

Carol Muske: The Shape of Meaning

An Interview

Carol Muske received her M.A. in English and Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, in 1970. She has taught as a Poetry Instructor at The New School, and as a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Irvine, the University of Iowa's Writing Workshop program, the University of Virginia, and Columbia University

Ms. Muske has published two books of poetry, *Camouflage* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975) and *Skylight* (Doubleday and Co., 1981). She has recently completed a third manuscript called *Wyndmere*. Her poetry has been anthologized in *Eating the Menu: Poems 1970-74*, *The American Poetry Anthology*, and *The Pushcart Prize*, among others. Her publications in various fine magazines and journals are too numerous to list, but they include poems in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The American Poetry Review*, and *Antaeus* as well as reviews in *Parnassus*. She has been the recipient of many awards and writer's grants and served as Assistant Editor of *Antaeus* from 1971 to 1977.

Carol Muske lives in Studio City and she and her husband have recently had their first child. This interview is from a taped conversation with the poet at her home on November 15, 1983.

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW: How did your interest in poetry begin?

CAROL MUSKE: I have to give my mother, if not the credit, at least the blame for all this. She was a living fan of poetry. She has memorized and knows by heart pages and pages of poetry, particularly the Romantics and Pre-Romantics and I think all the worst of Tennyson. She knows most of *Paradise Lost*; it's really astounding. If you hear her recite you realize that in some ways she doesn't have an understanding of the intellection of the line, but she has a sense of something I was just thinking of recently which is called a kind of rhythmic envelope of the sounds. In other words she understands the sense, without understanding what the poetry means; she understands the emotional sense of the poem, and the flow, the drama, the dramatic phrasing, much better than she understands the overall ideas. But what came through to me so strongly was the power of the emotional meaning of the words. So, in order to make this all short, my mother was responsible for my original interest in poetry.

When I spoke of my mother and the rhythmic envelope, I wanted to mention at the same time the essay Hugh Kenner wrote recently in the *New York Times Book Review* about William Carlos Williams and the shape of meaning. Williams heard language in a different sense, the same way Frost talks about hearing the line, how you hear the sound of the line before the actual words take place. He said it's like a clothesline on which you hang the words as clothes. I think the shape of meaning is a brilliant phrase, and Kenner came up with it in speaking of Williams. I think in fact you can even talk about it as a new kind of construction in poetry. You can't call Williams really a free verse practitioner, as Kenner points out, but you can call him a sort of experimentalist in the line. Through Williams you can have a whole new understanding of, say, American poetry versus British poetry. Kenner makes the distinction that Americans will end their lines with a preposition, which often happens in Williams, and he says that the accumulation of these end-stop prepositions provides a kind of rising cadence, and that this can be distinguished from British speech, which tends to be broken into logical units. American speech isn't like that. I had a sense of the shape of meaning before I had a sense of the meaning itself by

listening to my mother recite. I felt that this was language of magnitude, of power, emotional power, and something more, the kind of rhetoric that could change people's lives. My mother had such an investment in it that I thought it must be important.

NR: How did your development as a writer progress after this beginning with a sense of the shape of meaning?

CM: When I was eleven I published a story in a magazine called *American Girl*—I think it was a Girl Scout publication—I was so proud. It was about a dog that was saved at the last minute by a veterinarian. The developing writer's sense of the world is probably fairly close to the soap opera kind of formula, the romance type thing that they market on TV. When you finally find that being a writer becomes real to you, you trust in your individual imagination and you no longer have to buy the formula. You find that the oddities and the luxuries of your own imagination are much more attractive and much more survival-oriented. Joan Didion wrote an essay about how we have to believe that the world is kind of a romantic plot, that it's a story, a narrative, and we have to organize our information in that way or we go crazy. We have to believe there is a beginning and a middle and an end, that it makes sense for a woman to leap off the sixty-eighth floor of a high-rise. She says we can't leave ourselves in the midst of despair. I think a poet is willing to accept despair. Once you accept despair as a writer, then you can move into all kinds of possibilities, what Keats called "negative capability." You learn to cope with chaos and absurdity, chaos and despair. I don't mean to sound like Woody Allen, but it really is like that; there isn't a guiding narrative, there isn't a structure in life and no one's writing a plot. The only meaning that you can find in life comes from your individual imagination and the way in which it constructs forms for itself. That imagination informs your writing, and, of course, there is a lot of arrogance, or impertinence in thinking of yourself as someone who can actually write down things that the world is interested in reading. That in itself is rather an absurdity, but you trust that because you are flying in the face of the way the conventional world sees itself, you have something to say.

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NR: When you write a poem, how, or where, do you start?

CM: Well, I know only one way to do it. I don't sit down, like some people I know, every single day and try to write. When you face the chaos of the world you evolve your own clock as a writer, and I believe that you have a schedule which may not be called a schedule in anybody else's book but you know what's accumulating, what's owed. It's like an accountant's ledger. I think there are all kinds of ways to write poetry. I think you can write in your head a lot; there's a lot going on that doesn't involve actually sitting down at a typewriter, putting words on a page. You can be composing in your head the way you might have music running through your head. You're sort of adding things on, a syntactical accretion that goes on daily. You can't do that with prose, at least I can't. Maybe that's because prose tends to be almost always, except for certain experimental fiction, a kind of narrative thrust. It does involve itself in time, it happens within time, you have to push it, and advance the plot. You have to keep moving, one, two, three: somebody gets up from the chair, they walk to the window, and they sit down. In poetry, of course, you move outside of time. I really believe that. I mean that I think that the moment of the poem is open. You step into the sky, that's all I can say; you move out into all possibility. And time doesn't exist. That's space, right. The difference between poetry and prose is time and space. That's clear, I think. Therefore I think it's possible to write poetry in all kinds of different ways, but prose always has to involve itself in writing.

NR: Are you working on another book of poems?

CN: Yes. I have a third book of poems called *Wyndmere*. I have that done.

NR: What role does autobiography play in your writing?

CM: I think that autobiographies are important for people who are going to write autobiographies, but I really react to a tendency, a contemporary tendency, which places the fact from which an imaginative event occurs as the most important thing. It absolutely undercuts the transformational part of the imagination, which is such that it is meant to work on it's material and change it. You realize that when you might return to the place where

something happened and you see this very meager ground upon which the imagination worked. Then you see that the eye of the creative person is really the landscape. It's not what appears before it but the eye itself that's the transformational power, that that person looking at something makes it into something else. I use autobiography like everyone else does, but I try to transform it, I hope I make it into something else.

But I'm a great believer in letting the mystery of this alone. I don't like talking too much about process. Some people do. I find it mildly disturbing because I think that it all happens, for me anyway, without knowledge. All I know is that something will strike me and I will begin to see behind the words to the truth. That's what I was talking about before, the shape of meaning. As an example, I've been working on a poem in this new manuscript, and what I was working with, speaking of blending biography and poetic invention, was some stories my mother told me about Wyndmere, which is a little town in North Dakota. My mother told me lots of stories about herself growing up in this town, and stories about her father—my grandfather—who is what was called a separator man. He was a man who worked on a threshing crew and his job was the cliché, separating the wheat from the chaff. And then he got his own steam engine thresher. He started threshing around other areas, and became finally very rich and powerful. But he always was the separator man—that was his whole life. I tried to write a true story about this man. I wrote a piece of prose that I was going to use as a sort of introduction to the book, and it was God-awful. It was God-awful because what I tried to do was to recreate the exact facts of his life and then blend it into a nice little pastiche of verse, sort of, but it didn't work. Then I tried to fool around with the notion of my life and his life. Finally what I did was I cut it all down, sort of separating the wheat from the chaff, cut it all down into a kind of Williamesque verse, very short three line stanzas, maybe four or five word lines. Very truncated, very stark, and just a blend of "his life" and the meaning of his life, and what I got for a context of his life, which was that separating became his whole life. In the process of growing rich and powerful he separated himself from his wife, who died young and heartbroken in the stories, separated himself from his children, separated himself from himself. So what

it became was just this very long, lean poem about a man who denied himself much and in fact lived a cliché on one level literally and figuratively. He separated himself from everything in his life and ended up with the chaff, and there's a line in the poem, "No one to witness how what was taken away stayed with him."

NR: In some of your poems, I'm thinking of War Crimes especially: love occurs in what are often painful or disheartening circumstances.

CM: Oh, yes, in Skylight in particular. The poem called War Crimes is one in which love is equated in a way with torture, but there's another poem there also, called Chivalry, which is the flip side of War Crimes, and I'd rather stay in the long run with that as a statement of love as a kind of suffering. What Chivalry says is that although men and women suffer a great deal with each other and because of each other, suffering is worth it, and not in a masochistic sense but as a sort of trial by fire. Men and women have been so alienated by all the forces which conspire to keep them separate that love, the love that men and women have for each other, becomes the only way they have of discovering who they are beyond gender, beyond role, beyond the social definition of them as human beings. Chivalry is a poem in which a man is carrying his dead wife to the ghat, in Benares, to be burned, and his love for her allows him to place her in the flames. That seems to me a real act of reverence, and though it is born in suffering and, in a sense, dies in suffering—it dies in flame—I think that's as close as I come to believing in a love that is also a reverence. In other words, I think we're still evolving, I think men and women are still learning how to love each other. And they are very willing to suffer in the course of that discovery. Now, of course, in my new book, I feel very differently, I'm much more exuberant and vibrant about love. The difference in terms of its view on love between Skylight and Wyndmere is the difference between the real suffering of self-consciousness and a letting go.

NR: Several of your poems deal with motherhood in one way or another. Coral Sea is about your mother, and Birth and Hyena deal with a kind of fear of motherhood.

CM: *Coral Sea* is a poem in which I wrote about a dream that I had. I dreamt that I was in my mother's womb. I really felt that I could see through the walls of the womb just prior to birth and I didn't want to be born, pretty much the situation of the poem. I could feel the coral sea, the womb, around me, the atmosphere was the lustrous pink of the inside of a shell in the sun. I saw a very voluptuous beach scene, my mother walking barefoot; I could almost feel her feet on the sand. That feeling was very important to me; that poem is much more a dream and location than a straightforward description of my thoughts. I felt then that it was possible for me to imagine having a child myself. It took me a long time to come to the moment where I could accept myself as a mother and not a daughter forever. You finally move into the belief that you are also in line to give birth. I didn't believe that for a long time. I thought I should just be free to have my life and do all the obvious things people do in the twentieth century; I thought that having a child would be an obstacle to my freedom. Now I feel as if the solar system has been shifted, and she's now the sun. I just never would have thought that possible before. And I think maybe you're right about there being a fascination with the idea of motherhood in my poetry but it was also a kind of circling or hovering around an ideal without giving in to confront it. Now I've written some poems in the new book that deal more directly with having a child.

NR: *Do you find that maybe the element of fear won't be there now in your poetry?*

CM: The biggest fear I suppose anybody has is that the child should be like you. You feel, especially now, at this time of history when the world seems so limited anyway in terms of its future, that the limitations of your own personality somehow or the bad karma you've accumulated in your life would affect the child negatively. I had to overcome those feelings, though they may still be there in my fears for her.

NR: *In Her Story: Leaving Eden, you speak of conception as "a language we have yet to translate." I thought that was an excellent*

way to capture the inexplicableness of the thing, the fact that it is there and we could possibly understand it but we don't yet know how.

CM: Right. We don't, we have no way to locate ourselves, and we come to the world disoriented. There's a wonderful line by the poet Jon Anderson, who said, "I come out of a cloud falling into a cloud." We just sort of move between two ignorances. But it is extraordinary that we can spend so much time on the effects of our lives without understanding the causes; we are at war with ourselves without understanding where the peace in ourselves comes from, where the great beauty comes from. We seem to have inherited all that without understanding the great miracle of it. However, as women have become more articulate about themselves we certainly are uncovering the mystery. It's just starting. And women will talk more about what I am talking about now, the feelings of communication.

NR: In an interview in Poetry Miscellany, you said that you felt language was inadequate, that it keeps trying to say what it cannot say, and that the poet's preoccupation is with the way language fails us.

CM: Poetry is the attempt to say something perfectly, to say it right, and of course you never can say it right. Poets do fail, but by virtue of the attempt, poetry goes on. One continues to try, to believe that maybe one day, if I'm lucky, if the muse touches me, I will be able to say what it is that I want to say; I'll be able to sum up my life. There's a play by Ionesco, in which a character in the play kills another character with the word knife. I love that idea, the idea that language can become a living object. And if one could write a poem so powerful it could change the world, if one believes that one can, one will keep writing, and I think that's what everyone always hopes—that one could write a poem in which the word "light" would illuminate the room. It's impossible, of course, but it keeps you writing.

NR: What approaches do you take when you are teaching poetry to students in a workshop?

CM: You have to figure out who you are working with. Some

students are very skilled already by the time you get them. They know how to write a poem. There's no point really in assigning a sestina every week or a rondel, but they might have trouble finding their language or finding their theme, so you might concentrate on that. Then it might be just the opposite. Students who have every knowledge of what they want to say, but nothing to say it with. I also tend to stay with my own obsessions, with what I'm really thinking about at the moment. I feel that it's much more productive to deal with whatever's on my mind at the time. It's more stimulating for them and it's more stimulating for me. I think there is so much a student can learn by simply keeping up with current trends and thoughts in poetry. And that's why I tell them that they must read other poets, contemporary poets as well as past ones, if they are going to be writers themselves. There's no substitute for reading other writers as a tool for learning about your own writing and about poetry in general.

NR: Did serving as Assistant Editor at Antaeus help you with your own poetry?

CM: This was a tremendous learning experience for me. I had worked earlier with Daniel Halpern at the New School in New York where I had a class in editing. He was a brilliant editor and he taught that art with conviction about what was "good" and why. There were staggering amounts of manuscripts to sift through at *Antaeus*, sometimes one thousand a month, and you learned very quickly to develop your eye and ear for poetry. It speeds up the whole process of evolving a critical stance towards your own poetry as well as that of other writers. I just don't think that you can write well unless you learn to read well too—you have to be able to make judgments about other people's work and then learn to apply those standards to your poetry. It frightens me how everyone wants to be published, to be a great poet, and yet they are unwilling to read. The University of Pacific Press had a prize called the International Poetry Forum, which was the publication of your book. What was interesting was that when they would publish your book, they would publish maybe five-hundred copies, which sounds ridiculously small, but that's a standard run. After publishing five-hundred copies, they would

sell one-hundred-fifty, maybe two hundred copies. Three fifty would be a lot. Meanwhile, the submissions to the International Poetry Forum would number in the thousands. There's a certain discrepancy there. Everybody wanting to be published, but not willing to read other poets. That's terrifying. And in a sense this has been fostered by the workshop ethic. I'm a real believer in the workshops so this is a kind of heresy, but I do think that they have fostered the idea that anybody can write about anything and everybody has to publish. Not good. Everybody should spend a certain amount of time reading and studying one's peers and then one's masters.

NR: Do you enjoy giving readings?

CM: Yes, I do usually. What happens is that if I'm doing a new work I really enjoy it. One doesn't like to read one's own poetry over and over again. And recently I've had lots of new material. I had a big problem at the beginning. I just wasn't aware of how fast I was talking, and in my early readings I would become aware about half way through the readings of this mystified expression on the faces of the people in the audience. I had no idea it was all like a jetstream going by. Finally someone said, "You're reading too fast, nobody's getting anything." It's hard enough to get anything at a poetry reading, the ear isn't attuned to that dense a line, but when someone speaks very rapidly it's almost impossible. My terror at the beginning really accounted for the speed in the presentation. Now it's easier. When you first get up to read and you see the audience you realize that you will be reading to these people. That can be very frightening. Oddly enough that was just the thing that helped me, as well as the thing that terrified me. The idea that these people are listening became an aid as I started looking at them individually, reading to individual faces rather than seeing a blur of judges. The best thing you can do is to provide an atmosphere of intimacy and once you can do that and relax, I think you've got it made. Also, if you can create the moment of writing the poem, which of course is impossible, but if you can recreate the feelings that attended that, you will, just without even trying, give a very moving reading. Lawrence said that poetry was an act of attention, and I really think that's true.

We have to reorder all our expectations of language to listen to a poetry reading

NR: Have you ever, when you're reading a poem, noticed something different about the poem or something you hadn't seen?

CM: Oh, sure. Galway Kinnell is a famous person for editing as he reads. He reads with a pen. As he reads, he edits, makes little marks in the margin, drops lines. If you were following the text you could see it happening. I'm not that extreme but one of the best ways to test a poem, to hear the clunkers, to hear the lines that don't work, is to read them with the power of conviction and hear them fall out. What I try to do is hear it in my head before I put down the line, and the final test is actually saying it to an audience.

NR: How do you deal with lineation in your poems? I noticed some of them have very long lines, and sometimes there are one word lines.

CM: I think in *Camouflage* I was doing a lot of imitating of Merwin and Simic. I was trying to leave the white space in the poem a lot. I thought what was unsaid was as important as what was there.

NR: I noticed many more line and stanza breaks, and empty spaces, there than in Skylight.

CM: *Camouflage* is a group of poems by someone who is very self-conscious and undeveloped poetically; it was a flawed work. *Camouflage* in particular was a learning book for me. Auden said you can't talk of anything but influences until the age of forty and I really believe that. It's arrogant—there's that word again—but also it's distorting. I think it's self-limiting. You have too much emphasis on the idea of your own voice. I think that's happened a lot in writing programs, and I think it takes away from your ability to serve as an apprentice for a while. In *Camouflage* it was important to me to understudy the sense of those people, to understand how they worked as poets. Just now I'm beginning to see

maybe what I am in terms of a writer. *Skylight* was better put together because I do think as you develop as a writer you discover your theme. In *Skylight* I really found my theme, and I think that turned the poetic line more urgent; therefore it didn't matter so much to me whether they were long lines or short lines. They seemed to be broken by the need to say what I had to say, in just that rhythm. Some of them are formal poems and the forms govern the line breaks. *Fireflies* is a sonnet and there's a sestina there somewhere. Those poems are governed by the formal structure. But other than that, structure seems to come from just the urgency of the speech in the poem itself. And again there's no word for that except perhaps one calls it the shape of meaning. It is the rhythm that seems to be dictated by something other than free verse, which really isn't free. It's very cadenced. I think it was H.D. or Pound who said of the Imagist poem that it was "the rhythms of the mind thinking." That's as close as I can get in *Skylight*." Now in *Wyndmere* the poems are much more prosy, I suspect because I am working on the novel at the same time as writing that book of poems. Also, I think, in dealing with so many subjects that mention my mother's life and so on, in the autobiography that you brought out, the necessity for having a denser, longer line was paramount and really was necessary to me. But then I admire the short poem very much, so I will on occasion push myself, as I said in the poem *The Separator*, back to what I feel is the short Williams-like line. I love that truncated line and wish I could write it more. I really think that, since poetry is more than anything else the art of condensation, it's important to get that. What I'm aiming for in my poetry is to get to the point where I can write the great short poem.

NR: Do you feel that a poem must be a certain length to be successful?

CM: I feel that short or long makes no difference. The poem will say just what it has to say in the time it has to. If it's saying more or saying less it's not a question of the size but the question of intensity of the poetic gifts, or how closely the poet is in touch with his or her subject. Therefore you can have a poem by Dickinson which is six lines and it will outlast anything ever

written by some of our windier poets. Whitman and Dickinson are the two influences in American poetry, the two traditions. He is the extrovert, narrative tradition and she's the introspective, lyric muse. I think both of them seemed to take just as long as they needed to say what they had to say. Whitman took forever, and she was like a Zen telegraph. She could radio the absolute distillate of thought. That's what it is, you have to be able to get the long poem into the short poem.

NR: You mentioned that some of the poems in Skylight were formal poems. Do you experiment much with form?

CM: I was doing more on Skylight. I don't think I have as many formal poems in Wyndmere. I think it's important for poets to know their forms. Obviously, if you're going to be a practitioner of an art, it's a good thing to know a lot about that art, as much as you can. I've heard about the new formalism and a return to form in writing, but I don't believe that's as important as simply knowing about form and finding your own compromise with structure, finding the way to say what it is you have to say and finding its rhythms. I don't think it can hurt anyone to know how to write a sonnet or a villanelle.

NR: I really enjoyed your use of form, especially in Fireflies, in that it moved very naturally and the rhyme was so unobtrusive. I had to stop and count the number of lines and look for a rhyme pattern before it dawned on me that it was a sonnet.

*CM: That's good. That's presumably what it's supposed to do. It was very hard for me to get that poem right. The rhythm is a little off, Donald Justice told me. He asked me if I had done it on purpose! But I had a lot of trouble imposing the form on the poem. I felt the words wanted to go somewhere else and wouldn't stay in line, they wouldn't march in columns. Every once in a while you see a poem like Elizabeth Bishop's *One Art*, a beautiful poem about the art of losing. There you see form and content perfectly aligned. It's rare when that happens, and it always intimidates one away from using form. The form requires perfection because the form is flawless, because it is absolutely set, and in a sense perfection is horrible. It requires the content to be the same, and*

that's almost impossible. You have an unholy wedding of the two. The most flawless poems, flawless in terms of rhythm and meter and formal content, are often the most hideous. I'm much more interested now in the type of form that Williams availed himself of, whatever that was. You come back to poems like *The Poem for Elsie*, which is a strange, tormented, exuberant poem. It's hard to tell what it's about. It ends with the lines, "No one to witness/No one to drive the car." You're absolutely puzzled by those lines, and yet, there's that engine of exuberance pushing and pulling it forward. Exuberance and outrage, I should say, is pushing the poem forward. The meaning overcomes those moments of confusion, and in fact they become power, you *feel* you know what they mean.

NR: If we could return for a moment to teaching poetry, is there something in particular that you try to teach or try to convey to a student?

CM: The only thing one can do, as Roethke said, is to insinuate poetry, you don't really teach it. So you tend to talk about what is interesting you at a particular time. I guess what I try to teach is what I was taught, which is that one has to take oneself seriously as a poet. It means one has to take one's life seriously, one has to learn from one's life the lessons of literature. It sounds very pompous in a way, but it's a hard lesson to learn, and I think it's absolutely necessary. That's what I try to teach, that the passion which is part of your life, the passion which is unexpressed, usually is the passion which influences poetry. I try to teach that and the importance of being humble. One should also be humble about it because if you read, and you have to read, but if you go back and read everything you have to read in order to write poetry, it's hard to take up a pen again. But it does teach humility. So on the one hand you have to take yourself very seriously and I teach that, and also that you have to take yourself with a grain of salt because you're going to be an apprentice for most of your life, probably *all* your life, in the face of great literature. In the end, it's all creative reading, not creative writing. The best thing a student can do is to hole up in a library for a long time.

NR: *Are there poets you have worked with in particular that you've enjoyed or learned something from?*

CM: Sure. My first teacher was Kathleen Fraser, who is still in San Francisco, teaching at San Francisco State. She was really tremendously important to me. She was a touchstone for my work. She was a person who believed in her life in a way that allowed it to become poetry—what we were talking about before—and allowed her life to become transformed into poetry, and her courage in that conviction inspired me. I took a course from her which was an extension course taught in the summer at San Francisco State. Then I decided to apply to graduate school, and I did, and was accepted, and went on from there. She was really my first inspiration as a teacher. She's a friend now and I still talk to her and see her and am much interested in her work. I mentioned Halpern. I also had teachers like Kay Boyle who is a fiction writer at San Francisco State, Dan Rice, Mark Linenthal who is a very good critic. Later I don't think I had so many actual pedagogical teachers as I had people who write whom I learned from. Some became friends, some not. But it did help me to teach with people like Charles Simic, to teach with people like Mark Strand at Columbia. The fallout of their gifts is tremendous. There's something in the air, and this again is what draws people to writing programs if they're smart, to take part in that kind of intellectual fermentation, to breathe in that elixir. It helped me a lot just sitting in the classes of other teachers at Columbia. But I sort of ended my formal studying time with the class I took at the New School which was a class in editing. The critics can teach you much beyond that point. I pay pretty close attention to what's being written critically and try to keep abreast of all that. I read *Parnassus* for that reason, a really good critical journal. I keep mentioning Hugh Kenner's essay on Williams, which I found tremendously helpful. A piece like that is worth, in many ways, ten workshops of listening to myself speculate. If I had that ammunition, the ammunition of Kenner's thought, to go into the workshop with earlier, it would provide the kind of light by which I'd understand the students' work better and my own work better. Therefore I think it's imperative that I read criticism. There are certain essays that have been landmarks for me. I think there's

been some bad criticism, there's no doubt about that. There hasn't been anything really good written about women poets in general. Most of it's been either reactionary or defensive in some way. I wrote a review of Adrienne Rich in *Parnassus*. I found it very hard to write because there's no real critical tradition by which you can talk about a woman's life and her poetry.

NR: Do you see women poets as a school of their own?

CM: I don't know about a school but there are camps forming. Certainly there's Adrienne Rich's point of view, which is very radical and yet, I think, very enriching, not to make a pun. She does provide a kind of point of departure. She's willing to be outrageous, in a sense, and that allows women to take chances that maybe they wouldn't take. I think it is true that literature is dominated by males. They control publishing, they control most of the literary journals, they control the mechanics, the machinery of publication. There tend to be obviously more male poets than there are women poets. Women don't necessarily have to organize and become a school, as you say, but I think that it's worthwhile to talk about concerns which are purely feminine and maybe feminist. That's the way politics fits into your life. What I was saying about women suddenly articulating their feelings about a child and the womb, why that's astounding, that is political in the purest sense. That means that we can be conversant with a mystery, and only women can provide us with that information. Why haven't we had that after centuries of writing? Well, we haven't had it because men have controlled the business. Then you see how an aesthetic accrues, what's important to men becomes the determining aesthetic—the father-son conflict, the attitude toward women which is male. That is the necessity for writing in a female aesthetic. It won't be necessary when it evens out, when we balance the aesthetic somehow. When we balance the statement of who owes what to the muse—when the muse is neither male nor female—then we won't have to worry about it. But till then, women have to fill in the other side of the ledger. And if it takes a kind of reactionary politics, if it takes an Adrienne Rich to do that, it's OK. Just look at the number of women poets who are teaching at universities—not many. It's true everywhere, it's true at Columbia, it's true in almost every creative writing

program, there are very few women. There's been a lot of pressure by affirmative action recently on these programs to get their acts together and to start hiring women, but it's only because of that pressure. You don't know how many times I've been interviewed for a job, and they said, "We really need a woman poet." On the one hand you say, OK, fine, because I know myself I'm as good as my compatriots who are male, but on the other hand it is insulting. But it's the reality right now. They do need women poets. Once there is a balance it won't have to be an issue.

NR: Is there any advice you would give to young poets writing now?

CM: Don't listen to any advice from older poets! The idea of advice is truly awful, but I think that one thing that is really important is to discipline your reading, to set up a kind of path. Set up a sense of history in your reading, and then set up a sense of history in your own life, the history of your imagination, so that you can develop your own themes.

NR: In an interview in Poetry Miscellany you said that you believed people were born with their themes.

CM: I really believe that. When I speak of the history of the imagination, I mean as in Jung's autobiography. He wrote a book called *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. Someone requested that he write his autobiography, and instead he wrote the autobiography of his imagination. We all ought to do that. And in doing that, in going back and evolving the history of your imagination, in getting it clear to yourself, you discover your themes. They are set very early. You are born with them, in a sense, and by born with them I mean they evolve in the first few years of your life. I really believe the discovery of themes is the most important thing that happens to a young poet. It's not the discovery of voice, it's not the discovery of style, it's the discovery of themes that move you, whatever they are.