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Blood and Water: Feminine Writing in Beverley Farmer's The Seal Woman

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Blood and Water: Feminine Writing in Beverley Farmer’s The Seal Woman

Abstract
Using the phrase ‘feminine writing’ in the title of a paper would seem to take it for granted that there is indeed such a thin – that women do write - or at least can write - in a specifically feminine way which it is possible to identify, describe and comment upon. The idea remains hotly debated even though many critics, not all of them radical feminists, have asserted that indeed this is so, and have proceeded to point out what they regarded as the characteristic features - with regard to content and/or style - of this type of writing. The exercise has not always turned out to be very liberating for women writers, who were sometimes consigned to the rendering of a certain type of experience which, in the eyes of men, simply went to show that women were hysterical creatures who could only on rare occasions rise above the emotional quagmire to which their sex con- signed them.
Using the phrase ‘feminine writing’ in the title of a paper would seem to take it for granted that there is indeed such a thing, that women do write – or at least can write – in a specifically feminine way which it is possible to identify, describe and comment upon. The idea remains hotly debated even though many critics, not all of them radical feminists, have asserted that indeed this is so, and have proceeded to point out what they regarded as the characteristic features – with regard to content and/or style – of this type of writing. The exercise has not always turned out to be very liberating for women writers, who were sometimes consigned to the rendering of a certain type of experience which, in the eyes of men, simply went to show that women were hysterical creatures who could only on rare occasions rise above the emotional quagmire to which their sex consigned them.

Thus, at the turn of the century, Henry Lawson wrote a preface to Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* in which he said: ‘I hadn’t read three pages when I saw what you will no doubt see at once – that the story had been written by a girl.’ This was a back-handed compliment. Lawson meant to praise the novel, one of whose merits was a realism which occasionally transcended the defects inherent in women’s writing, and to which Lawson referred obliquely by saying: ‘I don’t know about the girlishly emotional parts of the book – I leave that to girl readers to judge.’¹ The novel, written under a man’s name, was a fine one on the whole but, Lawson implied, was marred by unmistakable traces of femininity. Although Miles Franklin was a crafty counterfeiter,² her real nature shone through her attempted disguise – she was the victim of an emotionality which is characteristic of women’s nature. Women’s writing, in this perspective, means the unbecoming predominance of emotion over reason. Compared with men’s writing, it is simply immature. This sexist perspective rightly infuriates feminists, although they are divided on the question of whether a truly feminine sort of writing exists. While Virginia Woolf suggested that there is such a thing as a ‘woman’s sentence’, Shosana Felman held that women still had to reinvent language in order to be free of what she
termed ‘the phallacy of masculine meaning’. As for Hélène Cixous, she prefers to speak of a ‘decipherable libidinal femininity’ which can be penned by either men or women. The problem is at once one of content and style, with feminine characteristics – whether assumed or genuine – envisaged in a rather different perspective in each case. Male critics have always acknowledged that women were good at writing about certain, mostly ‘domestic’ subject matters, with the result that women writers were not encouraged to venture beyond this traditional territory – their castle was also their prison. The purely stylistic character of ‘écriture féminine’, on the other hand, is regarded as far more elusive, and is sometimes dismissed out of hand as a feminist myth. The links between style, gender and an authenticity of female experience remain controversial.

I make no claim, obviously, to have found a definitive answer to this difficult literary – and more than literary – problem. My ambition is solely to look at a contemporary novel, Beverley Farmer’s *The Seal Woman*, which I found stunningly beautiful and which, it seemed to me, only a woman could have written – by which, and unlike Lawson, I mean that its literary qualities rather than its shortcomings are somehow uniquely feminine. What defines the femininity of the type of writing which is embodied by this novel? It is not for the most part a question of subject matter, of vocabulary, of syntax or of narrative mode – and yet it is all of these at once. Taken separately, the various ingredients which go into the writing of feminine fiction do not perhaps matter very greatly, or at least they matter less than the overall effect produced by their meaningful and deliberate combination into a kind of substance which is feminine writing – or at any rate an instance of it.

The French novelist Christiane Rochefort said women were supposed ‘to write about certain things: house, children, love’. Feminine writing thus reflects the social experience of women, whom the ruling patriarchal order circumscribes to so-called ‘feminine’ activities, places and emotions. In *The Seal Woman* a great deal of attention is paid to those traditional areas. Consider how the novel’s protagonist, Dagmar (she’s a Danish woman whose husband has been lost at sea and who revisits Australia, where she spent her honeymoon twenty-two years earlier) describes her activities: ‘I chopped crisp, snowy leeks and potatoes for soup. I gathered up a sprawl of washing and switched the machine on, in the hope that this would restore me to calm, or at least let me ride out the storm’ (p. 18). Here is a woman doing what women do traditionally – cooking, doing the washing – and coping with disturbingly strong emotions. Like any other male chauvinist, Henry Lawson would have understood this kind of feminine writing. But he would have been disconcerted by other accounts of female behaviour, such as the following: ‘First thing in the morning of one of my first days here I got up on a ladder and swept down all the cobwebs, under the sway of the nesting urge that still takes over for a day or two near the full moon when my blood flow used to start’ (p. 33). More
housework – but not performed as the result of some social conditioning. The passage suggests an interaction between the natural world – both inanimate (‘the full moon’) and animate (‘nesting urge’ suggests birds) – biology (menstruation), and female behaviour. A male chauvinist would say that women are the victims of anatomy, almost of instinct. Indeed Dagmar’s behaviour seems determined by factors beyond her control. But the implication is that this results from women being in touch with or attuned to realities to which men are simply blind. The source of their behaviour is far deeper than the tyranny of a patriarchal order. Women are in and of the world, not detached on-lookers like men: they participate in its rhythms; their experience is almost necessarily cosmic.

Beverley Farmer’s writing shows features which have been traditionally regarded as feminine, such as a particular and somewhat romantic attention paid to nature, flowers, animals, etc., as in the following passage:

Bananas are so cheap, and there are all the tropical fruits I knew – pineapples, papaya and kiwi and passion fruits all purple and gold, eaten with a spoon, and wary custard apples with their leaves of sandy pearflesh – and other new ones. There is a sleek red-skinned egg with blood-red seeds coiled in gold flesh around the shape of a Byzantine cross when cut through its equator... (p. 50)

More than thirty lines are thus devoted to a description of the fruits Dagmar loves to eat in Australia – a typical feminine conceit, one might be tempted to think. But these descriptions are not meant to prettify the text, nor are they a sign that the author cannot stick to a narrative thread and is constantly getting side-tracked into irrelevant details. The fruits are not just beautiful to look at – they’re nice to eat, and eating is part of living. The passage is in fact a celebration of living: it is a glory of colours (‘purple and gold’; ‘blood red’) and those colours, as we shall see, are a symbol of life. Nor is it by accident that the narrator refers to the fruits in metaphorical terms of the earth (‘its equator’) and of people (‘flesh’). These fruits, which sustain life, testify to the fertility of the earth, its bounteousness; they suggest harmonious and abundant living. The passage has directly to do with the major preoccupations of the novel, which concern living and dying, creating and destroying, fertility and barrenness, and which strike me as being especially feminine.

Dagmar, the heroine, is a frustrated and unhappy woman: she has lost her husband Finn prematurely – the novel accepts death as part of nature; what is not acceptable is when death is premature or unnecessary – she has no children and believes herself no longer fertile – apparently, she is experiencing an early winter of life? Her mind is on destruction and on death – ‘In a way I am a grave’ she says (p. 188) and she comes to Australia to work through her mourning, even though she doesn’t think she can do it: ‘What does it matter, after all, where I am? I am a vessel, and my cargo is the death of Finn wherever I am, bequeathed to me, and I live in a net of shadows’ (p. 188). However, Australia will regenerate her,
effect a cure, almost in the psychoanalytic sense, and in the end she will go back to Denmark, pregnant by her reluctant lover Martin, ready to carry on living.

Her odyssey is not simply an individual one – it has something archetypal about it. It is a paradigm of the eternal fight between the forces of death and the forces of life which involves the entire planet. Dagmar is a concerned environmentalist; she worries about the future of the earth which is threatened by man’s thoughtless activities – pollution, hunting and fishing in particular. Soon, she says, ‘only the submarines of the great powers will be left alive in the sea’ (p. 61), and then she adds, ‘The earth is one great graveyard, as we all know too well’ (p. 65).

In the fictionalising of these preoccupations, it is Beverley Farmer’s method, even more than the preoccupations themselves perhaps, which shows an unmistakable feminine touch. Under a man’s pen, it is likely that these preoccupations would have taken the form of an allegory or of an intellectual discourse; Farmer’s manner is far more subtle – and a good deal more effective as well.

In their studies of women’s autobiographies, Suzanne Juhasz and Rebecca Hogan have insisted on the diarists’ immersion in a profusion of details, resulting in a seeming loss of perspective which is in fact a non-hierarchical perspective and which has variously been described as ‘verbal quilt’ or ‘radical parataxis’: ‘immersion in the horizontal, non-hierarchical flow of events and details – in other words, radical parataxis – seems to be one of the striking features of the diary as a form,’ Hogan observed. ‘Diaries are not so much inclusive because they contain everything from a given day, as they are inclusive in the sense that they do not privilege “amazing” over “ordinary” events in terms of scope, space or selection.’ Much of this applies to the narrative mode Beverley Farmer uses in The Seal Woman.

The novel is a homodiegetic narration, and often takes the form of a diary in which Dagmar writes down her experiences of the day – thus: ‘At night the rooms next door cast light into the trees. Now and then I hear voices or the radio or TV’ (p. 76) or ‘At the surf beach at sunset the waves cover my footprints and run back’ (p. 272). This narrative mode is inherently parataxic: the juxtaposition of fragments and the use of the present tense prevent a perspective from emerging clearly; perceptions and sensations are jumbled, chaotic. This reflects Dagmar’s confusion, her struggle with depression. The present, however, does not predominate. Most of the narrative is written in the past tense and, were it not for its fragmentary character, would appear rather more conventional. The interplay between past and present – in the grammatical as well as in the psychological senses – is an essential aspect of the narrative. Dagmar, overwintering in Australia, is taking stock, and trying to make sense of her past. The alternance of past and present tenses convey this attempt. Passages written in the past tense are truly narrative: they recount the activities of Dagmar
and her acquaintances with a sense that they are inserted in the inescapable flow of time. Passages written in the present tense, on the other hand, are removed from this flow: they are moments of reflexion and interpretation, of nightmares and fantasies too. They transcend events and thus provide a perspective on them. The past - in so far as it is a source of alienation and depression - is thus gradually exorcized, which paves the way for a preoccupation with the future which shows Dagmar to be a free agent again.

This effect is reinforced by the collage technique which Beverley Farmer uses abundantly. Information is supplied in a fragmentary, apparently random manner - a snippet here and a snippet there - and the reader has to piece the fragments together. Finn's death when his ship was rammed by a tanker, for instance, is introduced cryptically: 'Martin said to me once, his mouth against the nape of my neck: "There was no doubt they went - in the water, then? They couldn't have burnt to death?"' (p. 7). The significance of the question is revealed only later, thanks to other fragments such as: 'I am Dagmar, a Dane. I am here now as Finn's widow where I came once as his bride' (p. 9). Her odyssey unfolds slowly and gradually, interrupted at intervals - as it seems - by what Murray Bail would call 'intrusions from real life'. Those intrusions consist in quotations, some of them almost a page long, from a variety of sources: poems, songs and ballads, folk tales, newspaper cuttings (cf. p. 15), excerpts from the Bible (cf. pp. 153 & 177), from Coleridge (cf. p. 145), from Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* (cf. p. 116), from Rowena Farre's *Seal Morning* (cf. p. 208), from Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (cf. p. 209), etc. These interruptions or asides often act as instances of lateral narratives, in the sense in which one speaks of lateral thinking, criss-crossing the main story line, opening it up, infusing it with other yet related preoccupations. What happens to Dagmar, in other words - her fears, her joys, her attitudes - is not something apart, purely individual, but part of a bigger, perhaps cosmic pattern. This dismantling of closures and boundaries - between the fictional, the mythical and the historical, between the past and the present - is in a sense peculiarly feminine. Woman, Hélène Cixous said, must 'write from the body': 'Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours.'

Dagmar, the narrator, indeed writes from the body - a dispirited and forlorn body at first, and then a serene, almost triumphant one, but always a very concrete one with strong life-asserting urges and cravings.

This gives Beverley Farmer's writing a paradoxically feminine earthiness. The feminine, as lady-like, is often associated with daintiness or prettiness, that is, a remoteness from the grosser aspects of existence. This is of course an alienated and mutilated version of femininity rather than the real thing. Farmer's narrator does not flinch from reporting, mostly in a matter-of-fact way, facts of life which are often regarded, especially by
women writers, as too coarse to mention. Thus: ‘I went to piss, I brought in the bicycle, already wet with dew. Then I undressed and slid into his bed which smelled of him, his strong sweat [...] I filled the bed with their shadows and ghosts, Martin and Tess, Finn, and Janni and my good hands that were wet when I came’ (p. 233). Such passages might seem to be a long way from more traditionally feminine lyrical descriptions of flowers or animals, which also abound in the novel. But in fact they underline the novel’s inclusiveness, its refusal to consider certain things as irrelevant, coarse, unworthy of attention. When Dagmar, pregnant, is planning her return to Denmark, she thinks: ‘And now I will have flesh and blood to grapple with also, and be anchored, earthed’ (p. 298). The novel’s occasional earthiness is a way of being earthed, in touch with global reality. It also underlines the fundamental role of the body in the process of living: to some delicate souls, micturition, smells and masturbation have no place in fiction; yet no one can deny they are part of living. Farmer refers to them in a matter-of-fact way which is anything but titillating or perverse: the body has its own way of speaking or writing, and can only be denied at the price of mutilation and alienation.

Farmer’s conception of writing is nothing if not holistic. It is imbued with a sense of the connectedness of things, with the intuition or conviction that human beings are not so much discrete individuals as elements in a wider, cosmic, scheme. This is reinforced by the novel’s mythopoetic dimension, and in particular by the numerous references to other cultures with which the narrative is studded. Dagmar would seem to be a frustrated anthropologist, with an enormous curiosity about folk tales, the legends and myths of remote civilisations – whether the Aborigines, the Inuit, the Celts or the Vikings. Her mind is constantly drawn to those alien yet familiar cultures because they have answers to the fundamental questions by which she is obsessed – especially those that have to do with life and death. The following passage is a good instance. Dagmar has planted some beans:

how strange that the bean, no less than the bee and fly and butterfly, was thought of as a vessel for the soul. In Greece and Rome you could drive a ghost away if you spat beans at it. They had air in them, breath, or why else would you fart after you ate them, and the breath and the soul are one and the same: that seems to have been the train of thought. (p. 79)

The most trivial everyday activity – like gardening – can be the starting point of a meditation on the mysteries of life, to which even farting is not irrelevant.

The cosmos is both one and multiple, and everything is connected with everything else. Ancient and modern mythologies converge to assert this. The author’s intuitive sense of the affinities which cultures have with one another, and which beings of this or that order have with beings of other orders, this refusal of rigid boundaries, this plasticity, has something
especially feminine about it. It does not, however, degenerate into syncretism. Boundaries can be crossed temporarily but not abolished: all creatures belong in a certain environment which they cannot leave permanently — this is illustrated by the tale of the seal woman, which Dagmar transcribes for her lover's daughter and appends to her diary. Dagmar herself, by the same token, has to go back where she came from, where she belongs, in order to be whole — Australia can only be a place of transition for her. Nature is flexible, but its laws must not be transgressed.

Beverley Farmer's preoccupation with living and dying is not expressed in an abstract, philosophical fashion. She eschews intellectual discourse and allegory alike and relies instead on clusters of images to let significance emerge. One very basic function of her metaphors is to establish the invisible kinship which unites all creatures of nature: human beings, animals, plants, the earth itself are a whole: 'the whole land, when you think of it, is a vast body,' Dagmar exclaims (p. 185), and to her the Nullarbor caves are 'the lungs of the earth' (p. 247). Elsewhere she writes of 'the dry rough skin of the rock' (p. 4) or of the 'fleshy smell' (p. 1) which a beach has in its salt, thereby emphasizing the links between humanity and the inanimate world. Metaphors also suggest links between humanity and the vegetable and animal kingdom. The pubic hair of Dagmar's lover is 'damp and warm like seaweed' (p. 1); the sounds made by children running on the wooden floor suggest 'a swan leaving the water, a pelican, slow beats of a paddle' (p. 1). The linkage between the various worlds is also expressed, with particular insistence, by the legend of the seal woman and the silkie — mythical creatures who are human beings upon the land and animals in the water.

What unites all creatures — even inanimate ones — is the fact that they are subjected to the processes of living and dying — mostly the latter. The characters feel very concerned about destruction, ecological disasters, etc. of which Australia appears to be an awful example: 'The desert is growing fast,' the protagonist writes; 'soon all that grows here will be the desert which is dead land... From horizon to horizon vast lands are already bone dry dust under a white shimmer like ice, the death mask of the salt' (p. 23). The major paradigm of destruction, which is referred to at regular intervals throughout the novel, is the mysterious sickness which in the late 1980s killed thousands of seals in the North Sea. This sickness appeared to derive from high pollution levels, and was thus man-made. Since the seal is presented by Dagmar as a semi-human creature, its destruction is symptomatic of mankind's self-destructive drive.

This preoccupation with death and destruction, once again, is mostly expressed through a series of related images which cluster around the twin poles of blood and water. It is not that either liquid stands for either life or death: each has dual, ambiguous connotations, and intermingles with the other to create a vision of great complexity and of compelling concreteness.
Blood suggests carnage, and is something of an obsession with Dagmar: 'The bloodbath, I say, always the blood bath', she repeats on various occasions (cf. pp. 34, 284 & 296). Blood stands for the urge to destroy, as in the documentary she watches in which piranhas eat a small calf of some native species:

In close-up the swarm gnashes and frays and crunches his still-living meat, bones and all, while the blood swirls over their gold eyes and the screen, the lens, and a soothing teacherly voice calls attention to the savagery of their bloodlust. But how, I wonder, could this have happened precisely in front of his camera unless the gallant little calf were trapped and offered up? And for what if not to slake our savagery, our bloodlust? (p. 177)

Blood is life slipping away, to be gone forever, as when Dagmar had a backstreet abortion to get rid of the bastard child Janni has fathered: 'I bled for two weeks, bedridden, but I covered my tracks... I had thrown overboard the only hope that I might have a child... I had blood on my hands' (p. 197).

By the same token, however, blood means life too. Blood, as one of the characters, the painter Olwen, asserts, is a symbol of life in many mythologies: The [Aborigines'] red ochre, the Holy Grail, the Cauldron of Regeneration, even your Odin's mead, if I remember rightly,' she tells Dagmar. 'The blood was life everlasting. They mixed it with honey, menstrual blood, and drank it' (p. 287). Dagmar is aware of the religious and creative, or redemptive, significance of blood, as is shown by her attitude when she bangs her head in a cave in the Nullarbor: 'I sat and held my stung scalp. Red in the torchlight, my left hand, bright with blood and water, and I pressed it on the wall. Make an offering of blood, they say, and the dead tongues come alive' (p. 249). The life-giving power of blood is illustrated in particular by menstrual bleeding. For Dagmar, who is forty-one at the time of her second visit to Australia, an apparent early menopause signifies the approach of death, and reinforces her depression: her life is sterile, pointless. But one day her period returns unexpectedly and she feels joyful, rejuvenated. This is narrated in a matter-of-fact way which may disturb queasy readers (whether male or female) but which enhances the life-affirming aspect of the experience: 'A red sheen shone on the lino where I had stood to make tea. I bent and peered: it was wet blood. I dipped a finger in my fanny and brought it out glossy with bright blood. It was rich and not so salty as I remembered nor so fishy, and sweeter, the red honey as it oozed from my combs' (p. 234). The potential to create is necessarily sweet and satisfying. Hence Dagmar's intense disappointment when, a little later, her period stops again: 'All this month, all November, no blood came: not a drop of blood. No heaviness and bloat, no clench of the belly, no bloodflow. Nothing flowed from me or into me any more. I never knew until it vanished again how glad of it I was, how proud. It was all of a piece with the loss of Martin [the lover
who has rejected her], both to be mourned for without distinction. So soon after I had got it back, to have dried up again, and be barren, that was hard to bear' (p. 290). The metaphor of the vessel (‘Nothing flowed from me or into me any more’), like that of the cauldron (cf. p. 297), which both express female creativeness, suggests an answer to the question raised by feminist critics Gilbert and Gubar: ‘If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?’

Soon afterwards Dagmar realises that her period stopped because, against all odds, she is pregnant. ‘I am flesh and blood,’ she exults, ‘heavy flesh, thick blood. Everything I see is solid’ (p. 296). Her creativity is vindicated and depression lifts. She is whole again, ready to go home.

Blood imagery is complemented by water imagery. The two kinds share a common liquidity, and as well both are associated with femininity: menstrual blood is of course uniquely feminine, and water is also a feminine element, as a quotation from Rowena Farre’s *Seal Morning* underlines: ‘In Scotland, as in most other countries, the female sex is symbolized by water and the male by fire’ (p. 208). The affinity of woman with water is also asserted by Martin: ‘“Years ago,” he said, “some bloke, I’m pretty sure it was a bloke, wrote a book about woman having been semi-aquatic back in pre-history. Woman as opposed to man’” (p. 141). Aboriginal customs seem to confirm this affinity: ‘The sea was the women’s domain, the men were banned’ (p. 58). Water and blood are often associated rather than opposed, as in Dagmar’s pet phrase ‘the blood bath’ or the quotation from a Norse saga, Snorri’s *Edda*: ‘How shall sea be referred to? By calling it Ymir’s blood...’ (p. 228). The painter Olwen also refers to ‘the sea as the mother of life. Salt water as the mother of our blood’ (p. 287). Like blood, water also symbolizes creativity and fecundity. This is suggested by a quotation from Genesis: ‘And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly’ (p. 78).

The association of femininity and fecundity is of course not accidental – it is very much part of the feminine character of the novel.

But, like blood, water can also be synonymous with destruction, with death. Finn drowns with his fellow-sailors: ‘A hole opened in the sea and swallowed them,’ Dagmar remembers only too clearly. ‘Well might they bury the drowned in the between-tide sand, those that are washed up, as was the way of things in old Jutland, and not in the churchyard for fear that the sea would rise up after her own and take the living as well’ (p. 17). One might be tempted to see the drownings referred to in the novel – there is Finn, and two young surfers (cf. p. 212) – as a sign that the sea’s association with femininity makes it hostile to the male sex, were it not that Martin’s sister, then a seven-year-old girl, also drowned (cf. p. 239). For all its femininity, the novel does not posit such stark oppositions between the sexes.

It is above all in the form of ice that water is a destructive force. The novel abounds in references to the Antarctic – the animals that live there...
and the men who died there. Dagmar has a curious memory of being, as it were, debarred from her almost-natural element, water: 'It seemed to me that more than anyone I was bound to this water, belonged there, and yet I alone could not go in, however hard I tried. I walked in it up to my thighs, but could no more move one step forward than if it were solid ice' (p. 7). The hostility or deadliness of ice is also suggested by references to the Norwegian film *The Ice Palace*, in which a little girl gets lost inside a frozen waterfall. Ice figures prominently in Dagmar's nightmares: 'The walls are ice. Nowhere dark to turn my face. Everywhere is radiant white' (p. 67). It also becomes a metaphor of grief: 'Is there a figure of speech, to be frozen with grief? He in his grief was like a river clotted with slurreries of ice...' (p. 218).

The colour white, which is of course associated with ice, also comes to represent sterility and death. Evoking the progress of desertification in Australia, Dagmar remarks: 'From horizon to horizon vast lands are already bone dry dust under a white shimmer like ice, the death mask of the salt... Now there is a curse on our land and it is a white curse' (p. 23). Traditional Aboriginal beliefs point in the same direction: 'They thought a white skin meant death. They weren’t far wrong', Martin remarks (p. 97). Dagmar herself, who has come to Australia to mourn and who is obsessed by death, stands out because of her pallor: 'How can anyone who spends so much time on the beach be so white? I was once asked' (p. 39). The fact that she spends most of her time in the water rather than actually on the beach only partly explains the oddity. However, the association between white and death is not unambiguous. As usual in *The Seal Woman*, symbolic meanings are apt to shift from one pole to the other, or at least to be complemented with opposite associations. Thus Dagmar's husband Finn is associated with red, which is the colour of blood, and therefore of life – he is described as 'shy, burly, sunburnt as red as the hull of his ship' (10). But we are told that the name Finn meant the "fair" or the "white" in old gaelic' (p. 53). Finn thus comes to signify both life and death – the life that was and which is no more. This paradox is apparent in a vision which Dagmar has of her dead husband: 'It is Finn trapped not in ice but in fire, his hair on fire, a lamp burning the wall yellow. His face is still as stone, as red stone. He is the Red Man who does not know he is dead' (p. 275). To the life giving elements (fire, burning, red) stand opposed those elements which signify death (ice, still, stone) resulting in a ghost-like creature, a man who does not know he is dead.

What, in conclusion, can *The Seal Woman* tell us about feminine writing? It shows that this is a kind of writing which, as male critics suspected, is not placed under the primacy of the intellect. The critics concluded that this made it inferior but I would argue that it makes it simply different. There is of course no lack of intelligence or subtlety in this writing, quite the reverse, but its intelligence is as it were made flesh. It has a sensuous, organic quality about it which male writing seldom attains, and which
appears for instance in the loving attention paid to visual details. Much of it has to do with the use of imagery. It is not just that some images are unmistakably feminine, as when Dagmar speaks of 'my shadow about my feet like a skirt I had undone' (p. 157). More importantly, recurrent, almost obsessive imagery – especially blood and water imagery – gives the writing a distinctive texture which is at once exquisitely concrete and remarkably imaginative. It works on a variety of levels, literal and metaphorical, realistic and mythopoetic, and is full of a sense that each level is intimately connected with the others. This all-inclusiveness, this refusal to regard anything as beyond the pale, this openness, is feminine to the extent that the masculine often means discrimination and exclusion, rigid compartments with little or no communication between them. Beverley Farmer's writing flows like a strong, winding stream whose waters are the very substance of life. It seems to invite comparison with Hélène Cixous' own writing, especially as far as biblical and mythological imagery are concerned. Cixous' mythical and biblical allusions, critic Toril Moi asserted, 'are often accompanied by – or interspersed with – “oceanic” water imagery, evoking the endless pleasures of the polymorphous perverse child.' She went on to say that 'For Cixous, as for countless mythologies, water is the feminine element par excellence: the closure of the mythical world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother's womb. It is within this space that Cixous' speaking subject is free to move from one subject position to another, or to merge oceanically with the world. Her vision of female writing is in this sense firmly located within the closure of the Lacanian Imaginary: a space in which all difference has been abolished.' As far as Beverley Farmer is concerned, however, we have seen that the plasticity of her vision did not extend to the abolition of differences. As the tale of the seal woman indicates, this attempted abolition is a sterile transgression. Her heroine does feel the temptation of closure – she says at one point 'All I wanted was a head pricked and blown clear like a goose egg, polished walls enclosing nothing' (p. 220) – but this is a pathological symptom which shows how close to mental breakdown Dagmar is then. What saves her is that she has in fact the strength to reach out and engage the world around her instead of remaining enclosed within her own grief. Closure is all right as long as it is provisional: the egg – to go back to the image Farmer used – must eventually break open to let life emerge. Perhaps the most feminine trait in Beverley Farmer's writing is its constant opening onto ever different planes, with pulsations which are the very rhythm of life.

It was brought to my attention that the two adjectives 'holistic' and 'mythopoetic', which I use to describe Beverley Farmer's writing, are often applied to the writings of Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka. And there is little doubt that they could be applied to the writings of other men too. This is not surprising – Hélène Cixous has been saying all along that 'écriture féminine' was not the exclusive preserve of women. Besides,
Farmer's mode of writing is simply one paradigm of feminine writing among others. All the same, the fact that Soyinka's writing can also be described as holistic and mythopoetic is not without interest: it suggests a common deviance from a norm which is perhaps less masculine per se than Occidental. The dominance of reason and logic, of linearity, which is an attempt to impose order on seemingly chaotic reality in order to understand it and therefore master it, the privileging of a single type of connection between events – chronological, cause and effect – at the expense of the many others which are no less real – those features of 'masculine writing' are perhaps associated with Western imperialism rather than with masculine 'nature' as such. In this perspective, there is no contradiction when both women and post-colonial male writers practise a type of 'écriture' which rejects those constrictive conventions in order to open new doors and release new energies. Feminine writing, then, could very well be another name for creativity.

NOTES

2. Cf. the implication of guilt in Lawson's sentence 'I wrote to Miles Franklin, and she confessed that she was a girl' (ibid., p. 119).
5. Beverley Farmer, The Seal Woman (St Lucia: UQP, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
7. Cf. p. 19: 'Even the bloodflow which always came at around the full moon for thirty years, stopped. Now I no longer bled. Most likely the menopause, the doctor said: I had no sign of cancer. It was a small matter; only right and proper, in a way: all of a piece with the death of Finn, of my youth, an early winter.'
10. Ibid., p. 103.
14. Dagmar's attitude should perhaps be seen in the context of the sense of shame menstruation still evokes in a number of women, and which was stigmatized as
follows by Germaine Greer: ‘If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood – if it makes you sick, you’ve got a long way to go, baby’ (G. Greer, The Female Eunuch (London: Paladin, 1971), p. 51).

Interestingly enough, the comparison between menstrual blood and honey also occurs in a masculine novel in which a girl who has only just started menstruating finds herself covered in bees: ‘Ah, so that is it! They have smelled the sticky blood-flow. They think it is honey. It is’ (David Malouf, Remembering Babylon (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 142). In Malouf’s novel – which by what might seem a remarkable coincidence also refers to silxies and seal women (cf. p. 154) – however, blood does not play the essential, and particularly feminine, part it does in Beverley Farmer’s.


16. Another association of ice with death is the fear of a new Ice Age which will obliter­ate most living creatures – cf. p. 182.

17. Cf. for instance this description of fish: Three were pale with only a glimmer of blue, all their fins beige, but the other was daubed with a tropical blue so intense that around the red eye it throbbed and made the fawn lacework along the skull seem an after-image. This same blue, diamond crossed with green, spread along each flank to the blue fan tail. But the side fins were grass green. Its ridge of back was mottled, a dark rock; and its flattened dorsal fin – I spread it out – was a deeper blue. Even the flesh in its vault of ribs was blue, spotted with blood, of a milk-and-water transparency (pp. 52-53).


19. Dagmar is robustly heterosexual, and in this respect too her story suggests that difference has to be accepted.

20. I would like to thank my colleague Prof. Christiane Fioupou for making this helpful remark.