I Made You to Find Me
I MADE YOU TO FIND ME

The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address

Jane Hedley
For my colleagues and students at Bryn Mawr College
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Steve Salkever, with whom I have been privileged to share domestic arrangements for more than twenty years, has been my professional colleague for even longer. In both capacities I couldn’t live without him, for too many reasons to list here.
in the first of these three passages, the status of “poetess” is invoked in a spirit of playful grandiosity by an aspirant to poethood who has just produced—to her own amazement—eight poems in as many days. Four years later, on the verge of writing the poems that would lay claim posthumously to the status she craved, this same poet would align herself with “the poetess Anne Sexton,” telling a radio interviewer that she found Sexton’s willingness to engage with certain “private and taboo subjects” “quite new, quite exciting.” Meanwhile, however, on
the back cover of her first published volume, *The Colossus*, poetry critic Alfred Alvarez was assuring potential readers that “Miss Plath... steers clear of feminine charm, deliciousness, gentility, super-sensitivity, and the act of being a poetess: she simply writes good poetry.”\(^2\) According to Alvarez, furnishing book jacket copy in 1961, “poetess” was indeed a “dread diminutive” whose connotations needed fending off in the interest of garnering the widest possible readership for a woman poet’s work.

Implicit in Alvarez’s praise for Plath’s début volume is the conviction that good poems are not acts of self-expression, but of making—acts to which gender, a category of social identity, is or should be irrelevant. The stereotype of the poetess stands in for the difficulty women are supposed to have in rising above or “steering clear” of their social identity on the way to poethood. Plath’s use of the term “poetess” suggests, however, that it helped her find a way to make poems that would explode the stereotype invoked by Muske and Alvarez. Sexton, Plath, and Rich all found ways to speak as women in their poems without being limited to or by the “Uber-frau-ish” stance of “poetess”: that is presumably what Muske has in mind in suggesting that together these three poets represent “the beginning of an era.”\(^3\)

“Who rivals?” Plath goes on to ask in the journal entry cited above, and answers her own question with a summary checklist of other poetesses: “Well, in history—Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—all dead.” Still living: “Edith Sitwell & Marianne Moore, the ageing giantesses & poetic godmothers.” In her own generation: “Adrienne Cecile Rich,” who, she assures herself, “will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems.”\(^4\) By the time Plath wrote this journal entry, Adrienne Rich had already published two books of poems, winning the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1951 for her début volume, *A Change of World*. But Rich aspired to poethood on terms that emphatically did not allow for conceiving of her as a poetess: the stance she crafted for her first two published volumes was intended to give her readers as little incentive as possible to hear a woman’s voice speak from their pages.

In 1949 Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*, her second book of poems. Neither Plath, in 1958, nor for that matter Carol Muske, in 1997, saw fit to include the poet of “Bronzeville” among the prototypical women poets of the twentieth century, and yet this is a status Brooks was not loath to claim for herself. “Weeps out of western country something new,” is how she announced the “birth in a narrow room” of an American girl child whose difficult coming of age is the organizing trajectory of the *Annie Allen* volume as a whole.
“The birth in a narrow room,” which is the title of the volume’s leadoff poem, evokes not only the home of Annie’s parents in the black belt of inner-city Chicago but also the location of the poet who is her true begetter, a writing-girl whose role models are female and male, “Negro” and “Gentile,” and who seeks to extend the purview of “western” poetry. For Brooks, race proved to be a more salient identity marker than gender in determining what kinds of poems she would want to write and would be able to publish. Throughout her long career it was the politics of race that gave her the work she most needed, as a poet, to do. And yet this work was strongly inflected by a woman’s perspective and experiences. Like Plath, and unlike Rich, Brooks early aspired to a niche in the canon of American poetry that awaited her because she was female: “a lady Paul Laurence Dunbar” would indeed be “something new.”

These four poets, who were near-contemporaries, all had their gender working both for and against them. Being female may indeed have worked for them by working against them, in that it brought each of them inescapably to grips with the question of who she would be speaking as in her poems and where she would be speaking from. Rich explained in her Foreword to The Fact of a Doorframe, in 1984, that the nineteen- or twenty-year-old poet who wrote the earliest poems collected in that volume had not yet realized “that she was neither unique nor universal, but a person in history, a woman and not a man, a white and also Jewish inheritor of a particular Western consciousness. . .” According to the “Western” tradition of the lyric she and her contemporaries inherited, the poet is a unique individual who leaves “his” individuality behind to some extent in order to be able to speak both to and from “our” shared humanity. This was a status only poets who were white and male could easily claim. In 1950 a woman who aspired to poethood had to learn by trial and error what kinds of authority she could lay claim to: “the learning of poetic craft,” Rich recalls, “was much easier than knowing what to do with it. . . .” How each of these poets crafted a viable poetic stance for herself as “a woman and not a man” is the story I have written this book to tell. Inasmuch as each turned a potential liability into an opportunity, the notion that gender should or could be transcended in the interest of universality no longer has much currency among us—which means that not only women but also men who are poets no longer aspire to poethood on the same terms as before.

Crafting a viable poetic stance involved coming to grips not only with the problem of the “I,” of how to write from the perspective of a woman’s experience and yet be taken seriously as a poet, but also with
the problem of the “you”—of constructing poetically and politically viable figures of address. “I made you to find me”: Sexton was ostensibly confessing to maternal malfeasance when she said this to her youngest daughter in “The Double Image,” but it’s a statement that also speaks to the rhetorical challenge she faced as a maker of poems. The question of whom the poem’s speaker supposes herself to be addressing is not, in the first instance, a question of who will actually be reading the poem. In the first instance, it goes to the always implicitly and often explicitly vocative character of lyric discourse.

What does it mean to say that lyric discourse is “vocative”? Poems often purport to be addressed to a significant other, be it another human being, a divinity, a force of nature, or a personified work of art; at the same time, however, when Richard Wilbur insists that a poem is “not a message from one person to another,” we know what he means. A poem’s deictic pronouns, its “I’s” and its “you’s,” are components of a verbal construct that is both “self-focused” and, as a linguist might put it, contextually underspecified. Thus even if the poet is ostensibly addressing his daughter, as Wilbur himself does in one of his poems, we do not take such vocative gestures at face value: they are figures of address. Does their addressee stand in for the reader? Very often it seems such gestures are being used to turn away from the reader, producing a structure of address that is ambiguous and complex.

The term for this rhetorical tactic is “apostrophe,” which Jonathan Culler has suggested we think of as lyric poetry’s founding trope. Its purpose, Culler suggests, is to claim for oneself the power and prestige of poethood—as in “Make me thy lyre,” Percy Shelley’s High Romantic apostrophe to the autumn wind. But American poets who came of age in the middle decades of the twentieth century were the inheritors of at least three different ways of conceiving of the lyric, and of the vocative force of lyric utterance. According to the first, of which Culler is a persuasive exponent, poems are “overheard” by their readers, but according to the second, proposed by Helen Vendler, poems are scripts for performance by their readers, and according to the third, espoused by W. R. Johnson and more recently William Waters, it is the “you” rather than the “I” that is the reader’s proxy inside the poem.

It will be worthwhile to look briefly at each of these ways of conceiving of lyric utterance, not only because each still has adherents in our own historical moment but also because Brooks, Sexton, Rich, and Plath each found her voice as a poet in the presence of all three ways of understanding what kind of speaker it was that poethood “called” or enabled or required her to be. When Rich declares in her Foreword to The Fact of a Doorframe that “the impulse behind writing poems” for
her has always been “the desire . . . to be heard, to resound in another’s soul,” she is speaking as the inheritor of a Shelleyan, High Romantic conception of poethood; when she adds that “increasingly this has meant hearing and listening to others, taking into myself the language of experience different from my own,” she is reaching for an “I-you” stance that is more dialogic and conversational. Plath, on the other hand, writing ecstatically in a 1958 journal entry that she “[feels] great works which may begin to speak from me . . . beginning cadences and rhythms of speech to set world-fabrics in motion,” is in the grip of a creative impulse that seems oblivious of others’ potential responsiveness. Plath’s conception of lyric utterance is consistent with Helen Vendler’s approach to the lyric; Brooks’s and Sexton’s poetic orientation is better captured by Johnson’s insistence that the lyric was originally and is properly an “I-you” poem. It is this interlocutory conception of the lyric that is gaining ascendancy in our own historical moment, but since a poem is finally a monologue, even a radically interlocutory stance also harbors an “apostrophic” conception of lyric discourse.

Literary theorists and critics for whom the Greater Ode is the quintessential lyric utterance are fond of citing J. S. Mill’s dictum that whereas eloquence is “heard,” poetry is “overheard.” In Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” the poet is figured as a nightingale “who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds.” Mill’s often-cited characterization of the lyric dispenses with the figure of the nightingale to make the same point more explicitly: “Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude.” “The peculiarity of poetry,” for Mill, “appears . . . to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener”; the poet is thus as different as possible from the orator, whose eloquence “supposes an audience.”¹⁴ T. S. Eliot espoused this conception of the lyric in The Three Voices of Poetry, where he aligned himself with Valéry, Rilke, and the German poet-critic Gottfried Benn in giving special primacy to the “first” voice, the voice of “the poet talking to himself—or to nobody,” and suggested that “part of our enjoyment of great poetry is the enjoyment of overhearing words which are not addressed to us.”¹⁵

Northrop Frye’s taxonomy of literary genres codified Mill’s and Eliot’s insistence on the lyric poet’s stance of solitary self-communion, but with a subtle shift of emphasis that brings the audience back into play: “the lyric,” according to Frye, “is the genre in which the poet . . . turns his back on his audience” to commune with himself, or
with an interlocutor he conjures up through an act of poetic imagination (my emphasis). It is in Frye’s account of the lyric that the rhetorical figure of apostrophe takes on special importance as the means by which its “radical of presentation” is established. Frye’s lyric poet is not unconscious of having an audience, but turns away from them by having recourse to a device that was, according to Cicero and Quintilian, part of the orator’s stock in trade. In Frye’s account of the lyric its speaker is playing a role: he “pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse . . . a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object” (my emphasis).16

Why would he do this? If we think of the poet as a special kind of orator, what is this gesture’s intended impact on its audience? Jonathan Culler has encouraged us to think of apostrophe as “the pure embodiment of poetic pretension”:

If asking winds to blow or seasons to stay their coming or mountains to hear one’s cries is a ritualistic, practically gratuitous action, [its very gratuitousness] emphasizes that voice calls to be calling, to dramatize its calling, to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice.17

Charles Altieri takes a different view of Romantic apostrophe, arguing that it was not an exercise in narcissistic self-inflation but the exercise of a calling whose strongest imperatives were ethical and social. Apostrophe and related devices broached the possibility of a “countereloquence” that “in place of mere efforts to persuade an audience”—efforts that were “bound to the rules of the marketplace”—could open up “alternative ethical vistas,” affording its readers or listeners “new possible identities in which to participate.”18 According to this way of understanding the function of apostrophe, as Ann Keniston explains, it is a figure which, by turning the poet’s face away from us, paradoxically “compels [us] toward and into the poem.”19

Even though his account of lyric poetry’s radical of presentation is more dramatistic than Mill’s and Eliot’s, Frye does attempt to capture some of what is at stake in the claim that poetry is “overheard” when he remarks that the word “audience” won’t quite do for the readers of a lyric poem. What is wanted instead, Frye suggests, “is something analogous to ‘chorus’ which does not suggest simultaneous presence or dramatic context” (Anatomy of Criticism, 249). As when a priest or preacher prays aloud with his back to the congregation, the lyric comes to us with an implicit invitation to “repeat after me”; the difference is that each reader is in a condition of solitude that corresponds to the
condition of solitary self-communion in which the poem was “uttered” in the first place. As Virginia Jackson explains, glossing Shelley’s and Mill’s depiction of the lyric poet, “this structure is one . . . in which the poet’s solitude stands in for the solitude of the individual reader—a self-address so absolute that every self can identify it as his own.”20 “Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky, / Like a patient etherized upon a table”: the opening lines of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” make this structure of self-address explicit, putting the reader in a position to overhear and identify with a lyric speaker whose own self is the only interlocutor for whom he might even begin to broach what he feels, or say just what he means.

In Poems, Poets, Poetry, an anthology she published for students and teachers of poetry in 1997, Helen Vendler takes this way of understanding the reader’s position a step further, insisting that “a lyric is meant to be spoken by the reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words.”21 Vendler rejects the notion that we “overhear” the lyric speaker’s utterance, on the grounds that overhearing would put us in a position of voyeuristic detachment,22 whereas the lyric’s gift to us is just the opposite—an invitation to dwell, for the duration of the poem, in “the innermost chamber of another person’s mind.” “Lyric is the genre of private life,” she explains: “it is what we say to ourselves when we are alone.” Lyrics therefore do not have an audience in the usual sense: “I do not, as a disinterested spectator, overhear the lyric speaker: rather, the words of the speaker become my own words. This imaginative transformation of self is what is offered to us by the lyric” (Poems, Poets, Poetry, x–xi).23 It is at once “the most intimate of genres” and the most universal, since it “presumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer’s shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader’s own.” When we are reading the poem successfully, “the speaker’s past is our past; his motivations are ours, his emotions ours, his excuses ours, his predictions ours” (Poems, Poets, Poetry, 177). Vendler’s readings of particular poems are astutely attentive to structures of address, but figures of address do not play the generically constitutive role in her account of the lyric that Frye and Culler have assigned to them. If it is by way of the “I” that the reader gains access to the poem, even though some “you” may also be specified no such gesture will be needed for reader orientation, or to establish what kind of discourse the “I” has undertaken.

According to all the theorists whose efforts to specify its generic distinctiveness have thus far been summarized, the lyric is preeminently the genre of “the poet talking to himself—or to nobody.”24 Whereas a “you” may be conjured up to secure the lyric speaker’s authority,
privacy, and/or solitude, any such interlocutor is a figment of the speaker’s imagination, unproblematically subject to his or her intentions. But according to W. R. Johnson, this way of understanding lyric utterance misrepresents its origins in Greek and Roman poetry and describes a post-Romantic trajectory for the lyric that has proven to be a dead end. For the poets who invented the western lyric it was preeminently an “I-you” poem—addressed to readers either directly, or by way of a human interlocutor who serves as “symbolic mediator . . . between the poet and each of his readers and listeners.” The Greek lyricists often built particular human interlocutors into their poems because, Johnson argues, they were attempting “to incarnate, in the songs themselves, the reciprocity which must govern any genuine act of discourse.” The addressee their poems envisaged was not a figment of the speaker’s imagination, brought to life and made responsive to his utterance by an act of poetic imagination, but a social being like him- or herself, whose responsiveness she or he hoped to enlist but whose differences from her- or himself must be reckoned with, and were indeed a significant incentive for the translation of private thoughts and feelings into public speech.25

According to Johnson, T. S. Eliot’s “first voice”—that of the meditative speaker who apostrophizes “nonhuman entities, abstractions, or the dead” to help him focus his meditation—is scarcely to be found in the lyrics of Sappho, Catullus, and Horace, nor in English Renaissance poetry until Henry Vaughan, who was an early harbinger of the meditative lyric’s subsequent efflorescence. Meditative verse gained ascendancy with the “greater Romantic lyric” and reached a kind of negative apotheosis in the poetry of Mallarmé, whose intuition of the human condition as one of utter loneliness strongly influenced the Modernist poets of the early twentieth century.26 Johnson argues that as the lyric “forgot how to say ‘you’” in our own century it also became ashamed and/or terrified “by the idea of saying ‘I,’” except insofar as a few poets, including Yeats and William Carlos Williams, “tried to continue the old pronominal forms” (The Idea of Lyric, 15). According to Johnson it is important to conceive of the lyric in “I-you” terms because it is only in an interlocutory context that the poet-speaker has the incentive to shape a discourse that can “[make] visible the invisible forms and rhythms of personality” (31). The lyric self or subject only exists, it can only be brought to life, in words, insofar as the poem specifies or presupposes an interlocutor for those words and a dialectic of engagement between them. Noting the important role that deictic words play in lyric poems, not only the deictic pronouns “I” and “you” but also the deictic adverbs “here” and “now,” Johnson argues that it is because
lyrics have particular occasions, occasions which are implicitly social, that they manage to capture “the universal” in a meaningful, powerful way:

By focusing on what he has to say, on why he is saying it, and on the person for whom—not so much to whom—he is saying it, the speaker discovers the exact, the proper, form for his own character as speaker on this particular occasion, in this particular discourse; and in fact, the purpose of discourse and the presence of the hearer furnish the speaker with enormous power and vitality. (Johnson, 31)

Remarking that it used to be fashionable to credit the Greek lyricists with having invented the self as we know it, Johnson argues that what they did invent was a literary genre in which selfhood can be made manifest:

A self without another self or selves to aggress or to admire or to solace might not—I doubt it—be truly a self; but, without a doubt, when two or more selves come together, their near likenesses and their absolute distinctions combine to promote knowledge of identity, even as they engender the sense of community. (75, Johnson’s emphasis)

That lyric poetry is preeminently the genre of “overheard” speech; that lyric poems are scripts for performance by the reader; that lyrics are always implicitly if not explicitly addressed to the reader: none of these ways of describing the lyric is mistaken, even though they make conflicting claims. Each gives priority to a different moment in the history of European poetry, or else to different poets within a single historical moment. Neither Johnson, who privileges the Greek and Roman lyric poets, nor Culler, for whom Romantic apostrophe is the lyric’s constitutive gesture, has much to say about the possible versions of “you” that Vendler cites to insist that while “there may be an addressee in lyric (God, or a beloved) . . . the addressee is always absent” (Vendler, x, emphasis mine). If Shelley’s west wind and Keats’s nightingale are lineally descended from the Christian deity who is addressed in the religious lyrics of the Renaissance, then Romantic apostrophe is not only—and perhaps not primarily—a device for turning one’s back on the reader. Instead it does begin to look like a device for bringing the reader into the poem, to partake of what prayer also promises: a “transformation of self” (Vendler, xi). As for the beloved, who is also ubiquitous in Renaissance poetry, Vendler appears to be thinking of Shakespeare’s Sonnets rather than Philip Sidney’s contemporaneous
Astrophil and Stella sequence, where the beloved is more fully realized as a social presence and the poems often seem to be scripting not an inner meditation but a conversational gambit. Among the poets I take up here, Vendler’s emphasis on the lyric “I” as the reader’s lifeline to the poem works well for Plath, whose poems aspire to a condition of vatic self-sufficiency, but gives less of a purchase on Sexton, whose speakers are more socially embedded, on Rich, who often worries out loud about the ethical implications of her own vocative gestures, and on Brooks, whose mixture of first- with second- and third-person voicing keeps a strongly self-centered “I” from emerging in her poems. Even where Plath’s poems are concerned, the very absence of a viable “I-you” relationship is of considerable interest: in several of her late poems an interlocutor is conjured up only to be emphatically, hysterically repudiated (“Off, off, eely tentacle! / There is nothing between us!”). Meanwhile, however, as Johnson points out, in poems of Plath’s that have no designated interlocutor the “I”-position also gets emptied out, so that the voice that speaks from the page seems eerily devoid of agency, of feelings—in short, of selfhood.27

What is particularly valuable in Johnson’s account of the lyric is his insistence that hypothetical readers are always implicated in its structures of address. In poems where an “I-you” relationship is made explicit, the more socially embedded that relationship is, the more subject it must be to negotiation, the more alive to hypothetical differences in attitude or viewpoint between the “I” and the “you.” But even where the “I” and the “you” share a single body they occupy different vantage points, so that even where feeling is “confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude,” that confession is getting a hearing and, potentially, a reading. Johnson’s approach also helps to explain what is going on when a poem’s speaker has recourse to a “you”-formulation that is not, or not only, being used to summon up an interlocutor, but is a rhetorical device for generalizing from the speaker’s feelings and experiences to those of others who are, or can imagine being, comparably situated. “Abortions will not let you forget” is the opening line of one of Brooks’s early poems. That way of using the second-person pronoun actively constructs the possibility of stepping into another person’s shoes, prompting two related inferences: first, that we don’t do this easily, and second, pace Vendler, that a poem’s strategies of interlocution are its means of persuading us to do so.

And yet, as Jonathan Culler’s and Barbara Johnson’s discussions of apostrophe have emphasized,28 figures of address in poems are always to some degree apostrophic: always they are “turning away” from actual readers, constructing a certain “you” in order to bring a certain “I”
into focus. Whether the designated interlocutor be God, the cliffs of Winander, the poet’s child, or the poem’s reader, the one who is speaking has always “made you to find me.”

A few specific examples will give these claims some traction. In Louise Glück’s poem sequence *Ararat*, we can see what Johnson means in suggesting that a poem’s speaker gains “enormous power and vitality” from having an interlocutor:

Long ago, I was wounded.
I learned
  to exist, in reaction,
  out of touch
  with the world: I’ll tell you
  what I meant to be—
  a device that listened.
Not inert: still.
A piece of wood. A stone.

Why should I tire myself, debating, arguing?²⁹

Glück’s interlocutor is each of her readers: “I’ll tell you” is a vocative gesture that enables her to speak from the page, so that as we read her words we seem to hear a voice talking out loud. The directness of “I’ll tell you” begins to give us a sense of the person behind the voice: she won’t mince words, she will tell us the unvarnished truth. Interestingly enough, the first thing she tells us is that a forthcoming, self-disclosive person is not at all who she “meant to be.” A long-ago wounding set the terms of her bargain with existence: she decided to be “a device that listened,” taking up an existential stance that did not oblige her to be fully human. Now, for whatever reasons, she is willing to speak about

and from her “wounded”-ness, instead of letting it silence her. A slight air of truculence and irascibility bespeaks some residual unwillingness to do this, but she does appear to possess the requisite self-detachment. In the second poem of the sequence the note of irascibility becomes louder as her range of reference expands. Having made the decision to be fully human, she is prepared to hold forth not only about herself but also about the human condition more broadly considered:

I’ll tell you something: every day
People are dying. And that's just the beginning.
Every day, in funeral homes, new widows are born,
new orphans. . . . (Ararat, 16)

Insofar as we don’t need to be told that people are dying every day,
these lines have an edge of self-parody: now that this woman has com-
mitted herself to talking as well as listening, we can expect to get an
earful!

Glück’s self-presentation in these passages seems to give the lie to
Vendler’s claim that “all the tones of a poem are the tones of an inward,
not an outward, quarrel.” Only now that she is willing to quarrel
with others is this poet-speaker in a position to speak about, and thus
make poetry out of, the quarrel with herself. Throughout the entire
sequence, “I’ll tell you something” is strongly implicit in her stance
and tone of voice, in her syntax and the rhythms of her speech. “In
our family, everyone loves flowers,” is the first line of the fifth poem in
the sequence: this is information we are being given to put the poem’s
subsequent reflections in context (“That’s why the graves are so odd:
/ no flowers, just padlocks of grass . . .”). “To say I’m without fear— /
it wouldn’t be true” is how another poem begins, setting the record
straight after several poems whose candor may well have struck us as
courageous. In a poem that hails her readers more explicitly, Glück
hearkens back to the sequence’s opening lines to proffer an etiological
explanation of the condition of woundedness that had been broached
there without explanation:

. . . Like Adam,
I was the firstborn.
Believe me, you never heal,
you never forget the ache in your side,
the place where something was taken away
to make another person. (Ararat, 55)

“Believe me,” a more emphatic version of “I’ll tell you,” is accompanied
here by a way of using the “you” pronoun that not only gestures toward
an interlocutor but also, as in the Brooks poem I have already cited in
passing, posits common ground between “us.” “You never heal” and
“you never forget the ache in your side” are formulations which insist
that the predicament in question is generic: it belongs to the existential
condition of being “the first-born.”

Many of the Ararat poems include “you”-formulations of this kind. It
is a rhetorical strategy with characterological implications: these poems’
speaker is a woman who has chosen to think of herself as predestined toward certain habits of feeling by family dynamics that are ruthlessly predictable. It also participates, however, in constructing a “radical of presentation” that is not the self-communing stance of the meditative lyric, but of a poet-speaker who is addressing her readers directly, making interlocutors of us. That way of using second-person address was identified by poet-critic Jonathan Holden in 1980 as “one of the most salient conventions to gather momentum in American poetry today.” In keeping with Frye’s definition of the lyric as “an intensely personal song [that is] designed to be overheard,” Holden argues that because it “acknowledges the presence of an audience” this way of using the “you”-pronoun is “inappropriate to the lyric mode.” But if W. R. Johnson’s history of the lyric is persuasive, Glück and other poets of her generation have found their way back to a rhetorical stance that was occluded by the meditative lyric, but rediscovered and reasserted by the Confessional poets during the 1950s and ’60s.

“Don’t listen to me; my heart’s been broken. I don’t see anything objectively” is how another of Glück’s poems begins, whose title is “The Untrustworthy Speaker.” As Ann Keniston points out in calling attention to this poem’s strategy of address, “its initial negative command is disingenuous, even devious,” since “the ferocity of its disclaimer makes us want to read further” and its speaker, presupposing that we have done so, continues to instruct us to discount her perspective. “If you want the truth,” she insists, “you have to close yourself / to the older daughter, block her out.” But do we want the truth on these terms? Are we not likely to find a first-person account more powerful, untrustworthy as it may be, than the more “objective” account she gestures toward by referring to herself as “the older daughter”? Glück’s use of reader-address in this poem raises questions that fall within the ambit of “confessional” poetry, psychological and epistemological questions about the authority and validity of speaking from personal experience whose crucible is family life. My first chapter focuses on the poets who began to raise such questions during the 1950s: Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. Like Glück, Sexton and Lowell were speaking from a position of having been “wounded”; like hers, it was a gendered position, and one whose trustworthiness is open to question. My contention will be that their interlocutory projects were not, however, symmetrical: in order to get a hearing for a woman speaker’s untrustworthiness, Sexton was constrained to lead with her gender in a particular way.

In Adrienne Rich’s poems, strategies of address are more often used to raise ethical and political questions: Rich makes “you” to find “we,” and this has impelled her toward an anti-confessional stance. In
In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of *we*, of *you*
we found ourselves
reduced to *I*
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:

The people who will say this will be looking back to a span of years
that includes, presumably, the year in which this poem was written, but
the poem has nothing to tell us about how the world they inhabit then
will be different. Its purpose is not to foretell the future, but to create
a sense of prophetic foreboding about the hypertrophy of the personal
that afflicts us in the present.\(^{35}\) The interrelatedness of the deictic pro-
nouns “*I,*” “*you,*” and “*we*” is crucial to its grimly abstract calculus:
without elaborating on how it is that the meanings of “*we*” and “*you*”
are mutually implicated, the voice that speaks from the future explains
that as the one was “lost track of,” the other also fell into disuse. In
its closing lines the poem leaves its collective protagonist trapped in
a desolate place of historical irrelevancy, “where we stood, saying *I*”:
the “terrible” irony of modern mass society is that we unknowingly
constitute a “*we*” by doing the very thing that keeps us from having any
meaningful access to that way of conceiving of ourselves.

Interestingly, however, “*we*” is the only personal pronoun that has
a pragmatic function for the collective speaker this poem cites in its
opening line. Try to imagine that speaker saying “I’ll tell you” or “Believe
me,” and you realize that “they” are not in a position to do so. In terms
of Johnson’s theory of the lyric, “In Those Years” is the exception that
proves the rule. Is the poem itself aware, in the sense of intending us to
notice, that a recovered capacity for saying “*we*” has been purchased at
the expense of consigning both “*you*” and “*I*” to the dustbin of history?

“In Those Years” is addressed to potential readers with a prophetic
urgency that is disturbingly impersonal, reaching a limit of abstraction
from which it is hard to imagine further poems being written. The final
section of “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” written by Rich at around
the same time,\(^{36}\) apostrophizes potential readers in a way that is dis-
turbingly personal, to make a similar point. Entitled “(Dedications),”
it functions as an “envoy” for the poem as a whole:

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a gray day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains’ enormous spaces around you.

The litany continues: two hypothetical readers are conjured up whose personal lives are in crisis, three whose condition is one of waiting helplessly for something to happen, one whose eyesight is failing, one who speaks very little English, and various others whose lives don’t easily make room for the reading of poetry. The one thing these hypothetical readers have in common is a need for what poetry has to offer that some of them recognize and some do not: elsewhere, in prose, Rich appositely speaks of how poetry can “break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire.”

Coming at the end of a poem that addresses its readers in their public capacity as citizens of a democracy that has failed its own ideals, her litany of dedications emphasizes that reading a poem is a private act, something we do in isolation from one another. This complicates the task of a poet whose project is to rescue her readers from anomie by speaking to our “we”-ness.

Rich’s engagement with the politics of the personal pronouns “I,” “we,” and “you” will be the focus of my second chapter. Her commitment to dialogue has led her to test the rhetorical force of reader-address, apostrophe, and second-person voice in poems that often are strikingly transgressive of the usual conventions of reader-address. Her interlocutory strategy in the passage I have just quoted from “(Dedication)” is a good case in point: I am startled to be told by the poet whose poem I am reading that she knows who I am. However, my situation has not been captured in any of her descriptions: have I just finished reading a poem that is not addressed to me, if I am neither lonely nor bored nor afflicted nor desperate to change my life? What this reaction highlights is that “I know you are reading this poem” is an apostrophe: an address to hypothetical readers that “turns away from” the reader who is actually present. What is the force and meaning of the gesture in this context? Does it stage a poet’s own wishful thinking? Is it intended to goad actual readers into active dialogue with her poem? Does it instance the necessarily ironic predicament of prophets from Cassandra onward, whose conviction of the urgency of their message is self-discrediting and gets in the way of their being
believed? It is a powerful but also risky gesture, one that Rich must have undertaken with full awareness that she could not wholly foresee or control its impact.\textsuperscript{40}

In the examples I have adduced thus far, what is at stake in the deployment of the second-person pronoun is reader-address. Glück’s \textit{Ararat} sequence is addressed to the reader explicitly and, for the most part, unproblematically, except in the poem whose opening gambit calls attention to the rhetorical contrivance involved in creating a dialectic of engagement between the one who says “I” throughout the sequence and the one to whom she says “I’ll tell you something” or “Don’t listen to me.” Glück’s deployment of “you” in this sequence is minimally apostrophic; Rich, by contrast, has used apostrophe in “\textit{(Dedications)}” to put her relationship with actual readers at risk and in crisis.

Let us now turn to a figure of address that is more obviously consistent with Vendler’s insistence that the lyric addressee is always absent: the “you” that is used in elegies to call upon the dead. Apostrophe is one of elegy’s most important resources, presupposing as it does that the dead can still hear us and hence that they are still alive, in some sense. It is used in elegies not only to address the dead but also, as in Milton’s “\textit{Lycidas},” to affirm the existence of a divinely created universe that is responsive to our sense of loss and can reconcile us to our mortality. Jahan Ramazani has richly demonstrated that twentieth-century elegies often reject the consolation this genre has traditionally afforded, refusing to let their dead rest in peace, displacing mourning onto the neighboring terrain of melancholia.\textsuperscript{41} Sylvia Plath is a notorious case in point: the first time she visited her father’s grave, as a young adult, she wrote in her journal that she had been strongly tempted to dig him up—“To prove he existed and really was dead” (\textit{Unabridged Journals}, 473). “The Colossus,” one of a number of elegies Plath wrote for her father, is the poem Vendler singles out in \textit{Coming of Age as a Poet} as being Plath’s first “perfect” poem, the first that “wholly succeeds in embodying a coherent personal style.”\textsuperscript{42} Its success is owing, Vendler suggests, to the poem’s “daring resort to abstraction. No longer a buried corpse, [the father] is now literally what he has always been in his daughter’s imagination . . . a colossus” (\textit{Coming of Age}, 123). Apostrophe becomes a scheme as well as a trope in this poem, whose antiphonal rhythm arises from an alternation between “I” and “you,” “my” and “your” that occurs both within and between successive sentences:

\begin{quote}
\textit{I} shall never get \textit{you} put together entirely, \\
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed. \\
Mule-bray, pig-grunt, and bawdy cackles
\end{quote}
Proceed from your great lips.

... Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.

... The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.43

This poem’s speaker is strikingly self-sufficient and self-enclosed: she has turned away not only from the reader, but from every conceivable interlocutor who is not her dead father. To put this more carefully, she has turned away from every conceivable interlocutor who is not the colossus, a figment of her own imagination that stands in for her father’s inaccessibility. She addresses it/him unhurriedly, without discernible affect, speaking of a project of reconstruction that is hopeless, never-ending, and utterly lonely. Her one-sided colloquy removes her from the ordinary world in which each of us is socially embedded, answerable to others, subject to growth and change. The place to which she has removed herself corresponds to the condition of her psyche, where the mythic structure of the Electra complex implacably holds sway. It is a weatherless, time-indifferent, wholly literary realm:

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.

This is apostrophe at its most ceremonious, but with an edge of self-mockery: we are more than halfway through an account of this daughter’s labors of restoration that depicts them as the prosaic drudgery of a Lilliputian housewife or prisoner.

The key to the poem’s success, according to Vendler, is explicitly present in the lines just quoted, which herald the subsumption of “Plath’s filial anguish into the complex dialectic of Greek drama.” It is a complex dialectic because it includes the “barnyard grunts” of the satyr play as well as “the tragedy of ritual obligation,” thereby enabling “the contradictory emotions of anger and love to cross and fuse in a single lyric” (Coming of Age, 132–33). The criterion of poetic success that Vendler’s reading invokes is New Critical, which is consistent with what we know of Plath’s poetic beginnings: she read the New Critics at an early age and found their precepts thoroughly congenial. Leonard
Scigaj has suggested that her early poetry "offers us as lucid a retrospect of the end of American New Critical poetry as Marvell did of the end of English metaphysical poetry." In my third chapter I will argue that the analogy with Marvell is even more appropriate for late poems such as "Medusa," "Daddy," and "Lady Lazarus," which explode the "well wrought urn" of New Critical poetics. But my present reason for citing "The Colossus" is that it exemplifies Plath’s use of apostrophe to build poems that are self-contained sites of utterance. You’ll not get these poems’ speaker to meet you at eye level; she knows too much, and knows it too absolutely, for there to be any question of dialogue. Where she uses figures of address to apostrophize the living in her poems, she seems bent on asserting a “Medusan” prerogative: these are “I-you” structures that kill their interlocutors into art.

Anne Sexton wrote an elegy for Plath soon after receiving the news of her suicide in February of 1963. What had drawn the two poets together in the first place, as students in Robert Lowell’s poetry workshop at Boston University, was not only their admiration for each other’s poetry but also their shared obsession with suicide. And yet Sexton’s last letter from Plath had emphasized how contentedly alive she was, with her children in Devon, “keeping bees and raising potatoes and doing broadcasts off and on for the BBC.” Sexton felt blindsided, and also betrayed. “Sylvia Plath’s death disturbs me,” she explained to her psychiatrist. “She took something that was mine, that death was mine! Of course it was hers too. But we both swore off it, the way you swear off smoking.” As Diane Middlebrook, Sexton’s biographer, points out, “this rivalrous attitude made its way into” Sexton’s elegy. Middlebrook concurs with Jahan Ramazani and a number of other critics that “Sylvia’s Death” is not a good poem: she finds it to have “a spurious tone, saturated with self-pity posing as grief.” And yet Middlebrook reports that Sexton “liked the poem and defended it to critics.” She sent it to George Starbuck, who had often joined the two of them for martinis after Lowell’s poetry class, saying, “It’s really good. You may paste it on your wall” (ctd. in Middlebrook, 200).

Sexton was hard on her own poems, and so her liking for “Sylvia’s Death” is worth paying attention to. Perhaps she liked this poem because it is a different kind of elegy than Plath herself would have written—just as unconventional, but in a different register. She may also have liked it because it captured the complexity of her own attitude toward suicide. Even while acknowledging “a terrible taste for it, like salt,” the poem’s speaker resists her friend’s death with all the rhetorical and emotional resources their friendship puts at her disposal. Using apostrophe much too often, she creates a sense of unfinished
business between the two women that is ugly and poignant and, above all, full of the vitality her friend has (traitorously) renounced:

O Sylvia, Sylvia,
with a dead box of stones and spoons,

with two children, two meteors
wandering loose in the tiny playroom,

with your mouth into the sheet,
into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,

(Sylvia. Sylvia,
where did you go
after you wrote me
from Devonshire
about raising potatoes
and keeping bees?)

what did you stand by,
just how did you lie down into?

Thief!—
how did you crawl into,

crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long. . .

In "The Colossus," apostrophe keeps the daughter-speaker’s attention firmly focused on her otherworldly task. Sexton’s hectic spate of exclamations seems, in contrast, defiantly this-worldly: Plath’s death has not changed the terms of a friendship that was dishonest, impure, and socially embedded, between women who were always in one way or another competing for a man’s attention.

The poem recalls a cab ride home with “our boy,” “the one we talked of” while downing extra-dry martinis: “Sylvia,” it seems, has run off with him while the poem’s speaker wasn’t looking. Sexton had been having an affair with George Starbuck behind her friend’s back, but in the present context “our boy” alludes to an even more seductive escort who’d been a powerfully absent presence at their boozy trysts. Sexton’s interest in “Sylvia’s” relationship with “our boy” is compulsively prurient; her resentment is mingled with envy: “O tiny mother, / you too!
/ O funny duchess! / O blonde thing!” If a woman in a 1950s Hollywood movie (call her “Persey”) had been found to be secretly dating a fascinating stranger, this is how her girlfriends might have greeted the news of her conquest. “Sylvia’s Death” overcompensates for its addressee’s abruptly chosen silence with an out-of-control barrage of gossipy questions, bitchy vituperation, and excited admiration—as if in a desperate attempt to bring their friendship back to life, in all of its dishonest complexity.

The poem solicits our interest and commentary by the impression it makes of not having mastered, or even fully understood, the feelings it discloses. “This is something I would never find / in a lovelier place, my dear,” is Sexton’s apt gloss on her own confessional stance in poems like these.48 The “something” referred to is not only a subject matter that was, as Plath had acknowledged, “quite new” for poetry in the early 1960s but also a set of rhetorical tactics that draw “enormous power and vitality” (W. R. Johnson’s phrase) from the emotional complexities of everyday personal relationships. Sexton’s attempt to overcompensate for Plath’s silence by talking too much, for Plath’s aloofness with an assertion of intimacy that is clinging and cloying, for her self-protective secrecy with a self-disclosive openness that holds nothing back, is ostensibly provoked by Sylvia’s death rather than by her poems. I will be suggesting in my chapter on Plath, however, that Plath’s stance as a poet had an analogous impact—not only on Sexton, but also on her husband and fellow poet, Ted Hughes.

“When you have forgotten Sunday: the love story” is the most openly autobiographical poem in Gwendolyn Brooks’s first published volume, A Street in Bronzeville. At poetry readings during the 1990s she would introduce it by recalling the series of kitchenette apartments she and her husband rented as a young married couple in the “Bronzeville” section of Chicago’s south side. And yet the poem’s strategy of address is highly stylized, its use of apostrophe more conventional than in any of the poems we have looked at thus far. Love poems are typically addressed to the beloved, while being “overheard,” as this one is, by an audience of readers the poet-lover pretends to ignore. “Only in you my song begins and endeth,” said “Astrophil” to “Stella” in 1591, succinctly explicating the logic of a love poem’s apostrophic mode of address. The young wife in Brooks’s poem is an unlikely heir to that tradition in several respects. Along with the husband she addresses, she is a black, working-class resident of inner-city Chicago. She speaks in free verse, and her love story is full of the small change of domestic married life. But the poem is out to show its readers that the more things may seem to be different, the more they remain the same. It consists of a single
“when-then” sentence, recommenced at irregular intervals by subtly varied renewals of its proleptic “when” clause. Many of Shakespeare’s sonnets use “when-then” constructions to similar effect, capitalizing, as this poem does, on their capacity to adumbrate both chronological succession and logical entailment.

Here, as there, a poet goes to war with Time on behalf of Love. But the rhetorical device this young wife uses to render her “love story” unforgettable is as un-Shakespearean as the rhythms of her discourse. The poem begins as if it were picking up the thread of an ongoing con-nubial exchange:

—And when you have forgotten the bright bedclothes  
on a Wednesday and a Saturday,  
And most especially when you have forgotten Sunday—  
When you have forgotten Sunday halves in bed,  
Or me sitting on the front-room radiator in the limping afternoon  
Looking off down the long street  
To nowhere,  
Hugged by my plain old wrapper of no-expectation  
And nothing-I-have-to-do and I’m-happy-why?  
And if-Monday-never-had-to-come—  
When you have forgotten that, I say . . .

After a leisurely catalogue of details that trace the arc of this couple’s typical Sunday, from the time they get up in the morning to the moment when they have “gently folded into each other” among “the week-end / Bright bedclothes,” the young wife completes both her sentence and her poem by playfully suggesting that when her husband has “forgotten all that . . . / Then I may believe / You have forgotten me well.”49 Her prolepsis is a witty device to fend off sentimentality while giving sentiment a space in which to flourish. On the one hand, the details of how she and her husband spend their Sundays are not in themselves memorable; on the other hand, how could he forget “all that,” with her love for him and their pleasure in each other so skillfully woven into her story?

The poem’s unstated purpose—Brooks’s purpose, as distinct from that of her poem’s speaker—is to depict for an “overhearing” audience, who in 1945 are probably white and therefore probably not from Bronzeville, a working-class Negro couple whose values, appetites, and pleasures are very little different from their own. In the context of that purpose, and of the Street in Bronzeville volume as a whole, the wife’s proleptic apostrophe is doing work that is easy to miss, but crucial. Not
only does it enable her to discover, in Johnson’s words, “the exact, the proper, form for [her] own character as speaker” in the context of her relationship with her husband; it also gives the poem a means of staging that relationship for the poem’s readers, to whom her discourse is not directly addressed but “for whom” it is intended.

Because her interlocutor is inside their relationship, he takes it for granted. She tells him what he already knows, reframing the all-too-familiar contours of their domestic life from the more distanced perspective of a time when they will no longer be young and relatively carefree and convinced of their own good fortune (“When you have forgotten my little presentiment / That the war would be over before they got to you . . .”). They will look back one day on this time in their lives as if it were some other couple’s idyll of domestic otium—unless, of course, he has by then forgotten it all. In order to coach him into remembering, she must practice self-detachment—as she does, for example, by giving the “plain old wrapper” she wears around the house an allegorical reading and by using her mind’s eye to place their dining table “in the southwest corner” of the room, “inkspotted” to hint at its secondary function as a writing-surface. And thus the angle of vision she constructs, ostensibly for herself and her husband, is one that also serves to put their life in perspective for readers whose outsider vantage point is a function not (or not only) of the passage of time, but of segregated housing patterns and racist assumptions about black people’s difference from themselves.

In this poem Brooks is making “you” to find “me,” or to find “we,” on two different levels. Using apostrophe to turn away from her poem’s readers, she has built a poem whose unstated purpose is to bridge the distance that keeps them from getting to know their Bronzeville neighbors. Part of that bridging is done by subtly alluding to a poetic genre whose conventions are well known and whose “western” pedigree is well established. This particular love poem is not a sonnet, but the Bronzeville volume also includes a sequence of war sonnets that give the traditional sonnet sequence a new lease on life. Over the course of her long career as a poet, Brooks developed a repertory of strategies for voicing both lyric and epic poems that were at once more innovative and more tradition-conscious than any of the other three poets with whom this study is concerned. Early on, her stance as a poet was constructed with an eye to the special challenges involved in writing simultaneously for both black and white readers, both “Negroes” and “Gentiles.” She sought to represent black people’s lives and perspectives in a way that would be compelling for both sets of readers, heightening their awareness of interests and values they had in
common as human beings and as American citizens. Midway through her career, Brooks turned away from white readers not figuratively, as in this instance, but by attempting to fashion a poetic vernacular that would no longer reference the conventions of “western” poetry. She became committed to setting an agenda for poetry “by Blacks, about Blacks, to Blacks” without regard to white readers’ interests, expectations, or canonical reference points. Zofia Burr has recently argued that this shift carried Brooks in the direction of oral performance; I will argue that Brooks did not turn her back on literariness to the extent that Burr and others have suggested. What she did was give her poems a different kind of work to do: work that is epideictic in its orientation and quasi-ekphrastic in its approach. In her late poems people’s actions begin to do the talking, and actions have a certain taciturnity. In this context, apostrophe is reborn as a device for en-voicing “Blackness” and enhancing its legibility, while at the same time calling attention to the inadequacy and/or bankruptcy of earlier modes of call and response.
I have been arguing throughout this book that in lyric poetry figures of address are crucial to the construction of a viable poetic persona, an “I” to take ownership of the voice that speaks from the page. When Louise Glück explains, in “The Education of the Poet,” that her preference as both reader and writer has always been for “poetry that requests or craves a listener,” she is suggesting that not all poems express that craving or make that request; but while we need to allow for varying degrees of explicitness and urgency, I would argue that “addressivity” is a key constituent of lyric utterance. Poems are written for the ear not only in the sense that their sound shape is meaningful, but also in the sense that they are getting a “hearing” for what their speakers have to say.

Who “I” can be in a poem depends on whom I have chosen to address and what is at stake between us. Is my supposed interlocutor an intimate or a stranger? Does “she” share my values and allegiances, or are “his” fundamental assumptions unjust to me and my kind? Am I addressing the poem’s readers directly, or constraining them to witness a summons or disclosure I have “turned aside” to address to someone else? In Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and
Ashbery, Helen Vendler has recently called attention to certain poets’ preference for conjuring up “nonexistent” listeners: a deity who is an intimate friend, a reader who has not yet been born, a long-dead artist from the past. The four poets this book has brought together were speaking instead from within existing social relations: those of parenthood; of a patient and her therapist; of lovers, friends, or spouses; of neighbors or of citizenship more broadly conceived. Their choice to inhabit and work from within existing social relations arose in part from the realization that who they were as social beings could not easily be bracketed or kept out of play. Each of them sought to claim the status of poet for herself in the teeth of a prevailing assumption that poetic authority and masculine gender were indissolubly connected. If you were a woman poet, coming of age at the middle of the twentieth century, could you afford to “sound like” a woman in your poems? Could you manage not to?

In attending closely to how four poets faced these interrelated questions, I have not been trying to sketch the contours of a poetic movement or a shared aesthetic. Far from it: I decided to write this book when I noticed how differently each of them came to grips with “the gender of things,” even though they began to have their poems published within a few years of each other. Anne Sexton learned from Robert Lowell’s poetry class to mistrust her propensity for writing “as a woman writes,” and yet it was by speaking as a woman in her poems that she found her poetic voice in the first place. Sexton’s interlocutory strategy typically calls attention to the power dynamics of socially constructed relationships in order to leverage those relationships to a female speaker’s advantage. Sylvia Plath, encouraged by Sexton’s example, openly aspired to become “The Poetess of America”: Plath’s speakers inhabit the gendered roles of daughter and wife, femme fatale and high priestess, with a hyperbolic intensity that has proved even more “unnerving” than Sexton’s high-profile performances. But whereas Sexton’s poems are aggressively sociable, Plath’s figures of address are stylized and poetic; they assist her female speaker to withdraw from the terrain of ordinary social life into a “kingdom” apart, a realm of mythic permanence and inevitability.

In contrast with Plath and Sexton, Adrienne Rich tried for a poetic stance in her first two published volumes that would be gender-neutral and hence generically human. Rich embarked on her poetic career with the goal of making “you” to find “we”; like Gwendolyn Brooks, she had an affinity for what Brooks called “the universal fact.” Rich came to want to position herself as a woman in her poems only gradually, as she became an activist on behalf of radical feminism during the 1970s.
Her ongoing involvement in the women’s movement brought home to her, however, that speaking as a woman entailed speaking as a white woman, an American woman, a woman of comparative privilege who has received a good education. The “difficulty of saying ‘we,’” a difficulty she had hugely underestimated at the outset, was a function of race and class as well as being a function of her gender.

Gwendolyn Brooks had no choice but to speak as a woman who was black rather than white, but she did not wish to disown or bracket either her gender or her racial status. When she first began to have her poems published by a mainstream publishing house, Brooks’s goal was to bring the lives of urban blacks into focus for the society at large. The question, however, of whether she could address her poems to “American” readers without compromising her allegiance to “blackness” is one that she had to revisit at intervals throughout her career, as the racial climate changed around her both in the city of Chicago and in the country at large. At mid-career, in the context of the Black Arts movement, Brooks explicitly redefined her poetic mission by turning away from white readers in order to concentrate on “calling all black people,” in the name of “black self-possession” and “self-address.”

Brooks is the outlier in this foursome; whereas Rich, Plath, and Sexton were very much aware of each other’s careers as they went along, her sphere of activity and of influence scarcely overlapped with theirs. But just as Rich’s attempt to keep her gender out of play in her first two published volumes renders Sexton’s choice to speak as a woman all the more interesting, and just as Plath’s use of apostrophe to “borrow the stilts of an old tragedy” makes Rich’s and Sexton’s allegiance to the realm of ordinary social life appear that much more chosen and hence meaningful, so Brooks’s bardic stance is all the more striking in its difference from the more self-involved, “I”-focused stances of Sexton and Plath, and her strategies for reaching out to potential readers come more sharply into focus when they are juxtaposed with Rich’s. As I have worked with Brooks’s poems alongside Rich’s, Plath’s, and Sexton’s, I have come to understand more fully how a poet’s political goals might come to inform her poetic practice; I hope that has been the experience of this book’s readers as well.

Two of these poets cut their own lives short; the other two finished out the century. One of them, Adrienne Rich, is still calling attention to the importance of the “I-you” relation in her poems, and she is still experimenting with that relation in ways that are both familiar and surprising. Her latest volume, suggestively titled *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth*, has for one of its epigraphs a categorical assertion by the African American poet Sterling A. Brown that “Poetry is not self-expres-
sion, the I is a dramatic I.” “To which I would add,” says Rich over her own initials, “and so, unless otherwise indicated, is the You.” Together, these epigraphs put us on notice that an “I-you” relation is crucial to each of the poems in the volume, but that the “I” is never simply Adrienne Rich. Is she reminding us of what we should have known all along about even the most apparently “confessional” poems, or calling attention to what is especially true of the poems in this volume? Perhaps the latter, since although Rich’s hunger for dialogue is everywhere apparent in these poems, collectively they seem bent on persuading us of the insuperable difficulty, notwithstanding the crucial importance, of constructing a viable “I-you” relation.

Never has the possibility of dialogue been in so many ways attenuated, the prospect of it so often rendered moot. A poem entitled “Even Then Maybe” gives a startlingly kinesthetic account of how it feels in your mouth and throat to be the bearer of speech that is withheld, swallowed, begrudged, or “taken back half-spoken”:

I told her a mouthful
I shut my mouth against him
Throat thick with tears
how words sound when you swallow
—and under the roof
of the mouth long stroke
reaching from the tongue’s root (Telephone, 58)

The volume’s third section consists of a single poem entitled “Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender, or Judged Unfit to Send.” In “Hubble Photographs: After Sappho,” the poem’s speaker maintains that “the most desired sight of all” is not the person you love beyond all others, “turning to look at you,” but the “impersonae” we encounter in the photographs of “galaxies / so out from us there’s no vocabulary // but mathematics and optics”: “we look at them or don’t from within the milky gauze // of our tilted gazing / but they don’t look back and we cannot hurt them” (Telephone, 50–51). The pathos of this poem’s longing for an encounter with beings who are not in any danger from the possessiveness, the self-interest, or the messy human inadequacy of our desire for contact with them is enormous as it resonates against the fifty-year career of a poet who has used both poems and essays to call for the kinds of human encounters that might address the difficulties of a “difficult world” with clarity and compassion.

If a telephone is ringing in the labyrinth, then who is the intended recipient of its peremptory summons? If she decides it’s for her, will
she be able to find her way to the phone before it stops ringing? Even if she gets there in time, a telephone conversation is a machine-mediated exchange that will distort her caller’s voice and emphasize their physical separation. We have to use the telephone because we are in different locations—on different sides of the country perhaps, or even the world. The title poem begins by addressing, it seems, some particular person of the poet’s acquaintance—“You who can be silent in twelve languages”—but then its surreal opening section unfolds an “I-you” relation that is complexly mediated, wordless, and at best hypothetical. “You” are depicted walking along the shoulder of a highway at sunset, “after the car broke down”—somewhere in the United States presumably, but the location is not specified—while “I” am accidentally breaking a bowl “by midsummer nightsun in, say, Reykjavík” (Telephone, 99).13 Perhaps you have “sighted” me in your rearview mirror; perhaps the “convex reflection” in one of the shards of the bowl that has just been broken has “caught you walking / the slurried highway shoulder . . .” (ibid.). Who are these people, and what is their relationship to each other? Is the geographic distance between them symbolic of other kinds of distance; is it deliberately chosen or merely circumstantial? In subsequent sections of the poem there is just as little information as to who is speaking and who is being addressed. In section iv, in the context of what appears to be an erotic encounter in a hotel room, the telephone rings and one of “us” says, or thinks, “(Don’t stop! . . . they’ll call again . . .)” (Telephone, 102). Is it the telephone in the poem’s title that is ringing? If so, are the poem’s “dialogic urgencies” being impeded or furthered by the decision to ignore its summons?14

In most of the poems in this volume so little is done to identify or “locate” the one who is speaking that the onus is on us to give his or her predicament a context: such poems are reading us, in effect, by testing our capacity to do so.15 Their purpose seems to be to distill the essential dynamics of situations that are symptomatic of the trouble we are in, both as Americans and as citizens of a wider world: the disorientation of immigrants who have “seen [their] world wiped clean” (in “Behind the Motel”); the impact of economic globalization (in “Voyage to the Denouement”) and of natural disasters inadequately foreseen and addressed (“The University Reopens as the Floods Recede”); the legacy of a war that sends its veterans home with their spirits shattered and parts of their bodies gone (in “Calibrations”). The speaker of a balladlike poem entitled “Rhyme” has returned to find nothing left of the place she or he called home (the refrain changes each time it is used, beginning with “O tell me this is home” and ending with “So tell me where is my home”). Instead of telling us what happened to bring
this about, the poem ends with the question “so what happened here so what / are the facts . . .” (Telephone, 44–45). That its questions go unpunctuated enhances the impression of a speaker who is not fully present and a “rhyme” that has not been fully voiced.

Throughout the volume even poems that carry dedications to indicate that the “you” being addressed is someone in particular stage acts of communication that are attenuated and ghostly. In “Via Insomnia,” a poem addressed to the poet Tory Dent within a few weeks or months after her death, it is impossible to distinguish cleanly between an “I” (presumably Rich) who is speaking and the “you” (presumably Dent) who was a friend of hers. It is “you” whose voice gets the poem going in the first place—“Called up in sleep: your voice: / I don’t know where I am . . .” But the speaker’s encounter with that voice on the “via insomnia” gives her a premonition of what her own death might be like, in the context of which their voices become eerily interchangeable as the deictic force of “you” is broadened to encompass them both: “you don’t know where you are // Is this how it is to be newly dead?” (Telephone, 81).

As of the summer of 2008, Anne Sexton has been dead for thirty-four years and Sylvia Plath for forty-five. Yet in contrast with the abstracted, ghostly voice that speaks from many of the poems in Rich’s latest volume, Sexton and Plath are even more distinctly audible now than when they were alive to read their poems aloud. If, as Christopher MacGowan has suggested in a recently published guide to Twentieth-Century American Poetry, the “neo-confessional” lyric was predominant throughout the second half of the twentieth century in mainstream poetry journals and creative writing programs, then these two poets, along with W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell, have left a powerful legacy. It is a legacy that has been taken up by both male and female poets; the domestic arena has proven to be a goldmine of exemplary stories whose tellers are men and women, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons. Meanwhile, however, Plath’s and Sexton’s voices are themselves still with us; the passage of time has confirmed and even strengthened their power to speak from the page.

In Plath’s case this is partly owing to the publication of her Unabridged Journals in 2000 and Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters in 1998; it is also a function of the aura of celebrity that attached itself to such poems as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” as soon as they first appeared in print. But the continued “presence” of Plath’s poetic voice is also an achievement of the poems themselves—of their intensely stylized interpersonal gestures and kinesthetically powerful patterns of sound and rhyme. In my upper-level “Women Poets” seminar this past spring my
students asked me as we came to the end of a month-long unit on Plath to read her poem “Daddy” aloud. “We want you to sound like Plath,” one of them said, to gloss their collective request. I can do a passable imitation of Plath’s recorded voice, but I think what they were really asking for was a live performance of our collective readerly intimacy with the poem: “You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe . . .” Plath’s late poems have flourished posthumously in a state of undead-ness that continues to claim successive generations of woman readers; we keep them alive by lending them our own life’s blood.

Sexton’s voice is still vividly audible for different reasons. Her poems’ performance of mid-century suburban American femininity stays in the past, but it belongs to a historical moment we are very much inclined just now to revisit, on television and in the movies. If that performance seems “dated,” so much the more successfully does it recall a particular moment in the twentieth-century history of American gender relations. In one of her elegies for Sexton, Maxine Kumin says to the friend she has missed so much, “You haven’t changed. / I, on the other hand, am forced to grow older.” Like Kumin, Brooks and Rich were “forced to grow older,” but Sexton is still the desperate housewife whose problem can be known but not yet named; her poems still speak to us from within a way of being female whose historical moment has passed, but is currently enjoying a kind of “retro” stylishness.

Both here and throughout this book as a whole, I confess to having overemphasized the extent to which lyric poetry sponsors the illusion of a speaking voice; I have said comparatively little about the capacity poems also have to withhold “voice,” and with it the illusion of a self or soul made present in the act of reading. As the L=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, among others, have emphasized, a poem can also make us aware of the ownerlessness of written or printed speech and the extent to which we are always being spoken by prefabricated discourses, “found” phrases, clichés of all kinds. Rich’s latest volume calls attention not only to the fragility of the “I-you” relationship, but also to its fictive, hypothetical status and to a variety of ways in which that relationship can be hollowed out or attenuated. And yet the withholding of voice would not be a powerful gesture if we did not “crave” what is being withheld. When all is said and done, “you” and “I” are the words that most enable poems to matter to us.
INTRODUCTION

1. The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets, ed. Peter Orr (London: Routledge, 1966), 168. The interview took place on October 30, 1962, a few months before Plath ended her life. She had written almost a poem a day during that October, including “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Ariel.”

2. I am indebted to Barbara Johnson for this piece of ephemera, which she cites in The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 102, in a chapter on the French poet Marceline Desbordes-Valmore.

3. Alicia Ostriker also discusses the problematic status of the “poetess” in her introduction to Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), a pioneering study that takes a broad thematic approach to the emergence of women’s poetry in America post-1960.


5. The first poem in the volume is an elegy for a friend and fellow poet who was killed in Germany in 1945, but “the birth in a narrow room” is the poem that opens “The Childhood and the Girlhood” by getting the volume’s protagonist born.

6. In chapter 4, my account of Brooks’s poetic formation will stress the interweaving of compliance and resistance in her response to mentors and editors.
7. My project differs from those of both James Breslin, in From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and Thomas Travisano, in Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999). Although my four poets do belong to roughly the same midcentury generation, my reason for bringing them together is not that they shared a particular set of aesthetic objectives, as Travisano argues for his quartet, nor that each of them represents a “major innovating movement of the late fifties,” as in Breslin’s study, but that they all came of age as poets at a moment of significant intersection between the history of American poetry and the history of gender relations.


9. My first chapter will look more closely at Rich’s attempt to construct a gender-neutral stance in her first two published volumes, A Change of World (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951) and The Diamond Cutters (New York: Harper, 1955).

10. Feminist critics who have done important work with this topic already include Jan Clausen, Joanne Feit Diehl, Elizabeth Dodd, Betsy Erkkila, Karen Ford, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Cynthia Hogue, Margaret Homans, Suzanne Juhasz, Linda Kinnahan, Helena Michie, Jan Montefiore, Cheryl Walker, Lesley Wheeler, Kim Whitehead, and Liz Yorke. I will be citing their work where it bears directly on the poems and poets my study is concerned with, but must acknowledge a more diffuse and pervasive debt to their engagement with the institutional politics of poetic authority and poetic stance.


12. In Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), William Waters points out that “poetry is, of all the ways we use language, the one with the most tenuous relation to a context of use” (10). The term “self-focused” is from “Linguistics and Poetics,” Roman Jakobson’s classic account of “the poetic function of language”: Selected Writings (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 18–51.

13. Susan Stewart arrestingly glosses this complexity in suggesting that “when speakers speak from the position of listeners, when thought is unattributable and intention wayward, the situation of poetry is evoked” (“Lyric Possession,” Critical Inquiry, 22 [Autumn 1995]: 34).


22. Cf. Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18: “The words of a poem are not ‘overheard’ (as in the formulations of J. S. Mill and T. S. Eliot); this would make the reader an eavesdropping voyeur of the writer’s sensations.” But Vendler has arguably misconstrued what Mill and Eliot have in mind; according to Jackson’s, Alitieri’s, and Keniston’s construal of the reader’s relationship to the poem that is overheard, the reader is drawn into the poem by its speaker’s supposed unconsciousness of having an audience.


24. In *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), Mutlu Konuk Blasing uses this definition of lyric poetry’s generic distinctiveness to argue that “the lyric presents us with poetic language per se,” and thus with “the otherness of the material medium of language to all that humans do with it—refer, represent, express, narrate, imitate, communicate, think, reason, theorize, philosophize” (2). Blasing argues that the “I”-position “is occupied by anyone reading or speaking a poem” (29), but for Blasing the poem’s “I” is standing in not for a person whose purpose is to communicate but for the very possibility that language can have such a purpose. Blasing’s approach to lyric “subjectivity” is thus very much at odds not only with Vendler’s but also with my own. The only twentieth-century poet her study and mine have in common is Anne Sexton, whose “hysterical” relationship to language is the subject of Blasing’s chapter 8.


26. In the poetry of Mallarmé’s epigones, among whom Johnson numbers Gottfried Benn, “it is very seldom that we meet with a You of any kind, nor are we likely ever to encounter an authentic I” (Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric*, 12).

27. Ibid., 19–21.


30. *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, 179. Vendler is alluding to W. B. Yeats’s memorable dictum that we make rhetoric out of the quarrel with others, poetry out of the quarrel with ourselves.


35. Will "people" then be in a stronger position than we are now relative to "the great dark birds of history"? Perhaps this is what history becomes if we cease to be capable of grasping the historical import of our personal lives. Ann Keniston finds an allusion to Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” who is “condemned helplessly to witness a past he cannot repair”; but if so, the pathos of the angel's helplessness has not found its way into the poem. Keniston, “‘To feel with a human stranger’: Adrienne Rich’s Post-Holocaust Confession and the Limits of Identification,” in Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays, ed. Jo Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 59.


48. Sexton, “For John, Who begs Me not to Enquire Further,” in The Complete Poems, 35. I will be discussing this poem at greater length in chapter 1.


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**CHAPTER 1**


2. In her 1971 volume *Transformations* Sexton introduces herself as “a middle-aged witch . . . tangled on my two great arms, / my face in a book / and my mouth wide, / ready to tell you a story or two” (*The Complete Poems*, 223).


6. “Shakspeare; or, the Poet,” in *Representative Men* (1850), repr. in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 710–26. This phrase appears in the essay’s opening paragraph.

7. In “Consorting with Angels,” a 1963 poem I will be discussing later in this chapter, Sexton pronounces herself “tired of the gender of things.”


20. Interestingly, both Willard Spiegelman and Deborah Pope construe this speaker’s attitude as timid and/or defensive and her gender as female: “In ‘Storm Warnings,’” says Spiegelman, “a girl shuns the fluctuations in the external and internal climates.” The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 151. “The ‘troubled regions’ of A Change of World were the poet’s struggles to live in the world as a woman,” infers Pope in A Separate Vision: Isolation in Contemporary Women’s Poetry (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 123. I would argue (contra Spiegelman) that this poem’s “I” and its “we” are as adult as Rich can make them sound, and (contra Pope) that, as Auden saw, the poem endeavors to stake out territory that is generically human, “the typical experiences of our time” (my emphasis).


28. Denise Levertov, Poems 1960–67 (New York: New Directions, 1983), 51–52. At poetry readings, Rich has explained this poem’s dedication as an acknowledgment that in the early 1960s she and Levertov were both beginning to try for a looser, freer poetic line.


32. Alicia Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 205, 209. In The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet’s Calling (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Mary Kinzie censures this strategy in the context of pronouncing Sexton to be a very bad poet indeed: “in Sexton,” Kinzie observes, “we have a writer . . . whose mask of com-
pulsive confidentiality we are asked to admire” but “whose literary judgment we are never invited to test” (54).

33. Letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe dated 1815, excerpted by Sexton for the epigraph of To Bedlam and Part Way Back (The Complete Poems, 2).


37. As Susan David Bernstein points out in Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), “confession never occurs outside of particular relationships marked by privilege and dependence, authority and vulnerability” (xi). In her essay on Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters for a recently published volume of essays, Modern Confessional Writing (London: Routledge, 2006), Jo Gill appositely quotes Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Volume One: “For Foucault ‘one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who . . . requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile’” (69).

38. Cf. Alicia Ostriker, “Annie Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience,” in Sexton: Selected Criticism, ed. Diana Hume George (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 5. This essay includes the best discussion I have found of Sexton’s interlocutory strategy as she used it to get hold of “the complexity of intimate relationships.”


47. Lowell, “Man and Wife,” Life Studies and For the Union Dead, 94; repr. in Collected Poems, 189.


49. “Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother’s bed” is the opening line of “Man and Wife”; “the tranquillized Fifties” and the quoted phrase “hardly passionate Marlborough Street” (which originated either with Henry or William James) are in the immediately preceding poem, “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” which begins Part II of Life Studies; repr. in Collected Poems, 187.


52. The original wording of the passage Lowell reworked for his epigraph from The World as Will and Idea is provided in the Notes to his Collected Poems, 1045.


58. Tillinghast, Damaged Grandeur, 8.


60. Cf. Tillinghast, Damaged Grandeur, 9.

61. Ibid., 89.


63. Ibid., 82.

64. Ctd. in Middlebrook, Anne Sexton: A Biography, 92. Middlebrook suggests (94) that Lowell “validated” the woman’s voice Sexton was developing in such poems as “The Double Image”; she notes, however, that the mostly male-authored poetry Sexton was reading in the seminar made her feel ashamed of having learned how to write poetry in the first place from “minor” poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay.

65. The Complete Poems, 117–18; the poem is dated May 1963.


68. In Sincerity’s Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), Deborah Forbes also calls attention to the transgressiveness of this poem’s apostrophe: “because we know that Joy is a real person with her own life history, the artificiality of the mode of address here becomes uncomfortably close to reality, with disturbing implications beyond the boundaries of the poem” (142).

69. In Searching for Mercy Street (58–60), Linda Gray Sexton recalls a role-reversal game her mother played with her when she was nine: the memory, which is emblematic as well as “real,” is of being terrified by her mother’s reluctance to end the game and reassume her maternal role.


72. W. D. Snodgrass, Heart’s Needle (New York: Knopf, 1959), 48; repr. in Selected


74. Sexton, “Cinderella,” CP, 255.


77. “Nobody died or withered on that stage” is a line from “Electra on Azalea Path” (The Collected Poems, 116); later in the same poem, “The stony actors poise and pause for breath.”


CHAPTER 2


2. These are the first two lines of Shakespeare’s sonnet 22.


4. This is the title Rich gave to the third of the three sections into which The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), is divided; it is also the title of the leadoff poem in that section.

5. For a discussion of the issues raised by a feminist stance of witness that is especially attentive to Rich’s goals in this regard and to the relationship between witness and consciousness-raising, see Harriet Davidson, “Poetry, Witness, Feminism,” in Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma, ed. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler (New York: Routledge, 2003), 153–72.


7. “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 224 (hereafter abbreviated BBP). In The Feminist Poetry Movement (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), Kim Whitehead thinks through the politics of voice and address in ways I have found helpful, especially in her chapter on Judy Grahn. Other feminist critics who have done valuable work with these issues include Jan Clausen in A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Long Haul Press, 1982) and Linda Kinnahan in Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).


9. Anne Sexton, The Complete Poems, with a Foreword by Maxine Kumin (Boston:
Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 127. This poem’s over-the-top deployment of apostrophe was discussed in the Introduction.


14. Deborah Forbes cites the ending of “Briar Rose” as an example of “the frightening and moving oscillation between poet and persona that makes for [Sexton’s] charisma” (149). In Sincerity’s Shadow, Forbes pairs Sexton and Lord Byron as poets whose “charismatic poetics” refuses to transcend the merely personal, so as to “[imply] that poetry is the irrepressible expression of an unusually intense life” (117).

15. Sexton was the only poet on a panel entitled “The Poet and Extra-literary Criticism” for the New England College English Association in 1962 (cited in Middlebrook, 188).

16. Cf., for example, an apostrophe to Lowell’s thirteen-week-old daughter in “Home After Three Months Away” that conjures up the tetrameter couplets of “To His Coy Mistress” to reproach her for “float[ing] my shaving brush / and washcloth in the flush”: “Dearest, I cannot loiter here / in lather like a polar bear” (Collected Poems, 185).


22. Rich’s 1971 poem with this title, the leadoff poem in Diving into the Wreck, is allegorically situated on a military testing ground (FD 2002, 93).


24. As of the 2002 edition The Fact of a Doorframe still includes “Rape” in the selection from Diving Into the Wreck that has been chosen to represent this moment in Rich’s poetic career. Both Cary Nelson’s critique, which I will be citing in some detail, and my own reading of the poem’s feminist project can best be weighed by consulting the entire poem at FD 2002, 105–6.


26. Nelson, 153; he is paraphrasing Robert Duncan, whose poetic stance is the subject of Our Last First Poets’ immediately preceding chapter. The charge of complacency is leveled against Rich’s poem on 152.

27. Cf., for example, the study Nelson cites as “an excellent overview of the problems inherent in political poetry,” Thomas R. Edwards’ Imagination and Power: A
Study of Poetry on Public Themes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) (cf. Nelson 3, n3). Edwards argues that Yeats’s most successful political poem, “Easter 1916,” “finds its securest note when it confesses insecurity” (197). Praising a 1953 poem of Lowell’s in similar terms, Edwards defines “a serious and responsible mind” in this context as “one which takes public actions . . . as imaginative problems demanding a reflective choice of the self one will adopt to meet the public circumstance” (221).


29. For an account of consciousness-raising that is attentive both to its importance for second-wave feminism and to its limitations as a strategy for disclosing the political in the personal, see Hester Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Thought (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 35–44.

30. “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” BBP, 221.

31. Roger Gilbert discusses this poem at some length in “Framing Water: Historical Knowledge in Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich,” Twentieth Century Literature, 43 (1997): 144–61. He too finds “Frame” succeeding better than “Rape” with its “language of witness,” and suggests that Rich may well have written “Frame” “with criticism of poems like ‘Rape’ in mind” (n5, 160).

32. An article by Joe Stampleman that appeared on Friday, 4 May, 1990 in the MIT student newspaper, The Tech, after Rich had given a poetry reading, speaks of “a well-publicized 1979 court case in which a Boston University student filed charges against police who brutally arrested her for trespassing when she sought shelter from driving snow in one of the university’s buildings, while waiting for a bus” (http://www.tech.mit.edu/V110/N24/rich.24a.html).

33. In Sincerity’s Shadow Deborah Forbes cites “Frame” to exemplify how Rich’s poetry often “presents an ‘I’ that is an almost disembodied self-consciousness about the possibilities and limitations of imaginative sympathy” (20).


37. The first phrase in quotation marks in this sentence is from “North American Time” (dated 1983), a poem whose bitter theme is that the “verbal privilege” accruing to a poet’s words can lead to their being (mis)read in the context of subsequent events they had no intention of addressing: “We move but our words stand / become responsible // for more than we intended // and this is verbal privilege” (FD 2002, 198).

38. Nick Halpern points out, however, that because Rich has an explicitly prophetic vocation, “too often . . . she seems not like someone who is leading an everyday life but someone who is walking the earth, and the question of the balance between isolation and community will not go away.” Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 185.


44. Tillinghast, Robert Lowell’s Life and Work: Damaged Grandeur (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 54–55. Access to an unpublished earlier manuscript of The Dolphin brought David Gewanter to the antithetical conclusion that Lowell cut back on the verbatim use of conversations and letters in order to cause both of his wives “less pain.” In “Child of Collaboration: Robert Lowell’s Dolphin,” Modern Philology 93, no. 2 (November 1995): 178–203, Gewanter argues that The Dolphin was originally conceived as “a postmodernist poetry of multiple voices and authors in the tradition of William Carlos Williams’s Paterson”; he finds the published version treating Hardwick “more kindly—at the expense of . . . its art” (179).


48. In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), Rich recalls that “once in a while someone used to ask me, ‘Don’t you ever write poems about your children?’” The reason she gives in 1976 for not doing so is that she experienced poetry writing and caring for young children as activities that were in conflict: “for me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself” (12).


50. Cf. esp. “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” in OLSS, 40: “But poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don’t know you know.”


53. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” BBP, 23. Rich explains in a footnote that the essay was originally written for the “Sexuality” issue of Signs in 1978; the Foreword from which my quotations are drawn was added in 1982 when the essay was reprinted in a feminist pamphlet series.


55. In an interview with Elly Bulkin in 1977, cited by Deborah Pope in A Separate Vision: Isolation in Contemporary Women’s Poetry (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), Rich explains that “Stepping Backward,” one of the poems in her first published volume, “is addressed to a woman whom I was close to in my late teens, and whom I really fled from—1 fled from my feelings about her” (130, n15). “To Judith, Taking Leave,” a 1962 poem that looks from within an ostensibly heterosexual framework (“two women / in love to the nerves’ limit / with two men—”) toward a time when they “can meet . . . as two eyes in one brow / receiving at one moment / the rainbow of the world,” went unpublished until FD 1984.

56. In Stein, Bishop, and Rich: Lyrics of Love, War, and Place (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Margaret Dickie suggests in her valuable, brief discussion of this poem that “among its multiple meanings” is a necrophilic “nostalgia for all the dead and maimed women she might have loved.” Necrophilia “associates
the woman’s desire with what is transgressive in desire and unassuageable” (156). Dickie points out that Rich’s “most recent poetry has grown out of an appreciation for those mysteries in her own life that she cannot fully fathom” (199).

57. In The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Elisa New argues that “many of the classic American poems are made not of linguistic possibility but of linguistic decision. Honed things, things that end, these poems are vessels of choice” (231).


CHAPTER 3


2. Parenthetically cited page numbers for Plath’s poems in this chapter will refer to The Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), hereafter abbreviated CP. “Kingdom” is from “The Disquieting Muses,” which will be discussed below.

3. In her essay on Plath’s letters and journals for the Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Tracy Brain warns of “a danger . . . of erecting false and overly rigid boundaries between Plath’s different types of writings” (142). Brain finds “the talky informality of many of Plath’s poems” to be letterlike and thinks they “owe a debt to the direct . . . address that is a feature of letter writing” (ibid.). Perhaps they do, but at their most colloquially “talky” they are also typically calling attention to the difference between what can be said in letters and in poems by way of direct address: “Daddy, I have had to kill you” is not something you’d be saying in a letter, for several reasons!


7. Scigaj, 241. While it is no longer the case in 2007 that “the attention accorded Ariel has left Plath’s early career in darkness” (Scigaj, 220), her ekphrastic poetry and her “painterliness” as a poet have still received little attention. An earlier version of this chapter was published in Raritan in 2001.

8. “Conversation Among the Ruins,” an ekphrasis of a painting by de Chirico, is immediately followed in CP by “Winter Landscape, with Rooks,” a poem that projects its own “landscape of chagrin” in an explicitly painterly way.
9. In the wake of Hughes’s publication of *Birthday Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) in 1998, critics and biographers remain deeply divided as to whether his various writings about Plath are helpful or misleading. Whereas, for example, Susan Bassnett concludes in her second edition of *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* (Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) that *Birthday Letters* “gives us a version of Plath’s life and writings that can truly be described as life-enhancing” (163), Sarah Churchwell, in “‘Your Sentence Was Mine Too’: Reading Sylvia Plath in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*,” finds Hughes using these poems self-interestedly to claim the high ground and have the last word (Literary Couplings: Writing Couples, Collaborators, and the Construction of Authorship, ed. Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006], 260–87).


12. Susan Bassnett points out that “critics have not laid much emphasis on Plath’s Americanness, nor is it very evident in her poems” (142). For Hughes, in retrospect, it is hugely significant: “18 Rugby Street,” the poem in which he recalls making love with her for the first time, ends with the lines: “So this is America, I marvelled. / Beautiful, beautiful America!” (*Birthday Letters*, 24; cf. Bassnett, 147).


15. Ibid., 15: “St. Botolph’s.

16. Sarah Churchwell calls attention to the memory-as-camera trope in “‘Your Sentence Was Mine Too’: Reading Sylvia Plath in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*.” Churchwell’s concern is with the way in which Hughes’s recourse to this trope acknowledges mediation, thereby compromising his claim to have access to the truth about Sylvia Plath.


21. *Unabridged Journals*, 202: entry for February 19. Karen Kukil’s note (684) explains that Plath had played the part of a prostitute in the Cambridge Amateur Dramatics Club production of Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* in the fall of 1955. Plath’s journal entry seems to be citing this performance as a way to characterize her social behavior as a “mad poet” at Cambridge.

22. *Unabridged Journals*, 199: entry for February 19. The *Strange Interlude* reference that will be parenthetically cited in the next paragraph is on the same page.


26. Frances McCullough explains in an “Editor’s Note” to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Dial Press, 1982) that “there are quite a few nasty bits missing—Plath had a very sharp tongue . . .” (ix). Before his death in 1998 Hughes released this material for publication in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. 


32. Hollander includes Shelley’s poem in his ekphrastic “Gallery” in *The Gazer’s Spirit*, 143–44. It was published after his death by Mary Shelley, who, as Hollander notes, “may have collaborated with him on it” (144).


39. In *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) Toni Saldívar discusses Plath’s affinity for Medusa as a “poetic ‘death-wish’” that she can be seen to be resisting in many of the poems in *Colossus* (70).

41. Leonard Scigaj has suggested that the desolation of both the house and the
outdoor landscape may “represent the irretrievable distance between Greek hero and
modern counterpart” (225). The image on the wall might indeed be a figment of the
lady’s imagination or a mirror image of her desire, since there is a strong visual cor-
respondence between her “Grecian tunic” and the togalike garment that drapes its
shoulders. I would like to thank Jennifer Hirsh, a specialist in de Chirico, for assist-
ing me to read this painting while she was working on her Ph.D. dissertation at Bryn
Mawr in the History of Art.

42. See esp. Museum of Words, 3, where Heffernan proposes a definition for ekph-
rasis that is “simple in form but complex in its implications: **ekphrasis is the verbal
representation of visual representation.**”

poem is an allegory of her nascent relationship with Hughes is strengthened by a
verbal coincidence linking the poem’s last line to a journal entry from April of 1956
in which Plath seems to have been drafting a letter to Richard Sassoon, the man
Hughes supplanted in her erotic imagination: “something very terrifying,” she says,
“has happened to me . . . and god knows what ceremonies of life or love can patch
the havoc wrought” (Unabridged Journals, 236).


45. Hughes explains in his Introduction to The Collected Poems that early 1956
“presents itself as a watershed, because from later this year come the earliest poems
of her first collection, The Colossus” (CP, 16).

46. In The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin,
Plath, and Glück (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), DeSales Harrison makes a
cognate suggestion, that “Plath’s interest in representational surfaces (looking glass-
es, pools, and ultimately poems themselves) derives in part from the way that these
surfaces present the looker with a likeness that is also a terrible unlikeness” (165).


49. Hughes’s note on this poem says they did get rid of the head by leaving it
in a tree on the banks of the Cam (CP, 275–76); in Birthday Letters he recalls that
Plath wrote the poem soon afterward to exorcise residual ambivalence, “rhyming
yourself into safety / From its orphaned fate” (Birthday Letters, 57: “The
Earthenware Head”).

50. Unabridged Journals, 399: entry for Thursday, July 3. In his introduction to The
Collected Poems Hughes cites these same passages but shortens the (February–July)
interval between them to ten weeks (CP, 13).

51. Letters Home, 468.

52. Scigaj, 243, citing Plath’s translation from The Diaries of Paul Klee: 1898–1918,
quotations are from this same passage.

53. “The Eye-mote” (CP, 109) is dated 1959 by Hughes; “Cut” (CP, 235) is dated
1962.

June 5, 1961, transmitted July 8, 1961; ctd. in Scigaj, 227.

55. The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (New York: Reynal and
Hitchcock, 1947), 186. Scigaj (227–28) paraphrases this and other underlined state-
ments, and furnishes the page numbers on which they appear.

56. “The Heresy of Paraphrase” is the title of The Well Wrought Urn’s eleventh
chapter; “The Intentional Fallacy,” of an article by William K. Wimsatt and Mon-
roe Beardsley in the Sewanee Review 54 (1946): 468–88, rev. and repr. in The Verbal
3–18.
57. Scigaj, 228, n17.
58. Cf. *Unabridged Journals*, 507, where Plath says she has written “one good poem [at Yaddo] so far: an imagist piece on the dead snake.”
59. In “Sylvia Plath and her Journals,” Hughes cites “Medallion” as one of the poems Plath especially valued from this period; but it is in the section of “Poem for a Birthday” subtitled “The Stones,” also written at Yaddo, that he suggests we can first hear the voice of her *Ariel* poems. *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*, ed. Paul Alexander (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 158.
60. This is a central theme of “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems”; cf. esp., in connection with “The Stones”: “She had never in her life improvised. The powers that compelled her to write so slowly had always been stronger than she was. But quite suddenly she found herself free to let herself drop, rather than inch over bridges of concepts” (192).
64. In “Notes on the Chronological Order,” Hughes explains the genesis of the poem. It “depressed [him] greatly,” he recalls, while confirming that Plath had finally arrived at her own center of gravity as a poet. “I had no doubt,” he says, “that this was a poem, and perhaps a great poem. She insisted that it was an exercise on the theme” (193–94).
65. Cf. Perloff, “Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” 110. Cf. also Perloff’s reading of “Cut,” where “it is immediately not [Plath’s] thumb that is bleeding but a new being outside of herself with which she can sympathize” (120).
66. In *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, 2nd rev. ed. (Basingstoke, Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Linda Wagner-Martin’s reading of this poem discloses a process of revision that served to enhance the speaker’s self-described “emptiness” and lack of agency, as well as reduce our incentive to infer a conventional backstory: thus, for example, the title changed from “Sick Room Tulips” and “Tulips in Hospital” to the single word “Tulips,” and “The water I weep . . .” became “The water I taste . . .” in the poem’s concluding stanza (cf. Wagner-Martin, 64–65).
68. These are the opening lines of “Daddy” ( *CP*, 222), “Stopped Dead” ( *CP*, 230), and “Lesbos” ( *CP*, 227), respectively.
73. For a reading of “Edge” that takes it to be a thinly concealed suicide note, see Mary Kurtzman, “Plath’s ‘Ariel’ and Tarot,” *Centennial Review*, 32 (Summer 1988): 286–95, cited by Wagner-Martin, 104–5. The poem’s strategies for achieving a tri-
umph of art over suffering (the enigmatic poise of its central figure, the rigor of its emphasis on illusion and seeming), are shortchanged by this kind of biographical reading, it seems to me.


75. For a good recent airing of “the complex relation between the poet in the poem and the poet in the world” as it has played out in biographical and critical accounts of Plath’s late poems, cf. Harrison, The End of the Mind, 143–45.


CHAPTER 4

1. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Brooks’s poems are from BLACKS (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), where this poem appears on page 132.


3. At age thirteen, according to biographer George Kent, Brooks “published” a handwritten weekly newspaper that sold for 5 cents; at twenty she was putting out a mimeographed “News-Review” with editorials, cartoons, brief biographies of “great Negroes,” and reports on local and national events. Cf. A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 40–44.

4. The PBS Black Press Web site explains that The Defender was smuggled into the South and “read aloud in barbershops and in churches” (http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/defender.html, accessed July 2008).


7. “when you have forgotten Sunday: the love story,” discussed in the Introduction, was obviously written from inside her own marriage to Henry Blakely. At readings Brooks would introduce it with the story of how they met, and talk about the kitchenette apartments they lived in as a young married couple during the 1940s.

8. The question of whom Brooks was writing for at different points in her career will perhaps never be settled to everyone’s satisfaction, in spite of her having spoken to it herself a number of times both in interviews and in her own writings. Zofia Burr puts that question front and center in her chapter on Brooks in Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); in the third section of this chapter I will be in dialogue with her discussion of Brooks’s changing posture of address.


12. Cf. Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” in A World of Difference (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 189: “The ‘you’ in the opening lines can be seen as an ‘I’ that has become alienated, distanced from itself, and combined with a generalized other, which includes and feminizes the reader of the poem.” Johnson’s is the only reading of this poem I have found that does justice to its complex structure of address.

13. It can equally be said that the poem’s speaker is and is not a poet: “I have heard in the wind . . .” is a formulation that evokes the Romantic tradition of “Aeolian” voices. (I would like to thank my colleague, Katherine Rowe, for pointing this out to me.) A Street in Bronzeville is full of poems whose relationship to the canonical tradition of the lyric is similarly double-edged: “when you have forgotten Sunday” is discussed in these terms in the Introduction.


16. “First person communal voice” is Barbara Jean Bolden’s useful coinage (Urban Rage in Bronzeville, 16).


18. RPO, 132.


20. “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” American Mercury, 477; Politics and Aesthetics, 247. Ironically, a closer look at writing that has been done in a spirit of “strict conformity to the taboos of black America” would reveal, Johnson argues, that its authors were “unconsciously addressing themselves mainly to white America.”


23. Ibid., 404; my emphasis.


25. Letter from Richard Wright to Edward Aswell, quoted in Kent, A Life, 63.

27. For a fuller discussion of the voicing of this poem, one that pays special attention to Brooks’s use of apostrophe to engage an implied reader who stands in for “the inability of white critics to understand the poetry of black Americans,” see Ann Folwell Stanford, “‘Like Narrow Banners for Some Gathering War’: Readers, Aesthetics, and Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,’” College Literature, 17 (1990): 162–82.


29. BLACKS, 48. According to Susan Schweik, Miller’s heroism was “noted only grudgingly and belatedly by the Navy and by the white-run media.” Schweik suggests that Brooks wrote the poem in response to a call from the editor of a new black literary journal, Negro Story, for compensatory attention to the heroism of “the Dorie Millers.” A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 117. “Negro Hero” was originally published in Common Ground, in 1945.

30. BLACKS, 48. Schweik adduces a disjuncture between the second stanza’s image of “the soldier-as-really-a-child” and the third stanza’s image of “the soldier-as-Real-Man,” and finds that these “two figures of male war-making . . . remain in disconcerting suspension.” She takes issue with Harry Shaw’s contention (in “Perceptions of Men in the Early Works of Gwendolyn Brooks,” in Black American Poets between Worlds, 1940–1960, ed. R. Baxter Miller [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986], 136–59) that the first of these self-characterizations sarcastically references white readers’ assumption that a Negro is not really a man. I see Miller’s “of course . . . of course” as rhetorical devices for humanizing the Negro Hero; where Schweik finds competing explanations, I find a self-confident layering of his motives for acting as he did. These differing readings are themselves good evidence for the poem’s rhetorical aliveness.


32. In his chapter on Brooks in Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, George Kent credits Brooks with “a legitimate universalism,” arguing that her poems do not “represent a reach for some pre-existing Western universal to be arrived at by reducing the tensions inherent in the black experience.” She gets to the universal, Kent suggests, by “going down deep, not transcending” (112).

33. This is Brooks’s own explanation of the thematic motivation for her use of off-rhyme (RPO, 156). Cf. also George Kent: “She attacked the sonnet’s rigidity by breaking up traditional sentence syntax into punctuated phrases, by emphasizing the colloquial, and by the pressure of her contemporary realism” (Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, 112).

34. George Kent, A Life, 80. Like other Modernist poets, Brooks was accused of willful obscurity by early reviewers: Saunders Redding, in the Saturday Review of Literature in 1949 warned that he “[d]id not want to see Miss Brooks’s fine talents dribble away in the obscure and the too oblique.” “Cellini-like Lyrics,” repr. in Stephen
35. One of the “Bronzeville” poems is entitled “the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon” (BLACKS, 31).


38. Ibid., 350.

39. “You often put a burden on the reader that is not commensurate with the rewards,” said Elizabeth Lawrence, Brooks’s editor at Harper’s, in a letter that accepted Annie Allen for publication with serious reservations (quoted in Kent, A Life, 77).


41. Essence interview, RPO, 172, 175.

42. She and her husband separated in 1969, but came back together some years later.

43. It is also expressed in a refusal to give up either the “universalizing” claims Don Lee associates with “their rules . . . their language” (my emphasis) or the “particularism” that embarrassed Saunders Redding, who doubted that anyone but another Negro could fully appreciate the subtleties of intraracial color prejudice (in Wright, On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation, 7).


49. Brooks had hoped for a poem that would run to two thousand lines—twice as long as the poem she published. D. H. Melhem, who provides a helpful backstory of its lengthy process of gestation in Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice, explains that in the early 1940s she had worked in the Mecca building for the spiritual adviser and purveyor of patent medicines on whom Prophet Williams is loosely based (158).

discourse with an empathetic portrayal of the Mecca residents’ individual and collective humanity.

51. Gayl Jones’s essay (“Community and Voice: Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca,’” in Mootry and Smith, A Life Distilled, 193–204) deals especially well with the poem’s polyvocality. Jones points out that “the multi-voiced poem has a long tradition in Afro-American poetry” (193).

52. The steel-and-glass structure that replaced it was one that contrived to harbor no “corrupting” shadows: as the centerpiece of the new campus, it epitomized the a-historical modernity of the international style.

53. In Martin’s piece for Harper’s the building’s janitor, who fights “a hopeless rearguard action against decay and vandalism,” is especially discouraged by the amount of glass that gets broken in the building, some by “Outsiders” and some by children playing in the halls: “The kids gets to playin’ and throwin’ at one another and first thing you know they break the glass” (“The Strangest Place in Chicago,” 90). “Boy Breaking Glass,” a stand-alone poem in the “After Mecca” section of In the Mecca, will be discussed below.

54. An account of “the Historical Significance of the IIT Campus” on the Web site of the Miës Van der Rohe Society at IIT explained, until 2004, that by the end of the 1970s, in the wake of a decline in student enrollment and a failure to implement a landscaping plan for the immediate neighborhood, “the harsh geometric lines of the buildings . . . conspired . . . to create a barren, inhospitable urban campus. What was once a retreat from urban chaos had become more of a void” (http://mies.iit.edu/significance.html, accessed May 13, 2003). The Web site was subsequently revised to give a more upbeat account of the impact of Van der Rohe’s “Master Plan” (http://mies.iit.edu.mies).

55. Brooks has Mecca resident Alfred, whose imagination has been captured by Leopold Senghor’s mythic vision of Africa, wonder early in the poem, “When there were all those gods . . . lighting stars and comets and a moon, / what was their one belief? / what was their joining thing?” (BLACKS, 409–10). As Sheila Hassell Hughes points out, “Alfred can only read Africa through Emersonian eyes” (“A Prophet Overheard: A Juxtapositional Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca,’” African American Review 38, no. 2 [Summer 2004]: 270).

56. During the more than thirty years since The Dialogic Imagination was published in English, a number of critics have pointed out that poems as well as novels can and sometimes do foreground heteroglossia. See esp. David H. Richter, “Dialogism and Poetry,” Studies in the Literary Imagination 23, no. 1 (1990): 9–27.


58. This is Gertrude Reif Hughes’s reading in “Making it Really New: Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the Feminist Potential of Modern Poetry,” in Wright, On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation, 204–5. But surely we are to infer that the poet “saw” this happen also, since the description is mediated by an omniscient narratorial discourse.

59. Wikipedia, drawing from the Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition, translates the Greek word “turning away” and defines it as “an exclamatory rhetorical figure of speech, when a speaker or writer breaks off and directs speech to an imaginary person or abstract quality or idea” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostrophe, accessed July 2008).


61. The poem’s account of Way-Out Morgan’s revolutionary project is also laced with potential ironies that in Lee’s introduction go unremarked. Whereas he finds Blackness beautiful as a political abstraction, Morgan is less inclined to do so in the context of private domestic arrangements: thus he “postpones a yellow woman in his bed (my emphasis), postpones / wetnesses and little cries and stomachings—to consider Ruin.” The verbal echo that links this passage to the poem’s closing description of “she whose little stomach fought the world” suggests that Pepita is a casualty not only of Jamaican Edward’s predatory pedophilia but also, indirectly, of Amos’s and Way-Out Morgan’s single-minded fantasies of revenge.

62. In the poem’s account of how Pepita’s sister Melodie Mary looks at the world, “other importances” refers to the Mecca building’s rats and roaches, whose deaths don’t make the headlines but are easier for her to pity than the deaths of children in China (BLACKS, 412).

63. Walter Kalaidjian, in Languages of Liberation: The Social Text in Contemporary American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), likens Alfred to T. S. Eliot’s Teiresias in his capacity as “spectator” to The Waste Land’s unfolding action (192). Kalaidjian finds Brooks “ultimately” siding “more with the poems’ embittered extremists,” Amos and Way-Out Morgan. I am suggesting that the question, “How many care, Pepita?” finds them, like the other Mecca residents, too preoccupied with the fantasy of another life somewhere else to care for the child in their midst.


66. Phillip Brian Harper, “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s,” Critical Inquiry 19, no. 2 (Winter 1993); repr. in Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 53. Brooks is a good example from Harper’s perspective because she “built her reputation on her expertly crafted lyrics of the 1940s and 1950s.”

67. Ibid. This lack of a specified objective, Harper suggests, presaged “fundamental difficulties in the nationalist agenda of the Black Arts poets.”


69. Brooks cites this “Websterian” definition from the dictionary: “1. opposite to white; . . . 2. dark-complexioned; 3. Negro; 4. without light . . . ; 5. dirty . . . ; 6. evil; wicked [etc.]” (RPO, 83).


72. That is what Pindar was doing, for instance, at a moment of political transition in ancient Greece from one kind of political regime to another. In this connection

73. A *Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* was a collaborative publication: it includes essays by Keorapetse Kgositsile, Haki R. Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee), and Dudley Randall. Randall explains in his brief Introduction that the volume was Brooks's idea and that "each writer's section is divided into six topics suggested by Miss Brooks" (1).

74. Brooks, *RPT*, 96. Burr reads Brooks's public assertions of a radical change in her poetic stance as "strategic speech-acts" aimed at "chang[ing] the terms of her reception." "What she was seeking to repudiate in talking of a 'turn' in her career . . . was the critical tradition that . . . spoke of her as a 'true', 'universal,' and 'genuine' poet in an effort to discipline other black poets who placed politics ahead of art" (142). Burr's point is well taken, but I do hear Brooks speaking in *Report from Part One* of a conversion experience, and I see her poetic practice changing "after Mecca" in order to engage with Blackness differently from before.

75. Burr cites a reading at Ithaca College in 1992 at which she herself was present, where in choosing to read "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals" Brooks gave a mostly non-black audience the experience of *not* being addressed. One of this poem's meanings, for that audience on that occasion, was that a "gesture of solidarity is inextricable from a gesture of exclusivity" (Burr, *Of Women, Poetry, and Power*, 145). D. H. Melhem's counterpart recollection, from a reading at City College in 1971, is of a poet less problematically in dialogue with her audience, "almost as if a brilliant friend—or mother—had come to visit students at their school" (*Afterword*, *RPT*, 155).

76. When Sanchez reads her recent work she builds in sounds that are not also words, thereby calling attention to her medium of expression as a medium of "sounded" speech. Brooks expressed great admiration for Sanchez, Shange, and others who have taken this direction, both in interviews and in the support she gave them during her term as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress.


78. The Greek verb "ekphrasein" literally means "to speak out."


81. "The Colossus" counts as such an image, and so do "Medusa" and "Edge." In "Daddy," the lines "You stand at the blackboard, Daddy, / In the picture I have of you . . ." provide a literal starting point, midway through the poem, for the fun-house mirror image of a "ghastly statue with one grey toe / Big as a Frisco seal" with which the poem begins.

82. *BLACKS*, 482–89; originally published in *Family Pictures* in 1970.

83. For a long time, as a white reader of this poem, I took from it an implicit message that with this kind of start in life, Lincoln West was headed for juvenile delinquency. Why did I not credit him instead with a capacity for making lemonade out of lemons—because his "ugliness" frightened me a little?

84. D. H. Melhem suggests, in her Afterword to *Report from Part Two*, that the "coherent impulse" underlying all of Brooks's work is *caritas*, nourished by a . . . vivid
sense of the Black Nation as an extension of the Black family” (“Afterword,” 150).

85. *BLACKS*, 444. This poem is part of a diptych entitled “Two Dedications” that was published in the “After Mecca” section of *In the Mecca* in 1968.


87. Soon after these poems were published, Don Lee became Haki Madhubuti.

88. D. H. Melhem points out that this title refers not only to the relative youth of its subjects but also to their status as “leadership exemplars . . . for black youth” (*Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, 203). Melhem suggests that together these poems present a conception of heroism that is threefold or three-dimensional: artistic, spiritual, and practical.

89. Cf. Melhem, who finds Brooks shifting from a conventionally lyric into a conspicuously heroic mode for this poem (*Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, 204).

90. “To Don at Salaam” does not entirely dispense with pronouncements that are publicly hero-izing: “Your voice is the listened-for music. / Your act is the consolidation.” But the main purpose of the poem seems to be to emphasize that a man does not need to be always playing the hero in order to qualify for herohood.

91. In *BLACKS, RIOT* begins on page 470.

92. “The Third Sermon on the Warpland” ends inconclusively with a valedictory section that includes the lines “Lies are told and legends made. / Phoenix rises unafraid” (*BLACKS*, 478). The reference to “ice and fire” in the third section’s title invokes Robert Frost’s professed uncertainty as to whether it will be love or hate that brings the world to an end.

93. Walter Kalaidjian finds Brooks using Cabot’s destruction to herald “the liberation of blacks from the cultural domination of consumer capitalism” (*Languages of Liberation*, 197). In “Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Riot,*” *African American Review* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2002), James D. Sullivan points out that she has chosen for this purpose “one of the most prestigious forms in the English tradition: blank verse” (565).

94. The hardcover edition of *RIOT*, published in 1970, includes a dated, handwritten version of “An Aspect of Love” that is signed by Brooks and dated “March 17/18, 1968.”

95. At the end of the novel Maud Martha is stuck in a very conventional marriage to a man who would rather she weren’t so “black.” Brooks said in an interview while she was planning a sequel to the novel that she intended to kill off Maud Martha’s husband, since it was “obvious he wasn’t going to change.”

96. Both Gloria Hull and Betsy Erkkila (Hull in Gloria Hull and Posey Gallagher, “Update on Part One,” 91, in 1977 and Erkkila in her chapter on Brooks in *The Wicked Sisters*) have taken Brooks to task for not paying as much attention to Black womanhood after Fisk as before; both infer that she accepted, more or less uncritically, the Black Power movement’s emphasis on empowering “the Black Male.” In relation to this poem, however, that charge seems misplaced, since its purpose is not only to envision a new kind of black man but also to speak as his female counterpart, thereby putting black men and women on a different footing than before.

97. Cf. Melhem, 200. We might also think of “Break of Day,” an aubade of Donne’s that is in a woman’s voice.

98. L. M. Findlay reminds us, in a 1985 riposte to Jonathan Culler’s essay on “apostrophe” in *The Pursuit of Signs*, that the device itself is closely linked to the


**CODA**

1. Louise Glück, “Education of the Poet,” in *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1994), 4. In the Introduction, Glück’s *Ararat* sequence was used to exemplify poetry that addresses its readers directly. “Addressivity” is a term I encountered first in Zofia Burra’s discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks’s strategies of address, with which this study engages in chapter 4.


4. Both of the phrases in quotation marks are cited in chapter 1.


9. In the headnote to her 1973 essay, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1979], 51), Rich names Brooks as one of the poets whose work she “came to know and put on my reading lists” in the SEEK program at City College from 1968–72, even though “few books by black women writers were available” at that time. During the 1970s, however, the African American poets with whom Rich was in dialogue around issues of sexism and racism were Audre Lorde and June Jordan, not Brooks.


13. In paraphrasing this section of the poem I have had recourse to the pronoun “I,” but Rich avoids using it, in part by attributing greater agency to a “green glass bowl” than to a speaker whose “hand slipped” while rinsing it.

14. The jacket blurb for *Telephone* cites “the dialogic urgencies of the title poem” as being deeply characteristic of Rich’s poetic “sensibility.”
15. I have put quotation marks around “locate” here to allude to Rich’s advocacy during the 1980s of a “politics of location” (discussed at greater length in chapter 2).

16. Insofar as Tory Dent wrote movingly of her own impending death during an almost twenty-year-long struggle with AIDS, the voice Rich’s poem conjures up is itself already a poetic construct as well as the actual, remembered voice of a friend. Dent died in December of 2005; Rich’s poem is dated 2006.


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