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WRITER / CRITIC / HYSTERIC: Who's (Reading) Who in
Spaces Like Stairs, Errata, and *Talking*

by

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We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

Spaces Like Stairs by Gail Scott, *Errata* by George Bowering, and *Talking* by Phyllis Webb are texts which are simultaneously creative and critical. The self-reflexive essays which comprise these collections undermine the conventional academic formality of the critical essay, and do away with the notion of essayist as a fixed entity whose opinions and ideas may be traced to a singular identity. They also break with the Canadian tradition of thematic criticism and concentrate, instead, on textual elements such as language and form.

As writers and critics, Scott, Bowering, and Webb produce essays which are formal and ordered but in ways which mirror the writers' questioning of subjectivity, authority and linear arrangement. In this way, their creative / critical strategies resemble the contestatory, subversive discourse of the hysteric. At once an act of writing and reading, hysterical discourse, may be considered a generative force which defines the form and function of these self-reflexive critical texts.

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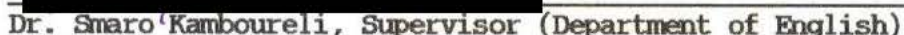

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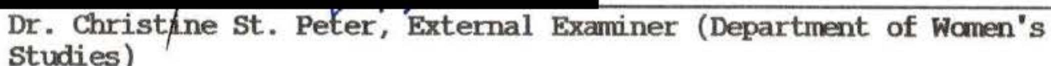

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I am, of course, indebted to Smaro Kamboureli for, among many things, allowing me to discover and honour the autobiographical nature of my reading and writing acts, and for being the first to pose the pivotal question for me, "Who speaks the name 'hysteric'?"

For my father, Rex

PRE-TEXT

May, 1990

Stephen Scobie has spoken to the Chair and regrets the Department will not allow me to write a novel as my thesis. I came up with arguments such as, "How can a department so concerned with theory and so critically hip not be willing to contemplate a creative thesis?" and "Theory does not exist in a vacuum" and "It's all story." Stephen, of course, is one of the converted. He is not responsible; he is a writer as critic.

There is tension between the Creative Writing and English Departments, a territorial line drawn something like: "If you start teaching creative writing we'll start teaching English." While I acknowledge the bureaucratic, institutional, and political complications embedded in that reasoning, it is structured out of a "rational," almost mathematical and linear mode of thinking and I don't think that way.

I would wait and do my MA with CW but there are no tenured women there to direct me. I have taken four years of fiction workshops without a female instructor. It seems a small, dare I say reasonable, request to expect one now. Besides, I'm an English major, i.e. a reader as well as a writer. Both. Better at neither over the other.

Looking for plan B.

September, 1990

I have a directed study with Jack H. I will do a first draft of a novel (country singer goes on the road with a small child in search of . . . Goes to the motorcycle race in the Isle of Man . . . goes to the circular (is it?) town of Kitimat and falls for a pilot (the nautical kind, from pilot boats). Islands, circles, country music, isolation, the whole bit). Yes, English will give me credit. Jack's given me an exhaustive reading list of primary texts I might find useful to which I've added Gail Scott's *Heroine*. I also came across her *Spaces Like Stairs*. What a great book to read when you're trying to write a novel.

October, 1990

Spoke to Dr. Kamboureli about putting together a thesis dealing with my "creativity vs. critical theory" unresolved dilemma. I'm wondering about why so many creative writers vehemently resist theory and others, such as Scott, want to explore every creative / critical possibility. Dr. K points out I'm confusing poetics with critical theory. I'm not sure of the difference but I see her point. I brought up *Spaces Like Stairs* and she perked up.

November, 1990

My thesis is going to consider *Spaces Like Stairs* by Gail Scott, *Errata* by George Bowering, and *Talking* by Phyllis Webb. I want it to be as creative as possible. Maybe a split page with the academic essay on one side and my personal, creative endeavors on the other. Sideways. Maybe photographs, graphics; a diary format with fiction excerpts.

My proposal will take time, but I'm excited. It's due the beginning of February, I think. The baby's due mid-January. I should be able to do it all. I want to take a course on Blake in January (my old "innocence and experience" fascination persists). I think I can just bring the baby with me to class. It's at night, so she'll probably sleep.

December, 1990

What's happened to the essay form? What are these writer / critics up to, making it all full of self-centred emotion and poetic language and weighted with more questions than answers? When did it start happening and why didn't someone tell me you could write an essay that way?

And whatever happened to thematic criticism: wilderness, prairie, survival, all that Atwood and Frye Canadian landscape and nationalism stuff? That seems to be the True North tradition of criticism, but "my" 3 writers (I'll rename them GS, GB, and PW) certainly don't adhere to that way of seeing. They seem to be just as interested in themselves when they read and theorize and criticize as they are in the object of

their reading, equally self-conscious about form and style and content, aware of historical context.

Eli Mandel seems to represent the moment when Canadian criticism shifted from the environmental to the personal, where the critic does not stand remotely outside the work but participates in it (as cited by Bennett 160); he's still into thematic interpretation, though.

It is not so much the movement of Canadian critics from the thematic and archetypal to the phenomenological and post-structuralist which interests me, though key players and major schools of thought define what's at stake for the Canadian tradition. Atwood and Mandel are artists and critics, but they do not seem, as Frank Davey puts it, to "break free of the linear argument featured in the traditional critical essay" (Bennett 166). It's as if they made a firm distinction between their poetic, or creative selves and the job they do (the role they play) as critics. Their criticism is intended to exist aside from the literary text; they see, implicitly, a hierarchical organisation which places literature in a superior position, with criticism existing only to distinguish itself from literature. I'm wondering what changed the tide for GS, GB, and PW.

February, 1991

I will be late with my proposal. I went into labour on the first day of the Gulf War, my water broke as two Jehovah Witnesses stood at my door, clucking over my faithlessness. Lily was born three days later; I found my labour could not progress, under the circumstances. It is difficult to defend bringing a brand new being into a world at war. We are a culture so willing to generate hysteria but what does the hysteria generate? The rhetoric of this war is ambiguously maternal and strangely (inappropriately?) poetic: the Mother of All Wars; "wave upon wave of SCUD missile attacks push and push again . . ." (these are not the waves from my relaxation tape, this is not how or what I have been trained to push): blame the mother. Tom wore headphones for two days following my request to turn the television off. He and my midwife almost missed Lily's entrance (exit, from my body's viewpoint) as they

were glued to the set in the hospital cafeteria. Watching for the world to end.

I can't take Blake. The baby doesn't sleep and neither do I. Furthermore, to borrow from writer / critic Betsy Warland, "the breasts refuse" (279).

I read and write in the fragments of stolen moments; it's the reading I miss the most. Motherhood in the wilderness.

mid-February, 1991

Speaking of wilderness, here's what Hartman says (I think I'll include it in my proposal): "It is crass to think of two specialties, one called reading and one writing; and then to view criticism as a particularly special type of reading which uses writing as an 'incidental' aid" (*Criticism* 20). This is exactly the relationship between writing and reading I'm trying to look at with GS, GB, and PW. Geoffrey Hartman challenges here the implicit hierarchical notion according to which criticism is considered to be subordinate to literature. Instead, he places the emphasis on the self-consciousness of the writing act. In doing so he questions the traditional concept that reading and writing are separate, distinct activities. He proceeds to show that the two acts are interwoven, if not indistinguishable. This coming together of the reading and writing acts has important aesthetic and theoretical ramifications, especially when examined in the context of such authors as GS, GB, and PW who produce texts which are at once literary and critical.

This kind of writer, Hartman argues, "[r]efus[es] the subterfuge of a passive or restrictive role, [and] becomes at once reader and writer -- or takes it fully into consciousness that he is both an interpreter of texts and a self-interpreting producer of further texts" (162). The result of this writing activity is the production of a text which is simultaneously creative and critical, a self-reflexive and critical exploration of imagination.

All that should go into my proposal, I guess. Or the thesis intro.

May, 1991

I've been asked to write an essay about my experience of breast feeding in terms of cultural attitudes to it for a local magazine (everybody's an expert). I'm no longer sure I'm 100% in favour of mandatory suckling; I don't know how I would express what I have to say in an essay. I'm not sure of what an essay is any more.

Montaigne writes that he will, in the essay form, follow his "natural and ordinary pace, however off the track it is" (297); "I speak my meaning in disjointed parts" (824), he adds. GS, GB and PW choose to undermine what is considered the conventional academic formality of the critical essay. They do away with the notion that the essay writer is an all-knowing and knowable "I," a fixed entity whose opinions and ideas may be traced to a singular identity. They acknowledge that each "I" who speaks -- and there may be many within one essay -- does so from a subject position. In other words, subjectivity is always constructed according to the contextual arrangement from which it proceeds. The essayistic "I" is never singular nor authoritative, they believe. It is always multiple, transitory, shifting to accommodate the world around it. Montaigne is an early example of an essayist who opened up the form.

> According to [his] conception, the essay evidently calls for a delicate set of mental adjustments, attuned both to giving the mind a free rein and reining it in, so that the form of the essay will appear to reflect the process of a mind in action, but a mind that is always in control of itself no matter how wayward it may seem to be. In other words, the essay is conceived as being based on an idea somewhat akin to the principles of organic form, yet also akin to the principles of artful artlessness.
>
> (Klaus 168)

What I like about this is that it qualifies what, in the essays of "my" three writers may be mistaken for lack of sophistication or sloppy thinking. Their creative / critical essays are formal and ordered but in ways which mirror their questioning of subjectivity, authority, and linear arrangement.

It's no accident that GS, GB, and PW each allude to Roland Barthes in or with their texts. Arguably Barthes, by giving us *A Lover's Discourse*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, was responsible for once again opening up the essay form by foregrounding *écriture* and problems of subjectivity (I'm reading Bensmaia's book which is all about Barthes' influence on the essay form).

Edward Hoagland figures "the artful 'I' of an essay can be as chameleon as any narrator in fiction" (26). "My" writers' essays are fragmented, autobiographical, poetic; they are in the form of short stories, prose poems, and epistolary narrative. Text book definitions of "essay" don't get at the idea that the essay may be, in a sense, an anti-genre which deconstructs itself as it constructs itself out of others. This is the sense of essay that I want to use in my thesis. For an artist to perform a critical act, perhaps it is necessary to "invent" at the site of that spliced activity an anti-genre which contains the co-presence of the creative and the critical, one which will not structurally or formally priorize one over the other. These essays -- opened up and subversive -- represent just such an anti-genre.

The essay form is the mediator; it is the / between
writer critic.

September, 1991.

My first draft of Scott was a complete disaster. I think I wandered too far from the academic essay, spun out and lost control. This is harder than I thought, but I'm not sure why.

January, 1992

In the ethnicity class (we are looking at Joy Kogawa) Smaro mentioned Freud's theory of "hysteria" and all of the critical (literary and otherwise) debate which surrounds it. I think I have found the quality which the GS, GB and PW texts share and the one which will move me in an emotional way to write about them.

The theory, briefly, states that hysterics suffer from physical symptoms which take the place of unspeakable emotional pain, the result

of childhood trauma. In order to cure hysteria, the analyst facilitates a "talking cure" in which the analysand recalls her past in narrative form; she reads her own story, and eventually remembers, through this act of reading and telling, the source of her trauma and of her hysterical symptoms. This suspends the symptoms.

Obviously the "hysteria" issue has many applications and off-shoots when applied to literary texts and there is a wealth of material which does just that. What I want to do, though, is look at the traces of what I believe is hysteria in the creative / critical texts of GS, GB, and PW.

Scott alludes to and mentions hysteria often in *Spaces Like Stairs*. She is concerned with formal issues, language, and blending genres, but her double role as writer / critic is guided primarily by her gender consciousness, namely the feminist considerations concerning woman as subject and the line between, or through, body and text. As a feminist, Scott questions, deconstructs, and eclipses the patriarchal legacy of an (over)valuing of male language and forms, and the cultural and ideological values that legacy espouses. She overrules the myth of patriarchy by giving attention and voice to the female imagination. The hysteric suffers from a similar relationship to patriarchal culture and its discourse of dominance. I intend to discover how this correspondence figures in Scott's text.

I, too, am a fugitive in the eyes of the law of the father.

February, 1992

"As a reader / critic, he dons many masks" (Kamboureli, "Preface" xiii).

I see the mask of hysteria in *Errata*, too. Bowering's text -- unpaginated, made up of numbered one-page essayistic fragments -- formally resembles hysterical discourse. I want to find the body (no, not the bawdy) in Bowering's text and theorize the masculinity inscribed therein in terms of his creative / critical acts. The figure of male hysteria, I think, may explain some of Bowering's self-conscious appreciation for his double role of writer / critic.

August, 1992

Webb, too, seems to write hysterical discourse. *Talking* is a volume made up of essays, radio talks, and critical reviews of other writers -- all essays as far as I'm concerned. It is in her writerly considerations of the relationship between suicide, death, and creativity where I see hysterical symptoms. There, too, the roles of writer and critic are, as with Scott and Bowering, mirrored by the similarly doubled roles of analyst / analysand and writer / reader.

end-August, 1992

Smaro returns from Greece any day. The fall term will get going. Here's what she wrote about the writer / critic paradox in the preface to Bowering's *Imaginary Hand*:

> Reading a writer / critic is, almost invariably, an act of remission [I like the medical connotations of this word]. Whether we begin with the creative work or the criticism, one genre sends us back to the other, thus revealing its own otherness -- its separateness from and its correspondence to the other genre. But a writer's criticism, in its erratic relationship to the critical tradition and to the writer's imaginative work, goes beyond the secondary function assigned to it.
>
> (vii)

It is on the "back and forth" of creative / critical prose I find myself stretched out and floating; riding on the ebb and flow of GS, GB, and PW.

I

Spaces Like Stairs: Gail Scott's Pass Through Hysteria

> In journalism you learn a lot about observing, about how to look at things. And you learn one really important thing about language . . . which is word economy: how to say things efficiently and quickly. . .But at the same time, when I was working as a journalist I was aware that there was a lot I wasn't expressing of myself and even perhaps of the people I was interviewing. I was talking to minority groups, to women, all kinds of people whose stories changed when they landed in the newspaper because the form had changed and the language limited them or censored them.
>
> Gail Scott, "On the Edge of Change" (17)

Speaking of her former role as journalist, Gail Scott raises in this passage many of the issues and ideas which she, as essayist, treats directly and in a rigorous way in *Spaces Like Stairs*. She alludes to the function of language, the drive toward self-reflexivity, and the form and function of story-telling, particularly women's story-telling, to convey her frustration with journalistic discourse as an expressive medium. Certain forms or genres, she suggests, suppress the narration of some stories. Literary conventions which privilege the "rational" or the decideable necessarily undervalue and block narratives that suggest the power of the irrational or seek wisdom in the uncanny.

Expanding upon Scott's perception of the contrast between the limits of journalism and the interpretive capacity of other types of narrative helps to illustrate some features of the text she has created in *Spaces Like Stairs*, a text which is at once rational and irrational, ordered and disordered, reasonable and hysterical. Using the code of journalism -- the who, what, where, when, why, and how of reportage -- we can establish "efficiently and quickly," as Scott puts it, one possible context of *Spaces Like Stairs*, the circumstances of its production. "Who" is Gail Scott, and "where" and "when" to situate "what" she has written may be determined by the following gloss: originally published in journals and anthologies in Canada, Québec, and the United States, *Spaces Like Stairs* contains eight short texts. They are the result of her associations and conversations with such

postmodern feminist Québec writers and academics as Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, and France Théoret, and of her participation as co-editor in *Tessera*, an editorial collective which included in its original membership Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, and Kathy Mezei.[1]

Spaces Like Stairs is divided into three sections, preceded by a preface which introduces Scott's concern and discomfort about certain generic traditions -- the essay, the novel -- within a feminist postmodern context, as well as her excitement at the emergence of a theory of women's "writing about writing" (10). Though the book is subtitled "Essays by Gail Scott," and Scott reiterates this when she refers to the body of *Spaces Like Stairs* as "essays / texts" (10), she also defines its content as "simply, (and not so simply) the story of a writer's journey among literary, theoretical, political signposts of a certain period" (11), thereby introducing the themes of self-reflexivity and contextualization and the narrative possibilities of "journey." Distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are blurred serving to problematize the capacity of authorial objectivity.

The first section, "Moi et L'Autre," deals with Scott's cultural and linguistic otherness in relation to language's effect on memory, to the Québecoise community that has supported her writing, and to her role in English Canada. The second section, "About Form," traces Scott's objections to the phallocentric tradition as it is reflected by the conventions of such forms as the essay and the novel. To illustrate her concerns, Scott documents her process of composition while writing *Heroine,* a novel published in 1987. The final section, "The Feminist in the Writing," contains only one essay, "A Feminist at the Carnival," where Scott meditates self-reflexively upon the spaces from which women might begin to speak once freed from the limitations and boundaries imposed by an exclusive (i.e. patriarchal) literary tradition.

As a woman in a patriarchal culture, a Protestant anglophone interacting with Catholic francophones and thus linguistically marginal, Scott examines her own cultural background together with prevalent ideological pressures on female identity, hoping to expose the ways in which an individual's linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts confound any notion of self. The texts in *Spaces Like Stairs*

elaborate the process of one writer's evolution: unravelling and articulating the space from which she speaks at a particular point in time. While she meditates on her own writing process, Scott records her commitment to creating a new literary form which, without suppressing the personal, expresses the needs and wants of women within a larger communal context. "To write about how we write," Scott maintains, "is to try and understand the processes of our work, to share with others a record of what we have grasped (our breakthroughs) and of what we have failed to grasp (our limits)" (9).

In conventional terms, if *Spaces Like Stairs* serves as a theory of what Scott proposes to achieve in writing, *Heroine* is the practice of that theory. This opposition is problematic, however, since theory and practice for Scott occur simultaneously and are aspects of each other. While careful to ignore any urge to order them hierarchically or to determine their origins, the reader might consider *Spaces Like Stairs* and *Heroine* as intertexts which are informed or determined by each other.

The publication of *Heroine* in 1987 predated *Spaces Like Stairs* by two years, although some of the texts in *Spaces Like Stairs* are dated as early as 1982 and include drafts and ideas for material obviously incorporated in the novel. *Heroine* resembles *Spaces Like Stairs* in a number of formal and stylistic ways. *Heroine* is a first-person narrative of a character named Gail (often referred to as GS) which is structured through her memory. Although framed as a novel in three sections, the book is a mosaic of theory, diary, autobiography, and poetry. The complexity expressed in this work, always gender-informed, examines Montréal and the Québec leftist politics of the 1970s, the ambivalent nature of homo- and heterosexual partnerships, the issue of art versus political revolution, and the role of the heroine in literary, cultural, and personal contexts.

Spaces Like Stairs is "the story of a writer's journey" which exposes the ways in which women experience "alienation within sexist language / cultural practices" (11); *Heroine* is a metafictional novel in which the narrator comes to identify the prevalence and restrictions of patriarchal language and proceeds to revitalize her own enunciation and,

therefore, her subjectivity. *Heroine* is a story of personal evolution in which Gail or GS takes a self-reflexive role. It is thus linked to *Spaces Like Stairs* formally and by Scott's self-reflexive intentionality: *Heroine* is a novel about writing a novel; *Spaces Like Stairs* is a book of essays / texts about writing essays about writing a novel about writing a novel. It is in this way that the two books are dependent upon one another and reflect each other.

To a lesser extent, but in a similar way, *Heroine* and *Spaces Like Stairs* are dependent upon and reflect Scott's first book, *Spare Parts* (1982), a short story collection which, by addressing themes of sexuality, language, gender, and ideology, traces a woman's development from puberty to maturity during the 1960s. *Spaces Like Stairs* opens with "Red Tin + White Tulle: On Memory and Writing." "[M]emory," writes Scott, as "a many-sided fiction, serves up different types of images -- often strongly coded ideologically" (20). In this 1980 essay Scott engages in a critical reading of excerpts from *Spare Parts* in order to express the disruptive qualities and contexts of memory and to explore how these affect her writing process.

This relentless authorial intertextuality in which the author promotes and explores relationships between and within her own texts is crucial to Scott's project. She believes that women write from "the socially marginalized feminine"(11), a situation caused, in part, by the way patriarchal culture has established conventions of genre that do more to silence female voices than to provide a means of succinct expression. As Scott states, in the preface to *Spaces Like Stairs*, "we, who have been muted and mocked, write from this feminine space with an exploratory, even caressing, rather than an 'objectifying,' hand" (11). Making use, in her three books, of authorial textuality, and while unsettling the stability of generic convention, Scott at once explores her own writing space and proposes new writing initiatives for women.

Most importantly, though, this approach, when presented by the voice(s) of a self-reflexive narrator, collapses the distinction between writer and reader and between writer and critic. It is here that the "why" and "how" of *Spaces Like Stairs* becomes concise. Scott adopts

a theoretical position which reflects certain tenets of reader-centred criticism wherein, as Jane Tompkins explains, "[r]eading and writing join hands, change places, and finally become distinguishable only as two names for the same activity" (x). In this way *Heroine* is not just a novel about writing a novel, but also a reading of reading a novel. The critical emphasis shifts from what the text is *about* to what the text *does* (Fish 75), to "how" the story means rather than "what" it means (Wright 150). As Tompkins writes, this

> re-definition of what literature is, i.e. not an object but an experience, obliterates the traditional separation between reader and text and makes responses of the reader rather than the contents of the work the focus of critical attention. (xvii)

What reader-centred theory achieves, and what Scott attempts by foregrounding the reading act in her writing projects, is to endow the process of reading the text, "of receiving it and responding to it, with value" (Tompkins xvi). According to another reader advocate, Wolfgang Iser, this endowment also disrupts the subject / object dynamic since "in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking. Thus there disappears the subject-object division that otherwise is a prerequisite for all knowledge and all observation" (Iser 66). Iser also views the application of his insight as therapeutic, "leading," in Tompkins' words, "to fuller knowledge of the self and even to self-creation" (xv). The healing capacity of the reading act will come up again but, at this point, it serves to stress the presence of a self in flux in Scott's work.

While Scott deconstructs "traditional hierarchies of author / text / reader," transgresses the common laws of unified selfhood and linear narrative by dispersing "the writing 'I' across an experimental space" (10), she puts her subjecthood into play in an enigmatic way. Rather than presume that a unified, universal "I" exists, Scott asserts the notion of a revolving and evolving subject, one that is paradoxically unravelling while advancing. As the self-reflexive Stephen Scobie points out,

> the position of the subject has largely been defined, ideologically, as male. . . The problem for feminism, then, has been to assert the possibility of female subjectivity without falling back into Cartesian models of the autonomous, coherent, fully self-knowing subject.
> (*Signature* 14)

Scott proposes that subjecthood is a construct, a fiction, or a process which needs to be traced in any reading of any text. It is what Scott calls "a female subject-in-process," "a 'writing subject' in-the-feminine. Not the 'self' as a (feminist or otherwise) pre-determined figure, but a complex tissue of texts, experience, evolving in the very act of writing" (11) -- and, we might add, in the very act of reading.

In *Spaces Like Stairs,* the form Scott chooses to practise this type of subjectivity draws on the customs of essay writing in collaboration with certain developments of the French feminist movement. She cross-references the tradition of the essay -- ranging from Montaigne, Virginia Woolf and Colette to Hélène Cixous -- the result being a hybridized corruption, suggestive of what Scott considers powerful in each. Cixous's model of *l'écriture féminine* posits an "erotics of writing to be derived from a feminine unconscious shaped by female bodily drives" (Kaplan 88). While Scott resists this notion of a collective female need to "write the body" in order to express women's subjectivity, wondering "Is your *écriture féminine* necessarily mine?", she makes use of stylistic and formal tendencies recognized in *l'écriture féminine* such as "double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative rather than linear structure," and open endings (Kaplan 88), and incorporates them into a personal style of writing. Furthermore, she takes a certain philosophical stance associated with *l'écriture féminine* which Toril Moi describes as a will to "strive in the direction of difference, struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality" (*Sexual* 108).

In terms of her use of the essay form, Scott does not approach the essay as if it were an authoritative, objective, and closed text. She treats it, instead, as a structure which is in transit, chameleon-like, changing shape. When women write about writing, she believes, they

text. It is the confluence of Scott's body and Scott's text which facilitates her "continuously shifting poetic project" (11), a project which cannot be contained or explained by a "purely discursive" discussion such as this one.

In this self-consciously journalistic explication -- we now know the who, what, when, where, why, and how of *Spaces Like Stairs* -- there has been little attempt to interpret the form of the "story" to which Scott refers. We know such a story exists because Scott alludes to it repeatedly, but the story, as Scott complains in the passage which introduced this discussion, has been changed by the chosen form. Language and word economy have limited Scott's story; as a result, the complexities of Scott and of her book are fettered by "rational" interpretation. Scott's story is hampered by the censorship, the limits of language imposed by standard critical explication. This is exactly the trap Scott struggles against in *Spaces Like Stairs.*

Instead of permitting the tradition of the essay form to change her story, to translate it into a restricted language and possibly lose much in translation, Scott allows the story to change the essay form, lets the story tell itself with Scott the essayist as its mediator. Once distinctions between writer and text have been deconstructed, the ability of a story to tell itself is possible and, perhaps, inevitable since the text becomes body, and the body text.

As the following passage from "A Story Between Two Chairs," in the "About Form" section of *Spaces Like Stairs*, shows, the story takes control and the constraints of language and syntax are loosened to express certain complexities -- the irrational, the hysterical, the disordered -- of Scott's project:

> From the tunnel to Dora's fortress. Outside the sounds of war. She writes. The better to see herself. Identity needs appearances. Storybook surfaces. So tell a story. Narrate a little order in the decadence. The holes show. Never mind. Under the surface the fragments. But who can speak of that? The family's back . . .
>
> (61)

The Dora of this passage with whom Scott identifies is Sigmund Freud's Dora, the code name Freud gives to Ida Bauer, the heroine of his

"Fragment of An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria." Dora and Anna O.(Bertha Pappenheim) are considered figureheads of the neurotic affliction known as hysteria. They are credited with paradoxically inventing and practising the cure for their own debility.

Freud, along with his colleague Joseph Breuer, who treated Anna O., theorized that the catalyst of hysteria is a pre-oedipal traumatic seduction by the father or a father-figure. Overwhelmed with disgust, the analysand subsequently represses the memory of the sexual violation (Breuer and Freud 7). Following the onset of puberty, the hysteric's memory is expressed unconsciously in the form of physical symptoms (Breuer and Freud 133). As Monique David-Ménard puts it, "[w]hat is played out in the body takes the place of a discourse that cannot be uttered" (David-Ménard 3). If Anna O. "invented" the cure for these symptoms she did so by telling a story.

Known as "the talking cure," the treatment was carried out by the patient as a restaging, in narrative form, of the origins of her symptoms. That is, while the patient tells the story of her symptoms, talks about them and their circumstances, the symptoms' origins become lucid. By rendering the origin of her symptoms in this way, the patient achieves a catharsis and the symptoms disappear. Anna O. converted a nonverbal message, expressed in body language as an hysterical symptom, into a verbal language (Breuer and Freud 29). Ruth D. Johnston points out that

> Freud found hysterics incapable of producing precise histories of their illness: their memories left gaps; connections remained incoherent; the sequence of events was uncertain. He regarded this impaired memory as "a necessary correlate of the symptoms and one which is theoretically requisite." He further maintained that the talking cure was designed to restore memory.
>
> (375)

Just as Freud notices the fragments, incoherence, and gaps in the hysteric text and judges them as necessary aspects of the hysteria and its cure, so does Scott speak, in a fragmented way, about her own writing: "The holes show. Never mind. Under the surface the fragments" (61).

By associating herself with Dora, Scott draws on the complex legacy of hysteria and its relationship to the so-called talking cure. She leaves gaps, writes in a discourse that is sometimes incoherent, and produces a non-linear narrative which, for Freud, might epitomize the hysterical text, all in an attempt to restore memory. For Scott, it is specifically a "*woman's* memory. . . Unwinding back to double-sided images: 'truth' plus fiction . . . the unwinding of words, the thinking back . . . leading to . . . the inexpressible" (17). Scott is cautious about this process, since when we delve into memory "by letting language take us where it will, we tend to uncover things we intended to repress" (23).

By writing in a way that is reminiscent of Dora the hysteric, Scott becomes a woman who, by using the talking cure, "writes. The better to see herself" (61). Significant in terms of Scott's larger project is the notion that when she sees herself more clearly through her written text, it is then the body of the text -- her own body in the text -- which Scott seeks. The hysteric rereads her own text, and figuratively writes the body by converting physical symptoms into verbal expression. The hysterical symptom, in Scott's case, manifests itself as the body of her textuality -- "the body of the hysteric becomes her text" (Jacobus 197); paradoxically, the body of the text becomes also the cure. Furthermore, in the narrative act of deciphering and ordering memory, the writer becomes the reader, the interpreter of her own hysteria (Felman 76), and she puts into place what Elizabeth Wright refers to as "a continuum whereby readers write in the act of reading and writers are shown to read in the act of writing" (123).

By thus erasing the distinction between writer and reader and by stressing the importance of their potential sameness within the context of hysterical narrative, Scott presents a number of paradoxical relationships and ambiguities: the text is both symptom and cure; Scott is Dora and Gail and so inside and outside the "fortress" of hysteria. Most importantly, Scott is both writer and reader, both writer and critic: she plays the part of interpreter and interpreted, analyst and analysand, and so eliminates the distinctions between them. In this way, Scott's strategy is consistent with the reader-centred theories

mentioned earlier, particularly with those of Iser who believes in the therapeutic value of the deconstruction of hierarchies: reading, like talking, heals.

The concept of "writing the body" to which Scott makes reference introduces the theories of Hélène Cixous but not only in terms of *l'écriture féminine,* the form and style of which resonate in Scott's passage about Dora. Scott also makes use of an intertextuality which proceeds from Cixous's own creative and theoretical work on Dora and hysteria. By examining the issues and insights which emerged out of Cixous's interests, we may determine just what Scott means when she "speaks the name 'hysteric'"(Wills 131).

In *The Newly Born Woman,* Cixous engages in a debate with Catherine Clément concerning the importance of the female hysteric for feminists. Cixous celebrates the legacy of hysteria -- "Those wonderful hysterics . . . they were dazzling" (95) -- while Clément is cautious about endowing the hysteric with implicit power and celebrating women's mental illness in a patriarchal system. Both, however, view women's hysteria as a challenge to the rationality of patriarchal order. For Cixous, Dora's words will one day "write themselves against . . . men's grammar" and male "bibliocapitalist society" (95). For Clément, the "hysteric puts the master and the academic, both power and knowledge, in check" (140). Hysteria is not, in this case, a neurosis which debilitates women and expresses the sexual agony and repressed suffering of childhood; it is analogous to a female language opposed to the rigid structures of masculine discourse and thought. It is the language expressed in the form of a pathological *écriture féminine* -- "text, my body," writes Cixous (93) -- where Dora represents all women and their "power to protest" (154) and in which hysteria functions as part historical context, part metaphor, and part metonymy.

It is clear that Scott, like Cixous and Clément, associates sexist language and cultural practices with women's powerlessness and that she considers the hysterical voice to be one possible mediator between female expression and sexist society:

> as women, we have been forced to operate in language from a negative semantic space, reduced or missing from the range of positive symbols. What choice do we have but to seize language and find new ways to use it? . . . [P]art of the process is getting behind the cover of cultural ennui, skirting linguistic and legalistic conventions by asserting our feminine voice -- a voice that may be initially denigrated as hysterical by some. . . I'm talking about finding memory traces of the feminine in our present language . . . (26)

Importantly, Scott refers to women being "forced" to operate in language thus reiterating the notion of violation: a sort of linguistic rape has occurred. The scenario Scott presents in *Spaces Like Stairs* is this: the patriarchal system has violated women and left them silent, without language to tell their story, to effect a cure for their victimhood. Scott, a reluctant victim but admitted hysteric, uses body language -- the body of the text -- to express her narrative. As Ann Wilson explains,

> The hysteric's gaps in memory, loss of speech . . . amount to the unconscious refusal to employ the language of The Father. The hysteric is not, however, silent; she commands the attention of her audience with the spectacle of her body. She threatens to disrupt the authority of phallocentric discourse. . . (78)

Scott's particular recourse is a doubled speech, "that threshold of language / identity over which the little girl scurries back and forth" (67), which is both conscious and unconscious, both symptom and cure wherein the traces of the violation persist and are reproduced by the daughter's use of the word of The Father. The daughter's cure is administered in the form of her own transgression, her own version of the story. *Spaces Like Stairs* is situated on the threshold of, in Shoshana Felman's words, "speaking madness and speaking *of* it, writing madness and writing *about* it" (14). In Scott's case, this site is also the meeting place of *l'écriture féminine* and essayistic convention.

The hysterical voice, though, does not simply mediate schisms. Rather, it subverts the prevailing masculine discourse and disrupts the order from within. In this way, Scott becomes truly "A Feminist At the Carnival," drawing on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to charge

and direct her hysterical transgression. It is in the carnivalesque that the grotesque body of the hysteric and hysterical text are permitted "liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Russo 219). It is at the carnival, then, where the reader may enjoy elevated status, where the privileges of the analyst are practised by the analysand. Here, a writer such as Scott may pursue a discourse which "breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics" (Kristeva 65) and produce a text which is hysterically carnivalesque, at once "shattered and coherent" (Kristeva 100)[2] yet capable of reforming official public norms.

Alluding to Bakhtinian theory, Scott calls for the setting up of "a dialogic process" which would allow women to finally occupy space within culture (52). Scott is in search of "dialogization" wherein "[e]verything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole -- there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Bakhtin 426). Patriarchal language, together with the way in which it limits form, is undialogized language: authoritative and absolute. At the site of the carnivalized body of the hysteric, then, Scott participates in "an intense interaction and struggle" between the word of The Father and her own word, allowing them to "dialogically interanimate" each other (Bauer 354).

Clair Wills sees significant links between carnival and hysteria. She notes that both carnival and hysteria are excluded from official public norms, and, furthermore, that "carnival and hysteria are linked in terms of the 'content' of their representations" (130) in that they both entail a cyclical return to the past in opposition to "official" time, "which presents a linear and hierarchical teleology of events" (131). The hysteric "goes backwards in order to go forwards . . . in order to investigate ways out" (147). Similarly, Scott refers to a "conspiracy between remembering and one's desire to move forward" (20). It is in this manner that Scott, in *Spaces Like Stairs*, brings together crucial aspects of carnival and hysteria. She dialogizes the public realm by juxtaposing the "official" mode of patriarchal communication with the "unofficial" mode of the hysterical text. Licensed by the inverted carnival world, she disrupts linear time,

looking both to the past and the future. It is in the preface to *Spaces Like Stairs* and in the italicized "pre-texts," which appear at the beginning of each essay and where the past and future co-exist, that Scott's transgression is suggested.

A "preface," as understood by Jacques Derrida, is "a table, a code, an annotated summary of prominent signifieds, or an index of key words or of proper names" (8). In the preface to *Spaces Like Stairs,* Scott alerts the reader to key words such as "essay," "self-reflexive," and "feminist," to proper names such as Virginia Woolf and Québec, and to prominent signifiers such as "subject" and "language"; the pre-texts function in the same manner. In short, Scott presents a set of codes by which the reader may enact what Scott considers a satisfactory reading. Scott's preface and pre-texts are part of the text in that they would not exist without the essays, and simultaneously outside of it -- *hors texte* -- separated from it materially and in terms of intention. Derrida's concept of preface is that it embodies paradox and ambiguity, that it is at once superfluous and necessary; in their semantic and structural functions, Scott's preface and pre-texts depend on this interpretation.

According to Derrida, the preface is a "metalinguistic moment of self-reflection" which involves "the play of anticipatory retrospection and internalized exteriority" (7). When Scott writes that "[t]hese essays / texts do not, therefore, make firm statements about writing in-the-feminine" (10), she anticipates the essays she has already written at the same moment as she remembers and interprets them -- makes a firm statement herself -- as writer and reader. The preface and pre-texts function, therefore, as both preface and afterword, a previewing of the essays informed by a postscriptive reading / writing act.

By using a form which is inherently double, Scott frames and highlights the doubleness embedded in the text. This formulates her experience as female writer; the "objectifying hand" (11) of male-dominated academic authority is precisely the one with which Scott writes her forewords. To speak her preface, Scott replaces the characteristics of *l'écriture féminine* with a rhetorical strategy which might be considered prescriptive. When Scott writes, "[t]he body's

possible imprint on form is particularly underscored in this text" (66) she imposes on her reader's interpretive strategy. She seems to say, "this is what I mean here." Implied by Scott's use of this discourse (as opposed to the more "experimental," less directive discourse of the essays) is authority, legitimation, and a transcendental subject which employs the tradition of the preface in order to exercise the privileges of masculine-language domination. Clearly, she seems to be in violation of philosophical ideals presented in the essays while at the same time authorizing their presence.

This may, however, serve as a successful strategy by which Scott brings the excluded and carnivalesque voice of the hysteric "into the offical realm in a single text" (Wills 132). By setting up a dialogic relation, the concept of public discourse may be altered, since for Bakhtin it is important to see the carnivalesque not simply as an inversion of the dominant order but as a strategy "engaged in a dialogic relation with it" (Wills 137).

Furthermore, the doubled voice of the preface, wherein Scott is writer and reader, writer and critic, margin and centre, mirrors her role as analyst and analysand. The hysteric, we know, rereads her own text. According to Mary Jacobus, she is thereby put in "illusory possession of an apparently unified version of her forgotten story" (217). The analyst's task is to then supply a critical reading of the hysterical reading, to translate the hysterical text into an explanatory text. The analysand begins the talking cure by relating current and recent events, gradually circling back to the beginning of the story. The analyst, then, learns from the hysteric "how to tell a story backwards . . . submitting to the contradictory condition of knowing and not knowing -- authorial omniscience and authorial irony -- at one and the same time" (Jacobus 217). When the hysteric reaches the beginning -- the violation -- she has reached the end of her story, of her treatment. As with the preface, beginning and end are paradoxically co-present. It can be said of hysteria -- and of the preface -- that in its beginning lies its end (Jacobus 219).

Scott's use of preface and pre-text may function as a "reading cure," wherein analyst and analysand (Scott as literal writer and

critic) converge in a reading act which foretells, enacts, and recaps the history of patriarchal violation. Like Dora, she invades the "scientist's territory by wanting to participate actively in the analytic examination of her psychic processes" (Strong 19). By using the voice of the traditionally male analyst, by appropriating his authority and placing it in the realm of the carnivalesque, Scott deconstructs further the hierarchy of patient / analyst and therefore of madness and sanity.

By the time Scott reaches the penultimate essay, these distinctions have become truly undermined. It is in this essay, "Spaces Like Stairs," where the authoritative, academic essay form interfuses dialogically with *l'écriture féminine* and where Scott unravels the story of her writerly hysteria and, therefore, its cure.

In the pre-text to this essay, speaking of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, Scott states in a fragmented way that "*[t]he absence in their work of that deference to authority which obsesses authors of academic essays appeals to [her]. And the openness regarding form which that absence of deference permits*" (107). Here Scott defers to the authority of two members of an elite literary canon -- one comprising established female writers -- to explain how she herself resists deferring to authority. As well, the pre-text subsequently ends with what sounds very much like the posed authority of an academic essay: "*it's precisely where the poetic and the personal enter the essay form that thought steps over its former boundaries*" (106). Scott the critic shifts effortlessly to Scott the writer and composes an essay "which is not one" (Irigaray).

"Spaces Like Stairs" more accurately resembles a prose poem, virtually unpunctuated and without the justified lines found in the rest of the book. The essay begins with a short poem:

> what's real?
> the problem is in the space
> example rape is a black card deck chance bad luck
> as normal product of patriarchal logic
> what's real
> when the jolly female child is here and the syntax (bound
> pornographic image) over there?
> the problem is in the space

> after ten years of textual trying are we ready to say how to say
> what (our) real is?
>
> (107)

Once again, Scott gives us images of rape, and of sexual victimization as the result of a patriarchal language system which violates and silences the female child. Scott then reads the poem and comments: "she's repeating herself, the first time" (107), and then rewrites and rereads it; and rewrites once more: "she's repeating herself, the second time" (109).

What appears between Scott's re-visions is a section which is punctuated and set off by the line "prologue (working material)" in which she deconstructs a viewing of Hollywood cinematic melodrama. "IT happened one night," she writes, "what happened? more important / how to write it?" (108). In this self-reflexive way, Scott, by embracing the emancipatory aspects of *l'écriture féminine* and abandoning the censorship and limits of the conventional essay form, steps over, as she puts it, thought's former boundaries, and comes upon the repressed origin of her writerly hysteria. Hysterical voice, Scott writes, is the "use of the voice invoking poetic meaning in excess of the sentence" (90); "[h]ysterical narrative," Mary Jacobus believes, "comes full circle until, with the reproduction of its founding moment, reminiscence loses its grip on the present and life can begin again" (219). Paradoxically put, the story begins to tell Gail Scott.

While she plays with the dangerous masking potential of metaphor, Scott simultaneously breaks through the figurative into the realm of the "real": she incorporates her own childhood hysterical voice into her own hysterical narrative:

> she's herself and Claudette at the same time.
> as Rock takes her in his arms the freckled hands of several
> men float by. Daddy's too. shhh. that was nothing. what were
> we doing? I don't know Mommy because I don't know
> what you call it. fun in the tub? seeing stars in the back
> yard?
> I wanted Mommy to change my bed but he came. Daddy dad-
> dy cries the little girl in the new coat jumping up and down
> beside the the [sic] smiling man while a camera draws the
> line between acceptable (what you see) and unacceptable
> seduction. (109)

Scott has circled back to the origin of her story, talking and reading until she has finally reached the beginning / end. In this moment she is present-tense writer, analysand, poet; in the next parenthetical moment, she is reader, critic, analyst analysing analyst, and interpreter: "(the young Freud said: incest creates hysteria in wom- en / but he had so many patients with that ailment he got em- / barrassed and had to change his theory" (109). Several pages before, Scott speaks of Gail, the character of *Heroine,* who has begun to write "over the top" (101) having gained confidence following a lengthy battle with a confusion of ideology, ethics, and sexuality. Though she writes with authority and creative power, Scott reports that Gail "feels a little like a poseur in her heady new self-assured garb, as if this isn't quite it either. For she will, she must face her own particular madness, her own particular pain. To pass through it *in words*. To 'accept' her hysteria as not only negative; as an adventure. And pass through it" (101). *Spaces Like Stairs* is the story of Scott's acceptance of hysteria and a record of the journey she takes in order to pass through it "in words." To pass through is to both enter and exit, to find a way in and a way out; it is precisely this paradox which is mirrored by Scott's formal and stylistic choices, her endless disruption of hierarchies. Her essays, when considered as hysterical texts, are both a way in / to the world of "intellectual and emotional self-discovery" (Berman 20) which Scott strives towards, and a way out of the confinement to which patriarchal culture has sentenced her.

Elaine Showalter cautions against "the dangers of a simple positivisation of women's madness, and the tendency to treat it as an archetypal form of protest when in fact it is a form of containment" (*Female* 149). But Scott, by blurring the distinction between clinical and metaphoric hysteria, does not use mental illness simply as a symbol. While she concedes to the pain of hysteria -- how it restrains her -- she chooses to consider her journey through that pain as adventure rather than as melodrama, which she terms "narrative at its most hysterical" (*Spaces* 88). She does not valorize the role of the hysteric; to do so would be to reconstruct what she has deconstructed, to "remain trapped in the snare of binarism" (Strong 24). She knows

hysteria is not the "miracle of Beauty" Proust thought it was (128); nor, though, does she think of the hysteric "in the sense of sick, overblown, a woman who made a nuisance of herself" (128). Rather, she uses hysteria as a code with which to tell her story, a signifier with which to flush out what she has repressed and at the same time to communicate with a reader who is familiar with all its possible signifieds: "[s]till the question / rests: for the little girl as for every woman where's the / language line to separate real caring from exploitative seduction?" (109). All women, Scott suggests, must pass through their own versions of hysteria in order to move forward or beyond an ideology which places them in the role of victim. It is a positivisation, but not a simple one.

The hysterical text, furthermore, serves as a medium through which the creative writer may -- perhaps *must* -- play the role of critic. Speaking of hysteric discourse and the talking cure Freud writes that "[s]ometimes the sensation would call up the idea to explain it, sometimes the idea would create the sensation by means of symbolization and not infrequently it had to be left an open question which of the two elements had been the primary one" (Breuer and Freud 180). Scott's hysterical text takes a similar form; her poetic and critical voices combine dialogically, as the creative and therapeutic processes are joined in the talking cure. She explains, "*[m]y writing about writing frequently happens in the spaces between my fictional output, the theoretical observations coming after the risk of writing is taken. Yet, they spur on the next act of fiction*" (67). Though muted by patriarchal convention, her drive to express women's writing about writing seemingly blocked by generic prohibitions, she compensates with an hysterical reaction. In Ernst Kretschner's terms, "[i]t is as if one twig were severed from a plant: hysterical shoots spring forth at the point where the drive is checked" (67). It is this notion of generation -- neither simply positive nor routinely negative -- which characterizes the energy of Scott's writing project and her role as writer and critic. We might consider the texts which comprise *Spaces Like Stairs* as hysterical shoots. We might also see them as writing which aims at producing, at least, a principle of cultural healing --

"the forward movement of the healing process" (*Spaces* 90) -- at most, a cure.

INTRA-TEXT I

January, 1992

I read X-rays today of my post-natal back. Clipped up, back-lit: I hate to be photographed. We looked at a shot of my lower back: it is not bad, knitting; some separation of the pubic bone, some sacral unevenness. The next shot was of my neck. "Here," said Dr., "is a serious s-curve. I've seen worse," he comforted, "but this is very bad."

A horrible twist and bend so old that my jaw and head are now completely straight: assimilated. My body has compensated and supports the family secret (what is an s-curve but a glorified question mark?) of my spine. Inside, I am pulled in many directions and now it causes great pain: I am an hysterical bonsai.

August, 1992

Looking at Scott and Nicole Brossard, I find a dominant vocabulary.
Scott's words: reconnaisance operation, sounds of war, like a war or political coup, blow by blow, war disasters.
Brossard's words: combat writing, exploding one-way sense; territory, trajectory, conquest.

If this is *l'écriture féminine,* what was Norman Mailer writing in *The Naked and the Dead*? These Québecoise feminist women seem to want to claim the language of war, to gain access to macho language in order to stage a revolution. That old feminist witticism that goes, "If men were the ones to give birth, there wouldn't be any babies," has always struck me (ha) as snobbery. It makes me think of my father in a POW camp for 18 months in WW II, accounts of soldiers in Vietnam, bodies eaten by parasites, chemicals, mold, fear.

My father came home from Germany just waiting for the opportunity to fall apart, to lose the memory of a war which had made him, at 18 or so, too masculine for his own good, too controlled by a masculine ideal. At 40, he walked into the water under the Burrard Street Bridge, threw

his identification away, and left town, suffering from amnesia and leaving my mother with three daughters and no story.

Am I a bad feminist for this contestation of sisterhood? Will my hysterical membership card be revoked if the body of my text is not aggressive, militaristic, and anarchistic? Who speaks for and about the body of my father's text, or the text of my father's body?

September, 1992

I understand "aphasia" from looking at Jakobson several months ago for the ethnicity class, now I'm using it in a sentence in conversation with Dad's doctor. My father is all lousy metonym. He struggles to express I have no idea what, with a string of associations only a poet could interpret -- "week? . . . month? . . . house?" he says and scowls. "No, that's not it." This began as facial spasms while driving home from a golf game. Attuned to hysterical symptoms, I guessed a stroke, unspeakable words trying to make his smooth face say what had never been said: I long for the dead, I love my children, the men in my Lancaster died because I tried too hard, my wife annoys me. Not a stroke (that lovely word, the language of desire but also the language of golf, of tennis: my father's games, he of the repressed desire) but multiple brain tumors. My mother points her scientific finger at the early radar systems in his Lancaster, with their perpetual low-level X-ray. The doctor says it was the melanoma from tennis on grass courts and worries for Mom's mental state.

But she is more right than he is, at least if we are to read this as literature and how else to read something so detailed and rich? It is soldier's brain, the hysteria of a man with too much history, excess memory. Cancerous cells dividing at miraculous speed to take the space, the place of memory.

Dad and Lily coexist in a realm of coming and going. They fight language, they pray to sleep unafraid, struggle to make some sense of the faces watching and witnessing their progress. They pretend they can read; their literacy is a hoax, a cover, a mask. Trying to find the words to say . . .

mid-September, 1990

I am torn in my readings of Bowering. I want to call him on his "feminism" but I want to credit the power of his discourse. He's clever, always talking about himself as a boy. It's hard to pick on the little rascal who keeps misbehaving and turning up to brag about it with such charming egotism.

II

Errata: Keeping Track of George Bowering

> I decided that
> if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.
>
> T. S. Eliot, "Hysteria" (34)

> As for the hysteric . . . he would be the one who takes the text *for ready money*, who joins in the bottomless, truthless comedy of language, who is no longer the subject of any critical scrutiny and *throws himself* across the text (which is quite different from projecting himself into it).
>
> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (63)

> What of a writer who delays closure? Maybe he should see a doctor. Maybe he *is* the doctor.
>
> George Bowering, *Errata* (100)

> What does it mean to be hysterical? . . . Isn't it a malaise, a great distress, caused by the desire for an impossible *something*? In that case, all of us who have imagination are afflicted with it, with that strange sickness. And why would such a malady have a sex?
>
> George Sand to Gustav Flaubert (Goldstein 150)

In T. S. Eliot's prose poem, "Hysteria," written in 1917, the subject is ambiguous. The poem begins, "As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her / laughter and being part of it," yet it is unclear whether the hysteria of the title resides within the "she" who laughs or within the presumably male "I" who admits complicity, who partakes of and takes part in the laughter. Furthermore, the narrator admits to an erotic complication. It is the shaking of the woman's breasts which must be stopped, but we do not know if this is because it represents the body language of the woman's repressed hysteria, or because the shaking is itself provocative, setting in motion the

narrator's own repressed desire. In other words, the poem may serve as either a sympathetic masculine rendering of female hysteria, or an enactment of symptoms of male hysteria which the narrator believes curable by ordering fragments carefully and subtlely collected. It may be, however, that the poem represents a meeting place of both female and male hysteria, and a site at which the co-presence of disgust and desire is both celebrated and demeaned by the sound of laughter. I propose corresponding, if not identical, relationships between female and male hysteria in this discussion of George Bowering's *Errata*. In order to define these relationships and to explore their value for the writer / critic, it is necessary to begin with an explanation of male hysteria and trace its presence in Bowering's discourse.

Specifically male hysteria is a phenomenon which Jean Charcot, at the end of the nineteenth century, theorized as a condition suffered by male survivors of railroad accidents and termed "railway brain." Travel by rail was so common and accidents so statistically frequent that men who had been traumatized by derailments and collisions developed symptoms which expressed trepidation about the real possibility of subsequent mishaps.[3] Though Bowering is not necessarily alluding to this particular condition, *Errata* 58 begins, "[t]he writing that results from what some of my favorite writers might do could be the result of, let's say, a brain derailment. No more choo choo. But lots of debris." His reference evokes the condition of male hysteria and claims to value the traces of its figurative wreckage. At the same time, Bowering introduces an image which expresses the textual unease inherent in the role of the writer / critic. In that dual role, Bowering proceeds both on and off the right track, coping with the locomotion of a creative and critical endeavor which may force his project to exceed conventional guidelines and prescribed limits. Josef Breuer referred to hysteria as "a surplus of excitation" ("Studies" 243), and noted that even in the simplest cases of hysteria there is "a splitting of the mind into two relatively independent portions" (226-27). "Eclecticism," claimed Breuer, "seems to me nothing to be ashamed of" (250). Bowering's strategy for maintaining his train of thought in the face of surplus

ideas is to value not only the freight, but also the vehicle, the sidetrack, the debris, and the aftermath of derailment.

He also betrays a hidden junction where literary gender preferences cause Bowering as critic to inadvertently switch tracks. In the language of Freudian sexual imagery, a female writer would represent the passive tunnel to Bowering's active, phallic train. Therefore, through implied pun and innuendo, Bowering claims that his "favorite writers" are male. Women are thereby restricted from the creative privileges afforded by hysteria, and power is assigned to a more masculine model. By disenfranchising the female hysteric in this way, Bowering functionally dismantles the feminist recuperation of the hysteric figure as was outlined in the previous chapter, and facilitates a return to the "classic" hysteric model wherein the female patient is regarded as a victim of patriarchal society. Important, too, is Bowering's inscription of a masculine code of behavior -- particularly the valuing of penetration over submission.

Male hysteria is for Charcot, and theorists interpreting his findings, a crisis of masculinity in which the male patient is unable to conform to cultural expectations of masculine performance. Just as female hysteria of the nineteenth century may be considered "the outcome of an unbearable ambivalence of gender roles" (Micale 324), male hysteria of the twentieth century is seen as an inability to function within prescribed gender expectations. During World War I, the condition was sanctioned as "shell shock" (or as the less machismo, "soldier's heart") (Showalter, *Female* 168). For the traumatized soldier, a rejection of the supposedly masculine ideals of action, bravery, power, and desensitization was deemed to be willful disobedience charged with femininity. Bowering seems to identify with stereotypical masculine ideals in terms of gender relations. He is, perhaps, too masculine to pass for a male hysteric, his critical acts too powerful. I maintain that the masculinity inscribed in *Errata* is a role which, in Mary Ann Doane's words, is "a masquerade which specifies the norms" of male behavior and at the same time designates a "mode of being" (42) for those women who appear in Bowering's text. Bowering the critic, in other words, acts in a masculine way not only to iterate male

behavior, but also, taking advantage of the male / female opposition thereby created, to reiterate what is expected of women.

If masculinity is indeed a matter of masquerade, then Bowering is doubly disguised. His masculinity -- the "male" signature of his hysteria -- is a disguise which legitimates his appropriation of the figure of the *female* hysteric. In *Errata,* it is as though the figure of Charcot's male hysteric adheres to masculine cultural norms while simultaneously performing an emasculated talking cure of the classic female hysteric. Hysteria remains symbolically a female condition: "[s]ince it was defined by society as a female disease, one may hypothesize that there was some degree of female identification among the men who assumed a hysterical role" (Smith-Rosenberg 331 n. 5). Bowering switches between the tracks of male and female hysteria and makes use of the creative potential of one, while sometimes "losing track" of the other. In order to at once transgress and enact a culturally defined masculine code -- one which directs that the male writing subject be unified, rational, coherent, and phallic -- Bowering identifies with both the female and the male hysteric and mimics their symptoms.

Like Eliot's male hysteric, Bowering sets out to collect fragments. His one-page essays constitute a formal derailment enacting, through a simultaneously creative / critical discourse, a talking cure which is part laughter, part despair. "I would really like to leave behind me," writes Bowering in *Errata* 47, "the kind of text I have cherished most: the kind that you read in your youth and know you do not understand, but which you know you will read all your life, hoping to understand more of in your maturity." Therein lies the "nature" of the male hysteric's talking cure. It is a personal narrative of sexual betrayal begun in youth. Too painful and intense to be fully comprehended, repressed in order to defer the potential for mental anguish; it is later rewritten and reinterpreted so as to free the storyteller from the body language and confinement of repressed memory. Eliot, writing as a modernist in 1917, allows his narrator the promise of an "end"; Bowering, who not only delays closure but actually resists it, chooses, at the end of *Errata,* the paradoxical role of doctor and

patient, and thereby defers cure. His fragments represent a "working through," and show Bowering thinking of himself as "an ongoing verb" (7).

It is in these relationships, wherein seemingly contradictory roles coexist, that an elaboration of the role of the writer / critic resides. As Smaro Kamboureli puts it, "the *critical* nature of this kind of text results from its simultaneous autonomy and intertextuality, its ability to assert its own literary value at the same time that it directs the reader both to the works it comments on and to its author's own oeuvre" ("Poet" 3). In *Errata,* Bowering undermines the conventional genre of the essay. By calling *Errata* "a sequence of discontinuous remarks" ("Closing". 5), he becomes derailed from what might be considered constrictive conventions of form and function, and erases the traditional distinction between literature and criticism. The *Errata* fragments represent a carnivalesque inversion similar to that of the texts in *Spaces Like Stairs,* for aspects which might once have been suppressed as marginal and desacratory to a text's authority -- revisions, corrections, contradictions -- are considered necessary, central to and reflective of creativity. And as with *Spaces Like Stairs, Errata* is a text in which the literary critic participates in the creation of a creative text. It is a text which resembles the talking cure produced by the patient of psychoanalysis, generated in the presence of the analyst, and the product of an interaction between analysand and analyst. Bowering's doubled role as writer and critic is a unified counterpart to this therapeutic binary relationship. *Errata* and *Spaces Like Stairs* exemplify a kind of creatively formulated critical text which, under the signature and license of hysteria, problematizes the traditional distinction between literature and criticism. "It is still debated," writes Phillip R. Slavney, "whether 'hysteria' is something a person *has,* something he *does,* or something he *is*" (3). Scott's text, as we saw in Chapter 1, *has* certain symptoms of hysteria, Scott as writer / critic *does* or performs a talking cure, and therefore *Spaces Like Stairs is* an hysterical text -- or, at least, functions as one. In Bowering's case, hysteria is something he *performs,* a disguise borrowed from the male and female hysterics which

allows him to capitalize textually on hysteria's disruptive and transgressive literary potential, to locate, like Scott, meaning "in excess of the sentence" (*Spaces* 90).

Both *Spaces Like Stairs* and *Errata* are hysterical texts in which certain aspects of *l'écriture féminine* express hysterical symptoms and in which each writer plays the paradoxical roles of analyst and analysand. The fragments of *Errata* are nevertheless critical essays which make use of certain strategies found also in other -- perhaps more conventional -- volumes of Bowering's critical writing (*Imaginary Hand, Craft Slices, The Mask In Place, A Way With Words*). They demonstrate at the level of language the co-presence of poet and critic. Bowering's critical essays have been noted in terms of their poetic technique:

> Word-play, associative leaps, dramatizations of the movements of the mind, a juxtaposition of subjective and objective responses . . . are the consequences of assuming that the essence of the poem or novel is not easily expressed in discursive prose and must therefore be approached indirectly in an evocative fashion.
> (Bennet 165).

Furthermore, Bowering, by using poetic and other techniques not customarily put to use in critical discourse, underlines the questionable hierarchies in relationships between subject and object, writer and reader, reason and . . . whatever we consider to be reason's opposite -- emotion, illogic, madness?

Other examples of the presence of the non-linear, erratic nature of hysterical discourse are immediately recognizable when the reader picks up *Errata*. "**Errata** -- ," reads the flyleaf, "[w]hat should have been said. What was unintentionally left out. The meditations and reconsiderations hidden in the margins of the book." "Errata" is posited as marginal discourse, the previously concealed and repressed symptoms of Bowering's entire body of work. Bowering's talking cure begins, then, at the site of the text's title: *Errata*. Histrionic and self-mocking, he is at once the analyst and the analysand of his own narrative, foregrounding with his title a deliberate act of revisionism.

Errata, as the title signals, unsettles the distinction between what is important in writing and what is not. As both mistake and

correction, "errata" is "what should have been said" and what Bowering is saying. "Errata" both *is* and *represents* a gap, the sort of gap Gérard Genette identifies as "paratext": "[t]he gap between intention and practice, between naming and performing, is also the sphere of the art of the peripheral" ("Introduction" 278). What might be considered in a conventional reading of *Errata* to be peripheral and not crucial to interpretation may, read another way, represent valuable textual material with which to approach the text proper.

The unidentified writer of the fly-leaf text writes that "*Errata* is vintage George Bowering -- the writer as cultural provocateur, harrying traditions, pestering assumptions, whittling away at ideological positions." But we know from Gail Scott's hysterical project that such aggressive literary tactics may in fact represent a certain unspeakable suffering. The state of Bowering's suffering and of his critical reconsiderations, the state of the perhaps "peripheral" art which mediates the distance between Bowering the writer and Bowering the critic, George the analysand and George the analyst, materializes first on the shimmering, nebulous border between the inside and outside of his text. It is at the periphery of *Errata* where I believe the symptoms of Bowering's hysterical condition may be diagnosed.

If the title serves as border, as commencement, and establishes the presence of the art of the peripheral, the dedication is the place where Bowering *practises* the art of the peripheral, where ambivalence, ambiguity, paradox, and irony are truly celebrated in an hysterical spasm of indeterminacy. The dedication functions as an hysterical symptom, as the textual evidence of a formal unease, and as another junction at which Bowering is sidetracked. If the dedication functions as a *paratext* then it "is subject to reading and hence to interpretation" (Genette, "Introduction" 278). It reads, "For Shirley Neuman, Smaro Kamboureli and Linda Hutcheon." These three women are part of Canadian literature's avant-garde in terms of work in feminist poststructuralist literary criticism and theory. Among other critical and creative projects, Neuman and Kamboureli, for instance, co-edited *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, an important collection of feminist-inspired essays on the condition of contemporary women's

writing in Canada. And if Linda Hutcheon refers to Robert Kroetsch as "Mr. Canadian Postmodern," it is fair to see her as the "queen of Canadian Postmodernism" since she is perhaps Canada's most prolific theorist and articulate champion of postmodern aesthetics. Each has included discussion of Bowering's writing in his / her critical work. In short, one might argue that their efforts to introduce Bowering's work to an academic audience have ensured that Bowering continues Bowering.

When asked, "[w]hy the dedication?" (Miki 86), Bowering seems to dodge the question by answering equivocally: "Well in this book there is more theory than criticism, and people who are doing theory in this country right now are mainly women" (86). What he might be saying is: these are the women who have inspired my theorizing and supported my creative endeavors and for that I gratefully acknowledge their influence by dedicating my book to them. But he seems ambivalent and could be saying, if these (mainly, but not wholly?) women can do it, so can I.

By placing the three women at the front of his text, Bowering accomplishes efficiently certain tasks. Firstly, he places *Errata* -- as theory -- under the protection and implied endorsement of feminist theorists. Neuman, Kamboureli and Hutcheon constitute a guarantee of *Errata*'s political, critical, and theoretical validity, and may be seen to thereby invite the reader to trust Bowering's "discontinuous remarks" as ordered by feminist poststructuralist sensibility. A dedication, Chambers believes, "functions to bring together the text and a context and in this way contributes to the text's signifying apparatus" (6). Bowering instructs us, in other words, how to read his text. Secondly, Bowering hints at his own particular motivation. The dedication invites us to assume that he feels compelled to investigate the realm of feminist poststructuralist critical theory, that he intends to deal with issues such as ethnicity and colonization, gender bias, autobiography, canon formation, interdisciplinary aesthetics, and boundaries of genre -- these three women critics' main areas of critical interest. At the very least the dedication leads us to believe that Bowering's writing is informed by a knowledge of these issues. The dedication thus operates as a sort of silent -- yet coded -- Derridean preface wherein

proper names are present, but prominent signifieds and key words reside only within the reader's ability or inability to identify the significance of the individuals behind the proper names.

However, there is another side to each of these tasks which Bowering's dedication accomplishes. It is not clear that *Errata* exhibits any particular feminist theoretical concerns, nor do the essays break any important new or old ground concerning women's writing and critical theory. The implied or coerced or imagined "endorsement" of the three female and feminist poststructuralist critics signals the reader to deconstruct George Bowering's critical endeavor, the authority of which is coincidently ironized by those who remain marginal. Although Neuman, Kamboureli, and Hutcheon are mentioned in the dedication-as-preface, they are neither directly quoted nor referred to in the essays. Instead, Bowering prefers to draw from the wisdom of those Canadian theorists who are not "mainly women," such as Robert Kroetsch and Frank Davey, and to consult the essays of American, fellow male writer / critics such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot. More than a list of significant influences, the literary personalities Bowering approves constitute a canon in their own right. By associating himself with these three female guarantors, Bowering may, in effect, appropriate their signature to achieve ends which are oppositional to the women of his dedication. Covered by the play of intertextual relations, Bowering aligns himself with feminist literary critics and theory, solicits their impetus to set his own text in motion, and then abandons them, leaving them at the border.

It is this slippage between the dedication's intentionality and the text's ultimate failure to comply which characterizes Bowering's hysteria. He dons the disguise of feminist literary critic, and drapes his masculinity in a costume which conceals, or at least camouflages, gender ambivalence. What I am proposing, then, is that in Bowering's text, male feminist literary criticism and the androgyny of male and female hysteria have a symbiotic relationship. It is the coupling of male and female traits implied by the notion of a male practicing feminist criticism which positions Bowering's hysterical discourse.

Critical disguise, wherein male critics such as Bowering play at or with feminist criticism, has come under pointed criticism by a number of theorists; "There *is*," as Stephen Heath argues, "a female impersonation in a man reading as a feminist" (28). Chris Tysh sums up the political, hysterical dynamic set in motion by male feminist criticism. In a creative / critical essay similar to Bowering's text -- derailed formally and generically -- Tysh writes:

> Messieurs the Innkeepers of Logos can just amble by, smell and rummage my fluidity, finger your oh so carnivalesque heterogeneity, fist fuck her utopian indecideability [sic] and for kicks drape our fragmentation, gap, contradictions on their very male selves. [They are] partaking of a little illicit frisson of masquerade, a license to rouge up without blushing or losing their aplomb: a ceremony of last resort, a flight of hysterical fancy one could call philosophical slumming . . . [F]or now, in the panic scrambling towards postmodern constructs of gender, these are merely power patterns on seamed stockings.
>
> (153)

Bowering may be unable to participate in hysterical discourse as anything but a poseur. Inescapably phallogocentric, Bowering enjoys inherent rights to language, and his use of feminine "fragmentation" and "gap" represents strategic mimicry and not shared sensibilities. Read metaphorically and symbolically as I did with the discussion of Gail Scott's text, the clinical description of hysteria may be taken to mean that it represents in each sex "an aspiration to androgyny -- that is to say, a protest against conventional gender definitions and an (ultimately failed) attempt to transcend them" (Goldstein 145). For writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Gustav Flaubert, and T. S. Eliot -- men who both wrote about female hysterics and named *themselves* hysteric -- the notion of male hysteria became an aesthetic tool by which they could collapse "all the old (patriarchal) signs of cultural authority . . . in the direction of androgyny" (Kroker and Cook, *Postmodern* 21). Though these writers share little aesthetically or historically with Bowering, their strategy is significant as it throws light on Bowering's hysterical endeavor. These writers, by appropriating the style of hysteria, and defining themselves as symptomatically hysteric, "expanded the scope and aesthetic

possibilities" of their own personalities thereby adding "female modalities" to their craft "without sacrificing male prerogatives" (Goldstein 156). George Bowering is comparably disguised: by draping himself in the costume of a feminist literary critic he attempts to cover the masquerade of his masculinity. His feminist strategy, however, serves to highlight rather than conceal the sexual ambiguity and ambivalence which informs Bowering's hysterical writing. Bowering writes:

> I have been, on a few occasions, in those beer parlours in which young women move around on a little stage, taking all those erotic clothes off to the sound of some teenage music from a cassette tape player. When their third song is finished they gather their cast-off raiment and make their way off the stage to some small place behind a wall. Sometimes one may see them later in the room, in their ordinary street clothes. It is then, invariably, that they look most interesting, even sexiest. Even though the woman on the stage is pretending some stock erotic drama, using symbolic attire, her nakedness is finally bare fact, the given. The stuff of realism. Later, in tight jeans or a jumpsuit, she is not the given but the disguised, or the artificed. The stuff of composition. People say, "I *love* your blouse." They don't say, "I *love* your pubis." So you see that naked realism is always pretending, while fictive composition is always more inviting of curiosity.
> (*Errata* 44)

The "I" here should not be regarded as a realistic portrayal of George Bowering, particularly since he so vocally eschews realism. Nor should it be considered the "I" of the traditional essay form where the "I" is, supposedly, that of the critic. Instead, the narrator of this text -- who may or may not be the narrator of the others -- establishes the position held by George Bowering, writer of the set of eloquent symptoms which is *Errata*: he is inside and outside feminist criticism, writer and critic of intellectual and erotic colonization; male hysteric whose body language speaks disgust and desire for the naked female form. While implicitly embracing feminist criticism he is, at the same time, unable to hide his repressed desire to colonize feminist territory; the body of the text betrays his hysteria.

Bowering presents an allegorical reading of the performances of strippers wherein naked they represent realism (which Bowering

belittles), and subsequently clothed they represent fictive composition (which invites his curiosity and therefore pleases him aesthetically). Yet *Errata* 44 is also an allegory of male feminist criticism and its symbiotic hysteria. Furthermore, the issues invoked by the dedication are paradoxically absent and yet embedded in this text, again demonstrating the hysterical in Bowering's writing project.

The tone of *Errata* 44 is distant, "uptight," and class-conscious. Bowering inscribes the disgust and ambivalence he feels towards strippers' performances onto the body of his text. He is unwilling to particularize the performance or to name it "stripping"; he distances himself from a class of people who frequent the realm of strippers, remaining the detached observer, pointing out the infrequency of his visits to beer parlours, and implying a certain superiority over regular customers. Bowering's "I" actually disappears -- or becomes generalized itself -- mid-text, when we read, "[s]ometimes one may see them later." This concealment of the I's disgust beneath the cultured language of the social scientist, however, actually represses desire.

By theorizing all strippers as desirable when clothed and undesirable when naked, Bowering transforms "exotic dancers" (within his text as within the beer parlour) into fetish objects, the objects of his male gaze, and the objects of his aesthetic judgement. Consequently, the male narrator enters into *their* territory -- the stage -- and, with colonizing male subjectivity, places himself histrionically, and hysterically, at the centre of their "stock erotic drama." The narrator presumes the women's inadequate understanding of their own performances -- strippers, he implies, unwittingly believe they are most erotic when performing. He privileges his own masculine response and so lays claim to their intelligence, art, bodies, their sovereignty and eroticism on the stage. By insisting implicitly that exotic dancers perform the same routine and are routinely the same, Bowering erases their individual identity. The exotic dancer is no longer exotic: she is domesticated, marginal, objectified, and faceless. Read allegorically, *Errata* 44 documents the colonization of the stripper's stage and the subsequent erotic enslavement of its dominant discourse at the will of Bowering's masculinity. Bowering thereby foregrounds the

risk of objectivisation while at once practising it. As well, he implicates his readers when he says, "[s]o you see that . . ." and generalizes the reader's response, not accounting for what are likely important differences between gendered readings. While he perceives a disguise of eroticism in the clothes of the stripper, he seems unselfconscious of his own masquerade as masculine interpreter.

Perhaps Bowering's narrator does not like to be teased. The essay recalls T. S. Eliot's poem in which the male narrator must stop the shaking of the female subject's breasts in order to deflect his own hysteria. By clothing a stripper's naked body, Bowering's narrator literally stops the shaking, but the presence of her clothed body does not silence his hysterical symptoms. Rather, it is the shaking of her breasts, now transplanted into his memory, that constitutes Bowering's hysteria, since he could not find the clothed woman "sexiest" without the trace of the memory of her nakedness. In other words, by clothing her in provocative "tight jeans" he actually *represses* his desire and sets up the condition for his hysterical text. Freud maintained that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" ("Studies" 7), alluding both to the suffering caused by an unspeakable sexual provocation and the return, in the form of physical symptoms, of the repressed memory of that act. It is the remembering of the dancer's naked body which sets up Bowering's hysterical text and defines his own body's suffering, its intolerance of desire.

He performs a talking cure by borrowing certain ungendered aspects of *l'écriture féminine.* His discourse, expressed as a linguistic condition and political stance, mediates between gender dichotomies in the guise of the alogical cognitive style of the hysteric. At the linguistic level we find rupture, discontinuity, disorder, and imaginative speech which are aspects of Gail Scott's text and characteristic generally of *l'écriture féminine.* For Elaine Showalter, though, what is termed women's writing "stands for a style, not a signature" ("Critical" 380). It is possible, therefore, to remove the gender specificity from *l'écriture féminine*, and reveal masculine writing such as Bowering's. The inscription of the hysterical in Bowering's language and its reflection in what is considered *l'écriture*

féminine are further supported by what Freud noticed in the speech of his patient, Anna O.. Freud found

> a deep-going functional disorganization of her speech. It first became noticeable that she was at a loss to find words. . . Later she lost her command of grammar and syntax; she no longer conjugated verbs, and eventually she used only infinitives, for the most part incorrectly formed from weak past participles; and she omitted both the definite and indefinite article. ("Studies" 25)

Freud's description of Anna O.'s grammatical explosion, and Bowering's self-reflexive statement of intention in *Errata* 7, together represent an interface of female and male hysterical discourse:

> My name is not Bower or Bowered. It is Bowering, so I suppose that the second word I ever learned to read looked like a present participle. Maybe I learned from the start of the written language to think of myself as an ongoing verb. . . What I do is not write or written. It is writing. It is writing, and so am I. I am Bowering and I am writing. If you are reading, you are reading writing and Bowering, I hope. I am not a bower of bliss and I am not bowered with any muse; I am too busy bowering, I mean writing. You do see what I mean. It is writing and I am reading and so are you. What is your name? Whatever it is, I hope you keep doing it. (*Errata* 7)

Simply put, *Errata* 7 is an hysterical text, "[u]nwilling to explain itself, requiring a reader-as-collaborator . . . to unravel its disguises" (Koestenbaum 137). As Roy Miki points out, in Bowering's project, "[i]nstead of a search for unity . . . the desire to write (and to be written) leads in the opposite direction, to a search for diversity" (viii-ix). In *Errata,* as in his earlier *Autobiology* and *Allophanes,* Bowering foregrounds the reading act while exploring the diversity of subjectivity. He persistently reads his signature as writer, checks up on the I his language passes through and, whether reading his own texts or those of other writers, indulges in a self-reflexive writing process.[4] Bowering, like Scott, conflates the roles of writer and reader, of writer and critic, and so as reader of his own text, collapses the distinction between hysteric and analyst. The Bowering we see now is a male feminist literary critic, producing a creatively rendered critical text which borrows from the formal and

stylistic apparatus of *l'écriture féminine* and of the high modernism of male writers such as T. S. Eliot. Moreover, he addresses the reader in a way that recalls the analyst / analysand relationship exhibited by Scott's text. When Bowering writes, "I am reading and so are you," he may have stumbled onto the perfect definition of the talking cure: the analysand reads the past; the analyst reads that reading.

Spaces Like Stairs and *Errata* are driven by a deconstruction of the writer / reader opposition which has traditionally overvalued the authority of the writer and marginalized the reader. Neither Bowering nor Scott is after a bounded, cohesive writing or reading self nor their expression in a closed text. Bowering's is not a quest for centrality or authority; rather, as Miki notes, his writing "circles the question of self: who am I that language inhabits me? and who is that I language passes through? and what is the signature of writing?" (viii). Once again mirroring the therapeutic relationship which motivates the talking cure, Bowering creates, to use Roland Barthes' term, a distinctly "writerly" text, wherein Bowering, as reader, "shifts from the role of consumer to that of producer" (Eagleton 137).

Errata 17 is an example of Bowering's interest in reading-as-writing. Although at heart a stylized close reading and rendering of the work of Samuel Beckett, *Errata* 17 is an effective example of the use of word-play, associative leaps, subject-object juxtaposition, unorthodox punctuation, to mention only a few of the strategies that characterize Bowering's writerly discourse. It also illustrates formal tensions present in all of the fragments: if the reader reads out loud,[5] brazenly changing Bowering's line breaks to fit a more musical form suggested by repetition and cadence already present, what results is "an intellectual poem"(Kamboureli, "Preface" 3):

> When I was young and intending to be a writer, and writing stories and probably poems, I continued the contrariness I had always practised as a kid. It seemed the logical way to escape common thought, which must be not good enough, and it was an instinct. So I instinctively distrusted the satisfaction of understanding. Now I know how to practise and describe a *methodos*, so I say that I function by and through misunderstanding. Maybe I should say dis-understanding. I know that my favourite books have always been the ones I could not really understand but which I

> could see immediately and could immediately see would last all through my life. An example would be *The Unnameable*. I really understand detective books, so now I cannot remember them. I feel a similar way about writing. I dont even mind if my readers think they understand, as long as they do not really understand the most important stuff.
>
> (*Errata* 17)

What is most important in Bowering's acts of reading is not that he *understands* a text, but that the text provokes him to indulge in his own free play of meaning. "Dis-understanding," then, becomes the goal of the reader in the writerly text. *Errata* is primarily a ledger of Bowering's *own* reading in which he refers to readers as "us readers" (8) and berates the naive: "[y]ou are not rereading. . . pay attention -- see? You are just reading" (*Errata* 3).

Bowering is not just any reader; he is a hedonistic, insatiable, neurotic reader: "all my life I have been reading, reading as much as I can, buying books faster than I can read them, hoping at first that I could read everything, later knowing that I will perish with books I paid good money for lying unread on the shelves and floor" (*Errata* 83). Present here and throughout *Errata* is a sexually charged subtext. Through understatement and punning, and with the voice of adolescent innocence, vulnerability, and suppressed desire, Bowering suggests that the appetite which drives his reading is prurient.

Errata 2 expresses further the notion that writing and reading-as-writing are private, intimate acts performed in solitude. The erotic relationship is with the text, and the text is masculine, central, and phallic -- "significant and growing":

> when one is writing there is no audience there; at the best of times one is alone except for the text. So one writes for the text. This is for you, one says, and one really hopes the text likes what one is doing. It is not, perhaps, the judge; but it is the significant and growing discernment one has to be aware of as company. When one happens to be the reader, producing the text that way too, one is also alone with the text. (*Errata* 2)

While he is "not a Bower of bliss" (*Errata* 7), Bowering creates a text of bliss, and pronounces the hierarchical relationship of writer and reader to be null and void. At the same time, he articulates the role

of the writer / critic, and defines the relationship of the analyst and the analysand in a creative / critical text such as *Errata* wherein patient and doctor reside in the same person. Bowering's text of bliss is an hysterical text which paradoxically conceals the terms of the repressed desire, and exposes its presence through sexual innuendo and double entendre. The talking cure is set in motion by the relationship of the writer and reader (who in Bowering's case are the same) to the text. Barthes describes this sort of endeavor:

> With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss*: you cannot speak "on" such a text, you can only speak "in" it, *in its fashion*, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss (and no longer obsessively repeat the letter of pleasure).
> (*Pleasure* 22)

Errata exemplifies Bowering's refusal to practise criticism from the outside. Rather, he proceeds to speak in the language of *Errata* itself, to double it with his own hysterical discourse, to occupy the reading and writing site/s. Just as Scott self-consciously enters into the hysterical text in order to "pass through it" (*Spaces* 101), so Bowering remarks that a writer must enter this "freefall" of language "perhaps to pass through" (*Errata* 78). Both writers occupy the ambivalent positions of the writer / critic: entering and exiting, present and absent, outside and inside.

According to Russell Brown, Bowering does not set out in his critical essays to provide the reader with "the interior of the work so much as the *experience* of getting there." His essays, using colloquial speech patterns and oblique style and tone, "seek to recreate the moments of reading and discovery" ("Words" 39). The result, then, is not so much an embracing of the reader, as an insistence on the reader's responsibility to remain present within the text and to contribute to its production. Bowering and his own readers, therefore, reside both inside and outside Bowering's own text and exemplify the relationship of analyst and analysand as co-producers of hysterical narrative.

Errata resembles classic examples of hysterical narrative in a number of other stylistic, formal, and thematic ways. The formal peculiarity of hysterical narrative, Mary Jacobus writes, is "its reversal of chronology in the process of retelling" (218). *Errata* is made up of self-conscious visitations to previous ways of thinking; it is a book of reminiscences grounded by authorial intertextuality. In order to tell the story of his present self or selves, Bowering proceeds backward and bears witness to the past -- to the history of his own thinking, reading and writing -- in order to go forward. Many of the fragments in *Errata* begin with a memory or specifically recall childhood events: "When I was a kid, and was trying to know what people who knew know . . . " (32); "When I was young and intending to be a writer . . . " (17); "I never wanted to write an autobiography . . . " (34); "In the early sixties I found this passage somewhere . . . " (71). Bowering explains how his impressions may have been naive, or more importantly, how he, at the time, was guilty of underreading literature, people, and culture. The "then" of Bowering's past becomes the "now" of his text as he supplements the memory of his reading with a simultaneous re-reading. The hysteric, we know, has the ability to reread the past, and in Bowering's case, instead of the hysteric living in the past, the past "seems to relive the present" (Jacobus 218).

As further illustration of the co-presence of the "then" and "now" in the text, *Errata* 97 and 98, both critical meditations on the translations of Ezra Pound, are dated "Aug. 1964, Mexico." *Errata* 97 ends with "[i]n twenty-five years I will agree with that language . . . ," and *Errata* 98 ends with "[i]n twenty-five years it may still be happening if there are still Englishmen . . . " Published in nineteen eighty-eight, *Errata* becomes the locale of the essays' "twenty-five years" later. This weaving of past and present wherein the sequence of events remains uncertain, and the distinction between now and then is obscured, recalls what Freud believes to be the role of reminiscence, namely that "memory behaves as though it were some current event" (Wills 135). For Bowering, the process of anamnesis is perpetually tangled and dispelled.

In addition, Bowering resorts to equivocation and imprecision which may signal, for one in the role of the hysteric, an inability or unwillingness to resurrect memory. Freud theorized that the mark of a repressed memory in Dora's hysterical discourse was her repeated use of the obscure, "I don't know" (Strong 18). The first line of *Errata* floats on its own unnumbered page, between the dedication and *Errata* 1. It reads, "I may be wrong, but . . . ." More than a simple disclaimer to the texts that follow, this line seems to be a version of Dora's "I don't know" wherein Bowering intends to say "*I don't know* if I'm right or wrong." Yet, when Bowering says, vaguely, "I guess that when all is said and done . . . " (16), or "I guess I write to trick reality into revealing itself . . . " (19), or "I don't know what will happen to fiction writing now . . . " (25), we do not believe he actually doubts his perceptiveness or critical acuity. The voice is confident, informed and supported as it is elsewhere by a detailed account of how he reaches conclusions and formulates opinions. Bowering's irony here is one step short of being sarcasm, and may signal, therefore, the presence of a discourse that cannot be uttered. The ironic rhetorical strategies represent a coded gap between what Bowering means and what he says.

Gaps characterize, in part, hysterical narratives. Buried and incomplete, memories leave spaces, interrupt narratives, and set up unresolved formal tensions in hysterics' stories. Furthermore, hysterics, known to "grow moody and irritable," sometimes "refused to talk at all" (David-Menard 2). For Anna O., "in moments of extreme anxiety, her powers of speech either deserted her entirely or she used a mixture of languages" (Hunter 468). Hence the holes in her autobiographical act were mirrored by actual gaps in the story telling. The discourses of Bowering's text -- and the spaces within and between them -- are equally significant and similarly constructed.

By blending colloquialisms with academic discourse, poetry, and anecdote, Bowering creates a polyphonic text. The lack of formal unity or conventional coherence leaves fluid gaps which the reader must ford in order to sense Bowering's intention. In *Errata* 37, Bowering writes:

> The continuity of the damned human will is the writer's (and especially the reader's) main enemy. Most of what we might

> discover is bypassed when we treat human sentences as message-bearers, dispensible when they reach their target. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog, but the dog can follow any scent that diverts him, in patterns that are never there till he is. Follow David Hume's scent far enough and you'll get to Heidegger. Follow Heidegger and you'll forget there ever was a topic sentence. Mona Hodgson, my grade eleven English teacher, ran weeping from the room. Guess what she wrote on my report card.

Bowering not only exhibits formally an hysterical pastiche of languages as he darts from one discursive mode to another, he also states thematically the importance and danger of derailed narrative. For him, it is *important* because it allows the writer to overreach the confines of structures and "follow" her / his nose to possibilities in language; the reader, too, is implicated in this process. It is *dangerous*, however, because the "hysterical" reaction it brings about for Bowering's reader and teacher swears to the Victorian belief that hysteria may be contagious, that friends and relatives may be contaminated merely by associating with one who has it. Mona Hodgson's contamination functions as the female projection of Bowering's own hysterical persona. As teacher of the unteachable Bowering, she performs the co-present roles of writer and reader, analyst and analysand. While she behaves hysterically, it is she who ultimately reads Bowering's writing, and young Bowering's report card bears the signature of her analysis.

The site of an altogether different language and the most blatant gap in *Errata* is *Errata* 52. Roy Miki explains reductively that Bowering is superstitious about the number fifty-two and leaves Chapter 52 out of all his books, as in *Burning Water* (87). Turning the page from *Errata* 51, Bowering's discussion of the fascist threat in socially responsible art, we find a black and white drawing of a male hunter who has been recently gored by a huge bison, so recently, in fact, that the man is still airborn and upside-down. The page is not numbered, though the next fragment is numbered 53. While certainly a text to be read and interpreted, the enigma which would be *Errata* 52 represents an hysterical moment when Bowering's speech, voice, and other discourses remain silent. The reader, as analyst, is left to interpret the visual

text and the silenced text of *Errata* 52. The drawing seems, like much of Bowering's writing, to be sexually charged or, at least, sexually ambiguous. The man has lost his grip on his phallic rifle which, suspended in mid-air, now points at his head. The bull's sexual organs are visible and large. The wound the man suffers may be read as perilously close to his testicles, signalling castration anxiety; alternatively, the scene may be read as a homoerotic instance of sexual anxiety, a crisis of masculinity where the wound signifies anal intercourse. In addition, the picture appears comic and carnivalesque. With the hunter's vulnerable position in relation to the bison, the worlds of man and beast are inverted both literally and figuratively. But there is more here than a parody of masculine omnipotence or a comic representation of sexual unease.

Bowering reveals cryptically that the picture is from a book on "explorers of the Dark Continent" (Miki 86), persuading us that it is more than an historical colonial moment with what he doesn't say, more than with what he says. The "Dark Continent" is, after all, the colonizers' name for Africa. Furthermore, by referring to the "Dark Continent," particularly given the context of *Errata*'s dedication, Bowering suggests an allusion to Hélène Cixous's influential and often-cited essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa." This is the essay which both *is* and is *about* "feminine writing" (Warhol and Herndl 331), and which influenced certain of Scott's styles and propositions in *Spaces Like Stairs*. Drawing, it seems, from Freud who states "the sexual life of adult women is a dark continent of psychology" (*Standard* vol. 20 212), Cixous posits a model for an erotics of writing to be derived from a feminine unconscious shaped by female bodily drives (Kaplan 88). Cixous proceeds to inform women that their "continent is dark" (336). She elaborates on this notion in a passage which echoes my concerns about the traces of masculine privilege and sexual colonization embedded in Bowering's text, a text which both *is* and is *about* hysterical discourse:

> Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity / passivity from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the

> consequential phantasm of woman as a "dark continent" to penetrate and to "pacify." . . . Conquering her, they've made haste to depart from her borders, to get out of sight, out of body. (349)

By invoking, through intertextuality, the work and philosophy of Hélène Cixous, Bowering not only includes the trace of Cixous's works on hysteria, he also expresses thematically and stylistically the creative potential of *l'écriture feminine* while simultaneously parodying its perhaps essentialist imperative: for a male writer to "write the body" when that body masquerades as masculinity is no less complex a project than for a female writer masked by femininity. Once Bowering has wittily made his point, though, he loses track of the risks of essentialism. Floating in the pictorial gap of his narrative, Bowering is at once masculine and feminine, the phallic, colonizing explorer and the passive, colonized "dark continent." He performs yet another masquerade of masculinity -- this is a more comic version of his train derailment scenario -- and thereby re-prescribes female norms: dark, dangerous, penetrable. As curious numerophobic superstition, or as another text to be included as evidence of Bowering's role as hysteric, *Errata* 52 may be Bowering's ideal creative / critical essay: an undecideable text in which the unsaid co-opts the regulatory role of the said, in which the value of representation is measured in terms of interpretation, and in which "the bottomless, truthless comedy of language" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 63) is hysterically indulged.

Though the silence of *Errata* 52 calls out to the reader to enter its space, to interpret and to fill it, Bowering insists that he doesn't "want to read first-person narration in which the 'I' is not writing" (*Errata* 8). The talking cure, in contrast, is the product of a first-person narrator writing; the analyst reads that writing. Throughout *Errata* Bowering takes part creatively in both reading and writing acts. At the same time, he demonstrates a need to *treat* the state of creativity, to inject it with a foreign substance, to graft onto it some prosthetic device, to conduct its erratic locomotion: "The body of the work gets tired as the body gets tired and that is your own biology and it is not disaster, it may need an operation" (*Autobiology* 96). Bowering does not consider the formal brain derailment of the writer /

critic to be a disaster. While Scott's hysteric text may be seen as an organic, generative representation of her divided subjectivity, Bowering's may be seen as a ratification of the mechanized, generative connotations of "aftermath" ("new grass growing after mowing" [*OED*]). Scott self-consciously plays the role of analyst and rigorously reads her own texts to perform a talking cure; Bowering does, too, but he chooses to get a second opinion.

While he muses on the condition of the contemporary writer and ends his book with "[m]aybe he should see a doctor. Maybe he *is* the doctor" (100), I read the emphasis to be on "maybe" rather than on "is." The question of who the doctor is of Bowering's text is a compelling if undecideable riddle. Technically, Bowering is not a "doctor" at all, in that he is without a PhD, though he was at one time enrolled in an eastern university as a doctoral student. The three women who Bowering leaves at the border, however, are all "doctors" since each holds a PhD. It could be said, then, that Neuman, Kamboureli, and Hutcheon are the "doctors" in Bowering's text and so capable of -- and Hippocratically bound to -- facilitating a cure. It could be said, too, that Bowering is only "playing doctor," executing a childlike seduction. But is he trying to seduce women readers, female critics, or other male readers and critics? Is he trying to seduce them all? The *OED* cites the figurative definition of the verb to doctor as "to treat so as to alter the appearance, flavour, or character of; to disguise, falsify, tamper with, adulterate, sophisticate, 'cook'." This seems to be closely related to the meaning of "errata" in that the text supposedly corrects certain opinions, positions, and exclusions found in the body of Bowering's work. In this way, Bowering certainly doctors his text, paradoxically verifying and falsifying the evidence of his hysteria, contaminating and curing himself. Andrew Haase explains:

> As the logic of masquerade teaches: to "drop" one mask is to pick up another (even if that mask is the "dropped mask"). A patronizing form of "male concern for feminist issues" is characteristic of the entire history of patriarchy as subterfuge. Unveiling the phallus implies veiling the phallus. (193)

Bowering as writer / critic doctors, and *Errata* is the textual operation -- the talking cure, the listening treatment -- that contests the authority of literary conventions which distinguish between literature and criticism. What Bowering paradoxically conserves with his particular masquerade, however, is a cultural model wherein traces of patriarchal convention and masculine codes serve to disempower women, and to silence female knowledge. "[T]he book is gone," Bowering writes in the final *Errata* entry. "So is hope of resolution, comfort, redemption, rest. Solace" (*Errata* 100). As for so many of Freud's patients, Bowering's treatment is not completed. The operation was not a success, the patient lives. Ongoing. Incurable.

INTRA-TEXT II

'ad and Mom. My mother is appalled by Dad's sudden
: Lawrence Welk, and women doing aerobics to
line at wrestling. He was a Fine Arts Appraiser
; maybe he was bored the whole time.

lay. On Tuesday, Lily began to stutter. I'm told

would be two years after giving birth before I
in. My father was an auctioneer, I am, to quote
itic set, a "fictioneer" (Van Herk 13).

A report on CBC of a serious fire at the aeronautic museum back east. The Spitfire was destroyed, among other irreplaceable classics. The fire reached the wall behind which stood one of two Lancasters still airworthy in Canada, and stopped short, didn't touch it. Tom told me this story and left the room in tears, suddenly overwhelmed by suppressed affection for my father, or for me.

I am not unmoved by synchronicity but I resist the melodrama of dying and death. Smaro's hands resemble my dead sister's and I want to hold them but I know I would sting with disappointment: perfume lingers and theirs is not the same.

Melodrama, says Scott, is the most hysterical genre.

mid-February, 1993

Smaro tells me Phyllis has stopped smoking. I wonder what those lovely flicking fingers will do now that they have nothing but air to clasp during difficult conversations and critical moments. And what will this mean for those who saw her nasty habit as another inscription of suicidal tendencies?

III

Talking: Phyllis Webb Corresponds With the Dead

> It's also part of wanting to be slightly offensive. And I have never, I think, challenged in an experimental way, very profoundly, in a way that might upset and disconcert. I've always worked within certain parameters that are more or less acceptable, although I've done, you know, my own experiments, but nothing really very wild or new or original. . . I've been trained to please and . . . this modifies my behavior, my poetic behavior. So I'm well-behaved. Always the good daughter. Yes, I think I'm a fairly well-behaved poet.
>
> Phyllis Webb ("Seeking" 34)

This excerpt from a conversation with Phyllis Webb -- layered, metaphoric, self-reflexive, and historicized -- invites interpretation. Webb presents herself as someone who does not contest, unsettle, or transgress generic or linguistic "parameters"; she is, she tells us, "well-behaved," a sort of tamed, domesticated agent of decorum and convention, trained professionally to support, not subvert, the literary status quo. The metaphor she uses to elaborate her role, that of the "good daughter," signals the presence of a subtext informing Webb's autobiographical moment. Symbolically, Webb's poetic subjection seems to be at the beck and call of a higher power, some parental authority that constitutes both the place from which her writing is allowed voice and the regulatory structure which ensures she is, as all obedient children, seen and not heard. Given the opportunity, Webb implies, and under a less strict régime, she would be more experimental, naughtier, more offensive. She contends that she is not in control of her own wants and needs when she states she would like to be somewhat "offensive," but laments that she cannot, under the poetic circumstances, challenge an authority which so dictates her behavior.

The voice -- the persona -- that speaks in this interview and attempts to influence the reader's understanding of Webb's project, is, in effect, a literary construction and a pertinent artifact in the intertextual display of Webb's art. While traces of repression and the painful effects of childhood trauma colour Webb's assertions of

acceptable, dutiful poetic practice, it is not the premise of this discussion that Webb's writing is generated necessarily by suffering; nor should one accept at face value Webb's interpretation of her own poetic "behavior." She occupies a subject position, and it is Phyllis Webb as a construct which is worthy of analysis.

Although Webb's tone seems frank and sincere, it may be interpreted as disingenuous or even ironic. The good-daughter role is, after all, a role; it is a masquerade which enacts certain prescribed standards of female behavior. It could be that Webb's masquerade is, like Bowering's masquerade of masculinity, a strategy by which to cover a particular behavior or position. But the good-daughter persona of Webb's poetic practice cannot disguise the hysterical discourse found in her essays. The body of her critical texts may be read as an hysterical body: it exhibits a language which formally, stylistically, and structurally articulates hysterical symptoms.

The good daughter, literature instructs, is often the mirror image of the seduced daughter, the emotionally repressed child of a sexually oppressive parent (or parents), one whose enigmatic power relationship with the father leads her into a confounded quest for selfhood and psychic liberation. Anna O., a model dutiful daughter, nursed her father through illness and into his death, performing a bedside role considered traditionally to be "wifely" or "motherly." The distinctions between women's roles are certainly blurred under patriarchy; but this supports further the notion that Anna O.'s hysteria was not simply a reaction to the trauma of her father's convalescence and death, but also to the trauma of her own sex role confusion. As she adopts the prescribed, good-daughter persona to nurse her father, her consequent hysteria may be seen as a display of mourning over the loss of not only her father, but of a particular "self." Her grief occupies the space once inhabited by a complex, "rational" self and is spoken by hysterical symptoms. Her hysteria, it might be said, adopts the form and function of mourning.

Although Webb mourns the demise of her "slightly offensive," wild, and original poetic self, critics of Webb's poetry remain unmoved or unconvinced by her good-daughter masquerade; they do not consider her

benign, domesticated, or servile. They read her, instead, as "slightly offensive" and disconcerting: suicidal, morose and malcontent, emotionally charged. Taking cues from Webb's own textual references to suicide, her critics seem fascinated and troubled by the presence of a creative, contestatory precipice from which Webb threatens to end not only her poetic output, but her life.[6] Some posit her as an example of the stereotypical female poet who prepares the ground for her death in poetry and subsequently carries out this suicidal script in life. Clearly, most neglect to consider Webb's subject positions as distinct from her personality.

At the same time as they question her emotional well-being, however, they do not regard Webb as passive. They note her "clandestine subversions of literary forms" (Ricou 206), acknowledge that her poetry exhibits an "exploratory quest(ion)ing [that] not only contests the law of the fathers but also the law of genre" (Carr 71), and diagnose this questioning as constituting "cries of pain camping as ideas," a way of writing which is "a symptom of unhealth" (Mays 14-15). These qualities were noted as hysterical symptoms in the prose of Gail Scott, with her contestation of the law and word of the father, and of Bowering, with the brain derailment that allows him to jump the tracks of literary convention. It is in Webb's prose where hysteria, then, may serve as a point of critical entry for those who read Webb as darkly innovative. The essayistic form(s) Webb commands in *Talking* (and in other prose texts), dispels the reductive image of a suffering poetess and reveals Webb as enjoying a complex relationship with suicide, death, and creativity.

The *Talking* essays, along with Webb's other prose works and many interviews, seem to have been underread or undervalued for their contribution to her body of work. They are not, however, simply keys to understanding Webb's poetry any more than *Spaces Like Stairs* is principally a guide to *Heroine*, or *Errata* only a companion text to *Burning Water*. Rather, Webb's essays warrant the same analysis and critical acuity afforded her poems. As in the creatively produced essays of Scott and Bowering, there is no identifiable hierarchy between the critical and the creative in Webb's prose, and no attempt to pledge

allegiance to the poem over the essay. Though Libby Sheier remarks, "Phyllis' loyalty is to the poem that has visited her at the site of the essay" (123), Scheier misses a crucial aspect of Webb's prose by privileging the poetic. The poetry and other generic forms which appear within Webb's essays take part in acts of intertransformation wherein each becomes the other in the creation of itself; the poetic and prosaic cannot be wedged apart, one does not exercise power over the other. As Webb puts it, "[f]rom the making made and made, now making / certain order -- this excellent despair / is laid" (*Selected* 93).

Webb's prose resembles that of hysterical discourse -- connections remain incoherent, the sequence of events uncertain. Her essays and critical texts are "excellent despair," representing the "unhealthy" yet paradoxically curative act of talking through those symptoms -- "talking through" in the sense that the symptoms mediate linguistic space between text and body, and also in the sense that their power is dismantled by verbal articulation. In her essays, Webb recuperates the hysterical role from the realm of victimhood, passivity, and obedient silence and situates herself, instead, on the offensive. She represents the good-daughter whose subservience and repression cultivate the fertile ground that, in turn, generates her art. She is the grieving daughter whose bereavement challenges notions of propriety. Webb writes, in the formally subversive essay, "Message Machine," "Oh dead [sic]. I've resisted writing this essay for months, possibly because my instinct to subvert the assigned exercise collides with my good-daughter mode" (296). It is just the same kind of collision -- an excess of creative energy forced to transgress limits -- which Bowering terms brain derailment and endorses. While Webb alludes to months during which she resisted writing "Message Machine," the text itself stands as the aftermath of her collision, the progeny of that fruitful period of silence.

Webb is questioned repeatedly about these characteristic silences, the long periods of artistic stillness during which no (public) performance records her creativity. The cryptic answers she offers, at once telling and evasive, are testimony to her anxiety and a coded message concerning her relationship to what -- for her, as for the

hysteric -- remains unspeakable. Webb's remarks do not prove that Webb is an hysteric personality. Rather, hysteria and the hysteric text are doubled by the persona -- the subject position -- which speaks in Webb's interviews. The body of her spoken text becomes a symptom which articulates the silent or repressed in her writing. "It has a great deal to do with my social formation," says Webb, "and with my family and with particular familial wounds that I can't deal with. And if I wait long enough, maybe I'll deal with them [the silences] . . . or they'll deal with me" ("Interview" 35). There is evidence, in recent interviews, that Webb believes she has found a way to speak the unspeakable.

> There is a general accessibility now to the unspoken. For most of my life, many things were not spoken about but are now so freely that my writing, I imagine, seems pretty mild to the young writers or readers. I don't know. ("Seeking" 32)

Significantly, she ends with an equivocal, "I don't know," reminiscent of Anna O.'s reticence and reluctance, and of Bowering's, "I may be wrong but . . . " It is as if Webb were not quite sure of her own hysterical capacity, that she has begun the process of the talking cure but is not convinced she is curable. Elsewhere, she is unwilling to name herself "hysteric." Speaking of her essay, "On the Line," and about her inability to master the long line in poetry, she states, hysterically,

> I don't know. I may not have it in me, because in that essay on the line I do talk about it as aggressive, or assertive, or hysterical, and I just don't know if I have enough of any of those things in me. . . [I]t seems to me that psychologically it does have to come out of a very assertive place, and I don't think I write that kind of poetry. I think I'm much more lyrical. . . And I may be too anxious to have that long a breath also. Unless I go into the prose poem. (Munton 84).

That assertive -- or offensive -- hysterical place resides within the prose essays of *Talking*. As with Gail Scott and George Bowering, Webb's role as writer and critic is motivated by a drive to "talk through" her creative process. The essay form conflates her creative and critical endeavors; her former, wild self merges with the good-daughter. It is

in "On the Line," where Webb may consciously reject the hysteric label for herself but in which formal and structural evidence of her talking cure can be found. The essay appears as the stylistic double to Anna O.'s talking cure, a self-conscious, fragmented, incoherent entry into analysis in which punctuation floats and settles randomly, altering meaning and enforcing it at the same time:

> To whom am I talking? The awkward sound of that "to whom." Am I talking? No. My mouth is shut . . . . Why did I start this dialogue which I now rebel against? On the poetic line. Let me discover the reasons for that as I try to find out to whom I am talking" (66).

"Talking" becomes a trope which is prefigured by the title of the book. Just as Bowering's title, *Errata*, both refers to and dismisses itself, functions as what the book is and what the book isn't, and constitutes a "cover" for Bowering's creative critical endeavor, the title *Talking* serves Phyllis Webb in similar ways. The essays which appear between its covers at once comprise *Talking* and, since Webb insists her mouth is shut, signal the absence of talking. Many of the texts in the book are further generically skewed as they first appeared as radio broadcasts. Webb's role, then, is multiplied and complex: she is writer, speaker, listener ("I must also have been a good listener"[7]), re-reader, and re-writer since the essays must have been edited for the page. Thus, Webb implicitly goads and upsets the hierarchy that places speech in the realm of the natural, original, and therefore privileged discourse thereby demeaning literature as an inferior copy of the spoken word. In the foreword of *Talking*, Webb states that "writing is always speaking of a kind, and the eye and the ear can't really be divorced" (8). Talking, then, becomes an apt cover for a creative / critical venture which refuses to priorize one form over another, which does not distinguish between poetry and prose, or the literary and the critical. Moreover, *Talking* appears as a coincidental abbreviation for "talking cure," a coded slang for the analytic process in which Webb performs the role of analyst and analysand: "[t]his book may appear to be a sort of autobiographical retrieval system," writes Webb, "but it is not offered as nostalgia or with regret" (8). Although Webb supplements the essays

with this key to her intentionality, her subject position signals readers to dispute her authority and analyse her claims. Contrary to Webb's directive, "On the Line" expresses both the presence, and paradoxical absence, of autobiography, nostalgia, and regret.

"On the Line" is a short text made up of "elliptical prose fragments" (Carr 68). It scans theoretical positions concerning the form and function of poetic line while self-reflexively revealing Webb's own creative process, her own complex relationship to line. While Webb measures the relative hysteria of poetic line, she deconstructs notions of influence, origin, and essayistic convention. In one section, she states what at first appears to be a given in the realm of poetry: certain male poets patrol the landscape from which extended poetic line ventures forth.

> *Certainties*: that the long line (in English) is aggressive with much "voice". Assertive, at least. It comes from assurance (or hysteria), high tide, full moon, open mouth, big-mouthed Whitman, yawp, yawp, and Ginsberg -- howling. Male.
>
> (68)

Webb transforms what seems to be a tribute -- coloured by envy -- to the power of male influence into a caution to female poets against the impulse to proceed from assurance of voice to being merely "big-mouthed." She also suggests that hysteria is the domain of the male poet. From Whitman and Ginsberg she moves, in another fragment, to writer / critic Ezra Pound and notes how he "changed our borders, changed the shape of the poem, its energy potential . . . ? . . . and presented us with the freedom we now mediate. Who are 'we'? To whom, etc.? Emily?" (69). Thus, she ironically calls into question the myth of generic traditions originating with one brave and brilliant transgressor, and theorizes instead that Pound and other male poets are credited with innovations due only to self-advertisement and self-aggrandizement.

In the next section, however, Webb constructs an hysterical dialogue with Emily Dickinson and at the same time reclaims the discourse of the hysteric for the female poet. The hysterical breakdown of language in "On the Line" is represented by stylistic as well as

structural fragmentation. The ellipses which appear between each seemingly random section function as hysterical gaps articulating the presence of the unspoken, and marking the place where Webb's silences reside. Webb recognizes a similar role in Emily Dickinson's ga(s)ps:

> -- Emily -- those gasps, those inarticulate dashes -- those incitements -- hiding what unspeakable -- foul breath? But not revolting; *subversive.* Female. Hiding yourself -- Emily -- no, compressing yourself, even singing yourself -- tinily -- with compacted passion -- a violet storm --
>
> (69)

Webb continues with a suggestion to readers to "compare" an excerpt from her *Naked Poems* with what she has just theorized about Dickinson. She mimics Dickinson's compressed and compacted poetic strategies when she writes

> Now you are sitting doubled up in pain.
> What's that for?
>
> Doubled up I feel
> small like these poems
> the area of attack
> is diminished. (69)

Webb distinguishes between the revolting (offensive, hysterical or aggressive, disgusting male) and the subversive (covert, quiet, hysterically inarticulate female) and aligns herself with the latter. The "Emily" fragment functions variously as poem, treatise, criticism, and as doubled hysterical text. The *Naked Poems* excerpt, which is its coda, is a reenactment of the therapeutic relationship in which the analyst (Webb) asks leading questions, and the analysand (also Webb) answers in a way which expresses the nature of her hysterical discourse: she is "doubled up in pain," sharing hysterical space with Dickinson, subverting the patriarchally constructed and enforced line, and playing the paradoxical roles of analyst and analysand. She demonstrates that, like Adrienne Rich, her "wounds" and her "power come from the same source" (71).

Webb concludes that her talking (cure) exists paradoxically in private and on the page: "I talk like this only to myself with my mouth shut. Laying it on the line" (71). The implied image of Webb laying

her body on a line, achieving a horizontal posture which mirrors a written text, also recurs in Webb's interviews. For example, she admits:

> I think in order to write you have to lie back, you have to rest, and often lying down is for me literally lying down. . . The horizontal position -- laid back, right? -- allows the entry of words. . . It embarasses me that I have to admit to this supine position. ("Seeking" 29)

Webb alludes to the therapeutic scene, wherein Webb the analysand lies prone, talking, and revealed to the upright analyst. The analyst, though, is also Webb, who in this instance functions as the interpreter of her own creative posture. While the image of words entering her supine form may signal an allusion to the phallocentric nature of discourse, the very duality of entry and submission is problematized by Webb's double role: she becomes phallocentric in an 'hysterographic' way, and *vice versa*.

Just as "[t]he tulip is moving, horizontally towards the light (tropos), cells burning bright, dying out"(67), Webb's is also the reclining posture of death, another image from "On the Line" that she locates as the impetus for her creative process and for her creative / critical act of writing this essay.

> I look again at the yellow dying tulip on the table. It is stretched out on an almost true horizontal. The flower has sliced itself exactly in half. I sympathize. The half tulip, halved tulip, hangs exposed. I was not there to hear the petals fall. They form a curve of yellow on the glass tabletop; they dropped to form a new line, a waxy curvature unique to the forces that befell them. *Curvature.* (66)

By personifying the tulip as a suicide -- having sliced itself in half and now dying -- Webb links her "own suicidal past and even present" ("Seeking" 32) with the tulip's death and celebrates the regeneration which is "the new line" and unique form they share. This rendering of suicide constitutes an elaborate, intense hysterical symptom wherein the body turns on itself in an uncontrollable spasm of repressed trauma. The body speaks explicitly of its emotional pain, destroys itself in order to cure itself, to break the cycle of trauma, repression and

hysteria, to change course. In a sense, Webb has seen her own death in the mirror of the glass table top, and has imagined the result of her suicide as generative. In other words, she has performed death and created, at the site of the essay, a life after death: a display of mourning. Thus, Webb's subversive treatment of suicide corrupts familiar stereotypes which represent it as a profoundly selfish act, or as the pathetic cry for help of an hysterical, solipsistic victim and reclaims for it the creative potential expressed by the concept of *pharmakon*. Webb has ridiculed and upset cultural attitudes to suicide on other occasions.

Perhaps the earliest instance of Webb's positive rendering of suicide comes in, "To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide." As Janice Williamson points out in her essay on the feminine aspects of Webb's "suicide narratives," the poem displays a "strategy of parodic reversals" in which Webb creates a "discursive field" wherein "suicide is seen not as self-destructive silencing, but as creative act" (159). It is also, it seems, a poem motivated by Webb's fondness for "upsetting the public" (Wills), a tendency which aligns her with the hysteric.[7] The poem reads, "to consider the numerous methods of killing oneself, / that is surely the finest exercise of the imagination" (*Vision* 54). Webb acknowledges a symbiotic relationship between her creativity and death, between self-destruction and self-determination. Williamson notes that, "[i]n a series of metonymic substitutions," Webb positions suicide "in ambivalence as both life and death" (160): "it is death; / it is not death" writes Webb (54). This is precisely the definition of suicide which directs my reading of Webb's prose: as Webb textually attempts suicide -- in "On the Line" and other essays -- , her suicide attempts to generate discourse. By asserting her own imagined death as an honoured form of creativity, she removes any element of regret concerning her own demise and replaces it with a generative force. There is loss -- the imagined loss of a self -- but this might be considered a sacrifice which facilitates subsequent creative acts. The texts which result, then, function as memorials to the sacrificed self: they mark the death of the self while immortalizing it. Furthermore, in mourning her own death through memorialization, Webb defers death,

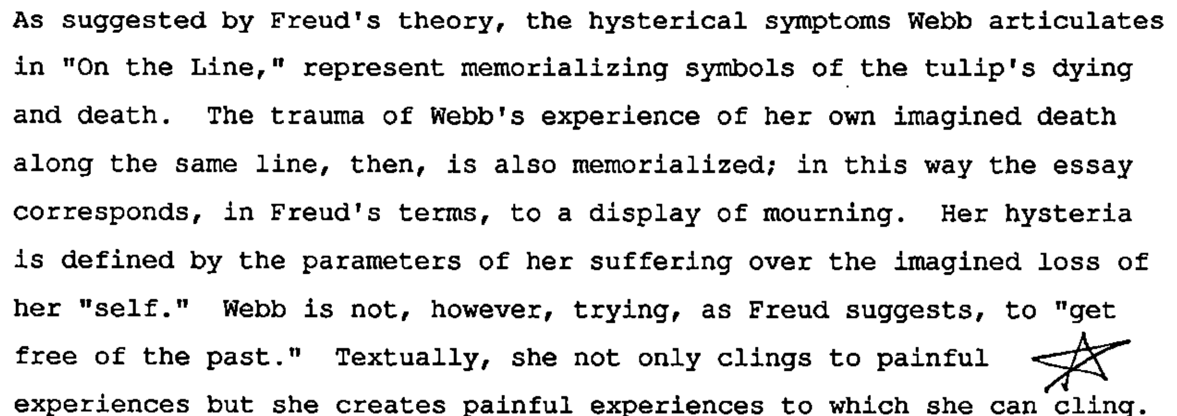
endlessly recreating it in her act of mourning. "On the Line" grows out of loss and stands as a memorial to both the tulip and to Webb's former self.

Freud uses a similar concept of memorializing as a sign for Anna O.'s hysterical symptoms. He writes that "her symptoms can only be regarded as mnemic signs of [her father's] illness and death. Thus they correspond to a display of mourning" ("Five" 17). In short, her symptoms resemble bereavement: a regretful experience of loss, characterized by a nostalgic recollection of times past that suspends acceptance of the loss. There is also a physical component of bereavement wherein the body may refuse nourishment and exercise; it may become overpowered by the physical need to weep, to sleep, to withdraw into inactivity and silence, or to strike out physically in anger at the perceived injustice of death.

Freud alludes, furthermore, to the healing capacity of hysteria. Just as mourning can be considered a process which results, ultimately, in acceptance, understanding of loss and, thus, in emotional healing, hysterical symptoms lead, through the talking cure, to resolution of repressed conflicts. From these insights about Anna O., Freud proceeds to theorize about hysterics in general.

> Their symptoms are residues and mnemic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences. We may perhaps obtain a deeper understanding of this kind of symbolism if we compare them with other mnemic symbols in other fields. . . [N]ot only do [hysterics] remember painful experiences of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally; they cannot get free of the past.
> ("Five" 16-17)

As suggested by Freud's theory, the hysterical symptoms Webb articulates in "On the Line," represent memorializing symbols of the tulip's dying and death. The trauma of Webb's experience of her own imagined death along the same line, then, is also memorialized; in this way the essay corresponds, in Freud's terms, to a display of mourning. Her hysteria is defined by the parameters of her suffering over the imagined loss of her "self." Webb is not, however, trying, as Freud suggests, to "get free of the past." Textually, she not only clings to painful experiences but she creates painful experiences to which she can cling.



To "cling" in this sense does not mean to dwell on pain simply for the sake of the dwelling; Webb's art does not exist simply to represent her personal anguish and she is not the archetypical suicidal poet. Rather, in a strategic attempt to re-formalize conventional grief, to memorialize and at the same time honour and recreate the deceased in a creative way, Webb's essay functions as an elegy on the occasion of her figurative suicide. To consider Webb's prose work as elegy is a way in which to account for certain formal and thematic elements in her essays. To call Webb's prose elegiac is to incorporate in a critical way the spirit of her texts' generic suspension, to, as the elegy does, celebrate and perpetuate significant contribution through a creative / critical discourse.

The death of the yellow tulip in "On the Line" mirrors the passing of one of Webb's artistic selves; the essay announces the rebirth of Webb as a writer and critic, a creative elegist who both enacts death and deflects it through the act of mourning (Schenck, *Mourning,* 1). Since it is Webb's own imagined death that is being commemorated, her text may be more precisely termed self-elegy. Self-elegy anticipates the absence of one's own being, rehearses death, and at the same time generates creativity through self-mourning as the imagination searches "for enduring incarnation" (Schenck, *Mourning,* 121). This is precisely the effect of Webb's endeavor.

In "On the Line," the mourning "self" coexists with the dead "self," Webb's persona "works through grief for itself" (Ramazani 164) and so sustains her powers of imagination. Furthermore, the presence of Webb's elegiac and self-elegiac impulses may be found in other essays. Their recurrence demonstrates how Webb does not resort to the conventions of elegy which facilitate acceptance; rather, by repeatedly enacting her own death and subsequent bereavement, she resists any movement from discord to harmony and thrives on irresolution. Webb's self-elegy functions as a mnemic symbol, a display of mourning which marks the site of her hysteric text. Similar to the texts of Scott and Bowering, Webb's essays are generated by an ongoing process of repressed trauma that seeks and achieves articulation. In "Up the Ladder: Notes on the Creative Process," Webb's process of mourning results once again

in a form that is both creative and critical, poetic and prosaic, and in which Webb is paradoxically analytic and analysed, grieved for and grieving. It is an essay in which the importance of elegy as memorializing symbol for hysteric symptoms is demonstrated once again. As Webb puts it, "[m]emory *is* life -- we need it not only for the recall and perpetuation of our own lives but for the celebrations, lamentations, and history of the tribe, the nation, and the world" ("Muse Figure" 116).

Webb states that "Up the Ladder: Notes on the Creative Process," is not simply an essay *on* process, but also "an essay of process" ("Excerpt" 83) which demonstrates the formal peculiarity of hysterical narrative: a reversal of chronology in the process of retelling (Jacobus 218). As Ann Munton expresses with breathless enthusiasm, this essay is truly self-reflexive and generically complex:

> [Y]ou begin by talking about your creative process, and then you start analyzing how you are writing the essay, and by example you're showing the process. That's marvelous! . . . By example you're showing how you write by questioning what you've done so far. Then you analyze the structure of what you've done.
> (83)

This might be an accurate description of the form of Webb's analysis, but the essay's structure corresponds to that of hysterical discourse. Webb writes knowingly, "I ask myself, is what lies behind the barrier embedded in the *structure* of what I have written so far in this essay rather than in the overt content? Structure as substance, as sub-text" (59).

Structurally, the essay is a reading of six of Webb's own poems ("Painting the Old House, " "Vasarely," "'The King of Kings has Left the Peacock Throne': CBC Radio News, Jan 16 / 79," "Father," "Field Guide to Snow Crystals," and "Messages"), framed by Webb's act of house painting; she links the two activites with the pun, "[o]ccupational therapy." Her analysis serves as a sort of rear-view mirror image of how the poems came to be; in this way, she shares the hysteric's ability to reread the past. "Up the Ladder" is also a polyphonic, multilingual *tour de force* containing the embedded voices of Vasarely, a CBC radio news broadcast about the Shah of Iran, poet Robin Skelton, the scientific *Field Guide*

to Snow Crystals, writer and critic E. D. Blodgett, and a psychic from Edmonton. Appearing at the center of the essay is Webb's dead father, and it is here where Webb continues her complex relationship with suicide, death and creativity.

In what resembles a Jungian version of the talking cure, Webb tells the story of how she wrote a poem titled "Father." Webb traces what she suspects is a significant line -- "the light is mauve" -- until she reaches a repressed association. The poem "Father" does not function as mnemic symbol on its own; rather, the symptom and its memorializing sign are found in the prose of the essay which is mediated by the poem:

> The light is mauve. The light is mauve. The light is mauve. Obsessions are vital to the creative process, as stalling often, a signalling, a belligerent mental tic. Mine are frequently related to various physiological states. The light is mauve. At that time my thyroid was dying, though I thought I was. The light is mauve. For several days that line haunted me. I began one poem with it. I began another. They weren't right. I didn't know what the line meant. Then I had a dream. A riderless horse, wild, was running down Morningside Road where I live. Passing the lilac hedge, it bounded through and crashed up the garden, galloped behind the house. There's still some life in the old girl yet, I thought. *Nightmare*. But the horse, I was sure was a stallion: the shadow, the other, animus, unbridled passion. (The punning aspect of dreams has particular charm and use for the poet.) Or Father. Father and horses. Yes, that was it; it was both. The light is mauve is death. Dead Father. (58)

The "overt content" (83) of this essay may, for Webb, be her analysis, in the form of poetic narrative, of the birth pangs of creative process, reflecting her need to talk "about where poems come from" (59). However, one who is alert to the content and conventions of hysterical discourse may recognize an alternative -- yet no less overt -- content. When she refers to "a belligerant mental tic" as an example of her "various physiological states," Webb unites the physiological with the psychological. Her mind's chronic repetition is taken up by her body, an hysterical relationship mirrored by the body of her text, which repeats the phrase, "the light is mauve." That phrase becomes a textual tic; but it is also a chant, an incantation that wards off her own death -- which she fears -- and her father's death, the memory of which she

has repressed for the purposes of the essay. As Webb begins one poem with "the light is mauve" and then another, unable to get the poem "right" because she is unable to decipher the line's significance, she embarks on a process of writing and rewriting which mimics the interaction of analyst and analysand during the talking cure: they proceed backwards in order to proceed foreward. Webb's acts of writing and revision, though, are, like her textual stutter, a way in which to delay encroaching death, to keep death off the page: out of sight, out of mind.

When death inevitably surfaces, it is in the form of both her own death and her father's. Through word play and punning reminiscent of Bowering's hysterical strategies, the horse is a simultaneous image of Webb and her father. Webb is sure the horse is a stallion and yet identifies with it by naming it a (night) mare. She intends a pun on "mare" which allows her to imagine "[t]here's still some life in the old girl yet." Significantly, just as Webb approaches catharsis, as she nears the association which will cure her hysterical symptom and release the body of the text from repression, Webb the writer and dreamer takes on the voice of the critic. The critical voice of the analyst interrupts parenthetically with this directive: "([t]he punning aspect of dreams has particular charm and use for the poet)." The critical, distanced tone of this sentence serves to curtail the momentum of Webb's dream analysis just in time to prevent "unbridled passion" from galloping into "Father." Furthermore, the sudden use of another discourse at this point signals the hysterical strategy with which the analysand suspends catharsis.

The line which haunts Webb, the hysterical symptom which speaks in place of her repressed memory -- "the light is mauve" -- she concludes "is death." Although Webb concludes that the horse is "Father," the image remains contaminated or "haunted" by Webb's presence. Through her dying thyroid, she has imagined her own death and it is this figurative suicide which leads her to read her dream as about "[f]ather and horses," about her father's death which, since she too occupies the image of the horse, is the "shadow" of her own death. Like Anna O.,

Webb does not only memorialize and mourn her father in the process of writing "Up the Ladder"; her own death is also commemorated.

As Webb proceeds, in this text, "[i]nto murk, unconscious psychological disclosures, grammatical errors" (53), it is as though she lets down the ladder of her creative process, leaving spaces between rungs -- spaces like stairs, perhaps -- which lead the reader "beyond mere anecdote" (60) and into the realm of "[t]he secret project of this essay" (60). The project would not be secret if Webb revealed its nature; she can keep a secret. Just as her dream resists definitive interpretation so, too, does her essayistic project. The moment in the text when Webb questions the relationship between death and creativity, however, elaborates the way in which death -- and Webb's reflexive, figurative suicides which correspond to it on its various occasions -- informs and drives her creative / critical responses.

The way in which Webb manipulates correspondences between her own death and the death of others in order to generate texts is especially evident in another essay -- and in the texts which attend it -- from *Talking*. "A Correspondence" is the third and final section of *Talking*. Although Pauline Butling refers to it as "Webb's publication of selections from the Duff / Berliner letters, with her commentary" ("Paradox" 202), that description betrays Butling's failure to address the complexities of Webb's prose text.[8] It is an essay about decoding stories in which Webb orders the correspondence between anthropologist Wilson Duff and Webb's friend, librarian Lilo Berliner, into a narrative which is at once romance, adventure, mystery and tragedy. In it, the two letter-writers never meet, the puzzle of the Haida myth, "Nothing Comes Only In Pieces," that they tried to decode remains unsolved, Duff commits suicide in his office at the University of British Columbia, . Berliner names a Haida petroglyph bowl on Salt Spring Island as his monument, and Duff's death is doubled by Berliner's own suicide as she walks into a Salt Spring high tide, having bequeathed to Webb the letters from Duff. Embedded within this narrative -- its alternating text -- is the Haida story, which is a Raven creation myth of intertransformation.[9]

While "A Correspondence" is a record of the correspondence -- the letters -- exchanged between Berliner and Duff, Webb makes use of the capacity of punning and the essay is fraught with alternative meanings of correspondence: in it there are correlations, similarities, equivalences, and symmetries designed by Webb to interact with and enhance each reading of each connotation. Written in 1977, but published in 1982, the essay holds within those dates the publishing of *Wilson's Bowl*, the volume of Webb's poetry published in 1980, and which contains the long poem, "Wilson's Bowl." The fallacy of the existence of one originary text is therefore refused (Williamson 162) since it is impossible to determine which text preceded the other simply by consulting copyright dates: there is no chronological order. In other words, the question of which instance of 'Wilson's bowl' came first and next, remains undecideable and is perhaps impertinent. Therefore, a hyphenated wilson's-bowl, in this discussion, will represent a unified mirroring concept, one that distorts principles of order and originality, and expresses its function in terms of Webb's texts.

While "A Correspondence" mourns two suicides, it is also a consolation for the figurative passing of a whole civilization. The Haida culture which tries to regenerate itself through a creation myth succumbs at the same time to a dominant, European culture which collects Haida artifacts and misreads Haida stories classifying both, condescendingly, as primitive. Arguably, Webb's inclusion of "Nothing Comes Only In Pieces" serves as a generous act of resurrection and indelible inscription, but she merely translates; in fact, she translates translations of what must be transcriptions of a Haida story which was generated by an oral tradition. "Nothing Comes Only in Pieces," with its enigmatic and circular title, is itself a story about confounded logic; it is a tale which locates, as Duff puts it, "the beginning in the end and the end in the beginning" (132). Webb reproduces the story in terms of her own bereavement over its loss, therefore memorializing the myth, passing it on, and grieving for the culture which composed it.

In so doing she foregrounds her own reading and writing acts by positioning herself as subject. This essay is primarily a story of

Phyllis Webb, and is a record of her own encounter with death. She describes Lilo Berliner as "a seeker after signs and symbols" (130), someone whose "intelligence was essentially poetic and her impulse mystical" (130), and one who has an "ability to gather all and anything into her symbolic system" (131). Webb describes Berliner's writing as "provocatively non-linear, associative and dream-like" but with an "inner logic" (136-7). The resemblances, here, to Webb's own creative process -- and to the discourse of the hysteric -- are obvious; Webb makes this correspondence -- or her perception of it -- more meaningful when she quotes a letter from Berliner to Duff:

> Yes, I believe in reincarnation and in miracles and in an often imperceivable design which runs from the microcosm to the macrocosm and includes all our "rambles." In German, to ramble is often called "*spinnen*," which refers to the spider web, and what could have more design than that? (141)

By choosing to introduce the image of "spider web," which echoes her naming of herself "Spider Webb" in "On the Line" (69), Webb exceeds symmetry with Berliner and projects herself into Berliner's story and into the role of its creator. By assuming the role of subject in a story of mirrored suicides, though, Webb is vulnerable to the will of that particular symbolic system. In "A Correspondence," Webb not only formalizes bereavement over the loss of two contemporaries and of aboriginal civilization, she also stages her own suicide in the mirror which is the bowl.

Wilson's-bowl has many facets -- aboriginal artifact, Lilo's mnemic monument to Duff, title of Webb's collection of poetry, title of one section of that book, and of one fragment ("The Bowl") in the "Artifacts" section of "Wilson's Bowl" in *Wilson's Bowl*; it also appears in the title of a photograph, "At Wilson's Bowl," taken by Betty Fairbank in 1980, which shows Webb sitting beside the bowl, about to peer into it -- each is a reflection upon the others. In "A Correspondence," Webb describes the bowl as "[i]ncredibly delicate, perfectly round, empty at low tide, full at high," and notes its capacity to reflect the moon. "It was," she says, "the perfect object for her [Lilo's] contemplation of levels of meaning" (131). In the

poem, "The Bowl," Webb elaborates on its role as "meditation's place." As the bowl's close reader, she positions herself physically and critically as that which it reflects. The bowl, when Webb looks into it at ebb tide, "Smiles -- / and cracks your smile" (*Wilson's* 64); it may be considered literally and symbolically to be a mirror for Webb. While contemplating the suicides of Duff and Berliner in the *speculum mortis* of a visual artifact, Webb merges with them, imagines and anticipates her own suicide and thereby creates her own artifact, her own mnemic symbol at the site of the essay. In effect, "A Correspondence" (and its attending texts) may be read as self-elegy. Once again deferring reconciliation, Webb stages her own death -- in the mirror of the bowl and as Berliner's double -- on the occasion of mourning others.

Webb has said the following about writing the long poem, "Wilson's Bowl":

> It was a way of dealing with death, writing that poem, or two deaths, and I guess, with my own suicidal impulses which the death cured me of. . . [I]t was an exorcism. But death has always been a big subject in my work. Of course, it's one of the great subjects. Some write about it more than others. Now in [reading] my own poetry . . . [I hear] the sense of my own imminent death coming into the poems. My concern is there and it almost slips in without me knowing what I'm saying. How it seems so imminent and yet it's not suicidal. ("Interview" 36)

Wilson's-bowl may be included within her frame of reference, a concept through which she may face the "big subject" of imminent death and yet not commit a literal suicide. Just as Berliner's letters from Duff were "her bequest" (148) to Webb, left in a black plastic bag on Webb's Salt Spring Island doorstep, "A Correspondence" is Webb's bequest to a subsequent poetic self, a mnemic symbol that mediates the distance between the trauma of loss and the hysteric symptom which memorializes that trauma. "For Lilo," writes Webb, "the doctrine of correspondences . . . informed her universe" (148). So, too, for Webb whose imagined suicide in this essay -- which becomes more explicitly, and poetically, stated in *Wilson's Bowl* -- corresponds to Berliner's and whose writing constitutes correspondence (dialogue and communication) between previous and subsequent artistic selves. As Margaret Atwood puts it, Webb "walks

into the sea and returns" (*Wilson's,* flyleaf), or as Webb herself writes, "I / want to die. / I want to die again" (*Hanging* 53).

The importance of the Salt Spring Island shoreline -- as both a point of entry and a point of departure -- to Webb's text may situate "A Correspondence" generically as a type of elegy known as *piscatorial,* a pronouncement on mortality and art which takes place by water (Schenck, *Mourning* 135). It is at the sea's edge where, in the piscatorial tradition, the poet tends to incarnate and where Webb is able to contemplate her own immersion, her own walk into the high tide. The sea "invigorates and replenishes, even baptizes and the sea-change experienced . . . makes possible the composition of the poem" (Schenck, *Mourning* 160). Furthermore, the piscatorial "stages a quest for the word, that secret talisman rendered up to the *mystes* by the sea" and finally, the poet succeeds with the help of "some interceding female figure who has the power to bestow or confiscate poetic power" (Schenck, *Mourning* 160). The legacy of Lilo Berliner's letters represents a mythical exchange wherein Berliner's word is passed on to Webb. By imagining her own drowning, Webb performs an initiation ceremony which replenishes her creative powers and through which she transcends her imagined death. The essay also corresponds in purpose to the classical elegy in that it fills the silence left by artistic predecessors and generates subsequent poetic production. As with "On the Line" and "Up the Ladder," "A Correspondence" functions, in part, as an elegiac essay and generates voice out of the silence left not only by Webb's predecessors, but also by her own poetic "self." Each essay at once stages and mourns Webb's death. But while classical elegies, written by male poets mourning male poets, are considered "vocational" in that they mark a poet's self-promotion into the professional milieu of the deceased, Webb's poetic inheritance, placed as it is within a non-linear, unresolved generic field, seems an example of "female" elegy as theorized by Schenck:

> Built upon a different set of internalized relations with predecessors, the female elegy is a poem of connectedness; women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead. Whereas male initiates need to eliminate the competition to come into their own.
> ("Feminism" 15)

Webb's strategy -- to correspond to and with Berliner, not to separate or distinguish herself from her -- should not, however, be claimed reductively as a distinctly feminist position. While "A Correspondence" may be read as a text of female community (Frey 46), such a discussion does not name Webb a revisionist feminist elegist bent on rescuing the form of female mourning from the grip of patriarchal generic conventions. On the contrary, Webb may also be seen -- and admits to see herself -- as an inheritor of masculine form and one who must struggle self-consciously to distance herself from "big-mouthed" male predecessors. Webb's divided loyalties are represented by one of the essay's attending texts wherein Webb is resolutely -- and in a conventionally masculine way -- vocational as she announces the death of silence, the elimination of male influence, allowing her to celebrate the rebirth of writing.

In the often quoted "Foreword" to *Wilson's Bowl*, it is Roland Barthes, whose own texts may be read as elegies on the occasion of the Death of the Author, who sets Webb's essay in motion. Webb continues modestly, "I don't think I could ever myself have explained [my relationship to writing] with such precision"(9). As foreword or preface, Webb's text is both critical and essayistic, formally and stylistically blurring the line between where the critical voice ends and the poetry begins. As in Scott's preface and pre-texts and Bowering's dedication, Webb's foreword is an instance of supplementation, wherein the foreword acts upon the text proper through what appears to be a "critical" act. Webb seems to resolve certain poetic problems by placing them under an extra-textual signature of authority and distance. The foreward, though, is both inside and outside the text; the subject position from which it is presented warrants interpretation.

Webb uses metaphor and autobiography, she plays with intertexts including those of Sigmund Freud and poet / critic Tillie Olson; hysterical symptoms once again move her through the work and move through her work. But like Scott and Bowering, Webb embraces the role of analysand while simultaneously ascending to the rank of analyst as

she deals critically with her poetic positions. She proceeds to discuss her long period of silence, the end of which is marked by the publication of *Wilson's Bowl*. She also acknowledges the sacrifice of the uncompleted *The Kropotkin Poems;* "remnants" of it, writes Webb, appear in the book.

As well, in this first paragraph of the foreword, Webb refers to the poems in *Wilson's Bowl* as "born out of great struggles of silence," the product of "critical wounds" which contributed to a "strange gestation." It is as if critically injured and struck silent -- enacting the death of her artistic self -- Webb is resurrected and then proceeds to celebrate the death of silence by giving birth to *The Kropotkin Poems*. Yet nothing, writes Webb, could move her "through that work"; *The Kropotkin Poems* survives only in a fragmented, failed state, the "scattered effects" of the projected work. The poems which survive are arguably, however, both as "grand" and "designed" in their own distinctive way as Webb hoped the completed work would be. More than an "apologia" as Webb names it, the foreword is a prosaic expression of Webb's creative process.

The second paragraph is an "apologia" for "the dominance of male figures in *Portraits*," a section of *Wilson's Bowl* which honours particular influences on Webb's art and life. In "Portraits," Ezra Pound, Vasarely, and Webb's "Dead Father" reappear, along with Rilke and Socrates, among others, but Webb's re-reading of her own text reveals to her the domination of a "male power culture" which has overwhelmed her "educational and emotional formation" and subsequently denied her access to inspiration from the "female figures" of her "intellectual life," her "heart," and her "imagination." While some critics read this as an apology on Webb's part (Fagan 23), "apologia" is literally "a formal defence of belief or conduct" (*OED*). Even as justification, though, Webb's argument is seriously flawed. Although she calls attention to the presumed absence of female role models in every aspect of her life and blames a perceived male power culture for engineering this occlusion, *Wilson's Bowl* would not exist but for the inscription and inspiration of Lilo Berliner. Had Berliner not bestowed "the word" upon Webb, the silence would have generated an altogether different work.

Rather than a formal apology for missing female voices, it functions more precisely as an announcement of the death of male influence in Webb's poetry which strategically places Webb in the role of elder poet and mentor. Webb is not undermined by male voices. As Ann Mandel puts it, Webb "may praise or condemn their lives, but to utter in their presence, to perform, requires awesome egotistical competitiveness" (88). As in the elegiac tradition, Webb honours the great ones at the same time as she removes them from their positions of power. It is as though Webb constructs a classical, "male" vocational elegy in which mentors are commemorated and at the same time eliminated from the field. The professional hierarchy disassembled, the way is cleared for the emerging poet to climb "up the ladder." So while Webb dismisses the dominant presence of male influence and implicitly suggests her movement towards female inspiration, she also positions herself as the heir to "male power culture." The foreword is at once a testament to male influence and a refusal of it, thereby doubling the elegiac form. What appears at first to be Webb's admission of failing strength and yet another example of a staging of her own death, becomes, instead, an hysterically aggressive contestation of the Word of the Father. Like Scott, Webb proceeds to claim the position of subject of her own discourse. The good-daughter masquerade and its accompanying proprietary silence are casualties of Webb's vocational momentum. In this way, Webb's prose texts constitute the wreck (in Bowering's positive sense) which marks the aftermath of the collision of her subversive, contestatory self with her good-daughter self.

Expressed with another, more organic vocabulary, the complex apparatus of symptoms which speaks for Webb's hysterical persona inscribes itself onto the body of her text, and leaves a scar tissue to commemorate and cover her figurative attempted suicides. The body of Webb's text is formed by the layer upon layer of destroyed and regenerated textual matter which grows out of her cycle of perpetual mourning. It is impossible to verify which layer is creative and which critical, or to establish which instance of healing was set in motion by a doctor and which by the patient. Neither determination would alter the vigorous texture and weave of the tissue.

AFTERMATH
("Reading Edith's Books")

end-February, 1993

It is the notion of hysteria as generative, of hysterical texts as organic which motivated my readings of *Spaces Like Stairs*, *Errata*, and *Talking* -- and the way in which the essay form mediates between the language of the body and the body of the text.

It occurs to me now that the writer / critic needs to cultivate what hysteria she can find in her body / text in order to perform with any precision and delicacy an act so blessed with doubleness.

March, 1993

Hysteria is the cure for itself. I need to believe this is true: the prose which lashes my hysterical text together begins to loosen and fray from the force of what my talking cure can't quite get out.

Why didn't someone tell me that when you have a child you are unable to read in bed for the first two years? I long to read from the passionately horizontal position.

mid-March, 1993

My mother's voice is disappearing in the long distance line between us. She is tired from flying up and down stairs to feed Dad. (He's cheered when he recognizes the faces of the men with whom he served in Germany on the players of the NBA: "There he is. There's the fella.") She had a minor collision in the bank parking lot and wept as she told me of a crumpled fender, identifying with the car, no doubt.

She is too tired for the details of my father's condition; able only to smoke, cook, and knit exquisite sweaters for Lily. I would send her the comfort of poetry but she cannot concentrate to read. At the time -- the many years -- my sister was dying, my mother showered me with books of every genre, gender, era and ilk: Hemingway, Rachel Carson, T. S. Eliot, Anne Morrow Lindberg's *A Gift From the Sea*. I owe her correspondence.

I will read (to) her, instead:

READING EDITH

'S BOOKS

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain,
spirit of the garden,
suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks

T. S Eliot, "Ash Wednesday"

I

Surrendered bounty,
The thick and erratic pulse of written word,
Edith's books took her place and
crossed my palm;
crossed our fingers
against the skittish dog whine of grief's foreclosure.

generation: life force / force life
spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden

The sea and silent springs code space
our experience fills;
proof of horizon, that line, limit,
end and site
onto which nostalgia projects.
We worship the old man and especially the sea;
the taut too long line and the primitive fishflesh settling along food chain links;
bone meal and phosphorescence take part
in the shimmer of Edith's legendary white sharkskin suit:

> My father steps from the burdened train, New Westminster muddy Fraser riverfront -- wait, Vancouver? -- In 1945, his soldier's heart is released from turnips, hard chocolate and Alsatian dogs, their oily coats and approved papers. In the back of his mind he saves a place -- an hysterical gap -- for memory's losses. Still in uniform, he's met by Edith; and she holds evermore to the richness of summer browned skin against the hem of her suit.

There is too much horizon in this moment.
A fugitive, I have disappeared into detail.

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood.
Each word I ~~write~~ read, scratch
out and replace --
settle for
and against --
I steal from the red hands of my mother without credit.

II

I dreamed Phyllis Webb on a long leather couch:
she flirts with my mother.
My lids heavy with ambiguous jealousy, I read
their aging twin faces:
High cheeks of arrogant ab-
originality
twitch nicotine and Johnny Walker and irreconcilable
politics,
turn fully
expecting to encounter
the next sabre slice of death
once
removed.
They ignore me and smile well.

Blesséd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain,
spirit of the garden.
The garden is also a garden,
Bound and determined by flat rock, pumpkin vines;
paths latticed with irradiated, shed and shorn black hair
of daughters gone
missing
in action.
Perennial sun settles below Edith's eyes where skin is scraped, pulled and tanned
like caribou on ice.

Her indelible black lung breath
lifts onto air a prehistoric tar that overcame and beat
the rain forest drum of migraine;
it scatters the fine ash of unspeakable spontaneous combustion.
The music in me declared a moratorium on these: ash,
fire, flicker, flame, embers, glow, candle, burnt, and
the lovely spark.
I have brazenly -- is that one? -- and on Edith's behalf,
contravened my own aesthetic
guide-
lines.

III

Three times a minute,
My heart cuts out   flutters,
cuts out   flutters,
cuts out   flutters
to make up lost time and to
penetrate the film between presence /
absence: I walk the line.
suffer me not to be separated.

I am the suicide my mother cannot commit,
The books laid at my grave her monument I read each
silent spring.
I lovingly cradle the linger of her betrayal
in my flawed heart
and remain calm; still
among even these rocks.

Notes

[1]Gail Scott was a founding member of Tessera and served on the editorial collective from 1984 to 1989.

[2]Kristeva, it is important to note, is not aligned with Cixous in terms of feminism. She does not call herself a feminist and does not share Cixous' feelings about the emancipatory potential of *l'écriture féminine.*

[3]This is my generalization based on accounts from many sources. For more detailed descriptions of the causes of hysteria in men, see Showalter, *The Female Malady,* Goldstein, Kirby, and Link-Heer.

[4]See also the chapter dealing with Bowering in Kamboureli, *On the Edge of Genre.*

[5]Russell Brown suggests a similar strategy for reading Bowering's prose in "Words, Places, Craft: Bowering's Critical Voice."

[6]Frank Davey and Stephen Scobie are notable and recent exceptions.

[7]Webb's interest in anarchy and anarchists (Kropotkin, for example) may be another instance of her preoccupation with upsetting public decorum or challenging order. Her essays often resort to the language of politics, militarism, and revolution. She uses words such as "subversive," "struggle," "resistance," "assignment," "exercise," and "rebel" which may indicate a political element of her hysteria not discussed in this chapter, but worthy of further investigation since the hysteric is perhaps above all an anarchist.

[8]See also Hulcoop, who reads the essay as an account of the letters between Duff and Berliner.

[9]Webb summarizes the elaborate, complex myth on pages 132-134 of *Talking* and gives sources as J.R. Swanson's *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida,* 1905, 72-74 and, in a longer version, in his *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect,* 1905, 110-112.

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