

Review by George Held

IT HAPPENS AS WE SPEAK: A FEMINIST POETICS

By Pat Falk

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\$14.95, 118 pp., paper

Born in 1950, Pat Falk has produced a short and pithy book that reveals how her life reflects her generation's coming-of-age coeval with the rise of contemporary feminism. It draws on the realms of autobiography, poetry, literary criticism, psychology, and philosophy, among others. And it exists as a probe and a guide for readers, especially women, who wish to understand themselves against the background of feminist studies, from the Sixties through the present.

Having absorbed Falk's efforts to delineate female from male, I use the word "probe" tentatively because of its male connotations. Yet because Falk's feminism is not dogmatic, she would perhaps forgive me and see that probe and guide are gender-free in the spirit of inquiry that her book embodies.

Inspired by the tutelage of Adrienne Rich at City College, shortly after the publication of her *Diving into the Wreck*(1973), Falk dives into the wreck of her own dysfunctional upbringing and marriage. To facilitate her emergence from internalized patriarchal thought, she draws on the many feminist foremothers of her time as a student, including theorists like Shulamith Firestone, Susan Brownmiller, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, and poets like Rich, Jane Cooper, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. In borrowing from their work and example and applying them to her own life, Falk becomes a prime exhibit of how feminism has helped to raise women's consciousness and open them to kinds of fulfillment that have remade the world, not to mention relations between men and women.

To present her case, Falk chooses not a chronological narrative but varied forms of discourse based on her journals, her studies, and her poetry and which also includes a dialogue among Child, Scholar, Poet, Woman—parts of the author herself—line drawings, and sharp juxtapositions of subject, such as between an analysis of feminist poetics and a reference to her pregnancy (not such a leap after all, in Falk's view). This allows her to treat themes from different perspectives of time and sorts of material. Thus in the chapter "The Flow of Knowledge" she begins with a quotation from Susan Griffin

that contains Falk's chapter title, moves to a journal entry from June 18, 1997, about "self-assessment and intimacy in the classroom," then back in time to Lindenhurst, 1981, for a two-page contemplation of Sophia, or Wisdom, a female element that needs to be revalued, and Erich Auerbach's divagation on *figura*, Latin for "form," then on to brief entries from Jamaica Estates, 1959, when the nine-year-old Falk had two male canaries; Amityville, April 18, 2000, for a look at poems by Rich and T.S. Eliot; Rego Park, July 28, 1979, when Falk was overdue to give birth; then back to Lindenhurst, 1994, as she writes a three-page analysis of Jane Cooper's poetry book *Scaffolding*, which helps Falk to mediate the split between woman and poet, an important project for her feminist poetics and her life.

As this summary of her penultimate chapter suggests, from chapter one on, the reader must learn and the book teach the writer's complex method for laying out her material. As the reader's education progresses, she'll come to see in the just-used word "material" the word "mater," so alert does Falk make one to the implications of words and their origins. The reader will also learn how this often-betrayed girl grew into a woman able to understand herself with the help of concepts like *Eras*, her name for the female erotic imagination, and the aforementioned Sophia; preparing to write a dissertation on the feminization of form; handling the "consequences of intimacy, sexuality, pregnancy," one of which is creativity; and reaching the conclusion that "only when the myths are rewritten and God is redefined can authentic female identity and sexual [creative] power emerge."

This perception occurs in the middle chapter of the book, one that begins with the suicide of Anne Sexton and ends with the birth of Karen Anna (after Anne Sexton), Falk's daughter, who grows up to take the iconic author's-photo for this book's back cover. Thus Falk literalizes in life the "matrilineal connection" that she theorizes throughout *It Happens As We Speak*. The title comes from a line in her poem "Crazy Jane" (Falk's middle name is Jane): "It happens as I speak," "it" referring to the way in which the speech act uses the word to make life. This idea might be "crazy"—in the sense of Yeats's wise Crazy Jane—to the laity, but it is sacred to the poet.

Women, particularly those who write poems, owe it to themselves to read this book. They might resist Pat Falk's feminist implications for themselves, but most will be

better off for having encountered them. The same goes for men, who can only gain from an acquaintance with her humane challenge to the hegemony of patriarchy. After all, Falk herself begins her book with the name of Adrienne Rich, whose words make the centerpiece for Miriam Schapiro's collage on Falk's cover, but she ends it with a stanza by William Stafford. What happens when we read *It Happens As We Speak* is that Falk releases a flow knowledge between feminine and masculine, alpha and omega, that helps to meld all such polarities.