

Ascension

Liliane Welch Talks About Poetry

Born in Luxembourg, Liliane Welch has lived for thirty-one years in Sackville, New Brunswick. A professor of French Studies at Mount Allison University, Welch is an avid explorer of the Fundy Marsh, a territory that is often the subject of her poems and essays. Welch is the author of fifteen books of poetry, the most recent *Fidelities* (1997), and of two collections of essays, *Seismographs* (1988) and *Frescoes* (1998). With her husband, the philosopher Cyril Welch, she co-authored *Emergence: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud* (1973) and *Address: Rimbaud Mallarmé Butor* (1979). *Fidelities*, like her earlier work, is full of movement and travel, and whether the speaker is touring paintings that hang in European museums, climbing mountains, or driving beneath Maritime skies, there is a sense of urgency in the travel. In the autumn of 1998, Luxembourg saluted Liliane Welch's literary achievement by electing her to the Institut Grand-Ducal.

ANNE Recognizing that *Word-House of a Grandchild* (1987) initiated the return to the past, is it fair to say that *Fidelities* (1997) is the most autobiographical of your collections as its first section ("Where are the images") returns to your Luxembourg childhood?

LILIANE That question is discomfiting to me because I do not believe that there is an autobiographical writing that is strictly autobiographical. All writing that is worth anything is fiction. Everything that a poet does with reality transforms it. Otherwise, it is not art; it might as well be journalism. I don't really think that you can take the "I" who speaks in these poems as my empirical "I." I believe what Rimbaud said, "'I' is an another." We receive from our experiences certain calls, and certain

impressions, and they are the trampoline from which we leap into something else. I would be very uncomfortable to say that such writing is very autobiographical. *Word-House of a Grandchild* is above all a “word-house.” I never met my grandfather. Everything in that book about my grandfather is fictitious. I have very beautiful images of my grandmother, but again those are *images*. Our past and all of reality around us are very dynamic and elusive. We can never really hold it or grasp it, or understand it once and for all.

ANNE When the imagination goes to work on what was—the actual past—it is, of course, transformed. It becomes framed, but you *do say* in *Word-House*: “When I explore the paths of my background I write poems” (9).

LILIANE Yes, but “paths” has to be understood in the widest way. When I explore the paths around Fundy Bay, or the paths in the mountains, I also get pushed to write poems. I think in those concrete places, it has something to do with our relatedness to the earth or to reality. I believe—and I don’t want to push this too much because it might sound romantic or elated—our mission as poets is to bear witness to where we are and what we are doing. And, of course, bearing witness is, in the end, to praise, to give an affirmative response. A poet can do that.

ANNE To speak the words of praise, then, is to salute?

LILIANE When you praise, when you affirm, you bring out the best in whatever you face. I have a long teaching career—thirty years here and, before that, at several other universities—and in that long career, you can imagine, one sees the spectrum of humanity in one’s colleagues. I could never understand how some colleagues could go into the classroom with hatred or negativity in their hearts, rather than with an affirmative stance toward their subject and students. They end up denigrating the teaching situation. Similarly, poetry or writing can be that way. There are some writers with negative, evil agendas. Theirs is a work the opposite of praising and testifying. You have to be able to love whatever you write or do.

ANNE There is a pattern of images in *Fidelities*, particularly in the first section, that has to do with the mythic. Not only paths and roads, but also passageways, mining shafts, and waterways tunnel through *Fidelities*. Is the job of poetry connected in some way to this underground?

LILIANE Notice in “Winter Fires” (29) that the gladiators are running through the dark passage ways towards the sun. In that case, they run towards their deaths but, in general, the point is to get out from the

underground into the sun. You just have to think about Plato's cave.

ANNE Are these images of the underground a master trope for the writing of poetry?

LILIANE I think certainly in our Western tradition that theme comes up over and over again. Also, in the natural context, the underground of the water wells to the surface. Undergrounds are very mysterious places. Look at those Icelandic pictures with their beautiful underground caves. [These photographs appear in *Mosaics: Music, Images, Words*, a book and CD (1999), with text by Welch.] Perhaps the underground is that which conceals itself so that we will be put onto the search, be forced to make a clearing, find something. That, too, is a trope in Western literature—*dévoiler*—this wanting to unveil, not just women, but reality, the need to take away covers.

ANNE So searching the underground is really plumbing mystery . . .

LILIANE . . . which always withdraws itself. It might appear as a facile difference between science and poetry to presume that scientists might have an explanation of this mystery. All great scientists maintain that they, too, come up to the unknown, the *other*, which points to human limitation.

ANNE Does that image cluster—tunnels / caves / mines—appear to a greater extent in the work of women than in the work of men?

LILIANE I wouldn't think so. I don't look at literature in terms of genitalia. For me, it is literature. Whether the author is a man or a woman does not make that much difference to me. I think it is, rather, something that goes through our culture. Maybe those images go through other cultures too, but the one I know best is our Western culture.

ANNE “[B]ooks and mountains / Convene my days” (*Fidelities* 11), one speaker says. Are these the guides, the things by which this speaker finds his or her way?

LILIANE Yes, and they are forms of transcendence also. In the mountain, there is, of course, ascension, and that means transcendence of a lower region. Books, I think, are similar. Great books take us out of the everyday and light up that other domain. I always read with my students Baudelaire's “Elevation.” To me, it is one of the most beautiful poems because you can take it as a guide. The narrator of the poem does what the Christian mystics might have done. He goes over nine different realms of our reality—oceans, mountains, plains, and so forth—until he comes to an emporium of peace and fantastic light. He breathes in this

divine *liqueur*, the air, but, strangely, right there occurs, also, the most sensuous image of the poem. The narrator feels that he is a very powerful swimmer, going through that air as though he were rolling through waves. The poem, in a Baudelairean way, shows that he is far away from the morbid valley miasmas. The students all cheer. Wasn't this the point—getting away from all those trappings that we have to put up with down here? But then comes the last line, where the narrator addresses his spirit, says that lucky or happy is the one who can, like the morning lark, take an ascension and can understand the language of flowers and mute things. So, you ascend to that region because you want to look down and get a real understanding of the things that you missed when you were down below. When you were caught up in the traumas and the miasmas, as Baudelaire calls them, you never look at what is close, what addresses you, beckons to you, but which, in all the machinations, you never bothered to be a witness for.

ANNE So the ascension enables us to see the inconsequential things in their consequences? There is a line in Rilke where he asks us to address the inconsequential things.

LILIANE The French poet Francis Ponge, in his book of prose poems *Taking the Side of Things*, writes of all the *seemingly* inconsequential things that we use and use up, misuse and maltreat, by not paying attention and respect to them. This, also, is a theme in the work of [Martin] Heidegger—the need to care for what is closest to us, rather than ignoring it. Often, in climbing, when we reached the peak of a mountain, I have thought about Sackville and those aspects of Sackville that I neglect because I am caught up in my professional life. Similarly, when you read a good book, it gives a different light to your everyday experience, validates it in some sense.

ANNE The ascension, then, is not to take flight from earth but to make us more noticing? We go back, not away, by going up?

LILIANE Yes, the ascension grounds us more authentically on the earth.

ANNE Things in their sensuality, persons in their sensuality, get noticed in your work. Do we owe our loyalties, our fidelities, finally, to our desires and passions? The second section of *Fidelities* begins with people such as the cyclist and the fisherman (“Still Life” and “Marriage,” respectively) who are divided from their desires.

LILIANE For the fisherman, his desire was his labour, his work. It is a question of whether you can keep the fidelity. Infidelity means not completely

giving yourself to this labour or to whatever, veering off into other directions before the “marriage” has been consummated.

ANNE The poem “Marriage” suggests that the “mind’s speed” has to do with body’s speed.

LILIANE Intensity comes from facing the elements. For me, mountain climbing, or hiking at the Bay of Fundy, is an exposure to the elements. That has always been a source of inspiration to me. My source of inspiration would be exposure to the winds and the sun in rough circumstances.

ANNE Would you say that your poetry is against austerities and for the passions?

LILIANE I like the word “openness.” Any kind of repression I abhor. Repression comes under many forms, many mantles—words and smiles—different guises. To remain open in one’s passions, to remain alert and curious, to get beyond the masks and the self-imposed chains, that is important.

ANNE *Fidelities* moves between Europe and North America. Is this the traversal of most importance in your poetry?

LILIANE It certainly seems to come back as a constant theme in my poetry.

ANNE Perhaps the best expression of the Europe-Canada traversal occurs in the “Diptych” that introduces *Dream Museum*. In the second sonnet, winter is “A cathedral navigating angels / and miracles home through the dark” (13). Is this what the Maritime winter is for you?

LILIANE Yes, the Maritime winter is well elicited in that image. The plentitude I experience here in winter, I’ve never felt in the “splenetic” European winter months.

ANNE Your last book, the collection of essays *Frescoes*, is a very European book.

LILIANE *Frescoes* is not without America too. There is the essay on [Edmond] Dune and the essay on “Minescapes.” Both re-locate European poetry, that of Dune and that of Anne Blanchot-Philippi, into the Maritime context of my poetry classes. Places, like other images, shift and travel.

ANNE Do you think of yourself as a migrant, an immigrant, or a Canadian?

LILIANE I am a Canadian. I feel at home here. I like the word “pilgrim,” and I like the idea of journeying for adventure. Although I must say that when I compare my travels now with that period when we used to do extreme climbing, it is the earlier travelling that would qualify—at least in the public’s mind—as adventure. Mind you, the mountains have been for me so heightened, so filled with plentitude, as a result of seeing them in the works of artists like [Alberto] Giacometti and [Giovanni]

Segantini and Giacometti's father [Giovanni]. I love to go into the Bregaglia Valley where Giacometti hails from. When I look at those mountains now, after having looked at them in paintings, they are so much richer than when I only climbed them.

ANNE So, painting helps you to see and to experience the landscape?

LILIANE In Holland, on the coast, we were surprised all the time by the showers, and we metaphorically flew into the museums. We thought then that we were right in the paintings. It was quite a wonderful experience. You can't walk very long on the dykes [in Holland] without being showered.

ANNE Every summer you return to Europe for the mountains and what might be called an immersion in culture. What would happen if you stayed all year round in Sackville?

LILIANE There are many things to be had, and still to be discovered, here. Eventually, when I am too old to fly, I'll stay here, buy myself two dogs, and with them, Cyril and I will run around the countryside all year long. Many of the *Frescoes* travel pieces speak of the return home to Sackville. The travellers long for the Maritimes.

ANNE The point of the compass in the *Fidelities* poem "Winter Fires" is "North." And in another poem, from where the speaker stands, the woods extend a thousand miles beyond "journey[ing] / to grounds unknown" (44). Is "North," like the mountains of Europe, access to the unknown?

LILIANE Yes, I have that feeling particularly here in Canada. I don't have it in the European forests because they are so different, so well-cared for. You have to have a permit to fell trees there. They have a different relationship to their by-now cultivated woods.

ANNE "Six Personae" are all women, all house-bound. The woman in "Dreamland" wants to trade "this stained north" for Florida. Other women, in these poems, are able to transform where they are through books or work. The transformation is imaged as "parachute" or as the "awakening" of the angel "lost in her body" (*Fidelities* 52, 51). Is this another version of the elevation pursued by climbers?

LILIANE Many angels appear in my work. As an artist, I am interested in angels as messengers. That woman [in "Mornings at Home"], with the angel lost in her body, is someone who might still answer to the call of that messenger. We have the choice in life to answer, in different ways, to those calls.

ANNE Your earlier word was “mission.” Is the angel, or the messenger, the one who offers the mission?

LILIANE He brings a message. In Greek literature it was Hermes, the messenger of the gods, the patron saint of interpreters. In my literary criticism class, I tell my students that I want them to become hermeneuts, to deliver the text, to open its message. The angel’s work would be in the framework of those images.

ANNE Rilke, you say, “called ordinary existence life unlive” (*Fidelities* 68), but in your Vermeer poem, it is the radiant ordinariness of Vermeer’s figures—the way they handle “household tools”—that seems to make “everything possible” (67). What are the avenues to this exaltation in the midst of the mundane?

LILIANE It is a certain bearing on the part of the individual. If you look at Vermeer’s milkmaid, her way of pouring that milk becomes a creative act. It all depends on whether you can make out of an ordinary experience, or a simple thing, something creative. Each Vermeer painting contains a very ordinary act. His work is a praise of those acts that normally escape us. Whereas Rilke, especially when you get to the *Duino Elegies*, conceives of the “mission” as something much more dramatic.

ANNE Rilke does say in Elegy Eight, after all his struggle with the angels, “Perhaps we are here in order to say house, bridge, fountain. . . .” He says that naming the ordinary is what we are here for.

LILIANE Yes. And it is why he finished his literary life by writing very humble and simple French poems. The epitaph on his gravestone (“Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight / Of being no-one’s sleep beneath / So many lids” [*Frescoes* 66]) can be read to mean the human word does not violate the natural thing.

ANNE The work of many painters (Knaff, Giacometti, Colville, Memling), as well as Vermeer, is honoured in *Fidelities*, and in your other collections as well. In the poem “Holland,” you say, “We sailed to those urgencies / Only paintings can hold” (66), and in another poem, the painting is a “Portal” (*DM* 36). What does this door open onto?

LILIANE A painting always invites you to go over a threshold. A transformation occurs. When you go into a dwelling—a painting in this case—you have to purify yourself in some sense. It is almost a religious experience.

ANNE In *Frescoes*, you talk about entering a painting—it’s a Memling, I think—and that entrance requires a shift: “you must break to a different language, purify your words” (50). In one poem, the painting is an altar

(*DM* 39). Has painting—and the other arts—replaced religious ritual as an approach to the divine?

LILIANE For some people it has. However, the arts have always been competitors of religions, kinds of religions for those who practise them and for those who take them seriously. Still, that does not necessarily mean that they replace the traditional religions. Some churches today are filled with people who avoid museums, where you step over that portal and experience some sort of enlightenment. Although today when I contemplate the spreading of popular culture—its power on the minds and the bodies of the young—I often wonder about the chance of the arts in this new configuration. I believe that the arts will always be for the esoteric. That doesn't mean that there won't be herds of people racing through the museums. The deeply felt and procreated experience of art is never going to be that of the wide masses of people, or of the advocates of the herd-mentality.

ANNE Is there any way in which it could be made to do so?

LILIANE Not any that I can see today. You can take a Van Gogh, or other painting, and you can blow it up huge and have it flashing from billboards and from screens, but look what you have done. You have turned it into popular culture. It is no longer a religious experience of conversion or change. It has become trivialized. Being ripped out of habitual patterns, seeing with different eyes—that is what art does.

ANNE So is that liability for change open only to those capable of “esoteric” experience?

LILIANE I think anybody can have that experience, but you are never going to get it in a group.

ANNE “The herd” is what you said earlier. Is art, then, in its many forms elitist?

LILIANE I would say that it is condemned to be that way. This is not an easy burden to bear. Many poets yearn to be popular poets, and would do anything to be popular poets. Even great poets fall into that trap when they go on endless reading tours. Even great poets feel the need to be confirmed. I like Camus' story “The Exile and the Kingdom” about the artist who doesn't know that he exists and, therefore, seeks confirmation. The truly great works of art are never going to be heroic flags for mass and popular culture. Sad thought.

ANNE Was it otherwise once? What about the groundlings at the Globe Theatre watching Shakespeare. Or to put it in the Maritime context, poets like Bliss Carman and Charles G. D. Roberts had a wide public fol-

lowing. Is this a twentieth-century phenomenon: popular culture split off from the allegedly elitist culture? Were they once one?

LILIANE We are today living in a different world. The mass media have done so much and so little at the same time. When there was no television, when all that we take for granted was absent, people were not exposed to as much mass media. They had the time and interest then for even more elitist literature.

ANNE In “Chateau,” you speak of those “airy cathedrals, / erected for a God already withdrawn” (*Fidelities* 70). If God and the angels are not in the cathedrals, have they gone from the world?

LILIANE Speaking now as a critic—the poems have to stand on their own—I would say religion in its traditional form, the godhead as it was conceived, is dead, as Nietzsche says. And remember, he said, too, that human beings have killed him. That doesn’t mean that the sacred is gone. The sacred undergirds our existence here on the earth. The sacred is far removed from all of the myths or stories that say if you do this or that, you are going to get your bonbon after you die, and you will be singing in the choirs of the angels. And if you don’t do that, you will go down into the frying pan. That type of reckoning, merchandising, mechanical explication of god, I have always found repulsive. Already as a child, I combatted the priests on that notion of the godhead. Hölderlin talked about the gods having fled and the poets and the artists being the wine gods’ disciples. They are going through the night searching for the new gods who have not yet come. I think that the sacred is there, but we are on the brink of losing it if we give ourselves over to the labyrinths of the Internet, for example.

At this point the interview moves to the area made famous by Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, the Westcock marsh, where the dykes, built by the Acadians, rise above the reddish-brown flats. We are walking along the coast and looking for a spot—in this serenely peaceful landscape—that is sheltered from the wind so that we can carry on with the interview.

LILIANE At first when I saw the Bay of Fundy, I was stunned—I’d never seen water like that—but now I really love it. When the sun is on the mud-flats, after the water has withdrawn, it is, perhaps, the most erotic landscape in the world, a landscape of bare flanks.

ANNE Europe was your birthplace, but coming to New Brunswick was your birth as a poet. Why did that move provoke poetry?

LILIANE I wrote [my] first poem on our first sabbatical leave away from New Brunswick. We went from Europe, where we were on leave, to Los Angeles for three weeks. To go from Europe to the farthest extremes of Western culture brought on quite a culture shock. It must have been around 1976. When I went back to Europe for the rest of the sabbatical leave, I suddenly started writing poems. I was also in the process of co-writing a book of literary criticism [*Address: Rimbaud Mallarmé Butor*, 1979]. The parts on Mallarmé and Butor were being written at the same time as the first poems. It was living here in New Brunswick that sparked my poetry. I don't think I would ever have written poetry if I had stayed in the United States. All the years previously down there never elicited poems from me. So it was very important that I came to New Brunswick and found a home here.

ANNE Your Maritimes are "primordial" (*Seismographs* 58), not pastoral. You speak of the "defiance and savagery" of the Tantramar marshes and the looming forests. After thirty years of living here, do the Maritimes remain, for you, "primordial"?

LILIANE Yes. That has never changed; it's truly amazing. When we come back from Europe, we go out to Wood Point [on the Fundy coast] and beyond to the last possible point. I always have exactly the same feeling—this is the primordial, originary, landscape of my life.

ANNE So you wouldn't use the word "pastoral" to describe this landscape?

LILIANE You have only to come here in the winter—the whiteouts, the fierceness of blizzards—and you couldn't possibly say it was pastoral. Also, in the winter, it becomes a landscape of gigantic constructions done by some enormous force. The tide, as it comes and goes, deposits huge blocks of ice right up to the dykes. It might look pastoral now because it is green, but there is a long, long period of the year when it is not like this. Someone from Toronto might see us here now—two women sitting on the dyke—and think that we came right out of a pastoral painting, but that is just one side of this landscape.

ANNE In an essay on Sackville in *Seismographs*, you say, "When I saw it first in a wild February storm, a desire arose to pierce the secret withheld from me. A language had to be invented to make the ground sing" (53).

LILIANE Yes. That is true. The Romans used to talk about the genius of the place. I believe that every place has a different genius. In Europe, too, there are different voices in the ground.

ANNE What, I want to know, are the features of the language that speak this ground? Is there a Maritime poetic?

LILIANE I think that my poetry answers that best.

ANNE Do you feel as though you belong to a Maritime community of writers?

LILIANE I suppose I do, but is there such a community? Aren't universities and university professors rounding up that community? Most writers work alone, but then because of [university] courses, they are suddenly rounded up.

ANNE You mean it is a definition after the fact?

LILIANE Well, you know if it hadn't been for your course in Maritime poetry and the "Poets Talking Series" [a series of lectures by Maritime poets held in conjunction with the course], I never would have met you, and we wouldn't be sitting in the Westcock Marsh, looking at the brown Fundy and talking about poetry.

ANNE It seems to me that it is on such occasions that the university is really doing its work—bringing people together, out of which comes further creativity. The Maritime community happens when we are talking together, or writing back and forth, about what we are working on, exchanging poems and manuscripts. That, not the one defined in the curriculum, is the Maritime community. I ask this question because you mention writing in solitude a great deal. In the essay "What Are Poets For" (*Frescoes* 78-84), you raise the question, Is poetry private or public?

LILIANE In that essay, I try to give you the experience that I had when I went to one of the most important poetry gatherings currently held in Europe. I went there, as an invited Canadian poet, but I also [was] thinking about the meaning of the whole enterprise. There were poetry readings and also big debates about whether poetry could still stand as a force in today's culture. The answer is there in the last sentence of the essay: "Poetry does not just tie us to the invisible, but also to the visible world, and to our fellows." Actually the question "What Are Poets For," is the one that Hölderlin asked. He was a man who took his position as a poet very seriously. His question goes on: "What are poets for in needy times?" I tried to loosely attach the essay to that question.

ANNE Silence is the word and the condition often associated in your work with Canada, but silence is also associated with the mountains of Europe. Is the achievement of silence—and the achievements in silence—what connects these two experiences: winter in Canada and the mountains of Europe?

LILIANE I have friends in Europe who go to the cafés because they must have noise around them to write. I must have something of the monk in

me because I value the silence most. I like music very much too, but it has to come out of the silence.

ANNE It seems to me that there are three Europes in your work. There is the Europe characterized by the church and domestic rigidities and social formalities—guardians of morality. Present-day Europe, which has replaced that earlier order, is characterized by bankers, finance, and cities thick with truck traffic. Then there is the Europe of your mountains and museums. Do these distinctions explain why the final section of *Fidelities* is called “The Past Released and Held,” which seems to encode a gesture whereby the speaker would let some things go and yet hold onto others?

LILIANE There is another Europe: the Europe of my friends. To go even further—beyond the three Europes that you discern—Europe is now something very dynamic and changing, especially if I compare what Europe used to be [during the war, after the war] with what it has become, not just financially, but also culturally. There are so many cultural opportunities pulsing. It is really booming culturally. Even a small country like Luxembourg, which at one time was considered a provincial place, is now cosmopolitan. The leading musicians on tour in Europe think that Luxembourg is the place, better than Paris, to perform. In Luxembourg there is a very demanding public. Of course, they have a conservatory there. This renewal and vibrancy is connected with a United Europe. They are aware that they are, together, a very important political, economic, and cultural world power. They have great hopes for their future. Europe is a place that has a lot going for it right now. If Europe had not become an economic power, it would not have the cultural vibrancy that one finds there today.

ANNE In *Frescoes* there is a fear of the commercialization of the very art that has been enabled by that economic growth.

LILIANE Commerce and art are always rivals. Baudelaire expounded a fierce hatred of commerce in his vilification of the merchant. Commerce for us is a necessary evil.

ANNE In *Fidelities*, Europe is “an old lady . . . [who] believes in ruins” (57). Yet the New England nuns who visit can expect to find “deceit under marble floors.” What is that deceit?

LILIANE Those nuns go to Rome; they do not visit the rest of Europe. In Rome, they examine the Vatican’s and the church’s power. That poem talks about what can be expected today of the Roman Church. The deceit is linked to whatever has been constructed in that seat of power. Actually,

now I find the church to be a very interesting historical phenomenon. As a young child, memorizing the catechism, the church didn't appear interesting to me at all.

ANNE In your essay on Rilke in *Frescoes*, you say, "Rilke's line 'Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror' . . . forced me to look at myself and at poetry with straighter eyes, with a sword in my hands" (66). Does this forecast a new direction in your poetry?

LILIANE There are always changes occurring. I'm still in the process of change.

ANNE The Blakean image of the sword in the hand suggests something revolutionary, but you mean there will be no more change in your poetry than there has always been—a gradual change?

LILIANE I would have to look into my diaries to see what I did the day after I visited Raron [where Rilke is buried]. I must say I was extraordinarily moved. I go there regularly, and I am moved everytime I go there to pay my respects.

ANNE Earlier you were talking about art and the spectator's willingness to be converted by art. Was that moment at Rilke's grave such a moment for you?

LILIANE I think we all have moments of enlightenment when we see with completely different eyes, with "straighter eyes." My first visit to Raron was very much that way. We also drove to Muzot, the house where Rilke lived. I was very affected there. Sometimes when you go to places where other great spirits have been, they seem to have left something there that speaks to you.

ANNE The poets whom you admire—such as Rimbaud and Rilke—were wanderers. Is there a link between travel and the transgression of boundaries, of limits?

LILIANE Yes. All travelling is a transgression of boundaries. That is particularly true in mountain climbing, but it happens in reading too.

ANNE Critics have focused a lot of attention on the cosmopolitan qualities of your poetry—its learning and culture—but actually you are, as well, an excavator of the domestic life, as in the "Accounts" series in *Dream Museum*. Husbands and wives have different accounts of their lives, and in the parent-child poems, parents thwart and deform their children's lives, unaware they are doing so. Are we all living different stories even when we live intimately together?

LILIANE A lot of people—not everybody—but a lot do lead different stories.

You will find a lot more on that theme in my very early books—*Syntax of Ferment*, *Assailing Beats*, and *October Winds*. (On that cover you see, by the way, a picture of this dyke.) I was preoccupied then by that topic, not so much any more now. The writing of poetry provides wonderful occasions to vicariously live other lives. I feel that often when I write poems about people. It's a chance of living another existence.

ANNE In *Life in Another Language*, the polarities are “well-plotted days” or “sedition” (16). Must the poet, in your opinion, live “Outside Approval,” which is the title of the piece containing that pair?

LILIANE I would say that poetry, as all art, lives “outside approval,” and is fundamentally revolutionary. Sadly, our educational institutions have been the instruments, over the centuries, for eroding that which is powerful in poetry, taking the revolutionary punch out of it. They reduce poetry to traditional frameworks and categories, and overlay it with obfuscations.

ANNE You have published a book of prose poems *Life in Another Language*; *Word-House* is an epic family narrative, and you have just published *Frescoes*, narrative wall paintings of places visited. What effect do these excursions into prose have on your poetry?

LILIANE I have written prose and poetry together for many years. I don't think that there is any particular effect. They go side-by-side. All the essays in *Frescoes* were written at the same time that I was writing poems. I write all of the time. Writing prose or poetry is a good way of living well.

ANNE In *Frescoes* you give us not only a map of Europe by way of your travels, but also a calendar of engagements, and the artists with whom you are engaged in that book are strong male artists. The book does end with an Emily Dickinson quotation, but otherwise the artists are male ones.

LILIANE Male and female artists came up naturally, without gender differentiation in the landscapes I visited for *Frescoes*. I don't like to see male and female pitted against each other for purposes of “agendas.” When we did the extreme mountain climbing, in conditions of extreme danger, the only thing that mattered was getting to the top alive in a common effort (without gender thoughts). It is a terrible shame that today in universities, young women are taught to hate males or to see themselves, which is even more criminal, as the victims of men. Writing poetry is also an extreme situation. Questions of gender are beside the point.

ANNE You make the people and places of *Frescoes* feel familiar to the reader. And you make those artists and their work familiar, but the woman of note

that I remember meeting in that art world is “Annetta,” the model (41-45).

LILIANE Annetta Giacometti, as far as I am concerned, is one of the most interesting women in the history of art. For more than fifty years, she was the model not just for her husband [Giovanni Giacometti], but also for her son [Alberto]. There is no other woman in the history of art that has been depicted as many times in paintings and sculptures. She is one of the strongest women that ever lived in the Bregaglia. Even today, a long time after her death, you meet people who either had relatives who knew her or have heard of her, and they still speak of her.

ANNE Your poetry has an East-West axis, but perhaps your permanent residency is in a house of books and pictures. I’m sorting through your library—reading the poems that you have written on poems. Are you—to use your phrase—“in conversation” with these earlier pieces of literature?

LILIANE All reading and writing is a conversing with art works, present and past. With other artists (poets, musicians, painters, and so forth), my work is part of the house of art. That house is grounded on the earth. And, changing the wording of Heidegger’s phrase, I would add: “Art is the house of being.”

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