

# Contemporary Canadian Women Poets and the Inability *Topos*

by Lorraine M. York

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"The lack of a sound university training has always made it impossible for me to distinguish between an iambic and a dactyl, . . . if this were not enough to condemn one for ever . . ." (7). So wrote Virginia Woolf in her *A Letter to a Young Poet* in 1932 — with what appears to be a rhetorical flourish of the age-old inability *topos*, particularly when it issues from so poetic a novelist as the author of *The Waves*. But for women who aspired to poetry, the ritual commonplace of humility which the rhetoricians styled *adynaton* was, as feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have reminded us, a sad piece of social history rather than a self-confident oratorical gambit; women, denied instruction in classical languages and their poetics, did feel themselves locked out of poetic expression and its mechanics. And even when a female poet undertook to write of her craft, that crippling sense of humility would often creep in. Dame Edith Sitwell's *A Poet's Notebook* is a fascinating case in point; it is a compilation of quotations, drawn almost entirely from men's works, on the nature of poetry and the poet. Sitwell devotes whole chapters to "Notes on Chaucer," "Notes on Herrick," "Notes on Wordsworth," and, of course, "Notes on Shakespeare," preceded by the following admonitory preface: "written with a proper sense of humility and awe. They do not profess to be anything more than a series of notes" (104). Yet the epilogue to Sitwell's humble notetaking enterprise consists of two poems, both written very much out of the experience of living in a female body. "A Mother to her Dead Child" engages, for example, that most female-specific experience of pregnancy: "Feel for my heart as in the days before your birth" (148.10), writes Sitwell, from a space where Chaucer, Herrick and even the Bard himself would have to confess at least a measure of inability. Generations of women poets have repeated Sitwell's textual practice; forced into the margins of culture's "notes" on the dominant male poets, they have saved their own poetry for the subordinate "epilogues" of literary history.

This conflict between silence and female creativity which Sitwell's book encodes characterizes both the practice and theory of women's poetry today. The desire to write the female body, as French theorists would say, to speak powerfully out of the marginalized space which is femaleness, faces the apparently contradictory awareness that dominant discourses and conventions are alien or unfriendly to the female poet's voice, pushing it repeatedly into silence. But a number of Canadian women poets have negotiated this seemingly irresolvable theoretical divide by transforming that classic statement of humble silence, the inability topos, into a blueprint for writing a new poetry of the female body; they have managed to become, to quote the paradoxical title of Lorna Crozier's recent collection, both "Angels of Flesh" and "Angels of Silence."

That they should do so by subverting one of the oldest rhetorical tricks in the classical canon is all the more satisfying. Rhetoric itself has long been a male pursuit; Brian Vickers's impressive 1988 study, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, does not include one example of a woman practitioner of rhetoric, in spite of the fact that Vickers brings the study of rhetoric from its classical roots and mediaeval and Renaissance manifestations into the modern age. And, of course, rhetoric as a study could easily be styled a male-gendered pursuit, with its rather aggressive overtones of persuasion and power (Wayne C. Booth, in a controversial passage from his *Rhetoric of Fiction* spoke of the "fictional world" which the writer seeks "to impose . . . upon the reader" [xiii].) A rhetorical topos such as the *adynaton* invites gender critique; the male rhetorician or poet uses it to resolve, at the level of public speech, his own conflict between silence and expression: Coleridge's "genial spirits fail," Yeats finds himself deserted by his circus-animal images, and Eliot's words "slip" and "slide." Of course, here the topos is at its double-edged best; the authors of "Dejection: An Ode," "The Circus Animals' Desertion," and "Four Quartets" confess inability only to reinscribe their god-like "ability" as poets. From a feminist psychoanalytic point of view, such a trade-off bespeaks male sexual "performance" fears and the elaborate psychological defenses which attend them. As Luce Irigaray writes in "When Our Lips Speak Together,"

If you/I hesitate to speak, isn't it because we are afraid of not speaking well? But what is "well" or "badly"? With what are we conforming if we speak "well"? What hierarchy, what subordination lurks there, waiting to break our resistance? What claim to raise ourselves up in a worthier discourse? Erection is no business of ours: we

are at home on the flatlands. . . . (213)

Rhetoric itself, that hierarchizing heightening of language, would be, in Irigaray's terms, a phallic preoccupation which women writers would do well to deflate; the inability topos, by the same reasoning, is a species of rhetorosexual performance pep-talk.

Recent Canadian women poets have taken this rhetorical topos out of the poetic locker room, and have invested it with new possibilities. At its simplest, this new inability topos is a flat denial of woman's ability to operate within male discourses. As B.C. poet Leona Gom muses about one woman's description of forced sex with her husband as "just like rape,"

the words you lose the right to,  
*rape* becoming just *like rape*.  
you are a stranger here,  
it is necessary to learn  
the new laws, forget  
the life you were fluent in . . . (55.1-6)

Penny Kemp, in her collection of poems about losing custody of her children in divorce, *Binding Twine*, equates the "laws" of language and the social laws which discriminate against women; both, for her, are systems which "bind" the female:

I write poems  
I speak out.  
Power returns.  
Body unknots.

But what's a word  
in court of law? (87.1-6)

This use of the topos is often closely tied to a linguistic-biological essentialism, what Adrienne Rich called "the dream of a common language" of and for women. In a poem entitled "Their Common Language," Canadian poet Libby Scheier invokes Rich's dream when she acknowledges her inability to enter fully into the works of a male poet, Jim Harrison:

What makes me mad about these poems  
is I am drawn into them by their beauty  
and then every third page or so  
am pushed out of the poem . . .  
. . . These poems are beautiful

But they also prove  
a common language exists among men.  
I stand outside some of these poems  
and watch the men nod as they read. (*Second Nature* 43-  
44. 13-17, 45-49)

Scheier's proof of the common language of men may not be very sound philosophy, but as a subversion of the inability topos, her lines are revealing. This use of what I would call the static inability topos ("I cannot enter this system because it is male") readily engages the ongoing controversy in feminist aesthetics about the specificity of woman's art.

One notable attempt to think through this complex question is British critic Jan Montefiore's 1987 study *Feminism and Poetry*. Her conclusion, that "there is nothing gendered about poetic form" (178), is based on a poststructuralist critique of some critics' assumption that so-called "authentic" female experience may inhere in literature. Montefiore is willing to allow, however, that, in her words, the "oppositional engagement," the "struggle to transform inherited meanings, is where the real strength and specificity of women's poetry lies" (179). "Stealing the language," then, is less appropriation than explosion.

Recent Canadian women poets steal the inability topos in this "oppositional," transformative way when they use that topos to subvert the traditional notion of poetry as granting access to universals. These poets proclaim not just inability to enter a male discourse which is biologically determined, but also inability to tolerate a discourse which privileges universals over particulars and which is *incidentally* found frequently, though not exclusively, in writings by males. As Monique Wittig writes, "One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal, and that women are not all reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is, continually at every moment, appropriated by men" (qtd. in Showalter 1). Wittig may be right, but if she is, then it does not necessarily follow that women poets must vie with the male tradition for power over the universal; to do so might well be to imitate a linguistic-political practice which does not merit imitation. Instead, contemporary Canadian women poets are reembracing what has been designated female: the particular; and they are launching, from there, an implicit attack on mainstream poetry's traditional claims on the universal.

The inability topos is one major way women poets in Canada are doing this, for it allows them to claim incapacity to operate within

traditional metaphor. In her poem entitled "Connecting," Bronwen Wallace begins with a concrete object, a "china fruit bowl" which has been handed down to her, along with a story about her great-grandmother. Just as the poem is about to ascend, in well-worn fashion, from this homely image to a generalized disquisition on myth, the poet cuts short, and substitutes the inability topos:

That's about it.  
Not enough for a poem really  
even with the fruit bowl  
which is delicate and well-made  
but both of them [family story and bowl] just kind of  
sit there refuse to relinquish  
the appropriate metaphors (*Marrying into the Family*  
51.14-20)

The inability topos is here revealed as an egotistical strategy, concerned with the poet's success rather than with the self-sufficiency or dignity of the objects in our lives. But Wallace's poem which, in praise and imitation of those objects, refuses "to relinquish / the appropriate metaphors," stubbornly returns, at its conclusion, to those same discrete particles of life:

Not much to build a poem on  
shapes so delicate  
like the china bowl filled with fruit  
glowing in the centre  
of my kitchen table (52. 41-45)

Of course, this revised inability topos is also double-edged; the bowl filled with fruit which occupies a central position in the poet's domestic world is a metaphor for the great-grandmother's life. Metaphor is not that easily denied or escaped. But this metaphor never does cut loose from its concrete moorings, and the poet is not going to stretch it, pound it until the simple china bowl reaches the universal realm. Like Irigaray, she decides that she is at home in "the flatlands" of domestic detail. The poem itself, after all, is called "connecting," not "hierarchizing" or "subordinating."

This anti-egotistical allegiance to particulars may assume a vital political urgency when the particulars are less benign. Libby Scheier's "A Poem about Rape" fittingly brings the inability topos together with an experience which marks the ultimate powerlessness of woman under patriarchy. Once more, metaphorical language is associated with a closure which the poet feels unable and unwilling to offer her reader:

I don't feel that I can tell you  
anything about rape in a poem about rape.  
I can't think of a well-crafted image  
that runs from the poem's first line  
to its strong but subtly suggestive ending.  
I can't even think of a list of clever symbols  
that would throw a new light on rape  
so that you might grasp it, finally. (*Second Nature* 32.12-  
19)

Here, the concrete particular resists not only universalization through metaphor but even more direct forms of presentation. As a result, Scheier breaks one of the traditional rules of the inability topos; she does not leave it behind in her prologue to proceed with a pyrotechnical display of ability. Rather, "A Poem about Rape" is one long lamenting inability topos which ends not with ringing generalization but with a hopeless shrug:

I want you to grasp the experience.  
I don't think a poem can do that.  
Certainly this poem is not doing it.  
This poem is definitely a failure  
in bringing the experience of rape  
into your living room.

A dramatic re-enactment is not the answer.  
A film about rape is not the answer  
These usually excite you anyway  
which is not my purpose.  
Raping you is not the answer.  
There doesn't seem to be any answer.  
There doesn't seem to be any answer right now. (33.47-  
59)

Here Scheier echoes her chosen epigraph for this collection, *Second Nature*: "There ain't any answer. There ain't gonna be any answer. That's the answer" — Gertrude Stein. The inability topos, divested of its traditional rise to ability and performance, is satisfying for women poets who have, like Stein, abandoned their faith in a totalizing "answer." Margaret Atwood, for instance, muses in a strikingly similar vein in the title poem from *True Stories*,

Don't ask for the true story;  
why do you need it?

It's not what I set out with  
or what I carry. (9.1-4)

This refusal of a monistic authority leads some women poets to other curiously strengthening inabilities: the inability to appropriate another's "story," or to advise other humans about composing their story-lives. Lorna Crozier begins her poem about "the first white woman in the West," only to be pulled up short:

who am I to tell  
her story?  
what is it  
I want to know? (*The Weather* 47.6-9)

The rest of the poem alternates sections spoken by that first white woman in the West, Marie Anne Lagimodière, and the poet's meditations and interrogations; even if the former accounts must pass through the filter of the poet's consciousness, there is still an awareness that Marie Anne is an entity not to be selfishly (or unselfconsciously) appropriated by her twentieth-century daughter. Similarly, in writings by young Canadian women poets, one can find a number of "advice to children" poems, which reverse some of the assumptions of their tradition, most notably represented by Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter." The new poets are not only unable to offer advice; they pose Crozier's question over and over again: "Who am I to tell / her story?" As Mary di Michele writes in "Poem for My Daughter," "baby woman, what can I tell you to try to be / without being wrong?" (*Necessary Sugar* 50.13-14).

These variations on the inability topos I would term dynamic: they may lead to various strategies for subverting traditional assumptions about poetry, poets, language and gender. They are most empowering in that they lead the female poet back to particulars, and away from the traditional assumption that poetry appropriates the physical world in the interests of deriving universals from it. Looked at in this way, recent writing by Canadian women reveals an aesthetic, a philosophical stance which engages it in fruitful oppositions with dominant discourses. Over and over again, contemporary Canadian women poets bring us back to particulars. Margaret Atwood writes in "Small Poems for the Winter Solstice," "I'm stuck! here, in this waste of particulars . . . I don't trust love because it's no shape or colour" (*True Stories* 35.10-11; 12-13). Susan Glickman, listing the colorful "particulars" of a "Tuesday Market," catches herself using an art simile; the puppies' faces are "smudged and tearful as half-erased sketches":

O.K. I brought Art in again, but I  
couldn't help it. After all, this  
is a poem — I can't give you  
the market.  
But what I want to convey is the lovely  
tumbled profusion and the way  
contingency discovers its own design. (*The Power to  
Move* 64.30-36)

Again, metaphor may be inescapable, but it is not the aim —  
particulars do not need the bullying force of the egotistical poet,  
agonizing over their elevation to universal significance. So too in  
"Particulars," the closing poem of Bronwen Wallace's significantly  
titled collection, *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace*. Life is not  
there to be marshalled into poetic significance, but to surprise us  
with its blessing, with the way its "contingencies" discover their  
own "design":

And to say for myself, just once,  
without embarrassment, *bless*,  
thrown out as to some lightness  
that I actually believe in,  
surprised (as I believe  
they were) to find it  
here, where it seems impossible  
that one life even matters, though  
like them, I'll argue  
the stubborn argument of the particular,  
right now, in the midst of things, *this* and this. (111.57-  
68)

The poet is unable, perhaps, to ascribe universal significance in a  
world "where it seems impossible / that one life even matters," but  
she is now rearmed, from a new philosophical perspective, and able  
to write a poetry of particulars.

From Virginia Woolf, whose confession of poetic inability gave  
me a beginning, to a Canadian poet setting out to chart "the  
stubborn argument of the particular," I have traced a return rather  
than a revolution. Virginia Woolf, though she may have  
apologized for her inability to distinguish poetic metres, taught  
women writers an infinitude about life "in the midst of things" —  
"the question of things happening" (to quote the title of one volume  
of her journals). How appropriate, then, that when Bronwen  
Wallace writes her poem to Virginia Woolf, she trips over

concrete particulars on her way to expressing Woolf's universal significance, and spends all of the poem commenting on her "inability" to write a traditional ode of praise:

I wanted the poem to be carefree and easy  
like children playing in the snow  
I didn't mean to mention  
the price of snowsuits or  
how even on the most expensive ones  
the zippers always snag ("A Simple Poem for Virginia  
Woolf," *Anything Is Possible* 18118-23)

She needn't have worried; it was Virginia Woolf, after all, who, in the midst of giving one of the Cambridge lectures which would become *A Room of One's Own*, reminded her academic listeners of the women who could not with them that night, because they were ironing the clothes or putting the children to bed. "Yet even as I write these words," Wallace concludes,

those ordinary details intervene  
between the poem I meant to write  
and this one where the delicate faces  
of my children faces of friends  
of women I have never even seen  
glow on the blank pages  
and deeper than any silence  
press around me  
waiting their turn (*Anything Is Possible* 182-83.89-98)

*Adynaton*, the ritual humility of the inability topos, has been dethroned, and the poet's traditional fear of impotence overcome. These Canadian women poets have faced the blank page, and have found it not cold and immobilizing but warm and empowering, full of delicate particulars.

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