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THE POETIC VOICE AND THE ROMANTIC TRADITION
IN THE POETRY OF MAXINE KUMIN

THESIS

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By

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The purpose of this study is to explore elements of the Romantic tradition in the poetry of Maxine Kumin and the poetic voice of Ms. Kumin as she writes in this tradition. The poet's choice of poetic-persona illustrates a growth of the consciousness, an identity of self.

Of particular interest is the poet's close interaction with nature and use of natural symbols and images. A principal motif in Kumin's poetry is the common man. Another theme is the poet's role in the family. In poems exalting nature and the person who lives in simple and close interaction with nature, a number of men from the past and present are subjects of Kumin's poetry.

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CHAPTER I

THE ROMANTIC TRADITION AND THE PROBLEM OF VOICE

Maxine Kumin is a poet--a woman poet and a New England poet--of renown; she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for her book of poetry Up Country. In Ms. Kumin's six collections of verse the poet shows a growth and an awareness of a feminine poetic consciousness in the Romantic tradition. An avid gardener, swimmer, and equestrian, Kumin relates to the natural environs of her native New England in a decidedly Romantic style. As a twentieth-century female poet, Kumin shows a struggle and progress from her earliest published verse in the 1950's to her latest book published in 1978 in finding a poetic-persona most suitable for her verse, her symbols, and her themes. Poems about characters (both real and fictional), poems about a mare, and poems about self work toward the poet's best expression of voice. Whatever the poetic-persona, Kumin strives for an understanding of self as an integrated whole; she finds one answer in the Romantic exaltation of the benefits man may reap from a life close to nature and apart from society.

The male characters in Kumin's poetry are individuals in touch with nature and for some reason alienated from their fellowman. They are Henry David Thoreau, T. H. White,

Wendell Berry, her neighbor Henry Manley, and the fictional hermit. In a group called "The Amanda Poems," she uses her mare, Amanda, as a mediator between Kumin and the world--both the world of nature and of man. Speaking before an audience at Tarrant County Junior College Northeast Campus in the spring of 1976, Maxine Kumin explained that this female role came into being when she recognized the limitation of the hermit image on the poetic-persona in her verse. Amanda is Kumin's answer to the problem of constructing a female counterpart to the hermit. The Amanda poems advance Kumin's expression of the Romantic ideal of the individual's interaction with nature as well as her expression of the female poetic-persona.

Many of the people in Maxine Kumin's poetry are reminiscent of the Wordsworthian "common man." Rereading a portion of the beginning of William Wordsworth's Preface to the Second Lyrical Ballads stimulates an appreciation for the likenesses between the rustic men of Wordsworth's poetry and the twentieth-century individuals of Kumin's poetry. Wordsworth explains his design as follows:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings,

and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable, and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature.¹

Whether speaking as the poetic-persona or the poetic-self, Maxine Kumin vitalizes the rustic, the primitive, the outcast, the individual. These characters share a blend of twentieth-century man and nineteenth-century Romantic ideals. In spite of the influence of society and technical progress, they remain by choice a part of a simple way of life.

Other qualities of character associated with the Romantic tradition emerge when Kumin assumes the voice of the poetic-self, the "I." In some of her poems she expresses a feeling of alienation from her fellowman. Sometimes she feels alienated because she is a woman. Being a fourth-generation Jew in America yields another source of alienation in her poetry. Many dream sequences provide the framework of her poetry wherein the past and its people are revived, or wherein the current stream of life assumes a heightened consciousness and a new realm of symbols. A few poems express the poet's voice of social concern, even anger, about political intrigues and political wars. Maxine Kumin is most of all, though, an individual who lives close to nature, taking from it and giving to it, and learning, emerging in the process of everyday living.

She is gardener, keeper of pets and stock, equestrian, swimmer, herbalist, folklorist, poet, teacher, and solitary thinker. Kumin's New England surroundings furnish a comfortable framework for the poetic-self to find symbols in the search for identity in the Romantic communion of individual and nature.

Exposing life through the imagery of nature and the lifestyle of the common man is exactly what Kumin does. In a review of several poems from her book Up Country, John Ciardi speaks of the power of Kumin's language and imagery. He observes that "Maxine Kumin knows how to see things. She teaches me, by example, to use my own eyes. When she looks at something I have seen, she makes me see it better. When she looks at something I do not know, I therefore trust her."² Examining poems from The Privilege, Robert Wallace gives Kumin a most positive response. He feels that "Maxine Kumin's new poems are superb. She hardly makes a mistake. Her language always catches the world into the poem, is deliciously prosy, direct, surprising. . . ." ³ Kumin's imaginative picture of the world of nature enhances, makes genuine both the lives of the common people in her verse and the poet's own life experiences. At the same time her images are often symbols inherent to the meaning of the poem. This use of the imagination is much like that of the Romantics as explained

by Lilian Furst. The imagination at work in the Romantics was an image-making one. Furst contends that "the image assumed a central position in the creative process as the tangible expression of unconscious impulses and therefore as the chief carrier of meaning. It is deeply embedded in the structure of the work, not mechanically superimposed. . . ." Kumin is straightforward in her approach to nature, but she, like the Romantics, is an image-maker.

In the Romantic image-making tradition Maxine Kumin finds the dignifying of the common life a primary step toward examining an important theme for her, the identifying of self and the integrating of self via nature. This is a theme expressed in a passage from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," where the poet says that he is

. . . well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.⁵

(ll. 107-11)

Through the medium of the poetic imagination in interaction with nature, Kumin attempts to find an order not readily present in the society of man. As the Romantics sought an order in the universe on an individual level, so does Kumin. R. A. Foakes says the task of the Romantic poet is "to establish a harmony such as the individual isolated in an

archaic society might attain by the power of self-intuition, that is, a possible spiritual order in which the individual might find an ideal, find repose from the world, and into which he might deviate from the norm."⁶ This is the task of Maxine Kumin.

The Romantic poets who went about trying to accomplish this task were male; the female poet who follows the same poetic and spiritual design has a special problem of identity. Simone de Beauvoir stated that "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men. They describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."⁷ Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey acknowledge this same problem in their book on feminine poetic consciousness: "In redefining herself and her world, the woman poet's chief confrontation is with a male consciousness which has become synonymous with the human consciousness."⁸ Of course, the Romantic poets viewed life from a decidedly male point of view. The solitary person who sought a livelihood and solace from nature was usually a man. Children were subjects of poetry more often than were women; women in verse were generally either innocent maidens or scheming temptresses. A real female self-consciousness was not apparent. Kumin responded to this need first with a female counterpart to the hermit, the solitary person in nature. Identifying self through

the motifs of the Romantic tradition is a challenge for the female poet which forces the imagination either to give birth to new and female mythic forms or to activate the poetic-self as a soul-searching consciousness, like that seen in early Romanticism. Maxine Kumin works in both realms of possibility as her poetic skills develop, as her identity takes shape, and as her feminine consciousness surfaces.

Perhaps the closest modern analogy to the Romantic poets are the confessional poets. In an essay on the poetry of self-definition, Sandra Gilbert speculates "that the self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self, may be (at least for our own time) a distinctively female poetic mode."⁹ This is despite the fact that confessional poetry is usually associated with several contemporary male poets such as John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and W. D. Snodgrass. Gilbert traces the tradition of such writing as follows:

. . . back through such male mythologists of the self as Whitman and Yeats to Wordsworth and Byron, those romantic patriarchs whose self-examinations and self-dramatizations probably fathered not only the poetry of what Keats called the egotistical sublime but also the more recent ironic mode we might call the egotistical ridiculous. Most male poets, however, have been able to move beyond the self-deprecations and self-assertions of confessional writing to larger, more objectively formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society.¹⁰

Although Gilbert contends that the self-defining confessional is a particularly feminine form today, Kumin is not to be considered one of the self-indulgent confessional poets. Most of her poetry is neither extremely ego-conscious nor full of personal crisis. However, even in this more recent and near-Romantic genre, the male confessional poet who explores his psyche "observes himself as a representative specimen with a sort of scientific exactitude. Alienated, he's nevertheless an ironic sociologist of his own alienation because he considers his analytic perspective on himself a civilized, normative point of view."¹¹ The male poet has a tradition in history and literature within which he may find a voice, a persona to represent himself. Even in a more contemporary mode of Romanticism, Maxine Kumin does not find in history or tradition anything to adequately support the role of a Romantic female persona.

Since the poetic voice(s) of Ms. Kumin as a Romantic female poet will be examined, the nature of the persona must be made clear. Early reference to the word "persona" was to denote the mask worn by performers in Greek drama. C. G. Jung identifies the persona in psychology as the protective mask an individual reveals to the world.¹² James W. Carlsen explores the history of the word "persona" and its growth into the usage given it by the New Critics.

From Aristotle to T. S. Eliot the voice of the poet has been a concern. Carlsen notes that T. S. Eliot makes three distinctions:

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself--or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.¹³

The persona may thus represent a self-consciousness or an other-consciousness. Carlsen also explores the distinction between the poet and the persona made by George T. White in his book The Poet and the Poem:

The persona may share much with his creator--a point of view, an attitude toward life, certain historical circumstances, certain intellectual qualities; but the persona is part of the poem, and the poet exists outside it. The author dies; the persona has a permanently potential existence, realized whenever the work in which he appears is read.¹⁴

While the poet and the persona may be quite similar, the persona should outlive the poet; the persona has a "life" of its own in the imperishability of the poem.

Having examined the history and the current thought on the persona, James W. Carlsen feels that no amount of explication will insure the critic that the "person of the poet" will be discovered, but perhaps only "a mask of the poet's inner self and poetic-persona." Both personalities may represent a part of the attitudes and feelings of the

poet, but neither can represent a unified whole which may be considered synonymous with the poet.¹⁵ It is the poetic-self which most nearly represents the psyche of the poet. In the poetic-persona the voice of the poet appears to be in a more objective stance, speaking not for and about the self but rather about and through others. There are levels of objectivity or subjectivity with either voice, the poetic-self or the poetic-persona. However, these terms provide a helpful tool in explicating the poetry of Ms. Kumin.

The wealth of the Romantic tradition emerges from a male-oriented history of deed and thought. Kumin's voice in her poetry illustrates that the Romantic may be a problematic stance for the female poet. Whatever persona Kumin uses, her poetry is a rich twentieth-century execution of some of the best work in Romantic tradition. As Maxine Kumin varies the persona in her verse and works toward finding a voice which most clearly expresses her thought, a new Romantic poetry emerges. At the same time Ms. Kumin identifies her poetic self and her female consciousness.

NOTES

¹William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," in Poets on Poetry, ed. Charles Norman (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 138.

²John Ciardi, "The Art of Maxine Kumin," Saturday Review, 25 March 1972, p. 12.

³Robert Wallace, "Down from the Forked Hill Unsullied," Poetry, 108 (1966), 121.

⁴Lilian F. Furst, Romanticism in Perspective (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 171.

⁵E. DeSelincourt, ed., The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, Vol. II, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 262.

⁶R. A. Foakes, The Romantic Assertion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 45.

⁷Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1970), p. 176.

⁸Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey, eds., Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness (New York: The Dial Press, 1973), p. 18.

⁹Sandra M. Gilbert, "'My Name is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition," Contemporary Literature, 18 (1977), 444.

¹⁰Gilbert, p. 444.

¹¹Gilbert, p. 445.

¹²C. G. Jung, "Two Essays on Analytical Psychology," in The Portable Jung, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 106.

¹³James W. Carlsen, "Persona, Personality and Performance," in Studies in Interpretation, Vol. II, ed. Esther M. Doyle and Virginia Hastings Floyd (Amsterdam: Rolopi, 1977), p. 222.

¹⁴Carlsen, p. 226.

¹⁵Carlsen, p. 227.

CHAPTER II

REAL CHARACTERS IN THE ROMANTIC TRADITION

The Romantic poets glorified heroic lifestyles and certain types of men: the natural man, the noble savage, the fated wanderer, the Faustian figure, the Promethean figure, the Satanic figure, the noble outlaw, and variations on these. In like manner Maxine Kumin explores and admires in poetry the lifestyle and character of the individual who turns from the world of society to the world of nature. He is part rebel, part natural man, part thinking man. The real men in Kumin's verse are individuals who are alienated from their fellowman, but without exception this alienation is the choice of the individual, usually after a life of full association with society. All believe strongly in the society of the self and in interaction between self and nature. Most have lived in the twentieth century. All are men.

Since the Romantic-type hero in Kumin's poetry is male--Thoreau, T. H. White, Wendell Berry, and Henry Manley--the voice of the poet is the poetic-persona. She both participates in the action of the poem and stands in the distance to observe the character. With some exception in the Henry Manley works, the "I" voice is

apparent in the poems. However, the revelations of the imaginative poetic-persona are the experiences of others, not the poet's. The attitudes and feelings of Kumin may be inferred from the poems, when they are not explicitly drawn. Sometimes she notes her own femininity, setting herself apart from her subject, sometimes using that point to draw herself back into the male's realm of existence. As she threads the Romantic tradition into modern poetry, her poetic-persona is a feminine voice.

One of the living subjects of Ms. Kumin's poetry is the American writer and naturalist Henry David Thoreau. Admiration for the man and his lifestyle is obvious in "my quotable friend"; he is part of the key metaphor in the poem "Beans." Knowing that many readers, her students especially, find interest in Thoreau, a maker of metaphor, or Thoreau, a rebel in jail, the poet finds interest in Thoreau, the self-sufficient individual living a solitary life at Walden. In "my quotable friend" she prefers to think

and blink instead to see you stump
out in thick night, Concord to hut,
a bag of rye meal on your shoulder,
guessing your route between tight-fitted
pines, as through the narrowest sort
of doorway, with a blind man's wit.
Thoreau, that kind of boldness moves me.¹

Kumin's expression of feeling is heightened by the apostrophe. The poetic-persona speaks to Thoreau and to the

audience, but at the same time the attitude of Kumin becomes apparent. In other stanzas of the poem she speaks admiringly to Thoreau: "I like you best brazening out / alternatives," "I bless your curses on / all tillage that requires more / than a day's work for a month of bread," "And loving the blueprint that you make / of ice fits, loon chase, water tables-- / safeminded ponderer--."² And in the concluding lines of the poem the voice of Kumin is at its most intimate:

and love you for brave cowardice
 in the graceless skiff,
 in the tightening woodland,
 in the tall bean patch,

 in life near the bone,
 almost true and gone.³

Attitudes to Thoreau which the Romantic Kumin must applaud are appreciation for nature and nonconformity. The experience at Walden is what may be called "life near the bone." This slang expression is vivid and succinct, but the informal language is also somehow appropriate for the subject and for the honesty of the poetic-persona. Kumin's style of language is vivid but uncomplicated, often sprinkled with colloquial expressions appropriate for the subject or speaker.

The paradox of Thoreau's "brave cowardice" might be explained by the desire stated in his journal on the third day at the pond: "I wish . . . to meet the facts of life--

the vital facts which are the phenomena or actuality the Gods meant to show us--face to face, and so I came down here."⁴ This is a statement of the task of the Romantic poet. The task is no grander than man's vulnerability in the world of nature where Thoreau puts himself. The Romantic poet must seek a feeling of unity outside the social world. Kumin knows that such daring is "almost true and gone." The inverted order of the words in this phrase is surprising and emphatic. With Thoreau the time spent at Walden was an experiment; it came to an end, even if the beliefs it fostered did not. Also, the Romantic-type hero--Thoreau, the individual--is gone. The tone of the poetic-persona of the concluding rhymed couplet is saddened by the loss.

Thoreau is an integral part of the metaphor in "Beans." A phrase from Walden, "making the earth say beans instead of grass," is the key to the poem. The image of Thoreau, an unyielding gardener, is the point of comparison for a gardener in the poet's life "among the weeds that stubbornly reroot." The metaphor is mixed with a common idiom in the last stanza:

Even without
the keepsake strings
to hold the shoots
of growing things
I know this much:
I say beans
at your touch.⁵

Although Thoreau is only a starting point for the poem, the strength and determination of the gardener is the heart of the metaphor. Again, the use of language of the common folk is appropriate for the subject and for the image of fertility and growth. Although the theme of the poem may be personal, the voice of the poetic-persona may not be the personal self of the poet. The metaphor does not allow an identification of the person spoken to in the poem; therefore, there is an ambiguity and a distance in the poem. Nevertheless, the image of Thoreau suggests the strong character of "my quotable friend," but in a briefer reference. Whether the subject of the entire poem or an important image in a poem, Thoreau is one of those individuals found admirable by Kumin.

After the death of T. H. White in January 1964, Maxine Kumin wrote "The Diary Keeper--to remember T. H. White." The biography T. H. White by Sylvia Townsend is a source, probably the key source, for the information about White's life in the poem. There are, in fact, three direct references to White's journals in the poem. Ms. Kumin has said that "journals, diaries, letters and memoirs especially delight the voyeur who is the writer in me."⁶ Being a writer, however, is only a part of the motivation. Maxine Kumin explains further:

I think my curiosity about the lives of other writers is heightened by the fact that I am a woman.

I want to see how other women managed their lives, either as wives of celebrated, memoir-keeping authors, or as writers--wives, mothers?--themselves. Then, too, the relation between person and poet, the pondering of his/her own case, the sharing of the ultimate condition of the writer--that drafty, celestially lonely, often boring condition--draws me to these texts.⁷

White's journals excite the curiosity of Kumin, the poet.

Although not always a recluse from society. T. H. White was an individual who lived a solitary lifestyle. The particular period of White's life referred to in "The Diary Keeper" was during 1945 and 1946 when he lived alone at David Garnett's cottage called Duke Mary's. Both White's letters to Garnett and his diary reveal his seclusion, his occasional venturing into town, his scheduling of household chores and writing. Kumin's poem commences with an account of White's loneliness:

I speak to the loneliness of the diary keeper
 holing up for months at a time
 in some cottage abutting a haybarn
 always at an altitude where
 the valley fold appear like black fleas
 in the snow and the grouse go up
 in a flurry of extra heartbeats.⁸

The diary keeper's distance from his fellowman, those "black fleas," is not only a literal distance, it is a more important distance of souls. In the White biography already mentioned, the October 10th, 1945, diary entry reveals the thoughts of a recluse:

I consider this has been a wasted day. I hate pubs, I hate fiction, I hate gin, I hate people and I hate myself.

No, I don't hate myself. The fact is when I am alone with my books and dogs we are the best of company in the world, and, if it were not for shopping, I would stay up here all day and every day and be content.⁹

This reflection is made after a day of drinking and entertainment in town. The books, the dogs, the never-ending acts of sustaining self by the simplest of means are the occupation of White, the diary keeper. The society of man does not sustain White's spirit; it corrupts it.

The poetic persona in the first four stanzas is a rather objective observer of facts. In the fourth stanza, however, Kumin prepares for a closer identification with her subject and a change in the poetic persona by broaching the subject of women. White never married, a fact Kumin alludes to in the fourth stanza when she says, "and never a word of woman, never / a word of those ovals, those olives, / those teacups unpoured and untasted."¹⁰ The assonance and alliteration of this stanza set the sound of it apart from the others. Also, the subtlety of the images here contrasts with the more literal, more exact language of the poem as a whole. The mysterious sound of "ovals" as symbol of womanhood suggests the distance between White and women.

From this point on Kumin changes her voice to an outspoken stance which sounds more masculine than feminine.

The poetic-persona now refuses to allow the difference in sex to interfere with a feeling of comradeship:

The reader I am is a woman
 (though solitude makes no distinction, sir,
 in the rootstock) and given
 like you to the winter habit of thinking.¹¹

To be "winter thinkers" in common is to share a unique trait, a trait that need not be categorized simply because of its source. Kumin's use of language here is masculine; the choice of "rootstock" certainly suggests male sexual imagery, politely preceded by the address "sir." In the remainder of the poem the poet's voice continues the endeavor to find likenesses despite differences:

On a day when the snow falls all cross-eyed
 and the woodstove spits out its caulking
 and scattering hay to the ponies, the pitchfork
 raises a mouse on one prong
 I follow you into your housepride
 in the heart of your red-and-white kitchen,
 the ferment of your bachelor salvages,
 to say that I too would be more of
 a coward if I had the courage

and coward, come muffled,
 come waving a fifth of Kilkenny Irish
 to mourn you into your due date.¹²

Courage or cowardice in literature, as in life, is usually associated with the male; it is traditionally a masculine issue. The last of the quotations that Kumin takes from the White biography reveals her yearning to "be more of a coward if I had the courage." White had conceived of the proverb as one of the several to be attributed to the fictional character in his journal at that

time, a character who was an unsuccessful replacement for Merlyn.¹³ The paradox of the proverb becomes meaningful for the more intimate voice of the poetic-persona. Implied is the courage of White and Kumin's separation from this type of courage. Perhaps she yearns for the courage of the diary keeper's aloofness, his solitude, his independence, his nonconformity, his individuality. These traits follow the design of a lifestyle glorified by the Romantics. Solitary living is acceptable for the male, and there seems to be a longing in the voice of the poet in acknowledging this distinction. Finally, the poetic-persona becomes the diary keeper's kind of coward in the decidedly male act of drinking from a fifth of whiskey to mourn White's death. The poetic-persona's every attempt to be like White seems to only make the difference more distinct. The poet's plight is obvious. However, T. H. White is only one of the individuals whose life Kumin examines in her poetry.

Maxine Kumin's poem "Night Soil (for Wendell Berry, despite inaccuracies)" gives an illustration of the type of man who refuses to be cramped by the twentieth-century society or progress. It is one of a group called "The Kentucky Poems"; Wendell Berry, subject of the poem, is a native Kentuckian. He is also a novelist, an essayist, and a poet, generally considered a pastoral poet. This independent man is an organic farmer and a naturalist.

Kumin's picture of Berry is one of the Romantic rebel at one with nature and at odds with machinery (progress). The poetic-persona actively participates in the action of this poem. The poem begins:

The poet, a hill man, curses
 machinery. Cars run over his dogs.
 Tractors balk, slip into reverse
 or threaten to tip over on the slopes.
 Except for a pickup truck to take
 him down to the river bottom place,
 he works by animal, gee-upping
 behind an old Thoroughbred mare
 he got last year in a swap.¹⁴

Kumin and Berry speak the "shop" of those who make a livelihood from the land: the ancestry of the mare, the practicality of a pair of oxen. Of the man the poet says "his god is in the furrow," and he gives something back to the earth: "Hence his privy, built into a hill, / conforms to a theory as roundabout / as the Japanese tending their night soil."¹⁵ The habits, personal and practical, of Wendell Berry suggest a close interaction between man and nature. He is an example of the Romantic natural man, and the struggle to be such a man is a great challenge in the twentieth century.

The poetic-persona becomes the more personal voice of the poet in the last stanza:

Before the sun goes down, I enter it,
 a room still bleeding pine rosin,
 the latrine of an intellectual.
 Almost due south of where I sit
 the cows, impatient to be stanchioned,
 are lowing. At the trough, pigs mew away.
 There's a stack of quarterlies

at eye level. They say:
 we read where we can,
 but my own words spring up
 from the top magazine!
 I am undone.
 The cows are to be milked,
 pigs to be swilled.
 I find myself in the outhouse
 and am emptied
 and am filled.¹⁶

Kumin does illustrate the complementary cycle of man and nature with an earthy image, but it is not an inappropriate image. It serves to illustrate, too, the complementary role that creative artists may play with one another.

Kumin has become a part of the hill man's rhythm of life: close to god, close to the furrow. Despite this simple mode of living, Berry has not totally negated society. The outhouse is both necessity and nicety; magazines provide brief distraction from the demands of the land. The poetic-persona's being "emptied" and "filled" at once is a strange mixture of the physical and the intellectual, and yet on another level it is the blending of the purely physical and the intellectual that Kumin admires in Berry. The voice of Kumin becomes more personal as she becomes briefly a part of the cycle of man and nature which is Berry's Romantic and individual lifestyle.

Since Wendell Berry is the type of person Kumin so admires for the subject of her verse, it is appropriate to cite a selection from one of his own poems that intensifies his role as a Romantic-type hero. "Passion" is a

section of a six-part poem called "Work Song." The body-soul antithesis of Kumin's poem is apparent:

Passion has brought me
to this clearing of the ground,
an ancient passion singing
in my veins, beneath speech,
unheard many years, yet
leading me through cities,
streets, and roads,
gatherings, voices, speech
and again beyond speech,
beyond the words of books,
to stand in this hillside field
in October wind, critical
and solitary, like a horse dumbly
approving of the grass,
the world as clear as light,
as dark as dark.

Can it lead me away
from books? It it leading me
away? What will I say
to my fellow poets
whose poems I do not read
while this passion keeps me
in the open? What is
this silence coming over me?¹⁷

The conflict between the intellect and the senses is clearly seen. Berry's dual role is a trying one for the twentieth-century Romantic hero. Both Kumin and Berry are keenly aware of the price one pays for independence and nonconformity, but for both poets it is obviously a price worth paying.

The subject of several Kumin poems is Henry Manley, a rural man in a plight different from the other real characters studied so far. Manley is the neighbor of the poetic-persona and, therefore, often the poet interacts

with Henry in verse. The first poem about this man so alien to society and progress appeared in Kumin's 1970 book, The Nightmare Factory. The single poem is published again in the 1978 book The Retrieval System, along with four others under the heading "Henry Manley."

The first poem, "Hello, Hello Henry," prepares the reader for the relationship between the poetic-persona and Henry, and also reveals something of the character of Henry:

My neighbor in the country, Henry Manley
with a washpot warming on his woodstove
with a heifer and two goats and yearly chickens,
has outlasted Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill
but something's stirring in him in his dotage.¹⁸

He is an old country man who still lives by the means and attitudes of the past, for the most part. Even as Henry's father had chased off the linemen and vowed to die by lamplight, Henry had lived most of his life avoiding progress. But now, Kumin notes, he has moved his privy, reamed his well, and most important, he has had a phone put in his house. So foreign is this type of improvement in Henry's life that he comes "shy as a girl" to tell the poet of it and says, "He'd be pleased if one day I would think to call him." For a man who seems to have lived apart from society, or at least apart from society's easiest means of communication, the change to the telephone is perhaps embarrassing; the act of social communication is perhaps as foreign as the new tool he wants to use.

The poem ends with "Hello, hello Henry? Is that you?" This independent character is one the poet wishes to call out to, to know better.

The vocation of Henry in "The Food Chain" sets him apart from the norm; he works for the Hatchery. Kumin notes his unique position after he delivers a double tub to her pond:

Knowing he knows we'll hook his brookies
once they're a sporting size, I try for something
but the words stay netted in my mouth.
Henry wavers, guns the engine. His wheels spin
then catch.¹⁹

In the chain of nature, Henry provides; most of humanity, here the poetic-persona, takes. Both Henry and the poet understand the system, but the voice of the poetic-persona feels guilt as words stay "netted" in her mouth. The word suggests the feeling of entrapment, the poet in her role, Henry in his. Although the poetic-persona represents the norm, the poet anticipates offending the sensibilities of Henry. The poet feels that Henry is more committed to those "brookies" than to his neighbors.

Henry and the poet share part of the cycle of nature and man in "Extrapolations from Henry Manley's Pie Plant." The poet picks Henry's rhubarb, returning soon with a pie or two and later in the fall with a pickup load of horse manure. Observing Henry in his old age that June, Kumin

ponders her own life in the midst of many possible choices.

She contemplates:

I could have studied law or medicine,
elected art history, gambled, won

or lost. I could have opened out each evening
in a downtown bar, all mirrors and singing.

Instead, mornings I commence with the sun,
tend my animals, root in the garden

and pass time with Henry.²⁰

As the title indicates, the poem is an examination of something of value for the future; the values lie in the annual bed of rhubarb and in Kumin's choice. Using nature for the starting point of self-examination is characteristic of the Romantic poets. The voice of the poetic-persona appears quite personal in this poem as Kumin compares her "could have's" with her actual choice. The decision places the poet close to the world of nature, close to Henry, even though she is no imitation of Henry.

Kumin uses three natural images within the poem which work together in the concluding lines: a thirty-year-old bed of rhubarb, goldfinches in the meadow, and horse manure. In nature's cycle the poet makes a contribution for the future as she says:

meanwhile thanking whatever's thankable
that acting on Henry's rich example

I'm to boast a hundred or so Junes
of pie plant and yellow bird and the mare's bloodlines.²¹

In these simple acts of giving and taking, man and nature perform complementary functions of long-range value. Kumin follows Henry's example, she says. The example of doctors, lawyers, and entertainers were forsaken for one of keener value to the poetic-persona. In the long-range scheme of things, the imitation of Henry Manley's lifestyle will benefit man and nature better than will conformity to the idea of "progress." The voice of the poetic-persona seeks identification with Henry, a Romantic individual.

In "The Henry Manley Blues" Henry is in conflict with the beavers, which have dammed a stream flooding his one cash crop of pines. He is also disturbed by the modern belief that beaver dams are best destroyed by blasting caps. Henry's experience tells him that it takes traps to catch the "kit," the beaver, rather than blasting caps; modern technology holds no hope for Henry. The irony of the poem is that Henry's old house and sheds are rotting and falling in around him. This decay goes unnoticed by Henry, while "Henry hears their nightwork from his bed." The poet's last lines heighten the distance between Henry's ideas and more modern ones: "Layer by layer the lodge is packed with mud / and board by batten his view of things falls in."²² Henry represents a mode of living and thought near extinction, just like his house. The poetic-persona in this poem is more objective than in the other Henry

Manley poems; the poet observes but gives no indication of evaluating as right or wrong the issues or thoughts in conflict in the poem.

The last poem of this group is "Henry Manley, Living Alone, Keeps Time." Kumin explains Henry's predicament in the beginning lines of the poem:

Sundowning
 the doctor calls it, the way
 he loses words when the light fades.
 The way the names of his dear ones
 fall out of his eyeglass case.

 "Window, wristwatch, cup, knife"
 are small prunes that drop from his pockets.
 Terror sweeps him from room to room.
 Knowing how much he weighed once
 he knows how much he has departed his life.
 Especially he knows how the soul
 can slip out of the body unannounced
 like that helium-filled balloon
 he opened his fingers on, years back.²³

In his sleep at night Manley is rejuvenated and "proper nouns return to his keeping. / The names of faces are put back in his sleeping mouth." He wakes to recognitions "with only the slightest catch."²⁴ As in the poem "The Henry Manley Blues," he is losing touch with the world. In one poem he yearns for the past ways; in the other he is helplessly torn from the memories of the past. In the Henry Manley poems a unique individual is shown in the process of becoming obsolete. Unlike the other individuals considered by Maxine Kumin, Henry has a tie with the simpler mode of living in the past that is quite real, not

assumed. Of all the poet's characters, Henry is the closest to the Romantic ideal of the rustic, the natural man. He is not shown to be a thinking man so much as a man of habit and strong beliefs. Since the voice of the poetic-persona assumes the role of neighbor to Henry, the authenticity of the poet cannot be questioned. As with the other real men living in some way in the Romantic tradition in Kumin's poetry, Henry Manley is often a departure point for the poet's examination of self.

NOTES

¹Maxine W. Kumin, Halfway (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957), pp. 38-40.

²Kumin, pp. 38-40.

³Kumin, pp. 38-40.

⁴Joseph Wood Krutch, Thoreau (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1948), p. 78.

⁵Maxine W. Kumin, Up Country (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), p. 26

⁶Maxine W. Kumin, "On Howard Nemerov's Journal of the Fictive Life," Mademoiselle, October 1975, p. 104.

⁷Kumin, "On Howard Nemerov," p. 104.

⁸Maxine W. Kumin, House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), pp. 44-45.

⁹Sylvia Townsend Warner, T. H. White (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 224.

¹⁰Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 44-45.

¹¹Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 44-45.

¹²Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 44-45.

¹³Warner, pp. 191-92.

¹⁴Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 35-36.

¹⁵Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 35-36.

¹⁶Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷Wendell Berry, Clearing (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), pp. 32-33.

¹⁸Maxine W. Kumin, The Retrieval System (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 19.

- ¹⁹Kumin, The Retrieval, p. 20.
- ²⁰Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 21-22.
- ²¹Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 21-22.
- ²²Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 23-24.
- ²³Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 25-26.
- ²⁴Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 25-26.

CHAPTER III

THE POETIC-PERSONA IN THE HERMIT POEMS AND THE AMANDA POEMS

The progress of the poetic voice of Maxine Kumin must be traced through the Hermit poems and the Amanda poems. In both groups the poet's imagination conceives of a poetic voice for a solitary figure. In the Hermit poems the poetic-persona is quite objective; in the few instances that the "I" voice is used the Hermit is speaking. The male figure in the poetry of women often emerges as remote and abstract; such is the case with Kumin's hermit figure.¹ In the Amanda poems the poetic-persona is personal; a solitary individual uses her horse, Amanda, as a mediator between herself and the world--both the world of nature and the world of man.

If considered in Jungian terms, the hermit does serve as the poet's persona, if a remote one; Amanda, however, serves as the shadow of the poet. The persona is a mask; the shadow is a more integral part of the psyche. The shadow contains more of a person's basic animal nature than any other Jungian archetype. This is not a play on words to suggest the appropriateness of the name "Amanda," a name which means "she who is to be

loved."² Probably the most powerful archetype, the shadow is the source of all that is best or worst in a person, particularly in relationships with others of the same sex. The suppression of the shadow by the persona is considered a necessary function for a human if animal instincts are to be kept under control. Jung explains that too much suppression may be harmful:

The person who suppresses the animal side of his nature may become civilized, but he does so at the expense of decreasing the motive power for spontaneity, creativity, strong emotions and deep insights. He cuts himself off from the wisdom of his instinctual nature, a wisdom that may be more profound than any learning or culture can provide.³

Kumin suffers no such losses through the use of Amanda, but rather she gains through a workable female (mare) figure for the femalepoetic-persona. She is freed of the restraint and limitation of the male hermit voice. Indeed, the poetic consciousness of Kumin interacting with Amanda is both remarkable and natural.

In both the hermit poems and the Amanda poems the loneliness or solitariness of the poetic-persona is outstanding. In an interview of Ms. Kumin by Martha Meek, the poet responds to the assertion that the hermit, alone as he is, finds that "the tribe, the family, is the last unit in a society that can be balanced between order and disorder." Kumin makes a parallel between the hermit and the poet:

Well, it's the family and it's the larger family, by extension, of those whom you love. For me, it's certain writers I've been close to and who, in effect, speak the same language. Writers are all secret Jews; they all belong to the same tribe. We do talk a kind of language; well, we tend to talk a lot of shop talk. So, there's the commonality of that. There's also the enormous commonality of the fact that to be a writer is to be a solitary. It's to be a hermit, by golly. It really is. It's to be shut off. Almost any other profession involves some sort of social intercourse with people, you know, with the world around you--medicine and law and so on. But to be a writer is to lock yourself up to do your job.⁴

Although the voice of the poetic-persona is quite alone in these poems, as was the poet in writing them, the source of that voice is usually interacting with some element of nature. In the same interview Ms. Kumin comments on the order to be found in the natural world and the order to be found in poetry. She answers a question about a crucial order in life by responding,

I think that there is an Order to be discovered--that's very often true in the natural world--but there is also an order that a human can impose on the chaos of his emotions and the chaos of events. That's what writing poetry is all about.⁵

This aim to find an order in the personal and social chaos of the individual life (psyche) by way of nature and poetry was one of the aims of the Romantic poets. Because of the nature of the art and the nature of the poet, the search for order must be a solitary one. In the hermit poems and the Amanda poems the poetic voice, the poetic-persona, echoes the singular quality of the poet's Romantic quest.

Within a scheme of solitariness and search for order in the eight hermit poems, Kumin deals with themes of man's role in the cycle of nature, man's communion with nature, God in nature, memory, immortality, death, and folklore. In the eight Amanda poems, in comparison, Kumin treats all of these themes plus politics, escape from life, desire for living, and the poet's commitment to her fellowman.

One of the common elements in both the hermit and the Amanda poems is Maxine Kumin's concern with nature and natural symbols. In "The Hermit Wakes to Bird Sounds" the poetic-persona revels in the sounds of morning by metaphorically identifying bird sounds with mechanical sounds. The "typewriter bird," the "sewing machine bird," the "logging birds," and the "oilcan birds" start the morning until "the old bleached sun slips into position / slowly the teasing inept malfunctioning / one-of-a kind machines fall silent."⁶ In "The Hermit Picks Berries" the hermit moves sympathetically into the motion of nature:

At midday the birds doze.
So does he.

The frogs cover themselves.
So does he.⁷

The hermit admires the stillness of the breeze and even feels fellowship with a snake, for most people one of nature's less attractive creatures. After the picking of the berries the hermit makes a doubtless rare appearance

in town: "The hermit whistles as he picks. / Later he will put on his shirt / and walk to town for some cream."⁸ The title "The Hermit Has a Visitor" sounds as if he does enjoy social intercourse, but the title is deceptive. It is not a human who visits but a nocturnal biting insect, apparently a mosquito. In these poems the hermit moves naturally in his uncomplicated, solitary world, but the voice of the poet is distant. Kumin observes but cannot penetrate the persona of the hermit.

In the Amanda poems, on the other hand, Kumin maintains a poetic-persona whereby she is a part of the interaction with the world of nature. In "Up from the Earth" the poet, a gardener, is preparing the soil, unearthing the earthworms "pink as a fat lady's garter." Then she graphically, colorfully identifies the seed plan:

Inside each Merrimack packet
the seeds wait for their lineup:
coral chaff that will be carrots,
black nits that will bloom as lettuce,
pale cobbles of beets, the surprise
of pink beads that will put up
the moon faces of cauliflower.
Only the green bean does not pretend
and corn can look like itself.⁹

An integral part of this springtime ritual, too, is Amanda:

And thank you, patient Amanda,
for the engine of your digestion
yielding those pure rank
bushels of horse manure
that slept here all winter
a blanket on a blanket.¹⁰

The poet and the mare both contribute to the cycle of nature in their own ways. In fact, the three elements in the poem, the gardener, the seeds, the fertilizer, would each be incomplete, if not impotent, without the others.

The union between the poet and the mare is more complete and apparent in "Amanda Dreams She Has Died and Gone to the Elysian Fields." Describing the morning hour, the poet comes "calling with a carrot / from which I have taken / the first bite."¹¹ The poetic-persona and the mare eat of the same food; they share a like energy source. The nourishment they share is not only physical but spiritual. The poem ends:

We sit together.
In this time and place
we are heart and bone.
For an hour
we are incorruptible.¹²

The voice of the poetic-persona is obviously personal. Amanda answers Kumin's need for a liaison between herself and nature; incorruptible, the poet seems to approach the integrated psyche. The coupling together of "heart and bone" may represent the persona and the shadow, the intellect and the sense, the physical and the spiritual, or man and nature.

Knowledgeable in folklore and herbal lore, Kumin uses this interest for different purposes in the hermit and Amanda poems. Such interests of the common folk are

part of the Romantic exaltation of the common life. In "The Hermit Meets the Skunk," the hermit tries to rid the smell of skunk from his dog by an old cure. Quite an interesting miscellany of folklore and herbal lore provides the framework for "The Hermit Reviews His Simples." Relying upon nature's aid, the hermit must follow the cycle of nature in a ritual of his own, as in this example from the second stanza:

Each year at the juice-end of summer
 the hermit goes down to the river
 to cheat the raccoons and the polecats
 of what the old herbals call wallwort.
 Bending the snappish twigs down
 and careless about the magic
 that laid to a snake bite will heal it
 or oozed in four droughts will cure dropsy,
 he strips off the elderberries.
 But after his pail has grown heavy
 he observes the ancient injunction
 lest any evil befall him:
 "on leaving do not look behind you."¹³

Again the poetic-persona of Kumin is an observer in the distance. In "Amanda is Shod" the poetic-persona takes part in a mystery of folklore. When the farrier finishes the paring of hooves and the shoeing of Amanda, the poet says

I collect them
 four marbled white C's
 as refined as petrified wood
 and dry them to circles of bone
 and hang them away on the closet hook
 lest anyone cast a spell on Amanda.¹⁴

The poet respects the skill of the farrier but also heeds native lore for the protection of her horse, Amanda. It seems that the "intellect" must protect "creativity" from the recasting of civilization. The theme-making of the poet expands rather than narrows as in the hermit poems.

Folklore is not the limit of Kumin's mysteries. Although the poet, a Jew, leaves her religious beliefs undefined, she does write of God, Christ, and religion in numerous poems and in various contexts. One of Kumin's characteristically Romantic motifs is the celebration of God in nature. "The Hermit Prays" expresses awe in the bird's nest small enough for the cup of the hermit's hand. In the last stanza of the poem, God is synthesized with the natural functioning of nature:

God of the topmost branch
god of the sheltering leaf
fold your wing over.
Keep secret and keep safe.¹⁵

The statement on God by the poetic-persona is more overt in one of the Amanda poems, "The Agnostic Speaks to Her Horse's Hoof." Cleaning her horse's hooves and contemplating the passing of man's life and the ruining of the oceans, the poet comments, "Let us ripen in our own way--." The last stanza begins with an unusual metaphor:

The hoofpick is God's instrument
as much as I know of Him.
In my hand let it raise
your moon, Amanda, your nerve bone.
Let us come to the apocalypse complete

without splinter or stone.
 Let us ride out
 on four iron feet.¹⁶

The poet's expression of the desire to become is Romantic; it is an affirmation of life. The poetic-persona in the hermit poems associates God with nature; in the Amanda poems the poetic-persona is dubious about a notion of God outside her own reach. The poet's participation in Christian acts and her self-expression reaching toward an "apocalypse complete" represent integral elements of Romantic religion as interpreted by Hoxie Neale Fairchild. His initial comment is:

For some years I held the opinion that romanticism could most fruitfully be defined as the attempt to achieve, to retain, or to justify that emotional experience which is produced by an imaginative interfusion of real and ideal, natural and supernatural, finite and infinite, man and God.¹⁷

Although Kumin as a twentieth-century poet apparently must deal with doubts such as agnosticism, her poetic spirit is Christian. Kumin's poetry generates what Fairchild calls "the taproot of romanticism, . . . an eternal and universal and primary fact of consciousness: man's desire for self-trust, self-expression, self-expansion."¹⁸ The poetic energy of Kumin is Romantic; the poet's desire to become complete is Romantic; the hoofpick in her hand is a symbol of Christian charity. Because the poetic-persona of the Amanda poems is the poet's intimate voice, one accepts the spirit and experience of the poem as truth.

The poetic-persona is also intimate in the Amanda poem "Thinking of Death and Dogfood," a poem concerned with the passing of time and the inevitability of death. When Amanda dies, or when her luck runs out, the poet says that Amanda will go to Alpo or Gaines. Viewing her own death, the poet sees herself as part of a cycle:

while I foresee my corpse
 slid feet first into fire
 light as the baker's loaf
 to make of me at least
 a pint of potash spoor.
 I'm something to sweeten the crops
 when the clock hand stops.¹⁸

Kumin is surprisingly blunt. After death Amanda will become dogfood and the poet will become a continuation in the natural cycle of all living things. Thoughts of death bring thoughts of the immediate. Thinking seriously while riding horseback, the poet asks, "What do I want for myself." The response is a simple and feminine answer:

All that I name as mine
 with the sure slow oxen of words:
 feed sacks as grainy as boards
 that air in the sun. A boy
 who is wearing my mother's eyes.
 Garlic to crush in the pan.
 The family gathering in.
 Already in the marsh
 the yearling maples bleed
 a rich onrush. Time slips
 another abacus bead.¹⁹

Admitting her mortality leads the poet to an affirmation of life. The last stanza expresses the individual's desire for a death with dignity:

Let it not stick in the throat
 or rattle a pane in the mind.
 may I leave no notes behind
 wishful, banal or occult
 and you, small thinker in
 the immensity of your frame
 may you be caught and crammed
 midmouthful of the best grain
 when the slaughterer's bullet slams
 sidelong into your brain.²⁰

The contrast between the poetic-persona and Amanda is the contrast between the needs of the intellect and the needs of the body. The thinker-poet wishes to die complete with an integrated psyche; the non-thinker need only be full of food. Once again the figure of Amanda provides the poet an antithesis which heightens the poet's theme and gives insight into the Romantic irony of the conflicting elements of a person's being. Moral man is both body and spirit; this is a fact that the poet, particularly a Romantic poet, is acutely aware of.

The fanciful wanderings (both in body and in imagination) of the hermit provide insights on immortality in the fine poem "The Hermit Goes Up Attic." Roaming in the deserted house of the Lucas Harrison family, the hermit discovers dates and scores carved into the attic rafters. These humble etchings record and rise and decline of the family; the hermit hears the ghost stories of the past. The desire, even in the hermit, to leave a sign of his

existence is coupled with the disappearance of the Harrison family. The last stanza is revealing:

Whatever it was is now a litter of shells.
Even at noon the attic vault is dim.
The hermit carves his own name in the sill
that someone after will take stock of him.²¹

The hermit's desire to leave something written behind is matched by the desire of the poet. As Kumin has said, "Always this sense the writer has, a kind of messianic thing: who will tell it if I do not? This is your assignment: to record it, to get it down, to save it for immortality."²² In the hermit poem the poetic-persona observes and comments on the motivation of the hermit in performing an act probably not consistent with the hermit archetype. Apparent again is the difficulty the female has in assuming a poetic-persona which will work well with a male archetype. One must admit, however, that the poet's desire to record thought for immortality is not distinguishable as a male or a female desire but rather as a universal desire.

Incongruity in the hermit archetype rises in "The Hermit Celebrates the Basswood Tree," a poem of memory and the past. The basswood tree in its spring foliage initiates a memory response in the hermit and carries him back to his eighth year when he took a skyride over Atlantic City with an uncle. It seems strange that a hermit should ever have been to Atlantic City, even as a child. The incident does, however, give the hermit a past,

a childhood, an extended identity. The theme of memory is better expressed in the Amanda poem "Brushing the Aunts." In this poem the poetic-persona successfully moves again and again from the Amanda image to the memory of the poet's old maid aunts. The poet's memory response begins with Amanda:

Consider Amanda, my sensible strawberry roan,
 her face with its broad white blaze
 lending an air of constant surprise.
 Homely Amanda, colossal and mild.
 She evokes those good ghosts of my childhood
 brillo-haired and big-boned,
 the freckled maiden aunts.
 Though barren like her, they were not petulant.

 Remembering this,
 I bring Amanda windfalls.
 That season again.
 The power of the leaf runs the human brain
 raising the dead like clouds in the sky.²³

The image of hair prompts the poet's associations. The copper hair from Amanda's tail hangs up the oriole nests in the fall. The poet carries the image further as she says, "All fall as I drop to the scalp of sleep . . . Amanda grows small in my head . . . the aunts return letting down their hair."²⁴ The last stanza of the poem completes the cycle:

In 4/4 time the way it was once
 I am brushing the carrot frizz gone gray
 a hundred ritual strokes one way,
 a hundred ritual strokes the other.
 We dance the old back-bedroom dance,
 that rattles the shakes of my mother's house
 till Amanda jitters yanking her tether,
 her eyes green holes in the dark, her blaze
 a slice of moon looming at the gate
 and the latch flies up on another night.²⁵

The use of animals to recall the memory of dead humans is a motif that Kumin uses in her poetry more than once. The poetic-persona appears authentic; the associations prompting memory are natural in this poem. No element of the poem seems contrived or suspect as with the poetic-persona in the hermit poem on memory associations.

The eight hermit poems have been explored; two Amanda poems remain for further examination. These poems continue to establish the poetic-persona of the Amanda poems as a freer mode of expression for the poet. "The Summer of the Watergate Hearings" blends the events and the atmosphere of that era in American politics quite pointedly with the worming of the horse. Graphically, Kumin counts the worms in Amanda's droppings:

Four dozen ascarids, ten strongyles--
I count them to make sure.

And all the while in Washington
worms fall out of the government
pale as the parasites that drain
from the scoured gut of my mare.

They blink open on the television screen,
Night after night on the re-run
I count them to make sure.²⁶

The metaphor speaks for itself; the attitude of the poet is apparent disgust. The issue of the poem is handled easily by the poetic-persona, whereas the hermit archetype would have been an inappropriate voice for such a contemporary topic.

Female poets are often criticized for remaining in their own narrow worlds instead of expanding their views to encompass the universal. Kumin, however, does not shy away from involvement or commitment. She does not try to merge into the world of nature at the expense of human relationships. Because the voice of Kumin is always present in the poetic-persona of the Amanda poems, the civilized world pervades the verse. The twentieth-century Romantic can commune with nature but cannot entirely escape from society. "Eyes" weaves together the frustration of a Romantic poet, a woman poet, and a friend:

At night Amanda's eyes
are rage red with toy worlds inside.
Head on they rummage the dark
of the paddock like twin cigars
but flicker at the edges
with the shy tongues of the spirit lamp.

There's little enough for her to see:
my white shirt, the sleeves
rolled high, two flaps of stale bread
in my fish paws. I can't sleep.
I have come back from
the feed-bag-checkered restaurant
from the pale loose tears of my dearest friend
her blue eyes sinking into the highball glass
and her mouth drawn down in the grand
comedy of anguish.

Today a sparrow has been put
in the hawk's hands and in the net
a monarch crazes its wings on gauze.
A doe run down by the dogs
commonly dies of fright before
its jugular opens at the fang hole.
In my friend's eyes the famine victim
squats, holding an empty rice bowl.

O Amanda, burn out my dark.
Press the warm suede of your horseflesh
against my cold palm.
Take away all that is human.²⁷

The poet's desire for escape from the world of a friend's tears, anguish, and commitment must be satisfied by only temporary moments of comfort. Kumin recognizes the horrors of both the natural world and the world of man. Seeking solace with Amanda in this situation is also a symbolic completion of the psyche of the poet, the instinctual and strong merging with the intellectual and compassionate. Once more the role of Amanda has mediated between the poet and the world. In Amanda the poet has a counterpart which enables her to develop a poetic-persona which best communicates the poet's intent.

The female poet's struggle to overcome the acceptance of the male experience as the universal experience and the predominance of the positive male archetype over the female within this experience is illustrated in the poetry of Maxine Kumin. Reaching toward an awakening and a fulfilling of her own feminine poetic consciousness, Kumin has found a workable way of overcoming the conflict. In overstepping the established symbolic structure of the hermit into the new realm of the Amanda poems, Kumin finds a voice for her own experience, the female experience. Maxine Kumin's movement from the use of the male to the female persona for a solitary figure marks not only a

progressive step for her own talents, but also a progressive step in the development of a poetic female consciousness with role-models acceptable in the new feminist literature.

NOTES

¹Segnitz and Rainey, p. 19.

²Eli E. Burriss and Lionel Carson, Latin and Greek in Current Use, II (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 131-32.

³Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordsby, eds., A Primer of Jungian Psychology (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 44-51.

⁴Martha George Meek, "An Interview with Maxine Kumin," The Massachusetts Review, 16, No. 2 (1975), 317-18.

⁵Meek, p. 320.

⁶Kumin, Up, p. 3.

⁷Kumin, Up, p. 8.

⁸Kumin, Up, p. 8.

⁹Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 85-86.

¹¹Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 88-89.

¹²Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 88-89.

¹³Kumin, Up, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴Kumin, House, Bridge, p. 87.

¹⁵Kumin, Up, p. 7.

¹⁶Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 90-91.

¹⁷Hoxie Neale Fairchild, "Romantic Religion," in Romanticism: Points of View, 2nd ed., ed. Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 206.

¹⁸Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 97-98.

- ¹⁹Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 97-98.
- ²⁰Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 97-98.
- ²¹Kumin, Up, pp. 12-14.
- ²²Meek, p. 319.
- ²³Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 95-96.
- ²⁴Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 95-96.
- ²⁵Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 95-96.
- ²⁶Kumin, House, Bridge, p. 94.
- ²⁷Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 92-93.

CHAPTER IV

THE POETIC-PERSONA AND THE POETIC-SELF IN THE POETRY OF MAXINE KUMIN

It may seem ironic at first glance that a poet who searches the world of nature for a defense against the world of man should join nature and the family in poetry. Kumin does not see the family as alien to her consciousness any more than the society of other poets is alien to herself. Also, it may be because she is a female that much of her poetry with natural imagery is mingled with the motif of the family. Concern for nature in the Romantic tradition of seeking peace, solitude, and personal consciousness-raising is not always separate from Kumin's identification with family roles. In fact, Kumin's theme of striving for an integrated psyche via oneness with nature is a challenge which often must be met in the midst of the facts of her being: family, friends, female.

For Maxine Kumin the family represents a past of her own as daughter, a past of her own as mother, as well as the present roles of daughter and mother. Rarely does Kumin speak of her siblings except in relation to their parents. Mixed with the themes of family is Kumin's Jewish background, a heritage which she takes back several

generations in verse. The theme of Jewishness sometimes presents a question of identity and belonging, sometimes a question of identity and alienation. The key symbols in Ms. Kumin's verse may work together, such as the family and nature, or they may stand independent of each other. The poet's concern with identity of the self, concern with becoming and integration of the psyche, concern with identifying sources of alienation become themes woven into the poems of nature and the family.

The poetic-self of Maxine Kumin exudes a history of a poet becoming, a poet identifying herself. By writing poetry of men in interaction with nature, Kumin conforms to the traditional myth-making process wherein the male is the Romantic character who seeks identity with nature. The problem for Kumin of separation of the poetic-self and the poetic-persona is not unique; it is a problem for other female poets faced with the old myths of the roles of men and women. This situation has been the subject of recent criticism by feminist writers as an outgrowth of a new feminist literary criticism. Sandra M. Gilbert describes the nature of the female poet's attempts at self-definition as follows:

For as she struggles to define herself, to reconcile male myths about her with her own sense of herself, to find some connection between the name the world has given her and the secret name she has given herself, the woman poet inevitably postulates that perhaps she has not one but two (or

more) selves, making her task of self-definition bewilderingly complex. The first of these selves is usually public and social, defined by circumstance and by the names the world calls her--daughter, wife, mother, Miss, Mrs., Mademoiselle--a self that seems, in the context of the poet's cultural conditioning, to be her natural personality (in the sense of being both physiologically inevitable and morally proper or appropriate). The female poet's second self, however, is associated with her secret name, her rebellious longings, her rage against imposed definitions, her creative passions, her anxiety, and--yes--her art. And it is the Doppelgänger of a second self which, generating the woman's uneasiness with male myths of femininity, gives energy as well as complexity to her struggle toward self-definition.¹

The dichotomy of the female poet's self is on one side traditional and acceptable and on the other side unconventional and unacceptable. Gilbert's description of the poet's second self, that "dark," private, antisocial, and irrational self, is a portrait of the Romantic poet. Because she is speaking of female poets, however, this observation is likely to go without notice.

Adrienne Rich has also spoken of the dominance of male myths in the imagery of women in literature and in woman's view of self. Rich sees the necessity of acknowledging these myths before vitalizing female-originated myths. Rich reviews the need for revision as follows:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have

been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see--and therefore live--afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.²

In Rich's observation is the desire to change the old identities by reexamining the past. Self-knowledge is not divorced from past knowledge but based on seeing the past with new eyes, new insights. For a female the search for self-identity will be a search of the past beyond the present mythic family roles.

Maxine Kumin works both within and outside of the realm of the traditional roles of the female, roles from which she may pull a stronger, more integrated picture of self, an emerging poetic-self. In speaking of the "I" voice, the "moi" voice of confessional poetry, Kumin explains her own awareness of the personal voice as it developed in her poetry.

I didn't really begin to write womanly poems until, well, my consciousness was raised by my daughters. I started to grow up at about age thirty. I had a very long childhood, and a long and delayed adolescence. I was programmed into one kind of life, which is to say: get a college degree, get married, and have a family. It was just after the war, and this was what everyone was desperately doing; the tribe was kind of the saving centrality in a world that had gone totally awry. And I came to poetry as a way of saving myself because I was so wretchedly discontented, and I felt so guilty about being discontented. It just wasn't enough to be a housewife

and a mother. It didn't gratify great chunks of me. I came to poetry purely for self-gratification.³

Finding the traditional roles limiting in real life, Kumin came to poetry, as she says, for self-gratification; this became a means of self-identification. Since the roles of women are so integral a part of her poetry, the family is a key image. In many poems wherein the poetic-persona is the "I" voice of Kumin, the poetic-self becomes recognizable in consciousness-raising poems. As the poems of self-identity are examined, the poet's Romantic need for a close coexistence with the world of nature will be emphasized, often working in the same verse with the imagery of the family.

The Poetic-Persona as Daughter

In the poet's view of herself as a daughter, some recurring symbols appear. The poetic-persona is, as may be expected in a Romantic poet, personal. Likewise, this is the voice of a female poet examining the traditional roles as a means of self-identification for the present. Kumin is following the advice of Adrienne Rich, except that she is examining her own roles from the past instead of the literature of others. The fruitful memories of the poet are mingled with imagery from nature as Kumin writes about her mother. In "The Spell" Kumin describes the richness and mystery of her mother's flower garden:

Toads in my mother's garden talked
 inside the ivy along the brink.
 Each in his personal thicket murmuring judgement
 wigwagged a green umbrella tilting its glossy ribs.
 Now and then one of them coughed in mid-sentence,
 carelessly dozed, and was torn by a cat.⁴

Even in the seemingly peaceful natural setting the unexpected and sometimes evil crouches at the edge of the picture, ready to spring on the careless or initiated. The poet's mother, too, is sometimes a victim. The poem continues with

. . . violets that I picked
 pleadingly for her sick headaches
 with long stems and collars of leaves
 to the end of my days.⁵

If the mother is a victim, then so is the child, as the poet admits. The child is the inheritor of the pain or the ecstasy of the parent. In the last stanza the power of the mother fuses with nature's own power:

Notice I say my mother's garden
 again and again, advisedly.
 She is here, she walks here in the evening,
 She scolds the common blue flags for putting up spears.
 In rough gloves she wrestles the roses,
 at supertime hauls in the sun.
 The violets cease their invasion now as she passes.
 Bees in mid-air turn to mind her;
 They enter the Japanese quince.
 It is she who infuses the ginkgo, now I see it.
 It is she who leans down to Jesus's blossoms,
 wherefore they know their limits.
 And all of the souls in the ivy
 pulse, sending receiving in code,
 listen, tattle, and listen.
 It is she who speaks to the toads.⁶

The mother is a part of the mystery and the power of growth in nature. She communicates; she sympathizes; she commands.

Kumin associates her mother with symbols of plant growth and garden inhabitants, images of fertility and activity. In other poems Kumin uses the symbols of nature to speak more directly to the mother-daughter relationship.

The fertility of the feminine naturally leads to symbols of nature and growth. Erich Neumann views two characters of the Feminine whole in his study of the Great Mother, the female archetype. One, the "elementary character," is designated as

the Great Round, the Great Container, which tends to hold fast to everything that springs from it and to surround it like an eternal substance. Everything born of it belongs to it and remains subject to it; and even if the individual becomes independent, the Archetypal Feminine relativizes this independence to a nonessential variant of her own perpetual being.⁷

This elementary character forms the basis of the "conservative, stable, and unchanging part of the feminine which predominates in motherhood."⁸ This stability, this power of the Feminine is recognizable in "The Spell." Mystery, too, is part of the essence of the Feminine, and even the title of the poem encourages a belief in the exceptional and supernatural powers of the Feminine.

The mystery of the Feminine in the poem "A Voice from the Roses (after Arachne)" is expressed by the poet's blending of natural and mythic symbols. Kumin uses the personal "I" voice in the first stanza, where she identifies with Arachne.

Having confused me
with the nearest of her nine
nimble sisters--

· · · · ·
my mother directed the craft
of her vengeance against me.⁹

The poet's real crime is not identifiable, but her punishment is apparent as the personal voice, the "I" voice of the poet, reworks mythic symbols.

I have lain
on this thorn thirty years,
spinning out of my
pear-shaped belly,
intricate maps of my brainpan,
that catch the morning light
and carve it into prisms;
you might say, messages.¹⁰

The poet's "thorn" is likened to the fate of Arachne, the disgraced suicide who had dared to challenge the superior status of the goddess Minerva. Repentant, Minerva revitalized the young mortal into the shape of a spider, a privilege which allowed Arachne to weave. Kumin associates the weaving with the message; the message is her womanhood, a state both blessed and cursed, a state thrust upon her by a superior force, her mother. The imagery of Kumin intensifies the sometimes agonizing, sometimes destructive element of the Feminine. Womanhood is a process of becoming; Kumin refers to the "furious barb / that I fed with my body's juices, / this nib of my babyhood." The present condition or state of the poetic-persona is revealed in the last lines of the second stanza.

Tugged this way and that
 by the force of my spinning,
 the old thorn
 now clasps me lightly.¹¹

The poet's weaving, the message, is not complete; the "thorn" still clasps her as does the mother's spell, strong and lasting as Minerva's own. The poetic-persona is still in the process of becoming, the process of identifying herself, in the presence of the old spell, the old influences. For a woman to fully identify herself as an individual, she must divorce herself from the mother figure, the stifling curse of the old roles passed from the stronger, superior force to the young. As in Erich Neumann's definition of the elementary character of the Feminine, the draw of the ego, the conscious into the unconscious, is strong. However, as the poet seeks an integrated and healthy psyche, as the individual approaches an independent and healthy identification of self, so the conscious ego must become strong and independent of the Mother. Neumann explains that the

. . . participation mystique between mother and child is the original situation of container and contained. It is the beginning of the relation of the Archetypal Feminine to the child, and it likewise determines the relation of the maternal unconscious to the child's ego and consciousness as long as these two systems are not separated from one another.¹²

The strength of Neumann's observation is acknowledged in the last stanza of Kumin's poem wherein she declares her

own part in the Great Round, the pull of the character of the Feminine. The stanza begins:

Nevertheless
 it is rooted. It is
 raising a tree inside me.
 The buds of my mother's arbor
 grow ripe in my sex.
 Mother, Queen of the roses,
 wearer of forks and petals,
 when may I be free of you?
 When will I be done
 with the force of your magic?¹³

This poem is Kumin's experience, the feminine experience, and it is the poetic-persona, the nearness of the poetic-self which makes the theme so meaningful and intense. The tree being raised inside the poet, the traditional thought and roles of women, will doubtless be implanted in her own daughters. The traditional roles are the thorn, and they are the curse. The imagery which suggests the agony of the psyche in exploring, explaining, and emerging into independence and integration might well represent the Romantic in the agony of becoming. Here, however, the plight is one of a female as well as a Romantic.

As a woman matures, as the daughter may become a mother, so there are crises of becoming when the two women will be able to sympathetically identify with each other. One such moment is the conflict between male and female, a conflict begun in childhood between father and daughter. "Life's Work" shows the poet's sympathy for her mother's conflict with her father and the parallel between this and

the poet's own conflict with her father. Again, the role of the head of the household--the lawgiver, the measure of respectability--is a trial for the female, with the daughter testing her independence, testing the traditional rules and roles. The poetic-persona and the mother give in eventually to the point of view, if not the demands, of the father. "Life's Work" begins with "Mother my good girl / I remember this old story." And an old story it is; like an obedient daughter, the female submits to the father's will. In the poem the mother is a Bach specialist as a youth, a graduate of the Conservatory wanting to go on tour with a young violinist. Recalling the final scene of the mother's story, Kumin writes:

and my grandfather
 that estimable man I never met
 scrubbing your mouth with a handkerchief
 saying no daughter of mine
 tearing loose the gold locket
 you wore with no one's picture in it
 and the whole German house on 15th Street
 at righteous whiteheat¹⁴

As the history of family and roles repeats itself, so the second stanza is the poet's version of the story. Of herself Kumin recalls

At eighteen I chose to be a swimmer.

 I swallowed and prayed
 to be allowed to join the Aquacade
 and my perfect daddy
 who carried you off to elope
 after the fingerboard snapped
 and the violinist lost his case
 My daddy wearing gravy on his face

swore on the carrots and the boiled beef
 that I would come to nothing
 that I would come to grief ¹⁵

The stories are essentially the same; the outcomes repeat themselves. The female's search for independence and identity must often become a challenge to the conventions of the family, the norm, the authority, and the figure of that authority who is the father. In this challenge and outcome the mother and the daughter share a knowledge of a past self, a self as yet unformed and uncompromised, a person who must too often remain a character in a past story, the "old story." The last stanza of the poem puts into adult perspective the common agony of compromise often experienced in growing up female.

Well, the firm old fathers are dead
 and I didn't come to grief.
 I came to words instead
 to tell the little tale that's left:
 the midnights of my childhood still go on
 the stairs speak again under your foot
 the heavy parlor door folds shut
 and "Au Claire de la Lune"
 puckers from the obedient keys
 plain as a schoolroom clock ticking
 and what I hear more clearly than Debussy's
 lovesong is the dry aftersound
 of your long nails clicking.¹⁶

The keys are obedient; the pianist was obedient. The poetic-persona hears a note of disappointment in her mother's continued love for music. The poet's choice of writing instead of swimming is at least a substitute, a compromise, though not a choice to belittle. The

poetic-persona does not express a longing for the once desired choice, but she does tell the tale. The conflict, the piece of history which becomes the common story of the female child reduced in power by the father is a history which ties the females, the mother and the daughter, one to the other. The striving of the poetic-persona to understand self must take her into the past again to examine the roles and the choices when they were made. As this looking back exposes a conflict on one hand, it is likely to reveal a tie between adversaries on the other. Always, though, the search for identity brings Kumin to look at the family. In the family environs the poetic-persona exposes more of the poetic-self.

The role of the father, like that of the mother, is examined by Kumin, but the imagery used is as different as the roles themselves. Although an examination of the relationship between father and child is necessary to understand and identify the self, this tie is also an important issue for the feminist poet, or for any female poet. The female poet's real or unreal image of the male role, the father, the figure of authority, is a real point of concern for feminists. Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey comment on this concern as follows:

Concerned as women are with their relationship to the male, women poets, like women fiction writers, rarely portray convincingly male characters. The male figure--whether God, father,

husband or lover--emerges as remote and abstract. While this fact applies to the majority of women poets, a significant group avoids altogether the sphere of power, with an elusive control over their lives. Perhaps this attitude is the aftermath of the Puritan foundations of our society: the human male has come to absorb the psychological attributes of the Puritan God. This struggle against the authority symbol helps to explain other prevalent themes in the poetry of women, such as parental conflict with both father and mother. Also, the single representation of "women" poems implies an intuitive blood tie between these victims of society which transcends other relationships.¹⁷

The previous Kumin poems mentioned are identifiable with several of the observations made here: the tie of female victims, parental conflict, struggle against authority. Also, the imagery used by Kumin in reference to her father is full of mythic and godlike figures and references.

In the poet's memory of childhood, the father assumes a multitude of roles, all authoritative. In "a hundred nights" the father saves the daughter from bats which have flown down the chimney. Kumin recalls

Father in a union suit
 came a hundred sultry nights
 came like an avenging ghost.
 He waved a carpetbeater, trussed
 with scrolls of hearts and cupid wings,
 a racket with rococo strings.¹⁸

To the child's dismay, the father would not kill the bats, only stun them and throw them out the window because, as the poetic-persona says, "My father had his principles." The childhood experience grew out of proportion in the

memory of the child. The poem ends with the notion of the omniscience of the parent.

no matter that my parents say
 it only happened twice that way

 and all the rest are in my head.
 Once, before my father dies,
 I mean to ask him why he chose
 to loose those furies at my bed.¹⁹

The godlike quality of the father is part of a childhood memory and point of view, part of a learned attitude toward the father figure, part of the poetic-persona's view of the role of the father in the family. To see the father in this light no doubt has an effect on the poetic-persona's image of herself. C. G. Jung comments on the power of the father archetype, which "is first of all an all-embracing god-image, the epitome of everything fatherly, a dynamic principle which lives as a powerful archetype in the soul of the child."²⁰ Herein lies a key to the poet's task of self-identification and the poet's interest in the family.

The god-image of the male represents a trial to the female poet. To break out of the role confines of the female is only half the step; the male role must alter as well. A powerful female image is still a secondary individual if placed in the shadow of a male god-image. As she examines self and roles, the father image of Kumin's verse is omnipotent in still other poems. For example,

the father has a lasting effect on the child in the poem "the marauder":

As false as your mustache
That made you terrible to kiss,
falsely I swear I will not wish
your earth-packed face back to me when you die.
Say I was blessed who thought
you would outlast me like a god;
each month I saw you pounding out
eight pipes, it was your hard hand made time fly.²¹

The father is guilty in the memory of the poetic-persona of various acts of authority which belong traditionally to the male role. They range from poisoning squirrels in the attic, owning a Luger pistol, having ropes in case of fire, locking the latches of the doors, chasing down the poet's brother to give him cough syrup. The acts vary greatly, but none is unusual. They are, in fact, all motivated by the role of the male protector. Kumin names the father "Keykeeper, strict watchman," while she is "the prize and prisoner." The poem's last stanza is the adult, the poetic-persona, acknowledging the power of the father's influence. She begins with an apostrophe:

Father, who kept me safe
and put the demons in my house
and built up your sure creed inside my bones;
Father, insure me, then,
before life tips to turn you in
or bends you querulous over a supper of prunes.²²

The father's mania for safety instilled in the child the presence of a lack of safety; he gave birth to fears. As Kumin asks for the insurance of her protector, she is

assured only of the death of her father, the loss of the protector. It is ironic that the rule of protector must make the protected aware of danger and vulnerability and eventually leave them still unprotected and vulnerable. Herein lies a danger in placing a human, the father-image, on a level with the gods; still a human, he is mortal and will eventually fail the worshippers.

Later poems by Maxine Kumin show the effects of her father's death on her psyche and on her symbols. In recalling the father, the poet uses the dream motif, a recurrent theme and motif of Romantic poetry, as the structure of her poems. C. G. Jung said that

dreams may give expression to ineluctable truths, to philosophical pronouncements, illusions, wild fancies, memories, plans, anticipations, irrational experiences, even telepathic visions and heaven knows what besides.²³

The dream life of the individual emerges from the unconscious. Too, the free examination of the source of dreams, the unconscious or the preconscious, is one of the features of Romantic literature.²⁴ Again Kumin's verse instills the character of the Romantic into the poetry of the present, the poetry of identification.

The poem "Lately, at Night" begins with a statement of the importance of the dream life in the poet. It begins with the apostrophe, "Father, / lately I find myself repairing / at night by inches the patchwork of

your death."²⁵ From the simplicity of this beginning the poem moves into graphic and factual details of the funeral of her father. Kumin is bothered by the contrast between the realm memory of the funeral brought back in dream and the proposals her father once made about his own funeral. She says:

Tonight again
 you who had sworn off funerals
 and said you'd have us send out for champagne
 lie stuffed and stitched like a suckling pig
 prettied up for the fiesta.²⁶

The crudity of the imagery for the dead father heightens the distortion of reality the poetic-persona experiences in the dream. The last stanza of the poem is a pleading for peace from the dreams:

Father,
 lately at night as I watch your chest
 to help it to breathe in
 and swear it moves, and swear I hear the air
 rising and falling,
 even in the dream it is my own fat lungs
 feeding themselves, greedy as ever.
 Smother, drown or burn, Father,
 Father, no more false moves, I beg you.
 Back out of my nights, my dear dead undergroundling.
 It is time. Let the pirates berth their ships,
 broach casks, unload the hold, and let
 the dead skin of your forehead
 be a cold coin under my lips.²⁷

The anxieties of the dreamer reveal the intimacy of the poetic-self. As C. G. Jung asserts, dreams give information about the inner life of the dreamer; in the poet this is the poetic-self.²⁸ The demanding and grotesque nature of Kumin's dream poetry, poems which bring the unconscious

to the surface, are reminiscent of the imaginative dream poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge's emphasis on the uninhibited imagination is revealed in his definition of a poet.

The poet described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name imagination.²⁹

Coleridge and Kumin share a poetic tradition which exalts the imagination, and all imaginative states of the psyche, especially the dream. Kumin has said, "I have a lot of reverence for what goes on at the dream level in the unconscious--those symbolic events. I have tremendous reverence for raising it up into language, which I think it what it's all about, really. That's what poetry is all about, at any rate."³⁰ Although the language of Coleridge and Kumin differs, the message is the same.

In a poem from Ms. Kumin's most recently published book, The Retrieval System, the motif of the dream is used again to raise from the dead the poet's father. In the dream of "My Father's Neckties" the "color-blind chain-smoking father / who has been dead for fourteen years" comes out of a bargain basement dressed in terrible ties with "six or seven / blue lightning bolts outlined in

yellow."³¹ Wondering at the significance of the reunion in dream, she asks,

Why do I wait years and years to dream this outcome?
My brothers, in whose dreams he must as surely
turn up wearing rep ties or polka dots clumsily
knotted, do not speak of their encounters.³²

So often in dreams and in the waking world the most intimate moments remain solitary ones, unshared. The seclusion of feeling among the siblings anticipates this truth in the last stanza.

When we die, all four of us, in
whatever sequence, the designs
will fall off like face masks
and the rayon ravel form this hazy version
of a man who wore hard colors recklessly
and hid out in the foreign
bargain basements of his feelings.³³

The imagery for the father is masculine; the necktie is of bold, even outlandish colors. The poetic-persona shares with siblings a lifetime influence from the father, ending only in their own deaths when the "designs fall off." The intimacy of the last lines reveal the poetic-self. To reveal feelings was foreign for the father; this is the truth rising out of the dream and the poem's symbols. The father's boldness in dress and colors contrasts with his reluctance to reveal the inner man. Here the female poet's search for identity admits to a family identity; she shares a common inheritance with a family and three siblings.

Kumin's use of symbol is obvious in "The Pawnbroker," which begins "The symbol inside this poem is my father's feet. . . ." ³⁴ The theme of this poem also deals with the love shared between the father and the daughter, the poetic-persona. As the Pawnbroker's daughter, the poet says, "Every good thing in my life was secondhand." After two stanzas of examples of the secondhand history of her childhood, the poet moved to the father-daughter relationship. In stanza six she says,

Firsthand I had from my father a love ingrown
tight as an oyster, and returned it
as secretly. From him firsthand
the grace of work, the sweat of it, the bone-
tired unfolding down of stress.
I was the bearer he paid up on demand
with one small pearl of selfhood. Portionless,
I am oystering still to earn it. ³⁵

The poet's real inheritance from the father, the identity of self she has mustered, leaves her still owing. As is often the case in a father-daughter relationship, the female finds it near impossible to realize the image, the debt left to her by the father. Parental expectations may seem immense. The image of the oyster suggests the secret and ingrown, the intense feelings for one another. At the death of the father in the last stanza the poet calls to him as "my father, my creditor," and "My lifetime appraiser, my first prince whom death unhorsed," and in the last lines she says:

my thumb-licking peeler of cash on receipt of the
 merchandise
 possessor of miracles left unredeemed on the shelf
 after thirty days,
 giver and lender, no longer in hock to himself,
 ruled off the balance sheet,
 a man of great personal order
 and small white feet.³⁶

The poetic-persona has given princely, powerful, if not godlike qualities to the father. The simplicity of the symbol in the poem, the father's feet, is associated with his livelihood, his work, a symbol of firmness and security, yet also of action and movement. While some of the symbols are associated with the natural world, the imagery for the father is not as closely associated with nature as are the symbols the poet uses with the mother-image. In Kumin's poetry the mother-figure is mystery and transcending strength; the father-figure is distant, elusive, and powerful. From poems of the family members, a part of the tribe, Kumin does begin to define herself. The identity of the poetic-self began as a child, so the parental roles must be examined. Inside the conscious roles of Maxine Kumin, poetic-persona and poetic-self, are numerous unconscious and preconscious roles which are drawn from the past and the family.

The Poetic-Persona and the Extended Family

When Maxine Kumin goes back into her heritage further than the immediate family, as she does in such poems as

"The Album," "Sperm," "The Deaths of the Uncles," and "For My Great-Grandfather," she often expressed her Jewish identity as well as the family identity. The poem "Sperm" is addressed to the poet's grandfather. The last stanza provides a comment on the roles of male and female in the family, as in the world, when she says,

O Grandfather, what is it saying,
 these seventeen cousins german
 descending the same number of steps
 their chromosomes tight as a chain gang
 their genes like innocent porters
 a mile churn of spermatozoa?
 You have to admire the product--
 bringing forth sons to be patriots
 daughters to dance like tame puppets--³⁷

The males perform manly tasks; the females assume submissive roles. The history of such roles must be explored and perhaps exploded if the identity of the poet is to be presently whole and independent. As Kumin goes back even further to the great-grandfather, the legend of the family's past becomes mysterious and foreign though mixed with the mundane facts of everyday living. In "For My Great-Grandfather: A Message Long Overdue" the poet has what she refers to as "three pages of you," a letter from 1895. The man with a "beard red as Barbarossa's / uncut from its first sprouting to the hour / they tucked it in your belt and closed your eyes," came with brass water pipe, praying shawl, and leather praying boxes from "somewhere / in Bohemia." The letterhead comes from a bill of sale:

"Rosenberg the tailor, Debtor, / A Full line of Goods of
all the Latest / In Suiting and Pants."³⁸ In recognizing
her heritage, Kumin again uses the image of the debtor in
the last stanza of the poem:

I tell you to my children, who forget,
are brimful of themselves, and anyway
might have preferred a farmer or a sailor.
but you and I are buttoned, flap to pocket.
Welcome, ancestor, Rosenberg the Tailor!
I choose to be a lifetime in your debt.³⁹

The choice of family ties and identification belongs to the
poet; here the poetic-persona readily assumes the story
and the origin.

In other poems Maxine Kumin is more obvious in refer-
ences to her Jewish heritage. It is to the poet both a
source of identity and a source of alienation. When Kumin
uses the imagery to suggest alienation, it is the aliena-
tion of the individual, the poet, not simply the Jew. In
one such poem the great-grandfather is once again an
integral image. The poem is "on being asked to write a
poem for the centenary of the civil war," a poem which
begins with a history of escape and guilt.

Good friend, from my province what is there to say?
My great-grandfather left me here
rooted in grateful guilt,
who came, an escaped conscript
blasted out of Europe in 1848;
came, mourned by all his kin
who put on praying hats
and sat a week on footstools there;
plowed forty days by schooner
and sailed in at Baltimore
a Jew, and poor;

strapped needles up and notions
 and walked packaback across
 the dwindling Alleghenies,
 his red beard and nutmeg freckles
 dusting as he sang.⁴⁰

The ancestor was not an abolitionist, but a tailor who, as a pacifist, made money on the Confederate uniforms, but lived to lose the money. The poem concludes:

I have only a buckle and a candlestick
 left over, like old rhetoric,
 from his days

to show how little I belong.
 This is the way I remember it was told,
 but in a hundred years
 all stories go wrong.⁴¹

Not belonging is an element of this poem; the poet's sense of identity comes from not belonging. Someone has assumed that the poet must share a sense of identity with the families of the American Civil War; she does not. As expressed in other poems, the poet's choices, whether as family member, poet, or Jew, are identifying elements which define herself.

The archetype of the Wandering Jew, the Jew alienated forever from his fellowman, was of interest to the Romantic writers:

As a matter of fact, most of the romantic poets of England at this time made some allusion, explicit or implicit, to the Wandering Jew, in proper recognition of the appeal of this legendary character to the emotional and imaginative instincts which were their stock in trade.⁴²

To the Romantics the legend had much to offer: the appeal of the terrible, the horrible, the grotesque, the

sensational, the supernatural, and the mysterious.⁴⁻³ The Wandering Jew was of real or implied interest in the literature of William Wordsworth, J. C. F. Schiller, George Crabbe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In addition to the Gothic appeal of the legend, the element of absolute alienation was appealing. In Kumin's poetry the poetic-persona suggests that being Jewish is symbolic of the alienation of the individual, the poet. An example from Kumin is the poem "Sisyphus," a poem of childhood experience. This poem is an example of Kumin's interest in the grotesque and the maimed, another of her Romantic characteristics. She recalls,

When I was young and full of shame
I knew a legless man who came

inside a little cart, inchmeal
flatirons on his hands, downhill⁴⁴

The scene is set for the childhood kindnesses, the nickels in his cup, the wheeling "my master up the hill," the day he called her "a perfect Christian child." The poem ends with the present awareness, the adult consciousness of the poet:

One day I said I was a Jew.
I wished I had. I wanted to.

The basket man is gone; the stone
I push uphill is all my own.⁴⁵

The conflict with honesty in the child is a conflict which involves admitting oneself, accepting one's identity. Indeed, any sense of identity forms early, but the early input carries into adulthood. The "stone" of the poet, her trial or damnation, is still present. The acceptance of the identity the child denied is crucial if the poetic-self is to become complete, accepting, integrated, and totally unashamed of that self. In this poem being Jewish is a means of suggesting alienation, but it is through a family, religious, or ancestral association that the separation exists. In other poems Kumin speaks of her doubts, her agnosticism, emphasizing the Jewish imagery as a symbol of everyman and the alienation in life.

The Poetic-Persona as Mother

Maxine Kumin's identity solidifies in poems where the poetic-persona, the "I" voice, examines or explores the adult roles she has assumed. In these roles the two selves of the poet, as described by Gilbert, come into conflict, the acceptable roles defined by cultural conditioning and the unacceptable roles of the rebellious, creative, imaginative poet, the poetic-self. As a mother Kumin writes about her children; an entire section of such poems comes under the heading "Tribal Poems" in one book. As the poet's children have grown up and changed, so the

poetic-persona's themes and attitudes have changed in poetry in relation to them.

The human cycle of birth-age-death is one of the natural cycles in Kumin's poetry. "The Absent Ones" mingles the cycles of nature with the cycle of man. Also, in this poem the poet's role as daughter and mother is brought into play:

The two foals sleep back to back
in the sun like one butterfly.
Their mothers, the mares, have weaned them,
have bitten them loose like button thread.

The beavers have forced their kit
out of the stick house; he waddles
like a hairy beetle across the bottom land
in search of other arrangements.

My mother has begun to grow down,
tucking her head like a turtle.
She is pasting everyone's name
on the undersides of her silver tea service.

Our daughters and sons have burst
from the marionette show
leaving a tangle of strings
and gone into the unlit audience.

Alone I water the puffball patch.
I exhort the mushrooms to put up.
Alone I visit the hayfield.⁴⁶

Three generations of family inhabit a state of life; the analogy to the weaning of the young in nature puts it all into perspective. Each age is both exceptional and natural. Once again, the effect of nature on the poetic-persona is a positive, soothing force. As the Romantics often thought and wrote, the solace to be found in nature, alone,

is the only means of salvation for the sensitive person. The poetic-persona is realistically aware of the roles, the cycles in progress, and nature offers a continuity not experienced in the lives of men and women.

Nature does not always offer an escape for the poet. In another poem of quite a different tone, a discordant tone, the imagery of nature evokes a sinister quality. The first stanza from "Changing the Children" sets the stage for the poetic-persona as mother:

Anger does this.
Wishing the furious wish
turns the son into a crow
the daughter, a porcupine.

Soon enough, no matter how
we want them to be happy
our little loved ones, no
matter how we prod them
into our sun that it may
shine on them, they whine
to stand in the dry-goods store.
Fury slams in.
The willful fury befalls.⁴⁷

The poetic-persona is undoubtedly a parent who finds the children guilty of making their own choices. A son "denounces the race / of fathers," and a daughter tells "how The Nameless One / accosted her in the dark." The poet's question is "How put an end to this cruel spell?" The answers are cruel: "Drop the son from the tree with a rifle," and "In spring when the porcupine comes / all stealth and waddle to feed on the willows / stun her with one blow of the sledge."⁴⁸ With each answer the children

are freed from whatever confines them, the wish or reality. In the last stanza of the poem the tone is one of resignation.

Eventually we get them back
 Now they are grown up.
 They are much like ourselves.
 They wake mornings beyond cure,
 not a virgin among them.
 We are civil to one another.
 We stand in the kitchen
 slicing bread, drying spoons,
 and tuning in to the weather.⁴⁹

The poetic-persona in this poem is identified as a part of a unit, a tribe, a family; the personal "I" voice of the other poems is not used here. Perhaps the incongruous yet heartfelt emotions of motherhood forbid the use of the personal voice. Too, it is the unfortunate normality of the last stanza which emphasizes the poetic-persona's role as only one of a unit. In looking back at the Kumin poems where the poetic-persona exposed the young self in conflict of mother-daughter and father-daughter, the reader finds that irony is present in the exchange of roles. But even in a pessimistic poem, a poem of disappointment, the importance of nature in the image-making of Kumin is obvious. On the one hand nature is beneficent; on the other the force is malevolent.

The consciousness-raising of Maxine Kumin in the direction of feminist concerns is best seen in "The Envelope." This poem seems to set right the mother-daughter

conflicts in other poems and to extend the poet's understanding of her own role as a mother:

It is true, Martin Heidegger, as you have written,
 "I fear to cease," even knowing that at the hour
 of my death my daughters will absorb me, even
 knowing they will carry me about forever
 inside them, an arrested fetus, even as I carry
 the ghost of my mother under my navel, a nervy
 little androgynous person, a miracle
 folded in lotus position.

Like those old pear-shaped Russian dolls that open
 at the middle to reveal another and another, down
 to the pea-sized, irreducible minim,
 may we carry our mothers forth in our bellies.
 May we, borne onward by our daughters, ride
 that chain letter good for the next twenty-five
 thousand days of their lives.⁵⁰

The tone of the poem is hopeful and optimistic; there are no regrets expressed over imposed roles. The idea expressed in the poem counters the male notion of immortality through a male heir. Kumin sees an immortality in the Feminine, but the person carried forward is androgynous. In the notion of androgyny may be the hope of a new identity for the female, if not for the poet. The combination of the male and female in the "miracle" may explode the old myths of male and female, the old roles which frustrate the young and disappoint the mature. The "I" voice of the poet is used in this poem; the intimacy of the symbols suggests the presence of the poetic-self, even if the revelation may be idealistic. In "The Envelope" is perhaps Kumin's best expression of the integrated psyche. Coming together agreeably are all the roles of the female in the

family that she has explored previously in verse. In "The Envelope" Kumin seems aware of herself, of her identity, and is comfortable with this new awareness. Also, in the looking forward and the looking backward at the Feminine, Kumin fulfills a feminist goal for redefining the Feminine, redefining the traditional patterns of thought. Indeed, in "The Envelope," the Feminine experience becomes the universal experience.

NOTES

¹Gilbert, p. 451.

²Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," College English, 34 (1972), 18-30; rpt. in American Poets in 1976, ed. William Heyen (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1976), pp. 278-79.

³Meek, p. 326.

⁴Maxine W. Kumin, The Privilege (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), pp. 10-11.

⁵Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 10-11.

⁶Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 10-11.

⁷Erich Neumann, The Great Mother, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1955), p. 25.

⁸Neumann, p. 26.

⁹Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 37-38.

¹⁰Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 37-38.

¹¹Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 37-38.

¹²Neumann, p. 29.

¹³Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 17-18.

¹⁶Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 17-18.

¹⁷Segnitz and Rainey, p. 19.

¹⁸Kumin, Halfway, pp. 47-49.

¹⁹Kumin, Halfway, pp. 47-49.

²⁰Jolande Jacobi, Complex / Archetype / Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1959), p. 107.

²¹Kumin, Halfway, pp. 63-65.

²²Kumin, Halfway, pp. 63-65.

²³C. G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1933), p. 11.

²⁴Jung, Modern Man, p. 11.

²⁵Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 17-19.

²⁶Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 17-19.

²⁷Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 17-19.

²⁸Jung, Modern Man, p. 11.

²⁹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "From Biographia Literaria," in Poets on Poetry, ed. Charles Norman (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 165.

³⁰Meek, p. 319.

³¹Kumin, The Retrieval, p. 10.

³²Kumin, The Retrieval, p. 10.

³³Kumin, The Retrieval, p. 10.

³⁴Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 14-16.

³⁵Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 14-16.

³⁶Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 14-16.

³⁷Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 9-12.

³⁸Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 9-12.

³⁹Maxine W. Kumin, The Nightmare Factory (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), pp. 51-52.

⁴⁰Kumin, Halfway, pp. 89-90.

⁴¹Kumin, Halfway, pp. 89-90.

^{4 2}George K. Anderson, The Legend of the Wandering Jew (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965), p. 181.

^{4 3}Anderson, p. 174.

^{4 4}Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 5-6.

^{4 5}Kumin, The Privilege, pp. 5-6.

^{4 6}Kumin, House, Bridge, pp. 19-20.

^{4 7}Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 30-31.

^{4 8}Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 30-31.

^{4 9}Kumin, The Retrieval, pp. 30-31.

^{5 0}Kumin, The Retrieval, p. 40.

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