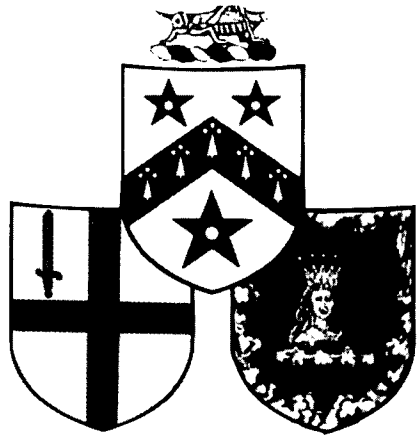
GRESHAM
COLLEGE



TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES: HOW DO WE RECOGNISE VALUE IN THE VERBAL ARTS?

A Lecture by

PROFESSOR LYNETTE HUNTER MA PhD
Gresham Professor of Rhetoric

18 March 1999

GRESHAM COLLEGE

Policy & Objectives

An independently funded educational institution, Gresham College exists

- to continue the free public lectures which have been given for 400 years, and to reinterpret the 'new learning' of Sir Thomas Gresham's day in contemporary terms;

- to engage in study, teaching and research, particularly in those disciplines represented by the Gresham Professors;

- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;

- to challenge those who live or work in the City of London to engage in intellectual debate on those subjects in which the City has a proper concern; and to provide a window on the City for learned societies, both national and international.

Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH
Tel: 0171 831 0575 Fax: 0171 831 5208
e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk

Textual Communities:
How Do We Recognise Value in the Verbal Arts?

Professor Lynette Hunter

At the moment England is looking for a poet laureate. This has got to be a key time for us to assess what we mean by value in the verbal arts, for a poet laureate will carry around their neck a textual community of some sort, and presumably a broad community. Will they, like the politicians I talked about last week, speak for us? or will they speak to us? The interesting thing about a poem is that whether it does one or the other, depends not only on the poet but also on the audience. Do we want to be spoken to? or do we prefer the comfort of being spoken for?

When Ted Hughes writes: (and isn't it interesting how we continue to use the present tense of dead poets?)

Black Coat

I remember going out there,
The tide far out, the North Shore ice-wind
Cutting me back
To the quick of the blood – that outer-edge nostalgia,
The good feeling. My sole memory
Of my black overcoat. Padding the wet sandspit.
I was staring at the sea, I suppose.
Trying to feel thoroughly alone,
Simply myself, with sharp edges –
Me and the sea one big tabula rasa,
As if my returning footprints
Out of that scrim of gleam, that horizon-wide wipe,
Might be a whole new start.

My shoe-sole shapes
My only sign.
My minimal but satisfying discussion
With the sea.
Putting my remarks down, for the thin tongue
Of the sea to interpret. Inaudibly.
A therapy,
Instructions too complicated for me
At the moment, but stowed in my black box for later.
Like feeding a wild deer
With potato crisps
As you do in that snapshot where you exclaim
Back towards me and my camera.

So I had no idea I had stepped
Into the telescopic sights
Of the paparazzo sniper
Nested in your brown iris.
Perhaps you had no idea either,
So far off, half a mile maybe,
Looking towards me. Watching me

Pin the sea's edge down.
No idea
How that double image,
Your eye's inbuilt double exposure
Which was the projection
Of your two-way heart's diplopic error,
The body of the ghost and me the blurred see-through
Came into single focus,
Sharp-edged, stark as a target,
Set up like a decoy
Against that freezing sea
From which your dead father had just crawled.

I did not feel
How, as your lenses tightened,
He slid into me.

Is he speaking to us – or for us?

What I would like to discuss today, raising more questions than offering answers, is the difference between what I call aesthetics a la carte, and aesthetics in the kitchen. In the last lecture I made a distinction between the rhetoric of speaking for and that of speaking to, by drawing on Aristotle. He makes it quite clear that speaking for others, means treating them as if they were all the same. A great deal of the critique that these lectures have attempted to make over the past eighteen months has been of aesthetic systems that try to treat us as if we were all the same. And simultaneously the critique has tried to think of approaches that could begin to deal with the enormous diversity of orature, book art, electronic script, writing and print, with which we currently are faced.
As you will be aware, many people are concerned with exactly these issues, and over the past several years many new approaches to aesthetics have been drawn up. I'd like to consider some of these and ask if they can help us in deciding what kind of textual communities we would like to support and further. At the same time, I'd like to read some poems to keep me honest amidst all the theory.

If Aristotle makes the distinction between speaking for and speaking to, a little earlier Plato made a similar distinction but went further. In the *Phaedrus* he argues that there are three types of rhetoric, the first is persuasion to do with appetite and satiation – it is a rhetoric of exploitation; the second is persuasion by exchange, in which all parties know what the hidden agenda is and agree to talk, listen and respond on a level playing field so to speak – most of our interactions with politicians are of this kind, as are our responses to family members; and third type of rhetoric, the type to which the others should aspire, is love. But Plato seems to have a very specific kind of love in mind. In fact, the *Phaedrus* presents the first two types of rhetoric as two types of love, one for power and one for money. The third type of rhetoric is philosophical love, in which we come to an appreciation of the other person or people not because they reflect or mirror ourselves back to us, but precisely because they ask us to negotiate with their difference. Where Aristotle says that plausible rhetoric, the rhetoric that speaks for us, is appropriate within small circles of knowledge, Plato argues that although we may not always achieve it, we should always be attempting to persuade through the rhetoric of the probable, the rhetoric that speaks to us.

Plato's images of how this persuasion works are gardening and medicine, a Galenic medicine that does not try to cure all people with the same drug in the way western medicine does nowadays, but which remains sensitive to each person's location and place and which will offer twenty treatments for one illness, suggesting different amendments for each

individual. The history of Platonic philosophy has in many ways been a response to this idea of the negotiation of difference. If Socrates says, through Plato's mouth, that we have to lose ourselves to find ourselves, the giving up to difference can happen in many different ways. Among many other things it can be a reminder of a fallen state, of loss, or inadequacy; it can be an invitation to sacrifice, 'for he that so loved the world, that he gave up his only begotten son....'; it can be a exercise in tolerance; or it can be, as it is for me at least, a negotiation with the elusive but inconvertible edge of difference.

Quite a lot of modern writing doesn't demand anything like this. It offers us conventions that we recognise and understand, that are part of our own field of vision. A lot of writing self-consciously works like Aristotle's sense of 'science', a closed community of writers and readers, especially in the area of genre fiction, detective story, fantasy, horror, science fiction. This writing often gives us representations of ourselves as we are used to seeing them. It is comforting, seductive, sometimes annoying in its predictability, and always implicitly inadequate to who or where we think we are located. Would we want Jeffrey Archer to be our new poet laureate (even were he interested, which he probably is not)? It is more likely that we would tend to value writing that to some extent challenges those conventional representations of who we are. We don't like being homogenised and universalised. We appreciate the value in language that recognises that we are individual, and that in doing so, values us.

We don't enjoy a Shakespeare sonnet because we are told to do so, but because we feel it – aesthetics means 'feelings':

Sonnet 29

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heav'n with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising,
From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Richard Holloway, the current holder of the Chair of Divinity at Gresham and the Bishop of Edinburgh, has spoken of the collapse of 'command ethics' in the church. In a parallel argument, with the growing number of diverse voices, there has been perhaps not a collapse, but an erosion of command aesthetics. The 'canon' of English literature, as the bastion of what is credited as good writing, is challenged with regularity if not fundamentally altered. One response to the challenges has been the development of a tolerant aesthetics, one that benignly puts up with diversity. The philosopher Richard Rorty posits this kind of approach, describing it as a 'cultural bazaar', in which we shop around or display our wares with some kind of equality. But, as I have argued earlier in this series, in this cultural market, some traders are more equal than others. Some have better routes for education, for production, for distribution, for recognition and reward. Some simply have better food and clothing.

Tolerant aesthetics, like command aesthetics, is only appropriate for those already being heard and valued, for those already with access to cultural power. Poets seem to know this, but critics often do not. If command aesthetics speaks at people, tolerant aesthetics is more insidious in the way it claims to speak for people while at the same time implicitly upholding the values of cultural community already in power. A curious thing happens in tolerant aesthetics: different uses of language appear to be inadequate, and hence failing, while in effect they are being assessed within an inappropriate context, a context that cannot even hear them.

Think of the difficulty Wordsworth had in being heard – how could the early nineteenth century ear not have responded to :

Lines...

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. – Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

One of the predominant responses to the way that poetics tries to do something different with language has been to think of the writer as one who is marginalised, pushed to the periphery of recognised culture and therefore somehow unable to use the available strategies of poetry to talk about their position. This kind of approach argues that because the conventions of language and poetics are so strong, it is literally impossible to use them to voice the concerns of those excluded from cultural power. Hence, for example, women, hence black writers, will only be able to arrive at a sense of value tied to the recognition of loss, or absence, or lack. Now it makes sense that if we choose to write within the strategies that are on offer, we may not find anything appropriate, because if we have been excluded from valued writing for so long then there may not be a tradition for working on our (also excluded) lives. One example of this might be lesbian love poetry, for despite Sappho, the love poetry tradition has been mainly centred on heterosexual male love. This critical approach can be summed up by the phrase 'sacrificial aesthetics', and is quite widespread in the scholarly world. It assumes that the writer sacrifices something of themselves in order to be able to write at all within the conventions on offer.

Listen to Daphne Marlatt. Ican't say I find this sacrificial:

Kore

no one wears yellow like you excessive and radiant storehouse of sun, skin smooth as fruit but thin, leaking light. (i am climbing toward you out of the hidden.) no one shines like you, so that even your lashes flicker light, amber over blue (*amba*, amorous Demeter, you with the fire in your hand, i am coming to you). no one my tongue burrows in, whose wild flesh opens wet, tongue seeks its nest, amative and nurturing (here i am you) lips work towards undoing (*dhei* female, sucking and suckling, fecund) spurt/ spirit opening in the dark of earth, *yu!* cry jubilant excess, your fruiting body bloom we issue into the light of, sweet, successive flesh . . .

What is emerging is a picture of a central systemic tradition which is authorised by the canon, and which contains the legitimate images through which we may represent ourselves. If we don't fit, then that tradition thinks that our writing loses something, is seen as inadequate. Similarly, there are critical approaches that could be called 'agonistic aesthetics' which set themselves up in opposition to that central tradition, continually testing the limits to which it can be pushed or shifted. Significantly, proponents of such an approach tend to be those who have at least some cultural power, often those relatively empowered 'intellectuals' whose business it is to translate the changing needs of individuals into something that can be represented within convention. All poets are to some extent faced with this problem, that's why they work on language. Listen to Margaret Atwood:

Down

i.
They were wrong about the sun.
It does not go down into
the underworld at night.
The sun leaves merely
and the underworld emerges.
It can happen at any moment.

It can happen in the morning,
you in the kitchen going through
your mild routines.
Plate, cup, knife.
All at once there's no blue, no green,
no warning.

ii.
Old thread, old line
of ink twisting out into the clearness
we call space
where are you leading me this time?
Past the stove, past the table,
past the daily horizontal
of the floor, past the cellar,
past the believable,
down into the darkness
where you reverse and shine.

iii.
At first you think they are angels,
these albino voices, these voice
like the unpainted eyes of statues,

these mute voices like gloves
with no hands in them,
these moth voices fluttering
and baffled around your ears,
trying to make you hear them.

What do they need?

You make a cut in yourself,
a little opening
for the pain to get in.
You set loose three drops of your blood.

iv.
This is
the kingdom of the unspoken,
the kingdom of the unspeaking:

all those destroyed by war
all those who are starving
all those beaten to death
and buried in pits, those slit apart
for reasons of expediency or money
all those howling
in locked rooms, all sacrificed
children, all murdered brides,
all suicides.

They say:
Speak for us (to whom)
Some say: *Avenge us* (on whom)
Some say: *Take our place.*
Some say: *Witness.*

Others say (and these are women):
Be happy for us.

v.
There is the staircase,
there is the sun.
There is the kitchen,
the plate with toast and strawberry jam
your subterfuge,
your ordinary mirage.

Your stand red-handed.
You want to wash yourself
in earth, in rocks and grass

What are you supposed to do
with all this loss?

Yet none of these approaches really addresses the needs of those people outwith the system of representation, those people who do not worry about inadequate representation because they can't be heard at all except within their specific location. Most of these critical

approaches to aesthetics present the writer as transgressor, a single individual making little impact on the larger structures of the canon. The reader too becomes caught within representations on whose behalf the writer transgresses. The process leaves the reader in particular feeling deprived of agency, unable to discuss our responses, to articulate the things we find difficult to value yet immediate to our lives.

These considerations are similar to those that raised in terms of politics last week, and they are at the centre of a growing area of philosophy concerned with situated knowledge, knowledge that is specific to local communities. Bringing these philosophical issues into the area of language, writing and poetics, is work at the leading edge of literary aesthetics, for situated knowledge cannot work without a sense of textuality. I would like to explore this area for the remainder of the lecture, and ask first, what is situated knowledge?

Situated knowledge looks at the knowledge and value formed from the standpoint of people who don't usually get access to cultural power, and argues that precisely because that standpoint is so different to the traditional system it can be a place for change, assessment and renewal. Situated knowledge is necessarily partial because it is specific to one community, and it is concerned with re-defining knowledge and value to account for those people who are not in the mainstream of access to power. In other words it is obviously outside command and tolerant aesthetics, but it also denies that sacrifice and continual opposition are helpful strategies. Who has elaborated on it? As you might expect: those people who are not usually allowed to contribute to conventional systems – women working on science, black people working on valid knowledge, aboriginal people working on philosophy and so on.

People concerned with situated textuality are concerned with the way that this kind of knowledge gets put into words, after all you can't have knowledge without communication. Situated textuality asks: could you do poetics differently if you did not erase people outside the conventional representation? and if so, how could you do it differently? Could we put into words lived experience that has not been spoken, recognised, legitimised by mimetic repetition, agreed to, valued and acted upon -- the tacit that we all have to work on within the limitations of language. Asking these questions lies at the centre of philosopher Lorraine Code's development of a knowing through stories that develops responsibility for others through empathy. Despite its potential for manipulation, empathy and, I would add, story, is a 'nuanced mode of knowing'[i] through which we learn a rhetoric of speaking to people rather than for them. The point for Code is to learn to treat others as the 'friend'. She says that we learn to respect people as a 'second person' not 'third person' individual. Second-person ethics is central to a rhetoric of 'speaking to' because it brings us together in both a commonality and a difference that is based on trust and friendship.[ii]

Code's deployment of narrative and story is extraordinarily helpful in the way it begins to lay out a vocabulary for textual valuing. She notes that because we cannot 'know' everyone intimately there is the 'cognitive and moral importance of an educated imagination as a way for moral agents to move empathetically beyond instances they have taken the trouble to know well to other apparently related instances' (92--3). Such textual work with narrative is 'responsible cognitive endeavour' (93), that educates individuals in the dangers and corruptions of social stereotyping. She continues by saying that empathic knowledge is intersubjective and necessarily ambiguous. Drawing on the work of Simone De Beauvoir, Code defines empathy this way because 'Its ambiguity is manifested in coming to terms simultaneously with the other's likeness to oneself, and her/his irreducible strangeness, otherness' (141). In resisting the attempt only to find sameness in other people, and in recognising the simultaneity of mutuality and difference, empathic knowledge is, according to De Beauvoir, love. Specifically, it is the love of Plato's philosophic lover in *Phaedrus*, who engages with love as gift always entailing responsibilities, and as possibility for change, and for whom such love is allied with a particular kind of engaged speaking and writing. As

Hilary Rose concludes in her work on science, *Love, Power and Knowledge*, 'It is love, as caring respect for both people and nature, that offers an ethic to reshape knowledge, and with it society'.[iii] These quotations from a few philosophers may give you a sense of the ethical, in other words the social, commitment of situated knowledge, but how might this work with words in a situated textuality?

In practice, learning how to be a friend to the text means first of all working on words and opening out textuality into articulations of different and immediately common ground. This work is vulnerable work. Unravelling the representative leaves moments, sometimes longer, of freefall. We need support and we need to want to do it, and hence we need communities with a shared sense of what has to be done, if not urgency. Textual communities for opening out and building common ground usually go on in writing, particularly in the activity before the written enters the commercial world. The communities are often intimate and personal, families, writing/reading groups, newsletters, newspapers, magazines and, recently, email discussion groups. These communities, like us, here in Gresham College, implicitly involve not only writers but also their audiences, the readers and listeners. In these settings people work, we labour on the articulation of grounds -- often initially with just a glimpse of commonality and shared ground that we seize upon and repeat, and in the to and fro of repetition gradually texture the movement into ground, valuing and legitimating it.

I would like to think about this by looking at two extracts from one of my favourite pieces of writing, a prose poem by bp Nichol, *Selected Organs* (copies of the extracts are appended to the transcript). Now Nichol is someone who reaches into the body of language, its heart, mouth and musculature, in rather literal ways. He breaks apart words, letters, sounds and syntax, and restructures them so that they may release different feelings. Sometimes his work is exceptionally difficult to read, but in *Selected Organs* he plays oral story-telling devices against the written to loosen the ties of grammar and narrative. One of his key locations is the pronoun, and each section of the poem focuses in a different way on pronouns. A curious event happens in 'The Mouth' as the 'I' moves toward becoming a noun. The section begins with a series of cliches that distance common experience from the self by way of the collective 'you': 'You were never supposed to talk when it was full. It was better to keep it shut if you had nothing to say' (13). But part 2 moves into the personal with a repetition, from 'Probably there are...' to 'Probably my mouth...'. The phrase 'my mouth' alternates with the pronoun 'I' for three sentences as if 'my mouth' is something separate from 'I', before shifting to an alternation between 'my mouth' and 'my life': 'Life' displacing 'I'. Part 3 continues the dislocation of 'I', and part 4 increases the momentum by way of a cumulative series of stories about what dentists did to his mouth, that become longer and more violent until he reaches dentist number six, when he brings back 'I' as a noun, as a character: 'I'd begun to see that every time I thot of dentists I ended the sentence with the word "me"' who concludes 'My mouth was me'. Parts 5 and 6 anchor the 'I' down to 'bp' or 'books and pamphlets' [Nichol], who 'really runs off at the mouth'. Yet by the time we reach this cliché it is no longer a cliché but literal, and we the reader can feel the personal life that invests the cliché with the particular truth of this individual, that makes the pronoun a noun.

The section on the mouth is also a meditation on the Biblical phrase 'In the beginning was the word...', and as the reader reads through the whole book each section may be read as an elaboration on a christian aphorism or phrase. 'The Chest' is partly a meditation on 'The word made flesh', and how we tell our bodies into words, or , in effect how very bad we are at doing just that. He starts with the social language for the chest that promises all sorts of recognisable narratives, and then undercuts them in part 2 by allowing sound to take over from visual image, moving to an alternation between redder/whiter, mutter/mother, muttering/ for her, and ending with the increasingly desolate monotone repetition of 'gedding bedder'. But parts 3 and 4 return us swiftly to the public world, and the way that nouns are often almost 'things', they take over what the body does, and often end in a tense explosion between feelings and words – especially for a teenager experiencing sexual excitement for

the first time. But the fifth and final part of 'The Chest' is a sad performance of the social insistence of the way we separate the word and the body. This particular body goes into therapy where it is told what and what not to do, to separate the head from the body, the word from the body, to stick to the conventional social story and keep the body out of it.

Each section of Selected Organs negotiates precisely that constriction on what it is that we are conventionally expected to put into words, and what this writer has to do in order to rearrange language in order to speak his body into it. I have described these parts in detail simply to give you a taste of the kinds of strategies that Nichol develops in order to write from his particular knowledge. There is no way we can value his writing without engaging in those strategies, and working with him on the words. But as I have mentioned rather frequently over the past few lectures, this involves hard work.

Situated textuality is not only concerned with creating more adequate representations whose transgressive moment of birth is 'beauty' as 'fit': what I call aesthetics à la carte. Situated textuality is also concerned with distinction, boundary, language as limited, and working on those limits: the hard graft of syntactic, morphemic, semantic and narrative restructuring that always occurs between at least two people, often more, as words, phrases and stories are repeated back and forth across a gap of individual difference till we find we have netted together a workable common ground. But working on language as necessarily limited is quite different in tenor to working on language as inadequate. Although it needs courage, it has no heroes. There are no guarantees that there will be a result, that the result will be valued by anyone else. This aesthetic shock is precisely that of shared common ground, it is aesthetics in the kitchen, a phrase that tells you a lot about my life starting with the probability that I have one -- a kitchen that is.[iv] The shock of shared common ground viewing language as work on limits is a shock of the recognition of common work, of shared value, it has hope written through it as well as joy.

All poets know this. Most readers do too, even if the critics hide behind screens turning their readings into artefacts/arteficts. And so who would we want as our poet laureate? And why would we want one in these days? So many of the engaged English poets are from small specific communities that do not speak for all, and nor would they want to. This has however always been the case, it's just that nowadays we admit to it. But how do we manage that admission. It is extraordinary that the one writer whom everyone seems to respect enough to be able to mention without embarrassment, Seamus Heaney, has apparently put himself out of the race. Perhaps our society has changed beyond the idea of poet laureate, perhaps we need some other structure that does not pretend to speak for us, but to speak to us in all our differences.

M. Atwood, *Morning in the Burned House*. McClelland and Stewart, 1995.
T. Hughes, *Birthday Letters*. Faber 1998.
D. Marlatt, *Touch to My Tongue*. Longspoon, 1984.
bp Nichol, *Selected Organs*. Black Moss, 1988.
W. Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, ed K. Duncan-Jones. Arden 1997.
W. Wordsworth, Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, 1798. ed J. Stillinger. Riverside, 1965.

[34] L. Code. *Rhetorical Spaces*, p. 132.

[35] Co-authors L. Code, M. Ford, K. Martindale, S. Shewin and D. Shogan, *Is Feminist Ethics Possible?* (CRIAW/ICREF, Ottawa, 1991), p. 23.

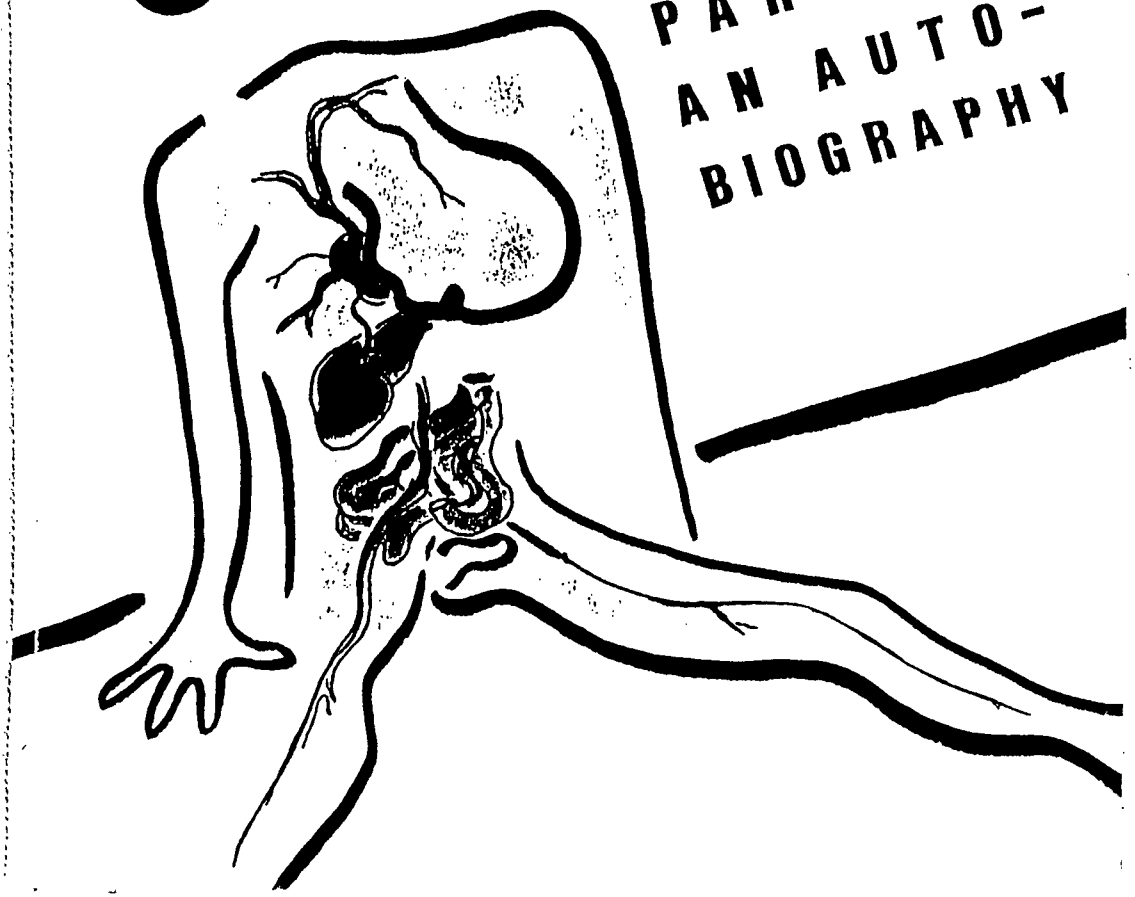
[37] H. Rose, *Love, Power and Knowlege*, p. 238.

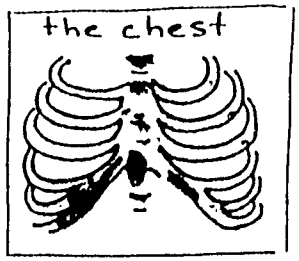
iv See P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, for the idea of beauty as a 'powerful alternative to Eurocentric aesthetics' could be a, 'dual emphasis on beauty occurring via individual uniqueness juxtaposed in a community setting and on the importance of creating functional beauty from the scraps of everyday life'(p 89).

bpNICHOL

SELECTED ORGANS

PARTS OF AN AUTO-BIOGRAPHY





The Chest

1.

You were obsessed with it. Everyone was obsessed with it. On the edge of thirteen when Carol Wisdom's chest started to develop you couldn't take your eyes off it. Until you were twelve everyone who was your age had a chest. But then you turned thirteen & you had a chest & she had breasts on her chest & your chest was puny & he really had a chest & she was chesty & all the bad puns began about being 'chest friends' & it was 'chest too much' or 'two much' or 'two for tea anytime baby' (which of course you always said to a guy coz you were too embarrassed to say it to a girl) & suddenly you had discovered chests as if they had never been there before & they were everywhere, everywhere, & you were obsessed with them.

2.

From the age of five to the age of sixteen you kept getting chest colds. Once a year for three weeks you'd be sick in bed,

your voice getting deeper (which you liked), your breathing shallower (which you hated), your nostrils redder, your face whiter, saying mutter for mother muttering for her. She'd bring you gingerale (to soothe your throat), vicks vaporub (to clear your head), & you'd say 'I'm gedding bedder' over & over again like a charm clutched to your hopeless chest, 'I'm gedding bedder' you'd say, sinking further into the sheets, 'I'm gedding bedder', til the bed & you were one pale continuous tone, white on white in white, 'I'm gedding bedder – bedder.'

3.

It was where longing resided. It was what you played your cards close to. It was one of the few body parts rhymed with the furniture & it held hope or tea or linen. It was a clear noun, substantial, the only named part that didn't seem small, didn't seem somehow smaller thru naming. It had no funny names or corny names or dirty names & it was the largest part of all. You stuck it out. You puffed it up. It was chest. What it was was chest.

4.

You didn't think of the chest as sensitive until you danced with her. You were thirteen & the dance floor was crowded & tho the moving bodies of your friends pressed you together you would only allow your chests to touch & there was heat & pressure & movement between you & your chest was ten times more sensitive than your hands, felt more than your eyes could see, & your trapped heart pounded as if you would die, explode, right there before her eyes, disintegrate from the

ache & longing. You were in love, your chests were in love, as the music & the crowd carried you, pressing you closer & closer together, over that moving dance floor that dark warm August night.

5.

When you went into therapy all the language changed. Now the chest was something you got things off of or bared, some place you shouldn't keep things inside of, as if it were a vessel & feelings held there grew stagnant, festered, expanded under pressure until released to air. In the shakey diagramming of the unconscious it was where deep lay – deep feelings, deep disturbance – or you thot it was because weren't you always being told you shouldn't be too heady, shouldn't talk off the top of your head, that it was bad to be cut off at the neck, dead from the neck down, & from the neck down is where the chest is. But not too far down because after all you weren't supposed to dump shit on anyone either, or talk a load of crap, piss on them, be a shit, & what was left then but the chest unless, of course, you had a gut feeling. But gut was too ambiguous, too subject to the charge you were just spewing vomit. No. It was the chest. It had to be the chest; that was where the heart was & the heart was good. You were good-hearted, had a lot of heart &, when you got right down to things you had a heart to heart, really opened up, bared your chest & spoke from your heart all your real feelings, your deep feelings, got everything off your chest, just like you were supposed to.

The Mouth

1.

You were never supposed to talk when it was full. It was better to keep it shut if you had nothing to say. You were never supposed to shoot it off. It was better to be seen than heard. It got washed out with soap if you talked dirty. You were never supposed to mouth-off, give them any of your lip, turn up your nose at them, give them a dirty look, an evil eye or a baleful stare. So your mouth just sat there, in the middle of your still face, one more set of muscles trying not to give too much away. 'Hey! SMILE! what's the matter with you anyway?'

2.

Probably there are all sorts of stories. Probably my mouth figures in all sorts of stories when I was little but I don't remember any of them. I don't remember any stories about my mouth but I remember it was there. I remember it was there and I talked & sang & ate & used it all the time. I don't

remember anything about it but the mouth remembers. The mouth remembers what the brain can't quite wrap its tongue around & that's what my life's become. My life's become my mouth's remembering, telling stories with the brain's tongue.

3.

I must have been nine. I'm pretty sure I was nine because I remember I was the new boy in school. I remember I was walking on my way there, the back way, thru the woods, & here was this kid walking towards me, George was his name, & I said 'hi George' & he said 'I don't like your mouth' & grabbed me & smashed my face into his knee. It was my first encounter with body art or it was my first encounter with someone else's idea of cosmetic surgery. It was translation or composition. He rearranged me.

4.

The first dentist called me the Cavity Kid & put 35 fillings into me. The second dentist said the first dentist was a charlatan, that all the fillings had fallen out, & put 38 more fillings in me. The third dentist had the shakes from his years in the prisoner of war camp & called me his 'juicy one', saliva frothing from my mouth as his shakey hand approached me. The fourth dentist never looked at me. His nurse put me out with the sleeping gas & then he'd enter the room & fill me. The fifth dentist said my teeth were okay but my gums would have to go, he'd have to cut me. The sixth dentist said well he figured an operation on the foot was okay coz the foot was a long way away but the mouth was just a little close to where he thot he lived & boy did we ever agree because I'd begun to

see that every time I thot of dentists I ended the sentence with the word 'me'. My mouth was me. I wasn't any ancient Egyptian who believed his Ka was in his nose – nosiree – I was just a Kanadian kid & had my heart in my mouth every time a dentist approached me.

5.

It all begins with the mouth. I shouted waaa when I was born, maaa when I could name her, took her nipple in, the rubber nipple of the bottle later, the silver spoon, mashed peas, dirt, ants, anything with flavour I could shove there, took the tongue & flung it 'round the mouth making sounds, words, sentences, tried to say the things that made it possible to reach him, kiss her, get my tongue from my mouth into some other. I liked that, liked the fact the tongue could move in mouths other than its own, & that so many things began there – words did, meals, sex – & tho later you travelled down the body, below the belt, up there you could belt out a duet, share a belt of whiskey, undo your belts & put your mouths together. And I like the fact that we are rhymed, mouth to mouth, & that it begins here, on the tongue, in the pun, comes from mouth her mouth where we all come from.

6.

I always said I was part of the oral tradition. I always said poetry was an oral art. When I went into therapy my therapist always said I had an oral personality. I got fixated on oral sex, oral gratification & notating the oral reality of the poem. At the age of five when Al Watts Jr was still my friend I actually said, when asked who could do something or other, 'me or Al'

& only years later realized how the truth's flung out of you at certain points & runs on ahead. And here I've been for years running after me, trying to catch up, shouting 'it's the oral', 'it all depends on the oral', everybody looking at my bibliography, the too many books & pamphlets, saying with painful accuracy: 'that bp – he really runs off at the mouth.'