

WILKINSON, MACEWEN, AND WEBB

**ASPECTS OF THE SPIRITUAL IN THREE CANADIAN WOMEN POETS:  
ANNE WILKINSON, GWENDOLYN MACEWEN, AND PHYLLIS WEBB**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines recent theories in feminist mythopoeic reconstruction and in contemporary theology, and considers their application to three English-Canadian women poets: Anne Wilkinson, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Phyllis Webb. It compares gendered theories about heroic and spiritual quest paradigms, concluding that the work of all three poets illustrates the *difference* of women's spiritual journeys. These journeys follow a pattern distinct from the male heroic quest of the divine, one of a dialectical series of encounters with the world of nature whereby the heroines resist normative restrictions to their spiritual liberty by imitating Daphne's retreat into the green world, following the model defined by Annis Pratt (1981). Writing both within and outside of the Canadian literary tradition, MacEwen, Wilkinson, and Webb challenge the structures of androcentric belief -- literary, spiritual, political, mythical. All three poets refute the validity of the manmade version of Paradise because they find it too abstract and impoverished. Instead of the ascetic approach to the divine, each substitutes her own aesthetic approach; poetry, spirituality, and a love of what Wilkinson calls the Green World become inseparable. MacEwen connects the poet giving birth to herself with the rebirth of nature. All three poets are suspicious of the transcendent artist-god, replacing him with an immanent deity. All employ metaphors of *engulfment* and resistance to suggest interiority and a sense of connectedness between nature, their bodies, and themselves, denying *disembodied* concepts of the divine. Each of the three poets elevates the private domestic sphere, debased as a result of the sexual division of labour. By shifting the discursive centre, they publicize and politicize the domain of women, embodying and elevating everyday experience, and simultaneously redefining the sacred.

To break with the ideological habits of our society results in marginalization. This thesis examines "the extent to which all or some women, by virtue of their marginalized relation to discourse, also write as feminists" (Meese 6). Each poet develops a strategy for imagining herself

as powerful and nurturing, elevating some aspect of her experience as a woman living on earth. For Wilkinson, the symbol of the divine is not the god-man of the Gospels, but a nursing mother who sings lullabies to her children. For MacEwen, the body is given new strength and eroticism, enrobed in vivid colour and sensual texture. For Webb, the encounter with suicide and despair yields a new understanding of the creative force of destruction. MacEwen and Webb elevate the domestic and the personal above the universal. Canadian women poets articulate their spiritual difference and describe their visions from an original perspective, arguing for the recognition of a female mystical tradition in Canadian poetry.

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## INTRODUCTION

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember.... Or failing that,  
invent.

- Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (89)

I began writing this thesis out of a need to reconcile an intense spiritual desire with strong feminist convictions, which seemed at first to me to be mutually exclusive -- even contradictory -- aims. In my study of women poets, I have simultaneously been influenced by my reading of recent theological debates and by feminist theory. I begin with the premise that there are enormous differences in perspective between male and female thinkers, writers, and readers. Since how we view the world depends so much on how we read signs, reading itself is a symbolic act. Many feminist critics, notably Fetterley, Gilbert, Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, have challenged our belief that reading is a transparent act whereby male cultural paradigms and signifiers are taken as “universal” norms. Feminist criticism challenges the notion that sexual inequality is either a biological, linguistic or divine mandate, and instead examines it as a social construct by which women have been historically devalued (Greene & Kahn 1).

The social devaluation of woman as “other”, as Simone de Beauvoir observed (1952), has deep roots in patriarchal religion and myth. Historically, the formation of spiritual ideas suggests female inferiority; the resulting dogma is evident in scholastic curricula, where the God of male-oriented, Caucasian “religion” is elevated above the divinities of “primitive” or “heathen” “others”. We are assured that, if the moral and social structures of a particular culture were deeply influenced by female leadership, there is only scant, and therefore inconclusive, evidence to support such a claim. Other, more subtle, forms of coercion exist. Those who seek a positive

image of women may prefer to secure a secular source in order to deny the impact that present male-oriented religions have had upon women who no longer believe in or practise them.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we are robbed of a rich history of matristic symbolism.<sup>2</sup> The history of religion describes a linear progression from evil to good, and the rise of patriarchy and monotheism are seen as advances over the more backward, polytheistic, womanly cultures of the past. Yet, as Simone Weil reminds us, religion and history are “nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves” (225). What I am referring to as spirituality, as opposed to institutional religion, is that inner life of the spirit which exists quite apart from social organizations. And women’s spirituality is based upon an ethos which undermines androcentric assumptions about the universe and the way we live in it presently.

A female ethos is central to the work of many women writers, but I have chosen to concentrate on poetry because it is traditionally a more sacred form of writing. Its emphasis on invocation, rhythm, and divination links it to ancient chants, magic rites, and the mysteries of many oral traditions. Poetry is, according to one critic, “the language most emphatically denied to women [because it] is the most concentrated form of symbolic language” (Kaplan 21).

When Northrop Frye distinguishes poetry as an older form of expression than prose, he describes the latter as sequentially organizing its material in conformity with a casual logic, while poetry takes us “back to a world of undifferentiated energy” through metaphor. Because poetry depends upon metaphor to create a sense of “continuous presence”, it constitutes an inherently synchronous and universal form (1980:68). By its very subjectivity, poetry undermines the

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<sup>1</sup> Merlin Stone makes these points in her introduction to *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*, and offers a plethora of myths, stories, and legends from hundreds of cultures which give substance to the argument that women have had sacred female images for many centuries, and that gynolatric spirituality is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Stone 1979).

<sup>2</sup> “Matristic”, means “mother-oriented” and should not be confused with “matriarchal”, “mother-dominated”. No historical evidence suggests that women-centered societies had dominating female leaders; rather, power seems to have been shared equally between the sexes in matristic cultures.

insistence that reality as we know it is factual, objective, rational, linear, and of the highest order. Women writers, conscious of their subjectivity, often attempt to subvert that order. Domna Stanton writes that “the act of speaking and, even more, of writing as a female represents a fundamental birth drive which will destroy the old order of death” (78). Adrienne Rich describes this order as the “death-culture of quantification, abstraction, and the will to power” (1976:292). And Luce Irigaray claims that only a conceptualization emerging from women’s bodies can transform the masculinist<sup>3</sup> death culture: “Women’s desire most likely does not speak the same language as man’s desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks” (101). In looking at poetry, I want to emphasize both its spiritual and its political dimensions. Poet and cultural critic Susan Griffin affirms the ideological bond between poetry and politics when she writes:

A poem cannot be apolitical. All human utterance can be understood as political theory.... I am not implying that poetry *ought* to be political, but that it *is* political. Political theory cannot possibly teach a poet to be political, because poetry precedes formal political theory in the imagination, and because *poetry is closer to the original form of all thinking* [my italics] (1982:241-2).

Feminist poet Audre Lorde expands upon the potential ritual importance of poetry as a vehicle for transforming the daily lives of women:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into more tangible action. *Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.* The farthest external horizons of our hopes

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<sup>3</sup> Masculinist here refers to those gender-based traits of patriarchy and is distinct from references to the male sex per se. “Patriarchy” is characterized as objective, rational, linear, abstract and hierarchical and should not be equated with the ‘nature’ of man.

and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences  
of our daily lives [my italics] (1980:126).

The intersection of poetry and politics here raises the suggestion that women have alternate models of divinity, given the different nature and structure of their experiences and the corresponding changes in their views of spiritual reality as it acquires meaning within the context of those experiences. A feminist poetic vision posits a different socio-political organization which is non-hierarchical, non-dualistic, non-linear, personal, and deeply symbolic -- often borrowing symbols of female power from the past. Women writing within the confines of patriarchal design have often reformed or rejected what was not true to them, what was not suited to their purposes. While seemingly reflecting the dominant ethos, some women have subverted it and created a separate female ethic for themselves. This subversiveness is often as visible in what is "not" said (or painted, or written, or sculpted) as in what "is" said: it is the silences, the omissions, the gaps, rather than overt statements, which contradict or undermine patriarchal concepts of spiritual truth. And it is these gaps which most intrigue me.

I have chosen three poets to illustrate how Canadian women writers challenge the parameters of conventional spirituality: Gwendolyn MacEwen, Anne Wilkinson and Phyllis Webb. Their challenges arise from the fact that they are women writing from a consciousness that their spiritual concepts do not fit into mainstream religion; in each case, their rebellion against what God stands for is somehow connected to an alternate (and feminist) apprehension of nature. And, although only one of these women, Phyllis Webb, overtly describes herself as a feminist, I believe that each one develops her enunciation of spiritual significance largely in terms of gendered difference. I also think that these poets are important because they emerged on the Canadian poetry scene in the 1950's, before the flowering of the present phase of feminism, and were therefore not responding to populist sentiments about women's emancipation; yet intuitively, their work seems to anticipate concerns highlighted by contemporary feminists and theo-

rists, particularly those who maintain that a male deity has alienated women from their innate powers. I therefore see all three as highly original, prophetic voices.

All three are what might be loosely termed Romantic poets, except that their responses to nature deviate from those of their male counterparts. All three may also be described as metaphysical poets, exhibiting a curious intimacy with tremendous forces, a touch at once familiar and adoring. Yet each undermines traditional concepts of metaphysical truth. Only MacEwen writes consciously of mysticism and defines her pursuit as specifically spiritual in nature, so I have chosen her as representative of an explicit desire to articulate a metaphysical vision.<sup>4</sup>

These three poets were also influenced, to varying degrees, by the mythologist Robert Graves. In *The White Goddess*, Graves traces the origins of the European goddess, her connections with the development of a women's language and alphabet, and her subsequent obliteration by the Romans and the Christians. He believed that the true "function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse", that all true poetry creates an "experience of mixed expectation and horror that her presence excites" (Graves 11). *The White Goddess* has had an enormous impact on many poets. It is problematic for women poets because Graves's main concern is to relate to the goddess as a male poet placating his (somewhat bitchy) muse, and because male poets after him have been most fascinated by the orgiastic aspects of goddess-worshipping sects. Poets

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<sup>4</sup> I could just as easily have chosen a poet like Margaret Avison, in which case I think I could demonstrate that her particular interpretation of Christianity both reflects and alters traditional Christian dogma. I would maintain that this spiritual ethic, which implicitly recognizes the powerfulness of female symbolism, also informs the work of other Canadian women poets, whom I do not have the space to discuss here. An interesting example of this which would merit further elaboration is the recurrence of the witch symbol in Canadian poetry, particularly in the poems of Margaret Atwood, Marilyn Bowering, Susan Musgrave, Anne Hébert, Daphne Marlatt, Anne Cameron, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Jay Macpherson, Diana Hertog, P.K. Page, and Dorothy Livesay. Why is the witch such a popular motif? What social configurations of the feminine have led so many women to delight in this mask? What contradicts it, what function does it serve, and how does it illuminate obscure aspects of women's history, her identity, her creativity? What is the relationship between the witch and nature? Is there a new form of pagan worship developing on the soils of the Canadian imagination? Is our extreme proximity to and traditional dependency upon the environment responsible for a heightened awareness of natural elements, and are these contributing factors in the shaping of women's consciousness, some of the "mysterious reasons [which have] favoured the production of good women poets in Canada", as Atwood claims (1982:xxix)?

like Anne Wilkinson, who describes *The White Goddess* as one of her favourite books, seem to have incorporated Graves's theories in their work. Phyllis Webb is also interested in the ramifications of a female muse for women poets. She claims that contemporary poets no longer have muses, especially since "the muse was once regarded as the source of Truth" (1983:115), something which postmodern consciousness continually calls into question.

To approach the poetry of these three women through their spirituality is only one way of discerning a feminist ethic among Canadian women writers, but for me it is a personally satisfying if idiosyncratic form of criticism. I would define my approach as feminist, syncretic, and eclectic, drawing as it does on the work of many feminist theories and on critics whose work offers a feminist spiritual perspective on literature, art, history, mythology, and culture. (By feminist, I mean woman-centred and female-identified, as opposed to "feminine", which describes culturally-defined attributes of women). I do not support the critical position which assumes that authorial presence has disappeared, as Foucault claims (1969:120). While postmodernism has made us aware that we cannot locate full presence anywhere, to erase a woman poet as the creator of her verse in favour of abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression, particularly at the historical moment when that woman's voice is finally emerging. I write also from the conviction that women are spiritually different, that women care more: for others, for their environment -- personal, domestic, and natural. Women are traditionally the prime caretakers and nurturers and are therefore more interconnected with all forms of life. Further, we are all "of woman born". Oppression has bred in women a kind of strength, and marginalization has given us a special voice which is being articulated by poets, environmentalists, teachers, artists, lobbyists, and health care workers. Its difference, its willingness to listen and to care, is beginning to be heard by the world at large.

This difference has been documented by a multitude of theorists writing on women's spirituality. Writers such as Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow, Nelle Morton, and Judith Ochsorn

propose spiritual quest models which undermine the masculinist search for transcendence, or expose it as illusory. Simultaneously, such critics of women's poetry as Margaret Homans, Alicia Ostriker, Suzanne Juhasz, and Sandra Gilbert have unearthed a tradition of spiritual difference which supports the conclusions of these theorists. The existential loneliness and pervasive fear for self-survival which characterize modern Western literature are not necessarily the desired outcomes of a culture which enshrines freedom and individuality, except when we realize that it sets free precisely those aspects of human nature which are particularly significant to only one dominant group: Caucasian males. As one contemporary woman poet notes, "to the eye of the feminist, the work of Western male poets reveals a deep, fatalistic pessimism as to the possibilities of change, whether societal or personal" (Rich 1986:49). By contrast, much of women's poetry is intuitive, intimate, sacred, earthy, communal, and connective, and therefore inseparable from life itself. It is grounded in common female experiences. It seems to me that there exists a countervailing tradition of great hopefulness among women poets, based on the conviction that both personal and social transformation are distinct possibilities. This is a poetry which Mary Daly refers to as ludic, Dionysiac, anti-Apollonian, and carnivalesque, not upholding dualities as opposites but as co-existing possibilities (Daly 1980). It is not a poetry which is an ornamental artifact produced for a leisured elite -- the "superior entertainment" that Eliot called for, nor one which "makes nothing happen", as Auden claimed. My role as literary critic of spiritual feminism is to recover the gynolatric focus of women's writing, obscured and alienated as it is by mainstream conventions.

My critical approach is part of the project which Catherine Belsey describes in her book *Critical Practice*. Cultural criticism endeavours to examine individual texts as they reproduce, subvert, and transform the status quo, calling into question dominant cultural values. In this case, it is conventional Judeo-Christian symbolism which is challenged by these three women poets, in varying degrees. Cultural criticism aims at a radical rewriting of history which would include

women's voices, despite their their social repression and need for conformity, by listening for the gaps, the silences, the pauses, and the disturbing contradictions or omissions within the text, all of which are marked by a dominant discourse. It pays as much attention to the small, the lost, the insignificant, and the buried voices, as it does the "definite", the "best", and the "natural" voices which have been historically accepted as true and real and accurate. It gives precedence to unconscious or unstated motives, and searches for paradoxes, allowing the critic to attempt to recreate an unacknowledged desire which has shaped the consciousness of the woman writer, contributed to a feminist countertradition, and which is now struggling to emerge and transform the social order.

MacEwen's work is part of this rewriting of history from a feminist perspective, whether or not she explicitly acknowledges her motives. MacEwen's *Trojan Women* revises Greek history to reveal its misogyny in a scathing and satirical reversal of the victor/victim motif. Her revisions of Egyptian history in her two novels give precedence to a viewpoint which challenges the hegemony of monotheism. This is particularly true of *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, where the earth and moon religion of the ancient goddess is represented by Nefertiti, envisioned by MacEwen as a tragic victim of social pressure to conform to monotheism.

The novel is remarkable for its ability to contemporize and enliven ancient history. It traces the reign of Akhenaton (1380-1362 B.C.), a mystic king who tried to impose the new religion of Atonism upon his people and suppress the superstitious polytheism prevalent in Egypt. Literally and figuratively impotent, Akhenaton is alienated from all that is earthy as he strives to achieve divine status for himself, to elevate the god of the sun over the goddess of the moon. Staring only at the sun causes him to become literally blind; likewise he urges his people to have blind faith rather than any spontaneous understanding of religion. Intent on eliminating the darkness, he smashes the head of Apops, "Snake of the Night, Slayer of the Sun", and destroys the temples of the lion-goddess Sekhmet and the cat-goddess Bast. In the process he alienates the temple

priests, loses all foreign tribute, and destroys the empire founded by his grandfather, watching passively as it disintegrates into chaos. His distorted view of a world split into two dualities is introduced on the first page, where Akhenaton's primary conflict between light and dark foreshadows his eventual downfall. Akhenaton most fears the "moonchild of Amon. The Obscene. The Unspeakable. He abhorred the shiny rays; they were devious, unclean" (101). Symbolically, he is devoured by the moon goddess, foreshadowed by the image of the snake which devours the pigeon by transfixing with its stare (219). Akhenaton's sister/wife Nefertiti is driven to suicide in her despair at being unable to help him come to terms with his darker side -- brother and sister incest serves as a metaphor for potential unity and androgyny, for the eternal cycle of sterility and fertility (this is repeated in the concluding poem cycle in *The armies of the moon*). Likewise the heir to the throne, his nephew Smenkhare, is defeated by the darkness, by his "otherness" ("My mother the sky stretches out her arms to me" [248] is how he describes his impending death). Nefertiti's loss is felt more keenly by the kingdom since she gave form to chaos and "her presence had somehow made everything real" (193). She is the ideal queen; "For her the flow of life was from the outside in. She allowed all things to enter her, she shaped and reformed the world inside herself - a dying breed of female"(244). When Akhenaton removes her name from the temples in Meru Aton because it is rumoured that she is "embracing false gods", his actions precipitate a split in the loyalties of his subjects that has catastrophic consequences. While the novels constitute a prolonged meditation on women's "otherness", MacEwen's elevation of the qualities embodied by Nefertiti is also apparent in her poetry.

This thesis will offer no direct comparison with male Canadian poets. As A.J.M. Smith and other critics have already adequately demonstrated (albeit inadvertently), most male poets, -- examples include Leonard Cohen, A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, A.J.M. Smith, and Daryl Hine -- follow the masculinist ladder paradigm in describing *eros* and *agape*. In "Ego or Narcissus? The Male Canadian Poet ", Fred Cogswell argues that male poets write most love poems in praise of

their own powers and attributes, what he calls the self as god, where women are always represented as conquests, 'others'. Female poets write entirely different lyrics, he claims, in which this dualism is not perceived, embracing a warmth and complexity lacking in the men's poetry (Cogswell 1968). In looking at three Canadian women poets, there are several questions which I would like to pursue. Is there a distinctly female ethos? How do women poets express their dissatisfaction with androcentric religious systems? What is woman's relationship to nature and how does it influence her spiritual values? Is there a pattern to women's spiritual journeys -- if so, what shape does it take? How is it different from the male model of spiritual transcendence? What metaphors do women poets use to explore their spiritual difference, and how do they illumine previously obscure aspects of women's history and the formation of female identity and creativity?

In the work of each of the poets examined here, the emphasis upon woman's unique relationship to nature is problematized, challenging the androcentric view of religious experience in Canadian literature. A masculinist religious ethos has been assumed and articulated by several Canadian critics, most notably Northrop Frye, A.J.M. Smith, E.K. Brown, and George Woodcock, as the dominant mode in the development of Canadian poetry. This ethos seems oblivious to the contradictory trend of writing about nature developed by women. A.J.M. Smith writes of the "eclectic detachment" which characterizes modern verse, and filters poetry through the lenses of his metaphysical bias, seeing John Donne's or T.S. Eliot's influence, where "heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (in Johnson's words), as a unifying thread in Canadian poetry. That poetry was created, Smith maintains, like the country, by "the hard work of hacking a new home out of the wilderness" (Smith 1960:xxiii), by civilizing nature -- and, by inference -- by taming women, (the violence of his metaphor is revealing) who have been traditionally associated with nature in this paradigm. E.K. Brown, in his discussion of the "masters" of Canadian poetry, affirms the predominance of this metaphysical tradition and blames puritanism as the major fac-

tor inhibiting the growth of a strong Canadian literature (Brown 1944). The emphasis in puritanism is on the mind/body dualism, favouring the suppression of the body in favour of enhancing the mind or soul.

Northrop Frye, echoing Jung and Neumann, has described the dominant Western mythical pattern as that of transcendence: creation, fall, exile, redemption, and restoration (1957:325). This pattern reaffirms man's control over death -- symbolically, as in a new personality, or literally, as in the Christian belief in resurrection and immortality.<sup>5</sup> He implies that conscious, discursive writing is fatherly and patriarchal; to write poetry, man must become, in effect, woman, since his conscious will places him "over and against the body of things he is describing" (removed from nature and in support of culture). The poet "writes creatively rather than deliberately" and is "not the father of his poem [but] at best a midwife, or, more accurately still, womb of Mother Nature herself: her privates he, so to speak." (1957:68). Another of Frye's theories is that Canadian writing is characterized by a "garrison mentality", whereby nature is the greatest frontier enemy in the Canadian psyche -- what theologians refer to as *mysterium tremendum* or an encounter with "holy otherness". Such a theory expresses a profound fear of nature in itself

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<sup>5</sup> Women are not merely excluded from religion, but charged with preventing mankind from achieving spiritual salvation. Schematically, the paradigm for the masculine ascent to this god resembles a ladder he must ascend, representing the conquest of the base, physical, mundane world on the lower rungs, which he leaves behind in order to rise toward the spiritual plane. According to this model, everything is ranked hierarchically according to its significance, and each upward step represents progress toward a higher realm. If masculinist salvation entails a flight from the contingencies of the world and a retreat to reason, it is woman and all that she represents to him that he seeks to flee.

The patriarchal religious ethic of transcendence is based upon the philosophical system of dualism. It is extremely problematic for women, because it involves their self-denial, and the denial of their bodies. Dualism as a system of thought is buttressed by science and the dominance of reason, by the mechanistic models of the universe which we have inherited along with our fascination with efficiency, and progress. Lately, it has been reinforced in the field of psychoanalysis. All of these fields have registered their imprint upon literature in various ways, and it is no accident that the linear model of the literary male heroic quest bears a striking resemblance to the ladder paradigm in religion. Odysseus leaves home (and the female whose presence hinders his development) and emerges as a hero after surviving many tests and trials and conquering all foes. Gilgamesh conquers all obstacles in order to achieve *anagnorisis*, however humbled by the many times he is brought to his knees in worship of the power which guides him. More recently, the film *Star Wars* involves the same process of self-discovery and propitiation of the Force. The quest brings about wisdom and a discovery of man's separate place in the cosmic scheme. It assumes a superior being, a higher reality above oneself, as well as inferior beings whom one must conquer in order to gain access to that higher knowledge. But the pattern does not work for women.

-- and, by extension, of women. Frye also claims that Canadian consciousness rests on an image of the land as an "unseizable virginity" (1965:826), reinforcing the critical assumption that progress in civilization, as in literature, is tantamount to rape of the unknowable object (nature/women), to the conquest of the zone of wilderness which represents the object of fear. This myth of fear of the wilderness in Canadian consciousness is yet another variation on the male creation story set in the garden of the new world.

Feminist reappraisals have suggested that there may be another way of envisioning the role of nature in the development of Canadian literature.<sup>6</sup> If we can speak of a Canadian consciousness, that sense of national and literary identity sought after by a generation of critics and historians, it would appear that women have played a major role in shaping it from the beginning. This may be one of the advantages of an evolving cultural voice, one which has not yet been fully articulated. Where women have historically been excluded from the formation of the cultural mainstream in other countries, Canadian writing has traditionally, perhaps inadvertently, promoted pioneering efforts to forge an original set of ideas, opening the way to those whose voices would otherwise be drowned in a sea of "major" literary figures backed by a long inherited tradition. This may account for what one writer describes as the "astonishing matriarchy in Canadian Letters" (Swan 1978). As Margaret Atwood observes, "although Canada was and is no Utopia for women, it has historically and for mysterious reasons favoured the production of good women poets to a greater extent than have England, the United States, or Australia" (1982:xxix). "Canada has produced an unusual, even a predominant, number of women writers", writes

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness", *A Mazing Space*, eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/Newest, 1986), 74-83. Murray suggests that Canadian women's wilderness writing is "existent, different, and unacknowledged" and subsequently marginalized (74). She considers the work of Susanna Moodie, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and several others in challenging Frye's myth of a garrison mentality in Canadian writing. "Women's writing in English-Canada [has] been iconoclastic and experimental" (80). She concludes that women are valued for their mediating function between nature and culture, that they occupy the "dangerous middle" zone (83).

Rosemary Sullivan. "The study of women's writing is too new to have taken us far in examining why this is so" (Sullivan ix).

There has been a strong feminist response to the fearful view of nature, especially among Canadian writers; Margaret Atwood, for instance, is well known for her thematic guide to Canadian literature which offers a challenge to the masculinist tradition of fear by stressing survival in the wilderness (Atwood 1972). Gaile McGregor claims that there is an "everywoman" in Canadian literature rather than an "everyman", that "Canadian literature is full of female survivors [since].... women, able to deal with both the psychic dislocation and the anxiety it stimulates in a more direct fashion, may be less susceptible to its more disastrous effects" (154-5). She describes Canadian literature and art in terms of a retreat from awesome Nature, and the pattern of avoidance of the "otherness" perceived in a featureless landscape. This McGregor calls "a prototype for our relation not merely with nature but with the world at large" (76). The question of how language and literary inheritance preform women's thoughts is a crucial one for McGregor; she uses the term "langscape" to delineate the social construction of Nature, as opposed to the Romantic perception of Nature. She writes of the "irreconcilability of separate viewpoints" (109), organized along gender lines, concluding that

the Canadian symbolic ego, set in dramatic opposition to an 'other' objectified in these particular terms, would -- whatever the ostensible sex of its various literary personae -- become feminine in temperament and function: emotional, passive, and vulnerable.... the [psychology of the] representative Canadian can be designated as insideness, in contradistinction to man's centrifugal outsideness. (135)

In spite of the disregard for the peculiarly feminized response to nature in mainstream academic criticism, a counter tradition which contradicts the male fear of nature has developed alongside it.

My own view is that Canadian literature is dominated by a masculine fear of nature, but that women writers frequently undermine this ethos while *appearing* to reflect and support it. This is not to imply that Canadian women poets are making a conscious effort to overthrow patriarchal religious systems by resurrecting a golden age of matriarchy. Rather there seems to be a subtle shift, from the early lyrics of Isabella Valancy Crawford, the Strickland sisters, or later, Margaret Avison, toward the development of a gynocentric symbolism which alters, refutes, ignores, or challenges the dominant masculinist spiritual ethos discernible in the Western poetic tradition. I want to make it clear that this is not always an overt or literal challenge to the status quo, but often a subconscious desire or bias -- sometimes it is merely a professed attraction to gynolatric images or the adaptation of a mask that manifests itself in the work of Canadian women, constituting a subterranean trend.

This trend is evident from the beginning of Canadian women's writing. Catherine Parr Traill's attitude toward nature is one early example of a pioneering woman's response to her environment which conflicts with the prevailing religious tradition of her time. In *The Backwoods of Canada*, there is an enormous tension between scientific rationalism, Christian values, and personal belief; "God" is for Traill problematic, both transcendent and immanent -- a *cri du coeur* she could never totally resolve, constrained as she was by the discourse of Reason. She could not disguise her awe for the natural world, in spite of her skepticism about attributing to it divine ordination, yet her effusiveness is muffled in an attempt to order her emotional responses to the ethical standards acceptable in her day. Her more romantic sister Susanna Moodie approaches nature as a dark chaos both formidable and instructive, preferring evidence of a Prime Mover who directs nature. Yet Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* is rife with contradictions in religious statement, or what she calls the "malady" of her doubt about the wisdom of Providence. One example is her questioning, through the persona of Brian the Still Hunter, the distinction drawn between humans and "beasts":

Is His benevolence gratified by the admiration of animals whom we have  
 been taught to consider as having neither thought nor reflection? When  
 I am alone in the forest, these thoughts puzzle me. (127)

Both sisters reject the assumption that nature is ordered along hierarchical ranks, or that the reality of nature can be apprehended solely through “objective” scientific method. Both of these women were, literally and figuratively, pioneers in shaping a unique female response to nature in Canadian literature, foremothers of an early Canadian consciousness. Later writers -- Margaret Laurence in the Manawaka novels and her early African stories, for instance -- write about a god of chaos, disorder, and disruption, in a very similar manner. Such prose writers have contributed enormously to the grounding of a female metaphysics in Canadian literature, although their full impact on subsequent generations of writers has yet to be assessed.

The Canadian fascination with nature overlaps with theoretical analyses of nature in both religious and feminist studies, providing some interesting parallels. In considering the equation of women and nature, the Canadian context does indeed differ from many other national literatures. There seems not only the obsession with nature as an awesome force, but also a predominance of matristic imagery, especially in images of paganism and witchcraft. There is a constant tension between the cultural definition of women’s relationship to nature and the development of a separate ethic, determined by women themselves, which is based on femaleness and its relationship to nature. The conflict exists between normative definitions of women’s spiritual “nature” and women’s genuine spiritual responses, between cultural models of women in nature, and actual female responses -- the difference lies in women’s perceptions of nature, in their rejection of the patriarchal devaluation of the relationship between women and nature.

In her influential article, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”, Sherry Ortner claims that woman is placed “between” nature and culture as mediator, lending her a symbolic ambiguity:

Shifting our image of the culture/nature relationship once again, we may envision culture in this case as a small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system. From this point of view, that which is intermediate between nature and culture is located on the continuous periphery of culture's clearing; and though it must thus appear to stand both above and below (and beside) culture, it is simply outside and around it. We can begin to understand then how a single system of cultural thought can often assign to women completely polarized and apparently contradictory meanings, since extremes, as we say, meet (84-5).

Woman is thus considered both an element of nature and an object of nature, a "good" in sexual economy (to borrow Luce Irigaray's term), simultaneously marginalized and central, like the clearing in the forest. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter calls this space imaginary, utopian, the construct of metaphysical speculation and gynocentric mythmaking, a "wild" zone (30-31). And it is this imaginary space in the wilderness of Canadian culture which I want to explore in the work of three Canadian women poets. In the wilderness, these poets recognize a spiritual force which reveals something of their inner nature to them, something barely explored. Gwendolyn MacEwen's poem "The Discovery" is particularly appropriate in its suggestion that women must continually re-search and re-evaluate history in order to uncover our gynocentric origins:

do not imagine that the exploration  
ends, that she has yielded all her mystery  
or that the map you hold  
cancels further discovery

I tell you her uncovering takes years,  
takes centuries, and when you find her naked

look again,  
admit there is something else you cannot name,  
a veil, a coating just above the flesh  
which you cannot remove by your mere wish  
when you see the land naked, look again  
(burn your maps, that is not what I mean),  
I mean the moment when it seems most plain  
is the moment when you must begin again.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ANNE WILKINSON

"Who can hide the accent of a mother tongue?"

("I was born a boy, and a maiden, a plant...")

Anne Wilkinson (1910-1961) wrote only two volumes of poetry, which are now out of print: *Counterpoint to Sleep* (1951) and *The Hangman Ties the Holly* (1955). She also produced a history of her ancestors called *Lions in the Way*, a children's book, and a prose memoir comprising fragments from her autobiography. Although her work was well received and praised by critics like A.J.M. Smith, who edited *The Collected Works of Anne Wilkinson* (1968), Desmond Pacey, and Northrop Frye, it is rarely included in collections or anthologies of Canadian poetry.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this obscurity may be that her poetry did not fit established critical categories. The work of Wilkinson shows how a woman poet working within the male tradition of representing nature could produce poems and images which disrupt the conventions of an established genre. Wilkinson refuses to remain content with the finite, and challenges conventional definitions of the absolute, as well as illuminating women's problematic relationship to hegemonic cultural models. As an heir to the legacy of Romanticism, Wilkinson expresses a love of nature and seeks spiritual satisfaction in nature. Yet there is a substantial difference in her approach to spirituality. Where many of the Romantic poets espoused philosophies of nature which work within a traditional Christian framework, Wilkinson's worship of nature suggests a new variation on the older theme of pantheism. In order to explore this, we need to understand her response to conventional religion. What is most remarkable in this regard is her relative *lack* of response to well-established religious customs. Her ability to resist social pressure is partly a luxury afforded her

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson is mentioned briefly in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* and has just recently been included in the ECW series *Canadian Writers and Their Works* (Armitage 1989).

by her wealthy social standing, which she describes at length in her memoir. Yet Wilkinson's religious background was unusual for her time and social situation; she was not schooled in any formal Christian doctrines. She disliked Christmas and did not celebrate it as a religious ceremony, preferring instead its pagan origins ("I was a lover of turkey and holly/But my true love was the Christmas tree"). In her autobiography,<sup>2</sup> she remarks that

In London, Ontario, and at our grandfather's house in Toronto, religion had been a thing so vague that no one ever made a definite statement about it. In London, we occasionally attended church; in Toronto almost never.

Instructed to pray for a relative during his operation, she utters a malapropism which is revealing in its unconscious disrespect for patriarchal authority: "[i]nstead of 'Our Father' I said 'Our Farmer', a natural mistake for a country-loving child" (Autobiography, 22). Forgetting on one occasion to say her prayers, she found her family still alive next day "and none the worse for my betrayal. I folded up my magic and put it away with outgrown dolls and teddy bears. My prayers had never been acts of grace, only something comparable to though less sacred than the rites of African tribes" (Autobiography, 22-23).

Like Emily Dickinson, who loved all books except the bible, Wilkinson also has a peculiar response to that book which Northrop Frye identifies as the single most important influence in the imaginative tradition of Western literature. In this regard alone she is set apart from other Canadian poets. Wilkinson never read the bible until the age of thirty-seven, at which time she read it in its entirety, finding Christ more miraculous as the human son of man than as the divine

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Wilkinson, Manuscript no. 29, box 3, fs.. Anne Wilkinson Papers, University of Toronto, Fischer Rare Books, 22. All references to Wilkinson's autobiography are to this manuscript.

son of God. She sums up her recollections of religion and nature in her memoir, where she explicitly rejects formal religion:

Christianity had been presented to us as a matter of ethics rather than faith, a mystery. And so I sought religion elsewhere, entered a Green Order, *an Order separate from man-made concepts*, in which I could escape personality, not mine alone, all personality.... I was curious and *the curious are never at ease with God*. (Autobiography, 24 and 43 [my italics])

Since her interest in Christianity seems to have stemmed only from intellectual curiosity, we must look elsewhere to locate her faith and her passion. While she implies that she sought refuge in an identification with nature that was outside androcentric theology, we need to understand what it was specifically about conventional religion that provoked her dissatisfaction. Wilkinson's disillusionment with institutional religion cannot be equated with detachment, anarchy, or a lack of spiritual consciousness (Lecker 39). Nor is it fair to claim that Wilkinson "at no time seems to have been moved by an inspiring or consoling spiritual vision" (Woodcock 1989:15); such an interpretation presupposes a very restrictive definition of a consoling spiritual vision. I want to suggest that she did in fact have her own brand of spirituality, linked to her concepts of social justice and freedom of expression. One poem in her second volume in particular points to her sense of moral outrage at the hypocrisy of conventional Christianity. "Christmas Eve" is a sustained attack on Christian values which exclude marginalized persons. The "paper thin" tramps she meets in the park on her way to church and the derelicts "bitten with grief" mirror her own rage and alienation when one of them remarks that "my heart is

hanging/On the ill will of a thorn" (82).<sup>3</sup> Those whose ill will crucified Christ are replaced by those contemporary Christians who would rather maintain the illusion of charity than of genuine aid to victims of social inequality. In a reference to Shakespeare's Portia, the speaker observes that "terror strains my mercy". There is no mercy which drops as the gentle rain because genuine *cariitas* has been replaced by institutionalized piety. In this poem, the church and the warm house symbolize the institutions which act as barriers protecting privileged insiders from harsh social realities, simultaneously stifling them with a sense of imprisonment. When the speaker aligns herself with the Christian view ("I am the priest the church the steeple/All the people"), she must "shut [her] eyes" to all the misery and suffering of the poor, who are neglected since Christ is "dead or only nodding/Out his forty winks of sleep" and no longer "guides the sheep". Her urge is to identify, to experience the beggar's outrage, to assume personal responsibility for the tragedies ignored by pious churchgoers. Organized religion denies access to the poor, to the hungry, to women, or to those of differing faiths, insuring the well-being of only a select group of men ("The witch is chained to the barn/God rest us merry gentlemen"). It leaves the poor and the hungry out in the cold on Christmas Eve, and parades only "tinsel angels" as guardians, offering no solace for the "community of tears" which the speaker would have to ignore in order to subscribe to this religion.

In one of her first published poems, Wilkinson writes that she has been "puzzled all [her] days/By the 'I' in godliness" ("Lens"). I read this as an indication of her sense of exclusion from what traditionally constitutes "godliness", her inability to identify with that godliness, her female absence from alienating religion. She states her objections to conventional religion most clearly in an early poem from her first volume, called "The up and down of it". The hierarchical, phallic

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<sup>3</sup> All references to Wilkinson's poetry are to the Smith edition of the collected poems; page numbers are included parenthetically.

model of spiritual salvation, first espoused by the Neoplatonist poets and usually depicted as a ladder ascending from *eros* to *cariias* whereby the aspirant “moves up” and abandons earthly love in finding god, is openly mocked in this poem. The speaker is both amused and disgusted that the man whom she meets “going up a narrow stair.... had the gall/To swear his name was God” (14). The image of a decrepit old man, attempting to ascend to the place whence she, “the loitering Moon goddess”, has just come, strikes her as comical. The speaker is clearly associated with sensuality, calling herself Mrs. Bloom after Joyce’s character, but she feigns conventional feminine humility:

‘Well met,’ I answered, modest,  
Lowering my catholic  
Appetite of eyes. (14)

The lower case “catholic” suggests that her appetite is indiscriminate and sensual, in contrast to “Catholic”. The referent of “well met” seems deliberately ambiguous. The speaker does not wish to gain access to his tower of heaven, since her goal is the green earth:

Ascending on the right  
He reached his tower.  
I, two steps at a time,  
Jumped my way to grass. (14)

In a reversal of the Christian master-slave trope (employed in Socratic teaching methods and later in Hegelian dialectics), it is God who cowers in the presence of woman, blushing at her unabashed earth-bound sensuality. Although she is merely

a simple witch  
With only the silky power  
To stroke the bat  
That flaps in his belfry (14)

she intimidates him and he is “squeezed against the wall” and “afraid”, like T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock. The witch’s position is clearly superior to god’s on three levels: first, by the fact that her “silky power” places her physically above God in his tower (in the belfry, to be precise); second, because she is the narrator controlling the interpretation of events according to her whim; and third, because she is the “I” placed typographically at the top of the page/tower/hierarchy. But, as the childlike skipping downward “two steps at a time” would suggest, she does not even subscribe to this phallocentric model, neither aiming to climb upward (take God seriously) nor control him pinned and wriggling against the wall as she has the opportunity to do. This poem anticipates the later feminist argument that women’s strength is “empowerment” -- the witch’s “humble spell” as the speaker describes it -- not the patriarchal domination which insists on “power over”. She destroys the relevance of the Renaissance ladder/tower trope of salvation (and phallocentrism itself) by bypassing it, and moving in the opposite direction -- two steps at a time -- contrasting her youthful vigour with the impotence of a bearded god past his prime. To let God pass is both to let him off the hook and to let his religion “pass” into history because she finds it untenable. By reaching the grass (returning to the earth), the speaker demonstrates the futility of the patriarchal model for upward progress/mobility, while she also makes room for him to continue striving to reach his tower, neither wishing to impose her choice upon him nor seek his approval, but opting for her own humble wisdom. God has “the gall” to drill her about her identity, wanting to pigeonhole her, to locate her position in the hierarchy, but her reply merely embarrasses him, sends him blushing and scurrying up the narrow stairs to his tower. The setting of the poem, a narrow tower with winding stairs, reinforces the speaker’s sense of claustrophobia. There is literally “no room” for a relational bond in this hierarchical scheme; one must let another gain ascendancy before continuing on the path to salvation. In a lighthearted and humorous vein, receptivity wins over aggression. Like Dickinson in “Heaven - is what I cannot reach”, Anne

Wilkinson satirizes the concept of a heaven “up above”, the ladder model of spiritual ascent.<sup>4</sup> The ladder motif is repeated in “The Puritan”, a man whose scorn of the sensual is mocked; he “cleaves to rock/And shaded stone”, resisting enlightenment, and by night he climbs his lonely tower, oblivious to the gifts of nature:

And still his bed  
Is cool and warm and sap  
Climbs up his stair  
And fireflies light him home  
At night, all unaware. (29)

In “Easter sketches, Montreal”, the crucifix atop Mount Royal is a vertical motif of godliness, and appears at first to be the central image in the poem. But it is surpassed by the description of the birth at the end of the poem, to which four whole stanzas are devoted. The transition from sterile urban life to the rebirth of spring is paralleled by the transition from a patriarchal religious system which places God on high or above the earth itself, to the fertility rites of spring and birth, celebrated when “time and the rolling world/Fold the birthday children in their arms” (57). The battle imagery of the “boom and shrapnel” during the “March of Easter, loud/Where guns of ice salute/The cracking god” gives way to fecundity; control yields to primal chaos or the consolation of a maternal embrace. This icy god is shown to have no connection with the real world, the “intimations of fertility” discussed in the following stanza, and loses his

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<sup>4</sup> Yeats too came to the conclusion that the ladder model for spiritual ascent was inappropriate: “I must lie down where all the ladders start./In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart”. Yet his response was to secularize the sacred, to laicize the divine in androcentric terms, in contrast with Wilkinson’s urge to sacralize the human. Yeats’ gyre theory has many similarities to Wilkinson’s concept of metamorphosis. Yeats’ twenty-eight-phased lunar gyre lasts for two thousand years, after which there is a sudden reversal, point to base, base to point, and the commencement of the opposing gyre. In “The Second Coming”, at the “death” of one gyre, the rough beast which crawls toward Bethlehem is symbolized by the third eye of the unicorn: the knowledge of one world moves, in its capacity as death and rebirth, into the next. But Wilkinson’s response to aging is less schizophrenic. Yeats, faced with old age, splits himself into Crazy Jane and an old man who seeks purification through the flesh. For Wilkinson, the witch/Crazy Jane stands on the green grass at the foot of the tower, inviting the old man to come down.

power in “the melting hour”. Sensual nature triumphs, and the melting of the ice into water renders the wasteland fertile again. In the city, “men grow deaf” and “sound is muffled by the pile of lawns”; like artificial Easter celebrations, nature cultivated loses its potency in contrast with nature untamed, where “skies can stretch their cloudy loins/To the back of the long north wind.” Vertical structures are overturned again as they become “rivers [which] swell in tumbling towers of praise”. The “tumbling” suggests chaos and the collapse of the tower, which is built upon artifice and deception. Once the natural cycle is recognized, even the shape of the images shifts: the concluding stanzas of the poem are replete with images of roundness, contrasting sharply with the earlier phallic images of towers, swords, steeples, and guns associated with Christianity and the urban world of culture. In the final section, the only vertical images are the Dionysian “green shoots in our wood”, used only as release from bondage, to “cut the natal cord” or in “freeing the animal sensual man” (57). When describing nature in its free, undomesticated state, the speaker aligns herself with “our wood” and celebrates “our nativity”. Setting herself apart from the cold Christian world where “Winter is Jehovah”, she says that

We [are]

The Jobs who scold the frosty Lord

Till wings of weather

Clap the air

And crows unfrock the melting God. (58)

To discover the vital blood of youthful summer and freedom requires the death of the Father, and the winter of adulthood must be thawed, exposed, and sacrificed to spring.

Christian symbols, associated with imprisonment, are displaced by metaphors of spiritual expansion and freedom in Wilkinson’s poetry. The nature lover is free to “open an ear to the earth, love” (21), to be attuned to inner rhythms rather than external laws. Pride in female power and creation informs a cycle of three poems written toward the end of Wilkinson’s career, on the

subject of the Biblical Adam. These poems resemble Dickinson's "Better - than Music! For I - who heard it", where Eden is merely "a legend - dimly told". In *Genesis 2* and in *Paradise Lost*, the delay between Adam's creation and Eve's permits Adam conversation with God (*Logos*) which gives him the power to name the animals; yet God never speaks directly to Eve. In the first in this cycle, "Old Adam", woman is shown as stealing sorrow and pride from her "old man". Wilkinson wittily suggests that the emulation of men achieves nothing, as Adam himself sadly realizes: "And when he woke he wept to see/Of pride and sorrow I'd made me" (145). The poem reverses the androcentric world view of Christian myth, whereby a male god mimics female gestation by shaping progeny from clay, breathing life into the vessel through the nostrils, putting the male to sleep and drawing from him a rib with which to construct woman. Wilkinson's version inverts the myth, restoring creativity to women, but mocking the phallic symbol of the rib. "Adam's rib" marks the beginning of the female quest for truth and autonomy as the

Angels bright rotate, encircle

Urgent tip of god-in-steeple,

As on earth all Eves inquire

The nature of the rib they were. (146)

Man's "rib in his side" which is "his sorrow and his pride" in the previous poem is now engulfed by the rotating angels, and the god's "spire" is now "thrust t'ward heaven's round" (146). The phallic steeple is toppled once again, replaced by a new, feminine model for the creation story which celebrates the "ring without beginning, end" (146).

In "Adam and God", God is shown as an anthropomorphic projection of male power, since "man breathed into God/Man's anger" and "charged His gun/That God might fire from heaven" (147). If God is male, then males consider themselves gods; their power is derived from power and domination. Male creation, or insemination, is described in brute militaristic imagery. Even God eventually flees this nightmarish scheme:

On Sunday

God cried, "Rest! Enough!" And ran from man and hid. (147)

The devil is "cut... from a sleeping woman's rib", reversing the traditional order in the creation of the two sexes. The conquest of nature and woman is specifically equated with imperialism, where man creates a god who is "President of waves" and who is given "Dominion of the sky"; he is crowned

Emperor

Of every creeping thing

A monarch of the night

And king of day. (147)

It is not merely the institutions and myths of patriarchy which Wilkinson's poetry ridicules, but the language which is used to describe them. It is more frequently through humour, wit, and parody than through invective that she mocks and undermines androcentrism. The puns and references to the great "masters" like Shakespeare, Donne, Marvel, Kipling, Yeats, Eliot, and Kafka, suggest that Wilkinson was well read and eclectic. Her work has much in common with the mythopoeism of Canadian poets like Jay Macpherson and James Reaney. Yet generally her references to great works are parodic, evincing a disrespect and irreverence for the material they quote, rather than being merely allusive, implying either respect for or imitation of their sources. This thematic playfulness is reinforced by stylistic play. Familiar with the medieval, metaphysical, and Romantic tropes, she subverts these conventions, calling their authority into question. The parodic process is explicit in a poem like "After the ballad 'Lord Randall, My Son'". The original poem is a tragic lyrical ballad in which a young man is poisoned by a false lover. Wilkinson's version ridicules the young man as an effete coward who is bullied by girls ("The girls are rough; Mother, wash my face clean/And stay close beside me and feed me ice-cream"). He is not poisoned, but rather his feet are amputated by his mother so that he cannot go to war. The ori-

ginal ballad ends on a vengeful note, where Lord Randall leaves his property to various family members but only “hell and fire” to his deceitful lover. But Wilkinson’s poem, while rather gruesome, is comic and leering, mocking the young man’s inability to stand up to the woman who “laughed at [his] love” or to let go of the apron strings. The reader’s response to the original ballad is sympathetic, while in Wilkinson’s poem, one can only laugh at the boy’s infantile response.

Wilkinson’s ballads frequently rely on the singsong rhythms of children’s rhymes and fairytales, which are juxtaposed with her ribald misquotations of the bible; children’s verse is also a “safe” genre for women poets to subvert, since it is rarely accorded status by “serious” literary critics. I would suggest that this redefines the oral text as a radical extension of feminist re-visions of literary history which include letters, diaries and other para-literary forms, elevating traditionally non-literary categories such as lullabies, ballads, nursery rhymes, carols, and marginalia. This marginalizes Wilkinson’s work. Perhaps this is why Northrop Frye concludes that Wilkinson is “essentially a dream poet” who is “too clever for her own good” (Frye 1952:252). Or why William Walsh concurs that Wilkinson has a “ferocity” of vision but that “the poet, one senses, is making one degree too much effort [and demonstrates] a bias toward melodrama” (Walsh 210). Many of the children’s poems playfully unite the sacred and the mundane. “Noel”, for instance, domesticates the nativity story, bringing it down to earth through the use of childlike language and imagery and reconciling inseparable “opposites”. The childish is the same as the sacred, “For toad and tart embrace one hell,/The heaven in each other” (149). Wilkinson’s capacity for self-revelation links her with Emily Dickinson, with whom she shares, according to Dorothy Livesay, “the same satiric, sometimes savage turn of thought”, but expressed through nursery rhyme (Livesay 24). In echoing, reinterpreting, or recalling myths, fairytales, and children’s nursery rhymes, she reconstructs their meaning through pun, whimsy, and irreverence. In “Winter sketches”, the child’s prayer is altered, asking not the Lord, but the snow, to preserve

not the child's soul, but the wings ("in his image"): "I dare the snow my wings to keep". Similarly, "Rhyme" inverts the parental advice generally given a child. And "Three poems about poets" depicts poets as magical creatures who fish, dive, and run, entertaining children by their skill, and the poem concludes by mimicking a line from a nursery rhyme: "Did you ever see such a sight in your life/As three new poems?" (93). In "Letter to my Children: Postscript", Wilkinson leaves her children a legacy of sensory images, concluding with:

In milk and curd of cheese  
Guess the whey and whyfore  
Of our interval need for peace

She uses frequent repetitions of "holy, holy" to signify "wholly", or puns, or parodic readings of scriptural language. The Christian fall, for instance, is parodically reduced to "one wholly Sunday afternoon" (10), and another poem features "a good Seamaritan" (52).

Wilkinson urges us to reinvest language with childlike frankness and sensuality, to seek the "working curd" that will release the "yeast" in a "glutton's feast of words":

Burst the skin off the tongue  
Till words reflect a hotter sun  
Than ever shone in heaven;  
They'll fright the devil's tufted ears  
And shrivel hawthorn's holy spears.  
Be done with comma and the groping guess  
And hurl a brick at words like loneliness;  
No good to wish our language new -  
Spell words that spit at need of dew. (175)

This poem is intriguing in its contrast with "Topsoil to the wind", where the "unrisen" and "heavy bread" is described as a "waste", a murderous communion based on sensory deprivation:

We have mislaid ourselves, purposely  
 As a child mislays a burden;  
 As if in miracle of treason  
 Pastures willingly  
 Threw topsoil to the wind.

We gnaw the forked and brittle  
 Bone of wish and call it food,  
 Party every hour to murder  
 At the altar of our adulthood.

In aisles between the graves we waste  
 The landed fish, our flesh.

Our hearts, unrisen, yield a heavy bread. (76)

This poem makes explicit that the heavy bread of Christian communion offers no nourishment; “unrisen” reverberates with meaning in this context, as unleavened bread, an unrisen saviour, and “unrisen” in terms of vertical advancement, referring to no upward mobility in hierarchical terms. She suggests the substitution of the five senses for the sacrament of communion, insinuating that instinct is more effective than mere repetition of ritual: “For bread and wine/Let wisdom on your tongue/Pause to conceive a fivefold grace” (133). The Lord’s prayer is parodied in the sequence entitled “A sorrow of stones”, where death is compared to the “Fall without end”; and in “Letter to my Children: Postscript”, the mother advises her children that “[y]our kingdom comes with senses” (128). Nature mocks the concept of a virgin birth in “Winter sketches”; snow banks are “immaculate conception in a cloud/Made big by polar ghost” (6).

What emerges clearly from these poems is that Wilkinson considers Christian dogma deceptive because it denies "otherness". Where she does employ Christian tropes, it is to subvert or to parody them, to attribute new meaning to them -- in short, to secularize the sacred. She often appropriates modified Christian imagery for her own purposes as well, as in "The pressure of the night", where the persona must resist the pressure of the saviour, who is portrayed as the poetic muse and "shepherd lover" who tries to seduce her through sleep. The metaphor of seduction by an inviting rescuer is an interesting one: it suggests that the woman poet is offered an appealing, easy way out, by giving in to the demands of the saviour. But to do so would require being unfaithful to her craft, and so she prefers to remain cold, lonely, and true to herself:

But she lies dumb  
Ice and fire die tepid on her tongue  
Scorched with cold, the unbeliever  
Resists her saviour. (47)

Resistance is a metaphor which informs much of Wilkinson's poetry, whether it lies in resistance to alienating institutions and conventions, the resistance of the child to the ways of the adult world, or the resistance of the seeker to conventional notions of the "appropriate" time, place and context for celebrating the spirit. Again it is interesting to note Woodcock's assessment that Wilkinson "stands in strange and tragic isolation" among her peers (1989:15). Her inability, or unwillingness, to conform suggests that she felt profoundly alienated by society and religion. Woodcock refers to the elegiac character of her work, the "poetry of sadness" which speaks of her "surrender to destiny." But I dispute that she surrenders to either convention or destiny. Again, it may have been her social standing which afforded her the luxury of resistance, protected as her material world was. For other reasons too, Wilkinson explicitly rejects religion.

If Wilkinson has no use for conventional religion, what then does she substitute? She seems to have drawn spiritual sustenance from three main sources: a love of nature, a love of sensuality,

and a love for mothering, all of which suggest that she was evolving toward a spiritual philosophy that could offer her more than institutional religion, which never took any real hold upon either her mind or her spirit.

What did take a greater hold upon her imagination and her soul, particularly at an early age, was what she variously termed the “green order”, the “green world”, and the “green religion”, which replaced a traditional Christian upbringing in her youth. Her family seems to have taken great delight in nature; she recalls running naked in the wet woods with her family and holding many picnics and family events outdoors (Autobiography, 55 3/4). Childhood was for her a magical time, as is apparent in her memoir. She speaks of the “supernatural” powers which inhabit “the vanishing wood”. Wilkinson nostalgically recalls a sense of oneness through her childhood identification with natural phenomena, a recurring theme in her work. The poet/child must re-establish the lost link with nature, with the mother as earth, to reach an undivided state of holiness. To counteract the effects of the wasteland she sees all around her, Wilkinson advocates a return to the watery element, reviving a motif common to the Holy Grail cycle of legends. Fertility to the arid land and the barren soul can be restored through renewed emphasis on both *mater* and matter. She celebrates both mind and body together, as interconnected. Although in advancing her spiritual belief, Wilkinson advocates a revival of sensuality, it is never at the expense of the intellect, but merely as a mode of expanding the present definition of spiritual wholeness. This is an all-inclusive view of nature, wherein it becomes possible to announce that “I was born a boy, and a maiden, a plant” without contradiction, as the aphorism by Empedocles used to open one poem suggests.

Anne Wilkinson’s nature philosophy emphasizes the oneness of all things. Her nature mysticism, where the unknowable is overwhelming and inaccessible except to those childlike enough to perceive it, is best summarized in “Theme and Variation”, where awe and reverence are embodied by “This”. The poem bears a striking resemblance to the philosophies of Lucretius

and Heraclitus (whose philosophies obviously attracted her, since she refers to both); they believed that to neglect mother earth was to invite wrath and destruction, since the earth is a living, breathing body. In Wilkinson's poems, the animate and the inanimate become inseparable:

The stone in my hand  
 IS my hand  
 And stamped with the tracings of  
 A once greenblooded frond,  
 Is here, is gone, will come,  
 Was fire, and green, and water,  
 Will be wind. (101)

This nature mysticism has much in common with the beliefs espoused by the Romantics. Wordsworth and Blake, for instance, also looked to nature to recapture childlike knowing and to contrast spiritual wholeness with social illness. D.H. Lawrence, whose *Sons and Lovers* Wilkinson described as being "drenched in flowers", also writes of the need to bond with nature, through the private worship of all living things. In *Phoenix*, Lawrence describes this pantheism as "a living tradition going far beyond the birth of Christ, beyond the pyramids, beyond Moses. A vast old religion which once swayed the earth lingers" (145):

This is how I "save" my soul, by accomplishing a relationship between  
 me and another person, me and other people... me and the animals, me  
 and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon: an  
 infinity of pure relations, big and little. (598)

So how is what Wilkinson advocates any different from that of her male counterparts writing in the Romantic tradition? Quite simply, her *relationship* to nature is different: nature is neither idealized nor objectified, nor is it a means of transcendence in her work -- it offers a form of communion, of connection, of identification. D.H. Lawrence wrote of his desire to

overcome dualism and to discover this sense of union. Lawrence believed that “Ours is essentially a tragic age” (the opening sentence of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*) and that man’s quest for mastery was falsely founded upon the “illusion of separation” between mind and body, that the reduction of something to an object led to its being easily overcome. In the unfinished *Apocalypse*, he writes:

We are unnaturally resisting our connection with the cosmos, with the world, with the nation, with the family.... *We cannot bear connection.* This is our malady. We *must* break away and be isolate. We call that being free, being individual. Beyond a certain point, which we have reached, it is suicide. Perhaps we have chosen suicide. (1966:198)

But Lawrence evoked his sense of communion with nature by celebrating male sexuality, by elevating the phallus to the level of the sublime. With none of Lawrence’s phallogocentrism, Wilkinson also advocates a return to the reverence of nature by emphasizing instead the female aspects of sexuality. As such, her relationship to nature is distinct from that of other Romantics, although superficially they seem to share the same impulse. And the difference shaped the evolution of spiritual values which resist androcentric belief systems. Her work, then, constitutes not a radical but nonetheless a distinct departure from the long line of Romantic visionaries from whom she is descended.

Wilkinson’s writing also relies upon many medieval and Renaissance ideas, particularly the trope of the poet as alchemist, as one who transposes the elements. In the cosmic scheme in which the four elements corresponded with the four planes of existence, certain elements were given priority. Wilkinson calls her memoir *Four corners of my world*, aligning her four childhood residences with the four elements. She has been compared with George Herbert as “a poet of inner weather” (Pacey 77), while her use of light as a symbol for truth links her with Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne, and her “metaphysical wit” with John Donne (Smith 1968:xiv).

Armitage contends that Wilkinson's "Notes on Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*" is evidence of "her manifest struggle, like Burton's, not to succumb to melancholy" (Armitage 281). Yet this sequence of poems is deliberately witty, and frequently undercuts and satirizes Burton's obsessiveness, specifically ridiculing his fear of the flesh, which she connects with Pauline doctrine. Certainly her yearning for perfection and her idealism link Wilkinson with many Renaissance thinkers, as does her attention to metaphysical wit. Wilkinson, however, evinces no modernist nostalgia for a lost golden age; her mythmaking grows more from a subterranean tradition of female self-projection and self-exploration than from the system-building of romantics like Blake, Keats, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Dickinson, and modern poets like Lawrence, Yeats, Graves, Pound, Eliot, and Auden. Unlike Eliot, for instance -- whose work she disliked, according to her letter to P.K. Page<sup>5</sup> -- Wilkinson elevates the personal and eschews aesthetic detachment, ignoring his call for the "extinction of personality" in poetry, or that of Yeats, who declared that "all that is merely personal soon rots". Anne Wilkinson's poetry challenges the validity of the notion that the persona is *never* to be equated with the "I". Moreover, Wilkinson stresses the personal in a distinctly feminine manner, particularly in her emphasis on the body and on domestic, mundane existence, both of which she elevates to the sacred. It is this emphasis which led several critics like Frye and Pacey to label her work "commonplace". All of these critical terms, taken out of their pejorative context, qualify Wilkinson as a feminist poet; for the very reasons she is rejected by mainstream critics, she may be celebrated as a poet of the feminine voice.

A large proportion of Wilkinson's subject matter is devoted to womanly issues; many of the poems address children, mothers, and poets who write with a "woman's eye" (48). By employing matrifocal insight, she transmutes the patriarchal image of woman into something more positive, enhanced by a new depth and dignity. She elevates desire, which she suggests was innate to her

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<sup>5</sup> Unpublished ms. no. 29, box 4, Fischer Rare Books Collection. Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

childlike apprehension: "All I remember was desire", she writes (Autobiography, 202). Wilkinson's poems anticipate the rise of both feminism and paganism, particularly at the point where these intersect. This is not to suggest her conscious appropriation of either ideology, but rather a coincidence of forms arising from an analogous impulse, from overlapping mythological allusions, and from a simultaneous ideological confrontation with monotheism. One might refer to her poetry as pantheistic. As she writes in "The red and the green", "she walk[s] an ancient path/Wearing [her] warmth and singing/The notes of a Druid song" (680). The notes of her songs are distinct from those sung by male poets working within the same traditions.

This raises an interesting question: does a woman poet *necessarily* produce different imagery, different values from her male counterparts? If the Romantic view of nature is embedded in a structure of gendered subjectivity, making passive femaleness both the object of scrutiny and the subject of male control, is it possible for a woman poet working within that tradition to see nature differently? In Wilkinson's case, because she was a woman, inhabiting a woman's body, viewing nature from a woman's perspective, and describing female experiences of nature, the answer is affirmative. What is most remarkable about her verse is its lack of inhibition in describing passion and sensual, bodily experience -- what it feels like to be a woman -- long before this became fashionable. The sheer intensity of her passion is palpable in the poems, which are most effective because of the sense of immediacy they impart to the reader. There is no sense of her feeling guilt-ridden or striving to shake off the burden of puritanical dogma to arrive at the truth of love. This is also reflected in her autobiographical comments: "Our parents never equated sex with evil" (Autobiography, 69 3/4); nor did they disguise death from the young child. She was told not to believe "the nurse's tales of hell" (Autobiography, 22). In "Effigy", Wilkinson pays homage to Pan and suggests that, without spirituality, human life lacks animation and meaning. Overintellection produces sterility, and "with sense alive you're wiser" (127).

Wilkinson also differs from many nineteenth-century Romantics in being unsentimental. As for the Romantics, love and death are still favourite themes, but she adds the dimension of sexuality as an active element. For Wilkinson, matter *is* spirit, and to worship the flesh is holiness itself. Maternal compassion overcomes phallic aggression: “Let the world go limp, put it to rest/Give it a soft wet day and/While it sleeps/Touch a drenched leaf” (77). Many of the poems celebrate sexuality as a way of knowing, a sensory reawakening to finer instincts. Nature is evoked to give pleasure and meaning to human existence.

Wilkinson explores all the senses through language, describing the sensuality of the skin, ear, eye and tongue (68). Typographically, her poetry is sinuous and sensual, literally curving and flowing (like the body) on the page, as in “Tower Lullaby”:

so creak on curv-  
ing rock or leap

or in “In June and Gentle Oven”:

Where fields go stroll-  
ing by           (61)

The visual sensuality of the verse is complemented by the tactile. Frequently she uses the word “tongue” to describe the poet’s gift and to refer to spiritual utterances; the tongue is “all-knowing” and “charged with grace” (62), and it is “compulsive in its desire” to articulate that knowledge (88). Language itself is connected to the sensual, not bound to the *Logos*. The pale victim in “The pressure of night” who “resists her saviour” keeps her words to herself as “she lies dumb/Ice and fire die tepid on her tongue” (47). Wilkinson longs for the memory of an earlier world “where the skin’s aware on your palm” and wants to “drench the flesh in fonts of memory”, to return to the watery womb and to “Uncurl prehensile fingers from the tree,/ Cut your name on bark, search/ The letters for your lost identity” (77). Seeking words for self-expression is likened to the quest of new creatures emerging from the sea and confronting a

strange environment. When deprived of the uterine waters of their origin, the new arrivals must crawl onto land, to “Amphibian shores”, “up from the bottom of the sea only yesterday” (163). On dry shore, the language is foreign, and “tongues trip on vowels, taste a changed saliva”, the sea-born creatures feel “anchored to the tide/Waving to its wide pre-natal hymn.” When the senses are fully recognized, the poet begins to use her tongue to name those experiences which she considers holy:

I walk it every day, love summer months  
 When air and time and I are white with searching;  
 I name its flora, feed its fawn. (25)

Her walk leads her to “the bearded face of God”, whose authority diminishes once she names things herself:

Pity him, a King, dependent now  
 On my erratic eye to right his halo;  
 He begs my eye to stay,  
 Begs my tongue call holy holy holy;  
 I yawn and as I turn he fades away. (25)

Wilkinson’s appreciation of the flesh is particularly evident in the moving poem called “In June and gentle oven”, which richly celebrates the rising of the sap and the lovers’ encounter as inseparable ecstasies:

In June and gentle oven  
 Summer kingdoms simmer  
 As they come  
 And flower and leaf and love  
 Release  
 Their sweetest juices. (61)

The language is at once sensual and religious, forceful in its evocation of passion, in both physical and spiritual terms:

And where, in curve of meadow,  
 Lovers, touching, lie  
 A church of grass stands up  
 And walls them, holy, in. (61)

The puns and the double entendres stress the lovers' interconnection with nature, suggesting that their union inspires their own kind of religion. In this setting, even insects become god-like, as they "walk on running water" and are "bright as angels" who are like "Klee-drawn saints". Like Donne, who emphasized the paradoxical oneness and separateness of the lovers, Wilkinson writes that "two in one the lovers lie." Yet Donne used an inanimate trope of the compass to describe such a union. Wilkinson's metaphor for sexual and spiritual omniscience is a kiss which involves the entire body and all of nature:

the lovers lie  
 And peel the skin of summer  
 With their teeth  
 And suck its marrow from a kiss  
 So charged with grace  
 The tongue, all knowing  
 Holds the sap of June  
 Aloof from seasons, flowing. (62)

The graceful language simultaneously conveys the intensity of the physical experience and the experience of communing with nature; both are grounded in the body -- of the earth, of the lovers. While feasting on fruit is a traditional metaphor for being consumed by love or devouring the loved one, sucking marrow does not generally connote romantic, let alone spiritual, love. Yet this metaphor succeeds in conveying a realistically insatiable hunger for love, for life, for the kind

of experience one feels in one's bones. It is a common, domestic image, startling in its originality and sharpness.

Images of ripeness, fertility, and abundance are everywhere in the nature poems, in striking contrast with the grotesque, mechanical images which proliferate in the poems with an urban setting. A complete absorption in the natural elements seemed to revive in Wilkinson a sense of awe and wonder, a lively wit. Even in her more melancholy poems which describe death, the effects are felt first in their bodily sense. Wilkinson's verse shows a keen awareness of death; besides a fascination with anatomical detail (absorbed perhaps from her husband's medical profession), the poems also exhibit Wilkinson's desire to revive rituals which restore the reality of death. She does not fear death; she merely assesses it in detached precision, accurately describing each sensation. She describes pain and the waning of her strength and powers in intensely moving terms, but these poems are vibrant and emphatic in their refusal to make death seem sterile, or easy. Wilkinson makes us aware that death is *physically* painful, rather than heroic, and she suffers openly, rather than stoically. The body truly is a temple, both in the fullness of life and in death. "Accustom the grey coils/Locked in the skull/To the silence", begins one poem which evokes the stillness of death; it ends with a celebration resembling a fireworks display where the "black sky [is] unloading/Its stars till the skull is alight" (76).

"A Sorrow of Stones", presumably written during the period when Wilkinson realized that her health was failing, describes her sense of awe that death is "other than I had imagined". Here death is depicted as a "Fall without end", a dreamlike journey, the intensity of which seems to startle her into some new insight. The poem explicitly denies the possibility of an afterlife which would guarantee the speaker freedom from turmoil and suffering. Heaven is rejected because it offers only false solace and escapism. Rather, one should greet death like a lover, in the medieval tradition of personifying death as seducer: "His cunning hand/Explored my skeleton" (78). Wilkinson reverses the sex of the seducer, altering the medieval convention.

The acceptance of death as a prerequisite to insight is central to an understanding of Wilkinson's philosophy of metamorphosis. Death is creative, and returning to the earth is a natural if somewhat awesome expectation. Whether it is death or pain or love, all are valued because they excite the sensations to an awareness of the body. Death is also seen as a homecoming, a heading "waterward" (55), a return to the uterine waters of our origin. "A poet's-eye view" portrays the "green ones" who populate the earth through an interrelationship with the body of the earth, who laugh at her "giant tremor of the soil". "For each storm's death, our knowing nonsense blowing/On and off the lode of your mortality" imitates the mother-child symbiosis in geologic terms. The earth is often described as female, and the sun is said to "bear down" like a woman in childbirth (58). Death, like life, is depicted in terms of its felt effects rather than in abstract metaphysical terms.

Closely related to death is the role which sleep plays in the poetry. The forced hibernation of nature, symbolized by the onset of winter, is equated with the artificial freezing of time and an anesthetized perspective. In "Winter sketch", "snow's vocation is to etherize/The wood" with "drifts of chloroform" (5). Stasis is worse than death, and to give in to it is to give up on life itself, to be seduced by passivity and blindness. Sleep is equated with the loss of synesthesia, sensuality, and vibrant colour. Conversely, a poem entitled "Waking" depicts the state of mind which is associated with a zest for life, with rebirth "[f]rom the drowning years" and a reawakening to sensual exploration as the key to illumination. Ordinary waking is not a real state of wakefulness because it does not fully employ the senses in their full capacity, and runs contrary to natural instinct. One needs greater alertness, an expanded perspective, in order to survive intact. Wilkinson evokes this broadened perception in a poem called "La Belle Dame Sans Dormi", which pays tribute to a goddess in the manner of ancient tributes to the Minoan snake goddess:

She did not dress  
 Except to wear  
 A word across her groin  
 She wore no jewels  
 But the snake  
 Living on her arm  
 She could not sleep  
 For sleep would watch  
 The flies stroll on her face  
 She did not dare  
 To lose her web  
 In that dark webbed place. (22)

This woman is the inverse of Keats' "La Belle Dame sans merci": she wears none of his garlands or bracelets, is not immortal, does not demand chivalry, nor does she put her lover to sleep, fearing the onset of sleep herself. The Christian saviour is described as inalert and therefore an ineffectual guide for his flock: "Is he dead or only nodding/Out his forty winks of sleep?" (83). "To a sleep addict" equates the drowning out of the poet's senses with a linen blanket of snow which covers up life. Life must be lived fully:

Turn your compass from  
 The point of sleep  
 Let the fixed pole wait.  
 Why hurry the traveller home?  
  
 The track is short so beat  
 The racing blood

For when its foaming dries

No whip can make you bleed. (103)

But the poem concludes by suggesting that life is reborn, that “resurrection springs” from the grass. It is not death that the speaker admonishes against, but rather the “point of sleep” and the “fixed pole”, which impose stasis upon the life of the senses. Sleep is associated with a colourless existence. “A room for sleep” is a poem of black, grey, and white contrasts, and their “monotone” dullness is juxtaposed with the brighter roses: “No scarlet here,/No trumpet from the noisy sun” (159). The poem is notable for its tongue-in-cheek tone and its lack of bright primary colours -- indeed, it ironically debases lively colours (violet is “gaudy”; rose is a “hussy”) -- in terms that denote a brazen, sexualized woman.<sup>6</sup>

To be only half awake, only partially alive, results in part from the artificiality of urban life and ignorance of the ecosystem which sustains nature. Wilkinson’s critique of urban life is aimed

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<sup>6</sup> Colour also plays an important imagistic role in Wilkinson’s verse: each seems to evoke for her a particular mood or idea. Colours suggest spiritual complexity and vibrant sensuality:

Who has the cunning to apprehend  
Even everyday easy things  
Like air and wind and a fool  
Or the structure and colour  
Of a simple soul? (43)

The most frequently occurring colours are red, green, and white. Red is often associated with strength, with blood, and with the veins and arteries which connect all living things, animating nature (3), the body (3, 28, 88, 112), inspiring passion (7, 8, 17), horror (112), pain and anxiety (9). Red is suggestive of poetic ability (“the lost red syllable”), and of memory (38): “For mine is a commonwealth of blood, red/And sluiced with recognition” (45), she writes. It is generally a female colour, associated with menses (172) and the “human red centre” (68), the heart: it adds a bold splash to Wilkinson’s poems and makes the reader intensely aware of bodily functions and anatomical detail. Even the reference to Christ’s blood “streaming in the firmament” stresses his human frailness and vulnerability.

Green usually represents the “wide green world” of nature (61) and rebirth (67), connectedness (69, 101), fertility (54), authenticity and truth (59), life (44), and the force of inspiration (15, 16). White, by contrast, is symbolic of sterility, sacrifice, and death (26, 50, 111, 155, 189), as it was for Emily Dickinson. “White is wrong” states one poem (30), and “God-white Jupiter” is false (174). In other poems, white is associated with chastity (6, 132) and purity (17). The “white genesis of paper” (44), the “white pulp of paper” (49) represents the “tabula rasa” of the poet’s mind awaiting poetic inspiration. The use of colours adds a childlike quality to the verse, as if Wilkinson enjoyed playing with a box of vibrant watercolours. There is, for instance, an unpublished poem entitled “Enemies” which A.J.M. Smith did not select for his anthology of Wilkinson’s verse. In this poem, the brain and the blood are seen as enemies, but the blood becomes a “Red tourniquet on reason!/Savage, singing, covering the world!”. The final stanza concludes:

O Blood and Brain, lie close together, embrace! I plead,  
Not for one but both, and for the child  
Of your mis-mating - this ghost we call a Man  
His aura bleeds - this shorn and prostrate Pan.

at exposing its static and sterile qualities. An uncanny and rather eerie foreshadowing of a potential nuclear holocaust, depicted in religious terms, can be read in such poems as “Fallout”:

Noah, God denied you sun;  
 Forty days his anger fell.  
 Now, in his own image, man  
 Makes the gentle rain to kill.

And what we know? is what you guess -  
 Noah, hear the father-wish:  
 Punished loin, the punished bone  
 Burn again in punished son.

Seared by dewdrop, or small rain,  
 Ark, we'll enter, one by one  
 Lest man or creeping thing or bird  
 Multiply from fallen seed. (166)

Another allusion to Portia's speech on mercy (it also figures in the earlier “Christmas Eve”) stresses by contrast Noah's lack of mercy, and his pride in taking action in God's name, “in His own image”. Here nature's fertility is horrifyingly mimicked by the “fallen seed” which kills. In “Nature be damned”, the persona dreams of being restored to the Green Order when “I was witch and I could be/Bird or leaf”, when “My feet walked on the surface of the earth”. But now there is no “living grass” where the lamb and the lion may “lie down in amity”, were it even possible to reconcile them. So the speaker is forced to dwell in an artificial environment, where there is only “undertaker's false green sod/Where I sit down beneath my false tin tree”, in which the senses have no place:

I hide my skin within the barren city  
 Where artificial moons pull no man's tide,  
 And so escape my green love till the day  
 Vine breaks through brick and strangles me. (109)

No seasonal changes are perceived here; false lamplight replaces the visions inspired by moonlight, and so "I go a new dry way, permit no weather/Here". No signs of fertility are visible: "There's too much danger in a cloud/In wood or field, or close to moving water". The poem closes with a re-enactment of the summer solstice, where the speaker burns her "winter caul to a green ash" and momentarily eclipses the desacralized wasteland where the "senses [only] nodded, dull by ritual". The sensual vision is quickly terminated by a return to the frozen world of artifice: "Then roused from this reality I saw/Nothing, anywhere, but snow."

If stasis, sleep, and the artifice of modern living seemed worse than death to Wilkinson, those who would live efficient lives, according to the clock, fare no better. The truly alive person must resist drowsiness and dullness, living according to an inner temporal reality which she perceives to be more sacred. Wilkinson's disillusionment with linear concepts of time is a natural corollary of her distrust of institutions. The poet's eye is a more reliable device in distinguishing the real from the unreal, and clocks and timepieces are despised as mechanistic devices designed to categorize and limit the infinite. In her autobiography, Wilkinson remarks that

adults were enemies.... Their greatest offence was in regards to Time. They were always ringing bells, or calling, Time for breakfast, Time to get out of the water, Time to go to bed, whereas we, with a more philosophical concept of the clock, knew that Time, in their sense, did not exist. What we happened to be doing was forever.... Slowly but certainly the enemy won, and thereby robbed us of immortality. (Autobiography, 71)

Wilkinson rejects the use of watches, as she writes in the unpublished poem called “I never strap a piece of time”, where she refuses to wear a watch because it forces her to dwell upon the future and distracts her from the present. Ideal time is rather the “now” moment of “Time is Tiger”, that moment of union in the jungle where tiger and lamb meet again. Mystical time, which is “things to come and the NOW and all things past” (60), unites both poet and child as

a child's  
 Black coal of trouble  
 Picks at the poet's ear  
 Sharper than any other,  
  
 For child and poet wind  
 A one-day clock. “NOW,”  
 It strikes, “*NOW*” is forever. (90)

“A child can clock” is about the natural ability of children to transcend conventional temporality:

A child can clock  
 An era on the arc  
 Of a day in the sun.

The same child, ageing to become a dying man, envies other youth this ability, though paradoxically he too steps out of time just before death:

And he is old when  
 Counterclockwise into clown  
 He tumbles on

The dial of earth  
 And dying blows a puff  
 Of dandelion

Envy greens his eyes  
 As the flightly seed  
 Soars then falls to his birth.

This is contrasted with ordinary time, which “turns pale/And stops to catch its breath” (62). Regular time imposes a sense of imprisonment and madness when one loses track of it (26), as in the pun where one is “betrayed by the off-beat of a tock-sick heart” (27), or in the portrait of a neurotic who cannot distinguish the “quick” from the dead (35). Natural time is refreshing, as “in June when time is light and big” (26). In “Strangers”, “a hot-house vision” which “clears the sticky senses” allows for a “lightning recognition”. Death-in-life is acknowledged as “A blaze of time that is not here/Or past or in the space to come”.

While it is a truism that most poetry and mythology celebrate the transcendence of time and the origins of a birth/death/rebirth cycle, Wilkinson’s version of this is different in that it recognizes this cycle as both material and perpetual. Yeats’s desire that spirituality and art transcend time, for instance, is based upon patriarchal concepts of the spirit/flesh dichotomy. Patriarchal culture stresses alienation from the imperfect physical world and fosters a Messianic goal of release to a purely spiritual existence. This can only be achieved within a framework of linear time. By contrast, Wilkinson’s notion of time, the ideal and “more philosophical concept” which she mentions, follows a spiral model, linking the material and the spiritual on a continuum. The spiral motif is juxtaposed with the androcentric clock and ladder motifs, both of which mark earthly time merely as a preliminary step in reaching eternity. The spiral suggests Wilkinson’s concept of metamorphosis: it involves a cyclical return to our origins while reaching beyond them toward the realm of possibility, and implies growth, ripening, expansion. The process resembles, diagrammatically, a sprung spring rather than a closed circle, since we never simply return to the same beginning. Rather the first beginning becomes incorporated from a wider vantage point,

which allows for the incorporation of even greater meaning. The poet is located at the centre of this spiral, with her keen eye ready to discern truth with the fearlessness of the child. In “Tower Lullaby”, the holistic perception of childhood is depicted in terms of the spiral and contrasted with linear movement:

Wheel, as a child is a swallow  
 Flying to spiral  
 Or plodding, string a necklace out of sweat  
 And stagger step by bead  
 Bead by step.

The vital force of blood is described in spiral form in “A folk tale”, where “The polar pull of blood, the needle/[is] Pointing north to recognition,/Twisting and yearning to trick the pulse/To the South position of love” (9). Perhaps the most graphic representation of the spiral occurs in two poems: “After great shock”, where the poet’s pen is compared to a cardiogram which “will trace the trough/And pitch”; and in “Zigzagzip”, which in the original manuscript appears on the page as follows:

Z  
 I  
 G  
 Z  
 A  
 G  
 Z  
 I  
 P

Cat o'nine tails whip

The tender night

To splintering applause.<sup>7</sup>

And finally, "Theme and Variation" depicts the "this-ness" of life, the ineffable, as "the spiral'd silence in a cave", the force which cannot be named yet animates the "pause between the compulsions of the heart" (19).

The recurrence of the spiral in Wilkinson's work challenges more conventional poetic symbols of unity. But besides her rejection of conventional notions of religion, death, and time, it seems to me that there is something more vital to an understanding of Anne Wilkinson's spirituality, and this lies in her recognition of maternal love at the centre of the spiral, as a source of inspiration. She specifically links her own mother's death to her loss of childhood innocence and identification with nature; the transition from one idea to the next appears abrupt unless one recognizes their interrelatedness in Wilkinson's mind:

For many years I remained devout but at length my Green faith weakened, then scuttled away like a rat to its hole. The human situation demanded something else, though I don't at all know what. At any rate I lost my power to identify with whatever took my fancy: tree, rock, grass, ant, chipmunk, bird.

The sun never shone brighter than on the morning she choked to death. She died of "natural causes". It took them two years to kill her, piece by piece. No Nazi ever did a more painstaking job. Worship the mindless enemy? No thank you. Yet, like an atheist Anglican, I go back; only for the beauty of the service, you understand. The service and the

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Wilkinson, Manuscript 29, box 5, ts., Anne Wilkinson Papers, University of Toronto, Fischer Rare Books, no page number.

singing. A solo today by a bird, a cardinal in a green chapel

(Autobiography, 24).

The reference to nature as Nazi-like implies Wilkinson's sense of betrayal and outrage that she should have been deceived by beneficent Nature. Only when she comes to terms with mortality and decay does Wilkinson acknowledge the strength of her Green faith. Her goal is henceforth not salvation in the Christian sense, but a different aim altogether: a returning to the matrix of natural creation. She writes that "Home is no longer a place, but a mother" (Autobiography, 26).

Anne Wilkinson states that "the curious are never at ease with God". If she was uneasy with God, she never experienced any such difficulty in attributing power to her mother. While one of the poems exhibits her struggle to resist a saviour she calls sleep, there are a number which describe the sleepy, contented, dream-like world she inhabited with her mother. The autobiography opens and closes with a tribute to the memory of her mother and a strong identification with her pervades the text, as if her mother provided the framework for the narration of her life. Certainly her mother played a very important role throughout Anne Wilkinson's life; the autobiography, which is not written in a strictly sequential or logical order, is given poetic coherence by the association of the author's love for her mother and her grief upon her mother's death. The opening sentence connects her love for her mother with that felt for a lover, as the source of life and inspiration: "I lay beside my mother and watched the moonlit sea through the bedroom window. It breathed, exhaling breakers on the sand, became my drowsiness. I slept" (Autobiography, 1).

In her autobiography, Anne Wilkinson describes the sense of security which she felt when being taken care of by her mother. When, at the age of eight, Wilkinson lost her father, she claimed that he took her mother's happiness with him, and that she was told to comfort her mother, but "at that I am not very good, wanting instead that she should be mine" (57 33/4). In a fantasy game she invents, Wilkinson desires to spank her father back when he disciplines her

(58 1/2).<sup>8</sup> She described the impact which Freudian psychology, taught to her by her mentor Mrs. Brown, had upon her ability to analyze her recurring dream of being reunited with her mother (Autobiography, 36 1/2). She also recalls, in the context of the memory of her mother, a “sensuous womb dream”, which is how she describes *The Princess and the Goblin*, a children’s story which obviously left a marked impression upon her. She discusses a specific scene from this story that takes place in the grandmother’s attic, which she claims her present imagination transforms into a room from *Revelations*:

The little princess has escaped goblins and underground by following the fine web spun by her grandmother, a thread that leads back to the grandmother. She is scratched, bleeding, frightened. The grandmother (queen of heaven?) floats her in a marble bath, deep as the sea, yet she does not drown. A thousand roses burn in the open hearth and the air is filled with their scent. The princess lies in the healing water and gazes at a blue, star-studded ceiling (dome of heaven?) until at length her grandmother lifts her from the bath and into her soft queen’s bed, a rose-bed of marvellous dreams. It is not a thing a child forgets.

(Autobiography, 60)

The reference to the queen of heaven may suggest a yearning for a matrifocal myth of salvation. *Lions in the Way*, Wilkinson’s retrospective history of her ancestors, is remarkable for its matriarchal focus, stressing the accomplishments of her pioneering greatgrandmother Ellen, even though it was men like Ellen’s son Sir William Osler, the famous doctor, whose names posterity associates with fame. In this book, the lion is her greatgrandmother. What this memoir and several of the poems indicate is that Anne Wilkinson frequently dreamed of and looked towards a female figure for solace and inspiration, rather than the conventional male heroic figure who

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<sup>8</sup> In her extensive overview of Canadian literature, Gaile McGregor finds father figures are most often overtly negative, while mothers are more variable and rarely threatening (176-7).

rescues women and leads them towards happiness. She does not seek a male saviour or muse, nor pay him tribute for poetic inspiration or the wonders of nature. Rather, the beauty of nature can be found within the self. Read this way, Anne Wilkinson's art represents a womanly creativity emanating from the mother/daughter cathexis.

In her later poems particularly, Wilkinson elevates maternity to a spiritual dimension, whether it is in subject matter, or forms such as letters to children, fairy tales, children's rhymes, or prayers for children. Some of the poems are expressly dedicated to Wilkinson's children. The mother is at the centre of her work; children must retrace their steps and "stroke/The soft white bulge of peonies", then "trace their crimson veins/Back to the milky memory of mothers" (131). The mother is closely connected to nature, but the mother as real and not an idealized Mother Nature. "When Nature is Mother Nature for Wordsworth", writes one critic, "she is valued because she is what the poet is not. She stands for a lost memory, hovering just at the edge of consciousness, of a time before the fall into self-consciousness" (Homans 13). Thus Mother Nature is only as powerful as Wordsworth allows her to be in his imagination, and she becomes the object of his desire. For Wilkinson, Mother Nature is valued because she *is* like the poet, like the mother, and like nature itself. The identification process is far more complete since there is no need for externalizing "otherness".

In the poems, woman *becomes* nature, and nature is a woman. A feminine metaphysics is developed through an elevation of the powers of the body: to create, to nurture, to give birth, to destroy. This identification with the maternal body is stressed through spring rites, when "our summer" is seeded; gestation is the metaphor for the arrival of spring as the sun "bears down" and delivers "birthday children" (58). The birthing metaphor reappears in "A sorrow of stones": "A tunnel travelled indicates/ Some kind of birth, a milky way" (173). In "The red and the green", the "tunnel... echoes the lost red syllable" and the speaker "put[s] on my body and go[es] forth/To seek my blood" (68). Repeatedly, nature is depicted in terms of its motherliness,

its femaleness, as *magna mater*, as a geological body which experiences the same material transformations and upheavals as a mortal body -- giving birth, providing sustenance, and dying. "Poem of Anxiety" represents a voyage, metaphorically the voyage through the birth canal, where the persona's fears of being "[e]xposed by the five columns of the moon" and of meeting death are paralleled by the experience of birth, where "I ride the rim of danger" and "[m]y whole and body being sings" (12). Interestingly, the maternal role of Mary is given prominence in the poem, rather than the resurrection itself -- Jesus's birth from a human woman is emphasized over his divine status. The arrival of spring is likened to nursing, where winter reigns

[t]ill April babble swells the shroud to breast  
 So milky full the whole north swills, licking  
 A world of sugar from encrusted nipples  
 Springful and swollen with love. (5)

The body is an integral part of rebirth, for it must return to its source: "The body still goes back/For of necessity/It makes strange journeys" (134). And when the body is ignored, the consequences are disastrous:

When a body breaks or is  
 Cast off from its hemisphere  
 Something grave has gone amiss.  
 Danger, danger everywhere. (172)

It is specifically the female body which offers nurturance to the poet in these poems; Frye objected to Wilkinson's maternal metaphors in depicting nature because he considered them "bad metaphysical poetry" (1952:253); certainly they do not follow conventional metaphysical tropes. It is through the "woman's eye" that reality is perceived as "milky" -- by refining the focus of the poet's lens, both the negative and the positive can be assimilated ("Lens"). The poet must learn to "bind my fluid form/To forest tree/Be still and let its green blood/Enter me", suggesting that nature as poetic inspiration must physically enter the poet's body (16). In "A poet's-eye view",

she celebrates the mother in a joyous ode to the earth: "You are earth, loam, actual fields/And we the green reeds growing from your body." Echoing Cicero and Seneca, who described the earth's bodily fluids as being hardened into veins of minerals and metals, the poem evokes the maternal force of the earth:

You are warped with rock, the woof of you  
Is ore; in soul's rough weather  
Rocks split open at the giant tremor of the soil;  
We, the green ones, laugh and add an inch  
For each storm's death, our knowing nonsense blowing  
On and off the lode of your mortality. (15)

Identification with the bodily strength and birth pains of the mother is stressed here, and knowledge comes from non-sense, from not attempting to comprehend the earth's power rationally, but simply by growing and diminishing from formlessness to form and flowing back again.

Nature is elevated to the role of the poet's muse when it assumes the bodily guise of mother nature, of teacher instructing her offspring. For the adult Wilkinson, retrieving the sense of wholeness she felt as a child was no easy feat, and her nostalgia for that original sense of wholeness and identification is palpable in the poems. While she can only attempt to capture momentary glimpses of that ideal time for herself, she can, in her maternal role, provide a model for her children. And this is where Wilkinson's spirituality of the senses most often differs from the transcendent vision of the Romantics. The very nature of mothering is a denial of otherworldliness because to bring a child into the world is to affirm the positive value of that world. The preverbal stage of childhood is a phase where oneness is intuitively and empathetically understood as the primary bond between mother and child, child and universe, prior to the use of language or symbol.

Wilkinson's poems about childhood reflect a maternal regret that children must be indoctrinated in order to survive, that they must move from Blakean innocence to the world of experience, and that she must be the one conscripted to force this upon them, as she laments in "Letters to my Children", "Ballad", "Rhyme", "Nursery Rhyme", and "A child can clock". The child is equated with unselfconscious wisdom, poetic inspiration, and the innocence of the unfettered senses and hence alienated from the adult world of dualism. If the child represents truth and innocence, it is an enviable state of clarity, not arrested naivete or hedonism (Lecker 36). While adults are "dismembered by two worlds;/Only the uncurled ears of children can hear" (6). The poems reflect sentiments espoused by Dickinson, who wrote "I wish we always were children" and "How to grow up I don't know" (*Letters*, 241). Wilkinson adopts the same childlike pose as Dickinson's persona, who asks ironically, "Why - do they shut Me out of Heaven?/Did I sing - too loud?" P.K. Page, one of Wilkinson's contemporaries, also presents children in the same light, and links their innocence to poetic vision. In Page's "Stories of Snow", poets and children can escape to "the area behind the eyes/where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies" (Geddes 95).

Wilkinson wishes that she had not complied with a non-nurturing and life-denying worldview; she has forced her children from "nipple to spoon", insisting that "manners make the man". In "Letter to my Children", the mother must

Admit I churched you in the rites  
Of trivia  
And burned the family incense  
At a false god's altar. (95)

The poet claims that "my age/must play with miracles", insinuating both the loss of childlike clarity which once produced miracles for her, and the age in which she lives, which must invent miracles to substitute for genuine spiritual experiences. Like Dickinson's "I don't like Paradise"

and “Over the Fence” (where disobedience against God is considered as natural as children’s rebellion against parents), the child’s perspective in Wilkinson’s poem is elevated because religion is shown to oppress the natural instincts. The mother as teacher of sensual truth should instead

Teach one commandment,  
 ‘Mind the senses and the soul  
 Will take care of itself,  
 Being five times blessed.’ (95)

Repeatedly Anne Wilkinson stresses that to separate the senses from the spirit or nature from culture is fruitless. It is hypocritical and futile to conscript children in the battle against the senses, as “Rhyme” makes clear:

A mother nags her daughter,  
 ‘Beware of Dick and Harry.’  
 O why should she nag her daughter  
 When she herself was merry?

A mother begs her son  
 ‘Be chivalrous with maids,  
 But if they be not maidens, O  
 Take to your heels and run.’

And boys and girls bow low, bow low,  
 ‘Thy will be done,’ they say  
 Then hang their clothes on a budding limb  
 ‘Be quick, my love,’ they pray. (137)

The pun in the final line, the parodic repetition of Christian filial obedience in “Thy will be done” (with its religious and gender reversals in being addressed to a mother instead of God the

Father, to a mortal rather than an immortal) and the twisting of religious language, undermine the conventional advice of parent to child, of ascetic god to aesthetic man. In any of the poems which celebrate childlike, passionate love, as in "In June and gentle oven" and "Lake song", the possibility of genuine love exists only in an idyllic, ideal realm where the connection with mother earth has never been severed.

In "Ballad", Wilkinson states her refusal to adopt the socially prescribed role of Eve, preferring to "spit forth the apple, drop the serpent/Hissing in my guilty arms", when her daughter pleads, "But what is the name of my fear" and "Why does an apple make me ill?" (136). The innocent core of the self, manifest in uncorrupted children, is temporarily revealed to the mother, who urges her children not to lose their original knowledge:

If we could start again,  
 You, newbegotten, I  
 A clean stick peeled  
 Of twenty paper years  
 I'd tell you only what you know  
 But barely know you know (94)

Here the richness of "knowing", in the carnal sense and in the sense of knowing of and knowing about something, is amplified by its spiritual connotation of knowing divinity to be within the self, the physical body, the present. The line "you, newbegotten, I" suggests, by its referential ambiguity, the interdependency of mother and child, the sense of being born again through children to whom one can pass on the wisdom of the senses; the mother is the child in embryo, as the child will become the mother (not the father, as Wordsworth saw it). The child is naturally a sensualist, born without inhibition:

O watch the child lie down and lusty swing

His arms to angel in his image, sing

"I dare the snow my wings to keep." (6)

"Angelic" for Wilkinson means something quite different than a word qualifying a disembodied, superior being; it is unclear whether angel imitates child, or child, angel. There is more than playfulness to the mockery of the child's prayer "I pray the Lord my soul to keep" -- there is an implicit challenge to orthodox religion.

The mother-child bond, central to Wilkinson's poetry, is evoked in terms of remembering a shared, forgotten past, in which one was united also with nature. Wilkinson often uses imagery of the sea to suggest this symbiotic wholeness. In defining her mother as the prime focus of her life, she describes how, after her mother's illness, "[w]e drew sustenance from our resurrected mother" and "we waxed and waned according to her health" (3). The association of the figure of the mother with the moon and the sea is repeated throughout many of the poems. Wilkinson's poems force us to recall that all organic life begins in water. She uses the sea as a symbol for the source of matriarchal power, a kind of lost Atlantis. In the poem "Waking", she celebrates the end of a consciousness which was once buried in the sea "as I turned and stretched/From the drowning years."<sup>9</sup> The persona here must dig "with a curious hand on my first sea-shore", she will wake "from water sleep" where she was "heavy-hung with salt" all her life, "a long long long time later/than the day I was a child" (61).

Throughout patriarchal literature, the descent into water has represented danger, death, and fear of the female, as in Prufrock's mermaids or the sea-mother in Whitman's "Out of the

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<sup>9</sup> Here Anne Wilkinson echoes Adrienne Rich's desire to dive into the wreck of the past and uncover the lost traditions of women, the depths of female powers, in Rich's poem, "Diving into the Wreck". It is also interesting to note in this context that most creation myths place the primary impulse of creation in a watery womb, representing the Original Mother (Tiamut, Kali, Ma-Nu, Themis, etc.). The Mother-letter M (Ma) is also an ideogram for waves of water.

Cradle". In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud remarks that he "cannot discover this oceanic feeling within [him]self" and therefore dismissed it as illusory; he traces this "feeling of indissoluble connection" to the mother as an infantile undifferentiation between subject and object, and hence degrades it as narcissistic.<sup>10</sup> In Anne Wilkinson's work, the sea is a symbol drawn from the lack of differentiation between self and other (or self and mother) which the child experiences *in utero* and subconsciously recalls in adult life as an archetypal image. This is the experience of "drowning" to which she frequently refers, the desire to return to a sea-green world. "Swimming Lesson" describes the "lost aquarium of Eden" where the persona tells "a tyrant's tale" of how she was weaned away from her mother "dark in the well" and forced to "float in home-eroded caves" because she does not wish to become an "earthbound dunce" like her captor. The poem may be read as a depiction of a conventional love affair, but there is another level at which the forces described are maternal, where "children wet with birth/Remember to their dying dust/The lost aquarium of Eden" and are "fed by currents in her blood" (53). Again the sea is a symbol of freedom, the only place "where there were no more walls", where her tidal rhythms can be rediscovered, and laughter fills her lungs once more:

Awash and knots away  
The breakers whinnied on the sands;  
Fields of moonripe seawheat  
Fed by currents in her blood  
Swayed to the tug and slack

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<sup>10</sup> The sea is consistently associated in Western poetry with feminine mystery, with magic, poetic inspiration, and birth and death cycles. The sea was considered the mother of all things, and water was the first of all elements, according to the cosmogony of Miletus (Campbell, *PM*, 64). Early Christians copied the pagan notion of rebirth through water, and the original font was described as the womb of Mary, whose name was that of all ancient sea-goddesses (Neumann, *GM*). Ancient goddess shrines were almost always associated with wells, lakes, springs, or the sea (Dames, 154). The Lady of the Lake, identical with Aphrodite, appeared as a mermaid. Water is often a metaphor for love in Western literature, since, without it, the material world becomes an arid Wasteland.

Of Polar streams

On the warm gulf seam of love. (54)

Although at first the woman “did not holy believe/She’d lost the hellfire of her disbelief”, gradually “she, accepting, drowned and swam/And happily lived ever waterward” (54). This ironic baptism is more than mere ritual; the search for meaning below the surface brings her to her watery source, and acceptance of death results in rebirth and happiness because she returns to her natural element.

Drowning is seen as a mode of connecting with the lost world of the mother goddess: the spiritual seeker is urged to be “not otherworldly, but under-worldly” (15). In her memoir, Wilkinson dreams of drowning and being reunited with her mother (183). Anne Wilkinson’s tribute to Virginia Woolf repeats this theme of maternal connection. Although Woolf never had children in actuality, the metaphor for her death by drowning is the return to the mother/sea in a metamorphosis whereby “From ivory pelvis spring/Her strange sea changeling children”. Woolf’s tragic death is not mourned in negative terms, but evokes instead a desire for rebirth and continuity as Woolf is welcomed back to the womb when the “sea fans open”. Associated with the mother of the sea, she becomes personified as the corpse of “coral remnants”, and learns to see in a new way, with “sockets deep with six lost layers of sight”, through the recovery of the senses.

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The spirit is made manifest not just through innocent human children, but also through the creatures who reveal themselves to the “woman’s eye”:

Even should it see

The holy holy spirit gambol

Counterheadwise,

Lithe and warm as any animal. (48)

To elevate animals also challenges the anthropomorphic view that God invented beasts to serve man.

Tigers occupy a special role in Wilkinson's animal kingdom, having mastered all knowledge of death ("Tigers know from birth"). "Time is tiger" equates the tiger with death who stalks the lamb of the present time, in those instances where Wilkinson clearly borrows characters from *The Jungle Book*. In her autobiography, she comments on the tiger in Blake, which she says represents mystery and courage. Wilkinson is fascinated by the stuffed tiger in her uncle's residence, Eldon House, in London. In "Poem of Anxiety", the speaker describes a moonlight confrontation with a tiger in the jungle. The tiger is associated with death, fear, and darkness. Wilkinson equates the tiger with sexuality as well, and when she describes in her autobiography her school-teacher's advances toward her, she portrays Mr. Brown as Blake's tiger: "Tyger tyger burning bright. The forest was there, close at hand. I could see it out the corner of my eye, but I did not turn my head and stare"(82 2/3). The tiger figure she also likens to that in *The Jungle Book*, where it represents death, and the "stripes are the wound he received from vines and branches as they bent low to mark the killer" (Autobiography, 77). In "Noel", God appears dressed in a tiger skin, and the nativity of Christ is parodied and debased: kings are toads, virgins are tarts. In "Orchids", God meets a tiger, loses his faith, and takes up painting orchids "for Arts sake"(17). "Poem of Anxiety" presents another mysterious portrait of the "striped, discerning" tiger, who is the "one bright foe" of the nature-lover, sent to unleash the domesticated senses, where "verbal tigers' progeny" will provide a new way of seeing (175). The tiger represents death stalking innocence, yet it presents no fear to children (33). It is also the power of the imagination which grants special insights to children and poets who learn to "[u]ncage the tiger in your eye" (129). The bird as a symbol of the spirit is central to "Leda in Stratford, Ont." In the Greek myth, Zeus, the father of the gods, raped Leda by assuming the form of a swan. In Wilkinson's version, the crow appears to Leda as the one who fulfills her "odd wish" to have a "high-class union" with the

swan. The parody seems aimed at elitist conceptions of romantic love and spiritual enlightenment. A vulgar crow interrupts the mythical rape: "no bird listened, for a caw/Loud and rude, came from the crow" (148). This witty poem is a demythologizing of the traditional notion of sex as a means of transcendence. The parody of Yeats's actual words leads to an ironic undercutting of his question, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power?" The poem refuses to acknowledge the transcendence of male power as transformative. Because the setting is Stratford, Ontario, (rather than Stratford, England) and because the crow and not the swan brings knowledge, the myth is rendered parochial and mundane. The notion that nature can be reduced to fixed "monuments of unageing intellect" enshrined by the "artifice of eternity" is ridiculed. Knowledge may arrive through passionate love, as in "In June and Gentle Oven", but never through rape.

Another interesting image in Wilkinson's poetry is the sacred serpent.<sup>11</sup> It is the only decoration which appears on the arm of the woman in "La belle dame sans dormi", a poem which offers an explicit visual representation of a goddess. In "After reading Kafka", the python represents death in the persona's paranoiac fantasy. The brain is likened to a coiled serpent in "Dissection"; it is a "sleeping snake" which "travels to the threshold of its sting", the force which animates the body like an "angel shedding glory, come to free/The puppet dangling from a mildewed coil". In "To a Sleep Addict", resurrection springs from the human body and "slithers though the grass" (103). In "Poem of Anxiety", the speaker says, "All morning I go walking in the jungle/Loving and sweet with snakes" (12). This recalls Lawrence's poem "The Snake", in

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<sup>11</sup> The snake, sacred to the goddess but denigrated as the source of evil throughout Christian history. Originally the ageless serpent was identified with the Great Goddess. Greeks referred to the cast-off skin of the serpent as *geras* (old age), and the ancient Aegeans worshipped primarily women and serpents. Men did not participate in any of these rites until the Bronze Age, with the rise of the Cretan bull god. Every culture has a myth in which the serpent is worshipped as the encircler of the world egg (uroboros), or as the phallic consort of the Great Mother, or (in early Gnostic literature, for instance) as the bringer of enlightenment. Thus Wilkinson can be seen to be restoring the serpent to its original symbolic function rather than alluding to its revised and reversed function in Christian mythology.

which he questions why a creature which does us no harm should be wilfully destroyed simply because we have been taught to associate it with evil. The snake is the symbol of fear and guilt in "Ballad", but in most of the poems, it is associated with mystery, sexuality, and immortality.

What is significant about Wilkinson's sustained use of all these motifs -- the sea, the moon, birds, serpents, tigers -- is that they are all central to pagan ritual. Because they are closely interconnected in her work, particularly where Wilkinson makes reference to a mother figure, or to Mother Nature, they emerge *in toto* as representing a kind of pantheism which is distinct from the patriarchal worship of nature common to Romantic poets; her motifs differ from those in common poetic usage. Medieval and Renaissance poets, for instance, rely upon tropes like the body politic, or the sun as the monarch of the universe which corresponds to an earthly monarch and to the noblest element, fire; such tropes traditionally suggest order, design, rank. Heaviest and lowest of the elements in the cosmic scheme was earth, the cold and dry element, and just outside earth was water, the cold and moist region. But Wilkinson reverses the order, suggesting that chaos reigns supreme, not order. In the medieval scheme, the elements were subject to divine intervention and controlled by the sublunary realm. Romantic poets like D.H. Lawrence repeat the theme of the solar king; Wilkinson elevates the moon and the sea, the earth and the "lower" elements. In her work these become paramount in a revaluing of matter, of flesh, of the mother, as central to a different understanding of spiritual wholeness.

The watery womb of the Mother, the jungle full of her wild beasts, the earth glorified by the immortal serpent, the woman who works her magic by the light of the moon -- all of these gynolatric images recur frequently enough to connect Wilkinson's work with a pagan mythos and to suggest a groping but unconscious urge to develop a separate female spiritual ethos. We need to ask whether it is possible for a woman poet who is neither a declared feminist nor mystic to produce poetry which is both feminist and mystical according to contemporary definitions. I think that it is not only possible but revealing to view her work as coincidentally feminist and

spiritual. There is also evidence that Wilkinson did perceive herself as something of an outcast, or a witch.

P.K. Page, one of Wilkinson's contemporaries, employs some of the same tropes in her poems, particularly the witch, as a figure of knowledge and power. A.J.M. Smith implies a comparison between Wilkinson's writing and witchcraft when he remarks that "the pure and innocent religion of nature and love has been clouded, amounting almost to a foreknowledge, by death, and there is an air of faint desperation in the spells and magic rituals that are tried as exorcisms" (1968:xix). Frequently in the poems, Wilkinson portrays herself as a witch, adopting this persona at first playfully, thinking it an innocuous literary artifact, but sometimes discovering that ancient power lingers in this kind of mask. "I was born a witch", writes Wilkinson, and "[s]queezed three aspects into one,/Or stretched one into three" (143); she emphasizes the triune aspect of a specifically feminine divinity. Emily Dickinson first identified the woman poet as a witch, referring to "womanly poetry" as a form of witchcraft, and spoke of the discovery of her own poetic vocation in the poem "I think I was enchanted". The speaker in Wilkinson's "'I was a boy, and a maiden, a plant...'" adopts the guise of a witch attending the hearth, and the speaker in "The Tightrope" refers to herself as witchlike and ethereal:

But I am two-times born  
 And when a new moon cuts the night  
 Or full moons froth with my  
 And witches' milk

I walk the tightrope  
 Free and easy as an angel,  
 Toes as certain of their line of silk

As the sturdy ones

Whose feet are curled on earth. (140)

Wilkinson also describes herself as a witch, a poet whose “self-appointed task” is to remain peripheral, whose “long duty” and “daily chore” is to perfect her craft. There is an implicit comparison between the poet and the soothsayer in “Lens”: “[T]he poet’s eye is crystal” and it is necessary to “keep and cherish [her] good lens” in order to describe “the mutiny within” -- an inner rebelliousness which she never clearly defines. Her lens is a critical one which is keen and “polished to accept the negative” as well as the positive (48).

The witch in the belfry of God’s tower is one with “silken powers”. “Boastful songs” portrays a powerful and sexualized persona who takes flight in the sky; here writing poetry is equated with “lunacy” and flying by the light of the moon:

When I wake up with all my feathers primed

And ready for the moon

Who then outflies me?

A million million million?

I never stop to see, am totally

My wingspread and my speed, and poems

Pouring from my pinions as I dive. (154)

Several times the witch is associated with the childhood experience of unity with nature, when “I was witch and could be/Bird or leaf/Or branch or bark of tree” (110). In “I was a witch, or Skilled Magician”, a later reworking of this poem, she claims that she “squeezed [these] three aspects into one/Or stretched one into three”, achieving oneness with various natural phenomena by employing witchcraft, art and magic. In “Divining Rod”, the speaker again laments the loss of her witch’s powers and resents her complicity in the world of “forked” dualities:

A freezing rain has frozen my forked self  
 And my forked hazel twig.  
 Hazel twig was my green god, I,  
 The obedient child. (153)

She likens herself to King Lear -- a poor, bare, forked animal who is divested or “unfrocked” of his powers -- standing lonely and miserable on the heath. Having lost her bond with nature and Pan, she feels divided, “no longer a dowser”, incapable of retrieving her divining powers “even over deep wells”:

Wood that waked at the touch of my green thumb  
 Now will not leap or shake the sockets of my arms  
 To tell me holy, holy, here the spring runs. (153)

Again the pun on “holy” is rich in meaning; “spring” here refers not only to her “deep wells” of spiritual truth, now dried up and inaccessible, but also to language, which Anne Wilkinson likens to the hazel twig. She longs for the green god who “pitied me my thirst”,

For when the mouth went dry  
 There it lived in my hands and by its tremor  
 I was led to where water ran. (153)

There is some justification in calling Anne Wilkinson a witch, whether or not she had any intention beyond merely assuming that guise as a poetic persona. I would suggest that this poetic mask gave her a position from which to criticize androcentric theology and to mock the absurdities of social conventions, as well as a way to formulate her own vision of the world of the spirit. Her resistance to and scepticism of conventional religious paradigms led her to discover patterns and cycles in nature, in her own life, and in her own green world, a construct not just of the imagination, but one springing also from a spiritual yearning for an alternative to conventional religion. It is the hints of this new world, the small gaps in her descriptions of contemporary life,

rather than any overt poetic statement of intent, which provide interesting clues as to the direction in which she was evolving: toward a more personalized spiritual ethos which would reflect an elevation of matter and of maternity in redefining spirituality. Wilkinson's apostasy never took any overt form of denunciation; her tolerance and her eclecticism prevented this. She says that her Green faith weakened upon the death of her mother, as if the maternal and the natural were inseparably bound in her imagination. The tone of resignation following her mother's death is palpable: "the human situation demanded something else, though I don't at all know what. At any rate, I lost my power to identify with whatever took my fancy...." (Autobiography, 24) Giving in to the human situation, defined in terms of patriarchal authority, linear time, and a denial of sensuality may have been more than Wilkinson could bear. Had she been writing poetry today, perhaps she might have found in the emerging feminist poetics a philosophic basis for what she termed "the mutiny within". There is one light-hearted poem called "A Cautionary Tale" where Wilkinson treats the theme of fear playfully, but it features a woman who lends her fear to a lion, beside whom she curls up to sleep -- and she is devoured. Behind the macabre facade of wit and cheeriness, I cannot help but see a woman poet torn apart by the courage of her vision and her fear of exercising her strength.

This is the voice of a woman who was constantly searching to discover and to describe that sense of wholeness and spiritual power which she once attained and then lost. Christopher Armitage concentrates on "the general futility" of Wilkinson's outlook, what he terms "the poet's deep personal unhappiness", her preoccupation with death and her marital problems (296). Woodcock concluded that her verse is "a poetry of sadness, of surrender to destiny" (1989:15). Perhaps there is a grain of truth here. Yet what intrigues me most about Wilkinson's poems are the exceptions to this sadness: the occasions where she was capable of breaking the silences -- what she refers to as "the pause between the compulsions of the heart" in "Theme and Variation" -- the oppressive social masks imposed upon her, and we see a poet who celebrates the

sensual joy of the body in a personal manner only recently permitted women poets. Wilkinson clung to the visionary experience of her childhood years and her faith in the Green Order remained strong until her mid-forties when her mother died. She captures through her poetry what she refers to as “my fluid form” (16), linking the spirit with the mer/mere -- “mere matter”, as she describes it. Her faith in the Green world and the clues buried in her poems offer us a glimpse into the possibilities opened up by an alternative view of spiritual wholeness, one which substitutes a love of nature, maternity, and sensuality for traditional religion. She describes in her work her desire to merge with nature in a poignant, elegant, witty, and sensual manner, for if she lost the hope of achieving a Green world within her lifetime, she never lost faith in the ability of words to capture the essence of her spiritual yearning.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GWENDOLYN MACEWEN

The new space, then, has a kind of invisibility to those who have not entered it. It is therefore inviolable. At the same time it communicates power which, paradoxically, is experienced both as power of presence and power of absence. It is not political power in the usual sense but rather a flow of healing energy which is participation in the power of being.... Instead of settling for being a warped half of a person, which is the equivalent to a self-destructive non-person, the emerging woman is casting off role definitions and moving towards androgynous being.

(Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 41)

Gwendolyn MacEwen writes that her poetic interest is in discovering “the real, unexplored country which lies *within* the country we think we have conquered.” “The search for a reality which resolves all contradictions” is how she describes her poetic desire (Colombo 65). A prolific writer, MacEwen published her first book *Selah* in 1961, followed by nineteen other works including the posthumously published book of poems significantly titled *Afterworlds*. She won the Governor General’s award for *The Shadow Maker* in 1970, and has written numerous verse dramas, radio plays and documentaries for CBC Radio, as well as producing two children’s stories, a travelogue of her 1978 travels in Greece called *Mermaids and Ikons*, and translations of the works of the contemporary Greek poet Yannis Ritsos.

I want to claim that MacEwen is a feminist poet, and that her feminism is articulated primarily through her spiritual views. MacEwen may not be recognized as a feminist poet in the

typical application of that term; certainly she does not call herself one, and her poetry offers no overtly feminist statements or objectives; on the contrary, she writes that "all/ideologies enrage me" (AM 34). Paradoxically, however, here is a poet who challenges and expands the parameters of feminist ideology. Her gynocentric vision is turned inward, focused on a spiritual realm, rather than made manifest in the sociopolitical dimension of feminism. MacEwen has a curious intimacy with tremendous forces of spiritual wholeness, and her approach is at once awed, adoring, and familiar. Her elevation of female desire to a state of holiness is in itself remarkable. Perhaps her greatest spiritual contribution lies in her praise of the deity who resides within, and in her recognition that dualistic values are unconsciously internalized as much as imposed from without. In *The Armies of the Moon*, she writes that "the Enemy is where he always was - /in the bleak lunar landscape of our mirrors" (AM 35). While not simplistically attributing a lack of spiritual wholeness solely to patriarchal systems of meaning, she nonetheless reserves a great deal of criticism for dualism and sexism as exclusive and excluding modes of thought. By contrast, her ideal seeker of wisdom is represented as a cosmic dancer, a liberator, a magician who overturns fixed systems of meaning.

Many of MacEwen's poems provide interesting parallels with the identity quest of contemporary feminist poets. Her verse is, she says, an attempt to "repossess the stage/we occupied before two thousand years", to search for the moment when all things converge to one (AM 17). Such a holistic vision suggests a yearning for balance in a world sadly divided, and leads MacEwen toward exploring ancient cultures, exotic myths, and versions of "otherness" which might present clues to unravelling the mystery of what has been lost to us. Although her emphasis is on Greek, Egyptian and Celtic mythology, the Kabbala, and the Tarot, she borrows from these only selectively and then builds her own interpretation. Each of these reconstructions or evocations of ancient myth can be reinterpreted in a feminist context. The poet-seeker is an alchemist who revises myth in order to transmute ordinary reality. I want to examine several recurring meta-

phors in MacEwen's work which mimic this process of alchemy: resistance to order, the female devourer who consumes reality in order to transmute it, the male dancer/consort who entices the female seeker toward a cosmic quest, and the circle as the unifier of opposites. Common domestic and mundane metaphors like cooking and sewing are also given extraordinary weight in interpreting the divine, so that both spirituality and art remain for MacEwen very much "grounded" in the ordinary, real world of a woman's experiences, while she is in her body, rather than seeking to escape its presence. The emphasis upon the flesh as the *means* to achieving divinity is consistent throughout her work.

In the introduction to one of her earliest books of poems, *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, MacEwen claims that in her view "there is more room inside than outside" and her desire is to "enclose, absorb" the world, rather than to separate it from otherworldliness; her choice of verbs here is particularly significant in terms of a protective, matristic philosophy of life. This specific statement of intent I take to be a conscious elevation of the philosophy of immanence over transcendence, of the power within over traditional -- and, misguided, she would claim -- concepts of power. MacEwen's spiritual journey, as depicted in her work, follows a pattern of feminine interiorizing, rather than the more common pattern of androcentric exteriorizing discussed in the introduction. Her mysticism has its roots in earthly and common experience, rather than in a denial of the worldly. Not trusting the exclusive reign of reason or will, she urges us to recognize the importance of the instincts, and particularly of the body, in achieving spiritual unity, stressing the significance of not denying the flesh in the process of realizing physical and metaphysical change. She compares her role of woman spiritual poet to that of an "extra-galactic vacuum beast" whose task it is to contain the world in its entirety -- an interesting and rather domestic metaphor, as though she were poised to keep her spiritual house in good order. Repeatedly MacEwen emphasizes the need to explore the dark side of experience, the moon, the interior patterns -- all the aspects of woman's "otherness" -- in order to overcome entrenched notions of

separateness. In her poems, wholeness is revealed as the synthesis of paradox, the unification of diversity, and the reabsorption of what religion has either denied or relegated to the margins.

Several critics have found MacEwen's work escapist and apolitical. This has more to do with the fact that she emerged during a period of nationalistic fervour and modernist sensibility, at a time when romantic individualism and mysticism were decidedly unfashionable among the cadre of leading academic critics in Canada. Recognizing MacEwen's treatment of macroscopic events in personal, microscopic terms, one critic refers to her "betrayal of poise" in reducing the Vietnam war to personal suffering, or in asserting that "the sheer hallucination of our wars/have somehow grown from small hurts" (Elson 475). Without comprehending MacEwen's underlying strategy of equating the outside with the inside, and failing to see she adheres to the notion that the "personal is political", one might concede that she trivializes human suffering or is simply too self-absorbed to notice it. Another critic claims that she is "evading, as Ondaatje does, the more immediate realities of life in Canada.... [and] she has... created her own 'other world'... [which is] more responsive to an inner vision than to any very defined contemporary social context" (Marshall 153).<sup>1</sup> These critics ignore the fact that MacEwen's use of other cultures and myths serves as allegorical satire or parodic commentary on that "very defined contemporary social context". She specifically denies that she is escapist or lacking a political context:

I don't think any form of writing can be apolitical. Writing is concerned with human destiny in one way or another and that involves social or political destiny.... I don't think writers should be propagandists or have strictly "political" causes. I think it limits them and art deals also with paradox, with mystery. (Meyer and O'Riordan 101)

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Dragland and George Bowering also view her poems as escapist and limited in perspective. Daniel Racine remarks that "[d]epuis le début, elle a répudié le monde véritable pour un autre, ancien et mythique" (51).

Her poetry does, however, directly challenge traditional views of religion and spirituality, through parody and humour. MacEwen maintains a surprising lack of solipsism or cynicism (compared to another contemporary Romantic poet like Leonard Cohen, for instance), and an uncanny ability to ground mysticism in ordinary experience. "People call me a mystic, but I live very painfully and real-ly. I don't think myth and reality are separate, and I have to see everything That's what I mean by mysticism" (Sandler 28). One critic complains of her "disoriented rambling", of her tendency to vacillate, such that "the result is a kind of no-man's land where neither the material nor the spiritual resides comfortably" (Alberti 83). Unwittingly this critic describes the precise aim of her poetry: to depict "no-man's land", to celebrate the space between dualistic categories, and to elevate ambiguity as a spiritual truth. Life is neither black nor white, matter nor spirit, evil nor good, but somewhere in between: a grey area which encompasses all.

I read MacEwen's poems as continuing a quest pattern typical of women writers which differentiates it from androcentric writing: female questors who instead of venturing out into the world, journey within the self, discovering in themselves and in nature the restoration of a green world. While a male companion may assist the questor, he is neither the object of nor the reward for her search; this difference is reflected in the structure and the value system inscribed in her writing (Pratt 1981). Her position is directly opposed to the modernist views espoused by Williams ("No ideas but in things") and Pound ("The natural object is always the adequate symbol"), whose influence on poets at the time MacEwen was writing was considerable. To compare her with another contemporary Canadian poet is to note how unique her vision was, how she was able to transform reality: "I tell only what I know," writes Frank Davey about his verse, "and speculate, never. Only with the validity of fact, and the form of the natural object, can a

poem hope to survive in a world that admits only the real."<sup>2</sup> While MacEwen acknowledges the reality of social atrocities, she urges us to move beyond social realism and pessimism, as she writes in the introduction to *A Breakfast for Barbarians*: "The particular horrors of the present civilization have been painted starkly enough.... Let's say No - rather enclose, absorb, and have done" ("Introduction", *BB*).

Following Kabbalist sources -- Jakob Boehme in particular -- MacEwen uses incantation to provide a release from linearity and abstraction. Like the primitive bards who also relied on incantation and repetition to enforce meaning, MacEwen uses a strong oral chant, most notably in those poems where the first and final lines are repeated. As with Zen koans, the simplest utterances can be metaphysically complex; for example, "Poem" from *The Shadow-Maker* is simultaneously melodious, mysteriously beautiful and baffling in its paradoxical density:

check  
TELOW

It is not lost, tell me how can you lose it?

Can you lose the shadow which stalks the sun?

It feeds on mountains, it feeds on seas,

It loves you most when you are most alone.

Do not deny it, do not blaspheme it,

Do not light matches on the dark of its shores.

It will breathe you out, it will recede from you

*What is here, what is with you now, is yours.*

(SM 14)

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to Peter Miller, quoted by bp Nichol in his Introduction to Frank Davey, *The Arches: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980):8.

Hence the very contradiction which she wishes to absorb is contained in her style, prompting one critic to complain in exasperation that her “ingredients do not mix smoothly” (Gose 36). Yet it is precisely her intention to jar the reader by combining arcane language and slang; poetic irony and prophetic intimations are deliberately cloaked in colloquial diction. Her verbal wit links her with the metaphysical poets, yet she is more earthy, comic. Primarily the reader is struck by MacEwen’s love of wordplay, careful phrasing, and her ear for sound -- as Tom Marshall observes, she is “a singer: her urgent and exuberant utterance creates a strong impression even when...it approaches incoherency” (Marshall 150). Refusing esthetic detachment, most of her verse is characterized by a palpable immediacy. “I’m interested in language as a magical power in itself”, she claims, “in the essence of utterance” (Meyer 101).

In “The Other Underground”, MacEwen describes the poet’s task of deciphering and translating the nonverbal clues of spiritual reality:

I’m so far underground you cannot find me,  
 hating the untellable which must get told,  
 trying to read the monthly Morse-code of the moon,  
 these urgent letters to the world. (*AM* 35)

She must engage in a desperate attempt to retrieve past knowledge: “a silver alphabet is floating past my eyes unreadably,/for all the secret things that we used to breathe/are some strange language no more known to me”. Writing is a subterranean quest for identity: “There is something down there and you want it told” (*SM* 50).

MacEwen often turned to other, more exotic, cultures during a period where there was great pressure upon Canadian poets to define and assert a nationalist identity. As a consequence, she was discriminated against for writing on the margins of culture and voicing a personal, peripheral view of identity. Mary Daly describes how, throughout Western culture, women have been relegated to the “boundaries of patriarchal institutions” (Daly 1973:40). It is these bound-

aries, or borders, between cultures, between myth and reality, which MacEwen seeks to inhabit, and to validate as appropriate spaces in which to create the magical. Feeling constrained by nationalist and spiritual conformism, she sought in ancient mythologies an alternate view of holiness. [She calls Atwood's remark that her work is "less concerned with turning [her] life into myth than translating myth into life" a "really powerful observation. I remember being deeply struck by it. It is deadly accurate" ] (Meyer and O'Riordan 103). MacEwen explores exotic mythologies because she is fascinated by their otherness, noting that our concept of what is exotic and distinct is always culturally defined: "in the east/they ask me of the dark, mysterious/west", and that it is the poet's duty to speak the truth, whatever its cultural origin:

this, my northern mouth  
speaks at times east, speaks south.  
  
I do not know  
  
which speech is best. (SM 21)

She faults Canadians for lacking commitment and passion, for their apathy: "Canadians are not really living in the present at all. We're always waiting for something to happen or pondering over things" (Meyer and O'Riordan 100).

MacEwen's iconoclastic nature has earned her criticism not just for being escapist and unpatriotic, but also esoteric, impure and impenetrable -- to use the revealing adjectives employed by George Bowering:

[Her poetry] stands outside the mainstream of current Canadian poetry, which seems generally to belong to the post-Williams age. That is, Miss MacEwen's language is opposite to the language of (our purest example) Raymond Souster.... Her "issues", if she claims any, are not of matter and the senses, but of a young, feminine *personal* imagination (Bowering 1964:70).

“Feminine” and “personal” are merely descriptive terms in Bowering’s lexicon, but their outcome is pejorative, or dismissive, at best. To claim that she is impure and young has sexual overtones that make Bowering’s patronization of MacEwen that much more sinister. Similarly, Ralph Gustafson complains that she has a tendency

to devote everything to inward complexity; to confine repetitive communication to the demon of her darker self.... Her poetry, at those times, is as egocentric as a dream.... [there is a] lowering of the level of speech into the colloquial. This may bring relief from the persistent uptight inner world but it fatally tramples its reality. And does witness literature, those dealings with the temporal world, have to descend to flat statement?

(Gustafson 107-8)

Comparing MacEwen’s *The armies of the moon* to Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night*, one disappointed reviewer also noted that all MacEwen’s crises seemed too personal next to Mailer’s “universal” concerns, and that her poems are “extremely breakable”, less impressive because she shares none of Mailer’s dread about global disaster (Rockett 46). And another critic refers to MacEwen’s spiritual doubts and careful scrutiny of the consistency of her philosophy in *The Fire-Eaters* as “a metaphysical menopause” (Oliver 125). The sexism and condescension are hard to miss in these judgements. For such critics, MacEwen’s work is considered outside the parameters which delimit what is acceptable in Canadian poetry. But to be an outsider, to write on the margins of mainstream Canadian literature, may ultimately prove a distinct advantage in terms of developing a feminist perspective on spiritual issues. Bowering and Gustafson are correct in recognizing the personal, interiorized, feminine, and subjective view in MacEwen’s work, and in identifying the Romantic elements which inspired her. My difference with these critics is that I do not view these qualities disparagingly; they merely attest to MacEwen’s gender and spiritual difference.

This difference lies partly in MacEwen's reinterpretation of Romantic doctrine. MacEwen, like other Romantic poets, expresses her vision as a longing for a simpler, more perfect past, a desire most coherently described in her book *The Rising Fire*, with its emphasis on childlike, instinctual "knowing". In "Evidence of Monday", the child of innocence compares the "brief green world" of childhood to the world of experience and hard labour; the child continues to long for a return to "eden under the tugging years,/ eden at the end of days." Another poem describes the child's desire for a womblike, contained space of wholeness where one can

eat only apples  
to improvise an eden....  
by eating the world you may enclose it:  
seek simplicities...  
and the moon duplicating you in your body,  
the cosmos fits your measures; has no ending. (RF 27)

Insight into the mythic dimensions of ordinary existence arises naturally in children, whose inherent capacity for joy and holistic perception is alluded to in "Generation Cometh". Here the child's vision threatens the authority of the adult world in a parody of the Garden of Eden:

he is in your dark garden  
he will eat your dark flowers  
you cannot stop him, old  
men, old women, you  
cannot stop him  
growing. (RF 79)

There is a lighthearted, staccato tone to these poems, a childlike breathiness. The child is fearless and can embrace the paradox which remains inaccessible to adults.

*The Shadow Maker* extends the fascination with childlike “knowing” further. Early memories are imbued with a sense of divine clarity, but as an adult one can only see through a glass darkly. Eden is an unapproachable dreamlike landscape where beauty fades into forgetfulness and some link with nature is lost:

I forget the land we walked through;  
 I forget your tall eyes and dark feet;  
 Your words I forget, your far voice also,  
 Your fingers captured by large rings,  
 Your hands tearing fruit from the hurting trees;  
 I forget these.

I cannot remember how much I have forgotten -  
 Broad leaves dropping in a garden of rain,  
 And again small animals surround us, for they  
 Remember us though we have forgotten them.  
 Between one tree and another we lose worlds  
 And serpents coil. (SM 70)

In “Dream Three: The Child”, the child turning endlessly on a big unicycle is recognized by the speaker as that part of herself which “from alpha to omega [keeps] turning and turning”. The continual rising of any force is destroyed, representing a completed cycle in which children are the icons of holiness and innocence. Like Blake’s shepherd boy or chimney sweep, MacEwen’s Bedouin boy is gifted with artistic vision:

and the flute he played  
 was anarchy between his fingers;  
 I saw the poor grass move  
 its tender blades, I

heard the wind awakening  
the desert from its sleep. (*SM* 36)

The visionary knowledge once achieved in childhood is arrived at by seeking its opposite, as Blake's Devourer does through his excess of delight. "Only because my poems are lies do they earn the right to be truth", writes MacEwen (*BB* 26). Like Blake's world within a grain of sand, inner truth is revealed when the seeker asks the right questions:

introverted eye looks inward  
to find the inward Eye looking out  
finds at the end of the universe  
not walls, but mirrors  
reflecting the question mark

(*RF* 31)

MacEwen's work reflects Blake's emphasis upon nature as yielding the secrets of truth and wholeness. She stresses a recognition of decay and denies the possibility of any triumph of heaven over earth, man over the moon, life over death, reason over will, culture over nature. This is evident even in her first novel: Julian the Magician represents unrefined nature as a potentially divine and potent force. For MacEwen, this divinity can only be realized once it is absorbed into nature as part of the cycle of natural transformation. Julian must allow the feminine process to unfold within himself in order to perform magic (*JM* 29). MacEwen insists upon the importance of sensuality in achieving magical or spiritual change; nowhere in her work is there any evidence of asceticism. In *The armies of the moon*, the moon is supreme because it embodies both nature and culture, because it is naturally powerful and magical. In "Horticulture", she writes that "the earth itself is dying", so there are "things one has to do" (*FE* 30) -- one must observe and accommodate the natural flux of the living process.

By contrast, urban “progress” is deceptive. The voice of stasis, of scientific artifice in “The Allergist” replies to the allergy sufferer’s question “*You mean I should avoid the world and go to seed?*” with a smug “Oh no, it can all be cured” (FE 15). Doctors and dentists who try to “fix” or alter the natural process of decay in the name of “progress” are lampooned. The dentist tells the patient that her gums are receding too quickly, to which she archly replies, “So is the sea” (FE 8). Like the Romantics, MacEwen distrusts the “gold, deceptive city”, because it epitomizes artifice and stasis, ignoring the chaos and transience of natural processes:

I should have predicted the death of this city;  
 I could have predicted it if only  
 there had been no such pretty flowers,  
 no such squares filled with horses  
 and their golden riders. (SM 35)

The true seeker is marginalized, existing *outside* the city, outside artificial categories and boundaries, absorbed by seasonal cycles, by the ebb and flow of light and dark:

and how we got here I cannot tell;  
 I have a basket and a little flute  
 which I play to coax the flowers out;  
 we call each other by quiet secret names  
 and our clothes are poor but our hair is tame  
 -- we are neither bad nor good  
 and below us is a dark green wood.

we dream of the big world we cannot enter  
 and we sit till we silently turn into winter;  
 the fruit is all gone and our shoes are thin;  
 by night we lie down to let the darkness in

-- it is only by night that I cannot bear  
the cold, or the tired clothes we wear.

we dream of the big world we cannot enter  
and we have no money and we turn into winter;  
when the next spring comes we will melt until  
we run like rivers down the high green hill. (SM 58)

In her final volume, *Afterworlds*, MacEwen specifically challenges the authority of a man-made god. In a rewriting of the Biblical *Genesis*, MacEwen upholds the philosophy of cyclical renewal, diminishing God as an errant child who remains subject to Nature:

In the Beginning was the End.

And God saw the Beginning and the End and was pleased.

And He asked the Beginning and the End to separate.

And they said No.

Then God was not pleased and threw a tantrum,

And said Why Not?

And the Beginning and The End said We Cannot.

And God said What Will You Do Then?

And the Beginning and the End said Just Watch Us.

(After 22)

This rebellion against a traditional God is clear from the beginning of her work. In *Julian the Magician*, it monotheism and dualism are the focus of MacEwen's irony and contempt. Julian unwittingly discovers that polytheism and bisexuality are the keys to spiritual transformation, recognizing that divine light proceeds from dark matter. He depicts his spiritual state of mind in gendered terms, incorporating the female perspective, and giving up the male prerogative of power: "My gender is no matter - my mind is decidedly bisexual; thus I can navigate in both female and male territory as freely as grass, and anticipate both female and male qualities in things" (*JM* 121). Like Cixous, who urges readers to focus on the bisexual element in order to overcome binary divisions, Julian draws our attention to his non-sexist apprehension of reality. Compelled by delusions of Christ-like grandeur, he involuntarily surrenders to divinity as he feels his body being overtaken by Christ. The son of a dark gypsy and a fair farmer's daughter, he embodies both dark and light qualities. As the personification of "otherness", Julian unveils the manifesto of the alchemist: "Our gold is not vulgar gold." He performs miracles when he integrates the dark element, restoring sight to a blind man by mixing spittle with dirt and rubbing it in his eyes. An idiot's intelligence is restored in the same setting, by a river in the dark. As Gose remarks, only by observing the ways of darkness and matter, seeing the "magic [in] manure" can genuine alchemical transformation occur (Gose 38). Julian's life illuminates Christ's ordinary humanity, his prosaic life, both the dark and the illuminated sides. Julian must resolve polarities and discover that salvation from an external god is based on false hope.

In her next novel, *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, MacEwen develops her critical view of monotheism. She claims that her object in this work was to warn of

the dangers inherent in any kind of monotheistic system.... Akhenaton  
is a failed mystic. I wanted to show the dangers involved for someone  
seeing only good and evil as separate forces, unable to see the overall

truth as a dialectical experience.... I hate organized religion. I hate any religion that says that *goodness* is against *evil*. (Meyer and O'Riordan 104)

Monotheism, symbolized by the sun, is depicted as a totalitarian abstraction, a masculine, orderly and cerebral religion, an historical push toward conformity and the suppression of natural, polytheistic trends. Because monotheistic concepts of God fail to embrace the dark side, since Father-Son relationships are incomplete, MacEwen presents them as devastating half-truths, as historical distortions. To ignore the female aspect of the divine proves fatal for both Akhenaton and Smenkhare. The novel concludes with the dreaded resurrection of the "High Priestess of Opet", the "gruesome witch" whose curse on the father of Akhenaton supposedly destroyed the family (273). Meritaton, the daughter of Nefertiti and the last queen, is associated with Isis, the goddess of fertility. It is she who has the last word:

Oh my brother, your breath is locked forever in my ears where once the name was whispered, and I defy eternity to take from me what is mine!  
 ...I have just remembered something. Before I left your tomb I pulled a single cowry shell from my collar and placed it in the dirt at your feet.  
 Your *ba* will see it glittering there forever like small brilliant vulva, the entrance and exit of life. (279)

The unfolding of the darkness, the female sex, the dirt, and the earth upon which our feet are planted -- all must be acknowledged as part of spiritual wholeness, not merely the light, the cerebral, the sky.

In many of the poems too, MacEwen stresses the importance of sacrificing to the darkness. Our culture, she suggests, is permeated by myths which idealize light and devalue dark, perpetuating racism and the conquest of the darker/lower/female realm. For MacEwen, spiritual empowerment lies in reconciling falsely-dichotomized "opposites". In a poem called "The

Sign", iconoclastic passion, the flesh and blood reality of spiritual experience, holds greater significance than the detached rituals of organized religion:

What you have finally made me do  
 is trace with my foot  
 in the frightened dirt  
 the sacred fish, the Christian  
 calling-card, the sign  
 of the society, that all may know  
 I am one to go down  
 to the sacred feasts  
 beneath the aqueducts of Rome.

You may think that this is my surrender to  
 some quieter form of love  
 and that this thin and spineless fish  
 swims only in rock or dust.

But what I am learning  
 is the lust of God,  
 the seas which boil in the bones,  
 and when next time I get to you  
 the teeth of my kiss  
 will trace in your flesh  
 the holy symbol of the catacombs. (*SM 23*)

MacEwen disdains hierarchical models of spiritual power, which are based on concepts of superiority, as she makes clear in a poem called “God”:

You can't get above God, you know

My gardener said

I figured there was something wrong

Inside his head

And then there was an early dawn

Which tackled night and won

It came before the sun

God'll get back

My gardener said

I figured there was something wrong

inside his head. (FE 57)

Dawn, which combines both day and night, light and dark, represents the perfect expression of divinity. Dawn achieves victory by tackling night, by absorbing darkness and reckoning with its power since, in both senses, it “came before the sun”. The gardener’s lack of perception is evident in his assumption that God is all lightness, that he is “above” darkness, and that the earth and its inhabitants are inferior to a heavenly deity. The gardener’s vertical symbolism is not just spiritually but also factually untrue: the earth orbits the sun and the sun can never be “above” those on earth. He awaits the return of God and hence misses the beauty of the sunrise, as well as his own innate divinity. We must observe the darkness, the shadows, the “otherness” which is overshadowed or obscured in conventional religions. In “January”, a toothless old woman and

a man “who was planning/on losing a leg” both agree on the necessity of accepting pain in the process of becoming holy; their concluding prayer undermines the ladder model and undercuts the belief in a heaven which offers only pleasure and not its opposite:

Brother, lead me up the evil stairs

That lead to God

Lead me up the goddam frozen

Broken stairs that lead to God

Lead me by the head or hand

Lead me by the hand or head

All up the slimy shiny stairs

To God (FE 6)

MacEwen stresses the need for a balance, equality, and nonhierarchical spiritual models.

To achieve this balance, MacEwen eradicates the inequities between the human and the animal kingdoms, inverting the traditional assumption that animals are created to serve man. Her verse is infused with a totemistic respect for what she terms “magic animals” -- creatures who incorporate incongruity in their construction as half human, half beast, and who are therefore potentially divine. MacEwen is particularly fascinated by extinct or mythic creatures, like dragons, unicorns, dinosaurs, and the phoenix. Certain features of the seeker’s relationship to her consort link the human and the animal worlds, suggesting a pantheistic outlook. Magic animals aid the seeker in the process of discovery by offering wise counsel. Like the child, the magical animal is “more real than real”, has a natural appetite and capacity for joy, and contains hidden depths and unnoticed intricacies. Animals are both angelic and demonic, brutal in their

instinctual ability to survive, superior in their ability to avoid man's complex and unnatural appetite for artifice:

Watch me

I am moving through the cages of the animals

I am moving through the peereek of these cells

Watch me because

I am watching them watching you

They are holding your immortal souls in trust

They have watched you since Eden

They are waiting for their time. (*MA* 123)

Paradise is complete except for the serpent: "we searched/for absences, and found at last/the sinuous absence/of a snake in the grass" (*SM* 33). There is no sexual guilt or shame associated with the snake in MacEwen's garden of delight; rather the landscape is imbued with a natural eroticism and ripe with images of fertility. Like the powerful feline goddess Bast who is mentioned in her second novel, the familiar adopts the seeker. The poet's cat is "a huge and totally worthless and basically hideous old grey/ cat who died", and its death is blamed on God: "everything dies and I'll get God for that/I might even get God for the manner of this death" (*MA* 152). The cat knows "exactly what he's hunting down/day after day in the dark places" because "my cat goes *behind* the shadows" (*AM* 5). Animals are elevated to the ranks of gods, while anthropomorphic superiority -- particularly regarding the spirit -- is deliberately undercut. The alchemist works her magic by upsetting the balance of power.

Of course, the alchemistic union of opposites is not a new concept and was developed by many poets before MacEwen. Thomas Vaughan, an alchemist and mystic whose writings MacEwen greatly admired, described the sun and moon as two peers whose consummation unified all nature. Blake's system of contraries pointed to the necessary dialectic engagement of

opposites in the search for enlightenment, and much of what we call evil or hell is treated positively in his prophetic vision of wholeness. T.S. Eliot, influenced by the metaphysical poets, likewise practised linking heterogeneous ideas in order to startle the reader into some revelation. Yeats, who edited and interpreted Blake's writings, conceived all consciousness as a conflict between opposites, which he depicted as intersecting gyres. MacEwen, like Yeats, had a great interest in the Kabbalah; both poets express their vision as a dance in elemental fire, fusing form and idea. All of these poets and visionaries have left their mark on Western poetry, and impressed MacEwen. However, while acknowledging Jakob Boehme's axiom that "the opposition of all essences is basic" (*STP* 6), MacEwen's writings depart from this metaphysical tradition. Boehme's concept of a dual-natured god and the integration of paradox is central in MacEwen's novels, but she revises the traditional view. Creation is arrived at through destruction, and renewal, through change -- "Nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent", in the words of Yeats's Crazy Jane. To wholly subsume both light and dark qualities, as the mystic does, is not merely to embrace destruction but also to obliterate the distinction between light and dark. Although her early work is clearly based on the teachings of Jakob Boehme, the Gnostics, Hermes Trismegistus, Karl Jung and other spiritual writers -- she often quotes directly from these sources -- in practice, her work reinterprets and subverts the very dualistic premises which inform them. In her early volume, *The Rising Fire*, MacEwen relies largely upon conventional mystical expression to convey her ideas, although she reworks it to suit her needs. "The Absolute Dance", in spite of its contemporary diction, echoes Yeats's gyre concept. But even here we see MacEwen struggling to redefine spirituality in a feminist vein, subverting this tradition in "The Ferris Wheel":

I ask you to revise your codes of holiness,  
in horn and halo, I  
ask you to join me on the ferris wheel.

and not to be circular and have no level  
 nor total logic nor anchoring of orders  
 but be in movement, nor static circle,  
 worlds from the still middle, the  
 point of absolute inquiry  
 and stop nowhere on the mind's circumference. (*RF* 49)

In this poem she specifically steps out of a tradition which gives precedence to a rational apprehension of the divine, and in her later works we see a development of the metaphor of the body as the means to approach the divine, beginning with "Morning Laughter" in this volume, where she substitutes her own birth as the "point of absolute inquiry":

umbilical I lumbered  
 trailing long seed, unwombed  
 to the giant vagina, unarmed  
 no sprung Athene  
 -- cry, cry in the sudden salt  
 of the big room, world  
 -- I uncurled plastic limbs of senses,  
 freed the crashing course of menses,  
       -- hurled  
 I hurled the young tongue's spit  
 for a common coming, a genesis  
 sans trumets and myrrh, rejected  
 whatever seed in love's inside  
 fought and formed me from  
 an exodus of semen come  
 for the dream of Gwen,

the small one,  
 whose first salt scream  
 heralded more and borrowed excellence. (*RF* 59)

What is interesting here is not merely the power of the body imagery, but also the elevation of the personal, the specific, over the transcendent notion of masking the individual in favour of a universal experience. The poet chooses to give birth to herself instead. The metaphor of giving birth is clearly connected to the birth of divine nature and divine selfhood in “The Self Assumes”:

not love, lean and frequent,  
 but the accurate earth,  
 a naked landscape, green  
 yet free of seasons  
 is a name the violate self assumes  
 after its violent beginnings

not this complex dance of fire and blood  
 which burns the night to morning,  
 these hypnotic feet which turn us  
 know no end and no returning

but a fish within a brilliant river  
 whose body separates the dreaming waters  
 and never touches land  
 is a name the violate self assumes  
 as silver winds instruct the swimmer  
 who swims with neither feet nor hands

O not this double dance which burns night to morning  
 and cracks the latitudes of time and sleep  
 whose lean and frequent fires in their burning  
 break apart the landscape of a dream,  
 but the accurate self which burns, and burning, assumes green

(BB 20)

Frank Davey insists that MacEwen's "poetry tells us that the mythic structure of reality is binary.... [and that] [b]ecause of the binary structure of the cosmos, knowledge is discoverable primarily through inverse means." (1973:13) But I would argue that she takes the union of opposites for granted, never viewing spirit and matter as divisible. This is a point which her chief critic Jan Bartley misses, contending that MacEwen, in effect, reinforces and perpetuates a philosophic system based on the duality of existence:

The quest for totality becomes possible when opposites are reconciled.  
 Accordingly, throughout her writing, MacEwen stresses the dualistic philosophy of the hermetic tradition: she employs the dualities of mind/body, spirit/matter, and their application, in the area of psychology, to the conscious, and unconscious realms of man's psyche. (Bartley 1983:3)

I would add to these assessments that I see MacEwen's writings in opposition to dualism itself. I think she is more concerned with the conscious and unconscious realms of a *woman's* psyche (although Bartley is obviously using the term man in its "generic" sense). In MacEwen's own words, the poet occupies a separate space which bridges the worlds divided by dualism:

In my poetry I am concerned with finding the relationships between what we call the "real" world and that other world which consists of dream,

fantasy, and myth. I've never felt that these "two worlds" are as separate as one might think, and in fact my poetry as well as my life seems to occupy a place -- you might call it a kind of no-man's land -- between the two. Very often experiences or observations which are immediate take on grand or universal significance for me, because they seem to capsualize and give new force to the age-old wonders, mysteries and fears which have always haunted and bewildered man. (Colombo 65)

Several important features of MacEwen's verse are outlined in this statement: the inseparability of a woman's life from her art, the immediacy of that art, and a reverence for ancient mysteries. Her poetry demonstrates that she elevates the dark side of binary divisions: passivity, matter, paganism, the primitive, the foreign, the unconscious. Because woman has been traditionally associated with these "negative" halves of the binary equation, what MacEwen implicitly advocates in her revival of matter and darkness is an elevation of the status of women, of "otherness". Matter is given new weight; this explains MacEwen's attraction to the alchemical precepts outlined in one of her sources, *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*:

What is below, is like what is above, for the performing of the marvels of the one thing. It ascends from the earth into the heaven, and again descends into the earth and receives the power of the superiors and inferiors. (Taylor 79)

It is not the "duality of truth", as Davey claims, but the inseparability of "opposites" which informs MacEwen's verse. She insists that nothing changes unless its form, its structure and its language also change. To work magic in alchemy is to create new metaphors, to quicken the senses. Without negating the light, darkness is reclaimed, as are the fertile earth where the seed lies unfolding, the unseen, fiery power rising from within, the dark of sacred human flesh, the night, the ocean depths. Instead of abstract enlightenment, she speaks of deepening power, of

“something down there” (*SM* 50). Dark and light, divine and mortal, spirit and matter, female and male -- these are fused together in alchemy, and all divisions are healed through the perception of the magician-poet.

Perception for MacEwen involves not just the interiorization of an experience, but actually absorbing its entirety. Perhaps the most frequent -- and certainly the most intriguing -- metaphor which she employs to describe spiritual possession is that of consumption, citing Boehme in *Julian the Magician* to reinforce the notion of devouring the divine: “The magician eats his parts. We eat our parts to form wholes. And the wholes are part of a Whole and the Whole has all parts and no parts” (*JM* 124). Consumption is the central trope in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*; it is, on one hand, used to mock a materialistic and indiscriminate consumer society which attempts to “buy” spiritual values, and on the other hand, is a metaphor for the kind of spiritual wholeness which can contain all diversity. Devouring as MacEwen describes it seems particularly feminine because of its uterine qualities -- a metaphor for her desire to absorb, contain, nurture, and enclose all life, rather than separate herself apart. This is not just a maternal embrace, but a desire to entwine herself with the world, to grapple with its limbs in a divine coupling -- another frequent metaphor for the devouring of the self. To engulf is to refuse to isolate or divide. Such a philosophy is stated in the introduction to the volume, where MacEwen responds to man’s alienation:

The intake.... I believe there is more room inside than outside. And all the diversities which get absorbed can later work their way out into fantastic things.... It is the intake, the refusal to starve./And we must not forget the grace.... No -- rather enclose, absorb, have done.

( “Introduction”, *BB*, no page)

Jan Bartley argues that MacEwen is implying that “to starve” is to deny the existence of a binary structure in the universe, to prevent the digestion of evil which then erupts in alienation

(243). I disagree with this because it is the binary opposition of matter itself which MacEwen claims should be absorbed and eliminated. Women have traditionally cooked and provided nurturance in most societies, passed on life in a very physical way. The emphasis in this volume is on converting the “raw” into the “cooked”, in swallowing the whole world in order to unite the self with that world; the poet is by turns a winemaker, a cook, an escape artist, or a lover for whom sexual union is a holy communion, a feast of the senses, total satiation of all appetites. Conversely, the sacrament of holy communion is parodied as gluttony, and MacEwen humourously combines the arcane and the domestic in expressions which appear ridiculous -- even oxymoronic -- at first glance: “tossed dictionaries”, “spiced bibles”, “apocalyptic tea”, and “boiled chimera”. Food which is about to be consumed triggers a primal racial memory which suggests the primitive sacramental qualities of the meal:

sometimes the food refuses to be sanctified  
and you stand over the table beating your chest  
and scream impotent graces for bacon and eggs  
graphic on the plate, arranged in greasy cipher

delicate barbarian, you think of pigs and chickens  
you think of mammoths and their tons of ancient frozen meat,  
you think of dark men running through the earth  
on their naked, splendid feet (BB 35)

By eating, we devour and reunify that which has been divided, we ingest and transform all experience and move beyond mere mindless consumerism, and “we will consume our mysteries”:

to no more complain of the soul’s vulgar cavities,  
to gaze at each other over the rust-heap of cutlery,  
drinking a coffee that takes an eternity-

till, bursting, bleary,  
 we laugh, barbarians, and rock the universe-  
 and exclaim to each other over the table  
 over the table of bones and scrap metal  
 over the gigantic junk-heaped table:

by God that was a meal. (BB 1)

The conclusion is ironic, grimly joking about the fate of those who will not serve their more profound appetites. But the meal has also been provided “by God”. Like Blake who insisted that art must have form and shape (“The Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer... received the excess of his delights”), MacEwen makes us notice the substantiality, the visceral aspect of food for the soul, rather than emphasizing abstract doctrine; she denies that one need suppress the appetite or control urges which are natural. Eating is holy, like the consumption of fire in *The Fire-Eaters*: “The living flame of the world is what matters/The fire is edible, and now” (FE 59), a volume which continues the gustatory metaphors introduced in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*:

I have eaten fire and found it fine/I have eaten the apples of  
 wrath and love (FE 63)

•

I swallowed my words like swords (FE 31)

Eat dreams and planets, all/Are edible/Fire invites fire (FE38)

I eat/the bright ephemeral fruits of morning. (FE 53)

and ate my thin volumes of verse

like fragile lettuce sandwiches

(FE 44)

The intake metaphor recurs in many forms; in one early poem, the orbiting astronaut encloses all opposition and promotes the synthesis of all around him: “his body has become a zodiac of bone/its own myth, a personal cosmology” (BB 41). The blind earthmen are juxtaposed with the “unseen silver armies”, the finite journey into outer space with the *infinite* journey of inner space; the poet is always “I interior” (AM 1). Part of the inner journey incorporates celebrating the body, not as a model of efficiency, but as a key to sensual perception, with a lushness which is frequently reflected in MacEwen’s choice of adjectives. In all of the poems in *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, the experience of being *in* the body, of participating in *feeling*, is stressed repeatedly; many “cannot breathe or speak because their bodies occupy/the same dark and troubled area”. In “Manzini: Escape Artist”, she writes that “there are no bonds except the flesh” in italics, but undermines this ironic statement by her description of the magician who defies the flesh in his escape act (BB 37). That which is insubstantial and remote has no place in MacEwen’s spiritual scheme, and her poetry is infused with erotic detail.

The maternal, aquatic qualities of the devouring metaphor extend its significance to include life and death in the body of mother earth. When MacEwen evokes nature as the source of spiritual wholeness, it is distinctly feminine. A symbolic return to the sea/womb is conjured by her consumption of the “naked and embryonic” oysters “which flung me forth, a nuisance in their midst/with my mind and complex hungers/crashing on the high white beaches of the world” (AM 11). The sea is the source and end of all life:

I insisted that my terrifying cosmos

was not different from your own;

I promised you that it contained

all you had seen or done

(for I had seen all things converge to one). (*AM* 58)

It is also a metaphor for spiritual rebirth and satiety: "Like seas we contain life/and somehow ever are contained" (*SM* 8). The life and death cycle from watery womb to liquid grave is celebrated most poignantly in "The Heel":

In the organing dark I bless those who came from the  
waters  
scaleless and shrewd, and walked with unwebbed feet  
to create memory, when every movement invented their  
end,  
who stood beside the holy waters with upright spines  
to destroy themselves, to inherit themselves, to stand  
while the fish fell back and the waves erased their birth.

I bless those who turned the double face of memory  
around,  
who turned on their naked green heels and had great  
dreams  
and in the queer hour when they are struck at the eyes  
and the last sunrise claims and cripples them, I stand  
and remark that on the edge of this strand I also feel  
the holy waters lapping just behind my heel. (*SM* 28)

To return to water is to return to the mother's body. The poem which most movingly links the female body with water is "Seeds and Stars":

when touch is merest wish we swim  
like fish, our seed the liquid night,

the length of seas, our first deep element  
and love is the end of sleep and sight

when wish is merest touch I bend  
like her whose curve is heaven over earth  
and love beneath me far and far  
makes of my flesh a miracle of stars (SM 71)

MacEwen calls the spiritual force which combines light and dark the shadow-maker; it generates the poet's being and is activated specifically through sexual contact. Female desire is the informing metaphor for spiritual desire, as the speaker actively takes a lover; she is neither the passive object of his desire nor does she objectify him -- rather, the lovers are inseparable. He is the object of *her* desire, however, and he will "come" when she needs to have him:

My legs surround your black, wrestle it  
As the flames of day wrestle night  
And everywhere you paint the necessary shadows  
On my flesh and darken the fibres of my nerve;  
Without these shadows I would be  
In air one wave of ruinous light  
And night with many mouths would close  
Around my infinite and sterile curve.

Shadow maker create me everywhere  
Dark spaces (your face is my chosen abyss),  
For I said I have come to possess your darkness  
Only this. (SM 80)

The woman takes what she needs from him:

Your face in dream becomes the dawn, and down  
to the dark of your sleep I, vampire, lean  
to breathe you like a vapour that gives me life again  
and of your flesh I eat, your blood, your brain. (*SM* 41)

All the poems address this unknown and unknowable "you" who is male muse, her self, and the reader simultaneously. Through this tactile union of flesh with vision, the poet achieves inspiration; severing the physical from the spiritual, touch from sight, would result in the absence of the shadow-maker. MacEwen views herself as an acolyte in relation to a male consort, and throughout her work she seeks a *hieros gamos* between opposites, what she recognizes as a *conjunctio oppositorum*.<sup>3</sup> Her attraction to a male muse, to her inner "otherness", sets her apart from poetic traditions which elevate and externalize female muses. MacEwen explores her dream world to contact the male muse who dominates her subconscious. Much attention has been given to MacEwen's muse (by Atwood, Gose, Bartley, and Davey), to the exclusion of her central focus. Margaret Atwood claims that for MacEwen the male muse is the "inspirer of language and the formative power in Nature.... Ignore him or misinterpret him and her 'muse' poems may be mistaken for 'religious' ones or reduced to veiled sexuality" (Atwood 24). But if the definition of "religious" were expanded to include the immanent in the terms I have been discussing, and to include sexuality rather than seeing it as extraneous to both poetics and religion, perhaps to consider these poems as religious might not be a mistake. Yet the muse plays an ancillary role, following the consort figure in pagan religions. Atwood reads the muse as a fatherly figure in MacEwen's early verse, a magician whose remoteness prevents dialogue, the union with whom is limited by the flesh. But MacEwen uses the muse to externalize her struggle towards her evolving divinity, merely an aspect of the poet herself, her holy "otherness", in the manner that Emily

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Bartley organizes her study of MacEwen's work in terms of this concept, and MacEwen herself conceded that "[Bartley] says it beautifully" (Meyer 104).

Dickinson masculinized those aspects of her self which a gendered lexicon constrained her from acknowledging explicitly. He is principally the “the handsome two-horned one who waits/at the river of the world’s end” (*AM* 61), the “Indestructible One” in “The Hour of the Singer”:

Now you comprehend your first and final lover  
 in the dark receding planets of his eyes,  
 and this is the hour when you know moreover  
 that the god you have loved always  
 will descend and lie with you in paradise. (*AM* 60)

The earth below is conceived of as a paradise, and the muse/lover is her equal, not “above” her nor externalized as a separate entity. The muse remains elusive, fluid, transient in form, subject to the poet’s beckoning, yet part of herself:

I gave you many names and masks  
 And longed for you in a hundred forms  
 And I was warned the masks would fall  
 And the forms would lose their fame  
 And I would be left with an empty name

(For that was the way the world went,  
 For that was the way it had to be,  
 To grow, and in growing lose you utterly)

But grown, I inherit you, and you  
 Renew your first and final form in me,  
 And though some masks have fallen  
 And many names have vanished back into my pen

Your face bears the birth-marks I recognize in time,

You stand before me now, unchanged

(For this is the way it has to be;

To perceive you is an act of faith

Though it is you who have inherited me) (SM 81)

The poet dissociates herself from “the way it has to be” and develops her own criteria for defining the muse as he appears to her.

Nor is MacEwen the only Canadian poet to depart from the dominant tradition of seeing the muse as female: Jay MacPherson's angels and Dorothy Livesay's male figures are but two examples of the way in which women poets deviate from a tradition which places women on a pedestal. That her muse is male directly challenges Robert Graves's assumption that the poet universally worships a female muse. Usually the muse appears in MacEwen's work as a consort to the goddess, in the guise of a prince or a king, a complementary figure whose difference inspires a sense of completion in the woman. He is valued and feared because he leads her into an unknown darkness, her uncharted interior, forcing her to confront change and mystery and to struggle towards her own evolving divinity. He is Eve's helpmeet, the object of the poet's creative urges, and she closes the final poem in *The Shadow Maker* by addressing him: “You are the eyes of my mind, and you are here/to help me see my dream”. He represents the force that will “test and revise” her, but it is she who determines that “*What is here, what is with me now/Is mine.*” (SM 13) She seeks both life and death through him: “my thighs, all silver with his seed/are sleek for swimming,/I see the aqueducts of death ahead” (AM 45). He is the “demon of my darker self,/denizen who crawls in my deep want,/white crow, black dove” (SM 6).

The muse for MacEwen is an icon of creativity: he may appear as a figment of her poetic imagination, a creature part human and part divine, like the native totems or the magic animals

which figure in her work. He is her king, lover, singer musician; he can assume any guise, remains fluid in form, is the darkness of her dreams, her animus, her guide, or the vulgar barbarian whose appetite knows no bounds. He is the cosmic "I/eye", a "composite god" with "fluorescent eyes" (AM 5). When they are united in *hieros gamos*, the sacred couple are "the man and woman naked and green with rain" of "Eden, Eden", symbolizing the beginnings of pastoral perfection, the possibility of transcending dualism in a union which would move them beyond time to an ideal state of unity glimpsed momentarily by the poet in her dream: "All things are plotting to make us whole/All things conspire to make us one" (SM 16). She awaits the arrival of the "Almighty and Most Perfect One, Lord of the Universe":

*Dear Gwen (It will call me by my familiar name), Stop  
waiting; All I have promised I have accomplished; the world  
is whole again (FE 28)*

The interiority of the muse is stressed as the couple works together in harmony to disorder the present world, and to create a better world of their own design:

We meet unplanned, each of us sure  
The other will be there; it was written,  
You see, long before.  
We smile, we swim in turquoise pools  
And then lie down together to plot  
The birth of a more accurate world. (SM 53)

But the muse is also an icon of destruction.<sup>4</sup> His inevitable sacrifice is described as submission to the moon goddess in "The Armies of the Moon":

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<sup>4</sup> All of the stories contained in *Noman* describe a symbolic ritual sacrifice which leads to mystical illumination: "House of the Whale" is about a native who inadvertently relives one of his ancestral myths while working on a construction site in Toronto; "Fire" is about two lovers who are so over-

in the Lake of Death there will be a showdown;  
 men will be powder, they will go down under  
 the swords of the unseen silver armies,  
 become one with the gorgeous anonymous moon. (*AM* 2)

He is constantly changing, expendable and easily replaced, each reincarnation representing another aspect of himself, constantly dying and being reborn anew:

observe that your anatomy is fire and brains are ashes  
 and in terms of old madness, sleep with queens,  
 take root; the most available loins are here  
 to place the equivocal seeds between. (*RF* 12)

MacEwen describes “these/sacrifices, these/necessary deaths” which demonstrate “how my people were.... offering up the holy oil of all their loves” in a ritual whose purity is contrasted with the senseless loss of lives which “we let fall/one by one/deliberately” in a misguided attempt to reach God “by killing/our golden/selves” (*SM* 78). In a poem titled “How weeps the hangman”, where the figure of the hangman is remarkably like Wilkinson’s, MacEwen likewise depicts death in the medieval tradition of the seducer (not the seductress; hence both poets break the male convention by reversing the sex of death). MacEwen’s hangman is both subject to the female speaker’s demands and offers death as an attraction to the speaker:

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whelmed by their vision of fire in their fireplace that they burn all of their possessions; and in “Snow”, a Mediterranean seer freezes to death in Canada after becoming dazzled by the brilliance of the snow. Noman himself, in his guise as Siva, is a creative destroyer who smashes the statue of an ancient Canaanite goddess against his apartment wall; from the ruins of the past arises the vision of the future. The male destroyer is depicted as the complement to the female creator in these stories; he awakens in her the possibility of stepping through the archway, moving beyond externally imposed limitations (120). All of these Pan figures bear a marked resemblance to the horned god worshipped by pagans, who is radically different from present cultural images of masculinity: he is neither “macho” nor effeminate, both Hunter and gentle comforter. He is passionate and embodies untamed sexuality – as a holy, connective power – the Dying God whose horns represent the waxing and waning crescents of the moon goddess. The green-world lover is related to the dying god in the myths of Aphrodite and Adonis, Ishtar and Tammuz, Isis and Osiris, where the love of the goddess for her consort gives her the power of rebirth. As Atwood observes, the figure of Icarus who dominates MacEwen’s early work is clearly a sacrificial element, the “man who flies but dies [and] is readily available for sexual metaphor” (Atwood 25-6).

Now the leaf the wild tree announces  
 is the season's sacrifice, and I  
 throw you all - pain, love, glory, blood  
 to the wind, crying *die, die, die*  
 for the whimpering hangman of our days,  
 die for the terrible love we bear.  
 O bless our lovers and our seasonal slaves....  
 O hangman thy hood attracts me so much  
 (do not ask why, do not *ask*.) (SM 76)

An intimacy with nature and the body is shown in nearly all the poems contained in *The Fire-Eaters*, where a reliance on the hands, feet, tongue, and teeth to discover the sacred infuses the poems with the tangible sensuality that characterizes *The Shadow Maker*.<sup>5</sup> The body is the language she uses to form her very words; art offers a fusion of perceiver and perceived:

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<sup>5</sup> Part of MacEwen's recreation of sensual experience is derived from her use of vivid colours. The recurrence of red in *The Shadow Maker*— blood, fire, heat, passion, flesh, tongue, royal velvet — emphasizes MacEwen's glorification of passion, of the flesh as the means by which the spirit reveals itself. Red is also the colour of menstrual blood — “the moon duplicating itself in your body”, as she describes it in an earlier poem (RF 3). In “Poem for a Lady”, the “lady dances in the crimson mirror of her blood/(Note that it is not red, but crimson)”, and she is inspired by peacocks who “have far too many/Colours”. The lady recalls Ishtar/Astarte anointing herself with vermillion in the sacred marriage ceremony with her consort. In her fluid, life-giving form (“I have told myself I am the sea”), the poet describes pain as an essential insight: “I shed the clear blood/of my eye, the red blood/of my time, and I shed/white blood like a prayer.” (SM 8). By contrast, blues and greens are cool, tranquil colours, as in the description of the holy Blue Hippopotamus (MA 148). Green is sleep, pastoral innocence; one must search in a “greenward” direction to find truth (SM 26). White absorbs all colours, and the large naked goddess figure rejoices in the “plural world” of her many-hued vision:

you laugh you cry you wear bright beads  
 and the colours love you, dozens  
 huddle upon you.

O lady the world will not confess your colours  
 and nowhere are your beads acknowledged  
 against the spectrum of your city.

(BB 32)

with eyes and arms I make alphabets  
 like in those children's books  
 where people bend into letters and signs (BB 5)

MacEwen concludes the poem cycle "Animal Syllables" with "The body has its own speech to be heeded now" (FE 46).

The intensity and dogmatism in her early work prevent her from achieving something different than the abstract articulations of faith she criticizes in monotheism; she dreams of that which is indescribable, encompassing all "contraries". The first poem in *The Shadow Maker* depicts her desire as a red bird, and its defiant tone, its sense of urgency, its rich sensuality, marks its difference from that which *can* be named:

You are waiting for someone to confirm it,  
 You are waiting for someone to say it plain,  
 Now we are here and because we are short of time  
 I will say it; I might even speak its name.

It is moving above me, it is burning my heart out,  
 I have felt it crash through my flesh,  
 I have spoken to it in a foreign tongue,  
 I have stroked its neck in the night like a wish.

Its name is the name you have buried in your blood,  
 Its shape is a gorgeous cast-off velvet cape,  
 Its eyes are the eyes of your most forbidden lover  
 And its claws, I tell you its claws are gloved in fire.

You are waiting to hear its name spoken,  
 You have asked me a thousand times to speak it,  
 You who have hidden it, cast it off, killed it,  
 Loved it to death and sung your songs over it.

The red bird you wait for falls with giant wings -  
 A velvet cape whose royal colour calls us kings  
 Is the form it takes as, uninvited, it descends,  
 It is the Power and the Glory forever, Amen. (*SM 2*)

The world of vibrant, sensual colour is set in relief against the relentless dichotomizing described by black and white photography, developed in the earlier *The Rising Fire*, in “The Black Light: The Eclipse”, “The Room of the Last Supper”, and “Black and White”, all of which point to the lack of magic in a colourless, dualistic existence.

To be open to the experience of the divine involves acknowledging subjectivity and its diversity. In stating that she wanted to create a myth, MacEwen claims she meant that “[i]t is not so much a matter of invention as of perception -- in a way it's more a matter of saying what I see” (Bartley 1983:234). By learning to trust the voice within rather than conforming to an external system of values, the questor is able to participate in the essence if not the exact circumstance of ancient ritual and to activate the primary impulse:

It is not lost, it is moving forward always,  
 Shrewd, and huge as thunder, equally dark.  
 Soft paws kiss its continents, it walks  
 Between lava avenues, it does not tire.

It is not lost, tell me how can you lose it?  
 Can you lose the shadow which stalks the sun?  
 It feeds on mountains, it feeds on seas,  
 It loves you most when you are most alone.

Do not deny it, do not blaspheme it,  
 Do not light matches on the dark of its shores.  
 It will breathe you out, it will recede from you.

*What is here, what is with you now, is yours. (SM 14)*

Vision is always personal, idiosyncratic, rooted in matter: the fire of alchemy is a metaphor transforming the physical world around us, recognizing its presence, its sensuality, its aliveness. Likewise in creating poetry: "My prime concern has always been with the raw materials from which literature is derived, not with literature as an end in itself" (Bartley 3).

One of the most striking aspects of MacEwen's vision, from a feminist perspective, is the manner in which she sets esoteric myth in domestic settings. There is a marked progression in her verse from the ethereal to the concrete, a shift from the enigmatic complexity of early mystical precepts to the complexity inherent in the simple tasks of a woman's daily life, as she translates the divine into the actual. Abstraction is opposed to reality and should be shunned by the poet: "For you I would subtract my images/for the nude truth beneath them" (SM 14). In *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, she asserts that poetry needs to be felt, experienced, lived, rather than merely read, but she seemed unable to convey this in a natural, relaxed fashion until later in her career, where all the conventions surrounding time, objectivity, reality -- anything too familiar -- are suspended in favour of a trancelike state which discloses the mystery paradoxically imbedded in familiar experience.

This grounding of mystical experience in common domestic detail and natural speech rhythms becomes evident in MacEwen's 1972 volume, *The armies of the moon*. The tone here combines elevated and colloquial, even vulgar, language with ease. "Memoirs of a Mad Cook", for instance, begins, "There's no point in kidding myself any longer/I just can't get the knack of it". The speaker evaluates the ordinary repetitive daily tasks of preparing meals in nearly metaphysical terms: "something is eating away at me/with splendid teeth" (AM 14). Everyday activities are imbued with extraordinary significance and luminescent detail. The success of the poems in *The armies of the moon* lies in its earthy laughter and in its evocation of the complex simplicity of daily life. Housecleaning is viewed as a cosmic task in "The Vacuum Cleaner Dream", where the speaker sees herself as "an avenging angel/and the best cleaning woman/in the world." A woman's work - domestic and spiritual -- is never done. Spiritual discovery is likened to interior cleaning, a search for something valuable that can only be found by tidying up:

the telescope turned inward  
to the corner of the room  
is slowly falling into inner space....  
above me the vast necropolis of space,  
below, a telescope turned inward  
and silver dust I must sweep up tomorrow  
in the corner of the room. (AM 47)

"I have mislaid many places/in this house without history",  
especially those things which "flung me forth", which  
"creep about miles below my eye" (AM 7).

"Meditations of a Seamstress (I)" extends the domestic environment to imagine that a garment bag represents the entire universe which the seamstress must somehow prevent from unravelling or coming apart at the seams. Her charge is a lofty one: "Something vital is at stake." The world itself is constructed by womanly arts; woman is not constructed by man in this cosmic scheme.

Nor is the search for the absolute an alienating experience, but a humble, personal household task:

I know somehow I'm fighting time  
 and if it's not all done by nightfall  
 everything will come apart again;  
 continental shelves will slowly drift into the sea  
 and earthquakes will tear wide open  
 the worn-out patches of Asia. (*AM* 8)

The poet/seamstress lives on the edge when darkness overcomes her:

Dusk, a dark needle, stabs the city  
 and I get visions of chasing fiery spools of thread  
 mile after mile over highways and fields  
 until I inhabit some place  
 at the hem of the world  
 where all the long blue draperies  
 of skies and rivers wind;  
     spiders' webs describe  
 the circling of their frail thoughts forever;  
 everything fits at last and someone has lined  
 the thin fabric of this life with grass. (*AM* 9)

The "sewing" poems imbue women's work with divine attributes. As Annis Pratt writes, women's fabric arts may be read as preverbal and preliterate encoded messages, since such domestic arts are excluded from accepted definitions of mainstream culture. Because women work on the fringes of culture, their work is frequently not taken seriously and its subversiveness is less subject to scrutiny (Pratt 1981). By employing such feminist metaphors as sewing, what MacEwen seemed to be evolving toward was a consciousness of a new spiritual response to the dilemmas

posed by a dualistic, monotheistic philosophy. In “Meditations of a Seamstress (2)”, she describes a fantasy in which she becomes like the virgin goddess Artemis, as she dreams of cloaking herself in a garment which will return her to a preverbal time of nature worship:

I dream things not to be worn in this city,  
yards of silk which like Isadora’s scarf  
may one day choke me, blue tunics held together  
by buckles wearing the lost portrait of kings,  
vests carved from the skin of frightened deer,  
green velvet cloaks in which I may soundlessly collapse  
and succumb to the Forest, sleeves to stress  
the arm of the archer, the huntress, Artemis. (AM 10)

Several poems are specifically devoted to strong female figures of divine power. “Lilith” evokes the power of an ancient goddess, represented by both dark and light sides of the moon -- the fearful and the benevolent -- and it is this figure of death the poet claims is “assailing” her and overtaking her poetry since “it is her time”: “Have no doubt that one day she will be reborn” (AM 15). One critic claims that in “Lilith”, MacEwen “is so feminine she is Bitchwoman, very shrill.... and *normal* femininity merely ghosts the fibre of her poetic mentality” (Sherman 120). Such powerful (and therefore threatening to male critics) female figures populate much of MacEwen’s writing.<sup>6</sup> In the poem “Tiamut”, MacEwen describes the creatress as female, as formless and undivided chaos. She equates sexual union, mystical experiences, and the creation of art, all of which lead to integration:

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<sup>6</sup> In the short story “Noman”, MacEwen celebrates the comic strip character of Wonderwoman, and a carnival woman named Medusa -- a “giant Eve with beasts” who laughs at the idea that chaos should have either meaning or structure. Medusa conjures up a Fat Woman named Omphale, the mother of the gods, who gives birth to the circus clown Noman. Kali, named after the goddess who inspired Siva’s cosmic dance, is his consort.

A woman called Chaos, she  
was the earth inebriate, without form,  
a thing of ripped green flesh  
and forests in crooked wooden dance  
and water in a wine drunk on itself  
and boulders bumping into foolish clouds.

Tiamut, her breasts in mountainous collision,  
her womb a cave of primeval beasts, her thighs torn  
greatly in the black Babylonian pre-edén

wincing at the coming of Marduk;  
her hands laid her flat and angry on a bed of void;  
Marduk stretched her out, and she lay there  
coughing up black phlegm.

Marduk flattened her belly under one hand  
and sliced Tiamut down the length of her body  
(the argument of parts, the division of disorder)  
and made the sky from her left side  
and fashioned the earth from her right.

We, caught on a split organ of chaos,  
on the right half of a bisected goddess,  
wonder why the moon pulls the sea on a silver string,  
why the earth will not leave the gold bondage of the sun,

why all parts marry, all things couple in confusion  
 while atoms wrench apart in this  
 adolescent time. (RF 5)

Many of the poems also feature women who are larger than life. In “The Astronauts”, MacEwen refers to the Russian cosmonaut Valentina as

female, dialectical, I imagine you  
 pivoting over the polar caps,  
 ferris-wheel woman, queen of hemispheres,  
 moving through the complex vacuum of a dream. (BB 17)

She does not name power as the goddess but describes it merely as ineffable, unnameable, internal: “The time has come/and I have not yet named myself;/there are so many names to choose from” (SM 22). There are also rather striking references to ancient Druidic practices:

Funny how all things revolve in the Druidic circle  
 of these trees

Some things revolve in air and have the gall to call  
 themselves birds

Some things resolve to be stones, but I know differently

I spend so long among your peers, God, that I  
 forget that once the wicked wheels of God start  
 turning  
 they don't stop (FE 18)

The displacement of vertical images of power with those suggesting roundness is popular among woman-centred revisionist poets. MacEwen reclaims the power of the moon, of

“lunatic” powers and dark passions, which leads her to ridicule the Apollo flight as a conquest over nature. In “The Lake of Death” section of *The armies of the moon*, MacEwen specifically addresses the moon goddess as the neglected “other half”, the dark, awesome truth which has been concealed:

I’m so far underground you cannot find me,  
 hating the untellable  
 which must get told  
 trying to read the monthly Morse-code of the moon,  
 these urgent letters to the world. (AM 35)

The moon is a symbol often employed by contemporary women poets to portray the cyclical nature of women’s lives, a mysterious source of female power and rhythm (Sadoff 93). MacEwen associates the moon with sacrifice and war, and with the lance that pierced Christ’s side, endowing it with terrifying violence, unknown and frightening power over the subconscious. In “The Film”, the “silver screen” becomes the lunar face of violent fantasies, reflecting man’s collective brutality. The moon is also the source of inspiration and nourishment: “*the moon was a cup from which we drank/the silver cup of night*” (AM 29). Yet it does not represent the “indulgence” of the dark shadow side “at the expense of authentic light”, nor does its presence reveal only how man “fails to strive toward his bipolar potential” (Davey 20). Rather its very ability to reflect, ✕ to contain both dark and light, to expose as well as to conceal, are the qualities that MacEwen reveres in the moon.

Projections of unconscious violence and desire on the moon reveal an androcentric fear of women, and when a woman encounters these mythologies, she often reinvents, revises, and transforms them to fit her own female body, experience, and identity. Contemporary women poets correct dualistic moon myths by re-evaluating and incorporating both aspects of the moon goddess (Sadoff 98). For MacEwen, the moon signifies self-doubt, desire, sacrifice, and a fear

of the unknown -- all of which are features typical of the moon as symbolized in women's verse. She unifies both light and dark, which appear in opposite guises that can be dialectically perceived as one. The moon is but one of many circular forms which symbolize the poet's movement toward enclosure and synthesis. It appears in many other forms: the earth, the sun, the conical hat worn by the magician, the eye, an egg, the orbiting path of the planets, the circling motion of neutrons and protons about the atom, and other recurring images. The cyclist turns the wheel of life and glimpses truth at "the rasping zodiac of your spokes":

approach it, neither a place nor a time but a state  
of hotness; approach it on large wheels  
I am the red centre  
the scream of quinine in the ear    (*BB* 7)

The finite and infinite cycle of time is represented by the ferris wheel which is an icon of freedom:

But it's funny because sometimes  
I'm glad I can't get off it.  
I circle, I rise, I fall.  
I seem to move better than anyone below  
Even though I can't move at all.    (*FE* 33)

Turning and returning in a cyclical fashion is a frequent motif in MacEwen's verse; the circle contains paradox, repetition, and flux. We are all dreaming "in the turning wilderness of time" (*SM* 51) and we are all haunted by the figure of the child who cycles in perpetual circles on the periphery of our vision:

are you turning and turning and turning  
getting nowhere fast on that wheel  
when you could be talking to me?

*I've always been here, turning and turning*  
*And I'll always be here, turning and turning*  
*From the beginning to the end turning,*  
*From alpha to omega, turning and turning,*  
 And I looked and saw it was me. (*Sm* 56)

MacEwen's fascination with circles is reflected not merely in content, but also in form. In each volume, the poems are organized in suites around a dominant image, although not necessarily following the same theme. Variations on the complexity of human truth are given a parallel structure in counterpoint. Like a musical score, the thematically unified suite is composed of individual poems which often end on the same note on which they begin, repetition reinforcing its sense of circularity. Perhaps the most interesting volume in terms of this structure is *The armies of the moon*. It is arranged in three lunar phases, according to three "seas" located on the face of the moon; we move from sea to shining sea, from the sea of crisis, to the sea of death, to the sea of dreams. This pattern suggests that disruption and decay give birth to new growth. Thematically each poem is linked by the transformation of base metals into silver and gold and then back again. The wholeness of life, resolving itself in death, is reflected and reborn in the mystical language of dreams.

The exploration of dreams is intimately connected to MacEwen's obsession with the figure of T.E. Lawrence. The *T.E. Lawrence Poems* are among MacEwen's best work, and unless they are read as a dialectic between the objective facts of his life and the subjective feelings of the poet, it is difficult to reconcile her obsession with a masculine megalomaniac with the feminist principles I am claiming she possesses. She relates to Lawrence as an "other", a double whose alterity leads her to explore his world as an aspect of her own life. Both were drawn to Middle Eastern culture and sought to blend in, to lose their foreign identity. MacEwen claims that she was obsessed with Lawrence for many years, that she identified closely with him because he was "a sort

of mad, poetic hero, seeking his past elsewhere, seeking some kind of ancestral mythical thing” (Meyer 101). She was attracted to his compulsive lying, and to the ambiguity in the legend surrounding him (in the same way Michael Ondaatje describes his attraction to Billy the Kid). Her poem sequence deliberately maintains this ambiguity. MacEwen relies heavily on *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and on several biographies, some of which reinforce the legend of Lawrence’s greatness, while others refute it. “I believe a little bit of all of them” (Meyer 101), MacEwen claims, while she constructs her own account of Lawrence’s version of the revolt in Arabia. Assuming his persona, she quotes and echoes his writings, but always with a savage twist: where it is clear that Lawrence revealed little of his inner self despite the enormity of his public image, MacEwen inserts philosophical queries of self-doubt which permit the reader a glimpse beyond the persona, to expand the mystery while simultaneously gaining a heightened awareness of its fictive construction. The baffling figure of Lawrence provides the poet with a necessary pole of alterity by which she is able to complete her own dialectic process of self-definition through responding to his otherness. Islam, like Christianity, another form of monotheism, is revealed as an appealing but distorted and extremist religion.

In a marvellously rich pastiche of the varied events in Lawrence’s life, MacEwen captures Lawrence’s sense of inner conflict as he is both seduced by the exclusivity and emptiness of Islam, while he runs in fear from all it opposes. His split is attributed to the inferiority complex he developed as a result of his illegitimate birth; he desired to be a “legitimate prince” instead of being born “on the wrong side of the bed, which made me/Prince of Nothing, and I fell off the edge of it into Hell” (TEL 8). He praises Allah for being “massive and alone”, for embodying the empty spirit of the desert, for mirroring the inner void which he calls “Nothingness, this Everything” (TEL 20). Silence, stasis, the terrible beauty and barrenness of the arid desert compel him towards the still point of death, which he pictures as the ultimate in cleanliness (TEL

68).<sup>7</sup> The anti-flesh puritanism of his childhood is summarized in a poem called “Words from the Preacher at Oxford”:

Let me implore you, my  
                                 young friends,  
                                 not  
 to imperil your immortal souls upon a pleasure,  
                                 which  
*so far as I am credibly informed*

Lasts  
                                 less than  
                                 one and three-quarter  
 Minutes.

Belief in Allah and in his cause as leader of the revolt affords him the illusion that he too is a chosen prophet, and “suddenly you know that all mysteries have been solved/for you, all questions answered” (*TEL* 42).

Like all of MacEwen’s failed mystics, Lawrence is betrayed by his delusions of grandeur, his childhood dreams shattered:

I dreamed of having  
 Millions of people expressing themselves through me,

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<sup>7</sup> In stark contrast with the sterile images of the desert are juxtaposed the fertile garden inhabited by Daoud and Farraj, whose innocence and unrestrained homosexual impulses fascinate Lawrence. The poem sequence itself is framed by two poems about water, which is formless, colourless, and contains all perspectives. As the ultimate camouflage, it represents fluidity, chaos, invisible mystery – water drowns Dahoun, but it is also the medium of the creative artist, and large gulps of water sustain the desert traveller between wells. Lawrence fears the clarity of water while imitating its chameleonlike properties.

Of being the saviour of a whole race, of rescuing  
A whole people from tyranny. Those were the tender,  
obscene dreams of my childhood. (TEL 11)

He wishes to unveil mystery, to categorize and tame it:

I need tones of yellow space, and nothing  
in the spectrum is unknown to me.

I am the living center of your sight; I draw for you  
this thin and dangerous horizon. (TEL 32)

I have come to uncover the famous secrets  
of earth and water, air and fire.

I have come to explore and contain them all. (TEL 37)

Lawrence's puritanical fastidiousness reminds the reader of Hitler. To remain detached, logical, and controlled is the essence of remaining in power: "It is not good to love and honour/anything overmuch, as I have said" (*TEL* 41). Lawrence's obsession with cleanliness is a corollary of his misogyny; he considers naked women "expressionless" and cannot fathom what interest women hold for men.

Matter remains “unconquerable”, as does the heart with its “monstrous machinery”, much to Lawrence’s dismay. “Intimacy is shameful unless it’s perfect. I know that” (*TEL* 66). Unable to conquer water or earth, his interest is in the “conquest of the Air”, he is “awed by the intricacy of the Machine,/logical, masculine; there were no women in the Machine, in any Machine” (*TEL* 62). Throughout the poem cycle, Lawrence is haunted by a vision of his mother, whom he compares to “Mother Eve”:

a giant who stands  
three hundred feet tall;

if I raise myself to my full height

Then I can see her, green and powerful, gazing at me still.

(TEL 5)

Unable to assert control, to remain pure and sexless (“Inviolable is the word”), he is overwhelmed by his fear of darkness and matter: “to have a body/is a cruel joke” (TEL 46) since “part of me lusted after death” (TEL 17). He despises his father for having had sexual contact with his saint/whore mother:

I wanted to show him

the way back home, but the house had become a place

of thunder: it stared at us with square

unseeing eyes, and I never knew why

he went to her in the permanent, resounding dark. (TEL 6)

Against the darkness he will wage “a neat war”, begin “the whole business of organized/destruction”, and so he “straightened out the bodies of dead Turks,/placing them in rows to look better” (TEL 41). As a “soiled Outsider” (TEL 29), Lawrence craves the purity of total anonymity and annihilation, the stillness of stone. When he dies, he says “I kept my soul in prison,/For nowhere could it exist in safety, nowhere in the world” (TEL 61). Dreading to explore intuition and feeling, Lawrence launches savage attacks on the Turks only when the eclipsing moon is symbolically “blindfolded”, when all that is womanly is not watching him. He is destroyed by his inability to synthesize opposition, represented throughout the poem sequence as the left/female side. His idealism crushed into disillusionment, he admits that his “great dream” has ended and with “my right wrist recently broken,/[while] I write this sad, left-handed poem” (TEL 61). The great Lawrence of Arabia is defeated by dualism in MacEwen’s account of his downfall.

Like Lawrence, MacEwen deliberately chooses the status of an outsider, a foreigner in her own country -- except that her exclusion as a woman from the masculine realm of power suggests a double marginalization. One cannot imagine a woman leading a revolt in the desert in Lawrence's time, and yet imaginatively MacEwen places herself there. Not only does she step out of her place, but often out of time, envisioning a mythical past which embraces the future as well, achieving a kind of timelessness. As Adrienne Rich has pointed out, many women's works link mysticism, science fiction, fantasy, and revisionist mythology; poets are embracing a world view traditional to all these, which is inherently paradoxical because it embodies a state of intensely subjective nonexistence and undercuts the linear concept of time: "We find ourselves at once in prehistory and in science fiction" (Rich 1975:124).<sup>8</sup> In the poem "Do You Have the Time", the "falling bodies of gods and clockmakers" and the "errors of calendars and clocks" signify the destruction of efficiency and anthropomorphic time, and giving children watches on their birthdays is considered a barbarous practice. Time and space are revised to produce a new perception of eternity:

Love, move me, cast me furious through space;

Love, bend me to your time -

Test and revise me, I fear your face!

What is here, what is with me now

Is mine. (SM 13)

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<sup>8</sup> Several of the stories in *Noman* employ the bizarre and the fantastic to describe the cosmic significance of the ordinary, as in the fluorescent tennis balls in *Tennis at Midnight* which "sploked through space". The science fiction quality of some of her work, particularly in *Noman*, aligns it with several contemporary feminist utopian visions. Margaret Atwood (in *The Handmaid's Tale*), Doris Lessing, Angela Carter, Denise Levertov, Susan Griffin, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, and Sally Miller Gearhart are but a few examples. Multiple timeframes produce a chaotic distortion of linearity in many of MacEwen's stories. Linear time is also undercut in MacEwen's second novel. The organizing principle of *King of Egypt, King of Dreams* is the hours of the (literally) dark night of the soul experienced by Akhenaton; the book is divided into the twelve hours of night, each of which is characterized by a specific ritual increasing the reader's sense of the king's doom (Waterston 76). What is most significant about MacEwen's use of time in structuring the novel is the symbolic weight and cosmic dimensions with which she endows actual time.

“First Song from the Fifth Earth”, which is inspired by one of the novels of Nikos Kazantzakis, levels time and place in an attempt to define the essence of memory itself:

I say all worlds, all times, all loves are one  
for we were there at the gathering of the waters  
when our unborn hours gathered wave on wave (*SM* 68)

All of life devises its own death, and exists along a continuum where the present unfolds itself eternally to the poet. Through dream, fantasy, and imagery the inner world is unveiled to the seeker who is haunted by a restless, hypnotic quest for the deeper meaning which transcends ordinary time.

*Afterworlds*, MacEwen’s final volume of verse before her untimely death, reiterates many of the same concerns voiced earlier, but there is a more poignant tone of loneliness and urgency to these poems. Perhaps the most moving of the muse poems is also a tribute to alchemy and the power of nature:

Your breath on my neck is the east wind,  
there are flakes of the sea, lovesalt on my thighs.  
we have lain since morning on this burnt beach  
as the sun, a gold beetle, crawls down the sky.

Your body is a crucible, an hourglass,  
a time capsule, vessel of sand and flame.

The night is molten rock; we wring  
the blood from stars, the blood from stone.  
Enter me, magus, reduce the world  
to fire, water, breath, gold bone. (*After* 111)

But it is the absence of the shadow-maker which the reader feels most keenly in these poems: "I am faithless to you, distant one./I lie with your blinding shadow, your/White mind" (*After* 108), she declares, as if making clear her ultimate commitment to her art, the empty white space signifying woman. MacEwen states that she can "accept this disturbed symmetry/This chaos which allows you to be" (*After* 25) She revels in anarchy, perpetual movement, while celebrating the clown, the misfit, and the daredevil who leaped to his death in a barrel over the falls -- figures who overturn our normal perceptions. The central section, "Apocalypse", is a dialogue between Rasmusen and the members of his search party as they seek the remains of the Franklin expedition. An imaginative piece of reconstructive history, it also charts the psychological journey of the men who discover their inner selves by abandoning reason as their sole guide:

A kind of meaning, even here

Even in this place.

Yes, yes,

We are men, we demand

That the world be logical, don't we?

But eight of your men went overland

and saw it, proved it,

Proved the waters found each other

as you said,

Saw the one flowing into the other,

Saw the conjunction, the synthesis

of faith, there

In the white metallic cold. (*After* 45)

In this final work, the body is the final authority, the vessel by which life and art are measured, and MacEwen concludes that

Poetry has got nothing to do with *poetry*.  
*Poetry* is how the air goes green before thunder,  
 is the sound you make when you come, and  
 why you live and how you bleed, and

The sound you make or don't make when you die. (*After* 35)

Beginning with *A Breakfast for Barbarians*, in which MacEwen says "Let's say No" to prescriptive philosophies, each volume heightens her sense of discovery as she dives beneath the surface of her consciousness, learning that life must be lived passionately and spontaneously. Life for her becomes an affirmation, similar to that voiced by Molly Bloom, and this is echoed in her work. "*Art is affirmation; to lift the pen is to say Yes!*" (*FE* 45), and what it affirms is the magic of the present moment:

If I see the connection I will die with laughter  
 I will tumble off the universe  
 At the very least I might make verse  
 With the fulsome laughter of the moment  
 Yes, at last! (*FE* 48)

Writing from the inside looking out, about being on the outside of culture looking in, allowed MacEwen a unique perspective from which to articulate one woman's positive holistic vision of female spiritual strength.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PHYLLIS WEBB

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to hurt him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

(Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112)

Of the three poets included in this study, Phyllis Webb is the only one to declare herself a feminist openly, and a poet disillusioned with androcentric systems of meaning. The body of Webb's poetry aptly illustrates the transition of a woman poet from god-centred reverence toward self-realization and freedom. Webb moves toward the gynocentric concept of rebirth, as a breaking free, into a new "sinister" wisdom, representing "holy fury" and knowledge, to borrow Mary Daly's terms.

Webb frequently and honestly confronts the issue of death. Moreover, she does so in a substantially different manner than male poets such as, for example, Al Purdy or Irving Layton. Webb envisions death as both a continuum of life, and as a sharp break from a past which has been constructed in patriarchal terms. Her vision of regeneration thus constitutes a breaking (a word which appears frequently in her verse) -- of bones, of glass, of ideas, of long lines, and of patriarchal traditions. Webb's poetic power is to end, to limit, to destroy -- to break -- and to acknowledge annihilation in the midst of life rather than as an end to life. The presence of terror in the face of mortality is not inseparable from our first experience of love; Webb seeks to invoke

and incorporate that power rather than flee its terrible manifestations. Hers is a voice of experience, bravely confronting the forces of life and death, the passing on of wisdom, and engaging in metaphysical speculation.

Phyllis Webb, as poet and woman, was dramatically influenced by the impact of feminism in the middle of her career, and her responses to aging, death, despair, and various related philosophical issues were subsequently altered, as reflected in her comments, poems, broadcasts, and essays. Facing the nihilism of existentialist philosophy taken to its logical extremes, contemplating suicide, and questioning the meaning of life led her through the death of an old way of thinking and toward her rebirth as a more positive, hopeful poet. Her waning interest in social politics -- in 1949, Webb was the youngest candidate for the CCF party -- was compensated for by an interest in spiritual politics. Her first attraction was to Buddhism, the influence of which may be felt in the sparse style of *Naked Poems* in particular, but eventually Webb abandoned Buddhism because "I really believed in conflict and suffering for growth.... I was too much of a materialist - the rational, socialist world brought me back.... It's an attitude of transcendence and trying to rise above." (Wachtel 11)

"Sitting", a poem from her 1962 volume *The Sea is also a Garden*, suggests the impossibility of reconciling ascetic values and humanness:

The degree of nothingness  
is important:  
to sit empty  
in the sun  
receiving fire  
that is the way  
to mend  
an extraordinary world,

sitting perfectly  
 still  
 and only  
 remotely human. (*VT 52*)

Once she left behind Buddhism and any notion of a transcendent truth, Webb severed all attachment to organized religion:

My antagonism toward conventional religions of all kinds is focused on the patriarchal structure. I don't want to become more involved with that, thank you. I want to become less involved. (Wachtel 13)

Webb next shifted her allegiance to feminism, which seems to have replaced religion for her; she states that she was "intuitively" a feminist as early as the 1950's:

But I never questioned the patriarchal order when I was at the beginning of my writing life. I was surrounded by all these super-brilliant men and they allowed me in. It didn't feel sexist at the time. But now when I look back on the way that the history of Canadian literature has been written, it's been documented mainly by Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith themselves and they have created their own little history.... I lost my father through divorce at any early age so I gravitated to men, to fatherly figures.  
 (Wachtel 13-14)

The reader of Webb's poetry sees her gradually shedding her privileged position in the patriarchal world, needing the approval of fatherly figures less and less. The move away from fatherly literary figures is paralleled by Webb's loss of interest in God the Father.

In evaluating Webb's development in her nine volumes of verse, what we witness is the death of the self-censoring, self-destructive patriarchal poet and the regeneration of a poet whose primary concern is woman's relationship to that patriarchy, to form, to language, to time and to

space. Webb transforms the silence of suicide and despair into the life-affirming action of creative writing, the energy of the engaged woman poet rather than one who withdraws. In this regard, she reinvents religion according to her feminist principles. Her courageous and unrelenting self-scrutiny in the face of enormous critical rejection strikes me as audacious and remarkable for its ruthless honesty -- of the sort one associates with one in the prime of her life, unmindful of the need to conform. Having confronted death and survived, Webb offers an alternate view of woman as mystic seer, a prophecy of the possibilities open to women who can achieve authentic autonomy.

One recurring figure in Webb's work is the aging woman. The older woman is presented negatively, or as a non-entity, in our society. Webb portrays her sympathetically in a poem called "Old Woman":

Her skin has dried and wrinkled  
like a continent,  
like a continent  
without motion and only one season  
where everything is repeated that has been said.

Her heart has dried and shrivelled  
into a small ruin,  
into a small ruin  
her life crumbles, and only one cause-  
people dying everywhere, repeating her dread.

Her hands have dried and withered  
into white claws,

into white claws  
 with nothing to clutch, only her fear  
 that sleeps at her throat like her ghostly beloved.

Her eyes have failed as life failed      *seeing not seeing*  
 like dying stars,  
 like dying stars  
 her night darkens and only refers  
 her dyingness to darkness and a hard god. (*EYRE* 46)

In the final line, Webb makes it clear that patriarchal religion is particularly harsh upon the elderly woman. Compared to male archetypes of wisdom, she is often portrayed as asexual, spiteful, inactive, unhealthy. Ridiculed for concealing her age, she is offered no rewarding role should she acknowledge her advancing years. Yet crosscultural images suggest more positive stereotypes of aging women; in horticultural and hunting and gathering cultures, the elder woman is frequently invested with supernatural powers, often becoming a healer, shaman, clairvoyant, or medicine woman whose powers increase after menopause (Friedl 1975). Proceeding from the arid wasteland of her despair toward the play of light on water, Webb's poetry develops an increasingly positive, woman-centered vision for spiritual transformation.

I want to trace the development of this gynocentric vision as Webb's verse moves away from the life-denying philosophy she once embraced, challenging her previously-held spiritual and aesthetic beliefs. Webb's poetic roots are in an androcentric system of meaning; in several interviews, she has acknowledged the influence of male mentors like F.R. Scott, and even her latest volume of verse is dedicated to him, among others. *Wilson's Bowl* (1980) is prefaced with an apology that all of the portraits, except one, contained within are male. "They signify the domination of a male power culture in my educational and emotional formation so overpowering

that I have, up to now, been denied access to inspiration from the female figures of my intellectual life, my heart, my imagination" ("Foreward", *WB*). One might add to this "my spirit", for whether or not she articulates it, Webb's spiritual values were also profoundly alienated within the male power culture. She concludes the foreword with another apologia: that she has not written more about women, saying that "[t]he others -- the unwritten poems -- are the real 'poems of failure.'" Webb eventually uproots herself from the urban scene, moves back to the sea of her childhood, and focuses on female writers like Sappho, Dickinson, Atwood, Rich, and on new forms. But let us backtrack momentarily and examine the philosophical values which inform Webb's early writings.

The metaphor of religious renunciation chosen by Webb early in her career to describe her vocation of poet indicates how deeply Webb had internalized masculinist values in the 1950's. As a woman poet writing within a male tradition, who is forced to identify against herself with the mute object of poetry, Nature, the silent Other, she has no voice as a synthesizing, self-expressive ego. She is not her own subject. The denial of personality and identity, the acceptance of self-imposed exile and secrecy, the donning of the mask of self-effacement, were necessary strategies for a female trying to gain acceptance in a patriarchal literary tradition. It therefore seems consistent that she should adopt the persona of a cloistered nun in her first volume of poems, *Trio* -- a book which also includes the poems of Eli Mandel and Gael Turnbull. Much of the early poetry is devoted to giant figures like King Lear, Van Gogh, Andre Gide -- men who were obsessed with "the poet's curse" of existential angst and who viewed the phenomenal world as intolerable. In "Poet", Webb adopts a similar pose, describing her vocation in terms of sacrifice and debasement of the self:

I am promised

I have taken the veil

I have made my obeisances

I have walked on words of nails  
 to knock on silences  
 I have tokened the veil  
 to my face  
 mouth covered with symbol  
 I have punctured my fingernails  
 to fill one thimble  
 with blood for consecration  
 in a nunnery  
 I have found each station  
 of the cross and to each place  
 have verbs tossed free,  
 to compass the bitter male  
 in this changed chancellery  
 and I have paced four walls  
 for the word, and I have heard  
 curiously, I have heard the tallest of mouths  
 call down behind my veil  
 to limit or enlargen me  
 as I or it prevails. (*Trio* 32)

This poem likens acceptance of the (masculinist) poetic vocation to submission to rape: the victim/poet is a pale object punctured until she bleeds, swallowed by the “tallest of mouths” which is set to overcome her in a contest of wills, “as I or it prevails”. The competition is fierce; this is not a vocation chosen in the pursuit of pleasure. Woman is literally effaced in this poem (a striking contrast to Webb’s later command that God/Poetry “Turn my head./I want to see your face” in “A Question of Questions”). The reader is also struck by the passive tone (“I am

promised”), the lack of choice, the sense of powerlessness, resignation, and the conclusion that poetry is some form of punishment or exile whereby the woman poet is confined to a nunnery. One can observe Webb’s early affinity with the figure of the spinster, the wisewoman who is also a social outcast because she does not fit the patriarchal stereotype. The persona who emerges in these early poems resembles the trapped “madwoman in the attic” described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979). The speaker of these poems writes of an ensuing sense of claustrophobia, of enclosure within various confining structures: the grave, the hourglass, the walls of the nunnery, the prison cell, the chancellery, and -- most significant for a woman -- the veil. Yet the veil simultaneously permits her one freedom: the power to observe, to remain inscrutable and protected from unsolicited gazing. Ultimately it allows her to play a subversive role. The veil is also an interesting metaphor because of its oblique reference to the veil of Isis/Ishtar, a figure who gains prominence in Webb’s most recent work.

Initially her privileged position as an acolyte in the male religion of poetry satisfies her, but gradually she finds her situation untenable and schizophrenic. She can no longer maintain the public illusion of wholeness, while remaining shattered as private individual. Repeatedly in these verses Webb contrasts appearance with reality, suggesting that truth is hidden beneath layers of camouflage, that the gap between desire and truth is enormous. Her public self is of necessity male, and in the following poem she again likens poetic inspiration to rape by a sky-god:

I

On the apparent corner of two streets  
 a strange man shook  
 a blue cape above my head,  
 I saw it as the shaking sky  
 and was forthwith ravished.

## II

A man bent to light a cigarette.

This was in the park

and I was passing through.

With what succinct ease he joins

himself to flame!

I passed by silently noting

how clear were the colours of pigeons

and how mysterious the animation of children

playing in trees.

[...]

The public and the person are inevitably

one and the same self.

And the self is a grave

music will not mould

nor grief destroy;

yet this does not make refusal

somehow... somehow...

shapes fall in a torrent of design

and over the violent space

assume a convention. (*EYRE* 22-3)

Webb echoes Donne's beseeching of his deity/muse, whose inspiration will desert the poet "except you ravish me". But the implications of ravishment for a woman poet are more onerous in this case; one hardly imagines a gentle seduction by god or muse in Webb's poem. The final horror lies in the suggestion that a woman poet perceives her power to be derived from some source

external to herself. In this volume, Webb makes it clear that even love cannot allay the pessimism of living in such a fragile world where there is no stable sense of self:

Oh, my darling tell me, what can love mean in such a world,  
and what can we or any lovers hold in this immensity  
Of hate and broken things? (EYRE 28)

Knowing everything is wrong,  
how can we go on giving birth  
either to poems or the troublesome lie,  
to children, most of all, who sense  
the stress in our distracted wonder  
the instant of their entry with their cry? (EYRE 36)

The precariousness of the nun's disguise and the fear that her spying will lead to discovery, lend a threatening, anxious tone to these poems. All of the violence and despair is turned inward. Caught in a web of powerlessness, subterfuge, and silence, the poet is free to observe but not to participate. The result is a despairing, disjointed view of the self, low self-esteem, a feeling of being buried alive. The power merely to observe is no longer sufficient:

The eye's lid covers  
the I aware,  
the hand hovers  
over, then plunders  
emerging despair.

Here is our overture then  
whose prayers of defeat are sown -

inheritance, bright with death  
spangled with bone. (*EYRE* 55)

The final startling image recalls Donne's "bracelet of bright hair about the bone"; many of these early poems are characterized by echoes of the metaphysical poets. What is remarkable about them is the paucity of bodily images, of the flesh as a positive life force, relative to Webb's later verse. Much of the early poetry focuses on skeletal images, a point observed by Helen Sonthoff, who remarks that for Webb "[b]one is harder than flesh, and deeper; it can be fractured and is, finally, dust; it is shaped and shaping, rigid and jointed; it is the skeleton which glistens with death and it is the structure of our living" (18). Webb makes an uneasy truce with bones, accepts their necessity, and is constantly aware of the skeleton structuring and occupying the flesh; bones suggest inherited weight in poems like "A Pardon to my Bones". But there is an underlying sense of resignation and futility about what the bones impute to the speaker's life: a sense of being ignored, misused, despised (Sonthoff 20). Living with the bones which shape and define her requires acknowledging the ambivalent co-existence of life and death, a reconciliation of opposing instincts which does not come easily to Webb at this stage in her writing, particularly since the bones (like the repeated glass images) represent the fragility of existence, an "inheritance, bright with death", an infrastructure not of her choosing. The reader has a sense that these are overworked poems; again the contrast with her later spontaneity and playfulness makes this evident. The awareness of the physical produces an instinct to retreat, to withdraw from the world. Yet Frank Davey, among other critics, is wrong in assessing this phase of Webb's writing as detached; it is typical of our materialistic culture to refer to contemplation as disengagement or introversion. Consistently contemplative, thoughtful, painfully self-conscious are more accurate phrases to describe Webb's early poetry.

Characteristic of the poems in Webb's first two volumes *Trio* and *Even Your Right Eye* is the recurring attitude of defeat, despair, and alienation which she expresses as pain, grief, and

spiritual anguish. One might read these two works as her “dark night of the soul”. Time is artificial, like the falling hourglass in “The Second Hand”, where “whether we love or not/ involves the clock and its ignorant hands” (*EYRE* 59). The poet would free herself from “the armourial night” in “Earth Descending” by evading the orbit of the sun and “the rest/ of the nocturnal floral pattern” from

old Electra  
(and even Oedipus)  
who have always hovered  
and in all and every emergency  
lowered the lid over the eye and me  
covered with night. (*EYRE* 62)

| up closed

One interpretive strategy would be to read these poems as gestures articulating the pain felt at being marginalized as a woman poet -- at putting a lid on the eye/I -- gestures which made Webb an object of scorn among several critics who gave her what she refers to as “critical wounds” (*WB* 9).

Here it may be useful to examine the phallogocentric assumptions which provoked such wounding. Jean Mallinson (1978) offers an insightful analysis of the misogyny behind one critic's comments; she chastizes John Bentley Mays for his attack on Webb (for which Mays, in retaliation, accused Mallinson of “disembodied intellectualism” -- a revealing comment about female critics who do not “put out” what is expected of them). Mays attacks Webb in *Open Letter* in 1973 for being nihilistic and for her failure, in his terms, to accept her body and sensual experience, referring to her poetry as “testimony, as a woman and a writer, of decisive, unmitigated failure” (12). His misogyny is apparent in his assumption that Webb directly translates experience into poetry. While I would challenge the notion that the poet and the persona are *always* separate, Mays's attack is focused more on the woman than the poet (in fact, more towards himself

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than anyone, as Mallinson's article reveals). What Mays accuses Webb of is a lack of virility, of not being a man. Since she cannot accept her feminine sensuality, having intruded on male territory, she might at least behave heroically. Instead she is merely a

poet whose whole desire goes out, finally, to the barbarian silence and lithic insensibility of things; whose poetry does not "mature", but merely changes as her tactics of self-destruction vary; whose work is as vain, sectarian, as without acme or distinction, as distorted by her lusts, and as inconclusive as any in the recent career of literary modernism.... if only she had given us one monumental poem, or had she loved or hated heroically, or shown evidence of courage toward one besetting sin, charity, let alone intelligence, would compel a reversal of verdict. (11-12)

It is critical to see [the poems as]... cries of pain camping as ideas, gasps of air too desperate for metaphor... against all reasonable expectation of what poetry can be expected to do. This unreasonableness...is that mental characteristic to which we can ascribe the melodramatic hollowness and overwrought stageyness of her poems.

Such writing is a symptom of unhealth. (13-14)

Lack. Unhealth. Distorted by lusts. Unheroic. Unreasonable. The doctor pronounces the old crone unfit. Mays's judgements are uncritically reiterated by Frank Davey in his influential survey of Canadian writers called *A Guide to English-Canadian Literature since 1960*:

As John Mays has argued, Phyllis Webb's work is vain, private and inconclusive. It aspires not to greatness but to the simple recording of its own small melodramas and failures.... Its voice seeks to become amoral and amaterial... (Davey 262).

Yet both Mays and Davey congratulate Webb for possessing a spiritual vision which seeks “purification of the soul by the abasement of the body” (Davey 262). Even John Hulcoop, Webb’s greatest critical advocate and editor of her first *Selected Poems* (1954-1965), affirms the view of her verse as self-indulgent solipsism and exhibitionism, whereby Webb is “making parade of her personal problems” (Hulcoop, “Introduction” 20). George Woodcock writes that Webb seems reluctant to publish, that her work is marked by its “scantiness”, and that she is driven by “philosophic pessimism”, writing about “small, simple” matters, and that her work is “honed down to an extraordinary intellectual sparseness” -- an equivocal compliment at best (Woodcock 1970). A dried-up, withered spinster, a bag of bones. To be ignored, relegated to the margins of the masterful discourse.

All of these critical terms, taken out of their pejorative context, qualify Webb as a feminist poet; for the very reasons she is rejected by mainstream critics, she may be celebrated as a poet of the feminist voice. I would expand the definition of feminist here to suggest that such descriptions also mark Webb as a spiritual poet, precisely because she turns her back on despair and redefines spirituality on her own terms. Concurring with Frank Davey’s description of her in *From Here to There* as a writer who “surrenders everything to the flesh”, Webb states that she nonetheless “vehemently” disagrees with his assessment of her as a “post-modern goddess of doom and gloom”, which she says is overdone:

Sometimes it’s quite funny, in fact. Sometimes there are some poems that have little jokes in them... I certainly was a very desolate poet for a long time, but it was a reflection of how I perceived the world. (Fitzgerald 19)

How she perceived the world was, in a word, male. And her perception is accurate. When men write about despair, they are considered great existential poets, courageously confronting the void of modernist angst and alienation. When women write of despair, they are being melodramatic, bitchy, hysterical, vain, eschewing greatness because they dwell on small matters. Stay in your

place. Go back to personifying beautiful Nature so that we can look at you, define you. Or at least be quiet. Don't let yourself go.

But letting herself go is precisely what Webb sets about: she lets go of the despair and the silence which constrain her, and all the walls come tumbling down like Jericho. The beginnings of this sense of liberation are evident in *Even Your Right Eye*. To return to "Earth Descending" for a moment, we note a literal breaking free in the stanza which follows that describing the veiled eye/I. The poet asserts her own presence, that of "this earthly eye/(it is I)/ rowing wildly away/from some universal dock". This is a declaration of her subjectivity, of an identification with nature, time, and mortality, away from the stereotype of the "universal" transcendent artist who praises immortality. Earth becomes more real than heaven for Webb, subject rather than object of the quest. Female autonomy is valued over conformity with an alien tradition of literary forefathers, while she remains as yet uncertain how to express this new vision.

To forge a new tradition which is her own requires inordinate trust, skill, strength and patience; what she refers to as "lucid cargo" -- the painful burdens of the past -- must be let go.

Patience is the wideness of the night  
 the simple pain of stars  
 the muffled explosion of velvet  
 it moves itself generally  
 through particulars  
 accepts the telling of time  
 without day's relativity. (EYRE 30)

She longs for a different time frame, "the slow beat of slanting eyes/down the heart's years". (The "slanting eyes" (I's) recalls Emily Dickinson's admonition that the poet "tell it slant"; Dickinson is a poet much admired by Webb.) Significantly, it is in descending like Demeter to an interior green world that the speaker finds the patience to endure: "patience is love withdrawn/into the

well; immersion into a deep place where green begins.” The emphasis now shifts from enclosed to open spaces, as Webb retreats into the green world of innocence and spiritual growth, a turning away from defeat. The search for the inner I/eye is intensified in *Even Your Right Eye*, where Webb’s loss of faith in the traditional ordering of time is acute. Her commitment to forge ahead is accompanied by the assertion that she can now leave the “lucid cargo” safely behind, that its importance will gradually diminish in her search for self-realization, a sentiment echoed in her choice of an epigraph from C.S. Lewis:

You cannot take all luggage with you on all journeys;  
on one journey even your right hand and your right eye  
may be among the things you have to leave behind.

As it is maleness that is generally associated with the right side (of the brain, of the political spectrum -- right means political conservative, establishment, correctness), Webb’s decision to make the right eye “among the things you have to leave behind” signals her radical and painful choice to sound the unknown depths of her femaleness, to begin a new, left-sided journey within. The epigraph is also a reference to F.R. Scott, Webb’s early mentor and confidante, who had one glass eye; the Cyclopean eye of this particular guru haunted much of Webb’s early career, for it was Scott who assured her that she was indeed a poet. For Webb, part of the poetic process involved shedding just such influences and mentor figures.

One of her essays on the creative process describes the writing of poetry as a stripping down to reach the core, “as if the poem contains layers of earlier incarnations hidden within it” (*Talking* 60). This process also involves the historical excavation of feminist sources, as Webb turns now to women writers for inspiration. The metaphor of stripping down to the essential core is at the center of two poems in particular, which are worth considering because they illustrate Webb’s development as a feminist poet. The earlier one is called “Poet”. At the heart of new growth in

this poem is the difficult kernel, “the bitter male”, who is later replaced with the seed of emergent selfhood:

Sprouts the bitter grain in my heart,  
 green and fervent it grows as all  
 this lush summer rises in heats about me    (*EYRE* 19)

The image of the seed is also central to “Double Entendre”; this time it is associated with hope in the figure of a pregnant woman. The pomegranate belongs traditionally to Persephone, who carried it with her into Hades; it represents the link with her mother Demeter.

The seed white  
           beneath the flesh  
                 red and diamonded  
                 under the skin  
                 rough, round

of the round pomegranate  
                 hopes in essential shape  
                 for a constellation of fruit

just as the pregnant woman  
                 in the street  
                 carrying her three-year old son

is one and entire  
                 the tribe of women  
                 weighed down by the race of man -

always to be renewed,

for the man killed

by the Temple clock when it fell

told me time had not stopped -

or only for him

though I saw

in this unflattering

accidental

irony

that he had indeed come

to a timely end

within the courtyards of the English

Courts of Law. (*EYRE* 49-50)

Like the child within the woman and the one without, the seed within the fruit is embedded in its flesh, in roundness, in continuity. The pomegranate must be destroyed to release the seed; life must flow into death in order to be renewed. This cyclical process of metamorphosis is starkly contrasted to the masculinist concept of time, death, and justice, where man is destroyed by his own “unflattering” and ironic image of time.

Besides the traditional concept of time, Webb also contrasts the male version of spiritual ecstasy with her own in one of her best-known poems, “Marvell’s Garden”. Marvell is portrayed

as one who escapes suffering by retreating into art, a journey likened to the ascent toward the paradise of which fallen man has been dispossessed. At first she is in awe of him;

But then I saw his luminous plumed Wings  
 prepared for flight,  
 and then I heard him singing glory  
 in a green tree,  
 and then I caught the vest he'd laid aside  
 all blest with fire. (*EYRE* 17)

Marvell's vision of heaven, and of eternity, is in accordance with the patriarchal myth of otherworldly escape from the toils of earthly existence; it represents seclusion, escape, freedom, exclusivity. In his poem, the poet finds refuge in a static pastoral haven that excludes the presence of women, where "[n]o white nor red was ever seen"; the colours associated with female beauty in Marvell's time are marked by their absence. It is the pervasive, orderly masculinity of his paradise that affords him peace of mind:

Such was that happy garden-state,  
 While man there walked without a mate:  
 After a place so pure and sweet,  
 What other help could yet be meet?  
 [...]  
 Two paradises 'twere in one  
 To live in paradise alone.

The same masculinity strikes Webb as oppressive. She declines Marvell's invitation to his "arcane solitude" because it requires "leaving brothers, lovers, Christ/outside my walls/where they wept without/and I within" (*EYRE* 17). She refers to "his garden [as] a kind of attitude/struck out of an earth too carefully attended" (*EYRE* 16). This line is interesting because it contrasts Webb's desire for simplicity, for community, and her yearning to shun the artifice of overly-refined

cultivated gardens, with Marvell's abstractions ("he did care more for the form/of things than for the thing itself") and his isolation. Webb's poem addresses the absences declared by Marvell, and she suggests by the phrase "struck out of an earth" a type of violence against the earth itself. She can neither sanction his exclusive "ecstasy" nor its isolated sense of enclosure ("his garden closed in on Paradise"). Having been traditionally confined to the earth, women do not have the same kind of relationship with paradise as do men. As women have never possessed paradise, they cannot be dispossessed. Men and women have a different heaven and earth, and the speaker longs for some recognition of the real earth, of women, in the patriarchal myth. To describe her longing, Webb employs a metaphor which simultaneously tears asunder and heals (breaks and makes), recalling the pain of childbirth, or a geologic rending of the earth, or the shudder of orgasm, demarcating two separate gendered realms: "Oh, I have wept for some new convulsion/to tear together this world and his" (*EYRE* 17). "Lament" also echoes this sense of alienation, the knowledge that separate spheres are inadequate, as Webb seems to address women in particular:

Knowing that everything is wrong  
 how can we go on giving birth  
 either to poems or the troublesome lie,  
 to children, most of all, who sense  
 the stress in our distracted wonder  
 the instant of their entry with their cry?

For every building in this world  
 receives our benediction of disease.  
 Knowing that everything is wrong  
 means only that we all know where we're going.

But I, how can I, I,  
 craving the resolution of my earth  
 take up my little gang of sweet pretence  
 and saunter day-dreary down the alleys, or pursue  
 the half-disastrous night? Where is that virtue  
 I would claim with tense impersonal unworth,  
 where does it dwell, that virtuous land  
 where one can die without a second birth? (*EYRE* 36)

“Poetics Against the Angel of Death”, Webb chastizes another literary giant for his arrogance, presumption and elitism. Of Wordsworth’s “Prelude”, she writes that it

suddenly made sense - I mean the measure,  
 the elevated tone, the attitude  
 of private Man speaking to public men (*SP* 58)

Again it is man’s elevated “attitude” which she criticizes, the androcentric assumptions about man’s rightful place, about his past, about death and immortality. The poem is interesting in its evasion of metric regularity; it lapses into iambic pentameter at the mere mention of Wordsworth’s name, while the subsequent short lines “run ragged” to compensate before collapsing or “dying” into a final affirmative run-on line, as if in imitation of the male sexual climax. This poem marks Webb’s commitment to a gynolatric form. Lambasting the posturing behind “The Great Iambic Pentameter” which Wordsworth and other “great” poets have relied on, she speaks instead of her desire to die -- not to reign immortal -- “writing Haiku/or, better,/long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!” The affirmative, ecstatic “Yes!” recalls Molly Bloom’s final triumph; like Molly, Webb gets the last word. Webb identifies the long line with phallic aggression: “It comes from assurance (or hysteria), high tide, full moon, open mouth, big-mouthed Whitman, yawp, yawp, & Ginsberg - howling. Male” (*Talking* 68). Like Virginia

Woolf, who strove to demarcate “a woman’s sentence”<sup>1</sup> Webb seeks a female form, a female voice which will enable her to move beyond the long lines, the elevated stance, the oppressive boundaries of the nun’s walls, the man’s garden, the glass clocks and the lonely towers. Her imagery from this volume onward dwells less on enclosures and more on openness and open spaces. Once towers are toppled, there is a gap, a hole, a free space (depicted as a bowl in *Wilson’s Bowl*) to replace the structures which have been destroyed.

“The Effigy” signals a breaking with patriarchal concepts of time and space as the speaker re-enacts the crucifixion (the description is remarkably like MacEwen’s passage describing the hanging of Julian the Magician):

I hoisted him up to the tree  
 on the ropes of my anger,  
 by the loops of my longing  
 I hooked him onto a branch.  
 Like a self-righteous lyncher  
 I had stuffed him with hatred and visions,  
 but he swayed thin as the skin on a skeleton  
 in the polluted breeze.  
 Effigy of a flourishing effigy,  
 judicial pendulum on a time-eating tree,  
 he was the grandfather of grandfather clocks  
 and he clicked and clocked out of me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, in a review of Dorothy Richardson’s *Revolving Lights* (19 May 1923), reprinted in *Contemporary Writers* (London: Hogarth, 1965):124. See also *A Room of One’s Own* (1928; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963):77.

He was the city whose buildings leered down at me.

He was the vulgar hats of its women.

He was the pale taste of a school of Sunday painters  
and the politics even I could not reform.

[....]

He was the given being not quite broken, not quite whole.

He was the No beyond negation. No! (SP 55)

The forceful “No!” here is a striking contrast to the affirmative “Yes!” which signals the creation of a new line length; the speaker’s negation is a protest against male politics, a breaking of silence, a voice defying the negativity which “clicked and clocked [the life] out of me.” In this poem, Webb attacks the same issues we have seen criticized by both MacEwen and Wilkinson: androcentric arrogance (symbolized by vertical images), time, urban decay; as well, she voices her anger and her desire for change (“the loops of my longing”). Webb’s contempt for externally imposed symbols of the absolute leads her to look within herself for satisfaction of her needs.

Webb’s self-scrutiny leads her toward a new understanding of death. “For Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide”, one of the central poems in *The Sea Is Also a Garden* (1962), links her with other female “contemplative” artists like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Diane Arbus. “I began being suicidal in my early teens”, Webb discloses (Wachtel 9). Although Webb’s poem was written two years later, it invites comparison with Anne Sexton’s 1964 poem “Wanting to Die”. Echoing Sexton, Webb sees suicide as a potentially liberating, defiant, creative act: “It’s still a good idea”, she begins. It is her awareness of mortality which inspires the quirky humour of the poem. The first section is a detached, aesthetic defence of suicide as an intellectual response to despair; the second is theatrical, mock melodrama. But the third section marks a sharp transgression of traditional authority, of Kirkegaard’s “sickness unto

death". The "we" suggests unified resistance to the "oversky" gods who are reduced to subhumans or distant stars:

.... we, my friends,  
 who have considered suicide take our daily walk  
 with death and are not lonely.  
 In the end it brings more honesty and care  
 than all the democratic parliament of tricks.  
 It is the "sickness unto death"; it is death;  
 it is not death; it is the sand from the beaches  
 of a hundred civilizations, the sand in the teeth  
 of death and barnacles our singing tongue:  
 and this is "life" and we owe at least this much  
 contemplation to our Western fact: to Rise,  
 Decline, Fall, to futility and larks,  
 to the bright crustaceans  
 of the oversky. (VT 54)

The use of "barnacles" as a verb suggests stasis, the active silencing of women's tongues (contrast this with the celebration of new tongues in *Water and Light*, or the exclamation "Let my tongue hang out/to remember the thirst for life" in *Wilson's Bowl*). The conclusion is mock heroic, defiant in its difference. To break silence, to let the patriarchal myth of female compliance die, is a holy affirmation of the destructive chaos from which a new ethos can emerge.

Of interest too in this volume is Webb's shift away from the exclusively intellectual, and a new emphasis on sensory experience as the key to truth. Her celebration of the five senses in "The Glass Castle" recalls Wilkinson's benediction of the "five kingdoms of my senses":

The glass castle is my image for the mind  
 that if outmoded has its public beauty.  
 It can contain both talisman and leaf,  
 and private action, homely disbelief.  
 And I have lived there as you must  
 and scratched with diamond and gathered diamond dust,  
 have signed the castle's tense and fragile glass  
 and heard the antique whores and stone Cassandras  
 call me, and I answered in the one voice I knew,  
 "I am here. I do not know..."  
 but moved the symbols and polished up the view.  
 For who can refrain from action -  
 there is always a princely kiss for the Sleeping Beauty -  
 when even to put out the light takes a steady hand,  
 for the reward of darkness in a glass castle  
 is starry and full of glory.  
  
 I do not mean I shall not crack the pane.  
 I merely make a statement, judicious and polite,  
 that in this poise of crystal space  
 I balance and I claim the five gods of reality  
 to bless and keep me sane. (VT 50)

Again the vertical symbol of the Ivory Tower is toppled, the glass with its illusion of transparent truth is cracked, and the stasis of patriarchal privilege is exchanged for the reality of the five senses, the balance of mind and body, and of action. The speaker requests that her perspective

no longer be marginalized. She requests that the male preserve, which enshrines the intellect, open up a space, make room for the flesh, the senses.

"Making room" becomes an important theme in her later volume, *Naked Poems*. In the sixties, Webb concentrates on the construction of a different, female voice, and of a variety of evolving forms more suited to the expression of female autonomy. She emphasizes the purity and simplicity of the lines, the "knotted bamboo" like knotted veins linking each female utterance or syllabic gasp in a chain. The declared female intimacy of the syllabic line is a marked departure from Wordsworth's elevated public stance. While previously, the break from traditional concepts of time and space involved for Webb "a slow, terrible movement of scars" (*EYRE* 28), the third volume speaks of nakedness, openness -- themes developed even further in *Naked Poems*. The poet here is a "Mad Gardener to the sea" and, like the "moon/rages across the sky to tend/oceans of an unloving dark" (*VT* 43).<sup>2</sup> A different, subterranean garden is imagined in contrast to the ethereal domain of Marvell, one which is "beyond all Paradise, all Arden/[as] moon multiplies the garden" (*VT* 43). It is a watery womb governed by the moon but it still embraces man as "man dreameth ever back to water - *l'homme inconnu et solitaire*" (*VT* 43). Instead of the lonely, divided artist contemplating his despair, we have "the hand sketching in the air/a half-moon, its hidden wholeness there" (*VT* 44). Webb sees that "breaking is a destructive element" but that it gives ways to "making" eventually. "Breaking" portrays Webb's disillusionment with androcentric thought, a loss of faith in God the natural corollary. The male construct of God is intangible, too remote for solace:

Give us wholeness, for we are broken.

But who are we asking, and why do we ask?

---

<sup>2</sup> The moon is a powerful symbol for Webb. As she writes in "Earth Descending", "I am free from the sun's orbit/and morbid regulated glances daily". In her later verse, the moon is associated with female power, and its supremacy over the sun becomes thematically important.

Destructive element heaves close to home,  
our years of work broken against a breakwater.

Shattered gods, self-iconoclasts,  
it is with Lazarus unattended we belong  
(the fall of the sparrow is unbroken song).  
The crucifix has clattered to the ground,  
the living Christ has spent a year in Paris,  
travelled on the Metro, fallen on the Seine.  
We would not raise our silly gods again.  
Stigmata sting, they suddenly appear  
on every blessed person everywhere.  
If there is agitation, there is cause. (VT 46)

Again Webb expresses disdain for vertical metaphors like the cross or the “raised gods” which symbolize man’s ascendancy. Recognizing destruction as an integral part of rebirth, she envisions instead a pattern of circular growth which necessitates death: “What are we whole or beautiful or good for/but to be absolutely broken?” There is an ongoing battle to break free of restrictive traditions or patterns, to re-make, to imagine, to create an “excellent despair” out of which insight will emerge. As Webb comments in an interview, “Being useful sometimes means being subversive” (*Poetry in Canada Review* 8, no author). “Making” replaces metaphors of walled-in space with the modern feminist trope of the collective quiltmaking process:

Quilted  
patches, unlike the smooth silk loveliness  
of the bought,

this made-ness out of self-madeness  
 thrown across their bones to keep them warm.

#### Making

under the patches a smooth silk loveliness  
 of parts:  
 two bodies are better than one for this quilting,  
 throwing into the dark a this-ness that was not.  
 It does.

#### Fragments

of the splintered irrelevance of doubt, sharp  
 hopes, spear and slice into a nice consistency as once  
 under the pen, the brush, the sculptor's hand  
 music was made, arises now, blossoms on fruit-tree bough.  
 It does. (*SP 44*)

Poetry is not merely self-expression, but hard work for women, an “exegesis of the will”, which is “making the intolerable, accidental sky/patch up its fugitive ecstasies” (*SP 44*). The poet must reconstruct the sacred from the fragments left by “intolerable” sky gods, create a myth which resonates with subjective experience. Her purpose is to form a patchwork quilt out of disparate details, “madness out of self-madness” which will warm the “mild unblestness of day”(*SP 44*). This privileging of piecework, of “making” of the self out of the fragments of experience, may be read as critical of the dualism prevalent in patriarchal perception because it is plurivocal, encompassing multiple perspectives.

*Naked Poems* (1965) marks Webb's snail-like retreat into her self -- not into despair or self-effacement as previously -- but into the "excellent despair" that heralds her re-emergence as a reborn, unbroken woman and poet. In this volume, woman reclaims the space denied her in a patriarchal *mythos*, and her destructive wrath gives birth to a new vision. Desire replaces despair as deceptions are identified and vocalized. The reader notes a new belief in experience, chaos, and fragmentary truth, an increasing distrust of the "wholeness" forced by a reliance on the intellect and order. Webb no longer seeks patriarchal approval, nor is she willing to comply in her own self-destruction. The central preoccupations of her verse become the construction of the female poet and the location of female sexuality and subjectivity. Now wholly herself, completely stripped of excess baggage, of protective male language and male garments, she is engaged in the *process* of "trying to write a poem" rather than focussing merely on the end product, or the need for sanctioned inclusion in the academy of male poets.

The form of the sapphic haiku fulfills Webb's need to let go of the illusions of containment, control, unity, enhances the earlier-stated desire for a new form to express new thoughts. The interconnected haiku create intense, sharp lyric moments -- what Webb calls "suites" -- which are organized in a linked pattern to form a narrative which is deliberately repetitive, and imagistically evocative through accretion. Webb defines this as her attempt to come to terms with

phrasing... the measure of the breath... to clarify my statements so that I could see what my basic rhythms were; how I *really* speak, how my feelings come out on the page.... [I was trying] to get away from a dramatic rhythm, from a kind of dramatic structure... so that they are very bare, very simple. (*Talking* 46-7)

Webb still seeks the bare bones of existence, trying to distill experience; it is not until she discovers the form of the anti-ghazals, where she refuses to simplify, that Webb indulges in a rich and chaotic collection of personally significant detail. In these naked poems, however, silence is

transformed into something powerful, rather than annihilating, celebrated as a period of waiting and discovery. The poems may be read as a reaction to the grandiose display of androcentric presumption about knowledge, enshrined in the works of poets like Rilke and Eliot, whom they address. They are therefore deliberately small, personal, and focussed, a way of asserting identity: “doubled up I feel/small like these .poems/ the area of attack/is diminished” (“Some final questions”, *NP*). “[D]oubled up” suggests the sharing of identity between women rather than the Romantic myth of the individual ego. It also states women’s doubled subjectivity. The vision of love, of spiritual truth, is expanded in the poems to include not just one but other women as well. The language here is spare, minimalist, naked. Each poem depends for its meaning on a shifting movement, a sinuous exploration of unknown, mysterious realms. Language, like love, is slippery, deluding, constantly shifting in meaning, as in the title of one of the suites: “Suite of Lies”. With the aid of her lover, the speaker can protest against women being reduced to absence and instead create a space for them:

walking in the dark  
 walking in the dark the presence of all  
 the absences we have known.            Oceans.  
 so we are distinguished to ourselves  
 don’t want that distinction.

Poetry becomes something fluid, actual, pictures and hieroglyphic symbols which will gradually unravel their many layers of meaning. The “silly gods” of “Breaking” are now supplanted by the goddess:

Hieratic sounds emerge  
 from the Priestess of  
 Motion

a new alphabet

grasps for air.

We disappear in the musk of her coming.

("Non Linear", *NP*)

This ecstasy is the cry of female orgasm, not the contained or climactic ecstasy sought by Marvell or Wordsworth. Even the line length suggests a coiling movement, compactness, flexibility; the word "Motion" arrives only after the eye travels to the next "syllabic" line, the letters only after a "breathing space" as one literally gasps for air. The breathiness captures a crisp, fresh quality in these lyrics -- not the inflated long line of masculine verse, but short syllables interrupted by "those gasps, those inarticulate dashes" of Emily Dickinson which Webb says she admires for being "subversive, Female" ("On the Line", *Talking* 69).<sup>3</sup> The poet listens for new sounds to reveal the difference, listening and anticipating and describing the process itself:

I am listening for

the turn of the tide

I imagine it will sound

an appalled sigh ("Non Linear", *NP*)

Awareness of the female self eclipses the presence of male authority and male text:

I hear the waves

hounding the window:

lord, they are the root waves

of the poem's meter

the waves of the

root poem's sex ("Non Linear", *NP*)

---

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Homans suggests Dickinson's deviousness in excluding herself by the use of poetic convention, that she "finds in languages's doubleness, paradoxically, a way around the hierarchizing dualism" which frustrated many other nineteenth-century poets (1980:166). She wrote that she was a nobody at the same time that Whitman proclaimed to be Everyman.

The subject/object tension necessary to the climax of the androcentric love lyric is dissolved, rendered irrelevant in the context of two women loving each other. Where, in the earlier poems, Webb's despondency about the potential of love dominates ("What can love mean in such a world?"), now lovemaking is equated with the making of poetry, with creating the female sex. The poems are written not just about the body, but by the body. A unified body of verse is likened to the unified bodies of women:

*You brought me clarity.*

*Gift after gift*

*I wear.*

*Poems, naked,*

*in the sunlight*

*on the floor. ("Suite II", NP)*

The body and the mind are linked but seek expression through the body: "It is a good mind/that can embody/perfection with exactitude." Each self-contained verse is itself embodied in the larger suite, like a series of Russian dolls. Read *en suite*, each verse overlaps and interconnects with the others, giving multiple layers of meaning. The same is true of the room which provides the setting for the suite: room denotes not only the four walls which contain the lovers, but also a room of one's own, a separate space:

It seems

I welcome you in

Your mouth blesses me

All over.

There is room. (“Suite I”, NP)

The room is also the body, the house of love, and it is the space each woman creates for the other, the room they make for love to grow, the space that opens up for the poem to exist. Typographically, the book poses several questions about space, about the way words are presented on the page, which literally opens up to afford more space for each small poem. The final section is presented as a series of terse questions and nebulous responses, occupying little space on the page and thereby highlighting silence, emptiness, negation, the abyss of the unexplored. The “Oh?” which stands alone on the final page returns us to omega, the question itself, the unending circle of which the suites are formed, and to the negation of language itself, its “zero” status, the body of words stripped naked. The lovers themselves also embody meaning and enlightenment:

*The sun comes through  
plum curtains.*

*I said  
the sun is gold*

*in your eyes*

*it isn't the sun  
you said. (“Suite II”, NP)*

The perspective shifts (“in your eyes”), and power is now equated with female desire. With shared sensual love, the women become inseparable (“While you were away/ I held you like this/in my mind”). There is no ascetic denial; although Webb emulates the Oriental penchant for simplicity which also fascinated T.S. Eliot, she mocks his elevation of the still point in *The Four Quartets* (“Who would call me to still centres/needs a lesson in desire.”). While the haiku is

generally associated with Buddhist *koans*, with detachment and dissolution of the self, in Webb's hands it becomes sensual, connective, a way towards discovering the flesh rather than escaping its demands. No fixed moment contains ultimate significance; rather, the body's fluidity, its natural rhythms and "hieratic sounds" are the kisses which are bestowed as "blessings", and the acts of love, the imagination, and of worship are the same. Movement and desire are typographically juxtaposed with stillness by parentheses and by alignment along an alternate margin (the voice of the marginalized):

the yellow chrysanthemums  
 a stillness  
 (I hide my head while I sleep)  
 in jade  
 (Your hand reaches out)  
 the chrysanthemums  
 are  
 (Job's moaning, is it, the dark?)  
 a whirlwind!  
 Eros! *Agapé Agapé*  
 ("Non Linear", *NP*)

Eros and agape are equated, even presented visually on the same line to demonstrate their equality. Yet their order is reversed: the detached stillness of *agape* usually belongs to the meditative tradition depicted in the first column, while *eros* is assigned to the physical world of the lovers. The redefined sacredness of bodily love is aptly illustrated by the "confusion" of the two forms of love, which Webb shows as inseparable. Darkness/matter is restored and sanctified; Job moans -- not in despair that the divine has deserted him, but in ecstasy. In the last suite, *Some Final Questions*, the interrogator asks "*What do you really want?*" and the response is

want the apple on the bough in  
 the hand in the mouth seed  
 planted in the brain want  
 to think "apple"

Eve wants knowledge of the flesh, to grow and to feel and to taste the apple in its natural environment, not separate from the bough of its context, but the flesh and the mind united.

However satisfying *Naked Poems* is as a breakthrough volume which breaks silence, Webb's stated desire to modify line lengths along women's demands remains problematic, if we define linear too literally. Only the typographical tricks of concrete poetry, the careful spacing on the page of the sparse *haiku*, can create the illusion that this poetry is genuinely non-linear. In her essay, "On the Line", Webb writes of the influence of Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (the very title of which links both poets to the crone) on her own writing. Webb discusses the "physics of the poem" and her desire to embody "curvature" in her verse, a need to imitate the lines of the female body, the natural rhythms of flowers unfolding and dying, "falling into line, each one of its own line, of its own accord, curved" (*Talking* 67). In this meditative essay, she dwells on the horizontal growth of the tulip as a model for natural line length; this she defines in reaction to the vertical, aggressive, and unnatural male line, which "splices" the natural rhythm. The line henceforth becomes for Webb an indicator of play and spontaneity and sensual exploration: "I play by ear. And the eye. The yellow tulip stretched on its stem, petals falling, a new moon, a phase.... [t]he seriousness of the moving line, for me" (*Talking* 70). Energy, sinuous motion, natural rhythms, taking herself seriously rather than comparing herself with male poets -- this is what Webb means by the womanly line as a form which is capable of breaking the stifling silence imposed on women by the "big-mouthed, howling yawp" of male writing.

Significantly, Webb focusses on the issue of silence in the foreword to *Wilson's Bowl*. In the earlier "Lament", she wrote that "we frame our lonely poems in/the shape of a frugal sadness" (*EYRE* 36). Her poems are "born out of great struggles with silence", an interesting metaphor because it suggests the gestation and rebirth of a new poet. Her silence has vexed critics: it does not signal her awe or acquiescence to patriarchal values; rather it is a period of waiting, a regathering of energy. Webb discusses silence in the context of Emily Dickinson's influence on her work:

The "frugal sadness" of the poems - is this the same as Emily Dickinson's "Sumptuous destitution"? - results from an attempt not to dramatize, hyperbolize, or sentimentalize the sadness. That is artful dodging, not silence. The silence is more profoundly strategic and connected with time. It's retreat, like religious retreat, or retreat from battle. It think it allows for integration of ideas and emotions. Healing time and making time. For me and the poems (*Poetry in Canada Review* 8, no author).

Webb describes her inability to write within a traditional literary framework, unable to meet the expectations of the androcentric text. Yet for her to attempt to recover prepatriarchal truth is equally frustrating:

To be reconciled with the past  
is redemption but unreal as hell  
if you can't recall the beginning  
and of time, who can get back there. (*WB* 14)

Nonetheless she states her preference for exploring the mysteries of the underworld, even though she is still haunted by the past. In a poem reminiscent of MacEwen's exploration of T.E. Lawrence's failure, Webb describes the inadequacy of "right-handed" thinking:

is there a shadow following the  
hand that writes

always? or for the left-handed  
only?

I cannot write with my right.

I grasp what I can. The rest  
is a great shadow. (WB 13)

She no longer desires the influence of her previous mentors, the literary avatars whom she once evoked and sought to imitate. In "Rilke", she writes "I speak your name I throw it away". (She does the same with Ghalib, the most famous ghazal poet, at the end of *Water and Light*, once she has adapted the ghazal to suit her own ends.) In naming, she regains control and asserts her own authority, her own presence. She defines this process as a peeling away of layers: "The poem begins to emerge from under the layers of paint, under the layers of guilt, of repression, into the codes of play, trance and language" (*Talking* 54). Now she reassesses her vocation of poet and rejects the nun's cell: "It is a delusion./ The cell is not quiet" (WB 41). She abandons Marvell's green tower, preferring the quest for a new language, the birth of the new self:

Let my tongue hang out  
to remember the thirst for life.  
Let my tongue hang out  
to deliver itself. (WB 41)

To seek identity within patriarchal structures is a self-defeating, self-deluding enterprise; Webb discovers inadequacy in the structure itself and not in the poet. No longer the absence in Marvell's garden, the female poet is the presence in a world of her own making as "the great dreams pass on/to the common good" (WB 85) -- an echo of Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*. Ann Mandel has noted the preponderance of "winged things -- angels, gods, black birds, and envied chevaliers in many forms" throughout *Wilson's Bowl*, forms suggesting

both the spirits of the dead and future liberators or guardian angels -- Webb's ambivalence is clear (85). (This ambivalence disappears in *Water and Light*, where the songs and ululations of twenty-one types of winged things are recorded, where the bird is unequivocally associated with ecstasy, freedom, the dance of Siva, music, and movement generally; the tone is one of elation at being set free.) Significantly, *Wilson's Bowl* ends with an affirmation, a positive and hopeful sense that Webb will discover an alternate female aesthetic to replace the outmoded poetics she previously admired. Webb states her faith that "the poems and paragraphs eventually proceed before the amorous invisible, governed by need and the form of its persuasions" (WB 38).

It is no accident that Phyllis Webb moved back from the city to the sea at this point in her career. The sea becomes the central metaphor in her poems for her expanded vision, for open space, for matristic connections, for waves of energy, for poetic process, for life and death. Webb is deeply drawn to nature and describes her strong sense of place:

I think the landscape and seascape are very important to me.... because  
I don't have any deep personal connections, my connection with the earth  
is really quite profound.... This nourishes me and somehow keeps me  
here. I really depend on beauty. (Wachtel 13)

*Wilson's Bowl* is inspired by what Webb identifies as the "strange network of connections", or wavelengths, contained in the correspondence between Lilo Berliner, a librarian at the University of Victoria, and Wilson Duff, an anthropology professor at the University of British Columbia. Although the two never met, they established a mystical bond through their writing which obviously fascinated Webb. The two correspondents viewed themselves as twins, like the twin masks of the Haida contained in Duff's collection. Webb's attraction to the masks as two kinds of vision seems natural. She believes that the two correspondents "were not identical" twins, since Wilson's outlook was "very Freudian and western" and he said he listened for "the two hands of God"; Lilo's intellect was more intuitive ("she was Jungian and oriental"),

what Webb describes as “casual, absurdist, at times abandoned” and possessed of an “inner logic” which closely resembles that of Webb herself. “Lilo listened for the sound of one hand clapping and heard it in spirals and circles” (*Talking* 148). Wilson is not even the ostensible subject of the poems, in spite of the title of the book; he is displaced by the connective female narrative voices which offer one woman’s response to another woman’s drowning. The sense of doubleness is thus not merely between Duff and Berliner, but also between Berliner and Webb. “Lilo saw art and life as a series of epiphanies” (148). The self-reflective epigraph in *Naked Poems*:

star fish

fish star

is a symbolic precursor of the relationship between the two women; both lines stare at and reverse their images as in a reflective body of water. The “hidden” reference to Ishtar links women through the creative act of death. Both Duff and Berliner committed suicide -- he by shooting himself in his office; she, by walking into the sea. Lilo’s death represents Webb’s accomplishment in an illogical pattern whose details are obscure; to “kill” the suicide is to cathartically allow for the dissolution of the self-destructive self and the emergence of the new twin artist, of Lilo’s creative potential. Here Webb may be seen to exercise the crone’s power of death, to understand the apparent necessity of death in the process of regeneration.

The voice is plurivocal in *Wilson’s Bowl*, as the two women’s voices merge into one, like the voices of animal spirits which form a refrain throughout the poems. It attests to a kind of female communion between Webb and her study, akin to the experience of the two lovers in *Naked Poems* who struggle against silence. Women are forced into silence, yet Webb and Berliner manage to connect in some mysterious fashion as the correspondence crosses Webb’s path. Webb writes that Lilo left the letters at Webb’s doorstep before walking into the sea. The ultimate silencer, death, discloses several unquiet voices. The ensuing poetry is palimpsestic. Webb pur-

sues silence in the land of the dead by conversing with the two suicides, which by asserting the unity of the living and the dead, allows her, like the goddess Inanna, to speak to the living. Stating her sense of alienation in language which moves beyond ordered and reasoned logic, Webb clearly identifies with Lilo's suicidal frustration at the loss of her connections, her inability to retain her insights and intuitive powers in a logical world. Berliner's commentary on the Haida myths, analyzed by her and Wilson through their letters, reveals a mind in search of alternatives. Webb argues for the same; the quest is most clearly articulated in a poem called "Crimes", where manmade language and its signs are compared to instruments of torture: the question mark itself is a "hook" on which we are hung, a

sickle

scythe

to cut us down:

why

how

oh God

has it come to this (WB 47)

Webb questions the authority of God, of judges, of anyone claiming fairness ("hello is as equal as we'll come, my love"): "Turn my head./I want to see your face" (WB 48). Like Lilo, Webb is in search of twin faces and names. "Spots of blood", a poem dedicated to "the women of the world in their menses" who "parade before me" with "fists clenched" suggests a greater identification with other women (WB 54).

The poems focussing on Duff and Berliner compose only one section of the volume, called "Artifacts", but the symbol of Wilson's bowl dominates the entire book. This was a rock basin on a beach near Lilo's rented "Zen House", as she referred to it, which she dedicated to Wilson: "Incredibly delicate, perfectly round, empty at low tide, full at high, it reflects the moon with

calculated magic. It was the perfect object for her contemplation of levels of meaning”, writes Webb (*Talking* 131). Like the question mark as a symbol of torture, the bowl represents both the fullness and the emptiness of language as artifact; it is both an abstract object of contemplation and a concrete reminder of the missing grail, both evoking and denying the myth. The bowl signifies silence, listening, waiting; it signifies Lilo, and the creative act of writing itself. The moon appearing on the surface of the earth, reflected in the bowl, evokes the body: the eye, the belly of the earth. Like MacEwen’s silver cup in *The Armies of the Moon*, it is distinct from the Christian chalice:

This is not a bowl you drink from  
not a loving cup.

This is meditation’s place  
cold rapture’s.

Moon floats here  
belly, mouth, open-one-eye

any orifice

comes to nothing

dark as any mask

or light, more light/is

holy *cirque*. (WB 64)

Like MacEwen’s difficulty in speaking the unspeakable, Webb’s problem is to state the metaphysical paradox: she must somehow name or put into presence that which is silent, empty, absent, drained: woman. Her task is to re-create the absence celebrated by Marvell. She outlines her strategy in the poem called “In This Place”, which opens the “Wilson’s Bowl” section; it is set in mythic time in a female landscape which undercuts present linear time:

You may read my signs  
 but I cross my path  
 and show you nothing on your way. (WB 61)

“Cross” in this context is antithetical to the symbolism implicit in the Christian cross, which lights the way of the seeker. Subterfuge and loss are also reflected in the crossing of librarian mystic and poet: a despair at being betrayed, at the drowning of a powerful creative voice; the final lines are “Dark sounds./ Dark sounds.” Jerome Rothenberg, cited in Webb’s source notes for *Wilson’s Bowl*, speaks of “the poem carried by the voice” and the “non-objective, post-logical” logic of poetry which recognizes the “poet as shaman” who is governed by “an animal body rootedness” (Rothenberg 19). This may be what Webb recognized she had in common with the figure of Lilo Berliner, which allowed her to play the protective, nurturing role of Demeter to her spiritual daughter Lilo/Persephone. As Webb wrote in an earlier poem, “Poetry/is cloaked in [the] sheer/profundities of otherness” (EYRE 52). To understand Lilo’s obsessions and suicide is tantamount to understanding the poetic process for Webb. The dark hieratic sounds are the songs of women; the last poem, “Twin Masks” is affirmative because it suggests that women may have made the stone masks (“Did Wilson ever think of that/before he shot himself so tidily/in his office?”). The poem concludes with a description of the spirit of a bird, the liberator, the singer of dark sounds who both mourns Lilo’s death and celebrates her vision:

Black bird pecks at her ear  
 pushes through to a nest in her brain.  
 She hears heavy feathers twice:  
 once as riffs on a drum;  
 once as a black bird’s sighs (WB 71)

*Wilson’s Bowl* opens with Webb’s “Poems of Failure”. She had intended to write a book of poems about Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist -- another of the powerless prisoners Webb

identifies with -- but never accomplished this ("intentions and visions fall/and fall like bad ladders"). Kropotkin was for Webb a "sweet Prince", a visionary whose intimacy with nature, political anarchy, and questioning of authority led to his exile and imprisonment in Russia and France. Although sensing her affinity with Kropotkin, she is hesitant to adopt him as a mentor; he is "unattached to the mode of doubt" (as are many of the other male philosophers in the "Portraits" section) and therefore not a model for a woman poet "absorbed in the fitting together/of pieces" (WB 18), in the dismantling of falsely-reassuring philosophies of wholeness. Once she has unmasked the "master", she has no need of male mentors, who merely ignore or doubt women or project onto them their own lack of vision. This volume marks Webb's abandonment of male muses.

Later Webb claims that contemporary poets no longer have muses, especially since "the muse was once regarded as the source of Truth", something which postmodern consciousness continually calls into question. Consider the traditional representations of the muse in Homer ("Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story"), Sidney ("Fool said my muse to me, look in your heart and write"), and Robert Graves ("Women is not a poet; she is either Muse or nothing").<sup>4</sup> "Right away", says Webb, "you can see the problem she poses to the contemporary woman poet/writer, who may herself be anti-domestic, even 'the other woman', if not exactly the awful (and naked) Truth" (1985, 115). For Webb, as for many other women before her, the muse as source of inspiration was often a male mentor, as we saw in her first few volumes of verse. When Webb does look into her heart and write, male critics describe what she finds there as "small" or trivial. But eventually Webb seems to transform the muse into a male demon in those

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<sup>4</sup> Graves considers the unusual case where a poet is female as unfortunate; she can be neither honorary male nor exceptional woman in his scheme, but must be "loving, serene, wise" (*The White Goddess* 500). The muse is thus associated with male property and inspiration, not as existing in her own right. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* says that muses "have few myths of their own", yet are "among the most lovable and influential of creations." This is to ignore the demonic role which the muse may play for some women (particularly MacEwen, as we saw in the previous chapter; one thinks also of Plath, Sexton, and several other modern women poets).

instances where her creative energy is externalized; the Biblical Daniel stands as both muse and alter ego in *Water and Light*, for example.<sup>5</sup>

Webb's most recent book balances observations of daily life with a "serene capacity" for wisdom. Whereas a certain sense of despair arose from being unable to achieve greatness within a powerful tradition of patriarchal works -- described in her so-called "Poems of failure" -- Webb now abandons her earlier ambition for the eventual recognition of the female voice in mainstream literature. In a reversal of her previous desire to be included, to achieve male acceptance, the 1984 collection entitled *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals* features "Fishtar", a figure whose name includes the goddess Ishtar, and whose presence dominates the poems, as opposed to the *excluding* nature of androcentric doctrine, the poems which "splice" out women's experiences. In revising the ghazal, Webb creates a marginal text of female poetics which challenges the conventions and the authority of male writing.

Formally the ghazal is ideally suited to Webb's revisionist pursuit. An ancient Persian lyric in which the male sings the praises of the object of his love (woman), its highest goals are refinement and pleasure through the acquisition of his desire. It is desire itself which Webb seeks to redefine from a feminist perspective. The traditional Persian lyric is highly structured, written in couplets which all end on the same rhyme; its aims are the distancing of the self from the ideal of universal love and the achievement of detachment and the symmetry of presentation. The

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<sup>5</sup> For comparison, Emily Dickinson's muse was masculine: she conceived of him as her creative, active power since she was culturally prohibited from ascribing such qualities to herself. Dickinson's lost lover or God is not the masculine strength alien to her, but rather a divided self-projection, an omnipotent force of no gender:

Adventure most unto itself  
The soul condemned to be -  
Attended by a single thread  
Its own identity

Webb's reference to the Hound of Iambic Pentameter refers most obviously to Thompson's "Hound of Heaven", but may also be an echo of the Dickinson poem, as Webb seems impressed by Dickinson's subversive qualities. The way in which the latter's poetry dismantles and abandons social conventions of femininity is discussed by Adrienne Rich in *Parnassus* 5:1 (Fall/Winter 1976:49-74).

conventions of the ghazal are as rigid as those of a Petrarchan sonnet: it also addresses an idealized Beloved who personifies all the cherished “universal” qualities of woman as lover. Both follow an orderly couplet structure, self-contained in subject and grammar, forming a continuous linked sequence. Webb’s poems invite comparison with Margaret Avison’s “Butterfly Bones; or, Sonnet against Sonnets” in their determination to challenge such conventional poetic structures. “But as I learnt more about Ghazals, I saw I was actually defying some of the traditional rules, constraints, and pleasures laid down so long ago”, she writes in the preface. The traditional ghazal was composed of couplets linked with an eye and an ear for song and music. Webb’s anti-ghazals focus on “the particular, the local, the dialectical, and private”, as she declares in her manifesto in the preface. Rather than directing her attention to woman as love object, Webb concentrates on the woman as writing subject, on the construction of the female self which is intrinsically bound to the development of a new kind of language. The language is deliberately disjointed, evocative, impressionistic, experiential, and sensuous, in a marked departure from the generalized romantic conventions of the earlier ghazals. Focussing on simplicity, Webb seems fascinated with nature, ancient ritual, and the sublime and mysterious rhythms which create the female self; hence she writes anti-ghazals. She is deliberately discordant, fractured and asymmetrical, blends elevated with colloquial language in a fruitful dialectic, employs varying line lengths, and does not always observe a set rhyme scheme, preferring instead to write fragments which are the

Drunken and amatory, illogical, stoned, mellifluous  
journey of the ten lines. (WL 20)

Webb also challenges the subject matter, the mystical seriousness, of the early lyric form by inserting various “trivial”, irreverent or mocking humorous incidents in her anti-ghazals:

Around the corner, Robin hangs out long sheets  
to hide the new added on kitchen from the building inspector.

(WL 11)

These too become serious matter for poetry. The first poem in the volume is a blend of personal reverie and public outcry, referential rather than reverential:

I watch the pile of cards grow.

I semaphore for help (calling the stone-dead John Thompson).

A mist in the harbour. Hydrangea bloom turns pink.

A game of badminton, *shuuelcock*, hitting at feathers!

My family is the circumstance I cannot dance with.

At Banff I danced in black, so crazy, the young man insisting.

Four or five couplets trying to dance

into Persia. Who dances in Persia now?

A magic carpet, a prayer mat, red.

A knocked off head of somebody on his broken knees. (WL 9)

The specificity of a detail from the interior memory (a dance in Banff), or from observing a pink hydrangea blooming in the garden -- grows by association from muted pastel pink to the horribly vibrant red of the victim's blood, contrasting the decadent, idle pursuit of dance/yard games/poetry with the reality of political and religious oppression in the Middle East. Outward serenity (flowers, a memory of playing badminton or dancing) is shattered by inner realization (the family who is "the circumstance I cannot dance with"); the tranquility of the past is disrupted by the violence of the present. The poetic mind is capable of uniting all these disparate experiences, can include the "mundane" reality of Iranian politics in a meditation on a garden flower. The ghazal form is expanded in Webb's verse to incorporate the very reality which it traditionally

seeks to distance itself from, to elevate the ordinary to the realm of the distinct. The object is no longer a passive woman, who is instead mocked by Webb as “the Beloved in her bored flesh”; the traditional ghazal as form is reduced to “this stringy instrument scraping away,/Whining about love’s ultimate perfection” (WL 20), while the conventional conceptualization of transcendental love itself is undermined by a playful tone. The centrality of male creativity and male sexual response is displaced, its authority neutralized through ridicule, contradiction, and disparity. What the anti-ghazals reflect instead is a spirit of female self-affirmation, the result of Webb’s long struggle towards personal, poetic, and spiritual autonomy.

In *Water and Light*, Webb addresses the prophet Daniel, with whom she endows the qualities of fluidity, transience. The eye/I is no longer fixed: “I Daniel” becomes “I Phyllis”, the voice of female resistance and strength “in the breakdown/of the bicameral mind - wherein I Daniel/alone saw the vision -” (WL 41). It is the prophetic voice which announces that Nebuchadnezzar has feet of clay, that the worship of patriarchal symbols is surpassed by the poet’s self-knowledge. Through her identification with Daniel, Webb aligns herself with the visionary who can read the writing on the wall, and dissociates herself from those leaders whom hitherto she held in high regard, but who now reveal to her a disappointing weakness of character. The Christian God is simply too heavy and unnurturing: “Yahweh is a speckled bird pecking at treebark./We are the insects most excellent to his taste.... The eggs of Yahweh crack in the tight nest./ Too big his bright wings. Too heavy his warm breast” (WL 14). There is a new tone of confidence in these poems. They are as lyrical and analytical as the earlier poems, but include more display of the self-expressive. Still meditative in tone, they are more buoyant and playful. Webb has found her underground connections with the past while living very much in the present:

The Authors are in Eternity,  
or so Blake said,

but I am here, feet planted  
on the ground;

I am listening to the song  
of the underground river.

I go down to the same river twice,  
remembering, always remembering.

I am you in your jewel-domed reading room,  
I am you in your kayak swimming.

I stand in one place risking almost everything.  
I weep for the last notes.

The river-stones are polished  
by the blue-veined hands of Ishtar.

Poor Fishstar! Yet - all is not lost. (WL 57)

In *Naked Poems*, the muse fish star/star fish is most definitely female, and it may be that the mysterious Fishtar whom Webb addresses throughout the latter half of *Water and Light* is also a female muse or goddess, a marine form of Ishtar. The oblique reference to Ishtar is echoed in this volume. Rather than invoking the benediction of the masters, Webb turns to a goddess for inspiration. Ishtar lives within her, in the collective memory of the woman poet, and in the very

fact of the speaker's survival. Her power is affirmed through the poet's connection to the earth, "feet planted/on the ground".

In the section focussing on the prophet Daniel, Daniel and the persona create each other, bring each other into existence, each enhancing the other's difference. The epigraph has the prophet seeking the poet, not the poet seeking to emulate the prophet: "No wonder you came looking for me, you who care for the grieving, and I the sound of grief." Daniel's imprisonment is reflected in the fragmented "I", which is non-linear; the female liberates the prophet from death and exile through her spirit of regeneration.

In *Wilson's Bowl*, Webb writes of her desire, based on the one expressed by Adrienne Rich, for a common language to unite women and to point to the inadequacy of patriarchal language; she focussed also on the end of transcendence and the dream of beginning anew -- drowning in a watery matrix to re-emerge whole. Webb has now shifted her literary allegiance to female mentors. Adrienne Rich introduced Webb to the ghazal; Rich contributed several of the adapted ghazal poems in *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu*, from which Webb takes her epigraphs, one couplet per section, for the five sections of *Water and Light*. Combined, the five couplets compose the first ghazal of Webb's volume.<sup>6</sup> Rich speaks of women's "tremendous powers of intuitive identification similar to Keats's negative capability" (Webb's affinity with Lilo, for instance), claiming that this is a positive way of describing women's "weak ego boundaries" so disparagingly defined from a patriarchal perspective.<sup>7</sup> This is Webb's rediscovered source of power, of a different kind altogether from that she sought by imitating her male predecessors. What is most interesting about *Water and Light* is the way Webb turns away from silence, absence, despair at being unable to emulate the great masters. Again, in breaking, Webb is engaged in

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<sup>6</sup> Noted by John Hulcoop in "Webb's *Water and Light*":152.

<sup>7</sup> She makes this observation in commenting on Emily Dickinson in "Three Conversations" (1975:114-5).

re-making. Following MacEwen, who shifted away from the esoteric dogma of her mentors and towards descriptions of the dailiness of women's work, Webb also celebrates common domestic experience, the way that women's tasks (including the task of writing) focus on the *interruption* of "wholeness":

The women writers, their heads bent under the light,  
work late at their kitchen tables. (WL 12)

My morning poem destroyed by the good neighbour policy.  
Mrs. Olsson, organic gardener, lectures me on the good life.  
[...]

Oh this *is* cozy, all of us together (WL 13)

Writing is not a retreat from reality, focussing on an *idée fixe*; it is *process*, the "pull/this way and that, ultimately into the pull/of the pen across the page./Sniffing for poems/the forward memory/of hand beyond the grasp" (WL 18). She is able to break space, break time itself. The easy blend of line lengths facilitates Webb's task in taking the line "across the page" or not, as she chooses, without resorting to the Whitmanesque "yawp", as she terms it. Writing is not the creation of a passive object or an artifact to be preserved for posterity, but rather it is a continuum centred on the present moment, the "flow, flux, even the effluent stormy/in high wind" (WL 16). Writing is interrupted by the welcome intrusion of women neighbours who teach the poet something about daily life; it is the ability to "relate disconnectedly". The real insight Webb offers us here is that genuine writing is done, not by blocking out the world, but by allowing it to exist. And this is a revelation with profound spiritual implications.

Webb's writing demonstrates the development of a feminist poet who rises from the ashes of her past, a past shaped by patriarchal perceptions of the divine and of art. Her repeated emphasis on "breaking" leads us to recognize the necessity of shattering outworn myths. Webb's

poetry has always pursued the metaphysical, but in this final volume she redefines that pursuit, locating it firmly in a feminine mystical tradition, as she writes in the preface:

And yet in the end (though I hope to write more), Love returns to sit on  
her "throne of *accidie*", a mystical power intrudes, birds sing, a Sitar is  
plucked, and the Third Eye, opal, opens. ("Preface", *WL*)

The all-seeing eye of ancient Persia belonged to Maat, the goddess of truth and final judgement; it was later attributed to Hermes.<sup>8</sup> Although the Third Eye usually invokes the Buddhist concept of godhead, for Webb it is distinctly female, a round, open centre of power like that of Wilson's bowl. In her essay entitled "Up the Ladder: Notes on the Creative Process", Webb writes of her "reticence" in revealing "the darker territory inhabited by the Creator Spirit" who inspires her poems (*Talking* 59). It is this spirit she invokes more openly in the later verse: a distinctly mortal, female spirit like the grey-eyed nymph (the epithet recalls Athena) who spins our fate, so that the

axis of this globe sends  
degree by degree us into curved  
path of portent  
accident, perishable  
eye-sad dryad. Look  
at her. Here. (*WL* 28)

The final poem in this volume suggests the presence of a woman poet who humbles herself before a greater spiritual force; there is no longer any despair associated with silence or blindness as the "eye's lid covers/the I aware", as she wrote earlier. The past is discarded, destroyed to open the way to the present. The inner eye/I lies behind the veil of Isis/Ishtar, the self buried under layers

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<sup>8</sup> *Ayin* was the "eye" in the Hebrew sacred alphabet, possibly derived from Aya, the Babylonian Creatress. Islamic Arabs diabolized her and corrupted her name into Ayin, spirit of the evil eye. Moslem Syrians call her *Ayin Bisha*, the eye-witch. (Walker 1983:294)

of cultural lies, the truth hidden under accretions of appearances. Instead there is but a momentary hesitation before she yields to a vision of spiritual inspiration and guidance:

Now for the Third Eye to read the grown signs:

flickers of doubt tic mouth, twitch eye's lid.

But it's open - always - the third one,  
guardian of splendours, crimes.

Seeing all, all-seeing, even in sleep knows  
space (outer, inner, around), tracks freak snows,

slumbering ponies, Love, I am timid  
before this oracular seer, opal, apple of my eye. (WL 21)

In her 1990 volume *Hanging Fire*, Webb's poetry is less lyrical than that of *Water and Light*, and in some respects seems to return to the dense, arcane language which characterizes her earlier work. Its mystery is heightened by the enclosure of each of the poems' titles in quotation marks, to indicate the "given" quality of the words, which Webb claims arrived "unbidden" in her mind (Fagan 23). The feminist awareness highlighted in *Water and Light* now finds its fruition in Webb's homage to female writers like Gwendolyn MacEwen, Brownwen Wallace, and Sharon Thesen -- not in an attempt to elevate the status of these poets to the level of Rilke, Marvel, Marx, Heidegger or the other gurus previously worshipped by Webb -- but to celebrate their ordinariness. Webb cites her indebtedness to younger women poets:

I'm on the whole very grateful for them.... [they] have kind of liberated  
me. Not necessarily in the way I write. But you'll notice that *Hanging  
Fire* is a more overtly feminist book towards the end. (Fagan 23)

This liberation has allowed Webb to let go of the despair which dominated her early career:

In *Hanging Fire* there is a lot more outright anger.... not masked as despair -- I think that's the emotional difference. I think I've found some of the sources of my despair and brought them into the light. That's what depression is for me, in-turned rage. It's a special technique of women who tend to turn self-destructive. Maybe I've learned from the younger and wiser poets. (Fagan 23)

Or maybe we can learn as much from Webb, following her journey from darkness into light, from despair into hope, like the silent woman in Webb's final poem "The Making of a Japanese Print" who "emerges at last/on the finest paper" (*HF* 78).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SOME OBSERVATIONS

What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?

If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, *to found* (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society.

(Hélène Cixous 1978:142)

At least one critic has noted that a rebellion against a monolithic God characterizes too much of Canadian literature to be accidental (McGregor 11). Writing both within and outside of the Canadian literary tradition, MacEwen, Wilkinson, and Webb challenge the structures of androcentric belief -- literary, spiritual, political, mythical. If, as has been previously hypothesized, the most natural Canadian stance is connective, following the mother-child dyad (McGregor 362), then it might prove fruitful to consider the development of Canadian literature in gynolatric terms, as I have attempted here. If "the quest for the father is doomed in Canadian

literature" (McGregor 362), perhaps research into its matristic roots would yield more positive insights. All three of the poets studied write verse which is affirmative and hopeful (even Webb's suicide poems). Both MacEwen and Webb write poems which specifically reply "Yes!" to the negativism and futility which characterize much modern philosophy and literature. And all three remain determined to break the silence which has kept female values from being acknowledged. Where most women writers of the earlier half of the century kept silent and were hidden behind the masks and mythologies of traditional femininity which Muriel Rukeyser referred to in her well-known line, "No more masks! No more mythologies!", these women's voices refuse to be suppressed, in spite of the critical abuse they have received.

All three of the poets whose work I have explored refute the validity of the manmade version of Paradise because they find it too abstract and impoverished. If the search for the father is doomed, their writing suggests that the search for a divine Father may also be futile. Instead of the ascetic approach to the divine, each substitutes her own aesthetic approach; poetry, spirituality, and a love of what Wilkinson calls the Green world become inseparable. I want to suggest that these poets were all moving toward an acknowledgement of divinity that was female-centred and inspired by recurring images of a goddess. MacEwen's Nefertiti, Tiamut, Bast and seamstress figures suggest this possibility in her work. Frequent references to a sacrificial consort revise the traditional critical assessment of MacEwen's male muse as an icon requiring submission; on the contrary, he is subject to the desire of the speaker. Perhaps the one poem which most explicitly identifies MacEwen's spiritual yearning for a goddess figure is "The Discovery":

do not imagine that the exploration  
ends, that she has yielded all her mystery  
or that the map you hold  
cancels further discovery

I tell you her uncovering takes years,  
 takes centuries, and when you find her naked  
 look again,  
 admit there is something else you cannot name,  
 a veil, a coating just above the flesh  
 which you cannot remove by your mere wish  
 when you see the land naked, look again  
 (burn your maps, that is not what I mean),  
 I mean the moment when it seems most plain  
 is the moment when you must begin again (SM 30)

This poem is remarkably similar to Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me", and anticipates Rich's "Diving into the Wreck", with its sense of discovering what is below the surface -- of history, of the land, of patriarchal mythology and mapping. Anne Wilkinson's Queen of Heaven figure suggests a divine mother, particularly in the description she offers in her autobiography. And Webb's elevation of the sea goddess whom she calls F/ishtar is certainly reminiscent of the ancient goddess Ishtar. What is evident (in varying degrees) is the yearning among all three poets for a figure of spiritual authority which does not alienate women. MacEwen connects the poet giving birth to herself with the rebirth of nature ("the accurate self which burns, and burning, assumes/green."). The Green World is the space within for MacEwen, as the interior of Wilson's bowl or the space on the page is for Webb. The spiritual *is* the physical, culture and nature are one, and the public and the private refuse the dichotomies demanded of them in the traditional writing of verse. All three poets are suspicious of the transcendent artist-god, replacing him with an immanent deity. All employ the metaphor of *engulfment* -- MacEwen's obsession with devouring, Wilkinson's with the sea, and Webb's image of the seed within the pomegranate -- to suggest this interiority and sense of connectedness between nature, their bodies, and themselves.

In this respect, I believe that these women poets present a distinctly feminine spiritual ethos, by way of displacing their dissatisfaction with androcentric systems of meaning.

The work of all three poets illustrates the *difference* of women's spiritual journeys, which follow a pattern distinct from the male heroic quest of the divine. Annis Pratt defines this as "the pattern of a dialectical series of encounters with the world of nature" whereby the heroines "resist normative restrictions to their liberty by imitating Daphne's retreat into the green world" (Pratt 9). Although Pratt is specifically discussing the female *bildungsroman*, her findings are equally applicable here. The green world offers each poet a glimpse of the possibility of matristic unity, of which we gain only an unconscious hint from the work of Wilkinson, a more mystical perspective from MacEwen, and a more overt recognition in the poems of Webb. In describing a woman's spiritual journey, each poet employs images and metaphors which are remarkably similar. The metaphor of resistance -- to male sky-gods, to organized religion, to Heaven, to abstract intellectualism, to traditional concepts of femininity, to creeds which deny sensuality, and to the objectification of women and nature -- is consistent in all of the poets' work. Resistance is connected with the rejection of traditional approaches to nature -- and, in Webb's case, to writing itself -- as the object of poetic scrutiny and the object of discourse. Instead there is a strong identification *with* nature in the process of discovering the source of the absolute. For this reason, none of the poets can sanction *disembodied* concepts of the divine. The recognition that the spirit is most firmly rooted in the earth inspires all three poets' verse, in varying degrees.

The marginalized status of women's writing places the poet's perspective outside time and space as conceived in linear terms. Pratt's observation is that women's writing frequently

manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely  
because the presentation of time by persons on the margin of day-to-day  
life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology and because those ex-  
cluded from the *agora* are likely to perceive normal settings from phobic

perspectives. Since women are alienated from time and space, their plots take on cyclical, rather than linear, form, and their houses and landscapes surreal properties. (11)

This is the same world view which Adrienne Rich refers to as inherently paradoxical because it fuses intensely subjective nonexistence with an undercutting of linear time. It is no coincidence, therefore, that each of the poets here has at least one poem in which watches or clock towers or traditional measures of time are destroyed. For MacEwen and Webb, this involves stepping outside of Western culture, employing Egyptian or Indian concepts of time to describe their visions.

Not only do these women write outside of time and space, but also outside of patriarchal discourse. Ursula LeGuin (1989) refers to the “language of power” as the father tongue, the language of Man Ascending, of Civilized Man. She distinguishes it from the mother tongue which is common, conversational, trivial, and banal. Wilkinson uses the term “mother tongue” in her work, MacEwen writes verse which translates esoteric myticism into vulgar and conversational dialogue, and Webb experiments with form repeatedly in order to capture the ordinary in women’s experience (as opposed to what she calls the “yawping, big-mouthed” elevated tone of “The Great Iambic Pentameter”). The mother tongue, continues LeGuin, expects an answer; the father tongue expects silent agreement. In the mother tongue, people “offer their experience as their truth”, while, in the father tongue, people win arguments. In the mother tongue, the margins become central, and there is a reaffirmation of the values of honesty, dailiness, unpretentiousness, and the exchange of personal knowledge. LeGuin concludes that women writers of this century are more connected to the world outside of writing than men, that their work is constantly interrupted by the dailiness of living, never a seamless whole. Rather than despairing about this lack of privilege, LeGuin finds in it women’s source of hope, a new perspective which offers a

counterpoint to the nihilism and pessimism of twentieth-century male writing (like Wilkinson's "counterpoint to sleep").

Each of the three poets elevates the private domestic sphere, debased as a result of the sexual division of labour. By shifting the discursive centre, they publicize and politicize the domain of women, embodying and elevating everyday experience. Simultaneously they redefine the sacred, bringing it back to earth, grounding it in the *this-ness* of experience. Virginia Woolf believed that female values differ from male values in both life and art (Woolf 1958:81). Her search for a form capable of enfolding feminine qualities continues. Fractured female identity is split by the cultural exigencies of "becoming woman" and the masculine performative writing mode of making writing public, an issue Webb foregrounds in confronting the schizophrenic dichotomy between reality and appearance, poet and persona. In cultivating a new spiritual identity, each poet also re-evaluates the female traits of passivity and receptiveness (particularly in Webb's assessment of the figure of Lilo Berliner), qualities generally denigrated in patriarchal culture, and reclaims their sanctity.

The poets here refuse to categorize experience in hierarchical terms, in contradistinction with masculine writing which seeks "to erect permanencies, [and] tend[s] to reflect not actual experience but traditional conceptualizations of it" (French 15). All three poets write verse in which erected permanencies are toppled, where vertical symbols of androcentric ascendancy are levelled: the ladder, the tower, the cross, the horizontal line. In doing so, each poet, intentionally or unconsciously, challenges and subverts patriarchal authority, both literary and sacred, eliminating in the process assumptions about prestige, privilege, and discrimination. In place of the phallic symbol of salvation, we find recurring spiral images in Wilkinson's poetry, and circles in the work of both MacEwen and Webb. Instead of legitimating the power of a sky god or a sun god, we find an earth goddess whose power is linked to the cycles of the moon. The rape of Leda by Zeus is a myth which is reinterpreted by all three poets, who undercut the transcendental

qualities of the immortal poet-as-god. In place of the authoritarian "I" and the alienated individual, we find a greater emphasis on plurivocalism and the dissolution of the self-centred ego, and on women's connectedness to all forms of life. Sandra Gilbert has argued that women poets alter the self-defining confessional modes traceable to the English and American Romantics, that women are more ambivalently subjective than men in an androcentric universe, and do not write confidently from a tradition of self-mythologizing (1977).

This observation is confirmed by the work of Alicia Suskin Ostriker, who outlines some common features in women's poetry from the seventeenth century until the 1960's in the United States. In her discussion of early female trends and precedents, she surveys hundreds of American poets, and concludes that

Gestures of bold assertion followed by retraction will form a recurrent pattern. Set against this, there will be female voices expressing pride in their ability to instruct or, later, to feel and experience life. Philosophically, a distaste for dualism, hierarchy, and vertical metaphors, and a preference for "a compact body whole entire" [in Anne Bradstreet's words] organized through balances rather than superior-inferior structures, will be a core female position. So will loving attachment to nature and the body and a willingness to identify the self with animals.... unity through mutual balance almost universally signals happiness in women's poems, while dominance submission relations (including those between God and the individual) are associated with suffering and death. (1986:21-2)

What this desire for connectedness signifies is a radical difference in the perception of power itself, both politically and spiritually, and this is reflected in each poet's choice of style and form. Suzanne Juhasz observes that contemporary women poets often "use a language bare not

only of adornment, but of obliqueness", a language which is simple and direct; their poems promote "non-hierarchical interchange rather than a power trip." These women use their art "to validate the personal and the private as legitimate topics for public speech" (Juhasz 1976). Women's culture is based on a sharing of abilities, a horizontal model, rather than a vertical model of maintaining "power over". And so women writing with different perceptions often *transgress male authority in coming to a realization of female spiritual autonomy.*

Luce Irigaray has theorized that women writers arrive at this transgression through spontaneous play. Certainly this is the case for Phyllis Webb, whose essay "On the Line" challenges the male creative process specifically. In order to transgress phallogocentric discourse, Irigaray herself transgresses Barthes. He calls for a productive rather than a passive approach to textuality, an approach he categorizes as "rereading, an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society... no longer consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different)" (1976:15-16). Gwendolyn MacEwen makes the same distinction between indiscriminate consumption and the devouring of all experience which leads to a vision of the divine. Irigaray adds to this the problem of sexual politics, stating that women's writing "tends to put the touch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms"; again the impulse is to connect with the text, to achieve what she terms "simultaneity" in the "fluid state" (1985:79-80).

To break with the ideological habits of our society results in marginalization. This thesis examines, in the words of Elizabeth Meese, "the extent to which all or some women, by virtue of their marginalized relation to discourse, also write as feminists" (119). I have focussed on the manner in which three women poets transgress male poetic and religious authority, in the choice of their subject matter and form. One problem which arises for me now, as a feminist critic, is my complicity in constructing a new critical canon in the very act of dismantling the old patriarchal one. I see no way around this. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn offer as a resolution the notion that feminist criticism is both critique and affirmation, that it requires "deconstructing

male patterns of thought and social practice; and reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked" (19). Until some balance is achieved in recognizing the experiences of "hidden or overlooked", disenfranchised "others", some privileging of alternate texts seems preferable. Until "humanity" in the Humanities is no longer defined as maleness and virile traditions, we will need to honour diversity in order to move beyond patriarchal value systems. Until we recognize that thinking is mythic, not "universal", as Cassirer postulates, we must challenge the status quo. We must learn to discriminate and elevate "difference" -- spiritually, politically, artistically, physically, psychically -- in order that women may overcome their inherited contempt for their own values, their own bodies, and their own work, which is too frequently the product of patriarchal education. I agree with Irigaray in her criticism of Freud, where she claims that cultural matrophobia is responsible for depriving daughters of a strong sense of identity and subjectivity, rendering them incapable of self-representation and creativity. She suggests that a new feminine creativity, impossible without simultaneous cultural changes, would restore a sense of our matristic origins and eliminate woman's need to search for herself continually (Irigaray 1985). Since women have traditionally shown greater respect for otherness than men, and have no desire to possess the world, Irigaray contends that matriarchal power would function more compassionately than in a patriarchy.

I have tried to emphasize each poet's choice of form and subject matter, rather than their "stated intentions", although in the case of Webb and MacEwen, it is difficult to overlook their stated aversion to organized religion. All three poets demonstrate a penchant for free verse (and free line length, in Webb's case) seeking to escape the objectification of traditional poetry/nature/women, the "thingness" which these are so often reduced to. Wilkinson is the only one of the three who does not overtly challenge the status quo through her writing, but her form and subject matter, combined with an emphasis on maternity, constitute a muted transgression of authority. There is also a renewed emphasis on the body. In "The Laugh of of the Medusa", H  len   Cixous

calls for a language writing of the female body, like Woolf's search for the female sentence. All three poets here write about "the body in time, the body as process.... wavering between sense and nonsense, language and rhythm." (Thesen, "Introduction", *The Vision Tree*, 35). This is how they can challenge the tradition that states that women's flesh is both corrupt and corruptible, both sinful and subject to change/death. Women who identify with the body as earth find a spokeswoman in another Canadian poet, Margaret Atwood, who taunts Odysseus in her "Circe/Mud" poems, "Don't you ever get tired of saying Onward?" (1974:51).

Each poet develops a strategy for imagining herself as powerful and nurturing. There are strong maternal tones in Webb's verse, for example, as there are indications that Wilkinson was encountering the crone figure through her own metamorphosis and confrontation with death, and her poetry is as concerned with the fading and dying of things as it is with their nurturance. But what is significant is that each poet has chosen to elevate some aspect of her experience as a woman living on earth. For Wilkinson, the symbol of the divine is not the god-man of the Gospels, but a nursing mother who sings lullabies to her children. For MacEwen, the body is given new strength and eroticism, enrobed in vivid colour and sensual texture, as the virgin chooses her consort. For Webb, the encounter with suicide and despair yields a new understanding of the creative force of destruction. Poets have perennially occupied themselves by finding analogies between the macrocosm of the world and the microcosm of the self, but these women poets insist on extending this to include the body politic, the woman's body as space cultivated by male prerogative, and examining the relationship between the public and the private self.

I began writing this thesis in anger -- anger at the way women's work is ignored or misinterpreted by critics and teachers, anger at the way academia reinforces patriarchal loathing for what women value. That anger has dissolved. Webb's poetry teaches us much about a woman poet's anger at senseless death and how to convert its energy into a positive, gynocentric force -- how, in Irigaray's words, "to try to recover the place of her exploitation, without allowing herself

to be simply reduced to it" (Irigaray 1985:76). Angry reactions are a luxury because they indulge our sense of injury rather than offering us a way out. To pursue anger polarizes and hardens opposition but rarely promotes change in the way that compassion can. To eschew ideology, and rigidly-held system of fixed beliefs, is difficult yet necessary if we are to move beyond aggressive confrontation. Ideology provides a protective, comfortable shell that preserves us from immediate contact with genuine change. Feminism can and has functioned as such for some of its adherents, becoming the new religion. Feminist criticism can have limitations when it becomes doctrinaire. The alternative to abandoning ideology is not, as many fear, acquiescing to a sexist status quo. When feminism becomes institutionalized, when it ceases to challenge our attachment to fixed structures, it must be abandoned like all other "isms". This is the project outlined by Cixous when she calls for women's writing to develop "the unorganizable construct" which is "always at the edge, the turning point of making itself" (1981:47). What is needed is a middle way, a non-dualistic allegiance to "neither this nor that". What we need is a Goddess-centred vision, a receptive, life-affirming ethos which will liberate us from unidimensional conformism, a philosophy that will remind us that the only possible paradise is here, now, on this earth.

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