

A STRANGER'S UTTERANCE: HILDA MORLEY'S POETICS OF SELF-DEFINITION

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American poet Hilda Morley (1919) has been recognized lately as one of the most suggestive writers associated with Black Mountain poetics. Highly admired by Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley, her poetic production, which has appeared widely since 1972, is being reassessed and revalorized by both critics and readers. In this essay I shall be concerned with delineating Morley's mode of conveying an uncertain and unstable sense of identity. While feminist scholars are currently addressing this very theme, Morley's poems articulate in a somewhat diffused manner her own conflictive relationship with the idea of subjectivity and how it may be poetically expressed. In the wake of her conception of poetry as an organic event, Morley problematizes in her texts a contingent notion of the Self which links language and identity inextricably but inconclusively.

In the late 1960s Denise Levertov was supposed to introduce a book of Hilda Morley's called *The Bird with the Long Neck* that remained, however, unpublished. She included a slightly revised version of that introduction in her book *Light Up the Cave* (1981), which became the first essay focusing on the art of this relatively unknown but gifted woman poet¹. In those introductory remarks, Levertov refers to Morley's unpublished poems as "each a perfect and separate pleasure" (1981: 265) and highlights the parallelisms between herself and Morley in terms of age,

¹Hilda Morley was born in New York (1919), and was educated there and in Haifa (Palestine), London, and at Wellesley College. In 1948 she met the composer Stefan Wolpe and soon after their marriage in 1952 they joined the faculty of Black Mountain. Her husband died in 1972 after a ten-year battle with Parkinson's disease. She died in London on March 23, 1998 at the age of seventy-nine. She received the Capricorn Prize for *To Hold in My Hand: Selected Poems* (1983). Her other collections of verse include the chapbook *A Blessing Outside Us* (1976), *What Are Winds and What Are Waters* (1983), *Cloudless at First* (1988) and *The Turning* (1998). Her poems have appeared in literary magazines such as *Chicago Review*, *Harper's Magazine*, *APR*, *The Nation*, *Hudson Review*, *New Directions Annual*, *Poetry*, *Ironwood* and *Sulfur*. However, her poetic output has received very little critical attention, despite having been highly praised by fellow poets such as Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley and by critics such as Stanley Kunitz. In fact she has been largely overlooked in the studies of Black Mountain poetics and ignored in women's poetry anthologies such as Florence Howe's 1993 *No More Masks!* or even in the popular *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. At any rate, her poetry is slowly but firmly beginning to attract critical attention; Paul Hoover, for instance, includes her in his 1994 *Postmodern American Poetry* anthology.

education and a life devoted to thinking about and writing poetry. She deploras, nonetheless, the fact that Morley's poems came to be published very late, for her first volume came out in 1976, making little or no impression on either critics or readers. Levertov places Morley in the tradition of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, in so far as the precision of structure and the nuances of rhythm, sound and diction make her poems truly organic pieces. In a later essay Denise Levertov made reference in passing to Morley's art when citing examples of women poets whose writing did not adhere to the "neurotically, excessively, self-indulgently [women's] poetry preoccupied with death or suicide" (1981: 267) so much in vogue during the seventies. Foremost among the qualities of Morley's style Levertov considers her "subtle sensibility" and a "rock-firm craft" (1981: 268). Similarly, in the preface to Morley's second book, *What Are Winds and What Are Waters* (1983), she eulogizes her poetry on the grounds that it manifests "the real meaning of the often-abused concept of 'composition by field'" (1983), thus assigning a place for Morley in the tradition of organicist poetry and implying that her work needs critical reevaluation. Morley's life experiences achieve supreme relevance when one attempts to account for the absence of her poetry in printed form until the late seventies. Additionally, it would be necessary to reassess the role played by her husband (German-born avant-garde composer Stefan Wolpe) in Morley's publishing career. During their stay at Black Mountain College in the 50s and in subsequent years, her poetry remained unpublished: her texts did not appear either in *Origin* or in *Black Mountain Review*, the emblematic magazines of the Black Mountain group. Donald Allen did not include her poems in the famous anthology of new American poetry he edited in 1960. I do not believe the reason for this silence, voluntary or not, is to be attributed solely to Morley's feeling, in Stanley Kunitz's words, "that there was room for only one genius in the family, and that one had to be her husband" (1983). That only partially explains why she had her first book published twenty years after she had actually begun writing. A different perspective emerges when one analyses the male attitude toward female art prevalent in Black Mountain, at least during Olson's rectorship from 1951 to 1956, precisely the period of Morley's stay. Brian Conniff has pointed out that the central role traditionally ascribed to Olson has precluded the critical consideration due to other writers. Specifically he believes that "to restore some of Black Mountain's kinetic energy ... it is helpful ... to try to establish some kind of legitimate poetic distance from Olson's writing and from that work of Duncan and Creeley most often associated with him" (1993: 119). Reconsidering the poetry of Hilda Morley is, I believe, an indispensable move in that direction. It is significant that Creeley himself, in the preface to Morley's 1998 book *The Turning*, readily pays tribute to her patience with "the male *machismo* of the college, which gave such small room if any to a poet like [herself]" (1998). He adds that the men in the college, "tramping about with our big ideas" felt probably "threatened" by this woman's talents (1998). In no way is this assessment by Creeley intended merely as a friendly gesture toward Morley but as a conscious validation of her work despite the ostracism she faced in that male-dominated milieu. While it is not my intention to resort to facile reasons to explain why Hilda Morley's work received such delayed

publication, it is nevertheless quite obvious that gender played a central role in Black Mountain College, as Creeley's remarks suggest.

In her work *The Arts at Black Mountain College* Emma Harris documents evidence of the hostile sexual politics of Black Mountain and remarks that Hilda Morley felt unappreciated due to her poetic interests as much as to her gender. She, in turn, came to understand the attitude of the faculty wives as a rather submissive one. Indeed, in her poem "For Constance Olson", dedicated to the poet's first wife, Morley records Constance's "movement/ of a Kore still/ (Charles celebrated/ it)" and her "thoughtfulness/ always of a maiden bringing/ offerings on a Greek vase,/ these & the assenting/ voice — spirals of pensiveness" (1983b: 40). Lines such as these reveal Morley's subtle critique of both the men's and the women's assumption of gendered values at Black Mountain college and although there is not the slightest trace of feminist vindictiveness in the text I do believe the tone of the commentary is overtly critical.

And yet Hilda Morley can hardly be considered a feminist. After so many years, the experience at Black Mountain provoked in her only a "spark of anguish" which "blasts the remembered images to ashes" at the same time that "the heat of her body shelters them" and yields a language of re-connection, "thread onto thread" (1983b: 40). In "For Robert Duncan", written on the occasion of the poet's death, Morley begins to problematize that initial gendered exclusion which she saw embodied in Duncan's person, who "didn't look at me/ but always/ past me, not wishing/ to talk to me, but moving/ toward someone else & preferably/ a man" (1998: 52). She makes clear, however, that Duncan's homosexuality didn't prevent her feeling compensated by his immensely suggestive poetry, for the poems really "broke out of the mist ... a vast embrace" between them (1998: 52). Robert Creeley, her lifelong friend, was perhaps the only exception as far as the male treatment of women in Black Mountain is concerned. In a poem dedicated to Creeley, whom she calls a "wandering minstrel", Morley foregrounds the different attitude of this poet toward her and highlights his "extreme courtesy/ so little/ seen in that particular place" (1998: 98).

At any rate, whether or not Morley was indeed influenced by the biased stance of the main male figures of Black Mountain, it remains beyond dispute that readers were deprived of her poetry for a long time. In an effort to explain her peculiar publishing career, Stanley Kunitz describes Morley as "unaggressive about her work", implying that she preferred to keep the poems out of the public eye, with the purpose of providing a resting period that would do them much good. In a similar vein, Denise Levertov considered that she "had been *keeping [her poems] under her sleeve*" and that "when they see the light, it is in full ripeness" (1981: 265). Both remarks lead one to speculate whether Morley's publication record is not, after all, the result of a conscious decision. In that case, one should not inquire further about the matter.

According to Brian Conniff, "Morley often views delay as providential, so long as it is part of a larger process in which attention is directed to the common world"

definitively, solid version of herself. Her poetry points to an unending revision of the self which dismisses closure altogether, while simultaneously she keeps pursuing a distinct subjective positioning. In "After Thanksgiving" she writes: "Now in my argument/ against myself I try to/ prove — that truth is:/ is paradox,/ that what is/ a contradiction/ is real " (1983b: 164-65), hence the awareness of her obfuscated being in poetry, her delight in constructing structures of words to signify just momentarily, to recall visions of reality which become defaced and re-created over and over. The nature of the subject which figures in most of Morley's texts bears some likeness to the unstable and discontinuous postmodern subject. The "Self" is assumed as a tentative account of one's experiences and, consequently, it is bereft of metaphysical certainty. It is small wonder, then, that she tries to sort out the paradoxes of identity through poetry, even though she also assumes the provisionality of the linguistic medium itself. Accordingly, in "The Last Rehearsal" she says that only "Where something is being made is/ where joy is" (1983b: 212). The pleasure resides in the making, in the process, and not in the outcome. Clearly enough, she shares with Black Mountain writers the emphasis on the idea of writing as a process of discovery, certainly not as unproblematic self-definition. Morley seems to embrace this view in texts which present an erratic subjectivity concurrent with the incapacity to account for it in full. At the most, subjectivity is susceptible of being just conjured up, as she says in "This Ledge":

Haunted here,
 my roots dangle,
 Alone, who am I?
 Is my identity
 only with others?
 ...
 I no longer
 know what is continuous,
 the linking
 I have missed, what is
 Continuous. (1998: 135)

Is the self a relational entity that finds meaningfulness only when there is an "other" to connect to? Or is it a self-sufficient substance that lies somehow at the core of being and that is prior to social performance? Morley doesn't offer a definitive answer to any of these questions. The distance between self-perception and the way(s) you are comprehended by the others entails a critical moment that suspends personal identity and leaves you *dangling*. Fortunately, though, language allows the poet to engage in a fruitful dialogue between the outside world and the inner consciousness, and even someone like Morley, who dares to admit that she lives in contradictions "without knowing/ either who or often who I am" (1983b: 5), finds some coherence in life by paradoxically becoming aware of the limitations of language to circumscribe reality, either visible or invisible, spiritual or physical. In this respect, Morley's aesthetics evinces a hesitant stance present as well in other Black Mountain poets, such as Robert Creeley for instance. Neither adopting nor

rejecting entirely the 'expressive' mode, Morley searched continuously for newer ways of poetic rendering. "Looking at that Sky" deals with the dilemma of whether to regard all possibilities lost or looking more intensely so as to discover other presences, other visions at first disregarded outright:

Looking at that sky,
 I thought, at first,
 we were to be shut out forever.
 A blank greyness
 flattened all possibility,
 a final closure:
 no hope, no variation there.
 ...
 But
 I looked further
 & below the greyness,
 colors of beginning — delicate apricot,
 unfolding
 of peach & apple were radiant,
 fused there
 & the grey darkened above them. (1998: 7)

The poetic persona refuses to give in to desperation and obscurity, trying in its stead to reach beyond the material and stretch her limbs toward a place of immense beauty and unexpected realities, as further prospects appear. Morley conceives of poetry as an event which takes place almost by chance, propelling her to "lay [the words]/ in amazement,/ wonder, ... (But) they are like cards,/ like playing cards, not used for/ building houses,/ not meant for/ structuring" (1983b: 193). Her artistic vision partakes of the rational and the emotional, which she finds empowering and diminishing alike, making her "a single thread/ tossed forward/ into nothing:/ a beginning" (1998: 10). Poetry provides self-knowledge and the means of accepting herself, of identifying with any account of the inner self that is negotiated between the occasionally disturbing forces at work in the process of spelling out a clarified selfhood. Borrowing a line from Cavafy, Morley sees her own reflection "at a slight angle to the universe", immersed in "what/ the world calls 'shyness'" (1998: 43), unprotected and vulnerable, witnessing herself in the act of recoiling from the others, from the life outside. But it is precisely at this moment that she encounters a sheltering language that orients her through the dark, that helps her grow at the same time that her poetic voice is articulated, once the efforts to decipher novel sensations have been exhausted. From loneliness to timidity, through dispossession and fragility, and ending with the perception of her own fortitude, Morley appears as a woman lucky to have an 'angle' from where she could "see more clearly" and could

accept myself more easily, for the angle
 moved with me,
 was pliable,

her attempts to think coherently and the inability to do so. Crucial words in this opening section are isolated from the central structure as if to enhance the effects of the goddess' presence, who is "stronger" than her, while she remains "half-waking" and calls on the goddess and her power. The parallel construction which follows stresses the disruption produced by the goddess' projection in the narrator's body and, accordingly, in the self-perception apparent in the indented quatrain. The speaker justifies her acceptance of the goddess' maternal authority, if only to bring back the sense of her own dislocation. The "I" of the text craves for re-constitution, for re-construction, for re-birth, calling on this ancient mother-goddess of shells, hoping that by giving in to her power and willing to be *held* in her maternal embrace, she might re-gain the old completion, or at least, the unified self that she has lost. The broken lines of the poem parallel the discontinuous self which figures in it as a reminder of the ever fluid contours which surround, but never fix, individual subjectivity.

Although she was conscious of the essential impossibility of attaining a solid constitution, there is in Morley's poetry a trend toward wholeness, toward integration of mind and body in a placid conjunction. And, occasionally, her spirit refuses to accept the fears, the misgivings brought about by a persistent sensation of solitude. In "After the Turner Exhibition", for instance, Morley voices her lack of self-confidence when confronting, once more, the indisputable reality of her husband's absence:

That weight inside the body
must be shifted,
 that terror
of where I am?
 that spasm
of anguish,
 now that S.
is gone irrevocably,
 that:
 Where do I
stand in the world?
 With what
firmness?
 Does it
hold me even
at all? (1983b: 48)

The poetic rendering of this emotion is carried out following the rhythm of the poet's impressions as they occur in her mind, yielding the words and the pauses which reflect back her breath in the length of the lines, sometimes just one term, on other occasions a full sentence. Thus, they proceed to re-construct on the page the continuity of feeling and extrapolate outwardly the impulse to create an image responsive to her expressive demands. Lines follow each other as one perception

leads to another and the speech of the poet achieves primary importance as it is recorded in the rhythmical pace. If anything, Morley's poetry constructs and deconstructs the self in ever shifting acts of language, which disdain absolute meanings and envision further ways of poetic realization. Morley likens poetry to an open medium (which is at the same time self-contained) whereby both the inner and the outer experiences are rearticulated. Poetry as well serves to achieve an immediate and recollected thinking that involve perceptions as well as wishes and fears. Perhaps in response to the question she raised in the above-quoted text, Morley tries to clarify her standing in the world finding inspiration, as in "Sow-Goddess", in feminine figures who exemplify determination and self-sufficiency. Thus, "La Belle Otero" presents this legendary character:³

... a woman who used
her capacities to the full,
from
the beginning,
with nothing
left over, nothing left to be
hurt, whose hardness
in dealing with the world was equal
to the world's hardness itself. (1983b: 19)

Similarly, "The Women of New Guinea" celebrates female pride and power: the independence and self-confidence of these women who protect and fight, but who also nurture and dance. Beautiful and gentle, strong-minded and courageous, the women of New Guinea represent for Morley a model of human integrity and strength. They provide for their family and yet these women haven't lost their femininity because it is precisely there that their energy resides:

The women of New Guinea stand proudly:
it is
they who cast nets to haul in
the catch;
it is they also
who perform dances to
ward off the spirits who
might assail them
Long-hipped, long-armed
& with necklaces of nuts & coral they dance,
with precision
& abandon at once
Their fierceness,

³ La Bella Otero is the artistic name of Agustina Otero Iglesias, a Spanish dancer and singer (1868-1965), who became famous in Paris for her art and her numerous loveaffairs. She became a symbol of the *Belle Époque* even after her retirement in 1918.

the look in their eyes is
an intentness, a concentration... (1983b: 86)

Likewise, the long narrative poem "For Marina Tsvetaeva" dramatizes Morley's recognition of this woman poet's perseverance ("How much bolder you were/ than I have been" she says).⁴ However, she underlines, more than anything else, the importance of the other woman's "lack of shyness", her defiant attitude, her rage, her tenderness (*Turning* 1998: 107-9). Conversely, in "For Carrington", Morley identifies with the English painter Dora Carrington mostly on account of their reverence for one man (Wolpe and Lytton Strachey), for both "needed to/ find wisdom in the beloved". Nonetheless, Morley laments the painter's "surrender", the self-effacement that accompanied her relationship with Strachey but, primarily, she reproves Carrington for her final collapse:

How you surrendered, allowed yourself to
be defeated, saying you were a
failure, in everything but in
your love of Lytton.
You might have
retraced your path, transformed
that 'failure' into a road
into yourself.
You were not born to find perfection in
love only.
There was another self who
had to grasp the world by drawing it... (1998: 62-70)

Much to Morley's fortune, she was enabled to deploy another self who did grasp the *world by writing it*, hence contributing to the overcoming of pains and wounds, to the surpassing of apprehensions and fears. Her verse, while stressing the relevance of individual expression, does exhibit a wavering subjectivity that refuses to articulate consciousness in any other way except as a linguistic performance. The poet undertakes a self-constitutive task that prevails as long as the texts re-enact the very moment of creation, or as Ezra Pound would have phrased it, as long as the emotion endures. Hilda Morley refused to approach life dualistically and disregarded a polarized thinking; in its stead, she preferred to integrate all sides of her art and her character in the poetic act whenever she found it necessary, thus confirming Kunitz's view that "her poems seem to happen, not to be composed" (1983). Therefore, a

⁴ Russian woman poet (1892-1941). She met the Russian Revolution with hostility because her husband was an officer in the White counterrevolutionary army. She fled Moscow in 1922 and exiled herself to Paris, where she published several volumes of poetry, including *Stikhi k Bloku (Verses to Blok, 1922)* and *Posle Rossii (After Russia, 1928)*. At the end of the 30s her husband returned to the Soviet Union, taking their daughter with him (they were to be victims of the Stalinist repression). In 1939 she followed them. The evacuation of Moscow during WWII sent her to a remote town where she had neither friends nor support. She committed suicide in 1941.

woman poet is her ability to intimate a state of mind without ever defining it, to advance a given viewpoint without establishing it, and, ultimately, to disclose herself without utilizing poetry as a confessional act. For Morley, then, a poem is always "the last rehearsal" as far as it is grounded on the present moment. Or, as Robert Creeley would put it, the poem is 'given' to someone and he must recognize the experience when the miracle happens.

Morley belongs in that group of poets who have attempted to reach beyond the inherited poetic ethos which placed the speaking "I" at the center of the composition. As she writes in one of her poems, "It's too easily comforting/ to imagine all our thinking/ derives from the universals: the good, the true,/ the beautiful" (1988: 27). Her poetry amounts to the imaginative expansion of the belief that there is neither an unequivocal mode of attaining knowledge, nor a single way of signifying. Morley's resistance to determinacy and uniformity implies an experimental approach to composition which underlines the subject's incapacity to circumscribe the world surrounding her. Readers of Morley's poetry must feel gratitude for her insistence on showing us that it is more enriching to explore ourselves bearing in mind the harsh and knobby facts of life, than to look for stability and uniformity, for these are, in the long run, misleading.

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