

# FEMININE IDENTITIES

Luísa Maria Flora,  
Teresa F. A. Alves and Teresa Cid  
(eds.)

CADERNOS  
DE ANGLÍSTICA - 5



Edições  
Colibri

University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

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## Contributors

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**Teresa de Ataíde Malafaia** is Assistant Professor at the Department of English Studies, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon from which she has received her PhD degree. Her fields of specialization are Victorian Culture and Aestheticism, namely Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater. As a result of the research done in identity matters, she has been publishing on nineteenth-century essayists, both female and male, and Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetics, as well as studying the links between Victorian women and empire. She has also published on multicultural education and citizenship. She is co-editor of *The Crossroads of Gender and Century Endings* (Lisboa: Edições Colibri and University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, 2000).

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**Joana Vidigal** is Assistant Lecturer at the Department of English Studies of Lisbon University. She wrote her MA in English Literature (1995) on Jean Rhys's novel. Her interests include 20th century English novel, modernist aesthetics, narratology, genre theory, romanticism, and painting vs. literature. She has published on pictorialism in romantic poetry and its echoes in later narrative and has contributed articles on literary history to Portuguese encyclopaedias. She is currently preparing a PhD dissertation on selected works by Virginia Woolf and Ivy Compton-Burnett.

**Jennie Wang** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa. Her main research fields are Twentieth-century American Literature, Asian American Literature and Comparative Literature. She has published several articles on Kingston, Faulkner and others; her books include *Novelistic Love in the Platonic Tradition: Fielding, Faulkner and the Postmodernists* (1997) and *The Iron Curtain of Language: Maxine Hong Kingston and American Orientalism* (forthcoming).



## Introduction

In its wide diversity, the selection of essays collected here illustrates the work done by eleven researchers from English Departments in the United States, in Brazil and at Lisbon University. The essays came together under the auspices of the University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (ULICES) as the result of work done by seven of its researchers and by foreign colleagues who were invited to contribute to the volume due to their previous collaboration in joint research. Through very different approaches these essays explore questions of gender, literary theory and feminine identity in the work of English and American writers, revisiting some of the problems addressed in a former international collection published in 2000 by *Cadernos de Anglística* and at an International Conference entitled *Identity Matters*.\*

The first four essays in this volume all focus on issues of gender in the works of different English authors and thinkers. Shorter versions of each of these essays were formerly presented as papers in an autonomous section of the Research and Educational Programme on Studies of Identity at the XXth

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\* Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa, Luísa Maria Flora and Teresa de Ataíde Malafaia, eds. *The Crossroads of Gender and Century Endings*, int. Isobel Armstrong, *Cadernos de Anglística*, 2, Edições Colibri and University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Lisboa, 2000. The international conference on *Identity Matters* was held at the Faculdade de Letras, Lisbon University, in January 2001, and the proceedings of the conference were published in the Journal of ULICES, *Anglo Saxonica*, 16/17, 2002.

Meeting of the Portuguese Association of Anglo-American Studies (Póvoa de Varzim, 1999) and published in the proceedings of the conference.

Isabel Fernandes, in “Women, Horses and D. H. Lawrence”, deals with Lawrence’s attitudes towards women and gender at three different stages in his career, successively exploring the symbolic images of horses in *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *St. Mawr*. From a first stage when a female principle is seen as a fertilising influence capable of renewing both the individual and society, when women are given precedence, Lawrence goes through a transition period marked by the 1<sup>st</sup> World War in which he looks into power relations among the sexes, reversing that precedence. He later “concentrates on the admission of a phallic principle in life and nature and on the need for feminine characters to cope with it”. In *St. Mawr*, where the woman protagonist confronts the symbolic horse, women will again be imagined as questers and agents of change, but this time they will be transcending the boundaries of both sex and gender.

In “‘So Men Said’: Virginia Woolf and a history of women’s creativity” Luisa Flora focuses on Woolf’s approach to women’s creativity and on her anticipation of some recent trends in social and cultural theory. Going back to the canonical *A Room of One’s Own*, read as an epitome of Woolf’s entire oeuvre, and its foundational role in studies of women’s literature, questions of gender and feminine identity, the essay introduces a brief historical account of a “vast, diverse and increasingly self-examining post-woolfian canon of women’s literature”. Acknowledging her frequent hesitation between loyalty to the *logos* and a poetic perception of wholeness, the essay also considers some of the processes through which Woolf, from the very beginning of her career, scrutinized the dominant patriarchal discursive formations, particularly in the complex relationships between biography, history, politics and language.

Both Virginia Woolf and a critique of discourse, writing and language from a woman’s perspective, reappear in Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa’s “Questioning Influence/ Gendering Influence” in a discussion which considers first and foremost Luce Irigaray’s feminist theorization of a culture of difference and Harold Bloom’s theory of influence. Selecting examples of Romantic and

Victorian women writers and their influence on contemporary male and female poets, the essay reflects on Woolf's anticipation of "Irigaray's theory that mothers should influence daughters, i.e., that they should set a female pattern for both private and public action". In spite of the difficulties involved in such a project, particularly the fact that women do not constitute a homogeneous group, the essay argues for a co-operative literary and cultural tradition for both women and men without rejecting the need for further investigation of the problems generated by the Bloomian male competitive model of literary analysis.

Teresa Malafaia's "Feminism and Citizenship: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Subjection of Women*" compares these two renowned essays by Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill and shows how, in spite of the constraints of their respective periods, they both engaged in a gendered reading of woman's access to power and active citizenship. Wollstonecraft and Mill emphasized the role of education in the construction of citizenship; both thinkers considered that "women's inferior status was not a result of their lack of capacities, but was due to the social, cultural and economic environment". The essay underlines the fact that, within the Enlightenment paradigm, they were both able to challenge dominant notions of public and private life and to envisage the female cause as inseparably connected with other human rights and values.

Problematising the aesthetic representation of women characters as victims of a patriarchal order, the fifth essay in this collection is also the last on an English author – Jean Rhys. In "Modernism, Violence and Disfiguration in Jean Rhys's Early Novels: Visible Identity in *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*," Joana Vidigal explores how "through pictorial devices contemplation and mirroring inflict violence upon the verbal medium that presents" character and identity in her first two novels. The essay reveals that in Rhys's writing practice "the metonymic possibilities of the visible validate themselves in the figurative contention they displace from the inside". In these novels, both identity rendering and the representation of spaces are shown to be dependent on one another, a technique which enables Rhys to achieve the metaphorical mode supposedly characteristic of modernism.

The second cluster of essays in this volume – two of which (Jennie Wang's and Teresa Cid's) were first presented, in shorter versions, at the joint ASA/CAAS Conference (Montréal, 1999) – addresses the work of American women variously engaged in contexts of cultural diversity and grappling with the ideas of what it means to be an American and a woman, particularly in the twentieth century. These essays approach, from different angles, the definitional quandaries and semantic difficulties encountered when speaking about the self and the United States and provide, in one way or another, a sort of feminine rewriting of American myths and history.

Teresa Alves's "Autobiographies of Women in the 'Promised Land'" is intended as a gateway into this section of the volume. The essay takes up the issue of female marginality in an "arguably masculine American canon" through the discussion of the autobiographies of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Hunter Austin who, despite sharing a similar cultural background, "illustrate the fundamental heterogeneity" and "the cultural polyphony of the United States." Discussing the "erosion of autobiographical narrative as a mirror of events" together with the "shifts suffered by the autobiographical canon", it focuses on *Earth Horizon. An Autobiography* (1932) and *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935) as instances of autobiographies which offer a cultural testimonial of difference, "of feminine identity breaking through social prejudice and established rights."

Lucy Maddox, in "Questions of Class in Contemporary American Indian Women's Writing", points out the "relative lack of attention that issues of class have received [...] in the critical response to American Indian writing" and draws on the autobiographical essays collected in *Here First* (2000) to claim for social class an importance similar to that held by "racial and tribal determinants" in the experience of modern Indian people. The essay develops an approach to the work of several contemporary writers, giving special emphasis to Betty Louise Bell's *Faces in the Moon* (1994), in order to discuss Bell's "conflation of "women, Indians, and the poor" and explore the interweaving of class and gender in the "understanding of modern Indian identities."

In "Performing Folklore: The Dilemmas of Zora Neale Hurston", Kathleen

Ashley examines the panorama of “equivocation and ambivalence” encountered when one wishes to “assess Hurston’s status as a folklorist” – even though she was the first African American to study folklore using the methods of the then new academic field of anthropology – and also her status “as a writer” – the reception of her work having suffered dramatic ups and downs over time. This essay focuses on Hurston’s “identity as female and African American folklorist, a complicated identity” in whose evaluation “the politics of racial representation” have always played an important role. It also discusses the way in which the paradigm that sees “art” and “science” as “irreconcilable categories of experience” has hindered a fuller appreciation of Hurston as a writer and a folklorist, furthermore tending to erase the constraints brought about by “gender, race, and economics.”

Jennie Wang’s “Reinterpreting Kingston’s Feminist Agenda” deals with Maxine Hong Kingston’s effort to break the “silence of the woman’s voice in a new American discourse with Chinese accents”, thus countering a cultural practice of misrepresenting the role of Chinese women. Drawing on the theoretical work on Orientalism by Edward Said and on his concepts of “strategic location” and “strategic formation”, the essay mentions the preconceived ideas about Chinese women still dominating Women’s Studies in the United States and discusses “the feminist energy in Kingston” as an example of the “heroic tradition of Chinese women.” It then considers the way in which that tradition is translated into American fiction by a writer whose aim is, arguably, to “re-Orient” women’s liberation in the United States.

In “Mapping Memory: Achy Obejas’s Transnational Mambo,” Sonia Torres deals with Obejas’s novel *Memory Mambo* (1996) as a reworking of Cuban-American literary tropes, such as the search for “a lost cubanidad”, via the musical cultural production linked to the “paradigm of Latinos in the United States show biz”. Written by a member of the so-called “Dialogue Generation”, a generation which is less insulated than older ones and has come more fully in contact with other Latino communities, this novel takes up “recurrent themes of contemporary Cuban exile literature” while at the same time exposing the falsity of an “idyllic national memory” and subscribing to “a

transnational chain of memory” which can be associated with multiple “feminine discursive practices.”

Teresa Cid’s “Reading Katherine Vaz, Re-thinking the Portuguese Diaspora” closes this volume of essays on “Feminine Identities” by an inquiry into the fictional writings of a Californian author with a Portuguese family background. Creatively embraced by Vaz, Portuguese history and stories, as they are relived in an American environment and enhanced by the dilemmas of the immigrant self, are at the root of a body of work which brings together (or rather, to use Katherine Vaz’s preferred metaphor, grafts) people, things and imaginations in complex ways. This essay thus looks into the sinews of identity (above all, but not exclusively, female) in novels and short stories that bridge the geographical and cultural distance between California, the Azores, and the town of Beja in Portugal, as much as it does the historical distance between the Reagan era and the seventeenth-century Portuguese War of Independence.

This volume has been put together as a further contribution from ULICES to the ongoing re-examination and study of feminine identities as they variously express themselves over time in different spatial and temporal locations. The editors hope that this second collection of essays on matters of identity may prove to be a fruitful participation in the multivocal dialogue fostered by contemporary approaches to the study of literature and culture.

Lisbon, 2002

The Editors



# **“Women, Horses and D. H. Lawrence”**

ISABEL FERNANDES  
University of Lisbon



## “Women, Horses and D. H. Lawrence”\*

### I

The aim of this essay is to enhance Lawrence’s evolving treatment of women and of gender issues in general at three different stages in his writing career. These will be illustrated by the various ways in which horses figure in three of Lawrence’s most important fictional works – a powerfully symbolic image with far-reaching ancestry in western literature and thought.<sup>1</sup>

My argument concerning Lawrence’s attitude towards women and gender issues could be summed up by the recognition of a growing antagonism or, at least, suspicion in relation to women in the fiction produced after *The Rainbow*, contrasting with the writer’s previous tribute to women in that novel. Such suspicion and animosity would henceforward engender a vision of man/woman relationships in terms of power and submission and be closely interwoven with an obsession with male potency and a rejection of democracy and the parallel need to explore political ideas of leadership (especially evident in his male novels of mid-career, *Aaron’s Rod* and *Kangaroo*). The reason for such a change can be attributed to more than one single cause but most critics dealing with it converge in the assumption that the traumatic experience brought about by the First World War was a decisive influence and

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\* The essay printed above is in great part the result of a one-week Doctoral Course on “D. H. Lawrence and Women” delivered at the University of Zaragoza – Spain, in March 1999. Part of the material in it (the sections concerning *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*) was presented as a paper at the annual APEAA Conference that same year and afterwards published as an article under the title “On Horses and Gender in D. H. Lawrence” in the proceedings volume (*Actas do XX Encontro da APEAA*, Póvoa de Varzim, 2000, 274-81). The extended version that is now being printed was the natural sequel of that article and I thank the CEAUL – Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa, and “Cadernos de Anglística” for giving me the opportunity of publishing the entire essay.

that it furthered Lawrence's already ambivalent treatment of women into more extreme and stereotyped forms. It should, however, be noted that in spite of this "turn against women",<sup>2</sup> Lawrence would return before long to the quester heroine whose agency becomes central in learning plots of redemption or renewal, at least from *St. Mawr* and *The Plumed Serpent* onwards.

Discarding for the moment the early phase of his writing (up to *Sons and Lovers*), I would call attention then to three different stages in his fiction according to the way in which he treats women and gender issues. The first is coincidental with *The Rainbow* and manifests the need of a female principle (largely identified with women) as a fertilising influence, able to renew both the individual and the social body. This is manifest in fictional terms in this novel and will be simultaneously approached in his "pseudo-philosophy",<sup>3</sup> pseudo-criticism of Hardy in *Study of Thomas Hardy*. The second stage is a transition period marked by disillusion and uncertainty and also by a serious investigation into power relations among the sexes – it corresponds to the writing of *Women in Love* and is echoed in a series of essays from *Twilight in Italy* and the first draft of *Studies in Classic American Literature* to *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (including "The Crown", "The Reality of Peace" and "The Education of the People"). Moreover this new emphasis already hints at the themes to be developed in the two subsequent novels such as man-to-man relations and the leader/follower problem – novels equally obsessed with male potency and male power. The third stage concentrates on the admission of a phallic principle in life and nature and on the need for feminine characters to cope with it. This new emphasis variously interpreted as a return to the Pan mystery in nature and man (as in the essay "Pan in America" or in the short novel *St. Mawr*) or in more straightforward sexual terms (as in his paintings of 1926 and subsequent years) affects Lawrence's fictional writing in and after *The Plumed Serpent* and culminates in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. However, I will concentrate on a very peculiar text that can be viewed as inaugurating this last stage – the short novel *St. Mawr*.<sup>4</sup> In it Lawrence leads his heroine beyond the phallic dimension and reshapes her not only as quester

but also as civilising agent somewhat reminiscent of Ursula, the "leading-shoot" of the Brangwen family.<sup>5</sup> In sharp contrast to the feminine protagonist, men in this work are discredited as either inadequate or unable to act, so that what we get in the end is not so much (as in other period pieces) women's passive need to cope with and submit to an external male force but the need to actively engage in a fight with a natural, wild principle that transcends sexual or gender boundaries. I will substantiate my arguments and my readings of the selected passages of the three novels by using contemporaneous letters and/or essays that help to confirm and clarify Lawrence's view on women, men and society.

Going back now to the time Lawrence began writing what would later become *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* it should be stressed that the history of the composition of these two novels was a complex and protracted one and it needs to be dealt with jointly because the seed of both works is to be found back in the year 1913 in the impulse to write a different novel from *Sons and Lovers*. The novelist was now feeling compelled to write in an utterly different vein and to address new problems – the possibility of successful relationships between men and women. For two years Lawrence worked relentlessly through several versions of the novel that in January 1915 finally split into two distinct works. The first one he finished in March of that same year as *The Rainbow* and he would then move on to the next which would later become *Women in Love*. Though very different from one another, I think one should stress the fact that they sprang from the same original impulse and that they share some important common features that set them apart from what Lawrence had written earlier and from most of what he would write after them. First of all, both of them centre around women characters, unconventional women, much more so than the feminine characters that we find in his early works. Another common feature that is visible in these two novels is the sense of something being written out of the novelist's commitment to his fellowmen and that very soon is recognised by him as a special commitment to women. Besides regarding the novel he was writing as "an answer to the *want* of today" (LI 511-1/II/1913), responding to the need of

“a readjustment between men and women” (L1 544 – 23/IV/1913), Lawrence saw his new fiction as being about “woman becoming individual, self-responsible, taking her own initiative” (L2 165 – 22/IV/1914). Both novels can be viewed as his tribute to women’s independence. His portrayal of independent women, free from social conventions, or at least capable of challenging the *mores* of a society still very much in the grip of Victorian standards and prejudices will henceforward recur in his fiction.

But what mars much of his subsequent fiction centred on women characters is the fact that these characters are obsessively forced into the realisation of their need to submit to a male partner whose superiority and worth are almost entirely taken for granted. In these two novels, on the other hand, all main characters, be they male or female, are treated equally, thoroughly investigated in their inducements and demands, all stand on the same footing and mutually resist each other (either mutely or dialogically).<sup>6</sup>

These common features, however, should not make us forget important differences between them, some of which I will now address by making use of the episodes involving horses in both novels.

## II

If we turn to the famous horses scene, at the end of *The Rainbow*, the first thing we will notice is that it centres around Ursula, the feminine protagonist of the second half of the novel; Ursula is the “new woman” enacting the progress and achievement of the third generation of Brangwens. We should also note that the scene occurs at a climactic moment in Ursula’s life when, unmarried and pregnant, she is on the brink of giving in to society’s claims and conventions by getting married to Anton Skrebenski, even though she knows deep inside that the child, marriage and life henceforth will be “the seal set on her own nullity” (R 448). In a parallel sense, the novel is also threatened by a conventional ending. The nightmarish episode with the horses intervening at this stage calls attention to the imperative need to overcome conventionality and propriety at both levels: at the internal level of Ursula’s life story and at the metafictional level where the horses disrupt and avoid the

establishment of literary convention. As literary devices the horses are hard to define. They are clearly unrealistic elements (part of a set that in this novel opens up a metaphysical dimension that both transcends and illuminates the social stage on which the characters still play their allotted parts) but they seem at first sight somehow contrived as a sort of *Deus ex-machina* insuring a satisfying outcome for the protagonist. It is only when we reconsider them in terms of gender that we fully grasp their place in the overall economy of the novel and in their connection with Ursula's predicament. In 1986, Cornelia Nixon, in her book *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women*, argues for a reading which has the advantage of calling attention to the kind of connotations most critics have ignored. For her "the horses are subtly identified with Ursula's unborn child and their behaviour mimics childbirth" (Nixon 89). Moreover, instead of identifying them with male potency (a very pervasive critical reading) she prefers to read them as female: "if Ursula's horses have something to do with the body, the soul, the senses, or the feelings, they ought to be female instead of male" (Nixon 91). Her argument relies on the date of the extra-textual evidence invoked by previous critics that stress male connotations in the horses. In fact it was only in 1921 (more than six years after writing *The Rainbow*) that Lawrence for the first time identifies horses in dreams with "the great sensual male activity" (F 171). This comes from *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, a work produced at a time when "he was obsessed with male dominance and proclaiming all things powerful to be male" (Nixon 91). This is very different from what we find in *Study of Thomas Hardy*, an essay that, unlike *Fantasia*, was written at the same time as the novel, in 1914, and in which he identifies the male principle with the mind and the female principle with the body and the senses (very much in the tradition of dominant trends in western culture). Moreover, in June of that same year, Lawrence was still sympathetic to women's advancement in society and even saw them as a way out of the dead end reached by modern civilisation. It was the men that seemed to him to be hopeless – "I can make nothing of men, they are all dead" (L2 426 – 2/XI/1915). In women he saw a last hope, therefore arguing for "men to have the courage to draw nearer to

women, expose themselves to them, and be altered by them” (L2 181 – 2/VI/1914).

This coming together of men and women was needed because civilisation (and art in particular) had become “ultra-ultra intellectual” (ibid.) and demanded an input of the female principle. Very much in the line of sex-psychologists such as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, Lawrence in 1914 was still clearly in favour of equality between the sexes and for the “feminisation’ of patriarchal society” (Simpson 17). In fact, to Gordon Campbell, in September 1914, Lawrence again insisted:

I believe there is no getting of a vision, as you call it, before we get our sex right: before we get our souls fertilised by the female. I don’t mean the feminine: I mean the female. Because life tends to take two streams, male and female, and only some female influence (not necessarily woman, but most obviously woman) can fertilise the soul of man to vision and being. (L2 218)

As can be deduced from this quotation and confirmed by reading *Study of Thomas Hardy* the male and the female principles are seen as inherent in life forms in general and thus are not the exclusive property of a gendered male or a gendered female being.<sup>7</sup>

It seems to me that all these ideas are enacted and clearly inform a novel like *The Rainbow*, where the diagnosis of a patriarchal industrialised society that has gradually severed its connections with earthly cosmic energies, leads to the emphasis on the urgent need of fertilising by “the female”. From the first to the last page of the novel a stress is laid on fertility, on pregnancy, growth and new birth, on new life bursting forth from the dead shells of the past. The last occurrence of a birth in the novel happens immediately after Ursula’s encounter with the horses and it has a double character: in a literal, physical sense we have a miscarriage instead of a birth proper; in a metaphorical sense there is the protagonist’s rebirth or her birth as a renewed and wiser human being, rid of past encumbrances she has learned to discard as false, coming from the patriarchal social world dominated by the mind – a phallo-logocentric order. In this context the decisive influence of the horses



must be read as representing a female principle, appropriately associated in this case with pregnancy, labour and birth, given Ursula's objective condition. The fact that her miscarriage leaves Ursula free for the achievement of her true self attests to her own realisation that hers is not her mother's way. Unlike Anna's misreading of marriage, Ursula does not take the by-product of the sexual embrace – pregnancy and children – for the embrace itself, thus enacting Lawrence's belief (stated in *Study of Thomas Hardy*) that to "bear children is not a woman's significance. But that she bear herself, that is her supreme and risky fate." (STH 52). It should also be noted that another parallel result of Ursula's experience with the horses is her closing vision of a renewed society, as though patriarchal order had been infused with new female blood and had risen "to a new growth" (R 459).

### III

If we now turn our attention to *Women in Love* we will notice how in two instances – Gerald's mastering of the mare and Loerke's statuette of the stallion and the girl – Lawrence is not only gradually displacing the symbolic overtones of the literary use of horses from feminine to masculine but, by the way he does so, he is simultaneously introducing in his fiction the discussion of a hierarchy between the genders as well as investigating the need for submission of one partner (the woman) to the other, in a social context where women are presented as threatening to men. In *The Rainbow*, in spite of all the struggles of wills, in spite of all the defiance, of the provisional victories and defeats between men and women, there was never at stake the a-priori definition of hierarchised roles for those involved in a sexual relationship, but simply continuous attempts by both partners at perfect matings of opposed wills and personalities (even if short-lived).

In *Women in Love*, however, in spite of Birkin's so often reiterated theory of the perfect marriage consisting of "two single equal stars balanced in conjunction" (WL 151), there is much more in the novel to discredit this formula than to confirm it. What we get throughout the text is a series of unbalanced relationships making manifest either insufferable dependency or

the use of power to enforce submission – relationships like, for instance, those of Hermione and Birkin, Gerald and Minette, Gerald and Gudrun, and Loerke and his young art student. But even Birkin, the mouthpiece for an alternative to this state of affairs, makes contradictory demands on Ursula as we will see.

If we consider Gerald's overpowering of the mare, forcing her to obey the sheer inflexibility of his will against all her instincts to turn away and flee from the approaching train, we will notice how its inescapable sexual overtones are caught by the two sisters, helplessly watching the scene. Gudrun's reaction as she looks on spellbound has in it the seed of the contradictory nature of the relationship she will afterwards establish with Gerald: a mixture of attraction and repulsion. Both characters are linked by their self-assertiveness, by their need to possess without being possessed, by the sheer pleasure they derive from exerting their will.<sup>8</sup> But what can be inferred from the scene at the level-crossing is the mere gratuitousness of Gerald's action: indeed nothing is gained from his forcing the mare to stand still as the blasting train passes by – it is simply showing off and an egotistical assertion of will, a violation of otherness. Gerald needs *to be* through power exerted over others – in the world of work, power is used over the miners and the mines, in his family circle by acting as *Pater Familias*, in his sexual relationships either by reducing women like Minette to a slave-like condition, by total submission or by being himself reduced to a childish dependency upon the woman (as with Gudrun). This is why the horse in this scene had to be a mare, explicitly female. But, whereas in *The Rainbow* the group of horses, similarly linked to the female principle, was itself in power – theirs was the potency of female regenerating force, in this scene of *Women in Love* we have the opposite situation – the female is subjected to gratuitous male force, in itself sterile.

In passing, one should stress that one of the contrasting aspects of the two novels resides in the former's insistence on fertility and growth whereas the latter is dominated by a sense of barrenness or at least of births that never occur. The two pregnant women in the novel, Minette and the bride at the fair (in chapter "A Chair") do not give birth. Moreover Minette is portrayed as a child-mother – her lisping suggests a certain immaturity, the incapacity of

"mothering" her own true self, while the pregnancy of the young woman in "A Chair" is presented as a trap, both for herself and for her male partner. The statue of the African woman in labour also carries the suggestion of an interrupted life process, not the accomplishment of life through birth, and in Gerald's mind it is significantly linked with Minette. Therefore the pervasive atmosphere in this novel is that of a waste-land, with derelict, alienated people crawling like insects for a way-out – either through aimless wandering (Loerke and Gudrun), or through death (Gerald), or, at best, through a tentative marriage (Birkin and Ursula) whose results remain an open question. All of the characters seem infected by the inability *to bear* themselves fully. Also significant in this respect is the way in which the text of the novel closes: Birkin invokes the sight of Gerald's dead body: "curled up as if for sleep" (WL 477), and the place where it was found: "a shallow pot lying among the stone and snow" (WL 478), "the navel of the earth" (WL 401). Inescapable here are connotations of a regressive movement to the maternal womb, hinting at an impossible or frustrated birth – unlike Ursula in the previous novel, Gerald, the industrial magnate, could not bear himself, did not come through as an individual and succumbed unborn.

The other episode involving a horse occurs much later in one of the final chapters of the novel, where Loerke shows to Gudrun and Ursula a reproduction of a statuette he has made of a young, naked girl sitting on a stallion. The girl is described as "young and tender, a mere bud ... just passing towards cruel womanhood" (WL 429) and she is contrasted with the horse which is presented in the following way: "The horse stood stock still, stretched in a kind of start. It was a massive, magnificent stallion, rigid with pent up power. Its neck was arched and terrible, like a sickle, its flanks were pressed back, rigid with power" (ibid.). Here the horse is undoubtedly male and overbearing. Already we recognise the meaning attributed by Lawrence to horses in dreams: they now represent male potency. As with Gerald in the previous scene, Loerke's stallion, in spite of all the artist's aesthetically based protestations to the contrary, is denounced by Ursula as the portrait of the sheer exertion of a brutal force on the part of this man to submit a young

female to his will and desires – in this case the young model (Loerke's art student) has to be "taught" (like Gerald's mare) to stand still. In fact Loerke later admits to have beaten her "harder than I have beat anything in my life" (WL 433). She has to be taught to stand still so that she can be turned into an art object – a subtle form of possession. After having been seduced by Loerke and then dropped – used as an object, she is to suffer the more refined process of objectification through art.

Obviously the "will to power" (an expression taken by Lawrence from Nietzsche) when it is one-sided and absolute, as is the case with Gerald and with Loerke in the examples given, is clearly criticised in the novel, namely by Birkin and Ursula. The alternative is Birkin's ideal of a relationship between man and woman where both and each retains his/her freedom and individuality while connecting with the other – a theoretically perfect proposal! However, when one analyses Birkin and Ursula's relationship as it develops and is enacted throughout the novel, one notices a certain urge on Birkin's part to dominate, to submit Ursula to a passive position which is paradoxically at odds with what he proclaims and clearly linked with his fear of the female. This fear of female power is, for instance, symbolically enacted in the well-known scene in "Moony" when he frantically throws stones at the reflection of the moon in the middle of a pond, or when, in "Mino" (notice the anagram uniting both chapters), he adduces the biological arguments exhibited in the "natural" behaviour of the two cats (a he-cat, Mino, and a she-cat) as proof enough for the need, at least in certain cases, of female submission to male power, though he never admits to it fully. But in this highly dialogical novel, every argument is submitted to thorough debate, given sides and deeply resisted. In this case it is Ursula's task to resist Birkin and to denounce (as she does in the case of Loerke's art) what lies below the surface of his theorising: "I know what your fine words work down to – bossiness, I call it, bossiness" (WL 150).

*Women in Love* is thus a very different novel from *The Rainbow* in terms of the way gender issues and sexual relationships are conceived. There is a threat impending upon all characters that they will not be able to achieve their full being and this threat is very often interpreted as coming from the

opposite sex which has therefore to be resisted and rendered powerless. It is the male characters especially that tend to view women in this way, associating them with the *Magna Mater* figure, a threatening, devouring being that has to be opposed. It is as though the strong female characters of *The Rainbow* (to which the novelist, after all, paid tribute) had suddenly gone out of control and evolved into a course of action where, either as travestied men (as in Hermione's case) or as menacing great mothers (like Gudrun and Ursula) they threatened to engulf an enfeebled male race. Any gesture towards articulateness and independence on the part of these men thus runs counter to women's newly enforced powers. It is as though women here are no longer able to give society their female, sensual, fertilising energy (thus operating the necessary resurrection of the social body, as Lawrence had envisaged in the previous novel) but had instead changed places and entered the man's world with a vengeance. Lawrence's writing now betrays his unease at such developments. In this respect, Hilary Simpson, in her book *D. H. Lawrence and Feminism*, sums up:

By the 1920s, Lawrence had become convinced that a feminist revolution had actually occurred, and had gone badly wrong. He believed that the dominant ideology of the post-war was feminine – not, however, a true femininity of instinct and feeling, but a perverted femininity of will and idealism – and that a masculine renaissance was necessary to restore the balance. (Simpson 17)

#### IV

But the symptoms of Lawrence's unease at the turn things had taken is already apparent in 1915, when he wrote *Twilight in Italy* or in 1916 and 1917 (in what would later become the essays of *Studies in Classic American Literature*). In these essays Lawrence paradoxically interprets what we normally call the patriarchal order as a kind of matriarchal society, dominated by the figure of the mother and dependent on it. Moreover this dominance of the mother figure had ultimately led, according to the novelist, to the emasculation of men. The power of this figure is, for Lawrence, operative and

verifiable in socio-historic terms and is at odds (it should be noticed) with his own metaphysical concept of the female that he associates (as we have previously seen) with the body and the senses. In fact, when reconsidering human history, Lawrence equated things differently: he derived the importance of the mother figure in western civilisation from Christianity, which he saw as fostering it and giving it unprecedented meaning. According to him, in the Christian outlook the mother of God figure is intimately related to the emphasis laid on the infant Jesus on his mother's lap and with the attendant concepts of self-abnegation, virginity and humility as paramount virtues. From the Middle Ages onwards there was an ever growing emphasis on such Christian virtues and on the concomitant view of men as helpless children at the mercy of an adverse world. This Christian ethos is seen by Lawrence as responsible for what he views as a degeneration of our western society in its movement away from an earlier, better way of life. That better way of life being, in his opinion, the specific patriarchal, "aristocratic" way of Pre-classical and Classical Antiquity. <sup>9</sup> In *Twilight in Italy*, Lawrence discerns a growing dependence phenomenon at the heart of Christian mankind from the Renaissance onwards. Still according to the writer, in the Renaissance such a process was extended into the State with the rule of Elizabeth I. As he writes in *Studies in Classic American Literature*:

Shakespeare's whole tragic wail is because of the fall of the true male authority... It fell with Elizabeth. It was trodden under foot with Victoria. (SCAL 105)

This vision of English history implies the idea of an enfeeblement of the state leading to Cromwell and Parliament, the dynamic life principle no longer being "For the King" but rather "For the good of my neighbour" or "For the good of the people" or "For the good of the whole" (TI 80) – the root of these injunctions being clearly Christian in origin. This kind of ethos is what Lawrence sees as informing modern democracies as well as socialist ideas, both of which he comes to loathe because he sees them as entirely emasculated, devoid of the "proud singleness of being" that had informed previous cultures and which

is incompatible with the Christian moral outlook. In *Studies in Classic American Literature* he significantly views democracy as a sort of surrogate of the Great Mother – “the great merge into the womb. Woman” (SCAL 178). Democracy for him represents the engulfment of men’s individuality in the maternal womb, a reduction of all to the same indiscriminate level.

This is the kind of reasoning that enters Lawrence’s work during and after the 1st World War and it can be directly linked to his experience of the war years – both at a personal level, when he was more than ever dependent on Frieda and on other women like, for instance, Lady Ottoline Morrel; and at a social level, where he found the reversal of roles (women taking over traditionally male jobs, positions and attitudes) as threatening and alarming.<sup>10</sup> At the end of 1918 and early in 1919, beside producing such short stories as “The Fox”, “Tickets, Please”, “Fannie and Annie” and “Monkey Nuts” (where women’s newly won position in society is under fire), Lawrence shows himself to be particularly obsessed with the problem of modern motherhood (“a strange and rather frightening phenomenon” (L3 247) – as he says in a letter of June 1918) which he sees as potentially dangerous. After reading Jung and reflecting on the issue of motherhood, the novelist writes a remarkable letter to Katherine Mansfield in December 1918:

[T]his mother-incest idea can become an obsession. But it seems to me there is much truth in it: that at certain periods the man has a desire and a tendency to return unto the woman, make her his goal and end, find his justification in her. In this way he casts himself as it were into her womb, and she, the Magna Mater, receives him with gratification. This is a kind of incest. (...) I do think a woman must yield some sort of precedence to a man, and he must take his precedence. I do think men must go ahead absolutely in front of their women, without turning round to ask for permission or approval from their women. Consequently the women must follow as it were unquestioning. (L3 301/2)

One should note how the precedence is given to women in *The Rainbow*, where, in a certain way, they are shown as “going ahead absolutely in front of their” men and how that precedence here is being reversed in terms of a male

leadership ideal (tentatively shown in Birkin's proposal of *Blutbrüderschaft* to Gerald). Also worth noticing is the concomitant need to oppose and resist the "devouring mother" (also made manifest in *Women in Love*).

One would think that Lawrence would henceforward adopt exclusively male quester heroes but, apart from the two novels of his mid-career written immediately after *Women in Love* – *Aaron's Rod* and *Kangaroo* – what we have in his subsequent work till the end, is again the predominance of women as questers of a new way and as agents of change.

## V

This is exactly the case with *St. Mawr*, a "long-short story" written in the Summer of 1924, in between starting and finishing *The Plumed Serpent*, where Lou Witt, the woman protagonist, is first confronted with the symbolic horse, St. Mawr. Here the horse no longer simply points at the sexual potency of male characters (as was the case with the horses used in *Women in Love* in relation to Gerald and Loerke), but instead signals its pervasive tragic absence in modern men. The horse in this text gains significance and ascendancy over Lou Witt precisely because she begins to perceive in him a mysterious power that is lacking in civilised male individuals whose connection with the body and with nature has been severed:

The wild, brilliant, alert head of St. Mawr seemed to look at her out of another world. It was as if she had had a vision, as if the walls of her own world had suddenly melted away, leaving her in a great darkness, in the midst of which the large, brilliant eyes of that horse looked at her with demonish question, while his naked ears stood up like daggers from the naked lines of his inhuman head, and his great body glowed red with power. (SM 30/1)

This symbolic figure that looms large in the first half of the story gives its name to the text: Mawr is a Welsh word, meaning great<sup>11</sup>; the St. in the horse's name hints at the sacredness of the phallic principle he symbolises for Lou. But before long, the saint becomes a sinner (as we will see) thus operating an ironic reversal<sup>12</sup> that forces the need for a new object for the heroine's



quest and causes a curious narrative split in so far as the symbol is substituted by allegory (as becomes clear with the story of the New England Wife).

But what Lou at first recognises in the men around her (with the help of the mysterious, dangerous fire coming from the eyes and from the body of the stallion) is that the animal in man has gone wrong and is now debased. Instead of the primeval Pan mystery, what one gets nowadays is a fallen Pan: "the man with goat legs" (SM 65), "half a man" (ibid.), instead of "the Great God Pan" (SM 64), "the Great Goat Pan" (ibid.), and Lou laments this loss and this debasement: "I don't know one single man who is a proud living animal" (SM 61).

When starting to assess men around her (particularly Rico) against the horse, she ironically concludes that it is in servants, like Lewis and Phoenix (with little or "no mind" (SM 59) at all) that a small spark of the inner fire is still to be found, whereas in the so-called masters (Rico, Dean Vyner, Cartwright and Fred) the loss is total and irretrievable; instead of harmoniously combining body and mind what one gets are disembodied heads – "the famous 'talking heads' of modern youth" (SM 34).

So that at the climactic moment reached with the accident at the Devil's Chair where St. Mawr injures two of these young men (Rico and Fred) what is suggested is the clash of two worlds – one primeval, inhuman and fierce (epitomised at this stage by the horse, but later symbolically given in the New Mexican landscape of the ranch), the other contemporaneous, civilised, mechanical and dead; in the latter case its paradigm is Rico, the baronet and fashionable portrait painter who prefers motorcars to horses and who adopts a defensive flirtatious attitude vis-à-vis women.

Rico illustrates the doom of the modern world: the fact that civilised human beings have cut their connection with the living universe around them has made modern life artificial, stressful and senseless and people have become restless and derelict (looking for an adequate background and never finding it).<sup>13</sup> This severance from nature's deep, vital flux of energy has had far-reaching consequences for human sexual life. Lawrence anticipates here in fiction some of his ideas on the subject (later to be more fully explored in *Lady*

*Chatterley's Lover*, or in essayistic terms in "Pornography and Obscenity" and "À Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*". In a world where sexuality is no longer "fed straight from underneath" (SM 62), people's sex has gone awry and perverse. The marriage of Lou and Rico, for instance, is "without sex" (SM 24). For them "sex was shattering and exhausting" (ibid.). Even Lewis shies away from any sexual contact; he declares: "I'm not by nature a marrying man (...) I don't feel myself after I've been with women (...) I feel messed up" (SM 122). He avoids the feminine embrace for fear of being diminished, so he "keeps to himself" (SM 71). Phoenix, on the other hand, perversely needs to be the sexual master in the night world to compensate for his subaltern position during the day. As "a predatory alien-blooded male" (SM 135) he self-conceitedly demands the "complete quiescent humility" (ibid.) of the Indian women. However he is "ready to trade his sex (...) for the white woman's money and social privileges" (SM 136). Love making in high middle-class circles, where Lou and Rico move, is showing-off and a pretence – impudent flirtation usurping the place of any serious commitment – a mere "game".<sup>14</sup>

No wonder then that in such circumstances the heroine is left with no alternative but to keep to herself and avoid any human contact. Even the horse lets her down: Lou is at a loss to interpret his "frenzied rearing, and his mad, hideous writhing on the ground" (SM 81) – was it "the slave taking his slavish vengeance then dropping back into subservience" (SM 84) "à la" Phoenix, or was it all the result of "the grief of the generous creature which sees all ends turning to the morass of ignoble living" (ibid.), as was the case with Lewis? On taking him to American soil, the fact that St. Mawr is before long "follow[ing] at the heels of the boss' long-legged black Texan mare, almost slavishly" (SM 132) again makes Lou (and the reader with her) question his integrity and value both as a character and as a symbol. This new ironic reversal corresponds to the shattering of one more illusion on the heroine's part and prompts her into a quest for something she concludes can no longer be found either in sex, in humanity or in modern society. Like Lewis, Lou (notice the phonic similarity of the two names) admits: "I'm not a marrying woman" (SM 139) and as the groom had devoted his life to the care of St. Mawr, so Lou is now ready to

devote her self to the wild "spirit of place" she encounters in the New Mexican ranch and to "keep to [her]self" (SM 155). Significantly the landscape around "Las Chivas"<sup>15</sup> is a pre-sexual world and also "a world before and after the God of Love" (SM 149) that is menacing and crudely indifferent to man, where "absolute beauty" (SM 145) has as its reverse a sordid cruelty relentlessly undermining it; it is reminiscent of Blake's "The Tyger" telling us of a God that must perforce be different from the God of Love who created the Lamb. This dimension that surpasses conventional dichotomies of good and evil, that transcends the boundaries of sex and gender, is the "something bigger" (SM 155) (bigger than the big St. Mawr) to which Lou is now responding. It can be called phallic only if we adopt Lawrence's sense of the word as he explains it in his essay "On Being a Man" (written a few months before *St. Mawr*):

The Cross, as we know, stands for the body, for the dark self which lives in the body. And on the Cross of this bodily self is crucified the self which I know I am, my so-called *real* self. The Cross, as an ancient symbol, has an inevitable phallic reference. But it is far deeper than sex. It is the self that darkly inhabits our blood and bone, and for which the ithyphallus is but a symbol. This self which lives darkly in my blood is my *alter ego*, my other self (...) the dark self that dwells in the blood of a man and of a woman. Phallic if you like. But much more than phallic. (Phoenix II 619)

"The dark self that dwells in the blood of a man and of a woman" is what makes both Lou Witt and the New England wife before her respond to the fierce living spirit of the ranch. A primeval bodily urge to relate to the living things around us: flowers, trees, rocks, rivers, mountains, is (according to Lawrence) what life primarily consists of and what ultimately gives sense to it.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore vital that we can open as "many doors of receptivity in oneself" (PA 26) as is possible and that is the move taken by both Lou and the New England woman. That they should ultimately engage in a vain fight with their wild surroundings is not so much a measure of their failure as the sign of their humanity.

Concerning this last section of the story, Michael Ragussis has shrewdly called attention to the fact that only the narrator and the reader share

knowledge concerning the story of the ranch and, in particular, of the New England wife's unsuccessful fight with the adverse natural elements around her. Lou is no longer used as a "filter"<sup>17</sup> here as was previously the case when St. Mawr was the object of attention. She is, therefore, ironically unaware of the more than probable defeat that awaits her and hence of the illusory quality of her hopes and prospects. Her predicament is, after all, similar to humanity's foolish belief that it can subdue nature to its own profit and immediate ends for good and come out of it uninjured. That she (unlike her mother) remains unsuspecting of the terrible threat of squalor and sordidness impending upon her does not in the least diminish her "inward vision" (SM 151) and her "cleaner energy" (ibid.) that make her into a significant civilising agent even if for a short while. This is why I would not so much put the stress on Lou's shortcomings and final failure (as suggested by Ragussis' article) as on the positive message that is nevertheless communicated by her human enthusiasm. That Lou is able to recognise and admit the great powers emanating from the wild nature around her, that she bends to them in reverence and awe and is eager to receive their vital elemental energy as well as give back her own human energy<sup>18</sup>, is already a victory in itself. Hers is not a purely destructive attitude but destructive/creative. The two women at the heart of this story – Lou and Mrs. Witt – play complementary roles and illustrate two possible escape routes but it is Lou's way, naïve as it may be, that is finally endorsed. Mother and daughter both emphatically negate conventional society and conventional marriage but whereas the intellectualism, cynicism and bitter disillusionment of Mrs. Witt prevents her from getting involved or entering into any kind of committed relationship and thus illustrates a way that is purely negative, her daughter's way is decidedly more positive. She learns from her mother (but also from her own experience) to repudiate society and marriage but, unlike her, she does not relinquish the human adventure into the unknown. Like the New England woman before her, Lou brings with her to America the vision and the energy required from those who dare brave the wilderness and carry on humanity's civilising effort. That this fight "has cost the lives of countless brave men" (SM 151) and will cost Lou an unknown price,

does not mean that it was vain or useless; on the contrary, this cost is precisely what will make the effort pay, earning her dignity and a sense of purpose in life.<sup>19</sup>

That this human, civilising action should be entrusted to women reminds us somewhat of Lawrence's pre-war confidence in women to renew the world (though the scope of such belief was admittedly different then). Somehow, it is reminiscent of the role played by women in *The Rainbow* when "look[ing] out from the heated, blind intercourse of farm-life" to the "beyond" (R 10) they "wanted (...) to be of the fighting host" (R 11).

But there is another reason for relating *St. Mawr* with *The Rainbow* and it has to do with the emphasis laid in both texts on the complicity between mothers and daughters. The involvement and solidarity between Lou and Mrs. Witt (evident in their dialogues and concerted actions) as well as the fact that Lou struggles to define herself in terms of her mother but also to surpass her mother's values and stance and react against her, is a pattern that was already at work in *The Rainbow's* successive generations.

## VI

In my approach to some of the most interesting fictional texts by D. H. Lawrence (brought together here by their incidental focus on horses) I have tried to show how the novelist evolved from a position which he intended as beneficial to women to a much more openly ambivalent one: with woman as both threatening and life-engendering.

In *The Rainbow* we have "woman becoming independent, taking her own initiative" from the unindividualised Brangwen women "set out to discover what was beyond, to enlarge their own scope and range and freedom" (R 11) through the first and second generations story (with Lydia and Anna variously enacting the leap forward) finally to the "new woman's" strenuous fight for a place in the "man's world" – this is Ursula's incomplete story. The sap of fertility runs throughout the novel and the labour in the fields is paralleled by the feminine labour of giving birth to men in both the literal and the metaphoric sense.

*Women in Love* is a period piece and a transition work. It is a period piece because although the war is never explicitly mentioned in the text it haunts it. As Lawrence himself said: "though it does not concern the war itself (...) the bitterness of the war may be taken for granted in the characters."<sup>20</sup> It is indeed a world lacerated by doubts and uncertainties, where the characters tend to recoil away from each other, to barricade themselves in, behind masks, words, thoughts, illusions, in a polyphony of voices never achieving total communication, always threatened by silence. It is a world where speech is seen as life-giving but language is denounced as hopelessly insufficient. Here men and women alike live in extreme situations of anxiety and alienation, but women emerge as showing more the stuff of survivors than men. Even though the author's mouthpiece is a man, he is ridiculed in his pose as *Salvator Mundi* and questioned and resisted in his theorising mainly by Ursula who helps redress the balance in the novel. But here we have an ambivalent treatment of women: they are either travestied men or child-like and undeveloped or else they appear as potential "devouring mothers", *Magna Mater* figures, whom men nevertheless desperately need. Men's unease at such powerful characters as Hermione, Gudrun and Ursula gives rise to the first signs of a sexual politics involving power relations and demanding women's submission. The novel tries to show both how destructive these can be and how necessary. But what remains for us, readers, is the strenuous quality of the battle that characterises the relationship between the sexes and human relationships in general as well as the paucity of the results thereby achieved. In this ongoing battle the main characters (be they male or female) fight on equal ground and Birkin's theory of "two stars in balanced equilibrium" makes sense as a way out of this exhausting battle field, even though it is only precariously enacted and achieved in the final equivocal Birkin/Ursula relationship.

In *St. Mawr* the diagnosis of a hopeless social world is not so much resented and internalised (as was the case in the novel previously alluded to), as objectively criticised through satire<sup>21</sup> and it is shown that no sexual relationship can redeem it or function as an alternative (as will be the case in

*Lady Chatterley's Lover*). Here the quester heroine has to learn "to keep to herself", in other words, Lou has to learn to renounce the marriage embrace and find new ways of connecting herself to the deep cosmic forces that bind man and nature together – the love between a man and a woman no longer being available as a genuine *via media*. She perceives herself as a modern version of the Vestal Virgins and takes to heart the task of rediscovering a sense for human life that her society has lost.

And again we sense that, after all, Lawrence continues to put his confidence in women, to trust them more than men – he "still ha[s] some hope of the women" (L2 425) (as he had in 1915 and will have till the end of his life) – and leaves with them the burden of his hopes.

## Notes

- 1 The entry in the *Dictionnaire des Symboles* by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant occupying ten pages is clear evidence of the importance and pervasiveness of the horse as a symbol in our culture as well as in other cultures. Worth noticing is also the ambivalent (even paradoxical) significance of this symbol both linked to life and death, the unconscious dimensions and controlled instinct, the moon and the sun. Cf. *Dictionnaire des Symboles: Mythes, Rêves, Coutumes, Gestes, Formes, Figures, Couleurs, Nombres*. 1969; Paris: Ed. Robert Laffont et Ed. Jupiter, rev. ed. 1982) 222-232.
- 2 The expression comes from Cornelia Nixon's title *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women* – a work whose argument I have here partly adopted.
- 3 An expression used by Lawrence himself in his "Foreword" to *Fantasia of the Unconscious* to refer to his own essayistic writing.
- 4 According to Keith Sagar, quoting Lawrence's letters, *St.Mawr* was referred to both as a "long-short story" and as a "novelette". Cf. Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence: A Calendar of his Works* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979) 138/9.
- 5 As can be read in the dust-cover synopsis of the first edition of the novel. Cf. Keith Sagar, *The Life of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980) page one of colour illustrations.
- 6 On Lawrence and dialogism see, e.g.: David Lodge, "Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Bakhtin: Lawrence and dialogic fiction" and Avrom Fleishman, "Lawrence and Bakhtin: Where Pluralism Ends and Dialogism Begins", *Rethinking Lawrence*, ed. Keith Brown (Milton Keynes – Philadelphia: Open UP, 1990) 92-108 and 109-19; Gamini Salgado, "Taking

- a Nail for a Walk: On Reading *Women in Love*", *D. H. Lawrence*, ed. and introd. by Peter Widdowson (London: Longman, 1992) 137-145; Isabel Fernandes, "Bakhtin e Lawrence – Um Diálogo Possível", *Dedalus: Revista Portuguesa de Literatura Comparada* 3 / 4 (1993-1994): 189-205, and more recently, M. Elizabeth Sargent and Garry Watson, "D. H. Lawrence and the Dialogical Principle: "The Strange Reality of Otherness"", *College English*, 63 / 4 (March 2001): 409-36.
- 7 Cf. *Study of Thomas Hardy*, 55/6.
- 8 One should not forget that later, in a parallel scene, Gudrun also exerts her will and power to control a herd of bullocks thus showing herself to be Gerald's equal if not superior to him.
- 9 Cf. *Twilight in Italy*, 76-78
- 10 I am drawing here on Hilary Simpson's argument in her book on Lawrence and Feminism.
- 11 Cf. note to the CUP edition of the text (SM 232). See also Keith Sagar's *D. H. Lawrence: Life into Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books; New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 265/66. For a different argument on the use of horses in some of Lawrence's fiction see also chapter "The Monk and the Beast" in the same work by Sagar.
- 12 A very interesting article by Michael Ragussis deals precisely with what he views as characteristic of this text: a succession of ironic reversals that lead him away from dominant readings of the text into a more corrosive disquieting one. Cf. Michael Ragussis, "The false Myth of *St. Mawr*: Lawrence and the Subterfuge of Art", *Papers in Language and Literature* 11 (Spring 1975): 186-96.
- 13 Note how at least the three main characters in this story (Rico, Lou and Mrs. Witt) share this quality of rootlessness and how it is Lou who finally makes the decisive move to establish herself on the ranch and to renew her relatedness to the natural scene that surrounds her.
- 14 Noticeable in this text is the number of puns; see, for instance, the ambiguity in the use of the word "game" on page 63 of the text. In the immediate context it alludes to women as game to men (as hunters) in a relationship between the sexes as seen by Rico (and other masculine characters in the text). In another sense it suggests the fickleness and irresponsibility with which people in modern society play with sex as though it were nothing more than a game.
- 15 Again the irony inherent in the name of the ranch dismally suggests, as Ragussis has pointed out, that at best Lou will "become the Great Female Goat Pan". (Ragussis 193)
- 16 This "vivid relatedness between the man and the living universe that surrounds him" (Phoenix 27) is the main theme of "Pan in America", an essay written in the Spring of 1924.



- 17 Seymour Chatman in a recent article published in a special issue of *Narrative* (devoted to Contemporary Narratology) uses the word *filter* for the character's point of view to distinguish it from the narrator's point of view. Cf. Seymour Chatman "'Soft Filters': Some Sunshine on 'Cat in the Rain'", *Narrative*, 9 / 2 (May 2001): 217-22.
- 18 In "Pan in America", Lawrence suggests that he conceives this "transaction" as two-sided: "Give me your power, then, oh tree! And I will give you of mine" (Phoenix 26)
- 19 Notice again the pun on the word "cheap" used throughout the story in relation to sex ("cheap sex") but also in relation to dealings (the sale of St. Mawr and the purchase of the ranch). Particularly interesting is Mrs. Witt's last sarcastic remark on the price paid by Lou for "Las Chivas": "Then I call it cheap, considering all there is to it: even the name!" (SM 155)
- 20 This comes from Lawrence's "Foreword to *Women in Love*" (WL 485)
- 21 "Satire" – says Lawrence in his essay of 1927, "On John Galsworthy" – "exists for the purpose of killing the social being, of showing him what an inferior he is. (...) By ridiculing the social being the satirist helps the true individual, the real human being, to rise to his feet again and go on with the battle." (STH 213). In the case of *St. Mawr* the main vehicle of satire is Mrs. Witt whose pitiless, mordant look and words on the social world round her makes her a privileged observer, a bit like Gudrun in *Women in Love*.

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# **'So Men Said': Virginia Woolf and a history of women's creativity**

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## **'So Men Said': Virginia Woolf and a history of women's creativity**

This essay is an expanded version of a paper initially presented in March 1999 at the XXth Annual Meeting of APEAA (Portuguese Association of Anglo-American Studies) as part of the work at that time being developed by the Research and Educational Programme on Studies of Identity. <sup>1</sup> While incorporating the original paper, the present essay will address some of the issues then only briefly considered, especially those which I deem to be central both to an understanding of Virginia Woolf's innovative approach to the question of women's creativity – her quest for a definition of “femininity”, her admittedly utopian vision of a future society where woman would “put on the body she has so often laid down” <sup>2</sup> – and to her anticipation of late twentieth century social and cultural theory.

Although *A Room of One's Own* has become one of the most canonical works in studies of women's literature and is widely recognised as a crucial foundational text in questions of gender and feminine identity, the extent to which it may still be theoretically productive today invites further enquiry. Woolf's first systematic attempt to account for women's erasure from history, her playful and subtle analysis of the puzzling absence of women from any established canon, goes deeper than has usually been credited and it challenges the notions of history, biography and discourse, which have dominated Western thought until the 1970s. To my knowledge, only during the 1990s did two essays, published by the sociologist Michèle Barrett, approach Woolf as a forerunner of recent theoretical developments. <sup>3</sup> And in 2000 Linden Peach, in his book on Virginia Woolf, <sup>4</sup> persuasively deals with the writer's ability to explore the complex relationships between history, politics and language and shows how

her work seems to be located at the very juncture between deconstruction and New Historicism (...). The dialogical relationship between the claims of history and historicity which has revolutionised historicism in theory and

which needs to be brought to any discussion of literary history is actually raised as an issue in Woolf's work itself. (Peach, 3-4)

Indebted as I am to his recognition that in *A Room of One's Own* "Woolf is interested in the kind of cultural materialism that poststructuralism initially tended to shun", (Peach, 155) he does not examine how far these questions, so methodically discussed in the book in the context of Woolf's novels, are crucial to this text. While confronting "the great problem of the true nature of woman" (6), Woolf tackles precisely those very issues that have become so central to contemporary thought.

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When (...) one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor (...). Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman. (48)

Anonymous for centuries, the poet Judith Shakespeare was born in 1929 in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. As one of the fictional characters she conceived for the book, Judith represents all those women who have been edited out of historical consciousness. How much do we know today of this imaginary woman writer in search of a historical self? How far did she come in her seventy-three years of existence?

Anonymous and motherless for centuries, the poet Judith Shakespeare has by now managed to secure a distinguished literary ancestry. Her name – admittedly under various different aliases – was in the limelight throughout the twentieth century, particularly in the last three decades. A vast number of scholars have assisted Judith in the laborious task of delivering her ancestral mothers. By reclaiming heaps of neglected papers, long hidden behind the scenes of public history, they unveiled a secluded life that had moved quietly forward, retrieving from oblivion extensive lists of women writers which had been excluded from historical documents.

Women started constructing alternative voices through writing even before they were suitably literate. In fact, the very first autobiography in English has been credited to the fourteenth-century mystic Margery Kempe who, unable to write, decided to dictate her thoughts. The Middle Ages provided Judith with other British forerunners, from the tenth-century abbess Hrotsvitha to the mystic Julian of Norwich, Chaucer’s contemporary. In the sixteenth-century, while the imaginary Judith Shakespeare, exiled by her artistic gifts from the society of her family and abused by those with whom she wanted to practise her craft, “killed herself one winter’s night” (47), quite a few aristocratic ladies were fluent in multiple literary forms. As Elizabeth H. Hagerman observes:

we now know that even though literacy rates were considerably lower for early modern British women than for men, there were in Shakespeare’s England enough women who did read (or who heard books read aloud to them) to create a market for books addressed specifically to them. <sup>5</sup>

Women were writing translations, letters, <sup>6</sup> journals, diaries and memoirs, conduct books, mothers’ advice books, autobiographies and biographies, almanacks, devotional hymns and religious pamphlets, poetry and drama. During the seventeenth-century our poet’s more privileged colleagues kept on creating across a wide spectrum of genres and they participated in literary circles. Looking into the foundations for women’s literary authority, Jane Spencer concluded that they were laid in this remarkable period, when:

women writers included a number of aristocrats dedicating their leisure hours to literary pursuits, and, less well known but also important, several middle-class women writing on household, medical and religious matters. The works of many poets, diarists and letter-writers remained private, while women’s published writing ranged from romance, poetry and drama to non-fictional prose. The traditional notion of women’s proper silence was being challenged, then, and in particular there were feminist writers who, by their emphasis on women’s intellectual capacities and the need for education, fostered a view that women’s learning and women’s writing were the instruments of struggle against male domination. (Spencer, 22) <sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, along with politically active gentlewomen like the influent Quaker pamphleteer Margaret Fell, also middle and lower-class authors were, according to Margaret J. M. Ezell's research on early Quaker women writing between 1650 and 1672, publishing epistles, prefaces, appeals, polemical texts, prophetic discourses and autobiographical narratives. The very considerable corpus of printed texts thus established shows that these writers employed a multiplicity of rhetorical devices and modes of discourse and were 'highly conscious of gender issues'.<sup>8</sup>

Judith's literary forerunners of the eighteenth-century were less difficult to locate. Her middle-class grandmothers were not only translating the classics, writing poetry and drama, Gothic narratives, romances, autobiographies, political, didactic and religious essays; they were playing a decisively important role in the development of the novel, as Dale Spender has shown in her 1986 *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Writers before Jane Austen*.<sup>9</sup> Quite a few were even supporting themselves by their pens. But, if it is by now common sense to recognise that, in Jane Spencer's words, "the emergence of the novel and the establishment of the professional woman writer" were "two remarkable and interconnected literary events", it has also been established that "as the novel (...) gained critical prestige women's part in it has been as far as possible edited out of the historical account". (Spencer, viii) While any reader of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* will confirm that erasure, we should bear in mind that

in the eighteenth century [the novel] was an important medium for the articulation of women's concerns, and its rise was centrally bound up with the growth of a female literary voice accepted within patriarchal society. (...) Their work imitated, or counteracted, or (a point often overlooked) influenced the work of their male contemporaries. (Spencer, ix)

The social structure erected by the rising industrial economic model was obviously hostile to the autonomy of women; their acceptance and acknowledgment as literary voices was accompanied by their rapidly declining public participation and status. With the spreading out of the bourgeois ideology of femininity (that would eventually dominate the Victorian age), a social and literary ideal of the "proper feminine" was steadily gaining ground from the first



decades of the eighteenth century. From the beginning of the century, the “double standard” being imposed both on the stage and on novels was particularly confining to women writers. Domesticity, modesty and discretion, sentimentalism, avoidance of political subjects, acceptance of a limited feminine role, conformity to a chaste presentation of female sexuality – these were some of the conventions then being enforced by reviewers and publishers on women authors. The development of a literature written by women appeared to defend these recent “literary” values as specifically “female” values and by

weighing passion against prudence, sexual attachment against female independence, desire against duty, and morality against romance, we (...) find them building, out of the contradictions of “femininity”, an identity for themselves as writers and a female tradition of literature. (Spencer, 33)

Some writers conformed to this new ethos; others like Jane Austen were shrewd enough to ironically contravene the conventions by seemingly accepting them. Mary Wollstonecraft intentionally rebelled, denounced the whole ideology of femininity and was sharply criticized by men and women as a result. “Her boldness swept male chivalry away and forced prejudice into the open.” (Spencer, 100) Still others subverted the new reading contract through their persistent use of Gothic fantasy and romance to destabilise the now prevailing realistic conventions. At the end of the eighteenth century both the male-dominated publishing market and the reading public had recognized that women authors had come to stay. Whatever the restrictions imposed on their creative freedom, many succeeded in devising authorial strategies capable of doing justice to their artistic integrity.

Throughout the nineteenth century women writers were widely acknowledged; some were acclaimed as honorary men. The respectable patriarchal establishment had reconfigured their diverse literary achievement and minimized their artistic scope to erase nearly every other genre except the novel, and by then,

many women had to deny or disguise their female identity in the struggle to secure a fair reading for their writings. The nature of the process at work here is perfectly illustrated by the fact that this was actually a reversal of the

eighteenth-century practice, when male authors had to masquerade as females to get their novels published. <sup>10</sup>

Yet women authors distinguished themselves also as poets, professional reviewers, translators, political essayists, journalists or hacks. Openly, anonymously or under a pseudonym, these authors widened their sphere of influence against considerable odds, challenging Victorian conventions of social and aesthetic demeanour. While other texts were less familiar to the general public, women's considerable novelistic production was indisputable. Nonetheless, the critical fact that the novel was not the most prestigious of literary forms should not be overlooked. The struggle for a better reputation for the genre was often a fight against the widespread notion that some lady authors were highly responsible for its allegedly inferior quality. Vindicating the moral and technical excellence attainable both by novels and by women writers, George Eliot expressed in her famous 1856 review "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" the following mordant comment:

To judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions. Apparently, their recipe for solving all such difficulties is something like this: – Take a woman's head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English, when not required. (Eliot, 149) <sup>11</sup>

The status of the novel as a serious art form obviously depended on its emancipation from lesser authors; the fact that it had already repeatedly been considered a "female" form somehow reflects Eliot's self-confident effort (pseudonym notwithstanding) to release it from many of the constraints of gender. A historical model of women authors as novelists had been erected against the actual fact of women's substantial contribution to a wider variety of literary genres. Of their participation in other cultural and social activities little was known – it was not deemed of great consequence.

The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed women's splendid achievement: they emphatically asserted their presence in every literary form and mode. And the last seventy years, since Woolf began in *A Room of One's Own* her productive rewriting of history to include the muted voices of her feminine ancestresses, have incessantly revealed an immense legacy of texts and a dynamic literary tradition where both female and male authors continuously influenced one another. Besides, throughout the twentieth century, women's deliberate break with conventional diction contributed more than ever before to burst through the barriers of cultural discourse. As Patricia Waugh observes:

it is precisely the quest for history, agency, and self-conscious identity, as aspects of relationships with socially situated others, which has motivated much women's writing in the twentieth century. (Waugh, 31) 12

Woolf, in spite of being certainly "bound by the limitations of the historiography of her day" (Ezell, 49-50), was very much alert to the political nature of reading and interpreting historical facts and clearly aware of the overwhelming difficulties of writing history.

During the 1990s, the tradition that Virginia Woolf initially outlined in *A Room of One's Own* (as well as in several other essays and reviews) was critically examined in the light of more recent research. Loyalty to her spirited resistance to closure demanded no less. The theoretical principles behind the construction of women's literary past were discussed and scrutinized, drawing on the contribution both of French feminist literary theory and the new historicism. Focusing on the need to question the assumptions underlying the work of pioneer scholars such as Ellen Moers or Elaine Showalter, Margaret J. E. Ezell pertinently defends that:

In order to create a coherent narrative, any type of history must necessarily be selective in its choice of materials and in its presentation. This is as true for literary history as for social, for women's literary history as well as for accounts of the traditional canon – it is as true for this study as for those it analyses. The question about the writing of women's literary history then becomes, what are the principles of selection and exclusion in the current

women's literary history and to what extent are they manifestations of unquestioned assumptions about women's texts, about historical periods, and about the nature of authorship? (Ezell, 2)

While we will never be able to retrieve from neglect all the works that have been lost, a vast, diverse and increasingly self-examining post-woolfian canon of women's literature is in the making. <sup>13</sup> For an infamous runaway daughter, the record now shows that Judith Shakespeare has made herself quite a good reputation.

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The former survey briefly shows that the history of women's (lack of) access to cultural discourse has so far revealed a much larger volume and scope of production than Virginia Woolf might have anticipated in 1929. Women's literature, particularly as it has been interpreted since the early 1970s, has enabled us to know much more about actual women writers, the extensive range of their enterprise and their relative situation within a wider history of writing. The fact that a few socially more privileged contemporaries of Shakespeare's doomed sister, Mary Sidney for instance, were able to pursue literary interests, does in no way diminish Virginia's fundamental contention: without financial independence and privacy no woman can do full justice to her merits (literary or otherwise). By relating women's (then supposedly) meagre literary achievement to the specific cultural constraints of their lives, *A Room of One's Own* opened an immensely flourishing field of research. As the pioneer landmark in women's literary history the essay has been thoroughly recognised and acclaimed; it is largely responsible for the deliverance of women as readers and writers. As the first systematic attempt to account for women's enigmatic absence from historical records, it also crucially prefigures the current rewriting of history as well as some of the most recent developments in philosophy, which now include women's diverse experience and the difference between the sexes as new objects of study. <sup>14</sup> The theoretical significance of *A Room of One's Own* – which, let me remind you, I chose to read here as an epitome of Woolf's entire work – does reach considerably beyond what has usually been admitted.

Woolf's enquiry into the historical conditions of authorship, the relations between gender and different modes of literary production and their connections to a male-engendered discourse began very early in her career. In 1906, her short fiction "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" <sup>15</sup> imagines the recovery by a woman historian of an early sixteenth century diary so far neglected. Mr John Martyn, very well-informed about his male ancestors and their historical feats, shows his surprise at the narrator's interest in Mistress Martyn's journal:

(...) I don't think you'll find anything out of the way with her; she was very much the same as the rest of us – as far as I can see, not remarkable – ('JMJM', 64)

The lady's life, quickly (and not accurately) <sup>16</sup> summed up by her descendant,

'Joan Martyn,' he began with the voice of a showman, 'was born 1495. She was the daughter of Giles Martyn. She was his only daughter. He had three sons though; we always have sons. She wrote this diary when she was twenty-five. She lived here all her life – never married.' ('JMJM', 60)

reveals to the historian the maiden's comments on her life and times, her dreams of a wider existence, her bookish leanings, her pleasure in writing, her considerable dowry and her anxieties concerning her planned marriage.

No other event in the life of a woman can mean so great a change; for from flitting shadow like and unconsidered in her father's house, marriage suddenly forms her to a substantial body, with weight which people must see and make way for. ('JMJM', 73)

Though in the light of Woolf's later work all these topics surely acquire additional importance, I will just devote a few words here to what seems more consequential to her examination of the writing and interpretation of history and biography. If the character of Joan Martyn is clearly an antecedent of Judith Shakespeare, Mr Martyn's condescending attitude both towards his ancestress and towards the woman historian is symptomatic of the general male lack of awareness of the female self. Before 1929 and *A Room of One's*

*Own*, there are several other examples in Woolf's short prose of this concern with a restricted male-dominated version of history. In a 1920 review for *The Times Literary Supplement*,<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf remarked:

One might indeed say that were it not for the novels of the nineteenth century we should remain as ignorant as our ancestors of this section of the human race. It has been common knowledge for ages that women exist, bear children, have no beards, and seldom go bald; but save in these respects, and in other where they are said to be identical with men, we know little of them and have little sound evidence upon which to base our conclusions. (‘MW’18)

Women were missing from the history of humankind; their everyday lives had left no traces, their creativity had gone unrecorded; their voices were scarcely audible. In her 1924 essay “Indiscretions”,<sup>18</sup> Woolf commented ironically:

A hundred years ago it was simple enough; [women] were stars who shone only in male sunshine, deprived of it, they languished into nonentity – sniffed, bickered, envied each other – *so men said*. (‘I’, 90, my italics)

Knowledge about women was, in all probability, only knowledge about what men had seen fit to record and appraise – usually what they thought reflected their greatness, or rather, their self-importance. A much quoted, but often excessively abridged, passage of *A Room of One's Own* is particularly eloquent on this issue.

Life for both sexes (...) is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babies in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority – it may be wealth, or rank, a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney – for there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination – over other people. Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself. It must indeed be one of the chief sources of his power. (...) Women have served all these

centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. (...) Whatever may be their uses in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. (35-6)

Combining her serious purpose of analysis of the cultural situation of women with a satirical critique of male narcissism that would eventually dominate *Three Guineas*, this passage unmistakably shows Virginia Woolf's alertness to the patriarchal prejudice behind the "historical" inferiority of women. If the whole masculine model of political, social, cultural and economic power is founded on a psychological need to assert male superiority, then any claim to a historically accurate account of women collapses. The real issue behind the absence of women from historical records thus becomes an issue of who engendered those particular narratives of history and in whose interest were they perpetuated. Situated within male discourses, women were accordingly constructed to boost men's egos – their weakness turns out to be the reverse of patriarchal strength. Woolf was determined to fight the binary logic endorsed by this mirror image of the relationship between the sexes, as her defense of an androgynous mind will later reveal. Examining, in 1929, the circumstances that had shaped women's lives in days only recently gone by, the writer confronts not only the time-honoured narrative of women as "nonentities", but also the established notions of history and biography and discourse – "history is too much about wars; biography too much about great men" (103).

In her effort to unveil the past, she shows her awareness that the difficulties of writing history are intimately related to a dominant patriarchal ethos that establishes women's invisibility and silence by systematically undervaluing or disregarding their contribution to humankind.

Young women, (...) you are, in my opinion, disgracefully ignorant. You have never made a discovery of any sort of importance. You have never shaken an empire or led an army into battle. The plays of Shakespeare are not by you, and you have never introduced a barbarous race to the blessings

of civilization. What is your excuse? It is very well for you to say, pointing to the streets and squares and forests of the globe swarming with black and white and coffee-coloured inhabitants, all busily engaged in traffic and enterprise and love-making, we have had other work on our hands. Without our doing, those seas would be unsailed and those fertile lands a desert. (106)

Woolf's search in *A Room of One's Own* for a suppressed and silenced version of history thus encapsulates the examination of the whole structure of patriarchy that she would accomplish throughout her writing. The "biographical" sketch of Judith Shakespeare is only a particularly striking example of her political and epistemological challenge to male authority. In her oeuvre she creates a spacious variety of potential narratives hidden behind public male-dominated discourse, releasing a multitude of silenced voices, inventing characters (both men and women) that fight to resist long-established conventions of behaviour and the routine patterns of biography. Her imagination, although rooted in the historical constraints she denounces,<sup>19</sup> empowers her with the ability to scrutinize those very same discursive formations.

Anticipating late twentieth century theorists such as Hayden White and Michel Foucault, Woolf

is positioned between an old 'historicist' viewpoint, tied to a concept of the permanence of originary meaning, and a 'textual' view of history which releases it from the conditions of its birth. Her approach is more dialectical than is allowed for in either of these two polarised positions (...) The exploration of the relationship between history and historicity in Woolf's fiction is posited on an understanding of what constitutes a text that is, also, close to Foucault's. (...) At the heart of any text, Foucault argues, is an interpretation and reinterpretation of events that have no existence either inside or outside of the text independent of its interpretative framework. Of particular relevance to Woolf's work is Foucault's argument that an event is always located in 'a complex group of relations', that these are constantly changing and that with them the event itself will change. (Peach, 5-6)



Before Linden Peach's recent contribution to Woolf scholarship, my appreciation of Virginia Woolf's writing as an important forerunner of contemporary social and cultural thought had in January 1999 been significantly encouraged by *Imagination in Theory: Essays on Writing and Culture*, then published by the sociologist Michèle Barrett. Considering the writer's texts from the perspective of someone particularly concerned with the analysis of culture, Barrett declared:

Virginia Woolf's writing, taken as a whole, does much to problematize the boundary between fiction and theory. It destabilizes the conventions within which texts of different kinds are classified and read. In this it has much to teach us about the losses we incur when we separate theory too rigidly from the imagination. It speaks to the gulf we have established between what one might call the rational and the unreasonable truth. (Barrett, 16-7)

In her literary and cultural theory as well as in her fiction, Woolf nurtured an "uncanonical, inquisitive, open, and unacademic" <sup>20</sup> vision. While she never fully rejected the old respectable masculine tradition of literary history into which she had been born and bred, Woolf's personal reading list included a wider choice of names than might at that time be expected. Her literary criticism contributed to the reevaluation of some then neglected authors (of which Lawrence Sterne is a splendid example); her personal notes confirm her constant attention to "minor" works or writers. Aware as she was of the need for a radical redefinition of history, she cherished throughout her life the project of an alternative literary canon, which, to a certain extent, she actually presented in the two series of *The Common Reader* and in other essays and reviews. <sup>21</sup>

In Woolf's fiction, her fluctuating narrative persona, her deliberate experiments with literary form, her subversion of conventional reading expectations and the changing interrogative strategies she developed throughout her work are all invariably provocative. How much does this contribute to our better understanding of Judith Shakespeare?

The vexed question of feminine identity is a good example of the fluid contradictory method Virginia Woolf developed. Arguably one of the most important questions she tackled, it was addressed with understandable caution:

“the great problem of the true nature of woman” is left “unsolved” because “when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth.” (6) In *A Room of One’s Own*, in *Three Guineas* and in several essays throughout her life, in her openly fictional writings as well as in her posthumously published “Anon” and “The Reader”,<sup>22</sup> Woolf hesitated between the (seemingly neo-platonic) apology for an androgynous utopia and the appeal to feminist action. Several motives may account for this hesitation. She thought (and wrote) within a male-defined tradition where frank representations of female sexuality were either conspicuously absent or clearly unsatisfactory. She was personally troubled by her confessed inability to write the body.<sup>23</sup> As she admitted in “Professions for Women” (1931):

To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artistic state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. (...) Her imagination could work no longer.<sup>24</sup>

Tranquil recollection was (is?) not always an option for artists outside the mainstream. *A Room of One’s Own* envisaged a future when no writer would be conscious of his or her sex, when “the androgynous mind” would transmit “emotion without impediment” and be “naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.” (94). Yet Virginia believed that no woman could express her emotions in language that had been chiefly designed by men to express theirs. In 1919, reviewing Dorothy Richardson’s *The Tunnel*, she cited with approval: “To write books knowing all about style would be to become like a man.” Greeting her colleague’s experimental narrative method as “better in its failure than most books in their success”<sup>25</sup>, she welcomed the “psychological sentence of the feminine gender.” Let us briefly recall her much quoted (and frequently misjudged) reflection:

[Richardson] has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson’s consciousness. It is a woman’s sentence, but only in the sense that it is used

to describe a woman’s mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex. Her discoveries are concerned with states of being and not with states of doing. 26

In *Pilgrimage* Woolf recognised her own effort to stretch the boundaries of fiction and human self-knowledge. Reading the recent first novel by Mary Carmichael, another of her fictional creations in *A Room of One’s Own*, she comments:

So I tried a sentence or two in my tongue. Soon it was obvious that something was not quite in order. The smooth gliding of sentence after sentence was interrupted. Something tore, something scratched; a single word here and there flashed its torch in my eyes. (...) to read this writing was like being out at sea in an open boat. Up one went, down one sank. This terseness, this short-windedness, might mean that she was afraid of something; afraid of being called ‘sentimental’ perhaps; (77)

Alert to the artistic risks present in such a venture, she was nevertheless aware that the difference between men’s and women’s writing might not be intrinsically dependent upon the supposedly different nature of each sex. As we have seen, Woolf was absolutely conscious that the principles behind patriarchal judgments of women’s lives and literary achievement were all but accurate or objective: women’s difference had continuously been underestimated or established as inferiority. In “Women Novelists” (1918) 27 she declared:

As Mr Brimley Johnson again and again remarks, a woman’s writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine. He shows his wisdom (...) by accepting the fact, upsetting though it is, that women are apt to differ.

And she offered some reasons for this upsetting fact:

There is the obvious and enormous difference of experience, in the first place; but the essential difference lies in the fact not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself. (...) there rises for consideration the very difficult question between the man’s and the woman’s view of what constitutes the importance of any

subject. From this spring not only marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method and style. ('WN', 316)

Language is inextricably linked with experience; literary methods and styles are dependent on the psychology of each sex. The difference between the sexes may be interpreted in ahistorical, idealist terms or as an expression of materialist historical contexts. Woolf hesitated between these obviously contradictory positions. But, whatever its origin, the living experience was known to be diverse. The future, she hoped, would either return the sexes to their lost primordial unity or create a new wholeness. In the meantime, the external (i.e. social) moulds which had so far determined women's cultural confinement were starting to break, yet the troubling question of feminine identity could not be solved as long as internal (i.e. psychological) constraints went undisputed. Psychology is not only, and perhaps not primarily biologically determined; inasmuch as it is produced by internalised values, "norms of behaviour and patterns of feeling"<sup>28</sup> it is also socially produced. "Each sex describes itself". Though it is not possible to think of the body and its passions in a sexual void, for Woolf, culture, not biology, is responsible for gender differences. If she lacked the concept of gender, which we now have, she was perfectly aware that any clear-cut definition of the differences between the sexes was as artificially constructed as the history of humankind had been. The difference between men's and women's writing might not be intrinsic to the different "nature" of each sex – most probably it was yet another outcome of their vastly different lives and opportunities.

The gesture towards androgyny is millennial, like all dreams of another language or mode of being; but its effect is to remove the area of debate (and the trespass) from biological determination to the field of signs; from gender to representation ('words' not 'things'). And in holding open other possibilities – otherness itself – such writing posits 'the difference of view' as a matter of rewriting.<sup>29</sup>

Who could tell what women might not achieve with some money, some learning, some privacy, "some time on [their] hands" (107)? Would not the revaluation of the "difference of experience" open up different new insights for human society? Had not the losses incurred by the deletion of women from history been too damaging for the human species? And, if they had been

removed from history by a male-oriented discourse, would not a fertile co-operation between the two sexes – “some marriage of opposites” (99) – generate new men and women? Rewriting history to include women’s “alien and critical” (93) perspectives could nurture a more harmonious future. Woolf’s androgynous vision derived, in Laura Marcus’s words 30:

from an unambiguous yearning for a way out of, or beyond, the confines of sexual difference and the intense ‘sex-consciousness’ of her times. (Marcus, 1997, 59)

The fact remains that her whole oeuvre is profoundly embedded in her own historical context. Yet it announced the future. Striving to get beyond the binary limits of femininity and masculinity, which she recognised as patriarchal constructs, Virginia Woolf encountered androgyny. Identity was mutually defined – a change in the attributes of one sex would affect the other.

Still, and at least for the time being, women’s values were different from men’s. By exploring this difference – from the point of view of a woman artist acutely aware of the unstable character of gender divisions – Woolf’s writing deliberately addressed “the rigid categories of gendered subjectivity which women’s liberation (...) tended to reinforce as well as challenge.” (Barrett, 121)

In Herbert Marder’s perceptive comment, for Virginia:

The last stronghold of patriarchal tyranny was in the minds of women themselves, in their adherence to alien modes of thought, in their attempts to be exactly like men, or to differ from them in everything. Self-conscious emulation, self-conscious defiance, both deformed the mind and diverted women from the goal, which was to be themselves. Political feminism could not bring about this freeing of the mind (...). 31

From this vantage point, her defence of androgyny does not look as romantically visionary as some worthy scholars – Elaine Showalter among others – have assumed.

Refined to its essences, abstracted from its physicality and anger, denied any action, Woolf’s vision of womanhood is as deadly as it is disembodied. The ultimate room of one’s own is the grave. 32

Woolf's dissatisfaction with any political movement is not a betrayal of her feminist intentions. She looks beyond her time. Both in *Orlando* (1928) and in *A Room of One's Own* androgyny is conceived as a harmonious integration of characteristics commonly attributed to both sexes, not as a denial of sexuality or of sexual difference. Her lifelong hesitation between an androgynous utopia and the appeal to feminist action was not only determined by personal and historical circumstances.

In its staging of multiple selves and positions, often internally contradictory, *A Room of One's Own* puts into play – perhaps even constructs – the diversity of feminist views and theories which would subsequently find themselves within it. In this sense, Woolf's *Room* is feminism's project. The question of its continued centrality as a feminist work – as feminism itself is alternately disowned and reclaimed – must remain as open as Woolf's own textual work and play. (Marcus, 2000) 33

Woolf's refusal to endorse any categorical definition of “what we mean by feminine” is an essential part of her nostalgia for the future. Her resistance to closure or conclusion lies at the very heart of her thought. For me, this is the most valuable legacy she left. Rather than play down Woolf's contradictions I would like to celebrate her work's abiding capacity to disturb any categorical distinctions. As Michèle Barrett remembers, “she lived out the tension between intuition, imagination and secular rationalism in her own experience as well as in her work.” (Barrett, 204)

Split between a persistent loyalty to the patriarchal *logos* and her poetic perception of mystical wholeness, Virginia Woolf, woman and artist, imagined our future and beyond.

[T]his poet who never wrote a word (...) still lives. She lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. For my belief is that if we live another century or so (...) and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; (...) if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there

is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body she has so often laid down. (...) Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. (107-8)

Judith Shakespeare, now in her seventies, still remains a somewhat elusive figure. Our present struggle and our unquestionable achievement are part of Virginia’s vision of the future.

Judith’s future is our own.

## Notes

- 1 Luísa Maria Rodrigues Flora, “This poet who never wrote a word” – celebrating the 70th birthday of Judith Shakespeare”, *Actas do XX Encontro da APEAA*, 261-7.
- 2 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 108. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 3 “Virginia Woolf: Subjectivity and Politics” and “Virginia Woolf meets Michel Foucault” in Michèle Barrett, *Imagination in Theory: Essays on Writing and Culture*, 35-67 and 186-204.
- 4 Linden Peach, *Virginia Woolf*.
- 5 Elizabeth H. Hagerman, “Women’s poetry in early modern Britain”, *Women and Literature in Britain: 1500-1700*, 190. See also Margaret P. Hannay, *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*.
- 6 Although Woolf seemed not aware of this, “Letters were an established literary form in the Renaissance and seventeenth century and were not “private” in the sense of personal domestic correspondence. They were highly conventional public forms of address, “epistles” on weighty matters written to display the author’s rhetorical graces and intended to be circulated.” Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Writing Women’s Literary History*, 34.
- 7 Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Benn to Jane Austen*. Spencer also refers to the debate around *Les Lettres Portugaises*; these were translated into English by Roger L’Estrange in 1678 and 10 English editions had appeared before 1740. *Idem*, 37.
- 8 “[O]f the nearly two hundred first editions by women published between 1651 and 1670, ninety-three of them were by Quaker women; between 1651 and 1660, twenty-eight Quaker women published more than four works each. Quaker women dominated the publication patterns of women writers through 1700; their writings form a large body of literature which is highly conscious of gender issues.” Ezell, 134.

- 9 Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Writers before Jane Austen*.
- 10 Rosalind Miles, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel*, 5.
- 11 George Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (*Westminster Review*, October 1856) in *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, 140-63.
- 12 Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*.
- 13 For a stimulating approach to Woolf's influence in outlining the canon of women's literature see "The Myth of Judith Shakespeare: Creating the Canon of Women's Literature in the Twentieth Century", Ezell, 39-65. This chapter of Ezell's book had a shorter version published in *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 21, 3, Spring 1990, 579-92.
- 14 See, among others, *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* ed. by Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford; Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women*, and the work of the French historian Michelle Perrot, *Les Femmes ou les silences de l'Histoire*, and of the philosopher Geneviève Fraisse, *La Différence des Sexes* and *Les Femmes et leur Histoire*.
- 15 "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" in *Virginia Woolf: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, 48-90. (1985) Subsequent references are given in the text ('JMJM').
- 16 The contradiction between the date inscribed on the parchment – "the year of our Lord 1480" – and Joan's date of birth, 1495, stated by Mr Martyn, denotes "his indifference to the female ancestral line." (Peach, 34) But Peach's comment that Mr Martyn "has tried to read the journal" is incompatible with Woolf's text: "O yes, I've read it; he remarked casually, as though that were but a simple undertaking." ('JMJM', 60)
- 17 "Men and Women" in *Virginia Woolf: A Woman's Essays*, 18-20. ('MW')
- 18 "Indiscretions" in *Virginia Woolf: A Woman's Essays*, 88-92. ('I')
- 19 Yet we should always keep in mind that "Woolf lived through an unprecedented period of transition." (Peach, 23).
- 20 Andrew McNeillie, ed. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. I: 1904-1912, ix. McNeillie is originally referring only to Woolf's essays.
- 21 See, among others, Juliet Dusinberre, *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?*
- 22 Brenda Silver, ed. "Anon" and "The Reader": Virginia Woolf's Last Essays", 356-80.
- 23 This issue was addressed in my paper "Killing the Angel in the House: sexuality, literary representation and censorship", read at Seminar 31: "Looking back at Women's Rights and Women's Studies: Writing the Feminine Difference" of the ESSE / 2000 – Helsinki.
- 24 "Professions for Women" in Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, Vol. Two, 287-8.
- 25 "The Tunnel", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. III: 1919-1924, 10, 12.
- 26 "Romance and the Heart", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. III, 367.



- 27 "Women Novelists", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. II: 1912-1918, ('WN').
- 28 John Mepham, *Virginia Woolf*, 66.
- 29 Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View" in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, 61.
- 30 Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*.
- 31 Herbert Marder, *Feminism & Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, 106.
- 32 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, 297.
- 33 Laura Marcus, "Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf" in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, 209-44.

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# **Questioning Influence / Gendering Influence**

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## Questioning Influence / Gendering Influence

Cats do not go to heaven.  
Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Shortly after its appearance in English, in 1993, I came across Luce Irigaray's *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, which had been first published in French in 1990.<sup>1</sup> This is a collection of fifteen essays written between March 1987 and May 1989, including a final undated one. They present two distinctive but closely interrelated intentions: arguing that women are able to develop, and culturally validate, a specific manner of thinking and feeling about multiple constituents of women's – and men's too – day-to-day life. The essays go from the analysis of religion and myth to that of the contemporary meanings of health and illness. They cover the examination of definitions of discourse, writing and language in general, and of a large number of contradictions in the psychological and social constructions of women's identity – as well as men's – in the last decades of the twentieth century.

*Je, tu, nous* has been considered a very eloquent introduction to Irigaray's work. In fact, in "A Personal Note: Equal or Different?" which opens the collection, the essayist makes it undoubtedly clear that, after deconstructing what has been meant by "equality", she has elected as her theory-founding concept that of "difference":

A rather more thorough analysis of the claims to equality shows that at the level of a superficial cultural critique, they are well founded, but that as a means of liberating women, they are utopian. Women's exploitation is based upon sexual difference; its solution will come only through sexual difference. (...) What is important (...) is to define the values of belonging

to a gender, valid for each of the genders [female or male]. It is vital that a culture of the sexual, as yet nonexistent, be elaborated, with each sex being respected. (...) It is quite simply a matter of social justice to balance out this power of the one sex over the other by giving, or giving back, cultural values to female sexuality. What's at stake is clearer today than when *The Second Sex* was written.

(Irigaray, 1993, 12-13.)

The sentimental and intellectual ambiguity of Irigaray's attitude towards Simone de Beauvoir is obvious in "A Personal Note". Although praising the part played by Beauvoir in the women's fight for civil rights, this younger woman academic is obviously rather critical of the conceptual "naïvety" of the demand for equal rights voiced by the older woman thinker and her generation in general.

The 1981 Winter Issue of *Critical Inquiry* was published under the title *Writing and Sexual Difference*. In its Introduction, the guest editor, Elizabeth Abel, wrote as follows:

The notion of difference has only recently emerged as a focus of feminist criticism. Initially, feminist theorists bolstered claims for equality with claims of similarity. (...) Aware that women writers inevitably engage a literary history and system of conventions shaped primarily by men, feminist critics now often strive to elucidate the acts of revision, appropriation and subversion that constitute a female text. The analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition translates sexual difference into literary differences of genre, structure, voice and plot.

(Abel, 1981, 173-174.)

Indeed, the shift of focus from the concept of equality to the concept of difference had been slowly developing during the second half of the twentieth century as a result of the work of several women researchers, namely the French-speaking Luce Irigaray (her *Speculum, de l'autre femme* had appeared in 1974, and *Ce sex qui n'en est pas un* in 1977). In that same 1981 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Mary Jacobus published "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and the *Mill on the Floss*" where she juxtaposes a chapter from George Eliot's

*Mill on the Floss* with a chapter from Irigaray's *Ce sex qui n'en est pas un*. Starting from this theory of sexual difference, Jacobus claims "that the woman writer (and the feminist critic) can express her difference only through a posture critical of the prevailing discourse [which is shaped by men]" (Abel, 1981, 175).

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"The Culture of Difference", dated September 1987, was one of the essays included in Luce Irigaray's *Je, tu, nous* which impressed me most. Here she argues that there is a kind of innate female respect for the other, i.e., for difference:

One of the distinctive features of the female body is its toleration of the other's growth within itself without incurring illness or death for either one of the living organisms.

(Irigaray, 1993, 45.)

At the same time she contrasts this biological model of tolerance with the male cultural model of exclusion:

Whereas the female body engenders with respect for difference, the patriarchal social body constructs itself hierarchically, excluding difference.

(Idem)

Irigaray is thus trying to call her reader's attention to one type of "repression", "injustice", or "anomaly" of which woman has been the constant victim. Indeed, until now, woman alone has had the power to engender the other, whether male or female, inside her own body, not as a stranger but as a part of herself. In view of this, it becomes much more contradictory, and even less tolerable, that for centuries men have been conceiving a social body from which they have more or less systematically excluded women, very often as if they were its most dangerous enemies. This leading Belgian thinker, mainly trained as a psychologist and a linguist, is therefore claiming that women's discrimination has its roots in an "insufficiently thought out relation between biology and culture" (Irigaray, 1993, 46).

Under *normal* circumstances it is indisputable that the woman's body is designed to tolerate the body of the child growing "within" it (to use Irigaray's

word quoted above), or to be more precise inside her uterus, without harming it, i.e., rejecting it, destroying it. This applies also to the child, whether female or male, whose growth during the process of pregnancy does not *normally* lead to the death of the mother. However, it is common knowledge nowadays that the cohabitation of mother and child, or children, during pregnancy is not at all simple. Being fully aware of this fact, Irigaray includes in *Je, tu, nous* an interview with H el ene Rouch, a biologist who “has studied the singularity of the relations between mother and child *in utero*” (Irigaray, 1993, 38).

The role the placenta plays during the foetus’ intrauterine life gives us an extremely accurate idea of the complex relation between mother and child throughout the pregnancy. If all goes well, they will experience – at a biological level (which has to be appreciated in psychological terms too) – a kind of harmonious equilibrium. At the same time, the mother and the child, i.e., two separate organisms, will have to keep negotiating with each other – or one another when there is more than one child – on their own differences regarding the self and the other(s). The fact that the placental tissue, although connecting mother and child, also separates them is made very clear by Rouch in the course of her long answer to Irigaray’s question about the placenta:

Firstly, I’ll just remind us what the placenta is: it’s a tissue, formed by the embryo, which, while being closely imbricated with the uterine mucosa remains separate from it. This has to be reiterated, because there’s a commonly held view that the placenta is a mixed formation, half-maternal, half-fetal. However, although the placenta is a formation of the embryo, it behaves like an organ that is practically independent of it. It plays a mediating role on two levels. On the one hand, it’s the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means that there’s never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms, not merely quantitatively regulating the exchanges (nutritious substances from mother to fetus, waste matter in the other direction), but also modifying the maternal metabolism: transforming, storing, and redistributing maternal substances for both her own and the fetus’ benefit. It thus establishes a relationship



between mother and fetus, enabling the latter to grow without exhausting the mother in the process, and yet not simply being a means for obtaining nutritious substances.

(Irigaray, 1993, 38-39.)

The complexity of the role played by the placenta during pregnancy also becomes obvious in *Embriología Médica de Langman* when T. W. Sadler hesitates about calling the placental membrane a “barrera placentaria” (“placental barrier”) (Sadler, 1996, 100). Indeed, the placental membrane is meant to separate the two organisms, namely the maternal blood from the foetal blood. But at the same time, a tremendous number of exchanges between the mother and the foetus (in particular from the fourth month of pregnancy onwards) have to take place in order to conclude that the placenta has successfully accomplished its function.<sup>2</sup>

Let us recall now all that we have been observing in respect to pregnancy – the complex relation between separate organisms, that of the mother and that (those) of the child(ren), whose very survival depends on their respect for their own differences in terms of the self and the other(s). Let us remember as well Irigaray’s defence of the imperative need for a cultural model of tolerance that will replace the masculine model of more or less aggressive cultural exclusion, an imperative need which nowadays seems even stronger than it was at the end of the 1980’s. Finally, let us accept with no further argument that a cultural model of action may be based on this kind of biological explanation. Considering this, I would say, unlike Irigaray, that a cultural model of tolerance should not be built on the isolated concept of the woman’s body as potential mother. In fact, it should be rather founded on the much broader explanation of pregnancy as a process actually involving different organisms that, in order to survive, have to respect each other (one another) – mother and foetus (female or male). At the same time, I will, of course, emphasise the part played by women as sole protagonists of this process up to the present day, i.e., I will insist that in *normal* circumstances pregnancy depends on what each woman chooses to do, both in biological and ethical terms. In the presence of other factors, specifically educational ones, such a

privilege might really contribute to making women most adequate to lead the building of such a cultural model of tolerance.

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Returning to Luce Irigaray's "The Culture of Difference", I begin by reminding the reader of her emphasis on the following contradiction (and what is more, the "injustice" of which women have been the constant victims): while they have always engendered the other with respect for her/his difference, women have been systematically excluded from the male social body. As she continues to elaborate her argument, a hypothetical solution for this contradiction is presented to us: women have to accede to "a subjective status equivalent to that of men", i.e., they must "gain recognition for their difference" (Irigaray, 1993, 46). In order to achieve this end, they are bound to reconstruct their identity according to a very concrete programme of action in which the urgent need for an active female tradition in society is obvious.

Though I do generally agree with Irigaray, I cannot help feeling somewhat sceptical about certain aspects of her programme for the acknowledgement of women "as valid subjects, daughters of a mother and a father, respecting the other within themselves and demanding that same respect from society" (Irigaray, 1993, 46). Here is the first part of the programme point no.2:

In all homes and all public places, attractive images (*not involving advertising*) of the mother-daughter couple should be displayed. It's very damaging for girls always to be faced with representations of mother and son, especially in the religious dimension. I'd suggest to all Christian women, for example, that they place an image depicting Mary and her mother Anne in their living room, in their daughter's rooms, and in their own rooms. (...) I'd also advise them to display photographs of themselves with their daughter(s), or maybe with their mother. They could also have photographs of the triangle: mother, father, daughter. The point of these representations is to give girls a valid representation of their genealogy, an essential condition for the constitution of their identity.

(Irigaray, 1993, 47. My italics.)

I do not contest the need for the woman/mother (and the grandmother, if possible) to act as economic, socio-political and cultural model of action for the girl/daughter, both in the public and the private spheres. Nor do I disagree that the photographic representations of the family may exercise a strong influence on the construction both of female and male identities. I wish to recall now those old photographs of large families. The father, as a patriarchal figure, is invariably standing with the oldest son(s) by his side; sometimes his hand rests on the mother's shoulder in a most ambiguous gesture of affectionate subjection. She always sits in front of him with the youngest son(s) and her daughter(s) close to her; very often she holds a new-born baby in her lap (see Figures. 1 and 2) <sup>3</sup>.

In fact, like Irigaray, I consider that the relations between woman/mother and girl/daughter have to be "improved" – much more so, I would insist, than have occurred to date – so that a new kind of female identity may begin to be progressively reconstructed. However, I am not able to derive from "The Culture of Difference", or from *Je, tu, nous* as a whole, a satisfactory solution for finding the most effective way to devise new and coherent female models of action to offer girls. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that various aspects of women's day-to-day life are covered in these essays: motherhood, the ways in which language is sexed, contemporary notions of scientific and technological progress primarily determined by the economic interests of the western countries. And yet today, like during the last three centuries, we still hope, as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf did, that the solution may develop from the continuous and systematic change of the educational environment, for girls as well as for boys, first at home and then at school.<sup>4</sup>

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Once again, in *Je, tu, nous*, and particularly in "The Culture of Difference", Irigaray is referring to tradition in a general historical sense; she is emphasising that women have to continue conceiving a common tradition of their own, in other words, a female tradition. This concept, "tradition", leads me to the next step of the argument that I am presenting here. In 1997, Harold Bloom

published a second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, a book written in 1967, revised in the following five years, then published in 1973. *The Anxiety of Influence* is now generally recognised as most influential in the field of literary studies. 5

A Preface was written for the second edition and the main feature appears to be Bloom's will to defend the western literary canon, with Shakespeare at the very centre, from its many critics. Here is a striking example:

To say that Shakespeare and poetic influence are near identical is not very different from observing that Shakespeare is the western literary canon.  
(Bloom, 1997b, xxviii.)

This constitutes the context for Bloom's strong opposition to the 'so-called "cultural criticism"' which, in his view, "devalues all imaginative literature, and which particularly demotes and debases Shakespeare" (Bloom, 1997b, xvi). In the same manner, the attack on feminist criticism becomes inevitable:

(...) the entire movement of our current School of Resentment is towards eradicating Shakespeare's uniqueness. Neo-Marxists, New Feminists, New Historicists, French-influenced theorists all demonstrate their cultural materialism by giving us a reduced Shakespeare, a pure product of the "social energies" of the English Renaissance. My own favourite joke about this is to add to Lacan, or "French Freud" and Derrida, or "French Joyce", the ultimate triumph of what calls itself "theory": Foucault, or "French Shakespeare".

(Bloom, 1997b, xv.)

By valuing Shakespeare not only as "the Western canon" but also as "the world canon" (Idem), Bloom cannot but drastically reject "this present age, when students are taught to scorn the Dead White European Males, or again, most simply William Shakespeare" (Bloom, 1997b, xviii).

In 1997, when the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence* came out, I was beginning to question the Bloomian literary theory of influence in terms of gender. When considering the last three centuries, I was then pondering whether it is legitimate to ask the following questions: Are there literary

mothers and daughters to be found? Are the mothers strong enough to make their daughters anxious? Are the daughters strong enough to try to overcome their mothers? Do these mothers have sons, and do these daughters have fathers?

Some time later, at the beginning of 1998, during a debate on the origins of Romanticism, in an Internet Discussion Group on the Eighteenth Century, I came across some challenging suggestions for the analysis of the Bloomian theory.<sup>6</sup> These suggestions were put forward by Adriana Craciun who was then teaching an advanced seminar on Nineteenth-Century British Women's Poetry, at the Department of English, Loyola University Chicago.<sup>7</sup> She is the editor of a recent paperback edition of Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century*, a gothic novel published in 1806.<sup>8</sup> She has co-edited a new electronic edition of Mary Darby Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, "a feminist polemic" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1996, 251), from 1799.<sup>9</sup> Her research has thus been focusing mainly on women writers from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

According to Craciun, "the Bloomian model of sons rebelling against fathers simply doesn't work" in the case of women presented "as either examples of Romantic (women) poets or as evidence of counter-Romantic traditions in the Romantic period" (Craciun, 4 Feb. 1998.). She then continues to defend that this is a tenable analysis and "not just because women poets aren't sons, and/or they have different relations to their literary mothers and fathers" (Idem). Finally, as she aims at countering the common "description of Romanticism's relationship to the Augustans as this oedipal struggle" (Idem), she produces the following line of argument:

Women poets in the Romantic period (who were as different from each other as Crabbe and William Wordsworth, Byron and Blake) don't generally follow this pattern of anxiety of influence and oedipal struggle. Nor do they (as Gilbert and Gubar imagined, following Woolf) lament their lack of literary foremothers. There is a rich tradition in the Romantic period of women poets who are very much aware of each other, and these

continuities cut across the periodization we've established based on the canonical male poets, in both directions – 18<sup>th</sup> century and Victorian.

And finally [some] male poets were (...) very much aware of these female contemporaries. Thus (...) as someone noted, Wordsworth's preface is primarily directed not at the Augustans but at his contemporaries writing in feminised discourses – Della Cruscan poets (largely though not exclusively women) and gothic novelists and poets.

(Craciun, 4 Feb. 1998.)

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After having read Craciun, two facts immediately occurred to me that would sustain her thesis, and both are related to Dacre's *Zofloya*. First, this novel shares in the feminine campaign for women's education that was going on in the 1790s and from which Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) emerges as a particularly good example.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, it should be emphasised that Dacre's novels and poems had a strong influence upon some of her male contemporaries: Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley are among them.

Indeed, Shelley as a young writer was very much under the influence of *Zofloya* as can be easily deduced from the first books he published, his two short Gothic romances: *Zastrozzi, A Romance* and *St Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian* (1810). But ten years later, in *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, *Zofloya*'s influence is still perceptible.<sup>11</sup>

Craciun's reference to Virginia Woolf made me reread *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the "classic" of feminist argument', to quote Hermione Lee (Lee, 1996, ix). Actually, the essay brings into focus the urgent need for an active female tradition because, as Woolf declares, "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf, 1996, 70-71). The word "tradition" is being used here in the general sense of a strong intellectual heritage as will be immediately inferred from the following statement:

Therefore I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast. By hook or by crook, I hope that you will possess yourselves of money enough to travel and to idle, to

contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream. For I am by no means confining you to fiction. If you would please me – and there are thousands like me – you would write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science.

(Woolf, 1996, 101-102.)

The programme implicit in these lines brings us back to our starting point – Luce Irigaray's *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, and particularly "The Culture of Difference" – inasmuch as Woolf seems to anticipate Irigaray's theory that mothers should influence daughters, i.e., they should set a female pattern for both private and public action. On the other hand, Woolf points out that, living in the late twenties of the twentieth century, women already have certain rights, namely educational rights, which were won by their foremothers, and which have always determined the intellectual work, either done by women or by men:

(...) may I remind you that there have been at least two colleges in existence in England since the year 1866; that after the year 1880 a married woman was allowed by law to possess her own property; and that in 1919 – which is a whole nine years ago – she was given a vote? May I also remind you that most of the professions have been open to you for close on ten years now? Moreover, the economists are telling us that Mrs Seton has had too many children. You must, of course, go on bearing children, but, so they say, in twos and threes, not in tens and twelves.

(Woolf, 1996, 105.)

*A Room of One's Own* is really about the urgent need for a female literary tradition, and specially a tradition in fiction; yet it has to be always considered in the larger context of the vindication for a female cultural tradition.

In this essay, though recognising that her contemporaries have still a long way to go, Woolf is also willing to celebrate the progress that they have already made. Looking back to the end of the eighteenth century, she emphasises that there was then a "change", and if she "were rewriting history"

she would “describe [that change] more fully and think [it] of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses”. This change consisted in the fact that the “middle-class woman began to write” (Woolf, 1996, 60-61). Finally, she goes so far as to present a brief genealogy of these first women writers:

Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter – the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn (...) for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she (...) who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.

(Woolf, 1996, 61.)

However, Woolf is indeed less optimistic than Craciun with regard to the way in which the women writers at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries related to their lack of literary foremothers and to one another. Here, I would like to remind you briefly of an example where this kind of relation appears to be not at all simple: Christina Rossetti’s sequence of sonnets *Monna Innominata*, published much later, in 1881. In a sort of brief Preface to the sequence, Rossetti deeply laments the lack of a female tradition of sonneteers, i.e., of women who are no longer the mere objects of male amorous discourses, but of women who write for themselves on love and desire, and whose objects are sometimes men. Moreover, she does not hesitate to be highly critical of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a sequence of sonnets published three decades before, in 1850:

(...) one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover’s poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honour.

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to



bequeath to us, instead of the “Portuguese Sonnets,” an inimitable “*donna innominata*” drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.

(Rossetti, 1986, 86.)

Another example of a difficult relation between a woman writer and her foremother is implicit in Luce Irigaray’s “A Personal Note”, the introduction to *Je, tu, nous*. There she regrets having been ignored by Simone de Beauvoir from whom she had expected to receive advice and support when she began publishing her books.<sup>12</sup>

Despite their differences, Woolf and Irigaray, as well as Craciun, are firmly convinced that a cultural and literary female tradition is needed, and I would add not only by women but also by men. Furthermore, it seems that the three of them are conceiving a similar model of tradition, i.e., one based on the concept of co-operation. Finally, they all reject more or less explicitly the male model of tradition as competitive rivalry that underlies the Bloomian theory of influence. In fact, having been the ones really in charge for centuries, men have always been forced to fight among themselves for leadership whether in the economic, the socio-political, or the cultural realm. As for women, though engendering men, they have been systematically excluded from the male society that they generate. This is why Judith Shakespeare could not have even attempted to write plays as her brother William did. Nevertheless, the distinction between a co-operative female tradition and a male competitive one has to be carefully examined. It may actually lead to the wrong conviction that women constitute a sort of homogeneous class of people transcending all kinds of ethnical, religious and economic differences, among others, and that therefore this class is absolutely free from internal conflicts, a conviction that is totally false.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1. Dominique Ingres, *The Stamaty Family*, 1818, Louvre, Paris.



Figure 2. Photography. End of the Ninetenth Century.

## Notes

- 1 I thank Doctor Ana Braz Maria for her advice as a specialist in obstetrics. I also thank my colleague Tom Grigg for having read this essay and for his comments on my English. This essay is an expanded version of a paper formerly published in *Actas do XX Encontro da Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos* (2000), Santa Maria da Feira: Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos, 282-291.
- 2 On the complexity of the relations between mother and child *in utero*, see all of Irigaray's interview with H el ene Rouch (Irigaray, 1993, 37-44), and the chapter of *Embriolog a M dica de Langman* entitled "Membranas fetales y placenta" (Sadler, 1996, 94-113).
- 3 Figures 1 and 2 were taken from Perrot, 1990, 92, 186.
- 4 See Wollstonecraft, 1988 and Woolf, 1996.
- 5 See Bloom, 1997a and 1997b.
- 6 I wish to thank my colleague Maria Teresa Malafaia for calling my attention to the following Internet Discussion Group on the Eighteenth Century: C18-L@LISTS.PSU.EDU (Online. Internet. 4 Feb. 1998).
- 7 The seminar **URL** was: orion.it.luc.edu/~acraciun/335.htm (Online. Internet. 12 March 1999).
- 8 See Dacre, 1997a.
- 9 See Robinson, 19 Jan. 1999.
- 10 Though *Zofloya* has not been sufficiently studied in terms of the question of women's education in the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, see Michasiw, 1997b, 275 n.72.
- 11 In relation to the influence that Shelley, among others, received from Dacre, see Behrendt, 1986; Chesser, 1965; Craciun, 1997, 10; Hartnoll, 1955; Michasiw, 1997a; Punter, 1996, 93; Punter, 1998, 63; Summers, [1928].
- 12 On the relation between Irigaray and Beauvoir, see the first part of this essay.
- 13 The idea of women as a sort of homogeneous class of people has in fact to be carefully examined. Let us consider then a first analysis of this idea advanced by Mary Eagleton: "Thus the Western woman, feminist or not, is the normative female subject; the 'third world' woman is the difference and the deviation. Or as Trinh puts the point, 'the generic "woman", like its counterpart, the generic "man", tends to efface difference within itself'. In such a way, the 'third world' woman is unrepresented. Mohanty's interest is in the textual strategies employed by Western feminists which reinscribe and legitimate this

power imbalance. Despite protestations of global sisterhood, despite its position as a critical discourse within its own culture, Western feminism may be limiting and demarking 'third world' women in ways that reproduce colonialist attitudes." (Eagleton, 1996, 346.)

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**Feminism and Citizenship:**  
***A Vindication of the Rights of Woman***  
***and The Subjection of Women***

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## **Feminism and Citizenship: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Subjection of Women***

In some ways Mary Wollstonecraft marks the turning point, not the beginning of a feminist tradition, a tradition of the 'disagreeable' woman – that is, a woman who will not try and gain a hearing by being agreeable to men.

Dale Spender. *Women and ideas (and what men have done to them)*, 1992.

However, although a very forward-looking feminist in many respects, he [Stuart Mill] in no way perceived the injustice involved in institutions *and* practices which allowed a man to have a career and economic independence, and a home life and children, but which forced a woman to choose between the two. His refusal to question the traditional family and its demands on women set the limits of his liberal feminism.

Susan Moller Okin. "Mill's Feminist Egalitarianism", 1979.

In spite of the long process towards an active citizenship, women's under-representation in the field of politics continues to be a reality at the beginning of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. According to Carole Pateman, in a political tradition in which citizenship has been theorised in terms of freedom and independence, women's citizenship has been impugned (Pateman 1989: 182-85) though from an early stage many have been the political theorists who have fought against women's subordination. Paradoxically, some who fought for women's suffrage, namely John Stuart Mill, and to a certain extent Mary Wollstonecraft too, are currently the object of the feminist critique of liberalism.

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The gender “neutrality” which has been stated even by modern political theory has functioned “ideologically to mask the gendered reality behind the concepts of political theory”. (Frazer, Lacey 1993: 37) Actually, we have already some research done in this field, that is to say in the social-liberal one and in spite of the fact that we have some crucial works on feminist and citizenship theory, this is a very recent and dynamic area of study as Rian Voet has pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Though we agree with this assertion when applied to contemporary theorisation, in which we sometimes notice a gendered reading of citizenship, in this paper we intend to discuss that, before the several waves of feminism, there were already essayists interested in this relationship. When considering women as citizens, there had been vital utterances through the 18th and 19th centuries which, having in mind this specific connection between feminism and citizenship, corresponded to marginal voices. Moreover, this leads us to two major works in English Culture, which are *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869). The comparative focus is intended to examine how authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill were aware of the ‘Woman’s Question’, namely in public/civic life and in the women’s struggle for equal rights, in the context of a nation, by which they meant at that time a society with a particular territory, a common identity and history.

When considering political identities, the period of suffrage struggles (1870-1930) or the so-called second wave of feminism at the end of the 60s in the XXth century have usually taken into account women’s oppression and the need for equality. However, these issues were rarely discussed in terms of their relation to power or of an active citizenship. Citizenship is, in fact, a social position that implies three kinds of rights: the civic, the political and the socio-economic ones. Yet, if we have in mind the paradigm of the Enlightenment, women were frequently seen as second-class citizens. Though feminism can be analysed “as all those ideas and movements that have as their fundamental aim the realisation of women’s liberation or a profound improvement in women’s condition” (Mitchell, Oakley 1986), we are still able to consider a previous moment. This moment corresponds in Mary Wollstonecraft’s work to

a time when she already saw women and men as members of political communities, having not only rights but also duties associated with that membership.<sup>2</sup>

In the two above-mentioned essays, Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill have specially focused on education in order to make clear to their readers that it was particularly important in the construction of an active citizenship. In both cases this emphasis is easily explainable by the accepted, and at the time practised, conception of a diverse education for men and women, who were expected to have different social roles. Thus, our main issue is to analyse how Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) have considered the way women were included or excluded from citizenship and also how feminist theorists continue to deal with their assertions nowadays. Nevertheless, both in Wollstonecraft's time and John Stuart Mill's, many have argued that in every time there have been women who do not protest as they cannot identify the cause of their own suffering and of their inferior status. In fact, according to their assertions, women's inferior status was not a result of their lack of capacities, but was due to the social, cultural and economic environment.

Wollstonecraft's experience as a woman who used to earn her own living and be sexually independent, that is, behaving in for her time a non-canonical way, gave her a strong cultural specificity even in a revolutionary era. However, her political essays also emerge from a tradition of women's writings in which we can find such authors as Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791), Mary Astell (1688-1731) and Lady Mary Montagu (1689-1762) who had already supported women's rights to education. To a certain extent, this may justify Dale Spender's observation when she argues that Wollstonecraft wrote in a context favourable to the development of her own criticism in relation to the 'Woman's Question' (Spender 1983: 183). From my point of view, this is a problematic assertion if we keep in mind that Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1790) was the first answer to Edmund Burke's criticism of the French Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Identically, though an admirer of Rousseau, she could not accept

that mothers did not need a citizenship of their own. This justifies Pateman's opinion that Wollstonecraft's idea of equality was a dilemma; in fact, as the period from 1918 to 1940 had shown us, citizenship kept meaning something beyond suffrage. And still in the third period (1970s and after), feminists continued to feel disappointed as is the case of Shulamith Firestone in her *The Dialectic of Sex*.

By the 1970 the rebellious daughters of this wasted generation no longer, for all practical purposes, even knew there had been a feminist movement. There remained only the unpleasant residue of the aborted revolution, an amazing set of contradictions in their roles: on the one hand, they had most of the legal freedoms, the literal assurance that they were considered full political citizens of society – and yet they had no power. They had educational opportunities – and yet were unable, and not expected to employ them. They had the freedoms of clothing and sex mores that they had demanded – and yet they were still sexually exploited. (Firestone 1970 : 34)

The issues mentioned and *justified* (my emphasis) by a tradition were due to the fact that the diverse revolutions have always been male dominated and in many countries even at the beginning of this new century women continue to be second-class citizens as we still see the predominance of male agency. However, from her feminist perspective, Wollstonecraft had declared that she wanted to “consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties (...)”. (Wollstonecraft 1792, 1988: 8) Consequently, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be seen as the first study to turn women's rights into a cause.<sup>4</sup> Considered at the time of its publication as a too revolutionary work it managed to find a following among radicals and succeeded in triggering off the trend towards regarding women as an important social force. In fact its subtitle *With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* suggests a strong relation between morals, politics and women's rights. Virginia Sapiro thinks Mary Wollstonecraft's work to be above all on “the mind and virtue duties and social practices” (Sapiro 1992: 118), as after all is the case in Mill's *Subjection*. Actually, in both works not only is formal education included, but also the

socialisation in which the question of citizenship is of deciding importance. Although perhaps not appearing so, Wollstonecraft has recognised the privileges of European women in comparison with those in the Islamic world, where she regarded the harem or the seraglio as the place of women's sexual exploitation:

In a seraglio, (...) the epicure must have his palate tickled, or he will sink into apathy; but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition? Can they supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the languor of weariness, rather than assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures and render themselves conspicuous by practising the virtues which dignify mankind? (Wollstonecraft 1792, 1988: 29)

And Wollstonecraft went on to say that all women were excluded everywhere from the public sphere, and often sexually exploited even in their marriage. (Wollstonecraft 1792, 1988: 86-87) This assertion reminds us of *Colonial Desire*, a work in which Robert Young points out the construction of a feminised Other which contains both genders and "begins to merge with an inter-racial homo-eroticism". (Young 1995: 109)

Education for citizenship, as we also see with John Stuart Mill, then became an indispensable strategy for the participation of all men and women, in political life, as it had already been emphasised by the Rational Dissenters.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Wollstonecraft and Mill, based on rational premises, have challenged in different ways male-dominated fields. The objection might of course be raised that the dominant culture considered women's participation in social and political matters a way of destroying femininity. Yet, this attitude became essential to the Victorian frame of mind, namely in relation to the standards of morality. As a matter of fact, Wollstonecraft, as Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was to write later on, made a more powerful critique than John Stuart Mill's regarding the cultural construction of femininity. Actually, and in agreement with Spender's comments, one notices that Wollstonecraft wrote in a very powerful way and made the point that political discourse had to be above all rational:

These are daring and defiant words. (...) She [Wollstonecraft] is correcting men in public, she is exposing their limitations in an area in which they have

great pride in their authority and achievement – that of logic. (Spender 1983, 147)

Nevertheless, and in spite of Wollstonecraft's very strong apology of women's representation (Wollstonecraft 1792, 1988: 147), John Stuart Mill is more deeply interested in the way citizens have their political and social rights guaranteed (Mill 1869, 1997: 145). However, the humanist feminism (which considers mainly representation as citizens) sees in both authors some patriarchal characteristics. The woman-centred feminism (representation as female citizens) tries to value a woman's experience, and the deconstruction feminism (plurality represented) to deconstruct the equality-difference dichotomy.<sup>6</sup> This last issue is a very interesting one as it shows how people are excluded from active citizenship or assimilated into some types of citizenship. It reminds us once again of Wollstonecraft when she speaks about slavery or Mill's *On Liberty* (1859). Both works are discourses aiming at inclusion. Thus, we cannot forget when they were written and how they have been incorporated, at different times, into the dominant culture. Meanwhile in both societies, exclusion was kept all along and in spite of Wollstonecraft's opposition, John Stuart Mill states in his *Autobiography* (1873) that he always considered his father's exclusion of women from suffrage "as great an error as any of those against which the Essay was directed". (Mill 1873, 1989: 93)

In the field of citizenship, namely with classical liberalism, we have to consider John Stuart Mill with his work on *The Subjection of Women*, his last and least successful book, according to the contemporary responses to it. Though Carole Pateman is undoubtedly a great critic, I disagree with her when she argues that the natural equality of men must be seen in a literal sense. In fact, many classical liberals kept on considering women as incapable of rational thought. Nevertheless, this is not applicable to Stuart Mill. In fact Pateman's observation only makes sense when we consider that classical liberalism was founded in Western countries from the XVIIth century on. Some thinkers, however, have judged that men had a natural right to liberty and property and, thus "naturally" excluded women. Likewise, when John Stuart Mill wrote his essay, there were a lot of problems concerning women's rights



and there was a great hostility to women's emancipation, as W. E. Houghton remarks:

Feminist claims to intellectual equality with man and to the same education and professional opportunity were attacked by liberals – let alone conservatives; partly, no doubt, to forestall competition, but much more to prevent what they honestly believed would mean the irreparable loss of a vital moral influence. (Houghton 1957: 352)

However, in *Subjection of Women*, a work where Harriet Taylor's ideas and her daughter's, Helen Taylor, were very important, Mill fights for legal, political and domestic equality between man and woman. These assertions led the essayist to state in his *Autobiography* that his fight for women's suffrage has probably been his most important achievement, in his own words, "by far the most important, perhaps the only really important public service I performed in the capacity of a Member of Parliament". (Mill 1873, 1989: 222)

According to my point of view, the interest in re-evaluating Wollstonecraft's and Mill's works lies in the fact that we have to analyse not only the social and economic concepts, and the new concepts concerning education, but also the ongoing influences of the Enlightenment paradigm. Both believed in the power of education to improve women's and men's condition; they also defended the idea that access to intellectual development is essential, namely to fight for equality in society and also to create new ways of behaviour adequate to modern communities. In spite of their specific identities, Wollstonecraft and Mill argue that women are educated in a non-rational way, which is bad for the progress of society. So we come to the conclusion that there is an utilitarian dimension in both of them because they were thinking of the necessity of using all talents in society. They saw great advantages in women's activity in society and Mill considered slavery as being the condition of half of the population whereby it was also expected that women "must always be at the beck and call of somebody, generally of everybody." (Mill 1869, 1997: 193)

Furthermore, when considering marriage, they have different opinions for Mill sees it as a vocation like any other (Mill 1869, 1997: 156) and

Wollstonecraft considers auto-sufficiency as synonymous with liberty and dignity. However, in the case of both authors, the active exercise of citizenship always depends on education and although both attributed domestic roles to women, they fought for women to play an active role in the public sphere. In Mill's opinion "the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal" (Mill 1869, 1997: 172) and this particular conception causes a great difference of opportunities. This is a very important issue indeed. Even nowadays some feminists still make the same point when considering that Wollstonecraft's conception of recognition in the public domain really depends on the way women live in the private one. Actually, it is an assertion which has anticipated some of our contemporary attitudes on the subject.

Indeed *The Subjection of Women* had also been forgotten for some time and has now begun to be discussed. Even at the time of its publication, respectable Victorians were very surprised by Mill's defense of "the fitness of women". (Mill 1869, 1997: 174) According to Alan Ryan's explanation, this was due to the fact that many people thought Mill's aims had already been achieved though *The National Society For Women's Suffrage* was only founded in 1867. As we know, "Mill's doubts about the disparity between male power and female subordination [are] again taken seriously, as was the question whether there was something in male and female *nature* that led to this disparity". (Ryan 1997: xxxix)

Arguing for better education for women, Stuart Mill is mainly fighting for an active citizenship which is really useful to the community. Though it is not the aim of this paper, we cannot forget that many Victorian feminists, sometimes not in the mainstream press, fought for the political debate too, and have tried to subvert the conception of women as "criminals, idiots and minors". (Cobbe December 1868) However, some critics when considering feminist and proto-feminist writers include John Stuart Mill, as he was one who "launched an attack on subordination of women and its so-called justification" (Frazer, Lacey 1993: 36). Having also the suffrage in mind, Mill considered that "women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join with them in

the undertaking". (Mill 1869, 1997: 196) Accordingly, both Wollstonecraft and Stuart Mill argued that there is no reason to suppose that women were suited to subordination, as he states:

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." (Mill 1869, 1997: 133)

Thus, Wollstonecraft was as interested in seeing the impact that equal rights for women would have on political life as Mill. The essayist, with the same aim, tried to invite men to learn the pleasure of living with women who were their equal, as he stated on this issue. (Mill 1869, 1997: 210-211) Yet, many contemporary citizenship theorists are aware of unequal social and cultural attitudes which contribute to several conceptions of women as second-class citizens, mainly visible for their under representation at higher levels of decision-making. According to Carole Pateman:

Women have demanded for two centuries that their distinctive qualities and tasks should become part of citizenship – that is, that they should be citizens as women – their demand cannot be met when it is precisely these marks of womanhood that place women in opposition to, or, at best, in a paradoxical and contradictory relation to, citizenship. (...) All that is clear is that if women are to be citizens as *women*, as autonomous, equal, yet sexually different beings from men, democratic theory and practice has to undergo a radical transformation. (Pateman 1989: 14)

Nowadays the issue is that of an active and sex-equal citizenship and, unfortunately, whenever dealing with women's identity we still have low female participation in decision-making. It also means, and this is very clear in both essays, that women are not subjects/persons to be ruled but citizens able to act together in a common task. To conclude my argument, and in spite of the different kinds of feminist approaches, it is very interesting to see that woman-friendly citizenship requires society to be organised in a particular way

as both essayists have suggested. Without naming it, they proposed a citizenship with which women empathise and one to which they could and wanted to be committed. Though some feminists argue that many of the concepts cannot be satisfactory, according to my point of view, Wollstonecraft and Stuart Mill understood that the female cause was linked with other human rights and values. Both authors did show the way, though sometimes only from a cultural/educational perspective. It is a way which undoubtedly has to be continued so that women and men, all over the world, may be really able to exercise their rights to an active citizenship and, still in many cases, challenge their inferior status.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Rian Voet, "Debates on Feminism and Citizenship", in *Feminism and Citizenship*, 5-30.
- 2 For an account of men's rights see also Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" (1790, 1994) in *Political Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 3 Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa (2000) "Is there a 'New Woman' in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* as Illustrated by William Blake?", in *The Crossroads of Gender and Century Endings*. Eds. Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa, Luisa Maria Flora, Teresa de Ataíde Malafaia. Lisbon: University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, 7-36, 10.
- 4 Cf. Hélio Alves stating that Mary Wollstonecraft can be considered a notable pamphleteer. (Alves, 37)
- 5 *ibid.*, 37-38.
- 6 For discussion of this question see Rian Voet, "Feminism", in *Feminism and Citizenship*, 17-30.

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**Modernism, Violence, and Disfiguration  
in Jean Rhys's Early Novels: Visible Identity  
in *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie***

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## **Modernism, Violence, and Disfiguration in Jean Rhys's Early Novels: Visible Identity in *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie***

*Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Jean Rhys's first novels, display a dry style that enhances the rendering of violence of both fictional universes. Such visibility is as fundamental for the construction of identity in Rhys's prose as for its inclusion within some major credos of modernism. Rhys's concern with life as *the only* subject matter of fiction led, however, to clichés in criticism such as "her sole concern with her heroines' victimization", through "plain autobiographical writing".

Sidestepping the specific problematic of autobiography, Rhys's critics often rebuild her heroines' stories into a series of sequels overlapping with the disasters of the real woman. Al Alvarez asserts that her first four novels – *Quartet* (1928), *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) – "recount the single, persistent, disconnected disaster of a life [...]". Similar readings quickly become established ground, the first lengthy study of Rhys's novels – written by Louis James in 1978 – being also responsible for similar considerations.<sup>1</sup> So, Rhys herself is recurrently regarded as a victim of the patriarchal order that her remaining (mostly male) characters are seen as embodying. To many, the confessional net tightens with the substitution of autodiegetic for heterodiegetic discourse in *Voyage in the Dark*; the single commitment of authorial opinion with the heroine's perspective would now be ostensibly proved by Rhys's resort to first-person narrative. From this point of view, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is either read as her single deviation from autobiography, or as a sophisticated sequel to her former urbane, sickly inertia. It would vindicate feminine identity, reaching back to Victorianism, and redeem authorial technique through the

narrative splitting between Antoinette and R. <sup>2</sup> Prompted by this late success, many critics unburied Rhys's early work from oblivion, regarding it as a minor modernist effort of only tardy fruit.

In being later explained by persistent tautology ("all of a writer that matters is in the book or books"),<sup>3</sup> the importance of *true life* in Rhys's writing has its apparent confessional emphasis reversed into artistic concern. To understand this shift we must consider the plural content that "identity" acquires to Rhys: it involves every experience – therefore made her own – that may be intellectualized, abstracted, and transfigured by artistic rendering. And this, I submit, means the continual displacement of the authorial figure in the recurring motives of fiction. Consequently to the assertion "I can't make things up. [...] I just write about what happened [...]", Rhys opposes: "Though I guess the invention is in the writing."<sup>4</sup> and she states, mainly, that "[t]he things you remember have no form. [...] To give life shape – that is what a writer does. That is what is so difficult."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Rhys submits the inevitable affectation of writing by its particular author and time to the necessity of Writing itself: a "huge lake" which every writer must feed after "taking from it."<sup>6</sup> True writing must "[...] not [be...] true as a fact. But true as writing."<sup>7</sup> Her single mirroring in victimized heroines is thus beside the point, although it is not surprising that her unsophisticated definition of character rendering is followed by a tautological option for the ordinary in the making of writing:

" I can't invent character. I don't think I know what character is. [...] But then there are two ways of writing. [...] I think what one should do is write in an ordinary way and make the writing seem extraordinary. One should write, too, about what is ordinary, and see the extraordinary behind it."<sup>8</sup>

Achieved simplicity amounts to the transfiguration of "life" into a coherent, and extraordinary, artistic truth. Her concerns with universality, organic writing, and with rendering things visible adjust Rhys's ideas to the thorough self-consciousness of various modernist manifestos. Her preoccupation with form has its main origin in Henry James' apology for the organic novel that also involves "writ[ing] from experience" while "attempt[ing] to render the look of things".<sup>9</sup> Learning James's lesson *via* Ford Madox Ford in the 1920s shows

Rhys's simplicity as craft, resulting from the severity celebrated in Ford's phrase, "when in doubt cut".

Ford's own proposals of rigour for the novel owe their source to Henry James and, much for similar reasons, to Stephen Crane and Joseph Conrad: "all three treated their characters with aloofness; all three kept themselves, their comments and their prejudices out of their works, and all three rendered rather than told".<sup>10</sup> A similar concern with aloofness as innovation can be read in Virginia Woolf's defence of visibility in – and through – character, even if rendering demands the violation of syntax.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Rhys's craft, and her emphasis on visibility, meets the coeval modernist thinking about novel writing; it also recalls Conrad's pioneer efforts "to mak[e the reader] see" through his writing. Ford's attention to Rhys's "instinct for form"<sup>12</sup> and character depiction gives credit to this link, and it suits, in return, his own apology for aloofness: "not taking sides with agreeable characters". It reinforces his conviction that only achieved simplicity sustains artistic merit: "the nearer you are to universality the greater you are [...]. You must therefore write as simply as you can".<sup>13</sup> Simplicity, then, means ability, and, ultimately, art; and shaping the universal – "life" – into writing is a slow, laborious process of reclaiming aesthetic coherence; or, echoing Croce's theory, of recognizing for art a proper order, different from reason and ideology.

Novel writing at the beginning of the twentieth century reflected this aesthetic consciousness. While theorization aided its rising in the hierarchy of literary forms, the genre extended its scope to the representation of pictorial problems. Questions of momentary – pictorial – visibility now force the sequential code of narrative, adding a material prominence to the notion of "rendering through words" which the "Horatian" *ut pictura poesis* cannot encompass. Rendering visible a moment / picture – often painting – through concatenate description demands a dryness in style achieved at the expense of description as prolixity and explanation. This accounts for the above-mentioned emphasis on simplicity. In Rhys's early novels, sharp writing brings to the foreground themes dear to verbal elaboration such as character and identity. But mainly, we can observe their redistribution through compacting, pictorial, devices:

contemplation and mirroring inflict violence upon the verbal medium that presents them.

In 1928 – the year of *Quartet's* publication – the intensity of Rhys's portraits already did justice to her later stated aims. The reversibility of roles of her “victims” (lonely females) and “victimizers” (mostly male “benefactors”) bears witness to her laborious apprenticeship in language rather than to social engagement. Sharp dialogue and description raise the novels to verbal canvases, “peopled” with violence. In *Quartet*, this visibility, shaped not *around* one character but *inside* claustrophobic milieus of personae, is metaphorized by the persistent topic of painting, and its moulding of postures.<sup>14</sup> If we aim at determining types, then Marya would be the weak, passive heroine controlled by the Heidlere while her husband, Stephan, is in prison. H.J. (Heidler) becomes her lover, and his wife, Lois, “imprisons” her in painting. Rhys's victims, however, sometimes control the most effective sides of violence: those of speech and image.<sup>15</sup> Coercion, then, becomes disturbing in its multiple origins and targets, metonymy recurring as a trope of contagion.

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By the end of *Quartet*, Marya breaks through her usual silence and says of Lois: “You don't know how often I have lain awake and longed ... to smash her mouth so she could never sneer again”.<sup>16</sup> This violent intention is surprising because Marya's image is one of extreme dependence. The focalization, however, as it is moulded to her scope, enhances similar complexities in others. Sharing uncongenial spaces means sharing her passivity, and her exposure to outside definition. Self-assertive identity becomes blurred to those who keep her company (even if they force it). Thus, all characters pose problems to representation. Lois, “obviously of the species wife” (76), had led her first confrontation with Marya from the paradoxical posture of a “well educated young male” (11). Her later insistence on portraying Marya is foreshadowed by the remark that “eating is one of the few pleasures that never let [one] down” (11). The simile herein produced – both painting and eating convey the idea of absorption – reveals Lois's desire of literally shaping Marya, but it also

foretells Lois's vulnerability before the object of her own painting: Marya's inertia bears latent strength to resist assimilation.

The tension between engulfing and exposing strangeness and resemblance enforces the sordidness of both *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. In *Quartet*, the "well fed" Heidlers shape Marya's apathy into a dependence which she, at times, fallaciously erases by focusing on other images of weakness. The process crystallizes in Marya's contemplation of a caged fox (124), metaphorical for her weakness when exposed, but also for the centripetal force of her alienation. By displacing sight, strangeness becomes more visible in her, although it remains extensible to the realms of composure. Both terms of the simile of absorption operate throughout, revealing ontological fluidity. While eating Marya becomes silent like a stuffed animal, revealing Lois's verve as absorption *into* and *through* painting. On deciding her image, Lois metaphorically "feasts on" each "morsel" she adds to the whole: "Or shall I have short green gloves? What do you think H.J.?" (40); and by the end of the meal, Marya is only: "... filled [...] with [...] extraordinary dismay".<sup>17</sup>

Accurate language thus renders the shifts in the feeding / painting transit. The pose of object transmutes Marya into an "active" receiver of strength, as she becomes the subject of painting. So, the ontological wholesomeness of the Heidlers is precarious: it depends on Marya's conformation both to norm and to difference against which real normality can be tested. Being the one "whom they spoke of in the third person as if she were a strange animal" (12), turns Marya into a mirror that attracts, returns and transfixes the Heidlers' hidden strangeness. This metonymical absorption moulds Heidler's view in a definite way. Marya, and the surroundings impregnated by her, return to him subduing sensations, latent within himself. On the verge of hysteria he hinders sight, hurrying away from the immediateness that threatens to engulf him:

'A bedroom in hell might look rather like this one. Yellow-green and dulish mauve flowers crawling over black walls.' [...]

The dim room smelt of stale scent. [...] She felt giddy and curiously light, as if she were floating about bodiless in the scented dimness.

It's frightfully hot in here,' Heidler was saying. D'you mind if I pull the

curtains and open the window? Where's your handbag? Look here – do go and dine somewhere decent for God's sake.'

He always hurried the end of his dressing, as if getting out of her bedroom would be an escape. (93)

In a fluid transit, Lois is exposed by the visibility she shapes in painting, having her image “eaten away” along with her statute of creator. Marya acquires a descriptive power that transforms her from object as passivity into objecthood as agency. The fragmentary objectifies in return and composes Lois's intermittent portrait: either “hurt animal” (13) or beast that “tears to bits” (89). Similarly, Heidler's forced reshaping into norm can only be represented by an (other) inert caricature (not a living image) of respectfulness: “His nose seemed to lengthen oddly as he spoke. Marya thought: ‘He looks exactly like a picture of Queen Victoria.’” (89). His speech fades while his distortion is rephrased in the foreground through Marya's narrative insight. His hysterical fear is betrayed by his grasping at a figment of decorum, which reveals a former breakdown, hidden while he had dared facing Marya's mirroring power.

Marya, herself, had resorted to self-defence by replying in polite English to some “shabby youths” (7). Yet, the attraction she casts over them reveals identity as a physical speculum for alienage: “her long eyes [...] oddly remote in expression. (7)”. The languages of the “shabby youths” are “unknown”, “spitting”, but each address shows the intuition of a mutual recognition. Seeing weakness in others turns Marya into *the* representative of the “norm” that casts her out. The paradox tightens figuratively in her attempt at self-devouring during an elided dream, the visible result of which reifies her inner fissure: “She put her light on and looked at the red marks on her arm, where her teeth had nearly met.” (125). The perception of (self-) estrangement, amounting to indistinctness, pervades the description of characters and surroundings. Sight is pulverized among the incidental, seeking ontological definition, but all images are pregnant with fragmentation, and will be impregnated by any gaze of strangeness of which they become the deposit.<sup>18</sup> Thus, metaphors of unbelievable terms become *the* device for realistic description. In Marya's metaphorical labour, the coincidence of “splendid caged animal roused and fighting to get out” (59)

and “unborn child” contracts peril and inertia. Fearing such distortion as an “abyss of sincerity” (64), Lois looks away from it: to her own image in a mirror. This is, of course, just an attempt at vanishing unity; before Marya, Lois’s effacement is gradual but complete: “Lois was a shadow, less than a shadow. Lois had simply ceased to exist.” (65). Marya imbues everything seen or felt with a spectral aura, and paradoxically all menaces become reassuring to her,

[...] The people passing were like the wavering reflections seen in the water, the sound of water was in her ears. [...] ‘It’s a dream,’ she would think; it isn’t real’ – and be strangely comforted. (96)

except for her own image: “A feeling of sickness would come over her as she stared at herself.” (96-97). Before it, she hinders sight as if “assembling” strangeness behind shut eyelids. While facing this blind (self-protected) object, the gazer may be absorbed beyond redemption. Heidler’s hysteria thus becomes evident in the vision of the picture:

He stood looking down on her feeling rather alarmed. [...] her face seemed strange to him: the cheek-bones looked higher and more prominent, the nostrils wider, the lips thicker. A strange little Kalmuck face. He whispered: ‘Open your eyes, savage. Open your eyes, savage. (102)

Before Marya’s fight with Stephan, aggression is prefigured in her distorting perspective: “the enlarged photographs of young men in their Sunday-best smirking down at her.” (143). Afterwards, it is Stephan’s turn to wear his mask of decorum: “He straightened his tie carefully, put on his hat and went out of the room without looking behind him” (143). Meanwhile he clings to passivity – the (public) feature of Rhys’s women – and ebbs before occasional feminine assertiveness:

At that moment women seemed to him loathsome, horrible – soft disgusting weights suspended round the necks of men, dragging them downwards. At the same time he longed to lay his head on Mademoiselle Chardin’s shoulder and weep his life away. (144)

Identity as unattainable definiteness is also figured in the perambulation along resembling streets; or along incessant corridors when Marya tries to find

a solution for Stephan's imprisonment: "[...] and Marya, hastening after him, began to feel as though she were playing some intricate game of which she did not understand the rules." (25). The cosmopolitan maze metaphor enhances the fallacious character of subjective and collective wholeness, and evokes other moments of modernism. In Kafka's *Prozeß*, non-communication is the linguistic counterpart of the maze. K. is the single retainer of lucidity in a world where aberration is the norm that restricts him. In the "Bildung" of Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, artistic epiphanies also occur in urban loss (the significance of Dedalus cannot go unnoticed), and after identification with the threatening feminine element.

Obstinacy with consciousness in the depiction of the visible is no less fundamental in Rhys's early fiction than it is in *To The Lighthouse*. Lily Briscoe's posing questions like "What does it all mean?" credit difficulty to the representation of perception through painting. However, this is clarified in stretches of inner monologue, whereby discourse shapes point of view. Reversibly, the characters in *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (both novels are also inhabited by painting) express the hardness of (self-) representation in linguistic scarcity or disconnection. The semantics of fragmentation shapes the look that depicts. It renders identity pulverized like perception, and like the perceived phenomena it is the image of. Thomas F. Staley notices that overlooking Rhys's accurate rendering may be due to the very economy of her style. Eloquently, he includes *Quartet* in the reflection on modernist issues:

Rhys's ample achievement in this novel can be too easily overlooked, and her characters and themes judged too morbid. The economy of language and directness of style can lead us to underestimate the range, depth, and quality of feeling in her work, but her narrative focus and technique relieve the intense subjectivity in *Quartet*.<sup>19</sup>

Description fluctuates among randomness, achieving insight into the mazes of mind or of human relations, through suitably strange metaphors. The preoccupation with perception does not lend itself to explanation; rather, it is shown by inconsistency imbedded in simple language:



Midnight. The band struck up Valencia for the sixth time. Somebody said to somebody else: It's all very well to talk about Jew noses, but have you ever tried to paint your own mouth? The artist addressed burst into tears. 'He's only trying to be modern and brutal and all that, poor dear,' said her friend ... "Don't mind him." [...] 'Doesn't Swansea Grettle look awful tonight?' 'She looks', said the unknown lady, smiling slowly, 'like a hundred gone bad, don't you think?' She was very healthy looking, was the unknown lady, with long very sharp teeth. How terrifying human beings were, Marya thought. But she had drunk two fines and a half-bottle of something which the patron of the Bal du Printemps called champagne, and after all it was a lovely party. [...] (56)

Music repetition matches Marya's incapacity to differentiate, in a self-reflexive sample of linguistic alienation. Like painting, this rendered moment is modern in the sense chosen by "the friend", i.e. brutal. Shown in interaction, characters and scene embody the horror of human relations; and its reversibility into collective ecstasy.

In Rhys's writing, psychic inaccessibility attains depth through the ironical, self-reflective disconnection of language. Much as with Virginia Woolf, the depicted matters for dislocating subjective fissures into the visible. What is lacking in Rhys is the interpretative certainty attained through Lily Briscoe's pictorial quest: "Yes I've had my vision", Lily concludes, in spite of herself. Rhys's language does not simplify the reader's task of observing the mind of characters; it leaves no space for gnomic truth. Stephan's silence and Marya's loss of consciousness are devices for rendering layers of insight that cannot be stated. This near nihilist ending is the artistic recognition that violence and fragmentation are languages never to be done without.

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In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, the introduction of the characters as established literary types reveals ironical awareness of the problems in identity representation. Mackenzie confines Julia, his discarded mistress, to the role of

the laughable: “Surely even she must see that she was trying to make a tragedy out of a situation that was fundamentally comical.”<sup>20</sup> The “comical” in Rhys, however, intensifies tension. Instead of laughter, it causes Mackenzie’s fear that his fallibility is rendered by what he tries, with detachment, to analyse as mere comedy: “He looked to the right and the left of him with a helpless expression” (22). He knows the peril of sympathy with excess – either tragic or comic – hence, his effort “never to go too far or too deep”. Having abandoned verse as reprobated juvenilia, he enacts the safe pose of a “critic”, regarding Julia as the minor. However, her haunting frailty embodies the “self” to be erased in him: “Once in his youth [Mackenzie] had published a small book of poems. But [...] in self-defence he had adopted [...] a certain code of morals and manners [...]” (20). Unable to obliterate the universal flaw of strangeness, he projects it in the (in)offensive Julia, turning her into scapegoat: the embodiment of the laughable.

Despite the barriers (“the instinct of self-preservation”[20]) of “anti-comedy”, Mackenzie’s leanings (“some kink in his nature [...] which morbidly attracted him to strangeness [...]” [18-19]) force empathy with Julia even though her apparition urges his linguistic reshaping: “One of the letters had begun, ‘I would like to put my throat under [Julia’s] feet.’ [...] Insanity! Forget it; forget it.” (21). Although he tries to embody the impartial critic, he experiences being seen as the centre of comedy, by the unknown Horsfield. Julia’s inertia causes hysterical loss of verbal capacity, and insight renders Mackenzie’s silence – and her paleness – visible like inertia:

She walked in – pale as a ghost. [...] [...] Mackenzie opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. So he shut it again. He was thinking, ‘O God, oh Lord, she’s come here to make a scene.... Oh God, oh Lord, she’s come here to make a scene.’ (22)

Julia, in turn, is not able to encompass ghastliness into self-knowledge, nor does she protect her own sight from it. She remains throughout “in between”, ending in the “hour between dog and wolf” (138). At times, her hybrid nature crystallizes before her. However, Horsfield will “enter” her “nothingness” farther than she will. Through displaced identity, he almost

reaches her “from the outside looking in”. This is foreseen in his “avert[ing] his eyes” (27-29) from the distorted (anti-) comedy, “enacted” in a looking glass, by “dream-like [...]actors” (28). His turning “too blank” (27), is seen by Mackenzie as empathy towards ghastliness. To Julia, though, “gathering” identity would imply a comprehensive self-dispersion she does not carry to the end:

There was only a grey fog shot with yellow lights, and its cold breath on her face, and the ghost of herself coming out of the fog to meet her.

The ghost was thin and eager. It wore a long, very tight check skirt, a short dark-blue coat, and a bunch of violets bought from the old man, it looked at her coldly, without recognizing her. (49)

Descriptive visibility sustains a fantastic realism; the spectre does not recognize her, so Julia’s facing of identity as division is hindered. Her visionary power has the grotesque as its only result, however revealing her visible deposits of animated distortion may be:

The room had individuality. Its gloom was touched with a fantasy accentuated by the pattern of the wallpaper. A large bird [...] faced, with an open beak, a strange, wingless creature, half-bird, half-lizard, which also had its beak open and its neck stretched in a belligerent attitude. The branch on which they were perched sprouted fungus and queerly shaped leaves and fruit.

The effect of all this was, oddly enough, not sinister but cheerful and rather stimulating. (7-8)

Julia is restored by, and included in, such non-sinister images: indeterminable, hence feared. Like the wingless bird, she is passive, but the predator is imminent in her. The grotesque exceeds description to become her inscription in a semantics of dissolution. While Julia transfixes herself into the picture of another woman, epiphany almost occurs, by self-identification concomitant with self-rejection:

‘And all the time I talked I was looking at a rum picture she had on the wall – a reproduction of a picture by a man called Modigliani. Have you ever heard of him? This picture is of a woman lying on a couch, a woman with a lovely, lovely body. Oh, utterly lovely. Anyhow, I thought so. A sort of

proud body, like an utterly lovely proud animal. And a face like a mask, a long, dark face and very big eyes. The eyes were blank, like a mask, but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman. At least that's how it was with me.

[...] I felt as if the woman in the picture were laughing at me and saying: "I am more real than you. But at the same time I *am* you. I'm all that matters of you."

'And I felt as if all my life and myself were floating away from me like smoke and there was nothing to lay hold of – nothing.

' And it was a beastly feeling, a foul feeling, like looking over the edge of the world. [...]' (40-41)

The repetitive description of the "woman's lovely body" suggests the first of Amadeo Modigliani's reclining nudes (1917), influenced by Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* (ca. 1805).<sup>21</sup> In Modigliani's painting, the woman's eyes are also large and convey blankness through a faint smile. The identification between Julia and the image gains in significance as she had been sitting for Ruth, becoming the referent of "her own" portrait, unseen by her for it must have been facing the painter.

This choice for the attempt at self-dispersion is significant. Modigliani's nudes strikingly reject displaying members, as if the canvas finished abruptly, with emergence to the foreground of the bulk of body and face. According to Michael Fried's explanation of absorption in modern painting, it is not probable that limbs are blurred or "severed" (they are not in Goya's or Manet's nudes) so that nakedness becomes briefly theatrical. (Theatricality, in this sense, is explained by Fried as a major device of Rococo painting to reclaim outside gazing through the embracing of ostensible sensuous motive and technique. Against it, French painting and criticism of the mid-eighteenth century asserted the primacy of absorption. As established by Diderot, the latter means the deliberate recoiling of painting into its own space as if to escape the beholder).<sup>22</sup> Rhys deals here, exactly, with the empathic beholding of the canvas that exists to be contemplated while seeming to overcome the beholder ("I am more real than you"), thus surpassing straight pictorial "recoiling". In the passage, the beholder's ontological status is waning: the picture's absorption

reclaims Julia's gaze, and thus her identity. In tune with this, Modigliani's obstinate escape from the representation of members – eschewing pure inner drama (the pre-condition of absorption), and reclaiming outside attention –<sup>23</sup> allows a reading of the images as deliberately imprisoned in the canvas. Moreover, the figures' eyes are either closed, or they bear an empty, or blurred, unfixed gaze. Either case sustains the same possibility: boundless gaze is both introverted since it hinders expression, and potentially encompassing of all eyes that meet it. In this transit – so it is to Julia – the picture is endowed with the sight it steals from the beholder. The described smile of the woman is self-directed because it may mean anything that the self being absorbed by the picture will surrender to it; to Julia this should have been identity itself.

The process may be preceded by Diderot's theoretical fantasy – as explained by Fried – of a zone being left in the self-absorbed picture for the literal entering of the gazer into it.<sup>24</sup> But this does not explain how a void substitutes for a portrait (Ruth's) of the self (Julia), and how it drains life away from the sitter / beholder. Perhaps we can contrast Modigliani's violent visibility of quietness, in Rhys's representation, with Fried's reading of Courbet's early self-portraits, *The Desperate Man* (1843?) and *Man Mad With Fear* (1843?). Here, the lightening of hands embodies despair, rendered by torsion and gripping, and the wide eyes, looking out with terror, aim at facing the beholder and at materializing – through expression – an unbridgeable gulf between sitter and painter (the same person in two separate roles), consequently between sitter and beholder, and ultimately between painting and beholder.<sup>25</sup> The overcoming of theatricality in Courbet differs from prior pictorial dramatization. The tension of the body intercepts the beholder through self-conscious affliction, materializing painful separation, and replaces the prior pictorial figment about the beholder's non-existence.

In Modigliani's images the beholder is expected to enliven immobility. Courbet's maddened images aim at an impossible jump to the outside, trying to bridge the gulf between the several personae involved in the painting / beholding circuit. Whereas Courbet shows embodied action materially immobilised by mirror and canvas, Modigliani serves Rhys's purposes by

ontological displacement: the picture is a self-conscious, material dislocation of identity and overwhelms it in pregnant inertia. While this means distancing, it also shows combination: the image is self-absorbed, but it urges the beholder to finish it. Modigliani (also revisiting the genre *via* Manet) may surpass in the nude what Fried claims as Manet's major breakthrough: to avoid theatricality whilst acknowledging in the picture the inescapableness of beholding<sup>26</sup>.

Contemplation, described by Rhys, fills in the blank of action in painting with the picture's engulfing of the beholder's inertia.<sup>27</sup> Between painting and text, a deposit for identity is created; in the "passivity" of the subject and in the blankness of its eyes, Julia lives her errand to self-dispersion: Rhys's fictional self-inscription. The beholder consciously completes the picture, thus acquiring a new ontological status. Away from Courbet's intense self-portraits, indifference (a well-known code in Rhys's writing) is Modigliani's way to bridge the ontological gulf within plural identity. His nude is not a self-portrait (not within the boundaries of the genre); but it validates all "passive" impersonations that may rotate before it. Even the increased scale of the bodies reclaims the beholder; he must rescue their "amputated" inertia from oblivion, and thus, his own. More, it is as if Diderot's fantasy were further complicated: because of the picture's human scale, the beholder entering it embodies the portrait of no one.

Julia endows a picture with absorbing voice, reversing Heidler's fear before the void of Marya's eyes. However, Julia's "split" does not reach identity as assertive nothingness:

When I got home I pulled out all the photographs I had, and letters and things. And my marriage-book and my passport. And the papers about my baby who died and was buried in Hamburg.

'But it had all gone, as if it had never been. And I was there, like a ghost. [...] and yet I knew that if I could get to the end of what I was feeling it would be the truth about myself [...].'<sup>(41)</sup>

Only the image's otherness can tell her story. It is "more real than her"; it renders what matters in Julia, by its inertia, by its peril and versatility. Away from the picture, identity as dispersion yields, and Julia, checked by outer codes, re-embodies fright.

Another pseudo-epiphany occurs during her mother's cremation: "[...] her brain was making a huge effort to grapple with nothingness. And the effort hurt, yet it was almost successful." (94). However, when the elided incineration ends, her inner flame vanishes, leaving Julia as vulnerable to what she does not reach as to normal vision:

Julia had abandoned herself. [...]. At the same time in a miraculous manner, some essence of her was shooting upwards like a flame. She was great. She was a defiant flame shooting upwards not to plead but to threaten. Then the flame sank down again, useless, having reached nothing. (94-95)

Julia's threat consists of nearing the summit of "nothingness": "nothing", instead, is just a lexical contingency to express failure. The narrative attempts simultaneous rendering of incommensurate languages: the one is "impartiality" affiliated in norm, the other serves fragmentation, where revelation corresponds to emptiness and pain, where subjectivity means contemplation, and where the mode of representation is primarily image. The protagonist understands this code, while the others shield themselves from its strangeness: Julia ("the rogue") is tentatively expelled from the ritual that follows the funeral. However, the circles of protection from delirium are, again, stages for "comedy" where the voice of "criticism" as norm can be subsumed:

[...]Uncle Griffiths[...] went on talking, eagerly, as if the sound of his own voice laying down the law to his audience of females reassured him.[...]He talked about life, about literature, about Dostoievsky.  
He said: 'Why see the world through the eyes of an epileptic?'  
Julia spoke mechanically, as one's foot shoots out when a certain nerve in the knee is struck: 'But he might see things very clearly, mightn't he? At moments.' (96)

Against false sanity, Julia dares defend alienage in literature, recovering – in a glimpse – an atemporal "eulogy of folly". However, this is just another frustrated attempt at productive difference. Its failure only adds to her usual blindness to the outside:

[...] blindly, Julia would bump every now and again into somebody coming in the opposite direction. When the people glared at her and muttered it seemed as if shadows were gesticulating. (16)

Julia's ghastliness renders anti-heroism visible. Mr James (Julia's early lover) conveys Rhys's response to the sense of loss caused by the war. In Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, although the final acceptance of perishableness is much Lily Briscoe's conquest, war affects all the surviving characters. In Rhys, the mention of the war seems as accidental as the mention of James; but so he is, coherently, metonymical for the hysterical coldness, and fright, that came as war's aftermath:

I despised a man who didn't get on. [...] But after the war I felt differently. I've got a lot of mad friends now. [...]  
 'Men?'  
 'Oh, no, some women too. [...] (82-83)

His cosmopolitan detachment from the "mad friends" suits narrative indifference, while preserving his "sanity". Their "madness" is too well known to James for him to venture tragic empathy with Julia: "My dear, don't harrow me. I don't want to hear." (82). The anti-heroic consequence of war proves a pervading fear that the poses of Rhys's men deny; even if denial corresponds to a crisis in representation. James's fear is displaced in anxiety while contemplating art: "When they looked at the pictures he became [...] anxious because he did not want to love the wrong thing." (83). His need of a mask is thus exposed, and his fatherly help is imbued in "feminine" torpor: "Well, look here, Julietta, good-bye. [...] I'll write at once; you shall have your rest." (83).

Mr Horsfield faces the opposite ordeal. He pursues identity in the images of imprisonment seen by Julia, e.g.: "a male figure encircled by what appeared to be a huge mauve corkscrew." (13). Reversibly, knowing her becomes (embarrassingly) vital:

However Moon[s][...] tone put the strange creature so much in her place that Mr Horsfield felt rather ashamed of having expressed any kind of interest in her. (28-29)



"The creature" dilates Horsfield's strangeness near to uprooting from decorum, contemplation being the spreading device of such malady. Narrative is seized as the place for reconciliation between men and the grotesque, the "incredible" becoming the essence to attain. If truth is what only the "elected" can see, if norm is a mask to wear among the non-illuminated, true elevation must be a "descent" into consciousness. Horsfield knows that representation depersonalizes ("[reduces the] ego to an egg" [29]), and his vision of Julia is consciously mirrored. Completing the anti-platonic turn, revelation is in the antipodes of the One, in dispersion through the contingent. More, art is the way to the essential (mainly through the grotesque and comedy); and through image, as an imitation of imitations: "fantastic and dreamlike" (28). Thus Horsfield is first represented by the "distortion" of "actors" he sees in a "looking-glass" (28). This is a pedagogical art: at several removes from unity, anti-platonic bondage is the way to (self-)knowledge.

Thus, climbing the stairs in the dark is symbolical for Horsfield's "descent" into consciousness, anticipating Antoinette's epiphanic dream in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "They mounted silently, like people in a dream. And as in a dream he knew that the house was solid, with huge rooms [...]" (109) Horsfield "watches" his visionary power, catalysed by Julia's proximity: "You are thirsty, dried up with thirst, and yet you don't know it until somebody holds up water to your mouth and says: 'You're thirsty, drink.'" (111). His descriptions surpass reminiscence: they foresee hallucination, and wordless, (self-) knowledge. When they re-enter darkness, it is Julia, not he, who precludes descent, and through words. He extends his conversion to the wholeness of senses, to the peculiar sight of "blindness", and emerges in a world of primitive certainties:

On the third landing she stopped. He knew it [...]  
 He groped and touched her hand, [...]. Then he ran his fingers downwards again, as a blind man might have done. He felt a strange pleasure in touching her like that – wordlessly in the dark.  
 She said in a loud voice: 'Oh God, who touched me?' (118)

He is conscious of his attraction for Julia: “[...] lonely people [...] reminded him [...] of certain aspects of himself [...]” (31) He has experience of self-disintegration: “[...] I know something about cracking up too. I went through the war, you know.” (111). Thus, he indulges in contemplating, in art, that which cannot be rationalized about himself:

On the screen a strange, slim youth with a long, white face and mad eyes wooed a beautiful lady the width of whose hips gave an archaic but magnificent air to the whole proceeding. [...]

He felt that in that bare place and to the accompaniment of that frail music the illusion of art was almost complete. (34)

Contrarily to Septimus (in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*), Horsfield lacks the suicidal courage to finish epiphanic “cracking up”, even after the rite of “true” representation: watching the moving image of insanity, and the grotesque magnificence of the feminine. Though if we agree that madness “is” feminine, we must also accept that, in Rhys, femininity overflows and displaces “typical” male fears.<sup>28</sup> To Horsfield, the bust of the Duke of Wellington, a symbol of heroism, becomes frightening, when he realizes that it stands in the space of marginality, and that: “Every moment his desire to get out of the room was growing stronger.” (113). After facing his anti-heroic inner labyrinth, Horsfield will return to “security”, only to plunge in a crisis of representation: “This is grotesque[...] He did not know whether he meant the policeman, or his excess of caution, or the Duke of Wellington, or the night he had just spent.” (113). His option for decorum only implies reshaping for the sake of making sense in public discourse. Again a singular realism is attained by the flowing out of insight: by ironical projection of self-debasement, expressive of the smallness of everything:

He shut the door and sighed. It was as if he had altogether shut out the thought of Julia. The atmosphere of his house enveloped him – quiet and not without dignity, part of a world of lowered voices, and of passions, like Japanese dwarf trees, suppressed for many generations. A familiar world. (126)

Both the tendency to encapsulate fear in the feminine characters and the prominence of description justify Jane Neide Ashcom's derogatory integration of Rhys's early novels in a niche of modernism shared by Isherwood, Orwell and Hemingway. This later writing tends to be segregated from "high" modernism, its style being seen as hard-boiled and lacking earlier depth. Such "superficiality", it is said, suits the authors' social – "rather than" artistic – concerns, and explains the renewal of interest in surroundings, preferred to insight and metaphor experimentation. 29

The strict barrier between the dissecting of the visible by late modernism and the exploration of psychical depth – typical for Woolf and Joyce – cannot be easily accepted in reading Rhys's early novels. Here, the visible is not synecdochical for routine: it is crucial for the rendering of inner states. Descriptions like "yellow-green and dullish mauve flowers crawling over the black wall" shape the metaphorical inclusiveness of the characters' inner vision. So, description eludes any referential pre-definition, and locally renders insight by dispersion of sight and being.

For Ashcom, only in *Wide Sargasso Sea* would mature detachment turn the visible into a metaphor of insight and identity: a more than twenty-year writing interregnum would have been necessary for Rhys to learn forgotten stylistic devices. In resurrecting "modernist technique", she would, in return, have underestimated description. This approach rests on the Jakobsonian thesis that in literature the metaphorical predominates over the metonymical use of language. David Lodge supports, to some extent, that it is so in modernist texts,<sup>30</sup> but this does not mean that metonymy was banished by modernism, and in Rhys, the intermingling of modes does occur.

Ashcom accredits metaphor as the only trope to fulfil Woolf's modernist assignment: to write "from the inside looking out". Woolf was firm about the need to refrain prolixity, but her intention was neither to abolish description nor, incessantly, to metaphorize the depicted. For Woolf, description, when filtered by perspective, is not excessive. Instead it will allow us to see (and Woolf emphasizes seeing), it will expose a way of looking, and achieve partial insight into the mind that shows.<sup>31</sup> In this vein, Thomas F. Staley describes

Rhys's first novels, emphasising their capacity of reshaping through projection, departing from the character's particular vision:

Rhys's heroines saw the world from the inside rather than from the outside. Her aim was the perfection of rendering private consciousness through style, not the achievement of an enlarged vision of the contemporary world.<sup>32</sup>

The aimless distress of the characters in Rhys's early novels does not mean their incapability of insight in a deterministic universe "simply described in its visibility", neither does description mean simplification in identity rendering. Instead, episodic narrative, supported by parataxis and ellipsis, reveals the representation of spaces and identity as dependent on one another. The metonymic possibilities of the visible validate themselves in the figurative contention they displace from the inside. Thus the truncated representation of characters (by reflection in others or in spaces and objects) attains metaphorical status. *Wide Sargasso Sea* perfects fragmentation of point of view, but the hostility of the described goes on interacting with the pessimism of the characters, and hostility is rendered, again, by scattered images.

Psychological density is adumbrated in Rhys's early novels through a particular visibility of discourse. Meaning recoils behind ellipses, it is dislocated, and therefore absorbs the reader beyond enumerative description. Precisely by restraining exposure, Rhys's representation demands minute observation to understand the dispersed picture of consciousness and identity. These juxtaposed processes are near to those Michael Fried detects in analyzing absorption and beholding in Chardin's *Card Castle* (ca. 1737). On the one hand, Rhys's writing of identity is, in Fried's terms, absorptive since it is totally turned within the universes it builds. On the other hand, also within Fried's possibilities, restraint and fragmentation in rendering are liable to provoke the reader's attempt at decoding and reassembling the pieces of identity within the text.<sup>33</sup>

Absorption may work in yet other dimensions. Elaine Showalter reads the bond between the feminine and instability as excluding men from the representation of visible madness, except as order-restorers. While femininity would mean over-sensitiveness, masculine hysteria, brought about by the First World War, would mean absence of sensation: such is the case of Septimus

Smith in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, where madness is given a cause.<sup>34</sup> In *Quartet*, Heidler's breakdown must, instead, be reconstructed through Marya, as a catalyst. To efface its symptoms, Heidler's posture is one of inner dramatization, of hysterical escape into the iconography of decorum. The theatrically of his "Victorian" portrait is legible as a tortuous dislocation of an androgynous potentiality which the narrative effaces, i.e., absorbs in itself.

Only dislocation reveals such levels of latent meaning. Androgyny is also displaced in Lois's inaugural masculinity, paralleled by the "[...] tall, gaunt, broad shouldered," Miss de Solla. In this universe of artists and outcasts, prosopopoeia is invested with dramatic power and encapsulated in contrasts: here the protective need protection, the needy are potential villains, promptly become victims, and back again, victimizers. As may happen in painting, the text completes a picture that turns inside itself, neutralizing the beholder. By the same token, completion of scattered identity demands the reader's empathy. He must enter the text to understand its paradoxes.

In Rhys's case, however, concision prompts confusion with "superficiality"; and the author seems to call for equation with protagonist. In her later years, having been revisited by criticism – which made a fashion out of her autobiographical (de)merit – Rhys felt the need to write an autobiography. This last work – left incomplete – instead of overtly going against the critical grain, groups motives and situations altogether recognizable from her novels into separate vignettes. Further, the links from one episode to the next – memory, or strategy, dictates it – are elided, alluded to.

The writing of subjective transparency easily breaks its "pact with the reader". The latter becomes, instead, the observer of a double-bladed *Bildungsroman*: it promises the history of somebody and it is, quite literally, built by pictures (etymologically moving between *Bildung* and *Bilder*). This again raises the problem of conjuring up the pictorial discourse in the verbal, in a text aimed at disclosing identity. Moreover, time linearity is twisted, descriptions become tautological, referential to a fragmented *I*, built in discrete portraits that seem to disclaim readability (or to discard the beholder). However, only reading purposes can account for the voids between one picture

and another: they wait to be filled in, to have the reader's understanding. The association of plates accomplishes the identity which autobiography renders disconnectedly away from us, while beckoning to us.

Very little of Rhys's life is explained in *Smile Please*. But the self-contained writing illuminates a coherent aesthetics – overlapping with the novels – in the usual “fortuitous” descriptions of “characters”, places or objects (that must not be tested against referentiality). The cryptic economy to which the novels have accustomed us subsists here. Thus, “autobiographical truth” is the revelation of a particular way of rendering, of absorbing both writer and reader into portrait-descriptions, whilst containing their visibility within borders that fragmented memory blurs. The life-long fear – of the life that matters: contained in all writing – that Meta inflicted upon Jean is described in autobiography with complete detachment from the plausible. However, it is legitimized by its similarity to the metamorphoses of the novels: they are shaped in the act of contemplation. Often the reader/gazer remains, disfigured, in the object of contemplation, which is also changed by him. Such reading owes to Paul de Man's tropologic theory of autobiographic discourse: it has to be tested against non-referential selection, not against what “happened”. The text is the result of a cognitive process occurring between two distinct subjects: the one who writes and the one constructed in the text, i.e., the one who bears the name of the first. By the same token, every *authorized* fictional text hosts prosopopoeia, and therefore the autobiographical; it is equally supported by a singular referentiality: that of selection, exceeding the factual.<sup>35</sup>

In this manner, Jean Rhys's novels must, after all, be said to be autobiographical, since their recurring tropes coincide with disfiguration and fragmentation. In *Smile Please*, besides, the first express mention of intratextual identity (“I”) is ulterior to photographic figuration and selection: “‘Smile Please,’ the man said. ‘Not quite so serious.’” (19). Jean-the-child begins by not being accessible to Jean-the-narrator unless through an image imposed from the outside, and she does not recognize herself in the resulting photograph. Thus the beginning of the text is a double paradox: both as writing and as self-knowledge. However in Rhys's autobiography, the assumable,

chronologically linear identity “Jean Rhys” becomes instead, justifiably, everything about which – and by whatever manner – she chooses to write: herself, and metonymically again, everything surrounding her. Obviously, if the subject / object of writing absorbs and is absorbed, and renders and is rendered, by everything, then sight more than endangers subjective wholeness. To see, then, is to become, and to be is to be represented as pulverized transfiguration, deeply encoded or unveiled, recoiling or revealing. We have but to observe the way in which Meta, Rhys’s black nurse, states the shattering of unity – that is, bare mutilation – by means of observation / reading:

She said, ‘If all you read so much, you know what will happen to you? Your eyes will drop out and they will look at you from the page.’

‘If my eyes dropped out I wouldn’t see,’ I argued.

She said, ‘They drop out except the little black points you see with.’

I half believed her and imagined my pupils like heads of black pins and all the rest gone. But I went on reading. (28)

What we are dealing with here, as we did in the novels, is with the anxious necessity of rendering Rhys’s autobiographic persona; and dispersion is what constitutes “Jean Rhys” as such: so as such are her fictional characters assembled through violence. Marya’s desire to disfigure Lois is metonymic for another wish: the destruction of everything that, within or without herself, literal or metaphorically, may restrict or harass her. We are not here beholding a casual consideration (there are none in Rhys); nor are we before a simple addition to a personification of passivity that could stand for the suffering – because female – author.

Rhys’s attitude to reviews and interviews makes plain that she was aware of – but never in agreement with – the identity she was expected to embody, and, of course, her heroines along with her:

If the letters enclosed reviews, she asked the title and the first line, then said. ‘Tear it up. When the title was ‘The Dark Underworld of Women’ or ‘The Woes of Women’ or had ‘women’ in it in any way, she’d grab the review from me and tear it up herself and throw it in the basket, laughing, and say, ‘No, I’ve had enough of *that!*’<sup>36</sup>

Her own voice bears ironical testimony to this refusal of a previously set identity:

The question-and-answer-game goes on. I realize that I am being gently pushed into my predestined role, the role of the victim. I have never had any good times, never laughed [...] Waiting, I have gone from tyrant to tyrant [...] All this, of course, leads to Women's Lib.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Al Alvarez, "The Best Living English Novelist", *New York Times Book Review*, pp.6-7. Cf. Louis James, *Jean Rhys*.
- 2 *Wide Sargasso Sea* bears an intertextual relation with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette, the female narrator-protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea* appropriates Brontë's silent, "mad woman in the attic".  
The abbreviation R. poses local identity problems in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. However, I will not question the established assumption that R. stands for Edward Rochester, the male protagonist of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.
- 3 Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, p.168.
- 4 David Plante, *Difficult Women: A Memoir of Three*, p.52.
- 5 Elizabeth Vreeland, "Jean Rhys: The Art of Fiction LXIV", p. 225.
- 6 David Plante, "Jean Rhys: A Remembrance", p. 247.
- 7 *Difficult Women*, p.31.
- 8 *Ibidem*, p.52.
- 9 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" (1894), pp. 398 -99.
- 10 Ford Madox Ford, *The English Novel: From the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad*, p.137.
- 11 Cf. Virginia Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, mainly pp.98 and 108.
- 12 Jean Rhys; Ford Madox Ford (pref.), *The Left Bank*, p.26.
- 13 *The English Novel*, pp. 124 and 139.
- 14 *Postures* was, eloquently, the title of the American edition of *Quartet*. It was also published in 1928.
- 15 The main centring of narrative focalization in Jean Rhys's heroines, and also Rhys's West - Indian origin, has drawn extensive attention to her work by such trends of literary criticism



as feminism and post-colonialism, which Harold Bloom would eventually group under the heading "schools of resentment". Many of those critics have disregarded such "idiosyncrasies" in Rhys's "victims". Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, mainly, pp.1-41.

- 16 Jean Rhys, *Quartet*, p.139. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
- 17 My emphases.
- 18 This idea of the pregnant indefiniteness of images transposes Focillon's development of the concept "image" as meaning, engendering from permanent displacement of meaning. Cf. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, especially pp. 34 and 67.
- 19 Thomas F. Staley, "The Emergence of Form: Style and Consciousness in Jean Rhys's *Quartet*", p.224. Cf. also *ibidem*, pp.203-204.
- 20 Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, p. 24. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
- 21 Besides Goya, Manet must be mentioned among the influences on Modigliani's nudes.
- 22 Cf. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, mainly p.35.
- 23 Issues of beholding in French painting, such as the arresting of vision compensated by the overcoming of the beholder's presence became – during the second half of the eighteenth century – too extensive for withholding within the Diderotian tradition of absorption. Fried defends that dramatic conflict was enhanced and surpassed by Géricault's aspiration to "go beyond theatricality" (Fried's emphasis). Other devices for the sidestepping of the debasement mark of theatricality came with the historical painting of Delaroche, and with the dramatic engrossment of Honoré Daumier's caricature. Fried claims that visual drama – the essence of absorption – is, herein, recuperated by the embracing of *theatricalization*, within a fundamental critique of theatricality. (My emphasis) Cf. Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, mainly pp.22-46.
- 24 Cf. *Absorption and Theatricality*, p.118.
- 25 Cf. *Courbet's Realism*, pp.61-2.
- 26 Cf. *Ibidem*, p.51.
- 27 Cf. *Absorption and Theatricality*, p.70. See also Fried's remarks about the gazing of the naked women in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862) and *Olympia* (1863). Manet's devices seem to imply the control over the beholder from within the paintings. Cf. *Courbet's Realism*, pp.200-202.
- 28 Minimizing her own former argument Showalter releases the masculine from schizophrenic fright as socially inhibiting. Mainly as far as male representation in female writing is concerned, she lessens men's traumatic experiences, in order to enhance the victimization of women. Cf. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, pp.167-205.

- 29 Aschom asserts: "The details of [Rhys's] hotel rooms and cafés are not metaphors for an emotional state; they are synecdochic of the lives of the characters." Jane Neide Aschom, "Two Modernisms: The Novels of Jean Rhys", p. 19.
- 30 Cf. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*, p.111.
- 31 Woolf exhorts the modern novelist to undertake insight instead of omniscient description: "And in all these novels all these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character.", "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown", p.98.
- 32 Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*, p.84.
- 33 Cf. *Courbet's Realism*, pp.9-11.
- 34 Cf. *The Female Malady*, mainly pp.167-95.
- 35 Cf. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, pp.67-81.
- 36 *Difficult Women*, p.39.
- 37 Jean Rhys, "Making Bricks Without Straw", pp.70-71.

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# **Autobiographies of Women in the “Promised Land”**

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## **Autobiographies of Women in the “Promised Land”**

The contents and styles of the writings by American women illustrate the variety under which the so-called American feminine identity may be subsumed in this second part of the volume. Elusive nature and fluidity of boundaries should be expected when we deal with issues of identity, and they become particularly relevant in the face of the diversity of cultures that have and are being woven into the composite culture of the United States. Diversity is already present in this introductory essay by the choice of two women authors, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Hunter Austin, who, while bringing the central theme of the book into focus, simultaneously illustrate the differences applicable to women of the same cultural background. They are both white and as a result are linked to the dominant culture of their time. They also belong to the “new woman” era and may be judged in light of the cultural changes introduced by the Modernist rupture with more traditional ways of fashioning a woman’s life. As reflected in living and creative orientation, their differences do, on the one hand, illustrate the fundamental heterogeneity of the American experience. Intertwining private and public spheres of life, their autobiographies do, on the other, show how questions of identity in general and of feminine identity in particular hinge upon the awareness of a complex cultural situation.

Issues ranging from the marginality of women in the face of the arguably masculine American canon to the change of the adversary condition into a challenging affirmative differentiation are very much at the heart of the feminist critique that has dominated the field of women studies from the late

sixties onwards. They are necessarily part of my argument, without, however, becoming the exclusive focus since, as stated above, my primary concern is with the dialogue and the divergence, the parallelisms and the oppositions, the assonance and dissonance that achieve the cultural polyphony of the United States. Such a cultural situation determined that gender questions should be situated in a field of allied interests in this introductory essay as well as in the ones that follow, all characterized by their multicultural orientation.

*Earth Horizon. An Autobiography* (1932) and *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (1935), foreground the response of the two authors to the circumstances that molded their experience, and the shape it takes when being changed into the story of one's life. They not only offer a privileged perspective on questions of feminine identity, but are also instructive about the role and the fortune of autobiographical testimonials as cultural artifacts. The following essays by Lucy Maddox, Kathleen Ashley and Jennie Wang are respectively set in Native, Black and immigrant cultures. They thrive on the crisscrossing between narrative and life, either by reference to the personal stories of the fiction writers under analysis, or by examining the autobiographical content of the different fictions. Sonia Torres's approach to one of the Latin cultures in the United States by means of a pseudo-autobiographical point of view and a first-person fictional narrative does not introduce a dissonant note to the analysis of cultural differentiation. Neither does Teresa Cid's essay on the work of Katherine Vaz, a second-generation Portuguese American, whose literary work plunges deep into the roots of her father's culture of origin.

These two last essays provide an excellent opportunity to confront, even if briefly, modes of writing that are apparently governed by opposing assumptions: autobiographical veracity, the true-to-life intent authorized by the root of the word, and fiction as a make-believe surrogate for reality. Autobiography, a composite word derived from the Greek, combines three elements that point in different directions: *autós*, *bíos* and *gráphein*. The notion of "life" is, therefore, qualified by the presence of a prefix denoting the "self" and the articulation to a third element, deriving from the verb meaning "to write".<sup>1</sup> Depending on the emphasis given to each of its constitutive parts so has the



notion of autobiography veered toward truth or fiction. The debate from the seventies to this day has by no means produced a consensual definition of the autobiographical act, differentiated as it is along gender, class, ethnic and racial lines. From the seventies onwards, feminist critique has enlivened the debate and contributed with valuable insights that have unsettled more canonical approaches to the genre and have highlighted woman's exclusion from the dominant cultural discourse. From this alternative angle, feminist critics explored the effect of memory upon the illusory "veracity of facts", shifting the emphasis from the course of a life to the agency of the self or to the act of writing as an arena of "multiple technologies".<sup>2</sup> In the wake of these analyses, the distinction between autobiography and fiction calls for an elaborate sifting through of similarities and differences, for, as Sidonie Smith asserts, "purporting to reflect upon or re-create the past through the processes of memory, autobiography is always, multiply, storytelling".<sup>3</sup>

The status of literary fabrication notwithstanding, autobiography thrives, unlike fiction, on the tension between the artifice of writing and the actual life of the autobiographer who is engaged in making sense out of experience and memory. A popular mode of recording the sense of life and experience in the United States, autobiographical writings have been variously described as "Songs of ourselves" or as "a rich and characteristically American mode of storytelling"<sup>4</sup>. In the canon built around the works of Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, or Henry Adams, the details of a personal life, the odds and ends that go into the making of a personality emerge, more often than not, from behind the scenes. To the curtain call comes the average citizen, the romantic explorer of nature or the modernist intellectual of discontentment, as the lives of these canonical autobiographers become stories attuned to the place(s) and the historical period in which they have lived. As such, while they feature their personal lives, they also catch the moods and distinctive traits of their age, the record of a particular life admitting the dialogue with the more universal categorizing by which the representative status is obtained. More than anything else, the mediation between the singularities of the course of a life historically located and the cultural legacy to which it responds – the

representative status – is also a fabrication that deeply implicates the self of the reader. I return to this question later in this essay.

In the United States of America, throughout the nineteenth century, canonical standards were exclusively the province of the white Anglo-Saxon protestant male and most women were silenced as public voices. Even those who were actively involved in intellectual and reformist movements had difficulty in overcoming the status allotted them by the social pieties of the age. Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, have, among others, broken the silence without, however, fully coming across the barriers imposed upon their gender, and their marginal status as spokeswomen for an alternative culture. Fuller left an autobiographical sketch that might have developed into a full testimonial of difference, had she lived long enough to be able to feature, as her personal life, her non-conformity. With the essay “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” (1844) in mind, it is not hazardous to venture that the opposite worlds of the library and the garden, respectively representing patriarchal and matriarchal orders, were already the embryo for a confrontation and resulting alignment with her deeper convictions. Stanton did live long enough to publish her monumental *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815-1897*. Her autobiography is an interesting illustration of the difficulties surrounding the representative status of woman in her time. More often than not, *Reminiscences* shows her moving back and forth between the need to authenticate a conventional, feminine image of the self and the paradoxical necessity to achieve the empowered tone that might sway other women to the cause of suffrage.

Born in 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln was elected president, Charlotte Anna Perkins was nine years old when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. In the first pages of *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the family line of the autobiographer goes directly to Dr. Lyman Beecher and includes ministers, “persons of piety and learning”, and a famous writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe, on her father’s side;<sup>5</sup> but Frederick Beecher Perkins, a man of books, provokes ambivalent feelings in his daughter, having deserted the family when she and

her brother were very young. Legacy and desertion surface in Gilman's memory of his occasional visits home and of her poverty-stricken childhood:

By heredity I owe him much; the Beecher urge to social service, the Beecher wit and gift of words and such small sense of art as I have; but his learning he could not bequeath, and far more than financial care I have missed the education it would have been to have grown up in his society. (6)

On her mother's side, she descends from Stukely Westcott, "one of Roger Williams's deacons and fellow-settler of 'Providence Plantations'", a man of courage who brought forth a distinguished lineage that would be true to the providential plot. Mary Fitch Westcott was, in her daughter's words, "a believer in the divine right of mothers" (6), but, her unswerving devotion notwithstanding, she was unable to develop a close relationship with her children. Due to the father's desertion and the mother's ineffectual presence, Gilman may have lacked parental warmth, but she certainly belonged to the right milieu in terms of birth, connections and educational opportunities. These circumstances allied to her natural talents makes one wonder whether, long before the revival of interest in her work by the feminist critique of the seventies, she would not have been admitted into the pantheon of American letters, had she been born a man.

At sixty-six, Charlotte Perkins Gilman began drafting her autobiography, finished all but the last chapter in 1926, and started revising the manuscript for publication and choosing photographs in 1934, two years after she was diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer. Published posthumously in 1935, *The Living* is one of the few autobiographies that end with the death of its author. Gilman's last words are grafted onto the text of the final chapter and are taken from the letter she left, in which her death is set out in terms of utter coherence with a life devoted to world-serving:

The time is approaching when we shall consider it abhorrent to our civilization to allow a human being to die in prolonged agony which we should mercifully end in any other creature. Believing this open choice to be of social service in promoting wiser views on this question, I have preferred chloroform to cancer. (333-4)

This is a unique testimonial as unique is the story of a life consistently geared to the desire to be useful to others. The assessment of Gilman as having been impaired by societal disaffection is, in view of her last words, highly improbable.<sup>6</sup> Belying her repeated complaints of nervous prostration, stands the monument of her achievement in life and the dignity with which she faced her death.

A record of the autobiographer's own interior growth, *The Living* thrives, I believe, on the tension by which the "new woman" is forged at the expense of the old one. The birth pangs accompanying such forging crop up throughout the record of an achievement that constantly defied old-established pieties, but those same pangs subside before the "tidal motion" of a life inspired by the need to be of use to others. This is the driving motif that brings the autobiography to its close, being announced in the first pages as "the Beecher urge to social service" (6) and carried through to the very end by the suicide note quoted above. To speak of *The Living* as the shape a life may take when it bifurcates between frailty and triumph, may, I believe, obfuscate such purpose and simplify the complex nature of the endeavor taken upon herself when she agreed to leave a testimonial of her life and deeds for posterity.<sup>7</sup> Gilman could not but be aware of the changes produced by World War I and its aftermath in the American nation. The sharp turn to conservatism and the hostility to the reform spirit of the preceding twenty years came hand in hand with the replacement of the "new woman" of the turn of the century by "the flappers" of the twenties. Such awareness must have been a determinant in her decision, in 1934, to go back to the autobiographical draft she had laid aside in 1927.

In her usual direct way, Gilman addresses the issue in the last chapter of her autobiography when the Connecticut College for Women, only twelve miles away from her Norwich home, ignores her presence in the neighborhood and fails to invite her to speak about the "Woman Question". As she flatly puts it:

After so many years of work for the advancement of women, with a fairly world-wide reputation in that work, and with so much that was new and strong to say to the coming generation, it seemed to me a natural opportunity. It did not seem so to the college. (333)

But Charlotte Perkins Gilman would not be discouraged by indifference. Recording her own life, she makes sure that her ideas and commitment to social reform will not be lost upon the future generations of readers who are concerned with similar issues to those which engaged her as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. She was not mistaken. Her theories on the women's movement would be fervently espoused by some of the most engaging feminists of the seventies.

*The Living* may roughly be divided into three sections. The first one registers the growth from childhood to that critical turning point when Gilman shed the conventional roles of a New England wife and mother for the crusade for equality and human rights. Telescoped in retrospect, the different phases of growth are structured around clusters of themes and motifs that disclose the budding identity of the autobiographer. The unfortunate events of childhood, youth and young womanhood are abundantly compensated for by the anecdotal vein in which others are recounted, giving the reader a taste of the style that, in spite of the author's disclaiming literary pretension, could also be judged from that standpoint. And if, after the inaugural chapters, the extensive middle section of the autobiography may take the uncaught reader by surprise and even be spoken of as a sort of "travelogue", the attentive one will soon become interested in those records of Gilman "at large", wandering around the world. Besides charting her role as a lecturer and essayist, these chapters narrate, with typical humor and in a storyteller's fashion, some episodes that are marked by acute observation and which have provided rich material for the author's own fiction. The last short section of the autobiography works almost as a coda to the preceding ones. The return to Norwich after twenty two years in New York – "twenty two-years in that unnatural city where everyone is an exile, none more so than the American" – (316) actually sounds like the return of the exile home.

Since so many of her ideas are connected to her own experience and so much of her fiction bears the autobiographical seal, the reader will soon discover that, as pointed out by Larry Ceplair, "the most convenient approach to an understanding of Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman begins with her

autobiography”.<sup>8</sup> Take, for instance, the reformist movements of the age and the opportunities afforded by the travel in the United States and abroad, which provide, in autobiographical terms, a characteristically American physical analogue for the interior growth of the autobiographer. Having moved to Pasadena, California, Gilman leaves behind the New England of the formative years which come to the end in the chapter titled “The Breakdown”, where the narrative of her failed marriage to Charles Walter Stetson and the difficulties of motherhood attain dramatic height. The emphasis placed upon this episode owes unfortunately little to its reading within the context of the whole autobiography and has affected critical approaches to Gilman’s life that focused mainly upon it. In the case of “The Yellow-paper”, the author’s most praised short story, autobiography has provided a far-reaching lens that allows for a wealth of readings. Fiction, however, is not autobiography, although, as argued above, the two co-exist harmoniously and necessarily borrow from each other.<sup>9</sup>

Any incident in the personal life of the autobiographer relates to the chain of selected events that are being narrated as the story of a life. In “The Breakdown”, the crisis is brought about by the clash between despondent reality and the compulsive, even if subconscious, need for assertiveness, the traditional role of the woman at home being disrupted by her calling for a public life. But the full meaning of the episode is only obtained with the progress of the narrative, the breakdown of the title representing a fundamental step in the development of the autobiographer’s mind. The crisis will gradually be resolved, as contradiction gives way to the more authentic expression of personal needs, the emancipated woman gradually being able to face the choice that would set her at odds with conventional society. As suggested in *The Living*, the craved-for emancipation was rewarding but dearly paid for by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, at the tremendous cost of having to separate from and entrust her daughter to the care of the father and of his new wife, Grace Ellery Channing. Public opinion dubbed Gilman an “unnatural mother”, to which she angrily retorted that she had exclusively acted in the interests of the child, at the expense of her own emotional deprivation. The picture of the difficulties facing the “new woman” include the autobiographer’s depression after the first

marriage in 1884, the breakdown following the birth of Katharine in 1885, the divorce ending the "insanity" of a loveless marriage, and the separation from the daughter on account of the itinerant public career in 1894.

It would, however, be far-fetched to ascribe Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story of her life a confessional propensity. In the first section of her autobiography, she is more outspoken about her love for Martha Luther and other girls and boyfriends that engaged her youthful imagination. After she enters public life, she is either anecdotal or reticent when writing about close family or even friends and acquaintances, to the point of limiting her courtship and long-lasting second marriage to George Houghton Gilman to casual references and a brief but humorous comment about the wedding. It fits well into the "travelogue":

I returned to Chicago June 8<sup>th</sup>, and on the eleventh went to Detroit, as usual to the house of a friend, where I was met by my cousin, G. H. Gilman of New York, and we were married – and lived happy ever after. If this were a novel, now, here's the happy ending. (281)

Yet we know from *A Journey from within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* how passionate the relationship with her second husband was until he died in 1932. Except for Adeline Knapp, the "Dora" of the chapter titled "Oakland", the autobiographer appears to have never been disappointed in her other affections, the most remarkable of all being her association with Grace Ellery Channing. This lifelong friend assisted Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the critical years of the breakdown, collaborated with her in playwriting, mothered her child when needed, and went out to Pasadena where, already suffering from cancer, Gilman had moved to spend her days, near her daughter Katharine. In contrast with the entries in a diary or with personal love letters, the fashioning of one's life story is, one should bear in mind, governed by selective memory and intended to express the compulsion to make sense of one's living. In retrospect, confession is expendable in tracing the design of the identity engaged in the welfare of her fellow-citizens.

Gilman's intention to leave a record of a life committed to serving others gives shape to her autobiography throughout the last two-thirds of the narrative.

Each chapter charts the course of the autobiographer as a lecturer and a writer engaged in reformist activity. Like her predecessors, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine Beecher, Gilman lent her support to the movements and ideas that changed the world of her youth. The suffragist struggle for enfranchisement deserved her attention and interest but it never became the ultimate purpose of her crusade. The 1880's might have challenged conventional ideas about women's roles, but she felt that the traditional nineteenth-century notions about gender would not be substantially altered by suffrage. For all her contributions to the feminist cause and awareness that she was one of the manufacturers of the "women's century", she preferred to be called a humanist. It was, in her opinion, a more adequate description of the overlapping of gender issues with others like eugenics, birth control, and sexual politics that also engaged her interest and creative energies. She was the author of twenty-five books which, either in the form of essay, fiction or poetry show her allegiance with the new social engineering proposed by her friends Edward Alsworth Ross and Lester Frank Wald, as well as her sympathy towards movements like Fabianism or Edward Bellamy's utopianism. Nothing less than the broad-ranging plights of humanity would satisfy her thirst for justice and equality.

One of the most interesting features of the autobiography is the straightforwardness of Gilman's opinions about the reformist movements of her day as related to her own convictions. Her comments on suffrage are a good illustration of this:

Full of the passion for world improvement, and seeing the position of women as responsible for much, very much of our evil condition, I had been studying it for years as a problem of instant importance. *The political equality demanded by the suffragists was not enough to give real freedom.* Women whose industrial position is that of a house-servant, or who do not work at all, who are fed, clothed, and given pocket-money by men, do not reach freedom and equality by the use of the ballot. (235, my emphasis)

In the following paragraph she links these concerns with the origins of *Women and Economics* (1896), the book that brought her fame, which was written



in six weeks without the help of extensive bibliographies, and has for a central theme the relationship between the home and the market place. In the book she does not spare the woman whose complacency with societal constraints is a "priestess to the temple of consumption", a "limitless demander of things to use up" whose "influence is reactionary and injurious".<sup>10</sup> The same satiric vein, this time directed against the paralysis fostered by societal restrictions, is at the core of her best poetry, as is the case with "The Obstacle", included in the foreword by Zona Gale to *The Living*.<sup>11</sup> (xlvii-xlviii)

*Women and Economics* was followed by other theoretical books, by *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), *Women and Social Service* (1907), *The Man-Made World or, our Androcentric Culture* (1991), and *His Religion and Hers* (1923). Between 1909 and 1916, she wrote and edited alone *The Forerunner*, a regular publication in which she serialized her longer fictions and other work, all these entering *The Living* as annotations to the autobiographer's reformist action. Considered a major writer for the women's movement in her own time, her theories were, in Mary A. Hill's opinion, built around "five major forces that she thought created and perpetuated gender inequalities". The economic dependence of women on the male-structured society is diagnosed as the central force and followed closely by the division of labor along gender-based lines, the psychological dependence on men, the "institution of motherhood", and, finally, the oppressiveness of "love".<sup>12</sup> All were sanctioned by nineteenth-century American society, to the point of becoming the pieties on which rested the concept of "true womanhood", as embodied in the dutiful daughter, the loving wife and the "natural" mother. Against such concepts is most of Gilman's short fiction engendered, as well as the utopian novels, where her flights of imagination are most notably seen at work. *Herland*, the best known of these fictions, was first serialized in *The Forerunner* and published in book-form only in 1979. It has been described as a fictionalization of the collective model against the sexual liberation characteristic of the twenties but, in Ann J. Lane's expert opinion, it "is a very funny book", "an example of Gilman's playful best".<sup>13</sup>

Charlotte Perkin's Gilman's zest for life and mischievous humor has, I

am afraid, seldom been written about, and, yet, it is one of the most engaging features of *The Living*. Together with her avowed passion for beauty (17), the suppressed laughter at herself and the others is an undertow ready to emerge at the slightest provocation. For instance, when Charlotte, the budding four-year-old reformer, reproaches a visiting relative who commits the unpardonable sin of smoking by telling him: "I disgust you, Uncle Charles!" (12), or when she inscribes in her narrative the valentine she sent and the reply she got from youthful, "flustered" Fred Almy (54-55). Several incidents are told with the glee of the storyteller, as she recalls the episode behind the story "Mary Button's Principles" (117-8), or one of her London trips and Shaw's impertinent remark about her American indiscreetness, which she settles by merely acknowledging "the effect of geography on the mind." (204). Ultimately, Gilman's recurrent inscription of diary entries into her autobiographical narrative are often a source of short-handed humor, which simultaneously energize *The Living*, providing a vital version of the autobiographer's life by the sense of immediacy that thwarts the convention of classic autobiography.

Her autobiography should also be read as the testimonial of her awareness that, just as Franklin, Thoreau or her contemporary Adams are representative of their fellow-citizens and set the standards of the canon, she also represents womanhood that claims to stand on an equal footing with its male counterpart. Interestingly enough Gilman's theoretical production, her essays and lectures, and even her poetry, have a parallel in Ralph Waldo Emerson's own production, even if he never wrote an autobiography and, similarly to many women of his century, exercised his autobiographical genius in his journals. A lecturer and traveler like Emerson, Gilman wittily associates him with her practice of stoicism (51) and throughout the narrative shares a good number of his concerns, such as when, for example, quoting directly from him, she addresses the question whether the soul underlies a condition of infinite remoteness. (63) There are less explicit instances but that, nevertheless, evoke Emerson, as in "Similar Cases", a poem about natural evolution, also chosen by Zona Gale to illustrate the range of Gilman's achievement in her foreword to *The Living*.<sup>14</sup> (xlviii-li)

Are we faced with the appropriation of the male voice, which the

feminist critique saw as a tentative overcoming of the feeling of "otherness" in a culture where the universal is necessarily masculine? <sup>15</sup> I hardly think so. After the publication of *Women and Economics*, Gilman emerges as the women's movement leader who is involved in several social gospels of her time, among others, positive Darwinism, socialism, populism and progressivism. As Larry Ceplair argues, "there is no other corpus of fin-de-siècle theorizing in the United States in which so many concepts intertwine".<sup>16</sup> In view of this, it is obvious that the record of her intellectual achievement was ensured by the books that earned her international reputation. Those books, however, leave out the sense of a life authenticated by the autobiographical act as the "virtual space" where the horizons of the autobiographer and the reader meet.<sup>17</sup> Telling her story, Gilman expects to be judged as a woman whose message is addressed to others who, like her, will be striving to make sense of their living. Her message was not intended for the twenties when self-gratification and sexual liberation had replaced the more politically and socially oriented concerns of the "new woman". Her never-failing intuition anticipated, however, the future generations when women like Adrienne Rich would "re-vise" the traditional cartography of male culture, claiming, in their own terms, the right to full citizenship.<sup>18</sup> The re-vision of liberty and equality were at the heart of *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. So was the pursuit of happiness that drove the autobiographer to the close of a narrative ending on a note of attunement to what she praised most in her own humanity.

The "plot" of Gilman's autobiography is woven around her perception that a woman's approach would deal with vital questions of the turn-of-the-century America in a thoroughly innovative way. A similar belief underlies Mary Hunter Austin's *Earth Horizon: An Autobiography* published three years before *The Living*, when the author was sixty-four years old.<sup>19</sup> Born in 1868, the story of her life reads mostly as an illustration of the basic tenets on which the picture of the "new woman" was being built. As an activist, she worked for social change, not only for the numerous feminist causes of her time, but also for the rights of marginal cultures, particularly the Indian, which she elected as an

aboriginal model for her own American culture. Together with her acknowledged efforts at changing conventional university curricula, her concern with environmental problems and desert ecology anticipate contemporary interest in such subjects. In her own time, she was acknowledged and named Associate in Native American Literature by the School of American Research and invited to give a series of public lectures on drama at the Folk Theatre, University of California, and at the Yale Department of Drama. She also organized the Indian Arts Fund in 1925 and served as president of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society in 1930, a deserved tribute to her active support of the Southwest cultural heritage. El Santuario of Chimayo, with its invaluable shrine and treasures, was bought by her and presented to New Mexico as we know from her autobiography. (359, Illustration 260)

Mary Austin brings her role as social historian both to her fiction and essays of cultural criticism, as Gilman did. Both autobiographers were in the forefront of the cultural movements of their time and both fashioned their writings after their own experience of life. Besides the reformist zeal so distinctive of the path taken up by the "new woman", their personal lives show curious similarities, even if one is a New England cultural offspring and the other has its roots in the immigrant culture of the Midwest. Their childhood was, however, marked by the loss of their respective fathers, Austin's father, captain George Hunter [at whose funeral a stoutish man with a wooden leg wept Whitman's line "Captain, my captain!" (30)] having died when she was ten years old, thus becoming an idealized figure in her memory. The sense of loss would be worsened by the death of Jennie, a beloved younger sister who succumbed to diphtheria after nursing Mary, shortly after their father passed away. Much in the same fashion as Gilman's mother, Susanna Savilla (Graham) Hunter appeared to have been ill-equipped to give her child the craved for affection and care. Contradictory feelings about the respective mothers characterize both autobiographers, their conflicting view barely compensated for by the excuse that as paragons of "true womanhood" they were filling the traditional societal roles the daughters were breaking away from. The mother is thus envisaged as the source of social restriction, while the father, even when

absent, nurtures the daughter's intellectual curiosity, the childhood memories being split along the masculine and feminine models. Austin and Gilman share this recurrent pattern in woman's autobiography, which may, for instance, be traced down to Margaret Fuller's autobiographical sketch of the mid-nineteenth century and re-emerges in Adrienne Rich's *Your Native Land, Your Life* at the close of the twentieth.

Gilman's indebtedness to the formative years is somehow paralleled in Austin's "the Thoughts of Youth Are Long, Long Thoughts", which bring into *Earth Horizon* detailed reminiscences of small-town life in the Midwest, of Sunday school and the College years at Carlinville, Illinois. Both autobiographers were, however, similarly affected in a fundamental way when they almost "blindly" moved to the West, their difference in cultural background notwithstanding.<sup>20</sup> Once in California or, perhaps, on their way to Pasadena, in Gilman's case, or to Tejon, in Austin's, they were faced with the revelation of their deepest cravings and of inner resources they appeared to have been unaware of, before the westward trip. Their self-consciousness about what they felt to be their calling did not make them easy partners in terms of conventional contracts. Even Gilman's successful second marriage did not appease her urge to redefine her status as a woman whose sense of duty was primarily engaged in the cause of humanity. Identically, there was no compromising for Austin, when she had to choose between a disappointing marriage and what she felt to be the fulfillment of her true vocation as a woman and an artist. But, throughout her autobiographical narrative, Mary Austin repeatedly complains about emotional deprivation and serious illness, the divorce from Stafford Wallace Austin and the abandonment of Ruth, their retarded child, apparently exacting from her as heavy a price as the separation from Katharine did from Gilman.

The sense of family had been a strong one in the Hunters and it had even determined the trip to the extreme Southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, where Austin's elder brother, Jim, had gone to try his fortune, being afterwards joined by the rest of the family. Stronger than any other consideration is, however, Austin's sense of the unfairness towards woman in a male-

oriented society, which bears the imprint of her own experience. In a passage about the difficulties of the family after the death of George Hunter, the autobiographer intertwines the affection she feels for her mother with the outrage at the societal neglect caused by widowhood:

At that time throughout America, the *status of Wife and Mother*, always spoken of in capitals, was sentimentally precious, a status of being treasured and apart. There was on all hands a general *social conspiracy* to keep the married woman's sense of her preciousness intact. *No matter how poorly, through incompetence, neglect, or misfortune, her husband 'protected' her*, she was allowed the airs and graces of the woman apart; she could keep it up in the face of the most flagrant violations of the fact. Then the blow fell and the treasured Wife became the poor Widow, the object of family bounty, not infrequently grudging, the grateful recipient of left-overs, the half menial helper in the households of women whose husbands had simply not died. (91-92, my emphasis.)

A similar outrage at women's loss of status in the absence of the husband emerges from Gilman's account of the family difficulties after the desertion of Frederick Beecher Perkins. In Austin, the reminiscence obviously allies her resentment against the unfairness of social treatment with the "incompetence, neglect or misfortune" she, in occasional references, blames her husband for. Speaking of her efforts to save the marriage she claims: "few have sacrificed more to the fulfillment of the pattern of man and woman working together for a converging point on the Earth Horizon." (274) Austin's frustration with marriage emerges in some of her fiction, most revealingly in "Frustrate" (1912), a story that like Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" is famous for its autobiographical overtones.

The "pattern" and the "Earth Horizon" of the above quotation are pervading images in Austin's autobiography. In a sense, they also encapsulate the difference between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Hunter Austin. For all the parallels in their personal lives and involvement in similar causes, they were very different women and so were the stories each one of them had to tell. The very titles of the two autobiographies bespeak such a difference. Gilman's focus on life as process is replaced in Austin by the title borrowed from an Indian

song about the search of the "inquiring soul" for the authentic self. Authenticity is in Mary Austin assumedly feminine, and it simultaneously entails aesthetics and a mystical quest. The quest draws the story of a life to its conclusion, epitomizing the achievement of the autobiographer as a celebration of the Earth Horizon. First announced in her Introduction to the autobiography, the pattern unfolds along the five books that trace its design: "It has always been a profound realization of my life that there was *a pattern* under it, which, though not always realizable when it occurred, explained and extenuated, in the end saved me from irreparable disaster" (vii, my emphasis). It adumbrates Austin's evocation of her family history, "The Saga of Polly McAdams", establishing the matrilineal heritage that on and off surfaces in the narrative as "the ancestral rootage", which legitimates the autobiographer's sense of her value as a woman. The first book also provides the background against which the events of the second, "The Thoughts of Youth Are Long, Long Thoughts", are to be appraised, small-town culture replacing the pristine culture of the Midwest.

Renewal is brought about in the third book, "El Camino Real", which will lead Mary Austin in the direction of her unknown cravings. Framed across the vectors announced in the Introduction, "the King's Highway" affords the opportunity to retrieve the McAdamses pattern, together with the revelation of spiritual wholeness and creative power:

Long before that time [the end of her youth] it was clear that I would write imaginatively, not only of people, but of the scene, the totality which is called Nature, and that I would give myself intransigently to the quality of experience called Folk, and the frame of behavior known as Mystical. (vii)

Going westward and travelling along unfamiliar trails, Mary Austin did turn a new page in the literary history of the American West. No longer will it be the stage for exclusive ballads about solitary heroes, after the eye of this woman roamed about its landscape and its peoples.<sup>21</sup> Austin's "scene" is extraneous to "the Territory ahead" where Huckleberry Finn fled to escape being "sivilized". Neither is it the province of small-town "local color", as in Bret Hart's tales, or the mythical extension about which Lawrence rhapsodizes so charmingly. It is, instead, populated by a diversity of people, among which the offspring of

immigrant culture learned to be at home and none more so than the Indians, who taught her how “to live off a land upon which more sophisticated races would starve, and how the land itself [had] instructed them.” (198) Most relevantly, perhaps, the “aboriginal culture” offered a fully integrated philosophy of life that allowed Austin to closely weave aesthetics with “the frame of behavior known as Mystical”. In *American Rhythm* (1923, 1930), she develops her poetics, dismissing intellectual life as a source of creative imagination, which she links to experience, and experience to the Indian sense of cosmological integration. Fundamentally, Austin aligns poetry with rhythm and rhythm with life in the inaugural section of her essay, announcing that “the major rhythms of the human organism are given by the blood and the breath”. A rhetorical question continues the argument: “What is the familiar trochee but the *lub-dub*, *lub-dub* of the heart, what the hurrying of the syllable in the iambus but the inhibition of the blood by the smaller vessels?” 22

The full implications of Austin’s theory of creative art are perhaps better appraised in *Earth Horizon*, a narrative that fastens the “organic pulsation” of the autobiographer to her intuitive response to a governing pattern – “in no sense a made-up pattern, but one that arose [...] out of a deeper self [...]”. (viii) Similarly, the autobiographer’s self unfolds along the five books (not chapters) where she creates the story of her life. Her role as an author is foregrounded in the predominantly third person narration in the first four books, or in the experimentation with point of view, as the dissociated “I-Mary” and “Mary-by-herself” alternate, in the narrative, with the pronominal shifts into the second and the first persons. As representations of the conflicting identity, and also of the different roles played in public and private life, the shifts bridge the distance to the mature first person narrator of book five, the authoritative autobiographer. An analogous mark of authority surfaces in the Introduction where Austin did not shy away from claiming “an accomplished destiny”. (viii) In this fashion and in explicit transgression of the boundaries of canonical autobiography, is the story of her life arranged into the pattern which, at once, is a recurring theme and a governing structure: 23



What has seemed important to me is to keep to what I began, the explication of the *inherited pattern of an individual life*, and to omit nothing that pertains to that essentiality. I have tried to account for the feeling of that pattern latent in my consciousness, for *the inherent tendencies* that produced it, *the environmental influences* which shaped it. I have given as succinct an account as possible of the contacts which helped or hindered, and dwelt, I hope not too insistently, on the rewards or the lack of them. It matters very little where, in a scale of achievement, I have arrived, or by what incidents. The totality of my experiences is that I have been faithful to the pattern, and it has not disappointed me. (ix, my emphasis)

With Austin's concluding words in mind, the prominence given in the last books of *Earth Horizon* to two nature-essays becomes particularly significant. Both essays are associated with important periods in Austin's achievement as a writer and as a person, their evocation bringing into focus the aesthetics and mystical concerns to which her life is moored. Personal incidents – marriage and disappointment in the relationship, the acquaintance with social reformers, business people and artists, the affection for friends and advisors or the grief about the retarded daughter and the loss of her own mother – are framed, in book four, by the leitmotifs that establish the recurring pattern. Its title is borrowed from *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), Austin's first book, upon which her literary reputation rests to this day. The experience of the landscape, the observations about the peoples, and the acknowledgement of the artist's calling interweave in a complex cluster of meanings that portray the Californian years as a period of inner exploration. *The Land of Journeys' Ending* (1924), a "monument to [Austin's] delight in the Southwest", is again revealing as a title to this last chapter of a life.<sup>24</sup> It was published after years of travelling between the West and the East, the United States and Europe, and occasional sojourns in the artists's colonies of Carmel, Greenwich Village and London. Rounding up the story of her life by reference to these nature essays shows, in my opinion, how intent the autobiographer also was on adjusting "environmental influences" to the rhythm of her personal experience.

The Midwestern rhythm to which "The Saga of Polly McAdams" inaugurates the narrative was incisive in endowing Mary Austin with the sense that

“the happenings of the hearth, as against what happens on the battlefield and in the market-place” were determinant and caused “a culture to eventuate” (15). On her westward route, while being true to the ancestor’s legacy, she was also accommodating the “indigenous rhythm” that as an “environmental influence” was explored in the nature essays as well as in two different collections of stories, *The Arrow-Maker* (1911) and *One-Smoke Stories* (1934). Of the people that provided the material for the stories and for her changed sense of rhythm, she wrote:

All this time there was an American race singing in tune with the beloved environment, to the measures of life-sustaining gestures, taking the material of their songs out of the common human occasions, out of the democratic experience and the profound desire of man to assimilate himself to the Allness as it is displayed to him in all the peacock splendor of the American continent.<sup>25</sup>

The appreciation of Indian culture and its influence on the poetics developed in *The American Rhythm* combines in Austin with the interest in all the cultures of the West, namely in the stories of the Southwest’s Spanish history and the folk stories she heard when pursuing her Western trails. These trails have been mapped in two other short-fiction collections, *The Basket Woman* (1909) and *Lost Borders* (1909), in children’s books, novels and poetry, which have become a testimonial to the dialogue across cultures that is Mary Austin’s enduring legacy.

The power of Austin’s visual imagination and the concern with the minutest details earned her the reputation of photographic precision that critics have extolled in her literary achievement and none more significantly than her collaborator in *Taos Pueblo* (1930), the photographer Ansel Adams, who provided the photos for the nature-essay on this Indian settlement of New Mexico. Adams admired Mary Austin for her extraordinary intellectual and spiritual power, prophesying she would be famous because of her perception of the complex matrix of American culture. <sup>26</sup> No other autobiography of the period indeed grasps like *Earth Horizon* the complex matrix, which it incorporates into the pattern of the individual life in “search of the Sacred Middle from which all horizons are equidistant”. (274) Equidistance, however,

presupposes the invitation of "environmental influences" and of "peopled landscapes" into the canonical American cultural legacy. Polly McAdams and the Indian Song are mere symbols in a multitude of other symbols by which a life is fashioned across intercultural territories. A similar diffusion and contradictory precision results from the dissociation of the modernist self who surfaces in the narrative in as many impersonations as those allowed in the deferral of stabilized subjectivity. Throughout the five books, such dissociation works out the hidden pattern of a life (re)invented in the act of narration transgressing generic codes. Halfway between autobiography and storytelling, Austin's *Earth Horizon* anticipates the autobiografictions that pull contemporary stories of a life into the lost borders of both genres.

The dismissal of autobiographical narrative as a mirror of events that are true to life has gone hand in hand with the shifts suffered by the autobiographical canon that initially conformed to the values of the dominant white culture and the privileged masculine gender. Questions of identity, no longer the exclusive domain of canonical pieties and cultural homogenization, have acceded, in the meantime, to the realities of gender, class, sexuality, racial and ethnic difference, thereby responding to the variety that characterizes the American scene. As illustrated by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Hunter Austin, feminine identity is a large umbrella that cuts across the dividing line between the discrete cultures that come into focus in the subsequent essays. By playing Mary Austin against Charlotte Gilman, I aimed at highlighting the differences that already come up in the references each makes about the other in their respective autobiographies, and, also, at using their stories as a symbolic embryo of diversity within a given culture. In my concluding remarks I, furthermore, sustain that, the differentiation along gender, class, sexuality, racial and ethnic lines notwithstanding, the contemporary American reality is very fluid and that such allegiances should not obfuscate the high price put on individual endeavor. It plays a central role in Gilman's *Living* as well as in Austin's *Earth Horizon*, both lives showing how the alternative culture of women emulated canonical autobiography *with a difference* almost a century ago. As relevantly, however, *Earth Horizon*, also provides the blueprint for the dialogue

across cultures, which ushers hybridization onto the American scene. Long before the concern with borders entered the mainstream of the contemporary posthistorical moment, it was voiced in the feminine and brought individual endeavor to the center of cross-cultural experience.

## Notes

- 1 An excellent discussion of the three constitutive elements is presented in James Olney, "Autos · Bios · Graphein: The Study of Autobiographical Literature," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77: 113-123. A complementary and equally relevant approach is offered in Sidonie Smith's "Autobiography Criticism and the Problematics of Gender," *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, 3-19.
- 2 In "Construing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth-telling in Women's autobiographies," *Women and Autobiography*, 37, 45.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 34-35.
- 4 In "The Proper Study: Autobiographies in American Studies" (1977), Robert E. Sayre claims that autobiographies in their bewildering variety recreate American diversity and vie with Whitman's poem as "the true Song of Myself. And Ourselves". This essay was reprinted in *The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Albert Stone who, in his "Introduction", aligns autobiography with storytelling (Respectively, pp. 11 and 19).
- 5 Charlotte Ann Perkins Stetson Gilman was known by three surnames during different periods in her lifetime. Nowadays she is most commonly mentioned by her last married name, which I use throughout my essay, except when considering events in chronological order. Then I follow the actual order of her changing names to which she humorously refers to in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*: "It would have saved trouble had I remained Perkins from the first, this changing of women's names is a nuisance we are now happily outgrowing" (284). Henceforth mentioned as *The Living*. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.
- 6 See, for instance, Elizabeth Winston's conclusion to her comments on Gilman: "The self-image Gilman projects in the autobiography is an ambiguous one. At times she impresses this reader as a confident teacher and committed exponent of feminist ideas. At others, she comes across as an emotionally damaged, guilt-ridden woman, who seeks pardon for her many failures. These conflicting images reflect Gilman's own changing views of herself. Corresponding to these shifts in self-estimation are changes in her relationship with the audience. She moves back and forth from an authoritative to a defensive

- position". Cf. "The Autobiographer and Her Readers: From Apology to Affirmation.", *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, 102.
- 7 In "Introduction" to *The Living*, Ann J. Lane makes use of the word "bifurcation" to divide Gilman's book into two parts. "The first part", she goes on, "describes the woman's life, the unhappy and suffocating childhood, the emotional collapse, the inability to mother, the failed marriage, the scarred woman. In the second narrative, the triumphant, successful, competent author/lecturer emerges, the "manly" woman, appropriating the prerogatives, privileges, and successes of male selfhood." (xxii)
- 8 In *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*, 5. It is also Ceplair, the editor of the *Reader*, who, after pointing out the relevance of Gilman's autobiography for a thorough understanding of her life and work, goes on to describe it as a "dreary travelogue" .(5)
- 9 For a more elaborate discussion of this question, see Teresa F. A. Alves, "Imprisonment and Madness: the Patterns of the Entrapped Self", *Anglo-Saxónica*: 189-90.
- 10 In. Ceplair, ed., Op. Cit., 105.
- 11 Together with a couple of letters, two poems, "Similar Cases" and "The Obstacle" were chosen by Gale to round up the introductory picture she drew of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They are written in the best of the autobiographer's poetic vein and expressively illustrate Gale's opinion that most of Gilman's work is "of and for today". A quatrain entitled "The Front Wave", also included in the foreword, synthesizes the spirit of youth and mirth that is Charlotte at her best: The little front wave ran up on the sand/ and frothed there, highly elated,/ "I am the tide!", said the little front wave,/ "The waves before me are dated!" (xlv). As suggested by this quatrain, it appears to me that, after all and against Charles Walter Stetson's "better" judgement, Gilman did read Walt Whitman, reversing the pathos of "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" by her characteristic epigrammatic turn.
- 12 Cf. "Introduction" to *A Journey from within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897-1900*, 19-21.
- 13 In "Introduction," *Herland*, v.
- 14 As, for example, stated in Emerson's epigraph to his famous booklet, *Nature* (1836) that reads: "A subtle chain of countless rings/ The next unto the farthest brings;/ The eye reads omens where it goes,/ And speaks all languages the rose; / And, striving to be man, the worm/ Mounts through all the spires of form."
- 15 On the sense of "otherness" peculiar to the woman autobiographer see Shari Benstock's "The Female Self Engendered. Autobiographical Writing and Theories of Selfhood", *Women and Autobiography*, 3-13, most relevantly 8-9; and on the appropriation of the male voice see Sidonie Smith's , Op.Cit note 2, 46.

- 16 Op. Cit, ix.
- 17 See Janet Varner Gunn's development of this question in "the Autobiographical Situation", *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience*, 3-28, particularly, 20-21.
- 18 As expressed by Adrienne Rich in her much quoted "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, 33-40.
- 19 Henceforth mentioned as *Earth Horizon*. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.
- 20 Gilman's first separation from Charles Walter Stetson and her baby-daughter strikes me as an almost blind impulse towards achieving survival, whereas at the close of the second book of her autobiography, Austin's reservation in accompanying her family is manifested. But by the end of the first chapter of "El Camino Real", Austin recalls that Mary "was consumed with interest as with enchantment [...] spellbound in an effort not to miss any animal behavior, any birdmarking, any weather signal, any signature of tree or flower." (194-5) Her brother's tentative homesteading in Southern California is explained by the lack of opportunities in Central Illinois, by then a definitely settled territory, no longer part of Turner's "frontier".
- 21 On women's private responses to the American frontier and on the record of women's involvement with the West, see the excellent analysis of Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. It is a particularly interesting introduction to Mary Austin's aesthetics of the West since the woman critic focuses her subject "on the imagery through which the landscape is rendered and assimilated into meaning". (xi-xii)
- 22 *The American Rhythm*, 4. Decades before Charles Olson's experimental theories about "projective verse" or Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac's transformations of poetic rhythm after the patterns explored by the Harlem Renaissance poets, Mary Austin claimed that the true American rhythm was indigenous, had been first perceived by the Amerindians, and had emerged in Whitman who, before any other American poet, composed his song on the road. (17)
- 23 The pattern is so tightly woven that Melody Graulich opens her excellent remarks, in the "Afterword" to the 1991 edition of *Earth Horizon*, with a quotation of Austin's claim that "she wanted to write books you could walk around in". Cf. Austin, 73; Graulich, 373. The same sort of argument is formulated by Esther F. Lanigan, when, writing about Austin's autobiography, she calls it an invention of life in literary form. Cf. *A Mary Austin Reader*, 244.
- 24 Quoted in *A Mary Austin Reader*, 205.
- 25 *The American Rhythm*, 18.
- 26 Cf. Melody Graulich, ed., *Exploring Lost Borders. Critical Essays on Mary Austin*, xi.

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# **Questions of a Class in Contemporary American Indian Women's Writing**

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## Questions of a Class in Contemporary American Indian Women's Writing

"What have not been adequately addressed are the many differences between the People and ourselves, meaning Native writers, and these *are* issues of class."

Gloria Bird

Gloria Bird's comment calls attention to the importance of the matter of social class to American Indian writers, as well as to the relative lack of attention that issues of class have received thus far in the critical response to American Indian writing. *Here First*, the recently published collection of auto-biographical essays by Native writers in which Bird's remark appears, provides significant evidence of the writers' consciousness of the ways in which their lives – and their works – have been shaped, in complicated ways, by the dynamics of social class structures in the United States. In many ways, the essays in *Here First* constitute a call for a new perspective on questions of identity, a perspective that recognizes that social class has been at least as important a source of common experiences for modern Indian people as either racial or tribal determinants.

It is significant that many of the writers in this collection identify themselves as being of mixed blood, often with European as well as Native ancestry. But it is also significant that the absence of a single tribal history and tradition, once perhaps taken as a marker of inauthenticity, is acknowledged by these contemporary writers as part of the ordinary condition of many Indian people, who live in what Gerald Vizenor has called the "postindian" present. Louis Owens, for example, in describing his sense of his own personal and family history, argues that the liminality of the mixed-blood person is not a sign of incomplete or inauthentic identity but, to the contrary, the crucial determinant of a fully-rooted, if complex and sometimes unsettling, identity:

I have learned to inhabit a hybrid, unpapered Choctaw-Cherokee-Welsh-Irish-Cajun-mixed space in between. I conceive of myself today not as

“Indian,” but as a mixed-blood, a person of complex roots and histories. Along with my parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, I am the product of liminal space, the result of union between desperate individuals on the edges of dispossessed cultures and the marginalized spawn of invaders. A liminal existence and a tension in the blood must be the inevitable result of such crossing. How could it be otherwise? But tension can be a source of creative power – as such brilliant writers as Gerald Vizenor and Leslie Silko have taught me. (*Here First*, 269)

Owens’s arrival at this sense of his postindian, mixed-blood identity is the result, he explains, of his personal history of changing one idea of what it meant to be Indian for another as he matured, testing each idea against his own experiences. Importantly, the constants in these shifting perceptions of himself and his family were social rather than racial: “Listening to my mother’s stories about Oklahoma, about brutally hard lives and dreams that cut across the fabric of every experience, I thought that was Indian.” (*Here First*, 269).

Owens, like other writers in the collection (including Gloria Bird, whose essay is the source of the epigraph to this essay), speaks of the tensions and conflicts that have accompanied his own movement away from the class determinants that defined the lives of his extended family. In many of these essays, the writers remark on the effects of education on their relationships to their families and to their sense of origins and roots. Owens notes that he was only the second person in his extended family to graduate from high school and the only one to graduate from college; as a result, “for almost twenty years I have lived in a world incalculably different from that of everyone else in my family” (*Here First*, 268-69). Kimberly Blaeser offers a similar, although more complex, assessment of the effects of her own experience of education. Acknowledging that education has helped her to rewrite her family’s “painful story” of struggle and saved her “from repeating a scenario of young motherhood, abuse, poverty, and alcoholism,” she also acknowledges the pain that comes from her own story of upward mobility through education:

It seems frighteningly symbolic to me that one of the first things Government boarding schools did when Indian children arrived was cut their hair.

Education has always been for me a dangerous cutting away. The academic perspective implies a distance, a distance that cannot be fully retraced. Looking back across that distance, I feel lonesome. (*Here First*, 85)

Gloria Bird explicitly confronts the relationship between the privileging effects of education and questions of identity:

I have been educated in a system that is designed to deny us on many levels; but as a participant in that system, which has earned me a 'site of privilege' from which to speak, however marginally, what have I become? And if the answer to that question remains continually out of reach, it does not keep me from asking of myself . . . , is this an act of liberation or the illusion of liberation? (*Here First*, p. 72)

As all of these writers indicate, the education that enables their writing also becomes – because it is at least *taken* to be a marker of class change – a constituent part of a sense of identity that can be both anxious and fragile.

Of all the essays in the collection, Betty Louise Bell's "Burying Paper" offers the most extended reflection on the sometimes contradictory desires and allegiances that come from a consciousness of class differences. Bell also, like Owens, Bird, and others, acknowledges that her writing has been made possible by her own transgression of class boundaries as well as by her consciousness of the tensions and anxieties that such transgression brings. As a child, Bell notes, her desire to escape the deprivations of her family life led her to literature:

In a house where both parents were semiliterate, where I read and wrote letters for relatives who could not read or write, I knew no greater ambition than to read. And in the books I read, there were *real* families: families free of lasting poverty, alcoholism, and violence. Their houses were homes, their love clear and clean, their survival finally certain. (*Here First*, p. 31)

At the same time, Bell came to understand the potential for betrayal in her attraction to the lives she read about and the potential for exchanging the role she had inherited for a role that was purely performative:

Once, sitting at the counter of a doughnut shop with my mother . . . , the manager of a local store leaned toward us and said to my mother, "Your

daughter reminds me of Jackie Kennedy.” Of course, I looked nothing like the young wife of the president, the compliment was meant for my mother: she had raised a child outside of her class and culture, a child with manners and affectations more ambitious than her employer’s children. My mother beamed on the manager and said, “She always wanted more.” (*Here First*, 22-23)

Becoming a writer was, for Bell, the means of escaping all the inherited determinants of her life: “I could imagine nothing that would take me faster and farther down roads closed to women, Indians, and the poor” (*Here First*, 39).

The reflections of these writers on the importance of class-consciousness to the shaping of their identities and their careers may not seem especially new; there is much that has the ring of the familiar about their focus on the particular conjunction of shame and desire that arises out of poverty and deprivation. What is new, I want to argue, is the emphasis on the centrality of class issues to an understanding of modern *Indian* identities, which have most often been treated as a function largely of race and/or specific tribal identity, particularly as those identities are represented in contemporary writing. Discussions of class have seldom been part of the critical response to Native writing. (In a recently published anthology entitled *Literature, Class, and Culture*, for example, Paula Gunn Allen’s poem “Womanwork” is the only entry by a Native writer, out of a total of one hundred and forty-one). I also want to emphasize the prominence of the voices of women in these discussions. Betty Louise Bell’s conflation of “women, Indians, and the poor” is suggestive, since it points to a way of understanding the work of Indian writers, especially women writers, that has not claimed sufficient attention so far. In the work of many of the women writers, one can find confirmation of Carolyn Steedman’s assertion that “class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made.” (Steedman, 7).

Bell’s own novel, *Faces in the Moon*, is perhaps the most extended and explicit examination to date of the relevance of class to considerations of Indian identity. The young mixedblood protagonist of the novel, Lucie, is tutored by her mother and aunt, both of them poor and semiliterate, in the ways of envy,

repression, and abjection. Lucie's earliest memories are of listening silently to her mother and aunt as they tell endless stories, not about their Cherokee history but about their history as desperately poor women looking for ways to survive and to claim respectability. Their history includes instances of sexual abuse, early and late, and Lucie herself is sexually abused by one of her mother's boyfriends. The mother, Gracie, speaks with pride of her fullblood Cherokee mother (who actually had some white blood), but in speaking of her own generation or her daughter's, she speaks only of Indian women, not Cherokee women. In her growing-up, Lucie is caught between her intense desire to distance herself from her mother's life and history and her visceral awareness that the stories of her mother's consistently painful life are inextricable from her own sense of who she is – as confused as that sense may be.

For Lucie, then, the definition of Indianness that she acquires from her mother has very little to do with tribal identity or tribal history or even with race; it has much more to do with class markers: poverty, instability, marginal employment (Gracie is a school cafeteria worker), marginal literacy, and a resentment of middle-class privilege that is combined with a desire to imitate the habits of the middle class – Gracie's desire manifesting itself in plastic-covered carpets and a set of matching living-room furniture. The "real" Cherokee women belong to the past, to the time before poverty, abuse, and bad jobs. In order to come to a comfortable sense of her own identity, Lucie must therefore find a way to define and accept her Indianness without replicating her mother's life and sensibility. As a corollary, Lucie must find a way to embrace a different life and different set of values without refusing to embrace the woman who is her mother.

The ending of the novel does not fully resolve the problems it has set for its protagonist. Lucie ends by declaring herself an Indian woman, but she also ends by destroying her mother's (badly) written efforts to record her own version of her life history – her attempt to find a way to document and make public both the unfairness of things and her own small victories. Interestingly, the novel leaves Lucie in a hall of records, searching for the written documentation of the history of her grandparents and great-grandparents,

having just burned the written record of her mother's life. Bell's closure then might be seen as an honest description of a dishonest act, as Lucie chooses to repress the public evidence of that part of her own history that she can neither embrace nor erase from her consciousness. As someone who has moved into the middle class through education, Lucie is seemingly empowered to choose which records will remain and which will be destroyed and thus to help determine the public shape of "Indian" history. Her act of excision, however, does not free her from her own private, and anxious, awareness of the inventedness of her identity and its dependence on the suppression of a secret history. As the older Lucie acknowledges, "I have lived in desire these four decades and practiced invention for just as long, but no matter how great my desire to run away from home, to live in a place and history free from secrets, I always take up my position at the table, in the early morning hours, and listen for those women's voices." (*Faces in the Moon*, 5). Bell thus leaves her protagonist in the position that is suggested by Gloria Bird's comment in the epigraph to this essay, distanced – because of class – from "the People" who are her family and her history, yet fully aware of how much of the distancing is a matter of performance and invention. At the end of this novel, Lucie's identity is far from settled and stable.

Bell's presentation of her female protagonist offers an interesting contrast to the ways in which Indian women characters have been represented in the work of some contemporary male writers. In the work of male writers, the female characters often stand as corrective contrasts to the male characters, or as instructive models – as stronger, more confident Indians. This contrast is perhaps most clear in the work of Sherman Alexie, whose women characters are often recognized as the "warriors" that the men aspire to be, with little success. Alexie's warrior-women are secure in their strengths, capable of full independence, and canny enough to know how to shape good lives for themselves, often in spite of the demands of men. These strong women are ever-present in Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a collection of stories that is, at least in part, about the debilitations of reservation poverty and dysfunction. While the male characters struggle in convincing ways



with the enervating effects of the self-loathing that reservation life can generate, and while Alexie makes a powerful and affecting case for recognizing the long history of racist manipulation that has produced the local catastrophes of reservation life, the women characters of his book repeatedly seem able to transcend the pressures that weigh down the male characters. They are strong, but, it finally seems, only through a kind of magical exemption.

There are other examples. In James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, the protagonist wanders aimlessly through his young manhood, searching for a model of Indian masculinity that will give him direction and a clear sense of identity, while his mother and grandmother remain steadily at home – literally and figuratively – providing a female version of continuity and stability that seems unavailable to the men of the family. Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* is an extended paean to the strength and adaptability of women. While his male protagonist muddles through to a lonely middle age, passive and indecisive, the women who surround him make plans, raise families, go to school, establish careers, and live their Indianness in various ways, all without the help of men. (One of his female characters even manages, through King's hilariously comic trickery, to conceive a child without the help of a man.) King connects the resilience of the women characters to the female figures of traditional creation/origin stories – First Woman, Thought Woman, Changing Woman, Old Woman. These traditional figures are essentially reincarnated in King's contemporary women, who seem almost impervious to the constraints of race and class, while his male characters can be undone by them. Welch's *Fools Crow* also establishes a connection between the women of the novel's present (and future) and the powerful female of tradition. The novel ends with a vision of the future that is provided by Feather Woman, a figure out of one of the foundational Blackfeet stories; it is her vision that gives the Blackfeet of the novel a way of imagining their future in a massively changed world. Her story – which is about adaptability and resilience – essentially replaces the stories that have been used to undergird the male-centered warrior society of the pre-reservation Blackfeet. The novel thus predicts a future in which the story of the resilient female re-emerges as the touchstone for Blackfeet endurance and survival.

These representations of women surely have their own political usefulness, and they occur in works that are uniformly powerful (and, in King's case, deliciously funny). The strength of these fictional women is clearly offered by the writers as a tribute to the strengths of real Indian women and a commentary on changing patterns within Indian communities. The pattern of representation, though, is suggestive: these women, whose strength and secure identities seem a natural function of their gender, stand in contrast to many of the female characters created by Native women writers – like Bell's Lucie – who do not so easily transcend the complex material and psychological realities of their lives, including the realities that constitute social class.

Class issues are, of course, notoriously difficult to separate out from other issues, and that may be especially the case in the United States. As Patrick Brantlinger notes in his discussion of the rise of cultural studies, "issues of class [in the U.S.] are complicated by American 'exceptionalism' and by slavery, racism, and ethnic divisions" (Brantlinger, 113). Brantlinger's brief discussion of academic treatments of class in America focuses exclusively on the work of a few labor historians. It is the case that approaches to class issues in the U.S. are generally predicated – following Marx – on the distinction between a working class and an amorphous middle class. The categories of analysis that ordinarily come into play in discussions of class are thus not relevant to Indian life before white contact or to the reservation period, except as those categories were imposed, from a distance, by white observers, whose characterizations of Indian people were often suffused with the language of class. The remarks of one observer, Lavinia Honeyman Porter, who crossed the Overland Trail in 1860, are representative of many such commentaries. Porter found that "the Indian brave abhors any work, and they looked on the white man with scorn and derision whenever they performed any duties to relieve the labors of their wives." The Indian women who were married to white traders were equally repellent to Porter:

To my point of view they were the most repulsive-looking creatures. I could see neither beauty, grace, nor intelligence in their stolid appearance. Their manners and habits were disgusting and offensive. The women thus bought

and sold were no truer to their masters than their more civilized sisters of the same caste in other countries, and were ever ready to decamp with any soldier or other man who offered sufficient lures by way of beads, blankets, or other gaudy paraphernalia. (Ridge, 251, 335)

Porter is quick to judge the Indian men by the amount of work they do, or don't do, and the Indian women by standards of taste and sexual comportment. She seems not to be disturbed at all by the interracial marriages she observes, while the "caste" markers she finds everywhere among the Indians are "disgusting." Porter's analysis, like those of many of her contemporaries, applies categories that are strikingly myopic and inappropriate to lives for which such categories are a disturbingly bad fit.

Appropriately, class becomes an issue for Indian writers and commentators when Indian communities (and Indian families) become less distant from white (or non-Indian) communities, less homogeneous, less defined by tribal affiliations or land-based social structures. For contemporary Indian writers, who are generally addressing the conditions of Native life in the present or the very recent past, one of the disturbing aspects of the movement away from reservations and rural communities into the white-dominated American mainstream is the inevitable encounter with firmly-entrenched notions of social class, such as those that Lavinia Porter brought with her on her journey west. For Native women writers, especially, the class position that is especially entrenched and can be especially disturbing is the one that conflates, in Bell's words, "Indians, women, and the poor."

Louise Erdrich's fictional chronicles of several generations of Chippewa families are especially attentive to the introduction of a class consciousness among her characters – and to its shaping and often damaging effects. That process is perhaps most clearly seen in the fraught relationship between two of her characters, Pauline Puyat and Marie Lazarre, a relationship that develops over the course of two novels, *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* (while *Love Medicine* was written first, the events of *Tracks* are chronologically prior to those of *Love Medicine*). *Tracks* traces, among other things, the course of events that leads Pauline Puyat to reject her mixed-blood identity and her Chippewa community

and enter a convent, taking on the name of Sister Leopolda with her vows. Pauline's complex psychological history is reflected, in small, in the youthful struggles of her illegitimate daughter, Marie Lazarre of *Love Medicine* – who is not aware that she is the daughter of the woman she knows only as a fierce antagonist and judge. While the trajectories of the lives of the two women are quite different, both are driven by their early need to surmount, or escape, the shame of being an Indian, a woman, and poor.

*Tracks* is the story of a desperately struggling Chippewa community that is being assaulted by disease, the machinations of a corrupt Indian agent, the greed of white land speculators, and the sudden need of the Chippewa for money, a need which makes them, perhaps for the first time, conscious of their poverty. Pauline is one of the narrators of the story; the other narrator is Nanapush, a traditional elder, who battles to save his land and his life, as well as the lives of others. He begins his narrative by describing the period covered by the novel as a time of dying: "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die" (*Tracks*, 1). While Nanapush goes on to recount his efforts to save the remnant of the Chippewa people and the remnant of their land, Pauline uses her initial narrative to situate herself within this history by identifying herself as an outsider, set off from the others by her mixed blood and her desire to leave the place of death, rather than try to save it. The Puyats, she says, were "mixed-bloods, skimmers in the clan for which the name was lost. In the spring before the winter that took so many Chippewa, I bothered my father into sending me south, to the white town. I had decided to learn the lace-making trade from the nuns." (*Tracks*, 14). While Nanapush is secure in his identity as patriarchal elder with responsibility to the people he can call his own, Pauline is without the claims to identity that come with clan affiliation, land, or age. Her recourse is to attempt to abandon the self that she sees as essentially invisible and attach herself to the ready-made (and classless) community of nuns, where being female is a requirement and being poor is a virtue, and where she might train herself in a delicate trade that is as far removed as possible from the hardscrabble, desperate life of the starving Chippewa. (In giving Pauline a

desire to learn lace-making, Erdrich may well be alluding to the educational programs at the Indian boarding schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which set out to “elevate” Indian students by suppressing their tribal identities and teaching them “useful” skills. In many of these schools, lace-making was a staple of the curriculum for girls.)

Pauline’s attempt to exchange one identity for another is, predictably, a recipe for psychological chaos and trauma. As the pressures on the Chippewa mount, her efforts to remove herself from the precarious position of landless Indian woman become increasingly frenetic. Her turn to Christianity is a movement toward two kinds of safety: that of white privilege, and that of a vaguely comprehended spiritual salvation:

Our Lord . . . had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous who lived in trees, the bush, or spirits of animals that were hunted so scarce they became discouraged and did not mate. There would have to come a turning. . . . (*Tracks*, 139)

Pauline vows to distance herself from the abjectness of the Chippewa: “They could starve and fornicate, expose their young for dogs and crows, worship the bones of animals or the brown liquor in a jar. I would have none of it.” (196) Her language makes it clear that Pauline’s rejection of everything Chippewa – all that shames and frightens her – includes an ironic acknowledgement of the reality of the Manitous and the animal spirits that are central to the Chippewa religious and ethical systems; in asserting their loss of power, that is, she simultaneously confirms their presence at the heart of her own consciousness. Pauline clearly cannot jettison her Indian identity so easily.

The Pauline of *Tracks* emerges in *Love Medicine* as the much older, more cynical and brittle Sister Leopolda, who has become a teacher in a convent school on the Chippewa reservation. Early in this novel, Pauline, now Leopolda, confronts her unsuspecting daughter Marie, a child of thirteen with “the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town.” (*Love Medicine*, 44). Marie is in many ways a

shrewder, tougher, more belligerent and outspoken version of the young Pauline, just as unsettled by her sense of herself as an Indian child of the poor as her mother had been, but more inclined to brawl her way through to some form of self-assurance. In language that echoes that of the young Pauline, Marie voices her conviction that she lives among the lost: "Where the maps stopped. Where God had only half a hand in the creation. Where the Dark One had put in thick bush, liquor, wild dogs, and Indians" (*Love Medicine*, 45).

Again like her mother, Marie turns to the convent to find a way out of the life that confines and shames her. She is lured there by Sister Leopolda, who sees her young self in her child and admonishes Marie, brutally, that "You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself up to God." (*Love Medicine*, 48). Unlike her mother, however, Marie is not tempted to take the vows and become a nun. Her ambition is to do battle with the dominating Leopolda and win, since Leopolda embodies for her precisely that contempt for "bush Indians" that threatens to poison Marie's own awakening sense of self. The contest between Marie and Leopolda is fierce and damaging to Marie, both psychologically and physically. She manages to emerge a temporary victor, however, through a comic inadvertency: the other nuns in the convent conclude that a stab wound to Marie's hand that was inflicted by the poker-wielding Leopolda is in fact a stigmata, a miraculous sign of sainthood. Marie thus beats Leopolda at her own game; she "smile[s] the saint's smirk into her face" and leaves the convent to find her own way out of that dark corner of the earth – the place of Indians and wild dogs – to which Leopolda would condemn her. Marie has, in effect, exchanged one form of stigma for another, charging thoughtlessly out of the stigmatizing shame of her origins and into the (false) triumph of Christian beatitude, marked with the saint's stigmata.

Marie returns to the convent only much later, when she is the mother of a substantial family herself. She goes back when she learns that Leopolda is dying – her visit motivated partly out of a combination of pity and curiosity that are, although she does not know it, the pull of blood, and partly to prove to Leopolda how wrong she was about the young Marie's prospects: "Long ago

she had tried for my devotion. Now I'd let her see where my devotion had gone and where it had got me. For by now I was solid class. Nector was tribal chairman. My children were well behaved, and they were educated too." (*Love Medicine*, 148). Marie prepares carefully for her visit, wearing her royal plum dress, "a good dress, manufactured, of a classic material," and taking along her sixteen-year-old daughter, Zelda, who wears pressed clothes, polished shoes, and a ribbon in her hair (*Love Medicine*, 148). When she confronts the dying Leopolda, Marie is sure to let the nun know how much her social status has changed, and how much of that was her own doing. She reminds Leopolda that because of the position of her husband, Nector, their house has been visited by a senator, and Nector has eaten supper with the governor. Most importantly, Marie informs Leopolda that "He is what he is because I made him." (*Love Medicine*, 154).

Marie's pilgrimage is thus energized by the same desire that sent her up to the convent the first time — the desire to find validation for a sense of self that has been constantly under threat. In her first visit, Marie sought to overcome her nascent sense of shame through competition with the woman who fed her shame; the battle is a psychological one, waged with the weapons of a distorted but convenient Christianity. For the older Marie, it is social standing, rather than a trumped-up miracle, that has become the measure she uses to gauge the distance between her present self and that invisible child, the offspring of "bush Indians," that she once knew herself to be. The signs of her success are a good dress, a child who goes to school in clean socks, and a husband — "made" through Marie's efforts — who can bring a Senator home for dinner.

Erdrich's two characters, Marie and Pauline/Leopolda, both move as if instinctively toward education as an important part of their anxious effort to escape the shame of being Indian and poor. Leopolda becomes a teacher; Marie, as a child, first confronts Leopolda in the schoolroom and then, as an adult, displays her schoolgirl daughter as an emblem of her own advancement. If education seems to each an obvious route away from what she perceives to be the stigma of race and class, the continuing frustration and anxiety of each woman also signals the inadequacy of education as a magical solution.

We might speculate about the extent to which Erdrich is reflecting her own trajectory – as a Chippewa, a Catholic, and an educated woman writer – in the struggles of these two characters; we might be especially tempted to speculate about the implications of these characterizations for Erdrich’s relationship to her own family and past. In the case of some other writers, the issue of education in its connection to class, and especially in its relationship to the writer’s own sense of her authority, is more clearly set out and less a matter of speculation. We have already noted the comments of several writers who specifically identify education as the source of fractures in their relationships with their families and all those whom Gloria Bird calls “The People,” those whom the writer ostensibly represents. These issues inform much of the poetry of Linda Hogan, who writes about her identity as a Chickasaw, a person of mixed blood, the educated child of poor parents whose work as an adult brings her into university communities. The beginning of her poem “Workday” succinctly identifies the sources of her uneasiness:

I go to work  
though there are those who were missing today  
from their homes.  
I ride the bus  
and I do not think of children without food  
or how my sisters are chained to prison beds.  
Now I go to the University  
and out for lunch  
and listen to the higher-ups  
tell me all they have read about Indians  
and how to analyze this poem. (Hogan, 43)

Hogan locates herself among the working poor, on the bus, sharing space with men and women who have “spider veins” and “broken knees.” The ordinariness of the “workday” routine distracts her from thoughts of the other poor, those whom Gloria Bird might call “The People,” for whom oppression is less subtle than it is for the workers on the bus. Hogan’s identification with both groups is, however, strained by her acknowledgment that her destination



is the University, where she will go to lunch with “the higher-ups” and listen to their condescending talk. The nature of her work separates her from the other workers on the bus, those with whom she may feel a natural affinity; at the same time, her identity as an Indian woman separates her from others at the University, for whom she is an object of study. Hogan – who identifies herself as the author of “this poem” – thus has no clear audience, nor does she have a way of feeling at ease with either the workers on the bus or those at the University. Her “workday” routine is a reminder of how education has distanced her from “The People,” who are not likely to read her poem, as well as from the “higher-ups,” who do not understand that their own position of privileged authority is in fact part of a hierarchical social and political system that is the real subject of “this poem.”

Hogan’s poem ends with a vision of the workers walking home from the bus; their shoulders “bend forward and forward / and forward / to protect the heart from pain” (Hogan, 44). This empathetic vision includes a tacit acknowledgment of the postures Hogan herself, as the “I” of this poem, assumes, to protect herself from the pain of her own sense of separation from the workers who ride the bus and her unwilling collusion with those at the University, whose education gives them a sense of entitlement.

The poem thus reaffirms the sense of anxiety, discomfort, and self-reproach that characterizes the positions articulated by the other Native writers we have been considering, for whom questions of identity are inseparable from questions of class, and for whom the identity of the Native woman writer, especially the educated writer, is grounded in an uneasy sense of difference.

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# **Performing Folklore: The Dilemmas of Zora Neale Hurston**

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## Performing Folklore: The Dilemmas of Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was the first African American folklorist and her book *Mules and Men* (1935) was the first major collection of African American folklore. This generally undisputed fact would seem to offer a firm basis for the discussion of her contributions to the study of folklore, but such discussions – whose numbers have increased in the past ten years – tend to be rife with equivocation and ambivalence. The same might be said of the critical reception to Hurston's writing in other genres, including her novels and her autobiography.<sup>1</sup> Why has it proved so difficult to assess Hurston's status as a folklorist or even as a writer?

Both the initial reception of Hurston's work in the 1920's – 1940's and the resurrection of her literary reputation in the 1970's and 1980's were enmeshed in the politics of racial representation which, in the first case, functioned to exclude her and, in the second, reasserted her value. As the most visible African American woman intellectual of her era, Hurston also provided a convenient gendered object for criticism. Since the history of both receptions has been well delineated elsewhere, I will focus here on her identity as female and African American folklorist, a complicated identity that I will argue Hurston herself claimed throughout her life. This essay will first explore some of the reasons why her identity as an ethnographer and writer about African-American folklife remains elusive, and then describe what I call Hurston's "performance of folklore." The dilemmas Hurston faced during her professional life both as a woman and as an African American led her to a way of performing folklore that violated the disciplinary categories available during the 1920's through the 1950's. Only now, fifty years later, does a critical language exist that might allow us to analyze and appreciate Zora Neale Hurston's pioneering work in folklore – work that was an inextricable part of her broad literary production.

Hurston's reputation has suffered, first of all, because she was writing during the decades that anthropology was establishing itself as a separate

academic field, a period resistant to the professionalization of women in general. Hurston encountered anthropology in New York City when she enrolled in 1925 as Barnard College's only black student. At the turn of the century, Barnard became the vital center of the emerging discipline of anthropology under the leadership of Franz Boas, a German Jewish immigrant who (in 1892) was responsible for the first Ph.D. in anthropology given in the United States.<sup>2</sup> After World War I, the nascent field of anthropology was marginalized to the curriculum of the woman's college, Barnard, while Columbia, the men's college, concentrated on professional training in established disciplines.

The result, ironically, was that Boas had a relatively free hand in shaping the curriculum that influenced new generations of anthropologists. Boas was mentor before World War I to a group of younger male intellectuals, many from immigrant families, all of whom were committed to developing anthropology along modernist scientific lines. One of the bases of the new Boasian anthropology was an attack on nineteenth century cultural evolutionists, who believed there was a single pattern of development for all the world's cultures. Boas and his associates meticulously documented and compared traits of individual historical societies, and thus promulgated "the modern anthropological conception of culture as pluralistic, relativistic, and largely freed from biological determinism."<sup>3</sup> Boasian anthropology has been acknowledged, in fact, as one of the intellectual bases for "New Negro" writers of the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Hurston's first fieldwork experience was conducted as a Barnard student, when she measured body shapes in a Harlem project to disprove then-current scientific racism about the mental inferiority of the black race.<sup>5</sup>

Modern cultural anthropology, with its skepticism of nineteenth-century systems of thought, its emphasis on the flexibility and relativity of all cultures, and the importance it placed on careful, and often arduous, fieldwork, also attracted "new women" who were challenging the dominant gender norms.<sup>6</sup> However, those women were white, and even for them academic anthropology was an inhospitable field for the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the claim that anthropology has been the one scientific discipline most open to female researchers, historians have recently challenged the assumption of the

field's gender neutrality.<sup>7</sup> It is true that, especially after World War I, Franz Boas encouraged and supported the work of such eminent women scholars as Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Elsie Clews Parsons. All had Ph.D.'s and were prolific publishers, active at the highest levels in their field and considered public intellectuals.

Yet, none of these women had the academic career that their qualifications and achievements should have earned them. As a wealthy upper-class woman, Elsie Parsons was free to pursue her fieldwork in the Southwest, the Caribbean, and Mexico without worrying about a job;<sup>8</sup> Margaret Mead spent her professional life associated with the American Museum of Natural History, rather than Columbia University, where she taught as an adjunct instructor;<sup>9</sup> she was not promoted to full curator at the museum until 1964, and her salary there was low, despite her fame.<sup>10</sup> Ruth Benedict occupied a lowly position at Barnard as Franz Boas' assistant, and was passed over for promotion until late in her career, despite her distinguished work as editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* from 1925 to 1939.<sup>11</sup> Boas made little effort on behalf of women professionals who had husbands to support them, and clearly did not conceive of women as candidates for academic leadership.<sup>12</sup> Many of his female students became eminent anthropologists, nonetheless, drawing on resources offered by their social privilege to position themselves successfully where their work would be noticed both inside and outside the discipline.<sup>13</sup>

Given the professional obstacles placed before highly qualified, socially secure, and relatively affluent upper class white women, it's not difficult to see that a black woman with no personal support system and no money would find it virtually impossible to make an institutional space for herself as a folklorist. To be a woman, of color, and economically disadvantaged is to be triply marginalized in American society. Hurston, like many African American intellectuals and artists of her time, was forced to rely on white patronage to fund her research. Her biographer points out that "Hurston received major financial support for seven years, beginning in 1925, from three rich and powerful white women."<sup>14</sup>

Annie Nathan Meyer, daughter of one of the oldest Jewish families in New York City, and a founder of Barnard College; Fannie Hurst, the bestselling novelist of the 1920's and 1930's, known for her novel of passing, *Imitation of Life*, and the mysterious, powerful, Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, patron to such other Harlem Renaissance artists as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Richmond Barthe, Aaron Douglass, and Claude McKay.<sup>15</sup>

Their modest support allowed the impoverished Hurston to receive her college degree from Barnard and do her initial fieldwork in African American folk culture. Her folklore collections in Florida and Alabama were later funded by Elsie Clews Parsons at the request of Franz Boas.<sup>16</sup> In 1927, she also received a fellowship from Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to collect folklore in Florida,<sup>17</sup> and in 1936 a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship to support her study of religious cults in the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup>

Some critics have answered the question of why Hurston has never been given her due as a folklorist by denying that Hurston saw herself in that professional role after an abortive attempt to do fieldwork and assigning her instead to the category of creative writer. One of the most influential was Robert Hemenway, who claims in his literary biography of Zora Neale Hurston that:

She had always considered research only "formalized curiosity," a "poking and prying with a purpose." After 1935 she had relatively little interest in the formalities of the academic method.... Zora never became a professional academic folklorist because such a vocation was alien to her exuberant sense of self, to her admittedly artistic, sometimes erratic temperament, and to her awareness of the esthetic content of black folklore.<sup>19</sup>

In line with his overall biographical assumptions, Robert Hemenway portrays Hurston as artistically temperamental and idiosyncratic. He effectively plays down the social factors that inhibited her progress as a professional folklorist, instead representing her as an individual with the full power to make "choices." In Hemenway's paradigm, too, "art" and "science" are irreconcilable categories of experience and Hurston must choose one or the other. He claims



that in 1927, at the conclusion of her Barnard studies, Hurston “had made a choice to subordinate art to science, and... to begin her career as a professional folklorist,”<sup>20</sup> whereas in 1935 she made the opposite choice, abandoning science for art. The language of her biographer erases the power of gender, race, and economics to constrain such “choices.”

In fact, Hurston was active as a folklorist after 1935 – witness the 1936 Guggenheim which took her to the West Indies to investigate voodoo.<sup>21</sup> She clearly saw herself as a professional folklorist until the end of her life in January 1960, despite increasing difficulties in finding support for the research and writing. She maintained a professional correspondence with many anthropologists, including Ruth Benedict to whom she wrote as late as 1947 – the year before Benedict’s death. On the basis of her own research in Honduras from 1946-48, Hurston urged Benedict and other folklorists to consider research in there on various groups, including the Black Caribs, the Zamboes, and the Icagues.<sup>22</sup> Her training with Boas and Herskovits was the contemporary state-of-the-art, and she shared their conception of ethnography as a “salvage operation” to preserve the vanishing traditional culture of African Americans. Surviving documentary evidence shows that she was a skilled researcher. However, her writing did not conform to the formal norms of modern ethnography and its content violated the expectations of African American critics, the two major reasons that Hurston’s mature work of the 1930’s and 1940’s failed to consolidate her reputation during her lifetime. It took the changing paradigms of the black and feminist movements of the 1970’s, which came together in the efflorescence of African American women writers like Alice Walker, to recuperate the importance of Zora Neale Hurston as a literary foremother.<sup>23</sup> However, Hurston has remained undervalued as a folklorist.

For anthropologists, Hurston’s folklore production deviated from the model of ethnographic writing that had become hegemonic during her lifetime as modern anthropology established itself institutionally.<sup>24</sup> Early twentieth century investigators under the leadership of anthropologists like Boas innovated the genre of the ethnographic monograph as the only “scientific” way to present findings. Ethnographic discourse implies “as a necessary methodological fiction

if not an empirical reality, the existence of bounded ethnographic entities, into which the anthropologist may... be incorporated and, in a manner of speaking, learn to know from the inside – without sacrificing that privileged marginality (as “stranger/friend”) which presumably enables a totalizing understanding.”<sup>25</sup> The majority of early twentieth century anthropologists or folklorists were not members of the cultures they were investigating. They might gain access to a group’s operations and secrets, but they largely remained outsiders from another culture, straining to interpret what they were seeing.<sup>26</sup> In the equation “participant-observer,” the observer was the operational dominant.

Hurston occupied a very different subject position as an African American investigating her own culture; she used her professional training to observe, but as often she chose to become an active participant in folklore sessions. In *Mules and Men*, for example, Zora dramatizes her technique for collecting folklore so that the study contains not just the tales themselves but the context in which they were told – more often than not with Zora playing a leading role. In one community, Zora masquerades as a bootlegger (to explain her fancy car and dress) and becomes the main attraction at the local dance. Although at first the participants are leary of her as a stranger, she wins their confidence by joining in the “woofing” (witty bantering) and singing traditional songs like “John Henry.” When she tells them she wants to write down folktales (which they call “lies”), they at first “couldn’t conceive of anybody wanting to put down ‘lies’” – but soon are contributing to Zora’s lying contests and recommending good places, like the swamp gang, to collect other stories.<sup>27</sup>

The collection of African American folklore was just beginning at the time, and the handful of researchers in the field were white. For Hurston, ethnographic training gave her a way to revisit the rural southern culture of her childhood and perceive it in new ways, as she acknowledged in her introduction to *Mules and Men*:

I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore.’ . . . From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says about the house top.... It was only when I was off in college, away from my native

surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.<sup>28</sup>

Ethnographic training gave her methodological tools and an interpretive distance, but her upbringing in the Black-run town of Eatonville, Florida, gave her equally valuable knowledge about how to collect and interpret folklore in African American settings.<sup>29</sup> As Graciela Hernandez points out, Hurston's *Mules and Men* "vitiates any sense of a monolithic African American 'folk' community" since she gives ethnographic details of three distinct communities, and she also portrays herself differently as interpreter negotiating each context – in other words as part of the cultural scene.<sup>30</sup> Both of these innovations, arising from Hurston's location as a native southerner and African American folklorist, disrupted the norms of the ethnographic narrative, which depended upon the model of a single, coherent cultural group as the object under scrutiny and constructed the anthropologist as privileged outsider whose view of the whole society was somehow uncontaminated by the politics of the historical situation.

Most importantly, the concepts of folklore gave her a language to articulate the rich creativity she found in that African American folk culture, a narrative tradition that had developed through slavery and Reconstruction and had, as Robert Hemenway puts it, "become a reservoir of figurative language that helped black people survive and affirm themselves as culturally unique."<sup>31</sup> When Alice Walker takes a copy of *Mules and Men* to her own urbanized and deracinated family in Boston and New York, who had forgotten "their southern cultural inheritance," Hurston's text,

gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed (told us years ago by our parents and grandparents)... [N]o matter how they tried to remain cool toward all Zora revealed, in the end they could not hold back the smiles, the laughter, the joy over who she was showing them to be: descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people; loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and *bodacious* company.<sup>32</sup>

The enjoyment of verbal artistry was at the very core of African American creativity, as Hurston saw it and as she represented it in all of her writings. In her primary collection of folklore, *Mules and Men*, “the porch is the site for the expression of the folktale as an evocation of an authentic black culture.”<sup>33</sup> Hurston describes the scene and her childhood response in *Dust Tracks on a Road*: “But what I really loved to hear was the menfolks holding a ‘lying’ session. That is, straining against each other inventing folks tales. God, Devil, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Sis Cat, Brer Bear, Lion, Tiger, Buzzard, and all the wood folk walked and talked like natural men.”<sup>34</sup> From the porch, the African American community told its stories and constructed its identity; however, as Hurston reveals, that identity was predominantly male. Women were usually excluded from storytelling, except as auditors. Janie’s appropriation of the power to “signify” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* marks the turning point in Hurston’s novel, where the female protagonist asserts herself against the hostile masculine talk. Thus, in addition to negotiating the shoals of racial politics, Hurston’s work took on sexual politics – both within the black community and in relation to the white world.

For the woman in African American culture, the site of greatest power was “conjure” – a set of practices by a conjurer or someone using voodoo or hoodoo to predict and control events.<sup>35</sup> A fascination with conjuring connects all of Hurston’s major work, whether classified as ethnography or fiction, and this element has been picked up by her literary daughter, Alice Walker, (who also presents herself as “author and medium” in *The Color Purple*).<sup>36</sup> In her novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Moses the hoodoo man learns his spiritual powers first from males, Mentu and then Jethro; however, sometimes in other books the conjurer is portrayed as a woman. In *Mules and Men*, the historical conjure woman whose spirit broods over New Orleans was Marie Leveau. Zora studies with Eulalia, “who specialized in Man-and-woman cases,” Anatol Pierre, Father Joe Watson, Dr. Duke, Kitty Brown, and also a nephew of Marie Leveau, Luke Turner. Through him, Hurston is initiated into the mystery of conjuring, until she becomes not just “an engaging lay narrator,” according to Houston Baker, but “a spiritual griot seeking her authority in doctrines and practices that

have ancient spiritual roots. By inhabiting the image of conjure, one might say, the narrator assumes not merely a power to 'change things around' through storytelling, but an ability to 'make' an emergent nation of Africans in America."<sup>37</sup>

Even Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* fails to conform to the early twentieth century norms of confessional self-portraits and becomes, in Françoise Lionnet's phrase, "autoethnography." In Lionnet's analysis, "Hurston's combined identities as anthropologist and writer ... simultaneously begin to emerge and to converge in *Dust Tracks*."<sup>38</sup> Reflexivity about herself merges with reflexivity about writing and about methods of studying African American folk culture, dissolving generic boundaries and fusing her aims as folklorist, storyteller, and cultural operator. As Lionnet puts it:

Moving away from what might be the sterile analysis of a fieldworker to the inspirational language of an artist, Hurston involves herself and her reader in a transformative process. She does not just record, describe, and represent; she transforms and is transformed by her autobiographical performance. To look at life from an aesthetic point of view and to celebrate her ethnic heritage are thus two complementary projects for her.<sup>39</sup>

The conclusion to *Mules and Men*, the story of Sis Cat, positions Hurston as the female, black insider/outsider whose folklore collecting/storytelling enable her some control over the dynamics of her complex identity. The cat is conned by a rat she intends to eat, who escapes by telling her, "Hol' on dere, sis Cat! Ain't you got no manners at all? You going set up to de table and eat 'thout washing yo' face and hands?" The next time this situation comes up, Sis Cat eats the rat and tells an interlocutor, "Oh, Ah got plenty manners. But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterward." Hurston's final line in *Mules and Men* is, "I'm sitting here like Sis Cat washing my face and usin' my manners."<sup>40</sup> It is a cryptic, unglossed statement that has provoked much critical discussion, but I find compelling the interpretation of Houston Baker:

She knows at the close of her work that she has refused to craft a compendium of "Negro Folktales and Voodoo Practices" that would satisfy dry, scholarly criteria of anthropology..... Zora may be among the "unwashed,"

but she is also among the culturally well fed. She had dined on the spirit, on the manna of black culture, and knows that she has power to manipulate such manna in significant ways.<sup>41</sup>

Baker adds that Hurston could certainly have employed the “official disciplinary language and perspective” of folklore, but that her choice was to write in a “radically alternative, black and autobiographical” mode.<sup>42</sup>

Since *Mules and Men* – her most recognizable folklore study – exceeded disciplinary norms in ways that hindered its full acceptance as professional work, one can understand why the academic folklore community was totally unable to read Hurston’s other work as a performance of folklore. *Tell My Horse*, in which she recounts her fieldwork experiences in Jamaica and Haiti, deviates even more generically from the norms of the ethnographic monograph in combining techniques from travelogue, political analysis, journalism, folklore, and art criticism.<sup>43</sup> Whereas the classic monograph depicted the native culture as virtually devoid of western influences (despite the fact that most were colonies) and portrayed the ethnographer alone as worker in the field, Hurston’s text embeds Haiti and Jamaica within the scene of international power relations, whose personnel she must deal with in the course of her research. She describes her personal experiences as researcher in this historically complex scene, and does not hesitate to critique the sexism of Caribbean societies or to condemn the cannibalistic Cochon Gris sect, which used the cloak of Voodoo for their activities.<sup>44</sup> In the words of Deborah Gordon, “Hurston offers a vision of fieldwork in which the limits as well as the possibilities of cross-cultural understanding are explicitly displayed” – a strategy avoided within the academic monograph.<sup>45</sup>

As Gordon astutely perceives, in her early career as ethnographer (1927-33) Zora Neale Hurston was part of a diverse group of African American intellectuals and writers who worked under the aegis of a white patron, Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, a network of creative people who “created the conditions in which the boundaries of drama, anthropology, folklore, and art could be merged.”<sup>46</sup> For Hurston, therefore, fieldwork was “simultaneously an ‘aesthetic’ and ‘social scientific’ endeavor, as well as a political activity aimed at changing

the consciousness of African Americans.” It is important to remember that Hurston was almost alone in the “Harlem Renaissance” group for having spent her childhood in the midst of southern folk culture; most of the other members were raised in cities outside the South.

Although Hurston worked much more on her own after the mid-1930’s, for many reasons she retained a model of folklore production in which folk culture could be presented in a variety of genres and modes – not just the scientific monograph. In addition to the accounts of fieldwork and folklore collection discussed above, Hurston produced plays, novels, short fiction, essays, journalism – and in each genre her commitment to representing folk culture was a dominant motivation.<sup>47</sup> As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it: “For the folklore Hurston collected so meticulously as Franz Boas’ student at Barnard became metaphors, allegories, and performances in her novels, the traditional recurring canonical metaphors of black culture.”<sup>48</sup> *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been celebrated for its stylistic and metaphorical achievements –but the rich voice of southern black culture and the acute social intelligence found in the novel pervade her other rarely-read work as well. Ultimately, I would suggest that Hurston’s oeuvre is stubbornly resistant to generic categorization, and only reading it as a whole can convey her remarkable ability to fuse self-presentation and the representation of folk process.<sup>49</sup>

Zora Neale Hurston’s failure to restrict herself to the one authorized disciplinary genre of folklore writing makes sense given her fundamentally performative approach to the cultures she studied and to the process of writing itself. As numerous critics have pointed out, Hurston saw folklore as an activity that created the black community and enabled them to survive in the face of poverty and racism. That she adopted those cultural strategies of survival in her own work has been well documented. As we have noted, too, Hurston went beyond seeing folklore merely as survival; for her, storytelling and joking were rich creative activities, on a par with the achievements of other cultures. In the philosophical sense defined by J. L. Austin, the “performative” is an “utterance that performs with language the deed to which it refers”<sup>50</sup> (e.g. *I promise to come, I marry you, etc.*). For Hurston, I would contend,

writing was a performative: all of Hurston's work was intended to *conjure up* for the reader aspects of black folk culture at the same time that it was to perform Hurston's complex identity as a female, an African American analyst and a cultural participant.

Nowhere was that sense of folklore as performance more visible than in the plays Hurston wrote and the musical she helped to produce, all efforts at literally dramatizing the play of culture for audiences outside the black community. She had gained theatrical experience in a traveling theater group as maid and wardrobe girl in 1915, held a WPA job with the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem in 1935-36, and put a lifetime of interest to work as drama instructor at North Carolina College for Negroes in 1948. In the early 1930's she published "Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas," contributed sketches to musical revues, "Fast and Furious" and "Jungle Scandals," and wrote the opera "Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts" with Langston Hughes.<sup>51</sup> In 1932 she wrote and successfully staged "The Great Day" on Broadway – based on black folk music Hurston had been collecting over the years– but her effort to dramatize folk culture fell prey to Depression economics and intellectual property issues.<sup>52</sup>

Although Hurston is now acknowledged primarily as a great novelist, all of her work is permeated by the conception of culture as cultural performance or social drama. In her multifaceted career – characterized by creativity in multiple genres and centered on the performance of African American folk cultures – Hurston might be seen as the first exponent of theories that were in the 1960's and 1970's to be associated with "Symbolic Anthropology." The powerful articulations of Clifford Geertz on cultural performance <sup>53</sup> or the influential writings of Victor Turner on reflexivity, ritual and social drama<sup>54</sup> that informed interdisciplinary cultural theories of the 1980's and 1990's had their early incarnation in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Even the recent turn to "post-modern" anthropology, which subverts the canonical modernist ethnography,<sup>55</sup> might be said to have had its trial run in Hurston's experimental accounts of folklore in process. The profession from which she was largely excluded her during her lifetime has now, finally, caught up with her!



## Notes

- 1 Issues arising from the reception of Zora Neale Hurston's work are succinctly and helpfully explored by Michael Awkwward in the "Introduction" to *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The personal venom of much response to Hurston, especially by other African American writers, is surveyed by Mary Helen Washington in her "Introduction" to *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. by Alice Walker.
- 2 Marshall Hyatt, *Franz Boas, Social Activist: The Dynamics of Ethnicity*, 3. On Boas and his career, see also Melville Herskovits, *Franz Boas: The Science of Man in the Making*, and George W. Stocking, Jr., essays in his *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology*.
- 3 Stocking, *Ethnographer's Magic*, 353.
- 4 See discussion of Boas's influence on many black intellectuals throughout the period in Mark Helbling, *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many*. *The New Negro* was the title of a book by Alain Locke, professor of philosophy at Howard University, in 1925; the book is usually seen as a key to understanding the forces at work in the Harlem Renaissance.
- 5 On Hurston's research and Boas' relations with leading black intellectuals and his powerful effect on the development of African American thought, see Vernon J. Williams Jr., *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries*, especially 1-53. Boas's student Melville Herskovits, who directed Hurston in her Harlem fieldwork, became the most important white anthropological researcher on concepts of race; see Helbling, *Harlem Renaissance*, 51-55. Hurston was very proud of Herskovits's citation of her as a scientist working on the "bodily form of the American Negro" in his 1927 review of anthropology and ethnology for *Opportunity* magazine, according to Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 63.
- 6 Desley Deacon, *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life*, xii-xiii.
- 7 See, for example, Nancy J. Parezo, *Hidden Scholars: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest*. Studies of the sciences generally show that the more marginal the field, the more likely it was to involve women as professionals, but that increased institutional support for an academic area had the corollary effect of excluding women from it. See, for example, the careful analysis by Margaret Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, especially Chapter 6, 122-48, on "Faculty at Major Universities," where nepotism rules often excluded married female academics, and Chapter 7, 149-64, on "Resentful Research Associates: Marriage and Marginality." Rossiter notes that "[a]mong the organizations most receptive to women leaders were the American Anthropological Association, with five women presidents

- between 1941 and 1969" (312). Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead were among those 5 (see Table 14.2). However, see Rossiter's comments on the experiences of some of those women presidents (316).
- 8 On Parsons, see Deacon, *Elsie Clews Parsons*; Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, *Wealth and Rebellion: Elsie Clews Parsons, Anthropologist and Folklorist*; Louise Lamphere, "Feminist Anthropology: The Legacy of Elsie Clews Parsons," in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, 85-103; also Rosalind Rosenberg, "The Primitive Side of Civilized Culture," in her *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*, 147-77. Parsons' money became a major source of support for Boas and his students' ethnographic projects through the Southwest Society, according to Margaret Mead, *Ruth Benedict*, 29.
  - 9 Among the many studies of Margaret Mead's life and work, see especially Jane Howard's comprehensive biography, *Margaret Mead: A Life*, and Mead's own autobiography, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*. See also Rosalind Rosenberg, "Beyond Separate Spheres," Chapter 8 in her book of the same title, 207-37; Nancy C. Lutkehaus, "Margaret Mead and the 'Rustling-of-the-Wind-in-the-Palm-Trees School' of Ethnographic Writing," in *Women Writing Culture*, 186-206.
  - 10 Rossiter, *Women Scientists. . . 1940-1972*, 244.
  - 11 Studies of Ruth Benedict include Margaret Mead's *Ruth Benedict and An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict*; Barbara A. Babcock, "Not in the Absolute Singular: Rereading Ruth Benedict," in *Women Writing Culture*, 104-30; also, Judith Schacter Modell, *Ruth Benedict: Patterns of a Life*.
  - 12 Margaret W. Rossiter, in *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940*, calls attention to the fact that the field of anthropology was "an extreme case of dependency on foundations and fellowships during the 1920's and 1930's. Since it was a small field and had few teaching positions available, most of its younger women did important work and built whole careers on little more than a series of temporary fellowships from the NRC and SSRC. In fact, there seems to have been a tendency, in this field at least, to give the fellowships to the women to 'tide them over,' while the few jobs available went to the men" (272).
  - 13 Margaret Mead, for example, between 1925 and 1975 published "more than 1,300 articles, essays, books, biographies, autobiographies, book reviews, and prefaces in both scholarly and popular publications" (Lutkehaus essay on Mead in *Women Writing Culture*, 186). Mead was also a brilliant user of other twentieth-century media, including ethnographic photography, radio and television.
  - 14 Robert Hemenway, "The Personal Dimension in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 33.
  - 15 Robert Hemenway, "The Personal Dimension," 33-34.
  - 16 Zumwalt, *Wealth and Rebellion*, 191.
  - 17 Vernon Williams, *Rethinking Race*, 48.

- 18 Rossiter, *Women Scientists... to 1940*, 273.
- 19 Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 212, 213.
- 20 Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 82.
- 21 For a contemporary acknowledgement of Hurston's ethnographic efforts in Haiti, see Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, 206-12.
- 22 On Hurston's long relationship with Ruth Benedict, see Mark Helbling, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 159-89.
- 23 This process of recuperation is analyzed by Dianne Sadoff in "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," originally published in *Signs* 11 (1985), and reprinted in *Black Women in America: Social Science Perspectives*, Micheline R. Malson, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, Jean F. O'Barr and Mary Wyer, eds., 197-219.
- 24 Marc Manganaro comments that the "relation between the way anthropologists have written about their subjects and the political establishment of their discipline cannot be overestimated. George Marcus claims that the rise of ethnography, the textual process resulting from the fieldwork method, must be considered primarily as an institutional phenomenon"; *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*. Marc Manganaro, ed., 29-30. Manganaro's volume contains numerous essays exploring the monograph as a "discourse of legitimation," in Lyotard's terms, for the discipline of anthropology. See also the groundbreaking discussion in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.
- 25 Stocking, *Ethnographer's Magic*, 364.
- 26 See, for example, the intellectual fracas of the 1980's over Margaret Mead's interpretations of Samoan culture, which were then being challenged by Derek Freeman in *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*.
- 27 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 60-75.
- 28 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 3.
- 29 A unique tape of Hurston singing African American folksongs and being interviewed by folklorist Alan Lomax during a 1935 research trip they took through the South reveals Zora Neale Hurston's privileged situation as both scientist and native of the culture she is studying; see the analysis by Robert Hemenway, "The Personal Dimension," 37-39. See also the dialogue in Note 16 (46-48).
- 30 Graciela Hernández, "Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality: Zora Neale Hurston's Experimental Ethnographies," in *Women Writing Culture*, 155, 156. On the "demise of [ethnographic] Authority" in the text, see also John Dorst, "Reading *Mules and Men*: Toward the Death of the Ethnographer,," and bell hooks, "Saving Black Folk Culture: Zora Neale Hurston as Anthropologist and Writer," in her *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*.

- 31 Hemenway, "The Personal Dimension," 44.
- 32 Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston – a Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 84, 85.
- 33 Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 84. Carby goes on to note that "[w]hereas in *Mules and Men* the anthropological self is positioned on a figuratively unified porch, primarily as a listener and a recorder, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the anthropological role of listener is embedded in the folk as community and the role of recorder situated in the mediator – Pheoby/the text" (84).
- 34 Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 47.
- 35 Houston Baker's essay on *conjure* is one of the most persuasive interpretations of Zora Neale Hurston's accomplishments as an African American cultural analyst; see Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Workings of the Spirit: Conjure and the Space of Black Women's Creativity," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah eds. In the essay, Baker offers a full description of the kinds of practices considered under the rubric of conjure or hoodoo, as well as the mythical or philosophical bases of those powers.
- 36 Through Walker, Hurston helped to create the black woman novelist's literary tradition, according to Marjorie Pryse in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds.: "Hurston would write out from folklore or hoodoo as a source of power and would be able to find for herself and invest her female protagonist Janie with the "magic" of authority that makes storytelling – whether in oral or written form – possible" (12).
- 37 Baker, "Workings of the Spirit," 301.
- 38 Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, 103. A perceptive exploration of *Dust Tracks* as anomalous black female autobiography is offered by Nellie Y. McKay, "Race, Gender, and Cultural Context in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., 175-88. On the editorial changes between the draft and the published version of the text, see the important essay by Claudine Raynaud, "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., 34-64.
- 39 Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 104.
- 40 Mark Helbling summarizes the critical response to this enigmatic ending in *The Harlem Renaissance*, 170, quoting Barbara Johnson on the difficulties of interpretation: "Hurston suspends the certainty of referent not by erasing those differences [black and white, inside and outside] but by foregrounding the complex dynamism of their interaction."

- 41 Houston Baker, "Workings of the Spirit," 302.
- 42 Baker, "Conjure and Space," 303. Only in the 1990's has the project of recuperating an experimental anthropological canon led to a reevaluation of Hurston's work, as Deborah Gordon notes in "The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston," in Marc Manganaro, *Modernist Anthropology*, 150.
- 43 Deborah Gordon, "The Politics of Ethnographic Authority," notes these aspects of the book's "generic complexity" and comments that because of the "complex intermingling of ethnographic poses in the text, there is no unified authority portrayed and no claims to reporting a 'culture.' (155)". See also analysis of the narrative strategies of *Tell My Horse* by Elizabeth Jane Harrison, "Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Hunter Austin's Ethnographic Fiction," in *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*. Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson, eds., 44-58.
- 44 Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, for Hurston's personal observations about her research experiences— not couched in the ethnographic objective third person — see, for example, 57-62, 195-217, 81-86, 245-57.
- 45 Gordon, "The Politics of Ethnographic Authority," 156. Hurston's explicit acknowledgement of the impact of colonial history on the peoples she was studying in the Caribbean is also noted by Gwendolyn Mikell, "When Horses Talk: Reflections on Zora Neale Hurston's Haitian Anthropology."
- 46 Gordon, 161.
- 47 Cheryl Wall says that "Hurston's respect for the cultural traditions of black people is the most important constant in her career. This respect threads through her entire oeuvre"; "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," in *Zora Neale Hurston*. Gates and Appiah, eds., 77. See also the analysis of Hurston's novels and essays by Eric J. Sundquist in *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction*, 49-91.
- 48 Gates, "Afterward. Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying,'" in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 262.
- 49 Susan Edwards Meisenhelder in *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston* recommends "a kind of cross-reading through her works" as a "helpful tool for individual interpretive problems and for appreciating the rich unity of all her work. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, for instance, echo and contrast with one another in ways that Hurston intended, that enrich both, and that illuminate other works" (11-12).
- 50 Definition by Chris Baldrick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 164. See also the explanation for the term in Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 215-21. Austin published his influential study of "speech-act theory" entitled *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962. His ideas have been

- extended by literary, feminist, and cultural theorists; see for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Excitable Speech*.
- 51 The unfortunate history of this collaboration (conducted under the aegis of their patroness Mrs. Mason), which foundered on problems involving intellectual property rights, has been recounted by Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 104-16, 136-57. The musical was only recently produced for the first time in New York; it was written in 1931.
- 52 Hemenway provides the fullest account of Hurston's efforts to produce folk music without adequate funding, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 177-85.
- 53 Clifford Geertz's classic study is *The Interpretation of Cultures*.
- 54 For an introduction to Victor Turner's thought, see Barbara A. Babcock, "The Arts and all things common: Victor Turner's literary anthropology," 39-46, and Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance?" 47-58, both in *Comparative Criticism: An annual journal*, E. S. Shaffer, ed. Volume 9. Also *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology*, Kathleen M. Ashley, ed.
- 55 See the analyses in Clifford and Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture*; also James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*.

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# **Reinterpreting Kingston's Feminist Agenda**

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## Reinterpreting Kingston's Feminist Agenda<sup>1</sup>

CA: In your parents' culture in China, girls were held in rather low esteem. Has that affected your outlook on the women's liberation movement in this country?

*Kingston.* In *The Woman Warrior* I was telling that the attitude towards women in China was very puzzling because on the one hand there was this slavery, which is so weird – I mean, I can almost understand better how white people can enslave black people than how men can enslave women. But at the same time they had these heroic stories about the women warriors, so there were two traditions going at once – about powerful fighters and poets and rulers that were women, and on the other hand, enslavement. So I think that women's liberation was already a tradition in China, too, you see. It's not as if they didn't have that idea on their own.

Interview by Jean W. Ross, 1983

The original form of the Chinese character for the pronoun in written Chinese *ta* contains an ungendered *ren* radical [denoting a human being], and the gendering of this pronoun arose from the circumstances of translation. For thousand of years, the Chinese had lived comfortably with the ungendered form of *ta* and other ungendered deictic forms. Suddenly they discovered that Chinese had no equivalent for the third-person feminine pronoun in English, French, and other European languages.

Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice*

During an interview with *Contemporary Authors*, Kingston was asked a typical question: "In your parents' culture in China, girls were held in rather low esteem. Has that affected your outlook on the women's liberation movement in this country?" This question may describe a popular response to Kingston's works, when it comes to the subject of "China," "the Chinese culture," and "the Chinese women," a subject which widely attracts the audience of Western women. It reveals positionality, or a certain attitude, in Kingston criticism shared

by many critics. My years of research and study of Kingston criticism suggests that such an attitude happens to be fundamentally accountable for much of the controversies, misreadings and misinterpretations, because it stereotypes Chinese women and Chinese culture, which Kingston's work is to redress and reinterpret in American Orientalist discourse. To say the least, such an attitude limits the reader's imagination in reading Kingston and appropriately approaching Kingston's subject. Unfortunately, this attitude disables even the feminist reader from appreciating the most powerful feminist energy in Kingston, that is, the heroic tradition of Chinese women, which Kingston inherits, or discovers, from her parents' culture – the voice of Brave Orchid, the strength of Fa Mulan, and the music and poetry of Ts'ai Yen. Translating the heroic tradition of Chinese women into American fiction is, I would argue, the very difference Kingston makes, and has made, in re-Orienting "the women's liberation in *this* country," I mean, in America.

Conceivably, what is implied in the interviewer's question is a positionality of Western superiority authorized by a missionary tradition. Stephen Sumida offers a historical account of this tradition. For the Christian missionaries, since the 19th century, the act of teaching English literacy was aimed at converting "heathen" people and rescuing women from prostitution, and from a culture that the missionary "rescuers" considered not simply inferior, but sinful. The Chinese woman, who was being rescued and converted, used to write her confession in the form of autobiography. She had to make an apology to a higher authority, to her audience, which believed their own culture and values of individual virtue to be superior to hers.<sup>2</sup> This missionary stance not only remains, but also dominates Kingston criticism. This predominant Christian response helps us to understand why and how Kingston's book is received as "autobiography" and "confession."

Edward Said, in his theory of Orientalism, defines this problem of attitude in terms of "strategic location" and "strategic formation."<sup>3</sup> He reminds us that every writer (here the interviewer) in the West assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient; the formation of such knowledge among texts, audiences, and institutions gives strength and

authority to the Orientalist position and representation, which always privilege the West. Kingston's readers stand in such a position when they respond to Kingston's text. They have a preconceived notion about "the Chinese women." They assume that they have some idea about women's status in Chinese culture – daughters unwanted, babies deserted, wives submissive, quiet, and obedient, having their feet bound – which is ahistorically stereotyped in the imaginary language of American Orientalism and cast in its "cliches." As quoted above, the question assumes that Kingston comes from a family where "girls are held in rather low esteem" (even though it is not what she tells in her story, which I will discuss later); and since she came from such a family, it is implied, she might covet the status of women in white culture, and be enlightened by "the women's liberation movement in this country"– in America. Orientalist presumptions often preface readers' response and predetermine their strategic location and their take on Kingston's text. This take, which condescendingly regards the Chinese women in the 1970s as followers of "the women's liberation movement in this country" is quite mistaken, and must be re-oriented before feminist criticism can make better sense in a historical context.

Such a reader response ought not to be viewed as a matter of critical opinion but a statement of cultural values, the values of a cultural hegemony which traditionally holds Chinese women "in rather low esteem." Unquestioned Western superiority over Chinese women, inherited from the missionary tradition and YWCA, still dominates Women's Studies in our universities. It assumes that only the Western feminists may lead the women's liberation movement in the world, that is, as remarked by Said, only the West can save the Orient, speak for the Orient, not vice-versa. In America, as a result of historical discrimination against the Chinese – racial prejudice, the Chinese Exclusion Laws, and diplomatic failure with China, the failure of missionary expedition, the loss of China in 1949, and especially the Cold War language in public media, the stereotyping of Chinese women and China men in comic books and Hollywood movies – Orientalist fantasies have become deeply rooted in popular consciousness, reflected in the reader response to Kingston's works. It is reflected in the above-quoted interviewer's question, which consciously and

unconsciously orientalizes her “parents’ culture.” First, it displaces Kingston’s “parents’ culture” as “in China,” ignoring the existence of Chinese immigrants, their community and culture as part of American culture, or at least an indigenous subculture in America; then it exorcises sexism as a “Chinese” problem unto the racial other, and, as does the Hollywood film industry, stages Chinese women (even those born and grown up in America who lived “a girlhood among ghosts”) as victims of their own culture, instead of victims of white America.

The above-quoted reply by Kingston to the question subtly challenges its presumption. Her rhetorical strategy is as resourceful and deconstructive as it is characteristic of her fictional style – paradoxical and provocative, problematizing a truism, or a stereotype, contradicting it with surprising opposition. She does not confront the wrong question or wrong assumption directly but deviously, and problematizes it with a rhetorical question: “In *The Woman Warrior* I was telling that the attitude towards women in China was very puzzling because on the one hand there was this slavery, which is so weird.” She knows what the reader has in mind (that women were wives or slaves in China), pretends that she is puzzled, has a question about it, and that she does not have an immediate answer to it; thus she makes the reader think for herself. By questioning a seldom-questioned popular belief, she subtly undermines the reader’s assumptions. Then she suspends the question, tells a different story, bringing up other topics and provocative ideas (such as race, Chinese heroines and warriors), unthinkable possibilities, thus contradicting the reader’s expectations. She suggests the very opposite with a “but” or in a dash: “– I mean, I can almost understand better how white people can enslave black people than how men can enslave women. But at the same time they had these heroic stories about the women warriors, so there were two traditions going at once – about powerful fighters and poets and rulers that were women, and on the other hand, enslavement. So I think that women’s liberation was already a tradition in China, too, you see. It’s not as if they didn’t have that idea on their own.”

It is with such opposite possibilities – slaves versus heroines, wives versus warriors, white people versus black people, women’s liberation in China versus



that in America, their tradition and our assumption – that she creates her well-known paradoxes. But underneath the surface of these paradoxes, she makes a difference in breaking the silence of Chinese American women. She has twisted the subject and turned the argument around. She has directed the reader's attention to the heroic tradition of Chinese women, which, instead of the slavery of women in China, is the real subject of her writing. *She finally makes her point by reminding her audience that women's liberation was not a white or an American idea*, thus she subtly subverts the reader's expectations. I believe this is important in understanding Kingston's style, what King-Kok Cheung considers to be Kingston's "provocative silence" or "guerrilla tactics."

*"So I think that women's liberation was already a tradition in China, too, you see. It's not as if they didn't have that idea on their own."* (my emphasis) While her audience might have expected her to act as a victim of the "Chinese patriarchy," rebel against her family, tradition, and culture, Kingston has but a different role to play and a different story to tell – the role of Fa Mulan and the story of Ts'ai Yen. I believe that, in writing *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston has a different feminist agenda to advocate – she is translating the heroic tradition of Chinese women into American fiction, so as to empower women's liberation in this country, in America; and by so doing, she demystifies the stereotypes of Chinese women in American Orientalism. *"When we Chinese girls listened to the adults' talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up but wives and slaves. We could be heroines and swordswomen"* (my emphasis) – this is her feminist manifesto.<sup>4</sup>

What is the Chinese "Idea" or the "heroic tradition" of Chinese women then? The most distinctive idea is, of course, the idea of Fa Mu Lan the Woman Warrior, a daughter who replaces her father to be drafted into the army to defend her homeland, her village and family. A less distinctive but more significant one is the idea of Ts'ai Yen and the heroic tradition associated with her writing. Ts'ai Yen, also named Cai, Yen and Cai, Wen Ji, was a poetess who lived around A.D. 175, and whose poetry recorded the miseries of wars in her lifetime and was passed down as a classic in Chinese literary history. In searching for roots, rediscovering her ethnic origin and recreating traditions, Kingston intended to

write a book about immigrant women from China, based on the life and stories of her own mother and the female kinfolk in her family, who carried over different traditions of female presence, and whose presence made a powerful difference in her memory, of growing up Chinese and female. The manuscript of *The Woman Warrior* was originally entitled “Gold Mountain Women.” The title is in the plural; it was not meant to be the story of an individual heroine. The most heroic living character is Kingston’s mother, Brave Orchid – an archetype of Chinese American immigrant woman – a Gold Mountain Woman.

In her search for a Chinese American woman’s identity, Kingston begins with the death of her aunt, but the No Name Woman, as I discussed in another essay, was the beginning, not the end, a beginning whose social reality existed before her lifetime.<sup>5</sup> In her real life, the most immediate model she has is the living presence of her mother. Her mother is an immigrant woman from China. In China, she was a modernist in the 1930s, went to medical school, and after she received her diploma, she returned to her village to care for the peasants as a medical doctor. She left China in 1939 to flee the Sino-Japanese war, and traveled all the way by herself across the Pacific, to join her husband in New York. In America, she kept the family together, and raised her children with talk-stories and Chinese theater, so that her daughter grew up with the idea of a theatrical woman warrior.

In handling the material from her ethnic heritage, Maxine Hong Kingston mixes both the high and low traditions – folk cultures and court traditions, theatrical cross-dressing and Chinatown martial arts, Confucius kinsmanship and Communist revolution – thus representing Chinese women’s experience in China, in America, in the ideal world of her fantasies, and in the social reality of California. Amidst the civil rights movement and ethnic movements, as well as the feminist movement in the 1960s, Kingston fights against racism on the one hand, and sexism on the other. The Chinese daughter from the Gold Mountain is determined not to repeat the family curse, but to redeem the name of her no name aunt. Therefore, the role models she chooses to follow are heroic characters, sons and daughters of immortal fame – Fa Mu Lan, Yue Fei, and finally Ts’ai Yen. The heroic tradition of Chinese women becomes her

American dream. In her dreams, Kingston casts herself in the role of a brave daughter, a village leader, an army General, a wife in command, mother of soldiers, a female avenger, and a dutiful daughter-in-law. (In traditional Chinese culture, the success of a wife, to a great extent, depends upon her success as a daughter-in-law.)

American dreams are free, anything can happen. In her dreams, our heroine could be what she wants to be. Therefore, the roles she plays are not limited to the recorded versions of the Chinese Fa Mu Lan, as the Chinese poets/historians wrote in "The Ballad of Mu Lan," or its variations. For one thing, the Chinese Mu Lan did not have a husband in the army or give birth to a son on the battlefield; her female identity was not revealed in public even after the war was over and she was given an award by the court. She declined the royal favor, accepted a fine horse instead, and hurried home. Years after she returned to her village, she met with her former soldiers, who were surprised to find that their former commander-in-chief was a woman. Hence she became a legend. For another, "The Ballad of Mu Lan" does not offer specific details of Mu Lan on battlefields, describing her actual experience as a military commander of and among men, fighting the enemy. Yet Kingston describes the Woman Warrior in the battlefields with vivid imagination, Western fantasies, and picaresque touches in her dream version.

American dreams deal with American realities. What is lacking in the Chinese version of women warriors is their sexual experience as women on battlefields. How do the women warriors relate to the men in the army? How do they overcome their physical difficulties on battlefields? Could they have a normal sex life as wives and mothers? Or would they be rape victims or sexual transgressors? These are challenging questions American women are concerned with in joining combat and military service. Gender relation and female sexuality are American themes that Kingston must deal with. As they are absent in those Chinese accounts mentioned above, Kingston has to imagine, to tell the untold stories.<sup>6</sup>

As a woman writer in 1970s America, faced with the choice of sexual freedom in white society on the one hand, and on the other, pregnancy and

the honor of family names and family values, Kingston has to improvise and invent her tale. She conceives herself as a self-controlled Chinese American woman warrior, who has the ability and competence to exercise her freedom of choice:

I hid from battle only once, when I gave birth to our baby. . . . Just before labor began, the last star rays sank into my belly. My husband would talk to me and not go, though I said for him to return to the battlefield. He caught the baby, a boy, and put it on my breast. "What are we going to do with this?" he asked, holding up the piece of umbilical cord that had been closest to the baby.

"Let's tie it to a flagpole until it dries," I said. We had both seen the boxes in which our parents kept the dried cords of all their children. (WW 40)

She is neither coy nor timid in describing female sexuality. Kingston is very much in command of her subject, sexuality becomes a space for recreating a Chinese American female identity. The "red dreams" opens a space of free speech, which enables her to deliver an ethnic difference – the Chinese tradition in women's liberation, as a Chinese American woman's response, as well as a contribution, to the women's liberation movement in this country, in America.

The most brilliant scenes in the novel are created in the form of Western fantasies, where her sexual fantasy during the period of menstruation explodes in her "red dreams," thus lifting what I call "the Iron Curtain of language" in American Orientalist discourse, opening improbable possibilities in American dreams. In order to create an ideal model in gender relation, Kingston dreams. Taking the liberty of her "red dreams," she improvises with an imaginary "dépà vu" – the model of comradeship from the Chinese Red Army in the 1920s:

I inspired my army, and I fed them. At night I sang to them glorious songs that came out of the sky and into my head. . we sewed red flags and tied the red scraps around our arms, legs, horses' tails. . My army did not rape, only taking food where there was an abundance. . So for a time I had a partner – my husband and I, soldiers together just as when we were little

soldiers playing in the village. We rode side by side into battle. . . . When the giant stumped toward me, I cut off his head. (WW 38-39)

The giant, her first opponent in the war, who “instantly reverted to his true self, a snake, and slithered away hissing” (WW 38), must be Satan, the evil seducer of American Eves. The woman warrior seizes the “veiled” devil as her arch-enemy, while she has no pity for his womenfolk, dainty creatures in sedan chairs, served by servants, who had watched her fighting from a distance, and now are weeping, “their long undersleeves . . . flew white mourning in the mountain wind” (WW 38). With wild Western fantasies and postmodern fabrication, Kingston transforms the Chinese legend into an American fairy tale.

But even the story of Fa Mu Lan is only a beginning; not until the end of the book does Kingston reveal an ideal model in the story of Ts'ai Yen. If Fa Mu Lan was a legend, the subject of a heroic verse written by men, Ts'ai Yen was a poet and historian herself, a real historical figure, not a goddess from myth or fairy tale. Cai Yen was also an immigrant woman, the wife of soldiers and courtiers, the mother of children born to another race. She was the daughter of a teacher/scholar, (so is Kingston). Her ear for music had been amazing ever since childhood. Once her father was playing the harp and broke a string in the next room, she could tell which one on the scale was broken. That talent having been discovered by her father, she was taught not only to play musical instruments, but also to compose, so that later she became a famous composer. She was learned not only in poetry, but also in history, so she could recite many historical documents that her father wrote. She also had a beautiful style in handwriting. Her calligraphy was passed down as a work of art, a special style that has influenced Wang Xi Zhi, himself a master of calligraphy.<sup>6</sup>

In traditional Chinese society, men call such women “intellectual beauty.” In the Chinese language there is a ready name, in common usage, for this kind of women – “cai nu” – meaning “a learned woman.” Thanks to her reputation as a learned woman among her father's circles, later in her life, despite her ill-fate in being kidnapped as a war captive and a rape victim, still she was highly esteemed in her “parents' culture” back home. After the war was over, the court sent courtiers to Xiong Nu, and offered a high price for her ransom with

the expectation that she might resume her literary activities, and sort out her father's manuscripts, which include a sequel to the *History of Han Dynasty*. On her way back home, a long-distance journey, missing her children left behind with her husband, she composed a long poem, which recorded the brutality and aftermath of war, the miseries and sufferings of civilians, and the cruel separation and destruction of family from the viewpoint of a daughter, a wife and a mother. This poem was passed down as a classic in Chinese literary history, known as "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," which Kingston borrows for the title of her last tale.

The Chinese historical accounts mostly honor Cai Yen's role as a daughter, a daughter of her father, as well as of China, often overemphasizing her sense of duty as a daughter over that of a wife, since she was willing to leave her husband to return to China. Kingston's play of Ts'ai Yen, however, elaborates on the role of a wife and mother, and Kingston is reluctant to give up that role. Kingston portrays Ts'ai Yen as a Chinese woman, who was able to adopt the life style and customs of the barbarians, "the barbarian women were said to be able to birth in the saddle" (WW 208), so she gave birth on the sand.<sup>7</sup>

In Kingston's translation, what Ts'ai Yen could not endure is the barbarians' primitive warring culture, and listening to the death sounds of their music:

During battle the arrows whistled, high whirling whistles that suddenly stopped when the arrows hit true. Even when the barbarians missed, they terrified their enemies by filling the air with death sounds, which Ts'ai Yen had thought was their only music. (WW 208)

As the crude arrow-whistle and the warring sounds of the day faded into the tragic mourning of a flute, "the music disturbed Ts'ai Yen; its sharpness and its cold made her ache. . . . She hid in her tent but could not sleep through the sound" (WW 208-9).

She stopped listening and began writing, composing. With her native talent for music and poetry, which she had preserved from memory, from her father's library and her mother tongue, she was able to produce a different song, a different voice:

Then, out of Ts'ai Yen's tent, which was apart from the others, the barbarians heard a woman's voice signing, *as if to her babies*, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. (WW 209, my emphasis)

It must be noted that in casting Ts'ai Yen in the role of a wife and mother, Kingston's ideal model is not a domestic wife. She turns Ts'ai Yen into a woman warrior, together with men in the battlefields, not as a patriotic cheer-leader of war, but as a soulmate and spokeswoman giving a feminine voice to silent soldiers and civilians. She highlights Ts'ai Yen's role as an immigrant woman, a transnational woman writer, whose role is to assimilate and transform cultures by music and poetry, to preach as a peacemaker in wars or cultural warfare. In that sense it is heroic. Through imaginary juxtapositions of a woman writer with the woman warrior, daughter of China and wife of two worlds, mother of sons born in the desert and companion to soldiers in barbarian battlefields, Kingston creates a unique female model – a translator of literary texts and cultural identities, a transnational woman writer. The lost legacy of her “mother tongue” is restored, “entitled” in her story through translation into a new language.

As the ending of the book, the story of Ts'ai Yen surprisingly subverts Orientalist expectations of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese tradition, and Chinese women, as it redresses through its performance and representation the theme of unwanted daughters, family honor and family values exposed in the opening story of “No Name Woman.” Like the no name woman in a strange way, Ts'ai Yen was also a beloved daughter, but a rape victim who lost her body to “strangers,” but she was reclaimed by her people, welcomed in court, to be remarried, to carry on her family name, “so that her father would have Han descendants” (WW 209). Her babies were wanted in China.

With such an ending, I think the popular response to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* that I acknowledged at the beginning can be properly redressed – the Orientalist assumption that a girl was held in rather low esteem

in her parents' culture, and that this might affect her outlook on the women's liberation movement in this country becomes problematized. Kingston knew that in her parents' culture, there is a tradition in which daughters are held in rather high esteem. From Ts'ai Yen to Fa Mulan, fathers survive either by the writing or by the fighting of their daughters.<sup>8</sup> Daughters carry on their backs not only the duty and honor of their fathers, their family, and their village, but also their cultural heritage, poetry, music, and history. Kingston knew that it "had been already a tradition in China" that the education of daughters means the preservation of culture and civilization, even of the history of a country and a nation, beyond the name of a family. In that tradition she discovers her ideal self and identity. Her mother's stories and father's poetry sustain her sense of identity with a rich variety of female legends for her to speculate on, recreate, and reinvent herself. Imitating Ts'ai Yen and writing from memory, she translates the heroic tradition of Chinese women into American fiction, feminizing the solipsistic voice of Anglo-American literary tradition with an Asian American woman's voice, a woman's voice in the wilderness that matches the flutes of the soldiers, and heals the alienation between the sexes, and between cultures. It was a Chinese idea, she says, that "Marriage promises to turn strangers into friendly relatives" (WW 12).

The heroic tradition of Chinese women had certainly affected Kingston's outlook on the women's liberation movement in this country, in America. While the feminist movement in America borrowed a Chinese idea of "a Woman Warrior" to advocate women's rights in military service, Kingston turned into a "peace veteran," as she calls herself, experimenting with a group of Vietnam veterans, and composing a *Book of Peace*, drawn from Chinese classics. Discovering herself in Ts'ai Yen's writing, she immediately invented a fictive form of "Eighteen Stanzas of Barbarian Reed Pipe," and wrote *China Men*, a Chinese Odyssey in American history. That book consists of eighteen sections, short and long, lyric in tone and tragic in mood, the form itself being so unique in American literature that one wonders where it comes from. It contains the epic history of her Fathers, the tragic experience of Chinese immigration in this country from late nineteenth century to the 1970s – a sequel to the history of the Han people



in North America. As a daughter of a China man, a village teacher, the wife of an American peace veteran, and the mother of contemporary Asian American literature, Kingston has fulfilled her American dream with a Chinese Idea.

Indeed, when Kingston declares in *The Woman Warrior*: "We could be heroines, swordswomen," the idea of heroism is evident in her design. The meaning of "heroism," however, varies according to context. Sometimes it is metaphorical, and sometimes theatrical. The feminist reception of Fa Mulan as a demonstration of women's physical strength as historical evidence in support of the women's rights in military service was used to challenge the prohibition against women entering combat, which may be "heroic" and radical in the women's liberation movement in this country, but somehow comic and contradictory to Kingston's idea and design.<sup>9</sup> Faced with such a militant use of her novel, Kingston was almost embarrassed and forced into a defensive position, reiterating her pacifism in public speech, and calling herself a "peace veteran." It is neither her intention nor her design to fight for equal rights to enter combat in military service. It is ironic that the "heroic" use of Kingston's book by the women's liberation movement in America, only orientalizes the heroic tradition of Chinese women.

Kingston does not profess the notion of "heroism" from the epic tradition of Western literature or the Western code of heroism as some critics would have it.<sup>10</sup> In Western society, heroism is mostly associated with war, and war is justified in the Christian theology of death and crucifixion, or in man's sexuality, man's passion for female beauty. For centuries, for the West, war was a profitable colonial enterprise to conquer the world – Africa, Asia and America, as it did. Western heroism in war is conceived in triumph more than in the tragic necessity of self-defense. In the twentieth-century American consciousness and American history, war was heroic until the end of the Vietnam War. Then war was hell because we lost the war (I am speaking as an American here). In a way heroism is identified with the winning of the war, not the cause of the war. Thus to speak of heroism is to speak of aggression, which is "male" in feminist theories. The woman's part in war in Western literature is but of "face value" – glorified in the beauty of Helen in the Trojan War.

War and heroism could not mean the same thing for the Chinese, or peoples from third world nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many Asian American immigrants came to this country to escape war, or after they had lost a war in their own country. For Kingston, from her indigenous tradition, not all fighting in war and physical valor displayed in armor is “heroic.” The Chinese believe that there are just wars and unjust wars, defensive wars and offensive wars, wars that are inevitable for self-defense, and wars that are planned to destroy others, to conquer other peoples’ land, to loot others’ wealth and women. The war one fights to defend one’s own country, land, and village, to protect one’s own family, life, and honor, to resist foreign invasion and occupation is a just war; and just wars will win in the long run. Therefore, even though death and destruction cannot be avoided and one has to lose one’s life in battle, the spirit of resistance is heroic.

In Chinese culture, in which I was raised and taught to read, wisdom is often identified with heroism. But wisdom is not conceived to be a “masculine virtue”; and I do not want to ascertain that it is necessarily “feminine intelligence” either, since wisdom is not “engendered” in such binary sexual opposition in ancient China as Western feminists were determined to “engender China” in the 1990s. Western “engendering” of China is not necessarily always superior, progressive and liberating to women’s status or women’s writing, culturally or linguistically. As Lydia Liu observes in *Translingual Practice*:

The original form of the Chinese character for the pronoun in written Chinese *ta* contains an ungendered *ren* radical [denoting a human being], and the gendering of this pronoun arose from the circumstances of translation. For thousand of years, the Chinese had lived comfortably with the ungendered form of *ta* and other ungendered deictic forms. Suddenly they discovered that Chinese had no equivalent for the third-person feminine pronoun in English, French, and other European languages. (36)

It is ironic to me that today, English speakers, and the French too, are repairing their tongue with the “he” and “she,” or “she” slashes “he,” to assert the equality between the sexes in the manner that is linguistically natural to the

Chinese, and yet some English teachers still have trouble with Chinese speakers who, after they have borrowed from Western languages a female radical for the third person feminine pronoun in written form (not oral), still cannot help but mix the “he” with the “she” in speech. Yet such a tenacious difference, deep-rooted in the speech habit of the Chinese, not only preserves a slight trace of gender identity in the Chinese tradition, but also indicates a linguistic resistance to speak a sexist language. Wouldn't it be all the better for English speakers to accept the Chinese speech habit in feminist translanguing practice? This is, I think, what Kingston has done. In translating the heroic tradition of Chinese women, she has recaptured its vestiges and articulated its resistance. Exactly as Helen Carr speaks of Native American literature, “Cultural difference in itself offers a powerful political resistance to what the West may consider hegemonic.”<sup>11</sup>

The heroism of the Woman Warrior in Kingston's text lies, first of all, in her courage to take the place of her father, in order to protect and preserve her family and village, not that she is fighting for women's rights to serve in the army, but that her father is aging, her father *is being drafted*. The historical background of Kingston's writing is the Vietnam war and her “memoir” may be read as a metaphor for the author's own commitments, her battles engaging her with the social movements that were underway in domestic American society, namely, the anti-war demonstrations, the civil rights movement, and the women's liberation movement. Her protagonist is heroic in spirit, but I do not think Kingston is celebrating women's physical strength to challenge men through practice of martial arts. In her fantasy of a battle scene, the woman warrior is overpowered by the strength of the giant, and finally saved by her own soldiers, who are men.

Her heroism is manifest rather in her textual performance, in her “war” with words. In postwar American fiction, genuine heroism lies in writing instead of warring. As I have argued elsewhere, writing is warring and the war is fought in words.<sup>12</sup> Kingston is an 1960s' idealist, who believes that writers can change the world by changing the language people speak. “We do it word by word. It's one word at a time,” she says during an interview with Bill Moyers. When Moyers asks her if she could imagine that Wittman Ah Sing, who is only twenty-

-three in *Tripmaster Monkey*, would still believe that he could change the world at the age of forty, after having been treated brutally, Kingston replies with genuine innocence: “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, I still believe it, we can change the world. In a way I myself have been at forty.” Then she uses the phrase “China Men” as an example; people used to say “Chinamen,” which is an abusive slur on the Chinese people, but after she wrote the book *China Men* and educated people to pronounce it as two words – “China Men,” it replicates the way the Chinese language is, with a spondee, one word at a time, so that now people say “China Men.”

During these ten years, I have changed the language, I changed people’s mouth. They say the way I wrote it. They no longer slur, they do not slur the word, they do not slur me. They say it right, and they read better. So I changed the world, in this case, two words at a time.<sup>13</sup>

This is what I call “literary activism” and it springs up from a heroic disposition.

Therefore, one must work with her words – puns, idioms, clichés, accents, jokes, bilingualism, neologism – “chink” words and “gook” words, as she takes them apart, twists them, and trashes them. One must work with the text and the language, observe the language of enslavement and oppression as well as the language of fictional freedom and innovation. On the one hand, there is the language of American Orientalism, an existing, familiar, accustomed language in American English – the language of misrepresentation, the surface of language, which Said calls the “exteriority” of representation. This is the language Kingston grew up with in “a girlhood among ghosts” – the language of the “ghosts,” the language of the white people. This language is Kingston’s fictional material that she has to deal with, at least to begin with, but not necessarily to end with – “The ending is mine,” as she always reminds us. On the other hand, the power of the narrative is charged with the disruptive energy of another language, which self-consciously differentiates itself from Orientalism, from the “ghost” language, the language of enslavement and oppression. This is the language of the woman warrior, the language of

women's liberation that Kingston draws and translates from the Chinese tradition, from her mother's talkstories, accented, ponderous, and resistant. In so doing, she has created a language, which can be called "mandarin" English. It is stylistically marked by polished ornate complexity of language and the voice of a matriarchy. Her mandarin prose serves as a powerful language of deconstruction, demystification, and *re-Orientation*. I always remember one of the most brilliant descriptions of Kingston's prose style, which was offered by a white male reader, Professor Neil Schmitz: "She reminds me of Isaac Bashevis Singer. She writes a lyric aristocratic gemmed prose, like Singer, like Nabokov." <sup>14</sup> Without "engendering the other," even a white male response easily identifies Kingston's prose as the same instead of the other. Kingston, the woman warrior of words, in her war with words, war against wars, hot wars in Vietnam and Cold Wars in America, has shown us her resources and tactics in her transnational linguistic practice. If, in its original sense and as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, a "hero" is an "active genius", then Kingston is truly such a hero.

To lift what I call "the Iron Curtain of Language" in English Studies takes "genuine heroism". China being the enemy country, American English lacks positive terms to speak of China, Chinese culture, China Men or Chinese women. A negative agenda, rhetorical hostility and linguistic abuse, are deep-rooted and built into the system of media language, popular consciousness, and reader response. An American audience and mainstream literary critics, particularly those "domesticated" by the mass media, isolated behind the Iron Curtain of language and the television screen, have, to a great extent, lost touch with historical reality when they speak of China, Chinese culture, and Chinese women. In the 1990s, American English is still an impoverished language, inadequate to deal with the rich layers of material in Kingston's writing. A new language must be invented to *re-Orient* critical thinking and critical writing.

In approaching the subject of Kingston's works, we need to free ourselves from the academic tradition of American Orientalism, that is to say, unlearn Western conceptualization of the Orient and Western theoretical impositions. In so doing, I am afraid that Kingston critics may, first of all, need to free

themselves from the dominance of Western gender theories and gender constructions, even to reject the concept of gender itself. In fact, nothing is more futile and oppressive than the language of “engendering” in the bulk of Kingston’s criticism that I have reviewed for over ten years. This is because the performance of gender roles in Kingston rejects the language of gender studies – it not only disrupts and deconstructs Western gender categories, but also exposes the limitations and inadequacy of Western feminist theories. There is indeed much to draw from the linguistic and artistic experiments in Kingston’s text to refresh Western concepts of human relationship in different paradigms. Its fictive language is so rich and refreshing, highly provocative, and critical that it becomes a “critifiction,” a criticism in itself.<sup>15</sup>

Kingston’s works are creationist texts, the kind of seminal texts Joyce created in his time. Like Joyce, Kingston is also determined “to create the uncreated conscience of my race.” What Joyce begot in his nightmarish “pissing,” Kingston does with her “barbarian reed-piping.” As I argued in my work on Joyce, contemporary poststructuralist theories are originated and engendered by *Finnegans Wake*; I would similarly argue that contemporary multi-ethnic and feminist theories may owe a great deal to Kingston’s stories – stories of cross-dressing, women warriors, powerful mothers and brave daughters, breaking silence through talkstories, through writing as self-fashioning, self-representation, and self-emancipation. The heroic tradition of Chinese women, which Kingston translates into American fiction, ought to generate a new theory to reorient women’s liberation in this country, in America.

What Kingston has created in *The Woman Warrior* is a revolutionary text, which demystifies the existing stereotypes of Chinese women in American Orientalism. In creating such a text, she draws from the heroic tradition of Chinese women, the stories and legends of “powerful fighters and poets and rulers that were women,” as she mentions in the interview, as well as from the life and stories of her own mother, an immigrant woman who came to America in the 1940s. The living presence of her mother and the heroic stories of Chinese women past and present, ancient and modern, legendary and living, are all counterparts and contradictions to the stereotypes – wives or slaves,

unwanted daughters, submissive, quiet, and silent, straight A students, or "Oriental girls' desire for romance."

Kingston's own mother is a woman who had liberated herself from the ghosts of tradition; she came to America to be a wife and a mother, and to raise American "heroines" with self-esteem, self-respect, and self-control, racism notwithstanding. Her talkstories offer alternative role models to mainstream canonical America. In recollecting her mother's stories from China, Kingston finds her rich and powerful feminine heritage, a cultural and literary legacy, which was denied her in school education as well as in the textbooks from which she learnt English literature. In telling her mother's talkstories, Kingston is never silenced by her mother as some critics claim, but virtually empowered by the brave spirit of *Brave Orchid* and her voice, a voice that is strong, undomesticated by the status quo and untamed in her native culture – "normal Chinese women's voices are loud and bossy" (WW 172), "Chinese communication was loud, public. Only sick people have to whisper" (WW 11).

It is this ethnic heritage that empowers Maxine Hong Kingston's feminist consciousness and gives her a complex notion of what sustains original selfhood. It draws her towards self-invention and self-emancipation, liberating not only herself, but also her kind, from linguistic oppression and misrepresentation in American fiction. But for Kingston, ethnic heritage does not mean to preserve culture, tradition, or identity as in the country of her forefathers. She makes use of such a legacy as an intellectual pursuit of knowledge and empowerment in order to redefine her own place and identity in the America of her experience and where she has lived. The postmodernist artist believes that tradition can be reinvented, but never reinvented without a difference. The knowledge of another tradition and the reinvention of that tradition in an American cultural and literary context are the unique contribution Kingston makes to the women's liberation movement in this country and to women's writing in American fiction.

She is at once writing and translating between different languages: the language of American English and the language of her mother tongue – the one has no positive phrase in speaking of the Chinese, and the other makes

no sense in public discourse. She has to translate the oral and inherited language into the language of her daily experience, thus breaking the silence of the woman's voice in a new American discourse with Chinese accents. She is not caught between the old world of China and the modern world of America, but caught between the culture of misrepresentation in the American literary market and the folk culture of Chinese America, where Chinese women have different images, play different roles, and use different voices from those in which they are stereotyped by American Orientalism.

She is certainly not free from the clichés and stereotypes of sexism and American Orientalism, as well as from the feminist slogans of her time, as no writer is free from the language in which she reads, writes and thinks; but as she is capable of telling different stories and creating dialogues between different systems of representation, none of the stereotypes exists without being called into question. In fact, the stereotypes are problematized by the radical differences that she translates from another system of representation – her mother's talkstories and the heroic tradition of Chinese women – and by the dialogues and paradoxes that she creates between such different systems of representation. The strength of Kingston's writing lies, indeed, in her forbearing the cross of historical burden, lifting the Iron Curtain of Language, subverting the dominant signs, and demystifying the stereotypes in American Orientalism.

## Notes

- 1 I wish to thank Teresa F. A. Alves and Teresa Cid for editing this article and for inviting me to participate in their panel on borderline studies at the 1999 American Studies Association Conference in Montreal. The first ten pages of this paper had been presented at that conference; the rest is taken out from the chapter "Translating the Heroic Tradition of Chinese Women" in a book manuscript "The Iron Curtain of Language: Maxine Hong Kingston and American Orientalism" (working title), that I am still working on.
- 2 See Stephen H. Sumida, "Afterword", *Growing Up Asian American*.
- 3 See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 20.



- 4 Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, 19. Subsequently indicated as WW.
- 5 Jennie Wang, "The Myth of Kingston's 'No Name Woman': Making Contextual and Intertextual Connections in Teaching Asian American Literature."
- 6 One Chinese version even claims that after the war was over and Flower Orchid (Fa Mulan) was revealed as a woman, the Emperor wanted her to be his lady; to reject his imperial summon, (or resist the "sexual harassment," as we call it) Flower Orchid committed suicide. Thus she preserved her own name as a military General and the name of her family as well; as such she was honored and immortalized. The Hollywood movie *Mulan*, written by a male writer, might have borrowed that version.
- 7 See Cai Zhuo Zhi, *One Hundred Celebrated Chinese Women*, 81.
- 8 In Chinese culture, traditional and modern, when a woman gives birth, she is expected to stay in bed for a full month without touching cold water or eating cold food. Though regional customs vary, nation-wide the maternity leave under law in China is fifty-six days, which is extended to be longer and more flexible in recent decades with the policy to encourage having one child only. So for readers who are familiar with the Han customs that women observe in child-birth, it is almost heroic for Ts'ai Yen to be able to "give birth in the saddle."
- 9 Such as Wen Ho Lee's daughter, Alberta Lee, who acted in defending her father's civil rights in 2000. An English major and a writer, and a graduate from the University of California, Los Angeles, she played the role of Fa Mu Lan, taking her brother's place in defence of her father's case. See Heather Clark, "Alberta Lee Discovers an Asian American Voice."
- 10 For instance, in Lori S. Kornblum's, "Women Warriors in a Men's World: The Combat Exclusion."
- 11 See John Limon's *Writing after War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*.
- 12 Helen Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions, 1789-1936*, 15.
- 13 Jennie Wang, "To Wielderfight His Penisolate War: The Lover's Discourse in Postmodern Fiction."
- 14 Interview with Bill Moyers in Moyers, *The Stories of Maxine Hong Kingston*.
- 15 I borrow the term from the title of Raymond Federman's book, *Critifiction* (1992).

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# **Reading Katherine Vaz, Re-thinking the Portuguese Diaspora**

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## Reading Katherine Vaz, Re-thinking the Portuguese Diaspora\*

Even though, as Leo Pap wrote, the Portuguese are “an ethnic group [that] has woven itself into the fabric of American history since the earliest days of discovery and colonization,” they have also been described as the “invisible minority” – invisible partly in the sense in which Ellison’s protagonist is, because people refuse to see them, but also due to their own pliability, their ability to adapt to environments and circumstances, combined with a certain tendency towards self-effacement not uncommon among immigrants that aspire to belong to the new society they are living in.<sup>1</sup>

Portuguese immigrants, traditionally involved in the activities of fishing or farming and in their associated industries, became, in the last half century, a much more diversified group, often with a higher level of education and a different way of looking at themselves and their history. No longer viewing their Portuguese background as a hindrance to building their life on American soil, they could even, as happened with Katherine Vaz’s father, August Vaz, get interested in researching the history of their American community, be it Californian, New Englander or Hawaiian.<sup>2</sup>

It was in the light of these new circumstances that a writer from California, of mixed Portuguese (Azorean) and Irish descent, Katherine Vaz, made her somewhat startling appearance on the American literary scene. Portuguese American writers have been so far relatively few in number and most have preferred to write in Portuguese, thus locating themselves in a linguistically eccentric community *vis a vis* the dominant one in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, none seems to have attained the visibility of Vaz, who

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\* A shorter version of this essay was first presented at the 1999 ASA/CAAS Annual Conference in Montreal, in session 218 on “Re-crossing Borders: Assessing American Multi-ethnic Society and Literature Back Home,” chaired by Teresa F. A. Alves.

was listed among the fifty most influential Luso-Americans in the twentieth century (the only other writer included in this list is John dos Passos, whose stance towards his part-Portuguese ancestry was highly problematic and only publicly acknowledged late in his career).<sup>4</sup>

The object of literary recognition both in the United States and abroad, Katherine Vaz has published since 1994 a body of fictional work mindful of the immigrant circumstance of hybridity and the stories of dislocation that are so often a feature of it. Herself partly the result of Portuguese diaspora – a term also appropriated by Portuguese Americans as befitting their own situation of dispersal – Vaz’s work brings this side of her ethnic background into the limelight, whereas her Irish background – likewise combining immigration and Catholicism – becomes a sort of subtext to her fiction. Portugal (the Azores especially) is, for Katherine Vaz as for other contemporary writers, no longer the “dying nation” Leo Pap refers to, but the *locus* of a captivating culture, vitally speaking to her imagination.<sup>5</sup> As a result, her characters are predominantly Portuguese (coming mostly from the Azores) or Portuguese American. The use of Portuguese words for titles of books written in English further emphasizes the cultural location she chooses to write from, exhibiting a concern with language as identity and a will to cross linguistic and cultural borders that also finds explicit development as a form of heteroglossia in the body of her work.

*Saudade* (1994), the title of her first novel, refers to a kind of longing culturally understood as specifically Portuguese. The most celebrated artistic expression of this emotion is to be found in folk music, in a type of song known as “fado”, a word borrowed for the title story of her collection of short stories published in 1997, *Fado and Other Stories*. “Fado” literally means fate and it is the fate of a celebrated Portuguese nun intensely struck by feelings of “saudade” that is the subject of her second novel *Mariana*. It is thus the Portuguese sense of fate and the special longing it entails that is Vaz’s main subject and the shaping force of the life of her characters in general.<sup>6</sup>

In so doing, Vaz has somewhat antedated what can be viewed as a revival of interest in a musical expression that most Portuguese would, not many years ago, tend to have disregarded as purely, and maybe detrimentally,

sentimental. Could that be a product of immigrant life? Could geographical but also cultural distance work as a binding force to a past of history and legend that paradoxically surfaced as a presence in late twentieth-century America? Nostalgia and sorrow have, indeed, been pervasive feelings in emigrant Portuguese writing that has much in common with “fado” as the expression of an emotion of essential loss.<sup>7</sup> This emotion has, moreover, been fuelled by both the geographical distance and the time-induced changes that interfere with what memory remembers and cherishes.

As diasporic reality is a de-centering one, the result of a slippage process of centered stabilities, the emotion of loss expresses the mixed feelings of the immigrant who would like to retain an immutable point of reference, untainted by globalisation, amid all the hybridity of his or her present life, while not quite wanting to give up on the manifold advantages that life in the United States can offer. Within this less than euphoric outlook on immigration, America may be perceived as a necessity, and its expanding dynamics clearly resented, especially when its globalizing influence is felt in the re-visited mother country: “America, we complain about it but we could not live without it, similar to an immense Sears and Roebuck from which we get tons of consumer products, from computer programs to jeans. [...] Fado is almost only for tourists and what is ‘in’ is to get some ‘mani’ to buy ‘cee dees’ of British or American rock. Or even Portuguese, if need be. [...] Even so, go, go on to see this Portugal of nice mediocrities, unbearable lacks and touching absurdities”<sup>8</sup>

Katherine Vaz accepts the invitation and what she sees is significantly different. As a result, reading Vaz means experiencing through language and narrative the loss that immigrant life necessarily involves, but also the gain it entails. The fact that worn out iconic words such as “saudade” and “fado” are given a new freshness and intensity of meaning is also, for Portuguese readers, to become aware of another kind of loss experienced by those that stayed at home, namely the often pervasive lackluster of our Portuguese-ness. In her work, those words do not refer to a stale sensibility, but to a vital spiced-up one, allowing readers to embark on a voyage of discovery or recovery of themselves – a voyage revealing new routes to old treasures, much in the way our forebears



did centuries ago when they established new webs of communication and goods, notably spices, and Portuguese became the lingua franca for commerce.<sup>9</sup>

Then as now, words need to perform their task as conveyors of meaning, and in modern America, Portuguese words are so foreign that they have to be taught and explained, sometimes even within the ethnic community.<sup>10</sup> This is what happens to the title word of Vaz's first novel: "*Saudade* – it is an untranslatable word. It is nostalgia. It is melancholy. It is a joy. It is a joy that is held to until it ages into yellowed joy (Cheese stays milk, despite the setting in of mold). It is an ancient affliction. It is a modern affliction. It is more than longing, more than yearning. For the past, for glory. For someone, something. It is a declaration: *Your absence has become the greatest presence of my life. Although you are so much in me that I carry you around, this is a pale fulfillment compared with the you that might be before me. Come to me!*" (*Saudade*, 186). Elsewhere, "fado" is explained as a chemical leak in the form of a song: "We are so sad, so chemically sad, that it leaks from us: The *fados* wailing from our record players remind us that without love we will die, that the oceans are salty because the Portuguese have shed so many tears on their beaches for those they will never hold again" (*Fado*, 97-8).

Important as this cultural translation may be, there is also the risk of overdoing it, as well as of overplaying the differentiating ethnic element of one's past as the cornerstone of identity. That Vaz is aware of that risk is proven by one of her character's musings on the subject which carry a distinct autobiographical ring to them: "Nowadays people like to claim that they're the product – and I mean exactly that – of the land of their ancestors; it suggests ceremonies and royalty and flights of fancy, more glamorous than the shopping lists we make of our days. I'm like that myself. My parents wanted to be American, but people my age want to take the most exotic portion of their blood and paint themselves a character out of it. The problem is that we collect quick impressions and pretend that they're sensations we've earned. I plead guilty to that as much as the next guy should." Awareness of ethnic-construction or enhancement does not prevent him, however, from insisting on the

genuineness of a distinctly Portuguese vital component in him: “But I do have one Lusitanian quality that has the strength of instinct in me, without my faking it or pumping it up: Portuguese fatalism gravitates to the absolute.” (*Fado*, 20)

Gravitation to an absoluteness of feeling and expression infuses Katherine Vaz’s fiction where the personal and the historical get inextricably mingled. As with Faulkner, in it the past is not dead, it is not even past. Fading legends and myths are disclosed as enduring entities, ascribing added meaning to the lives of today. A case in point is Vaz’s use of a long-standing myth addressing the desire for the restoration of Portugal’s lost glory, the myth of King Sebastian. Vaz is determined to do something more than just talk about how the “Portuguese sailed around the world and opened the route to the East” (*Fado*, 18), despite the fact that her medium is also that of words. As such, she discards the more traditional Portuguese attitude of waiting for King Sebastian, an attitude infused with passivity and longing, and recasts it as dynamic venture, a personal hunt for that saving figure, with the concomitant realization that *sebastianism* is also what emigration is about, salvation being sought after or hunted for on distant shores, oceanic or otherwise.

Though Vaz’s characters, plots, and language may seem on occasion somewhat contrived, they often manage to carry the genuineness of their simply wanting to be emphatically more, to strive for higher levels and subtler tonalities of being and expression. Oftentimes in strange and surprising ways, they seem to be trying to achieve what happens to the protagonist of “Math Bending Unto Angels,” that is, the ability to fly away in beams of light and eventually come back as blissful rain – or possibly tears: “that was what flying over the land of possibilities meant – and he would hold out his arms to the rain, and listen to her tales of purple talk, and beg her to sing”. (*Fado*, 54-55)

Reading Vaz is also, in many ways, similar to listening to a song of sorrow, but also of love and discovery, possessing at times even luminous grace. She actually invites the reader to see a country of seafarers in the literal and the metaphoric senses of the term, a cloistered nun acquiring, no less than a dentist or a post-office clerk, that essential longing for a larger horizon that bridges the distance between Portuguese and American cultures. The handling

of language is often lavishly musical and poetic, hard and almost repulsive on occasion, but seldom dull. The way she approaches language may be due to her being a second generation immigrant, the closeness to the language of the adopted country being clearly evident but the knowledge of the ancestral one not completely lost, only much less familiarly there. It is thus a simultaneously intimate and distanced stance towards English due to the interference of a different perspective offered by Portuguese that infuses her work, both culturally and linguistically, the two languages creating a freshness in their interaction that makes reading Vaz a singular experience.<sup>11</sup>

Although different in style, her work partakes of the spirit of Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Nabokov's *Lolita*, two of the remarkable love affairs with language we can find in American Literature. In *Saudade*, Clara, a Lolita of sorts born in the Azores, is almost in Ahab fashion trying to capture her whale by careful scheming and sheer willpower. Were she successful, she would in a literal sense get "Transfiguration," the land so named that was meant to be hers – or so she believes – thus bringing together both the promise of America on a larger scale and the promise for the immigrant on a more individual one. The fact that she incessantly tries to but never really achieves this goal and has to re-discover herself anew ironically links the Portuguese fatalistic-tainted worldview and the American assertive one that feels "you can take your fate and shape it a certain way and things can be better."<sup>12</sup> As such, Clara's story neither subscribes to the tragic drive of Ahab, nor to the routine ordinary life of the grown-up Lolita, offering rather a repositioning of the subject and its destiny that follows a more intricate and less predictable pattern, which is inclusive, expansive, syncretic, baroque.

Clara's story also updates, in a provocative way, two of the main impulses behind the so-called discoveries made by the Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, namely the acquisitive and the missionary, the commercial and the religious, their sometimes perverse combinations being actually called "original sin" – the title of the short story that laid the foundation for the novel *Saudade*. Clara is the beautiful rebellious grotesque heir of such a past, determined on a course of action beyond all common sense, driven by desire, willing to

explore the deepest layers of her world, and heeding more to the power of her mind to command her physical body than acknowledging the traditional limits imposed by it. Born deaf and dumb, she is bound to find other ways to communicate and only later learns how to talk.<sup>13</sup> Allowing herself to be caught in the formal system of regular reading and writing solely because someone was able to turn the fishhook-like alphabet into a beautiful dance, she uses sugar language, communicates in colors, and manages to attain a level of “love-living” so intense that, not only do colors become language, they also become sound. Her music of colors is an audible expression of narrative and poetry, offering the occasion for intense episodes in the ongoing textual love affair with Portuguese literature, as well as with oral popular lore.<sup>14</sup>

Reading Vaz from a combined American Studies and Portuguese point of view makes one aware of the multiple literary voices present in her text and, above all, of the way they continue the dialogue other writers have been engaging in across both cultures, notably those of Melville with Camões, or of Pessoa with Whitman; such a reading also allows for the perception of a more intense self-awareness, self-questioning and search for self-definition so typical of American concerns; furthermore, it gives added clarity to the way this present-day woman writer is dealing with the voices of a predominantly male canon, both American and Portuguese.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Vaz does not shun these literary monuments, the epigraphs to her books suggest it is another lineage she is looking for, that of the questioning and searching female voice, one that says “I must go” (*Saudade*, 3).<sup>16</sup> Dynamic rather than passive, Vaz’s outlook regards even the work of expansion and conquest as the province of women, expansion and conquest being shown not as they are in official documents as the work of men, but in a more unperceived way as depending on the persuasive, resilient, unyielding power of women. The character of Mariana – the title-lending protagonist of Vaz’s second novel – when still a child living in the mid-seventeenth century, offers a paradigmatic example of such an attitude: “whether it would be soul, men, or birds, it was worth every risk to be out here in the open air [...] Mariana would go for walks whenever she wanted! One day she would visit the court

of Louis XIV [...] During her travels in Goa and Macau, she would inhale spices. She was not the godchild of the great-grandson of the explorer Vasco da Gama for nothing!" (*Mariana*, 10)

One should then not wonder at the fact that Katherine Vaz writes improbable stories about improbable events, feeding upon a history of improbabilities: the Portuguese achievements in navigation, or the incredible existence of the Azores islands themselves, a handful of volcanic cones surfacing in the mid-Atlantic, on the periphery of continents but still vitally central both in terms of navigational routes over the centuries or in terms of the much more recent ones for American military aircraft. These are wondrous stories born out of wondrous lives and minds, more often than not on the move and necessarily alert to an outside world that is all but tame or lame. This is a place that natives constantly have to leave, either to work at sea or in a distant land on a more permanent basis, their sense of loss never quite completely overcome precisely because of what they leave behind – a demanding place, claustrophobic amid all the fierce openness of nature that binds the fiery entrails of the earth with the surrounding Atlantic waters joined at the horizon with the always changing airy skies.

Nevertheless, it is not the preservation of the self as an island that is upheld, nor are geological or ethnic islands defined as peripheries from which one may look at the American center – quite the contrary. Vaz does indeed embrace the role of mediator and even cultural translator of a different but still American world existing within the frontiers of the United States. Her writing spans the possible void existing between the ethnic community and the surrounding mainstream American culture. In *Saudade*, for example, Reagan's economics and reaffirmation of the myths of struggle and success are both central and marginal to the novel and to the lives of the Portuguese-American characters, whose intricate, and American, "fados" consistently occupy the center stage.

The concern with bridging the gap, in this case not only between two cultures but two different times, is also at the heart of *Mariana*, Vaz's more recent novel. It takes Vaz back to Portugal and back in time to the seventeenth

century, more specifically to the town of Beja, where someone who may be deemed a neglected Portuguese writer lived enclosed by the walls of a convent during a crucial time of strife over Portuguese national and cultural identity. Published in 1997, *Mariana* turned into an instant bestseller, acclaimed by the critical world that praised the way it handled the figure of Mariana Alcoforado (1640-1723).<sup>17</sup> This Portuguese nun was purportedly the author of the passionate love letters that were first published in French in 1669, a Portuguese original never having been found; she becomes for Vaz the occasion for a deep exploration of independence and interdependence of states and nations, but also of freedom of action, of expression and feeling as they primarily apply to women living in a confined environment. The re-visitation of the ancestors' country in this very contemporary historical novel opened for Katherine Vaz and reopened for her readers in Portugal a most interesting terrain of literary and cultural inquiry.

In this novel, Vaz explores once more the Portuguese sense of fate and the special longing it brings about. The fate of this character, Mariana, has remained to this day both veiled and a source of inspiration for writers and artists. In recent times hailed as a paragon of feminist assertion, an inspiring figure for the right to self-expression, she has also been the object of feminist criticism, which translates its misgivings about her into an avowed "inten[tion] to displace the nun from her overextended reign as epistolary queen."<sup>18</sup>

However, her reign has been a feeble one, to say the least. Extolled by Rilke as one of the "powerful examples of women in love [...] who even while they called him, surpassed the man they loved,"<sup>19</sup> the presumed author of the celebrated five love letters known as *Lettres Portugaises* has nevertheless remained a shadowy figure, more often than not denied by literary critics the authorship of the letters that were to become such an influential work – so much so that the word "portugaise" came to refer antonomastically to a passionate love letter.

*Lettres portugaises traduites en françois* (1669) met with instant success, being reprinted many times and eliciting responses and imitations, both in the same year and, we might say, ever since. Elision has certainly been part of the

process, followed, however, by a disclosure that has never ceased to be considered problematic, begging the question of how gender can be identified in writing.<sup>20</sup>

The discussion about authorship has, in fact, revolved around style but also around considerations of gender and expression. It has been argued that only an accomplished writer could have written them; Rousseau, for example, thought that only a man would have the depth of emotion necessary to write such a piece of literary work; others have, on the contrary, emphasized their aesthetics of disorder (repetitions, inflamed tone, etc.) as a proof that they have, indeed, been penned by a woman.<sup>21</sup>

However, even though Vaz necessarily becomes part of this discussion, clearly taking the side of the Portuguese nun as author, the controversy is not really the focal point of Vaz when she approaches the subject of Mariana. Nor is her main focus the discussion of an ideology of femininity based on a figure of sorrow and suffering. Her acknowledged purpose has been to turn absence brought about by time and space – inductive of epistolary writing, after all – into presence. Drawing on whatever historical elements she could collect from the careful research she did in Portugal, she fictionalizes by imaginative leaps all the missing biographical gaps. The result is a captivating novel that chronologically follows its protagonist's life, focusing its "camera eye" on fragmentary moments of different import and significance, relating to personal, family, and national issues, with domestic lore and "newsreels" becoming intimately intertwined.<sup>22</sup>

Vaz's historical novel on the enigmatic Portuguese nun, encompassing the whole of her long life rather than exclusively focusing on the passionate short period for which she became controversially known, and exhibiting an uncommon creativity in incident and language, was received in Portugal with acclaim but also something more. The fact that it was written by an American with a Portuguese (Azorean) family background, and not by a Portuguese author was a real surprise. Though Mariana and her story as well as the question of the authorship of the *Letters* have not been foreign to scholarship or literary imagination in Portugal,<sup>23</sup> that such a work could come from a Portuguese-American author was almost a shock, exposing how powerful can

be preconceived ideas about emigrants, just as much as about America as a place of fast-food cultural products.

As mentioned above, Portuguese-American fiction writers have been few in number and perhaps not always given the recognition they deserve. Even fewer have written in English. That one had not only crossed the borders of the immediate ethnic community circle in the United States but also become known abroad was something to be noticed, indeed. In Portugal, the story of Vaz's Mariana as a daring girl, always ready to go one step further in whatever endeavor she put herself up to (be it love – of man, of God, of fellow humans-self-punishment, or other) struck an important chord. The idea that she had never repented having lived an intense love experience or resented the fact that her letters had been made public and had traveled to places she had wanted to visit and never did was also worthy of note. And so was her courage to return from the depths of suffering to an ultimately cultured, humanly strong and rewarding life within the walls of a convent. Vaz's ability as a writer also got special attention for the way she combines oral tradition with scholarly erudition, this being praised as unique and well nigh foreign.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, whereas for non-Portuguese readers her writing may seem foreign in the sense that it is importing a different cultural milieu into the American world of letters, native Portuguese readers feel both at home and estranged from home when reading Vaz. The intensity she brings to her fictional work becomes both disturbing and enticing since one is forced to share a double point of view, as if looking at oneself almost as a total other but not quite. Portuguese readers of Vaz feel compelled to migrate in their minds to a different horizon, only then being able to look back at themselves and their own myths seen from an American distance that elicits new questions and ways of thinking about the Portuguese diaspora of yesterday as well as of today. Dulled cultural senses – historical, religious, social, gastronomical even – are, in a way, turned upside-down, much like the cherished Saint Anthony image is in *Mariana*. One feels forced to look harder at what is going on and, hopefully, intervene and “tell everyone what's possible.” (*Fado*, 54) In parallel fashion, I believe that most American readers used to the idea of a Portugal



defined almost exclusively as a privileged tourist destination will experience a different but no less interesting sense of dislocation. For both readers, “fado” is enticingly re-centered as a meaningful expression, thus losing its peripheral status of tourist attraction or irrelevant lament.

Furthermore, *Mariana*, as an historical novel that incorporates the epistolary, crosses in postmodern fashion the borders of genre. It makes readers doubly conscious of the process of historical imaginative travel in the realms of both recorded events and literary ones, by dealing not so much with the dramatically heroic side of history, but with the personal, intimate one and the ways it interacts with the national versions present in acknowledged official records. Even more significantly perhaps, *Mariana* can be read as the letter from an immigrant in the shape of a novel. It is a letter both to a place and time of origin as well as to a founding spirit worked out in the imagination – a spirit of discovery (mostly in the sense of revelation) and of endurance, a spirit of strength of will and of emotion, all of it captured in the letters upon a page. “How thrilling, what a marvel”, thinks the protagonist, “that writing could contain a beloved one!” (*Mariana*, 5)

In *Saudade* there is a character who is a dentist by profession and a botanist by inclination, his main research interest residing in grafting. He tries to take this activity into realms that are more those of the creator than of the manipulator of created elements. He untiringly grafts, in experimental and more often than not doomed ways, such disparate elements as emotions and plants, words and flowers. Improbable as some combinations may be, some of his unusual grafts turn out as beautiful new beings. This is, as I see it, what Vaz’s work is all about: the grafting of people and cultures, of words, sounds and rhythms that become no longer separate entities but a new one. Even her so-called use of magical realism is of a special kind, possibly the result of grafting “saudade” and “fado” to the American land and culture.

This most suggestive metaphor for the immigrant experience allows her to go beyond the simple image of the hardworking, upwardly mobile, thrifty individual or community, at times torn between the material benefits reaped in the country of adoption and the emotional ties to the country that was left

behind. More than the pride felt by the successful immigrant or the weariness of the failed one, what one finds in Vaz is a path of self-discovery spurred on by some missing thing, be it a flower to complete the bouquet of a person's life (in *Saudade*), or the answer to a grandmother's riddle (in *Mariana*). It is, after all, the grafting of the self and the world that everyone has to achieve, but that becomes especially apparent in the circumstance of immigrant life. Her characters, however insignificant, are pictured as special, more often than not as artists and seers, capable of discovering in themselves gifts that distinguish them from everyone else and can be put to good use both in terms of the individual and the community. Such is the case of Clara, who plays music that gathers people together and makes their hearts almost burst. Such is the case of Mariana, whose written words take her and so many others, even within the confines of the convent, into surprising realms of transcendence. Unlike Clara, for whom language and writing are obstacles to be overcome, Mariana sees them as things to be cherished and carefully practiced, with love and precision, expanding rather than bureaucratizing the world. They become not only a means of powerful personal expression, but also a source of inspiration for others, allowing her to really achieve transfiguration, much as her country achieved independence.

The work of Katherine Vaz is about languages and words, with an emphasis on those written or spoken by women; it is about achieving a transfigurative inter-dependence – just another way of saying genuine love; it is about passion and about freedom, about discovering the world without coercively controlling others, about penetrating the depth of one's being, always pushing the limits of dull everyday life a little further. Readers may not applaud every turn of fancy or choice of words. They may even resent some contrived episodes or extravagant references, but it is difficult not to acknowledge the force of this writing that takes in hand the task of reconfiguring American and Portuguese fates, thus hopefully freeing them from complacent cultural quiescence.

## Notes

- 1 See Leo Pap, "Preface" to *The Portuguese-Americans*, and M. Estelie Smith's "Portuguese Enclaves: The Invisible Minority."
- 2 For an appreciation of the relationship between emigrants to the U.S. and Portugal see, for example, Diniz Borges's *América. O Outro Lado do Sonho*. August Vaz, a historian, wrote a history of the Portuguese in California.
- 3 Werner Sollors has been insisting on the need for a "multilingual turn in American Studies," stressing the usually neglected polyglot nature of the U.S. and the fact that a work written in the U.S. in a language other than English, even in a "hybrid tongue" or "melting glot" (such as "Portinglês," the mixture of Portuguese and English), should be the object of study within the fields of American Studies or American Literature and not necessarily regarded as foreign literature. However, most of the literary works written in Portuguese by U. S. residents, or citizens, have been grouped under the heading of Portuguese literature and are not really considered as American.
- 4 The list mostly includes politicians, business people, judges, bishops, physicians, and artists. See "Os 50 Luso Americanos Mais Influentes do Século."
- 5 See Pap, 222; Vaz said the following in an interview with Mario Machado: "I was raised to believe that the world was not only a reasonable place, but a mysterious one as well"[...] "And I think that is a very important, and I realize rare, distinction that people can make about the Azorean culture." (1).
- 6 Vaz won the 1997 Drue Heinz Literature Prize for *Fado and Other Stories*. Both her novels have been translated into Portuguese and *Mariana* has also been translated into Italian, German, Spanish and Greek.
- 7 The history of *fado* and of its diverse types is beyond the scope of this essay. It is, nevertheless, worth mentioning, that it is itself a product of Portuguese colonial encounters in earlier centuries, encompassing complex aspects of locality and gender as well as of mood, musical rhythm and tone.
- 8 Eduardo Mayone Dias, "Vem Georges." (118-19; my translation). It might be added that, even though several interpreters of *fado*, both singers and musicians, have in the last few years been doing interesting and innovative work that is increasingly claiming public attention, it still bears no comparison to the popularity of other kinds of musical expression, such as Anglo-American popular music among large segments of the Portuguese population.
- 9 This recovery does not, however, mean a return to a sense of exceptionality in terms of identity, expressed as a proud affirmation of isolationism during the Salazar regime, when under the slogan of "orgulhosamente sós" ("proudly alone") colonial wars were fought in Africa against the better judgment of many, both abroad and at home.

- 10 Vaz has mentioned in interviews that, though she has several siblings, she is the only one who decided to learn Portuguese, since in her home that language was used only rarely, even by adults. See, for instance, Isabel Laranjo's "In the land of their ancestors."
- 11 For example, even though she may find fault with other aspects of Vaz's fiction, Ruth Scurr comments on "her enviably poetic sensibility" in the following terms: "The scale, delicacy and coherence of this piece ["Island Fever"] is worthy of comparison with the best of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry."
- 12 See interview with Kathleen Lawrence, 21.
- 13 Establishing a parallel between her protagonist's circumstance and that of whoever may try to express oneself in a foreign language, Vaz underlines the fact that she understood early in life that people have the ability to find alternative forms of expression in order to communicate. See Isabel Laranjo's "In the land of their ancestors."
- 14 *Saudade*, called a "book of discoveries" by Isabel Laranjo, was published in Portuguese in September 1999, following the best-selling success of *Mariana*, which had been published in translation in 1998. For further comments on these novels by Portuguese or Portuguese American critics see also Teresa Almeida, Adelaide Batista, Linda Santos Costa, Xavier Coutinho, Vamberto Freitas, Tony Jenkins, Mario Machado, and Rosa Simas.
- 15 *Saudade* has been read in Portugal, for instance, as an echo of Eça de Queirós' nineteenth-century novel, *O Crime do Padre Amaro*. However, Teresa Almeida (1999) rightly points out that we do not really find in Portuguese fiction a female figure with the violence and autonomy of Clara.
- 16 In *Saudade*, subdivided into Books and in chapters, there are several epigraphs irregularly scattered in the volume; the first chapter is introduced by the story of the mermaid who falls in love with a man and asks the water-gods to grant her feet. Epigraphs for *Mariana* are an excerpt from one of Héloïse's letters to Abelard and a stanza from Emily Dickinson's poem "The way I read a Letter's - this -". In *Fado*, the epigraph is from the sonnet "?" by the Portuguese poet Florbela Espanca.
- 17 Among other factors, such as the publisher's marketing ones, the fact that the subject of the novel was an European story may have played a part in the choice to have it published in London. This has, however, hindered American readers' accessibility to the novel, it being almost impossible to find in American bookstores.
- 18 See Katharine Ann Jensen, *Writing Love Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, 1605-1776*, xii.
- 19 Rainer Marie Rilke, *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 133-34. Rilke translated the letters into German in 1913.
- 20 *Lettres portugaises traduites en français* was first anonymously published in Paris, by the house of Claude Barbin with an introductory note briefly referring to its Portuguese origin. Later the same year, a Cologne publisher, Pierre du Marteau, issued another

edition under the title *Lettres d'amour d'une religieuse écrites au chevalier de C., officier français en Portugal*, identifying both the addressee, Monsieur le Chevalier de Chamilly, and the translator Cuilleraque, known today as Guileragues. The name of the nun, as well as some other scarce but relevant data, was actually mentioned in the body of the letters themselves. A recent English version of the letters is: *The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, London, Harvill, 1996, trans. Guido Waldman. Katherine Vaz initially approached the *Letters* with the intention to simply translate them into English, which she did, somewhat modernizing the seventeenth century style and eventually incorporating them in the novel; here, they appear ordered in a sequence which, rather than the original one, adopts that proposed by Luciano Cordeiro.

- 21 Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes in a footnote included in “An Epistle to Mr. D’Alembert” the following: “Women in general are admirers of none of the arts, they have no disposition for any, nor are they possessed of genius. They may succeed in little performances, which require only sprightliness of fancy, delicacy of taste, or a superficial understanding. [...] But that celestial fire which warms and animates; that genius which consumes and devours; that glowing eloquence, those sublime transports, which penetrate the soul, will be ever found wanting in the works of female writers. [...] I would venture to wager, that the famous Portuguese [sic] letters were written by a man.” (148-49) Much more recently, Leo Spitzer arrived at a not so different conclusion, when he discussed the style of the letters, arguing that they were written by an accomplished literary master such as Guileragues is posited, albeit un-unanimously, to have been. Commenting on his reading of the *Letters*, Linda S. Kaufman criticizes Spitzer’s outlook as grounded in a gendered academic perspective that erases the power of the Portuguese nun’s predicament and discourse. The controversy over the authorship of this work is still very much alive, and the work itself continues to be re-issued both in French and in new translations.
- 22 I am here deliberately borrowing the terminology used by John Dos Passos in *USA*.
- 23 See, for instance, the scholarly works of Luciano Cordeiro, A. Gonçalves Rodrigues, Hernâni Cidade, Fidelino de Figueiredo, E. T. Dubois, Xavier B. Coutinho or Ann Livermore, among others; see also Júlio Dantas’s play, Afonso Lopes Vieira’s poem, and *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa. Better known as *The Three Marias* in the English translation, it was published in Portugal in 1972 by three liberated women who took Mariana as a point of departure for their own expressions of feelings of love and opposition to social patriarchy and political censure. The book caused an enormous uproar and the authors were tried on charges of abuse of the freedom of the press and outrage to public decency. After the revolution of 1974 brought the authoritarian regime to an end, the charges were finally dismissed and the authors considered and acclaimed as heralds of feminist thought and action.
- 24 See Teresa Almeida, “Travessia de Fronteiras: Um romance sobre Mariana Alcoforado revela uma escritora de ascendência portuguesa.”

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