POETIC IDENTITIES IN "THE KNOT" *BY RUTH FAINLIGHT*

Ileana Silvia CIORNEI*

Abstract: *Conversational and intimate, the poetry of Ruth Fainlight combines a lightness of touch with great intensity due to the fact that she finds strangeness and mysticism beneath the surface of everyday life events. Although her themes have changed and developed with the passage of time, her poetry always tried to render the subtlest perceptions and emotions of the world in its complexity. The most important dimensions of her creation are poetic craft, race and gender. Certainly, poetic craft, feminist and Jewish elements can be easily traced in her poetry all clothed in a highly symbolic language. However, besides these, her work is constructed around themes like hope and despair, death and ageing, loss, heart's affections, human fears, human behaviour, human relationships, awareness of the natural world, its changes and continuities.*

"The Knot" *appeared in 1991, half way her literary career and has a rich, complex structure which illustrates her main themes and reveals her identities as a woman, a poet and a Jew. The title of the collection refers directly to the poetic creation and poetic craft. The volume includes poems about poetic creation, female-centred nature and attitudes, human experiences, natural world and the mythical power which lies underneath, journeys through time and space.*

Keywords*: poetic craft, gender, race.*

Ruth Fainlight started her poetic career with with *Cages* in 1966 and continued during the following six decades to publish collections of poems, works of fiction, translations and opera libretti. Born in the USA, the daughter of a British father and an American mother, both of Jewish ancestry, Fainlight came to Britain in 1946, studying in Birmingham and Brighton and finally settling in London.

Conversational and intimate, her poetry combines a lightness of touch with great intensity due to the fact that she finds strangeness and mysticism beneath the surface of everyday life events. Although her themes have changed and developed with the passage of time, her poetry always tried to render the subtlest perceptions and emotions of the world in its complexity. "I do not know how it would be possible to write without being driven by emotional intensity" says Fainlight, "for me, that intensity is another name for inspiration". (Vianu, 2009: p.118)

The same interview shows that in Vertical, from the collection *Another Full Moon,* she refers to the liberating power of her writing. "I am released by language /which sets me free /From whomsoever's definition: Jew. Woman. Poet." (Vianu, 2009: p.116). The poet expresses here the most important dimensions of her life-poetic craft, race and gender. Certainly, poetic craft, feminist and Jewish elements can be easily traced in her poetry all clothed in a highly symbolic language. However, besides these, her work is constructed around themes like hope and despair, death and ageing, loss, heart's affections, human fears, human behaviour, human relationships, awareness of the natural world, its changes and continuities.

The Knot appeared in 1991, half way his literary career and has a rich, complex structure which illustrates her main themes and reveals her identities as a woman, a poet and a Jew. The title of the collection refers directly to the poetic creation and poetic craft. *The Knot* suggests that inspiration comes in solitude "in empty huts at the edge of

* University of Pitesti, silviaciornei@yahoo.com

BDD-A29921 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:11:16 UTC)

the clearing" and the poet can be her own muse "you need to be alone to tell the story. The story you tell yourself all day but sometimes cannot hear". Words will form a knot in order to tell the story. Why a knot? The Knot is a very ancient symbol which appears in the writings, legends and mythology of nearly all cultures. As a symbol, the Knot signifies complexity, completion, vows, and hidden secrets. On a much deeper level, the symbolism of the Knot is just as complex and intricate as the Knot itself. Through its closely wrapped cords of mystery, fable and legend, the Knot protects the Truth and Wisdom which lie at its centre, just as life lies in the middle of poetic creation and poetic creation in the middle of life.

According to Marian Ilea, knots and weaving are a powerful metaphor for the ultimate layer of storytelling, of artistic creation. Knots are defined as means to bring to light a "what we all have (each of us) deeply buried in the in the consciousness of untold and (allegedly) forgotten things". (Informaţia zilei de Maramureş, 13 septembrie 2014)

The second poem of the volume, The European Story is not lyric but a collage of odd folklore motifs from European culture and mentions "the rooting goodess who eats her farrow", the White Goddess, proposed by Robert Graves, an European deity, the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death, inspired and represented by the phases of the moon, who lies behind the faces of the diverse goddesses of various European and pagan mythologies. Graves argues that "true" or "pure" poetry is inextricably linked with the ancient cult-ritual of his White Goddess and of her son. Graves based his work on the premise that the language of poetic myth current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry.

On the Theme of Artifice refers directly to Wallace Stevens' poetry whose themes resemble hers in their domesticity. Imagination is both upon and against reality (nature). Poetry is the essence of reality. A discussion with Patrick Kavanaghn compares the ironic detached attitude of the Parnassians to the emotional rendering of the world. She experiences a kind of confusion since poetry is always emotion and not detachment. Diamonds used here symbolize purity, light and spiritual force. he Poet describes "a quiet evening in August", the melancholy pleasure of aimless thought which may precede poetic creation. Again, moon and stars lie behind the atmosphere as symbols of "limitless expansion". That Presence compares again writing with weaving, and other arts as painting and sculpture, underlining that long, minute process of writing: "to make a poem sound simple and inevitable requires a great deal of time, thought, knowledge and effort. I work on a poem for days, weeks, sometimes months before I can begin to think it has come close to what I want and hope it to be. Almost all my poems go through many drafts. And sometimes years later I see that something needs to be changed, sharpened or simplified." (Vianu, 2009: p.110)

Through the Sibyl figures, Ruth Fainlight constructs her identity as a woman poet. "The Sibyl was a perfect vehicle to express some of my deepest feelings", a muse and alter-ego. She relates "the idea of the sibyls, who can see and say things others can't, to the idea of being a poet—speaking things as a poet." (Vianu, 2009: p.121). She began her first Sibyl sequence (in *Sibyls and Others*, 1980), a collection originally illustrated by Leonard Baskin, the American sculptor and print-maker, who wanted to collaborate with a poet on a book about sibyls, because he had begun a series of prints and drawings of sibyls.

The sibyls were women that the ancient Greeks believed were oracles who prophesied at holy sites. Their prophecies were influenced by divine inspiration from a

BDD-A29921 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:11:16 UTC)

deity; at Delphi, the deities were chthonic deities. The sibyl may be the voice of female prophecy, the centrality and mystery of religious belief in every culture, at every time and in every place. In the sequence of poems *Twelve Sibyls* Fainlight evokes a range of archetypal female figures who are gifted with the power of utterance and self-creation yet who are still denied, frozen, and curbed by the controlling strength of the male "god" (Riggs, Thomas, 2000: p.326) There are only two sibyls in the collection namely in The Navajo Sybil who describes a stormy night set in a chtonic landscape, the land of the Navajo Indians, the Grand Canyon. Earth is a powerful presence ravaged by a storm while humans are somehow experiences of the "buried gods who created Time and Space.; and The Wittersham Sybil, a wonderful poem about nature between autumn and winter where "she" knows that everything in nature „the pattern of dew, fallen apples, the livid toadstools and rusty moss" are messages from God.

Although she does not profess a radical feminism, Fainlight is always open in her feminist views which rather describe definitions of feminity, related to equality under law, equal rights and opportunities. A lot of her poems reflect a female -centred nature and attitudes. Flower Feet analyses through the patriarchal Chinese habit of crippling young girls' feet in order to have delicate small feet, the conventional notion of beauty which have often transformed and mutilated women emotionally, mentally or physically. Truly enough, this poem is so powerful nowadays when women transform themselves to follow unrealistic and artificial patterns of beauty. My Fuchsia centres upon woman as central to life and its perpetuation, compared to the life cycle of flowers-from buds to yellow leaves and faded flowers. Ruth Fainlight has a special preference for August, "its exhausted fertility /after glut and harvest", as a woman who performed her functions and is still "a gallant fine creature". In Like Manet's Olympe, the portrait of her aunt, a feminine archetype is powerfully sketched in colourful visual images "so much the same as the painting" which made her "afraid to enter". In spite of the fact that such loneliness, vanity, fearfulness and beauty were "helpless against suburban power", the portrait is that of a powerful female presence. August, a poem "about ageing and loss, establishes free connections between middle-aged feminity and the month when everything stops growing". Again, the poem is centred upon a powerful, solitary somehow old-fashioned woman who "had been treated badly by men". Mothers in Shakespeare clearly underlines female position as seen through a daughter's eye in a male-centred society, represented by the figure of Father, the writer who dictates while mother types his sentences. Shakespeare's world is remembered as a male centred-one in which mother literary figures are very few. Death of the mother is suggested here caused by unhappiness, loneliness and lack of love. The suicidal gas-poker death may remember the death of her friend Sylvia Plath who committed suicide at 30, after depressing episodes, a difficult relation with her husband and inability to cope with everyday existence.

The roles of woman and poet intermingles in Fainlight's relationship with her mother, which is presented in several of her poems. The relationship is seen as ambivalent, somehow between love and resentment; it is significant that Fainlight regards the muse as a mother figure whose status she is not always willing to admit: She looks what she'd been born as: a shrewd, ironic Jewish peasant /who knew competing daughters are best ignored. Her indifference drove me quite /berserk. For years I fought it.

Her apparatus of femininity always involves petticoats, kohl, powder and especially bags and lipstick. The crescent looks like her mother's lipstick, worn away to a crescent, while her own lipsalve takes the same shape: I carry the sign of the moon

BDD-A29921 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:11:16 UTC)

/and my mother, a talisman /in a small plastic tube /in my handbag, a holy relic /melted by believers' /kisses, and every time /I smooth my lips with the unguent /I feel them pout and widen /in the eternal smile /of her survival through me /feel her mouth on mine//.

She has a particular gift in in describing interpersonal relationships within the family, as in Towards My Waiting Mother: [...] like a forest /creature who crawls into a hollow tree /or ditch when its time has come, he curved around/the smallest possible space in the hospital bed. He didn't talk much – none of the stories /I'd hoped at last to hear which only now /I realise that I expected (still /the child demanding his attention). Instead, how simple everything seemed as he moved further /away from me, towards my waiting mother//. In Learning about Him she remembers her father with warmth and intensity as she discovers things about his love for her and about the funny, melancholic and intellectual side they shared. Childhood memories of her family can be found through the volume in Those Photographs, Keeper, Out of the Porch.

Since Fainlight's poetry is private and deeply personal, it reflects a systematic blending of personal experiences rooted in apparent ordinary moments of life. The Yellow Plate which describes a porcelain painted with the Chinese zodiac celebrates the death of a friend while Flies and Early Rivers bring the past back through visual and kinaesthetic perception. Rock Island experiences the approach of death through each detail. It seems that underneath the clear vivid picture of the landscape lies something which brings the stillness of death: The pale fungus, the litter of bark and branches /from fallen, broken trees along the hill. Confusion of greyness against earth's redness. I pulled a mushroom, tall and bullet-like with a gun-metal glint, and turned it over. The gills looked inky, sooty, dangerous//.

Poems dedicated to interpersonal relations have a conversational tone; however, they are lined with an acute sense of human emotions-love, passion or affection, sense of loss, uncertainty - The Planetarium, String, Cartography or High Pressure Zone.

The poetess has a deep perception of the natural world. *The Knot* has some poems on this theme but two poems in the volume illustrate best the double layer of her poetry- clear descriptions of the natural world and the mythical power which lies underneath. In The Same Power, the first stanza is more picturesque: Lush chill of spring in Holland Park /Dark glossy flesh of the bluebells, hoarse /cry of a peacock strutting his courtship cope/against a wind which flattens it out behind/, while the second possesses a Shelleyan tone which evokes the hidden power which created all- […] that common regret for not having been alert enough to recognize the one moment/when beauty, truth, life and death became the same Power: evoked not described. The Novelty focuses on the permanent changes in nature. Although images belong almost exclusively to the natural world, there is a sense of human transitoriness which accompanies the novelty of each new beginning.

Ruth Fainlight is equally known for uniqueness and originality: "I don't really want to be called an American poet, or an English poet, or a Woman poet, or heaven forbid, a Jewish poet. I am an English Language poet." (Petch, 2011: p.86). She does not wish to be described as a Jewish writer; Fainlight combines ethnic, female and literary elements within her own complex personality, but there can be no doubt that her Jewish heritage is a powerful factor in her poetry. In The Knot the Jewish aspect of her nature is shown through biblical accounts and references - "Daddy's volumes of Jewish thoughts" (Keeper), "look after my feigele (the Yiddish name meant little bird)" in Learning about Him, "a shrewd, ironic Jewish peasant" (Those photographs), (The

BDD-A29921 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:11:16 UTC)

Propeller) “kicked to death in a pogrom” or Sister, Sister, a modern recreation of a biblical story of Tamar’s rape by Amnon. Oppression and the Holocaust, absent in *The Knot* will form the subtext of future poetry.

Apart from her Jewish heritage, Fainlight is an Anglo-American poet whose cultural duality is perceived as having a sense of *bothness*. “I prefer mid-Atlantic imagination to describe how they transform their preoccupations with geographical location, journeys and home through the poetic act that is contingent upon yet moves them out of these material experiences of place”. (Petch, 2011: p.83)

The mid-Atlantic imagination combines through female-specific perspectives and symbols American and British polarities. Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, and French feminist and poststructuralist critic, Julia Kristeva, describe how Anglo-American poets evoke artistic subjectivity creating a “somewhere” out of “nowheresville”. (Petch, 2011: p.89)

The journey has the creative potential of the transitional spaces. *The Knot* includes many transitions and journeys through time and space: Tuscaloosa, Bouzigues, Résidence Secondaire. Driving I, II and III are poems of self-reflection, using images seen through windows which suggest, according to Kristeva, a heightened female awareness. “In the journey space poets project their enjoyment at being apart from the thrust of social imperatives: It is in the aspiration towards artistic and, in particular, literary creation”. (Petch, 2011: p.89)

Not simply poet, female or Jewish, Ruth Fainlight is all of them and more, and this complexity is reflected in her writing from first to last.

Bibliography

Fainlight, R., *The Knot*, Hutchinson, 1990
Hutton, R., *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*. John Wiley & Sons, 1993
Petch, M., *The Mid-Atlantic Imagination*, Cambridge Collection online, CUP, 2011
Riggs, Th., *Contemporary Poets*, St James Press, 7th edition, 2000
Vianu, L., *Desperado Essay Interviews*, Editura pentru Literatură Contemporană, 2009

Webography

https://literature.britishcouncil.org/ accessed 14/03/2018
https://www.poetryarchive.org/ accessed 14/03/2018
www.cprw.com/ accessed 14/03/2018
www.oldways.org/ accessed 14/03/2018

BDD-A29921 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:11:16 UTC)