Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English

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In her poem "Diving into the Wreck" (1972), Adrienne Rich imagined a descent into the sea of history that might see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail. The poem has been a mandate for feminist critics as they measure the damage patriarchal cultures have inflicted and the treasures that a female tradition has nevertheless accumulated. We have yet to survey fully, however, the lesbian writers who worked under the double burden of a patriarchal culture and a strain in the female tradition that accepted and valued heterosexuality.¹ It is these writers whom I want to ground more securely in the domain of feminist criticism.²

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¹ The number of texts about lesbians, by lesbians and nonlesbians, is unclear. There are about twenty-three hundred entries in Gene Damon and Lee Stuart's The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography (San Francisco, 1967) and about nineteen hundred entries in the revised edition by Damon, Jan Watson, and Robin Jordan (Reno, Nev., 1975). While this second edition has more nonfiction entries and has been updated, the compilers have also cut over a thousand entries from the first edition because they referred to "trash" men had written for male readers (p. 26). The pioneering survey of the figure of the lesbian in Western literature remains Jeannette H. Foster's Sex Variant Women in Literature: A Historical and Quantitative Survey (London, 1958), but adding to it now is Lillian Faderman's valuable Surpassing the Love of Men (New York, 1981).

² For a study of the French literary tradition, see Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," in Homosexualities and French Literature, ed. George Stambolian and Marks (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), pp. 353–77. Several of the articles on female sexuality which were collected in Women—Sex and Sexuality, ed. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person (Chicago, 1980), have insights into modern lesbianism.

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My definition of the lesbian—as writer, as character, and as reader—will be conservative and severely literal. She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying. Of course a lesbian is more than her body, more than her flesh, but lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh. That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being. Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone. If female and male gay writings have their differences, it is not only because one takes Sappho and the other Walt Whitman as its great precursor. They simply do not spring from the same physical presence in the world.

To my lexicographical rigidity I will add an argument that is often grim. Because the violent yoking of homosexuality and deviancy has been so pervasive in the modern period, little or no writing about it can ignore that conjunction. A text may support it, leeringly or ruefully. It may reject it, fiercely or ebulliently. Moral or emotional indifference is improbable. Few, if any, homosexual texts can exemplify writing at the zero degree, that degree at which writing, according to Roland Barthes, is "... basically in the indicative mood, or ... amodal ... [a] new neutral writing ... [that] takes its place in the midst of ... ejaculation and judgements; without becoming involved in any of them; [that] ... consists precisely in their absence." Lesbian novels in English have responded judgmentally to the perversion that has made homosexuality perverse by developing two repetitive patterns: the dying fall, a narrative of damnation, of the lesbian's suffering as a lonely outcast attracted to a psychological lower caste; and the enabling escape, a narrative of the reversal of such descending trajectories, of the lesbian's rebellion against social stigma and self-contempt. Because the first has been dominant during the twentieth century, the second has had to flee from the imaginative grip of that tradition as well.

3. Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston, 1970), pp. 75–77. Barthes has claimed that a recent novel, Renaud Camus' Tricks (trans. Richard Howard [New York, 1981]), which I read in manuscript, exemplifies homosexual writing at the degree zero. In his preface, Barthes says that homosexuality is "... still at that stage of excitation where it provokes what might be called feats of discourse," but "Camus' narratives are neutral, they do not participate in the game of interpretation." I suggest that Tricks does interpret a pattern of male homosexual activity as a fascinating, intense, limited, and only apparently permissible form of experience.

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If the narratives of damnation reflect larger social attitudes about homosexuality, they can also extend an error of discourse about it: false universalizing, tyrannical univocalizing. Often ahistorical, as if pain erased the processes of time, they can fail to reveal the inseparability of the twentieth-century lesbian novel and the twentieth century: "... in the nineteenth century... homosexuality assumed its modern form," which the next century was to exhibit. One symptom of modernization, of the refusal to exempt the lesbian from the lurching logic of change, was a new sexual vocabulary. Before the end of the nineteenth century, homosexuality might have been subsumed under such a term as "masturbation." Then lesbians became "lesbians." The first citation for lesbianism as a female passion in The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary is 1908, for "sapphism" 1890.

The public used its new language with pity, hostility, and disdain. The growing tolerance of an optionally nonprocreative heterosexual failed to dilute the abhorrence of a necessarily nonprocreative homosexuality, especially if it threatened social as well as sexual self-sufficiency. In her study of birth control, Linda Gordon states: "We must notice that the sexual revolution was not a general loosening of sexual taboos but only of those on nonmarital heterosexual activity. Indeed, so specifically heterosexual was this change that it tended to intensify taboos on homosexual activity and did much to break patterns of emotional dependency and intensity among women." Both female and male writers absorbed such strong cultural signals. If "guilt and anxiety rarely appear in homosexual literature until the late nineteenth century... [they] become the major theme of Angst... after 1914." Evidently, freedom in one place may serve as an inoculation against its permissible appearance elsewhere. The more autonomy women claim in one sphere, the more they may enter into an obscure balancing act that may lead to tighter restrictions upon them in another.

Such an environment nurtured external and internal censorship. During a century in which the woman writer as such became less of a freak, the lesbian writer had to inhibit her use of material she knew intimately but which her culture might hold to be, at best, freakish. She learned that being quiet, in literature and life, would enable her to “pass.” Silence could be a passport into the territory of the dominant world. In a quick-witted recent novel, June Arnold’s *Sister Gin*, an aging mother responds to her middle-aged daughter’s attempt to talk to her about her lesbianism: “But she shouldn’t say that word. It isn’t a nice word. ‘People don’t care what you do as long as you don’t tell them about it. I know that.’” Such silence signifies a subterranean belief in the magical power of language. If the lesbian were to name herself, her utterance might carry a taint from speaker to listener, from mouth to ear. Silence is also a shrewd refusal to provoke punitive powers—be they of the family, workplace, law, or church. Obviously this survival tactic makes literature impossible. Culture, then, becomes the legatee of linguistic zeros, of blank pages encrypted in tombs critics will never excavate.

If the lesbian writer wished to name her experience but still feared plain speech, she could encrypt her text in another sense and use codes. In the fallout of history, the words “code” and “zero” lie together. The Arabs translated the Hindu for “zero” as *sifr* (“empty space”), in English “cipher.” As the Arabic grew in meanings, *sifr* came to represent a number system forbidden in several places but still secretly deployed, and cipher became “code.” In some lesbian fiction, the encoding is allegorical, a straightforward shift from one set of terms to another, from a clitoris to a cow. Other acts are more resistant to any reading that might wholly reveal, or wholly deny, lesbian eroticism.

Take for example “the kiss,” a staple of lesbian fiction. Because it has shared with women’s writing in general a reticence about explicitly representing sexual activity, the kiss has had vast metonymic responsibilities. Simultaneously, its exact significance has been deliberately opaque. Look at three famous kiss scenes:

It was a very real oblivion. Adele was roused from it by a kiss that seemed to scale the very walls of chastity. She flung away on the instant filled with battle and revulsion. [Gertrude Stein, *Q. E. D.*]


Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! . . . she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up . . . she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through the revelation, the religious feeling! [Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway]

Does the kiss encode transgression or permissibility? Singularity or repeatability? Impossibility or possibility? The same character, "O," can stand for both the zero of impossibility and for the possibilities of female sexuality. Does the kiss predict the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning, or a lesbian erotic enterprise? Or is it the event that literally embraces contradictions?

Still, the overt will out. As if making an implicit, perhaps unconscious pact with her culture, the lesbian writer who rejects both silence and excessive coding can claim the right to write for the public in exchange for adopting the narrative of damnation. The paradigm of this narrative is Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness—published, banned in England, and quickly issued elsewhere in 1928, by which time scorn for lesbianism had hardened into orthodoxy. Novelist as well as novel have entered minor mythology. Hall represents the lesbian as scandal and the lesbian as woman-who-is-man, who proves "her" masculinity through taking a feminine woman-who-is-woman as "her" lover. In a baroque and savage satire published after The Well of Loneliness, Wyndham Lewis excoriates a den of dykes in which a woman artist in "a stiff Radcliffe-Hall collar, of antique masculine cut" torments a heterosexual fellow and dabbles with a volupitous mate. He is too jealous and enraged to recognize either the sadness of costume and role reversal (the stigmatized seeking to erase the mark through aping the stigmatizers) or the courage of the masquerade (the emblazoning of defiance and jaunty play). Be it mimicry or bravery, the woman who would be man reaches for status and for freedom. The man who would be woman, because of

11. See Nina Auerbach, Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pp. 186-87, for more comment on the "O."


the devaluation of the female and feminine, participates, in part, in a ritual of degradation.

Comparing The Well of Loneliness to Hall's life reveals a discrepancy between the pleasures she seems to have found with her lover, Una Taylor, Lady Troubridge, and the sorrows of her hero, Stephen Gordon. Hall offers a parallel to the phenomenon of the woman novelist who creates women characters less accomplished and successful than she. In addition, the novel is more pessimistic about the threat of homosexuality as such to happiness than Hall's earlier novel, The Unlit Lamp (1924). Set in roughly the same time period as The Well of Loneliness, The Unlit Lamp dramatizes a triangle of mother, daughter, and governess. The daughter and governess have a long, un Consummated, ultimately ruptured lesbian relationship. Their grief is less the result of a vile passion and the reactions to it than of the daughter's failure of nerve, her father's patriarchal crassness, her mother's possessive manipulations, and the constrictions provincial England places on the New Woman.

In brief, The Well of Loneliness tends to ignore the more benign possibilities of lesbianism. Hall projects homosexuality as a sickness. To deepen the horror, the abnormal illness is inescapable, preordained; an ascribed, not an achieved, status. For Stephen is a "congenital invert," the term John Addington Symonds probably coined around 1883 and Havelock Ellis later refined: "Sexual inversion, as here understood, means sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex. It is thus a narrower term than homosexuality, which includes all sexual attractions between persons of the same sex." The congenital female invert has male physical traits—narrow hips, wide shoulders—as "part of an organic instinct." Stephen also has a livid scar on her cheek. Literally, it is a war wound; socially, a mark of the stigmatized individual who may blame the self for a lack of acceptability; mythically, the mark of Cain. The Well of Loneliness stresses the morbidity of a stigma that the politics of heaven, not of earth, must first relieve.

Yet Hall planned an explicit protest against that morbidity. Indeed, having Stephen Gordon be a congenital invert who has no choice about her condition strengthens Hall's argument about the unfairness of equating homosexuality with punishable deviancy. The novel claims that God created homosexuals. If they are good enough for Him, they ought to be good enough for us. Hall cries out for sacred and social toleration, for an end to the cruelties of alienation. In the novel's famous last paragraph, Stephen gasps, "God . . . we believe; we have told You we believe.


... We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us the right to our existence."17 Ironically, the very explicitness of that cry in a climate increasingly harsh for lesbians, combined with the vividness of Hall's description of homosexual subworlds, propelled The Well of Loneliness into scandal while the far more subversive, if subtle, Unlit Lamp was a success. To double the irony, Hall's strategies of protest against damnation so entangle her in damnation that they intensify the sense of its inevitability and power. The novel's attack on homophobia becomes particularly self-defeating. The text is, then, like a Janus with one face looming larger than the other. It gives the heterosexual a voyeuristic tour and the vicarious comfort of reading about an enforced stigma—in greater measure than it provokes guilt. It gives the homosexual, particularly the lesbian, riddling images of pity, self-pity, and of terror—in greater measure than it consoles.

The Well of Loneliness lacks the intricacies of Djuna Barnes' Nightwood, another parable of damnation, published eight years later. Its lack of intricacy, plus its notoriety and the way in which it inscribes damnation, helped to transform its status from that of subject of an obscenity trial to that of an immensely influential, token lesbian text. As one historian writes, "most of us lesbians in the 1950s grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon."18 Despite, or perhaps because of, its reputation, critics have ignored its structural logic, an error I want to remedy now.

Each of the novel's five sections (or acts) ends unhappily, the parts replicating and reinforcing the movement of the whole. Book 1 begins with Stephen's birth to a loving, rich couple.19 The happiness of their legitimate, heterosexual union is the positive term that opposes the woe lurking in wait for illegitimate, homosexual ones. Although Sir Philip Gordon had wanted a son, he loves his daughter. Wise, courageous, kind, honorable, attentive, athletic, he embodies a fantasy of the perfect father Hall never had, the perfect man she could never become. Lady Anna, however, who had simply wanted a baby, instinctively repudiates her "unnatural" daughter. Though mother and child are of the same sex, they share neither gender nor love. Hall's idealization of Sir Philip and her regrets about Lady Anna are early markers of a refusal to link a protest against homophobia with one against patriarchal values.

During her late adolescence, Stephen meets a visiting Canadian,

17. Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness (1928; New York, 1950), p. 437; all further references to this work will be included in the text.


19. Though Hall's father deserted her mother around the time of Hall's birth, he left the child a generous inheritance. She was one of several aesthetic lesbians whose incomes permitted them to do more or less as they pleased. Class cannot abolish the stigma of homosexuality, but it can mitigate some of the more painful impressions.
Martin Hallam. They become the best of brotherly friends—until Martin falls in love with Stephen. His emotions shock her; her shock stuns him; he leaves the neighborhood. Stephen's introduction to heterosexual passion, to her a form of homosexual incest, confirms her inability to pass even the most benign of initiation rites for girls. The loss of her "brother," however, is far less painful than the accidental death of her father, which ends book 1: it deprives her of "companionship of mind,... a stalwart barrier between her and the world,... and above all of love" (p. 121).

So bereft, Stephen behaves blindly. She falls in love with Angela Crosby, fickle, shallow, and married. As Angela strings Stephen along with a few of those conventional kisses, she sets her up as a rival of two men: husband Ralph and lover Roger. The masculinized lesbian has few advantages in competition with natural males. To keep Ralph from finding out about Roger, Angela shows him a love letter from Stephen and claims to be the innocent victim of odd affections. Ralph takes the letter to Lady Anna, who gives Stephen the choice of leaving her beloved ancestral estate or watching Lady Anna leave it. Finding her "manhood," Stephen accepts exile. With a loyal governess, a favorite horse, and a private income, she abandons Eden for London. Hall concludes book 2 with the punishment of expulsion, proving that even the aristocratic homosexual must suffer.

In the city, Stephen completes the rites of maturity for inverts. She finds a home: Paris, the center of literary lesbianism in the first part of the twentieth century. She finds work: literature itself. She writes a wonderful and famous novel. As Cain's mark was from God, so both Ellis and Hall give their inverts some compensations: intelligence and talent. If the body is negatively deviant, the mind is positively so. Hall demands that the invert use that intelligence and talent. Hard work will be a weapon against the hostile world; cultural production an answer to the society that repudiates a Stephen because she has been forced to repudiate reproduction. Finally, serving a larger cause, Stephen becomes a valiant member of a World War I women's ambulance corps. (Hall here explores, if peripherally, that standard setting of the lesbian text: a community of women.) But despite the personal bravery of both female and male warriors, the war is a wasteland. Stephen's personal anguish and confusion over her sexuality, then, find a larger, historical correlative in the trenches, as Hall ends book 3 with a lament for the dead.

During the war, however, Stephen has met a poorer, younger, Welsh woman, Mary Llewellyn, whom she takes to a Mediterranean villa. For a while they suppress their physical longing. In Stephen's fears that sex will destroy love, ecstasy intimacy, Hall is suggesting that the stigma of homosexuality is tolerable as long as the erotic desire that distinguishes the lesbian remains repressed. The conclusion—that a released eros will provoke the destructive potential of the stigma—places Hall in
that Western cultural tradition that links sex and death. In addition, she is attributing to lesbianism a conventional belief about female sexuality in general: that women prefer love and romance to physical consummation. Ultimately Mary’s needs overwhelm Stephen’s chivalrous hope to protect her from them. Though their bodies, like those of any homosexual couple, are anatomically similar, their relationship embodies a number of dyadic roles. Into their closed and exclusive world they structure multiple polarized differences, primarily that between female and male. Hall exults:

Stephen as she held the girl in her arms, would feel that indeed she was all things to Mary; father, mother, friend and lover, all things; and Mary all things to her—the child, the friend, the beloved, all things. But Mary, because she was perfect woman, would rest without thought, without exultation, without question; finding no need to question since for her there was now only one thing—Stephen.

[P. 194]

Seeking metaphors for their passion, Hall, like many lesbian novelists, turns to nature, both tamed and untamed: to vineyards, fruit trees, flowers, the four elements, the moon. Such standard tropes carry the implicit burden of dissolving the taint of “unnatural” actions through the cleansing power of natural language. 40

Most idylls, even those of refound Edens, must end. Hall concludes book 4 with the ominous “And thus in a cloud of illusion and glory, sped the last enchanted days at Orotava” (p. 317). Stephen and Mary return to Paris. There, with their loving dog, they are happy—for a while; but Mary, restless, begins to seek diversion with other lesbians and in the homosexual underworld, particularly in the bars that modern cities nurture. Bars can serve as a source of warm, egalitarian communitas for the marginal homosexual who must also aspire to the far more prestigious heterosexual world that is a structural reference group. 41 But the fearful, puritanical Stephen despises them; like many fictive lesbians, she finds security in a sanctified domesticity. Though a friend reasonably tells Stephen that Mary has too little to do, especially when Stephen is obsessively writing, Hall just as reasonably locates the primary source of strain between the lovers in the tension between their little world and the larger world of society and family that fears them.

20. As late as 1974, when the American Psychoanalytic Association voted to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness, lesbian writers were still dipping into the reservoir of such romantic tropes, as in Kate Millett’s Flying (New York, 1974): “Taste of salt. Catching it in my mouth. A thirst to suckle it... Very small thing. Pain of tenderness... Fire. The vulva a sun setting behind trees” (p. 56).

Whatever the cause, Mary mopes and hardens. Then, a secular *deus ex machina*, Martin Hallam returns. Stephen’s alter ego, he, too, has been wounded in the war. He, too, falls in love with Mary. The two fight it out for her. Though Stephen wins, the price is too high: where she once had Mary’s soul but feared possession of the body, she may now possess the body but not the soul. For God’s scheme includes congenital heterosexuals as well as congenital invertes. Mary has, somewhat belatedly, realized that she is one of them. Martyring herself in the religion of love, Stephen pretends to be having an affair with a woman friend, Valerie Seymour. She stays out for two nights. When she returns, her mock confession of infidelity drives the distraught Mary into the night and the arms of the waiting Martin, whom Stephen has posted in the street below.

Throughout book 5, Hall’s religiosity has become more and more omnipresent: her attraction to Catholic theology, architecture, and liturgy; her anxious queries about God’s real allegiance in the war between Stephen’s little world and that which would damn it. As Stephen renounces Mary, she has a compensatory vision, at once hallucination, inspiration, and conversion experience. She will become the voice of the voiceless stigmatized; she will help them break through to a new, sympathetic recognition. So willing, Stephen finds that “her barren womb became fruitful—it ached with its fearful and sterile burden” (p. 437).

That juxtaposition of fruitfulness and aching burdens is a final bit of information about the unevenly balanced duality of Hall’s text. Yet she does create the figure of Valerie Seymour, a charismatic teetotaler who keeps a famous Parisian salon. Amidst the volatile gloom of Stephen’s histrionics, she is serenely sunny. She, too, finds homosexuality congenital, but she lyrically interprets fate as a friendly boon: “Nature was trying to do her bit; inverts were being born in increasing numbers, and after a while their numbers would tell, even with the fools who still ignored Nature” (p. 406). Though Hall does little with Valerie, she signifies the presence of a second consciousness about lesbianism that *The Well of Loneliness* and the forces surrounding it helped to submerge, screen, and render secondary during the mid twentieth century. This consciousness, aware of the labelling of lesbianism as a pollutant, nevertheless chose to defy it.

The “Kinsey Report” suggests the existence of such a mentality. Of 142 women with much homosexual experience, 70 percent reported no regrets.22 This consciousness has manifested itself in literature in two ways. First, in lesbian romanticism: fusions of life and death, happiness and woe, natural imagery and supernatural strivings, neoclassical paganism with a ritualistic cult of Sappho, and modern beliefs in evolu-

tionary progress with a cult of the rebel. At its worst an inadvertent parody of fin de siècle decadence, at its best lesbian romanticism ruthlessly rejects a stifling dominant culture and asserts the value of psychological autonomy, women, art, and a European cultivation of the sensuous, sensual, and voluptuous. Woolf's Orlando is its most elegant and inventive text, but its symbol is probably the career of Natalie Barney, the cosmopolitan American who was the prototype of Valerie Seymour.  

The second mode is lesbian realism: the adaption of the conventions of the social and psychological novel to appraise bonds between women and demonstrate that such relationships are potentially of psychic and moral value. The sleakest realistic text is Stein's Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, but less tricky examples include The Unlit Lamp and another ignored novel, Helen R. Hull's Labyrinth (1925). There one sister marries an ambitious, egocentric man. A second sister lives with an ambitious, generous woman. The first sister is unhappy and confined; the second happy and productive.  

What Labyrinth implies, other realistic texts state explicitly: even though the lesbian may have children whom she loves, she must reject the patriarchal family, which the stigma against her helps to maintain, if she is to reject repression as well. The tension between the role of mother, which the lesbian may desire, and the traditional family structure, in which women are subordinate, is obviously far more characteristic of lesbian than gay-male writing. A man may have both paternity and power, but a woman must too often choose between maternity and comparative powerlessness.

In 1963 Mary McCarthy's The Group brought that submerged, screened, secondary consciousness to public prominence. Second on the fiction best-seller list for its year, selling well over 3,000,000 copies by 1977, The Group showed that lesbianism could be an acceptable, even admirable, subject—particularly if a writer of unquestioned heterosexuality served as the gatekeeper. Moreover, McCarthy was tactfully judicious about the erotic details of lesbian sexuality. Cleverly, if perhaps inadvertently, McCarthy fused lesbian romanticism and lesbian realism. In characterization, setting, style, and some of its assumptions, The Group was realistic, but its heroine was wonderfully romantic. For Lakey is self-assured, intelligent, beautiful, charitable, and anti-Fascist; she wears violet suits; she has lived in Europe; she has an affair with a baroness. In brief, she personifies the most glamorous of enabling escapes from stigma and self-contempt. The members of The Group, all Vassar graduates, also prefigure the possible response of liberal readers of this

24. A more ironic and subtle English equivalent is Elizabeth Bowen's The Hotel (New York, 1928). Patricia Highsmith's ("Claire Morgan") The Price of Salt (New York, 1952), like Labyrinth, is about the family and the lesbian's need to leave it even if she is a mother.
novel to the claims of this secondary consciousness to primary status. Lacey, after she returns from Europe, cannot be damned; indeed, she must be respected. Yet The Group finds encounters with her awkwardly enigmatic and strange; strangely and enigmatically awkward.

Since The Group, a far less tormented lesbian has surfaced—to supplement, if not wholly supplant, the Stephens and the Marys. In some texts by nonlesbians, she is little more than a romp, a sexual interlude and caper. Like masturbation and the orgy, homosexuality has become a counter in the game of erotic writing. Trade fiction has claimed the provinces of pornography and sexology. Other texts, however, primarily by lesbians and sympathetic feminists, damn the lesbian's damnation. Their appearance in strength is the result of a confluence of forces. Certainly a material cause was the founding of several journals, magazines, and presses that could publish the products of a more audacious sexual ideology and practice. Among the most substantial, for the lesbian novel, was the small trade house, Daughters, Inc. Its subtitle, "Publishers of Books by Women," reflects its founders' theory that feminism would create new genres. Existing in that climate, which might have a certain early crudity, would be a "freer lesbian novel, and Daughters would be a medium that lesbian novelists could count on." Among the social causes of the reappearance of a submerged consciousness and its narrative of the enabling escape have been the women's movement, more flexible attitudes toward marriage (so often contrasted favorably to the putative anarchy of homosexual relations), the "modernization of sex," which encourages a rational, tolerant approach to the complexities of eros, and the growing entrance of more women into the public labor force, which gives a financial autonomy inseparable from genuine sexual independence.

The new texts are hopeful about homosexuality and confident about the lesbian's power to name her experience and experiment with literary form. These novels invert the application of the label of deviant: the lesbian calls those who would call her sinful or sick themselves

25. Bertha Harris (personal interview, New York, 3 August 1977); unless otherwise indicated, all further quotations from Harris are from this interview. See also Lois Gould, "Creating a Women's World," New York Times Magazine, 2 January 1977, pp. 34, 56-58.


27. Ann Allen Shockley has suggested that the taboo on such a lesbian voice has been stronger in the black community than in the white, but even there the gags have loosened; see Shockley, "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview," in Conditions Five, The Black Women's Issue, ed. Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith (1979): 133-42. The entire issue is courageous and important. See also J. R. Roberts, Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography (Tallahassee, 1981), with a foreword by Smith.
sinful or sick; she claims for herself the language of respectability. In a
sweet novel of the 1960s, Elana Nachman's *Riverfinger Woman*, the pro-
tagonist fantasizes about enlightening some benighted heterosexuals.
She and her lover will make a movie "so that people would see that
lesbians are beautiful, there is nothing, nothing at all unnatural about
them, they too can have weddings and be in the movies."28 Mingling
fiction, journalism, autobiography, and polemic, Jill Johnston declares in
her book *Lesbian Nation* that "that awful life of wanting to choose between
being a criminal or going straight was over. We were going to
legitimize ourselves as criminals."29 Obviously these dreams and man-
ifestos are still enmeshed in older vocabularies of value. A few books
approach indifference. Less attracted to acts of reversal, they hint at a
Barthian writing degree zero.30

Among the first of the more hopeful lesbian novels was *A Place for
Us*, which its author (using the name Isabel Miller) published privately in
1969 and which a commercial press reissued as *Patience and Sarah* in
1972. That was the year of the Stonewall Resistance, the defense of a
New York gay bar against a police raid that symbolizes the beginning of
the Gay Liberation movement. The history of *A Place for Us*—the
pseudonym, the dual publication—shows both the presence and the dis-
solution of a fear of lesbian material. Its author's comments about *The
Well of Loneliness* reveal both the influence of and a resistance to Hall's
earlier gesticulations: "I think Radclyffe Hall was antihomosexual....I
first read *The Well of Loneliness* when I was about seventeen....I was very
excited. But I didn't like the characters, I didn't like the arrogance of the
heroine."31 Gentle, kindly, *A Place for Us* tells of two nineteenth-century
women who run away together from patriarchal brutalities to build their
farm in New York State. Almost immediately after *A Place for Us*, the
most successful of the new texts appeared, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit
Jungle* (1973), which during the 1970s replaced *The Well of Loneliness*
as the one lesbian novel someone might have read. In *Rubyfruit Jungle* (the
title alludes to the female genitals), Molly Bolt (a name that alludes to

30. For example, in Linda Crawford's *A Class by Herself* (New York, 1976), pills and
booze compel a far greater renunciatory attention than does the stigma of lesbianism.
31. Alma Routson ("Isabel Miller"), interview in Jonathan Katz, *Gay American His-
professional novelist replicates the historical shift from a stress on the stigmatized text to its
rejection. As "Ann Aldrich," Marijane Meaker wrote widely read novels about the
romances and difficulties of the lesbian subculture. Then under her own name she published
*Shockproof Sydney Skate* (New York, 1972). Profitable, well received, it is about a triangle
consisting of a woman, the younger woman with whom she has an affair, and her son, who
is in love with the younger woman as well. The lesbian circles are little more absurd than
any other subject of a comedy of manners.
freedom and flight) escapes from a seedy provincial background to triumph over mean men, shallow women, bad schools, menial jobs, and lesbian-baiting.

If *A Place for Us* adapts the narrative of the enabling escape to the pastoral domestic idyll, *Rubyfruit Jungle* integrates it with the picaresque and the *Bildungsroman*. Together these novels dramatize two contradictory attitudes about sex and gender that pervade the contemporary lesbian novel. The first of these attitudes is a bristling contempt for sexual role playing (*A Place for Us* is an exception here). The protagonist in *Riverfinger Woman* asserts: "we were too modern already to believe that one of us was the man and the other... the woman. We felt like neither men nor women. We were females, we were queers. ... We knew we had the right to love whomever we loved." Under the influence of an existential ethic that praises the freely forged self and of a feminist ideology that negates patriarchal practices, such novels abandon the customs of a Radclyffe Hall. Yet they are simultaneously conscious of sex. Males, particularly traditional ones, are in disrepute. Some novels, such as Arnold’s *Sister Gin*, articulate punitive fantasies—some violent, some playful—which they justify as catharsis or self-defense. The female and the female world are honorable, as structural reference and source of *communitas*. Women ask not only for equality but for self-celebration; less for the rehabilitation of men than for independence from them.

Lesbian novels thus map out the boundaries of female worlds. Some of the bonds within these boundaries are erotic, a proud isosexuality that separates the lesbian novel from other, more guarded explorations, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*. Characters also search, however, for alter egos, moral and psychological equivalents, which the term “sister” signifies. Poignantly, painfully, they seek the mother as well. A mother waits at the heart of the labyrinth of some lesbian texts. There she unites past, present, and future. Finding her, in herself and through a surrogate, the lesbian reenacts a daughter’s desire for the woman to whom she was once so linked, from whom she was then so severed. Because the mother was once a daughter, a woman approaching her can serve as the mother’s mother even as she plays out the drama of a daughter. In such complex mother/daughter exchanges and


35. See, e.g., Joan Winthrop, *Underwater* (New York, 1974), p. 256. Winthrop has her central character indulge in a good deal of masculine role playing, which occurs with a certain *esprit* but is only one aspect of personality, not a controlling force as it is in *The Well of Loneliness*. That the role playing takes place after a radical mastectomy is a point Winthrop does not explore. She does, however, say that her heroine’s fantasies of being male were the product of years of her own “repression” (personal interview, Sag Harbor, N.Y., 28 July 1976).
interchanges, the women explore both narcissistic and anaclitic love. Of course lesbianism is far more than a matter of mother/daughter affairs, but the new texts suggest that one of its satisfactions is a return to primal origins, to primal loves, when female/female, not male/female, relationships structured the world. A lesbian's jealousy, then, spurs like blood from the cut of terror at the possibility of losing again the intimacy that has at last been regained.

To focus on mothers and daughters—or on any personal bonds—is too narrow; psychology hardly defines the totality of our lives. In several texts the world of women is also a political center of solidarity and resistance. As such it can perform social experiments that the larger culture might regard attentively. To name such communities, the lesbian writer calls on myth: prehistorical matriarchies; the Amazons; Sappho and her school. The myths, also current in contemporary feminist ideology, were popular in stylish lesbian circles in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Part of their value is their ability to evoke atemporal resonances within narratives that are separate from such patriarchal religious structures as the Catholic church before which Hall knelt. When novelists grant myths the status of history (easier to do with Sappho than with Amazons and primeval matriarchs), their error, because it occurs in the freewheeling context of fiction, is more palatable than in the stricter context of programmatic ideology, political theory, and "herstory."

The most ambitious and the cleverest of the new novels in English is perhaps Bertha Harris' Lover (1976). The lesbian novel has tended to be, and remains, formally staid, a conventionality that has served both a homosexual and heterosexual audience. The lesbian, as she struggles against the hostilities of the larger world, can find comfort in the ease of reading. Between text and self she may also establish a sense of community. The heterosexual, as she or he nears unfamiliar and despised material, can find safety in the same ease of reading. The continued strength of literary form can stand for the continued strength of the larger community's norms. However, Harris, an American equivalent of Monique Wittig, experiments with narrative pattern as a possible coefficient of her vision of sexuality. A modernist, she fragments and collapses characters, settings, chronology, and states of mind. Her central presence appears as Veronica (also the name of the second wife of Veronica's bigamist grandfather); as Flynn; as Bertha; and as "I." In each guise the voice is both fiction and the author in the act of writing fiction. In brief, Lover is another book about becoming a book.

Harris is ingenious, sardonic, parodic—an economical comic intelligence. Another cultural consequence of the stigma against the lesbian is that it deforms comedy. Those who support the stigma, such as Wyndham Lewis, may freely assault the homosexual with hostile satire and
burlesque. Those who internalize the stigma use the same weapons as a form of self-assault. Only when the stigma is simultaneously comprehended can the comedy of a Harris, or of a Barnes before her, emerge. It is a satire, often elaborate, even grotesque and baroque, that ultimately adorns rather than mutilates its subject. Barnes’ enigmatic and rich prose has deeply influenced Harris, but more immediately, so has Nabokov’s, his “tricking and fooling and punning and literary joking.”

Some people in the feminist and lesbian press have criticized Harris and others for these adventures. Harris has been called inaccessible, as if modernism were itself an indecipherable code. She is, therefore, supposedly ideologically unsound, stopping that illusory creature, the average lesbian, from using literature to articulate her experience and urge rebellion against its nastier aspects. Harris has explanations for such prescriptive reviews. She believes that the feminist and lesbian press still lacks an informed criticism to mediate between texts and a large audience, and she finds too few “well-read reviewers, conscious of literary traditions.” The press must learn to do what modern art has done: to create a self-explanatory body of criticism. Furthermore, “the lesbian readership” wants a “positive image” in its novels. Part of the huge popularity of Rubyfruit Jungle is due to its ebullient self-admiration. Such easy hedonism and heroism is, of course, didactically helpful and politically worthwhile, but it also “prevents a deeper look into the nature of things and the nature of lesbianism.”

The baffled response to Lover is ironic, for few writers have given the lesbian a more lyrical identity. Harris explores the various roles women have played: grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, wife and second wife, businesswoman in man’s clothing, prostitute, factory worker, movie star, muse and tutelary spirit, warrior, artist, fake saint, martyr. She codifies difference of role in order to assess similarities of the players and to find a common basis for a community of women. There the primary difference will be between lover and beloved—though lovers can be loved and the beloved lovers. The phallus may not be unwelcome, especially if necessary for breeding, but the nonphallic lesbian has a privileged status. In loving women she exalts both self and other. Harris also anoints this paradigm and paramour as an omnipotent cosmic spirit. Capable of anything and everything, she is polymorphic, amorphic, transmorphic, and orphic. She both pictures margins and escapes them. She is the principle of creativity, of a fertility of both mind and body. As such she incarnates the genesis of the world itself, once

suppressed, which might be reappearing now. In an essay about Barnes and lesbian literature, Harris might be talking about Lover itself:

There is not a literature that is not based on the pervasive sexuality of its time; and as that which is male disappears (sinks slowly in the west) and as the originally all-female world reasserts itself by making love to itself, the primary gesture toward the making at last of a decent literature out of the experience of a decent world might simply be a woman like myself following a woman like Djuna Barnes, and all she might represent down a single street on a particular afternoon.36

Not everyone will accept Harris’ only partially ironic apocalyptic fantasy. Her picture of the damned does, however, reverse that of The Well of Loneliness. The lesbian novel has offered up Hall’s vision, but it has also sheltered and released the rejection of that vision, offering an alternative process of affirmation of the lesbian body and transcendence of a culturally traced, scarring stigma. It has been a deviant voice that has both submitted to deviancy and yearned to nullify that judgment. Feminist critics, zeroing in on that voice, can serve as its acoustical engineers. We can listen for its variations, fluctuations, blurrings, coded signals, and lapses into mimicry or a void. As we do, we must also try to hear, in wonder and in rage, words and phrases that might explain what is now a mystery: why people wish to stigmatize, to dominate, to outlaw, and to erase a particular longing for passion and for love.
