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Pat Falk's Dichotomy

A Review of her "Poetics"

By Ian Wilder

Amityville resident Pat Falk's, *It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics* (Plain View Press) is easier to read than to describe. It is a mixture of non-linear biography, poetry, literary criticism and symbiotics to explore what it means for women to express themselves. This combination is not surprising since Falk is a professor of women's studies, literature and writing at Nassau Community College.

Falk has wisely structured the book in two different ways to ease the journey for the reader. The first section of the book deals mostly with revealing the emotional touch points of Falk's life, whereas the second half skews towards the subject's intellectual appeal. Falk also structures the entire book in diary-entry size pieces so the reader is neither overwhelmed by the tragedies of her life nor her analysis.

Falk uses a mixture of previously separated writing forms to cross what she sees as an arbitrary line between the personal and the professional in writing. Each category informs the other in a way that carries forward the thoughts of the writer. She attempts to move beyond this simple dichotomy in both her thoughts and the form of this book. This tone is set in the Prologue, which opens with Falk saying to poet Adrienne Rich that she is her "literary mother" and Rich stating in turn that such was her feeling about Simone de Beauvoir.

The first clear break with this autobiographical style flows from Falk with her January 1978 thoughts of starting her dissertation with Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who she describes as "women poets who have internalized and absorbed male power to the point of self-effacement." Falk then continues on with a five-page analysis of Sexton's "Love Plant" and Plath's "Three Women."

The most vivid episode in Falk's book involves a doctor who was a legal client of her father's. Falk's father defended the doctor against charges of performing an abortion, which was illegal at the time. The case became the subject of continual media coverage, because it appeared the operation was botched, causing the young woman to die in the process and the doctor pulverized her remains to avoid being caught. Twelve-year-old Pat was given the chore of cutting out the newspaper articles and creating a scrapbook for her father.

This echoes later in her analysis of the socially imposed roles of the active male and the passive female. The doctor and her father are active participants. The young woman, young Pat and Pat's mother (in her failure to intervene in assigning this horrible chore) are all passive. Falk seems to be exposing both her life and the strictures of the passive role placed on women, so she can help break them free to be creative beings.