

*Dickinson and the Boundaries  
of Feminist Theory*

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"All we are strangers—dear—"  
*Elegy and (Un)knowing*

"All we are strangers—dear—," Emily Dickinson wrote in the spring of 1859 to Catherine Scott Turner, a woman she may have loved. She imagines them simultaneously isolated from the world ("not acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted with her") and from each other, "owing to the smoke" of a battle in which enemies and friends alike are obscured. From behind this imagined veil, Dickinson asks for intimacy and distance at the same time: an intimacy not necessarily contingent upon presence or vision, a distance not reducible to physical separation. A century and a quarter later, Adrienne Rich would cite this letter in her poem, "Spirit of Place," trying to say her own *ave atque vale* to Dickinson's spirit. To do this, Rich recognized, she needed "a place large enough for both of us" and, like Dickinson, a veil—"the river-fog will do for privacy"—to achieve intimacy and distance at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

The elegy is an essential testing ground for any idea of literary tradition and women's particularity of tradition, as Celeste Schenck has argued. For male poets, the tradition of pastoral elegy has stood as gatekeeper to the poetic canon. The pastoral elegy is traditionally "modelled on archaic initiation rituals of younger man by an elder"; it "marks a rite of separation that culminates in ascension to stature; it rehearses an act of identity that depends upon rupture." By contrast, "the female elegy is a poem of connectedness; women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead."<sup>2</sup>

As my initial citations of Dickinson and Rich will suggest, in keeping with my readings of Dickinson's poetry and feminist psychoanalytic theory, I think it necessary to introduce a measure of distance and difference into Schenck's eloquently proposed countertradition of connectedness in women's elegies. I am not sure that the "female funeral aesthetic" enjoys an "unsettling coherence," as Schenck suggests, "across centuries";<sup>3</sup> or at least it seems no more startlingly

coherent than do male-authored elegies through the centuries, especially as Peter Sacks's recent study describes the male tradition.<sup>4</sup> I see more ambiguity in women's elegiac gestures of connectedness than does Schenck, and less than an absolute distinction (although this is not my main concern here) between women's connectedness and men's rituals of separation. If identities are constructed asymmetrically for women and men in patriarchal culture, as the new feminist psychologies suggest, and if women's identities depend more on connectedness than do men's, still certain psychic processes inherent to identification surely overlap between the genders, and not all women accede to their gender identification in exactly the same degree of connectedness. (To think otherwise would be to subscribe to a thoroughgoing functionalism in the psychic realm, in which identity always reproduces itself identically.)<sup>5</sup>

Women's resolutions of identity, broadly speaking, do differ from men's, but also from each other's. So too may women's elegiac representations of identity differ in their degree of connectedness. Moreover, psychoanalysis and deconstruction, as we have already seen, point to how difference and otherness inhabit connectedness. As Dickinson's figuration of home as a receptive boundary suggests, what divides may also connect; one may forge connections to otherness through the bonds of difference and deferral rather than through an Imaginary dream of sameness and simultaneity. Language as such, language as it structures psychic possibility, may consign us to a different "dream of a common language," in Adrienne Rich's phrase.

The texts I want to explore are not all, strictly speaking, elegies nor lyric poems, but they are all concerned with issues of memory and psychic continuity. All contribute to an intertextual network, encompassing works by Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Adrienne Rich, and Emily Dickinson, that does include formal elegies. They differ from the traditional masculine "initiatory" models in that they fall toward the middle or end of their authors' writing careers. And they differ from most of the women's elegies cited by Schenck insofar as they address other women as precursors. Schenck finds that "women writers, lacking mentors, tend to mourn their personal dead rather than predecessor poets."<sup>6</sup> These elegiac texts, in their varying ways, constitute exceptions. In these works women writers elegiacally re-read and re-present their own writing as well as other women's. Perhaps for this reason, questions of difference and power for these texts are more acute than when women poets mourn their more strictly "personal dead."

Is poetic space then at a premium—as Rich's language of "pri-

vacy" might suggest—even in a women's countertradition? Not in any simple way, in these texts; yet poetic power and its possession are still to some degree contested. The issues for these elegies seem to be: How "other" is my female precursor's power? How "other" was her power to her? If I connect myself with her, do I also connect myself to her possibly alienated or oppressed sense of the sources of her own power, and its relation to male precursors? In these elegies, connections can be dangerous, and separation is sometimes sought after, for a variety of reasons. Identifications are double-edged. These elegies, in my reading, radically qualify—without abandoning—what Schenck identifies as the female elegist's drive to connect. They relate the poet ambivalently to "the piece of us that lies out there" (Rich, "The Spirit of Place") or in the other, dead or alive.

Finally, these elegiac texts revise our understanding of the elegy's traditional relationship with sexuality. According to Sacks, the elegist's figurations of "loss and gain" must "work toward a trope for sexual power."<sup>7</sup> Sacks's paradigm for this work is, not surprisingly, the male castration complex and its resolution. If, as feminist revisionary psychoanalysis insists, women's psychosexual development is different (and all too poorly understood), do women elegists also work for tropes of sexual power, and, if so, how? Schenck approaches this question in her reading of Anne Sexton's elegy for John Holmes, "Somewhere in Africa," the only truly "vocational" woman's elegy in her essay. Sexton there indeed powerfully images her sexuality; the "God who is a woman" bears Holmes away in her hold. Maternity and female sexuality, in this troped consolation and consolidation of power, merge. But are there alternatives to the merging of maternity and female sexuality, which is after all the patriarchally prescribed resolution of women's psychosexual development? The elegiac texts I discuss here, by contrast, profoundly distrust heterosexual resolutions. And Rich explicitly undertakes to find other tropes of female sexuality, other resolutions.

Editing a selection of her sister Emily's poems for the posthumous 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Gray*, Charlotte Brontë gave the final place to the poem now often known (through her title) as "No Coward Soul Is Mine."<sup>8</sup> She prefaced it with a note saying simply, "The following are the last lines my sister Emily ever wrote." In this poem Emily addresses the "God within my breast," exulting (in the final two stanzas) that

Though earth and moon were gone,  
And suns and universes ceased to be,

And Thou wert left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void:  
Thou—THOU art Being and Breath,  
And what THOU art may never be destroyed.

Charlotte's note and her editorial placement of the poem have probably done much to make "No Coward Soul Is Mine" the best known of Emily Brontë's poems (and one that was important to Dickinson; Higgins read this poem at her funeral), but Charlotte's strategies are a little deceptive. The last poem of which Emily made a fair copy may indeed—for all we know—have been "No Coward Soul Is Mine," but she *composed* the poem nearly three years before her death.<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Brontë apparently wanted "No Coward Soul Is Mine" to have the last word on her sister's heroism in the face of death—to be, in effect, Emily's self-authored elegy—and Emily seems in fact to have died in that poem's spirit, refusing consolation and medical aid until her last hour.<sup>10</sup> "There is not room for Death," the poem says, and Emily gave it none.

I would like to propose as a counter-elegy, however, the penultimate poem in Charlotte's 1850 arrangement, "Stanzas." More directly concerned with the traditional elegiac matter of memory and pastoral nature, these second-to-last words (as Charlotte, in her editorial role, cast them) movingly revise the account of female heroism that Emily and Charlotte collaborated upon in their writing and reading of "No Coward Soul Is Mine."<sup>11</sup>

Often rebuked, yet always back returning  
To those first feelings that were born with me,  
And leaving busy chase of wealth and learning  
For idle dreams of things which cannot be:

Today, I will seek not the shadowy region:  
Its unsustaining vastness waxes drear;  
And visions rising, legion after legion,  
Bring the unreal world too strangely near.

I'll walk, but not in old heroic traces,  
And not in paths of high morality,  
And not among the half-distinguished faces,  
The clouded forms of long-past history.

I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:  
It vexes me to choose another guide:

Where the grey flocks in ferny glens are feeding;  
Where the wild wind blows on the mountain-side.

What have these lonely mountains worth revealing?  
More glory and more grief than I can tell:  
The earth that wakes *one* human heart to feeling  
Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell.  
("Stanzas")

The poet in "Stanzas" is rereading her own life and, implicitly, her own poetic production, with acknowledged difficulty. She feels "rebuked" for doing so since she herself is not sure that her own "first feelings" ("the fountain light of all our day," Wordsworth said, and "master light of all our seeing") do not amount to "idle dreams of things which cannot be."

Can her own life sustain a Wordsworthian retrospective? Unlike the speaker of "No Coward Soul Is Mine," who addresses a unified immortal power that leaves no room for death, doubt, or other existences, the speaker of "Stanzas" looks into a visionary realm without initial certainties. In "No Coward Soul Is Mine," Brontë protests too much that the immortal power really does reside within the poet's own breast: in fact, as Margaret Homans has put it, that "the spirit rests in her and she draws power from it is not an equal relation but a hierarchical devotion that operates only in one direction."<sup>12</sup> In "Stanzas," by contrast, Brontë admits to the uncanniness of the quasi-external visionary realm that comes "too strangely near," and her admission of the vision's elusive otherness-in-nearness renders her relationship to the visionary realm more equal. The speaker is powerful enough, by the third stanza, to get by the "shadowy region" with its "legion after legion" of visions (almost a poetic underworld); now she becomes a powerful Romantic figure, the poet walking, or rather wandering, since at this point in the poem she still must decide where she is going by where she is not. The "shadowy region" of the second stanza gives way here to slightly more determinate forms. The "old heroic traces" and "paths of high morality" refer Brontë back to her own youthful heroic poetry—perhaps even to "No Coward Soul Is Mine"—but these memories are still for her uncanny, like the "half-distinguished faces" of history, in part because they are implicated in the male literary-historical tradition of Byronic heroism. Brontë cannot, over the course of this poem, repossess these heroic traces wholly for herself, but it is a gain to know and image in this poem, as she does not in "No Coward Soul Is Mine," their cloudy, half-determinate, divided allegiance—to know, and keep journeying.

In the final two stanzas Brontë at last finds, so to speak, a place to walk: in nature, or in the nature of William Wordsworth's poetry of the "first affections." Marked by Wordsworthian ideas and his diction of "glory" (and vexation), this nature is not unambiguously Brontë's own in an ordinary, Edenic sense; someone has walked here before. Like Byronic heroism, nature after Wordsworth is intertextually marked with the "trace" of another, but the question of poetic power's connection to otherness in this Wordsworthian nature is at least posed differently. The wind of inspiration blows wild here without Brontë's defensive claim that she includes it, or that it includes her and all the universe besides. This poem does not rely upon invoking the (always dualistic, and potentially violent) boundaries between self and other. The Wordsworthian earth that wakes us to feeling "centre[s] both the worlds of Heaven and Hell" but leaves the poet free still to wander, rather than nailing her to the spot to await a visionary lover or mourn a dead one (as in the plot of so many of Emily Brontë's poems).<sup>13</sup>

The romantic figure of the poet walking works for Emily Brontë's freedom in "Stanzas" and leads her to a less alienating courage than that she proclaims in "No Coward Soul Is Mine" or other of her poems of "romantic imprisonment." And unlike Cathy at the ending of *Wuthering Heights*, the speaker here is still alive to know this glory. But the Wordsworthian romantic poet walking in nature is still traditionally alienated from both the nature he sees (using the pronoun "he" advisedly) and the society he leaves behind to go walking, as Brontë's defensive emphasis on *one* in the last stanza suggests. To what degree does visionary imagination transgress both upon nature and upon human or women's community? Over the course of Emily Brontë's career, Nina Auerbach finds, imagination transgresses indeed.<sup>14</sup> Brontë's elegiac rereading of her own poetic career, its dangers and attractions, is only in part an adventure in connectedness. Reconnected to her own "first feelings," she still insists on separateness in her reimagined freedom. But if connectedness is complicated in this poem, so is separateness. Separateness does not mean the isolation of a unified, self-present single self, the "*one*." The self walking here is in some ways divided from itself, other to itself, walking among the half-discerned shadows of its own younger dreams. The subject is, in a certain, difficult sense, a community even when it walks alone.

Emily Brontë died while Charlotte Brontë was writing her third novel, *Shirley*. As many readers have recognized, Shirley Keeldar, one of the novel's two heroines, is Charlotte's portrait of her sister. Among many remarkable visionary prose passages in the novel is a long prose-poem elegy for Emily that, among other things, seems to

reread Emily's poem "Stanzas" while trying to come to terms with the alienation of Emily's self-figurations in this poem and in her other works. Although not the most celebrated of the visionary prose passages in *Shirley*,<sup>15</sup> this is perhaps one of Charlotte's best moments as a reader of her sister's poetry.<sup>16</sup> The passage is conspicuously lyrical not only in its elevation of style and use of the continuous narrative present, but in its underdetermination by its narrative context. At this point in the novel's plot, Shirley has nothing much to do but wander her house in distraction, reading and waiting for a man with whom she is secretly in love to turn up. Charlotte Brontë strews plenty of hints about the sources of Shirley's distraction and, later in the novel, produces the man by a stratagem that hardly pretends to credibility. What matters for this passage, however, is that the narrator here explicitly denies that her romantic plot in any way explains Shirley's visionary mood, marking this lyric reverie as an unassimilable other in the narrative:

At last, however, a pale light falls on the page from the window: she looks, the moon is up; she closes the volume, rises, and walks through the room. Her book has perhaps been a good one; it has refreshed, re-filled, rewarmed her heart; it has set her brain astir, furnished her mind with pictures. The still parlour, the clean hearth, the window opening on the twilight sky, and showing its "sweet regent," new throned and glorious, suffice to make earth an Eden, life a poem, for Shirley. A still, deep, inborn delight glows in her young veins; unmingled—untroubled; not to be reached or ravished by human agency, because by no human agency bestowed: the pure gift of God to His creature, the free dower of Nature to her child. Buoyant, by green steps, by glad hills, all verdure and light, she reaches a station scarcely lower than that whence angels look down on the dreamer of Beth-el, and her eye seeks, and her soul possesses, the vision of life as she wishes it. No—not as she wishes it; she has not time to wish: the swift glory spreads out, sweeping and kindling, and multiplies its splendours faster than Thought can effect his combinations, faster than Aspiration utter her longings. Shirley says nothing while the trance is upon her—she is quite mute; but if Mrs Pryor speaks to her now, she goes out quietly, and continues her walk upstairs in the dim gallery.

The narrator claims that Shirley's vision owes nothing to any particular human connectedness. Even the book Shirley has been reading, whatever it may be, does not explain this elevation—or if it does, it does so only insofar as the book's authorship is attributable to something exceeding human agency. Charlotte bows to the uncanny otherness of Shirley/Emily's visionary experience, as Emily Brontë herself does

in "Stanzas," but in a way that tries to cure this uncanniness, retrospectively, of its anxiety. Shirley reads and moves on, again like the poet of "Stanzas," without being wholly *authored* either by the book she sets down or by Charlotte Brontë's narrator, whose plot (by the narrator's own admission and desire) does not quite enclose her.<sup>17</sup>

Yet there is something to be gained from connectedness in this passage, for Charlotte Brontë as elegist has something to give to Emily's memory through the novelistic character by whom she remembers her. As we saw in chapter 3, Emily's poetry, along with *Wuthering Heights*, again and again imagines the world claustrophobically or agoraphobically or both: those on the inside wanting to escape, those on the outside wanting to get in (think of her mourners longing to enter the beloved's grave, or Cathy's ghost at Lockwood's window), each place defined as being not the other, the boundary of an impossible and violent desire. What Charlotte imagines for Emily instead is a less absolute architecture of remembrance, one that is inside and outside at once; an architecture reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's figurations of home. The "green steps" and "glad hills" by which Shirley's vision mounts are the same steps that lead her to her home's dim upstairs gallery. She can wander freely in an internalized nature and at the same time enjoy the protection of a human shelter.

Charlotte's reading of Emily in this passage is both generous and delicately poised. She softens the violence of Emily's struggles with the male romantic visionary tradition, while preserving an allusion to struggle in the narrator's reference to "the dreamer of Beth-el"—Jacob, who, on another memorable night, wrestled with God himself (in the biblical episode Emily Dickinson so often recalled). She provides Shirley/Emily with cosmic parents familiarly gendered as male and female, God and Nature. These parents have dowered Shirley, but no fixed marriage has yet taken place—no cosmic "crowning epithalamium" through which male romantic poets often figured the relationship between nature and the human mind.<sup>18</sup> Shirley is still free, although not without loss. The narrator glides over the pain of Mrs. Pryor and Shirley's mutual incomprehension; apparently there are no visionary human foremothers for Shirley. Still, Charlotte's elegiac passage makes a shelter for Emily Brontë while striving to honor her otherness, and it seriously represents at least one half of Emily Brontë's working poetic life, her *reading*, as an experience of power and self-possession serenely mingled with self-forgetfulness.

If the scene omits or arrests the other half of poetic vocation—composition, utterance—it still renders a woman in the full power of a vision out of the romantic sublime. And if we recall the romantic figure

of the poet walking from Emily Brontë's own "Stanzas," we may think of composition as intertextually encoded in the scene's ending, which juxtaposes Shirley's muteness with her pacing. As Charlotte Brontë's narrator goes on pointedly to say, "If Shirley were not an indolent, a reckless, an ignorant being, she would take a pen in such moments"; as Emily Brontë, reckless being that she was, in fact often did. As Gaskell recalls the Brontës' work patterns: "The sisters retained the old habit, which was begun in their aunt's life-time, of putting away their work at nine o'clock, and beginning their study, pacing up and down the sitting room. At this time, they talked over the stories they were engaged upon, and described their plots. Once or twice a week, each read to the others what she had written, and heard what they had to say about it. . . . the readings were of great and stirring interest to all, taking them out of the gnawing pressure of daily-recurring cares, and setting them in a free place."<sup>19</sup> Charlotte's elegiac interlude recreates this free place. And silent as she is, Mrs. Pryor's presence may be indirectly helpful. Shirley replies to Mrs. Pryor not directly in speech but through the active imagination of her pacing. Relationships between women, the scene suggests, can encompass difference and still be enabling. The architecture of this elegiac passage respects distance as a form of connection.<sup>20</sup>

This communion of Shirley, Mrs. Pryor, and the narrator, elegiac and tenuous as it is, is better than Shirley's eventual fate in the novel. Charlotte's plot ushers Shirley into marriage through pedagogical scenes of reading as dominance and submission that alienate Shirley's own visionary powers from her more completely than the elegiac passage even begins to hint is possible. By the end of the novel, Shirley's visions are no longer hers to command; instead, she recalls her early dreams (in the shape of her ancient devoirs, her French homework) at the behest of a male master (the former tutor whom she will eventually marry). It is as if Charlotte Brontë's inevitably social narrative of the vicissitudes of female desire had to pay for the freedom of the elegiac lyric vision, including its implied freedom from heterosexual desire (Shirley there "has not time to wish"—for the absent lover, among other things). In the lyric passage, Shirley enjoys a mental and bodily "delight . . . not to be reached or ravished by human agency," a kind of pre-Oedipal, nearly prehuman, sexual plenitude overseen by the distantly benevolent parents, God and Nature. But what this prose-poem elegy proposes in the way of presocial female sexual delight, the narrative punitively disposes.<sup>21</sup> It remains for Adrienne Rich, invoking Emily Brontë and other female precursors more than a century later, to break up this unwillingly Oedipal narrative's resolution.

In the poem that closes Adrienne Rich's collection *Poems: Selected and New, 1950–1974*, "From an Old House in America,"<sup>22</sup> Rich takes farewell of her poetic career up to *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), which openly announced her lesbian-feminism. This poem also marked an important step in Rich's (still ongoing) elegiac representations of her former husband, Alfred Conrad. Rich begins the poem's fourth section with an italicized and scrupulously annotated borrowing from Emily Brontë's "Stanzas":

*Often rebuked, yet always back returning*  
I place my hand on the hand  
Of the dead, invisible palm-print  
on the doorframe  
spiked with daylilies, green leaves  
catching in the screen door  
or I read the backs of old postcards  
curling from thumbtacks, winter and summer  
fading through cobweb—tinted panes—  
white church in Norway  
Dutch hyacinths bleeding azure  
red beach on Corsica  
set-pieces of the world  
stuck to this house of plank

Why, then, this scrupulous appropriation of Emily Brontë's words? Like the poet in "Stanzas," Rich in this poem is acknowledging the difficulty of undertaking an elegiac rereading of her own life, a difficulty compounded both by the suicide of Conrad in 1970 and by the pressures that Rich's emerging lesbian identity exerts in mid-life upon her organization and understanding of her own memories. This elegy is thus clearly posed upon the threshold of defining new sexual powers, to recall once again Sacks's description of the male elegy—but sexual powers not encompassed by a heterosexual prescription from women's maturation. Borrowing the opening of Brontë's "Stanzas" in this section of "From an Old House in America," Rich at once admits to and displaces her own defensiveness toward the dead, her own guilt and need to return to the scene of loss. Lead by her female precursor, Rich ventures into a realm of half-effaced traces, elegiac inscriptions, the faded writing exchanged on old postcards that is Rich's counterpart to Brontë's "half-distinguished faces" and "clouded forms of long-past history." This trace or writing symbolically half-externalizes memory, suggesting that its power comes both

from within and without the self. As Rich describes it, the impulse to the work of memory is material yet invisible, a palimpsest, rewriting over writing that is already there:

I place my hand on the hand  
of the dead, invisible palm-print  
on the doorframe

On the doorframe, the liminal place, neither inside nor outside the house of self or history, this uncannily doubled handprint anticipates the involuntary return of memories through writing. But these memories, like the "old heroic traces" of Brontë's poem, are not wholly to be (re)possessed by Rich, because they are implicated with the power of a masculine other—once, for Rich, a living man, now a signature: the handprint, the postcards. Unlike Brontë in "No Coward Soul Is Mine," however, Rich refuses to take consolation or draw vicarious power from locating her being "inside" the masculine other, the other who, in Rich's case, has been subsumed himself into the powers of "Non-being." Rich's involuntary memories may be implicated with the life they shared, but not to the point of confusing life with death. On the threshold between being and nonbeing, she will look and listen, but not merge with the dead:

The other side of a translucent  
curtain, a sheet of water  
a dusty window, Non-being  
utters its flat tones  
The speech of an actor learning his lines  
phonetically  
The final autistic statement  
of the self-destroyer  
All my energy reaches out tonight  
to comprehend a miracle beyond  
raising the dead: the undead to watch  
back on the road of birth

If this poem eventually becomes a ritual of connectedness, it depends also upon an imperative separation, dividing Rich from this ultimately alienated voice. Bearing Brontë's words with her into the world of the dead—a feminist version of Aeneas's golden bough—she returns from the underworld more knowing, and alive, seeking connections in other directions. Where elegies in the masculine tradition look forward to raising the dead ("So *Lycidas*, sunk low, but mounted

high / Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves," ll. 172–73), Rich prefers a feminist trope of birth. Yet she revises not only male-authored literary tradition, but that of many nineteenth-century women poets as well (including the Emily Dickinson of Rich's essay "Vesuvius at Home" and the Dickinson fascinated with the idea of resurrection), by turning away from tropes of power as a transcendent, otherworldly, overmastering masculine otherness. Behind the veil, that ancient metaphor of hope and disillusion, is not God or truth or power but nonbeing. Look elsewhere.

What happens, then, to the elegiac mode later in Rich's career, when issues of memory and community, power and sexuality, are addressed from a woman-centered (if not necessarily separatist) literary perspective? Several poems in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* address the challenges of the work of elegiac remembering and re-reading within the bounds of an interpretive community of women.<sup>23</sup> I would like to conclude by looking at two poems from *A Wild Patience*, "For Memory" and "The Spirit of Place," which bear directly on the questions already addressed to elegy and memory within the context of Rich's earlier poetry. "The Spirit of Place," moreover, takes a long last farewell of Rich's haunting sister-other, Emily Dickinson.

Rich knows in "For Memory" that "there are gashes in our understandings / of this world"; she addresses another with whom she at one time "came together in a common / fury of direction / barely mentioning difference." To understand differences, there must be memory, and it must somehow be shareable. But where there is memory, can there be freedom to change? The poem concludes with an attempt to work out the difficult association between freedom and memory, difficult because (as in "From an Old House in America") the power of memory comes in part from its involuntariness, its estranging community of unconscious implication with things both past and other, hence not fully open to repossession. On the other hand, what else but memory holds a life together and makes retrospective conscious sense of even its most radical changes of direction—"that common life we each and all bent out of orbit from"? (This is also the problematic of memory for Rich's coming-out poems in *The Dream of a Common Language*.) Rich weighs memory's powers of estrangement and powers of connection in the poem's end, and at last she coerces an ideologically freighted choice between them.

Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out  
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers  
of light, the fields of dark—  
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine

remembering. Putting together, inch by inch  
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.

To borrow Freud's and, more recently, Derrida's distinction between different representations of memory,<sup>24</sup> Rich here decides for memory as recollection (self-continuous, self-possessed, self-present, voluntary, laborious, communal, and prosy) over memory as trace, that is, as a writing not altogether continuous or self-present or voluntary, and communal only in the difficult sense of bearing witness to the voice(s) of the other(s) underlying individual identity.

Rich's decision has clear political pertinence and a kind of ethical insistence in scholarly terms as well. Feminist scholars, whatever the contradictions of that identity, all know that we should be working in the library all the time, scavenging in the lost collections and producing well-wrought prose, inch by painful inch. We all believe that the history so produced will re-member something important for women, will foster community by making difference historically intelligible; and we tremble at the self-aggrandizement besetting other, more romantically "poetic" ideas of freedom. Poetry's aggrandizing tropes of power bear a guilt toward history (certainly in the academy today, and perhaps elsewhere) that seemingly might be exorcised by a life spent reading in the American suffrage archives (as is part of Rich's project in other poems of this volume), by a voluntary asceticism disciplined through prose and history.

But it is also worth reflecting on what this poem says freedom is not. Why is it only "once" that one could walk out under the Milky Way, as Emily Brontë too walks into nature, but "always back returning"? What power or what tradition denies this experience repeatability? Part of the answer, as so often in Rich's poetry, seems to lie in this poem's revisionary stance toward her own earlier poetry. The ending of "For Memory" alludes to Rich's earlier poems about male figures of power and identification up in the sky, the most conspicuous example of which is "Orion" (written in 1965), in which she says to that alien being of whose nature she ambivalently wishes to partake:

You take it all for granted  
and when I look you back  
It's with a starlike eye  
shooting its cold and egotistical spear  
where it can do least damage.  
Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon  
out here in the cold with you  
you with your back to the wall.

In back of "Orion" and its evocation in "For Memory" is the male romantic tradition of the egotistical sublime, identified in literary history with William Wordsworth and characterized by a poetics of memory as trace rather than recollection, memory as involuntary, intermittent, and bound up with powers of repression. The Wordsworthian "spots of time" do ground a lifetime's worth of feeling but they indeed happen only "once," as Rich says by way of rejecting this poetics in "For Memory."<sup>25</sup> Already a tradition of alienated subjectivity even for men, the egotistical sublime is twice so for women, who traditionally do not have direct access to its involuntary, eruptive powers, but who, like Dorothy Wordsworth in her brother's poem "Tintern Abbey," have memory only in order to be a storehouse of male gleanings of power. "Remember me," Wordsworth says to Dorothy, "And these my exhortations."<sup>26</sup> The egotistical sublime for women, Rich suggests, is not freedom, not outdoors, not a place in which to walk out under the Milky Way, but just another confining patriarchal architecture. She indirectly repudiates what Emily Brontë does in "Stanzas," walking out in the company of Wordsworth, and chooses not to identify herself with the cold male hunter (a situation that again invokes Dickinson's poem "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun"). Her work of memory chooses instead the libraries of prosy recollection, where prose encloses and confines poetry, binding its energies to the reconstruction of women's collective presence to one another.

We may or may not regret what "For Memory" does to the male tradition of the egotistical sublime, and we may not regret Rich's re-reading of her own earlier "Orion" and its brother poems. But at last, I think, the attempt to separate memory as recollection from memory as trace, to deny an unconscious or repressive poetics of memory in order to reconstitute a fully present women's tradition (in literature or history) does not work, intellectually or practically. The always-othered nature of language, let alone human beings, may not allow it to work. It does not work that way, I will argue, in Rich's "The Spirit of Place," concerned with remembering the words of Emily Dickinson. And something important in Rich's own career falls between the cracks of the distinction "For Memory" draws—between what memory and freedom are not, "once," and what they are, daily and routinely. Between "Orion" in 1965 and its revision in "For Memory," came "Planetarium" (1968), another poem in which Rich symbolically reengages "Orion"'s problem of the starry male egotistical sublime. The quarrel (at least one of the quarrels) Rich has with the romantic sublime—its failure to relate visionary moments to the work of dailiness—was always a quarrel within Romanticism itself as well.



For Percy Bysshe Shelley or the young Wordsworth, not less than for Rich, the political question was and is how "Apocalypse becomes immanent; the sublime, a daily habit."<sup>27</sup> And Rich's visionary answer, in "Planetarium":

I am bombarded yet I stand  
 I have been standing all my life in the  
 direct path of a battery of signals  
 the most accurately transmitted most  
 untranslatable language in the universe  
 I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-  
 luted that a light wave could take 15  
 years to travel through me And has  
 taken I am an instrument in the shape  
 of a woman trying to translate pulsations  
 into images for the relief of the body  
 and the reconstruction of the mind.

If the speed of light itself is finite (fifteen years in the journey) when it travels through the instrument of the woman poet's body, then there is no imaginable revelation in the universe that is not continuous rather than ("once") instantaneous and unrepeatable; no power so alien and other that it cannot be translated into the immanent "relief of the body"; and, in political terms, no revolution that is not continuous. Rich uses scientific knowledge brilliantly to transform the romantic trope of light as instantaneous revelation into sustained political recollection. Of all Rich's many and searching representations of the mind of the poet at work, "Planetarium" perhaps rejects the least and transforms the most in the "battery of signals" whence its language comes.

Writing her elegiac "The Spirit of Place," by contrast, Rich discovers, or chooses, the limits of her assimilative and transforming powers with respect to Emily Dickinson. Like Charlotte Brontë in the elegiac passage from *Shirley*, Rich here remembers and rereads a powerful and difficult woman poet who resembles the earlier Emily (and the younger Rich) in her tendency to figure her own poetic power in the alienated form of a masculine other. Like Charlotte Brontë, Rich belatedly tries to give comfort to a woman who would not be helped to die. Dickinson's ghost, to use the (historically feminized) language of nineteenth-century spiritualism, needs help "crossing over" and until she does, she is dangerous: in Dickinson's own words, "I have but the power to kill / Without the power to die" (poem 754). Like Charlotte Brontë, Rich nevertheless tries to protect and honor Dickinson's strangeness. As traditional elegies often do, "The Spirit of Place"

castigates the dead one's venal or inadequate mourners, in clearing its own space.<sup>28</sup> They are ready to hand:

In Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst  
 cocktails are served the scholars  
 gather in celebration  
 their pious or clinical legends  
 festoon the walls like imitations  
 of period patterns

Rich wants to protect Dickinson from the academic industry of which Dickinson is herself the capital, the worldly literary critics who consume her words to foster their own legends and drink over her corpse in crass parody of Dickinson's observation that "A Word made Flesh is seldom / And tremblingly partook" (poem 1651).

But what, then, can distinguish the poet's own mourning from that of the bad mourners? Their oral greed is related, at bottom, to Rich's confession that she had "taken in" and brooded over Dickinson's "My Life had Stood—" (poem 754) for many years.<sup>29</sup> The gesture left to her is to stop taking. No more transformations of Dickinson's words, no more passing her signals through the poet's involuted body for revision and reconstruction. As antidote to the scholar's mixed drinks, Rich faithfully offers up Dickinson's own words, from a letter to her beloved friend Catherine Turner, italicizing them with respect for their otherness:

and you whose teeth were set on edge by churches  
 resist your shrine

escape

are found

nowhere

unless in words (your own)

*All we are strangers—dear—the world is not  
 acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted  
 with her. And Pilgrims!—Do you hesitate? and  
 Soldiers oft—some of us victors, but those I do  
 not see tonight owing to the smoke.—We are hungry,  
 and thirsty, sometimes—We are barefoot—and cold—*

The scholars batten greedily on her words; Dickinson herself hungered; turning away from the temptation to consume further, Rich puts Dickinson to rest in privacy, like a daughter, a sister, a mother. The setting for this consciously revisionary ritual of mourning and of feminist intertextuality is a naturalistic underworld:

This place is large enough for both of us  
 the river-fog will do for privacy  
 this is my third and last address, to you  
 with the hands of a daughter I would cover you  
 from all intrusion even my own  
 saying rest to your ghost  
 with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands  
 open or closed as they prefer to lie  
 and ask no more of who or why or wherefore  
 with the hands of a mother I would close the door  
 on the rooms you've left behind  
 and silently pick up my fallen work.

Freighted with dignity, self-denying, scrupulously faithful to Dickinson's own words, this elegy is nevertheless for me haunted by a Dickinson poem that it half-remembers, half-represses. Rich's choice of Dickinson's prose for citation, rather than her poetry, and the gesture of closing the door upon the older poet, uncannily recall Dickinson's protest:

They shut me up in Prose—  
 As when a little Girl  
 They put me in the Closet—  
 Because they liked me "still"—  
 (poem 613)

It is eerily as if Dickinson had anticipated Rich's motherly compassion and rejected it in advance. Dickinson's poem brings into sharp relief the double edge of the protection Rich offers her memory. Rejecting a sublime poetics (Orion, later in the poem, "plunges like a drunken hunter,"—a figure of this rejection) in favor of the prose of dailiness, Rich's architecture of remembrance is spatially more restrictive than the elegy Charlotte Brontë offers to Emily in *Shirley*, more housebound. Seductive as Rich's compassionate dignity is, something about words (Dickinson's own) escapes it. That room with the door shut, I would prefer to think, is empty.

"The Spirit of Place" is a ritual of separation as much as connectedness. Rich separates Dickinson's voice from her own both typographically and stylistically. As in "From an Old House in America," she insists on the necessary separation between the living and the dead, although in this case the dead is a woman and a precursor. Although she names herself Dickinson's mother, she does so in the context of a separation, untying the identification between herself and

Dickinson through the rite of mourning. In some ways, "The Spirit of Place" answers closely to Schenck's characterization of the male, rather than the female, elegy: it "marks a rite of separation that culminates in ascension to stature," although the stature here envisioned is, importantly, maternal rather than paternal. Moreover, Rich's elegiac separation uncannily recalls aspects of Harold Bloom's schema of male poetic careers, the kind of Oedipal schema Rich's poem and Schenck's essay seem to want to hold at a distance from women's writing. In Bloom's schema, the final revisionary ratio in the career of a strong (male) poet is labeled "apophrades," "the Return of the Dead," in which the dead precursor returns but in the voice of the living poet, who thus celebrates a triumph over time and "the return of the early self-exaltation that made poetry possible," inverting the subjection of his initiatory identification with his precursor.<sup>30</sup>

Rich diverges from Bloom's paradigm in crucial respects: she allows Dickinson to retain her own voice rather than subsuming it; she sternly disciplines any attendant narcissistic exaltation; and, to the extent possible, she wants to work within, rather than against, time. Yet there are points of similarity. Rich and Dickinson change places, as do Bloom's ephebe and precursor, in a chiasmus of poetic identity. And Rich could indeed be said to invert her "initiatory identification" with Dickinson, as she herself traced it in her essay "Vesuvius at Home." How far, then, does the poem at last partake of what Bloom describes as the central irony of the "great pastoral elegies" of the male tradition? "The later poets, confronting the imminence of death, work to subvert the immortality of their precursors, as though any one poet's afterlife could be metaphorically prolonged at the expense of another's."<sup>31</sup>

Rich's challenge to the conventions of male elegy is eminently serious and not in any simple sense self-defeating. Her differences are real. I would only want to suggest that there is difference within, as well as difference without—difference within the poems of individual authors and within any idea of a women's literary tradition.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Charlotte Brontë's prose remembrance of Emily in *Shirley* resembles Rich's elegy for Dickinson in its commitment to respecting the other woman's silence. Yet the Brontës (and Dickinson as well) remain committed (not uncritically) to a poetics of the romantic sublime that Rich deliberately, and for many reasons, rejects. If historically male-identified, this poetics nevertheless works in some positive ways for Charlotte Brontë's remembrance of Emily. Charlotte Brontë's elegiac passage offers a sympathetic rereading of Emily's romantic desire, as well as a hospitable place for it. *Shirley's* imaginative flight and the mysteriously expansive character of the house itself<sup>33</sup> speak to

Emily Brontë's restlessness within the categories of inside and outside, nature and the house. Charlotte's lyricism, for a moment, figuratively disarms these categories of their cultural power over women in general. By contrast, Rich's very effort to revalue the historically female sphere of the house against the sphere of the romantic natural sublime in a certain way preserves these ideological categories and immures Dickinson's desire inside them.

Yet part of Rich's problematic distance from Dickinson in this poem comes from her need to see what has changed, and not changed, since Dickinson's time. The poem's mourning of Dickinson is enmeshed in a difficult context of mourning for history, for things done and not done. Rich puts history into this elegy—exactly what is missing from the female elegy in Schenck's reading of its changelessness over centuries. She connects her own public lesbian identity with Dickinson's passionate but still private and sexually undecodable letter, while respecting the historical distance between them. Rich also mourns, without resignation, the insufficiency of her own freedom in the Berkshire hills, and the existing liability of living things to violence.

as it is not as we wish it  
as it is not as we work for it  
to be

What is at stake in these readings is the possibility of a nonidealizing "countertradition" of women's writing. The texts I have discussed here seem to me a fascinating concatenation of relationships; they make a powerful case for a "tradition," but not a tradition possessed of a mirror-like smoothness and coherence, the idealizing mother in which to discern the perfectly connected mother. This tradition encompasses differences among and within women, different readings of separateness and connection, different attitudes to and figurations of power. One of feminist criticism's anxieties today is whether this tradition can survive readings impelled by one version or another of the "hermeneutics of suspicion"—whether deconstructive, psychoanalytical, or marxist. What theoretical challenges to the metaphysics of self-presence, what forms of psychic ambivalence, what gaps between revisionary intentions in language and actual linguistic performances, what absences, what distances, what differences (apart from those with the male-authored tradition) can feminist critics entertain with respect to women writers? As Laurie Finke has argued, we need such theoretical challenges in order to understand the actual complexity of the "interrelationships" constituting women's texts and women as subjects.<sup>34</sup> Interrelationship, connection, is not the same as full pres-

ence or the absence of difference. Rich puts it best: we need some form of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in order to think process and pain in identity:

Ourselves as we are in these painful motions  
of staying cognizant: some part of us always  
out beyond ourselves  
knowing knowing knowing  
(*"The Spirit of Place,"* 1980)

## NOTES

1. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:349. Rich's "Spirit of Place" is in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978–81* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).
2. Celeste Schenck, "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 5, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 13–15.
3. Schenck, "Re-Constructing the Elegy," 23.
4. Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). Sacks's book—and particularly his provocative contention that the elegiac work of mourning-by-separateness applies "with similar force to both genders" (12)—helps impel Schenck's argument. Sacks's anatomy of the elegy is more richly suggestive for feminist criticism than either Schenck's essay or this chapter can show.
5. Jacqueline Rose argues this point in her critique of Chodorow's and others' "sociological accounts of gender," in "Femininity and its Discontents," *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 90–91.
6. Schenck, "Re-Constructing the Elegy," 15.
7. Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 32.
8. C. W. Hatfield, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941), 243–44. I quote the poem in the version Charlotte edited and published in 1850, because one of the issues at stake in this argument is how Charlotte re-presents Emily.
9. *Ibid.*, 243. The manuscript is dated January 2, 1846.
10. As Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) narrates Emily Brontë's illness: "She made no complaint; she would not endure questioning; she rejected sympathy and help" (354).
11. The collaboration between Emily and Charlotte Brontë on "Stanzas" may have been more one-sided than Charlotte's attribution of Emily's authorship suggests. Hatfield notes that no manuscript of "Stanzas" survives and gives his opinion that the poem "savors more strongly of Charlotte than Emily, seeming to express Charlotte's thoughts about her sister, rather than Emily's own thoughts" (255). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, however, in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), acknowledge "speculation" about the poem's authorship but declare that "the poem

seems to express much of Emily's characteristic vision," and print it as hers (751). I will treat the author, provisionally, as Emily Brontë; but the possibility of Charlotte's forgery (to put it strongly) underlines the problem of how literal faithfulness and connectedness to the dead (typical of women in Schenck's reading of women's elegies) perhaps crosses over, here, into literally claiming the signature of the dead—a powerful usurpation of the dead woman poet's identity and autonomous voice.

12. Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, 132.

13. Brontë's more typically heroic mourning poems can be seen as the ultimate instance of women's insistence on connectedness. As Schenck comments: "In #182 [Cold in the earth, and the deep snow piled above thee!], Rosina even asks to die when Julius does, knowing that in time she will forget to mourn him: as that 'divinest anguish' of grief now defines her relation to him, it is as if she fears that ceasing to mourn would most threaten her sense of self" (24), whereas continuing to mourn (contrary to Freud's thesis) emphatically exalts her sense of self (as superior to "the empty world"). But the poems are more complicated than this would suggest. In fact the speaker of #182 says she has "Sternly denied [her young soul] its burning wish to hasten / Down to that tomb already more than mine!" And she speaks fifteen years after Julius's death. In the context of the Gondal saga, Rosina/A. G. A. is outstandingly successful in what Schenck and Sacks suggest is the *male* elegist's activity—figuratively and literally substituting new gratifications for old. She has it both ways: getting through (while gorgeously, orgulously mourning) lots of men. See, for instance, #110 (To A. G. A.), where A. G. A. figures a change in love objects as the substitution of sun for moon (eerily recalling Shelley's figurative love astronomy in the "Epipsychidion"). See Nina Auerbach for a more extended reading of what Auerbach eloquently calls "A.G.A.'s sin against relationship, and her gift to it as well." *Romantic Imprisonment*, 218. The character in the Gondal saga who best lives out what Schenck sees as a female will to stay connected, the inability to sublimate or refigure desire, is actually Lord Alfred of Aspin Castle, who kills himself for love of A. G. A.

14. Auerbach, "Emily Brontë's Anti-Romance," esp. 218–19.

15. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss the famous Eve passage of chapter 18 in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 193–96.

16. Legions of critics have complained of Charlotte's treatment of *Wuthering Heights* in the preface she wrote for the posthumous edition of 1850. "An interpreter ought always to have stood between [Emily] and the world," Charlotte wrote in the 1850 edition's "Biographical Notice." Repr. in Mark Schorer, ed., *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1966), xxix. Charlotte, to the extent that she could, assumed that role of interpreter.

17. Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. Andrew and Judith Hook (1849; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), chapter 22, 373–74.

18. Emily Brontë's own poems often turn back the expected romantic epithalamium in one way or another; see Auerbach, "Emily Brontë's Anti-Romance," 220.

19. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 307–8.

20. Mrs. Pryor's difference from Shirley is literalized inasmuch as she is not Shirley's own biological mother but rather Caroline's (the novel's other heroine). Psychologically, Mrs. Pryor's participation in the scene recalls the good-enough mother described by object-relations psychologist D. W. Winnicott, who can stand by—even be temporarily forgotten—while the child explores her separate autonomy. See D. W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone," in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965); and *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 47–48.

21. Helen Michie also notes of this passage that "Shirley's visionary re-writings cannot sustain themselves; by the end of the novel her authorial voice speaks out only in schoolgirl compositions corrected and interpreted by her teacher/lover Louis Moore, to whom, like so many Brontë heroines, she defers as "master." *The Flesh Made Word*, 116. Within the novel's own narrative frame, this is true enough; but in the larger context of the Brontë sisters' achievement, something in this passage is sustained in my reading.

22. Rich has since reissued her collected poems in volumes incorporating later work, so that the special concluding force of "From an Old House in America" is no longer felt in the same way; even in 1975, however, one would have read "From an Old House" both as conclusion and as initiation.

23. I regret that I am not able to include a discussion of Rich's next volume, *Your Native Land, Your Life*, which begins with the sustained elegiac sequence, "Sources."

24. Sigmund Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" (1923); trans. James Strachey, repr. in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), reinterpreted by Jacques Derrida in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

25. Wendy Martin has also remarked that in these lines Rich is "rejecting the romantic exaltation in freedom from everyday concerns." *An American Triptych*, 220. Neither Wordsworth nor Romanticism, of course, so simply rejected the everyday. Neither Martin's discussion nor mine can do justice to Rich's complicated relationship with the ideological underpinnings of that particularly Wordsworthian Romanticism which sought exaltation as "A simple produce of the common day" ("Prospectus" to *The Excursion*)—one of the ancestors of Rich's own "dream of a common language."

26. See Margaret Homans's discussion of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, 41–103.

27. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 50.

28. Sacks discusses this move in Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais." *The English Elegy*, 90–117, 138–65.

29. Rich, "Vesuvius at Home." See chapter 3 above.

30. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 147.

31. *Ibid.*, 151.

32. On the political importance of thinking difference in deconstructive

terms, see Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1–11.

33. Compare Lucy Snowe's apostrophe to imagination in *Villette*: "A dwelling thou hast, too wide for walls, too high for dome—a temple whose floors are space—" (chapter 21). Her vaunting lament for her love of Graham Bretton is cast in similar terms: "Graham's thoughts of me were not entirely those of a frozen indifference, after all. I believe in that goodly mansion, his heart, he kept one little place under the skylights where Lucy might have entertainment, if she chose to call. . . . I kept a place for him, too—a place of which I never took the measure, either by rule or compass: I think it was like the tent of Peri-Banou. All my life long I carried it folded in the hollow of my hand—yet, released from that hold and constriction, I know not but its innate capacity for expanse might have magnified it into a tabernacle for a host" (chapter 38). As Mary Jacobus points out, however, this dwelling may also contract into a prison in which Reason and Imagination alternately keep guard. "The Buried Letter: *Villette*," 59–60; see chapter 3 above.

34. Laurie Finke, "The Rhetoric of Marginality: Why I Do Feminist Theory," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 5, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 252–72.

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