Contemporary American women poets: new voices, new visions

Diana Fuss
Colby College

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CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
WOMEN POETS: NEW VOICES, NEW VISIONS

by

DIANA J. FUSS

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ABSTRACT

The focus of "Contemporary American Women Poets: New Voices, New Visions" is the new tradition of poetry presently being established by American women writers. With an aim towards determining what is distinctive to this tradition and why it has been formed, ten poets are considered in particular detail: Adrienne Rich, Tess Gallagher, Ai, Carolyn Forche, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, Louise Gluck, Kathleen Fraser, Olga Broumas, and May Sarton.

Part I considers the origin of this new tradition and explores some of the obstacles American women poets are struggling to overcome. A consideration of the dilemma of the "divided woman" and the impassioned quest for wholeness that is produced is central to any understanding of why women have chosen to formulate a specifically female poetics. Tokenism in general and the oppressions encountered by minority women poets in particular further explain the need for a wholly new tradition of poetry determined and defined by women.

Having examined in Part I the situation in which the contemporary woman poet finds herself, Part II explores the key themes and interests which characterize the new tradition being created. The influence of the family--of the patriarch and the matriarch--is of particular concern to the woman writer as she seeks to come to her own identity as poet and woman. Just as the traditional family structure is called into question, the institutions of marriage and motherhood are similarly re-evaluated from a feminist perspective. In questioning the foundations of the patriarchy and its literary tradition, the contemporary woman poet comes to a renewed appreciation of her connections with other women and of her own identity as female. Thus, the recurrent interest in female bonding, female sexuality, self-births, and matri-lineal lines forms the thematic core of contemporary women's poetry and gathers these poets together into a tradition of women writers.

Part III moves away from theme to focus more closely upon language, imagery, and creative sources. Contemporary American women poets question the patriarchal bias in language and work towards infusing the old terms with new significations. The concept of the female muse is also reclaimed, and goddesses are typically recalled as symbolic inspirational figures. The study's final chapter examines the charge that women's poetry is too "political" and seeks to resolve the tension between personal and political poetry posed in the modern period. Finally, the conclusion attempts to determine the various possible ways in which poetry by contemporary American women might continue to evolve as it further seeks to clarify the importance of this new, female tradition for the history of Western literature.
CONTENTS

PART I. THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMAN POET

Chapter
I. THE DIVIDED WOMAN AND THE QUEST FOR WHOLENESS .. 1
II. TOKENISM AND THE MINORITY WOMAN POET .. .. 17

PART II. POWER AND PATRIARCHY: MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

Chapter
III. KINSHIP AND THE FAMILIAL INFLUENCE .. 40
IV. THE FAILURE OF MARRIAGE AND THE WRECK OF CIVILIZATION .. 57
V. MOTHERHOOD VERSUS AUTHORHOOD: CHILDREN AND THE CREATIVE ACT 73
VI. FEMALE BONDING AND THE PROCESS OF RE-MEMBERING 86

PART III. BUILDING A NEW TRADITION

Chapter
VII. THE "DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE" .. 110
VIII. THE MUSE AND THE GODDESS .. 126
IX. PERSONAL VERSUS POLITICAL: A NEW POETRY OF WITNESS 140

CONCLUSION .. 153

NOTES .. 159

WORKS CITED .. 175
PART I:

THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMAN POET
CHAPTER ONE:

THE DIVIDED WOMAN

AND THE QUEST FOR WHOLENESS

"It seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhabited them." --Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken"

"Sun
make me whole again
to love
the shattered truths of me" --Audre Lorde, "Chorus"

The Western literary tradition is a predominantly white, male, middle-class tradition. Few would deny that the voice and vision of women are largely omitted from the canon of Western literature--an omission generated by centuries of enforced female illiteracy in addition to social and sexual oppression. Because of this deliberate exclusion of potential women writers from basic literacy and actual women writers from literary acknowledgment, the tradition itself can justifiably be labelled patriarchal. Further, the patriarchal literary canon is, in fact, only a partial chronicle at best, for no tradition can claim universality when it denies the experience of more than half the human race. These conclusions may seem anachronistic to some, for it might be argued that more women poets are writing today than ever before. However, it must be noted that disproportionately fewer works by women than by men are being published, anthologized, and seriously criticized in the
modern period.¹ In this way, the woman poet continues to be excluded and continues to experience difficulty in finding her place in an entrenched tradition of patriarchal poetry. Why? And how is she to overcome these obstacles?

Suzanne Juhasz, in her study of modern American women's poetry, posits the theory of the "double bind" to account for why, until the modern period, there has been no collective work of women's poetry in English. Juhasz persuasively argues that the reason for the absence of women's literature is that the woman poet experiences "an excruciating and irreconcilable civil war"² that the male poet does not. Male poets have developed an exclusive poetic tradition characterized by male norms and male standards. In fact, to be "writer" is to be "male" in a patriarchal society. Thus, "the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles."³ The woman poet is at a distinct psychological disadvantage for, unlike the male poet, she must labor under a double bind situation which dictates that her identity as female and her vocation as poet are mutually exclusive.

If the woman poet chooses to follow her calling as poet despite the tensions and pressures placed upon her, her path is further complicated. How can a woman poet "fit in" to what has been defined and fixed as a masculine tradition? Juhasz's double bind situation is applicable here as well. The problem is this: the female poet's models have all been men; her criteria and standards of excellence are also male-
defined. If the woman poet "writes like a man," she denies her own experience as female. If she writes as a woman, her subject matter is viewed as trivial or unimportant simply because it does not fit into the male schemata, the masculine tradition. If the subject matter is considered woman's," Tillie Olsen explains in Silences, "it is minor, moving, evocative, instinctive, delicate." How, then, can the double-bind situation be solved?

For contemporary American women poets, the solution to the dilemma is the creation of a new tradition. This tradition will be a female tradition with norms and standards that are determined and defined by women. It will be a tradition to counter the one which has oppressed women through its conscious exclusion of the female experience. Finally, it will be a tradition which will compliment—and some would argue, dominate—the already established mainstream of patriarchal literature and, juxtaposed with this so-called "mainstream" (Adrienne Rich's "male-stream"), will help produce a true universal perspective on human experience.

Yet, before the quest for wholeness and the validity of a female tradition are themselves examined, the cause for this quest and the necessity for this new tradition must be explored. What has been the effect of the double-bind conflict upon the contemporary woman poet? Does she, in fact, consciously experience the divisive tension, and is this conflict apparent in her poetry? How, in the end, does she reconcile the dichotomy between "woman" and "poet" and move toward wholeness?
Undeniably, the woman poet (consciously or unconsciously) experiences her dilemma in a profound and disturbing way. Erica Jong is not the only contemporary American woman poet to confess that "without even realizing it, I assumed that the voice of the poet had to be male." If a few women poets have, in the past, succeeded in entering into the "male-stream," they have done so despite and frequently in denial of their identity as female. The use of pseudonyms (George Eliot, the Bronte sisters), the decision to remain single (Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen), and, if married, the decision to remain childless (Katherine Anne Porter, Virginia Woolf)—all bear witness to this tragic, unnecessary denial of a woman writer's sexuality in order for her to be accepted into a tradition which negates her.

Contemporary American women poets, then, are part of a tradition of women writers who are bonded together by the shared obstacles they must struggle to overcome. Oppression, it is well known, often has the effect of unifying the very social unit it sought to disperse. Such is the case with women writers—particularly in the twentieth century, but true in past centuries as well. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their comprehensive study of the nineteenth-century woman writer propose that it is women writers' "anxiety of authorship" which links them to what might be called "the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture." This "anxiety of
"authorship" is more serious and ultimately more damaging to the woman poet than Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" is to the male poet. Whereas the male poet experiences extreme anxiety over how he might do better than his male precursors, the woman poet experiences a much more fundamental anxiety—a fear of the creative act itself. The woman writer's precursors, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, not only "incarnate patriarchal authority," they attempt to define her in ways which withhold from her the possibility of being artistic creator. Women create babies, not art. Gender, the woman artist is told, renders her incapable of any creative act other than the biological.

Little wonder women poets questioned their vocation as writers, and little wonder all but a few of these women were silenced. Writing was more difficult for a woman, not because she was less talented or less intelligent than her male contemporary, but simply because she was given fewer if any opportunities to adequately fulfill her creative potential. In response to those who insist that the scarcity of women writers in history is due to a lack of female ability, one need only cite, first, the social and psychological repression a woman has been subjected to in the past as well as in the present which prevent her from writing (witness the demands traditionally imposed by motherhood and marriage), and second, the patriarchal disregard of her work when she did succeed in making a significant literary contribution (witness the negative critical reactions given
to the nineteenth-century works of Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Olive Schreiner, to name a few—works only now being rediscovered and reclaimed by feminist critics). For these reasons, a distinction must be made between the male and the female poet and their attempts at self-definition and self-articulation:

The loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention—all these phenomena of "inferiorization" mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart.9

The fact is the woman poet begins in a different position than the "Isaih, Miltons, and Shelles of the world . . . . Hers has not been an acceptable, traditional relationship with the world. If she is no longer 'queer,' as she was in [Amy] Lowell's day, she still needs to be labeled not poet but woman poet."10 The addition of the feminizing adjunct, "woman," implies a deviant at the same time it highlights the writer's gender. The implication is clear: to be a woman poet is a deviation precisely because the poet is woman; gender is the key factor which determines what is the norm and what is the exception. "The term 'female' is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman's animality," writes Simone de Beauvoir, "but because it imprisons her in her sex."11
An awareness of the double bind conflict can be detected within the body of women's writing itself. The profusion of doubles—in theme, imagery, and structure—clearly illustrates the importance of this dilemma for the American woman poet. The twin is a recurrent figure and the most obvious indication of the presence of the divided woman theme. Louise Gluck's "Gemini,"12 for example, explores the split between the speaker's past and present self, her emotions and intellect, her body and soul. Olga Broumas entitles a poem "Amazon Twins"13 to explore not the separation but the physical and psychic bond between two lovers. For Gluck, the twin figure is employed to underscore duality; for Broumas, the twin is used to effect a "re-union" of like entities. In both cases, a woman's inner division motivates the action and necessitates a move toward wholeness.

The mirror image is perhaps the most frequent in women's poetry. Poems such as Adrienne Rich's "The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One"14 uses the image of the mirror to evoke the theme of the divided woman. Women, Rich perceives, are not only divided within themselves, but separated from one another in a patriarchal society which seeks to maintain absolute control. It is, in fact, man's "patriarchal need for mastery"15 which is the source of almost all artificial dualisms Rich believes—not just the dualism between woman and poet, but the metaphysical dichotomy between body and
mind, feeling and intellect. Thus, the poet's use of the mirror, like all good symbols, serves a dual function. On the one hand, it indicates the separation between the myth and the reality: the patriarchal view of women and the truth of female experience. On the other hand, it indicates that women are, in truth, reflections of one another. A common motif in contemporary women's poetry is the idea that daughters mirror mothers, sisters mirror sisters, women mirror women. Though we may all be struggling with the dilemma of the divided woman, we are all still aspects of one another. It is this theme which the image of the mirror in women's poetry most frequently underscores.

Mothers, daughters, sisters, and lovers all serve to define and differentiate the female self in significant ways. The mother-daughter split, for example, is a central one for the poet Audre Lorde. In Lorde's "From the House of Yemanja," the speaker/daughter's divided existence finds expression in her yearning to be reunited with the mother from whom she was separated at birth. Not until she can return to the female will the speaker be whole. This same theme is echoed in Broumas' "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Snow White"—two poems which retell the male-codified fairy tales from a female perspective and which emphasize the mother-daughter bond which the patriarchal society attempts to destroy. It is the tragedy in women's lives that, in the twentieth-century, these efforts have been largely successful. Recognizing and rebelling against this divisive
action, women poets today, through their verse as well as through their lives, attempt to re-establish and solidify not just the bond between mother and daughter (though this may be the most important, certainly the most fundamental, bond) but the broken connections between all women.

3

Have women been successful in these efforts? Can wholeness be achieved, or is the problem of the divided woman insolvable? It seems clear that for the contemporary poet who is female, this quest for wholeness is not only achievable but necessary. As Suzanne Juhasz points out, though women may be writing today out of a double bind, the new tradition of modern women's poetry has been "a major force" towards breaking the restrictive bind.¹⁸ It is the goal of women's poetry to bring women toward the state of wholeness. Rich's "drive to connect"¹⁹ can be seen as the motivating impulse behind this new tradition of women's poetry. Because the divided woman problem is one shared by all literary women, it is not surprising that each should work towards abolishing the false dualisms and achieving a state of "integrity."

"Integrity" is Rich's preferred term for the state of completion she is striving for and might be presented here as the "common" definition of wholeness shared by the majority of contemporary women writers. In her poem entitled
"Integrity," Rich comes to the insight in her forty-ninth year that "I have nothing but myself/to go by.../Nothing but myself?... My selves./After so long, this answer."

She has reached a state of wholeness which does not involve uniformity or conformity; rather, this state consists of a self composed of many selves. Completion for Rich implies complexity—but complexity focused around a rooted center.

In short, the total self is the centralized self:

Anger and tenderness: my selves.
And now I can believe they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities.

Anger and tenderness: the spider’s genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere—
even from a broken web.

The centralization and integration of self are achieved by the embracing of one’s dichotomies. Rich perceives how she can build upon her inner divisions to construct her own unified self. She assumes "the spider's genius" to make connections out of brokenness. This is, in fact, Rich’s response to the problem of the divided woman. Paradoxically, it is the inner divisions which allow her, through her art, to work towards wholeness, to re-integrate the dichotomies and transform them from "polarities" into "angels." Rich chooses advantageously to exploit the patriarchal dualisms thrust upon her, using them to reconstruct, on her terms, both self and world.

In her seventh and most recent book of poems, The Black Unicorn, Audre Lorde similarly attempts to utilize
the conflicts she has inherited as "woman poet" to her advantage, rather than allowing them to hinder her poetic imagination and undermine her work. For Lorde, the object of the female quest for wholeness is the quest itself; that is, the process of moving toward wholeness generates the fulfillment which is its aim. What is of greatest concern to the poet is process itself--a concern which clearly is developed as the central theme in the volume. Change, Lorde believes, occurs through a series of conflicts and tensions. The constant interplay and inter-penetration of conflicting forces are signified in her poetry by the use of various oppositional pairs: noise and silence, black and white, past and present, brokenness and wholeness. Wholeness for the poet is not achieved by rejecting these divisions and doubles but by acknowledging and integrating them into a single movement, a single personality. This process is on-going, and the tensions which produce it are necessary tensions. Without conflict, no growth is possible. Like Rich, Lorde understands that the growth process toward completion is sustained by the passion to resolve those very forces that initiated the dynamic of change.

Olga Broumas' *Soie Sauvage* is a book in which the structure itself reflects the characteristic movement in women's poetry from brokenness to wholeness, division to unity. The poems in this volume chronicle the poet's journey towards wholeness through their portrayal of the
healing process. This process is initiated by the abandonment of a former lover—a "wounding" which renders the poet, at first, wholly incapable of writing. The poet feels divorced from both herself and her art, alienated from the world and forced into solitude. However, it is in solitude that, paradoxically, Broumas can re-establish the connections that have been broken in her life. Broumas employs religious rhetoric and assumes the posture of a solitary retreatant in order to illustrate the nature of her journey towards rebirth and its unique demands. To move towards wholeness and an integration of love and work entails a period of solitude, a place of silence, and, most importantly, a willingness to feel again. In these healing poems, winter functions as a metaphor for the period before rebirth. It represents a time of hibernation, gestation, and preparation. It is the "Lenten" period in which Broumas anticipates a figurative rising from the dead—a re-vitalization of her personal and poetic powers. Significantly, this renewal of self is achieved by the end of the volume; Broumas has reached a state of integrity by the long concluding monologue "Namaste" and feels confident in developing the themes of love, language, and liberation from a new perspective—the perspective of a wholistic, integrated self.

The individual means of Rich, Lorde, and Broumas are not the only paths toward achieving wholeness in one's life and art. Yet their journeys typify the desire of every woman poet to put to rest the conflict of the divided woman
and begin to write out of a whole self. Tess Gallagher, Ai, Carolyn Forche, Louise Gluck, May Sarton, Kathleen Fraser—each of these poets embarks upon the female quest for wholeness in her poetry. It is this common goal, more than anything else, which argues for treating the poetry by contemporary women writers as a new tradition—different from and often in direct opposition to the already established body of patriarchal literature.

4

It might be argued that male poets as well experience division and conflict, and hence, like women, work towards completion in their poetry. Undoubtedly, male poets are writing out of any number of authentic feelings of tension which need to be resolved. (Indeed, the germ of all poetry can be defined as conflict.) Yet never has the male poet been divided against himself nor against society on so fundamental a level as gender. Though sometimes viewed as an outsider—as the stereotypical "mad poet"—the male writer is ultimately respected, honored, approved of and applauded by a society willing to forgive his vocational eccentricity because of the significant contributions he makes to the culture's language and literature. For the woman poet, however, there is no forgiveness, no social redemption.

Historically, the woman writer's social eccentricity has been labeled "freakish" or "unnatural," and the writer
herself has been termed a "monster" or a "witch." Hence, many women poets (particularly in past centuries) have chosen the protection of a male pseudonym both to insure the fair appraisal of their work and to obtain at least a nominal position in the male-stream. Certainly, no male writer finds it necessary to assume a female name in order to be admitted into the patriarchal literary tradition. In fact, even the most radical male poet can secure a place in this tradition as a radical. This possibility has been traditionally withheld from women poets, however, because their very gender places them outside the perimeters of the patriarchy. They have no acceptable place in the male-stream and are thus outcasts in the truest sense. The "mad" male poet and the "freakish" female poet, then, are not in truth similar descriptions of comparable roles; for whereas the male writer's choice of vocation is interpreted as mere eccentricity, the woman writer's choice is viewed as true madness--indeed, as an unacceptable act of monstrosity.

The historical conception of the female artist as a "madwoman" has, of course, been modified in recent years. Vestiges of the traditional view still remain in the designation of a writer as "woman poet" or "lady poet;" however, the extreme and total exclusion of the female writer from the mainstream is no longer the general rule. And yet the question must still be asked whether women can, in fact, be fully heard without benefit of a supportive literary tradition of their own behind them. In other words, is a female
tradition really necessary for the expression and interpretation of female experience?

For a new generation of women writers, the answer is unequivocally affirmative. Indeed, this new tradition of poetry is viewed as a necessity for the full development and free exercise of the female imagination. Without a tradition that she can truly call her own, the contemporary woman poet is merely a writer in exile—a writer cut off from the sustaining bonds that link her male counterpart to a centuries-old literary tradition. It is her consequent sense of deprivation and alienation which has motivated the woman poet to establish a female tradition of poetry. One might note that had the patriarchal tradition been able to satisfactorily fulfill the needs of the woman poet, then such a motivation would never have arisen. And yet, the individual voices of contemporary women poets have, in fact, joined together to condemn their exclusion from the literary mainstream and to advocate the formation of a new tradition of poetry—a tradition which will both support and affirm their literary endeavors in a way the patriarchy has never been able to do.

This new tradition of poetry is presently engaged in reclaiming the unique female heritage which has been lost to women because of their exclusion from the mainstream.

Adrienne Rich writes:

Think of the deprivation of women living for centuries without a poetry which spoke of
women together, of women alone, of women as anything but the fantasies of men. Think of the hunger unnamed and unnameable, the sensations mistranslated. The hunger of which Rich speaks is the hunger for nothing less than a female poetics—a tradition of poetry which will retranslate the native sensations, rename the experiences of women from a female perspective. In order to insure that their experiences will no longer be denied and their contributions no longer ignored, women are presently constructing their own poetic tradition. It is their hope that in bonding together to form a unified, integrated tradition, the dilemma of the double bind conflict will be resolved and completion will be achieved. With a female tradition behind them to lend strength to their voices and credence to their visions, contemporary women poets are indeed closer than ever before to fulfilling their motivating quest for wholeness.
CHAPTER TWO:

TOKENISM AND THE MINORITY WOMAN POET

I

"... women have trouble with poetry except for Emily."
--Kathleen Fraser,
"One of the Chapters"

"We have known that men would tolerate, even romanticize us as special, as long as our words and actions didn't threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting us according to their ideas of what a special woman ought to be."
--Adrienne Rich,
"When We Dead Awaken"

The problem of the token woman artist is one of the greatest obstacles the contemporary woman poet encounters in her quest for wholeness. This "myth of the special woman, who is also the token woman"¹ is so damaging to the woman writer precisely because it is used against her to justify the status quo—in this case, the patriarchal literary tradition. By allowing a "special woman" to enter their ranks, male writers seek to imply, first, that the "ordinary" woman is incapable of writing; second, that theirs is the only "true" tradition of literature; and third, that the anomalous female who does write is not really female at all but a "monster" who must un-sex herself in order to find a place in the masculine tradition. All of these implications are, of course, false; yet each is a destructive myth which every woman poet must confront. Tess Gallagher, Olga Broumas, and Adrienne Rich each de-construct, in a seminal
poem, the myth of the special woman while at the same time exploring the other ways in which the patriarchy has sought to obstruct the path of the woman writer.

Tess Gallagher's "A Poem in Translation," while, on one level, a poem about the twentieth-century Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, also addresses itself to the treatment of the woman writer in a field dominated and controlled by men. The poem's title functions as a metaphor for every poem written by a woman writer which must be "translated" into the patriarchal language in order to be accepted into the mainstream. The woman poet is a "foreigner" to the establishment, an outsider, and must smuggle her poems into what she believes, at first, to be the true tradition of the masters:

After years smuggling poems out of an unknown country
You have been discovered by a known and skillful master. Your language is foreign and eligible, your circumstances Russian, . . .

However, the "skillful" masters effect considerable harm upon the woman poet's original work. In their attempts to make it conform to the rules of the establishment, the language, structure, and imagery of the poems become twisted and alien:

In the new language you are awkward.
You don't agree with yourself,
these versions of what you meant
to say. Like a journalist, one has written
"throat" where you have said "throat." Another uses his ears as a mouth; he writes like an orator in a bathroom, not "tears" but "sobbing."

The "new" language is really the "old" language—the language of men created to reflect male experiences in male terms. Yet it is a language which is new—or perhaps more properly, foreign—to the woman writer. It is awkward for the simple reason that male terminology is inadequate to convey female experiences. The nature of this patriarchal language is suggested, in part, by the passage just quoted. Gallagher perceives of patriarchal writing as journalistic in nature; though the event is strictly chronicled, the very rigidity of a factual account fails to capture the more important spirit and significance of the occurrence. Further, many male writers write "like an orator," Gallagher maintains. That is, their language is often rhetorical, loud, abrasive, and polemical; the message they seek to impart is unnecessarily forced. Gallagher is not the only woman poet to suggest a connection between the use of force in the sexual act and the act of writing for a male. Adrienne Rich, Olga Broumas, and Audre Lorde also perceive how a patriarchal language has been used by some writers metaphorically to "rape."

Thus, the language itself is inimical to the woman poet entering into the "male-stream." Yet she defects nonetheless under the illusion that the tradition in power is the best tradition. She is like the immigrant who travels
to a new country believing that it will welcome her and bestow upon her the gift of freedom to practice her vocation in more favorable surroundings. And, more often than not, the courageous immigrant is welcomed by the foreign country. However, what she does not immediately realize is that the conditions she must compose under are, in truth, subtly restrictive if not openly repressive. She must deny her identity as female and become, in Gallagher's terms, the patriarchy's "ideal sacrifice." Further, she must come to the awareness that she was accepted not because of her true giftedness but because she can be of use to the patriarchy. Her presence as token woman poet is allowed merely to justify the status quo and flatter the tradition's collective ego. She is specifically like the Russian defector who is welcomed by the American government simply because she has come to recognize the "evils" of her own homeland and so abandons it in favor of becoming a citizen of an ostensibly greater, more benevolent power.

Though the patriarchy does restrict her in many crippling ways, however, the woman poet is not permanently imprisoned within this foreign tradition. Gallagher believes that the poetry of women can be reclaimed from the patriarchy, retranslated by women into its original language. Significantly, it is the figure of the double which will restore to the woman writer her lost poetry:

One night (it always happens at night) these translations, against all precautions, are smuggled back to you by a woman looking much like yourself.
The double symbolizes the un-doing of the split between woman and poet. The woman poet no longer needs to deny her sexuality in order to "write like a man" and be accepted by the status quo. A re-integration has been achieved by the end of Gallagher's poem through the very composition of the poem itself; "a poem in translation" has again become "a poem."

Olga Broumas aptly chooses a figure from a patriarchal fairy tale to illustrate the myth of the special woman. In a poem entitled "Cinderella," Broumas uses the castle to represent the bastion of male literature—a private men's club, in effect—and employs the woman, Cinderella, to represent the token poet who is allowed entrance into the sacred precincts:

Apart from my sisters, estranged from my mother, I am a woman alone in a house of men who secretly call themselves princes . . . .

The metaphor of royalty suggests that the male writers are maintaining an exclusive and, in their view, hereditary, position of control through the instrument and institution of autocracy. They are the poets who govern the tradition because they are the people in power. Given their absolute control, the literary princes find it advantageous to exclude all but Cinderella, the token female poet:
I am the one allowed in

to the royal chambers, whose small foot conveniently
fills the slipper of glass. The woman writer, the lady
umpire, the madam chairman, anyone's wife.

Once again, a contemporary woman poet is illustrating how
the feminine adjunct is used subtly to ridicule and debase.
Terms such as "lady umpire" and "madam chairman" deliberately
suggest a deviant female in a traditional male role just as
surely as "woman poet" headlines tokenism.

Broumas understands, like Gallagher, that the token
woman poet is at first glad of the opportunity to practice
her art within the castle's ancient walls. "I once was glad,"
states Broumas' Cinderella, "even alone/in a strange castle,
doing overtime on my own, cracking/the royal code." Never­
theless, she soon comes to realize that she has been used by
the "masters" for their own profit, to testify against all
women who, in the eyes of the patriarchy, are presumptuous
enough to attempt self-articulation and self-control:

I am a woman in a state of siege, alone

as one piece of laundry, ...
A woman co-opted by promises: the lure
of a job, the ruse of a choice, a woman forced
to bear witness, falsely
against my kind, as each
other sister was judged inadequate, bitchy, incompetent,
jealous, too thin, too fat.

Better to die young like the poet Anne Sexton, Broumas con­
cludes, than to be co-opted by the fathers, patronized by the
men in literary power.

Adrienne Rich's example of the token woman writer--a
historical illustration of Broumas' fictional Cinderella—is the nineteenth-century American poet, Emily Dickinson. She perceives, in reflecting upon the recent critical acclaim lavished upon Dickinson, how the condescension Broumas describes is, in fact, a victimization:

In Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst
cocktails are served the scholars
gather in celebration
their pious or clinical legends
festoon the walls like imitations
of period patterns

(... and as I feared, my 'life' was made a 'victim')

The remnants pawed the relics
the cult assembled in the bedroom
and you whose teeth were set on edge by churches
resist your shrine
escape are found
nowhere unless in words (your own)

The scholars victimize Dickinson through their irreverent claiming of her. Their "scholarly" familiarity, Rich divines, is nothing less than a violation not only of the poet's home but of her life and art. In clinically pawing her "remnants" and piously assembling her "relics," the scholars make a relic of Dickinson herself. Their deification depersonalizes and dehumanizes the poet; she is transformed from human artist into inhuman saint. Such canonization is effected by the patriarchy as necessary to explain Dickinson's greatness "despite" her gender. It is the opinion of the scholars that Emily Dickinson was no woman at all, but a saint—a gender-less, transcendent being. No true woman, it is implied,
could ever write as well and certainly not better than a man. Therefore, Dickinson was not woman but asexual goddess.

The victimization of the woman poet, then, assumes its most insidious form: worship. By objectifying and deifying the monster/woman, the male literary establishment can come to accept Dickinson's great giftedness on their own terms. One might note that in the fairy tale, Cinderella, after gaining entrance into the castle with the aid of her godmother's magical powers, must in the end leave abruptly in order to be re-admitted on the terms of the princes. Similarly, in real life, token women poets such as Dickinson have at first been rejected from the mainstream and later accepted only when their extraordinary talent could somehow be satisfactorily rationalized and explained by the male literary establishment.

Adrienne Rich, in one of her finest poems, examines the problem of the token woman poet within the context of exploring the effect of domestic confinement upon the female artist. The subject of the poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" (1958-1960) is a middle-aged housewife whose literary calling has been frustrated and limited by her role as wife and mother. The daughter-in-law is a woman whose mind is "mouldering like wedding-cake,/heavy with useless experience".
Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.
Only a week since They said: Have no patience.

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

"The angels" in this passage function for the poet as
figures for the artistic muse. Though menial housework
occupies the daughter-in-law's time and energy, the muses
nonetheless chide and distract her, push her towards the
indulgence of her creative passions. These passions, as the
presence of the muses indicates, have not yet been wholly
suppressed. The "raked gardens" serves in the poem as an
image of imposed order to suggest domestic imprisonment.
However, it is the "sloppy sky"--symbol of the artistic
temperament--which preoccupies the woman. This tension
between free thought and physical bondage, artistic creation
and menial labor is underscored by the poem's composition.
"Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" is divided into ten parts--a
division which seems arbitrary (as in a random collection of
snapshots) and in conflict with the poem's own self-defining
rhythms and movements. Such compartmentalizing and structuring
are meant to appear super-imposed and awkward in order best
to reflect the ordered, domestic life which similarly con­
fines and cripples the woman's literary imagination.

Once again, Rich evokes the life of Emily Dickinson
to communicate her desired message:
Domesticity suppresses creativity—creates "a loaded gun" situation. Dickinson, in the midst of domesticity—nursing an ailing mother, serving a domineering father—succeeded despite her situation in triggering the gun and giving outlet to her creative imagination. Yet if she produced poetry in spite of domesticity, she possessed an advantage so many potential women writers lacked: Dickinson was without husband and without children. Rich's daughter-in-law, like the poet herself, must contend with the limitations imposed upon her by marriage and motherhood. The demands of those dependent upon her, those whom the poet genuinely loves and values, can be the most confining stricture of all:

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before an unlocked door, that cage of cages, tell us, you bird, you tragical machine— is this fertilisante douleur? Pinned down by love . . . ?

Had the daughter-in-law escaped the various cages which imprisoned her as an artist, she still would have found herself in a tradition of women writers dismissed by patriarchal scorn. She would have been Mary Wollstonecraft's heir—a woman, partly brave and partly good, who fought with what she partly understood. Few men about her would or could do more, hence she was labelled harpy, shrew, and whore.

It is at this point in the poem that the poet becomes fully
engaged. The frustrated daughter-in-law becomes herself. Rich identifies with her persona and with every woman artist of the past and present who has been falsely labelled and unfairly denied:

all that we might have been,
all that we were--fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition--
stirs like the memory of refused adultery
the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.

Considering the tremendous odds against the woman poet, Rich writes, it is amazing that poetry by women has been composed at all. The gift of time and a favorable social climate, as Tillie Olsen has pointed out, are two of the most crucial factors in the full realization of one's art; yet time is precisely what most women in the past did not possess. Those few women of leisure who were fortunate enough to be freed even from the duties of household management could not benefit in any way from the second of these requirements--social approval and a benevolent writing atmosphere--for, as has been stated, society scorned the woman writer. Despite these obstacles, some women persevered and, one might venture to guess, soon came to Rich's conclusion that

    Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
Our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mould straight off.

Women writers are rewarded—if they are mediocre.
This is the crux of the problem of the token woman. If inferior, the woman poet can be humored and patronized, accepted as the token. If superior, the poet, like Mary Wollstonecraft, is labelled "harpy, shrew, and whore." To "cast too bold a shadow," to "smash the mould straight off" is threatening in a quite radical way to a patriarchal tradition which seeks to maintain its position of power and influence. Hence, the patriarchy, in order to protect its monopoly, finds it necessary to punish the woman writer, to submit her to, in Rich's words, "solitary confinement, tear gas, attrition shelling." Small wonder so many embattled women have been discouraged from achieving more than "fragments and rough drafts!"

Rich concludes her lengthy poem with a vision which indicates that the woman writer is finally breaking free from the restrictions which limit her and is discovering her own voice, her own visions. Rich pictures the woman poet as a bird or a helicopter--a vehicle of tremendous power and freedom of movement:

Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge breasted and glancing through the currents, taking the light upon her. . . . poised, still coming,
her fine blades making the air wince but her cargo no promise then: delivered palpable ours.

The affirmation in these final lines can be interpreted as an assurance that female voices will now be heard; what could not
be guaranteed in the past can be promised in the present. With liberation comes the opportunity for the writer to claim what is hers and express what she will—in short, freedom of the imagination and its artistic expression. It could be argued that these final lines express only the poet's vision of the liberated woman artist and not the reality. Whatever the interpretation given to Rich's final snapshot, the strikingly affirmative tone and content of the image of power cannot be denied. The concluding lines express nothing less than the release of suppressed energy, the fulfillment of the demands of the intellect, and, most importantly, the liberation of the female poet. Dickinson's loaded gun has indeed been fired.

II

"No one is more victimized in this white male American society than the black female." --Margaret Walker, "On Being Female, Black, and Free"

"If we are to survive, we must work on the ways in which we define ourselves." --Audre Lorde, Interview with Karla Hammond

If white women experience difficulty finding a place in the patriarchal tradition of literature, the obstacles encountered by minority women are even greater. Not only is the black woman poet beleaguered by fundamentally sexist conventions, attitudes, and institutions, but
racism is also an ever-present prejudicial force levied against her. Audre Lorde notes that

a situation of grave oppression comes not just because you're a woman so much as because you're Black, and because you are a Black Woman. It's triple jeopardy. Margaret Walker, in her essay "On Being Female, Black, and Free," adds class oppression to the list:

Being female, black, and poor in America means I was born with three strikes against me. I am considered at the bottom of the social class-caste system in these United States, born low on the totem pole. If "a black man has no rights that a white man is bound to respect," what about a black woman?

A poet who happens to be female and black is treated not as "poet" but as "black female poet." Her vocation as a writer is doubly qualified and the validity of her calling twice called into question. The poet who is "woman/and not white" is indeed socially relegated to a position "low on the totem pole."

There is, however, an even lower caste in the hierarchical organization of writers and poets: the lesbian poet. Audre Lorde defines lesbianism as "strongly women-identified women where love between women is open and possible, beyond physical in every way . . . ." Adrienne Rich chooses the definition of "a primary intensity between women." Perhaps the best description of the lesbian poet and her woman-identified literature is offered by the critic, Barbara Smith. A work of literature which can be termed, among other things, "lesbian" is a work in which women
are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another. The form and language of these works is also nothing like what white patriarchal culture requires or expects.12

If women writers in general find it necessary today to forge a new tradition, the lesbian writer finds it imperative. Unlike other women, "she is forced by the conditions under which she loves, and the conditions in which all women attempt to survive, to ask questions that did not occur . . . even to an Elizabeth Barrett Browning."13 She is constantly on the defensive, having to justify not just her gender, and sometimes her race, but the facts of her private life as well. "Two women sleeping/together," writes Rich, "have more than their sleep to defend."14

The black woman poet, the impoverished woman poet, the lesbian poet, the impoverished, black, lesbian poet—what is their response to a white, heterosexual, male writing class of privilege? Faced with a literary tradition that is itself used as an instrument of oppression against her, the minority woman poet rebels. Her experience and articulation of rage are necessary if she is to rebel successfully, and her rebellion is a prerequisite for her very survival. Thus, the key themes of anger and survival in contemporary poetry by minority women can be understood as a valid, indeed healthy response to the literary conventions as well as the social institutions which oppress her.
On the subject of rage in contemporary women's poetry, Erica Jong states that

the anger has been discovered, unearthed, anatomoized, and catalogued. . . . The time has come to let go of that rage; the time has come to realize that curiosity is braver than rage, that exploration is a nobler calling than war.15

The problem with Jong's analysis of anger is that she is working on the assumption that anger is a wholly negative, entirely destructive emotion. In actuality, anger can perform a productive function as well in contemporary poetry by women, especially minority women. Not only does it help clarify the terms of their oppression (as women, blacks, lesbians), it can be constructively channeled toward the service of their poetry. Intense feeling need not hinder the creative act when it can be transformed into positive energy and powerful motivation. Jong's statement which emphasizes the negative use of anger must be weighed and balanced with Audre Lorde's perspective which focuses upon anger's positive aspects:

There's a place beyond anger which is constructive anger. It's a matter of using that force, that energy, for something which begins to build.16

In Diving into the Wreck (1973), Adrienne Rich uses anger as a constructive force to energize her poetry. "The Phenomenology of Anger"17 is a poem which explodes with rage—a rage which serves to fuse rather than defuse the poem. "The Phenomenology of Anger" is concerned with how,
in a patriarchal society, facts are valued over people. The value of life itself is denied by "the machinists" who employ lies to justify their inhuman actions. Rich desires to destroy these lies and to transform the enemy:

When I dream of meeting the enemy, this is my dream:
. . .
raking his body down to the thread of existence
burning away his lie
leaving him a new world; a changed man . . .

The tone is not only one of bitterness and anger but also of hope for a restored world, a restored humanity.

This dual attitude characterizes Rich's "Merced" poem as well. The poet's rage against social injustice becomes internalized in this poem; the anger becomes self-consuming:

For weeks now a rage has possessed my body, driving now out upon men and women now inward upon myself . . .

What most angers Rich is the numbness of so many hearts rendered incapable of feeling any tenderness or compassion simply by trying to survive "in a world masculinity made/unfit for women or men." "I look down at the city/which meant life to me, not death," Rich reflects,

and think that somewhere there a cold center, composed of pieces of human beings metabolized, restructured by a process they do not feel is spreading in our midst and taking over our minds
a thing that feels neither guilt
nor rage... that is unable
to hate, therefore to love.

In her burning anger, at least the poet can feel deeply.
The inhumanity of the city's "cold center" spreads only
indifference in a world most in need of basic human decency.
Rich's anger allows her to perceive this destructive indiffer­
ence and motivates her to rebel against it.

In the production of Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*
volume, then, anger serves the function of liberating the
poet from false mythologies, false definitions of self, and
false ways of perceiving and responding to reality. It is
the anger manifested in these poems, in fact, which initiated
the revolutionary thinking which we associate with her today;
and it is rage which allowed Rich finally to affirm her sex­
uality and lifestyle as a valid choice outside the restrictive
confines of patriarchal norms and expectations. Thus,
Wendy Martin could not be closer to the truth in ascertaining
that for Rich, as for many women writing today, "rage . . .
is an energizing force, an emotion which provides an impetus
for social change."19

Discovering and naming the forces of oppression
directed against her is only the first step for the minority
woman poet in the struggle to survive. Having rejected
externally imposed definitions of self, she must come to her
own understanding of her identity. "If we don't name ourselves," Audre Lorde asserts, "we are nothing."

As a Black woman I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all. In that sense it becomes a survival situation."

For the black woman, self-definition is particularly crucial. To allow others to define her is to risk being "mistaken for a shadow or symbol." To refuse self-definition is to risk annihilation.

One way in which minority women poets define themselves is as survivors. In the poetry of the black writer Ai (Florence Anthony), survival is the central theme. Pictured on the cover of Ai's *Killing Floor* is a photograph of a young girl, perhaps ten years-old, with ammunition draped around her shoulders and waist, a shotgun in her hand, and a petticoat showing beneath a shabby winter coat. The anonymous child in the picture has learned what it takes to survive in a hostile world; she is a living illustration of Ai's conception of the survivor. Significantly, the poet's myriad of personae—the mid-wife, the tenant farmer, the cripple, the corpse-hauler, even the suicide—are all fighting from this same impulse to live.

It is true that Ai's speakers seem angry and "hardened" in many ways, but it must be remembered that they are communicating difficult themes: death, disregard, loneliness, mutilation, starvation. In order to survive they must be
hard; yet they must also be flexible. Survival, Ai believes, demands the utilization of every ounce of one's strength, creativity, and imaginative energy. The tone of Ai's speakers, then, is characteristically confident, defiant, proud, "gutsy." Lines such as "I'm strong enough to let you cry alone" and "not even you, wolf, can bring me down" are representative of the tone and attitude of Ai's survivalists. The final lines in _Killing Floor_ further illustrate the point:

Does God think that because it rains in torrents 
I am not to go to Peru and destroy the world? 
God. The boot heal an inch above your head is mine. 
God, say your prayers.

If such language and imagery in both Ai's books, _Cruelty_ (1973) and _Killing Floor_ (1979), are hard on the reader, one can't help but conclude that this is the poet's very purpose in employing them. Just as Ai's personaes must survive those forces that confront them, so must the reader survive Ai's poems. One cannot read and experience these poems and not be affected.

Ai's conception of the survivalist is Grahn's definition of the "common woman." In her prefatory essay to Judy Grahn's collection of poems entitled, appropriately, _The Work of a Common Woman_, Adrienne Rich writes that "the 'common woman' is in fact the embodiment of the extraordinary will-to-survive in millions of obscure women, ..." As a lesbian poet, Grahn conceives of herself as not at all uncommon but in truth quite ordinary. This is not to deny her special qualities and gifts as an individual, but only
to affirm her connections with other women—both like and unlike herself. In her seven portraits of the common woman, Grahn seeks to describe the "regular, everyday" woman—the woman who survives and the woman who succumbs.

"Helen, at 9 a.m., at noon, at 5:15" describes the woman who succumbs, who becomes a true "businessman" at the price of her sanity. Helen typifies the woman who believes that if she is to achieve success in a man's world, she must play by their rules and scheme her way to greater positions of power. She becomes like the men she seeks to depose—a businessperson for whom "details take the place of meaning, money takes the place of life." Helen's downfall is her unquestioned assumption that survival means the achievement of success in a man's world:

She doesn't realize yet, that she's missed success, also, so her smile is sometimes still genuine. After a while she'll be a real killer, bitter and more wily, better at pitting the men against each other and getting the other women fired.

Not surprisingly, Helen's ultimate fate is tragic; Grahn accurately prophesies that "she'll go mad."

Juxtaposed to the portrait of Helen are the portrayals of two survivors—Ella, a lonely but proud highway waitress, and Nadine, a tough city tenant woman. Like all Grahn's common women, Ella is a complex of qualities; she's clever, stoical, and street-wise at the same time that she's nervous, exhausted, and vulnerable.
She keeps her mind the way men
keep a knife--keen to strip the game
down to her size. She has a thin spine,
swallows her eggs cold, and tells lies.

In the city's ghettos, Nadine survives through sheer force of will and determination. It is women like Nadine, Grahn believes, who keep the city from falling apart, who hold things together like "a nail." It is Nadine who "collects bail" and "makes the landlord patch the largest holes."

It is Nadine who raises fifteen children only "half of them her own." Whereas Ella survives through her intellect, Nadine survives through her physical stamina. For Grahn, there are almost as many different types of survivors as there are women.

The theme of survival plays an equally important role in the poetry of Audre Lorde. The recurrence of the warrior woman in her poems testifies to its significance for the poet. In an interview with Karla Hammond, Lorde states that "to be able to see yourself as a warrior, channels the aggressiveness because you can deal with survival." Having to labor under and react against the double oppression of sexism and racism, black women, Lorde asserts, must perceive of themselves as warriors if they are to survive. The warrior is simply the woman who refuses to be victimized any longer. She is like Seboulisa, the goddess in African mythology who is both a warrior and "the Mother of us all." Her energy is creative and transformative; she fights to protect and defend, not to dominate and destroy. The Amazon woman with the mutilated
breast is another apt figure in Lorde's poems for the black woman-survivor. "Armed with scars/healed," the Amazon woman rises up stronger than before, rooted in her identity as "female, black, and free" (Margaret Walker) and confident in her ability to defend that identity from any who seek to deny her.

I would agree with Adrienne Rich in maintaining that this passion for survival is one of the great themes of contemporary American women's poetry. Every woman who writes today is herself a survivalist (Tillie Olsen's "one-out-of-twelve" women writers to be recognized for every male writer). The odds against her are still enormous, the obstacles imposed seemingly insurmountable. But more women are, in fact, writing today than ever before. "We were never meant to survive," notes Audre Lorde, but it is a witness to the strength and courage of the woman writer that she does survive—in spite of all that militates against her.
PART II:

POWER AND PATRIARCHY:

MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND FEMALE SEXUALITY
CHAPTER THREE

KINSHIP AND THE FAMILIAL INFLUENCE

The influence and the significance of the family and familial relationships are particularly important factors to be considered in the study of contemporary women's poetry. The family, it must be realized, is a patriarchal institution; that is, it is a societal unit designed to perpetuate the norms and structures of the patriarchy and to preserve the status quo. As such, the traditional family unit has served to preserve the myth that a woman's sole calling in life is to be wife, mother, and "daughter-in-law." Any other vocation a woman might attempt would serve only to disrupt the careful distribution of roles and challenge the foundations of the patriarchy itself—the very institution upon which the family group is modelled. Hence, women have been discouraged within as well as outside the family from fulfilling their calling as "literary women."

Ironically, in the modern period, the tensions generated within the family have been part of the cause rather than the prohibition of the impulse to write poetry. Because the woman poet is divided within herself, the conflicts within the family—particularly between the parents—provide an outlet for the tension created by the double bind situation. Though the poet has not yet been able to label the true cause of her inner tension, the conflicts played out
within the family unit allow her to externalize her own dilemma and hence, to express herself freely in verse. The woman poet is still cognizant of the fact that she is writing out of conflict; yet she now believes (and rightly so) that these conflicts are not the result of any incompatibility between gender and vocation within herself, but rather the result of assimilating a variety of tensions from the personalities and situations around her. Through her writing she attempts to resolve these conflicting forces and achieve a state of wholeness.

Resolving the familial conflicts, however, constitutes only part of the woman poet’s literary quest. Familial bonding is a second, complementary goal which transforms the divisive conflicts in her experience into fertile connections for her poetry. It is integration rather than alienation (though one certainly cannot be considered apart from the other) which brings the poet closest to achieving completion in her art. Significantly, the figures of the mother and the grandmother become representative in contemporary women’s poetry of the possibilities for self-integration. Such an integration can only be achieved, it is held, by a figurative embracing of the influential women in the poet’s life and by a return to a female heritage. In this way, the themes of kinship and the familial influence figure centrally into the female poet’s primary quest for personal wholeness and artistic integrity.
"Between the canyons of their mighty silences
mother bright and father brown
I seek my own shapes now" --Audre Lorde,
"Outside"

In tracing the roots of her poetry, Tess Gallagher speaks of the family as the formative influence upon her writing. Gallagher lived in a household that, in her own words, "was perpetually on the verge of dissolving." Her parents, unable to communicate authentically with one another, led dual and separate lives. Her "mother's sense of being betrayed" and her "father's life leaking away daily in drink, work and sleep" alienated them from each other and set up the central conflict which was to propel Gallagher towards poetry:

If to be a poet is to balance contraries, to see how seemingly opposite qualities partake of— in fact penetrate— each other, I learned this from my combative parents.

It is one of the unique gifts of the contemporary woman poet, I believe, to be able to transform potentially destructive contrarieties into fertile tensions for her poetry. Gallagher is just one of many woman poets who have succeeded in channeling her feelings and frustrations about family, society, and relationship in general into the creative act of writing poetry. This positive transformation and utilization of conflict can be detected in Gallagher's work through the figure of the double. One can uncover a myriad of
doubles in her poems—mothers and daughters, mirror images, reflections in water, shadows. The title of her first book, *Instructions to the Double*, provides perhaps the best indication of the poet's exploitation of family conflicts in her work.

The influences of the family in the work of Audre Lorde can be detected through the poems themselves. In her poem "Outside," Lorde explores how both her identity and her work have been shaped, in part, by her parents' formative personalities:

> Who shall I curse that I grew up believing in my mother's face
> or that I lived in fear of potent darkness
> wearing my father's shape
> they have both marked me
> with their blind and terrible love . . . .

Because of their tremendous influence upon her, Lorde desires somehow to put her parents into perspective and seek her own name, her own identity. Though she recognizes that she is "blessed with the images" of her parents, she is also aware that she must seek her own shapes, "for they never spoke of me/except as theirs." Yet the poet can never deny the significance of the role her parents played in the development of her poetry. "Poetry was something I learned from my mother's strangeness and from my father's silences," Lorde confesses. Like Tess Gallagher, Lorde's creative impulse originates in the desire to reconcile these familial contraries and to come to a sense of a wholistic identity apart from other-imposed, conflicting definitions of self.
"remote men
... men quiet
because of their lives"

--Carolyn Forche,
"Calling Down the Moose"

The father and other patriarchal figures play a significant role in contemporary American women's poetry. Many of the poems are born out of the female poet's attempt to confront, respond to, and ultimately understand or reject the influence of the father upon her self and her art. Whereas the father is usually accepted to some degree by the poet, "the fathers" who perpetuate the patriarchal tradition are not. Indeed, the patriarchal tradition is clearly rejected; the woman writer is forced to come to a definition of herself apart from the patriarchy in order to survive. This movement can most clearly be seen in the poetry of Olga Broumas.

The figure of the father is conspicuously absent from the body of Broumas' poetry. "The fathers," however, are a force to be reckoned with. One of the earliest poems in Beginning With 0, "Leda and Her Swan," thematically confronts the destructive actions of the fathers in the lives of women. The allusion to the famous Yeats' poem, "Leda and the Swan," is, of course, deliberate. Interpreted from a feminist perspective, Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" takes as its theme male virility and female passivity--specifically, the idea that "male sexuality awakens a woman's entire self, indeed allows her to be a mature knowledgeable woman."
Broumas is taking issue with Yeats through her own de-
mythologized understanding of male authority and power:

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

The tone is ironic, the portrayal humorous, but the threat is real. It has been the authority of the fathers which has silenced women for centuries. Broumas thus attempts to reduce them in her poem to mere "Dresden figurines"--small, ineffectual, breakable. In so doing, she dismisses their power over her and proceeds to write "women-identified" poetry, defying Yeats' belief that a woman's knowledge is graciously bestowed upon her by the man who is in control.

To reject "the fathers," however, is not necessarily to deny the individual father. In fact, many of the poems in contemporary American women's poetry are working towards an empathetic understanding of the family patriarch. For Tess Gallagher, the understanding was a costly one, yet crucial to her personal and poetic development. Stanley Kunitz sees the "archetypal search for the father" as the driving force for certain poets, and Gallagher believes this to be true to some extent of her own poetry. The presence of the severe and silent laborer, the patriarchal figure, can be felt in those Gallagher poems in which he is not even mentioned. For Gallagher, to come to a true understanding of the father is to make the silences speak.
In a poem entitled "Even Now You Are Leaving," Gallagher is able to determine the cost of her father's reserve:

Father,
some neglect is killing us all, but yours
has a name of its own: family,
something gone on without you, your eyes
ruined and terrible in a face
even now you are leaving.

Though her father is able to provide material support for his wife and children, Gallagher perceives, his hard labor only masks a deeper neglect: a withholding from his family of words, presence, and emotional investment. The father's inability to give of himself works to his own disadvantage; he becomes alienated, shy, and lonely. He is a man who is no longer present even to himself. Gallagher genuinely feels for her father; her tone is not accusatory but sympathetic. The daughter desires passionately to understand her energetic but remote parent, and it is perhaps for this reason that the themes of neglect, abandonment, and exclusion are so carefully explored in her first volume, Instructions to the Double.

By her second volume, Under Stars, Gallagher has come to an acceptance of partings and exclusions, limitations and loneliness. This progression has been achieved because she has finally come to an understanding of the father. "3 A.M. Kitchen: My Father Talking" recounts the actual moment when Gallagher and her father succeeded in breaking through to authentic communication. Having recently suffered a stroke, the father feels compelled to confide in "Threasie"
for the first time, to explain to his gifted daughter the events of his own life as a longshoreman and a logger with a wife and five children to support:

For years it was land working me, oil fields, cotton fields, then I got some land. I worked it. Them days you could just about make a living. I was logging.

I quit the woods. One day just walked out, took off my corks, said that's it. I went to the docks. I was driving winch. You had to watch to see nothing fell out of the sling. If you killed somebody you'd never forget it. All those years I was just working I was on edge, every day. Just working.

It's winter. I play a lot of cards down at the tavern. Your mother. I have to think of excuses to get out of the house.

You don't have no idea, Threasie. I run out of things to work for. Hell, why shouldn't I play cards? Threasie, some days now I just don't know.

Gallagher's empathy with her father is so great that she feels able to compose the entire poem in his voice. The poet can assume a wholly different point of view than her own, for she understands, for the first time, the true nature of her father's experiences and the conditions of his life. Hence, the poems which follow in Under Stars are marked by a distinctly positive focus; they are primarily concerned with the beginnings of relationships rather than their ends, with the positive aspects of growth and change rather than the fear, and, most importantly, with the moments of genuine interpersonal exchanges that do occur—however short-lived.
"A woman is her mother
That's the main thing" --Anne Sexton,
"Housewife"

"A curious
music, an un-
catalogued rhyme, mother/daughter" --Olga Broumas,
"Snow White"

Whereas the woman poet achieves reconciliation with
the father through opposition and differentiation, she achieves
reunion with the mother through identification and integra-
tion. Significantly, because they are of the same gender, a
daughter identifies much more closely with her mother than
her father. In coming to terms with the mother, the poet is
coming to terms with herself. Hence, the woman poet seeks
in her quest for wholeness to define herself not in opposition
to but in identification with the mother. This is not to say
that a confrontation with the mother—as with the father—is
not necessary for her personal and intellectual growth, but
only to point out that the poet desires more than mere
reconciliation with the mother. Instead, she yearns in her
poetry for a more fundamental reunion which will reconnect
her to the basic life impulses which can stimulate and
energize her poetry and her work.

The element of confrontation in the poet's relation-
ship with her mother is generated by the very likeness
between them—a likeness which creates for the poet a crisis
in identity. The poet wants both to return to the female
from whom she was separated at birth and to reach an identity
apart from her. Thus, her feelings about the mother are
often, at first, ambivalent. In Audre Lorde's "Sequelae," the
poet finds herself both loving and hating the mother who
is so much herself:

... I battle the shapes of you
wearing old ghosts of me
hating you for being
black and not woman
hating you for being white
and not me...

Later in the poem a subtle but significant change takes
place. The "shapes of you/wearing old ghosts of me" become the "old ghosts of you/wearing the shapes of me." The poet has moved from detecting herself in her mother to perceiving her mother in herself. She cannot escape the mother's face—"tipped like a pudding under glass"—reflected in her own, the mother's voice echoing in her own "deepest culverts."
In many ways the daughter is indeed the mother's sequel.

For the woman who denies this unique maternal inheritance, who is unable to move beyond the point of mere reconciliation, a true understanding of both herself and her mother tragically may never be achieved. In Adrienne Rich's "A Woman Mourned by Daughters," the self-understanding is acquired too late for a reunion to occur. In this poem, it is only after the death of the mother that the two daughters finally come to comprehend the forces which determined their mother's life and imprisoned her in a living death. They agree that the woman whom they had "so often/succeeded in
ignoring" exerts more of a presence in her death than in her life. In life she had become "a leaf,/a straw blown on the bed,/... had long since become/crisp as a dead insect"—inconspicuous, inconsequential, ignored. In death, her absence becomes presence:

You breathe upon us now through solid assertions of yourself: teaspoons, goblets, seas of carpet, a forest of old plants to be watered, an old man in an adjoining room to be touched and fed.

The daughters clearly associate the possessions and responsibilities of the household with the figure of the mother, perhaps because the mother's life was, in fact, defined by these domestic objects and marital duties. It is thus finally perceived in the poem how the needs and desires of the mother were denied in life even as they continue to be disregarded in death—"And all this universe/dares us to lay a finger/anywhere, save exactly/as you would wish it done."

The daughters recognize the ways in which society has been hostile to the fulfillment of their mother's needs and has transformed her from vital presence into preserved existence (a "leaf," "straw," or "insect"). Unfortunately, the insight has been achieved too late to effect a reunion with the mother, though not too late for the daughters to save themselves from a similar fate.

Reunion with the mother, then—its present realization or its potential fulfillment—is a central theme in contemporary American women's poetry. It is from the mother,
after all, that the child is separated and hence the origin of the need—for both men and women—to return to the female. Because women are directed away from the female in the institution of marriage, this need is particularly acute. Louise Gluck, in yearning for "the absolute/knowledge of the unborn," the original state of oneness with the female, believes that "it was better when we were/together in one body." Adrienne Rich, Carolyn Forche, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, May Sarton, Olga Broumas—all write of this consuming desire to be once again "together in one body" with the female, reunited with the mother to recreate that first experience of amniotic warmth and security. The final lines of Olga Broumas' "Snow White" provide the clearest illustration in the canon of contemporary women's literature of the desire to return to the female in order to achieve wholeness:

Defenceless
and naked as the day
I slid from you
twin voices keening and the cord
pulsing our common protest, I'm coming back
back to you
woman, flesh
of your woman's flesh, your fairest, most faithful mirror, . . .

Receive
me, Mother.

Beginning With Q concludes on this plea to the mother to "receive her"—welcome her back into the original state of oneness they both shared. This reunion is not a literal one. The desire to return to the mother figuratively represents the need for intimacy and security in one's
present love relationships. Psychologist Michael Balint persuasively argues "that the return to the experience of primary love—the possibility of regressing to the infantile stage of a sense of oneness, no reality testing, and a tranquil sense of well-being in which all needs are satisfied—is a main goal of adult sexual relationships." How this goal is reached or impeded will become the focus in the following chapters on marriage, motherhood, and female sexuality. Suffice it to say here that the female poet's theme of a return to the female is, in fact, a response to the problem of the divided woman and a means proposed to achieve the wholeness (or "integrity") which is her aim.

4

"It is strange to be so many women"  
—Adrienne Rich, "After Twenty Years"

Second only to the predominance of mother poems in contemporary women's poetry are poems written to and about grandmothers. The grandmother, even more than the mother, is the figure who directly links the poet to a matriarchal line. Because the contemporary woman poet is seeking to establish a female tradition of literature, rediscovering her own matrilineal heritage is integral to the understanding of herself as poet and as female. This would account for why poems about grandmothers recur with such notable frequency in the canon of American women's poetry; before the
poet can forge a new tradition for the future, she must first expose and reclaim a rich matriarchal past.

In a poem entitled, simply, "Grandmothers," Adrienne Rich explores the "frustrate life" of Mary Gravely Jones and Hattie Rice Rich—her maternal and paternal grandmothers. Hattie is described as the "widow of Samuel, and no matriarch, dispersed among the children and grandchildren." Her life was "frustrate" because she had no room to call her own; rather, she was shuffled about amongst children and grandchildren, deprived not only of her solitude but of her right to choose her own lifestyle. The frustration in the life of Rich's maternal grandmother, "Mary, widow of William, and no matriarch," was created by the repression of her literary gift. Like Rich, she was a writer by temperament—a brilliant and creative woman of considerable literary promise; however, unlike Rich, her ideas were wholly ignored because of her gender:

You were impotent and brilliant, no one cared about your mind, you might have ended elsewhere than in that glider reciting your unwritten novels to children.

Both of these women play a significant symbolic role in Rich's poetic thought. They are the women whom her poetry seeks to reclaim; their lives typify the frustrate lives of scores of nameless women whom Rich is attempting to rename in her poetry, to acknowledge and pay tribute to by placing them within a clear matriarchal tradition.

The figure of the grandmother performs a similar...
function in Carolyn Forche's *Gathering the Tribes.* The first two poems of the book focus upon the death of "Anna"—Forche's Slavic grandmother who played a formative role in the poet's personal maturation. In "The Morning Baking," Forche angrily despairs of her grandmother's death:

> Think you can put yourself in the ground  
> Like plain potatoes and grow in Ohio?  
> . . .  
> Think you can lie through your Slovak?  
> Tell filthy stories about the blood sausage?

Throughout the grandmother poems, the poet identifies the elder woman with the wisdom of the earth and the nurturance of bread. Different kinds of rising are described in "The Morning Baking": the rising bread, the rising of the grandmother's body from the earth, and the raising of the poet from childhood. Each of these growth movements are thematically linked by the central metaphor of bread: the grandmother brought the poet/granddaughter to maturity as she made the yeast rise. The poet rails against this strong woman who insisted on raising her in the Slavic tradition only to leave her and return to the earth before the process was complete. Yet Forche's tone of anger masks a deeper tenderness as evidenced by the dramatic shift in the poem's final lines:

> Your wavy loaves of flesh  
> Stink through my sleep  
> The stars on your silk robes

> But I'm glad I'll look when I'm old  
> Like a gypsy dusha hauling milk

The final stanza repeats the structure and tone of the opening
two lines--"Grandma, come back, I forgot/How much lard for these roles"--and thus functions as a framing device which emphasizes the poet's true sense of loss and despair.

The poem which follows, "Burning the Tomato Worms," explores in more detail Anna's unique role as Forche's mentor and guide. The poet continues in this poem to attribute to the grandmother the special wisdom of the earth and to identify her with nature's organic mysteries. "She knew how much grease/How deep to seed/That cukes were crawlers," Forche says of Anna. "Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth" was Anna's advice to her granddaughter. It is the "Truth" of which the grandmother spoke--the truth of her identity as Slavic, as American, as female--which the poet must herself achieve. Through weaving, baking, and remembering, Anna was inviting her granddaughter to something "sacred and eternal"--a confrontation with the ultimate questions of existence and identity. "I want to ask you why I live," the poet confides to Anna's spirit; "Why I am here and will have to feel the way I die." The grandmother's greatest wisdom lies in stimulating these questions for the poet while keeping from her "whatever she saw." The poet must formulate her own answers in the poems that follow and determine for herself what it means to be mortal, free, and female. Forche never forgets that it was the grandmother who initiated her growth process, who kneaded her like bread to allow her to rise on her own. One suspects that it was
not the parents who stimulated in Forche the desire to write
poetry but the grandmother--the matriarchal muse.

The presence or memory of the grandmother, then,
can aid the woman poet in the performance of her art by
linking her to a tradition of women who shared many of the
same dreams and visions. Unlike her female ancestors,
however, the achievements of the woman writer composing
today are more frequently acknowledged and appreciated.
Though the obstacles which confront her are still great,
the contemporary woman poet is indebted to a matrilineal
network which has laid the foundations for the success of
her present literary endeavors. Further, this network
provides the cornerstone for a new tradition of women's
poetry, a tradition which already is celebrating the vital
contributions of the literary mothers.
A significant obstacle in the woman poet's quest for wholeness is the patriarchal institution of marriage and the fallen civilization which has produced it. Adrienne Rich employs the specific metaphor of a ship wreck in her poetry to describe the present state of civilization and its various institutions. Rich believes that, in the hands of the patriarchy, civilization has been destroyed and a new order of exploitation, death, and destruction erected upon the ruins. Further, this "order" is itself perceived as part of the wreck, part of the very chaos which is the inevitable result of the misuse of power and knowledge. Clearly, the world is in need of reconstruction—a reconstruction which Rich believes must be effected by women. However, the task of women is complicated by an elaborate production of patriarchal myths. As if the mere destruction of civilization were not enough, those in power attempt to camouflage the wreck, to mask exploitation as progress, and oppression as freedom.

The cause of the wreck is the violence and exploitation initiated and perpetuated by the patriarchy. The consequence is the mutilation of language, the dehumanization of society and its institutions, and the continued oppression
of the powerless. For women, the effects are especially
damaging because women are the powerless in a patriarchal
society. The institution of marriage in particular seeks to
relegate women to a position of passivity and dependency, and
few can find satisfaction in this subordinate role. Hence,
opoesms which affirm the institution of marriage and the
mutuality of male-female relationships are rarest of all in:
the new tradition of contemporary women's poetry, for marriage
and the love relationship are themselves viewed as part of
the wreck of civilization. Not until the patriarchal
myths are unveiled and the truth of the wreck perceived can
women begin to reconstruct their relationships and, in so
doing, "reconstitute the world."  

I
Exploring the Wreck

"Men are increasingly aware that their disorders may have
something to do with patriarchy. But few of them wish to
resign from it."

--Adrienne Rich,
Of Woman Born

Adrienne Rich's Diving into the Wreck is itself
structured around the poet's plunge into the wreck of civil-
ization in an attempt to assess the real damage and to salvage
what has not yet been completely destroyed. Her exploration
of the wreck is the specific theme of the book's title poem,
"Diving into the Wreck," in which the poet explains why it is
she has undertaken her underwater search:
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.

...the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth...

The speaker of these lines is searching to penetrate the myths in order to discover "the thing itself"—the reality, not the illusion. The poet succeeds in the poem in locating the wreck and, upon further investigation, is shocked to discover herself among the debris: "I am she: I am he/whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes." Rich herself is a casualty of the wreck; she is the drowned face yearning for the sun. Rich is not the only victim, however; everyone is a fatality ("We are, I am, you are")—the oppressor as well as the oppressed, the powerful as well as the powerless. Those in power, in their passion to achieve and to command, are themselves degraded and diminished by their dehumanizing actions. Nevertheless, it still must be remembered that no one is more victimized than the powerless. Unlike the men in power, the women who are exploited are unable to determine or control the terms of their exploitation. Women, blacks, and other minorities are victims in the truest, most tragic definition of the term.

In Rich's A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981), it becomes clear that the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society takes a variety of different forms. Economically, politically, sexually, women are used to support the system which exploits them. The creation of false images is one of
the most insidious forms of victimization as evidenced by the
commercial, often blatantly pornographic, portrayals of the
female body. "When did we ever choose," Rich challenges in
"The Images,"\(^4\)

to see our bodies strung
in bondage and crucifixion across the exhausted air
when did we choose
to be lynched on the queasy electric signs
of midtown

The war against women is not only a war of images; violence
and the threat of violence mark the life of every woman--
regardless of age, nationality, or race. There are no
geographical boundaries in the war against women:

I pretend the Hudson is a right-hand margin
drawn against fear and woman-loathing
(water as purification, river as boundary)
but I know my imagination lies;
in the name of freedom of speech
they are lynching us no law is on our side
there are no boundaries
no-man's-land does not exist.

Thus, Rich must come to the painful realization that there
are no havens, refuges, or purifying waters to shield her
from victimization. Like Olga Broumas, she concludes that
the exploitation of women by the men in power is, in Broumas' words, an inescapable "war/without national/boundary," a "fear beyond tribes."\(^5\)

The theme of power is Judy Grahn's central concern
in The Work of a Common Woman. In poem after poem she por-
trays the different ways in which the powerful exploit the
powerless. In several other poems, the injustices the
oppressed perpetrate on one another are also depicted by the
poet. Grahn's message is clear: such power imbalances are universally destructive. Grahn, like Rich, is careful to distinguish the power of women from patriarchal domination. Women, she believes, exert their power to enhance life, not diminish it; the power of women is creative, not destructive. How is it, then, that men hold the positions of power in society?

Grahn's "Jason, hero" poem, one of her most important and also most humorous poems, presents the mythological figure of Jason as the prototypical patriarch who has achieved his power by tapping the innate strengths of women:

Jason, hero  
everytime we created something  
you put on our clothes  
and called it yours

you sat down on our birthing chairs  
& crowned yourself  
the king of life

took the contents of our medicine bags  
and appointed yourself  
surgeon general

gathered up our potatoes sheep & yams  
moved into the Dept of Agriculture  
and told us to go on a diet.

Grahn seeks to express in these lines her belief that the power men possess is not their own. Women's power to give life, to heal, and to nourish have simply been appropriated by men for their own purposes. The great "Jason, hero" is no more than a petty thief:

Jason you are no good  
and you have such a pretty name, too.  
I wonder who gave it to you.
We should take all your names away from you and give you one: Mr. Grand Larceny sentenced to stand aside while we take all our stuff back where it came from.

If men have appropriated their power from women, it follows that the legitimacy of the male hierarchy is dishonestly derived from the oppression of those without whom it would be powerless. The supreme tragedy for women, Grahn thus perceives, is that we are supporting, unwittingly, the very power structure that victimizes us. If a de-constructing of the patriarchal power structure is to occur at all, women must first reclaim what has been stolen from them.

In an effort to prevent the repossession of female power and integrity, the patriarchy has created certain myths. Among the stories which have been fabricated are the myth of female passivity, the myth of the special woman, and the myth of the female literary monster. Each of these myths has served to imprison women and prevent them from reaching full potential in their life and in their art. Women have been excluded from the arenas of power by being entombed within the confines of ignorance and illusion. "Reading the Parable of the Cave/While living in the Cave" has been the fate reserved for women in a patriarchal society.

Women can and do, however, reject the blinders fastened upon them in order to assume a new way of looking which reflects things as they are and not as the patriarchy would make them appear. The emphasis upon correct vision
occurs throughout the poetry of Judy Grahn and Adrienne Rich and is, in fact, a characteristic theme for both poets. Grahn's concern is witnessed by her persistent search "for the facts" in her poems. The poet herself refuses in her poetry to exploit or manipulate words, to disguise or couch her themes in any way. Rich's concern for seeing beyond the male myths to the truth of reality is evident not only in Diving into the Wreck but in The Dream of a Common Language (1978) and A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981) as well. Perhaps more than any other poet, Rich is convinced that it is only by first piercing through these false mythologies generated by the wreck that one can even begin the upward climb toward wholeness and liberation.

II

The Wreck of Marriage

"Marriage is lonelier than solitude." —Adrienne Rich, "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff"

"Families create children gendered, heterosexual, and ready to marry. But families organized around women's mothering and male dominance create incompatibilities in women's and men's relational needs." —Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering

The institution of marriage, like the related institution of family, is a patriarchal unit. In its structure and in its purpose, it seeks to strengthen the personal inequities and political injustices which form the foundations
for white, patriarchal rule. Because it is structured upon a fundamental power imbalance, the traditional marital union evinces many of the faults and impurities which characterize the society as a whole. Violence, exploitation, and false mythologies are as much a part of marital relationships as social encounters. The possibility of a haven from victimization, then, is no more likely for the woman within marriage than the woman outside of marriage. Indeed, the married woman must contend with the additional anxiety that many of the injustices she suffers are condoned by society precisely because she is married and held to be legally subject to her husband.

For the contemporary American woman poet, marriage is a severely flawed institution. Indeed, few have anything positive to say about a structure which is used as an instrument for women's oppression. In a section of poems entitled, significantly, "Songs of the Runaway Bride," Tess Gallagher speaks of marriage as a ceremony "even the dead regret." Adrienne Rich, in another poem on marriage, describes the union as "this sin of wedlock." In the poetry of Louise Gluck, the failure of marriage is portrayed as an inevitability. In all but one poem dealing with marriage, the husband leaves the wife, while the wife remains rooted to her confinement. In "Here Are My Black Clothes," it is the woman who leaves the man. In either case, separation is seen as inevitable and the failure of marriage is assured.
Gluck implies in her poems that a woman’s will, her power of choice, and her ability to act are all depleted by the institution of marriage. Men turning away from and women turning towards is a characteristic movement in these poems. The position of the husband in marriage is one of freedom of choice and movement; the position of the wife, on the other hand, is one of domestic confinement. This theme of marriage as confinement runs throughout Gluck’s poetry. Over and over again, for example, the women in these poems are portrayed as standing at, behind, or leaning out of windows: "the wife leaning out the window/with her hand extended;" or, "‘often I would stand at the window-- . . ./waiting, in the early evening.’/That is what marriage is." The image of confinement and the gesture of yearning cannot be missed. For Gluck, an institution which restricts one’s intellect, will, and emotions cannot and should not be sustained.

It is not just the institution of marriage which fails to be what it claims. Beyond comprehending the failings of the institution, contemporary women poets recognize that the real problem concerns the male-female relationship itself. If men are so willing to buy into the position of power in marriage and women so deluded as to let them, clearly something is wrong with not just the institution of marriage but the ways in which men and women relate—or fail to relate—with one another. This inability of men and women to communicate authentically with each other is one of the most
frequent themes in contemporary women's literature.

The opening poem in Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck* explores the poet's frustration in (as the title suggests) "Trying to Talk with a Man." Out in this desert we are testing bombs," the poet begins. The "desert" she describes is a metaphor for the relationship itself; the "bombs" which they are testing are words. Yet even these words fail to establish a connection between the lovers:

Coming out to this desert . . .
walking at noon in the ghost town
surrounded by a silence

that sounds like the silence of the place
except that it came with us
and is familiar
and everything we were saying until now
was an effort to blot it out . . .

The words become weapons (bombs) when the possibility for true communion is finally destroyed. This failure of communication is attributed by Rich to the unwillingness or perhaps inability of men to listen genuinely. Listening presumes that the speaker has something of worth to impart, but in a society which devalues the intelligence and contribution of the female, such respect is often denied women even in their love relationships:

When I try to speak
my throat is cut
and, it seems, by his hand

The sounds I make are prehuman, radical
the telephone is always ripped out
and he sleeps on.
Significantly, two images of violence are employed by the poet to describe the broken lines of communication. The ripping out of the telephone and the slitting of the speaker's throat both metaphorically reflect the violence inflicted upon the woman by a man who so totally dismisses her.

This failure to connect is evident in the sexual arena as well. A common motif in contemporary women's poetry is the opinion that the first sexual encounter for the female is experienced as a wounding or an act of violence. Louise Gluck believes that for the woman, the sexual act is not so much a consummation as a consuming. Consuming and devouring are key terms for Gluck. In several poems, the young woman's initial sexual experience is portrayed by the poet as a murder or devouring. The woman is ritually sacrificed by the act: "the sun/opens to consume the Virgin on the fifteenth day." Following upon the initial experience, making love becomes routine, and this routineness is perceived by the poet as just another form of devouring.

"A woman's body/is a grave," Gluck states, "it will accept anything." This same theme of a woman's sexual vulnerability and receptivity is developed by Olga Broumas. "The Knife & the Bread" poems in Beginning With O uncover the violence and abuse which Broumas believes so often characterize male-female relationships. The violence is held to be gender-orientated for the male; that is, by virtue of his sexuality, a man possesses the capacity to do violence. Only when this
capacity is enacted does the poet decry the resultant violations. The image of the knife (clearly a male image) cutting bread (clearly a female image) best illustrates Broumas' perception of the violence implicit in the sexual act. "How long/can i keep the knife/in its place," the poet queries; how long, she wonders, can the violence be kept in check? The question remains unanswered. Broumas, like Gluck, maintains that her body is a "grave" and her sexual relations a victimization. It is this perspective upon male-female relationships which gives rise to the theme of female hunger/female desire in contemporary American women's poetry.

The lack of mutuality in the marriage or love relationship accounts for the characteristic concern in women's poetry for the problem of female unfulfillment. The male lovers are continually portrayed as men who cannot give in a relationship. "Women are badly damaged by the failures of love resulting from the male need for mastery," Wendy Martin explains. To remain in control, many men believe it is necessary to withhold from the women they love any feeling or tenderness. But, as Adrienne Rich appropriately responds, "without tenderness, we are in hell." This lack of mutuality which the man believes solidifies his power base in fact only undermines the relationship and places both the woman and the man in emotional and sexual bondage. Through the man's constant taking and the woman's constant giving, both are depleted and the relationship irreparably damaged or destroyed.
The tragedy of male-female relationships, especially in marriage, is that while the woman continually gives in the relationship, she never receives in turn from the man who can only take. Thus, the problem is that of one-way nurturance. The woman is set up in the relationship as the nurturer, the healer, the mother—"borne, tended, soothed, cauterized,/stanched, cleansed, absorbed, endured/by women."²⁰ The man is set up as the taker, the needy, the master—the recipient of the tending, soothing, cauterizing, and cleansing. It is this problem of taking and giving in a marriage which compels the mother in one of Ai's most moving poems to warn her daughter against marriage:

He takes and takes and you just give. . . .
. . . don't do it.
In ten years, your heart will be eaten out
and you'll forgive him, or some other man, even that
and it will kill you?!.

The speaker herself has been drained to the point of self-annihilation in her marriage, and she wishes that her daughter might escape a similar destruction of self.

The last section of Carolyn Forche's Gathering the Tribes further explores the inability of men to give honestly of themselves in a love relationship. In a poem entitled "Taking Off My Clothes,"²² Forche portrays how women are largely the active participants in marriage and men the passive receivers.

I take off my shirt, I show you.
I shayed the hair out under my arms.
I roll up my pants, I scraped off the hair on my legs with a knife, getting white.
The repeated emphasis upon the personal pronoun stresses the activity of the woman. It is the woman who is expending and sacrificing to please her male lover. Her skin is "polished as a Ming bowl," and yet, she concludes--"In the night I come to you and it seems a shame/to waste my deepest shudders on a wall of a man." The "bowl" and "wall" metaphors highlight the difference between the lovers. The woman, like a precious Chinese bowl, is open and receptive but also fragile and vulnerable. The man is like a wall, closed and unreceptive, hard and impenetrable. He is satisfied by the present state of the relationship; whereas the woman, because she is used, is dissatisfied and unfulfilled.

You recognize strangers,  
think you lived through destruction.  
You can't explain this night, my face, your memory.  
You want to know what I know?  
Your own hands are lying.

At this point the question must be posed why, psychologically, women are so much more dissatisfied than men in the marital relationship. Is the problem of one-way nurturance the primary cause of a woman's disaffection? Nurturance is, in fact, only an indication of female unfulfillment; the origin of female hunger is much deeper. Louise Gluck believes that the hunger is initiated by the young girl's unsatisfactory relationship with her father. Because of the fear of incest, the father's touch and tenderness are withheld from the child, and the daughter's consequent frustration results in the birth of female hunger.23
However, most women poets writing today attribute the hunger to a different cause. They hold that female desire is initiated by the child's separation from the mother at birth. Because of this fundamental split, there arises a constant yearning in the child to return to the mother's womb where the former state of unity and oneness can be re-established. Males are also separated from the female at birth; yet the split is not as deep nor as lasting because social convention directs men back to the female in marriage. The same patriarchal society, however, denies this possibility to women; institutionalized sexual union with the male serves only to further distance women from the female. Hence, the origin of female desire.

This theory of the origin of female hunger is supported and further elucidated by contemporary studies in psychology. Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* offers the most thorough treatment of the subject from a feminist perspective. Chodorow explains that because both sexes are parented by a woman, both look for a return to this primary union. Whereas a man can directly reproduce the exclusive mother-child relationship through the heterosexual bond, the same bonding is unsatisfying for a woman.

As a result of being parented by a woman and growing up heterosexual, women have different and more complex relational needs in which an exclusive relationship to a man is not enough.
Chodorow argues that a woman's attachment to men is secondary to her primary attachment to her mother and other women: "Men cannot provide the kind of return to oneness that women can," she maintains. Further, the male fear of intimacy and emotional bonds described by contemporary women poets is also seen to alienate them from women:

Men grow up rejecting their own needs for love, and therefore find it difficult and threatening to meet women's emotional needs. As a result, they collude in maintaining distance from women.

Women are no less responsible for the increasing difficulty in achieving mutual male-female relationships. Adrienne Rich believes that we "infantilize" men and thereby reinforce their dependency, their urgent needs, and their emotional difficulties. "We are going to have to put down the grown-up male children we have carried in our arms," Rich insists, "and move on, trusting ourselves and them enough to do so." In short, we must stop mothering men in spite of their demands that we nourish and sustain them. Only when men are encouraged to develop their emotional needs and their potential for love and only when women allow them the opportunity to do so will mutual, generative relationships between the sexes become a genuine possibility.
CHAPTER FIVE:

MOTHERHOOD VERSUS AUTHORHOOD:
CHILDREN AND THE CREATIVE ACT

"The word is bear: you give and give, you empty yourself into a child. And you survive the automatic loss." --Louise Gluck, "Autumnal"

"I write this not for you who fight to write your own words fighting up the falls but for another woman dumb with loneliness dust seeping plastic bags with children in a house where language floats and spins abortion in the bowl" --Adrienne Rich, "To A Poet"

Few women poets in literary history have been mothers as well as writers. Indeed, almost no mothers are among the list of women who did succeed in authoring their works despite the tremendous odds against them. It has been the unspoken rule in the past that "motherhood excluded authorhood." The relationship of mother to child, more than any other human relationship, has been and continues to be defined and determined by dependency. With the bulk of her time and concentration devoted to the nurturing and rearing of a child, the mother has traditionally been left with little resources to invest in her own interests and compositions. Knowing this, many women poets writing today have come to the conclusion that for the sake of their art and their personal life, authorhood can no longer be subordinated to
motherhood.

The re-evaluation of motherhood by many of today's poets is not a condemnation of the experience itself but rather of society's exploitation of that experience. Adrienne Rich's distinction in Of Woman Born between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood is key: the experience of motherhood is defined as "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children;" the institution of motherhood is precisely that which "has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them."2 It is the institution and not the experience of mothering against which contemporary American women poets rebel. They recognize how their biological capacity to give birth has been used as witness against their ability to be creative in other ways. It has even been argued in the past century that those women who did write composed merely out of a sense of sexual frustration. Because they were unable to produce children naturally, they unnaturally produced poems. Though this theory has since been justifiably ridiculed and discredited, motherhood still poses a problem for the contemporary woman writer.

Alice Walker begins an essay on motherhood and the female artist with this personal anecdote:

Someone asked me once whether I thought women artists should have children, and, since we were beyond discussing why this question is never asked artists who are men, I gave my answer promptly. "Yes," I said, somewhat to my surprise. And, as if to amend my rashness, I added: "They should
have children—assuming this is of interest to them—but only one.”

"Why only one?" this Someone wanted to know.

"Because with one you can move," I said. "With more than one you're a sitting duck."}

Mobility, as Walker perceives, is a central factor in the silencing of the mother-artist. Children, because of their very dependency, make extreme demands upon both parents; however, it is invariably the mother who responds to and fulfills the child's needs. The weight of responsibility rests on her shoulders because of the social model imposed upon her—a model which depicts the mother as emotional nurturer and the father as economic provider. These familial stereotypes serve only to dichotomize parental roles and to provide the man with considerable freedom of movement in the world and the woman with little if any mobility in the home. For the woman poet (or indeed any woman artist), the stereotype is particularly destructive, for it impedes the full development of her creative powers by directing them towards the service of others rather than the nurturance of self.

The myth of the selfless woman who is dedicated above all to fulfilling the needs of others derives both its force and its failings from the myth of the true mother. To be a "true" mother is to gear all of one's efforts towards the proper socialization of one's children into the larger patriarchal society. While this effort may reinforce the stereotypes and structures of the society, it does little for the self-sacrificing woman. Self-sacrifice is far from
virtuous when it becomes self-subjugation. Wendy Martin explains how the very human qualities of nurturance and generativity--possessed by both men and women--have been used to deny women the possibility of self-fulfillment:

While it is essential for all people to strive to be responsive, loving, concerned human beings, it is very destructive for women to be expected to give priority to the needs of others; to serve men, or even children, in the name of compassion can be damaging. Femininity based on self-denial is masochism, but self-sacrifice is a cultural norm for women.4

Because it is a cultural norm for women, the self-sacrifice demanded of the mother and wife can hardly allow for the self-indulgence of writing. The myth of the selfless mother (the so-called "ministering angel"), then, is yet another means of keeping women within the bounds (or bonds) of domesticity and outside the artistic arena. Motherhood as institution has, in short, "ghettoized and degraded female potentialities."5

In some cases, the actual experience of motherhood has done irreparable damage to a woman's writing career. Adrienne Rich's "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff"6 describes how having a child destroyed Paula Becker's future fulfillment as an artist. Paula Becker was a turn-of-the-century painter who is, in fact, one of Rich's martyred women artists alluded to in "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law." In "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," the painter confides to her literary friend (also married but childless) her premonitions about giving birth:
I was dreaming I had died
giving birth to the child,
I couldn't speak or even move.
My child—I think—survived me.

Throughout the poem, biological and artistic creation are contrasted and opposed to one another. Biological creation is portrayed as other-induced, a means of confinement, a source of frustration, and a process mysteriously associated with death. Artistic creation, on the other hand, is depicted as self-induced, a means of liberation, a source of fulfillment, and a process characterized by life associations. Rich shows in the poem how Paula first needed to give birth to herself through her art before giving birth to a child; yet this choice was not open to her: "Sometimes I feel/it is myself that kicks inside me,/myself I must give suck to, love . . . ." She was "a halfborn woman" when she found herself a mother, and tragically she was never to fulfill her potential as either artist or parent. Paula Becker was one of the countless numbers of women artists who died in childbirth. Ironically, her voice was permanently silenced, while her husband, Rainer Marie Rilke, went on to become one of the leading figures in the male literary establishment.

Does biological creation in truth inhibit artistic creation? Yes, if the former is used as witness against the latter and women truly believe that their role as mother supersedes their vocation as author. Women poets writing today, however, are no longer convinced that motherhood excludes authorhood. They note that neither the experience
nor the institution of fatherhood has deprived men in any way from fulfilling their literary calling. Why, then, it is posed, are motherhood and authorhood viewed as mutually exclusive, mutually destructive realities? Why is parenthood viewed as a denial of literary talent in women but not in men? For the contemporary woman poet, the traditional stereotype of "mother"—a stereotype which has imprisoned the woman writer within the reproductive functions of her body for centuries—is simply no longer credible. A woman can not only be both mother and author, it is proven, but the experience of mothering can provide vital images, themes, and structures for her art. If motherhood has been perceived in the past to hinder a woman's artistic development, it is now perceived to further that development by offering new experiences and new perspectives which can be used in the service of the writer's artistic expression.

"Psychologists have demonstrated unequivocally that the very fact of being mothered by a woman generates in men conflicts over masculinity, a psychology of male dominance, and a need to be superior to women."

--Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering

In The Reproduction of Mothering, Nancy Chodorow examines the question which fascinates so many contemporary women poets of why it is that women mother. The fact that women mother, Chodorow argues, is not due to "instinct" or
biological determination; rather, it is concerned with the mother-daughter bond itself and the failure of the heterosexual relationship to effect a woman's return to her mother. It is, in fact, the female's unsatisfactory relationship with the male which ensures her desire to mother. Because she cannot reproduce the early mother-child bond with a man, she chooses herself to become a mother and re-create the bond in this way. In essence, women mother in an attempt to become whole.

Chodorow's explanation of why women mother is of particular concern to the contemporary woman poet who is seeking to re-define what it means to be both poet and mother. Though poems about children and the psychology of mother-child relationships appear less frequently than those concerned with other significant influences in a poet's life, the child and the experience of motherhood nevertheless comprise a consistent thematic vein in the body of women's literature. Importantly, poems concerned with the writer's son differ markedly from those dealing with the daughter. The theme of the violence of sons against mothers, for example, does not find a correlative theme in the daughter poems. Nor does the theme of a mother's identification with her daughter find its parallel in the poems about sons. Clearly, though her love may be equal, the mother responds and relates differently to sons than to daughters.

Audre Lorde's "Coniagui Women" explores the reason
behind the son's rejection of the mother and the violence which he so often directs against her:

Boys burst from the raised loins
twisting and shouting
from the bush secret
they run
beating the other women
avoiding the sweet flesh
hidden
near their mother's fire
but they must take her blood as a token
the wild trees have warned them
beat her and you will be free . . .

Nancy Chodorow explains that because the son is of a different gender than the mother, he must differentiate himself in opposition to her. In order to be accepted into a patriarchal society, he must reject the mother upon whom he has hitherto been emotionally dependent. In tribal societies such as the one described in Lorde's poem, the denial of the mother often becomes a ritualized ceremony and is accompanied by her literal wounding.8 "There is much to suggest," Adrienne Rich theorizes,

that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of dependence on a woman for life itself, the son's constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is 'of woman born.'9

Both Lorde and Rich believe that it is in the effort to deny the mother and become a "man," that the son's violence against all women is engendered, explained, but not justified.

The male child's early experience of separateness is similarly experienced by the mother. The mother knows that the son to whom she has given birth will eventually reject
her to enter into the male world, the patriarchal domain which both excludes and oppresses her. The son, in other words, will ultimately join the fathers in the very tradition which has denigrated the mother. Louise Gluck's "The Apple Trees" describes a mother's love for but also detachment from the infant son whom she knows will leave her as surely as her father has abandoned her:

In the dark room your son sleeps.
The walls are green, the walls are spruce and silence.
I wait to see how he will leave me.

The mother's disassociation from the child is reflected by her continual reference to him as "your son" rather than "my son." The speaker/mother must maintain this distance from her child, for she realizes that the son is crafted in the image of the father and like the father will one day reject her: "Already on his hand the map appears/as though you carved it there . . . ." Gluck is tragically aware that, by "right of gender," the son will become her oppressor.

"Volumes have been written about the oedipal complex, but little has been written about the girl's relationship to her mother."

--Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess" in Woman'spirit Rising

If the mother's sole purpose in the patriarchy is "to bear and nourish the son," what, then, becomes of the
mother-daughter relationship? This relationship differs significantly from the mother-son bond because both mother and daughter are of the same gender and hence identify more closely with one another. Because of this fundamental connection, the daughter, unlike the son, comes to maturity through an acceptance rather than a denial of the mother. Her process of maturation involves a mutual confirmation between mother and child, an embracing and integration of two like bodies, one of which has given birth to the other. This unique relationship, however, is virtually ignored in patriarchal history:

Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad. Small wonder, since theology, art, and social theory have been produced by sons.¹²

The mother-daughter bond is viewed as irrelevant in literature precisely because women are viewed as unimportant in society.

The profusion of poems in contemporary women's literature which celebrate the mother-daughter relationship seek also to redress the past trivialization of the primary attachment between women. Women poets today have come to recognize, in the words of Anne Sexton, that "a woman is her mother."¹³ Thus, rejection of and by the mother is equivalent to the rejection of the poet's own self. Olga Broumas writes of her fear of being cast off by the woman who is the mirror image of herself:

Don't curse me, Mother, I couldn't bear the bath of your bitter spittle.

No salve
nothing in a doctor's tube, no brew  
in a witch's kettle, no lover's mouth, no friend  
or god could heal me  
if your heart  
turned in anathema, grew stone  
against me.  

Yet, as much as the daughter is the mother and fears alienation from her, she is also different from the mother and desires a separate identity. The mother's conception of the daughter as her ideal self differs from the reality. In Audre Lorde's "The House of Yemanja," the speaker/daughter states:

My mother had two faces  
and a broken pot  
where she hid out a perfect daughter  
who was not me  
I am the sun and moon and forever hungry  
for her eyes.

The metaphor of the "sun and moon" and the broken pot image indicate the daughter's conception of herself as divided and imperfect. She yearns for the mother to anchor her in what is "steady and familiar" and to make her whole again; she desires to return to the mother's body to be rooted and renewed:

"Mother I need/mother I need/mother I need your blackness now/as the august earth needs rain." The repetition of "mother I need" reflects the extreme fragmentation behind the daughter's need. Her call to the mother is desperate, and yet, in the poem's final lines, the poet comes to sudden affirmation. She can identify herself through separation from the mother, she realizes, as well as through identification.
I am
the sun and the moon and forever hungry
the sharpened edge
where day and night shall meet
and not be
one.

Wholeness will not be reached, but for Lorde it is the
dynamic of change which is important; and it is the daughter's
resemblance to and fragmentation from the mother which
initiates and energizes this crucial journey towards wholeness.

Lorde, like so many women poets, develops in her poetry
her own mythos of the mother-daughter relationship, finding
that there is little in the history of literature which
speaks to this fundamental bond. The "universal" stories of
human tragedy, Rich further explains, have almost exclusively
dealt with the father-daughter or mother-son split (witness
Lear, Hamlet, and Oedipus\textsuperscript{16}). The one notable exception to
this rule is the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone--
a story which is viewed as particularly important by contem­
porary women poets, for it is perhaps the only portrayal of a
close mother-daughter relationship which has endured from
antiquity to the present. In this story, Persephone is
raped by the god of the underworld and taken from her mother
"half-live/an underworld/paraplegic."\textsuperscript{17} Yet, importantly,
the mother rebels against her daughter's abduction and
succeeds in insuring her return for the nine months of every
year. The unique element in the story of Demeter and Perse­
phone is the portrayal of the mother's love for her daughter
as "so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death."\textsuperscript{18}
The mother is willing to do battle for her daughter and rage against the entire earth for the great wrong that has been done to them.

It is this mythological portrayal of a loyal, loving, powerful relationship between mother and daughter which is conspicuously absent from the rest of western literature. Had more mothers been given the opportunity to formulate the culture's myths and embody them in literary and artistic works, more mother-daughter relationships would appear in the texts of human history. Yet, this opportunity has been denied women by the institution of motherhood, an institution which is presently being called into question by a new tradition of women writers. "To destroy the institution," however, "is not to abolish motherhood."19 Rather, it is to liberate the experience of motherhood from the patriarchal systems which have perverted it into a form of servitude. Such a liberation is finally allowing women total freedom in their art—freedom to write as mothers if they choose, but first and foremost, freedom to compose as women.
CHAPTER SIX:

FEMALE BONDING
AND THE PROCESS OF RE-MEMBERING

"You have wished us a bonded life"  --Judy Grahn
"a funeral plainsong"

"It is possible . . . for the woman poet to reconstruct the
shattered tradition which is her matrilineal heritage. Her
trip into the cavern of her own mind . . . begins the process
of re-membering."  --Sandra Gilbert and
Susan Gubar,
The Madwoman in the Attic

Adrienne Rich's The Dream of a Common Language (1978)\(^1\)
can be seen as the complementary or companion volume to Diving
into the Wreck (1973), for it attempts to respond to and
resolve some of the basic questions and challenges posed by
the earlier volume. The crucial question left unanswered by
the poet in Diving into the Wreck is how, after women have
identified the wreck of civilization and the failure of
patriarchal institutions, can the wreck be salvaged and the
institutions reformed? Rich concludes that the possibility
of reconstruction requires that women bond together and
attempt to "re-member" the broken past so that the present
can be re-assembled into an ordered whole. These central
themes in The Dream of a Common Language are not distinctive
to Rich. In fact, it is the theme of female bonding and the
theme of re-membering which represent the two most character­
istic themes in contemporary American women's poetry and
constitute the unifying thematic strands which gather these
poets together to form a new tradition of poetry.

The theme of female bonding is the most frequently posed solution to the problem of the divided woman. Contemporary women poets are all too aware of how they have been alienated from other women and divided against themselves. By rejecting these false separations and superficial dichotomies, the woman poet seeks to re-integrate her scattered selves. "I will not be divided by myths of separation," Rich resolves in *The Dream of a Common Language*. Rich is constantly connecting in this book—love and action, desire and achievement, woman and woman. The connections illustrate the poet's desire to unify herself through female bonding; for the poet's self is a multitude of selves and her personal integrity depends on her public connection with other women.

For the contemporary woman poet, however, achieving wholeness demands more than the immediate formulation of female bonds. It requires in addition the "re-membering" of past lives, past women, who have indirectly influenced her present reality. Poets writing today are seeking to reclaim a matrilineal heritage to provide historical depth and continuity to their present lives and works. To write without support, without a sense of precursors or literary mothers, is in many ways to compose in a vacuum. The rediscovering and re-establishing of the lost visions and voices of her female ancestors provide the contemporary poet with a context in which to write and a lineage in which to place herself. It is by re-connecting these bonds to a remote past that the woman
poet prepares the way for reconstructing the future.

"... Love, our subject:
we've trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
worn it like lead on our ankles
watched it through binoculars as if
it were a helicopter
bringing food to our famine..."

—Adrienne Rich,
"Translations"

Before female bonding can succeed in salvaging the
wreck, conventional ties to patriarchal codes and conventions—
even and especially the romantic love tradition—must be
broken. The rejection of the romantic love ideal is of
special concern to Louise Gluck, Kathleen Fraser, Judy Grahn,
and Adrienne Rich. Each of these poets recognizes the impor-
tance of de-mythologizing the classical view of love—a view
which can destroy by the unreal expectations and situations
it artificially creates. Both Adrienne Rich and Judy Grahn
reject the romantic conventions totally, conventions which
they perceive to be heterosexually and patriarchally defined.
Louise Gluck and Kathleen Fraser retain the heterosexual
foundations of the romantic tradition; yet they, also, wish
to establish a more realistic view of love.

The central theme in Louise Gluck's *Descending Figure* (1980) is the rejection of the classical view of love and the
embracing of a more humanistic view. The poet comes to the
insight in this volume that the cause of her dissatisfaction
described by The House on Marshland poems is precisely her unquestioning acceptance of the classical love tradition and the inevitable failure of her relationships to embody this ideal. The statuaries and other art objects which appear throughout Descending Figure serve as symbols for this idealized love. For the poet, romantic love is no more human than a monument. Such love disallows any growth or change and is, indeed, a statuary ideal.

It is a mistake, Gluck believes, to expect to achieve perfection and eternal happiness in any love relationship. The danger of romanticizing love lies in the danger of perfection, for what is perfect is also static, routine, and non-human. For Gluck, perfection and permanence are achievable only in the world of art, and when one strives for the classical absolute, objectification and dehumanization is the result. The woman described in Gluck's "Porcelain Bowl" is a victim of this destructive love tradition. The poem depicts "the analogous/body of a woman" arranged on a lawn chair, frozen in an involuntary gesture of repose in a world which, in contrast, is animated around her. The woman has herself become an art object, Gluck perceives, a precious stone or porcelain bowl—"Pearl white/on green. Ceramic/hand in the grass." Her objectification is the tragic consequence of disappointment in marriage and disillusionment in the ideal of love.

In an even bolder denial of the romantic love tradition, Gluck challenges the Petrarchan view of love and marriage
expressed in Edmund Spenser's famous wedding songs. Gluck composes her own "Epithalamium" in *Descending Figure* as an ironic reversal of Spenser's patronage of the classical love ideals. For Gluck, the tradition of marriage is an unbroken chain of pain and death:

There were others; their bodies were a preparation.  
I have come to see it as that.

As a stream of cries.  
So much pain in the world . . . .

Marriage is not a holy union but a "terrible charity." Even the wedding vows which pledge fidelity and protection resonate ominously: "Here is my hand, he said. But that was long ago. / Here is my hand that will not harm you." The spoken promise of the marriage ceremony is understood to be a convention only. This is, in fact, exactly how Gluck perceives of the classical love tradition: conventional form without genuine emotional investment.

Kathleen Fraser shares Gluck's negative assessment of the tradition of romantic love. In a series of journal poems entitled "Notes on Emma Slide," Fraser unveils the shallowness of the tradition and its debilitating effect upon women. Emma is a fictional character, a composite of all those women whose need for love pushes them, with disastrous consequences, into relationships "lit by cliched expectations." Over the course of the journal entries, Emma comes finally to realize that there is a difference between "loving someone, or being 'in' love." Further, she recognizes that the space and hunger
within her cannot be completed and satisfied by her lover, as she had been led to expect.

Looking back I see I wanted him
  to be my final solution

I wanted him to pay my dues
  take me on a cruise
  and never lose sight of me

That way I wouldn't have to keep watching out for Emma

Emma must make the painful self-admission that her lover is not a god or a spectacle, and to expect him to conform to the Petrarchan ideal only diminishes them both. Even love is "not a phenomenon to be in awe of," she concludes—"not to be prayed to..."/not to have an emotion named after him, all his own, in/his honor." Though the concept of Love must be deflated, it should be noted, the act of loving for Fraser and Gluck still remains an attainable reality. Both poets retain a certain faith in male-female relationships; for though they acknowledge the intrinsic as well as extrinsic problems which plague any relationship, they also believe that genuine mutuality can be achieved in the act of loving itself.8

"two women together is a work, nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work heroic in its ordinariness" —Adrienne Rich, "Twenty-One Love Poems"

Adrienne Rich and Judy Grahn maintain that it is the very heterosexual basis of the romantic love tradition which
accounts for its destructiveness. The tradition leads women to expect gratification in their love relationships with men, and when this gratification is not forthcoming, they are unavoidably left disillusioned and dissatisfied. Consequently, women are encouraged to look elsewhere for the satisfaction of their relational needs; the development and maintenance of close personal relationships with other women is one way of achieving this sense of fulfillment:

Women tend to have closer personal ties with each other than men have, and to spend more time in the company of women than they do with men. In our society, there is some sociological evidence that women's friendships are affectively richer than men's.9

This is not surprising since, as has already been stated, men can satisfactorily reproduce the early mother-child bond in their relationships with other women, whereas the heterosexual relationship is fundamentally ungratifying for the female. In her relationships with other women (physical and non-physical alike), a woman can also succeed in recreating the significant primary bond to the mother.

Adrienne Rich maintains that the decision to love and the act of loving women is the central factor which can re-integrate the divided woman. Because "birth stripped our birthright from us, tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves/so early on,"10 Rich explains, only a return to origins can "re-member" us. In short, Rich contends that separation from the mother at birth generated the fundamental split in being, and it is lesbian love which can re-establish
this primary union and effect the state of wholeness. This love is not merely desirable for the poet but necessary, for "until we find each other, we are alone."11

Yet, bonding between women of any kind is viewed as profoundly threatening in a patriarchal society:

Men perceive the new presence of women to each other as an absence. This is the real separation they dread--that women should not be waiting there for them when they return from the male group, the hierarchies, the phallic world.12

One way of insuring that women are waiting for men when they return from the phallic world is by instilling within women a sense of dependency upon the male and a belief in the classical love tradition which romanticizes and even glorifies the male-female relationship. A woman who chooses the lesbian lifestyle rejects the patriarchal myths and chooses instead to fulfill her primary identification with women. For the lesbian poet, the task is more complicated. She must reject the entire convention of love poetry and undertake the creation of a radically new tradition of literature.13 This tradition will illustrate unequivocally that, as Rich expresses it, "Tristan und Isolde is scarcely the story."14

Judy Grahn explicitly attempts through her poetry to forge this new tradition of literature and to portray a lesbian consciousness which both she and Rich believe to be inherent in all women. In the introduction to her poem "Confrontations With the Devil in the Form of Love," Grahn celebrates the fundamental connections between women which so profoundly
effect the creation of female traditions of all kinds:

How I love these vital threads passed around among women, especially those of us who are expected to be completely split from each other by class, education, race, age, homophobia. How important this is, to our lives and our literature.15

Grahn envisions the present bond between women as a "circle" which is not finished;16 the completed circle symbolizes female fulfillment and ultimate wholeness. It is not until women bond together in love and friendship, the poet believes, that the full gratification of female hunger and desire can be achieved.

The chief obstacle to female bonding and the completion of the circle is, of course, the heterosexual bias of a male-dominated society. Grahn's "The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke" poem challenges this bias and its prejudicial effect upon women who cannot or will not conform to heterosexual norms. "Edward the Dyke" is a satire on romantic love as it has been assimilated by an unsuspecting lesbian. As Adrienne Rich points out in her analysis of the poem,18 Edward's problem is not her sexual orientation but her "Utopian" view of love. She is simply taken in by the psychoanalyst's assessment of her sexuality as "sordid and depraved" and is stunned rather than offended by Dr. Knox's sadistic treatment of her "ailment":

'My child,' he murmered in featherly tones, 'have no fear. You must trust us. We will cure you of this deadly affliction, and before you know it you'll be all fluffy and wonderful with dear babies and a bridge club of your very own.'
The resemblance of "featherly" to "fatherly," the priestly overtones of "my child," and the use of the papal "we" in this passage all portray Dr. Knox as the epitome of the patriarchal autocrat, the shaper of society's culture and values. Dr. Knox is as satanical as he is comical. He is the representative patriarch attempting to mold his female patients into his idea of what a woman should be: a passive, ignorant, reproductive piece of fluff. After "a few minor physical changes" and a few years of intensive therapy, the doctor tells Edward, "you'll be exactly the little girl we've always wanted you to be." Grahn's outrage is abundantly clear: to be bonded to women in a patriarchal society is to be subjected to hostile forces and violent attempts to "re-adjust" her basic sexual identification and chosen lifestyle. For Grahn and Rich, however, it is a re-adjustment and reconstruction of society which is required to allow for a more diverse social order flexible enough to embrace all manners of living and loving--straight and lesbian, white and black, rich and poor, conservative and liberal.

"Small childbride mother of myself" --Olga Broumas, "Woman With Child"

"Telling the truth about one's body: a necessary, freeing subject for the woman writer." --Tillie Olsen, Silences
Grahn emphasizes the theme of female bonding (as does Rich) to illustrate how, by bonding together, women can correct the power imbalance in society and re-establish relational harmony. Contemporary American women poets unanimously agree that to be female is to be powerful. Women need only recognize this inherent power and bond together to claim it irrevocably in order to prevent the sapping of female energy and strength by the patriarchy. Just as a strong literary tradition by women can off-set the dominance of the patriarchal tradition, so can women's claim to power off-set male dominance in both the public and private arenas.

However, before any woman can begin to "reconstitute the world," she must realize the depth and scope of her potential by giving birth to herself and by coming to terms with her sexuality. Both these themes—the theme of self-birth and the theme of female sexuality—are recurrent motifs in contemporary women's poetry, different from but intimately connected with the primary theme of female bonding.

Carolyn Forche's Gathering the Tribes (1976) concludes on the theme that women must be their own midwives before they can give birth to others in relationships. In "White Wings They Never Grow Weary," the speaker is clearly pregnant—"my naval is gone, the moon is up,/in a month or two my breasts will be in pain," the poet states. Yet, significantly, no man is present in the poem. The speaker is alone and puzzled by the changes in her body—a body which hardly seems her own:
Out here a woman wonders.
And if she has no man her arms get strong.
When seasons change she can't believe
there will ever be milk in her body.
Ever believe there will be someone
asking something from her.

If the phallic is indeed rejected by the poet, as further
suggested by the imagery of the opening lines ("Ice branches
ripped off in the wind are waterborn"), then the question can
be posed: how did the woman come to be pregnant and to whom
is she giving birth? The answer to both these challenges is
the theme of self-birth.

Forche has been seeking throughout Gathering the
Tribes to learn the secret of her grandmothers, the key to
her identity. "White Wings They Never Grow Weary" provides
the answer: Forche must nourish and shape herself in order to
be herself. Pregnancy serves in the poem as a metaphor for
the need for all women to give birth to themselves, to satisfy
their own needs and desires, in short, to create themselves.
This message is underscored in the book by Forche's deliberate
allusions to the figure of the Virgin and by her careful
linkage of the female body and the earth.

Through the evocation of several landscapes as female,
the personification of the earth as pregnant, and the constant
portrayal of the earth as a positive life force, Forche
effects her desired analogy between women and nature.
For Forche, earth is a body which is simultaneously mother
and child. That is, the earth is self-generating and self-
sustaining; it creates and is created through its own power. Like the self-creating earth, the analogy indicates, women must "birth" themselves. The recurrent figure of the Christian Virgin Mary in Forche's poetry (and indeed the preoccupation with the Virgin throughout contemporary women's literature) performs the same function. Like the Virgin who gives birth to the child without impregnation, women must exercise their own powers of autonomy. In giving birth to herself, a woman can form, shape, and determine her own life. Forche's "White Wings They Never Grow Weary" celebrates this ability to give birth to one's own powers and potentialities and to be comfortable in one's independence and ingenuity.

The theme of immersion and rebirth is of particular importance to the woman poet. Having been immersed for so long in the wreck of civilization, a woman's eventual emergence is welcomed not only as a new birth but as a crucial self-birth. Women give birth to themselves, Rich believes, through the painful, difficult process of moving from male bonds to female bonding. A woman's self-birth is, in fact, a figurative return to the female. Olga Broumas employs Rich's ocean imagery to describe her understanding of female self-birth:

you'd turn
in the paused wake of your dive, enter
the suck of parted waters, you'd emerge

clean caesarean, flinging
live rivulets from your hair, your own
breath arrested.20

A clear immersion/emersion movement is depicted in these
lines. Broumas' ocean imagery portrays the woman's inner exploration as a dive into the womb from which she is metaphorically reborn—a "clean caesarean." Thus, in returning to her own inner resources, the woman reconnects her sexuality and is bodily renewed; she surfaces to herself as a diver surfaces from an underwater treasure.

More than any other poet, Broumas relies on sea imagery to develop the theme of female sexuality. Moist shells, marine odors, salt lips, seaweed, shell fish, gill fish, and other ocean metaphors are frequently evoked to describe the female body and the sexual response:

Do you understand

... how the moon, the tide
is our own
image? Inland
the women call themselves Tidal Pools
call their water jars Women, insert
sponge and seaweed
under each curly, triangular thatch.21

The connection of the sea with the womb, female rhythms, and female sexuality in general suggests once again the belief that the achievement of true liberation for a woman entails a return to the female. The sea itself functions as a metaphor for female liberation in contemporary women's poetry, as Kathleen Fraser illustrates in the connection she makes between the ocean and a woman's freedom in the prose poem, "Les Valeurs Personnelles/Personal Values:"

This morning she'd awakened smelling the sea.
Before thought, she'd noticed an urgency in her left foot to dangle in the water, and it crept up into her body, pulling, wanting the openness of the sea, the wetness, wanting her body to be
taken into the largeness without any walls, no
object to distract her into order. She felt
the boat tipping. She felt the possibility of
doing nothing to stop it. 22

For Fraser, as for other women poets, the sea represents both
a body without confines and the mother's enveloping womb. It
is a "largeness without any walls," a body whose only defining
characteristic is freedom.

If the sea is a particularly appropriate image for
female sexuality and female liberation, the earth is an
equally popular metaphor in women's poetry. The earth is
viewed as the repository or receptacle for the world's
creative life spirit; it is portrayed as the Body of Creation.
A woman's life-giving capacities are analogized to the earth's
fertility by the female poet not to imprison her within her
body's reproductive functions (as men have attempted to do
in the past) but to affirm her powers of generativity and
productive creativity. Lesbian love poems in particular employ
the image of the earth's rich deposits to describe the intri-
cacies of the female body:

I greet you again
on the beaches in mines lying on platforms
in trees full of tail-tail birds flicking
and deep in your caverns of decomposing granite
even over my own laterite hills . . . 23

Contemporary American women's poetry is filled with these
natural images describing the female body in poems which
openly celebrate and explore female sexuality.

The question might be posed, why is the affirmation
of their sexual identity so important for these poets and
why the specific use of natural imagery? The female poet's dependence upon images from nature and her conscious identification with the earth's body can be explained by her consuming desire to be whole. May Sarton maintains that to be "almost earth" is, in fact, to be "almost whole." Sarton is suggesting the belief that a woman can approximate a state of wholeness in nature more easily than in society, simply because society consciously excludes her. One might well argue, as Carol Christ does, that women experience greater affinity to the natural, not because of any innate inclination which disposes them toward nature, but because the natural is opposed to the cultural, and the cultural is patriarchal. Images from nature, then, are particularly appropriate to describe the liberation of female sexuality from the social and religious strictures established by the patriarchy.

Affirmation of her sexuality is so important to the woman writer because, as Tillie Olsen comments, access to her own body has historically been denied her:

Telling the truth about one's experiences as a body, forbidden, not possible, for centuries. Rights of one's own body denied to woman for centuries. Men owned us. Babies inhabited our bodies year after year. Knowledge of one's body that comes only through free use of it, even free exercise of it, denied.

Women writers today thus have every cause and justification to affirm female sexuality. Centuries of sexual slavery--of tight corsets and heavy veils--are being shed and knowledge is being acquired. It has been ignorance of the body and the
undeserved, unwarranted emotion of shame which together have imprisoned women within the very bodies which, paradoxically, are withheld from them. Women are only now beginning to realize how their life-giving capacities have been turned against them to be used as a means of their oppression. "The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life," Rich laments. She goes on to prove that "we need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body." The celebration of the female body in contemporary women's poetry is an attempt toward actualizing Rich's dream.

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world."  

--Adrienne Rich,
"Natural Resources"

To name herself anew and come to her own sense of self is not enough for the contemporary woman poet. She finds it incumbent upon her to "reconstitute" her world and re-name it on her own terms in order that her self-identity be secured and the chosen identity of all women accepted and affirmed. Adrienne Rich believes that, faced with the wreck of the society in which they live, all women are motivated by the
passion to rebuild, the impulse to heal, nourish, and reconcile the wounds and fractures around them. If men have succeeded in undermining the foundations of society and severing the vital life-lines between nations and individuals, then women, Rich maintains, have succeeded in repairing the old foundations and generating new life-lines. Through their daily acts of heroism, women of every century have sought to construct the bedrock of a new civilization—a civilization which will substitute integrity for conflict, care for indifference, and tenderness for violence.

Adrienne Rich's most important poem in The Dream of a Common Language, "Natural Resources," takes as its central theme the idea of reconstituting the world. As the movement of diving functions as the crucial metaphor in the seminal poem "Diving into the Wreck," mining serves as the pivotal image in "Natural Resources." The poet investigates several different kinds of mining in her poem—the unearthing of her elusive identity, the exploring of the depths of female sexuality, and the uncovering of a hidden matriarchal past. Each of these exploratory journeys has as its aim the recovery of women's natural resources—those powers and gifts that were dragged down with the wreck and buried in false mythologies and images. Rich attempts in her poem to reclaim each of her native resources, for she is impatient to begin the process of reconstruction:

This is what I am: watching the spider rebuild—"patiently", they say,
but I recognize in her
impatience—my own—

the passion to make and make again
where such unmaking reigns . . .

The passion of women "to make and make again" wherever unmaking reigns is evident in the simple articles and objects which witness to a past tradition of women miners:

These things by women saved
are all we have of them

or of those dear to them
these ribboned letters, snapshots

faithfully glued for years
onto the scrapbook page

these scraps, turned into patchwork,
doll-gowns, clean white rags . . .

These humble artifacts provide the very key to understanding the means of reconstruction and its ultimate rewards. Without this "universe of humble things," Rich asserts, there can be "no memory/no faithfulness, no purpose for the future/no honor to the past." One way for the woman poet and all women to honor the past is to assume the painful process of re-making initiated by the foremothers. "The women who first knew themselves/miners, are dead," and hence women such as Rich feel commissioned to continue the mining effort which involves as much building as mining. It is the very re-claiming of past influences and personal resources that permits the building of a new tradition.

The opening poem in Rich's most recent book, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, provides a fuller explanation

... my hunger is so old
so fundamental, that all the lost
  crumpled burnt smashed shattered defaced
  overpainted concealed and falsely named
faces of every past we have searched together
in all the ages
  could rise reassemble recollect re-member
themselves as I recollect myself in that presence
  as every night close to your body
in the pain of the city, turning
I am remembered by you, remember you ... 29

"Re-member" is the key term by which this passage and the entire poem can best be understood. Rich plays on the double meaning of the term "re-member"—remember suggesting memory and re-member connoting construction. The poet proposes that a re-membering of the present can only be accomplished by a remembering of the past. Thus, the word suggests the continuity between past and present which is necessary for the building process while at the same time revealing the poet’s impassioned hope for future reconstruction.

Reconstruction, then, demands recovery, and recovery requires a filling in of the gaps in history—those spaces where the lives of women have been ignored and their presences denied. The history of "Mankind" is precisely that, Rich perceives—the history of man; and hence the poet attempts, through her poetry, to stitch together with words the lost pattern of a specifically female history, a matrilineal line.

In "Culture and Anarchy," Rich incorporates the words and impressions of past women into the poetic text itself. Her literary heritage becomes woven into the fabric of her poetry.
She is "beginning to stitch together/Elizabeth Ellet/Elizabeth Barrett/Elizabeth Blackwell/Frances Kemble/Ida B. Wells-Barnett/Susan B. Anthony." By invoking the names and words of her literary mothers, their voices become Rich's voice, their selves become her self. They become the source and substance of her literary tapestry. Rich freely acknowledges her debt to these women (Dickinson, Cather, Adams, Tubman, as well as all the "silenced") and celebrates in her poetry their daily acts of heroism. She views them as extraordinary in their ordinariness, in their persistent effort to pull "together, inch by inch../. From all the lost collections." It is this effort, symbolized by the images of weaving, braiding, and quilting in her poems, which the poet seeks to carry on in her own life and art.

Rich is not unaware, however, of the difficulty involved in filling in the historical gaps and making the silences speak. "There are gashes in our understandings of this world," the poet cautions, and the healing of these wounds is not an easy task. "Amnesia" becomes Rich's chosen term to express the tragedy of historical omissions and the wrenching mental effort to re-member a broken past:

Those who have ceased is amnesia-language;
no more to be said of them. Nobody wants
to see their faces or hear what they were about.

A tradition of contemporary women poets, however, does desire to see the faces and hear the voices of women who have been lost to history, buried by the debris of the wreck of civiliza-
tion. These poets share the belief that it is knowledge
of the past which can empower women in the present. By keeping women ignorant of their place and role in history, by excising them from the evolution of "mankind," the patriarchy has rendered women solitary, rootless, unsupported, and hence powerless. Thus, what is demanded of women is "staying cognizant" by remaining attuned to false histories and especially false interpretations of women in history.

For the lesbian archaeologist who desires specifically to uncover and restore the historical influence and role of lesbians, the task becomes even more difficult. She must break totally with conventional, patriarchal, heterosexual methodologies in order to see rightly, for if she does not, her search for a lesbian tradition in history will be futile. The present effort by women to restore meaning to Willa Cather's lesbian identity can succeed only if the heterosexual bias of the novelist's self-appointed literary historians is unequivocally rejected.

On this beautiful, ever-changing land
--the historical marker says--
man fought to establish a home
(fought whom? the marker is mute.)
They named this Catherland, for Willa Cather, lesbian--the marker is mute,
the marker white men set on a soil of broken treaties, Indian blood,
women wiped out in childbirths, massacres-- for Willa Cather, lesbian,
whose letters were burnt in shame.35

Thus, "a different method of weaving"36 is required: for the lesbian explorer. She must ask the questions which have never been posed before, find the missing links in history which even the feminist historian is likely to miss.
The task of the historian seeking to chronicle the place of black women in history is equally difficult. It is understood by the contemporary poet that in a white patriarchal culture, a black woman is perceived as a "ghost," a "shadow," or a "negative image." Audre Lorde's "For Assata" describes how women, especially black women, have been accorded only a shadowy presence in history, have been acknowledged more by their absence than their recognizable presence:

In this picture your smile has been to war you are almost obscured by other faces on the pages those shadows are sisters who have not yet spoken your face is in shadow obscured by the half-dark by the thick bars running across your eyes like sentinels . . . .

Black women have been imprisoned for centuries within a white, patriarchal history, and their voices are only now being liberated—as evidenced by their central role in the formulation of a new poetic tradition. The poems of Ai, Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, and others all attempt to write black women back into history. Audre Lorde's portrayal of goddesses, witches, and warriors in her poems serves as a particularly emphatic reminder that a black woman is not a "negative image" but a powerful, transformative presence in society and culture.

The efforts of all women—white, black, lesbian, and straight—to reconstitute the world and re-member a matrilineal heritage is motivated by the characteristic desire to be whole. In fact, it is out of a newly achieved sense of wholeness that women writers are beginning to build a new
literary tradition, a new social order.

Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity, the striving for greatness, brilliance--only with the musing of a mind one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing dark against bright, silk against roughness pulling the tenets of a life together with no mere will to mastery, only care for the many-lived, unending forms in which she finds herself •••• 39

The female quest for wholeness--the passion for resolving the dilemma of the divided woman--has given birth to the movement of reconciling the world's contrarieties, pulling the very "tenets" of life together. Energized by an authentic social conscience and encouraged by the success of her own efforts at self-integration, the contemporary woman poet applies herself to a re-membering of civilization through the building and bonding of a non-prejudicial, all-encompassing vital tradition of literature.
PART III:

BUILDING A NEW TRADITION
CHAPTER SEVEN:

THE "DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE"

"... the true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language."

--Adrienne Rich,
"Origins and History
of Consciousness"

"All through my attempts in the poems this need has been
building, the need to forge a language that would give these
dead and living lives a way to speak. There was often the
feeling that the language might come too late, might even do
damage, ... All these fears. Finally no choice."

--Tess Gallagher,
"My Father's Love
Letters"

The first step toward building a new female tradition
must necessarily focus upon the crucial problem of language
for the contemporary woman poet. Words are the tools of her
craft, the vehicles of her themes, and without a repossession
of language, the poet remains voiceless. Such a repossession
is necessary because the patriarchal character of language
omits the experience of women. This omission creates certain
"holes" in the language, holes which contemporary women
poets believe to be the cause of the failure of communica-
tion in a patriarchal society. A male language cast almost
exclusively in male terms is experienced as awkward and
confining by the female writer. She feels uncomfortable with
and constrained by a collection of words which so often
negates her experience as a female and which is clearly
male-orientated in origin and practice. Hence, the possibility
of creating a new, female language is introduced into contemporary literature.

Adrienne Rich's "dream of a common language" aptly expresses the contemporary woman poet's vision of a new way of communicating which will facilitate understanding and interaction among all people, rather than solely among one gender, race, or nationality. It is a dream that words will be transformed from unmeaning to meaning, confusion to coherence. Language in its present state, Rich believes, necessarily fails because it is built upon the enforced silence of the powerless. Because women are primarily the powerless in a patriarchal culture, they feel most constrained by that very rhetoric traditionally used to deny them full equality, full personhood. Audre Lorde perceives that a fear of ridicule and disregard further intimidates the woman writer:

... when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive. 3

Formulating a new language and rejecting the old one thus becomes a central priority for the female poet. Olga Broumas explains that if a proper outlet is not created for female expression, women will be consumed and destroyed by their own creative energy. The importance of finding words which adequately convey and express women's experiences cannot be minimized for the female poet: "we must/find words/or burn." 4
"I get down on my knees with every other Slavic woman
And we speak the language . . . ."

--Carolyn Forche;
"Burning the Tomato Worms"

The power of words is derived from the ability of language to shape and determine the way in which something is perceived and understood. Language is a construct of the mind, developed to categorize and communicate human experience and emotion. Because language can determine reality itself, its influence and impact on human behavior should not be ignored. Nor should the power of language be romanticized, as Rich warns in "The Images":

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

Rich acknowledges in these lines the tremendous transformative powers of artistic, musical, and linguistic forms. These constructs are, in fact, powerful enough to capture the reality of violence and victimization in patterns of art which are "powerful and pure." Rich comes to the crucial insight in her poetry that real violence must not be confused with its beautification in art and language. The Pietà is indeed a polished sculpture, but is the reality upon which it is
based—the crucifixion of a male god—true for women? Similarly, women, while recognizing the power of patriarchal language should ask themselves whether the foundations of the language—male dominance and the oppression of the powerless—are acceptable to them. For Rich and others, the power of the patriarchal language is inappropriate for women seeking liberation from male texts and male images.

In the view of the contemporary woman poet, it is not the words so much as their usage in the patriarchy which is experienced as particularly offensive. Words themselves are created to unify a society or culture by providing individuals with a common language. In the hands of the patriarchy, however, language has been perverted from its original intent. In a prose poem entitled "Ancapagari," Carolyn Forche alludes to the Pentecostal tongues of flame and the failure of the Christian apostles to create a true universal language. "Ancapagari longs to be spoken in each tongue," Forche writes; "it is the name of the god who has come from among us." Forche’s "Ancapagari" is the god of language, a mythic god whom we have only to name if we wish to secure a common system of communication:

You are forever swinging between this being and another, one being and another. There is a word for it crawling in your mouth each night. Speak it.

Forche draws upon the ancient Hebrew understanding of the word in her call to speak "Ancapagari." For the Hebrews, the power of the word is its mere articulation; one need only speak the
word to put its meaning into effect. For Forche, one need only "speak" the common language--a language of gestures, sounds, and feelings--to be connected to the human Spirit, the universal human voice.

While Forche pays tribute to language's god-like attributes, Adrienne Rich and Tess Gallagher are careful to point out that language is not the immutable, sacred institution the patriarchy would have us believe. Rich perceives that the belief in a perfect language is simply another patriarchal myth which must be dispelled: "It was an old theme even for me/Language cannot do everything."7

Tess Gallagher adds in "Second Language" that "each word/has a crack in it to show the strain/of all it holds, all that leaks/away."8 The core message of both poets is that, though words may be powerful, they are certainly not all-powerful. Words, particularly as codified by the patriarchy, are inadequate to hold all we attempt to invest in them. As vehicles they can easily break and crack under the heavy burden of meaning. Hence, the creation of a new language in a female literary tradition must take into account the limited function as well as the unifying power of words.

"For many women, the commonest words are having to be sifted through, rejected, laid aside for a long time, or turned to the light for new colors and flashes of meaning . . . . When we become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess . . . ."

-Adrienne Rich,
"Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman"
Exactly what is a "female language," and how is this language to be achieved? The simplest definition of a female language is a linguistic tradition which is non-patriarchal. One could add to this negative description the positive attribution of a tradition which incapsulates female as well as male experiences and which functions in every way as a true universal language. Contemporary women poets propose three concrete stages in which this "common language" can be established. First, recovering the remnants of an ancient matriarchal language, if such a language existed, will provide women with the philosophical and linguistic underpinnings for a female language. Second, a return to the female body and the sensuous form of language will create new words denoting female experiences to fill in the numerous spaces created by the exclusive policies of the patriarchal tradition. And finally, a reworking and repossessing of the patriarchal language itself will complete the common language by transforming the meanings of old words into new, non-prejudicial, non-exclusive significations.

Many women poets adhere to the proposition that a matriarchal society did exist at one point in history. Working on this assumption, poets such as Adrienne Rich and Olga Broumas propose that women excavate the past in order to uncover vestiges of an already established matriarchal language. Women must "go back so far there is another language," Rich advises; "go back far enough the language/is
no longer personal."9 Reaching beyond the cultural and linguistic debris to salvage fragments of a female language, however, can be a discouraging endeavor. Broumas writes of the frustration involved in reclaiming what has become so elusive:

Approximations.
The words we need are extinct.

Or if not extinct
badly damaged: the proud Columbia stubbing
her bound up feet on her damned
up bed... Daily
by accident, against
what has become our will through years
of deprivation, we spawn the fluid
that cradles us, grown
as we are, and at a loss
for words. Against all currents, upstream
we spawn
in each other's blood.10

The vestiges of a female language, like the feet of Japanese women, have been bound and covered. Because of their extreme discomfort, Broumas writes, women have begun to actively fight the will of others imposed upon them. The image of the fish fighting the current is a particularly apt metaphor for the woman poet in contemporary American literature. Like the trout moving upstream to spawn in its own birth place, the woman poet struggles against the "male-stream" to return to the origins of her matriarchal past and the security of her native language.

Because many of the words women need are, in fact, extinct and because the remnants of a matriarchal past can only partially be recovered, women must look toward formu-
lating their own words and configurations. One way of creating a new language is by returning to the female, for language is seen to have its roots in the body. The female language Olga Broumas envisions and herself employs is a language which is thus centered in the female body and which derives its energy from female sexuality:

... I work
in silver the tongue-like forms
that curve round a throat

an arm-pit, the upper
thigh, whose significance stirs in me
like a curviform alphabet
that defies

decoding, appears
to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-
mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound.
What tiny fragments

survive, mangled into our language.11

The female language, then, will be a language of "o's" (note the assonance of o's in this passage), of circles and centers--a "curviform alphabet." Broumas frequently employs the figure "o" as a stanza break and closure device in her poetry. The figure has deliberate connections to female sexuality and further represents the theme of female wholeness. Those poems concerned with patriarchal and heterosexual relations are punctuated by the "&" figure--a symbol representing the twisted nature of the present state of the language and of male-female relationships. "I am a woman committed to/a politics/of transliteration,"12 Broumas asserts, and for the poet this transliteration demands substituting, wherever necessary, the wholistic "o" for the broken "&."
The "o" figure finds its structural equivalent in the popular creation of spaces and the standard omission of punctuation in contemporary poetry by women. One explanation for the profuse use of spaces is based upon the paradox that it is only out of brokenness that wholeness can be achieved. Kathleen Fraser in particular, by creating visual and thematic "holes" in her verse, forces the reader to actively connect in order to understand. An old language, like an old pair of shoes, is inadequate to take the poet where she wants to go. Hence, her book New Shoes (1977) is characterized by the creation of open spaces, unfinished events, and "long, unending lines." These spaces are structurally created by the very placement of words on a page and stylistically produced by associative verse which leaves holes of information unfilled. For Fraser, words are so well-constructed they have become confining, and so she must create open spaces to allow freedom of thought and movement:

that's why
I cross out words
so thoroughly,
as though I never
said them, . . .
felt it
to be
so well-constructed
that it would
keep saying
itself
that way,
automatically moving
ahead,
when I
no longer wanted to.14
A second reason for the use of spacial gaps is that they remind both poet and reader of the voices of past women who have been so effectively silenced. By recalling these empty spaces in history, women poets proceed to re-create their language and world while never losing sight of the female tradition of which they are such an integral, revolutionary part. Perhaps the most important justification for the use of spacial gaps in women's poetry is their liberating function. The sexual connotations attached to the "o" figure and the empty spaces clearly indicate that these are places where women in particular can breathe. They are female spaces rooted in the body, in female sexuality:

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

Having to work primarily from a patriarchal language, women poets see the creation of spaces as crucial for artistic growth and experimentation. It is in these very silences between words that the female voice is being born.

The final stage in molding a female language is the process of transformation—a refurbishing of language as we have it. Contemporary women poets are not advocating the complete rejection of the culture's language but rather a re-interpretation of that language. Through the practice of her art, each poet has come to the awareness that

the past echoing through our bloodstreams is freighted with different language, different meanings—
though in any chronicle of the world we share it could be written with new meaning . . .

Thus, the poet seeks to eradicate outdated, narrow connotations and generate newer, more appropriate definitions. She seeks to cleanse herself of what Rich has defined as "the guilt of words:"

I was mute innocent of grammar as the waves irrhythmically washing I felt washed clean of the guilt of words . . .

Rich is referring to the guilt a woman assumes when she must speak in the language of the oppressor. In the mere formulation of her own language, a woman can rid herself of male terminology, masculine significations, and the remorse that inevitably accompanies their usage. Rich's sea imagery indicates that such a reformulation is, in fact, a rite of purification, a significant repossession of language itself. Thus, through the "politics of transliteration," the patriarchal language is reclaimed by women and incorporated into a new tradition of language and literature.

"Being women, women writers have women's bodies, which affect their senses and their imagery." --Ellen Moers, Literary Women

The process of reclaiming is a characteristic movement in women's poetry. It can be seen not only in the attempts to repossess language itself but in the efforts to restore meaning to certain images and symbols. Contemporary
American women poets all seem to share an interest in re­
claiming the domestic objects, figures, and resources, that
have been associated with women in the past--those very
possessions which have been used falsely to testify to
women's innate domesticity. Because the voices of these
women have been, to such a great extent, suppressed and their
visions denied, the only consistent witness to their lives
and experiences are the domestic remnants which have survived
them. Thus, the woman poet is concerned with investing
these objects with new significations, transforming them in
her poems into female images which bear witness to a female
tradition.

Weaving, quilting, and sewing function in the new
tradition of women's poetry as metaphors of connectedness.
Skeins of yarn, bits of fabric, and patchwork pieces
symbolically represent the "natural resources" available to
women to reconstitute the world, to join and stitch together
a society which is ripping apart at the seams: women are
working "to pick apart . . . to remake/this trailing knitted
thing, this cloth of darkness,/this woman's garment, trying
to save the skein."19 Audre Lorde's conception of the world
as a collection of "vital flaws unstitched like crazy patch­
work"20 underscores the urgency of reconnecting the stray
pieces and strengthening culture's fabric. Rich suggests
that the best way to bind together society and culture is
"to clarify connect/past and present, near and far/the
Alabama quilt/the Botswana basket/history . . . ."21 By
stitching together the dichotomies, a stronger, more integrated social structure can be assured.

The baking of bread is another popular domestic image reclaimed. Judy Grahn employs the bread image as her central metaphor for the common woman:

the common woman is as common
as good bread
as common as when you couldn't go on but did.
For all the world we didn't know we held in common all along
the common woman is as common as the best of bread and will rise
and will become strong--
I swear it to you on my own head I swear it to you on my common woman's head

Women will rise as surely as baking bread to become the sustaining influence in a world starved for new visions and new voices. Carolyn Forche also employs the bread metaphor in her poetry to symbolize a woman's abundant capacity to give and to nourish. The grandmother in Gathering the Tribes is described as a woman whose "hands were like wheat rolls" and whose flesh was like "wavy loaves;" the poet identifies Anna so closely with the bread she bakes that the grandmother becomes the bread. Women are often thus identified by the contemporary poets with the bread they bake, the quilts they sew, and the clothes they weave. Such an identification of women with their art, however, is not intended in any way to objectify them but is meant to link them to a vital tradition, a pattern of female history. Contemporary women poets are weaving the fabric of their own literary tradition
in the reclaiming of domestic metaphors and in the restoration of a primitive language.

Images of completion characterize this new literary tradition—a tradition which is energized by the female quest for wholeness. Circles are the most obvious example: "the bond between women is a circle," Grahn writes; "we are together within it." A more original image which figuratively describes the theme of completion is offered by Ai:

You raise your hands to shade your eyes from the sudden explosion of sunlight through the umber clouds.
In that brightness, you separate into five stained glass women

Four of you are floating north, south, east and west.
I reach out, shatter you in each direction.

Ai is describing a woman's explosive entry into the state of wholeness. She is centered in her identity as female at the same time her boundaries are shattered to encompass all of humanity. Fraser provides a similar image of centering in her Emma Slide poems. A woman is like a starfish "in the very center of the 'world' is/pointing five directions at once/all the symmetry of it pulling against its . . . center." Centering is a key term for the divided woman poet, for it denotes the very purpose of her poetic endeavor—the focusing of her artistic and intellectual resources and the bonding together of her multiple selves.

Images of female bonding and female sexuality predominate in women's poetry. The image of the braided hair—"nets, strands, a braid of hair/a grandmother's strong hands
plaited/straight down a grand-daughter's back"—evokes both the theme of female bonding and the theme of a matrilineal heritage. The moon, the tides, and the sea itself are recurrent images for female sexuality—as are images of littleness (e.g., berries, stones, gems) and images which suggest enclosures or receptacles: the "porcelain bowl," the collapsible cave," and the "windless bay." Even fire recurs as a female image in contemporary women's poetry. The titles of Rich's complementary poems, "Burning Oneself In" and "Burning Oneself Out," reflect the double meaning and use of the archetypal symbol. In some poems, such as Rich's "Mother-In-Law," fire functions as an image of the rage of the oppressed—a rage which will become self-destructive if it continues to be suppressed: "my anger takes fire . . . and in the oven/the meal bursts into flames." If the rage is directed outward to its proper cause, then fire can serve as a symbol of active rebellion and female liberation as in Rich's "The Phenomenology of Anger":

    night after night
    awake in prison, my mind
    licked at the mattress like a flame
    till the cellblock went up roaring

Whether one "burns oneself in" or "burns oneself out," fire serves as the principle metaphor for the woman poet's artistic, intellectual, and sexual energies which desire freedom from the cultural taboos which inhibit and oppress.

The language and the imagery of the patriarchal tradition will not suffice to express the ideas, dreams, and
experiences of the contemporary woman. Gallagher reveals that for the woman poet in particular, the words of the patriarchy are precisely "the words/which must find you/off the page." To put themselves back into the annals of literary history, women must forge their own language to convey their own messages. Language may in fact be the key to the success of the new tradition of women's poetry, for, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "as long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless . . . ."
"When I was young,
I misunderstood
The Muse.
Now I am older and wiser,
I can be glad of her
As one is glad of the light,
But rejoice in what we see
Because of it. --May Sarton,
"Of the Muse"

Like the problem of language, the question of the
female muse strikes at the very heart of the woman writer's
difficulty in placing herself within the tradition of patriar­
chial poetry. Not only is the tradition overwhelmingly male,
its conventions are similarly geared to the needs and
interests of the male poet. The personification of the poetic
muse as female is a distinctly masculine invention which, in
the artistic realm, serves to relegate women to the role of
passive inspiration, while allowing men to actively "beget"
their poetry upon them. If the poetic process is thus
defined as the "sexual encounter between a male poet and his
female muse," as critic Harold Bloom maintains,¹ then where
does that leave the woman poet?

Feminist critic Pamela Di Pesa suggests in her
article on "The Imperious Muse" that the masculine conception
of the art of writing poetry has functioned for the woman
writer, not as an appropriate and useful symbol of inspiration,
but as "a continual reminder . . . of the prohibitions and prejudices of the literary tradition itself." Di Pesa brilliantly theorizes that the concept of the female muse originated as a projection of the male artist's feelings of ambivalence toward this poetic tradition as well as toward women and nature. In order to repress his negative feelings toward all three of these formidable forces, the male poet encapsulates them in the concept of the idealized female muse, and in this way he succeeds in stripping them of their most threatening connotations. "What used to be a hindrance to the artist is now a help," Di Pesa notes:

He has dealt with the apparent opposition between life and art by using the former in the service of the latter; he has overcome his first antagonist, nature, by drawing it, in the person of woman, into the second field of battle. Rather than distracting the artist in his struggle with tradition, the image of woman enters the contest as a kind of mediator, helping the artist in the same way that she helped his predecessors--by providing him with poetic progeny.

The muse, then, performs three vital psychological functions for the male poet: it neutralizes his formerly discomforting feelings about the mysterious life impulses in nature (birth, death, creativity); it distances and objectifies his fear and desire for the female; and it links him to his male predecessors and the already established tradition of world literature. One must next ask the question, as Di Pesa does, of how a woman confronts this poetic tradition. Without a muse to connect her to a tradition of writers, without a symbol to absorb and project
her destructive inner anxieties, how can a woman fulfill her literary ambitions? How can she assume the role of active creator when for centuries she has assimilated the patriarchal view of herself as a figure for the mediating muse?

The first step in de-mythologizing the concept of woman as muse is the recognition of how the concept has been used or mis-used by the literary "sons" (Bloom). In classical mythology, there were nine muses in number, each a daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne ("Memory") and each a goddess of a specific artistic or scientific field. These muses were graced with the power to make the true seem false as well as the ability to inspire in a person true knowledge if they so wished. Olga Broumas assumes the ancient voice of the muses in her poem "Triple Muse" to explore the unique gifts of these goddesses as well as their idealization as feminine in the predominantly masculine tradition:

False things
we've made seem true, by charm, by music. Faked
any trick when it pleased us

and laughed, faked
too when it didn't. The audience couldn't tell, invoking us absently, stroking their fragile beards, waiting

for inspiration
served up like dinner, or sex.

The mythological muses were powerful, for truth was within their control, and yet still Broumas acknowledges that their actions were no more than theatrical performances for an apathetic and ignorant audience waiting to be inspired. The muses are personified as women, the poet perceives,
precisely because the male poets view the gift of inspiration as a service, as something which is offered to them "like dinner, or sex."

Adrienne Rich employs the native American figure of the "shamaness" or desert witch in her poem "Turning the Wheel." to explain the prevailing influence of the ancient Greek conception of the muse and its continued usage by the patriarchal poetic tradition. The shamaness is a faceless Indian figure of a woman grinding corn—an archetypal symbol for Rich of the millions of faceless, nameless, voiceless women in history who have been silenced by their culture. Significantly, the "desert witch" can also be read as a figure for the abstracted muse in "Turning the Wheel." By attributing to the female symbolic power, whether in the symbol of the desert witch or the figure of the muse, the establishment poets deny women actual influence in the patriarchal realms:

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

As an abstraction, the power the female muse possesses is not actual but merely metaphoric and hence ineffectual in the real world. Rich makes the point in her poem that even the power which is metaphorically allowed a woman as muse is only that of inspiration, not actual creation. She is imprisoned within a literary ideal which is, in truth,
powerful—but only to the men who have created it.

The contemporary female poet, in the process of building a new tradition of poetry, has broken free from this stereotype of literary muse to herself fill the role of literary creator. Having rejected the conventions of the female muse and its historical role in upholding and sustaining an exclusively male poetic tradition, the woman writer is inevitably faced with another set of questions and challenges. If the inspirational female muse is to be rejected, then what is the specific source of creativity for the woman poet? Does she, in fact, have a muse, and if so, is the muse an idealized, inspirational male or a gender-less creative influence?

It seems clear that "there is nothing in tradition, mythology, or in the social history of women, to support the idea that women might conceive of men as their sources of inspiration or creativity."? However, there is some evidence in contemporary women's poetry that the muse is asexual, or at least that it takes the form in women's poetry of a creature without gender. The angel is the most common figure used to represent the gender-less muse. May Sarton describes the role of angels as the centering presence in a poet's life, the forces which graciously bestow upon her the gift of poetry:

Angels, who can surprise us with a lucky chance,  
Be with us in this year; give us to dance  
Time's tick away, and in our whirling flight  
Poetry center the long fall through light.
The poet perceives of the angels' performance as "an act of grace"; the conveyors of inspiration are portrayed as divine messengers who herald the presence of every poem which is about to be born. This is how May Sarton cleverly responds to Bloom's masculine poetics: if she cannot beget her poems upon the muse, then she will place herself in the role of the Virgin and place the muse in the role of announcing angel. As she gave birth to herself, she will independently give birth to her poetry and, by this means, circumvent the tenets of Bloomian poetics.

Another way the woman poet has chosen to deal with the problem of creative sources is by internalizing the muse. The muse is not the traditional, abstract concept used as a linkage to a larger tradition; rather, for the woman writer, she is the chronicle of one's past history and experiences. She operates as the writer's inner mirror, as in Rich's "The Demon Lover":

Woman, stand off. The air glistens like silk.
She's gone. In her place stands a schoolgirl, morning light,
the half-grown bones of innocence. Is she your daughter or your muse, . . . ?"

The reflection Rich perceives is both her daughter and her muse; it is her younger self, her more innocent self, her inspirational self. The muse is indeed female, but she is no longer distanced or detached; she is the concrete representation of the poet's past and present self which
must be confronted and understood if poetry is to be produced. Many women poets aptly employ the Medusa image in their poetry to express the intimate connection between a poet's muse and her inner self. As Karen Elias-Button points out in her study of "The Muse as Medusa," the mythological goddess with the face that turns to stone has traditionally been interpreted within the male system as a symbol for the castrating female. She represents the destructive forces within the creative genius—the forces which, if confronted directly, can paralyze and consume the poet's literary gift. In patriarchal mythology, Medusa must be overcome if the male poet is to break free from "the Terrible Mother" and achieve his manhood. However, in the new tradition of women's poetry, the woman writer moves beyond the destructive effects of the mythic mother figure not by conquering her, as in the Perseus story, but by acknowledging Medusa as part of her own inner self that must be more fully integrated before the goddess's creative energies can be tapped:

I turn your face around! It is my face.
That frozen rage is what I must explore—
Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!
This is the gift I thank Medusa for.

May Sarton communicates in these lines her conviction that women can reclaim the "terrible" goddess by affirming their dependence upon her. For the woman poet, Medusa does not hinder the creative act of writing poetry; rather, she facilitates the process. She does this by initiating within the poet the dialogue with herself. In this exchange, Sarton
explains, "the Muse never answers;" instead, "the Muse opens up the dialogue with oneself and goes her way." Just as it is a mistake to suppose that God is chiefly concerned with religion, Sarton maintains, so is it a mistake to suppose that the muse is primarily concerned with poetry. The muse functions like a mirror or Medusa whose sole purpose is to turn the poet's gaze inward before she can productively and positively externalize her inner creative energies.

Often this mirror image takes the incarnate form of a female lover or friend. In Sarton's own poetry, the female muse is precisely that—another female. "Women are the Muse, and they elicit my poetry," she reveals. "These love affairs have been able to capture my imagination. I've been in love with men but never written any poems. It's a mysterious thing." For the poet Adrienne Rich, the muse is also a woman incarnate—a woman of actual rather than symbolic power. Both poets remove the muse from the abstract realm of literary convention to place her concretely in their lives and in their work. The placement is not an artificial one; indeed, Sarton seems surprised that the voice of the muse is a human voice:

I never thought that it could be, not once,
The muse appearing in warm human guise,
She the mad creature of unhappy chance
Who looked at me with cold Medusa eyes,

But the muse does speak to her in "warm human guise" and challenge her to confront the ravaged places of the heart.

Sarton once again employs the image of the Medusa to indicate
that the creative powers that have hitherto been denigrated and denied are finally surfacing in women's poetry, and she celebrates this act of repossession by claiming the terrible goddess as her own.

II

"Women need a new mythology, sustaining definitions of self that are not male-identified."

--Wendy Martin

The reclaiming of the Medusa figure for the muse illustrates the shared concern in women's poetry for reaching back to a remote past to recover a lost mythological heritage. Traditional goddesses of Greek and African mythology are frequently invoked by the poet, and they often hold a central place in her poetry. The stories of Demeter, Medusa, Aphrodite, Kali, Circe, and Seboulisa are all retold and reaffirmed from a feminist perspective, and their mythological powers are re-interpreted by the women who see themselves as the beneficiaries of the goddesses. Just as a tradition of male poets have viewed themselves as indebted to a benevolent god for the excellence of their gift, so do women claim the goddess as their literary benefactress. Though in both cases the appeal to the divine spirit may be merely symbolic, the divinity performs the necessary psychological function of affirming the importance of the poetic vocation and strengthening the poet's artistic ties to past writers and to the past tradition which they inhabit.
Maternal prototypes in mythology are most commonly re-invented by the contemporary poet. One might add to the Greek mothers, Demeter and Medusa, the African mother goddess, Seboulisa, and the Hindu mother figure, Kali. Seboulisa, in Audre Lorde's "125th Street and Abomey," is the goddess whom the poet invokes to re-connect the splintered selves and make her whole again. In a ritual act of supplication and trust, Lorde offers up her multiple selves as sacrifice to "the Mother of us all:"

... I poured on the red earth in your honor
those ancient parts of me
most precious and least needed
my well-guarded past
the energy-eating secrets
I surrender to you as libation
mother, illuminate my offering ...

The poet desires to be re-connected by being reunited with the mythic mother: "see me now/your severed daughter/laughing our name into echo/all the world shall remember." Like her warrior sisters, Lorde implores Seboulisa for "the woman strength" which only she can give. Without this strength and without her connection to the ancient mother goddess, Lorde feels exiled and homeless in a white, patriarchal culture which consistently denies black female power.

May Sarton turns to the black goddess Kali to find her strength and support in her chosen vocation as poet. In "The Invocation to Kali," the savage goddess is re-interpreted as the mother of the creative act itself. Sarton defines Kali as the anguish, rage, and brute power within us that has not yet been mastered and controlled.
Yet without "the destroyer"—without the element of opposition and conflict—the act of creation could not take place:

Every creation is born out of the dark.  
Every birth is bloody. Something gets torn.  
Kali is there to do her sovereign work  
Or else the living child will be stillborn.

The "awesome power" of Kali can be tamed through the positive act of creation, for, paradoxically, the most productive and generative use of the destroyer is within the creative act. The black goddess is Sarton's figure for the destructive side of the creative unconscious which must be confronted and accepted before it can be productively channelled into the service of poetry:

It is time for the invocation:

Kali, be with us.  
Violence, destruction, receive our homage.  
Help us to bring darkness into the light.  
To lift out the pain, the anger,  
Where it can be seen for what it is—  
The balance-wheel for our vulnerable, aching love.  
Put the wild hunger where it belongs,  
Within the act of creation, . . .

Sarton invokes Kali with the same sense of reverence that Lorde invokes Seboulisa. Both poets are attempting to reclaim the mythic mother in their poetry and to convert her potentially destructive powers into positive, transformative energies.

Olga Broumas focuses in her poetry not just on the mythic mother but on the variety of goddess figures which can be repossessed and re-interpreted by the contemporary woman poet. The first section of poems in Olga Broumas'
Beginning With Q is devoted to these "Twelve Aspects of God," which are, in fact, twelve aspects of the preclassical Greek goddess. Broumas explains that the purpose of her opening section and the use of contemporary language in poems about ancient mythology is "to express the continuity of those myths, and of female power, through the centuries to our own time." Broumas seeks to situate her own poetry within a matriarchal timeline by re-mythologizing the early goddesses in poems about contemporary women. Thetis, the goddess of the sea, fertility, and impregnation, for example, becomes the subject of a poem on modern day birth control. The goddess of immortality, Calypso, because she was renowned in antiquity as a skilled weaver, painter, and storyteller, becomes a figure for the contemporary woman artist. Even Circe is reclaimed as the prototypical autonomous woman—a woman of such magnitude and power that she can "turn/men into swine" as she passes every "corner/bar, corner store, corner construction/site" in the city.

In like manner, Louise Gluck recalls the figure of Aphrodite to represent the disillusioned young wife in contemporary society. Gluck chooses the goddess of love and beauty in her poem "Aphrodite" as an ironic symbol for the disparity between the lonely, suffering wife and the husband's romantic conception of her. In the husband's imagination, the wife is the goddess of divine care when she welcomes him home from his daily voyage into the larger world. He fails to see the wife's intense loneliness
and frustration and chooses only to greet her as a welcoming harbor when he becomes "weary of the open."

In time, the young wife naturally hardens. Drifting from her side, in imagination, the man returns not to a drudge but to the goddess he projects.

The goddess that is projected is the husband's fantasy of what his wife should be--a passive object, a guiding light, and a nurturing mother. The young wife, however, cannot survive as the idealized goddess of her husband's imagination. She must assert her own selfhood apart from the romantic ideal; and so she becomes "the armless figure" confronting the wayward traveler, "her thighs cemented shut." The wife could not be more removed from the classical goddess, and yet she is a goddess in her own right--powerful and determined enough to terminate a dangerous relationship and bar "the fault in the rock" by claiming her autonomy.

Autonomy is the key to understanding why the goddess is such a popular figure in contemporary women's poetry. Carol Christ, in an essay on "Why Women Need the Goddess," interprets the need as a necessary response to patriarchal religions which have upheld for centuries the male god as the legitimator of male power. Celebration of the goddess, Christ notes, liberates women from dependence upon men and from patriarchal authority as codified and enforced by masculine images of the divinity. Significantly, the central themes of contemporary women's poetry--female sexuality, female generativity, and female autonomy--are all
suggested by the figure of the goddess. Further, the ancient goddess provides the all-important continuity with the past which the contemporary woman poet desires for the establishment of her new literary tradition, and she offers the mythological, religious, and psychological underpinnings for its construction. In short, because the goddess embodies the voices and visions of centuries of women dedicated to the fulfillment of female potentialities, she functions as a particularly appropriate inspirational figure for the evolving tradition of women's poetry.
CHAPTER NINE:

PERSONAL VERSUS POLITICAL:
A NEW POETRY OF WITNESS

The formulation of a new tradition of women's poetry based upon a female language and energized by an inspirational goddess is as political as it is personal. Indeed, the new tradition of women's poetry has often been criticized for its "separatist" tendencies and its political themes. This attack upon political poetry is not unique to women's poetry nor is it peculiar to the modern period. The debate between personal and political poetry is an on-going one which has been intensified in the twentieth-century by the evolution of various political movements—most notably, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. Such movements and the literature connected with them have served to revive the question of whether political poetry can be termed poetry at all. For the contemporary woman poet, the question is a particularly disturbing one, since so often the charge "political" is levied as a dismissal of both her motivation for writing and her poems themselves. It is assumed that, because much of contemporary women's literature has been composed during the "second wave" of feminism, and because black women's poetry has arisen out of the Civil Rights Movement as well, the literature which is produced must necessarily be polemical.
Undoubtedly, no political movement can avoid generating a certain amount of propagandist poetry. However, it is false to assume that all poetry written during a politically turbulent period is didactic poetry. Indeed, many women poets of the 1960's and 70's (May Sarton, for example) composed important works of literature in a manner and style which suggests imperviousness to the various political movements around them. Even those poets who do compose from a definite political stance (Adrienne Rich comes to mind) are more typically energized by the political atmosphere rather than oppressed by it. Certainly no American woman poet writing today can or would wish to deny the influence of the liberationist movements on her life and her art. It has been these very movements which have provided a whole generation of women writers with the social license and political freedom to fulfill their literary vocations in a less hostile environment. The psychological effects of this expansion of social and cultural boundaries have produced a veritable explosion in women's literature; and implicit in this literary awakening is a transformation in the woman writer's personal life which has had a direct effect upon her public life as a poet. It is indeed true that, because of the great influence of the political movements of the period (movements which insist upon racial, sexual, and class equality), to be a female poet has suddenly become personally and politically acceptable. The terms "poet" and "woman" no longer denote contradictory and mutually exclusive realities.
And yet, if the poet's gender and vocation are no longer opposed to each other, her politics are now viewed as incompatible with "true" universal poetry. Those women writing especially during the 1970's have been confronted with the traditional argument that political poetry cannot be conceived of as pure art since art in its highest form is essentially non-political. Carolyn Forche writes:

I was cautioned to avoid mixing art and politics, that one damages the other, and it was sometime before I realized that "political poetry" often means the poetry of protest, accused of polemical didacticism, and not the poetry which implicitly celebrates politically acceptable values. I suspect that underlying this discomfort is a naive assumption: that to locate a poem in an area associated with political trouble automatically renders it political.¹

The critical problem for the woman writer is that, in filling a hitherto masculine-defined role, her very gender constitutes a radical political statement. Because the female poet characteristically composes poems which affirm human experience (female as well as male) rather than exclusively male experience, her creative endeavor is conceived of as a revolutionary act which invalidates her poetry. Forche is thus correct in detecting that the "pure" art form which so many critics uphold as the universal norm does, in fact, contain certain implicit political assumptions about the nature of poetry and what it means to be a poet. Among these assumptions is the traditional belief that the universal as well as the particular are equivalent to the male. Hence, the very fact of being both woman and poet, though
obstensibly no longer incompatible on the level of gender, is politically and thus artistically incorrect in a tradition which, despite the recent social reform movements, still remains patriarchal in both definition and practice.

"Politics, you'd say, is an unworthy name for what we're after. What we're after is not that clear to me, if politics is an unworthy name." — Adrienne Rich, "Rift"

A closer look at the definition of political poetry should clarify the significant points of contention in the present debate with non-political, private poetry. Contemporary poet and critic, Denise Levertov, in her essay "On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?" addresses herself to this very question in an effort to determine whether political poetry can, in truth, be termed good poetry. Before tackling the larger issue, Levertov traces the tradition of political poetry within the patriarchy itself in order to more precisely define its chief characteristics. Citing such well-known poets as Dante, Milton, Blake, and Pound, Levertov concludes that most political poetry, "if not actually revolutionary, takes its stand on the side of liberty and not of maintaining the status quo." Moreover, political poetry typically affirms freedom and
honor, "even when the poet suffers illusion about where these are to be found." For Levertov, then, political poetry is in essence the poetry of revolution, for it confronts and opposes, through theme and imagery, the established values and politics of the status quo.

Having defined political poetry most simply as poems which deal with social observations, Levertov can now respond to the central challenge directed against political poetry. Whether or not a poem is good, she maintains, "depends on the gifts of the poet, not on the subject matter." In other words, one might just as well pose the question of whether personal poetry is good poetry, for subject matter alone cannot determine the worth of a poem. One might add to Levertov's defense of political poetry the equally valid argument against censorship. Clearly, when a tradition begins to dictate proper and improper subject matter—defining the personal as "proper" and the political as "improper"—censorship is the inevitable result. The recognition that there is, in truth, no definable "proper" subject matter, no thematic or artistic norm to be strictly followed and emulated, allows the tradition of political poetry to be treated with the same seriousness and interest presently accorded to all non-political poetry in the canon of Western literature.

Though political poetry can, in fact, be detected throughout the standard history of literature, it is worth noting that its opposition to the supposedly more refined
tradition of personal poetry is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Levertov theorizes that the dichotomy arises from the mistaken Romantic conception of poetry as mere private expression without a social or political dimension. A more plausible explanation, I believe, is that the social concerns of the classical tradition and the private interests of the romantic tradition have together created a very real tension which is presently being worked out in the modern period. Accordingly, the question of personal versus political poetry can be seen as an embodiment of this tension and the battleground for the opposing views of the classicists and the romantics. Whatever the origin of the poetic controversy, it does seem appropriate that women writers, so deliberately excluded in the past from these great literary movements of the age, should, in attempting to break the bonds of their own double bind situation, resolve in the process this most divisive tension in modern literature.

"What those of us whose lives are permeated by a sense of unremitting political emergency, and who are at the same time writers of poetry, most desire in our work, I think, is to attain to such osmosis of the personal and the public, of assertion and of song, that no one would be able to divide our poems into categories." --Denise Levertov, "On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?"

The most consistent and most convincing argument in women's literature to counter the prevailing tendency to
dichotomize personal and political poetry is a line of reasoning which questions the validity of the dichotomy itself. For Levertov, Rich, Forche, and others, the contradiction between the personal and the political, the private and the public, is merely superficial. One cannot oppose the public to the private, for the personal is political and the political is personal. In speaking of her own poetic development, Adrienne Rich cites the growing awareness of her political self as the turning point in her literary career:

I began . . . to feel that politics was not something "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition.6

The outcome of this insight was the 1974 volume Diving into the Wreck which explores the political failure of the patriarchy and its consequent dehumanizing effect upon the personal lives of both men and women. The opening quotation from one of Rich's literary foremothers, George Eliot, is a particularly appropriate epigraph for a book which is as political as it is personal: "There is no private life," Eliot writes, "which is not determined by a wider public life."

Rich chooses in A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far the politically controversial figure, Ethel Rosenberg, to illustrate the intimate connection between a person's public and private lives.7 Convicted and executed as a spy along with her husband in 1953, Rosenberg, Rich believes, was condemned for more than her politics. She was a woman of independent thought and unconventional creativity.
that daughter of a family
like so many
needing its female monster

she, actually wishing to be an artist
wanting out of poverty
possibly also really wanting
revolution . . .

In the eyes of society, Rich perceives, Rosenberg's real
crime was her personal deviation from the accepted values
and norms of the larger social order: "charged by posterity/
not with selling secrets to the Communists/but with
wanting to distinguish/herself being a bad daughter a
bad mother . . . ." Rosenberg, by attempting to fulfill
her call to political activism, suffered the extreme victimi-
ization of being denied her personhood. Thus, the poet is com-
pelled to question whether Rosenberg was executed for the
nature of her politics or for the very fact of her political
involvement. Rich poses the key question--"Ethel Greenglass
Rosenberg would you/have marched to take back the night/
collected signatures/for battered women who kill . . . ?"
Whatever her politics, it is her inalienable right to be
political which Rich defends; and so she concludes the poem
with a vision of tolerance, allowing Rosenberg not only her
individuality but her own definition of revolution:

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

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

Unfortunately, Rich's stance is an anomaly in a world
so often governed by prejudice and intolerance. Rich's own position as a lesbian poet makes her particularly vulnerable in a heterosexist society. This sense of vulnerability (paradoxically, the source of the unique strength, insight, and integrity of the woman poet) is not peculiar to Rich alone. Every woman poet experiences herself and her art as embattled, and because of this sense she cannot escape the political repercussions of her private lifestyle. Judy Grahn does, in fact, unambiguously define the subject of lesbianism in political terms, presenting it as "the question of male domination that makes everybody angry." Hence, in the political/personal realms (which are for Grahn, as for Rich, so closely related as to be inextricable), lesbianism can ultimately "overthrow the rule of men over women." Olga Broumas is yet another contemporary poet who defines her public poetry as closely linked to her private sexuality. Broumas' poems—in particular, her love poems—are political in the most radical sense, for they witness to a style of living, a mode of thought, and a method of writing which challenge the very basis of a patriarchal society and its literary and cultural traditions. Broumas' poetic work is indeed, to quote critic Stanley Kunitz, "as much a political document as it is an impassioned lyric outburst."

In short, the dichotomy between personal and political poetry is viewed by the new tradition of women poets as simply another by-product of the divisive patriarchal society in which we live. Thus, to be dismissed as "political" is no
longer a threat to the woman poet, for she has come to recognize the cultural bias which has generated the charge. Further, most women writing today are aware that, once the distinctions between public and private have fallen away, the term "political" is open to more positive significations, to definitions of their own choosing. Florence Howe comments that if contemporary women poets "are labeled ideological, they will wear that label as a banner. If they are challenged as poets, they will gladly be women/poets." When the old definitions fail to encompass female expression, then new definitions are readily constructed, and in this way the designation "political" has been transformed in women's literature from epithet to banner.

"If I did not wish to make poetry of what I had seen, what is it I thought poetry was?"  
--Carolyn Forche, "El Salvador: An Aide Memoire"

In the new tradition of contemporary poetry by women, poetry is perceived to be at once political and personal. The separation of art from politics is viewed as not only undesirable but impossible, for, as Carolyn Forche insists, "all poetry is both pure and engaged." In her article, "El Salvador: An Aide Memoire," Forche articulates the growing conviction among women writers that there is, in fact, no such thing as non-political poetry:
All language . . . is political; vision is always ideologically charged; perceptions are shaped a priori by our assumptions and sensibility formed by consciousness at once social, historical, and aesthetic.

Yet we are not powerless to effect our consciousness.

Indeed,

We are responsible for the quality of our vision, we have a say in the shaping of our sensibility. In the many thousand daily choices we make, we create ourselves and the voice with which we speak and work.12

The poem itself is an illustration for the poet of our efforts toward self-creation, toward more fully integrating private expression and public statement, the inner sensibility and the outer stimulus. It is clear that for Forche, politics can no longer be viewed as belonging outside the realm of poetry but rather it must be seen as it is--more immediately located within the experience of the poem itself.

This political dimension is emphasized and underscored by Forche's understanding of poetry's distinctiveness as its "quality of engagement."13 Levertov also employs the precise term "engagement" to suggest that it is the poet's intense involvement with her subject and her mode which gives the poem its special urgency and power. A poem of direct personal experience and of passionate social observation can, in Levertov's words, "affect our senses and engage our aesthetic response just as much as one with whose content--spring, love, death, a rainbow--we can have no argument."14 In fact, poetry written by those who are active participants in their subject matter is more likely to exert affective
power than those poems written from a stance of objective
detachment. It is Levertov's contention that the great
appeal for this so-called "political" poetry lies in the
concreteness of its passion and the authenticity of its
metaphors which are derived from the poet's own personal
involvement with her themes.\(^{15}\) It follows, then, that the
political poet is so engaged in her subject that the resultant
poem cannot fail to engage the reader.

This new poetry of engagement is also a poetry of
witness. Forche goes so far as to say that the twentieth-
century human condition demands a poetry of witness.\(^{16}\) The
woman poet especially can no longer afford to confine herself
to the observer's role if she wishes to survive and work
towards personal integrity. Relegated for so long to the
role of passive observer--to a placement outside the perimeters
of full human experience--the woman writer must assume the
central position of active participant in order to perceive
the reality of her world. Without a willingness to witness
to the reality, no real forward movement is possible for the
writer. In the new tradition of women's poetry, the poet
believes that she must, if necessary, insist upon the strength
of her vision and the authority of her voice. In a poem
concerned with violence against women, for example, Rich
plainly states:

\[
\ldots \text{What I am telling you}
\]
\[
\text{is told by a woman who they will say}
\]
\[
\text{was never there. I say I am there.}^{17}\]
The poet refuses to permit the denial of her presence and the dismissal of what she has witnesses, for to do so would be to endanger her own sense of personal integrity as well as to diminish the power of her voice.

More remarkable even than such direct assertions of female power and presence is the sheer number of poems being composed by women in the contemporary period. Each of these poems is itself illustrative of the impulse to witness to the truth of women's perceptions and to the validity of a female perspective. Gathered together into a unified tradition, the impact of these poems is even greater. Indeed, the very formation of a modern tradition of women's poetry is an attempt to give voice to women's perceptions and to give weight to a perspective too often ignored in the history of western literature.
CONCLUSION

The recent poems of "engagement" composed by contemporary women writers reinforce the growing awareness that a new tradition of women's poetry is at last definitively emerging in the modern period. The focus upon female bonding, the reclaiming of a matrilineal heritage, the repossessing of language, and the re-interpretation of the literary muse all testify to the conscious efforts of these poets to create a new poetics—a new tradition of poetry determined and defined by women. In this tradition, the patriarchy and its institutions—marriage, motherhood, family—are continually re-evaluated, continually re-interpreted from a female perspective. The very formulation of a female poetics challenges the rule of patriarchal literature at the same time it bonds women together to form a new literary tradition.

The direction this new tradition of women's poetry might take in the future is, of course, open to speculation. The avenues open to the tradition are several: women's poetry may ultimately remerge with the so-called mainstream of literature; it may continue to grow against or away from the mainstream and form a separatist tradition; or it may join the mainstream in creating an androgynous tradition. Given the goals of contemporary women poets and their impassioned reasons for specifically formulating a new tradition of poetry, it appears unlikely that any of these alternatives will, in fact, be realized. Rather, it is more probable, I believe,
that two distinct traditions of poetry will evolve—sometimes in accord, sometimes in opposition with one another—traditions strong enough to maintain their separate identities even when joining together for their mutual benefit.

The proposal that women's literature will re-enter the mainstream after a brief period of autonomy, appears to be the least likely end in the evolution of women's poetry. It is held by many that the present formulation of an independent female poetics will harm women writers by isolating them from the mainstream of western literature. The implicit assumption in such a line of argument is, of course, that the mainstream is the "Right" (indeed, the "Good") without which nothing can survive. If this premise were true, however, the new canon of poetry by women would never have evolved, never have thrived in the way in which it clearly has.

Further, the contemporary woman poet is well aware that the proposed integration of women writers into the mainstream entails nothing less than a significant adjustment on her part to the patriarchally-defined tradition. As Suzanne Juhasz points out, "that 'mainstream' or 'real world' to which its proponents refer is still the patriarchy, even as the very term 'androgyny' has historically meant subsuming the feminine into the masculine psyche."¹ Thus, for the woman writer to compromise and submit to the mainstream would mean nothing less than being engulfed by a tradition in which the male writers would continue to dictate the standards and criteria by which to judge "true" literature.

Another popular argument when considering the future of women's literature is the belief that gender should be irrelevant in the composition of any literary work. Ideally, the writer should be an androgynous figure and should strive to compose in an androgynous voice. Hence, it is held, women must come to realize that there is no such thing as a distinctly male voice or a distinctly female voice; the literary voice is gender-less. Contemporary women poets—because of their emphasis upon what is distinct to women, upon female sexuality, female bonding, and female histories—tend to perceive of the ideal of the androgynous writer as fundamentally unrealistic. Whether or not women writers compose from a distinctly female perspective and men from a distinctly male perspective, it does seem true that no writer is gender-less and that the writer's experiences flow from this gender and are influenced by it. The concept of an androgynous literary voice is believed to deny the validity of these experiences and to disregard their significant influence upon the writer's artistic sensibility.

For these reasons, then, the concept of androgyny is a specious one for the contemporary woman poet. She has come to recognize in her personal and artistic growth that gender is not an indifferent form, that indeed gender has always affected her experiences and perspectives. In a 1972 poem entitled "The Stranger," Adrienne Rich embraces the concept of the androgynous writer:
I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child.2

However, in five years time Rich comes to reject this very
same concept as a denial of her sexuality:

There are words I cannot choose again:
humanism androgyny

Such words have no shame in them, no diffidence
before the raging stoic grandmothers.3

The question must be raised, are the experiences of the grandmothers adequately represented in the mainstream of literature? For Rich and others, the answer is clear: women in general are not sufficiently or adequately portrayed by the literary voices of western culture—voices which claim a universal viewpoint while in truth treating only male themes from male perspectives. In short, the androgynous voice has, in the past, been equated with the male voice; and hence, the contemporary woman poet is rightfully suspicious of any appeals to the ideal of the androgynous writer.

Separatism is viewed by some critics and poets as the only viable direction contemporary women's poetry might take. Advocates of separatism argue that because it was the mainstream in the first place which excluded female experience and hence generated a distinct tradition of women's poetry, it would be tragic for this tradition to become re-assimilated into the mainstream, subsumed into the larger flow. Thus, it is concluded, the new tradition of women's poetry must remain
a separate tradition at all costs to preserve its unique identity and distinctive concerns. The problem with this stance is that it presumes that women's literature is unable to hold its own in connection with the established body of patriarchal poetry. It assumes that it is only in isolation that the new canon of women's poetry can ultimately survive. Contemporary women poets would unanimously disagree, I believe, with the premise that women's poetry is inherently weaker than any other tradition of literature. Indeed, they would argue for the growing strength of the tradition and its present integrity. Such integrity renders total isolation unnecessary for the woman poet, since the strength which she derives from her tradition allows her to engage freely and openly in dialogue with opposing literary perspectives--even and especially the patriarchal viewpoint in literature.

Thus, it can be argued that the future of women's poetry--though admittedly a matter of debate--might well initiate the crucial dialogue between (as well as within) varying traditions--a dialogue that is necessary for a more diverse and, at the same time, more integrated world. What is here envisioned is two independent traditions of literature--a male tradition and a female tradition--which can come together when desirable to mutually influence one another. Like two adults, the two traditions will be able to interact harmoniously precisely because they are each secure, independent, complete entities. Each tradition can benefit by the other's special themes and concerns without either body of literature
required to submerge into the other, lose its identity completely in the other. It is in this direction that I believe contemporary women's poetry is moving.

The stage in which both traditions have achieved a position of parity has not, however, yet been achieved. Consequently, contemporary American women poets are presently calling for the time and the space in which to further develop and refine their own literary tradition. Just as a patriarchal tradition was, in the past, necessary for the full flowering of the male imagination, so is what might be termed a "matriarchal" tradition viewed in the present as necessary for the full evolution of the female imagination. In recent years, there has been an explosion of writing by women who, I believe, are already beginning to pioneer a new tradition. Accepted and acknowledged for the first time as legitimate writers, a veritable Renaissance in women's poetry is taking place in the modern period. Women's literature—so long denied and suppressed—is presently coming of age; and it is contemporary American women poets who are fashioning a new, female tradition of poetry to mark what is perhaps the most significant literary development in the history of western culture.
NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

Tillie Olsen in her book *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978) gives figures detailing the representation and recognition accorded women writers in the areas of critical works (one out of thirteen to one out of thirty), reference works (one out of eleven), anthologies and textbooks (one out of eleven), and fiction published (one out of four). The representation of women writers in modern poetry anthologies alone is telling: *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, Ellmann and O'Clair, eds.—thirteen out of ninety-six; *The Major Young Poets*, Lee, ed.—no women, eight men; *Contemporary American Poets*, Strand, ed.—twelve out of ninety-two; *Contemporary American Poetry*, Hall, ed.—two out of twenty-five. Cf. *Silences*, pp. 186-193 for complete figures.


3*Naked and Fiery Forms*, p. 1.

4*Naked and Fiery Forms*, p. 3.

5Pp. 40-41.

6Rich in her preface to Susan Griffin's *Voices*, 1976.


Madwoman, p. 50.


The Second Sex, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), p. 1. On the subject of the "woman poet," Tillie Olsen humorously makes the point: "I am looking forward to the anthologies (and works of criticism) which, though including women writers only, will be titled: The Major Young Poets; Innovative Fiction, Stories for the Seventies; American Literature, 1950-1975; or: Critical Studies in Recent American Literature. Or conversely, when only men writers are being discussed, The Male Imagination or Literary Men" (Silences, p. 188).


Wendy Martin, "From Patriarchy to the Female Principle: A Chronological Reading of Adrienne Rich's Poems,"
in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, selected and edited by Barbara
Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W.W. Norton

16 The Black Unicorn (New York: W.W. Norton &


18 Naked and Fiery Forms, p. 207.

19 "Origins and History of Consciousness," The Dream
of a Common Language (New York: W.W. Norton & Company,

20 A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (New York:


22 (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press,
1979).

23 "Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman," in
On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (New York: W.W. Norton &

CHAPTER TWO

1 Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as

2 Instructions to the Double (Port Townsend, Washing-

3 Beginning With O, pp. 57-8.


At the time this poem was written (1958-60), Rich was married and the mother of three young sons. Interestingly, there was an eight year interlude between publication of *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) and *Snapshots* (1963); Rich herself was temporarily silenced by the demands of marriage and motherhood described in this poem.


10 Hammond, p. 21.

11 "It is the Lesbian in Us . . . ." in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*, p. 200.


14 "The Images," *A Wild Patience*, p. 3.

15 Jong, p. 179.

16 Hammond, p. 21.

17 *Diving into the Wreck*, pp. 27-31.

18 *Diving*, pp. 35-7.
Whether it is the society which reproduces the family structure or the family which recreates the patriarchy is still open to question. (Cf. the methodological debate between Judith Lorber, Rose Laub Coser, Alice S. Rossi, and Nancy Chodorow in Signs, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 482-514.) My own
position in this study is to hold that the family recreates the patriarchy—at least in the present; for it seems true that although "society" may originally have been patterned on the family unit, this unit is now being used to justify and validate the power imbalance inherent in the patriarchy.

5 The Black Unicorn, pp. 61-2.
7 The one exception to this statement is the sympathetic treatment of the father in "Landscape With Next of Kin," in Soie Sauvage, pp. 20-1.
8 Pp. 5-6.
9 Howe in her introduction to No More Masks!, p. 15.
10 Instructions to the Double, pp. 24-5.
14 Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law, p. 35.
15 Beginning With Q, pp. 69-71.

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**CHAPTER FOUR**

1"Natural Resources," *Dream*, p. 67.
2 Pp. 22-4.
3 Women, of course, are the only minority group in society who, in numbers, constitute a majority.
5 "The knife & the bread," *Beginning With O*, p. 39.
6 *The Work of a Common Woman*, p. 139.
7 "Living in the Cave," *Diving*, p. 42.
9 *Instructions to the Double*, p. 54.
10 "A Primary Ground," *Diving*, p. 38.
12 "All Hallows," *Marshland*, p. 3.
14 Pp. 3-4.
CHAPTER FIVE


3"One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)," in The Writer on Her Work, p. 121.

4Martin, p. 176.


6Dream, pp. 42-4.
In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes that this ritualized, physical rejection of the mother is evidenced by "striking her, as with the Fiji," or "wounding her with arrows, as with the Apache and Iroquois," p. 199.


The *Black Unicorn*, pp. 6-7.

*Of Woman Born*, p. 237.


*Of Woman Born*, p. 240.

*Of Woman Born*, p. 280.

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CHAPTER SIX


"Splittings," p. 11.


Descending Figure, p. 28.
Descending Figure, p. 17.


Gluck's "The Undertaking" and "The Swimmer" (Parshland, pp. 27 and 39) and Fraser's "Because You Aren't Here to be What I Can't Think Of" and "Now that the Subjunctive is Dying" (New Shoes, pp. 96-100) are poems which unambiguously celebrate heterosexual love.

Chodorow, p. 200.

"Transcendental Etude," Dream, p. 75.

"Hunger," Dream, p. 75.

Rich, Of Woman Born, p. 213. Rich relies, in part, on Mary Daly's insights in this passage on female bonding.


Common Woman, p. 102.


Forche, p. 58.


New Shoes, p. 64.


Cf. Sarton's "She Shall Be Called Woman" (pp. 20-6), "My Sisters, O My Sisters" (pp. 74-7), and "The Second Spring" (p. 102) for additional portrayals of the almost mystical identification women have with nature and the wholeness which is thereby achieved.

Feminist theologian Judith Christ notes that in almost all cultures, "women's bodily experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, combined with their cultural roles of caring for children, the sick, the dying, and the dead have led to the cultural association of women with the body and nature, and men with culture, the spirit, and transcendence. Whether or not women really are closer to nature, cultural attitudes and cultural roles have encouraged women to develop a sense of their own affinity with nature." Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 22.

Silences, p. 254.


Dream, pp. 60-7.

P. 5.


"For Memory," A Wild Patience, p. 22.

A Wild Patience, p. 21.

"Turning the Wheel," A Wild Patience, p. 54.
CHAPTER SEVEN

1 Adrieenne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," Diving, p. 6.
2 "Transcendental Etude," Dream, p. 75.
3 "A Litany For Survival," The Black Unicorn, p. 32.
5 A Wild Patience, p. 4.
6 Gathering the Tribes, p. 37.
8 Under Stars, p. 27.
15 Olga Broumas, "Rumplestiltskin," Beginning With Q, p. 66.


Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," *Diving*, p. 5.


"The Common Woman," p. 73.


*New Shoes*, p. 43.


"Porcelain Bowl" (p. 28) is the title of a Louise Gluck poem in *Descending Figure*; Olga Broumas in *Beginning With 0* speaks of "collapsible caves" in her poem "Innocence" (p. 45) and alludes to the "windless bay" in "Lullaby" (p. 51).
Chapter Nine


2. Light Up the Cave (New York: New Directions

3. Levertov, p. 119.
4. Levertov, p. 120.
5. Levertov, p. 128.


15. Levertov, p. 128.

CONCLUSION

1. Naked and Fiery Forms, p. 207.
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Articles


