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[Introduction to] Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture

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Writing the Woman Artist

Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture

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Introduction

Suzanne W. Jones

> I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill.
>
> —Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women"

> These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling.
>
> —Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"[1]

The essays in this collection explore the many ways in which women writers have seen and dreamed the woman artist as a character in their works. In describing this character, her struggles and her visions, we as feminist critics run the risk of prescribing her, and yet failing to name her means failing to know her. We confront this difficulty not by defining the woman artist figure but by identifying many. Recognizing as Teresa de Lauretis has suggested that the social construction of gender is "a common denominator"[2] among women, we examine the different representations of the woman artist figure as gender is mediated by race, class, nationality, ethnicity, motherhood, sexual orientation, and historical era as well as literary movements and theories of language. Although a concern with so many positions may seem to suggest a paradoxical passive creator determined by external elements alone, Linda Alcoff argues that "the concept of positionality includes two points: first . . . that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context; but, second, that the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the contruction of meaning."[3] The title of the collection, *Writing the Woman Artist,* suggests both the social construction of women artists and their own imaginative construction of the artist figure; it registers the tension between the fictional and the empirical figure, the problematic relationship between language and reality.

The collection builds on a number of earlier works about the artist

figure. One important and influential study of the *Künstlerroman* in western literature is *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* (1964) by Maurice Beebe. His thesis is that the artist hero is a divided self—a human being of sensual longings, who is drawn to life, the "Sacred Fount," and a detached creative spirit living apart in an "Ivory Tower," who transcends life through art.[4] Beebe argues that writers have tipped the scales toward art or life depending on their visions of the artist's role in society and their views of the nature and function of art. Beebe traces the beginning of the artist archetype in literature to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Goethe popularized the portrait of the artist genre and delineated the main conflict as one between art and life. In Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Werther fails because he cannot accept life; in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96), Wilhelm fails because he becomes too immersed in life. Thus, Beebe deduces that for Goethe, "the true artist stands midway between the Ivory Tower and the Sacred Fount,"[5] a position Beebe champions as that of the very best novelists in the genre. At the same time Beebe views Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781–88) as a model for literary self-portraits. Rousseau not only made the confessional novel popular but also described, though he did not praise, the sensitive and introspective traits that we have come to associate with the "artistic temperament." Beebe locates the origins of the "Sacred Fount" tradition, which assumes that the artist must be immersed in life in order to create, in the Romantic movement, and he locates the origins of the "Ivory Tower" tradition, which assumes that the artist must be aloof and solitary in order to create, in the aesthetic movement.[6]

Although Beebe does discuss a few *Künstlerromane* by women, particularly George Sand's work, he was unaware of the considerations of gender for the form. For the most part, Beebe's artists are men, and his muses are women. Not until 1979 was any attention paid to the effect of gender on the representation of the artist figure. Grace Stewart in *A New Mythos, The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877–1977* (1979) and then Linda Huf in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (1983) sought to define the characteristics of *Künstlerromane* by women and to differentiate them from works by men. Both Stewart and Huf see the conventional conflict of the artist figure as doubly frustrating for women. According to Stewart, "whereas the man feels split between personal and social being, the woman experiences that split and the separation of sexual and personal identity."[7] Similarly, Huf argues that unlike the artist hero, the artist heroine "is torn not only between life and art but, more, specifically between her role as a woman, demanding selfless devotion

to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work."[8]

In *A New Mythos* Stewart argues that neither of Beebe's definitions of the artist as seeking personal fulfillment through experience or as experiencing transcendence through aloof, solitary reflection fits woman's traditional role of selfless nurturer of others. Thus, Stewart reasons that the woman artist figure must "defy the cultural definition of artist or of woman if she is to remain artist and woman."[9] Noting that male artists have often identified themselves with the myths of Prometheus, Daedalus, Icarus, and Faust, Stewart argues that twentieth-century women writers have reworked these myths "to focus on the meaninglessness of incessant striving."[10] Stewart suggests that a more appropriate narrative for *Künstlerromane* by women may be the Demeter-Persephone myth because artist heroines "must always wrestle with mothers, with daughters, or with their own identity in either role."[11]

While Stewart delineates structural differences between *Künstlerromane* by men and women, Linda Huf in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* examines differences in characterization. She describes the artist hero as having conventional "feminine" traits—passivity, sensitivity, shyness—and the artist heroine as having conventional "masculine" traits—liveliness, strength, fearlessness. She argues that women writers of the artist novel pit their female protagonists against sexually conventional foils and that they do not create male muses because they do not idealize men.[12]

Although too categorical at times, these two studies were valuable for emphasizing gender as a factor in discussing the representation of the artist. They laid the foundation for subsequent work, including the essays in this collection. Stewart concludes *A New Mythos* with a call for a historical approach to the genre that "notes variations, details the effect of time or events on these patterns, and shows trends."[13] In 1981 Susan Gubar took up this task with "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield," a historical approach to the conflict between role and vocation in *Künstlerromane* by women. Gubar notes that whereas nineteenth-century artist figures gave up their art for motherhood, turn-of-the-century new women artists renounced motherhood for their careers. Finally in the 1920s and 1930s, Gubar argues, women writers reshaped the *Künstlerroman* with domestic images of creativity, thereby freeing their artist figures from the either/or imperative. Gubar believes that declining infant and maternity mortality rates and new birth control technology and awareness, which freed women from compulsory maternity, resulted in a valorization of do-

mesticity and motherhood. Gubar points out, however, that after World War II when it became clear "that a feminine mystique was replacing female self-definition, women's *Künstlerromane* suffered a critical disillusionment."[14] She concludes that only with the contemporary feminist movement does resolution of the dilemma between role and vocation once more return to the optimism of the modernist period. Contributors in Part III of this collection chart the same literary history that Gubar outlined, but often their conclusions differ because they complicate Gubar's historical analysis with other factors such as race, class, age, motherhood, or childlessness.

The essays in this collection broaden the study of the woman artist figure beyond the novel as a genre, beyond literature written in English, beyond conflicts emerging from the dilemma of role and vocation, and beyond fictional characters and poetic personae who are white, middle-class heterosexual women. The first two sections of the book concern women writers and their artist figures who struggle with the conventions bequeathed to them by male and female literary ancestors. Although the section on the fathers is concerned with revising men's traditions and the section on mothers with revaluing women's, essays throughout the collection focus on what is helpful and what is harmful for women artists in each tradition, rather than valorizing one heritage at the expense of what is useful in the other.[15] The third section examines artist figures who deal differently with the conflict between women's domestic roles and their artistic desires depending on the way gender relations are mediated by other social relations and by language itself. The fourth section analyzes the politics of art and the potential for social change, and the fifth section treats the aesthetic theories of women artist figures who try to break down old oppositions and create new possibilities.

The divisions of the collection, which I decided upon after several readings of the essays, are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. The section titles should be seen not as an attempt to compartmentalize but as a guide to the multiple related issues encountered in writing the woman artist. Indeed, it is difficult to maintain categories since many of the essays touch on most of the issues. One concern treated in several sections, but without a heading of its own, is the relationship between women artist figures and their muses. Essays by Susan Stanford Friedman, Josephine Donovan, Margaret Stetz, Linda Hunt, Ann Ardis, and Mary DeShazer all examine this relationship. Although Linda Huf concludes in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* that *Künstlerromane* by women do not have muses, contributors to this collection discover muses in literature by women when they look for ways in which women writers have redefined the relationship between artist

and muse. If viewed as nurturing as well as inspiring, as mutually desirous rather than productive of desire, the muse of the woman artist can be female friend, male friend, female lover, mother, or a community of women.

Part I: Deconstructing the Fathers' Tradition

Essays in Part I analyze how three American poets, H.D., Adrienne Rich, and Elizabeth Bishop, redefine the terms *artist* and *muse* and revise literary conventions that depict women as powerless, passive objects in male artists' lives rather than powerful, creative subjects in their own. In *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Toril Moi argues that "women's relationship to power is not exclusively one of victimization. Feminism is not simply about rejecting power, but about transforming the existing power structures—and, in the process transforming the very *concept* of power itself."[16] The women writers discussed in this section of the collection do not believe that creative power is necessarily synonymous with autonomy and authority. In rewriting these relationships between artist, subject, audience, and muse, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and H.D. transform the concept of power, envisioning it as connection rather than control, as reciprocity rather than dominance. Contributors in this section use an American feminist-revisionist form of deconstructive analysis to examine these transformations. As Susan Stanford Friedman and Mary Poovey have noted, while Derrida shows how a *text* deconstructs, feminist critics in the United States will often show how the *author* deconstructs cultural binary oppositions thus integrating concepts of "self," "agency," and "intention" with theories of deconstruction.[17]

In "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: H.D.'s Rescriptions of Joyce, Lawrence, and Pound," Susan Stanford Friedman analyzes H.D.'s rewriting of the relationship between women and art, artist and muse in her autobiographical work *HER* (1927). Friedman points out that the use of the objective pronoun Her as the artist's name cleverly transforms the woman from muse to artist, from object in Pound's text to subject in H.D.'s. Friedman shows that H.D. self-consciously comments on Joyce's, Lawrence's, and Pound's representations of the artist figure by refusing "to be split into body or soul," refusing "to choose between love and writing." Whereas Friedman sees the relationship between artist and muse in *Portrait of the Artist* and *Sons and Lovers* as fundamentally Oedipal, she identifies this relationship in *HER* as pre-Oedipal: "the daughter, rejecting Oedipal love, returns to the fusion of the pre-Oedipal in her love for Fayne, to the merged identities of two women." Friedman argues that H.D. transforms the relationship between artist and muse into a "mutually desirous and creative" one.

Adrienne Rich continues H.D.'s deconstruction of the fathers' tradition by transforming the poet's persona and her relationship to her subject and her readers. For Adrienne Rich, writing is "re-vision" and re-vision is "survival," equations set forth in her influential essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (1971).[18] In "Power and Poetic Vocation in Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*," Lynda K. Bundtzen argues that Rich revises masculine concepts of godlike power and individual heroism by exploring mutual strength in collectivity. Bundtzen believes that while Rich "assuredly reinvokes the Romantic aspiration to mythmaking power," she "reshapes the Romantic poet's chosen role as prophet and oracle," creating a poetic persona that "invites community with her reader" and challenging an aesthetics that privileges poetics over politics.

Elizabeth Bishop also revises the way Romantic lyricists assumed authorial power by choosing a lyric voice that is unobtrusive, marginally positioned, sexually ambiguous, and often plural. Adrienne Rich, searching for a "clear female tradition," wished for a central female voice in Bishop's work and later decided that, in her peripheral poetic stance, Bishop had written woman's position as outsider. In "Lyric Voice and Sexual Difference in Elizabeth Bishop," Kathleen Brogan sees Bishop's poetic voice as more subversive, as blurring the distinctions between inside and outside—a feminist attempt to underscore the dangers of hierarchy and to avoid a narrow, dualistic conception of sexual identity. Brogan, like Mary DeShazer in Part IV, suggests that behaviors, such as tenderness or aggression, are not gender specific.

Part II: Thinking Back Through Our Mothers

With *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf focused attention on women's literary history by writing "we think back through our mothers if we are women."[19] Essays in Part II examine how women writers and the artist figures they create have perceived their relationship with their literary foremothers and biological mothers. While Willa Cather sees this exercise as transforming, Anita Brookner views it as a painful but necessary step in the creative process. The essays on Cather and Brookner both discuss "the gift of sympathy" that can be learned from the maternal world. The essay on George Eliot and Virginia Woolf in this section and the one on Margaret Drabble in Part IV, however, argue that thinking "back through our mothers" can be dangerous because their lives and their work can offer their female inheritors what Margaret Homans calls "a debilitating training" in conventional roles and techniques.[20]

In *No Man's Land, The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth*

Century, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar continue Virginia Woolf's interest in women's literary history by defining a twentieth-century "female affiliation complex," in which women writers oscillate "between their matrilineage and their patrilineage in an arduous process of self-definition."[21] Willa Cather is an example of such problems of affiliation. Early in her career, Cather rebelled against nineteenth-century women writers, whom she judged sentimental scribblers, and allied herself with her literary forefathers. Josephine Donovan's "The Pattern of Birds and Beasts: Willa Cather and Women's Art" documents Cather's gradual move away from a masculine identification in her early years toward an artistic practice rooted in traditional women's household practices. Whereas Cather had first viewed the artist as appropriating material and imposing his or her ego upon it, Donovan argues that with Sarah Orne Jewett's influence Cather saw the value for the artist in abandoning her ego and embracing her subject through a "gift of sympathy." Analyzing *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *One of Ours* (1922), and *The Professor's House* (1925) from a Marxist perspective, Donovan demonstrates how Cather's artist protagonists, both women and men, discover a traditional women's aesthetic, become inspired by it, and subsequently begin to value the emotional integration with their subjects that they gain from it.

Similarly, in "Anita Brookner: Woman Artist as Reluctant Feminist," Margaret Diane Stetz argues that not until Anita Brookner's artist protagonist Frances accepts her mother in herself is she able to write the fatalistic but sympathetic narratives of which *Look at Me* (1983) is an example. However, Stetz raises the question of whether a woman writer might not exhibit feminist aesthetics even though she does not subscribe to feminist politics. Acknowledging Brookner's own pronouncement that "You'd have to be crouching in your burrow to see my novels in a feminist way,"[22] Stetz looks from just that angle and terms Brookner's writing "reluctant feminism." She argues that if Brookner is not politically feminist, she is aesthetically feminist, in part because her women artist figures look back through biological mothers and literary foremothers, in part because Brookner herself champions literature written by and for women and values aesthetic and/or emotional bonds between women writers and their women mentors and audiences.

Alison Booth views George Eliot's influence on Virginia Woolf as enabling but also troubling. In "Incomplete Stories: Womanhood and Artistic Ambition in *Daniel Deronda* and *Between the Acts*," Booth suggests that George Eliot haunted Virginia Woolf's efforts "to reconceive women's creativity beyond motherhood and self-sacrifice." While Woolf saw herself as a more outspoken feminist and sought to demonstrate that gender roles were socially conditioned, she remained subject

to what Booth considers "an ideal of essential feminine selflessness as an antidote to masculine forms of power," an ideal apparent not only in Woolf's portrait of Eliot but also in the fictional portraits of female dramatic artists in Eliot's and Woolf's last novels.

Part III: Confronting the Dilemma of Role and Vocation

Essays in Part III analyze women artists' conflicts between the social roles inherited from their mothers and their own artistic desires, at the same time that they explore differences among women by considering how gender is mediated by other social constructions—the complex "positionality" to which Linda Alcoff refers. In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that whereas nineteenth-century women found traditional roles a barrier to their artistic achievement, twentieth-century women writers have solved the "dilemma of role and vocation" for their artist characters "by having the fictional art work function as a labor of love, a continuation of the artisal impulse of a thwarted parent, an emotional gift for family, child, self, or others."[23] The first three essays in this section, by Linda Dittmar, Jane Rose, and Katherine Kearns, bear out but complicate her argument as they examine more specifically the complex social positions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers and their artist figures. The next two essays, by Mara Witzling and Linda Hunt, question the universality of DuPlessis's twentieth-century narrative resolution, and the last, by Renate Voris, locates meaning, not in the relation between text and world, but in the relation between text and text, arguing that the use of language itself may reinscribe structures oppressive to women. This last argument questions all forms of empiricism, including feminists' dreams of autonomy and liberation and critics' notions of feminine subjectivity and feminine *écriture.* All of the essays in this section reveal textual tensions where women writers struggle to negotiate conflicts between social roles and artistic expression.

The first essay in Part III concerns creative female characters who do not produce art but who make themselves into art objects. Linda Dittmar's "When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*" explores both the difficulty women face in resisting the social constructions that prevent them from perceiving or expressing their creativity and women's collaboration in these very constructions that serve patriarchal interests. In contrast to Susan Gubar, who in her essay "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity" depicts women as the victims of cultural inscription,[24] Dittmar views them as playing a "more active, more participa-

tory, and even productive" part in determining their roles. Dittmar's argument, like Brogan's about Bishop, subverts the conventional dichotomy between "we" and "they," outside and inside. She pairs works by black and white American writers to highlight the ways that considerations of race and class affect gender relations. Dittmar uses these two works by Larsen and Wharton to illustrate that only when women fully understand the complexity of their social positions will they be able to transcend them.

In "The Artist Manqué in the Fiction of Rebecca Harding Davis," Jane Atteridge Rose adds another element to the equation—age. Unlike Larsen's and Wharton's protagonists, Davis's are productive artists, but they are caught in the double bind of many nineteenth-century women artist figures: the pursuit of art seems to suggest failure as a woman, and the pursuit of domesticity seems to mean failure as an artist. Rose plots Davis's fiction alongside her life to suggest that the forms of failure her artist figures experience reflect Davis's own changing attitudes toward the dilemma of the woman artist as she grew older and experienced different stages of marriage and motherhood.

Similarly in "From Shadow to Substance: The Empowerment of the Artist Figure in Lee Smith's Fiction," Katherine Kearns argues that only as Lee Smith reconciles herself to her own vocation as an artist, do her fictional artist figures resolve the conflict between role and vocation. Kearns delineates three stages in the women's growth as artists in Smith's work. In the first stage the artist character, though sensitive and perceptive, creates herself as she crafts an acceptable social persona. In the second stage, she discovers matriarchal power, which she uses to create consumable artistries, which nourish family and friends. In the third stage the artist figure in *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988) creates and nourishes others, but mostly herself, through the permanence of the written word. Kearns deals with two important and not totally resolved issues in Lee Smith's work: her wariness of the very term "artist" applied to herself or to her characters, who are often poor Appalachian women, and her need to reconcile the writer's vocation to the demands of family and community life.

While sculptor and painter Judy Chicago never shied away from defining herself as an artist, she did feel repressed by the limitations placed on the content of her art by the men who were her teachers. In "*Through the Flower*: Judy Chicago's Conflict Between a Woman-Centered Vision and the Male Artist Hero," Mara Witzling argues that even though Chicago eventually found "a visual language that merged her identity as an artist with her identity as a woman," her autobiography *Through the Flower* communicates a contradictory message in relating her development as an artist. Witzling finds the "feminine" content

of Chicago's work, which celebrates female sexuality and reproduction, at odds with her "masculine" mode of production, which subordinates relationships to artistic creativity and which defines the artist as autonomous and obsessed.

Twentieth-century Norwegian writer Cora Sandel creates an artist figure in her *Alberta Trilogy* (1926–39), who redefines what it means to be an artist. In "*The Alberta Trilogy*: Cora Sandel's Norwegian *Künstlerroman* and American Feminist Literary Discourse," Linda Hunt argues that Alberta is able to pursue her career only by extricating herself from the binary oppositions of gender; when Alberta no longer sees "men and women as opposites, she no longer sees 'artist' and 'woman' as contradictions." Hunt emphasizes that an important step in breaking down gendered oppositions comes when Alberta reconceptualizes artistic productivity as work and begins to think of her writing as a way to support herself and her son. Then the artist becomes for her not a selfish person, an exalted being, isolated from the world, but an ordinary worker, involved in routine activities and social responsibilities. Hunt compares Cora Sandel's rather negative representations of traditional domesticity and motherhood to the more positive ones of her British contemporaries Woolf, Richardson, and Mansfield[25] and speculates that perhaps these writers overly valorize motherhood because, unlike Sandel, they were not mothers.

In "The Hysteric and the Mimic: Reading Christa Wolf's *The Quest for Christa T.*," Renate Voris argues that Wolf's paradoxical novel enacts "what Julia Kristeva has called the two fates of woman in Western culture: that of the classic hysteric who is denied her place in language, yet represents in that negativity a sort of disturbance of the symbolic order, of power and domination, *and* that of the mimic who takes her place in language and represents in that positivity a submission to the symbolic order, to masculine power and authority." In the novel a female narrator tells the story of a female writer and mother, Christa T.—a repetition, Voris contends, of the familiar paradigm of the female subject who does not speak for herself. Voris sees the narrator as the mimic who lets Christa T., the hysteric, speak "only in order to subordinate her speech to the (sexist) narrative of procreation."

Part IV: Rethinking the Politics of Art

When Krista Brewer asked Alice Walker why she writes, Brewer informed her of James Baldwin's answer to the same question: "writers write to change the world." Alice Walker replied, "I have written to stay alive. I've written to survive. That was from the time I was eight years old until I was 30. Then from the time I was 30 until now at 36 maybe

I'm ready to change the world."[26] Such a comment indicates that artists' motivations for writing differ as their position in the world changes. In *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that twentieth-century women writers have created a tradition that "counters the modernist tradition of exile, alienation, and refusal of social roles—the *non serviam* of the classic artist hero, Stephen Dedalus. The woman writer creates the ethical role of the artist by making her imaginatively depict and try to change the life in which she is also immersed."[27] Mary DeShazer and Z. Nelly Martínez support DuPlessis's theory about the social roles of women artists and the political function of their art, even though the artist figures they describe define their roles differently, from the warrior poets of U.S. women of color to Allende's artist healers. Elsewhere in this collection, however, Katherine Kearns and Margaret Diane Stetz suggest that contemporary writers Lee Smith and Anita Brookner envision a more personal function of art for some women artists, art as a means of survival, as a means of defining and nurturing the self. The nature and function of art discussed in this section, indeed in this collection, is as varied as the needs and desires of the artist figures represented, a topic Pamela Caughie returns to in Part V with her essay on Virginia Woolf's diverse portraits of women artists and their works. In the last two essays in Part IV, Gayle Greene and Ann Ardis debate the revolutionary possibilities of art.

In "'Sisters in Arms': The Warrior Construct in Writings by Contemporary U.S. Women of Color," Mary DeShazer uses Chicana feminist theorist Aída Hurtado's assessment that women of color are more effective than white feminists in using their anger to promote social change because middle-class white women are protected by their class and race from acquiring a political consciousness until later in their lives.[28] Acknowledging the problem many feminists have with the term *warrior,* DeShazer delineates three ways in which U.S. women of color use the warrior figure: identifying themselves as warrior poets, naming themselves war correspondents, and invoking warrior muses. Writing about such authors as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ntozake Shange, June Jordan, and Maxine Hong Kingston, DeShazer argues that U.S. women of color use the warrior figure "both to articulate an impassioned feminist politics and to inspire them to undertake its attendant sociocultural transformations."

Similarly, for both contemporary South American writer Isabel Allende and her protagonist Alba, writing is a political act. The novel Alba writes not only denounces the cruelties of patriarchy and the brutalities of totalitarian government, but also calls on women to change the world. In "The Politics of the Woman Artist in Isabel Allende's *The*

House of the Spirits," Z. Nelly Martínez emphasizes that Allende's devaluation of the patriarchal god and her elevation of the goddess figure is especially empowering for women in Latin America, "where military rulers assume a truly godlike role." Asserting that Allende links women's creative power with the erotic, Martínez develops a point that Estella Lauter explores further in Part V. Martínez sees Allende's women artists as healers, celebrating life in their fight against male violence and patriarchal dictatorships, and she views their art as spiritual, healing the split between women and men, peasants and overlords. Martínez argues that the writing of Alba's novel, as well as its many potential readings, is subversive because it expresses the energies that patriarchal cultures have repressed as feminine.

With Doris Lessing as her revolutionary guide, Margaret Drabble rewrites George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) in writing *The Waterfall* (1969). In "Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*: New System, New Morality," Gayle Greene suggests that Drabble's revisionary work about heterosexual love goes beyond Lessing's because she investigates language as well as narrative. Greene shows how writer-protagonist Jane Gray's alternating first- and third-person narratives test the relationship of language to reality and how her refusal to close her novel conventionally suggests a resistance to positing a single truth and erasing interesting contradictions. Jane's linguistic play is equally subversive, an example in Greene's mind of French feminists' *l'écriture féminine.* Greene emphasizes how Jane's word play "liberates words such as 'do,' 'make,' and 'have' from syntax and word order in which they denote possession and product, something one person does to another, and makes them not only describe but also reflect processes of reciprocity and mutuality." Greene concludes that such revision of narrative and linguistic conventions creates revolutionary possibilities for both writers and readers by releasing them from the old ideologies and the traditional subject-object relations, reenacted in such conventions.

In contrast, Ann Ardis speculates that feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément may be too optimistic in contending that writing is revolutionary because it changes the symbolic order.[29] In "'Retreat with Honour': Mary Cholmondeley's Presentation of the New Woman Artist in *Red Pottage,*" Ardis shows how the critical paradigms of the conservative readers within Cholmondeley's novel cause them to misread her protagonist's fiction and to devalue her narrative technique. Ardis also demonstrates that even today feminist critics, burdened by narrow definitions of woman and of modernism, have not credited such "New Woman" novels as Cholmondeley's with the literary experimentation they evidence.

Part V: Reconceiving Feminist Aesthetics

In the last few years feminist critics, with much debate, have worked to codify what they have variously called *l'écriture féminine,* "a female aesthetic," "a women's poetics," and "a feminist aesthetics." More recently, such efforts have been labeled both potentially essentialist and politically dangerous. In Part V Holly A. Laird, Pamela L. Caughie, and Estella Lauter take up this debate by analyzing the work of three women writers, who theorized about aesthetics in their poetry and their prose.

In the mid-1970s French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray formulated a poetics based on the female body. In "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975) Cixous linked a female language, *"l'écriture féminine"* with the mother's voice and body, arguing that women must "write their bodies" with "white ink" or mother's milk, thereby producing a discourse very different from "phallic" discourse with its emphasis on linearity, authority, homogeneity, mastery, and unity. With a similar focus on the female body, Luce Irigaray, in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977), theorized that because women's sexual organs are multiple, female eroticism, if not repressed, would express itself in a use of language different from "phallic" discourse. Both theorists suggest that a *"féminine"* writing style would exhibit reciprocity, multiplicity, and fluidity and that it would disrupt traditional logic, syntax, and diction.[30] Although both Cixous and Irigaray have at various times insisted on the possibility of bisexuality in writing, viewing certain works by men as examples of *l'écriture féminine,* they have at other times focused exclusively on women writers. Because of their focus on the female body, a number of critics have judged their theories essentialist and exclusionary, even as they find their discussions of language provocative.[31]

In 1979 Rachel Blau DuPlessis and the members of Workshop 9 formulated "a female aesthetic," which DuPlessis defined as determined "by women's psychosocial experiences of gender asymmetry and by women's historical status in an (ambiguously) nonhegemonic group."[32] DuPlessis argues that art produced by this experience has a nonhierarchic structure, a both/and (as opposed to an either/or) vision, and a social function. DuPlessis concludes that this "female" aesthetic, which is essentially a poetics of critique, is "not exclusively female" but rather an "aesthetic position that could be articulated by any nonhegemonic group."[33]

Similarly, Gisela Ecker in the introduction to *Feminist Aesthetics* (1985) argues for a poetics of critique, which she terms a "feminist

aesthetics."[34] However, Ecker does not define any formal or thematic characteristics of this aesthetic, and she objects to DuPlessis characterizing the following as features of women's writing: "Any list of the characteristics of postmodernism would at the same time be a list of the traits of women's writing: inwardness, illumination in the here and now (Levertov); use of the continuous present (Stein); the foregrounding of material (Woolf); the muted, multiple, or absent telos; a fascination with process; a horizontal world; a decentered universe where 'man' (indeed) is no longer privileged."[35] Although DuPlessis qualifies her definition by saying that "women reject this position as soon as it becomes politically quietistic,"[36] Ecker claims that such a list is exclusionary, ahistorical, and prescriptive. Like Ecker, Rita Felski in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989) contends that one cannot develop an abstract theory of "feminine" writing or "feminist aesthetics" apart from the particular social and historical conditions of a text's production and reception.[37]

In the mid-1980s Lawrence Lipking and Josephine Donovan looked to women's traditional experiences to formulate women's poetics. In 1983 Lipking wrote "a woman's poetics" entitled "Aristotle's Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment," based on plot patterns involving the seduction and betrayal of innocent young women.[38] He argues that abandonment may be the archetypal female experience and therefore may provide an understanding of female creativity and its literary expression, which he defined as advocating expression over imitation, the personal over the impersonal, and affiliation over authority. A year later in "Toward a Women's Poetics," Josephine Donovan, arguing that Lipking's theory was derived in part from texts written by men, defined a women's poetics based on works by women and deriving from traditional women's household practices. Noting the diversity of women's histories and cultures and not wishing to define a tradition common to all women writers, Donovan, however, identifies "six structural conditions that appear to have shaped traditional women's experience in the past and in nearly all cultures":[39] (1) a psychology of oppression or otherness, (2) confinement to the domestic sphere where labor is nonprogressive, repetitive, and static, (3) creation of objects for use rather than exchange, (4) shared physiological experiences such as menstruation and sometimes childbirth and breastfeeding, (5) childrearing or caretaking, what Sara Ruddick calls "maternal thinking," which involves "keeping" rather than "acquiring," "holding" rather than "questing,"[40] and (6) a gender personality that values relationships, as Nancy Chodorow explains in her theory of the reproduction of mothering. While Donovan focuses on traditional women's household practices to formulate her aesthetic, she does not

suggest that all women make this kind of art or that it is reflective of all women's experience, or that any one woman consistently engages in producing "women's art."

Heide Göttner-Abendroth also looks to women's experiences, but to art produced in matriarchal societies, in order to develop her "Nine Principles of a Matriarchal Aesthetic" (1985). According to Gottner-Abendroth, matriarchal art has the following features: (1) it involves magic, used in ancient art to influence nature and in modern art to change society; (2) its structure is determined by matriarchal mythology, which differs according to regional, individual, and social conditions; (3) it is not a product, but a process in which artist and audience participate collectively; (4) it joins artist and audience and unites feeling, thinking, and doing; (5) because "it is a process which takes place between the participants, matriarchal art cannot be evaluated and interpreted by outsiders nor sold as a commodity on the art market and later stored away in a dusty archive or exhibited in a museum"; (6) it cannot be subdivided into genres nor can art be separated from craft; (7) it arises out of a different value system than that of the patriarchy; thus, it is based on the erotic rather than on work, discipline, and renunciation; on the continuation of life rather than on war; and on a sense of community rather than on authority, dominance, and egoism; (8) it overrides the divisions between elitist and popular art, emerging "as the most important social activity and bringing about the aestheticisation of the whole of society"; and (9) it is not divorced from life, but matriarchal art is itself "energy, life."[41]

The essays in this section of the collection continue to try to come to terms with the aesthetics of women writers. They caution against establishing the defining, and thereby confining, traits of a female or women's aesthetic. They examine the works of women writers who do not so much define such an aesthetic as seek to break down gendered oppositions. Just as other contributors to this volume have sought to change our way of thinking about "woman" and "artist," they seek to change our way of thinking about "women's art," from how it is defined to how it is used in a particular context. The aesthetics these essays argue for are feminist in being informed by gender rather than wholly determined by it.

Holly Laird summarizes the aims of this section in this way: "In previous discussions of female and feminist aesthetics, critics have found themselves either arguing for an author who expresses her experience in her writing, or dissolving the author into her work, usually by arguing for a pre-determinant structure of language that writes the female body or is disrupted by a 'feminine' excess, and they have thus produced theories in which the author stands up against her

art or else may be deconstructed. The essays in this collection, however, all postulate the woman artist as an operative factor within women's writings which, by implication, should be included in the formulation of any feminist aesthetics."[42]

In "*Aurora Leigh*: An Epical *Ars Poetica*," Holly Laird emphasizes the danger of a prescriptive women's poetics, arguing that the effect of Lipking's "alternative poetics" for women is "to recolonize women, to allow them personal expression rather than heroic authority, to hear them speaking as agonized sufferers but not as proud suffragists." Laird contends that when Lawrence Lipking went looking for Aristotle's sister, he should have widened his search. If he had included Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857) in his study, he would have found a heroic figure, an artist who spoke for and to her age, not "an abandoned woman speaking of her private woes to a small community." Laird argues that in her novel-poem Browning does not restrict her artist figure to Lipking's either/or vision, but champions with her key terms, "twofold" and "double-faced," "a poetics that gives equal weight to action and character, to mimesis and expressive form, to the double aim to teach and to delight." Laird emphasizes that "In contrast to New Critical irony and structuralist binarism, whose self-cancellations enable the critic to achieve a transcendent detachment, and in contrast to Derridean *différance* with its endlessly radicalizing erosions, Browning's terminology enacts embrasure, enfolding possibilities, multiplying choices, permitting alternatives."

Similarly, in "'I must not settle into a figure': The Woman Artist in Virginia Woolf's Writings," Pamela Caughie sees in Virginia Woolf's many different portraits of women artists and their varying art forms a caution against defining *a* "female aesthetic." Caughie argues that it is precisely because feminist critics have exposed literary conventions employed by men "as arbitrary constructs, as a universalizing of provisional and provincial concepts of art," that we cannot now offer an alternative set of conventions; for "we have made the concept of *any* appropriate form suspect." Caughie suggests that an alternative, then, to discussing Woolf's novels in terms of the *nature* of art is to discuss them "in terms of the various *functions* of the artworks themselves." While Caughie agrees that for Woolf, "sexual differences have everything to do with art," she argues that this alternative approach enables us to understand as well that for Woolf, "sexual differences in writing are provisional, variable, and contingent." Emphasizing Woolf's changing artistic practices, Caughie concludes that Woolf was "less concerned with how to write authentically as a woman than with how to adapt and survive as a woman artist."

Feminist critics' current concern with differences among women in

a world that has often made women feel uncertain of their power to create and their authority to make choices sends Estella Lauter searching for "the power to be gained from shared visions." She finds such a vision in Audre Lorde's figure of "the Black mother within." In "Re-visioning Creativity: Audre Lorde's Refiguration of Eros as the Black Mother Within," Lauter argues that Lorde has moved beyond her sources, both Western and African, to a vision of creativity that challenges binary oppositions between women and men, black and white, chaos and order, life and art, almost ad infinitum. In her definition of the erotic as the "drive toward completion, satisfaction, and excellence which informs our physical, emotional, psychic and intellectual experience as we become responsible to ourselves," and in her personification of this drive in female form, Lorde displaces centuries of thinking about creativity as male genius. She challenges Western culture at its roots in its conception of Eros. Lorde spiritualizes, politicizes and re-sexualizes the erotic desire to create as a communal act of recovering the energies and materials repressed by patriarchal cultures. Thus "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"; it is a necessity for social change. Lauter considers Lorde's view of creativity especially valuable for women, not only because it validates women's authority, removing "the necessity for certification of one's ideas by the dominant group," but also because it refuses to restrict women's creativity to one sphere, one aesthetic norm (whether formalist or feminist), one function. Because Lorde's vision encourages radical rethinking of the premises on which our relationships are built, it can create new bridges between people who are otherwise threatened by their differences from each other.

As all of the essays in this collection show, writing the woman artist is complicated by numerous variables. Many different portraits of the woman artist have been written. But the women writers who create these portraits share in making problematic old oppositions between procreativity and creativity, romantic passion and artistic desire, process and product, theory and practice, women and men, woman and artist.

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," in *Women and Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 60; Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 36–37.

2. See Teresa de Lauretis, who argues in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) that "the differences among women may be better understood as differences within women. For if it is the case that the female subject is en-gendered across multiple representations of

class, race, language, and social relations, it is also the case . . . that gender is a common denominator: the female subject is always constructed and defined in gender, starting from gender" (14).

3. Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13.3 (1988), 434. In "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 12.4 (spring 1987), Jane Flax makes a similar point, "the experience of gender relations for any person and the structure of gender as a social category are shaped by the interactions of gender relations and other social relations such as class and race. Gender relations thus have no fixed essence; they vary both within and over time" (624). A difference between Alcoff and Flax is that whereas Flax places feminist theory within two categories, the analysis of social relations and postmodern philosophy, Alcoff situates positionality as a third option to cultural feminism and poststructuralism.

4. Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 6.

5. Beebe, p. 38.

6. Beebe, p. vi.

7. Grace Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877–1977* (St. Albans, Vt.: Eden Press, 1979), p. 175.

8. Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), p. 5.

9. Stewart, p. 14.

10. Stewart, p. 39.

11. Stewart, p. 47.

12. Huf summarizes her assessment of the differences between artist novels by women and men in Chapter 1 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman,* pp. 1–14.

13. Stewart, p. 181.

14. Susan Gubar, "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield," in *The Representation of Women in Fiction,* ed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 50.

15. Susan Suleiman argues that rereadings and rewritings accomplish two complementary objectives: "They appropriate positive but male-oriented symbols like the golden fleece or the holy grail by feminizing them, and they reverse negative, female-associated symbols like the head of the Medusa by endowing them with a positive value." "(Re)writing the Body: the Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 20.

16. Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 148.

17. Susan Friedman's arguments about the Americanization of many concepts of European critical theory appears in "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author," in *Influence and Intertextuality,* ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) and "Post/Post-Structuralist Feminist Criticism: The Politics of Recuperation and Negotiation" (paper presented at the 1989 MLA Convention, Washington, D.C.). See also Mary Poovey, "Feminism and Deconstruction," *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988), 51–65.

18. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 35.

19. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929, rpt. 1989), p. 79.

20. Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 278.

21. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, *The War of the Words* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 169.

22. John Haffenden, "Anita Brookner," in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 70.

23. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 104.

24. Susan Gubar, "The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 292–313.

25. See Gubar's "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine."

26. Krista Brewer, "Writing to Survive, An Interview with Alice Walker," *Southern Exposure* 9.2 (1981), 13.

27. DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, p. 101.

28. Aída Hurtado, "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989), 849–54.

29. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 147–60.

30. For English translations of Cixous and Irigaray, see *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

31. For helpful summaries and evaluations of these theories, see Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*," in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Showalter, pp. 361–77; Silvia Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?" in *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker, trans. Harriet Anderson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 23–50; Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics;* and Susan Rubin Suleiman, "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism."

32. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Members of Workshop 9, "For the Etruscans: Sexual Difference and Artistic Production—The Debate over a Female Aesthetic" in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. 139–40.

33. DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans," p. 149.

34. See Gisela Ecker's Introduction to *Feminist Aesthetics*, pp. 15–22.

35. DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans," p. 151.

36. DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans," p. 151.

37. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

38. See Lawrence Lipking's "Aristotle's Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September 1983), 61–81.

39. Josephine Donovan, "Toward a Women's Poetics," in *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship,* ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 100.

40. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6 (summer 1980), 342–67.

41. See Heide Göttner-Abendroth's "Nine Principles of a Matriarchal Aesthetic," in *Feminist Aesthetics,* ed. Ecker, pp. 81–95.

42. Letter from Holly Laird to Suzanne Jones, June 11, 1990.