

Dennis Altman,  
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Homosexuality,  
Which  
Homosexuality?

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## **BETWEEN ESSENCE AND PRESENCE**

### **Politics, Self, and Symbols in Contemporary American Lesbian Poetry**

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#### MYTHS

This paper deals largely with the tensions between history and myth<sup>1</sup> which can be found in that not so narrow band of poetry written by American lesbians who have been actively connected with the Movement during the past ten years or so.

As I write, I am quite aware of the irony of discussing 'essentialist' traits in lesbian discourse by referring to a mythical persona called the 'lesbian poet'. In real life, I know quite a few individuals who are both lesbians and poets, but I know no archetypal lesbian poet - except Sappho 'of the triple blackness'<sup>2</sup> - who meets the specifications of being nebulous, fabulous, and encrusted in tradition. Paula Gunn Allen, Olga Broumas, Judy Grahn, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Joan Larkin, Jacqueline Lapidus, Irena Klepfisz, Marilyn Hacker, among many others, are very different poets, each with her own distinctive voice, life experience, racial affiliations, political priorities. But still, it seems to me that during the seventies, as the women's movement took shape (creating a community of readers) and these poets came to choose women as their primary referent, both as source of inspiration and privileged audience, their poetry took on a quality of shared cultural identity expressed in recognizable symbolic language. For this reason I feel justified in collapsing their individualities into the persona of the Lesbian Poet.

A similar kind of inconsistency marks my discussion on the Community. My daily experience leads me to view lesbians as women strongly differentiated by provenance, language, class, race and politics, whereas the necessity of theorizing on my topic leads me not only to collapse individual differences but also to map consequential connections for situations which should be viewed as space- and time-bound. However, during the years I

have given close and passionate attention to all things lesbian, far and near, I experienced the Community (not just the vast American network, but the other national networks in Europe as well) as a strong presence in state of flux, as a sort of collective murmur in the background, out of which stronger voices emerged, posing issues that spread and reverberated far and wide, leading to theoretical and political trends. These meshed with other themes to affect in different measure the way we thought about our own lives. Certainly, individual communities had their own specific problems and interests, but because of the 'grapevine' and the capillary diffusion of small and larger presses, it was possible to map and follow generalized trends. Similarly, rereading American lesbian poetry of the seventies and early eighties, I can sense periods of synchrony and assonance, and then a creeping dissonance as diversification increased, indicating, no doubt, healthy growth.

These are the premises from which I begin, assuming that there is and has been among us, both within and beyond national and local boundaries, a Community with a sense of shared cultural identity both expressed through and created by a shared symbolic language. Language and symbols can be employed, and are, as political tools in order to organize and act for specific ends, to increase power and impose ideology. It is this particular use of language and symbols which I shall discuss both in relation to lesbian poetry and to our community. I feel that our political ideology, while aiming at the political construction of a collective (female) consciousness, tends at times to level and discourage varieties of interpretation and endeavour, and even to encourage self-censorship.

Certainly, we need a 'common language' to provoke fundamental changes in thought and social practices; we need to develop our own culture; we need, in other words, powerful myths to propel us. The past is a construct of the symbolic activity of the mind. Thus, all cultures are mythical, all traditions are invented out of the need to impose meaning, order, patterns. We lesbians have such a need too.

In the same way, we seem to have the universal compulsion to repeat patterns. How else can we explain why in the United States, the most powerful country of the world, the city-based lesbian

subculture, with a small minority of significant exceptions, felt the need to rethink itself in terms of a past of radical innocence, a sort of Lesbian American Dream? To revert to agrarianism, to strict separatism, even to menstrual sponges. Still, myths often 'both state and enforce culture's sentences' most accurately.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the Dream accurately expresses the desperate wish to revert to the initial premise and promise of a society gone, it appears, irrevocably wrong; the refusal of an imperfect reality, the aspiration to identify with a perfect model, the utopian attempt to refound a society expressive of the repressed: in our terms, of women and lesbians. Moreover, myth has a strong link with human subjective awareness. It enables us to escape hierarchies and tradition, to gain access to the power of definition.<sup>4</sup>

I do not speak as one who did not join in myth-making, quite the reverse. Now, however, I wish to understand why we made certain choices and how experience and ideology, myth and reality became part of the tradition we live by and of my own history. As lesbians, we cultivate our critical faculties. Yet we are both creators and victims of a 're-visionary' mythology intended to open up 'the possibility of a woman-centred discourse'.<sup>5</sup>

We have deconstructed the universe and mapped a grid of differences, starting from the archetypal Difference (in the sense of opposition) between male and female, and followed this with the other archetypal split between heterosexual and homosexual. Along these coordinates we have rebuilt our world. And we have made it revolve around two myths that shape our imagination and our language: the Lesbian continuum and the female-coded Symbolic.

I find it significant that the spreading influence of the second, after the first was already established, has produced an ideological rift in the Community dividing it into two camps which hardly communicate with one another. The fact that in the United States the second is still mostly entrenched in the academic world because of its (especially literary) cultural requirements, should not blind us to political implications: the widening gap between theory and practice, ideologues and the movement, those who think and those who do.

This gap has long and intricate roots in patriarchal soil as well as in the women's movement. Mind/body, thought/action, in-

tellectual/manual or political, are dichotomies which have been investigated, deconstructed, resolved, or left unresolved over and over again by feminist analyses, and not just during the first wave. The dream of a common language rests on our ability to avoid those juxtapositions which inevitably translate into political divisions and colonizations among women. Language levels (high, low, common, scientific) are never innocent of social privilege and power politics. Theory has its own unquestionable freedoms, it has been said; but philosophical speculation needs to be linked to political necessity. At the same time, action has little direction and meaning unless based on some form of existential and political lesbian theory.

Lately, I think, the problem has become not how to reconcile theory and practice, but how to make people act according to some theoretical construction justifiable under the heading of political necessity. In Italy I have witnessed, I am witnessing, the attempt to apply the theory of sexual difference to politics.<sup>6</sup> The give-and-take between grassroots feminists and 'thinkers', both traditionally opposed to hierarchies and therefore resistant to organization, has been revolutionized through the very accessible simile of the 'teacher-pupil' relationship. The necessary 'trust' required with much simplicity from the pupil has become the vehicle to ensure that the 'teacher-idologue' receives the consensus and support of the women's community at large. Through one very innocent-looking operation, involving the recognition of the 'teacher's' value (or superiority), the individual woman has abdicated the authority and sovereignty which the first wave of feminism had won for us all.

One may say, of course, that the American theory of 'empowerment' has also been, for some years and in all Communities, a powerful and necessary strategy to gain consensus. But it was devised and used to support efforts, individual and collective, of general and tangible benefit, and it recommended the scrupulous, ethical recognition of all kinds of differences, of a multitude of centres of value.

The *political* application of the theory of Sexual Difference, instead, has reintroduced linear hierarchies, and issues of authority and power among women. The American theory deconstructed the patriarchal power structure. The French theory applies

deconstructive methodologies in order to reconstruct its female mirror image. But we must not forget that it is proving itself, as claimed, functional to the self-assertive woman of the 'third wave' who wants to live at ease and with ease in a society also hers by right, a woman who has outgrown the need for the hothouse of separatist space.

In moments of detachment, I view the juxtaposition of the two as typical of the mother-daughter generation gap. One seems to me the mother of the other, and not necessarily incompatible – because they are both essentialist myths expressive of different historical necessities. The one feminist, the other post-feminist, they are still myths of power. They try to reconcile visions which political practice had unavoidably fragmented; they aim at reconstituting whole pictures from those individual segments, from those differences within, between, among women which we have so painfully learnt to consider and of which this rift is yet another example. By glossing over clefts, leaps, discontinuities, both theories postulate a community aware of a line of continuity with the past, ready to unite in the formulation of a present-future where women inscribe their authorial I.

Although the rift barely masks the understandable power struggle aimed at winning over a wider audience and a larger territory, both theories reflect a dream of wholeness: the dream of a common language, whose aim is the ethical construction of a new symbolic and social order. The original formulation of the lesbian continuum encompassed all women, not just lesbians. The theory of sexual difference makes no distinction between lesbian and straight, white and black, rich and poor, so as to avoid the pitfall of categorizing oppressions.

The combination of these factors led me to change the terms 'essentialism' and 'constructionism' proposed for discussion into the different but not unrelated categories of 'essence' and 'presence', as I was considering lesbian poets. I have often wondered about the tensions between an original, intrinsically feminine poetic self (if such a thing exists), and the construction of a lesbian-feminist poetic persona which, in Adrienne Rich's terms, is that poet's *presence* to the world.

There are points which I consider relevant here: that this presence is inextricably linked to both the myths and the realities of

community life; that lesbian ethics find a political arena in textual politics; that lesbian myths become the symbolic projection which enables the poet to give 'universal' significance to inner experience; and finally, that for a lesbian, the lesbian community is the third person necessary to achieve the transition from the imaginary dyad (I-thou) to the symbolic order. This complex network is difficult to negotiate, as I will show while I move through my discussion.

## SYMBOLIC MOTHERS: TRADITION AND COMMUNITY

In *Lesbian Poetry* (1981), Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin reprinted as a preface the introduction to their *Amazon Poetry*, an anthology they had edited in 1975, where the 38 poets included identified themselves as lesbians.<sup>7</sup> Their poems, it was announced, belied 'a simple sexual definition of lesbianism; they expressed, rather, the many sides of their lives, marred by the patriarchal oppression which is especially hard on those who do not meet society's standards. The preface ended by quoting Susan Griffin, who acknowledged:

The risks other women take in their writings, casting off the academic shroud over their feelings, naming the unspeakable, moving with courage into new forms and new perceptions, make me able to write what before could not be written. In every sense we do not work alone.

*Lesbian Poetry* included 64 poets. In the introduction, the editors expressed their relief that the long drought was over. After surviving for centuries without 'knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning', ... the work has already begun that gives historical shape to our lives and our literature. Hopefully it will continue in directions that encompass the diversity of past and present lesbian poetry and lesbian existence.<sup>8</sup>

In 1985, Judy Grahn published *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition*.<sup>9</sup> In the chapter called 'The Ideal Place of Wholeness Appears in All Our Work', she speaks of the myth of wholeness connecting 'the commonality' (i.e. the number of overlapping groups that constitute the American Lesbian Community) in 'a House of Women, a House of Muses'. Mythical

realism, as she calls it, appears in the imagery of most lesbian poetry and signifies both the recovery of a (sapphic) tradition and the creation of a new paradigm.

In ten years, the lesbian poets had progressed from the celebration of a first collective coming out to the celebration of an established mythology that compensated for alienation, oppression, and the 'culture trance' that had so far blinded society to the lesbian tradition.

Having established these landmarks, I will, at this point, recall some definitions given, by women critics and poets, of poetry by women and lesbians and of poetic tradition:

- Poetry is a privileged access to the poet's own experience;
- Poetry is a highly charged collective repository of female experience;
- Poetry is the concentration of the power of language which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe;
- It is a means to transform the symbolic order;
- Tradition is the context where poems are not haunted by patriarchal suggestions and symbols;<sup>10</sup>
- It is a field of precedents which determines the referential and symbolic context of the poem;
- It is an area of perpetual struggle, both political and intellectual.<sup>11</sup>

As Jan Montefiore has said, some of these definitions rest on, and promote, often (as I have said) for strategic reasons, romantic myths of universality which idealize poetry as universal consciousness, and see women's tradition as autonomous, discounting the fact that the mode itself, the 'material formalities' of making a poem, keep it anchored to (male) poetic tradition.

However, I do not agree with Montefiore that women's and men's traditions should be seen in *opposition*, for this would imply that the submerged text is always male, whereas in fact all writing could be considered a palimpsest containing male, female, and also lesbian texts.<sup>12</sup> Thus, I prefer to see the male tradition as the foreign tongue one must perforce use to express oneself, but one which the woman poet reconstructs and genders through equivocations, gaps, spillages, quotations – the techniques of indirection illustrated by Luce Irigaray which, by preventing dual



oppositions, allow new possibilities to take shape. But Montefiore, when speaking of language, will also conclude (as we shall see) that the male text is always present and that therefore we cannot speak of a wholly feminine language.

I am particularly interested in the last definition of poetry given above and quoted from Montefiore, which sees tradition as an area of perpetual struggle. A feminist line of interpretation reverses Harold Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence' in the case of women poets, stressing instead the symbolic mother-daughter link between and among them, which leads to cooperation and authorial empowerment.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Highest Apple*, Judy Grahn expands this relationship to include the Lesbian Community both as audience and as a reservoir of positive consciousness made available to the lesbian poet. Similarly, Rachel Blau du Plessis, quoting Myra Jehlen, speaks of the poet's need to situate 'the self in relation to conventions of representation, and of constructing "enabling relationships"', and also of how women create and recreate for themselves and others the possibility of creativity.

The pattern seems to be that moments of connection lead to expansion and then on to moments of detachment which are essential for self-preservation. Following through this pattern, at one point, Du Plessis (re-reading Virginia Woolf) comments on the repetitive struggle of the woman writer for the authority to write, that is to transcend (and to mend the damage of) the feminine. One part of this struggle involves 'killing the angel in the house', a provocatively blasphemous conjuncture. The angel's maternal conservatism restricts boldness, judgement, and outspokenness.<sup>14</sup>

Extending this argument to lesbian poets, one could assert, therefore, that the lesbian who has re-viewed her own female identity by recasting it in patterns that do not accept traditional male/female demarcation lines is more likely to express herself with authority. The lesbian who can rely on a strong community is even more likely to do so. The example of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, with their careers as poets, speakers, theoreticians and charismatic leaders of the lesbian Community, might seem enough to prove the issue.

But what if the Community, besides acting as a reservoir of

consciousness, also acts as an overbearing symbolic mother restricting 'boldness, judgement, outspokenness' in the name of the symbolic and political significance the poem must have in order to be representative and inspirational? What if, as in the case of the 19th-century authors described by Nina Baym and Joan Kelley, the community does not view the poem as detached from the poet and insists rather on the (political) coherence of life and art?<sup>15</sup> Under these conditions, does lesbian ideology act as a repressing factor?

At first sight one would think that it doesn't. In their introduction to *Lesbian Poetry*, Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin stated that the poets included in the collection 'sought to create a tradition that was anti-literary, anti-traditional, anti-hierarchical'. Indeed, lesbian poetry seemed born to express the unspeakable, the off-limits. It was, and still is, daring, dashing, iconoclastic, innovative. Sometimes.

Yet I would suggest that the myth of nurturance and sisterhood that to a great extent cements our community has tended to encourage a new orthodoxy which lesbian poets have had to outgrow in order to speak with their own voice. Virginia Woolf's angel in the house had to be killed for the writer to achieve authority, but the 'angel in the community' may plead successfully for her life because she has taken the shape not only of necessity but also of creativity.

The need to connect with the Community on the one hand, and the need to disconnect from it on the other often place the lesbian poet in a difficult bind. The lesbian author as a rule agrees with and accepts communitarian principles which set cooperation, harmony and nurturance above and beyond power and authority. Therefore it is in the name of lesbian ethics that the poet strives to establish a non-threatening identity that rides the narrow boundary between authorship and authority.

The outcome often takes the shape of safe explorations of feeling and behaviour according to lesbian-feminist ethics. The cost of trespassing could be a community mirror cracked from side to side. All the same, the ethical code pointing to selflessness is matched, in all of us, by an opposing and necessary drive toward self-expression and self-affirmation. To be accepted as representative, the poet must balance one with the other by using ploys

to justify the need for self-possession, self-ownership and self-esteem in the light of prevalent lesbian-feminist tenets.

I am not saying that this balance is required only by our community. The mainstream poet has also always walked the tight-rope between the world's dictum and private conscience. But although we recognize that poetry interprets and attains to the common reservoir of images and dreams, we usually praise the poet for being out of phase with the world while yet being in synchrony with some private vision of her/his own, we praise the poet for her/his unique voice above and beyond the background noise of current ideas. Still, in the case of lesbian poetry we seem to apply a double standard, for we expect it to be attuned to a set of beliefs which, no matter how at variance with the heterosexual and patriarchal establishment, are orthodox in the community of origin. We may therefore speak of functional poetry, one that serves the interests of the community. Could this be, I ask myself, Lesbo's highest apple?

Lesbian poets, however, at least those who are part of the community and have themselves codified some of its principles, believe that lesbian poetry should speak from the margin. Grahn states: 'In all our work it is clear we understand our role as that of the outsider.'<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Lorde and Rich among others have stated, demonstrated, embedded in their texts the necessity for 'a decentering polylogue', as Elizabeth Meese points out. Multivocality is essential to permit the expression of all women. 'The dynamics of becoming', and the 'freedom of process' are more important than 'the permanence of product'.<sup>17</sup> But what if the margin has since become a hard centre?

Originating in radical grassroots politics, American lesbian-feminism has grown by carefully balancing the needs of many minorities and allowing each and all the legitimacy of self-expression. *Provided* the liberal view of an integrated, multiracial and multicultural community remained finalized to the myth of a whole and wholesome lesbian culture. If individual interests prevailed and/or failed to meet this standard, community approval has been slow in coming.

When Irena Klepfisz wrote her first book, *Periods of Stress* (1978)<sup>18</sup>, she spoke 'from the margin' of two separate but equally powerful centres of consciousness: her Jewishness and her les-

biansm. When the poems were published, she was shocked to find that her Jewish friends could not relate to the lesbian themes, and, worse perhaps, her lesbian friends could not relate to the Jewish themes. As Rich did later, she persevered further into marginality; her next book was that small masterpiece *Keeper of Accounts* (1983)<sup>19</sup> where the two themes join and proliferate.

On the other hand, the special interests of community leaders often point the way to new trends and developments. Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*<sup>20</sup>, for instance. Or Rich's *Sources*<sup>21</sup>, where, coming out as a Jew, she theorized an 'identity of the diaspora' which was lesbian but not only lesbian, and which at the time served the purpose of hushing the ugly politics of pain dividing black and Jewish women. This book, I think, marked yet another turning point for Rich. For the first time in years she made lesbianism the submerged, and not the overt text in her poetry. Many in the community found that 'the powerful womanly lens' she used to analyze the patriarchal and Jewish world was not explicit enough. Immediately afterwards, Rich wrote one of her great poems, 'North American Time', which begins:

'When my dreams showed signs  
of becoming  
politically correct....'<sup>22</sup>

It marks the phase when Rich realized she had become her own bearer of lesbian-feminist orthodoxy. It was time for her to fall silent and lie fallow, in order to begin speaking again. In Du Plessis's pattern, this was the time for detachment. But Rich was lucky, for she was largely her own victim, trapped by her own power.

Audre Lorde, however, seems as yet to have no qualms about her leader's role. She has relentlessly continued to follow her stern, even grim, path of political indictment of racism and class oppression outside and within the women's community. In her poetry integrity, freedom, and orthodoxy seem to overlap via the acknowledgment of her roots and the absolute needs of her black community.

The strength of these ethical choices - which are also textual choices - rests on a set of beliefs shared by most contemporary

lesbian poets active in our community, once all due differences are taken into account: a belief in a sapphic tradition; in the poetry of the common life of women – a poetic matter culled from details and small signs invested with symbolic value; in the transforming power of language; in a lesbian consciousness that crosses the boundaries of time and space; in a women-identified culture investing every existential component with political significance; in love, because it is ‘dually’ that we test the knowledge gathered alone, in groups, or community; in a poetry of awareness coded in a language ‘common’ to the community, directed to an audience of the like-minded, an audience of potential lovers.

For all our poets, lesbian feminism has come fairly late in life. When it came, it shaped their existence and imagination, and shook them with a passion of re-vision and awareness. However, they were not born to the feminist mode, even if they were re-born of it; they embraced, developed, nurtured it. Whereas their poetry was born earlier on, and took root in dark places. Isn't it a truism that the poet will have to tear through the layers of present consciousness in order to articulate the child that cries out deep down and the dark side of adult dreams impermeable to reason? Can lesbian-feminism reach that deep? Or is it not rather, that even in the midst of a rich community, loneliness and angst cry out, defying our common world and defying any hope of perfect communication? Is it not that angst and hope are the matter of poetry? and that no matter how deeply social responsibility is felt, the poet's ultimate commitment is to the inner voice and to the form that best expresses that voice?

Let us look again at the situation of the lesbian-feminist poet. She feels part of the community, considers it her privileged audience and acknowledges its influence and importance in her life as her reservoir of ideas and inspiration. The community, in turn, has a great investment in her poetic value, in the gift of tongues of this sister-daughter, and consequently exacts a price: that she speak for them.

The request is subtle and almost inescapable, because the poet is, in a sense, the product of the community. It is the community's greatest homage to finalize, almost, her existence to reflecting the community back to itself. It is also a reasonable request. Lesbian feminist ideology is all-encompassing and pervasive to the point,

it seems, that it is not only a way of life but almost a second nature. Besides, according to the principle of Visibility, experience does not exist until it can be named and articulated. Hence, lesbian lifestyles do not exist until they are witnessed and spoken for. By her act of witnessing, the poet not only confirms the community's existence, but also her own as a lesbian. This give-and-take makes the request by the community both ethical and understandable.

One can expect lesbian poets to be witnesses and bards, those who have crossed this ideological terrain, investigating the nature of the feminine, of sexuality, of woman-to-woman relationships; those who have made a critique of existing conditions and investigated political changes. Those, like the poets, for whom lesbian-feminism, in its meta-linguistic aspects, involved investigating the art of poetry. In this lesbian universe a poem is a symbolic act, an act of representation and acknowledgment of the political connection – charged in and by itself with political significance.

The poem is also a symbolic act of love, because of the primary, sexual, emotional, social involvement of the poet with other women. This crucial element in the interaction between lesbian author, text and reader may be one of the reasons why lesbian poetry so often addresses the audience directly, or uses strategies of involvement, like Rich's sophisticated extension of the I to the many or even, at times, to the Cosmos.

However, this game of demand and accession to the request can also be explained through the observation that the (feminine) self is often experienced as both dual and multiple by lesbians. In the game of mirrors which we play in life, the self reflects other selves, forever changing and being changed. Essence and presence are indistinguishable. Relationships become maps of mutations. For a lesbian, lesbian identity is inextricably connected with a lover. I am a lesbian because I love women/make love to them.

Predictably, in lesbian love poetry the beloved becomes a signpost in the poet's process of becoming; at worst she exists to establish the poet's own identity, at best she enjoys a primary presence, 'the crucible of a new language'.<sup>23</sup> She tells the lover where she is; she is the measure of sameness and of difference. She marks the territory in between. Because fusion cannot, even in poetry,

be sustained, the beloved sooner or later becomes the Other. Her individuality, by the very matter of poetry, becomes objectified into the landmark, into the body one crosses, into the experience shared but used for the poet's own purposes.

Such is the stuff of desire, that from the desire of desire per se, we fix our attention upon a subject, and make it into an object for our gratification. Yet, in the semiotics of passion all excess escapes this economy by seeking re-presentation and transcendence.

If we transpose this pattern to the relationship of the poet with her audience, the poem is finally greater than the poet, greater than the beloved, greater than the audience. The poem is the presence of the poet to the world. Her access to the symbolic universe. Her badge of authority.

## THE DOUBLE-CROSSING POINT: WHERE LOVERS MEET

I would like, at this point, to postulate a pattern to be found in some textual strategies used by poets, particularly in the seventies, in order to connect their love poetry to the sapphic tradition, especially by way of imagery, echoes and quotations, general style.

It seems to me that the poets try to establish a complicity with the reader through two parallel moves. The first tends, by the very simplicity of the occasion described, to posit the relationship as common, recognizable and shareable beyond a possibly exotic setting – this I would associate with ‘presence’ in actual time and space. The second connects the commonality of feeling and experience through metaphor and simile to the ennobling tradition of sapphic love, myth and epiphanies experienced in and through nature. This I would associate with ‘essence’ and the use of ‘symbols’. The pattern appears to fit the mythical realism praised by Judy Grahn; the poetry meets community approval because it is both expressive of the poet's subjectivity and accessible to a wider audience; it can be labelled essentialist because the lover and the beloved both acquire mythical status; and the whole operation is ultimately ‘politically correct’ because the lover cannot be faulted with casting the beloved subject as an object if the lover

herself has been turned into myth. There remains the suspicion of a taint arising from the fact that in real life the poet acquires status through her poetry by using the beloved as muse – which is, hélas, unavoidable. This suspicion is well grounded, because it demonstrates once again that the poet's ultimate commitment is to the poem, hence, if you will, to the poet who writes the poem. It is the poet who ultimately double-crosses both the beloved and the community.

If this pattern can indeed be found, it is not, however, as interesting as more sophisticated ones. It is too acquiescent, too innocent, a little too essentialist. A poet's poetry evolves as her life evolves, poem after poem, situation after situation. The innocence of early lesbian love poetry, prone to myth, evolves into more complicated forms, no matter what returns and repetitions we may find. The early joyful acceptance of the Community after a while turns into qualified participation. It is in this maturer and more recent poetry that I prefer to look for the way one poet at least cuts across a love relationship where lesbian ethics, community pressures, and the commitment to poetry overlap.

The poets so far under consideration have been in the community a long time. Among them, one is a little (more) different from the rest, less of an insider as far as politics are concerned, but certainly an insider as the former editor of the poetry magazine *Thirteenth Moon*. I would like now to consider Marilyn Hacker, author of five major poetry collections, and in particular her recent sequence of love sonnets called *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*.<sup>24</sup>

The book tells the story of a love affair with another, younger poet: its non-consummation, consummation, difficulties, resolutions, arrangements, its ending. Hacker is a poet who believes in the craft of poetry. When I asked her why she is so insistent on the use of meter and other traditional forms in poetry, she said, rather evasively, that after all women have been writing free verse since the beginning of the century, and free verse is also form.<sup>25</sup> But it seems to me that Hacker, who nurses no illusion as to the transparency of language, has been attempting to challenge the medium itself and to tell women they ought to do the same.

The insistence on high forms alone would set Hacker up as a disturbing factor in a community which upholds the right of



every woman to express herself creatively. If craft distinguishes the real poet from the 'natural', the first line of authority is drawn, the first boundary set. Professional know-how becomes a filter, a parameter for discrimination. This kind of argument would probably seem demagogical to Hacker. Language is not a transparent medium for one's feelings; it is a tough, resilient dimension with its own consistency which we must learn to fashion for our own purposes. It is the prehensile thumb needed to express what we perceive.

Certainly, the use of poetic forms can be seen as a pass-key to the precinct of male poetic tradition. A way to show we can do it just as well and better. But in Hacker's case we soon discover that form means essence, presence and symbol all at once. We watch Hacker challenge the reader with sonnets, rondeaux, and villanelles, challenge her lover to yet another sonnet, her students to tighter forms. Tight forms, she says, 'only make them funkier, slang their diction down' (p. 86). Mixing high structures with low form is a deconstructive strategy. It is not just that, sonnet after sonnet, writing, food, and lovemaking interweave. But that orality and semiosis (in the shape of puns, irony, nonsense) signify the presence of the body together and beyond the subject matter. They break through the abstract pattern of form, make fun of it, debunk it, control it, enjoy it. They point past words and through sounds to the underlying semiotic patterns. Her manipulation of language into new semantic combinations expressive of the body feels voluptuous, somewhat perverse, definitely naughty. But if this strategy can be labelled a high transgression in the domain of signification<sup>26</sup>, it is nonetheless constantly redressed by the hard boundaries of the poetic symbolic structure.

There is another reason why I find this book relevant to my argument. It deals with the love of two poets with strong egos tempted by passion and commitment to a relationship endangered from the start by age difference and unequal professional experience. One, an established and very knowledgeable poet very much in love; the other a young, untried poet still learning her craft, hungry for experience and freedom.

Such difficult premises can only be met if individual autonomy is never in jeopardy. The question of community pressure seems to be ruled out from the start: 'The uniform of the politically

correct, dear, would be grounds for a divorce,' one lover tells the other (p. 101). Community authority is here challenged, bypassed, dismissed. One may live by and for the book, but not by and for community rule(s). The poet is first of all an individual.

Although the ethical plane is not entrusted to an outside code, it does exist as an inner dimension inextricable, at least for the speaker, from poetic identity. Whether they make love or not, whether they look like lesbians or not, they are lesbians. But they are also poets. Their ultimate allegiance is to poetry. The relationship must be functional to it. Bliss is talking in some bar 'about us, and poetry' (p. 42). Completion is being together, 'in love with our work' (p. 69). Just as in poetry the 'anarchistic libido' is always in conflict with the repressive ordering of form, in life self-possession is essential; and this love relationship takes shape according to a pattern of temptation, abandon, fear, resistance, refusal of symbiosis.

Whereas merging with the beloved is both longed for and feared, there is no ambiguity about the longing to marry art and life. In fact, these love sonnets look more often like a courtship of poetry than of the beloved. Text and body continuously merge; one reflects on the other. Rachel's body 'is a text I need the art to be constructed by'; the speaker's body is 'a book made for your hands to read'. The lover's permanent address is the cardboard covers of the notebook 'between which I live with you' (p. 38). A clean page is where Rachel can be found again.

Such commitment to art clearly cannot be separated from the search for control and order in one's life. 'I will not go to bed with you because I want to very much,' states the first poem, thus expressing a perverse yet ethical principle. It is not that sleeping with someone else's lover is bad because the Community says that to do so is immoral. It's bad 'for one' because it's messy; it endangers the clean lines of one's life; it leaves a bad taste. This much becomes obvious, by implication, in a later poem ('Lacoste V', p. 25), one of those where writing, cooking, and longing interweave. The grit and patience needed to keep the long vow of silence in order to write a set of Welsh quatrains will be rewarded with a cassoulet of goose simmering in the meantime on the burner. That kind of stamina is no different from the self-control needed to wait for Rachel to leave her present 'wife' so that the

new relationship, when it really starts, can be well-lived.

However, this is a book about a relationship that will not last, except on paper, as a sequence of sonnets. Perhaps Jan Montefiore is right when she calls the sonnet the narrative *donnée* of deprivation.<sup>27</sup> These sonnets are best when they cast the other's absence as a presence in the lover's body, in her mind – even if this can be said of all writing, which is perforce a substitute. But here, the sonnet is the real and most privileged space in between lover and beloved – the place of interaction of two lovers where the highest hopes are placed. Writing can only come from the gap between I and thou, as we look at us together, there where the others also are.

The existence of a Community is never questioned but is perceived as a loose network of individuals on the move, interrelating, supporting, listening, loving, turning up at expected or unexpected places. The Community is also perceived as ancestry. Hacker's many returns to Paris in the guise of yet another Jewish dyke (expatriate) in France claim kinship with Stein & Co. If this is yet another myth – one that passes through food, language and hard sex, one that associates sapphic love with laxatives and tummy-aches in the attempt to bring a tangible, concrete lesbian body to a father-form where the daughters have been erased – then it is welcome. For this is not an act of seduction, but a raid, whose aim is not to deface with graffiti the walls of a male bastion, but to claim the structure itself. We need this mythology too, the way we need all new formulations that show our communities to be fluid, heterogeneous, multivocal and authoritative.

## NOTES

- 1 My definition of 'myth' is eclectic and my use of the term does not necessarily carry negative connotations. I see myth as the extrapolation of symbolic forms from experiential data; as related to fabulation and juxtaposes to *logos*, the language of reason; as related to *agon* in the complex pattern explored by John Barth in *Chimera*, where *mythos* acts as the heroic and symbolic representation of *agon*. Furthermore, I owe the concept of myth as de-politicized language, suppres-

sive of dialectics and complexities, and elusive of social realities to the last chapter of Roland Barthe's *Mythologies*. In this sense, this very text may be considered mythical, but I hope also expressive of a heterogeneous subjectivity and multiple identity (quoting Teresa de Lauretis) networking with other textual mythologies by women.

- 2 Rachel Blau du Plessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending. Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 23.
- 3 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 36.
- 4 Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry. Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*. London: Pandora, 1987, p. 56. I substantially altered an early draft on this paper after reading Montefiore's text. I wish to thank the author, whom I have never met, for a book that filled so many needs.
- 5 Montefiore, *op.cit.*, pp. 84-85.
- 6 Luisa Muraro, a respected philosopher who has worked for years with the group of the Libreria delle Donne in Milan, is considered the symbolic mother of the 'Affidamento' (here translated, somewhat improperly, as 'trust': the Italian formulation of the theory of Sexual Difference). For her viewpoint on the history of feminism in Milan, see Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987); and for the theory developed by her philosophy group 'Diotima', see Adriana Cavarero *et al.*, *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987). For a view of the debate as it intersects Italian lesbian-feminism, see Liana Borghi, Gloria Corsi, Alessandra de Perini and Simonetta Spinelli, 'Italian Lesbians: Maps and Signs'. In *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality? Conference Papers*, Social Sciences, Vol. 2. Amsterdam: Free University and Schorer Foundation, 1987, pp. 112-125.
- 7 Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin (eds.), *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981; and *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Out and Out Books, 1975.
- 8 Bulkin and Larkin, *Lesbian Poetry, op.cit.*

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- 9 Judy Grahn, *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition*. San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1985.
- 10 Montefiore, *op.cit.*, p. 57.
- 11 Montefiore, *op.cit.*, p. 20.
- 12 The best formulation of textual strategies related to lesbian-feminist poetry is to be found in the work of Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz. See among other essays: *The Transforming Power of Language: the Poetry of Adrienne Rich*. Utrecht: Hes Publishers, 1984; and *Translating Poetic Discourse. Questions on Feminist Strategies in Adrienne Rich*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1985.
- 13 For a summary of the debate, see Betsy Erkkila, 'Dickinson and Rich: Toward a Theory of Female Poetic Influence'. *American Literature* 56:4 (1984) pp. 540-60.
- 14 Du Plessis, *op.cit.*, p. 102.
- 15 Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers. Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; and  
Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage. Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- 16 Grahn, *op.cit.*, p. 82.
- 17 Elizabeth Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 148.
- 18 Irena Klepfisz, *Periods of Stress*. Brooklyn: Out & Out Books, 1975, 1977.
- 19 Irena Klepfisz, *Keeper of Accounts*. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1982.
- 20 Audre Lordc, *Cancer Journals*. Argyle, New York: Spinsters Ink, 1981.
- 21 Adrienne Rich, *Sources*. Woodside: Heyeck Press, 1983.
- 22 Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Door Frame: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984, p. 324.
- 23 Adrienne Rich, 'Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman'. In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, pp. 250-51. In the original sentence, Rich includes a reference to Mary Daly. Discussing Grahn's poetry in this essay, she also speaks of

what the word 'lover' might mean 'in a world where each person held both power and responsibility' and, further on, adds the following: 'love-sustaining love-poetry is not "about" the lover, but about the poet's attempt to live with her experience of love.... For the lesbian poet it means rejecting the entire convention of love poetry and undertaking to create a new tradition'.

- 24 Marilyn Hacker, *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons*. New York: Arbor House, 1986. Page references are given after each quotation.
- 25 This conversation took place in New York on 19 September 1987.
- 26 Andrea Nye, 'Woman Clothed with the Sun: Julia Kristeva and the Escape from/to Language'. *Signs* 12:4 (Summer 1987) p. 680.
- 27 Jan Montefiore, *op.cit.*