

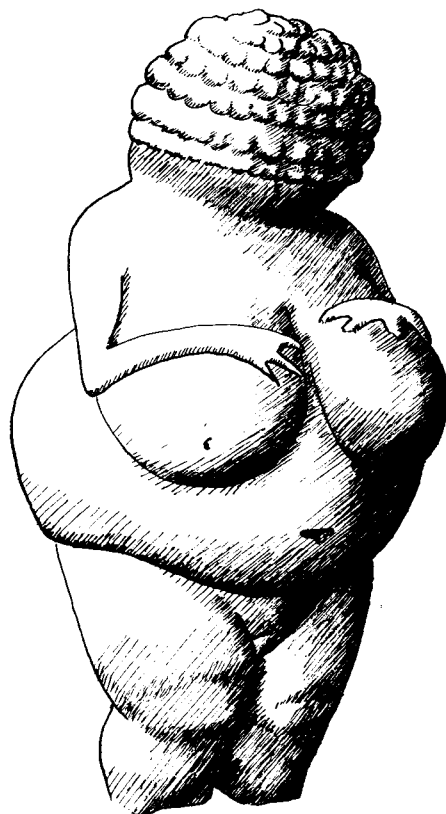
# Book Reviews

**Of Woman Born** Adrienne Rich.  
New York: Norton, 1976. Pp. 318.

For the generation of women who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of the most pressing issues of the feminist movement--child care, abortion, birth control, equal pay for work of equal value--aimed in effect, if not in fact, to undermine the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The admonition to "choose" replaced the categorical imperative to "bear," and it became possible to postpone having children until careers were established, to have children and use available child care facilities or to decide not to have children at all. During this same time, popular feminist literature concentrated on either the "singleness" of the woman--the independent as distinct from the dependent female--or the unity of women in "sisterhood." Now that the sound of the word "woman" is beginning to spark an image of strength and confidence, and the "sisters" have had children and time enough to think about them, we can finally turn to examine the issue of motherhood with refreshed interest and with the insights born of experience.

American poet Adrienne Rich deals with motherhood as both an experience and

an institution in Of Woman Born, and sees the two forces struggling in an antagonistic relationship. The book is an essay in definition, an attempt, says Rich, "to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential re-



*Venus of Willendorf* c.a. 21,000 B.C.

relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential--and all women--shall remain under male control."

(p. 13) The two spheres of institution and experience, Rich suggests, have generated the correlative emotions of anger and tenderness, the two dominant emotions of motherhood which characterize the mother's ambivalent psychological state. Often, the two spheres move together so discordantly that violence erupts. The anger and desperation of powerlessness, the rage that accumulates with years of resentment, the cutting edge of unrelieved frustration which sometimes even severs the bond between mother and child--all the taboos of motherhood that stand in contradiction to the archetypal sympathetic and giving mother and are broken in secrecy--are seen as part of this galling and violent legacy of patriarchy.

At a general social level, the institution of motherhood is seen as one that bolsters other patriarchal institutions, religious and political. The mother as a bearer of children, especially sons, serves the needs of the men who run her society. In government offices, corporation boardrooms and other places where the business of society is carried out, the institution of motherhood provides both necessary and decorative fittings. In the lower depths, it is responsible

for the violence of rape, infanticide and even abortion. ("Abortion is violence: a deep, desperate violence inflicted by a woman upon, first of all, herself." (p. 269) The physical and psychological violence of patriarchy, what Rich calls the "Heart of Maternal Darkness," results from the control of women's bodies by male interests. Even birth control movements have been directed by men, in particular the sterilization of Third World women. The patriarchal system, Rich contends, with its control of "contraception, fertility, obstetrics, gynecology, and extra-uterine reproductive experiments," (p. 34) must be a continual source of potential or actual harm.

Although the book is in large measure a record of the devastating effects of patriarchy on motherhood, its tone is remarkably positive. The emphasis throughout is on women's potential. Rich urges women to experiment with "new ways of living." (p. 282) By forming new relations with their male and female children, their own mothers, other women and themselves, women may alter the institution of motherhood and make more enjoyable the experience of mothering. The most decisive changes, Rich maintains, will follow the "repossession by women of our bodies," (p. 285) a phrase to which Rich's historical account of obstetrical procedures gives considerable clarity. Rich asks women to begin "to think through the body," (p. 285) a

remark that should be read, I believe, with its full resonance of Eliotic dissociation of sensibility. She is especially perceptive when she writes of the plight of the intellectual woman whose body has been a trap, a prison to escape from: "The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit." (p. 40) One recalls the final travels of Doris Lessing's neutered and ethereal Martha Quest in The Four Gated City. Rich is, as I understand it, demanding nothing less for woman than physical, emotional and intellectual integrity.

For all of the book's sound analytical judgments and accurate observations, it is often disturbing and will no doubt be received as a controversial work. Rich's reluctance to dictate to women, to preach a position of one sort or another, sometimes puts her in the odd position of having to report particular views without either endorsing or refuting them. At one point, for example, she quotes Suzanne Arms, a woman who objects to Lamaze breathing drills because they allow the woman in labour to be "too involved in . . . control . . ." (p. 173) Is this doubletalk or an obsessive distaste for anything smacking of an exercise of male restraint? Rich simply records the comment and leaves it at that. Regrettably, this is not an isolated example. Moreover,

Rich is reluctant not only to dictate to women but also to call for any legislative reforms which might alter the institution of motherhood. She does not care to support state-controlled day care: "Mass child care in patriarchy," she argues, "has but two purposes: to introduce large numbers of women into the labour force, in a developing economy or during a war, and to indoctrinate future citizens." (p. 14) Perhaps this is so, but why not urge caution, awareness, even skepticism, instead? The destruction of patriarchy that Rich desires will surely be encouraged by the introduction of more women into the labour force, as Rich herself often comes close to saying, but never does. If women's work in the nineteenth century was, as Rich believes, "clearly subversive to 'the home' and to patriarchal marriage," (p.49) why should it not be so today? Why not help to facilitate women's entry into the labour force? Lastly, if Rich acknowledges that "poverty, malnutrition, desertion by the father of the child and inadequate prenatal care" (p. 177) are the conditions attending most births, why does she not discuss the high cost of giving birth in the U.S. or the cost, availability and quality of gynecological preventive medicine? In fact, she is far too unwilling to propose any reform that might change the state of motherhood under patriarchy. Surely this is a species of excessive purism.

Paradoxically, Rich's generous tolerance of other women's ideas and her refusal to legislate for the women's movement render her narrowly intolerant of women who see the future taking a more definite shape. Rich believes that patriarchy, which predates capitalism, survives under socialism. Accordingly, men abuse women, in Rich's view, not as capitalists or socialists, but as men. Rich offers a running critique of socialist practices in the Soviet Union, China and Cuba where, she concludes, the "double role" of working woman and child nurturer exists. Socialism, she says, may remove economic inequities, but it will leave the patriarchal structure intact. It does not seem to have occurred to Rich that such a conclusion may be premature.

The most readable and compelling sections of the book are in the second half and deal with midwifery and obstetrics, the relationship of mothers to male and female children and the psychic and physical violence of motherhood. For many women, the absorbing chapters of the book, the ones to be read and re-read, are those that focus on mothers and sons and mothers and daughters. Rich, a mother of three sons, urges women to ask themselves what kind of sons they want, to separate themselves from their sons and make an independent life and to alter the course of the internalization of patriarchal values. The chap-

ter on mothers and daughters is written from the point of view of a daughter understanding her own mother, understanding the "burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?" (p. 223) The traditional rivalry between mothers and daughters is movingly detailed. The best mother, Rich decides, is the one who can live for herself: "Only when we can wish imaginatively and courageously for ourselves can we wish unfetteredly for our daughters." (p. 248)

Adrienne Rich has written a much-needed if contentious book. It is occasionally self-indulgent and lacking in cohesion--excerpts from Rich's journals and personal anecdotes are rather carelessly mixed with historical and anthropological scholarship. Her observations are sometimes curiously blinkered: was the problem of the SDS and the Weathermen simply a matter of "their sexual exploitation of women and their inherited theories of patriarchal revolution?" (p. 78) Exacting readers will wish for a bibliography in addition to the chapter notes. But, for all of its shortcomings, Of Woman Born is a book we cannot afford to neglect. If mothering is ever to be "freely chosen work," (p. 280) the patriarchal Everyman must be called to his general reckoning. Of Woman Born will help make that summoning come sooner rather than later. Of Woman Born will not, I

think, ever become the essential book on motherhood; it does not have either the tone or the quality of a definitive work. It is, however, something of a "first," and as such it deserves careful reading and genuine respect.

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**A Stone Diary** Pat Lowther. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977. Pp. 96.

In the Fall 1975 issue of Contemporary Verse Two (Vol. 1, Number 2) a fairly long review appeared of Pat Lowther's third book Milk Stone (Borealis, 1974). Entitled "Between the banal and the beautiful," it is a good example of constructive criticism, laying a deft finger on passages of coy whimsy and applauding with both hands the imaginative power and controlled verbal exuberance of the best work. In the next issue of CV II tributes appeared to the murdered poet as well as a letter from Leona Gom saying that Pat Lowther thought that the review was "the fairest and most perceptive criticism of Milk Stone that she had read." Oxford University Press has now brought out posthumously her last collection, A Stone Diary, a work of

no banality and great beauty. One likes to think that good criticism can divert poets from the depths, though finally all have to soar on their own wings.

As both titles suggest, Lowther was fascinated by stone, and one could hazard a guess that one of the myths most fundamental to her work is that of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the only survivors of the Greek flood. Wishing to renew the human race, they were ordered by the goddess Themis to cast behind them the bones of their first ancestor. Heads veiled, they walked across the plain throwing over their shoulders stones torn from the earth. For they were the descendants of Gaea, the earth, and rocks are the bones of the earth. Like these two survivors Lowther is a poet very conscious of destructive forces, but is herself essentially a preserver and renewer. At the core of survival she sees the strength and beauty of stone:

Last week I became  
aware of details  
cubes of fool's gold  
green and blue copper  
crystal formations  
fossils shell casts  
iron roses candied gems. . . .

Do you know  
how beautiful it is  
to embrace stone  
to curve all your body