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## **A Yeatsian Feminist**

Doris Barkin

Pat Falk is lying to us when she declares, "If I never write again I will be happy." In "Blue Night," she claims, I would rather sleep than write." She lies to us and lies to herself, but this is not mendacity or trickery or manipulation. Quite the contrary, Falk's searingly honest, painful, often heartbreaking collection of poems *Crazy Jane* attests that Falk must write: if the act does not make her happy, at least it works towards healing her. It is the paradoxical act of writing as healing and as hurting, among other conundrums, that Falk grapples with in this recent collection.

A professor of English and women's studies and an award-winning poet, Falk has written two previous collections of poetry, *In the Shape of a Woman* (1995) and *Sightings: Poems on Discovery* (1999), and a widely reviewed memoir, *It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics* (2006). At the City College of New York, she studied with Adrienne Rich whom she considers a "literary mother." Her current collection reaffirms the feminist stance that has shaped her life and work. *Crazy Jane* draws for us the course women travel, circumnavigating the challenges of sexuality, spirituality, love, and war, which may rupture but will not erode: steering onward with fortitude and determination, they may be wearied, but they prevail.

For Falk, one way to heal from rupture is through an ongoing relationship with nature. Many of the poems reside in nature: on the beach, among pebbles, sand, and birds. In "Montauk Journal," she weds language and nature as if both are alive:

...call and break of passing  
fading, crashing splash on purpled sand and broken stone  
and back again; witness how the silence comes alive...

change me, change me,  
cruel crustacean rock and weed...

In the very same poem, she refers to William Butler Yeats, a major influence on her writing and on the collection itself: "here now at heart-center, center heart, dream machine/of mundi spirit, spiritus mundi..." The allusion is from "The Second Coming" in which Yeats envisioned *spiritus mundi* as an individual mind connected to one all-encompassing human intelligence: Falk has the same universality in mind.

Yeats's cosmology is referenced and imbedded. The book's title comes from Yeats's poem "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment" wherein the eponymous Jane lies prostrate, naked in the grass. A stanza from the poem forms part of the frontispiece of Falk's book. One wonders whether Falk identifies with Crazy Jane (Jane is Falk's middle name), or whether Falk writes her poems as a response to Crazy Jane, rejecting her, and insinuating that she is the Anti-Crazy Jane: "For too long I have carried/you inside me, color and substance/of lead, burden of darkness and dawn." If poetry heals, she maybe healed of her inherent craziness. If Yeats's Crazy Jane is, according to E.B. Cullingford, "vulnerable to the male gaze" in her nakedness, perhaps Falk's borrowing contradicts this vulnerability. Her womanhood may have been violated by the male gaze in the past, but no longer. In "Heat," she yokes together the male and female in erotic imagery:

if the sun is male so be it  
let his violent rays penetrate and soothe me

or let the sun be woman  
she too will take me as I open to her tongue...

The male gaze is no longer threatening as it is transmuted from masculine to feminine.

Yeats is also recalled in Falk's recurrent symbol of the swan. One reflexively thinks of "The Wild Swans at Coole," or "Leda and the Swan." Falk rebels against the male[en]forced violence by appropriating Yeats's symbolism and imbuing the swan, a mythic, mute, male, phallic-necked symbol with femaleness. Hence, a cycle of swan poems, "Swan Nesting," "Obsidian," "The Swan's Egg," "Snow Over Crocus," appears at the end of part 1. In these poems, the swan is clearly feminine, maternal:

the swan herself  
in hollow reeds  
putting stick to stone to mud  
in a hurry: she is due.

When the swans are both male and female, the male does not dominate: "he leads, she leads, they circle one another." Falk's feminism will not allow for male hegemony, noted in the emergent resolve of "Kaddish," the Jewish prayers for the dead: "Kaddish came from men/so daughters didn't count—/twenty years later I begin to count."

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The strongest poems in the collection are often the most spare. When Falk writes about her loneliness and abuse, she is most luminous. In “For My Mother,” precisely because the voice is disembodied and numb, the words are more powerful:

I remember being hit  
till my skin turned thick  
and people thought me shy or cold...  
When you slashed your wrists  
I held your hand, sopped  
the blood with Kleenex....  
I remember fear and need,  
but I don't remember love.

Many of the poems in the book are recollections of the poet's painful relationship with her father and her mother. However, if the mother/daughter relationship is thematic, Falk is both mother and daughter. She heals her brokenness through her own mothering. The first poem in the book, “Lifeline,” chronicles childbirth; its fragmentary structure reflects the poet's internal breakage:

she won't stop screaming  
the air she breathes is red  
the air she breathes is

blue

...the ache of birth.

While the poet rejects her own mother in “Pegasus,” “I can be/my mother's daughter— I swear/I never will”; in another poem, she recognizes that her own daughter's rejection of herself is of a different order. It is separation – a natural, healing progression:

...when she was eight,  
I'd walk her to the couch, her star-like hand

pressed warm in mine..  
She moves more deeply into sleep, turns her head away...

I need to let her go.

Falk admits to a changing life, to the depression that often goes hand in hand with aging, yet the poems express acceptance. In “Virgo,” the alliterative phrasing induces meditation; the metaphor of a tree conveys the sexuality of middle age, poignant and hopeful:

...no new leaves though the old  
dry dead ones have finally fallen off.

Walk up close to: examine: round swollen buds.  
Just last Tuesday they were tight and brown,  
now they burn with blistering green.

It is a sober group of poems. There is a lyricism which is elegiac, meditative, and solemn; however, amidst all the psychic pain, one wishes for a little relief, some whimsy, lightness, humor. The collection does not offer it. Even in a poem entitled, "Chinky, a Dog," here one expects a lightheartedness, where the timbre and rhythm of the words suggest playfulness, the dog dies and the speaker is filled with shame. At times, the feminism bespeaks a victimization that seems old-school. In "After Reading Women on War," Falk describes Japanese comfort women in all the expected ways. A newer feminism would venture away from the stock, wounded figures to strong, viable, sexually driven women who challenge male aggression.

Nonetheless, *Crazy Jane*, for its deeply personal poetics is rich indeed. It is fitting that Yeats is Falk's progenitor/model. As a visionary and revolutionary, politically and spiritually, Falk would find in Yeats the source of the engagement she seeks as a way to meet life's impediments and encumbrances. Falk's poems on war demonstrate this. The work is about hope, healing, and engagement: the very last word in the book is "commitment." For this attitude, reading Falk's work is resolutely uplifting, validating, and gratifying.

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