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Songs of Silence:  
Women's Writing and the  
Recovery of the Romantic Project

Introduction

The first day in a freshman writing class is inevitably one in which the sound of an anxious and expectant silence deafens real speech. Its first spoken words are often a recitation of the syllabus: papers to be written, books to be read, first words then sentences then paragraphs to be understood, then forms of writing to be mastered (or sometimes the reverse), a jargon to be learned like those in all the other college classrooms. Next to the mathematics class, it is probably the place of more anxiety than any other college classroom. It is the place where mistakes will be corrected with varying degrees of embarrassment to corrector (teacher) and correctee (student), where inevitably some hidden fault will come to light, no matter how hard its author tries to cover her confusion. It is a place of many assumptions about what should be known before we come—or, worse, what has never been known and seemingly never will. Here, being and knowing play hide-and-seek on expectant faces, suspicious, and rightly so, that despite all the talk about process (the being) the grade will evaluate a product (the knowing) pure and simple.

Is it any wonder, then, that following the first, tentative written piece, dashed off in varying degrees of hurry and confusion (often the "writing sample") a first questioner turns out of the peer group sharing each others' work toward the place in the room where the teacher stands: "Is this right?" "Am I right?" "Is this what you want?" "How many pages should it be?" "Is this too short?" "Is this long enough?" "My teacher said that you should always/never do it this way." Clearly, there is a silent, conspiratorially enforced agreement: this will never be the place of "plain and ordinary things." Thus, the anxiety: these students sense that they are somehow broken writers who have come to the college writing class, with understandably varying degrees of desire, in one last effort to be "fixed."

The effort to separate process and form (or content), the ecstatic and the rational, the natural and the human, the private and the public, the *reproductive* world of conceiving, gestating, nurturing children and the *productive* one, is a hallmark of the separation of ontology from epistemology, of being from knowing. Relating these two worlds of experience, or, better, recognizing that being and knowing are dialectical processes informing our experience of one world, is crucial to making art (the “piece” is, after all, an intersection of many kinds of knowing-in-the-world and being-in-the-world). And this recognition is crucial to making *meaning* in a written text. In short, the piece gives speech to what both William Wordsworth and Adrienne Rich think of as “plain and ordinary things.” In so doing, as utterance, it connects us to them and enables us to “compose” our brokenness. In composing the text, we compose, as well, the self.

To rethinking the art of writing and the art of teaching writing, the feminist movement’s revisioning activity can make a radical contribution. Exploring that contribution, it is finally not necessary—and not the project of this book—to ask if women’s writing is “different” in some particular way. Nevertheless, the intersection of women’s arts and theories encourages us to rethink the ways we read and write, and the ways we teach students to do both, as well. A revisioned literary history is important to this enterprise. New ways of reading texts in light of that historical revision offer insights about the relationship between reading and writing, about writing processes and writing pedagogy.

This chapter looks at the efforts of some women to recover, readress and reintegrate the work of the Romantics, which writers like Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot strove so hard to repudiate. Their project has three dimensions: it involves, first, women’s definition of the object; second, their sense of the perceiving subject’s relations *with* (not *to*) the object; and last, the nature of knowing/being expressed in the written record of that seeing-in-relationship.

### The Problem of Romanticism

As the Romantic experiment failed<sup>1</sup> and as efforts to repress the questions it raised and to repudiate the relationships it deemed important intensified, the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> experienced a gradual, horrifying numbness. This “denaturing” of experience was marked by a growing rift between human and natural, human and human, between aspects of the self, between knowing and being, between the song and the text. If our connection with the world and with each other is broken,

and if significant aspects of the self are repressed, the text that explores and constructs meaning will be broken, too. I propose that, as teachers of writing in the twentieth century, we are facing in our students' texts the consequences of that brokenness. Women's literature frequently records the effort to come to terms with this actual—and literal—brokenness. In part, this is because women write from the position of Other. In Peter Duerr's terms, we have consistently stood, or been placed, in the "wild" space outside of the culture's enclosure,<sup>3</sup> a position that often facilitates the critique of the relation between sameness and difference and a recognition of the dialectical nature of that relation. Consequently, I believe that we can learn a great deal from women's work.

If we must discover new forms to reconstruct meaning from brokenness, as teachers of writing we must find new forms to help students reestablish the relationships that Romantic writers understood and brought into their texts as crucial to a fulfilled, authentic life. These new forms are essential for making meaning of learning processes, too. So pedagogical and aesthetic questions are never mutually exclusive; that is, both practices—the pedagogical and the aesthetic—remain rooted in *ethos*, in questions about how to live authentically.

Where have students learned this sense of brokenness, and how have we come to suggest to them—and perhaps believe ourselves—that the writing class is higher education's last-stop repair shop? In part, it is because they come convinced that they have no story to tell.<sup>4</sup> In part, it is because Wordsworth's triumphant experiment "to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure"<sup>5</sup>—an experiment about language, but really an experiment about connecting people to their world and to one another—finally failed. And, in part, it is because the potential fruits of his experiment were finally buried under an avalanche of competing cultural demands unleashed upon everyone by the growth of the modern city.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, English and American people found themselves confronting city life as a reality and as an image—or, better, an icon—of the impact its technology would have on their lives. A pervasive brokenness—real and imaginative—begins here. So, too, begins the human lament for what is lost. In Byron's *Don Juan*, London is

A mighty mass of brick, and smoke, and shipping,  
Dirty and dusky, but wide as eye

Could reach, . . . a wilderness of steeples peeping  
On tiptoe through their sea-coal canopy. (X, lxxxii, 1–3, 5–6)

For Wordsworth, it is a “monstrous ant-hill on the plain/Of a too busy world!” (*Prelude* VII, 149–50).

A work completed to our hands, that lays,  
If any spectacle on earth can do,  
The whole creative powers of man asleep! . . .  
. . . What a shock  
For eyes and ears!  
What anarchy and din,  
Barbarian and infernal,—a phantasma,  
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound!  
(*Prelude*, VII, 679–81, 685–88)

In Charles Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit*, it is “this crowd of objects” (162), and in *Bleak House*: “Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snow flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. . . . Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city” (1). For Eliot, it is simply “Unreal” (*The Wasteland*, 60), for Joseph Conrad, surreal: “Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven’s frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world’s light. There was . . . darkness enough to bury five million lives” (*The Secret Agent*, 12).

In the midst of this mesmerizing city stood the Crystal Palace, a paradox of steel and glass erected in 1851 on the green in Hyde Park, an industrial exhibit hall and a pervasive symbol of Victorian worship of progress. But the psychological reality was a pervasive sense of their own brokenness. Wordsworth would write in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: “For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities” (*Prose Works*, 128). “I am past thirty, and three parts iced over—and my pen, it seems to me is even stiffer and more cramped than

my feeling," Arnold had written to his friend in 1853 (Foster, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, 128).

Arnold's remarks come at the midpoint of a century whose pervasive themes are broken geography and broken object-relations—country and city, organism and mechanism, parent and child, person and nature, person and person, self and selves—and a desperate effort to find appropriate connection. The early part of the century had witnessed a Romantic revival of the lyric; its singers sought with varying degrees of success to make the object into an image, an imaginative leap through which their transcendence of brokenness might be achieved. Tintern Abbey and the natural landscape that surrounded it became for Wordsworth a reminder of a certain kind of childhood vision of a time when "Their colors and their forms, were then to me/An appetite; a feeling and a love" ("Lines: Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 79–80). It was a vision to be repudiated by the adult mind. Abbey and landscape became as well vehicles for an extraordinarily abstract (and one might say finally highly suspect) feeling of "connection" to "humanity."

. . . I have learned  
 To look on nature, not as in the hour  
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
 The still, sad music of humanity,  
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns  
 . . . and in the mind of man . . .

("Lines: Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 88–89)

The struggle with abstraction is reflected in what becomes of things, and persons, in some of Wordsworth's work. One might say, for example, that only a man of Wordsworth's class privilege (and distance from certain kinds of people and objects) could romanticize the "dignity" of a leech-gatherer's life, immersed in frigid ponds, attracting the bloodsuckers for later sale with his warm-blooded, quickly chilling, old legs. These poems begin in specificity—a ruined abbey, daffodils, a nightingale, an urn—but they end with the object-made-image—thus somehow no longer itself. The lament of Keats ("Cold Pastoral!") seems inevitable. Entombed in his hedgerow, he recognized the failure—or at

least the unbearable transiency—of this project of transcendence: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (“Ode on a Grecian Urn,” 45; “Ode to a Nightingale,” 79–80). A failure to connect lurked in the hedgerow, and in the heart.

By midcentury, the voice of Arnold would be heard claiming, emphatically and repeatedly, a new, back-to-basics project: “to see the object as in itself it really is” (“On Translating Homer,” *Complete Prose Works*, 1: 140). Arnold rode the railroad all over Europe for thirty-five years, inspecting schools and producing several volumes of essays on the problem of education in England and on the Continent. He and his fellow Victorians were, at least early in their careers, obsessed with form as a means of managing a psychically unmanageable content. Their poems, like his, were a poignant lament over their disconnection from history, from other persons, from nature, from the imaginative faith of their Romantic predecessors, and from themselves. (It was, after all, not an accident that the Romantic lyric gave way to the dramatic monologue, a poem of implied, not actual, conversation, and a poem of intellectual relativism that was the form perfected by this latter part of the nineteenth century.) Defeated by his inability to fulfill his own classical prescription that poetry should “inspirit and rejoice the reader” (*Complete Prose Works*, 1:2), Arnold concludes the Preface to his *Poems, 1853* with a resounding exhortation to formal excellence:

if it is impossible for us, under the circumstances amidst which we live, to think clearly, to feel nobly, and to delineate firmly; if we cannot attain to the mastery of the great artists;—let us, at least, have so much respect for our art as to prefer it to ourselves. Let us not bewilder our successors; let us transmit to them the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws, under which excellent works may again, perhaps, at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect, not yet condemned and canceled by the influence of their eternal enemy, caprice. (*Complete Prose Works*, 1:15)

But neither tinkering with form nor tinkering with content worked. Arnold simply stopped being a poet and turned to writing about poetry, politics, and society instead. The ultimate terror of this self-exploration was, of course, solipsism, what he called in the 1853 Preface “the great disease of modernism, the dialogue of the mind with itself.” While his classicism called him to epic, his inherently Romantic legacy made him,

at his best, a lyric poet, but one frightened by what his poetic self-confession might reveal. In fact, only quite late in his career, after he had stopped writing poetry, did Arnold put aside his terror of the emotional anarchy the Romantics' exploration of the feeling self seemed to threaten and celebrated the vital promise offered by their "*lyrical cry*" ("On Translating Homer," *Complete Prose Works*, 1:209). While his Scholar Gypsy was "born in days when wits were fresh and clear" ("The Scholar Gypsy," 201), his nostalgically Romantic, Victorian consciousness experienced itself, "With its sick hurry and its divided aims" (204), "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born" ("Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse," 85–86). And in "The Buried Life" he stutters rhetorically,

Only—but this is rare—  
 When a beloved hand is laid in ours, . . .  
 When our world-deafen'd ear  
 Is by the tones of a lov'd voice caress'd  
 . . . then he *thinks* he knows  
 The Hills where his life rose,  
 And the sea where it goes.  
 (77–78, 82–83, 96–98; emphasis added)

The object as image was insufficient to the Victorian imagination, and genuine connection—to object or person—seemed an impossibility.

Arnold's legacy in the twentieth century is Eliot's "Prufrock," who "dares" not even "think he knows." Eliot's "objective correlative" is a catchphrase that seeks to achieve the same promise as Arnold's "imaginative reason"<sup>6</sup>—appropriate connection of the feeling subject to an object "in itself, as it really is." His work demonstrates a visceral struggle with the problem of integrating feeling and the necessity to provide an "objective" description of experience. While it reflects the failure of William Blake's triumphant proclamation that imagination itself might "buil[d] Jerusalem/In England's green pleasant land" ("Preface," from *Milton*, II, 15–16), Eliot's struggle demonstrates that the dream was not yet dead.

Feminist criticism has pointed out that disconnection, the denaturing of the lived experience, had inevitably to be accompanied by a devaluing of the feminine—life—principles, and thus a devaluing of "woman," and of individual women in the culture. This devaluing was acted out in the creation of forms, the Victorian "Angel in the House" and her whalebone corset not the least of them. These forms could capture and possess her energy and her potency, thus mastering and

sanitizing (dreadful corruption of the world) a terrifying array of natural processes—among them conception, birth, and the nurturing of children—through mastering her.

If this poetry of male Romantics and their legatees expressed their yearning for connection, it was complemented by the separation imposed on women. Many “forms” were erected on the conventional ground of language itself. Pregnancy was called “confinement.” Middle and upper class working women who married were abruptly and immediately “retired” to the home to await the birth of children without any cultural ritual to ease that drastic change of lifestyle. “Rest” cures for “hysterical” symptoms focused on eliminating factors that had caused them—underlying disturbances of women’s reproductive organs and functions—and were conducted with the demand for complete control by a male physician whose female nurses dispensed milk diets and douches while he himself prescribed aliments and nutriments, the potables heavily laced with alcohol.<sup>7</sup> Massive furniture, some of it heavily and elaborately carved, crowded every room, its weight and mass bringing a kind of solid security in a rapidly changing world, and a massive cleaning problem, too. Multiple patterns covered walls, drapes, and rugs as though frantically to fill up every possibility of empty space. The nursery was removed to the top of the house; in *Jane Eyre* only the attic where Rochester’s “nymphomaniac” wife was kept and from which her mad laugh echoed was at further remove from the everyday work of the household. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story recording her own “rest cure” reveals, more than one attempt was made to “confine” women there with their children and to use infantilization itself as a primary means of control; thus, the Victorian sexual fascination for the child-woman.<sup>8</sup>

And gradually, relentlessly, male and female writers in the latter half of the century, their texts strewn with lovers, brokenhearted in one way or another, tell stories of efforts—largely unsuccessful—to bind up and thus to control those demonic and ecstatic elements that were the great fascination of an earlier Romantic generation. It is a tribute to the power of this Romantic inheritance and the women who came to embody it that, despite relentless efforts at repression, this feminine energy would not be contained. The child Jane throws herself furiously against the locked doors of her dead stepfather’s blood-red bedroom, and they do not yield. But she is delivered unconscious from this room, reborn in the identity of a confirmed defiance that causes Jane the woman to refuse Rochester’s efforts to dress her as his doll, and infuses her refusal to return to him until his dreadfully maimed state guarantees her mastery of their married life together. Rochester’s wife emerges from her attic, and the fire of her bounded rage burns down his house and wreaks upon him



a terrible, castrating revenge. Keats's sinuous Lamia and Coleridge's Christabel find expression in Tennyson's Vivien and Rossetti's often halo-bound recreations out of myth and literature. Despite her reduced social status at court, the prostituted quality of her sexuality, and the pitiful tenor of her jealousy, Vivien works her magic, entombing Merlin for eternity like no mean Circe. And the sinuous hands of Rossetti's women, along with the sheer mass of their hair and torsos, threaten always to burst from the confinement of his frames. In short, as Nina Auerbach argues of texts whose women are apparently more submissive (the saintly child Helen is clearly Jane's foil in this regard), these women's stories are the fulfillment of "a vital Victorian mythology whose lovable woman is a silent and self-disinherited mutilate, the fullness of whose extraordinary and dangerous being might at any moment return through violence. The taboos that encased Victorian woman contained buried tributes to her disruptive power" (*Woman and the Demon*, 8). Again, "Burne-Jones and his Victorian associates force us to look into the serpent-woman's face and to feel the mystery of a power, endlessly mutilated and restored, of a woman with a demon's gifts" (*Woman and the Demon*, 9). Seeking to master nature—and the nature in ourselves—we confront increasingly the fact that we have instead unleashed a monster—many monsters, in fact. But the warnings of these consequences were present already in nineteenth-century images of women over whom for centuries patriarchal cultures had sought control as part and parcel of this ongoing obsession for mastery over life and, thus, over death.

The complement to this sense of broken relationship, to the disconnection from the objects of our experience that images cannot heal, to the separation and silencing of women in culture, is the loss of song, the loss of story itself. In his book, *The Singer of Tales*, Albert Lord reflects that "if the way of life of a people furnishes subjects for story and affords occasion for the telling, this art will be fostered. . . . The songs have died out in the cities not because life in a large community is an unfitting environment for them but because schools were first founded there and writing has been firmly rooted in the way of life of the city dwellers" (20). Why did writing silence song? Because in Europe, culture and literacy had gradually come to be synonymous. "Culture and humanity resided in writing. Without writing there was a void. The oral culture of the indigenous civilization was a non-culture, was barbarous. By a process of repetition, 'humanity' came to be synonymous with being European: with the 'possessor' of European culture. . . . The myth of the cultural void of the non-West—The Other—was to be central to the ideology which the West would use in its rise to world domination."<sup>9</sup>

Silencing women's efforts to represent their experience is of a piece with male efforts to culturally dominate the "barbarian" Other, because women's project shares important connections to that of oral cultures. Women's writing takes as one of its projects a return through memory to a time and a culture that is not "illiterate" as it is typically described, but "preliterate," to an oral tradition in which the word is conceived as "utterance," the "outring" of self in order that the self can find a creative and fluid intersection with an ongoing cultural tradition. Madeleine Grumet speaks of it as "recovering our own possibilities, ways of knowing and being in the world that we remember and imagine and must draw into language that can span the chasm that presently separates what we know as our public and private worlds" (*Bitter Milk*, 15). This is, of course, what the Romantic lyric, which is first and foremost a song, was about.

In women's writing, this reclamation has often involved the recovery of personal history, partly, yet significantly, what Virginia Woolf called "think[ing] back through our mothers" (*A Room of One's Own*, 79), a task that every woman writer must inevitably do at some point—or at many points—in her ongoing process. Secondly, it involves the rediscovery and the reaffirmation of the senses and the sense of time, of history, that are the hallmarks of this preliterate time of life and this preliterate relationship to language. This is no conventional history, but the history of our own Otherness and, by dialectical extension, the record of the ways that we, too, have been possessed and colonized in the West. In short, just as there is an oral tradition emerging from the preliterate period in the history of a culture's literature, a period when "composition and performance are two aspects of the same moment" (Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 13), so too is there a preliterate period in the history of an individual's struggle toward written language and the sense of fixity and "conventionalization" that the mastery of written language inevitably brings.<sup>10</sup>

In their effort to move back behind erected linguistic conventions that have fixed their identity in a language foreign to their experience and a linearity foreign to their understandings of time and space, these women, too, seek a return to a kind of Romantic consciousness in which being and knowing—composition and performance—are at least dialectically understood if they can no longer in a literate society be conceived as one. Preliterate men, bards, and troubadours,<sup>11</sup> and their Romantic legatees, sang the poetry that shaped and was shaped by culture, but lost the song when their literacy became obsessed with fact, with linearity, with progress defined only as a relentless hurtle toward technocracy. Reminding us of what we had lost and seeking a way to recover it in song was preeminently Romantic work. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was among the first of these efforts.

Contemporary women writers, like their Romantic counterparts, seek the recovery of this oral tradition. Their interest is not its formed, or formal, but its *forming* possibilities and its connection to mythic time. They seek the song as utterance. But, unlike their predecessors, they seek the song, not to *make* the object image, but to *forge a relationship* between the two. They seek the moment of relation and the many moments that become history, that place “between” that Virginia Woolf calls “the moment of being.” They seek what Rich calls “the thing itself and not the myth” (“Diving into the Wreck,” I.63).<sup>12</sup> They are both willing, and in fact recognize the need, to suspend fact for facticity,<sup>13</sup> expecting to find and articulate not “truth” but “truth-in-relation,” and to “know” it by its “being” there in relation to them.

Despite current cultural pressure to make students write in conformity to standard English, the first battle of the writing classroom is, ironically, against the conventionalization of language. This is, it seems to me, a renewed Romantic battle in the oral tradition particular to the project of women’s literature, and women’s work in this regard can be significantly instructive to writing pedagogy. Its aim is to help students discover, to hear, or perhaps best, to overhear, their own voices—voices that many writing teachers I know will lament as having been absent from students’ texts for a very long time—and once they have overheard them, in Eliot’s phrase, to “dare” to *trust* them.<sup>14</sup> Eudora Welty writes of her own process:

Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn’t *hear*. As my eyes followed a sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn’t my mother’s voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. . . . I have supposed but never found out, that this is the case with all readers—to read as listeners—and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me. Whether I am right to trust so far I don’t know. By now I don’t know whether I could do either one, reading or writing, without the other. (*One Writer’s Beginnings*, 12–13)

The work of these women writers is crucially about memory, a chief fascination for Romantic and Victorian alike (although each group regarded its activity and its fruits very differently). It is also about

discovering techniques that can link sensation to experience and to feeling. This work leads ultimately, as Robert Langbaum (*The Mysteries of Identity*) describes the Romantic understanding of these, to *self* (what Keats called “Soul”), to *identity* (the continuity of self over time), and, I would argue, to *voice* emerging from a written text. For *self* and therefore *voice*, in my view, is dependent on the capacity to do exactly what Madeleine Grumet describes: to remember ways of knowing and being in the world, the childlike and the playful not the least of these; to imagine the possibilities for other ways of knowing and being, and to have the capability of calling them into language.

Tracing nineteenth-century understandings of “self” through Locke, Hume, and (chiefly) Wordsworth, Langbaum argues that, for Hume, “the self is a retrospective construction of the imagination, and for this reason ‘memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production.’ Only through memory can we create the self by seeing continuity between past and present perceptions. . . . Memory above all will remain the creator, the artist-fabricator, of self” (*The Mysteries of Identity*, 27). But “[Hume] lacks the Wordsworthian notion that the forgotten past comes suddenly alive in the present and establishes when it does the only continuity of self that matters” (28).

This movement backward in order to go forward is, as Langbaum notes, a chief characteristic of Wordsworth’s “processive self.” It is also a hallmark of the personal narrative work of countless women writers, and it spills richly into their fiction, as well. The object relation happens by remembering the object and imaginatively reproducing it. In this relationship, the self is formed and transcended at the same time, a circular—or spiraling—evolution both celebratory of and dependent upon a faith in the relational possibilities of human experience.<sup>15</sup>

Yet while the object-made-image may evoke archetypal dimensions of the human self and of human experience, the risk is always that the semiosis of the object may disconnect it from its reality as a thing in the world. This is one dimension of the kind of solipsism most feared by the Romantic generation, and it underlies Keats’s lament about the veracity of his own ecstatic experience as the nightingale flees from his hedgerow.

Often their inability to grasp multiple levels of meaning attached to image and symbol as they are claimed and elaborated by individual writers and cultures causes contemporary students to be labeled “literalist.” But as legatees of the Romantic struggle with the same issue, they are finally, it seems to me, certainly *not* literal—and this is the problem—they are simply not connected to these objects at all. How, then, does writing teacher help these students to begin to recover connections?

I suspect the answer is not to forget, as Wordsworth felt he had to, the time of “thoughtless youth,” but to begin to remember it. These memories and imaginings are first called into language—first given voice—in song. This is where the troubadours began, this is where the Romantic poets began, and this is where many contemporary women writers begin as well. “My mother,” Welty says, “always sang to her children” (*One Writer’s Beginning*, 12). Traditionally, the lyric, the formal hallmark of nineteenth-century Romanticism, has been understood to be the place of song, of utterance, but to harvest its rich potential, and to grasp the extent to which this potential has been lost to literate cultures, necessitates a return to an understanding of its oral roots.

### Orality and Memory

The thematic and formal qualities of oral narrative have been well documented by Scholes and Kellogg in *The Nature of Narrative*, and by Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales*. I suspect, in fact, that Matthew Arnold intuitively recognized and effectively exploited the oral *formula*, “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea,”<sup>16</sup> as a rhetorical strategy. But what is most interesting is the way Lord describes the epic songs of illiterate Yugoslavian mountain poets recorded almost eighty years ago, and what his description offers to writing classroom theory. First, Lord notes that the oral poet is not merely a transmitter but also a creator of cultural tradition: his key point—and the key point of the relationships among these oral poets, romantic writers, and contemporary women’s work—is that the act of composition and the act of performance are one and the same. Unlike the Western, postliterate ballad passed on exactly from generation to generation, “an oral poem is not composed *for* but *in* performance. . . . We must eliminate from the word ‘performer’ any notion that he is one who merely reproduces what someone else or even he himself has composed. . . . Our singer of tales is a composer of tales. Singer, performer, composer, and poet are one under different aspects *but at the same time*. Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act” (*The Singer of Tales*, 13).

“[S]uch a price/The Gods exact for song;/To become what we sing” (“The Strayed Reveller,” 232–34), Arnold had written in this poem richly reminiscent of Keats. “I do not believe in separation,” says Bernard in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*.<sup>17</sup> “The human voice has a disarming quality—(we are not single, we are one)” (221). In an important sense,

students' questions—"Is it right?" "Is it long enough?" "How do I do that?"—suggest the extent to which we have communicated to them a false linearity in the writing process: first we compose it, then it is read, usually in silence, by the teacher at her desk, to determine if it is "right." This implies that writing and making texts are the same activity, that writing involves fixed forms to be learned and imitated rather than fluid processes to be entered into. From this it follows that students experience themselves as mere transmitters of cultural convention rather than as creative voices to be added to the chorus of those who have come before. Writing so often with a frightened sense of how their texts will look (rarely sound) to their teacher-audience, students lose both a sense of ownership of their work (words pass through them but do not come from and so do not belong to them) and a validation of their own voices. Thus the brokenness of their relationship to fact—the negation of facticity: these voiceless students simply never tell their own stories because they never feel invited, in the world of school, to tell them, nor have they inherited the tools or the attitude of mind that would make the telling possible. How many of our students feel able to risk the act, or to pay what Arnold calls (and Woolf demonstrates is) the price—in self-exposure, in effort, and in time—to be genuinely connected to the object? And how often have they learned from the academy a false sense of appropriateness that has negated their experience and in some cases invalidated the fullness of experience itself?

It was the urge to invite back into their songs all kinds of experiences proscribed by past formal constraints that gave impetus to the Romantic movement. This same impetus informs contemporary women's writing—and should inform contemporary teaching as well. Woolf's poet, Neville, one voice of the six who compose *The Waves*, speaks about experience in a way that prescribes how Woolf's prose poem is to be read—or, better, how it is to be listened to—and what the nature of the relationship between person and person, person and world, person and self or selves, reader/listener and narrator must be:

Certainly, one cannot read this poem without effort. The page is often corrupt and mud-stained, and torn and stuck together with faded leaves, with scraps of verbena or geranium. To read this poem one must have myriad eyes . . . One must put aside antipathies and jealousies and not interrupt. One must have patience and infinite care and let the light sound, whether of spiders' delicate feet on a leaf or the chuckle of water in some irrelevant drainpipe, unfold too. Nothing is to

be rejected in fear or horror. . . One must be skeptical, but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely. Also sometimes weep; also cut away ruthlessly with a slice of the blade soot, bark, hard accretions of all sorts. And so (while they talk) let down one's net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make poetry. (313–14)

In addition, Lord's description of Yugoslav villages where oral poets perform can also speak richly to the writing classroom's pedagogy. In fact, it is a paradigm for the contemporary classroom with all its literal, cognitive, and emotional traffic.

In the country villages, where the houses are often widely separated, a gathering may be held at one of the houses during a period of leisure from the work in the fields. Men from all the families assemble and one of their number may sing epic songs. Because of the distances between the houses some of the guests arrive earlier than others, and of course this means that some leave earlier. Some very likely spend the whole night. . . . The singer has to contend with an audience that is coming and going, greeting newcomers, saying farewell to early leavers; a newcomer with special news or gossip may interrupt the singing for some time, perhaps even stop it entirely. (*The Singer of Tales*, 14)

We think of the writing classroom as a place like so many others in which a certain amount of teaching/learning occurs in a specified amount of time. In reality, like Lord's description of Yugoslavian storytelling, it is not a place, but a time—a fluid and chaotic time without a defined beginning or ending—a moment of being together in which composing and performing are one activity. This conception can shed new light on curriculum, on our conception of writing as a solitary *versus* a communal activity, on the syllabus with its defined goals and fixed due-dates for paper completion, and, along with these poets' sense of "repertory" and "competence," on the revision process itself.

First, after the poet has listened much of his life to other singers and longs to join their ranks, an increase in the poet's competence involves not primarily increasing his "products"—the number of songs per se that he can sing—but facility with a process: "this does not involve memorizing a text, but practicing until he can compose it, or recompose

it himself" (*The Singer of Tales*, 25). Consequently, there is no imaginary *Wasteland*—no imaginary fixed and unchanging text against which "correctness" can be measured. Secondly, he is a poet without a sense of linearity. His sense of the word involves its embeddedness in a relational group of sounds: "The word for 'word' means an 'utterance.' When the singer is pressed then to say what a line is, he, whose chief claim to fame is that he traffics in lines of poetry, will be entirely baffled by the question" (25). This extends to his consciousness of time, as well. When asked if he can learn a song he hears right away, he responds, "Yes, I could sing it for you right away the next day" (26). What is more, "The singers he has heard have given him the necessary traditional material to make it possible for him to sing, but the length of his songs and the degree to which he will ornament and expand them will depend on the demand of the audience" (25).

He sees the work not as a partial structure, beginning, middle, and end; the conception of "line" as a partial unit of meaning has no significance to him. His focus is a core of meaning out of which the structures that allow and enhance its expression emerge. The activity of composition is therefore organic, not self-consciously mechanical, and it is ultimately bound up with a consideration that it is sung to be overheard. Finally, the revision process is celebrated as an ongoing, lifelong one. Competence, artistry, involve having "a sufficient command of the formula technique to sing any song that he hears, and enough thematic material at hand to lengthen or shorten a song according to his own desires and to create a new song if he sees fit" (26). He can thus never, like contemporary students and teachers, ask the questions "Is this right?" "How many pages should it be?" "Is it good enough for an A, a B, a C?" but only the single question "Does this work?" This question can be asked only in the felt context of a supportive community, without the anxieties that we know block the composing process. It is a question that causes the modern writing teacher to rethink the concept of fact and originality, as well as the nature of the composing process itself.

Demo Zogic, one of the poets Lord interviewed in his study, comments on his ability to sing a song again that he has heard only once: "It's possible . . . I know from my own experience. When I was together with my brothers and had nothing to worry about, I would hear a singer sing a song to the *gusle*, and after an hour I would sing his whole song. I can't write. I would give every word and not make a mistake on a single one" (27). Yet Sulejman Makic, another poet responding to the question whether it is better to sing a new song right away, or a day later when it might be forgotten, argues: "It has to come to one. One has to think . . . how it goes, and then little by little it



comes to him, so that he won't leave anything out . . . One couldn't sing it like that all the way through right away" (26–27). What he describes is a process not merely of recovering an original text, but of recreating, recomposing the initial experience of his hearing it—the Romantic experience of seeing/hearing, remembering, imagining, calling it back into language. His relationship to fact, then, is a relationship to story, to narrative, and never to words themselves. So the concept—oft repeated in the writing classroom—"in your own words" is a foreign one to him.

We think of change in content and in wording; for, to us, at some moment both wording and content have been established. To the singer the song, which cannot be changed (since to change it would, in his mind, be to tell an untrue story or to falsify history), is the essence of the story itself. His idea of stability, to which he is deeply devoted, does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story. He builds his performance, or song in our sense, on the stable skeleton of narrative, which is the song in his sense. (99)

"My mother always sang to her children," Eudora Welty had written, overhearing her mother's storytelling voice in the dark. "Long before I wrote stories I listened for stories. Listening *for* them is something more acute than listening *to* them" (*One Writer's Beginnings*, 12, 16). "Writing is to start," writes Chantel Chawaf, "it is always to push the beginning further back, because in language nothing of the body, nothing of the woman has, as yet, been integrated. . . . Everything starts from the body and from the living, from our senses, our desires, our imagination."<sup>18</sup> "I learn," May Sarton writes, "by being *in relation to*" (*Journal of a Solitude*, 107).

Journal writing, telling one's story to oneself, is one means of creating facticity, the relation of persons to the facts of their experience, remaking as it does so our sense of time and of our "place" in it. While it is clearly not song, journal writing, the personal narrative that is undisputedly a significant one for women, is a postliterate form participating in some of the rich possibilities of its roots in oral narrative. Like the lyric, its impulse is inherently conversational: as a conversation with the self, it offers to its composers/performers the opportunity to circle back upon our experiences and ourselves, revising, reseeing both. Re-reading each successive diary entry, we may circle back not upon recorded experience per se, but on (a sometimes continually varied series

of) fixed texts that record our memory of the experience reproduced there. Composing the narrative, in fact, we compose our selves; like the way an oral poet learns his song, one comes to it “little by little.”

In Moffat and Painter’s *Revelations*, women talk about their journal writing: In 1918, the young diarist Nelly Ptashkina wrote of herself, “Two Nelly’s live in me. Sometimes I would like to know which is the real one. When I am in that other world, ‘that’ Nelly seems the real one; when I am back again in my ordinary everyday one it is ‘this.’ In fact, they complete each other and make up the real me” (59). Joanna Field speaks about her diary work in *A Life of One’s Own*: “I seemed to have two quite different selves, one which answered when I thought deliberately, another which answered when I let my thought be automatic. I decided to investigate further the opinions of the automatic one, to ask it questions and write answers without stopping to think” (352). Anne Frank’s journal is a series of letters written to an alter ego she calls Kitty: “I hid myself within myself . . . and quietly wrote down all my joys, sorrows, and contempt in my diary” (35–36).

Whether it is introduced as a book for free writing, prewriting, reaction, focused reflection, description, or dramatization, if its use is not distorted by an overzealous writing teacher anxious only to help her students find material to write about, the journal can be a safe place where conversation can begin. Because its truth is “my story,” truth-to-me, as a form it can validate the kind of “playing around” with experience that schooling’s passion for order and form so frequently condemns, and it can be a place where the resignifying process that marks feminist work with language can begin. It validates chaos as a means of making order. And in the guise of a linear record of time, it allows participation in a circular, recursive temporality so fascinating to the Romantics that is at the heart of “composing” anything, including ourselves. Virginia Woolf writes of her own journal:

there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously in fiction . . . The main requisite, I think on rereading my old volumes is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, and found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time. (Moffat and Painter, *Revelations*, 227)

Like her Romantic predecessors, what Woolf explores is her own creative process—her journals are the ground of her fiction making—and in the dialectic between journal writing and fiction writing, Woolf explores consciousness itself. Her particular interest is an inherently Romantic one: her work is an extended inventory of the objects and relations of her life in memory, but she seeks them less as images through which the transcendent can occur than as things themselves that are part and parcel of the “moments of being” punctuating the organic and orgasmic movement of her text.

Woolf’s texts are the songs of many voices, all of which are her own. More than any other twentieth-century writer she seems to have grasped the capacity to become one with the object. Her effort is to reclaim the landscape out of which the colors and the voices of her experience are born, reclaiming not fact, but facticity, and negating the kind of portraiture in which writers “collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown” (*Moments of Being*, 69).

Like Blake’s *Songs* and Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, much of women’s writing is a retrospective effort to reclaim their childhood with their mothers in order that they might reclaim both their own children and themselves: “Many bright colours; many distant sounds; some human beings, caricature, comic, several violent moments of being, always including a circle of the scene which they cut out: and all surrounded by a vast space—that is a rough visual description of childhood” (Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 79). This world begins in the nursery. Like her Romantic predecessors, Woolf seeks first to reclaim not solely childhood, but a childlike connection to the object. Remembering two “first memories” she writes:

without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself—or if not it will not matter—I begin: the first memory.

This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground—my mother’s dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose. Perhaps we were going to St. Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St. Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories. If life

has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.

. . . . .

Those moments—in the nursery, on the road to the beach—can still be more real than the present moment. (*Moments of Being*, 64–65, 67)

In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf's Rhoda expresses her struggle for identity as the desperate effort to reconnect with the objects of her experience. She begins with a lament: "I have no face." She ends with the intuition that identity is about relationship, about facticity: "Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand hard against some door to call myself back to the body" (203–4). Woolf's own intuition is that while the object itself may be lost to us, writing is a means to recover our relation to it. About her own mother she writes an incessant elegy, in diaries, autobiographical fragments, and in many fictional works:

What one would not give to recapture a single phrase even! or the tone of the clear round voice. . . . past as those years are, her mark on them is ineffaceable, as though branded by the naked steel, the sharp, the pure. Living voices in many parts of the world still speak of her as someone who is actually a fact in life . . . as of a thing that happened, recalling, as though all around her grew significant, how she stood and turned and how the bird sang loudly, or a great cloud passed across the sky. Where has she gone? What she said has never ceased. (*Moments of Being*, 36, 39)

Later she would reflect of her mother: "She was keeping what I call in my shorthand the panoply of life—that which we all lived in common—in being" (*Moments of Being*, 83).