

# Women and Writing:

## Keynote Speech in Honour of Margaret Laurence

by *Miriam Waddington*

*Miriam Waddington delivered this speech in honour of Margaret Laurence At the Women's Arts Festival, Toronto Board of Education on 6 May 1987.*

When I was asked to give the keynote speech, I asked myself, what is a keynote speech anyway? What does the word itself mean? It means I suppose that one must sound the right note and hope it will evoke an answering note from the audience; and it also means that one must bring a key or keys — and try to open a few doors that until now have remained closed, or if open, have needed to be opened still more.

Today's celebration of women artists is dedicated to the memory of Margaret Laurence. I hardly need add my own words to what has already been said about her. Let me only re-affirm that her writing, as far as comprehensiveness, passion, profundity, and pure representativeness goes, has no equal in the Canadian canon. Apart from her achievement as an artist, her life bore continual witness to the artist's role as citizen, a citizen who urged her community to move in a forward direction, towards peace, full freedom for women and better social arrangements for all. I believe that all women, whether they are artists or not, must continue to work for these goals.

There is another note worth sounding and today's celebration is sounding it: art is more important than ever in a society which is becoming increasingly technological, fragmented and materialistic. Art is the strongest, if not the last and only humanizing force available to us. Through painting, sculpture, music and literature — either as creator or participant — we can still nourish the imagination, articulate and make living our dreams and penetrate to the core of truth, of reality.

Women artists have something special to contribute. They can make known what has been and still is unknown, and they can claim, out of the anonymity Virginia Woolf so eloquently describes, a new awareness and new identities. They can, and are, breaking through the circumstantially imposed silences which, as Tillie Olsen has shown us, have existed for centuries, and still do exist to paralyze us, unless we continually struggle to change those circumstances.

I used the words new identities — emerging identities as opposed to the past anonymity of women's lives. Some of these identities are still shrouded in mystery and partially locked away; the doors are not completely open even today. Certain identities are only beginning to be explored and articulated by women through literature. I refer to the experiences of groups such as immigrant women, working class women, old women, and lesbians.

I recently attended an international conference of women writers in Jerusalem which was hosted by the Israeli women's network. There were fifty-seven women from almost as many countries (six were Canadian). The theme of the conference was simply "women do differently." Everyone was in agreement about that. But how do women do differently? In what way? Not a single participant had an answer, and in fact no one even tried to answer the question. Each writer simply presented herself and her work.

But it was enough that the question had been raised — that it was in the air — that it hovered over every session and was implanted in everyone's mind. We all took it home with us. It was like the stone you throw into a pool; it radiates into wider and wider circles covering more and more space but always affirming that

women are different.

How does this difference manifest itself in women's writing? Before coming here I did some reading as well as thinking about the subject. The reading was not always enlightening. The clearest discussion was in an article by Elaine Showalter "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." In it Showalter describes and analyzes four feminist critical approaches to women's writing. First is the biological approach, "a woman's writing proceeds from the body; our sexual differentiation is also our source." Second is the approach through language, a so-called women's language. This is a very complex and controversial issue, but as Showalter has it "English and American linguists agree that 'there is absolutely no evidence that would suggest the sexes are pre-programmed to develop structurally different linguistic systems.'" As for myself I have always known that all language is physiological as well as symbolic. A poem is a physical act. What after all are rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, except pulse and breath? A woman's language, like the language of any other person, expresses *her* pulse *her* rhythms *her* breath — and the pulse and breath are those of a woman. Even if she uses the same language as a man, you can be sure she will use it differently.

Next comes the psychological approach. Here Showalter discusses Freud's view of female creativity as well as some non Freudian alternatives. She suggests that among the most interesting byproducts of the feminist psychoanalytic approach has been the focus on the mother-daughter relationship. Nonetheless, psychoanalytic models of feminist criticism cannot, she believes, "explain historical change, ethnic difference" or the influence of economic factors.

For these we must turn to the fourth and

final approach to women's writing — the approach through culture — which, Showalter believes, is more comprehensive and flexible than any of the other three approaches. A cultural theory also "acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers; class, race, nationality and history are literary determinants as significant as gender... furthermore women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space."

There is a lot of truth in the statement that women's culture forms a collective experience, and I want to emphasize that the experience is a historical one. The feminist movement didn't spring up full-grown in 1970 but long before that, and this needs to be remembered. Every woman who was an artist who wrote out of herself, her life and her values, was a feminist whether she knew it or not. She may not have been part of the political feminist movement — which was true in my own case. But I was certainly writing out of and about my body — pregnancy and childbirth, mothering, aging and death — and I was shaping my language to suit what I had to say so it must have become a woman's language. But as you know, theory always comes after the experience — it is only when we experience the theory through our living that we can really know it. Furthermore we have to achieve a balance when we apply theory to a text — emphasis on any one factor — gender, language, or culture to the exclusion of the others, just leads to plain silliness.

For purposes of research one person's experience doesn't count for much. But for what it is worth I submit my own story of how I became a woman writer. I never until recently recognized that I was responding to women's culture when I chose books to read. Since the age of six I've read everything in sight without ever thinking why or what. Yet now, when I do stop to think, I realize that I always felt closest to women writers, even bad women writers.

In adolescence I nourished myself on the poetry of Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Sara Teasdale, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Of course I read Yeats too. I also read Marjorie Pickthall and Pauline Johnson without shame or criticism. I like minor poets; how could a woman be declared a major poet even if she was one?

I also read women's magazines and women's columns in the newspaper —

how to cook and clean better, how to sew, and how to look like a million without spending a cent. When I was eleven I disobeyed my mother — who thought I should read classics — to read and imbibe the false and commercially motivated women's mythologies about love etc in magazines called LoveStory and True Romances. Believe me I learned a lot from them, mostly about perfidious man — even if I had to unlearn it all later. How explain this except through the collective cultural experiences of women?

I was a typical girl and maybe that's why it took me such a long time to think of myself as a woman writer. I had a hard enough time to even think of myself as a writer. Fifty years ago women wrote, but that didn't make them writers. They had other more primary functions which defined them: to get a husband, have children, manage a household. Their inner lives were lived, anonymously and underground. The inner underground life applied to me as it did to most women writers of my generation and at times I was aware of it and wrote poems about going to meet myself.

I started to write poetry accidentally, when I was eleven. A teacher gave our class an assignment to write a poem about spring and I discovered I enjoyed playing with language and making rhymes. I was also lucky in another purely practical way. I was one girl among three brothers so I always got to have a room to myself, and in that room I pursued my private reading, writing and dreaming. Also, my father was no tyrant, and was as willing to pay for me to go to university as he was willing to pay for my brothers, while my mother was a rebellious feminist who never accepted her lot. Subverting the text of life was her favorite pursuit and she worked at it with a passion. Both parents were busy earning a living and going to meetings so I was left alone to write what I wanted and find whatever publishing outlets I could.

In the 1930s when I was in high school, and later at university, there were few literary magazines. There was no Canada Council, there were no arts grants. But that didn't stop me from writing. I recently came upon some very early forgotten manuscripts of mine in the Public Archives. There was a whole exercise book solidly packed with poems written when I was thirteen and fourteen — all neatly copied out and indexed — who had typewriters in those depression days — I couldn't remember how or when I had written all those poems, or why I had written so many, revised them so care-

fully and copied them out so neatly. I have no idea what that thirteen year old girl thought or felt while she did all those things. I can only marvel at her confidence and persistence.

I was lucky enough to get some poems published and to win a few prizes here and there. But I still didn't think of myself as a writer; only as someone who wrote poetry. I did not advertise it since it was no social asset; nor could you hope to earn a living through poetry. After university I worked on a magazine for a year but found I didn't like it. I went back to take a degree in social work so that I would have a useful profession. I also got married and continued to work even after I had my children.

As I look back on those years of pregnancy, babies and mothering, I see it as a time when I was enclosed in a haze, sunk into a sort of drunken sensuous sleep full of milk and jam and bicycles and music lessons and parents' nights.

I still wrote poetry, still as inwardly as in my girlhood, except that now I had only a desk instead of a whole room to myself and I had to postpone my inner life to when the children were asleep. I wrote about my experiences — transformed of course — childbirth, love, work, and politics. Hardly the kind of subjects to engage the interest of academic male critics. In those days myth, distance, and so-called objectivity were all the rage.

I was over forty and divorced and had published three books and many essays and stories before I could think of myself as an artist, a poet, and not just a woman who wrote poetry. In our culture social confirmation for the artist of either sex is slow to come and for a woman artist it is slow to the point of almost never. Until very recently our culture has been reluctant to take women seriously as either thinkers or makers. For many years — even after I became a university professor — no man with the exception of my sons and my students — would ever ask me what I thought about anything. What men often would ask me was, "what else do you do besides write poetry?" — as if it were some kind of idle and frivolous pastime.

Perhaps the psychoanalyst Otto Rank was right when he suggested that man always was, and still is, afraid of the matriarchal female force in woman because "it symbolizes the epitome of irrationality, the marvel of creation itself."

However that may be, many of the practical barriers to women's creativity have been overcome by a new generation of women who have organized them-

selves, have clamoured and lobbied and have prevailed.

The organization of women in political interest groups has brought about the breakthrough we are celebrating today. There is a new awareness — and it is shared by men — of how women have been moulded by our culture into shapes that don't always fit them and assigned to roles they did not themselves choose. Awareness leads to action, and women organizing have forced society to a new understanding and have helped it to amend old laws and even to write new ones. We now have courses in women's

studies, we have women's presses, we have hundreds of women writers. Women's lives are no longer so anonymous but we are still mysterious, especially to ourselves. And there is still no agreement among us as to how and in what way our art is women's art. Or indeed how a feminist ideology can be the source of an art that is different from the art which is the product of a masculine ideology. How is it really feminine — biologically, linguistically, psychologically, or culturally? Do we write differently about the same subjects or only about different subjects, or both?

I have no answer to these questions and I don't even think it's important to have an answer. It's only important that the question has been articulated and that we are all aware of it. Such awareness may not immediately change what we do or what we write or what we make, but it will certainly give us new energy with which to examine the past and a larger framework upon which to build the future. And the more knowledge we have, the more questions we ask, the more choices will be open to us. And choice, after all, is the essence and the epitome of freedom.

## MIRIAM WADDINGTON

### Ulysses Embroidered

You've come  
at last from  
all your journeying  
to the old blind woman  
in the tower  
Ulysses

After all adventurings  
through seas and  
mountains through  
giant battles  
storms and death  
from pinnacles  
to valleys,

Past sirens  
naked on rocks  
between Charybdis

and Scilla from  
dragons' teeth  
and sleep in  
stables choking  
on red flowers  
walking through  
weeds and shipwreck.

And now you are  
climbing the stairs  
taking shape  
a figure in shining  
thread rising from  
a golden shield,

A medallion  
emblazoned in  
tapestry you grew

from the blind hands  
of Penelope.

Her tapestry  
saw everything  
her stitches  
embroidered the  
painful colours  
of her breath the  
long sighing touch  
of her hands.

She made  
many journeys.

### Coffee Break

Her teeth are  
too heavy for her  
mouth her tongue  
tangles them her  
bones are too wide  
for her uniform  
she is on her coffee  
break and tells the  
girls around the

coffee urn the exact  
state of her life:  
on Thursday her cold  
was worse but her  
daughter has learned  
to cook her husband  
came home yesterday  
and fixed the TV  
her son left school

now he works for  
a painter she doesn't  
know how long this  
time yes today her  
cold is better but  
she can feel winter  
in the air.