MUSCLING IN : A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN POETS AND ENGLISH POETIC TRADITION

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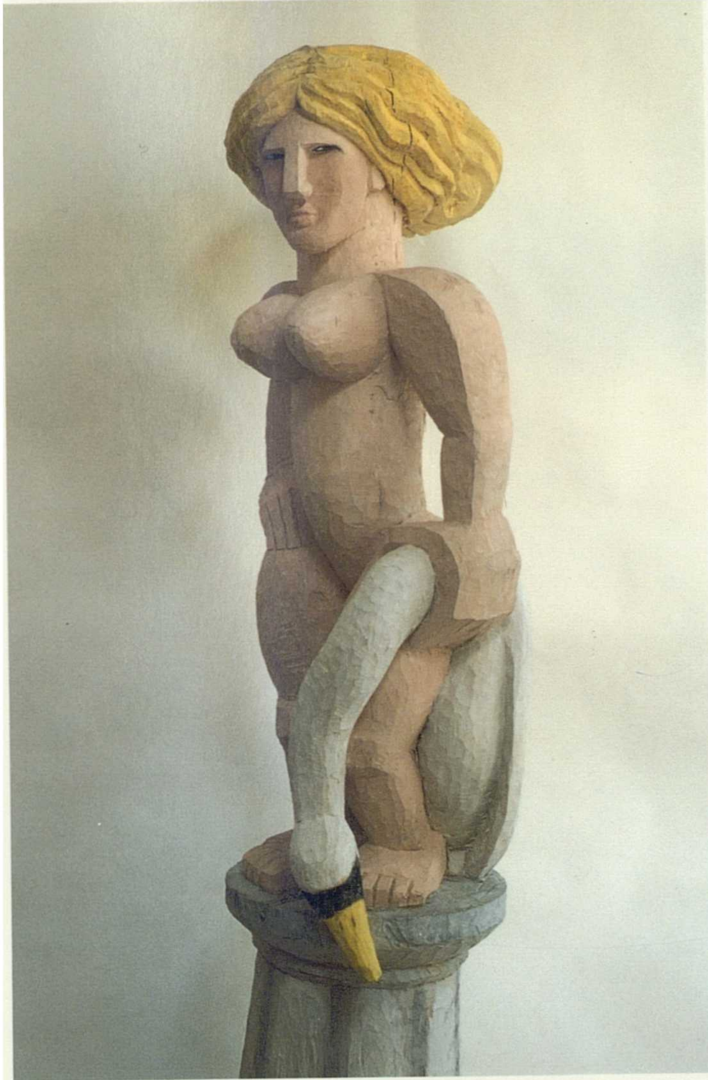

She clambers up
four ladders of narrative
till she swings free
in the vault of darkness, the
silence between sentences.

Michèle Roberts, 'Restoration work in Palazzo Te',
<u>Psyche and the Hurricane</u>.

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of contemporary women's poetry published in Britain between 1970 and 1992. It aims to replace the confusion and prejudice surrounding 'women's poetry' and 'feminist poets' with clear interpretative frameworks that foreground gender as a valid site of inquiry.

The introductory chapter considers the place of women poets within the poetry 'Establishment'. A large number of women poets are currently being published, but there is little evidence of the critical interest that is essential to the surviv al of their work. It provides some historical and cultural context for the study that follows, and looks at how and where women poets are reviewed, and misguided preconceptions about both 'feminine' and 'feminist' subject matter.

The rest of the thesis is devoted to analyses of six poets: Eavan Boland, Deborah Randall, Carol Ann Duffy, Suniti Namjoshi, Michèle Roberts and Grace Nichols.

The central issue in each analysis is an exploration of how each poet creates a female voice within an overwhelmingly masculine lyric tradition. The poets seek alternatives to a liberal humanist perspective and their work is informed by further crucial determinants: for example, lesbian sexuality, questions of racial difference, and the impact, for women, of legacies of nationalism and colonialism within literary tradition.

The final chapter is a detailed exploration of the intersections of gender, race, nationalism and poetic tradition. Focusing on Nichols, it examines the emerging Caribbean poetic tradition, and argues that the parameters of current debate are based on patriarchal definitions that are quite inappropriate to her work. Her poetic transcends the barriers of race and class, dissolving oral and literary distinctions in an original synthesis. This chapter illustrates the underlying problem with existing critical frameworks; their unacknowledged gender-bias makes them ill-equipped to do justice to the exciting range of work being created by contemporary women poets.

The Conclusion points out the stubbornly persistent nature of the obstacles that block the recognition and appreciation of poetry by women. Nevertheless, it applauds progress made, particularly in educational programmes, to improve their status and visibility.

INTRODUCTION

During my first year as an English Literature student at Oxford University we followed a compulsory class in 'Practical Criticism'. A small group of us, seven or eight, met regularly to discuss a text, invariably a poem, selected by our tutor. Towards the end of the year he handed the choice over to us, and each week one student brought along photocopies of a piece they wished to critique. I took a poem by Ursula Fanthorpe. The tutor read it out, as usual; immediately it sounded embarrassingly thin, quite out of place in the beamed, booklined college study with its air of intense, expectant concentration. The words did not sound as they had when I first discovered the poem for myself. They did not resonate. No one appeared sufficiently inspired to offer comment. I didn't understand why, but I knew I'd somehow chosen wrongly. 'Did you write it yourself, Vicki?' the tutor asked, laughing. (1)

I did not understand, then, the subtle role played by context in the appreciation of any work of literature. I did not realise that there could be many different registers of poetry, and that they could all be valid. Instead I felt that the poem I had picked was just not very 'good'; by implication, my own critical acumen was faulty, misguided, immature. Everyone else appeared to know, as if by instinct, what Great Art was. I didn't. Many of the classic undergraduate texts struck me as dull and obscure; they did not move nor even interest me. But I learned that these personal reactions were not appropriate guides in the quest for Great Art. There were special, objective tools for that.

A learned aesthetic is extremely hard to exorcise. I have internalised the traditional British hierarchy of literary Quality, and still something in me expects the printed and neatly-bound volume of poems to be intrinsically 'better' than the more cheaply-produced pamphlet from a small press I haven't come across before. I have discovered that my trusted techniques of critical exegesis rely upon a hidden aesthetic which is culturally specific and not, in any easy sense, 'universal'. In a society nourished by the infusion of rhythms, imagery and techniques from unfamiliar traditions, a language continually enriched by international influences, such orthodox textual reading can be applied fruitfully to a smaller and smaller selection of conventional poetry.

Poet and critic exist symbiotically; each nurtures and facilitates the understanding of the other. It is the critic who, ideally, helps the reader to find a way in to an otherwise confusing text, creating a sympathetic context within which the poem's full resonances can be explored. There are many poetries presently denied the attention, energy and sympathy of critics, or ignored by the publishing houses and journals in whose 'high culture' cutting-rooms tomorrow's literary history is made. I have chosen to focus on poetry by women in Britain, however controversial the grouping, because I believe that the lack of an accepted and sympathetic context for their work is largely responsible for the continuing neglect and misinterpretation from which it suffers.

Feminist criticism gave me confidence to question assumptions I could not begin to challenge as a nervous novice in the inner sanctum of English literature. Gradually I found I was able to dispense with the pretence of the impersonal reader, and to devote more attention to the *processes* at work in the formation of my own critical responses. (2) Hence the emergence of 'Mr Bingen'. I realised that I was very quick to anticipate the harsh judgements typically made about women poets. The complaints I expected to come from unsympathetic critics certainly came; but I realised that they were also *my* complaints, *my* anxieties. Periodically I would lose my conviction that their work was poetry - that poetry could say those things, could be expressed in that way - and a voice would start up in my head, insinuating and expanding doubts.

This voice was my constant companion-in-research. Finally I shaped it into a character, and named him Mr Bingen. He is a composite figure, largely fictional, shaped from various male teachers whose benign encouragement and correction have guided my studies in the past. He owes something, too, to Mr Ramsay in To The Lighthouse - for me, the most compelling portrait of the patriarch's curious ability to provoke anger and sympathy simultaneously.

This is not a frivolous embellishment, nor a heavy-handed piece of satire. For Mr Bingen is also, of course, in my head; he is part of my own critical history, however rigorous my attempts to expel him might be. It seems important to stress, at a time when feminist politics of whatever description have

acquired such pejorative connotations, that a feminist practice is not the oversimplified, dogmatic monolith of dismissive stereotype. To me, any feminist practice is, by definition, continually engaged in a process of self-criticism and expanding awareness. It is easy to shut out self-doubt and suppress evidence. I have included Mr Bingen because I think it is crucial not to hide such processes. I have named him after my maternal grandfather, with affection. (3)

When I began my research I wanted to shut this treacherous character up. Curiously, once I let him speak, he lost his power to censor my speech. Admittedly I am not playing fair; I am putting words into his mouth. But that, on reflection, seems justifiable since he, the voice of patriarchal literary judgement, continues to put words in far more influential places.

Each of the following chapters concentrates primarily on one individual poet. I chose poets instinctively: I submerged myself in anthologies and read until a particular poet grabbed my attention. The poets I chose seemed to me first to raise and then to explore a particular theme or area which might cause problems for a female poet writing into or against English poetic tradition. As my research progressed, the underlying connections that inform this study emerged.

The first chapter examines the phenomenon of 'Post-Feminism' in the world of poetry. In the light of the cheery optimism of two of the most influential women poets in Britain (4), and their confident assurances that discrimination and misogyny are no more, is the idea of 'women's poetry' perhaps already outdated?

My research suggests that this is not the case, and that gender has been pushed off the agenda rather too hastily. There are clear signs of unease and confusion about exactly what is meant by 'feminist poetry' and a 'female aesthetic'. In each of the chapters that follow I focus my discussion on the work of one or two poets, tracing the processes of her negotiation with, and transformation of, literary tradition.

CHAPTER 1

POST-FEMINISM IN THE POETRY WORLD

This introductory chapter takes as its starting point the glib premise that sexism in the poetry world is a thing of the past. It is not a whinge about injustice, but an attempt to identify the current forms and disguises of such chameleon attitudes, in order to prepare the way for the corrective contexts and resistant readings that follow.

The general opinion of those involved in the creation and dissemination of poetry in Britain seems to be that women poets need no special pleading. The heady radicalism of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies has subsided, the protests have been heeded. Overt sexism and racism have been weeded out of the critical vocabulary and women are published in the mainstream. The most respected British women poets go out of their way to insist that their work is essentially no different from the standard; they are simply poets, not women poets. They have reacted swiftly to the danger of becoming marginalised within the bounds of any 'female poetic'. Not surprisingly, they do not wish their work to be seen as appealing only to a female readership.

Inevitably, the climate of opinion within poetry circles reflects the politics of the society in general. In bookshops, free-standing stacks of Women's Press and Virago books are being dismantled and their contents distributed throughout the General Fiction shelves. Why separate them, as though they represented some special interest group, when they can justly claim to be 'literature', no longer some sub-section for specialists? (1) Women poets understandably insist that their work is as varied in theme, style and tone as the poetry of men has always been. The

idea of trying to define the characteristics of female poets, as though their vision and craft were in some way inexorably determined purely by their gender, is insulting.

And yet, despite this consensus that the gender of a poet is irrelevant, women poets continue to be grouped together in reviews and critical essays; they are compared with one another rather than with male poets; their names seem to be instinctively linked in the minds of readers and critics. In less enlightened ages, the association was consistently negative, as Theodore Roethke's oft-quoted catalogue of the shortcomings of the species illustrates beautifully. With a barely-concealed yawn he bemoans their:

> lack of range in subject matter and emotional tone, and lack of sense of humour...the spinning out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life...hiding from the real agonies of the spirit;...lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar; stamping a tiny foot against God or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has reinvented integrity; carrying on excessively against Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on. (2)

Such opinions are not, of course, printed today. Instead, with anything from zealous conviction to weary pragmatism, editors take care to avoid sexist commentaries and to represent a fair proportion of women poets. (3) Yet there is a curiously paradoxical tendency evident in all mainstream poetry publications. On the one hand, as I observed above, women poets are huddled under the same umbrella, particularly for reviews. On the other hand, no one seems quite sure why they should be.

Invariably the critic ends up using this gendered group as a platform from which to declare the ridiculousness of attempting any such segregation in the first place. There is never any explicit rationale given for the practice. Moreover, quite apart from the pointlessness of this particular exercise in literary evaluation, there is a further irritation. The very diversity of women's contemporary poetry, which is finally being acknowledged, is now used as a 'proof' that feminist critics were engaged in a faintly ridiculous enterprise from the start. Pat the poets on the back while you stick a knife in the academics; divide and rule is alive and kicking. It is easy to imagine the 'balanced','rational' critic's bemused train-of-thought:

> Look at the difference in style! Who on earth suggested they should be similar just because they have ovaries? How absurd. Worse, in fact; I might even venture to suggest it is just a little bit sexist!

In short, it is fine for mainstream critics to keep the women poets together, but it is not fine for 'feminists' to do so. Why? Because the infuriating creatures will transform what was intended as a safely dull and obscure railway siding into a main line connection. They will produce even more 'women only' anthologies. Attention and purchasing power are finite in the poetry market as in any other, and the extraordinary popularity of women's poetry collections must rankle. (4) The fact that female poets have always been treated as a group, and that feminist critics, rather than initiating this bizarre practice, have merely tried to use such ghettoisation positively, is

conveniently overlooked. Thus Clair Wills, assigned an all-female selection of poets to review in the TLS, opens with the following remark:

> If the notion of a distinctively female poetic voice was ever seriously entertained, it is unquestionably undermined by the variety of forms and range of styles in these six recent volumes. (5)

It is hard to believe that any theorist ever suggested that a female poetic would demand unity of form and style from each one of its women poets, but Wills's clear scorn for the idea of there being any connection between poets who happen to share similar anatomies naturally invites the query: why, if this is so, repeatedly shuffle women poets together?

In surveys of contemporary poetry the practice is even more widespread than in reviews. Writing in 1972, Margaret Byers ventured the opinion that there were a few women poets who could productively be grouped alongside one another:

> Their work is personal without being private, and despite their manifest differences in temperament and development they can in a real sense be grouped together. 'British woman poet' is rather more than a sexual classification. (6)

What it might actually be remains disappointingly unclear, since Byers discusses only six poets, and is far from enthusiastic about any of them. The only thing they seem to have in common is, as she points out, that they have all been neglected by, and frequently excluded from, the mainstream poetry scene. Her eleven-page essay actually reinforces this segregation: it is the only article of the sixteen included to discuss any women

poets at all.

Of course, the situation has changed since 1972. As a respected London poetry bookshop owner observed lightheartedly, women are 'taking over' poetry, just as they have taken over the novel. We are inundated with women's poetry, not only from the mainstream publishers but from all the women's presses. Plaintive cries of injustice and reverse sexism can be heard from frustrated male writers. (7) Some even claim that 'a lot of them are just promoted because they're women'. (8) Yet even in an era supposedly teeming with the productions of female poets - and, for the most part female poets who ask to be read simply as poets, in the mainstream, and not as women apart - the segregation persists. In 1988 Alan Robinson published his collection of essays on Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry (9). There are eight of them; each chapter discusses the work of a single poet in considerable depth, with the exception of two: Chapter 2 pairs Craig Raine and Christopher Reid and Chapter 8 (the last one) is devoted to women poets. Needless to say, these awesomely productive creatures do not succeed in knuckling their way into the main body of the volume as effortlessly as they have, apparently, invaded the contemporary poetry scene. He manages to squeeze five of them into forty-seven pages, under the curious title, 'Declarations of Independence: Some Responses to Feminism.'

What all this suggests, aside from the entrenched reluctance of the male critical establishment to admit women artists as worthy of serious, sustained study, is that there is a certain

insecurity about just how to approach women's poetry. However vehemently some women protest that their writing is essentially the same as men's, no one seems able to put the gender of the poet quite out of their mind. Somehow their work does not always fit snugly within the traditional parameters of critical exegesis. But since the recent prominence of the category 'women poets' arose largely through the efforts of the feminist movement, no one can resist equating the two. 'Women's poetry' is viewed suspiciously as a political mouthpiece for that most unfashionable ideology, Feminism. Even Robinson's choice of title illustrates this association, despite the efforts of two of the poets he discusses, Fleur Adcock and Anne Stevenson, to downplay their gender and draw a firm distinction between feminism and poetry. (10) His heading works in two ways: it provides a pseudo-justification for grouping the women together, and at the same time implies a distance between their position and 'Feminism'. There may be many excellent reasons for choosing to examine the work of several female poets as a group, but Robinson's inaccurate headlining does not constitute one. Rather than shedding any light on the poets, it serves only to summon up the feared and despised ghouls of Feminism for yet another drubbing.

It is certainly true that the recent publication of a spate of women-only anthologies has been made possible by the work of feminists in setting up women's presses. It is perhaps, therefore, hardly surprising that the poetry in them is presumed to be 'feminist poetry' - although just what that might mean is

a different matter. Some of these collections have in fact quite explicitly advocated a new poetic grounded in the political goals and visions of feminism. (11) Others, like Naming the Waves (12), an anthology of lesbian poetry, seem to be taken as thinly disguised feminist propaganda, and consequently overlooked, because of the bizarre presumption that every lesbian is a radical feminist. Obviously, a 'separatist' anthology of any kind is seen as an affront to the sacred liberal humanist belief that art is not, and should not be, political. Even discreet and conservative anthologies, like Adcock's Faber collection, generate disgruntlement. The familiar anxiety produced by the absence (or worse, exclusion) of men is stirred, even by something as innocuous as a book of poems...

But it is the alliance of 'feminism' with poetry that provokes the strongest outrage. If a group of women were to publish a collection of poems about flower-arranging, the transience of human life, and the tragedies of love and death, no doubt they could, with generosity, be squeezed into the canon as a footnote, in much the same way as E. J. Scovell has recently been retrieved from obscurity to take her place as a proficient 'minor' poet. (13) But not only do some of the poems express indecorous and 'unfeminine' feelings; some envisage a world so unfamiliar that there are no men in it. And British literary tradition holds that poetry is supposed to transcend the divisions and barriers of mundane material reality; it is not meant to sully its hands with political struggle. (14)

The 'not inferior' female poet: a brief historical perspective

A quick glance into the past reveals that women-only anthologies are not a modern phenomenon, nor have they always been associated with feminist politics. The editors of The Distaff Muse: An Anthology of Poetry written by Women (15) published in 1949, celebrate the emergence of a specifically female poetic vision. In their Preface, they remember a time when it used to be thought high praise to say of a woman, 'She writes like a man,' and are relieved that such a bizarre attitude is no longer favoured. The anthology illustrates their conviction that 'women not only write like women, but ha[ve] that to say in their poetry which no man could or would try to express'. The clarity of this authentic female voice is taken as a measure of the excellence of the poetry. Commenting on the final, most recent section (which features work by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and Christina Rossetti) Bax observes:

> As time proceeds, women begin to write more and more confidently in a feminine mode. The reader is unlikely to judge that a single poem in this section of the book could have come from a man. (p. 68)

Originally the anthology was to be called 'Feminine Poetry', but the editors reluctantly agreed to alter it in response to fears that such a title would attract accusations of inferior quality. Despite this compromise they assert that:

> the poetry of women ought to be distinguishable from the poetry of men. No woman objects to being told that she has 'feminine hands'. Indeed, if there were no difference between the poetry written by the two sexes, there could be no purpose in segregating the poetry

written by women.

Such celebration of the innate difference of women's poetry is unusual, and its implications of dainty, pure upper-class femininity may not seem so attractive to today's female poets. What it does show is how fully aesthetics are governed by the climate within which they take shape. There is a long history to the troubled question of the relevance of gender within poetry. Usually the precedents set by these women are ignored in current debate, and it is assumed that any gender distinction is a political, feminist act and therefore disqualifies the poet from the ranks of the 'pure' artists.

Examining earlier women-only anthologies, it becomes clear just how little things have changed. Far from being a recent phenomenon, the byproduct of feminist anger, women's poetry anthologies have a long history. What is remarkable (and depressing) is how little the defence of quality and of the importance of poetry by women has changed. The editors of the extraordinary Penguin Book of Women Poets ('we have been conscious of the difficulty of spanning 3,500 years and representing almost 40 literary traditions in a single volume,') quote from the introduction of a less ambitious undertaking, published in 1755, Poems by Eminent Ladies:

> It will not be thought partiality to say that the reader will here meet with many pieces on a variety of subjects excellent in their own way; and that this collection is not inferior to any miscellany compiled from the works of men. (16)

The modest defence of women's poems as 'not inferior', pleading so tentatively for equality, seems to be a characteristic of the enterprise. Women's Voices: an anthology of the most characteristic poems by English, Scotch and Irish Women was published in London in 1887. Like Margaret Byers, its editor Mrs William Sharp feels that the achievements of women poets have been consistently neglected, even though their work is as skilful and interesting as that of comparable male poets who are widely respected and admired. She notes too that a few token women are fêted and acclaimed while the majority are inexplicably ignored:

> It is, however, not generally recognised how much of verse of high intellectual and artistic quality has been written by women during the last two centuries. One or two names have a high place on the roll of fame; others are rewarded with honourable if somewhat patronising mention and approval; and many whose productions are of a quality exceptionally noteworthy are totally forgotten, or...strangely, and one is inclined to say, ungenerously neglected. (17)

Just as contemporary critics express bewilderment at the sheer volume of new writing appearing, Mrs Sharp accepts that:

> In the great and ever-increasing pressure of literary production it would be unreasonable to expect that every true voice should make itself heard, even for the brief while of its singing-days: many, indeed most poets, must be content with the selfish reward of their art.

In spite of this general injustice, she argues that a quite disproportionate number of these neglected poets are women. Her intention is to demonstrate that 'it is as possible to form an anthology of "pure poetry" from the writings of women as from

those of men.' (18) And with the greater freedom of movement and opportunity recently made available to women, Mrs Sharp confidently predicts that the 'steady development' evident in the quality of their poetry will continue. Even so soon after these liberties have been attained, she is convinced that her selection is, like the Poems by Eminent Ladies, 'not inferior to any that might be made from the poetry of men of similar standing.' She hazards a bolder claim:

> among the minor poets of this generation women have written more that is worthy to endure than men have done. It is, however, not a question of assertion or denial: the settlement of the question is within the power of every one who cares to go into the matter intelligently, sympathetically, and without prejudice.

Women editors are making the same claims today. Carol Rumens uses the sub-title 'Post-Feminist' for her anthology Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry 1964-84 (19) to signify the dawning of a new age of what she calls 'mental freedom' for women: a psychological authenticity of being which 'a few outstanding women in any age have achieved, and which many more, with increasing confidence, are claiming today.' (20) In the Introduction to her selection, The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry Fleur Adcock locates the undervaluation and neglect of women's poetry firmly in the past, an unjust discrimination that hindered women 'until recently,' (21) whenever that might have been. In the present tense of the introduction she believes, thankfully, that 'this phase is over (as far as at least one large section of the reading public is concerned)'. But despite the wide variety of poetry being

written and sometimes published, women still constitute a tiny percentage of the core of generally-recognised poets. The same three or four names are hauled out in defence whenever the establishment is accused of neglect.

I have sketched this historical perspective because there is a tendency to dismiss even the idea of anthologies of women's poetry as an example of absurd feminist 'overreaction', and to distort and simplify the attempts women have made to create a more sympathetic context for the reading of their work. It seems important to point out that women have published their poetry in all-women anthologies for hundreds of years, not always because they wished to make any political statement, but because the (male) editors of the 'general' anthologies either did not know of their existence, or were not interested in publishing their work. The troubled grouping, 'poetry by women' is not synonymous with so-called 'feminist poetry', and it is significant that so many critics conflate the two in a confused, vague and invariably derogatory way.

The invasion of noisy amateurs : women's anthologies today

An anthology usually tries to present some connecting thread or theme, either through the strong individual taste of its editor or on the basis of common theme, age, location, etc. Anthologies do not demand strict conformity; they merely aim to provide a broader overall context within which individual poems can gather weight and resonance from one another. As part of a common project the single poet can benefit from the greater visibility of a recognisable 'group', and fruitful juxtapositions may foreground or illuminate interesting aspects of their work. In the same way that publishers issue a list of four or five poets in a series, so that the books promote one another, carving out a shared readership, anthologies aim to stimulate the reader, foregrounding unexpected similarities and divergences. 'Schools' or groups of poets are accepted as a convenient fiction: a tool enabling the reader to trace some kind of pattern to aid their interpretation and contextualising of the poetry.

In the case of women poets, because the classification itself has acquired such pejorative overtones, the editor of an anthology whose determining principle of selection is the poet's gender has a hard task. She has to argue that these women poets are not writing 'women's poetry' at all, but represent the variety, skill and control associated with 'Poetry'. The very rationale for grouping the contributors together carries its own

innate negative implications. It is not surprising that women poets take pains to insist on their distance from such limitations. In her introduction to Making for the Open Carol Rumens betrays her own obedient phallocentrism. Like Mrs Sharp, she is eager to prove that women can and do write 'pure poetry'. She admits her disappointment at the quality of the poetry that has been published by women's presses:

> Few have been solely, or even primarily, concerned with excellence...Those writers concerned with 'the stern art of poetry' as an end in itself have tended to be swamped by the noisy amateurs proclaiming that women, too, have a voice. This anthology is different from its predecessors in that the poems proclaim only themselves. (Introduction, xv)

In her eagerness to defend the poets she has selected, Rumens inadvertently subscribes to this prejudice about 'women's poetry'. The passage implies that 'noisy amateurs' are, generally speaking, women: before they started to think they could write, the 'real' poets were genuine craftsmen (sic), devoted to 'the stern art of poetry'. There was fierce protest about these assumptions, and in the second edition of the anthology Rumens revised the whole introduction in response. In the new version, her tone is less dismissive and she is much clearer about the place of politics in poetry: she has no objections - indeed welcomes political insights - provided attention to form, rhythm and language are not sacrified to content. But how does a poem 'proclaim only itself'? Clearly for Rumens, a 'pure' poem is one that is not grounded in an oppositional politics, or in other words, does not upset the

precious liberal humanist applecart - the belief in Universality. As we shall see in more detail in the main chapters of this study, issues that are specifically concerned with women's lives and experiences tend to be treated as parochial. In order for a poem to 'proclaim only itself' it has to be dealing with some rather more *universal* topic. Of course. Women's politics embarrass people.

One of the many muddled beliefs about 'women's poetry' is that it is narrow in subject and theme, obsessed with any specifically female experience, the more bodily the better: menstruation, childbirth, rape, etc. Critics tend to react uneasily to such work. Martin Booth's hurt perplexity is fairly characteristic. In his study of British poetry from the 'Sixties to the 'Eighties he remarks plaintively:

> It is a sorry fact that most modern female poets seem to be writing only for their own sex and the men are ignored (22).

It is in order to defend their work against this kind of accusation that Carol Rumens takes pains to prove that women write poetry about all kinds of things, and as a result finds herself apologising for having included even one or two poems that consider any exclusively female preserves:

> My aim was not merely to display the technical accomplishment of women writers but to indicate something of the sheer range and variety of subject matter... I have made no attempt to discriminate against poems dealing with specifically female experiences, provided they are genuine poems...

Distinguishing a 'genuine' poem from a false one is an aesthetic problem; she does not enlarge on the criteria by which such a distinction is made. Her defence of women's poetry downplays these superficial differences that have been exaggerated and devalued, in order to prove that female poets demonstrate intellect, objectivity, action: those qualities associated with ***real*** poetry. Finally she ducks out of the debate altogether by offering this justification for her act of 'positive discrimination' in even compiling a women's anthology:

> This seems to me morally justifiable on the grounds that those who have suffered negative discrimination deserve some righting of the balance, and artistically defensible on the grounds that an anthology, if it is to be readable, must have some limiting factor, that of gender being as good a one as any. (xviii)

The choice of words here is revealing; Rumens is almost apologising. It is common to find editors expressing regret at the necessity of imposing an arbitrary birth-date as a cut-off in their selection, but Rumens's whole introduction sets out to affirm the quality of women's poetry in a culture she recognises as antagonistic to it, so why then describe the very premise of her selection as, in itself, a 'limiting factor'? It would seem strange to hear Frank Ormsby reproaching himself for the geographical limitations of his anthology, Poets from the North of Ireland. (23)

In her introduction to The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry, Fleur Adcock expresses her own opposition to the premises of this separate 'women's anthology':

> If I have a theory about the tradition informing their poetry it is that there is no particular tradition: there have been poets, and they have been individuals, and a few of them have influenced a few others...if 'women's poetry' were a special genre, a minor and recognizably different offshoot from the main process, it might make sense to see it as a unity, but as things are, women have been involved in the currents and movements as little or as much as men, and have been as various. (Introduction, p. 1.)

The only common characteristic she and Rumens wish to distinguish is that of unjust neglect. The collections thus carry a slight whiff of righteous worthiness, as though they were just the result of rather unexciting acts of atonement: the publication of those who were left out, the also-rans, hardly a compelling connecting thread around which to construct a sympathetic and productive ambience for the poems. (24) Adcock refutes every possible rationale for considering 'women's poetry' as the basis for any kind of critique because she has accepted the hostile viewpoint that such a grouping is *merely* political or sociological. Consequently the whole anthology is founded upon a negative unifier. Yet, as we have seen, the strength of anthologies lies in their capacity to provide a shared and sympathetic context for the poems within. This is not to say they must represent a single theme, style, message or aesthetic. But in declaring at the outset that there is no positive unifying force behind the selection, Adcock defuses its potential strength, condemning the individuals within to swimming uneasily

around the outside of the big fishes' pond. They are ghettoised not because their vision as poets is constrained by their gender, but because they are effectively deprived of a valid and authentic context by their own editor.

And as Alicia Suskin Ostriker points out in her study of American women poets, the useful generic labels, 'American poets' , or 'French poets', do not generate the same scepticism; no one expects them to demonstrate uniformity (25). Women poets are apparently expected to assert their solidarity, - whether political or aesthetic is not made clear.

So we have a situation in which any notion of the possible fruitfulness of looking at poetry by women as a group is viewed with suspicion from the outset. Examples of previous attempts to do so are quoted irresponsibly and out of context if they are in any way radical, and thereafter accepted as representative of a 'movement' which in reality is extraordinarily diverse, its very variety characteristic of its strength. The more conservative separatist anthologies, like those compiled by Adcock and Rumens, tend to select work that conforms to the traditional expectations of British lyric poetry both in technique and tone, presenting the most orthodox poetry in order to pacify critics and readers hostile to the idea of grouping 'women poets'. Consequently the bold assertion running across the centuries - that poetry by women is just as 'good' as that written by men - is made more palatable (and far less threatening) by the reassurance that it is actually *no different*: conforming to rather than challenging literary, aesthetic and philosophical

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traditions. Deliberately aiming to neutralise difference in this way, such anthologies end up, as we have seen, undermining themselves. Both Adcock and Rumens seem to feel that women should not be segregated in this way; that the time has come for them to take their rightful place in the mainstream.

As I have hinted, any impulse to examine 'women's poetry' as a grouping, however loosely defined, is discredited through the tendency to confuse 'female' and 'feminist'. A few token women poets are recognised because they obey the time-honoured precepts of the liberal humanist poetic, but, since their work is no different from men's poetry, there is, as Bax and Adcock point out, no sense in differentiating them from the mainstream. Yet the fact remains: female poets are consistently underrepresented in mainstream journals, anthologies and critical studies. When they do appear it is usually in small clusters, where they are compared with one another (a familiar mode of assessment for women, inscribed by the format of competitions like 'Miss World') not 'up there' with the boys. But even in this enclave women poets are denied a sympathetic context of their own at the same time as they are excluded from the spheres of 'real' poetry.

Those who are singled out for praise are frequently contrasted favourably with a despised 'norm': unlike the usual women poets, *this one*...etc. The chosen woman is seen as a miraculous exception to the mundane rule. Thus, in an essay on the work of Carol Ann Duffy, the critic Jane E Thomas remarks:

> Although she is a lesbian and a feminist she displays none of the self-congratulatory essentialism commonly associated with such a stance. (26)

With which particular stance? Is she talking of lesbian ***poets***, feminist ***poets***, or of the political stance of lesbian feminism? Does Thomas herself share this common association, or intend to critique it? This conflation of complex and actually quite separate strands of female experience and ideology is widespread: a well-established practice which facilitates the selection of token women, while outlawing *any* challenge to the status quo - whether it be political, philosophical, or aesthetic.

Where is she? - The Ranting Virago (or 'Feminist Poet')

What is this oft-cited quantity, the feminist poem? Is it distinguished by content, theme, technique or context? In 1983 the poet Sylvia Kantaris asked the same question. She became puzzled by frequent but vague and invariably derogatory references to a school of 'feminist poets'. A TLS review finally prompted her to write to the journal. The lines that goaded her into action were written by Anne Stevenson, in her review of a new collection of poems by Gillian Clarke. Praising Clarke's 'peace offering', Stevenson claimed that:

> At the end of the 1960s it looked as if the predominant tone of women's poetry for the next forty or fifty years was going to be obsessively Medean. Vengeance, self-immolation, man-hating and blood were the themes of the angry women who followed Sylvia Plath...Now, in the 1980s, the overall mood seems calmer. (TLS, July 15, 1983.)

Kantaris wrote:

> Every poetic movement in our past and recent history seems to have been fully documented, with one exception: The Hysterical Women's Movement (1963-80). We know this movement existed because reviewers frequently mention it in relation to women poets who appear to have reacted against it... I do not wish to denigrate Anne Stevenson's thoughtful review... and am only interested to know the names of the poets who have been even more harshly castigated by Ian Hamilton as 'post-Plath hysterics' or 'muscular harpies of the Adrienne Rich school'... These are only two amongst many examples of reviews and critical articles which measure the poets under consideration against The Hysterical Women's Movement, but in none of them are we given the names of members of that movement, or titles of the books they wrote. All we know is that their voices were almost uniformly 'shrill' or 'strident'. (TLS, August 19, 1983.)

Stevenson responded with five examples, four taken from One Foot on the Mountain: An anthology of British Feminist Poetry 1969-79, one from the Virago collection of women's poetry, Bread and Roses. (27) Is every critic who invokes the mythological standard of this ranting virago familiar with these two books? It seems unlikely, particularly since one of them, put together and distributed on a shoestring by Onlywomen Press, was never even on sale in most bookshops. Kantaris's letter touched some raw nerves, and it is important, I feel, to put this on record. Carol Rumens wrote, observing that:

> The existence of *any* women poets, of any school whatever, has in fact recently been questioned. Daniel Abse, when asked in a BBC 'Woman's Hour' interview on July 4 whether he had presented any work by women poets on his reading tour of New York, replied that he had not, as there was none to present. (2 September 1983, p 932.)

She added dryly, 'Quite clearly, many of us have been labouring under an illusion of a most radical kind.' Mr Abse naturally tried to demonstrate that he hadn't meant it *like that*, although this proved tricky since the programme had been recorded. He had a brave go anyway, producing a lengthy and rather confusing account of everything *else* he had said, concluding:

> ...In the BBC interview I had finally added - there was no time to elaborate - that there were *not many British women poets*. Of course, by that I meant that the numbers of worthwhile women poets were few compared to men. ((9 September 1983, p 961.)

Exactly. He was down, and Adcock put the boot in:

> ...I have now listened to the tape of the interview and must concede that Dr Abse's dismissal of our sex was, in its verbal detail, less absolute than his weary, indifferent tones made it sound on the air. What he said, when asked why neither he nor his companions on the New York visit had presented work by any women poets, was: 'Perhaps there weren't the women poets to present. That's the problem, you see, in Britain there aren't that many women poets to present.' (23 September 1983, p 1021.)

Several others joined in the fray, but none responded to Kantaris's second letter, in which she points out the curious anomaly that Stevenson's examples of this supposedly historical Movement are taken from very recent anthologies. As she remarks, the most famous women poets of the 'post-Plath' years were actually Stevenson herself, and Patricia Beer:

> both of whom have been admired for their spareness and craftsmanship (among other qualities) - although Anne Stevenson's muse was called 'bossy' by Peter Porter. Male poets do not have bossy muses, as far as I can

see. (16 September 1983, p 990.)

The amount of controversy generated by her original letter signals how many women poets feel angry about the persistence of belittling or disparaging assumptions about their work. A year later Stevenson records her growing suspicions about the sexist bias in literary reviews, ending with the plea: 'I do wish you gents would read us with the same attention you read each other.' (27 July 1984, p 855.) Maggie Gee provides one final example of phallocentric criticism in the TLS. She picks up on Michael Hofmann's choice of words in his review of some new poetry:

> We are told that Carol Rumens' book 'promises much for the future', and that Jeni Couzyn's qualities show 'promisingly'. Yet Carol Rumens and Jeni Couzyn are both over forty, and respectively on their fourth and sixth solo books. It is a long time since, say, Craig Raine or James Fenton was promising...The final adjectives Mr Hofmann attaches to the poems of Making for the Open are 'delightful' and 'engaging', as if they were the work of good children. (13 December 1985, p 1427.)

All these writers are drawing attention to the very practices which, in the upbeat introductions discussed earlier, Adcock and Rumens cheerfully relegated to the dim and past dark ages. Clearly, then, 'feminist poetry' has an infamous reputation out of all proportion to the available evidence. (28)

<u>Honorary Men</u>

If women have, as Adcock maintains, been involved in the same poetic currents and movements as men, their presence therein has been consistently ignored. Just as Mrs Sharp complained one hundred years ago, so Margaret Byers commented on this continuing exclusion in 1971:

> there are a number of women writing interesting poetry, and they have neither individually nor collectively been given their due. I am always disappointed to see how few women are included in anthologies as they appear. The Penguin trilogies have so far included the work of four women at most. Jeremy Robson, for his anthology, <u>The Young British Poets</u>, was unable to find even one. And in Michael Horovitz's <u>Children of Albion</u>, of the sixty three children only three were daughters. Stevie Smith, Kathleen Raine, sometimes Elizabeth Jennings - their work is available in selection and anthology. But others whose work is of similar standard, and certainly equal to that of many men writing, are excluded. (29)

Nor does the situation appear to have changed much; in 1984, concluding his overview of contemporary British poetry for an American audience, Dana Gioia expressed bewilderment at the absence of female poets from the scene. (30) His article discusses two anthologies, <u>Contemporary British Poetry</u>, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, and <u>Some Contemporary Poets of Britain and Ireland</u>, edited by Michael Schmidt. Gioia is conscious of the underlying rivalry between these two selections of the most interesting and significant poetry around, and notes how little overlap there is between the two. Such partisan selectivity is in the nature of anthologies, which can hardly

hope to be comprehensive and, particularly when presenting contemporary work, rarely set out to be so, and which offer instead work the editor considers of particular merit. Common to both these is the tiny proportion of women poets. Schmidt includes two (Gilllian Clarke and Alison Brackenbury); Morrison and Motion five (two of whom, Adcock and Stevenson are not, as Gioia points out, native British, and both are in their fifties, making them substantially older than all but one of the male contributors.) He comments:

> Are there really so few talented young female poets in the United Kingdom, or have the editors simply missed them?...If these two emigrés and one Welshwoman really represent the finest achievements of British women poets fifty and under, then the Muse operates very differently on the other side of the Atlantic. (p 19-20.)

But on home ground, even the most chauvinist British poetry critic would not deny the existence of a considerable number of young, gifted women poets. Indeed, if anything, there is a tendency to overexaggerate the phenomenon. (31) Yet their omission from the two collections cited is in no way exceptional. In small-scale selections like the annual Poetry Society Anthology, they tend to appear slightly more regularly, but numbers drop drastically in the more authoritative anthologies issued by the older, 'Establishment' publishing houses. It is these anthologies that are widely-circulated, exported and used in schools and universities. It is their selection that is most likely to be remembered in literary history. The percentage of female contributors to these 'general' anthologies remains

more-or-less constant at between 5 and 8 per cent: the same proportion calculated by Joanna Russ and other feminist researchers. (32)

Whenever this gross under-representation is challenged, the same old names are wheeled out in defence. Daniel Abse in the TLS offers what he considers rock-solid proof of his impeccable fairness:

> For seven years, until 1980, I edited The Best of the Poetry Year annuals for Robson Books. I selected what I thought to be the best poems published in books or in periodicals of the previous year. Men outnumbered women by roughly eight to one. But that is far from saying there are no British women poets. (9 Sept, 1983)

He closes his letter with a familiar list of this rare breed: 'Fleur Adcock, Patricia Beer, Gillian Clarke, Freda Downie, Ruth Fainlight, U. A. Fanthorpe, Elizabeth Jennings, Anne Stevenson, etc.' With rare exceptions, these are the 'established' British women poets (although Freda Downie has largely disappeared from more recent lists, and, interestingly, Ursula Fanthorpe is not always admitted). These are the women poets whose latest collections are invariably reviewed in the TLS, PN Review, Poetry Review and other 'quality' journals. They are accepted as authorities on that troubled phenomenon, women's poetry, and regularly commissioned to appraise the work of their 'sister' poets. It is tempting to suggest that the reason they have been incorporated is precisely that they conform to traditional aesthetics of the establishment. They have learned their craft according to the revered standards of the

past, and their work responds well to orthodox critical exegesis.

So despite the wealth of poetry by women published in the last decade, this list of the acknowledged few remains unchanged. Martin Booth, writing in 1985, shares Abse's regret at the paucity of good women poets on the scene. After lamenting the tendency of most contemporary female poets to ignore men he notes cautiously that there are:

> a few...who could lead the way into a new consciousness of providing good poetry that isn't self-aware twaddle, but it is too early to tell... (33)

Six of the names that follow are also on Abse's list. Booth adds Jenny Joseph, Elaine Feinstein, Frances Horowitz, Nicki Jackowska, Anne Beresford and Penelope Shuttle. With the exception of Shuttle (born 1947) and Jackowska all these poets are in their late forties / early fifties. As Adcock herself has noted, 'late development as a poet, or at any rate delayed publication, seems to be a predominantly female phenomenon.' (34) She sees the recent appearance of numerous collections by younger women as an encouraging development. Why, then, does Mr Booth appear unaware of the existence of Grace Nichols, Judith Kazantzis, Libby Houston, Sylvia Kantaris, Merle Collins, Maureen Duffy, Michèle Roberts, Elma Mitchell, Suniti Namjoshi, Gillian Hanscombe, Amryl Johnson...? Are these the poets he finds guilty of ignoring men? It is impossible to know, since he gives no examples of the poets he has in mind. Instead he discusses older favourites, Stevie Smith and Patricia Beer. Beer's work, he suggests:

> is best described as safe. It takes no risks and is rooted firmly in a security that chauvinists might say is typical of women who are happy and safe in a home, a marriage and a round of life in which they know themselves. (p. 190.)

Hardly surprisingly, after this he cannot find much else to say about it and passes on swiftly. He is more enthusiastic about Stevie Smith. Her vision is 'bizarre, macabre, witty, mystical, strange, wonderful and exotic' (p. 191.), but apparently she is not a woman poet, she is 'an enigma'. An interesting semantic shift has occurred. 'Poetess', laden down by negative connotations of sentimental weepiness, has fallen out of use, presumably as a gesture of enlightened respect for female practitioners. But 'female poet', its replacement, is here devalued in the same way, used to imply limited range, vision, audience. Thus Sylvia Plath is 'not a female poet, but just a poet', because he likes her work:

> She wrote from the core of the modern woman's soul and, since so many males also took wholeheartedly to her poetry, she did a vast amount for the female cause. (p. 190.)

Booth is beguilingly frank. Plath struck a popular chord because she wrote uncompromisingly of suicide and death, 'in a violent world to people for whom the bloody violence was fast becoming a sign of the times'. (p. 188.) Lucky timing. Lucky that the men could relate to her poetry. The 'woman's soul', a limitation in itself, can only be transcended when there is something to interest the men too. Men can hardly be expected to be gripped by women's souls. They tend to be a little dull ('happy and

safe'). The soul of man is, of course, of infinite depth and fascination, and centuries of poetic investigation have yet to plumb even its shallower waters. It would seem that only a very few women poets succeed in transcending the limiting specificities of their condition, and finding a metaphor that both expresses that debased Other term, the feminine, as well as being broad and vague enough to encompass some 'universal' (male?) anxiety. The few who succeed usually jettison or veil any gender-specific metaphors in order to evade accusations of narrowness and insularity.

Leaving men out: the narrowness and introspection of the female poet

What is clear from the remarks of both Abse and Booth is the extent to which the critic relies on his own personal aesthetic judgement. 'I selected what I thought to be the best poems published in books or in periodicals of the previous year,' Abse recounts. Which books and periodicals did he leaf through? Which did he never discover, or perhaps never consider worth reading?

Booth is open about the premises of his aesthetic, since he is conscious of writing against and outside current literary fashion. He is not afraid to declare his own position:

> Art, to be successful, must reach through to mankind. It fails if it appeals to but a few, or if it is so esoteric as to be beyond the comprehension of all but

> the chosen. To be a success, it must do something, fill a need, spur thought in the masses...a good poem, in short, emotively uses words to express intelligent or emotional thought from one human being to the other. (p. 15. & p. 20.)

He is saddened by the gulf that has developed between popular, accessible poetry and the high art defended and championed by respected arbiters of taste and quality:

> Poets seem to ignore the lesson that generations of writers have learnt: literature that lasts is for the masses, for thinking people and not for the writers themselves. Literature, to survive, must be totally unselfish. Modern British poetry is quite the opposite. (p. 257.)

This kind of talk has become embarrassing, largely because any idea of 'the people' as a uniform mass has been painstakingly demolished. Representatives of assailed 'high culture' are concerned to defend its traditions and status. The English language, British culture: such phrases have been justly problematised. The resulting fragmentation of any consensus about quality and standards is unsettling. British cultural democracy is founded upon such consensus, upon the right of all to enjoy what is 'best'. In the present climate 'popularity' and material, financial success are closely allied. 'Popular' art equals commercial art; the connection is distasteful. Conservative critics feel that Great Art should surely be beyond such commoditisation. By implication, Great Art, Quality, is unpopular. To these critics, 'the masses' are not, of course, the 'thinking people'.

Refreshingly, Mr Booth insists that poetry can still be meaningful to everyone if it eschews wilful obscurity and treats

universal dilemmas of humankind in clear, accessible language. The insularity he complains of in contemporary women's poetry is disappointing (to him) because it focusses on **female** rather than universal experience. These female poets are addressing themselves to only half the universe. Their approach, he believes, is symptomatic of the current tendency of British verse to 'draw lines around itself' (p 191), propagating 'a narrowing influence and an introverted one' (p 190). Yet he has already demonstrated how the woman poet has to climb out of the limitations of her gender in order to capture the attention of male readers. With luck and skill she can find some poetic metaphor that contains the specificity of her own experience and vision, and at the same time can pass as some more generally-felt emotion: exact ly what Plath managed in Booth's interpretation, chiming in with the contemporary *zeitgeist*. Then the critic can latch on to what is really significant and interesting about her work, tolerating the 'woman's soul' because he does not have to hear about it; he can skim-read the parts that seem introspectively 'female', and concentrate on the truly universal elements. In such a case, he then bestows the highest praise of all, officially divesting the poet of the shackles of her gender, marking her apart from the inferior 'female poets', crowning her 'just a poet'.

Establishment aesthetics in contemporary Britain : some provisional generalisations (35)

As we have seen, the women poets who are admitted inside this charmed circle of recognition are those who conform to the traditional criteria of what constitutes the 'genuine poem' invoked by Carol Rumens. What exactly is this? The underlying implications of the Faber anthology provide a fairly accurate summary of the conservative 'establishment' aesthetic. Adcock, unusually for an editor, is laconically candid about the partiality of her selection, acknowledging that there are many different styles and registers of poetry, and her own choice is not comprehensive. But with the authority of the Faber imprint behind her, it is hardly surprising that her criteria for authentic poetry reflect those traditionally accepted by the establishment. Her distaste for 'incantatory poetry' seems quite justified when it is described as: 'consisting entirely of chants, charms, spells, prayers and other forms of heightened utterance...lazy writing and short on sense'. (p. 14.) In today's climate the mystic is out of favour. Adcock's tastes do not challenge the reader but reinforce the prevalent *zeitgeist*. (It is easy to forget how radically such preferences can alter: Dylan Thomas is one example of a poet subject to reassessment by a new generation suspicious of music which cannot be elucidated through the intellect.) So what Adcock openly admits to as her 'prejudices' do not seem unreasonable; they serve rather as a concise outline of current orthodoxy among the established

poetry critics and practitioners in Britain. Alongside distrust of the seductive superficiality of beautiful sound and rhythm unsubstantiated by firm, moral common sense lies the conviction that poetry should be the most perfectly wrought expression of humankind's finest thoughts, a slightly more rigorous version of Romantic philosophy, only now carefully wary of the impassioned, the utopian, or - most debased of all - the soul-baring Confessional. Aside from the brief and startled response to the work of Sylvia Plath, British sensibility has tended to shy away from this kind of writing, preferring a subtler incorporation of the personal: lower key and potentially less embarassing. The styles Adcock acknowledges she has little time for - mysticism, the surreal, and the minimalist style she associates with 'Creative Writing Programs of the American universities' (p. 13.) - are generally out of favour in the British poetry establishment. Unlike the fourth and final category she chooses to exclude, they are not predominantly associated with either male or female poets. This last group clearly carries its own implied gender, evoking that by-now familiar, yet amorphous quantity, the feminist poet:

> I am not interested in 'primal scream' writing: slabs of raw experience untransformed by any attempt at ordering and selection. (p. 13.)

Adcock's introductory remarks go to considerable lengths to placate the feathers ruffled by the practice of women-only publications. It is hard to see how her anthology could offend establishment opinion.

To summarise, the general attitude would seem to run something like this: In the past, it is true, women poets sometimes did not receive adequate recognition (although much of their work was inferior for reasons beyond their control: poor education, lack of worldly experience and the broad, universal perspective so gained). (36) There are now a number of talented women poets whose work deserves to be read and appraised in the mainstream. The Women's Movement unfortunately stimulated the production of several separatist anthologies and far too many embarrassing Plath-imitators. It is also responsible for the sadly reductive and bizarre effort to prove that women's poetry is somehow innately different. (37) Those women poets who are worth reading can be read against the same time-honoured standards of the liberal humanist aesthetic; they aspire to transcend shoddy and earthbound, fleshly or material difference. There is little point in tracing the network of influences between women poets, because there have been so few that women have taken male writers as models; similarly, little point in examining the implications of Bloom's masculine theory of Oedipal anxiety (or any other theoretical paradigms) for **women** poets. There is, in short, nothing to be gained from looking at these women as a group; they are not women, simply poets, saying and doing the same kinds of things as male poets have been doing for much longer. Since the era of unjust discrimination against women's poetry is now over, rather than dwelling on the past it would seem more productive and exciting to look at the work women are producing today, with the benefit of their newly-won 'mental

freedom'.

But, as Gioia asked, *where are the poets?*

Women poets in the mainstream

There is, of course, no such thing as 'the' British poetry scene. In reality there are many different attitudes to poetry, many magazines, publishing houses and editors each with their own opinions of what constitutes a 'good' or, in Rumens' words, 'genuine' poem. Inevitably there are cliques; equally inevitably some of them wield greater power, in terms of access to print and publicity, than others. The older, more traditional publishing houses like Faber and Faber inevitably carry greater authority and financial resources than smaller presses and tend, as a result, to exert a disproportionate influence over the hierarchy of poetic excellence. Alongside such long-running journals as the TLS, these imprints are seen as the representatives of high culture, their concern - the maintenance of 'standards' and 'quality'.

Such journals, however influential, are not themselves the primary site of poetic activity. The small magazines and poetry presses are the real provinces of emerging new talent and technique. While funding cuts have made their survival even harder - and many critics complain of a London-dominated poetry scene - there are still many poetry magazines, each characterised by the particular interests and tastes of its editor(s). The same

names tend to appear regularly. It would be a gross oversimplification to argue that there is some general conspiracy against women poets operating through all these different outlets. Yet letters complaining of the lack of female contributions appear periodically in almost all of them. (38) Some, inevitably, are more sympathetic than others. Thus The Wide Skirt, reviewing Dancing The Tightrope: New Love Poems by Women concludes with an Appendix of practical measures of positive discrimination to be adopted by all poets and editors. These include demands for equal numbers of male and female contributors in magazines and at readings, and a woman co-editor on every magazine. The last demand is even more radical:

> All male poets should seriously ask themselves the question - am I free to write and follow my creative drive because [of] some woman who is taking over all the domestic and organisational chores, perhaps at the expense of her own creativity? (39)

Matthew Caley, the author of this programme, explains the basis for such positive action:

> If small press magazines...profess to an openly left-wing bias and acknowledge the inherent link between politics and poetry then their response should be along practical lines such as these. Sexism is as morally obnoxious as racism and endemic to ALL societies and it is all too easy for editors to claim that not enough good women writers submit work. Their work must be actively sought.

Some sense of the difference in tone and aesthetic amongst the wealth of poetry outlets can be gained by comparing this approach with the National Poetry Society's response to the same book.

They held a reading to launch the collection. In their Report for 1987-88 they note, with some surprise, that this and the one other organised 'women's event' drew the biggest audiences of the year, commenting: 'Areas often thought of as peripheral but "worthy" are clearly actually very popular.'

The Wide Skirt's open recognition of the under-representation of women poets is unusual; more frequently editors respond by pointing out that they simply do not receive the same proportions of work from women. Lorna Tracy, co-editor of Stand, answering one such complaint, agrees that there is a serious imbalance, but explains that it is not the editors' fault: women seem to prefer submitting their work to feminist journals (40); hence they 'select themselves out'. (41) She is opposed to the idea of reverse discrimination, believing that that in itself would constitute a greater insult:

> Are we to produce a 'women's issue' now and then? I think that would absolutely confirm those who assume that Stand Magazine thinks women who write are exotic. Wouldn't it be better if Stand Magazine could embody the idea that a quality journal is neither a male nor a female preserve? Participation is what I want for women - not as linguistic colonials or male impersonators, but as strong and independent writers getting their feelings and subjects on to the human agenda. (p. 54-5.)

The problem, as she points out, is that while almost all editors are male, even the few women in such posts have formed their literary judgement in male-biased cultural institutions. Or, as she puts it damningly, 'Any literary editor today over twenty-five will be an hereditary carrier of patriarchal attitudes.'

Presented in this determinist fashion, it would seem that there is nothing we can do to overcome this genetic burden. Yet, as is clear from the very different atmosphere now apparent in North America, this is a falsely defeatist and, at root, reactionary belief. There is something about the British climate, in poetry circles and beyond, that makes us particularly resistant to change. Partly, perhaps, this can be attributed to an awareness of the weight of tradition behind today's poets and critics; partly, also, it may be due to suspicion of what is new - a desire to preserve and protect past 'standards' in the face of the bewildering variety of unfamiliar traditions challenging yesterday's wisdom. Critics are increasingly insecure about appealing to an unarticulated consensus appreciation of 'quality', not just in poetry by women but in all recent work. In the last chapter of his study of contemporary poetry and its complex relationship to society, Jonathan Raban acknowledges this hesitancy:

> It has perhaps become rather harder than ever before for anyone to feel certain about literary value...During the course of writing this book I began to wonder quite seriously whether we had not been rendered constitutionally incapable of doing anything more than mildly preferring some poems to others. (42)

There has been a reaction against the popular, democratising efflorescence of poetry 'for the people', and a retreat into high culture, but now it appears that confidence is faltering. Booth discusses the song lyrics of Kate Bush, The Police and Bob Dylan; Benjamin Zephaniah makes a bid for the Poetry Chair at Oxford.

Traditionalists bury their heads in the sand. Even the most open-minded are bewildered. What is poetry?

The kneejerk association between 'the masses' and 'the unthinking' is, I suggest, a peculiarly British phenomenon, nurtured by the belief that great art cannot be commoditised and must therefore, be unpopular. A genuine poem should look like a poem; its tightly controlled web of allusions necessitates close textual study. It makes demands on the reader, rather than instantly revealing its subtleties. Hard work is rewarded. That this valuing of effort and difficulty often disguises an antidemocratic impulse is suggested by Poetry Review's reaction to one poet's attempt to make her work more accessible. Alison Fell prefaces the poems in her latest collection, The Crystal Owl, with a brief prose introduction, providing the kind of background information and context usually given at a poetry reading. Sheenagh Pugh, reviewing the book, is outraged:

> ..the whole practice [is] terminally irritating. No reader likes being taken for a dimwit, and it is arguable that if the poem is really so incomplete without the note, then the poet hasn't properly finished writing it yet. (43)

Rather than patronising the reader, Fell's introductions operate as stepping-stones into the poems. Pugh may complain that 'She trusts the reader's intelligence for nothing, not even to understand basic French or to make a simple connection', but she seems unaware that there may be readers who are not familiar with French, nor allusions that Pugh or any white, middle-class

conventionally-educated reader would grasp automatically. Her reaction is symptomatic of a defensive reluctance to admit the validity of different tones and registers of poetry.

A 'genuine' poem is not simply one that acquiesces in conventional forms and theme, but one that is read within its intended context, bolstered and nourished by an open, sympathetic environment keen to learn how it asks to be read. The guardians of high culture are slow to admit this. They welcome the familiar. Derek Walcott is lauded and assimilated because he strives to effect a fusion between the native rhythms and landscapes of the Caribbean and the Shakespearean influences of his colonial education. More unfamiliar approaches are greeted less eagerly. While the importance of common ground is clearest in the processes of recognition granted to poets of traditions alien to the British sensibility, it is the absence of this same familiar ground that operates to exclude women poets. One last example will have to suffice. The enormously popular Liverpudlian poets are received uneasily by the defenders of high culture. Neverthless, their influence is taken seriously. In the critical survey British Poetry since 1960 there is a fifteen-page scholarly and respectful article by Grevel Lindop entitled 'Poetry, Rhetoric and the Mass Audience: The Case of the Liverpool Poets' (44). Lindop has his reservations about the future immortality of their work, but this does not disqualify them from receiving detailed critical study. The widespread activity of *women* poets at contemporaneous political and social events passes unmentioned. After all, there is something

intrinsically absurd about the idea of women confidently taking the stage to deliver humourous homilies. But while they are unacknowledged in Lindop's study, they do at least get a mention in the chapter on women poets. Margaret Byers offers this swift and biting dismissal of such ephemera when penned and delivered by a ***female*** poet:

> On the reading circuits and through broadcasting, a number of women poets have recently come into prominence whose work is outside the scope of this essay. They write without distinctive style - without style at all - and are tolerated as chameleons in whatever adopted skin they sport - whether Sylvia Plath's or Stevie Smith's skin or their own whim-mottled pelts. Jeni Couzyn and Libby Houston are the most notable of these - they are performers whose work is as temporary as their topical allusions, gestures, unformed and self-regarding sentiment, and their unambitious language. (45)

Full stop; a fairly conclusive demolition job. And yet the resurgence of performance poetry in late 'Eighties Britain owes much of its energy and support to women poets. Will they too be written out of the story when literary critics present their retrospectives of the fin de siècle? This public terrain may often be unwelcoming at first (the pub being, of course, the classic male sphere) and the necessity of catching the attention of a loud, possibly uninterested crowd could be particularly problematic for a female voice with its innate handicap, - lack of authority. Neverthless, women have been enormously successful. The powerhouses of the poetry industry tend to ignore such achievements, and when they do deign to notice individual poets, the same bias operates against women. Ian

McMillan, John Hegley, Ben Zephaniah: although they are often given only patronising attention, they neverthless qualify for inclusion in poetry surveys and magazines. Jean Binta Breeze and Liz Lochead are rather less famous. These processes of discrimination - haphazard, complex, unintentional, - operate collectively to deny women the context their poetry needs in order to nurture the emergence of appropriate ways of reading and appreciating it.

North America : A more favourable climate

In 1971 Adrienne Rich delivered a speech entitled 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', which has since become something of a feminist classic. It contains a bold challenge to the patriarchal poetic tradition:

> To the eye of a feminist, the work of Western male poets now writing reveals a deep, fatalistic pessimism as to the possibilities of change, whether societal or personal...The mood of isolation, self-pity, and self-imitation that pervades 'nonpolitical' poetry suggests that a profound change in masculine consciousness will have to precede any new male poetic - or other - inspiration. The creative energy of patriarchy is fast running out; what remains is its self-generating energy for destruction. As women, we have our work cut out for us. (46)

It is hard to imagine a British feminist making such a sweeping, vigorous statement; Eavan Boland probably comes closest. (See note 36.) Aside from the fact that our national character is

perhaps more cautious and circumspect, we lack a feminist and a poet of comparable standing. Almost all the feminist critical studies of contemporary poetry by women have been written by North American scholars, as have the bulk of attempts to uncover a female network of influence amongst women poets of past generations. (47) Perhaps because North America is less constrained by the weighty centuries of poetic tradition, it is more open to creative innovation of all kinds. Formal experimentors like Maggie O'Sullivan find the journals there welcome work which is greeted with scepticism and incomprehension in Britain. Of course there are many more such outlets, and more money to fund them in North America; neverthless, their attitude appears more open, less entrenched and less defensive than its British equivalent. As Dana Gioia's surprise at the absence of women poets in Britain suggested, over there the recent achievements of female poets are recognised, even lauded. Herbert Leibowitz, editor of Parnassus: Poetry in Review, devoted the entire annual issue to the work of female poets in 1985. His introduction declares that:

> The most remarkable event in American poetry of the last fifteen years has been the eruption of Vesuvius: the emergence of talented women poets in unprecedented numbers. (48)

Many of these women are known here too: Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, Marge Piercy, Alice Walker. They are poets and critics, their work informed by feminism and nurtured by close association with one another. Poet and critic work symbiotically; they do not necessarily agree, nor share

stylistic or thematic approaches. These writers no longer seem to be asked to justify their identity as 'women poets'. The relatively open, welcoming climate enables more specific and exciting channels of inquiry to be explored. Marge Piercy's introduction to the anthology, Early Ripening: American Women's Poetry Now (49) provides some insight into the differences. She does not seem to need to defend or justify her selection of solely **female** poets, and she makes no apologies for 'women's poetry' or 'specifically female experiences'. The hesitant, defensive claim that women's poetry is 'not inferior' has vanished. Not only does the work not need defending, it does not need to be smuggled into the mainstream as 'just the same' as poetry written by men. Indeed, the work of these contemporary women will, in Piercy's confident words, 'change the assessment and finally the shape of all of the writing of our era'. It represents:

> not so much a women's culture as a contribution to a culture that must now be for and of women's experiences as well as men's, that must change to accommodate such rich, diverse and powerful work. We are past the point where critics, whether reviewing a few poetry books in the London Times or New York Times, or for literary magazines, editors, teachers of literature and male poets themselves can pontificate about poetry and mean only the work of twenty or thirty white male writers. (p. 2.)

The book follows on from Rich's bold declaration, presenting poems that infuse new life into the old traditions, energising and revitalising them; finding new ways of uniting emotion and intellect. Piercy hazards a few generalising characteristics,

suggesting that:

> Contemporary women's poetry tends to be, far more seamlessly than contemporary men's poetry, of the body, the brain, the emotions fused. (p. 1.)

Yet such characteristics do not act as a limiting prescriptivism; within the collection there are, as she points out, poets who contradict this and any other attempt to define and constrict the variousness of female poetic activity. Such plurality does not threaten to dissolve the category 'women poets'; diversity *adds* to the strength of an emerging female poetic.

Piercy suggests that it would be fruitful to look at men's poetry from within the context and landscape mapped out by their innovation. She recognises the significance of this shared common context in carving out a challenge to the orthodox, male-dominated and defined parameters for interpretation and evaluation. Approaching men's work from this unfamiliar perspective might elucidate new angles, perhaps resulting in different readings of familiar poems. In Britain we are still a long way off even contemplating such a revolutionary idea. Just how far is hinted at by one critic's reaction to Piercy's statement. Reviewing Early Ripening in the UK, Lawrence Sail appears quite impressed by the poems, but he does not seem to grasp Piercy's point in the Introduction. Quoting her remark that:

> It is really about time to do an anthology of poetry that includes male poets in that same landscape and looks at them in the perspective of the exciting work that women are producing. (p. 2.)

he implies that such a proposal is merely a reversal of sexism, enquiring daintily, 'Is there a hint here of wheels turning full circle?' (50) This reaction neatly demonstrates Sarah Maguire's point about the importance of there being an appropriate context before any poem or piece of criticism can release its full meaning. (See note 38.) Obviously not just in relation to women poets, there is far greater resistance on this side of the Atlantic to any radical reassessment or expansion of the traditional understanding of what poetry is.

Piercy can write with such confidence because the importance and achievement of women poets in North America seems more generally acknowledged, and is therefore less pejoratively associated with feminist politics. The high public profile of a group of female poets, recognised as friends and colleagues, has doubtless facilitated such acceptance and nurtured the development of a sympathetic milieu within which the significance of other women's work can begin to take shape. The situation is far from perfect; only a handful of the women Piercy includes carry international reputations; most could never hope to support themselves through their writing. But this is not purely the result of their gender or the kind of poetry they write, but a fate shared by the vast majority of poets. She explains how the more severe economic hardship borne by many coloured and Black women poets acts as a real obstacle to the publication of their work, even when an anthologist tries hard to trace them. This acknowledgement of the **practical** impediments that lead in turn to exclusion from publication and recognition is in itself

a refreshingly down-to-earth approach. To explain the mundane difficulties of tracing and contacting poets is to reveal the arbitrary forces that influence the hierarchy of recognised talent: to admit that what is acknowledged as 'great' is decided by a relatively small number of readers whose personal tastes and mere geographical location may prescribe the limits of their 'quality' selection. The assumption that the greatest poetry surfaces miraculously, finding its way to the light effortlessly like some mythical beanstalk, is implicitly undermined. Poetic hierarchy does not descend from heaven but is prey to the workings of chance, material circumstance, connection and community. This recognition is slow to come in Britain. Piercy shifts the premises: it is not a matter of deliberate and systematic sexism or racism, but the consequence of economic and social inequity that impedes the circulation and approval of this poetry. But in Britain it is seen as unseemly to draw such practical, material realities into the arena of the poetic spirit.

A mixed-gender anthology founded on the insights and aesthetics of women's poetry would finally establish a context within which women were taken as the standard, no longer the Other. Sail's view that this would simply repeat male discrimination in reverse is characteristic of the British approach that maintains there is nothing different about poetry by women yet continues to segregate or ignore it. Piercy's proposal offers a way out of this impasse. She believes that the new territory opened up by contemporary women poets must

bring about a radical reassessment of the criteria by which poetry has been evaluated in the past. It is not a question of making some space for women poets within the old conventions, but of looking at the entire machinery of critical appraisal, and asking whether its ancient methods still yield relevant or desirable insights today. Fundamentally such a project demands an open admission that the critic's prized objectivity, his [sic] appeal to an intangible universal liberal humanist aesthetic is no longer permissible. The poet can no longer be sure of the composition of his or her audience, cannot confidently allude to a common body of shared knowledge or even a shared language. In the past writers bemoaned the death of God and consequent fragmentation of 'Truth'; today there is a multitude of Gods and Goddesses from cultures throughout the world, a vitalising exchange of philosophies and ethics, a flood of unfamiliar rhythms, images and visions in the poetry being written in many languages that take their roots from some form of 'English'. The old tools of critical exegesis are hopelessly inadequate.

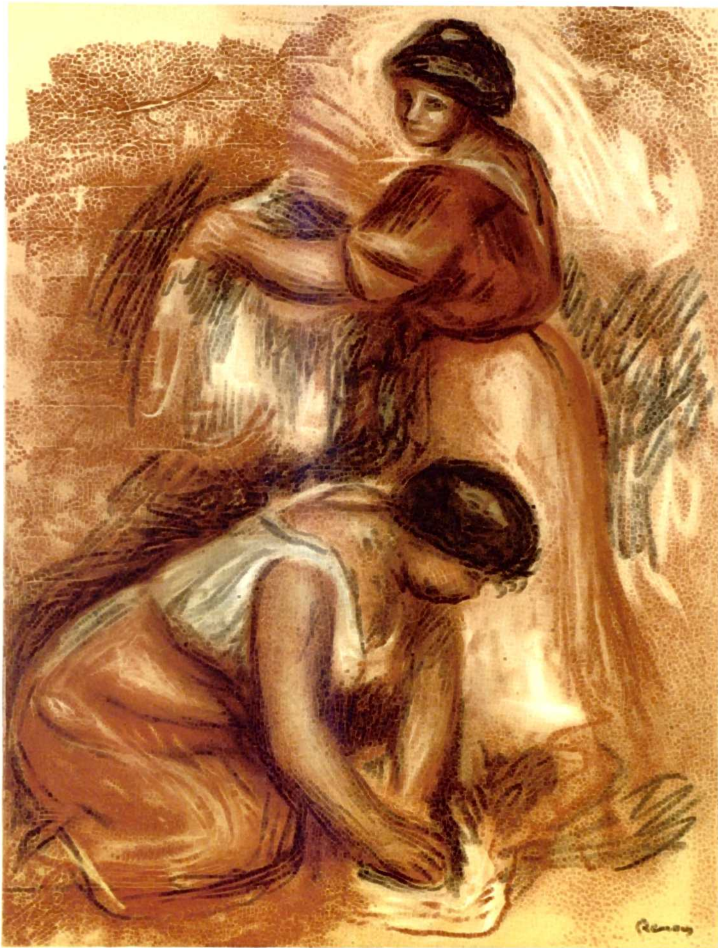
North America looks more prepared for the expansion and change Piercy advocates, and has done much to foster and encourage such innovations. Poetry journals carry a respectable proportion of women's work; they publish lengthy interviews with women poets. Reviewers do not seem surprised when they encounter a strong female narrative voice, nor do they instantly assume it to be the poet's own. Larger claims are made for poetry, not just by women. Poets are not afraid to sound

passionate, to aspire to ideals, to embrace utopias. In Britain we must borrow some of their courage.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING LYRIC POETRY AS A WOMAN:

THE POETRY OF EAVAN BOLAND



Decorum and dignity: the dutiful daughter

> Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow,
> a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course,
> the gaunt Hag of Beare. (1)

Eavan Boland could be described, perhaps harshly, as a dutiful daughter of patriarchal poetry. Despite her confession of having 'never been immune' to feminist ideology, she steers clear of radical commitment or innovation. (2) She describes herself as a lyric poet, 'always working with time and perceptions of loss and just common down-to-earth disappointments or irretrievable segments of human experience'. (3) Neverthless she is a fine analyst of the particular difficulties, temptations and 'psycho-sexual' pressures facing the contemporary woman poet. (4)

She never sounds angry - Mr Bingen likes her for it. Her prose style is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's non-fiction: generously laced with quotations from eminent men, always controlled and charming. She has an intimate understanding of the softening glove of eloquence, for she imbibed its seductive rhythms as a young poet reading the Silver Age poets:

> the harmonies of servitude,
> the grace music gives to flattery
> and language borrows from ambition -

These lines, from the opening poem in her sequence, 'Outside History', could serve as her epitaph. (5)

Boland was the first poet I worked on because, to put it bluntly, she was not threatening. Her poetry did not require jettisoning the literary critical tools I had only recently got

to grips with. I was very anxious about Mr Bingen's judgement, and there didn't appear to be anything for him to object to. Boland is published by Carcanet, a 'quality' press respected for their highbrow international poetry list. The publisher's blurb on her books is soothingly conventional, informing us that the poet 'lives in Dublin with her husband, the novelist Kevin Casey, and their two daughters.' More important still, she has an impressive Curriculum Vitae. She won the Macaulay Fellowship at the age of 23, and was immediately recognised as a young poet of 'immense ability' (6). Her last two collections have been recommended by the Poetry Book Society. (7) She even receives reviews in the TLS. Critics praise the 'rare artistic resonance' of her work and even appreciate 'something very honest and *muscular* about her poems' [my italics]. (8) And Neil Corcoran pays her what is clearly the greatest compliment of all in The London Review of Books, where he refers to her 'radical but undoctrinaire feminism'. (9) It is the quality and composition of this tone that caught my attention at a stage when more radical poetries were too daunting. It is the composition of this tone I wish to explore.

Mr Bingen, like Mr Corcoran, appreciates her restraint. Like Adrienne Rich (clearly a strong influence on her work) Boland was spotted as a young poet, awarded prizes, and marked as a promising talent, before her 'rebellion'. But it seems now as though her feminist protest at male literary tradition is relegated to the sidelines: In Her Own Image, her 1980 collection, is set aside as being the work of her 'angry phase',

a passing mood akin to adolescent immaturity. She herself has not challenged this tendency: her own accounts of her poetry's development bear out her determination not to be marginalised as a 'woman poet'.

This is understandable. Boland's intention is, she says, to open up the silences, the unresolved areas of human experience. The exclusion of women is perhaps the most immediately obvious silence in Irish literature, but Boland is anxious to guard against the 'siphoning off' of women poets into their own little backwater. So her poems are attempts to 'humanize femininity', not to feminize human experience. (10) She does not really tackle the germinal problem of 'femininity' itself as a construction.

As O'Brien's epitaph makes clear, Eavan Boland is well-served for examples of woman being used as a symbol. But it is not this feminization of the land that disturbs Boland so much as the distorted literary representations of actual Irishwomen's lives. Boland is eloquent on the detrimental effects of this reification, both over the nation's literary tradition and for the woman writer. She has described the impact of her own discovery that gender did make a huge difference over what and how she wrote: how when, with marriage and motherhood, her circumstances and routines changed, so too did the things she wanted to write about. Her former aesthetic - inherited from poetic predecessors and contemporaries - no longer seemed relevant, 'necessary' or 'true'. (11)

It is doubtless unnecessary to point out the obstacles

facing women on a practical level in a fiercely Catholic, rural community. Unsurprisingly the virtual absence of women from influential positions in public cultural life is reflected in the literary world. The so-called 'general' anthologies of Irish poetry are heavily dominated by male poets. (12) Some radical female voices have managed to struggle into print with the help of determined grassroots feminist publishers (13), but these publications are regarded as 'special interest' genres, ignored by the mainstream journals.

Yet curiously, as Boland herself observes (14), women have always been active writers, even if the contemporary *cognoscenti* choose to overlook their work. In his Introduction to the Faber Book of Irish Verse, John Montague discusses the unusually large number of women who wrote in early Gaelic. Irish, he claims, 'is the only literature in Europe, and perhaps the world, where we find a succession of women poets.' (15) In the light of this remark his observation a few pages later seems a little strange:

> Psychologically, a Female poet has always seemed an absurdity, because of the necessarily intense relationship between the poet and the Muse. (p. 22)

The contradiction perhaps helps explain why Montague includes only two modern women poets and two poems by each of them. (One of the selected Boland poems is actually a translation of a Gaelic poem.) The psychological absurdity is obviously alive and kicking.

Neverthless, three particular women poets do tend to get attention - the same three, wheeled out whenever the question of

'women poets' arises. Eavan Boland is one of them. The other two are Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. It seems likely that their work is acceptable because it is subtle, playing quiet games with tradition and form. Sadly, the energetic anger of poets like Maighreád Medbh (titles include 'The Fucking Pontiff') never makes it into the mainstream. (16)

The idea of a female poet seeming absurd is not, of course, specific to Ireland. However the Irish context does offer a particularly stark illustration of the lurking gender bias in contemporary Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the role of the poet. I hope to show how these unacknowledged expectations influence apparently neutral critical evaluations. Memories (or retrospective constructions) of the poet's role in past times - what he can or should achieve, how he should speak, what kind of relationship he should have with his own community - continue to effect the values and judgements of contemporary critics.

Irish literary history is rich: colourful and poignant; impassioned and flamboyant; and overwhelmingly male. Inevitably the influence of such an impressive past over contemporary writers is strong. In addition Ireland has a firm tradition of the bard as an important spokesman in history and legend. In early Irish society the bard was a man apart, a highly-trained professional endowed with mystical, quasi-divine authority. He was closely concerned with the political fortunes of his nation, chronicling events in his country and commemorating history in poetry. (17) Legend, myth, and event habitually merged. While the formal aspect of this role has disappeared, the expectation

is still there. Yeats played the part not that long ago; he has recently been described as 'the last of the great public poets...[an] extraordinary mixture of poet, prophet and politician...', self-consciously transforming the personalities and conflicts of the Irish nationalist movement into the emblems of a new pantheon. (18)

This ability - I am tempted to call it bravura - is the hallmark of the bard. Public spokesman, leader of the people, man apart: these remnants of the role persist in less obvious manifestations. There is a tendency, amongst critics, to rank the poet with the most powerful and distinctive personal mythology as the greatest poet: the more comprehensively he tames and moulds material to fit his vision, the grander his achievement. Yeats is virtually unrivalled in this sphere. Anthony Burgess describes his virtuosity:

> [he had] perfected a rhetoric that could absorb anything - pain, politics, bread, salt, as well as Maud Gonne and Augusta Gregory - and elevate the quotidian and the highly personal to great art...Yet so powerful is his mythopoeia that we borrow his imagination and elevate these ordinary creatures into the figures of a new Iliad. (19)

Yeats's 'mythopoeia' (20) subsumes real individuals and events in the weave of his vision. This is the poet's prerogative: with flair and *gravitas* to transform the mundane into the Olympian. There is something enormously appealing about this stern, omniscient figure. He is not so distant from us;

after all, we still send artists out to war, we still have a Poet Laureate. Ethical questions about the apppropriation of others' experience vanish before the dizzy rhetoric of these importance public duties. The role is implicitly gendered and this fact exerts a crucial influence over the evaluation of contemporary poets which means that, while the presence of women poets is certainly acknowledged, there is a strong psychological resistance to admitting them to the hallowed ranks of bardic privilege.

In the men's rooms: masonic ladders to fame

> 'in contemporary Ireland...it is simply assumed that Yeats's poetic heir will be male.' (21)

If the bardic mantle sits most naturally upon broad shoulders, there are stages *en route* to the investiture in which gender inevitably plays a further part. An important informal ingredient for any poet is the circle in which he or she moves. The friendship between Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon at Ulster in the 'Sixties is a famous example. Groups of aspiring poets support and encourage one another, while an older mentor can offer advice and influential introductions. There is nothing sinister about this, of course, until its translation into systems of informal patronage that are handed down through networks of close friends. Looked at from the outside, the ladder of poetic reputation resembles a masonic brotherhood: charting a well-defined path from student to apprentice to

reviewer on the TLS or some other well-respected literary publication, onwards to editorships, competition-judging, and finally establishment as an arbiter of quality amongst the plethora of emergent new voices. While these positions are predominantly occupied by white middle-class Oxbridge men, their vaguely left-wing politics repeatedly prove themselves more receptive to the 'working-class' visions of Douglas Dunn or Ken Smith, and to male multiculturalism (in the guise of Fred D'Aguiar, James Berry and John Agard, for example) than to women of any class or race. Interestingly this proves the case even in popular culture: there is no female equivalent of John Hegley or Benjamin Zephaniah playing the role of 'poet of the people' on Wogan or in The Guardian.

In this respect it becomes significant that female critics are usually asked to review female poets, presumably on the grounds that their empathy will be more complete. Despite the increase in numbers of women working in the publishing market very few are in positions of editorial responsibility, particularly in the poetry lists. Thus the female reviewer, while given not inconsiderable authority to critique women's work, does not also have direct access to the mechanisms of production and publication that are so crucial in the formation of poetic reputation.

It seems a very patriarchal model, based on seniority and age; a classic male ranking system incorporating a mixture of apprenticeship and struggle. It resembles Bloom's paradigm of the fight for literary succession as an Oedipal conflict between

father and son. (22) And the respect afforded age is again gendered: our culture is not prone to endowing elderly females with the same kind of reverent status. The nature of this process of reification actually obscures the very real networks of encouragement and opportunity which operate to sustain and nurture the young male poet.

Our educational establishment instils a certain humility towards our great literary forebears. The confident young genius is treated with benign, if quizzical indulgence as he (it usually is a 'he') forges his way through the tradition to carve out his own rightful place. The precedents are set: the strong virile youth wrestling with his weak predecessor. The same mythological endorsement is not available to the woman poet, and the lack of precedents is psychologically inhibiting (23). The paucity of women with access to any real power in the poetry world both reflects this absence and puts women poets at a real disadvantage.

All this perhaps sounds a little vague: bitter supposition without any real evidence. The following case study illustrates the impact of such intangible genderings.

In recent years considerable attention has focused on poets from Ulster. Inevitably attention focuses on their reaction to 'the Troubles' and how they respond to the national situation in their poetry. In February 1980 the TLS published a long review of a recent anthology, Frank Ormsby's Poets from the North of Ireland. The reviewer, Roger Garfitt, compares the poets Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, claiming that they epitomise two

very different strands within 'Ulster poetry'. Garfitt's preference is clearly for Heaney, the one with the bardic sweep, Yeats's true descendant. Garfitt applauds the grandeur of his mythopoeia; he appreciates 'his sense of the poet as diviner', and celebrates his achievement of a 'more ambitious poetry that could both encompass and restructure history and myth.' (24) He contrasts this Olympian span with the mealy-mouthed gestures of Mahon's poetic, rich in English irony. It is clear that what Mahon lacks is the bold ambition and unfaltering nerve of Heaney's poetic: the aura of confidence that enables Heaney to see himself as representative of his nation: as the carrier and cleanser of the Irish language and community.

Where Heaney harnesses it, Mahon deflates the rhetoric of nationalism and the sublime. Where Heaney jumps to his role as knight-protector of Queen Ireland, Mahon abdicates. Heaney serves his Mother Ireland - whether queen, whore or hag. She is a capricious mistress / muse in the tradition of the greatest:

> She tightened her torc on him
> And opened her fen,
> Those dark juices working
> Him to a saint's kept body, (25)

The trope of the (male) poet serving the female spirit of his motherland is familiar. (26) But what Garfitt praises is the bold defiance in Heaney's work. It may be that the surrounding violence of the Irish context gives the poet's prophetic stance even greater resonance. It strikes a chord of longing: that something noble and beautiful might yet come out of such unremitting brutality. In comparison Mahon seems, to Garfitt, disappointingly anti-heroic:

> He can offer only whimsies of a post-Armageddon pastoral, which are worse than nothing. For all his consummate skill, his art is reduced to being momentary in its scope, momentary and, as it were, helpless.

Garfitt refers back to a poem by P J Kavanagh, <u>Epic</u>, which Heaney also quotes from in one of his own lyrics. It records the poet's sense of unease with the local quarrels of his community as suitable material for poetry:

> I have lived in important places, times
> When great events were decided, who owned
> That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
> Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
> I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
> And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
> Step the plot defying blue cast-steel-
> 'Here is the march along these iron stones'
> That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
> Was more important? I inclined
> To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
> Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
> He said: I made the Iliad from such
> A local row. Gods make their own importance.

Heaney has praised the opening line for its 'air of bursting a long battened-down silence' and, echoing Joyce, congratulated Kavanagh for forging:

> not so much a conscience as a consciousness for the great majority of his countrymen...raising the inhibited energies of a subculture to the power of a cultural resource.

The son acknowledges the daring mythology of the father, and then casts himself as the legitimate inheritor of this sanctified role: the descendant of Homer, the new prophet of the age. Garfitt in his turn endorses Heaney's claim. His praise is fulsome: Heaney's poetry 'has grown like a spring finding its way

as a river to the sea'. He identifies himself as the spokesman of his community, taking on the role of the Irish bard with exhilarating confidence. The power of his rhetoric is acknowledged by Garfitt - 'that command of verbal texture that enables...[him] to incorporate shards of the lost Irish into his own language'.

This chain of preferment links male poets whose aesthetic fits its grandiose tones. It is not only Heaney; Tom Paulin is singled out for his 'powerful ambition', celebrated as a poet-pioneer who has:

> created his own imaginative landscape, a Protestant North quite different from Heaney's, and is now using that landscape to explore pressures of history and politics that extend well beyond Ulster.

The favoured aesthetic is, then, that of the noble bard. This notion of aesthetics is grounded in opposition: the conquering poet forging ahead, overturning obstacles, making free with history, all material grist to his mill. Questions of ethics are subordinated to the glories of his quest. He breaks with the prevailing *zeitgeist* of uncertainty and shapes a brave new world from his imagination and language. He is the man apart, the lone warrior. As Cixous points out, this figuring of the artist as Ulysses is all very well for Joyce (or Heaney or Garfitt), but its narcissistic introspection specifically excludes the woman writer. (27) So although no one actually states that the poet has to be male, there may be more than metaphorical advantages in having balls.

These contemporary versions of bardic status, from poets who

have shaped their own mythopoeic 'territory', win Garfitt's approval. So what does it take to receive such recognition? The poet needs a strong community to endorse the authenticity of his vision, and to agree that it is powerful enough to be capable of 'raising the inhibited energies of a subculture'. He has to establish a harmonious congruence with the mood and climate of the world outside, whose inhabitants both constitute his audience and are the material out of which he has shaped his myth. They give credence to his story; they agree that the narrative is authentic and its tone is perfectly matched to the times. A full page review in such a prestigious journal clearly signals approval for this new mythmaker.

Hierarchies of poetic talent quickly harden into unchallenged literary histories in a society whose media networks both disseminate and dictate hierarchies of 'greatness'. And women poets, once again, are seen, if at all, only out of the corner of the eyes of the critics who form these opinions. Eavan Boland evolves a mythopoeia every bit as grand as those praised by Roger Garfitt, yet alongside the titans whose mighty rocks disturb poetic waters, her contribution makes fewer waves than a small pebble whose stately 'plop' momentarily stirs the surface.

'a quiet search for attention': the domestic sublime (28)

> Under the street-lamps the dustbins brighten.
> The winter flowering jasmine casts a shadow
> outside my window in my neighbour's garden.
> These are the things that my muse must know...
>
> What I have done I have done alone.
> What I have seen is unverified.
> I have the truth and I need the faith.
> It is time I put my hand in her side.
>
> If she will not bless the ordinary,
> if she will not sanctify the common,
> then here I am and here I stay and then am I
> the most miserable of women. (29)

This dignified blend of hushed visitation in a suburban landscape is characteristic of Boland's poetry. She too makes large claims for her poetic role, adopting a certain rhetorical grandeur. She describes how Sappho, her muse, comes to her in a vision, having singled her out as the Chosen One, 'my own daughter'. Individual conviction is accompanied by open challenge - of other poets, past and present, and to poetic tradition. Sappho is portrayed here as a female divinity in a quietly shocking imitation of Christian ritual. The poet proclaims her privileged access to Truth; she is witness and disciple, set apart from ordinary folk. She needs to touch the dead poet's stigmata to strengthen her courage for the lonely task ahead. Such tones are unusually bold for a woman poet in a Catholic country. Boland has the poise and conviction of the bard.

In the article about Heaney, Garfitt praised the poet's decision to stay in his community, and write out of it, citing Kavanagh's bold declaration that 'Gods make their own

importance.' He continued:

> Kavanagh drew an important distinction between the provincial and the parochial: the provincial writer, always looking over his shoulder to the metropolis, is doomed to inferiority, whereas the parochial writer, having the confidence to stand his ground, can aspire to the universal. (29)

We have seen how the poet's gift for elevating the parochial wins the official stamp of approval from Heaney and Garfitt. Boland offers her version of the same: a plea to the muse for her blessing, to sanction the parochial, 'the ordinary' and 'the common'. The similarity is striking. Boland's poetic celebrates ordinary life: her focus is on the domestic. Her determination to make poetry from the apparently trivial and unheroic activities of suburbia would seem a perfect example of the parochial. Her tone is not always so exalted. 'The Journey' (its 'Envoi' is quoted above) opens with her crisp observation that, 'there has never /..been a poem to an antibiotic: /...Depend on it, somewhere a poet is wasting / his sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious // emblem instead of the real thing.' (30) What could be more parochial than a poem to an antibiotic? What more ordinary than the hassled mother bending to wipe her child's nose in the street, or the housewife, surrounded by mountains of laundry and the rumblings of washing machines? (31) But there is no sign that Garfitt and company are amenable to these versions of the parochial. Basically, some aspirations are more parochial than others. Some aspirations can aspire, and some cannot.

This conviction - that the truly poetic fabric of life lies

not in distant or glorified heroics, but in the daily round - first took shape in Boland's work when motherhood made the conventional matter of lyric poetry seem irrelevant. She stopped reworking Irish legends and translating Gaelic verse, and began to focus more and more consistently upon women's ordinary lives, using her own as a constant reference point. She made the gradual discovery that her authentic vision lay closer to home, within the domestic sphere:

> I stood at the centre of the lyric moment itself, in a mesh of colours, sensualities and emotions that were equidistant from poetic convention and political feeling alike. Technically and aesthetically I became convinced that if I could only detach the lyric mode from traditional Romantic elitism and the new feminist angers, then I would be able at last to express that moment. (32)

Her fourth volume Night Feed, records the atmospheres of domestic life, casting a surreal eye over daily routines and investing them with an aura of mysteriousness:

> Machines jigsaw everything she knows.
> And she is everywhere among their furor:
> the tropic of the dryer tumbling clothes.
> The round lunar window of the washer.
> The kettle in the toaster is a kingfisher
> diving for trout above the river's mirror. (33)

Poems about nursing a newborn baby are suffused with wonder as if to imply that these mother/child rites give access to a forgotten realm of female power. But Boland is too alert to the temptations of literary falsification not to offset such glimmers of the sublime with a measure of irony. She maintains a careful balance between humour and solemnity, between mundane realism and glimpses of a lost or submerged female divinity:

In the round
of the staircase,
my arms sheafing nappies,
I grow in and down,

to an old spiral,
a well of questions,
an oracle:
will it tell me -

am I
at these altars,
warm shrines -
washing machines, dryers,

with their incense
of men and infants -
priestess
or sacrifice?

My late tasks
wait like children:
milk bottles,
the milkman's note. (34)

The tone here is a tightly-controlled mixture of self-mockery and seriousness. The phrase 'sheafing nappies' catches both ingredients: a light, humourous image given force by the allusion to Demeter. The incongruity of cumbersome machinery and 'high tech' housewifery transformed into props in a pagan ritual still does not eclipse the serious aspect of the poem, with its implications of subterranean mystery.

It is this sharp humour that saves the poems from sentimentality. Boland exploits the tension between the yearning for a female sublime, and the determination to keep her feet firmly on the suburban ground. This dialetic is particularly clear in 'The Muse Mother':

My window pearls wet.
The bare rowan tree
berries rain.

I can see
from where I stand
a woman hunkering -
her busy hand
worrying a child's face,

working a nappy liner
over his sticky, loud
round of a mouth.

Her hand's a cloud
across his face,
making light and rain,
smiles and a frown,
a smile again.

She jockeys him to her hip,
pockets the nappy liner,
collars rain on her nape
and moves away,

but my mind stays fixed:

If I could only decline her -
lost noun
out of context,
stray figure of speech -
from this rainy street
again to her roots,
she might teach me
a new language:

to be a sybil
able to sing the past
in pure syllables,
limning hymns sung
to belly wheat or a woman,

able to speak at last
my mother tongue. (35)

The poem dramatises the distance between the poet - occupying the male position of the spectator - and the housewife, and it uses this distance to undercut the poet's temptation for abstraction. The ethics of Boland's aesthetic prevent her from appropriating this woman as symbol of the female muse. In this highly Romantic vision, she longs to claim this image of the 'mother' as her

emblem. If she could overlook the urban reality of women's lives, and take refuge in a pastoral idyll, she would be able to satisfy her aesthetic desire for reconnection with a female oral tradition. At the same time she recognises that this transformation of flesh-and-blood woman into symbol only repeats the very crime of which she accuses literary tradition: using woman as metaphor. Boland insists upon the vivid and unglamorous reality of this nose-wiping 'Eighties housewife. The tension between these two moods - the pull towards a seductive myth of communality, and an insistence on authentic representation - is the hallmark of her poetry. (36)

The settings of suburbia and laundry rooms may not appear fitting scenes for the great passions of poetry, but neither did the petty squabbles of his neighbours seem so to Kavanagh, until he imagined Homer's ghost with his reassuring words. Heaney praises Kavanagh for 'raising the inhibited energies of a subculture to the power of a cultural resource.' (37) How is Boland's homage to domestic realism received? For the most part, with silence. Our culture's critical perspective endorses one - a lively territorial squabble - and baulks at the narrowness of the other. Nappies cannot be noble.

Boland is aware of the discrepancy. She quotes Jean Baker Miller's thesis that women become the repository for areas of human experience with which society is uneasy. She also acknowledges how this anxiety has led to her poems being misinterpreted. She insists that her task as a poet is to expand the terrain that is acceptably 'poetic', to articulate silenced

areas of human experience. She describes the early volume, In Her Own Image, as an attempt to do just that, to look at the darker energies residing in certain degraded areas of human experience:

> A lot of what we now call 'feminine experiences', or 'women's experiences', or 'women's issues', within poetry, are in fact, if people would only look at them closely, powerful metaphors for types of humiliation, types of silence, that are there throughout human experience. But you need to unlock the metaphor and you can't do it by feminizing the material. You can only do it by humanizing it. (38)

Despite that aim, this early volume is seen as her 'feminist' phase; titles like 'Mastectomy' and 'Anorexic' prove irresistable 'evidence' to critics.

Implicitly Boland admits that representation, myth and historical narratives are shaped by, and around, men. She wants to broaden the span of images and experiences accepted as human rather than female. This has to be done, as she says, by 'humanizing the feminine parts of an experience' (an extraordinary admission that the feminine is generally taken as sub- or un-human). (39) So, with admirable flair, she throws her child's mitten down before the patriarchs: take these experiences as metaphors. But is the violent estrangement between flesh and mind in 'Anorexic' acceptable as a metaphor for human suffering, as opposed to female suffering? She knows it is not, and she also knows why:

> If you take an experience and 'feminize' it, you give it its meaning within a sociological or a political context. If you examine anything that you do according to its purely feminine importance, then you lose a good deal of the myth and power of that experience. (40)

In the _Sleeping With Monsters_ interview she responds to the inevitable question about gender with tortuous reasoning:

> I don't think of myself as writing in the voice of a woman. I am a woman and I write in terms of what defines me.

The ambiguity is revealing. Her comment implies a sense of constriction and claustrophobia as well as emphasising the role of language in forming gender roles. But whereas we shall see Deborah Randall and Suniti Namjoshi explore this linguistic palimpsest, what Boland is really speaking about appears to be not language so much as cultural respositories - history, legend, myth - within the folds of which lie the dormant myth and power she wants to harness. Her attempt to make female experiences stand as metaphors for varieties of human experience backfires: the metaphors collapse back onto their female subjects. This is not surprising considering her own acknowledgement of the limitating nature of femininity. In the process of humanizing female experience gender is bypassed, since humanism occludes gender difference and imposes a masculine subject. This is the paradox that lies at the heart of Boland's project, succinctly expressed by Clair Wills:

> She seeks not to challenge the basis of the poet's authority, but to widen the political constituency, adding women to the electoral rolls. But of course poetry cannot simply add the 'private' or 'personal' experience of women to its dominant structures, and Boland herself does not so much represent female experience as trope it. (41)

The poetry hovers between orthodoxy and rebellion. The tension between realism and a female sublime is borne out in what

appears to be a split between wanting to put women's lives on the patriarchal record, and the desire to write a new script: one that inscribes women's experiences as 'outside history'. This new script traces a different trajectory; it entails breaking with the 'well-made poem' Boland inherited uncritically as a dutiful apprentice, the poem that:

> had a beginning, middle and end. The relation of music to image, of metaphor to idea, was safe, repetitive and derivative. (42)

Such relations were 'safe' because they stuck firmly to the stable, familiar areas of human experience. Boland's aim is to explore the excluded spheres. When she tries to do this within the old parameters, these experiences slide back onto the female subject.

The critics do not comment directly on these aims; perhaps they do not even notice them. Selected Poems got a brief and grudging paragraph from Michael O'Neill in the TLS, where he criticises her for her 'head-on flatness' of tone, and observes that her female muse 'would seem to owe a debt to Heaney's Dantescan adventures'. Only Neil Corcoran is astute enough to realise that the similarity between Boland's 'Journey' sequence and Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island' is deliberate, and to wonder whether Sappho's visitation is intended as 'an oblique riposte to that poem's all-male cast.' (43)

So Boland's grand poetic is not rewarded with the same expansive praise afforded Yeats and Heaney. This kind of lukewarm critical reception to poetry that is quite clearly outspoken as well as technically skilled demonstrates how hard

it is to get female experience accepted as a metaphor for human experience. Metaphors lie at the heart of the resistance. In the Introduction to Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women from 1690 to the present, A. A. Kelly apologises for the limitations of contemporary women poets:

> They are often self-regarding, and too conscious of their female function.

It is tempting to ask whose definition of a woman's 'function' is being used here, but more disturbing still is Kelly's impatient and reductively literal reading of such work:

> Contraception, rape, abortion and female circumcision are highly emotive and controversial issues about which women find it hard to be objective...Women poets now dare to write explicitly about their bodies. A glut of this subject, too explicitly expressed, should lessen as female metaphor becomes innate rather than innovative; ...Female metaphor is still insecure. Female taboos still permeate the subconscious. (44)

It is difficult but exciting to conceive of a poetry in which female metaphors are no longer 'insecure'. Certainly for the moment, the taboos remain all too healthy - though whether on the part of the poets or the readers is another question. (45) These loci of 'unresolved' human experiences cannot lock into the familiar narratives that act as a kind of ballast to poetic structures. Aware of this, Boland's challenge is not quite as straightforward as the notion of 'humanizing femininity' would imply. At her most experimental, she tries to plot alternative narratives. In some of her work she hovers on the brink of delineating new boundaries and a new trajectory that replaces the

oppositional conflict of male tradition with a female aesthetic founded on continuity and collaboration.

'How is her life shapeable in poetry?'

Mary Carruthers suggests that the absence of autonomous conceptualisations of the *shape* of a woman's life constitutes a central difficulty for the woman poet (46). She argues that the myths and stories that constitute our cultural heritage provide clearly-mapped itineraries of man's journey through life as an autonomous individual, but tend to chart woman's progress only as an adjunct of man - father, lover or husband. She contrasts the bleak ending of Middlemarch with the triumphant shape of Dickens's hero in Great Expectations:

> Pip's life has a priceless gift bestowed upon it by the imagination of English speakers throughout the history and pre-history of the language: it has a conceivable shape, a beginning, middle, and end. (p. 284)

This is the comfortable beginning, middle and end of the poem Boland inherited. The common theme and its recognisable landmarks slowly acquire the weight of myth. Carruthers begins her essay with the question, '*how can the poet imagine a woman's life, how is her life shapeable in poetry?*' (p.281), and she identifies this lack of a clearly-defined, autonomous life trajectory as one explanation for the avoidance of, or ambivalence towards particular themes in women's poetry. Where father/son conflicts comfortably stand as metaphors for a whole

range of human experiences, the mother / daughter relationship is habitually construed as a metaphor for female rivalry. As Carruthers points out, this inward-looking, private struggle - frequently fought over beauty - carries no cultural weight outside itself, but implies the 'natural' introspection and narrowness of the female psyche.

If it is men who are the principal actors in the major mythic narratives of Western culture, this is not to say women are entirely absent: quite the opposite - they are the static pole around which the myths cohere, the objects of exchange or of desire. Their role has historically been a passive one and in mythic, if not in social terms, it does not seem to have changed. As Virginia Woolf observed wryly in 1929:

> Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. (47)

Paradoxically such passive presence is essential; without the relegation of Woman to the negative site of the Other, the constructs of philosophy, rationality, language communication would be unworkable. (48) Medbh McGuckian conveys the delicate subtlety of this dependence in the closing lines of 'Ode To A Poetess':

> What they ask of women is less their bed,
> Or an hour between two trains, than to be almost gone,
> Like the moon that turns her pages day by day,
> Letting the sunrise weigh up, not what they have seen,
> But the light in which the garden, pressing out into
> The landscape, drew it all the more into its heart. (49)

Just as the meaning of these lines is continually deferred, just as causal distinctions blur and language becomes opaque, so does

'Woman', in visual and literary representation, hover indistinct and unobtrusive over the pages of patriarchal myth and history. Male narratives are not concerned to record her observations, but her presence enables them to focus on what is beyond her - the light in the garden, intensified by the constant shadowing of the feminine principle.

The problem as defined by Carruthers is one of a failure to imagine a woman's life with its own integrity, 'shaping its own vision in response to its own inner logic' (p. 290). This inability to see Woman as an autonomous whole she labels 'gynecomyopia' - shortsightedness towards women. Myths play a crucial role:

> our concept of generational relationship is a metaphor, a myth, of wholeness and harmony, a means of reconciling the stages of human life. (p. 290)

Rather than being sacred parcels of God-given truth, they are ways of organising chaos into recognisable patterns: they reflect the processes of life as it is experienced. The emphasis Carruthers places on the woman poet's need to conceptualise Woman as a self-contained subject highlights the revolutionary potential of the imagination. Imaginative visions prepare the way for change, by creating new choices for women, but the conventional frameworks constrain freer representations. A crucial element in the woman poet's task is that of breaking down the narrative structures that confine our conceptualisations of a woman's life.

Kennelly, editor of the _Penguin Book of Irish Verse_, adds a fascinating dimension to the notion of poetic mythmaking,

unwittingly making the woman poet's difficulties crystal clear. In his introduction to the collection he writes about the necessity of myth for poetry:

> A poet without a myth is a man [sic] confronting famine. Like the body, the imagination gets tired and hungry: myth is a food, a sustaining structure outside the poet that nourishes his inner life and helps him to express it. (50)

The metaphor is revealingly confused: myth is both a 'structure', outside the poet, - with implications of fixity and permanence,- and a 'food' that is impermanent and services another's needs: once consumed, it exists no more. The comparison, strange as it is, parallels the role played by Woman in phallocentric myths. It sounds, from Kennelly's description, as though what the poet really needs is an edible wife!

Woman's static presence is thus essential as a stimulus enabling Man to project and reflect his own image against her. It is beyond this circuit that Woman has no symbolic force; she cannot stand outside the process. She can never, within this framework, be in the position Kennelly describes, with the sustaining structure of these mythic patterns *outside herself*.

The problem for the woman poet, then, is to create a mythology capable of sustaining without invading her. She must remain on the outside of this structuring of experience rather than becoming an integral part of its pattern; hence Boland's attempt to situate woman 'outside history'.

Outside Patriarchal History : the archaelogy of hedgerows

> Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves...We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (51)

Rich's inspiring words have coined a new phrase in feminist criticism - revisionist mythmaking. Since it is, for the most part, Greek, Roman and Judaeo-Christian material that underpins English literary tradition, these are the legends that have received most thorough reworking. In her study of contemporary women poets in America, Alicia Ostriker devotes a chapter to this project, which she enthusiastically describes as a 'vigorous and varied invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language' (52). The intention is usually to re-write the familiar myths from a different perspective - that of the silenced, objectified woman. So Helen of Troy and Eurydice offer their versions of events, and Leda gets to talk back at last - implicating Leonardo da Vinci (and by association the entire tradition of Western visual art) in her rape (53).

There are limitations to this kind of revisionism. The Classics are so deeply entrenched - these myths are the foundations upon which 'English Literature' is constructed - that attempts to change the story can look feeble in comparison to the familiar version. As Jan Montefiore concludes in her brief discussion of reworked fairy tales:

> just because this material is both traditional and powerful, it is resistant to recasting. Political interpretations can deflect but not alter these meanings, which either return to haunt the poem that overtly discards them, or vanish into witty analysis. (54)

Without the endorsement of readers and critics, such sporadic sallies into the ancient treasury of meaning are easily dismissed as polemic. Montefiore does not spell it out, but of course the equally ideological messages concealed within traditional narratives go unnoticed. Re-writings also depend on a community of readers willing to take up and endorse the new narrative. Ostriker's optimistic claims for the effectiveness of revisionism perhaps overlook this material necessity: the usefulness of an enthusiastic Garfitt to nudge the new work into broad circulation.

But despite the rich legacy of Irish legend, Boland uses none of it in her revisionary practices: there are no Queen Maeves and no Cathleen Ní Hoolihans. Nor does she make much use of Classical or Christian myths. O'Neill noted, when suggesting her muse owed a debt to Heaney's, that her engagement with Irish history was 'more shadowy' than his. This is certainly true: it is in the shadows, the wings of formal history, that Boland locates her mythopoeia. Her poems pick out the aspects of a scene that are unaffected by human events: the subtle changes in shades of light, the colouring and textures that mark out different seasons. It is a landscape of natural vegetation; human habitation barely leaves a trace. Conscious of the interconnections between myth, poetry and history, and angry at

the false idealisations created by her predecessors, she fuses and redesigns her own version of events. As a poet she still has a nation, but she has reshaped it to her own liking.

'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland', from the sequence entitled 'Outside History', provides a clear example of this process of redefinition. The poem tracks an actual physical movement away from the constraining realism of woman's life in suburbia, as the narrator drives westwards into the wild lands. The white hawthorn holds her kind of history. She stops herself from gathering it, remembering an old tale about hawthorn bringing bad luck. The hawthorn represents continuity, roots, superstition: markers of a community consciousness. It preserves a sense of the past unaffected by the vicissitudes and sectarianism of official public history:

> So I left it
>
> stirring on those hills
> with a fluency
> only water has. And, like water, able
> to re-define land. And free to seem to be -
>
> for anglers,
> and for travellers astray in
> the unmarked lights of a May dusk -
> the only language spoken in those parts. (55)

The most radical, and indeed potentially fruitful, aspect of Boland's poetic lies in this redefinition of the idea of a nation. She criticises her literary ancestors for their tendency to fuse woman and nation and in so doing, to oversimplify both. She acknowledges the close historical association between poet and nation, but warns that the poet is not a nationalist; is not bound only to record a past of noble and tragic defiance. She

describes the concept of nation proffered by Irish writers, past and present, as 'a collective fantasy' of consolatory images (56).

Boland wants no truck with this glorified version of the past that substitutes 'fictive queens and national sybils' (p. 12) for the real suffering of Irish women. Yet she, like Heaney, sees the potential relevance of their lives as metaphors for the life of the nation:

> if there really was an emblematic relation between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation, I need only prove the first in order to reveal the second. (p. 21)

At first her poetic landscape appears to be a wholly domestic domain - the private sphere of childrearing, gardens and housework. Clair Wills's misgivings are understandable when you consider some of the titles: 'The Unlived Life', 'In the Garden','Domestic Interior'. (57) They fit Cixous's sharp definition of the patriarchally-defined 'feminine' uncomfortably well, depicting a world of 'the nonsocial, nonpolitical, nonhuman half of the living structure....tirelessly listening to what goes on inside - inside her belly, inside her "house".' (58)

She criticises her fellow lyric poets for their hackneyed heroics. In 'The Glass King' she accuses them of being mired in outdated nostalgia: 'hand-wringing/ elegists with an ill-concealed greed/ for the inheritance' (59). Like her ancestors, she holds the poet to be a central social figure: chronicler, commemorator, the engine of continuity. Yet today's poets are still wedded to a dead history, consoling themselves with false

glorifications of the past. In the same poem she castigates the nation's lyric as 'untouchable, outlandish, / esoteric, inarticulate and out of reach//of human love.' So her aim is not merely to open up a little space for women's experiences; it is to challenge the conventional understanding of what are fit subjects for poetry. No one writes about the daily round, about antibiotics, about chatting with neighbours. Like Heaney, she recognises that language is organically connected to the land and community, and is thus a crucial part of national consciousness; words that are not earthed, that do not feed back into tradition and history are flimsy, sapless. As a result the persistence of an oral tradition is extremely important: it is a kind of umbilical cord connecting words and people to their roots. And Boland casts this oral tradition as a female triumph: the interconnective weave of stories and legends that provides individuals with a sense of place, geographical and temporal. Here, in this alternative version of history, women are central: the spinners of the social fabric, authors of the tales that remain firmly 'outside history'. (60) Boland tries to resurrect a contemporary version of this subculture in poems like 'The Oral Tradition', 'What we Lost', and 'The New Pastoral'. (61)

This organic relationship between language and nation is developed in the landscapes she paints in her poems. Natural rhythms and seasonal change form the permanent backdrop, the measure of normality against which human dramas are played out. Kavanagh's squabbles shrink against such a large-scale canvas. Boland substitutes natural history for human: not to deny human

agency, but to bring about a shift in perspective, away from the channels of patriarchal nationalist history. The settings for her poems are minutely described and yet mysteriously vague; the landmarks she uses are trees or the silhouette of a hill. Like a painter, she employs colour and shade with precision but the setting of these poems is an enabling device, a passport out onto a metaphysical plane where human time is meaningless. Despite the suburban location of some of the lyrics, with streets and gardens, these too are strangely placeless. They could be any street, anywhere. This deliberate erasure of the trappings of the Irish 'nation' allows Boland to present what she regards as the genuine constituents of nationhood, - the country's landscape, soil, and people - while excluding the rhetoric of nationalism.

It is women who inhabit her mythical landscapes of 'lost history', for it is their lives that have been lived most consistently 'outside history'. Her sense of a nation is evoked through their shadowy presences. A lace ruff sets off a train of associations about the workers who strained their eyes to make it; the woman who brought her water on Achill is finally recognised as her mentor and muse. As a keen young poet she grappled, like her male colleagues, with the English poetic inheritance, quite blind to the indigenous material that lay all around her. Boland seeks new ways to connect her life to the past lives of Irish women, particularly in their work as mothers where, despite material changes, the emotions and routines are the same. The nation becomes not a 'real' political or economic

unit, but a community of echoes and reflections, an atmosphere imbued with a sense of the past that lingers in hedgerows and grasses. Showing her the dead women and children in the Underworld, her guide, Sappho, cautions her against realism. Instead she urges the poet to flout orthodoxy and look for the submerged commonality that links her to these women and transcends history:

> 'Do not define these women by their work:
> not as washerwomen trussed in dust and sweating,
> muscling water into linen by the river's edge
>
> nor as court ladies brailled in silk
> on wool and woven with an ivory unicorn
> and hung, nor as laundresses tossing cotton,
> brisking daylight with lavender and gossip.
>
> But these are women who went out like you
> when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
> recovering the day, stooping, picking up
> teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets -
>
> love's archaeology - and they too like you
> stood boot deep in flowers once in summer
> or saw winter come in with a single magpie
> in a caul of haws, a solo harlequin.' (62)

The centuries that separate her experience from theirs crumble away; the anachronistic presence of tricycles and rag dolls underlines the continuity of emotional experience. Love's archaeology is unaffected by the vicissitudes of political strife.

Clearly there are risks involved in this bold rescue mission - primarily the danger of sentimentality. As if to guard against this, the women are depicted engaged in hard physical labour: 'muscling water', 'tossing cotton' and 'brisking daylight'. These images ally activities now regarded as 'soft' with their

original energetic effort, as if to revise notions of women as gentle, etherial creatures. Boland translates the spare physicality of their existence into her representation by using this precise, vigorous language. One of her main criticisms of Irish literary tradition is that it has romanticised the harsh lives of Irish women:

> The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. (63)

She makes sure that her reimaginings are far from such motionless icons. The memory of these women is 'beyond speech, / beyond song, only not beyond love;' Sappho warns her. A less innovative poet might have tried to write the forgotten stories of these women's lives, filling in the gaps in the patriarchal record. This may well be what Wills expects of the poet she criticises for naively believing she can simply expand the terrain of acceptable poetry to include the private and domestic. But Boland is firmly in the present; what excites her is the opportunity to convey complex images of women in poetry:

> A hundred years ago I might have been a motif in a poem. Now I could have a complex self within my own poem. (64)

She uses the emblematic silences of women's past lives as her own brand of mythic material. They carry traces of the past that live on in the present - the vestiges of a vibrant oral tradition. These details fill out the unglamorous narratives of

contemporary suburban life, adding the resonance of pattern and myth to her bare lyrics.

A self in process

This complex self, shaped from autobiography but informed by the lives of generations of women before her, is always a self *in process*: it is the act of writing (and of reading, or hearing) that creates the persona. This is a partial answer to Boland's sensitivity to the dangers of fixity and objectification. Several poems use paintings to exlore the relation between artist and subject and the ethics of representation. (65) Despite her pleasure in the plain naturalism of Chardin, the artist who seems closest to her own conception of poetic vision; despite the prescription that you take beauty and reveal its truth (66), objectification remains an ethical problem.

The sculptor in 'A Ballad of Beauty and Time' provided an early example of her disquiet about the artist's power. (67) It is he who judges precisely what constitutes an 'honest flaw', his own standard of beauty that leads him - with divine authority - to stay his hand. He decides, he selects, faithful to his vision and the impulses of his aesthetic. The subject or model is merely an object. These are crucial issues for Boland. How can she articulate the truths of women's lives, both her ancestors and contemporaries, without appropriating them? How can she

negotiate a way through the imbalance of power between artist and subject? Even though she refuses to idealise her subjects, she is still the artist playing freely with their lives and subsuming them to her interpretation.

She tries to break up this inequality by disrupting the neat divisions that separate poet, subject and poem, or artefact. Stepping out of her omniscient invisible role as poet, she disturbs the dynamics of the traditional literary critical reading process. In 'Woman Posing', (after a painting, 'Mrs Badham', by Ingres), she tries to bring the real woman alive out of the flat canvas. It is not his artistry she questions; Ingres's portrait is very revealing. Boland uses this information to 'flesh out' the human subject, focussing on the discrepancy between the woman's ordinary routine and this special occasion. She catches the nuances of awkward, self-conscious pretence in 'dressing up': a grown-up child painfully aware of her potential absurdity:

> She smirks uneasily at what she's shirking
> Sitting on this chair in silly clothes
> Posing in a truancy of frills.
> There's no repose in her broad knees.
> The shawl she shoulders just upholsters her.
> She hands the open book like pantry keys. (68)

But this revisioning does not solve the ethical dilemma. Boland creates another artefact from the original; she does not rid herself of the distance between image and poet. She is not Mrs Badham, nor is her reader. We are still looking at her, at two removes - through the eyes of Ingres and, through him, of Boland herself. Only by implicating the reader within the process can

she divest herself of the disturbing authority of the poet. In 'Woman Posing', Boland is still the observing artist, outside the experience, even though she breathes life back into the frozen portrait.

So it is not only that the traditional narratives provide no space for *women's* life experience, operating around poles that relegate women to the position of object or appendage. The heart of the problem lies in the ethics of representation. How can she create images, and yet elide the distance between the image itself, and her own imaginative recreation of it? Not poems about experiences, but poems that *are* experiences, she insists, borrowing Adrienne Rich's phrase; poems that insist on the presence of the poet within her vision, as the filter through which the image reaches its audience. (69) Forcing the reader to recognise her own presence, as poet, within the poem, Boland both strives to dissolve this distance between her 'subject' and herself, and compels the reader, in her turn, to acknowledge that she too is instrumental in the creation of meaning. In this way she disrupts the traditional literary critical practice which depends on the reader maintaining distance from the poem. Boland revives elements of the oral tradition, situating herself within the story as she unfolds its sequence, commenting and drawing the reader into the scene too. Boland's self-portraits bring woman and poet together, emphasising the essential unity of the two aspects of her persona.

Boland's first person narrative is determinedly authentic. She insists, with quiet dignity, on her ordinariness, refusing to

become either omniscient artist or idealised symbol. She inscribes herself within every poem as both mediator and subject, writing out of the truth of her experience but involving the reader within it. The processes of any creative act are made explicit. 'Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening' provides a particularly clear example of this strategy. Chardin is seen painting a woman in the garden:

> All summer long
> he has been slighting her
> in botched blues, tints,
> half-tones, rinsed neutrals. (70)

The vocabulary is precise: the technical terms 'slighting' and 'botched' are accurate descriptions of the painter's craft, but they also convey the clumsy, insulting nature of any effort to frame reality or try to harness its essence:

> What you are watching
> is light unlearning itself,
> an infinite unfrocking of the prism.
>
> Before your eyes
> the ordinary life
> is being glazed over:

The reader observes as, through the painter's consummate skill, infinite subtleties of the scene are captured on canvas. It is actually happening, before our eyes; as we read we witness the process not only of Chardin's artistry, but also Boland's. A trance-like state conveys the movement from the unnamed woman to the revelation that she is the poet herself, suddenly caught, by her own words, crossing the garden, as the reader reads, unfolding the narrative, making this happen:

Truth makes shift:
The triptych shrinks
to the cabinet picture.

Can't you feel it?
Aren't you chilled by it?
The way the late afternoon
is reduced to detail -

the sky that odd shape of apron -

opaque, scumbled -
the lazulis of the horizon becoming
optical greys
before your eyes
before your eyes
in my ankle-length
summer skirt

crossing between
the garden and the house,
under the whitebeam trees,
keeping an eye on
the length of the grass,
the height of the hedge,
the distance of the children

I am Chardin's woman

edged in reflected light,
hardened by
the need to be ordinary.

While Chardin creates his representation, Boland re-presents him, and creates her own self within the picture. The reader triggers off the process by unlocking the narrative, and is then drawn in by the poet's repeated questions. The final lines restate the dual role she is determined to sustain: both poet and woman. She undermines Chardin's status as the one who wields absolute power over his subject by turning him too into a represented object. In doing so, she acknowledges how this act runs the same risks of falsification. Painting freezes the moment, captures the subject

through the painter's eyes, and presents his (or her) perspective of truth to the viewer. The poet carries the same responsibility. Boland realises that the distance between actual truth and its artistic representation can never be crossed, but her sensitivity towards the ethics of this relationship, and her emphasis on the role of the reader has led her to explore new relationships between them in her poetry.

The Noise of Myth

The poems that seem least well-received by the critics who have reviewed Boland's work are those in which she explicitly outlines her own aesthetic. Lachlan Mackinnon, in his short (one column) TLS review of The Journey and other poems, dislikes the three pivotal poems in the collection, where the bardic tone is most pronounced:

> Such an open statement of intent, blurred by inconsequential myth-making, wrecks all three poems. ['The Journey'; 'Envoi'; 'Listen. This is the Noise of Myth';] Instead of an artful 'open weave' we have willed effort. When she conceals her art, Eavan Boland can be memorable and unnervingly honed, but when she does not she is hardly an artist at all. (71)

Indirection and subtlety are the appropriate methods for the woman writer, not the declarative tones of the bard. Boland is praised when her language fits Heaney's conception of the 'feminine mode'. (72) When she trespasses into the 'mascline mode' of 'assertion or command', the reception is less enthusiastic. But Mackinnon's terse dismissal of these three poems as 'inconsequential myth-making' is interesting, since it

is here I would locate the most radical aspects of her work.

'Listen. This is the Noise of Myth' (73) is the triumphant announcement of a woman poet who has discovered a way of freeing her vision from the circumscriptions of poetic tradition. Boland writes, as usual, in the first person; she is the oral poet, telling the oldest story in time. She presents archetypes of mythic narrative - a nameless man and a woman on an allegorical journey - but she quite openly takes the liberty of changing the story. Her control over the narrative is explicit:

> This is the story of a man and woman
> under a willow and beside a weir
> near a river in a wooded clearing.
> They are fugitives. Intimates of myth.
>
> Fictions of my purpose. I suppose
> I shouldn't say that yet or at least
> before I break their hearts or save their lives
> I ought to tell their story and I will.

Assuming the voice of the storyteller, and intervening in the narrative, Boland makes the oral quality of the tale explicit. The couple travel through the overdetermined mythic terrain of forests, their path strewn with archetypal symbols. The seasons change as they travel, through winter into spring, that most overused metaphor: season of birth, rebirth and change. Having related their past itinerary, Boland brings them and us back into the poem's present tense:

> And here we are where we started from-
> under a willow and beside a weir
> near a river in a wooded clearing.
> The woman and the man have come to rest.
>
> Look how light is coming through the ash.
> The weir sluices kingfisher blues.
> The woman and the willow tree lean forward, forward.
> Something is near, something is about to happen;

something more than Spring
and less than history. Will we see
hungers eased after months of hiding?
Is there a touch of heat in that light?

If they stay here soon it will be summer; things
returning, sunlight fingering minnowy deeps,
seedy greens, reeds, electing lights
and edges from the river.

But she is not going to let the internal force of the old story reassert itself. She halts the familiar train of events:

Consider
legend, self-deception, sin, the sum
of human purpose and its end; remember
how our poetry depends on distance,
aspect: gravity will bend starlight.

Such narratives have closed off alternative stories. The variety of human experience has been brought into the service of a morality which dictates the proper development of the story, deciding what is noteworthy, and what is not. Historically, the poet has dutifully obeyed the precepts of detachment and solemnity; he has told the proper story. The old stories have acquired the permanence of fact, but they can be wiped away:

Forgive me if I set the truth to rights.
Bear with me if I put an end to this:
She never turned to him; she never leaned
under the sallow-willow over to him.

They never made love; not there; not here;
not anywhere; there was no winter journey;
no aconite; no birdsong and no jasmine,
no woodland and no river and no weir.

One by one, item by item, effortlessly, she rubs out the plot-lines of the old story. It is not so difficult: these bastions of time-honoured authority can be erased without violence:

Listen. This is the noise of myth. It makes
the same sound as shadow. Can you hear it?

In this way Boland dissociates herself from mainstream poetic inheritance, not just the narratives of Irish history. The myths were never hers: like the poem she found herself writing, they offered no space in which to explore and create the shape of her life as a woman. She claims a new territory in which to forage for authentic visions:

> This is mine.
> This sequence of evicted possibilities.
> Displaced facts. Tricks of light. Reflections.
>
> Invention. Legend. Myth. What you will.
> The shifts and fluencies are infinite.
> The moving parts are marvellous. Consider
> how the bereavements of the definite
>
> are easily lifted from our heroine.
> She may or she may not. She was or wasn't
> by the water at his side as dark
> waited above the Western countryside.

She gives back to Woman the choices which, in the old myths, are denied her. Imaginatively, at least, the framework of human life allows for endless variety around the constant poles of birth and death. The poet who accepts the old truths as the only truths ends up looking backwards, lost in the dead past, contorting reality to make it sit easily within the hallowed sphere of what is suitably poetic. Blind conformity to tradition has worn out the old images. They are encrusted with dead meanings. But the bones of mythology - the stark outlines of what is constant about human existence - should be bare. The poet must dare to re-imagine, to create new configurations within the flexible cast of the story:

> The scene returns. The willow sees itself
> drowning in the weir and the woman
> gives the kiss of myth her human heat.

Reflections. Reflections. He becomes her lover.

Instead of sticking to the old storyline Boland makes free with the characters, casts them in new roles, overturning traditional meanings. She reinstates woman at the centre of the narrative and restores her free choice. What will she do? There are no predetermined paths she has to follow. Boland reshapes the old staple characters, shifting the focus to liberate Woman from the determinist assumptions encoded within our mythologies. The poem shatters the idea of the inexorability of myth, by daring to suggest that these apparently solid structures, these maps of meaning, are easily dismantled. They only continue to define the borders of what is real or imaginable if we continue to accept them as 'Truth'. (74)

It looked, on publication of the volume containing these three poems, as though Boland was hovering on the edge of exciting new work. The Journey filled in the silences of women's unrecorded lives and ended on this optimistic note, hailing the possibility of change. But her next collection, Outside History, reveals a more conventional preoccupation with the transitory nature of human life. Gender seems to have slipped from the agenda. As a true lyric poet Boland now seems to find her elegaic vision in a modified version of meditations on the past.

The poet must be engaged with her subjects; she cannot invoke remote figures who bear no connection with her own lived experience and hope to use them as vehicles for her vision. The relationship between poet and image depends upon a profound reciprocity: that each is somehow within the other. Boland, as a

woman and a mother, writes out of these experiences. Solitude, the intimate observation of a baby's slow growth, the home as emotional nucleus of human life: the perennial conflicts and emotions of all human experience are played out in this landscape. She does not paint romanticised images of cosy hearthside scenes, brimming pitchers of milk and gleaming freshly baked loaves. Instead she uses the mundane images of mothering, - vegetables to be peeled, toys strewn across the garden, - in association with the constancies of seasonal changes in the surrounding world - in trees, textures and nuances of light, the feel of the air - to establish a connection with the women who lived before her, the harshness of whose reality has been prettified or ignored by history and myth.

Her confident assurance is not easily associated with the feminine. Roger Garfitt, reading male Irish poets, understands the tradition out of which Heaney is carving his own authoritative position; he admires the poet's close affinity with the land and his dialogue with Yeats. But Boland writes outside these recognisable guidelines, of experiences with which he has no connection. She rejects such establised affinities, implying, like Virginia Woolf, that as a woman she has no country, in the sense that nationalism and patriotic feeling have always been understood.

The reviewers do not seem to pick up on this strand of her poetic. When domesticity becomes such a flagrant theme that they cannot miss it, they start ruminating on 'feminist poetry'. McElroy praises her as 'more than just a poet of pots and pans

who goes public with her private exasperations'. (75) He describes 'Witching' (approvingly) as 'utterly strident'; 'Daphne with her Thighs in Bark' as 'polemical'. He concentrates on the recognisable tone of feminist anger rather than Boland's originality in directing this anger against *literary forms and tropes* instead of expressing personal rage.

As I observed at the beginning of this chapter, Boland is a well-respected poet. But her work generates no debates in the TLS; it is not endorsed by the institution. Most damagingly, it is not seen as composing a universal statement. Lots of poems about ordinary women: of what interest are these, how can they claim to hold universal truths? In response to T S Eliot's famous statement, 'No poet, no artist of any kind has his complete meaning alone,' Boland comments wryly, 'The woman poet is more alone with her meaning than most' (76).

Cultural endorsement is essential to the dissemination of new configurations of experience. But the poet's mythology must also strike a chord with its audience; it must capture and explore the preoccupations and attitudes of the age. And those who might find in Boland's work precisely such resonance are disenfranchised; they do not have a voice in the institutions which arbitrate genius. Ordinary women remain largely invisible. Ordinary women, in the opinion of the cultured establishment, are not interested in poetry. They like romances, Mills and Boon, glamo rous sagas. It is fair to say, however, that 'ordinary women', whoever they may be, are going to have to

work pretty hard to understand Boland's poetry. This is an important point, and leads into some concluding misgivings.

The limitations of nostalgia

Mr Bingen has grown to like Eavan Boland's poetry. I have grown slightly tired of its repetitious tone and slippery avoidance of a more realistic engagement with the situation of Irish women. Mr Bingen likes its elegant lyricism. After all, even when she is angry, she keeps her poise. I fear that in itself is healthy grounds for suspicion.

Boland's tone bears similarities to Heaney's. But where Heaney seems to take in a vast historical canvas, Boland keeps the focus narrow. The problem with Outside History, for me, is that the poems seem quite happily outside history; they deliberately (and skilfully) foreground what survives regardless of human activity: the hawthorn, the bulk of mountain, the shades of twilight. This is all very well, but the retreat from realism comes with a price. There is a strained feel to this rarefied atmosphere, as though the door is being held firmly shut on the rest of the world. There is a hushed atmosphere about her self-questioning lyrics: meditative, nostalgic, meandering, almost indulgent. The scene has shrunk and this inward-turning focus sits uneasily beside the bold claims of her prose and poetry, to 'tell the truth about the age', to stretch and splash around in mythic waters, coming up with new stories and different endings. These poems are too quiet, too still, too cerebral.

When her focus widens, Boland lets go of the gendering that informs these intensely personal lyrics. But even when there is an implicit stress on the female heritage, the elevated rhetoric is sometimes too much. 'What We Lost' from her most recent volume typifies this mannered elegance. It employs a similar register to those grand statements at the end of The Journey, and the narrator's voice intervenes in the same way. The poem sets a domestic parlour scene: countrywoman mending linen, candlelight, teatime, and child. The woman tells a story; the narrator halts the action:

> Believe it, what we lost is here in this room
> on this veiled evening.
> The woman finishes. The story ends.
> The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away. (77)

Who is the 'we' here - is it 'humankind', or 'women', or 'we Irish', or some other group? The danger seems to me to lie in romanticisation, just as Boland criticises poeticised accounts of Irish women's pasts. What makes this idyllic scene any different? It may, like Chardin's painting, take truth and reveal its beauty, but is this really how *most* people lived in times of desperate poverty and famine? It seems clear that Boland's real subject here is language, and a lament for the richness of legend and tale in a predominately oral community. But the reverent tones seem too grand, and the fireside scene too uncomfortably idealised.

I fear that Mr Bingen likes Boland's poetry because it is 'feminine - controlled, dignified and charming. There is no extremity: no passionate joy or bitter anger, no sudden release

of emotion. Reviewing Outside History Helen Dunmore asks for a bit more of the blunt roughness of the 'harsh, driving edge' of the closing lines of 'The Latin Lesson' (78), and Anne Stevenson in P N Review observes that the poems lack the wild spirit, the devilish vitality and careless verve, of Yeats, Joyce and Wilde. (79) There is, certainly, a sense of suffocation, of painstaking poise about these poems. 'The Shadow Doll' makes this tone explicit. (80) But she is, above all, an elegaic poet; she seems to be irresistibly drawn to the past, continually retracing stories and memories, engaged in a mammoth task of reconstruction which is centred on her mother's life. Nostalgia (without its pejorative connotations) is her proper element. It is perhaps unfair to criticise her for not being a different kind of poet.

Boland does not wish to be a separatist poet. She is quite explicit about the need for 'the fullest possible dialogue' with poetic tradition, and has said that her interest is in 'human states, not just states of women'. (81) She says she is working through *conventions* of gender differentiation, not voicing innate biological differences. Her subject matter is neverthless received, by the critics, as intrinsically 'womanly'. This resistance to any metaphorical material that can be marked 'female' is something we shall return to repeatedly, as other poets seek ways of negotiating this invisible barrier.

CHAPTER 3

TENDER TRANSFORMATIONS:

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES IN THE POETRY OF

CAROL ANN DUFFY AND DEBORAH RANDALL

'<u>here I am and here I stay</u>': <u>caged in the subjective</u> (1)

Eavan Boland's poetic persona is shaped in the mould of the traditional lyric 'I'. This voice is consistent in tone and identity, ranging from steady decorum to the borders of the sublime. She is, as I have pointed out, unusual amongst contemporary women poets for this reason; the downbeat shrugs of irony are more popular than such grandiose expansiveness. (2)

Analysing the impact of Romanticism on contemporary women poets, Margaret Homans notes that one characteristic of the 'feminist poetic' that arose out of the Women's Liberation Movement was the impulse to do away with falsification and mask, to tell (and share) the truth about female experiences. Within the context of 'Sixties popular politics there was no real problem about the philosphically doubtful notion of such a thing as 'the truth'. Directness and taboo-trampling dominated the early poetry of these women. (3)

Quite apart from philosophical objections to this notion of a coherent 'I', the project has serious implications for poetry and imagination. The intention is to avoid appropriating the experience of others - a danger women poets are, understandably, especially sensitive to. But, as Homans explains, the attempt to dispense with poetic masks proves ultimately counterproductive. Commenting on the literalism favoured by this project, she writes:

> this emphasis on truth implies a mistaken, or at least naive, belief about language's capacity not just for precise mimesis but for literal duplication of experience...The hope that language can gradually be

> released from a heritage of untruths about women may not be entirely deluded, but when those lies reinforce and are reinforced by the inherently fictive structure of language, it is chasing phantoms to expect that language will suddenly work for the expression of women's truth. This aim is fundamentally antithetical to the aims of poetry, and it dooms itself by denying itself the power that poetry genuinely offers. (p. 216)

Writing as a post-structuralist, Homans argues that efforts to frame an authentic, autobiographical 'I' disregard the dualistic nature of language which inevitably sets up screens between 'the truth' and its expression in words. If feminists claim to write without masks, they simply reconfirm the Romantic schema in which woman is allied with Nature, and denied the potential to transform and transcend her literal existence. As Homans concludes:

> The new 'I' has nothing to do with creative power; its purpose is to make poetry approximate as closely as possible a personal, spoken communication...To place an exclusive valuation on the literal, especially to identify the self as literal, is simply to ratify women's age-old and disadvantageous position as the other and the object. (p. 218.)

Furthermore, acute sensitivity to the possible consequences of claiming one's own experience as normative and universal encourages the female poet to be specific about her 'qualifications' for speaking. 'Personal experience' has become a bizarre shorthand for 'knowledge': the idea that you know something when you have experienced it, and, by implication, do not, and cannot, know what you have not experienced. This empiricist notion of authority leads to a snowballing specificity: white woman cannot presume to speak about black woman's experience, heterosexual about gay, etc. Barriers of

difference separate individuals from one another, and question the ethics of writing from outside the niche of subjectivity. But when does respect for difference slip into an excuse for neglecting anything outside your own perspective, and become a justification for self-absorption? There is an unavoidably political aspect to this inexorably narrowing focus; it sits neatly alongside the ideology of Thatcherite individualism. Ultimately this rigorously circumscribed notion of poetry denies the form's most valuable potential: to urge empathy, pushing the reader or listener outside themselves, facilitating the recognition and understanding of difference.

This frank effort to abandon masks has another, more pragmatic drawback for the woman poet: it encourages autobiographical readings. The tendency to downgrade women's creativity by reading their work back onto their lives is a phenomenon well-documented by feminist critics. (4) If the poetry purports to tell the truth about the poet's life, this intercepts any attempt to claim broader relevance for its insights. The poet ends up speaking only for and about herself, caged in the subjective. So a supposedly liberating strategy may paradoxically end up reinforcing the obstacles that impede the acceptance and circulation of female metaphor. This was clear in my own frustration with the narrow range of Boland's poetry. There is apparently no solution to this problem: the would-be universal lyric 'I' is a masculine 'I'. If the 'I' is a woman's voice, it delivers personal insights, tells personal truths.

A good example of this apparently irresistible habit is

Seamus Heaney's reaction to Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'. He complains that Plath's urgent 'personal needs' mar the poem. Plath is such a popular case in the irresistible 'biographical-readings-of-deranged-female-poet' syndrome that Heaney does not even need to spell out the fact that his reading is based on her autobiography. To him it is clearly obvious that the 'I' who speaks the poem *is* Plath: after all, the speaker in this particular poem is sufficiently neurotic to fit the Plath mythology. (5) Heaney complains that Plath (the 'real' person) swamps the poem:

> ...the cultural resonance of the original story is harnessed to a vehemently self-justifying purpose, so that the supra-personal dimensions of knowledge - to which myth typically gives access - are slighted in favour of the intense personal need of the poet. (6)

The 'supra-personal dimensions' of Plath's radical reworking of the Lazarus story remain unclear to Heaney, I suggest, because he himself is implicated in the poem's critique: he is one of the 'peanut crunching crowd' whose voyeuristic fascination is, the poem argues, always gendered: it is woman who performs the striptease, woman who is the object of the gaze. Plath offers a disturbing analysis of femininity as highly choreographed performance. 'Lady Lazarus' depicts a woman serving up her life to the crowd as a sex show. Even the rawest secrets become public property, a commodity up for grabs. When Heaney reads back onto Plath herself an 'intense personal need' to wrench the original myth into a new perspective, and cites this as flawed craft, he is actually proving the poem's point. Women are not allowed to

transcend the personal. The woman writer's access to the airy heights of the supra-personal is strictly regulated. As Boland's dilemma illustrates, once openly marked 'female' the lyric voice loses its capacity to transcend the self.

Trespassing in the male / mainstream

> literature is inescapably concerned with the relations between the sexes.... with the construction of gender and with what it means to be of one sex or the other within particuar social circumstances. (7)

During the 'Seventies, women flouted the rules. They wrote frankly about menstruation and their sexuality, challenging the constricting image of conventional femininity. The explicitly oppositional and uncompromising tone of their work laid it open to charges of 'agitprop', and many heads turned quietly away to pursue what Carol Rumens designates 'purer' poetry. (8) But this upsurge, however studiously outlawed or ignored, has had a profound effect. The spectrum of appropriately female themes has broadened subtly. The female voice has become more familiar; 'domestic' is no longer a term of belittlement. (9) Yet this apparent freeing-up of appropriate subject matter has tended only to mark out a new female orthodoxy, as gendered and as distinctive as before. In a recent interview Carol Ann Duffy gave a witty resumé of the situation:

> For quite a long time even into this decade we've been allowed certain areas of subject matter, like children, what bastards men are, looms: all these things that appear in late 'seventies, early 'eighties women's anthologies. But I haven't got any children and I don't

define myself entirely as a woman; I'm not interested in weaving. (10)

Feminists tend to treat this kind of impatience with what is designated 'Female' with suspicion, and equate it with the token woman's denial of gender. It is often taken as a slur on the female rather than a protest at the narrowness of definitions of what 'female' actually means. It is important to point out, then, that Duffy is not claiming that she is one of the boys, and that female experience is uninteresting or irrelevant. She is frustrated at the way in which her gender operates to keep her on one side of the fence, discouraging her from trespassing into the male/main stream. Of course there is no physical barrier, and indeed Duffy does write about areas of experience far outside her gendered 'proper sphere': she writes in a wide range of voices, from that of a native North American Indian, to a fairground rapist. What she is referring to in this wry comment is what Plath satirized so brutally in 'Lady Lazarus': the stubborn laws of representation according to which a woman's authorship is received as dramatised life-performance.

But if Heaney and his colleagues are reluctant to recognise women poets' ability to transcend the personal, that makes no difference to the poets engaged upon such explorations. Equipped with the confident knowledge of how it feels to experience life as a woman, a growing number of contemporary poets are carrying that understanding over the fence, as it were, to take a look at life from the other side of the gender divide; if not trying to hold the two subject positions simultaneously,

then at least alternating between them. For as Gillian Allnutt says in her introduction to _the new british poetry_:

> poetry must be one of the few areas of language use where it is acceptable, indeed obligatory, to try and break up the boxes we ordinarily think in. (11)

'It does not look like me': the freedoms of impersonation (12)

I have already mentioned the strategy of 'revisionist mythmaking', whereby famous historical or mythological female characters are resurrected as mouthpieces, and sharp irony injected into their hitherto silenced voices. (See Chapter 2, p. 86.) At least as Clytemnestra, Helen, or Persephone the female poet can conjure a compelling fantasy of power and action with a measure of subjectivity. But it is still not easy to transform characters who operate as mere catalysts for narratives of war and empire-building into active and acting subjects. For the woman poet conscious of bias, writing in the female voice demands situating that voice in constant opposition.

Dramatic monologues - writing in the multiple voices of Duffy's personae - offer a way round this problem. Women have long sheltered behind the disguise of a man's name, but the kind of writing I shall discuss in this chapter is not just the result of pragmatic disguise. Carol Ann Duffy and Deborah Randall experiment with a range of different voices: male, female, old, young, ancient, historical, contemporary. They make little attempt to foster a stable coherent poetic self through which to

view the world. (13) Unconstrained by autobiographical realism, they claim the right to speak from a variety of subject positions. Instead of an 'I' whose resemblance to the poet encourages a narrowing identification of persona with poet, this 'I' is quite distinct: remote through situation, historical period, the subject's gender, class, race, etc. Moving away from the traditional authoritative 'I' of the western lyric tradition also goes some way towards solving feminist unease over presuming to speak with authority on behalf of others: the chameleon identity enables a much fuller degree of empathy. It also frees women from conscriptions about subject matter. The poet can play at being a Viking warrior or evoke a complacent chauvinist pig with biting satire. Duffy writes convincingly in the mournful cadences of the dispossessed North American Indian:

> I wonder if the spirit of the water has anything
> to say. That you will poison it. That you
> can no more own the rivers and the grass than own
> the air. (14)

and then leaps into the vicar's shoes, as it were, evoking the frightened glee of his secret games:

> Now they have all gone, I shall dress up
> as a choirboy. I have shaved my legs. How smooth
> they look. Smooth, pink knees. (15)

This technique of using multiple personae also provides an alternative perspective to that of female victim from which to critique patriarchy. In 'Psychopath', instead of writing *about* the fairground rapist, as his observer or victim, Duffy writes *as* him:

.....She is in the canal.
Let me make myself crystal. With a good-looking girl crackling
in four petticoats, you feel like a king. She rode past me
on a wooden horse, laughing, and the air sang *Johnny, Remember Me.* I turned the world faster, flash. (16)

There are few contemporary examples of male poets experimenting with female personae; women poets seem more generous with their empathy. (17) But then, they have more to gain. The implications of ventriloquism are very different for men: the 'oppressed' hold the moral high ground. Perhaps this accounts for the relative rarity of poems written by men that adopt a female persona. (Similarly, I am not aware of any white poets who risk creating Black narrators.)

The most exciting aspect of this vogue for dramatic monologues is its offer of the chance not simply to critique gender difference, validate the female or painstakingly identify the shortcomings of mankind, but to cross the divide, unfolding a fuller inquiry into power relations between the sexes. The poet can interrogate both 'masculinity' and 'femininity', exploring what might lie at the core of gender differentiation once the layerings of stereotype are peeled away. At its most transformative, such writing offers new configurations of difference.

Duffy and Randall use this chameleon freedom to rather different effects, but both poets offer new configurations of difference, engaged in the process Sylvia Kantaris defines as the essential responsibility of the poet:

> of continually breaking the moulds and remoulding in a different pattern, working towards the possibly unreachable ideal of a human family...a common language, informed, and respectful of our differences and similarities. (18)

'I want / a better part than this' : Carol Ann Duffy's dramatic personae (19)

> 'They are trying to label me,
> translate me into the right word' (20)

Duffy's favourite characters are the losers and the powerless: nervous, self-effacing middle-aged women, the so-called 'mentally ill', disaffected and alienated youth. The effect of their monologues is neither parody nor exactly empathy. 'Psychopath', which caused a considerable stir because of its daring feat of impersonation, does go some way towards exploring the personality of the rapist, but the strongest impression the poem leaves is of a 'Fifties' cinematic image, with the rapist reminiscent of the David Essex character in 'A Hard Day's Night'. Despite its casual depiction of brutal violence, the poem is less an indictment of masculinity than an imaginative recreation of a specific era. (21)

Mr Bingen enjoys this poetry; he admires her slick command of language and proficient deployment of a variety of poetic forms. A little condescendingly he comments on the 'widespread appeal' of her work, and its suitability for use in schools. While he likes the dramatic monologues, it is obvious that he

does not consider them to be 'Great'. And, curiously, he can find nothing at all to say about her love poems...

Generally, Duffy is less concerned with psychological realism than with language, and the extent to which what someone says *is* what they are: how far language is identity, how far the language we use shapes our personality. Her dramatic monologues scoop up the words and phrases associated with particular stereotypes. Like a sharp journalist, she shapes characters out of catch-phrases. Her poems have a strong theatrical element, and it is not surprising that she has also written for the stage. 'You Jane', from Standing Female Nude is typical in this respect:

You Jane

At night I fart a guinness smell against the wife
who snuggles up to me after I've given her one
after the Dog and Fox. It's all muscle. You can punch
my gut and wait forever till I flinch. Try it.
Man of the house. Master in my own home. Solid.

Look at that bicep. Dinner on the table
and a clean shirt, but I respect her point of view.
She's borne me two in eight years, knows
when to button it. Although she's run a bit to fat
she still bends over of a weekend in suspenders.

This is the life. Australia next year and bugger
the mother-in-law. Just feel those thighs.
Karate keeps me like granite. Strength of an ox.
I can cope with the ale no problem. Pints
with the lads, a laugh, then home to her.

She says Did you dream, love? I never
dream. Sleep is as black as a good jar.
I wake half-conscious with a hard-on, shove it in.
She don't complain. When I feel, I feel here
where the purple vein in my neck throbs. (22)

The critic Alan Robinson takes this poem very seriously and likens the speaker to a grossly-exaggerated Andy Capp: 'a

caricature of subhuman machismo' who 'undergoes a dark, satirical heightening'. (23) But this bloke is more than a caricature; he is a sort of composite stereotype, a collage of clichés. We all recognise the boorish, beer-swilling macho man with his bicep-flexing and obligatory Guinness. This one should, by rights, be collapsing under the weight of the overdetermined signs that embody him. Rather than trying to create a three-dimensional character Duffy creates a Frankenstein out of words, watching as it comes to life.

On the opposite page of the collection from which this poem is taken she offers its inverse: the distracted, fragmented persona of a woman who has no firm sense of her own identity at all. Her children have grown up and left home; looking back over her memories she tries to piece together an image of who she is, only able to see herself through their childish eyes:

> They see me always as a flickering figure
> on a shilling screen. Not real. My hands,
> still wet, sprout wooden pegs. I smell the apples
> burning as I hang the washing out.
> Mummy, say the little voices of the ghosts
> of children on the telephone. Mummy. (24)

Again, the sense of a 'Fifties environment is strong. All the familiar props of motherhood are assembled:

> A row of paper dollies, cleaning wounds
> or boiling eggs for soldiers. The chant
> of magic words repeatedly. I do not know.
> Perhaps tomorrow. If we're very good.
> The film is on a loop. Six silly ladies
> torn in half by baby fists. When they
> think of me, I'm bending over them at night
> to kiss. Perfume. Rustle of silk. Sleep tight.

This poem forms a deliberately stark contrast with 'You Jane', a

contrast informed by the theoretical sophistication that lies behind Duffy's experimentation with language. The macho man is parodied in the title of his poem, which suggests his linguistic deprivation, but also makes oblique reference to post-structuralist interest in the power of naming: Tarzan equals Man, the one with the power to define. He conflates the woman's mouth and vagina: 'She's borne me two in eight years, knows / when to button it.' The confused speaker in the accompanying poem has only a fragile grasp of language. Where 'Tarzan' obsessively turns to his physicality as proof of his identity, she clings to the insubstantial fabric of memories.

In 'Dies Natalis' Duffy traces the transmigration of a soul through its different incarnations - as bird, cat and baby. In a poetic version of psychoanalytic theories about the child's emergent identity, the baby's entry into the world is seen as necessitating huge loss:

> ....They are trying to label me,
>
> translate me into the right word...
>
> The man and woman are different colours and I
> am both of them. These strangers own me,
> pass me between them chanting my new name. They wrap
> and unwrap me, a surprise they want to have again,
>
> ....New skin thickens
> on my skull, to keep the moments I have lived before
>
> locked in. I will lose my memory, learn words
> which barely stretch to cover what remains unsaid. (25)

The child must take its place within the social and linguistic order, forfeiting fluidity for the fixity of the speaking subject. Interestingly, Duffy leaves the child's gender

unspecified. What is clear is that this is an identity that must be assumed; it is imposed from outside the individual, who has no choice over its composition. It blocks out complexity and contradiction, shaping and clipping human consciousness to fit predetermined categories.

Where Boland's stated intent - 'I am a woman and I write in terms of what defines me' (26) - belies a certain acquiescence in cultural definitions of 'womanhood', Duffy recognises that identity, and hence gender, is constructed *through* language. It is possible that her dramatic monologues, now so popular, arose out of her search for a voice of her own: as if she needed to clear some space by working through all the most familiar roles, getting the stereotypical accents out of her system. She began writing during the heyday of the Liverpudlian poets and was closely connected with them - one of the few writing women. It must have been hard to find a medium of her own. She has experimented with as many forms as voices, including the villanelle and *terza rima*, as well as translations. Often the voices in these poems are haunted by the voices of former poets (notably W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot). 'Naming Parts' is a particularly good example: a poem full of echoes and disrupted sequences:

> Her heart is broken and he fears his liver
> will explode. Outside the world whimpers
> and rumours bite like gnats in bloodless ears.
> You have placed my small hand on your large penis.
> This is an erection. This is the life. This
> is another fine mess. Perhaps soup will comfort them.
> To have only soup against such sorrow.
> I cannot bear alone and watch
> my hands reach sadly for the telephone. (27)

A cacophany of quotes - snatches of Laurel and Hardy juxtaposed with 'The Wasteland' - create the impression of a melting-pot of literary and cultural influences, as the narrator tries out different voices. One line stands out, determined amidst the confusion - 'I want / a better part than this.' It is as though this medley of voices drown out her own. But towards the end of the collection published only two years later, a quiet love poem suggests that the interferences have been overcome. Telephoning her lover, Duffy emphasises the autobiographical clarity of *this* voice amidst all the impersonations:

> I try again, dial the nine numbers you wrote once
> on a postcard. The stranger waiting outside stares
> through the glass that isn't there, a sad portrait
> someone abandoned. I close my eyes... *Hello?*... see
> myself
> later this evening, two hundred miles and two hours
> nearer
> where I want to be. *I love you.* This is me speaking.
> (28)

There is an extraordinarily strong contrast between the 'social realist' monologues that gather the language of the streets, and Duffy's love poetry, the centre of her poetic. (29) In these brief lyrics her language has the quality of polished stones: ordinary words seem somehow washed clean. Unlike the dramatic monologues, these poems are intimate and contextless: they speak the private language of lovers. In her most recent collection, The Other Country, this tone spills over into a greater percentage of the poems; there are fewer ventriloquist performances. It is as though the monologues have acted as a shield behind which, in strikingly different mode, she has shaped

the voice of her love poetry; as if her imitation of familiar identities and other poets silences their ghosts, freeing space for the spare purity of the 'I' and 'you' of her love lyrics:

> Somewhere on the other side of this wide night
> and the distance between us, I am thinking of you.
> The room is turning slowly away from the moon.
>
> This is pleasurable. Or shall I cross that out and say
> it is sad? In one of the tenses I singing
> an impossible song of desire that you cannot hear.
>
> La lala la. See? I close my eyes and imagine
> the dark hills I would have to cross
> to reach you. For I am in love with you and this
>
> is what it is like or what it is like in words. (30)

<u>Beauty and the Beast: some poetic role-swapping</u>

> Men and women often come at poetry from such different angles that sometimes it looks as if we could never find a common language and craft. I am sure we can. Maybe poetry is more important than any of us know, yet, as a way of working across the supposed Great Divide...I suggest that engaging with 'the other' in the language of poetry is a way of healing the wounds of separatism, and certainly the best way I have ever found of approaching mutual recognition and trust. (31)

Carol Ann Duffy shapes a lesbian poetic in the space cleared of stereotypes. Where she presents poems with male and female speakers, her vision is a bleak one: a pessimistic portrayal of the chasm that separates them. (32) Deborah Randall's approach is more hopeful. She does not engage with the 'other side' in the sense that Kantaris, who is writing here about her experiences of collaborative authorship with men, intends.

Neverthless, her poems are astonishing acts of open engagement with the other, suggesting that Kantaris's faith in the transformative power of poetry is not misguided. Like Duffy, she makes wide use of the dramatic monologue, but instead of cleverly reproducing the stereotypes, she explores the depths they conceal, muddying the clear waters of gender differentiation. Male characters speak with a tender lyricism, introspective and vulnerable, while female voices convey a blunt, coarse practicality quite at odds with the traditions of Western lyric poetry. She thus effectively undermines the oppositional framework of gender distinctions. Writing in male and female voices, Randall questions the very bases of the dichotomy.

The first two poems I want to look at are not dramatic monologues, but they provide a clear introduction to the processes of rewriting at work in her poetry. They are both taken from The Sin Eater, the only collection published so far, (although a second volume is currently with the same publishers, Bloodaxe).

Wood Nymph

And this, he said, is the natterjack toad,
an obscene living fungus or a pregnant wart,
the sort of tongue you could pull and pull,
like the insides of a golf ball.

She took it in her hand, it lumbered off,
he scratched at the mosquito bites
under his shirt, the sort of shirt
lumberjacks wear, with the sleeves rolled manfully.

My favourite tree is the copper beech,
what's yours? he said, but she'd moved on
looking for something ugly,
and he watched the drift of her hair.

A white white blonde in the heart of the wood,
her hair took his breath away.
A spider swung over her path on silk,
she caught and crushed it casually,

and turned to him with an open hand
to show him what she had found. (33)

The scene manages to be both modern (the lumberjack shirt) and somehow timeless; the two characters have the curious quality of archetypes. The poem works through a series of incongruities and oppositions - betwen beauty and ugliness, frailty and force. The woman, traditional symbol of innocence and purity, is drawn to earthy ugliness as though to sin. She is indifferent to his eager attentions and the narrative lightly mocks his wooing, drawing out the gauche nature of his inquiry. There is a mesmeric quality to the poem achieved through repetition: 'his shirt, the sort of shirt'; 'he watched the drift of her hair...her hair took his breath away.'; 'a white white blonde'; and this effect is enhanced by enjambement. This echoing quality also contributes to the atmosphere of suspense. The woman's outstretched hand forms an ambiguous gesture - neither acceptance nor rejection of her companion's advances. Where a full closing rhyme would emphasise their union - the completion of courtship - the light echo produced by consonance creates instead an inconclusive ending. The poem overturns courtly lyric conventions: this blonde nymph is unlikely to be interested in pretty gifts, and she does not seem very interested in what he has to say either.

A further example of Randall's delving in the literary

rummage box is her witty rendition of a modern-day 'Belle Dame Sans Merci' in 'The Beast and Fiona'. Fiona is a good-time-gal, giving the shove to her Sugar Daddy now that something more appealing has come up (so to speak):

> And here he is on the heathery hill, their trysting place,
> an hour he's waited in cold and driving rain
> for late Fiona, who picks her way, fine as a hart,
> an arrogant twitch to her nose when she gets wind of him.
>
> He's already miserable, she intended he should be,
> water has got in and run him through to the heather,
> he raises an arm to her like a drowning sailor,
> but she's thinking of Pierre. (34)

The poem pokes fun at the Romantic trope of the *femme fatale*. Randall's contemporary *'belle dame'* is a practical girl; there is nothing mysterious or sublime about her. Her poor old doting lover, far from performing heroic feats, has just been hanging around getting his Barbour soaked. *Randall uses the Petrarchan* tropes of courtly love, punning on heart / hart, and giving a clever twist to its familiar rhetoric. The fatal 'kiss of despatch' seems incongrous beside the banality of Fiona's 'exchange visit' to France. These constant shifts in register are accompanied by puns, clichés and cheeky rhymes threaded through the poem:

> She plants a last perfunctory one on him
> then walks away, she doesn't linger but does display
> her pretty haunches, she can't resist it,
> to leave him in a lather, old enough to be her father.
>
> Each fingerprint she left on his hide is washed away,
> only a whiff of his carnal self clings under his Barbour.
> Indelible as ever, he sets his deerstalker at a less

jaunty angle,
the decrepit stag so nearly gave himself to the gun.

Both these poems recast the mating game, using familiar tropes but transferring them onto the wrong actor. The lover / Beast has no hidden power to transform himself into a Pierre; he's an old stag and the gun is pointing his way. He is clearly out of his depth; Beauty is mischievous and merciless. In these comic rewrites Randall irreverently deflates literary tradition. (35)

These two poems set the scene for the more sustained, serious explorations of gender in her dramatic monologues. In strong contrast to Duffy's, these personae are not familiar 'types'. They are not city folk either, but loners from wild outposts - creatures, as it were, from the margins of the imagination.

'Avoiding a consuming death': female characters in Deborah Randall's dramatic monologues. (36)

The women of these portraits are forthright and assertive - female philanderers, contemporary Wives of Bath, Celtic women with a healthy contempt for the chauvinism of church and country. They have lusty appetites and a coarse *joie de vivre*, as the 'Ballygrand Widow' illustrates in a lament for her toyboy:

> So, you have gone my erstwhile glad boy,
> whose body, I remember, stained my big cream bed,
> and didn't we mix the day and the night in our play,
> we never got up for a week. (37)

Yet the price these women pay for sexual pleasure is often social opprobrium: female desire which is not regulated by marriage transgresses the social order:

> I wear your mother's spit on my shoes,
> the black crow priest has been to beat me.
> But you gave me a belly full, the best,
> and they shan't take it.

Her language is imbued with the defiant strains of folk songs, and a Gaelic vitality. These women are clear-eyed and resilient; they are under no illusions about the hypocrises of priests:

> .....The priests make more mess,
> they hatch and hatch in this country,
> they drop their messes on the head
> of a poor woman, the priests I've kissed
> who don't care for anyone. (38)

But in spite of this stoic humour, the curiously flat tone of these monologues undercuts a possibly glib impression. This speaker celebrates the freedom she has won too late - freedom from the constraints of custom and community:

> I wish thinking had come to me, and anger,
> sooner, but I ate flat bread, bad-mouthed none
> and kept on the run, my best freedom
> to race the wind off the sea.

The yearning for physical freedom and escape is frequently expressed in these poems, but it is in depicting what they want to escape *from* that the real differences in Randall's portraits become clear. The speaker in 'The Swans at Abbotsbury' explores her sense of claustrophobia, trying to trace its origins:

> A hurricane of wings in darkness unrelieved,
> swans are leaving, the ship of fools pitches
> and our hammocks collide.
>
> To be a protected species, migrate at will
> out of one life, or listen for everyday slops

under the rib of our ship. I have
a how-to-problem, how to be angry.

How come the night plugs my husband's
consciousness, his eyes, ears, tongue;
stowaway, he swings with my life
to tidal rhythms, a cabin boy again.

Don't, lovely swans, leave me, the most free thing
I lifted my eyes to. I could have learned from you,
from your wings' delicacy, said to be capable
of breaking a man's embrace. (39)

She cannot lose herself in such blissful self-absorption, which only seems to be available to men. (40) Despite understanding that, as the swan demonstrates, consummation with man entails loss of freedom and the end of flight, she has still been drawn into it. Yet these are not poems of blame, but meditations inspired by a bold willingness to question beyond received notions of 'natural' female behaviour. Human relations are often, as in 'Swans', justaposed with animals, drawing on the primitive similarities that lurk beneath the socialised surface. The man is elsewhere, a brief visitor:

Your child rides inside me against the world
and you are careless of that fact, cool as Nature,
or a patriarchal God, imitating partiality
in the act of creation, (41)

The instinct to nurture and protect collides with the desire for independence, but these characters are not seen as having any real choice: both men and women are ruled by their instincts. Analogies with 'Nature' are all-too-often used by reactionaries to justify male superiority (42), but in Randall's hands difference becomes not a site of struggle but a source of speculation and curiosity:

I put my baby to your chest,
pulsing pink anemone mouth
kneading for your nipple,
you shrank from the unexpected
sting, a mere stipple, scarcely
grasped, amongst your male
fronds and your flat male treasury
that could not be breached
for milk or martyrdom. (43)

The distance between this tone - loving, envying, wondering - and the terror of Plath's narrator in 'Three Women' is a measure of the change that has taken place. In the earlier poem male sterility is a synonym for death:

I watched the men walk about me in the office. They
were so flat!
There was something about them like cardboard, and now
I had caught it,
That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas,
destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks
proceed,
Endlessly proceed - and the cold angels, the
abstractions. (44)

In Randall's presentation, maleness is no longer threatening; woman is no longer the frightened hart, paralysed with fear.

'Tenderness is political dynamite': re-visioning masculinity (45)

Women's poetry over the last twenty years has, hardly surprisingly, not devoted much attention to men, as a sad Mr Booth observed. (46) When it has done, the poems have tended to be either cynical, defiant or mocking, dominated by acerbic wit or tense fear of 'the arid sterility of the male scimitar'. (47) But in Deborah Randall's work men are no longer the Enemy or the Oppressor. They stretch credulity, expressing vulnerability and tenderness. Traditionally, the agonies of the male soul have tended to be viewed through safely depersonalised debates around Art, Ideology, Philosophy, Theology and other grand intellectual inquiries. The male poetic voice is rarely caught gazing at its navel; it explores, as it were, the navel of the world. But Randall's male characters talk about *themselves* and the personal circumstances of their lives. They deal with the shunned 'little' things, - the nuances of emotion, private grief and regret. They too gesture wistfully towards a more honest level of engagement with the Other; an openness that might establish some common ground between themselves and women.

At first they seem unlikely characters: surely men do not talk like this:

> Her lips are clutching, even barnacles look for
> something
> and cling, I understand, I want to go home, just as
> she wants him, her husband again. I float
> on my back in their wide blue marital bed
> that lets the ocean in. (48)

Predictably, Mr Bingen is unconvinced by her male characters.

Men don't talk like that; they don't think in that way. These voices are far too open to be men's; they make themselves too vulnerable. Certainty is dissolving: this speaker's sentences become more fluid as he examines his feelings. Duffy's 'Tarzan' would smack his gut and down another pint, outlawing self-questioning. The reflective lyrical tone in this monologue is extraordinary; it holds a childlike quality rarely glimpsed in the male voice. And yet Mr Bingen's disbelief is not evidence of inauthenticity, only proof of the unfamiliarity of this tone in men's writing. (49)

'Gavin' is a striking example of the generosity of her portraits of men. It is a tender, bemused love poem, spoken by a woman. She seems to be thinking aloud; she keeps breaking off from her train of thought, struck by another vivid memory of the time she spent with this man. Gavin is as alien and unreachable as the gulls. She reflects on the unnavigable distance he has set up between them, and on his elusive, enigmatic spirit. Where traditionally Woman has been portrayed as the object of the quest - the hart, the bird, the untameable - here it is the man who fills this role. Briefly they are intimate, before he draws away from her again:

> I saw you go with the first fag of the day,
> basted by the juices of first light,
> unhuman things at your feet.
>
> The beach is love, is virgin skin, stretched out
> for a hammering.
>
> ...I shook hands the first time,
> a hand that was sleeping seagull,
> the sea came off on me, the saturation,
> the power and the passion.

Close, you smelled of ashes.

...My ear pressed to your chest, I heard the sea,
what words can't be
and animals are.

The creature comfort we take in one another,
I couple but you were rutting.

...Put up the big rock now.
I sent curses when I meant love.

Even your handful of dust you have sealed from me
lest you run through my fingers
when I embrace you, unspeakably. (50)

He is like a creature from a remote world, evoked through comparison with the elements and natural phenomena that surround him. He smells of ashes and his hand feels bloodless, like a seagull. Yet he retains vestiges of warmth revealed fleetingly in swift smiles. Shifts in tense and register - from the colloquial to the poetic - reflect the woman's disorientation, and the collapse of regular stanzas echoes the fragmented quality of her thoughts. The tone is quiet, steady, like all the other Randall poems, with a musing strain evoked through subtle internal rhymes of assonance and alliteration that give the poem a submerged pattern. Biblical phrases and religious imagery are reworked as though to enhance the spiritual, elemental quality of this scene. The narrator cannot get close to this stranger, but where Duffy's caricature 'Tarzan' also liked to think of himself of as a rutter, Gavin somehow possesses a 'purer' essence of maleness. His cruelty is not deliberate - not even, perhaps, conscious. The poem is a quiet, wondering celebration of Otherness; an elegant meditation on the irreducible alterity of

man to woman which, in these poems, is both the source of attraction and the explanation for incomprehension.

Randall's male characters are torn between their yearning for intimacy and their repulsion from social intercourse, from the mesh of relationships that entwine (and often suffocate) the women. Often they are merchant seamen - the archetypal rootless wanderers, existing outside the networks of community. The women envy such freedom, but the men suffer in a different way. Randall explores the overlap and interchange between them. The men also yearn, like the women, for an unattainable consummation with the Other. They struggle to make sense of their lives, abandoning the pseudo-objectivity of the disinterested observer. The merchant seaman quoted above reminisces over his youthful adventures, wondering how true the clichés about sailors and girls-in-every-port really are:

> There is a sickness comes on the mariner.
> Going round the world a few times makes him dizzy
> and so dislocated he'd mistake a whore for a mother,
> maybe we only think two ways about women
> but something was cracking in me, I wanted reality,
> not to be another punter in another seaport city. (51)

In her exploration of masculinity Randall ranges from such contemporary portraits to extraordinary evocations of early society. In one particularly striking poem, 'Longships and Lovers', she examines the ancient codes of comradeship, brotherhood and honour at work in pre-Christian tribal society. She writes out of this distant perspective with impressive

empathy, evoking the ancient customs and laws of loyalty and male bonding. It is as though she is exploring possible origins for the differences between men and women. She writes in the voice of a warrior, mirroring the style and techniques of Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic sagas:

> So we shared a sword and a high friendship
> and latterly, unwillingly, a woman.
> You know I'd have put my back against you
> and given as many lives as one had I possessed them
> to your honour and preservation.
> You are a fine Earl, men speak of you across oceans
> and I'm going to kill you.
>
> With love I will kill you
> softly as the speaking bird insinuating a talon
> into the breast of a rival.
> I don't want to hurt you, I have seen you naked and
> young
> in a river, I know what you have built your manhood on,
> snowy flesh that kept a purity.
>
> .....
>
> I am preparing for war, it is in my blood
> singing and there's nothing I can do,
> we were made for this above beauty and truth
> to kill. I am lascivious
> with war, shoulder to shoulder we have despatched.
> I want her less, I will have you,
> I must have your head and look into your eyes
> after death.
>
> Thori maddens me, he sees the hag on my shoulder.
> It ends badly
> but so this world we know shall end
> muffled into sanctity. I have sniffed the new climate,
> the sops that gladly put their hearts on our swords,
> the stones they raise up in some remote place to His
> glory. (52)

The concept of love figured in this poem is utterly alien to our modern understanding of the word. Love, in contemporary usage, suggests sympathy, tenderness: the surrender of the self and

absorption of the ego within the other. But this pre-Christian ethic of love is not soft nor giving; it is a mark of esteem and respect. Love in this guise is only possible between equals; it signals a savage recognition of the other, a potent combination of desire and enmity. The arrival of Christianity is seen as heralding the demise of this clean pagan ethic. The narrator despises the emergence of weak sentimentality that sullies the clear ethics of the pagan warrior code. He foresees a world 'muffled into sanctity', and dreads it. This patriarchal order exists beyond and outside the civilising codes of Christian morality. Its premises are completely different: it has no concept of guilt, malice or cruelty.

Randall observes vestiges of this same alien order in her contemporary portraits of young boys' attempts to claim and define their masculinity. In one poem, 'Schoolboys in the Sea', a boy reflects upon the murder of his close friend. He held his head down under the water while they were swimming. He had no malicious motive, no motive at all beyond this restless quest for knowledge: an irresistible urge to fathom the workings of the universe, to question, to test; to push things to their ultimate limits. His act - remnant, Randall suggests, of an older patriarchal code of conduct - has nothing to do with morality; it is both beyond and outside our system of ethics. It is amoral, heathen, profane, only without the connotations of disapproval such words carry in a culture steeped in Christian morality. He is fascinated and awed by the knowledge that his act has given the dead boy. In drowning, he has experienced the

ultimate mystery of a world beyond this mundane one, not a heaven or an afterlife but the secrets of the universe, a mystical reality:

> How deeply you have delved
> and we know nothing.
> ......
>
> Alisdair I held you down
> your face became the waning moon
> dissolving like a Sunday wafer.
>
> Imagine you knowing
> how it feels to drown
> as if a tear had overcome you. (53)

In these curiously toneless ruminations, Randall tries to imagine Otherness in some of its most extreme forms. She examines the codes and formulae underpinning the edifice of 'masculinity', not merely in terms of relationships with women, but the principles and ethics of comradeship and honour. In place of anger and attack she substitutes open inquiry:

> Tenderness is political dynamite because of the way it equalises subject and object...Power relations, by contrast, depend upon inequality and imbalance, an oppressed and an oppressor. (54)

Randall offers startling and tender revisions that challenge and rewrite ossified literary and cultural conventions. Her work helps justify Kantaris's faith in the power of poetry to effect reconciliation between the sexes. These poems create space for the emergence of a new understanding of what 'masculinity' and 'femininity' might mean. Refusing to work within the traditional polarities, she undermines received notions of gender difference,

at the same time liberating herself, as a woman poet, from the constraints of subjectivity.

CHAPTER 4

'LOVE IS NOT THE SAME':

THE LESBIAN LYRIC OF

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

'<u>Love is not the same</u>' (1)

This chapter will again be concerned with difference and Otherness, this time in lesbian poetry. Where Deborah Randall's poems *imagine* the Other, Suniti Namjoshi's most recent work actually *includes* the Other, who is her lover, Gillian Hanscombe, transforming the lone voice of lyric poetry into a dialogue. This intimate conversation forms an exploration and record of their life together. But despite this collaborative venture, Hanscombe and Namjoshi are very different writers, and their collaboration does not imply the dissolution of this individuality. (2) I shall concentrate on Namjoshi's poetry, taking a chronological look at the development of her ideas about lesbian identity. But by way of introduction, a brief digression on the issue of labels.

<u>Labial labels</u>

I was recently teaching contemporary poetry to a class of undergraduates. I put a pile of about twenty anthologies in the centre of the room and asked each group to choose a book. The idea was that they would choose a poem to discuss with the rest of us. One group picked <u>Whatever You Desire: a book of Lesbian Poetry</u>. (3) After they had read out their poem, the speaker for this group explained how their initial amusement had vanished as they read:

> When we first began reading it, we thought it was really funny, but then suddenly we were moved and absorbed; it affected us deeply.

I waited for someone to suggest that the poem could equally well apply to a heterosexual story of unrequited love; no one did. (4) 'Lesbian writing' is different.

What they did say was that the subtitle was 'offputting' - thus implicitly recognising that while the writing itself, by lesbians, was wonderful, the *word* 'lesbian' on the cover made them feel excluded. I do not know whether this is because they have internalised derogatory media stereotypes of dungareed dykes, or because any subtitle has the effect of targeting a particular readership and thus seeming to imply that the contents will not be of interest to anyone who does not identify themselves with that description. Whichever, their remarks raise once again the issue of labels in poetry. (5) Politically it seems clear that there is a strategic advantage in naming 'lesbian', in order to combat both the invisibility and the distortions surrounding the word. But specifically with regard to poetry, the term may also signal the presence of a different, *lesbian aesthetic*. I shall return to this later. (6)

The potential categories into which we could 'slot' Namjoshi multiply for, as an Indian woman living in the West, she could also be classed as an 'ethnic minority'. Drawing on her experiences of several different communities and cultures, her writing is an exciting synthesis of disparate elements. So is she a 'lesbian poet' or a 'Black poet' or an 'Indian poet' or all

three? And are these labels really necessary?

All too often the definition of a group identity premised upon marginalisation ends up reinscribing the original dualism and further segregating the group. As James Berry points out in an angry objection to Poetry Review's separate heading, 'Black Poets', there is a fine line between positive identity and apartheid:

> Just as I have never heard of 'white writing' I have no idea what 'black writing is. (7)

But Namjoshi offers an alternative: a concept of lesbian difference founded on a positive understanding rather than deviance. The destructive effect of our endless divisions and sub-divisions of identity is the theme of many of her fables. Yet ultimately her poetry articulates a lesbian consciousness which insists on the need for redefinition; for the expression of a world that makes sense to lesbian experience. Its justification of the need for a context of its own is so completely embodied within the writing itself that the external political category 'lesbian' is transformed into a literary aesthetic. No one could say, after reading her work, that they had no idea what 'lesbian writing' might be.

Meanwhile, Mr Bingen is not relaxed. The 'L' word makes him uncomfortable. In irascible mode he would probably pontificate about the ridiculousness of segregation on the basis of sexual orientation, citing the infamous (and mythical?) example of aerobics classes for lesbians in Hackney. But he prefers to tread cautiously, because he is one of those I referred to in

Chapter 1, who presume that 'lesbian' equals 'radical feminist'. So he is apprehensive. (8)

Writing with the lover

Namjoshi is probably best known as the author of Feminist Fables, a collection of satirical fairy tales and legends that recast Grimm, Aesop and company in a new light. She has also published two prose satires, The Conversations of Cow and The Mothers of Maya Diip: astute and amusing critiques of women's politics. Primarily, then, she is seen as a humorist sharp on picking out hypocrisy within feminist and lesbian politics.

Her poetry is very different: its tone confiding and gently melancholic. While her prose presents a highly polished surface, giving no insight into the private feelings of the woman behind the pen, reading the poems is like meeting an actor after she has come off stage: the performer shares her real thoughts and feelings with a friend in the wings. Her poetry provides a rest from the poise of the satirist; a more intimate expression of desire and pleasure:

> But when she came, bending the green wave
> of grass before her, treading the mountains
> and - though courteous as ever -trampling the hills,
> and I opened my arms wide,
> and wider
> to receive her, neither grass, nor sky,
> nor the pounding sea could hold her in,
> and I held her close and we had our fill. (9)

In _The Blue Donkey Fables_ these sensual meditations run parallel to the polished narrative of the professional storyteller like a self-reflective commentary, interrupting the smooth authority of the ironist.

Before she began writing with Hanscombe, Namjoshi frequently used her poetry to query and subvert her own authority as a satirist. So in this earlier collection, the Blue Donkey's fables are interspersed with poems that express unease at the neat wisdom of these fables. They ponder the mysterious way in which art transforms the tentative and clumsy gestures of everyday experience into pithy proverbs. Namjoshi's poems reveal the gulf between this fictional persona and the 'real' Namjoshi: no guru, but an ordinary human being, as confused as the rest of us. In the more recent _Flesh and Paper_, it is Hanscombe who assumes this role, questioning the accuracy of her partner's record and offering her own slightly different version of things. This constant reciprocal critique prevents either of them seeming to have a monopoly over the 'truth' of their relationship as they try to create a full and balanced record of their life together. As lesbians they are acutely aware of the power of language to create and define what is accepted as 'reality'. By gently questioning each other's account of an experience they seek to guard against this. They begin to clear a space within the lyric tradition for the expression of lesbian reality. As they write eloquently in the Introduction to this collection:

> it is our lived experience as lesbians that the 'universal truths' of the human heart, which are claimed as knowledge by the male heterosexual literary tradition, are not 'universal' at all. For us, love is

> not the same; sex is not the same; parenting is not the same; work is not the same; safety is not the same; respect is not the same; trust is not the same. Only death might, perhaps, be the same. (10)

Abstract nouns and archetypes : 'polemical poetry' (11)

Reviewing Talkers Through Dream Doors: Poetry and Stories by Black Women, Maureen Marmont admits that she is disappointed in the collection:

> This anthology protests too much, with poem after poem making use of abstract nouns such as 'bigotry', 'solidarity', 'discrimination', 'liberation', and surely, in a poem about prejudice, the word 'prejudice' should be omitted. (12)

It is not abstract nouns in themselves that are the problem, but the particular abstract nouns being used: the terminology of newspaper reports, of documentaries and party political broadcasts. This is a leaden language which clings to a sociological context, and rather than freeing the imagination serves instead to deliver us back into the boxes we use to label and to generalise. Its occasional use can be very effective, but if we accept Gillian Allnutt's description of poetry as being about **dissolving** familiar conceptual categories (see Chapter 3, p. 117), then its limitations are clear. These abstract nouns invoke very concrete reactions: they carry their own in-built morality and invoke ready-made categories rather than creating new configurations of human relationships. Such nouns deliver the reader back into the real world with a thud that knocks

imagination on the head.

Poetry works by engaging the reader in the discovery of meaning. If 'discrimination' and 'bigotry' slam their damning weight down like a fist, it is clear that meaning has already been decided; the judgement has been delivered. There is no ambiguity, no space between such words, in which to play or explore the ramifications of meaning. The skilful poet recognises that the way to win the reader's attention is to involve them in excavating the resonances of a variety of 'truths', - not a mechanical decoding, but a process of unwrapping, as the reader participates in the activity of shaping meanings.

This is not to imply that the indirect approach need bury itself in learned allusions or sophisticated intellectual games. The most accessible fairy tales and jokes harness an ambiguity that is not 'difficult', but available to the least experienced reader. Suniti Namjoshi's plentiful abstract nouns are of this quality. Noble, kind, gentle, cross, sulky: these staple tags of the fairytale invoke archetypal qualities, not the sociological terminology of the late twentieth century. Nor do they carry innate condemnation or praise; they help transport the reader into a fictional world safely removed from political realities: a world of animals and birds that talk, of bright forests and still, deep, ponds. Her writing is often quite pointedly 'political', but by using this synoptic language of generalised characteristics rather than terms that are wholly dependent upon a particular social context, she frees the exploration of

identity from its overdetermined contexts of gender, race and sexuality, enabling the writing to move out onto an imaginative plane which transcends cultural specificity. Goodness, nobility, mischievousness, rivalry and intolerance are not the property of any identifiable political group.

In this way Namjoshi overcomes her immediate problem of being categorised as a 'minority' artist on the basis of her recognisable difference. Apart from aesthetic considerations, segregation would be likely, as my students' reaction proved, to cut her sales figures! Such practical considerations about how a writer makes enough money to live are, quite rightly, tackled head-on in her work. One of the fables in Blue Donkey, 'Dusty Distance', depicts an elegant Lady reclining against a tree, reading poetry. She declines the Donkey poet's offer of a recital with the excuse that:

> though I have studied many languages and my French and German are both excellent, I have never mastered Blue Donkese. (13)

The Donkey explains that she writes in English, but the Lady is still not interested, explaining patronisingly:

> But surely as a Blue Donkey, integrity requires that you paint the world as it appears to you. And consider: what have a lady and a donkey in common?

As an Indian woman who has moved to live and work in the West, and as a lesbian, Namjoshi has first-hand experience of what the buzz-words 'discrimination', 'prejudice' and 'bigotry' mean in practice. Both India and the West are 'home' in some senses, and a hostile and constricting environment in others, and

both have fed and shaped her imagination. But writing about India from the West, and for a Western audience is problematic: what is commonplace there becomes exotic here. (14) And if she is wary of being sectioned off as an eccentric blue donkey that talks, the prospect of absorption into the mainstream heterosexual lyric scene is, as we shall see, even more disturbing.

For all these reasons, Namjoshi is wise to eschew realism. Through using the timeless and placeless realms of the fairy tale, she can avoid the cultural specificity that would facilitate her marginalisation. Working with symbols and metaphors gives her access to a wider audience; you don't need to speak Blue Donkese to get the joke.

'What sort of beast was I?'

Not surprisingly, perhaps, her central preoccupation is with identity, an inquiry that inextricably forms part of any exploration of cultural difference. Where the poets of Talkers Through Dream Doors opt for accurate realism, Namjoshi replaces stark representations with allegory. She creates an archetypal pastoral landscape: a fantastical world in which the animals who 'people' it talk and squabble, tease and compete with one another. In this bucolic setting she brings the similes of feeling like a 'misfit' alive: one of her creatures won't just behave 'like a bull in a china shop'; it will be one. Blue

donkeys, lesbian cows and one-eyed monkeys dramatise the experience of feeling oneself an alien, and being treated by others accordingly. This delightful imaginary play strikes an unfamiliar note among contemporary British poets. It is a highly original blend of Hindu philosophy and reworked Shakespearean romance; a synthesis she has wrought over time from the disorientations of her past.

In India as a young woman Namjoshi inherited a ready-made identity:

> I was inescapably my grandfather's granddaughter, one member of a particular family located for hundreds of years in a particular region, with a particular place in a particular system. (15)

As a lesbian in a culture that denied the existence of such desire, she had to disguise her feelings and pretend to conform. The very word 'lesbian' was unfamiliar to her. But her move to America, while it freed her from the family tentacles, brought her face-to-face with another alienating environment. The sense of inauthenticity was just as strong; in a different way even sharper, since it brought not only racism, but also the encounter with an unfamiliar culture whose conventions and preoccupations she found bizarre. She describes this type of culture shock as a feeling of profound inauthenticity:

> one is not recognised - in both senses of the word...I was literally Nobody from Nowhere. (16)

Even if she were able to override racial difference, to a lesbian trying to write lyric poetry there were some seemingly insurmountable problems to be tackled. Neither of the roles

available - the lady or the lover - fit. Namjoshi could not see herself as the passive lady, nor as the questing knight. She allied herself instead with the non-human creatures. (17)

Cows that talk

Namjoshi describes the legacy of her Indian upbringing in Because of India:

> I wasn't brought up at all as an orthodox Hindu; but if one grows up in a Hindu family in India, however liberal, then certain ways of thinking that are characteristically Hindu seep in through the pores... To me a beast wasn't 'bestial' in the Western sense. To me a bird or a beast was a creature like anyone else. Hinduism is, after all, panthesistic; and the popular notion of reincarnation attributes a soul to everyone. This may sound odd to Western ears, but for me, it was as familiar as it was unconscious. It was in the very air I had breathed while growing up. (18)

Contrast this with the recent words of the Conservative government Minister for Agriculture, John Gummer, defending the eating of meat:

> The Bible tells us we are masters of the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field and we very properly eat them.

Although unintentionally providing a virtual caricature of the hubris of *homo sapiens*, Gummer's attitude is a faithful, if stark, expression of the highly individualistic humanist philosophy of the West. Man (kind) is at the centre of the universe, master over all he surveys. But according to

Hindu philosophies, human beings are not so special, since every living organism has a soul. Equipped with this perspective, Namjoshi can thus offer a more detached view of 'identity':

> It's apparent that the components of the core identity change from place to place and period to period. Today the main components seem to be based on gender, skin colour, and sexual choice, as well as other factors such as nationality and religion. (19)

So at the same time as being aware of the political and material importance of these identity tags, she brings a gentle mockery to bear in this fierce climate of obsessive categorisation. She is, in fact, ideally placed to experiment in the way that Adrienne Rich argues is essential for the poet :

> to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, ... to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; (20)

The question she asks - ' what would happen if one let go of the identity one clings to so desperately?' - has enormous relevance to our contemporary world. (21) Neverthless, in a Western culture that sets such store by this mythical beast, Identity, Namjoshi finds herself forced uncomfortably into ever more specific compartments, each proclaiming their difference from the rest, and culminating in the sad scenario of 'Dusty Distance'. As a woman in patriarchal society, as a lesbian in a heterosexual world and as an Indian woman in Europe or America, she is the Blue Donkey poet. What does she have to say to 'ordinary' people? As a Blue Donkey she is rendered speechless, along with all the other beasts of the field. The cows might wish to challenge Mr Gummer's reasoning but, of course, cows do not talk. In Namjoshi's world, they do.

Writing desire

Feminist Fables marked an important landmark for Namjoshi. In the poems that followed, the ambiguous symbolism of her early work, with its veiled depictions of lesbian desire, is replaced by a more confident and explicit tone. In Shakespeare's The Tempest she discovered an appropriate vehicle for a fuller exploration of marginalisation. Snapshots of Caliban is an imaginative re-casting of her source, focussing on the central triangle of Prospero, Miranda and Caliban to explore the tensions between patriarchal society and lesbianism. Caliban is lesbian. Her difference makes her threatening and literally monstrous to the heterosexual world even though, as the colonised native, tolerated as a convenient plaything for the young heiress, she has no real power at all. Miranda and Prospero are amused by her slavish devotion and the naivety with which she tries to imitate them. She is loyal and affectionate, and they feel faintly sorry for her. But gradually Miranda's attitude changes. She becomes aware that Caliban is strangely attractive to her. Disturbed, she tries to crush her feelings, burying confusion in annoyance at this monster who has somehow upset her pretty dreams of handsome suitors and happy endings. But when she tries to reject her she finds herself acknowledging an unwitting kinship. She thinks it through in her journal:

> Caliban, this is a hate poem.
> You are squat and ugly.
> You are not the noble
>   the beautiful other,
> You are part of me.

> But that's wrong, very wrong. Not what I intended to write at all. I shall cross it out. (22)

Prospero, the patriarch, finds himself isolated as in the play, only this time he is excluded by the tentative emergence of a bond between the two women, gesturing towards an understanding and recognition of sameness that disrupts the patriarchal *status quo.* Miranda, instead of following the expected path from father to husband, finds she is drawn towards the strange, gentle beast. Her allegiance shifts away from men, leaving Prospero baffled and excluded:

> I made them? Maiden and monster
> and then disclaimed them?
> Was there something in me
> that fed and sustained them?
> Are they mine or their own?
> I dare not claim them. (p. 102)

But as well as being the lesbian, Caliban also (and rather curiously) seems to personify the spirit of unbridled desire. She thus symbolises both the disruption lesbianism wreaks on patriarchal society, and also the untameable, amoral nature of desire. Caliban is treated with ambivalence by Namjoshi: as a creature at once innocent and dangerous.

<u>On not wanting to be a guru</u>

> Loss of identity, ie. freedom from having to be someone, rather than achieving personal immortality, is the ultimate aim. (23)

Feminist Fables, published in 1981, had made Namjoshi famous in feminist and lesbian literary communities. The discovery of an audience was crucially important, (24) but it had its drawbacks. The droll, sardonic persona of these tales was a seductive identity to take on, but in ways it was just as ill-fitting and contingent as that of being her father's daughter .

The Blue Donkey Fables, published in 1988, picture the effects of that fame: the *donkey becomes blasé and complacent*, bored of her fêted position. Namjoshi sends up the publishing industry's marketing strategy too, telling the story of the one-eyed monkey who is told to change her autobiographical central character because the public want books with strong 'human' interest. (25) After deleting the word 'monkey' wherever it appears, and still having no luck in finding a publisher, she puts it back *in again, and a small scale company agree to take it* on:

> But please, they begged her to remember that an audience of exclusively one-eyed monkeys was hard to find; could she help to pay for it? (26)

While she delivers some pointed jibes at the publishing world, with its domination by profit margins, these later fables also parody her own *alter ego.* The Blue Donkey is no saint; she has her own 'vulgar streaks'. In one tale, driven beyond endurance by the jay's taunting query, 'Wouldn't you like to fly?', she plays a mean trick on her tormentor by asking instead for floating lessons:

> ' "flying's a bit strenuous for a beast my age; but if you could show me how to float, why then I could try it

> and practise in private.' 'What do you mean?' The jay was caught off-guard. 'Well, you know, floating. When you just fold your wings and sit on air.' Then the Blue Donkey looked at the jay suspiciously. 'Are you saying you don't know how to float? Perhaps I'd better ask somebody else.' 'No, no,' cried the jay. 'Of course I can float. Look, I'll show you.' And she flew into the air, folded her wings and plummeted to the ground.
> The Blue Donkey cushioned her fall with a bundle of hay, but even so it was several minutes before the jay recovered . 'Did I float?' she asked. The Blue Donkey shook her head. 'Oh.' 'Would you like to float?' enquired the Blue Donkey. 'Yes.' 'Too bad,' and the Blue Donkey wandered off. (27)

Despite their superb comic timing, Namjoshi is discontented with these witty parables. Perhaps, like Carol Ann Duffy's dramatic monologues, however popular they are, they do not lie at the centre of her poetic. Undoubtedly, part of her dissatisfaction stems from an awareness of the limitations of satire. As the alien - the one-eyed monkey, the Blue Donkey, the lesbian - she cannot either float or fly. She cannot create anything new; she can only send up the familiar patriarchal heterosexual world. She turns to poetry as a more fluid, potentially transformative tool:

> To be an alien addressing human beings is not how worlds are invented, not if the role is taken literally. When the device works, it is an ironic device. And irony is needed since language is obdurate and millions upon millions of patriarchal and heterosexual worlds have already been invented. But authority is also needed, and we have it in that we are. Now let us invent who we are. (28)

'Inventing who we are'

I have already touched on the ways in which the lyric voice presents particular problems for a lesbian writer. Namjoshi and Hanscombe sum them up succinctly:

> who, in lyric poems, is addressing whom and in what capacity? And who is overhearing? And who has the authority and credentials to comment on what is being said? In the past the roles assigned by the heterosexual context have silenced heterosexual women and obliterated lesbians. (29)

It is the sonnet that offers the greatest challenge to lesbian poets. Its dynamic of relations between poet-lover and his Lady in a sense encode patriarchal ideology. (30) As Jan Montefiore points out, the Lady, ostensibly the subject of the poem, really only operates as a mirror to reflect the male poet back to himself. (31) She has no subjectivity and no substance at all. The paradigm is the same one we saw at work in the mythological narratives in Chapter 2. How can lesbian love be represented within this scenario? What happens when both the lover and the beloved are women? Who has the stronger claim to subjectivity; who has the right to create the other?

In The Lion Skin, Namjoshi crafts a sequence of lesbian-centred love sonnets:

The Lion Skin

That in some dream I might be a lion
walking nobly and happily through a wood,
and that some lady, who has had her eye on
me, might say to me I am both great and good.

And then in this dream may this lovely lady
ruffle my yellow mane and trim my claws
and lead me to a spot green and shady,
but here the dream fails. I'm forced to pause.
For what do we say, this lady and I?
What happens next? Do I remove my skin?
And what does she do? Is she shocked and shy?
Or civil, and removes her own clothing?
I've never had the courage to dream the dream through,
but I think she says, 'You be me, and I'll be you.'

'Delectable, firm and juicy, such fair flesh
is good to eat.' It was not I who said that,
it was the lady, and I, caught in the mesh
of light and leaves, could only lie there, and let what
might befall, quickly befall me. She took
such pleasure in each simple incision
that, unwilling to betray by a word or look
I felt anything, I admired her precision
as slowly she flayed me. But there's a pleasure
in the nerve ends that makes one want to scream.
At last I screamed. And such was the measure
of this rare lady and such her supreme
and unexampled skill that she made me scream
again and again and long to wake and still to dream.

Dispense with disguises. The lion's skin
is a skin after all. Spread it on the ground,
so that no twig or stone in this forest clearing
shall hurt or trouble us when we both lie down.
Or should the weather change and we grow cold,
let the fur cover us and warm our sleep
till we wake again and are brave and bold.
And if the stars choose to peep, let them peep.
What can stars or moon or sun discover?
That the lady is a woman, and I,
who lie so close beside her, am her lover?
The stars will not shriek, will make no outcry.
The stars are sensible, and would not sever
woman from woman or lover from lover.

I'd been dreaming again and in the dream
everything was lovely. You were very kind.
We'd finished making love and I felt serene.
When suddenly your voice: 'Do you mind
not making love without my permission;
I am not the creature of your fantasy.'
I squirmed, I did not know which way to turn
because you were real, at least, real to me.
And so I lied. I said, 'I do not know
who you are. For though you look like her, she
is kind, and her voice gentle, soft and low.
Oh you could not be whom you seem to be.'

You answered, 'No, I am not what I seem.'
With that you vanished and I clutched my dream.

And yet there's a poetry of penury
that far outdoes the paeans of plenitude,
and the gorgeous dream blooms without injury
only in the hermit's austere solitude.
By which I mean that sometimes my arms ache,
my nostrils twitch, and I feel, or almost feel,
your body's warmth, and then sometimes I fake
the rest, cast caution aside, and make a meal
that would make an emperor look askance.
That I crave, desire and solicit you
is known to us both, and that I may not advance.
And since there is nothing I can say or do,
I tell myself that the dream is made of such stuff
that to dream is best and the dream enough.

The thick, tough skin of the lion shall be chopped
and snipped to make six balls, which, when filled with
air,
shall go spinning crazily like the lopped
heads of poets crammed with passion and despair.
And you, while walking through the woods some day,
might chance to glance at these leathern orbs
and seize them and make much mirth and holiday.
I shall be content, for the dream that absorbs
me can have no other end. Thus held and seen
it is real, and still real, again and again,
whenever you choose. And what might have been
is cause for contemplation, banishes pain.
Then all shall be well, and by the grace of the muse
this lion skin shall still give pleasure and prove of
use. (32)

What is immediately striking about this sequence is its graceful blend of Renaissance formality and contemporary colloquialism. In this Arcadian landscape, reminiscent of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, and replete with disguises, decorous play and the eloquent protestations of the unrequited lover, Namjoshi unfolds an extraordinary story of desire. In an article on contemporary lesbian erotic poetry Caroline Halliday writes that she finds the sonnet form restricting:

> The style...acts, for me, like a pallet bed to make love on (narrow with a hard wooden border), where a looser form may allow freedom to make more diverse connections. (33)

She does concede, however, that perhaps this tight form acts to increase the passion! In Namjoshi's sequence there is little sense of restriction. Her words seem to fall effortlessly into place; she uses the skeletal outline of the sonnet, but stretches its lines, equally at ease with heavy endstops and lyrical enjambement. There is even a nod towards Spenser in the longer closing couplet of the last sonnet. These marks of the Renaissance - the familiar trope of the dream; the deliberate literary references to forest frolics, and the agony of unrequited love - are accompanied by ornate poetic language: line inversions, caesurae, and archaic expressions like 'flay' and 'leathern orbs'.

So, in a flagrant subversion of lyric tradition, the Renaissance sonnet is bent to the service of lesbian love. With quiet assurance the lover assumes the part of the lion - traditionally, of course, symbol of male prowess. And, as the poem takes care to spell out, the particular 'lady' being wooed here is a **woman**. This underlining of the 'womanliness' of the lady makes confusion impossible. After all, as Shakespeare was aware, there is more than one kind of 'Dark Lady'. Discussing the problems of writing lyric poetry as a lesbian, Namjoshi and Hanscombe point out that the same difficulties do not apply to gay male writers, because of the convention whereby the lyric voice is male and the beloved does not speak, so his gender, in

the case of homosexual love, can remain unspecified. (34) And yet the gender of Namjoshi's lover is never made explicit; just when it looks as though she is going to really 'dispense with disguises', she holds back, describing herself only as 'her lover'.

There are other important differences in these sonnets, quite apart from the altered genders of lover and beloved. One of the most important concerns the representation of the Other. Instead of the focus being on the love object's physical beauty, with elaborate similes celebrating her lips and eyes, this woman has no corporeal presence. It is the *lover*'s desire that is foregrounded. She envisages the sensual delight of surrender, imagining herself as the passive and helpless recipient of her lady's caresses. But in creating this fantasy she is, of course, subjugating the lady to her wishes. And in the minefield of lesbian sexual politics, her erotic fantasy of surrender, with its concomitant freedom from responsibility, raises issues about accountability. While, in keeping with her Renaissance models, the whole object of the exercise is really to demonstrate the poet's skill, in Namjoshi's rendition this becomes an ethical problem, and is actually what angers the lady most. Her interruption breaks up the dream, rather than merely fuelling the fires of unsated desire: 'I am not the creature of your fantasy'.

The crucial debate taking place in this sonnet sequence is about power and desire in lesbian relationships. One of the most striking features of Namjoshi's work is her frank exploration of this difficult terrain. Distancing the context enables her to tackle the problem of roles and courtship in contemporary lesbian experience. The orthodox scenario of unrequited love - the lover fantasising a sudden conversion on the part of his previously indifferent beloved - acquires a new poignance when it is recast as a lesbian fantasy. 'That I crave, desire and solicit you / is known to us both, and that I may not advance' takes on a heavy sense of finality.

But who is the pursuer, who the pursued? It seems that the poet-lover must always play the wooer, and yet she yearns to swop roles, and to be the passive beloved. In her fantasy, of course, she does:

> ......I, caught in the mesh
> of light and leaves, could only lie there, and let what
> might befall, quickly befall me. She took
> such pleasure in each simple incision
> that, unwilling to betray by a word or look
> I felt anything, I admired her precision
> as slowly she flayed me. But there's a pleasure
> in the nerve ends that makes one want to scream.
> At last I screamed. And such was the measure
> of this rare lady and such her supreme
> and unexampled skill that she made me scream
> again and again and long to wake and still to dream.

Namjoshi and Hanscombe have declared their opposition to the endorsement of lesbian sadomasochism (35), but what these lines do, courageously, is describe a form of sensual pleasure that is all too often collapsed into reactionary theories about innate female masochism. This is a moment of total trust and release,

as the lover yearns to surrender all control, to relinquish the dissatisfactions of always being the active one, and deliver herself completely into her lover's arms.

Although conventions have made it difficult for lesbians to express their love in lyric poetry, there is no doubt that Namjoshi's strong and fluent sonnet sequence possesses that 'authority' she and Hanscombe celebrate in their blueprint for a lesbian poetic. But ethical problems about the appropriation of the Other and the representation of desire still remain to be solved.

Writing erotica

Namjoshi's emphasis on the fictional nature of the roles her literary lesbians assume in courtship marks an important and distinctive characteristic in her work. Western-centred critics tend to theorise the lesbian psyche in ways that leave no room for the playful - and sometimes problematic - manipulations of identity that she explores. Thus, for example, Liz Yorke revises and expands on Lacan's theorising of the subject:

> it is, at the deepest levels, the mirroring discourse of the lesbian *lover* which enables the lesbian to *make* her self, to identify herself so as to be seen and to be heard - to defiantly accept the costs and take the risks. It is through receiving the deep acceptances of the reciprocal pleasures of lesbian love, that is, in the fullest dimensions of the physical, spiritual and sexual responses of her lover, that the lesbian woman is able to confirm the validity and integrity of her lesbian identity. (36)

In this paradigm, the emergence of an Identity is deadly serious. In keeping with her more flippant approach to the notion of identity, Namjoshi sees things rather differently. She lets her creatures try on a number of different wooing masks. Above all, courtship and love-making are seen as *rituals* in her poetry, shaped by codes of propriety; they are self-conscious performances, rather than psychological processes. When she and Hanscombe filmed extracts from Flesh and Paper for the television series Out On Tuesday, they gave a highly stylized performance on a set draped with Indian wallhangings. The poems were accompanied by Indian music, and interspersed with clips of traditional dance, with its concentrated, precise movement and theatrical intensity. Their readings create something of the same effect, managing to be both intimate and public; the audience are 'invited in' quite explicitly, involved as listeners and witnesses. In this way the crucial importance of a sense of lesbian community is conveyed.

Critical interest in lesbian poetry seems to focus on attempts to reclaim language, to fight back after centuries of homophobia and accusations of 'deviance'. As Halliday puts it:

> If language has been nullified by male usage, our bodies' namewords *do not belong to us.* Where can we live without our bodies? To begin with, lesbian poets could not easily move on to words that still came across crude and male, or too medical (and male)....Do not lesbians need to reclaim a great many words, just as the word 'lesbian' had to be reclaimed? Words that still frighten, or awe, words such as cunt, fanny, vagina, labia, come? [her italics.] (37)

She celebrates the progress made since the late 'Seventies in attempts to develop an authentic erotic language :

> There is a difference between the use of these images and the concern being expressed in 1979-80 in a London discussion of 'Writing about Sex', over "how" to say "it". The images have been changing, from fern fronds to wild garlic, from cradles of petals to mussels raw in the strainer. The change marks a dramatic increase in the freedom with *which lesbians are viewing their* bodies, and their poetry. The images change our notions of ourselves, recognising their accuracy with excitement and some shock. (38)

Namjoshi and Hanscombe pursue a different course. They do not create such explicit images. Indeed it is rare in their poetry to find any physical description of the lover at all. Desire and pleasure are always fully interactive, so that neither poet is describing what is being done to the other, but both are involved in the *process* of making love:

> Be a dolphin then, or be a water woman
> and I'll be a dolphin, follow you about,
> butt you and nuzzle you, leap into air
> and falling back, lie there laughing, while you
> my water woman, you'll lie beside me
> or lie on me - I'll be your raft. On days
> when the wind blows more keenly, we'll cut through
> the waves, your thighs gripping me, your nakedness
> burning, burning, and cooling my back.
> But when the sun blazes and penetrates
> water, I'll shed my dolphin skin, we'll lie
> on the sea floor, our hands on one another's
> breasts. Then, as we lie, dive inside me, and surface
> splashing; and then, if you like, we'll dive again.
> (39)

This mellifluous eroticism seems, to my mind, a more effective sensual celebration than the blunt practice of shattering taboos. It even manages to rework traditional tropes to startling new effect. The phallic sun - principle of male influence - is

figured here as impotent, and oxymorons of burning and cooling are assimilated into this lesbian erotic with an ease that might make Petrarch turn in his grave. Again, there is no sense of strain in the sonnet form: the cumulative, circling rhythms enact the lovers' mounting pleasure, sweeping effortlessly over line-endings.

This orgasm-in-words is relatively rare in their poetry. For being lesbian is not just about sex - though in Namjoshi's lively lyrics, there is plenty of that too! Instead of focussing solely on sex, Namjoshi and Hanscombe concentrate on recording their perceptions as lesbians on a broader canvas. For as a lesbian, everything is different. And just as in the traditional lyric, the relationship between wooer and wooed embodies a patriarchal distribution of power, so too in the lesbian lyric relations between the two lovers function as a metaphor for relations between women in a lesbian community. Rather than naming the naughty bits, their poetry asks what the implications of lesbian love might be. They examine how lesbianism affects the way they see and interpret experiences far outside the darkened shades of the bedroom, and return again to the knotty problems of representation and of ethics.

'It takes a lesbian to see it how it is', one of them remarks in Flesh and Paper (40), but this sense of specialness never slides into a glib assumption of superiority. There is a mischievous vein to Namjoshi's poetry, which serves her well, bringing a rebellious independence to the fore when questions of political correctness get too fierce. Lesbians do not have a

monopoly on goodness. As Namjoshi puts it, her latest persona, St. Suniti, is a creature who:

> doesn't know how to live morally with other creatures; she wants to know how to save her soul and how to be good, but she doesn't want to be too good, because that is too hard and perhaps also because it's too dangerous. (41)

'there is no word for you and me'

How, then, is it possible to write the Other, without appropriating her? The old poetic forms cannot provide an answer. Negotiating a solution involves rewriting literary tradition, and resisting the closure of the sonnet form. (42) In 'Stilted Poem' Namjoshi conveys a vivid impression of the excitement and apprehension accompanying this task:

Stilted Poem

Murmur of grass, pleasure's pinpricks,
amorous intent made explicit -
to dwell on that - what it was like -
that is not difficult -
indeed, it is easy.
Or to proffer the studied
and stilted compliment - that your eyes
were like mirrors -
that they changed - swirled -
were a dream
of drowning - I know that,
and you
have been told it. At times,
such things
please. But the rest?
Is stilted.
Stutters and stops. Then spills
into life,
and like life, is not finished (43)

Halting, hyphenated lines convey the way in which their love breaks the rules, overflows the mould. The old images seem flat; the traditional format is inadequate. How to write the as yet unwritten story of lesbian existence? Just as Virginia Woolf observes the inadequacy of conventional biography to catch the resonances of a woman's life, so Namjoshi bears witness to the same difficulty in love poetry. Writing of her tricksy hero/ine, Orlando, Woolf explains:

> the truth is that when we write of a woman, everything is out of place - culminations and perorations: the accent never falls where it does with a man... (44)

A central element, as we have seen, in the charting of this new accent, is the concept of reciprocity. Dialogue has to replace soliloquy:

> 'But surely, ' she says, 'there are some
> you love, some you trust?
> Me, for example. Think of me
> please as some sort of flower.'
> It's easy enough. We're sitting
> on the grass.
> She looks exactly
> like a gigantic flower.
> So I say to her,
> but she still looks sad.
> 'There is a difference,'
> she tells me gently,
> 'between a simile
> and a genuine metaphor.' (45)

Namjoshi builds her lover's words into the fabric of her poem, extending the gesture of compromise into her writing. Again, there is no resolution: no neat rhyming couplet to round things

off, but these conversational pieces mark the beginnings of a choric interchange which undercuts the appropriative authority of the individual poet.

From the earliest days of her relationship with Hanscombe, Namjoshi has woven her love and gratitude to her into her work. She dedicated The Blue Donkey Fables to Hanscombe, prefacing the book with one of her poems. But the fullest expression of this collaboration came with Flesh and Paper. This collection is a mixture of poetry and prose, Both poets are adept at handling shifts in irony and distance, and the book records a delightful range of moods - from exuberant splashing in the paddling pool of words, to the slow sensuous slur of lowered voices making love. Their exchange of ideas and perspectives is not always easy: there are gentle digs, queries, and teasing, as well as tense moments of open disagreement, resentment and insecurity.

The final sequence in the book explores the possibility of finding a home that can transcend the barriers of race, culture and difference and invent a new world for lesbian love. The poems record their visit to India, Namjoshi's original 'home'. Hanscombe's companionship has helped her face her ambivalent feelings towards the country:

> When one knows that someone else might be able to understand what one thinks, it's easier to think. (46)

But the visit was clearly fraught, and the poems bear the scars: questions, line-breaks and disjointed syntax continually interrupt their rhythms:

To invent, just we two,
a view? How to think? What to do?
And a country?
In yours, though the
climate is warm, the buildings fabulous,
though even the rocks have names,
we wither, having no word.
And in mine,
the word is so raw it bleeds: and from
fury of pain, it attacks; and would
maim us daily. (47)

For Namjoshi it is crucial that her lover witnesses and understands her contradictory feelings towards the land of her birth:

I did not
come into being
a full-grown lesbian
with a knowledge of English,
a trained brain
and sexual politics
inscribed upon it.
These native modes
these shades of feeling,
return me to an element that feels
like home.
In the West I burn;
here,
when my lungs give out,
I cannot breathe. (p. 59))

But for Hanscombe there are even more urgent considerations. She has to respect Namjoshi's wish to keep their relationship secret, and this enforced estrangement makes her feel even more isolated by the unfamiliar culture and landscapes. When Namjoshi, looking back on the journey, thanks her for her understanding forbearance, Hanscombe gently reminds her that it was not so easy, nor so cosy between them; that she felt the impact of her own status as a white tourist; felt the guilt and accompanying anger at such exclusion, as well as Namjoshi's cold distance.

She writes in the third person to reflect this sense of alienation:

> They invent, circumvent. No tigers here.
> Lovers retreat.
>
> At best they smile. They are seemly and courteous.
> They sleep apart. Their goddess hides her face.
> Shame has many modes.
>
> The family takes trouble, infinite care. The
> servants are kind and scrupulous. She does her
> best to be a good guest, but has little to offer.
> They do it for her lover's sake, who isn't her lover.
> The gift of deception is hidden, implicitly prized.
>
> Are they mated or parted? And do they know? (p. 58).

By alternating their voices, offering different accounts of the same experience, they filter and refine their individual perspectives. Neither voice obscures or engulfs the other. They do not submerge their separateness, but use it to challenge and explore, to spar against one another, testing out their 'truths', in the attempt to forge a new, reciprocal poetic. The neat structure of traditional verse forms is jettisoned and replaced with a looser, more fluid shape; gaps and hiatuses mirror the unbridgeable distances, the failures of communication. But although the sequence traces the impossibility of discovering a ready-made home, it finds in poetry the transformative energy that can, potentially, invent one:

There is no undiscovered country,
   though the beasts are harmless,
                  and the fish
   do not leap to tell us fiercely
                     we must go elsewhere.
There is only an ordinary planet,
    where the shack falls down,
                       weather prevails,
    and we must pay for safety
                           with a disguised
    and difficult deference
                      and the habit of fear.
And there is only a man-made language
                        with its logic
  of need and greed,
                         doom, dearth, despair.
But in spite of a hurtful history
   shall we speak of a peopled place
       where women may walk freely
              in the still, breathable air? (p. 64)

This is the last poem in the sequence and the book, and its tentative resolution is striking: a frail question, laced with doubt. Yet coming after the courageous recognition of the indissoluble differences that brand these lovers 'Other' to each other, it offers a quiet determination regardless of the odds against them.

A Final Question for the One-Eyed Monkey

> we lesbians, millions of us, now have a new understanding. We can speak in public...It is lesbians who write and hear and overhear and understand. We have the awareness of a lesbian context and a lesbian audience. (48)

The existence of this audience and the evolution of an authentic context makes it possible to develop and explore new worlds, - the invented worlds of lesbian experience. Together Namjoshi and Hanscombe are inventing such worlds. But what would the Lady Reader in 'Dusty Distance' have to say about their work? She would politely refuse to read it, explaining that, once again, they have nothing in common. The old categories close in once more: Blue Donkeys read the work of Blue Donkey poets, lesbians read poetry by lesbians. But what happens when heterosexuals read poetry by lesbians?

Adrienne Rich tells this story: A heterosexual friend of hers called to say how much she and her lover had enjoyed reading Twenty One Love Poems, and how accurately the poems depicted tensions and emotions they recognised from their own relationship. Rich was angry; the poems were about a *lesbian* relationship.

Were her friends guilty of distorting the poetry to make it fit their own experience? Or does their reaction testify to the genuinely transcendent quality of Rich's writing?

And as for the Lady Reader, well - it's her loss!

CHAPTER 5

'THE DIRTY ALPHABET OF EARTH': RECASTING THE SUBLIME IN THE POETRY OF MICHELE ROBERTS

Hester Tradescant, and her stepson John

> I've got a religious sense of language - metaphor for me is something real. When you say, 'I am a tree', you actually mean it. It's not a metaphor. (1)

Where Namjoshi's playful pantheism offers one alternative to liberal humanism, Michèle Roberts offers another. Hers is a form of animatism: every object is alive - from armchairs to hurricanes, the world is teeming with vibrant creatures:

> An ebony vase
> tips out a riff of orange tulips
>
> armchairs in Chinese shawls
> jiggle their silvery fringed hips
>
> a black tin tray
> drums patterns of red
> poppies, anemones
>
> and bread jumps up in the oven
> spinach in the back plot
> to sambas, to salsa.
>
> High-shouldered ducks
> limbo past to the pond. (2)

Her art is transformative: it is as though she dons a pair of 3-D glasses and draws a quirky, sensual magic out of the most familiar environments. Everyday household objects take on magical properties: she touches them with a magic wand and sets the surroundings dancing. An everyday street-market in Italy triggers a eulogy for blueness. Blue crates brimming with produce of different textures and depths of blue: aubergines, grapes and asters combine to form a symphony in blue:

Blue bursts in my mouth:
juice avalanche of trays
of muscat grapes.

Blue mountain of dusky plums
patched with black. Sweet bruises
fat as eggs. (3)

Colour becomes a taste, a texture, an atmosphere in this riotous synaesthesia. Blueness is everywhere; even smelt, in the wisp of cigarette smoke, 'blue steam writhing'.

This exuberant sensuality is set against spoilsport 'law and order' - the rule of logic and classification, concerned always to define and categorise, to rein in chaos. This impulse is equated with patriarchal thought, and Roberts wreaks havoc with its neat compartments. A male intellectual is told that his vision is defective; it is also portrayed in the poem in childish language, as if to imply that such ways of seeing are immature:

you say
colour is clear:
fields lie, little
tucked-up
beds of taut green silk
an orange car comes by
glossy as caramel, colts
kick up their smart white socks

I tell you
look again
brown is brighter than shorn curls
and bronze ditches
are deep with the purple of figs
the hedges' olive mouths
are stained with plums
those forests flush, that
beech-flame interrupts
the willows' silver-grey

only your language knows
where rust ends
salmon, pink begin

I tell you
landscape is truer than you
less curt
and more careless (4)

Ditches and trees are imbued with human senses: the hedges have mouths, the forests blush. Natural phenomena are absorbed in their own intense physical exchanges and communion. Words flow into one another with no regard for syntax or grammar, just as rust, salmon and pink threaten to merge. She combines words in new compounds, breaking up familiar conceptions of colour: 'beech-flame' and 'silver-grey' enact the collapse of boundaries linguistically, adding to the impression of intermingling colour and vegetation.

Mr Bingen, as one of the male intellectuals in question, is a little bemused. He scents mysticism; fears incense and humming. He finds spiritual excess embarrassing. Such emotional weakness should be dealt with in church where at least people don't make fools of themselves: they can just follow the rubric. Too much of this makes him impatient and, to make matters worse, he disapproves of free verse. There are no regular stanzas, and no punctuation. Why all these spaces; some lines suspended in the middle of nowhere for no sensible reason, some with only one word to them? Prose chopped up into lines, that's all it is. He thinks she is probably one of those trendy lower-case addicts, allergic to the level-headed full-stop. (5) He wouldn't be at all surprised if she used those giggly-girl circular dots above her 'i's in the original manuscript.

Taking off the boilersuit

> I could say, 'I'm a woman' and that was not FULL STOP; it was like a launching-pad...You could spend your whole life writing poems and novels and plays and stories about what 'woman' meant... (6)

I may have parodied my mentor-censor to excess here; the reason is that I too initially had problems with Roberts' work, although not the same problems. (7) She was writing about being a woman: complex concoctions of resentment, hurt, disappointment, love, and fear felt towards women - whether the biological mother, an older maternal figure, a lover, or a friend. When I first tried reading her poetry I was not prepared to tackle, or even acknowledge those feelings. I was also anxiously committed to realism as the only admissible guise in which something as bourgeois as poetry could be considered relevant to the women's movement. As a result, I was suspicious of elevated tones, and the mention of anything intangible; I was uneasy with poetry that celebrated the spiritual and even the natural world. I also shared what now seems the rather reductive response of many British feminists to the poetic sublime of writings by Hélène Cixous. (8) Used, as it were, to desexing myself as an intellectual, to taking the 'objective' masculine position, I was inevitably hostile towards this unrelievedly womanly perspective. It is astonishing how easy it is to be an ardent feminist, challenging stereotypical images of women, fighting sexism in language and in legislation, and still to live with the unspoken belief that it is normal -

even appropriate - to deny sexual difference. Roberts traces the woman artist's recognition of such alienation in _The Visitation_:

> Her body hides itself within a vast old boilersuit. To write, Helen always feels she has to cancel her body out, become pure mind. Genderless, transcendent, like a man. (9)

The identification was uncomfortable. She foregrounded what I had learned to overlook or to tolerate, certainly not emphasise. Such extreme alientation from one's gender is not, of course, an unusual experience for women. Looking back on her younger self, Adrienne Rich recognises a true daughter of the patriarchs:

> My own negative associations with male derivations from female anatomy were so strong that for a long time I felt distaste, or profound ambivalence, when I looked at some of the early mother-goddess figures emphasizing breasts and belly. It took me a long time to get beyond patriarchally acquired responses and to connect with the power and integrity, the absolute nonfemininity, of posture and expression in those images. (10)

When I interviewed her in July 1989, Michèle Roberts described to me her own painful progress towards self-acceptance:

> I've had to come through even acknowledging I was female, which took a lot of my adult life even to admit...I wanted to deny it so much because I was an intellectual and a writer; having recovered it with immense pain and struggle but joy and liberation into writing, it's remained rather precious to me, that sense of gender, and it still to me is a very good window on the world...I do see it as an eye / I, that's gendered, not as *any* kind of limitation. (11)

When I first read Roberts, I was not as far along that path; for me 'woman' meant passivity, martyr, victim, self-denial, self-control; above all, fear. Although I could 'understand' her poetry as a literary critic, I could not really *enjoy* it. I couldn't believe her, because she was making into a virtue and cause for celebration what I saw as the lot of the underdog. Let me give an example. Her poem 'In the Tradescant garden, Lambeth' (12), contrasts a man's vainglorious desire for fame after death with his wife's unnoticed slide back into the soil. Her act of relinquishing life without a struggle ('Letting her / self go, letting herself / be worked upon / so that the garden's speech / may be reborn,') enriches the soil, participating in the vegetative cycle of rebirth. I read it too fiercely, too literally: I couldn't help feeling that being more environmentally friendly, as it were, was small consolation for obscurity. Wasn't this precisely the kind of altruistic, self-effacing behaviour traditionally instilled in women and then praised as 'natural'? It took some time to realise that the poem did not yield a message or blueprint of this nature; her poetry is not about political correctness.

I still have, periodically, to sweep a metaphorical broom around my head to clear out Mr Bingen's demons. I still feel tense as I answer criticism that Michèle Roberts' poetry is 'all about being a woman', however fluently I might quash the complaint. (13) It took a long time before I learned how to read her. At first I wanted to be able to explain the

references, to translate and explicate. I read the poems again and again, desperately trying to uncover a logical train of association. It took me so long to surrender to spell-weaving!

Roberts is unusual in several ways. Her daring pitch, her leaps towards the sublime, and her sensual celebration of the body are informed and enriched by keen theoretical knowledge. The traces of her engagement with theory are quite explicit in the poems. She combines the insights of psychotherapy with modern-day versions of the Eleusinian Mysteries. No doubt influenced by her Anglo-French origins, she takes on theory and therapy: two concepts the British literary establishment seems to regard rather like rabies - something to be kept from these shores at all cost.

She is fully aware of the dangers of a poetic that allies woman and nature in the way that hers does. When we met she pointed out that what she aimed to do was to *interrogate* this relationship rather than merely reproduce it. (14) She recognises that this makes her an unusual figure on the contemporary literature scene. But the absence of irony in her work is refreshing, as is her iconoclasm. She recently 'came out' in print with a scathing review of Adrienne Rich's latest volume of poems. Criticism of Rich is virtually unheard from feminists; after all, there are usually enough hostile voices without adding to them. But Roberts, undeterred, made some pertinent observations. She described the book as a 'long-winded dirge' laced with 'squirm-inducing sentimentality'. Her final remarks get to the heart of the matter:

> Rich's fans claim her work evinces a Whitmanesque kinship with all beings. I read it as imperialist: she's always speaking for the silent masses, a tourist of oppression, as she flits from India to Haworth to Wounded Knee. (15)

Roberts' impatience with this tone is revealing. Rich has been one of the most eloquent and lucid critics of Western literary tradition, itemising the thorny issues of power and representation that it has cheerfully ignored. It is strange, then, that she still clings to the liberal humanist lyric 'I'. The poet in this study who most resembles her is Eavan Boland: the same ringing tones of oratory, the same sense of a spokeswoman delivering a public address to her community. This is the poet as bard: a female bard, certainly, for a female audience, but the rest of the equation remains the same. (16)

Roberts sees that, however admirable its intent, such confessional 'bearing witness' ends up foregrounding the *poet*, and those those she tries to speak of (or for) are relegated to the background. (17) By contrast she gives the cue for fun, some playfulness, and a change from this rigidly self-conscious poetic that takes such care to be politically correct. (18)

It looks, then, as though Rich and Roberts have little in common. Nevertheless their poetic projects are remarkably similar. They are both searching for ways of reclaiming a version of the sublime for women poets. But their differences are crucial. Where Rich is a prophet, Roberts is a priestess.

'I discovered a sense of femininity that was about power and joy and sex.' (19)

Roberts has published two solo collections of poetry, both with Methuen: The Mirror of the Mother and Psyche and the Hurricane (20). She is, however, better known for her novels even though she thinks of herself primarily as a poet. She senses disapproval from some quarters at this flouting of traditional genre rules - the convention that a writer is either a poet or a novelist: being both lays one open to accusations of dilettantism. Neverthless, Mirror received several favourable reviews. Writing in the TLS Clair Wills commented:

> Roberts plays with duplicitous language, uncovering possibilities hidden in even the most mystifying metaphors. (21)

Michael Horovitz was expansive with his praise:

> In most of her verse....Michèle Roberts is what Milton wanted his epic diction to be, 'at once simple, sensuous and passionate'...the mirror of this poetry is among the fairest and most truthfully revealing amidst all our tumbling white-city walls. (22)

Prior to the appearance of Mirror, Roberts had collaborated with other women in co-operative publishing ventures, producing the poetry anthology Cutlasses and Earrings in 1976, a volume of stories, Tales I Tell My Mother in 1978, and more poetry, Touchpapers (with Judith Kazantzis and Michelene Wandor) in 1982. She was also publishing novels during these years. But it was not until 1991 that her second solo collection of poetry, Psyche and the Hurricane, was published, although the poems in it were

written considerably earlier.

Wills and Horovitz pick up on the two outstanding characteristics of her poetry: dazzling metaphors and pagan sensuality. Indeed, the two are inextricably linked. Roberts is an inexhaustible spinner of language, a spider pulling the thread of words out of herself. The Alps seen from an aeroplane are 'a college of grand- / mothers in white caps'; to a bereaved friend she describes how 'Grief buckles itself onto you / like a new winter coat.' (23) Her imagination is drawn most insistently to the elemental aspects of the natural world: earth, water, wind, light. Her sense of metaphor is organic and holistic, rather than intellectual. She works towards a healing of the split between mind and body, matter and spirit, that underlies Western philosophical and religious tradition. This brings a new religious - in its root meaning of reuniting - tone to her metaphors. This sense of a language that is 'earthed' becomes clearer when her metaphors are compared with those of the celebrated Martian poets. Where their clever comparisons offer flashes of unlikely recognition, like a small firework, Roberts' metaphors spark off the illumination of an entire display. (24) Her imagination is rooted into, and energised by, its connection to nature.

Traditionally women are the **subject** of metaphors, rather than the inventors of them. And, as Homans points out, (25) the relationship between woman and nature operates to deny woman subjectivity. Usually the woman in the metaphor operates merely to 'service' the other half of the comparison, and is thus

subjugated to it. In any case, the supposedly 'female' characteristics invoked tend to be insipid cultural constructions of femininity meant to inflame mens' hearts, and goad them on to defend 'the motherland'. From the imperialist quests of Rider Haggard to the cheap (but clever) commercialism of Benson & Hedges cigarette advertisements, the trope of woman as land is an indispensable ingredient. (26) Roberts creates vivid new configurations out of this unpromising material.

She does so by using the body. Today's custodians of English poetic tradition are squeamish about the body. Rochester provokes sniggers, Donne only gets away with it because we are still pretending he is 'meta'-physical. On the whole, canonised poets preserve a polite cerebrality. Ostriker points out that, 'woman in both our sacred and secular mythologies *is* the flesh': it is man who writes of her, either in praise or fearful scorn. (27) Her research demonstrates that there is a new anatomical frankness about much recent poetry by women, and she, like Halliday, suggests that this development signals a new confidence. (28) But rather than naming parts, Roberts creates metaphors for the female body, as Namjoshi and Hanscombe did. The male body is also represented as a part of nature, and their sexual union is both represented by and represents the vegetative processes of seasonal change. In 'persephone descends to the underworld' the erotic charge of the original myth is restored:

my lover is a dark man
we embrace in the garden, in the grave; his
twisting root is clotted with my black earth
as I break open, and take him in (29)

Roberts also uses the metaphor the other way round, visualising love-making as a pagan ritual:

It all heaved up in me:
love, sobs, knowledge
the closeness of hedges and grass
how the one body was both of us.

....
You delved in, rooting
me till
our dark body sparked with light. (30)

'poem on the day of the spring equinox' relays a similarly pagan vision. Winter is an intruder, his presence figured as a violation. Spring has to endure the slow, painful days, awaiting cyclical renewal:

the winter enters her
so silent, it
slants in and
squats her; the
thin time of Lent
her skin's a curtain between cold and cold

....

there's no prince, no melting
kiss; she simply
endures
the dark months
of the occupation, the aching embrace
 - like a root

till March loosens her

then there's a white
insurrection
of crocuses; each one blooms
close and full as an egg; how
their purity hurts

she must learn to open her yellow heart (31)

Growth is effortful; achieved only at the cost of travail, through sexual risk and release. This updating of the myths, both harsh and sensual, makes T. S. Eliot's cruel April seem rather tame in comparison.

Rich has also written about the ancient vegetative rites of the Eleusinian mysteries, - but in her prose, not her poetry. In Of Woman Born she examines the visions of female power these myths encode - a transformative, regenerative power of which little evidence remain in today's culture. (32) She comments on the etymological connection between the word 'mother' and the word for 'earth':

> Prepatriarchal thought gynomorphizes everything. Out of the earth-womb vegetation and nourishment emerged, as the human child out of the woman's body. The words for mother and mud (earth, slime, the *matter* of which 'man' is built) are extremely close in many languages: *mutter, madre, mater, materia, moeder, modder....* (33)

There are striking parallels in Roberts' poetry. Mud recurs throughout her work as the earth's blood: it bears the signs of new growth and birth as well as the scars of decay and death. The arrival of Spring is imprinted in mud:

> The announcement was made in mud:
> sticky river of mud, slither
> of bluebells down hidden
> hills in the woods. (34)

'A walk on the south downs' transposes the walkers' grief at their loved one's terminal illness onto the landscape:

> In January
> even the wind is lean
> trimming the hawthorns
> to blunt, bent doggedness

scraping the downs
out; hollow
vistas of hunger
a morphine fast.

Your body is
a die that
stamps
these hills: the stretch
of your pain
repeatedly
struck into soft chalk.

Jim and I
flounder up
valleys of mud
bulky as elephants
clotting our boots

winter slapping loose
lips together: mud
swallows, mud belch. (35)

The land is invested with human senses, painted as though it were a body, vulnerable to the teeth of the diggers: 'the graphite mine / sinking its rusty teeth / in the valley's side'. (36) The walkers scramble up as though over the skin of some huge sleeping giant:'We knuckled up / the stony spine of /this bit of planet.' (37) In another poem, the seashore is personified: the coastal train line 'tracked Devon's lip / licked and / bitten by sea.' (38)

Over the last twenty years, women poets have documented their estrangement from the body. (39) But in Roberts' work, the body is no longer Other; there is no schizophrenic split between a woman's mind and her body. She is also one of the few poets to offer positive depictions of masculinity. In our discussion she expressed her love of the gendered charge carried by Donne's

work. In stark contrast to the fudgings of Rumens, she **wants** a gendered poetry:

> there's so much that's important about gender in the world we live in, not just in negative ways but in positive ways, about difference... it's very much involved with falling in love with men and enjoying that, as well as ranting at them about hoovering the carpet, so I can't imagine what a gender-free poetry would be like really, I'm quite happy for poetry to be gendered. (40)

She is one of the few contemporary women poets who writes love poetry to a man:

> I tested *vertiginous*
> on your mouth's
> taste of garlic and olives
> and held on
> to the view of no lack
> all the way down: (41)

The senses intermingle: instead of uttering the word she translates language into a kiss, collapsing the sensation of giddiness and the rich sound of the word into a metaphor. She is finding out how it feels to surrender herself to this falling motion, as well as playing mouth games, - trying to talk and kiss at the same time. And this giddy, sensory euphoria is the hallmark of her version of the sublime.

Rewriting the Romantic Sublime

The other poets I have studied tend, with the exception of Carol Ann Duffy's ventriloquist pieces, to avoid realism as an appropriate mode, but they retain a strong sense of propriety. They take care to keep their voices level - perhaps, unconsciously, as protection against the familiar complaints of shrillness and hysteria. Namjoshi uses the reins of form; Randall's tone is wistful reflection rather than euphoria. Reading Eavan Boland you can sense her dragging her feet back down on to the suburban pavement, checking the urge to fly off into the unknown; she is, in her own words, 'edged in by the need to be ordinary'. (42) Roberts is exceptional.

The brief glimpses of transcendence which Boland allows herself receive much fuller treatment in Adrienne Rich's hands. 'Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev' (43) is her most thorough articulation of a female and feminist sublime. Homans reads the poem as offering a radical redefinition of the Romantic sublime. Where Wordsworth and Shelley seek a solitary epiphany, Rich emphasises the interdependence of the women climbers. Where traditionally the female dissolves into the natural world, Homans argues that in 'Phantasia', death is a passport to an eternal presence:

> The poem enters into the nineteenth-century problem of the woman dying into nature, but here it is the universe - 'the possible', not chthonic nature - of which she has become a part, and death generates speech rather than curtailing it. The husband is put in the position of the male poet who gains his central speaking self from the silent otherness of the women he

buries, but unlike Lucy and Margaret, these women cannot be buried in nature, nor can they be silenced:

> When you have buried us told your story
> ours does not end we stream
> into the unfinished the unbegun
> the possible (44)

Rich thus substitutes collectivity and co-operation for the individualism of the Romantic sublime. (45) The women have gained immortality, and are safe from the defining and confining powers of the patriarchy.

Homans offers this poem as a blueprint for the female sublime. But Roberts' version is very different. In Rich's vision, the women are bodiless; their immortality is as spiritual presences. Roberts, characteristically, offers an earthed alternative. Her female protagonist does 'die into nature', but this 'death' does not mean annihilation. The intimate telepathy between the two does not replace or obliterate autonomous selfhood. In her poetry the woman's body strains out towards the world beyond, hovering on the brink of dissolution into it. Letting go is the route to the sublime, and is an act of courage and faith. It means losing a sense of self, of identity, uniqueness and individuality, but it is through this surrender that Roberts envisages the possibilities of the sublime. In her eyes such a plane is reached not through transcending the body in order to reach a higher spiritual plane, but through letting the rest of the world in: daring to open yourself so fully to another person (or to the natural world) that you lose your separateness. In her third novel, The Wild Girl - the fifth

Gospel according to Mary Magdalene, - such dissolving of Mary into Jesus and Jesus into Mary is explicitly equated with the experience of finding God within. It is through the union of their flesh that Mary comes to understand the words, 'I am the resurrection and the life'. (46) In her Gospel she tells her story of how, after Jesus' death, she tried to convey the essence of his instruction to the disciples:

> What is this rebirth? How is it to be achieved? The image of this rebirth is a marriage...between the inner woman and the inner man. You must go down deep, down into the marriage chamber, and find the other part of yourself that has been lost and missing for so long. Those who are reunited in the marriage chamber will never be separated again. *This* is the restoration. *This* is the resurrection. (47) (her italics)

This account of Jesus' message seeks to reintegrate the vegetation myths; it is not surprising, considering its pagan sensibilities, that the disciples reject her testimony. They opt instead for the spiritual version of Christian doctrine, thus instituting the schism that has dominated Western religion ever since; what Roberts describes elsewhere as:

> this separation of the sexual and the maternal that the Virgin and the Magdalen exemplify, the good mother and the bad whore. (48)

Woman is equated with the body; she is considered inferior and innately sinful. Whereas in Mary's account of the Lord's ideas:

> The body is the mirror of the soul, and *through* the body, not by denying it, we enter the other world, the world of eternity which co-exists with this temporal, fleshly one. (49) (her italics)

The Romantic sublime enacts a similar eclipse of the flesh, making transcendence a purely spiritual affair. And in Rich's

revised version the same is true. In contrast, Roberts' sublime is attainable only *through* the body; she categorically rejects the dualism of body and spirit.

In place of the idealised co-operation of the climbing-team, - hardly an everyday enterprise - Roberts offers smaller-scale epiphanies of ordinary existence: between lovers, or friends. Letting go is a way of bridging the gulf that separates human beings from one another. It can take many forms. It is celebrated with awe in 'A Psalm for Easter', a brave inspirational sequence that draws an extended comparison between a woman giving birth and the crucifixion. (50) Roberts echoes the language of the Bible, making it clear that the surrender of the self to the will of another - be it 'God', the irresistible push of the emerging child, or a lover - is an act of courage and self-transcendence. So relinquishing physical self-control - the control of will-power - during orgasm or childbirth is one manifestation of this access to the sublime; surrendering the body to the natural processes of decomposition after death is another.

'<u>her</u> / <u>truth is vegetable</u>, <u>her</u> / <u>sex linguistic</u>' (51)

In the ancient myths, woman is associated with death as well as with birth. (52) Again, Rich provides useful information. She emphasises the crucial importance of women's transformative power, and the wide range of skills it included - from potting

and weaving, to giving birth. But the connection between woman and rebirth is even more significant:

> In winter, vegetation retreats back into the earth-womb; and in death the human body, too, returns into that womb, to await rebirth. Ancient Mid-Eastern tombs were deliberately designed to resemble the body of the mother - with labyrinths and spirals intended to represent her internal anatomy - so that the spirit could be reborn there. (53)

'In the Tradescant garden, Lambeth' is a poem about rebirth. It offers a radical alternative to the Christian ideal of heaven-bound transcendence:

> In the wings
> of the grey church
> here in the garden of the dead
> the stone box of Tradescant bones
> is dark in the rain, under
> the gurgle of blackbirds.
>
> Cold bees dive and swerve
> by the sweetbriar hedge, by
> the blue burn of violets.
>
> Jehane and I, giantesses
> in black raincoats
> stomp round the
> knee-high privet knot
> crouch to repeat names
> uttered by white tongues:
> artemesia, digitalis, saxifrage
> stinking hellebore, asphodel.
>
> Doll-sized, we enter
> these green loops
> a script that writes
> that separates
> compartments
> tight with hyssop
> heartsease, thrift.
>
> My two grandmothers
> have taken over the church:
> the funeral urn pours tea
> into green Utility cups.

The Queen's man in his tomb
the scholar, the connnoisseur
is a collection of dry sticks
spelling a hexagram of hope: his
dust intact, he spurns
the worms, those fond
greedy under-gardeners.
He seeks promotion to a purer
sphere, a higher court. He'd
change this parterre
for a paradise.

Hester his relict
rots down somewhere else
divorced, mislaid;
her virtues blank
in the carved poem.

Hers is the dirty
alphabet of earth, the
dance of atoms and
of meanings, a
translation
between words not worlds: her
truth is vegetable, her
sex linguistic.

Letting her
self go, letting herself
be worked upon
so that the garden's speech
may be reborn:

this is the undying
labour of the gardener's wife. (54)

The little white 'tongues' represent the Law of the Father: the naming, defining voice that was challenged in 'to a male intellectual'. The two John Tradescants, famed seventeenth century royal gardeners, are collapsed into one in the poem: father and son, representatives of the patriarchal line. Their work is commemorated in the carefully-tended replica garden with its neat borders and precise labelling. The individual plants are separated by green looped railings that symbolise the

patriarchal script. The Tradescants represent Nature tamed and named: their labour of classification formed the basis of the Ashmolean museum.

Meanwhile, women preside over the death rites with their tea urn while the deceased, confident of his right to ascension, (both spiritual - to the kingdom of heaven - and metaphorical - enduring fame on earth) has had a secure stone coffin prepared. He hopes to be safe in there, protected from the very processes with which he has worked all his life - the natural cycles of rotting and decay. His one-time fellow-workers, the worms, are suddenly enemies.

His wife Hester, 'relict' as the gravestones put it, surrenders herself to a different after-life. Her death passes unfêted; she is insignificant beside her famous husband. Her gravestone is 'somewhere else' the narrator notes vaguely. And it seems as though the old gauntlet flung down by Tradescant in defiance against death has worked for him. His bones are preserved, safe in their stone box inside the church, while no trace of Hester remains.

Yet it is Hester's act of letting go which figures the sublime. She lets go not just of worldly trappings but of the individuality that we cling to greedily, and that, in Roberts' work, is the barrier to a fuller spiritual harmony. Like the friend letting go in childbirth, like Jesus surrendering his will to that of God and succumbing to the crucifixion, Hester offers a metaphor for the greatest gift. Where the climbing-team find a voice (or voices) in death by transcending the body, Hester

achieves, *through* her body, a legacy that is 'undying'. Her script is organic. Woman's earth alphabet follows a circular path, for Hester's communication contains within itself the germs of its own transformation. Truth is 'vegetable', - organic, continually evolving. This is a very different kind of truth to the eternal Truths, those stone tablets so beloved of the patriarchs.

'woman is never far from the "mother" (I do not mean the role but the "mother" as no-name and as source of goods' (55)

In our discussion Roberts said that 'the mother' was the inspiration for all her writing. Cixous's distinction between the 'role' and the metaphor is useful, since there are few treatments of actual mothering in Roberts' poems. As Adrienne Rich points out, we are well accustomed to mythic stories of the father-and-son, and mother-and-son dyads. There seems to be a fashion for the former at the moment: Tony Harrison, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney have all recently published poems that investigate their relationships with father figures.

What Rich describes as 'the great unwritten story' (56) of the mother / daughter dyad is centre-stage in Roberts' first solo collection, Mirror of the Mother, a book full of mother-mourning and one which demonstrates the diversity of meaning invested in the symbol of the mother. She has a number of surrogates: grandmother, female friends and lovers, therapist.

But the real mother is an absence: she can only be approached through the distancing of classical mythology and fairy tale. It is as though the mother is literally beyond representation. She is a symbolic, mythical figure: locus of the poet's most intense yearnings.

'Mother' implies the safety of enclosure, of life in the womb, nourished and protected. Roberts works with a psychoanalytic understanding of what the separation of birth means to the child. Sons receive special treatment: in 'the eldest son goes home': 'the house grips him/ with the teeth of love// silk beds are flung for him / game slaughtered, at his mouth / whole generations / of feeding bottles held'. (57) It is the daughter who feels her estrangement; from the moment of her birth, the mother is irretrievably lost to her. 'I have been wanting to mourn' is a frank lament. The poem contrasts actual deaths, signalled by church bells and the public recognition of ritualised grief, with this huge, unacknowledged, loss:

> I want a funeral first
> where I can mourn
> mothering, and mourn me
> losing and lost, I
> wanting her cradle, fat
> gobbler of gaps, my consolation
> the grave shovelled into my mouth (58)

In her sequence of poems based on the Eleusinian Mysteries, Roberts portrays Demeter as a modern earth-mother: acquainted with the properties of herbs and wild flowers, sensitive to the communications of the vegetable world. She is a practised and practical survivor; busily gathering and storing harvest produce

in preparation for the long winter; quietly convinced that her daughter will return when it has passed:

> She chooses the best of the season's goods
> to plant, then squats on the moist
> black earth and puts her ear
> to the chestnut's bark. She listens for messages
> issuing up from the roots, the invisible girl. (59)

But in addition to this pagan quality, Roberts often uses religious imagery when she describes the bond between women and the gifts they can offer each other. 'Magnificat' borrows from the opening of Mary's prayer of thanksgiving in order to celebrate the miracle of an enduring and restorative love between two women:

> I called for you and you came, you voyaged
> fierce as a small archangel with swords and breasts
> you declared the birth of a new life
> in my kitchen there was an annunciation
> and I was still, awed by your hair's glory
> ....
> when we met, I tell you
> it was a birthday party, a funeral
> it was a holy communion
> between women, a Visitation
>
> it was two old she-goats butting
> and nuzzling each other in the smelly fold (60)

Characteristically, the poem mixes linguistic registers: the elevated tones of religious transport sit snugly next to homely details. Her friend arrives 'in the nick/of time', 'fierce as a small archangel' to pick up the pieces of a messy, failed relationship. Such praise songs to women's friendship and love are, hardly surprisingly, unusual within the recognised canon.

The ambivalence of the mother-daughter bond is explored too: the daughter has to learn to let her mother go, and vice versa.

The mother can be a constraining force, holding her daughter back, although the tension between them is not as fraught as it is in Plath's 'Medusa'. (61) Establishing separation from the mother-figure is neverthless painful and difficult:

> this women's work is thrifty and grim:
> learning to save myself, learning to live
> alone through the long winter nights
> means so much unknotting, unknitting
> unravelling, untying the mother-cord
> - so much undoing (62)

The mother-figure is the lost comforter, bearer of unconditional love and support, but a return to the place where she knew such ecstasy is, of course, impossible. But the mother is also an enigma: the hole at the centre of the story. In 'New Year's Eve at Lavarone' she is the ice queen. The poet and her companions are led on a quest through the fairytale snow-covered landscape. Their 'narrator' takes them to 'the myth's heart', a frozen pool buried beneath the snow:

> Our narrator, the man in the red woollen cap
> leads us to the myth's heart. He scrapes with his
> stick in a white dip, exposes a perfect circle
> of glazed grey ice. He uncovers the mirror
> of the mother, she who goes away
> comes back, goes away. Her cold eye blinks
> unblinks. Our kiss on her round mouth is chalk,
> inscribes us on her body's blackboard: want, want. (63)

The landscape is surreal. Familiar contours have been transformed by the snowfall. The atmosphere feels heavy with suspense, leaden like the snow-laden sky. Everything is inside-out, density and distance reversed by the snow. Disoriented, the

seekers try to uncover or interpret their surroundings. They guess wildly: there is a magic tree, and those logs look like dead brides. Finally they reach their goal: the 'perfect circle / of glazed grey ice'...the mirror / of the mother, she who goes away / comes back, goes away.' The poem treats the impossibility of return, of retracing one's origins, of returning to the safety of the mother's womb. It suggests that such a return, even if it were possible, would mean death: the mother is emotionless, frozen. She represents the stasis of death or perfection.

Yet if return is impossible, the bond between mother and daughter transcends death, as the poet comforts a friend who has recently lost her mother:

> Paula, curator of memories
> keeper of your parents' house
> I tell you
> your mother
> will rise inside you
> strongly as the moon. (64)

These mysterious, mythical representations of the mother evoke what we have lost - the despised and obliterated feminine principle. She is a spiritual presence, the ancient goddess, figured in the poems as a rich source of regenerative energy but also, as the Mysteries make clear, as the presider over death and destruction.

Diving or flying?

> To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs... (65)

'Restoration work in Palazzo Te' is a witty, positive and skilful poem about feminist revisioning. It can be read as a poem for the *cognoscenti*, who will pick up its ironic nods towards the influential works of two particularly famous feminist academics, Hélène Cixous and Adrienne Rich. It also serves as excellent proof that so-called 'theory' is not as dense and obscure as it may, on first sight, appear. (66) With a little gentle satire, Roberts brings a welcome note of light mischief into the arena of revisionist strategies:

> Psyche, imprisoned in the paint, has
> got free, and wields a bucket. White
> vest against her golden
> shoulders, white overalls rolled
> about her waist, she caresses
> her sisters' eyes with a wet sponge.
>
> Return to that house of desire
> made flesh. Re-vision it. Discard
> the cradle of winds, all magical escorts.
> Prefer to be engineer
> locking your steps to the air
> on scaffolding frames
> clasped with rusty latches.
>
> She stares at the dream. Level after level
> of images falls past. She clambers up
> four ladders of narrative
> till she swings free
> in the vault of darkness, the
> silence between sentences.

She's equipped with a photo-map
topped by a plastic sheet she
marks with a Pentel pen. Knocking
at the plaster of the myth's crust
she listens for disturbances
below the surface.

Now she is close to the invisible god:
pressing her ear to a deep crack
she hears him breathing.

Leaning over him, daring and disobedient
she hoists her lamp, clips it
to a metal strut, switches
the beam of her love full on.

At this point, the story breaks up:
the wall stutters, incoherent
in a litter of paint flakes.

She records that the presence of the male body
in the text disrupts it.
Here lies, she guesses, Eros:
her hero, naked and unconscious.

Her task is to rescue what she can
from the fresco: not
to smooth-talk; not to make him up.
Woken by her hot looks, he sulks. He
never asked for this, resists

her questioning hands, her
fingers pattering at him, white
braille in white dust.

Possibly she's absurd.
Anyway, it is the work that matters. (67)

Roberts shares Cixous' ideas about the possibilities of writing as a path to reclaiming 'native strength'. She takes up many of the ideas expressed so memorably by Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', sometimes even using the same images and phrases. Cixous describes the woman writer's task as 'this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to

speak'. (68) And so we have the plucky adventuress - working her way nimbly across the fresco in search of the truth beneath the layers of plaster-myth, and shining the illuminating full beam of the lamp on her recalcitrant lover. 'Inscribe the breath of the whole woman,' urges Cixous; so Roberts picks her favourite heroine Psyche, - her name, of course, meaning 'breath'. Text functions in both writers as a metaphorical history; 'the marvelous text of her self' is what lies unwritten; Psyche has to take that leap in the dark, using literary and cultural tradition ('four ladders of narrative') as a launching-pad.

Adrienne Rich receives sharper treatment. The poem makes several comic digs at 'Diving in to the Wreck', a poem written in 1972 and one which has since become something of a landmark. Where the earlier poem uses a solemn and dramatic diving expedition as a metaphor for feminist retrieval, 'Restoration work' offers a much more down-to-earth version of the same. Psyche is a cool customer; she is committed and efficient, but not above seeing the potential ridiculousness of her work. In contrast, the tone of 'Diving' is urgent, intense:

> First the air is blue and then
> it is bluer and then green and then
> black I am blacking out and yet
> my mask is powerful
> it pumps my blood with power
> the sea is another story
> the sea is not a question of power
> I have to learn alone
> to turn my body without force
> in the deep element. (69)

Where the conscientious diver carries a camera, a book and a sharpened knife, as well as a firm sense of the importance of her quest, Psyche is clad in scruffy painters' overalls and clutches a Pentel and a plastic sheet. And where the diver says she has come to *find*, 'the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth', Psyche is less naive; she knows that a representation is only ever a representation. (70) Where the diver seems almost to revel in her brave solitude, Psyche doesn't even stop to think about the fact that she is on her own. In this way Roberts demystifies the hallowed palimpsests of myth just as Psyche herself does, dispensing with 'all magical escorts' and choosing pragmatic determination as the best antidote to this encrustation of patriarchal nonsense. It is a refreshing note. Myth is suddenly concrete; the narratives of past centuries are the ladders she scales en route to her own truth:

> till she swings free
> in the vault of darkness, the
> silence between sentences.

Previous feminist representations have tended to dwell on the problematic nature of these gaps, representative of the unspoken and unrecorded female story. (71) Here, it is a moment of exhilaration, a joyful plunge into the unknown; the silences that used to be a problem are now an advantage: there is plenty of room to invent new stories of her own. Rich's diving metaphor is claustrophobic in comparison with this leap into free space; her explorer is hemmed in by the weight of the water above her.

The poem makes myth concrete: beneath Psyche's inquiring hands the plaster crust begins to disintegrate. When you can see and touch your obstacle, how much easier it becomes to tackle it. Roberts updates Psyche and Eros with delightful practicality, transforming the oil lamp whose drop wakes the secret lover in the original tale, into a serviceable electric torch. (72) And when Psyche sees him, the myth crumbles. The poem, like its heroine, switches coolly from high-falutin rhetoric to bathos:

> She records that the presence of the male body
> in the text disrupts it.
> Here lies, she guesses, Eros:
> her hero, naked and unconscious.

He is not looking too heroic. The scene is reminiscent of countless cartoon vigils: the protagonist leaning over a sleeping giant who is just about to wake up, roar and eat the intrepid soul. But Eros is no giant; he is in a sulk, woken by a randy and insistent Psyche bent on exploring him. Her search is both sexual invitation and curiosity: she wants to know all about this man. Significantly, she uses *touch* to discover him, thus replacing the scopic nature of masculine representation with a feminine tactile version. The reference to braille reinforces this radical revisionism. The lovers are blind; sight - with its history of objectification - is outlawed. (73)

Psyche's further project, aside from the persistent and painstaking exploration of this recalcitrant hero, is one of rescue and preservation. Tucked in amidst the light-hearted tale is a brave and generous statement of poetic intent:

> Her task is to rescue what she can
> from the fresco: not
> to smooth-talk; not to make him up.

Psyche wants to preserve the wealth and insights of culture, believing in its value and truth, not harbouring grudges about gender-blindness. But she is not interested in flattering the patriarchs; she rejects all such wiles, and avoids the 'smoothing-out' of pseudo-placatory talk. Nor does she want an idealised version of masculinity in history; she wants to know about Eros. Her determination is an act of faith. As Cixous observes, women have been tricked into turning away from loving *one another* with the assurance that *men* will give to them in love:

> we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their body. (74)

Body as text; history / culture as 'that house of desire'. Eros has been giving nothing from his safe hideout, and Psyche has had enough. After all, 'Flying is woman's gesture - flying in language and making it fly'. (75)

Prophet and Priestess

> I now think that the writer should struggle to be bisexual and learn from the father as well as the mother. You have to start with your femaleness, *not* with writing like a man, and grow and expand from there, find your masculine part too...I prefer the word 'bisexual': it's the *play* between the two sides that interests me, not some static state of rising above them. (76)

This exploration of the differences, complementarities and conflicts between masculinity and femininity preoccupies Roberts in her poetry and her novels. Her writing insists on the reintegration of oppositions: mind / body, male / female, light / dark. She speaks of the interpenetrative dance between the two aspects. (77) Like Cixous, she believes women are more in tune with the rhythms of the natural world because they have erected fewer barriers of protection against them. (78) Once again, the parallel with Adrienne Rich is instructive. Discussing Freud's conception of ego boundaries, she makes a similar point. In his essay 'On Negation', Freud confidently distinguishes between 'inner' and 'outer'. Rich comments:

> As the inhabitant of a female body, this description gives me pause. The boundaries of the ego seem to me much less crudely definable than the words 'inner' and 'outer' suggest. I do not perceive myself as a walled city into which certain emissaries are received and from which others are excluded. (79)

She draws attention to the many ways in which her experience, particularly in lesbian lovemaking, is one of transcending fleshly barriers:

> feeling the melting of the walls of flesh, as physical and emotional longing deliver the one person into the other, blurring the boundary between body and body. (p. 63)

Both writers see women as being more courageous, more prepared to move out of their own sphere, risking absorption or engulfment. But in Roberts' work this capacity is intoxicating: woman, in her vision, exists on the fringes, always in danger of slipping into the landscape. In 'Madwoman at Rodmell' the fragility of the line separating inner from outer becomes the boundary between sanity and madness. The persona is clearly based on Virginia Woolf, and the poem enacts her suicide at its close. Extreme sensitivity to every sensation around her threatens and erodes any sense of individual boundaries. Celebrating the fecund beauty of the hills and light is a sensual experience: she tastes the landscape, transforming sunlight into syrup 'tart and sweet'; the hills are shaped like a cup, with clouds as the frothy milk at its brim. Yet this intense receptivity tips over into chaos: the flip side of such fusion with the surrounding world is the absence of defence, of cut-off points. And once the barriers have fallen, she is the insatiable child, living outside the Symbolic, free from the Law of the Father:

> she strolls in the valley, alone
> her ears scan the warning
> twanging of birds
> her boots plop and suck in the mud's grip
>
> the sky is a cold gold spoon
> sun tart and sweet
> in the cup of hills licked
> clean by the gulp of cows
> \- at the cup's lip, the foam
> and crust of milk, a swell of clouds

and yellow plums; leaves curl
like the peel in marmalade

the world is her mouth
a sour swill of yells

trees scar, and suddenly
redden; bright berries of blood and teeth
hang in the hedge; the bad
baby is out; she
bites through the net; she swarms
free, fizzing; she thunders like bees in a box
maddened for honey, and her mama

her lips clang shut on mean rations:
she swallows the river
and mourns on down, a thin bellyful (80)

It is a dangerously fine line to tread; much safer to stay, white-socked amongst the colts, in the neat green fields with their safe fences. But in such tame spots there is no fizz, no sizzle.

Roberts believes in the healing and indeed transforming capacity of poetry. There is an extraordinary sensation of freedom that comes across in the poems. She refuses to 'police' her imagination. Instead she lives out Rich's programme of daring experimentation: trying new perspectives, turning certainties upsidedown. (81) The sad irony is that Rich herself, who recognises how crucial such uncensored imaginative freedom is to poetry, cannot attain it. It is hard to imagine her allowing politically incorrect thoughts or fantasies into her head. She cannot take those risks because her restless sense of responsibility forbids hedonism, and her intense self-consciousness, however ethically sound, makes loss of self all but impossible. She can theorise about it, but she herself

cannot do it; she has lived for so many years as a true daughter of the patriarchy that the fields must, in the interests of rationality and realism, remain green. And despite the urgent sincerity of her call for the reintegration of body and mind, her poems are products of the *intellect*, not the senses. In contrast Roberts oozes with body. 'Earth-and body-bound', she is the high priestess of contemporary women poets sporting, in her own words, 'a red robe, not a dog collar'. (82)

CHAPTER 6

KICKING DAFFODILS: THE POETRY OF GRACE NICHOLS

We the Women

We the women who toil
unadorn
heads tie with cheap
cotton

We the women who cut
clear fetch dig sing

We the women making
something from this
ache-a-pain-a-me
back-o-hardness

Yet we the women
who praises go unsung
who voices go unheard
who deaths they sweep
aside
as easy as dead leaves (1)

A Introductory matters

In this chapter I shall look at the poetry of Grace Nichols, a Guyanese poet resident in Britain since 1977. Although she is a successful poet, winner of the 1983 Commonwealth Poetry Prize and a much sought-after performer, there is remarkably little critical interest in her work. To date, she has published three solo poetry collections: i is a long memoried woman, The Fat Black Woman's Poems, and Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman (2). She has edited an anthology of poems for children, and is working on another sequence around the memories and experiences of West Indian women immigrants in Britain.

Nichols is not the only innovative Caribbean poet whose voice seems to pass largely unheard, and certainly not the only woman. Neverthless I believe the lack of interest shown in her work is not simply a further example of gender bias in what critics

consider important. I spend the next fifty pages providing information about the various contexts surrounding her work - not because the poetry needs such extraneous material, but in order to give some sense of the 'norm' from which she differs so radically. The best known Caribbean poets (in Britain) are men, and the formal and rhythmic originality of their work is unfortunately not matched by similarly exhilarating novelty in their sexual politics. It is their work that generates critical debate; Nichols does not fit in. I would like to argue that the irrelevance of orthodox critical frameworks to her poetry is, in itself, proof of her originality. But it is not quite so easy to dismiss orthodoxy when it holds the purse strings and the power to shape tomorrow's literary history.

I was particularly anxious about this part of my research. I was used to poems that were formally orthodox: the content might be subversive, but they *looked* conventional. They were shaped into regular stanzas and followed clear rhythmic patterns. Until now I had not had to part company with traditional literary criticism; I'd simply used its techniques on poems that never seemed to be selected for 'the treatment'. I had not been forced to question the establishment's propensity for allusive, solemn, 'heavyweight' poetry (like Derek Walcott's latest bruiser, 'weighing in at over 300 pages' [3].) However radical the content of the poems I had been reading, I could still comfortably play the critic, pointing out camouflaged references and drawing attention to graceful, if ironic, nods towards the past masters of poetic tradition. Flicking through Nichols'

collections, the lines were so short, the words so 'simple'; the poems looked almost skeletal and, while I couldn't admit it, I was afraid lest the absence of fleshy embellishment signalled a lack of sophistication.

There is another explanation for my anxiety. The pleasure of reading your own experience, - of someone else describing your muddle, or pain, or joy, and not only imposing on it some measure of comforting order but also making it beautiful, - this was not available to me through Nichols as consistently as it had been with other poets. When Eavan Boland remembers drizzly afternoons spent in the musty university library, hours spent pouring over Virgil's Aeneid, I can draw on a similar experience (4). Put bluntly, Boland's poems bear the stamp of the middle-class (white) intellectual, and I know what that is about. But I have no first-hand experience of the Caribbean: no visual, sensory or cultural repository to be activated by a poet, however skilled. This anxiety manifested itself as doubt about my ability to appreciate poetry from a world with which I was entirely unacquainted. Did I understand the techniques of picong and calypso, the rhythms of tropical life? Might I not miss the jokes and the nuances of the language? I would not recognise a saltfish if it lay at my feet. How qualified was I to comment? I felt that my response would inevitably be inauthentic, cackhanded, faked: at best secondhand.

I took a poem by Nichols, 'Praise Song To My Mother', to a poetry course I was running. One of the participants, a woman from Ghana resident in Britain for ten years, said she could

smell the plantain and see the flame tree, but wasn't it difficult for the rest of us to visualise and feel with the same intensity? Inevitably her response was more immediate, more 'felt', than that of the rest of us. As Brathwaite and others have pointed out (5), the (English) poetry taught as a matter of course in West Indian schools was, until recently, completely alien to the students' experience; they were expected to appreciate blankets of snow and icy blasts over the heath. Now, as in Louise Bennett's satirical 'Colonization In Reverse', the process works the other way round. The poem's disingenuous comment on the large numbers of Jamaicans emigrating to England opens with the cheery exclamation:

> Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
> I feel like me heart gwine burs
> Jamaica people colonizin
> Englan in reverse.
>
> By de hundred, by de tousan
> From country and from town,
> By de ship-load, by de plane-load
> Jamaica is Englan boun. (6)

Speakers of 'standard English' need to learn about different inflections and dialects, as well as to acquaint themselves with the unfamiliar rhythms and vocabulary of the Caribbean. We have to bring patience and receptivity to our readings: the humility to acknowledge that we don't know, the energy to find out what a flame tree looks like. The poem is a springboard: if we put enough energy into it, we'll take off higher and in more directions than if we passively take what is immediately clear because familiar, and forget the rest. It is often not easy to find reference books that answer queries about West Indian

mythological characters, historical data or political references. Unlike the massive concordances and textual guides to Shakespeare and Pope, such information is not yet considered essential in any self-respecting research library.

There is a further dimension to this apprenticeship when a White Western critic attempts to read and critique poetry from the Caribbean. The African critic Chinweizu has attacked the 'neo-colonial' enthusiasm with which Western academics have taken up non-western literatures. The dangers of presumption and appropriation are all too clear. In his polemical introduction to Voices From Twentieth Century Africa, Chinweizu attacks what he sees as the invasive attention of white critics moving into fashionable 'African Literary Studies' and their construction of an inaccurate, bastardised 'tradition'. He argues that the literature these critics praise so highly is the work of 'Euroassimilationist collaborators': writers who mimic Western trends. Their popularity all but erases the 'authentic' voice of pure African literature, he claims, - a tradition that, as he points out, predates European literature by some 2,000 years. Quoting Wole Soyinka as an exemplar of 'Euromodernist aesthetics', Chinweizu rails against the fêting of this 'most blatantly anti-black and anti-African..."pure" literature' which is 'paraded as the flower of African literature, while the authentic core of African literature is shunted out from the academic purview under the guise of "folktale".' (7)

With cunning self-deception I embarked on a bizarre research trek through 'the Caribbean', in order to become a better

informed reader. I ploughed through linguistic treatises on the development of Creole, sociological data, studies of folk stories and children's rhymes, political history, the development of the novel... I gathered every study of the 'Black arts' in Britain that I could find and read about Arts Council funding policies, policing at the Notting Hill Carnival, Naseem Khan's controversial research paper 'The Arts Britain Ignores', and the fierce debate that followed. (8) For two months I chased up articles on Black aesthetics and the poems lay unread.

It seems obvious now, of course. At the time I felt I had a duty to 'understand' everything (at well beyond second remove, of course) before I could presume to write about Nichols' poetry. Strangely, for Nichols is most accessible to the British reader: her poems are often set in Britain, and they teach you their rhythms as you read or listen.

Meanwhile my mentor, Mr Bingen, was working overtime. With his 'Port-and-plush-sofa' demeanour he wished merely to make a few inquiries. Yes, it was great fun, her poetry; witty, pleasing in its sharp original images; undoubtedly she was proficient. But, (here he seemed to summon every vestige of his painstakingly-won wisdom; the hefty tomes stacked at the feet of his armchair seemed to loom ever taller and a look of avuncular benignity settled over his face) wouldn't the term 'verse' be better suited? Not, for a moment, to belittle her efforts, but the very lightness, the humour, - at times rather too slick (I thought of 'wherever I lay me knickers, that's my home' (9) and blushed), - surely intimated that *she herself* did not wish to be

taken seriously? She was not concerned with the rather old-hat (he laughed self-deprecatingly) rarefied realms of the philosophical or the metaphysical.

I went in search of her collections of poetry. They are not easy to find. Small, shoestring publishers rely on small, shoestring distribution networks; the chain bookstores rarely bother with such low-profit specialist stock. You generally have to hike your way up to the furthest, darkest, lowest-priority selling space even to find the poetry section. The reward tends to be a smart row of tidy Faber imprints: regular size, format, logo, happily snuggled up together. There are no collections by Grace Nichols. It does not inspire confidence that the spines leap from 'McGough' to 'Owen'. You have to go to the 'alternative' stockists to find the slim volume containing _i is a long memoried woman_. It will probably be tucked away between the recycled toilet paper and the Guatemalan gourds. It is more than likely a rather battered copy with a scruffy cover, printed on thin, scratchy paper; the ink is blodgy and blurred. There are misprints and occasionally the lines wobble. (10)

If the sequence was produced so poorly, maybe that was proof of the low expectations and valuation of its author. Perhaps I was guilty of that most embarrassing intellectual gaff: endowing the trivial and ephemeral with a dignity it never even asked for, let alone deserved.

My trawl through the burgeoning bibliography of studies on Caribbean literature seemed to bear out this fear and make Mr Bingen's gentle caution seem embarrassingly appropriate. In

articles on contemporary poetry Grace Nichols was rarely mentioned; a couple of her slightest, lightest lyrics appeared in the anthologies but it was obvious she was not considered a Serious Writer or even marked down as a promising poet-in-waiting.

Why? Is she a 'minor' poet, and if so by what criteria is that assessment made? Is her subject-matter somehow inappropriate, - too humorous, too accessible? Are her lines too short?

These might sound ridiculous suggestions but, as I hope to show, Nichols is a versatile and precise wordsmith, a bold, original poet whose work encompasses experiences barely touched on by her contemporaries. Her omission from critical debate is bewildering. Might this absence actually be due not to common assent about her 'status', but to the lack of available (and accepted) literary critical strategies to elucidate the style and subject matter of her writing? And is it cynical to suggest that part of the explanation for her omission might lie in the establishment's well-demonstrated inability to respond to specifically female experience and metaphor?

B The Construction of a Canon of Caribbean Poetry

Caribbean poetry is, at last, the focus of keen enthusiasm and debate in Britain. During the 'Sixties and 'Seventies a number of anthologies were commissioned, coinciding with and

encouraging the broadening of school syllabi in the West Indies and (later) in Britain. But it is only in the last ten years that British-based companies have caught on. (11) Four large anthologies of poetry from the Caribbean have been published in the last five years by influential conglomerates: *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* (1986), Chatto's *News for Babylon* (1984), Bloodaxe's *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (1989), and *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean* published by Longman in 1989. The educational publishers have also been busy. In 1989 Longman brought out a fully revised and updated edition of Kenneth Ramchand's *West Indian Poetry*, specifically geared to the Jamaican CXC examination syllabus. Stewart Brown's *Caribbean Poetry Now* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1984) is aimed at the same market, in conjunction with Julie Pearn's excellent introduction for British-based children less familiar with Caribbean lifestyles, *Poetry in the Caribbean*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985). Publishing activity is reflected in the criticism industry. Influential poetry journals are devoting entire issues to this 'new' poetry which, of course, is less new than the attention being given to it. A 'tradition' is being mapped out, influences and developments charted and an implicit (but neverthless clear) 'pecking order' established. Despite the commendable caveats of those who realise that for every newly-acclaimed Big Name many other, equally important writers remain unknown, the magazines tend to feature the same few names repeatedly. (12) Consequently, in Britain 'Caribbean writers'

are now accepted as a cohesive group, which is ironic considering the diversity of languages, cultures and politics amongst the islands, and the various patterns of migration and return traced across their territories. Literary critics have given birth to a united nation where successive governments struggle even to create a unified state.

C The familiar omission : 'we the women'

Back in the dark ages, long before 'Post-Feminism' burst triumphantly onto the stage of cultural politics, Tillie Olsen and Joanna Russ (among others) devoted many hours to the counting game: how many women writers made it on to school and college syllabi, how many of them were included in anthologies, etc. Between 5 and 8%, they concluded: the percentage of literature by women, on courses or in collections, never exceeded 8%. Even when new names were added, they appeared in place of a staple name, not in addition to it. (13) Carol Rumens and Fleur Adcock may express optimism at the passing of such days (14), but the statistics remain stubbornly consistent (15). And it is depressing to discover that such percentages remain true of the Caribbean literary tradition currently being hyped and documented. Certainly the figures are not quite so consistently low, but, predictably, the more prestigious the anthology, the fewer women poets. (16) Obviously head-counts are trivial and reductive, yet they do demonstrate an important paradox.

Repeatedly, the editors of these recent anthologies pay tribute to the astonishing achievements of contemporary women poets in their introductions, yet when you come to look at the poems themselves the choices are limited, unrepresentative or merely careless - the same poems 'borrowed' from a previous collection.

What are the explanations for this bias? It is not as though all the famous names in Caribbean literature have been men. Louise Bennett was the first poet to make successful poetry from what was then termed 'dialect', and her performances drew crowds of 60,000 to the theatres. (17) She was internationally famous. Nor is there any shortage of younger women excelling in the competitive recitals that take place all over the islands every year. For once, poetry seems equally open to boys and girls. At grass roots level, women are active creators, performers and evaluators of poetry. It is when literature becomes professionalised and institutionalised, and when the big international publishing houses start signing up individual writers, that the number of women involved drops.

I shall examine some of the determining features of this newly-born tradition and the premises upon which it is based, because I believe these factors are instrumental in the exclusion of much poetry by women. Critics and editors (still invariably male) draw on critical debates that have yet to acknowledge or incorporate gender within their analyses. Theories of post-colonialism, pluralist aesthetics, race, and nationalism meet, overlap and contradict one another, but they all tend to marginalise the impact of gender. But before concentrating on

Caribbean poetry, I think it is important to sketch in some of the debates surrounding Black aesthetics and the advantages and drawbacks with colour-labelling poetry.

D Black Aesthetics

> Just as I have never heard of 'white writing' I have no idea what 'black writing' is. (18)

What is 'black poetry'? Why the need to distinguish poets on the basis of skin colour? Why does the Peterloo poetry competition see fit to offer two prizes: the main one of £1000, and one of £500 for the best 'Afro-Caribbean or Asian' entry? Black poet, Black British poet: what do such labels mean? Just as the grouping of poets on the basis of gender is always tendentious, so too the attempt to map out a Black aesthetic provokes fierce dispute. It is interesting, however, that at least some effort is underway to clear a space for this ill-defined quantity, 'Afro-Caribbean or Asian poetry'; even though the kind of segregation offered by Peterloo generates more anger than support, it is difficult to imagine a national competition offering a separate prize for the best 'female' entry. (19)

As is the case with the female aesthetic, most attempts to define and inscribe a Black aesthetic have come from North American writers and critics. The Afro-American literary tradition first grew out of the abolitionist movement, and theorists emphasise the importance of this original impulse over

the subsequent development of their literary tradition. Henry Louis Gates makes this point in Talking Black:

> The Afro-American literary tradition is distinctive in that it evolved in response to allegations that its authors did not, and could not, create literature, a capacity that was considered the signal measure of a race's innate 'humanity'. The African living in Europe or in the New World seems to have felt compelled to create a literature not only to demonstrate that blacks did indeed possess the intellectual ability to create a written art but also to indict the several social and economic institutions that delimited the 'humanity' of all black people in Western cultures. (20)

In Britain, the relationship between coloniser and colonised is complicated by the effectiveness of British cultural imperialism: the inculcation, through education and government, of respect and awe for what was seen as the nurturing 'Mother Country'. As a result, clearcut oppositional literature is a rarity, and the complex intermeshing of indigenous and English traditions renders North American theoretical approaches inappropriate. Poets from a colonised culture tend to have a schizophrenic attitude to the colonial literary past: its influences are ingrained and, in order to write outside this imposed tradition they have to exorcise them, to clear the ground in order to make space for their own poetry.

So poets from the Caribbean have, until very recently, been brought up on an almost exclusively Western 'Great Tradition'. They have needed to engage with that opus, to take issue with its implied assertion of pre-eminence and universality, in order to heal or at least make sense of the enormous gulf between their experience and world, and that represented and promulgated in the

gilt volumes of the past. The poets they need to engage with are the poets they learned their craft from. Thus Derek Walcott, steeped in English (and North American) tradition, wrestles with Wordsworth and Homer (21), while David Dabbydeen attacks the euphemistic gentility of English lyric poetic tradition, at the same time observing tersely, 'one always writes in response to English poetry'. (22)

There are obvious problems for the female poet in this scenario, - the kinds of problems encountered and articulated so clearly by Boland, in her relationship to a tradition that is both model and inspiration, and an enduring symbol of her own invisibility and exclusion as a woman. The traditional stories are male-centred and women play only peripheral parts in them. These Classical patriarchal dramas are undergoing yet another renaissance in the work of male poets from Seamus Heaney to Walcott, but Lorna Goodison is the only female practitioner to rework this mythological material. (23) Apart from her the work of women poets from the Caribbean notably avoids the staple myths of Western tradition. Instead they draw on the fabric of indigenous culture: the stories of Annacy, the heroic deeds of Nanny of the Maroons, the texture and tone of everyday life. (24) Women are inevitably less in thrall to (and less enthralled by) the staple myths of the colonialists' culture, since they have been largely excluded from the occasional patronage afforded their exceptional brothers. Living more closely in touch with the local community, they draw on the familiar substance of their lives. Shakespeare and Wordsworth may well make up that

substance to the exiled academic Brathwaite, but to Louise Bennett, local reactions to the employment of female police or the transparent social climbing of 'passing' for white provided the organic material for her work. It is hardly surprising that, until very recently, her poetry was omitted from anthologies. Western critical tools were hopeless to deal with this kind of unintellectual subject matter: no allusions, no internal rhyme, - what could you say about such poetry? As Suzanne Juhasz observes in her critique of orthodox critical practice:

> what is commonly considered to be 'good' literature, the poem that is thought of as 'really poetry,' is usually the work that responds well to criticism - for example, the poems upon which we learned our craft as critics, or poems like them... (25)

And since the critic inevitably hadn't learned his (sic) craft on poems like Bennett's, he would tend to avoid them. Similarly, Nichols' poetry seems to take nothing from the literature of the past.. The only mention she gives it is to send up Hamlet's soliloquy in 'To Pee Or Not To Pee'.

Inevitably, poets' borrowings or revisions are marked by a profound ambivalence to the colonial heritage. The tension is between belonging and autonomy; love of the poetry, hatred of the slave-owners, confusion and anxiety at the overlap. Similar complexities accompany debates around the nature of Black aesthetics in Britain. There is no consensus among critics or practitioners. Kwesi Owusu puts forward a radical definition of Black art in his study of The Struggle for Black Arts In

Britain. He insists on the interrelatedness of art and politics in the Black community, announcing:

> To be BLACK is not merely a matter of skin colour. It is a state of consciousness..., a living, interminable challenge to Imperialism in the metropolis... In this book we always assume an inseparable link between 'arts' and 'politics', and between Black arts and the Black community which nurtures and sustains them. (26)

The Guyanese poet Fred D'Aguiar does not seem to share this strong sense of community. In his introduction to a selection of 'Black British Poetry' he declares that:

> Two Black poets in Britain today are likely to have less in common than two poets picked out of a hat. (27)

The West Indian poet James Berry makes a similar point more forcibly: he is deeply suspicious of the concept of 'Black writing', and sensitive to the fineness of the line between segregation and the creation of a ghetto-mentality that shunts Black poets to the sidelines, exoticising and isolating their work. The very claim that you can single out an arbitrary 'group' of poets on the unexamined, unjustified grounds of race, - not nationality, not shared aesthetics, just skin colour, - betrays the enduring attraction of 'English literature' as a 'pure' national product. Suzanne Scafe draws attention to the absurd vagueness of the label in her helpful study, Teaching Black Literature:

> 'Black' literature is so defined because it is different from (white) literature. It is neither a description of form nor of location, but is used cross-culturally and cross-nationally to describe, inclusively, African writing in English, French, Portuguese or Swahili; Caribbean writing, literature by

> non-white writers in Britain and so on. The difference is one which is created and perpetuated by the selectivity of the literary establishment and its 'tradition', and is one which is exploited by Black writers themselves. (28)

The idea that there are various 'subgroups' kept out on the margins reinforces the illusion of a coherent, unified 'British poetry'. Where is the contemporary 'centre' to which such groups are peripheral? In reality there is no firm consensus, just the disproportionately influential opinions of a few London-based editors, all - perhaps unfairly - much-maligned, precisely because of their power. In their article 'Finding the Centre: "English" Poetry After Empire', Mark Williams and Alan Riach hint at the economic basis of such authority, demonstrating how the 'centre' shifted in the 1960s and '70s away from England to the United States, at the beginning of the process they describe significantly as the 'exporting' of American poetry. (29) Les Murray speaks of 'the dreadful tyranny where only certain privileged places are regarded as the centre and the rest are provincial and nothing good can be expected to come out of them', (30) and lays the blame at the door of the publishers:

> Australian publishing is all British- or American-owned - though there is also a certain Mr Murdoch who belongs to the super-nationality of the rich. The pipe flows all one way: so you get 'real' Penguin Books and you get Penguin Australia and while books from America and Europe come to us, none of our material flows back. (31)

While the economics of the publishing world inadvertently help shore up the frail timbers of literary imperialism, so too do our

more conservative critics. Williams and Riach are a refreshing change; they suggest putting an end to the tendency to place European inheritances at the centre of English literary studies:

> we must question that longstanding and entrenched assumption within English studies that the Renaissance, with its rooting in the classics, remains the torso of English studies while all the subsequent periods constitute the outer limbs. (32)

They praise the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris for his acceptance of 'the conflicting demands of tradition *and* difference': an openness to the plurality and complexity of cultural legacies in a post-colonized world, and a move away from the tendency to see non-western traditions as somehow reliant on the former colonial powers. Yet however attractive this non-hierarchical, friendly pluralism sounds, it cannot do anything about the economic clout that enables the West to determine standards and reputations.

Aside from the political implications of colour segregation it is worth repeating Gillian Allnutt's argument that it is against the very nature of poetry to impose cumbersome external labels upon its creators:

> To put any sociologically descriptive tag - be it black, working-class, gay, lesbian or feminist - in front of poetry, is to limit its possibilities. To me, poetry must be one of the few areas of language use where it is acceptable, indeed obligatory, to try and break up the boxes we ordinarily think in... (33)

And yet, the use of such descriptive tags seems to me justified on two grounds. The first is a strategic unity: banding together

as a neglected group, sharing political solidarity, under a banner that offers a greater chance of visibility and recognition. As the Movement poets proved so successfully, launching a set of individuals as a 'school' commands greater public attention, making access to publication more likely. However dissimilar their work might actually be, poets inevitably cut more ice as a group: the solitary unknown name joins up with four others and can perhaps even persuade a publishing house to produce an anthology of 'Black writing'. If nothing else, they provide the reviewer with a yardstick for comparison. This is the pragmatist's defence. The same impulse led to the 'women only' anthologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and naturally, the strategy is vulnerable to the same sorts of distortions. (See Chapter 1, pp 15-19) But there is also a more serious literary rationale acknowledged, I think, in Peterloo's somewhat clumsy prizewinning categories: the need to provide an interpretative context for new writing, so that innovative forms and perspectives are not received in bemused incomprehension. As I have already argued, some knowledge of the culture and traditions that have formed a backdrop to the poet's nascent creativity can only enrich interpretation, and since the institutions that train tomorrow's literary critics cleave stubbornly to the scansion of Augustan satire, there is little likelihood of them being familiar with the traditions of other cultures. Poems that exploit such 'exotic' stylistic devices are likely to appear bizarre printed alongside the arch understatements that characterise our own Larkin-lamenting age.

In Britain today there is a feeling amongst those Black writers who have won recognition that segregation works against them. The cynic might suggest that now they are 'mainstream' they no longer need the political solidarity of a marginal group, but in fact the support and work they put into promoting the writing of other up-and-coming Black writers invalidates this suspicion. James Berry, whose bemused query about what 'Black writing' means opens this section, typifies their disquiet. Berry is rightly respected not only as an excellent poet, but for his editorial achievement in <u>News From Babylon</u>, and for his work promoting poetry in schools. He wrote to <u>Poetry Review</u> to protest at their dubious distinction between 'Black Writing' and 'Poems':

> ...the PR [Poetry Review] presented David Dabbydeen, Fred D'Aguiar, James Berry, E A Markham captioned under BLACK WRITING. Then, further down on the cover listings comes, POEMS: James Lasdun, Anne Stevenson, Daniel Abse, etc. The suggestion is extraordinary. One group does 'Black writing', the other does 'Poems'...Why this new sectioning off of Black writers? ... 'Segregation', 'colour discrimination', 'lynching' 'apartheid' all ran through my head. Then another string of separatist's terms followed - 'darky', 'wog', 'halfcaste', 'non-white', 'minority', 'ethnic'...Was I being sectioned off and placed separately to become a target? (34)

That this strong unease is widespread was signalled by the attitude of the writers present at the British Asian Writers' Symposium at Warwick in June 1990. Even amongst an ethnic community so poorly acknowledged in mainstream literary circles the mood was against targeting subsidy towards Asian writers. There were heated exchanges between a representative of the Arts

Council and members of the audience protesting against the policy of earmarking specific funds to 'Black' writers, and strong resentment at the Peterloo poetry competition's decision to have two prizes. A few voices admitted the necessity for financial aid and promotion, but the predominant mood appeared to be frustration over this 'special' treatment.

Just as the troubled category 'women poets' can end up serving as a justification for the '*gynecomyopia*' (35) of poetry editors and critics, so with colour distinctions: it is hard to draw the line between a segregation that operates to keep the writers marginal, fending off any potential threat to the status quo, and a genuine effort to support and foster the development of a radically different perspective. In both cases the rationale for unity is grounded in an inevitably political experience of prejudice, oppression and neglect which can appear to have little to do with the art of writing poetry. In the introduction to their anthology Right of Way the Asian Women Writers' Workshop record their difficulties in deciding what to call their group:

> When we made the transition from a workshop to a collective, political arguments arose from the name we should give ourselves. Some of us suggested that we should call ourselves 'black' women to show our alignment with that part of the movement which believes that Asian and Afro-Caribbean women face a common oppression and that the way ahead is to fight together. Others felt that they had been squeezed out of black women's writing groups where the women were predominantly Afro-Caribbean and the implicit attitude was that the term 'black' belonged to them. Yet others felt that there were cultural differences which would make it difficult to respond critically and knowledgeably to Afro-Caribbean writing and vice versa. There was also the feeling that there was no Asian

women's forum... (36)

Such unflinching and painstaking attention to questions of political affiliation may seem far removed from the aesthetic pleasures of poetry, but to argue that such matters are irrelevant is to ignore their crucial influence over recognition, emergence and publication for the individual poet. It is tantamount to subscribing to what Adrienne Rich describes as:

> the falsely mystical view of art that assumes a kind of supernatural inspiration, a possession by universal forces unrelated to questions of power and privilege or the artist's relation to bread and blood. (37)

What looks like a mere squabble over a name betrays a fragmented and patchwork poetic identity. This anxiety about naming is not a straightforward debate about colour politics, but symptomatic of the absence of an accepted and signposted tradition for Asian writers living in Britain. All poets need this sense of context and location. Brathwaite's landmark lecture, The History of the Voice, and his promotion of Creole as a poetic language rich in potential, did a lot to provide Caribbean poetry with such a context. Poets (read 'male') from the Indian subcontinent have, as yet, little profile in Britain; there are no famous names to map out the complexities of the many venerable strains of poetry in the subcontinent. As Horovitz notes, only two of the twenty-two 'Black British' poets selected by D'Aguiar for the new british poetry are of Asian origin. (38) Without this clear tradition the poets flounder

between affiliations with their native styles and the influences of English tradition or contemporary poetry. Even if they themselves carve out a context, their readership may lack the signposts to enable an informed reading. For Asian *women* poets, there is a choice to be made. They have to rely on the larger-scale profiles either of 'Asian poetry' or 'women's poetry' for recognition and evaluation, because of the overcrowded and competitive publishing world and the nervous, sheeplike behaviour of our critics. In the light of such basic material obstacles, current debate about 'Black aesthetics' seems often to function as an intellectually stimulating red herring that ends up obscuring the ubiquity of female exclusion.

E Black Women Poets: 'sequestered in the monolith'

Location and a sense of community are, then, important to the poet, and also to the successful marketing of her work. Hence the publishing houses' preference for launching new 'series' of poets: not necessarily because the chosen writers have anything in common, but because they generate more attention appearing side-by-side. It would seem a sensible strategy for Black women poets to strengthen their access to various strands of media attention. But there are very few outlets for their work. Black women have virtually no power in the British publishing scene (nor in television, film, or literary journals). At the

most optimistic count there are three houses devoted to publishing their work, and all three are minute businesses with very poor distributive networks. (39) In the United States, Black women's organisations are much more powerful and there are many more publishing groups specialising in Black women's writing. Black women in Britain have not got access to production on anything like the same scale. I have already mentioned the difficulties of finding copies of Nichols' poetry. As I have pointed out, if you want to find books by or about Black women's creativity you go to the specialist 'Third World' shop, not Waterstones.

Consequently the status of Black female aesthetics is shaky. Black women rarely get reviewed in mainstream literary journals. They get sketchy mentions in Spare Rib and Race Today, but even this airing tends to reinforce a notion of their work as somehow not 'poetry', pure and simple. The only sizeable house to publish a collection of Black women's poetry is The Women's Press (40). It is easy to see why there is an unvoiced prejudice that 'Black poetry' is for Black people, hence 'Black women's poetry' for Black women. The 'political' or radical magazines obviously want to choose punchy, accessible poems that make sharp protests. A reluctant literary establishment unwilling to search beyond these publications can happily conclude that all 'Black' poetry is 'protest poetry', and that they need have no more to do with it. (41) The emergence of a figure of the stature and talent of Maya Angelou or Audre Lorde might do much to alter this state of affairs. Instead Benjamin Zephaniah and M. C. Hammer

are the popular representatives of Black creativity in Britain and, while the former has cleaned up his sexual politics, the macho tones of rappers offer a pervasive image of Black culture that muffles the achievements of Black women poets.

Accepting the classification 'Black women poets', and the inevitably close relationship between poetry and politics, creates another problem. There is the danger of sacrificing poetic individuality to a search for 'the' Black woman's voice. In North America the problems attendant on such a close alliance between the politics of the Black and the feminist movements and the poetry written by Black feminists has been sharply acknowledged by Ntozake Shange. She is an Afro-American poet who models her poetry around an innovative fusion of the rhythms of Jazz and Blues. In 'takin a solo / a poetic possibility / a poetic imperative', she draws attention to this tendency to lump all Black poets - or Black women poets - together by contrasting the treatment of Black American poets with that of the musicians. No one could mistake Tina Turner for Bessie Smith: their voices are distinctive, and such a confusion would reveal a total lack of musical understanding. Yet when it comes to writers:

> we, as a people, or as a literary cult, or a literary culture / have not demanded singularity from our writers. we cd all sound the same. come from the same region. be the same gender. born the same year.....(42)

Shange extends the implications of this depersonalisation, reading it as a sign of political and cultural invisibility:

> that means there is absolutely no acceptance of blk

> personal reality. if you are 14, female & black in the u.s.a. / you have one solitary voice / though you number 3 million / no nuance exists for you / you have been sequestered in the monolith / the common denominator as persona. (43)

Shange's innovative style - use of slashes in place of line breaks, and the re-spelling of certain words - mark her blatant dissociation from the traditions of English poetry. She draws attention to the flipside of political solidarity when applied to writers and, by implication, to Black communities in general. This is not to say that poetry cannot be political (I would argue that all literature inevitably is); it is to insist that any attempt to extract a single political 'meaning' from poetry impoverishes the poem which is trying to convey much more. Narrowly political interpretations easily slide into reductive superficial readings that inhibit a fuller, more subjective enjoyment of the poetry.

Various expectations are already linked to the designation 'Black women': the label now signfies resistance, resilience, strength and determination. Such assumptions may colour critical assessments of the poems of Black women. There are very few academic papers on Black women poets writing in Britain, but the only one I have had access to certainly falls into this trap. 'Difficult Subjects: Black British Women's Poetry', an essay by Patrick Williams, is a very strange affair. Williams implicitly embraces the stereotype of the Black woman as an indefatiguable warrior, adversary of all injustice, parodist of tightlipped British convention and of men. The assumption is built into the title: these women are tricky customers. There is not a world of

difference between the old stereotype of the African matriarch, massive and domineering, and this zealous pioneering creature. Williams expects defiance and retaliation, so he does not notice any other tone in the poems. He sounds rather like an earnest social worker creeping into the most notorious estate in town, full of admiration but already too sure of what he will find to notice anything else.

The article is curious in other ways. Williams never explains why he has chosen these particular poets. The group looks rather arbitrary, comprising women of Caribbean, Chinese, and African origins, but offering no discussion of their cultural diversity nor the ways in which their very different experiences, - some born and raised in Britain and only visiting their native lands as adults, some coming to Britain in their twenties, - shape and influence their poetry. They all write what he describes as 'minor' literature, meaning literature written by a minority in the language of the dominant majority, rather than 'of little significance', although the ambiguity is troubling. From his footnotes it would appear that he has drawn on six collections of poetry, all published by women's presses. It is worth pointing this out, since not only does it demonstrate that the women's presses are the *only* ones publishing Black women poets, but it also raises the question of other women (of all colours) whose themes or artistic beliefs make them unsuitable for publication by the feminist houses or who select themselves out on personal grounds. Where are they published? Williams apparently presumes the political stereotype to be fact - that

all Black women are left-wing feminist activists.

More importantly, his analysis ignores the poetry. He is interested in what he defines as the three main characteristics of 'minor' literature: it displays a high degree of deterritorialisation; everything in it is political; the tone is collective rather than individual. We are informed via a quotation from Frederic Jameson that for writers in the Third World life is struggle; poetry is defiant, aggressive. It leaves no room for the indulgences of individualism:

> Third world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society. (44)

Is it just hopelessly Western and middle-class to plead that poetry can be created from the heart and the soul, the private realms? That it communicates the personal so skilfully as to open up a subjective truth so others can have access to it, rather than transforming that personal truth into public, political allegory? I am not quite sure what a 'properly libidinal dynamic' is, but the widespread disapproval expressed by theorists (not only Marxists; the theme appears more general today) towards the corruptions of the personal is particularly ironic considering the difficulties women have claiming access to (and validity for) that personal voice at all. (45)

This tone of categorising, simplifying, determining who belongs with which 'camp' pervades the essay. It shifts the

focus away from the poems and into the arena of theorised political confrontation. Williams' metaphors inadvertently transform the poems themselves into weapons; he argues that the poets' use of Creole is 'a deliberate attempt at reterritorialization' (p. 115), apparently visualising some kind of military confrontation. On one level, of course, writing in Creole can be an uncompromising gesture of defiance, but it is often something subtler too. The emergence of Caribbean Creoles was a mark of the tenacious spirit and determined survival of a people living under slavery. Today such 'dialects' have evolved into sophisticated languages combining elements of individual African languages and English, French, Dutch or Spanish. Linguistically and poetically, the meeting of two languages stimulates an inrush of new mythologies, traditions, rhythms and images, enriching and renewing the old stock. Such a cross-fertilization revitalises poetic language. Williams' military metaphors of 'reterritorialization' are ill-equipped to convey the complexity of this dialectical motion. Where he sees a polarisation - standard English versus native Creole - the poems themselves enact a more subtle, enriching synthesis of languages and cultures.

This search for hostile affray dominates his understanding of feminism too. Towards the close of his survey he turns his attention to gender as a relevant site of inquiry. Yet he appears to interpret gender politics as hostility to men. In his trawl for evidence of this particular ideological strain he dredges up two examples: 'the sarcasm and dislike of unthinking

male physicality in Carole Stewart's "Jerry Perm Poem" ', (p. 123) and 'the exposure of sexism so blatant it requires no comment in Rita Anyiam-St John's "One Man To Another" ' (p. 124). Sure enough, it gets no comment.

Williams discusses the poetry as if it were documentary evidence of the life of 'the Black woman' in Britain. The essay sits uneasily somewhere between a cursory literature survey and a socio-linguistic inquiry into the political affiliations of Black women in Britain. This becomes clear when he asks:

> Should Black women form alliances only with other Black women, or with white women as well, making common cause against patriarchy? Or should their first allegiance be to Black men, regardless of the problems of sexism, in order to present a united front against racism and social injustice?...The poems offer no simple answer... (p 125)

Poetry is not usually taken as a fit yardstick for measuring the political climate. 'Allegiance' is a revealing word: is there talk of Black male poets' first 'allegiance'? And what exactly does Williams intend by 'patriarchy'? He slips it into the paragraph as though we are all agreed on the controversial word's meaning.

In short, the political concepts he uses are too leaden to pick up the resonances of poetic language. His expectation of confrontation and hostility from Black towards White encourages him to seek examples of race solidarity in the poems. This leads him, for instance, to misread Amryl Johnson's sequence about Carnival in Trinidad. In 'Panorama from the North Stand', the

narrator stands watching the frenetic motions of the crowds as they gyrate to the steel bands. (46) She feels her status keenly: an outsider, a visitor from England, despite the fact this island was once her home. Williams writes that:

> the sort of relentless questioning of individual identity, role and responsibility...gives way...to a feeling of joyful merging with the collective body (p 119).

Yet the poems seem to me to suggest just the opposite: a heightening of the sense of being an outsider. The narrator struggles to put the scene into words but her language is wooden and heavily Latinate: quite incongruous as an attempted description of the frenzied rhythmic possession of the dancers. She cannot rid herself of the self-consciousness that holds her apart from the festivities. The poem develops a subtle distinction between the narrator's self-scrutiny and the utterly unselfconscious abandon of those around her. While she claims to be carried away by the music and the street parades, the way she details her state of mind suggests rather a *yearning for* abandon, not its achievement. The insistent listing of her observations and the formalised style of her reflections form a stark contrast to the truly expressive exclamations of the revellers:

> This is nothing to do with a steelband competition
> This is co-existence in an atmosphere so highly charged
> I am carried sky-high on a bolt of electricity
> set free from enslavement
> loosened from my inhibitions
> I may never need to take refuge there again
> DJ music punctuates the steel orchestrations
> A hot calypso favourite sends arms flying
> voices raised in raucous rendition
>   Oh Gard, oh!
>   Oh meh lard, oh!
>   Oh Lard, oh!

Oh meh gard, oh!

The contrast between these last four lines - so clearly not her own, but reported speech - and the flat, highly abstract nouns that come thick and fast heightens the tension. Rather than the joyful oneness Williams detects, to me Johnson dramatises the unbridgeable distance between the Europeanised returner and her native people. She does not know the rituals; does not understand why, when the celebrated band, the Desperadoes, start playing, there is a lack of enthusiasm among the crowd. The poem works around this tension between the analytical intellectuality of her responses, and the bacchanalia:

> This is nothing to do with a steelband competition
> This is a lesson in living
> I am amazed at their capacity for enjoyment
> I am humbled by their generosity
> I am dwarfed by their magnanimity
> I am envious of their spontaneity
> I am -
> Am I the only person looking at the band?
> Everyone else has his back to the stage
> hailing his friends
> Cedric, Merrill, Look meh!

The narrator sounds like a social anthropologist observing the bizarre but delightful rituals of an unknown tribe. The insistent introspection - 'I am' - both emphasises the gulf between watcher and participants and mocks the inescapable cerebrality of Western culture. But the speaker cannot shrug off this part of her personality, ingrained over the years of upbringing in England that have made her incontrovertibly different. Williams's reading is literal: he takes the poem

at face value, as straight 'evidence' rather than poetry that is layered, contradictory and imaginative.

For Williams these poems have to come down on one side or the other. He wants their allegiance to be a clearcut matter of politics, not the messy complexity of emotional affiliation. He cannot see that Johnson's persona yearns to be one of the celebrants transported in a furore of joy and rhythm but cannot achieve that state. The premises of his argument depend on poetry affirming the solidarity of the embattled minority, and the dissolution of any differences that might exist between them.

The unexamined assumption underlying the whole essay is that the Black women poets he discusses themselves accept, even actively promote, their group identity. Yet, as D'Aguiar argues, there is no rationale for classifying all Black British poets under one umbrella. (47) If Williams was offering some literary as well as thematic evidence of a shared aesthetic it would be different. But as it is he ignores the significant differences between Nichols and Johnson, as well as between the other poets he mentions. His essay illustrates the accuracy of Shange's misgivings about the denial of individuality. Not only does he repeatedly equate the 'I' of the poem with its author, implying female poets can only write autobiographically, he also disregards differences of style, theme, nationality, age: all differences, in sum, because he employs a vague, undefined notion of 'Black' female group identity.

F **The Caribbean poetry tradition**

Why the continuing under-representation of women poets? So far I have been discussing *written* poetry, but poetry from the Caribbean is closely allied with community and performance. The Western division between 'oral' and written poetry is challenged by Afro-Caribbean tradition and further eroded by the virtuoso performances of writers who have made their home in this country. Dub and rap poetry have achieved almost cult status; the enormous influence they are having on youth culture has even ensured at least some academic attention, although this tends to come from the sociologists and cultural studies departments, rather than from literature faculties. In these more cautious, conservative corridors a firm line is still drawn between what is now dignified with the title 'performance poetry' and more 'literary' work. The younger, more experimental presses are beginning to bridge the gap by publishing the texts of performers' work, but bearing in mind the hierarchy of 'quality' publishing houses, it still makes sense to speak of these two different registers of Caribbean poetry. When Faber start publishing Benjamin Zephaniah it might be time for a rethink, but for the moment the division stands. (48)

It is perhaps not surprising that women are under-represented in the world of performance. Traditionally the role of public speaker is one reserved, in all patriarchal societies, for men. Women usually win access to this position by supernatural or mystical claims, as channels through which supernatural agencies

choose to communicate. The figure of the poet in African community life, the griot, who conveyed news, announcements or tribal lore, is traditionally male. Contemporary performance poetry continues to be a largely male-dominated sphere. It tends to be controversial, hard-hitting, often deliberately avant-garde. Radical protest has always proved to be tough terrain for the female performer. The dub poet Jean Binta Breeze touches on these problems in a recent piece for Women: A Cultural Review. At her first performance at a Reggae Sunsplash concert, people found it difficult to equate her angry stance with her gender; they were much happier when her work was re-recorded by a male colleague, Mutabaruka. Binta Breeze explains:

> many people thought they were lyrics much more suited to a male voice and someone even suggested that they had been written by a man....it was much more masculine to achieve such distance from the subjective or personal. (49)

Cutting more sharply into the roots of such prejudice, she recalls being chastised for her sensual dancing during the performance:

> I was told by many people that a radical dub poet should not be 'wining up her waist' on the stage as it presented a sexual image rather than a radical one.

After that incident she took to wearing khaki uniforms on stage for a while, before determining that what some saw as provocative gyration was her body's natural participation in the rhythms of creativity. Now, she says:

> I dress in a way in which the woman in me is totally at ease in motion so the body can also sing and I dare

> anyone to say that for a woman to be accepted as a radical voice she cannot celebrate her own sensuality.

Performance poetry blurs the dividing line between 'high' and popular art forms, often critiquing the elitism of the former in ways that ought to make it a sympathetic forum for feminist practice. Unfortunately all too often radical protest seems to go hand-in-hand with machismo. American-influenced street rapping would seem to be a rite of passage as unrelievedly masculine as the street gangs of the 'Fifties and the romanticised image of boyhood promulgated by films like Stand By Me. On the testimony of one researcher, the situation is no different in Trinidad, the original home of such expressive performance. In her brief overview of Trinidadian calypsos, Elma Reyes detects a similarly misogynistic strain permeating the island's popular lyrics which 'portray Caribbean women as money-crazy, promiscuous, evil schemers' (50). She explains that it is the raunchy, sexy lyrics that sell:

> Any woman who objects to the sexist treatment of women in calypsos encounters the argument that most other women are not bothered by it. She is told that women are the staunchest calypso fans and that the Mighty Sparrow has been most popular, during his 28 years in the field, when he produced songs relating to his sexual encounters with women. (p. 121)

Reyes concludes, depressingly, that, 'women's rights do not seem to be adaptable as a suitable theme by the exponents of calypso - male or female' (p. 119).

In Britain some efforts are being made to alter this situation, and to encourage women to venture into the realms of performance art. Julie Pearn's Poetry in The Caribbean

recognises the extent to which dub poetry and rapping are seen as male pursuits. At the end of the section on 'Poems For Protest' she suggests some exercises for practical work. One idea is to compose and perform a piece of dub poetry to the B side of a reggae record, taking the theme of injustice. After the instructions she adds a message for female students: '(Girls, make sure you get a go.)' (51)

The obstacles facing female performers are not hard to find. Yet the omission of their voices persists in the more rarefied realms of anthologies and further education syllabuses. Four female poets out of a total of fourteen in Hinterland; fourteen out of eighty-eight in Voiceprint; fourteen out of sixty-seven in West Indian Poetry; three out of forty in News for Babylon. (Once again there are separatist anthologies like Jamaica Woman (52) attempting to redress the balance and taking pains, in so doing, to emphasise that their separatism is not hostile or chauvinist.) But why is it that the editors of these 'general' contemporary anthologies of Caribbean poetry reproduce precisely the same gender imbalance, in spite of their explicit recognition of the work of female counterparts?

The editors of these collections, - indeed all the men whose dedication and hard work has contributed to the overdue recognition granted poetry from the Caribbean - were the handpicked recipients of the "Mother Country"'s questionable philanthropy. They travelled on university scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge, as the triumphant climax to years of learning about and admiring the great British literary heritage.

Going to Britain was like escaping; they viewed the Caribbean as a cultural backwater. They were encouraged to feel both humble and enormously privileged. As I have already suggested, it was inevitable, under such circumstances, that they should internalise the criteria and techniques of literary evaluation they were taught. Their understanding of aesthetics and quality judgement is drawn from the same authorities as my own: a mixture of Arnold, I A Richards and T S Eliot. (53) They tend not to make explicit the effects of such internalised colonisation, but they are evident from the concerns of their poetry and critical writing. They are hooked into English poetic tradition; they had no choice in the matter. It is both their inspiration and their goad.

The Caribbean poetry 'nation' they have outlined thus has a lot in common with the English tradition, possessing all the hallmarks of a national literary tradition even down to its own martyrs. In his introduction to Hinterland Markham proposes the 'coming of age' of Caribbean poetry, now that the pastoral imitations of English poets have been outgrown. He cites the murder of Michael Smith as a landmark:

> Suddenly we're not the poor relation to the Mandelstams of this world. From Michael Smith's death, we come forward with a sense of equality with the horrors found in Index On Censorship....The stone that killed Michael Smith drained some of the innocence, some of the romantic excess from our poetry... (54)

Furthermore, the need to assert a national identity and to provide a record of the struggles towards independence naturally

take centre-stage in the structuring of these anthologies. Nationalism is not, traditionally, an arena known for its sensitivity to gender politics. All too often a country's declaration of independence and autonomy finds expression in reactionary forms of traditionalism that restrict women's freedom. Feminists are familiar with the hollow promises of equality for women after the revolution. Neverthless, poetry from the Caribbean is remarkable for the lack of this kind of reactionary politics, - perhaps because Caribbean writers have produced direct, realist records of the political upheavals during and in the wake of independence, rather than romanticised versions of the struggle. Inevitably the impact of these countries' efforts towards self-government forms a central theme in their art and is given an important place in the anthologies. Particularly in collections prepared for school use, poems are divided into sections, for ease of reference, with curious effects. In Ramchand's West Indian Poetry, for example, of thirty-nine poems in the sections entitled 'This Land' and 'Struggle and Endurance' only one is by a woman, while 'Politics and Society' offers three out of seventeen, (one of which is appropriately titled 'No Man's Land'). The section titles are drawn from the registers of political and media rhetoric, and unfortunately the editors seem to slot poems into each section in a rather clumsy, superficial way. It looks, from a cursory glance through Ramchand's anthology, as though women do not write about the effects of political and social upheaval. They are represented by love poems and poems about womanhood.

Certainly, their views are often critical towards men or society, - but that is just what Williams selected in his survey, and hardly representative of the variety of theme, tone and technique employed by Caribbean women poets. The problem is a familiar one: a matter of perspective. These women writers approach issues of nationalism and independence from a different angle. Editors seem to interpret themes along narrow, stereotypical lines. A poem detailing a street riot at election time will qualify for inclusion under the noble heading 'Struggle and Endurance', whereas a less blatantly 'political' poem will be overlooked. To give an example, Nichols' 'Waterpot' describes the everyday humiliations of slavery, observing the women as they return from the canefields, chivvied by the impatient overseer:

> The daily going out
> and coming in
> always being hurried
> along
> like like....cattle (55)

In addition to the forced labour inflicted on all slaves, the poem insists on a further *gendered* layering of degradation: the male overseer's mockery and disdain for the woman he owns. He knows she is trying to gather the little dignity that remains to her but the show is pathetic and ludicrous to his cruel eyes:

> she tried hard to walk
> like a woman
>
> she tried very hard
> pulling herself erect
> with every three or four
> steps
> pulling herself together
> holding herself like
> royal cane

The poem recalls all the other occasions on which women pass before men's coolly-assessing gaze, the humiliation of this particular scenario made unbearably sharp by the woman's literal enslavement and his power to rape her at his pleasure. Nichols insists on this gendered dimension to the experience of slavery, and yet it seems as though this insistence works to circumscribe the poem's importance in the eyes of editors. It becomes a poem about women, not about 'Struggle and Endurance'.

While they rarely appear in the political, public sections of anthologies, women poets are beginning to get what seem like their own sections: they end up being represented by themes conventionally associated with the female or domestic role also familiar in western poetic tradition: love, childrearing, etc. Ramchand gestures towards a more inclusive understanding of the variety of poetic themes and includes the sections 'Men and Women', and 'Being A Woman', clearly acknowledging the previous omissions, but the former consists of eighteen poems, only four of them by women. Most of the men's poems are love poems to women, instead of any more sustained, probing studies of relations between the sexes. 'Being A Woman' is clearly considered an impossibility for the busy male scribes so in this section all eight pieces are by women, but what purpose is served by separating these from all the other general poems? Such segregation furthers the misconception that women poets are limited in their themes to some undefined 'women's interest'. Perhaps significantly this section is the only one which is

dropped in Part Two of the book, the part devoted, according to the rubric, to the work of 'less established' poets, - precisely where we might expect to find most of the fourteen lucky women.

G Academic pioneers

So far I have suggested some of the influences working against the equal representation of women within Caribbean poetry. Debates about racial affiliation tend to ignore gender; thematic groupings reproduce narrowly patriarchal definitions of politics; gender segregation without a clearly stated justification only ends up reinforcing women poets' marginality.

The respectability of Caribbean poetry is, as I have intimated, largely due to the work of a few poets who are also academics. Edward Kamau Brathwaite led the way with his lecture, The History of the Voice, first delivered as a medley of taperecordings interspersed with eloquent commentary, which traced the evolution of a colonised poetry and underlined the need for Creole or 'nation language' as he called it, to be recognised as a language in its own right. Brathwaite demonstrated the inappropriateness of the English iambic pentameter as a fit rhythmic structure for Caribbean literature. He pointed out that the tempo of life was utterly different; that the hurricane does not rage in time to such a stately regular fall. The imitative hybrid poetry produced under colonial rule failed to convey the authentic experience of

life in the Caribbean. (56) Brathwaite pioneered an innovative style that finally shook off the straitjacket of Western poetic form, 'mashing' the language and experimenting with Creole language, African-influenced rhythms and mythologies.

The desire to create an indigenous tradition, to shake off the legacy of colonialism and its accompanying weight of cultural imperialism, shapes the development of Caribbean poetry. I may be oversimplifying, but it seems to me this process is marked by one of two attitudes to the literary legacy of the British Empire: entranced admiration coupled with the will to swallow and absorb (like that of the young poet for his 'strong' forefather in Harold Bloom's theoretical blueprint, _The Anxiety of Influence_), or impatient scorn, and the will to kick the English lyric in the teeth. These contrasting responses are visible in the work of two important West Indian poets, Derek Walcott and David Dabbydeen.

Derek Walcott is hailed as one of the greatest living poets and acclaimed throughout North America and Europe. He appeals to the intellectuals: his work is sophisticated, allusive, and resonant with echoes of the great masters of Western literary tradition. He plunders the treasure chest of Shakespeare, Homer and Wordsworth, transplanting their stories to the Caribbean. In his bold quest to forge a glorious tradition for the islands of his birth, both the heroes and the stylistic models of Western tradition are recast in the contemporary tropical landscape of the Caribbean. _Omeros_, already mentioned, is his latest publication: an epic poem on a dazzlingly grand scale. It

draws on The Iliad, The Odyssey and The Aeneid in a skilfully-conceived revisioning of the ancient sources transposed to Walcott's home island, St Lucia. 'Achille' and 'Hector' are local fishermen, quarrelling over the beautiful 'Helen' in her yellow dress. Critics greeted the appearance of this formidable work with admiring awe, above all at its length. No one dares write epic poems these self-effacing days, and Walcott makes it look effortless. His poem is a marvellous celebration of the sea, the island and his own skill. Yet his re-use of the old myths is, in terms of gender, disappointingly conservative. Originality and daring are there in the way he changes the setting; but even in St Lucia the story still seems to offer a giant playpen for the boys; women only get a look in in their standard roles of young princess and old hag. Helen is the object of desire; Ma Kilman the witch or sibyl, elderly proprietor of the local bar. Rather than presenting a challenge to the Classical poetic tradition, Walcott joins it and rewrites it, but the few women who appear are conventional cyphers, peripheral to the action, unexciting and superficially-drawn.

As regards subject matter, David Dabbydeen is more challenging and experimental. He is the author of two poetry collections to date: Slave Song and Coolie Odyssey. Dabbydeen is also an academic at the University of Warwick and author of several articles on Caribbean Creole and Post-Colonial literary criticism. In place of Walcott's obviously deep admiration for the English literary tradition, Dabbydeen substitutes his unique brand of devastating scorn for the 'diseased gentility' (57) of

English lyric poetry. He provides a nice parody of the sickness: its tendency to gaze with languid rapture at a falling autumnal leaf, or contemplate 'the play of the light of memory upon pine furniture' (p. 11). Dabbydeen traces this characteristic indulgent indolence back through literary history and equates its suave, wistful tone with the softening euphemisms of the eighteenth century poet James Grainger who glossed over the brutality of slavery, referring to the overseer as 'Master Swain' and slaves as 'assistant planters' (p. 4). Grainger, Dabbydeen remarks, is 'a classic example in English poetry of the refusal to call a spade a spade' (p. 4). Dabbydeen is understandably impatient with the prettifying and glib gentility of much contemporary English poetry. He attacks the measured, reflective tone of 'quiet understatement' with which English poets demean human tragedy, and argues that such indulgent sentimentality is enjoyed at the expense of others' despair. It is, he claims, characteristic of:

> a tradition of colonizing the experience of others for the gratification of their own literary sensibilities. (p. 11)

Writing about the dialect poems of Slave Song, he uses aggressive language and imagery to echo the raw realities of slavery:

> The canecutter chopping away at the crops bursts into a spate of obscene words, a natural gush from the gut, like fresh faeces. It is hard to put two words together in Creole without swearing. Words are spat out from the mouth like live squibs, not pronounced with elocution....If one has learnt and used Queen's English for a long time, the return into Creole is painful, almost nauseous, for the language is uncomfortably raw. One has to shed one's protective sheath of abstracts and let the tongue move freely and bleed again. One has to get accustomed to the

> unsheathing of the tongue and the contact of raw matter. (58)

All this talk of sheaths, blood and faeces is meant to make you feel uncomfortable. The smooth eloquence of standard English, with its soft, rounded vowels and elaborate circumlocutions is set against this harsh, elemental expression. Dabbydeen has to erase quite a lot of English literature in order to set up this stark contrast between standard English and Creole: the former elegant, polished, ornate, the latter 'angry, crude, energetic'. The schism is artificially stark: English is presented as the language of abstraction, Creole, of choreography and matter. Telescoping the English language into this parody of eloquent abstraction is a deliberate rhetorical ploy. People only speak like that at Cambridge University - where Dabbydeen himself was educated. And, more to the point, he can do it too:

> The canecutter aspires to the lyrical experience and expression but cannot escape his condition of squalor nor the crude diction that such a condition generates. So, to describe beauty, he struggles to transform vulgar words and concepts into lyrical ones, the result being poignant and tragic. He has no poetical words because his experience of life under colonial rule was never poetical. The cry for transfiguration or abstraction is constantly frustrated; he cannot escape his words, cannot escape the mud. (p. 47)

In Slave Song the canecutters are depicted as men whose minds and desires have been perverted by the dehumanising experience of slavery. Wearing his academic hat, Dabbydeen writes of the 'corrosive sexuality' created by colonial subjugation. He argues that, 'The British Empire...was as much a pornographic as an

economic project' (p. 3), and Slave Song boldly attempts to recreate the voices and desires of the victims of that project. In the process of re-imagining their lives he tries to show how men and women's sexuality was distorted by the imposed order but in doing so he unfortunately appears to reproduce some of the most damaging myths about women. One critic, Benita Parry, points this out:

> as the cut, chop, hack and stab of 'the savage ceremony of cane' takes possession of the imagination of male canecutter and slave, the rage against their condition is spent in fantasies of abusing and mutilating the white woman. This implicates the poems in a discourse shared by the master's culture and beyond, one that represents rape as what woman wants. It could be anticipated that a poetry refusing colonialism's misconstructions would displace its premises. (59)

She draws attention to one of Dabbydeen's Eliotesque Notes to the poems where he explains:

> She wants to be degraded secretly (the long lace frock is temptingly rich, and it hangs loose, suggestively; also the chaos of her hair), to be possessed and mutilated in the mud. The tragedy is as much hers for her desires too are prevented by social barriers. (60)

Is he being ironic? I fear not. While he wants to demonstrate what he sees as the hidden effects of colonial rule, how acceptable is it to make use of this stereotype? You could argue, unkindly, that he himself is guilty of 'colonizing the experience of others' for the gratification of his own literary (or other) sensibilities.

Dabbydeen's approach to English literary tradition is openly confrontational and, as a radical critic who keeps his eye on

what is happening in the 'real' world, he carries his understanding of the power of language into the context of racist violence within British society. He sees his own fight represented on the street in the patois spoken by young West Indians in London: their version of a survival strategy in a hostile environment. He recognises the importance of the powerful dub and rap poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson and others. The tone of his writing is similarly uncompromising and confrontational:

> I cannot feel or write poetry like a white man,... much less serve him. And to become mulattos, black people literally have to be fucked (and fucked up) first. (p. 13)

It is tempting to call his tone hysterical. Even in this aggressive pun he does not admit women to his vision: it is, bewilderingly, 'black *people*' who 'literally have to be fucked', not Black women. It is revealing to contrast the violence of this presentation of mixed blood with Grace Nichols' portrayal of the mulatto child as a symbol of survival, even forgiveness, and the triumph of human (specifically mother-) love in the face of absolute degradation. After struggling with her ambivalent feelings towards the child she is carrying, product of forced intercourse with her white master, Nichols' pregnant woman finds peace through prayers to the Mother and welcomes the baby in a beautiful incantation:

> ...
> I squat over
> dry plantain leaves
>
> and command the earth
> to receive you

in my name
in my blood

to receive you
my curled bean

my tainted

perfect child

my bastard fruit
my seedling
my sea grape
my strange mulatto
my little bloodling (61)

It is as though she has atoned for the manner of the child's conception to protect it from the displeasure of the spirit powers or the hatred of others in the community:

For with my blood
I've cleansed you
and with my tears
I've pooled the river Niger

now my sweet one it is for you to swim

She accepts the child as her own, giving it her name in a gesture of defiance towards the overseer who will claim and probably sell it. (62) Dabbydeen's flippant and vicious pun looks glib and sick in comparison. (63)

As an academic, Dabbydeen inherits the tools and strategies of British intellectualism; as West Indian immigrant he offers his own brand of survivalist patois to the literary establishment. The terms of the confrontation are set along the lines of a street fight: the sides are clearly drawn - Black against White, Creole against Standard English, tough kid against slippery-suave

gent. He is the point at which the two strands of Caribbean poetry converge: the machismo of protest and performance meets the literary artistry of Tradition. The former uses the language of fist-fights, the latter flows on in the patriarchal grooves of fathers, sons, beautiful women, and the quest for transcendence. Neither strand provides a narrative within which a female voice can comfortably participate.

Dabbydeen may be writing against the grain of the colonisers' 'napkin of poetic diction'(p. 46), but, as the Cambridge graduate, master of the slick tongue when he wants it, his imitations of the inarticulate slaves take big risks. Walcott's sophisticated and almost systematic revisioning wins him ambiguous access to the hallowed ranks of the mighty scribes but it is an act of reclamation that does not topple the edifice and, according to one's perspective, can be read as yet another example of the insidious impact of internalised colonisation. In addition there is a dogmatic tone to literary debate, visible in Williams' essay: an insistence on clear battle lines and opposing camps. It is the expectation of hostility, divisiveness and confrontation.

This polemical overview of the contexts of the newly emergent Caribbean tradition may have seemed like a long digression; it is necessary in order to highlight the guiding principles which lie beneath the supposedly objective selections and evaluations of today's important writers. My aim has been to show that channels of critical inquiry become fixed along lines that are frequently inappropriate to any discussion of the ways in which

women are writing today. If the poems of Caribbean women are to be included in critical debate we have to start asking slightly different questions.

Grace Nichols's poetry does not fit into either of the mainstream polemical or the aesthetic frameworks represented by Dabbydeen, Brathwaite and Walcott. Her 'raw material' is the same: she too is negotiating her way through the same complex figurations of nationalism, racism and the legacies of colonisation. Yet her responses are wildly, delightfully, exuberantly, generously different.

Unlike Walcott, she does not seem in the least preoccupied with the European literary tradition, either in reclaiming and revising its formal and thematic concerns, nor in attacking it. Her work does not drive a wedge between the two cultures, - colonised and colonising, - but employs the insights gained from displacement to offer wry comments on the supposedly normative definitions and etiquette of the coloniser. She does not set up Standard English and Creole as hostile opposites, but seeks instead to effect their fusion: 'blending the two tongues, to create my own language in a way.' (64) Where Walcott and Dabbydeen polarise she attempts synthesis. Nichols' conception of her 'nation' is spiritual rather than literary, cultural or narrowly political. She does not commemorate actual events, - marches, massacres, elections - in order to form a historical record of Caribbean nationhood. Her longest work, _i is a long memoried woman_, envisions a spiritual solidarity that transcends nationalism and traditionalism, overriding social or

tribal custom to claim access to an integral (female) bond that lies much deeper than the structures of nationhood. As public persona she is equally 'unassimilated'. The titles of her collections are ostentatiously flippant, implying a lighthearted, lightweight tone, as though the poems are mere throwaway thoughts of no great import. Yet the poems within are often poignant, urgent and deeply serious. She grins cheerily from the cover photographs, eschewing the gravity and poise of the earnest poet. Where Dabbdydeen, as an academic, offers theoretical explanations of his poetic aims, Nichols comments cheerfully in an interview that she does not know what she is going to write before it happens, and evades attempts to affiliate her work and person to a political cause. Her poetry is richly humourous, straightforward, accessible. She is also a popular performer. As Bennett's neglect already suggests, the Establishment is not too sure quite how to receive poets who do not slot easily into the familiar literary context and whose lines are not peppered with graceful allusions towards their revered masters.

A '*Poet of the World*'

Asked in an interview whether she saw herself as a Guyanese poet or as part of the Black British tradition, Nichols explained that while both were relevant to some extent, she preferred to identify with the richer landscape of the Caribbean:

> when you say I'm from the Caribbean, or I'm a Caribbean poet, you really mean you're a poet of the world, because you have all the different cultures in the Caribbean. You have Africa, you have Asia and Asian culture, you have European culture, and the Amerindian, the indigenous culture. It's all there. (65)

While English and North American critics still squabble over whether T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath count as 'English' or 'American' writers, Nichols puts such jealous parochialism to shame. And where Chinweizu denounces the bastardisation of pure African creativity by 'Euroassimilationist' imperialism, Nichols embraces cultural difference, celebrating the enriching influences of internationalism. The Epilogue to *i is a long memoried woman* evokes both the violent loss inflicted by the colonisers and the resilient survival of the colonised:

> I have crossed an ocean
> I have lost my tongue
> from the root of the old
> one
> a new one has sprung

The root still holds, connecting this triumphantly new voice to its energising origins. This is a refreshing tone in 'post-colonial' poetry; one that looks forward, not trying to erase the past but affirming the tenacity of the human spirit and

celebrating the growth of a new language and culture. Where Brathwaite sought to reconnect the Caribbean to its African origins, Nichols' presentation of the implications of nationhood is radically different. Her characters remain 'in touch' with their origins however physically far from them. Undoubtedly such confidence is more readily available to Nichols as a younger poet, with a firmer sense of her Caribbean heritage (thanks, in part, to the achievements of Brathwaite and his colleagues). She does not flinch from acknowledging what has been lost in the course of the journey, but this loss of a single nationality wins rich compensation with the influx of many national identifications. She transforms Brathwaite's introspective gaze into a generous embrace of difference and dispersal.

As I have mentioned, Nichols was awarded the 1983 Commonwealth Poetry Prize for _i is a long memoried woman_, a sequence of poems about Caribbean women's history through the diaspora and slavery. The book has only just been reprinted. (66) Usually a prize-winning collection gets swiftly republished and widely reviewed; this one seemed to have sunk without trace. (67) Since winning the award, Nichols has published two more solo collections of her poetry (both with Virago) as well as several stories and anthologies for children. Why this silence from the critics? Perhaps it is the accessibility of her work that accounts for the lack of interest shown in it so far, or perhaps she is seen condescendingly as a 'children's writer'. She has a laconic wit and her poems deliver deceptively simple wisdom. They offer pithy gnomic

insights, precise, succinct observations. Maybe critics are uneasy with the predominantly lighthearted tone? Maybe they think her subject matter is disappointingly narrow? It is true, after all, that most of the characters in her poems are female: mothers, warriors, sybarites, spell-weavers or supermarket shoppers they may be, but they are mainly women, so perhaps her work falls into the suspect category 'special interest'.

Nichols was born in Guyana where she lived until 1977 when, at the age of 27 she came to live in Britain. The gradual changes evident in her poetry since long memoried woman offer a record of the process of finding a voice in that 'new tongue' signalled in the Epilogue. Later in this chapter I will look more closely at the ways in which she pioneers new forms of Black female literary representation and clears a space for her own aesthetic, but before this more general investigation it is useful to note some of the changes in focus, theme and form that characterise her development so far.

The Fat Black Woman's Poems, published in 1984 (only a year later) is very different, in style and theme, from long memoried woman. It is the first of her collections to include poems about life in Britain and, despite the cheeriness of the title poems, it is really a volume about uneasy transitions. As well as excerpts from the prize-winning sequence, the collection includes three other sections. It opens with the Fat Black Woman poems, appealingly light-hearted caricatures of a London immigrant. The other two sections are more sombre. Titled 'In spite of

ourselves' (a line from one of the pieces), the theme of the first is displacement:

> In London
> every now and then
> I get this craving
> for my mother's food
> I leave art galleries
> in search of plantains
> saltfish/sweet potatoes
>
> I need this link
>
> I need this touch
> of home
> swinging my bag
> like a beacon
> against the cold (68)

'Home' is very definitely elsewhere, not London. The need for connection with this *real* home is an intense physical craving. These are poems about feeling out-of-place, disoriented, perched uncomfortably between two worlds. Nichols' subjects do not know whether to look backwards or ahead; to try to conceal their origins or to celebrate them. The poem that gives the section its title epitomises this insecure ambivalence:

> The timbre
> in our voice
> betrays us
> however far
> we've been
>
> ....
> the old ghost
> asserts itself
> in dusky echoes
>
> like driftwood
> traces (69)

The force of 'betray' is softened by the tenderness of memories of origins being described 'like driftwood / traces'. These poems seem muffled, inward-looking; they are characterised by caution and sometimes fear. A couple of them are set in bleak English winter; wrapped up warm and snuggled close to the fire, the narrator preserves the glow of Caribbean temperatures in her thoughts. It is a period of recouping energies before venturing out into an unfamiliar world. But if scale and movement are muted in these poems their impact is not. In 'Spring' the narrator describes how, after wrapping up warmly all winter, she realises that the worst of the weather is over:

> with all the courage of an unemerged
> butterfly
> I unbolted the door and stepped outside
>
> only to have that daffodil baby
> kick me in the eye (70)

What fitter announcement of the arrival of a new voice than this oblique reference to one of the most famous poems in English poetic tradition? The subjects of her poems are often absent or distracted, quite elsewhere in their thoughts, reflecting the disorientation of feeling oneself suspended between two cultures. The subject of 'Island Man' wakes every morning to the sound of blue waves crashing and wild seabirds cawing, before the roar of the North Circular drowns these comforting rhythms. In his imagination he still lives on his 'small emerald island', dreaming its rhythms and landscape. Memory of 'home' is rooted

in sharp visual details: hibiscus flowers, plantains, saltfish, the women hauling in the shrimp catch from their nets. These roots are tangible, the poignant memories of exile. One poem guesses at the thoughts of two old Black men on a bench in Leicester Square. Anyone who has been in Leicester Square will recall the folk who while away the hours there, staring blankly ahead. The poem picks up on this apparent vacancy and then contradicts it, colouring in the history and memories of the old men with a gentle irony for the idealizing nostalgia of age:

> do you dream revolutions
> you could have forged
> or mourn
> some sunfull woman you
> might have known a
> hibiscus flower
> ghost memories of desire
>
> O it's easy
> to rainbow the past
> after all the letters from
> home spoke of hardships
>
> and the sun was traded long ago (71)

The poem underlines the ordinariness of its subject: in setting the scene these two are 'old men' before they are 'Black', they are part of the city, and the poem belongs to a familiar tradition of reminiscence. Yet in only four lines Nichols alters the landscape and tempo of conventional meditative lyric poetry, creating the antithesis of dull, grey London by word-painting the vision before their eyes. Revolution, motion and the vitality of a 'sunfull woman', with the hints of her mischievous 'sinfulness' enact the very process of rainbowing the

past, bringing bright colour, clash and a tingle of anticipation into the poem. But quickly it all fades away again, imitating the tantalising tricks memory plays.

The second section in Fat Black Woman is called 'Back Home Contemplation' and is largely preoccupied with looking back - memories of childhood in the Caribbean, sharp visual evocations of the islands and the vegetation, short songs and, very occasionally, some Creole phrases. There is no overlap between the two sections. Memories of home are sealed off from 'real life' in England; they are the province of old men, a luxury that cannot be afforded because all energy is needed to survive this new way of life. Buying 'plantains/ saltfish/sweet potatoes' satisfies the yearning temporarily, the need for 'this touch / of home'.

The Fat Black Woman is the mechanism by which, in these early poems, Nichols effects some synthesis between 'back home' and England. It is as if the connection can only be made by creating such a comic caricature. She is very deliberately larger-than-life, nameless so as to emphasise her status as a literary device, a bold riposte to the stereotypes of Western representations of Black womanhood. Neverthless she is a vivid comic creation in her own right. In London stores she steels herself to fend off the snide 'slimming glances' of sticklike shopgirls. She rummages through the harshly-lit racks looking for something 'soft and bright and billowing/to flow like breezy sunlight/ when she walking' (72). No amount of immersion in the tightlipped, closed grey city can blot out her indomitable

spirit. Slavery has left its scars, but they are not debilitating; unpleasant recollections of 'playing / the Jovial Jemima' in enforced servitude are shrugged off with cool 'jazzy' disdain:

> But this fat black woman ain't no Jemima
> Sure thing Honey / Yeah (73)

The Fat Black Woman is not typical of Nichols' characterisations. Ordinary people in ordinary circumstances dwell in her poetic world. They are the inhabitants of the metropolis, observed on park benches and station platforms. Nichols recogises that the attempt to challenge racism by decontextualised slogans like 'Black is beautiful' risks buying into the racist polarising of Black and White, instituting a label as a human identity. The age of stark juxtapositions, - overseer and slave, Black and White - is gone. So in her poems 'Black' is never merely a statement of political allegiance, but is woven into the personality of each individualised character. She provides a history and a personality for the unremarkable inhabitants of the city.

Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman, the collection that followed in 1989, shows the development of a relaxed synthesising spirit. The book is divided into two parts merely numbered I and II and with no distinguishable difference between the poems as regards subject matter or form. There is thus no longer any structural distinction between 'back home' and Britain. Both sections contain poems that reflect on life in the Caribbean and in

Britain. The collection moves easily between the two cultures, reflecting an easy 'at homeness' within both. Nichols' use of Creole idioms, of a wide variety of rhythms from the lyrical to dub and rap (and even break-dance), signals a new confidence too. The poems envisage union on a grand scale:

> Soon we must make a journey
> behind the mask
> Into the heart. Wherever the spiral memory
> leads our dreaming feet.
>
> ....
>
> And we will stoop to find
> the stones we left buried,
> the small smooth ones
> which are still warm.
>
> Which still carry within them
> the memory
> of our fondest secrets. (74)

This movement towards the dissolving of racial divisions does not erode the differences between different races; the poem both acknowledges the dispersal of Black people throughout the world and at the same time urges a recognition of the bonds of common ancestry. Nichols rejects the intricate compartmentalising of Blackness into different strands, visualising instead an international community that transcends the fragmenting effect of categorisation:

> An African countenance here
> A European countenance there
> An Amerindian cast of cheek
> An Asianic turn of eye
> And the tongue's salty accommodation
> The tapestry is mine
> All the bloodstained prints
> The scatterlinks

The grafting strand of crinkled hair
The black persistent blooming. (75)

The repetition of 'countenance' draws out the word's further implications of toleration and acceptance.

Alongside this prophetic vision of future Black integration runs a closely autobiographical record of the experiences of a Guyanese woman who has left her homeland to live in Britain. By this third collection the ambivalence and caution of her earlier work has disappeared. 'Immigrant' vision becomes the source of some sharp satire; the baffled, disoriented voice is replaced with the more stable, confident tones of one who is well accustomed to the quirky ways of the Brits., and enjoys poking a little lighthearted fun at their stiff etiquette:

And is so, little by little
I begin to change my calypso ways
Never visiting nobody
Before giving them clear warning
And waiting me turn in queue
Now, after all this time
I get accustom to de English life
But I still miss back-home side
To tell you de truth
I don't really know where I belaang

Yes, divided to de ocean
Divided to de bone
Wherever I hang me knickers - that's my home. (76)

Her more secure attitude is figured in the way she adapts the English language: 'I get accustom to de English life', she proclaims, while quietly bending the rules of Received Pronunciation to fit her own linguistic rhythms. (77) The narrator uses the new perspective she has gained through life in

Britain to take another look at her original home, acknowledging that exile has meant losses as well as gains. Instead of retreating into the visual and sensual memories of home, the poet's voice is more firmly grounded in its own newly-formed perspective. The gulf between the two cultures narrows. Quintessentially British scenes trigger off memories of the Caribbean. Watching a small boy collect conkers, she remembers herself as a child picking up and hoarding 'orange-coloured cockles' from a tropical country that seems so far removed, in colour, tone and temperature from the crisp, bronze autumn landscape in Britain. (78) Yet the words resemble one another, enhancing this process of eliding the distance between the two cultures.

This motion is, of course, reflected in the mixing of Creole and standard English. Unlike Dabbydeen, Nichols usually writes a softened form of Creole. Rather than a compromise to her predominantly White, English-speaking audience, it is an act of synthesis that produces refreshingly innovative rhythms. She has written of her desire 'to fuse the two tongues because I come from a background where the two were constantly interacting' (79), and the results of such fusion are extraordinary. She pares expression down to its barest bones, yet touches off several different levels of meaning and visual imagery. Stanzas that look almost stern in their staccato sparsity flout English rhythm; one minute the lines flow, straddling verse breaks and line endings effortlessly to create a lyrical continuity that contradicts the visual appearance of the poem; the next, the pace

has changed utterly and words leap and spring, lilting and jolting; syllables are pushed apart and broken up into new units, as the stress pattern changes:

> Man I love
> but won't let you devour
>
> even tho
> I'm all watermelon
> and starapple and plum
> when you touch me
>
> even tho
> I'm all seamoss
> and jellyfish
> and tongue
>
> Come
> leh we go to de carnival
> You be banana
> I be avocado
>
> Come
> leh we hug up
> and brace-up
> and sweet one another up
>
> But then
> leh we break free
> yes, leh we break free
>
> And keep to de motion
> of we own person/ality. (80)

Splitting 'personality' underlines the poem's point about the importance of maintaining individuality within heterosexual relations: the need to hold on to the separateness of one's own 'person'; it also signals the need to pronounce the word with Creole stress. When Nichols reads the poem the flowing lyricism of the early stanzas breaks after 'tongue', and is replaced by lilting invocation in the next two verses. The rhythm shifts once more for the concluding stanzas, stretching the lines out so

that insistence on the demand for independence is enhanced by the strong reiterated beat of the closing lines. These sudden changes in pace and rhythm echo the speaker's declared need to be flexible in loving-moods: to shift in and out of rhythm with one another, sensitive to each others' individuality. Even a reader unfamiliar with the cadences of Caribbean English finds that the structure of the poem teaches her how to catch its rhythm. The 'a' and 'ty' sounds in 'person/ality' are drawn out, creating a clipped rhyme with 'free' and slowing down the beat to end the poem with three strong stresses: a-li-ty. Such rhythmic variety within a short poem gives the lie to critics who argue that English poetic form is structurally inflexible and rigid. Nichols manoeuvres the language with apparently effortless versatility, switching from orthodox meditative rhythms to the stronger, energetic pulses of Caribbean cadence.

Several critics have written about the problems of transcribing Creole dialect (81). They point out the arbitrary nature of selecting which words are produced as 'standard' English and which are Creolised, as well as the patronising connotations of such attempts to reproduce 'defective' English. Nichols responds to the needs of each individual poem rather than adhering to a rigid political stance on the matter, in much the same way as she avoids narrowly political interpretations of her use of language:

> I don't consciously set out to write it in Creole or Standard English, the poem just comes, it dictates itself. So you might be writing a particular poem, and you just find yourself writing it in Creole for example. (82)

When she does write in Creole, the political dimension is carefully harnessed to the poem's meaning. In 'On Receiving A Jamaican Postcard' she describes the antics of a 'native' couple, gambolling by the seaside in exaggeratedly lurid costume. 'de' and 'dem' become part of the irony with which the poem depicts this latest form of colonial invasion, - tourism - encouraging the people to play up to the 'tropical flavour' of the tourist operator's hype:

> de two a dem in smiling conspiracy
> to capture dis dream of de tourist industry
>
> and de sea blue
> and de sky blue
> and de sand gold fuh true (83)

She uses this clumsy pidgin English to play up to the stereotypes, just as the figures on the postcard exaggerate their ethnic exoticism. With even such a sparse use of dialect, Nichols makes oblique reference to the way in which native Jamaicans end up parodying their culture to cater to credulous and patronising visitors. The flexibility of her employment of Caribbean speech patterns is evident in 'Walking With My Brother in Georgetown', where Creole is used to very different effect. The poem describes the narrator's return to her hometown, where she finds herself alienated from, and saddened by, the city's atmosphere and way of life:

> Dih city dying
> dih trenches seem smaller
> dih streets
> dih houses
> an everyting an everybody
> look suh rundown
> and stamp wid dih dry ah hunger

You been away too long girl
smile mih brudder (84)

The visitor's catalogue of evidence for the decline she feels is expressed in Creole while her brother's intermittent refrain, 'You been away too long girl' stands out, by way of ironic contrast, in virtually standard English. The tone of his response is left deliberately neutral. Only at the end of the poem, when the narrator's mournful cadences reach their climax, does the poem hint at his own feelings. He speaks out in Creole to protest at her gloomy diagnosis:

Hibiscus blooming
People grooving
Girl why yuh sehing dih city dying
Seh me brudder sighing

His spirited defence of the city is offset by the poet's choice of this very moment to add a descriptive verb to his words, suggesting his own hidden unease. But in these last lines the narrator turns the analysis round upon herself to wonder whether it is not in fact *she* who has changed, not the city; whether exile has not sapped some vital juice from her. Now she looks upon the music-drenched streets as proof of the inhabitants' head-in-the-sand hedonism:

An ah hearing dub-music blaring
An ah seeing dih man-youths rocking
Hypnosis on dih streets
Rocking to dih rhythm of dere own deaths
Locked in a shop-front beat

But perhaps it is she who has simply forgotten how to have a wild

time; she who has become, like Amryl Johnson's narrator, too Anglicised and self-conscious to let go:

> Maybe I lying
> Maybe I dying

In Nichols' use of Creole, language is yoked to meaning not, as in so much 'dub' or rap poetry, to fuel angry protests at racism and deprivation, but to convey sorrow, humour, love, self-questioning, gaiety. This marks an important development in expanding the repertoire of 'literary' Creole. James Berry has pointed out the limitations of the narrow thematic approach in most dub poetry:

> 'Dub' poetry, with its intensity and shock value, has done its job so well that it engenders imitators who swallow their model whole. The imitators seem to believe firmly that black poetry can only be a protest against racism and deprivation. And, unfortunately, listeners who hear it - and are perhaps impressed by poetry for the first time - seem to arrive at a similar evaluation. British black poetry should not want to be stuck with this one dimension. It should want to expand its awareness. It could still work wonders with the 'dub' form, using fresh themes. For example, the poetry shows little signs of exploring relationships, or real personal experience, or black culture's myths and legends, or the natural universe, or a celebration of anything. (85)

Overemphasising the 'rawness' of Creole has the disconcerting side-effect of seeming to acquiesce in a racist idea of Creole speakers as somehow cruder, more primitive. Dabbydeen veers dangerously close to this. It is possible to imagine the accessibility of Nichols's dialect poetry being criticised as a sell-out, another example of 'Euroasssimilationism'. In such a scenario, language has become most important as a sectarian

weapon. Yet as well as being an accurate representation of some Black British speech, Nichols' blended language enacts the inclusiveness and internationalism that inspires her. It is poetry that wants a wide audience, not poetry just for the marginalised and oppressed. One white evening class student summed up the difference succinctly. Asked to compare long memoried woman with David Dabbydeen's Slave Song she said:

> He obviously isn't writing for me; he doesn't want a white middle-class British woman to understand or to read him. *She* is writing for me. (86)

At readings Nichols takes care to introduce the audience to a dialect with which many will not be familiar. 'Dead Ya Fuh Tan' records a Caribbean visitor's astonishment at white folks' obsession with getting a sun tan. She finds the elaborate paraphernalia of sunbeds and lotions and endless, patient prostration utterly bizarre:

> If me na been come ya
>
> Me na been know
> People a dead ya fuh tan (87)

Nichols leads the audience into the poem, explaining how alien the concept of sunbathing is to the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands who live with sunshine all year round. This friendly, explanatory approach would probably be scorned by many performance poets but, rather than compromising her own difference, it works to enhance the effect of the piece over White audiences. The unspoken implication is clear: why do they

(you) spend so much time trying to look more like us when they (you) hate black skin? The words take on a menacing tone, hinting at the literal enactment of the casual idiom: that Whites really do kill Blacks because of their 'tan'. Nichols lightens the underlying implication, exploiting the beach scene's absurdity with heavy assonance and alliteration to make the speaker parody him/herself too:

> Dem a bare dem breast
> Dem a bare dem bum
> People a dead ya fuh tan

The use of dialect as an integral part of the poem's meanings is taken even further in the 'dub' poem, 'Beverley's Saga'. Here two voices relate the narrative: Beverley's, and that of her friend, the main speaker. This allows for an injection of irony that 'frees' Beverley; it is the main speaker who frames the narrative and who herself expresses the argument, explaining that 'Dih black presence go back / Two, three century.' (88). If it were not for this narrator, Beverley would seem to be defending herself; as it is she just gets on with her life, telling the old lady who asks her if she is on holiday quite cheerily that:

> Me not on holiday,
> Me a live right hey.
> Me na plan fe go no whey.

Again, the predictable format of rap and dub rhythms is extended into new territory. The poem explores the undramatic nature of the most widespread forms of racism in Britain - not physical violence but the unexamined assumptions of White Britons, whose

thoughtlessness or prejudice is skilfully, but subtly, sent up. Beverley is as 'at home' as her language; she has made the phraseology and the habits of English life fully her own:

> O mek we tek a lickle walk,
> It so nice an sunny.
> Summer is hearts,
> An a dread de wintry.
> But a have me lickle flat
> An a have me lickle key.
> You want to come in
> For a lickle cup-o-tea?

The central impulse behind Nichols' poetry is the transcending of false categories - primarily, of course, of 'Blackness' as being an adequate identity in itself, but also, as these poems demonstrate, a challenge to the separateness of 'standard English' and Creole. Origin is only a part of an individual's identity. For Nichols, in any case, origins are a psychic inheritance, transhistorical and ineradicable. At a poetry reading in Ilkley, in September 1990, she was asked how she was able to create such vivid evocations of Caribbean life when she had been living away for so long? She seemed slightly bemused, as though the whole tenor of her poems should have made it obvious that the land, the rhythms, sounds, colours and textures of the Caribbean are within her, a core constitutent of her being. They are not external memories that fade, but a spiritual 'home' that is unaffected by physical displacement.

Some parts of this psychic memory grow out of events not directly experienced by the individual who remembers them; she carries the evidence within her, as a kind of collective unconscious. This sense of a collective memory persisting

through generations of Black women is present in the work of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and other Black American women writers. It flouts the conventions of realism, carrying literature into a spiritual realm that contemporary Western writers tend to avoid. Nichols' characters voyage freely through time and space, inhabiting a spiritual dimension that transcends the boundaries of historical exactitude. One minute the Fat Black Woman is frolicking in the waves, the next she lives in a twentieth century metropolitan consumer culture, complete with weighing machine, Miss World on the TV and bubble baths. Her ancestors' past is part of her present; it has shaped both her personality and the environment in which she finds herself living.

Nichols' inclusivity offers an alternative to the mushrooming mutually-exclusive 'interest groups' British society identifies in the spirit of supposedly tolerant pluralism. She rejects all the labels:

> I say I can write
> no poem big enough
> to hold the essence
>   of a black woman
>   or a white woman
>   or a green woman (89)

All too often such groupings serve, as she recognises, only to reinforce marginality and exclusion, and work to polarise rather than to unite. (90) Her generous embrace of internationalism and difference thus promotes 'radical synthesis' as a political as well as a poetic vision.

I Long - but rather different - memories

Earlier in this chapter I drew attention to what I see as the limitations of the kind of Caribbean revisionism exemplified by Derek Walcott, in so far as such reworkings tend to duplicate a male-centred world vision that bypasses the lives and emotions of women. On one level this is a psychological barrier to women writers and readers; on another, the reluctance on the part of publishers and critics to acknowledge this gap makes them poor readers of any poetry that presents a consciously gendered vision. The effect is serious: i is a long memoried woman was turned down by several publishers because they felt that the material had already been used by another poet. Nichols was surprised by the comparison they drew:

> I was very much aware that I was dealing with my whole female history, looking back at that, because we didn't have that perspective....in Caribbean literature. What's interesting is after writing the book, some of the publishers who rejected it, including OUP, one of the reasons they gave, even though they liked the book, was that this area, or this journey, was covered by the poet Edward Brathwaite already. Edward Brathwaite is a poet I like but I was coming from a very *female* perspective, and it was exploring the whole female psyche, so I couldn't see their rationale at all. (91)

The work referred to is Brathwaite's trilogy, The Arrivants, first published sequentially in 1967-9. The claim that it covers the same ground as long memoried woman is, as Nichols says, rather strange. It is worth examining the structural and thematic foundations of the earlier poem - the characteristics usually taken for granted - in order to see more clearly just how

profound the differences are. For it is much more than a question of the gender of the participants; Nichols' 'female perspective' encompasses radical redefinitions of history, time and narrative that seem to have gone unremarked.

In an extract from his autobiographical essay 'Timehri', (reprinted in Hinterland) Brathwaite describes his experience of cultural alienation as a young man. He won a scholarship to Cambridge and left Barbados; it was the 1950s, 'the age of the Emigrant' as he describes it: a period in which the West Indies was beginning to be written about by its exiled writers, graduates of the British education system. Returning to Barbados, with its 'stifling atmosphere of middle-class materialism and philistinism', was unthinkable:

> I was a West Indian, roofless man of the world. I could go, belong, everywhere on the worldwide globe. (92)

He went to Ghana, discovering, in the small village in which he lived, the sense of community that had eluded him:

> Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, I came to a sense of identification of myself with these people, my living diviners. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland....And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean...The connection between my lived, but unheeded non-middle-class boyhood, and its Great Tradition on the eastern mainland had been made. (p. 119)

Brathwaite's New World Trilogy follows this circular trajectory; it documents the long journey from enforced exile and repatriation to an ultimate reconnection with African roots.

He felt that the Caribbean islands were in limbo: cut off from an African heritage their inhabitants shunned; stranded as misfits in a hybrid colonial culture. His poem sought to reunite the two.

The Arrivants marked an important departure on its first publication in the late sixties. The sequence stretched traditional English poetic form, 'mashing' the language (see p. 259), and reshaping stanzas in order to create a form capable of holding and expressing the rhythms, landscapes and sounds of the Caribbean islands. (93) He mimicked drum beats and chants, liturgies and worksongs; wove the names of African kings and ritual invocations into bizarre stanza shapes and introduced the natural speech of Caribbean people: church congregations, cricket matches and family ancestors are all included. This material was welded on to the West's Classical heroic format to create a polished, semi-parodic cultural epic. Using this ancient model and injecting into it such unfamiliar material, he made a bold statement about the possibilities of modern epic and the appropriateness of such a 'high' style for the people of the Caribbean. He proved that the dispossessed African peoples' fight for their heritage was as worthy of the heroic register as any Caucasian struggle.

Brathwaite, renowned critic and poet, respected academic whose work did so much to further serious recognition of the riches of Creole, has earned his firm place in the literary tradition of the Caribbean. Naturally such a pioneer is an important figure. You will find The Arrivants, beautifully

printed by Oxford University Press, on university syllabi in Britain and North America, and generously extracted in anthologies of Caribbean poetry.

The _Trilogy_ follows venerable models. African gods are substituted for the more familiar classical ones; they are praised and placated, their support for the ensuing 'battle' enlisted through propitiatory ceremonies. The second section, 'Masks', opens with a long description of the intricate ritualised construction of the sacred drum, shaped lovingly from sacred wood and goat skin. The drum barrel is formed from wood of the twenduru tree:

> hard duru wood
> with the hollow blood
> that makes a womb. (94)

The process is disturbingly feminised: the drum, symbol of future liberation, is endowed with human properties of flesh and pain; the warriors shape its womb and the poet figures the wood's sap as blood:

> You dumb adom wood
> will be bent,
> will be solemnly bent, belly
> rounded with fire, wound-
> ed with tools
>
> that will shape you.
> You will bleed,
> cedar dark,
> when we cut you;
> speak, when we touch you. (p. 95)

The central narrative of the sequence pursues the warriors' quest. Brathwaite depicts a wholly masculine world of

patrilineal ancestry, bloody conflicts and solitary heroic suffering. The warriors list their genealogical credentials in an echo of Biblical and Miltonic models:

> With the help of the Caliph
> of Heaven, who in heaven
> and earth conquers all;
>
> I, El Hassan, son of Amida,
> King of Axum,
> of Halen, Hemer, Rayden and
>
> Salhen;
> made war on the Noba;
> fought at Takazi, by the ford
>
> of Kemalke; (p. 103)

The central narrator is one of the warriors; he describes his anguish on returning to his former village and finding no trace of his family. He is the Odyssean wanderer, stumbling through arid landscapes, digging in the dust to recover his umbilical cord:

> seek-
> ing the dirt of the com-
> pound where my mother
>
> buried the tiny breed-
> ing worm that grew
> from my heart
>
> to her sorrow. (p. 148)

There is no room, within this recasting of heroic glory, for a female-centred vision. The few women who do appear are helpless victims of the time-honoured 'rape and pillage' of war; their plight serves merely as a goad to the men whose passionate

determination is fanned by sensationalising images of feminine vulnerability:

I hear

the whips of the slavers,
see the tears
of my daughters;

over glass
of their shattered
cries, feet

bleeding, I walk
through the talk
of the market, (p. 132)

In focussing on these aspects of the sequence I do not mean to query Brathwaite's skill, nor the innovatory importance of his work. (95) I want to emphasise the enormous difference between his project and Nichols' sequence. Where Brathwaite's sense of kinship is articulated through the rituals and myths of Africa, Nichols envisions a psychic rootedness within Caribbean women: a connectedness signalled by their strange intimacy with the natural properties of the islands, - soil and weather, vegetation and landscape. This bond persists unthreatened by the vicissitudes of politics and war. There is no sense in her poetry of a need for reconciliation or reconnection; the roots are still firm, and the new tongue is still connected to these old roots, regardless of geographical displacement and the passage of time. Emigration alters values and vision, but for Nichols it does not erase this underlying surety of origin and history. Brathwaite draws on what is presumably in some sense an oral respository of African mythology, and however drastically he

manipulates poetic form, the catalogue of names seems both emphatically literary, intellectual and highly stylised. This fits rather uneasily with the colloquialism of the major part of the Trilogy. And what of the selectivity of this cultural and mythological source material? Is not the absolute silence of women rather curious? Since Chinweizu manages to omit women from his recent (1988) anthology of Voices From Twentieth Century Africa, perhaps Brathwaite did not do so badly; he does at least include women's voices in the sequence. But one of the most exciting aspects of long memoried woman is its representation of the secret myths, stories, rituals and lore of Afro-Caribbean women, - material that has so far been ignored by mainstream anthropologists and mythographers. (96) The editor of Hinterland, E A Markham seems to be one of the few to have recognised the different tone that this material brings to her work. In his introductory notes to the anthology he observes that:

> the streams of memory which flow through her have more moisture than the arid landscape that Brathwaite tried to reclaim in 'Masks'. Nichols' poems have a wholeness, an intouchness barely discernible in her male colleagues. (97)

Nichols does indeed harness 'streams of memory' - intangible, psychic memory - in place of Brathwaite's more formal, schematised version of cultural history. This reliance on invisible or submerged knowledge is central to her technique in the poems. Like the irresistible Fat Black Woman, equally at home luxuriating in a bubble bath or enthroned, queenlike and

impassive, above the 'white robed chiefs', the women's sense of birthright is ineradicable despite the endemic pressures of forced repatriation and abuse. Beside her work Brathwaite's recovery of an ancient past proclaiming its credentials with lists of exotic names seems rather laborious. Where he tells, she shows.

Nichols records and commemorates the lives of the women who have slipped unacknowledged through the roll call of colonial history, their deaths 'swept aside as easy as dead leaves.' (98) Through form and subject matter she implicitly challenges the premises of masculine-centred vision. Where Brathwaite uses the formulae of epic poetry she prefers a looser structure. African male gods are replaced with heroines, sometimes mythological, sometimes historical: Ala, Yemanji, ('Mother of Shango / Mother of the long breasts / of milk and sorrow'), and the freedom fighter, Nanny of the Maroons. The narrative voice drifts into and out of an array of female personae from different historical eras, creating a choric effect. In one poem she speaks as a contemporary woman, trying to understand the source of her mother's mysterious power and benevolently haunted by her memory:

> But I
> armed only with
> my mother's smile
> must be forever gathering
> my life together like scattered beads
>
> What was your secret mother -
> the one that made you a woman
> and not just Akosua's wife (p 20)

She searches for a way of honouring the dead:

> How can I eulogise

their names?
What dance of mourning
can I make? (p. 17)

Then, smoothly, the narrative voice travels freely back or forward in time, merging with the voices of her foremothers toiling in the plantation. One moment she is the mother, praying for strength to bring her bastard child into such a world; then she is the goddess herself, soothing and promising aid:

> Heal
>
> Cast your guilt to the wind
> Cast your trials to the lake
> Clasp your child to your bosom
> Give your exile to the snake
>
> Mother I need I have your blessing
> Mother I need I have your blessing (p. 55)

The voice addresses the white slavemaster, warning him that his time is coming, foreseeing the return of Nanny in the gathering 'wind a change'. Moving through time and across the boundaries of individual identity, Nichols creates a multivocal testimony of remembrance, recognition and celebration. There is no attempt at realistic description of daily life in the contemporary Caribbean. The market sellers, the wealth of vibrant colour, the details of everyday life that are so memorable in much of her later work, are absent. Instead she creates a psychic landscape through this collage of vivid memories: women mourning the savage punishment meted out by the slaveowners to the mother who kills her child rather than bring it into such a world; the

weary field worker stretching her cramped limbs to walk with womanly dignity in spite of the subhuman life she is forced to lead. The poems celebrate the survival of the human spirit: of the open sexual desire, humour and love these women still exhibit in the face of the daily humiliations of slavery. These fragments of a narrative follow the emotional climaxes of their lives, not the conventional demands of plot. This chameleon narrative technique enables Nichols to transcend historical and individual separateness, claiming the continuity and kinship of black women. And this, of course, is the characteristic that worries Williams in his essay on 'Black British women poets' (see pp. 243-250 for my discussion of this article). He notices that the women's lives are 'in some ways undifferentiated' (p 124), but then claims that the sequence is historically and geographically specific:

> This localizing helps to offset an idealizing tendency within the poems, the feeling that an essential Black femininity which persists regardless of circumstance is being posited. (pp. 124-5)

I can find no evidence of this specificity at all, and suggest that actually Nichols *does* posit a uniting 'essence' of Black womanhood, not as a literal or reductive characteristic but in recognition of the rich heritage communicated from one generation of women to the next. This oral legacy is also acknowledged and commemorated in the fiction of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. It is a testament to the wisdom and ingenuity of Black women's survival in times of extreme hardship.

i is a long memoried woman incorporates an extraordinary

variety of verse forms. It is an invocation and a praise song; it includes prayers, spells and elegy. The title of the sequence aptly conveys both warning and celebration. The past cannot be erased; the atrocities of history will not be neatly swabbed from the slate. Yet hope is a central tenet in Nichols' philosophy, and the title bears witness to the indestructible continuity of female kinship. Nichols does not flinch from recording the treachery of African men:

> But I was traded by men
> the colour of my own skin
> traded like a fowl   like a goat
> like a sack of kernels I was
> traded
>   for beads   for pans
> for trinkets?
>
> No it isn't easy to forget
> what we refuse to remember
>
> Daily I rinse the taint
> of treachery from my mouth (p. 19)

The memory of collaboration endures, but it is not used to drive a wedge between the sexes. Even under the yoke of slavery desire persists, - not, as in Dabbydeen's schema, the site of perverted power-play, but as part of the vitality and resilience of these courageous women. Working against the hackneyed presentation of black women as cowed drudges, Nichols insists on the survival of their capacity for pleasure and joy:

> I must devote
> sometime to the
> joy of living (p. 36)

The woman straightens from her weeding, and catches the eyes of a man standing nearby:

> his hands
> soft his words
> quick his lips
> curling as in
> prayer
>
> I nod
>
> I like this man
>
> Tonight
> I go to meet him
> like a flame (p. 37)

There are careful and deliberate woman-centred revisions running through the sequence. Nichols subtly recasts the Genesis story: long memoried woman opens with a revised creation myth. The woman who survives the Middle Passage renacts the 'discovery' of the New World. Questing hero and tribal genealogies are replaced by the figure of a woman giving birth; the battle cry becomes the wail of a woman in labour, 'her belly cry sounding the wind' (p 6). There is nothing either glorious or miraculous about this birth; no idealised picture of bleached swaddling bands and cribs. This Creation is brutal, effortful, agonising as the mother, caged in the cramped haul of the insanitary slave ship, gives birth amidst the dying:

> and after fifty years
> she hasn't forgotten
> hasn't forgotten
> how she had lain there
> in her own blood
> lain there in her own shit

bleeding memories in the darkness (p. 6)

The image functions on two levels: its unflinching realism flies in the face of conventional romanticised versions of childbirth, insisting on the unsanitised reality of a woman in labour. On a symbolic level this new birth represents the seed of the future: the hope and stoic endurance of the survivors of the Middle Passage. These women carry not just seeds of a future generation, but the histories and knowledge of their origins within them. Nichols echoes the Biblical cadence of Genesis:

But being born a woman
she moved again
knew it was the Black Beginning
though everything said it was
the end

And she went forth with others of her kind
to scythe the earth knowing that bondage
would not fall like poultice from the
children's forehead (p. 7)

Where the questing hero greets his 'virgin' territory by sinking his staff or flag into its soil, (99) the woman makes no attempt to 'imprint' her mark, but rather works co-operatively with the earth, nurtured by the store of her memories and the seeds slowly germinating:

From the darkness within her
from the dimness of previous
incarnations
   the Congo surfaced
so did Sierra Leone   and the
Gold Coast which she used to tread
searching the horizons for lost
moons (p. 7)

In addition to such gendered revisionings, Nichols brings a new flexibility to poetic form, encompassing an extraordinary range of tone. Brathwaite tends to set language and form against one another, deliberately stretching the rhythm and breaking it:

> ...And I return,
> walking these burnt-
>
> out streets, brain limp-
> ing pain, masked
> in this wood, straw
>
> and thorns, seek-
> ing the dirt of the com-
> pound where my mother
>
> buried the thin breed-
> ing worm that grew
> from my heart
>
> to her sorrow. (100)

It seems as though the real reason for these broken lines is a political one - the first stage of a protest against the imposition of English metre. It is hard to know what else is achieved by such dramatic split lines. Nichols' control of pace and timing is more versatile; gaps and linebreaks interrupt and qualify the steady underlying chant. She moves confidently from taut repetitions to a plateau of lyric reflection. The section quoted above provides a beautiful example of this skill:

> and after fifty years
> she hasn't forgotten
> hasn't forgotten
> how she had lain there
> in her own blood
> lain there in her own shit

bleeding memories in the darkness

how she stumbled onto the shore
how the metals dragged her down
how she thirsted...

Broken, staccato rhythms are replaced with the weave of echoes, halfway between a prayer and a lament. Repetition can easily become tiresome and bullying, but Nichols uses it to create an incantatory effect. What looks simple is subtly crafted: in the last three lines of this passage the movement from 'She' to 'the' and back to 'she' gives satisfying aural shape to the stanza. Visual shape is important too: the linebreaks often signal a change in tempo and tone, acting like 'rests' in a musical score. 'bleeding memories in the darkness' halts the movement, making the reader pause after the catalogue of physical misery, before it recommences. One short poem can incorporate several such rhythmic shifts. This opening piece begins with a grand, declamatory gesture, before the terse brevity of the second line undermines the flourish:

Child of the middle passage
push (p. 6)

This juxtaposition of elevated, poetic language and the terse cry of physical exertion sets up a tension between the solemnity of this overdue poetic testimony and the stark, shocking reality it records. 'push' brings the poem back to earth with a jolt, re-enacting the physical effort of childbirth. In the space of a few lines the tone can switch from the sublime to the

melancholic, from blunt realistic observation to spiritual reflection. She effects these shifts with an astonishingly economical use of language. Layers of meaning are packed into one compact line, ambiguity hovering above its stark outline:

> and the men who seed the children
> she wasn't prepared for that look
> in their eye
>
> that loss of deep man pride
>
> Now she stoops
> in green canefields
> piecing the life she would lead (p. 8)

What is the tone of these lines? What is 'that look in their eye'? We probably expect it to refer to lust but, urged to pause by the line spacing, the real explanation of the look is more surprising. Criticism of male brutality is softened by a recognition of the emasculating humiliations of slavery. The verb 'stoops' works similarly, conveying both physical exhaustion and, paradoxically, renewed energy. It describes the physical toll of slavery at the same time as suggesting that this gesture of subjugation is also restorative, as the woman garners energy and inspiration from her steady absorption in the spiritual force of the land.

So _i is a long memoried woman_ is a profoundly innovative sequence poem rather than a rerun of Brathwaite's _Trilogy_ with women playing the men's parts. Nichols eschews the linear narrative with its explicit markers of the passage of time - its particular battles, or the individualised heroes whose fortunes often propel the narrative forwards. She rejects this tradition

of central characters; the only ones who are named are legendary heroines and goddesses whose appearance is incidental to the process of the poem. A choric voice replaces the individual hero/ine: the reader can never be clear quite who is speaking when. And as regards the momentous 'events' whose chronology shapes traditional Western history, in long memoried woman such moments are not wars nor treaties, but the crucial rites of passage of female experience ignored in the public recording of history. Desire (so curiously absent from conventional public histories), childbirth, child-rearing, the transmission of communal knowledge to younger women: these spheres of specifically female experience are central, as are the women's powers of witchcraft and their telepathic intimacy with the spirit world, figured through violent climatic changes. In its rejection of patriarchal notions of linearity, history, individualism, heroism and materialist representations of the past, long memoried woman signals its distance from poetic and national orthodoxies. How long must we wait for the big guys at OUP and Faber to catch on?

Scooping out the stereotypes

Black, like Woman, is a negative marker in Western discourse; it is on the wrong side of the fence. Both are inscribed as Other: what is alien, disturbing, repressed. As the Black activist and theorist Frantz Fanon described the division, where 'White' stood for culture, sophistication and progress, 'Black' signified its opposite:

> the biological, the genital, the sexual instinct in its raw state,...concupiscence, sexual prowess and performance (101)

In Black Skin, White Masks Fanon described the insidious effects of internalised racism, revealing the formation of his own self-perception along the lines laid out by the White master. He documented the process of his struggle to see himself in terms other than those instilled by colonial discourse, commenting:

> The black man [sic] has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man...I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics, and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships. (102)

James Berry's protest at the sectioning-off of Black writers is a salutary reminder that a similar roll-call of racist abuse still simmers just beneath the surface in supposedly multicultural Britain. Fanon argued that the only way out of this impasse was for the Black writer to discover or create alternative modes of self-perception, finding a position outside colonial discourse from which to construct an identity. Inevitably this is much harder than it sounds. Rejecting, for example, the racist

association of 'blackness' with potent sexual desire paradoxically pushes representations of Black sexuality closer to conventional White norms. In a rigidly dualistic framework it is hard not to end up on one side or the other, and since White discourse holds the defining power, moving away from the negative Black markers means moving closer to White ones. The ultimate outcome erases difference. Alternatively, the attempt to reclaim Blackness by transforming the characteristics allocated to it as negative markers into positive strengths is equally unsatisfactory since it means accepting and ultimately reinscribing the false premises of the White man's dichotomy. This frequently happens with rap music: the raw energy, aggression and anger that convey the musicians' rejection of White values paradoxically reaffirm the racist stereotypes White culture promulgates about Black. (103)

Feminist critics have pointed out that Black women have to overcome the doubly negative markers of gender and race (104). Earlier in this chapter I took Walcott and Brathwaite to task for the conventionality of their representations of women. In this final section I shall return briefly to these stereotypes before moving on to discuss the originality of Nichols' attempts to carve out alternative subject positions for Black women.

McLuskie and Innes argue that the legacy of late nineteenth century representations still influences contemporary African writers:

> as Europeans saw Africa as essentially female (needing and desiring European masculinity - a paternal governance), so Senghor and many other African writers

> see Africa as female awaiting the African male to take his rightful place....The coloniser's mythologising of Africa as the Other, as Female, as treacherous and seductive, was all too often transformed into recognizably related forms by African male writers in the name of nationalism. (105)

The most famous example of a European writer's depiction of African womanhood is probably Kurtz's majestic mistress in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. This woman is represented as the epitome of exoticism; her huge body is weighed down with beads, charms, elephant tusks and brass leggings that 'glittered and trembled at every step.' The passage continues:

> She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it has been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (106)

Woman becomes a symbol of the sinister yet enticing, unexplored territory. McLuskie and Innes argue that this figure, fetishised within colonial literature, persists in contemporary treatments by Achebe, Soyinka, Ousmane and others. They cite several examples of the 'mysterious, super-seductive woman...a kind of river or sea mermaid goddess /siren' being used as a metaphorical analogy for the land. (p. 4) Nichols also depicts woman and land in intimate relation, but the two coexist, rather than one operating as metaphor for the other. There is a telepathic sympathy between woman and the natural and spirit worlds. In long memoried woman the women sense the dawning of political liberation through climatic change - the hurricane

brings 'winds of change', and rains to cleanse and revitalise the land. The fighter Nanny's return is also announced through seasonal change. Instead of being symbols of revolution or freedom, the women are active agents in the struggle: their cunning and witchcraft are not 'ornamental' or symbolic, but deadly efficacious weapons. They appear as self-determining autonomous actors at last.

Some other contemporary writers have tried to bring this authenticity to their representations of Black women. The poet David Dabbydeen who, as we saw earlier in this chapter, explores the workings of sexual desire under slavery in his first collection, tries (and to my mind fails) to instil his version of the pornographic dimensions of imperialism with verisimilitude. Crudely, Slave Song offers no critique of the female masochism it portrays. Arguing that the women are only thus because of the perverted social order is insufficient in this case, where their representation reflects the so-called 'normal' versions of female sexuality in circulation in uncolonised countries like the United States and Britain.

A very different style of literary representation is that of the 'Black Madonna': African woman as pure, dutiful and loving, modelled on Western notions of the superior virtue of womankind. Derek Walcott offers an illustration of this type in his autobiographical portrait of his mother:

> Maman,
> you sat folded in silence,
> as if your husband might walk up the street,
> while in the forests the cicadas pedalled their
> machines,
> and silence, a black maid in white,

barefooted, polished and repolished
the glass across his fading water-colours,
the dumb Victrola cabinet (107)

Woman in mourning: it is a powerful tableau, but one that tends to reduce woman to the status of appendage and, rather than exploring her as a fully-realised character, tends to stick to the external, visual effect she creates. This image goes to the opposite extreme from the exaggeratedly exotic and erotic portraits of Conrad and Rider Haggard (108). And as we saw at the start of this chapter, the options for women in Omeros are hardly more inspiring.

It would be possible to give many more examples of the one-dimensionality of representations of Black women. It is perhaps sufficient to note, by way of conclusion, McLuskie and Innes' observation that 'African women are rarely portrayed *except* in relation to men, or their *otherness* to men.' (p. 4; their italics)

So how does Nichols attempt to do things differently? Her most obvious strategy is sending up the stereotypes by exaggeration. The Fat Black Woman carries three negative markers in her very name. She flaunts her physical bulk, her insatiable sexual appetite and a brand of sensual luxuriousness utterly at odds with the acceptable norms of White western culture. African matriarch, comforting Mammy, outrageously sassy lover: she encompasses each of these familiar stereotypes. She contains them, rather than being contained by them. Such characteristics, previously marks of inferiority or fetishised difference, are

subjected to a slick ironic revisioning. Nichols effects a skilful balancing-act: she writes into the stereotypes and undercuts them simultaneously. Her version of Black womanhood in this caricature character is very deliberately a literary construct, a composite figure put together from hackneyed past representations. The Fat Black Woman enjoys acting up to the stereotype; she mocks her own presentation at the same time as revelling in it. 'The Assertion' offers a good example of this process:

> Heavy as a whale
> eyes beady with contempt
> and a kind of fire of love
> the fat black woman sits
> on the golden stool
> and refuses to move
>
> the white robed chiefs
> are resigned
> in their postures of resignation
>
> the fat black woman's fingers
> are creased in gold
> body ringed in folds
> pulse beat at her throat
>
> *This is my birthright*
> says the fat black woman
> giving a fat black chuckle
> showing her fat black toes (109)

Throughout, the tone of this poem hovers between seriousness and mischief. The grand opening is gradually undercut as it becomes clear just how much enjoyment the Fat Black Woman is getting from frustrating the men around her. It is interesting that these chiefs are 'white robed'; they are symbols of both racial and patriarchal rival authorities. But the real irony that

underlies this scene is the way in which it dramatises the high element of performance in the woman's behaviour. She does not reveal herself, as an individual, at all; she simply acquiesces in (and indeed camps up) the stereotype of African matriarch that has been constructed about her. In so doing, she mocks them by *being* the fearful creature of their imaginations. All we see of her are eyes, fingers and toes, in an ironic nod towards traditional representations that concentrate wholly on the corporeal. Yet there is a sombre aspect to the poem. The 'fire of love' in her eyes is only barely held in check; the penetrative beady glare of her gaze and her laconic authority betray vestiges of a power and status almost erased but still glowing under a patriarchal social order.

So the Fat Black Woman exploits the remnants of her matriarchal stature with wry and knowing humour, using these atavistic associations to her own advantage, to intimidate others and to bolster her own sense of self-worth in a hostile and cold society. But as Nichols points out at her readings, this character also functions within the poems as a symbol. She represents difference, and what Nichols calls a 'largeness of spirit' which she finds lacking in Western culture. If we focus this obviously broad notion of expansiveness on female desire, the radicalism of Nichols' project becomes clearer. If female desire is a threat to patriarchal control it is not surprising that it should be projected on to the Other. Contemporary western culture's standard of ideal beauty minimalises this threat by selecting slight, slim, pale-skinned (ie. White) images

as the epitome of desirable femininity. Of course, she who is desirable according to these terms tends, as the Fat Black Woman notes, not to have any desire of her own. Watching 'Miss World' on television, she ponders the curious plasticity of the simpering doll-like clones, 'perfect' but passionless:

> And as the beauties yearn
> and the beauties yearn
> the fat black woman wonders
> when will the beauties
> ever really burn? (110)

In strong contrast to this artificial 'purity', racist ideology portrays the Black woman as primitive, lustful, lascivious. This is only a turn-on because historically her desire has always, ultimately, been subject to male control. Nichols plays directly into this tradition, but gives it a discomforting twist. This woman's desire is autonomous. The owner of this lively libido calls the tune:

> Come up and see me sometime
> Come up and see me sometime
>
> My breasts are huge exciting
> amnions of watermelon
> your hands can't cup
> my thighs are twin seals
> fat slick pups
> there's a purple cherry
> below the blues
> of my black seabelly
> there's a mole that gets a ride
> each time I shift the heritage
> of my behind (111)

Maya Angelou's voluptuous self-presentation in 'Still I Rise' affects an unashamed sensuality quite similar to that of the Fat

Black Woman. She knows that this proud demonstration of a woman at ease with her body and its desires is threatening, particularly to her male audience, so she flaunts it:

> Does my sexiness upset you?
> Does it come as a surprise
> That I dance like I've got diamonds
> At the meeting of my thighs? (112)

These confident, self-determining presentations of female sexuality destablise male fantasies of the seductress and the insatiable Black woman.

The Fat Black Woman's sequence opens with a quietly radical redefinition of beauty:

> Beauty
> is a fat black woman
> walking the fields
> pressing a breezed
> hibiscus
> to her cheek
> while the sun lights up
> her feet
>
> Beauty
> is a fat black woman
> riding the waves
> drifting in happy oblivion
> while the sea turns back
> to hug her shape (p. 7)

Nichols replaces the serene, impassive icon of White beauty with this carefree, self-absorbed fat Black woman. Where in western visual tradition the female model looks out towards the viewer, Nichols depicts a figure too busy enjoying herself to be bothered by anyone watching her. Questions about visual representation and the gendered 'gaze' have, of course, formed the subject of

much feminist debate over the last two decades, and several White women poets have taken famous paintings as their subject in order to reveal the inequality of power relations between artist and model, consumer and object. Eavan Boland transforms Degas' 'Laundresses' into a dramatic scenario, using the narrator's voice to warn the women of the sinister presence of the artist sneaking up behind them, poised to 'catch' them in his canvas. Judith Kazantzis subjects Leonardo's celebrated depictions of the rape of Leda to a harsh review, entitling her poem 'Leda and Leonardo the Swan', and thus casting the artist as the rapist, projecting his own desires onto Leda. (113) But Nichols' exemplar of beauty does not even give a nod of acknowledgement to the iconography it subverts. As in her freedom from western traditions of poetic form or allusion, here again she shows a refreshing originality. This woman is not trapped by the artist; she is too wrapped up in her own auto-erotic pleasure, frolicking in the sea, and wandering by herself through the fields. She is her own person, happily indifferent to the male gaze.

In Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman Nichols develops a new persona, exploring new ground in her depictions of Black women. The collection's title suggests that these poems have just been thrown together effortlessly by their lazy creator; that they are casual, even frivolous. It seems to acquiesce in the denigrating associations of blackness with indolent arrogance. The narrator starts off with some witty praise songs to dirt and grease and proceeds to unfold a philosophy of laid-back non-intervention. There are a couple of light praise songs to the naturalness of

domestic mess, dirty ovens and quietly moulding cheese. No housewife psychosis here:

> I sing the body reclining
> As an indolent continent
>
> ......
> I sing the weighing thighs
> The idle toes
> The liming knees (114)

Gradually it becomes obvious that, once again, a stereotypical notion of Black behaviour is being parodied. In public readings Nichols spells it out, explaining that several of the early poems in Lazy Thoughts were written when she was in the early stages of pregnancy and feeling very lethargic. In other words: take care, being laidback is not a racial characteristic, it does not come in the genes. Furthermore, there is always a careful intention beneath the apparently nonchalant, throwaway tone of these poems. 'The Body Reclining' is a response to Walt Whitman's praise song to the American work ethic, and implicitly draws a comparison between two cultures: America, with its meritocratic philosophy of hard work and reward, and the more relaxed, less frenetic life-style associated with the Caribbean. The poem's eulogy to laidback indulgence hints that western capitalism's antipathy to unashamed relaxation verges on the pathological. While the narrator advocates lethargic insouciance, scorning the frantic scurrying of White culture, she is also offering a radical critique of Western behaviour.

In other poems that cultivate this air of lotus-eating pleasure she shows herself to be no lazy lounger. Such poems demonstrate

that a slower pace and a less tense attitude do not necessarily signify careless and carefree indifference; the 'liming knees' and 'idle toes' may belong to a lounging body whose mind ponders long and hard. The volume's title does not prepare us for the highly crafted, serious poems that follow; her 'lazy thoughts' reveal a passionate humanity that is the very opposite of laziness. By presenting herself as the amateur scribbler she pokes fun at the traditional reverence accorded the poet in the west, and at the same time clears a new space for herself as a Black female poet, signalling her voluntary distance from this notion of the poet as the Romantic's super-sensitive man apart. (115)

Nichols' celebration of 'laziness' and of physicality is, then, more than an attempt to reclaim these aspects of human nature. Almost unnoticeably, the lazy voice moves from its verbal stretches and yawns to become a cumulative critique of Western values. Examining the many ways in which White capitalist societies attempt to 'perfect' the human body by removing all traces of its natural form, Nichols problematises attitudes and values that have been propagated as normal and desirable. Whiteness becomes a metaphor for an obsessive, disturbing anxiety about everything natural, signalled by ceaseless efforts to sanitise the human body, hiding its natural properties of hair, odour, and secretions. This activity is viewed by the bemused narrator as a bizarre and disturbing form of neurosis:

Those who scrub and scrub
incessantly
corrupt the body

Those who dust and dust
incessantly
also corrupt the body

And are caught in the asylum
Of their own making (116)

In this way Nichols turns the tables on colonial discourse. Seemingly acquiescing in its polarising of Black and White, she puts Whiteness under the microscope. What is traditionally Other becomes normal, unproblematic; it is these strange White ways that are a cause for concern. It provides Nichols with a way of carving out some firm alternative base from which to present fuller, richer portraits of Black female experiences.

One of the fullest of such exploratory portraits to date is 'Configurations', included in Lazy Thoughts. This poem insists on the crucial significance of history and the inescapable legacy of the past - familial, national, or racial and gendered as in the poem - over the present:

He gives her all the configurations
of Europe.

She gives him a cloud burst of parrots.

He gives her straight blond hairs
and a white frenzy.

She gives him black wool. The darkness
of her twin fruits.

He gives her uranium, platinum, aluminium
and concorde.

She gives him her 'Bantu buttocks'.

He rants about the spices in her skin.

She croons his alabaster and scratches him.

He does a Columbus -
falling on the shores of her tangled nappy orchard.

She delivers up the whole Indies again
But this time her wide legs close in
    slowly
Making a golden stool of the empire
of his head. (117)

In exploring the tensions that surround a white man and a black woman's sexual relationship Nichols picks up once again on traditional iconography to turn it to her own ends. She literalises the metaphors of colonial writing, casting the woman's body as the 'virgin territory', and portraying the lovers' clumsy gifts as symbols of the two races. Heterosexual relations and colonisation share vocabularies, of course: we speak of sexual 'conquests' and the 'rape' of the land, and Nichols collapses these metaphors into one. The poem plots the movements of a dance of sexual exploration in careful stages, almost as if it reflected the movements of the advancing European 'traders'. They 'give' one another markers of their difference: Bantu buttocks, straight white hair, metals and fruits. Each gift carries its historical associations of exploitation, fetishisation, theft and violence, yet each is also a gesture of attempted intimacy. The fineness of the line between desire and appropriation is implicitly being tested. Their exchanges are curiously flat and muted, without the warmth or passionate absorption of lovers' tokens, as they feel their

way tentatively across this political and sexual minefield. This tension between marvelling appreciation and the desire to own and subjugate the desired object is perfectly imaged in the analogy between sexual desire and colonisation. Until the final stanza, the woman is presented as instinctive, unreflecting; her gifts are the overdetermined symbols of the 'primitive' world. Only the last lines overturn this cliché, finally bringing the two levels of the poem together. The white male lover is controlled by the object of his desire and (perhaps) the object he yearned to control. The woman's legs encircle him as she moves to intensify her orgasm, no longer the passive catalyst for his pleasure but a seeker after her own. She may deliver the land, but she also keeps it, making him the golden stool that enhances the beauty and value of the land and, simultaneously, her orgasm. The stereotype of woman-as-land here receives, as it were, its ultimate come-uppance! By the end of the poem her orgasm, to male eyes often the ultimate gift, is explicitly equated with a revised replay of the 'rape' of the Indies: she gives him access to her 'riches', but in so doing ensures his own 'enslavement' too; creating a new configuration, a new, more equitable distribution and exchange of power between the sexes and races.

Again, then, Nichols picks up on the familiar tropes of racial and gender politics, reclaiming and reversing the spells of 'too much white male power' (118). Where Dabbydeen's depiction of sexual power play within a colonised society finds no space for reconciliation, Nichols presents a post-colonial scene in which the lovers seek ways of communicating beyond the

damaging enmity provoked by colonialism. The poem underlines the fallacy of the notion of sexuality as a pure or private realm to retreat to, since even the individual's desire is scarred by history. Yet it successfully moves beyond the traditional 'stale-mate' of representation, envisioning a wholly new pattern of power relations between man and woman, Black and White.

'Configurations' acknowledges that no act of representation can be constructed or received in a vacuum. History - literary, national, racial - cannot be disregarded. As a Black woman poet, Nichols has to return to the troubling images of the past before she can explore new ground. She writes straight into the stereotypes partly to mock them, but partly also to explore the complexity their shallowness conceals. Her poetry starts out with surface detail in order to scoop out what lies hidden and repressed beneath the surface. The firmest taboo lies, as usual, over autonomous female desire. In clearing space for authentic expression Nichols insists not only on the possibility of such desire existing quite independently of men, but on its centrality to literary creativity. Mischievously she locates the source of her own creativity between her legs in a poem for Ntozake Shange:

> just tinkin bout/
> how hot it isht
> tween yo crotch/
> isht enuf/
> to make you rush
> to rite a poem/
>
> For poems are born
> in the bubbling soul of the crotch. (119)

In her introduction to Early Ripening, an anthology of contemporary North American poetry by women, Marge Piercy observes that today's female poets seem often to display a joyful physicality absent from the work of their male colleagues. She says that their work 'tends to be, far more seamlessly than contemporary men's poetry, of the body, the brain, the emotions fused.' (120) Nichols seems to exemplify such synthesis. She celebrates the rich procreative power of her sex not just to give birth to children but as the source of energy and harmony that 'flows over/ on to the dry crotch/ of the world'. (121) The development of her work shows a deepening progress towards such synthesis far beyond the divisions of nationhood, race and politics. In a recent unpublished poem, 'Hurricane', the freak gales that struck Britain in 1988 become a symbol of this international union: even the Caribbean weather travels across the world, bringing what was firmly categorised as 'over there' into a different sphere, serving as reminder that 'the earth is the earth is the earth', regardless of boundaries and governments. Perhaps it is this confident iconoclasm (and its far-reaching implications) that keeps the critics at bay.

CONCLUSION

> Undoubtedly gender does play an important part in the making of any art, but art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc, into two sexes is to emphasise values in them that are not art. (1)

Do women poets write differently? was not really the question I wanted to address in this thesis, since the answer seems clear. Some do, others don't. Some men poets (how strange it sounds!) write differently from other men poets. And anyway it is the question itself that gives the game away. Differently from whom?

What I have tried to do is to explore the elusive 'values' that Elizabeth Bishop relegates, rather uneasily, to a different arena - the arena that is 'not art'. It is not surprising that she does this, since she is comparing like with unlike: 'values' are, self-evidently, not the same thing as 'art'. 'Art is art', she insists, as if she hoped that repetition would compel assent and knock on the head any debate about that perennial hot chestnut, *'what is art?'*. The circle is thus firmly closed. However, her argument implies that there are *some* values that *are* 'art'. The particular insights that emerge when work is interpreted on the basis of gender are clearly excluded from this privileged enclave because they disturb and disrupt something that is taken for granted about 'Art'.

It was this that I wanted to explore. I have attempted to find a way of reading poetry that foregrounds gender as a valid - indeed, essential - site of inquiry. (2) I hope this study offers some parameters within which meaningful discussion of women's poetry can take place, instead of the haphazard mixture of prejudice and superficiality that currently dominates any debate around the troubled category 'women poets'.

There are three central ways in which women poets challenge *the idea of the poet* latent behind current ideas about poetry. The first is the unarticulated - but neverthless highly influential - expectation that the poet is a figure of authority, speaking for and to his community. Women poets have had to look very closely at the issue of community: at who they are addressing, and who they are seen to be speaking *for*.

The second main issue concerns the poet as a lone voice - the individual with his unique insight, set apart from the indistinguishable masses. Women poets have subverted this tradition by experimenting with dialogue in poetry, replacing individualism with mutual insights and, sometimes, collaborative experiments with joint writing projects.

The third issue concerns the idea of the poet as a cerebral, intellectual creator. Women poets have questioned the way in which contemporary versions of poetic tradition downplay the body and the senses. Their work creates new forms of transcendence in which the importance of the body is reinstated.

These characteristics exist alongside a broader movement to demystify the concept of the poet and of poetry. This is not a rerun of the kind of democratic impulse characterised by the Liverpudlian poets. It is rather part of a new insistence on the ways in which hidden agendas mediate success: the operation of networks of infuence and promotion or, more generally, an emphasis on the factors affecting the emergence and survival of a poet, the economic realities of their existence.

With regard to the writing itself, the most immediate issue facing women poets is that of finding a voice in lyric poetry when traditionally that voice has been presumed to be (and usually has been) male. Often this is allied to a movement away from liberal humanism, in order to avoid duplicating its phallocentrism. Each of the poets I have looked at tackles these related issues in some form or another.

Eavan Boland turns that lyric voice to her own use. She simply substitutes her female voice for that of the male bard. Carol Ann Duffy experiments with different voices in her dramatic monologues, and in her love poems shapes a voice that bears no traces of grammatical gender at all. Deborah Randall's dramatic monologues are gestures of imaginative empathy that, like Duffy's, flout the notion of a stable poetic persona. Both Randall and Duffy create instead a variety of different 'I's. Suniti Namjoshi delivers the sharpest dig at liberal humanism, playing with its comfortable notion of a fixed and stable identity. She explores fictionalised versions of the Self, and

dismantles the one-way traditions of sonnet form, in order to shape a reciprocal lesbian poetic. Michèle Roberts puts the female body back into the lyric voice, creating a sensual, erotic 'I' which is independent and strong, as well as fluid and organic; able to dissolve into the land in a mystic union that rewrites traditional representations of the sublime. Grace Nichols combines elements of all these strategies: her lyric voice is sometimes choric, sometimes corporeal; her poetry transcends national, linguistic and cultural conventions to effect a rich and original synthesis.

Throughout this study I have tried to emphasise the importance of reading as a *process*. In a poem that constitutes a wry dig at literary critics and burgeoning theory, Ursula Fanthorpe offers a satirical vision of literary evaluation, in which the poem is regarded as a cross between a crafty child and a recalcitrant sheep. She describes step-by-step stages for the novice critic to follow:

> ...The next step is telling the sonnet
> What it is trying to say. This is called
> Interpretation. (3)

Fanthorpe uses Eagleton as the butt in this poem, but the tone she is parodying - the notion of a literary detective, dealing with a dimwit poem - is not, of course, unique to him. Her point is important. It is not the poem we need to be suspicious of, but the critics. We need to keep asking them (and ourselves) ***why***. When you hear that Plath's greatest poems were those

written in the days leading up to her death ask, *'why do you think so? what is it, in your opinion, that makes them her greatest?* '. Peel away the layerings of authority until you can engage with the personality that reads this way, rather than that way, that likes *this* rather than *that.* After all, to play along for a moment with sexist analogies, one reader's 'come hither' is another reader's sexual harassment.

AFTERWORD

It is almost four years since I began this research. How, if at all, has the climate changed regarding women's poetry? Economic recession has hit small magazines hard, but poetry never really experiences boom sales, so financial hardship cannot be used as an excuse for the lack of critical attention paid to women's poetry.

Rebecca O'Rourke has recently carried out a survey of the position of women in the poetry world. (1) It makes for depressing reading. Inspecting the poetry lists of the major publishers she found that Bloodaxe had the highest ratio of women, with fifty-one male poets to nineteen female. Faber produces a dismal nine female to fifty-nine male, - four of these nine females are dead. (2)

As for the all-important multicultural aspect to British poetry, the outlook is equally gloomy. Publishers reproduce the conventional sexist bias. (3) It would appear that our editors are like amateur jugglers: they can only keep two balls in the air at .once.

But it is not all bad news. More women poets seem to be represented, as a matter of course, in Poetry Review. Despite the recession there is still one magazine that publishes new poems by women. (4) The 1992 Arvon Poetry Competition was won by a woman, even if the judges did manage to come up with ripe clichés about one of the shortlisted poems being too violent to be by a woman. (5) And perhaps most encouraging of all is the way in which television programmes and videos produced for schools now incorporate gender as a central part of their

analysis. (6) The publication of two anthologies for younger readers, Singing Down the Bones and Fire The Sun is also heartening. (7) It may be mere chance, but it also seems that the undergraduate students I have encountered have been less enslaved to 'the Canon', more willing to rely on their own critical judgement.

The publication of Delighting the Heart and Taking Reality By Surprise - anthologies of personal writing experiences, practical advice and exercises - marks a welcome new interest in women as creators. (8) I have no statistics to prove it, but I suspect women form the larger part of creative writing workshops and residential courses such as those run by the Arvon Foundation. If such experiences and the encouragement of these books have any effect, it seems possible that the distance Eavan Boland highlighted between a woman saying, 'I write poems', and 'I am a poet', will narrow. (9) But women's tendency to lack confidence still operates as a serious disincentive, and they are still more likely to suffer severe economic hardship. (10)

Poetry Review have just published a long polemical piece by the American poet and critic, Dana Gioia. (11) It is all about the introspection of contemporary poetry in the States. Gioia concentrates on the position of poets within universities, and argues that we are swamped by poor poetry which no one reads. He describes what he calls a 'subculture' of poets who have no general readership, and publish simply to improve their record and thus the likelihood of getting a residency. In many ways it

is a familiarly despondent wail, and reminiscent of Martin Booth's book, which I discussed in the first chapter. So it seems fitting to end with the wheel come full circle. For what is striking about Gioia's article is its total neglect of the phenomenon of women's poetry. One of his main arguments is about the lack of a vibrant connection between the host of eager poets and general readers. Yet this is precisely what women's poetry offers. He makes startlingly inaccurate remarks as a result of this oversight, like the following:

> Almost no popular collections of contemporary poetry are available except those, like the Norton Anthology, targeting an academic audience. (p. 37.)

He also asks plaintively why poetry readings do not make use of other media, - music, dance and theatre - and comments sharply that, 'most readings are celebrations less of poetry than of the author's ego'. (p. 38.) He has obviously not seen performances by Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, or Storme Webber. In the course of his article he mentions ten women poets and over fifty men. His most revealing remark comes about halfway through the piece, when he refers to Adrienne Rich. It is a brief reference:

> Occasionally a writer links up rewardingly to a social or political movement. Rich, for example, has used feminism to expand the vision of her work. (p. 40).

Like Lawrence Sail, who appeared bemused at the suggestion that women's poetry might necessitate a re-reading of the poetry of the past, Gioia demonstrates here a similar failure to understand that feminism is not like a pair of glasses or an

expensive shirt that you can take on and off. (12) These male critics (and writers) seem unable to appreciate that this poetry offers a radical challenge to conventional ways of reading and writing. Potentially, for the poet and for her reader, it changes everything - not just poetry. (13)

Reviewing a recent book of photographs of poets, Russell Davies wonders why all the women in it look like mistresses from an Oxbridge college. (14) But these are women from the older generation; the only way they were likely to win admission to the Canon was via such placatory conformity. They have already given warning of how they intend to change:

> When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
> With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
> And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer
> gloves
> And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
> I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
> And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
> And run my stick along the public railings
> And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
> I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
> And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
> And learn to spit. (15)

Today's younger women poets have not had to wait for the freedoms of old age in order to escape the prescriptions of what is considered 'fitting' behaviour. Seers, satirists, sensualists: theirs are the voices of women's poetry in the late Twentieth Century.

There is room for so much more research in this area; I hope my study will be of use to others who also choose to celebrate the marvellous richness of this poetry.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 The poem I had chosen was 'The Watcher', from Side Effects (Liskeard: Harry Chambers/Peterloo, 1978)

2 Particularly influential in this respect was an article by Suzanne Juhasz, 'The Critic as feminist: Reflections on women's poetry, feminism, and the art of criticism', Women's Studies vol 5 (1977), pp 113-127. This helped me understand that a poem (or poet) can create new ways of reading, new terms or norms by which it (or she) asks to be read. Juhasz also quotes from a paper by Annette Kolodny about the role of the feminist critic in a period of so much experimental women's writing:

> it will be the duty of the feminist critic... *to insist upon restoring to the language of critical analysis its sense of reading as process.* That is, we must restore and reiterate the fact that the experience of a text is not an experience of any kind of whole or totality, as a *genre* definition would imply, but, instead, a series of feelings, emotions, recognitions, expectations, questions, surprises, etc...[her italics]

Kolodny's paper was (according to Juhasz) delivered at the Modern Language Association National Convention, December 1975. As far as I know it has not been published elsewhere.

3 I think it is important to emphasise the kindly nature of my imagined mentor, so as to distinguish him from the aggressive careerist or 'Magister Implicatus', thus named and depicted by James Sosnoski in ' "A Mindless Man-driven Theory Machine": Intellectuality, Sexuality and the Institution of Criticism', pp 55-78 in Linda Kauffmann (ed) Feminism and Institutions (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Mr Bingen has already reached the top of the ladder, so he does not need to be so competitive.

4 The two poets referred to are Carol Rumens and Fleur Adcock. See their introductions to, respectively, Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry 1964-1984 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985) and The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry (London: Faber & Faber, 1987). Their comments will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 1

1 See Nicci Gerrard, Into The Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing (London: Pandora, 1989) for an interesting discussion of this process of assimilation.

2 Quoted by Alicia Suskin Ostriker in her Introduction to Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (London: Women's Press, 1987) p 2. Gilbert and Gubar also use the quotation in their anthology, Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets (Bloomington: Indiana Univ Press, 1979), p. xviii.

3 Of course, what constitutes 'fair' is itself a controversial issue. Editors complain that they receive far fewer manuscripts from women poets; some women poets point out that it is hardly surprising, since the magazine never publishes any women at all, etc. etc. For an example of this familiar 'vicious circle' syndrome, see the correspondence between editor and readers printed in Stand (Winter 1986-87), 54-5.

4 Although this underlying fear may account for some of the hostility towards treating women poets as a sub-group, it seems likely that the anthologies first commissioned by feminist presses and since imitated by Faber and Chatto, are often bought by people who would not previously have bought poetry. This new market appears to remain almost totally separate from the mainstream. Might it be interesting to do some statistical research into the age, gender, class and race of, say, Fabers' clientele? It would probably emerge as a mirror image of the age, gender, class and race of the poets!

5 Clair Wills, 'Among their selves', TLS, 24 June 1988, p. 715.

6 Margaret Byers, 'Cautious Vision: Recent British Poetry by Women', in British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey, ed Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1972), 74-84.

7 See, for example, Jerry Lamb, 'How it feels when the typewriter is on the other foot,':

> '...Since I have just written a short story I was interested in books containing collections of short stories by a variety of authors. I found two: one entitled "The Seven Deadly Sins" and the other called "Storia"...On further inspection I was dismayed to find that both publishers only accepted contributions from female authors...It all seems very sexist to me, unless of course the publishers intend to produce a selection of short stories by male authors...'

The Guardian, 21 January 1989, Letters page.

8 Les Murray, who continues:

> 'Right now feminism seems to have absorbed a lot of their energy and I think women are writing less well because feminism is there to absorb the energy that otherwise would have gone into literature. I'm glad I'm publishing that opinion a long way away!'

The American Poetry Review (March/April 1986). Murray was speaking specifically about Australian women writers. As Sylvia Kantaris pointed out in reply, the 'advantage' he cites is a mixed blessing:

> 'You can't be just a poet as a woman. You have to be pre-something or post-something or "token" something or whatever, and often I hear, "Of course, you realise it's only because you're a woman" in relation to any little "success".' Stand (Winter 1986-7), p. 56.

9 Alan Robinson, Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1988).

10 Indeed Carol Ann Duffy and Mebdh McGuckian, the other two poets he discusses, also take pains to distance themselves and their poetry from simplistic political allegiances.

11 See, for example, Lilian Mohin, ed, One Foot On The Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry 1969-1979 (London: Onlywomen Press, 1979). Jan Montefiore provides an interesting discussion of the unexamined Romanticism within radical feminist aesthetics in the opening chapter of her study Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing (London: Pandora, 1987).

12 Christian McEwen, ed, Naming The Waves: Contemporary Lesbian Poetry (London: Virago, 1988) To its credit, P N Review did see fit to review this collection. See vol 15 no 3 (Autumn 1988) p. 47

13 Carcanet published her Collected Poems in 1988.

14 There are, of course, glorious exceptions to this rule, variously acknowledged according to the predilections of the individual critic. Shelley's poems for revolution, Pope's satirical Dunciad squabblings, Spenser's political allegories in The Faerie Queene, and most recently the fêting of Irina Ratushinskaya, suggest that 'political' is a fairly flexible label, but one ususally only used when the proferred ideology is seen as unwelcome.

15 Clifford Bax and M Stewart, eds, The Distaff Muse: an anthology of poetry written by women (London: Hollis and Carter,

1949). Quotations without page numbers are taken from the Prefatory Note.

16 Carol Cosman, J Keefe and K Weaver, eds, The Penguin Book of Women Poets (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 29.

17 Mrs Elizabeth Sharp, ed, Women's Voices (London: Walter Scott Ltd, 1887), p v-vi. Mrs Sharp's style is wonderfully suggestive. However elegantly she does it, she certainly 'doth protest too much'; her tone anticipates the iron velvet of Woolf's persona portrayed most famously in A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas. Reading Mrs Sharp (I even feel I must keep her title) is like reading a Victorian parody of Rumens or Adcock; her claims are uncannily identical. A few extracts:

> 'I do not think that the poetry enshrined herein requires any apology from me or from any one: it speaks for itself, and - to my mind, at any rate - conclusively enough.... The idea of making this anthology arose primarily from the conviction that our women-poets had never been collectively represented with anything like adequate justice; that the works of many are not so widely known as they deserve to be; and that at least some fine fugitive poetry could thus be rescued from oblivion. My claim, now that my task is at an end, is, that the following selections will further emphasise the value of women's work in poetry for those who are already well acquainted with English Literature, and that they will convince many it is as possible to form an anthology of "pure poetry" from the writings of women as from those of men. It was because I felt so assured I would have to make no apology that the labour has been to me one of love...' (Preface viii-ix)

Is her irony deliberate?

18 Sharp's assertion that women also write 'pure poetry' is particularly interesting; it suggests that the growth of the Victorian women's movement stimulated politically-motivated protest poetry akin to that of what Kantaris dubs 'The Hysterical Women's Movement, 1963-1980', so frequently castigated today. Holloway Jingles, a collection of poetry by imprisoned suffragettes, is unlikely to have been a one-off phenomenon; no doubt many other 'feminist' anthologies lie tucked away in second-hand bookshops throughout Britain.

19 Carol Rumens ed, Making For The Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry 1964-84 (London: Hogarth/Chatto and Windus, 1985), p. xvi.

20 Rumens, op. cit. p. xv.

21 Fleur Adcock ed, The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 1. A revealing tale

of hidden intervention lies behind this anthology. Although it is Adcock's name that appears on its cover, her selection was substantially altered by *her* editor, Craig Raine. He deleted 'some 20%' of her choices. (Letter from Adcock, 13 August 1988).

22 Martin Booth, *British Poetry 1964-1984: Driving through the Barricades* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p 190.

23 Frank Ormsby ed, *Poets from the North of Ireland*. (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1979).

24 For an anthology that asserts the positive insights gained from studying women's poetry in a collective context see Jeni Couzyn, ed, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1985). Limiting her selection, Couzyn is also able to present a substantial number of poems from each woman, thus offering a fuller introduction to their work.

25 As she points out:

> '...we do not hesitate to use the term "American poetry" (or "French poetry" or "Russian poetry") on the grounds that American (or French or Russian) poets are diverse. Should we call Whitman, Frost, and Stevens "poets" but not "American poets"? '

Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing The Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (London: Women's Press, 1986), p. 9.

26 Jane E. Thomas, ' "The Intolerable Wrestle With Words": The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy', *Bête Noire*, Issue 6 (Winter 1988), 78-88.

27 Diana Scott ed, *Bread and Roses: Women's Poetry of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Virago, 1982).

28 I am indebted to Sylvia Kantaris for kindly drawing my attention to these letters.

29 Byers, 'Cautious Vision', op. cit. p. 74-5.

30 Dana Gioia, 'The Barrier of a Common Language: British Poetry in the 'Eighties', *Hudson Review*, vol 37, no 1 (1984), 6-20.

31 See Les Murray or your local poetry bookshop owner for more details!

32 Joanna Russ, *How To Suppress Women's Writing* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 79.

33 Martin Booth, *British Poetry*, op. cit. p. 195-6. It is, sadly, too late to tell whether Frances Horowitz could eventually satisfy Booth's criteria of 'good' poetry; she died, as he acknowledges, in 1983, two years before his study was published.

34 Fleur Adcock, Twentieth Century Women Poets, op. cit. p. 9-10.

35 It is, of course, extremely hard to generalise about a whole nation's aesthetics. Undoubtedly there is no seamless consensus in Britain; here I offer some general impressions of the tastes of those with access to the channels of 'high culture'.

36 If this rings a distant bell, it is probably not surprising. Here is Mrs Sharp again, in 1887:

> 'Women have had many serious hindrances to contend against - defective education, lack of broad experience of life, absence of freedom in which to make full use of natural abilities, and the force of public and private opinion, both of which have always been prone to prejudge her work unfavourably, or at best apologetically. These deterrent influences are gradually passing away, with the result that an ever-widening field for the exercise of their powers is thus afforded to women. Herein was an additional reason for the chronological arrangement of this volume. I found, as I trust others may, that the collection thus made pointed to a steady development of intellectual power, certainly not unaccompanied by artistic faculty - a fact which gives further sanction to the belief that still finer work will be produced in the future by women-poets ' (op. cit. Preface, ix).

In particularly gloomy moments it can seem as if there will always be optimistic souls proclaiming the incipient dawn of a Great Era of women poets. Eavan Boland ends her interesting article 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma' with an even more distinctive peroration:

> 'It seems to me, at this particular time, that women have a destiny in the form...I believe we are better equipped than most to discover the deepest possibilites and subversions within poetry itself...women should break down the barriers in poetry in the same way that poetry will break the silence of women.' Stand (Winter 1896-87), p. 49.

37 Alongside fears of such innate difference runs the *nonsequitur* that, if such difference were evident, male readers would not be able to understand the poetry, nor would they be thanked for even trying to. Thus Robinson gives this well-intentioned apology:

> 'If my choice of poets appears tendentious, in that it includes none who would wish to define herself outside a binary, oppositional relationship with masculinity,

> my apologia is that I do not seek to neutralise feminist critique through selective co-optation of its less threatening elements, but choose not to offend those writers who would resent the presumed patronising or appropriative attention of a male critic.' op. cit. p. 163.

38 A magazine can, without being actively antagonistic towards women's writing, still prove a hostile environment for its publication. This is nicely illustrated by a letter from Sarah Maguire to PN Review, explaining her decision not to proceed with a review of Showalter's The New Feminist Criticism. Maguire argues that the magazine's sustained neglect of feminism in any form demands some discussion of this fact in a review of the book. To pass no comment would merely 'reinforce this marginalisation'. She continues:

> In not challenging the anti-feminism of PNR I felt I should merely contribute to its exacerbation through permitting a semblance of pluralistic tolerance. If PNR can be credited with a modicum of feminist input covertly introduced, then the broader issues of its longstanding refusal to engage with feminism may be safely ignored...' PN Review, Vol 13 no 1, p 3.

39 Matthew Caley, The Wide Skirt, August 1988.

40 It is unclear precisely what Tracy means by 'feminist journals', since most of the serials recognised as such rarely include poems. *To my knowledge,* Writing Women *is the only* women's creative writing magazine that publishes primarily poetry. Distaff and Women Live both offered some, but have both ceased publication. Various other small-scale (and financially-perilous) publications produce poetry by women, but their reputation and distribution are so localised that they can hardly compete with Stand and its colleagues.

41 Lorna Tracy, 'Stand: A Male-Order Magazine?' Stand (Winter 1986-87), 54-5.

42 Jonathan Raban, The Society of the Poem (London: George Harrap and Co, 1971), p. 173.

43 Sheenagh Pugh, Poetry Review (Spring 1989), p 49.

44 Schmidt and Lindop, British Poetry Since 1960, op. cit. 92-106.

45 Byers, 'Cautious Vision', op. cit. p. 74.

46 Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision', (1971) reprinted in On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (London: Virago, 1980), 33-49.

47 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Mary K DeShazer, Alice Walker and June Jordan have probably been the most influential contemporary writers/critics. Gilbert and Gubar's collection of essays, Shakespeare's Sisters pioneered research into the notion of a concealed tradition amongst Victorian women poets. See Bibliography for details.

48 Herbert Leibowitz, 'Diving and Climbing', Parnassus: Poetry in Review, 1985, (New York), 6-15.

49 Marge Piercy, ed. Early Ripening: American Women's Poetry Now (Massachusetts and London: Pandora Press, 1987).

50 Lawrence Sail, Stand (Summer 1989), p 80.

CHAPTER 2

1 Edna O'Brien, Mother Ireland (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 11.

2 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma', Stand (Winter 1986-7), p.48.

3 Rebecca E Wilson and Gillean Somerville-Arjat (eds), An interview with Eavan Boland, Sleeping With Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 80.

4 Boland elucidates these 'psycho-sexual' pressures in 'The Woman Poet'. She quotes Robert Graves on the paradoxical position of the woman poet in being herself her own Muse ('she is herself the Muse'). Boland adds:

> 'I may think there is a certain melodrama in Graves's commentary. Yet, in a subterranean way, this is exactly what many women fear. That the role of poet added to that of woman may well involve them in unacceptable conflict. The outcome of that fear is constant psycho-sexual pressure, and the result of that pressure is a final reluctance to have the courage of her own experience - all of which adds up to that distance between writing poems and being a poet...'

Boland, op. cit. p. 46.

5 'The Achill Woman', Outside History (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), p. 27.

6 From an article in the Irish University Review, quoted on the back cover of The War Horse.

7 Her Selected Poems was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation; Outside History was a Poetry Book Society Choice. It is worth mentioning the fact that the review-space her work is given in the TLS is not overgenerous.

8 Back cover, The Journey. To date, Boland's collections are:
New Territory (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967).
The War Horse (London: Gollancz, 1975).
In Her Own Image (Dublin: Arlen House, 1980).
Night Feed (Dublin: Arlen House & London: Marion Boyars, jointly, 1982).
The Journey and other poems (Dublin: Arlen House, 1986).
Selected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989).
Outside History (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990).

9 'Neil Corcoran confronts the new recklessness', The London Review of Books, 28 September 1989. Hardly surprisingly, the title does not refer to Boland, but to James Fenton's new volume, Manilla Envelope, reviewed in the same article. Boland is

described by Corcoran rather diminishingly as 'a poet of quiet, meticulous, patient craft', but he is enthusiastic about her Selected Poems amd calls her 'a fine poet moving onto a new plateau of achievement.' p. 15.

10 Boland, 'The Woman Poet', p. 45.

11 ibid.

12 Here are some examples of the showing of women poets in contemporary anthologies:
Thomas Kinsella (ed), The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse (OUP, 1986) - not a single modern woman poet.
Kennelly (ed), The Penguin Book of Irish Verse (Harmondsworth, 1970) - six women.
Gerald Dawe (ed), The Younger Irish Poets (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1982) - two women, but twelve poems by one of them (McGuckian).
David Marcus (ed), Irish Poets 1924-1974 (London: Pan, 1975) - four women.

13 For more information about feminist publishing enterprises, see 'Ireland's New Rebels' by Ailbhe Smyth, in The Women's Review of Books, v. iv, no 7 (April 1987). The Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement produced a collection of poetry and prose, The Female Line, edited by Ruth Hooley, in 1985 to celebrate their tenth anniversary. They received grants from the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in order to do so. More recently Attic Press, the publishing imprint of Irish Feminist Information, have produced Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing, edited by Ailbhe Smyth (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989).

14 Boland, 'The Woman Poet in a National Tradition'.

15 John Montague (ed), The Faber Book of Irish Verse (London: Faber, 1974).

16 Maighreád Medbh, The Making of a Pagan (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990).

17 Rachel Waters, 'Poetry and the Literary Establishment', Studies (Dublin), v. 68 (1979), 294-304.

18 Terry Eagleton, 'Great Irish silly-billy', The Observer (29 January 1989). He goes on to describe Yeats's genius for the part:

> He had an uncanny ability to convert the history around him into instant myth: the Dublin corporation has only to refuse to house an art collection and Yeats is immediately off the mark with a poem transforming the affair into weighty symbolic significance. The woman he loved, the Republican revolutionary Maud

> Gonne, becomes rose of Ireland, Helen of Troy, archetype of aristocratic virtue - anything, in fact, but an actual woman.

For Eavan Boland, this repeated ellision of the 'actual woman' becomes an urgent ethical issue.

19 Anthony Burgess, 'Mad as the mist and snow', <u>The Independent</u> (28 January 1989).

20 By this I intend the recurrent features - of landscape, image, theme, etc. - of a poet's *oeuvre*: features which develop over time and form a framework around which new poems cohere.

21 James McElroy, ' "Night Feed": An Overview of Ireland's Women Poets', <u>The American Poetry Review</u>, v. 14 (i) (February 1985), p. 32.

22 Harold Bloom, <u>The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry</u> (Oxford: OUP, 1973).

23 See, for example, Showalter's 'Women and the Literary Curriculum', <u>College English 32</u> (1971), p. 855; Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971), reprinted in <u>On Lies, Secrets and Silence</u>, 33-49, (London: Virago, 1980); Eavan Boland, 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma' <u>Stand</u> (Winter 1986-7), 43-9. Also Nuala O'Faolain, 'Irish Women and Writing in Modern Ireland', in Ní Chuilleanáin (ed) <u>Irish Women: Image and Acheivement</u> (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985).

24 Roger Garfitt, 'Stability, exile and cunning', <u>TLS</u>, (February 15 1980), p. 169. All following unattributed quotations are from this review article. Ormsby's anthology was published by Blackstaff Press in Belfast, in 1979.

25 Seamus Heaney, 'The Tollund Man', from <u>The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry</u>, ed. by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 27.

26 Heaney's sexual allusions do not limit themselves to the motherland. In an essay on the poetry of Hopkins he develops the following analogy between registers of language:

> 'So I am setting up two modes and calling them masculine and feminine - but without the Victorian sexist overtones to be found in Hopkins's and Yeats's employment of the terms. In the masculine mode, the language functions as a form of address, of assertion or command, and the poetic effort has to do with conscious quelling and control of the materials, a labour of shaping; words are not music before they are anything else, nor are they drowsy from their slumber in the unconscious, but athletic, capable, displaying the muscle of sense. Whereas in the feminine mode the

language functions more as evocation than as address, and the poetic effort is not so much a labour of design as it is an act of divination and revelation; words in the feminine mode behave with the lover's come-hither instead of the athlete's display, they constitute a poetry that is delicious as texture before it is recognized as architectonic.'

'The Fire I' The Flint', in Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978 (London: Faber, 1980), p. 88. Mary Ellmann would doubtless have had an acid riposte.

27 Cixous describes her search for a role model, suggesting that the figure of Ulysses the wanderer, so appealing to male writers, is solipsistic: writing is seen as entailing a repulsion or appropriation of the Other:

' "Silence, exile and cunning" are the tools of the young man-artist with which Stephen Dedalus arms himself to organize his series of tactical retreats while he works out in "the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race." A help to a loner, of course...Ulysses, the artist of flight...Always returning to himself...The Loaner: loaning himself to women and never giving himself except to the ideal image of Ulysses...'

from 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks / Ways Out / Forays', The Newly Born Woman (Manchester: MUP, 1986), p. 74.

28 Boland, 'Domestic Interior', Night Feed (Dublin: Arlen House, 1982).

29 Garfitt, 'Stability, exile and cunning'.

30 Boland, 'The Journey', Selected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p. 86.

31 See 'The Muse Mother' and 'Monotony', op. cit. p. 54-5.

32 Boland, 'The Woman Poet', p. 49.

33 Boland, 'Woman in Kitchen', op. cit. p. 43.

34 Boland, 'Monotony', op. cit. p. 55.

35 Boland, 'The Muse Mother', op. cit. p. 54.

36 Sylvia Kantaris envisages a rather different version of the woman writer's muse in her wry satire, 'The Tenth Muse':

'.....
My muse lands with a thud
like a sack of potatoes.
He has no aura.

The things he grunts are things
I'd rather not hear.
His attitude is "Take it or leave it, that's
the way it is", drumming his fingers
on an empty pan by way of music.
If I were a man I would enjoy
such grace and favour,
tuning my fork to Terpsichore's lyre,
instead of having to cope with this dense
late-invented eunuch
with no more pedigree than the Incredible Hulk,
who can't play a note
and keeps repeating "Women
haven't got the knack"
in my most delicately strung and scented ear.'

The Tenth Muse. (Liskeard: Harry Chambers /Peterloo Poets, 1983), p. 9.

37 Garfitt, 'Stability, exile and cunning'.

38 Sleeping with Monsters, p. 81.

39 ibid.

40 ibid.

41 Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Irish Women Poets: The Privatisation of Myth', in Diverse Voices: Essays on Twentieth Century Women Writers in English , edited by Harriet Jump. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 258.

42 Boland, 'The Woman Poet', p. 48.

43 Quotations from Michael O'Neill are taken from his untitled review in TLS, July 7-13, 1989, p. 737. Those from Corcoran, from 'Neil Corcoran confronts the new recklessness', op. cit.

44 A. A. Kelly (ed) Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women from 1690 to the present. (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1987).

45 Although see Caroline Halliday's observations on the striking originality of metaphors used by lesbian poets. She notes a new freedom and confidence which translates into more daring, vivid forms of imagery:

> 'There is a difference between the use of these images and the concern being expressed in 1979-80 in a London discussion of 'Writing about Sex', over '"how" to say "it". The images have been changing, from fern fronds to wild garlic, from cradles of petals to mussels raw in the strainer. The change marks a dramatic increase in the freedom with which lesbians are viewing their

bodies, and their poetry. The images change our notions of ourselves, recognising their accuracy with excitement and some shock.'

'"The Naked Majesty of God": Contemporary Lesbian Erotic Poetry', in Mark Lilly (ed), Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 93.

46 Mary Carruthers, 'Imagining Women: Notes towards a feminist poetic', Massachusetts Review, v. 20 (Summer 1979), 281-307.

47 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Granada, 1977), p. 35.

48 Obviously these remarks are culled from the insights of Cixous and Irigaray. See especially Speculum of the Other Woman (Cornell Univ Press, 1985).

49 Medbh McGuckian, 'Ode to a Poetess', Venus and the Rain (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 11.

50 Kennelly (ed), The Penguin Book of Irish Verse (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 39.

51 Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 35. On Lies, Secrets and Silence (London: Virago, 1980).

52 Alicica Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language (London: Women's Press, 1987), p. 211. It is Ostriker who first uses the term 'revisionist mythmaking', drawing upon Rich's ground-breaking article.

53 Judith Kazantzis, 'Leda and Leonardo the Swan', The Wicked Queen (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1980), p. 8.

54 Jan Montefiore, Feminism and Poetry (London: Pandora, 1987).

55 Boland, 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland', Outside History, p. 32.

56 Boland, 'The Woman Poet in a National Tradition', LIP: A Kind of Scar (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), 4-24. The next two quotations are also from this article.

57 See Selected Poems for all these pieces.

58 Cixous, 'Sorties', p. 66.

59 Boland, 'The Glass King', Selected Poems, p. 95.

60 See the introduction to Jeni Couzyn's Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets (Newcastle: 1985) for an interesting discussion of women's special relationship to oral traditions.

61 See Selected Poems and Outside History.

62 Boland, 'The Journey', Selected Poems, p. 86.

63 Boland, 'National Tradition', p. 12.

64 ibid, p. 23.

65 See, for example, 'Fruit on a Straight-sided Tray', 'On Renoir's "The Grape Pickers" ', and 'Degas's Laundresses' - all in Selected Poems.

66 Boland, 'The Woman Poet', p. 49.

67 Boland, Selected Poems, p. 43.

68 ibid, p. 48.

69 Boland, 'National Tradition', p. 10.

70 'Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening', Selected Poems, p. 72.

71 Lachlan Mackinnon, 'A material fascination', TLS (August 21 1987), p. 904.

72 Heaney, 'The Fire I' The Flint', p. 88.

73 'Listen. This is the Noise of Myth', Selected Poems, p. 90.

74 Compare Cixous's discussion of the invisible Law that constrains Woman:

> You will not pass. You will not see me. A woman is before the door of the law. And the bearded watchman...warns her not to go through. Not to go, not to enjoy...from always being looked at without seeing, she pales, she shrinks, she grows old, she is diminished, sees no more, lives no more. That is called 'internalizing'...Her powerlessness, her paralysis, her feebleness? They are the measure of her power, her desire, her resistance, her blind confidence in their L_ _....maybe there is a L_ _ and it is the petrifying result of not-knowing reinforced by power that produces it.

'Sorties', p. 102-3. It is interesting to compare this with Angela Carter's brisk debunking of myth:

> 'All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway.'

The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History (London: Virago, 1979), p. 5.

75 Mc Elroy, '"Night Feed": An Overview', p. 32.

76 Boland, 'The Woman Poet', p. 44.

77 Boland, 'What We Lost', Outside History, p. 43.

78 Helen Dunmore, 'A Civil Tongue', Poetry Review, v. 81 no. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 11.

79 Anne Stevenson, 'Inside and Outside History', P N Review 83, vol 18 no 3 (Jan. / Feb. 1992), 34-38.

80 'The Shadow Doll', Outside History, p. 17.

81 Robert Henigan, 'Contemporary Women Poets in Ireland', Concerning Poetry (Bellingham, WA), v. 18(1-2) (1985), 103-115.

CHAPTER 3

1 Boland, 'The Journey', Selected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p. 90.

2 The work of several lesbian poets proves an important exception to this generalisation. See also, Patricia Yaeger's essay, 'Towards a Female Sublime', in Linda Kauffman (ed), Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 191-212. She provides a neat summary of the shortcomings of 'the old-fashioned sublime of domination, the vertical sublime which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others' (p. 191), and outlines the value of a redefined horizontal sublime for women writers. I shall return to this in the chapter on Michèle Roberts.

3 This discussion forms the last chapter of her study of the work of Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson and Emily Bronte. Women Writers and Poetic Identity (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980).

4 See, for example, Joanna Russ, How To Suppress Women's Writing (London: Women's Press, 1983).

5 See Jacqueline Rose's recent study, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath (London: Virago, 1991), for an analysis of the forms and functions of the Plath mythology.

6 Seamus Heaney, 'The Indefatiguable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', in The Government of the Tongue (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 168.

7 Patricia Duncker, Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 5.

8 Rumens, Introduction, Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985). See chapter 1 for further discussion of this introduction.

9 Indeed, quite the opposite: praise for the domestic sensibility has become one of the most common features in reviews of men's work. When I first mooted the idea of researching poetry by contemporary women (in 1987), a male poet suggested, with uncanny foresight, that a more interesting topic might be the increasingly sensitive portrayals of domesticity in poetry by men. Craig Raine and Douglas Dunn are two of the most freqently-mentioned in this context. For an example of how this concern, traditionally the very heartland of women, neverthless succeeds in excluding them, see Robert Crawford's review article, 'Callaloo', which opens as follows:

' "Where do you come from?" asks one of the most important questions in contemporary poetry - where's home? Answering the pulls and torsions of that question produces much of the verse of Heaney, Harrison and Dunn, but it also produces very different kinds of poetry...Home can be a bit smug, though; and sometimes constricting. The poetic celebrants of home at the moment tend not to be women. But if it was once fashionable to see home as a "provincial" bore, there have been poets around for some time, such as Edwin Morgan and Roy Fisher, who give the lie to that. Home is no longer "so sad".'

LRB (20 April 1989), p. 22. The only female poet to get a mention is Merle Collins. Eat your heart out, Eavan Boland!

10 Andrew MacAllister, 'An interview with Carol Ann Duffy', Bête Noire, Issue 6 (Winter 1988), p. 72.

11 Gillian Allnutt, the new british poetry (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 77.

12 Carol Ann Duffy, 'Standing Female Nude', Standing Female Nude (London: Anvil, 1985), p. 46.

13 Although, as we shall see, Duffy's more recent work makes greater use of an apparently personal lyric voice.

14 Duffy, 'Selling Manhattan', Selling Manhattan (London: Anvil, 1987), p. 34.

15 Duffy, 'Model Village', Selling Manhattan, p. 21.

16 Duffy, 'Psychopath' Selling Manhattan, p. 28.

17 Heaney's 'Act of Union' is a fairly offensive example, in North. (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 49. Tony Harrison's 'The Nuptial Torches' is an extraordinary recreation of the grotesque wedding ceremonies said to inflame King Philip's lust, spoken by his terrified but mesmirised virgin queen. In Selected Poems, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 60. Some of Ian Hamilton's sensitive vignettes are delivered by female narrators. See Fifty Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1988). Peter Reading's exuberant poetic probably provides the most examples. See, for example, Essential Reading. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986).

18 Sylvia Kantaris, 'Writing with Men', Delighting The Heart (London: Women's Press, 1989), p. 210.

19 Duffy, 'Naming Parts', Standing Female Nude, p. 21.

20 Duffy, 'Dies Natalis', Selling Manhattan, p. 10.

21 It is interesting to compare 'Psychopath' with Roger McGough's chilling depiction of an actual rape, 'The Jogger's Song':

> Well, she was asking for it.
> Lyin there, cryin out,
> dyin for it. Pissed of course.
> Of course, nice girls don't.
> Don't know who she was,
> where from, didn't care.
> Nor did she. Slut. Slut.
>
> Now I look after myself. Fit.
> Keep myself fit. Got
> a good body. Good body. Slim.
> Go to the gym. Keep in trim.
> Girls like a man wiv a good body.
> Strong arms, tight arse. Right
> tart she was. Slut. Pissed.
>
> Now I don't drink. No fear.
> Like to keep a clear
> head. Keep ahead. Like
> I said, like to know what I'm doin
> who I'm screwin (excuse the language).
> Not like her. Baggage. Half-
> dressed, couldn't-care-less. Pissed.
>
> Crawlin round beggin for it.
> Lyin there, dyin for it.
> Cryin. cryin. Nice girls don't.
> Right one she was. A raver.
> At night, after dark,
> on her own, in the park?
> Well, do me a favour.
>
> And tell me this:
> If she didn't enjoy it,
> why didn't she scream?

Melting into the Foreground (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 61.

Duffy's decision to set her poem in the 'Fifties was intended to distance the effect: 'so that it didn't come over as exploiting something that you would read in the newspapers.' ('An Interview with Andrew MacAllister', op. cit. p. 70.) She explains that her aim is to 'bear witness':

> 'I don't want to write the kind of poetry that tells the reader how I feel when I see a rainbow. I don't want to write the kind of poetry that tells the reader that I as a feminist think that this guy should have his prick cut off because he was the Yorkshire Ripper. What I want to do is present it, as it is. Poets don't have solutions, poets are recording human experience.'

The lack of explicit condemnation, facilitated by this freedom to write in the rapist's voice, guards against the damning label, 'feminist poet'. I was surprised to discover how crucial tone is to the (usually derogatory) classification. In a seminar, I gave students several anonymous poems and asked them to guess the gender of the poet. If they felt the tone of a particular poem was 'bitter', the vast majority of students guessed it to be by a woman. '15th February', by Peter Reading, was overwhelmingly believed to be by a woman, because it was considered such a relentless attack on masculinity.

Interestingly, there are still vestiges of the idea that women are 'nicer' than men. It seems that bitterness is somehow expected from the woman poet, whereas cool, level-headed violence is not. One student thought that '15 February' described acts 'too horrific' to have been written by a female poet. The judges of the 1992 Arvon Poetry Competition clearly hold similarly quaint notions about femininity. All of them assumed that the 'simple, murderous poem', 'Lily Pond' was written by a man. (It was, in fact, by Vicki Feaver.) See Kate Kellaway's report, 'Neat, well-mannered, risky and rude', The Observer (8 March 1992), p. 49.

22 Duffy, 'You Jane', Standing Female Nude, p. 34.

23 Alan Robinson, 'Declarations of Independence: Some Responses to Feminism', in Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 196.

24 Duffy, 'Whoever She Was', Standing Female Nude, p. 35.

25 Duffy, 'Dies Natalis', Selling Manhattan, p. 10.

26 Boland, Sleeping with Monsters (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 81.

27 Duffy, 'Naming Parts', Standing Female Nude, p. 21.

28 Duffy, 'Telephoning Home', Selling Manhattan, p. 52.

29

> 'I like to write love poems but they are the most difficut. You see I don't like being praised as a great writer of other voices 'cos I think I'm a great love poet.'

'An Interview with Andrew MacAllister', op. cit. p. 74.

30 Duffy, 'Words, Wide Night', The Other Country (London: Anvil, 1990), p. 47. The dialogic quality and disrupted grammar are reminiscent of Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe's love poetry. See Chapter 4.

31 Sylvia Kantaris, 'Writing With Men', in Susan Sellers (ed) Delighting the Heart: A Notebook by Women Writers (Women's

Press, 1989), p. 210. Kantaris has collaborated on sequence poems with D. M. Thomas and Philip Gross.

32 See 'Human Interest', 'Alliance', and 'Missile', all in Standing Female Nude, for further examples of polarised enmity between men and women in Duffy's poems.

33 Randall, 'Wood Nymph', The Sin Eater (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989), p. 31.

34 Randall, 'The Beast and Fiona', op. cit. p. 25.

35 Compare Ursula Fanthorpe's title poem in Not My Best Side, a skit on Uccello's painting of 'St George and the Dragon'. She sends up St. George as a pompous chap, and has the maiden sorely tempted to stay with the dragon rather than be rescued by her Knight.

36 Randall, 'The Swans at Abbotsbury', op. cit. p. 30.

37 Randall, 'Ballygrand Widow', op. cit. p. 57.

38 Randall, 'Gael Marian', op. cit. p. 62.

39 Randall, 'The Swans at Abbotsbury', op. cit. p. 30. This poem seems, for some reason, much closer to Randall herself than many of the others - perhaps because of its urgency.

40 Compare the closing lines of 'Nightwatchman':

> I open my four lips for your fingertips and my cunt
> weeps
> as my face won't, and like an angry sponge absorbs you,
> all, and when you are sleeping I watch the night,
> small boys sleep off their pleasure, I watch
> the night, and wonder at such perfect death.

Randall, op. cit. p. 12.

41 Randall, 'Maelstrom', op. cit. p. 16.

42 See, for one example, Louise Bernikow's satirical 'conversation based on experience, full of imaginative truth', in which an eminent professor explains why women are not good poets:

> '"Because women are good at accumulation of detail.." He is holding his arms in front of his body, forming a circle with them. He has shaped a pregnant belly. "...and not at the sharp, thrusting..." He is making sharp, thrusting motions with one of his arms. "...sensibility that is required for good poetry."

The World Split Open (London: Women's Press, 1979), p. 3.

43 Randall, 'Sea Cow', op. cit. p. 17.

44 Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women', in Winter Trees (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 40.

45 From an unattributed review of 'Kiss of the Spiderwoman', quoted by Nicki Jackowska in 'Holding the World Open', in Delighting the Heart, op. cit. p. 183.

46 Martin Booth, British Poetry 1964-1984: Driving Through the Barricades 1964- 1984 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 190. See Chapter 1 for further discussion.

47 The quotation is from Virgina Woolf's To The Lighthouse (St. Albans, Herts: Granada, 1980), p. 39.

For examples of acid-bath wit, see Fleur Adcock's farewells in 'Instructions To Vampires', 'Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow', and 'Advice To A Discarded Lover'. Selected Poems (OUP, 1983). These poems do not critique masculine behaviour; they are revenge poems.

The two collections edited by the Raving Beauties provide more examples of the same kind of approaches. See In The Pink and No Holds Barred (London: Women's Press, 1983 & 1986 respectively.)

The recent work of Jackie Kay in The Adoption Papers (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991) and Michèle Roberts (see Chapter 5) offer examples of a more generous, exploratory approach to masculinity, rather like Randall's.

48 Randall, 'An Amsterdam Garden', op. cit. p. 14.

49 Gay male poets are probably most likely to critique masculinity; I am not familiar enough with their work to make further comment here, but it would be an interesting area to research in the future.

50 Randall, 'Gavin', op. cit. p. 20.

51 Randall, 'An Amsterdam Garden', op. cit. p. 14.

52 Randall, 'Longships and Lovers', op. cit. p. 22.

53 Randall, 'Schoolboys in the Sea', op. cit. p. 18.

54 Unattributed review, from Jackowska, 'Holding the World Open', op. cit. p. 183.

CHAPTER 4

1 Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe, Flesh and Paper (Seaton, Devon: Jezebel, 1986). Introduction, p. 3.

2 In Diana Collecott's recent paper, 'At the Threshold: Contemporary Lesbian Collaboration', (delivered at the 'Feminist Criticism in the Nineties' conference, April 1992, Exeter University), there was a slight tendency to read collaboration as the lesbian's riposte to the arrogant individualism of literary tradition. She spoke about the work of Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland, as well as Namjoshi and Hanscombe, suggesting that their collaboration shattered the '1000-year-old paradigm' of artistic individuality. It is important to stress that Namjoshi and Hanscombe retain quite distinctive voices; claims that their work transcends boundaries of the ego should take account of this fact.

In this respect it is also worth remarking that other poetic collaborations include that between Kathleen Jamie and Andrew Greig, A Flame in Your Heart (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986), and Sylvia Kantaris's 2 joint ventures, News From the Front, with the infamous D. M. Thomas, (Todmorden, Lancs: Arc Publications, 1983), and The Air Mines of Mistila, with Philip Gross, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1988). See 'Writing with Men', for Kantaris's enthusiastic account of these experiences. Stand, (Summer 1987), p. 53-5.

3 Whatever You Desire: a book of lesbian poetry, ed. Jo Mary Bang (London: Oscars Press, 1990.)

4 Adrienne Rich describes this happening with her sequence, twenty-one love poems, which I mention at the end of the chapter.

5 See Chapter 1. These issues are pursued in Chapter 6.

6 While both Namjoshi and Hanscombe would, I think, claim that their work shaped a lesbian aesthetic, they are cautious about claiming to represent a lesbian community. They comment on the difficulty of defining a 'lesbian sensibility' in the light of lesbian pluralism, and the recent emergence of aspects of lesbian identity with which they are not in sympathy:

> 'The very proliferation of difference within the lesbian sense of identity tended to reduce the word "lesbian" to merely a matter of sexual orientation. To speak of *the* lesbian perspective became impossible, and of *a* lesbian perspective problematic, since there were "lesbians" who were making it clear that almost any perspective could be lesbian... Opinions are stated and stances taken by "lesbians" with which we cannot agree at all, e.g. the endorsement of sadomasochism (SM) or of lesbian pornography. It then becomes awkward to

claim that we are speaking as and for all lesbians.' (p. 163) See their lucid and cogent article, 'Developing Lesbian Sensibility in the Writing of Lyric Poetry', in Out of the Margins: Women's Studies in the Nineties, ed. by Jane Aaron and Sylvia Walby, (London: Falmer Press, 1991). 156-167).

7 See Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of the implications of racial segregation in literature.

8 In his bleakest moments, he is haunted by a caricature of a radical feminist lesbian poet, wielding her pen, and behaving in an aggressive manner in a public place: 'I'll scratch your eyes out'!

9 Namjoshi, 'The Return of the Giantess', The Blue Donkey Fables (London: Women's Press, 1988), p. 48. Namjoshi says in the article cited above that much of this verse had already been written before she and Hanscombe met. See 'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', op. cit. p. 160.

10 Flesh and Paper, op. cit. Introduction, p. 3.

11 'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', op. cit. p. 162. This is the phrase Namjoshi and Hanscombe use to describe the flood of poetry that prioritised content and paid little attention to form and convention. Interestingly, their argument here is reminiscent of Carol Rumens' in Making for the Open. (See chapter 1. p. 18)

12 Maureen Marmont, Journal of Northern Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), December 1989.

13 'Dusty Distance', Blue Donkey Fables, p. 24.

14 Namjoshi, Because of India, (London: Onlywomen Press, 1989), p. 42.

15 ibid. p. 14.

16 ibid.

17 Her account, with Gillian Hanscombe, makes the dilemma clear:

> 'As young poets, particularly stimulated by the lyric tradition of poetry in the English language, we inherited certain formulations: connotations fixed by traditional images, for example, the rose, the garden, or the chase; and the traditional roles assumed by the lyric persona, the "I" who speaks the poem. The "I" - the lover, the pursuer, the wooer, the thinker, the speaker - was assumed by convention to be male; whereas the "you", who was addressed, but who - of course - remained silent, was assumed to be female. Alienation from the lyric tradition was, in the beginning, acutely painful and confused, since the most obvious

explanation for it was simply to assume that one wasn't "good enough". If one's poems didn't seem to fit in or to resonate with work being written by others, and if one's work seemed discontinuous with its own roots (ie. the lyric tradition), then surely it simply meant that one wasn't a "good" poet.'

'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', op. cit. p. 156.

18 Because of India, op. cit. p. 28.

19 ibid. p. 84.

20 Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision', (1971), reprinted in On Lies, Secrets and Silence (London: Virago, 1980).

21 Because of India, op. cit. p. 84.

22 'Snapshots of Caliban', ibid. p. 93.

23 'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', op. cit. p. 165.

24 In her commentary to the selection of fables and prose, Namjoshi writes:

'The knowledge that an audience existed to whom I would make sense made all the difference. It released my imagination to try to make the patterns that were authentic to me.'

Because of India, op. cit. p. 79.

25 Her digs at the publishing industry have grown even sharper; in April 1992 at the 'Feminist Criticism in the Nineties' conference at Exeter University, Namjoshi and Hanscombe together delivered a witty and pertinent paper that asked some uncomfortable questions about what was really 'feminist' about feminist publishing. The paper was called 'A Portrait of the Artist as Consumer Product.'

26 'The One-eyed Monkey Goes Into Print', The Blue Donkey Fables, op. cit. p. 9.

27 'The Vulgar Streak', The Blue Donkey Fables, op.cit. p. 37.

28 Flesh and Paper, op. cit. Introduction.

29 ibid.

30 'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', op. cit. p. 157.

31 Jan Montefiore, Chapter 4, 'Two-Way Mirrors: Psychoanalysis and the Love-Sonnet', Feminism and Poetry (London: Pandora, 1987), pp. 97-134.

32 'The Lion Skin', The Blue Donkey Fables, op. cit. p. 33.

33 Caroline Halliday, '"The Naked Majesty of God": Contemporary Lesbian Erotic Poetry', in Mark Lilly (ed) Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays, (London: Macmillan, 1990), 76- 108. p. 101. For the most part, Namjoshi sticks quite closely to the traditional English sonnet's form - three quatrains and a closing couplet. But she also slips easily into her own variants, stretching the form to suit her content.

Carol Ann Duffy also experiments with, and remoulds, the sonnet. In 'The Kissing Gate' she splits the fourteen lines into two equal halves, instead of following more traditional patterns of quatrains. The Other Country, (London: Anvil, 1990), p. 46.

34

> 'These are not problems shared by male homosexual poets, since, being men, they could assume the gift of utterance as men, and could also assume the active stance without that presenting an ambiguity about the nature of maleness. Therefore it was much less problematic for Auden to write lines like "Lay your sleeping head my love / Human on my faithless arm" since the reader of lyric assumes the speaker to be male.'

'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', op. cit. p. 158.

35 ibid. p. 164.

36 Liz Yorke, 'Primary Intensities: Lesbian Poetry and the Reading of Difference', in Elaine Hobby and Chris White (eds) What Lesbians Do In Books, (London: Women's Press, 1991), 28-49. p. 36.

37 Halliday, op. cit. p. 97-9.

38 ibid. If this quotation looks familiar, I also used it in a note to Chapter 2. (note no. 45.) I thought it was relevant and important enough to be repeated here.

39 'Be a dolphin then', Flesh and Paper, p. 23.

40 'If you agree', ibid. p. 42.

41 'Developing Lesbian Sensibility', p. 165.

42 Eavan Boland attempted a similar resistance and recasting in 'Listen. This is the Noise of Myth'. (See Chapter 2, p. 99).

43 'Stilted Poem', Blue Donkey Fables, p. 89.

44 Virginia Woolf, Orlando, p. 195. Woolf's cool satire expands on the way in which patriarchal tradition depicts women as creatures wholly devoted to loving men, pointing out the

problems involved in writing about a woman who does not conform to this conventional pattern:

> 'when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman's whole existence. And if we look for a moment at Orlando writing at her table, we must admit that never was there a woman more fitted for that calling. Surely, since she is a woman, and a beautiful woman, and a woman in the prime of life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin at least to think of a gamekeeper (and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking). And then she will write him a little note...and the gamekeeper will whistle under the window - all of which is, of course, the very stuff of life and the only possible subject for fiction. Surely Orlando must have done one of these things? Alas, - a thousand times, alas. Orlando did none of them. Must it then be admitted that Orlando was one of those monsters of iniquity who do not love? She was kind to dogs, faithful to friends, generosity itself to a dozen starving poets, had a passion for poetry. But love - as the male novelists define it - and who, after all, speak with greater authority? - has nothing whatever to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity, or poetry. Love is slipping off one's petticoat and - But we all know what love is.'
>
> (London: Panther / Granada, 1977) p. 168-9.

45 'Explanation', Blue Donkey Fables, p. 6.

46 Namjoshi, Because of India, p. 112

47 'We can compose ourselves', Flesh and Paper, p. 63.

48 ibid. p. 3.

CHAPTER 5

1 Interview conducted with Michèle Roberts in London, July 1989.

2 'Magical realism near Montgomery', Psyche and the Hurricane (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 95.

3 'praise blue', ibid. p. 14. Roberts prints the titles to her poems in lower case.

4 'to a male intellectual', The Mirror of the Mother (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 69.

5 In fact, where e. e. cummings and Roger McGough (probably the most famous poets to spurn upper case) do so uniformly, Roberts capitalises only one word - 'I'. This is in keeping with her argument that, while there is urgent need for the white male 'self' to be deconstructed, it is much harder for a woman to create a firm, stable 'I'. It ought, then, to be celebrated before it is deconstructed!

6 Interview, July 1989.

7 This is difficult territory: excavating buried explanations for personal preference. Suzanne Juhasz does it skilfully in her article, 'The critic as feminist: Reflections on women's poetry, feminism, and the art of criticism', (Women's Studies, vol 5 (1977), 113-127). She deconstructs Patricia Meyer Spacks' disparaging remarks about Anne Sexton, suggesting that Spacks doesn't like Sexton's kind of poetry because she:

> doesn't like Sexton; doesn't like the experiences that Sexton brings out of the linen closet into the public consciousness; and most of all, doesn't like having to be identified with them, just because she, too, is a woman. She wants everyone to realize that women don't have to be sloppy and emotional and self-indulgent and narcissistic and suicidal...She wants people to see that women can (and should) be objective and analytic and critical and professional, as she is.

pp. 120-121. I'm not sure how far we should take this kind of meta-criticism of one another... but here it seems important to distinguish my lit. crit. reservations, - the hangover of the obedient orthodox student - from my personal refusal - or inability - to read and appreciate Roberts' work when I first tried to.

8 I found Nicole Ward Jouve's essay, 'Helene Cixous: from inner theatre to world theatre', particularly useful in this respect. In White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography (London: Routledge, 1991), 91-100.

9 Roberts, The Visitation (London: Women's Press, 1983), p. 99.

10 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born (London: Virago, 1977), p. 98

11 Interview July 1989, London.

12 'In the Tradescant garden', Psyche, p. 44.

13 I remember being rendered speechless by a London publisher in a pub conversation when he said, 'The thing I don't understand about women poets is, why do they always, and only, write about being a woman?' I didn't know where to start.

14

> 'I try to work with a gut feeling that Woman and Nature seem connected in some very deep way, but to expose and explore that through language so that it isn't just a statement that, "a woman's body is somehow specifically connected to natural processes", but that that can be examined, and looked at very critically as well as celebrated... I write about mystical experience very often, where I and the landscape are one, and it worries me because I feel I'm doing all these terribly reactionary things you're not supposed to do...from a feminist and post-structuralist point-of-view.'

Interview, July 1989.

15 'Dirges and dreams', review of Rich's An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991, (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1991) and Margaret Atwood's Poems: 1976-86, (London: Virago, 1990). In New Statesman & Society (February 14, 1992), p. 41.

16 These lines from Rich's 'North American Time' are fairly representative of this tone:

> Everything we write
> will be used against us
> or against those we love.
> These are the terms,
> take them or leave them.
> Poetry never stood a chance
> of standing outside history.
> One line typed twenty years ago
> can be blazed on a wall in spray paint
> to glorify art as detachment
> or torture of those we
> did not love but also
> did not want to kill

Naming the Waves, edited by Christian McEwen (London: Virago, 1988), p. 170.

Interestingly, while her words provide a warning, they also carry a justification in her own defence. Boland is clearly paying tribute to Rich in the title of her latest collection, Outside History.

17 See chapter 2. See also the final chapter, 'A Feminine Tradition', pp. 215-236, in Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity (Princeton: PUP, 1980), for a discussion of this issue in relation to Rich's poetry.

18 Judith Kazantzis displays a similarly cheerful irreverence in an article on her poetry:

> 'I would not claim, nor wish to claim, that the more personal poems I write are all grounded in high feminism. Some are about country life, and I send them to Country Life, others are about fucking and possibly sexist and these I might send to male editors and gauchely assume that Spare Rib readers - for whom I have reviewed women's poetry for some years - won't come across them.'

'The Errant Unicorn', in Gender and Writing, edited by Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983), p. 25-6.

19 Interview, July 1989.

20 The Mirror of the Mother (London: Methuen, 1986); Psyche and the Hurricane (London: Methuen, 1991).

21 Clair Wills, TLS, July 10, 1987.

22 Michael Horovitz, Poetry Review, vol 76 no 4, (December 1986) p. 58.

23 Quotes taken from 'Flying to Italy' and 'for Paula, mourning', p. 13 and p. 18 respectively in Psyche.

24 Craig Raine,

25 Homans, op. cit.

26 For further discussion of this issue see Chapter 6.

27 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language. (London: Women's Press, 1987), p. 93. Ostriker conducted a survey of the number of references to the body in one thousand lines of poetry by an arbitrary selection of male poets and another thousand by women poets. The men's contained 127 references to human or animal bodies; the women's, 236. She lists terms used by one group and not the other, demonstrating the greater inventiveness of the women, but her most interesting conclusion is that;

> 'women poets referred both to their own bodies and to external figures, while the men's work included no more than a dozen references to the poets' own bodies.'

(p. 259)

28 See Chapter 4, p. 168.

29 'persephone descends to the underworld', Mirror, p. 90.

30 'In the New Year', Psyche, p. 70.

31 'poem on the day of the spring equinox', Mirror, p. 79.

32 The relationship between woman and nature is articulated in these ancient myths with a clarity that has made them popular with many of today's women writers. A couple of examples: Jenny Joseph has written a fascinating book-length sequence of prose and poetry on the subject - Persephone (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986. Judith Kazantzis also treats the theme in The Wicked Queen (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980).

33 Rich, Of Woman Born, op. cit. p. 107-8.

34 'April in Sussex', Psyche, p. 72.

35 'A walk on the south downs', Psyche, p. 80.

36 'Tourists on Grisedale Pike', Psyche, p. 66.

37 ibid.

38 'In the New Year', Psyche, p. 70.

39 A particularly striking example is Eavan Boland's 'Anorexic':

> Flesh is heretic.
> My body is a witch.
> I am burning it.
>
> Yes I am torching
> her curves and paps and wiles.
> They scorch in my self denials.
>
> How she meshed my head
> in the half-truths
> of her fevers
>
> till I renounced
> milk and honey
> and the taste of lunch.
>
> I vomited
> her hungers.
> Now the bitch is burning.

Selected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p. 35.

40 Interview, July 1989. In an article bemoaning feminist critiques of language-use, John Casey notes that no-one would dare praise a piece of writing for its 'feminine' or 'masculine' qualities any more. He quotes Gerald Manley Hopkins' appreciation of the 'naked thew and sinew' of Dryden's poetry regretfully. (The Sunday Telegraph, 18 August 1991). It wouldn't, of course, take much effort to demonstrate - once again, as Mr Casey presumably missed it last time - that the two terms carry very different connotations. Unlike 'masculine', 'feminine' is not usually used as a term of positive appreciation. It is sad to note that, even outside feminist circles, 'masculinity' now seems to carry such unrelievedly negative connotations that no-one uses it any more as a mark of praise.

41 'Tourists on Grisedale Pike', op. cit.

42 Boland, 'Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening', Selected Poems, p. 72. Perhaps she feels the influential hot breath of Fleur Adcock steaming down her neck as a warning against any tone that smacks of the inspirational. Adcock has little time for such poetry. See Chapter 1, p. 39.

43 'Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev', The Dream of a Common Language (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 4.

44 Homans, op. cit. p. 234.

45 Cixous also challenges the cultural myth / convention of the artist as lone soul. In 'Sorties' she analyses the narcissism that characterises the loner's vision. See Chapter 2, note 27.

46

> 'That night I lay with Jesus, held in his arms, in a grain-store belonging to a kindly farmer whose property lay along our route. Separated from the others only by the wall of the cloak he cast about us, we touched each other in the darkness. As we drew closer and closer towards each other we entered a new place, a country of heat and sweetness and light different to the ground we had explored together before. I felt us taken upwards and transformed: I no longer knew what was inside and what was outside, where he ended and I began, only that our bones and flesh and souls were suddenly woven up together in a great melting and pouring. I was six years old again, lying on the roof looking up at the stars, at the rents in the dark fabric of the sky and the light shining through it. Only this time I rose, I pierced through the barrier of shadow, and was no longer an I, but part of a great whirl of light that throbbed and rang with music - for a moment, till I was pulled back by the sound of my own voice whispering words I did not understand: this is the resurrection, and the life.'

The Wild Girl (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 67.

47 ibid. p. 110-1.

48 'The long jump up to heaven', New Statesman, 28 September 1984, p. 25-7.

49 Wild Girl p. 108-9.

50 ibid.

51 'In the Tradescant garden, Lambeth', Psyche, p. 44.

52 In a moving poem about her grandmother's death, familiar female metaphors of knitting and spinning are transformed into the more sinister activities of the Fates spinning the future:

the womb is the house of death
and each woman
spins in death's web; as I inch
back to the light
death pays out the bright thread.

'after my grandmother's death', Mirror, p. 76.

53 Of Woman Born, p. 107-8.

54 'In the Tradescant garden, Lambeth', op. cit.

55 Cixous, 'Sorties', The Newly Born Woman (Manchester: MUP, 1987), p. 94.

56 Of Woman Born, p. 225.

57 'the eldest son goes home', Mirror, p. 42.

58 'I have been wanting to mourn', ibid. p. 32.

59 'Demeter keeps going', ibid. p. 95.

60 'Magnificat', ibid. p. 70. The idea of her friend voyaging 'fierce as a small archangel with swords and breasts' is reminiscent of the ending of Angela Carter's rewrite of the Bluebeard story, 'The Bloody Chamber', in which the mother, alerted to her daughter's plight through mysterious telepathy, gallops to the rescue, miraculously just in time. The Bloody Chamber (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

61 Sylvia Plath, 'Medusa', Collected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 224.

62 'poem on St. Valentine's day', Mirror, p. 85.

63 'New Year's Eve at Lavarone', ibid. p. 120.

64 'for Paula, mourning', Psyche, p. 18.

65 Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa', in New French Feminisms, edited by Marks and de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), pp. 245-264. p. 250.

66 I write 'so-called' because I think it is misleading to classify Cixous as a theorist.

67 'Restoration work in Palazzo Te', Psyche, p. 42.

68 Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', op. cit. p. 250.

69 'Diving into the Wreck', Adrienne Rich's Poetry, edited by Barbara and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 65.

70 Roberts' familiarity with post-struturalist theory facilitates this sense of the *layerings* of history and culture.

71 See, for example, Eavan Boland in 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma' (Stand, winter 1986-7, pp. 43-9):

> 'It is difficult, if not impossible, to explain to men who are poets - writing as they are with centuries of expression behind them - how emblematic is the unexpressed life of other women to the woman poet, how intimately it is her own.'

72 Both the torch beam and the ladder are also central in Rich's poem; Roberts is a thorough mimic!

73 Irigaray has written about the importance of sight in a masculine economy in Speculum of the Other Woman (Cornell: Cornell UP, 1985). In Roberts' gospel in The Wild Girl the disciples opt for a similar privileging of sight. They take Jesus' prophecy of resurrection literally, and when he does appear to them, believe that they have been Chosen. Mary advocates a metaphorical interpretation which they ignore: visual proof is paramount.

74 Cixous, 'Medusa', p. 256.

75 ibid. p. 258.

76 Olga Kenyon, Women Writers Talk (Oxford: Lennard, 1989), p. 172.

77 It is interesting to compare Helen's dream at the end of Roberts' novel The Visitation (London: Women's Press, 1983). She visualises a statue of Adam and Eve:

> 'There they are, the two lovers, entwined in one another's arms, so closely interlinked that they seem to be one. It is hard to see where their bodies separate, so closely are arms wrapped around arms and legs around legs; even their heads look like twin

> flowers on a single stalk....This is how things should be: the masculine and the feminine so tightly joined that they are inseparable one from another. Both have graceful, white stone limbs; their features are identical. A hermaphrodite bloom. Plato's double-bodied human, before the axe of separation falls.'

pp. 170-171.

78

> '... no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. You don't build walls around yourself, you don't forego pleasure as "wisely" as he.'

Cixous, op. cit. p. 251.

79 Rich, Of Woman Born, p. 63.

80 'madwoman at Rodmell', Mirror, p. 73. In general, Roberts' avoidance of closure is striking. A male poet recently told me that he wrote only to pre-selected syllabic patterns, otherwise he simply could not contain his emotions. Seen in the light of 'madwoman at Rodmell', such fear of untrammelled raw material is revealing.

It is interesting to compare Douglas Dunn's skilful sonnet sequence Elegies, written on the death of his wife, with the group of poems Roberts wrote about her dying sister. ('The Diagnosis'; 'Lacrimae Rerum'; 'A walk on the south downs'; 'mayday mayday'; 'home alterations'; 'marking time'; 'for Jackie'; 'home delivery'; 'At Haworth', all in Psyche, pp. 78-92) Dunn uses the tight form of the sonnet to keep his grief orderly; somehow Roberts has the concision and control to do so without imposing external constraints.

81

> 'Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name.'

'When We Dead Awaken', On Lies, Secrets and Silence (London: Virago, 1980.

82 First quotation taken from interview, July 1989; second from Kenyon, op. cit. p. 170

CHAPTER 6

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this chapter 'White' is given upper case, since there seems no good reason why 'Black' should be if 'White' is not.

I prefer 'dialect' and 'Creole' to the term 'nation language' and feel that their usage is in keeping with Nichols' project of reclamation. Valerie Bloom also signals her own choice of 'dialect':

> 'Most Jamaicans refer to their first language as "patois", but I have never come across the term "patois poetry". "Dialect poetry" is a standard term, however, in Jamaica (Miss Lou's poems are sometimes referred to simply as "dialects"), and is the term I have used, though when referring to the language as a separate entity I have used "patois". I appreciate the reason why some people prefer other terms, but for me the struggle has been won. "patois" and "dialect poetry" have a high value. There is no need to use a term to boost the status of the way we talk.

Let It Be Told, p 87.

'Western' is an unsatisfactory term. I use it, in spite of misgivings, to convey the economic and cultural dominance of Western capitalist countries, whose critics produce most of the academic debate and almost all of the publications with which I am concerned.

1 Grace Nichols, i is a long memoried woman (London: Karnak House, 1983), p 13.

2 i is a long memoried woman (London: Karnak House, 1983); The Fat Black Woman's Poems (London: Virago, 1984); Lazy Thoughts of A Lazy Woman (London: Virago), 1989.

3 Robert Crawford's revealing turn of phrase in a review of Omeros for Poetry Review vol 80 no 4 (Winter 1990-91), p. 8-10.

4 Eavan Boland, The Journey (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987).

5 This is how he described the effects of such colonial education:

> 'in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow, for instance - the models are all there for the falling of the snow - than of the force of the hurricanes which take place every year. In other words, we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic

intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall.'

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, The History of The Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p 8-9.

6 Paula Burnett, ed. The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 32.

7 It could be suggested that Chinweizu is himself fighting for an unrealistically 'pure' African literature. To take his argument to its logical conclusion would produce an isolationist tradition untouched by foreign influences; an Edenic vacuum of 'folktales' unsullied by European contact or any 'impure' contact, whatever that might be. *But it is more likely that his anger is really directed against the hegemony of Western publishing and institutional academic power, and its arrogant, neo-colonial takeover of African literary tradition.*

It is worth pointing out that Chinweizu's alternative, 'authentic' selection of oral literature is disappointingly short on female contributions, and tends to favour the jovial bragging celebrations of male sexual prowess. Here is one example:

SHE: Salongo's big penis digs
Deep into my womb,
Spits the seeds so hot,
Tickles and crushes the path.
My Salongo, Father, come,
Come and fuck me more.

HE: Nalongo's vagina is deep;
My penis searches its corners,
Swims across to the end
Finds the place for my seeds.
Come, my Nalongo, come
Mother, I'll fuck you more.

Chinweizu (ed), Voices from Twentieth Century Africa (London: Faber & Faber, 1988). p. 152.
The subculture of women's voices, - of songs, lullabies and jokes - remains unheard and unacknowledged.

8 Some of the more relevant material included: Amon Saba Saakana, The Colonial Legacy in Caribbean Literature (London: Karnak House, 1987); David Sutcliffe & Ansel Wong, eds, The Language of the Black Experience (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and British Black English (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Kwesis Owusu, ed, Storms of the Heart: An Anthology of Black Arts and Culture (London: Camden Press, 1988); David Dabbydeen, The Black Presence in English Literature (Manchester: MUP, 1985).

9 The last line of 'Wherever I Hang', Lazy Thoughts p 10.

10 We are very happy to talk about the pleasures of the text so why not admit the pleasures of the page? If the book is well-produced we presume its contents are valued highly. The most prestigious publishing conglomerates use the thickest paper, as though silently reaffirming some unspoken adman's hierarchy: 'The Crisper the Paper, the Sharper the Print, the Smarter the Product'. Surely the shape, design, and print contribute to the experience of reading? I was accustomed to the luxurious texture and smell of a new book: pristine pages and sharp print.

This was before the popularity of recycled paper, but even now we don't appear to expect our writers to do their bit for the environment. It tends to be the unknowns, the self-published, who use it - primarily because it is cheaper!

11 Without the determined work of London-based CAM (Caribbean Artists Movement) in the 'Sixties and 'Seventies and the more recent promotional efforts of James Berry, it is fair to guess publishers and the media still wouldn't have recognised the achievements of poets from the Caribbean.

12 'So far, world literature has fostered the notion that there are in each country two or three writers of note. So the reader of Kundera, Calvino, Heaney, Brodsky, Rushdie, and Levi may also read Achebe, Soyinka, Walcott, Naipaul, Desai, but the spotlight never descends on any one country long enough to take in the variety of writing produced. We have been as guilty as anyone, in that we have, for instance, devoted considerable attention to Derek Walcott, without, before this issue, looking at the range of Caribbean poetry.' Editorial by Peter Forbes, Poetry Review, Vol 80 no 4 (Winter 1990/1), p 3.

13 Tillie Olson Silences (London: Virago, 1980; originally published in 1965); Elaine Showalter 'Women and the Literary Curriculum', College English 32, no 8 (May 1971); Joanna Russ How To Suppress Women's Writing (London: Women's Press, 1983.

14 See their respective Introductions to Making for the Open: the Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry and The Faber Book of Women Poets, and further discussion in Chapter 1.

15 Rebecca O'Rourke's thorough research demonstrates how little the situation has actually changed despite the sharper awareness of literary editors. Her paper, including counts of the number of women currently on the major poetry publishers' lists, is published in Women: A Cultural Review, vol 1 no 3 (Winter 1990), 275-286.

16 Here are a few statistics to bear out the point: Brown's Caribbean Poetry Now presents poems from 45 contributors, 9 of whom are women. Of the 80 poems in the anthology, 10 are by those poets. The only female contributor to be represented by more than one poem is Louise Bennett, who has 2. Brown, like the other editors, gives more space to the heavyweights: Brathwaite has 8 poems, Walcott 7, James Berry 5.

The Open University/Heinemann 1982 collection, An Anthology of African and Caribbean Writing in English includes 23 Caribbean poets: 16 men and 7 women. More disturbingly, of the 7 women (one poem apiece except for Louise Bennett who has 3) 4 of them are represented by poems lifted straight out of Pamela Mordecai's 1980 women-only anthology, Jamaica Woman. Walcott and Brathwaite get 5 poems each in this OU collection.

Paula Burnett's The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse In English is a rich trove of almost 400 pages of poems. Controversially she draws a distinction between the 'oral' and the 'literary' traditions, splitting the book in half. She includes poems by 13 women in the 'literary' section, and by 3 in the 'oral' part, but there are also many contributions by Anon. While the spread of her choice is heartening, a curious phenomenon can be observed. The women are represented by a steady average of 2-3 poems each. 21 of the men (there are 61 of them in the 'literary' section) get 4 or more pieces included, not even counting the long extracts from earlier eighteenth century works that usually take up at least two pages. Only 2 of the women are represented by more than 3 poems: Una Marson has 6, and Gloria Escoffery has 4.

James Berry's News for Babylon contains poems by only 3 women out of over 40 contributors.

17 See Rex Nettleford's introduction to her collected poems, Jamaica Labrish (Jamaica: Sangster, 1966).

18 James Berry, letter in Poetry Review, vol 78 no 4 (Winter 1988-9), p 78.

19 Writers at the Asian Writers' Symposium at Warwick University (July 1990) expressed their anger at the implicit attitude behind this 'second prize': that Afro-Caribbean or Asian poetry is not, somehow, Real Poetry, and cannot be evaluated alongside more supposedly traditional work. Protest against a separate prize for women would be even more controversial, since no 'female tradition' is generally acknowledged. Merle Collins' sharp, witty poem, 'No Dialects Please', springs irresistibly to mind (Rhonda Cobham & Merle Collins, eds, Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain (London: Women's Press, 1987), p 118.

As regards 'women only' publishing ventures, as we saw in Chapter 1 the climate is hostile. It is worth repeating Lorna Tracy's remarks, since they would seem to be so representative. She is co-editor of Stand Magazine. Replying to an accusation that Stand is a 'male order' magazine with virtually no female contributors, Tracy explains that women simply do not submit their work. 'Are we to produce a "Women's Issue" now and then? I think that would absolutely confirm those who assume that Stand Magazine thinks women who write are exotic.' Stand (Winter 1986-7), p 55.

20 Henry Louis Gates, 'Talking Black', in *The State of the Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990 edition), eds Michaels and Ricks, 42-50.

21 Fred D'Aguiar pointed out the Wordsworthian echoes in *The Arkansas Testament* on a Kaleidoscope interview on Radio 4 just after the book was published. The parallels with Homer are explicit in *Omeros*.

22 David Dabbydeen, 'On Writing "Slave Song"', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol 8 no 2 (Spring 1986), 46-48.

23 See 'The Mulatta As Penelope', 'The Mulatta And The Minotaur', in *I Am Becoming My Mother* (London: New Beacon Books, 1986)

24 See, for example, the work of Valerie Bloom (a small selection is published in Lauretta Ncobo, ed, *Let It Be Told: Black Women Writers in Britain* (London: Virago, 1988), pp 83-94, and of Jean 'Binta' Breeze, *Riddym Ravings and Other Poems* (London: Race Today Publications, 1988); and *Spring Cleaning*, (London: Virago, 1992).

25 Suzanne Juhasz, 'The Critic as feminist: Reflections on women's poetry, feminism, and the art of criticism', *Women's Studies*, vol 5 (1977), 113-127.

26 Kwesi Owusu, *The Struggle for the Black Arts in Britain* (London: Comedia, 1986), p 22.

27 Fred D'Aguiar, ed, *the new british poetry* (London: Paladin, 1988), p 4.

28 Suzanne Scafe, *Teaching Black Literature* (London: Virago, 1989), p 84.

29 Mark Williams and Alan Riach, 'Finding the Centre: "English" Poetry After Empire', *Kunapipi*, vol xi, no 1 (1989), pp 97-105. They discuss the demise of T S Eliot's concept of a uniform 'Tradition' based on shared knowledge of Western Classical literature and suggest that we need now to think in terms of 'the conflicting demands of tradition *and* difference' (p 105); relinquishing the desire for an 'empyrean' vantage point, recognising that the cross-currents and influences of international Englishes render the concept of such an authoritative viewpoint unworkable.

30 ibid, p 97. Quotation from Les Murray, originally published in *Landfall*, vol 42, no 2 (June 1988).

31 Blake Morrison, 'Large moral universe down under' an interview with Les Murray, *The Independent on Sunday* (15 April, 1990)

32 'Finding the Centre', op cit.

33 Gillian Allnutt, the new british poetry, op cit. p 77

34 Berry, op cit.

35 Mary Carruthers coins this word to convey 'the condition of being short-sighted towards women', in 'Imagining Women: Notes Towards a Feminist Poetic', Massachusetts Review, 20 (Summer 1979), 281-307. See Chapter 2, p. 84.

36 The Asian Women Writers Workshop, eds, Right of Way (London: Women's Press, 1988), p 3.

37 Adrienne Rich, 'Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet', in Selected Prose 1979-85 (London: Virago, 1987), p 178.

38 'Roll on a libertarian millennium', Michael Horovitz reviewing the new british poetry, The Guardian, 23 September 1988, p 30.

39 The three I refer to are Sheba (probably the most well-known), Blackwomantalk collective, and Urban Fox, based in Yorkshire.

40 Rhonda Cobham & Merle Collins, eds, Watchers and Seekers, op cit. Virago did produce Ain't I A Woman! Poems by Black and White Women, edited by Illona Linthwaite (1987).

41 James Berry draws attention to the limitations of Black poets producing solely protest work in 'The Literature of the Black Experience', in David Sutcliffe & Ansel Wong, eds, The Language of the Black Experience (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 69-106. He points out that there is a whole spectrum of human emotions as yet untreated by this new generation of poets. See note 85.

42 Shange, Nappy Edges, London: Methuen, 1987. p 3

43 ibid

44 Frederick Jameson, quoted by Patrick Williams in 'Difficult Subjects: Black British Women's Poetry', in David Murray, ed, Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon (London: Batsford, 1989), 108-126.

45 Ketu H Katrak also takes issue with Jameson's article for his use of the vague generalised term 'Third World texts'. Katrak comments:

> 'Basically, Jameson wishes to suggest a method of reading third-world novels for the Western, postmodern, alienated intellectual.'

'Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts', Modern Fiction Studies, vol 35 no 1 (Spring 1989), 157-179.

46 Amryl Johnson, 'Panorama from the North Stand', Long Road to Nowhere (London: Virago, 1985), p 14.

47 An extension of this is the tendency to 'draw writers in' to the Great Tradition, by making bizarre comparisons between their work and that of the past masters [sic]. This impulse appears to be well-nigh irresistible (it probably has a lot to do with commercial interests). Writers have, understandably, begun to complain. See, for example, Derek Walcott in The Independent, 10 November, 1990 and Toni Morrison interviewed by Claudia Tate, in Black Women Writers At Work (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 1985) pp 117-131. Morrison puts it succinctly:

> 'If someone says I write like Joyce, that's giving me a kind of credibility I find offensive. It has nothing to do with my liking Joyce. I do, but the comparison has to do with nothing out of which I write. I find such criticism dishonest because it never goes into the work on its own terms. It comes from some other place and finds content outside of the work and wholly irrelevant to it to support the work...It's merely trying to place the book in an already established literary tradition. The critic is too frightened or too uninformed to break new ground.'

p. 121-2.

48 Valerie Bloom's collection Touch Mi: Tell Mi is published by Bogle L'Ouverture; Jean Binta Breeze's Riddym Ravings and Other Poems by Race Today Publications. It is perhaps significant that Bloodaxe, a far larger and better-known publisher of contemporary poetry, signalled their venture into the realms of performance poetry with a collection by the popular white punk poet Joolz, rather than any Caribbean writers. They have remedied this omission by publishing a collection of work by Linton Kwesi Johnson (December 1991) and plan to issue similar editions of the poetry of Benjamin Zephaniah and Lemn Sissay later this year. No women!

49 Jean Binta Breeze, 'Can A Dub Poet Be A Woman?', Women: A Cultural Review, vol 1 no 1 (April 1990), 47-49.

50 Elma Reyes, 'Women in Calypso', in Women of the Caribbean, ed Pat Ellis (London: Zed Books, 1986), 119-121

51 Julie Pearn, Poetry in the Caribbean (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p 35.

52 Pamela Mordecai & Mervyn Morris, eds, Jamaica Woman: an anthology of poems, (Kingston/ Port of Spain: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980)

53 Despite the difference in our ages, Oxbridge is not renowned for its swift take-up of modern theoretical approaches!

54 Hinterland, Introduction: Random Thoughts, p 21-2.

55 'Waterpot', long memoried woman, p 14

56 See, for example, the poetry of Francis Williams: 'The Ode to George Haldane, Governor of the Island of Jamaica', reprinted in Burnett's Penguin anthology. Williams was sent to England to be educated as an experiment to test the intelligence of Negroes. He went to Cambridge, learned (and wrote poems in) Latin.

57 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', p 11. Dabbydeen acknowledges that the phrase was first used by Alvarez.

58 'On Writing "Slave Song"', Commonwealth Essays and Studies, vol 8 no 2 (Spring 1986), 46-48.

59 Benita Parry, 'Between Creole and Cambridge English: The Poetry of David Dabbydeen', p. 6, Kunapipi, vol x no 3 (1988), 1-14.

60 ibid, p 14.

61 'In My Name', from i is a long memoried woman, p 56.

62 It is enlightening to compare Toni Morrison's treatment of motherhood under slavery in Beloved. The dramatised version of long memoried woman does convey some of the anguish of being a mother with no rights over her own children which is portrayed so brilliantly in Morrison's novel. Lorna Goodison also often writes about the 'mulatta' in her poems, creating a strong, bold woman, reclaiming the word from its abusive connotations.

63 It also looks deeply misogynistic - who is being 'fucked (and fucked up)' ??

64 Grace Nichols, interviewed by Maggie Butcher, Wasafiri 8, (Spring 1988), p. 18

65 ibid.

66 A new edition was finally published earlier this year. Copies of long memoried woman were not available for sale after her reading at the Lyttelton Theatre, London, October 1991, because of problems with the distribution set-up in such a small company. Obviously, the lack of availability has detrimental effects.

67 This neglect is somewhat offset by the work of a group of Black women artists who have produced a video and radio play from the sequence, using a stunning musical score by Dominique Le Gendre and choreographed dance by Greta Mendez. Produced by Leda Serene Productions. It was broadcast on Radio 4 in 1991.

68 'Like A Beacon', Fat Black Woman p 27

69 'We New World Blacks', _Fat Black Woman,_ p 30

70 'Spring', _Fat Black Woman,_ p 34

71 'Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench', _Fat Black Woman,_ p 35

72 'The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping', _Fat Black Woman,_ p 11

73 'The Fat Black Woman Remembers', _Fat Black Woman,_ p 9

74 'Behind the Mask', _Lazy Thoughts,_ p 55

75 'Tapestry', _Lazy Thoughts,_ p 57

76 'Wherever I Hang', _Lazy Thoughts,_ p 10

77 It is exciting to witness the sense of hard-won confidence and 'arrival' in poets who have successfully made the English Language their own. An utterly different example of English being reclaimed and shaped to suit its speaker's native cadence is Debjani Chatterjee's 'To The English Language':

> Indifferent language of an alien shore,
> the journey was troubled but I am here:
> register me among your step-children.
>
> That special love that flows easy with my birthright
> is for Bengali, my mother - a well rounded tongue,
> sweet and juicy with monsoon warmth,
> rich and spicy with ancestral outpourings.
>
> What has proficiency to do with it?
> I know I dream it endlessly.
>
> English, your whiplash of thoughts
> has scarred me, pebbles rattle in my mouth
> while innuendoes turn my tongue.
>
> For generations you called to me,
> siren of the seven western seas,
> though now you may deny this and tell me
> to go back where I came from.
> Your images were the barbed lines
> that drew me, torn, to this island keep.
>
> Your words raise spectral songs to haunt me.
> I have subverted your vocabulary
> and mined rebellious corridors of sound.
> I have tilled the frozen soil of your grammar
> - I will reap the romance of your promises.

from _I Was That Woman_ (Frome: Hippopotamus Press, 1989), p. 27.

78 'Conkers', Lazy Thoughts, p 47

79 Hinterland, op. cit. p. 297

80 'Even Tho', Lazy Thoughts, p 21

81 Patrick Williams queries the decision to provide a 'translation' of Valerie Bloom's Creole poems in Let It Be Told, arguing that:

> 'The use of translation...reinforce[s] preconceptions about Black English as alien and/or defective; no one suggests providing translations of the arguably much more impenetrable Glaswegian dialect of Tom Leonard, for example.'

op. cit. p. 117. In Teaching Black Literature Suzanne Scafe records her students' uneasy and suspicious reactions to dialect poetry. She points out that, regardless of their ethnicity, students are used to *hearing* Creole dialect, not seeing it in written form. They are familiar with standard English from their school education, so inevitably see dialect poetry as deviant, rather than as a language in its own right. They often react with hostility because they are fully aware of the negative value put on non-standard pronunciation. Discussing Mikey Smith's 'Mi Cyaan Believe It', Scafe points out how arbitrary its transcription is. She wonders why 'fire' is presented in standard English, rather than written as 'fyah', concluding that such decisions about appropriate spelling seem to be made in an unsystematic, haphazard way. Nichols' use of Creole dialect guards against such criticism by skilfully yoking language to sense.

82 Wasafiri, op cit. p 18.

83 'On Receiving A Jamaican Postcard', Lazy Thoughts, p 23

84 'Walking With My Brother In Georgetown', Lazy Thoughts, p. 39

85 James Berry, 'The Literature of the Black Experience', pp 68-106 in The Language of the Black Experience, (eds) David Sutcliffe and Ansel Wong (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Maya Angelou has also voiced her disquiet about some of the claims made for 'rap' poetry. In an interview with Rosa Guy she says:

> 'A number of young people are being satisfied with "rapping". And so they take this cheapest way out of saying something about the street. And quite often I'm asked, is this poetry? And I say no. That is rapping. There may be poetic lyric, that kind of rhyme structure, AB, AB, ABC: AB, AB, ABC. But most of it, of 100 per cent, 15 per cent may be considered to have poetic imagery in it. Too many young Blacks, as far as

I can see it, and young whites, for that matter, have been told that if you just tell me what you think, that is great writing. Well, that is not so, as we know.'

Taken from an interview in Writing Lives: Conversations Between Women Writers, ed Mary Chamberlain. (London: Virago, 1988), p. 17. Jean Binta Breeze makes a similar criticism, claiming:

> 'I'd rather we had only two or three artists in our community that represent what is finest and truest about ourselves than a host of poseurs who have been allowed to take on the title of artist simply because they are black...I'm tired of people preaching to the converted and saying it's art.'

Interview with Andrea Stewart, Marxism Today, November 1988, p 45; also quoted by Carolyn Cooper, 'Words Unbroken by the Beat: The Performance Poetry of Jean Binta Breeze and Mikey Smith', Wasafiri, Spring 1990, no 11, pp 7-13

86 Adult Education evening class, 'Finding Words: Women's Writing', Leeds, 1990.

87 'Dead Ya Fuh Tan', Lazy Thoughts, p 11

88 'Beverley's Saga', Lazy Thoughts, p 35

89 'Of Course When They Ask for Poems About The 'Realities' of Black Women', Lazy Thoughts, p 52

90 A good example of this negative effect occurs in Jan Montefiore's study of women poets, Feminism and Poetry. Arguing that 'radical feminist poetics' incorporate unrecognized romanticism, she draws attention to the dangers of apolitical essentialism:

> 'the tendency to privilege the notion of female experience, and to think of women's poetry as a magically powerful collective consciousness, can make for a too easy and uncritical assumption of identity between all women: the kind of assumption that has in political practice recently been challenged by the articulate anger of Black women who have found white feminists unable or unwilling to acknowledge their experience of racist oppression as relevant to their experience as women. I had wanted to bring home this point with a quotation from the poem 'White Woman, Hey' by Carmen Williams, denouncing a white feminist for her failure to recognize Black women's experience of racist oppression, and for her generally patronizing attitudes. However, permission to print was refused as the author did not want her poem printed in a context of white literary criticism, however feminist: an impasse which certainly illustrates the crucially differing experiences and viewpoints of women of

opposed cultures, races and educations with particular clarity.'

(Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing, (London: Pandora, 1987), p 12-3.
Montefiore leaves the discussion there, inadvertently reinforcing a stark, over-simplified division. Are different cultures necessarily 'opposed' to one another? Suzanne Scafe warns against this tendency to read 'culture' as a rigid and inflexible white, male, middle-class monolith, arguing that this conception obliterates the complexity and constant changes that take place within it. (Teaching Black Literature, p 27)

91 Nichols, interview, Wasafiri, op cit.

92 'Timehri', extracted in Hinterland, p 118

93 ibid, p 30

94 'The Making of the Drum', from 'Masks', The Arrivants, p 95

95 Mine is not the first query about his sexual politics. He has been criticised by Sue Thomas in her useful article, 'Sexual Politics in Edward Brathwaite's Mother Poem and Sun Poem', published in Kunapipi Vol 9 no 1, 1987. Thomas accuses the poet of presenting unexamined racial sexual stereotypes. She argues that the poems are weakened dramatically by this shortcoming. concluding that:

> 'the failure of the voice of the visionary poet to critically examine the inadequacies and contradictions of its "pro-family" patriarchal sexual political ideology is a source of limitation'.

p 34

96 Where anthropologists have bothered to study women from other cultures their findings have, inevitably, reproduced the biases of their own expectations. Feminist theorists have only recently begun to have some effect over anthropological research, and to explore some of the practical and ethical problems involved in investigating women's lives and the kind of hidden lore Nichols touches on. For interesting approaches to these issues see: Susan Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories: Method and Content', Signs vol 11 no 2 (Winter 1986), pp 334-351; Roger M Keesing, 'Kwaio Women Speak', American Anthropologist no 87 [1] (1985), pp 27-39; Judith Stacey, 'Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?', Women's Studies International Forum vol 11 no 1, pp21-27; M Z Rosaldo, 'The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on feminism and cross-cultural understanding', Signs vol 5 no 3 (1980), p 389.

97 Hinterland, p 36

98 long memoried woman, p 13

99 See the title poem by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in The Second Voyage for a wonderful exploration of this ancient conqueror's gesture. Odysseus is depicted as being frustrated in his attempts to claim the ocean as territory by the waves' indifference to the plunges of his staff. (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) p 26.

100 The Arrivants, p 148

101 'Between Creole and Cambridge English: The Poetry of David Dabbydeen', Kunapipi, vol 10 no 3 (1988), p 6. Benita Parry paraphrasing from Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (Pluto Press, 1986; first published in English in 1967)

102 Fanon, op cit, p 112; quoted by Parry.

103 This is what seems to happen in the work of one of the earliest African writers in a European language, Leopold Senghor of Senegal. As one of the founder members of the Négritude movement, Senghor sought to transform the negative markers of difference imposed by Europeans into a celebration of Africanness. As Kathleen McLuskie and Lynn Innes observe in their article 'Women and African Literature':

> 'It is interesting also to see that Senghor's response to Europeans' generalizations about Africa and blackness is to affirm négritude and Africanité.'

(Wasafiri, no 8 (Spring 1988), pp 3-7) They give a convincing example from Senghor's 'Black Woman':

> Naked woman, dark woman
> Firm-fleshed ripe fruit, sombre raptures of black wine,
> mouth making lyrical my mouth
> Savannah stretching to clear horizons, savannah shuddering
> beneath the East Wind's eager caresses
> Carved tom-tom, taut tom-tom, muttering under the
> Conqueror's fingers
> Your solemn contralto voice is the spiritual song of the
> Beloved.

104 See, for example, A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing, edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, (Denmark and Oxford: Dangaroo Press, 1986)

105 McLuskie and Innes, op cit. (see note 102), p 4

106 Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (London: Penguin, 1983), pp 100-101. This section is also extracted for comment by McLuskie and Innes. Lest it be thought this tendency to reduce female characters to symbols of land is peculiar either to Conrad's colonial era or to today's African writers, J G Ballard

provides a delightful example of its continuing popularity in The Day of Creation (London: Grafton, Collins, 1988). The story is told in the voice of a slightly crazed white doctor working in an isolated outpost in a 'war-locked nation..[in].. the dead heart of the African continent' (p 17) He becomes obsessed with finding the source of the Mallory river (he gives it his own name), which happens to spring up one day in the drought-ridden region. In place of the gigantic fleshy African queen he discovers Noon, a mute child of about fourteen, who accompanies him on his harrowing journey down the river, protecting him from guerillas and crackpot military police. This is how he describes her on their first significant meeting:

> ' Her solemn and elegant features were marked with old scars around her brows and lips, and I guessed that she had been abused as a child, driven away after her mother's death and left to fend for herself....She was either mute or autistic, or had suffered slight brain damage....For all her primitive background, there was a stylishness about her neat movements...' (p 89)

Noon begins to 'housekeep', washing the decks and measuring out rice rations per day. She discovers a pile of 'educational cassettes' and spends hours playing them. Benevolent Mallory calls them 'her guides in a basic English language course, the first tuition of any kind that she had received in her life.' (p 117) But astonishingly quickly this 'primitive' child becomes a luring temptress. Mallory watches her with lingering desire:

> 'She lay on her back in the dark water, her legs breaking the surface as she lifted her knees, admitting the river like a lover between her thighs. The platinum foam, the soft teeth of this black admirer played across her small nipples. Was she, in her child's coquette's way, trying to draw me back to the river, to ease my fever for ever in that cool draught between her legs?' (p 146-7)

107 Walcott, extracted from Another Life, chapter 2; reproduced in Julie Pearn's Poetry in the Caribbean, p 24 (see note 51)

108 I am indebted to Rebecca Stott for drawing my attention to Rider Haggard's She, and the figuring of the female body in its topography of the explorers' expedition.

109 'The Assertion', Fat Black Woman, p 8

110 'Looking at Miss World', ibid, p 20

111 'Invitation', ibid, p 12

112 'Still I Rise', And Still I Rise (London: Virago, 1986) p 41. Angelou's stage presentation of powerful female sexuality can usefully be compared with Nichols' Fat Black Woman.

Audiences tend, of course, to take the stage persona as the genuine personality of the poet herself. Nichols has commented on the surprised reactions of some of her audience who expect her to *be* the Fat Black Woman when they go to listen to her read.

113 Eavan Boland, Selected Poems, p. 42; Judith Kazantzis, The Wicked Queen, p. 8.

114 'The Body Reclining', Lazy Thoughts, p 4

115 We tend to equate protracted effort with quality; if the poet says s/he spent ages 'wrestling' (it is usually male poets, and they do this kind of thing) with language, we are more likely to treat the resultant work with respect. Inspiration is, curiously, viewed with suspicion these days. Consequently, Jean 'Binta' Breeze's description of poems just coming to her fully-formed, like Nichols' flippant poetic persona, are bound (and perhaps intended?) to provoke maximum scorn from traditionalists.

116 'The Body Reclining', Lazy Thoughts, p 4

117 'Configurations', Lazy Thoughts, p 31

118 'Spell Against Too Much Male White Power', Lazy Thoughts, p 18

119 'On Poems and Crotches', Lazy Thoughts, p 16

120 Early Ripening: American Women's Poetry Now (London: Pandora, 1987). p 1

121 'My Black Triangle', Lazy Thoughts, p 25

CONCLUSION

1 Elizabeth Bishop, quoted by her literary executors, in The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry, edited by Fleur Adcock (London: Faber & Faber, 1987).

2 While I only consider work by women poets, I hope it is clear that I believe this to be just as important when reading men's poetry.

3

'Knowing about Sonnets'

Lesson 1: "The Soldier" (Brooke)

'[The task of criticism] is not to redouble the text's self-understanding, to collude with its object in a conspiracy of silence. The task is to show the text as it cannot know itself.'

Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology.

Recognizing a sonnet is like attaching
A name to a face. *Mister Sonnet, I presume?*
If I
And naming is power. It can hardly
Deny its name. You are well on the way
To mastery. The next step is telling the sonnet
What it is trying to say. This is called Interpretation.
If I should die
What you musn't do is collude with it. This
Is bad for the sonnet, and will only encourage it
To be eloquent. You must question it closely:
What has it left out? What made it decide
To be a sonnet? The author's testimony
(If any) is not evidence. He is the last person to know.
If I should die, think this
Stand no nonsense with imagery. Remember, though shifty,
It is vulnerable to calculation. Apply the right tests.
Now you are able to Evaluate the sonnet.
If I
That should do for today.
If I should die
And over and over
The new white paper track innocent unlined hands.
Think this. Think this. Think this. Think only this.

Selected Poems (Liskeard: Peterloo, 1986), p. 112.

AFTERWORD

1 Rebecca O'Rourke, 'Mediums, Messages and Noisy Amateurs', Women: A Cultural Review, (Winter 1990) vol 1 no 3, 275-286.

2 O'Rourke makes the following astute observations about the nature of the prejudice:

> 'It isn't against all women, that would be easy to mobilize against; it is far more effectively undermining by being against *most* women. Women, like black and working-class writers, are not so much denied excellence as mediocrity: we must be geniuses or nothing. The playgrounds of poetry, its teething rings and testing grounds are closed to us, swamped with men and boys of indifferent talents.' (p. 283.)

3 Even Bloodaxe let themselves down here; they are about to bring out collections by Lemn Sissay and Benjamin Zephaniah to accompany the publication of Linton Kwesi Johnson's volume this year.

4 Writing Women, 7 Cavendish Place, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE2 2NE.

5 See Chapter 3, note 21.

6 A recent series focusing on three poets used two women - Christina Rossetti and Liz Lochhead, alongside Seamus Heaney. The BBC produced an introduction to Caribbean poetry that included Grace Nichols and Valerie Bloom, and several of the poems by men tackled gender issues - Ben Zephaniah's 'Man Woman', and James Berry' s 'My Sister' were two examples.

7 Jeni Couzyn, Singing Down the Bones (London: Livewire / Women's Press, 1989); Maura Healy (ed) Fire The Sun: An Anthology of Poems (London: Longman, 1989).

8 Both edited by Susan Sellers and published by The Women's Press, 1989 and 1991 respectively.

9 Boland, 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma', Stand, Winter, 1986-7. 43-49.

10 Michèle Roberts told me that it is usually the men who will write to her after a workshop, enclosing fifty pages of work-in-progress and an invitation to dinner next week. The women, if they contact her at all, are more likely to send a postcard, and perhaps one poem if they are particularly brave.

11 Dana Gioia, 'Can Poetry Matter?', Poetry Review, vol 81 no 4 (Winer 1991/2), pp. 36-46.

12 See Chapter 1, p. 52.

13 Michèle Roberts offers a possible explanation for this blindness:

> 'Men often can't hear women speaking *as women*: they can only hear anger, for example, expressed in masculine terms: aggro, smashing things up. My poems invite the audience to listen, to open up, to take images inside. Clearly this is threatening to some men, since it suggests a feminine activity: embracing, holding; a power they are frightened of.'

From an article in Michelene Wandor (ed) On Gender and Writing (London: Pandora, 1983), p. 62-3.

14 Russell Davies, 'Spots of Time', The Listener, 4 December 1986, pp. 23-4. Quoted by Christine Battersby in Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics (London: Women's Press, 1989). I am grateful to Treva Brougton for drawing this to my attention.

15 Jenny Joseph, 'Warning', When I am an old woman I shall wear purple: an anthology of short stories and poems, edited by Sandra Martz (California: Papier-Maché Press, 1987). p. 1.

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Poetry Magazines

(There are nearly 200 'literary magazines' in Light's List, 1989, most of which accept poetry manuscripts. The Arts Council restricts its list to 62 'poetry magazines'. I have only listed those with which I am familiar. To my knowledge there are three publications which only accept work by women, despite outraged complaints about the prejudice which makes it so hard for male writers to get into print. (Over the last five years Stand, The Times Literary Supplement and The London Review of Books have all been taken to task by female readers for their systematic neglect of women writers). Joanna Russ calculates that women tend to make up a steady 6-8% of any literary selection, anthology or syllabus. The most recent poetry anthologies published in this country obey this unspoken rule. It seems that only when women publish as separatists can they constitute more than a tenth of the whole.)

Agenda

Ambit

Bête Noire

Distaff(women only; ceased publication)

London Magazine

London Review of Books

Network of Women Writers (women only; ceased publication)

Orbis

PN Review

Poetry Review

Prospice

Slow Dancer

Stand

The Wide Skirt

Writing Women (women only)

For extensive information see _Light's List of Literary Magazines_, (Tring, Herts: Photon Press, 1989) and _Poetry Listing 1_ (1988), 2 (1989), 3 (1990), compiled by David Hart, (Birmingham: Wood Wind Publications, 42 All Saints Road, Kings Heath, Birmingham, B14 7LL).