

*Sotto Voce: Language and Resistance in George
Eliot's Felix Holt, the Radical and Elizabeth Gaskell's
Sylvia's Lovers*

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My body knows unheard of songs...
What's the meaning of these waves,
these floods, these outbursts?

Cixous

Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) and Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) are novels preoccupied with speech, sound and silence. To examine these roughly contemporary works together provides special insight into their themes and meaning, and illuminates the gender politics, and the related social politics, of each. Both may be termed 'novels of resistance', in that they challenge the established language and master-narratives of their culture to explore new ways of writing gender and social history. Both works show oppressed social groups—women, the working class and culturally-distinct regional populations—as lacking the language and the opportunity to express themselves, and both use the idea of the 'flood hemmed in' to suggest the destruction that can occur when the pent-up energies of these silenced groups burst their restraints. Both recognise the analogous position of women and workers in respect of their under-education and political nonentity, and use a philosophy of sexual difference and distinct masculine and feminine languages—a theme that retains currency in contemporary feminist criticism—as a means of reflecting on cultural differences between social classes and regional communities in an increasingly 'nationalised' and economically integrated England. This England is presented in turn, in both works, as the centre of a nascent world empire, extending its homogenising control into new regions of difference and thereby threatening cultural diversity. Perhaps the most striking parallel between the works is the sensitivity of each to alternative, non-linguistic means of expression which enable the culturally marginalised to connect and communicate; in particular, the liminal voice of the body and the wordless roar of the mob resound in these texts.

A *sotto voce* undercurrent of subversion runs beneath the rational masculine voice of narration in *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia's Lovers*. In a striking anticipation of Helené Cixous' 1970s identification of 'waves', 'floods' and 'outbursts' of feminine energy that resist the masculine cultural order,¹ Eliot and Gaskell both employ metaphors of flowing and flooding to evoke culturally silenced perspectives and desires. In the conclusion of her earlier novel *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot had used a catastrophic flood to represent the anarchic, albeit short-lived, empowerment of her transgressive heroine Maggie Tulliver, and in *Felix Holt* she employs comparable symbolism. Immediately before Mrs Transome is introduced, for example, Eliot's narrator hints of 'hidden waters' submerged beneath the textual surface, alerting us to a narrative undercurrent of 'red warm blood', 'unuttered cries', 'whisper[s] in the roar' and silent sufferings that are written only in tears.² Here, such 'waters' represent passions and energies that cannot be directly given voice, and resist narration. Similarly, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell associates Sylvia with the unbounded, tumultuous sea to indicate her heroine's resistance to social convention.³

Both novels expose the inadequacy of written language to represent female being—ironically so, in that, as novelists, Eliot and Gaskell must themselves use written language to make this exposition; their imagery and symbolism can alert us to extra-linguistic realities, but only as an 'absent presence' in the text. In each work, language and writing are shown to be run by what Cixous calls a masculine 'cultural economy,'⁴ where logocentrism and phallogentrism are at one. Texts and rhetoric further male desires—particularly, in Eliot's narrator's phrase, the desires of a 'pence-counting, parcel-tying' bourgeoisie (*FH*, 65)—and *Sylvia's Lovers*

¹ H. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, (Leitch, B., gen. ed.), Norton, New York, 2001: 2039-2056, p.2040

² Epigraph to G. Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866), Penguin, London, 1995, ch.XLIV, p.426 and 'Introduction', p.10 (all subsequent references will be to this edition, and included parenthetically in the text).

³ On this link see J.S. Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, Faber & Faber, London & Boston, 1993, p.507, and for textual examples see E. Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 1982, p.43 pp.367-9 (all subsequent references will be to this edition, and included parenthetically in the text). See also P. Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Harvester, Brighton, 1987, p.19; compare D. D'Albertis, D., *Disassembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1997, p.134.

⁴ Cixous, p.2042

indicates how language propagates a proprietorial world-view and commodifies women; masculine talk is 'full o' business... and o' makin' money, and getting' wealth' (*SL*, 196). In these novels written well before the *Married Women's Property Act* was passed in 1882, women are shown to have little use for so reductive a linguistic order, and each work confronts that order with an idea of the feminine that refuses overt textualisation—or, in a phrase from *Sylvia's Lovers*, 'cannot be put into words' (*SL*, 243).⁵ Hence the passage in *Sylvia's Lovers* where Daniel Robson objects to his wife's use of a word he does not understand—the word 'pretext' (*SL*, 43). Gaskell's point is not simply that Mrs Robson is better educated than her overbearing husband; that the word Daniel cannot understand should be 'pretext' is telling—it suggests the inability of men to comprehend the 'pretextual' feminine condition, which no language yet exists to express. In *Felix Holt*, in a similar vein, Eliot notes her culture's failure to recognise that 'mothers have a self larger than their maternity' (*FH*, 111); Eliot had previously suggested the need for women to develop a language with 'a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experiences.'⁶ *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia's Lovers* do not seek to reduce 'woman' to words; instead, they give space for a female mode of being to emerge less directly by focussing on the liminal and the pre-lingual, on ideas and desires that lie outside male lines of sight, on relations and connections between women, and on the symptomatic language of women's bodies.

Both Eliot's and Gaskell's women are shown as having needs and feelings that cannot be expressed within the restrictive formulae of existing language. When they do speak, they have to do so within the preset terms of a system that has been defined by, and belongs to, men. To 'speak like a woman' (to use Sylvia's phrase) is thus something of a contradiction in terms, and the attempts of Sylvia, Mrs Transome and Mrs Holt to command power through language generally founder. An example is when Mrs Transome, who is ordinarily mute in her former lover Jermyn's presence, finally confronts the lawyer in a voice 'like an icicle':

⁵ Both Eliot and Gaskell were in favour of property rights for married women: see C. Pettitt, *Patent Inventions: Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p.28 and D'Albertis, pp.117ff.

⁶ G. Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' *Westminster Review* 66 (October 1856): 442-61, pp.460-1 considered in Uglow, p.468

‘Don’t speak... Don’t open your lips again. You have said enough, I will speak now.’ (*FH*, 400-1)

Her speech is ineffective, however, for Jermyn departs still intent on his own self-serving ‘masculine’ purposes (*FH*, 401), and the harshness of the speech act jars Mrs Transome’s frame: she feels ‘a tremor, as if at the remembrance of womanly tenderness and pity’ (*FH*, 402). Mrs Holt later has the same experience: the ‘maternal cord’ in her speech clashes with her ‘masculine decisiveness of tone,’ making her ridiculous (*FH*, 416). ‘It is not loud tones and mouthiness... that make a woman’s force,’ one of Eliot’s chapter epigraphs suggests (*FH*, Epigraph to ch.XLVI, 437). Similarly, in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Sylvia vows ‘niver’ to forgive Phillip, but her combative language belies her far more complex underlying feelings—her ‘sad and soft’ emotional state (*SL*, p.334). Whenever Sylvia ‘assume[s] to herself the right of speech’ (*SL*, 380) her expressive efforts prove counter-productive—for example, when she protests her mistreatment by Philip her ‘strong relentless language’ fails to persuade but, on the contrary, disgusts the businessman Mr Foster (*SL*, 412). For Sylvia, language is a form of incarceration, and written texts impose restraints on her action—the biblical doctrines of forbearance to which she submits are one such restraint.⁷ The ‘link between written texts, property and patriarchal ideology’ in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, noted by Stoneman,⁸ may be related in turn to Sylvia’s resistance to ‘writing and ciphering’ (*SL*, 107-8). Sylvia first appears in the novel barefoot, ‘turn[ing] aside’ from a prescribed path to take an irrational leap into a flowing stream, and when she speaks it is to *reject* speech, telling Molly ‘dunnot lecture me; I’m none for a sermon hung on every peg o’ words’ (*SL*, 10-12).

Notably, in both *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia’s Lovers* female characters’ thoughts are rarely rendered in the style of direct speech, as those of male characters are often rendered,⁹ and when Sylvia and Charley share what the reader can only imagine to be a first kiss, it takes place outside the text:

⁷ See *Sylvia’s Lovers*, p.380, p.333, p.383; compare how Hester is constrained by her biblical learning: *Sylvia’s Lovers*, p.498. I here differ with Uglow, who argues that Sylvia’s bible-reading offers her a form of escape and regeneration; Uglow herself notes how biblical solace proves ineffectual at Darley’s funeral: see Uglow, p.45

⁸ Stoneman, p.148

⁹ See e.g. Felix at *Felix Holt*, pp.73-4, pp.130-1 and Philip Coulson in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, p.212; cf. Father Corney at p.139

One instant Charley Kinraid was missing from the circle of which he was the life and soul; and then back he came with an air of satisfaction on his face.

The novel signals that what Sylvia is experiencing is something that cannot be textualised: 'she was in a new strange state of happiness *not to be reasoned about, or accounted for*' (*SL*, 146, my emphasis). Similarly, in *Felix Holt*, Esther Lyon's speech does not accurately reflect her inner being: her 'light, airy talk' in courtship, which she knows makes her 'charming' to a male gaze (*FH*, 406-7), leaves a 'veil' over her deeper feelings (*FH*, 419). Esther can only find her own voice by escaping the matrix of masculine language and written texts: as she is choosing whether to accept Harold and/or her inheritance, Esther's life is itself a wordless 'book' that 'she herself [is] constructing', and as she meditates on the 'forever running river' of existence it becomes 'impossible to read' the texts of others (*FH*, 383, 464-8).

The schism between speech and being is one Eliot explores on numerous levels in *Felix Holt*, and Mrs Transome embodies that schism most clearly. Mrs Transome is very much a relative being, defining herself solely by reference to her male relations, and her overt speech evinces a preoccupation with the patrilineal inheritance system and its status symbols—her family history anecdotes are described as being like 'so many novelettes' (*FH*, 379-80). We are warned, however, that Mrs Transome is herself a 'quivering thing' crouching behind the 'withered rubbish' of such talk (*FH*, 31). The language of blood and class which she speaks (text) is a mere screen for the deep stream of her desiring feminine being (subtext or 'pretext'), and in this being is an intense and complex 'yearning' which 'words could not be quick or strong enough to utter' (*FH*, 469). That it is Mrs Transome, rather than Esther or Felix himself, who is first introduced in *Felix Holt* is suggestive. Mrs Transome's embodiment of the speech-being schism makes her a pivotal figure for making sense of *Felix Holt's* tripartite structure, through which Eliot figures a shift away from reliance on the spoken word to explore alternative communicative modes. The novel's first and second volumes are preoccupied with 'utterance'—speech, rhetoric and verbal argument dominate the build-up to the Treby Magna election, with Eliot presenting a highly stratified world where power belongs to those who can best manipulate language, and status is

demarcated by its use or misuse. Notably, Esther assumes Felix has high social status because he 'speaks better English' than most (*FH*, 73) while Denner sees 'her mistress' rhetoric' as belonging 'to her superior rank' (*FH*, 379). In these volumes, a large cast of characters of different social stations and political persuasions betray varying degrees of education and rhetorical skill as they compete and combat in language, mooting arguments for and against popular election and reform in both formal and informal settings (the pub, the parlour, the study, the street, the election platform).¹⁰ In *Felix Holt's* third volume, however, these masculine verbal debates are not resolved but *displaced* as the narrative focus shifts onto a non-verbal, specifically feminine communication model, with Esther and Mrs Transome's relationship at its centre. For the project of representation Eliot undertakes in *Felix Holt*, *heteroglossia* is not enough—the novel tests its limits and finds it wanting. The subtle messages Esther and Mrs Transome exchange without words makes the verbal sound and fury of the earlier volumes appear retrospectively empty and ineffectual.

This is the most striking area of common ground between *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia's Lovers*: both look beyond masculine language with its paternalistic, antagonistic structures and its logic of possession and control to explore alternative methods of communication based on care, perception and sympathy. In doing so, both focus on relations between women, and the non-verbal or 'empathic' sign systems through which women communicate. In *Felix Holt*, masculine language has 'no reference to any woman's feeling' (*FH*, 19) and fosters a narrow world-view.¹¹ Similarly, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Philip knows little of Sylvia's inner life and desires because he is 'busy with facts and figures' (*SL*, 189; see also 354, 360). The silent conversations of women, by contrast, enable insights the spoken word does not offer. When Esther comes to stay at Transome Court in *Felix Holt*, the depth of insight Esther and Mrs Transome establish through gestures and glances contrasts with the superficiality of their verbal converse (see for example *FH*, 366, 381). Esther senses a change in Mrs Transome by signs 'which only women notice'—her blank gaze and 'strange fitfulness'—and this awareness accentuates the less actual verbal 'talk' they have (*FH*, 431).

¹⁰ Chapters VII, XI, XX, XXVIII and XXX of *Felix Holt* afford many examples.

¹¹ See e.g. *Felix Holt*, p.17 where Mrs Transome remains in 'silent' misery as Harold reads rapidly over every newspaper advertisement; see also *Felix Holt*, p.17, p.348, 403, 411, p.417-18 (where Harold tries to understand Esther's feelings in the light of an 'experiment') and p.463 (where Harold cannot read Esther's body language).

She shares the 'tacit understanding' by which Mrs Transome's maid Denner is able to 'divin[e]' her mistress' feelings (*FH*, 27). Sensing Mrs Transome outside her door one night, Esther's 'caressing' thought 'leap[s] towards her' without 'ask[ing] admission' and words are secondary as they meet 'hand in hand' and kiss (*FH*, 469-70). Harold himself is drawn into this communion the next morning: he and Esther 'merely pre[ss] hands' by way of greeting, and a physical 'thrill' reveals his mother's pain (*FH*, 471). It is this communicative mode, not the 'strong words' and 'brusque openness' of Felix Holt (*FH*, 68-9), on which the novel ultimately places value.¹² Notably, Esther is shown to learn more through her empathic interactions with Mrs Transome and her meditative self-development at Transome Court than she learned through Felix's didactic lecturing: it is through 'the force of her own character and judgement' (*FH*, 412), and the complex 'inward revolution' she arrives at through her deep connection with Mrs Transome, that she makes her 'final choice' (*FH*, 464-8). This emphasis on empathy and pre-verbal understanding presumably relates to Eliot's belief, expressed in *Felix Holt* and elsewhere, that the development of subtle faculties of sympathetic perception across the wider public would be more effective than abstract political discourse in promoting social good.¹³

Gaskell gives equal attention to the non-verbal communications of women. Sylvia's mother has 'a deeper insight into her daughter's heart than her husband' (*SL*, 237), despite Sylvia's temperamental resemblance to her father and, as in *Felix Holt*, such pre-lingual perceptiveness is associated with heightened sympathy and understanding. When Hester confesses her love for Philip through 'rising sobs', she expects Sylvia will be jealous and possessive, but instead:

immediately she was in Sylvia's arms. Sylvia was sitting on the ground holding her, and soothing her with caresses and broken words.

'I'm allays saying t' wrong things,' said [Hester]. (*SL*, 444)

¹² On Felix as 'angry pedagogue', talking down to Esther, his mother and the Sproxtton men, see *Felix Holt*, p.58, p.63, p.121, p.134, p.261.

¹³ *Felix Holt*, p.354; compare G. Eliot, 'John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*' in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, A.S. Byatt and N. Warren (eds.), Penguin, London, 1990, pp.367-378 and G. Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' in *Selected Essays* (pp.107-140), pp.107-8

To apply Julie Kristeva's terms, such exchanges exemplify a non-representational semiotics based on sound not sense, *melos* not *logos*—again, Gaskell's text resonates with themes of twentieth century feminist criticism.¹⁴ Sylvia herself has been 'saying t' wrong things' in her hardhearted vows against Philip, whereas her sighs, embraces and other body language when Philip is on his deathbed exemplify an empathic alternative. Although Sylvia speaks no word, we are told Phillip 'knew that she was by him; that she had knelt down by his bed, that she was kissing his hand.' (*SL*, 495). Further, whereas the linguistic order reinforces ideas of class and social status, such non-verbal communications allow Sylvia to maintain attachments across class boundaries: having married into the middle class, Sylvia is estranged from the farm-worker Kester, but when the two meet after Bell Robson's death and Kinraid's return in the aptly-titled chapter 'Unutterable Things', their speechless bodily gestures and Sylvia's tears indicate the lasting affection between them (*SL*, 400). Sylvia's ability to connect without language with Yorkshire's 'low folk' is also apparent when she grips hands in sympathy with the 'breathless, gasping' prostitute 'Newcastle Bess' (*SL*, 27). In such scenes, emotional messages are not reduced to hard sentences but are expressed through a meta-language of caresses and sonorous 'broken words' (*SL*, 444). This roughly corresponds with Kristeva's distinction, as explained by Barthes, between the rules, codes, structures and other representative aspects of language (*geno-text*) and the materiality of the voice—its extra-conventional textural, melodic and bodily character (*phenotext*).¹⁵ Like Kristeva and Cixous more than a century later, Gaskell sees linguistic codes as reinforcing the masculine socio-cultural order, and seems to recognise how an alternative feminine vocality might disrupt that order.¹⁶ In particular, her novel explores how the 'invisible histories' of women disrupt the master-narratives of patriarchal culture.

¹⁴ See Kristeva, J., *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine, L.S. Roudiez, ed. L.S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, pp.132ff and the discussion in Dunn, L.C., 'Ophelia's Songs in Hamlet' in Dunn, L.C. and Jones, N.A. eds., *Embodied Voices*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994 (pp.50-64), pp.54-5 and *passim*.

¹⁵ See Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice' in *Image Music Text*, Stephen Heath ed. and trans., Fontana Press, London, 1977, p.182

¹⁶ See Kristeva, J., *Powers of Horror*, Leon Roudiez trans., Columbia UP, New York, 1982, pp.1-15, building on Lacan, and Dunn, L and Jones, N., 'Introduction' in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1994, p.1, p.4

Given this concern, it is striking that both novels' openings situate the reader in the masculine field of public history, employing an impersonal, factual narrative voice:

On thenorth-eastern shores of England there is a town called Monkshaven, containing at the present day about fifteen thousand inhabitants. There were, however, but half the number at the end of the last century. (*SL*, 1)

In those days there were pocket boroughs, a Birmingham unrepresented in Parliament and compelled to make strong representations out of it, unrepealed corn-laws, three-and-sixpenny letters. (*FH*, 3)

I would argue, however, that both authors—both of whom sought to avoid stigmatisation as ‘woman writers’¹⁷—are consciously adopting such a dispassionate, empirical viewpoint in order to expose its limitations, and create dislocations between it and the alternative representative modes their novels offer. Notably, when the rational-scientific voice of *Sylvia's Lovers'* opening chapter returns at later points in the novel it seems a rude intrusion, clashing with the complex affective ambience and emotional depth of the very different levels of ‘history’ the narrative has delved into. As if to mark this point, when Gaskell's narrative shifts from the personal to the public stage of landmark history in the Acre siege sequence, she employs a profoundly non-realist style—flowing prose, primary colours, an absence of factual details—such that all seems ‘dream[y]’ and ‘improbable’ (431), and the battle ‘only a picturesque blue and red accident’ (*FH*, 14) like the military paintings on Mrs Transome's drawing-room wall in *Felix Holt*,¹⁸ and it is telling that Philip finds the Acre scene less ‘real’ than his Monkshaven memories (*SL*, 431). Here, Gaskell is highlighting the limitations of dominant models of history with their linear focus on progress and chronological narration of monolithic ‘events.’

Both *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia's Lovers* ask their readers to focus on the living bodies and live desires that precede discursive patternings, and suffer under the restrictions those patterns impose. Bodies ‘speak’ in both novels, disclosing secret histories—‘every fibre in me seems to be a

¹⁷ See Pettitt, p.209

¹⁸ See *Sylvia's Lovers*, ch.XXXVIII (‘The Recognition’), pp.424-434.

memory,' Mrs Transome tells us in *Felix Holt* (*FH*, 375), while in *Sylvia's Lovers* there is a 'terrible story in [Sylvia's] eyes' (*SL*, 377)—but they signify in a language inaudible to, or unheeded by, men. Philip, for example, cannot read the 'tangled multitude of thoughts' in the 'unseen receptacle' of Sylvia's mind (*SL*, 76). Imprisoned within constricting social roles and narrow domestic spaces, Sylvia and Mrs Transome become figures of living death, embodying the silenced, extraneous position of women in their and their authors' society. Mrs Transome looks to Esther not like 'a breathing woman' but 'faded, dried, and bleached' (*FH*, 371) while Sylvia, scolded by Philip, becomes 'motionless and silent'; her 'steady, dilated eyes' have the 'mute reproach' seen 'in the eyes of the dead' (*SL*, 354).¹⁹ In Cixous' terms, Mrs Transome, Hester Rose and the married Sylvia are 'muffled' women, living 'only in their flesh, in dreams, in silences.'²⁰ In *Sylvia's Lovers*, there is a parallel between these repressed female bodies and the preponderance of male bodies that have been captured, mutilated and even put to death through the operations of state power and the project of empire—Darley's, Kinraid's, Daniel Robson's and Philip's. In this way the gender issues and the socio-political issues explored in the novel are subtly enmeshed.²¹

Although Sylvia is shown as being repressed by the men around her, including her father, she is also aligned *with* her father in that both share a spirit of resistance with the Monkshaven community, such that Sylvia's voicelessness and marital repression offer an analogue for her community's repression by the state. Sylvia is frequently silenced by her father, who prefers talking to his dog over his wife and daughter (*SL*, 87), but she also shares a voice with her father in that both speak in a distinctive idiom and with a fierce fighting spirit indicative of their stubbornly regional identity. In *Felix Holt*, there is a similar connection between the gender politics and the wider social politics presented: the novel's voiceless women parallel other voiceless social groups such as the working class who, like women, can 'choose only meaner things because only meaner things are within [their] reach' (*FH*, 263). As in *Sylvia's Lovers*, however, the alignment is only approximate: Mrs Transome, despite being silenced as a

¹⁹ For further examples see e.g. *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.319, pp.367-9; *Felix Holt*, p.467; note the resemblance to Mrs Transome in Esther's 'deathly' and 'corpse-like' physicality as she 'mutely' farewells Felix in prison at p.436.

²⁰ Cixous, p.2049; on Hester see *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.24, p.424, p.452

²¹ D'Albertis also notes this 'subtle synthesis': D'Albertis, p.137

woman, does not sympathise with other social minorities but is a self-styled Tory, while the repression of women is shown to cut across social classes—as with the Sproxtton miner who beats his wife because ‘she thinks she knows better nor me, and I can’t make head nor tail of her talk’ (*FH*, 134). That the silenced wife is apparently more erudite than her violent husband indicates that Eliot, like Gaskell in her depiction of Bell Robson, recognises exceptions to the societal norm of women being less educated and verbally expressive than men.

Nonetheless, there is a definite link in both novels between the soundless speech of women’s bodies and the wordless roar of the crowd—another form of communication *sans paroles*. *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia’s Lovers* both feature scenes of public uproar where a multitude of voices are blended such that individual voices become indistinguishable within the larger sound. When the press-gang first raids in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, for example, there rises ‘the sharp simultaneous cry of many people’ which is ‘inarticulate’ but ‘yet an intelligible curse’ (*SL*, 28). Significantly, both Eliot and Gaskell use water metaphors to evoke communal noise, recalling the ‘waves, floods and outbursts’ they associate with transgressive feminine energy. Gaskell describes a ‘stormy multitude’ of rebellious Monkshaven inhabitants coming ‘pressing up’ with ‘half-amphibious boys... compelled by the pressure of the coming multitude’ as it ‘swell[s] into the marketplace’ with a fluid motion and a ‘dense’ rising sound (*SL*, 28-9). In the Treby riot in *Felix Holt*, the crowd’s rising buzz of ‘confused deafening shouts’ swells into oceanic ‘roaring,’ with the crowd’s motion likened to ‘a flood hemmed in’ (*FH*, 311-12) and then ‘a noisy stream’ (319). Just as individual voices are absorbed in a communal vocality, so is individual volition subsumed into mass movement: Felix is ‘pushed along’ with the tide as the mob finds its own direction (*FH*, 311-320), and individual actions are almost ‘involuntary’ in the tow of events after the second gang raid in *Sylvia’s Lovers* (*SL*, 258-61), while the resistance to the first raid is likened to the ‘unconscious action of an enraged wild animal’ (*SL*, 29). The crowd has its own ‘transindividual’ subjectivity—a voice and a mind that is relatively independent of the separate human agents who comprise it.

Eliot’s narrator describes this overdetermining force as ‘that mixture of pushing forward and being pushed forward which is a brief history of most human things’ (*FH*, 317). What is proposed here is a structuralist view of history, where the rational individual is no longer seen

as the best unit of analysis for understanding transitional events. In their portrayal of the subjectivity of the mob, as in their portrayal of women's empathy, both novels challenge bourgeois notions of the bounded self, suggesting the inadequacy of the language of possessive individualism to represent this more collective agency. Like the wordless protestations of women's bodies, the wordless roar of the crowd represents an *unbounded* form of expression, reflective of the crowd's subversively transpersonal subjectivity: the 'waves, floods and outbursts' of its sound and motion represent a condition of pure communication that resists the rational discursive formulae of spoken and written language which Gaskell and Eliot in turn associate with top-down social control. In the riots in *Sylvia's Lovers*, it is apparent the full force of the Monkshaven community's outrage against outside oppression cannot be conveyed through such language, nor by any one individual voice. In *Felix Holt*, formal language fails in the face of mob resistance when the Riot Act is read and the crowd surges on regardless (*FH*, 312).

The two novels' explorations of the inadequacy of language to represent the intimate histories of women are thus linked with their exposure of its inadequacy to represent other more public struggles—those of isolated communities, and the working class, against their oppression. Hence Gaskell's association of both Sylvia's struggle and that of her community with the wordless tumult of the sounding sea: the married Sylvia's 'wild outburst[s]' of tears are soothed by the 'passionate rush and rebound' of the ocean's roar (*SL*, 368-9), which itself gives voice to the common spirit of the Monkshaven community. The connection emerges distinctly in Chapter XXXII when Sylvia comes upon a crowd of locals massing to rescue a shipwreck. Joining in the 'push and mighty strain' of this shared labour, Sylvia temporarily escapes the imprisoning limits of her bounded social role as a middle-class wife—her separate individual identity is suspended as she merges into the crowd's common being, as 'all human voice' is subsumed in 'the tempestuous stun and tumult of wind and wave' (*SL*, 370-1). Homans has suggested that the tendency of novelists to associate women with nature diminishes women's agency by subsuming them into the natural world, but Gaskell triangulates the familiar relationship so that her heroine's connection with nature (the ocean) is also a connection which joins Sylvia with her community in its striving, and which—far from depoliticising Sylvia—allows her stifled voice to roar through a vast surrounding medium.

Sylvia's fierce spirit cannot be understood without reference to the fierce political spirit of her locale. Monkshaven is a relatively self-contained community, regulated less by state power than by local customs and the distinctive socio-economic practices (such as smuggling) which derive from its geographical isolation, its distinctive environment and its primary industry, whaling. This makes it a community with strong emotional and cultural bonds, and a shared spirit of resistance to external authority which Sylvia, Daniel Robson and Kinraid all embody.²² Speaking of Yorkshire more broadly, Gaskell's narrator suggests the sociological underpinnings of this collective instinct:

The universal interest felt in one pursuit [whaling], bound the inhabitants of that line of coast together with a strong tie, the severance of which by any violent extraneous measure, gave rise to passionate anger and thirst for vengeance. A Yorkshireman once said to me, 'My county folk are all alike. Their first thought is *how to resist...* It is so in thought; it is so in word; it is so in deed.' (*SL*, 8—my emphasis)

This explains the intensity of Daniel Robson's rage against the press gang, despite his limited understanding of its operations or significance: his hatred is not the product of his own reasoning processes but is determined by a wider communal consciousness which exceeds Daniel's individual understanding, and it is this which gives Daniel's rage the appearance of a supernatural 'possession' (*SL*, 253). Daniel is channelling a collective political animus that he lacks the language to explain—his express words against 'that distant thing called government' (Eliot's phrase: *FH*, 4) often seem naïve and foolish, yet he instinctively rages against it.²³ Sylvia is the same: enraged after her father's arrest, she knows her fury has deeper causes than she is able to express:

'I can hardly tell what I say, *much less why I say it...* I could fight wi' t' very walls, I'm so mad with grieving.' (*SL*, 294)

²² Robson and Kinraid are, of course, not 'native' to Monkshaven, but all are from Yorkshire. On Daniel and Sylvia's fierce spirits, and their community's, see *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.76, p.280, p.287, pp.411ff.

²³ See Daniel in *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.40-1, p95 (on his 'John Bullish' interest in the war); compare Sylvia at p.62 and p.108 and *Felix Holt*, pp.48-50 on political ignorance.

Sylvia's rage stems, like her father's, from instincts that are not solely hers and which accordingly resist individual understanding or expression; they are instincts expressed without words in the multi-voiced oceanic roar of the mob. Again, Gaskell is questioning the validity of the individual subject and of rational discourse as vehicles for understanding political action—just as she questions their validity for understanding female being.

I have suggested above how Sylvia's flesh 'speaks'—how, in Cixous' phrase, she 'physically materialises what she is thinking, she signifies it with her body.'²⁴ But her body not only speaks against women's repression by men, but the repression of her community and her social class by the state. Empathising even with the 'lowest' people in Monkshaven,²⁵ and being 'of that impressible nature that takes the tone of feeling from those surrounding' (*SL*, 18) Sylvia's is physically sensitive to historical processes and communal energies that exceed her individual awareness. When the press gang first raids in Chapter III, Sylvia's body becomes the site of urgent signals: her moans, tears, shivers and swooning physically embody a wordless protest against the march of history and the growth of state power as it intrudes into her locality, oppressing the community's powerless inhabitants. This specifically feminine energy and vocality is matched in the townswomen, 'crying aloud, throwing up their arms... showering down abuse as hearty and rapid [as a] Greek chorus' (*SL*, 29). The linkage between the community's resistance and the gender issue is flagged when Philip warns Sylvia not to show resistance because 'it's the law, and no one can do aught against it, least of all women and lassies' (*SL*, 28). Similarly, the 'cold steel' language Philip uses to control Sylvia after their marriage (*SL*, 360) recalls the 'furious metal tongue' of state power, heard when the press gang rings the Monkshaven fire bell to entrap the townsmen (*SL*, 256). Sylvia's rage is, like her father's, directed quixotically against impossible, incomprehensibly large opponents: what she unconsciously rebels against is the immense phenomenon that is historical transition and, in particular, the expansion of state control and the structures of centralised nationhood. There is an understated connection with the American War of Independence, fought over similar issues of self-determination and communal autonomy: notably, Sylvia's daughter emigrates to America in the novel's conclusion, and Daniel Robson exhibits

²⁴ Cixous, p.2044

²⁵ On Sylvia's 'low' connections see *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.27, pp.124-5

an 'old hatred' when he speaks of his impressment for the American war and the self-mutilation he underwent to escape it. His identification with the Americans is flagged when he says he 'could na stomach the thought o'being murdered i' my own language' (*SL*, 38). Daniel's *express* politics may be a confused hash of patriotism and protest, but his mutilated hands silently communicate a message of resistance: it seems that, as speech and text work against the oppressed, only the body offers a reliable site of protest.

Eliot, too, is interested in how historical transitions are registered on the body. Mrs Transome's flesh responds to her maltreatment by men and, in particular, to her son Harold's neglect after his transformation abroad into a model of entrepreneurial efficiency, and this means that she is also responsive to the broader processes of historical development of which Harold's business-like metamorphosis is but one instance.²⁶ Her physical form is like an aerial or antenna taking signals from an environment 'vibrating' with the spirit of change: when Harold announces that he has become a Radical in favour of reform, for example, Mrs Transome's 'limbs totte[r]' with an 'electric shock' (*FH*, 17; compare *FH*, 37). Like *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Felix Holt* is interested in the determination of individual lives by 'a wider public life' (*FH*, 50) and the jolts caused when national history (the war with France in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Reform in *Felix Holt*) intrudes on the lives of individuals and communities. That both novels show characters choosing *downward* rather than upward social mobility—most notably Philip in *Sylvia's Lovers* and Esther in *Felix Holt*—underscores their ambivalence towards the terms in which their culture defines progress and success.²⁷ At the same time, however, they seem to accept the inevitability of such progress: both *Felix Holt* and *Sylvia's Lovers* suggest a national life becoming too large and too integrated for local communities to preserve their relative self-containment.²⁸

²⁶ See e.g. *Felix Holt*, p.37 for Mrs Transome's distrust of the 'new style of tenant', and on the division of labour, and 'improved agricultural management'; cf. Harold at p.39 on how 'women don't change their views'. On modernisation and industrialisation in Treby Magna see pp.6-7 and pp.45-9. Note Eliot's anxiety about rapid socio-political transition in 'Natural History', p.127 (suggesting that 'what has grown up historically can only die out historically').

²⁷ On this issue in Gaskell see Uglow, p.26, p.509

²⁸ Hence *Felix Holt's* repeated emphasis on the interconnectedness of human agents and social bodies as 'one web' (*Felix Holt*, p.186).

Eliot, by contrast with Gaskell, seems to downplay there being any real political feeling animating the working class in the mob action seen in her novel—the Sproxtton miners, for example, are depicted by Eliot as being motivated largely by alcohol. Nonetheless, the presence of an unconscious spirit of resistance similar to that seen in *Sylvia's Lovers* is seemingly hinted in the figure of little Job. This silently suffering working-class boy is described as having a 'confused yet profound sense of sorrow' when he enters the sphere of affluence and privilege at Transome Court after the ill-fated election riot and the Tory victory (*FH*, 352), and the epigraph to this chapter (from the biblical Book of Job) is also suggestive:

I also could speak as ye do; if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could heap up words against you. (*FH*, Epigraph to ch.XXXVII, p.350)

Here, Eliot seems to be suggesting that the 'underworld' of 'unuttered' passions referred to in her introduction includes not only women but also other political minorities who lack a language and a forum for expressing their needs. Eliot is aware of how the abstractions of bourgeois language, including that spoken by Felix, serve to obscure the genuine material grievances of the working class: in the scene where the Trades-union man speaks at Duffield, Eliot has the 'abstracted' Felix literally cut off this worker's address (advocating greater rights for those who struggle to meet their daily needs) in order to advocate instead 'that treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling and manners' (*FH*, 494). The description of the election-day mob as a 'flood hemmed in' after the Riot Act is read also suggests the dangers of denying the populace any channels for self-expression (*FH*, 312).²⁹ Notably, Eliot's narrator implies that if the Treby rioters *had* been animated by 'real political passion or fury against social distinctions' rather than 'a mere medley of appetites and confused impressions' then they *would* have had a right to 'fight against authority' (*FH*, 317, 442).³⁰ This suggests an explanation for Job's enigmatic sorrow: Job is only a child and perhaps, whereas the adult workers have been socially conditioned to think of nothing but beer, Job's relatively unschooled instincts enable him to see the very real hardships of his class. In any case, our reading of the Treby riot scene should not be limited by the

²⁹ *Felix Holt*, p.312; compare *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.29 ('Inarticulate... nearer and nearer'). On the Trades-Union man as foil to Felix see Hollis, *passim*.

³⁰ Compare Eliot on 1848 in 'Natural History', p.123

refusal of Eliot's rational-voiced narrator to endow the mob action with any 'real' motivations: it may well be that—as with Daniel in *Sylvia's Lovers*—the question of conscious motives is secondary, and the working-class mob's flooding rage is determined by a collective political instinct that exceeds the comprehension of its individual agents.

While it might be argued that, by having Sylvia forgive the dying Philip, *Sylvia's Lovers* ultimately endorses the middle-class conformity Philip earlier embodied, this is to overlook the fact that, on his deathbed, Philip no longer embodies such conformity. Having shed his name and identity in joining the military, Philip symbolically switches places with Kinraid in the myth-like sequence at Acre—it is the injured Philip who is now the social outcast, while the once rebellious Kinraid becomes wealthy and socially successful, marrying to advantage.³¹ It is only *after* this switch that Sylvia accepts Philip, and to do so now is a gesture not of her capitulation but of her continued resistance to conformity.³² In titling her novel *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell draws attention to such symbolic choices, and Philip's death scene is actually one of the novel's most transgressive. When Sylvia arrives to tend her husband 'the men f[a]ll back' (*SL*, 493) in a symbolic retreat that makes space for a non-masculine communicative paradigm to emerge as Sylvia embraces Philip in a therapeutic connection of unutterable care and emotion. The narration repeatedly refers to the ocean's 'ceaseless waves', associated throughout the novel with subversive desires, inexpressible histories and with the passionate Sylvia herself.³³ The scene's iconoclastic power is not diminished by its religious overtones—Gaskell's association of God with the eternal, maternal ocean is a highly unorthodox representation of divinity, and one conspicuously lacking in doctrinal specificity.³⁴ Philip's death scene thus has a vital relation to the different levels of narrative 'resistance'—linguistic, sexual, social, historical—that Gaskell interweaves in the novel.

³¹ For another view see D'Albortis p.130 (on Philip as 'repressed female subject').

³² Contrast the penniless and mutilated Philip's outcast status with *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.283, where Philip is on the side of 'property' and seems to approve of the press-gang's conduct against the Monkshaven rioters.

³³ See *Sylvia's Lovers*, pp.493-497. Sylvia's 'sobbing sighs' which shake Philip's frame reflect the rhythm of the waves below (*Sylvia's Lovers*, p.499).

³⁴ Stoneman, p.157, cf. p.507 on this maternal view of divinity and Philip's rejection of chivalric and Puritan narratives; note *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.499 where Philip's efforts to 'remember all that he had ever read about, God' are overtaken.

Both Eliot and Gaskell examine the possibilities of resistance offered by an escape from structured language, and both privilege extra-lingual forms of communication, but Gaskell is also interested in exploring the unorthodox energies of oral culture. Gaskell goes to great lengths to capture what Uglow calls the 'unregulated oral vigour' of the Monkshaven dialect.³⁵ This is not done out of antiquarian interest but is a stylistic move fully integrated with Gaskell's overall project in emphasising the vibrant, integrated collective psychology of the Monkshaven area when set against the wider national life to which it is resistant. Sylvia's animosity towards written language can be related to the way her community's rich oral culture is defined against the discursive codes of an increasingly homogenous national culture, and the cold institutional logic of the state. Written language, and written texts such as the bible, link into wider national institutions than those native to Monkshaven; accordingly, Sylvia's resistance to learning to read and write—and to learning any geography that does not have Monkshaven as its centre³⁶—reflects the solidarity of her community in its resistance to outside influence. By contrast with the working-class speech seen in *Felix Holt*, the local dialect in *Sylvia's Lovers* is not presented as being 'lesser' so much as 'other', with its own rules and requirements.³⁷ The term 'Randyvowse', for example, is no simple mispronunciation, but an instance of local dialect bound up with a particular local perspective on the phenomenon it describes (the Rendezvous-house)—like the 'Butter Cross' and the whaling yarns of Kinraid and Daniel Robson, it speaks volumes about the cultural identity of the community it belongs to.³⁸ Gaskell's careful phonetic rendering of distinct dialects again suggests her novel's privileging of the sonorous, vocal, bodily aspects of communication over its semantic rules and codes—*melos* over *logos*; voice over words—and the 'regional vocality' of Monkshaven, like the feminine semiotics or the roar of the crowd considered above, represents

³⁵ Uglow, p.515; she notes Gaskell's attention to variants in local idiom, such as Bell's Cumbrian forms and the Quaker 'thee' and 'thou' and the cultural differences these calibrations demarcate.

³⁶ See *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.109; compare *Felix Holt*, p.4 on the parish as equivalent to the 'solar system' for Trebians.

³⁷ Contrast *Felix Holt*, where the characters whose psychology Eliot probes in depth have a literary education; the working class, while not undifferentiated, often talk in chorus and think mostly of beer (see e.g. *Felix Holt*, p.127) whereas Gaskell's are more 'fully-realised' (Nash, p.24)

³⁸ See *Sylvia's Lovers*, ch.I, ch.V and note Gaskell's incorporation of real songs like the 'Keel Row.'

a subversion of the dominant socio-economic and political order that official language serves. With a register that is at once both regional and feminine, Sylvia not only embodies a feminine energy that disrupts masculine codes, but also this energetic otherness of her community in its resistance to establishment structures.

Throughout *Sylvia's Lovers*, the unstructured vitality of Sylvia's speech strongly contrasts with the measured, formal, pedantic language of Philip and the better-educated middle-class characters. As Sylvia tells Molly, 'Feyther's liker me, and we talk a deal o' rubble,' whereas others' words are 'liker to hewn stone' with 'a deal o' meaning in 'em' (*SL*, 12). In her middle-class marriage, by contrast, Sylvia is faced with 'remembering certain set rules, and making certain set speeches' (*SL*, 348). Sylvia's native passion, spontaneity, colourful dialect and even her perversity present a compelling alternative to such lifeless conformity.³⁹ A similar contrast can be drawn between the 'wild and free' motion of the thronging Monkshaven inhabitants when the Greenland ships return in Chapter II, with 'everybody [relying] on everybody else's sympathy' in a shared 'hour of great joy' (*SL*, 19) and the mechanical 'measured movement' (*SL*, 29) of the warrant officers when the gang raids.⁴⁰ Again, Sylvia's marital repression offers an analogue for her community's oppression by the state. *Felix Holt*, too, shows us a language machine working in the service of capital and the dominant social order: Harold Transome, for example, returns from his overseas business ventures speaking efficiently and 'rapidly' (*FH*, 32) and keeping 'people and places' like 'a map' in his rationalist brain (*FH*, 22). Anticipating time-and-motion theory, Harold's speech habits function to 'compress a great deal of effective conversation into a short space of time' (*FH*, 32). We hear also of a former butler whose 'words used to come like the clicks of an engine' (*FH*, 21)—recalling the lawyer Donkin in *Sylvia's Lovers* who speaks with impatient economy 'as if words were too precious to waste' (*SL*, 284-5).⁴¹

³⁹ Shuttleworth makes this observation about Maggie Tulliver in Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, and I adapt her words: pp.511-12

⁴⁰ At *Sylvia's Lovers*, p.19 we also learn that 'squeezing and cramming and sitting together on chairs' was 'not at all out of etiquette at Monkshaven' (p.148).

⁴¹ On the idea of machinic language, see also Pettitt, p.13, p.26, p.210 on the analogies drawn between writing and mechanical invention in the Victorian period.

Eliot was interested in the 'historical' character of language and the way it evolves idiomatically within different locales. In her review 'The Natural History of German Life', she expressed concern that rationalism may vitiate such pluralism, emphasising how 'rational language' threatens the continued vitality of 'historical language' with the growth of the centralising state and noting more broadly how the cultural diversity of local communities 'gradually disappear[s] under the friction of cultivated circles.'⁴² Gaskell's emphasis on the vitality of collective local life in *Sylvia's Lovers* indicates that she was similarly concerned about the homogenising processes of 'nationalisation' and 'rationalisation' she could see taking place both in England and abroad. This concern is brought out by the setting of the novels in the past: Gaskell's narrator comments on how Sylvia's contemporaries 'felt' and 'understood, without going through reasoning or analytic processes', implying that something is lost in the 'logical and consistent' mindset (*SL*, 318) which dominates in contemporary times and vitiates 'freshness and originality' (*SL*, 74). Eliot explores similar issues in *Felix Holt* in her portrayal of Harold Transome's mixed-race son Harry—a character who is often overlooked or dismissed by critics as a racist stereotype due to the overtones of primitivism or orientalism with which his person is described.⁴³ On closer inspection, however, Eliot's project in creating this character appears far more sophisticated, and although Harry plays little part in the foreground action, he is an integral figure in the novel's multi-tiered meditations on language and alterity.

Firstly, like Gaskell's Sylvia, young Harry resists acquiring formal language, expressing his impulses by more colourful means. In the scene where he meets Lady Debarry, a devout Tory, Harry is initially unresponsive, but we are then told that:

putting his head forward and pouting his lips, the cherub gave forth with marked intention the sounds, 'Nau-o-oom', many times repeated: apparently they summed up his opinion of Lady Debarry, and may perhaps have meant 'naughty old woman', but his speech was a broken lisping polyglot of hazardous interpretation. (p.94)

⁴² Eliot, 'Natural History', p.115

⁴³ Eliot's descriptive focus on the boy's exotic physical attributes—such as his 'black mane', 'huge black eyes' and 'war dancing'—do suggest a racial stereotype, but Eliot undercuts this by showing how the ethnological gaze can be reversed, presenting Esther through Harry's eyes as a 'specimen' with a strange 'light complexion' (*Felix Holt*, 377).

As with Gaskell's treatment of local dialect in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Harry's peculiar language is not presented as being merely primitive, simplistic, untutored or otherwise inferior to 'the King's English.' Rather, it is recognised as being the vocal expression of nuanced, complex sentiments and, significantly, the narrator makes no attempt to translate what these 'sounds' import.⁴⁴ Harry's speech is not lesser but simply *other*—indeed, Harry's 'polyglot' conveys his contempt for Lady Debarry and her patronising gaze better than words could, and an English translation would therefore be reductive. Nor can the respect with which Harry's noise is treated be dismissed as merely ironic, for it is reflected in Esther Lyon's delight in Harry's raw energy and vitality—a delight which Harry returns when he finds that '[Esther] laughed, tossed him back, kissed and pretended to bite him—in fact, was an animal that understood fun' (*FH*, 377). Mr Transome, too, finds a 'new world created for him' through Harry's presence, discovering a 'living, lively' mode of being (*FH*, 378) that contrasts with his former hobby of classifying beetles, an activity representative of the deadening taxonomical gaze of Enlightenment rationalism.⁴⁵ This contrast between the deadness of formal discourse and the lively, extralingual mode of being Harry parallels the contrast both novels set up between the dead word and the wordless 'living language' of women's bodies. Through the figure of this mixed-race child who refuses to speak English, Eliot seems to be extending her novel's exploration of issues of language and resistance to the question of race. Harry notably shares with Gaskell's Sylvia the qualities of spontaneity and vitality that *Sylvia's Lovers* shows as being threatened when a central dominant power imposes itself on distinctive regions abroad, whether intra or internationally. Accordingly, just as the unlettered Sylvia embodies her community's resistance to centralised state power, so Harry may embody a caution against the growing drive to imperial expansion in British foreign policy. Gaskell's reader, too, is reminded of the global context of British military activity and foreign policy wrangles over the 'Eastern question' through the Acre siege sequence, through which Gaskell may be subtly flagging the contiguity

⁴⁴ See also *Felix Holt*, p.378 where Mr Transome (dubbed 'Gappa' by Harry) claims Harry could 'talk well enough' if he wanted to but 'likes to make his own' language, calling Mrs Transome 'bite' which Mr Transome says is 'wonderful.'

⁴⁵ See also *Felix Holt*, p.93 where Harry rides his grandfather like a horse, making 'inarticulate' animal sounds.

between structures of oppression at home and overseas. Gaskell's interest, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, in the politics of regional difference may subtly figure an interest in the politics of racial difference: the animal sounds and gestures of Monkshaven's rebellious natives are reminiscent of Eliot's representation of racial otherness in Harold's 'war-dancing' (*FH*, 377) Eastern son—some who resist the gang raids are described as looking 'scarce human' (*SL*, 29), while the captured Kinraid is likened to 'a fierce wildcat brought to bay' (*SL*, 217).

Sylvia's Lovers and *Felix Holt* are novels of resistance, each protesting the dominance of men and masculine discourse, the growth of state power, and the homogenising influence of historical 'progress.' Giving attention to the submerged voices of women and the merged, wordless voice of the crowd, they challenge the lifeless codes of Establishment structures and the discursive conventions that circumscribe individual and communal identities. In seeking to represent alternatives to their society's ruling values, they explode conventional accounts of femininity, history and class difference by giving attention to the 'hidden waters' that run beneath and overflow such constructions—harnessing the specific energies of the feminine and the culturally marginal in order to burst open the floodgates of patriarchal thought.

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