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# BODY LANGUAGE: SOMATIC IMAGERY IN WOMEN'S POETRY

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Body language and somatic imagery are two issues that have been dealt with quite a lot lately. The answer for this might be that women writers nowadays have been making poetry labeled as 'extravagant' by some and 'outrageous' by others. It should be mentioned that what we nowadays call 'shocking' has in fact three subspecies: what strikes the imagination – the extravagant; what strikes the senses – the repulsive; what torments and tortures the feeling – the terrifying. Women poetry is trapped somewhere in between the extravagant and the repulsive.

The aim of the paper is to examine three sorts of representative attitudes discernable in women poets who explore female bodily experience associated with three sorts of verbal strategies. In the work which is referred to, the familiar vertical standard has shattered; body is not assumed to be inferior to some higher principle. The attitudes are rejection, ambivalence and affirmation; the verbal devices are irony, comedy and revisionist symbolism. Of special interest are the emotions, the forms employed and the reinterpretations of other matters which follow from interpreting the body.

During the last three decades, America poets have been employing anatomical imagery both more frequently and more intimately than their male counterparts. Their female audiences enjoy this. Male readers, unsurprisingly, tend to be more uncomfortable by female candor and to feel that it is inartistic. The American artist sometimes avoided her femininity by getting her mental hysterectomy early. She will often not speak for female experience even when the men do. She will be the angel-artist, with celestially muted lower parts. Sometimes, in any of the arts, where women's work remains beautifully mandarin or minor, it may not be because of their womanhood but from their lack of it.

It is of course difficult for any of us to evade the mental yardstick which seems to have been let down from heaven like Jacob's ladder, governing thousands of years of religion, philosophy and literature, according to which the mortal and corruptible flesh imprisons the immortal and incorruptible soul, the body is base and the mind exalted.

If anatomy is destiny, we all want to escape it. From Plato to Freud, and beyond Fred to Simone de Beauvoir, civilization means vertical mobility: one transcends the body in order to achieve something o public worth. In **The Second Sex** (1972) Simone de Beauvoir develops this idea more explicitly than any other writer, in the course of a argument designed to show that male biology, because its strength and independence encourage the masculine deeds of control, acts relatively to man's advantage, while female biology, because it is organized to serve *the iron grasp of the species* (ends of procreation) rather than the individual, is a handicap. For de Beauvoir, the inferior life of immanence associated with the body must become superior life of 'transcendence' willed by the striving individual ego; this, she believes, will improve the lives of individuals of both sexes, and the quality of civilized life.

As to woman, woman in mythology *is* the flesh when men write about her as she has not been required to write about *the flesh herself.*

## From pleasure to pain

If, traditionally, the flesh has been either overlooked or disregarded, that has happened due to two main reasons. The flesh is both corrupt and corruptible; that is, both inherently sinful and inherently subject to change and death. The former grievance is expressed morally, the latter lyrically – and with the understanding that in the youth and prime of life, the flesh is a source of pleasure.

A large number of women poets since the 1960's appear to view the body as a source essentially of pain, not pleasure. The topicality of such issues as: abortion, breast surgery, rape have become part of women's poetic repertoire. There exists a subgenre of poems in which a woman's flesh and blood are manipulated by a condescending doctor figure. The damaged bodies of war victims, the hungry bodies of famine victims are important images in the work of Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, and Denise Levertov. Women also seem drawn to describe psychic hurt in somatic terms.

"*We sat across the table,/ he said, cut off your hands,/ they're always poking at things,/ they might touch me./ I said yes./ Food grew cold on the table,/ he said burn your body,/ it is not clean and smells like sex,/ it rubs my mind sore,/ I said yes./ I love you, I said,/ that's very nice, he said,/ I like to be loved,/ that makes me happy./ Have you cut off your hands yet?"* (Piercy Marge, *The Friend*, 1973: 65).

The very beginning lines point to an idea of distance and coldness between the two protagonists who have already engaged themselves in an incessant love battle for supremacy: both of them have clearly marked their own territories *'across the table'*. The hands have turned into lifeless/ loveless objects that are *'always poking at things'*: they no longer are *the mouth of the body* which once kissed, touched and felt and comforted the beloved one. The lines are filled with images that describe the metamorphosis of pleasure into pain: love is the *'food'* which *'grew cold on the table'* with the passing of time and the two lovers have obviously lost the passion which de-flamed their bond. The idea that love is not only painful but filthy thus requiring purification by fire is in the line *'he said burn your body'*, which, paradoxically enough might be seen as a solution to the riddle of love if we are to *translate* it into *'go and inflame you body, go and fill it with life, with fire and passion'*. The imagery created is so strong and powerful that we can almost picture the two lovers sitting across the table while poking at each other, and smell the strong stench of sweat gliding down the two bodies after having had animalistic sex. The woman seems to be mentally crippled since she is unable to take attitude and react against her being turned into a mere (sexual) object: *'I said yes'*.

With Anne Sexton, the body is turned into a protagonist of the poem: there is a suggestion of self-abandonment into comfort, into tranquility, the tranquility that one needs to flee back from all the ado of the modern world.

*'Oh, darling, let your body in,/ let it tie you in,/ in comfort .../ What I want to say, Linda,/ is that there is nothing in your body that lies.'* (*Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman*, 1973: 124).

Most women writers make use of powerful somatic imagery in their poems to render the idea of psychic hurt and scorn of the flesh: there is always a strong connection between physical vulnerability and ironic self-rejection.

*'Stop bleeding said the knife./ I would if I could said the cut./ Stop bleeding you make me messy with this blood./ I'm sorry said the cut.'* (Swenson May, *Bleeding*, 1978: 54).

The normal as well as the abnormal in a woman's life may feel like imprisonment, as in Lisel Mueller's *Life of a Queen* (1975: 134) which summarizes the biological cycle of

cognate species: *'They build a pendulous chamber/ for her, and stuff her with sweets … A crew disassembles/ her royal cell'*, or the opening of Anne Sexton's *Snow White*: *'No matter what life you lead/ the virgin is a lovely number,/ cheeks fragile as cigarette paper,/ arms and legs made of Limoges,/ lips like Vin du Rhone,/ rolling her china blue eyes/ open and shut'* (1973:84).

To understand the connection between physical vulnerability and ironic self-rejection, we may consider Sylvia Plath. Plath' work is filled with body images both internal and external: skin, blood, skulls, feet, mouths tongues, wounds, bone, lungs, heart and veins, legs and arms. She writes of both male and female bodies. She also projects human anatomy into the natural world. The moon is *'a face in its own right, / White as a knuckle and terribly upset'* (1973: 142). Goldfish ponds being drained *'collapse like lungs'*, an elm speaks like a woman pregnant, or cancer-ridden – one cannot tell the difference: *'Terrified by this dark thing/ That sleeps in me; / All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity'* (145). When the poet is hospitalized, tulips breathe: *'Lightly through their swaddlings, like an awful baby,/ their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds/ They are opening like the mouth of some African cat'* (146). The organic, for Plath, is approximately identical with suffering. Her poetry offers fragments of beings, not whole persons. In **The World as Icon** (1970:73) the critic Annette Lavers notices that the living flesh is felt as a prey to axes doctor's needles, butchers' and surgeons' knives, poison, snakes, tentacles, acids, vampires, leaches and bats, jails and brutal boots. Similarly, small animals are butchered and eaten, man's flesh can undergo the final indignity of being cut to pieces and used as an object. Subjects and metaphors include a cut, a contusion, the tragedy of thalidomide, fever, an accident, a wound, a paralysis, a burial, animal and human sacrifice, the burning of heretics, lands devastated by wars, and extermination camps. Therefore, Plath's poetry is a *'garden of tortures'* in which mutilation and annihilation take nightmarishly protean forms.

A number of persistent motifs are particularly feminine. Plath's imagery for strangulation implies in extreme form the woman fatally imprisoned and stifled by her own body. Attacks by miniature enemies evoke the idea of a woman's body as a parasite, feeding from her life. Children are hooks sticking in one's skin, and placenta and umbilical cord threaten to poet in *Medusa.* Most painfully, her imagery of laceration suggests woman's essential anatomical condition, shameful to endure, difficult to confess as in *Cut* where the poet runs through a series of brilliant metaphors for the thumb she has just sliced with a kitchen knife *'instead of an onion'*. All the metaphors are masculine and military: *'Little pilgrim …, redcoats …, homunculus …, kamikaze man'* before the final *'How you jump -/ Trepanned veteran./ Dirty girl,/ Thumb stump'* (1973:149).

What, after all, is more humiliating than being a bleeding dirty girl? At the same time, the landscape of war and mutilation in a poem like *Getting there,* the references to Jews and Nazis in *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus,* the *Hiroshima Ash* of *Fever 103* and even the sour commercial comedy of *The Applicant* in which a wife is sold like a household appliance and only the mutilated man can be normal enough to marry, reinforce Plath's vision of worldly existence as at worst holocaust, at best tawdry sideshow. The drama of social and political life plays out, on a nightmarishly large scale, the victimization of the body.

Plath demonstrates a will toward detachment from body and word in two ways, of which the first is Art – the distancing of experience through poetic manipulation. Her early verse employs tight formal structures, bookish diction, a harmony of allusions to sanctioned works of art and literature, and a consistently ironic impersonality of tone, which has everything to do with rising above experience, little to do with dwelling in it. The looser, less traditional forms of her late work rather intensify than relax our sense of the poet's control. She manipulates rhyme and off rhyme, regular and irregular mater, with

the casualness of a juggler tossing knives, and her mature mastery of colloquial idiom illustrates her contempt for the vulgar and cruel social relations which generate such idiom. She becomes a mocker of the vernacular, using language against itself: *'The peanut-crunching crowds shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot - /The big strip tease'* (*Lady Lazarus,* 1973:152). But *'Dying/ Is an art, like everything else'*. The implicit equation is clear as early as *'Two Views of a Cadaver Room'*, which places a real-life scene with corpses next to the *'panorama of smoke and slaughter'* in a Breughel painting. In *The Disquieting Muses*, Plath rejects her mother's cheery songs and stories for the three bald and faceless figures she accepts as artistic guides. And in *Ariel*, as in poem after poem, the poet *unpeels* herself from her body, lets it *flake* away, annihilates the *trash* of flesh which disgusts her because it would make her kin to the ogling peanut-crunching crowd – as she transforms herself from the gross matter to a *'pure acetylene virgin'* rising towards heaven, or to dew evaporating in the sunrise – transcendence always means death. And if she fears and scorns death's perfection: *'Perfection is terrible. It cannot have children', 'This is what it means to be complete. It is horrible'* (153), self annihilation is nevertheless the ultimately ironic response to humiliation.

Plath is an extreme example. One may view her work aesthetically as a radical extension of the mode of disenchanted alienation in the Eliot – Auden – Lowell line. One may view it morally as a capitulation to weakness, self-indulgence. Perhaps it is both. In any case, the identification of woman and body, body and vulnerability, vulnerability ad irony – which in effect responds to the implacable indifference or cruelty of the external world by internalizing it – is a common phenomenon in women's poetry of the last thirty years or so.

**Advertising women**

As W. B. Yeats has his *'beautiful mild woman'* (actually Maude Gonnet's sister) observe in *Adam's Curse, 'to be born a woman is to know / Although they do not speak of it at school /Women must labor to be beautiful* (1983:56).

The idea of vulnerability and self annihilation appears not only in the poems marking the passing *from pleasure to pain* but also in such poems dealing with the woman's permanent concern to do away with the stereotype of *exchange value* created and kept alive by men.

In reply, one may imagine a chorus of not-so-mild women poets remarking: you said it. The labors of loveliness have not been traditionally spoken in poetry, beyond misogynist attacks on the foulness of the painted woman. But they are now, commonly to hilarious effect. Honor Moore's poem *'M' Mother's Moustache* (1988:67) gives a wry and detailed account of adolescence with and without depilatories. Karen Swenson tells of a bosom which never attains movie star amplitude, and hopes (with oral metaphors in the Spenser – Keats tradition) to find a man who will settle for dumplings at the feast of life. Kathleen Fraser writes *A Poem in Which My Legs are Accepted* (1993:89). The opening poem of Diane Wakoski's **Motorcycle Betrayal Poems** (1971: 78) complains about *'this ridiculous face/ of lemon rinds/ and vinegar cruets'*. Grumbling with the voice of multitudes in *Woman Poem* (1973:69), Nikki Giovanni summarizes: *'it's a sex object if you're pretty/ and no love and no sex if you're fat'*.

Beauty, when a woman stops to think about it, mans bondage. In *A Work of Artifice*, Marge Piercy compares the feminine fate with that of a bonsai tree, artificially miniature.

*'It is your nature/ to be small and cozy,/ domestic and weak;/how lucky little tree .../ within living creatures/ one must begin very early/ to dwarf their growth:/ the bound feet,/ the*

*crippled bran,/ the hair in curlers,/ the hands you love to touch.'* (1973:153). Obviously, as a woman, there seems to be a continuous interest for keeping up with some *beauty* standards as early as the adolescence days. The feminine fate is compared to that of a bonsai tree the symbolism of which sends us to the idea of limitation: it is its (her) innate nature not to grow and say *'dwarf, small and cozy'* all its (her) lifetime.

In *Pro Femina,* Carolyn Kizer *advertises women* and forwards the idea that there are commercial-economic and emotional reasons that lead to a woman's entrapment and psychological handicapping.

> *'Our masks, always in peril of smearing and cracking,/ In need of continuous check in the mirror or silverware,/Keep us in thrall to ourselves, concerned with our surfaces./…/ So sister, forget yourself a few times, and see where it gets you:/ Up the creek, alone with your talent, sans everything else./ You can wait for the menopause, and catch up with your reading.'*(1980:42)

The adaptation of advertising language in the opening lines grimly indicates that a woman's face is not her own but someone else's fortune. But what can she do? She needs to be loved. Further on Carolyn Kizer talks about women of letters and addresses the unique dilemma of the lady with the brains and ambition.

Is our perpetual concern of always wearing masks and pretending to be something that we are not derived from our wrong ideas that we might not think ourselves worthy of a man's love? Is this frailty ego, deception? Could this be a demystification of the woman? If *beauty* is just refraction, a distorted one, into the mirrors of our minds, why can't we do away with the *bondage* we have crated? We should remember Luce Irigaray's **Speculum of the Other Woman** (1985) where the mirror, used in its connotative meaning, is the instrument of penetration in gynecology, but it also triggers off the process of *specularization* – speculation (phalocentric thinking) and specularization – looking into a mirror, therefore a narcissistic act.

While quizzical poems on the topic of beauty versus truth as applied to cosmetics will admittedly weigh lightly in most literary scales, they typically embody two interesting stylistic decisions. First, the poems are not openly autobiographical and factual, but anti-literary, even anti-aesthetic, in the sense that they refuse, rather than cultivate, formal distance.

In the volume of women's poetry **Making the Park**, Marina La Palma wrote *Holding Fast*, a poem on the woman-flower theme:

> *'In a shop there are dark red/ and purple flowers growing from a pot./ My fingers hesitate, then press against their/ folds – which yield only a little/ and give no sign that they've been touched/ "Like intestines" he woman says./ To me they are inside/ vagina convoluted folds./ I hesitate before I say it/ thinking it might shock her/ obvious and careful point of view.'* (1981: 76)

No persona, no gloss of verbal refinement intervenes between the poet and the sense of personal inadequacy, or between herself and her audience. There is no *extension of personality* here. As readers, we are asked to participate in the predicament of someone who wants to be beautiful while challenging, implicitly or explicitly, the standards or value of beauty for a woman, and who does not pretend to transcend the situation. It would be inappropriate to make the poem itself too beautiful.

But the poem must be comic. Comedy enables writer and reader to agree that the predicament is, after all, innately absurd. Not a life-or-death matter, is it? Clowning shows that we have perspective. Or perhaps we laugh that we may not show the frown lines to the mirror? He rollicking meter and jaunty-to-blustery tone of *Pro Femina*, unlike Kizer's more usual lyric style, serve the same function as a woman's preening: they make a disguise for a naked emotion, as paint for a woman's naked face.

Possibly, the funniest, certainly the most outrageous poem of this subgenre is Erica Jong's tour de force *Aging*, subtitled *Balm for a 27th Birthday*. Jong at the outset presents herself as: *'Hooked for two years now n wrinkle creams/ creams for crowsfeet ugly lines (if only they were one)/ any perfumed grease which promises youth beauty/ not truth but all I need on earth'* (1978: 67). She imagines through several lines the advancing track of the wrinkles as *'ruin proceeds downwards'* and the face begins to resemble *'the tragic mask'*. Her tone grows increasingly nervous, but the poem is undergoing a transformation of its own, from self- mocking panic to self-loving acceptance. Though *'the neck will give you away'* and the chin in spite of face-lifts *'will never love your bones as it once did', 'the belly may be kept firm through numerous pregnancies/ by means of sit-ups jogging dancing (think of Russian/ ballerinas) and the cunt/ as far as I know is ageless possibly immortal becoming simply/ more open and more quick to understand more dry-eyed than at 22/ which/ after all is all that you were dying for…'*(67).

If a woman is naturally narcissistic, she might as well go the whole hog. Beauty is, Jong reminds us, as beauty does. Incidental amusements like the play on *lines* and *plotting* in a woman's face or her writing (both of which show *promise* of *deepening*) occupy the reader through the first part of the poem. The four-letter term at the poem's crux has been cunningly prepared for by suggestions that decline in on aspect may bring ascendance in another. The close gracefully offers the pun on *'what you were dying for'* and concludes with a deft inversion of a centuries-old poetic convention. Time, the enemy of love in lyric poetry since the Greek *Anthologia,* has become sequence of lovers-blundering, presumably young and inexperienced lovers at that – to whom a woman, ripe with herself, can condescend.

Jong writes less successfully when she attempts to make narcissism look sublime rather than ridiculous, and poems of self examination in this surface sense do not easily survive the comic mode. Because humor can effectively spotlight problems and conflicts which are naggingly real and ostensibly trivial, the comic-autobiographical mode has become a major opinion in women's writing.

**Female body symbolism**

When women write to praise the body rather than attack or joke about it, their most significant technique is symbolism. Water, moon, earth and living things, the natural as opposed to the artificial, provide the strongest sources or imagery for women poets engaged in commending the basic physical self, just as they always have for men describing women.

Nevertheless, there are differences. The identification of woman with flowers, for example, is as least as old as the **Le Roman de la Rose.** Elizabethan poets agreed that *'Beauty is but a flower/ Which wrinkles with devour'*. Keats urged the melancholic lover to glut his sorrow on a rose, a wealth of globed peonies, or his mistress's peerless eyes, all of which with beauty that must die. Poets have seen both woman and flower from without, whether in erotic poetry, poetry of witty seduction, or poetry of reflection on the transience and mutability of life. But, when Diane Wakoski compares an armful of roses first with skin and then with internal organs the, focus changes.

> *'The full roses with all their petals like the wrinkles of laughter/ on your face as you bend to kiss someone/ are bursting on the bush,/ spotting my arm, as I carry a bundle of them,/ to my friends;/ they seem to have come out of my skin/ on this fragrant night,/ and I imagine the inside of my body/ glowing, phosphorescent, with strange flower faces/ looking out from the duodenum/ or the soft liver,/ white as my belly, the eyes are*

*always disbelieving/ the ugly processes that make a living body.'* (*In Gratitude to Beethoven*, 1968: 54)

In their particularized detail-color, texture as well as dramatic quality, these flowers resemble Plath's poppies and tulips. One experiences not *beauty* but an overwhelming vividness, energy and terror in the sense of self as living organism. The rapid and radical alterations of focus in Wakoski's lines blur spatial distinctions between night and roses, ace, arm and the inside of the body, until everything seems equally bursting, hot, fragrant and in flux. The extreme vitality of flowers and body approaches the obscene, as in Plath it approaches the predatory. Though wrinkled, there is nothing frail or weak in the blossoms of either poet.

The *personalism* and *particularism* of women writers can provoke both disapproval and approval given that, on the one hand, the female tendency to define the self in terms of relationships with others is a defect, and on the other, a virtue, since relationship, communication and identification are primary devices for women writers. Again, when Adrienne Rich writes of dividing into the wreck, or Sharon Barba of entering *'that dark watery place'*, both poets accept a woman-water identification held in common with Shakespeare's **Cleopatra**, identified with the fertile and capricious Nile, or with Milton's Eve – whose first act in **Paradise Lost** is to kneel and behold her own image in water, where Adam at the moment of his creation sprang upright and looked at the sky. One also recalls the sea-mother in Whitman's **Out of the Cradle,** and the Mermaids of Prufrock's plunge into memory, into fantasy, into that brief moment of womblike ease before he wakes and chokes on mortal air. Throughout western tradition, descent into waters signifies danger or death, consistently associated with the feminine.

Women who make the same plunge also evoke the dangerous and the unknown, but they tend to evoke at the same time a sense of trust. The destructive element is *their* element. It is alien, and yet it is home, where one will not be hurt. Rich notes that relaxation rather than force is required to maneuver here, and she is confident of finding treasure as well as devastation. At the deepest point in the poem she becomes her deepest self, the androgyne: *'I am she ... I am he'.* Barba anticipates, from these waves, the birth of a new Venus, closer to nature than Boticelli's.

Still again, if our most celebrated and compendious symbol for woman is earth, adored as mother, revered as virgin, earth is of course *other* than the celebrant; she is always the principle of passive material life divided from the mental or spiritual and she is always subject to conquest. Women who identify with earth, however, include Margaret Atwood who in her *Circe/ Mud Poems* (1973) taunts Odysseus: *'Don't you get tired of saying Onward?'* and Yosana Akiko who in *Mountain Moving Day* (1983) makes the mountain a symbol both of women's bodies and of their awakening consciousness. The idea of a consciousness invisible from the earthy body appears in Anne Sexton's notorious *In Celebration of my Uterus*, written on the occasion of a medical reprieve which has defied rational diagnosis. Sexton's opening is euphoric, buoyant, and hyperbolic.
*'They wanted to cut you out/ but they will not.../They said you were sick onto dying./ but they were wrong./ You are singing like a schoolgirl'* (1989:68).
The poem's central portion compares the uterus with *'soil of the fields ... roots'* and the poet announces, in an engaging combination of insouciant self-confidence and generosity: *'Each cell has a life./ There is enough her to feed a nation'*(68).

The abundance and fertility of the poet's imagination in inventing her group of women of all types, from all religions of the globe, must be understood as a parallel to, or an extension of, her uterine health. Moreover, this chorale of far-flung women cannot be

perceived from without, precisely as the continued vitality and fertility of the womb has evaded external discernment:

> *'Many women are singing together of this:/ one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine, /.../ one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,/one is straddling a cello in Russia,/ one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt,/ .../ one is staring out the window of a train/ .../ anywhere and some everywhere and all/ seem to be singing although some cannot/ sing a note.'*(68)

As matter, so spirit. Both, according to this poem, lie within, in the realm of the immanent rather than the transcendent. The function of spirit is to celebrate matter, not to subdue or escape it, and women become mutually connected beings by the participation of spirit in the principle of flesh they commonly share. (Sherry Ortner, *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* 1974: 98)

Sexton has used a conventional fertility-and-harvest symbolism to lure us into a set of convictions – here presented as perceptions – entirely opposed to those of the vertical standard.

For a woman, perhaps the most decisively difficult act is to think of herself as powerful, or as more powerful than a man, and capable of influencing the outward world without sacrificing femaleness.

One poet who has asserted hat female biology equals power, and has found a set of symbols to state is nature, is Robin Morgan. In the series of poems entitled **The Network of the Imaginary Mother** (1977)**,** Morgan describes a conversion from flesh-loathing to flesh-affirmation while nursing her dying mother, and defines her biological capacities in terms of goddess-figures – Kali, Isis, African and Pre-Columbian madonnas – representing a triumphant will to love and nurture. Her husband in this poem is Osiris, a *consort* and her son teaches *the simple secret of delight.* For Morgan is not the god-man of the Gospels, but a nursing woman who says to her own son, and by extension, all children, envisioning a world un-threatened by violence and famine: *'Take. Eat. This is my body,/ this real milk, thin, sweet, bluish,/ which I give for the life of the world .../ as honest nourishment/ alone able to sustain you.'* (*Lady of the Beasts*, 1977:82)

Biological facts and spiritual interpretation here become indistinguishable. He poet's fantasy of a maternal politics would eliminate the burden of conflict between humanity and nature, between individual and species, between woman's body and social change.

## Self as world

Poets have perennially occupied themselves with discovering analogies between the macrocosm of the world and the microcosm of the self. For many women poets at present, the microcosm means, emphatically, a physical self from which it is neither possible nor desirable to divide mental or emotional existence.

A particular endeavor of twentieth-century thought has involved a questioning of distinctions between private and public life, in order to understand how each influences and reflects the other. Here too, women poets seem inclined to insist that we begin with the body to understand the body politic. None of these poets seems disposed to celebrate a world of *transcendent* public action at the cost of minimizing the physical self. For some, the dominant experience of life in the flesh is suffering. One can scarcely deny the public validity of such an apprehension in the light of history. For other writers, the relation between private and public means a conflict between what used to be called appearance and reality. To cosmetize or not to cosmetize? This is a battle fought on the fields of the skin, as well as on more dignified terrain. For still others, the body is felt as strength, a

kind of connective tissue uniting human beings at a level beneath the particularities of individual ego or circumstance, a set of capacities both socially and personally valuable.

Compared with the variety and richness of works by omen in this area, the works of most male poets in the 1970's appears inhibited and unoriginal. If we may say that women have contrived to make a continental landscape out of the secret gardens to which they have been forcefully confined, we may say by the same token that men have endued a certain self-imposed exile.

*Distance* remains a virtue in the male poetic establishment, almost like a corollary of the training which defines the masculine body exclusively as tool or weapon, forbids it to acknowledge weakness or pain, and deprives in accordingly of much potential sensitivity to pleasure – a sensuous man is an *effeminate* man – apart from the pleasures associated with combat or conquest. The discourse of male bonding may derive from big and little, game hunting and the tennis court, or from allusions to the responses of women in bed. These are the safe, sane, blush proof topics.

Men also look in mirrors, experience troublesome and delicious sensations contribute to the generation of species and ride throughout life the tide of emotions influenced by glandular secretions. They too get ill, grow old and withered, and are, in sum, precisely as rooted in nature as women. Will they in due time acknowledge this condition? Will women begin comparing the bodies of men to flowers?

Confronting old age, Yeats divided himself into two beings: a old man craving fiery purification from the flesh and an old woman – Crazy Jane – raucously declaring her satisfaction with it. One must assume that the discoveries women poets are making about bodily experience, and the verbal tactics employed to name their discoveries, will enter common usage and become readily available to men as well as women. Crazy Jane stands at the foot of the tower, inviting the man to come down.

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***Abstract***

*The present paper aims at examining three sorts of representative attitudes discernable in women poets who explore female bodily experience associated with three sorts of verbal strategies.*

***Résumé***

*Cet article essai d'examiner trois catégories représentatives qui peuvent être identifiées dans la poèsie des poétesses qui explorent l'expérience sensorielle du corps en l'associant aux trois catégories de stratégies verbales.*

***Rezumat***

*Lucrarea de faţă îşi propune spre analiză trei tipuri de atitudini reprezentative ce pot fi identificate în poezia scrisă de poetese care explorează experienţa corpului feminin asociindu-i trei tipuri de strategii verbale.*