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Pearls and Toads, Yeast and Froth: Relationships in
Anna Świrszczyńska's Poetry¹

Recently, when discussing A. Świrszczyńska's poetry, scholars have mainly focused on her depiction of gender and self-creation, particularly in her collections *Wiatr* [*Wind*](1970) and *Jestem baba* [*I Am a Broad*] (1972).² Miłosz, Borkowska, Ingbrant, Stycos, Peretz, myself and others particularly point out the way that she redefines women, breaking stereotypes and focusing instead on women's embodied experiences.³ In these discussions of *I Am a Broad*, schol-

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¹ I first read a version of this article at the 2005 annual conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Salt Lake City, Utah. I am particularly indebted to the commentary given at the time by Joanna Nizynska, Catherine Ciepiela, and Sibelan Forrester.

² There is no exact translation into English for the Polish word, *baba*. Renata Ingbrant explains, "In the common usage, 'baba' functions as a derogatory name for an older woman who is perceived to be ugly and disgusting" (see Renata Ingbrant, *From Her Point of View: Woman's Anti-World in the Poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska* (Stockholm: Intellecta AB, 2007) 183). So I am choosing to follow Maya Peretz's lead and use the English word "broad," instead of the much less charged "woman" for this translation. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue see Maya Peretz, "A Female Poet and Her Male Translator: A Case Study," *Trabalos en Lingüística Aplicada* 19 (1992): 41–47 and Ingbrant.

³ To readers of Polish, a great many articles and a few books on these issues are available. Czesław Miłosz is probably the most prolific of her critics. See particularly his introduction to her collected works, *Poezja* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1997), and his book *Jakiegoż to gościa mieliśmy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo ZNAK, 1996). For an excellent critical biography of Świrszczyńska: Renata Stawowy, "Gdzie jestem ja sama": *O poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004). Although few critics have written on Świrszczyńska in English at this time, a few works are available. Maya Peretz and Maria Nowakowska both discuss women's issues and feminism in Świrszczyńska's later poetry: Maya Peretz, "A Woman, or a Lady? The Poet's Self-Image in Translation," *Heart of a Na-*

ars such as Ingbrant have stated that Świrszczyńska allows her lyrical subjects to form fully independent selves only once they have completely rejected men: “Świrszczyńska’s intention is rather to liberate woman from any constraining patterns, which she does by gradually erasing from the range of woman’s perception the man who is somehow always in the way, either blocking out or obscuring her horizons.”⁴ Borkowska agrees and claims that femininity lies in the expression of sexuality and that sexual intercourse gives the lyrical persona strength. However, she claims that love or strong relationships are not required for the woman to get what she needs from sex in Świrszczyńska’s poetry.⁵ Miłosz also proposes that Świrszczyńska’s lyrical personas’ relationships with women, particularly with those who have experienced severe suffering, are more profound than any of her relationships with men.⁶ Taken in combination, these readings indicate that Świrszczyńska generally suggests that female relationships support self creation and male relationships hinder it.

Although I agree in part with all of these interpretations, I would like to offer a more nuanced reading of the relationships presented in her poetic collection *I Am a Broad*. I contend that,

tion: Polish Literature and Culture III. Eds James S. Pula, M. B. Biskupski, Thomas J. Napierkowski (New York: East European Monographs, 1993) 181–190, and Maria Nowakowska Stycos, “The Construction of a Feminine Voice: Rich, Castellanos, Belli, Swir,” *Letras Femeninas* Numero Extraordinario Conmemorativo (1974–1994): 147–155. Czesław Miłosz and Leonard Nathan have published forward and afterward to translations of her poetry that provide some valuable insights into her stylistics, her concern with corporeality, the relationship between body and soul, and the effects of the Warsaw Uprising on her poetry. See particularly, Anna Swir, *Talking to My Body*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Leonard Nathan (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1996). Finally, I discuss the relationship between body and identity (particularly female identity) in “Born ‘Under a Black Star,’ Living with Happy Thighs: Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Jestem baba* Collection,” *The Polish Review* LV, no 3 (2010) 267–284.

⁴ Ingbrant 198.

⁵ Grażyna Borkowska, “Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/poezja kobieca,” *Teksty drugie* Vol 3–4 (1995): 42.

⁶ To support this view, Miłosz references two poems from the *I Am a Broad* collection: “Sisters From the Bottom” and “The Same Inside.” (Miłosz, *Jakiegoż* 87–88).

while gender does play a role in how the relationships are perceived by the lyrical subjects, what matters more is the general nature of the relationships. In *I Am a Broad*, relationships are an integral part of self creation.⁷ The lyrical persona either constructs her sense of self or allows her understanding of herself to change by viewing herself through the eyes of others. Relationships allow the lyrical persona to gain new perspectives about who she is or can be; they can provide a perspective that she could not reach on her own.⁸ Thus, the sense given by Świrszczyńska's poetry is that self-creation happens partially through a willingness to engage in relationships that help the lyrical persona grow beyond her original views of herself. The relationships that have the most positive effect on the lyrical persona's selves, then, are those that do not constrain her; some are a bit unstable, most allow her the freedom

⁷ The concept of "self" has been highly theorized, especially in recent years. It has become such a complicated concept that we now break off parts of the self and discuss them separately—such as national identity, gender identity, cultural identity, etc. Most critics of Świrszczyńska's works generally focus on the gendered self. When I refer to the "self" in this article, however, I am offering a much broader view of identity. Although Świrszczyńska does focus this collection on women's lives in particular, I think she would find our critical focus on only the gendered self reductive. I would suggest that she views the self as an inseparable amalgam of various selves which are constantly changing and expanding. So when I use the word "self," I am self-consciously referring to the broadest sense of the word and suggesting an individual's identity that is formed of many parts that constantly interact with and influence the other parts. My interpretation of self-creation in Świrszczyńska's poetry is largely influenced by post-structuralist theories, particularly those advanced by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989). According to these theories, the self is a fragmentary and constantly fluctuating entity that, therefore, defies definition. Although Świrszczyńska certainly did not know of this theory at the time that she wrote *I am a Broad*, scholars indicate that she was likely aware of some French feminist theory, which presaged Butler's theories (see Ingrbrant 181). I will not argue that Świrszczyńska intentionally adopted these theories. They were "in the air" at the time and either entered her poetry for that reason or she created them on her own.

⁸ This concept is now a commonplace among developmental psychologists. Lacan's work most strongly influences my interpretation. See particularly Jacques Lacan *Ecrits: A Selection*. trans Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004).

to come and go, they reject stereotypes, and they encourage self reflection.

Static or constrictive relationships, on the other hand, are extremely damaging to the lyrical personas. These relationships can destroy the persona's sense of self and impede or even stop a self's growth, causing a sense of being lost, depression, and even masochistic and suicidal tendencies. These negative relationships, in effect, kill the self and they must be ended and overcome if the lyrical persona is to become healthy again. Thus, Świrszczyńska's poetry implies that a healthy, happy self must be constantly changing and growing and that such a self is partially created and supported by open and encouraging relationships, while an unhealthy self is static, in a state of entropy, and this state can be caused by constrictive, unbending relationships.⁹ To emphasize these points, Świrszczyńska weaves tropes of growth and transition into her poetry of healthy relationships, and tropes of unconsciousness and stasis to indicate negative relationships. She particularly focuses on ways that three key emotional components of relationships, desire, longing, and loss, can all lead to self growth. When embraced, desire, longing, and even loss, can encourage the self to stretch beyond itself, to look for something more than what it is.

In the rest of this article, I will discuss each major section of the collection by first providing a brief overview of each section and then examining an exemplar of that section. I will conclude the analysis with a close reading of the collection's epilogue, "Kobieta mówi o swoim życiu" ("A Woman Talks about Her Life"), which I believe beautifully summarizes the connection between identity and relationships.

I am a Broad is divided into two sections, "Jestem baba" and "Trzy poematy" ("Three Poetic Cycles").¹⁰ About half of the poems

⁹ See my discussion in *The Polish Review* for further elaboration of the ways that Świrszczyńska's poetry depicts the self as fluid, fractured, and constantly changing.

¹⁰ The first section consists of forty-four poems. The second section, which is framed by a prologue and epilogue, contains sixty-nine poems in total which are grouped into three poetic cycles: "Felicia's Love", "Antonina's Love," and "Stefani's Love." Of the first forty-four poems, twenty-one (or roughly half) are specifically about relationships between family and friends. Seven are about occasional

in the first section focus on the ways that relationships with men and women can enhance or destroy a woman's sense of self. Seventeen of the lyric poems discuss women in abusive relationships or women whose lives change drastically for the worse because of those relationships. Fifteen of these poems discuss relationships with lovers—relationships that should have begun positively, but have turned sour. In some of these poems, the negative effects on the women's identities are obvious. The lyrical persona has obviously become depressed, beaten-down or has gone mad. In others, the effects are only implied. For example, in "Szekspir. Poskromienie Złośnicy" ("Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew"), the narrator points out that men cheer when the heroine in *Taming of the Shrew* is chased with a whip for "protesting the fate of girls." The implication is that, just as the heroine Katherina finally loses her sense of self and becomes subservient to the constant humiliations of Petruchio, the wives of these applauding men have had, or will have, their strength of character beaten out of them.

This image of a self who is destroyed or severely damaged as a result of these terrible relationships is slightly counterbalanced by the three brief, but memorable poems that allow the lyrical persona to become more than herself by forming positive, dynamic relationships, even kinships, with other women and men. For example, in "Największa miłość" ("The Greatest Love"), the relationship with and view provided by a male lover allows a mature woman to battle stereotypes and see herself as beautiful and vivacious. This view of the mature woman is important, as many of the poems in the first half of this collection depict mature women as exhausted, lonely, insane or cruel.¹¹ So the readers' expectations are shocked when we come to this poem and find quite a different perspective.

relationships, or those between the lyrical persona and someone she meets rarely, yet these relationships impact the woman's life. Examples include the lyrical persona's gynecologists and midwives.

¹¹ Miłosz also notes that stereotypes about old women in Polish culture in general are extremely negative. See Miłosz, *Jakiegoż to gościa*, 78–105.

As the lovers walk arm in arm, the wind blows the woman's hair and her lover comments that her hair is "like pearls."¹² As we'll see later in the collection, "wind" is an important metaphor for Świrszczyńska, as it connotes change, movement, and growth. So the poem places the two lovers inside a metaphor of growth as they walk together. Moreover, far from impeding the woman's personal growth, this male lover makes the woman and her life like poetry. It is a life where she can walk down the street, like a teenager, arm in arm with "the greatest love of her life."¹³ It is a life where the lover doesn't see wrinkles and gray hair when he looks at her, but vibrancy and the delicate beauty of a pearl. A pearl is a kind of rare, precious stone (this concept becomes important in the next poem) that only becomes precious after years of refining by the most banal-seeming of creatures—an oyster. The pearl begins as hard and with sharp edges, but becomes beautiful because of the way the oyster adds layers to it and polishes it. Once forged, it is prized. The kind of male gaze that sees his sixty year old lover as being like a pearl is far from entrapping; it is freeing. While the children, and the society we see in the rest of the poems, try to put the woman back in her place by calling her an "old fool,"¹⁴ the woman can ignore them and allow this relationship to help form her sense of self as valuable, precious because of her layers of experience, and loved, despite, or if the pearl simile holds up, precisely because of, her age.

By far the best example of relationships that encourage the lyrical persona's personal growth is "Siostry z dna" ("Sisters From the Bottom"). This first poem of the collection describes the lyrical persona's friendship with a group of beggars who are found in the transitional space of the "planty."¹⁵ This space acts as an important symbol for the nature of their relationship: it is a transgression of social boundaries, it does not require the friends' constant pres-

¹² Świrszczyńska, "The Greatest Love", 195.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The *planty* is a space surrounding the outside of the old city of Krakow, but contained within the new city. Most people who work in the city must cross it every day. It can be understood as a transitional space between the old and new city.

ence (so they may and do come and go), and it encourages a transition from one understanding of the lyrical persona's self to a new one. This unusual friendship is explained through the similarities the narrator finds between her own and the beggars' experiences and in the narrator's very sympathetic description of the beggars. Indeed, the poem is largely about finding comfort in the sharing of suffering, and in forming relationships with others through that sense of shared suffering. Ultimately, the narrator's ability to become a translation between self and Other—her ability to connect with the transients' bodies and, figuratively, their inner beings—gives the narrator and the transients comfort. These themes of friendship, transition, and personal growth are reinforced largely through symbolism, metaphor, allusion and imagery, most of which evoke the feelings of loss and longing.

"Siostry z dna"

Mam przyjaciółki na plantach,
stare żebraczki, wariatki.

W ich oczach są pierścionki,
z których wypłynęły
drogie kamienie.¹⁶

Opowiadamy sobie swoje życia
od dołu, od człowieczego dna.

Siostry z dna,

Mówimy biegle językiem cierpienia.

Dotykamy swoich rąk,

To nam pomaga.

Odchodząc całuję je w policzek
delikatny jak woda.¹⁶

"Sisters From the Bottom"

I have friends in the park,
Old beggar women, crazies.

In their eyes are rings,
which dropped
out precious stones.

We tell each other about our lives
From down below, from the human bottom.

Sisters from the bottom,

We speak fluently in the language of suffering.

We touch each other's hands,

This helps us.

Leaving, I kiss them on the cheek
Delicate as water.

Świrszczyńska begins this poem with a striking comment—she has friends who are insane beggars. The word that I have translated as friend, *przyjaciółki*, implies a deep, close relationship. More intimate than the English word "friend," *przyjaciółki* has no English equivalent. This deep relationship is further underscored by the title of the poem, "*Sisters From the Bottom.*"¹⁷ Sisters may

¹⁶ Świrszczyńska, 183.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Catherine Ciepiela for stressing the importance of sisterhood in this poem.

not always be friends, but use of the word implies a shared heritage, shared experiences, even shared genes. The word "sister" symbolizes that these beggars are so close to the lyrical persona that she feels she's a part of them. Świrszczyńska's use of these two words for her lyrical persona's relationship with beggars, those generally regarded as the Other by society, is more than a little shocking.¹⁸ Such powerful language draws our attention to the relationship, distinguishing it as the focus of the poem.

The lyrical persona then describes these friends through metaphor and allusion. Although they are transients who wander in the park, they are also women whose eyes once held precious jewels. As eyes are often used as a metaphor for the soul, we can understand that these women once possessed souls of extraordinary value. Their eyes still hold the rings from which the jewels fell. These rings and jewels suggest two interpretations: first, the glaringly empty sockets of the rings emphasize what these women have lost, but the remaining rings that held the stones act as metaphors for the beggars as they are now. They may have lost their jewels, but they are still human beings with whom our lyrical speaker can be a sister. They still have something of value to offer to those who will take the time to listen to them.

But what are the jewels that fell out of the beggars' eyes? A quick examination of a story by Hans Christian Andersen, from whom Świrszczyńska seems to have drawn this image, may illuminate Świrszczyńska's metaphors. In the story "The Toad," a young toad is told by her mother that either she or one of her siblings has a jewel in his/her head. They search, but none of them can find the jewel. Finally, the little toad gives up, but instead decides to explore the world. In imagery reminiscent of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," the toad crawls out of the well in which she lives and spends the rest of her short life striving to learn more. In the end, the toad is eaten by a stork because she believes the stork can carry her to Egypt. Right before her death, a spark flies from

¹⁸ In this same collection, the lyrical persona Antonina describes her encounter with a beggar woman in strikingly similar terms. She finds that she and the beggar are "the same inside" and is so taken with her that she forgets that she had been going to her lover's apartment for a "love feast."

her eyes and is carried away by a sunbeam. The lyrical persona's response to this event is: "And it was just she who had the jewel. That jewel was the continual striving and desire to go upward—ever upward. It gleamed in her head, gleamed in joy, beamed brightly in her longing."¹⁹

Świrszczyńska's reference to this story can be no mistake. Through her use of the sparkling jewel metaphor, she implies that these beggars once constantly longed and strove for more and that this striving and growing is exactly what made their souls so valuable. They strove for better lives, for greater knowledge and, perhaps, are beggars because of that continual striving and longing. And although they no longer strive, some glimmer of that longing for change and growth remains, as indicated both through the metaphor of the rings and through the transitional space in which they live.

This ring metaphor, tied with the metaphor of sisterhood, suggests that the lyrical persona gains something of deep, personal value through her relationship with these Others. The value of these experiences is also underscored by both the tender tone and the imagery the lyrical persona uses to describe her friendship. She tells us that they sit and talk about their lives and calls them "sisters from the bottom." The phrase "from down below, from the human bottom" implies that the women have experienced the worst of human existence. But she offsets the horrors of these experiences through the companionship implied in the metaphor of "sisterhood," a kinship so close that they have experienced and internalized these experiences together.

The worst of human experiences are the ones that we have trouble confronting and discussing with others. They are the experiences that we often would rather hide or forget but that nonetheless shape who we are. So sisterhood in this poem is important because it allows the lyrical persona to share experiences that are generally considered difficult to speak about. In other words, her relationship with these women allows the lyrical persona to con-

¹⁹ Hans Christian Anderson, "The Toad," trans. Johan de Mylius, 2002: fairytalecollection.com/Hans_Christian_Anderson/The_Toad.htm

front and deal with a part of her identity. The fact that these women are insane and that the lyrical persona feels a kinship with them, calling them “sisters,” also implies that the lyrical persona senses a certain insanity in her own self. So by forming a relationship with the beggars, the lyrical persona is able to glimpse into her psyche and possibly into her own future.²⁰

The last several lines of the poem strengthen our understanding of the value of the beggar women’s rings. Here, the lyrical persona symbolizes the powerful connection felt in this relationship through the women’s physical connection and the form of their communication. When these friends talk, they speak “fluently in the language of suffering.” Their experiences are so painful and terrible that they cannot be communicated verbally. The adverb “fluently” underscores this point. The women are so used to suffering that they have become fluent in the language of pain. On the other hand, their sisterhood is so close that these women do not need words. Instead, they speak through a kind of sign language of physical touching. The lyrical persona uses two starkly simple and powerful phrases to convey the depth of this communication: “We touch each other’s hands,/ this helps us.” Through this simple gesture, the women convey the enormity of their experiences and feelings. The communal language (“we” and “us”) stresses that this is a relationship built on mutual need and support. Finally, the gentle touch of the hand and kiss on the cheek counterbalances the terrible pain of the experiences they share.

In short, through “the fluent language of suffering” these women share their experiences and find comfort. But the lyrical persona not only finally faces her own experiences; she takes in theirs (and thus sees the precious jewels and rings in their eyes). Through this profound relationship, this poem emphasizes the way a friendship, particularly a friendship grounded in a common sense of loss and longing, can expand the understanding of the self. The lyrical persona could never have known about these beggars’ precious stones and rings had she not stopped to become their friends. Her willingness to cross the social boundary and be-

²⁰ I am indebted to Sibelan Forrester for suggesting this point to me.

come close friends with beggars allows the lyrical persona to see herself in the Other and the Other in herself. She is able to see the beggars as more human and herself, perhaps, as closer to an old, crazy beggar woman than she might have thought before meeting them.

But the other critical element of this relationship is that the lyrical persona does not stay with the beggars. She does not become so close to them, nor so enthralled by what she learns from them, that she leaves her old life behind and becomes a beggar as well. Instead, she spends time with the women, grows because of that relationship, but then leaves. The freedom allowed in this relationship makes sense. The beggars themselves are women who live free lives, in an open, transitional space, and are women who had dedicated their lives to striving and growing. The freedom in this relationship, symbolized by the *plenty*, allows the lyrical persona to construct herself based on what she learns about herself from the women and to not be constrained in any way. Finally, this is a relationship that encourages and allows the lyrical persona to feel longing, to desire to strive, but also to feel catharsis from loss. I contend that it is the complex nature of the relationship that allows the lyrical narrator to grow, or reconstruct her sense of self. Perhaps, because she has stopped to be friends with these women, she can pick up where they left off; she still has the jewels (though perhaps not for too much longer) and is still longing and striving beyond the life that was given to her.

The poems of the first section of *I am a Broad* examine how individual women's relationships can enhance or destroy the self. The three poetic cycles (which take up about half of the volume) are a little more complicated. They explore the women's inner environments—the way the body and soul inter-relate, their existential questions of who they are and what their place in this world is, and how these concepts are affected by their relationships with a lover. In all three cases, the relationship starts off positively, but eventually each woman encounters a problem with the lover. Although these women do not seem to experience the horrors felt by the women in the lyric poems, the results are still terrible. Eventually, all three women feel lost; they even want to harm themselves

(emotionally, if not physically). As a result, they find that they need to leave the lovers and start their lives over again, either alone or with a new man. In one case, the woman decides to return to her lover. In this later cycle, the return to the lover represents a return to the body, or an acceptance of that part of her self which the woman had completely rejected when she rejected him. Ultimately, the cycles suggest that negative relationships slow or stop the growth of the self and that these relationships must be overcome or improved in order for the lyrical persona to continue to grow as a self and live a healthy life. To demonstrate this phenomenon, I will closely examine some representative poems from the cycle "Felicia's Love."

The first few poems of "Felicia's Love" depict the powerful effects of a lovers', or possibly a marriage, relationship. "Trzy ciała" ("Three Bodies") uses the beautiful imagery of a mother's, a father's and a growing foetus' bodies to stress both the wonder of physical creation and the connection that such creation can generate between father and mother. After the father places his head next to the stomach of his pregnant lover and hears the movement of "a tiny hand or foot of [their] child," the parents "feel the same." As with the beggar women of "Sisters," a simple touch communicates a shared experience, and in that moment the identity of the two people merges. Pregnancy also symbolizes a transitional stage in a relationship; a couple is becoming a trio, and a life is being created, but hasn't yet been born. The joy and wonder inherent at such a transitional moment causes the deep connection felt in this relationship and helps shape Felicia's sense of self as a woman linked to both child and lover.

The next poem in the cycle, "W Niebieskiej piżamie," ("In Blue Pajamas") is complex; it simultaneously presents a positive view of Felicia's relationship with her lover and child, but hints to the reader that her relationship is about to turn sour. Through the physical connection between Felicia, her lover and her child, she gains safety and comfort. These emotions, in turn, help her form a new sense of who she is and what she has experienced. However, the imagery in this poem suggests a certain stasis in the relation-

ship and causes readers to worry that Felicia is allowing herself to be blinded to reality.

“W Niebieskiej piżamie”

Śpię w niebieskiej piżamie,
z prawej strony śpi moje dziecko.
Nigdy nie płakałam,
nigdy nie umrę.

Śpię w niebieskiej piżamie,
z lewej strony śpi mój mężczyzna.
Nigdy nie biłam głową o ścianę,

nigdy nie krzyczałam ze strachu.
Jaki szeroki jest ten tapczan,
pomieściło się na nim
takie szczęście.²¹

“In Blue Pajamas”

I sleep in blue pajamas,
at my right my child sleeps.
I have never cried,
I will never die.

I sleep in blue pajamas,
at my left my man sleeps.
I have never knocked
my head against the wall,
I have never screamed out of fear.
How large this bed is,
that it has room
for such happiness.

Just lying next to her child gives Felicia a feeling of comfort, wiping out past sorrows and making her forget that she has ever cried. Moreover, Felicia gains a sense of immortality from the pooled warmth of her child's and her own body. Lying next to her man's body also changes her past, removing her experiences of fear and frustration. For the time that they all remain in the bed together, the horrible parts of Felicia's past and future cease to exist, allowing her to feel immortal, unafraid, calm and completely happy. Thus, a basic body connection in a close relationship, highlighted by the simple, straight-forward style of this poem, not only affects Felicia internally, but also allows her to change her understanding of herself for a time. This change is also reminiscent of the alteration in “Sisters” lyrical persona who gains physical comfort and a new understanding of herself through the physical and emotional connections with the beggars.

The reader's concern, however, is raised by the static, even unconscious nature of this relationship which is highlighted by the diction and imagery used in the poem.²² The poem presents an image of a family asleep and unmoving. The kind of relationship

²¹ Świrszczyńska, 204.

²² I am particularly indebted to Pavitra Sundar and David Marshall for suggesting this reading.

symbolized through the image of sleep is disturbing. Although certainly a peaceful and happy image, it is also an image of unconsciousness and stasis. Felicia may be feeling comfort and a changed sense of who she is, but the other two do not; they are oblivious to what is happening to her, and not currently active participants in this relationship. More interestingly, Felicia says that she is sleeping, but then tells us the thought processes she has while asleep. It would seem that she is actually awake or that she dreams these thoughts. In either case, the verb “sleep” indicates that Felicia herself is in some kind of unconscious state. This fact is worrisome because it suggests that the comfort and self-growth she undergoes through this relationship are perhaps illusory. This perception is underscored by the graphic imagery she uses to describe the past experiences that her sleeping companions help her to ignore. The juxtaposition of the actions that take place (beating her head against the wall vs. seeing her child sleep, or screaming out of fear vs. seeing her man sleep) is powerful. Again, the juxtaposition can suggest that the comfort inspired by the peaceful love of this family may outweigh the terrors of the past. But the more pragmatic reader may see a woman trying to push down the traumas of her past into her subconscious, trying to dream through life, instead of facing these traumas and finding the catharsis the women of “Sisters” find. So this poem leaves readers with a confused, uncertain view of this relationship since the happiness and personal growth found here seems undercut by the unconscious and static nature of the relationship.

This concern proves well founded as we read further into the cycle. Readers find that most of the next several poems start to suggest that Felicia feels a certain dissatisfaction with “her man.” Interestingly, in all but the first few poems, the child disappears. So either a great deal of time has passed in Felicia’s life, or the relationship between mother and child is not Świrszczyńska’s primary focus; her focus is on the relationship between woman and man and the way that it can undermine and even destroy the new sense of self Felicia had gained.

The first few negative poems demonstrate the ways that Felicia becomes fractured from both her baby and her lover. At first

she realizes that the connection she felt between herself and her lover is not as protective as she had thought. In the poem "Śpisz" ("You Sleep"), while lying in bed, terrified of death and hoping that her man's warm body will protect her, Felicia notices that her lover is asleep. In "I Sleep in Blue Pajamas," seeing her lover sleep had brought her comfort. In this poem, however, his sleep symbolizes his complete unawareness of her inner turmoil. The lyrical persona's use of the word "death" here may also suggest that Felicia fears the death of their relationship. Either way, her lover cannot protect her if he does not understand, or even care, about her fear. Then she realizes that the two of them are not as similar as she had thought. In "Samica i samiec" ("Female and Male") Felicia tries to show her lover their joint creation. The poem uses the metaphor of pearls to represent their child, a metaphor we know from "The Greatest Love," connotes growth as well as value.²³ But the male does not understand either what has been created or how the creation occurred. He is "blind and deaf" ("bez oczu i uszu") to what had connected them previously. The exact Polish translation for this phrase is "without eyes and ears," and this language underscores the severe dislocation the two lovers' experience. In the earlier poem, "Three Bodies," the lover touched Felicia's belly and they both felt their child move. That touch, that bodily connection, is what brought them together. Now, however, the metaphors "without eyes or ears" stress the fact that the man now lacks two of the bodily senses necessary for basic communication in a relationship. It seems as though his body is falling apart, which is certainly an apt symbol for their disintegrating relationship.

Finally, Felicia suddenly realizes that she does not even view her man as a lover anymore. In "Zdumienie" ("Astonishment") she says, "Yesterday, by chance I kissed another. And then suddenly I understood with astonishment that long ago you ceased to be a man to me" ("Wczoraj/przypadkiem pocałowałam się z innym./I wtedy dopiero/dowiedziałam się ze zdumieniem,/że ty/już

²³ The language of this poem also suggests that Felicia is a poet and that her lover has helped create some of her poetry. His complete unawareness of the beauty of this creation suggests that he is also disconnected from Felicia's mental endeavors.

dawno nie jesteś dla mnie mężczyzną”). She does not connect with her lover as comforter, as intellectual partner, as father of her child, or as a sexual partner. Their relationship hasn’t grown, but has been characterized by metaphors of unconsciousness, lack of mutual understanding, detachment, and lack of communication. Thus, she realizes that their family, and her own concept of herself, has been flawed. The words “suddenly” and “astonishment” in this last poem almost imply a sense of awakening. The sleep metaphor has come full circle, and the reader realizes that Felicia must now awaken from her illusory, static relationship and allow herself to change.

Świrszczyńska underscores the severely negative impact of their relationship on Felicia’s psyche in the poem “Ona się boi” (“She Is Afraid”).

“Ona się boi”

Koło kobiety leży jej mężczyzna.
Kobieta boi się,
że on ją znowu zabije.

— Czy mnie już więcej nie zabijesz? —
pyta kobieta.
—Nie zabiję—mówi mężczyzna.

Ale ona boi się,
że on ją znowu zabije.

Więc podbiega do okna
i skacze na bruk. pavement.
I już jest ocalona
leżąc na bruku.
Już on jej więcej ni zabije.²⁴

“She Is Afraid”

Next to a woman lies her man.
The woman is afraid
that he will kill her again.

‘Are you going to kill me again,’
asks the woman.
‘I will not kill you,’ says the man.

But she is afraid,
that he will kill her again.

So she runs to the window
and throws herself to the
And already she is saved
lying on the pavement.
Now he will not kill her again.

This poem offers an excellent example of Felicia’s masochistic response to her relationship gone bad. To highlight this turn in their relationship, Świrszczyńska deftly interweaves the imagery that made such a powerful impact in the previous poems of the

²⁴ Świrszczyńska, 208.

cycle. The metaphor of sleeping together in bed now illustrates Felicia's fear of her man—her fear that his obliviousness and detachment will figuratively kill her again. When the image of the family, which had been such an important component of Felicia's life, starts to fracture, the connection with her companion becomes terrifying instead of uplifting. Although a logical absurdity, metaphorically "killing again" reflects the constant psychic and/or emotional harm caused by the nature of Felicia's relationship with her man.

This need to dislocate herself from this situation is highlighted by the point of view used in the poem. In the vast majority of the other poems of this cycle, Świrszczyńska writes in the first and second person. This use of first and second person underscores the fact that the poems are about Felicia's relationships (they are about "you" and "me") and how they impact her identity—they are about what she gains from the relationships or how she feels about them. However, this poem is written in third person. Such a drastic change of voice in this poem suggests that Felicia's sense of self has been so dislocated that she has entirely stepped outside of herself. Psychologically, such dislocation generally happens as the result of trauma, suggesting that Felicia's relationship has had a powerfully negative effect on her sense of who she is. Symbolically, the relationship has thrown Felicia completely outside of herself, as underscored by the metaphor of death in the poem. The only way to rectify the situation is to destroy this part of her life in order to move on to something healthier and in order to feel in control again. This need to fracture and destroy such an important part of herself is reflected in her willingness to physically hurl her body out the window. In order to keep her man from damaging her internally, she intentionally hurts herself physically.

The harm Felicia does to her body symbolizes the effects on Felicia's psychic and emotional self when she decides to separate herself from her relationship/marriage. In the several poems following this one, Felicia clearly engages in self-flagellation, damaging both her body and psyche with painful sexual relations and "dirtying" her physical self. For example, in "Jak powietrze" ("Like Air") she says, "I befoul my body, which you loved...It is

not possible to love someone who has been befouled, I will be saved.” (“Splugawię swoje ciało,/które kochałeś...Nie można kochać splugawionego, będę ocalona”). Felicia harms herself so that her man can no longer love her (and possibly so she can no longer love herself). Most of the poems that follow “She Is Afraid” also use images of death, suggesting that an old self *must* die, no matter how painful the death, if Felicia is to survive this relationship.

Finally, in “Moje ciało musuje” (“My Body Effervesces”) Felicia manages to let her past self and former relationship die and, thus, is born again. Unlike the masochistic, lost self of the previous poems, this new, growing self is joyful. Świrszczyńska expresses this rebirth through almost sexually ecstatic imagery, thus demonstrating that the person Felicia is becoming is healthy and happy. Moreover, Świrszczyńska’s use of imagery suggests that the new self is fluid and changing. Thus, Świrszczyńska implies a strong connection between the fluid, ever-changing self and personal health.

“Moje ciało musuje”

Urodziłam się po raz drugi.
Jestem lekka
jak rzęsa wiatru.
Pienię się, jestem piana.

Idę tańcząc,
jeśli zechcę, uniosę się w powietrze.
Skondensowana lekkość
mojego ciała
kondensuje się najdobitniej
w lekkości
stopy i pięciu jej palców.
Stopa muska ziemię,
która ugina się jak sprężone powietrze.
Elastyczny duet
ziemi i stopy. Taniec
wyzwolenia.

Urodziłam się po raz drugi,
szczęście świata
znów przyszło do mnie.

“My body Effervesces”

I am born for the second time.
I am light
as the eyelash of the wind.
I froth, I am froth.

I walk dancing,
if I wish, I will soar in the air.
The condensed lightness
of my body
condenses most forcibly
in the lightness
of my foot and its five toes.
The foot skims the earth,
which gives way like compressed air.
An elastic duet
of the earth and of the foot. A dance
of liberation.

I am born for the second time,
happiness of the world
came to me again.

Moje ciało musuje,
myślę ciałem, które musuje.

My body effervesces,
I think with my body,
which effervesces.

Jeśli zechcę,
uniosę się w powietrze.²⁵

If I wish,
I will soar in the air.²⁶

The poem begins with the metaphor of rebirth, a metaphor that stresses Felicia's new life and her ability to finally see herself differently than she had during her previous relationship. The language and imagery of this rebirth, particularly her use of the words "effervesces," "froth," "soaring" and "condensed lightness" imply sexual ecstasy. But the poem does not mention a man, or any other person. The reason for this may be found in the previous poem "Ogniotrwały uśmiech" ("Fire-Proof Smile"). In this poem, Felicia realizes that she can replace the man of her life with her own inner strength. She also decides that she will not allow anyone else to become part of her or enter into her soul. So at the end of that poem, the reader thinks that perhaps Felicia has decided to reject all relationships, except for the one she has with herself. Considering the placement of this poem immediately before "My Body Effervesces," the simultaneously uplifting and disturbing poem "Fire-proof Smile" suggests that men have little to no part in Felicia's highly erotic rebirth. This suggests either that the language of sexual ecstasy is used in this poem to portray the joy of rebirth (i. e. the joy of leaving behind her past self and realizing that she can survive alone), or that Felicia's understanding of her growing, self-reliant self now allows her to enjoy her own body and have a positive sexual experience. In either case, through this sexual imagery Felicia's body and her psyche are reintegrated. This reintegration allows for the birth of a more fluid self. More importantly for our context, this poem suggests that Felicia is finding a new, healthy and fluid self *because* she rejected a static and

²⁵ Świrszczyńska, 214.

²⁶ Most of this translation is taken from Anna Swir, *Talking to My Body* 66. However, where Miłosz and Nathan translated "duet" as "duo," I decided to maintain the musical metaphor and used the word "duet." Moreover, after the phrase "I will soar" I included the words that Miłosz and Nathan left out, "in the air."

constrictive relationship, and now she is either exploring a relationship with herself or one with another person who is less constrictive.

Świrszczyńska suggests this reintegration and fluidity with the title of the poem, "My Body Effervesces." Felicia's body effervesces—it becomes less solid, insubstantial like froth. On a metaphorical level, froth represents lightness and transience. Froth only lasts a short period of time before it dissipates. The first stanza then immediately expands on this apparent contradiction of a non-solid body. Świrszczyńska's choice of the phrase "I am born" stresses Felicia's embodiedness. Then, as the lyrical persona later points out, she "thinks with [her] body which effervesces." Felicia grounds the roots of consciousness, the part of us that thinks, in her body, but then she insists on the changing, insubstantial nature of that body. She will not allow her self, neither her mind nor her body, to fall into the trap of stasis again. Instead, she merges consciousness and body into a fluid, changing self. This is an important development for Felicia since her negative, static relationship with her lover had caused her to feel estranged from both her consciousness and her body.

The lyrical persona then uses a simile that prefigures the metaphor of wind that we will see later in the epilogue to this collection and compares herself to "the eyelash of the wind."²⁷ Eyelashes are practically weightless and are easily moved and pushed by the wind. Wind also seems insubstantial. Świrszczyńska's hyperbolic imagery thus stresses the extreme lightness of her body and, by extension, her new self. No longer weighed down by the grief, loss, and guilt caused by her old relationship, this new self can "soar in the air." Moreover, in personifying the wind in this poem, Świrszczyńska stylistically ties together Felicia with the lyrical persona we will see in the epilogue.

The next stanza begins with images of physical movement, suggesting that Felicia's body and sense of self are no longer asleep, but in motion. These movements, particularly dancing and

²⁷ It is reminiscent of the prologue to the three narrative poems. In that prologue "A Woman Converses with her Thigh," the lyrical persona is also able to soar on the wind as the result of a sexual experience.

soaring, underscore Felicia's joy. Thus, the lyrical persona suggests that movement/change and joy are connected. Moreover, the lyrical persona combines these physical movements with the image of air. Air, too, is constantly moving, constantly shifting. So all the images of the first line of the second stanza stress the motion of Felicia's identity and the joy such motion brings her.

Felicia then describes her "dance of liberation" from her past relationship and past self. Felicia's rebirth is so powerful that it alters all physical substances around her, allowing her to pass fluidly in and out of all substances. The natural consistency of foot and earth become reversed. The foot becomes as light as air and the earth gives away at the foot's touch, more like an insubstantial cloud than solid earth. Then, Felicia's body joins briefly with the earth in an "elastic duet," suggesting the fluidity and non-unitary nature of both. Indeed, through this moment of sexual ecstasy, Felicia is able to join with an Other, just as she had joined with husband and child and just as the lyrical persona joined with the beggars in "Sisters." In this case, the Other that she joins with is the earth, a metaphor, perhaps, for creation. So this sexual experience allows Felicia not just to join with another human being, but with everything. Importantly, though, this duet is "elastic," or stretchy and yielding. It is a relationship that does not constrain, but leads ultimately to a "dance of liberation." Her sexual experiences, which simultaneously symbolize and allow her liberation from her previous self, are artistic.²⁸ The free enjoyment of sexuality allows Felicia to be an artist again, and as an artist, she has the ability to create and express herself. So this final image of the stanza not only stresses Felicia's fluidity, but also her newly rediscovered control and creation of herself.

Ultimately Felicia's rebirth reconnects her physical and conscious selves in such a way that the two move fluidly into and out of each other. As implied by the metaphors of froth, wind, and elastic duet, her new self flows among various parts. Moreover,

²⁸ In the prologue to the poetic cycles, the lyrical persona claims that her sexual experiences make her an artist. Similarly, Felicia had felt that the creation of her child, the physical manifestation of her sexual experiences with her lover, was a form of art.

her rebirth, as suggested by the previous poem, comes from understanding her liberation from her relationship-gone-bad, or from her newfound self-reliance. In turn, this changing self allows for a greater liberation, one symbolized by dance and soaring on the wind. This sexually active, free and fluid self brings “the happiness of the world” to Felicia. Thus, only by destroying a past relationship and past self and moving into a new, more self-reliant and fluid self, can Felicia enjoy life again.

The three poetic cycles are followed by a final poem to the collection, “A Woman Talks About Her Life.” This last poem beautifully illustrates the view that only non-restrictive, positive relationships allow the lyrical persona to embrace a fluid, and therefore healthy, sense of self. This fluid, changing sense of self is largely expressed through tropes of longing, loss and growth:

“Kobieta mówi o swoim życiu”

Wiatr mnie pędzi po drogach,
wiatr, bóstwo odmiany
o dmuchających policzkach.

Kocham ten wiatr,
cieszę się
odmianom.
Chodzę po świecie
we dwoje albo sama
i miłe mi są jednakowo
tęsknota i śmierć tęsknoty,
która nazywa się spełnienie.

Czegoś jest we mnie za dużo.
Przelewam się przez brzegi
jak drożdże. Drożdże mają
swoją własny rodzaj szczęścia.

Idę, ciągle idę,
czasami przyłącza się
do mnie mężczyzna.
Idziemy razem,
on mówi, że to do śmierci,
potem gubi się o zmroku
jak rzecz nieważna.

Idę sama,
potem znów na zakręcie

“A Woman Talks about her Life”

Wind drives me along roads,
wind, the deity of change
with blowing cheeks.

I love this wind,
I rejoice
in changes.
I go through the world
in two or alone
and equally dear to me
are longing and the death of longing,
which is called fulfillment.

There is too much of something in me.
I am overflowing over the banks
like yeast. Yeast has
its own kind of happiness.

I am going, continuously going,
sometimes a man joins me.

We go together,
he says that it will be unto death,
then he gets lost in the twilight
like an unimportant thing.

I go alone,
then again at the turn

zjawia się nowy towarzysz.
Idę, ciągle idę,
wiatr pędzi po drogach.

appears another companion.
I am going, continuously going,
the wind speeds along the roads.

Na moich drogach
Zawsze wieje wiatr.²⁹

On my roads
the wind is always blowing.

In this poem, the lyrical persona uses wind, yeast and her relationships with other people to imply the ever changing, multiple and fragmentary nature of her lyrical persona's identity. In this poem, wind is a metaphor for change or transition and it drives her along the path of her life. From the first stanza, Świrszczyńska personifies the wind, recalling Neo-Classical representations of it as a god's face with puffed-up cheeks.³⁰ Such representations also appear on maps.³¹ Significantly, the wind is not just change itself, but its blowing cheeks suggest that change pushes the lyrical persona down her various paths. The map implication further supports this view, as the reader is given an image of the personified wind pushing the lyrical persona down the many, twisting roads of her map of life. The lyrical persona does not just have to confront many changes in her life; change *impels* her life.

But perhaps the lyrical persona suggests another possibility with this imagery. If we imagine the way the deified wind pushes someone on a map or in a painting, we will probably first notice the subject (the person being pushed), then look behind her and see the wind, then the god with puffed cheeks. From a certain perspective, it can look like the wind follows the woman. Perhaps the lyrical persona would suggest not only that she is driven by change, but that change follows her; in other words, her travels also cause change, just as the lyrical persona of "My Body Effervesces" changes the world around her through her sexual encoun-

²⁹ Świrszczyńska, 247–248.

³⁰ Świrszczyńska's father was an artist and her preface to her collected works as well as her own poetry attests to the impact his art and the study of painting had on her poetry. This particular personification of wind, which is so common in Renaissance and Baroque art, lends credence to her claim.

³¹ I am indebted to Sibelan Forrester for pointing this out and for suggesting the relationship between the passage over roads and the way the lyrical persona perhaps affects change as she travels.

ters. Certainly a woman so strongly driven by change would likely leave change in her wake. Most importantly, the lyrical persona loves and rejoices in change. She embraces the constant movement of her self and of the world around her.

The simile yeast provides an even better example of change. With warmth, yeast grows and changes and can even overgrow whatever contains it. Knead a yeast bread and it grows. Beat a yeast bread down and, given time, it will rise again. Such a trope for the self is telling, as is the lyrical persona's claim that "yeast has its own kind of happiness." In this one concept, the lyrical persona gives us the recipe to understanding her life. She requires the warmth that the world can provide (positive relationships, love and knowledge are most commonly associated with the trope of warmth). She also requires kneading to grow. She needs life to push and pull at her, press into her and stretch her. Such a life does have its own kind of happiness. It isn't calm or stable, but there is a joy to be found in the erratic, sometimes painful movements of life. Finally, the fact that yeast springs back, and even grows bigger after being beaten suggests that the lyrical persona can recover from adversity. There is a certain elasticity to her self, a tenacity that allows the self to not only survive adversity, but to use it and grow from it. The simile of yeast does not just suggest a bubbling warmth and growth; it suggests a complete acceptance of all of life's sticky complications and changes.

The lyrical persona combines the simile of yeast with the metaphor of the river (implied by the word "bank" or "edge") to suggest that she, herself, has grown and flowed beyond whatever would restrict her.³² Returning to the earlier implication of the map, we could imagine that the paths the lyrical persona is blown down are rivers. As moving water so often connotes change, these are the perfect paths for this lyrical persona. With no solid ground for her feet, she flows down a winding river. Combined with the simile of yeast, the bank or edge metaphor suggests that the lyrical

³² I particularly like Borkowska's way of putting this when she points out that the yeast itself (which she sees as a metaphor for sexuality) searches for an outlet. Yeast takes on a life of its own and looks for a way to exist without restrictions. Borkowska 43.

persona is moved by the warm wind of change to grow beyond herself or beyond what was initially given her, and that her life is one, continuously flowing change. The metaphor “bank/edge” may also represent the lyrical persona’s body, that which holds in and guides, if not confines, the soul.³³ So the lyrical persona suggests that constant change allows her sense of self to expand beyond the confines of the body beyond whatever limits confront her.

Part of what helps the lyrical persona change and rise beyond herself is her relationships with other people. Her existence alters between loneliness and companionship, between one companion and another, and between longing and the “death of longing.” No relationship is stable, so the lyrical persona does not have the opportunity to sink into complacency. Instead, the unstable nature of her relationships forces her to be constantly changing. However, this interpretation that relationships are largely responsible for the lyrical persona’s ability to create a fluid, changing self is not immediately apparent. Strikingly, the lyrical persona of this epilogue at first seems to disdain companionship, as Felicia did in the poem “Fireproof Smile.” At the very least, this lyrical persona certainly does not seek it. Świrszczyńska’s use of passive constructions and her shifts in the subject of the sentences indicate that the lyrical persona does not control the fate of her relationships, nor does she wish to. The companions wait for her around the corner or “get lost;” she does not lose them. Worse, when she describes what sounds like a marriage—“he says that it will be unto death”—she seems to hardly care when the husband/partner disappears. Instead, she describes the man as being like “an unimportant thing!” Although marriages can fall apart, they often start off as close relationships. The fact that this lyrical persona describes what must have once been a close friend, or at least someone who must have

³³ As Miłosz, Giżewska and myself have all noted, many of Świrszczyńska’s poems discuss the relationship between body and soul. Agnieszka Giżewska, “Od nienawiści do akceptacji własnego ciała w poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej,” *Ruch Literacki* 43: 4–5 (2002) 441–447.) Two poems in particular in the *I am a Broad* collection, “What is a Pineal Gland” and “Large Intestine,” highlight the apparent dichotomy between body and the “I” whereas the poetic cycle “Felicia’s Love” demonstrates the importance of integrating the two.

had an enormous effect on her life, as like an “unimportant,” not even human “thing,” implies that she views such relationships indifferently at best. Considering her seemingly passive acceptance of the instability of her relationships, it would seem that this lyrical persona cares little for her relationships. But a closer look at this poem suggests that the lyrical persona sees a more important role for all of her relationships.

Our first clue to understanding the lyrical persona’s view of relationship lies in the third stanza: “I go through the world in two or alone and equally dear to me are longing and the death of longing, which is called fulfillment.” The phrase “equally dear” unambiguously demonstrates that the lyrical persona values the end of longing as much as she values longing itself. But what does the word “longing” mean? What is she longing for? The word “longing” implies a yearning or a desire for something that we do not have. It has a pained quality to it. When someone is longing for something, they ache or pine. It is a state of uncomfortable unfulfillment and a state of change (since longing implies a movement toward something). Considering how much this lyrical persona values change, her love of unfulfilled desire shouldn’t be too surprising. She finds pleasure even in this uncomfortable experience of instability.³⁴

And what does she long for? Considering that the first part of the stanza is about companionship and its lack, I would suggest that she is referring to the “longing” for a lover or a friend. By extension, the “death of longing” could be seen as the fulfillment brought by this relationship or even sexual fulfillment since the language of “longing” and “fulfillment” is often associated with sexuality. Why, then, does she use such ambiguous language to describe the consummation of that relationship? She finds “equally dear longing and the death of longing, which *is called* fulfillment.” The passive phrase, “which is called” implies that the lyrical persona might not agree with this definition; she might not

³⁴ Other lyrical personas in this collection exhibit this same love of longing. In “Virginitiy,” Stephanie, a lyrical persona of one of the poetic cycles, even claims that longing “purifies” and “fashions” the soul. She calls it “the virginitiy of happiness.”

see fulfillment in this “death of longing” (or in this finding of a lover). A woman who so strongly values instability and change would not find fulfillment in a single relationship. Instead, the consummation of that relationship is like a death. Notice that she describes the end of longing not as an “end” or as “the realization of longing.” She so strongly values the sense of yearning that the loss of it is considered a “death.” To her, a relationship is not fulfillment, but only the death of a highly prized feeling.

So how can any kind of relationship be “equally dear” to her, then? In this poem we have to take the lyrical persona’s word for it. She offers no other clues through diction or metaphors as she does to explain her love of longing and change. This death and rebirth imagery is reminiscent of the death and rebirth of Felicia’s relationships and her sense of self. The imagery, and the way it was used in the Felicia cycle, helps the reader understand this lyrical persona’s relationships and their connection to how she understands herself. She finds value both in longing for a friend/lover and in having one. She is able to let them get lost and view them as “insignificant things” because she enjoys the sensation caused by yearning for new friends and because, sometimes, bad relationships need to end if the lyrical persona is to maintain a healthy self. Moreover, if the lyrical persona can value the sense of longing as well as change, then it makes more sense that she would not mind the loss of a friend or husband. Such a loss will only cause a new longing and a new change in her life. If the lyrical persona has had such negative experiences as Felicia, she certainly will have learned that change is better than stasis. But this lyrical persona is also able to let friends join her when she turns another corner because the experiences of being with them shape and change her.

We can now better understand the reason that the lyrical persona of “A Woman Speaks” is so willing to allow relationships to end. But, in examining the poems “Sisters from the Bottom,” “The Greatest Love,” and even the Felicia cycle we can also understand the value the lyrical personas find in relationships with both men and women. In examining herself through the eyes of another, the lyrical persona creates an understanding of who she is. That un-

derstanding is powerfully affected by the nature of the relationship. Positive relationships encourage women to create fluid, changing, unstable selves. By using tropes of growth, transition, and longing (or, in some cases, sexual ecstasy), Świrszczyńska depicts many types of positive relationships in these poems. Generally, these tropes suggest that the relationships are not constraining, so they encourage the breaking of stereotypes or allow the lyrical persona to come and go in and out of the relationship. The most positive relationships also build a sense of a shared bond, or they even go so far as to encourage a merging of the lyrical persona's self with that of another, as long as the lyrical persona returns to herself. This sense of merging with another, and then returning to the self, is a special kind of self-creation that requires a particular willingness to stretch beyond the self, learn from another, and then grow or change from that experience.

On the other hand, negative relationships, which are static, constraining, or somehow unconscious of any shared connection, can destroy or seriously debilitate the self. Świrszczyńska uses of the tropes of sleep and stasis to demonstrate these kinds of relationships. In all cases, it is the nature of the relationship that ultimately affects the lyrical persona's self creation.

There remains only one last aspect of relationships to be examined. In most of the discussed poems, the lyrical personas welcome longing, consummation and loss because these relationships all affect the self, allowing it to grow and change. Fluidly and constantly moving through the cycle of gain and loss, these lyrical personas choose to destroy or leave parts of themselves, past experiences or past relationships behind and embrace new possibilities for who they may become. But these relationships imply that others are not as important to the lyrical personas as they are to themselves. The image of a woman continuously walking down many roads and who is joined by others that come and go, stresses the fact that, ultimately, this woman is alone. Similarly, Felicia, whose greatest and happiest sense of self is expressed in a sexual poem lacking any reference to a partner, and the lyrical persona of "Sisters," who ultimately is a transient herself, are also ultimately alone. Although Świrszczyńska does consider relationships with

others valuable, she reminds us of the existential reality facing us all. Self creation happens partially through relationships with others, but an integral part of self creation is self reflection. Aloneness is ultimately a way of being in relationship with one's self, and it is through that kind of relationship that the final step in self creation takes place. Ultimately, in a world of constant change, the most valuable friend to a woman is herself.