Feminizing Feminism:

Constance Beresford-Howe and the Quest for Female Freedom

by Andrea O'Reilly

Constance Beresford Howe's trilogy, *The Book of Eve* (1973), *A Population of One* (1977), *The Marriage Bed* (1981), weaves together the diverse patterns of women's lives to create an intricate tapestry of female experience.* Like the works of her better known contemporaries, Laurence, Engel, Atwood and Munro, Beresford-Howe's novels, singularly and collectively, form a fictional matrix which is specifically gynocentric in its thematic and theoretical texture. In its diversity of characters — twenty-three year old Anne, a deserted wife in *The Marriage Bed*, Willy, a single professional in *A Population*, and sixty-five year old Eva, who walks out on her husband after forty years of marriage in *Eve* — the trilogy reflects the different socio-economic circumstances of contemporary women. However, despite these differences in the characters' life situations and the plot structures in which they unfold, all three women, as Beresford-Howe explains, "are caught in the same dilemma. They're seeking freedom and what to do with it once they've found it."[1] Importantly, as this quest motif structures and unifies the characters' development, it also, in its consideration of female emancipation, makes the texts not only gynocentric but feminist in their thematic orientation.

In their pursuit of "freedom," Anne, Willy and Eva not only experience and speak to the patriarchal institutions, myths and so forth that hinder the expression of female autonomy, they also question the value of freedom as it is defined in a male world. Their quests become, in the words of the feminist theologian Carol Christ, "a process of renaming,"[2] a process which involves the rejection of the patriarchal definition of freedom and the male-identified values on which it is based and an affirmation of female-identified values from which a new gynocentric understanding of freedom is achieved. Seemingly, therefore, the feminist ideology at work in the trilogy is that of maternal feminism or what Angela Miles has termed "Integrative Feminism," a feminism which affirms and celebrates woman's specificity and asks not for the eradication of women's traditional roles and values but for the recognition of their importance.[3] Like the "difference" feminists who construe the heightening of gender difference as the route to sexual equality, Beresford-Howe ultimately argues in *The Marriage Bed* that freedom is to be found in wifedom and motherhood.

However, inherent in Beresford-Howe's thesis is a fundamental contradiction which disturbs the thematic coherence of the trilogy. Similar to Integrative Feminism, which is rendered problematic by its paradoxical premise that woman's specificity is both the source of her oppression and the means to transcend it, the trilogy is marred by theoretical inconsistencies in its feminist agenda. For while Beresford-Howe criticizes the limitations of the feminine private sphere in *Eve*, she suggests in *A Population* that the either/or domestic/public dichotomy can not be synthesized, and she accepts, if not glorifies, the circumscriptions of the traditional mother/wife role in *The Marriage Bed*. Underlining this larger structural contradiction are narrative tensions in *A Population* and *The Book of Eve* which further unravel the thematic fibre of the trilogy and the feminist ideology from which it is made. In each novel a subtext encoded in a symbolic framework displaces the feminist theme through its suggestion of an alternative reading. These narrative crosscurrents and the textual ambiguities which they create not only make the texts thematically enigmatic, they also point to an ambivalence in Beresford-Howe's feminist position. Therefore, though the trilogy is feminist in its consideration of female freedom, it ultimately expresses through the textual ambiguities and theoretical contradictions an authorial voice uncomfortable with and unsure about feminism in both its theory and praxis.

The first novel in the trilogy, *The Book of Eve*, is structured as a spiritual quest: Eva transcends "nothingness," the sterility of her conventional marriage; experiences "an awakening," to reject the male-identified values of her former life; and finally undergoes a process of "renaming," a creation of a new self and world which reflects her acquired wholeness.[4] Furthermore, Eva, like other female heroes of this genre, is an older woman whose development transpires outside the confines of society in the timeless cloistered cellar. The motif of descent and ascent of the spiritual quest is also conveyed in this text; Eva literally goes underground to resurface following the completion of her quest, as symbolically revealed through the opening of the basement door. However, despite its conformity to the patterns and motifs of a successful quest, other symbols and textual undercurrents suggest another interpretation and point to the author's ambivalence. This countermovement undermines the text's feminist theme, colouring its radicalism with conservatism.

The various stages of Eva's quest are developed through a symbolic matrix which marks the end of one phase and the beginning of another. Eva's initial psychic experience of "nothingness" is symbolically introduced through her reference to the clocks which represent the self-abnegation she experienced in her marriage. In her introspective search for an explanation concerning her desertion, Eva concludes: "Our house was full of clocks rustling their self-importance and coughing delicately like people in church

— they had something to do with it" (p. 7). In contrast, the absence of time in her cellar, as she observes, symbolizes her freedom: "Funny, after all those years with Burt's clocks, not to know when I woke up what the time was, or even the day. But I felt a lot better" (p. 54). As winter approaches, the critical necessity of boots threatens to thwart her quest, for without them she is unable to shop and hence retain her independence. She rejects a return home as the solution because "those clocks with prim hands over their eyes would reclaim [her]" (p. 66). Her eventual purchase of sneakers not only ensures the continuation of her quest, it also, in defying convention ("I would graduate to a freak overnight in those shoes," p. 67-68), signifies a turning away from the clocks and the values they represent.

As the clocks represent the "nothingness" which initiates Eva on her quest, the timelessness achieved through the seclusion of the cellar and reinforced through the associative present to past stream-of-consciousness narrative structure — itself a disruption of chronological time — provides the nurturing climate for her development; similarly, Eva's letter to May functions as a concrete externalization of her internal awakening which, by its revelations, creates the psychic condition of self-awareness necessary for the continuation of a spiritual quest. In identifying the emotional deprivation experienced in her former life, "The whole thing (motherhood and marriage), is just servitude to some enormous machine" (pp. 52-53), and through her realization, "But its rejecting so much I once valued that I think is so important" (p. 63), Eva has secured control of her life, enabling her to begin that process or renaming from which her self-defined values will emerge. Eva's "finding" facilitates and symbolizes this process: as she re-evaluates her life, placing it in the context of her emerging moral criteria, she combs the streets of Montreal, learning to differentiate between the valuable and the unvaluable. This selection process is of critical importance because through it Eva creates and consolidates her new identity. Therefore, her thoughts during the final conversation with her son, "at last something of value was being communicated in spite of our clumsy words" (pp. 169-170), indicate that Eva has realized and affirmed that which has been defined as valuable. Her attraction to Johnny marks a further rejection of traditional values. Not only is Johnny unconventional, he also, as Eva observes, in eluding definitions and labels, challenges the patriarchal thinking which explains by way of classification: "Now I knew him better, it seemed to me I'd never met a man before quite so complicated, such a collection of paradoxes — absurd and wise, funny and profound, animal and thinker" (p. 128). Therefore, as the "finding" metaphor symbolizes Eva's process of redefinition, her reflections during the telephone call and the character of Johnny confirm its completion. Seemingly, therefore, Eva has not only realized the ambition of her quest, a renaming of self and world, she has also translated her spiritual awakening into a social reality, establishing an unconventional heterogeneous non-biological family.

Importantly, however, other symbolic occurrences, particularly Johnny's role, call into question the success of Eva's quest. Seemingly, Johnny's function is that of what Annis Pratt has termed a "Green-World lover," "an ideal, nonpatriarchal lover (who) appears as an initiatory guide and... aids at difficult points in the quest."[5] It is Johnny's, "Adam's," arrival at Eva's door which releases Eva from her depression. Eva's spiritual transformation, initiated by Johnny, is described as a religious ceremony. The drinking of the wine generates a mystical conversion, rejuvenating Eva's power and restoring her vision. Her spiritual rebirth culminates with a baptism: "Naked as the newborn, weak and shivering, I stepped into the bath-water and washed myself clean" (p. 90). However, it is also Johnny who urges Eva to eat and replace the weight lost during her isolation. This is significant because the fluctuations in Eva's weight operate symbolically. While Eva's obesity functioned "as a disguise" (p. 16) in her former life, the later loss of twenty-five pounds symbolically reflects the emergence of a new identity. Significantly, Johnny regards obesity as the feminine ideal — "A woman should always have four inches of good fat on her everywhere, all over" (p. 114) — and brings about Eva's later weight gain: if obesity represents Eva's self-denial, then her weight increase indicates that her aspiration, self-definition, has not been achieved. And Johnny's complicity compromises his function as "Green-World lover." Johnny's taming of the cat also renders this role problematic in that it represents the domestication of Eva's tempestuous spirit. This contradiction between the plot's conclusion and the symbolic overtures may only point to a technical oversight or it may underline Beresford-Howe's ambivalence respecting the feminist pursuit of female freedom as it is dramatized in Eva's quest. Whatever the reason, the subtext ultimately qualifies the novel's feminist theme, and in so doing, anticipates the conservatism found in *A Population*.

Beresford-Howe's second novel, *A Population of One*, is also rendered thematically enigmatic and ideologically problematic by its textual ambiguities. Initially the novel is structured as a social quest, "a search for new modes of relationship and action in society,"[6] and centres upon Willy's project, "to marry somebody as promptly as possible — or at the very least to have an affair" (p. 1). This social quest symbolically introduced through the train takes as its goal the realization of the "Project." Upon her arrival in Montreal Willy purchases "Voughish" clothes and sets up a gauche pad to entice an eligible bachelor. Importantly, as with Eva's obesity, these furnishings disguise rather than express Willy's true identity. But her quest necessitates such a persona because, as Willy explains: "I am a nineteenth-century person who has strayed by some regrettable time lag into the wrong place and period. In fiction I would be that anomaly, a Victorian heroine absurdly planted in the twentieth century — a Lucy Snowe in modern Montreal" (pp. 37-38). However, though such a masquerade arrests Willy's development and attracts men, such as Bill Trueblood, who are incompatable with her real self, it is maintained throughout her social quest. It is not until the conclusion of her later spiritual quest that she discards her disguise, as symbolically revealed through her purchase of a Victorian home.

The social quest centres upon Willy and Bill's courtship, charting its vacillations to its climax, the trip to Virginia where, despite Willy's attempts, it fails to be consummated. However, following the termination of the relationship, Willy's response is relief: "I am not — at the moment anyway — oppressed with any sense of failure... Maybe... I am actually getting tougher. Growing up. If so what a good thing" (p. 17). Although the disintegration of the relationship marks a major set-back for the "Project," Willy, as she confides, is more distressed about her estrangement with Archie: "Another end of a chapter. But why is this one so much harder to accept?" (p. 176). This absence of grief and Willy's preoccupation with Archie, circling his home in an hypnotic trance, reveals to the reader and to Willy herself that her attraction to Bill was founded solely on a desperate effort to

realize the "Project." Importantly, Archie's arrival and the restoration of their friendship immediately follows Willy's realization, initiating the transition in the novel's plot.

Archie's death marks the completion of Willy's social quest and begins her spiritual one. Willy's spiritual quest, like that of Eva brings her to a new naming of self and world. This process unfolds symbolically. As Willy climbs the mountain — a metaphor for the emergence of her self-defined identity — she encounters a group of people in a clearing. Whether they and Willy's interactions with them are completely or partially a product of her imagination, is never made quite clear. In her drugged condition, however, she hallucinates, seeing her parents among the crowd. Willy's brief interchange with her "father" operates as an epiphany in that it engenders a psychic condition of self-awareness: "I realize then that my father and mother will never come back: I have seen them truly and for the last time" (p. 196). Willy's realization marks an important change in her self-perception, she has come to see herself as a separate autonomous individual and not as an extension of others or they of her. This revelation anticipates Willy's final awakening at the conclusion of her climb: "It is an illusion. Yes, I understand it all now. There is no more to know" (p. 197). Though its ambiguity is never resolved, Willy's revelation, in its reference to "illusion," suggests that Willy, like Eva, has achieved through her spiritual quest an understanding of the self-deception and destruction inherent in a woman's identification with male-identified values, particularly as they are enforced in the convention of marriage. Moreover, Willy's later rumination: "No one but himself knows how separate, how different, the island-dweller will always be. This makes me smile..." (p. 198), affirms that Willy's achievement of female autonomy has brought with it an acceptance of the aloneness intrinsic to such a self-definition.

In interpreting Willy's grief as a spiritual quest, the final image of Willy as a defeated, disappointed woman condemned to spinsterhood is undercut. For though Willy has failed in her social quest, her freedom acquired through the later spiritual quest allows the expression of her self-defined values and identity. This would not have been possible if the "Project" had been realized. However, the symbolic text which concludes the novel ultimately undermines such a reading. The train ride, by taking Willy back to the origins of her social quest, implies a circular movement which suggests, as Willy concludes, a psychic paralysis: "Absolutely nothing has happened to me... There's no visible difference in me after this year in Vilette" (p. 199). Though such an interpretation is quickly rejected — "No, this trip is not, after all, exactly like the last one. It's completely different, in fact. More interesting. Who knows, perhaps I am too" (p. 200) — it does, nonetheless, cast doubt upon the success of Willy's spiritual quest. The reason for her return, the birth of her sister's baby, and the pregnant woman on the train, which recall the birth in *Eve* and anticipate the one in *The Marriage Bed*, also shroud the novel's conclusion with ambiguity. For though they suggest life and growth, they also remind us of the children Willy will never have.

As with *Eve*, these textual ambiguities express Beresford-Howe's ambivalence concerning feminism. Though the text purports to be feminist in its delineation of a single professional woman and in its treatment of a plot which moves its character from integration with society (marriage), to self-integration (autonomy), it bears traces of a conservative ideology. The text ultimately acquiesces to the patriarchal either/or private/public dichotomy which prohibits the amalgamation of career and motherhood. Consciously or not, the novel, through Willy's acceptance of "loneliness (as) a condition" (p. 201), confirms that the independence achieved through a career and the reciprocity that characterizes maternity can not, and perhaps should not, be reconciled. Significantly, this thesis contradicts the novel's theme of female freedom.

A conservatism is also detected in Beresford-Howe's handling of women's reproductive freedom. During Willy and Molly's discussion about abortion Molly argues that "A woman has rights over her own body" (p. 86). Willy's response: "But this is somebody else's body isn't it?" and her later reflection — "I am haunted by that inch of humanity about to be scientifically, hygienically, rationally, vacuumed into nothingness" (p. 87), point to an anti-choice position. Though Willy may not be voicing Beresford-Howe's sentiments, her statement, nonetheless, contradicts the novel's theme. For if *A Population* and the trilogy as a whole are concerned with female freedom, as Beresford-Howe maintains, then Willy's anti-choice stance, in denying a woman control over her reproduction and hence her life, invalidates this thematic premise. This anti-choice position, coupled with the public/private dichotomy, reveals a conservative, if not an anti-feminist, ideology. This suggestion of anti-feminism found in *A Population* is given full expression in the novel which completes the trilogy.

The Marriage Bed, the third and final novel in the trilogy, is distinct from its predecessors in its clarity and simplicity of meaning. Unlike the earlier novels which are rendered thematically enigmatic by both authorial ambivalence and textual ambiguities, *The Marriage Bed* achieves a thematic coherence which deters multiple interpretations. However, it is this thematic unity which, ironically, makes *The Marriage Bed* a problematic text. Anti-feminism was detected in *A Population*'s articulation of an anti-choice position and adherence to the patriarchal either/or dichotomy; but though the novel advocates certain conventional values, it remains concerned with the acquisition and expression of female freedom. In *The Marriage Bed* the conservatism is not challenged or undercut by an alternative feminist quest for female self-realization. The text, in portraying a woman whose self-definition is achieved solely through her auxiliary roles of mother and wife, maintains the very female subjugation Eva and Willy defied. Beresford-Howe, however, denies that the novel is anti-feminist: "The times tell us domesticity is meaningless, wasteful and stupid... It is not. I know a lot of women who say I like staying home with my children. Yet they're made to feel as if they're stupid or wrong. When Anne says, 'It's in kitchens and bathrooms (and not office towers) that real life takes place,' I have to agree."[7] However, though the novel may be gynocentric and not androcentric in its perspective, it is motivated by a patriarchal, rather than a feminist ideology.

Importantly, Anne is portrayed not as a woman whose marriage affords full equality (such a presentation would not necessarily be anti-feminist), but one who regards her husband's desertion as just punishment for her faults, namely, "her plants, her cat, and *her* children." Throughout the novel Anne consistently assigns the blame for the failed marriage to herself, and only waits in her abandonment for her husband's forgiveness. In portraying Anne as a voluntary victim or martyr, the text precludes the possibility of female autonomy through marriage.

Anne's mothering also inhibits her self-expression. Importantly, her mothering experiences and the theories of motherhood which inform them are not self-

determined but are rather shaped by the patriarchal ideology of motherhood which Anne, consciously or not, has internalized. Unquestionably, Anne derives personal satisfaction from mothering. This in itself is not problematic. However, her identity, as she confides, is defined solely through this role: "I was born when my daughter was... When Ross lifted my head for the first look at that small purple creature... my whole life focussed and became perfectly simple. I had one purpose: to keep that ugly, helpless human thing safe" (pp. 36, 152). Moreover, as a result of a traumatic experience with a babysitter in her childhood, Anne refuses to leave her children in the care of someone else. Conditioning this personal phobia, however, is an assumption that childcare is detrimental to the well-being of children. Therefore, the text gives credence to and perpetuates the patriarchal myth that a mother is altruistic; it also upholds the conservative ideology of the family as the preferred institution for the care of children. Therefore, Anne's mothering —because it is determined by the patriarchal institution of motherhood which demands, by virtue of its ideological imperative, female subservience and subordination — does not allow, contrary to Beresford-Howe's assertion, self-realization. As with Anne's marriage, it is Beresford-Howe's concurrence with a patriarchal ideology that makes her depiction of motherhood anti-feminist, and not the experience itself.

However, Beresford-Howe and her character Anne never discern this crucial difference between ideology and experience. Consequently, they come to equate freedom with servitude. Anne's reading and interpretation of the newspaper article make manifest this oxymoronic understanding:

> *'Martinique. A prisoner locked in his cell was the sole survivor of an earthquake in the village of... What a neat little paradox. It suggested something profoundly true about liberty and bondage... Was freedom actually a kind of prison and vice versa?* '(pp. 171, 172)

Though Anne does not arrive at a definitive conclusion, her rhetorical, conjectural question suggests that the article, in its function as an epiphany, has generated a renaming of freedom. Unlike Eva, Anne has redefined bondage and liberty as synonymous terms. Anne's identity is achieved rather than denied through servitude. Since the patriarchal view of motherhood with which Anne has identified prohibits female power and freedom, Anne redefines them so they may be experienced in submission.

The final childbirth scene consolidates Anne's renaming of power and freedom. The description of the birth reverberates with mythic and ritualistic imagery. The reference to the moonlight not only creates an esoteric atmosphere, it also, because the moon is a feminine symbol, suggests a celebration of female power. However, such power is circumscribed, for like the moon whose light is dim and reflected from the sun (a male symbol), Anne's power originates solely from her fertility. Anne's responses to the birth of her daughter articulate this paradox of woman's specificity. While at one moment Anne pities the child for its gender — "Poor little girl... Face up to it right from the start. Things are not easy for the sisterhood" (p. 230) — she later rejoices in her feminity: "What was wrong with being in chains? I was dizzy with happiness" (p. 231). Therefore, while Anne acknowledges the inequality between men and women, she believes that the solution to such resides in the accentuation, not the effacement of gender demarcation: the feminine private sphere from which feminists advocate flight is not a prison but a sanctuary of female power. Having redefined servitude as freedom and subordination as power, Anne's reconciliation with her husband and the birth of the girl signify not a compromise or sacrifice but a triumph; they ensure the survival of woman's domain. The procession which concludes the novel affirms, by linking the past to the future, the continuity of traditional femininity.

The trilogy, therefore, concludes with the reaffirmation of gender difference and a celebration of the feminine. The quest for freedom advanced in each novel has, through its process of renaming, returned to its point of departure, to take on a circular rather than a linear shape. Importantly, the procession reflects the developments in the feminist movement. *Eve* was written at the height of the feminist movement, *A Population* in its decline, and *The Marriage Bed* in what Betty Friedan has termed its second stage. In *Eve* Beresford-Howe identified with the earlier liberal feminism which, in its assumption of an androcentric perspective, accepted the male-defined evaluation of the world and consequently regarded men's activities as more human and important than women's. Like the earlier feminists, Beresford-Howe, having internalized male-identified values, believed that female emancipation could only be achieved through an eradication of women's traditional roles and the subsequent entry of women into the public sector. However, in *The Marriage Bed* Beresford-Howe rejects the hierarchical dualisms of masculine and feminine, and, in so doing, explores the specificity of woman's culture and values. Her agenda changed from a "demand for women to be 'let in' to the male-defined world to a challenge of that world itself and its definitions not only of femininity but also of humanity."[8] However, in feminizing feminism Beresford-Howe has resurrected the conservative values — anti-choice, anti-childcare, and so forth that are, by definition, anti-feminist. Because Anne's female specificity, like that of Eva and Willy, is not self-defined but conditioned by and expressed through patriarchal ideology, it does not engender female freedom. If freedom and power are to be attained, then they must be born of a feminist, rather than a patriarchal, ideology. However, in the trilogy, true female freedom is not achieved: though it feminizes feminism, it fails to reclaim the feminine as feminist.

*Quotations from the texts are from the following editions: *The Book of Eve* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985); *A Population of One* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); *The Marriage Bed* (Toronto: Totem Books, 1982).

[1] Micheal Ryval, "Constance Beresford-Howe's Subversion and Sensibility," *Quill and Quire*, 47, No. 7 (1981), p. 62.

[2] Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1980), p. 8.

[3] See Angela Miles, "Ideological Hegemony in Political Discourse: Women's Specificity and Equality," in *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics*, ed. Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982).

[4] See Carol Christ, p. 13.

[5] Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 140.

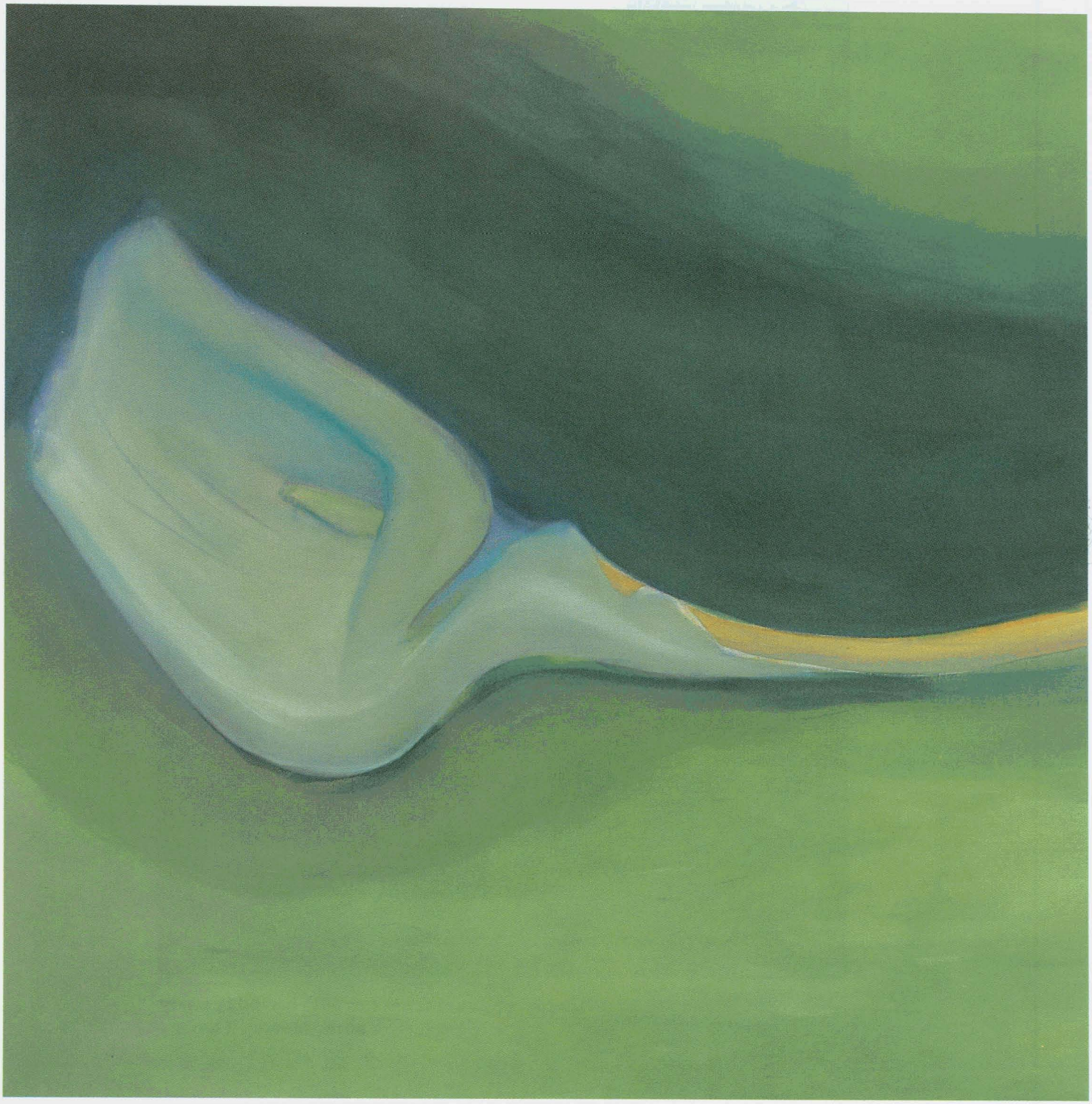
[6] Carol Christ, p. 8.

[7] Micheal Ryval, p. 62.

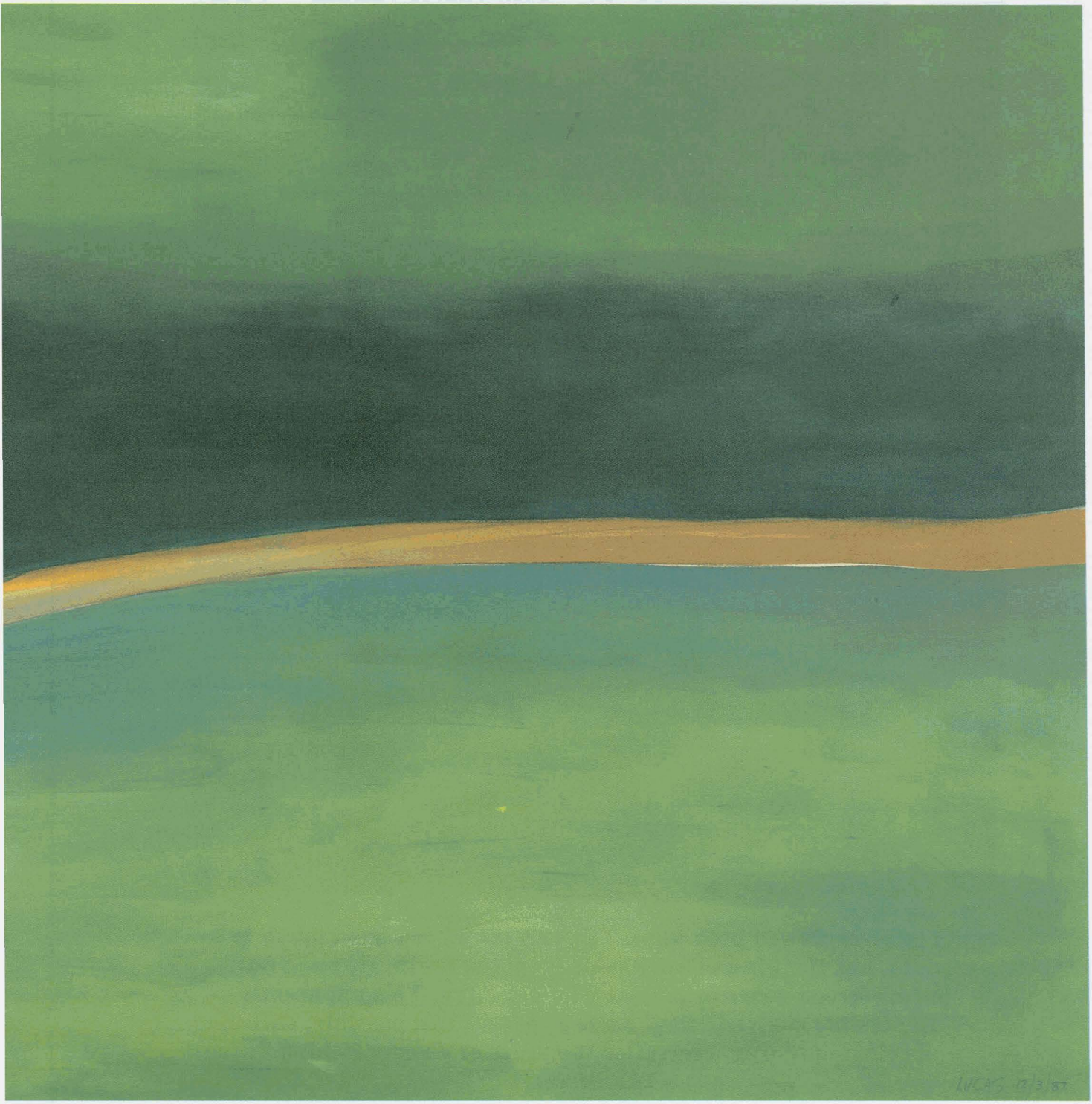
[8] Angela Miles, p. 216.

Remembering Margaret...

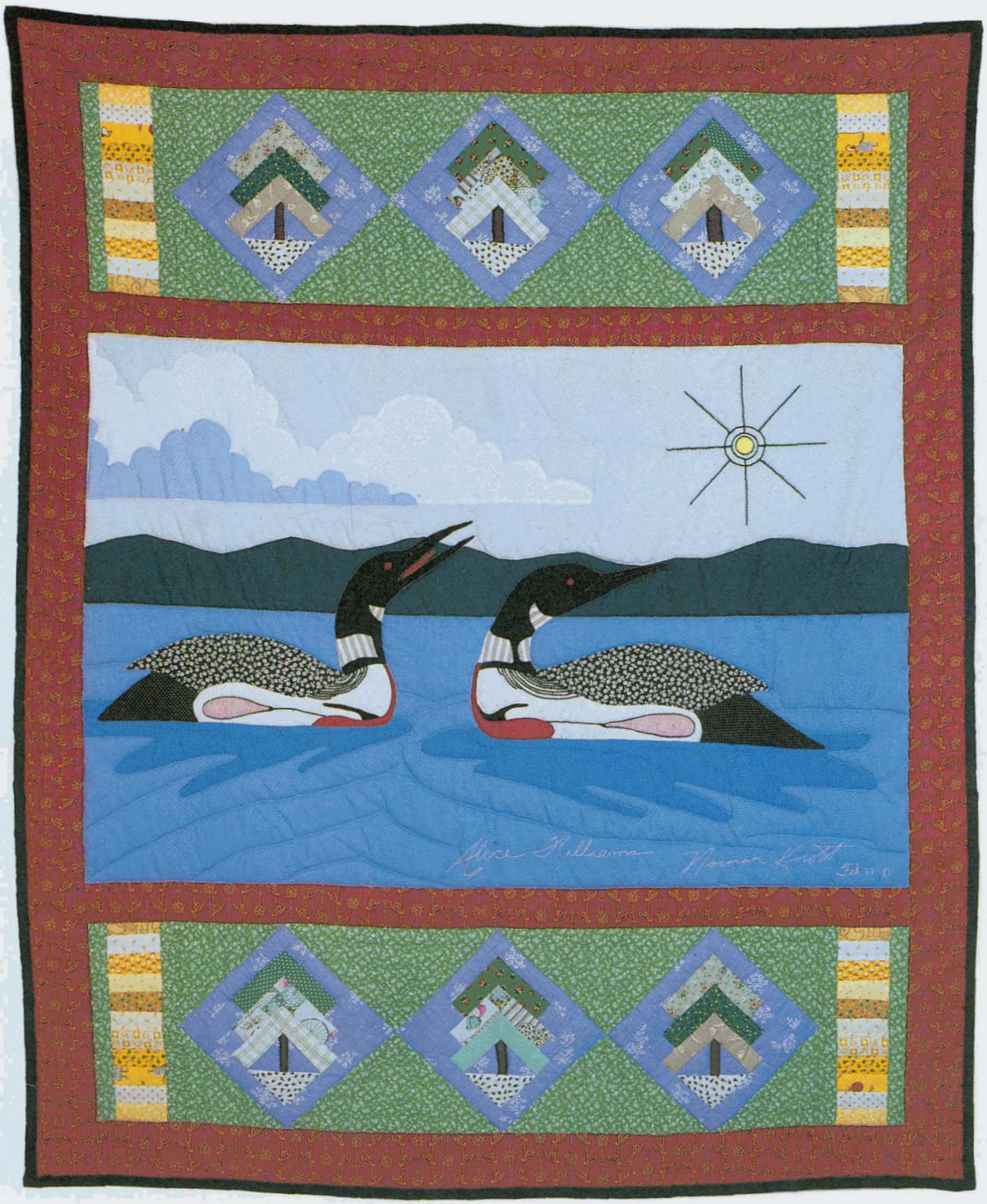
Margaret Laurence at her 60th birthday party
Photo: Morley Thomas



Helen Lucas
***The River Flowed Both Ways*, 1987**
acrylic on canvas, 4' x 8'
Courtesy: Bau-Xi Gallery



Alice Olsen Williams
Loon quilt



"The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching."
—The Diviners