Fiction by Tillie Olsen

TELL ME A RIDDLE

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From the Thirties

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Silences

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ONE OUT OF TWELVE: WRITERS WHO ARE WOMEN IN OUR CENTURY

An unwritten talk, spoken from notes in 1971 at the Modern Language Association Forum on Women Writers in the Twentieth Century. In this reconstituted, edited form, it appeared in the "Women Writing, Women Teaching" issue of *College English,* October 1972.

Happily, some of what follows is by now, in varying degrees, familiar. It was only beginning to be so in 1971. The tone, markedly different from that of "Silences," is distinctly of that year of cumulative discovery.

The content was conditioned somewhat by its being addressed to college teachers of literature. A few quotations from "Silences," then unavoidable, herein repetitious, are kept intact.

It is the women's movement, part of the other movements of our time for a fully human life, that has brought this forum into being; kindling a renewed, in most instances a first-time, interest in the writings and writers of our sex.

Linked with the old, resurrected classics on women, this movement in three years has accumulated a vast new mass of testimony, of new comprehensions as to what it is to be female. Inequities, restrictions, penalties, denials, leechings have been painstakingly and painfully documented; damaging differences in circumstances and treatment from that of males attested to; and limitations, harms, a sense of wrong, voiced.

It is in the light and dark of this testimony that I examine my subject today: the lives and work of writers, women, in our century (though I speak primarily of those writing in the English language —and in prose).*

Compared to the countless centuries of the silence of women, compared to the century preceding ours—the first in which women wrote in any noticeable numbers—ours has been a favorable one.

The road was cut many years ago, as Virginia Woolf reminds us:

> by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot, many famous women and many more unknown and forgotten. . . . Thus, when I came to write . . . writing was a reputable and harmless occupation.

Predecessors, ancestors, a body of literature, an acceptance of the right to write: each in themselves an advantage.

In this second century we have access to areas of work and of life experience previously denied; higher education; longer, stronger lives; for the first time in human history, freedom from compulsory childbearing; freer bodies and attitudes toward sexuality; a beginning of technological easing of household tasks; and—of the greatest importance to those like myself who come from generations of illiterate women—increas-

*This is the poorer for such limitation.

ing literacy, and higher degrees of it. *Each one of these a vast gain.* *

And the results?

Productivity: books of all manner and kind. My own crude sampling, having to be made without benefit of research assistants, secretary, studies (nobody's made them), or computer (to feed the entire *Books in Print* and *Contemporary Authors* into, for instance) indicates that at present four to five books are published by men to every one by a woman.**

Comparative earnings: no authoritative figures available.

Achievement: as gauged by what supposedly designates it: appearance in twentieth-century literature courses, required reading lists, textbooks, quality anthologies, the year's best, the decade's best, the fifty years' best, consideration by critics or in current reviews—*one woman writer for every twelve men* (8 percent women, 92 percent men). For a week or two, make your own survey whenever you pick up an anthology, course bibliography, quality magazine or quarterly, book review section, book of criticism.

What weights my figures so heavily toward the one-out-of-twelve ratio are twentieth-century literature course offerings, and writers decreed worthy of critical attention in books and articles. Otherwise my percentage figures would have come closer to one out of seven.

But it would not matter if the ratio had been one out of six or five. Any figure but one to one would insist on query: Why? What, not true for men but only for women, *makes this enormous difference? (Thus, class—economic circumstance—and color, those other traditional silencers of humanity, can be relevant only in the special ways that they affect the half of their numbers who are women.)*

Why are so many more women silenced than men? Why, when

*These are measured phrases, enormously compressed. Each asks an entire book or books, to indicate its enabling relationship to literature written by women in this century—including the very numbers of women enabled to write.

**Richard Altick in his "Sociology of Authorship" found the proportion of women writers to men writers in Britain a fairly constant one for the years 1800 to 1935: 20 percent. This was based on books published, not on recognized achievement.

women do write (one out of four or five works published) is so little of their writing known, taught, accorded recognition? What is the nature of the critical judgments made throughout that (along with the factors different in women's lives) steadily reduce the ratio from one out of three in anthologies of student work, to one out of seventeen in course offerings.

This talk, originally intended to center on the writing, the achievement of women writers in our century, became instead these queryings. Yet—in a way sadder, angrier, prouder—it still centers on the writing, the achievement. *

One woman writer of achievement for every twelve men writers so ranked. Is this proof again—and in this so much more favorable century—of women's innately inferior capacity for creative achievement?

Only a few months ago (June 1971), during a Radcliffe sponsored panel on "Women's Liberation, Myth or Reality," Diana Trilling, asking why it is that women

> have not made even a fraction of the intellectual, scientific or artistic-cultural contributions which men have made

came again to the traditional conclusion that

> it is not enough to blame women's place in culture or culture itself, because that leaves certain fundamental questions unanswered . . . necessarily raises the question of the biological aspects of the problem.

Biology: that difference.** Evidently unknown to or dismissed by her and the others who share her conclusion, are the centuries of prehistory during which biology did not deny equal contribution; and *the other determining difference—not*

*Added to text, 1976.

**Biologically, too, the change for women now is enormous: life expectancy (USA) seventy-eight years—as contrasted with forty-eight years in 1900. Near forty-eight years of life before and after one is "a woman," that is: "capable of conceiving and bearing young." (And childbearing more and more voluntary.)

biology—between male and female in the centuries after; the *differing past of women*—that should be part of every human consciousness, certainly every woman's consciousness (in the way that the 400 years of bondage, colonialism, the slave passage, are to black humans).

Work first:

> Within our bodies we bore the race. Through us it was shaped, fed and clothed. . . . Labour more toilsome and unending than that of man was ours. . . . No work was too hard, no labour too strenuous to exclude us.*

True for most women in most of the world still.

Unclean; taboo. The Devil's Gateway. The three steps behind; the girl babies drowned in the river; the baby strapped to the back. Buried alive with the lord, burned alive on the funeral pyre, burned as witch at the stake. Stoned to death for adultery. Beaten, raped. Bartered. Bought and sold. Concubinage, prostitution, white slavery. The hunt, the sexual prey, "I am a lost creature, O the poor Clarissa." Purdah, the veil of Islam, domestic confinement. Illiterate. Denied vision. Excluded, excluded, excluded from council, ritual, activity, learning, language, when there was neither biological nor economic reason to be excluded.

Religion, when all believed. In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children. May thy wife's womb never cease from bearing. Neither was the man created for the woman but the woman for the man. Let the woman learn in silence and in all subjection. Contrary to biological birth fact: Adam's rib. The Jewish male morning prayer: thank God I was not born a woman. Silence in holy places, seated apart, or not permitted entrance at all; castration of boys because women too profane to sing in church.

And for the comparative handful of women born into the privileged class; being, not doing; man does, woman is; to you the world says work, to us it says seem. God is thy law, thou mine. Isolated. Cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd; the private sphere. Bound feet: corseted, cosseted, bedecked; denied one's body. Powerless-

*Olive Schreiner. *Women and Labour.*

ness. Fear of rape, male strength. Fear of aging. Subject to. Fear of expressing capacities. Soft attractive graces; the mirror to magnify man. Marriage as property arrangement. The vices of slaves:* dissembling, flattering, manipulating, appeasing.

Bolstering. Vicarious living, infantilization, trivialization. Parasitism, individualism, madness. Shut up, you're only a girl. O Elizabeth, why couldn't you have been born a boy? For twentieth-century woman: roles, discontinuities, part-self, part-time; conflict; imposed "guilt"; "a man can give full energy to his profession, a woman cannot."

> How is it that women have not made a fraction of the intellectual, scientific, or artistic-cultural contributions that men have made?

Only in the context of this punitive difference in circumstance, in history, between the sexes; this past, hidden or evident, that (though objectively obsolete—yes, even the toil and the compulsory childbearing obsolete) *continues so terribly, so determiningly to live on, only in this context can the question be answered or my subject here today—the women writer in our century: one out of twelve—be understood.*

How much it takes to become a writer. Bent (far more common than we assume), circumstances, time, development of craft—but beyond that: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman.

The leeching of belief, of will, the damaging of capacity begin so early. Sparse indeed is the literature on the way of denial to small girl children of the development of their endowment as born

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning's phrase; other phrases throughout from the Bible, John Milton, Richardson's *Clarissa,* Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Virginia Woolf, Viola Klein, Mountain Wolf Woman.

human: active, vigorous bodies; exercise of the power to do, to make, to investigate, to invent, to conquer obstacles, to resist violations of the self; to think, create, choose; to attain community, confidence in self. Little has been written on the harms of instilling constant concern with appearance; the need to please, to support; the training in acceptance, deferring. Little has been added in our century to George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* on the effect of the differing treatment—"climate of expectation"—for boys and for girls.

But it is there if one knows how to read for it, and indelibly there in the resulting damage. One—out of twelve.

In the vulnerable girl years, unlike their sisters in the previous century, women writers go to college.* The kind of experience it may be for them is stunningly documented in Elaine Showalter's pioneering "Women and the Literary Curriculum."** Freshman texts in which women have little place, if at all; language itself, all achievement, anything to do with the human in male terms—*Man in Crises, The Individual and His World.* Three hundred thirteen male writers taught; seventeen women writers: That classic of adolescent rebellion, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man;* and sagas (male) of the quest for identity (but then Erikson, the father of the concept, propounds that identity concerns girls only insofar as making themselves into attractive beings for the right kind of man).† Most, *not all,* of the predominantly male literature studied, written by men whose understandings are not universal, but restrictively male (as Mary Ellmann, Kate Millett, and Dolores

*True almost without exception among the writers who are women in *Twentieth Century Authors* and *Contemporary Authors.*

***College English,* May 1971. A year later (October 1972), *College English* published an extensive report, "Freshman Textbooks," by Jean Mullens. In the 112 most used texts, she found 92.47 percent (5,795) of the selections were by men; 7.53 percent (472) by women (One Out of Twelve). Mullens deepened Showalter's insights as to the subtly undermining effect on freshman students of the texts' contents and language, as well as the minuscule proportion of women writers.

†In keeping with his 1950s–60s thesis of a distinctly female "biological, evolutionary need to fulfil self through serving others."

Schmidt have pointed out); in our time more and more surface, hostile, one-dimensional in portraying women.

In a writer's young years, susceptibility to the vision and style of the great is extreme. Add the aspiration-denying implication, consciously felt or not (although reinforced daily by one's professors and reading) that (as Virginia Woolf noted years ago) women writers, women's experience, and literature written by women are by definition minor. (Mailer will not grant even the minor: "the one thing a writer has to have is balls.") No wonder that Showalter observes:

> Women [students] are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity, in part because they do not see it mirrored and given resonance in literature. . . . They are expected to identify with masculine experience, which is presented as the human one, and have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experiences, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature, or accepted in criticism . . . [They] notoriously lack the happy confidence, the exuberant sense of the value of their individual observations which enables young men to risk making fools of themselves for the sake of an idea.

Harms difficult to work through. Nevertheless, some young women (others are already lost) maintain their ardent intention to write—fed indeed by the very glories of some of this literature that puts them down.

But other invisible worms are finding out the bed of crimson joy.* Self-doubt; seriousness, also questioned by the hours agonizing over appearance; concentration shredded into attracting, being attractive; the absorbing real need and love for working with words felt as hypocritical self-delusion ("I'm not truly dedi-

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O Rose thou art sick./The invisible worm,
That flies in the night/In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed/Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love/Does thy life destroy.
—William Blake

cated"), for what seems (and is) esteemed is being attractive to men. High aim, and accomplishment toward it, discounted by the prevalent attitude that, as girls will probably marry (attitudes not applied to boys who will probably marry), writing is no more than an attainment of a dowry to be spent later according the needs and circumstances within the true vocation: husband and family. The growing acceptance that going on will threaten other needs, to love and be loved; ("a woman has to sacrifice all claims to femininity and family to be a writer").*

And the agony—peculiarly mid-century, escaped by their sisters of pre-Freudian, pre-Jungian times—that "creation and femininity are incompatible."** Anaïs Nin's words.

> The aggressive act of creation; the guilt for creating. I did not want to rival man; to steal man's creation, his thunder. I must protect them, not outshine them.†

The acceptance—against one's experienced reality—of the sexist notion that the act of creation is not as inherently natural to a woman as to a man, but rooted instead in unnatural aggression, rivalry, envy, or thwarted sexuality.

And in all the usual college teaching—the English, history, psychology, sociology courses—little to help that young woman understand the source or nature of this inexplicable draining self-doubt, loss of aspiration, of confidence.

It is all there in the extreme in Plath's *Bell Jar*—that (inadequate)‡ portrait of the artist as young woman (significantly, one of the few that we have)—from the precarious sense of vocation to the paralyzing conviction that (in a sense different from what she wrote years later)

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*Plath. A letter when a graduate student.

***The Diary of Anaïs Nin,* Vol. III, 1939–1944.

†A statement that would have baffled Austen, the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, Eliot, Stowe, Alcott, etc. The strictures were felt by them in other ways.

‡Inadequate, for the writer-being ("muteness is sickness for me") is not portrayed. By contrast, how present she is in Plath's own *Letters Home.*

> Perfection is terrible. It cannot have children.
> It tamps the womb.

And indeed, in our century as in the last, until very recently almost all distinguished achievement has come from childless women: Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Katherine Mansfield, Isak Dinesen, Katherine Anne Porter, Dorothy Richardson, Henry Handel Richardson, Susan Glaspell, Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, Eudora Welty, Djuna Barnes, Anaïs Nin, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Zora Neale Hurston, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Christina Stead, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Jean Stafford, May Sarton, Josephine Herbst, Jessamyn West, Janet Frame, Lillian Smith, Iris Murdoch, Joyce Carol Oates, Hannah Green, Lorraine Hansberry.

Most never questioned, or at least accepted (a few sanctified) this different condition for achievement, not imposed on men writers. Few asked the fundamental human equality question regarding it that Elizabeth Mann Borghese, Thomas Mann's daughter, asked when she was eighteen and sent to a psychiatrist for help in getting over an unhappy love affair (revealing also a working ambition to become a great musician although "women cannot be great musicians"). "You must choose between your art and fulfillment as a woman," the analyst told her, "between music and family life." "Why?" she asked. "Why must I choose? No one said to Toscanini or to Bach or my father that they must choose between their art and personal, family life; fulfillment as a man. . . . Injustice everywhere." Not where it is free choice. But where it is forced because of the circumstances for the sex into which one is born —a choice men of the same class do not have to make in order to do their work—that is not choice, that is a coercive working of sexist oppression.*

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*"Them lady poets must not marry, pal," is how John Berryman, poet (himself oft married) expressed it. The old patriarchal injunction: "Woman, this is man's realm. If you insist on invading it, unsex yourself—and expect the road to be made difficult." Furthermore, this very unmarriedness and childlessness has been used to discredit women as unfulfilled, inadequate, somehow abnormal.

What possible difference, you may ask, does it make to literature whether or not a woman writer remains childless—free choice or not—especially in view of the marvels these childless women have created.

Might there not have been other marvels as well, or other dimensions to these marvels? Might there not have been present profound aspects and understandings of human life as yet largely absent in literature?

More and more women writers in our century, primarily in the last two decades, are assuming as their right fullness of work *and* family life.* Their emergence is evidence of changing circumstances making possible for them what (with rarest exception) was not possible in the generations of women before. I hope and I fear for what will result. I hope (and believe) that complex new richness will come into literature; I fear because almost certainly their work will be impeded, lessened, partial. For the fundamental situation remains unchanged. Unlike men writers who marry, most will not have the societal equivalent of a wife—nor (in a society hostile to growing life) anyone but themselves to mother their children. Even those who can afford help, good schools, summer camps, may *(may)* suffer what seventy years ago W.E.B. Du Bois

*Among those with children: Harriette Arnow, Mary Lavin, Mary McCarthy, Tess Slesinger, Eleanor Clark, Nancy Hale, Storm Jameson, Janet Lewis, Jean Rhys, Kay Boyle, Ann Petry, Dawn Powell, Meridel LeSueur, Evelyn Eaton, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Pearl Buck, Josephine Johnson, Caroline Gordon, Shirley Jackson; and a sampling in the unparalleled last two decades: Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Margaret Laurence, Grace Paley, Hortense Calisher, Edna O'Brien, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Pauli Murray, Françoise Mallet-Joris, Cynthia Ozick, Joanne Greenberg, Joan Didion, Penelope Mortimer, Alison Lurie, Hope Hale Davis, Doris Betts, Muriel Spark, Adele Wiseman, Lael Wertenbaker, Shirley Ann Grau, Maxine Kumin, Margaret Walker, Gina Barriault, Mary Gray Hughes, Maureen Howard, Norma Rosen, Lore Segal, Alice Walker, Nancy Willard, Charlotte Painter, Sallie Bingham. (I would now add Clarice Lispector, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, June Arnold, Ursula Le Guin, Diane Johnson, Alice Munro, Helen Yglesias, Susan Cahill, Rosellen Brown, Alta, and Susan Griffin.) Some wrote before children, some only in the middle or later years. Not many have directly used the material open to them out of motherhood as central source for their work.

called "The Damnation of Women": "that only at the sacrifice of the chance to do their best work can women bear and rear children."*

> Substantial creative achievement demands time . . . and with rare exceptions only full-time workers have created it.**

I am quoting myself from "Silences," a talk nine years ago. In motherhood, as it is structured,

> circumstances for sustained creation are almost impossible. Not because the capacities to create no longer exist, or the need (though for a while as in any fullness of life the need may be obscured), but . . . the need cannot be first. It can have at best only part self, part time . . . Motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now* (and remember, in our society, the family must often try to be the center for love and health the outside world is not). The very fact that these are needs of love, not duty, that one feels them as one's self; *that there is no one else to be responsible for these needs,* gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant, toil. Work interrupted, deferred, postponed makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be.

There are other vulnerabilities to loss, diminishment. Most women writers (being women) have had bred into them the "infinite capacity"; what Virginia Woolf named (after the heroine of

**Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil.*

**This does not mean that these full-time writers were hermetic or denied themselves social or personal life (think of James, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Balzac, Joyce, Gide, Colette, Yeats, Woolf, etc. etc.); nor did they, except perhaps at the flood, put in as many hours daily as those doing more usual kinds of work. Three to six hours daily have been the norm ("the quiet, patient, generous mornings will bring it"). Zola and Trollope are famous last-century examples of the four hours; the *Paris Review* interviews disclose many contemporary ones.

Full-timeness consists not in the actual number of hours at one's desk, but in that writing is one's major profession, practiced habitually, in freed, protected, undistracted time as needed, when it is needed.

a famous Victorian poem) *The Angel in the House,* who "must charm . . . sympathize . . . flatter . . . conciliate . . . be extremely sensitive to the needs and moods and wishes of others before her own . . . excel in the difficult arts of family life . . ."

> It was she who used to come between me and my paper . . . who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her . . . or she would have plucked out my heart as a writer.*

There is another angel, so lowly as to be invisible, although without her no art, or any human endeavor, could be carried on for even one day—the essential angel, with whom Virginia Woolf (and most women writers, still in the privileged class) did not have to contend—the angel who must assume the physical responsibilities for daily living, for the maintenance of life.

Almost always in one form or another (usually in the wife, two-angel form) she has dwelt in the house of men. She it was who made it possible for Joseph Conrad to "wrestle with the Lord for his creation":

> Mind and will and conscience engaged to the full, hour after hour, day after day . . . never aware of the even flow of daily life made easy and noiseless for me by a silent, watchful, tireless affection.

The angel who was "essential" to Rilke's "great task":

> like a sister who would run the house like a friendly climate, there or not there as one wished . . . and would ask for nothing except just to be there working and warding at the frontiers of the invisible.

Men (even part-time writers who must carry on work other than writing**) have had and have this inestimable advantage toward productivity. I cannot help but notice how curiously absent both of these angels, these watchers and warders at the frontiers of the

Professions for Women.

**As must many women writers.

invisible, are from the actual contents of most men's books, except perhaps on the dedication page:

To my wife, without whom . . .

I digress, and yet I do not; the disregard for the essential angel, the large absence of any sense of her in literature or elsewhere, has not only cost literature great contributions from those so occupied or partially occupied, but by failing to help create an arousing awareness (as literature has done in other realms) has contributed to the agonizingly slow elimination of this technologically and socially obsolete, human-wasting drudgery: Virginia Woolf's dream of a long since possible "economical, powerful and efficient future when houses will be cleaned by a puff of hot wind."

Sometimes the essential angel is present in women's books,* though still most "heroines are in white dresses that never need washing" (Rebecca Harding Davis's phrase of a hundred years ago). Some poets admit her as occasional domestic image; a few preen her as femininity; Sylvia Plath could escape her only by suicide:

> . . . flying . . .
> Over the engine that killed her——
> The mausoleum, the wax house.

For the first time in literary history, a woman poet of stature, accustomed through years to the habits of creation, began to live the life of most of her sex: the honey drudgers: the winged unmiraculous two-angel, whirled mother-maintenance life, that most women, not privileged, know. A situation without help or husband and with twenty-four hours' responsibility for two small human lives whom she adored and at their most fascinating and demanding. The world was blood-hot and personal. Creation's needs at its height. She had to get up at

*Among them: Harriette Arnow, Willa Cather, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, H.H. Richardson (of *Ultima Thule*), Ruth Suckow, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Sarah Wright, Agnes Smedley; Emily Dickinson, pre-eminently; Sylvia Plath, sometimes Christina Stead, Doris Lessing. (I would now add Edith Summers Kelley (*Weeds* and *The Devil's Hand*), the Marge Piercy of *Small Changes,* and my own fiction.)

> four in the morning, that still blue almost eternal hour before the baby's cry

to write at all.* After the long expending day, tending, caring, cleaning, enjoying, laundering, feeding, marketing, delighting, outing; being

> a very efficient tool or weapon, used and in demand from moment to moment. . . . Nights [were] no good [for writing]. I'm so flat by then that all I can cope with is music and brandy and water.

The smog of cooking, the smog of hell floated in her head. The smile of the icebox annihilated. There was a stink of fat and baby crap; viciousness in the kitchen! And the blood jet poetry (for which there was never time and self except in that still blue hour before the baby's cry) there was no stopping it:**

> It is not a question in these last weeks of the conflict in a woman's life between the claims of the feminine and the agonized work of art

Elizabeth Hardwick, a woman, can say of Sylvia Plath's suicide,

> Every artist is either a man or woman, and the struggle is pretty much the same for both.

A comment as insensible of the two-angel realities ("so lowly as to be invisible") as are the oblivious masculine assumptions, either that the suicide was because of Daddy's death twenty-three years before, revived and compounded by her husband's desertion; or else a real-life *Story of O* (that elegant pornography) sacramental culmination of being used up by ecstasy (poetry in place of sex this time):

*In the long tradition of early rising, an hour here and there, or late-night mother-writers from Mrs. Trollope to Harriette Arnow to this very twenty-four hours—necessarily fitting in writing time in accordance with maintenance of life, and children's, needs.

**Phrases, lines, throughout from Plath's *Ariel,* letters, BBC broadcasts.

> the pride of an utter and ultimate surrender, like the pride of O, naked and chained in her owl mask as she asks Sir Stephen for death. . . .*

If in such an examined extremity, the profound realities of woman's situation are ignored, how much less likely are they—particularly the subtler ones—to be seen, comprehended, taken into account, as they affect lesser-known women writers in more usual circumstances.

In younger years, confidence and vision leeched, aspiration reduced. In adult years, sporadic effort and unfinished work; women made "mediocre caretakers of their talent": that is, writing is not first. The angel in the house situation; probably also the essential angel, maintenance-of-life necessity; increasingly in our century, work on a paid job as well; and for more and more women writers, the whirled expending motherhood years. Is it so difficult to account for the many occasional-fine-story or one-book writers; the distinguished but limited production of others (Janet Lewis, Ann Petry, for example); the years and years in getting one book done (thirty years for Margaret Walker's *Jubilee,* twenty for Marguerite Young's *Miss Macintosh My Darling*); the slowly increasing numbers of women who not until their forties, fifties, sixties, publish for the first time (Dorothy Richardson, Hortense Calisher, Theodora Kroeber, Linda Hoyer—John Updike's mother); the women who start with children's, girls' books (Maxine Kumin), some like Cid Ricketts Sumner (*Tammy*) seldom or never getting to adult fiction that would encompass their wisdom for adults; and most of all, the unsatisfactory quality of book after book that evidence the marks of part-time, part-self authorship, and to whose authors Sarah Orne Jewett's words to the part-time, part-self young Willa Cather still apply, seventy years after:

> If you don't keep and mature your force and above all have time and quiet to perfect your work, you will be writing things not much better than you did five years ago. . . . Otherwise,

*Richard Howard, in *The Art of Sylvia Plath,* edited by Charles Newman.

> what might be strength is only crudeness, and what might be insight is only observation. You will write about life, but never life itself.*

Yes, the loss in quality, the minor work, the hidden silences, are there in woman after woman writer in our century.** We will never have the body of work that we were capable of producing. Blight, said Blake, never does good to a tree:

> And if a blight kill not a tree but it still bear fruit, let none say that the fruit was in consequence of the blight.

As for myself, who did not publish a book until I was fifty, who raised children without household help or the help of the "technological sublime" (the atom bomb was in manufacture before the first automatic washing machine); who worked outside the house on everyday jobs as well (as nearly half of all women do now, though a woman with a paid job, except as a maid or prostitute, is still rarest of any in literature); who could not kill the essential angel (there was no one else to do her work); would not—if I could—have killed the caring part of the Woolf angel, as distant from the world of literature most of my life as literature is distant (in content too) from my world:

The years when I should have been writing, my hands and being were at other (inescapable) tasks. Now, lightened as they are, when I must do those tasks into which most of my life went, like the old mother, grandmother in my *Tell Me a Riddle* who could not make herself touch a baby, I pay a psychic cost: "the sweat beads, the long shudder begins." The habits of a lifetime when everything else had to come before writing are

Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, edited by Annie Fields.

**Compared to men writers of like distinction and years of life, few women writers have had lives of unbroken productivity, or leave behind a "body of work." Early beginnings, then silence; or clogged late ones (foreground silences); long periods between books (hidden silences); characterize most of us. A Colette, Wharton, Glasgow, Millay, Lessing, Oates, are the exceptions.

not easily broken, even when circumstances now often make it possible for writing to be first; habits of years—response to others, distractibility, responsibility for daily matters—stay with you, mark you, become you. The cost of "discontinuity" (that pattern still imposed on women) is such a weight of things unsaid, an accumulation of material so great, that everything starts up something else in me; what should take weeks, takes me sometimes months to write; what should take months, takes years.

I speak of myself to bring here the sense of those others to whom this is in the process of happening (unnecessarily happening, for it need not, must not continue to be) and to remind us of those (I so nearly was one) who never come to writing at all.

We must not speak of women writers in our century (as we cannot speak of women in any area of recognized human achievement) without speaking also of the invisible, the as-innately-capable: the born to the wrong circumstances—diminished, excluded, foundered, silenced.

We who write are survivors, *"only's."** *One-out-of-twelve.*

*For myself, "survivor" contains its other meaning: one who must bear witness for those who foundered; try to tell how and why it was that they, also worthy of life, did *not* survive. And pass on ways of surviving; and tell our chancy luck, our special circumstances.

"Only's" is an expression out of the 1950s Civil Rights time: the young Ralph Abernathy reporting to his Birmingham Church congregation on his trip up north for support:

> I go to Seattle and they tell me, "Brother, you got to meet so and so, why he's the only Negro Federal Circuit Judge in the Northwest"; I go to Chicago and they tell me, "Brother, you've got to meet so and so, why he's the only full black professor of Sociology there is"; I go to Albany and they tell me, "Brother, you *got* to meet so and so, why he's the only black senator in the state legislature . . ." [long dramatic pause] . . . WE DON'T WANT NO ONLY'S.

Only's are used to rebuke ("to be models"); to imply the unrealistic, "see, it can be done, all you need is capacity and will." Accepting a situation of "only's" means: "let inequality of circumstance continue to prevail."

> And yet I wonder whether the "blessing" is not missing from such work. No longer diverted by other emotions, I work the way a cow grazes. . . . Perhaps in reality I accomplish a little more. The hands work and work and the head imagines it is producing God knows what, and yet formerly, in my so wretchedly limited working time, I was more productive, because I was more sensual; I lived as a human being must live, passionately interested in everything. . . . Potency, potency is diminishing.*

Käthe Kollwitz, forty-three, rare in being great artist and mother. One wonders what work was lost to us, undone, in that "wretchedly limited" time. Her greatest work was still ahead, but then the strength began to be "wretchedly limited."

IF—needed time *and* strength were available simultaneously with "the blessing," the "living as a human being must live" . . . (as, with changes, now could be).

Diaries and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz.

THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE▲

Virginia Woolf and the Angel

> It was she who used to come between me and my paper . . . who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.*

But Virginia Woolf never killed that aspect of the angel "extremely sensitive to the needs and moods and wishes of others": she remained—an essential part of her equipment as writer ("I think writing, my kind of writing, is a species of mediumship; I become the person"). And—as is evident in Woolf's diary and the reminiscences of those close to her—was usually characteristic of her personal relationships as well.

More important to remember, Woolf recognized in the angel an artist-being having to be expressed for and through others; understood her human value in a patriarchal structure (had herself been a beneficiary).

In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse,* (Mrs. Ramsay) enduring portraits of women constricted to the angel (and shown in their true powerlessness, division, exhaustion, narrowness), she celebrated—in anguish—their creative power ("making the moment something permanent . . . [making] the individual more whole and present"); their active professional qualities ("Domestic life is a *profession* and should be *paid;* motherhood is an exacting task." "The difficult *arts* of family life"); their longings, latencies; their having to find fulfillment vicariously in varied

*"Professions for Women."

▲ ONE OUT OF TWELVE, P. 34

contributions to others at a time when achievement for nearly all women could be only through others. She did not see them as submissive, passive, nor despise them for their constricted development. She knew, that born into her mother's generation, almost inescapably her capacities and life would have gone as theirs; that in her own generation, too, she was an exception—and that chancily; barely.

Some Manifestations of the Angel, 1800–1970:

The Answering and Echoing Movements

> . . . the exceeding sympathy, always ready and always profound, by which she made all that one could tell her reverberate to one's own feelings by the manifest impression that it made on hers. The pulses of light were not more quick nor inevitable in their flow and undulation than were the answering and echoing movements of her sympathizing attention.
>
> —Thomas De Quincey on Dorothy Wordsworth, 1827

A perfect mother's life—the life of a perfect wife

> She is no more of an angel today than she had always been; but I can't believe that by the accident of her death all of her unspeakable tenderness is lost to the beings she so dearly loved. . . . One can feel forever, the inextinguishable vibration of her devotion. I can't help feeling that in those last weeks I was not tender enough with her —that I was blind to her sweetness and beneficence. . . .
>
> When I came back from Europe I was struck with her being worn and shrunken, and now I know that she was very weary. She went about her usual activities, but the burden of life had grown heavy for her, and she needed rest. There is something inexpressibly touching to me in the way in which, during these last years, she went on from year to year without it. If she could only have lived she should have had it, and it would have been a delight to see her have it. But she has it now, in the most complete perfection! Summer after summer she never left Cambridge—it was impossible that father should leave his own house. The country, the sea, the change of air and scene, were an exquisite enjoyment to her; but she bore with the deepest gentleness and patience the constant loss of such opportunities. She passed her nights and her days in that dry, flat, hot, stale and odious Cambridge, and had never a thought while she did so but for father and Alice. It was a perfect mother's life—the life of a perfect wife. To bring her children into the world—to expend herself, for years, for their happiness and welfare—then, when they had reached full maturity and were absorbed in the world and in their own interests—to lay herself down in her ebbing strength and yield up her pure soul to the celestial power that had given her this divine commission.
>
> —Henry James in his *Notebooks,* after the death of his mother (1882)

William Butler Yeats, "On Woman"

> May God be praised for woman
> That gives up all her mind,
> A man may find in no man
> A friendship of her kind
> That covers all he has brought
> As with her flesh and bone,
> Nor quarrels with a thought
> Because it is not her own.

Sparing Him, And So On

> Ida, I want you if you can to come to me. But like this. We should have to deceive Jack. Jack can never realize what I have to do. He helps me all he can but he can't help me really and the result is I spend all my energy, every bit, in keeping going, I have none left for work. All my work is behindhand and I can't do it. I simply stare at the sky. I am too tired even to think. What makes me tired? Getting up, seeing about everything, arranging everything, *sparing him,* and so on. That journey nearly killed me, literally. He had no *idea* I suffered at all, and could not understand why I looked "so awful" and why everybody seemed to think I was terribly ill. . . .
>
> —Katherine Mansfield (a letter to her friend, Ida Baker)

Katherine Anne Porter, on being asked:

> . . . But haven't you found that being a woman presented to you, as an artist, certain special problems? It seems to me that a great deal of the upbringing of women encourages the dispersion of the self in many small bits, and that the practice of any kind of art demands a corralling and concentrating of that self and its always insufficient energies.
>
> I think that's very true and very right. You're brought up with the . . . curious idea of feminine availability in all spiritual ways, and in giving service to anyone who demands it. And I suppose that's why it has taken me twenty years to write this novel; it's been interrupted by just anyone who could jimmy his way into my life.
>
> —*Writers at Work, The Paris Review Interviews*

FREEING THE ESSENTIAL ANGEL▲

Virginia Woolf's vision of the future

> I think of Sussex in five hundred years to come. . . . Things will have been scorched up, eliminated. There will be magic gates. Draughts fan-blown by electric power will cleanse houses. Lights intense and firmly directed will go over the earth, doing the work. . . .
>
> . . . And then there was the sudden dancing light, that was hung in the future . . . "Look, I will make a little figure for your satisfaction. . . . Does this little figure advancing . . . to the economical, powerful, and efficient future when houses will be cleansed by a puff of hot wind satisfy you?" . . . We cried out together: "Yes, yes," as if affirming something, in a moment of recognition.*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*Women & Economics* [1898], *The Home, Its Work and Influence* [1907]) is the pioneer and still almost the only exponent of ways whereby "this technologically and socially obsolete, human-wasting drudgery" could be eliminated (the essential angel freed), while still preserving human maintenance-of-life satisfactions where they are intrinsic. But as free, voluntary, expression of the self, not life-consuming necessity.

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*"Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor-car," *Collected Essays.*

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