

REMEMBERING FORGETFULNESS WOMEN POETS AND THE LYRICAL TRADITION¹

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*How happy I was if I could forget
To remember . . .*

Emily Dickinson (* 898)²

I can remember much forgetfulness.

Hart Crane³

This essay is part of a much larger project, provisionally titled "Problems of the Modern Lyric," in which I concern myself with lyric poetry, inspiration, and the muse in the Western tradition. I am particularly interested in how women poets have dealt with these problems. The question of the women poets' muse has been a major topic of feminist research in the West for the past few decades.⁴ Here, I shall articulate some of the most interesting findings of this research with a topic I formulate as memory-as-inspiration. I hope to show that remembering forgetfulness is a strategy that women poets resort to in the West for what some of us still call "inspiration."

As we all know, in the Western tradition there is not just one muse.⁵ The muses are nine, and Mnemosyne, or Memory, is their mother. The reason why we insist on speaking of "the muse," knowing perfectly well that the muses are more than one (poetry alone has more than one), is a problem I won't take up here.⁶ I may, however, touch upon the issue of the "tenth muse." As a title first given to Sappho by the Hellenistic poets, the phrase, "the tenth muse," in itself immediately suggests a questioning of the tradition. In the course of years (if not centuries), it has unsurprisingly lent itself to different kinds of reflections and yielded various book titles, including Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung in America* (1678). That the Hellenistic poets also called Sappho "the mortal muse" is, however, of far more interest to me here. My concern is to

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understand how women poets in the West situate themselves in the lyrical tradition.

As with women in a patriarchal society (or peoples of color in a racist society), women lyric poets have often found it a violence to belong to the tradition. What the tradition constantly reminds them of is exclusion, in the passive role they are often made to play in creativity. As Adrienne Rich once said memorably, "in the tradition" (she is of course referring to poetry written by male poets), the role of women is that they "are beautiful, and preferably asleep" (or dead, one might add, thinking of Dante's Beatrice; or Edgar Allan Poe's many beautiful dead women).⁷ Rich's keen observation appears in the context of her praise of Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poem that expresses the male poet's ambiguous admiration for the power of the woman's song, which he alone has just imagined. "If a woman had written that poem, my God!," Rich cries out, forgetting, perhaps, that the woman in Stevens's poem, although gallantly named "single artificer" and "maker," is the male poet's strategic invention to ground his own inescapable "rage for order." But, in "the tradition," lyric poetry is precisely the recollection of what comes *before* order (divine or otherwise), and that's where the concept of memory becomes so important.⁸ Lyric poetry is freedom and power, hence remembrance (or construction) of originary priority, and forgetfulness of any ideas of order. Even Stevens's ostensible "rage for order" is undermined by the indeterminate "ghostlier demarcations" at the end of his poem.

It is my contention that women poets do not exist outside this tradition, rather they fully belong to it, although the most gifted of them have felt the violence of their belongingness acutely and made of that feeling the very source of their writing.⁹ "She cannot forget the history of poetry, because it is not hers," says Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and then she goes on to demonstrate exactly the opposite in poems that exhibit the woman poet's subverted rememberings of her skewed, yet for-

ceful belonging to history, including a brilliant, personal reinvention of Sappho in the opening poem. In DuPlessis's "The Poems of Sappho," the ambience of Sappho's fragments is invoked and reinvented in "women's things": "tender pain," "the flesh-pink moon," "soft bread," and "tender pillows"; and a "lyre, guitar and mandolin" play to the "clear-voiced moon." But, as if belatedly reenacting the very suggestiveness of the "mortal muse"'s precarious fragments, DuPlessis's poetic subject's yearning and desiring lose their "breath" and are interrupted by "the dark sleep of night."¹⁰

The high mark of lyric poetry in the Western tradition is origination, what is often called originality of invention. It is, as Heidegger puts it after Hölderlin, the going back, by means of Memory as the mother of the Muses, to what "demands to be thought about first of all." (Heidegger, 376).¹¹ Lyric poetry, in other words, recollects experience before it gets codified in ordering abstractions. It is unconcealedness presented as form. If woman is conceived of by the overwhelmingly male-constructed poetic tradition as the origin of poetry, in the beautiful and seductive *ewig Weibliche* figure of the muse-as-inspiration, how can women conceive of themselves as bodily agents of creativity, or as potent makers? How can they discover anything, if they are mainly viewed as the mere *transport* of discovery? If woman is "the truth" or "wisdom" or the "style," as in Nietzsche, how can women conceive of themselves as makers, creators or poets?¹² In "the tradition," you cannot be poet and muse at one and the same time. The muse in the Western lyric is an intermediary figure for the radically inhuman "other" that grounds lyric poetry. She does not hold poetic power herself, she merely *transports* it and makes it available to the poet. For reasons that we are all aware of, poetry was first and for very long written almost exclusively by men. No wonder the muse was conceived of as female, in accord as well with the secondary roles women have always been ascribed in society and the culture. Some women poets have been capable of ima-

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gining the necessary otherness that grounds the power of self-sameness, without resorting to the compelling myth. Sappho is the most ancient, finest example. As Page duBois has shown, Sappho's fragmentary, indeterminate, undecidable lines disrupt a seemingly univocal culture.¹³ Her broken lines point to lyric poetry itself, the space *par excellence* of memory as recollection and forgetting, as the very site of the ever fragmented subject's self-mastery. In Sappho's fragments we never hear, "Sing O Muse!" Aside from the poet's addresses to the beloved, the closest we get to a poetic invocation is fragment 118: "yes! Radiant lyre speak to me / become a voice." (Sappho, 2002: 241). The invocation goes here, however, directly to poetry itself, not to the (intermediary) muse.¹⁴ The Muses, goddesses of the arts, are mentioned, as are the Graces, goddesses of beauty and charm, companions of the Muses and attendants of Aphrodite. Aphrodite is the only entity Sappho addresses explicitly, but Aphrodite is no muse, she is the goddess of love, beauty and pleasure, and in the fragments she signifies the poet's own desiring body, and that's precisely where the source of lyric poetry lies. The body of Sappho's poet remembers and forgets and yearns. "I long and seek after," (Sappho, 2002: 69), one of the fragments reads — and that's what makes the poem appear.

If Sappho had no need of a muse, neither did Emily Dickinson.¹⁵ Let me begin by quoting the poem from which I borrow one of my epigraphs:

How happy I was if I could forget
To remember how sad I am
Would be an easy adversity
But the recollecting of Bloom

Keeps making November difficult
Till I who was almost bold
Lose my way a little Child
And perish of the cold. (# 898)

The construction of my epigraph called for a bold interruption of sense. I want the poem to say immediately and succinctly what it does end up saying: that it is difficult to forget to remember and painful to recollect paradise in its absence. No greater pain than to recollect happiness in times of woe, says Francesca da Rimini in Dante's *Inferno* (V. 121-123). Recollecting happiness emboldens the poet but leads her astray, and she perishes. Nonetheless, it is in her perishing by the memory of absent bliss that the poem appears. Memory is the source of Dickinson's poetry. "Blossoms will run away," she sings in a bright little lyric, "Cakes reign but a Day, / But Memory like Melody / Is pink Eternally" (# 1578). Memory, however, is not usually to be so blithely conceived of, as the poem quoted in full above shows. Memory is a dangerous source of poetic power, one must not let oneself be pursued by the "fathoms" of remembrance, as another poem has it (# 1182). "Through those old Grounds of memory," Dickinson writes in another poem, "The sauntering alone / Is a divine intemperance / A prudent man would shun" (# 1753). The grounds of memory only allow for "sauntering," a marvelous word, with its mixed suggestions of wandering, idling, musing, and rambling. "Divine intemperance," the poet calls it, as if the demonic possession that male poets used to boast of had given way to the joys and pains of human recollection. It is easier to avoid intoxication, the poem goes on to say, than the "tranquil perfidy" of memory, for memory promises the gold of longing but does not deliver. Being is never possessed, it is for ever yearning, and yearning is where lyric poetry lies. To go back to "Real Memory," "shod with Adamant," as Dickinson says in still another poem (# 1508), is to center poetic power on the poet's being alone, body and soul. A poem by Ana Luísa Amaral, entitled "Nem Tágides, nem Musas," speaks eloquently of "inspiration" in a strong woman poet:¹⁶

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Nem tágides nem musas:
só uma força que me vem de dentro,
de ponto de loucura, de poço
que me assusta,
seduzindo

Uma fonte de fios de água
finíssima
(raio de luar a mais
a secaria)

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Nem rio nem lira
nem feminino grupo a transbordar:
só o que herdei em força não herdada,
em fonte onde o luar
não está

[Neither *tágides* nor muses:
just a force from inside me,
From a point of madness, a well
that scares
seducing

A spring of water threads
very fine
(too much moonlight
would dry it up)

Neither river nor lyre
nor feminine gathering overflowing:
just heirloom of force not inherited,
in spring where moonlight
is not]

The history and changing social conditions of Western culture eventually forced male poets as well to conceive of the muse and inspiration not in terms of a messenger of some transcendent divine absolute, but in terms of their own mortal bodies upon the earth. In the nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire, from his standpoint as lyric poet in the era of high

capitalism, pronounced the muse sick, evidently because the course of civilization, including, not so paradoxically, Christianization, had secularized her, drawn her further away from the ancient gods and the true spirit, or source, of inspiration; in another muse poem by Baudelaire, she is even compelled to sell herself to survive.¹⁷ In the twentieth century, Fernando Pessoa, Portuguese poet of Western decadence and lost empires, sadly acknowledged the disappearance of the Muses. "The ancients invoked the muses," writes Pessoa/Campos, "We invoke ourselves." (Pessoa: 1981: 330).¹⁸ Robbed of the Muses, the poet has no choice but to reinvent himself out of the bottomless well of his own being. It is remarkable that in Pessoa the poet reinvents himself as embodying many selves (the heteronyms), testifying to the infinite variety and complexity of being's experience. Since, in the words of a contemporary American male poet, "the muses no longer call upon the poets with the gift of the poetic word," male poets, too, must reconcile themselves with the disappearance of the muse-as-inspiration and simply abide by their own mortality.¹⁹

Women poets do not have such a problem. Hasn't mortality been always the realm of women? Herein lies the beauty of the concept of "a mortal muse." But because women poets do not exist outside the tradition, they could not ignore it as a problem. Dealing with the concept of the muse often implied for women reconceptualizing poetry: remembering what the traditional myths that ground poetry forget and re-remembering the women's place, location or position as subjects in the culture. Sometimes women poets present themselves as their own muses; but in the most powerful poetry by women, they reveal their being-poets as coinciding with poetry itself. I shall next look at some of the forms that these gestures have taken among some modern and contemporary American women poets.²⁰

As Mary DeShazer has shown, many women poets have written poems on or around the muse figure. Whether addressing the muse and explicitly referring to her by that name, or,

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more frequently, invoking a female figure endowed with power, either angelic or demonic, presumably for inspiration or simply as a symbol of creativity, the poets and poems quoted by DeShazer tend to make problematical the traditional conception of poetry as divine or transcendent inspiration by bringing the traditional muse down to earth. The traditional muse, we recall, does not embody poetic power. She is the mere vessel or vehicle of poetic power *prior* to her. Engaging with her may be for the woman poet, paradoxically, an apotropaic gesture. To reject the muse is to reject the concept of subordinate female mediation and to strike at the "source" first hand. This is how I would read the Medusa poems analyzed by DeShazer. One of them, by May Sarton, presents "The Muse as Medusa" (Sarton, 1993: 338). The terrifying Gorgon, who would freeze into stone whoever dared to look at her, is made powerless as part of "legends" not to be believed. Medusa is here no more than the woman poet's imagination recreating her as muse for the poet's own purposes. Ironically, Sarton reverses the Gorgon's power, freezes Medusa instead, and goes on to delight in a sea of feeling, teaming with life. In Louise Bogan's "Medusa," on the contrary, the poet bypasses Medusa's power by willingly embracing and inhabiting the dread barrenness and stillness it brings about. (Bogan, 1968: 4). The "dead scene," condemned to appalling stasis, is, however, the solitary, self-sufficient poet's writing scene, implicitly the site of creativity itself.

To negate the muse and defy the monster is to locate poetic power in the human being and the woman's mortality. In so doing, the poet fully embraces the human condition, however painfully, and remains entrapped in the inescapable web of the comforts and oppressions of its quotidian relationships. Not surprisingly, we sometimes see the muse cede to the mother in a troublesome way, as in Sylvia Plath's "The Disquieting Muses," a poem that conjures up three monstrous "ladies," clearly reminiscent of the three Gorgons, and blames the mother for their ominous presence (Plath, 1981:

74-76). A later "Medusa" poem by Plath further associates motherhood and inspiration in an even more savage way: "I shall take no bite of your body," the aspiring poetic subject cries out from her mother's womb in utter disgust, struggling with the "paralysing" placenta. As giver of life, the mother conveys death as well in the bloody act of birthing itself. "There is nothing between us," Plath's poet concludes defiantly, claiming her own separate and mortal body as the sole location of her poetic power (*Idem*, 224-226). A far more exquisite Medusa poem is one by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1980: 35-42). DuPlessis's "Medusa" recalls Medusa's beheading by Perseus. What is important in DuPlessis's poem is not Medusa's monstrous power to petrify, but that Medusa herself, once Perseus has slaughtered her, is like a metaphor for the woman poet's power. It is like a subversion of the image of castration that Freud takes the beheading of Medusa to be (Freud, 1963: 212-213). In DuPlessis, the terrifying head signifies rather all the power of creativity. DuPlessis retrieves the image of the rock or stone as a symbol for the poem, so rich in the Western tradition (think of Wordsworth, think of Stevens; or the Portuguese António Ramos Rosa), and has the slain Medusa sublate Perseus's violence and signify the woman poet's creativity in her utmost vulnerability. Playing with the fragmentariness of language to the point of apparent senselessness, DuPlessis reimagines the myth as a dismemberment that the poem's shattered form imitates and transcends: "mutter" and muttering become "mother" and mothering (i.e. originator) and the beheaded Medusa becomes her own power petrified: "rock" or "crossroad stone"—a "rocky mine" bursting out.

The mother as muse is a very rich topic in the Western lyric, and not just in poetry written by women. It is part of the process of de-divinization, or humanization, that I have already mentioned. To humanize (I'm tempted to say, *to mortalize*) the muse is, then, ultimately to do way with her. It is indeed to

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do away with intermediation. Most poems by women in which female figures appear to be muse figures or may be read as muse figures, I would read precisely as canceling out the "legend," as May Sarton called it. This is so even when the muse is explicitly invoked and seemingly remythified, as in Denise Levertov's "The Well" (1983: 40-41). "The Well" (featuring another very traditional metaphor, see Pessoa and Ana Luísa Amaral above) is a modern legend that undoes itself by the associations it draws in. The poem has an ekphrastic quality to it, one has the impression that the poet is describing a picture full of illusions—a seemingly bucolic landscape that is a "baroque park," a lake with a spring, a little stream with a bridge over it, an ordinary woman (yet named "muse") stooping down to fill her pitcher, a barge drawing her away across the lake without sails or oars or motors. But the poet is right inside the picture, she is there on the bridge, forgetful of herself as the creator of it all. British-born Levertov reminisces about London and Essex, and imagines that the little stream that runs into the river Roding is really a tributary of the river Alpheus, suddenly transformed into the love-sick river-god yearning across the ocean for his beloved Arethusa-turned-spring to escape him. In this magical scenario, which is, as the poem states, a "place of origins," what stands out as vital is the meaning of water as source of life. The poem recalls the miraculous moment in which Annie Sullivan teaches Helen Keller "water" in the palm of her hand, and then goes on to reinvent the woman poet's "palm" as the poem itself. Poetry had been suggested early on as the materiality of writing in the image of the papyrus (as the actual plant and as an allusion to antiquity, palimpsest, and rewriting). The "Muse" is named three times in the course of the poem, but rather than being the source of the poem, she is created by it in the woman poet's "knowledge." "I know she is the Muse," the poet says as she comes to her conclusion. Then, her "heart leaps in wonder" as she feels "the word 'water' spelled in [her] left palm." The conclusion

may well be that the woman poet recollected the Muse so that the poem could end up forgetting her.

Among many other "legends" frequently misremembered by women poets, one of the most beautiful is the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the tradition, Orpheus is synonymous with lyric poetry, Eurydice with the muse. No wonder many women poets have often remembered much forgetfulness in their recreations of this myth. H. D.'s "Eurydice" is the woman poet's indictment of Orpheus as the archetypal (male) poet who feeds parasitically on the woman-as-muse (H.D., 1983: 51-55).²¹ Eurydice is now the singer, Orpheus the object of the song. By angrily invoking the poet and denouncing the self-centered rashness of Orpheus, Eurydice's voice depicts the self-portrait of a woman muse whom loss and pain have turned into self-sufficient singer. Eurydice's bitter experience of abandonment is actually the woman poet's utter gain. It is as if Orpheus, a name for poetry-in-the-tradition, had been finally reinvented in Eurydice's body and voice, and *she* had now the power of her own light to open up the darkness of hell and redeem poetry itself. Rachel Blau DuPlessis's "Eurydice" is even more powerful (DuPlessis, 1980: 43-53). A kind of pastoral fable of flowers, fragrances, birds and songs that again resorts to the images of mother and the stone, DuPlessis's poem imagines a muse that is mysterious to herself and whose death wish is like a *felix culpa* that allows her to discover herself in her "cave," see "the stone opening" and "make the rock crumble into rich earth." The potent concluding image is that of the poet giving birth to herself into the poem. Lighter by far is Alta's wry "Euridice." In her comical trivialization of the myth, Alta accomplishes the total erasure of the traditional muse. Here is her Euridice's contemptuous brief monologue that composes the entire poem:

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all the male poets write of orpheus
as if they look back & expect
to find me walking patiently
behind them. they claim i fell into hell.
damn them, i say.
i stand in my own pain
& sing my own song.
(Alta, 1985: 8).

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A far more interesting case is Muriel Rukeyser. To the best of my knowledge, Rukeyser never showed any interest in the figure of Eurydice herself, but in her *Collected Poems* there are three poems that deal with Orpheus as the aptest symbol of lyric poetry in the Western tradition: "In Hades, Orpheus," "Orpheus," and "The Poem as Mask: Orpheus." (Rukeyser, 1978: 112, 291-300, and 435). In all of them, the woman poet presents herself as very close to the mythic Ur-singer. "In Hades, Orpheus" retells the tragic love story of Orpheus and Eurydice (even though her name is not mentioned) as a life-and-death episode of our own time, and again the man is sorrowfully unable to save the woman, who is apparently doomed by her own fear. Salvation would have to lie in her alone. In "Orpheus," the woman elaborately records the slaying of Orpheus by the Bacchae and makes the experience of painful dismemberment the grounding of her own song. Finally, in "The Poem as Mask: Orpheus" she disclaims her earlier identification with the "fragmented god," rejects "mythologies," and proclaims "memory of [her] torn life" the site of her own "music." And yet, even as the woman poet claims to reject the Orphic "mask" and retrieve "memory," the powerful image of the god in "fragments" goes on founding her womanly singing. Clearly, for Rukeyser, the image of Orpheus as the most inspiring metaphor for poetry is not disturbing.²²

All these gestures entail explicit engagements with the tradition, and rightly so. As Harold Bloom once said in a half-humorous mode, you can't really break with the tradition

without stopping writing. Even when such engagements have nothing to do with the muse figure, their rewriting of the tradition questions the authority that for centuries has given voice and image to what founds poetry: a divine or transcendent absolute that is available to mortals only through the intercession of a female figure, and hence constructed as a male principle of power and authority, to be touched, if at all, by men alone. Lucille Clifton's *The Book of Light* engages in many such rewritings both of classical and biblical motifs. (Clifton, 1993: 69-76). In *The Book of Light* we encounter a pathetic old Cain still unable to tell the whereabouts of his brother; an enduring Atlas that is the symbol of all the oppressed bearing the world; an ever faithless Sarah that only wants her son Isaac spared; a Naomi that just wishes to get rid of Ruth to mourn her husband and sons in peace; and three Ledas retold in three mundane stories of incest, jealousy and sex, the last one of which expresses Leda's disgust for "pyrotechnics" and her demand that the swan-god next time come as a man or not at all. A woman's experience of subordination or mere secondariness rings in all these poems. The most striking of them all is a rewriting of the "creation" and the "fall," a sequence of eight poems entitled "brothers" and described as follows: "'brothers" (being a conversation in eight poems between an aged Lucifer and God, though only Lucifer is heard. The time is long after).' Thus, even though the poem is announced as "a conversation," heard is only the voice of Lucifer, he who can "remember" the creation (God is the totality that cannot be distinguished from, let alone remember, the creation). The deliberate silencing of God's voice is a form of forgetting, it is the poet's radical gesture of accusation, borrowed from Carolyn Forché's "The silence of God is God." The totalitarian and tyrannical meaning of the biblical "the Word is the Word"—indifferent witness to so much human suffering and injustice—is thus totally upset. (Forché, 1994: 5).²³

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I have been speaking about compelling poems written by

women that rewrite or merely allude to "the tradition" in what we might call a subversive mode. I'd like to go now briefly to poets and poems that upset "the tradition" as well, but in much subtler ways, as if forgetting to remember the tradition itself. Perhaps no American woman poet did it so successfully as Marianne Moore. Her way of interrogating poetry-in-the-tradition is by pretending that she does not write poetry at all, she writes only "observations." (Moore, 1961: xiv). Her poem "Marriage," (Moore, 1980: 62-70), for example, must be called "poetry," the poet says, because no other designation would be considered more adequate, but, she insists, the "poem" is "a little anthology of statements that took my fancy — phrasings that I liked." (Moore, 1961: xv). In Moore, poetry is under constant revision (as is the poem thus entitled, "Poetry"). Her "Foreword" to *A Marianne Moore Reader* makes this quite clear. Here, in fact, Moore redefines lyric poetry for modernity. Even though the "Foreword" has often been praised for its author's humility and self-effacement, *poetic arrogance* seems to me to be the concept to adduce in this case.²⁴ In *A Marianne Moore Reader*, Moore boldly recreates herself as "Marianne Moore" and sets her own poetic terms for the reading of herself as a self-fashioned modern American poet. Although her favorite authors were "the classics" ("ignorance of originals is suicidal," she once said), they are no burden to her. The challenges of modernization in the first half of the twentieth century, as the woman poet understood them *as a woman*, are Moore's source of inspiration. The interface between *physis* and *techné*, or nature and art, grounds much of her poetry, and is particularly striking in her "animal" poems. Moore's famous quotations, winking at the nascent advertising techniques, testify to the immense curiosity of this omnivorous reader and meticulous gatherer of information ("I would be lost without the newspaper," she used to say). No other American modernist poet, with the possible exception of Williams Carlos Williams and, in a very different way, Gertrude Stein, made her or his poetry so palpably a part of the

transformations affecting the social, cultural, economic, and scientific fabric of the time. No wonder Moore dared to say of "Poetry" (with a capital "P") that she, too, disliked it:

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one dis-

covers in

it, after all, a place for the genuine.

(Moore, 1980: "Poetry", 36)

I suspect that a similar (arrogant) stance is the source for DuPlessis's "Drafts," unlike Pound's, deliberately and definitively not "Cantos." In the "polygynous memoir," included in her "Reader, I married Me" (DuPlessis, 1993: 97-111 [107-108]), DuPlessis explains that, in the 1980s, in order to escape the "seductions" of the "pure" "lyric" that she had cultivated in *Wells*, she started writing two kinds of poetry: the "analytical lyric," that consisted of a rewriting of positionings of women in histories of poetry and poetry anthologies; and a "post-lyric" kind that she refers to as "working poems" and calls "Drafts" (i.e., as in Moore, "not poems"). *Tabula Rosa* (a provocative title in itself from the point of view of the tradition) includes both kinds already, but her greatest accomplishment to date in this regard are *Drafts 1-38*, *Toll* (2001) and *Drafts 39-57*, *Pledge, with Draft, Unnumbered: Précis* (2004).

Gertrude Stein is another formidably arrogant woman poet, who stands on her own, with no need of the idea of a muse. Memory is what presides over her poetry. She writes both by remembering and by forgetting the tradition, but above all by recalling her own lived experience in the culture. Stein's daring gestures, of which the repetition of the rose is the most famous, amount to a radical reinvention both of poetry-in-the-tradition and its subject. Her phrase for this reinvention is "being existing" and her love poems accomplish it best of all. Reading her lecture on "Poetry and Grammar," one finds out once again that lyric poetry is the "discovery" of love as sense (in

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all senses of the word sense). (Stein, 1998: 313-332). As she was writing *The Making of Americans*, she discovered the wonder of being in love. She discovered that things were finally made visible to her as sensuous things, and immediately afterwards her writing was all passion — the poetic passion of naming. Not Adam's arbitrary naming of things that already exist, nor the passion of inventing new nouns for names that have been names for a very long time (that's the job of slang), but the passion of naming anew the proper names of things ("rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"). All of a sudden, she was, Cratylus-like, conjuring up, not a vocabulary of thinking (as in *How to Write*), but a vocabulary of *thinging* — the sensuous thinging of "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms" in *Tender Buttons*. (*Idem*, 313-355). *Tender Buttons* is no ordinary love poem, it doesn't ask to be compared to others in "the tradition." It rather places English lyric poetry in the tranquil geography of trivial, disinspired, as it were—yet joyful, playful, pleasurable, and caring—quotidian living in the feminine. The poetic closure of *Tender Buttons* does away with bucolic sentiment only to make it strangely new inside the woman's sitting room:

The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong
and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair
and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible
justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus,
and also a fountain.
(*Idem*, 335)

Stein, writing not only like a woman but as a woman, thus reinvents erotic poetry anew. In a far more exuberant and explicit manner than *Tender Buttons*, "Lifting Belly" (1915-1917, not published in her life time) speaks a new language of sexual love and love making never heard before, and the poet proudly knows and asserts it in the poem itself: "What did I say, that I was a great poet like the English only sweeter." (*Idem*, 410-458 [426]). "Sweeter," she claims, than "sweet Will" (Shakespeare),

who in the sonnets puns on sexual desire and gourmandise in a manner that is comparable to Stein's in her erotic poetry: "Lifting belly this./So sweet./To me./Say anything a pudding made of Caesars./Lobster. Baby is so good to baby." (A whole paragraph in the first few pages of another of Stein's love poems, "Patriarchal Poetry," reads like a parodic menu for the week).

Let me conclude by insisting one last time on memory-as-sensuous-faculty as the site of lyric poetry. Poets, both male and female, have often addressed memory, whether directly or indirectly. Often in male poets, addresses to memory are really subtly constructed invocations of the muse. Think of Coleridge's powerful longing in "Kubla Khan": "Could I revive within me/Her symphony and song/ To such a deep delight 'twould win me,/That with music loud and long/ I would build that dome [i. e. poem] in air." Forgetfulness in "Kubla Khan," as in so many other muse poems by male poets, amounts to forgetting the power of the woman's song as poetry itself, by stressing the erotic inspiration provided by the "damsel with a dulcimer." Memory is the joy of remembering and the pain of forgetting, but also the pain of remembering and the joy of forgetting. More often, it is a fine combination of these, as in Hölderlin's poems to "Mnemosyne." As mother of the muses, goddesses of the arts, Mnemosyne, or Memory, is, after all, where the art is to be found — and founded. To say, as H. D. does in "Notes on Thought and Vision," that "Memory is the mother, begetter of all . . . song" is to bypass the muses and strike at the imagined origin through the human vulnerability of generation and mortality. (H. D., 1982: 23). Hölderlin grasps this poignantly in the three different versions of his hymn to "Mnemosyne," where he speaks of the poem's nostalgia (*Sehnsucht*) for the being that is locked in the length and weight of time. (Hölderlin, 1951: II, i: 195-196; II, ii: 816-830).²⁵

In poetry by women, memory is often explicitly identified with the poet's own body. In "A Conversation with Memory," a poem included in Marge Piercy's latest book of

poetry, entitled, quite significantly, *Colors Passing through Us*, memory is invoked in a series of striking forms. (Piercy, 2003: 150-151). First, memory is something the poet drags along in the dust like a peacock's tail, its apparent dullness ready to flare up in iridescence and a myriad eyes when the forgotten is remembered. Then, it is the weight the poet lugs about like an overpacked suitcase that dislocates her shoulder. Next, it is the poet's hefty shadow engulfing the present and the oblivion of sleep. And suddenly, like a body snatcher, memory sucks the poet's body and makes it one with the dark thick matter where remembrance is to be found: "... you suck me under/into viscous cold black waters," the poet tells memory, "where my body too remembers." In the voice the poet gives her, and in a rather "feminine" gesture, memory dismisses its own power by admitting that it rests only in splinters, faded pictures, evanescent scents of flowers and soups, and in grandmother's tales. But, at the same time, power is returned to the poet herself, in whose mind alone resides the capacity for lighting flames. The woman poet is finally, unapologetically, the poet. To paraphrase the last couple of lines of the book's title poem, all the colors of the world pass through the poet's body like strings of fire. (Piercy, 2003: "Colors Passing through Us", 107-109).

The "tradition" has not made things easy for women poets. To forget the sublimity of the traditional muses and cling to pure memory-as-mortality is a brave gesture, full of rewards, but not devoid of pain and predicaments. A very recent, unpublished poem by Ana Luísa Amaral, "Os teares da memória: Mnemosine e suas filhas" [The Looms of Memory: Mnemosyne and Her Daughters], speaks eloquently to this dilemma: "I would like to forget, but they won't allow me: / They come with her loom and her cruel hand," begins this poem, made up of 21 distichs, one tercet and one final, isolated line: "But she won't allow, nor death permit". This very last, ominous line sums up the anguish pervading the whole poem: memory, forgetfulness and mortality are one and the same

thing, and the very site of the lyric.²⁶ That is why Piercy's "A Conversation with Memory" strikes me as the appropriate conclusion for this study of women's lyrical poetry as a sophisticated remembering of forgetfulness:

You are something I drag behind me
in the dust like a peacock's tail
sweeping up leaves. Ignored
until something prompts that display:

then the dull weight of the forgotten
spreads out into a glorious fan
iridescent flightless feathers shining,
and the hundred eyes reporting. >>

Yes, memory, you are this weight
I lug about like an oversized briefcase,
like a too big too full suitcase
pulling my shoulder from its socket.

You are my shadow that weighs
more than lead. You turn on
in the night and your searchlight
vanishes the present and sleep.

I study how to make you more vivid,
stronger, and you suck me
under into viscous cold black waters
where my body too remembers,

open lost gills and I breathe
your thick substance and you take
over my brain and instruct me
how to serve in the synagogue-

library-catacombs of your power.
Ah, you say, what could be weaker
than me, who resides in splinters,
in grandmother's tales, in fading

brown photographs, in evanescent
scents of tulip and black bean soup
weak as a taper until you light
my flame with your mind. <<

NOTAS

[1] This is a revised version of the paper presented at the American Studies Association Convention, Hartford, CT, October 2003. I would like to thank Monica Andrade for her fine editorial corrections, comments, and suggestions.

[2] Dickinson, 1960: 425. Poems identified by number.

[3] Crane, 1966: "Forgetfulness," 137.

[4] A brief MLA search will yield countless articles on the subject. The most thorough single book is arguably Mary K. DeShazer's *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (1986).

[5] By the Western tradition I mean classical and Judeo-Christian.

[6] See Nancy, *The Muses* (1996). First published as *Les muses* (1994 [2nd rev. ed. 2001]).

[7] Rich, 1975: 116. See also Bronfen, 1992.

[8] See Nancy, *Les muses*, 65; *The Muses*, 36.

[9] I do not think, therefore, that strong women's poetry requires a break from tradition, as Harold Bloom was prophesying in the 1970s. The most accomplished women poets have rather always contested the masculinist monolithism of the "tradition." Cf. Bloom, 1975: 33.

[10] DuPlessis, 1987: 1, 3.

[11] Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, "La jeune fille qui succède aux muses." *Les muses*, 96-97; *The Muses*, 54-55.

[12] Cf. Derrida's reading of Nietzsche's philosophical use of "woman" in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche* (1979). For further discussion of Nietzsche's complex misogyny, see *Nietzsche and the Feminine* (1994).

[13] DuBois, 1995: see esp. 24, 154.

[14] Unlike other scholars, I don't consider the beloved a muse figure, even though dead beloveds often appear in the tradition as muses. See Bronfen, 168-78, 360-83. The most notable of dead beloveds turned into muses is, of course, Dante's Beatrice. However, I am not even convinced that Beatrice is Dante's beloved, not in the sense that, say, Anaktolia is Sappho's beloved. Beatrice is just the poet's *idea* of poetry. For a different and very fine approach to the concept of "muse" as "the feminine" in modern poetry, see DuPlessis, 2002. In "Gendering the Muse", Jed Rasula (1994) makes an interesting case for "the muse" as "gendered inspiration."

[15] In a landmark essay which provoked some controversy at the time, Joanné Feit Diehl argued eloquently for Emily Dickinson's muse as being a "Master-muse." I disagree with the terms of the discussion. Feit Diehl confuses influence with the concept of muse, whereas her discussants are too eager to find a female muse for Dickinson. I submit that the conventional muse concept does not further our understanding of Dickinson's poetry. Her poet delves directly and deeply into the source of power, sometimes she gets scorched but often reemerges triumphant. See Dickinson's "A little East of Jordan—" and cf. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1970: III,

903. For Dickinson's female muse, see Diehl, 1978: 572-587, and the comments by Lilian Faderman and Louise Bernikow, followed by Feit Diehl's response, in *Signs* 4.1 (Autumn 1978) 189-196.

[16] It is certainly not coincidental that Ana Luísa Amaral is a contemporary Portuguese poet who has a very profound knowledge of Dickinson's poetry. *Emily Dickinson: Uma poética de excesso* [A Poetics of Excess] was her doctoral dissertation (University of Porto, 1995). "Nem Tágides, nem Musas" (here also in my English translation) first appeared in Amaral, 1993: 32. *Tágides* are the names of the nymphs of the river Tagus invented by Camões to serve as his muses in *The Lusiads*; the woman poet, in contrast, shuns any "feminine gathering overflowing".

[17] See Baudelaire, 1963: 14-15. Cf. Benjamin, 1992.

[18] My translation.

[19] Próspero Saiz, "In Time, Keep the Muse Thin." First presented at the Fourth International Meeting of Poets (Coimbra, 1998). To be included in *Novas poéticas*, a volume gathering theoretical contributions to the International Meetings of Poets (1992-).

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[20] For an exploration of this topic in modern and contemporary Portuguese women's poetry, see my "Re-inventing Orpheus: Women and Poetry Today" (1998).

[21] In its conclusion, DuPlessis's "Propounding Modernist Maleness" (2002) is a particularly eloquent analysis of a modernist male poet's parasitical use of a muse figure.

[22] Here, I swerve slightly from DeShazer's reading (1986: 36-37).

[23] Forché's phrase is used as epigraph in section six of Clifton's sequence, and then again in eight, further silenced into "..... is God."

[24] For an elaboration of the concept, see my chapter on poetic arrogance in *Atlantic Poets: Fernando Pessoa's Turn in Anglo-American Modernism* (2002: 115-153).

[25] An English translation of the third version appears in Hölderlin (1998: 250-261).

[26] My thanks to Ana Luísa Amaral for letting me see this remarkable poem about the impossibility of forgetting memory.

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