WOMEN IN ROMANTICISM

Meena Alexander

Women Writers

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Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley

Meena Alexander

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For David

'Printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away.'

William Blake

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Editors' Preface

The study of women's writing has been long neglected by a male critical establishment both in academic circles and beyond. As a result, many women writers have either been unfairly neglected or have been marginalised in some way, so that their true influence and importance has been ignored. Other women writers have been accepted by male critics and academics, but on terms which seem, to many women readers of this generation, to be false or simplistic. In the past the internal conflicts involved in being a woman in a male-dominated society have been largely ignored by readers of both sexes, and this has affected our reading of women's work. The time has come for a serious reassessment of women's writing in the light of what we understand today.

This series is designed to help in that reassessment.

All the books are written by women because we believe that men's understanding of feminist critique is only, at best, partial. And besides, men have held the floor quite long enough.

EVA FIGES
ADELE KING

Preface

When I first began to read William Wordsworth and Romantic poetry, I was a young child in India. Like many other young children receiving an English education in a post-colonial world, I had to learn his 'Daffodils' poem by heart. I had no idea what the flower looked like. Many years later, with a shock of recognition, I caught sight of those fleshly yellow petals in a Nottingham wood. It was still years later, in North America now, that I read Dorothy Wordsworth. She stunned and delighted me. Little in my education had prepared me for the complex precision of her writing, or its fragmentary and feminine nature. Reading Dorothy, I turned round. I sought out the writings of that passionate woman Wollstonecraft and then the fierce work of her daughter Mary Shelley. I was reeducating myself, learning afresh about Romanticism, glimpsing covert strategies in those who had no power, sensing a more hidden turmoil than in the grand displays one prizes in the male poets. Reading and writing about these three women has brought me closer to home.

I am grateful to friends who have helped me through this project, listening and talking over a cup of coffee, pointing out difficulties, making further suggestions. Some have helped me read hard manuscripts, others have taken care and trouble to read these writings at various stages. To Svati Joshi, Walter Kendrick, Beth Darlington, Joel Porte, James Boulton, Yi-Fu Tuan, John Maynard, Florence Boos, Susan Sherman, Stephen Parrish, Norman Fruman, James Earl, Philip Sicker, Vivian Gornick, Alice Fredman, Martin Roth, Richard Leppert, James McGavran, J. Robert Barth S.J., Paul Betz, Richard Barickman, I send my thanks. My thanks to Adele King and Eva Figes, series editors and to

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Thanks are due to those who generously helped me at Grasmere: Jonathan Wordsworth, Chairman of the Wordsworth Trust and Terry McCormick, Resident Curator of the Wordsworth Library. I am grateful to The Dove Cottage Trust for permission to study and quote from the Dorothy Wordsworth manuscripts preserved in Grasmere. Thanks to the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library and to Donald Reiman and Mihai Handrea of The Carl H. Pforzheimer Shelley and his Circle Collection of the New York Public Library for access to relevant materials on Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley. I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to quote from the six volume set of *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*; Mary Moorman's *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*; Ernest de Selincourt's editions of *George and Sarah Green, A Narrative* and *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*; Mary E. Burton's edition of *The Letters of Mary Wordsworth*. I am grateful to W.W. Norton for permission to quote from Adrienne Rich's *Dream of a Common Language*. Some of the thoughts on Dorothy Wordsworth were first published in my essay 'Dorothy Wordsworth: The Grounds of Writing' which appeared in *Women's Studies* vol. 14, no. 3 (1988) and I am grateful for permission to reprint portions of it. I have benefited from a Summer Seminar Grant, and a Travel Grant from the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities), a Grant-in-Aid from the ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) and a Fordham Faculty Research Grant, each of which helped the work along.

In the course of my writing, my son Adam Kuruvilla grew up and my little daughter Svati Mariam was born. The heart of what I have learnt about maternity, a recurrent theme in this book, comes from them. My husband David

Lelyveld has cared for me and supported my poems and prose writings. I have learnt more from him than I could ever put into words.

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Introduction: Mapping a Female Romanticism

Beyond Subservience

A little girl, who is teaching herself to write before she can read, starts with the letter 'O'. 'To begin with, she would write nothing but O's; she was always making O's large and small, of all kinds and one within another, but always drawn backwards.'[1] Suddenly, the little girl stops short and catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Discomfited by her appearance, she flings away her pen. After that she refuses to write again. Only the threat of misplacing her clothes induces her to continue. She learns how to write in order to mark them with her name.

This story from *Émile* (1762), Jean Jacques Rousseau's treatise on education, is meant to show that reading and writing, the whole command of the symbolic, can only be a 'fatal knowledge' as far as the little girl is concerned. They intrude on her true tasks, the discrete, practical activities involved in running a household. While teaching herself how to write, the child has stumbled against her own image. As Rousseau makes clear, she could not tolerate 'the look of the thing.' (*E*.332)

Rousseau's tale captures a vision of the feminine that the women writers considered in this book, each in her own way, had to struggle against. He sees the girl – she prefigures the state of the grown woman – forced to stop short in her writing precisely because of her dismay at her appearance as she writes. The way she looks as she writes is unfeminine, and hence 'unnatural'. As Mary Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's first feminist critic realised, this Romantic vision of what

was natural to women was a reflection of social constraints. It was not a necessary condition of a woman's life. The idea of femininity had to be radically questioned and exposed for what it was, a man-made notion.

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in 1759. She died in 1797, eleven days after giving birth to an infant girl who grew up to be the writer Mary Shelley. Mary Shelley lived until 1851. Dorothy Wordsworth was born in 1771, a year and a half after her famous brother William whom she outlived by five years. She died in 1855, having spent the last two decades of her life in the darkness of a physical and mental deterioration, the cause of which is not fully known.

A mother and a daughter, a sister and a brother: powerful familial bonds that fuse the separate strands of creativity in the works of three women writers whose lives spanned the era of English Romanticism. It is a difficult passage from Wollstonecraft's revolutionary fervour, her ardent belief in the claims of social justice for all human beings regardless of sex, to the resolutely private world of Dorothy Wordsworth, her genius intimately bound to the complicated, meditative powers of her poet brother. With Mary Shelley, a second generation Romantic, we enter a harsh visionary world. Her female longings are bound to radical loss, failures of compassion, abrupt endings. Through these three women, one may track the growth and decay of Romantic knowledge.

But the map is not of the usual sort. The claims of Romantic subjectivity are questioned, undermined and finally refashioned in these writings. Where the Romantic poets had sought out the clarities of visionary knowledge, women writers, their lives dominated by the bonds of family and the cultural constraints of femininity, altered that knowledge, forcing it to come to terms with the substantial claims of a woman's view of the world. But cutting against the 'minute attention to propriety' or even the grace of feminine images in Romantic poetry was

only part of the story.[2] Beneath the embattled surface of women's writing, lay a less obtrusive search: for new forms of literary knowledge, for a territory shaped by the truths of a female life.

To grow up female in the age of Dorothy Wordsworth was to recognise that the world of women was distinct if inseparable from that of men. The inner-outer dichotomy the Romantic poets played with presupposed a centralising self that could not be easily translated into the world of women. Born into a realm of implicit subservience, however privileged its immediate nature, women often grasped the public world as difficult, if not inimical to their aspirations. To state this flat out is not to deny the achievement of women of letters, several of whom earned their living by the pen. Wollstonecraft thought of herself as 'the first of a new genus'. (*WL*.164) She was not alone in her endeavour. Before and after her, women in England not only wrote for a living but became major literary figures. Still the condition of ordinary women's lives cannot be ignored.

Through detailed household tasks, women preserved the fabric of ordinary life. They cared for the young, watched over the sick and dying, supported other women in childbirth. Birth and death, the fragile passages in and out of existence, even if sanctified by the patriarchal authority of Church and family, were held within the world of women. Indeed the persistent difficulties of female creativity in the Romantic era had to do with the struggle to capture a subjectivity that endured and supported the fabric of daily life, haunted always by a sense of subservience.

Built into the self-conscious ponderings of Romantic poetry, the ruminations on sensory perception and spiritual power, were concepts of hierarchy and authority that male poets could take for granted. A pained, questing consciousness in search of ever more elusive truths was upheld by a social code of implicit autonomy, and permission for acts of power. Whether in the fierce prophetic vein of William

Blake, in William Wordsworth's convoluted reckonings with memory, or Percy Shelley's edgy scepticism, the Romantic poets sought a vision that assumed the authority of self-consciousness. That took as a right the intense, seemingly unremitting complications of poetic thought. I am not saying that the heights of poetic meditation were easy to achieve, that doubt and dismay were not woven into the fabric of this knowledge, or that it was a monolithic whole. But when set beside women's writings, the implicit assumption of power in male writing is cast into relief.

The woman writer had to cut through the bonds of femininity, those structures of patriarchal authority that seemed to stand outside her, though powerfully gathered in to her intimate grasp of self, even as she set about the slow and often difficult task of discovering the sources of her own genius. In a gendered world, as Mary Wollstonecraft painfully discovered, knowledge was never unmarked.

But given the powerful male tradition, how were women to face the 'anxiety of authorship'?[3] In the Romantic era one discovers two types of female writing. On the one hand, there is a meditative structure gathering strength from an abnegation of the overt will to power, as in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Alfoxden and Grasmere Journals*, or portions of Wollstonecraft's *Letters from Sweden*. On the other hand is a fierce, even violent confrontation with masculine obsession or male authority as in Wollstonecraft's *Maria* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda*. Both types are strategies for overcoming the anxiety of feminine inadequacy, playing against it, turning it on its head.

These women writers developed what might be called a back-against-the-wall aesthetic. For the mythic power of personal symbols, so critical to Romantic poetry, they substituted bits and pieces of their own bodily selves. Obviously it is impossible to put into a poem, novel or journal, actual and substantial bits of one's physicality, to stick 'brute reality' as it were into the text. It is

possible, however, to get as close as one can to such an activity: draw on the substantial, bodily self, like Dorothy Wordsworth, who kept walking in her journals, or Wollstonecraft's imprisoned Maria, who drew inspiration from her painfully swollen breasts, or Mary Shelley who in fierce, contorting acts of the imagination drew on bits and pieces of dead bodies for a monster that could never be naturally birthed. Each writer in her own way struggled to construct a world that in large measure, and at least for the time of composition, was freed from the brutal demands of subservience.

In their distrust of the canonical forms of literature, women writers turned to the concrete world around them. The aesthetic orders they forged never strayed too far from their origins in daily life or the values of a communal existence. The resolutions available to women writers involved recapturing a life shared with others even if the knowledge was darkened by a despair that could not readily be translated into a metaphysic.

By highlighting the change wrought by the seeing self, the eye/I, the great poets of English Romanticism established a distinctive mode of capturing the real. And the political radicalism that Blake, the young Wordsworth and Shelley shared with many others served to sharpen this absorption in the act of vision. The centrality of the poet's self was crucial to an art that tried to free itself of pre-determined orders, whether literary or political. The world could not be remade without visionary freedom.

For women writers this Romantic ideal of selfhood and its visionary freedom was not easy to come by. Nor did it always seem to be singularly appropriate to women. The Romantic self presupposed a self-consciousness that had the leisure and space to enshrine itself at the heart of things. Brought up with a very different sense of the self, with constant reminders of how their lives were meshed in with other lives in bonds of care and concern, women

could not easily aspire to this ideal. Indeed, to some women writers it seemed patently false, or wrong-headed. And just as difficult for women was the Romantic vision of the feminine. It might be gentle, nurturing and silent, or fiercely sexual and fatal; but nowhere was it granted a genius commensurate with that of men.

If the essence of Romantic art lies in the keen emphasis on subjectivity, a fascination with the activities of the poet's imagination as it remakes the visible world, women writers standing where they did in the shared world questioned that intense self-absorption. They turned their literary powers to a clarification of genius that had to struggle through its enforced marginality, work against images that would deplete it of power. The freedom, solitary and boundless, sometimes seen in Romantic writing, however exhilarating it might be, had little place in the work of women. If anything it forced women writers to a careful scrutiny of their own lives.

Male Romantics frequently valued the concrete image, the particle of the physical world that could be turned into symbol. Concretion provided a vivid, incontrovertible starting point for a mind enamoured of the visionary. Blake, uncomfortable though he was with Wordsworthian naturalism had set the concrete particular at the heart of his poetics. A grain of sand might disclose a whole world; heaven might be glimpsed in a wild flower. Wordsworth for his part was resolute in attacking all those who might veer towards abstractions, even his dear friend Coleridge. In *The Prelude* we read his somewhat pained critique of Coleridge whose eloquence and learning seemed to the poet a 'wild ideal pageantry', mere words lacking a hold of the substantial world. Coleridge's poems seemed to Wordsworth to be 'shaped out':

> From things well-matched, or ill, and words for things –
> The self-created sustenance of a mind

Debarred from Nature's living images,
Compelled to be a life unto itself . . . [4]

Picturing his friend as this glorious frenetic mind, Wordsworth could subtly highlight what he viewed as his own adherence to the natural world and the solid truths it afforded the poet. But nature was of course only a starting point for Wordsworth. His true material lay in reflections on how the imagination worked, the very act of making meaning, the 'picture of the mind' as he called it in 'Tintern Abbey'. There is a contrast here with his sister Dorothy's work. In her writings, the natural world, in all its delicate detail stands as the end point of vision. The boundaries of the visible are illumined in her work. She remains within them and within the shared world. Seen from the perspective of her writings, her brother's work, in all its grandeur, edged by an imagined metaphysics, seems isolated, apart. His genius might even justify the use of the phrase he applied to Coleridge, a mind 'compelled to be a life unto itself'.

The belief in individual subjectivity that led to the Romantic fascination with the processes of imagination, also nourished a political radicalism. Searching out marks of the mind's activity was compatible with a belief in revolution, a desire to overthrow oppressive social orders. The French and American revolutions gave actuality to Romantic belief. At times the New World seemed very close at hand, a fresh order created through human energies.

Cut free of the stamp of an earlier classicism, Romantic poetry bears within itself inklings of the processes of mind that brought it into being. By the same token it offers glimpses of its own unravelling, a sense of the provisional nature of all order, a sense of a greater hidden chaos. This implicit power of decreation might be considered ironic, a mode of Romantic irony, ultimately 'a way of keeping in contact with a greater power'.[5]