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Learning To Breathe Free

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from a glance at her list of poets. Only one of DeShazer's five reimagining women—Louise Bogan—is exclusively heterosexual, and Bogan is also the poet most at odds with herself, most drawn to an aesthetic of silence, impersonality and “classic” calm, and most suspicious of identifying herself as a woman poet. And DeShazer only hints, in her preface, at the source of Bogan's conflict—“perhaps because she is neither lesbian nor what contemporary feminists call ‘woman identified.’” *Inspiring Women* would have been a stronger, more forthright book had DeShazer either argued out her briefly articulated premise and/or tested it against the work of a powerful heterosexual poet like Denise Levertov.

When Paula Bennett investigates the psychological grounds of female creativity, she discovers anger—the capacity to refuse constraint, to confront any circumstance which violates one's sense of self or truth—at the core of literary power. *My Life a Loaded Gun* is the most theoretically seamless and most provocative of the books under review here. For Bennett, Dickinson's loaded gun is the powerful and angry assertion of female poetic autonomy, and the most significant muse of contemporary women's poetry is Medusa. Unlike DeShazer, she views Carol Gilligan's validation of women's connectedness, ability to nurture and fluid ego boundaries as a dangerous thing, especially to women artists. “Unable to separate adequately from those she loves and whose well-being or approval she seeks, the woman artist has been torn between conflicting needs and alienated from her own inner drives. Committed by her womanhood to ‘the activity of attachment,’ she has been led to view her personal desires and ambitions as unwomanly.” Like critic Jane Marcus, Bennett believes that “emotional liberation, the release of rage, . . . is psychologically anterior to the integration of the self and makes possible the artist's song.”

Bennett builds her case by analyzing in depth the lives and works of Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, figures who “represent three key moments in the history of women's poetry, moments when specific women writers chose to reject the definitions controlling them in order to assume without shame or reservation the crown or lyric ‘I’ they knew was theirs.” In a concrete and controversial account of Dickinson's development as a poet, Bennett finds her neither neurotic nor, to use Ostriker's term, “duplicious,” but rather, after a lifetime of pain and struggle, in “a position of complete, self-authorized authority.” Plath, though finally defeated by her mother-engendered need for approval and sacrifice, nonetheless bursts into liberating honesty with her *Ariel* poems. And, finally, there is Rich, “a woman of our times,” making her journey from ironic privilege, father-identification and uneasy obedience, through fragmentation, self-doubt and near despair, to rebellion, self-assertion, love of women and ultimate connection to a larger world. “Supported by the women's movement and, in particular, by the presence of an articulate lesbian-feminist community within it,” only Rich of the three poets “has managed . . . to negotiate successfully a complete transition from dutiful daughter to woman poet,” sacrificing “neither

her self nor the sexual and social rewards to which we should all be entitled.”

Whether you agree or disagree with Bennett's thesis, hers is a bold and expressive addition to feminist debate about the nature of the female self. It makes me nervous when Bennett calls Dickinson “wholly sane”; I sometimes hear in her praise of autonomy the stifling voice of Ozick's sovereign Master, and wish she had wrestled more with French-based criticism of American ego psychology. But I admire the courage of her convictions, as well as the care and passion of her analysis.

It is just such passion that I find missing in Claire Keyes' book. The most troublesome thing about *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* is the way it domesticates its subject. Chapter by chapter, volume by volume, Keyes leads us through Rich's life-and-works, marking as she goes Rich's changes-of-mind-and-style. Each chapter features the same photograph of the poet, a discussion of someone else's critical theory, two or three (often insightful) close readings of poems, and then a summary of the ideas we have just read. Rich, who so often uses her particular life to illuminate our actual history, becomes Exemplary in the worst sense, a figure so typical and so boxed in by the traditional form being used to feature her, that she becomes still and remote—too much a Lesbian Everywoman.

Most disappointing, Keyes fails to develop the one idea which might have held the book together: that Rich articulates an “aesthetics of power,” one marked by her commitment to feminism. She does trace the evolution of Rich's ideas about the nature and function of power in patriarchal culture, and she shows how Rich's poetic forms have altered over the years. But nowhere does she indicate how Rich's ideas about power influence the forms of her poems. Content is not connected to style. And by the end of the book, its major thesis has simply dropped away, an unresolved strand.

What will keep Rich free from the awkward machinery of academic criticism, as from the opaque predispositions of the *New York Times*, and what makes her such a vital presence to so many readers, is not only her hard-won integrity, but also her continuing capacity to surprise and move us. As Bennett points out, “For Rich, the achievement of integration through feminism has not meant the smoothing out of contradictions and differences within the self. It has meant their acceptance.”

Rich's 1978 poem “Integrity” illustrates the impulse of much recent poetry by American women: towards acknowledgment and celebration of a transformed consciousness.

Anger and tenderness: my selves.
And now I can believe they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities.
Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere—
even from a broken web.

¹ See “Recharting the Canon: Some Reflections on Feminist Poetics and the Avant-Garde,” *American Poetry Review*, July/August, 1986, Vol. 15, no. 4, pp., 12–20.

Learning to Breathe Free

by Marjorie Murphy

City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860, by Christine Stansell. New York: Knopf, 1986, 301 pp., \$30.00 hardcover.

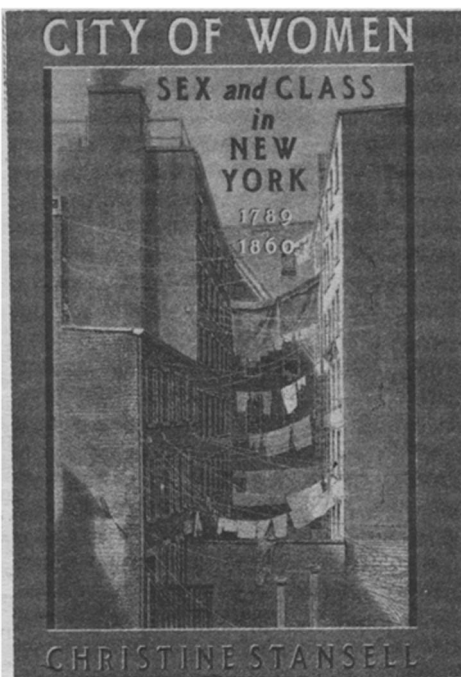
New York City in the early nineteenth century was the epicenter of a new capitalist economy that thoroughly restructured politics, family and work. It was also a place where women first entered the labor market, “a female city concealed within the larger metropolis of New York,” as Christine Stansell writes in the first pages of *City of Women*. And poor women made a special contribution to the creation of a new metropolitan culture that would leave a lasting mark on the history of working women.

The new economy brought with it an ideology that assigned a special place to women in the home. Domesticity, Stansell argues, was an aspect of bourgeois identity destined in the eyes of its creators to purge the city of its working-class rowdiness. The power of this ideology and the countervailing weight of an emerging working-class culture created the milieu in which working women shaped their lives.

Stansell argues that as New York changed from a commercial trading center to an urbanized industrial society, the image of women in working-class communities also changed. Beginning with what she calls the “precarious dependencies” of the period from 1780 to 1820, when women were dependent on the patriarchal family, she moves to the era from 1820 to 1850, where she finds gender attitudes changing from hostility between the sexes to accommodation—within a formula of “proper” feminine behavior.

Focusing on this complex transition in gender attitudes, the paths taken—and not taken—Stansell assesses the impact of the American Revolution in class and gender terms. She finds that while the republic gave a new identity to working-class men in citizenship and to middle-class women in republican motherhood, it left little for poor women. As metropolitan industry grew, working men strengthened their prerogatives in family life while propertied women pursued their new sense of importance through their notions of propriety. The cult of domesticity, that pedestal of moral superiority, piety and purity, was erected by women of an emerging bourgeoisie. “It was the ladies who expanded on its possibilities and the workingwomen who bore the brunt of its oppressions,” Stansell writes. Working women may have easily rejected the obvious class interests of the proponents of the cult of domesticity. It was difficult, however, to ignore working-class men's infatuation with domestic values. Because women worked outside the home they had to cut a unique pattern of behavior and propriety according to their own cultural standards. It was not, Stansell warns, a simple transformation in class relations that produced the new gender system.

The lives of working-class women in the antebellum city are so obscure that it takes extraordinary skill and imagination to locate them and give voice to a silent past. Stansell has left few stones unturned. She has examined court records, state and national censuses, newspapers, legal records on abortions, on infanticide and on marriage, club minutes, private letters, diaries and novels to find real women like Bridget Clarke, Mary Galloway and Catherine Gallagher.



A chapter on women in the neighborhoods illustrates the rewards of Stansell's careful research. Poor women lived in communities where privacy was an alien concept, where involvement in a neighbor's troubles or in a stranger's dilemma was not uncommon. This public activity defied middle-class concepts of family privacy, of the calm of domestic relations and of the sanctity of the privatized home. In immigrant neighborhoods life was in the streets. Women were the guardians of the neighborhood, not the home. “To some degree,” Stansell writes, “the working poor, especially immigrant women, were able to create urban communities in the context of massive transiency.” Evictions attracted mobs and sexual impropriety could invite the retaliation of the entire neighborhood as poor women asserted their own sense of propriety in sharp contrast to the calm and affection of bourgeois femininity.

Because life was so precarious, often “in a calamity, neighbors' help made the difference between survival and destitution.” A fire could destroy the homes in an entire block, leaving the lucky survivors to be taken in by neighbors

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while the less fortunate friendless victims froze in makeshift shelters. It was not unusual, Stansell tells us, for women like Bridget Clarke to take in perfect strangers, sharing food, shelter and clothing. Stansell skillfully renders a scene, a portrait of active women in a community of need, where neighbors help strangers adjust to the harshness of urban life. (Quite a contrast to the middle-class women in Mary Ryan's study of antebellum Utica, who distrusted strangers and saw them as intruders threatening to corrupt innocent youth.)

But Stansell's purpose is not so much to overturn our understanding of middle-class antebellum behavior as to add to it by recognizing that the cult of domesticity was not ubiquitous and that class alternatives emerged as the gender system changed. Bourgeois alternatives for woman—angel or demon—left little room for working women to maneuver, much less escape the tedium of their working lives. The new Bowery Gal, the young woman who worked in the city shops and factories, found that on Saturday evening she could parade down the Bowery to visit the oyster houses, the dance halls and the Bowery Theatre. Stansell argues that the Bowery Gal's colorful dress allowed young women to experience the street without the trappings of middle-class coquetry and yet appear not as flamboyantly dressed as the common street-walker. Even so, her fancy clothes attracted the condemnation of both middle-class reformers and working-class observers who interpreted her freedom in dress as sexual license. She was already undermining the authority of the family by circumventing its economy to buy her own extravagant clothing with her own earnings. She was also working outside the scrutiny of family members; she could easily flirt with the single men she encountered. "Sexual freedom seems to have been the issue: not the fact of premarital sexual activity," Stansell writes.

Bowery Gals were not innocents, Stansell tells us; but in discussing sexuality she is tentative about weighing the dangers of city life against the pleasures of freedom. The young women accepted favors from men and were sometimes raped in return, but Stansell asks the reader not to draw too harsh a conclusion from the exchange: "In a city where women were taking new territory for themselves, the intentions of both parties in a heterosexual encounter could be murky." Even asking for directions could be construed as an invitation to sex; sometimes, Stansell points out, the women were not innocently asking for directions. Night life in the Bowery was masculinist, to be sure, but not nearly as misogynist as had been relations between the sexes in earlier history.

Stansell argues that the women created a new sexual code that was oddly related to commercial culture: he pays for the oysters and beer and she responds with sexual favors. It was because women had their own wages and expressed their independence in their dress and because in the Bowery working women encountered men of their own class that the meaning of sexual encounters was "murky." Certainly the wages of a Bowery Gal would tempt her to make him pay for the oysters and beer. What he would expect in return would depend upon what he could get away with under a system of justice that frowned upon her "freedoms." Hardly an egalitarian system, as Stansell admits, but better than being raped simply because one is a woman.

But it seems to me that if the women were not innocents, neither were the men. The very men who were rejecting commercial culture in the shops were cutting sexual deals on the Bowery. For the woman it must have been difficult to determine whether her Bowery Boy was a leftover eighteenth-century misogynist or a new nineteenth-century masculinist republican. In either case she risked getting raped.

How far did the wages and work of the Bowery Gals allow them to create a new self-image? Stansell provides ample evidence, in her studies of early sweatshops and domestic service, that the low wages and long hours of working women left very little time for amusements. New recruits to the working-class youth culture of the Bowery, she argues, must have been drawn from the new factories where work was steadier and piece rates higher. These women did assert some control over their labor (in an 1835 strike of straw hat makers and tailoresses) but they seem to lose control of the language and mean-

ing of protest as reformers and working men offer them support. "Beginning with assertions of self-reliance," Stansell writes, "the working women ended up relying almost entirely on public sympathy." Very little of the republicanism of the time could be translated into a vibrant, self-actualizing trade union movement for women.

The commercial culture itself raises questions about the degree of control these women had over their destiny. Bourgeois women and working men, despite the limits on their lives, managed to create their own role within this new culture, but apparently working women could only expect to be appropriated by either group. Feminist reformers pictured working women as cruelly exploited, used them to symbolize the mistreatment of women generally and claimed universality for their own definition of womanhood. At the same time, working men embraced the ideology of the male family wage which undermined the force of an argument for better wages for independent women. The combination of female victimization, voiced by sentimentalists, with the rhetoric of "preservation of the working-class family," as articulated by working-class men, proved overpowering for the few women who had attempted to feminize republicanism in a trade union movement. "The language of feminism subsumed working class women's experience into categories of victimization, and the language of class struggle blurred the particularities of their lives into the unified interests of the working-class family."

While Stansell is careful to explain how these new working women were undermined by the cultural anxieties of both middle-class reformers and working-class men, she also argues that the Bowery Gal invoked a special identity that promised new sexual freedom. Threatened by this freedom, reformers saw in "the image of the Bowery Gal" the first step in youthful pleasures leading fatefully to prostitution and ruin. By tracing the hysteria over prostitution in antebellum New York, Stansell shows how casual prostitution operated in working-class neighborhoods. Although "girls and women traded their sexual favors for food, lodging and drink," there were boundaries dividing sex outside of marriage from prostitution. Bourgeois reformers failed to appreciate the distinction, a failure which Stansell attributes to their general anxiety over the new factory girl's independence from the household and her circumvention of family discipline.

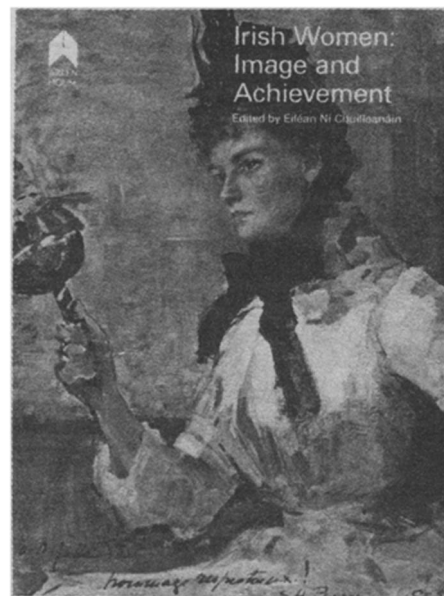
Few histories of women give us as much to ponder as Stansell's book. *City of Women* brings home graphically how disruptive the introduction of women's factory work was to class and gender relations in early urban America. Once a shadow of the Bowery Boy, the Bowery Gal emerges in these pages as a young working woman, pressing her employer for extra time off while fighting the temptations of silk bonnets and fancy aprons in shop windows. She infuriates bourgeois culture by her colorful dress, her forthright language and her unchaste presence on the evening streets of the Bowery. Unlike the rebel girls of the Progressive era who rose up and demanded better pay and a place in the trade union movement, the Bowery Gals of New York failed to forge a political movement. Still, they stood in the vanguard of a profound change in women's history. They were the pioneers in work outside the home. They expressed themselves by participating in a special culture, a heterosocial world where they could test their newfound freedoms. "It was a place where the dialectic of female vice and female virtue was volatile; where, in the ebb and flow of large oppressions and small freedoms, poor women traced out unforeseen possibilities for their sex." In this realm of the possible Stansell brilliantly uncovers the tensions in sex and class that shape and reshape our own sexual freedom. □

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Ireland's New Rebels

by Ailbhe Smyth

As it is altogether possible that Ireland has slipped off the atlas since you last looked, I'll remind you that it is the beleaguered little country suspended in a geographical warp between Europe and America—the last outpost of the old world, ironically confronting across the ocean that brave new world which has seduced so many millions of its daughters and sons eager to free themselves from centuries of colonization and the stifling rigidity of its social and sexual mores. Forget the shamrocks and shillelaghs, lilt-ing leprechauns and rolling celtic mists of myth and legend; the realities of contemporary Ireland are harsh and all too bleakly real. Bearing the double burden of its troubled history and strife-torn present, the Republic faces an economic crisis of mammoth proportions. The foreign debt is currently running at over £10 billion and 240,000 people are unemployed out of a total population of only three and half million.



During the 1970s, those euphoric early days of the women's liberation movement, it was not impossible to believe that even Ireland could be swept along on the tide of the root-and-branch change for which we all fought so valiantly. We know now that those early encounters—over contraception, rape, equal pay—were mere skirmishes, a phoney war, prior to the battles of the 1980s against the serried ranks of church and state, staunch defenders of the Faith of our Fathers and the myth of motherhood. The litany of defeats, and of victims—some known, the vast majority unnamed and nameless—is shocking: Ann Lovett, aged 15, died in the open air, in front of a shrine to the virgin mother, while giving birth to her still-born child, alone and apparently without the knowledge of anyone in her small country town; Joanne Hayes, aged 24, concealed the birth and death of her baby, subsequently "confessed" to the murder by stabbing of another baby (despite contrary forensic evidence) and during the longest public tribunal of inquiry in the history of the state, though accused of no crime, was subjected to the most appalling interrogation and humiliation. And so on, and on. Over the past few years, women have been subjected to unprecedented social, psychic and moral battering. Yet each time, feminists have refused to accept defeat; they regroup and press on to the next issue, the new battle.

I have started by emphasizing the gloomier aspects of the Irish situation, partly because there is nothing to be gained by "telling it slant": life is hard, scandalously hard for so very many Irish women. Partly also because it is important for women outside Ireland to understand what a deeply traditional and sexually repressive society it is, even in the 1980s. Abortion—a criminal offence—was declared unconstitutional in a 1983 referendum; divorce is still prohibited by the constitution. No Irish feminist is fooled by the strongly marked Marianism of Catholicism, nor by the typical symbolization of the nation in female terms, nor indeed by the lip-service paid to the sacrosanct nature of women's place within the family. Ireland is no matriarchy, and Irish women are locked into "good mother" roles with little chance of escape.

The role of feminist publishing in Irish women's struggle for autonomy is virtually incalculable. Feminist publishing and the interconnected blossoming of Women's Studies are two of the most dynamic projects in the Women's Movement in Ireland at present. Against all the odds, there are now three visible and healthy feminist imprints. Each is different, and each is a vital force in empowering women to realize our full potential. Women's desire to raise our voices and express our visions, and male resistance to this project, are accurately reflected in the difficulties and struggles of feminist publishing.

Catherine Rose, Arlen House's founder and prime mover, met me in the sophisticated but minuscule space they now occupy in a brand-new Dublin office block—a far cry from the livingroom in County Galway where her publishing adventure began over a decade ago. Way back in those mid-seventies salad days, Catherine told me, she had been commissioned to do a book on first-wave feminism in Ireland. But the publisher let her down very badly, leaving her with a broken contract, no money and the conviction that if women's knowledge, ideas and dreams were to be recorded, women would have to do it themselves. Catherine herself published *The Female Experience: The Story of the Woman Movement in Ireland* in 1975. Margaret MacCurtain, a Dominican nun, feminist and university lecturer in Irish history (a somewhat atypical combination in Ireland) read the book, admired her courage—and suggested they set up a feminist publishing company.

Janet Martin's *Essential Guide for Women* was their first joint book, and a much riskier one than its title suggests. Catherine said, "It's hard now to understand just how radical that *Guide* was. As well as dealing with the standard sorts of information—which no one had in fact ever dealt with before—it broached the taboo topics of contraception and abortion." Author and publishers actually ran the risk of imprisonment under the terms of the Censorship Act. They managed to survive, and in 1978 Catherine came to Dublin, where she had few friends and no contacts in the Women's Movement. She advertised then for anyone interested to become involved in Arlen House—and ended up, through lack of response (what were we all doing, I ask myself?) simply asking the only three women she knew in Dublin to become co-directors.

Looking back now, Catherine believes Arlen survived only because "so many women gave so much of their time for nothing." Editorial meetings took place in each others' houses "with small children under the table and sticky fingers in the proofs." By dint of dogged perseverance they eventually managed to get commercial sponsorship for a short-story competition. This they ran for two years, publishing the results in ground-breaking anthologies which revealed the store of stifled imagination, wit and ability of women writing throughout the country. One of the winning stories, "The Wall Reader" by Fiona Barr, struck a particularly sensitive chord with its exploration of the effect of "The Troubles" on one young mother's monotonous but secure existence, and through the ironically understated parallels drawn between the two occupied zones—women and country.

Further success and another landmark came in 1978 with the publication of a collection of essays, *Women in Irish Society*, edited by Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha O'Corrain. Since then both Arlen House, and more recently, Attic Press, have gone on to play a central part in the process of (re)claiming women's history and identity. Arlen's 1985 *Irish Women: Image and Identity* has a double aim: to examine representations of femaleness through myth, history and legislation and to explore the ways in which Irish women have sought to create autonomous self-concepts and images through music, writing and the arts. They have just launched the beatifically-entitled *Tale of a Great Sham*, Anna Parnell's turn-of-the-century memoir of her bitter experience in setting up the Ladies Land League. For editor Dana Hearne, Anna Parnell is a