I Fall Upward: Images of Women and Aging in Contemporary Women's Poetry

"I am luminous with age"
Meridel LeSeur

Dr. Nadya Aisenberg, adjunct associate professor, Women's Studies, Brandeis University, is the author of four nonfiction books, most recently, O*rdinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, Continuum Publishing, N.Y. 1995. She has also published four books of poetry, of which the latest, *Leaving Eden*, Forest Books, London, 1995, won the Bruce P. Rossley Literary Award from the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, Boston.

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When in December 1836 Charlotte Bronte, aged20, sent some of her poems to Robert Southey, then Poet Laureate of England, earnestly soliciting a response from "his throne of light and glory," and confessing that she wanted "to be known forever as a poet," she received, after three anxious months, the following reply:

Madam,

Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity.[1]

"Proper duties" of women were held to be: care of the elderly, (a particular cross of Charlotte Bronte's in fact); motherhood; submission to and nurturance of a spouse; domestic management. The role of a poet, by contrast, involved a degree of self-preoccupation disallowed women. Southey never addresses the poems themselves. His rejoinder centers on the rigid separation of public and private spheres, and the inappropriateness of women harboring ambition. It is the ad feminam argument. This, of course, applied to all women in the arts, not only to aspiring women writers. Linda Nochlin observes that very similar problems confronted women painters and sculptors; such aspirants had to overcome traditional attitudes that censured a life of commitment and focus for a woman.[2] Dedication and solitude were deemed "unfeminine," certain to interfere with traditional marriage roles. As we will see later on, women writers treasure solitude as a necessary condition for creativity, but it has taken a very long time for them not to internalize solitude as social rejection, the unfortunate result of not being chosen.

The inequality of women is possibly nowhere more evident than in the opprobrium and neglect aging women face. Misogyny becomes extreme when directed toward *older* women as a consequence of the pervasive definition of women's "nature" as exclusively physical. First, the erotic definition, i.e. woman as the object of desire of the male gaze, (though not with any acknowledgment of women's own sexuality), and second, the woman as fecund, the maternal body.[3] This traditional identification of woman-as-body, which concomitantly dismisses women's moral and intellectual powers, justifies the neglect of older women as useless once they have advanced the mandated roles of sexual object and child-bearing vessel. A barrage of literary and visual images which I propose to discuss supports this false cultural identity. Further, fear lurks that aging women will be an economic burden, since men statistically pre-decease women in our society, thereby leaving them with insufficient resources. Self-supporting women are disadvantaged through lower salaries with smaller pensions, and less complete medical benefits. Yet precisely because of the increasing size of the elderly population, social change demands a new relation between elderly and young.[4]

My project here is to demonstrate that as older women have claimed a voice in which to express publicly their own experience, their own engagement with the world, weary assumptions, prejudices really, fall away. Aging women are not less creative, less adaptive, less innovative, emptied of productivity and dependent. Older women writers change the perception of who they are, humanizing the portrait of the despised group, speaking out for their own history, their own values.

Older women writing now, for example, refute stereotypical roles and pernicious images pertaining to their eroticism and maternalism. As women

describe their own sexuality, they interpret their lives differently than interpretations put upon them by men. Louise Bogan's poignant "The Crows" testifies to the continuance of desire regardless of age. Here's the first stanza:

The woman who has grown old
and knows desire must die,
Yet turns to love again,
Hears the crows' cry.
She is a stem long hardened...[5]

As far as limiting maternity to child-bearing per se, older women express rather their own sense of an *ongoing* maternal function which begins with child-bearing, proceeds through child-rearing, and remains into the difficult formulation of a relation to adult children. This theme crops up in the work of Alicia Ostriker, Shirley Kaufman, Adrienne Rich, to name but a few examples. In fact, women writers explore the *many* dimensions of motherhood, and portray it in all its cultural and psychological, as well as physical complexity. They amplify from personal experience the ideological portrayal of motherhood as an idealized, even holy role. The Russian poet Marina Tsvetsayeva writes, "Motherhood is a question without an answer." In fact, studying the mother's point of view rather than her role in the child's process of development, is a very recent undertaking.[6]

What we find looking at the work of contemporary women poets who have passed the age when romantic love is *assumed* to be their primary subject matter—though let us not forget that male writers such as Thomas Hardy, Robert Graves, Robert Frost, did not find age rendered poems of their passion inappropriate—are poems of courage, wisdom, humor, engagement with politics and social issues, work testifying to love between and among women, poems confronting death, and above all, poems that irrefutably display growth into the self, and self-transcendence. These works show older women not as a burden, but as a positive resource for the larger community.

Older women are valuable not least because, as Patricia Meyer Spacks points out in another regard, they are resisters, feared for their "disobedience, opinions, anger, outspokenness, and general lack of compliance."[7] In other words, the fearless older woman shows us how to challenge the status quo.

The older woman poets of today have laid to rest once and for all the hoary criticism that poetry by women is regrettably small in scale and limited in range. This charge was still being leveled as recently as the 1970's when Theodore Roethke wrote: "Two of the charges most frequently leveled against poetry by women are the lack of range—in subject matter, in emotional tone—and lack of humor." Once upon a time, perhaps, the harsh constraints under which women lived their lives had understandably blunting effects on their literary work, but women poets today, especially perhaps those over fifty years of age, demonstrate that it is possible to combine a closely observed representation of daily life with a wide variety of tones and themes and voices.

When we consider the widespread and continuous subordination of women throughout history, and more particularly the scornful dismissal of older women, (even the psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, as a faithful follower of Freud, viewed the *older* woman as "other"),[8] and then add to these deterrents long-standing proscriptions against women's speech, we can first appreciate how remarkable it is that we have a vital, creative, sizable body of work by twentieth century older women poets.[9]

I am thinking here of such poets as Eve Merriam; Meridel LeSeur; Lucille Clifton; Lorine Niedecker; May Sarton; Maxine Kumin; Amy Clampitt; Muriel Rukeyser; Marie Ponsot; Alicia Ostriker; Denise Levertov. Recently, Virginia Hamilton Adair has shaken the literary world—though a closet poet all her life, she did not publish her first book of poems, *Ants on the Melon*, until age 83! And then to critical astonishment and acclaim!

The list above is a mere sampling of women who demonstrate that creativity, like desire, is not quenched when youth ends, but is a continuing voyage of discovery. "Discovery," the title of one of Marie Ponsot's reflective poems about aging, is, tellingly, a significant theme for this group as a whole.

I do not mean to suggest, it would be foolish to do so, that twentieth century women poets sprang or spring full-born from the forehead of a muse. Certainly, we can point to outstanding women poets from earliest times to those directly before us who exceed their stereotypical roles: the intense, lesbian lyrics of the ancient Greek poet Sappho are usually where any glance at women's poetry begins. And if we skip from that beginning (not that the interval is a blank) to what directly precedes the contemporary scene we are examining, we find in the nineteenth century Christina Rosetti, who wrote in "Goblin Market" of female homoeroticism; Elizabeth Barret Browning, who, though popularly known as the author of love sonnets to her husband Robert Browning, wrote anti-slavery and politically radical work such as "Aurora Leigh" and was a dedicated feminist; or Emily Dickinson, whose original and passionate voice, whose explosive punctuation, assuredly do not conform to our notion of repressed and demure spinsterhood. But most women writers are lost to us, because strictures of modesty, decency, good taste, led them to keep their writing private, or if they did publish, their work was edited (often not by them!) to preserve decorum. Moreover, husbands, brothers and sons eclipsed women's careers; many of women authors withdrew from the public eye.

The vast redirection of creative energy in the poetry of older women writing today is marked by freshness and vigor of style and subject matter which stakes out new territory. Everything about imaging women's age still needed to be done. Men had not supplied older women with positive portraits of themselves, but with farcical ones—the possessive mother-in-law, the post-menopausal vaporous hysteric.10 Now women are providing their own representation.

I turn now to the expressions of some of those voices, emphasizing again that these women are representative of a larger whole. Only limitations of space excluded many other choices equally valuable and instructive.[11]

My selection was based on the following questions: how are "appropriate" subjects redefined? What happens when women examine their own and other women's lives, and shape their own experience? Are there commonalities of style and tone?

What I found as I examined this work was that women poets addressing age and aging seemed to address similar themes. I define these as: women commemorating each other; praising solitude; defying chronological age; reinterpreting relationships; breaking out of woman/space; speaking out on public issues.

Themes

1. Women commemorate and celebrate each other.

They remember and save for others' memory the experience of their mothers, grandmothers, friends, teachers, and the unsung heroines of untold days.

For instance, Eleanor Wilner in a poem titled "Emigration," centralizes not the famous Charlotte Bronte, but Bronte's obscure friend Mary Taylor who, in order to escape the severe constraints of English economic and social structures, emigrated to Australia. It is Taylor who is the subject of "Emigration," and who is the eponymous heroine, the "emigrant" of the title—"whom no one would remember/except she had a famous friend named Charlotte /." Invoking our admiration for Taylor's daring break with the Englishwoman's role of the 19th century, traveling "past/the reach of fantasy, or fiction," Wilner rescues her from the invisibility of the woman's historical past. (In fact, travel will be discussed in its own right later, since understandably it plays a large part in women's imaginative liberation.)

In her poem "Culture and Anarchy"—a title which provides ironic reference to Matthew Arnold's well-known defense of Hellenistic tradition—Adrienne Rich similarly memorializes unknown or little-known women.

Matilda Joslyn Gage; Harriet Tubman;
Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Maria Mitchell;

Anna Howard Shaw; Sojourner Truth;
Clara Barton; Harriet Beecher Stowe;
Ida Husted Harper; Ernestine Rose

Rich stitches these names together into a quilt of tribute, sewing in as well "and all those without names..." so they, too, will have remembrance.

Rich's poem challenges Arnold by asking "*which* culture" Arnold is opposing to "Anarchy" in his title. The only culture Arnold saw as worthy to compare with Hellenistic culture was Hebraic culture; Rich subversively proposes an alternative culture built on women's lives. Is hers then "anarchy"? Or is Arnold's implication that "culture" can be free-standing and unitary a false hypothesis? That is, does her "culture" presuppose a different history? To this end, i.e. providing such a history, whole stanzas of Rich's "Culture and Anarchy" such as the one above consist of women's names, creating a new cultural record undreamt of by Arnold.

Instead of Arnold's view of culture as a bold mountain range with pinnacles of achievement, Rich looks back and grieves for "The History of Human Suffering: borne,/tended, soothed, cauterized,/stanched, cleansed, absorbed and endured by women..." Her poem begs the huge question then, What is a culture that is based on human suffering? And specifically, what is a culture that hobbles women with "the crippling influences of fear," that denies women the "solitude and personal/responsibility/of [her] own individual life"?[12]

Marilyn Hacker's commemorative "Ballad of Ladies Lost and Found," though unlike Rich's poem in its humor, evident immediately in the title, (which echoes Francois Villon), nevertheless stems from the same impulse. Like Rich's, it combines familiar and unfamiliar names in a litany of praise.

Women commemorate other women elegiacally, as Maxine Kumin does her good friend Anne Sexton. She mourns her with novel simplicity, directness, freshness. Her opening line

unconventionally addresses the departed friend herself: "Shall I say how it is in your clothes?" Putting on the "dumb" blue jacket that belonged to Sexton, Kumin puts on, as it were, the departed life, holds it close, gives it utterance. She enumerates quotidian details that revive memory of this relationship—a hole in the jacket's pocket, a neglected parking ticket, shared vodka and ice, coffee and talk in the kitchen.

Traditionally the elegy, even those such as "Lycidas" by John Milton or "In Memoriam" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, each occasioned by the death of a personal friend, is formal. "Lycidas" begins by addressing the *reader*, with the instruction to "Weep for Adonais, he is dead." Milton then calls on nature itself to share the mourning, employing the well-known poetic device of the "pathetic fallacy" which projects human emotions onto nature. The reader weeps, nature weeps, Milton universalizes his grief, and the subject/friend is thereby elevated in importance. In Tennyson's case, "In Memorian," the elegy for his friend Arthur Hallam, is so sonorous, so symmetrical, so lulling in its rhythms, that the sharp edge of grief is dulled with euphony.

Kumin, by contrast, keeps her grief personal, her imagery immediate. Rather than the transcendence to which "Lycidas" and "In Memoriam" aspire, Kumin's elegy "How It Is" tells it "like it is," and acknowledges how slow the process of accommodation to loss is—"I will be years gathering up our words." The friendship is not subsumed, nor is closure reached in symbols of eternity, as in Milton's or Tennyson's elegy. Both for its stylistic departure from traditional elegiac conventions and for the witness it bears to a powerful friendship between women, Kumin's "How It Is" is a poem that speaks from and to women's experience of deep friendship.

Muriel Rukeyser, composing a long elegy for a dead woman friend, also writes in "The Blood is Justified, Part I/Life and Works/" of small, homely details—dress, conversation, copper bowls:

Remembering the pale suede jacket and russet coat
swinging down avenues of trees together,
the nights of talk light cast from copper bowls,
the fugitive journey to the coal-hills : names,
Del Thomas, Tony Mancuso, Mrs. Silva,
the black river curdling under a midnight wind.
Remembering how the pale wrists flickered love,
the dark eye-sockets impelled her to the poor,
ring changes
tell of the loves in her life
tell how she loved
This was my friend of whom I knew the face
the steel-straight intellect, broidered fantastic dreams
the quarrel by the lakes
and knew the hopes
She died. And must be dead.
And is not dead where memory prevails...

Here the poet revivifies the forgotten—in a trip and memories shared of ordinary people, citing their proper names, "Del Thomas, Tony Mancuso, Mrs. Silva." The two women whose relation focuses the poem shared both the craft of writing and radical political commitment, (this was a woman "whose job was freedom") Rukeyser writes, but the refrain that runs through the long work is "This was my friend..." Intimate, intensely personal, emotional loss. This is not an encomium, a funeral oration.[13]

An interesting sub-genre of women's elegies is the succession of new persona poems about Biblical and mythical women. Poets Alicia Ostriker, Eleanor Wilner, and Ruth Whitman, among others, reinterpret Biblical narratives of Ruth, Naomi, Deborah, Sarah, as well as imaginatively reconstruct heroines such as Penelope, Demeter, Psyche, as part of the larger feminist interest in righting a historical record, providing exemplars, looking for new heroines.[14] The Psyche/ Persephone myth has been a favorite with feminists, because it is a female quest myth which gives the heroine a task commensurate in importance with the traditional one assigned the hero.

Here is Ruth Whitman writing about a modern Persephone, in a poem entitled "Persephone Travels Back to Hell, as Arranged." Persephone begins her journey on the subway:

"Persephone Travels Back to Hell, as Arranged"

So long as this old subway keeps going,
I'm all right,
but it's the sudden stopping, the pause
in the middle of no air, nowhere
that gasps me.

Travelling back to a first rape...

Despite its jolting beginning, Whitman concludes the poem with a surprising benediction:

My gratitude to the black guts of the earth,
my thanks to this submachine taking me into the tunnel.
I brush kisses from my fingertips to all bats,
roots,
moles,
and blind and upsidedown things
squatting and squinting in the waiting dark.

Although she has been raped by Pluto and abducted to the underworld, Persephone does not remain a victim.[15] In Whitman's version she accepts, and identifies with, the subterranean world. Through her gesture of blowing kisses from her fingertips the poem evokes a pagan, feminine, benign deity. Forgiveness has entered the myth of violence.[16]

In her newest book, *The Descent of Alette*, Alice Notley, like Whitman, transposes the Psyche/ Persephone myth to a modern city. She extends the myth to a full-scale heroinic epic, a significant development. In Alette's underground, as in Whitman's, the subway, not Pluto's kingdom, is the setting for the contemporary narrative quest journey. But an archetypal Tyrant must still be overcome before the people who ride endlessly underground and are not permitted aboveground, can come to light. Alette's quest is nothing less than to "heal" (Notley's word) the world; hers is a "psychic" travail.

Updating the epic form as well as the setting, Notley invents a new measure or rhythm for her lines, based upon the length of a spoken breath. Her highly original use of quotation marks to separate *each* phrase from the next, makes this a

spoken text, as if it were a transcription from a contemporary oral tradition.
This short excerpt from the ending shows the healing accomplished, hope restored to the realm:

"Whatever," "whoever," "could be" "was possible" "Or had been" "forgotten" "for long ages" "now joined us" "now joined us once more" "came to light" "that morning"[17]

Marilyn Hacker also celebrates a mythic heroinic figure in her "Rune of the Finland Woman," creating a woman with magical powers:

"She could bind the world's winds in a single strand."

This binding and healing performed by Alette and by the Finland Woman reprise the contribution of female lore—midwifery, herbalism, spells, magical powers; we recall that the mythical Isis gathered up the fragments of Osiris and made him whole.

2. Women praise solitude.

The recognition that solitude, individuation, is as vital for health as relation, applies to any one struggling to achieve a self, not just, but perhaps particularly, to creative artists. The first act of the imagination for the woman has to be imagining a place to own one's own voice or vision, as Virginia Woolf famously insisted in A *Room of Her Own*. If women are going to participate in a creative life, solitude is a necessary ingredient, as it is for male artists of whatever stripe. But the definition of women as "naturally" more relational, living in a familial and social matrix, makes this claim harder to press. These older women poets give this issue voice. So we have Denise Levertov's celebration "A Woman Alone," in which she reflects on the pleasures of solitude:

When she can sit or walk for hours after a movie
talking earnestly and with bursts of laughter
with friends, without worrying
that it's late, dinner at midnight, her time
spent without counting the change...

She feels

a joy/untainted by guilt

exclaiming in the last line,

O blessed Solitude.[18]

May Sarton, in her memoir *Journal of a Solitude* about living alone in Maine, writes with great candor about that condition:

"These days the silence is immense," she reports. But still in old age, she is questioning, plumbing that silence:

At the bottom of the silence what lies in wait?
Is it love? Is it death? Too early or too late?

The musing, reflective, philosophical tone of these lines builds to the trenchant and pivotal question:

What is it I can have that I still want?

Though the rhetoric in Sarton's poem is self-directed, it nevertheless stands behind much of the poetry quoted in these pages. It is *the* question of age—"What is it I can have that I still want?" Sarton's solitude is what enables her to formulate, articulate, and then elaborate, her desires. The time and space for this project are what are new for women.

Sarton's poem moves the reader with its dawning realization that as she ages it is the transience, the evanescence of things that stirs her. This response to the world as poignant because passing is what it means to confront death. But the images she employs are of beauty, not grimness:

"light-shot clouds," "a passing glory," "lilacs about to open."

In old age, closely observed natural images are even more redeeming, more affirming for the life, for what one has loved. As women grow older, the relational self may experience fewer demands; the sense of being part of creation may supply then *both* immanence and transcendence.[19]

So, in Virginia Hamilton Adair's "The Last Marriage," the union is with nature, not with another human being.

"The Last Marriage"

The children gone, grown into other arms,
Man of her heart and bed grown underground,
Powder and chunks of ash in a shamefast urn,
Her mother long since buried in a blue gown,
Friends vanishing downward from a highway crash...

The poem continues in a beautiful second stanza of reconciliation. Through the strenuous, exhausting effort of hacking through overgrown wild shrubbery, the poet sees the earth she's preparing for a garden as her own future place:

But day by day in the afterbath she recovered stillness,
Day by day the disreputable garden regained
Its green tenderness. They wooed one another. The living
Responses issued from clean beds of earth.
It was a new marriage, reclusive, active, wordless.
Early each morning even in rain she walked
The reviving ground where one day she would knock and enter.
She took its green tribute into her arms and rooms.
Through autumn the pruned weed gave her ceremonial
Fires, where she saw lost faces radiant with love.
Beyond the window, birds passed and the leaves with them.
Now was a season to sit still with time to know,
Drawing each breath like a fine crystal of snow.[20]

In the winter of her life, she has created what enables her to sit still; and she has the wisdom to know it.

The ages-old binary opposition of Woman/ Nature, Man/Culture, has been detrimental to women, locating them in the realm of dark mysterious forces, instinctual, emotional, changeful, and placing them outside of reason, intellect, logic. So the identification of woman and nature has been operated negatively. But as the writing of older women reveals, nature becomes a powerful resource for them as relational demands lessen, and time for contemplation and wonder increases.

3. Women defy chronological age.

I want to say a brief word here about the terms "aging," "older" and "elder" which I have been using interchangeably and without specificity. But this is indeed because they *have* little specificity; at which time of life such description becomes precise is not just numerical: it varies with such factors as nutrition, hygiene, exercise, availability and quality of medical care, birth rate, and the moment in history and the place in the world we single out for consideration. When girls were married at twelve, thirty was old age.

As women move away from the long tradition of woman-as-victim which was rooted, in part, in youthful desirability inevitably outgrown, they come to terms with flawed lives, flawed selves, and find, as they grow older, new selves and new criteria of self-esteem, as men must do. Women harbor the expectation of increasing mastery in their work, creative energy shaped by artistic development. Reading classics now, we find that place and time are transcended by art; surely this can be true regardless of gender. So poet Louise Gluck can remark that she is looking for "the great poems of my middle years," anticipating a male trajectory in which development spans a life. In other words, women as well as men can feel that their art outpaces time's arrow.

Writing fifty years before Louise Gluck, the French novelist Colette, even when confined to bed in her later years, declared that her writing conferred authority and subjecthood upon her. In her memoir *Journal a Rebours* she speaks of her "avidity" for life and for art. Despite her invalidism, she was not invalidated. In fact, her choice of the word "avidity" reminds us of Margaret Mead's phrase, "menopausal zest." Both "avidity" and "zest" imply healthy appetite.

Thus, overturning male conceptions of female sexuality, today's older women poets redefine the connection between creativity, desire, and the body. Anna Swir's "The Greatest Love," flings out the challenge:

She is sixty. She lives
the greatest love of her life.

She walks arm-in-arm with her dear one,
her hair streams in the wind.
Her dear one says:
"You have hair like pearls."

Her children say:
"Old fool"[21]

Here, she also defies the idea that maternity would preempt female sexuality.

However, when older women are imaged by men, they are commonly the target of malevolent visual portraits. Two oil paintings which perfectly exemplify not merely the devaluation of older women, outcasts in the society, but the actual revulsion they arouse in the male artist, deserve description.

The first, "The Fountain of Youth" by Lucas Cranach, (1546) is a narrative which depicts in its first scene old, repellent, sick women arriving in their carriages at the Fountain of Youth. The second scene shows these women bathing naked in the basin of the Fountain. In the third, restored to youth and beauty, and elegantly attired, they banquet with young beaux. The cycle of life is averted, women once more have a right to pleasure and attention, but it took a miracle! The second work, "The Three Ages of Woman" by Gustav Klimt, (1905) approximately 400 years later, portrays three naked female bodies in close juxtaposition to each other, loosely forming an oval composition. One, the lissome mother, is shown holding the second in her arms, a lovely daughter about five years old. To the left of this pair, and tellingly alone, is the grandmother. Naked, with sagging breasts, a convex belly, sharp elbows, she covers her face completely with her hands as if saddened and ashamed by her appearance. The image bestowed upon her by the artist is generic. The misogyny of fin-de-siecle Vienna, epitomized by Klimt, restates Cranach's position.[22]

By contrast, the changes women describe are not distortions of those the mirror reveals. Women seek examples of honesty in age without concomitant self-despisal or self-rejection. Thus, poet Elizabeth Jennings writes admiringly of the self-portraits by the aging Rembrandt, praising the painter's dispassion, experiment and truth, wanting for women the same freedom in their representation. One aspect of women writing about their own physicality, rather than being viewed through the male gaze, is that they can be tender toward their aging bodies; part of "flawed lives, flawed selves." They can be self-accepting, and go on from there. Lucille Clifton writes of her wide girth with appreciation. She describes herself as "a city/of a woman," with a "geography" of her own, requiring a "map" for understanding. She throws a challenge out to the (male) onlooker in a good-natured, funny lingo.

Women writing of their own bodies write of their own illness—breast cancer, ovarian cancer. So Virginia Hamilton Adair begins "The Waters":

The August of my hysterectomy
I lay stunned in tidewater heat...

The title echoes the Biblical psalm, "By the waters of Babylon, there I sat and wept," as well as ironically alluding to "healing waters," and the breaking waters of birth. After recounting the story of an earlier fishing expedition she concludes, "I too have been gutted alive." The experience which impelled the poem was a particularly female experience, and no man could or would have thought of such a work. Such frankness about the body was not considered proper for *women* writers until recently. Now as women grow older they draw upon their experience of menopause and mastectomy, as Alicia Ostriker does in her most recent book, *The Crack in Everything.*[23]

Beyond such realistic reporting of her/story, the poetry of older women affirms the value of experiential wisdom accruing through the years, and frequently links it to increased *creative* and *spiritual* powers.

When W.B. Yeats, worried about loss of sexual vigor as he grew older, exclaims:

An aged man is but a paltry thing
A tattered coat upon a stick
Unless soul clap its hands and sing

He is invoking a long tradition of male power residing in the word, in language, ("soul clap its hands and sing"), in authorship and its authority. But the right to language is just what women were denied; instead they were subsumed as Woman, Nature, an allegorical force, not a unique subject but a myth. Whereas eve bears children (nature is physical, immanent), Adam gets to name the animals; if she is Nature, he is Culture. Language replaces fecundity as the principle of generation. Poetry means being the speaking subject. God is the word, and Adam hears God and speaks to God. Eve listens, receives the word second-hand. Threatened by mortality, the *male* poet transcends the physical self through art.

The wisdom of aging and increased creative power is the subject of Ruth Fainlight's "It Must," a poem about self-discovery and autonomy as the welcome gifts of aging. Beginning with a wry (but gentle) acknowledgment of the depredations of time upon the face in the mirror, she advances to the question:

Friends, tell me the truth. Do you also
sometimes feel a sudden jaunty indifference,
or even better, extraordinary moments
when you positively welcome the new
face that greets you from the mirror like
a mother — not your own mother, but that other
dream-figure of she-you-always-yearned-for.
Your face, if you try, can become hers. It must.

Worth noting here, in addition to the positive variation wrung upon the theme of aging, are characteristics of style—direct address, the candid diction we have already remarked in Kumin's elegy for Anne Sexton. In Fainlight's poem, humor also commands attention...

These days, I prefer firmer flesh in close-up and
features, crusted and blurred with the same heavy make-up
I've taken to wearing — warpaint, if, as they say,
the real function of warpaint is to bolster
the uncertain warrior's spirit, more than to
undermine and terrify his opponent.

Humor, let us recall, was singled out by Theodore Roethke as one of the two gravest omissions of women's poetry. As we go on, other examples will be noted, (Marilyn Hacker's title "Ballad of Ladies Lost and Found" has already been mentioned), for Fainlight's tone, not self-denigratory but gently self-mocking, is one popular with many of today's women writers.[24]

Under the ambiguous title, "Toward the Time of My Life" (is the poet having "the time of her life?" or is she referring to a particular period of time, or the cessation of the periods in her life?) Eve Merriam, like Fainlight, commences with a description of her own physical aging. But again, like Fainlight, she counters these changes by citing the epiphanies age confers, coupling experiential wisdom to thematic rebirth:

The years and years and the seasoning years
increasing I praise:...

in proof of which she offers the kind of understanding those years have brought her:

The making of love
Is more than child's play.
As love is made in many ways and places.

She goes on to ask whether once past childbearing years, she must "be affrighted?" No, she responds to her own question, she will, rather:

Submerge in the drownest sea and find footage.

The allusion to water signals faith in rebirth, here the baptism of experience. Rebirth is contingent upon a cyclical view of time which is traditionally one associated with women, because their own bodily cycles are likened to cycles of nature. At any rate, a cyclical view of time, (characteristic of Native American, Inuit, and many African cultures), makes a strong ally for defying chronology.

Merriam's seasoned wisdom consists now, she discloses, in understanding that the challenge age has handed her is how she will remain faithful to life. The woman as object of the gaze, worried about sexual faithfulness within marriage, matures in the course of the poem into woman/subject, pondering her ongoing relation to life.

Passing fancy, tell me plain:
will my husband true remain?
Be concerned more for his wife
and her faithfulness to life.

The riddling question echoes the fairy-tale in Snow White: "Mirror, mirror on the wall? Who is the fairest of them all?" but here Merriam confounds us with her answer, overturning the predictable. Merriam's question—upon what grounds is she to continue her faithfulness to life—recalls us rather to Sarton's incisive query, "What is it I can have that I still want?"[25]

Recognizing that men's lives don't provide reliable signposts for women in their journey towards self-discovery, Marie Ponsot writes a

poem called "Field of Vision: A Map for a Middle-Aged Woman." In it we find a barely suppressed elation, a literal uplift transcending gravity as well as time. This proves a recurrent motif in the writing of older women:

I fall upward to wake outside
The numbered myths of measure
Into real time
I fall awake beyond
The distancing myths of memory
Blinking to see
Measurelessly...

Toward the conclusion of this uncharted voyage into the self, she learns:

Without guidebook
Unrehearsed, where I climb,
Each shape to take the air
Is the only; all are first;
None last...

The final defiance of linear time ("outside the numbered myths of measure") destroys hierarchical vision, ("all are first; None last...")

In "Discovery," another map poem, Ponsot welcomes age, as Fainlight and Merriam do, for the wisdom it confers.

For ripe fruit,/Thank the tree,

Ponsot reminds us. And, applying this to herself, she adds:

And I will yet thank me, if
Splotched still with dried time
I can be washed unstiff of history,
If inside the outside of me,
Is me. [26]

In all these lines of Ponsot's the metaphor of *rebirth* is unmistakable: cleansing ("washed") off the false life, revivifying ("unstiff"), uncovering, ("outside"), discovering, ("inside"), the self with which one is pregnant, coming to be born. We recognize the same progress—age, wisdom, rebirth—as in eve Merriam's affirmation, just quoted, that she will

"Submerge in the drownest sea and find footage."

Notably, all these poets are both midwife and mother to themselves, (As Ursula LeGuin advises women to be in her essay "The Space Crone"), and the spiritual journey is a crucial motif of their poetry. A crone's harvest is a timely gathering-in of wisdom.[27]

In the memorable words of Meridel Le Seur, "I am luminous with age."

Women defy chronology, then, the familiar view of aging as unmitigated diminishment, by declaring feelings of growth and liberation.

These feelings can stem from creating a group identity. Women had been the keepers of oral traditions in many cultures, from the British Isles to the plains of the American West. Women, for example, were not only the official keeners (mourners), but "reciters" who composed and sang work songs, (the female equivalent of men's railroad, canal boat, sailing songs), as they worked at weaving, spinning, dyeing, and other household tasks. These tasks were intergenerational, and the experiential wisdom and know-how of older women remained necessary to the domestic economy. They had a respected identity, derived in large measure from functional participation in the

community. As we mentioned earlier, women's culture practiced midwifery, the healing arts, collected "simples" or housewives' remedies. These activities had a strong spiritual power as well as a practical end; women took charge of their own lives, and consulted their own sex as savants. The devaluation of domestic skills through industrialization, smaller families, geographical mobility that separated generations, raised serious questions about what social place older women can occupy, what their rightful contribution can be. Thus poet Eve Merriam dispels the notion that what women fear most is the loss of youthful attractiveness. She poses, again, the riddle "Mirror, mirror on the wall/Who is the fairest of them all?" and again answers it a wholly unexpected way:

Mirror, mirror on the wall:
what do I fear the most of all?
Unusefulness.

Now older women poets call for the re-establishment of female community.

Judy Grahn is one who urges a return to community, a recognition of commonality, a group identity. The poem from which I quote here has no title and almost no punctuation, running like a river of time past young and old:

Slowly, a plainsong from an old
woman to a younger woman

am I not olden olden olden
it is unwanted

The narrator continues, citing derogatory terms by which the narrator feels herself to be typically perceived—"shaky," "glazing," "hazy," "guarded," "craven"—she informs us that *her* song, what she calls "my version" is "unwritten." She switches then from how she is perceived to how she perceives herself and her kind: in her own composition she is "raging," "patient," "charming," "stable," and *ancient*, part of a historical past, not merely "olden." Wasn't she, the "olden" one also "building," "forming," "braving," even "ruling," "guiding"?

In short, she is all women, "a common woman," (her collected poetry is titled *The Work of a Common Woman*), and "a long story," (since she is "ancient"). She admonishes her younger "sisters":

Are you not shamed to treat me meanly
when you discover you have become me?
are you not proud you have become me?

The final line carries the freight of the poem in its conclusive changeover from the pronoun "I," who is the chanter of the "plainsong," from the discrete "you" and "me" to the "we" of the common world:

"are we not olden olden olden." (emphasis mine).[28]

Or, the affirmation of life may take a humorous twist, as Fainlight's "It Must" did. Testifying to the persistence of a young spirit which remains inside the altering body, my own poem "The Dog as Artist, The Artist as Hero," spoofs notions of the end of desire and creativity. In company with other poems cited here, it welcomes age for the liberation that accompanies it:

There's freedom in diminished expectations,
seems to argue for the resignation and passivity of
napping on the hearth with rheumy eyes,
but confounds that expectation in the poem's last lines:
How startled they'd be to see
Beneath my tussocked hair and slack-skinned brow
The sexual Dream, the Idea of Fire,
The Fantasy of trees planted in furrows of waves.[29]

And Marilyn Hacker in "Lines Declining a Transatlantic Dinner Invitation" jests,

But, being d'un certain age, we come to know:
better to be discussed than to be de trop.

Humor can be the weapon of a saboteur.

4. Women reinterpret, with frankness, the central relationships of their lives—to husbands, parents, lovers, children—affirming emotional attachments while eschewing sentimentality.

So Alice Walker in "Beyond What" asks what lies beyond the romantic dream. Here is the poem in full:

We reach for destinies beyond
what we have come to know
and in the romantic hush
of promises
perceive each
the other's life
as known mystery.
Shared. But inviolate.
No melting. No squeezing
into One.
We swing our eyes around
as well as side to side
to see the world.

To choose, renounce,
this, or that—
call it a council between equals
call it love.

Abjuring the cliched, Tin Pan Alley definitions of romantic love, Walker insists on equality, a new contract.[30]

Denise Levertov also holds an anti-sentimental view, taking on the institution of marriage itself, in a poem revealingly titled "The Ache of Marriage":

The ache of marriage
thigh and tongue, beloved
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

We look for communion
and are turned away, beloved,
each and each

It is leviathan and we
in its belly
looking for joy, some joy
not to be known outside it

two by two in the ark of
the ache of it.

As with Walker, "two" remain "each and each" for Levertov; romantic love does not, contrary to rumor, achieve "communion," oneness, the dying unto one's self, even in the act of love-making.[31] Better to forsake the artifice of the romantic heroine whose close association with death is deeply embedded in western culture, from medieval legend to nineteenth century opera. If women have been fashioned the heroine/victim of the myth of romantic love, when they speak for themselves they write of love as they know it, as their experience has informed them. This realism is based on mature acceptance of "flawed lives, flawed selves," and is the opposite of infantalizing, self-destructive fancies they are handed to internalize.

Aside from romantic love, one of the key experiences for women, both in terms of how they see themselves and how others project their image, is motherhood. The poems which follow present the maternal state in terms arising from women's own lives, as did the poems examining the erotic life. Consequently they ring true, conveying in this case the strong emotional pulls women feel between maternal unselfishness and their hard-won sense of subjectivity.

Linda Pastan, like Walker and Levertov, jettisons the predictable but falsifying tone the occasion calls for as she sits by her dying mother's bedside in the hospital. The poet doesn't flinch from acknowledging generational conflicts between mother and daughter even as she grieves. Pastan reveals her ambivalence—simultaneously needing her mother and needing to escape from her:

I am waiting

for you to be again
what you always were,
for you to be there whole
for me to run to with this new grief —
your death — the hair grown back
on your skull the way it used to be,
your widow's peak the one sure landmark
on the map of my childhood...
We escape from our mothers
again and again, young
Houdinis, playing the usual matinees.
First comes escape down
the birth canal, our newly carved faces
leading the way like figureheads
on ancient slaveships,
our small hands rowing for life.
Later escape into silence, escape
behind slammed doors,
the flight into marriage.
I thought I was finally old enough
to sit with you, sharing a book.
But when I look up
from the page, you
have escaped from me.

The hoped-for equality between adult daughter and mother has been intercepted by death, so that a final resolution is impossible. Hence the poem is paradoxically entitled "Duet for One Voice." The poet can but muse alone, and mourn.[32]

We find still another without-rosy-spectacles description of motherhood in Anne Stevenson's "Generations"; this time the poet is the mother, not the daughter:

Know this mother by her three smiles.
One grey one drawn over her mouth by frail hooks.
One hurt smile under each eye.

Know this mother by the frames she makes.
By the silence in which she suffers each child
to scratch out the aquatints in her mind.

Know this mother by the way she says
"darling" with her teeth clenched.
By the fabulous lies she cooks.[33]

In the taut, ironic stanzas above, Stevenson shows the demands love makes upon her. She insists, to the dismay of some and the relief of others, that not only children can be hurt, but mothers, also. Her own dreams and work, symbolized by "aquatints," which are also "pretty pictures" of motherhood, are destroyed. The domestic task of cooking, feeding the family, includes the task of feeding them the necessary lie that nothing else matters but them. There is an intensity and bite here reminiscent of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Marina Tsvetsayeva, women poets not included because they all committed suicide before growing old. Women are allowing themselves to express anger in writing about personal relationships, a new note.

In "Mothers, Daughters," quoted here in full, Shirley Kaufman, Israeli-American poet, speaks with admirable candor about the experience, not the myth, of motherhood:

Through the night we hate,
preparing the next day's
war. She bangs the door.
Her face laps up my own
despair, the sour, brown eyes,
the heavy hair she won't
tie back. She's cruel,
as if my private meanness
found a way to punish us.

We gnaw at each other's
skulls. Give me what's mine.
I'd haul her back, choking
myself in her, herself
in me. There is a book
called Poisons on her shelf.
Her room stinks with incense,
animal turds, hamsters,
she strokes like silk. They
exercise on the bathroom
floor, and two drop through
the furnace vent. The whole
house smells of the accident,
the hot skins, the small
flesh rotting. Six days
we turn the gas up then
to fry the dead. I'd fry
her head if I could until
she cried love, love me!

All she won't let me do.
Her stringy figure in
the windowed room shares
its thin bones with no one.
Only her shadow on the glass

waits like an older sister.
Now she stalks, leans forward,
concentrates merely on getting
from here to there. Her feet
are bare. I hear her breathe
where I can't get in. If I
break through to her, she will
drive nails into my tongue.

The shocking image of the last line wrings a change on the image of crucifixion, for here the nails go not through hands and feet, but through the tongue. The daughter's struggle for independence stifles conversation, explanation, any verbal expressiveness on the part of the mother. Daughters, not only the weight of patriarchy, silence mothers. The unpleasant smells of singeing and burning, the defiantly untidy daughter, provide a startling contrast to the pink-and-white domestic interior of idealized maternity.

Stylistically, the poet uses short lines simulating breathless speech, brief outbursts of anger; at the same time, because the poem as a whole proceeds as a sequential narrative and reaches a total of forty-one lines, it also conveys the mother's painful experience over protracted time. It is as if we were watching the feat of a scarf being drawn through a ring.

In the poem above, "Mothers and Daughters," the daughter was a young adolescent; fifteen years later, she is married, a mother herself, and the relationship has changed. Now there is mutual recognition based in part on the commonality of a female world, continuity and change. A new dynamic interplay acknowledges the presence of both love and separation.

"Milk," excerpted below, (the title refers both to the dairy farm the daughter now keeps, and also to the nursing young mother), continues Kaufman's exploration of the entangled mother-daughter-mother relation:

You pump it from the six goats
morning and evening
and renew your own. The baby
is harnessed to your back,
Her dark head bobbing. Your life
and its order that isn't mine.

I've come as close to you
as I can...

"We're not who we are to our mothers," Kaufman notes. Observing her grandchild, she intuits what the mother may not have as yet—the child's inevitable recognition of a separate self:

"Even now/in this sweet flesh/isn't there
something starting/to withdraw?"

But now, poet older, daughter older, they are "two women trying once more...to get [it] right." They have moved past the female cycle of self-despisal, the daughter refusing the mother, the mother refusing the daughter, which Adrienne Rich views as the true victimization of the woman in a patriarchal society. So, many of these poems write a myth of mother/daughter loss and recuperation, choosing to emphasize that bond rather than the more familiar issues around the mother/son bond,

the father/son relation. Are there collective powers, mutual support and understanding, women can reclaim? Kaufman's implicit question echoes Adrienne Rich's plea for female community, "a common language."[34]

Motherhood is also the subject of Marie Ponsot's "From the Fountains at Vaucluse." The poet reflects, in a different mood from the selections above, on her daughter, what she wishes for her. What mother does not do so at some time? Ponsot arrives at a very different conclusion from that of W.B. Yeats, who, as father, desired that his daughter be rooted in "one dear perpetual place," to be allowed to remain ceremonious, innocent, and finally—passive.

Ponsot, quite to the contrary, declares:

She [my daughter] neither flirts nor wails.
Generous & gentle, can she stand firm
Having found her own ground, or will she fail
(I've failed) to use her time and too late turn
To lay her claim? Can her young wisdom
Keep loving-kindness and yet rise to spurn
Unsuitable self-sacrifice?...

What this mother wishes for her daughter is the strength to be autonomous, to claim her own life, to be agentic. The question Ponsot frames, one which women continually meet, is how to retain feminine "loving-kindness" without succumbing to the ultimate feminine trap of "self-sacrifice." Her own gendered experience, from which she writes, taught Ponsot how acutely difficult this is.[35]

The African-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks reflects on her present condition of life—past romantic love, past maternal necessity—with what we have now come to expect, utter frankness:

Already I am no longer looked at with lechery or love.
My daughters and sons have put me away with marbles and dolls,
Are gone from the house.
My husband and lovers are pleasant or somewhat polite
And night is night.

But, whereas this first stanza of Brooks' "A Sunset of the City," (metaphor for the sunset of a life), concludes on a passive note, (i.e. I am the one discarded), the final lines of the poem switch abruptly, jarring us awake from that night of stanza one, to an active voice, offering a choice:

And I incline this ear to tin,
Consult a dual dilemma. Whether to dry
In humming pallor or to leap and die.

The speaker's identity, which for most of the length of the poem had been role-defined—mother, wife, lover—is so no longer; she seizes her life back, even if the choice remaining is how to end life, whether with a whimper or a bang. (Reversing T.S. Eliot's order, "Not with a bang but a whimper," Brooks puts the bang last, "to dry...or to leap and die," the dramatic ending of her ending.)[36]

What I have been calling "realism" is the answer to the earlier question the poet Muriel Rukeyser posed in "Homage to Kathe Kollwitz":

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open"

Appropriately, the poem signals this breaking apart with eccentric typography and punctuation. For instance, there is, tellingly, no period after the (final) word of the poem, "open," leaving both question and answer literally open-ended.

This line, which concludes Rukeyser elegy for Kollwitz, finishes a poem which is at one and the same time a picture of the painter's, Kollwitz's, family life and a diatribe against war. And in its combination of intimate sympathies and global concerns, in its plea for truthfulness about the lived life as opposed to the heroic imagination of a life, it can teach us much of what we have to learn from older women poets.

Realism in all these examples means exposing the abyss between women's experience and social and cultural myths of womanhood. It was also Muriel Rukeyser, an icon for women poets, who exclaimed, "No more masks! No more mythologies!"[37]

5. Women break out of the confinement of woman/space.

We've already introduced the theme of travel in older women's poetry in its most expansive sense as a spiritual voyage of discovery, transcending time. But women also use travel, couched in the vocabulary of geography, to denote a masculine sense of space as opposed to the feminine place, domestic space.

We encounter one example of this in a poem such as Gillian Clarke's "Letter from a Far Country" from which this excerpt is taken:

The minstrel boy to the war is gone.
But the girl stays.
To mind things. She must keep. And wait. And pass time.

Clarke's first line, which is borrowed from an old Irish ballad about a young boy who accompanied the Irish troops, (as there were pipers or drummer boys marching in other wars), immediately places the poem in a historical context, battle, of established gender separation. Indeed, the title itself, "Letter from a Far Country," sets up questions of gendered space. Since "the girl" is the writer, "*from* a far country" refers not to the foreign country to which the soldier has traveled, but her place. Home, then, the domestic space, becomes the foreign place because the center according to gendered space, is where *he* is.

Similarly, Marie Ponsot, also ruing women's restriction, observes,

What women wander?
Not many. All. A few.
Most would, now & then,
& no wonder...Women wander
As best they can.

The image of the woman as a roamer, a traveler, a voyager, is anti-traditional. Ulysses sailed; Penelope stayed at home. Aeneas founded Rome; Dido stayed in Carthage and killed herself for love. Not surprisingly, given this polarity, women project an alter ego free to follow her will, to be an observer of the wide world, to be what she may. Elizabeth Bishop is perhaps the supreme example of the woman/poet as traveler, both literally and in her writing. Her book-length poem *Geography III* retells the Robinson Crusoe story; she projects herself imaginatively not only as voyager but as survivor, appropriating Defoe's ur-tale of male self-sufficiency and enterprise on a desert island and making it her own story. Rescued and back in England Crusoe (Bishop) muses on islands:

My blood was full of them; my brain
bred islands...

In "A Woman Alone," Denise Levertov pictures herself a kind of gypsy-woman:

a kind of sober euphoria makes her believe
in her future as an old woman, a wanderer,
seamed and brown,
little luxuries of the middle of life all gone,
watching cities and rivers, people and
mountains,
without being watched; not grim nor sad,
an old winedrinking woman, who knows
the old roads, grass-grown, and laughs to
herself...[38]

Poet Fleur Adcock writes of a Bogyman she confronts at various ages in her life. Addressing him directly, she says:

But what, Bogyman,
shall I be at twice my age? (At
your age?) Shall I be grandmotherly, fond

suddenly of gardening, chatty with
neighbours? Or strained, not giving in,
writing for Ambit and hitch-hiking to
Turkey?...[39]

The footloose, please-yourself eccentric older woman is a persona developed with great affection by writers like these.[40]

6. Women speak out on public issues, they have joined the search for a civil society.

Not only *literary* forerunners must be acknowledged by today's women poets. Any complete study of contemporary women's poetry should contextualize it inside women's politics, as Louise Bernikow comments in *The World Split Open*. But that is beyond the scope of this paper, and can more properly be left to some commentator closer to the political scene. What we should note, however, is the existence of a strong tradition of radical women, women like Harriet Martineau, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who produced the first *women's* Bible), Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Grimke, women who worked actively as abolitionists in America, or for the repeal of the Poor Act in England, for women's suffrage, animal rights, equal rights for women, the labor movement. Women who were highly articulate on these widely humane issues stand behind women poets of the modern times.

Anger against injustices social, economic, and political inform the oeuvre of Adrienne Rich and Muriel Rukeyser, to name two of the most obvious examples, and contradict effectively the charge that women are trapped in a victim's psychology. In fact, women's liberation, literary as well as political, has as an aim to see beyond this, and has marvelously done so, insofar as this is possible without denying the very real disadvantages of race and class still in place.

The women who grew up with the radical tradition to which Elaine Showalter refers in *These Modern Women* never considered poetry an activity of disengagement; and a public voice is strengthened today because women are more culturally powerful. That is, today's women have been wage-earners in the workplace; they have seen the introduction of birth control and abortion, though these haven't reached consensus; women coming of age now have had mentors and role models, if not as many as men. Since I have already drawn from the work of Adrienne Rich to illustrate another theme, but more particularly because she is perhaps the most widely quoted poet of social conscience writing today, I want to draw upon Muriel Rukeyser and Alicia Ostriker who exemplify the same engagement.

In her long poem "To Love Is" Alicia Ostriker first avows her allegiance to the world:

And if I have desired
From my first moments of sentience
When I recognized that I ardently loved the world...

and then proceeds to acknowledge the abundant evil and ugliness surrounding her. Nevertheless, despite limited power to effect change, she conceives a large, public role to play in the world. She wants to

help
Unlock it [the world] to become
More and more itself
More and more alive...

I have my task
What matter if I can
Never accomplish it.

The poem ends here with Ostriker shouldering the largest responsibility possible—that of her share of the world. How far we are from "women's poetry" as pretty, trivial, unremittingly domestic, pious![41]

And here are a few excerpts from Muriel Rukeyser's angry, acerbic political poem, "The Lynching of Jesus," which takes within its scope all of "gibbering war, gibbering conquest"…"what numbers of lynched Jesuses have *not* been deified?" (emphasis mine.) Rukeyser sneers at the rhetoric of committees who offer "little calm tributes of the unconcerned," reminding them:

Many murdered in war, crucified, starved,
loving their lives they are massacred and burned,
hating their lives as they have found them, but
killed while they look to enjoy what they have earned,
dismissed with peremptory words and hasty graves,
little calm tributes of the unconcerned.

A few pages on in the same epic (the disruptive typography mirrors her desire to tear apart the tissue of lies) we come across the lines:

We are powerful now: we vote
death to Sacco a man's name
and Vanzetti a blood-brother, death
to Tom Mooney, or a wall, not matter;
poverty to Piers Plowman, shrieking anger
to Shelley, a cough and Fanny to Keats;
thus to Blake in a garden; thus to Whitman;
thus to D.H. Lawrence.
And to all you women,
dead and unspoken-for, what sentences,
to you dead children, little in the ground
: all you sweet generous rebels, what sentences…[42]

A distinction I wish to make here is between the established genre of political satirical poetry as practiced, say, by John Dryden, which took as its task the exposure of particular politicians, parties, leaders, and so on, and Rukeyser's epic against a history of injustice, oppression of the poor, the ignorant, the humble. Women are joining their voices to a tradition such as that to which the poet William Blake belonged, of more radical opposition to institutions of government and the powers they protect, upheld by war.

A short bitter poem of Rukeyser's about war, "M-Day's Child is Fair of Face," ironically and effectively uses as a point of departure the nursery rhyme, "Monday's child is fair of face…":

M-Day's child is fair of face,
Drill-day's child is full of grace,
Gun-day's is breastless and blind,
Shell-day's child is out of its mind,
Bomb-day's child will always be dumb,
Cannon-day's child can never quite come,
But the child that's born on the Battle-day
is blithe and bonny and rotted away.[43]

In my own poem "Winter Solstice" I rail against the senseless annihilation of war, concluding:

There has never been a holy war,
only men's impatient cleaver,
graves with crosses, stars of David,
graves facing east to Mecca.
The shortest day could last forever.[44]

In the course of looking at substantive issues, we have raised stylistic concerns as well. We can summarize the findings. Anger, directness, candor, intimacy with the body and its eroticism, the deliberate subversion of formal poetic forms like the ode and the elegy, are all important

constituents of the poetry under consideration here. Taken together, these stylistic characteristics are evidence of new breadth and scope in the poetry of older women, embracing both realism and the possibility of transcendence.

I want to return finally to women's humor, emphasizing it beyond the few illustrations already presented, for humor is a positive sign of moving past victimhood and its compensatory fantasies into perspective on the self. Humor is one face of wisdom, and wisdom is what Erik Erikson singles out, for both sexes, as the particular strength of old age. For that reason, I want to share a poem with you which so admirably deflects self-pity (I recall here Charles Maurras' characterization of the feminine in literature,[45] "Je souffre, donc je suis")—Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle, "One Art":

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.[46]

The poem is a poignant recitation of loss, accelerated by time and accomplished with practice. This, in the hands of a lesser poet, could lead straight to bathos. But Bishop's loss is contained by the tight structure of the poem; a villanelle is a poetic form which constantly turns and twists on itself, repeating lines, its suppleness enhanced by a light, skipping rhythm congenial to humor. Moreover, the loss is undercut by Bishop's witty perspective which turns loss from accident or misfortune to an accomplishment which requires art, as the title immediately informs us.

Humor, perhaps particularly in combination with eroticism, brings women poets into a traditionally male camp, far away from love-sick maidens or wronged matrons. Virginia Hamilton Adair's "Peeling an Orange" which begins "Between you and a bowl of oranges I lie nude/reading 'The World's Illusion'" sings an erotic song from a long-married woman to her husband—about eating, reading, and being seduced simultaneously. Marvelously, joyfully, irreverent, it employs the playful, witty tone to be found in abundance in the work of such poets, younger than Adair, as Diane Ackerman, Cynthia Macdonald, Louise Gluck, Marilyn Hacker. Humor also locates women poets alongside women novelists where they have stood from the beginnings of the social novel through today, writers such as Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, and Fay Weldon.

Women see themselves, in sum, neither as agentic witches nor as passive victims, *even as they age.* Though their work necessarily reflects a long

history of learning to survive, these poems go beyond endurance to convey the wisdom and strength of the female constituency for whom they speak. They respond to Muriel Rukeyser's question posed earlier:

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."

The poems we have been looking at *are* truth-telling; they are women's poems; and we have reasons to believe they are agents of change, both in personal relations and in the public realm.

All six of these themes—women commemorating each other; women praising solitude; women defying stereotypical, denigratory images of aging; women redefining, from their own experience, central relationships of their lives; women seeking to transcend time and space as they are imposed by conventions about female lives; women raising public voices against injustice—have in common first the shedding of masks, turning the face to the world, and then the voyage of discovery to what lies beneath.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Bronte: a passionate life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995, pp. 63-4.

2. Cf. Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?", *Women, art and power: and other essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

3. Women have internalized the strictures about youth and beauty constituting a woman's power; one measure of this internalization is the fact that within a professional organization dedicated to the study of women, The National Women's Studies Association, it took four years of struggle on the part of academic Barbara Macdonald to initiate, in 1986, the first plenary session on "Women and Aging."

4. The elderly (defined as over sixty-five years of age for the study performed by Harvard Medical School) do consume more health care than any other age group. But this statistic does not reveal the spectrum within this rapidly growing segment of the population. Half the people now alive in America will live to be over seventy-five; recognizing this demographic change, a National Institute on Aging was formed just twenty years ago; geriatric medicine is now commonly included in medical school curricula, and hospital departments. But because the elderly have never before comprised such a large portion of the total population, we can't extrapolate from experience. How can we forecast what the positive as well as negative effects of such demography will be? By the year 2020, one out of every six Americans will be over sixty-five. Our fears for our own self-image, or for a threatened "quality of life," are based on stereotypical and uniform images of dependence, loss of faculties. These images represent a very partial truth. Currently, for instance, only 4.5% of the aged population are in nursing homes; we do not have detailed information on numbers receiving professional home care; family care; those living independently; those in retirement communities. Comparative figures are crucial here. Obviously, we need also to know what proportion of the elderly are men, what proportion women. Nor do we have statistics on the number of "well" people who are able to pursue creative, productive lives after retirement.

Information about women and aging may be obtained from:
National Women's Health Information Center (202-690-7650)
Older Women's League (202-783-6686)
National Institute on Aging (301-496-3136 or 301-496-0765)
Tufts Nutrition Center (617-556-3094)
The New York Times, Sunday September 22, 1996, Section 4, p. 1,5-6.
World Health Organization; O.E.C.D.: Census Bureau.

5. Louise Bogan, "The crows," *No more masks!: an anthology of twentieth century American women's poetry*, ed. Florence Howe. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

6. Cf. Rozsika Parker, *Mother love/mother hate: the power of maternal ambivalence*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. Also Diane Eyer, *Motherguilt: how our culture blames mothers for what's wrong with society*. New York: Times Books/Random House, 1996.

7. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*. New York: Knopf, 1985.

8. Helene Deutsch, *Psychology of women, a psychoanalytic interpretation*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1944-45 (two vols.).

Partially as a result of the pervasive imaging of the older woman's body as an index of deformation (whatever the changing standards of beauty of the day), women have become in our present society the principal consumers of the billion dollar industries of cosmetic surgery and cosmetic products; they buy the products because they buy into what Naomi Wolf has termed "the Beauty Myth." Capitalism has capitalized upon, and fostered, these anxieties. Many cultural critics see a commercial continuum from pornography to the fashion industry. (In this connection, we may remark that the media attention which focused on feminist Gloria Steinem's "glamour girl" persona ironically succeeded in making her youthful looks strengthen her political status.)

9. With two exceptions, I have limited myself to poetry written in English; the exceptions are Marie Ponsot, whose work is so intertwined with the theme of aging it seemed conspicuous to omit her; and Anna Swir, whose whole volume *Talking to my body* engages the themes of sexuality and creativity in older women. I have also bent the rule of inclusion for Marilyn Hacker and Alice Notley, who are younger than the rest of the women poets discussed here, but whose work incorporates many of the stylistic or thematic concerns discussed here.

10. Though the precise age at which women become "older" or "aging" is difficult to pin down, since both terms imply a process and a comparative degree, we *can* say that currently the menopause is a focal point for those female anxieties which center on time's passage. (Because men do not experience a corresponding functional change to that of no longer being able to bear children, the male climacteric has been the subject of surprisingly little medical or psychological scrutiny.) As Lois Banner reports, in our society the menopause is commonly feared, and with good reason, not for its inherent terrors (now improved by advanced medical knowledge about osteoporosis, brittle bones, "dowager's hump"), but for those terrors ascribed to it, including mental instability and sexual dysfunction. Misleading and actually false representations of this change in women's lives had it that "retention of the menses" was "unhealthy," that a "retention of the evil elements of the blood" was in part what turned older women into witches. Menopause has been tied to madness, specifically to melancholia by Freud, who, accepting as a foundation the French neurologist Charcot's theories about female hysteria, linked pathology to women's sexual maladjustment. Such attitudes about menopausal women persisted into the twentieth century, as did the anxieties they fostered, but can now be seen as culturally induced, in large measure, rather than personally experienced.

11. Though Marilyn Hacker is younger than the other poets discussed, I cannot resist mentioning her work here. Much praised for her command of structure, her mastery of form, the reader is equally persuaded and beguiled by her omnipresent wit. *Humor* is her great weapon—against sentimentality, against chaos, against "things as they are." As a radical, a lesbian, a single mother, a Jew, a poet of two countries, France and America, she has a variety of outsider positions from which to write. And though her work poignantly presents the loss through death of

friends and family, and many poems of separation, it is the humor which gives the poetry its distinctive and unshakable foundation, and allies it with much of today's writing by women.

12. Adrienne Rich, "Culture and anarchy," *The Norton anthology of poetry by women*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: W.W. Norton, 1985, pp. 2039-2043.

13. Muriel Rukeyser, "The blood is justified, part I/Life and works," *The collected poems of Muriel Rukeyser*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978, p. 47.

14. A prose corollary of this are the short stories in Sara Maitland's *Angel maker*, which invents narratives from the viewpoints of Hagar, Sarah, Artemis, Andromeda.

15. The myth has it that after the intercession of her mother, the goddess Demeter, goddess of earth and grain, Persephone dwells only half the year below the earth, our winter, surfacing above ground the other half.

16. Ruth Whitman, "Persephone travels back to hell, as arranged," *The Marriage wig and other poems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, pp. 10-11.

17. Alice Notley, *Alette*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 148.

18. Denise Levertov, "A woman alone," *No more masks*, p. 148-50.

19. May Sarton, "The silence now," *Women and aging: an anthology by women*, ed. Jo Alexander, et. al. Corvallis, OR: Calyx Press, 1986, p. 125.

20. Virginia Hamilton Adair, "The last marriage," *Ants on the melon*. New York: Random House, 1996, pp. 120-121.

21. Anna Swir, *Talking to my body*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1996, p. 99.

22. When older women *are* painted as benign, they have turned pious, and self-negating, as in Dutch genre oils of elderly women in their kitchens reading their missals, or Whistler's famous portrait of his mother. Whistler himself, quite the London dandy, paints us a maternal figure in her rocking chair so dowdy she achieves instant, almost totemic acceptance. Victorian grandmothers ushered in the newly appropriate image of older women as moral custodians in the domestic sphere. Also, on older women as grotesque, see *Rabelais and his world*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968.

23. Alicia Ostriker, *The crack in everything*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996.

24. Ruth Fainlight, "It must," *The Bloodaxe book of contemporary women poets: eleven British writers*, ed. Jeni Couzyn. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985, pp. 139-40.

25. Eve Merriam, "Toward the time of my life," *Each in her own way: women writing on the menopause and other aspects of aging*, ed. Elizabeth Clamans. Eugene, OR: Queen of Swords Press, 1994, pp. 120-121.

26. Marie Ponsot, “A field of vision: a map for a middle-aged woman,” *Admit impediment*. New York: Knopf, 1981, pp. 101-107.

27. Ursula LeGuin, *Dancing at the edge of the world: thoughts on words, women, places*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

28. Judy Grahn, *The work of a common woman: the collected poetry of Judy Grahn, 1964-1977*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1978, pp. 104-106.

29. Nadya Aisenberg, *Leaving Eden*. London: Forest Books, 1995, p. 29.

30. Alice Walker, “Beyond what,” *Images of women in literature*, ed. Mary Anne Ferguson. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991, p. 560.

31. Denise Levertov, “The ache of marriage,” *The Bloodaxe book of contemporary women poets*, p. 84.

32. Linda Pastan, “Duet for one voice,” *No more masks*, p. 218-19.

33. Anne Stevenson, “Generations,” *The Bloodaxe book of contemporary women poets*, pp. 191-192.

34. Shirley Kaufman, “Mothers, daughters” and “Milk,” *Roots in the air*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Books, 1996, pp. 15, 156. Marilyn Hacker, in “Coda” at the conclusion of “The Regent’s Park sonnets,” arrives at a different conclusion tracing mother/daughter conflict back to a root source: “It was not my mother or my daughter/who did me in. Women have been betrayed/by history, which ignores us, which we made like anyone, with work and words...”

35. Marie Ponsot, “From the fountains at Vaucluse,” *Admit impediment*, p. 51.

36. Gwendolyn Brooks, “A sunset of the city,” *The Penguin book of women poets*, ed. Carol Cosman, Joan Keefe and Kathleen Weaver. London: Penguin Books, 1983, pp. 347-348.

37. To the extent that the position toward older women can be seen as one of many existing social prejudices, their reclamation of a voice to speak for their own history, their own values, shares the experience of other groups, for example, African-Americans. The prejudice gives way as this voice humanizes the portrait of the despised group, as well as because larger forces in the society, e.g. demographic shifts, dictate the need for a changed perception.

38. Denise Levertov, “A woman alone,” *No more masks*.

39. Fleur Adcock, “Bogyman,” *The Bloodaxe book of contemporary women poets*, pp. 209-210.

40. Jenny Joseph’s “Warning,” a mild plea for eccentricity in age, became a positive position statement for many feminists when it first appeared in 1986. More recently, the image of woman as a roamer was captured in “Latcho drom,” the movie about a Gypsy woman that gained unexpected popularity.

41. Alicia Ostriker, “To love is, part iii,” *Women and aging*, p. 122.

42. Muriel Rukeyser, “The lynching of Jesus,” *The collected poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, p. 124.

43. Rukeyser, "M-day's child is fair of face," *Ibid*, p. 166.

44. Nadya Aisenberg, *Leaving Eden*, p. 38.

45. Not only did Charles Maurras, an influential French thinker of the first decades of the twentieth century, so characterize women (*L'avenir de l'intelligence*. Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1905), but he and like-minded colleagues such as Julien Benda, another influential French thinker of the same period, condemned French culture (1929) as debased because "it is entirely created by women." This extraordinary statement Benda explains by stating that "All the literary attributes exalted by contemporary aesthetics are those with which women are most highly endowed, and which form a kind of monopoly of their sex; absence of general ideas, cult of the concrete and the circumstantial, swift and entirely intuitive perception, receptiveness to sentiment alone, interest centered on the self..." (Julien Benda, *Belphegor*, trans. S.J.I. Lawson. Payson & Clarke, 1929, p. 3.)

All of this sounds distressingly familiar, elevating to a political position the masculinist admonitions of Southey to Bronte more than a hundred years before. Interestingly, the feminist literary scholar Margaret Homans takes exactly the antithetical view, maintaining that Romanticism is the epitome of the *male* individualistic ego.

46. Elizabeth Bishop, "One art," *The complete poems, 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983.

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