THE FEMINIST ROMANTIC: THE REVISIONARY RHETORIC OF *DOUBLE NEGATIVE*, *NAKED POEMS*, AND *GYNO-TEXT*

by

Susan Drodge

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
Memorial University of Newfoundland

October, 1996

St. John's Newfoundland

Abstract

"The Feminist Romantic" argues for the revision of romantic rhetoric and structures in three Canadian feminist texts: Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland's *Double Negative* (1988), Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* (1965), and Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Gyno-Text* (1983). In its analysis of the textual challenges posed by contemporary feminist writing, it recurrently reads the various rhetorical tropes of these three texts against the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley--poetry likewise engaged on both thematic and structural levels with subjectivity and its ensuing problematics. This dissertation attends to the paradoxical position of the female writer attempting to write her self, her body, and her subjectivity within traditional textual conditions that have recurrently repressed woman and her feminine economy of representation. "The Feminist Romantic" recurrently points to the ways in which *Double Negative*, *Naked Poems*, and *Gyno-Text* appropriate canonical strategies to create textual space for female being and to pose epistemological challenges to the authority of the governing symbolic. The first chapter of this dissertation reads *Double Negative*'s representations of desire,

fragmentation, and female agency against the poetry of Coleridge, Blake, and Keats and further draws upon Wordsworth's *Prelude* to comparatively analyze the ways in which Marlatt and Warland's sequence ultimately calls into question its own affirmations and authority. The second chapter argues for *Naked Poems*' figurations of female desire and feminine subjectivity as a radical rewriting of *The Prelude*--a revision that interrogates the strategies and epistemological foundations of the precursor text. The third and concluding chapter turns to *Gyno-Text*'s promotion of a 'new' discourse on the textual energy and authority of the maternal body and considers the ways in which this text draws upon the poetry of Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, and Shelley in a renewal of conventional representational strategies that takes into account the generative force of maternality. The critical and theoretical framework of this dissertation is provided by contemporary Canadian criticism, poststructuralist criticism, particularly that of Geoffrey H. Hartman and J. Douglas Kneale, and the theoretical writings of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the careful supervision of Dr. Noreen Golfman in the writing of this dissertation. I would also like to thank my parents and George Morgan for their encouragement and emotional support and Iona Bulgin for her careful proof-reading eye.

Introduction:
"such strength of usurpation"[1]

Like many dissertations, "The Feminist Romantic" had humble beginnings, in this case as a short essay on the resonance of romanticism in Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland's *Double Negative*. This essay (later revised and expanded to become the first chapter of this dissertation) was uncompromising in its criticism of what I then perceived to be the shortcomings of this text when read against a master narrative of British romanticism: a powerful body of imaginative poetry that, like much contemporary feminist poetry, recurrently interrogates subjectivity and consciousness on both thematic and structural levels. In my initial analysis, *Double Negative* was not as revolutionary as I (idealistically) wanted it to be; I was reading for ruptures, and the feminist text's perpetuation of canonical representational strategies seemed to justify a rather curt critical dismissal of its political and epistemological challenges

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[1] *The Prelude* 6.599-600. Unless otherwise specified, all citations from Wordsworth's *Prelude* refer to the 1850 version.

to the hegemony of patriarchal discourse.[2] I did not then possess the theoretical background by which to acknowledge and assess the complexities of the feminist revision of romantic structural strategies and rhetoric;[3] I was just beginning to read the writings of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous and had not yet been introduced to the poststructuralist body of romantic criticism that has since strongly influenced the argument of this dissertation.[4] I naively viewed any feminist complicity in the perpetuation of traditionally oppressive textual conditions as a weakness rather than an unavoidable paradox within which the play of difference might work towards undoing the textual repression

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[2] I would now argue that such complicity provides traditional literary scholars with a vehicle with which to approach and analyze feminist writing and to integrate this rich body of literature into canon-centred classrooms which focus on the evolution of literary history. Here and throughout this dissertation, I use *canon* to refer specifically to the traditional canon of Western literary history: an exclusive grouping of 'standard' literary texts that is dominated by the writings of privileged white males.

[3] To quote J. Douglas Kneale, "By 'rhetoric' I mean figural language, indeed language itself, since even the simplest scientific assertion is never far from experimenting with its rhetorical potential" (xv).

[4] The argument of "The Feminist Romantic" is particularly influenced by the writings of Paul de Man, Geoffrey H. Hartman, J. Douglas Kneale, and Tilottama Rajan--all of whom attend to the "fundamental question of language" in their interrogations of the rhetoric of Romanticism (Kneale xiii).

of woman and her feminine economy of writing. My analysis of Marlatt and Warland's sequence has since adopted a more comfortable and compromising position, attending to the inevitable paradoxes of contemporary feminist writing and the power of textual revisionism itself.[5]

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[5] Like Kneale's *Monumental Writing*, this dissertation is particularly interested in the revisionist maneuvers manifest in the rhetorical tropes of the 'ephebe' text(s), rather than a more general study of influence, such as that found in Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. As Kneale writes,

> I have said elsewhere that the difference between influence and intertextuality--and this is not limited to verbal texts--is that intertextuality is the expression of influence, and thus presents itself as a suitable object of rhetorical analysis. Since it is language with which I am primarily concerned here, I leave the question of literary influence to psycho-biographers and crisis theorists like Bloom in order to direct my attention to the specific ways in which Wordsworth's poetry appropriates the texts of his precursors, especially those of John Milton. A close examination of the workings of such tropes as quotation, reference, allusion, and echo is necessary because despite the considerable amount of interest, both recent and long-standing, in the "presence of Milton" in Wordsworth's poetry, readers continue to discover new aspects of intertextuality in their poetic relationship. When one first seeks to define the Miltonic "presence," stylistic similarities and verbal echoes are what immediately resonate in the reader's mind. But there are richer entanglements, as Keats said--intertextual affiliations which, while incorporating allusion and echo, go beyond lexical similarities to aspects of structure. (28)

While this dissertation draws upon Bloom's terminology and his definitions of the types of influence, it is more closely aligned with the approach of *Monumental Writing* in its analysis of "intertextual affiliations." Indeed I question the totalizing view of "the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet" presented

This approach is strongly influenced by the writings of Hélène Cixous, who argues for feminist literature as a *potential* locus of insurgence and transformation.[6] As Lola Lemire Tostevin writes of this writer/theorist,

> While she recognizes the impossibility of ridding oneself totally of mastery, of a masculine economy, or of undoing all repressions, it is, at least in written texts, a question of degree. While her extensive knowledge prevents her from simply making an exit by referring everything back to women and "pretending that we have fallen from the sky," it allows her to cross, to traverse the masculine economy and exceed it. It is possible to trace throughout her work an extraordinary path as it opens on to a space that displaces limits. ("Breaking the Hold on the Story" 389-90)

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in *The Anxiety of Influence* and find that its recourse to patrilinearity and phallocentric psychoanalytic theory is, at times, inadequate in accounting for feminine economies of writing (7). The prologue to Bloom's argument, for instance, marks the text's inherent repression of woman and her textual authority: while its title points to the patrilinear underpinnings of the text's argument--"It Was A Great Marvel That They Were In The Father Without Knowing Him"--, its conclusion suggests a biologizing of femininity: "He wanted to say: 'strengthless and female fruit'" (3).

[6] As Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "She [woman] must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history" (880). Woman must, therefore, aggressively refuse silence and write her self and body, "become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 880).

"The Feminist Romantic" attends to a displacement of limits that creates textual space for female being, in this case focusing on the revisionist drives manifest in Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland's *Double Negative* (1988), Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* (1965), and Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Gyno-Text* (1983).

This dissertation specifically reads these three Canadian feminist texts against the poetry of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, pointing to the ways in which the female poets can be seen as appropriating or revising the rhetorical and structural strategies of their precursors. Whenever possible or appropriate, the argument of "The Feminist Romantic" further considers the epistemological challenges which the respective revisionary maneuvers generate. The first chapter offers a romantic reading of Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative*--a tri-parted, interdisciplinary collaboration that includes lyric poems, an 'interview,' prose poems, and negative collages and foregrounds the desire and poetic process of two lesbian lovers travelling by train across the Australian outback. This chapter focuses on the text's representations of desire, fragmentation, and female agency as they are backgrounded by the poetry of Coleridge, Blake, and

Keats and considers the ways in which the sequence ultimately calls into question its own political strength and textual authority. *Double Negative* is the most explicitly political text considered in this dissertation and, owing to its recurrent recourse to a 'real' world outside the text, the most problematic. The second chapter of this dissertation reads Webb's *Naked Poems*--a lyric sequence of five diverse movements that attempt to recover textual space for the expression of female desire and feminine subjectivity--as a rather radical rewriting of Wordsworth's *Prelude* which interrogates the strategies and epistemological foundations of the precursor text. Of particular interest is Webb's challenge to the conventional barriers between narrative and lyric, her interrogation of subject-object relationships, and her textualization of female desire. Where *Double Negative* quite adamantly refuses to be victimized by the dominant discourse and its strategies of representation, *Naked Poems*, which pre-dates Marlatt and Warland's sequence by more than two decades, manifests a more certain sense of anxiety in relation to the textual influence of the governing symbolic and its conditions of representation. While creating the space necessary for the textualization of woman and her desire, *Naked Poems* nevertheless assumes a defensive stance which is particularly evident in the

interrogatory interview of its concluding movement--a stance that perhaps reflects Webb's anticipation of resistance on the part of its modern audience accustomed to fragmented representations of female being and "the Canadian male's tradition of lyric love-poetry" (Hulcoop, "Phyllis Webb and Her Works" 290). The displacement of limits in *Naked Poems*, however, seems to me to be instrumental in expanding textual conditions for later representations of female subjectivity, desire, and authority, such as those of *Double Negative* and *Gyno-Text*. The third and concluding chapter of this dissertation turns to Tostevin's *Gyno-Text*--a series of thirty-seven short-line lyrics (in both English and French) that recurrently represent the generative power of the maternal body and develop a discourse of maternality that displaces the limits of conventional representational strategies and opens space for a feminine economy of writing. In its recurrent conflation of body and text, *Gyno-Text* encourages a re-examination of the romantic representational strategies (specifically those of Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, and Shelley) that background its own constructions, recurrently pointing to that which is repressed in the precursor texts, namely, the energy and authority of the mothering body. More than *Double Negative* and *Naked Poems*, *Gyno-Text* manifests a

resolute sense of confidence in its own textual authority. In its doubled discursivity and its textual appropriation of the symbiosis of female and foetal bodies, Tostevin's series offers a powerful poetic argument against the autonomy of subjectivity and the hegemony of the dominant discourse.

What these three texts have in common, beyond their shared engagement with the narrative of British romanticism, is their structural and thematic dependence upon a shifting textuality and multiple subjectivity that promote difference and destabilize the more unified subject of much canonical literature. Each text furthermore foregrounds an aspect of female being that has been repressed by Western textual conditions influenced by Christian epistemology; while *Double Negative* and *Naked Poems* both attempt to reclaim the textual strength of lesbian desire, *Gyno-Text* works against "the taboo of the pregnant woman" and promotes a textual authority based on the symbiosis of the female and foetal bodies that comprise the maternal body (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 891). Each of these texts is furthermore characterized by a loose narrative line that aligns it with the comparatively open form of the long poem, which, as Sharon Thesen suggests, often provides contemporary Canadian poets with "a way of handling their distrust of the 'poetic' associated with

the lyric voice, seen as a falseness, a colonizing wish overlaid upon the real" (14). Such an unfettered poetic form further offers a means of reaching beyond the bounds and negations of conventional binary constructions and potentially fosters a play of difference between non-linearity and linearity, time and space. For Webb, the long poem or sequence specifically offers a resistance to the oppositional logic that characterizes the dominant discourse and has traditionally defined woman as man's Other: she writes,

> I find that the basic sentence is based on an opposition of ideas, so that you get "buts" and "thoughs" and "althoughs," or "ifs," and so on. And it seemed to me that this had some philosophical significance and that I had to break through the basic oppositions that are presented to us in everyday thought and get to a more refined synthesis. Well, I haven't arrived at this yet, but this is one of the intellectual problems, and one of the poetic problems. (Thesen 375)

Indeed, a "refined synthesis" of ideas is perhaps unattainable under present textual conditions; however, *Double Negative*, *Naked Poems*, and *Gyno-Text* all illustrate a movement towards such a goal in their respective challenges to canonical constructions based on subject-object divisions and the authority of conventional oppositional logic. As "The Feminist Romantic" argues, romanticism's interest in gender, being, nature, and

socio-political critique provides canonical precedent for many foci of the contemporary Canadian feminist text, while it offers a framework for acknowledging the ambitious revisionary projects of the texts considered in this dissertation.

Figures of Complicity in Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative*

this the manner of the Sons of Albion in their strength
They take the Two Contraries which are calld Qualities, with which
Every Substance is clothed, they name them Good & Evil
From them they make an Abstract, which is a Negation
Not only of the Substance from which it is derived
A murderer of its own Body: but also a murderer
Of every Divine Member: it is the Reasoning Power,
An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing
(Blake, *Jerusalem* 1.10.7-14)[1]

i look out the window
déjà vu:
nothing looking at nothing

two women outback
down under
add it up--two negatives make a positive (Marlatt and Warland 20)[2]

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[1] This and all subsequent references to Blake's poetry provide whenever possible chapter, plate, and line numbers, in that order. Where there are two numbers given in the parenthetical reference, they refer to plate and line(s), respectively, and where there is a single number given in the parenthetical reference, it refers to the plate of the Blake poem in question. This is in keeping with David V. Erdman's edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, which does not always provide line numbers.

[2] For the sake of clarity, this and all following references to *Double Negative* cite page numbers, rather than lines.

Introduction: "travelling backwards"[3]

Like many essentialist attempts to textualize woman,[4] the rhetorical operation of "Figures of Complicity in Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative*" is inevitably and strategically paradoxical, engendering certain problematics that point to the pervasive force of conventional textual conditions. The paradoxical nature of this chapter's argument is particularly evident in its concurrent New Critical and poststructuralist approaches to *Double Negative*'s "alternative version [vision]" (38).[5] Discussing the text's collaborative process of "rewriting the train experience from a female perspective," Betsy Warland recounts, "we certainly talked about the mainstream literary tradition but to write about it

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[3] Marlatt and Warland 12.

[4] As Diane Fuss argues in *Essentially Speaking*, essentialism itself can be strategically deployed as "a lever of displacement," and, if used self-consciously, it "can operate as a ["powerfully displacing and disruptive"] deconstructionist strategy" (72; 19; 32).

[5] While the close textual analyses or New Critical readings of *Double Negative* offered in the first section of this chapter tend to accept and validate Marlatt and Warland's proposal of a semantically-knowable, epistemological "alternative version," the poststructuralist approach of the chapter's second section interrogates the very viability of such a construction, seeing their "vision" more as a function of language itself.

would have taken us outside of ourselves and what was happening [yes the trace is there on the brain but we colour outside the lines referentiality's locus shifted]" (38; author's brackets).[6] The hermeneutic proposed by "Figures of Complicity," however, is one that rejects the possibility of 'uncontaminated' poetics and suggests that "the mainstream literary tradition" is itself a significant particle in the figural operation of *Double Negative*. For instance, this chapter locates the canonical authority of *Double Negative*'s structural strategies in a master narrative of British romanticism and further draws upon the theoretical concerns of romantic literature to problematize the feminist text's politicization of woman and its construction of textual authority. This chapter proposes that in rewriting certain romantic strategies, such as fragmentation and negative capability, *Double Negative* not only challenges the authority of canonical conventions but, ultimately, the authority and alternity of its own "version." Indeed, Marlatt and Warland's poetics recurrently manifest an indebtedness to the masculinist strategies, such as "The Gaze," that their text explicitly censures (24). The approach of "Figures of Complicity," however, does

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[6] In the "Crossing Loop" movement of *Double Negative*, the poets more specifically refer to "the tradition of how trains have been depicted" (36).

not mean to underestimate *Double Negative*'s ambitious project to establish female agency and to forge a feminist poetics; neither does it intend to neglect the theoretical instabilities of the text's political position: its "word to word fight / for defining whose symbolic dominates whose" (51). This is this chapter's paradox or, perhaps more appropriately, its duality, a critical divergence that is encouraged by *Double Negative*'s own rather reflexive and adversarial positioning within the dominant discourse. As with Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the rhetorical operation and figurative reflexivity of *Double Negative* invite such a double-edged critique as it "turns back upon itself in a manner that puts the authority of its own affirmations in doubt" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 27). However, as it applies to *Double Negative*, a striking consequence of such operation is that its politicization of sexual/textual politics--a matter of little (explicit) concern in *The Prelude*--is dramatically undermined. In other words, the rhetorical operation of *Double Negative* ultimately challenges the text's own political authority.

The first section of this chapter, then, offers close textual readings of *Double Negative*'s constructions of desire, fragmentation, and female

agency, particularly as these concerns are backgrounded by the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, and John Keats. This section reads the feminist text as an evolutionary project that expands on the structural and thematic concerns of the traditional literary canon such a way that points to the patriarchal biases and structural limitations of certain romantic conventions. For example, *Double Negative*'s figurations of woman and lesbian desire implicitly critique Coleridge's strategies for representing female "doubling" in his narrative poem *Christabel* (Marlatt and Warland 48). Marlatt and Warland further critique and rewrite Blakean and Keatsian notions of transcendence to take into account the conventional relegation of woman to the realm of the Other, a position that has been denied transcendence.[7] As such, the first section of this chapter reads the poetics of *Double Negative* as imparting a feminist perspective on the representational strategies of the British romantics. The revisionary

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[7] As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, woman has traditionally been consigned to the realm of immanence: "the opposite or negation of transcendence, such as confinement or restriction to a narrow round of uncreative and repetitious duties; it is in contrast to the freedom to engage in projects of ever widening scope that marks the untrammelled existent" (translator's footnote 63).

ratio considered in this section might be described as a *tessera*, which, as Harold Bloom writes,

> is completion and antithesis; I take the word not from mosaic-making, where it is still used, but from the ancient mystery cults, where it meant a token of recognition.... A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough. (*The Anxiety of Influence* 14)

As Bloom's analysis of anxiety suggests, a certain complicity in or appropriation of conventional textual conditions is a feature of the revisionist drive of strong poets. In relation to the *tesserae* analyzed in the first section of "Figures of Complicity," the poetic influence is primarily and antithetically manifest in the feminist text's recovery of that which has been repressed by the precursor texts, namely, female desire and a feminine economy of writing.

In a slight divergence from the first section's evolutionary or revisionary focus, the second section of this chapter considers the theoretical problematics generated by *Double Negative*'s textualization of woman, suggesting ways in which the text might be seen as challenging its own authority and political stance. For example, Marlatt and Warland's construction of a strategic female essentialism exhibits an epistemological

connection to the metaphysical foundationalism of universalism--a universalism that has conventionally denied female agency: "His / One Essential Story telling and retailing of male quest / escape from the metaphorical womb and the / conquering of it" (54). In the second section of this chapter, *Double Negative*'s own metaphors and figurations are seen as being inescapably complicit in the textual perpetuation of conventional representational strategies--a complicity that calls into question the feminist politics and authority of the text itself. Much as Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* draw upon differing authorities--the New Testament God and the Old Testament God, respectively--"Figures of Complicity" draws firstly on the New Critical tradition of close textual reading in its canonical analyses of *Double Negative*'s structural strategies and, in its second section, on poststructuralist readings of rhetorical operations and figural moments in its location of the text's theoretical problematic. Such an approach hopes to reveal *Double Negative*'s textual indebtedness to romantic conventions and to offer a critical framework for acknowledging the text's ambitious revisionary project.

I. Reading Figures of Reading in *Double Negative*

For some Canadian feminist texts, such as Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative*, the textual and ideological challenges posed by the British romantics offer a particularly suitable entrance into the contemporary canon of literary and theoretical discourse. Like romanticism, for instance, feminism tends to embrace "subject-centered inquiry" (Di Stefano 76).[8] Indeed, much romantic poetry, in both its structures and its themes, grapples with subjectivity and its ensuing textual problematics. How is the self constructed? Is it autonomous? What is its position in the governing symbolic? How do the hierarchies of society and

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[8] This is in direct contrast to the approach of postmodernism which is often conveniently, albeit problematically, paired with feminism. In "Dilemmas of Difference," Christine Di Stefano points to the inherent danger in paralleling these two schools of critique: she writes,

> To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency. (76)

It follows that the literary groundwork of *Double Negative*'s feminist project might be more appropriately traced to texts that function both structurally and thematically as political, ideological, and/or visionary vehicles. As opposed to postmodern literature, much of Romantic poetry represents such a canonical force.

the hierarchies of perception itself influence poetic vision? These preeminent concerns of romantic literature find continuance in many contemporary feminist texts, such as *Double Negative*. In *Coleridge's Metaphors of Being*, Edward Kessler signifies the open-endedness of the romantic project, writing that "The end of the poetic process was not a poem (as an artifact), but a new knowledge of the self, a new awareness of Being. The modern prose poem, free verse, and the fragment as a form may have had their beginnings in Coleridge's 'failure'" (5-6).[9] This section of "Figures of Complicity" proposes that *Double Negative*'s own concerns with being, fragmentation, marginal subject positions, alternative symbolics, and non-linearity can be traced to and fruitfully read against the

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[9] It might well be argued--as this chapter proposes to do--that the failure to textualize being without recourse to essentialist argument finds continuance in *Double Negative*. However, as was suggested earlier in this chapter, essentialism can be deployed strategically. Recognizing that "strategic essentialism might be humanism's way of keeping its fundamental tenets in circulation at any cost and under any guise," Fuss suggests that the effective activation of essentialism depends upon the subject position(s) from which the strategy is employed: "I cannot help but think that the determining factor in deciding essentialism's political or strategic value is dependent upon who practices it" (32). As the concluding section of this chapter proposes, the subject positionality of *Double Negative*--that being a multiple female subject--differs dramatically from that of British Romanticism and, as a result, so too does its textualization of being and its employment of essentialism.

textual strategies of the British romantics. Yet, as is the nature of tesseric revision, the ephebe text does not merely reproduce the strategies of its precursors; in this case, it rewrites certain romantic conventions to privilege that which they have repressed, namely, female desire.

To read Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative* against the background of British romanticism draws attention to certain textual strategies that are fundamental to the operation of this work as a potentially disruptive textual and political force. The readings proposed in this section illustrate how Marlatt and Warland rewrite some of the structural strategies of British romanticism to embody a feminist poetics and ideology and, consequently, to point to the masculinist biases of the strategies in question. For instance, reading *Double Negative* against Coleridge's signification of female desire in *Christabel* points to the shortcomings of conventional strategies for representing female energy and mutually supportive female relationships. However, like the fragmented symbols and perceptions of Blake's Prophetic Books, such as *Jerusalem*, *Double Negative*'s fragments and fragmentation demonstrate the alienating force of the patriarchal symbolic. For Blake, unification can be achieved through the transcendent power of the imagination; consistently vexed by external

hierarchical structures, Marlatt and Warland, by contrast, do not and perhaps cannot turn solely to the visionary realm for resolution. Their vision is quite literally thwarted by the recurrent signifiers of colonization in their trek across the Australian outback. Their mythology, like Blake's, however, is fluid; fragmentation is a part of, not the product of the process. Likewise, the inter-disciplinary, non-linear text of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* provides a certain canonical precedent for Marlatt, Warland, and Cheryl Sourkes's own inter-disciplinary effort. Yet, perhaps the most productively problematic romantic analysis of *Double Negative* is to be found in reading the text's construction of a multiple female subject against the concept of negative capability as it is developed in John Keats's 1819 series of odes (Keats 370).[10] For this romantic poet, transcendence of the self through empathic projection is an arduous process, yet for the female poet(s) traditionally denied the position of subject, such a feat is a linguistic, perceptual, and theoretical ordeal.[11]

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[10] In a letter of December 1817 to George and Tom Keats, John Keats defines negative capability as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (370).

[11] For Luce Irigaray, the feminine is that which is repressed by patriarchal culture and is thus necessarily denied subjectivity and the authority

Marlatt and Warland negotiate their way through patriarchal language, symbolism, and epistemology in an attempt to develop their feminist poetics of desire: "we float off the page held tender & / fierce in our terrifying difference what is woman (in her / ecstasy)?" (55).

"A sight to dream of, not to tell!"[12]

To demonstrate both its challenge and indebtedness to conventional textual constructions of female desire, *Double Negative* might be read against a text such as Coleridge's *Christabel*, a narrative poem that suggests such desire is a dangerous curse that precipitates alienation and death. One notable contrast between the two texts is to be found in their respective strategies for representing female desire. For instance, in his signification of Christabel's potential desire for the duplicitous Geraldine, Coleridge depicts only the external landscape:

> Like one that shuddered, she [Geraldine] unbound
> The cincture from beneath her breast:

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of self-representation. As Toril Moi explains in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, "Woman is not only the Other... but is quite specifically *man's* Other: his negative or mirror-image. This is why Irigaray claims that patriarchal discourse situates woman *outside* representation: she is absence, negativity, the dark continent, or at best a lesser man" (133-34).

[12] Coleridge, *Christabel* 253.

> Her silken robe, and inner vest,
> Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
> Behold! her bosom and half her side--
> A sight to dream of, not to tell!
> O shield her! shield sweet Christabel! (248-54)

This representational strategy fosters a figurative disembodiment of female sexuality and desire--a disembodiment manifest in "her bosom and half her side." In a departure from Coleridge's representational strategy, the boundaries between the poets' internal and external landscapes become blurred in *Double Negative*, negating the space between body and text and thus representing female desire as a motivating force of feminine writing. As Marlatt and Warland write,

> rock bottom sea bed we lie in
> you pulled me under last night
> sucking me out through my womb inside out
> re-versed writing across bed into sky
> touching holding everything (25)

By contrast, the figural distance between female sexuality and the narrative voice of *Christabel*--a distancing manifest in "A sight to dream of, not to tell!"--signifies Coleridge's textual alienation of female desire. His presumably male narrator further resists textualizing lesbian desire through his appropriation of Christabel's potential reaction to Geraldine's act of seduction; in other words, it is "A sight to dream of" for the narrator, not

for Christabel herself, who must be shielded. The imposition of the narrative voice in *Christabel*--"O shield her!"--further suggests the impropriety of lesbian desire, the two women trapped within the gaze and judgment of patriarchal epistemology. The poem's development is therefore highly predictable: after her night with the serpentine Geraldine, Christabel becomes "Like a youthful hermitess," estranged from her community and, perhaps most significantly, from her father, whom Geraldine charms away (320).[13] Her association with Geraldine is

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[13] It is significant that a textual silencing of Christabel's voice and desires coincides with her alienation from the patriarch, Sir Leoline:

> 'By my mother's soul do I entreat
> That thou this woman send away!'
> She said: and more she could not say:
> For what she knew she could not tell,
> O'er-mastered by the mighty spell. (616-20)

In "About Chinese Women," Julia Kristeva analyzes how women are relegated to the role of the silent Other in the symbolic order of Judeo-Christianity. Her theory that "woman's only access to the symbolic order goes through the father" is poignantly manifest in the silencing of the alienated Christabel in the resolution of Coleridge's poem (Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* 138). As Kristeva writes,

> A woman has nothing to laugh about when the symbolic order collapses. She can take pleasure in it if, by identifying with the mother, the vaginal body, she imagines she is the sublime, repressed forces which return through the fissures of the order. But she can just as easily die from this upheaval, as a victim or a militant, if she has been deprived of a successful maternal identification and has found in the symbolic paternal order her

represented as an offense that effaces the bond between father and daughter and leaves the young woman empty of hope and vitality. In contrast, Marlatt and Warland depict *unacted* female desire as an "ecosystem of unhappiness" and represent female "doubling" as an empowering social force (49):

> the inconceivable
> doubling herself into life no slouch-backed beast (even
> double humped) heading for Bethlehem but the
> doubling of "woman" into hundreds camped in the
> middle of desert outside Pine Gap's nuclear base (48)

In *Double Negative*, it is through such doubling that woman is "birthed into subject," "no longer / the object of exchange but she-and-she-who-is-singing" (48).[14] The doubling of *Christabel*, by contrast, ensures that

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> one superficial, belated and easily severed link with life. ("About Chinese Women" 150)

For the motherless Christabel, rejection from the symbolic order is particularly devastating.

[14] In *Double Negative*, lesbian love is represented as a textually subversive force that challenges conventional subject positionality:

> you send me kisses from the end of the seat
> on the map Bookaloo, Woocalla, Wirrappa
> names that twitter like small birds
> in the scrub we aim for
>
> off the map
> opening up the Subject

woman remains, at best, "the object of exchange"; at worst, she is destroyed.

Despite its counter-canonical constructions and atmosphere, the representation of lesbian desire in *Double Negative* is indebted to certain rhetorical strategies which can be seen as having their foundations in canonical representations, such as those of *Christabel*. For instance, *Double Negative*'s manipulation of metaphor in its evocation of the female body and lesbian desire and its equation of woman with life might find a background in Coleridge's own dependence upon figurative devices in his equation of lesbian desire with ruin and woman with death. However, Marlatt and Warland reverse the paradigm constructed in *Christabel* to

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hands a manual alphabet
i sign your V (20-21)

The multiple feminine subject position of *Double Negative* is not unlike that promoted by Cixous in *"Coming to Writing"*. Such subject positionality does not repress difference, but rather pursues it; as Cixous advises,

> Search yourself, seek out the shattered, the multiple I, that you will be still further on, and emerge from one self, shed the old body, shake off the Law. Let it fall with all its weight, and you, take off, don't turn back: it's not worth it, there's nothing behind you, everything is yet to come. (40)

equate the patriarchy with death.[15] Presumably meditating upon the fates of his wife and child,

> Each matin bell, the Baron saith,
> Knells us back to a world of death.
> These words Sir Leoline first said,
> When he rose and found his lady dead:
> These words Sir Leoline will say
> Many a morn to his dying day! (332-37)

It is conspicuous that the focus on death is that of the patriarch, Sir Leoline rather than that of Christabel, who views her 'fallen' state as being like a trance, or Geraldine, whose venomous character and perceptions are

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[15] As Brenda Carr suggests in "Collaboration in the Feminine," *Double Negative*'s political critique depends upon a reversal of inherited paradigms that signifies the text's ultimate (albeit antithetical) dependence on canonical strategies of textual representation:

> This textual collaboration enacts a crucial critical intervention: it re-verses literary and socio-cultural grounds to facilitate the emergence of a female-defined collaborative subject position on which female agency, or the ability to change oppressive social practices and structures, may be contingent. (112)

While *Double Negative*'s recourse (however revisionary in focus) to "oppressive... practices and structures" might be seen as being problematic in terms of the textual authority of its argument, the poets' privileging of what is repressed in conventional paradigms might in itself be considered political and subversive. As Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "In woman there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes" (882).

represented in a rather phallic allusion near the conclusion of the poem.[16] Coleridge's death imagery is the antithesis of that of *Double Negative*, where women shun dissolution in favour of unification and life:

> earth mothers free love flowers slipped
> into barrel ends of riot control rifles rejection of one
> authoritative version verso turning over a new leaf
> women's lib black power versus the Great White
> Father's Vietnam their armies undisciplined riddled
> with deserters (49)

The "love flowers / slipped into barrel ends of riot control rifles" might be read as a figurative stifling of patriarchal tools of repression. In one of its many reversals, *Double Negative* associates the patriarchy with death; however, the oppositions of male-female and life-death remain.

While the effectiveness of *Christabel*'s figurative language relies upon a connotative duality (as in the concurrently erotic and foreboding

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[16] Coleridge writes,

> A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy;
> And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head
> Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye,
> And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread
> At Christabel she looked askance!--
> One moment--and the sight was fled!
> But Christabel in dizzy trance
> Stumbling on the unsteady ground
> Shuddered aloud.... (583-91)

"Like one that shuddered"), Marlatt and Warland's metaphors move beyond traditional connotation, their meaning instead dependent on the feminist "imaginary" that the text itself constructs (18). Indeed, the fluid hermeneutic proposed by *Double Negative* suggests the instability of traditional connotation: "here changes / in a sentence" (17). With its figurative language and imagery recurrently pointing to the energy and influence of the female body and natural landscape, *Double Negative* manifests a certain distancing from the governing patriarchal symbolic. In "Peterborough," for instance, the imagery seems to propose an essential connection between the feminine landscapes of the female body and nature itself--a bond that defies the oppositional logic of Western philosophy:

> THIS, this
>
> image cattle climb the
> soft mound of hill lost
> dip or cleft a
> V to view (18)

Despite *Double Negative*'s ultimate and, it seems, unavoidable participation in what Julia Kristeva refers to as "the symbolic" ("the domain of position and judgment"), its recourse to a non-linguistic communion of body and environment proposes a hermeneutic that abandons certain subject-object

divisions (Roudiez 19). As Kristeva writes in "Revolution in Poetic Language," "All enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence is thetic. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects" (98). In contrast to the "mixed metaphors" of "see-vill(ain)-I-say-tion" that impose "anglo overlays" on the natural landscape, *Double Negative*'s figurative language develops a more consistent and inclusive process of signification that conflates landscape and text with the female body itself (19). For instance, as Carr writes,

> The fantasizing of the landscape as the V of the Venus mound is a collaborative act of literary intervention. It facilitates entry into a female-defined imaginary that the collective "we" enters. Here, as the end of "coming into Port Pirie" also suggests, the monolithic subject is opened up to allow for the birth of a twinned subject: two women in a train berth giving birth to each other as desired and desiring subject in and for each other's writing. ("Collaboration in the Feminine" 119)

Metaphor and imagery such as that found in the "Peterborough" poem of the first section of *Double Negative* create textual space for the female subject with her poetics of desire to be potentially birthed into being: "this the imaginary / we enter" (18). The inclusive female "we" that concludes "Peterborough" marks a departure from the exclusivity of the "royal we"

referred to earlier in the poem, the more inclusive construction figurally resisting the conventional subject-object divisions and hierarchies connoted by the "royal we" (17).[17] This rhetorical departure signifies the text's epistemological challenge to social and textual binaries that deny female subjectivity and, consequently, lesbian sexuality: as Marlatt and Warland insist, "mouths move in anOther motion" (16). Unlike the destructive female relationship of *Christabel* which alienates one of the participants from subjecthood, "Lesbian collaboration in *Double Negative* suggests a symbiotic relationship among female collaboration, cultural agency, and subject formation" (Carr, "Collaboration in the Feminine" 121).

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[17] While *Double Negative*'s inclusive "we" is potentially problematic in its suggestion of an essential female unity, it is strategic in its figurative renunciation of the authority of Western epistemology. As Donna Haraway writes,

> Innocence, and the corollary insistence on victimhood as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage. But the constructed revolutionary subject must give late twentieth-century people pause as well. In the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history. (157-58)

The reflexivity of *Double Negative*'s representational strategies will be considered in the second section of this chapter.

Double Negative's critique of traditional structural strategies used in the textual construction of female relationships is further developed by its unconventional triangulations that defy binarity or what Mary Jacobus calls "the tyranny of hierarchical oppositions" (109).[18] These triangulations are, as Carr suggests, more akin to collaboration, in contrast to certain romantic triangulations whose hierarchies lead to the alienation of at least one of the participants and reinforce binary relationships. In *Christabel*, for instance, the various triangulations--Sir Leoline, Christabel, Christabel's mother; Geraldine, Christabel, the spirit of Christabel's mother; Geraldine, Sir Leoline, Christabel--structurally necessitate the silencing of one of the women involved, respectively, Christabel's mother, her spirit, and, ultimately, Christabel herself. The evolution of *Double Negative* likewise depends upon triangulation, in this case, the triangulation of female 'subjects,' particularly Marlatt, Warland, and the earth itself: "we go inside / out / into the womb of the continent / ochre, red earth, salt plain" (13). As Carr further suggests, "At the scene of lesbian doubling, female subjects proliferate. The desert personified as 'she'--waking up

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[18] My consideration of textual triangulations is strongly influenced by Mary Jacobus's "Is There a Woman in this Text?"

after years of playing the 'obstacle-boundary-space' to the desert fathers--is also the female subject in and for this writing" ("Collaboration in the Feminine" 120). In *Double Negative*, a co-dependency facilitates the emergence of the participating female subjects, as well as the voices of other women:

> the desert a different
> economy (her own woman?) yet there's uranium to be
> mined, sacred aboriginal sites to plunder Ann seeing
> "beauty" yet Evelyn doubtful (no place free from this
> violent taking) Jane at the table thinking desert thinking
> desire the two she writes driving out into it (46)

While *Double Negative*'s triangulations might find a background in traditional textual triangulations, the former's resistance to binarism and hierarchies opens space for women's voices, some of which would be silenced in conventional constructions.

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand"[19]

Unlike hierarchical textual triangulations, the figure of the fragment is more generally associated with postmodernism than with traditional representational strategies, such as those of romanticism. Indeed, in contemporary theoretical discourse, the structural concerns of feminist and

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[19] Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" 1.

postmodern literature--in particular, their shared attention to fragmentation--are often paired. However, while the postmodern fragment challenges the humanist ideal of autonomy, the feminist fragment, like the romantic fragment, often reaches beyond a shattered ideal, in this case to represent a female reality and symbolic consistently denied by post-Enlightenment thought; as Marlatt and Warland ask, "what is woman (in her own / symbolic)?" (52). While Patricia Waugh argues that postmodern fragmentation represents a type of nostalgia for the wholeness of representation offered through the discourses of modernity, she sees feminist fragmentation as "a final defense against the fear of annihilation [that] is preceded by a desire to destroy that which threatens to annihilate oneself" (191). In "we entered this," Marlatt and Warland symbolically evoke the patriarchal repression of female voice and characterize the linguistic fragment as a potential source of resistance: "a / closed door creates a stone rolled over the mouth. the / mouth groans sings its fervid blue note, 'you you' / muffled under the weight of the others the ones who / do not sing out loud" (43). End punctuation--used infrequently throughout the text--here signifies the confines of traditional textual conventions. While the figurative "stone" of such conventions muffles the

female voice, it does not render it completely mute, and this, in turn, points to a potential fissure through which woman might textually construct herself. However, what is here sung--the self-effacing and potentially accusatory "'you you'"--points to the representational limitations of traditional textual conventions. With the conflation of the female body and landscape in its evocation of female desire, the conclusion of "we entered this" is, however, optimistic, implicitly proposing an alternative strategy of representation that is more open to female subjectivity and desire:

> our coast monumental
> thighs breasts slide into (islands touching under the
> water). this is the brilliance of rainless weather
> everyone discrete a brilliance flesh dryly supports, but
> they are opening doors and when they glance up water
> artesian wells in their eyes. (43)

More closely related to the romantic fragment that "serves as an authenticating token of the validity of the imaginary" (Morse 194), the feminist fragment authenticates marginal spaces that have been repressed in many canonical representations. In particular, *Double Negative* proposes a perceptual re-evaluation of colonial constructions of centrality. As Marlatt and Warland write in "Forrest,"

> imagin-a-nation in the heart of
> "nothing"

when not/hing comes unhinged
far as the eye can see

there are birds, insects, mammals, reptiles, scrub trees,
bushes, grasses
thriving outside The Gaze (24)

"The Gaze" (a conventional sexual/textual strategy that fosters objectification) is here represented as precipitating boundaries, albeit unstable ones. Notably, the gaze is not omniscient; instead, as it is here figured, it is willfully blind to that which it marginalizes. By contrast, the aforementioned lyric foregrounds what has been repressed by the colonial eye and suggests (through the diction of "thriving") that the gaze textually stifles the energies and life-forces of the natural world. In destabilizing the divisive perceptions engendered through the strategy of the gaze, *Double Negative* once again exposes the limitations of traditional perceptual and textual conventions. Furthermore, the possibility of alternative symbolics--symbolics that inevitably challenge the supremacy of the dominant symbolic--is effectively rendered through the fragment which offers an "authenticating token" of that which has been displaced or denied by traditional Western ideals of male hegemony. In "there's nothing there," Marlatt and Warland write of "this texting the abandoned made new in

her," signifying the subversive plenitude of non-traditional feminine logic and discourse: "'In / the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the / expert's mind there are few' what is woman (in her / emptiness)" (49). What Irigaray sees as a phallocentric logic of the same--a logic that is fundamental to Western philosophy--is dramatically undermined by the rhetorical operation of the fragment in *Double Negative*. The fragment here points to and authenticates at least some of the possibilities repressed by the "law of the *same* desire" in which woman, a mirror for masculinity, is denied the authority of self-representation (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 55). Concurrently, the feminist fragment serves as a structural emblem of the female history of linguistic and representational domination:

> women as CONS: "contra, against, opposite"
> to
> PROS
>
> that is
> behind, after, without a version
>
> negative feminine space
>
> walking into the diner
> "are you ladies alone"
> "no"
> "we're together" (19-20)

The "negative feminine space" is here reclaimed through a female doubling of subject. As Marlatt and Warland playfully write in "two women in a birth," "desire in their desire room in their room somebody in the body not in but in the doubling of" (48).

While Marlatt and Warland recurrently figure the fragment as a potential source of resistance to textually oppressive conventions, the disjunctive syntax of *Double Negative*'s lyrics and prose poems further develops the poets' project of destabilizing the closed forms of the canonical tradition. The sentences themselves become fragmented in the text's privileging of a multiplicity that is often thwarted by the closure of the grammatical sentence. As Marlatt and Warland write in "imagin-a-nation in the heart of," "(she is not for termination after all) she is well / on her way to de-railing the 'long straight' which can / only see its own track while she is out on either side" (50). The "long straight" sentence is here represented as a textual strategy (much like the gaze) that willfully dismisses that which is outside the margins of its own creation. By contrast, *Double Negative* proposes a playful "spiral movement" which has the potential to "undermine every prop(er) deafinition" (51). Notably, the proposed movement not only challenges the linearity of the conventional

literary text (as the playful typography of "prop(er)" suggests) but also challenges the authority of the logos itself (as is signified by the diction of "deafinition"); both are seen as constructs, inventions that defy more natural perceptions, such as those suggested by the non-divisive syntactical movement of "shifting desert dunes her desire" (51). The sentence fragment is thus figured as a potentially subversive force that disrupts the textual conditions engendered by Western logic--conditions that can be seen as fostering subject-object divisions and exclusive representations. By contrast, the subject and object become destabilized in *Double Negative*'s sentence fragmentation--a destabilization that points to the potential for multiple or inclusive subject positions. On a syntactical level, then, the fragment is seen to foster the plenitude of feminine discourse. As Marlatt and Warland write,

> Jane at her table (in the desert) u at your table (in the desert) Nicole at her table (in the desert) and me at this table (in the desert) not there but there writing the not here inverts turning perspective upside down writing morphogenetic lines which refuse to be read parallel writing desert lines (mirage between the eyes) writing rail lines (illusion our desires meeting) (54)

It is within such organic or "morphogenetic lines" that "all points of / view converge where eyes close signalling bodies to / trust the turning as we

float off the page" (55). *Double Negative*'s syntactical attention to fragmentation and its challenges to textual conditions can thus be seen as supporting and, to a certain extent, paralleling the text's more figural attention to fragmentation. However, while the text's resolution seemingly anticipates the transcendence of fragmented perceptions in favour of more inclusive ways of seeing, syntactical fragmentation endures as a requisite, it seems, to the representation of female desire. As Marlatt and Warland write in "we had not wanted it to end," "this everturning threshold no / line is nothing to cross or resist your mouth mine / mouths us in suspense the evercoming trembles on..." (56).

Like William Blake's "temporary" thematic and structural fragmentation in his Prophetic Books (Punter 230), feminist fragmentation, both syntactical and figural, can be strategic, pointing to the many potential and existing ruptures--the "unuttered texts"--of the traditional symbolic (Marlatt and Warland 28). Moreover, the fragmentation of *Double Negative*, like that of Blake's *Jerusalem*, is ideological not only in its critique of contemporaneous social and textual constructs but also in its promotion of new ways of seeing and being. Of Blake's fragmented symbolic, David Punter writes,

> he tries to attract our attention to the crucial importance of cultivating a sense of the individual, for the social threat, as Blake sees it, is that this new, highly organized but feelingless world will reduce people to a mindless conformity, will erode the sense of the individual which is essential not only for the production of great works of art but also for everybody's sense of participating fully in the world. (233-34)

The 'organization' that Blake's poet-figure Los rebels against is one characterized by a patriarchal epistemology and hierarchical duality that many feminist writers likewise challenge, for, as de Beauvoir writes, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (xvi). Fittingly, "Crucial to... [Blake's own] myth of separation is the division of the sexes" (Punter 231). For both Blake and the poets of *Double Negative*, fragmentation has the strategic potential of negating the gender hierarchies and male hegemony authorized by the patriarchal symbolic, as well as creating space for the emergence of alternative ideals and 'marginal' symbolics. As Blake's Los declares in *Jerusalem*, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (1.10.20-21). In the "Crossing Loop" section of *Double Negative*, Marlatt similarly rejects the comparative stance, recounting, "We also didn't admit any of the tradition of how trains have

been depicted, we didn't contrast how we were experiencing the train, from the inside, with how it's so often imaged from the outside" (36). While many of the poems and prose poems of the *Double Negative* sequence do indeed represent divisions and contrasts between the sexes, in the last poems of the text Marlatt and Warland move beyond the fragmentation of oppositional logic to propose a poetics of desire:

> we settle into this endless motion once again settle into the beginninglessness the endlessness of this page this desert this train this shared desire wholly here with a passion that humbles us what is woman (in her own symbolic)? (52)

The diction of "beginninglessness," "endlessness," "shared," and "wholly" promotes a textuality that resists binarity and linearity. In a departure from canonical strategies of representation based on divisions, comparisons, and hierarchical dualities, the text points to the possibility of alternative perceptual strategies and symbolics which do not entirely depend upon conventions that have traditionally thwarted female subjectivity and representation, but rather attend to the multiplicity and plenitude of female desire.

Like the romantic fragment, the feminist fragment, symbol, and figure address themselves to the reader's 'recognition' of a realm beyond

conventional representation in a process of signification that transcends canonical notions of textual autonomy. As Nicole Brossard writes in *The Aerial Letter*,

> The integral woman is radical. My senses origynate in her. She shares in their integrity. Time, space, belong to her; she is female symbol for all of us, "symbola," a reconnaissance sign of recognition. Figure, image, metaphor, with the meaning she gives to words, she always makes and in/core/porates sense. (115)

As *The Aerial Letter* suggests, the feminist fragment draws upon the political potential of representational strategies. Like Blake's Prophetic Books, much feminist literature textually figures the contrariety of fragmentation and wholeness to challenge notions of closure and signify spaces beyond the text itself and its literary conventions. Blake's *Jerusalem*, for instance, concludes with a rather transcendent vision:

> All Human Forms identified, even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. all Human Forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied Into the Planetary lives of Years Months Days & Hours reposing And then Awaking into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.
>
> And I heard the Name of their Emanations they are named Jerusalem (4.99.1-5)

The conclusion of *Double Negative* similarly envisions connectedness and abundance:

> we are arctic we are summer
> tasting a water not so salt as marked by it forever
> lingual tongue in alkaline caves succeeds accedes to the
> pre (prairie free) symbolic flowers here a desert's
> standing sea the ocean in us throbs to meet
>
> we bilingual reading rock reading sand word reading us in
> (56)

In both *Jerusalem* and *Double Negative*, the representational conditions of hierarchical opposition, temporality, and linearity are implicitly contested to create textual space for alternative versions and visions. Such a challenge points to the blindspots of Western philosophy--blindspots that can be potentially exploited to rupture the governing symbolic and its textual conditions.

Double Negative's textual indebtedness to the structural strategies pioneered by William Blake is further evidenced in this text's unconventional design. With his illuminated books, Blake advances an alternative to the linear text, coupling illustration with the printed word, offering texts that more closely represent the alternative visions and symbolics expressed therein. Contemporary Canadian feminist texts, such as Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli's *A Mazing Space*, Paulette Jiles's *Sitting in the Club Car Drinking Rum and Karma Kola*, and Marlatt

and Warland's *Double Negative*, turn to style and design in resistance to the canonical tradition of textual presentation. The oversized, colourful text of *A Mazing Space*, with its shell designs linking the different contributions, celebrates its femininity. Jiles's train logo, guiding us forward through *Sitting in the Club Car Drinking Rum and Karma Kola*, self-consciously parodies the linear structure of the modernist tradition--a parody that is enhanced by the text's own lack of closure. Marlatt and Warland's incorporation of Cheryl Sourkes's negative collages exemplifies the interdisciplinary and collaborative approach of much contemporary Canadian feminist art and offers an alternative to conventional "translation of colour into / black on white" (Marlatt and Warland 22). In these texts, the writers and contributors self-consciously imprint their female identities and their challenges to canonical methods of textual presentation. These women revise our notions of the limited and limiting linear text. W. J. T. Mitchell speculates that Blake's illuminated books were

> his strategy for confronting the ambivalence about the printed word in his own time with his own talents, but he certainly recognized other strategies... he wanted all books to be the products of loving, creative, nonalienated labour. He wanted books, engravings, drawings--representations of all sorts--to bear the imprint of their creators, that is to be expressions of both common human work and unique individuality, the

> human form divine. To the extent that writing, printing, graphic art, and other media, genres, or styles had become sites of ideological production and reproduction, hieroglyphics of alienation and repression, I think Blake, like the other Romantics, felt that his task was to struggle with and reshape them, not to simply accept them in their received form. (90)

Rather than being an expression of the "human form divine," certain Canadian feminist texts become visual representations of the individuality and potential 'divinity' of the feminine. As Marlatt and Warland propose, "we carry it with us / manna a kind of dew / falling from heaven as water does" (17).

"Opposition is true Friendship"[20]

As Blakean textual production provides canonical precedent for *Double Negative*'s challenge to conventional notions of the printed text, so too might the text's marginal address be seen as finding its precedent in the narrative of British romanticism. As David Morse writes in *Romanticism: A Structural Analysis*,

> The Romantic author does not address himself to a group of peers who will understand his point of view and orientation because they belong to the same stratum of society, but rather sees his work as a missive directed to readers who, though they may be presumed to be sympathetically disposed toward

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[20] Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 20.224.

> him, are nevertheless alien. He may seek to carry them along with him or win them over, to dissever them from bourgeois norms and values from which he himself is already estranged. (191)

When Brossard voices the conditions of feminist writing, she clearly echoes the anti-bourgeois thrust of the romantic poet: "Generally speaking, I would say that in order to write one must... feel a profound dissatisfaction with the prevailing and mainstream discourse, which denies differences and obstructs thought" (133). However, Brossard's conception of the 'true' feminist poet as the lesbian who, knowing "the fire and the ashes of desire, of being, and of fragment," addresses herself directly to other women and "makes patriarchal dogma invalid," challenges the mediating function of the more inclusive romantic address (121; 122). Marlatt further signifies the potential exclusionary nature of alternative textual representation as she considers the collaborative process of *Double Negative*: "we were so into rewriting the train experience from a female perspective that we didn't want to admit any of the imagery from the tradition because it would have contaminated our alternative version

(vision)" (38).[21] While the romantic poet often strategically excludes himself from the two worlds he mediates, Marlatt and Warland more definitely position themselves and their cultural ideology in the centre of a new textual cosmos that necessarily decentres the conventional perception of otherness. As they shrewdly ask, "what if the boundary goes walking?" (48).

In its evolution of a multiple female subject, *Double Negative* might be unexpectedly yet fruitfully read against John Keats's 1819 series of odes. Like Marlatt and Warland's sequence, Keats's odes grapple with subject positionality, desire, unresolved contrarieties, temporality, nature, and disillusion. Keats's series--from the "Ode to Psyche" in which the "poet seeks 'love' rather than 'wisdom'" to "To Autumn" which "has no...

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[21] The attention to process found in Marlatt and Warland's conversational "Crossing Loop" section is itself highly Romantic. The famous "*Preface* to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads," in which the methodology of the poems is described and justified for the reader, provides a certain canonical precedent for *Double Negative*'s own explicit consideration of approach. Notably, however, the "Crossing Loop" section is found in the middle--the heart--of the feminist text, signifying Marlatt and Warland's challenge to conventional genre distinctions and divisions. This challenge is further enhanced by the prose poem forms of the concluding section of the sequence. The overall structure of *Double Negative* thus resists binarity and instead fosters a sense of the differences that are allowable in feminine textual economies and production.

absence/presence dialectic"--represents a thematic and structural progression towards a transcendence of the various textual constructs of self with the goal of empathic projection to be achieved through a movement from subjectivity to a positionality more akin to 'objectivity' (Bloom, introduction 3; Hartman, "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self-Consciousness'" 49). The fluency and efficiency of this progression contrasts sharply with that of *Double Negative*, which is thwarted in any such movement by traditional textual politics that prohibit female subjectivity, not to mention 'objectivity.' As Marlatt and Warland write,

> PROhibit (whose CONscience)
> PROinhabit (whose CONtrol)
> whose weapons
> whose land
> . . . . . .
>
> PRO: "before, in front of, according to"
> (Adam before...the Gospel according to...)
> &
> CONS: "conjunx,
> wife" (19)

The working of Keatsian negative capability, however, provides a certain canonical access for *Double Negative*'s own transcendence of the individual ego and its evolution of a poetics of desire. Particularly appropriate to the feminist project is Keats's defiance of "consequitive reasoning" in the

overall evolution of this group of odes, the product being a poetic vision that is dependent upon intuition and imagination for its 'truths' (365). If Adam can awake from his dream to find it "truth," presumably so might Eve awaken (Keats 365).

In the opening ode of his series, Keats focuses on the "hethen Goddess" Psyche whose alienation is precipitated by her society's repression of beauty and desire (475).[22] In terms of a comparative analysis with *Double Negative*, it is ironic yet perhaps fitting that the myth upon which Keats loosely bases this poem involves a same-sex rivalry and hierarchy between Psyche and the powerful goddess Aphrodite, "who was indignant at her beauty" and was presumably jealous of Psyche's marriage to Eros (Grimal 379). The triangulation of Keats's allusion is conventional, resulting in a rift between women, whereas the various triangulations of *Double Negative*--"you and me / in Robyn's bed," for example--are inclusive, even sensuous (10). Despite its recurrent allusions to human sensuality, "Ode to Psyche" represents an internalization of love

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[22] As Pierre Grimal notes, "Psyche was stunningly beautiful and much admired, but whereas her sisters had found husbands, no one wanted to marry her because her beauty was so daunting" (379).

and worship as the poet's song becomes a "delicious moan / Upon the midnight hours" (30-31). As Helen Vendler writes of Keats's "Ode to Psyche,"

> It aims, whatever its sensual metaphors... at a complete, exclusive, and lasting annihilation of the senses in favour of the brain. The locus of reality in the ode passes from the world of myth to the world of mind, and the firm four-part structure emphasizes the wish to reproduce earlier sensual and cultic reality in a later interiorized form. (47)

Any process of interiorization in *Double Negative* is prolonged by the poets' necessary externalization of inappropriate patriarchal mythologies (particularly evident in the first section of the text) and the arduous textual development of a relevant feminine mythology. A process of mythologizing is active in "Katoomba," where Marlatt and Warland write,

> we entered this
> here
> Robyn threading us deep
> into blue bush aboriginal sacred look/outs
> creviced waterfalls
> our bodies these Blue Mountains
> mesmerized by gum tree glisten bird calls echoing
> across self-possessed valleys
>
> it could have been any century
> it could have been before our counting (10)

The act of mythologizing is further evident in the text's "Crossing Loop" section with Warland writing, "i began to have a sense that there is some kind of a North American lesbian tradition of exploring the feminine in relation to the desert" (38). While Keats's "Ode to Psyche" quite effortlessly begins within the framework of Western mythology, *Double Negative* must laboriously construct a sense of its own history and tradition before Marlatt and Warland can assume the position of 'poet.' As they themselves acknowledge, "narrativity not possible without Law and / History" (54).

Not unlike the project of *Double Negative*, the structural and thematic progression of Keats's odes represents an attempt to transcend the textual constructs of self and reason with the goal being the theorized negative capability. In Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," for instance, reason disrupts the attempt at empathic projection: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" (71-72). By contrast, the construct of self is signified only in the recurrent personification of the concluding ode of the series, "To Autumn": "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store? / Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find / Thee sitting careless on a granary floor, / Thy hair soft-lifted

by the winnowing wind" (12-15). Here divisive perceptions are almost completely resisted, and the poet becomes absorbed into (rather than self-absorbed with) the natural cycle of life and death. As François Matthey observes in *The Evolution of Keats's Structural Imagery*, "To Autumn" "shows Keats focusing his attention on that all important moment of receptive communion with the tangible world" (244). The opening poem of *Double Negative* proposes a similar transcendence of division: "'travelling backwards through Australia' / you said through / (not across / not over" (8). Any unifying perceptions, however, are thwarted by the recurrent signifiers of patriarchal culture; after all, this is not an unblemished Keatsian landscape, but rather one abundant with signifiers of colonialism. Language itself is one such signifier, an artifice that acts as a barrier to poetic 'truth': as Marlatt and Warland write,

> we no longer remember
> dingo talk didgeridoo style
> (mimicked at Central Quay by a street hawker
> performing "the real thing" for the kids
> who do perhaps remember (14)

For the feminist poets, "Indo-European words" are "dead wood" which cannot represent or authenticate the female experience (15). Other signifiers that work against the transcendence of divisive perceptions

include road signs and borders: "'Welcome to Western Australia' the sign said" (28). The binarity manifest in such non-organic divisions is in direct contrast to what Marlatt perceives as being the inter-connectedness of the feminine tongue. In "Musing with Mothertongue," she writes, "language thus speaking (i.e. inhabited) relates us, 'takes us back' to where we are, as it relates us to the world in a living body of verbal relations. articulation. seeing the connections" (226). In *Double Negative*, colonialism is represented as a divisive force that precipitates a territorial approach to language and to perception itself, thus prohibiting a transcendence of the self, particularly for those who have been marginalized in the role of Other.

The movement of *Double Negative* shifts from a textuality in which woman is defined as Other to one which presumably authorizes the birth of a multiple female subject. The female speaker, however, cannot transcend the self (as Keats proposes to do) when she is initially denied the position of subject. In other words, the female subject must create herself before any such transcendence is possible. Despite the centuries between the writing of Keats's odes and the writing of *Double Negative*, Marlatt and Warland must begin their journey into negative capability at least one

structural step behind the romantic poet. To develop their poetics of desire, it is necessary that they first birth themselves into a textual being that is itself multiple and inclusive. Clearly echoing Keats's emphasis on negative capability, Marlatt theorizes that "The erotic has everything to do with immediacy and presence, though it is not self-contained. like water or fire, it seeks to go beyond limits, above all beyond the limits of self as distinct from other" ("Lesbera" 123). While Keats's poet in "Ode to Psyche" is an alienated yet comparatively unified being, the poets of the first section of *Double Negative* are marginalized and, in their position of otherness, perceived as non-unified: "two women outback / down under / add it up--two negatives make a positive" (20). As *Double Negative* progresses and the poets begin to textually establish their own multiple subjecthood, their presence (in a Keatsian movement) becomes minimal, enabling them to move beyond certain divisions: "writing the not / here inverts turning perspective upside down" (54). Only once they have birthed themselves into textual being can they begin where Keats's poet enters his journey towards negative capability: "rock reading sand word reading us in" (Marlatt and Warland 56).

II. Reading Figures of Authority in *Double Negative*

While the preceding section has argued that *Double Negative*'s textual constructions of desire, fragmentation, and agency implicitly respond to and, at times, revise certain structural strategies of the British romantics, this section of "Figures of Complicity" explores the various rhetorical operations that authorize this text's representations of nature, woman, writer, and reader, particularly as they generate further comparative analyses with the canonical narrative of romanticism. As the section heading suggests, "Reading Figures of Authority in *Double Negative*" recognizes that textual authority is itself a construction, a function of language itself, for, as Bloom notes, "Words, even if we take them as magic, refer *only* to other words, to the end of it. Words will never interpret themselves, and common rules for interpreting words will never exist" ("The Breaking of Form" 9). As such, this chapter's interrogation of *Double Negative*'s problematic construction of authority is not intended to undermine the text's ambitious counter-canonical project, but rather to explore its reflexivity. This section thus responds to certain theoretical concerns that are generated by Marlatt and Warland's attempt to forge a feminine poetics of desire. How does *Double Negative* textualize

the theoretical implications of feminist aesthetics? What epistemological sources does the text draw upon in establishing its authority? And--a question central to any poststructuralist analysis--how does the text ultimately turn back upon itself and its constructed authority? In its response to these concerns, this section once again proposes that *Double Negative* draws upon certain strategies engendered by the British romantics, particularly Wordsworth and Blake.

In its textualization of nature, writer, and reader, British romanticism can once again be seen as offering a master narrative to *Double Negative* and its figural representations. Influenced by deconstructionist and poststructuralist theory, the poststructuralist criticism of the past two decades points to the poetry of the British romantics, particularly that of William Wordsworth, as offering figural moments that foreground a given text's theoretical concerns. In other words, the poetry can often be seen as textualizing its own interpretation or constructing its own hermeneutic. While such attention to hermeneutics is not exclusive to romantic poetry, as Tilottama Rajan suggests, it is here foregrounded in the operation of a text's overall form:

> Making the reader a constituent of the text, as H. R. Jauss's studies of medieval literature suggest, is not unique to romantic literature. What may be unique is the manner in which this move is theorized into a crisis in signification by developments in romantic hermeneutics that both reflect and influence the organization of texts. The result is an increasingly metafictional literature that makes theory a subject of reflection within the text itself. (*The Supplement of Reading* 4)

Such reflexivity suggests that the way in which a text is "to be seen, or heard, or read becomes an allegory of its own figuration" (Kneale 13).[23] In its promotion of an alternative epistemology and hermeneutic, *Double Negative*'s feminist project necessitates a similar metafictional engagement with relevant theoretical issues. For instance, in "there's nothing there," Marlatt and Warland explicitly repudiate psychoanalytic theory's authorization of the governing symbolic,[24] insisting that

> this is not the Mirror Stage
> but a glimpse of her own ecosystem of emptiness "If

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[23] As Kneale writes, "insofar as a text attempts to say something about itself to itself or to another reader, an allegory of reading implies the reflexive nature of all texts, the tendency for language to talk about itself *as language*" (13).

[24] As Leon S. Roudiez writes, "Genetically speaking, it [the symbolic] comes into being later than the semiotic, at the time of the mirror stage; it involves the thetic phase, the identification of subject and its distinction from objects, and the establishment of a sign system" (19).

> your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything"
> her mind a womb its blood the 'watching nothing
> going by' embrace of the churinga (the 'deathless
> body') this texting of the abandoned made new in her (49)

In its association with the thetic phase, the mirror stage of psychoanalytical theory requires that "the subject must separate... from and through his objects" (Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language" 98). Such separation works against the textual dissolving of distance between subject and object, as well as the multiple or inclusive subject positionality of *Double Negative*, and, as such, the poets strategically discredit a psychoanalytical interpretation that would dispute their challenge to the authority of the governing symbolic. As Marlatt and Warland write, "what she longs for is the absence of the / symbolic" (51). The theoretical implications of *Double Negative*'s challenge to conventional meaning and interpretation potentially propel the text into the realm of metalanguage or metafiction, particularly as convention itself--"the symbolic"--becomes seen as a barrier to the poetic process. In his *Monumental Writing*, Kneale suggests that Wordsworth's *Prelude* engenders a certain poetic standard of theoretical rigor and awareness (a standard by which the effectiveness of *Double*

Negative's own metafictional operations might be assessed); of *The Prelude*, Kneale argues that

> The theoretical prospect that *The Prelude* repeatedly obliges us to consider is that it is a narrative about its own composition but, more precisely, about the problems of that composition. The result is a text that thematizes its figural language of autobiography and epitaph, intertext and *mise en abyme*, voice and letter, metaphor and metonym, creating a monumental allegory of a trope called "Imagination" which is but a meta-name for an awful power of language itself. (xx)

In addition to *Double Negative*'s textual indebtedness to the structural strategies of British romanticism, the theoretical self-consciousness of this canonical literature might further act (as this section proposes) as a frame for the analysis of the feminist text's reflexivity.

This section of "Figures of Complicity" will firstly consider the theoretical problematic generated by *Double Negative*'s recurrent association of the female body with nature, particularly as this association presumably authorizes a feminine poetics of desire. Secondly, this section will explore the text's construction of a more natural poetic language and its figures of writer and reader, paying particular attention to the text's assumed authority in its promotion of an alternative hermeneutic and a feminist counter-canon. In considering the text's political or authoritative

stance, this section argues that *Double Negative* consistently employs a strategic essentialism in its politicization of gender and its textualization of woman. Ironically, this essentialism is itself undermined by the text's representation of the private woman in a figural moment near the sequence's conclusion in which the writers, figured as woman, appropriate the conventional strategy of the gaze to render their female object of perception voiceless. In its process of textualizing female desire, a dependence on such masculinist strategies might be seen as being politically problematic, and, as a result, the feminist project of *Double Negative* might further be viewed as being complicit in the perpetuation of canonical conventions.

"A correspondent breeze"[25]

Like many romantic texts, *Double Negative* manifests a heightened awareness of the natural landscape and represents a mutual reciprocity between nature and imagination. This reciprocity finds a master narrative in Wordsworth's poetry, particularly in his *Prelude*, whose internal development is conspicuously influenced by the tension between these two

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[25] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1.35.

forces. Critics have argued that Wordsworth's poetry restores "integrity or wholeness to an object [generally, nature] and, in doing so, revises the binary of subject-object to that of subject-'subject'" (Gutierrez 12).[26] A similar non-objectification of nature is proposed by the poets of *Double Negative* as they include nature in their multiple, female subject position. While *The Prelude* does not assume such an inclusive subject position, as Geoffrey H. Hartman writes, "Nature, for Wordsworth, is not an 'object,' but a presence and a power; a motion and a spirit; not something to be worshipped and consumed, but always a guide leading beyond itself" ("The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way" 290). While it might be argued that the inclusion of nature in *Double Negative*'s subject position represents an appropriation of nature's assumed authority--a consuming that is characteristic of conventional subject-object relationships--such appropriation is strategically figured as a *reappropriation* of that which has

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[26] Gutierrez's characterization of *The Prelude*'s "subject-'subject'" relationships signifies that, despite its minimizing of distance between subject and object, the text's subject positionality perpetuates the conventional binary construct of Western logic. By contrast, the multiplicity of *Double Negative*'s feminine subject position resists binarity and, in its inclusivity, potentially negates the distance between subject and object, self and Other.

been exploited and misrepresented by colonialism. Marlatt and Warland write,

> as the
> people who inhabit this emptiness will tell you
> heartland laid waste (desert is not waste) dug up for
> uranium irradiated in nuclear testing (the fragile
> ecosystem the heart is) will fence off sacred sites to
> keep out the acquisitive the heart is consumed the heart
> is not allowed to throb for pleasure in what surrounds
> it (50)

Double Negative's reappropriation of nature is herein figured as a potentially liberating textual strategy as it promotes a consubstantiality of 'ecosystems' and fosters desires that have been repressed by conventional textual conditions. Arguing that Wordsworth is an "epistemological poet" in his conception of "subject-'subject'" relationships, Donald Gutierrez extols the radicality of his promotion of the consubstantiality of human nature and nature; he writes that this

> is one of the most revolutionary instances of communalism in the modern era. It harbors implications about the interrelatedness of man, the natural environment, and human society that, for the attainment of a harmonious and humanely fulfilling society, would urge a pronounced change of our entire social-economic order. (40)

Such a change is one likewise proposed by *Double Negative* in its overthrowing of the conventional perception of nature as object: a "bleak /

obstacle-boundary-space to and for his adventures ground / to his figure and exploits" (48). The static male figure here is, of course, the patriarch, whose epistemology and authority are at risk in any renegotiation of subject-object relationships. Unlike *The Prelude,* which perpetuates binary relationships despite its "subject-'subject'" constructions, *Double Negative* renegotiates a traditional binary of subject-object relationships by conflating nature and female voice in the proposal of a multiple, female subject: "she has rolled over / in all that red dust (the year is endless here) given / herself a shake and birthed into subject" (48).

While Marlatt and Warland's multiple female subject signifies a departure from canonical constructs, their textualization of the influence of nature on imaginative vision is inevitably complicit in traditional representational strategies, particularly as it quite conventionally figures nature as the nurturing female.[27] *Double Negative* draws upon the earth's history of repression and violation and the rather tenuous link between female biology and the workings of nature to figure nature as mother:

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[27] Once again, it might be argued that this is a strategy of reappropriation, an act of reclaiming what has been conventionally textualized as feminine.

> frame after frame
> of red ochre menstrual stain
> (source of earth's life blood)
> over and ochre
> even the horizon
> unable to dam her flowing sand. (24)

In his "Intimations Ode," Wordsworth likewise figures the earth as female; in his rather Oedipal triangulation of earth/mother, human/son, and God/father, the earth is, however, a notably treacherous figure as she precipitates a distancing between the son and the father, who presumably rests in his "imperial palace":

> Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
> Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
> And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
> And no unworthy aim,
> The homely Nurse doth all she can
> To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
> Forget the glories he hath known,
> And that imperial palace whence he came. (77-84)

In such canonical representations, nature is mother to the son. *Double Negative*, however, substitutes *daughter* for *son* in this binary to suggest that nature is primarily mother to the daughter. Such a substitution is once again strategic: it suggests a matrilinear transmission of knowledge and authority. This figuration of matrilinear descent poses an epistemological challenge to the Judeo-Christian order that privileges "patrilinear descent"

(Kristeva, "About Chinese Women" 142). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, "woman's only access to the symbolic order goes through the father" (Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* 138). In its strategic substitution, *Double Negative* suggests that woman's access to an alternative feminine symbolic goes through the mother: nature herself.

While mother-nature presumably contributes her wisdom and authority to the multiple female subject position of *Double Negative*, it is notable that we never actually hear her speak. This strategy might likewise find its canonical precedent in Wordsworth's poetry, for, as Kneale writes, "Just as the poet hears nature's voice while the reader often does not, so Wordsworth reads texts that are kept hidden from his readers" (85). In a recurrent association of nature and nature's wisdom with feminine consciousness and the female body, the consubstantiation of nature and imagination as it is figured in *Double Negative* offers a type of transcendence potentially exclusive to women. We might well ask, then, if it is only women who have access to this source of authority? While the text denounces "His / One Essential Story," its dependence on the assumed bond between the "natural (Mother)" and the female perspective in its fostering of a certain textual authority likewise falls into a type of

essentialism (54; 42). Once again, Marlatt and Warland can be seen as reversing a traditional binarism only to privilege the female condition:

> we are not
> apart from it
> 's incessant stream
> the landscape pours through
> us filled with it, held and
> rocked backward (17-18)

The primary difference between this and many canonical representations of the earth-female bond, it seems, is the female persona, the seemingly essentialist *we*, promoting the reciprocity.

"what is woman (in her own fiction)?"[28]

Stemming from the assumed bond between nature and female nature is *Double Negative*'s implicit promotion of a more 'natural' or organic level of poetic diction. The poets' privileging of organic diction and logic is seemingly authorized by Australia's aboriginal language--a language that serves as a contrast to the conquering force of "Indo-European words" (15). Marlatt and Warland want to "be as the Nullarbor 'not any tree' / no syntax only syllables / no train of thought" (28). Such a language thwarts oppositional logic and potentially fosters a plenitude appropriate to a

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[28] Marlatt and Warland 47.

feminine poetics of desire. Yet "the oldest living language group in the world" offers only a prototype for the organic diction promoted by the female poets who "can't go back" (14; 15). As they write in "Mannahill,"

> Yunta, Paratoo, Ucolta, Yongala
> words we head for down this birthing canal
> "the oldest living language" shaping our tongues lips
> to speak it out (though we do not know the meanings)
>
> magnetic field of sounds
> mouths move in anOther motion (16)

Rather than appropriate the language of "anOther," Marlatt and Warland propose a reinvention of "the matter of language" that finds its "lit language" in the female body: "your Mound of V" (28). With the text's recurrent conflation of nature and female nature, such body-centred language becomes figured as organic. In its attempt to construct a textual language imbued with an integrity that finds its origins in 'natural' discourse, the feminist text manifests a further affiliation with the romantic, particularly the Wordsworthian text. In his "*Preface* to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth promotes poetic language as "language really used by men" (446). As an ideal, his promotion of the poet as "a man speaking to men" might be revised in terms of gender to describe *Double Negative*'s own stylistic agenda (453). His contributions

to the *Lyrical Ballads* collection seek a potential reconciliation of vernacular and poetic language; of the project, he asserts,

> The language, too, of these [rural] men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived.... Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets. (447)[29]

Wordsworth's privileging of "repeated experience" finds rather ironic resonance in many contemporary feminist texts that repeal woman's traditional relegation to the repetitious realm of immanence. The continual movement that characterizes *Double Negative*'s narrative "track," for instance, marks a resistance to the repetitious and restrictive realm of immanence (26). The female poets here represent themselves as having a freedom of (forward) movement traditionally reserved for men. The textual representation of such freedom signifies the poets' refusal to be

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[29] M. H. Abrams suggests that "Wordsworth's chief concern is not with the single words or the grammatical order of prose discourse, but with figurative departures from literal discourse" (110).

oppressed by the conventional gender binary that denies woman transcendence. As de Beauvoir writes,

> Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the "*en-soi*"--the brutish life of subjection to given conditions--and of liberty into constraint and contingence. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. (xxix)

The poets' resistance to such constraint is particularly evident in "Zanthus," where they write,

> yet now stopped in our tracks
> null
> an odd
> stillness
> addiction to movement i'm restless irritable
> still want to get out (28)

While *Double Negative*'s resistance to textual representations of immanence might be seen as a strategic departure from Wordsworth's privileging of repeated experience, its promotion of organic diction faces a theoretical obstacle not unlike that faced by the romantic poet in his promotion of "hourly" discourse, that being a questionable and problematic justification of the locus of language. As Hartman writes of Wordsworth's logocentrism,

> This progress toward a language which is human and timely, a word that dwells with and between men, remains uncertainly fulfilled. For the "power in sound" cannot be humanized by a sheer act of will or the arbitrariness of metaphorical speech.... [Ultimately, for Wordsworth] The Logos dwells with God and when it comes to men is not understood. The Light to which it gives Being lights a darkness that is uncomprehending.
> ("Words, Wish, Worth" 195)

Double Negative is concerned with the notion of uncomprehending "emptiness"--an emptiness associated with the figures of woman and nature in conventional representations--rather than the "darkness" that is precipitated by logocentrism (49). In its challenge to Judeo-Christian epistemology (a challenge evident in its figurations of matrilinear descent and lesbian desire), *Double Negative* implicitly criticizes the doctrine of the Logos for its authorization of patriarchal strategies of naming and mapping which imprint an 'unnatural' logic on nature and thus restrict human freedom and natural discourse. Marlatt and Warland criticize

> a line of thought 478 kms long
> studded with former Prime Ministers
> who knew how to put their names on the map
>
> Watson, Fisher, Cook, Hughes, Deakin, Reid
> settlements of identical houses facing the track
> each with fire extinguisher by front door
> occasional human figures stare motionless

this symmetry focusing the i to test screen patterns (25)[30]

This figuring of patriarchal logic as distinctly non-organic and restrictive is highly strategic: it renders *Double Negative*'s feminine logic (based on the nature-woman consubstantiality, in contrast to the rigidity and divisiveness of patriarchal logic) liberating and 'natural.' The text further draws upon its construction of the nature-woman bond to propose an alternative source of language and thus logic--the female body--that, in turn, challenges the authority of the doctrine of the Logos itself. Marlatt and Warland write,

> o contraction Star of V-us
> first letter of another alphabet
> lit language we star(e) at
>
> we will open the bed and chant our stars down
> into the sway of unuttered texts
> (make a wish)
> as the matter of language reinvents itself all over again (28)

Once again, their critique of patriarchal representational strategies has recourse to an essentialism that proposes a seemingly exclusive female

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[30] We might here recall William Blake's "London" with its emphasis on the conformity that is precipitated by patriarchal institutions and their strategies of community development.

access to an alternative, natural language.[31] That this language has the power to reinvent itself defies the doctrine of the Logos, yet the alternative 'doctrine' proposed by Marlatt and Warland remains bound in mystery: the figuring of celestial forces--"our stars"--only serves to mystify rather than theoretically justify, the poets' challenge to conventional logocentrism.

Figuring nature as a victim of patriarchal logocentrism, however, further aids the poets of *Double Negative* in their politicization of traditional hermeneutics. This figure foregrounds the bond between nature and the female poets and authorizes a more 'authentic' interpretation of nature itself than that accorded by traditional Western hermeneutics. *Double Negative*'s project thus manifests a further affiliation with that of

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[31] Such exclusivity is notably not unlike that precipitated by the Judeo-Christian tradition of patrilinear descent. Furthermore, *Double Negative*'s promotion of a female language (as is suggested by its recourse to biology, to the female "Mound of V"), rather than a feminine language that would be potentially accessible to either sex, characterizes their project as reactionary, rather than revolutionary. By contrast, Hélène Cixous promotes a revolutionary, non-repressive feminine economy of writing that pursues difference; she argues for a plurality, "a simultaneous presence of masculinity and femininity within an individual subject" (Shiach 16). For Cixous, the "alternative textual, political, and ethical economy" is ideally available to both sexes (Shiach 3).

The Prelude; as Kneale writes of the interdependency of nature and poet in *The Prelude*'s structural development,

> Having bestowed the powers of speech and writing on nature, the poet is free to receive the language again, to hear nature's voice and to read its written texts. The growth of the poet's mind is thus also the development of a hermeneutic, an ability to interpret the mind's linguistic projections as a continuous allegory--specifically, an allegory in which the poet keeps discovering his own figurations as language keeps doubling back on itself. (75)

Because of its own "doubling back on itself" in its development of an alternative hermeneutic, *Double Negative*'s politicization of nature might also be seen as concurrently authorizing its politicization of female being. Yet, as was noted earlier in this section, nature speaks only through Marlatt and Warland as it becomes conflated into the multiple, female subject position of the poem; nature remains relegated to the realm of letter rather than being given its own voice. Nature might thus be seen as becoming the silenced victim of *Double Negative*'s own representational strategies. This is in direct contrast to the poetry of Wordsworth, in which nature is attributed the power of voice as well as letter:

> The two figures of voice and letter that alternate within Wordsworth's poetry reflect the similar linguistic doubleness the poet perceives in nature: the *liber naturae*, or book of nature, and the *vox naturae*, or voice of nature. The concept,

> traditional in Wordsworthian criticism, of the reciprocity of mind and nature has, it would appear, its linguistic version: Wordsworth transfers these two forms of human language to nature and then receives them again, as though nature were linguistically prior, as though to understand Wordsworth's rhetoric one must first understand the rhetoric of nature. (Kneale 74)

The hermeneutic proposed through *Double Negative*'s multiple female subject position invites the reader to accept the poets' interpretation of nature's rhetoric in good faith rather than enter into any active hermeneutic process with "the *vox naturae*." The proposed hermeneutic might therefore be seen as being exclusive to those women allowed access to the text's subject position. As a result, the politics of *Double Negative* manifest little theoretical sway; the reader must simply accept the text's interpretations of nature and thus its authority.

Through figuring its own hermeneutic as natural, potential reader dissension is itself figured as unnatural and unoriginal. In other words, *Double Negative* alienates any dissenting audience. This is in contrast to the romantic address which might actually be seen as (potentially) being more politically engaging in its appeal to "alien" readers (Morse 191). In its implicit promotion of a counter-canon of feminist desert narratives, *Double Negative* further figures its reader as being a well-read feminist

who accepts the authority suggested by the notion of a literary canon. In "of instant (by instant," for instance, Marlatt and Warland construct a tradition of like-minded women writers, a tradition that seemingly imbues *Double Negative* itself with a canonical (albeit counter-canonical) authority: "Jane at her table (in the desert) u at your table (in the / desert) Nicole at her table (in the desert) and me at this / table (in the desert).... / we are ever dependent on Robyn in the Gibson Desert" (54). This strategy might be compared to that of Blake, who authorizes his poetry by situating it in a canonical tradition. As Rajan writes,

> Insofar as Blake himself encourages canonical reading, while at other times stimulating resistance to it, his work is centrally involved in the dissemination of a traditional hermeneutic. The figure of the canon brings together the cultural ambitions of the hermeneutic tradition.... Not only does it employ reading synchronically to claim consensus, as Wordsworth tried to do, it also develops the diachronic dimension of hermeneutics by using the supplement of history both to claim future authority and to contain textual contradictions within a teleological narrative. (*The Supplement of Reading* 197)

Despite its rather exclusive mandate, the textual figure of a canon in *Double Negative* might be seen as being similarly tied to the hermeneutic tradition in its strategic move towards consensus and authority. However, the text's inclusive female subject position and various allusions to other

female voices/writers signify the political nature of the hermeneutic proposed in its construction of a specifically feminist community and canon. Such inclusiveness might also be traced to the strategies pioneered by certain British romantic texts. As Rajan further writes,

> because of its heteroglossic inclusion of different voices, the *Lyrical Ballads* inscribes its project in a social text that causes us to reflect on romantic ideals of sympathy and community. The creation of a social hermeneutic thus becomes implicated in a social dialogic that makes us aware of how our languages diverge. (*The Supplement of Reading* 137)

Yet, in their address to like-minded readers, the poets of *Double Negative* render any such social dialogic virtually inoperable. The patriarch, whose epistemology and hermeneutic are explicitly challenged throughout the text, remains a mere figure of repression rather than being figured as a potential reader who might discover how "our languages diverge."

"Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"[32]

As repeatedly suggested in the preceding sections of this chapter, *Double Negative*'s promotion of a poetics of desire recurrently has recourse to essentialist argument. Drawing upon the figure of an earth-female bond and a counter-canon of feminist desert narratives, Marlatt and

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[32] Blake, "The Tyger" 20.

Warland propose an alternative symbolic which privileges a feminist epistemology. Their recurrent allusions to the physical and textual experiences of women--allusions that seemingly authorize their proposed alternative mythology--find further affiliation with the narrative of British romanticism. As Hartman writes of Wordsworth's use of allusion,

> Milton and Milton's use of the Classics recall to him a more absolute beginning: a point of origin essentially unmediated, beyond the memory of experience or the certainty of temporal location.... This recession of experience to a boundary where memory fades into myth, or touches the hypostasis of a supernatural origin--as well as complete respect for that boundary--is what preoccupies the psyche of the poet. ("Words, Wish, Worth" 183)

In its proposal of an alternative and authoritative feminine poetics, the project of *Double Negative* depends upon the blurring of the boundary between memory and myth; in contrast to the "written language," the text privileges

> Dreamtime a vision we can only imagine in theories
> like collective memory whatever it is they see
> differently until them i had not known the power of a
> culture shapes the substance of our eyes makes us
> citizens on a cellular level yet there are aberrations
> mute mutations whose ocular language goes largely
> undetected by the linguistic mass (44)

Is this theorized "Dreamtime" an origin of *Double Negative*'s own challenge to temporality and the patriarchal symbolic? Perhaps so, for it is through her "gender's memory" that woman can transcend the boundaries that have been imposed on her and her desires (51). As Marlatt and Warland write, "here she can play encounter her anima(l) self pre-sign / pre-time touching you i touch kangaroo words forming / then shifting desert dunes her desire to untrain herself" (51).

Yet the question remains: "what is woman (in her own symbolic)?" (Marlatt and Warland 52). It is a question that points to *Double Negative*'s complicity in canonical conventions and problematizes the text's political argument. For instance, in their textual construction of woman, the poets of *Double Negative* might be seen as depending upon the strategy of the gaze, a conventional strategy of objectification that they themselves censure in the prose poem, "he says we got to stay on track": "she wants to migrate she wants to mutate she / wants to have no natural predators be nothing looking / at nothing thrive in her own absence be out of focus / out of range of The Gaze" (51). Even the textual politics of the feminist poetics proposed by *Double Negative*, it seems, do not transcend the "range of The Gaze." In their observational position of passengers on a

train, the poets are themselves figured as spectators to the scenes passing before their eyes, much as Wordsworth figures his own role in *The Prelude*.[33] Their spectating stance is problematic in terms of the text's general critique of objectification since Marlatt and Warland might themselves be seen as objectifying the private woman, who stares from the landscape through which they themselves pass in "he says we got to stay on track." Catching her in their gaze, they appropriate her voice and motivations in an apparent attempt to corroborate their own political agenda. They write, "she looks out the / window what she longs for is the absence of the / symbolic to lose track of disappear into this emptiness / (his key ring tight around her neck)" (51). The woman of this figural moment becomes the poets' double; any identity which she has is textually effaced through the text's representational strategy, which might be termed narcissistic. Once again, this strategy might be seen as finding precedent in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, particularly in the episode of the Blind Beggar. As Kneale writes,

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[33] As Kneale writes of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, "the figure in which his reader and listener are combined... is the spectator" (100).

> Wordsworth's meeting with the Beggar... provides the imagistic and thematic correlative of what the language and structure of *The Prelude* have been enacting. The confrontation of the self with itself (or the double of itself) may produce a heightened self-consciousness--even, as Geoffrey Hartman has said, a "consciousness of self raised to apocalyptic pitch" (*WP* 17), but this state of mind is in turn, I think, a function of language, a product of a figural foregrounding that repeats language's own self-encounter.... This is the "narcissistic" moment of language.... (97)

Indeed, *Double Negative*'s figural moment of self-encounter draws attention to the text's own textuality, as well as its potential relationship to the world outside. Here we might draw upon Rajan's distinction between the figural moment and the figural scene to illustrate the potential effectiveness of *Double Negative*'s strategy: Rajan writes,

> We must ask why romantic texts (unlike the lyrics of Baudelaire or Mallarmé) so often go beyond the inclusion of figural moments to represent the problem of representation in a scene. Scenes are more complex than figural moments, both in what they express and in their effect on a reader. A scene arises from a surplus of meaning that cannot be reduced to a conceptual statement.... Finally, though scenes are expansions of figural moments in that they unmask the textuality of whatever happens in literature, they simultaneously have the opposite effect: because a scene is a narrative with characters and events, it also represents textuality as something that happens in the world. (*The Supplement of Reading* 10)

Marlatt and Warland's appropriation of the private women through the strategy of the gaze does indeed signify the potential social repercussions

of the feminist text, yet their dependence upon such a conventional strategy might very well call the means of their signification into question. The private woman of "he says we got to stay on track" remains in "range of The Gaze," albeit now the focus of feminist strategies of sexual/textual politics.

Conclusion: "we had not wanted it to end"[34]

This chapter has suggested that the feminist text of *Double Negative*, despite its problematization of masculinist strategies of representation, is ultimately dependent upon many of the canonical strategies whose authority it rather paradoxically calls into question. While a feminist poetics that is not 'contaminated' by the literary tradition is a highly ambitious, if not impossible project, the text's rejection of canonical authority becomes problematic in the promotion of its own authority. The authority of *Double Negative* becomes further problematized by its recurrent recourse to essentialist argument--an argument which ironically might be seen as simply reversing (and thus exhibiting complicity with) Wordsworth's universalism. As Abrams writes,

> The fact that he grounded poetry in his own feelings made Wordsworth, as he realized, especially vulnerable to the contemporary charge that these feelings might be peculiar to himself, and capriciously linked to trivial subjects.... His defense is that though, being human, he is fallible, a poet's best guide to universal human feeling is his own feeling. (107)

Marlatt and Warland might likewise defend the project of *Double Negative* and their feminist poetics of desire: "yet / it's *what* we see this illusion the

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[34] Marlatt and Warland 56.

eye momentarily / believing in unity (believing *is* desire) seeing is... we / believe ourselves into ecstasy" (54).

Sexing the Lyric Sequence: Greatness and Nothingness in Webb's *Naked Poems*

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams?
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1.269-74)

I hear the waves
hounding the window:
lord, they are the root waves
of the poem's meter
the waves of the root poem's sex.
The waves of Event
(the major planets, the minor
planets, the Act)
break down at my window:
I also hear those waves. (Webb, *Naked Poems*)[1]

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[1] Please note that, because *Naked Poems* itself is not paginated, no page references will be given for any quotations from this sequence.

Introduction: "the chosen guide"[2]

Like Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative*, Phyllis Webb's 1965 lyric sequence *Naked Poems* challenges and revises conventional textual conditions that repress female subjectivity. In its own attempt to forge a poetics of lesbian desire and a feminine economy of writing, it implicitly proposes a re-examination of traditional rhetorical strategies and a reclaiming of textual space for the representation of woman in her complexity, plenitude, and love. As Webb writes,

> *You brought me clarity.*
>
> *Gift after gift*
> *I wear.*
>
> *Poems, naked,*
>
> *in the sunlight*
>
> *on the floor.* (*Naked Poems*)

In its repetition of "gift," this lyric positions itself against the masculine representational economy that is based on notions of exchange and lack--notions that precipitate a distancing between self and Other (see Cixous's "Coming to Writing"). The diction of "naked" develops the sequence's

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[2] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1.16.

conflation of poetry and body and its promotion of a hermeneutic that recovers the generative energy of female sexuality and subjectivity. The press release accompanying the first edition of *Naked Poems* notes, "This book is a new departure for Phyllis Webb. Her purpose is a radical recovery of things, an examination of subject/object relationships." The "things" to which this text attends also include the notion of textual autonomy and genre distinctions. In its five internal movements ("Suite I," "Suite II," "Non Linear," "Suite of Lies," and "Some final questions"), *Naked Poems* resists the structural and thematic continuity of much canonical literature, instead looking to the excessive identity of the female subject, in this case a "double lesbian subject" (Carr, "Genre Theory and the Impasse of Lyric?" 72). As in *Double Negative*, it is the plenitude of female being and desire that becomes a source of authority for the disruptive feminine economy of *Naked Poems*. However, where *Double Negative* is explicitly socially political in its recurrent figurations of the ramifications of colonialism, Webb's sequence is primarily focused on textual politics, more subtly interrogating the foundations of Western epistemology and writing. Perhaps more so than the other poetic texts considered in this dissertation, *Naked Poems* manifests a certain

"melancholy or an anxiety-principle" in relation to the influence of the literary tradition and its methodology (*The Anxiety of Influence* 7). This sense of anxiety is perhaps attributable to Webb's allusive style and paradoxical figurations which repeatedly point to the repressive force of the Judeo-Christian symbolic and the textual conditions it engenders. However, as in *Double Negative*, such conditions are reflexively revealed to be ultimately inescapable. While the paradox (a characteristic feature of Webb's poetry) becomes a source of play and textual generation in *Naked Poems*, it concurrently signifies the inevitable complicity of feminist poetics in the perpetuation of conventional strategies of representation.

Like *Naked Poems*' double-edged critique of textual autonomy and authority, the concerns of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" are themselves playfully paradoxical, engaging with the rhetorical operations of form, concept, and "language at all levels" of the poetry (Butling 192).[3] While

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[3] As Pauline Butling writes of Webb's playful poetics,

> The play in her poetry operates on many levels but it is always heuristic play. Play, in other words, that is generative. The play disrupts and thereby creates a carnivalesque state, as defined by the Russian formalist Bakhtin, a time when existing orders and hierarchies are subverted, when disorder, abandon, contradiction, wildness, chaos, predominate. (191-92)

this chapter traces many of the sequence's structural strategies to a master narrative of British romanticism, it proposes that Webb's poetics problematize the very strategies they are backgrounded by. For instance, a reading of the shifting subject position and non-linearity of *Naked Poems* against the structural strategies of Wordsworth's *Prelude* suggests the theoretical difficulties implicit in the more stable figurations of subject-object relationships and narrativity in the romantic personal epic. Yet, in challenging the authority of the canonical representational strategies upon which her own rhetoric evolves, Webb, at times, paradoxically problematizes her own textual authority. Her figuration of the Judeo-Christian symbolic's repression of woman and her desire, for example, ultimately calls into question *Naked Poems*' representation of lesbian desire as it textualizes a theoretical challenge to her own epistemological assumptions.[4] In other words, the various figurations of *Naked Poems*

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[4] While *Naked Poems* strategically resists reconciling the paradoxes inherent in the process of writing against the dominant discourse and epistemology, in "there's nothing there" from the third section of *Double Negative*, Marlatt and Warland more hastily dismiss the masculinist theories that work against their own constructions, theories that would potentially discredit their feminist poetics; as they insist, "this is not the Mirror Stage" (49).

consistently call into question the authority of romantic conventions while, at times, challenging the authority of its own counter-conventions. Furthermore, the counter-conventions manifest in the highly allusive form and figures, as well as in the double lesbian subject position of the sequence, point to "the difficulty of locating meaning totally within one source" and encourage a system of interpretation that privileges intertextuality (Hartman, preface viii). In other words, *Naked Poems* textualizes a hermeneutic that is at least double as it foregrounds the far-reaching influence and constraints of canonical conventions, as well as that of its own alternative textual strategies. Despite the epistemological departures that background them, Webb's rhetorical operations are seen as stretching the boundaries of textual conventions rather than rupturing them. This stance becomes a significant source of play and paradox in *Naked Poems*, as well as in "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" itself. Yet, as Kneale notes, such reflexivity is "a rhetorical operation that the text performs on itself, rather than a method that a critic applies to a text" (xiv). He further argues that

> The function of the critic is to uncover and in a sense repeat the text's rhetorical maneuvers by means of what J. Hillis Miller calls "the linguistic moment, that is, the moment of

> criticism which hovers in a prolonged interrogation of language as such. Such a 'moment' recognizes that literature accomplishes whatever it can accomplish by means of language" ("Deconstructing" 29). (xiv)

Taking its cue from poststructuralist analysis, "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" focuses on the rhetorical operations of *Naked Poems* as the sites of Webb's double-edged critique and textual reflexivity.

In a strategy intended to foreground how conventional constructions and textual authority are interrogated by *Naked Poems*, "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" more specifically proposes reading Webb's sequence as a rewriting of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, a text (like Webb's own) that is highly reflexive in its figurations of time-space and subject-object relationships. John F. Hulcoop suggests that

> Webb's major precursors--Sappho, Marvell, Wordsworth, the Japanese haiku masters, Rilke, Yeats, and Wallace Stevens--are not really difficult to identify since the ephebe's (or disciple-poet's) struggle to resist, overcome, absorb, and so transform the precursor's power (influence) is almost always, made public as poetry. ("Phyllis Webb and Her Works" 263)[5]

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[5] As Bloom writes in his own analysis of poetic influence,

> poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better. The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images.... [The study of poetic influence] will be compelled to

As Hulcoop's statement implies, the implicit dialogue or family romance between the poetry of William Wordsworth and that of Phyllis Webb finds a rather antithetical resonance in the latter's poetics.[6] In their resolute nakedness, for instance, the poems of Webb's sequence rigorously resist *The Prelude*'s "power" to mystify the human mind--a mind "Of quality and fabric more divine" (14.454). The influence of such exalted subjectivity is playfully undermined in the "Non Linear" movement of *Naked Poems*, where Webb writes, "I have given up / complaining / but nobody / notices." Such deflation suggests that the revisionary ratio at work in this particular family romance is akin to what Bloom calls a *kenosis*:

> a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; *kenosis* then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor.... The later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, but this ebbing is so performed in

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> examine simultaneously the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance, and as chapters in the history of modern revisionism, "modern" meaning here post-Enlightenment. (*The Anxiety of Influence* 7-8)

[6] Eli Mandel describes the family romance as "an account of some of the more important resentments in Canadian writing and some of the consequences. It is also a story of misreading and rewriting, of how strong writers misread and rewrite their precursors" (*Family Romance* x).

> relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is not as absolute as it seems. (*The Anxiety of Influence* 14-15)

A strategy of deflation particularly characterizes the concluding section of *Naked Poems*, where the interrogated poet rather flatly explains, "I am trying to write a poem."

"Sexing the Lyric Sequence" argues that in *Naked Poems* "the precursor's power" is antithetically manifest in the figurations and constructions that challenge conventional textual strategies. Webb's blurring of the boundary between lyric and narrative, for instance, evokes the tension between genres evident in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, while posing a theoretical challenge to that poem's construct of linearity. Other Canadian critics, particularly Lisa Potvin, have noted Webb's divergence from Wordsworthian poetics. Of *Naked Poems*, Potvin writes that "The declared female intimacy of the syllable line is a marked departure from Wordsworth's elevated public stance" (49).[7] Potvin further suggests that

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[7] Potvin further notes that the textualized ecstasy of Webb's poetry is "the cry of female orgasm, not the contained or climactic ecstasy sought by Marvell and Wordsworth" (52). Where "Phyllis Webb: The Voice That Breaks" primarily focuses on Webb's rhythmical departures from Wordsworthian poetics, "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" explores the female poet's rhetorical and epistemological departures.

this departure is, in part, necessitated by a difference in gender and its textualization.[8] As the title of this chapter suggests, the ensuing analyses will be further unified by a recurrent attention to the sexual politics inherent in *Naked Poems*' resistant representational strategies. The plenitude figured in many of *Naked Poems*' lyrics, for instance, fosters a feminine economy of writing that has been silenced by the patriarchal and prohibitive monologism of "0-1 logic," such as is seen in the narrative drive of *The Prelude* (Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" 70).[9] Webb's "Poetics Against the Angel of Death," preceding the publication of *Naked Poems*, signifies the weightiness of Wordsworthian poetics for the female poet:

> I am sorry to speak of death again
> (some say I'll have a long life)

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[8] Potvin writes that

> the central preoccupations of her [Webb's] verse become the construction of the female poet and the location of female sexuality and subjectivity. Here the poet is engaged in the process of "trying to write a poem" rather than focussing merely on the end product, or the need for sanctioned inclusion in the academy of male poets. (50)

[9] As Kristeva writes, "With Bakhtin, who assimilates narrative discourse into epic discourse, narrative is a prohibition, a *monologism*, a subordination of the code to 1, to God" ("Word, Dialogue, and Novel" 70).

> but last night Wordsworth's "Prelude"
> suddenly made sense--I mean the measure,
> the elevated tone, the attitude
> of private Man speaking to public men.
> Last night I thought I would not wake again (1-7)[10]

The diction of "death" perhaps anticipates Webb's more deconstructive approach to Wordsworthian poetics found in *Naked Poems*--an approach that sees authority and epistemology (*The Prelude*'s and, ultimately, her own) as a function of language itself. Part of this chapter's project is the exploration of the operation of such deconstructive death or *différance* in *Naked Poems*.[11]

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[10] Of "Poetics Against the Angel of Death," Potvin writes, "Here Webb seems to be experimenting with a new gynolatric form. Lambasting the posturing behind what she calls 'The Great Iambic Pentameter' which Wordsworth and other 'great' poets have relied on, she speaks instead of her desire to die--not to remain immortal" (48).

[11] As Jacques Derrida writes in his essay on "*Différance*,"

> In a language, in the *system* of language, there are only differences.... on the one hand, these differences *play*: in language, in speech too, and in the exchange between language and speech. On the other hand, these differences are themselves *effects*.... What is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that "produces"--by means of something that is not simply an activity--these differences, these effects of difference. (65)

In its recurrent attention to presence and absence, language and speech, *Naked Poems* fosters a play of differences and their effects, attending to a *différance*

"Sexing the Lyric Sequence" is divided into four sections of diverse yet not unrelated foci united by a shared attention to the playful, resistant, and renovative figurations of Webb's poetics. The first section offers a misreading and rewriting of Webb's harshest critic, John Bentley Mays, whose theoretically-weak, canon-centred analysis at once undermines her poetry while paradoxically pointing to its complexities and potentially deconstructive stance. In particular, this section borrows Mays's terms "greatness" and "nothingness" to explore the figurative underpinnings and subsequent reflexivity of *Naked Poems*. To further its analysis of "the shape of greatness" as it is figured in *Naked Poems*, this section looks to the canonical standards established by Wordsworth's *Prelude*, a personal

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that is perhaps most poignantly evoked in the fifth poem of the "Non Linear" movement:

walking in the dark
waking in dark the presence of all
the absences we have known. Oceans.
so we are distinguished to ourselves
don't want that distinction.
I am afraid. I said that. I said that
for you.

As this lyric suggests, *Naked Poems* resists the authority of language in signification and the assumption that language can 'distinguish' identity. "I said that for you" further points to the differences at play in "the exchange between language and speech."

epic that has become one of the standards of greatness in modern poetic autobiography (Mays 11).[12] Continuing in its reading of *Naked Poems* against *The Prelude*, the second section of this chapter considers Webb's structural challenge to the conventional barriers between narrative and lyric, particularly as these poetic types influence textual figurations of linearity and non-linearity, time and space. As a vehicle for assessing these figurations, this section draws upon the contrasting musical types suggested by the title of *The Prelude* and the inter-movements of *Naked Poems*. The third section of this chapter offers a reading of subject-object relationships in Webb's sequence, particularly as they are backgrounded by the sense of interchange upon which the internal evolution of *The Prelude* depends. As in *Double Negative*, the polyphony and instability of *Naked Poems*' subject positionality call into question the more stable subject of much of canonical literature and ultimately interrogate the conventional devices of resolution and closure as they are established by such a subject. Where Marlatt and Warland's sequence ends with an affirmation of its double discursivity ("we bilingual"), *Naked Poems* resists any sense of

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[12] We might here recall Webb's own characterization of Wordsworth's "Iambic Pentameter" as "Great" in her "Poetics Against the Angel of Death."

closure, its concluding "Oh?" signifying the text's inability or perhaps its unwillingness to resolve its instabilities and interrogations (56). In a strategy once again akin to that of *Double Negative*, Webb's shifting subject furthermore destabilizes the object and frees itself from the specularization it has traditionally endured. While the third section argues for *Naked Poems* as a canonically-evolutionary project, the fourth section of this chapter focuses on Webb's more disruptive figuration of female desire, particularly as it implicitly responds to and repudiates that of Wordsworth's personal epic. This section is particularly interested in the female poet's difficulties in voicing her desire under textual conditions influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition's restrictive representational strategies. Is the textualization of female desire at all possible under the epistemological weight of the Judeo-Christian symbolic? Or can this symbolic order, as Webb's "Suite of Lies" suggests, be deconstructed, seen more simply as a function of language itself? In its attempt to uncover and repeat *Naked Poems*' rhetorical maneuvers, these are some of the questions to which "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" attends.

I. Misreading Greatness in *Naked Poems*

As the poetics of *Naked Poems* rewrite Wordsworthian conventions, so too does this analysis rewrite Webb criticism that has denied the stylistic rigour and theoretical richness of her sequence and too hastily concluded that her poetry in general is a literature of "failure" and "unfreedom" (Mays 12). In its own way, "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" embodies a type of family romance with modern Canadian criticism in its intentional misreading of those critics, specifically John Bentley Mays, who have perfunctorily dismissed the complexities of Webb's poetry and poetics. This chapter's subtitle, "Greatness and Nothingness in Webb's *Naked Poems*," points to the paradox characteristic of a family romance, that being a convergent indebtedness and challenge to the precursor, such as is evident in this chapter's explicit response to Mays's disparaging analysis of Webb's poetry in his 1973 *Open Letter* profile of the poet. Here he repeatedly derides her poetics, insisting that "Despite her admirers' best attempts at rehabilitation, her work sprawls and breaks and refuses to assume the shape of greatness" (10). To the post-Davey Canadian

literature critic,[13] Mays's "shape of greatness" is a highly ambiguous standard, evoking those canonical values that have historically sanctioned such contentious conduct as the marginalization of women writers. Yet, as this chapter argues, the "shape of greatness"--a greatness which is here read as being the (assumed) authority of canonical conventions--might itself be seen as a rhetorical figure operative in and generated by the poetics of *Naked Poems* itself. The "nothingness"--a similarly ambiguous standard--of this chapter's subtitle further points to the ensuing misreading of Mays's "Phyllis Webb." Near the conclusion of his article, Mays harshly declares that "Phyllis Webb is her stupid, humble body, she is her hypertrophized, unrelenting consciousness, and she will be both until death takes her. *Naked Poems* ends with Phyllis Webb *the same*, incapable of the nothingness she desires" (31). Might this "nothingness" likewise be a construct of the text itself, a figure like "greatness" that suggests an (albeit

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[13] In *Reading Canadian Reading* (1988), Frank Davey suggests that

> Most criticism published in Canada still seems unaware that every critical act, no matter how naive or unpretentious, assumes at least one theory of criticism.... Even in books in which critics have displayed an awareness of theoretical issues, they have frequently been blind to the implications of their own approaches. (5)

antithetical) ideal that is only textually realized as a function of language itself?[14] This section argues that the figure of nothingness or nakedness in the 1965 lyric sequence functions, in part, as a deconstructive maneuver that ultimately calls into question the authority of the canonical strategies that background the text and, at times, its own strategies and authority. This section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" thus attempts to suggest how canonical conventions, particularly those engendered by Wordsworth's *Prelude*, are antithetically figured in Webb's *Naked Poems*.

Perhaps *Naked Poems*' most blatant evocation of canonical representational strategies is to be found in its internal structure, which figuratively follows the conventions of the Baroque suite.[15] While the rhetorical operation of this structural strategy will be explored at some length in the second section of this chapter, it is here expedient to note that the genre of the suite, owing to its privileging of thematic discontinuity,

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[14] The title of *Naked Poems* itself suggests a baring or unveiling of the "greatness" of canonical conventions.

[15] As a literary genre, poetry has recurrently borrowed many of the conventions of the musical canon, and, as such, these conventions might be seen as being non-exclusive to that canon or, more to the point of my argument, conventions of the literary canon itself.

fosters an internal variety and non-linearity not likewise fostered by Wordsworth's poetry or, it has been argued, by the literary canonical tradition itself.[16] The internal variety offered by the suite might be seen as being particularly open to what Cixous calls the feminine economy: an economy of writing that is not based on the repression of the Other in a reproduction of the same but rather one that attends to plenitude and difference (see "The Laugh of the Medusa" 879).[17] Aritha Van Herk argues for such an economy in *Naked Poems*, writing,

> Wearing past the insistence that the page be weighty and
> pronunciative,
> full of sentence and dead image.
> These poems instead plead nakedness, the fulsome speech
> of defenceless trust and silence, space,
> the dark (85) as plenitude. (179)

In contrast to the masculine economy based on exchange--an exchange that, one might argue, precipitates the cause-effect progression of *The Prelude*--, the feminine economy is "A having without limits, without restriction; but

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[16] Wallace Berry writes, "Thematic unity, or cyclic treatment, is not a common feature of the suite" (344).

[17] In the concluding section of *Double Negative*, Marlatt and Warland point to the sense of difference that is fostered by the (conventionally repressed) feminine economy of writing: "the desert a different / economy (her own woman?)" (46).

without any 'deposit,' a having that doesn't withhold or possess" (Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 4). While the suite and its figurative manifestation in *Naked Poems* might be seen as being particularly open to the expression of feminine plenitude and difference, the linear, temporal drive of Wordsworth's *Prelude* and, indeed, that of the prelude form itself fosters a sense of exchange and the subsequent non-abundance of the masculine economy.[18] If such non-abundance is a characteristic of Mays's "greatness," then the plenitude signified in Webb's figural manifestation of the Baroque suite can be seen as "nothingness" only in that it offers nothing for exchange or expects nothing in return. Wordsworth's *Prelude* further evokes the sense of exchange characteristic of the masculine economy in its figuratively exclusive address to the poet's friend Coleridge. By contrast, Webb's address is made to the indefinite and non-exclusive pronoun "you." The inclusivity and plenitude of the feminine economy of "the flesh at work in a labor of love" characterizes many of

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[18] In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous argues that masculine writing is based on castration anxiety and fear of lack, while in *"Coming to Writing"*, she further explains that the masculine economy is based on a "deposit" that seeks return (4).

the poems in the first two suites of *Naked Poems* (Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 42). As Webb writes in the second poem of the sequence,

> AND
> here
> and here and
> here
> and over and
> over your mouth[19]

While the strategy of repetition in this lyric inscribes a certain plenitude or excess, the diction of "here / and here and / here" plays with signification itself and fosters a sense of the difference that is more widely characteristic of the internal structure of the Baroque suite. If, as Bloom suggests, "What is called 'form' in poetry is itself a trope, a figurative substitution of the as-it-were 'outside' of a poem for what the poem is supposed to represent or be 'about,'" then the figurative underpinning of *Naked Poems*, that being the form of the Baroque suite, imparts difference, plenitude, and, ultimately,--as a later section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" will argue--desire ("The Breaking of Form" 1).

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[19] The indeterminacy of this lyric's representation of female desire and lesbian sexuality signifies a strategy akin to that of *Double Negative*, where the poets suggest that their desire is excessive and irreducible, "touching holding everything" (25). In both representations, there is a sense that female desire is a force that cannot be contained by conventional linear constructions.

Cixous's differentiation between masculine and feminine economies is further useful when figured into this section's misreading of Mays's terms "greatness" and "nothingness." With the implication that "greatness" finds its roots in the canonical tradition, it might well be assumed that it is an attribute of a masculine economy that dominates Western literary history and its representations.[20] As a contrast to "greatness," "nothingness," then, might be seen as that which is repressed in canonical representations.[21] In such a reading, "nothingness" becomes an assumed attribute of the feminine economy and a sign of sexual opposition. Of the phallocentric Western tradition of writing, Cixous writes,

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[20] As Cixous writes, "with a few exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity; exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 878).

[21] Cixous would likely argue that feminine "nothingness" is potentially subversive. As she writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa,"

> A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive... volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter. (888)

> I mean it when I speak of male writing. I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing: that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural--hence political, typically masculine--economy....
> ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 879)

Taking its cue from Cixous, "Misreading Greatness" argues that to describe the plenitude and difference manifest in the various playful and generative figurations of *Naked Poems* as "nothingness" is to align one's own analysis with the masculine economy--the primary economy of a tradition that represses women and difference.

To continue, then, with the proposed analysis of the divergence between Webb's poetics and those of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, this section looks to the fourth lyric of "Suite I," titled "The Bruise," as one site of *Naked Poems*' double-edged critique and reflexivity. The title itself is particularly effective in evoking subject-object interchange, as well as the difference of signification. Here Webb writes,

> Again you have left
> your mark.
>
> Or we
> have.
>
> Skin shuddered
> secretly

As *The Prelude* represents an interchange between subject and object, so too does this lyric develop a sense of reciprocity between subject and Other. The Other--"you"--becomes incorporated into the subject positionality--the revised "we" of the lyric's second stanza. In other words, the Other becomes released from her otherness and is represented as a vital, active force. Such a strategy might be seen as finding its canonical roots and authority in the subject-object relationships of Wordsworth's poetry. As Gutierrez writes,

> by restoring integrity or wholeness to an object, perceiving and acknowledging its roundness, depth, and substance, we also restore to it its "life." In so doing, the universe, or at least the external and internal scope of our whole human sensibility, is or could be recharged with vitality and numinosity, with the creative tension of subject-'subject' rather than being deadened by the perniciously deanimizing relation of subject-object. (12)

According to Gutierrez, such an animizing of object, for Wordsworth, has its epistemological basis in pantheism, in the belief of "the immanence of God in nature" (13).[22] While Webb's animizing of the Other in *Naked*

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[22] As Gutierrez further writes,

> Wordsworth is, among other things, an epistemological poet. Conceiving reality as comprised of mind and nature is to put subject and object in spatial terms, as here and there, creating the distances of farness but also of nearness, and thus the

Poems might likewise be seen as epistemological in basis, the epistemology therein manifest is one that rejects Judeo-Christian notions of creation and is intent on rupturing hierarchical binary logic rather than restoring "human well-being." As Butling writes of Webb's epistemological challenge to Western philosophy,

> Seeing the act of creation, whether of world, person, or poem, not as the act of a powerful Other on which the self or poet is dependent but as a process of intertransformation, with all participants on equal footing, provides a model for a much more dynamic interaction between poet and the Other (self, language, world, history). (202)

Webb's epistemology thus rejects the "0-1 logic" of religious discourse and, consequently, the conventional binary model of thought and language.[23] Indeed, Webb's epistemology instead fosters a generative playfulness--a playfulness that Butling sees as being characteristic of this poet's later work, such as *Naked Poems*. Once again, Mays's terms can be

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> potential "indissolubleness" of I-Thou involvement, the realization of which restores human well-being. (40)

[23] In "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," Kristeva argues that "the epic is religious and theological; all 'realist' narrative obeying 0-1 logic is dogmatic" (70). According to this definition, *The Prelude*'s epic form precipitates a certain dogmatism, while *Naked Poems*, in its departure from both realism and narrative, is potentially exempt from this charge.

here applied to conclude that, as a canonical standard, "greatness" has its epistemological basis in the Judeo-Christian tradition, while "nothingness" is that which is silenced in monologistic discourse.

While the subject positionality of *Naked Poems* will be more extensively analyzed in a succeeding section of this chapter, it is of particular interest to this section that the site of subject-Other encounter, collaboration, and communion in Webb's "Bruise" is the female body itself. This figuration of the body as text marks a fairly radical departure from romantic representational strategies.[24] This departure is particularly evident in reading the lyric's figuration of the semiotic and hermeneutic processes against the backgrounds of Blake's "London" and Wordsworth's *Prelude*. "The Bruise" implicitly evokes the active and passive usages of "mark" in Blake's "London," as well as nature's engravings on the poet's psyche in *The Prelude*. Through the repetition of "mark" in "London," Blake's poet is figured as writer, engraver, and agent of the text's semiotic process: "I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd

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[24] In blurring the boundaries between the poets' internal and external landscapes, *Double Negative* similarly negates the space between body and text: as Marlatt and Warland write, "re-versed writing across bed into sky" (25).

Thames does flow. / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (1-4). Similarly, the poet of "The Bruise" signifies her participation in the semiotics of her body-text through the explicitly revised diction of "we" in the lyric's second stanza. Notably, the semantic content of Webb's "mark" remains ambiguous (as is signified by the diction of "secretly" in the poem's third stanza), while the semantic content of Blake's "Marks of weakness, marks of woe" is made explicit. It might be argued that the ambiguity of "The Bruise" calls for an alternative hermeneutics based on the body, while the hermeneutical process signified in "London" depends upon the poet's gaze and might thus be seen as objectifying the Other.[25] The rhetorical operation of "The Bruise," by contrast, de-objectifies the female body. The body here becomes animized with the potential to become subject, no longer the static object of conventional representations: as the lyric concludes, "Skin shuddered / secretly."[26] While the marks of Blake's song of experience

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[25] We might here recall *Double Negative*'s representation of "The Gaze" as a means of perception that is willfully blind to that which it marginalizes (24).

[26] One might further consider this lyric's echo of Coleridge's *Christabel*, a text likewise engaged with female desire. In his signification of Christabel's

"London" suggest a violent interaction between subject and object, Webb's "mark," in its reversal of conventional negative connotation, signifies the eroticism and pleasure available in a hermeneutic based on the female body. As Cixous writes,

> To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasure, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 880)

The poet of "The Bruise" is not simply an agent of its semiotic process; she is also the receiver of the pleasure that has been denied her in conventional textual representations.

In Wordsworth's *Prelude*, it is the poet's mind rather than his body that is the site of the "monumental writing" of the object, which, in this case, is nature herself (*Prelude*, 1805 version 11.295). In the various

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potential desire for the duplicitous Geraldine, Coleridge writes, "Like one that shuddered, she [Geraldine] unbound / The cincture from beneath her breast" (248-50). As in Webb's "Bruise," the diction of "shuddered" in Coleridge's *Christabel* at least partly suggests erotic pleasure and female desire.

"spots of time" of *The Prelude*,[27] the text becomes somewhat conflated with the poet's imagination, as in the Stolen Boat episode:

> No familiar shapes
> Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
> Of sea, or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams. (1.395-400)

More akin to Webb than to Blake in approach, the poet here receives the signs of nature, but he does not immediately interpret their semantic content. The resulting ambiguity is similarly seen in the conclusion of Webb's "Bruise" with the secret shuddering of the body-text. Notably, however, the ambiguity of "The Bruise" is further fostered by the non-thematic progression of the sequence, while Wordsworth's spots of time, though ambiguous in and of themselves, are ultimately infused with a certain semantic value in the context of the "Growth of a Poet's Mind." Unlike Webb, Wordsworth rather anxiously assumes that the marks engraved upon his psyche must be productively meaningful in terms of his

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[27] David Punter defines Romantic spots of time as "those moments time itself is suspended, and there is an opening of the doors, a cleansing of perceptions, which enables us to view, just for a moment, our life in its entirety, as a perceptible pattern, or as a work of art" (239).

subject's spiritual evolution,[28] and, as a result, *The Prelude* itself becomes a sustained hermeneutical process that seeks a certain closure and points to the poet's inherent uneasiness with the potential plenitude of ambiguity. As Kneale notes, "For Wordsworth, interpreting nature is like the critic's task of interpreting a text: the poet reads the world and the critic reads his reading; both poet and critic try 'to detect / Some inner meanings which might harbour there' (8:537-38)" (84). For Wordsworth, however, as this critic further notes, the interchange of voice and letter, while signifying difference, ultimately privileges letter:

> In such strength of usurpation, when voice becomes writing, Wordsworth's text acknowledges the passing from living voice to dead letter but seeks to outlive this death through the epitaphic permanence of writing that aspires to the phonocentric immediacy of speech. The voice of Wordsworth's poetry is always the voice to be accomplished in writing. (Kneale 84)

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[28] As Wordsworth writes in Book 1 of *The Prelude*,

> Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
> Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
> That givest to forms and images a breath
> And everlasting motion, not in vain
> By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
> Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
> The passions that build up our human soul.... (401-7)

In "The Bruise," by contrast, the inherent impermanency of the "mark" playfully rejects any notions of "epitaphic permanence." Furthermore, as Webb's strategy of ambiguity implies, what the body speaks--its "living voice"--is ultimately unrepresentable through textual semiotic strategies. Webb's "mark" or bruise thus signifies its own death, a death which, to use Kneale's phrasing, "is but another name for *différence*" (xiii). Once again, Mays's terms might be misread to suggest that "greatness" aspires to a permanence that privileges letter over voice, while "nothingness" interrogates the locus of language itself.

While the scope of this chapter does not permit what would inevitably become a rather cumbersome reading of Webb's entire sequence against *The Prelude*, it should here be noted that *Naked Poems* recurrently evokes and (implicitly) interrogates the rhetorical strategies of Wordsworth's epic. For example, Webb's playful questioning of the impact of distance on perception in "Flies" from "Suite I" echoes *The Prelude*'s similar exploration of perception in the Stolen Boat episode. As Wordsworth writes,

> I struck and struck again,
> And growing still in stature the grim shape
> Towered up between me and the stars, and still,

> For *so it seemed*, with purpose of its own
> And measured motion like a living thing,
> Strode after me. (1.380-5; italics mine)

A strategic deflation of *The Prelude*'s representation of distance and perception is evident in Webb's playful "Flies":

> tonight
> in this room
> two flies
> on the ceiling
> are making
> love
> quietly. *Or*
>
> *so it seems*
> down here (italics mine)

While "Flies" ultimately negates any semantic value of the distorted perception with its irresolute conclusion, "Or / so it seems / down here," the Wordsworthian poet becomes troubled by what he comes to more definitely perceive as "huge and mighty forms" (1.399). As "Flies" suggests, however, such "forms" might be simply a function of the human mind, and Wordsworth's poet might thus be seen as being terrorized by his own imagination. His "forms" are furthermore symptomatic of an objectification, a projection of the subject's positionality rather than an animizing of the object of perception. Webb's figuring of distance in

"Flies" further challenges Wordsworth's privileging of the authority of the human mind or imagination--an authority that is again playfully interrogated in the first poem of the second movement of *Naked Poems*:

> *While you were away*
>
> *I held you like this*
> *in my mind.*
>
> *It is a good mind*
> *that can embody*
> *perfection with exactitude.*

Here the stammering typography of "with exactitude" might be seen as undermining the preceding assertion of the mind's capacity to embody perfection and challenging Wordsworth's claims to the superiority of the imagination.[29] Rather than signifying the transcendent power of the mind, the diction of "embody" antithetically focuses the reader's attention on the intangibility or incorporeality of what the mind can hold. In other words, it reinforces the sense of absence--"While you were away"--with which the lyric opens. The ambiguity of "perfection," followed by the numerous semantic uncertainties in the ensuing poems, further

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[29] As Wordsworth concludes in Book 12 of *The Prelude*, "The mind is lord and master--outward sense / The obedient servant of her will" (222-23).

problematizes canonical claims regarding the authority of the human mind. It might here be noted that "greatness," like Webb's ambiguous "perfection," is an elusive, ultimately unknowable entity. It is a term, like "perfection," that must be acknowledged as being simply a function of language itself.

As a figure backgrounding the structural strategies of *Naked Poems*, the notion of "greatness" precipitates an initial assessment of Webb's own "naked" poetics as unambitious and lacking--lacking the assumed greatness of the canonical constructions of subject, authority, and temporality that are evoked within the text itself. Yet, must we simply "accept her testimony, as a woman and as a writer, of decisive, unmitigated failure," as Mays suggests we do (12)? Or is this sense of failure or "nothingness" at least partially generated by the textualized standard of canonical authority or, in other words, by the figure of greatness present in *Naked Poems* itself? This question anticipates another: is canonical authority simply a figure, a function of language? We might indeed read the nakedness of Webb's title as an augury of sorts--an augury that we see the ensuing poems not through the trappings of canonical convention, but rather through a baring of the "greatness" of conventional standards and

judgments. As Van Herk asks, "Is nakedness humiliation, abasement, submission? Celebration, a baring of delight? The senses freed to occasion, to the replication of love in every creature and every word" (177).

II. Reading Time and Space in *Naked Poems*

While the preceding section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" focused on the figurations of canonical conventions in *Naked Poems*, this section explores its rhetorical challenges to the textual constructs of linearity and genre, particularly as they implicitly respond to *The Prelude*'s structural strategies. The loose narrative line that links the lyrics of Webb's sequence fosters a play of difference between poetic types and the conventions upon which these types depend. This difference, in turn, points to what is repressed in the narrative drive of much romantic literature, such as Wordsworth's personal epic with its focus on temporal progression and thematic resolution. This section once again reads *Naked Poems* as a rewriting of Wordsworthian poetics--a rewriting that, in this case, specifically interrogates *The Prelude*'s figurative privileging of time and narrative. Such a reading suggests that time and space, as well as narrative and lyric, must themselves be seen as textual constructs, functions of language which infinitely defer "the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence" (Derrida 61).

A deferral of time and space is consistently manifest in the playful rhetorical strategies of *Naked Poems*, but it is perhaps most notable in the fourth poem of "Suite II," where Webb writes,

> *Tonight*
> *quietness*
> *in the room.*
>
> *We knew*

The inconclusive "knew" is infinitely generative, signifying some ambiguous semantic content beyond that of "the room" itself.[30] Indeed, the end punctuation preceding "We knew" seems to signify that neither the room--the spatial setting--nor the temporal setting--"Tonight"--is the semantic object in question. Webb's rather elliptical conclusion with its change of tense might be seen as ultimately deferring both the time and

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[30] Such "inconsequent" statements as "We knew" might be seen as further aligning Webb's poetics with the 0-2 poetic logic of the carnivalesque, as opposed to the 0-1 logic of narrative and religious discourse. As Kristeva writes in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel,"

> Figures germane to carnivalesque language, including repetition, "inconsequent" statements (which are nonetheless "connected" within an infinite context), and nonexclusive opposition, which function as empty sets or disjunctive additions, produce a more flagrant dialogism than any other discourse. Disputing the laws of language based on the 0-1 interval, the carnival challenges God, authority, and social law; insofar as it is dialogical, it is rebellious. (79)

space of the lyric and thus resisting the movement of signification itself.[31] Notably, the diction of "quietness" likewise evokes the failure of signification. As Derrida writes,

> the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already

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[31] In its repetition of "Tonight / quietness," this lyric from "Suite II" echoes the third lyric of "Suite I," where Webb writes,

> TONIGHT
> quietness. In me
> and the room.
>
> I am enclosed
> by a thought and some walls.

The ambiguity of "We knew" (from "Suite II") is not, however, clarified or resolved by returning to the earlier lyric--a resolution the reader might well expect in a sustained hermeneutical process, such as that of *The Prelude*. Indeed, a pairing of the two "naked poems" that begin "Tonight / quietness" points to the instabilities at work in the structure and subject positionality of the sequence as a whole. For instance, while the subject of the poem from "Suite I" is single, the subject positionality of the poem from "Suite II" is plural: "We knew." Furthermore, if these two poems are to be considered representations of the same "Tonight," then the subject positionality of the sequence is seen to have dramatically shifted. If, however, we read these poems as having two different temporal settings, the diction of "Tonight" points to the sequence's deferral of time and its play with the difference of signification. In either reading, *Naked Poems* is seen as resisting conventional strategies of representation and interpretation.

On a slightly different note, the diction of "TONIGHT / quietness" and "enclosed" in the lyric from "Suite I" suggests the restrictiveness of conventional textual representations of time and space.

> letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. (66-67)

While Butling suggests that in *Naked Poems* "The shifting ground in language is syntactic rather than semantic," the problematization of time, space, and signification in the aforementioned lyric precludes any certain semantic content (198). What Derrida calls "temporization" or "the becoming-time of space" is explicitly manifest in Wordsworthian spots of time and is a requisite of any stable hermeneutical process (66). Webb's playful poetics, however, disrupt temporization and, inevitably, the poet's own, as well as the reader's hermeneutical operation. Such disruption is evident in the uninterpretable "We knew" from "Suite II." The result in *Naked Poems* is a polyphonic openness of signification, subject, and form--an openness that implicitly challenges Wordsworth's privileging of the self in his "Autobiographical Poem," *The Prelude*. As Butling writes,

> A world that is constantly changing and is characterized by paradox and contradiction does not fit into a closed form. It demands a polyphonic form in which the self as subject dissolves and becomes simply one of the many particles in the field of the poem. (200)

A dissolving of "the self as subject" is exemplified in the shifting subject positionality of "The Bruise," where the single subject becomes a plural subject--"we"--, while later the body itself--"Skin"--usurps the subject position. Such a movement challenges the comparatively egocentric assumptions of the Wordsworthian poet, who perceives that "Beyond solace and fancy is the synthesis of the self in time" (Onorato 170).[32]

Despite the appearance of little formal similarity between Webb's lyric sequence and Wordsworth's epic narrative, on a rhetorical level both texts manifest a shared engagement with representations of time and genre. In its recurrent attention to "the still and lyric point of the turning narrative world," *Naked Poems* exhibits a certain affiliation with *The Prelude*, whose spots of time fragment its overall narrative succession (Hulcoop, "Phyllis Webb and the Priestess of Motion" 31).[33] Indeed, it might be argued that

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[32] It might be here noted that certain Romantic critics, such as William Galperin, observe a comparable dissolving of the self in such poems as Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"; Galperin notes that in this ode, "the speaker's intimations of immortality depend equally on his own shrinking" (162). While such a "shrinking" may be characteristic of the spots of time in *The Prelude*, this text's extensive construction of the poet and his authority ultimately privilege the self as subject.

[33] Hartman suggests that the spots of time help the poet resist a threatening alienation through time; he defines these spots as "strong

a lyrical impulse of a sort, characterized by an evocation of the internal landscape of the poet and a sense of timelessness, dominates the early books of *The Prelude* with their recurrent spots of time. As Hartman suggests, in these spots, "A sudden self-consciousness transferred to outward things, is raised against him [the poet] under the mask of nature.... The impact of the scenes on him is inseparable from overwhelming sense-impressions" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 215). However, as the poet strives towards a thematic and ultimately temporal resolution to "The Growth of a Poet's Mind" in the later books of *The Prelude*, a narrative impulse and linear movement become dominant.[34] This narrative impulse provides or perhaps imposes a certain structural and thematic unity on the diverse lyrical spots. The closed narrative form of *The Prelude*, for instance, necessitates a certain hierarchical resolution of

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memories dating from the first act of his [the poet's] life, surviving in him as fresh as when they happened, and often unconsciously restorative" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 210).

[34] This temporalizing impulse might be seen as being somewhat inherent in the spot of time itself; as Hartman further suggests of the "time-spot," "The concept is... very rich, fusing not only time and place but also stasis and continuity. The fixity or fixation that points to an apocalyptic consciousness of self is temporalized, reintegrated into the stream of life" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 212).

the primary subject-object (mind-nature) relationship at work throughout the personal epic. In the final stanza of the poem, Wordsworth concludes that "the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells," thereby subordinating nature to the realm of object (14.448-50). As many critics have noted, such a resolution seems to be forced by the dictates of the monologistic logic of narrative itself.[35] Galperin, for instance, notes that

> Wordsworth gradually discloses--while bringing *The Prelude* to "its appointed close"--that the real problem before him has less to do with transcendental myth and its claim to enfranchisement than with those obligations consistent with the need to bring the personal epic to its proper end. The authority appropriated for the character of the Poet, no matter how radical or agnostic that appropriation, corresponds by rights to a conventionally hierarchical or... patriarchal tradition. (176)

This critic further suggests that "Given this 'autonomy,' not only of the man writing but also of the poem itself, the 'spots of time' can do no more than protest the progress of *The Prelude* to its appointed closure" (185). Webb's *Naked Poems*, by contrast, rejects linear progression with only a

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[35] Gutierrez writes, "One reason I find the ending of *The Prelude* dissatisfying is that Wordsworth, it seems to me, has virtually made a God of the mind, lending it an almost deific majesty at the expense of the force and independence of the natural or material universe" (56).

loose narrative thread apparent in "the careful arrangement of the poems" of the sequence (Hulcoop, "Phyllis Webb and the Priestess of Motion" 31). The generative "Oh?" concluding her sequence becomes rather emblematic of the textual freedom that is engendered by the more open form of the lyric sequence. Such a privileging of the lyric impulse over that of narrative seemingly stems from an epistemological challenge to the patriarchal "waves of Event"--waves that propel temporal and linear movement--as opposed to the "root" waves of *Naked Poems* which propel a non-linear and potentially atemporal motion that is playful and generative. As Webb writes in "Non Linear,"

> I hear the waves
> hounding
> the window:
> lord, they are the root waves
> of the poem's meter
> the waves of the
> root poem's sex.[36]

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[36] As John Hulcoop writes in "Phyllis Webb and Her Works," "Superficial appearances to the contrary, the 'root poem's sex' is no longer masculine in *Naked Poems*. Having completed her novitiate, the belated poet (who took the view in the second poem of her first collection) is now initiated into a new order by 'the Priestess of Motion'" (290).

As in Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative*, *Naked Poems*' recourse to the processes of nature seems to argue for its own poetics as being more natural or organic than those that stem from the hierarchial, patriarchal tradition.

In the eighth lyric of "Non Linear," Webb's figural play with the textual constructions of time and space is foregrounded in her allusion to the mythical figure of Sisyphus, whose destiny is determined by a textual strategy of temporal and spatial cyclicity.[37] Not unlike the poet of *The Prelude* who must relive his childhood spots of time in his process of becoming a poet, for the founder of Corinth the past and present merge in a textual figure akin to predetermination.[38] A sense of predetermination is evoked in the first book of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth asks,

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[37] Hartman's analysis of the spot of time as being one or "any moment" might be loosely applied to Sisyphus's perpetual confinement to one temporal movement. Sisyphus's predicament bears an ironic relationship, however, to Wordsworth's "one moment," which "interposes the generosities of nature between the precarious descent of grace and the now-or-never of political fervor" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 153).

[38] As Grimal writes of the Sisyphus myth, "One version maintained that Zeus struck him with a thunderbolt and hurled him into the Underworld, where he was condemned to roll an enormous rock eternally up a hill" (404).

> Was it for this
> That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
> To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
> And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,
> And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
> That flowed along my dreams? (269-74)

The most notable difference between the Wordsworthian poet and Sisyphus is perhaps the quality of their everlasting spots of time and the former's mental rather than physical participation in such everlastingness. It might be argued, therefore, that it is not the process of becoming itself that is privileged in *The Prelude*, but rather this process as it is contextualized within a greater semantic certainty of resolution. Sisyphus, by contrast, is "appalled" by his victimization through time. The poet of the eighth lyric of "Non Linear" implies that she is likewise confined by the restrictions of father time.[39] The female poet's paradox is unavoidable, it seems, for, as

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[39] Trapped in an endless cycle, the situation of Sisyphus manifests a certain parallel with female subjectivity. As Kristeva argues in her essay on "Women's Time,"

> female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations.... there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as

Kristeva writes, in "About Chinese Women," "There is no time without speech. Therefore there is no time without the father" (153). Webb writes,

> I am listening for
> the turn of the tide
> I imagine it will sound
> an appalled sigh
> the sigh of Sisyphus
> who was not happy

The diction of "listening" might be seen as signifying the silencing and subordination of the female poet by the conventions of temporal representation, "the tide" being implicitly connected to the patriarchal forces that force the fate of Sisyphus. Yet, as Janice Williamson writes of Webb's poetry,

> Rather than a representation in writing of woman's silencing, Webb's poems strategically push at the boundaries of language and form, voicing the contradictory internal division of the woman writer. Webb's suicide poems which bear "the crown of darkness" produce a complex and paradoxical reading of

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> extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable *jouissance*. (191)

She further points to the patriarchal underpinnings of conventional representations of temporality, writing, "'Father's time, mother's species,' as Joyce put it; and indeed, when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming or history" ("Women's Time" 190).

> the vitality of writing woman while invoking and interpreting the silence of another life. ("'You may read my sighs'" 171)

While the aforementioned lyric differs considerably from Webb's suicide narratives,[40] its attention to silence and confinement suggests a similar "internal division of the woman writer"--a division that will, however, be diminished as the "tide" turns and the "root" waves become sexed by the "Priestess of Motion" in the progression of "Non Linear." The diction of "motion" is particularly effective in challenging representational strategies that privilege temporal progression, for, instead of suggesting any definite linear movement, "motion" remains ambiguous and open, connoting both time and space. While it might be argued that *Naked Poems* never attains any significant transcendence of temporality and that such transcendence is itself impossible under conventional representational strategies, the sequence constructs a problematic in which time is figured as a restrictive textual force. Such a problematic undoubtedly finds resonance in any

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[40] Unlike *Naked Poems*, Webb's suicide narratives, such as "Wilson's Bowl," are characterized by the "figure of the suicidal woman as self-destructive and auto-censoring in relation to language and writing" (Williamson, "'You may read my sighs'" 155).

reading of temporal representation and movement, such as that invoked by *The Prelude*.

The form which *Naked Poems* assumes might itself be seen as signifying Webb's antithetical relationship to Wordsworthian poetics and textual strategies. Both *Naked Poems* and *The Prelude* draw upon conventional musical forms as an overall structural strategy--forms that might be seen as being somewhat emblematic of the poetic processes and structural strategies of the respective texts. While the Baroque suite figured in the inter-movement of Webb's lyric sequence differs dramatically from the prelude to which Wordsworth's personal epic alludes, the shared strategy of evoking rhythmical progression and a thematic or developmental pattern promises a certain musicality or rhythmical movement in each text, as well as a figurative adherence to the conventions of the genre in question. As an introductory movement, the musical prelude evokes notions of process, continuity, and linearity; as a short piece of music, it promises a concise thematic focus. Like the musical prelude, Wordsworth's *Prelude* assumes a comparatively unambitious stance: in the third stanza of the poem, the poet draws a contrast between his earlier, more profound "poetic numbers" and the

humbler ambitions of the ensuing verses, drawing upon the diction of musical analysis, such as "song," "measured strains," "voice," and "echo" (1.51; 47; 48; 55; 56). In the concluding stanza of Book 1, he emphasizes the thematic unity of *The Prelude*, writing that

> The road lies plain before me;--'tis a theme
> Single and of determined bounds; and hence
> I choose it rather at this time, than work
> Of ampler or more varied argument,
> Where I might be discomfited and lost.... (641-45)

The genre of the Baroque suite, by contrast, evokes notions of discontinuity and non-linearity. The overall form of the suite is characterized by a "contrast of tempo and meter... in the inter-movement ordering" (Berry 344). *Naked Poems* figuratively adheres to such conventions with its five contrasting inter-movements, its explicit evocation of non-linearity in the middle movement, and its diverse thematic concerns explored through a disjunctive point of view. As Butling writes, "Instead of the single voice of author(ity), there are several contradictory voices" (197). Attending to the structural strategies of *Naked Poems*, Van Herk further notes "a back and forth nonlinear in page or distance, distant in linearity. The poem's denial and admission, conquest and return" (176). The contrasts inherent in the musical genres evoked by Webb's sequence

and Wordsworth's *Prelude* point to *Naked Poems*' departure from a privileging of textual continuity and linearity--a departure that abandons the notion of contextualization through time and problematizes the notion of time itself. As Webb suggests in the sixth lyric of "Suite II," any closed linear or temporal movement, such as that represented by the form of *The Prelude*, is reductive:[41] she writes,

> *In the gold darkening*
> *light*
>
> *you dressed.*

---

[41] To quote Derrida,

> An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions (to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that soon will reveal itself to be inadequate), that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization. (66)

I hid my face
in my hair.

The room that held you

is still here

The concluding lines of this lyric render any temporal shifts or progressions to be seen as functions of language itself, dependent on the difference of signification. While there is an implicit acknowledgement of such difference in *The Prelude*'s spots of time, the poem's overall strategy of contextualization ultimately appropriates the content of these spots and thus might be seen as containing or repressing the system of *différance*.

Naked Poems' privileging of lyric over narration in the loose narrative line of its sequence of lyrics fosters a comparatively inclusive construction of time and space. Traditionally, the lyric has been associated with personal expression, foregrounding internal landscapes, where time and space are finely interwoven; the narrative, by contrast, is characterized by a more focused attention on events to be recounted, in other words, on the external landscape of 'fact' and action: "The waves of Event." Furthermore, in its potential disregard for linear, temporal evolution, the form of the lyric sequence allows for a textual consubstantiality of space

and time, while narrative, with its drive towards climax and resolution, might be seen as ultimately privileging time over space. Webb's construction of time-space consubstantiality is poignantly manifest in the highly imagistic opening lyric of "Non Linear," where she writes, "An instant of white roses. / Inbreathing. / A black butterfly's / twitch and determined / collapse on a yellow round." The temporal setting of this lyric--its "instant"--is conflated with the spatial setting--its "white roses"--to develop a textual convergence of time and space. While *Naked Poems* promises movement in the first line of "Suite I," it is soon evident that the poems themselves are primarily interested in spatial shifts and shifting subjectivity rather than linear, temporal progression. As Webb writes in the first lyric of the sequence,

> MOVING
>
> to establish distance
> between our houses.
>
> It seems
> I welcome you in.
>
> Your mouth blesses me

all over.

There is room.[42]

The emphatic "There is room" anticipates the sequence's focus on space, in particular its creation of space for the representation of female desire and feminine subjectivity. In other words, this lyric implicitly promotes a recovery of textual space for what has been repressed in conventional representations, that is, woman and her feminine economy. Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative* likewise proposes a reclaiming of "negative feminine *space*" (19; italics mine). By contrast, the first stanza of Wordsworth's *Prelude* draws upon the motif of the journey to promise a forward movement that ultimately foregrounds temporal progression. The setting of the journey is here figured as a map pointing towards resolution:

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[42] Butling writes,

> Webb is certainly exploring the meanings and emotions associated with the word "moving," but she is equally involved in "moving" as an event in the poem itself. We are conscious of her movement through the poem and the different rhythms of each line as she varies that movement. The poem seems generated as much by her play with rhythmic patterns as her explorations of meaning. (199)

By contrast, the linear movement and temporal continuity of *The Prelude* repress any excessive formal and rhythmical variety--an excess that, in the case of *Naked Poems*, points to the plenitude of female desire and feminine subjectivity.

"whither shall I turn, / By road or pathway, or through trackless field, / Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing / Upon the river point me out my course?" (1.27-30). The diction of "course" anticipates the conventional, closed structure of *The Prelude* as a whole. However, Wordsworth's recurrent attention to the epic's potential spatial settings--"road," "pathway," "field," "hill," and "river"--points to the shifting spaces that generate the signification of temporal movement. Despite its forward movement, *The Prelude* might thus be seen as attending to the non-linear spaces that background its linear structure and temporal representations. In its recurrent attention to form, spacing, and temporization, *Naked Poems* itself interrogates the time-space relationship that is already implicitly problematized in *The Prelude* and much of canonical literature. The sequence's response to conventional representational strategies might therefore be seen as evolutionary rather than apocalyptic, as Webb's anticipation of "the turning of the tide" might suggest (*Naked Poems*).

Naked Poems' challenge to genre autonomy--a challenge manifest in the loose *narrative* drive of the *lyric* sequence form--is likewise revisionary or evolutionary in focus as it draws attention to the biases inherent in the

poetic types of literary history and, by extension, promotes an openness of form. As John Hulcoop suggests, such a challenge is one that is itself backgrounded by canonical literature:

> Introducing the "Naked Poems" (Suite I and II in the present volume) at a 1963 poetry reading in Edmonton, Miss Webb called them poems refined down to the "bone-essential statement." She said she was trying to establish "a kind of narrative line with a lyric intention." On the almost invisible "narrative line" she threads each "brief lyric" or "pearl poem" and in so doing reveals her self-confessed debt to Sappho and the haiku, and perhaps an unconscious debt to Browning whose experiments with the dramatic lyric opened up the form and left it charged with a potential which twentieth-century poets have fully exploited. ("Phyllis Webb and the Priestess of Motion" 30-31)

The duality of form in *Naked Poems* is further backgrounded by that of *The Prelude* with its lyrical spots of time and overall narrative drive. The more explicitly varied form of *Naked Poems*, however, might be seen as fostering a more definite sense of difference than *The Prelude*. As Brenda Carr writes in "Genre Theory and the Impasse of Lyric?,"

> Following another of Webb's pseudonymous signatures, I take 'Fishstar' as a trope for her inhabitation of liminal spaces, genre among them. The lyric sequence as chiasmus, a crossing place, an intersection which modulates codes in multiple directions. Placed in context, "starfish / fishstar" (the epigraph to *Naked Poems*) may also be seen as an imagist trope for the configuration of the double lesbian subject of

> *Naked Poems*, an undecidable figure that floats above and below, out of (cultural) bounds. (72)

It is the unconventional subject of *Naked Poems* and this text's challenge to conventional subject-object relationships that are the foci of the next section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence."

III. The Dynamic Other of *Naked Poems*

While the preceding section of this chapter focused on the figural relationship between time and space in *Naked Poems*, this section offers a comparative analysis of Webb's subject positionality and that of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, particularly in relation to how the respective constructs effect the textual representation of the object or Other. Like much twentieth-century poetry, *Naked Poems*' "dynamic interaction between poet and the Other" finds a background in *The Prelude*'s empathetic treatment of the object (Butling 202). Of *The Prelude*'s "mode" of subject-object relationships, Gutierrez offers high praise, writing, "Extreme, apocalyptic, revolutionary in the most literally radical sense, it is a mode of gesture and response of subject and object, that taking object into its radiant embrace, makes 'subjects' of all 'things'" (4). From this critic's praise, one might assume that subject-object relationships reach a type of textual consummation in Wordsworth's personal epic;[43]

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[43] While subject and object might be seen as being somewhat indissoluble in *The Prelude*, they are not figured as being mutually dependent, for, as Wordsworth writes, "Points have we all of us within our souls / Where all stand single; this I feel, and make / Breathings for incommunicable powers" (3.188-90).

yet the double lesbian subject of Webb's *Naked Poems* more completely negates the space between subject and Other.[44] As Van Herk asks, "is nakedness the moment when we feel both truly ourselves and truly other, when the self turns its eyes towards the self's body in ecstasy and disbelief?" (175). This section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" proposes to examine how the subject positionality of *Naked Poems* resists the subject-object divisions of *The Prelude*--divisions that create a textual space wherein the authority of the subjective self can be ultimately affirmed. This section will also explore the epistemological implications of Webb's challenge.

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[44] Gutierrez argues that Wordsworth's *Prelude* engenders the textual *potential* for the object to become subject:

> Wordsworth's endowing of nature with a moral life and the ability to "feel" is extraordinary. It is also all the more impressive psychologically because of its ambiguity or conditionality about how *much* life nature really possesses, and how much "she" is having bestowed on "her".... This elevation of nature's status to a potential subject is firmly connected to the symbolic exaltation of nature in which *The Prelude* climaxes. (44-45)

While Webb's dissolving of the space between subject and Other finds a canonical background in Wordsworthian *symbolic* figurations, the textual authority of the Other becomes manifest in the *structural* strategies of *Naked Poems*, particularly in the sequence's polyphonic point of view.

It is notable in terms of this chapter's analysis that the primary object of Wordsworth's *Prelude* is nature, which is therein figured as a subordinate female: "a handmaid to a nobler than herself" (14.260).[45] In her complex manifestation, she is further represented (as the first section of this chapter has suggested) as a type of text, an object subordinate to the poet's interpretation.[46] Moreover, for Wordsworth, it is the power of the maternal female that "irradiates and exalts / Objects through widest intercourse of sense" (*The Prelude* 2.238-40), while the "Science" or patriarchal symbolic that succeeds the influence of the mother and dominates the world of adulthood proposes the separation of subject and object, self and Other. Such "Science" fosters a "false secondary power / By which we multiply distinctions, then / Deem that our puny boundaries are things / That we perceive, and not that we have made" (*The Prelude*

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[45] Despite critics' claims of the radicality of Wordsworthian subject-object relationships, nature is figured primarily in relation to the poet of *The Prelude* and is thus figurally deprived of 'her' autonomy.

[46] As Kneale writes, "That nature should offer a paradigm of intertextuality comes as no surprise: nature is conventionally a text (the *liber naturae*), and Wordsworth's response to it is quite legitimately a 'reading'" (12).

2.216-19).[47] Notably, maternal "virtue" and truth are *drunk* from the "Mother's eye" rather than being dependent on the semiotics of "Science" (*The Prelude* 2.236; 237). We might here consider Kristeva's suggestion that "what the father doesn't say about the unconscious, what sign and time repress in the drives, appears as their *truth* (if there is no 'absolute,' what is truth, if not the unspoken of the spoken?) and that truth can be imagined only as a *woman*" ("About Chinese Women" 153). Wordsworth's

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[47] We might here apply Kristeva's psychoanalytic/semiotic analysis to Wordsworth's figuration of the developing child and his detachment from the mother and entrance into the adult realm. In her "Revolution in Poetic Language," she suggests that Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of early childhood development might be interpreted as revealing the basis for

> the two separations that prepare the way for the sign.... The sign can be conceived as a voice that is projected from the agitated body (from the semiotic *chora*) on to the facing *imago* or on to the object, which simultaneously detach from the surrounding continuity.... The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother, and the perception of this lack... makes the phallic function a symbolic function; the subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, *separates* from his fusion with the mother, *confines* his *jouissance* to the genitals and transfers semiotic motility on to the symbolic order. (101)

Of his early days, Wordsworth writes that "I held *mute* dialogues with my Mother's heart" and suggests that the sensibility engendered through these dialogues was sustained in his development (*The Prelude* 2.268; italics mine). However, by Book 3 of *The Prelude* and the subject's entrance into teenage years with its "Unprofitable talk" and "trivial books," he feels that his "Imagination slept, / And yet not utterly" (3.252; 254; 259-60).

figuration of the mother and her truth might thus be seen as finding its epistemological foundations in the patriarchal symbolic.

In *Naked Poems*, the binary logic of the Judeo-Christian symbolic and its power to transform woman into the voiceless Other is chillingly evoked in the concluding lyric of the "Non Linear" suite--a lyric that appropriately introduces the fourth movement of the sequence, the "Suite of Lies." Webb writes,

> "That ye resist not
> evil" falling
> limp into the arms
> of the oppressor
> he is not undone
> by the burden
> of your righteousness
> he has touched you

While the five poems preceding this lyric offer a first-person female point of view that authorizes feminine subjectivity, the "I" is here transmuted into the more objectified "you," signifying woman's relegation to the realm of the Other by "the oppressor."[48] The diction of "falling," particularly as it is used in the context of this poem's signification of Old Testament

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[48] As the "you" of other lyrics in *Naked Poems* is figured as female, it is here also assumed to be so.

epistemology, becomes an allusion to the Fall of Genesis, a falling that precipitates subject-object divisions and textualizes woman as man's Other. The oppressor notably cannot be "undone" by woman without an epistemological and semiotic rupture, which seems unlikely, if not impossible, under the textual conditions of Western literature, for, as Toril Moi explains in her commentary on Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*,

> Subjectivity is denied to women... and this exclusion guarantees the constitution of relatively stable objects for the (specularizing) subject. If one imagined that woman imagines anything at all, the object (of specularization) would lose its stability and thus unsettle the subject itself.... Without such a non-subjective foundation, Irigaray argues, the subject would not be able to construct itself at all. The blindspot of the master thinker's discourse is always woman: exiled from representation, she constitutes the ground on which the theorist erects his specular constructs, but she is therefore also always the point on which his erections subside.
> (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 136)

In Webb's lyric, it is notable that, while female "righteousness" cannot touch the oppressor, the oppressor in his position as specularizing subject has the power to *effect* and thus be a determinant of signification and binary logic, such as that suggested by the diction of "evil." The Wordsworthian poet, by contrast, gains access into the realm of the patriarchal symbolic, where he can possess a self-sufficiency and stability

like that assumed by the specularizing subject: "The self-sufficing power of Solitude" (*The Prelude* 2.77).

There is no comparable sense of self-sufficiency figured in Webb's *Naked Poems*, owing, in part, to the sequence's polyphony and shifting subjectivity. While the concluding interrogatory movement of the sequence takes the explicit form of an interview, the previous movements more implicitly manifest a conversation between the lesbian lovers who share the poems' shifting subject position. In "Your Blouse" from "Suite I," for instance, Webb writes,

> I people
> this room
> with things, a
> chair, a lamp, a
> fly two books by
> Marianne Moore.
>
> I have thrown my
> blouse on the floor.
>
> Was it only
> last night?

The "blouse" of the second stanza becomes a signifier of the sequence's shifting subject positionality, as in the third lyric of "Suite II" it becomes "On the floor *your* blouse" (italics mine). The sequence's shifting

subjectivity is further evident in the movement between the fourth and sixth poems of "Non Linear." In the first of these poems, Webb writes, "I can see her perfectly clearly / through this dusk her face / the colour of moonlight," while the speaker of the second of these lyrics protests, "My white skin / is not the moonlight." Webb's destabilized subject allows the object of specularization to become likewise destabilized and thus to be released from her victimization by a specularizing subject (who has dominated Western writing). Butling suggests that "Webb makes her most important advances in disrupting the authority of the subjective self to create a genuine polyphony. Here the polyphony is created not by playing disjunct voices against each other but by fragmenting the sentence itself" (198). Yet, it is within the disjunct voices of *Naked Poems* that we find one manifestation of Webb's theoretical and epistemological challenge to the authority and autonomy of the subjective self--a self such as is seen in *The Prelude* with "the development of Wordsworthian selfhood from identification to identity" (Galperin 155). The authority of *The Prelude*'s subject ultimately depends upon its usurpation of its object, maternal nature. Notably, in the resolution of this poem, nature is figured as an object for prophets' interpretation, its voice finally silenced by the grown

poet's "reason" and "faith": "Prophets of Nature, / we to them will speak / A lasting inspiration, sanctified / By reason, blest by faith" (14.444-46). In *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth*, Galperin signifies the exclusion of the poem's primary object in the subject's developing authority, writing that "Proceeding less by authority of the writing poet and more by authority of the Poet writing, *The Prelude* progresses finally by authority of 'we'--the Poet and his expectant audience" (182). Webb's *Naked Poems*, by contrast, consistently challenges the authority of the "Poet writing" through its double lesbian subject and thus poses a theoretical challenge to the subject construction and authority of such works as *The Prelude*. As Potvin writes of the double lesbian subject of *Naked Poems*, "'Doubled up' suggests the sharing of identity between women rather than the Romantic myth of the individual ego" (51).[49]

Much as the subject is figured as a non-autonomous, unstable entity in *Naked Poems*, the object is likewise figured as being capable of textual shifting. In the second poem of "Suite II," Webb problematizes

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[49] The "Romantic myth of the individual ego" is likewise challenged by *Double Negative* with its thematic and structural insistence on the multiplicity of its textual authority: as Marlatt and Warland write, "'we're together'" (20).

conventional subject-object relationships through an explicit questioning of the validity of the subject's perception:

> *The sun comes through*
> *plum curtains.*
>
> *I said*
> *the sun is gold*
>
> *in your eyes.*
>
> *It isn't the sun*
> *you said.*

The poem's strategy of assertion and denial suggests the dubious credibility of the gaze as a valid perceptual means.[50] It instead foregrounds the responsive eye contact of lovers engaged in an intimate, sensual moment and demonstrates a refusal to appropriate or subjugate the object of perception, "the sun." The figure of the gaze in *The Prelude* is of particular interest if we look to the Blind Beggar episode, where there is, in fact, no chance of the poet's gaze being returned: "on the shape of that unmoving man, / His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed, / As if

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[50] In *Double Negative*, the gaze is likewise represented as a limited and limiting perceptual method. Indeed, Marlatt and Warland suggest that the gaze precipitates questionable boundaries (such as those between subject and object) and is willfully blind to that which is beyond its narrow scope.

admonished from another world" (7.647-49). That the beggar is "Wearing a written paper, to explain / His story" signifies his protest at his objectification, but, as Kneale notes, "the beggar's attempt literally to ornament himself with language, figurally to present himself as a text and not as a referential object, only half succeeds; the text that he wears is an ill-fitting garment" (7:41-42; 93). The beggar's relegation to the realm of object--a relegation effectively rendered through the poet's gaze--is further signified by Wordsworth's diction of "unmoving" in the description of his shape. As Kneale further notes, this "allies him curiously to an inanimate object, one that has to be propped up. The man appears divested of the indications of life: no motion has he now, no force; he neither speaks nor sees. He is his own living epitaph" (95).[51] This critic further notes that the beggar becomes a textual figure for the poet's self, signifying the completeness of the appropriation achieved through the gaze. Such appropriation is explicitly resisted in the second lyric of *Naked Poems*' "Suite II": "I said / the sun is gold.... / It isn't the sun / you said." Here

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[51] We might here recall Webb's diction of "limp" to describe the female victim of the Judeo-Christian symbolic in the concluding lyric of "Non Linear."

the doubling of perception does not appropriate, but rather affirms the subjectivity of each of the lovers. As Potvin writes, "With the aid of her lover, the speaker can protest against women being reduced to absence and instead create a space for them" (52).[52] The double 'gaze' is thus figured as a perceptual strategy that mutually affirms both participants' credibility as subjects and fosters the sequence's double subject position. As John Berger notes, in *Ways of Seeing*, "Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world" (9). The double gaze of Webb's *Naked Poems* further evokes the sexual tension of erotic interchange and desire itself. It is the text's figurations of desire and their departure from Wordsworthian poetics that the next section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" will consider.

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[52] In relation to the open form of *Naked Poems*, Potvin further notes that "The subject/object tension necessary to the climax of the androcentric love lyric is dissolved, rendered irrelevant in the context of two women loving each other" (52).

IV. The Character of Desire in *Naked Poems*

While the preceding section of "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" considered the structural negation of conventional subject-object binarity in Webb's *Naked Poems*, this section explores the sequence's rhetorical attention to desire, particularly as it is backgrounded by the figuration of desire in *The Prelude*. Notably, the internal development of both texts eventually displaces the desire that characterizes their earlier movements. In the final two suites of *Naked Poems*, for example, desire is infrequently manifest in the poetics themselves; it instead becomes a conceptual focus of Webb's deconstructive challenge to Judeo-Christian epistemology. *The Prelude* likewise displaces desire in its resolution; the universalizing tendencies of the personal epic, in this case, seemingly necessitate the textual downplaying of anything personal, including desire.[53] Indeed, in both texts, desire finds its most conspicuous manifestations in the more typically lyric poems or segments: in *Naked Poems*, desire is a primary particle of the first two suites, while it is seen as a significant force in

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[53] As Douglas B. Wilson writes, "Had he [Wordsworth] concluded with the spots of time [in which desire is a significant particle], their uncanny personal aspect would not have served his final, universalizing purpose--to write an epic on a mental journey into the depths of his own mind" (164).

Wordworth's rather lyrical spots of time which are "infused with the uncanny" (Wilson 45). As Hulcoop writes of the pairs of suites surrounding "Non Linear,"

> the first pair refuses to chronicle or narrate but nevertheless gives voice to a love affair between two women which, in 1965, was a rebellious breaking-out of the Canadian male's tradition of lyric love-poetry (so startling that many critics missed the point altogether or preferred not to acknowledge it); the second pair tells lies about a brother-sister relationship and poses "Some Final Questions," both of which flout preconceptions about the form and subject-matter of lyric poetry. ("Phyllis Webb and Her Works" 290)

It might be further argued that, in addition to the more narrative impulses of *Naked Poems* and *The Prelude*, their respective epistemological concerns become a source of desire's displacement, as Webb interrogates Judeo-Christian epistemology in the later movements of *Naked Poems*, and Wordsworth proposes the superiority and immortality of the human imagination in the resolution of *The Prelude*. Yet, the epistemological challenge of *Naked Poems* might be seen as being generated or even necessitated by the earlier movements' textualization of desire--a lesbian desire that is denied by the Judeo-Christian symbolic--, while in Wordsworth's epic it is not conventional textual/sexual politics but the closure of the narrative form itself that displaces desire and figures it more

simply as a means to an end. For Webb, the textual conventions of Western epistemology *must* be confronted and, if possible, dismissed as invention or "lies" in order to allow her own desire unfettered textual representation. As the first poem of "Some final questions" reads,

> *What are you sad about?*
>
> that all my desire goes
> out to the impossibly
> beautiful

The diction of "impossibly" here suggests the repression of beauty and the poet's own desire by the textual conditions generated by the Judeo-Christian epistemology figured in the "Suite of Lies." In a marked contrast to Webb's final movement, *The Prelude*'s resolution rejoices "In beauty exalted" by "the mind of man," and the desire of the male poet finds its figurative climax in traditional textual conditions (14.453; 448).

In a departure from Wordsworth's association of beauty and desire with the human mind, desire, in Webb's sequence, is allied with the human body. Indeed, the conflation of text and body conditions the reader to interpret the text's desire as being that of the female body itself.[54] As

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[54] In the fourth lyric of "Non Linear," Webb explicitly conflates the female body with the poem's subject position:

Potvin writes of *Naked Poems*, "The body and mind are linked but seek expression through the body" (53). This is in direct contrast to the stance of *The Prelude*, where the sensory experience of the spots of time finds expression through the poet's evolving imagination:

> When thou dost to that summer turn thy thoughts,
> And hast before thee all which then we were,
> To thee, in memory of that happiness,
> It will be known, by thee at least, my Friend!
> Felt, that the history of a Poet's mind
> Is labour not unworthy of regard.... (14.408-13)

As suggested by the resolution of *The Prelude*, the poem's design ultimately privileges the expression of the "Poet's mind." By contrast, the

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> I can see her perfectly clearly
> through this dusk her face
> the colour of moonlight.
>
> *Maybe my body, maybe I?*
> But when has my love
> ever been
> offered exactly
> and why should she be an
> exception? (italics mine)

With the body included in this poem's subject positionality, desire becomes figured as an expression of the body, rather than that which seeks expression through the imagination of the subject (as we find in Wordsworth's *Prelude*).

We might here recall *Double Negative*'s figuration of desire as a generating force of textuality itself: "writing desert lines (mirage between the eyes) writing / rail lines (illusion our desires meeting)" (54).

opening lyric of *Naked Poems* proposes to create the textual space necessary for the expression of the *body*'s desire: as Webb writes, "Your mouth blesses me / all over. / There is room." Such textual "room" is further evoked by the layout of the suite itself. As Van Herk notes, "Suite I sits at the bottoms of the pages, lies beneath the articulated desire of that white block of waiting, the white room within which the language of desire lives" (177). With the conflation of body and text and the typographical evocation of "waiting," of desire, desire becomes figured as an almost tangible entity in *Naked Poems*.[55] By contrast, the desire evident in *The Prelude*'s spots of time becomes abstracted as it is disassociated from the original sensory experience and incorporated into the workings of the poet's imagination. As Wilson writes, "Wordsworth's spots of time, infused with the uncanny, retain *traces* of desire; these spatial and temporal landing places in the landscape of memory contain evidence of imaginative potency" (45; italics mine). In Book 1 of *The Prelude*, for instance, Wordsworth records that the "Presences of Nature"

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[55] We might here look ahead to the next chapter's analysis of *Gyno-Text*'s emphasis on the corporeality of the maternal body--a corporeality that defies mystification or reduction to metaphorical function.

> Impressed upon all forms the characters
> Of danger or desire; and thus did make
> The surface of the universal earth
> With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
> Work like a sea? (471-75)

The diction of "hope and fear" suggests the "imaginative potency" of the poet's desire and aligns that desire with his mental and emotional workings rather than his body. In *The Prelude*, desire becomes figured as "an alien presence within the calm of nature," rather than, as we find in Webb's sequence, a natural presence within the body itself (Wilson 44). Furthermore, as Wilson argues, for Wordsworth,

> Desire, in effect, motivates narrative and re-motivates earlier events. The reader responds to uncoded desires as a by-product of the act of reading. As an adult looking back upon his past in world-weariness, Wordsworth craves the very energy of desire as a source of creativity. (45)

Desire thus becomes integrated in *The Prelude*'s overall process of immortalizing the poet's mind, while in *Naked Poems* desire is not subject to the same universalizing tendencies, perhaps signifying Webb's reluctance to let the mind appropriate the body's drives and desires.

While desire is consistently evident in the love lyrics and double lesbian subject position of the first three suites of *Naked Poems*, in the concluding suites it is rather antithetically represented as that which is

repressed by Judeo-Christian epistemology. In the fourth movement of the sequence (conspicuously titled "Suite of Lies"), the imposition of a patriarchal voice becomes dominant. The allusion to the biblical Fall established in the concluding poem of "Non Linear" is here further developed through the repetition of the verb "to fall,"[56] suggesting the resonance of such epistemology in Webb's own poetics. It seems that, at best, the female poet can only temporarily dodge the textual conditions precipitated by Judeo-Christian divisions. Yet, in its careful positioning in the overall sequence, following a consistent manifestation of female desire in the earlier suites, this "Suite of Lies" challenges patriarchal textual authority. As the earlier suites suggest, the textualization of female desire is indeed possible *despite* conventional textual conditions and authority. The Judeo-Christian epistemology voiced in "Non Linear" is one which promotes a gender binary that has traditionally negated female subjectivity

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[56] As the first lyric of the "Suite of Lies" reads,

I know the way
of the pear tree
and apple tree the way
the light shines
through pear petal
apple, a light
falling into our consanguinity

and desire; such binarity is evoked as Webb writes, "brother and sister / conjunctive and / peaceable."[57] The typography of this second poem of "Suite of Lies," with the extended spacing between "brother" and "sister," signifies the separation of the genders and the displacement of the female to the realm of the Other. The diction of "conjunctive" points to the oppositional logic and constructions of the patriarchal symbolic which represent woman specifically as man's Other. As the Other of the Judeo-Christian Symbolic, woman is denied her desire(s). As Kristeva argues, the Christian order severely limits the participation and acceptable experiences of women: in her essay, "Stabat Mater," she writes,

> The *ecstatic* and the *melancholic*, two great female archetypes of Christianity, exemplify two ways in which a woman may participate in this symbolic Christian order.
>
> In the first discourse, the maternal traits are attributed to the symbolic father, the mother is denied by this displacement of her attributes and the woman then submits herself to a sexually undifferentiated androgynous being....

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[57] We might here recall William Blake's condemnation of the Judeo-Christian repression of desire in "The Garden of Love" with the "Priests in black gowns... walking their rounds, / And binding with briars, my joys & desires" (11-12). While Blake does not include gender concerns in this particular critique of organized religion, "The Garden of Love" and several other of the *Songs of Experience* attend to the divisive perceptions engendered by the social constructs precipitated by Judeo-Christian epistemology.

> At the same time, in the second discourse, submission to the father is experienced as punishment, pain and suffering inflicted upon the heterogeneous body. Such a confrontation provokes a melancholic *jouissance* whose emotive eulogy is perhaps to be found in Catherine of Sienna's treatise on the sensuality of tears. (147-48)

As she further notes in "About Chinese Women," in Judeo-Christian epistemology, "patrilinear descent with transmission of the name of the father centralizes eroticism, giving it the single goal of procreation," and thus "the vagina and the *jouissance* of the mother are disregarded, and immediately replaced by that which puts the mother on the side of the socio-symbolic community: childbearing and procreation in the name of the father" (142; 146). The lesbian desire manifest in the first three suites of *Naked Poems* is denied representation in Western textual conditions influenced by this symbolic order. As the "Suite of Lies" with its conspicuous lack of textualized desire suggests, this symbolic order is a potentially powerful textual construct, yet these "lies" do not have the power to negate the desire represented in the preceding three suites of the sequence. If anything, the representations of female desire in the earlier lyrics expose the patriarchal epistemology figured in the fourth suite as being a problematic and repressive invention, a construct of language

itself. As Van Herk writes, "The poems refuse to renunciate desire and its ambiguous blossoming, refuse to permit the Judeo-Christian flagellation abhorring nudity. Closing the eyes so that you will not see or desire your own breasts, your own desirous body. What shame is this?" (177). With its double lesbian subject position and the resulting instability in subject-object relationships, *Double Negative* calls into question the Judeo-Christian divisions that restrict female desire and subordinate feminine subjectivity and authority. Rather than identifying with the father to gain access to the patriarchal symbolic, the subject of *Naked Poems* identifies with her own sex and body and proposes an alternate symbolic based on a female desire that has been denied under the textual constructions of Western epistemology. It is within this symbolic that the textual repression of woman is rendered temporarily inactive, and female desire finds manifestation.

Naked Poems can be likewise seen as challenging the authority of the Judeo-Christian symbolic in its interrogation of the locus of language. Like Wordsworth, Webb textualizes the "two figures of voice and letter," yet in her poetry, unlike in *The Prelude*, such a textualization becomes a

means of problematizing the doctrine of the Logos (Kneale 74).[58] Through its attention to the "problematic *locus* of language--a place of voice that is also a place of writing" (Kneale xiii), the third poem of Webb's "Suite of Lies" suggests that the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the Logos mystifies voice. The paternal voice that it privileges is here figured as being a limited and limiting one. As Webb writes,

> *I use the word groves*
> *light falling*
> *found in the orchard*
> *finding what fell by a*
> *breath*

The "breath" of the concluding line characterizes the voice of the father as being semantically ambiguous, suggesting that the doctrine of the Logos involves a highly questionable hermeneutic. The diction of "use" in the opening line of the lyric signifies the female poet's attempted appropriation of the sign and her subsequent challenge to the restrictive patrilinear access

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[58] For an extensive and insightful analysis of the manifestation of these two figures in Wordsworth's poetry, see the third chapter of Kneale's *Monumental Writing*: "Images of Language: Voice and Letter in *The Prelude*."

to subjecthood.[59] In its critique of the Fall narrative, this lyric furthermore points to the repression of the feminine economy of difference and plenitude in Judeo-Christian epistemology and rhetoric. The singular "apple" of the original version becomes "groves" and an "orchard" in Webb's lyric, the contrast suggesting that the masculine economy that characterizes the biblical narrative precipitates limited and divisive perceptions. Indeed, God's words to Eve signify the biblical narrative's masculine economy of exchange--an economy that generates the notion of exclusivity: as Eve claims, "God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden...'" (Gen. 3.3). Webb's more inclusive figuration of the Fall narrative calls into question the authority of God's perceptions, voice, and thus the doctrine of the Logos itself. This challenge to authority is not totally unlike that signified by the Wordsworthian poet's deliberate misreadings of the voice of nature: as Kneale suggests,

> Whether written or spoken, the language of Nature has a "forbidding" aspect that implies norms but permits deviations in a manner corresponding to a structuralist model of rhetoric.

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[59] As Kristeva writes in "About Chinese Women," "That, incidentally, is what the Father is: sign and time" (153).

> Disobedience in reading is "misprision," to borrow Harold Bloom's trope; it is the willful error of interpretation. The boy poet [notably not the grown poet who has accessed the Symbolic] loves to stand and misread. (85)[60]

It is such a deliberate misreading that is manifest in Webb's revision of the biblical Fall narrative.

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[60] Bloom argues in *The Anxiety of Influence*, "Poetic influence--when it involves two strong, authentic poets,--always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (30).

Conclusion: The "appointed close"[61]

As "Sexing the Lyric Sequence" has argued, the rhetorical operations of *Naked Poems* recurrently point to the restrictions which certain canonical conventions and their inherent patriarchal epistemology impose on the female poet's textualization of feminine plenitude, subjectivity, and desire. This chapter's stance, however, does not mean to underestimate the complexities and innovations of Wordsworthian poetics, for it is arguable that without certain strategies engendered by *The Prelude*, such as the elevation of the object to a potential subject, the rich theoretical maneuvers of Webb's poetics would not be textually viable. Indeed, in her attention to subject-object relationships, temporality, genre distinctions, and desire, Webb might be seen being of a new breed of romantic, who revises Wordsworthian strategies to embody contemporary feminist concerns. While *Naked Poems* successfully escapes the "Great Iambic Pentameter" of canonical poetry, the influence of the 'father' is still consistently felt in the various rhetorical figures and operations of this feminist text. Indeed, the sequence does not and perhaps cannot totally escape certain canonical

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[61] *The Prelude* 14.303.

conventions, such as the 0-1 logic of narrative and the binaries generated by patriarchal epistemology. That the sequence concludes with the persecutory "final questions" comes as no surprise: under conventional textual conditions, the female poet must be made to answer for the discord she has engendered. As Webb tells Janice Williamson, "The interrogator in the last section is definitely an aspect of myself, I think, a kind of superego, making me responsible, in a way, for my statements" (*Sounding Differences* 329). In the interrogation of "Some final questions," the poet is contemptuous of this "superego," a voice, like that of patriarchal epistemology, that attempts to restrict the openness of the sequence's strategies. As the fifth poem of the final suite reads,

> *I don't get it. Are you talking about*
> *process and individuation. Or absolutes*
> *whole numbers that sort of thing?*
>
> Yeah

Webb's strategy of textual resistance and evasion is herein voiced. As the sixth poem of this suite suggests, while woman and her desires are repressed by canonical textual conditions, the female poet must at least *try* to resist the textual repression of her subjectivity and desire: "*But why don't you do something*? / I am trying to write a poem."

Intimations of Mortality in Tostevin's *Gyno-Text*

The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home
(Wordsworth, "Intimations Ode" 58-64)

oral
pit
spits
yolk
spins
spine

embryo
rolled
in
a
scroll (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*)[1]

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[1] Please note that, because *Gyno-Text* itself is not paginated, no page references will be given for any quotations from this series.

Introduction: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom"[2]

As Lola Lemire Tostevin suggests, "For women writing in Canada, there can be no conclusions when so much points to new beginnings" ("Breaking the Hold on the Story" 391). Taking its cue from the resistance to closure manifest in *Double Negative* and *Naked Poems*, "The Feminist Romantic" concludes with an analysis of Tostevin's *Gyno-Text*, a series of short line lyrics that engages both conceptually and structurally with notions of becoming. These poems recurrently depict the symbiosis of the woman and foetus who comprise the maternal body and point to the revisionary textual conditions that this body generates. In her afterword to the series, Tostevin explains that "These small poems are not about the mystification or sacred calling of motherhood defined as duty or end-in-itself but as a source of generative creative power and strength."[3] Such a

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[2] Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 7.3.

[3] As is evident in a comparative analysis of the quotations that epigraphically introduce this chapter, *Gyno-Text*'s insistence on the corporeality and textuality of the maternal body works against the mystification of origins that characterizes many Romantic poems, including Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode." Where Wordsworth's representation of "The soul that rises with us... From God, who is our home" mystifies the origins of imagination and textuality, *Gyno-Text*'s spitting "oral pit" and its "embryo rolled in a scroll" actively work against such mystification and its

figuration of maternality is in itself highly disruptive as it "throttles" conventional representational strategies that have repeatedly figured the mothering body as a "lost territory... an idealization of primary narcissism" (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*; Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 161). Yet, in their recurrent conflation of text and female body, the lyrics of *Gyno-Text* offer more than a demystification of the Western symbolic construct of maternality: they develop a discourse of maternal energy that unsettles conventional strategies of representation, such as subjective autonomy and hierarchical binarity, and births spaces for female textual being. The disruptive energy of the maternal body is effectively rendered in the twentieth lyric of the series:

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inevitable repression or idealization of the maternal body. As an alternative to "pretending that we have fallen from the sky," *Gyno-Text* focuses on the powerful and generative link between the female and foetal bodies and thus imparts a feminist ideology and feminine economy that disrupt masculinist myths of origins (Tostevin, "Breaking the Hold on the Story" 389). This strategy of disruption is one likewise promoted in the writings of Hélène Cixous:

> Where masculinist ideology is based on originary theories of separation, loss, absence, death, Cixous openly defies these and writes not from separation from the mother but from a link that continues to flow between mother and daughter. Where man in his fiction reduces woman to absence, Cixous writes from presence, from that which has not been lost, but repressed.
>
> (Tostevin, "Breaking the Hold on the Story" 389)

first
thump

the
throb
that
throttles

Like Webb's *Naked Poems*, the lyrics of *Gyno-Text* privilege excess and plenitude as they problematize conventional textual conditions and foster a "Writing which differs in space and defers time" (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text* afterword). The typographic minimalism of both Webb's sequence and Tostevin's series creates new textual spaces within which differences are validated and "within which the language of desire lives" (Van Herk 177). This ideological emphasis on difference facilitates a resistance to the reductiveness that characterizes many canonical representations of femininity, while promoting the plenitude and multiplicity of woman. Like Marlatt and Warland's strategic doubling of subject in *Double Negative*, the doubling manifest in *Gyno-Text*'s representation of the symbiosis of the maternal body and its figuration of mother tongue fosters a subjective multiplicity that unsettles the hierarchies of conventional subject-object relationships and any assumed homogeneity of the dominant discourse. The result of such doubling in *Gyno-Text* is a blurring of boundaries

between what have traditionally been seen as antithetical forces; as Janice Williamson writes, "In this 'female-body-writing,' the double standard of French and English, of mothertongue and speaking Anglo-'white,' of 'menspeak' and 'femspeak,' is crossed and double-crossed" ("'to pen a trait'" 100).[4] As in Marlatt and Warland's sequence, here the excess of voice and body-text is manifest in a subject position that is at least double, though, in this case, the doubling is manifest within a 'single' (albeit non-homogeneous) body that privileges the shifting space of identity.[5] As

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[4] In *"Coming to Writing"*, Cixous argues that conventional boundaries exile woman from a wholeness of self, from culture and from "the Law"; she writes that "for woman, it's even forbidden to hope to have everything a human being can have. There are so many boundaries, and so many walls, and inside the walls, more walls" (40; 3).

[5] In its attendance to the various voices that background and authorize its multiple female subject position, Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative* draws upon the canonical strategies of consensus and community. It thus problematically suggests that textuality finds its authority in the world itself. By contrast, *Gyno-Text* figures the authority of the maternal body in terms of the textuality it generates, signifying perhaps a greater confidence in the influence of its subject position and a resistance to the problematic association of text and world that is constructed by *Double Negative*. An insistence on the generative textuality of the maternal body characterizes many of the poems of Tostevin's series, for example:

cordon
rond
dit
ronronnement

Williamson further notes, "the female seeing subject signs herself as an uncertain sign who, refracted in difference, looks onto the world" ("'to pen a trait'" 103). Indeed, the "uncertain," dynamic subject of *Gyno-Text* resists any stable textual reading. In her irreducibility, she insists that the reader discard any hermeneutical dependence on canonical conventions of closure and stability and instead read for difference. Like the other texts considered in this dissertation, *Gyno-Text* constructs a rich hermeneutic that involves a misreading and revision of conventional textual conditions and canonical representational strategies.

Following the critical approach taken in the preceding chapters of this dissertation, "Intimations of Mortality in Tostevin's *Gyno-Text*" reads this feminist text against the background of British romanticism, in

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arrondit
le
ventre
au
verbe

As this chapter will later argue, *Gyno-Text* represents textuality as a force generated by the maternal body, rather than something that happens in the world. While *Double Negative* seeks to undermine the politics of colonization, *Gyno-Text* is primarily interested in the politics of textuality itself. This is not to suggest that Tostevin's contributions are socially ineffectual, for her text is a powerful argument for the necessity of overthrowing the taboos surrounding pregnant women.

particular, against the poetry of William Wordsworth, William Blake, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Once again, this approach generates certain paradoxes as it points to the feminist text's concurrent indebtedness to and resistance of canonical strategies of representation.[6] As this dissertation has previously suggested, for the female writer (or any writer) a complicity in the dominant discourse and dependence upon conventional representational strategies is unavoidable. As Williamson argues, "In Tostevin's writing, the power relations of sexual difference require that the woman writer articulate her difference while speaking within the dominant discourse. To move outside of this discourse is to assume a position that speaks silence or nonsense" ("'to pen a trait'" 101). Rather than having recourse to "silence or nonsense," *Gyno-Text*'s disruptive, expansive, and corrective revisionary movements shift the power balance of the dominant discourse. In short, Tostevin's series calls into question many of the conventions of the dominant discourse and offers a feminist alternative to

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[6] As *The Anxiety of Influence* argues, such paradoxes are characteristic of the "family romance" of writers: "Poetic history... is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative spaces for themselves" (5).

its constructions of textual authority. Reading this text against the background of British romanticism provides a framework for analyzing this text's "meaningful and constructive dialogue" with the conventions it concurrently observes and opposes (Tostevin, "Breaking the Hold on the Story" 386).

The first section of this chapter offers close textual analyses that focus on some of the ways in which *Gyno-Text* revises romantic strategies and figurations to embody the concerns of the female-body-writing. Of particular concern are the text's figurations of difference, textual suspension, and the body-text. This section reads Tostevin's privileging of difference against the contraries at work in Blake's poetry, its figuration of textual suspension against that manifest in the verb "to hang" in *The Prelude*, and its blurring of the boundaries between internality and externality against the rhetorical operation of negative capability in Keats's 1819 series of odes. This approach is not meant to suggest that, in its implicit dialogue with British romanticism, *Gyno-Text* simply reproduces the representational strategies in question; rather, in its recurrent conflation of text and female body, Tostevin's series gives voice to that which has been excluded or repressed in such canonical representations, namely the

maternal body and female subjectivity. In order to inscribe her own femininity, the female poet *must* work against the repressive forces of conventional representational strategies, for, as Tostevin writes in "Breaking the Hold on the Story,"

> Throughout history she [woman] has been expected to identify with experiences that either exclude her or represent her in fragmented ways. Too often she has been the outsider looking in and has unwittingly fulfilled that image of herself, a phenomenon of some outside world, or in Simone de Beauvoir's words, she has been even to herself "the other." (386)

As the earlier chapters of this dissertation have suggested, many of the strategies of British romanticism precipitate such exclusion and fragmentation.

While the first section of "Intimations of Mortality" considers the ways in which *Gyno-Text* revises or expands certain rhetorical strategies and representations of British romanticism, the second section looks to the ways in which Tostevin's text amends romantic figurations, in particular Shelley's representation of maternal influence in *Alastor* and Blake's privileging of the "Eye" as the source of textual 'truth' in "Auguries of Innocence." While the first section foregrounds *Gyno-Text*'s implicit dialogue with British romanticism, the concluding section argues that the

feminist text, at times, takes a more adversarial position, pointing to the ways in which canonical poetry can be seen as mystifying femininity and textual authority. In its recurrent association of textual birth with the gestation and generation of the maternal body, *Gyno-Text* implicitly repudiates Shelley's appropriation of maternity as an allegorical function in the poet-hero's narcissistic quest of *Alastor*--an appropriation that does not attend to the excess, corporeality, and 'reality' of the mothering body. Yet, as is made explicit in *Gyno-Text*'s recurrent conflation of subjectivity and the female body, the speaking position of this text is female-specific, and its own 'truths' might likewise be seen as fostering certain exclusions not unlike those manifest in much of canonical literature.[7] The text's

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[7] *Gyno-Text* develops a rather problematic analogy between the female body and female subjectivity as the speaking positions of various poems of the series are conflated with the biological "tongue," "cervix," and "*vagin*" of the female subject. This strategy of conflation exhibits an essentialism that seemingly represses constructionist accounts of sexual difference and being. Arguably, such a strategy might be seen as simply reversing what Freud describes as the "genital deficiency" of the female (Irigaray, *Speculum* 112). However, it might be further argued that *Gyno-Text*'s essentialism is strategically employed to disrupt the phallocentrism of Western philosophy, and the ambiguity of the maternal body's 'truths' avert any re-mystification of femininity. The ambiguity of the body's articulations is effectively rendered in the diction of "dream," which concludes the fifth lyric of the series:

privileging of the maternal body as a source of creativity and generation also marks a departure from Blake's valorization of the "Eye" as the authoritative door of perception and creativity. Implicitly working against Blake's rather exclusive figuration, *Gyno-Text* suggests that the maternal body is a valid source and authority of textuality and its 'truths.' Ultimately, this feminist text promotes difference, not unlike Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in which he argues that "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth" (8.38).

---

through
the
cervix
the
helix
leaks
a
dream

That the female "cervix" is a vehicle of imaginative expression--"a dream"--challenges phallocentric theories of authority. That it "leaks" (rather than speaks) that dream signifies the difference of signification in a feminine economy.

I. The Tesseric Movement of *Gyno-Text*

In its attention to conventional rhetorical strategies, this section of "Intimations of Mortality" argues for *Gyno-Text* as a canonically evolutionary project, one that adopts and revises certain strategies cultivated by the British romantics to foster its own concerns with the generative maternal body. In particular, this section looks to the poems of Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats as the precursors of *Gyno-Text*'s own problematization of identity, signification, and the relationship between the surface text and the processes that background it. The revisionary ratio evident in *Gyno-Text*'s engagement with the romantic strategies to be considered in this section might be defined as a *tessera*:

> completion and antithesis; I take the word not from mosaic-making, where it is still used, but from the ancient mystery cults, where it meant a token of recognition.... A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough.
> (Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* 14)

The figurations of *Gyno-Text* can, at times, be seen as completing certain romantic representational strategies by foregrounding that which they have repressed, namely, the maternal body and a feminine economy of writing. As Tostevin writes in "Breaking the Hold on the Story,"

> There's little doubt that the androcentric vision of both classic and contemporary male writers can be at times embarrassingly self-indulgent but merely pointing the finger of scorn is insufficient. Methods are needed that will force not only an examination but a reinterpretation of traditional and theoretical methods. It is urgent that women bring to their reading and writing a more comprehensive vision than those presented to us through so-called facts of human sciences or fiction--a vision which not only seeks the destruction of that which it opposes but hopefully can convert it into a dialectical adversary for the sake of meaningful and constructive dialogue. (386)

It is such a dialogue that is seen in *Gyno-Text*'s engagement with canonical conventions. For instance, the opening lyric's evocation of difference--"a / different / tongue"--acts as an expository challenge to canonically-sanctioned subjectivity, signifying the adversarial stance of the poems to follow. The diction of "tongue" is particularly effective in foreshadowing the text's problematization of the assumed autonomy of a mother tongue, its privileging of female sexuality, and its attention to the writing body.[8]

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[8] The diction of "tongue" as it applies to the mothering body of *Gyno-Text* further signifies the text's departure from Christian representations of maternity, which centre on the figure of the Virgin Mary. As Kristeva writes in her essay "Stabat Mater," "We are entitled only to the ear of the virginal body, the tears and the breast" (172-73). In contrast to the representational strategies of the Christian symbolic, Tostevin's "tongue" privileges the sensuality and voice of the maternal body.

"Without contraries is no progression"[9]

In its figurations of non-exclusive oppositions, Tostevin's *Gyno-Text* offers an alternative to the hierarchical binary constructs that characterize much of Western literature and philosophy. *Gyno-Text*'s rhetorical attention to the hyphen as a signifier of difference and excess is one example of the text's resistance to conventional textual constructions based on oppositional binarity. This punctuation mark is a particularly effective source of resistance as it unites potentially opposing forces (as in manic-depressive) without negating their difference or privileging one term at the expense of the other. As a figure of textually sanctioned difference, the hyphen or "*le / trait / d'union*" of the first two poems of *Gyno-Text* points to the potential multiplicity of each particle in the poem's field of play. As Williamson suggests, the hyphen of "gyno-text" becomes "the trait of difference between women and their tissues of writing" ("'to pen a trait'" 101). Hierarchical binary constructs are further challenged by *Gyno-Text*'s representation of the excess or multiplicity of the maternal body and the text that it generates. The body-text finds its authority in the generative

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[9] Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 3.7.

energy and power of the maternal body, whose processes defy binarity. As Tostevin writes,

> ridge
> gives
> rise
> to
> gut
> tied
> tongue
>
> tugs
> the
> lingual
> hinge

The diction of "gives rise" points to the generative force of the maternal body, while the colloquialism of "gut" helps resist a mystification of maternal influence. The "lingual hinge" is particularly effective in its proposal of a linguistic theory based on the excess (as opposed to binarity) of the maternal body. As Shirley Neuman writes of the final poem of the *Gyno-Text* series,

> Few poems are so simultaneously aware as this one of both linguistic theory and the corporeality of much female experience, and few so resolutely refuse to position linguistic theory and corporeal experience in a binary structure: the moment in which the child is pushed from the birth canal--*vagin*--into the other medium, air, and in which she gives voice to her birth cry--*vagir*--is phonemically recorded as a minimal difference, and semantically recorded, in the single

> adverb, *enfin*.... This emphasis on the corporeal *and* on linguistic process keeps the old symbolic mother at bay, allowing these mothering bodies to write in the 'different' rhythms of their maternal and their sexual pleasure, to recover control of the discourse of their own sexuality. ("Importing Difference" 400-1)

As the analyses of the preceding chapters of this dissertation attest, Tostevin's refusal to perpetuate canonical binary structures is a recurrent focus of much feminist literature.[10] As Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and others have noted, conventional binary logic precipitates the social and textual subjugation of female subjectivity and is thus an anathema to feminist writing.[11] Cixous, for instance, contends

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[10] We might here recall *Double Negative*'s use of unconventional triangulations in its representation of female alliances--triangulations that refuse to reinforce the alienating binary relationships seen in the resolution of Coleridge's *Christabel*. In its animizing of the Other, Webb's *Naked Poems* also resists the hierarchical nature of the conventional binary model of thought and logic.

[11] As Julia Kristeva suggests in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," the "0-1 interval" backgrounding conventional binary constructs is itself a construct of "God, authority and social law," and any poetic language based on a dialogical interval of 0-2 "is rebellious" insofar as it disputes the laws of language and escapes binarity and linearity (79). Thus, *Gyno-Text*'s promotion of "non-exclusive opposition"--what Kristeva describes as a figure "germane to carnivalesque language"--might be seen as offering an ideological challenge to conventional monologic language which perpetuates a "subordination of the code to 1, to God" ("Desire in Language" 79; 79; 70). Such non-exclusivity is evident in the symbiotic relationship of the pregnant

that the masculine economy of writing "has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 879). In contrast to the traditional literary canon that privileges a masculine economy of oppositional logic, *Gyno-Text* promotes difference--not only sexual difference but the difference of "word and thought, of word and thing, word and Being" (Tostevin, "Breaking the Hold on the Story" 387). The poetics of *Gyno-Text* ultimately point to the difference inherent in signification itself--a difference that privileges process.[12] As Tostevin writes in the afterword of *Gyno-Text*,

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subject and the foetus of the series, as well as in Tostevin's figuration of the generative processes of the maternal body.

Naked Poems likewise promotes 0-2 logic and "non-exclusive opposition" in its play between the poetic types of lyric and narrative, as well as in its representation of the dynamic relationship between self and Other.

[12] The nineteenth lyric of *Gyno-Text* provides one example of Tostevin's foregrounding of the process and difference of signification in an economy based on the maternal body:

body's
first
articulations
broach
bone
by
bone

> In her essay *l'engendrement de la formule* Julia Kristeva uses the terms *phéno-texte* and *géno-texte* as two main features of poetic language. Phenotext as the familiar language of communication, the formula of linguistic analysis, while genotext operates at a level which doesn't necessarily reflect normal structures but generates elements of language in process. A language rooted in something beyond language. A sprouting which develops slowly as a seed instead of sentence. It is against this double background that *Gyno-Text* was conceived. At the ridge where becoming of subject is affirmed and developed through process.

Gyno-Text's focus on the "becoming of subject" fosters a complex, unstable, and multiple subjectivity like that for which Cixous's "Coming to Writing" argues. In contrast to the "0-1 interval" of the Western symbolic and its precipitation of binary textual constructs, the plurality of *Gyno-Text*'s maternal body-text fosters an economy in which "the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*... in terms of *one and other*" (Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" 69). According to Kristeva, such poetic language "transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality as well" ("Word, Dialogue, and Novel" 70). Furthermore, *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of the subject-in-process avoids reducing subjectivity to a homogeneity that would encourage the repression of difference and foster

the textual privileging of the subject at the expense of the Other.[13] As Cixous writes,

> I believed as one should in the principle of identity, of noncontradiction, of unity. For years I aspired to this divine homogeneity. I was there with my big pair of scissors, and as soon as I saw myself overlapping, snip, I cut, I adjusted. I reduced everything to a personage known as "a proper woman." ("Coming to Writing" 30)

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[13] In its recurrent attention to the multiplicity of the maternal body, *Gyno-Text* figures subjectivity itself as plural. Such a figuration offers a certain resistance to what Irigaray sees as the "specularizing subject" that dominates Western philosophy and inscribes the 'lacking' female as "the 'object' to be investigated" according to a phallocentric logic of the same (*Speculum* 144-45). In contrast to the 'sameness' of masculine sexuality and discourse, Irigaray argues that female sexuality and, by extension, feminine subjectivity is multiple and diffuse, suggesting that

> Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary. So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*.... But *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere.* She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined--in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness. (*This Sex Which is Not One* 28)

While a plural subject position does not necessarily preclude hierarchical subject-object relationships, the privileging of difference in *Gyno-Text*'s representation of subjectivity signifies a disruption of the logic of the same that precipitates many such hierarchical constructs.

In its various figurations, *Gyno-Text* privileges the plurality and process of identity and thus resists the textual mutilation of self that Cixous sees as endemic of masculine strategies of representation.[14] The result is a poetics of process: as Tostevin writes,

> Out of O
> into
> the
> narrow
> bare
> but
> for
> this
> foreign
> marrow

In its figuration of a shifting, non-unified subjectivity, this *Gyno-Text* lyric marks a departure from traditional representational strategies of homogenous identity. Binary constructs are themselves rendered virtually inactive in the excess and difference--the open-ended, generative "O"--of this poem's subject positionality.

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[14] In "inventing ourselves on the page," Tostevin explains that "subjectivity can never be one subject or static because immediately we become defined into that one subject. The 'I' in my book [*Song of Songs*] is an ongoing 'I,' an ever-changing 'I' [like that of *Gyno-Text*]; the 'subject-in-process' to use Kristeva's term" (274).

The plurality of identity manifest in Tostevin's *Gyno-Text* might be seen as finding a certain canonical precedent in the characterizations of Blake's Prophetic Books. In these texts, Blake figures identity as fluid and plural, at least temporarily so. According to David Punter,

> In the large symbolic scheme which underlies the Prophetic Books, in fact, every one of Blake's figures is double. That is to say, they have what Blake describes as a 'fallen' and an 'unfallen' form. For instance, Orc represents desire, the pushing urge for change and revolution, the unstoppable qualities of a rising generation, in this fallen world, the world of real turmoil and compromise. But in paradise, or Blake's equivalent thereof, Orc becomes Luvah, who is still the "god of desire" but now represents a far more peaceful and co-operative temperament. (230)

Not unlike the shifting identities of Blake's mythic figures, the subject's identity in *Gyno-Text* is represented as multiple, assuming different forms or traits, speaking positions that are (in a marked departure from romantic strategies) conflated with parts of the female body, such as the tongue, cervix, and vagina. The concluding poem of the series, for instance, celebrates the unleashed voice of the vagina as Tostevin writes, "*vagin / vagir / enfin.*" While the subjective plurality of Tostevin's text recalls that of Blake's Prophetic Books, *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of identity recurrently resists social determinism (although it might well be argued that all

literature is inevitably characterized by a socio-political economy and that this particular text's doubled mother tongue is evidence of such an economy at work). Yet *Gyno-Text*'s resistance to the social determination of identity is recurrently manifest in its refusal to situate its maternal body in a 'real' world outside the text, and this resistance is perhaps most explicitly expressed in the fourth lyric of the series: here Tostevin writes,

> V
> notch
> of I
> dentity
>
> a
> legend
> at
> leg's
> end

While the diction of "legend" evokes the notion of an oral tradition which might be seen as offering an alternative to textual representation and its 'truths,' it likewise recalls Western social myths or folklore regarding female sexuality and conventional strategies of mystifying the female body. The semantic ambiguity of Tostevin's "legend," however, precludes any hermeneutic based on a sociopolitical context. This marks a contrast with Blake's own 'legends' (particularly those of his Prophetic Books) where the

identity of a character is significantly influenced by his or her sociopolitical context.[15] As Northrop Frye writes, for Blake, "The term 'identity' expresses at once an individual and a social integration"--an integration that might be seen as ultimately arguing for a certain noncontradiction and unity (249). While Blake's construction of identity fosters a representation of textuality "as something that happens in the world," *Gyno-Text* alternatively represents its own textuality as something that "happens in" and is generated by the female body (Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading* 10). Such a representation resists any social authorization of its textual 'truths'--an authorization that would inevitably undermine Tostevin's disruption of the monologism of social law and the Christian symbolic.[16] *Gyno-Text*'s lack of explicit consideration of the

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[15] *Gyno-Text*'s comparative inattention to its female subject's social influences and existence might be seen as fostering a biology-centred representation of the maternal body and thus aligning itself with essentialism in the constructionism/essentialism binarism (as it is outlined in Fuss's *Essentially Speaking*). This representational strategy is potentially problematic, for, as constructionists would argue, "the body is never simply there, rather it is composed of a network of effects continually subject to sociopolitical determination" (Fuss 5).

[16] Many Blakean critics have pointed to the poet's attempt to textually revitalize Christianity. As Jack Lindsay suggests, "his basic myth forms around the Christian world-view, restoring integrity to that world-view"

social implications of its representations further helps to position itself against universalism; in other words, it strategically precludes any systematization of its play of differences.[17] As Steven Shaviro suggests in "'Striving with Systems,'" the construction of shifting identities in Blakean mythology might ultimately be seen as a particle of a larger, totalizing impulse of the Prophetic Books themselves: he writes, "Any such identification of the role of Los ["as figure of Imagination"] depends upon a previous conception of Blake's myth or System as a coherent and organized totality" (272).[18] In its continual process of becoming, the

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(*Perspectives for Poetry* 26). By contrast, *Gyno-Text* rejects many of the representational strategies of the Christian symbolic, most notably its monologism, which precipitates hierarchical binary constructs, and its version of maternity, which absorbs "the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 161). In positing the generative maternal body as the source of its textuality, *Gyno-Text* challenges Western social law based on Christian epistemology and its doctrine of the Logos.

[17] As Steven Shaviro writes, "The doctrine of Contraries, as put forth in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is differential and anti-discursive in terms of its polemical content, but universalizing, conceptual, and systematic in terms of its form" (274).

[18] Shaviro does, however, propose a Blakean hermeneutic in which identity must be acknowledged in its paradoxical complexities, noting that in Blake's poetry

> creating a system is conjoined with attacking, destroying, or evading a System; and an Individual is constituted both as one

excessive maternal body of *Gyno-Text* resists any coherent systemization. While *Gyno-Text* engages in a "process of being freed from the constrictions of a System" of representational limitations, the only "System" it (antithetically) proposes is one of difference based on the plenitude of the female body. "Constrictions" themselves become absorbed into the text's play of difference: as Tostevin writes in the second poem of the series,

> hymen
> hyphens
> gender
>
> two
> constrictions
> made
> one

As suggested earlier, *Gyno-Text*'s positing of difference and plentitude as alternatives to hierarchical binary constructions finds a certain canonical precedent in Blake's explicit promotion of contraries in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* In this poem, Blake argues that "Without

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> whose individuality is realized only in the process of being freed from the constrictions of a System, and as one who is only produced or defined as individual within and by virtue of such a System. (273)

contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence," while the text engraved on the title-page of *Milton* emphasizes the non-hierarchical nature of such contraries: "Contraries are positives. A Negation is not a Contrary" (3). While Blake's theory of contraries draws upon the tension between opposing forces, it upholds the integrity of each element of the opposition and offers an alternative to hierarchical relationships based on the subjugation of one element at the expense of another. As Shaviro suggests, Blakean contraries are "equal and binary opposites" (274). The non-hierarchical thrust of such contraries is poignantly manifest in the rather symbiotic relationship between the Angel and Devil--a friendship that, in short, represents a "Marriage of Heaven and Hell." In other words, Blakean contraries respect difference, for, as Blake declares near the conclusion of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Opposition is true Friendship" (20). For Blake, then, "The clash of contraries is thus an essential part of the 'redemption' of mankind" (Frye 189).[19] While the

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[19] A Blake writes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, contraries "are always upon earth, & they should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence" (16-17).

difference recurrently figured in *Gyno-Text* is not developed into any like scheme of mankind's redemption, Tostevin's poems likewise involve a clashing--a clashing with Western textual conditions and their tyrannical binarisms. Where *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* redeems the conventionally repressed energy of Evil,[20] *Gyno-Text* foregrounds the conventionally repressed energy of the maternal body. Marking an ideological departure from Blake's poem, Tostevin's series resists marrying the authority of its feminine economy with that of a masculine economy of

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[20] In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "The voice of the Devil" argues that

> All Bibles or sacred codes. have been the causes of the following Errors.
>
> 1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.
>
> 2. That Energy. calld Evil. is alone from the Body. & that Reason. calld Good. is alone from the Soul.
>
> 3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.
>
> But the following Contraries to these are True
>
> 1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discernd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age
>
> 2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
>
> 3. Energy is Eternal Delight.... (4)

Blake's ideological argument that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul" might be seen as lending a certain canonical authority to *Gyno-Text*'s own demystification of the female body.

representation. While the poetics of *Gyno-Text* refuse any unproblematic reconciliation with the dominant discourse, the concluding chorus of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* signifies a certain unification of authority: "For every thing that lives is Holy" (27).[21]

The opening poem of the *Gyno-Text* series plays with non-hierarchical contrariety as it applies to feminine subjectivity and the notion of mother tongue. Here Tostevin writes,

a
different
tongue
to
pen
a
trait

le
trait
d'union

---

[21] It should be noted that the 'reconciliation' figured in the conclusion of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* maintains the tension and difference between the opposing forces of good and evil: as Blake writes,

> Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren whom, tyrant, he calls free: lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale religious letchery call that virginity, that wishes but acts not! (27)

This lyric's concurrent emphasis on difference and 'pen-a-trait-ion' serves as an exposition to the text's playful yet adversarial stance in relation to a phallocentric discourse that dominates the Western literary tradition and silences the plenitude of woman. As Williamson writes,

> A reading of the poem that concerns itself with consumption, with consuming the "already read," insists on the phallic pun, "penetration." However, a different reading will attend to a voice of silence and "embrace its absence." This voice speaks through the gap of "woman's span," through elision, and is "misread" by the feminist reader. The feminist whose reading practice is informed by "a disruptive *excess* on the feminine side" adds an "o" to "pen".... The twinned reading suggests a poetics of disruption developed in response to woman's different relation to language. (101)

The diction of "trait" foregrounded in Tostevin's play with 'penetration' recalls Blake's notion of "quality." Yet, where *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of "trait" allows for the play of difference (as is evident in the multiple traits or speaking positions of the text's subject position), Blake's notion of quality is associated with the moral judgmentalism of "negation" and is seen as sanctioning the construction of hierarchical relationships.[22] For

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[22] Frye points to the moral judgmentalism and fragmented perceptions precipitated by a focus on qualities, rather than the "real thing": "All real things have qualities in them, and qualities always have opposites. This is particularly true of moral qualities.... But the believer in the cloven fiction prefers to identify a real thing with one of its qualities" (189).

Blake, quality is a negative force, and a focus on qualities rather than on the "real thing" precipitates fragmented perceptions and leads to the "absolutizing of circumstances" (Frye 189).[23] As Frye notes, "things become easier to generalize about when classified into qualities" (189). As a particle at play in a language field that foregrounds a doubled discursivity, the notion of "trait" evoked in the opening lyric of *Gyno-Text* strategically figures the text's different relation to language as a repressed characteristic of the dominant discourse and thus argues for woman's access into that (non-homogenous) discourse.[24] This figuration signifies a

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[23] In *Jerusalem*, Blake depicts the dissolution that is generated by "Quality and Negation":

> instead of heavenly Chapels, built
> By our dear Lord: I see Worlds crusted with snows & ice;
> I see a Wicker Idol woven round Jerusalems children. I see
> The Canaanite, the Amalekite, the Moabite, the Egyptian:
> By Demonstrations the cruel Sons of Quality & Negation.
> Driven on the Void in incoherent despair into Non Entity
> I see America closd apart, & Jerusalem driven in terror
> Away from Albions mountains, far away from Londons spires!
> I will not endure this thing! I alone withstand to death,
> This outrage! (2.38.63-72)

[24] As Neuman writes, "For the female as for the colonial subject, the only recourse [against silence] is to foreground one's difference from the dominant discourse while speaking within that discourse" ("Importing Difference" 402).

strategic revisioning of Blake's notion of quality as it problematizes any generalizations about the nature of the dominant discourse--generalizations that have traditionally subjugated the voice of women. In other words, *Gyno-Text*'s notion of "trait" positivizes the fragmentation of Blake's notion of "quality" to point to the fragmented nature of Western discourse and to thus figure the feminine tongue as that which offers a certain (albeit clashing) completion to that discourse. *Gyno-Text* thus resists a perpetuation of a male economy based on the binarity of sameness and lack by pointing to the conventionally unacknowledged multiplicity that inherently characterizes the dominant discourse itself. The difference, then, evoked in the opening lyric of *Gyno-Text* points to the text's refusal simply to reverse the binaries and hierarchies of phallocentric literature and philosophy and its antithetical promotion of a hermeneutic based on multiplicity and diversity.

As *Gyno-Text* implicitly challenges the homogeneity of the dominant discourse, it likewise problematizes the assumed homogeneity of a mother tongue, as is suggested by the bilingual play of the opening lyric. Here the play on "trait" continues as Tostevin points to "*le / trait / d'union*" (the hyphen) as a figure for the text's resistance to hierarchical binary

constructions and fragmented representations of the female body and feminine subjectivity. The opening lyric further suggests a subject's potentially "doubled relation to language that carries the possibility of resisting and reversing the monologic univocal character of the dominant discourse" (Williamson "'to pen a trait'" 98). Much as the functioning of the maternal body is represented as a process characterized by "pulsation / gives / & / takes" in the third lyric of the *Gyno-Text* series,[25] the text moves from English to French, refusing to privilege one language at the expense of the other. What Shirley Neuman writes of Tostevin's *Color of her Speech* is also appropriate to the discursive strategy of *Gyno-Text*:

> The doubled discourse of French and English in these poems functions as a sign of irreducible difference that--as the political history of Canada demonstrates--cannot be assimilated into a homology of (male/English) Subject and (female/French) Other. Here, it seems to me, lies one of the great strengths of the double discourse of feminist writing. For the difference it introduces into the dominant literary discourse is not so much one of style--male writers use many of the same rhetorical strategies and women writers often learn from them--as one of ideology, an ideology of

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[25] In the third lyric of *Gyno-Text*, Tostevin's figuration of the "gives / & / takes" of the maternal body exhibits a certain complicity in the oppositional constructions that dominate Western philosophy. However, the diction here points to a type of oppositional "Friendship" (to borrow Blake's term), rather than antagonism.

> difference. The explicit ideology of the subversive, rupturing, dialogic part of this doubled discourse forces us to acknowledge the ideology of the dominant, received, monologic part (and here we must remember that even the so-called 'disruptive' and 'polyphonic' techniques of *modernité* can be, and often are, in the service of a monolithic and monologic ideology). ("Importing Difference" 404)

Since Blake's poetry itself imparts an "ideology of difference," Tostevin's revisioning of his theory of contrariety to incorporate woman's difference represents not so much a corrective movement as a completion, what Bloom might call a "*tessera*" which implies that "the precursor had failed to go far enough" (*The Anxiety of Influence* 14). *Gyno-Text* might thus be seen as misreading Blakean theory to allow for a wider and more sustained play of difference that resists the binarity manifest in many of the romantic poet's textual representations of contrariety. Such a misreading attends to a wider spectrum of differences and renders monologism and its ideological implications inactive.

"while he hung listening"[26]

While Blake's theory of contrariety provides a certain canonical framework with which to analyze Tostevin's promotion of difference,

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[26] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 5.381-82.

Gyno-Text's figuration of textual suspension can be fruitfully read against the rhetorical maneuver of the pause in Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Such a reading points to the feminist text's revitalization and expansion of canonical conventions, revealing an implicit tesseric relationship between Tostevin's text and that of Wordsworth--a relationship that represents, to borrow Bloom's phrasing, the "later poet's attempt to persuade himself [in this case, herself] (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe" (*The Anxiety of Influence* 67). An analysis of *Gyno-Text* as a *tessera* in relation to *The Prelude* points to the feminist text's dynamic position in the literary tradition--a position that renews the precursor's canonical contributions within the domain of contemporary textual politics and theoretical concerns. In such a reading, *Gyno-Text* can once again be seen as revising the precursor's poem "as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense" (Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* 14).[27] In this case, it revises

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[27] Bloom's argument for a revisionary "Tessera or Completion and Antithesis" in *The Anxiety of Influence* is itself ironically undermined by *Gyno-Text*'s alternative representation of the tension of the birthing process--a representation that privileges liberation, rather than loss. The text's emphasis on liberation is poignantly manifest in the unleashed birth cry of the concluding poem of the series. As Neuman suggests, the adverb "*enfin*"

Wordsworth's notion of generosity--a notion that *The Prelude* associates with nature--to foreground the maternal body and "The birth-voice. Brought to our senses through language that launches" (*Gyno-Text* afterword).[28] In other words, where Wordsworth's rhetorical maneuver

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which concludes this lyric points to "the simultaneous and mutual relief of the mother having given birth and of the child finally born" ("Importing Difference" 401). In his own analysis of anxiety, Bloom turns to phallocentric Freudian theory with its emphasis on the trauma of birth, arguing that

> The primal increase of excitation may be the birth trauma, itself a response to our first situation of *danger*. Freud's use of "danger" reminds us of our universal fear of domination, of our being trapped by nature in our body as a dungeon, in certain situations of stress.... Separation from the mother, analogous to later castration anxiety, brings on "an increase of tension arising from nongratification of needs," the "needs" here being vital to the economy of self-preservation. Separation anxiety is thus an anxiety of exclusion, and rapidly joins itself to death anxiety, or the ego's fear of superego. (*The Anxiety of Influence* 57-58)

[28] In *Gyno-Text*, Tostevin offers an alternative representation of "the birth trauma": rather than focusing on "anxiety" and "danger," she represents the poignancy of separation--a separation that is not a loss but a division through which love is created. She writes,

> heart
> hollow
> divides
> two
> ounces
> of
> bloody
> love

of the pause fosters the emergence of nature's voice, Tostevin's figuration of suspension fosters the emergence of the maternal body as a source of voice and a feminine economy of textual representation.

Tostevin's figuration of the pause revises or completes that of Wordsworth's *Prelude* in its celebration of the generosity or excess of the maternal body, implicitly suggesting that this body is a repressed term in the Romantic poet's rhetorical attention to the generosity that exists between the imagination of man and nature itself. As Hartman argues, in Wordsworth's poetry the pause creates a textual space for the emergence of

> a responsive Nature in whom the principle of generosity is everywhere apparent--one cannot say why the stars move along the edges of the hills, rising or setting, yet one feels that they do it for the sheer joy and splendor of motion--but the poet is not given moral or creative strength according to the exertion of voice and will. He is formed, and his imagination rises, precisely at that moment when he, like the Boy of

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> &
> bitter
> ness

Notably, the "love / & / bitter / ness" is not specifically that of the emerging body, but likely that of both bodies engaged in the birthing process. Such attention to the potential "separation anxiety" of the mothering body signifies *Gyno-Text*'s revision of Freudian theory itself, pointing to Western philosophy's subordination of the maternal body as object (rather than double subject).

> Winander, has ceased exertion and hung listening. (*The Unmediated Vision* 14)

Gyno-Text, by contrast, looks to the generosity of the maternal body--a "ridge / [that] gives / rise / to / gut"--as the source of textual generation. Notably, the lyric in which the body's "ridge" is figured as a generative source of the text's "lingual hinge" immediately follows one of *Gyno-Text*'s two figurations of suspension--one that signifies the splendor and generative space of the maternal body. Here Tostevin writes,

> dismembered
> shape
> in
> soluble
> space
> so
> splendidly
> suspended

The alliterative abundance of this lyric acts as a type of transparency to the plenitude of the mothering body. As in *The Prelude*'s Boy of Winander episode, *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of suspension creates a textual space--here a "soluble space"--that moves away from the "exertion of voice and will" towards a hermeneutic based on a more natural process of becoming. However, in *Gyno-Text*, this process of becoming is generated by the

maternal body rather than a more general and ambiguous nature.[29] Such a revision does indeed suggest that "the precursor had failed to go far enough" as *Gyno-Text* recurrently foregrounds the feminine processes that Wordworth's text more casually associates with a generous and responsive nature and points to the mothering body as a source of creative strength

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[29] A comparison might here be drawn between *Gyno-Text*'s representation of the maternal body as a natural process and *Double Negative*'s rhetorical conflation of female biology and the workings of nature--a conflation manifest in Marlatt and Warland's metaphoric "red ochre menstrual stain / (source of earth's life blood)" (24). While many of the *Gyno-Text* lyrics resist such an explicit naturalizing of the feminine, the abundant nature imagery of the sixteenth poem of the series develops a rather problematic association between the maternal body and the generations of 'mother' earth. Tostevin writes,

> thick
> trunk
> unleashes
> leaf
> limb
>
> bud
> tender
> lotus

As in *Double Negative*, the maternal body is here represented as being authorized as a source of creativity and generation through its association with the processes of nature itself.

and textual generation.[30] Such a revision marks a departure from canonical constructions of the maternal body as a sanitized symbol, as a body purged of its often excessive biological processes. Neuman notes that, in contemporary women's writing,

> The mothering body appears in many rhetorical shapes. What those shapes have in common... is an unremitting emphasis on 'real' bodies at the expense of the symbolic: on the exhaustion and the exhilaration of labor, on bleeding and crowning and suckling and washing as positive, sensuous experience

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[30] In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom illustrates his theory of the revisionary *tessera* with a comparison of the treatment of maternity in Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman, writing that

> Stevens antithetically completes Whitman by *The Owl in the Sarcophagus*, his elegy for his friend Henry Church, which can best be read as a large *tessera* in relation to [Whitman's] *The Sleepers*. Where Whitman identifies night and the mother with good death, Stevens establishes an identity between good death and a larger maternal vision, opposed to night because she contains all the memorable evidence of change, of what we have seen in our long day, though she has transformed the seen into knowledge.... (68)

Bloom's attention to the "larger maternal vision" of the ephebe poet might be antithetically applied to embody the nature of the romance between *Gyno-Text* and *The Prelude*. In other words, the feminist text proposes a more specific and 'real' maternal vision which completes the highly idealistic and symbolic representations of Wordsworth's "larger maternal vision." Indeed, Bloom's argument points to the abundant *tesserae* of Tostevin's text--a text that not only amends the maternal vision of Wordsworth's poetry but also that manifest in other canonical poems, such as Stevens's *The Owl in the Sarcophagus*.

> mediated by a female relation to language. In this unsanitized textual world, the symbiosis of female body and foetal body, the merging and the marking of their boundaries, are as precisely recorded as when, in Lola Lemire's *Gyno Text*, the foetus begins to move down the birth canal.... ("Importing Difference" 400)

Tostevin's representation of the mothering body clearly contrasts with Wordsworth's orderly sanitization of the "filial bond / Of nature that connect him [the child] with the world" (*The Prelude* 2.243-44). And it is within *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of the pause that such a body is given the textual space for emergence.

In both *Gyno-Text* and *The Prelude*, the rhetorical maneuver of the pause allows for shifts in subject positionality, as well as a playful indetermination of signification. In other words, the pause is generative, pointing to a textuality that "pivots on the point of becoming" (Williamson, "'to pen a trait'" 101). In Wordsworth's poetry, the pause is recurrently manifest in the use of the verb "to hang" to signify "a suspension both physical and mental, when a force other than that of personal effort seems to sustain mind and body" (Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision* 14). Wordsworth's most poignant figuration of the textual pause is found in the Boy of Winander episode from *The Prelude*; here the boy's play with voice

and echo leads to a certain disquietude, a rupturing of the certainty and stability of the world and the workings of voice itself. As Wordsworth writes,

> when a lengthened pause
> Of silence came and baffled his best skill,
> Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
> Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind,
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
> Into the bosom of the steady lake. (5.379-88)[31]

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[31] It should here be noted that "the same verb 'to hang' reappears in the second part of the [Boy of Winander] poem (typographically separated from the first by a space), and that it represents the thematic connection between the two apparently free-standing halves" (de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 53). In the second section, the verb is explicitly associated with an awareness of death, the boy's own death in particular:

> This Boy was taken from his Mates, and died
> In childhood, ere he was full ten years old.
> --Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
> The Vale where he was born; the Churchyard hangs
> Upon a Slope above the Village School,
> And there, along that bank, when I have pass'd
> At evening, I believe that oftentimes
> A full half-hour together I have stood
> Mute--looking at the Grave in which he lies.
>
> (*The Prelude* 5.414-22)

In the "conceptual / space" of the pause (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*), the boy's imagination ("defined by the power of its language precisely not to remain imitatively and repetitively true to sense perception") is seen in a process of becoming--a becoming that anxiously anticipates its own death (de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 53).[32] As Paul de Man argues, Wordsworth's use of the word "hung" signifies the text's anxiety about death--a death that, to borrow Kneale's phrasing, "is but another name for *différence*" (xiii): de Man writes that, in the Boy of Winander episode,

> There is a hidden but indubitable connection between the loss of the sense of correspondence and the experience of death. The boy's surprise at standing perplexed before the sudden silence of nature was an anticipatory announcement of his death, a movement of his consciousness passing beyond the deceptive constancy of a world of correspondences into a world in which our mind knows itself to be in an endlessly precarious state of suspension. (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 53-54)

This "state of suspension" allows nature's own ambiguous play with signification--"the voice / Of mountain torrents"--to usurp the speaking

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[32] Paul de Man's suggestion that "Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" might be applied to the Boy of Winander's coinciding awareness of his mortality and the non-correspondence of voice and echo (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 81).

position of Wordsworth's text.[33] The ambiguity leads to a further suspension of "moral... [and] objective correlatives," which, in turn, foster a sense of the arbitrariness of the "connections which are the necessary product of a searching mind" (Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision* 15). In other words, the hegemony of the subject is called into question, and the poem's figuration of the textual pause disallows conclusion and closure.

In *Gyno-Text*, the textual pause is likewise employed, although, in a marked departure from Wordsworth's rhetorical strategy, it is here manifest in association with the generation of the maternal body (rather than in association with death).[34] Tostevin writes,

> pregnant
> pause
> as
> conceptual

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[33] As Kneale suggests, the Boy of Winander episode might further be read as a figuration of the poet's own self-encounter: "The poet is admittedly a spectator, but to the extent that he identifies himself with the Boy of Winander.... he is also a participant in this epitaphic spectacle, standing proleptically over his own grave, or the graves of second selves" (117).

[34] We might here recall *Double Negative*'s figuration of the maternal life-force as the antithesis of the repressiveness and destructiveness precipitated by patriarchal ideology: "earth mothers free love flowers slipped / into barrel ends of riot control rifles" (49). Here the "riot control rifles" offer a stark image of the patriarchy's resistance to difference.

space

interval
between
inner
outer
folds

As in *The Prelude*'s Boy of Winander episode, the ambiguity that arises out of Tostevin's figuration of the pause ruptures any illusions of the text's hermeneutic stability, pointing to an "interval" that fosters a deferral of signification and an unstable speaking position. This interval inscribes a tension that arises, it seems, not only from the unstable hermeneutic but from the destabilized and destabilizing maternal body--its "inner / outer / folds."[35] It is within this "pregnant / pause" that woman can engage in a textual process of becoming which refuses fixity and completion. What Williamson writes of Tostevin's "do not be deceived by appearances / I am not a woman" in *Double Standards* finds a certain applicability here: "This figuration of woman is not completed or fixed, nor is she disembodied.... This tension between the assertion of woman's body and woman in process

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[35] Here the absence of a conjunction between "inner" and "outer" marks a resistance to the masculine economy of binary logic. The diction of "folds" in the conclusion of the poem further signifies the maternal body's challenge to conventional barriers between surface and depth.

as an uncertain sign is maintained in 'the verb / to hold held / in suspense'" ("'to pen a trait'" 102). Where the verb "to hang" in *The Prelude*'s Boy of Winander episode creates a textual opening for the voice of nature, Tostevin's figuration of the pause creates a textual space for an 'authentic' representation of the maternal body in its plenitude. The lyric immediately following the "pregnant / pause" records the complex and potentially excessive materialization of the body and emotions of the "different / tongue" that characterizes the series. Here Tostevin writes,

> *sens*
> *et*
> *sang*
> *prennent*
> *corps*
>
> *prêtent*
> *l'oreille*
> *au*
> *texte*
> *qui*
> *s'organise*

It is not nature but the body-text itself that emerges from the pause of the earlier lyric. In other words, it is the text as maternal body that is given voice. While *The Prelude*'s figuration of the pause looks to the voice of nature as background to the subject's process of becoming, *Gyno-Text*'s

figuration of suspension develops a new textuality that looks to the economy of the mothering body.

"swallow in skull's hollow"[36]

Much as Tostevin's figuration of the pause revitalizes *The Prelude*'s strategy of suspension to embody theoretical concerns with writing the maternal body, *Gyno-Text*'s blurring of the boundaries between internality and externality offers a type of feminist *tessera* in relation to John Keats's theory of negative capability as it is developed in his letters and is rhetorically active in his 1819 series of odes. Once again, *Gyno-Text*'s revisionary movement focuses on the textuality of the maternal body, in this case, on its symbiosis of surface and depth. In *Dark Interpreter*, Tilottama Rajan identifies the ultimate shortcoming of Keats's attempt to redefine the boundary between depth and surface (and, by extension, internality and externality), this weakness being that the "Ode on a Grecian Urn"--the ode that most rigorously grapples with the boundary in question--does not go far enough in developing a "semantics of aesthetic illusion" which would recognize "that the aesthetic surface is related to the

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[36] Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*.

knowledge it encloses as a transparency rather than as a barrier" (135). By contrast, *Gyno-Text* recurrently figures the surface text as a representation and generation of the maternal body.[37] Of Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn," Rajan writes,

> A reading of the poem generates a dialogue in the mind of the reader between what appears on the outside of the urn and what is within it, between the innocent surface and the depth. Two very different concepts of the artistic medium lie side by side for much of this poem: one which separates the visual appearance of art from its deeper reality, and another which is aware that surfaces exist in relation to a depth. In the penultimate stanza Keats's poem is brought almost to the verge of redefining the semantics of aesthetic illusion.... [However] Irrespective of who speaks them, the last lines of Keats's poem reaffirm the rhetoric of the surface and reduce questions to the flatness of the statement and the urn itself to its merely decorative appearance. (135)

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[37] One such figuration is found in the twenty-first poem of the *Gyno-Text* series:

le
point
d'exclamation
est
la
mise
au
point
névralgipue

Gyno-Text's figuration of the dynamic relationship between the surface and depth of the maternal body resists the reductiveness manifest in Keats's rhetorical attention to the urn. Rather than reaffirming "the rhetoric of the surface," *Gyno-Text* recurrently points to the depths in relation to which surfaces exist. As Tostevin writes,

> skin
> skims
> the
> surface
>
> the
> swallow
> in
> skull's
> hollow

The diction of "skims" signifies *Gyno-Text*'s refusal to reduce the body-text to the world of appearances.[38] The "surface" is here figured as a

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[38] *Gyno-Text*'s resistance to an aesthetic of surfaces is further evident in the twenty-third poem of the series:

> &
> belly
> bells
> in
> abdominal
> dome
>
> wells

medium for the dynamic relationship between internality and externality, depth and structure rather than as a barrier that precipitates fragmented perceptions of the body-text and separates "the visual appearance of art from its deeper reality." Of particular significance to a Keatsian reading of Tostevin's text is the "swallow" of this lyric's second stanza, which implicitly alludes to the conclusion of "To Autumn": "The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft; / And gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (31-32). In its suggestion that the textual negation of the individual ego is generated by the dynamic relationship between the body's internality and its externality (a relationship that generates its own correspondences), Tostevin's "swallow / in / skull's / hollow" offers a tesseric completion to Keats's proposal of negative capability as the empathic projection of a disembodied imagination. In other words, Tostevin's text insists upon the corporeality of negative capability, while the operation of this structural

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inside
out

While it is likely intended to be read as a verb, "wells" as a noun provides a particularly suitable metaphor for the blurring of externality and internality. A more dynamic figure than Keats's grecian urn, a well not only contains and is contained but suggests the actual depth of surface. The hermeneutic proposed by such a figuration encourages the reader to consistently read the surface text in relation to the depths that generate it.

device in Keats's odes remains dependent upon the empathy of the mind. In view of *Gyno-Text*'s revisionary movement, Rajan's criticism of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" seems to find a certain applicability to this poet's more general theory of textually negating the individual ego: Keats privileges the influence of externality--of the world of appearances--at the expense of some of the deeper forces at work in the subject himself, with one such force being the maternal body.

As suggested in the preceding sections of this chapter, the maternal body of Tostevin's series authorizes an economy of representation that privileges a subjective multiplicity which, in turn, destabilizes conventional divisions between self and other.[39] In relation to Keatsian negative capability, it is notable that *Gyno-Text*'s maternal body represents a negation of the individual ego in favour of communion between fellow beings, in this case, between the pregnant female and the foetus. *Gyno-Text*'s movement towards negative capability is particularly evident in the concluding poems of the series. Here the lack of possessive pronouns

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[39] We might read the dissolving of distance in *Gyno-Text*'s subject-object relationships as one possible response to *Double Negative*'s question "what if the boundary goes walking?" (48).

points to the communion of the maternal and foetal bodies in the act of becoming. Tostevin writes,

> brain
> blooms
> white
> webs
> hemmed
> in
> spheres
> hung
> loose
> ly

This lyric's subject positionality is characterized by an ambiguity which might be interpreted as an absence of ego--an absence that privileges, to borrow Keats's phrasing, "a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" (365). Indeed, the relaxed typography of "loose / ly" suggests a suspension of conventional representational strategies and an openness to the sensuality of the moment. Such openness similarly characterizes Keats's renunciation of fact and reason. Of the romantic poet's negative capability, Walter Jackson Bate explains that

> In our life of uncertainties, where no one system or formula can explain everything--where even a word is at best, in Bacon's phrase, "a wager of thought"--what is needed is an imaginative openness of mind and heightened receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness. This, however, involves negating one's own ego. (18)

Where Keats looks to the empathic mind as the source and authority of sensory openness, *Gyno-Text* looks to the maternal body. While the "full and diverse concreteness" of negative capability in Keats's "To Autumn" offers a canonical precedent for the plenitude represented in the symbiotic relationship between Tostevin's female and foetal bodies,[40] *Gyno-Text* points to the excesses of the maternal body as its source of sensual textuality and love. *Gyno-Text* thus expands Keatsian negative capability to include the textuality of the female body, which, in turn, foregrounds a feminine economy with "the flesh at work in a labor of love" (Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 42). *Gyno-Text*'s *tessera* in relation to Keats's negative capability thus centres on the inclusion of what is repressed in the

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[40] Keats's negation of ego is poignantly manifest in the concluding ode of the 1819 series, "To Autumn," which "seems to absorb rather than extrovert that questing imagination whose breeding fancies, feverish overidentifications, and ambitious projects motivate the other odes" (Hartman, "Poem and Ideology" 87). In addition to silencing the ego and, consequently, diminishing subject-object distance, the negative capability achieved in "To Autumn" further negates the conventionally divisive perceptions of temporality, instead fostering a freedom of movement, where "there is no moment which divides before and after" (Hartman, "Poem and Ideology" 90). As Hartman further writes of "To Autumn," "Its motion is, in fact, part of the magic. Time lapses so gently here, we pass from the fullness of the maturing harvest to the stubble plains without experiencing a cutting edge" ("Poem and Ideology" 89-90).

precursor's rhetorical application of the theory, that being the female and maternal bodies.

After considering *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of symbiosis, we might indeed read Keats's notion of negative capability as a manifestation of nostalgia for the non-verbal communion, shifting subjectivity, and non-linear being associated with the maternal body.[41] Keats's promotion of empathy (explicit in his letters, implicit in his odes) foresees a communion between fellow beings that is independent of semiotics; as he writes in a 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey, "if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existince and pick about the Gravel" (366). Indeed, as his "Ode to a Nightingale" implies, the signification process potentially ends the empathic 'trance' in which the individual ego has become minimal, as well as thwarts the communion the poet seeks: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" (71-72). While the symbiotic relationship of the female and foetal bodies of *Gyno-Text* is not totally independent of any semiotic process, it foregrounds "indelible"

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[41] Paul de Man argues that, for Keats, poetry is always a means by which "a separation [is] healed" ("The Negative Road" 32).

codes rather than linguistic signs as a source of communion. As Tostevin writes,

> uterine
> tattoo
> your
> fast
> code
> tapped
> against
> your
> small
> cell
> wall[42]

This lyric is particularly powerful in its promotion of a hermeneutic based on the textuality of the maternal body. The "uterine / tattoo" that opens the poem proposes a textuality based on the individual rather than cultural context--a textuality that, through its ambiguity and untranslatability, refuses to be subordinate to or exploited by the dominant discourse with its emphasis on linearity and binarity.[43] The praise Williamson grants to

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[42] The diction of "tapped" here evokes the Morse code, which in its translation of language sign to dot might be seen as exemplifying the arbitrariness of the signification process.

[43] *Gyno-Text*'s figuration of the maternal body playfully dismisses the syntactical linearity of literary convention: as Tostevin writes,

> synaptic
> reflex

Tostevin's "*les trois ailes de mon nom*" of *Double Standards* is appropriately given here: "The intelligibility of Tostevin's text depends upon its untranslatability, for it is written in difference" ("'to pen a trait'" 103). Tostevin's figuration of a non-verbal transmission of information further offers what Keats's rhetorical strategy of negative capability does not, that being a certain monumentalism, which suggests that voice is "'always already' a form of writing" (Kneale xiii). The indelibility of the symbolic "code" of communication between the symbiont bodies in Tostevin's lyric further offers an alternative to the death of identity celebrated in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale":

> Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath;
> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy! (51-58)

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skips
a
syllable

A certain non-linearity of being itself is likewise promoted by the *Gyno-Text* poems that attend to the "tides / whorls / & / sinews" of the excessive maternal body.

Rather than a "pouring forth" of the "soul," *Gyno-Text* figures a pouring forth of the maternal body as a source of textual communion. As such, Tostevin's text implicitly promotes what Cixous calls a feminine economy of love. As Cixous writes in "Coming to Writing", "I start writing from: Love. I write out of love. Writing, loving, inseparable.... Everyone is nourished and augmented by the other. Just as one is not without the other, so Writing and Loving are lovers" (42). Such an approach, emphasizing mutual receptivity and advantage, marks a departure from the one-sidedness of Keats's negative capability which, rather than aiming to engage in a symbiotic relationship as a means of negating the individual ego, is more closely related to a possession of the other's experience.

II. The Clinamenic Movement of *Gyno-Text*

While Tostevin's *Gyno-Text* might be read as a *tessera* in relation to Blake's contraries, Wordsworth's figuration of textual suspension, and Keats's negative capability, the series manifests a more severe criticism or what Bloom might describe as a *clinamen* in relation to Shelley's mystification of motherhood and Blake's figuration of the "Eye" of authority. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom defines the *clinamen* as a

> poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a "swerve" of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves. (14)

While the preceding section of this chapter focussed on *Gyno-Text*'s revitalization of canonical conventions, this section's consideration of *Gyno-Text*'s clinamenic movements in relation to Shelley's *Alastor* and Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" reveals a rupturing of the rhetoric of romanticism on the part of the 'ephebe' poet. In short, while Tostevin's series promotes a foregrounding of maternal influence (like that of *Alastor*) and a cleansing of conventional perceptions (like that promoted in

"Auguries of Innocence"), it points to and 'corrects' the shortcomings of the representational strategies of the romantic texts in question. For instance, *Gyno-Text*'s recurrent emphasis on the corporeality of the maternal body revises the romantic dependence on symbolism and myth (particularly that relating to origin)--devices that, in Shelley's poetry, facilitate a mystification of maternity and, in the case of Blake's poetry, a too hasty dismissal of the 'real' body as a source of textual generation and 'truth.' As M. H. Abrams writes in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, "Symbolism, animism, and mythopoeia, in richly diverse forms, explicit or submerged, were so pervasive in this age as to constitute the most pertinent single attribute for defining 'romantic' poetry" (296). In a marked departure from such rhetorical strategies, *Gyno-Text* represents the maternal body as a complex and excessive process of becoming that resists any unproblematic reduction to symbol, metaphor, or myth.[44] In its

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[44] For instance, in the seventh lyric of the *Gyno-Text* series, Tostevin writes, "all / that's / left / is / cleft," signifying her strategic demystification of the maternal body. The diction of "cleft" here suggests the space (both corporeal and textual) of the gestation process. A similar emphasis on textual space is evident in the opening lyric of Webb's *Naked Poems*: "Your mouth blesses me / all over. / There is room." Much as the 'cleaving' of *Gyno-Text*'s maternal body ruptures conventional textual conditions to create space

refusal to turn "women into poetry as metaphoric functions, utopian spaces for the male reader's pleasure," *Gyno-Text*, like Tostevin's later poem "Not a Poem," leads the reader "to uncover the ideological implications of figurative language that romanticizes the female body" (Williamson, "'to pen a trait'" 104-5). The nature of figurative language is such that it creates a distance between its focus (for instance, the female body) and textuality itself. In other words, figurative language that "romanticizes the female body" works against the textuality and generative power of that body. In resisting a rhetorical dependence upon figurative language, *Gyno-Text* likewise resists representing the maternal body as something necessarily distinct from the text itself. The maternal body of Tostevin's text is furthermore represented through highly concrete diction which insists upon its corporeality rather than its metaphoric dimensions: as Tostevin writes,

> papillae
>
> alar
> lumina
> wings

---

for a poetics based on the female body, *Naked Poems*' "room" engenders the textual space necessary for the expression of female desire.

the
lateral
wall

While, as Paul de Man argues, the diction of romantic poetry marks "a return to a greater concreteness, a proliferation of natural objects that restores to the language the material substantiality which had been partially lost," "the structure of the language becomes increasingly metaphorical and the image--be it under the name of symbol or even of myth--comes to be considered as the most prominent dimension of the style" (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 2). In conjunction with the stylistic rejection of conventional structures of binarity and linearity, the concrete diction of the above *Gyno-Text* lyric creates a sense that the text is a type of transparency to the maternal body. In other words, *Gyno-Text* represents the maternal body as the source of the text's power and strength rather than a metaphor or symbol that the text appropriates to a thematic purpose. *Gyno-Text*'s consistent emphasis on the maternal body as the source of textual generation implicitly criticizes and rewrites romantic representations of maternity and the authoritative "Eye" of perception.

"The mystery and majesty of Earth"[45]

As suggested earlier, *Gyno-Text*'s demystification of the maternal body marks a clinamenic departure from Shelley's representation of the mothering body in *Alastor*. While Shelley might indeed seem to be "too obvious an example of the nature of sexism to engage extensive feminist thinking," his recurrent attention to motherhood and femininity marks his poetry as a suitable focus for feminist misreading and revision (Gelpi, "A Feminist Approach to Teaching Shelley" 157). Indeed, feminist representations of maternal influence *must* rewrite the canonical legacy of maternity if they are not to be victimized by it, for, as Bloom notes, "If he himself is not to be victimized, then the strong poet must 'rescue' the Muse from his precursors" (*The Anxiety of Influence* 63).[46] Indeed, in

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[45] Shelley, *Alastor* 200.

[46] Bloom further argues that

> The strong poet--like the Hegelian great man--is both hero of poetic history and victim of it. This victimization has increased as history proceeds because the anxiety of influence is strongest where poetry is most lyrical, most subjective, and stemming directly from the personality. In the Hegelian view a poem is only a prelude to a religious perception, and in an advanced lyrical poem the spirit is so separated from the sensuous that art is at the point of dissolving into religion. But no strong poet, in

Shelley's *Alastor*, the mother herself is given a muse-like role--a role that signifies this text's repression of the corporeality of the maternal body; as Barbara A. Schapiro writes in *The Romantic Mother*, "*Alastor* opens with a direct address to the Mother in which the poet avows his love and anxiously appeals for her favour" (3). In this poem, the mother is conflated with nature, while many of Shelley's other poems draw upon the archetype of the mother-goddess in their figurations of maternal influence. As Barbara Gelpi suggests, Shelley's poetry is recurrently preoccupied with femininity, particularly that of the maternal goddess:

> Sometimes she is the overt subject of a poem, as in *Adonais* or as the figure of Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*. Cythna is avatar of the "foam born" in *Laon and Cythna*; in the *Ode to Liberty* the goddess is 'written' iconographically over the prayer that Liberty may lead forth Wisdom.... Indeed, though the word may be inelegant, one can only say that she is scrawled iconographically across all of Shelley's work. ("The Nursery Cave" 47)

> his questing prime, can (as poet) accept this Hegelian view. And history is no consolation, to him of all men, for his victimization. (*The Anxiety of Influence* 62-63)

Gyno-Text necessarily resists the Hegelian view of poetry, which, as Bloom suggests, represses the authority of the (maternal) body. In its implicit repudiation of conventional strategies of representation and canonical constructions of authority, it likewise resists a victimization by precursor texts.

Not unlike *Gyno-Text*, Shelley's *Alastor* represents an evolving 'symbiotic' relationship between mother (in this case, the earth) and child (the poet-hero).[47] However, where Tostevin's text recurrently demystifies the symbiosis of the maternal body, Shelley's poem is mystifying, as is evident in "The fountains of divine philosophy" that are attributed to the domestic realm of the mother and the pastoral realm of mother-nature:

> By solemn vision, and bright silver dream,
> His infancy was nurtured. Every sight
> And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,
> Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.
> The fountains of divine philosophy
> Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great,
> Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past
> In truth or fable consecrates, he felt
> and knew. (*Alastor* 67-75)

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[47] The mutual advantage of the poet-hero and his mother (nature) of Shelley's *Alastor* is poignantly manifest when, having rejected the feminine influence within his own sense of self and being, the poet's perceptions become melancholy and isolating. Nature herself becomes barren and cold with this rejection:

> The cold white light of morning, the blue moon
> Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,
> The distinct valley and the vacant woods,
> Spread round him where he stood. Whither have fled
> The hues of heaven that canopied his bower
> Of yesternight? The sounds that soothed his sleep,
> The mystery and majesty of Earth,
> The joy, the exultation? (194-201)

While the diction of "fountains" suggests a certain feminine excess not unlike that figured in *Gyno-Text*,[48] the "divine philosophy" that these fountains offer spiritualize the maternal realm and mystify the relationship between mother-nature and her poet-child.[49] As the ambiguous diction of

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[48] *Alastor*'s figuration of patriarchal civilization as a realm in which "dead men / Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around" offers a poignant contrast to the "fountains of divine philosophy" attributed to the female realm of the poet's early childhood. The diction of "divine" "fountains," however, evokes the notion of a baptismal font and, consequently, the Christian child's initiation into the symbolic realm, and, as such, the offerings of *Alastor*'s maternal realm might be seen as a more 'spiritual' or mystified version of what secular, patriarchal culture provides. In other words, rather than rupturing the Christian symbolic, Shelley's "fountains" of maternity reproduce the conventions of that symbolic.

[49] As several critics have noted, the maternal force of Shelley's *Alastor* becomes subordinated as the poem progresses; nature herself becomes the victim of the poet-hero's quest for imaginative vision. In "The Unpastured Sea," Bloom argues that "Shelley's poet longs to realize a vision, and this intense and overconstant yearning destroys natural existence, for nature cannot contain the infinite energy demanded by the vision" (379). We might here recall *Double Negative*'s attention to the environmental repercussions of the perceptual subordination of nature: "heartland laid waste (desert is not waste) dug up for / uranium irradiated in nuclear testing" (50). Indeed, as the first chapter of this dissertation argues, Marlatt and Warland incorporate nature's energy into the subject positionality and authority of their text, and, as such, their vision is represented as one that does not work against nature but rather with that maternal force. In conjunction with his above argument, Bloom's proposal that "*Alastor*, whatever Shelley's intentions, is primarily a poem about the destructive power of the imagination" points to the repression of maternal influence in this Romantic poet's conception of the imagination ("The Unpastured Sea" 379). As the concluding analysis of this dissertation

"choicest impulses" suggests, *Alastor* celebrates the maternal realm of the poet-hero's infancy for its seemingly selfless offering of delight and morality, for what it imparts rather than for what it generates. This points to a certain masculine economy of exchange at work in the romantic poem. *Alastor*'s allusion to the morality and values promoted in traditional fables further suggests that the maternal realm is primarily an allegorical device in the rhetoric of the poem rather than any corporeal entity or generative force.

In a marked contrast and corrective movement to Shelley's mystification of maternity in *Alastor*, *Gyno-Text* foregrounds the sensual experience of the mothering body itself. There is no "divine philosophy" offered in Tostevin's figuration but rather a sensory "rhythm" that marks the symbiosis between the female and foetal bodies:

tympa
tym
        panic
rhythm
of a
heart

---

argues, such repression is likewise found in Blake's promotion of the imagination as the source of textual and perceptual 'truth.'

some
w)here

The unconventional typography of "w)here" emphasizes the symbiotic character of the relationship between the female body and the "heart" it generates. It diminishes the space between the heart of the subject and "a / heart" of another and thus signifies the potential for a textual negation of subject-object divisions in a poetics based on maternality. The diction of "heart" once again emphasizes the corporeality of the maternal body and that which it generates, marking a clinamenic contrast to the representation of the more 'soulful' connection between mother and child in Shelley's *Alastor*.[50] Shelley writes, "If our great Mother has imbued my soul / With aught of natural piety...," foregrounding the spirituality rather than the corporeality of the mothering body (*Alastor* 2-3). However, it might be argued that the diction of "imbued" here suggests a liquid saturation, a diffusion, such as that between a child and his mother's milk, which, in turn, points to the corporeality of the mothering body. Within the context

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[50] In *Double Negative*, the heart is likewise associated with feminine textual being: "the heart is never / isolate never away (women cannot get away)" (50).

of early nineteenth-century maternal ideology, this connotation finds particular resonance: as Gelpi notes,

> A somewhat tangential but extremely important point related to the culture's emphasis on breast-feeding lies in the conviction that just as the discourse of the mother-educator 'tinctures' the mind of the child, so the mother's milk infuses the infant with her personality traits.... We know that this conviction of liminality in the mother/infant relationship had an impact upon Shelley because when Harriet refused to breast-feed Ianthe and insisted on hiring a wet-nurse, Shelley's horror, allegedly so strong that he attempted to suckle the child himself, stemmed from the fact that 'The nurse's soul would enter the child.' ("The Nursery Cave" 52)

While this biographical anecdote is itself tangential to an analysis of maternity in Shelley's *Alastor*, it does point to the cultural mystification of the mothering body that backgrounds much romantic poetry. It is against such a 'modern' discourse of motherhood that *Gyno-Text* is written.[51] The radicality of Tostevin's focus on a 'real' (as opposed to symbolic) maternal body is antithetically illustrated by another anecdote concerning the feminine ideology surrounding the birth of modernity: when Elizabeth Pilford Shelley was pregnant with the poet-to-be, the height of fashion for

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[51] I here rely upon Paul Johnson's dating of *The Birth of the Modern* as "the fifteen years 1815-30... during which the matrix of the modern world was largely formed" (xvii).

both married and single women was a 'sixth-month pad' which glorified female reproductive status in an almost parodic manner. Such a fashion is one extreme example of the traditional emphasis on the symbolic mothering body--a body that feminist texts, such as Tostevin's, must rewrite if they themselves are not to be victimized by the elevation of maternity to the realm of symbolism, where it is too distanced from the tissues of writing to be a force of textual generation.

Another feature of *Gyno-Text*'s *clinamen* in relation to Shelley's *Alastor* is the feminist text's 'swerving' away from a narrative strategy that diminishes the play and dialogical tendencies of a double or multiple point of view. While *Alastor* offers the double point of view of narrator and poet-hero, the relationship between the two subjects is characterized by a sense of lack and exchange, what Cixous sees as traits of masculine writing. As Rajan writes,

> The narrator and the Poet, far from representing contrary positions, are essentially similar beings.... The dialogical tendencies inherent in the form of frame-narration are thus diminished by the fact that dialogue is conceived on the sentimental model of kinship and affinity rather than dissent: the emotional kinship of an older survivor with his lost and defeated younger self.... the narrator's epipsyche fails to still his "obstinate questionings" (l. 26) by taking him beyond his peculiarly mixed existence of "awful talk" and "innocent love"

> (ll. 33-34), into the pure unmixed innocence that he seeks through the Poet and images in the two swans (ll. 275ff). The Poet continues trying to still his obstinate questionings by pursuing his epipsyche.... (*Dark Interpreter* 76)

As Rajan's commentary signifies, a fear of lack is evident in the double point of view and narrative drive of *Alastor*. The drive that governs *Gyno-Text*'s evolution, by contrast, is not narrative, but rather the gestation drive of the excessive and multiple maternal body. The text's emphasis on the becoming of subject fosters a feminine economy of "having that doesn't withhold or possess," in contrast to the fear of lack that is manifest in Shelley's poem (Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 41). In other words, the dynamic multiplicity of subjectivity in Tostevin's text helps resist the economy of exchange that is evident in the way in which Shelley's narrator and poet alike respond to their obstinate questionings. Marlatt and Warland's *Double Negative* and Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* likewise offer alternatives to the fear of lack manifest in *Alastor*'s double point of view. *Double Negative*, for instance, resists the binarism and exchange evident in *Alastor*'s point of view by conflating nature and female voice in its proposal of a multiple female subject: as Marlatt and Warland write, "she has rolled over / in all that red dust (the year is endless here) given /

herself a shake and birthed into subject" (48). In its double lesbian subject and lyric sequence form, *Naked Poems* likewise offers an alternative to *Alastor*'s economy of exchange and lack; the doubled subjectivity of Webb's text is characterized by a sense of "defenceless trust and silence" (Van Herk 179), while the form of the lyric sequence, in contrast to Shelley's narrativity, "modulates codes in multiple directions" (Carr, "Genre Theory and the Impasse of Lyric?" 72). Where these feminist texts 'swerve' away from *Alastor* is in their alternative feminine economies, which welcome giving rather than fearing lack. The economies at work in *Double Negative*, *Naked Poems*, and *Gyno-Text* inscribe the multiplicity and plenitude of femininity; as Cixous says of female writing, "we're not afraid of lacking" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 878).

"eye ball On stalk"[52]

This dissertation concludes with an analysis of *Gyno-Text*'s clinamenic movement in relation to Blake's privileging of the "Eye" as the source of 'truth.' Implicitly correcting Blake's focus on the authority of the imaginative "Eye" and resisting his recourse to a myth of origins in

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[52] Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*.

"Auguries of Innocence," *Gyno-Text* figures the excessive "O" of the maternal body as a source of textual authority and generation; indeed, one might argue that the text itself is born "Out of O" (Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*). This particular *clinamen* signifies how even the most liberal and liberating canonical constructions might be seen as repressing the power of real maternality. While much of Blake's poetry seeks to overthrow the repressive forces of conventional thought, his figuration of imaginative power seemingly represses the possibility of a textual 'truth' that is generated by a force other than perception itself, a force such as the maternal or female bodies that background the feminist texts considered in this dissertation. Blake's promotion of the perceptual "Eye" in "Auguries of Innocence" manifests a totalizing tendency that works against the unstable process of becoming and the fluid sensuality of *Gyno-Text*, and his argument that "We are led to Believe a Lie / When we see not Thro the Eye" implicitly denies the potential authority and 'truth' of the feminine "O" of Tostevin's text (125-26). In a marked departure from a rhetoric that generalizes or totalizes, *Gyno-Text* figures the generative "O" as an excessive and disruptive force, which cannot be contained:

eye
ball O
n stalk
sucks
brain

flows
Over
lid
fOld

The diction of "fOld" is particularly effective in signifying the doubling of perception available through the maternal body--a doubling for which Blake's "Eye" does not account. In Tostevin's lyric, the eye, however dynamic, is simply one particle in the excessive play of the open-ended "O."

Like Blake's imaginative "Eye," the "O" of *Gyno-Text*'s maternal body is a force that challenges conventional boundaries between surface and depth (as is evident in "flows / Over / lid"). "Auguries of Innocence" figures the "Eye" of textual truth as a means of perception that is not clouded by the divisiveness precipitated by conventional ways of seeing, particularly those that separate self and other, object and world. Blake thus begins his poem with a purgation of conventional perceptual limitations: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild

Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour" (1-4). In its problematization of heterogenous identity and subject-object distance, *Gyno-Text* presents a not dissimilar vision of the potential expansiveness of being. However, where Blake's "Auguries" promotes unity and continuity, Tostevin's series turns its focus to a play of difference. This departure signifies the ideological difference between the romantic and feminist texts in question: while Blake ultimately spiritualizes the workings of the human imagination, Tostevin recurrently insists on the corporeal and linguistic reality of the generative maternal body. In the conclusion of "Auguries of Innocence," Blake has a certain recourse to a myth of origins that characterizes perceptual truth as a manifestation of divinity, writing that the Eye

> was Born in a Night to perish in a Night
> When the Soul Slept in Beams of Light
> God Appears & God is Light
> To those poor Souls who dwell in Night
> But does a Human Form Display
> To those who Dwell in Realms of day (127-32)

As with Shelley's figuration of the maternal realm, Blake's figuration of the source and strength of the imagination is mystifying, privileging the concept over the potential corporeality that backgrounds it. In its

reappropriation of the maternal body from its conventional symbolic or allegorical function, *Gyno-Text* rigorously works against canonical representational strategies, such as those found in *Alastor* and "Auguries of Innocence," that repress the female body and its plenitude and energy. As such, the source of *Gyno-Text*'s authority is not the "God" of Blake's "Auguries," who precipitates a certain monologism, but rather the corporeal mothering body, whose textual energy is irreducible and inexhaustible: as Tostevin writes,

> vena
> cava
> excavates
>
> runs
> its
> ruts
> &
> turns

The abundance of verbs in this particular *Gyno-Text* poem points to the plenitude of the maternal body and its dynamic generative force.

While one might argue that Blake's privileging of the "Eye" of perception represents an oversight rather than a repression of maternity, the recurrent focus on birth in his "Auguries of Innocence" signifies a more rigorous subjugation of the mothering body. Blake's repression of

maternity is particularly manifest in his figuration of birth in "Auguries of Innocence"--a figuration that focuses on the situation into which a child is born rather than the situation from which the child is born. Blake writes,

> Every Night & every Morn
> Some to Misery are Born
> Every Morn & every Night
> Some are Born to sweet delight
> Some are Born to sweet delight
> Some are Born to Endless Night (119-24)

Gyno-Text's attention to exactly *how* "Some are Born" implicitly 'corrects' Blake's strategy of abstraction. In order to claim any textual authority, *Gyno-Text*'s own representation of the maternal body must recurrently insist upon its 'reality' and even its priority in terms of generative forces at work in the world and in textuality itself. A de-mystification of corporeal and linguistic generation is, as this chapter has suggested, at the heart of the *Gyno-Text* project, but perhaps it is most poignantly represented in the penultimate poem of the series; here Tostevin depicts the birthing process as a process that generates textuality itself:

> mute
> skeleton
> moves
> to
> muscle
> string

pulled
taut
from
A
to
Zone

Gyno-Text's insistence on the maternal body as a source of textual generation and authority does indeed force "a reinterpretation of traditional and theoretical methods," particularly and paradoxically some of the methods that the series itself draws upon in its own representations (Tostevin, "Breaking the Hold on the Story" 386). While *Gyno-Text* can be read against the background of British romanticism, it is as a worthy adversary that seeks to overthrow the authority of canonical strategies and economies that repress or victimize the maternal body, who is the source of its own textuality. *Gyno-Text* works to ensure that the mothering body and her drives are inscribed into contemporary textual conditions, for, as Cixous writes, "the gestation drive... [is] just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 891).

Afterword: "palate joined"[53]

As "Intimations of Mortality" has argued, *Gyno-Text* calls for a 'new' discourse of maternality, which, in turn, calls for a revision of conventional textual conditions to take into consideration the authority and generation of the maternal body. In its recurrent figurations of the connections between female subjectivity and sexuality, Tostevin's series insists on the textual presence of woman, in contrast to the many canonical representations that depict woman as absence and negativity. As in Cixous's "Coming to Writing", woman in *Gyno-Text* is powerful and irreducible in her "Plenitude": she is "Not seduction, not absence, not the abyss adorned with veils" ("Coming to Writing" 51). Indeed, a shared characteristic of the three Canadian feminist texts considered in "The Feminist Romantic" is an insistence on the textual presence of woman and the irreducibility of female subjectivity and desire. In *Double Negative*, Marlatt and Warland insist, "we perpetuate," pointing to the generative force of their desire (30), while Webb, in *Naked Poems*, suggests that feminine subjectivity is "a whirlwind!" Tostevin's *Gyno-Text* likewise

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[53] Tostevin, *Gyno-Text*.

figures the strength and potential plenitude of the feminine body-text as it "excavates / runs / its / ruts / & / turns." These are texts that not only refuse silence but, in their revisionary drives, attempt to displace the conventional textual conditions that thwart the expression of feminine subjectivity and limit the representation of woman and her desire. The penultimate poem of Webb's sequence--"If I have known beauty / let's say I came to it asking"--might be slightly revised to embody the rich rhetorical and epistemological maneuvers of *Double Negative*, *Naked Poems*, and *Gyno-Text*: if they know female desire, it is because they "came to it asking."

Double Negative, *Naked Poems*, and *Gyno-Text* are by no means the only Canadian feminist texts to respond to or renovate the narrative of British romanticism. These texts have been chosen because of their particularly rigorous revisionist drives, similar revisionary concerns, and distinctly unconventional subject positionalities, which call into question the authority of the Western symbolic. Indeed, if the scope of this dissertation would permit, its analysis of the feminist romantic might be

expanded to include such Canadian writers as Mary di Michele,[54] Roo Borson,[55] Robin Sarah,[56] and Bronwen Wallace[57]--all of whom

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[54] In "*les plaisirs de la porte*," for instance, di Michele implicitly interrogates the sexual politics of Wordsworthian spots of time, suggesting that the revelation offered through these spots is often denied woman, who has internalized society's subordination of her desires to the point that any cleansing of the doors of perception is virtually unachievable. As di Michele writes, "If she [woman] catches sight of a brilliant world suddenly opening... he / will enter before her, and if he waits and makes way for her, / she knows how she must follow" (8-10).

[55] In "Blackberries," for example, Borson implicitly expands the concept of the spot of time to include socio-political considerations, particularly those relating to sexual violence. She writes,

> They've been told about this wind. They've been told
> it can get you pregnant, that in the dark spaces
> between bushes sometimes a man crouches.
> That at the sight of a girl a man
> just goes crazy, he can't help himself.
> They keep picking, but faster. All they want
> is some blackberries. (9-15)

In a marked departure from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, nature--"this wind"--is here represented as a threatening male.

[56] The figuration of temporal progression in Sarah's "Tides," for instance, implicitly problematizes the linearity manifest in *The Prelude*'s overall evolution. Here the female poet draws upon the rhythms of the mothering body as she problematizes conventional representations of linearity and temporality:

> Seasons have changed
> and she hasn't noticed. One day
> she woke up, and it was fall--
> another, the snow was melting;
> always she fell back

implicitly rewrite Wordsworthian representational concerns in their representations of incidents and situations from the "common life" of contemporary women (Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*" 446). Drawing upon a strategy akin to Wordsworth's structural innovation, the spot of time developed throughout *The Prelude*, these and other Canadian feminist poets render the impact of female experiences, such as menstruation, rape, and childbirth, valid poetic experiences which resemble epiphanies. As the British romantics radically

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into the close dream where his little face
was sun and moon. (7-13)

[57] Wallace's "Jeremy at Ten" offers a particularly interesting misreading of Wordsworth's Boy of Winander episode with its preoccupation with the figure of the pause and its repetition of "falling," which evokes Wordsworth's use of the verb "to hang" in *The Prelude*. In the conclusion of "Jeremy at Ten," Wallace further engages in an implicit dialogue with Wordsworthian poetics as she represents a particularly poignant spot of time that foregrounds the relationship between mother and child:

in this moment of letting you go, again and again,
the moment when lovers turn from each other at last
or the child turns to begin its journey into light,
the moment when we know ourselves to be unique,
mortal, separate, like everybody else,
the tips of our tongues, Jeremy,
each strand of hair,
our cells as constant as the stars
burning with their necessary song. (58-66)

renovated traditional genres and forms to express the political and ideological upheavals of their milieu, so too have many Canadian feminist writers revised conventional literary techniques and structures--including those of romanticism itself--in their challenges to canonical assumptions about gender, subject positionality, and feminine writing. Romantic poetry and contemporary feminist literature alike obstinately theorize and promote the validity of "worlds not realised" through patriarchal logic and precursive representational strategies (Wordsworth, "Intimations Ode" 145). Romanticism's interest in gender, being, nature, and socio-political critique provides canonical precedent for many foci of contemporary Canadian feminist texts, while offering a critical framework for acknowledging the ambitious revisionary projects of the female writers considered in this dissertation.

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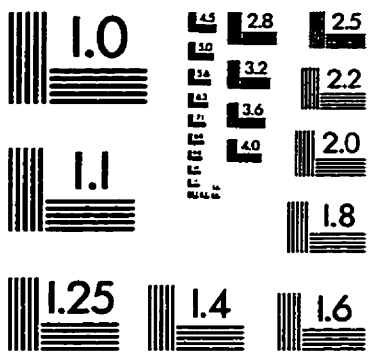

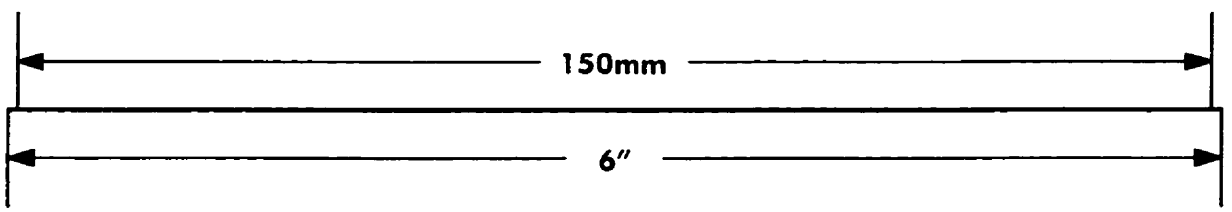

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