

CONDITIONS FOR WORK: The Common World Of Women

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...the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our life-span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn into it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men [sic] may want to save from the natural ruin of time.¹

Women both have and have not a common world. The mere sharing of oppression does not constitute a common world. Our thought and action, insofar as it has taken the form of difference, assertion, or rebellion, has repeatedly been obliterated, or subsumed under "human history," which means the "publicity of the public realm" created and controlled by men. Our history is the history of a majority of the species, yet the struggles of women for a "human" status have been relegated to footnotes, to the sidelines. Above all, women's relationships with women have been denied or neglected as a force in history.²

The essays in this book are parts of a much larger work, which we are still struggling to possess: the long process of making visible the experience of women. The tentativeness, the anxiety, sometimes approaching paralysis, the confusions, described in many of these essays by intelligent, educated, "privileged" women, are themselves evidence of the damage that can be done to creative energy by the lack of a sense of continuity, historical validation, community. Most women, it seems, have gone through their travails in a kind of spiritual isolation, alone both in the present and in ignorance of their place in any female tradition. The support of friends, of a women's group, may make survival possible; but it is not enough.

It is quite clear that the universities and the intellectual establishment intend to keep women's experiences as far as possible invisible; and women's studies a barely subsidized, condescendingly tolerated ghetto. The majority of women who go through undergraduate and graduate school suffer an intellectual coercion of which they are not even consciously aware. In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.

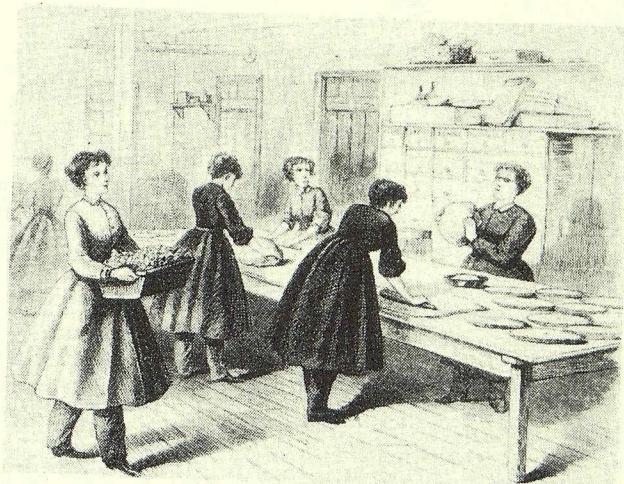
Writing of the destruction of the civilization of Languedoc by the forces of the Church under Simon de Montfort, Simone Weil reminds us: "Nothing is more cruel to the past than the commonplace which asserts that spiritual values cannot be destroyed by force; on the strength of this belief, civilizations that have been destroyed by force of arms are denied the name of civilization; and there is no risk of our being refuted by the dead."³ For spiritual values and a creative tradition to continue unbroken we need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us. In the false names of love, motherhood, natural law—false because they have not been defined by us to whom they are applied—women in patriarchy have been withheld from building a common world, except in enclaves, or through coded messages.

The protection and preservation of the world against natural processes are among the toils which need the monotonous performance of daily repeated chores.... In old tales and mythological stories it has often assumed the grandeur of heroic fights against overwhelming odds, as in the account of Hercules, whose cleansing of the Augean stables is among the twelve heroic "labors." A similar connotation of heroic deeds requiring great strength and courage and performed in a fighting spirit is manifest in the mediaeval use of the word: labor, *travail*, *arbeit*. However, the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition.⁴

Hannah Arendt does not call this "woman's work." Yet it is this activity of world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair, the million tiny stitches, the friction of the scrubbing brush, the scouring-cloth, the iron across the shirt, the rubbing of cloth against itself to exorcise the stain, the renewal of the scorched pot, the rusted knife-blade, the invisible weaving of a frayed and threadbare family life, the cleaning-up of soil and waste left behind by men and children—that we have been charged to do "for love"—not merely unpaid, but unacknowledged by the political philosophers. Women are not described as "working" when we create the essential conditions for the work of men; we are supposed to be acting out of love, instinct, or devotion to some higher cause than self.

Arendt tells us that the Greeks despised all labor of

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Communal kitchen of the Oneida Community. from Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, April 9, 1870.

the body necessitated by biological needs. It was to spare themselves such labor that men kept slaves—not as a means to cheaper production. "Contempt for laboring, originally arising out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity and a no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance, spread with the increasing demands of *polis* life upon the time of the citizens (i.e., males) and its insistence on their abstention from all but political activities."⁵

And, in the aside of a footnote: "Women and slaves belonged and lived together... no woman, not even the wife of the household head, lived among her equals—other free women—so that rank depended much less on birth than on 'occupation' or function...." According to the index, this footnote is the last reference to women, on page 73 of a volume of 325 pages on *The Human Condition*, written by a woman.

Every effort that left no trace.... The efforts of women in labor, giving birth to stillborn children, children who must die of plague or by infanticide; the efforts of women to keep filth and decay at bay, children decently clothed, to produce the clean shirt in which the man walks out daily into the common world of men, the efforts to raise children against the attritions of racist and sexist schooling, drugs, sexual exploitation, the brutalization and killing of barely grown boys in war. There is still little but contempt and indifference for this kind of work, these efforts. (The phrase "wages for housework" has the power to shock today that the phrase "free love" possessed a century ago.)

2.

There is a natural temptation to escape if we can, to close the door behind us on this despised realm which threatens to engulf all women, whether as mothers, or in marriage, or as the invisible, ill-paid sustainers of the professions and social institutions. There is a natural fear that if we do not enter the common world of men, as asexual beings or as "exceptional" women, do not enter it on its terms and obey its rules, we will be sucked back into the realm of servitude, whatever our temporary class status or privileges. This temptation and this fear compromise our powers, divert our energies, form a potent source of "blocks" and of acute anxiety about work.

For if, in trying to join the common world of men, the professions moulded by a primarily masculine consciousness, we split ourselves off from the common life

of women and deny our female heritage and identity in our work, we lose touch with our real powers, and with the essential condition for all fully realized work: community.

Feminism begins, but cannot end, with the discovery by an individual of her self-consciousness as a woman. It is not, finally, even the recognition of her reasons for anger, or the decision to change her life, go back to school, leave a marriage (though in any individual life such decisions can be momentous and require great courage). Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to the fathers, and recognize that the world they have described is not the whole world. Masculine ideologies are the creation of masculine subjectivity; they are neither objective, nor value-free, nor inclusively "human." Feminism implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male-created ideologies; and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition.

In the common world of men, in the professions which the writers of these essays have come to grips with, it takes more than our *individual* talent and intelligence to think and act further. In denying the validity of women's experience, in pretending to stand for "the human," masculine subjectivity tries to force us to name our truths in an alien language; to dilute them; we are constantly told that the "real" problems, the ones worth working on, are those men have defined, that the problems we need to examine are trivial, unscholarly, non-existent. We are urged to separate the "personal" (our entire existence as women) from the "scholarly" or "professional." Several of the women who contribute to this book have described the outright insults and intellectual sabotage they encountered as women in graduate school. But more insidious may be the sabotage which appears as paternal encouragement, approval granted for internalizing a masculine subjectivity. As Tillie Olsen puts it, "Not to be able to come to one's own truth or not to use it in one's writing, even in telling the truth to have to 'tell it slant,' robs one of drive, of conviction, limits potential stature." Everywhere, women working in the common world of men are denied that integrity of work and life which we can only find in an emotional and intellectual connectedness with ourselves and other women.

More and more, however, women are creating community, sharing work, and discovering that in the sharing of work our relationships with each other become larger and more serious. In organizing a women's self-help clinic or law collective, a writing workshop, in

editing a magazine, creating a center for women's work like the Women's Building in Los Angeles, in running a press that publishes "lost" books by women, or contemporary work that may be threatening or incomprehensible to male editors, in participating in a women's prison project or a crisis center, we come to understand at first-hand not only our unmet needs, but the resources we can draw on for meeting them even in the face of female poverty, the hostility of institutions, the lack of documentation of our shared past. Susan Griffin has said that, for a feminist, writing may be solitary but thinking is collective. Any woman who has moved from the playing-fields of male discourse into the realm where women are developing our own descriptions of the world, knows the extraordinary sense of shedding, as it were, the encumbrance of someone else's baggage, of ceasing to translate. It is not that thinking becomes easy, but that the difficulties are intrinsic to the work itself rather than to the environment. In the common world of men, the struggle to make female experience visible—will they take seriously a thesis on women? Will they let me teach a course on women? Can I speak bluntly of female experience without shattering the male egos around me, or being labeled hysterical, castrating?—such struggles assume the status of an intellectual problem, and the real intellectual problems may not be probed at all.

Working together as women, consciously creating our networks even where patriarchal institutions are the ones in which we have to survive, we can confront the problems of women's relationships, the mothers we came from, the sisters with whom we were forced to divide the world, the daughters we love and fear. We can challenge and inspirit each other, throw light on one another's blind spots, stand by and give courage at the birth-throes of one another's insights. I think of the poet H.D.'s account of the vision she had on the island of Corfu, in the *Tribute to Freud*:

And there I sat and there is my friend Bryher who has brought me to Greece. I can turn now to her, though I do not budge an inch or break the sustained crystal-gazing at the wall before me. I say to Bryher, "There have been pictures here—I thought they were shadows at first, but they are light, not shadow. They are quite simple objects—but of course it's very strange. I can break away from them now, if I want—it's just a matter of concentrating—what do you think? Shall I stop? Shall I go on?" Bryher says without hesitation, "Go on."

...I had known such extraordinarily gifted and charming people. They had made much of me or they had slighted me and yet neither praise nor neglect mattered in the face of the gravest issues—life, death.... And yet, so oddly, I knew that this experience, this writing-on-the-wall before me, could not be shared with anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl had said without hesitation, "Go on." It was she really who had the detachment and integrity of the Pythoness of Delphi. But it was I, battered and disassociated... who was seeing the pictures, and who was reading the writing or granted the inner vision. Or perhaps, in some sense, we were "seeing" it together, for without her, admittedly, I could not have gone.⁶

Even for those who would mistrust visionary experience, the episode is revealing as metaphor. The personal relationship helps create the conditions for work (out of her

vision H.D. went on to create her great, late, long poems celebrating a matriarchal world and the quest of female heroes); no less does the fact of working together deepen and sustain a personal relationship. "If Chloe likes Olivia and they share a laboratory... this of itself will make their friendship more varied and lasting because it will be less personal."⁷ By "like" I believe Virginia Woolf (still, in that book, writing more cautiously than later in *Three Guineas*) also meant "love"; for "a laboratory" we can read "the creation of a common world."

Many women have known the figure of the male "mentor" who guides and protects his female student or colleague, tenderly opening doors for her into the common world of men. He seems willing to share his power, to conspire with her in stealing what Celia Gilbert names in this book "the sacred fire" of work. Yet what can he really bestow but the *illusion* of power, a power stolen, in any case, from the mass of women, over centuries, by men? He can teach her to name her experience in language that may allow her to live, work, perhaps succeed in the common world of men. But he has no key to the powers she might share with other women.

There is also the illusion that if you make your emotional and erotic life with women, it does not matter that your intellectual work is a collaboration with silence and lying about female experience. At a panel of lesbian writers at the Modern Language Association in San Francisco in December 1975, Susan Griffin spoke of the damages we do to ourselves and our work in censoring our own truths:

I feel that this whole idea of the Muse, of inspiration, is a kind of cop-out. There is something very fascinating going on with a writer's psyche when you are undergoing a silence, an inability to write. Each silence and each eruption into speech constitute a kind of struggle in the life of a writer.... The largest struggle around silence in my life has had to do with the fact that I am a woman and a lesbian. When I recognized my feelings as a woman, when I recognized my anger as a woman, suddenly my writing was transformed—suddenly I had a material, a subject-matter.... And then a few years later I found myself unhappy with my writing, unhappy with the way I expressed myself, unable to speak; I wrote in a poem, *Words do not come to my mouth any more*. And I happened also... to be censoring the fact that I was a lesbian. I thought that I was doing this because of the issue of child custody, and that was and still is a serious issue. But I wasn't acknowledging how important it was to me, both as a writer and as a human being, to be able to... write about my feelings as a lesbian.

In fact, I think that writers are always dealing with taboos of one sort or another; if they are not taboos general in society, you may just have a fear in your private life of perceiving some truth because of its implications, and that will stop you from writing.... But when we come to the taboo of lesbianism, this is one which is most loaded for everyone, even those who are not lesbians. Because the fact of love between women... is one which affects every event in this society, psychic and political and sociological. And for a writer, the most savage center is oneself.⁸

The whole question of what it means, or might mean, to work as a lesbian might have occupied an entire essay in this book. Of past women whose thought and work have remained visible in history, an enormous number have been lesbians, yet because of the silence and

denial that has enveloped lesbianism, we learn little from women's biographies about the relation of their work to their relationships with women or to the social taboos they lived among. One writer in this book mourns that "there was only one Alice B. Toklas." But in fact women's support to women *has* been there all along, lifetime or long-term comradeships. For many women, struggling for economic survival in the common world of men, these relationships have had to be dissimulated, at what cost to the work (let alone the relationships) we cannot begin to know. Every lesbian has been forced to walk past the distorting mirrors of homophobia before she could get down to the real problems of her work. Every lesbian artist knows that when she attempts to embody lesbian sexuality in her work she runs the risk of having it perceived pornographically, if it is not simply denied visibility. When a lesbian feels she may have to choose between writing or painting her truths and keeping her child, she is flung back on the most oppressive ground of maternal guilt in conflict with creative work. The question of economic survival, of keeping one's job, is terribly real, but the more terrible questions lie deeper where a woman is forced, or permits herself, to lead a censored life.

3

In thinking about the issues of women and work raised in this book, I turned to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* to see how a major political philosopher of our time, a woman, greatly respected in the intellectual establishment, had spoken to the theme. I found her essay illuminating, not so much for what it says, but for what it is. The issue of women as the laborers in reproduction, of women as workers in production, of the relationship of women's unpaid labor in the home to the separation between "private" and "public" spheres, of the woman's body as commodity—these questions were not raised for the first time in the 1960's and 1970's; they had already been documented in the 1950's when *The Human Condition* was being written. Arendt barely alludes, usually in a footnote, to Marx and Engels' engagement with these questions; and she writes as if the work of Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, Jane Addams, to name only a few writers, had never existed. The withholding of women from participation in the *vita activa*, the "common world," and the connection of this with reproductive, is something from which she does not so much turn her eyes as stare straight through unseeing. This "great work" is thus a kind of failure for which masculine ideology has no name, precisely because in terms of that ideology it is successful, at the expense of truths the ideology considers irrelevant. To read such a book, by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of the female mind nourished on male ideologies. In fact, the loss is ours, because Arendt's desire to grasp deep moral issues is the kind of concern we need to build a common world which will amount to more than "life-styles." The power of male ideology to possess such a female mind, to disconnect it as it were from the female body which encloses it and which it encloses, is nowhere more striking than in Arendt's lofty and crippled book.

Women's minds cannot grow to full stature, or touch

the real springs of our power to alter reality, on a diet of masculine ideology. This is not the same thing as saying that we can use nothing of these ideologies, or their methods; or that we need not understand them. But the common world of men cannot give us what we need, and parts of it are poisoning us. Miriam Schapiro, in this book, describes the process through which she begins to work: filling sheets of paper with smeared paint, images created "freely, mindlessly," going back to that place in childhood where she simply painted and was happy. To her husband, this appeared as "de-professionalizing" herself. Yet the very concept of "professionalism," tainted as it is with the separation between personal life and work, with a win-or-lose mentality and the gauging of success by public honors and market prices, needs a thorough revaluation by women. Forty years back Virginia Woolf was asking:

What is this "civilization" in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading, the procession of the sons of educated men?⁹

Her answer was that it is leading to war, to elitism, to exploitation and the greed for power; in our own time we can also add that it has clearly been leading to the ravagement of the non-human living world. Instead of the concept of "professionalism," we need, perhaps, a vision of work akin to that described by Simone Weil in her "Theoretical Picture of a Free Society":

A clear view of what is possible and what impossible, what is easy and what difficult, of the labors that separate the project from its accomplishment—this alone does away with insatiable desires and vain fears; from this and not from anything else proceed moderation and courage, virtues without which life is nothing but a disgraceful frenzy. Besides, the source of any kind of virtue lies in the shock produced by the human intelligence being brought up against a matter devoid of lenience and of falsity.¹⁰

If we conceive of feminism as more than a frivolous label, if we conceive of it as an ethics, a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the conditions of human life, we need a self-knowledge which can only develop through a steady, passionate attention to *all* female experience. I cannot imagine a feminist evolution leading to radical change in the private/political realm of gender, that is not rooted in the conviction that all women's lives are important, that the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; and that to make visible the full meaning of women's experience, to re-interpret knowledge in terms of that experience, is now the most important task of thinking.

If this is so, we cannot work alone. We had better face the fact that our hope of thinking at all, against the force of a maimed and maiming world-view, depends on seeking and giving our allegiance to a community of women co-workers. And, beyond the exchange and criticism of work, we have to ask ourselves how we can make the conditions for work more possible, not just for ourselves but for each other. This is not a question of generosity. It is not generosity that makes women in community support and nourish each other. It is rather what Whitman called the "hunger for equals"—the

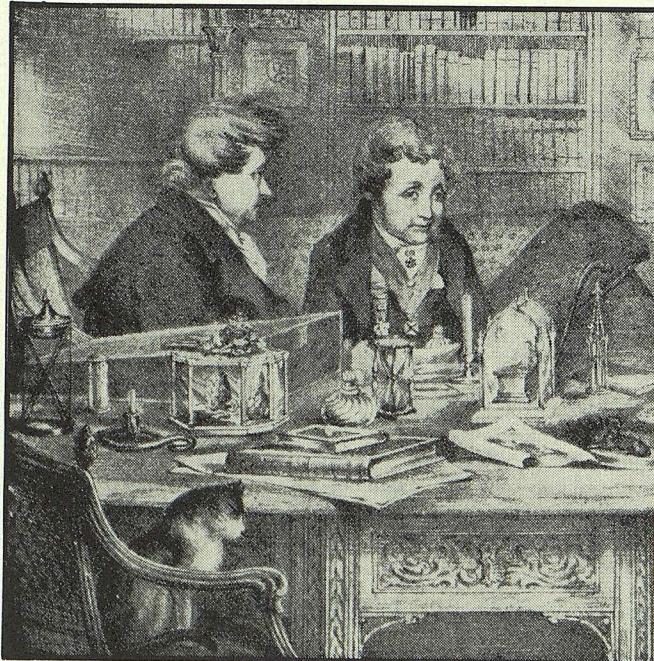
desire for a context in which our own strivings will be amplified, quickened, lucidified, through those of our peers.

We also, of course, need community with our past. Women's art and thought and action will continue to be seen as deviant, its true meaning distorted or buried, as long as women's work can be dismissed as "exceptional," an interesting footnote to the major texts. Or, it will be encouraged for its timidities and punished for its daring. This is obvious to women who have tried to work along seriously feminist lines in the established professions. But even before the work exists, long before praise or attack, the very form it will assume, the courage on which it can draw, the sense of potential direction it may take, require—given the politics of our lives and of creation itself—more than the gifts of the individual woman, or her immediate contemporaries. We need access to the female past.

The problem, finally, is not that of who does housework and child-care, whether or not one can find a life-companion who will share in the sustenance and repair of daily life—crucial as these may be in the short run. It is a question of the community we are reaching for in our work, and on which we can draw; who we envision as our hearers, our co-creators, our challengers; who will urge us to take our work further, more seriously, than we had dared; on whose work we can build. Women *have* done these things for each other, sought each other in community, even if only in enclaves, often through correspondence, for centuries. Denied space in the universities, the scientific laboratories, the professions, we have devised our networks. We must not be tempted to trade the possibility of enlarging and strengthening those networks, and of extending them to more and more women, for the illusion of power and success as "exceptional" or "privileged" women in the professions.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 55.
2. The historian Joan Kelly-Gadol suggests that a feminist view of history is not merely "compensatory history," a parallel to the accepted views of history as male. It means "to look at ages or movements of great social change in terms of their liberation or repression of woman's potential, their import for the advancement of her humanity as well as his. The moment this is done—the moment one assumes that women are a part of humanity in the fullest sense—the period or set of events with which we deal takes on a wholly different character or meaning from the normally accepted one. Indeed, what emerges is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women in those periods of so-called progressive change." ("The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," in *SIGNS*, Vol. 1, #4, Summer 1976.)
3. Simone Weil, *Selected Essays 1934-1943*. Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 43.
4. Arendt, p. 55.
5. Arendt, pp. 81-83.
6. H.D., *Tribute to Freud*. Carcanet Press, Oxford, 1971, pp. 50-54.
7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, London, 1929, p. 126.
8. *Sinister Wisdom*, Vol. I, #2, Fall 1976.
9. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938). Harbinger Book, New York, 1966, p. 63.
10. Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*. Translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Mass., 1973, p. 87.

Adrienne Rich's most recent books are *Poems Selected and New: 1950-1974* and *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, both published by W.W. Norton, and *Twenty-One Love Poems*, published by Effie's Press, Emeryville California.



Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831) and Eleanor Butler (1739-1829), known as the Ladies of Llangollen, were born in Ireland but left their homes at an early age, to spend the rest of their lives together in the small Welsh village of Llangollen. They were a curiosity of their day; several articles about their "romantic friendship" were written and their farmhouse became something of an intellectual center in Great Britain. Louisa Gordon wrote a novel, *The Chase of the Wild Goose*, based on their lives, which was originally published by Virginia Woolf's *Hogarth Press*. In 1971 Elizabeth Mavor published a biography entitled *The Ladies of Llangollen*.