Ideology and Rhetoric
Ideology and Rhetoric: Constructing America

Edited by

Bożenna Chylińska
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INTRODUCTION

BOŻENNA CHYLIŃSKA

The familiar modern understanding of the term „ideology” denotes the body of ideas, reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class or culture. However, in old strict usage, it is also the study of the nature and origin of ideas as well as a system that derives ideas exclusively from sensation. If combined with rhetoric, which is perceived as the art or science of all literary uses of language in prose or verse, or the art of effective expression and the persuasive use of language, ideology can construct political and cultural reality. The discovery of America and its further development into a modern state and a nation are the clear instance of how ideology and rhetoric are entwined and how they can encompass widely disparate viewpoints.

Since, in the postmodern era, images of various kinds have attained the power to construct reality, it seems that the concept of “ideology,” which, according to some critics, originates from myth, has outlived its usefulness. Today the term “ideology” usually refers to a systematically false consciousness. But if representation is the only reality, if truth is merely a rhetorical device, then how are we to distinguish between true and false modes of thought? The postmodernist position on truth and ideology maintains that truth is a sum of human relations which, after long use, seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people, whereas ideology is defined as un-dialectical thought that seeks to reduce a mutually definitive binary opposition to one of its poles. It is impossible to distinguish between these categories because they both are reciprocally sustaining. However, both ideology and truth, combined with persuasive rhetoric, constructed American historical reality and they fundamentally changed the cultural substratum as well as the shape of the American nation.

American Studies is presently distinguished by its growth and mutability; it is, above all else, heterogeneous. What characterizes the study of American literature, history, and culture through Europe is its multidisciplinary and multicultural nature. “American” in multidisciplinary sense signifies a multifaceted view of the object of study, and its corollary would be the potential for dialogue between
the (sub-)disciplinary approaches which construct it. “American” in multicultural sense assumes cultural relatedness, intercultural relationships (Anglo-American vs. non-Anglo-American cultures), the dialogue between the texts and contexts of Anglo-American and those of other American cultures with which it interacts across the various disciplines.

Accordingly, the authors of the essays address the issue of the changing nature of American Studies—from a single disciplinary project to new texts and contexts, new approaches, new configurations, and new interdisciplinarities; they thematize and problematize cultural difference and otherness; they attend to discourses of gender, race/ethnicity, class, power, domination or counter-domination, and they demonstrate the value of contextualist as well as particularist approaches. Their observations are accompanied by revision, reevaluation, and reconfiguration of canons and orthodoxies across the discipline and thus they harmonize with the expectations of the heterodox audience.

* * *

A French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray, perceived femininity as a role, an image, and a value imposed upon women by the systems of male domination. The selected poems of three American modernist women poets: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mina Loy, and Marianne Moore, explored in this volume, consciously and subversively employ their feminine roles to break with the imposed models and to criticize the prevailing tradition which forced women either to renounce the specificity of their sex and to adopt the rhetoric alien to women, or to write from within the limiting “feminine” conventions of sentimental literature.

Also the American stage has always served an important function as a mirror of many of the values of the burgeoning society. Close study of the frequently neglected early American dramas—considered as “literary archeology”—provides insight into the crystallizing notions of what constituted a “good daughter” or, in fact, a proper woman in post-colonial American society. Royall Tyler’s social comedy The Contrast would provide a model for much of the drama which followed. Analysis of the play’s female characters, two women whose respective passive and independent characters stand as one of the play’s “contrasts,” puts into sharp focus precisely what America expected—and until well into the 20th century, continued to expect—of its women.

Death is Don DeLillo’s constant preoccupation; he offers an ideology of passing away in both physical and spiritual aspect. His novels are chronicles of the death foretold; public and private agony in the contemporary world of rapid technological development where life becomes fiction, a rhetorical figure; where death is commercialized and the languages of the characters undergo “mediaization;” where life becomes a game that costs casualties in the constantly changing universe of information and broadcasting, in the universe of contemporary America.

Race has always been one of the key concerns of African American literature.
Captured within the framework of the question of identity, gender, and power relations between blacks and whites, race has become pivotal for generations of black authors from Phyllis Wheatley to Randall Kenan. The dynamics of the relationship between and within versatile social, national, ethnic and minority groups has been explored by such black writers as Melvyn Dixon, Charles Johnson, Kenan, Ishmael Reed, and Al Young. The division in the African American community also goes along the gender line. Gender as a cultural formation manifests itself in black female writing, represented by Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Maya Angelon, Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor, and other African American women authors. The process of self-identification is of primary value for a whole generation of black American women writers who claim that male domination, which imposes masculine standards on society, is responsible for a distorted image and perception of the world.

Alice Walker’s novels reveal mainly racial exploitation and relations in the American South. Her *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* provides an investigation of the construction (or deconstruction rather) of gender ideology. It also traces masculinity and violence in the black community. The discourses in the novel derive from the tradition of black fiction that focuses on political and economic struggles; they, however, particularly address black female experience and demonstrate Walker’s concern for women of her own racial community.

Black autobiographies and biographies are particular challenges, representing a history of a frequently fascinating, yet usually unknown or little known, individual. All black autobiographies, through numerous and often extended life stories of people in the immediate environment of the protagonist, are inevitably bound with the lives of other blacks living in the segregated African American community. Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* is an attempt to appropriate the mainstream culture’s narrative of individual success to the dominant narratives of gender and sexuality, and to the discourse on black masculinity in particular. Combining the autobiographical narrative of success with ethnographic content, *Manchild* appeals to a wide audience by an assimilationist, rather than politically radical treatment of sexuality. A biography of Ira Aldridge, the only African American actor memorialized by a plaque at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, naturally represents the complexity of black life, exploring the traumatic split in the fragmented racial self-consciousness and troubled identity.

The rhetoric of blackness inevitably includes hybridity and cross-cultural processes with a particular emphasis on the interrelations between black and white cultures. The Harlem Renaissance movement, defined by Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois and Jones Weldon Johnson, attempted to reclaim and reevaluate the ideology of American exceptionalism combined with cultural nationalism and pluralism. However, the Harlem Renaissance vision of cultural pluralism demanded a cross-cultural idea of the “Americanness” of black culture and the blackness of American
culture, correlated with American nationalism, black liberation, and the ideology of hegemonic masculinity.

The contemporary multiethnic and multi-religious American reality translates not only into landscape but also into literature which explores issues of personal religion, spirituality, and ethics. Theoretical insights borrowed from contemporary ethnography to examine American literature by and about people of color. Ethnic literature, defined and evaluated through its ethnographic content opens into the ethics and aesthetics of the novels of the array of present-day women color authors: Louise Erdrich, Alice Walker, Chitra Divakaruni, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Achy Obejas, and others. Particular ethnic groups have made an effort to formulate their own theologies and manifestoes. Native women writers have often been reluctant to call themselves feminists because they generally experience colonialism, rather than sexism, as their primary mode of oppression. The prose of Louise Erdrich, the Native American, addresses issues of conquest and colonization in order to provide survival models for ailing communities of American Indians. The African American religious experience also accommodates a variety of traditions, and Alice Walker is well known for her syncretic approach to religion and spirituality, interweaving religious, ecological, and political threads. Both the Japanese Hawaiian, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, and the Cuban American, Achy Obejas construct representations of islands off the American mainland, modifying and verifying the popular understanding of the notion of “Americanness.” They both are sophisticated, postmodern novelists, yet as they write about complex exotic island communities, they are perceived as auto-ethnographers.

One of important fields of examination of fiction written by Polish American and Jewish American authors who, in the first half of the 20th century, came to America with the Great Wave immigrants from partitioned Poland, are the rhetorical devices employed. Although social processes and practices can frequently be traced outside of language, it is language, and the significance of discourse in the construction of culture and subjectivity that give them meaning and discursive function. Although those immigrants from Poland, predominantly of Roman Catholic and Jewish backgrounds, were residentially and emotionally close, despite some traditional, deep-rooted prejudices, the rhetoric of their writings, especially those representing the private sphere of their lives, reveal crucial discrepancies which demonstrate the gap in cultural communication. The widely-read novels of the best-known women authors of their time within their respective ethnic groups, Sprzedawaczka z Broadwayu (Salesgirl from Broadway) by the Polish American, Melania Nesterowicz, and Bread Givers by the Jewish American, Anzia Jezierska, each in its own, distinctive rhetoric, present the rebellion of the daughters against the Old Country values and lifestyles.

American conquest ideology was a powerful feeling and a conviction of a mission to be fulfilled, translated into and mythicized in the idea of Manifest Destiny,
born in the 19th century. Military superiority was also identified with cultural and civilizational superiority, explaining and justifying the American conquest of lands populated by other people. It was in Mexico, however, that the ideology of Manifest Destiny found its fullest expression. The Mexicans, proud of their mixed European and Indian racial and cultural heritage had continued to be the subjects of the negative stereotypes until the second half of the 20th century. Helen Hunt Jackson, the 19th century romantic author, in her romance *Ramona* attempted to draw public attention to the condition of the Indians of the frontier and of the Mexican population in the US-annexed territories. The negative stereotypes of “exotic” Mexicans began to considerably change in the 1960s, when the Chicano Movement made significant efforts to introduce Mexican culture to Anglo society and it demonstrated that images and symbols might be used to reinforce Mexican ethnic identity and to offer ideological support. Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, a pseudo-historical, quasi-Western novel, set on the borderlands between Mexico and the United States after the Mexican-American War poses certain questions crucial for Western philosophy in general and for American ideology in particular. Rooted in the mid-nineteenth century history of the American South-Western frontier, it dismantles several significant concepts of American ideology: the myth of “regeneration through violence,” the idea of Manifest Destiny, and the traditional coming-of-age tale.

In the 20th century, after three hundred years of contact with white civilization, many Native American tribes gained sovereignty and relative economic stability. The essential source of revenue for some of them has become gambling which has brought them affluence but it exposed them to negative public emotions over the sudden transformation of some small tribes into booming entrepreneurial communities. Over the centuries, the relations between the Native American tribes and the US federal and state governments were based on the rhetoric of separation or assimilation. The “policy of termination,” adopted by the House of Representatives in 1953, was to end federal ties to Indian communities and to withdraw federal support for tribal governments. The attractive rhetoric of the new policy convinced many to see it as a humanitarian move to improve the situation of Native Americans, motivating their initiative and freedom. Others, however, claimed that the policy of withdrawal aimed to simply push the Indians to the verge of extinction and final disappearance. Surprisingly, the Indians, relocated into mainstream society, searched for revenue-generating ventures and started operating casinos if those were legal in the states their reservations were located. The Mashantucket Pequot nation of Connecticut was particularly successful in the “gambling” trail it followed. Once defeated because of their inherent weaknesses, mostly technological backwardness and alcoholism, the Pequot Indians have taken revenge by capitalizing on the weaknesses of 20th century middle-class Americans: an addiction to gambling and alcoholic beverages.

Although English is predominantly the only language of communication and
artistic expression for most of the Indian communities, in some areas, such as the American South-West and parts of Canada, Native languages are still in use, both in everyday speech and in literary texts. However, due to the politics of forced assimilation there has long been a marked gradual shift from a rich diversity of Native languages to English. Thus the notion of language loss has been felt as a loss of intimacy that the language constructs between all the members of the community. Leslie Marmon Silko, the Laguna Indian female author, in her short fiction *Storyteller* captures the moment when English as the language of dominance invades the tribal space, marginalizing Native languages. The forced coexistence of the white man’s language and culture with Native languages, cultures, and ways of life, as well as the instances of direct confrontations between the two groups are skillfully expressed in the language of Silko’s characters, their choice of words and effects they want to achieve. Silko uses her native language as a vehicle in which her culture can thrive, whereas English, spoken by the white man, serves as the language of lies and deceptions. Such a juxtaposition reflects an unbalanced relation between the oppressed and the oppressors, which reduces chances for successful communication.

An Atlanticist approach to early modern North America metaphorically situates colonial settlers in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The themes explored by the Atlanticist historians of British America in the colonial and early republican times most frequently revolve around economy and politics, however, social and cultural issues are also investigated. One of the significant cultural concepts is the territorial identity of individuals located somewhere between the British Isles, the North American east coast and the Caribbean. Although the historical debate on the construction of American national identity in the mid-seventeenth century British Atlantic world does not offer a clear definition and an explicit and coherent interpretation of the condition of territorially defined, colonial selfhood, the very concept seems broad enough to accommodate the elements of personal identity pertaining to the geopolitical area one felt affiliated with. Colonial autobiographical writing, such as diaries, letters, memoirs and travel books contain a wealth of documentary evidence which records the changes in the Atlantic world, and map out the new constructions of self. Two contemporary diaries, by two genuine trans-Atlantic individuals, *Secret Diary of William Byrd II*, and *The Journal of John Harrower, 1773-1776* are explicit, coherent personal reflections on territorial and political affiliation in British America, and specifically on a broader sense of the social and cultural reality of the colony of Virginia on the eve of the American Revolution.

The conservative ideology and rhetoric of the Antebellum American South, in the period by a few decades preceding the Civil War, extolled the Southern gentleman—the planter, the slaveholder, the benevolent and honorable man, an icon and a moral leader of the society. The vision of the mythologized Old South, portrayed by its apologists as a land of a perfect social order, was needed for the feverish de-
fense of the sacred values implemented by the gentleman of aristocratic parentage; it was essential in a society with a strong sense of separateness and otherness, constantly seeking to reaffirm its identity, and haunted by the sense of defeat and guilt which it tried to heal by the repeated attempts at justifying its way of life, its reluctance toward progress and change, and its holding other human beings in perpetual bondage. The apologetic rhetoric of the writings of George Fitzhugh and Daniel R. Hundley—the genuine gentlemen of the South—greatly contributed to the preservation of the somewhat utopian myth of the Old South, charged with a mission of retaining and propagating the idyllic way of life as opposed to antagonism, unrest and moral decay, typical for the North.

If all nations are, to some extent, ideological and rhetorical constructs, sometimes called “imagined communities,” then this may particularly be true of the American Jewish community, itself diverse and fundamentally pluralistic, whose roots and traditions go back to Iberia, Germany, Persia, and the Arab States. Jews in America today are also religiously and culturally diverse, advocating all modes of Judaism from Orthodox through Reform to secular. There may be traced some particular recurrent rhetorical themes in American Jewish culture that have shaped the American Jewish community’s worldview within American realities. These themes reveal Jewish beliefs about America and reflect their hopes and desires to define what made their community distinct and exceptional—different from Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East. American Jews have always idealized America, extolling the universalistic virtues of the American heritage and praising the fundamental principles of Americanism as subsumed in the Bill of Rights: free speech, free press, separation of Church and State, and the right to assembly. The compelling ideal of Jewish universalism shares with Americanism many basic assumptions and values, such as democracy and justice. American Jewish ideology and rhetoric are rightly grounded on the finest American ethical foundations: exceptionalism and idealism. One of the greatest judges ever to sit on the American Supreme Court, and the first leader of American Zionism, Louis Dembitz Brandeis claimed that there was no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry; that the Jewish spirit, the product of both religious and non-religious experiences, was essentially modern and essentially American.

The two fundamental currents of contemporary Jewish experience were the rise of the American Jewish community, and Zionism. Zionism resulted from the interplay of anti-Semitism, the national mood of the 19th century, and the traditional Jewish religious longing for a return to Zion. Political Zionism, formulated by Theodor Herzl, assumed the establishment of a geopolitical entity in which Jews could build an autonomous society, internationally recognized and supported by the European powers. Herzl’s attachment to the concepts and expectations of modern democratic nationalism, which developed in the atmosphere of materialism of the German Real Politik, paved the way toward his own solution of the Jewish
problem—Jewish statehood. The lack of the spiritual dimension in Herzlian Zionism provoked Ahad Ha-Am, the Russian thinker and essayist of Zionism to offer his own definition of Zionism with a high regard for Jewish tradition, and to lay the foundations for “cultural Zionism.” In the first decade of the 20th century, a group of the outstanding American Zionists, considered to be adherents of Ahad Ha-Am, exposed Ahad Ha-Am’s ideas to the American public and formulated the fundamental principles of American cultural Zionism, adopting it to the different American milieu. Following Ahad Ha-Am’s flexible position on the future of the Jewish Diaspora, they proposed the idea that America was a suitable place for Jews to gradually create a new center for Judaism.

Today, that is in the early 21st century, the American legal system seems to be a legitimating ideology that reinforces the dominant institutions and mainstream culture of American society. Significantly, however, according to its critics, the American legal system, focusing on superficial equality, seems to hide the persistence of numerous invisible inequalities. Until the 1970s, American legal debate had largely followed two accepted pathways: legal formalism, akin to “a law of rules” and to “strict constitutionalism” as a constitutional doctrine, that would allow judges to interpret any constitutional provision or statute; and legal instrumentalism—the root of “the rule of law” and of “liberal constructionism” that would allocate to jurists the power to redefine the law creatively and periodically to promote civil liberties, or to respond to social change and achieve substantive justice. What emerged in the decade of the 1970s was a legal literature movement, whose writers, known as “Crits,” claimed that American law was too widely open to political debate and, consequently, decisions made by courts of law were political, be they formalist or instrumental. The notion that legal discourse conceals relationships of domination and that the ideology of free speech is used to validate and legitimize existing social and power relations, hiding a lack of real participation and democracy is central to a wide range of critical scholarship. The “Crits” argue that the apparent neutrality of the law masks the bias of the law in favor of the interests of the ruling elite. Thus the objective of the Supreme Court is to pacify the conflict through the mediation of a system of ideas and images about the world which serve today as the secular equivalent of religious ideology in previous historical periods.

Although the framers of the American Constitutions often disclaimed that there had been any overt borrowing from British source in the origins of the State of the Union address in the United States, the idea to inform the Legislature on the condition of the state derives from the royal act of the annual communication with Parliament. The so-called Speech from the Throne, officially known as the Royal Address, probably originated in medieval England and became the address that the Monarch made at the opening of each Parliament to explain why the House of Lords and the Commons had been summoned to the royal presence, and then to give a “state of the nation” address. However, the origins of the clause calling for information to
Congress can be traced back to a typically American source—Article XIX of the New York Constitution of 1777, which imposed on the governor a constitutional duty to inform the legislature, at every sessions, of the condition of the state and to recommend to the consideration of the legislature such matters which “shall appear to him [governor] to concern its good government, welfare, and prosperity.” The State of the Union Address, or the Annual Message,” as it had been known until the 80th Congress in the years 1947-49, has evolved over time. The addresses today provide at least three important views from the White House: first, there is a view of the events as seen from the nation’s capital, which is summarized by the President; second, there is the view or judgment of the President represented in the message; third, there is the view of the presidency itself, through the manner and the content of the communication.

Throughout the evolution of the presidential rhetoric, the prestige, content and mass impact of the State of the Union addresses considerably deceased. They became the lengthy documents, written and dedicated principally to Congress, of rather little public interest and rhetorical merits, with almost no public address words, which essentially distanced the presidents from their audiences. Modern modes of communication and practices of presidential speech-making were introduced by Woodrow Wilson who made the Annual Message much shorter, more practical and proper for public presentation. Wilson’s first State of the Union Address, delivered in 1913, was to clearly demonstrate that the public would be the primary target audience for his speech and that it would be spoken directly to the people, and only through them, to Congress. With the advent of television, and Harry S Truman’s address, televised in 1947, the audience addressed by the President became much larger and more heterogeneous. The newly employed medium required time, length and content readjustments to both the television format and the public’s expectations. The focus of the address shifted from the legislative to the ceremonial aspects of the presidency, limiting (if not eliminating) detailed presentations and formulations of policy programs. Today, because of the wide and highly diversified audience, the State of the Union Address has become one of the most open means offered to the American president to communicate with the public, and to reaffirm and reinforce his political leadership.

Presidential campaign ads in a TV-transmitted American political marketing have become a significant strategy whose impact on voters’ preferences and their final decisions cannot be overestimated. A rhetorical analysis of any presidential campaign ad which deals with the war issue shows how key stylistic devices: metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche are employed as the chief organizing principles in a presidential candidate’s TV spot and how they become the necessary factors for a rhetorical situation to exist. Thus a campaign ad can be regarded as an example of a rhetorical situation in which both the candidate and the voters engage in a discourse which requires their response to the campaign issue, and which creates a specific
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rhetorical context. War has become the most important content of campaign ads as, rhetorically, war belongs to a broader concept of crisis situation which constitutes the best example of how rhetoric functions. Thus the topic of war can be used to demonstrate the imagery and discourse of crisis rhetoric to legitimize the ideas which embrace the core of the American system of values: the ideals of peace, freedom, and democracy, sanctifying total victory and leaving no room for defeat and compromise.

Another important topic which can be constructed and analyzed in the rhetorical context of the 1930s are the rhetorical strategies of the leaders and spokespersons of the American birth control movement, employed in order to popularize and politicize the issue of birth control among the US public, and to transfer the problem from private to public sphere by methods of professionalization, bureaucratization, alliances with the American Medical Association and the eugenics movement. The rhetorical devices employed in the 1930s were intended to politicize the birth control issue by feminism, eugenics, and the theory of democracy and freedom, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by emphasizing the gender dimension of birth control, both in the context of the rhetoric of the dominant discourses of the time.

Only quite recently has the significance of discursive skills and oratorical qualities of societies been acknowledged as a necessary feature for the democratic processes of American society. The rhetorical device of debate as a rational means of discourse, linked to the practice of argumentation, can be traced back to antiquity. Seen as a method of the process of deliberation necessary to settle any other kind of controversy over beliefs, debate developed into the act of rhetoric which set logical argumentative patterns to justify communicative strategies. At the end of the 19th century, marked by the spread of adult education, and of higher education in particular, American scholars of rhetoric did not perceive public speaking as the art of persuasion, but rather as the display of conviction. Debating was seen as transmuting particular statements into universal and reliable truths and convictions. The rise of debating societies in the 20th century made public speaking and rational contemplation central to the socially and politically successful lives of nations and individuals. Thus the fundamental principle of rhetorical education and debate is seen today as a humanistic and liberal ideal as well as a communicative strategy of spoken argumentation as a necessary feature of the democratic processes in American society and elsewhere.

The ultimate expression of beauty, perceived as a perfect order of things that combines and harmonizes various and, not infrequently, contrasting elements is the quintessential spirit of any kind of art, from poetry, music and painting to literature. Literature, and especially American literature—a multilingual construct, both culturally and linguistically plural, in a state of transition and transformation—has the potential for a dialogical existence of contradictory voices, since harmony dwells in difference no less than in likeness. Consequently, literature establishes
an important space between the personal and the public, between any closed system of ideology and cultural complexities; it provides a sensible dialogical balance among differences; it harmonizes diversities. From Margaret Fuller’s literary criticism to the rhetoric of prominent art critics writing on the New York School of Abstract Expressionist Painting, in the decades of the 1940s through the 1960s, the textual territory, defined by the form of the critique they embraced, harmonized private experience and public understanding, promoted the rhetoric of “American-ness” and “togetherness,” reconciling the seemingly impossible: immediate political goals with timeless aesthetic values, the American reality of the Cold War and the freedom of American art. The Cold War discourse on Abstract Expressionism, where the most powerful American symbols and myths were explored as a rhetorical battleground, clearly revealed the unavoidable connection between politics and culture. Similarly, the peace movement of the 1960s, a decade of rebellion, did not live up to the expectations of Raymond Mungo; it did not offer any alternative solutions to the already existing structure, becoming yet another repressive system. Thus the reader of Mungo’s autobiography is confronted, through a number of rhetorical devices, with environmentalism—a counter ideology to political activism, and as a way of life.

As I noted at the beginning of this introduction, American studies today does no longer define American culture within the limits and limitations of the borders of the nation-state. A transnational interpretation of American culture, which assumes that there is no distinctly American culture, and which developed as a result of the cross-cultural transformation of European culture/cultures, moulded on American soil under specific and genuine American conditions, has become a unique reformulation of the very idea of America itself. This new transnational perspective proves that the United States possesses a valuable genuine culture defined as an expression of uniquely American identity and of resultant exceptional national virtues.
PART I

POETRY, DRAMA, AND PROSE:
FEMININITY REVISITED, DEATH RECONSIDERED
A French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray, wrote in her study *This Sex Which Is Not One*, that “[F]emininity is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her part.”1 The essay presents two forefront modernist women poets: Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore as two different types of Irigaray’s “feminine masquerade.” Their selected poems will be used to show that both consciously and subversively use their feminine roles, disguises and masks to break the imposed models and to criticize the dominant tradition which forced them either to renounce the specificity of their sex and adopt a discourse foreign to women or to write from within the limiting “feminine” conventions of sentimental literature. It will be also argued that rather than “losing themselves” in this masquerade, as Irigaray suggested, Millay and Moore ultimately gain more self-confidence as poets and work towards a definition of poetry that is more fluid, more inclusive, rooted in the female relationship to experience, and yet free of stereotypical gender constructs.

“[W]e’ve always lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers,”2 writes Hélène Cixous in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” and Millay’s sonnet from *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* beautifully testifies to “this art of flight” as it makes visible the “masquerading” aspects of the poet’s life and work and her strategies of finding the hidden passageways and crossovers in the dominant cultural text:

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!
Give back my book and take my kiss instead.
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,
“What a big book for such a little head!”
Come, I will show you now my newest hat,

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1 Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 84.
And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!
Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that.
I never again shall tell you what I think.
I shall we sweet and crafty, soft and sly;
You will not catch me reading any more:
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;
And some day when you knock and push the door,
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.3

The poem clearly entails and confronts the male projections of the Victorian ideal of womanhood and its oppressive veneer while simultaneously weaving them into a narrative of subversion, an ominous gathering of power and feminine emancipation. The opening image of a husband interrupting his wife’s reading by demanding a kiss, and all the subsequent references to fashion and appearance, point to the popular perception of the woman as a body and an adornment of her husband. The invitation “Come, I will show you now my newest hat./ And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!” defiantly inscribe the woman’s body into the feminist subtext of her poem, while the promise “Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that” and “You will not catch me reading any more” point to Millay’s characteristic combination of theatricality, deceptive coyness and archness which hint at her complex relationship to the concept of “femininity” incorporating both the limiting conventions of representative Victorian womanhood and the New Woman’s bold and rebellious claims of sexual and intellectual independence. As the New Woman, Millay discloses woman’s necessity to “win back her body” and “write through [her] body”4 in a conscious and subversive way in order to strike through and dislocate the Victorian cultural paradigm which prevents women from self-possession and self-realization by reducing them to the role of lovable and desirable objects. Through her overdramatic gesturing towards this paradigm, Millay not only problematizes the complex life of woman in a culture that excludes her from the realm of the intellectual, requiring her obedient submergence in the social “pattern” of marriage and family, but she also shows her contemporaries how to confront and destabilize these restrictive expectations and social conventions. The wife’s confession: “I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly” and “I never again shall tell you what I think,” reveals the poet’s desire to put forward woman’s cleverness and inwardness through her conscious use of disguise, duplicity and masquerade. The misleadingly compliant and submissive tone of the poem additionally masks and foregrounds its defiant message, its rejection of the romantic ideals and clichés of “love and all of

4 Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 244.
that,” gradually revealing the poem’s powerful subtext of the plotted revenge with its displacement of male authority and the final threat of the speaker’s liberation.

And yet Millay’s deceptiveness, sexual openness and boldness is curiously channeled into a highly conventional form of the sonnet—a form “laden with figurations exclusive to a male poetic authority.”5 Although it seems to deepen the impression of the poet’s entrapment within the traditional, the sonnet, however, also seems to serve her subversive ends whose ultimate goal is poetic and sexual freedom. By adopting and mastering the sonnet form, the poet seems to suggest that, to separate herself from the limiting text of patriarchal culture, woman must learn how to work from “within,” how to embrace this text, internalize its structure in the form of tradition and, finally, how to “explode it, turn it around, and seize it, to make it hers.”6 The sonnet becomes thus part of the poet’s disguise, as its rigid form demonstrates the ways in which women are locked into socially prescribed roles, texts and definitions, at the same time offering them a chance to display their changing consciousness and their need for a new self-definition.

This peculiar doubleness and the disruptive power of Millay’s aesthetic extends also to her public image, in which her unconventional behavior was coupled with a deliberate and “flamboyantly theatrical”7 display of the conventions of femininity. As her biographers point out, Millay was a natural-born actress. Epstein, for example, argues that “acting came as natural to her as breathing; she created several different roles for herself in the private world of her imagination before she ever began to play roles for her friends, her lovers, and the public.”8 Kennedy similarly notes that “giving readings in her maturity Millay would look the part of a poet, typically draped in a loose velvet gown with red-and-gold braid, girdle-free, flicking a back velvet cape behind her as she strode. . . . Reciting from memory, she would act her poems with her whole body, winning thunderous applause.”9 In a letter to her family, Millay herself expressed a need to adorn her poetry readings with appropriate, “poetess-fitting” gowns: “[F]amily, I discover that I have nothing

6 Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 245.In her study of the social aspects of Millay’s “The Ballad of the Harp Weaver,” Agata Preis-Smith similarly calls her traditional form “a costume,” or “a guise” pointing to the poet’s self-conscious and masquerading use of the conventional forms to analyze and reflect not only gender relations and the social structures shaping her experience as a woman, but also to examine the problems of social injustice. Using Millay’s ballad as an example, the critic unveils some of the women modernists’ subterfuges “for interweaving the social and political with poetic discourse, in opposition to the mainstream ban on any discursive heterogeneity.” Preis-Smith, “The Costume of Traditional Form and the Motif of Social Injustice,” 217, 221-222.
7 Kennedy, “Edna St. Vincent Millay’s doubly burning candles,” 96.
8 Epstein, What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, 48.
to give readings in, I must have long dresses, trailing ones. The short ones won’t do.”

This carefully designed and staged image of a “medieval princess in a floating chiffon dress,” which flaunted her physical and feminine beauty and enhanced her erotic aura, became an important gloss on her poetry and an integral part of her “feminine masquerade,” to borrow Luce Irigaray’s term again. One of her many admirers, Floyd Dell, thus described their effect on her audience:

A sort of Celtic magic seemed to emanate from her like a perfume. She seemed a little aloof from ordinary concerns. . . . I thought of the Snow Princess, whose kiss left splinters of ice in the hearts of the mortal men who loved her.”

By dramatizing her self-image in this way, Millay showed that she was deliberately using her body and fashion as discourse. Such an ostentatious employment of masquerading strategies allowed her, as Gilbert points out, “to work from the position of fetishized femininity and to question the conventions of culture in which critics had placed the woman poet.”

Through her conscious appropriation of the props and ideals of Victorian femininity, Millay invited scorn and criticism of those of her contemporaries who tended to overlook her original ideas concealed behind conventional forms. Her contemporary, Marianne Moore, who put her female subjectivity into more innovative and idiosyncratic forms, was often praised by her male peers and considered part of the recognized tradition of literary modernism. In his review of Marianne Moore’s poetry, T.S. Eliot wrote: “And there is one final, and ‘magnificent’ compliment: Miss Moore’s poetry is as ‘feminine’ as Christine Rossetti’s, one never thinks of this particularly as anything but a positive virtue.”

Without explaining what this elusive compliment really meant, Eliot suggested, however, that Moore’s was the acceptable kind of femininity, while the ostentatiously feminine Millay was dismissed by his friends and contemporaries as a poet of “sensibility” of “the second order lacking the power of creation” and “desperately middle-class poet” whose poems have “the intimacy of the actress and (off-stage) the femme fatale.” “[L]ess pliant, safer, as a biological organism,” wrote Ransom in his notorious essay “Woman as a Poet,” “she remains fixed in her famous attitudes, and is indifferent to intellectual-

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11 Gilbert, “Female Female Impersonator,” 298.
12 Dell in Gurko, Restless Spirit, 89.
13 Gilbert, “Female Female Impersonator,” 298.
15 Tate, “Miss Millay’s Sonnets,” in Thesing, 62.
16 Shapiro, review of Collected Poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, in Thesing, 103.
Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows it.” To both her contemporaries and critics, it was Moore’s poetry and not Millay’s that seemed closer to the emerging ideal of formal novelty, impersonality, abstractness and intellectual hardness. Pound found Moore free of “the stupidity beloved of the ‘lyric’ enthusiasts,” recognized her good ear, and praised her intellect and her guarded impersonality. Stevens called her “the poet that matters,” and Williams saw her as “a splendid poet in her own right.”

Although singled out as a poet different from “the surrounding menagerie,” Moore was well aware of the strong male bias against woman as poet. Referring to the poetry of H.D., she scrutinized the polarities between the masculine and the feminine and openly expressed her unease with the traps of binary thinking:

Women are regarded as belonging necessarily to either of two classes—that of intellectual freelance or that of the eternally sleeping beauty, effortless yet effective in the indestructible limestone keep of domesticity. Woman tends unconsciously to be the aesthetic norm of intellectual home life and preeminently in the case of H.D., we have the intellectual, social woman, non-public and “feminine.” There is, however, a connection between weapons and beauty. Cowardice and beauty are at swords’ points and in H.D.’s work, suggested by the absence of subterfuge, cowardice and the ambition to dominate by brute force, we have heroics which do not confuse transcendence with domination and which in their indestructibleness, are the core of tranquility and of intellectual equilibrium.

To escape the danger of being trapped in the role of “the eternally sleeping beauty” or that of “intellectual freelance,” Marianne Moore proposed a different position and, as Gilbert suggests, created a different female persona, that of “anti-poetess,” which allowed her to blur these distinctions, combine “weapons and beauty” and in this way voice her suspicion of the limitations imposed on women poets by the cultural standards of her time. Like Millay, by using this persona self-consciously, she also established a vital link between her public image and her aesthetic practice in an attempt to subvert the literary conventions and gender-laden narratives of lyric poetry. In a letter to a friend, quoted after Gilbert, Moore came up with the following self-portrait:

I’m good natured but hideous as an old hop toad. I look like a scarecrow . . . . I look

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17 Ransom, “The Woman as Poet,” in Thesing, 76.
19 Stevens, “A Poet that Matters,” 244.
20 Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 80.
21 Moore, *The Complete Prose*, 82.
22 Gilbert, “Female Female Impersonator,” 298.
23 Ibid., 298.
permanently alarmed, like a frog. I aspire to be neat, I try to do my hair with a lot of thought to avoid those explosive sunbursts, but when one hairpin goes in, another seems to come out... My physiognomy isn’t classic at all, it’s like a banana-nosed monkey.24

Moore’s playful rejection of the conventional markers of femininity in this humorous self-presentation as a “hideous” old maid reveals important qualities of her work and brings the power of her mind to the fore: her love of animal imagery which she frequently employs to shield, disguise, destabilize or engender the subject in her poems, her signatorial desire for perfection and “the neatness of finish,” which is reflected also in the expressed regret that her physiognomy is not “classic,” her attempt at challenging, downplaying and de-romanticizing the conventional ideal of feminine beauty and sexual desirability through the images of “an old hop toad” and “a scarecrow,” and the extreme self-consciousness of her aesthetics coupled with playfulness, intelligence and an unquestionable penchant for caricature.

Like Millay, Moore also cultivated her public appearance as part of her poetic style, adorning her spinsterish and lady-like look, however, with an element of a male uniform: the cloak and the famous tricorn “battle-hat a la George Washington crossing the Delaware.”25 By this cross-dressing and battle camouflage, as Silke aptly notes, Moore “appropriated male authority” and “wrap[ped] herself in an aura of distance,”26 making her body simultaneously gender-conscious and resistant to easy gender categorizations. Unlike the self-consciously feminine costume of Millay whose function was to seduce, defy and forge an intimate and immediate alliance between the poet and her readers, Moore’s belligerent and asexual self-image signaled a desire to “daunt her male readers,”27 inviting them to treat her eccentric disguise both as a shield and weapon against the narrowing perceptions of femininity.

The masquerading strategies are even more visible in Moore’s poetic practice and they affect both the content and form of her works. Sabine Silke quotes Moore’s letter to H.D. in which Moore calls her Poems “my Cretan twilight baby or ... veiled Mohammedan woman,”28 disclosing her own desire to keep her poems veiled, mysterious, elusive and “hidden from the viewer’s eye,”29 and thus, like the Muslim woman’s headdress, simultaneously protecting and revealing her identity as a woman. The Cretan twilight baby metaphor, observes Silke further, combines also maternal tenderness and identification with the ancient Cretan culture known

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24 Moore quoted after Gilbert, “Female Female Impersonator,” 299.
26 Silke, Fashioning the Female Subject, 85, 82.
27 Ibid., 85.
28 Moore quoted after Silke, Fashioning the Female Subject, 88.
29 Silke, Fashioning the Female Subject, 88.