

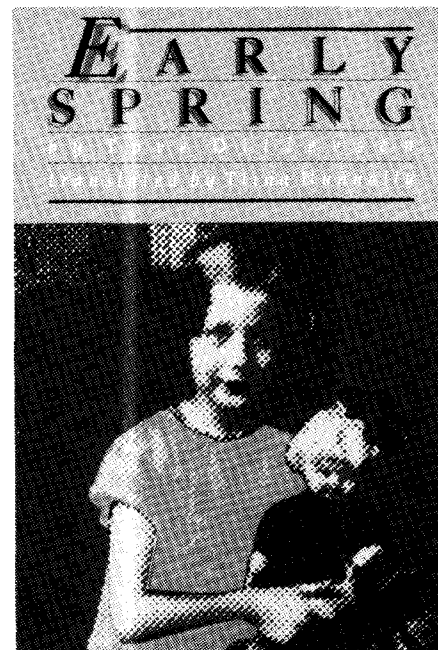
reader are universal. It does not matter that the author and the reader are separated by socio-economic conditions, or indeed, by distance and language. Whatever the outward differences, the inner feelings of Tove will be instantly recognized by readers everywhere.

Tove Ditlevsen grows up in a family where touching is suspect and any expression of love non-existent. Times are hard in Copenhagen during the 1930s for members of the working class. Her socialist father and her non-political mother are as different as if they "come from different planets." She quickly learns that pretence is a way of survival, and she suffers greatly for the discrepancies between reality and truth that she sees around her. Her mother and brother laugh at her fondness for words and attribute it to her "oddness," an obvious result of reading too much. Her father tells her in no uncertain terms that poetry writing is not a pursuit for a girl.

In desperation she begins a long search for someone, anyone, with whom she can share her inner thoughts and dreams. Several times she believes that she has found this person, but she is continually disappointed. There is her grandmother, with whom she shares a love for the old hymns. There is her beautiful, but superficial, girlfriend. Later on, there are

any number of young men, of whom she hopes that at least one will be turned, by love, into that perfect friend. There is the editor of the *Social-Demokraten's Sunday Magazine*, who sees the potential in this gangling, shy fourteen year old girl. There is the old antiquarian bookseller, with whom she feels a silent understanding based on their common love of books. But it is not till she meets Viggo F. Møller, editor of a small literary magazine, that she knows instinctively that she has found what she has been looking for all her life. For the first time she does not feel alone. This man is the key to that other world that she knows is there, but has never been able to catch hold of.

Early Spring reads as a novel about the maturing of an ugly duckling that finds consolation in the sounds of words, into a beautiful swan that writes poetry. At the same time, the reader is treated to a long line of authentic characters, who in their own peculiar ways help fill out the plumage on that truly northern bird. It is a story of a determined spirit that prevails in spite of the destructive forces around it. Tove Ditlevsen finally understands the impact of a cold, bleak childhood and a precarious adolescence on her development into a very special human being and an artist. Hans Christian Andersen's words on the plight of the artist: "First you go through



such an awful lot — then you become famous," aptly describe Ditlevsen's experience; she does go through a lot and she does become famous.

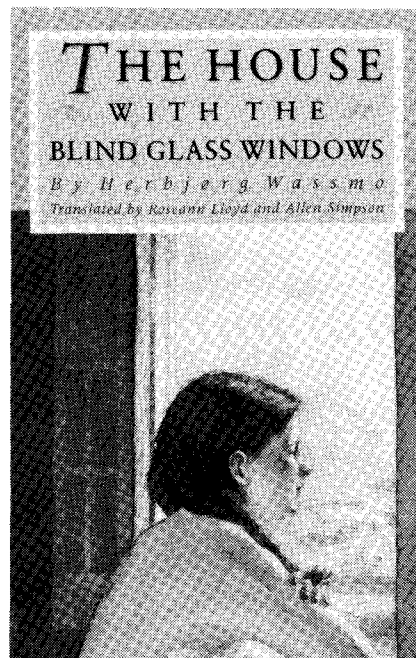
Early Spring will appeal to readers of both sexes and varied ages because of the universality of the author's profound insight into human nature and human relationships, and because the flowing style of the narrative sustains the attention of the reader throughout. This is a credit to both author and translator.

THE HOUSE WITH THE BLIND GLASS WINDOWS

Herbjørg Wassmo. Translated by Roseann Lloyd and Allen Simpson. Seattle, Washington: The Seal Press, 1987.

Seija Paddon

The Christian adage 'not everything dies,' *non omnis moriar*, assumes a mythology of its own in Herbjørg Wassmo's novel, *The House with the Blind Glass Windows*. Not unlike the defenseless holothurian which, when in danger, splits itself in two and leaves one half to be devoured by its predator in order to escape in the other, Tora, the sexually abused girl who is the central character in Wassmo's novel, intuitively understands the value of self-sectioning as the only means of survival. When in danger, she imagines two



distinctly separate bodily selves; the helpless and powerless one has to suffer abuse and defeat, the other escapes — whole in

itself — and ultimately at the novel's close, achieves a dramatic victory.

The novel, the first volume in a trilogy about Tora, was originally written in Norwegian; the author is the winner of the 1986 Nordic Prize for Literature. The English translation ably reflects what I take to be the lyricism in the 'original' text. The novel's setting is the bleak landscape of a fishing village in the archipelago of northern Norway where nature and climate conspire to test the many-faceted notion of survival in equally many-faceted ways. The narrative commentary on nature's overwhelming presence runs the expressive gamut from sheer exasperation to wonder that barely finds words. The fall — when "the good Lord had sunk all of October and November at the bottom of a sea of fog...with an irritating moon that promised a bright tomorrow and lied" — finds its contrast in February, when the sun returns and is visible above the old, snow-covered tiled roofs, when

winter darkness is "shouted out through open windows" and "poetry lays ambushed in the details; in the blessed dripping from the broken rain gutter, for example."

Wassmo's suspenseful grip on the reader, however, has as its source her powerful depiction of another kind of test for survival. The novel begins with the sentence: "She didn't know when she first became aware of it: the danger." Danger carries the name Henrik. He is Tora's stepfather, in whom the sadism inherent in uncontested power has overcome all bounds, and hence no longer needs to explain itself. For Tora life constantly menaced means familiarity with the dark side of the unpredictable. It means being held over the edge of a cliff which overhangs the ocean; it means being able to identify a person by his/her footsteps in the dark, or listening to steps so silent that only the breathing "they're full of" audibly identifies imminent danger. The notion "A room of one's own" takes on a twist the colour of black lightning. A room of one's own is not sufficient unless it has a door that can be locked, with a lock that holds.

Wassmo's writing reflects keen authorial understanding of how fear affects the human psyche, how it fragments a whole; hence the many images of dismemberment in the novel. It is the hands

that first become visible in the dark. Sensing threat, Tora's heart somehow hangs outside her body and "it takes a while to get it back inside again." Wassmo also links the phenomenon of fragmentation with concretized emotions. Shame is something into which Tora "creeps" or which often "fills her head" as if it were something solid; but since shame is God's invention, it is inescapable. The notion of shame in Wassmo's narrative also emphasizes the unexamined hypocrisy of the socially conventional. In the dramatic language of the religious, Tora is termed an outsider because she is "the result of the wages of sin." In the harshly realistic language of cruel children (all too apt at mimicking their elders) she is called "the German bastard," an identity painful to endure in post-war Norway.

Wassmo's novel can be viewed as representative of feminist fiction to the same degree as we view male writing about the various Huck Finns as representative of male/ist fiction. Her stark realism deglamorizes war and emphasizes its demoralizing effects which last long past the last skirmish. Unmistakably, hatred once unleashed necessarily persists in finding scapegoats and new targets. Moreover, while wartime's embittering experiences happen to both Tora's mother, Ingrid, and Henrik, Ingrid cannot afford to indulge in self-destruction and self-pity. As female

characters — Ingrid, her sister Rachel, Tora's curiously misnamed girl-friend Sol, and most magnificently Tora herself — emerge stronger than some of the male characters, it is also evident that they have no option but to endure at all costs. Thus, in Wassmo's fictional world, male-invested power turns against itself and life goes on although nothing can be fully erased or blotted out. The unarticulated love between Tora and Ingrid, sparsely and movingly sketched, forms an incontestable bond between them. Together Wassmo's characters, male and female, weak and strong, seemingly simple and on reflection complex, make up a fictional mosaic of the unsentimentally human. Significantly, Tora's passage from childhood to adolescence evokes in the reader near-perplexing awe. A menaced child who observes light rising from the grey and blue of the ocean and insists that the glow illuminates the sky against the pragmatic adult commentary to the contrary, is nurturing an inner core which will remain unassailable. In fact, it is in the depiction of Tora's inner growth that Wassmo's narrative skills most manifestly succeed.

In the end the novel, despite its dramatic conclusion, resists easy summations. Rather, it raises some disturbing questions, such as: why is a painfully and deservedly won victory inevitably accompanied by feelings of guilt?

THE CELEBRATED MARY ASTELL: AN EARLY ENGLISH FEMINIST

Ruth Perry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

THE FIRST ENGLISH FEMINIST: 'REFLECTIONS ON MARRIAGE' AND OTHER WRITINGS BY MARY ASTELL

Edited by Bridget Hill. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

Ann B. Shteir

Mary Astell (1666-1731) was an essayist and a writer of religious and political tracts, and part of a tradition of femi-

nist polemic which Moira Ferguson has delineated in her *First Feminists* as yet another women's tradition in writing. The two works for which Astell is best known are: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies For the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (Part I 1696, Part II 1697) and *Reflections on Marriage* (1706). In the field of 18th century women's studies two Marys constitute the parentheses around the richness of feminist ferment: Mary Astell at the beginning and Mary Wollstonecraft at the end. They are both Enlightenment rationalists who analyze female oppression within marriage. Both attack prevailing forms of education for women and modes of fashionable behaviour. Both also see sexuality as problematic for women. But whereas Astell's ideal education for women is single-sex, Wollstonecraft's is not. Whereas Wollstonecraft's world is mother-centered, Astell's vision is woman-centered and also celibate. Above all, Wollstonecraft's

critique of women's education is part of a larger social critique, calling for transformation in institutions, whereas Astell writes as a political conservative committed to the institutional status quo. Astell's writing poses problems, therefore, for those who want pure links between feminist critiques of women's circumstances and a call for transformation in the socio-political institutions responsible for women's oppression.

Astell was born into a prosperous family in northern England, and she maintained a level of material comfort throughout her life. She was allied to Anglican ideology and to political views which elevated monarchy over incipient democratic theory. She supported the dominant conservative ideology of her day in many ways. Yet within that she worked fiercely for women. In the ferocity of her commitment to women's education and in her acerbic analysis of marriage, she had no counterpart at her time as a writer.