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PERSONAL ICONS: WOMEN AND GODDESSES IN ELIOT, WILLIAMS, AND ROETHKE

Nietzsche, that “insightful old misogynist”, in John Jervis’s memorable phrase, used to say that women “‘put on something’ even when they take off everything” (Jervis 140). The statement, though dated, seems fairly representative of the perspective shared by many 20th-century American male poets. To them a “real” woman is, first and foremost, a natural – and hence often unwitting – enactor of the primordial role-models of virgin, mother, and crone, that is a specific manifestation of womanhood rather than a unique and psychologically complex individual in her own right. As Jervis points out,

There is a sense in which a man becomes a man through culture, through clothing; a woman, however, is always a “woman”, clothed or unclothed. Angela Carter suggests that a woman “can accede to a symbolic power as soon as her clothes are off, whereas a man’s symbolic power resides in his clothes, indicators of his status”; in this sense, “The female nude’s nakedness is in itself a form of dress”. [...] It is as though femininity refuses a rigid nature/culture distinction, so that clothes no longer have to mark this boundary [...]. (140)

Concomitantly, there is a sense in which silence, understood as institutionally sanctioned denial of access to privileged modes of discourse, remains an invariably feminine attribute.¹ “In this scheme”, Mary Jacobus tells us, “woman as silent bearer of ideology (virgin, wife, mother) is the *necessary* sacrifice to male secularity, worldliness, and tampering with forbidden knowledge. She is the term by which patriarchy creates a reserve of purity and silence in the materiality of its traffic with the world and its noisy discourse” (50).

This gender-based stereotyping has apparently fostered two major, and conflicting, attitudes towards femininity among modern American male authors, namely condescension and reverence. To cite a classic example of an essentially misogynist perspective on women one could point to T. S. Eliot’s verse. Similarly, it seems that to poets such as William Carlos Williams and Theodore Roethke, to name but two monumental figures, a woman is a natural custodian of

telluric (i.e. earth-oriented) spirituality. Their mythopoeic attitude to women may be regarded as both empowering and limiting. In his short poem “Marriage”, published in *Poetry* in 1916, Williams writes:

So different, this man
And this woman:
A stream flowing
In a field.

(Ahearn 39)

Though, admittedly, not exactly the most original lyric in the poet’s output, the text is nevertheless fairly representative of an entire poetic generation’s perspective on the “feminine” issue. As Barry Ahearn notes, “The association of the man with the stream suggests a variability about the man’s character, as well as extensions of his interest outside the domain of the marriage. Conversely, the equation of the woman with the field represents her as nurturing, stable and likely to stay put” (39). Likewise, in the last stanza of Williams’s “Woman Walking”, first published in 1914, the anonymous female acquires, in the critic’s words, “emblematic status” by becoming “another version of Williams’s frequently encountered Kore returning to the surface of the earth” (Ahearn 73). Barry Ahearn’s comment is apt: “Inherent in the poem is a tension between Williams’s willingness to let the woman be herself (whatever that might be) and his need for someone who, like Poe’s Helen, can serve as a personal icon” (74). Consequently, whenever such an approach revives the ancient fertility-cult-based reverence for the female principle, it might be viewed as an act of empowerment. An earth-goddess, however, as viewed by most modern male poets, is passive and unreflective, even if powerful. A woman thus construed can be revered as a source of life, but at the same time denied the powers of rational thinking; the female invariably lapses into the feminine.

In T. S. Eliot’s verse woman is habitually feared rather than worshipped. A. David Moody rightly notices that, “The characteristic predicament in the poems in Eliot’s first volume is that of a male subject whose self-possession is threatened by the women who are the object of his attentions” (184). “The eternal enemy of the absolute” – as referred to in “Conversation Galante” – woman remains an eternal Other to Eliot’s poetic persona. What he abhors is, needless to say, not particular women as such but what they stand for in his private mythology. For one thing, in the poet’s resolutely dualistic vision of man as a being torn between supernatural longings and all-too-natural physiology, the feminine principle represents all kinds of earthly distractions confounding the soul’s arduous ascent to a more sublime realm. In “La Figlia Che Piange” the imaginary act of a man leaving his (potential?) lover connotes the archetypal soul-body opposition:

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left

As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
As the mind deserts the body it has used.

(Eliot 20)

This perspective presupposes, of course, the staple Cartesian dualism with its set of binary oppositions:

The principal distinction [in Western thought] is between the self which suffers and the mind which contemplates and creates. It is this which enables Eliot in his poetry to detach himself from the nothingness of experience and to identify his being with pure consciousness. As the observer of himself and of his world he would transcend his contingent existence in the world and enter into a new life as a conscious soul. Our authentic being, he would maintain, is in being conscious. (Moody 183)

Not surprisingly, women in Eliot's poems are ostentatiously more at ease and seem to feel more at home in the world in general and the quotidian reality of social interactions in particular, however detestable the latter may appear to the hypersensitive, if not morbid, male speaker. Their existential cool is invariably attributed to their cheerful lack of self-awareness combined with an unwitting submission to social convention. The Eliot persona, especially that of the early poems, oscillates between condescension and concession to the power of feminine wiles. This conflict is partially resolved in Eliot's later verse. As Moody argues, "The separation of the mind which is 'conscious', and therefore 'not in time' (as it is stated in *Burnt Norton*), from the women who suffer the anxiety of temporal existence, is a major design in Eliot's *oeuvre*. The fear suffered by the male subject comes to be laid off upon women who had been its initial cause, thus freeing him to pursue union with God" (186–187). In a similar vein, surveying the axiological affinities between Baudelaire's and Eliot's work, Kerry Weinberg notes the nascent misogyny of both poets, and argues that "[in Baudelaire's texts] the recurring image of woman in the negative sense is the one who takes advantage of him, and who, after having had herself 'dorée' and torn out his heart for fun, just to see how far her enchanting power goes, throws it away. Nor is Eliot's description of woman any more flattering; but it is more detached and dispassionate, almost emotionally anaemic" (46–47).

Admittedly, as Moody points out, Eliot does acknowledge the possibility of woman acting as a spiritual catalyst, assisting the aspiring saint in his attempts to gain unmediated access to God's love. Still, in order to be able to function so, she must forego her sexuality:

It becomes apparent in the work following *The Waste Land* (more particularly in the sequence "The Hollow Men" – *Ash-Wednesday* – "Marina", and in *The Family Reunion* and *Four Quartets*) that while the poet separates himself from women as objects of desire and love,

he is still questing after love, though now it is in the form of the saint's occupation, that is, giving one's self up wholly to the drawing of divine Love. However, women are still closely associated with this new love, which turns out to be after all the repressed love of women returned in a new form, one in which women are not themselves the object of love, but are necessary intermediaries. This is explicit in *Ash-Wednesday* in the invocation to the Lady who is both "Blessed sister" and "holy mother", and who thus combines in one person women who have been loved and Mary as intercessor with her Son. The changes from lover to spiritual sister to spiritual mother are of course vital. It is only so far as they assume these spiritual roles that women are associated with anything other than fear and anxiety. Spiritualised, they provide in an acceptable form what was found inadequate and even threatening when offered by real women.

(Moody 187)

One does not have to subscribe to the implicitly Freudian angle of this tracing of the poet's spiritual longings to his "repressed love of women" (following on that track, we would readily have to agree that what most Church Fathers really needed was some good therapy) to grant Professor Moody an important point: the Eliot persona does progress from a visceral withdrawal from the workaday world to an articulately dogmatic relinquishment of worldly distractions. In other words, Eliot begins as a world-weary intellectual instinctively shrinking from the vulgarity and automatization of modern city life and ends up as a contemplative ascetic reaffirming the Christian dogma. The transition is from the austere aesthetic (and hence, by implication, non-religious in the traditional sense) to the self-consciously spiritual experience.

In this respect "Portrait of a Lady" is particularly interesting because, although belonging to Eliot's early verse, its ambivalent attitude towards the woman portrayed anticipates the above-mentioned spiritualisation of the feminine principle in the poet's later work. The poem, its emotional perspective deliberately detached almost to the point of aloof condescension, begins on an ironic note with the speaker emphasizing the contrived character, the artifice (with the standard implications of insincerity and decadence) of the social ritual performed by his lady friend. She takes pains to make the pre-arranged, almost pre-choreographed meeting appear as natural and spontaneous as possible:

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
 You have the scene arrange itself – as it will seem to do -
 With "I have saved this afternoon for you";
 And four wax candles in the darkened room,
 Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
 An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
 Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.

(Eliot 8)

The interjection of the future tense (“as it will seem to do”) after setting the scene in the present tense suggests the repeatedness and predictability of the lady’s interactions with her “friends”. At this point the speaker may be recalling or anticipating one such encounter (another casual insertion – “We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole” – further invalidates the distinction between the past and the future, or the real and the imagined); either way, the scenario seems all-too-predictable. Thus contextualized, the woman’s emotive enunciations are rendered inevitably banal and, so, “the conversation slips / Among velleities and carefully caught regrets” (Eliot 8). We are never explicitly told why the man subjects himself to this ordeal, but there is little doubt as to how he feels about it. In this respect he resembles Prufrock: though perfectly aware of his miserable condition, he chooses, as it were, to remain inarticulate about its causes or potential remedies. In “Portrait of a Lady” the speaker rebels, however implicitly, against the emotional and/or intellectual sterility of his “date”, but the revolt is described as purely visceral, originating in the inarticulate depths of the man’s subconscious and hence remaining beyond analysis, let alone control. The inner voice has been reduced to a “dull tom-tom” hammering a “capricious monotone”:

Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone
That is at least one definite “false note.”
– Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,
Correct our watches by the public clocks.
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.

(Eliot 9)

The rhyming couplets that conclude that part of the poem mark a shift into a more conspicuous rhyme pattern, as if to emphasize the automatic, conventional nature of the two friends’ outing. Going out with his lady friend is to the poet the same as going through the motions, an empty ritual of sorts.

The text’s second part offers more clues as to the nature of the relationship. For one thing the lady must be considerably older than the gentleman for during one of their conversations she pontificates that “youth is cruel”, and later on refers to herself as “one about to reach her journey’s end” (Eliot 10). While in the poem’s first part the woman is presented as a somewhat affected connoisseur of high culture, in part two she is made out to sound like an equally conventional, incurably pompous mentor:

Now that lilacs are in bloom
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
And twists one in her fingers while she talks.
“Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know

What life is, you who hold it in your hands";
 (Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)
 "You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
 And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
 And smiles at situations which it cannot see."
 I smile, of course,
 And go on drinking tea.

(Eliot 9)

The woman's statements are, of course, not banal in themselves (actually, they sound like a not too far a cry from Tiresias's "Son of man, you do not know..."). Eliot makes sure, however, that they do ring hollow. Already at the outset the sound effect – consonance and an internal half-rhyme – of putting the words "twists" and "talks" in the same line establishes an ironic parallel between the woman's twisting gestures and twisted meanings. Further in the text her voice is described as returning "like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon" (Eliot 9). The music metaphor, like that of the conversation mingling with "remote cornets" and the "dull tom-tom" inside the speaker's brain, implies some sort of jarring incongruity or asynchronism – the out-of-tuneness – between words and actions, some abiding insincerity on the part of both interlocutors.

The poet promptly dismisses the "wisdom" offered by the crone, and goes on drinking tea. The first perceptible shift in his hitherto consistently patronizing attitude occurs in the final section of part two:

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
 For what she has said to me?
 You will see me any morning in the park
 Reading the comics and the sporting page.
 Particularly I remark
 An English countess goes upon the stage.
 A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,
 Another bank defaulter has confessed.
 I keep my countenance,
 I remain self-possessed
 Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired
 Reiterates some worn-out common song
 With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
 Recalling things that other people have desired.
 Are these ideas right or wrong?

(Eliot 10)

Here, for the first time in the poem, the speaker admits to his own vulnerability and confusion. On closer inspection the passage reveals a recurrent pattern in Eliot's early work: a world-weary gentleman yearns for a different, more authen-

tic life than the one he is forced to share with the upper middle-class spiritual diletantes from his immediate social milieu (incidentally, the typists, clerks, and the lower classes do not come off much better either). For some unspecified reasons he chooses – or, perhaps, is forced to by circumstances; the reader never learns that – to continue tormenting himself by living the inauthentic life of the “hollowed” man, the major difference between him and the other wretches being his increased self-awareness. (The only consistently implied reason, of course, is the crisis of Western civilization from which, apparently, there is no escape; though interested in Hinduism and Buddhism, the early Eliot is no Amy Lowell or, say, Gary Snyder.) Like Prufrock’s, his self-possession is a mere pose, strenuously maintained. In this light, his deliberate immersion in the trivia of mundane particulars – sports events, sensational news, etc. – can be interpreted as the troubled mind’s instinctual ruse aimed at distraction, an emotional survival technique of sorts, a desperate attempt to keep the nascent spleen at bay. The particulars, by drawing one’s attention to the surface of life, help one to ignore, at least temporarily, the horror of the void lurking underneath. There is a difference, though, between the “Portrait” speaker’s clinging to the social surface of life (to suppress dormant suicidal thoughts perhaps) and the shoring of “fragments” against one’s personal “ruins” in the concluding passage of *The Waste Land*. In the latter text, the poet selects various quotes that seem to have some lasting idiosyncratic value to him alone. In “Portrait” the speaker seems much less conscious, let alone articulate (as, again, by contrast, Tiresias is), about the sources of his ordeal.

Given the poet’s emotional and mental confusion (“Are these ideas right or wrong?” he asks), it is ironic that in the preceding section the woman pronounces him “invulnerable” and having “no Achilles’ heel”. This apparent blunder undermines her credibility as a mentor. On the other hand, her severe judgement of youth (“youth is cruel, and has no remorse / And smiles at situations which it cannot see”) begins to ring true once we have read the whole poem and see how applicable this judgement is to the speaker’s attitude. Still, even if at this point the lady is right, she seems unwittingly so. The way Eliot presents it, her speech sounds more like some derivative, conventional pontificating on the follies of youth rather than a truly personal insight. Ironically enough, it is the lady’s eulogy of the young man’s alleged inner strength that, again, probably contrary to her intentions, proves disturbing to the hitherto smug gentleman, forcing him to acknowledge his own spiritual blandness. In sum, she seems to stumble upon the truth rather than consciously articulate it. This is a typically Eliotesque situation: a woman can be right only by accident; she may be a catalyst of a spiritual experience, but not a spiritual teacher.

Once the speaker’s condescending attitude has been shaken, there is no return to it in the poem’s final part. Instead there is an increase in emotional ambiguity. The man admits to being “ill at ease”, his self-possession first “flaring up for a second”, then “guttering”:

The October night comes down; returning as before
 Except for a slight sensation of being ill at ease
 I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
 And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.
 “And so you are going abroad; and when do you return?
 But that’s a useless question.
 You hardly know when you are coming back,
 You will find so much to learn.”
 My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac.

“Perhaps you can write to me.”
 My self-possession flares up for a second;
This is as I had reckoned.
 “I have been wondering frequently of late
 (But our beginnings never know our ends!)
 Why we have not developed into friends.”
 I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
 Suddenly, his expression in a glass.
 My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.

(Eliot 10–11)

Ascending the staircase leading to the lady’s apartment seems to Eliot more like descending into his half-acknowledged lower (feral?) self: hence, probably, the mounting-on-all-fours simile. If we continue on this speculative track – the poet deliberately refuses to offer any explicit clues regarding the speaker’s motives – then the comparison might imply some suppressed need, some inarticulate craving that, though despised by the man’s intellectual nature, bids him to pay the visit. (The scene, by the way, could also be an example of Eliot’s skillfully exploring the symbolic potential of an otherwise perfectly realistic detail, i.e. mounting a particularly steep staircase, which, as a rule, forces one to stoop; the longer the climbing, the more pronounced, usually, the stooping.) The image, of course, connotes other things as well, such as, for instance, the man’s sense of self-humiliation, self-abasement, as if his higher self (the soul) felt that the lower one (the body) was doing something against the soul’s (implicitly noble) will. The man’s inner split is foregrounded here.

Significantly, throughout the poem the speaker remains silent as it were, the woman doing all the recorded talking (perhaps another tacit concession on the poet’s part to the stereotyped perspective on women – this time the prattling female stereotype). In contrast to the garrulous lady, the gentleman seems thoughtfully reticent, musing upon his own emotional quandaries, smoking, smiling (knowingly, of course) at the lady’s affected confessions, and sipping tea. Although we know from the text that the two friends “discuss the late events”, among other things, and so there must be a dialog going on, the speaker never quotes himself. This, of course, is a simple stylistic maneuver aimed at making the woman the more vulnerable party in the poem.

In part three the poet's ironic distance increases, resulting in emotional self-detachment as well. In line 99 his cool, analytical stare, hitherto directed at the woman, is turned upon himself ("I feel like one who smiles...") to reveal a young man "not knowing what to feel" (line 119). The penultimate section exposes one of the speaker's abiding concerns (besides the already mentioned self-possession), namely his inarticulateness when faced with the ambiguities of an emotional relationship that escapes instant pigeonholing:

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance –

(Eliot 11)

What follows is the line "Well! and what if she should die some afternoon" (reminiscent, by the way, of Laforgue's "I can die tomorrow and I have not loved"), which marks the final turning point in the poem. The speaker now entertains doubts whether his careful avoidance of any emotional involvement with the lady (romantic love was, needless to say, out of the question from the start) was the best possible course to take. The somewhat cryptic line "Would she not have the advantage, after all?" suggests that the young man must have viewed his acquaintance with the older woman in vaguely competitive terms, afraid that he might "lose" something should he become too intimate with her. (A Freudian might argue that Eliot unwittingly enacts at this point the primordial male fear of women's sexuality invariably associated with some mysterious, potentially destructive power likely to effect men's emotional "castration".) On the other hand, though, having evaded the nascent commitment, the poet also experiences a momentary sense of unspecified loss. All in all, the lady remains an ambivalent figure – a possible threat to the gentleman's much-cherished self-possession, but also a conceivable liberator of his suppressed emotions.

A similar ambiguity is articulated in William Carlos Williams's "To Elsie", with the eponymous heroine presented both as victim and potential saviour of a doomed culture. The entire poem revolves around an emblematic set of binary oppositions such as earth-sky, body-mind, nature-culture, and feminine-masculine.² "The pure products of America / go crazy", the poet declares in his searing critique of what he sees as a profound cultural crisis, a crisis, among other things, of representation, a semiotic anarchy, so to speak. The poem's central theme is thus inarticulateness, both on a personal and a cultural level. The "devil-may-care men" (line 10) "who have taken / to railroading / out of sheer lust of adventure" seem as inarticulate about their motives as the "deaf-mutes" or the "young slatterns" who get date-raped, "succumbing without / emotion / save numbed terror" (Williams 1568). They indeed "seem reduced to expressing themselves simply in terms of wild abandon and crime. Their random release of sexual energy lacks ritual, order and design" (Ahearn 78). The poet's social di-

agnosis is simple: both parties lack “peasant traditions” that would “give them character”. Significantly, Williams implies that what the hoboes and “mountain folk from Kentucky” need is not formal education, or any other form of consciousness raising, but some unspecified kind of visceral knowledge, an instinctual social wisdom allegedly transmuted via peasant tradition, that is a tradition that regulates social interaction by means of conventions. That Williams is clearly, and perhaps somewhat naively, romanticizing the European peasantry is beside the point here. Rather, his peasants can be viewed as another iconic representation of an organic community, the modern Noble Savages in the Rousseauian sense. In short, some rural Americans, according to the poet, have lost their tribal instinct, their rampant individualism having degenerated into sheer anarchy. The crucial image here is that of “isolate lakes and / valleys”, with isolation made out to be the root of all social evil. “An accident of geography has placed a barrier between these Americans and more recent immigrants, and this proves their undoing. This portion of the social class, in its want of admixture, mirrors the sterility and degeneration of European aristocracy” (Ahearn 77).

Besides specifying the lack of commonly-accepted social ritual as the main source of the crisis, Williams also points, though less explicitly, to another cause of cultural inarticulateness, namely the predominantly uranian (i.e. sky-oriented) character of American culture and the attendant lack of respect for, let alone spiritual rapport with, the female principle. Elsie, compared to “voluptuous water”, with her “flopping breasts” and “ungainly hips”, is clearly meant to resemble the paleolithic representations of Mother Earth; she seems womanhood incarnate. However, though an embodiment of fertility, Elsie, as any student of anthropology would readily agree, would not make a perfect telluric Goddess; she lacks both power and self-awareness, the two staple attributes of any pagan divinity, male or female. The “truth about us” which she expresses with her “broken brain” is hence a sad one. Apparently unaware of the mythic potential of her emblematic womanhood, Elsie, like the date-raped country girls, still seeks approval from “rich young men with fine eyes”. Consequently, the girl – her “dash of Indian blood” significant in this context – is presented as an unwitting victim of a culture in which the earth is viewed as “an excrement of some sky”, people being but “degraded prisoners / destined / to hunger until” they “eat filth” (Williams 1569). Elsie’s subservient cultural status and her unreflectiveness are thus lamentable by-products of a dualistic, uranian theology which, having put body and soul in opposition to each other, has managed to degrade the earth, the wilderness and the “feminine” (now equated with the irrational and the instinctual).

It is not only the country girls who suffer; the poet seems also dissatisfied with his lot, though for different reasons. His imagination “strains / after deer”. This nostalgic longing for a different way of life, a life closer to nature, more in tune with one’s immediate surroundings (the aforementioned dream of an organic community) and with the wilderness, must, in the poem’s reality, remain unfulfilled. It is probably in this sense that the frustrated desire for a spiritually satisfying life – and, by the same token, a yearning for an alternative, more earth- and body-oriented religion – proves emotionally destructive (“Somehow /

it seems to destroy us"). Given this diagnosis, the remedy comes as no surprise. The country, in Williams's view, needs a cultural regeneration. "To Elsie", then, signals the potential to effect this transformation through the spiritual agency of the female principle. As one critic has put it,

Williams' work suggests a variant of the American obsession to possess the environment, to wrest from it its secrets and powers. There are two ways to possess America: the way of Cortez, the conqueror, whose spiritual descendants are now strip-mining in Kentucky [...] and the way of De Soto, who came to conquer but, in Williams' interpretation, was conquered himself by the *female spirit of the New World*. [...] Possession by surrender, it might be called. (Townley 152; italics mine)

Nevertheless, though obviously more self-aware and more articulate than Elsie or the mountain folk from Kentucky, the doctor-poet seems equally helpless with regard to any large-scale political action that might improve the situation. All he can do is provide a temporary shelter for Elsie in his home. His helplessness – and presumably that of other intellectuals like him, whose imagination also "strains after deer" – seems more than merely political though: it is primarily spiritual. The poet's moments of insight, the "isolate flecks", are too fleeting and fragmentary to sustain a coherent spiritual alternative. Almost a mystic in many other poems (cf. the famous "Red Wheelbarrow"), the author of "To Elsie" remains a compassionate but skeptical intellectual. The girl's compelling presence forcing him, as it were, to re-examine his stance, Williams seems all-too-aware of the inevitably personal, and hence limited, scope of his social and cultural insights. After all, there is "no one to drive the car" (Williams 1569), no one to take up responsibility for the spiritual well-being of Americans. In sum, Elsie's cultural status remains at best ambivalent; a mute goddess is simply powerless. In a way, Elsie's position is like that of Eliot's lady in "The Portrait": she may function only as a catalyst of the poet's spiritual experience, not as an autonomous agent.

The heroine of Theodore Roethke's "I Knew a Woman" is, by contrast, a highly articulate mistress of her immediate environment, though only, as I will try to demonstrate later, within the limited scope of a "feminine" worldview as construed by a male-centered culture. Roethke seems a connoisseur of carnality in general and the woman's body in particular. Not a playboy but a pilgrim, however, he approaches the female principle with an almost religious reverence, viewing it in archetypal terms, as an embodiment of a primordial life-sustaining force. The poet's telluric spirituality, reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's and W. B. Yeats's, is modified by occasional irony originating in his outspoken urbanity. This gives rise to emotional ambiguity. "Aging, I sometimes weep, / Yet still laugh in my sleep," declares the speaker of "The Other" (Roethke 130). A patrician intellectual, i.e. a product of what feminist critics would undoubtedly label as a patriarchal culture, the persona of, say, *Words for the Wind* often blurs the female and the feminine, invariably associating both with the realm of instincts and emotions. Thus the

poet's stance, although qualified by (self-)irony, seems in line with the centuries-old Judaeo-Christian ambivalence towards the female principle. Mary Jacobus's comment on Lawrence's fiction could be applied to many a Roethke poem: "For D. H. Lawrence, woman is 'the unutterable which man must forever continue to try to utter'; she achieves womanhood at the point where she is silenced (like Sue Bridehead) and installed within the sanctuary" (52). Thus whatever existential wisdom Roethke's women may offer is, as a rule, tokenised as intuitive and largely inarticulate. At the same time, however, being self-conscious and self-ironic, Roethke often exposes the tenuous character of his intellectual claims, especially their axiological weakness as manifest in the emotional life of the skeptical academic, a figure recurrent in the poems. (The juxtaposition of sterile intellectualism and inarticulate vitality – so typical of Western modernism in general – is, of course, staple fare in American literature.) In short, though implicitly detached from the feminine realm of telluric piety, the poet explicitly declares that he can see no other effective facilitator of his experience of transcendence.

Nowhere are the above ambiguities enacted more expressly than in "I Knew a Woman". Triggering the speaker's self-examination, the poem's heroine seems to function, like the females in Eliot's and Williams's poems, as a catalyst of some unspecified spiritual transformation on his part. In the critic's words,

Roethke, following [D. H.] Lawrence and the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, carries the love relationship between man and woman to a higher level of spiritual insight by means of images and metaphors traditionally reserved for religious subjects. [...] Lawrence's love poems, as well as his novels, furnish Roethke with points of departure for his own love lyrics. "I Wish I Knew a Woman" expresses Lawrence's desire for an ideal sexual relationship: Roethke's "I Knew a Woman" presents such a relationship in its consummation. (La Belle 119–120)

The first stanza is therefore somewhat deceptive, establishing as it does an ironic distance between the woman and the speaker:

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

(Roethke 127)

The lady is described as "lovely in her bones" and given to hypersensitive emotional responses to her immediate surroundings ("When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them"). The portrayal of the lady contains a potentially

comic element; there is something ludicrous in a presumably voluptuous woman affecting the ways of a heroine of romance, an oversized sentimental lily, all swoons and sighs, earnestly meaning every minute of the act. At this point Roethke posits himself as a bemused intellectual stooping to carnal self-indulgence, his attitude towards his live doll predictably patronizing.

Nevertheless, “when she moved, she moved more ways than one”, and it is the lady’s movements, the sheer vitality of her body that arrest the speaker’s undivided attention, prompting his clinching, self-ironic confession in the last stanza: “I’m martyr to a *motion* not my own” (italics mine). Perhaps a major reason for the poem’s lasting appeal (it is one of Roethke’s most often anthologized lyrics) is its ingenious juxtaposition of two seemingly conflicting stereotypes of femininity: that of woman-the-life-giver and woman-the-culture-bringer. In a patriarchal culture – feminist critics remind us – woman can be revered only as a repository of elemental forces largely beyond her control, such as fertility or the maternal instinct. The central metaphor behind such concepts is that of the female body as vessel, with the obvious connotations of passivity and, sometimes, inertia. In Roethke’s text the line “The shapes a bright container can contain!” immediately follows the poet’s effusive praise of the diversity of his lady’s movements. The link, then, is clear: the woman’s body is a “container” capable of containing many “shapes”. A mistress of motion, so to speak, the lady in question appears to be in perfect control of her body’s ways, however dazzling (“Her several parts could keep a pure repose, / Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose”). Roethke, however, modifies the stereotyped metaphor by making the woman both a recipient and a creative shaper of the acquired energy. After all, the references to the bodily movements do hint, however slightly, at a conflict, or, more precisely, a creative interplay, a playful tension between the body and the forces residing in it. “To contain” can mean both “to hold” or “to include” as well as “to curb”, “to control”, “to hold back”. In this light the entire line reads like a veiled pun, what with the ambiguity of the word “bright” to boot. Thus the container in question could stand for a gleaming/translucent vessel or a clever controller/tamer. The second meaning, however contrived, is nevertheless also there, at least potentially. The poem’s woman, then, remains to a certain extent an acknowledged mystery, despite the speaker’s occasional condescension. A natural body artist, so to speak, she operates in a transition zone between nature and culture.

To our neolithic ancestors, anthropologists tell us, the idea of woman as the source of both life and culture was an indisputable given, the fertility cult being apparently a dominant form of religion in those early agricultural societies. Thus a woman giving birth to a baby and, later on, raising it, seemed an emblematic embodiment of nature and nurture combined. The concept itself must have been indeed compelling for it survived the patriarchal takeover, though under understandably ambiguous guises. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, to cite a classic example, the wild man Enkidu is “tamed” by a temple prostitute, who, having “made herself naked” before him, teaches him “the woman’s art” (Sandars 64). As a result, Enkidu can no longer run as fast as the gazelles, and the wild animals shun him; he has become a full-fledged human being. “Enkidu was grown weak, for wis-

dom was in him, and the thoughts of a man were in his heart” (Sandars 65). Interestingly enough, it is the very act of fornication, not the woman’s words following it, that proves decisive in turning Enkidu into a complete human being. One senses behind such passages an underlying fear of female powers, a conviction that sex is a woman’s domain, “the woman’s art”, as the epic has it. The chain of associations is interesting here: for a man, being fully human entails a loss, the severance of a natural bond with the animal world and, by extension, with the wild, instinctual aspect of his selfhood. Woman, being instrumental in bringing about this loss, and offering the boon of culture instead, is thus marked from the start as an equivocal, not to say suspect, figure. Civilization, in other words, is a dubious blessing and woman is its agent.

The temple prostitute is not, however, an autonomous agent in the story; she has been sent to Enkidu by Gilgamesh and is thus merely an envoy, a messenger of a higher order. Her acculturative mission is restricted in scope, her task being just to weaken the wild man and then persuade him to go to the city to meet its king. Her coaxing eulogy of city life is blatantly exaggerated: “She said, ‘Let us go, and let him [Gilgamesh] see your face. I know very well where Gilgamesh is in great Uruk. O Enkidu, there all the people are dressed in their gorgeous robes, every day is holiday, the young men and the girls are wonderful to see. How sweet they smell!’” (Sandars 65). In short, though certainly persuasive, the female emissary is not entirely reliable. This encounter illustrates, in a nutshell, all the major premises of later androcentric ideologies in respect to women and their place in society. Their civilizing mission, once fundamental in the neolithic matriarchal cultures, under patriarchy became viewed as invariably derivative. The matriarchal role model of woman-the-culture-bringer gradually deteriorated into the stereotype of woman as guardian of social convention. In socio-political practice these stereotypes perpetuated the myth that females may be, say, nuns but not priests, that they make good schoolteachers but poor university professors. Allegedly good at details but invariably lacking a broader vision of things, females were now believed to be born secretaries rather than bosses, fit for teaching table manners, but not philosophy. Similarly, the epic’s female emissary evidently does as she has been told and sticks to her fortes, the “woman’s art”.

“I Knew a Woman” builds upon this centuries-old accretion of androcentric stereotypes, regardless, of course, of Roethke’s intentions. Admittedly, the relation between the speaker and the woman is that of disciple and teacher, but the knowledge his mistress imparts smacks of a highly conventional kind, whether it be erotic positions or social poses: “She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand; / She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin” (Roethke 127). Given the standard critical explanation that the “Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand” signify the three parts of the Pindaric ode,³ these slightly obscure literary allusions may be but periphrastic references to the progressive, and equally conventional, stages of courting culminating, all too predictably, in “Touch”. The metaphor’s tenor, then, would be the idea of ritualistic – and thus inescapably conventional – self-expression in the realm of (e)motions (the woman’s domain), its vehicle being the image of the Greek choir moving from one part of the stage

to another to deliver its appointed lines. If, however, one chooses to ignore the irony involved (which, after all, is always in the eye of the beholder), then the Classical references may acquire more weighty implications, as they evidently do to Jenijoy La Belle:

By employing these literary terms in his line, Roethke describes the rhythm of love as a movement in poetry. He not only transforms life into art, he also perceives and thus images it as art. This metaphor, imaging sex as poetry, has its converse in a mocking title scribbled in one of Roethke's notebooks: "Thirteen Ways of Fornicating the Amphibrach." In an even more general formulation of the union of poetry and sex, sex and poetry, Roethke wrote down a few pages later in this same notebook a line from Becquer: "Poetry is feeling and feeling is woman". (121–122)

The stylistic strategy of cloaking the quotidian in the cultural is also manifest in the first stanza: "Of her choice virtues only gods should speak, / Or English poets who grew up on Greek / (I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek)". The playful suggestion that the woman's virtues could be given justice only by means of Cavalier poetry⁴ delivered Broadway-chorus style, establishes, as such ironic juxtapositions habitually do, the light-hearted, bemused, and implicitly patronizing tone of the poem. The precise contents of the lady's teaching are never revealed, but its derivative, conventional character is certainly implied. The poet begins as if he did not want his relationship with the woman to be taken seriously (this, as already indicated, will have changed by the end of the poem).

The reference to the Pindaric ode functions, like the aforementioned "bright container", also on another level, namely as a veiled pun. Had Roethke intended to limit the connotative scope of his literary allusions, he could have spoken of Strophe, Anti-Strophe and Epode rather than Turn, Counter-turn and Stand. Translated into colloquial English, however, these abstruse Greek literary terms evoke more familiar associations with physical movement, as if the poet wanted to suggest that what he learned from the mistress of motion was indeed a moving ritual (pun intended) which, for all its thin veneer of cultural sophistication, proved rather shallow on closer inspection. To repeat: though we are never told what the tripartite rite consisted of (it could be anything, from polite small talk with in-laws to moonlit serenading under the beloved's window to the Kamasutra-inspired sexual practice), it must have been as ceremonious and predictable as the motions of the Greek choir in Pindar's times. Whatever the interpretation of the periphrastic passage, one thing seems clear: the lady's teaching must have been a truly baffling mix-up of (broadly defined) nature and (narrowly defined) culture. The conventionality of the woman's pretensions to refinement is hinted at in the line "Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize". This juxtaposition of voluptuousness and (perhaps prudish emphasis on self-control and propriety produces a well-timed comic effect. However free of sarcasm or even warm-hearted Roethke's irony may

be at this point, it is nevertheless firmly grounded in the aforesaid androcentric stereotype of woman as a dutiful guardian of social convention.

Despite the speaker's ostensible attempt to keep the whole affair at arm's length – as in, for instance, stanza two: “She was the sickle; / I, poor I, the rake, / Coming behind her for her pretty sake / (But what prodigious mowing we did make)” – his final admitting to having totally embraced his mistress's teachings not only substantially modifies the lyric's hitherto frivolous tone but also locates the poet's attitude somewhere beyond mere irony:

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
What's freedom for? To know eternity.
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

(Roethke 127)

The lesson is complete: the initiated lover occupies now what the mystics metaphorically describe as the immobile center of the ever-rotating wheel of time; his experience of eternity, in this context, may equate living in the eternal present.⁵ In this new temporal dimension the standard time-measuring instruments simply do not apply. The clock's pendulum having been replaced by the swaying body, time as an objectified abstraction no longer abides. The intellect has finally relinquished its claims on the old man's selfhood.

The ordeal of the “martyr”-intellectual acknowledging the victory of the “wanton ways” in his life (the mind-over-matter maxim reversed) brings to mind Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert's resigned submission to the dictates of desire (incidentally, the poem was published in 1958, the year of the novel's belated publication in America). Both Roethke's speaker and Nabokov's narrator-agent are highly-literate high-brows smitten with females whom they otherwise view as their intellectual inferiors. The two intellectuals' rueful acceptance of their emotional destinies seems thus a modern enactment of the Faustian theme. Its self-reflexive acuity notwithstanding, the “masculine” intellect surrenders before the formidable, visceral powers of the “feminine” domain. Similarly, in W. B. Yeats's love poems, like in those by Roethke, Jenijoy La Belle argues, “the powers of the body (and thus the powers of women)... [are presented as] radically different and perhaps even superior to powers of masculine intellect. Loving a woman therefore can be quite a dangerous venture as these two beings – the woman-body and the man-mind – come together” (124).

In this respect Roethke seems closer to Williams, who, unlike Eliot, occasionally embraced the intellectual abandon resultant from a temporary fall into the feminine realm. The three poets, however, remain the “pure products of [patriarchal] America” in their essentialist outlook on women. Needless to say, great

poets need not be great feminists. Still, while enjoying their wit and their metaphors, one should not forget that,

If you want to change the way people think about women in a world dominated by men, you must first discourage the habit of defining “woman” as an essence whose “nature” is determined biologically, and whose sole destiny is to reproduce the human species. For that is precisely the ideology – “anatomy is destiny” – which makes a woman feel it is somehow “unnatural” of her to place any activity above her reproductive role. It also ensures that men encounter only a little competition at work from a few female “freaks” and none at all from the majority of “real” women, who stay at home to bring up families in their “proper” sphere. In order to change that situation, you have to conceive of “woman” not as an essence which precedes the social organisation of life, but as a category or construct produced by a society and mediated in the discourses which it circulates about itself.

(Ruthven 36)

Notes

- ¹ Throughout the article I adopt the standard feminist distinction between “female” and “feminine” explained by Toril Moi as follows:
Among many feminists it has long been established usage to make ‘feminine’ (and ‘masculine’) represent social constructs (patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms), and to reserve ‘female’ and ‘male’ for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference. Thus ‘feminine’ represents nurture, and ‘female’ nature in this usage. ‘Femininity’ is a cultural construct: one isn’t born a woman, one becomes one, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it. Seen in this perspective patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for ‘femininity’ are natural. (122–123)
- ² I owe this idea to Professor Paul Merchant.
- ³ As Jenijoy La Belle explains,
The source for this unusual way of naming the three divisions of an ode (commonly called ‘strophe,’ ‘antistrophe,’ and ‘epode’) is probably Ben Jonson’s ‘To the Immortal Memorie, and Friendship of that Noble Paire, Sir Lucius Cary, and Sir H. Morison,’ in which the terms ‘the Turne,’ ‘the Counter-Turne,’ and ‘the Stand’ are used as titles for the various sections of the poem. (121–122)
- ⁴ La Belle writes:
One poet who fits the description and whom we are inevitably reminded of when we read Roethke’s extended metaphor on ‘mowing’ is Andrew Marvell. Although the ‘mowing’ image is predominant in several of Marvell’s poems (‘The Mower against Gardens,’ ‘Damon the Mower,’ and ‘The Mower to the Glo-Worms’), it is in the refrain to ‘The Mower’s Song’ that the description of scything is most clearly a metaphor for the sexual relationship with a woman: ‘When Julianna came, and She / What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.’ Roethke, like Marvell, brings new life to the convention-ridden pastoral love lyric through the injection into his poem of the intellectualized sensuality of metaphysical wit. (121)
- ⁵ The literary associations at this point are legion. Having pointed out the affinities between

passages from Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* and Roethke's poem "The Dream", La Belle continues:

Through words and expressions such as 'point,' 'encircled,' 'the center,' 'circles,' and 'least motion,' Roethke images the love experience in terms similar to Lawrence's. The two poets, by describing love through the spatial metaphors of the circle and the point in the center of the circle, image secular love through Dante's metaphors for holy love in the *Paradiso*. Similarly, the states of 'eternity' and 'steadiness,' in which the lover and his beloved reside, and the references to 'fire' take on religious connotations. [...] By bringing Yeats into association with Donne, Drummond, Jonson, Marvell, and Lawrence, Roethke functions as both critic and poet: he offers us a new perspective on a major tradition in English love poetry. (120, 125)

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