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*"Love-Cracked":
Spinsters as Subversives
in "Anna Malann," "Christmas Jenny,"
and "An Object of Love"*

by BARBARA A. JOHNS

IN HER essay "No One Asked Me to Write a Novel" Alison Lurie recounts her childhood equation of the woman writer's vocation with the single life, an equation predicated on the adult praise she received for her "perfectly lovely stories" but not for her "skinny, plain, odd-looking body" or for her personality "not especially charming or affectionate or helpful."¹ Never told that *she* was "perfectly lovely," Lurie thought that she must choose "the perfection of the work" and thus align herself with the Old Maids of the Victorian children's books that were her favorite reading:

Old Maids wore spectacles and old-fashioned clothes and lived in cottages with gardens, where they entertained children and Old Maids to tea. They were always odd in some way: absent-minded or timid or rude or fussy. Sometimes they taught school, but most of their time was devoted to making wonderful walnut cake and blackberry jam and dandelion wine, to telling tales and painting watercolors, to embroidery and knitting and crotchet, and to growing prize cabbages and roses. Occasionally they shared their cottages with another Old Maid, but mostly they lived alone, often with a cat. Sometimes the cat was their familiar, and they were really witches. You could tell which ones were witches, according to one of my children's books, because there was always something wrong with them: They had six fingers on one hand, or their feet were on backward, and so on. (p. 13)

As it turned out, Alison Lurie did not have to embrace the spinster's life, though she most certainly did become a storyteller. But even in her whimsical description of the life that she imagined would be hers, there is a hint that the aspiring woman writer and her readers might discover a source of truth in the fictional old maid. Perhaps in this complex figure that seems trivially diminished yet powerful, mysterious, even dangerous, women could discover some insight into what secrets lay behind the "perfectly lovely" appearances of things. Perhaps in the hands of women writers whose very sense of vocation is linked with the old maid, the spinster could be made use of, could become an artist's vehicle for examining the cultural pieties about marriage, or religion, or friendship, or woman's place. The old maid, almost by definition an outsider, a marginal figure, could be a means of exploring whether beyond blackberry jam and dandelion wine there exists a knowledge of the

1. *New York Times Book Review*, 6 June 1982, p. 13. All further references to this work appear in the text.

universe born, figuratively speaking, only of having six fingers or one's feet on backward.

Three short stories written by women during the same period as Lurie's favorite children's literature use the old maid figure in precisely this way. In "Anna Malann" (1898), "Christmas Jenny" (1891), and "An Object of Love" (1887), Annie Trumbull Slosson and Mary Wilkins Freeman create three old spinsters who live alone in cottages and who are not perfectly lovely in either physical appearance or personality. Although these women do have friends, each is decidedly "odd" in her peculiar intimacy and identification with the natural world. Like "good witches" or "white witches,"² they are marked by an intense devotion to animals and pets, including cats with whom they are "familiar." They are particularly distinguished for their intuitive knowledge of the cruelty done to animals, especially those injured by boys, and two of them have a special capacity for healing. Though traditionally pious and devoted, each woman trusts her own religious experience and commands her own conscience, and most significantly, she asserts both in opposition to male structures, notably the church, which would dismiss her for being the spiritual equivalent of six-fingered. Working beneath the surface of the stereotypically eccentric, amusing old maid, Slosson and Freeman use these spinsters to criticize those patriarchal systems that refuse to women the integrity of their knowledge and the power of their vision. In the hands of their creators, Ann Ellis, Jenny Wrayne, and Ann Millet are, indeed, dangerous old maids.

Annie Trumbull Slosson's "Anna Malann" is, on one level, a sweet and sentimental story of a peculiar, love-cracked spinster who runs a kind of animal hospital in the New England countryside. But in its narrative techniques and in the conflicts it describes, it is also a story with a subtext about both the ways women's stories are told (and received) and the genuine subjects of those stories.

"Anna Malann" opens with a frame device in which the first person narrator is herself introduced to the story of the odd spinster. The narrator interrupts her own rambling, appreciative journey through the New England countryside (she names several kinds of wildflowers growing along the road)³ to intervene in what she perceives to be a typical scene of cruelty to animals. The scene includes a dog, a river, and a group of boys, a group clearly intended to represent the quintessential male (they have brown, black, flaxen, and red hair). The narrator notes that while she loves dogs and is fond of boys, she "does not always enjoy seeing the two

2. For a discussion of witchcraft, "the craft of the wise," and its veneration of the natural world as embodiment of the Goddess, see Starhawk's "Witchcraft and Women's Culture" in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 259-68, and *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). See also Elizabeth Ammons, "Jewett's Witches," in *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gwen L. Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 165-84.

3. Annie Trumbull Slosson (1838-1926) was herself a naturalist, especially interested in entomology and botany. She gave 35,000 specimens of insects to the American Museum of Natural History in 1925.

classes together."⁴ "Knowing a good deal of animals and their ailments," she leaves her carriage "fired with missionary zeal" in order to make appeal for her "dumb favorites" (pp. 86-87). But when she reaches the boys, she discovers that they are tenderly if vainly nursing a dying dog. Thinking she must be dreaming ("Was this a real dog, and were these boys?" [p. 89]), the narrator learns that the boys have a special reverence for animals, and that they intend to take the dead animal to "Anna Malann" in Wilson's Gore, because they "allers fetch 'em to Anna Malann, even when they're dead" (p. 90).

Curious about what place could produce such atypical boys, the narrator discovers from the innkeeper that Wilson's Gore was "one of those bits of land . . . which were left between the boundary-lines" (p. 91). Its nine families, "through the example or influence of one Anna Malann, an old woman in the place, . . . seemed to treat dumb creatures with strange consideration" (p. 91). Told by the male innkeeper that Anna is "dreadful amusin'" but that she should "see for [her]self" (p. 91), the narrator sets out to meet Anna Malann. Slosson structures the opening incident to suggest that Anna's life, too, is between the boundary lines, beyond the constraints of normal society, unusual in its impact on male behavior.⁵ Through the sympathetic narrator, herself curious about Anna's missionary work yet willing to judge her without cultural prejudice, Slosson invites the reader to join in the act of seeing.

In contrast to the neatness traditionally associated with the spinster's home, Anna's house is surrounded by boxes, barrels, tin cans, crates, and baskets, all of which provide shelter for various animals. Anna herself is a "thin, pale little woman" who has "soft brown eyes, with a certain wistful, gentle look often seen in the eyes of an animal, especially an intelligent, affectionate dog" (p. 92). So struck is the narrator with Anna's eyes that she remarks, "since I first saw her I can never look into the true eyes of my brave dog Larry without a quick memory of Anna Malann and her gentle face" (p. 93). Indeed, Anna (like Larry) turns shyly away, "averse to meeting a prolonged human gaze" (p. 93). The narrator's tone here may initially seem to be that of the condescending, superior outsider who reports the lives of peculiar country people for the pleasure of sophisticated audiences like herself, but the identification of Anna with dogs does not, in fact, trivialize her. Rather, the association introduces Anna's essential intelligence, affection, truth, and bravery. Indeed any sense of the narrator's superiority is undercut by her discovery that Anna's name is actually Ann Ellis, that she has apparently mistaken "Animal

4. *Dumb Foxglove and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1898), p. 85. All further references to this work appear in the text.

5. In "Witchcraft and Women's Culture" Starhawk notes that all witchcraft rituals take place "within a circle—a space considered to be 'between the worlds,' the human world and the realm of the Goddess. . . . The casting of the circle begins the ritual and serves as a transition into an expanded state of consciousness. The power raised by the ritual is contained within the circle so that it can reach a higher peak instead of dissipating" (p. 265). Anna Malann's Wilson's Gore may be read as an attempt to make permanent women's expanded state of consciousness and their powerful energy.

Ann" for "Anna Malann." This discovery (which the reader also must make, given Slosson's title) emphasizes that the narrator still remains an outsider in Wilson's Gore, that she has yet to hear and fully comprehend its philosophy. But her discovery of the correct name prompts her respect: "I looked with fresh wonder and reverence upon one whose very bearing of the title seemed to give her a sort of canonization" (p. 93).

The narrator steps back from the narrative to name in what way she will serve as the vehicle for Ann's story. Not unaware of how her wonder and reverence make her sympathetic, she elects to report Ann's life and work "in her [Ann's] own words—without exaggeration or sentimentality" (p. 94). She calls her account "not really a story" but a "mere sketch" with "no plot, little incident, and no *dénouement*" (p. 94). Ann's story, in other words, is not a conventional male plot of high adventure or conquest of nature; neither is it the traditional female romance. Ann is not a typical hero. To join content and form, then, the narrator's work is a sketch—unfinished, open in its form, without strict resolution or ending—because Ann's life "is still being lived and the quiet, unobtrusive work going on in, *and farther and farther beyond*, the tiny hamlet of Wilson's Gore" (emphasis mine, p. 94). In other words, Ann's life cannot be captured within the usual narrative boundary lines and cannot be rendered in a linear plot structure that insists upon closure.⁶ Rather, because Ann's work expands in widening circles, the form of the narrative must allow for reverberation.⁷ Indeed, the narrator notes that though she wrote down Ann's story directly after hearing it, "while the words were fresh" (p. 95), she has, in fact, heard the story many times while visiting Ann, for the two women have become close friends. The almost ritual repetition of Ann's story and the visitations of the storyteller to continually "see for herself," identify "Anna Malann" as a woman's narrative. Ann's life is given shape and expression by a woman writer able to recognize the inherent seriousness of the subject (however much the culture might dismiss it as "amusing") and willing to give voice to another woman who, though "odd in some way," is nonetheless a courageous, intelligent truth-teller. The frame around the story thus joins together subject, teller, and reader in a circle of affection and understanding.

As the narrator suggests by the image of Ann as canonized saint, there is a sense of heroism in Ann's character, a heroism that grows out of two nineteenth-century "feminine" qualities: emotional sensitivity and religious zeal. Though, like most saints, Ann cannot account for the mystery of her gift ("I don't know exactly how it come about" [p. 95]), Ann tells how, from her early childhood, she recognized that her father

6. I owe this understanding of the sketch form to the discussion between Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, "Regionalism as a Women's Genre: Jewett and Her Contemporaries," at the opening session of the Westbrook College Conference, *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer for Our Time*, 16 June 1985.

7. For a superb presentation of the appropriateness of the circle structure to women's stories, see Elizabeth Ammons, "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 16 (Fall, 1983), 83–92.

had given her an example of goodness to animals. He told her that his attitude came from his own father and from the minister: he valued "dumb creatur's" because they were "useful" and because he was "uncomfortable and fidgety" (p. 97) when an animal was abused. But, he told his daughter, neither the Bible, the church, nor the catechism — i.e., none of the religious instruments of patriarchy — gave animals "rights," and just because he happened to feel "soft like and nervous" about them, that didn't mean he *ought* to feel that way.

Ann, however, trusts her own observations and feelings far more than her father or church doctrine; even as a girl, she thinks his notion of the mere usefulness of animals "sort of ha'sh" (p. 97). Trying to understand the inner voice that tells her that animals should be revered and protected at all costs, yet trying hard to make her father's abstract beliefs "sound right and reasonable" (p. 97), in spite of their limitations, Ann consults her mother, but she "shut [her] up directly" (p. 98) with the absolute doctrine that animals simply don't have souls. The mother's complicity, however, does not silence Ann. She stays true to her own vision and decides to treat animals as if they were "folks," as if they shared the same life principle and history as humans. Ironically, she applies the rigors of Calvinistic logic to justify her intuition:

They act like folks: They're good or they're bad; they're lazy or industrious; they're noisy or quiet, pleasant or ugly, selfish or freehanded, peaceable or snarly. In short, they've got ways. There's no two creatur's just alike, no more than there is folks. They take sick like folks, too, and they don't like to suffer no more'n folks do; and, come to the last, they die like folks. (p. 97)

Released from her parents' strictures after their deaths, Ann is free to follow her own woman's instincts, though they inevitably move her to confrontation with conventional male wisdom. She grows so sensitive to animals that her ears ache with the sounds of their torture, with the "crying out of the beings folks call dumb" (p. 99). Increasingly plagued by the suffering that others cannot or will not hear, she confesses to becoming "nigh about crazy" (p. 99). Finally, in order to act on her beliefs, Ann breaks with her family, who can't bear to see "an Ellis, and a female one, too, set up for a stirrer-up and overthrower. . . ." (p. 100). She gives up her share of her father's inheritance (but keeps the money given her by the aunt after whom she was named) in order to attempt a "millenium of [her] own" by "bringing over a whole community to [her] way of thinking" (p. 101).

In the course of her revolutionary and prophetic efforts, Ann examines the Scriptures for evidence to support her instinctive concern for animals. In her intellectual honesty, she can find nothing that reveals a life after death for creatures, though she insists that the Bible does admonish people to be merciful to them. But her most radical religious act — an immensely serious, decisive, and courageous one for a believer — is to relinquish heaven for herself if there are no animals there. Ann's rejection of

heaven is as heroic as Huck Finn's "All right, then, I'll go to hell," and, indeed, Ann emerges as a woman who can rightfully (if ironically) take her place among the ranks of holy men and women for whom care for animals has long been in the tradition of saintliness. Or, perhaps more appropriately, she can take her place within the matrilineal tradition of witches, the women healers who find inadequate the doctrines of traditional Western religion and who know that the universe is indivisible, that women and cats are "familiars" because they share the same life:

I've got such a terrible aching and burning over the things done to these creatur's that I can't attend to the other things folks tell me is the highest, most important ones. I haven't got time for all the meetings—the sewing society and the missionary concerts and temperance meetings and the anti-smoking society, and all those stated means, as they call them. . . . And so I tell Him plain, but humble and respectful, that if He thinks best to say, because I give up the work and duty of a professor, I must give up the rewards too, why, I've nothing to say. He knows best, understanding the whole case, and I know He'll do right. So I just go on with what I've got to do for these poor things as if I was just one of them, soul lacking and all. And they think I am." (pp. 115–16)

Ann's faith in her own vision finds expression in acts that fall well beyond the pale of traditional feminine behavior, but they are marked by consistency and integrity. She extends her ability to hear animals' "dumb cries" by speaking the languages they understand. Ann recounts how she tried to learn French phrases like "bong shang" in order to heal the broken heart of a grieving French poodle belonging to a deceased "monsheer." Conversely, she avoids words that will give offense. When the narrator observes that one animal looks like a "good hunting dog," Ann quickly calls him simply "good dog" and whispers that he is in fact gun-shy, that she is protecting him from his owner's beatings. Ann also knows the power of non-verbal communication, as when she rebukes the narrator for laughing at a badly deformed cat, for the creature is "real touchy about her looks" (p. 109). Her religious tolerance is evident in her belief that animals absorb the creeds of their owners. She thus warns her new friend not to say anything bad about Jews as they approach the kennel of one of her dogs because the animal "don't know any other religion; he's been with them all his days" (p. 110). Ann's method for teaching her own philosophy contrasts with the evangelization techniques of traditional religion. Just as she has "nothing to say" in the face of religious judgments that might be made against her, she promotes her missionary work only by example: "I've never preached about it or scolded and fretted" (p. 102).

When the narrator completes the frame of her sketch—"I do not even point a moral. Maybe there is none. It is for you to say" (p. 117)—Slosson offers her readers more than a choice about our attitudes toward "amusing," dog-like old maids whose devotion to animals is carried to the edges of reality. In the story of "one woman and her work and ways" (p. 117), she offers instead a decision on the value women should give to traditional religious doctrine when that doctrine negates or ignores a woman's own

intelligence, affection, truth, or courage. For in spite of Ann's clear peculiarities, she is a woman who endures near insanity, family ostracism, and the implied accusations of unfemininity and heresy in order to be true to her own hard-won principles. In letting the reader name the moral, Slosson invites her readers to say "no" to patriarchal structures—including the conventional plot devices—that constrict women and circumscribe the breadth of their influence. She invites us, finally, to give voice to the hidden heroism of other lives lived "farther and farther beyond" the cultural boundary lines.

Mary Wilkins Freeman's Jenny Wrayne of "Christmas Jenny" is like Ann Ellis of "Anna Malann" in that she lives apart and cares for a variety of wild animals, many of which have been injured by the traps and guns of male hunters.⁸ Many villagers consider her "somewhat fantastic" for "in her early youth she had had an unfortunate love affair, that was supposed to have tintured her whole life with an alien element. 'Love-cracked,' people called her."⁹ Through Jenny, Freeman explores the notion of the spinster as mystic, a person so misunderstood by her society that she is considered strange, yet so united with the universe that she is capable of profoundly influencing two of society's most unyielding institutions, marriage and the church.

Jenny's friends include an elderly couple, the Careys. They represent a nineteenth-century marriage in which the woman has internalized all the features of the cult of true womanhood.¹⁰ Betsey Carey is a passive, fragile, domestic caretaker. On two occasions in the story, Jonas Carey has a tantrum over minor frustrations, once when he falls on the ice while trying to carry a pail of water, and once when his shoelaces become untied. Each time, he simply sits down in the midst of a harsh New England outdoors, petulantly refuses to move, "imperatively" orders his wife back into the house, and silently ignores her sobs. His wife "piteously" begs, coaxes, and exhorts him to come in; she hovers over him, trying to help him up or tie his shoes; she genuinely worries that he will miss whatever meal she is then preparing. But each time the spinster Jenny intervenes and simply treats Jonas as an adult temporarily acting the fool. A strong woman who "comes sturdily over the slippery road" (p. 163) and who "trods confidently up the icy steps" because she "ain't afraid of slippin'" (p. 164), Jenny refuses to pamper Jonas, ignores his stubbornness, and forces Betsey to do the same. When, predictably, he gets over his moodiness just in time for the meal being served, she carries on a normal conversation with him. By refusing to sanction the wife's assigned role in

8. In *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition* (New York: Ungar, 1983), p. 132, Josephine Donovan calls these guns and traps "mechanized masculine operations that destroy that natural life with which . . . women identify."

9. *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891; rpt. Ridgewood, N.J.: The Gregg Press, 1967), p. 167. All further references to this work appear in the text.

10. See Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1976).

these marriage tableaux, Jenny shows Betsey Carey that it is possible to stand up to the established power of the husband, to assert one's own autonomy. Later in the narrative, through a carefully crafted use of bird images, Freeman transfers the odd woman's sensitivity, power, and self-sufficiency to her married friend. "Christmas Jenny" affirms that once such a transfer has occurred, women united can go on to resist whatever institution attempts to keep them in their place, including the church.

Jenny Wrayne's name suggests a delicate, wren-like woman, but Jenny has a large, "weather-beaten, deeply-tanned, and reddened" face. Hers is one of those "sylvan faces with features composed of bark-wrinkles and knot-holes, that one can fancy looking out of the trunks of trees" (p. 164). Indeed, she looks like "a broad green moving bush" (p. 163) when she carries the evergreen Christmas wreaths and everlasting flowers which she sells to support herself. A woman at one with nature, particularly with birds, Jenny shares Ann Ellis's acute concern with the suffering of animals in the face of male incomprehension. Though Jonas looks at her "stupidly," Jenny "soberly" tells Betsey of her worry over the woodpeckers and bluejays who can't get through the ice to "git breakfast" (p. 166). She decides not to buy a desperately needed calico dress for herself, spending the money instead on seed for her starving birds. As she walks through the woods on her way home from the village, she sees no people, but "met many living things that she knew" (p. 167), including the beloved jays and woodpeckers. As she glances back at the village, she has "a clear view" of it (p. 167), but the clear view is not reciprocated.

Jenny's identification with nature is misconstrued and even misrepresented by the village residents, among them the minister's daughter, who reports that "they" say she half-starves her caged animals and treats miserably a deaf boy who lives with her. The minister and Deacon Little, a man of "sinewy leanness" with a "sallow and severely corrugated face" (p. 169), set out to investigate the charges. Clearly little able to appreciate the spinster's work—the deacon seems a sinister, serpent-like predator—the two men enter the house that is like Jenny herself (weather-beaten and vined) when they do not find her at home. Inside, their vision is at first incapable of penetrating the "sacred space" they have intruded upon. They can only hear the sounds of the animals. As they gain their sight, they perceive the "curiously sylvan" nature of the apartment, hung as it is with "little rough cages and hutches" containing "forlorn little birds and rabbits and field-mice" (p. 170). When they recognize the deaf and dumb boy among the cages, they "stare remorselessly" (p. 169), if incomprehendingly, for the boy appears to be a girl. Dressed in a "long blue gingham pinafore," he "sat in the midst of a heap of evergreens, which he had been twining into wreaths; his pretty, soft, fair hair was damp" (p. 169). Neither the minister nor the deacon can speak, nor can they understand what they see. They cannot envision the boy as an embodiment of Jenny's values, or as a sign of the unity that makes Jenny, the forest, the

house, and he himself inseparable, indivisible. The boy's "wild and inarticulate" cry, united with the cries of the caged creatures, is "like a soft clamor of eloquent appeal to the two visitors" (p. 170). But it is futile. "[T]hey could not understand it" (p. 170). They can only stand mute, "solemn and perplexed" (p. 170).

But Jenny's story does have a voice which is not puzzled, which can interpret and make clear what the men can neither see nor hear. The two churchmen are confronted by Betsey Carey, who has crawled on her hands and knees over the ice in order to speak on Jenny's behalf. Mrs. Carey "stood before them like a ruffled and defiant bird that was frightening them as well as herself with her temerity. She palpitated all over, but there was a fierce look in her dim blue eyes" (p. 171). Like Ann Ellis, Mrs. Carey recites a litany of the cruelties done to animals that Jenny has tried to relieve, then proclaims: "I dunno but what bein' a missionary to robins an' starvin' chippies an' little deaf-an'-dumb children is jest as good as some other kinds, an' that's what she is" (p. 172). She tells them that she is not afraid to speak the truth about the deaf boy, whom Jenny had taken out of the poorhouse because nobody else wanted him; she reports that Jenny provides both the boy and her animals with enough to eat even if she doesn't have food for herself. Finally, Mrs. Carey addresses the issue of Jenny's oddness and confronts the insidiousness of the "witch hunt that went up the mountain road that December afternoon" (p. 174):

They tell about her bein' love-cracked. H'm. I dunno what they call love-cracked. I know that Anderson fellar went off an' married another girl, when Jenny just as much expected to have him as could be. He ought to ha' been strung up. But I know one thing—if she did get kind of twisted out of the reg'lar road of lovin', she's in another one, that's full of little dumbies an' starvin' chippies an' lame rabbits, an' she ain't love-cracked no more'n other folks." (pp. 172–73)

When Betsey Carey is finished, the minister and deacon "were thankful to leave that small, vociferous old woman, who seemed to be pulling herself up by her enthusiasm until she reached the air over their heads, and became so abnormal that she was frightful" (p. 173). Indeed, Betsey and Jenny are over the ministers' heads; they are frightful to "normal" people. They have transcended together the pettiness and the narrowness of a church which sits in judgment of women, which twists charity into abnormality or perversity; and they have transcended a culture which prescribes that there is only one "reg'lar road of lovin'." The meal the women share at the end is a communion of kindred spirits. Its joy is not dependent on the guilt offerings of turkey and brown calico the ministers send Jenny as a Christmas gift, nor is it dependent on Jonas's presence. The "love-cracked" spinster's life has taken flight into the imagination of another woman. Their confrontations with marriage and the church are Freeman's subtle subversion of woman's place in nineteenth-century New England.

Freeman's "An Object of Love" centers on a different kind of emo-

tional attachment to animals. In this story, Freeman creates not a missionary whose concern is diffused onto all animals, but a spinster who cares for a particular pet cat, her own "object of love." The story affirms that the spinster's attachment to a living thing is her due, her right as a feeling human being. Freeman asserts that if Providence itself owes at least this much to an unmarried woman, society owes her the right to express her own desperation, grief, and anger when an object of love is lost. In this story, then, Freeman uses the odd woman-pet relationship to criticize a culture which tells women not only how they should behave, but how they should feel.

Ann Millet shares Ann Ellis's and Jenny Wayne's ability to communicate with animals. Her cat, Willy, knowingly watches her from the windowsill when she harvests his favorite squashes, and when she promises to cook them for him, he "look[ed] as if he knew just what she meant."¹¹ She always feeds Willy before herself, then shares her own meal with him, while he purrs and rubs his soft coat against her. Their satisfaction in each other seems mutual.

But Ann Millet struggles throughout the story to measure up to the emotional "duty" of most situations. When, for example, she brings in the squashes, she thinks out loud, "I'd *orter* be thankful" (p. 266). She constantly invokes the "I *orter*" phrase, changing only the ending. She is a woman whose "deep-set blue eyes looked with a strange, solemn expression. . . . Some people complained of feeling nervous when Ann looked at them" (pp. 266-67). Ann's unrelenting look at the world, coupled with her reluctance to feel what she "ought," suggests a conflict many nineteenth-century women found in their lives: the discrepancy between what was promised and what actually was. What Ann has learned from her clear-eyed vision is that life often gives women the minimum reward, rarely the maximum. It is difficult, then, to be thankful, to never complain, to be patient when there is much to be impatient, angry, and ungrateful for. For instance, when Ann speaks of the comfort Willy gives her, there is a great deal that is unspoken about the loneliness, the fears, the deprivations of a spinster's life:

What on airth I should do this long winter that's comin' without him, I don' know. Everybody wants somethin' that's alive in the house. . . . I've got my Bible an' Willy, an' a roof over my head, an' enough to eat an' wear; an' a good many folks hev to be alone, as fur as the other folks is concerned, on this airth. An' p'rhaps some other women ain't lonesome because I am, an' maybe she'd be one of the kind that didn't like cats, an' wouldn't hev got along half as well as me. (p. 268)

Ann does try to conform her attitudes to the local conventional wisdom. She is unswerving in her loyalty to the church, for example. She never misses a prayer meeting, however predictable the dull minister's prayers,

11. *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887; rpt. New York: Garrett Press, 1969), p. 270. All further references to this work appear in the text.

for "to her a minister was an unpublished apostle, and his wife and family were set apart on the earth" (p. 271).

Yet Ann's discipleship disappears when she returns from a meeting to find that Willy has disappeared. She frantically searches for him, her face "wild and wan":

The little thin, shivering old woman standing outdoors, all alone in the rude, chilly night air, under these splendid stars and streaming lights, called over and over the poor little creature which was everything earthly she had to keep her company in the great universe in which she herself was so small. (p. 272)

In this context of almost cosmic anguish, Ann rebels against a Providence that apparently denies to some women even the small joy of a cat. She refuses to go to meeting: "I ain't never goin' to meetin' agin. Folks go to meetin' to thank the Lord for blessin's, I s'pose. I've lost mine and I ain't goin' " (p. 273). When a married neighbor rebukes her for sinfully "setting by" an animal as if it were a baby, Ann passionately responds:

I ain't hed no folks of my own sence I kin remember. I've worked hard all my life an' hed nothin' at all to love, an' I've thought I'd orter be thankful all the same. But I did want as much as a cat. . . . I'm *here*, an' I ain't *thar*; an' I've got hands, an' I want somethin' I kin touch. . . . I ain't—never—felt—as ef I'd orter complain. But—*thar*—was—cats—enough. I might 'a hed—that—much. (p. 274)

Ann's fear that Willy has been poisoned or stolen by "a boy over the river makin' a cat-skin kerridge blanket" and her profound sense of loss goad her "meek, reverential nature into fierceness" (p. 275); that fierceness, in turn, makes her a "wicked, rebellious old woman" (p. 276). Her "dreadful state of mind" (p. 275) provokes a call from the minister, but hers is a case "entirely outside his experience" and he goes away "without saying much of anything" (p. 277). Unable to understand her loss or to take her suffering as genuine, he does nothing to assuage her anger with God. She still refuses to go to meeting and Freeman comments that it was "doubtful whether or not she would ever have done so if she had not found the cat" (p. 277). The energy Ann Millet devotes to her grief seems to the village to be absurd, but Ann's refusal to compromise with God is a refusal to have her integrity diminished. It is a protest against not having her own needs and pleasures taken seriously.¹²

When Ann discovers that she herself had inadvertently locked the cat in the basement and then not heard his cries, her first reaction is to revert to the "shoulds" of her previous beliefs: "I've been an awful wicked woman. I ain't been to meetin', an' I've talked. . . . I hadn't orter hev anythin'. I'd orter offer up Willy. Lor' sakes! think of me a-sayin' what

12. In *Mary Wilkins Freeman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p. 53, Perry D. Westbrook suggests that the real question in "An Object of Love" is "Had [Ann] unconsciously resented the cat which had been a substitute in her life for husband and children?" He argues that Freeman expects the reader to answer yes to this question, since she herself knew a good deal about "single ladies and their cats" and the "destructive emotions" which could occur in relationships between human beings and animals. I would argue that the destructive emotions in this story do not occur between a single lady and her cat, but between a single lady and her God.

I did, an' him down cellar!" (p. 278). But when she returns to meeting, she does not make apologies for her behavior; she doesn't accuse herself of an "unpardonable sin"; she doesn't do what she "orter." She has come to church because she has driven a bargain with Providence: she has demanded self-defined blessings in exchange for her worship. When the minister welcomes her return, her response is a simple, "The cat has come back" (p. 279).

Ann Ellis, Jenny Wrayne, and Ann Millet do, in many ways, have their feet on backward. Strange, peculiar old spinsters, they walk away from the theologies and churches that would deny their sacred, mysterious relationships with animals, and they refuse the categories assigned to them, especially the accusations of witchcraft or heresy. "Love-cracked" to those traditional patriarchal institutions that cannot know or understand them, they are heroic subversives to the authors who tell their stories.