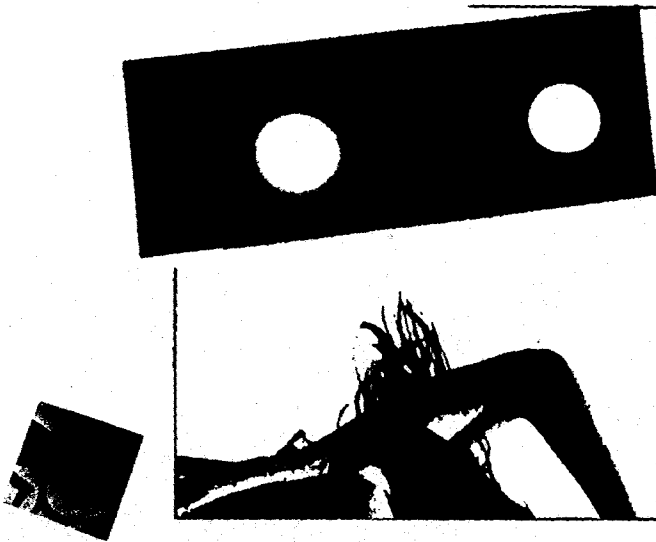


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Writing our Way
Through the Labyrinth

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Writing and Reading. two of the three R's every child learns in school (forgetting, for the moment, that one of the two begins with 'w'). writing and reading go together like speaking and hearing. ancient uses of the eye, the hand, the one informing the other. i was taught to write whole, taught to form the letters of words that together formed lines of poetry, deciphering as i went what the words meant, following the curve of syntax, its twists and turns, as i made the curving up-and-down of letters forming words : *Slowly, silently, now the moon / Walks the night in her silver shoon...*¹

and so caught from then on, intrigued by the twists and turns of the labyrinth of language. an ancient structure i found my way into (or my teachers led me to, leaving me alone with the thread in my hands), full of interconnecting passageways, trap-doors, melodious charms, vivid and often incomprehensible images on the walls, all of them pointing, pointing me further along — the thread, the desire to know, *gnō*—, narrative, tugging in my hands. life-line (trying to make sense of it all). the pull of syntax (“arranged in order”) i felt my way by. trying to find something familiar, something i recognized : so i could be found in the midst of all these meanings pointing elsewhere.

later as i began to write (compose) poetry, i learned that writing involves reading or hearing all the language is saying that i am “lost” in and writing my way through. as if the labyrinth were itself an inner ear, a

¹ from “Silver,” a verse for children by Walter de la Mare.

sensory organ i feel my way by (sentence, *sentire*, to feel), keeping my feet by a labyrinthine sense of balance as the currents of various meaning, the "drift," swirl me along. of course the labyrinth is filled with fluid, as the membranous labyrinth of the inner ear is. women know the slippery feel of language, the walls that exclude us, the secret passageways of double meaning that conduct us into a sense we understand, reverberant with hidden meaning, the meaning our negated (in language) bodies radiate. bodies that possess no singular authoritative meaning but a meaning that is multiplicit, multilabial, continuously arrived at.

labyrinth : a structure consisting of a number of intercommunicating passages, arranged in a bewildering complexity... labyrinth : "not a maze to get lost in ; it had only one path, traversing all parts of the figure."² labyrinth : a continuous walking that folds back on itself and in folding back moves forward. labyrinth : earth-womb, underground, a journeying to the underworld and back. House of the Double Axe, sceptre of the Cretan Moon-Goddess (here she is again, in her silver shoon). intercommunicating passages circling back.

but these are images on the walls. and if we remove a few bricks ? writing goes back to a Germanic word, *writan*, meaning to tear, scratch, cut, incise. it is the act of the phallic singular, making its mark on things (stone, wood, sand, paper). leaving its track. "I was here," the original one in the world. reading goes back to Indo-European *ar-*, to fit together, appears in Old

² *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, ed. Barbara Walker (New York : Harper & Row, 1983), p. 523.

English as *raēdan*, to advise, explain, read. advise and care for seem to be enduring aspects of its meaning and still survive in the word *rede*, counsel or advice given, a decision taken by one or more persons ; or, to govern, take care of, save, take counsel together. always there is this relating to others. even in the usual sense of read, "to look over or scan (something written, printed, etc.) with understanding of what is meant by the letters or signs," there is this relating what the writer meant to what the reader understands, a commun-ication writing seems not to carry from its root. this deep desire to "stand in for" (the other), to understand something other than what one knows oneself, comes to the fore in such phrases as reading the future, reading someone's palm. "The sense of considering or explaining something obscure or mysterious is also common to the various languages, but the application of this to the interpretation of ordinary writing, and to the expression of this in speech, is confined to Eng. and ON (Old Norse) (in the latter perhaps under Eng. influence)," says the OED. reading what we are in the mi(d)st of. reading the world. reading one's body, that vast text (60,000 miles of veins and arteries). writing, the act of the singular, and reading, the act of the plural, of the more than one, of the one in relation to others.

in a time when language has been appropriated by the Freudians as intrinsically phallic,³ it seems crucial to

³ "...the linear, grammatical, linguistic system that orders the symbolic, the superego, the law. It is a system based entirely on one fundamental signifier : the phallus," as Xavière Gauthier succinctly puts it in *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York : Schocken, 1981), p. 162.

reclaim it through what we know of ourselves in relation to writing. writing can scarcely be for women the act of the phallic signifier, its claim to singularity, the mark of the capital I (was here). language is no "tool" for us, no extension of ourselves, but something we are "lost" inside of. finding our way in a labyrinthine moving with the drift, slipping through claims to one-track meaning so that we can recover multiple related meanings, reading between the lines. finding in write, rite, growing out of *ar-*, that fitting together at the root of read (we circle back), moving into related words for arm, shoulder (joint), harmony — the music of connection. making our way through all parts of the figure, using our labyrinthine sense, we (w)rite our way *ar-* way, "reading" it, in intercommunicating passages.