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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Barbara Alice Templeton entitled "A Feminist Theory of Poetics." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

B. J. Leggett
B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

William H. Shum

Marilyn Kalut

Betsy C. Postow

Accepted for the Council:

Cwminkel
Vice Provost
and Dean of The Graduate School

A FEMINIST THEORY OF POETICS

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ABSTRACT

Many critics have argued that modern poetry is most comprehensively understood as an expansion rather than a rejection of the romantic tradition. Simply stated, their claim is that the romantic lyric, in which the mode of perceiving rather than the perception itself is the central subject of the poem, remains the dominant form in modern and post-modern poetry. In general, contemporary poetry also presents itself as an act of the mind encountering and evaluating the external world. As a poetic movement influenced by feminist thinking, contemporary women's poetry grounds itself in the romantic tradition while deviating from it in ways that indicate a difference in poetic theory. By retaining the romantic conception of the poem as an act of the mind privately making meaning, but also continually acknowledging that the formation of that "mind" consists of a complex web of social, cultural, and political facts and values, contemporary women poets both enlarge romantic poetic theory and criticize its tendency toward isolationism and idealism.

An analysis of poems and essays by Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Carolyn Forché, Olga Broumas, and Cathy Song reveals that poets influenced by feminist thinking define the poem more specifically as an act of the mind in dialogue with itself and with the outer world. The power of the dialogue relation, in which the separation of subject from object is undermined, is a common theme in women's poetry, and the dialogue structure often serves as a formal design for women's

poems. Since by definition the dialogue is opened, women poets view the poetic experience and the dialogic relation it makes possible as tools for exposing culturally legitimated delusions of determinism, whether these be aesthetic, philosophical, or political closures of meaning. For women poets, then, poetry is not only capable of transforming the individual but also crucial in revising social ideologies. Finally, through their poetry these women poets define the poem as an act of the feminist informed mind breaking through self-imposed and culturally-disposed barriers in order to renew itself and society.

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of the women's movement has failed to challenge a charter assumption of bourgeois literature: the notion that literature in general and poetry in particular exist for the expression of the private, individual, and the subjective element in supposedly universal human experience. Recognizing through the movement that our "personal" experiences are in fact shared with other women, we have proudly asserted their authenticity as subjects of poetry. But we also learn through the movement that our oppression has a social basis and an eventual social remedy, and that knowledge is also part of how we experience our lives. It is this larger aspect, especially as it affects the internal dynamics of the movement, that feminist poetry has, by and large, been unable to accommodate.¹

Lillian S. Robinson, 1977

In tracing the themes common to various examples of women's poetry in her essay "The Keen Eye . . . Watching: Poetry and the Feminist Movement," Lillian S. Robinson acknowledges that she assumes the existence of an as yet unarticulated feminist theory of poetics that would identify particular poems as "feminist" works. Having assumed such a theory, chosen her examples, and discussed their feminist themes, Robinson draws the conclusion, quoted above, that women's poetry has so far not been able to break away from traditional conceptions of the private boundaries of poetry and therefore has not adequately incorporated feminist social experience into poetry. In short, Robinson laments that feminist poetry has generally failed to merge effectively the poetic and the political.

¹Lillian S. Robinson, "The Keen Eye . . . Watching: Poetry and the Feminist Movement," in Sex, Class, and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 254-309.

However, it is more likely that the failure Robinson attributes to women's poetry itself lies instead in the absence of a feminist theory of poetics. For while the term "poetic theory" suggests an explanation of a particular strategy of writing poetry and a particular understanding of the origins and stages of the poetic process, a poetic theory also provides a strategy of reading; it not only explains what the poet requires of the poem but also what the poem requires of the reader. Thus it is possible that an articulation of a feminist theory of poetics would redress the failure Robinson describes by revealing a way of reading women's poetry that does indeed challenge the "charter assumption of literature," without dispensing with or even reducing the traditionally over-emphasized subjective element within the poetry. A feminist way of reading might be able to recast private experience in the social context in such a way that the "poetic" cannot be divorced from the "political" unless the poem is read from an exclusive, diminutive perspective. While Robinson may be justified in faulting some women's poetry for portraying feminist consciousness too narrowly, the failure of other women's poetry to express feminist experience comprehensively may not lie only in the poetry itself, but also in our (the readers') misunderstanding of the feminist poetic experience and our role in it, even in our refusal to let go of familiar, traditional responses to poetry. An articulation of a feminist theory of poetics that conveys feminist ways of reading, as well as writing, could provide

a bridge into a broader context that would enable us, as readers, to deepen the political, feminist implications of women's poetry.

My intention here is to define a feminist theory of poetics by analyzing selected essays and volumes of poetry by five contemporary American women poets--Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Carolyn Forché, Olga Broumas, and Cathy Song. I have chosen these poets, all of whom have received some critical recognition, because their poetry achieves the kind of private and social inclusiveness Robinson calls for: their work rejects conceptions of poetry as a purely individual experience and enlarges the domain of the "poetic" to include the "political" as well. While some of these poets are not self-proclaimed feminists, their poetry reflects the influence of feminist thinking because it actively participates in criticizing and changing destructive social and poetic practices that give rise to sexual oppression. These poets are conscious of the duality of their position as women writing in a predominately male poetic tradition, one that often ignores and even negates women's experience, and as women writing in a newly emerging, self-conscious female poetic tradition that affirms and celebrates women's lives. Also these poets share an attentiveness to the problematics of poetic language, its ability to mystify rather than clarify, and its potential to modulate meanings for both constructive and destructive ends; that is, they recognize the political power of poetry. Writing both within and against the male poetic tradition, these five poets continually confront the problems of revising traditional conceptions of poetry

and the reader's role in it. As a result of their conscious attempt to create a more inclusive, politically active poetry and poetics, their works are valuable resources for deriving a feminist theory of poetics.

These five poets are all intuitively if not consciously influenced by feminist thinking. I will argue in the next chapters that it is the influence of feminist thinking that makes their poetry, and the way of reading suggested by the poetic theory implied in their work, a critical, revisionary experience that both enlarges and reevaluates the modern poetic tradition in general and the American poetic tradition in particular.

CHAPTER I

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY AND THE MODERN ROMANTIC TRADITION

It has become a critical commonplace to discuss modern poetry as an extension of nineteenth-century romanticism rather than a break with it. Even discussions of anti-romantic, anti-Symbolist traditions that give rise to certain strains of contemporary poetry cannot avoid using the modern romantic tradition as a frame of reference. In her book The Poetics of Indeterminacy, Marjorie Perloff argues for the existence of "the other tradition," a Surrealist, anti-Symbolist body of poetry originating with Rimbaud and passed through Stein, Pound, and Beckett down to such contemporary poets as Cage, Ashbery, and Antin; yet the modern romantic tradition still provides the context within which, or rather against which, these writers are understood: "we read an Ashbery against an Eliot or an Auden just as Duchamp's Large Glass acts to defamiliarize our sense of what a painting or sculpture should be."¹ By placing these contemporary works in the context of "intertextual relationships" and reading them "against" the familiar romantic tradition, Perloff maintains that we heighten our sense of the unique identity and evolutionary novelty

¹Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 33.

of the untraditional, newer poetry. In her words, we realize that "much of the poetry now emerging has different origins and therefore makes rather different suppositions."²

Yet certainly such a contextual reading can also lead to the opposite result: to neutralizing the novelty and obscuring the unique identity of anti-romantic works. As Perloff points out, the reader who is not constantly on guard will be tempted simply to appropriate new poetry that makes anti-traditional claims into the comfortable romantic framework: "readers seem so bent on absorbing the unfamiliar into familiar patterns" that the works are not read on their own terms.³ The dangers, and the rewards, of such a large contextual reading can be obscured by the false sense of critical security that the framework of interrelatedness and continuity brings to contemporary poetry, a continuity that the poetry itself may or may not ordain. "Poetry" can too easily become synonymous with "romantic," so that unless young poets have cultivated the sensibility Wallace Stevens calls "new romanticism," their work appears immature and unprofound to the critic concerned with intertextual relationships.⁴ So while there are significant advantages in reading

²Perloff, p. 44.

³Perloff, p. 33.

⁴Stevens explains "new romanticism" in his essay "A Poet That Matters: A Review of Selected Poems by Marianne Moore," in Opus Posthumous, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), pp. 247-54.

contemporary poetry through the guidelines of the romantic tradition, we also risk leveling the unique efforts of individual poems or schools of poetry that do not claim a romantic context or seek to sustain it. And we especially risk blinding ourselves to the criticisms of the romantic sensibility that may lie in poetry that deviates from the romantic tradition.

A study that attempts to place contemporary women's poetry in the context of modern romanticism while still acknowledging its distinctive, untraditional voice is especially vulnerable to these critical pitfalls. Since in general the forms and conventions of women's poetry arise from romantic origins, the body of women's poetry could conveniently be subsumed under the familiar critical framework and simply treated as another post-modern "version" of romanticism. Many readers would be relieved; others would be outraged, and rightly so. For contemporary women's poetry is pervaded by a distinct conceptual perspective that is rarely found in male romantic writing: the feminist perspective. This feminist impulse, with its emphasis on the revision (or re-envisioning) of male philosophic, aesthetic, and literary traditions and its sensitivity to the political implications of language and poetry, insures that women's poetry cannot justly be comprehended as merely another "version" of modern romanticism. To do so would deny the poetry its "different origins" and its "different suppositions."⁵

⁵Perloff, p. 44.

However, to claim that women's poetry bears no relation to male romantic poetry would also be a misbegotten critical stance, a way of reading that would impoverish the women's poetry rather than heightening its singular identity and power. As Suzanne Juhasz points out in Naked and Fiery Forms, the predecessors of contemporary feminist-informed poetry--Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Denise Levertov, and others--firmly ground their work in the male romantic tradition.⁶ Juhasz argues that writers such as Plath, Sexton, Brooks, and Giovanni begin deviating from the romantic mainstream when they recognize and write out of their sense of the essential conflict between their identity as women and the traditional male identity of poet. While Plath's and Sexton's work reveals the influence of a kind of stunted feminism, the progress of Adrienne Rich's poetry serves as a model for the development of a full-fledged feminist-informed poetry, secure enough in its vision that it can transform romantic strategies for its own purposes. Rich's early writing, with its meditative tone and careful balance of tension between desire and necessity, clearly imitates romantic forms and poses; however, as the feminist impulse becomes stronger for her, she transforms those romantic forms and evolves new, anti-romantic strategies in her poetry to accommodate the feminist voice. Rich's work signals the beginning of a movement in contemporary women's poetry that extends but also successfully

⁶Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition (New York: Colophon Books, 1976).

revises the tendencies in male romantic writing.⁷ This body of women's poetry is most valuably read both within and against that tradition. To study it as an isolated mode of literature, or to read it only in the tradition of female writing, would be to minimize its revisionary power.

Given the successful modulation into an openended feminist poetry found in Rich's work, many women poets that follow Rich place their work in the same "region" as her recent poetry; a specifically female poetic context in which male romantic forms and conventions are used for "feminist" purposes. I italicize the word "feminist" here because while not all these poets blatantly proclaim themselves feminists as Rich does, their poetry does reflect feminist concerns and themes. Among these concerns are the celebration of the female body as found in Olga Brouma's Beginning with O, Carolyn Forché's inquiry into the political role of the poet in The Country Between Us, Audre Lorde's expression of the singular difficulties of being female and black in The Black Unicorn, and the desire to give voice to the various relationships and roles women assume, as found in Cathy Song's Picture Bride. The commonality of theme in these poems and the poets' consciousness of being women poets reflect the influence of feminist thinking on their work and suggest that these

⁷For other assessments of the evolution of Rich's poetry, see Jane R. Cooper, ed., Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-81 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1984).

writers view their work in a particularly female poetic context.⁸

However, even more binding than the commonality of theme in their work is the theory of poetics that these women share. By theory of poetics I mean the understanding these poets have of what the poem is, what it can do for the writer and reader, where it "resides" in relation to other poetic works and to the world at large, and how it functions in the world. While these writers retain the romantic conception of the poem as a lyric, an act of the individual imagination coming into relation with the external world, the women poets are also deeply aware that the "individual imagination" is largely defined by its position in a complex web of social, cultural, and political values and ideologies. A feminist-informed theory of poetics is therefore significantly different from a romantic one because, to the feminist-influenced poet, poetry does not exist in its own isolated poetic "region," nor can the origin of the poem be traced back to an autonomous poetic imagination that creates gratuitous meaning; instead the poem is written and read in a context that is complicated by political and cultural implications that the modern romantic poets do not usually acknowledge. Thus while contemporary women poets retain the romantic conception of the poem as an act of the individual meditative mind, their poetry reflects their constant awareness of the interconnection between acts of the individual

⁸Robinson's "The Keen Eye . . . Watching" examines in detail the common themes in women's poetry.

imagination in repose and inflections in general cultural ideology. With this broadening of the context in which the poem becomes meaningful, the women poets both expand and revise the modern romantic theory of poetics.

The need on the part of women poets to revise modern romantic poetic theory suggests that they find something inadequate or outmoded about that viewpoint. The limitation women poets discern in modern male theory becomes apparent when we look briefly at recent criticism that attempts to identify modern romantic poets' conception of the poem.

The critics who claim that modern poetry is an extension rather than a rejection of the early romantic tradition argue their point from many different perspectives, but all generally agree that modern poetry is romantic because the underlying theory of poetics is romantic. That is, the modern poets' assumptions about how the poem originates and evolves, what the poem does, and what its functions are sustain a romantic context more than reject it. In general these critics argue that a romantic conception of poetry produces poems that are self-reflexive. Simply stated, their stance is that the romantic lyric, in which "the mode of perceiving itself becomes the object of perception," remains the dominant form in modern and most post-modern poetry.⁹ In Transformations of Romanticism George

⁹Stephen Spender, The Struggle of the Modern (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p. 133.

Bornstein relies heavily on Stevens' view of poetry to derive a definition of the romantic poem as an "act of the mind" encountering and giving value to reality. Bornstein states that "romantic poems are less about their ostensible subjects than about a psyche interacting with them."¹⁰ Harold Bloom offers a more extreme definition when he says that the romantic poem "is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity, the loss of what the poem is 'about.'"¹¹ Robert Langbaum's explanation of romantic poetry as "a poetry of experience" also suggests self-reflexivity: romantic poetry is "a form initiating not nature or an order of ideas about nature but the structure of experience itself."¹² Given its form, then, the romantic poem would seem to "initiate" repeatedly the romantic poetic "structure of experience."

This characteristic tendency toward self-reflexivity and even autoproductive subjectivity allows romantic poetry both to enjoy and to suffer from a precariously duplicitous relation to its own tradition. Because it is self-reflexive, because it incorporates its own poetic processes into its subject matter, romantic poetry is able constantly to assess and to revise the romantic impulse, testing the

¹⁰George Bornstein, Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 2.

¹¹Harold Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," in Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 8.

¹²Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 47.

various stances of the self in relation to the world that are alternatives to the extreme postures of solipsism and self-denial. In his poetry Wallace Stevens apparently undermines any possible closure of the romantic perspective by continually shifting, from poem to poem, the stances of the imagination in relation to the outer world. The constant parrying between the imagination and reality appears to redress in one poem any violation of either that might have occurred in another poem.

Yet while this kind of scrutiny of the romantic perspective within romantic poems themselves would seem to serve a critical, cautionary role, it also illuminates a deeper problematic within the romantic tradition. We must be at least suspicious of a body of poetry whose central critics claim it is not concerned with anything but itself, a poetry that has lost "what the poem is 'about'" and presents only subjectivity as its subject. By reading the romantic poem, in which "the mode of perceiving itself becomes the object of perception" and the "subject" is the romantic, poetic act of the mind, we are confined to a repetitive subjectivity from which we cannot challenge or question the romantic perspective in any radical way. To read romantic poetry is to continually prepare or train ourselves to experience romantic poetry, whether the poetry we read makes romantic claims or not.

Thus romantic poetry is peculiarly equipped both to scrutinize the problematics and to insure the perpetuation of its own tradition and perspective. This duplicity probably operates in any school of

poetry or thinking, but it seems especially true in a developed tradition that takes its own processes of understanding for its subject (or its lack of subject). The simultaneous openness and closure of romantic poetry further explains why feminist-informed poetry is most valuably read both within and against the romantic tradition. One of the most significant efforts of contemporary women's poetry is the struggle to transform and transfuse romanticism by enlarging its perspective to include more than a repetitive subjectivity, thereby escaping the tendency to engender repeatedly its limitations and self-enclosure. Feminist-informed poetry accomplishes this expansion and critique at once by giving equal priority to the romantic processes of understanding and to the reality of external subjects. In this way the romantic perspective is addressed by a subject other than itself. While the feminist-influenced poem does construe itself as an "act of the mind," the "act of the mind" does not erase or transcend the poem's concrete subject but rather conceives value in complicity with the subject. Both self and subject are therefore equally implicated in the poem.

Like the male romantics, the women writers are centrally concerned with how the individual imagination and external reality interact. But external reality for these women is most often a social/political/cultural reality rather than a natural or supernatural one. As a result, the essentially romantic questions that their poetry implies take on a significantly different tenor: where does the individual consciousness intersect with the communal/political one?

How far can the individual imagination constructively universalize itself before it violates either itself or the world around it? How much of a metaphor or metonymy is the individual experience for the cultural/social experience? By responding to such questions in their poetry, women poets retain the romantic priority on the individual imagination while they acknowledge that the single imagination is the locus for innumerable social, political, and cultural pressures, some of which are recognized, others of which remain obscured. In general the women's poetry assumes answers to these questions from the beginning: the imagination is the only means of understanding and evaluating social and political realities. Far from advocating solipsism, women poets define the notion of the "individual imagination" differently from the male romantics; it is not an autonomous, self-contained energy that "plays" on the world around it, but rather is interdependent with the external world and social ideologies and is in turn "played on" by those cultural values and historical prejudices. In short, the imagination is the grounds of our understanding and not a privileged tool that rises above the limits of our cultural experience.

It is obvious why a woman poet influenced by feminist thinking would have to revise the terms of any questions concerning "the individual imagination." For hers is not the generic "individual imagination" but rather the individual female imagination. As Juhasz and others have argued, contemporary women's poetry grows out of the writer's sense of herself as a woman poet. She is aware of herself

not only as a poet, but also as a woman in the sense that de Beauvoir describes her: "For us woman is defined as a human being in quest of values in a world of values, a world of which it is indispensable to know the economic and social structure."¹³ By necessity a woman poet's understanding of her relationship to that external "world of values" will be different from a male poet's because of her traditional place as "other," as a cultural outsider whose contribution to creating our "values" historically has been strictly limited. Not only is she alienated from cultural values because they do not reflect her creativity or sensibility, but she is also victimized by them. Because of the myths about the female body perpetuated in a male dominated society, her physical existence as a woman renders her more vulnerable and subject to violation than men are. As Adrienne Rich points out in the essay "Taking Women Students Seriously," women's "capacity to think independently, to take intellectual risks, to assert ourselves mentally, is inseparable from our physical way of being in the world, our feelings of personal integrity."¹⁴ On the most basic physical level, a woman is in danger in the "world of values" and her perception of given values is likely

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. 58.

¹⁴ Adrienne Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously," in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 242.

to be more critical than a man's. Women poets reflect this critical consciousness of social and political conditions in their poetry and use the poem as a means of regaining power over their own bodies and lives by creating new values of their own and re-casting existing values. Therefore, a study of poetics informed by feminist thinking extends beyond the traditional romantic domain of "poetry" and more accurately addresses "poetry in society."

In an essay on the role and goals of feminist criticism Sandra Gilbert explains concisely why feminist thinking demands revisionary activity: "Ultimately . . . it is women's ubiquitous cultural alienation that necessitates what I have called a 'revisionary imperative.'"¹⁵ Though she refers to feminist criticism, her point holds for the "revisionary imperative" in feminist-influenced poetry as well. The woman poet's sense of herself as not only personally and politically alienated, but also aesthetically estranged, necessitates both that she reevaluate the male poetic tradition and conventions, and that she evolve new forms and conventions to accommodate her emerging feminist voice and sensibility. From her vantage point of "cultural alienation," a woman poet finds herself writing poems that at once mirror and mend her separation from mainstream aesthetic, philosophical, and political powers. Like male romantic poetry's duplicitous relationship with its tradition, contemporary women poets both suffer from and enjoy their cultural and poetic alienation.

¹⁵Sandra Gilbert, "What Do Feminist Critics Want? Or a Postcard from the Volcano," ADE Bulletin (Winter 1980), 17.

Though suffering from the lack of a poetic tradition that can articulate specifically female perceptions and that can encompass feminist concerns for the integration of self and culture, some women poets' work has been intensified by the necessity of discovering for themselves a poetics commensurate with their consciousness. The imperative of exploring given values, discovering new meanings, and breaking silences for the first time lends their poetry a sense of crisis and cruciality that is often missing in twentieth-century male writing.

The sense of crisis in women's poetry also arises from the poets' conception of the power and role of poetry in their own lives and in the lives of their readers. For the woman poet, the poem functions in a context that is not limited to the aesthetic or the meditative. Ultimately its implications extend beyond the individual writer and reader; as an "act of the mind" the poem participates in a drama that exceeds yet includes the individual. Because literature is political, it enacts what Judith Fetterley in The Resisting Reader calls a "drama of power."¹⁶ Fetterley analyzes "the drama of men's power over women" that is played out in the seeming "apolitical" literature of the traditional canon; however, contemporary women's poetry claims for itself a power that is not simply a reverse overpowering of men by women, but rather a humanistic power not contingent on the violation or silencing of others. As Sandra Gilbert

¹⁶Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. xiii.

points out, the assumption that feminist critics, and I argue feminist-influenced poets, work under is one "that few people have taken seriously since the Romantic period: the possibility that through literary study we can renew our lives."¹⁷ This belief in the power of poetry to transform radically the quality of our lives and the urgent need these poets see for our lives to be renewed contribute to the sense of crisis and immediacy found in women's poetry.

The choice of the word "renew" in Gilbert's definition of the feminist approach to literature is a significant one. So much of modern male poetry strikes the reader as being a resignation to the "necessities" of life rather than a renewal of value and quality in life. This distinction implies a radical difference in not only poetic theory but also philosophical position between the modern romantics and the contemporary women poets. To view poetry as a means of renewing our lives is to assume that it can indeed "act" on life, recreate it, and conceive value in and through it. In contrast, to find in poetry a means of resigning or reconciling ourselves to the injustices and violations that life aims at us is to assume that we are antagonized by "Life" and that our power is ultimately negated by it. Poets who hold such agonistic assumptions will often defer their power (and the reader's) in the face of obstacles, appealing to conventional abstractions like "tragedy," "necessity," or "the

¹⁷Gilbert, p. 23.

universal condition of humanity," deterministic visions that ennoble and even excuse human limitations while simultaneously veiling alternative responses and actions. This reductive version of the romantic stance, which I have overstated for comparative purposes, portrays the individual's lack of power in the face of "universal Truth" or "necessity" as inevitable and tragic.

Narrow readings of the romantic attitude I have just characterized are used to justify two prevailing modern perspectives that most affect women poets: the aesthetic view that poetry at its most powerful records and presents that moment of tragic understanding of human limitation, and the cultural view that would "protect" women from exposure to that burdensome tragic knowledge of ultimate closure. The sense of futility that poetry often conveys legitimates discouraging women from pursuing the development of their consciousness since gaining the "power" of consciousness eventually leads only to the recognition of the emptiness of that power in the face of "ultimate truth."

Some of the most serious and energetic efforts of women poets have been, first, to break down these cultural barriers that impede the development of women's consciousness and, second, to redress what Mary Daly calls the "delusions" of determinism that are reinforced by modern and contemporary male conceptions of writing and reading poetry.¹⁸ These delusions of determinism not only place limits on

¹⁸Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). Daly discusses

an individual's power to think and articulate possibilities beyond the given reality, but also limit the power of poetry to be the medium through which those possibilities are conceived and constructed. In this way the power of the individual imagination and the effects of poetry are reduced and confined to a meditative, tragically limited poetic sphere of experience that has little to offer "life" outside reconciling the solitary mind to its necessities.

Because of the attitude of tragic necessity that pervades modern writing, the isolated sphere of poetry is viewed as the privileged region where the imagination can dominate; however, in much male writing the imagination's power derives from its overpowering the concrete "subject" of the poem and privileging the poetic imagination over the external world. In fact, the beauty that male poetry claims for itself is often dependent upon its separation from social and political implications, which, by comparison to the imagination's passion of despair, are mundane considerations.

Yeats's poem "Adam's Curse" illustrates the point. The poem itself acknowledges that beauty depends on excising the difficulty of labor from the beautiful activity or object, whether the activity is writing poetry, maintaining physical female beauty, or loving another person. Beauty is contingent on erasing its own difficult

the "delusions" about their identity and inherent evil that women unconsciously adopt from the myths and rituals of Judeo-Christian religions. She defines the feminist movement as a communal existential search for a philosophy and religion that are unhampered by the anti-female mythologies of traditional western thought.

process of coming into being, on cutting its connection to the dull world of work and struggle. But while it acknowledges its relation to the daily world, the poem itself resides completely in the realm of the beauty it defines: its simplicity of expression and ease of development reveal how fully the signs of labor have been excised during the creative process. If we value what the poem does over what it says, the final implication is that the poetic act is ultimately not analogous to the activities to which it is compared, for only in poetry can the apparent erasure of origin be accomplished. The beauty of the poem is then a function of its confined, privileged status in comparison to love or physical beauty. The poem's beauty lies in the power of the imagination to express the imagination's lack of power outside the privileged poetic realm; its success depends on our accepting the failure of love and the failure of imaginative powers in the daily world as tragic necessities.

Much of the beauty of modern romantic poetry arises then from the elevation of the poetic experience above daily experience and from its apparent apolitical stance. By refining its concrete origins, as in "Adam's Curse" or "Among School Children," the modern lyric generally culminates in an intense imaginative vision, yet the end of the poetic process seems to give little value back to the raw materials that initiate the poem. The meditation begins grounded in the setting of the schoolroom or in conversation with two women and then ascends into its own sphere, where usually the poem will end. The imagination does not so much circulate in the world

surrounding it as it does absorb that world to fuel flights into its own inner recesses, or upper reaches. It takes but does not give back before the poem ends. What could the smiling public man who has just envisioned the dancer and the dance say to the schoolchildren and the nuns? Of what value is the beautiful woman and her sister to the speaker who has seen himself and his capacity to love as being empty like the hollow moon? Though one apparently ends in despair, the other in elation, the power and beauty in both poems reside in how thoroughly the real world and situations that give rise to the meditations are excised from consideration in themselves. The question "What now?" is completely inappropriate because symbolic power alone, and not literal power, is the issue of such poems.

Here we arrive at the single most important limitation in modern romantic poetics that women poets are compelled to revise and renounce. Feminist poets and critics continually define the power of symbolizing as the key to political power and to social change. For them, access to language allows access to criticizing communal values; the power to name potentiates the power to be; to reevaluate and redefine through language implies the possibility of changing the self and the society. In general, male poets accept the social world as given; their poetry is therefore directed by and toward the self. As Geoffrey Hartman points out, the romantic poem begins as a description of the personal desire for elevation out of self-containment, but in the fortunate expression of the desire, the poem

modulates into an act of fulfillment.¹⁹ Frost's poem "Birches" comes to mind: the speaker desires temporary relief from daily responsibilities and achieves that relief by dreaming of birch-swinging as a youth. By creating a symbol out of birch-swinging to express his desire, he achieves the momentary rest he longs for. As Hartman says, to "explore the transition from self-consciousness to imagination, and to achieve that transition while exploring it (and so to prove it still possible) is the Romantic purpose I find most crucial."²⁰ By deepening their self-consciousness rather than denying it, Hartman argues, romantic poets paradoxically overcome their entrapment in the self. Although Frost's poem indicates a specific desire to get away from the daily world of responsibilities and the daily self, most romantic poems by men imply a similar, though often implicit desire to transcend the literal world through exercising the imagination's power to symbolize. Thus the power to symbolize represents to the male poets a means of transcending the world, not necessarily a means of improving it.

"Birches" offers an interesting contrast to the examples by Yeats because it does not completely dismiss the question "What now?" The reader can fairly comfortably assume that indeed the speaker returns to his daily routine renewed by his imaginative flight. Also

¹⁹Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness," in Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 298-310.

²⁰Hartman, p. 307.

the speaker continually acknowledges his awareness that his visions in a sense "violate" or contradict what reality dictates is true. Certainly "Birches" is a poem about the "act of the mind" playfully but carefully enriching reality for the purpose of soothing the tensions and relieving the weariness of the self. Renewal takes place but its consequences are limited to assuaging individual desire and loss. The poem has "cured" self-consciousness, temporarily at least, by mirroring it in the symbol of birch-swinging. Again, the repetitive subjectivity of the romantic poem relieves the burden of subjectivity.

Hartman's explanation of the romantic poem raises the very difficult question of whether "self-consciousness" is the same for the women poets and for the male romantics. Also it suggests the question of whether the "cure" for self-consciousness is perceived as the same by both groups. According to Hartman, the male romantics' self-consciousness consists of a separation from the powers of imagination and its cure involves consciously pursuing self-consciousness into transcendence. One thinks of Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" as a prototype. The poem enables the poet to transcend self-consciousness because it creates a symbol of it. For the male romantic, transcendence is accomplished through repetitive subjectivity, or the symbolizing of self-consciousness.

As shown in the discussions of "Adam's Curse" and "Among School Children" the nature of a symbol is that it erases its own causes or origins and elevates the "subject" to a privileged,

apolitical level. As the poem's subject, self-consciousness is cured when its causes or origins are erased and its symptoms are neutralized, the symptoms usually being realizations like "I am not communicating with this other person" or "I am estranged from these people or this circumstance." By translating self-consciousness as a subject into a symbolic realm, self-consciousness is overcome because the "other" by which it is relationally defined is excised from the poem, either by being left behind or by being transfigure in the poetic realm. When the "other" begins to be erased or overpowered by the imagination, by Hartman's definition, self-consciousness modulates into imagination. The implication, then, is that like the failure of love or imagination in literal life presented in "Adam's Curse," self-consciousness is an inevitable, tragic necessity that can be overcome or cured only in the poetic symbolic realm where the imagination controls and assigns values and where self-consciousness is divorced from real circumstances and so purified. It can be transcended only through repetitive subjectivity enacted in a privileged sphere.

In general, women poets experience self-consciousness as a personal but also a social, political estrangement, and they resolve it not by erasing the other, but by admitting its reality into their consciousness. The cure is not transcendence of the circumstance of self-consciousness, but involvement in it. In one sense, Hartman's explanation applies to the women as well as the male romantics; self-consciousness is overcome by pursuing it to its limit. However, while contemporary women's poetry is also an act of imaginative

power, it does not dramatize the motion of the imagination toward transcending or overpowering reality, as much modern romantic poetry does; instead the direction is toward involvement, not self-absorption.

The models of monologue and dialogue illustrate the difference.²¹ Whereas the modern male's poem tends to use a real situation as an occasion to initiate an imaginative monologue, the women poets usually engage the real world in a kind of dialogue with their imaginations. The power of the individual comes not from manipulation of or separation from the real setting, but from an engagement or play between self and world that elevates both, not just the self. Thus the typical progress of a lyric by a woman poet involves a circulating motion between self and world, or, in a more traditional lyric, the "out-in-out" process that Abrams identifies as characteristic of the Greater Romantic lyric.²² In general, the woman poet finds it more difficult and more dangerous to dissociate her imagination from her context than the male romantic poet does.

One reason the woman poet finds it so necessary to "listen to" the world outside her is that, given the feminist emphasis on the

²¹My understanding and use of the term "dialogue" derives from my reading of Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method (New York: Crossroad, 1982) and Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Though I do not use the language of hermeneutic philosophy here, Gadamer's analysis of dialogue as a hermeneutic model deeply informs my work.

²²M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 528.

pervasive influence of cultural values and political ideology on the individual consciousness, the world outside her is also inside her. As a continual victim of cultural violence, whether physical or psychological, a woman poet simply cannot afford to entertain the modern male poet's assumption of the imagination's autonomy from political, historical coercion. As a result, her poem deliberately exposes rather than erases the causes and origins of self-consciousness and addresses the question "What now?" as a central issue. Her poetry attempts directly to explore possibilities for engaging in and renewing daily, literal life.

Thus women poets seek individual power through poetry by integrating their poetic imaginative acts with their daily social and political lives. In their work they attempt to resolve their literal crises rather than mirror them in symbolic language and elevate them to tragic heights. Envisioning changes in their consciousness implies for them envisioning cultural changes, for inflections in individual perceptions engender revisions in a larger, social context. However, while they acknowledge that the single imagination is grounded in political, historical circumstances, that awareness does not lead them to individual paralysis or a shallow determinism. Again the dialogue model is illustrative. In the dialogue, neither partner dominates or manipulates the other; otherwise the interaction is not a dialogue but rather a monologue or an act of exploitative communication. The nature of dialogue is such that both partners are elevated out of their own limited perceptions by participating

in each other's visions. Also dialogue is characterized by its open-endedness: the dialogue never really comes to a close, an impasse, but rather it is arbitrarily ended, perhaps because one partner has an appointment, or because one partner violates the dialogue role and manipulates the other into silence. While much women's poetry articulates women's frustration at being the silenced partner in a potential but thwarted dialogue, what I will generate as the "mature feminist lyric" is an act of dialogic relationship, whether the partners are individual people, parts of a divided self, self and culture, or expressions of different interpretive visions.

The use of the dialogue as a formal model and the integration of the individual imagination with external reality are certainly not innovations that can be credited to contemporary women poets, but the awareness of the social and political implications of such a model seems especially acute in the work of women writers. For example, in Virginia Woolf's novels the female central characters continually wrestle with the challenge of enriching their lives by exercising their imaginations while being careful not to violate or manipulate external reality, which includes the "realities" of other people. Think of Clarissa who "creates the moment" not only for herself but also for those around her. Her creativity and imaginative energy are not enlisted to create a flight from social responsibility or from a consuming self-consciousness but rather to humanize and intensify social bonds, her difficult work culminating, of course, in the occasion of her party. The structure of the novel itself is

defined by the modes and frequencies of the transitions in imaginative motion; just when the "voice" of Clarissa's imagination borders on monologue, she is addressed by some external voice--the backfire of a car, the striking of Big Ben--that returns her to a dialogic relationship with the world around her. Certainly the beauty of the novel lies in the difficulty of the role she conceives and enacts for herself, balancing her own projections of meaning with a receptivity to other meanings. Her power does not come from manipulating the world outside her imagination, as Peter Walsh's does, or from silencing others, as William Bradshaw's does, but from a constant, often enervating dialogue between her imagination and reality. Her beauty consists also of her lack of self-consciousness, as it is defined in male romantic writing.

While Clarissa maintains the difficult but balanced dialogic relationship with others and with the outer world, her "complement" Septimus Smith struggles but fails, and sinks into madness and death. Yet the novel certainly praises his effort over Sir Bradshaw's reduction of the difficulty to "proportion," an attitude achieved through the illegitimate power to censor and silence others:

Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion--²³

²³Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1953), p. 150.

With his "infallible instinct, this is madness, this sense" (p. 151), Sir William secures his power by violating and negating others: Clarissa secures hers by violating neither others nor herself. Thus she identifies deeply with Septimus who also at least attempts the difficult dialogic partnership with his world though in his madness he reduces the difficulty to an ironic choice between inevitable and monstrous self-violation in life and self-preservation in death.

Although Woolf does not overtly indicate connections between the dialogic relationship that structures the novel and identifies the main character and political power, the presence of illegitimately powerful figures like Sir William and Holmes suggests an ironic disparity between those who possess public power and status and those who constructively "create the moment" as Clarissa does. Also the self-conscious daydreaming of Peter Walsh, the romantic bohemian, appears insignificant and impotent in comparison to Clarissa's imaginative energy because of Peter's isolation from community. His imagination is self-serving while Clarissa's power serves both herself and others. Thus Woolf implies a critique of illegitimate political power and ineffectual private power, providing an alternative to both in the character of Clarissa, the solitary woman who exemplifies a synthesis of legitimate personal and communal power as she creates meaning for herself and others. Her party is the extension of her dialogical personal context to others.

Mrs. Dalloway provides an example of how the dialogue model can be used to structure a literary work and to imply a critique of

the power play and self-consciousness typically enacted in modern romantic writing. In contemporary women's poetry the dialogue model serves both these purposes and, more importantly, becomes a means of defining women's conceptions of poetry and of its power. It becomes evident that the most valuable feminist-informed poetry is that which is more than merely a criticism of romantic poetics and poses. The next chapter will analyze poems by several women writers to explore how the dialogue model structures the form and reinforces the themes in contemporary women's poetry. The poetry I will choose to discuss uses the dialogue form not only as a means of exposing the limitations of male romantic poetics, but also as a medium for developing feminist revisions of personal, aesthetic, and cultural values. The poetry will be analyzed as both a "reaction" against and a feminist "act" within the romantic tradition.

CHAPTER II

THE POEM AS DIALOGUE

While the dialogue model is not directly apparent in all feminist-informed poetry, it does serve an important role in the development of a feminist theory of poetics. Contemporary women poets use the dialogue model in several different ways: first, it provides a structural scheme in those poems that portray literal acts of dialogue; second, it suggests a method or process of inquiry by which poets come to understand and evaluate their subjects; and third, even in poems that do not use it as a structural design, the dialogue model often constitutes an underlying, or assumed, ethical relation that the poem acts upon. Whether the dialogue is used directly or discreetly as a poetic stance, its presence in much contemporary women's poetry implies that women writers have found in the dialogue a functional analogy for the process of poetic creation and the process of feminist thinking.

The most extensive example of the conscious cultivation of the dialogue as a metaphor and methodological model for a feminist poetics is found in Adrienne Rich's volume The Dream of a Common Language (1978).¹ The dialogue is used both as a structural tool and as a thematic center to convey feminist perspectives and conceptions of

¹Rich, The Dream of a Common Language, Poems 1974-1977 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978). All quotations of Rich's poetry in this chapter are taken from this volume unless otherwise noted.

poetry. In this volume the major themes--women's lives, the power of language, and the conceptions of dreams that map possibilities for new meaning--converge in the central structural and thematic image of the dialogue, or the "common language."

The role of the dialogue relation in the experience of understanding as explained by the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer helps to clarify the importance of the dialogue model for women poets. Gadamer uses the dialogue metaphor to express the event of mediation and reciprocity that occurs when understanding takes place. The exchange of perspectives and ideas occurring in a dialogue is analogous to the participation of players in a game; like partners in conversation focusing on a topic together, players are absorbed by the game itself, not preoccupied with each other or their own-self-consciousness. In the same sense that "all playing is a being-played" then, all understanding is a "being-understood": self-understanding derives as a kind of subsequent effect from involvement with and understanding of others.² As Gadamer explains, in an actual dialogue,

something of the character of accident, favor, and surprise--and, in the end, of buoyancy, indeed, of elevation--that belongs to the nature of the game is present. And surely the elevation of the dialogue will not be experienced as a loss of self-possession, but rather as an enrichment of our self, but without us thereby becoming aware of ourselves.³

²Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 95.

³Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 57.

Women poets characteristically construe self-realization not as a state of autonomous, conscious selfhood, but as a discovery of the co-implication of self with others that results from the experience of communion with others.

Gadamer's discussion of the experience of art as an event of dialogue also helps explain women poets' view of the relation between the poem and the reader. If the aesthetic experience is an event of real dialogue and real play, the work of art cannot be treated as an object, nor can the reader perceive herself as a privileged separate subject:

. . . the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience, changing the person experiencing it. The 'subject' of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work itself.⁴

For women poets the poem, like the game or the dialogue, initiates the event that can elevate the participating reader out of a limiting self-consciousness and out of repetitive subjectivity, thus providing the reader with new perspectives and new possibilities for meaning.

Gadamer's point that dialogue, play, or an aesthetic experience can only take place if the participant is truly addressed and engaged by the topic, game, or poem is emphasized from the beginning of Rich's volume. The headnote, from H. D.'s The Flowering of the Rod, insists on the importance of the "common language" and the pursuit of individual values rather than prescribed roles:

⁴Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 92.

I go where I love and where I am loved,
into the snow;

I go to the things I love
with no thought of duty or pity

From the beginning and throughout the volume Rich declares the individual sensibility and desire, not an abstract sense of duty or a demeaning emotion of pity, motivate her work and shape her vision. Yet, as her poems attest, the desires and limits of her imagination are inextricably interwoven with those of others, particularly, in this volume, those of other women. Her poems are indeed acts of love, and as such they encompass and enact more than reflections of her subjectivity. As in a dialogue, the poet and her subject are implicated and interconnected in an experience of mutual reflexivity.

As the title indicates, the poems in this volume are governed by Rich's dream of a shared communion in which language, and by extension poetry, plays a crucial role. The word "dream" suggests both an imagined experience that is contrary to fact and a strongly desired, potentially attainable objective. The poems focus specifically on communion between women, but Rich implies here and in her other work that the dialogue she desires is between everything female, every person and force that values creation and relation above all.⁵

⁵In her article "Adrienne Rich and an Organic Feminist Criticism," College English, 39 (1977), 191-203, Marilyn R. Farwell suggests that Rich's poetry, with its emphasis on process and relation, provides the framework for a truly organic, non-dogmatic feminist theory of criticism.

In cultivating dialogue through a "common language," not only can women discover mirrors for clarifying and developing their identities, but they can also begin, with their self-understanding, to redress and reconstruct the social and political ideology which, as Rich explores in her previous collection Diving into the Wreck (1973), is exclusive, wasteful, and dehumanizing for both sexes in the reductive definitions of male/female roles it propagates.⁶

Given her feminist perspective, Rich is deeply aware that both the proliferation of a false cultural ideology and the promotion of self-understanding that can initiate social change depend on the dualistic nature of language: language has the capacity to simultaneously convey and conceal truth.⁷ Because it necessarily implies a "center" of meaning in relation to which other things, concepts, or persons take on value, language can privilege one culture or group

⁶Rich, Diving into the Wreck, Poems 1971-72 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

⁷In After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), George Steiner clearly explains how the dual capacity of language to convey certain meanings as it conceals others makes language ambiguous but also organic and valuable. The notion that language necessarily constructs a provisional center of meaning and thereby appears to present absolute, whole "truth" is perceived by many contemporary critics and philosophers as the central problematic in writing and reading. See, for example Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-93.

over another, as, for example, patriarchal language privileges male values over female ones. One goal of the feminist movement is of course to "decenter" the patriarchal language that, either by omission or by denigration, devalues women's lives and thereby to discover and articulate what a female culture and system of values might be. Therefore, having emerged at the end of Diving into the Wreck from "the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth,"⁸ having "seen through" the language concealing reality and self from her, Rich attempts in The Dream of a Common Language to construct carefully and consciously a new language that interprets a new world and conveys women to, rather than conceals women from, themselves and other women.

Rich's essay "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" helps explain the drive toward dialogue in her poetry and in other feminist-informed works.⁹ Because "lying is done with words, and also with silence," the possibility of dialogue, of hearing and being heard, is an essential precondition to discovering, or recovering, the truth about self and society. The "truth" that Rich desires is not so much a specific knowledge or an endpoint as it is an open-ended way of encountering self and others:

There is no 'the truth,' 'a truth'--truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely,

⁸Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," in Diving in the Wreck, pp. 22-24.

⁹Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, pp. 185-94.

or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.¹⁰

"Truth" is in fact a mode of being, a participation in the creation of openended and individually validated meaning. The dialogue relationship, which is both creative and participatory, allows one to perceive and partake of the complex interdependence of self and others and the multiple possibilities for meaning that are veiled by reductive, superficial ideologies and false languages. In this "truthful," dialogic mode of being one can overcome the "amnesia," the estrangement from self and honor, that Rich identifies as "the silence of the unconscious."¹¹

For Rich poetry is a manifestation of the unconscious's struggle to speak its dreams and possibilities for meaning:

The unconscious wants truth, as the body does. The complexity and fecundity of dreams come from the complexity and fecundity of the unconscious struggling to fulfill that desire. The complexity and fecundity of poetry come from the same struggle.¹²

Poetry then originates in desire, as it does for the most of the male romantics, but, as Hartman points out, the romantic poem fulfills the desire as it expresses it. Rich's poems continually express a desire for openness to self and others, and the desire begins to be fulfilled in the dialogic relationships involving the reader and the poem, the writer and the poem, and, in some works, subjects or "voices" within

¹⁰Rich, "Women and Honor," pp. 186-87.

¹¹Rich, "Women and Honor," p. 187.

¹²Rich, "Women and Honor," p. 188.

the poem. The significant difference between Rich's, and other women's, writing and male romantic poetry lies in the scope and consequences of the poets' desires. As Rich explains, the feminist poet and all women "have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other."¹³ For the feminist, "the personal" can ignore communal existence only at a great expense to her own consciousness and to truth, as Rich defines it.

But poetry does more than just "describe" women's reality, as Rich had explained nearly ten years earlier:

. . . I can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan: the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as it progresses. Without for one moment turning my back on conscious choice and selection, I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than one voice of a single idea. . . instead of poems about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it. In my earlier poems I told you, as precisely as I knew how, about something; in the more recent poems something is happening, something has happened to me and, if I have been a good parent to the poem, something will happen to you who read it.¹⁴

By listening "to more than one voice," the poet is not confined to expressing repetitively her own subjectivity but can also challenge her subjective isolation and overcome it through dialogue with other

¹³Rich, "Women and Honor," p. 190.

¹⁴Rich, "Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading (1964)," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, Texts of the Poems, the Poet on her Work, Reviews and Criticisms, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 89.

voices and perspectives. Rather than being a pre-determined expression of an experience, the poem is itself an experience of communication, a creative, communal act in which the poet and the "subject" of the poem establish a relation of powerful interdependence, not a relation of overpowering or domination.

To understand why Rich and other women poets reject the notions that "Poetry makes nothing happen" in the social, political world and had only the capacity to sooth the solitary individual,¹⁵ we need to investigate the feminist view of the poem as an act of the mind. In his article "What Kind of Speech Act a Poem Is," Samuel R. Levin offers a definition of the poem as a performative speech act that is strikingly similar to Rich's view and practice of poetry.¹⁶ Levin proposes that a "higher sentence" that expresses the illocutionary force of poetry is implicit in every lyric or "personal" poem. This

¹⁵W. H. Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," from which the quote is taken, expresses this conception of poetry.

¹⁶Samuel R. Levin, "Concerning What Kind of Speech Act a Poem Is," in Pragmatics of Language and Literature, ed. Teun A. van Dijk (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 141-60. Levin builds on J. L. Austin's speech act theory in order to define the "illocutionary force" of poetry, which in simple terms means the kind of "work" poetry, as a linguistic act, performs. Levin explains:
 . . . the standard grammatical categories of declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences are all so-named for the particular illocutionary acts they perform. They are, in the first place, locutionary acts. In addition, however, they perform the various illocutions of asserting, questioning, and requesting or commanding. (p. 144)
 Basically, Levin, like Rich, concludes that poetry performs the work of envisioning new worlds.

implicit higher sentence "'I imagine myself in and invite you to conceive a world in which . . .'" contains performative verbs, that is, verbs that do what they say, for example, "I choose you" or "I challenge you." In the higher sentence, the act of imagining and inviting are being performed by those words, not just reported. The surface structure of most poems deletes this deeper sentence, but the illocutionary force of poetry, the poet's act of imagining herself in a different world and inviting the reader to experience that world, remains implicit and central to our understanding of poetry and its value.

The higher sentence Levin proposes coincides with the foundation of Rich's view of poetry and language, although Levin's theory stops short of explaining the implications Rich believes poetry has in the world beyond art. First, the higher sentence recognizes the poem as a dialogue between "I" the poet and "you" the reader, between "I" the poet and "myself" the poet's self-image or persona, and between the literal world the poet imagines in and the visionary world she imagines herself in. Because the poem is a performative speech act rather than a declarative utterance, the question of whether the poem is objectively "true" or "false" is inapplicable. Instead, the validity of a performative utterance is a question of "felicity;" if the reader accepts the invitation and conceives the

world the poet imagines, "the poetic transaction" takes place.¹⁷

However, if readers insist on applying objective standards of truth to the poem, they have not understood the implicit context of the poem and cannot participate in the experience the poem offers. Therefore felicity and understanding depend on an acknowledged voluntary relation between the reader, poet, and poem. This agreement is the trust that allows dialogue, and the "truth" of the poem resides in the trusting relation and mode of being that the poetic transaction makes possible.

Levin's use of the word "conceive" is fortunate since Rich and other women poets often describe the composition of poetry and the reader's act of experiencing poetry in terms of the experience of motherhood.¹⁸ In the poem "Origins and History of Consciousness,"

¹⁷It is interesting that Levin acknowledges that to achieve complete felicity in the poetic transaction, the reader must abandon concepts of poetry as metaphorical or symbolic:

. . . as long as we perceive the poet's descriptions
as metaphors, our suspension of disbelief is not total
and we do not share fully in the poet's vision. True poetic
faith would consist in our perceiving, with the poet, his
descriptions as literally true. (p. 159)

In describing her own feminist poetic activity as a dangerous, potentially deadly descent into the mine shaft, Rich claims in "Natural Resources" that "The miner is no metaphor." Other women poets I will discuss later also continually assert that poetry is a literal act, not the symbol of an act.

¹⁸In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), Rich connects motherhood with dialogue, just as she had associated poetry with dialogue earlier: "From the beginning, the mother caring for her child is involved in a continually changing dialogue" (p. 36).

from which the volume's title is taken, Rich discusses herself as a woman, poet and lover directed by the "drive/ to connect. The dream of a common language." The demands love makes upon her are parallel to the illocutionary agreement that a reader or writer must make with the poem for it to act as an experience rather than an expression of an experience. The lover, writer, and reader must deliberately choose to participate in the experience and to be acted upon it despite the risk and uncertainty:

It's simple to wake from sleep with a stranger,
dress, go out, drink coffee,
enter a life again. It isn't simple
to wake from sleep into the neighborhood
of one neither strange nor familiar
whom we have chosen to trust. Trusting, untrusting
we lowered ourselves into this, let ourselves
downward hand over hand as on a rope that quivered
over the unsearched. . . . We did this. Conceived
of each other, conceived each other in a darkness
which I remember as drenched in light.

For Rich "conceiving of" another person or another way of life is to "conceive" that other person or life, to bring her or it into being. Because the same reciprocal dialogic relationship is necessary in both experiences, love is impossible "Without contemplating last and late/ the true nature of poetry."

While Rich's view of poetry and its processes as emblematic of life seems to restate the modern romantic idea that "a theory/ of

poetry is a theory of life,"¹⁹ it is clear that for Rich the poem is an act of dialogue and relation that extends into life beyond the poem. It is more than a theory, emblem, or reflection of life because it participates in life and feeds back into it, just as the weaver's work reflects the patterns of the carpet as she contributes to their creation. Rich's consciousness of the power of language to act on our lives is seen at the end of "Origins" when she refuses to confine poetry and language, or love, to an isolated aesthetic or solitary realm. She prevents herself from trivializing the power of language by making it accountable to life and to "truth:"

I want to call this, life.

But I can't call it life we start to move
beyond this secret circle of fire
where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall
where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps
like a dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner.

Rich's imagined poetic world is intimately informed by the real world, and the real world is integrally re-formed by poetry and language. In this passage she realigns her stray desire to call her private passion "life" with what she knows is true: the lover's private experience is incomplete and untested until it is integrated into the broader world beyond the solitary selves. In her refusal to compliment her experience with the name "life," the speaker emphasizes her rejection of incongruity or split between her personal life and

¹⁹Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), pp. 465-89.

her social life, and she charts directions for her movement toward increased consciousness, responsibility, and community.

Obviously Rich's view of poetry, language, and the choice to trust or deliver oneself into a dialogue implies greater tension and consequences than Levin's discussion of "poetic transaction" explores. For Rich the dialogue relation that is necessary for poetry to act does not stand apart from life or beyond accountability to it. Instead, as an act of the mind, the poem becomes a medium for expanding our conceptions of life and our possibilities for action within it. Thus the poem is integrally interwoven into the fabric of life--it is not an escape from life's responsibilities but a means of conceiving "dreams," of clarifying, claiming, and expanding those responsibilities.

Most of the poems in The Dream of a Common Language are dialogues either between specific women, women in general or parts of the speaker's identity. The volume is divided into three parts: part one, "Power," establishes the commonalities on which dialogue between women is built; part two, "Twenty-One Love Poems," consists of dialogues addressed to a lover that explore the intense emotional and physical relationship between two women; and part three, "Not Somewhere Else, But Here," reaffirms Rich's determination to resist the destructive pull of the past and its mythology that would separate her from other women and to live creatively in the present.

Like many poems in The Dream, "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" not only uses the dialogue as a structural design but also presents

as its subject the strength and power that arise from dialogic communion among women. Rich adopts the voice of Shatayev, the leader of a women's mountain climbing team, all of whom died in a snowstorm on Lenin's Peak in 1974. Thus the poem and the poet act as medium and mediator between the reader and the subject. Shatayev speaks to her husband, who climbs the mountain to bury her body, "with a voice no longer personal/ (I want to say 'with voices')" celebrating the love and strength felt by the women climbers as they struggled to survive. In the face of death Shatayev is resolute yet not defiant of death itself:

In the diary torn from my fingers I had written:
 'What does love mean
 what does it mean "to survive"
 A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies
 burning together in the snow We will not live
 to settle for less We have dreamed of this
 all of our lives'

The poem emphasizes not death or vision purchased by loss, but the power of communion between women as they try to survive in any situation, for Shatayev, as she speaks from beyond the grave, sees the changes her team experienced as "still enacted and continuing." Though her husband will tell his version of their story, "ours does not end we stream/ into the unfinished the unbegun/ the possible." The sense of future possibility, of renewed and recreated life, pervades the poem and counters any "tragic" overtones or suggestions that Rich views Shatayev's experience of communion as merely an exceptional moment of desperation before death. Shatayev's personal experience is in a sense "no longer personal" because it names and

exemplifies an experience desired by and open to many other women, in particular Rich.

In allowing a historical figure to speak through her and through the poem, Rich places herself, as poet, in dialogic relation to history and to other women. Rich endows Shatayev with a voice to tell her own story, thus "conceiving" of Shatayev as a real person, a subject rather than an object, a self whose experience is present for Rich and for the reader. In this and other poems Rich acts as a mediator between figures in women's history and the reader.

The poem "Splittings" illustrates how the dialogue model is used as a structural model for the poem, a method of inquiry for the poet, and an ethical, philosophical foundation for the poetry in the entire volume. The poet wakes to pain that is caused not only by her lover's absence, but also by "the presence of the past/ destructive/ to living here and now." In a motion typical of many poems in The Dream of a Common Language, the poet relies on the subjunctive, in this case the conditional, to distance herself from her own pain and allow her to question its origins and consequences:

Yet if I could instruct
myself, if we could learn to learn from pain
even as it grasps us if the mind, the mind that lives
in this body could refuse to let itself be crushed
in that grasp it would loosen Pain would have to stand
off from me and listen its dark breath still on me
but the mind could begin to speak to pain
and pain would have to answer

In dialogue with her own pain, the poet learns that by not resisting myths of separation and love, her self-indulgent isolation jeopardizes real, present love:

'I am the pain of division creator of divisions
 it is I who blot your lover from you
 and not the time-zones nor the miles
 It is not separation calls me forth but I
 who am separation And remember
 I have no existence apart from you'

By privileging pain as a "sign" of love or by entertaining it as an inevitable byproduct of love, the speaker endangers her love and perpetuates myths about the tragedy of love and the separated lovers' powerlessness.

In the second part of the poem the speaker begins to renounce those myths and assert her own power: "I believe I am choosing something new/ not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel." While it is difficult to resist destructive repetitions of the "configurations of the past," the poet states again, "I choose/ to separate her from my past we have not shared." The speaker is determined not to let the past that can blot out "her particular being the details of her love" interfere in the present possibility for love:

I will not be divided from her or from myself
 by myths of separation
 while her mind and body in Manhattan are more with me
 than the smell of eucalyptus coolly burning on these hills

She will replace the "presence of pain" with the imagined presence of her loved one and resist the temptation to live in the past.

Part three shifts focus from the dangers of the poet's violating herself and her love by allowing destructive pain to interfere and instead explores the dangers of surrendering her power in the experience of love. Just as yielding to pain could serve as an escape from the responsibilities of powerful love, so love could

serve as a refuge from the difficulties of life and selfhood:

The world tells me I am its creature
 I am raked by eyes brushed by hands
 I want to crawl into her for refuge lay my head
 in the space between her breast and shoulder
 abnegating power for love
 as women have done or hiding
 from power in her love like a man

As in "Origins and History of Consciousness" the temptation here is for the lover to retreat to a private sphere, to turn her back on the world that violates her, and simply isolate herself and her love. But that separation is another "splitting" that Rich cannot accept:

I refuse these givens the splitting
 between love and action I am choosing
 not to suffer uselessly and not to use her
 I choose to love this time for once
 with all my intelligence

Through her language Rich consciously performs acts of choice that assert her own power over the destructive pull of pain and history. She is able to resist the temptation to repeat the "tragedies" inherent in her personal past and in established myths about love and separation by refusing to render herself powerless, choosing instead to integrate her love with action.

Rich's determination not to divide love from action leads her to revise the definition of power in feminist terms. The last poem of the volume, "Transcendental Etude," portrays the woman who has "walked away/ from the argument and jargon in a room," rejecting the defunct language and "splittings" of patriarchal culture, and begun to create from her own power. Her materials are simple objects--bits of yarn, small shells, the petal of a petunia--which

she lays out "absently" on the kitchen table:

Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity,
 the striving for greatness, brilliance--
 only with the musing of a mind
 one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing
 dark against bright, silk against roughness,
 with no mere will to mastery,
 only care for the many-lived, unending
 forms in which she finds herself,
 becoming now the sherd of broken glass
 slicing light in a corner, dangerous
 to flesh, now the plentiful, soft leaf
 that wrapped round the throbbing finger, soothes the wound;
 and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further
 forming underneath everything that grows.

Power here is not an over-powering; nor does it involve "using" the materials to gain a particular end. Instead the composer has no "will to mastery" but rather sees the many "forms in which she finds herself" in the materials she arranges. The materials then are not separate from her as objects because her being is implicated in them.

Rich's refusal to split love and action and her understanding of power clearly influence her poetic theory, as "Transcendental Etude" suggests. The seventh love poem even more explicitly addresses the problem of the poet's relation to her subjects or the materials for her poetry. As in "Splittings," the poet does not want to "use" her lover or her experiences for her poetry--she does not want to exploit her materials or create poetry that evades rather than reveals life--but rather she wants her work to convey the kind of power described in "Transcendental Etude:"

What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
 What atonement is this all about?
 --and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living.
 Is all this close to the wolverines' howled signals,
 that modulated cantata of the wild?
 or, when away from you I try to create you in words,
 am I simply using you, like a river or a war?
 And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars
 to escape writing of the worst thing of all--
 not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
 but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough
 so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem
 mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves?

Though the first two lines express a kind of self-loathing and suspicion, the poet recognizes her work as a form of living. Her concern is that her work not perpetuate destructive myths and relations between herself and others or between poetry and life. She recognizes the dangers of exploiting her own experience, her pain, and her love for others, for poetic material that violates rather than actively loves others. As the last few lines indicate, if love is not divided from action, then our poetry and our lives will reveal how we see ourselves in others and how we see others as selves.

While "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" and "Splittings" illustrate how the dialogue model is used as a structural device and a method of self-inquiry, they also provide an example of how language performs certain acts of consciousness, or choice, that directly affect the quality of relations outside the poem. "What kind of beast . . ." makes the same claim for the language of poetry: the poetic experience can restructure our relationship with the world so that people and things in the world become part of us

rather than "others" whose lives are separate from ours. The poem initiates the dialogue relation, which can be seen as a functional analogy for the "truth" Rich defines in her essays. Truth is not an end, or a thing, or a piece of knowledge; it is a relation that allows one to perceive and participate in "an increasing complexity." The poems in The Dream of a Common Language assume that poetry has the power to place us in a truthful relationship to ourselves, each other, and the world, and that dialogue, as a mode of being, does not, or need not, end when the poem does.

The relation between participants in a dialogue precludes the kind of self-consciousness and epistemological inquiry that characterizes much modern poetry by male writers. Whereas the problem of knowing and of ascertaining universals is often the central issue in male writing, the "splitting between/ love and action" that Rich renounces is the main obstacle the women writers confront. Their questions do not concern how we know, whether we can know, or whether individual knowledge can be universalized, but rather what can be actively done to build on or create from the knowledge the individual has, limited though it may be. The paralysis of the will found in some modern poetry by men becomes an emphasis on the powerlessness of the will in women's writing. Often the female will is aching to act but avenues of power are blocked or obscured so that the individual must create her own way, subverting the obstacles that would frustrate her as she proceeds. While

the male tradition generally concerns itself with the power of the imagination to act in a poetic, aesthetic sphere, the women writers concern themselves with transposing or translating their poetic, imaginative power into action that motivates positive personal, social, and political change.

The poetry of Carolyn Forché clearly illustrates this emphasis in women's writing on the issue of the power (or lack of power) to merge love and action, the ability of the individual imagination to act against the violence and inhumanity that prevails in the world by acting on its dreams or visions. In the first half of her volume The Country Between Us (1981) Forché addresses the problem of the relation between poetry and political violence, specifically the turmoil in El Salvador, and confronts the same difficulty Rich describes: how to transpose love into action.²⁰ Forché's perspective, as a poet living amid the violence in Salvador and writing about it in her poetry, illuminates in a drastic, harsh light the limitations, roles, and values of poetry and its voice in an inhumane political context. On the one hand, Forché is concerned about her own motives--she is aware of the temptation to exploit her experience in Salvador in her poetry and of the difficulty, given a romantic, idealist tradition in English and American poetry,

²⁰Carolyn Forché, The Country Between Us (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). All subsequent quotations from Forché's poetry are taken from this volume.

of resisting the tendency to metaphorize, symbolize, and falsify the literal situation. Like Rich, she is conscious of poetry's insidious capacity to "make the past permanent," to appeal to necessity or to elevate the subject to a tragic fixed realm.²¹ While Rich's poetry attempts to "prefigure what is possible," Forché's work focuses on the revulsion and frustration she, as a poet and a human, experiences in the face of seemingly unalterable illogical violence. In this context of unconscionable violation of human life, Forché questions deeply the role and value of poetry.

However, the extremity of the situation and poetry's presence in it attests to Forché's conviction that poetry is valuable and powerful as both a translator of political violence and a counterbalance to it. In the poem "Message" Forché portrays a situation similar to that in Yeats's "Easter 1916" in order to define or discover the relationship between the poet's and the activist's role in revolution. However, whereas Yeats bestows a tragic "terrible beauty" on the deaths of the revolutionaries, Forché's poem

²¹In "The Mirrored Vision of Adrienne Rich," Modern Poetry Studies, 8 (1977), 140-73, Susan R. Van Dyne discusses Rich's concern to avoid reinforcing destructive myths that have been blindly accepted in the past while she projects visions of a new world and a new, constructive mythology. Marge Piercy also expresses the kind of double vision of history that radical women poets must maintain: "When a people are building themselves, poetry must write the history at the same time that it evokes it" [from Marge Piercy and Dick Lourie, "Tom Eliot Meets the Hulk at Little Big Horn: The Political Economy of Poetry," in Literature in Revolution, ed. George Abbott White and Charles Newman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 78].

deliberately works to undermine such transcendence. Yeats's poem takes as its subject the power that is evident in the fusion of love and action as exemplified by the revolutionaries' sacrifice, but implies that their "terrible beauty" results from their transcendence of the "casual comedy" of daily life. In Forché's "Message," however, there is no distinction between a daily "comic" reality and a transcendent "tragic" one. For it is in the real daily world that the war against inhumanity is fought, where "women walk among champas/ with baskets of live hens, grenades and fruit." Violence is embedded in the very fabric of daily, domestic life, in the necessities of survival.

The people Forché writes about struggle for "the most hopeless of revolutions" in which "You will fight/ and fighting, you will die." Their fight is a literal struggle for physical survival and a literal struggle for values:

Leonel, you load your bare few guns
with an idea for a water pump and
co-operative farm.

In this struggle the poet is active and, like the revolutionaries, nearly ineffectual because the adversary is so formidable. Yet Forché still claims her role:

I will live
and living cry out until my voice is gone
to its hollow of earth, where with our
hands and by the lives we have chosen
we will dig deep into our deaths.
I have done all that I could do.

In this and other poems Forché reveals the waste and death that prevail when dialogue is denied and the humanizing individual

imagination is not granted a role in directing political action.

In uniting with the activists after death, Forché suggests that poetry is a revolutionary act that complements literal action. After death, individuality is erased and the revolutionaries and poet join

where we will not know each other
or ourselves, where we will be a various
darkness among ideas that amounted
to nothing, among men who amounted
to nothing . . .

Yet within the nothingness, the ineffectuality, and the defeat, the poet and the revolutionaries share

a belief that became
but a small light
in the breadth of time where we began
among each other, where we lived
in the hour farthest from God.

The repetition of "among" reinforces the imperative of interdependence, the lack of self-enclosure or autonomy, and the complicity of all of us in the situation. Far from romanticizing or idealizing the Salvadoran struggle, Forché portrays the desolation, hopelessness, and waste, yet acknowledges also the "small light" of humanity and imagination forced to fight violently and often die for its vision. The effort of restraint and the controlled tone that resists both romantic overstatement and cynical, flippant understatement attest to Forché's conception of the poem as a purveyor of truth, a message that relays the real conviction of the revolutionaries, and a source of power and humanity despite its comparative smallness. Poetry then is a voice that translates the war to those outside it; it is, in

Forché's words, "a poetry of witness" speaking for the revolutionaries, who themselves are silenced, their "voices sprayed over the walls/dry to the touch by morning."²²

Forché's conscious desire to make her poetry work for the understanding of the Salvadoran problem and her own sense of her power as a poet is reflected in the poem "Return," a dialogue between the frustrated, spiritually sickened poet and an American friend. The poet expresses the fear and revulsion she feels when she returns from Salvador to the trivialities and commercialism of the United States:

Upon my return to America, Josephine:
the iced drinks and paper umbrellas, clean
toilets and Los Angeles palm trees moving
like lean women, I was afraid more than
I had been, even of motels so much so
that for months every tire blow-out
was final, every strange car near the house
kept watch and I strained even to remember
things impossible to forget.

Josephine recognizes what horrifies the poet:

So you've come to understand why men
and women of good will read
torture reports with fascination.

The poet is overwhelmed with the sense of her own powerlessness and her inability to communicate with people who treat the very real horrors she has witnessed as diversions:

²²In her essay "El Salvador: An Aide Memoir," American Poetry Review, 10, No. 4 (1981), pp. 3-7, Forché describes the evolution of her understanding of the political power of poetry. A "poetry of witness," of true engagement, is political, according to Forché, because it illustrates that poetry is not and cannot be subservient to a particular politics; that is, poetry is political because it reveals the limits of the merely political.

I have not rested, not since I drove
those streets with a gun in my lap,
not since all manner of speaking has
failed and the remnant of my life
continues onward. . . .

I cannot, Josephine, talk to them.

But through dialogue the poet's loss of relatedness and power, her silence, is exposed as an evasion of responsibility. Josephine forcefully reminds the poet that those "who erase/ what they touch" do not dehumanize and destroy only their immediate victims:

We are all erased
by them, and no longer resemble decent
men. We no longer have the hearts,
the strength, the lives of women.

It is not the experiences of inhumanity that the poet witnessed in Salvador that render her powerless, but rather the false sense of isolation she has received from her culture:

Your problem is not your life as it is
in America, not that your hands, as you
tell me, are tied to do something. It is
that you were born to an island of greed
and grace where you have this sense
of yourself as apart from others. It is
not your right to feel powerless. Better
people than you were powerless.
You have not returned to your country,
but to a life you never left.

This self-conscious withdrawal is culturally disposed, but more importantly it is personally imposed and perpetuated. Josephine tells the poet that it is not her right or privilege to see herself as distinct from others. "Return" then exemplifies the kind of poem Rich calls for in "What Kind of beast . . .," a poem whose subject is

Not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
 but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough
 so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem
 mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves.

In "Return" the dialogue is used as a structural method and the conversation serves to challenge the poet's sense of herself as separate and unimplicated in the lives of others. The poem also points out that what sickens the poet, what makes her "go mad," is the power play, which is pervasively sexual, that "erases" us all and forces us to play its game, just as Leonel in "Message" must load his guns to begin to fulfill the ideas for insuring the bare survival of his people. The brutal sexual tortures in Salvador are described alongside a portrayal of American men, "the constant Scotch and fine white/ hands, many hours of business, penises/ hardened by motor inns and a faint/ resemblance to their wives." The suggestion is that the "luxury" of objectifying others perpetuates violation, and that violation, regardless of degree, is still destructive to both victim and victimizer, in fact, to humanity in general. In Salvador the American ambassador's withdrawal into luxury--"his tanks of fish, his clicking pen, his rapt devotion to reports"--keeps him from confronting the human issues. In a pathetic attempt to displace his apathy, his wife "flew where she pleased in that country/ with her drunken kindness," announcing to the people that "she was there to help." As in "Message," Forché conveys the near hopelessness of the effort to soothe human suffering in the face of the brutal luxury of those in power and the apathy of those estranged from but implicated in the situation.

Forché's purpose in the Salvador poems is similar to Rich's in Diving into the Wreck as Rich seeks to extract "the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth." In Forché's case, the "myth" that must be resisted is acknowledged not so much as "patriarchal ideology" as it is the tendency in poetic tradition toward reifying solitary experience and detaching the "poetic" from the "political:"

From our tradition we inherit a poetic, a sense of appropriate subjects, styles, forms and levels of diction; that poetic might insist that we be attuned to the individual in isolation, to particular sensitivity in the face of "nature," to special ingenuity in inventing metaphor. It might encourage a self-regarding, inward looking poetry.²³

Forché's problem consists of finding a voice for "a poetry of witness," or finding a poetic form that takes seriously its political role:

Since Romanticism didactic poetry has been presumed dead and narrative poetry has had at best a half life. Demonstration is inimical to a poetry of lyric confession and self-examination, therefore didactic poetry is seen as crude and unpoetic. To suggest a return to the formal didactic mode of Virgil's Georgics or Lucretius's De Rerum Natura would be to deny history, but what has survived of that poetic is the belief that a poet's voice must be inwardly authentic and compelling of our attention; the poet's voice must have authority.²⁴

What matters finally to Forché is not the politics of the poem, however, but "the quality of its engagement." By deeply engaging its subject, the poem "expresses in exemplary fashion that it is not at the disposal of politics. That is its political content."²⁵

²³Forché, "El Salvador," p. 7.

²⁴Forché, "El Salvador," p. 7.

²⁵Forché, "El Salvador," p. 7.

Forché's understanding of the poetic tradition helps explain the tone of restraint and deliberateness in such poems as "The Colonel" and "Because One Is Always Forgotten." Like Rich, Forché is constantly aware that she is working as much against language and poetic conventions as with them:

. . . the inherited poetic limits the range of our work and determines the boundaries of what can be said. There is a problem of metaphor which moved Neruda to write: "the blood of the children/ flowed out onto the streets/ like . . . the blood of the children." There is a problem of poeticizing horror, resembling the problem of the photographic image which might render starvation visually appealing.²⁶

In "The Colonel" Forché even abandons line length in an attempt to resist any "poeticizing" or symbolism that would divert the reader's attention from the horror of the real situation. Forché acknowledges the difficulty of restraining herself and her language when she says, "There is no other way to say this," and the understatement created by the neutral reporting style attests to the near hysteria underlying the narrative.

While Rich consciously cultivates the dialogue, or "common language," as a form and as an analogy for the process of poetic creation and of feminist thinking, Forché seems deliberately to avoid any theoretical or systematic framework of poetics in the Salvador poems. Still, both poets are concerned with subverting any poetic conventions that reduce or obscure the subject. They also attempt to overcome the indulgent self-consciousness that perpetuates

²⁶Forché, "El Salvador," p. 7.

separation and exclusion rather than community and dialogue. And both poets are interested in testing the limits of poetry's power in a political context, though these contexts pose almost opposite problems for the poetic voice. Forché narrates situations in which the imagination and the dialogic relation are nearly defeated and overwhelmed by the inhumanity taking place. The poet must restrain herself in order to protect that imagination from callousness or sheer madness. In contrast, Rich creates a context in which the imagination, having clearly assessed the "wreck," begins to reconstruct meanings from a female perspective. The problem for Rich is not so much the defeat or diminution of the imagination as it is loss of power through diffusion. Rich must deny certain avenues and issues in order to keep herself attuned to "what is essential."

Though Forché depicts the imagination nearly defeated by external circumstances while Rich portrays the imagination in danger of defeating itself, both poets suggest that a central contribution poetry makes to political change lies in the ethical perspective it develops toward its subjects. Without the engagement required by a dialogic relationship, we make objects of ourselves and others and limit our freedom. The last image in Forché's volume serves to summarize this imperative of seeing others as selves:

There is a cyclone fence between
ourselves and the slaughter and behind it
we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.
It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing.

CHAPTER III

BEYOND DELUSIONS OF DETERMINISM

In Beyond God the Father Mary Daly defines feminist thinking as ultimately an existential inquiry, a personal search for meaning, being and "god."¹ Daly claims that the radical feminist indeed confronts an urgent choice similar to Forché's uncompromising ultimatum "ourselves or nothing": she can divest herself of false cultural myths about women and cultivate the power to name herself, or she can surrender herself to those myths and live an inauthentic existence. At the core of the feminist movement Daly finds a deep struggle for selfhood and a corresponding drive to renounce any delusions of determinism that would undermine a woman's sense of power over and responsibility for her own life. Whether these delusions of determinism take the systematic form of culturally legitimated religious myths and theories of history, economics, psychology and aesthetics, or the less systematic form of untested personal restrictions, feminists consistently turn away from such limiting "given" frameworks of thought and instead grant authority to their own experiences and the power of their own imaginations to derive and prefigure new meanings and possibilities for being.

Contemporary women's poetry reflects this concern to expose the destructiveness of false closure and to release women from

¹Daly, 1973.

culturally-disposed and self-imposed limitations. Women writers' resistance to false consciousness takes many forms, from Rich's refusals to be victimized by myths of pain, love and history to Audre Lorde's adamant proclamations of warrior-like power, and from the celebration of lesbian sensuality in Olga Broumas's work to the openended, patient simplicity found in Cathy Song's poetry. Even in works that directly resist yielding to myths of political determinism--such as some poems by Rich and Forché--the refusals to be confined, resigned, or condemned to historical "necessity" are inseparable from the kind of self-examination and self-celebration found in the less consciously "political" writers' works. As Rich has pointed out, the power of overtly political poetry "can come only from the poet's need to identify her relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of her pain, fear, and anger, the meaning of her resistance."² No matter what the concrete subject of the poem is, for these women poets the responses of the individual sensibility provide the grounds for understanding and evaluating experiences in fresh ways.

The relation of dialogue that the feminist-influenced poem enacts helps break through delusions of determinism by precluding the alienation inherent in subject-object relationships. Because dialogue is by definition neither open nor closed, having no origin or goal,

²Rich, "Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman," in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, p. 251.

its nature challenges deterministic theories of history, theology, and ontology. By participating in the openended, vital play of dialogue, one is made aware of possibilities for meaning and being and realizes a sense of power that comes with complete involvement and responsiveness in the event, a power that is not possible to experience in a subject-object relationship. In Rich's poem, Elvira Shatayev expresses the heightened sense of power she feels as she and the other women struggle together to survive:

' . . . I have never loved
like this I have never seen
my own forces so taken up and shared
and given back'

The experience itself, the self's complete participation in it, is vitally important, and systems of meaning that dissuade us from participation by projecting loss or inevitable failure only waste our powers and urge us "to settle for less."

Because things, people and ideas are encountered not as alienated objects but as selves engaged in dialogue with the poet, feminist influenced poets give authority to the experiences and responses of the individual imagination. This is not to say that these poets privilege the imagination over its materials or subjects, but rather that women poets attempt to encounter the world for themselves instead of viewing it through predetermined cultural frameworks, which generally are patriarchal. As Mary Carruthers has observed, contemporary women's poetry celebrates and prefigures "integrity" or the wholeness of the individual. But "integration is not isolation.

Because it is constructed through sharing and bonding, through seeing the selves in others, recognizing and recovering them, it leads to a truly civilized and social vision of being."³ Again the model of the dialogue, in which the participants discover self-possibility through giving themselves over to the play of dialogue, reflects this achievement of both self realization and social realization.

As an ethical stance, a relation that violates neither participant but rather elevates each out of subjective isolation, the dialogue serves a doubly important role when it is used as a formal model in women's poetry. Because it is an act of dialogue, the poem is seen by women writers as a crucial vehicle in their drive to break through given conceptions and definitions of women and women's experiences. It is also a valuable tool for restoring authority to the self, allowing women to speak what has never been named or what has been reductively defined. Audre Lorde explains why "naming" ourselves and our experiences firsthand is imperative for women, and especially for black women:

If we don't name ourselves, we are nothing. As a black woman I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all. In that sense it becomes a survival problem.⁴

³Mary J. Carruthers, "The Re-Vision of the Muse: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas," Hudson Review, 34 (1983), 320-21.

⁴Karla Hammond, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," American Poetry Review, 9, No. 2 (1980), 19.

As Lorde explains in the article "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," poetry is one of women's most powerful sources of naming and of surviving:

For women . . . poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our lives.⁵

Poetry projects possibilities for new meaning and change in a world that might otherwise seem meaningless, or full of false meaning, and determined.

The release from delusions of determinism that the poem enacts results in some unique characteristics of form and tone in women's poetry. Rich's "Splittings," in which the speaker refuses to accept myths of defeated love and tragic pain, ends with a performative language act that carries the experience of the poem over into the world beyond the poem. The speaker's resolve to "love this time for once/ with all my intelligence" signals a willful change of consciousness that must integrally change her relations to others beyond the poem. In other works by Rich, the discovery that life is not given or predetermined, but rather is shaped by our wills and willingness to derive values from our experiences, leads the speaker to conclude with short, gnomic statements that might sound trite or

⁵Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in The Future of Difference, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), p. 126.

clichéd out of context. Jonathan Holden's description of Philip Levine's poem "Coming Home" can also explain how Rich's poems "earn" their otherwise trivial conclusions:

. . . it is as if the poem discovered its last line--what it has been trying to say--through its imagery. Without that last line, a line that comes with the force of a revelation, the poem is unsatisfying, merely a seeming hodge-podge of grim images which are never brought into the suddenly terrible clear focus that ends the poem. Similarly, the last line, by itself, without the supporting context of imagery through which it is "discovered," seems pat, already decided upon, only a slogan.⁶

Interestingly enough, this comment is taken from an article in which Holden criticizes Forché for naively blurring the distinction between poetic engagement and political engagement. Yet Holden fails to consider the significant qualitative difference between the kind of "revelation" that closes Levine's poem and the kind of revelation that concludes, for example, Forché's "Ourselves or Nothing" or Rich's "Hunger." Levine's line is revelatory in the same sense that Joyce's epiphanies are: the characters or speakers are paralyzed by their sudden recognition of the facts--this is the way things are, "We burn the city every day." Women's poems, however, are seldom content to stop at such a crucial stage of understanding; instead they confront not only the facts, but the values and significance of the revelation. Thus, our responsibility for those facts becomes as important as the facts themselves, as expressed in Forché's "the

⁶Jonathan Holden, "Poetry and Commitment," Ohio Review, 29 (1982), 28.

choice is ourselves/ or nothing" and Rich's "Until we find each other, we are alone" or "Only she who says/ she did not choose is the loser in the end." While these concise lines certainly offer no tangible solutions, they do convey a deep sense of urgency and even prophetic admonition, and they express at the very least the possibility that we can direct and claim our futures instead of resigning ourselves to them. Besides not dealing with Forché's best poems, Holden oversimplifies Forché's comments on a political poetics in order to preserve the traditional distinction between the poetic and the political. He wants "political" poems to settle for factual revelation, rather than engaging the poet and the reader in the more pressing problem of evaluation. Thus he misses the significance of Forché's exploration of the nexus between the personal and the political, and reifies the notion of a political "reality" existent apart from the values and uses that are made out of the facts.

The tone of prophecy found in some women's poetry directly results from feminist thinking and the release from oppressive deterministic views of self, history, and political change. As Joanne Feit Diehl points out, Rich's authority to speak prophetically partly arises from her choice of audience and subject matter, choices involving "a deliberate rejection of the borrowed power of tradition, the necessity of incurring the self-inflicted wounds which mark the

birth of an individuated poetic voice."⁷ In fact, in many of her poems Rich abandons her personal voice and speaks as particular women from other cultures and other historical periods--Elvira Shatayev, Madame Curie, Paula Becker, Susan B. Anthony, and others. By using what Diehl calls "a lesbian ontology," a communal female-centered vision, Rich can escape "the anxieties of male-dominated poetic influence."⁸ By centering her work on the female self and granting it the authority to name experiences either never before named or already misdefined in patriarchal poetic tradition, Rich mines the powers of the imagination to evoke through language new meanings and realities, and the prophetic tone that occurs in her poetry reflects her proximity to that wonderful, yet often terrible power.

Rich's emphasis on refusing certain poetic conventions and poses is matched by her constant concern for self-responsibility--she chooses her direction as she turns away from other less meaningful existences. The prophetic tone in Forché's poems also arises from her vision of our need to claim responsibility for the political persecution of others. Her method is to expose the inhumanity that persists while we fail to claim and use our power to prevent it. The urgent apocalyptic tone of her work results too from the

⁷ Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Cartographies of Silence': Rich's Common Language and the Woman Poet," Feminist Studies, 6 (1980), 533.

⁸ Diehl, p. 536.

extremity of her subject matter--in a situation such as "The Colonel" depicts, in which the imagination is nearly defeated by the horrors it is forced to perceive, the imagination's response is necessarily extreme. The poem, as an assertion of the humane imagination, is indeed an act of survival. For Jonathan Holden, Forché is "merely shocked at human atrocity" and offers only "an iterated, mechanical cry of pain . . . a despair without the authority of discovered vision";⁹ yet it is possible that Holden simply does not acknowledge the vision that Forché discovers because it does not privilege the solitary poetic imagination, as traditional modern poetics does, but rather implicates it in the El Salvadoran crimes. As Forché emphasizes in her poems and her essays, she resists "using" her experiences to feed conventional poetic visions and to reinforce myths of the poetic imagination's transcendence of political realities; instead her poems portray the terrible power of such a political context to warp and ultimately defeat the humane imagination. Her message is not finally despair but responsibility.

Both Rich and Forché find powerful voices by transgressing and modifying the poetic tradition to make it speak for their experiences. Thus while they proclaim the power of the individual to change herself and her world through naming and witnessing, they accomplish that revision within the sphere of poetic tradition. Both poets' work signals radical breaches of poetic expectations and

⁹Holden, p. 30.

aesthetic determinism by challenging traditional views of poetry as an isolated, privileged, and apolitical activity. Diehl points out an interesting paradox in Rich's poetry that marks her work as transitional:

The central paradox of this volume [The Dream of a Common Language] resides in the poems' assertion of this move toward a new mode of writing, toward a gentle poetics antithetical to the aggressions of the patriarchal tradition of Western poetry, while at the same time claiming the bold heroic nature of this enterprise.¹⁰

As a consequence, Rich alternates between using two interdependent modes of expression, "the intimate voice of inner conversations" and "the rhetorical formulations of the need for an alternative form of power." Diehl summarizes Rich's challenge in The Dream as the problem of finding a language that will speak powerfully yet not violate the things it speaks of, a language that composes, like the woman in "Transcendental Etude,"

the tenets of a life together
with no mere will to mastery,
only care for the many-lived, unending
forms in which she finds herself.

The mutual presence of the powerful, prophetic voice and the gentle, quiet tone in contemporary women's poetry accounts for the unusual sense of justified, non-hysterical crisis and intensity of experience found in much women's poetry. Audre Lorde's poetry especially illustrates the fusion of clear-sighted, often violent anger and gentle, yet firm love. The Black Unicorn (1978) begins

¹⁰Diehl, p. 541.

with an image of the poet's determination and mystical, haunting power:

The black unicorn is greedy.
 The black unicorn is impatient.
 The black unicorn was mistaken
 for a shadow
 or symbol
 and taken
 through a cold country
 where mist painted mockeries
 of my fury.
 It is not on her lap where the horn rests
 but deep in her moonpit
 growing.

The black unicorn is restless
 the black unicorn is unrelenting
 the black unicorn is not
 free.¹¹

Lorde's opening poem to the volume ominously foreshadows the violent, uncompromising tendency of the poems to follow. Like Rich's and Forché's poetry, Lorde's poems will transgress conventional poetic expectations in order to defy and reject interpretation of themselves as "shadow or symbol"; her words are literal acts of disruption and of renaming, not symbolic substitutes or representations.

The admonition of impending uprising and coming into strength in "The Black Unicorn" recurs throughout the volume. The primary source of power for Lorde is her matriarchal African heritage by which, especially in the first section, she displaces the authority of patriarchal, caucasian values in contemporary society. Within

¹¹Lorde, The Black Unicorn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978). All subsequent quotations from Lorde's poetry are taken from this volume.

the African matriarchal setting, the women's voices Lorde assumes are self-assured and proud:

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind.
I seek no favor
untouched by blood
unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as my errors
or my pride
I do not mix
love with pity
nor hate with scorn
and if you would know me
look into the entrails of Uranus
where the restless oceans pound.
("A Woman Speaks")

Lorde evokes the African goddesses and mothers as muses, calling on the visionary power of their blackness:

Mother I need
mother I need
mother I need your blackness now
as the august earth needs rain.
("From the House of Yemanja")

What the black mother-muse provides the poet with is, of course, a language and a context in which she can speak truthfully and powerfully of herself and her experiences as a black woman.

However, in "Dahomey" Lorde, like Rich, indicates that warrior-like fury is not the only component of her personal and historical identity:

Bearing two drums on my head I speak
whatever language is needed
to sharpen the knives of my tongue
the snake is aware although sleeping
under my blood
since I am a woman whether or not
you are against me

I will braid my hair
 even
 in the seasons of rain.

The domestic image of braiding hair recalls the quiet tone in the poetry of some native American women poets and of Hawaiian poet Cathy Song. Like Rich, Lorde implies that while black women discover the sources of their strength and carry out the profound re-naming of themselves, that discovery of power does not distort their gentle, loving nature but rather nourishes it. It is clear in Lorde's work and in other women's writing that when complemented by this strength, women's love is not a weakness easily exploited or abused. Lorde's lines "I do not mix/ love with pity/ nor hate with scorn" recall the self-assured love H. D. expresses in the headnote to The Dream of a Common Language: "I go to the things I love/ with no thought of duty or pity."

The image of women as warriors "spreading out through nights/ laughter and promise/ and dark heat," violently defiant yet loving, is accompanied in The Black Unicorn by the poet's consciousness of both the urgency and the difficulty of speaking authoritatively as a black woman in a culture dominated by white men. In "A Litany for Survival," for example, Lorde enacts a dismissal of the self-conscious questions that often lead to paralysis. Addressed to those who live on the edges or borders of definition--those living "at the shoreline," "looking inward and outward," "seeking a now that can breed/ futures"--the poem enumerates the many fears and possibilities of loss that silence and paralyze us:

when we are loved we are afraid
 love will vanish
 when we are alone we are afraid
 love will never return
 and when we speak we are afraid
 our words will not be heard
 nor welcomed
 but when we are silent
 we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
 remembering
 we were never meant to survive.

Like Rich's "Splittings," this poem rejects conventional poses of tragic necessity, but for different reasons. The authority to speak here comes not from the speaker's resolve to take control of her life and choose her direction but from her recognition of the license implied in her people's suffering fears and longings. The fact of having gratuitously survived endows Lorde's people with a reckless freedom to speak, as if they have nothing to lose. Although a later poem qualifies this freedom--"I do not believe/ our wants have made all our lies/ holy"--the poem still illustrates the curious mingling of prophetic admonition and simple receptivity and conveys a complex, wise tone that is reinforced by the repetitive biblical rhythm.

In other poems the prophetic message is expressed through the use of the conditional mood. In Rich's work the conditional phrase often projects a dream or envisions possibilities for growth, as, for example, in these lines: "if I could make sense of how/ my life is still tangled/ with dead weeds"; "if I could know/ in what language to address/ the spirits that claim a place"; "Yet if I could instruct myself"; "If I could let you know--/ two women together is

a work/ nothing in civilization has made simple."¹² In contrast, Lorde often uses the conditional to dissuade us from adopting certain attitudes or to project where the future should not go. For example, the poem "Power" warns against the poet's misusing or thoughtlessly hiding behind the rhetoric of her poems. First, Lorde defines the dangerous power of poetry: "The difference between poetry and rhetoric/ is being/ ready to kill/ yourself/ instead of your children." The poet struggles "without imagery or magic/ trying to make power out of hatred and destruction" as she dreams of a dying black boy shot by a white policeman. She resolves to not surrender her only power by legitimating the false "justice" that sets the policeman free, as did the one black juror

. . . who said
 "They convinced me" meaning
 they had dragged her 4'10" black woman's frame
 over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval
 until she let go the first real power she ever had
 and lined her own womb with cement
 to make a graveyard for our children.

The poet warns herself, and her reader, at the end of the poem how easy it might be to seek mere retribution instead of real justice:

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.
 But unless I learn to use
 the difference between poetry and rhetoric
 my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
 or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
 and one day I will take my teenaged plug
 and connect it to the nearest socket

¹²These quotations are taken from Rich's The Dream of a Common Language; the first two are from the poem "Toward the Solstice," the third is from "Splittings," and the fourth is from Part XIX of "Twenty-One Love Poems."

raping a 85-year-old white woman
 who is somebody's mother
 and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
 a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
 "Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."

In this poem Lorde acknowledges a temptation similar to the one Forché resists when she recognizes the danger of "poeticizing," and so reifying, political violation in her work. Both poets perceive a qualitative and ethical difference between rhetoric, or propaganda, and true poetry. Whereas rhetoric, which is mocked in Lorde's last stanza, arises from a sensational stock response to the event, poetry requires authentic engagement of the poet, and hence the reader, with the subject. The surreal scenario Lorde depicts at the end of "Power" attests both to the depth of her anger (and so to the depth of her temptation) and to the potential of rhetoric masked as poetry to perpetuate violation and legitimize the "myth of separation" that both Rich and Forché expose in their work. The absurd conjunction of the image of the Greek chorus, a convention of tragedy, singing in waltz time emphasizes further the sterility and triviality of the final response. Rhetoric dismisses the reader from responsibility by making a rote response adequate, whereas poetry implicates the reader in the pain and the joy of others.

Like Rich and Forché, Lorde is deeply aware that poetry is political because it brings its readers into some kind of relation with the poet, the subject of the poem, and themselves. Poetry can either bring the reader into a powerful, though often difficult, dialogic participation in the world, or, like Lorde's parody, it

can essentially rape the reader's power, leaving her placated by reinforcing her delusions of determinism and so resigned to her powerlessness. All three poets attempt to expose and transgress the poetic conventions and poses that allow both poet and reader to fake engaged responses while escaping responsibility.

A similar conditional warning against the myth of separation and non-responsibility occurs in "Between Ourselves." Here Lorde cautions her people against hating other blacks for their "differences." She seems especially to address the destructiveness of gynephobia and homophobia. The poem closes on an apocalyptic note, using African myth to describe individuals as multi-faceted and irreducible to a single, static definition:

Armed with scars
 healed
 in many different colors
 I look in my own faces
 as Eshu's daughter crying
 if we do not stop killing
 the other
 in ourselves
 the self that we hate
 in others
 soon we shall all lie
 in the same direction
 and Eshidale's priests will be very busy
 they who alone can bury
 all those who seek their own death
 by jumping up from the ground
 and landing upon their heads.

Again, the message that pervades contemporary women's poetry is reiterated here: we preserve ourselves when we preserve others, and we realize others as we realize ourselves. By giving voice to the "others" in themselves, the angry rapist in Lorde, the matriarchs of

history in Rich, the weakened, near-speechless poet in Forché, these poets illustrate how challenging arbitrary limits restores authority to the self, allowing us to reevaluate and redefine meanings that seem fixed and exclusive.

The Black Unicorn concludes with a poem entitled "Solstice" that exemplifies the convergence of violent, apocalyptic vision and gentle tone. The setting is, as the title indicates, a time of transition, self-transformation, and suspension between states of being. The communal "we," which is quite prevalent in women's poetry, is portrayed as having lived off the food of others rather than survived by nourishing and taking nourishment from their own gardens, houses, and families. Though "our skins are empty . . . vacated by the spirits/ who are angered by our reluctance/ to feed them," the speaker and her people are not doomed to empty lives; instead her heritage provides resources and preserves the spirits, which are "hidden away by our mothers/ who are waiting for us by the river." The speaker claims her future just as she claims her past:

My skin is tightening
soon I shall shed it
like a monitor lizard
like remembered comfort
at the new moon's rising
I will eat the last signs of my weakness
remove the scars of old childhood wars
and dare to enter the forest whistling
like a snake that has fed the chameleon
for changes
I shall be forever.

Finally in the last stanza the speaker calmly celebrates and anticipates both the beauty and difficulty of her impending transformation in a meditative but defiant voice:

May I never remember reasons
 for my spirit's safety
 may I never forget
 the warning of my woman's flesh
 weeping at the new moon
 may I never lose
 that terror
 that keeps me brave
 May I owe nothing
 that I cannot repay.

The repetition recalls the incantation in "A Litany of Survival" and serves to suggest both the prophetic vision and personal quietude that characterizes Lorde's poetry and much of the work of other women writers. As in so many women's poems, the speaker turns away from old ways of living that no longer serve her, carries with her what is valuable from the past, and moves toward a new existence with full awareness of its difficulty and its possibility, quietly celebrating her transformation.

It is certainly significant to an understanding of Lorde's view of poetry, and of contemporary women's poetics in general, that "Solstice" closes The Black Unicorn. The strong meditation that concludes the volume serves as a functional closure rather than a final one, as a kind of benediction that looks forward to what is to come. Also the gentle but determined tone indicates that the speaker of the volume has united the unrelenting, restless power of the black unicorn with the patient recognition of the economy of change, the "changes/ I shall be forever." Yet neither attitude or conviction is diminished by the other; rather each needs the other to enact and guide it. Also, as the last poem in the volume, "Solstice"

signifies the translation of poetic experience into "real" life; the reader is delivered back into the world beyond the poem just as the speaker is reborn, having shed her empty skin. As Lorde says in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," "In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors."¹³ Lorde closes her volume with a statement of her determination to keep the open-ended vision steady before her, no matter what fears, pain, or distractions tempt her to resign in defeat.

Olga Broumas's poetry resembles Lorde's in the way that it seeks to break through delusions of determinism and re-evaluate the meaning of the poet's cultural heritage. Broumas uses Greek myth in the same way Lorde uses African mythology to serve as a context in which the female voice can be assertive and authoritative. Like The Black Unicorn, Beginning With O (1977) opens with a series of poems that feminize the traditional mythology and so create a female-centered poetic context for the entire volume.¹⁴ Although Broumas's revisions of Greek myth are generally more sexual and less violent than Lorde's portrayal of her African heritage, the strategy and

¹³Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," p. 127.

¹⁴Olga Broumas, Beginning With O (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). All subsequent quotations from Broumas's poetry are taken from this volume.

purpose of both rereadings are similar: to displace the authority of the traditional sexual/racial hierarchy, in which power means domination, not dialogue, and to displace the authority of a male-centered poetic tradition and way of reading in which the same relation of power as overpowering pertains.

The first poem, "Leda and Her Swan," illustrates Broumas's need to assert from the beginning her transgression of male poetics and male-centered sexuality. Deliberately recalling Yeats's poem in the title, Broumas reenvisions a poetic context for her work as she revises the myth of the rape of Leda. In the foreground the speaker dreams about and enjoys another woman's love, while in the background the "fathers" nod in approval, secure in their illusion of having decreed this relationship:

The fathers are nodding like
overdosed lechers, the fathers approve
with authority: Persian emperors, ordering
that the sun shall rise
every dawn, set
each dusk. I dream.

Clearly in this poetic and sexual context, the fathers are extraneous and powerless, "Dresden figurines/ vestigial, anecdotal/ small sculptures/ shaped by the hands of nuns." The women lovers only note the incongruity of the fathers's "will to power" over them and, turning away, find in themselves a fertile and expansive worldly beauty:

. . . Scarlet
liturgies shake our room, amaryllis blooms
in your upper thighs, water lily
on mine, fervent delta

the bed afloat, sheer
 linen billowing
 on the wind: Nile, Amazon, Mississippi.

Neither the sexual nor the poetic relationship here is a rape relation justified by some goal of transcendence: there is no power that is an overpowering. As the speaker views them, the fathers are not so much evil, hated destroyers who must be rebelled against as they are silly, pretentious men who simply don't belong. They have wandered into a context that does not legitimate their vanities.

By immediately dismissing the male perspective from the poetic context, Broumas is able to present positive images of lesbian experience, without constant reference to the male world, in the rest of the poems in the first section, "Twelve Aspects of God." For Broumas, god, or the gods, are all female, and her "lesbian ontology," to use Diehl's term, results in poems characterized by a startling, concentrated integration of sexual, aesthetic, and religious experience.¹⁵ For example, "Io" describes female receptivity that is at once sexual, poetic, and religious. The poem suggests that, like the lover, the poet and even the reader receive most value when they openly listen to or experience with their bodies, not filter experience through preconceived judgments or inherited psychological responses. "One would" ideally divest herself of all givens and grant herself the authority to conceive meaning:

¹⁵Diehl, p. 536.

One would know nothing.
 One would begin by the touch
 return to her body
 one would forget
 even the three
 soft cages
 where summer lasts.

One would regret nothing.
 One would first touch the mouth
 then the warm
 pulsing places that wait
 that wait
 and the last song around them
 a shred of light.

A crumpled apron, a headcloth, a veil.
 One would keep nothing.

By the still mouths of fear
 one would listen. Desire
 would spill past each lip
 and caution. That which is light
 would remain.

That which is
 still would grow fertile.

Like so many contemporary women's poems, "Io" prefigures a state of innocence and openness that the poet envisions for herself and for her reader; she would like the reader to receive the poem as she would receive a lover, without preconceived evaluations, intellectual distance, or myths that would in any way limit or confine the experience. The poet would like the reader's relation to the poem to be one of dialogue, not mastery. Though Broumas's vision of dialogue here is thoroughly sexual, the ethical configuration is still intact. The participants take the risk of opening themselves to dialogue and are rewarded when the experience results in light, stillness, and fertility, not in exploitation or self-erasure.

As this poem indicates, Broumas is much less concerned with directly articulating the social-political implications of private relationships than Rich, Lorde and Forché are. Her poems most often boldly portray and celebrate personal sexual experiences unqualified by, for example, the need Rich sees for moving "beyond this secret circle of fire" or the grief Lorde feels as she reads "only the headlines/ of this morning's newspaper." In two poems, however, Broumas makes clear the connection she often silently assumes in other poems between lesbian sexuality and the radical decentering of politics and poetics. In "Rumplestiltskin" the tongue has the sexual and linguistic power to excavate new meanings:

Tongues
sleepwalking in caves. Pink shells. Sturdy
diggers. Archaeologists of the right
the speechless zones
of the brain.

Also in "Artemis" Broumas directly acknowledges that the act of re-ordering language to express female vision, of transgressing the alphabet and "beginning with 0," is both a political act of recentering meaning and a personal and communal act of survival:

I am a woman committed to
a politics
of transliteration, the methodology

of a mind
stunned at the suddenly
possible shifts of meaning--for which
like amnesiacs

in a ward on fire, we must
find words
or burn.

While these poems, especially "Artemis," directly articulate political consequences of private experiences, most of Broumas's poems simply assume that extension without expressing it continually. This is not to say, however, that Broumas's work implies a retreat from the world into a solitary, private realm, but rather to emphasize the secure sense of authority within a female-centered context that her poems project.

The concentration on the single experience, usually sexual, lends Broumas's poetry a physical immediacy and intensity that distinguishes her work. Whereas a Rich poem is often layered--the very personal core ripples out to collide with and/or shape the political reality, and vice versa--most of Broumas's poems take the political implications of her poetic acts for granted. To state the difference in Diehl's terms, Broumas's work generally lacks the "rhetorical formulations" that proclaim a need for an alternative form of power and an alternative poetics, and instead speaks mostly in the "intimate voice of inner conversation."¹⁶ The feminist mode of writing and reading, the dialogue relationship among poet, subject, and reader, that Rich constantly defines and urges in The Dream of a Common Language is assumed in Beginning With 0 from the first poem when the fathers, with their "will to mastery," are dismissed. With Rich as a precursor, Broumas does not have to be concerned to

¹⁶Diehl, p. 541.

demonstrate the need for a feminist form of power, but instead she can demonstrate her experience of the power itself.

One of the best examples of the concentrated, body-centered poems that Broumas writes is the preface poem to the volume, "'Sometimes, as a child'":

'Sometimes, as a child

when the Greek sea
was exceptionally calm
the sun not so much a pinnacle
as a perspirant of light, your brow and the sky
meeting on the horizon, sometimes

you'd dive
from the float, the pier, the stone
promontory, through water so startled
it held the shape of your plunge, and there

in the arrested heat of the afternoon
without thought, effortless
as a mantra turning
you'd turn
in the paused wake of your dive, enter
the suck of the parted waters, you'd emerge

clean caesarean, flinging
live rivulets from your hair, your own
breath arrested. Something immaculate, a chance

crucial junction: time, light, water
had occurred, you could feel your bones
glisten
translucent as spinal fins.

In rain-
green Oregon now, approaching thirty, sometimes
the same
rare concert of light and spine
resonates in my bones, as glistening
starfish, lover, your fingers
beach up.'

Many of the poems that follow capture experiences of a "crucial junction" like this one when, though body-centered communion with

others, the poet sheds the luggage of reductive ideologies, taboos, and false responses, keeping nothing but her own receptive sensibilities and the power that arises not from manipulation but from love.

The poems in Cathy Song's Picture Bride (1983) exemplify the quiet, gentle power that the poet derives from complete receptivity and integration between body and imagination.¹⁷ Like Broumas's work, Song's poems portray moments of "crucial junction"; in fact, each poem is like painting, in which the relations drawn between images are perhaps more significant than the images in themselves. References to Georgia O'Keeffe pervade the volume, and its sections take the names of O'Keeffe paintings. Like these flower paintings, Song's poems are quiet and still, though beautifully alive, completely lacking the prophetic, directly political themes in Forché, Rich, and Lorde, and rarely containing rhetorical passages that interpret the significance of her poetic vision, as are found occasionally in Broumas's work. Song's poetry is subtle and openended; even Rich's phrase "the enormity of the simplest things," while it would convey the power that Song derives from concentrating on simple subjects, seems too grotesque to describe Song's work accurately.

Song's poetry illustrates the kind of poetic imaginative power that does not seek to transcend the world or dominate its

¹⁷ Cathy Song, Picture Bride (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). All subsequent quotations from Song's poetry are taken from this volume.

subjects but rather seeks dialogue, interconnectedness, and community. The deep sense of kinship, the constant intermingling of sensory details, the conflation of past with present, and the presence of the body infuse her poetry with a rich fabric of relations which she explores and draws with calm attentiveness. In "Picture Bride" Song quietly muses over what coming to Hawaii must have been like for her grandmother, a picture bride who left Korea to join a husband she had not yet met. The respect for place and detail, the precision of the imagery, and the gentle rhetorical questions that sustain the narrative all indicate the care the poet takes not to impose upon or manipulate the story. While she is careful to "listen to" the story her imagination fleshes out, she is not overly self-conscious or tentative about her inquiry into her ancestry:

What things did my grandmother
take with her? And when
she arrived to look
into the face of the stranger
who was her husband,
thirteen years older than she,
did she politely untie
the silk bow of her jacket,
her tent-shaped dress
filling with the dry wind
that blew from the surrounding fields
where the men were burning cane?

As in most of Song's poems, in "Picture Bride" it is the relationship of the grandmother to her stranger-husband, to the landscape of her new home, and to her own body that tells us who the grandmother might be and conveys as well the compassionate, yet mixed feelings of the granddaughter who approaches the grandmother's story quietly,

in an attempt to understand without overpowering. The power of the poem resides in the quality of the relations it draws, not in the identity of isolated images.

The body, as the grounds of sexual and poetic sensibility, is as central to Song's work as it is to Broumas's, but Song's work contains none of the radical defiance of tradition or emphasis on the politics of sexuality that Broumas's does. In "The White Porch," the speaker sits on the porch after washing her hair and thinks of the "luxury" of having the entire afternoon before her to do laundry or prepare beans: "Each one,/ I'll break and snap/ thoughtfully in half." Amid this mindfulness, this anticipation of careful, attentive work, the body also begins to stir:

But there is this slow arousal.
The small buttons
of my cotton blouse
are pulling away from my body.
I feel the strain of threads,
the swollen magnolias
heavy as a flock of birds
in the tree. Already,
the orange sponge cake
is rising in the oven.

What is most remarkable is the poet's lack of prescriptive self-consciousness, her complete receptivity to these diverse emotions and thoughts: the weight of her wet hair, the warmth of the laundry, and these gently erotic emotions are interwoven without violence or conflict. In the last stanza the speaker recalls her mother's "grabbing" the thick braid of hair as they worked together. At the end of the poem she integrates the hair image with the erotic:

My mind often elsewhere
 as we did the morning chores together.
 Sometimes, a few strands
 would catch in her gold ring.
 I worked hard then,
 anticipating the hour
 when I would let the rope down
 at night, strips of sheets,
 knotted and tied,
 while she slept in tight blankets.

The daughter lets the rope of hair down for the lover who waits in the shadows, thus escaping her mother's world and its confined sensuality as she celebrates her own body. This unqualified celebration of the body and its receptivity that is found in Song's work is seldom sustained in contemporary women's poetry; although it occurs quite often in Broumas's and Rich's poems, for every poem celebrating the female body there is usually another poem acknowledging its vulnerability to violation.

In poems such as "Hotel Genève" and "Blue Lantern" Song uses a central image, like hair in "The White Porch," to unify the poem, but the image constantly modulates and enlarges, because of the interrelations and resemblances the speaker's imagination draws. In "Hotel Genève" the rain falling reminds the speaker of the rain in Mexico City when she was a girl "trying to find the words to describe/ the phenomena of the world/ opening up before me/ like an anemone." The rain and its vapor are pivotal images for the associations the speaker makes, and finally the steam becomes the element in which past and present, and body and poetry, are intermingled:

Tonight,
 I am filled with the steam
 my warm body gathered,
 wrapping the petals of itself
 in a white towel.

The image recalls the journal the speaker wrote in "when anything white pleased me": "I would fold secrets into each page/ as though I were wrapping/ jade fish into origami." As the opening line of the poem says, "There are these quiet resemblances" and Song's poetry acts to bring about these relations.

Because it is a dream poem, "Blue Lantern" intertwines its imagery in even more surreal ways, but similar translations of sight into sound, sound into touch, and emotion into sensory imagery occur. Each image the child dreams or perceives modulates into another image or turns "back" or "through" the child's consciousness in another form. She hears the music from the grandfather's room in the house next door: "shavings of notes,/ floated, and fell;/ melted where the stillness/ inserted itself back into night." Or she dreams that "the music/ came in squares,/ like birthday chocolate,/ through the window/ on a blue plate." Other images change sensory form: "the shape of his grief/ funneled through the bamboo flute," "the cry . . . like a glimpse of a shadow," "Listening, my eyes closed/ as though I were under water/ in the blueness of my room." Finally in the last stanza the two children who lie in separate houses listening to the grief in the grandfather's music are brought together, linked by the image of the tide that washes over them:

It was as though the weight
 of his grief washed over
 the two of us
 each night like a tide,
 leaving our bodies beached
 but unbruised,
 white and firm like shells.

Immersed in the fluid music that brings them into relation with each other, the two children share a kind of catharsis or rebirth every night that bonds them. They are both circumstantial participants in the grandfather's ritual of grieving.

Several poems suggest Song's view of the poet as a passive receptacle of impressions. In "For My Brother" she compares her own quiet occupation to her brother's physical activity, his constant love of swimming:

We each have become our own animals.
 I am like the sheep,
 woolly and silent.
 I plant my belly on the hillside,
 count myself to sleep.
 I sit in the sun,
 patient as a boulder,
 like any proper sister.
 And I know that I move differently,
 using the alphabet
 to spring from me an ocean,
 to propel me through night waters.
 This is my way
 of swimming with you.

Poetry is the poet's "attachment to the world" because it brings her into relation with others. The poet's responses are shaped by who and what addresses her, just as the woman in "Waialua" is shaped by the hands of her lover, a potter: "In your curved arms/ my belly was a smooth bowl/ you shaped, fleshed out and brightly/ glazed."

Rather than dominating or manipulating her subjects to validate or reinforce some perception of her own identity, Song willingly yields herself to her subjects and is shaped by them.

The last poem in Picture Bride portrays an aging seamstress who lives quietly with her father and sisters. Her life is her work, her "attachment to the world." She expresses satisfaction with her limited but productive life in the last stanza:

It seems I have always lived
 in this irregular room, rarely needing
 to see beyond the straight seams that fit neatly,
 the snaps that fasten securely in my mind.
 The world for me is the piece of cloth
 I have at the moment beneath my hands.
 I am not surprised
 by how little the world changes.
 My father carrying the green hose
 across the grass, a ribbon of water
 trickling down his shoulder,
 staining the left pocket
 of his gray, loose-fitting shirt.
 The wedding dresses each white, dusty summer.
 Someone very quiet once lived here.

The attentiveness of the speaker, her delight in details, and her attitude toward her work make her confined life seem large. As in "Picture Bride" it is the seamstress's relation with the things and people that immediately surround her that defines her and reveals the quality of her life.

Song's work does not in any way claim to be feminist, but her poetic pose illustrates one extremity of feminist poetics. Speaking in the "intimate voice of inner conversation" while simultaneously rejecting the "necessity of incurring the self-inflicted wounds

which mark the birth of an individuated poetic voice,"¹⁸ Song presents a poetry that arises from integrity and wholeness rather than loss and affliction. In it, relation and response are valued more than transcendence, and power results from dialogue rather than domination. Rather than using her subjects to define herself, Song constantly yields herself and modifies her "form" to the impressions of her subjects, as if she herself were water or steam or clay conforming to the shapes of the people, things, and landscapes that touch her. Most important for a feminist poetics, Song's work provides one example of an alternative form of poetic power and an alternative understanding of the pose of the poet.

The poetry of Lorde, Broumas, and Song suggests different approaches to the problem of breaking through delusions of determinism, whether they be restrictions perpetuated by cultural institutions or more subtle psychological confines assumed by the individual. By challenging the traditional racial, sexual, and poetic hierarchy, their works illustrate versions of power based on resemblance and dialogue rather than difference and exploitation and present visions of the openended possibilities for meaning and being. Whether the poems violently disrupt poetic conventions, powerfully displace male-centered poetic and sexual authority, or quietly discover communion by assembling the simple details of life, the poetry written by

¹⁸Diehl, pp. 541 and 533.

women implies that the poem is indeed a personal and political act of survival. Their work reveals that the restrictions we tolerate in our ways of writing and reading poetry, and our ways of being, are not given limits inherent to poetry, or to being, but arbitrary determinations that can serve us only when we test their value against our own experience and freely choose them.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN'S POETRY AND IDEOLOGY

At the same time that women's poetry acts to expose deterministic systems of history, psychology, theology, and aesthetics as delusory, it affirms the fact that "nothing--not the deepest aspects of the psychic life--exists apart from the pressures of a historical age."¹ This acknowledgement of historical relativism would seem to contradict and invalidate the notion that the individual can radically critique the values of her own age and freely choose or create her own meanings. That is, an affirmation of historical relativism seems to also affirm historical determinism. However, according to feminist thinking, historical determinism is a false concept precisely because we live under the condition of historical relativism.

Other traditions of thought besides feminism have wrestled with the "problem" of historical relativism and have seen the very condition of relativity as a necessary state for foiling a mechanical historical determinism. This thesis is extensively argued in Gadamer's Truth and Method, and is also suggested by Louis Althusser's revision of Marx's notion that social being determines consciousness.² By

¹Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser," in Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 292.

²See especially Althusser's "Marxism and Humanism," in For Marx, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), pp. 219-47.

redefining "ideology" as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," Althusser argues that social being is itself produced to give object to ideology, which, though it has a material base, is not itself the "real conditions of existence."³ Althusser begins to replace Marx's emphasis on materiality and "fact" with an emphasis on relation and "value." In his book Identity and Relationship Jeremy Hawthorn explains how this recognition of the relativity of value affects our understanding of the mode of being of literature and art in general:

The art work . . . cannot be seen as a fixed, 'objective,' autonomous whole, but must be seen in the context of its mediations with the outside world, as something with an infinite number of 'properties, qualities, and aspects' which are manifested in an infinite number of concrete contexts.⁴

The very condition of historicity, then, keeps the literary work from being a fixed, determined object independent of its readers and opens it to an array of meanings as various as the contexts in which it is read. Without discussing in detail the mode of being of the literary work, textual coercion, or reader response theory, the distinction between a historical and a ahistorical perception of the work remains clear.

³Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)" in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 162.

⁴Jeremy Hawthorn, Identity and Relationship: A Contribution to Marxist Theory of Literary Production (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), p. 24.

As discussed earlier, feminist-influenced poets perceive the poem as an act of dialogue between themselves and language as the poem is being written, and between the poem and the reader as it is being read. The value of the poem is always particularly dependent on the standpoint of the reader, and, in fact, the poet is concerned that the reader not attempt to abandon or escape her personal perspective, but rather bring her particular interests and experiences to the poem. The poem as an object is much less important to the women poets than the poem as an act of relation or an event of dialogue. Yet certainly a reader's relationship to a poem is itself influenced by historical pressures or ideologies of reading. In Formalism and Marxism Tony Bennett explains the interrelation between cultural values and literary relations:

The text is not the issuing source of meaning. It is a site on which the production of meaning--of variable meanings--takes place. The social process of culture takes place not within texts but between texts, and between texts and readers: not some ideal, disembodied reader, but historically concrete readers whose act of reading is conditioned, in part by the text it is true, but also by the whole ensemble of ideological relationships which bear upon the incessant production and reproduction of texts.⁵

Because women poets are aware of these ideological effects that shape a reader's relation to a poem, and because they perceive traditional literary relations as exploitative and manipulative of female readers, the central impulse of their poetry is revisionary: it displaces male-centered versions of power, value, and poetic relations as it

⁵Tony Bennett, Marxism and Formalism (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1979), pp. 174-75.

creates alternative visions of relations between poet, poem, and reader. Specifically, feminist-informed poetry is concerned with the quality and the powerful effect of immediate relations or values. In this sense, then, poetry by women is aware of itself as an ideological activity. As a tool of naming and conceiving, poetry discovers, through dialogue with its subject and the reader, new possibilities for meaning and for being in the world.

Though using the term "ideology" risks introducing confusion into the discussion, conjuring the Marxist tradition of criticism can illuminate the affinities between feminism and Marxism, the only other strong critical school that addresses the political implications of art, and can also delineate the distinct revisions feminist thinking makes.⁶ My concern is not to engage in a Marxist critical discussion of ideology, but to transfer the term to a feminist context, thereby changing it and in fact erasing the pejorative sense that Marxists give to it, and to discuss how, in the view of feminist-influenced poets, poetry both reflects and contributes to ideology, or our "'lived' experience of human existence itself."⁷ Finally my interest here is to discover in what sense for these women poets poetry is political.

⁶For discussions of the affinities and distinctions between Marxist and feminist theory, see Gayle Greene, "Feminist and Marxist Criticism: An Argument for Alliances," Women's Studies, 9 (1981), 29-45, and Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," Signs, 7 (1982), 515-544. Lillian S. Robinson's Sex, Class, and Culture, 1978, provides an example of a Marxist-feminist perspective.

⁷Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," in Lenin and Philosophy, p. 223.

To say that feminist-informed poetry is above all conscious of itself as an ideological activity is not to say that it is merely propagandistic. It does not reduce "truth" to a single thing, or belief, or goal, but rather illustrates truth as an "increasing complexity," in Rich's words, by demystifying ideology.⁸ As practice, as a "lived" relation to the world, ideology is inescapable; the goal of transcending it is both impossible and undesirable since meaning arises from relation. Yet entrapment within a single perspective or an absolutist vision is reductive and falsely deterministic. As an act of ideological revision, women's poetry does not provide an escape from ideology but rather illustrates the open possibilities that exist for revising our relation with the world. Michel Foucault could have been describing the task women poets perceive for themselves when he noted the difference between abandoning ideology and loosening the ideological hierarchy:

it's not a question of emancipating truth from every system of power . . . but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony (social, economic, and cultural) within which it operates at the present time.⁹

By displacing those centers of power that would monopolize and mystify truth, by exposing them as functional rather than absolute, feminist

⁸Rich, "Women and Honor," pp. 186-87.

⁹Michel Foucault, "The Political Function of the Intellectual," trans. Colin Gordon, Radical Philosophy, 17 (1977), 14.

poets promote the play of ideology and maintain access to truth as an "increasing complexity."

Similar to the feminist view of art as an act of re-envisioning meanings, Althusser claims that the particular value of art and literature lies in their ability to suspend ideology, allowing us to see it for what it is, a specific assumed practice of relations to the conditions of our lives, and not the fixed conditions themselves.¹⁰ Art enables us to perceive ideology as evaluative, not factual, and thus as provisional and not final. In Bennett's words, literature exposes the false closure on meaning that ideology would seem to produce:

. . . the 'effect' of literature might be construed as inherently critical. In temporarily prising apart the chains of ideology, it creates a kind of open, disengaged mental space within which a new attitude to reality might be produced.¹¹

Certainly women poets perceive the poem as a critical act since it re-envisions cultural-political values as well as traditional aesthetic values. As Bennett points out, literature in itself can neither produce a revolutionary consciousness nor scientific knowledge, but "it does induce a temporary suspension of ideology, a temporary release from its operations, which may give rise to a new form of attentiveness to and thoughtfulness about reality."¹² Literature

¹⁰Althusser discusses the relation between art and ideology in "A Letter on Art" and "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," in Lenin and Philosophy, pp. 221-27 and pp. 229-42 respectively, and in "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht," in For Marx, pp. 129-51.

¹¹Bennett, pp. 125-26.

¹²Bennett, p. 126.

displaces our assumed relation to the world and allows us to recognize possibilities for different kinds of relations and meanings.

The desire for emancipation from ideology is unmistakable in most Marxist critical writing. The very words that describe ideology-- "imaginary," "false," "misrecognized"--suggest the sinister power of ideology to deceive us and coerce us into inauthentic relations with the world. Certainly one major effort of feminist criticism and women's poetry has been to expose the destructive effects of patriarchal ideology on women. The opening of Judith Fetterley's The Resisting Reader explains the general task of much applied American feminist criticism as a decentering of the predominant patriarchal ideology within literary works:

John Keats once objected to poetry "that has a palpable design upon us." The major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader, all the more potent in their effect because they are "impalpable." One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative. When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on its comprehensiveness, then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes. It is the purpose of this book to give voice to a different reality and different "universality." To examine American fictions in light of how attitudes toward women shape their form and content is to make available to consciousness that which has been largely left unconscious and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relations to them, and their effect on us. It is to make palpable their design.¹³

¹³Fetterley, pp. xi-xii.

Thus Fetterley proceeds to "rupture" a particular ideological practice recurring in representative works of American fiction, the exploitative treatment of women that is masked, whether consciously or unconsciously, as universal "truth." In exposing this specific ideology, Fetterley produces a new value for the texts and changes their effect on the reader.

Fetterley's criticism illustrates two characteristics of ideology that Marxist critics find significant. First, she accomplishes her criticism by addressing the texts from outside the ideology she exposes. She gives voice "to a different reality and different vision," taking as her perspective "a different subjectivity." Pierre Macherey's definition of ideology suggests that the only way an ideology can be exposed as reductive or contradictory is if it is addressed from outside.¹⁴ Bennett summarizes:

For, in Macherey's definition, ideologies are internally coherent, non-contradictory wholes. They do not contain any contradictions which can be simply 'reflected' in other practices. They can only be put into contradiction by practices which work on them from without.¹⁵

An ideology is thus criticized and redressed only when we step out of our own standpoint into another ideological practice, a motion out of confined subjectivity that is accomplished most fully in the experience of dialogue and in the experience of art.

¹⁴Pierre Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 130-31.

¹⁵Bennett, p. 125.

As it displaces male-centered systems of meaning with a female centered perspective. Fetterley's criticism illustrates another important characteristic of ideology. According to Althusser, ideology "subjectifies" the individual by seeming to privilege her position in the world. Bennett explains:

Individuals are related, in ideology, to the conditions of their existence through the imaginary concept of their own selfhood and of the place they occupy within 'the order of things' as governed over and given sense and coherence by the Absolute Subject of God, Man, Nation, etc.¹⁶

As Fetterley points out, the power of the "designs" of American fiction on the female reader resides in their claim to universality, in their pretense to non-subjectivity. Fetterley's critical approach for exposing the male-centered design is to pose a "different subjectivity," a non-universal, female subjectivity, that illuminates the relativity and reductivity of the male-centered vision. Thus Fetterley emphasizes the arbitrary and destructive nature of a specific ideological practice within literature and criticism, i.e. the idealization and exploitation of women, bringing that practice into consciousness and focus by positing a different center or subjectivity.

Yet how do feminist critics and women poets keep their own revisions of patriarchal ideology from becoming just as static and rigid as those they displace? In her article on myth in women's poetry, Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses the quality of the ideology that is reconstituted in women's poetry once the male center is

¹⁶Bennett, p. 118.

displaced. Through the use of female myths--for example, the African matriarchal myths in Lorde's work or the feminized Greek myths in Broumas's poetry--women poets construct a mythical framework of interpretation that, DuPlessis argues, is understood as prototypical rather than archetypal. The difference is that while an archetype is a repetitious form of meaning recurring across cultures and throughout history, a "prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity, of its own transformation. Thinking in terms of prototypes historicizes myth."¹⁷ Thus while women poets' revisions of myth or history do not claim to escape ideology, the ideological values it reconstitutes are seen as functional, provisional, and open to revision. As DuPlessis points out, women poets' view and use of myth illustrate their rejection of deterministic schemes of meaning:

Criticizing the nature of myth is one of the reimaginings of culture that women writers consciously undertake, for their own lives allow them to see the culturally repressive function of archetypes, and their own experiences of personal and social change, recorded in poems of consciousness and politics, belie the illusion of a timeless, unhistorical pattern controlling reality.¹⁸

These poets' willingness to participate in ideology as a continually shifting relation between self and world allows them to be open to new meanings and to resist repressive deterministic systems of thought.

¹⁷DuPlessis, p. 299.

¹⁸DuPlessis, p. 300.

In fact, to seek to escape ideology, to somehow stand outside our particular relations to the world and overcome the pressures of our cultural and historical setting, would be self-defeating for a feminist thinker. Such an "emancipation" would perpetuate rather than avoid sexual exploitation by yielding the grounds upon which understanding and dialogue can take place. Dialogue is an impossible relation if one partner remains objective since objectivity implies lack of participation and renders the other partner to the status of an object rather than a self. Objectivity thus perpetuates violation rather than escapes it. In Althusser's words,

ideology is not an aberration or a contingent excrescence of History: it is a structure essential to the historical life of societies. Further, only the existence and the recognition of its necessity enables us to act on ideology and transform ideology into an instrument of deliberate action on history.¹⁹

For women poets involvement in the creation of value is the only means of countering violation; the effects of a destructive ideology are not avoided by refusing to come into relation with the world, an impossible stance anyway, but by participating fully in the play of ideology.

This willingness to evaluate by coming into relation with the world, rather than by withholding involvement and claiming "objectivity," is most evident in women poets' views and uses of history in their work. DuPlessis points out that women's revision of myth as prototype rather than archetype results in a "concentration on

¹⁹Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism," p. 323.

the immanent moment."²⁰ Similarly, in her discussion of Rich's "Transcendental Etude" Wendy Martin argues that Rich, like most feminist influenced poets, wants

to be grounded in life. Transcendence, in this instance, does not lead to a rising above ordinary experience but the dissolution of artificial categories that prevent us from seeing and appreciating life in its extraordinary variety.
...²¹

Rich's work illustrates "a commitment to growth not destruction" and, Martin points out, "a nurturing ethos replaces the imperative to dominate or transcend ordinary experience."²²

While Martin specifically discusses Rich's relationship to nature, the same can be said for her relation to history. Like feminist informed poets in general, Rich is concerned to "nurture" history, to grow within it, not destroy it or rise above it, and especially not to be destroyed or victimized by it. Rich's most recent volume of poetry, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981), explores the problematics and possibilities of history from a feminist perspective and illustrates the feminist poet's willing commitment to engage in the play of ideology and historical understanding.²³

²⁰DuPlessis, p. 299.

²¹Wendy Martin, "The Nurturing Ethos in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich," in Reading Adrienne Rich, ed. Jane R. Cooper, 1966.

²²Martin, p. 166.

²³Rich, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, Poems 1978-1981 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981). All subsequent quotations from Rich's poetry are taken from this volume unless otherwise noted.

In general, A Wild Patience focuses on history and access to history as a source of power for women, just as The Dream of a Common Language explores language and access to it as a primary resource for conceiving new visions of women. In the first poem in A Wild Patience, "The Images," Rich acknowledges the dangers inherent in language, and by extension in poetry, only after she has described in detail her particular setting, "the pain of the city" in which "there are no boundaries":

I can never romanticize language again
 never deny its power for disguise for mystification
 but the same could be said for music
 or any form created
 painted ceilings beaten gold worm-worn Pietas
 reorganizing victimization frescoes translating
 violence into patterns so powerful and pure
 we continually fail to ask are they true for us.

As the rest of the volume suggests, history, like language, can also be used as a tool of oppression rather than dialogue; it can reinforce, order, and even ordain violation as a "fact," a necessity, rather than confronting our role in perpetuating it and alleviating it. In a passage reminiscent of the end of "Origins and History of Consciousness" Rich comments on the power of images (and the power of the absence of other images) from history and the need to translate the personal into political action:

And so I came a woman starving
 for images
 to say my hunger is so old
 so fundamental, that all the lost
 crumbled burnt smashed shattered defaced
 overpainted concealed and falsely named
 faces of every past we have searched together
 in all the ages
 could rise reassemble re-collect re-member

themselves as I recollected myself in that presence
 as every night close to your body
 in the pain of the city, turning
 I am remembered by you, remember you
 even as we are dismembered
 on the cinema screens, the white expensive walls
 of collectors, the newsrags blowing the streets
 --and it would not be enough.
 This is the war of the images.
 We are the thorn-leaf guarding the purple-tongued flower
 each to each.

Though the self that society constantly violates and dismembers can
 be healed through private relationship, the continual reconstitution
 is not enough to satisfy the speaker's hunger. As in "Origins," the
 women must move "beyond the secret circle of fire" to secure complete
 healing for themselves and other women.

"Integrity" is a poem of self-assessment in which the speaker
 acknowledges that while her desires to break silences, both personal
 and historical, cause her pain, they also nurture her. The poem
 expresses a deep dependence on her own powers and a vision of
 continuity that provides faith for the future. Because "a wild
 patience has taken me this far," the speaker trusts her own ability
 to direct herself and to survive. Since "really I have nothing but
 myself/ to go by," since "nothing/ stands within the realm of pure
 necessity/ except what my hands can hold," the speaker embraces the
 variety of selves that she is:

Anger and tenderness: my selves.
 And now I can believe they breathe in me
 as angels, not polarities.
 Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius
 to spin and weave in the same action
 from her own body, anywhere--
 even from a broken web.

The web image suggests a sense of continuity but significantly the spider's "genius" lies in her ability to spin--to create--the fabric from her body as she weaves it into the web. She designs the web as she creates the materials for it. The image thus emphasizes self-delivery, self-healing, and the continuity between personal and political, or inner and outer, action.

Having reaffirmed in "Integrity" the power of "subjective" experience and both the urgency to change and the care not to violate suggested by the phrase "wild patience," Rich moves in "Culture and Anarchy" into a direct exploration of history and the continuity between self and historical persons. Quoting continually during the poem from the writings of women's rights organizers and early feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Jane Addams, Rich portrays the effort of two women to resurrect or excavate the history of a movement that has been silenced, "its records usually 'not considered of sufficient value to be officially preserved.'" Their activity is not simply objective research but a dialogue that the speaker enters into with these women of history. The speaker's own relationship with the other women who works to salvage women's history in fact reflects or partakes of the continuity she discerns in history. A voice from the past justifies their efforts to conceive a history of women:

The strongest reason
for giving woman all the opportunities
for higher education . . .
is the solitude and personal
responsibility
of her own individual life.

The speaker finds this solitude and self-responsibility in relation to the other woman: "How you have given back to me/ my dream of a common language/ my solitude of self." Finally the poem closes with another voice from the past that expresses the speaker's present situation and the continuity that comforts her and validates her work:

'I should miss you more than any other
living being from this earth. . .
Yes, our work is one,
we are one in aim and sympathy
and we should be together. . . .

The immediate personal community is enlarged here into a community that spreads over time and place. The speaker enters into dialogue with historical women to understand their struggles and therefore her own.

Yet Rich is quite aware of the various dangers of "using" history just as she is conscious of the power of language and poetry to distort, silence, or close off meaning rather than illuminate it. Still, as in The Dream of a Common Language, Rich does not abnegate potential power by refusing to be responsible; she does not deny herself access to history as a source of understanding because of the risks it involves. In several poems she portrays the problematics of encountering history by revealing the difficulty of responding to it without violating or manipulating it, by portraying abuses of history, and by directly engaging in dialogue with a subject from history.

In "For Ethel Rosenberg" Rich is attracted by the subject of Rosenberg's trial and execution because of affinities with her own

life; Rich's Jewishness, her female identity, and her questions about communism draw her to Rosenberg's case. But even more significant is the fact that the Rosenbergs were executed one week before Rich was married, and like their trial, marriage itself is "a question of loyalty/ or punishment." Rich's growing awareness of herself as a woman parallels her realization of Ethel Rosenberg as a person, a subject, a real life:

Her figure sinks into my soul
a drowned statue
sealed in lead

For years it has lain there unabsorbed
first as part of that dead couple
on the front pages of the world the week

I gave myself in marriage
then slowly severing drifting apart
a separate death a life unto itself

no longer 'the Rosenbergs'
no longer the chosen scapegoat
the family monster

till I hear how she sang
a prostitute to sleep
in the Women's House of Detention

Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg would you
have marched to take back the night
collected signatures

for battered women who kill
What would you have to tell us
would you have burst the net

As the speaker begins to recognize Ethel as an individual, a self, she identifies with her and even sees her as part of her own life and work.

But Rich's encounter with history is not simply legitimization of self, for the visions of Ethel Rosenberg cause her pain:

. . . if I imagine her at all
I have to imagine first
the pain inflicted on her by women

'her mother testifies against her
her sister-in-law testifies against her'

Also Rich is aware of the ease with which she could manipulate history by imposing her own desires on it, thus robbing the Rosenberg vision of its power to challenge her own life and values:

if I dare imagine her surviving
I must be fair to what she must have lived through
I must allow her to be at last

political in her ways not in mine
her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine
defining revolution as she defines it

or, bored to the marrow of her bones
with "politics"
bored with the vast boredom of long pain

small; tiny in fact; in her late sixties
liking her room her private life
living alone perhaps

no one you could interview
maybe filling a notebook herself
with secrets she has never sold

By admitting that Rosenberg might not have been political in an active feminist way if she had survived, Rich allows her dialogue with history to be flexible enough to offer criticism of her own "politics" and work. Her vision of Rosenberg as quietly thoughtful and solitary critically challenges her own role as an openly political, public poet.

In "The Spirit of Place" history is defined as a living presence that pervades the landscapes and settings described in the five parts of the poem. History is present because the mind of the speaker is receptive to it. In Part I the speaker drives with her companion through New England, "a shadow country" where the struggle in the past between women's suffrage and abolition still presents itself:

it was not enough to be for abolition
while the spirit of the masters
flickered in the abolitionist's heart

it was not enough to name ourselves anew
while the spirit of the masters
calls the freedwoman to forget the slave

'With whom do you believe your lot is cast?'
If there's a conscience in these hills
it hurls that question

unquenched, relentless, to our ears
wild and witchlike
ringing every swamp

As in "The Images" it is "not enough" to proclaim emancipation of the self without securing it on a political level for others as well. The consciousness of the past, which to the speaker is continuous with the present, demands that the "freedwoman" resist false ideologies that isolate her from other oppressed people.

Part II emphasizes the same resistance to false ideologies that obscure the real conditions of the world. The speaker acknowledges that while she and her companion have felt "a kind of freedom" and have known

hours of a calm, intense and mutual solitude
reading and writing
trying to clarify connect

past and present near and far
 the Alabama quilt
 the Botswana basket
 history . . .

political violence and danger still pervade her life. She cannot
 retreat from the world

as it is not as we wish it
 as it is not as we work for it
 to be

To find self-reflections in history, to draw ideological connections
 and values, is only a partial corrective; while our openness to
 history helps us discover meanings in the present, self-responsibil-
 ity and action follow understanding.

In Part III Rich illustrates how history and the lives of
 people from the past can be co-opted by false ideologies in the
 present and rendered powerless by those who manipulate history. In
 this poem scholars assemble at Emily Dickinson's house, like a "cult"
 visiting a shrine. The speaker responds to their absorption of and
 vain familiarity with Dickinson by trying to protect her from viola-
 tion:

with the hands of a daughter I would cover you
 from all intrusion even my own
 saying rest to your ghost

with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands
 open or closed as they prefer to lie
 and ask no more of who or why or wherefore

with the hands of a mother I would close the door
 on the rooms you've left behind
 and silently pick up my fallen work

In Dickinson's words, "my 'life' was made a 'victim'" and Rich seeks
 to preserve or retrieve Dickinson's "strangeness" from the scholars

who violate her by assuming they "know" her completely. "Strangers are an endangered species" but the speaker would respect Dickinson's solitude by leaving Dickinson unviolated and returning to her own work.

Rich expresses her desire to engage in dialogue with history without a "will to mastery" in Part IV. She suggests that the quality of that encounter with history maps directions for her own growth in the future:

how with the hands of a lover or a midwife
to hold back till the time is right

force nothing, be unforced
accept no giant miracles of growth
by counterfeit light

trust roots, allow the days to shrink
give credence to these slender means
wait without sadness and with grave impatience

here in the north where winter has a meaning
where the heaped colors suddenly go ashen
where nothing is promised

learn what an underground journey
has been, might have to be; speak in a winter code
let fog, sleet, translate; wind, carry them.

The nurturing ethos that Martin finds in Rich's work is seen here as a willingness to "speak" in terms of nature, to adapt herself enough to enter into dialogue with the subject. The speaker internalizes the winter setting so that a common language serves them both.

Finally Part V suggests that our relation to nature is emblematic of the state of our age. In this poem "the world as it is" is the raw materials underlying our use of those materials, the world

as it is defined not by ideological manipulation but by its existence
and its possibilities:

The world as it is: not as her users boast
damaged beyond reclamation by their using
Ourselves as we are in these painful motions

of staying cognizant: some part of us always
out beyond ourselves
knowing knowing knowing

Yet the myth of eternal nature is not Rich's point; instead, as usual,
it is self-responsibility, but a self that is deeply historical, not
narrowly "present":

Are we all in training for something we don't name?
to exact reparation for things
done long ago to us and to those who did not

survive what was done to them whom we ought to honor
with grief with fury with action
On a pure night on a night when pollution

seems absurdity when the undamaged planet seems to turn
like a bowl of crystal in black ether
they are the piece of us that lies out there
knowing knowing knowing

Answering the question posed in Part I--'With whom do you believe
your lot is cast?'--Rich ponders our debt to history, to those who
have been and are violated. Yet as this and other poems emphasize,
it is also a debt to ourselves. To cut ourselves off from the "piece
of us" that lies beyond us by renouncing history and ignoring the
consequences of violation is to reduce ourselves to victims and
surrender our access to change.

In the last poem of the volume Rich draws a vivid distinction
between "nostalgia," a form of amnesia and escape, and a true

encounter with history that provides understanding of the past and present. Like "The Spirit of Place," "Turning the Wheel" has several parts, each of which offers a different perspective on history and a different illustration of a useful or abusive relation to history. In "Location" Rich describes a collage of buildings in a desert town that, like different movie sets, in no way blend with or even acknowledge the desert setting. The commercialism merely mocks and "conquers" the desert. The violation is more powerfully expressed in the next poem "Burden Baskets." "Nostalgia" for the desert draws one to the museum where "False history gets written every day." Sometimes, though, truth breaks through:

Yet suddenly for once the standard version
splits open to something shocking unintentional.
In the elegant Southwest Museum, no trace of bloodshed
or broken treaty. But, behind glass, these baskets
woven for the young women's puberty dances
still performed among the still surviving
Apache people; filled with offerings:
cans of diet Pepsi, peanut brittle,
Cracker Jack, Hershey bars
piled there, behind glass, without notation
in the anthropologist's typewritten text
which like a patient voice tired of explaining
goes on to explain a different method of weaving.

Like the "imitation of a ghost mining town, . . . the faceless pueblo/ with the usual faceless old woman grinding corn" in the first poem, "false history" here is also a product that dispenses with history, not a dialogue or an encounter with it. False history, to one seeking more than amnesia, speaks loudest where it is silent, where it unintentionally contradicts itself. The image revealing the violent collision of cultures is all the more shocking

because the museum's "text" does not acknowledge the violation.

In "Hohokam," entitled after an Indian tribe who mysteriously disappeared from a desert region where they had developed advanced irrigation systems, Rich further explores how dominant culture and its language dispenses with the reality of history by rendering its meaning closed and determined. Rich criticizes the museum's label of the Hohokam as "those who have ceased" because it is "amnesia language" meant to dismiss their existence rather than imagine its reality. In contrast, the speaker does try to imagine the particular qualities of the tribe's existence:

I try to imagine a desert-shamaness
bringing water to fields of squash, maize and cotton
but where the desert herself is half-eroded
half-flooded by a million jets of spray
to conjure a rich white man's paradise
the shameness could well have withdrawn her ghost.

Though she tries to imagine the shamaness, the modern setting which manipulates and alters nature seems to banish the reality of history. While Rich suggests that the sources of power in history and historical vision are not available to us unless we reach for them with our imaginations, she also acknowledges the obstacles in our culture that alienate us from history. In this poem, as in others, the separation from and manipulation of nature and the break from history are symptomatic of a relation of domination, not of dialogue.

The theme of how co-opting and colonization are effected is continued in "Self-Hatred." The speaker is addressed by the fact that

the influence of Christianity resulted in a change in the embroidery patterns used by Colcha women from images of birds and serpents to images of self-flagellation. The speaker recalls the patterns she sewed with pride which were labelled "childlike, primitive, obscene." She closes with a supplication to women of future ages:

What rivets me to history is seeing
arts of survival turned
to rituals of self-hatred. This
is colonization. Unborn sisters,
look back on us in mercy where we failed ourselves,
see us not one-dimensional but with
the past as your steady and corrective lens.

The speaker asks women of later ages to avoid repeating the relation of "colonization" when they look back on women of her period. She wishes to be imagined in her historical context, as a woman struggling to survive, as a subject, or self, not as an object.

The fallacy of not subjectifying and particularizing the details of history is revealed in "Particularity." If the desert shamaness is seen as an abstraction, an archetype or a symbol rather than as an immediate presence, then her real power, the power of relation between past and present, is lost:

. . . so long as she does not limp
so long as you try to simplify her meaning
so long as she merely symbolizes power
she is kept helpless and conventional
her true power routed backward
into the past, we cannot touch or name her
and, barred from participation by those who need her
she stifles in unspeakable loneliness.

Ironically, Rich understates the effect such abstracting has on us and instead emphasizes the loss and loneliness of the shamaness, who is ready to address us if we will only invite her to.

"Apparition" warns against the same trespass against history committed by the Dickinson scholars in "The Spirit of Place." No matter what the situation, whether the Indian woman is a princess, a famous potter, a peddler of Indian wares, or a mere image "for the appeasement of the ignorant," "look at her closely if you dare/ do not assume you know those cheekbones/ or those eye-sockets; or that still-bristling hair." By assuming to "know" the woman--by categorizing her, idealizing her or silencing her in any way--we bypass the dialogue process and thus violate her as we limit ourselves. The ominous image of "that still-bristling hair" indicates that though we may treat the woman as defeated and silenced, she is not inwardly resigned to oppression.

In "Mary Jane Colter, 1904" Rich adopts the voice of the designer of Hopi buildings at the Grand Canyon, thus allowing a historical woman to speak directly to the reader. The voice of the poem recalls "Elvira Shatayev" and especially "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," since it too is a letter from the speaker. Colter anticipates designing the building and expresses her desire for her mother and sister to understand her need to work and create:

(Do you understand? I want this glory,
I want to place my own conception
and that of the Indians whose land this was
at the edge of this incommensurable thing.)

Not only does Colter's desire to fuse her own conception with that of the Indians and with nature's design illustrate a relation of dialogue with history and nature, but the poem itself is an act of

dialogue with history. By giving voice to Colter, Rich allows history to present itself and thus to illuminate the present in light of the past.

Finally, in "Turning the Wheel" Rich distinguishes between a vision of historical continuity that derives from one's particular, immediate experience with history and an overwhelming, abstract sense of time and totality. As she looks at the Grand Canyon, "the face/ of annihilating and impersonal time," the speaker is both identified and erased:

The road to the great canyon always feels
like that road and no other
the highway to a fissure to the female core
of a continent
Below Flagstaff even the rock erosions wear
a famous handwriting
the river's still prevailing signature

Seeing those rocks that road in dreams I know
it is happening again as twice while waking
I am traveling to the edge to meet the face
of annihilating and impersonal time
stained in the colors of a woman's genitals
outlasting every transient violation
a face that is strangely intimate to me

Though there is some comfort in envisioning the totality that endures passing violations and erases the individual, the speaker refuses to rest in that perception of "general" time and instead explores her particular solitary time:

Today I turned the wheel refused that journey
I was feeling too alone on the open plateau
of pinion juniper world beyond time
of rockflank spread around me too alone
and too filled with you with whom I talked for hours
driving up from the desert though you were far away
as I talk to you all day whatever day

Thus the speaker turns away from a vision of time that would release her from any responsibility for or relation with her own particular world and instead chooses "particularity," relation and dialogue. As usual in Rich's work, the personal relationship between women transforms them and opens the world to them. Here the dialogue is not literal but spiritual and psychic. Filled with the particulars of her setting, her own solitude, and the "presence" of her companion, the speaker "turns the wheel" away from a vision of overwhelming, impersonal time, embracing the "immanent moment" rather than a transcendent totality.

While Rich brings to light lost "facts" of women's history in A Wild Patience, her main concern is with the value of those historical facts for individuals in the present and the problematics of evaluating history. These poems illustrate the tendency of women poets to affirm historical relativism as a necessary condition for dialogue, relation, and meaning. As Audre Lorde points out in an interview with Rich, facts themselves are of limited importance if there is no strong personal interest in them:

I can document the road to Abomey for you, and true, you might not get there without that information. . . . But once you get there, only you know why you came, what you came for, as you search for it and perhaps find it.²⁴

A search for values, not objective detachment, engages us and brings us into meaningful relation with other people, things and history.

²⁴Lorde and Rich, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," Signs, 6 (1981), p. 732.

A Wild Patience openly challenges dominant patriarchal ideologies not only because it seeks to educate women about their "lost" collective past but also because it contends that history is made and not given. Value is not inherent in things, facts, or texts but arises differently with each new relation that is initiated. In discussing the distinction between the literary text as an object and the text as an event of meaning, Bennett articulates the kind of openness to and possibility for value and change that feminist influenced poets perceive:

Value is not something which the text has or possesses. It is not an attribute of the text; it is rather something that is produced for the text. To neglect this, to reify the text as a source of its own value, is to run together two quite distinct problems: the explanation of the text as the production of a particular practice of writing and the production of the text as a valued text.²⁵

More accurately, for the feminist poet value is produced with the text, through a dialogue between the text and the reader.

Unlike many Marxist critics who call for an objective or "scientific" criticism, feminist poets and critics do not try to escape the "play" of meaning--they do not seek a final determination of the text (or whatever subject is open to interpretation) that transcends historical relativity--but rather they participate in exploring the variety of relations and meanings that historical relativism makes possible. Erasing the pejorative connotation that the word "ideology" often possesses in a Marxist context, feminist

²⁵Bennett, p. 173.

thinkers participate in the play of ideology, acknowledging both the provisional character and the political power of particular ideologies. Just as women poets perceive their myths as prototypical rather than archetypal, so they view their relations to the world, their ideological practice, as open-ended and subject to change and growth. The poem, as an act of the imagination coming into relation with the world, is not a closed or self-contained event, but because it is critical, revisionary, and visionary, it changes our relationships to history, to others, and to ourselves. Because it brings about relations that conceive values, poetry "makes" history and "makes" new ideologies possible.

"Making" history does not mean manipulating it, however. Women poets' willingness to be receptive to the unconscious illustrates their concern not to violate or manipulate what addresses them into preconceived schemes of meaning. As Broumas's "Artemis" suggests, women poets nurture the unconscious rather than try to break it or conquer it:

I am a woman
who understands
the necessity of an impulse whose goal or origin
still lie beyond me.

Broumas's passage indicates that engagement is more important to her than complete rational understanding or clear-cut purposiveness. In her article "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry" Jeanne Kammer points out that the use of silence, expressed by various formal devices like compression, lack of conventional syntax,

and ellipses, characterizes modern poetry in general but has unique significance for modern women's poetry:

The use of silence in male artists is often characterized as an acknowledgment of the void, a falling-back in the face of chaos, nothingness; for women, there appears more often a determination to enter that darkness, to use it, to illuminate it with the individual human presence.²⁶

Also, silence, a form of powerlessness, "expresses [the woman poet's cultural] condition even as it is denied."²⁷ Whereas the male poets in general are driven to silence by the chaos of their culture, women poets begin with inner silence and ironically their poems speak about the inability to speak. In general, for male poets the lack of resolution, the incapacity to name a final "goal or origin" is devastating, whereas for women that very openness is the occasion of the poem. Contemporary women poets' willingness to "enter that darkness," to tap the unconscious, to engage in openended interpretation, and to make histories and ideologies that they recognize as provisional rather than final reflects their understanding of value as conceived through dialogue.

Kammer makes several other points that can be extended to define the consequences of the feminist view of history and ideology on the form of contemporary women's poetry. Using Phillip Wheelright's distinction between two kinds of metaphor--"epiphor," or the definition of an abstraction by a concretion, and "diaphor," or the

²⁶Jeanne Kammer, "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry," in Shakespeare's Sisters, p. 158.

²⁷Kammer, p. 158.

juxtaposition of two concrete images--Kammer argues that while the diaphoric impulse, in which non-rational response and silence play a large role, typifies modern poetry, its significance is unique in women's poetry because of the reasons women choose the form. Epiphor "sets in motion a primarily linear process of concretion to abstraction," whereas diaphor is better understood as "configuration rather than statement."²⁸ Women's perception of meaning as relational rather than inherent in objects or texts would lead to their selection of the diaphoric rather epiphoric form, but in contrast to modern male poets, who generally use the minimal diaphoric form to "represent both a dramatization of and a withdrawal from a culture fragmented, disordered, and lacking in central values and visions," women use the form as a means of probing the unconscious for new values, visions, and forms of power.²⁹

The respect for silence, for non-rational response, and for the possibilities beyond and within language is revealed in the physical appearance of many poems by contemporary women poets. As Kammer points out, the epiphoric poem "aims at filling space. . . . and moves toward a resolution at the bottom;" by contrast, diaphoric poetry "opposes this downward, oral emphasis with the functional use of . . . 'negative space.'"³⁰ That is, the lines are less regular

²⁸Kammer, pp. 156-57.

²⁹Kammer, p. 158.

³⁰Kammer, p. 160.

in the diaphoric poem and the white space on the page is often as significant as the printed words since it gives emphasis to single phrases and indicates resistance to a vertical pull. Cathy Song's poetry especially illustrates this respect for silence and emphasis on engagement rather than goals or ends. Many of Forché's poems are also lean, pervaded by an ominous and prophetic speechlessness that belies any claim to controlling and dispensing with the fact of political violation that the language itself might appear to entertain. The notable exception is "The Colonel," which employs a prose, epiphoric form in a desperate attempt to fill the horrifying "negative space" in which the humane poetic imagination is erased. However, the lack of "resolution" points to the inadequacy of traditional poetic forms, and traditional conceptions of the role of the reader, to deal with political subjects authentically. Certainly "The Colonel" and Forché's other poems about El Salvador demand revisions of the traditional conceptions of the relationship between the poem and the reader and between the poetic and the political.

Other examples of the visual use of silence that serves as an acknowledgment of the play of meaning and the provisional character of the spoken (written) words can be found in poems by Rich, Lorde, and Broumas. While this silence resists closure, it is also true that many poems by women reach a kind of resolution at the end, a characteristic of epiphoric poetry, according to Kammer. However, as was discussed in Chapter I, this resolution, which is more a sense of resolve and self-responsibility than a solution, is not a

transcendence of the imagination at the expense of the reality of the subject of the poem; the concrete situation that gives rise to the poem is not merely a vehicle abandoned once transcendence is reached. Instead, the "resolve" at the end of poems such as Rich's "Splittings" or "Transcendental Etude" is a determination to extend the immanent, intimate dialogue that the poem has enacted into other life situations. Thus, the resolution of the poem opens rather than closes the poetic experience, emphasizing its power as an ordinary, continuous, communal act rather than a private, privileged, transcendent one.

Though contemporary women's poetry cannot be thoroughly or accurately described as either "epiphoric" or "diaphoric" in form, certainly it builds on diaphoric form by calling attention to the necessity of relation, or "configuration," as a source of value and meaning. As Kammer points out, the diaphoric poem makes certain "demands" on its reader that linear, epiphoric poetry does not imply:

. . . the diaphoric imagination acts not so much as a comfortable "bridge" between the real and the intangible, as a disturbing presence that validates the real, forces us to apprehend "things in their thingness" (including the person of the artist), and by that means to approach what hiddenness lies behind them. It is genuinely "universal" in its presentation of the acts of individual perception and experience, indeed more immediate and available than the generalized abstraction. The diaphoric impulse is at least as valid and valuable as its epiphoric alternate--perhaps more so in the existential confrontation it demands.³¹

Though one need not legitimate diaphoric poetry, as Kammer does, in terms commensurate with epiphoric thinking (validating the

³¹Kammer, p. 164.

real would be "disturbing" only to one who expects the real to be dismissed), her points suggest an explanation of how, for women poets, the poem is a political act. First, the poem is political in that it is an act of "existential confrontation," drawing the reader into a relation that insists upon the subjectivity (rather than manipulable objectivity) of "the real," or the concrete subject and voice of the poem. That is, the poem and the reader conceive together an event of dialogue rather than of domination. Second, this confrontation is always inescapably historical and so participates in the open play of ideology; therefore, it undermines any pretense to closure of meaning, determinism, or tragic necessity. It illustrates that values are conceived through relation, not transcendently given. And third, for contemporary women poets the poem is a political act because the response it calls for from the reader is not confined to a privileged, isolated poetic experience. Just as the end of Rich's "Splittings" moves to translate the poetic act of dialogue into a literal, active relation with others and with self, women's poetry in general opens the traditionally closed, apolitical realm of poetic experience and offers its dynamics of dialogue and ideological play as alternatives in the larger world to power achieved through domination.

CHAPTER V

A FEMINIST THEORY OF POETICS

The poetry of Rich, Lorde, Forché, Broumas and Song suggests a theory of poetics that encompasses the two "sides" of feminist consciousness that Robinson describes--the individual experience and the social experience. By not separating the two sides or privileging one over the other, women poets emphasize the role of the individual sensibility in evaluating and improving social existence. Their poems therefore can be viewed in the romantic tradition as "acts of the mind" but their works present the act of the individual mind as more than a subjective, private experience. For feminist-influenced poets, the poem--that is, our ways of reading and writing poetry--brings about relations that are both individually and politically powerful, relations that can oppress us just as much as they can deliver us from alienation. For women poets the power of the poem is not limited to reconciling the individual to the necessities of life or to transforming only the individual but is capable also of renewing our collective existence. By claiming that our ways of reading and writing are politically as well as privately consequential, contemporary women poets build on the tradition of a romantic theory of poetics while they revise that theory in ways that reveal the influence of feminist thinking.

The theme of the "act of the mind" in the process of creating meaning, which is prevalent in women's writing, certainly recurs in

romantic poetry in general and in American works that are considered romantic. Contemporary American women's poetry expands this romantic tradition in that it is also concerned with the quality of the mind's engagement with reality, and it most often depicts the act of the imagination attempting to enter into dialogue with the outer world. However, contemporary women's poetry generally deviates from the romantic tradition in at least one essential sense: women poets perceive the ethical poses that poetry enacts as political ones. Because of the influence of feminist thinking on their understanding of life and of poetry, women poets begin with the assumption that "literature is political."¹ As a result, their poetry pleads an enlarged context that is unique in the tradition of American romantic poetry, a context in which the motions of the individual imagination are inextricably intertwined with the social-political-cultural climate in which the poem is written and read. By treating their poems, and all poems, as politically powerful and by emphasizing the role of individual consciousness in the creation of meaning both within and beyond the poetic event, these poets demand in overt terms an expanded attentiveness and sense of personal and political responsibility both from themselves, as poets, and from their readers. While the concern for individual participation in and response to life is not unusual in American romantic literature, the emphasis in feminist-informed poetry on the power of individual understanding

¹Fetterley, p. xi.

and action in defining political realities is a unique claim in American poetics and criticism. By de-mystifying politics, by rejecting limiting myths of the autonomy of inner from outer, subject from object, and self from society, and by cultivating consciously in their poetry the capacity of language to displace centers of power, women poets show that the testing grounds of politics are the individual sensibilities, and that the limits of the political implications of poetry are functional, provisional restrictions, political in themselves, and not fixed boundaries inherent to poetry itself.

Thus as they expand our conception of the context of poetry to include the world at large, and especially the political world, contemporary women poets also call attention to the ideological foundations of our definitions of poetic tradition and our critical understandings of poetry. From a feminist perspective the poetic experience, as an event of openended dialogue between the poet and reader, offers the most acute critique of the pretense of ideological closure within literary criticism and poetic theory. I say "literary criticism and poetic theory" rather than "poetry itself" because of the feminist's recognition of the dependency of a work's identity on the quality of the reader's relation with it and the significance defined from that relation. For the feminist influenced poet, the "pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice" because pursuing consciousness involves recognizing increasing complexities of meaning, more possibilities for relation, and wider

community.² That is, the development of consciousness implies participation in ideological play and therefore reveals not only the ideological, hence provisional, grounds of the traditional realm of politics, but also the political and provisional grounds of traditional conceptions of poetry, the role of the poet, and the power of poetic language.

A feminist theory of poetics therefore suggests that our ways of encountering poetry, and not poetry itself as an isolated objective canon, can be as alienating and victimizing on the one hand as they can be emancipating and humanizing. Judith Fetterley's definition of feminist criticism reflects a similar emphasis on the reading relation as a conscious personal and political act:

At its best, feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read.³

A feminist theory of poetics asserts that traditional ways of reading often presume to define absolutely the poem as an identifiable, isolated "text" independent of the act of reading. Rich finds a similar desire for absolute, closed definition in the traditional realm of politics:

Much of what is narrowly termed "politics" seems to rest on a longing for certainty even at the cost of honesty, for an analysis which, once given, need not be reexamined.⁴

²MacKinnon, p. 543.

³Fetterley, p. viii.

⁴Rich, "Women and Honor," p. 193.

By perceiving the poem as an act of dialogue among the poet, reader and subject, a feminist theory of poetics questions the notion that a poem is meaningful apart from the event of reading and, more generally, that understanding can take place apart from involvement.⁵

To say that the poem, as an act of the mind (both the poet's and the reader's) in the process of conceiving meaning, or in the process of ideological play, is a political and ethical event is also to suggest that a way of reading is a way of being; writing and reading are events of relation in which the participants conceive roles as they participate rather than enter into the event with fixed identities that they maintain. Feminist-informed poetry demands us to devise a new, though still fundamentally romantic theory of poetics because it insists upon a new way of reading and a new understanding of the implications of reading. Jonathan Culler points out in his book On Deconstruction that a poem distinguishes itself from other poems by the roles it makes possible for the reader to assume; that is, the poem "coerces" the reader into adopting particular possible relations to the poem's subject, or more exactly, particular roles in the event which is the poem.⁶ Certainly in a sense any poem defines its audience and moves its readers to assume certain roles

⁵Gadamer's critique of the inflated priority granted to objectivity in the modern age provides another philosophical similarity between his hermeneutic perspective and the feminist view of understanding and interpretation.

⁶Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 67.

and relations to the world within the poem. Yet the feminist view of poetry is distinctive in that ideally the reader's role does not end when the poetic event is over. The feminist perspective insists that the poetic experience is not an isolated, privileged event incommensurate with other relations beyond the poem; the poetic act is not separate from literal, political ones, just as the historical realm is not transcended and trivialized by a universal, ahistorical realm. Instead, the feminist poem consciously attempts to lend the reader a role in a fully historical, human context, not alienate her in an ideal aesthetic realm from which daily, immanent life appears tragically limited and determined.

A feminist theory of poetics thus suggests that our understanding of what the poem is, what it does, and what it can do are not inherent limits fixed by the identity of the poem as an isolated, ossified object, but rather are limits delineated by our ways of reading and encountering the poem. The poem is as it acts in complicity with the reader. It is not a thing but rather is an event of relation and an act of dialogue that need not end when the last word is read.

These ideas about the locus and mode of being of poetry are not strictly innovations of feminist influenced poets and critics, although feminists arrive at these conclusions for reasons different from those of thinkers from other critical schools. After a massive effort to "locate" the poem either as an object on the page or as a "concretization" in the mind of the reader, Roman Ingarden concludes

in The Literary Work of Art (1973) that the literary work "is only an ontically heteronomous formation which in terms of ontic autonomy is a nothing."⁷ Clearly a disappointment to Ingarden, the literary work does not exist without a reader, nor does it fully exist only in the mind of the individual reader. To stabilize the literary work and to salvage for it some form of ontological and interpretive continuity, thinkers have developed concepts like Stanley Fish's "interpretive community" and Hans-Georg Gadamer's "effective-history" which rescue the work from both a purely relative, subjective existence and a purely static, objective mode of being.⁸ Also formalist critics occasionally acknowledge that treating the work as an object is a false but, in their view, necessary first step in critical commentary. In The Verbal Icon W. K. Wimsatt remarks that the

poem conceived as a thing in between the poet and the audience is of course an abstraction. The poem is an act. The only substantive entities are the poet and the audience. But if we are to lay hold of the poetic act to comprehend and evaluate it, and if it is to pass current as a critical object, it must be hypostasized.⁹

⁷Roman Ingarden, The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 373.

⁸Stanley E. Fish, Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1982.

⁹W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1954), p. xvii.

A feminist theory of poetics would agree with Wimsatt on the point that the poem is not a thing but is an act of involvement and response; it is an experience of dialogue that exceeds definition in categories of "subjective" and "objective." Yet Wimsatt's disclaimer also illustrates the implicit politicism within conceptions of literature and criticism that feminist thinkers are interested in bringing into consciousness. Why must the poem, which is not "a thing" anyway, "pass current as a critical object" (my underline)?¹⁰ In this case the critical approach transforms the poem in order to create an object that will sustain the approach itself, manipulating the poem into false closure in order to insure the survival of basic formalist assumptions--the autonomy of the poem and the objectivity of the critic. The model of the dialogue is instructive here since participants in dialogue both "conceive" and "conceive of" each other in a reciprocal relation.¹¹ A feminist thinker would question the legitimacy of a critical approach that overpowers the poem and its play in order to contain and rigidify its meaning. From a feminist perspective a critical approach that insists on the closure and determinacy of the poem rather than its openness gains its power not from dialogue but from domination.

¹⁰Hawthorn offers a similar challenge to Wimsatt's logic and concludes that "it is basically accurate to see [Wimsatt's objectifying of the text] as one aspect of the whole process of alienation, or 'reification' as Lukacs calls it, which substitutes a view of fixed and autonomous objects for a more fluid view of the primacy of developing human relationships" (pp. 26-27).

¹¹From Rich's "Origins and History of Consciousness," in The Dream of a Common Language.

What is particularly revisionary about feminist poetics is the conjunction it emphasizes between the practice of too conveniently "hypostasizing" the literary work to make it determinate and the analogous practices of sexual domination in the larger world. The politics of critical strategies, most often masked (whether consciously or not) as apolitical practices, illustrate and are symptomatic of the sexual politics feminists thinkers have analyzed and acted against in other areas of our lives. Thus, as for Stevens and many other modern romantic poets, for contemporary women poets "a theory/ of poetry is a theory of life," but not only because of its existential implications for the individual searching for meaning.¹² For the feminist, a theory of poetics is a theory of life because of poetry's participation in reifying, criticizing, and conceiving particular social and political practices. The poetic situation, which might be compared to the nexus of relations Wayne Booth defines as the "rhetorical stance," can enact not only a manifestation but also a modulation of sexual and political relations.¹³ As I have shown earlier, an acute sensitivity to and responsibility for both the destructive and constructive political power of poetic language characterizes poetry that derives from a feminist understanding of the world.

¹²Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," p. 486.

¹³Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication, 14 (October 1963), 139-45.

The emphasis on the underlying political power of traditionally "apolitical" poetics and criticism is not of course restricted to the feminist perspective, though, as mentioned earlier, the feminist arrives at her views for distinctive reasons. Much like the feminists, Marxist critics ground their understanding of poetry on the premise that literature is dialectically ideological: it both produces and is produced by ideologies within the culture in general and within the literary tradition. In discussing the ideologies that govern the production of realist literary form, Terry Eagleton comments that there is

a mystification in the very forms of realist fiction, which by casting objective social relations into interpersonal terms, constantly hold open the possibility of reducing the one to the other.¹⁴

Eagleton's analysis of the forms of realist fiction could be extended to challenge the feminist view of poetry, whose central issue is the complicity between social, political relations and interpersonal, psychological ones. Eagleton's comment would seem to contest the feminist aphorism that "the personal is political, the political personal," for, from his perspective, literature based on such an assumption serves to anesthetize the individual's sense of communal responsibility and allay her political involvement by resolving those real social conflicts in individual, humanistic, and ultimately

¹⁴Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory (London, Verso, 1978), p. 121.

"unreal" terms. It is possible that the reader might mistake ideological resolutions for objective solutions and so become oblivious to real, socially grounded conflict. Eagleton's analysis, then, might appear to expose as naive the feminist claim that poetry can be and often is experienced as a positively creative, rather than a negatively deceptive, political practice.

However, from analyzing contemporary women's poetry that is influenced by feminist thinking, it is clear that the separation Eagleton maintains between the political and the interpersonal is perceived by women poets as itself a dangerous reduction that perpetuates the same violation and closure committed by any viewpoint that claims objectivity.¹⁵ In fact, in their work women poets insist upon ways of reading that confound the possibility Eagleton fears, that a merely subjective reconciliation will be construed as a social solution. For the feminist poet, the individual imagination is the starting point for developing and acting on political consciousness, for it is only through dialogue and community with others that the

¹⁵According to Eagleton, "criticism must break with its ideological prehistory," which sees criticism as a kind of midwife to the text, and instead situate itself "outside the space of the text on the alternative terrain of scientific knowledge" (p. 43). The task of criticism "is not to redouble the text's self-understanding" but rather "to show the text as it cannot know itself" (p. 43). In "Metacommentary," *PMLA*, 86 (January 1971), 9-18, Frederic Jameson also calls for a kind of science of criticism that "aims at tracing the logic of the censorship" within the text (p. 17). Metacommentary too would reveal the text "as it cannot know itself." Eagleton and Jameson assert that criticism becomes scientific when it is capable of commenting on its own existence, that is, when it recognizes and accounts for its own historicity.

individual overcomes isolation and victimization. In their work women poets therefore resist "mystifying" or privileging either personal subjectivity or political objectivity.

At the same time, women poets recognize, as Fetterley does in The Resisting Reader, that the appeal to the universal or ahistorical "truth" is insidiously reductive.¹⁶ In an article responding to Eagleton's ideas about the ideology of literary form, Marxist critic Francis Mulhern articulates the same temptation feminists resist in their writing and reading toward displacing individual responsibility for the real, material conditions of existence by ordaining universals like "ultimate Truth" or "tragedy" or any other form of determinism:

One of the most common forms of displacement [in literary form], I would argue, is that of historically specific contradictions with the realm of the supra-historically 'human,' the dissolution of social antagonism into 'human-nature' (or simply, Nature).¹⁷

Like Eagleton, Mulhern views the "personalization of social contradictions" as dangerous because it clouds the reader's objectivity and obscures the nature of real, social conflicts:

By depicting objective, systemic relations in the form of their immediate appearance--intersubjective relations among persons--this kind of literature strips social contradictions of their objective character and makes them resolvable by acts of individual will. The resulting finale symbolically transcends these contradictions and, at the same time, discredits them as destructive, abstract enemies of human community

¹⁶See Fetterley, pp. xi-xii. Quoted here in Chapter IV, note 13.

¹⁷Francis Mulhern, "Ideology and Literary Form--A Comment," New Left Review, 91 (May-June 1975), 86-87.

My contention is that feminist influenced poets are eminently aware of the possibility of reduction that Eagleton and Mulhern point to, and equally aware of the reduction that both critics' comments illustrate. As Rich's work exemplifies, women poets are constantly sensitive to the tendency of poetic language to privilege subjective response over communal responsibility; thus poems like "Splittings" attempt to convey the reader through the poetic event and into the "real" social act. The motion of a generalized feminist lyric consists of the passage from "love" into "action," in Rich's words, from personal response to communal responsibility. Elvira Shatayev's claim to speaking with "a voice no longer personal," Rich's other adaptations of voices of women from the past, and other women poets' continual use of the communal "we" indicate feminist poets' care to avoid ordaining poses of politically complacent subjectivity. Alternately, women poets are sensitive to the reduction that Eagleton's and Mulhern's comments illustrate. As different as their works are, both Forché's and Song's poetry indicate the insidious violation that occurs when the humanizing, empathetic power of the individual imagination is denied a role in evaluating and conceiving political action, or the impoverishment that occurs when the imagination is withheld from immediate concrete relations. In terms of poetic consequences, such a separation results in poetry that is subservient to political causes, in Lorde's word from her poem "Power,"

"rhetoric" that is as victimizing and destructive as the pernicious myths and relations feminist poetry tries to redress.¹⁸

As I have shown, the model of dialogue, or the "common language," serves to conceptualize the act of reciprocal, communal relation that allows feminist-informed poets to avoid reductively separating subject from object and privileging either one. It also allows them, in their poetics, to avoid some of the problems, such as the relativism of solipsistic interpretation and the false reification of the poem as a fixed object, that thinkers with other critical orientations have had to resolve. Feminist poets and a feminist theory of poetics asserts that there is no "realm of the supra-historically 'human'" just as there is no realm of the supra-historical political; there is no mystical, all-encompassing

¹⁸In her article "Her Cargo: Adrienne Rich and the Common Language," American Poetry Review, 8, No. 4 (1979), pp. 6-10, Alicia Ostriker invites this reduction of poetry to rhetoric when she faults Rich's work for containing too much personal anger, joylessness, and separatist views. Such personal anger, according to Ostriker, does not flatter the feminist political vision or provide women with "desirable fantasies" (p. 8) they can pursue. However, by asking Rich to abandon her poetry of personal suffering in favor of reflecting a visionary promised land--"a world without victims, a self unvictimized, unmastered, complete" (p. 8)--Ostriker not only reveals her failure to recognize how Rich rejects tragic deception by conceiving joy out of suffering, but also how the poetry offers valuable models of women changing rather than abstract, ideal goals that are easily dismissed as unattainable. Ironically, Ostriker asks Rich to repeat the same tragedy she has worked to overcome, to reconstitute the same kinds of pernicious myths she has struggled to dissolve, and to provide women with anesthesia rather than possible cures.

universal Truth, human or sexual Identity, or cultural Necessity.¹⁹ Meaning and being, which for the feminist are not separable into a personal and a political level, are open to play, and poetry, as an active purveyor of meaning and being, has a role in that play if our understanding of it is large enough to grant it that power. Because of these assertions and because of women poets' sensitivity to the implications of their work, the feminist ways of writing and reading provide more of a solution to than an example of the "problem" of mystification in literary form that concerns Eagleton and Mulhern. These poets recognize that the danger the Marxist critics find inherent in literary form is overcome by developing new forms that revise our ways of encountering existing forms, not by abandoning or censoring those traditional works.

Therefore, unlike for some Marxists, for women poets, the recognition that the poetic experience has the capacity to be read as a resignation to social-political circumstances rather than an act of involvement in and responsibility for those conditions does not finally produce a bitterness toward poetry or toward their own poetic drive, although certainly many feminist influenced poets have written very bitter, self-suspicious poems at some stage in their

¹⁹See Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in Woman, Culture and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 67-87, and Alison Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Rowman and Allanheld, 1983) for examples of feminist thinkers who expose the fallacy of appealing to universals like Nature, Culture, and Human Nature to legitimize sexual oppression.

careers, a stage I earlier called "stunted feminism."²⁰ Instead contemporary women poets in general have created a firm, fertile context for their poetry by means similar to the way Madame Curie in Rich's poem "Power" works with her radioactive materials, "denying/ her wounds came from the same source as her power." Rather than attempting to enclose and therefore diminish the poetic experience, women poets affirm the openness of the poetic event and allow the reader to discover the power of dialogue.

As they introduce new forms of writing, then, feminist influenced poets promulgate a new way of reading. The notion that there is no text as such apart from the reading experience is no longer a radically innovative critical conception, but the context that feminist poets insist grounds their poetry is radically less exclusive than most other critical, theoretical, and poetic approaches claim. There is no text that we can consciously understand and evaluate until it is read, and women poets are concerned that we, particularly women, who have historically been victimized by traditional ways of reading as well as by traditional social and political practices, extend the understanding of the dialogic conception of meaning and being to the "text" of politics, the macrostructural circumstances that design and limit every aspect of our individual lives in ways that we are often conscious but more often unconscious of. To repeat

²⁰In "A Common Language: The American Woman Poet," in Shakespeare's Sisters, pp. 269-79, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi offers a more detailed outline of the stages of feminist consciousness that women poets usually pass through.

MacKinnon's comment, reading from a feminist perspective is a political act because the "pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice."²¹ By reading the "text" of politics for ourselves, we call into question what was previously assumed to be "given" or merely "circumstantial" and bring into consciousness what was previously unconscious. Because of the analogy between the poetic experience and other relational conditions in life, feminist poets, like Audre Lorde in "The Black Unicorn," assert that poetry is not a "symbol," not an isolated, artificial, or politically inconsequential experience, but an active, politically significant conduit of meaning and being that can revise and improve our collective existence.

For women poets affected by feminist thinking the quality of the poetic experience--the relation among the poet, subject, and reader that brings the poem into being--is both symptomatic and potentially curative of the destructive sexual politics in the larger social world. Through their work these women begin redressing relations of mastery and manipulation not only by thematically exposing their false power and ultimate destructiveness, but also by demanding a new way of reading and a new role for the reader. The poem presents itself not as an object but as a human voice, usually female, desiring dialogue with the reader, a voice seeking communion, commonality, and empathy rather than objective detachment. The dialogue

²¹MacKinnon, p. 543.

relation achieved in the poetic situation thus undermines the kind of power that is falsely gained through overpowering the poet, reader, or poem's subject, and redefines legitimate power as relational, communal, and immanent rather than absolute, solipsistic, or transcendent.

By transforming our understanding of the implications of writing and reading poetry and by enlarging our perception of the domain of literature to include the traditionally separate realms of the poetic and the political, contemporary women poets who are influenced by feminist thinking emphasize the fundamental romantic assumption that, in Sandra Gilbert's words, "through literary study we can renew our lives."²² By cultivating a "common language," feminist poets insist on a new form of poetic experience in which the legitimately powerful relation of dialogue erases false notions of privilege and/or powerlessness and overcomes delusions of determinism for both the poet and the reader. Thus it is possible that, because of her participation in the feminist poetic experience, the reader, as well as the poet, will extend that poetic dialogue into the larger social world, seriously engaging in the openended criticism of "given" values and in the continual conception of new meanings and modes of being.

²²Gilbert, p. 23.

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VITA

Alice Templeton graduated from Lambuth College in Jackson, Tennessee. She received an M. A. in English from Memphis State University and a Ph. D. from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.