collection in "I was in her woods":

I was in her woods.
I made a fire with pitch
and laid our bed
between two trees.
I was sleeping with my lover.

I was sleeping
She took my head
and turned it from him.
She spread my womb with moss
until he could not enter.

... ...

We'd lie
as if death
kept between us.
We played
the bone-game

on her back,
and thought we'd win,
we'd rise
and, courteous,
raise her with us.

... ...
With half my heart
in his embrace,
the rest was seed of hers.
Come, kiss me, tell
what bloody pieces
would you breed? 38

In Bowering's poems it is most often the sinister side
of Old Woman which is uppermost, pulling the poet/speaker
away from the ties of love, and motherhood. There is a kind
of theatrical defiance in the assertion of this aspect of
woman: she is a shocker, child-killer, husband-burier:

With it I broke my child's neck.
With it I threw him in the river.
My other children are cripples.

. . . .

I am old.
Dream no longer covers me.
I am licked clean
by all my children.
But they are stopped.
Death is wide,
old age is wise.
I have only to open my one eye. 39

This baleful female, the wife who waits to weave her husband's
winding sheet, celebrates her malign independence in "A
Woman's Song":

My marrow's loose,
it rattles
in my bones;
his hawking eyes
have homed on me.
I picked green nettles
thinking of his lips.
I've never asked
to be a bride,
or to be saved
from sea or sound,
and I have arms
that bruise and burn.40

"Retrieval," an attempt to disinter and name this
sinister lady, is a poem of self-discovery through the image
of the witch: a contemporary genre in women's poetry which
involves self-definition through one of the sinister per-
onae which have been handed down to women by the traditional
society which surrounds them and whose codes they must use.
The hag, witch, whore, bitch, beldame, are variants of the
type. Bowering uses a vaguely Indian context to delineate
her version of this poem:

I dig roots
like a woolf,
thinking blood
in her mind.
She warns me
away,
scatters urine
like an old wife.
Never wife she.

Her fathers
were killers,
her mothers
hunted bird.
She is stranger,
mother,
her lips are claws.
Her eyes
think blood
into my mind.

She is buried,
wants to move.
I have bruised
her bones.
If I knew
my birth,
I'd dig her out.41
In the final section, the poem moves toward self-definition:

The three forms
are moon,
snow,
flower.

I myself
by myself.
Sufficient
to know dream,
tree,
water-fall,
cave.
Quiet
in the breaking world.

No stranger,
bowl,
or word.
I myself
Sufficient. (72-89)

"Yan Deathsong," "Winter Solstice Song," and "North Coast Lament" are three of Bowering's poems which show the influence of Indian occasional songs. The "Solstice Song," with its artfully unidiomatic syntax, its parallels, its refrain, is clearly written in the manner of an Indian source:

Sun has travelled a long way,
it was good for sleeping,
now he's moving.
Water moves,
and sings;
the night was good for sleeping,
now it's moving.

Blown about in the sky all day,
blown about a long time.
I did not wake up,  
it didn't matter,  
the cold was good for sleeping,  
now I'm moving.

Blown about in the sky all day,  
blown about a long time.

My eyes are open now  
at your return.

Blown about in the sky all day,  
blown about a long time.42

"North Coast Lament," too, in its occasion, its laconic
spareness of detail, and its use of question and refrain
is clearly modelled on Indian song:

He is getting
a skiff ready
to go up the inlet.
He has days ahead of him,
the sea full of herring spawn
and weed,
gathering to do
and drying.

. . . .

Two days
across the inlet,
her waving an oar
tied orange with her coat,
nothing wrong,
but wanting
something good to eat,

drinking all th' time
(. . . no one come over,
know us, I guess).

Ahana, young man
who are you killing?
Young man
put your glass down
let me rock you on.
These pieces, like the "Married Woman's Complaint," are either adaptations of Indian sources or exercises in the genre, a poem in the manner of a west coast Indian song. In its vivid detail, its brisk lack of transitions, and its lyrical restraint, the "Complaint" shows Bowering's ease and control in this mode:

He is always greedy, eating clams and salal berries. He has salmon bones stuck in his hair. He skinned the children and brought them to me to cook -- I have bad eyesight.

To explore the influence of Bowering's poems in this genre on her poems in other modes is outside the scope of this study. The persona of the Witch colours the tone of the whole collection, which is cast in almost unrelieved dark speech; even the humour is black. The laconic, elliptical narrative, the juxtaposition of vivid, often incongruous detail, the parallel structures and refrains can be surmised to have influenced such poems as "Rose Harbour Whaling Station 1910," "Cold Harbour," "Animals are Surplus," and "Winter Harbour." This last poem, which takes its title from an actual place name on Vancouver Island, is a powerful symbolic poem in the tradition of Lampman's "City of the End of Things." The poem is based on a proliferation of detail, in relentless parallel statements, rising out of the paradox of a shelter which is also a nothingness or death:
Winter harbour has no geography
or location.

There are no unfulfilled desires in winter harbour.
There is one animal which has found its way there.
It is not man.
It is an extinct animal.
It has always lived there.
You can see its footprints in rock near your home.
Your home is on the shoreline of the harbour.
There are boats for you, and new clothes.
You would be mad to leave your home.
You are mad to leave your home.
There are no islands to give you safety,
no islands to imprison you.
Spring closes the harbour.
Without ice there is no harbour.
Suicides may not enter the harbour,
nor may any of the unreasonable unborn.
Reason may not enter the harbour,
nor any of your illusions.
There are no harbours or illusions of harbours.
You need no escort to winter harbour,
you are watchman to it.\

This emblematic abstraction of some essence in place or
place-name is one direction in which a poet can go from a
preoccupation with locale, with heraldic images like the
totem images of the west coast Indian systems, and with
sinister personae but the likks with specific Indian sources
are too tenuous to be explored here.

Two of Carolyn Zonailo's poems use Indian material much
as Hubert, Musgrave, and Bowering Do: as a strategy of
self-discovery through fictions which are graphic, tactile,
varied, and kinetic, and which, particularly through the
figure of Old Woman, Sea Witch, and D'Sonoqua, provide women
with a voice and an access to powerful stories. Zonailo's
"D'Sonoqua" evokes the aspect of the Terrible Mother in the three-fold spirit: a fiction which provides a frame for expressing anger and destructiveness in women:

This terrible mother's mouth is swollen
larger than a pregnant womb.
She gives birth by eating.

Her cannibal jaws swallow
and spew me out like a maggot.
I bring food, bring gifts
from the mouth
of the hungry woman.

Twice born, I
dream of a mother
more frightening than nature.
I fashion her
in the bole of a tree
in the vision
of my childhood nightmare.
Her breasts are blok red.
Her breasts are an eagle beak.

At night the village children
hide under woven blankets
under their mother's belly
but the spirit woman
holds the children
tighter than fear.

She carries them
to a cave
where her terrible
mother wrath devours.46

This is D'Sonoqua as Emily Carr saw her first: "the terrible one, out there on the bluff." She is also the wrathful, potentially destructive mother that women recognize in their own mothers and in themselves. The fiction from Indian Lore provides a way of coping with this dark double, by giving her a public, shared presence in a poem.
Zonailo's "Initiation" is a poem of self-exploration and discovery through the image of the totem as carved dancer's mask. The mask and the dance as a symbol of all art, including poetry, are familiar to us through Romantic iconography, but the Indian version of these images is particularly appropriate in this poem. Zonailo, like the other women poets discussed in this chapter, is a west coast poet, so these images are all around her, closely linked to place. And the Indian mask, being carved out of wood, can be linked with the artistic act as a surrogate for making a poem. The carving of the wood, too, involves a kind of metamorphosis of tree-into-wood-into-mask, and the link woman-into-tree has a long mythological history. Finally, the analogy between animals, who are mute but who can "speak" through the totem mask, and women, who have been "mute" but who now speak through poetry, sustains the poem:

Inside
an animal lurks
its nature undefined
there are
no ceremonies
to give it a name
It is my totem animal
sometimes it leaps out startles
It is a beast's body inhabiting mine
In forest's sleep
I hear my name called
in animal urges
in mute animal syllables
When I learn
to dance
I'll carve the mask of this unknown self
in primary colours red, blue, yellow
I will paint the lines and let its mouth close over mine
It is an antelope or bird or bear moving in awkward rhythm or the antelope dancing on tips of antlers a bird flying west north south by instinct
Feathers or fur clawed or cloven the totem animal is born inside me at birth
and the wood strokes of the carver's art give it a shape a name

"Initiation" is an elegant example of the genre which serves women poets particularly well, and which it has been the purpose of this chapter to explore: the poem which uses fictions
and images from Indian sources to shape and elucidate a contemporary poetic and human occasion.
Chapter III

Notes


8 Gary Snyder, "4 Changes" (Santa Barbara: Ploughshare Bookstore and Whole Earth Book Store, 1970). A poster.
11 Ross, pp. 87-88.
12 Harrison, Prolegomena, pp. 286-292.
16 Cam Hubert, Dreamspeaker and Tem Eyos Ki and the Land Claims Question (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978).
17 Makara, 2, No. 1 (1977), 2-9, and Room of One's Own, 2, No. 1 (1976), 38-46.
18 Constance Lindsay Skinner, Songs of the Coast Dwellers (New York: Coward-McCann, 1938).
19 Cam Hubert, "Old Woman," Room of One's Own, 1, No. 1 (1975), pp. 26-40. Line references for quotations from the poem are given in the text.


24 *Grave-Dirt*, pp. 47-72.


27 *Grave-Dirt*, pp. 48-49, 11. 1-12, 22-33.


30 *Impstone*, p. 93, 11. 19-35.


34 *A Man to Marry*, pp. 85-96.

35 *A Man to Marry*, p. 92. The poem is complete as quoted.

36 *A Man to Marry*, pp. 102-103. The poem is complete as quoted.

The Killing Room, pp. 28-30, ll. 1-10, 72-89.

The Killing Room, p. 15, ll. 3-5, 14-22.


The Killing Room, pp. 17-19, ll. 1-26. Subsequent line references are given in the text.

The Killing Room, p. 41. The poem is complete as quoted.

The Killing Room, pp. 50-51, ll. 1-9, 16-30.


Auto-da-Fe, n. pag.
Chapter IV

Domestic Fictions as a Source of Imagery and a Way of Organizing Experience in Poetry

The domestic--its locale, functions, and gear--has always, until recently, been at the bottom of the hierarchy of literary kinds and the decorum of figure and diction associated with them. This prejudice, imbedded in a tenacious literary tradition, enforced by social bias, has created a rhetorical problem for women poets who wish to claim the domestic for poetry: how to adapt available genres, or invent new ones, in order to incorporate an area of experience which has been for so long relegated to the sub-literary or at best to the base genres. Power repressed tends to return in daemonic forms; and the denial of power and prestige to the domestic may account, in part, for the split or doubling of persona and voice characteristic of contemporary domestic poetry by women. Each genre in this mode has a positive and a negative side. The balance between the two varies with context and occasion, and sometimes what may seem like an emphasis on the dark side is in fact a rescue operation to celebrate a female persona--like the woman-with-cauldron--which has been tarnished with sinister connotations.

Contemporary women poets have been resourceful in adapting traditional poetic kinds to domestic fictions, just as they are inventive in adapting mythological fictions to new purposes.
But the challenge to women poets in using the domestic in poetry, as in writing poems about their own bodies, is more radical than that involved in the accommodation of classical mythology to subversive intentions: it is to assimilate into literature what has hitherto been women's talk, or women-to-children talk.

Poetry is never written in isolation, least of all the kind of poetry which, like domestic poetry, rises out of a ground of shared experience. Certain kinds, like kitchen gothic, a genre characterized by images of static rage in a setting of domestic imperatives, become topical and imitable for a time because they provide a vehicle for organizing an important complex of feeling and idea; other kinds, like the poem of address, mother-to-child, one of the earliest kinds of domestic poem to be written by women, endure and are still written today because they describe an encounter which is as old as and will last as long as the relation of mother to child.

In order to illuminate the links between poems, it has been necessary to improvise some provisional categories for the sake of discussion. The first category celebrates the couple as the primordial unit and basis of the domestic. Into this division also fall poems which include images of the archaic or uncanny mother. The daemonic side of the image of the couple united in the hieros gamos is the sunder-
ing of the couple, acknowledged in a contemporary genre of wide range but single focus: the divorce poem.

The second category comprises poems of continuity in time; thus it follows naturally after the first, which reaches back to the beginnings of time. Continuity in terms of things is expressed in the heirloom poem. The object conceived of as an heirloom can be as tiny as a stitched anagram or printed recipe, or as large as a quilt; what matters is that its importance has to do with the handing on or down of some significance. It does not even have to be a thing: it can be a prescribed domestic task, like ironing, or a certain way of arranging cutlery. Continuity in terms of persons often has to do with a blood line traced through female forbears, but it can involve a more generalized sense of participation in a temporal line of women. The daemonic aspect of the heirloom is the curse or the accursed object or pattern of doomed behaviour, as in the term "family curse." In this genre in women's poetry the daemonic does not loom large, for reasons to be explored.

The first two categories, then, are involved with time, though not exclusively: the couple generates domestic space like an atmosphere around it, and things with a continuity in time also occupy space. The second two categories have primarily to do with space, though insofar as they have a mythological dimension, they too have a temporal aspect. The
third category, then, is the hearth poem. Subsumed under this class are poems addressed to and poems about children and poems centering on domestic spaces and tasks. The daemonic side of this genre is the poem of domestic violence, notably the kitchen gothic poem and the poem in which domestic space is seen as sinister or imprisoning, the hearth-fire as a kind of hell-mouth. Sometimes the two aspects are combined in one poem. The daemonic version of the nursery poem is the lament of the freaked-out mother.

The fourth class is the cosmic-domestic poem. At the centre of this genre is the figure of Ariadne-Arachne, the woman as spinner and weaver. Central to the project of these poems is the creation of the world on the analogy of the task of spinning, or of any other domestic task. In mythological terms, Penelope-Ariadne represents the benign aspect of the woman-spinner; the three norms or fates, the daemonic. The benign task is making, the creation of cosmos, the sinister one, decreation.

It should be remembered that these categories are not mutually exclusive; their validity is provisional, their usefulness to be measured by the extent to which they delineate the kinds of poems found under the general category of "domestic," and clarify the links between poems. Every poem exists at a point where time and space cross; some are more involved with narrative or a sense of sequence than others;
some, like kitchen gothic poems, are transfixed at a point in space; others move in a space that is circumscribed. The categories devised for this section of my study are like grids or filters which cast a special emphasis on one aspect or the other.

But prior to the domus as the space in which the theatre of the domestic is enacted, previous to the family history and family romance which the domestic situation generates in time, there is the couple, the man and woman whose coupling creates the domestic in one or another of its varied and complex forms. The sense of the couple, primordial, stripped of individuality, is definitively captured by Virginia Woolf in the conclusion to *Between the Acts*:

> The old people had gone to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.

> Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.³

A similar sense of the couple as primordial is expressed in Margaret Atwood's "Habitation." It is not that Woolf's pas-
sage is a source for the poem, only that both pieces express
a similar insight about marriage:

Marriage is not
a house or even a tent
it is before that, and colder:

the edge of the forest, the edge
of the desert
the unpainted stairs
at the back where we squat
outside, eating popcorn

the edge of the receding glacier

where painfully and with wonder
at having survived even this far
we are learning to make fire

This sense of marriage as somehow both archaic and
perilous, ordained and improvised, is reiterated in Atwood's
recent poetry, along with a new sense that--however shaky it
may seem--it is the only shelter we're likely to find to
huddle in together. In "Two Miles Away" the couple is at
once a questionable makeshift and the substance of a script
handed down from before the invention of language:

Outside this house, the hammock
weaves one tree to another.
For once there is no wind.
Sandbox in moonlight, the glimmer
of shadowy toys, the green shovel,
the cracked white pail, the red star.

In the turned furrows, around our bed,
wild carrots, pinkish-mauve and stealthy
creep over the rug, the cleared space,
an invasion of savage flowers
reclaiming their lost territory.
Is this where I want to be, 
is this who I want to be with,

half of a pair, 
half of a custom, 
nose against neck, knee thrown 
over the soft groin, 

part of this ancient habit, 
part of this net, this comfort, 
this redblack night, 
humility of the sleeping body, 
web of blood

As in the Woolf piece, it is at night, and in nakedness both 
vulnerable and sexual, that the archaic quality of the couple 
becomes clear. Personality is diminished or obliterated as 
the man and woman—each become "half of a pair, / half of a 
custom." And, as in Woolf's prose, the house ceases to be a 
shelter; the couple is marooned in a space without dimensions, 
so that the shape they make with their mingled bodies is the 
only certainty.

Atwood's "Night Poem" evokes the man/woman pair not as 
primordial couple but as primal parents: mother and father 
as giant forms, cosmic and uncanny, the vast night images 
which are at once protective and mysterious. As with the 
couple, this aspect of the parents is manifest in darkness:

There is nothing to be afraid of, 
it is only the wind 
changing to the east, it is only 
your father—the thunder 
your mother—the rain
your true parents disappear
when the curtain covers your door.
We are the others,
the ones from under the lake
who stand silently beside your bed
with our heads of darkness.
We have come to cover you
with red wool,
with our tears and distant whispers.

You rock in the rain's arms,
the chilly arc of your sleep,
while we wait, your night
father and mother,
with our cold hands and dead flashlight,
knowing we are only
the wavering shadows thrown
by one candle, in this echo
you will hear twenty years later.  

These images of the couple as giant forms, whether man and wife or mother and father, enlarge the scope and momentousness of the domestic in both time and space: in time, because they seem to have existed forever, as prototypes; in space, because the walls of the domus disappear, and the domestic space becomes a kind of aura or atmosphere which the couple emanates.

A different but not unrelated enlarging of the scope of the domestic occurs in the cosmogonic-domestic poems which constitute my fourth category.

An archaic image of the woman as primordial bearer of children occurs in part two of Pat Lowther's Woman";

Knowledge coarsened my flesh
I grew heavy
stumbling down endless flights of stairs
Earth and salt sea
rocked between the two
poles of my knees

an omen, for I shrink
into my body and beyond
into the warm thick cave of genesis.

This is an image of the female as generatrix, encompassing
in her body the kind of primordial fecundity associated with
paleolithic Venus figures. In Lowther's "The Bones" a
similar image is called up, explored, and displayed in terms
of its truth rather than its iconic or talismanic significance.
This poem is the second half of a two-part poem
called "The Dig," a meditation on an archaeological finding
of the bones of a woman:

The women we see finished
completed like fat jars,
like oil floating on water;
breasts bellies faces
all round and calm. (33-37)

This enclosed image is shattered by the poet's choric
response:

Their bones should thrash
in the diggers' baskets,
should scream against the light.
(38-40)

These women were broken by sex and domestic work, two kinds
of labour:
Their work bent them
and sex, that soft explosion
miraculous as rain
broke in them over and over,
their bodies thickened like tubers
broke and were remade.
again and again crying out
in the heave of breaking
the terrible pleasure
again and again till
they fell away, at last
they became bone. (41-52)

Their world is phallus-centered; what the sexual act does to
their bodies corresponds to their domestic tasks:

Even their hands
curved round implements,
pounding-stones, were worshipping
the cock that made them
round and hollow. (53-57)

The conjunction of man and woman, the coupling which signifies
matrimony and is at the centre of the domestic, is described
in this poem as predatory; the woman is prey, or sacrificial
victim, broken and eaten, or a city ransacked and looted:

They would say there is
a great fall like water,
a mask taking shape on air
a sound coming nearer
like a heavy animal
breaking twigs.

And the flesh stamen
bursting inside them
splayed their bones
apart like legs.
Will our bones tell
sisters, what we died of?
how love broke us
in that hopelessly desired
breaking, and men
and children ransacked our flesh,
cracked our innermost bones
to eat the morrow. (61-78).

A poem late in *Power Politics,* a poem series which is
an anatomy of coupling even though it takes place outside a
specifically domestic space, evokes an archaic image of the
male as husband/lover in the lineaments of a primordial
statue, his visage and form defaced by time:

now your body
glimmers in the dark

room/ you rise above me
smooth, chill, stone-

white/ you smell of, tunnels
you smell of too much time

I should have used leaves
and silver to prevent you

instead I summoned

you are not a bird you do not fly
you are not an animal you do not run

you are not a man

your mouth is nothingness
when it touches me I vanish

you descend on me like age
you descend on me like earth (3-18)
Power Politics projects a series of flamboyant vignettes centered on the paradigm of the couple locked in sinister stalemate or conflict; the final poem in the series ends with an image of the couple trapped and in flight:

You walk towards me
carrying a new death
which is mine and no-one else's...

The death you bring me
is curved, it is the shape
of doorknobs, moons
glass paperweights

Inside it, snow and lethal
flakes of gold fall endlessly
over an ornamental scene,
a man and a woman, hands joined and running.
(1-3, 6-13)

The couple chained to one another in deadly wedlock is an intermediate image between the couple seen as at least in part benign, and the couple sundered. One of the most powerful images of the couple itself as sinister and destructive is Atwood's prose-poem "Marrying the Hangman." The marriage in this piece is historically unusual, but there are suggestions in the text that the salvation-predicament, the wed-lock, of the couple are to be taken as archetypal:

He said: the end of walls, the end of ropes,
the opening of doors, a field, the wind, a house, the sun, a table, an apple.

She said: nipple, arms, wine, belly, hair,
bread, thighs, eyes, eyes.
They both kept their promises.

The hangman is not such a bad fellow. Afterwards he goes to the refrigerator and cleans up the leftovers, though he does not wipe up what he accidentally spills. He wants only the simple things: a chair, someone to pull off his shoes, someone to talk with him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men for wishing to be beautiful. There is a wide choice . . .

What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another? They talked of love, naturally, though that did not keep them busy forever.

He said: foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife.

She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth, belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood.

They both kept their promises.

(58-74, 82-85, 93-97)

The early catalogues are lists of idyllic expectations, romantic promises; they are not false, only half-true. The later inventories are itemizations of the lived-out dichotomy between men and women: on the one hand history, law and order, violence; on the other, fate, the body, the womb, death. This is the other half of the truth. And in terms of their late imperatives as well as their early dreams, the man and the woman do not even share the same vocabulary. The link, "What did she say when she discovered that she had
left one locked room for another?" suggests that the superficia
cially eccentric fate of the woman who married the hangman
is in fact typical.

Since the couple, whatever its subjective experience,
has the sanction of custom, biology, church, and economics,
we can expect its breaking apart to be violent; and the con-
temporary genre, the divorce poem, justifies this expecta-
tion. Though the divorce poem is related to the traditional
poem on the occasion of the parting of lovers or the con-
clusion of a love affair, it is radically different because
marriage--involving community affiliations, property, legal
contracts, and often children--is a complicated institution
and its dissolution a momentous occasion. Shipwreck is the
metaphor Joy Kagawa uses for it in the emblematic "One Does
Not Ask"; the couple leave the "shine and clank / of metal
ship" for the peril of a raft drifting downstream in a dark-
ness full of primordial danger:

when we set out on our
explorations bravely over the
black waters we intended no
wrecked ship creaking on the rocks

we call and call the
wilderness peers through our
glowing eyes one does not
ask for terror one has not
sought this information (8-11, 16-20)
The metaphor implicit in this poem is that marriage is an ark of some safety against "the prowling night / of leopards, lynxes, reptiles / in the dark," that divorce brings exposure and fear. Yet in the series, "The Wedlocked," from which this poem is taken, marriage as a whole is seen as an unfolding disaster, the domestic space a closing noose. The series belongs in the "woes of marriage" tradition, which exposes the dark side of the occasion which the epithalamion celebrates in joy. In Kagawa's sequence even the wedding ceremony is a kind of parody of burial:

they did their measured step down the aisle forsaking all others --
with endless ring "till death do us part"
till ashes to ashes
they seeded their bed with promise and prayer
the priest and kneeling congregation covered them with earth (1/1-10)

Of course, in the logic of the poem-sequence, the wedding is viewed from the point of its ending; it is seen as having contained its own death even in its origins. The images of violence between the beginning and the end are covert, contained:
day upon day they agreed to stay through slow death by soul rot, routine, repetition, they chose their familiar wage-weary faces the hard and dreamless durable stone

the day's unkind truths were splints and spears on their fractured limbs they cracked when they bent

with porcelain smiles with carved conversations they administered their marriage they executed their lives. (8/5-12)

The couple is finally discovered by neighbours "clutched in plastic,"

a calcified couple wrapped in endless shawls they carried a stale conception and memories of war (11/7-10)

In contrast to these images of stifling impasse, the explosive violence of the images in "The Reject Wife" expresses the outrage at the breaking asunder of divorce: 15

quietly by telephone and weeping to her friends she fashions her pain into knives she carves flesh with ravenous hands, the ventricles tough and chewy on her sharp teeth, the strange deceptively sweet taste of vengeance is on her lips
she flings her broken children
into the streets, she is delirious
with liberation, they groan
in her nightmares, her legs
cannot move, she is weighted
by crimes she cannot confess
her body ages, in the morning
she forgets everything except
that she must survive. (1-18)

Joan Acosta's "Dissolution" is concerned with the division
of possessions after divorce; often a matter of contentious
litigation, the sorting out of small properties is, in this
poem, an occasion for reflecting on the break-up of marriage,
and on the household goods as emblems, now relics, of a shared
past:

Dividing
what had so carefully
been added together.

The past of each
once joined
in a single brick
and a pine plank bookshelf,
now redistributed:
your Dylan Thomas
and Joyce,
my Alan Watts
and Sylvia Plath.

... . . .

What slide rule
can compute the quotient
for each
of sadness and memories,
buried silently
like hard, dry roots.
(1-12, 31-36)
The numinous, evocative power of things which is at the centre of "Dissolution" is also at the centre of the heirloom poem, which celebrates the continuity through time granted by the handing down of things, which become emblems. Pat Lowther's "Inheritance" is about the complexity of such bequests. Seldom entirely appropriate, because they come from an image of the receiver often at odds with reality, nevertheless they hand on something substantial: an essence of the character of the giver, and a sense of something which endures, a link and a responsibility:

Annie McCain bequeathed to me 
her lace: 
tatting  crocheting 
yards and yards of 
ecru and cream and white 
spiderweb pattern  pineapple 
doilies and tablecloth edging 

She must have imagined me
in the citrus smell
of furniture polish
gleaming walnut and oak
pouring tea from a silver pot

She should have known even then
I'd be something else
useless at owning things
up to my head in books

But she gave me lace.

... ...

I'd rather have her rockingchair
I coveted half my life
Twenty-five years in tissue
wraps, Annie McCain's lace
runs through my all-thumbs
like something I can't
even regret.
It's turning slowly amber
like her beautiful hair.
that never went grey
in a long life of making
(1-17, 26-36)

The conflict in the poem is resolved in the word "making";
it is dedication to craft, to "making"--the old English word
for creating poems--which Annie McCain has bequeathed to the
poet as her inheritance.

Colleen Thibadeau's "This Iron" expresses the independ-
ence in things long used, which could be sinister but in
this instance isn't: 18

This iron seems to know its way:
Collar & Inside, Back, Front & Sleeves
it's all to easy though
and the sweetgrass smell
rising from cotton takes me
 to that tall red house
and the sun bringing in sharp spurts
of melting icicles.

... ...

& now it's that Farmhouse windbound
where the irons wait lined on the stove
and get snapped up in their handles
and slapped at those shirts
viciously reddening:
Collar & Inside
Back, Fronts & Sleeves men, men, men.
(1-8, 12-18)

The iron evokes the past, a place--"that tall red house"--and
is emblematic of all domestic chores, imperatives handed down
from one generation of women to another. "Slapped" and
"viciously" suggest some protest against the drudgery of the
domestic round or vicious circle, but "the sweetgrass smell /
rising from cotton" which calls up the image of the house and "the sun bringing in sharp spurts / of melting icicles" is almost idyllic, so that the tone of "Men, men, men." is more likely a kind of resigned, rueful tenderness than irritation or bitterness. If there is ambivalence in the tone of the final words, it is as close as we come to the negative in this genre. There is no sense of doom or a cursed inheritance handed down from woman to woman. The dominant tone of the heirloom poem is acceptance, gratitude, and the renewed strength that community gives. In other domestic genres there is violence against things, and anger about being a woman, but not in this one. 19

This sense of power passed on from woman to woman and emblemized by things is explicitly stated in one of Margaret Atwood's "Five Poems for Grandmothers." 20 Through her dying grandmother, the poet discovers her own dimension in time and a sense of self that is not sui generis but composite, made up of bits and pieces of her forebears:

The bibbed print apron, the shock of the red lace dress, the pin I found at six in your second drawer, made of white beads, the shape of a star.

Sons branch out, but one woman leads to another. Finally I know you through your daughters, my mother, her sisters, and through myself:
Is this you, this edgy joke
I make, are these your long fingers,
your hair of an untidy bird,
is this your outraged
eye, this grip
that will not give up?
(iii/25-28, 31-42)

The "Five Poems for Grandmothers" are tender, elegiac
meditations on woman in domestic space, on the ritual
tenacity of habit, on the numinous power of things handled
and used for domestic purposes, the way in which our relation-
ship with accustomed things orients us in the world:

It is not the things themselves
that are lost, but their use and handling.

......

The dishes, washed daily
for so many years the patterns
had faded; the floor, the stairs, your own
arms and feet whose work
you thought defined you;

The hairbrush, the oil stove
with its many failures,
the apple tree and the barrels
in the cellar for the apples,
the flesh of apples; the judging
of the flesh, the recipes
in tiny brownish writing
with the names of those who passed them
from hand to hand: Gladys,
Lorna, Winnie, Jean. (ii/1-2, 5-19)

The recipes hand-written and signed with the names of women
now-dead or too old to use them are poignant emblems of the
link between women created by the sharing of what they know.
In Atwood's "A Red Shirt," a meditative occasional poem, this sense of continuity between generations of women is projected into the future through the poet's daughter:

My sister and I are sewing a red shirt for my daughter. She pins, I hem, we pass the scissors back and forth across the table.

... 

... red is our colour by birthright, the colour of tense joy & spilled pain that joins us to each other ...

The shirt we make is stained with our words, our stories.

The shadows the light casts on the wall behind us multiply:

This is the procession of old leathery mothers.

the moon's last quarter before the blank night,

mothers like worn gloves wrinkled to the shapes of their lives,

passing work from hand to hand, mother to daughter,

a long thread of red blood, not yet broken ...

It may not be true that one myth cancels another. Nevertheless, in a corner of the hem, where it will not be seen, where you will inherit it, I make this tiny stitch, my private magic.

(i/1-4, ii/1-5, 9-21, iv/21-27)
Part four of "Solstice Poem" is a meditation on the more intangible talismans which we hand on to those who come after us. As in the heirloom poem, the irony and anxiety in this poem, the sense that whatever wisdom is given will not be enough, is as close as we come to the negative, in this genre:

How can I teach her
some way of being human
that won't destroy her?

I would like to tell her, Love
is enough, I would like to say,
Find shelter in another skin.

I would like to say, Dance
and be happy. Instead I will say
in my crone's voice, Be
ruthless when you have to, tell
the truth when you can,
when you can see it.

Iron talismans, and ugly, but
more loyal than mirrors. (iv/9-22)

Like her sense of the couple, and of the connections between generations of women, Atwood's feeling for the given-ness of domestic arrangements is deeply implicated in a past which is a sanction, but not an unmixed blessing. It hands us our imperatives, which we ignore at our peril; and any given domestic space is a palimpsest of antecedents:

Midnight: my house rests
on arrowheads and toebones,
scraps of raw fur, a cellar
scooped from the trashgrounds
of whatever ancestors once also
passed through time here,
shredding themselves piecemeal
in their long trek to sunset.
Things we are leaving:
bushel baskets and broken glass,
a knitted hand squashed flat,
potatoes that sprout and rot,
a rubber foot.

In this leaking boat I sail downhill
from one day to the next.23

In the darkness, each distant house
glows and marks time,
is as true in attics
and cellars as in its steaming rich
crackling and butter kitchens.
The former owners, coupled and multiple,
seep through the mottled plaster, sigh
along the stair they once rubbed concave
with their stiff boots, still envious,
breathe roasts and puddings through the floors;
it's wise
to set an extra plate.
How else can you live but with the knowledge
of old lives continuing in fading
sepia blood under your feet?24

Most of Atwood's hearth poems are touched with this sense of
the hazardousness as well as the givenness of domestic under-
takings:

November, the empty month; we try
to fill it with the smells
of cooking earth: baked roots, the comfort
of windfall pears, potatoes
floury and round, onions
and vinegar simmer
on the black stove, & the air
fogs with sugar; the risen bread says
this is where
we live,
brave statement.25
Atwood's emblematic celebrations of domestic tasks in "Apple Jelly"\(^{26}\) and "All Bread"\(^{27}\) are less grim and minimal, but they are made more complete by the very negatives which they carry like shadows of the manifest text:

No sense in all this picking, peeling & simmering
if sheer food is all you want; you can buy it cheaper.

Why then do we burn our hours & muscles in this stove,
cut our thumbs, to get these tiny glass pots of clear jelly?

Hoarded in winter: the sun
on that noon, your awkward leap
down from the tree,
licked fingers, sweet pink juice,
what we keep
the taste of the act, taste of this day. (1-18)

A jar of apple jelly, like a poem, is a distillation, a charm against loss. Bread is even more quintessential, casts a wider net in its sense of communion. Bread, the poem tells us, is made of wood, dung, moss, "the bodies of dead animals," earth. "All Bread" is traditional in its celebration, contemporary in its irony, its inclusion of negative images:

Live burial under a moist cloth,
a silver dish, the row
of white famine bellies
swollen and taut in the oven . . .
Good bread has . . .
   . . . the salt
taste of your mouth, it smells
of its own small death, of the deaths
before and after.

Lift these ashes'
into your mouth, your blood;
to know what you devour
is to consecrate it,
almost. All bread must be broken
so it can be shared. Together
we eat this earth. (11-14, 17, 19-29)

Perhaps in our century, when so much has been desacralized,
the "almost" has to be added; nothing, not even the domestic,
can be celebrated without ambivalence. As we might expect,
it is in poems about or addressed to children that the sense
of hearth and home as unqualified shelter is strongest.

Atwood's characteristic insistence on negative instances,
so that even her epiphanies are undercut by irony, often
takes the poetic form of paired opposites, a praise and a
contempt making together a poetic whole. Thus "The Two
Fires" is made up of two contrasting parallel pieces with a
coda.\(^{20}\) The first is a meditation on the domestic dwelling
as shelter, on the precariousness of the security it gives.
The occasion is a summer bush fire, and the house is invoked
as a protection against the destruction outside:

One, the summer fire
outside: the trees melting, returning
to their first red elements
on all sides, cutting me off
from escape or the saving
lake.
I sat in the house, raised up
between that shapeless raging
and my sleeping children
a charm: concentrate on
form, geometry, the human
architecture of the house, square
closed doors, proved roofbeams,
the logic of windows (1-14)

In the contrasting sequel, their haven betrays them, becomes
a raging threat, from which they must seek safety outside
the house:

The other, the winter
fire inside: the protective roof
shrivelling overhead, the rafters
incandescent, all those corners
and straight lines flaming, the carefully-
made structure
prisoning us in a cage of blazing
bars...

Two fires in-
formed me,

(each refuge fails
us, each danger
becomes a haven) (19-26, 37-41)

If the home is thought of as a keep, beseiged or imperilled
by dangers from the world outside, the ultimate terror is
that the enemy will get inside, that the fortress will turn
into what it is designed to protect against. The worst be-
trayal is to have the heart and centre of domestic comfort,
the hearth fire, turn against those who warm their hands
at it.
The image of domestic space as a haven set over against a world of some peril is central to Pat Lowther's domestic poems. In "Midterm Exam" the fluid, everyday world of homely tasks and the care of children is juxtaposed with and contrasted to contemporary history which is unavoidable and, by implication, perilous:

... my history
professor says "Passed"
and writes me a pass

BEARER ENTITLED TO
nothing more strenuous today
than wrestling a buckling clothesline while wind blows
my hair full of eyes
for the beautiful
salmonberry-yellow last time
I looked tree
now black peekaboo seethrough bare
as the damned rain
finally for a while stops

My body goes confidently about
performing its perfect right
of making milk before
the baby cries.
It seems that history's
given for my final mark
a conditional pass . . .

... and I am assured of
regular meals
a domestic furnace
time for occasional composition of
a poem a child
protection against certain kinds of rain
and therefore a probably natural death
(1-22, 28-34)
This poem—through the fiction of an exam in a history course—ironically contrasts the exigencies of history with the obligations of private domestic life but the latter is not viewed with unequivocal lyrical affirmation. A kind of dialogue is set up between the two terms or adversaries. The "conditional pass" is a reprieve in dangerous times, a quasi-assurance that the "bearer" (of children and domestic burdens) can be assured a little interval of safety: protection from "certain kinds of rain"—the rain containing nuclear fallout; and a "domestic furnace," rather than the incinerators of recent history which consumed human flesh. The reassurances are provisional, the pass to the future, conditional, the natural death only probable.

In "Midterm Exam" the poet settles for little enough—regular meals and time for a poem or a child between wars—but it seems rich compared with the deprivations which history is capable of imposing. In other hearth poems by Lowther the home space is rendered in more sinister images. In one early poem the house becomes a kind of spinning limbo, an abyss in which one can lose oneself:

The complicated airflow in the house stirred by my passing sets the doors to opening and closing one and then another in an unknown order like a pack of cards playing its own solitaire. The echoes fade like wooden etudes.
I think sometimes my passage
through this hall is like a falling
down a cleft into the sea
and where I hit, a hissing
fault springs on the surface
(warp in a spider web,
spidering of a mirror) (1-15)

The home rendered in these figures of speech is not a shelter,
but a kind of labyrinth, the order of its phenomena unknown,
alien, and solitary, suggesting vertigo and isolation. The
violent image of impact and fracture in the last few lines is
repeated in the final section of Lowther's "Woman,"31 in
which the speaker, "Shrunken between walls"--diminished and
imprisoned--thinks of a tree, which had been an image of
freedom, as "a slow paradigm / for an explosion":

there is still a delicate network of cracks
like a tree's branches
behind my eyes

resembling lightning also.
Someday you will find
feathers and blood
on the inside of the window.

This poem associates domestic space with imprisonment
and violence--in this instance, violence done to the woman's
self, first in her coarsening and diminishing, then in her
implied immolation on the inside of a window pane. This
association is most explicit in a genre within the mode of
the hearth poem: a genre, initiated by Sylvia Plath,32
which I call kitchen gothic.33 This kind of poem moves
decisively into the daemonic or negative image of the domestic. It is usually surreal in technique—juxtaposing the ordinary and the bizarre, transforming the commonplace into the sinister—and subversive in intent. Lowther's "Kitchen Murder" is a typical example of the genre, hard-edged, full of desperate bravado toward the decorum of kitchens, and hostile in a self-destructive way:

Everything here's a weapon:
i pick up a meat fork,
imagine
plunging it in,
a heavy male
thrust

in two hands
i heft a stone-
wear plate, heavy
enough?

rummage the cupboards:
red-pepper, rape-
seed oil, Drano

i'll wire myself
into a circuit:
the automatic perc,
the dishwasher, the
socket above the sink

I'll smile an electric
eel smile:
whoever touches
me is dead.

In this poem, characteristic of the genre, woman and domestic space, the kitchen, are linked; the space is particularized by the implements which occupy it, and the woman becomes part of the destructive circuit. The violence is turned outwards,
but it includes her.

Susan Zimmerman's "Ordinary Madness" condenses the incongruous juxtapositions which characterize the genre. It begins simply and does not alarm:
a funny odour in the fridge,
another in the rugs and curtains.
One morning you notice the milkman
and think of his cold white hands.

Then insects, nothing large,
just funny little ones
that only you can see.
You think of his long white fingers.

Afterwards a noise comes drifting up the stairs,
you burn the roast and break a dish or platter--

Now the vacuum doesn't work,
alarms go off when you're alone.

You think about screaming
or burning your hair.
(1-9, 15-16, 20-21, 30-31)

This poem presents, typically, a fiction of ominous breakdown,
the incursion of the sinister into the functioning of everyday routines.

In kitchen gothic, then, the round of domestic tasks becomes a vicious, imprisoning circle, a tightening noose, or breaks down into stasis or fragmentation. In Rosalind MacPhee's poem sequence Maggie, the domestic gothic "Strategy,"
which occurs within a narrative of emotional breakdown, is contrasted with an earlier poem in the series in which "the
circles / of routine" are signs of the comforts of the normal, "tending to the children, / turning on the coffee, / calling to the dog":37

My hands . . .
No longer
having a sense of things

Is it a madness
with which I stand here
in front of the Frigidaire door?
(Madness, it seems,
comes with different labels
like Nabob, or Sun Rype.)
A refrigerator
is full
of real death. Real ghosts.
The rabbit burrowing
between zucchini
and radishes.
Marinated with instinct.
Life must dodge quickly
when the bullet flies.
(1, 3-5, 10-24)

The convention governing perception in this genre is that the everyday does not change, but through some bouleversement which the protagonist least expected, the "sense of things" is lost, and the quotidian takes on the sinister guise of the insane. The link with incipient or actual madness is usually explicit, and it allows for precisely that juxtaposition of the normal and the abnormal on which the poem turns: madness joins surprised hands with Nabob and Sun Rype.
Gail Fox's "Housewives Progress," a fairly elaborate example of the genre, is part of a narrative of growing madness, beginning with a dawning sense of the bizarre:

Numbers, routes to the stars, space ships, dehydrated spinach, run me ragged.
I eat less, I think of Plato, I don't think. (1-6)

Typically the movement of the fictions in poems in this genre is not toward a solution or resolution but toward a reaction, often violent or surreal, or toward impasse:

In the times of other years, I bought clothes, raised children, tended my zinnia plants. I was normal, I was happy as a sugar cube, crazy for God.

But then the moon began to wake me, began to push me out of my room, I had to go somewhere.

At the library, I worried that I was a werewolf, and cut my hair right there on the books . . .

. . .

I needed my freedom.

I broke out in sevens all over my body, they examined me, they were amazed and sent me to a fair. (7-22, 26-30)
In Fox's poem, the double meaning of "to break out" is deftly used to accomplish a kind of resolution. She needed her freedom, but instead of breaking out of her imprisonment, she breaks out in a numerical rash, and is newly incarcerated as a freak in a side-show. In this kind of poem, to break out is to freak out. The protagonist exchanges one prison for another.

Mary Humphrey Baldridge's *The Loneliness of the Poet/Housewife* provides a number of variations of kitchen gothic. "Vision" presents a version of the sense of immobility which is central to the genre. Usually it involves incarceration or impalement, but in this poem it is expressed in an image of revolving stasis: at the centre, the "I" of the poem is envisioned as a diamond with cutting edges; as she turns, she fractures the domestic environment; she may be trapped, but she is dangerous:

The kitchen's locked in light 
and I alone revolve
Gigantic diamond
Cutting sharp squares 
Through porcelain, chrome, black metal bone
Releasing erupted ice-cubes 
in cold pyramids
The whole room a revolution 
of white light and ice
Imprisoned in the centre am I 
When I move
My facets are in danger of cracking 
Like the shattered window 
Through which glass and snow and broken leaves spray slowly.
"Revolution" in the context of the poem implies not only vertigo but violent subversion: she releases imprisoned ice-cubes. But she remains "Imprisoned in the centre" and her facets are "in danger of cracking." The total impression is one of contained destruction, the agent of ruin herself powerless. Another poem in the series is surreal in its manic, methodical destructiveness which, true to the genre, is a reaction, not a solution:

Today I took out  
all of the dishes  
from their cupboards  
and maliciously smashed them  
Despairing over the steady, constant  
daily chipping away at  
plate edges & cup rims  
the sudden chink out of a  
wine glass in the dishwasher  
I took out all of the dishes  
from their cupboards  
& smashed them in the sink  
2 sinks actually, full of handles  
like cleanly dismembered limbs  
Smashed all the good china cups  
Even smashed the antique wine glasses  
on their amber stems  
they flew apart when they splintered  

This aggression toward the domestic environment and gear, a reversal of the routines of house-keeping, is part of the outrageousness of these poems. The growing oddness of the surroundings which used to seem innocuous or benign, the animation of inanimate objects, is part of the image of pervasive break-down generated by these poems. Things become ornery in an ominous way. In Baldridge's "Possessions
Leave Me" the disengagement of the housewife from her environment is a kind of freedom, but it is the disorienting freedom of nightmare. Thus it conveys the sense of predicament central to the genre; there are no solutions, only destruction or dissolution:

Possessions leave me, slip out of my fingers spin into the universe  
The tugging continues clothes leave in layers by pockets and pieces  
seams come apart I unpeel, unclothe even the shoes are gone  
from under my feet fingernails pull hair at the roots  
even my skin is beginning to tear loose my rings are gone

This poem fits the genre by virtue of its sense of powerlessness and disintegration. Its passivity is as disturbing as the aggressiveness in the poem about smashing dishes, and is in fact its counterpart. Such passivity is a version of the stasis characteristic of kitchen gothic. Destructiveness in these poems comes not out of a sense of power, but out of a sense of powerlessness. The speaker is imprisoned in her passivity, so that she cannot lift a finger to prevent the disintegration of her world.
In "fairy tale" the central figure "sits on the couch / as if it were a raft / and she adrift / in the cold room," immobilized, and out of touch. Her "children's voices recede / and fade" and "her white walls fall / in silence." The reversal whereby the familiar and comforting become sinister or remote is characteristic of the genre. In "Against the Wall" the woman has escaped the confines of the house, only to be immobilized in another way: impaled, strung out on the ground of her own garden, prey to the carving knives of rain, "bas relief / against the disappearing earth." In the last line, she is no longer "strung out along the ground / cracked from crotch / to split grimace," but espaliered, "somehow risen against the wall." This poem lacks the paraphernalia of kitchen gothic but it is related to the mode through its central image of immobility in a domestic space—in this case the garden, the environs of the house—and in its surrealistic, grotesque deformation of the woman's body, first racked on the ground and then espaliered against the wall. In fact, all of the poems in Baldridge's poem sequence can be read as variants of the fantasies engendered by solitary incarceration in a house.

Gwen MacEwen's "Memoirs of a Mad Cook" is not unrelated to kitchen gothic, though its tone is bewilderment rather than rage. The sense of comic alienation which pervades
it certainly places it on the negative or daemonic side of the hearth poems. It depicts a lavish, splendid failure, and might be called "Apologia for Ruined Dinners":

There's no point kidding myself any longer, I just can't get the knack of it; I suspect there's a secret society which meets in dark cafeterias to pass on the art from one member to another. Besides, it's too personal preparing food for someone's insides, what can I possibly know about someone's insides, how can I presume to invade your blood? I'll try, God knows I'll try but if anyone watches me I'll scream because maybe I'm handling a tomato wrong, how can I know if I'm handling a tomato wrong?

Wistfully I stand in my difficult kitchen and imagine the fantastic salads and souffles that will never be. Everyone seems to grow thin with me and their eyes grow black as hunter's eyes and search my face for sustenance. All my friends are dying of hunger, there is some basic dish I cannot offer. (1-14, 17-24)

The rhetoric of this poem is based on a comic reversal of the fiction of nurturance which is at the centre of the positive hearth poem. The sense, in the tomato vignette, of the normal turning into an ordeal, and the sinister tone of the last lines link the poem with kitchen ethic. The poem expresses, too, the insatiability of the demands made on the housewife-nourisher; she can never measure up: "there is some basic dish I cannot offer." The rage of the
disappointed is there, too: "Everyone seems to grow thin with me / and their eyes grow black as hunters' eyes / and search my face for sustenance." The woman who cannot provide nourishment may find that she herself becomes edible. 45

Domestic solitude is broken and domestic incarceration enlivened and made purposeful by the presence of children. The nursery poem, or the poem to or about children, is one kind of hearth poem which has a long history in women's writing. 46 Yet it has never been part of the main literary tradition; it exists mainly in a sub-literary genre, the lullaby, which is associated with song and the oral tradition. Other than that, most of the children included in the canonical genres are dead: there exists, scattered throughout English poetry, a variety of moving elegies for children who died young.

Yet looking after children is so full of occasions ritual and accidental, and the focus of such intense emotion, that it is astonishing that poetry has largely ignored it. The reasons must have to do with the conventions which have governed poetry and the hierarchies of accepted importance and significance which underlay these conventions. The problem for women poets wishing to write about children is analogous to their dilemma in the handling of erotic poetry, classical mythology, and fictions of muse and vocation: how to adapt traditional genres to the material, or to invent new ways of handling it. The solutions are, as will become
apparent, ingenious and varied. The ruminative Romantic mode of reflective inner musings, often in a domestic setting, as developed by Coleridge and used by later poets, is sufficiently flexible to be adapted to reflections about children. Margaret Atwood's "Daybook" series is a perfectly canonical version of this kind of poem. Other models are the ballad in dialogue and the nursery rhyme, both obvious choices because of their link with an oral tradition already associated with children. 47

Pat Lowther's "Two Babies in Two Years" is a poem of self-definition as mother, which loops in symbolic overtones without abandoning the immediate and particular. 48 It stands on the threshold of "poems about children" because at its centre is the image of the housewife-mother who bears the children and to whose skirts they cling:

Now I am one with those wide-wombed mediterranean women who pour forth litters of children mouthfuls of kisses and shrieks
their hands always wet and full in motion

Now that the late summer stays, the child hangs in the webbing of my flesh
And last year's baby, poised
on the lip of the spinning
kitchen, bedroom,
vacuum, living
room, clings to the cord
of my skirt, afraid yet
of her first step. (1-6, 16-25)

The poem has cosmogonic, mythological overtones. Each of
these wide-wombed women

... is the weaver of her province
spinning a tight fuzzy world out
of her own body
and distracted mind (7-10)

The "mouthfuls of kisses and shrieks" is traditional
nursery imagery, affirming the essentially positive tone.
The poem is centred in motherhood, the woman is centred
in her body and her children, extensions of her body, one
still webbed in her flesh, the other still clinging to
"the cord of my skirt." The only negative interruption to
its seriously lyrical tone—a passage suggesting isolation
and domestic mess—is placed in parenthesis:

(a loose shred of thought
loops in "there is
the sun"
or "the sea with fish"
in the smeary congress of kitchens)
(11-15)

The image of the domestic space, in the final stanza, as a
kind of maelstrom or vacuum into which the child is afraid
to venture is a contemporary manifestation of the under-
current of anxiety which is traditionally one of the strands
in the complex feelings mothers have toward children.
Gail Fox's "Lines in Contentment" is a somewhat more uneasy poem concerned with self-definition as mother. The distraction compressed into a parenthesis in Lowther's poem is here a thread running through and colouring the whole, brief poem:

My son, whose small age barely confirms my motherhood, sings into my sleep with hungry insistence and catches me always on the verge of forgetting who I now am and must be: loving, honest, possessed of my senses. I pick him up and he grows in my hands, grows into each successive morning, singing me into a semblance of identity. He grows, and in his excessive joy, takes me along.

Fox's wistful poem is more a poem of self-persuasion than of self-definition. But it is essentially a celebration, even though her hold on herself-as-mother is tenuous, and the lyrical, rising close overcomes the uneasiness which underlies her "semblance of identity."

In Margaret Atwood's "Today" we hear the tones of the anxious mother distanced by the conventions of the elegiac model which she loosely follows: a genre essentially reflective, not lyrical or dramatic:

Today the lawn holds my daughter like a hostage where she walks, not as high as the wrecked picnic table.
(Watch the slope, hard clay with bladed stones, posing innocuous as daisies . . .

. . . .

The lure of eleven birds on water, the glitter and true shine, how can I tell her that white, that bluegreen gold is treachery?

Each of these rescues costs me something, a loss, a dulling of this bluegold eye.

Later she will learn about edges. Or better, find by luck or a longer journey the shadow of that liquid gold place, which can be so single and clear for her only now, when it means danger only to me. (1-4, 11-13, 18-34)

In the tradition of the reflective occasional poem, "Today" makes of the here and now a starting point for musing on life—its hazards, its attritions. Atwood handles the genre with characteristic skill and honesty, balancing the immediacy of the mother's cry, "Watch the slope," with traditional, if mordant, reflections about the child's future—"hostage," after all, echoes Bacon's dictum that children are hostages to fortune—expressed in an idiom which is entirely contemporary.

In one sense, Atwood's poem is about innocence and experience, but in it the child is not an emblematic abstraction set up so that the poet can have an opportunity to
talk about these matters. The poem does not transcend its occasion, it remains passionately personal: we know that the predicament expressed in it is universal, but we are drawn into the poem, made to feel at home in it, because it does not abandon the immediate.

Heather Spears' "fears for children" focusses on the terror which is distanced in Atwood's reflective "Today." Descriptive and narrative rather than meditative, it pulls the reader into a fantasy of peril which articulates the anxieties that always press against the havens and stratagems of safety which parents devise to protect children:

I see you dark blue snow suit walking unsteadily leaning for some reason with the wind head jerked back doll like maybe your hat's slipped now I'll go after you and I'm running, on the left the big tame waves, underfoot snow on the quaint path, tidying your footprints

I see you before me at night I could dream of you walking like this to other destinations nothing is safe no where (12-24)

Atwood's "The Puppet of the Wolf" is about the fictions we devise both to inure the child to the idea that the world is a dangerous place and to reassure her that for now she is protected against its perils. It uses the occasion of playing with a child before her bath to suggest the difference between art and life: an old subject, made fresh by the
vividness of the occasion, which is poignant, detailed, and familiar. Tender and sinister, the poem explores the mystery of fictions, which is the mystery of poetry:

The puppet of the wolf
I have not made yet
encloses my right hand:
fur stubbles my wrists,
a tongue, avid, carnivorous,
licks between thumb and finger . . .

. . . .

the wolf is transparent, but visible:
my daughter sees it,
my right hand is the wolf.
She laughs at its comic
dance, at its roars
and piglet murders . . .
(1-6, 10-15)

The two hands enact the story until

The last house crashes down:
the wolf is on fire,
my right hand is on fire,
the wolf is gone. (20-23)

The hand becomes a hand once more, ordinary, benign, involved not in destruction but in preparations for the child's bath. But the unspoken poem tells us that outside the safety of bathrooms, hands are capable of cruelty. For now, though, in the poem,

This is a miracle, there is never any death:
the wolf comes back whenever he is called,
unwounded and intact. (32-36)
The poet's "dying right / hand" is "immortal, / briefly, and innocent": innocent with the innocence fictions bestow and with the tenderness children arouse. The poem ends on a rising note of grace as the child is lifted into the bath water.

The use of a nursery rhyme or folk tale from the store of children's literature as a frame or point of reference for a poem, as Atwood uses *The Three Little Pigs* in "The Puppet of the Wolf," is one way of making a poem to or about a child. The knowledge of the framing fiction which the readers bring to the poem allows the poet to use a kind of allusive shorthand which renders the poem at once more intimate and succinct. Similarly, Janis Rapoport's "Jeremy's Dream" is a collage or cento of snatches from the oral tradition of Mother Goose rhymes, mingled, surrealistically, with fragments of the child's reality:

One by one we
enter Jeremy's dream along the equinox
sun's last rays as they spin out
four and twenty blackbirds
pecking at the clouds and
let us race the sunset colours as
they turn to chimney smoke
the smoke that Sara spilt --
this was the smoke that
escaped the house
that baked the pie the
first blackbird pie, counting now
one little two little three little
fire engines, red with white ladders, a schoolbus, schoolbus there goes a
cow with a crumpled horn (1-16)
The advantages of constructing a poem in this way is that the elements are common knowledge, and they have a formulaic certainty which can be played off against uncertainties. The familiar phrases make a frame which is full of echoes and associations, so that they hand the poem a kind of richness ready-made.

Children's stories and nursery rhymes are obvious choices of genre for a poet to use in making a new poem about a child. But other genres can also be extended to domestic use. The Romantic occasional-conversation poem is clearly the model for Atwood's meditative poems about her daughter, and Anne Wilkinson's companion poems "Letter to My Children" and "Letter to My Children: Postscript" use a very old genre, the epistle, as the model for meditative lyrics of direct address. These two poems are linked in kind with the heirloom poem because they are valedictory in tone, and they articulate a kind of wry, quintessential wisdom handed down from mother to children:

I guided you by rote--
Nipple to spoon, from spoon
To knife and fork,
And many a weak maternal morning
Bored the breakfast hour
With 'manners make the man'...

Before you turn
And bare your faultless teeth at me
Accept a useless gift, apology...
If we could start again...

...I'd tell you only what you know
But barely know you know,
Teach one commandment,
'Mind the senses and the soul
Will take care of itself,
Being five times blessed.
(1-6, 11-13, 18, 22-27)

If the first letter is a kind of apologia, a defensive mother's self-justification, the "Postscript" is a spelling out of the epigrammatic advice at the end of the first poem: a lavish, lyrical cataloguing of the pleasures of the five senses:

Uncage the tiger in your eye
And tawny, night and day,
Stalk the landscape for the contour
Of a fern or arm
Gorge on pigment squeezed
From barley fields
Or part the strawberry leaves
That hungry eyes may water
On the fruit and feast of colour...

Touch everything available
To consciousness,
Birch and bark of cedar, tables
Worn to silk by women
Rubbing their restlessness
To polished wood...

Touch worms and warts
In gratitude for shudders, stroke
The soft white bulge of peonies
(62-70, 84-89, 95-97)
Though cast in the form of the epistle, these poem-letters are also a testimony to what is worth while in life and a legacy of love and knowledge.

Gail Fox's series of poems to her son in Dangerous Season is formally a cycle of love poems, moving from innocence—the child's innocence—to experience. The scheme of growth underlying this movement is Romantic and Wordsworthian, but the poems are substantial and intimate rather than abstract, because they are informed by the poet-mother's experience of her son, from his shared birth, through his first steps, to his learning to talk. The crisis in the cycle, in "My Son as Adam," is related to his learning speech; his fall is a fall into language:

You listen to our dark tongues, watch our sullied lips.
Overnight you begin to speak, speech revealed in its sorrow, illusive, misleading speech, telling of death, and like death, knowing where it must go and what it must do. Once there was no darkness in your tongue, but now you have been tempted, my experimenter, my innocent, falling one.

More contemporary are "Jason, Becoming" and "In the Playpen." The first is about the child as territorial invader of a domestic space hitherto shared by man and wife, now become mother and father:
There is no room
that does not bear
your touch, your innocent
destruction, all things
become toys, vehicles of pleasure,
to pull, to push, to tear, to break,
there is no limit. (1-7)

"In the Playpen" is an image of the child's surmised world
as microcosmic, complete, mysterious and archaic:

His playpen growls softly
with animals, they
sit behind the bars
like circus beasts
and their eyes are blank.

Jason is their tamer,
Only he knows how
to put them
through their paces
take out their
cotton insides . . .

Jason sleeps. The
animals relax, the green dog
dances but slowly.
Somewhere the forests
are empty. Somewhere
all green dogs dance.  
(1-11, 21-26)

Atwood's image of her daughter asleep is similar, but more
uncanny, centred as it is on the notion of totemistic magic:

Downstairs, my daughter sleeps
in her jungle of pastel animals
with their milky noses and missing eyes;

green leaves are rising around her cage,
rubbery and huge, where she hunts and snuffles
on all fours through the hours;
she has eaten the eyes of the lion
and is the lion. 59
This sense of the child as completely other, eerily intact in a world which parents cannot enter, is transient in the normal range of feeling which unite mother and child. But there is a kind of negative hearth/mother poem in which the child is consistently perceived as alien. This might be called the meditation of the disoriented mother: a mode which can be linked with the ballad tradition about crazed girls who wandered the hills after having abandoned or drowned their infants. Though post-partum depression is a routine form of emotional malaise, and violence practised by mothers against children is documented in the headlines of newspapers, ambivalence, not to mention rage, against very young children is associated with pathology, and is not often directly expressed in literature.

The relative scarcity of alienated mother poems is related to the tension between experience, social norms, and literary genres. The idea of the ambivalent or reluctant mother is so threatening that poems concerned with her are likely to occur in the context of emotional breakdown. Social standards suggest that if a mother can't handle or can't stand her baby, she must be depressed or crazy, and literature tends to conform. Poems in this mode view the infant not as a creature innocent and loved, but rather as something alien, handed to the mother like a gift from another country. Two of Heather Spears' poems are subtle and accomplished examples of the genre:
Am I so good at it? I tire, 
the fabric gives again, I must mend, 
elsewhere and elsewhere the birds soar like stones, 
trees live their own lives, and perfectly. 

to live my life! that would be something. The appalled 
infant stares up at forms of light, its hands 

swim vaguely, as against glass, its skull 
is warped, hairless, its blue spine 
a reed. 

Now it is interpreting the shape of the light-- 
a wound. It is touching, questioning, its warm 
excretions. 

Enough. It is folded, smoothed, hushed. 
O difficult and ingenious, the shuttering of its 
2 bald eyes. 61 

It could be said that in this poem the infant serves as a 
vehicle for the expression of the poet's hopelessness; it is 
horrifying to consider that a creature so fragile and vulner-
able should be alive in a world in which light is a wound. 

Its miraculously remote intactness in the two final lines is 
both a comfort and a sign of its separateness. The infant, 
in this poem, is not joined to the mother through mutual 
need and love, but is an object seen from a great distance, 
with a mixture of refined admiration and sick dismay. 

The second poem, "Wife Poem," centres on the predicament 
of the mother, her demoralization, and the distance between 
herself and the domestic world in which she is expected to 

function:
The poor morning makes its moves, I am caught
in its grey light, an unfocused photograph,
My face dreads me, the silent encounter,
there where I've hund the mirror.
Will you see me? my son, who looks at me with those eyes
sour, the breath of steam in the kitchen,
the walls grieve. The poem on the sill
curls and yellows, I memorize it
only to replace it, another commitment,
while my bare arms receive, on their own, a scalding grace.
I play house badly,
I am foreign and ill,
I lie to my children,
at daybreak I am hardly refreshed by my numerous dreams.

The fact that it is called "Wife Poem" and not "Mother Poem"
and that it includes the whole domestic performance—"I play
house badly"—might place this poem back with domestic gothic;
but its tone of low-keyed desperation, and its mood of re-
signed alienation, are more like the tone and mood of the
failed-mother poems. There is no anger in it; only regret,
despair, and a kind of grief.

"Postpartum," by Joan Michelson, a meditative ode to
the self in a state of reluctant convalescence—a mode in-
vented by Sylvia Plath—is concerned with ambivalent
mothering:

Your elephantine daughters
arrive
one after another, and you
thin back into bone and colds
and cramps. Your mother
comes. It is October...
All you know is:
nerves in your neck
and a head so lost
it cracks on shifting floors
and gapes at cries for sucking out
your marrow white as milk.

There is talk of madness.
There is always the postpartum.

Flown away on business, your husband
returns brown. The trouble is
the children
know no limit.

Even in your crib-bed they
crowd your breast;
crush
your lungs upward wanting milk.
(1-6, 12-23, 28-31)

The substance of such poems is new to English poetry; their
writing is part of the telling of what has been called "the
world's best kept secret: the private lives of one half the
human race." The genres that serve this project may
change, once the substance of the secret becomes commonplace.

For now, they have the excitement of novelty, but they also
establish precedents which claim for literature certain
matters which have hitherto been outside literature; besides
the intrinsic beauty of some of the poems, this is their
value for the continuity of poetry.

The domestic sphere is admittedly a microcosm, and
there are some poems which use the domestic as an analogy
for vaster goings on: the world may be created on a sewing
machine and sucked up in its final hour by an apocalyptic vacuum cleaner. The complete image of the archetypal domestic female is the figure of a woman with broom, cauldron, and spindle: she cleans, cooks, and weaves. This figure is most familiar to us in its daemonic aspect, as the witch.

As we have seen from MacEwen's "Memoirs of a Mad Cook," there is something ludicrous about cooking on a cosmic scale. The image of woman as cleaner is hallowed in folk tale, in the figure of Mother Carey or Hulda shaking out her feather pillows; and there is a Dutch tale about a little woman who was so zealous at scrubbing that she was set to sweeping the milky way and burnishing the stars.

That the image of woman as char does not have the—albeit sometimes sinister—prestige of the woman as spinner and weaver in the European tradition has to do with the bias pertaining to class and gender built into that tradition. That for women this image is an emblem of their oppression is evident in the anger associated with kitchen gothic. It is difficult to dignify repetitive drudgery. The wry poetry of the poignant, subversive undersong written for La Saguine by the contemporary Acadian Antonine Maillet gives range and dignity to the voice of the scrubwoman.

Gwen MacEwen's "The Vacuum-Cleaner Dream" inflates the domestic task of house-cleaning into cosmic, even apocalyptic, dimensions.67 Of all modern "labour-saving devices" the vacuum-cleaner is the most sinister, in its name, its noise,
and its undiscriminating omniverousness. The poem is a fantasy of compensation and though it is on the whole light in tone, the self-image of the "avenging angel" suggests anger or at least a desire for power. In tone the poem is linked to kitchen gothic, but the theatre in which its fantasy is played out is much larger, and the dream of destruction does not involve destruction of the speaking self. The speaker's energies are turned outward; this cleaning woman is cheerfully turning her machine on the whole world. And she will receive in return the accolades promised on television advertisements to those who use the right machine and try really hard: she will be the "best cleaning woman in the world."

Rhetorically, the poem takes the hyperboles of prescriptive advertising to their logical conclusions:

I dreamt I was vacuuming the universe and everything got sucked into my blind machine \textit{whirr whirr whirr} I was an avenging angel and the best cleaning woman in the world (1-7)

The poem is self-congratulatory on a grandiose scale; the machine becomes an "extra-galactic vacuum-beast, / expertly tamed by me." The surrealistic, lyrical dream-ending fits the compensation fantasy because it describes a reward commensurate with the extraordinary expertise of the cleaning woman: instead of the usual detritus of lost buttons, cats'
hair, and dirt, she finds inside the vacuum bags some lovely surprises:

- a dictionary of dead tongues
- a bottle of wine
- lunar dust
- the rings of Saturn
- and the sleeping body of my love.

"Lunar dust" is a kind of transformation of the commonplace kind gleaned from wall-to-wall carpets, and what vacuuming woman has not dreamt of erotic release from her drudgery? The "rings of Saturn" are arcane and magical substitutions for safety pins, tacks, and twisted bobby-pins.

This enlargement of one domestic task into cosmic dimensions is high-spirited mock-heroic: accomplished light verse, with surrealistic overtones and subversive undertones. Joy Kagawa's "Washday" is a more sombre poem, and its strategy is different. 68 Rather than inflating the dimensions of one domestic function to grandiose proportions, she uses an unstated analogy between washing clothes in a washing machine and the general process of cleansing or purifying. The poem depicts a nightmare ordeal, the impossibility of cleansing something in dirty water:

how can the wash get clean
if the water is not clear
if there are buckets of mud
in the washing machine  (1-4)
The literary precedent for this predicament is Lady Macbeth's obsessive and guilty hand-washing, and its precedent in folk tale is the ordeal of the maiden who is required to prove herself by performing some impossible domestic task, like spinning straw into gold. The poem moves through images of transformation:

> it is true, after awhile
> the mud becomes very clean
> after awhile the scream
> thins into silence, the corpse
> turns to air after awhile (5-9)

to a fresh, kinetic, but somewhat resigned close:

> time will change all this
> the sheets will blow in the sunny weather
> someone else will fold them. (15-17)

But the central image in the European tradition of woman as domestic—an image archaic, elevated, and often sinister—is the woman with thread: spinner, weaver, sewer, knitter. She is connected with our beginning—the umbilical cord—and our end: she cuts the thread of life, she weaves the shroud. Arachne, Ariadne, Penelope, the Norns, and the Weird Sisters, all are thread women. She appears definitively in Margaret Atwood's "A Red Shirt" in the guise of the Old Woman:

First: she weaves your body.
Second: she weaves your soul.
Third: she is hated & feared, though not by those who know her.
She is the witch you burned
by daylight and crept from your home
to consult and bribe at night. The love
that tortured you you blamed on her.

She can change her form,
and like your mother she is covered with fur.
The black Madonna
studded with miniature
arms and legs, like tin stars,
to whom they offer agony

and red candles when there is no other
help or comfort, is also her. (iii/2-18)

In elaborating this multiform image of the weaving woman
Atwood draws on and modifies the long tradition which has
created the images of woman as witch and madonna. P. K.
Page, in "The Knitters," by using a vocabulary which evokes
the mythological link between women and yarn, transforms the
women knitting into heraldic images of the mystery they
practise:

These women knitting knit a kind of mist--
climate of labyrinth--
into the air.
Sitting like sleepers, propped against the chintz,
pin-headed somehow--figures by Moore--
arachnes in their webs, they barely stir-- (1-6)

The knitters are tranced, "sitting like sleepers"; they knit
their own atmosphere, a "climate of labyrinth"; a phrase
which evokes the Arachne-Ariadne figure in all its ambiguity,
since the labyrinth is the trap, the spider's web, and the
thread from which it is spun is the guide out of it. The
image of the women as "pin-headed somehow"--their figures, sitting, foreshortened as they lean back--suggests archaic images of women found in caves: the woman all belly, Queen of the Termites. The concluding arachne image is sinister.

In the first stanza, the knitters are ancient, fixed, and iconic. The second stanza, with more kinetic images, imitates the fidgety, click-clack busyness of knitting fingers. But the image is still heraldic: the knitters are wired into an urgent circuit, compulsive agents of some force:

except their eyes and hands, which wired to some urgent personal circuit, move as if a witch controlled them. Hear the click and hum as their machines translating hieroglyphs, compulsive and monotonous, consume--losenge and hank--the candy-coloured stuff.

"Hieroglyphs" continues the sense, established in the first stanza, that the knitters are involved in something ancient and significant, to be deciphered.

Stanza three expands the ideogram visually, reinforcing the impression of an action ritualistic and mysterious:

See two observe the ceremony of skeins:
one, forearms raised, the loops around her palms, catscradle rocks, is metronome, becalmed; while her companion spun from her as from a wooden spindle, winds a woolen world.
This is the cosmic image of a woman spinning a world out of her body, which has become completely the instrument and vehicle of her craft. The final stanza is a commentary on the first three: a woman's sense of how a man might view these female mysteries:

A man rings like an axe, is alien, imperilled by them, finds them cold and far. They count their stitches on a female star and speak another language, are not kin. Or is he Theseus remembering that maze, those daedal ways, the Minotaur? (23-30)

The man is "imperilled by them" because their ritual excludes him; he is shut out of the world they spin with their wool. They have become, through their shared mystery, absolutely other. Or, the poem rhetorically asks, does the skein-winding evoke for him the labyrinth and its consequences? By using "daedal" with a lower case, the poet avoids the reminder that a male artificer constructed the labyrinth. The whole poem is devised to blazon the knitting women as emblems of the female.

The rhetoric of Page's poem elevates all that it touches, rendering extraordinary the mundane and everyday, and transforming the domestic into the legendary. Gwen MacEwen's companion poems, "Meditations of a Seamstress" (1) and (2) draw upon the same tradition, but in a lyrical mode. The meditation, a genre with some status and a
serious history, is used in the seamstress poems to augment to cosmic proportions the modest work of a sewer of garments. The first poem is in part a day-dream, a fantasy of wish-fulfillment; in part it is an anxiety dream, based on the compulsion to finish, together with the knowledge that one will never finish, that underlies the repetitive cycle of domestic tasks. The obsessive sewing is accompanied by the fantasy that something of great import depends on this activity; it is the housewife's paranoia on its euphoric side:

When it's all too much to handle
and the green seams of the world start fraying,
I drink wine and sew
like it was going out of style;
curtains become dresses, dresses
become pillowcases, clothes
I've worn forever get taken in or out.
Now I can't explain exactly
what comes over me. But when the phone rings
I tell people I'm indisposed;
I refuse to answer the door, I even neglect my mail.
(Something vital is at stake,
the Lost Stitch or the Ultimate Armhole,
I don't know what) and hour after hour
on the venerable Singer
I make strong seams for my dresses
and my world. (1-18)

I know somehow I'm fighting time
and if it's not done by nightfall
everything will come apart again;
continental shelves will slowly drift into the sea
and earthquakes will tear wide open
the worn-out patches of Asia. (23-28)
Here the housewife's habitual desperation—if it's not done by nightfall, something terrible will happen—is given a reason commensurate with the intensity of her feeling: her sewing holds the world together.

In the final stanza the poem takes an interesting turn: the seamstress's frantic, obsessive stitching has confined her to her domestic space—she pretends she's sick, does not answer the phone or collect her mail—but in her fantasy she breaks out of the confines of the four walls of her little room and is at large in the universe:

Dusk, a dark needle, stabs the city and I get visions of chasing fiery spools of thread mile after mile over highways and fields until I inhabit some place at the hem of the world where all the long, blue draperies of skies and rivers wind;

spiders' webs describe the circling of their frail thoughts forever;
everything fits at last and someone has lined the thin fabric of this life I wear with grass. (29-38)

The universe of her imaginings is described in the metaphors of her expertise; her tender, lyrical apotheosis is rendered, too, in images taken from her craft.

"Meditations of a Seamstress" (2) is a Cinderella dream, a grandiosely compensatory imagining of the ultimate garment which will be all garments, and which will not only transform its maker-wearer but will link her with paradigms of beauty and power: Isadora, Artemis. In fantasy, the artificer, a woman sewing, conjures the perfect garment, which will both
clothe her resplendently and reveal her to those who can interpret:

I dream impossible clothes which will confess me and fall apart miraculously as the Red Sea and reveal to you the stunning contours of my mind . . . (1-4)

She dreams "yards of silk," "tunics held together / by buckles bearing the portraits of lost kings," "vests carved from the skins of a frightened deer, / green velvet cloaks in which I may soundlessly collapse / and succumb to the Forest." The apotheosis in this poem is erotic and personal rather than cosmic, but on a grandiose scale and couched in arcane imagery:

Only one dress I made ever came out right--
(It will never happen that way again);
all the way down the front of it
where it opens from the collar to the hem
I sewed the signs of Athens,
a row of obsolete but perfect keys
on a strip of black and gold,
with which you may, O naked emperor,
enter and decode my world. (15-23)

Phyllis Webb's "Making" takes the domestic craft of quilting--another skill which embodies the long association between woman and thread--and finds in it an analogy for all other kinds of making. The rhetoric of the poem transfigures and elevates the craft, but with a tender respect which also leaves it what it is; it is never turned into an emblem of itself, as Page tends to do with what she elevates. Webb plays deftly with the meanings of two English
verbs, "to make" and "to do." Quilting—the making out of fragments a patterned shelter and comfort—becomes a paradigm for all making: love making, the making of a child, the making of art (and in old English a poet was called a "maker"), making transient or transcendent sense of life's fragments. And the refrain "It does" means at once something achieved, and something which is sufficient, which "will do."

Making

Quilted patches, unlike the smooth silk loveliness of the bought, this made-ness out of self-madness thrown across the bones to keep them warm. It does.

Making under the patches a smooth silk loveliness of parts: two bodies are better than one for thisquilting, throwing into the dark a this-ness that was not.

Fragments of the splintered irrelevance of doubt, sharp hopes, spear and splice into a nice consistency as once under the pen, the brush, the sculptor's hand music was made, arises now, blossoms on fruit-tree bough. It does.

Exercise, exegesis of the will captures and lays haloes around bright ankles of a saint. Exemplary under the tree, Buddha glows out now making the intolerable, accidental sky patch up its fugitive ecstasies. It does.
It does, and, all being done, a child on the street runs dirty from sun to the warm infant born to soiled sheets and stares at the patched external face. It does.

From the making made and made, now making certain order--this excellent despair is laid, and in the room the patches of the quilt seize light and throw it back upon the air. A grace is made, a loveliness is caught quilting a quiet blossom as a work. It does.

And do you, doubting, fractured, and untaught, St. John of the Cross, come down and patch the particles and throw across the mild unblessedness of day lectures to the untranscended soul. Then lotus-like you'll move upon the pond, the one-in-many, the many-in-the-one, making a numbered floral-essenced sun resting upon the greening padded frond, a patched, matched protection for Because. And for our dubious value it will do. It always does.

In Webb's poem, the paradigm for the essential human activity--the making of a certain order and grace out of fragments--is quilting. Thus a domestic craft not even accorded a place as a fine art is elevated into central significance. And yet, to speak of elevation in this context is inappropriate, because the domestic is a great leveller, including everything in a microcosm without hierarchy, so that the fine-stitching of a quilt to keep the bones warm and shelter love is as exemplary as the making of the "numbered floral-essenced sun" of spiritual illumination.
Claude Levi-Strauss has said that cooking is the initial act of cultural transformation, whereby human beings are set apart from nature. The domestic space is still the place where the human infant is made human, where activities which will later become cultural tasks have their beginnings in the tending of the human infant. The significance of the domestic is, in our time, beginning to be articulated in poetry. That a great deal—though not all—of this poetry should have been written by women is no surprise, for the domestic has been up till now the territory of their expertise and the theatre of their private lives.

Not all domestic modes of communication have been raised to literary status; the recipe, for all its rigour of form and condensed clarity of language, still hovers on the border; the shopping list has so far proved intractably sub-literary, and the melange on the kitchen notice-board or magnetted to the refrigerator has yet to be collaged into a poem. But either through the enlargement of traditional domestic genres like the poem of address, mother-to-child; or through the adaptation of traditional modes like the love poem, the epistle, the elegy, the day-book, domestic matters have been found not intractable to literary uses. The only new genre, kitchen gothic, may prove to be ephemeral, a transient explosion on the edge of pent-up anger. But if women poets do not relinquish their claim that the domestic is momentous,
and its occasions and milieux appropriate to poetry, the richness of the present proliferation of domestic poetry will be consolidated and expanded.
Notes

Chapter IV

1 The category "kitchen gothic" is derived from Ellen Moers' definition and discussion of "female gothic" in *Literary Women*, especially Chapter 5, pp. 90-110, and Chapter 7, pp. 122-140.


8 Lowther, *A Stone Diary*, pp. 89-92. Line references for passages quoted are given in the text.

9 Atwood, *Power Politics*, p. 53. Line references are given in the text.

10 *Power Politics*, p. 56. Line references are given in the text.

11 *Two-Headed Poems*, pp. 48-51. Line references are given in the text.

13 *Jericho Road*, pp. 69-106.

14 *Jericho Road*, p. 14. Line references are given in the text.

15 *Jericho Road*, p. 97.


19 The positive tone of the heirloom poem may be related to what Gilbert and Gubar call the woman writer's "anxiety of authorship," which leads women authors actively to seek out precursors to sustain them. See Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 49-53.


29 Lowther, This Difficult Flowering, p. 20.

30 This Difficult Flowering, p. 17.

31 Lowther, Milk Stone, pp. 41-43.


33 See Note 1.

34 Lowther, A Stone Diary, p. 25.

35 Susan Zimmerman, Nothing is Lost (Vancouver: Caitlin, 1980), p. 10.

36 Rosalind MacPhee, Maggie (Toronto: Coach House, 1979), p. 38.

37 Maggie, p. 29, 11. 11-15.


40 Loneliness, p. 25.

41 Loneliness, p. 41.

43 Loneliness, p. 42, 11, 17, 4-6, 19.


45 This is linked, of course, with the substance of Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman (Toronto: McClelland, 1969), whose heroine cannot get the knack of it, either.

46 See Note 2.


48 Lowther, This Difficult Flowering, p. 18.

49 Fox, Dangerous Season, p. 60.

50 Two-Headed Poems, pp. 22-23.


54 Anne Wilkinson, Collected Poems, pp. 94-95, 127-133.

55 Fox, Dangerous Season, pp. 52-54.

56 Dangerous Season, p. 52.

57 Dangerous Season, p. 53.

58 Dangerous Season, p. 54.

59 "Daybooks 1," Two-Headed Poems, p. 29, 4/11. 4-12.


63 Room of One's Own, 3, No. 3 (1977), 26-27.


65 See Note 27, Introduction.


67 MacEwen, Magic Animals, p. 96.

68 Kagawa, Jericho Road, p. 23.

69 For a discussion of the variants of the threat woman see Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 94-95, 520ff., 630ff.

70 Atwood, Two-Headed Poems, pp. 102-106. It is, of course, appropriate that the Old Woman as weaver should appear in a poem about two women sewing.


72 This image is found in Atwood's Power Politics, p. 4:
the woman image left
in cave rubble, the drowned
stomach bulged with fertility,
face a tiny bead, a
lump, queen of the termites.

73 MacEwen, Magic Animals, pp. 88-89, 90.

74 Webb, Selected Poems, n. pag.

75 Claude Levi-Strauss, The Raw & the Cooked:
Introduction to a Science of Mythology, trans. John and

76 D. W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality (New York:
Penguin, 1971). See especially Chapter 5, "Creativity
and its Origins," Chapter 7, "The Location of Cultural
Experience," and Chapter 8, "The Place Where We Live."
Chapter V

The Woman's Body in Poetry, a New Presence: The Effect of Novelty on Genre and Convention

Virginia Woolf, in her essay "Professions for Women," said that one thing she had failed to do, one task remaining for women writers to accomplish was "Telling the truth about my own experiences as a body..." This problem, she continues,

... I do not think I solved; I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful—and yet, they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome.

These words were written half a century ago, yet it is only in the past two decades that women writers have felt free to write about their experiences as bodies.

There is a sense, of course, in which the body is always implicitly present in the poem as the source of speech energy and rhythm; words are felt in the mouth and emerge through the finger ends. But the issue here is the body as expressed experience, as a fiction in the poem: the body as a figure made up of speech. The movement in women's poetry is parallel to the movement in the social milieu in which...
poems are made: from a fiction of absence or self-effacement to a fiction of presence or self-assertion.

The recent appearance of this novelty, the woman's body, in works written by women, can be associated with a current general relaxation of taboos regarding the body and its functions, and with the growth of a substantial literature of description and commentary concerning women's bodies, and written by women. This reclamation is territorial and crucial; the expression in discourse of women's sense of the modes of their own embodiment introduces into literature a presence and an energy which are new.

Up until very recently, as Sheila Rowbotham and Dorothy Smith have pointed out, women have accepted—officially, at least—male definitions of their bodies:

We substitute for our own experience of our genitals, our menstruation, our orgasm, our menopause, an experience determined by men. We are constantly translating our own immediate fragmentary sense of what we feel into a framework which is constructed by men.

... we have a conception of sexuality based on male genital sexuality and of woman's body as deviating from this so that her psychosexual development must be thought of somehow as an attempt to do away with this fundamental defect.
The new literature now being written to redress this situation has either to invent new genres or adapt old modes to new purposes. Margaret Atwood recently identified one new genre, the gynecological novel. There is a corresponding mode in poetry: the gynecological poem or poem series. These are intense, specific modes, possibly transitional, explorations of new territory which will in time be incorporated into a map of a world forever altered by them.

Traditionally in literature, woman's body has been the focus of attention mainly in the various genres associated with erotic poetry. The female form has always represented for heterosexual male poets what Blake called "the lineaments of gratified desire." The challenge to the contemporary woman poet is how to locate herself in relation to this dominantly male discourse. What can she make of the various fictions of her body in the iconography of love? The language of love in literature, its stock of metaphors, its sense of the norm, is masculine; what can she do except imitate, adapt, parody, subvert, or transcend its rhetoric? By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept is a work of great originality because it delineates the range of erotic experience from the point of view of a woman, who takes the "Song of Songs", a fiction central to the male erotic tradition, and forces it to her own purposes;
it is a kind of handbook on how a strong literary tradition can be used by a woman writer in a new way.

Sexuality does not exhaust the possibilities of the body, but it is central to the body as it appears in poetry: the female body in poetry is most often the object of desire, or its converse, disgust. Moreover, female sexuality, from the woman's point of view, is complex and eventful, involving not only the sexual act in its variety, but also ovulation, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, menopause, and possible abortion and hysterectomy: a wealth of potential material.

But this elaboration of female sexuality, the substance of the new poetry of the body now being written by women, is a largely subjective drama, its occasions private, its drama shared with other women rather than with one's lover. The traditional focus of the erotic poem is on the prelude to and the consummation of the act of love. In this tradition, the woman is a figure to be seen; and being seen, to be desired; and once possessed, to be celebrated and displayed for others to see. A woman is valued by men and hence evaluates herself, according to her appearance, her beauty according to the taste of the day, and her clues to how she is seen are the responses of men and the image in her looking glass. The mirror is judgement or reassurance, condemnation or confirmation. As Susan Sontag has said,
To be a woman is to be an actress. Being feminine is a kind of theatre, with its appropriate costumes, decor, lighting, and stylized gestures. From early childhood on, girls are trained to care in a pathologically exaggerated way about their appearance and are profoundly mutilated (to the extent of being unfitted for first-class adulthood) by the extent of the stress put on presenting themselves as physically attractive . . . Beauty, women's business in this society, is the theatre of their enslavement. A woman's preoccupation with her appearance is thought to be not incidental but essential, not morbid but normal. Open defiance of it is something to be marked, an eccentricity. The central contemporary commentary in women's fiction on this complex of attitudes is Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*, but the rejection of the "made-up" mirror image of woman is central also to Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. To Anna, the secondary female character in *Surfacing*, her compact is her soul-keeper; and part of the making over of the woman at the novel's centre is her active rejection of the adman's conception of the attractive woman, a conception mediated to her largely by her mirror, which the heroine turns to the wall. When, after her self-imposed ordeal, she turns the mirror round, what she sees is deliberately contrasted with the manufactured image:
I turn the mirror round: in it there's a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from deep sockets; the lips move by themselves . . . They would never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body, on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bath-mat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centrefold.

To be first and foremost a sight is a limited and limiting self image. Moreover, it condemns women to a very short life, since the span of years during which the mirror provides a conventionally beautiful image is brief; we are all doomed, like Snow White's stepmother, to be supplanted. The identification of women with their mirror image and the anxiety that identification produces are deeply rooted in our society. The destructiveness of the duplicity involved is aptly described in the phrase used by Gilbert and Gubar: the "'killing' of oneself into an art object--the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging, with hair which is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick--." The woman's response is either a complaisant or desperate compliance, or the kind of protest expressed through the heroine in Surfacing.
Beth Jankola's poem series *Mirror/Mirror* devotes itself wittily to the project of undermining the enslavement of woman to the illusion of the self-as-seen. The poems move through various satirical and comic variations on the theme elaborated in "Work of Art":

Loving a woman/ is a work of art/ he said
and woman must be protected
he said gluing/ her doll's head
 to a mirror/ with a black grille
 protecting her/ and at the same time
 locking her up.13

This is political light verse, using cliches and familiar images ironically to reveal the political bias of the noblesse oblige with which women have been treated. Sontag's elaboration of the way in which preoccupation with beauty becomes the theatre of woman's enslavement might well be a gloss on this poem: as long as the doll's head is glued to the mirror, she will be effectively locked up.

Jankola's "Scandalized Mirror" is a comic exposé of the ludicrousness of the inflated image in which traditional rhetoric has entrapped her:
"My Problem" is a satirical piece about the triviality of the endless self-scrutiny to which women are enjoined:

Day after day
I look into the mirror

I still see something new
a new pimple (1-4)

Like the infinite regression of images in the double mirror, the attempt to eradicate all blemishes is endless.

Whimsically, the poet speculates that she has a mobile pimple which simply changes position. The fatuousness of the obsession is summed up in the mock-naive closing lines:

If someone asked me/ what is your problem
I'd have to answer/ it's my skin (14-16)

"FASHION SHOW/30'S CLOTHING/ IVAN DIRECTS/ does he"
is a series of vignettes of models, each one projecting a calculated image, manifesting some version of hauteur or
the hard-to-get. They are, in the language of Courtly Love, "daungereuse," unobtainable, yet sexually provocative. Thus, though the images they project are hard-edged and contemporary, they are linked to the tradition of the "cruel fair": the siren, the saucy bitch, the young gamine, the earth mother/Venus, the daddy's girl—theymime the entire theatre of women as sexually provocative to men.

Yet the question in the title suggests that women are not entirely victims of the sexually stereotyped roles they play, but can use these disguises to embody genuine power of their own. This poem shows how a woman poet can use a male tradition—the classification of women according to their sexual stance—in an original way.

Catherine Wright's "Late Tuesday Evening/Early Wednesday Morning Singing for her Supper" also describes a series of tableaux in which the body of a woman is displayed to be looked at and desired by men. The project of the poem is to deflate the authority of the tradition which conceives of women as things to be looked at, by demonstrating the inauthenticity of that tradition. The strategies are simple: to show the image of the nude woman as recognizing or confronting the male viewer, thus asserting her subjectivity, her existence outside of his fantasy; or to show her identifying with the male viewer and thereby appropriating to herself some of the male power.
Or, let us, say, arrange her as we find Tintoretto's Susanna: not surprised by the Elders, plump and naked in the garden, taking her bath. In one arrange her staring out of the canvas, catching your eye in a look of recognition. In another have her gazing absorbedly into a mirror, partaking of herself as a vision, along with the wicked judges. (14-25)

The mirror-gazing, a traditional motif, suggests female complicity in self-display. As John Berger says, the ostensible role of the hand looking-glass in such tableaux was to represent Vanity, but "The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight." 18 The next stanza describes a self-deluded anorexic, desperate parody of the fashionably desirable woman:

(now she stands unfashionably dressed: a tightly drawn wide belt controls her already too thin centre. Looking into the mirror she does not see the gaunt emaciated figure that she is.

She sees the most beautiful young woman and standing outside the glass she is all maleness and hardness contemplating the seduction of her female self locked within that glass.) (30-40)

This image, the self-destructive extreme of one convention of female beauty, stands outside art, but inside the triadic relation: self: ideal/illusion: mirror.
The next stanza describes the macho image of the jack-booted woman who embodies male sado-masochistic fantasies of sexual encounter. Then comes a condensed version of the image of female breakdown: perhaps the dominant fiction about women in our time.19 Wright presents this version of woman as a dead-end not unlike the others, if anything a half-way house, not a destination:

No, better we arrange her in the puffed-up song of herself, giving her a disease, cerebral or otherwise. Allow her to probe and re-probe her pain, talk of blood and semen and death. Permit her the gesture of madness. (61-71)

The fiction of madness, allowed as a kind of self-display, is part of the enslaving tradition that associates women with abnormality, weakness, and suffering; its self-dramatization is "puffed-up," inflated. It provides an image of woman which, though intended as self-assertion and protest, is all too easily incorporated into the tradition of oppression; indeed, it helps to justify that oppression.

In the final vignette the poet attempts to conjure up an image of woman outside of fictions either imposed or permitted:
Or, suppose we simply
let her be,
dispense with the propositions.
Let her talk of the larger things
that matter.
Allow the I to no longer blossom
in gross obscenity.
Let us finally, say,
not call this anything.

(she is naked, not as they see her,
but as she is) (78-88)

This image, the last of the exempla, cannot be called any-
thing, because it lies outside existing fictions, those
propositions which have hitherto defined women. This
woman who is naked "not as they see her, / but as she is"
is a mystery, a historical novelty, because she is still
outside known categories. "Propositions" has, of course,
a sexual meaning, which accords with the intention of the
poem as manifesto, a rejection of the intellectual and
artistic tradition which viewed women as subject to,
defined by, and schooled to provide comfort and sexual
pleasure for, men.

In the dominant, the male, tradition of erotic poetry;
then, the woman is to be seen; being seen, to be desired;
being desired, to be possessed. There is some evidence,
as the poems cited show, that contemporary women are
rejecting the limiting notion of themselves as primarily
creatures to be seen and judged. In the next stage—posses-
sion or mutual sexual pleasure—the situation is more com-
plex. The genital basis of sexuality sets up paradigms
which determine the occurrence, still, of traditional imagery:
the woman as hollow gourd or vessel; her sexual parts as
garden or flower; her body as besieged, conquered, and
broken in the sexual encounter. But these images are used
by women poets with a difference. And the range and variety
with which contemporary women poets use traditional male
imagery for female sexuality provide an example of how
rhetorical traditions can be taken, changed, and enriched
by women poets.

It has always been true that love is in large part what we say about it; it is modified, sometimes even invented,
by discourse. Even the popularly observed tongue-tiedness
of lovers has been prescribed by a long tradition of dis-
course. Margaret Atwood, with her flair for contemporary
insights and her talent for epigram, has expressed the link
between love and speech:

Holding my arms down
holding my head down by the hair
mouth gouging my face
and neck, groping into my flesh

(Let go, this is extortion,
you force my body to confess
too fast and
incompletely, its words
tongueless and broken)

if I stopped believing you
this would be hate

The occasion of this poem is a sexual act, and its narrative
tells of the woman's being forced, her orgasm incomplete, her
sense of outrage. But the poem is also about language and power; power lies in the hands of those who have the definitions in their mouths. Love is what we say it is, and if one half of the definition of love—the woman's—is made "tongueless and broken," then the idea of love, and therefore the experience of love, will be partial and incomplete. The implications of radically new ways of talking about love are revolutionary, for literature and for life. In another poem Atwood is concerned with changing the metaphors, finding new ways of talking about love:

love is not a profession
   genteel or otherwise

sex is not dentistry
   the slick filling of aches and cavities

you are not my doctor
you are not my cure,

nobody has that
   power, you are merely a fellow/traveller.

It will not be easy; the old discourse is tenacious:

to love is to let go
   of those excuses, habits
   we used once for our own safety

but the old words reappear
   in the shut throat, decree

themselves: exile,
betrayal, failure.
The poem sequence from which these passages are taken traces the movement from the mind's evasions and the body's absence to the mind's tentative and imperilled consent and the body's presence: an arrival which is also a consummation. In "Four Evasions" the speaker is "unable to say how much I want you / unable even to say / I am unable." She is "thinking of my reluctance, why I withdrew / when you came towards me, why did I." Later, the statement is modified:

... it's your surprised body, pleasure I like. I can even say it, though only once and it won't last: I want this. I want this.

The last two poems in the series describe the hard-won consummation of love in traditional sensuous imagery drawn from nature:

... this is the season of peaches
with their lush, lobed bulbs
that glow in the dusk, apples
that drop and rot sweetly, their brown skins veined as glands

No more the shrill voices
that cried Need Need
from the cold pond, bladed and urgent as new grass

Now it is the crickets
that say Ripe Ripe
slurred in the darkness, while the plums
dripping on the lawn outside
our window, burst
with a sound like thick syrup
muffled and slow

The air is still
warm, flesh moves over
flesh, there is no
hurry

And, in the final poem:

History
is over, we take place
in a season, an undivided
space, no necessities

hold us closed, distort
us. I lean behind you, mouth touching
your spine, my arms around
you, palm above the heart,
your blood insistent under
my hand, quick and mortal

This is a love acknowledged, mutual, incarnate, without victim
or victimizer, without the prescriptions of a tradition which
distort love by defining its necessities. The body is named
in the poem only in parts, by synecdoche, but our sense of
its triumphant presence is complete and whole.

Dorothy Livesay is one poet who uses the traditional
figures of love without much transformation or protest; there
is in her early love poems a lyrical intensity which gives
subjective substance to the woman's experience of sexual love
within the bounds of custom. And her lavish gusto and lack
of squeamishness in the pleasure she takes give a new vitality
to a somewhat over-familiar pattern.
In this passage from "The Woman" Livesay's frankness is twentieth-century, but her attitude is traditional, and the central image of breaking is a very old metaphor for the deflowering of a virgin and by extension for the penetration of the woman in the act of love. Her title has the generalizing power of suggesting that the experience described in the poem is archetypally female:

Don't hurry, I might say
when you first enter in
but then the urge takes hold
and it is I who cry
0 hasten, quick untie
the fearful knot of pain
0 hurry hurry on
and down
break me again
(unti1 the bliss begins) 29

"The Taming," too, is a traditional injunction to woman to be submissive and compliant in her response to the male-definition of what it is to "be woman":

Be woman, You did say me, be woman. I did not know
the measure of the words

until the night
when you denied me darkness,
even the right
to turn in my own light.
Do as I say, I heard you faintly
over me fainting:
be woman. 30
In these poems the woman is complaisant, unaggressively eager, expressing from her own point of view how it feels to occupy the woman's place in the traditional scenario of erotic poetry. In "Touching" Livesay shifts her ground to elaborate a strain which is characteristic of love poetry by women in English. Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett, and Elizabeth Smart have all celebrated the experience of love as rebirth, self-discovery, self-completion in union with the other; the self is discovered through the body, in Livesay's poem specifically through the orgasm of the man in her body:

pierce me again
gently
so the penis completing
me
rests in the opening
throbs
and its steady pulse
down there
is my second heart
beating

Each time you come
to touch caress
me
I'm born again
deaf dumb
each time
I whirl
part of some mystery
I did not make or earn
that seizes me
The fiction which shapes this poem is linked to *the suphemism* "a little death" for the sexual act but in Livesay's poem the emphasis is on the rebirth. For whatever reason—perhaps because of the link, for women, between love-making and actual birth—this shift in emphasis is characteristic of women's poetry.

Rebirth and self-discovery can be expressed in terms of transformation. In this next poem by Livesay, the traditional image of a woman's sexual parts as a garden or flower is used to create a fiction of paring down, followed by a transformation which is linked, too, to the iconotropic myths of girls turning into trees:

You left me nothing, when you bared me to the light gently took off my skin undressed me to the bone you left me nothing, yet softly I melted down into the earthly green grass grew between my thighs and when a flower shot out of my unclenched teeth you left me nothing but a tongue to say it with
This floral imagery, being linked with pastoral, is most often benign, but it is used by contemporary women poets with a wide range of tone. Carolyn Zonailo's "Maiden's Complaint" is affirmative and lyrical, but as the title suggests, there is latent in it an undertone of some discontent with the status quo of love, or perhaps with the disposition of the traditional imagery of love:

A gigantic flower grows
from my navel.
I open my thighs
to let the flower of my sex
blossom. Have you tasted homey?

You pluck the petals,
one by one, from my
hidden garden. Ah, lover,

I want to flower inside
you, the way your hand
holds me, a bridal bouquet. 33

The final stanza suggests some ambivalence about the sexual act as deflowering, some longing for mutuality or intactness: a change in the metaphor which would stand for a change in the act of love. Zonailo's poem is at some distance from Livesay's sensuous abandonment to the pleasures of decreation and rebirth. The movement of the fictions in the two poems is an index of the difference. Livesay's poem is a triad of disappearances: the woman is undressed to the bone, reduced to loam and grass, and when, in the final stanza, a "flower shot / out of my unclenched teeth," she is present only by
synechdoche, as a tongue to bear witness to their love. Zonailo's poem moves from flower to a de-petalling, to a cry of longing for intactness and display, which is not a rejection of the act of love, but a wish that it might be more mutual, that its metaphors could be shared.

In Pat Lowther's "Wanting," which also combines the image of her sex as a flower with the image of breaking, the rhetorical distance or contrast between the two images is great, so that the movement of the poem is not narrative, as in Livesay's poem, but dramatic. It expresses a stronger version both of Livesay's luxuriating in being broken and Zonailo's longing:

Wanting
to be broken
utterly
split apart with a mighty tearing
like an apple broken
to unfold
the delicate open veined petal pattern
inside the fruit

I am arrogant
knowing
what I can do
for a man

I am arrogant
for fear
I may be broken
utterly open
and he not see
the flower shape of me.
This mixture of longing, fear, arrogance, and a sense of absolute vulnerability is a complex of feelings which there has been little room or occasion in the tradition for men to express. It is specifically sexual, and it is a new note.

In this poem by Margaret Atwood the tension between the images of sexual love as both breaking and flowering is at its most extreme:

yes at first you
  go down smooth as
  pills, all of me
  breathes you in and then it's

  a kick in the head, orange
  and brutal, sharp jewels
  hit and my
  hair splinters

  fall away from me, no
  threads left holding
  me, I flake apart

  layer by
  layer down
  quietly to the bone, my skull
  unfolds to an astounded flower.

The similarity in the central fiction of paring down, breaking and flowering, and the difference in imagery, diction, and movement, between this poem and Livesay's, is a measure of the range of tone and intention within which traditional erotic images can be used by contemporary women poets.

This poem by Carolyn Zonailo takes the old metaphor of the sexual act, for the man, as a little death and the traditional sinister image of the *vagina dentata* and makes them
new, from the point of view of the woman speaking:

that man going round & round
on the spiral staircase
enters me

as he ascends
he forgets part of himself

as he descends
he finds them again

that man going round & round
frightens me

one moment he will climb
past the balustrade
farther than my eye
can see

lose all those parts of himself:
flesh, bone, spirit

One of the notes in this poem is ambivalence, a half fear
based on a sense of the power of sex, here, its power over
the man; in other poems there is a sense of its generative
power, its power to change a woman's body and her life. The
complexity of this response is most sensitively explored by
Pat Lowther. In "Angel" she says:

I have
opened my thighs to gold,
Have used my lover's sex as a divining rod to the very source
of love which is like many waters
flowing among intricate roots
at the centre of the world.
And I have accepted all that love is, the ruthless hand
in my guts, the rearranging,
breaking and remaking,
the flowing of myself
in tortuous dry channels
over and through rocks . . .
The first part of this passage is a variation on the traditional idea of love as a transforming power. But for the woman there is, besides the transformation, the "rearranging," the ruthless hand in the guts, and it is precisely the exploration of the consequences and range of the sexual act which gives scope and power to much love poetry by contemporary women.

Livesay's "The Descent" is a lyrical manifesto declaring her acceptance of the wholeness of love, including what Lowther elsewhere calls "the warm thick cave of genesis." Livesay's poem is a celebration of a fact about sexual love which St. Augustine commented on with a querulous and fastidious distaste and which Yeats noted with a fascinated disgust: that love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement, that we are born between faeces and urine. Robust rather than squeamish, Livesay swallows this paradox whole, with gusto, and finds in it a recipe for being human:

I enter and am warm
in that dark cave
where mosses swarm
in slime on the rock wall
and water endlessly
registers no time

I have been in that place
of mucous and sweat
semen and swift blood
moon engendered
and I have seen
the toad's cold eye
and touched his coat
and pulled from my body
the after-birth
This fiction of descent into a cave—a comprehensive image of the total availability of the woman's body to her sexuality—is one which Livesay shares with Lowther. In Lowther's earlier poems, the downward movement and the image of the cave are linked with childbirth, which counterbalances their obliterating power. Part II of her "Woman," based on the Biblical idea of the Fall as in part a fall into sexuality, uses "knowledge" in the precise, Biblical sense of sexual intercourse, and elaborates images of descent and gravity, derived from the notion of the Fall:

Knowledge coarsened my flesh
I grew heavy
stumbling down endless flights of stairs

At landfall I clawed
in fear of air I'd marked
with curlicues of flight

Earth and salt sea
rocked between the two
poles of my knees

an omen, for I shrank
into my body and beyond
into the warm thick cave of genesis
Remembering lonely sky I became a slave to the whimpering womb
That hollow mouth that never says enough until too late. 40

In Lowther's later poems the fiction of descent is darkened, and the transformations the woman's body undergoes are not so much a rebirth as a sometimes sinister deformation. The poems cited in Chapter 4 from Lowther's "The Dig" describe women in terms of the gourd image, as ossified emblems, transformed into the shape their sexuality imposed on them. 41 The women are

... finished
completed like fat jars,
like oil floating on water:
breasts bellies faces
all round and calm.

The sexual act in this poem is, for the woman, an act of violence, a "soft explosion / miraculous as rain" which breaks and remakes their bodies. Its pleasure is "terrible":

... the flesh stamen
bursting inside them
splayed their bones
apart like spread legs. (41-44)

The anguished choric commentary asks:

Will our bones tell
sisters, what we died of?
how love broke us
in that hopelessly desired
breaking, and men
and children ransacked our flesh,
cracking the innermost bones
to eat the morrow. (45-52)
Her sinister "The Last Room" describes the dead-end transformation of the woman into the hollow sexual vessel, the gourd. There is resignation in the poem; she has reached the lower limits of gravity; the long fall is over:

I am smooth as a gourd
without resistance
my shape spreads
downward
seeking the lowest
centre of gravity

... ...

I am green as a gourd
but inside I am red

I am becoming a red hollow skin
a gourd for drinking
only now do I recognize
shards patterning the dust
between my legs

they are my former skins

Here, the image of peeling away, paring down, which Livesay and Atwood used about the woman in the act of love, becomes reductive, destructive. The poem is informed with a sense of radical loss, a numbed and almost objective quiescence.

The diagram of sexuality underlying Lowther's poems is traditional; even the dominant images—hollow vessel, miraculous rain, garden, conquered city—are traditional. But the focus, range, and tone are contemporary. Her vision of woman's sexuality is double: on the one hand, it deforms her and breaks her asunder, destroys her; on the other, it—
corresponds to an ineradicable craving; she is an eager accomplice in her own undoing—it is "hopelessly desired." By infusing a woman's voice and perspective into a traditional frame, Lowther transforms the entire tradition.

Elizabeth Brewster, in her sequence of love poems in *In Search of Eros*, gives irony and a fine edge to her cool, wry adaptations of traditional motifs. The series is tenderly and humorously elegiac, because her lover is old, and perhaps also because the sequence is a wry tribute to a waning literary mode, the cycle of love poems. Her body appears most explicitly in the first poem, not in its own lineaments, but obliquely in literary analogies or conceits, which arise out of the tradition of erotic poetry and make gentle fun of it:

Your hand, which has written these poems that I read in the spring evening, has also traced poems on my flesh. The inside of my mouth has flowered into lyrics; my breasts are rhymed couplets; my belly is smoothed to a sonnet; and the cave of my body is a found poem.

This poem is a half lyrical, half ironic commentary on the erotic poem, specifically the blazon, which itemizes the beloved's beauteous parts. In this instance, she is writing the poem herself, which is part of the fun. The fact that her body, throughout the series, is present only by synech-
doche, in fragments, places her poems centrally in the tradition, which tended to dismember the woman's body in verse, focussing on it piece-meal: an eyebrow here, the dimple of an elbow there:

We make love in the afternoon
with the curtains closed.
cars drive past the window.
a car door slams below us.
Someone is walking down the hotel corridor
knocking on doorways.
We hold our breath till whoever it is goes past.
Your hand rests motionless
on my bare shoulder.
I trace with one finger
the curve of your left eyebrow.

Brewster works by placing herself in the tradition and at the same time distancing herself from its conventions through irony and change in point of view: it is the woman who speaks.

But, as Lowther's and Livesay's poems make clear, there is more to woman's sexuality than the act of making love, and it is precisely this range of experience which leads women poets to go beyond the adaptation or subversion of the traditional language and forms of erotic poetry, to the invention of new genres: in this instance, the gynecological poem. in women's erotic poetry, the woman experiences her body in pleasure or violation, as she receives her lover, as she is perceived by him. The fictions which sustain erotic poetry tend, naturally, to be of mutuality, of not always songs of deep accord. It is significant, and related to gynecological
poetry, that for women the sexual act involves re-birth rather than, as for men, a little death; and that implicit or anticipated procreation is often present, for a woman poet, in the erotic poem.

The gynecological genre is a varied exploration, a self-exploration, of the woman's body as interior. Women are bound to be interested in their interiors, because such momentous events occur there, and because women's bodies are available and vulnerable as men's are not: women can be entered. In the gynecological mode, the woman's body is rendered not as it is seen, but as it is experienced, subjectively, and as it functions or is acted upon: at its most powerful and ordained, in childbirth, and at its most vulnerable, in abortion.

The fact that it is now possible for women poets to write about abortion is related to the undermining of decorum which is characteristic of twentieth-century literature, and, recently, to social conditions which have made women realize that they have an actual presence and a potential power in the world. Certain aspects of female sexuality have traditionally been taboo in literature except in the euphemisms or smut of popular modes like music-hall songs, barrack-room ballads, and the genres associated with pornography which, though it occasionally is accepted into the canon, usually drifts in the demi-monde of the sub-literary. Only in the
last decade, for example, have specific taboos relating to female sexuality been crossed in poetry.

The relative abundance of contemporary poems about abortion suggests that woman's body, so long excluded from poetry except as described by men, has flung itself with violence into literature. It seems clear, too, from the love poems cited, that women still experience their bodies as vulnerable: in rape or sexual assault, as Pat Lowther's later poems attest, and perhaps definitively in abortion, with its traditional and lingering atmosphere of risk.

The abortion poem—or, as is often the case, poem series—seems to provide a focus for a sense of outrage and waste as well as vulnerability. Since abortion is a problematical event, fraught with moral and psychological dilemmas, involving a complex range of emotions, a number of literary modes can be adapted to the genre: the ordeal narrative, the lament, the manifesto. There is a public and even political aspect to the abortion experience, and a sense of shared ordeal. Abortion, too, has a long underground history; it links generations of women in whispered, covert advice or expertise. In this, it only takes to an extreme the status, or lack of status, granted to what women do and know. One of their most secret acts, often forbidden, always dangerous, for women abortion is a paradigm of risk and waste.
Cathy Ford's "Riding" is a terse, episodic narrative of an abortion. The ironic parallel on which the poem is balanced, suggested in the title "Riding," becomes clear as the poem proceeds:

```
go to the doctor
  now
young lady
put your feet in the stirrups
used to ride a horse
when you were
loved your best friend
like sunshine
stallion (40-48)
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The poem moves on to a brutally straightforward catalogue of possible solutions, and by means of this unadorned, pragmatic list, a sense of shared ordeal is conveyed:

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  attempts include
  corrosive liquids
  introduced into the vagina
  pill overdose
  high-powered vacuums
  inserted into the womb
  and turned on
  paralysis
  stomach pump
  inside-out uterus
  death
  the dog quiet spirit
  desperation (73-85)
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These stratagems rejected, the poem moves toward the ordeal scene, with its brutal surprises:

```
vomiting
  in a grotesque high-ceilinged auditorium
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no one told you it would feel like this
scraped the inside of your belly
with a dull knife
cold steel
sending sparks off woman stone
no one said it would feel like this
the final humiliation

... ...
if you could stand straight
you would

... ...
no one could say it would be this
fire in a dead womb  (101-102, 110-118, 133-134)

Ford uses the unembellished pared-down rhetoric of contemporary poetry to convey a desolation and anguish made more poignant through understatement. Though the poem reaches out implicitly to a community of women, it remains a personal narrative: spare, minimal, with a trace of lyrical commentary.

Joy Kagawa's "Dear Euclid" sequence, though it begins as an impressionistic personal narrative of a journey, using the convention of dated diary entries to carry the story, quickly develops in a variety of modes: an argument with the self; a reflective passage about the meaning of birth and death; an ode to the never-to-be-born child; a lament. She uses parallels from various fictions, mostly Biblical, and a technique which is lavish and expressionistic in its expansive, dream-like conflation of images. It is not, like Ford's poem, a
reflective monologue, and its focus is not so pointedly on
the body of the woman undergoing the ordeal. The poem talks
around the experience, trying to find a resolution. The
project of the poem-series is to find out ways of imagina-
tively containing the devastation of the experience.

I am an Eskimo mother pursued by starving
Beasts by night and howling blizzard
And I abandon you, here, here, in the
White numbing coldness, your face I dare not
Look at for an instant longer, you are
Dead before you are alive and I don't know how
My limbs move when it is I
Should lie there with you, the foreign judge
Proclaiming my guilt and calling me
Murderer but my legs only frostbitten
Move on, stumbling in the perpetual winter
(74-84)

In this passage the woman's body is projected into a meta-
phorical situation which attempts to explain her desperate
act and the chilled stasis in which she now dwells because
of it. She flings off metaphors like swaddling clothes to
protect her destroyed almost-child:

Is this my child drowning in a
Fiery sea this sudden tidal wave
This rush of mud over Pompeii
Can you hear the rushing Child, this world
Is not for you, nor you not yet, for it.
(118-122)

The poet then imagines, in a kind of parody of a lullaby,
that the abortion is a safe-keeping, a protection of the
potential child from the corruption of arguments, schools,
newspapers:
newspapers:

Baby baby it is finished now
But stay with me stay in this
Perfect world let me keep you
Alive let me hold you warm
Body let me baby keep you
From the arguments this time, the schools, the,
Newspapers it's a friendly woods we
Walk in on grass soft as quilts
We are together in this deep soft trap
This well, this long falling I
Tripped the latch with my own hand (127-137)

But the pastoral dream in which this passage begins turns
to other versions of the dominant metaphor of sacrifice:

I have not stumbled I have rushed
Headlong towards the breakers
Carrying you tossing you from cliffs
I have burnt you on many altars
Offered you to the village elders
For their evening meals, my ran-child,
My Issac without a saving God--
Where did you go so quickly were you so
Uninsistent on life you died so easily
Could you not have fought a little at the oven door
Performed a mere Daniel in a den

... You were
A small fish struggling for three minutes
On the prongs of a well aimed hook
(128-134, 148-151, 165-167)

The series ends in a kind of reconciliation to the loss:

There are patterns more hidden than our patterning
Deaths more lasting than our murdering
There are celebrations still in the surety of death
And more resurrections than I have known.
(182-185)

Very different from Ford's narrative, Kagawa's sequence
grapples in a variety of modes with the meaning of the exper-
ience of abortion, the emphasis shifted away from the woman undergoing the bodily ordeal and toward the child, the world, the moral dilemma.

Janis Rapoport's "Abortion" is one in a series of poems moving through abortion to renewed pregnancy to stillbirth to a new, promising pregnancy. The series explores all the facets of the gynecological genre except the actual birth. The prelude to the sequence is "Pregnancy Test," a kind of twentieth-century occasional poem:

Predicted reaction on plated glass
confirms a life inside mine
too petitably comacular
although the heart
has already begun its embryonic beat . . .
(1-5)

The containing form Rapoport uses is traditional: the circle or ring of poems, which ends where it begins. But if the rhetorical frame is old, the poems, which render episodes in the gynecological history of women, are new.

As in Cathy Ford's poem, there is in "Abortion" an element of shocked surprise:

let them vacuum you
out of this, my body
as though you were a circle of hardened dirt;
first they spread the
light blue thighs,
razor away the slightest hair
and then the polished clamps can proceed with their
whiteness:
a translucent and speedy phallic syringe.
They didn't explain this part before, pain that anaesthetically should not happen as you emerge two inches long maybe curled in warm liquid already sucking your thumb and struggling

In Rapoport's poem, as in Kagawa's, there is a strong sense of collusion and guilt in relation to the abortion; and the woman's body, as in Ford's poem, is described as the object of technological violence, which the woman experiences as a kind of outrage: in the abortion poems, a monstrous addition to her suffering, and in birth poems, an incongruous intrusion. In the fourth poem, "Letter to an Obstetrician," she says:

> What has happened that the born cannot be born when ready and that you have to stimulate the uterine the first and subsequent contractions with intravenous punctures and vicious piercings of the sac?

> Rather I were alone on a wooden bed a patch of dry land would do to join the urgent ecstasy itself a barrier to pain (16-25)

In "Transition" the violence is explicit:

> Electroded onto a narrow table slung into the largest elasticated size they are monitoring me and you inside me still your heart the intensity the hurt
and they say
stay on your back, lady
otherwise the machine--
and I scream
and tear the metal
from my belly, bleed
through the restrictions
and I cry and scratch and tear
on my side on my head
and I crouch no breath is left no breath
to reverse the darkness of the blood
prelude to your birth

The "still" in line 5 of this poem is premonitory: the next brief poem ends "stillborn." The poem following is an occasional poem written on the anniversary of the birth/death of the stillborn Sara, which coincides with a lecture the poet attends on genetic engineering. The poem is a reflection on and a rejection of "genetic engineering/ genetic surgery, genetic warfare / sperm banks / transplant of eggs / . . . cloning chromosomes / synthetic placentae": all this discussed by a "semi-superman" who, though mystified by a simple death, the death of her child in birth, yet insists on experiments with mutations. The revulsion against the technology of modern obstetrics which the earlier poems expressed is here enlarged to a dismay at and a rejection of the abstracting habit of mind which persists in tampering with and doing violence to life. The final poem, "For the first Sara, Erev Yom Kippur 5773," is an elegy for the still-born Sara and a looking forward to a new birth: 
Tomorrow
it is permitted
they will let me mourn,

... ... 

Today
my belly swollen with
Sara reincarnate
I return ... (1-3, 8-11)

Love-making and giving birth are the orgasmic peaks of woman's gynecological experience. The first has been analysed and celebrated through a long tradition of poetry which women have adapted and augmented. The second is new to poetry and is being written into literature through the adaptation of received modes, the most obvious being the occasional poem of celebration. Pat Lowther's exuberant and tender "Touch Home" is such a poem: 57

My daughter, a statistic
in a population explosion
exploded
popped
out of my body like a cork.

The doctors called for oxygen,
the birth too sudden, violent,
the child seemed pale

But my daughter lay
in perfect tranquillity
touching the new air

with her
elegant hands

Gail Fox's "Memory of Birth," a celebration in the form of an ode, bears out our sense that in childbirth the focus is shifted away from the mother's body and toward the child: 58
My boy, my boy,
your beauty stunned me,
your tenacious mouth
on my breast gave me
joy replacing the pain
we shared, your head
poking out and yelling
while your body waited,
quickening with life
in the dark constrictions
of my body. (1-11)

Childbirth is so manifestly the central event of
regeneration in our lives that it is possible to imagine
a literature in which it becomes the crucial metaphor for
renewal. In Pat Lowther's posthumous "Doing It Over,"
childbirth is such a metaphor. 59 The poem has the lovely
dailiness of domestic poetry, together with an authentic
but unpretentious reach to the circumferences of our
lives and its larger gestures are earned by the vivid
specifics with which it begins:

Once we've had babies
we can't stop
dreaming them; sound asleep
we grow moon bellies,
relive the hospital rituals,
astonish ourselves with
blue-eyed children,
small-animated mouths.

The act itself, the orgasm
of delivery
is missed; some things
no dream can recreate.
(But I didn't want anaesthetic!
I cry, dead asleep.)
Our arms keep remembering
the cradle shape,
the breasts heavy again,
the milk prickling in
to the glands
(My mother at 65
after the surgeon took
half her stomach
woke up and asked
Is the baby all right?)

All our lives
swelling and germinating
in our dreams, we may
be more like plants
than we thought:
apple trees can't
forget the seasons

nor can we ever
be done with newness
but make our beginnings
over and over again
in the roots of ourselves,
in the dark
between our days.

Lowther's earlier "May Chant" is a kind of prelude to
birth, celebrating it as an affirmation of life and whole-
ness, a negation of the hierarchy of condoned, ritualized
suffering enshrined in male history and mythology:

May
and I squat in labour

crying the child Come down
Surely I am only
a partway-unwound

spiral of bloody cord
crying the child Come down

from his male cross
and the others and others
before him

...
Come down
to the roots of things
and I . . . will
in the darkness of germination
stealthily gather
his scattered members
and bind them whole
(1-10, 27-33)

In this poem, the woman squatting in labour, calling the child to be born, is calling also for an end to the killing of sons by their fathers in war or sacrifice. The poem is thus a manifesto enclosed in an invocation. Carolyn Zonailo's "War Poem" expresses the same idea in a deliberately diagrammatic manner. Rhetorically, her poem is a simplification of the kind used in demonstration-instruction sessions, and therefore the woman's body is present in it only by synecdoche, through the naming of the womb as emblem of nurture, opposed to destruction:

This is a war poem.
The bodies in it are blasted
all over the page
arms, legs torn off
at the sockets
guts spilling untidily
over your clean
white mind

This is a war poem.
The rhythms in it
are sung from a fractured
culture
like an anachronism.

This is a war poem.
Men have made it
and lived it
and breathed its barbarian glory.
This is a womb.
Women have carried it
inside them
to breed new heroes.

This war poem could
become a womb
and in it
we could all,
poet and reader
and war monger,
curl up together
and be born
again
and again
and again.

Zonailo's poem gives a political, historical dimension to
the motif of Lowther's "Doing it Over": childbirth as an
image of the renewals which sustain our lives and make it
possible for us to move into a future.

Outside the erotic tradition, in which a woman's body
is either beautiful or ugly, desirable or undesirable, the
woman's body has traditionally been perceived as on the one
hand powerful, on the other fragile: powerful in childbirth,
fragile in its--to men--mysterious gynecological rhythms and
its vulnerability to violence. In Zonailo's "Heritage," in
which the naked bodies of women are centre-stage, sub-
versive instruments of political power, their robustness and
their frailty are brought together in one image:

on the deck
lying nude
I remember
there's a tradition
of walking naked
in my history
doukhobor women, who lacking horses
or oxen
harnessed themselves to the plow
pulled a beast's burden
to break new land

know the power of their body
break rules of government
by stripping their clothes
their faith
as 'spirit-fighters'
sure as their borsch-fed buttocks

and yet
something is frail about
those women
of my heritage
walking naked in protest

their flesh unlike any machine
or weapon

The physical power of these women is evidenced not by childbirth, but by their pulling plows like beasts of burden. The subversive power of their nakedness arises out of the tradition of decorum which states that the only legitimate reason for female nudity is sexual congress with men and that they should otherwise cover their bodies. The R. C. M. P. men could only avert their eyes and hand the women blankets. Their vulnerability is the vulnerability of any naked human body, male or female, against a machine or weapon, a fragility contrasted with the sturdiness of the women in the poem, whose strength fitted them for both kinds of labour but who are not battle-ready. Their tactics, and the transient success of those tactics, are an implicit commentary on history, at the centre of which is the human body destroyed again and again and again.
The image set up against this, in Zonailo's "War Poem," is an emblem of a community of bodies engaged in perpetual rebirth. It is an emblem which goes counter not only to history but to a social decorum which prescribes that we should apologize for accidentally touching one another.

The body as surface is a sensitive, elaborate, extended organ of touch; and in Pat Lowther's early sequence The Insider: A Poem for Voices it is a woman's voice who states the case for the body as a means of communion:

> Why are we so afraid of touch? - the pursed fingers dipping, tapping the bloodstream; women breaking like bread, men become more than a blunt prong become a subtle needle probing a cloudy vein before-speech; even the slow slide forehead to forehead of other than lovers. Why is the shell more dear than those rich minglings?

And "The single voice," which is not identified with either sex, replies, expressing the hope that woman as poet can sing out of her body, can bring her body with her into poetry:

Listen I grow my song and self huge and branching carelessly, complex and infinitely casual. Listen I only know my body is warm and my singing extends it, my warm self grows with my song. I squat and sing and grow easily outward.
Study the serpent
who stretches in the spring
and sloughs the dead constricting skin
from eyelids,
breathing pores,
and all his parts;
who led us naked and confident
to all touch. 65

In this poem, the image of the paring down of the body
through the sloughing off of skins is used not in the
sinister, diminishing manner of Lowther's "The Last Room,"
but to suggest renewal and new vision. Woman as body and
woman as poet are one, squatting, as in childbirth; singing
the body into the song; leading us "naked and con-
fident / to all touch."

The final poem of Carolyn Zonailo's sequence "The
Dreamkeeper" combines the image of the cave of genesis of
Livesay's and Lowther's poems with the image of the shed-
ding of layers of skin, which we found in Livesay, Atwood,
and Lowther, into a composite which the poet calls "the
desired image": 66

I stay overnight
beside these dry rocks,
sleep in the hollow basin
near the blood stream.

Here's the wolf's carcass:
I taste her milk, such
blood from her nipples.
The snake I wanted to kill
began to love me:
my body smells like shed
skin. I wait until

blood dries in thin brown
strips on my legs, then bury

my clothes, the amulets of love
I carried with me. When I descend

from the mountain, I walk
naked into a morning of light

where there are no dreams. 67

These images of arrival, integration, and renewal are only
part of the many guises in which the woman's body is written
into contemporary poetry, but the woman/poet's body whole
and warm and singing does balance those other images of the
woman dismembered, ransacked, explored by sharp instruments
and worn to the bone. Nicole Brossard has spoken of the
necessity, for women, of "Making visible and consistent the
fictional matter of our bodies before it is too late." 68

This urgent enterprise is being carried out in the poems
discussed in this chapter. Gail Fox writes of imagining
"a village where the body has a place." 69 If the absence
of woman's body from literature was a kind of murder by
convention and syntax, her presence in contemporary poetry
is a birth through new conventions, changes in syntax and
pronoun. It is no longer necessary to imagine a literature
in which woman's body has a place. It exists, in its
beginnings, now.
Notes

Chapter V


2 The Death of the Moth, p. 241.


8 Elizabeth Smart, By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept (Toronto: Popular Library, 1966).


11 Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Toronto: McClelland, 1972), p. 190.


13 Beth Jankola, Mirror/Mirror (Vancouver: Caitlin, n. d.), n. pag.

14 Mirror/Mirror, n. pag.

15 Mirror/Mirror, n. pag.

16 Mirror/Mirror, n. pag.


19 The literature of emotional breakdown by women, based as it is on received notions of the emotional vulnerability of women, does not play an important part in poetry written by contemporary Canadian women, who are supported by a tradition of emotionally robust women writers. It is however exemplified in recent poetry in Heather Spears' From the Inside (Fredericton: Fiddlehead, 1972) and Miriam Mandel's Lions at her Face (Edmonton: White Pelican, 1973).

20 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage-Random, 1980). I. Foucault argues that discourse defining sexuality and also prescribing the necessity of talking about it has been used for political purposes throughout recent European history.
21 Atwood, You Are Happy, p. 55, 11. 1-11.


23 "Four Evasions," You Are Happy, pp. 77-78, 11. 16-22.

24 "Four Evasions," 11. 6-8.


26 "There is only one of everything," You Are Happy, p. 92, 11. 21-25.

27 "Late August," You Are Happy, p. 93, 11. 3-22.

28 "Book of Ancestors," You Are Happy, pp. 94-95, ii, 11. 9-18.


33 Carolyn Zonailo, Split Rock (Vancouver: Caitlin, 1979), n. pag.

34 Lowther, Milk Stone, p. 46.

35 Atwood, Power Politics, p. 22, 11. 1-16.
36 Zonailo, "Jacob's Ladder," Auto-da-Fe, n. pag.

37 Lowther, This Difficult Flowering, pp. 25-26, 11. 20, 22-32.

38 Lowther, Milk Stone, p. 42, 1. 12.

39 Dorothy Livesay, Ice Age (Erin, Ont.: Porcepic, 1975), p. 58.

40 Lowther, Milk Stone, p. 42.

41 Lowther, A Stone Diary, p. 91, 11. 7-11.

42 Lowther, Milk Stone, pp. 44-45, 11. 3-6, 13-21.

43 Brewster, In Search of Eros, pp. 11-20. The poems are not designated as a sequence, but in the reading they make up a sequence.

44 "Poems for Your Hands," In Search of Eros, p. 11.


46 See Note 6 for this chapter.


50 Janis Rapoport, Jeremy's Dream, pp. 35-42.

51 Jeremy's Dream, p. 35.

52 Jeremy's Dream, p. 36.

53 Jeremy's Dream, p. 38.

54 Jeremy's Dream, p. 39.


56 Jeremy's Dream, p. 42.

57 Lowther, Milk Stone, p. 40.

58 Fox, Dangerous Season, p. 50.


60 Lowther, This Difficult Flowering, p. 8.

61 Zonailo, Auto-da-Fe, n. pag.

62 Auto-da-Fe, n. pag.

63 Lowther, This Difficult Flowering, pp. 37-42.

64 This Difficult Flowering, p. 41, 11. 13-25.


69. Gail Fox, "Body and Village," *God's Odd Look* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976), n. pag.
Harold Bloom ventures, in a passage peripheral to his main argument in *A Map of Misreading*, to speculate:

I prophesy though that the first true break with literary continuity will be brought about in generations to come, if the burgeoning religion of Liberated Women spreads from its clusters of enthusiasts to dominate the West. Homer will cease to be the inevitable precursor, and the rhetoric and forms of our literature then may break at last from tradition.1

Bloom's sybilline utterance has the elegiac tone of the perhaps premature lament of a self-defined belated man. The foregoing study is intended as a partial demonstration, through texts chosen from the writing of contemporary Canadian women poets, not that the rhetoric and forms of our literature have broken from tradition, as Bloom fears they may, but that they are being radically modified by women poets who are questioning, changing, and thus renewing the tradition. The fact that women poets and critics are also now rediscovering and defining the hitherto submerged, but increasingly visible tradition that links women writers means of course that there will be precursors other than Homer, with possibly momentous consequences for poetry; but there has been and will continue to be a sharing of precursors across the lines of gender. Given the tenacity of
linguistic and literary conventions, it seems likely that the rhetoric and forms of our literature will not be abandoned, but transformed.

It is entirely possible that a new poetics or critical system based on an affective/expressive aesthetic might be devised in the light of the shifting of precursor from Homer to, say, Sappho. Even now feminist theorists of style and genre and defining such modes as bavardage (natter) and litany as genres which might have a place in such an aesthetic. The present study has been pragmatic and exploratory in its approach, defining new genres, and the modification of old genres, as they are discovered in the actual practice of women poets. My premises, stated in the introduction, that the making of literature is an act of imitation with variation; that its conventions are tenacious and coercive in a practical sense; and that women poets have always had and still have a special relation to the dominant tradition, set the stage for an exploration, through specific texts, of how the practice of contemporary women poets is changing and enlarging the nature and scope of poetry. The nets I have cast are wide, and could have been refined in a variety of ways. An entire chapter could have been devoted to the iconography of love, how women poets expropriate it, reject it, transform it, laugh at it, reinvent it. The relation of women poets to fictions of madness and emotional
breakdown—both the precedents for such fictions and the contemporary fascination with them—might have merited a chapter. I chose to deal with these matters peripherally, in the context of larger concerns.

Chapter I is concerned with the orientation or crisis poem because it defines the threshold and the crossing of the threshold; moreover, there exists a tradition of exercises in this genre by women poets, a tradition engendered by the problematical relation of the woman poet to her poetic vocation. In the orientation poem, the potential woman poet insinuates herself, through the modification of old fictions or the invention of new, into the definition of poet, and is thereafter freed to write poetry with some sense of legitimacy, instead of hiding behind fictions of concealment, impairment or diminution. The fact that these very fictions, related as they are to the problematical in a woman's sense of her vocation as poet, can be the subject of poetry of considerable beauty and excitement—an excitement engendered by a sense of predicament—points to the tension which gives vitality and interest to women's poetry in general. Though one may lament the passing of the problematical from the orientation poem, as women become more secure in the authority of authorship, one can rest assured that the problematical, in one form or another, will always be with us, and will in its turn inspire poetry which
projects the tension of the effort to contain conflicting fictions.

In terms of the scope of this study, what can be observed in women's poetry is a shared enterprise directed toward novelty: in the first chapter, the adaptation of traditional fictions of the woman-as-poet and a search for muse figures adequate to the felt predicament of the woman as poet; in the second, the subverting of canonical versions of classical story through irony of tone, shift in point of view, focus on a neglected part of the received version of a story, telling of an uncanonical version, or turning to pre-hellenic fictions like the legend of Inanna; in the third, the discovery, in available versions of west coast Indian lore, of personae, forms, and occasions which provide fictions particularly suited to women poets; in the fourth, the adaptation of a wide range of traditional genres—the conversational poem, the love poem, the epistle, the ordeal narrative—and the invention of one new genre—kitchen gothic—to create a place in literature for the presence of the domestic; in the fifth, once again the adaptation of traditional genres—love poem, manifesto, celebration—and the invention of a new genre, the gynecological poem or poem series. As might be expected, it is in these last two areas, dealing with the domestic—a relative novelty in poetry—and with woman's body—an absolute novelty in poetry by women—
that new genres have emerged. Here, too, is found a significant shifting of focus, of who speaks and from where: the voice from the hitherto silent partner in the diagram of sexual love, and the voice from kitchen or nursery, speaking as someone with authority, at the centre of life, rather than, at its periphery.

Particularly during the contemporary period of innovation and change, it seems premature to define too rigorously the scope and nature of women's poetry. The danger of creating new constraints and confinements, new inhibiting and restricting romances out of the fictions found in women's poetry, should not be underestimated, since they could result in new prescriptions, new kinds of bondage. There is an analogous danger in premature critical codifications. They can be a way of co-opting and undermining the subversive power of innovation. Unless theoretical categories remain tentative and provisional, they can become in turn ways of falsely assimilating the new into the schema of the old.

Louise Bernikow has commented that

... a woman poet, authentic and in rebellion, is subversive of standard economic, political, social, artistic, and psychic orders.

Why is this so? Because the world as we live in it is defined by discourse, by the stories we tell about it and about ourselves and one another, and women's hitherto
unheard share of that telling—to use Laura Riding's term—both completes the half world of man's telling, and subverts and undermines the inevitably half false half-truths of his versions. And as women's telling is granted a status of some legitimacy, the polarities observed to be characteristic of women's writing may well turn out to have more to do with the stratagems, duplicities, and absences enjoined by social and hence literary prescriptions than with the fact of gender.

One note is consistently absent from the poetry of contemporary women, as it is consistently present in the poetry of contemporary men: the elegiac tone, centred in a sense of irrevokeable loss and a mood of resigned melancholy. Harold Bloom's entire theory of poetic misprision, beautiful and valuable though it may be, is informed with this tone of elegy, and is based on the critical concept of belatedness. Critical theory, like poetry, is always overdetermined by a situation which may find intellectual and ideological expression in discourse, but which has its roots in a personal existential and historical situation. Bloom may feel belated, at the end of a long and waning tradition, burdened with the achievements of precursors. Women writers do not feel this way; nerves by their rediscovery of precursors, they are moving into novelty; sustained by the achievement of women writers before them, they
are rendering new versions of possible realities. And this
enterprise does not go on in isolation, but feeds into the
whole culture of words. Suzanne Lamy has said:

All real creativity comes from the margins, the confines of our cul-
ture. And to-day it is women who are the source of the renewal and
creativity in writing. It is writing by women which is forcing
men to redefine their relationship to language.6
Notes

Conclusion

1 Harold Bloom, A Map of Misreading, p. 33.


4 Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 48-49.


6 Simon, p. 7.
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