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FEMALE CONFESSIONALISM: THE FEMALE BODY, MENTAL ILLNESS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND FAMILIAL DYNAMICS

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Introduction

In the midst of trying to describe his larger-than-life brother, the narrator of *Seymour: An Introduction* finds it difficult to pinpoint what makes Seymour so remarkable. Buddy Glass struggles with the personality of his brother, because it seems to escape articulation. J.D. Salinger has conveyed the singularity of the Glass family in other short stories and novels (*Franny & Zooey*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*), but it is in *An Introduction* that he makes an attempt to deliver a pseudo-biography. The result is a self-conscious diatribe about the impossibility of truly getting at the heart of a person, particularly when that person is a poet. Buddy remarks that "…the more personal Seymour's poems appear to be, or *are*, the less revealing the content is of any known details of his actual daily life in this Western world" (Salinger, 1994: 84). The quote underlines the basic conceit of *An Introduction*, which is that the personal can only be "introduced"; it can only be given broad strokes but it can never be summarily captured. The more you try to grasp it, the quicker it will slip away. The same can be said for Seymour's poetry; the sense of intimacy it purports actually gives nothing away.

Often times, talking about yourself is an effective way to conceal or even modify your identity. It is why readers and critics look upon autobiographic writing with some measure of suspicion. In Lacanian terminology, the subject only emerges as part of a discourse with an Other, it can only be born out of intersubjectivity (Olney, 1980: 324) and, therefore, "the self can no more be author of its own discourse than any producer of a text can be called an author – that is the originator - of his writing" (325). To put it differently, the Self cannot claim independence from other Selves, from other texts and from other discourses. The Self is enmeshed in an intertextual matrix (325) and is not formed by a singular effort. As consequence, if one wanted to depict the Self, one would need to depict the entire matrix that enables it. But as postmodern subjects, we have undergone a "metamorphosis" through which our subjectivity has been dispersed and codified (322). As such, it is almost impossible to "talk" about ourselves in a way that will coherently convey

the Whitmanian multitude of our being. The more we attempt to do so - consciously or not - the more we distance ourselves from our subjectivity.

This frustration is encapsulated in the gradual collapse of autonomies and binaries in the postmodern world. Bruno Latour argues that we are beyond certain distinctions and separations. He points out that past modernity was characterized by a divorce between Nature and Culture; Nature was in charge of providing factual, scientific information about objects, whereas Culture was at the helm of "representing subjects" (qtd. in Connor, 2004: 7). However, as with most systematic binaries, the Nature/Culture opposition was one that could not sustain itself over time, and this led to an altered relationship between object and subject (7). The uncontainable subject spilled over and contaminated the object (and vice versa). Consequently, the postmodern subject acts as an intrusion upon the object or, in our case, the text. Roland Barthes' concept of a "readerly" and "writerly" text hinges upon this very intrusion, underscoring the fact that the subject/reader ultimately enters a relationship with the text and re-writes it, he or she becoming a "producer of the text" (qtd. in Allen, 2003: 88). So if the subject already modifies the text, how much more does the subject modify their own *personal* text?

Buddy Glass' efforts to assess his brother's personality are plagued by his own subjectivity, by the multiple emotional tangents that all connect to Seymour, but also seem to lead us further and further away from him. Buddy is writing about *himself* writing about his brother, and as a result, we deal with different levels of intersubjectivity where the subject is neither Buddy nor Seymour, but someone in between. Salinger presents this narrative as one doomed to fail from the start, but it is the very failure to depict personhood which sustains the effort of self-discovery. We still follow Buddy in his complicated search for the sibling Self because it opens avenues into what it means to be a subject. Even if Seymour's poetry ultimately eschews personal interpretation, Buddy's effort to understand him mirrors what Kennedy & Gioia call in *An Introduction to Poetry*, "a hunger for honest self-examination" (1998: 299). The "hunger for self-examination", whether ultimately conducive to a genuine rendition of the subject or not, gives the text meaning and direction. The search for selfhood, whether it can be articulated or not, is a compelling journey and, one might argue, it is the only way that one can arrive at the dispersed postmodern subject.

This journey may take many forms but it is in poetry that the difficulties and the satisfactions of self-examination become more urgent since it is a medium which thrives on the clash between personality and truth. This clash may be observed in the inaugural efforts of the ancient poets. For Homer, it is the "audê" (Gr.), given to the poet by the Muses and the gods, which is responsible for the act of creation (Ford, 1994: 174). "Audê" may be translated as the plain human voice, but it is not the simple vocal apparatus; rather, it is its potential to "emit a sound that is harmonious, powerful, and above all endowed with meaning" (qtd. in Ford, 1994: 174). The gods appear to "breathe" audê into the poet (174) and the exchange is as a life-giving force that raises the poet from subject to messenger. Interestingly, the message (i.e. the poem) is still delivered in human voice, despite its divine origins (174). It seems that even if the poet relinquishes responsibility for the act of creation, the channel of expression remains marked by human subjectivity. The gods reserve other manners of speech that are not meant for human ears, such as "omphé" (a derivative of "song") or "ossa" (a derivative of "voice") (175), but "audê" remains the most accessible "voice", which makes for a strange hybrid that retains qualities from both realms. Poetry is then a hybrid too, a mixture of the divine and the personal, of what is represented as general truth and what is represented as subjectivity.

Throughout the history of poetry, the two elements were often placed in subordination, with personal experience having to serve and ultimately be integrated within general truths (Eliot, 1975: 251), but posmodernist subjectivity questions the possibility of creative autonomy and whether the relationship between truth and self is much more diffuse and unstable than previously thought. This line of thinking was adopted by various artistic factions which emerged in America in the latter half of the 20th century, one of them being the poetic movement known as confessionalism, which aims to explore the unstable nature of personal discourse and what this means for us as subjects. Like Buddy Glass, confessionalism acknowledges the impossibility of arriving at a holistic self. It argues that poetry can be the medium in which questions of subjectivity and autonomy may be explored, precisely because poetry forces the subject to be present, whether as a messenger of the gods, gifted with *audê*, or as an elusive, unmanageable persona like Seymour Glass. As Peter Brooks argues in *Troubling Confessions* (2000), confessional speech may be the "vehicle of

the most authentic truth, yet capable of the most damaging, self-destructive untruth" (9) and it is this precarious balance that is explored in confessional poetry. Personal experiences of a painful or even shameful nature are brought to the light - almost *exorcised* in verse - with the purpose of pushing the barriers of what can and cannot be said. It comes down to the simple act of "talking about yourself" and discovering how much of it conceals or reveals you. As Jo Gill posits: "to think about confession is to abandon…dependable notions of reliability, authority and authenticity" (2006: 1) and to embrace the full spectrum of postmodern subjectivity, despite its unreliable and sometimes inauthentic manifestations.

In the following chapters we will look at the origins of confession and the way it has shaped Western culture and modes of expression in matters of authenticity and reliability. We will also follow the trajectory of confessional poetry and its impact on postmodern subjectivity. The second half of the thesis will be dedicated to understanding and exploring the way in which confessionalism opened the gates for many other selves that had been denied space in the literary canon. There will be a particular focus on female selfhood and its reflections in confessional poetry. As we shall see, the construction of female subjectivity mirrors the confessional trajectory in both purpose and method.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Approaches to Confessional Poetry

I. Confessionalism and Theory

1.1 A Brief History of the Practice of Confession

In *The Compulsion to Confess* (1961), Theodor Reik speaks of confession and the "urge for expression" as a force which threatens to "shape the destiny of us all" (qtd. in Gill, 2006: 6). What exactly is this "force" that compels us to "express", and why should it affect all of us? Peter Brooks asks himself a similar question: "…what is it about confession that makes it such a difficult and slippery notion to deal with? Why do we worry about confessions and their truth value, not only in the law but in literature and in daily life?" (2000: 11). In other words, why is the expression of truth in modern times such a hazardous business? These questions preoccupy us intensely because, as Michel Foucault puts it, the "Western man has become a confessing animal" (1978: 59); he or she is constantly searching for a better way to express who he or she is. In the following section we will try to answer some of those questions, while also examining how confession, as a concept and a process, has influenced the way we speak and write.

Etymologically, confession is an act of "acknowledgement" ("confess", Online Etymology Dictionary, para. 1), derived from the Latin "*confiteri*" which itself is made up of two particles: "*com*" (together) and "*fateri*" (speaking/admitting) (para. 1). Hence, confession is meant to be a shared, communal act. The idea of togetherness may not seem particularly relevant in the act of confessing; after all, Shlomit Schuster argues that each philosopher engaged in confession wishes to "reveal his own true self" (qtd. in Taylor, 2010: 2), and such an endeavor requires a certain kind of solipsism which frames the confession as an internal, individual activity. But is this accurate? Is individuality all that counts in the process? Foucault argues that confession does not simply happen in a vacuum; in every such act there is a *confessor* and a *confessant*, someone who "listens and says nothing" (1978: 61) and someone who speaks and says everything. Who is this silent audience and what role do they

play in the confession? In order to ascertain their significance, we must first look at the cultural loci where confession is most prevalent.

Confession as a normative practice can be studied, as Brooks suggested above, in "the law" and its various apparatuses that are designed to gather information from the subject. In legal matters, confession represents a useful, but often unreliable tool of disclosure; as G.H. Gudjonsson explains in *The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions* (2003), authorities are most interested in the "accuracy" and "completeness" of a given statement (2), which is why they are often concerned with the possibility that a confession has been delivered under pressure, or altered by external influence (1). This is a psychological conundrum that has been explored in literary form as well; look no further than the character of Nikolai Dementiev in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, a painter who willingly confesses to a crime he did not commit out of a mistaken feeling of guilt. This tendency to confess to a "wrongdoing" is considered by American Chief Justice Warren Burger to be a "human urge" that is "normal, in all save hardened, professional criminals" (qtd. in Taylor, 2010: 2). Talmudic law, however, believes that this kind of self-incrimination stems from a "death-drive" (Brooks, 2000: 21), an urge to bring about "punishment or even self-annihilation" (21). This urge, Freud also asserts, is born out of a sense of guilt which manifests at an unconscious level and which must be satisfied through punishment (Brooks, 21).

But the urge to confess often overlaps with the simple verbalization of a confession. Linguistically, the confessant is placed under an assumption of guilt from the moment he or she utters "I confess" (Brooks, 21), since the speech act of confession entails both an utterance and an action. As theorized by J.L. Austin, a speech act contains both a constative and a performative aspect (Brooks, 21). Hence, if the speaker begins his or her statement with "I confess", the constative aspect refers to the sin or wrongdoing he or she has committed, whereas the performative aspect refers to the action of atoning for that sin and demanding absolution or punishment (21). Brooks gives the example of Catholic confession, wherein the confessant begins with the formal utterance, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned" (21). In this case, the constative aspect is the confessant informing the priest that he or she has committed sins, but the performative aspect behind it is the confessant asking for

forgiveness (21). The problem with these two aspects is that they happen simultaneously within the speech act and that when an individual says "I confess", the underlying assumption is that he or she also wishes to make amends for a wrongdoing, meaning that their guilt is as good as certain. As such, "the performative aspect will produce the constative, [and] create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires" (Brooks, 21). Given the linguistic entrapment which the act of confessing entails, it is difficult to judge the individual's psychological intent or the certainty of his or her guilt.

Of course, the individual is encouraged to confess, no matter the reality behind his or her "sins". The desire to be punished or forgiven only escalates the more one confesses (Brooks, 22), because the process of confession bears a deeply emotional effect on the confessant. Indeed, Foucault strengthens the argument when he posits that expressing guilt "exonerates, redeems and purifies the confessant" and "promises him salvation" (1978: 62). Whether or not the confessant is actually guilty seems to be a moot point; the verbalization of what Erik Berggren calls "oppressed secrets" (qtd. in Taylor, 2010: 1) is an act of liberation. Nikolai Dementiev of *Crime and Punishment* is not guilty of killing anyone, but by admitting to an imaginary crime, he is freed from a psychological burden and offered salvation.

In order for the liberation to have full effect, however, the confessor (the one who "listens") must wield enough power to confer it; in other words, the authorities must be able to "prescribe and appreciate" (Foucault, 1978: 61) the confession in order for the confessant to feel release. This means that there is a clear power relation between the two parties. The confessant is bound to make an appeal, and the confessor "is called upon as witness and judge of its efficaciousness" (Brooks, 95). Such a power relation is often found in religious practices as well, and it is here, in fact, that various theories of confession emerge in relation to the truth and the Self. The Christian faith, in particular, believes in the power of confession to purge sin, as St Augustine of Hippo stipulates: "*qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem*" (qtd in Taylor, 2008: 17), meaning that speaking the truth paves the path to the light (17). St Augustine's famous confessional work entitled *Confessions* was highly influential both within and outside sacred writings. His belief was that, "by knowing one's sins and temptations, and by bearing witness to these sins and temptations in the presence of others, a Christian could better access the truth of God" (Taylor, 17). To put matters differently,

confession is a rite of passage towards knowledge of a higher truth, but it also implies a degree of self-knowledge. This self-knowledge is only obtained by appealing to the judgment of others: one must know one's "sins and temptations" and then one must "bear witness … in the presence of others". Sin is expunged through a period of self-reflection and afterwards, a public confession, which implies at least one more party being present.

The interconnectedness of sin and confession has been explored at length by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality, vol I.* He notes that the act of confessing became linked with a specific kind of sin; the sin of the flesh (1978: 19). Hence, "the confession of the flesh" dominates the rituals of penance and provides a framework for the confessor to testify to any deviance related to the flesh, including "thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and soul" (19). The flesh is fashioned into a signifier of innocence for both body and mind, to the extent that confession is transformed into a process of vigilant self-examination whose purpose is to prevent "thoughts" and "desires" from disturbing the flesh (20). The ultimate goal is to reform the sinner by dwelling on things which may seem "trivial and insignificant" (20), but which to the confessional apparatus are anything but unimportant. Confession must nurture both a medium of lofty inquiry and one of inconsequential detail which leaves no possible door unchecked: "no obscurity, no respite" (20). The idea of repeatedly "telling", of disclosing any thoughts and actions related to sex, becomes part and parcel of the individual's sexual existence (20); he or she is not fully a sexual being until they *confess* they are. Indeed, the caveat of confession is that every desire has to be transformed into discourse (21). As such, desire itself is modified, whether through multiplication or re-contextualization (23), and becomes dependent on its verbalization. You confess what you desire, and you desire what you confess.

This dualism leads to the idea that confession ultimately betrays one's desires, simply through the act of speaking. The sin of the flesh is transferred from a personal to a public sphere and thus becomes "real", and this places the confessant in a submissive position, where he or she awaits judgment. As Foucault clearly states,

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for

> one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console (…) (62)

Here we should pause to expand on the phrase "a ritual of discourse" and what it means for confession. The issue of discourse and discursive power was broached by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966) where he posited that each historical age was defined by a certain type of discourse which influenced the very direction of history and society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in particular, Foucault argues that a shift took place by which:

> all language had value only as discourse. The art of language was a way of 'making a sign' – of simultaneously signifying something and arranging signs around that thing; an art of naming, therefore, and then, by means of a reduplication both demonstrative and decorative, of capturing that name, of enclosing and concealing it, of designating it in turn by other names that were the deferred presence of the first name, its secondary sign, its figuration, its rhetorical panoply (2005: 48).

As we see from the quote above, language gains value as a connotative instrument which reduplicates, captures, encloses, conceals, designates. These verbs all point to a certain power which discourse wields, namely to designate one name "by other names", to replace one representation for another. Indeed, Foucault suggests that discourse is a "representation providing the articulation for another [representation]" (2005: 109). The jargon of certain professions, social classes or age groups is a form of discourse, because it identifies every member belonging to that faction through specialized speech, while also making sure to keep out those who do not adhere to the linguistic code (Oliver, 2010: 29). There is a marked difference between a person who wields the dominant discourse and someone who is not fluent in it, and that difference will manifest itself in an imbalance of power. If we return to the definition of confession as "a ritual of discourse", we will see that it is not enough to confess to an interlocutor vested with power over us, but we must also adhere to a certain linguistic code when engaged in the act of confession. We must formulate our confession so as to *sound* like a true admission within the strictures of the power relation. Therefore, to

confess means to say "I confess", "I admit", "I am guilty of…", therefore placing ourselves within a submissive discourse. The problems that arise from such a ritual of discourse are that of truth and autonomy. It seems that the confessant is encouraged to confess, but only as long as the confession is delivered in a "prescribed" manner, which the confessor (the authority) may condone. In other words, the confessor must approve of the confessant's discourse.

The prescriptive quality of confession is particularly relevant in religious practices. The notion that a confessor is carefully monitoring the confessant's speech is encapsulated in St. Augustine's famous aphorism on the ubiquity of the divine audience: "The abyss of the human conscience lies naked to your eyes, O Lord, so would anything in me be secret even if I were unwilling to confess to you? I would be hiding you from myself, but not myself from you" (2009: 179). The confessant need not always be willing to testify to his or her sins since God is always watching and listening anyway. Rather, confession is a chance to acknowledge that one *knows* God is always present. Throughout Christian history, confession has acted as a useful signifier for the belief in God; after all, St. Augustine writes that he is not writing his *Confessions* to God: "rather, in your presence I am relating these events to my own kin" (28). Hence, St. Augustine is writing to fellow believers who understand the potency of the phrase "in your (God's) presence". The prescriptive nature of confession, then, stems from the notion that you are never alone with your thoughts, nor should you be.

Religious institutions implemented a similar approach to confession: in the 11th century, the Christian Roman Church issued a decree by which "annual confessions" were an obligation for its subjects, particularly if they wanted admittance to Easter communion (Brooks, 2000: 19). One's religious status was therefore dependent upon confession. Likewise, the Council of Trent in the 16th century placed confession among the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, deeming it "of divine origin and necessary for one's spiritual salvation" (Brooks, 18). Things took a turn with the advent of Calvinism and Protestantism, which stood in opposition to the Catholic tradition and argued that confession should be private, preferably written and with the ultimate goal of self-examination (Gill, 2006: 5). Both denominations, be it Catholic or Protestant, imposed a certain type of confession on its subjects and linked it closely to redemption. American Puritanism,

however, returned to a more Catholic representation of confession and required "a public performance of private experience" (Gill, 5). This expansive mode of confession would go on to influence American thought for a very long time, and Christopher Lasch would argue that this is very much connected with the brand of American narcissism that we know today (6).

What we can ascertain from its history is that confession gave rise to a practice of self-examination that was often structured according to the authorities at hand. Self-disclosure was less about speech reflecting reality - and therefore, *mimesis* - but rather about speech creating reality i.e. *poiesis* (Gill, 2006: 4). One did not reflect truth, one *produced* truth with each iteration. Additionally, as we have mentioned above, the truth that the confessant produced had to be in accordance with the prescribed discourse of the confessor and the audience. As Judith Harris points out, confession often grappled with the "ideology of truth" (2001: 259), a mechanism of power which persecuted the individual and forced him or her to confess to an acceptable version of the truth (259). Creativity (*poiesis*) on the one hand, and prescriptivism on the other hand, meant that the confessional mode became a matter of invention and performance and this led to a production of "secular" works that dealt with the problem of self-reflection (Gill, 5).

One can look at Jean Jacques Rousseau's famous *Confessions* as a "self-conscious" response to St. Augustine's *Confessions* and may observe that the former work questions the latter in matters of "self-reflection and self-knowledge" (Taylor, 2010: 91). Rousseau is on a quest of self-discovery, but he also makes that task difficult for his audience. He deceives his confessors, while at the same time pondering on the benefits of deception on the road to self-knowledge (91). In a famous episode from his adolescence, Rousseau recounts his haunts through the streets of Turin with one purpose in mind; to find a woman who could provide him with sexual enjoyment by applying to him the punishment of his childhood, by spanking him. At one point in the narrative, he happens upon a few serving girls in a courtyard and he exposes his backside to them. The girls are not amused or willing to spank him; instead they call for the assistance of a big man who, after chasing young Rousseau through "labyrinthine cellars" (Brooks, 50), finally catches him and forces him against a wall, demanding an explanation. On the spur of the moment, Rousseau makes up a false confession, "*un*

expédient romanesque" (qtd. in Brooks, 50). He tells the man he is a foreign aristocrat whose mind is unhinged and who has run away from his father who means to lock him up. If his identity should be found, he is doomed. In return for the man's discretion, Rousseau is ready to make promises of a future reward. The ruse succeeds; the man lets him go. A few days later, Rousseau happens upon him on the streets and the man realizes he has been cheated. The fictional confession has served its purpose and is now rescinded (Brooks, 50). But was it only a fictional confession? Was the identity that Rousseau employed in this stratagem based wholly on a lie? A closer look at the facts would tell us that the writer may have exposed more of himself than he intended in his "*expédient romanesque*". For one thing, he *was* a foreigner, and though he was not a born aristocrat, he considered himself superior to his circumstances, particularly when he was forced to act the part of a servant (Brooks, 50). Moreover, his mind was generally thought to be in disarray and he too had run away from his father's house, not out of fear of confinement, but because he did not like his occupation (50). This goes to show that confessions regularly "cohabit with both truth and lie" (49) and that the fictions we weave around ourselves are grounded in morsels of truth and, therefore, should not necessarily be discredited.

For this becomes the crux of self-exploratory writing; is the construction of the self under our control? Are our fictions and truths so involuntary and difficult to separate that we lose grasp of the entire project? The "line between deception and self-deception" (Taylor, 91) is very thin, meaning that the difference between a willful lie - told to deceive the confessor - and a lie which one sees as personal truth is hardly a difference at all. Is the act of confessing damaged by the possibility of self-delusion? Gill would argue that this is not the case, and in fact, confessional writing dwells particularly in "its own failure to confess" (2009: 8), examining the ways in which the self is (re)invented and displaced in our attempts to map it (7). As such, deception and self-delusion might be a *necessary* step towards self-exploration.

Another compelling example that illustrates the wide scope of self-exploratory writing is the famous diary of Samuel Pepys which he kept for an extended period of time (1660 to 1669) and which detailed intimate scenes from the life of a prominent Restoration-era figure. Pepys was concerned mainly with private, family affairs and as such, the diary foreshadows the eighteenth-century novel's preoccupation with domesticity (Nandi, 2011:

66). More than that, the diary was written in a period when the private and the public sphere were not yet separated (66) and this meant that Pepys did not feel the need to cosmeticize or idealize the various foibles of domestic life. And yet, it is no accident that the diary went on to influence the novels of the next century. There are elements of the novel in the diary; Pepys creates a cogent narrative of his attempt to rise in society, while also focusing on the interiority of his experiences (Nandi, 64-66). More than that, however, he writes about himself with the self-conscious knowledge that someone, someday, might read his words. This is evidenced in the fact that he often edited entries he did not find to his taste (67). Harry J. Berger also pointed out that the passages in the diary about the Great Fire of 1666 which seemed most genuine were written several months after the incident and not directly afterwards (Nandi, 67). It is noteworthy that what strikes us as more authentic in his writing was actually further removed from reality. Such distinctions are often difficult to make; the chronicled self that Pepys puts to paper is both fictitious and rooted in the realities of his time. Almost every entry has a beginning, middle, and ending. He rises in the morning and goes to bed at night. In fact, a variation on the phrase "and so home to supper and bed" (2000: 2) is encountered quite frequently and every entry has a sense of moving forward, of advancing to the next stage of the day. As such, in the rare cases where Pepys does express a troubling thought or an emotional disturbance in the daily schedule, it registers as clandestine. In this way, we may speak of a diary within a diary, a confession that slips between the cracks. An example would be an entry where Pepys is fighting with his wife on the subject of "her mayds". The diarist wishes he could brush the unpleasantness aside, even in his own private account, but he is not entirely successful:

> Lay long in bed discoursing with my wife about her mayds, which by Jane's going away in discontent and against my opinion do make some trouble between my wife and me. But these are but foolish troubles and so not to be set to heart, yet it do disturb me mightily these things. (…) So I sent for my wife to my office, and told her that rather than be talked on I would give her all her wages for this Quarter coming on, though two months is behind, which vexed my wife, and we begun to be angry, but I took myself up and sent her away, but was cruelly vexed in my mind that all my trouble in this world almost should arise from my disorders in my family and the

> indiscretion of a wife that brings me nothing almost (besides a comely person) but only trouble and discontent. She gone I late at my business, and then home to supper and to bed (Pepysdiary, Saturday 4 February 1664/5, para. 1-3)

Though the day begins and ends in bed, the natural order of events is disturbed by the pressures of Pepys' domestic affairs, namely his relationship with his wife. Overstaying in bed is a luxury reserved for special occasions or sickness, and so the diarist is marking an actual grievance by the delay in his routine. The metatextual significance of this entry is the inability to "keep" a daily diary without having to usher away some experiences: "but I took myself up and sent her away" (para. 3). Pepys' diary, while not confessional in nature, confesses something about the nature of personal writing, about the pitfalls of self-observation and self-reflection. It is also part of an ongoing tradition of documenting the self, despite the many obstacles such a task creates.

Coming to grips with the creative ambiguity of the confessional mode means confronting certain inevitabilities. As Foucault reminds us, no one is excused from the exercise of confession, since "this is not something the individual can hinder; confession is a universal ritual and we have all been socialized into performing it" (1978: 22). We are all driven to communicate the self, to the best of our abilities. Therefore, it is important to investigate the way in which confessional writing of any kind shaped and continues to shape our perception of selfhood and truth.

1.2 Confessional Writing and Romanticism

A truly confessional preoccupation only begins to flourish in literary form with the rise of Romanticism in Europe, since many Romantic principles of the time were founded on ideals of authenticity and sincerity, namely the authenticity of the self and its ability to express genuine emotions (Milnes, Sinanan, 2010: 2). One obsession of the period was to find the "holistic self at the heart of writing" (2) which would ensure that the meaning of each word was a truthful reflection of authorial intent (2). But therein lay an epistemological problem: in order to cultivate such an awareness of one's intentions, one would have to

undergo a process of constant self-examination, to make sure that one is being truthful in every single utterance. This, however, eclipses the effect of authenticity one is striving to achieve. If you are constantly preoccupied with what you mean, how can you be authentic? The idea of a "holistic self", suggests a fixation on inner coherence, but that is often challenged by the additional "sincerity" that Romantic poets are expected to employ. How can one be both sincere *and* homogenous, when sincerity demands constant self-questioning? Does that not invalidate the "holistic" quality of the Self? That conundrum is posed by Martin Heidegger, who argues that authenticity "is a mode of being achieved by Dasein"(2), by ultimately "being there", and this mode should come naturally to us and *not* be the result of a studied effect. This implies that authenticity cannot be taught, one must simply have it.

Perhaps only the very gifted can access this state and do it harmoniously, and so the Romantics referred to it as Genius, a spirit which, according to James Kirwan, considers "the world … too small for the self" (qtd. in Wawrzinek, 2008: 39) and seeks transcendence (39). The Genius would not be satisfied with aspiring towards "Dasein", it would not be content with only "being there". In order to express genuine emotion, the Genius examines the composition of emotion, the way it is birthed from the interaction of the Self with the world. The Genius questions and probes the outer limit of the Self in relation to the Kantian "Sublime". The Sublime is an aesthetic category which prompts the individual to turn his or her gaze and "[take] pleasure in objects that neither possess nor express consciousness" (Ferguson, 2013: 4), such as Nature. We experience awe in the face of Nature because it is not bound by anything remotely subjective – it does not "bear any obvious relation to intersubjective experience" (5) – therefore, we are forced to meet it outside the boundaries of our selfhood. We must move beyond ourselves in order to grasp its potential. Nature is also infinite, and because of its boundless reach, defies objective classification (5). This means that it can only be contemplated by dwelling on the ontological distance between the animated subject and the inanimate object. In other words, the limitless quality of Nature can only be approximated; the most we can do is to examine the distance between our contained self and the unbound object. This distance triggers an aesthetic reaction of awe or reverence, which manifests itself through mental images (3). Could we ever describe those mental images? What do we see when we contemplate the indifference of Nature? Whatever we

picture, it must be rather imprecise, for though our impression is linked to the object, it is hardly *identical* to it; in the same fashion, a dream or a memory, though linked to reality, does not perfectly mirror it (3). The process of "imagination" (the making of images from the contemplation of the Sublime), propels the Self to consider what is Self-*less* and in doing so, to redefine the Self. When Shelley imagines and personifies the cloud: "With wings folded I rest, on mine aery nest,/ As still as a brooding dove" (2014: 362), he captures the approximate effect of Nature on him and extends his own sense of Self in the process. Whatever the subject imagines about the object, it becomes a reflection of the subject (just like dreams and memories say something about the one who dreams and reminisces).

The reflection of the subject in the object mattered a great deal to the Romantics, for it meant that they needed to be careful about choosing their object, as it would weigh so heavily upon the Self and the subject. It also meant that they had to beware false representations of objects (which would lead to false representations of the Self). With the continuous progress of the industrial revolution and the advance of technology and science, the possibility of a genuine representation came into dispute (Bowie, 2003: 46). The manipulation of objects through science meant that one could not readily find ways of describing them accurately. It was not enough anymore that the subject had a "truthful" vision of the object, for that very truthfulness was put into question.

For the Romantic poet, then, authenticity and imagination were the stepping stones of expressing the genuine Self, but they were also obstacles in their own right; authenticity was split between homogeneity and self-examination and imagination was torn between impression and truth. An apparent solution to this problem was found in the concept of "pure poetry", coined by the Romantic poet Novalis (46), a type of poetry which would be devoid of representations that could betray the subject's fraught relationship with authenticity and truth. This poetry, in Novalis' view, would aspire towards an "absolute", not only by divesting itself from "empirical conditions" but also by becoming "an expression of the absolute" (qtd. in Dahlaus, 1991: 144). It was the kind of ideal that was easier found in music than poetry (145) and one that poets sought to emulate. It also exerted a great deal of influence on poetic language, which was stripped of mimetic quality and instead strove to be as figurative and expressive as possible (Sitter, 2001: 150).

Ultimately, poetic language was forced to look inwards for inspiration, since Nature was becoming impossible to represent faithfully and authentically. Matei Călinescu argues in *Conceptul modern de poezie* (1972) that romanticism introduced the aspect of *poiesis* in literature, turning the creative act into a self-conscious one (2017: 11) where the language is self-reflective rather than imitative (2017: 11). Hence, poetic language did not need to reflect Nature when it could very well produce it (11). This tension between imitation and production is also at the center of the confessional act, as we have seen in previous sections.

1.3 Confessional Writing and Modernism

The development of "pure poetry" and self-reflective poetic language led to the rise of the modernist movement which exacerbated the Romantics' troublesome relationship with the Self. Part of the problem was the individual's new relationship with the notion of historical and cultural time. For a long time, tradition, with its immutable values, was considered the highest authority in the land, but with the development of bourgeois culture and capitalism, the beauty of permanence was replaced with the beauty of transience (Călinescu, 1987: 15). Baudelaire would come to write that "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable" (qtd. in Călinescu, 15). Baudelaire considered that the "fleeting" and constantly changing nature of art eventually conquered the eternal aspect (15), which is why art in modernity is self-conscious and self-reflexive, reinventing itself with each iteration. The attraction of the impermanent was also echoed in the way we perceived subjectivity: the advent of the Bergsonian "durée" as a representation of personal time meant that we recognized modern culture as deriving from the formation of the Self (Călinescu, 15). Namely, the imaginary duration that was attributed to human experience became more important than objective, historical time.

Yet it was precisely because modernity entailed transience and constant mobility that the modern subject was placed in a dialectic relationship with what came before him or her. Bernard of Chartres' metaphor of the dwarf standing on the shoulder of giants (qtd. in

Călinescu, 1987: 27) best encapsulates the idea that the modern individual (the dwarf) possessed a more complex view of art and reality, but at the same time, he or she had not reached that point through personal merit or contribution, but by taking advantage of the contribution of the classics that came before his or her time (the giants) (Călinescu, 28). The modernist movement that coalesced at the dawn of the twentieth century was a necessary response to an increasingly secularized and modern culture which was now at the mercy of the individual. The optics of modernism depended on the notion of self-reflexivity, but it also clung to the idea that one must honor one's privileged position by creating something new that would enrich the legacy of the giants on whose shoulders one stands.

The key figure of modernist poetics was T.S. Eliot, who encapsulated the principles of this new trajectory in the essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), where he outlined the new aesthetics of what came to be known as "impersonal poetry". Eliot claimed that the poet's personality (or sense of Self) ought to be guided in an intellectual rather than emotional manner; hence, the poet was supposed to make an effort to transform the personal into a purely mental, self-reflexive expression, emptying himself or herself of personality so that the literary tradition could be renewed through him or her (2014: 6-7). The dwarf had to allow the giant to live through him. As such, the "purity" that the Romantics had sought in abstraction would now be accessible through an impersonal transfiguration. The poet would be the representative of *all* poets and his or her poetry would be enriched by *all* the poetry that had come before it.

Modernist views on poetry were adopted unanimously for the first half of the twentieth century. Eliot cast a long shadow over both his predecessors and his successors, many of whom fostered their poetry in alignment with his theoretical principles (Perkins, 1996: 7). Since Eliot's criticism soon became more influential than his poetry, writers like William Empson and Allen Tate considered that poetry needed to resemble and reflect "critical ideas and tastes" (8), that it hence needed to be dubbed as "the poetry of critical intelligence" (7). Undoubtedly, Ezra Pound's similar critical bent and his influential partnership with Eliot also played a part in the modernist upheaval which would give rise, in America, to the birth of New Criticism. The "New" poets strove to compose poems that could be readily examined and "close read" (8) in classrooms and universities using the

methods of New Criticism. Thus, poetry adopted an academic style which observed past tradition and tried to improve upon it (to "modernize" it), while still keeping within formal boundaries of meter and stanza (8).

This style of writing was so widespread that many of the renowned confessional poets such as Lowell, Berryman and Rich, first started out in the same vein, and only later managed to reject this formalism and adopt a more individualized style. Indeed, many poets struggled with the legacy of modernism and its abstruse style, being unable to reject it wholly, but finding it unsatisfactory as long as it remained constrained by rigorous theory (Perkins, 9). For that seemed to be the paradox of a modern age: past conventions had been overthrown, but more exacting conventions were put in their place. To be a modernist was to be a rebellious apprentice; the poet rejected the false Romantic gods (17), only to reinstate an altogether similar set of gods. This hegemonic vision needed to be dismantled in order for the poetic form to continue to evolve (10). Even modernists were slowly distancing themselves from it, since the "high modernist style" of the period was not always as pure and as impersonal as is believed.

One instance of modernist "impurity" can be traced to the influence of the novel and prose upon poetry; given that the novel was also undergoing its own modernist experiment, but at a much faster and prolific rate, poets were unable to ignore the creative somersaults performed in the narrative form. Accordingly, Charles Molesworth argues that Eliot and Pound were both interested in "broaden[ing] the subject matter of poetry" (1979: 40) by resorting to some narrative effects (Molesworth specifically points to *The Waste Land's* second section, namely the bar sequence, in which a non-lyrical dialogue becomes the focus of the poetic voice, and in Pound's case, he refers to the famous *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* which inaugurated his "imagist" period, and reflected Pound's desire to render "the world of sensations" (1979: 48) in poetic format). This further underlines the fact that modernist poetry could not be contained within the rigorous limits imposed by its own philosophy.

Another revealing instance of distancing is found in the critical reactions to modernist poetry. Robert Lowell, for example, posited that T.S. Eliot's vast influence on the literary world stemmed from his "artistry and sincerity" (qtd. in Perkins, 5) which was superior,

Lowell thought, to many of his fellow poets. While it is difficult to deny Eliot's artistry, his "sincerity" is notably less obvious, since a good deal of modernism has been so intrinsically linked with depersonalization. And yet, Steven K. Hoffman argues that personality was only hidden by "elaborate masking techniques" (1978: 6-7), and that the temperament and views of the poet could not be altogether removed. Consequently, one may read *The Waste Land* without insisting upon Eliot's involvement in British society after the Great War, but one cannot disassociate it from his temperament or his views *on* war which he presents, unvarnished. In view of that, *The Waste Land* becomes a deeply personal work (Hoffman, 7). Not only that, but Eliot's later whole-hearted embrace of Christianity also puzzled readers and critics who believed that the heretical tone in *The Waste Land* would have excluded such an "unmodern" allegiance to the Church (Hoffman, 14). But this, of course, did not prevent Eliot from infusing a great deal of his poetry with the themes and rhythms of the Anglican Church services he attended (14), which goes to show that the depersonalized self in modernist poetry is a concept difficult to uphold or sustain.

Hence, we cannot speak of a uniform Modernist poetry that remained wholly faithful to its tenets. It is easy to see how various strands managed to break away, in time, in order to develop their own artistic sensibilities, one such sensibility being the urgent and confessional "Howl" started by Allen Ginsberg in America (Perkins, 10). On the other side of the Atlantic, the English poets also felt that the two World Wars had exhausted the romantic abstractions of heroism, as Ted Hughes remarks, "enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They'd seen it all turn into death camps and atom bombs" (qtd in Perkins, 418). Hughes argued that people wanted a return to normality, precisely because that normality was difficult to recover: "all they wanted was to get back into civvies" (418). The desire to recover the colloquial was felt in the way poets like Philip Larkin, Kinglsey Amis, Elizabeth Jennings, Roy Fuller and others depicted the "drab facts and emotions of ordinary life" (425) with its common satisfactions and failures, perceived by a personal, non-abstract Self, where the " "I" who speaks is the poet himself" (425). The degree of intimacy and the range of emotions expressed - "hurt, resentment, self-pity, apathy, fear, envy, boredom,

grudge, narcissism, egomania, masochism" (425) - left both the poets and readers exposed, in a way that had not happened before.

The dwarves were no longer content to sit on the shoulders of giants; they no longer valued the view from above. They wanted to climb down from the ivory tower and make art compatible with daily life. The postmodern temperament, as it came to be envisaged by Daniel Bell, "demands that what was previously played out in fantasy and imagination must be acted out in life as well. There is no distinction between art and life. Anything permitted in art is permitted in life as well" (qtd. in Călinescu, 1987: 17). The return to life and, in fact, the total embrace of life came with its own set of victories and pitfalls.

1.4 The Advent of Confessionalism

The recovery of a more personal, more palpable poetry was best personified in the American movement aptly named "confessionalism". The term "confessional poetry" was first coined by M.L. Rosenthal, in regards to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). As the title suggests, the volume – namely, the second part – was preoccupied with Lowell's "life", and in particular, his childhood. Rosenthal's aim was to find a category for Lowell's writing that could mirror both its autobiographical nature and its confessional tradition, ranging, as we have already mentioned, from St. Augustine to the Romantics (Hoffman, 1978: 1). Confessional poetry was defined by Charles Molesworth as: "a split between revealing intimate details in an unvarnished context and obscuring the occult curve of … dissociated, self-concealing emotional lives" (1976: 7). In other words, it confronted us with the minutiae of everyday lives, but it did so with the full awareness that some "obscuring" would be unavoidable. Indeed, David Yezzi argues that "confessional poems…lie like the truth" since they "make an artifice of honesty" (1998: 3), meaning that they employ "sincerity" in a programmatic and voluntary manner. This, of course, harkens back to the question that the Romantics had agonized over before, which is how to express the Self in an authentic manner.

Instead of going over the same argument – namely, the impossibility of being authentic - the confessionalists placed the idea of sincerity between Phenomenological Brackets and instead investigated the very possibility of self-disclosure and whether the many "strategies of evasion, displacement and obfuscation" (Gill, 2006: 7) we employ are just as relevant, if not more, than our "expressions of personality" (7). Confessional poems, then, interrogate the possibility of ever communicating a Self and whether there is a degree of "self-invention" (7) in the act. The idea of editing or censoring the Self is not new, given the history of confession, but what is new is the attempt to test the limits of self-censorship; hence confessionalists pushed the boundaries of disclosure by depicting "experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention: mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one's body" (Gregory, 2006: 34). Such disclosures are meant to carry the reader to what Julia Kristeva describes as the "True-Real", a mythical place which lives outside of language and interpretation and to which we aspire as a primordial womb (Gregory, 36). The "True-Real" is the simultaneity of language and interpretation, where speech and reality are inalienable and indivisible, as we shall see below.

Kristeva refers to the Platonic dialogues, *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*, to elaborate on the relationship between "truth" and "reality". She argues that, in Platonic terminology, "a sentence is true if the arrangement of its parts corresponds to a connection between the eidetic essences" (1986: 220). The "*eide*" are the eternal Forms that "institute the order of 'universals'" (220). As such, there is a direct correspondence between "the truth of the sentence and the truth of the judgement" (220). In other words, a statement is true when it helps to reveal (or demonstrate) the "*eide*" (forms) in reality. Given these circumstances, Kristeva argues that there can only be three sources for truth, as derived from Platonic logic:

> Since truth consists of whatever is demonstrable, it either frees itself from the laws of the *sentence* and the order in which elements are given; or it lies in the psychic act of nominating and judging; or else it is to be located in the correspondence between this act and a referent, or to Being in general (1986: 220).

If truth can be arrived at discursively through demonstration, yet discourse is infinitely flexible, it means that truth must lie beyond discourse, either in the psyche or in the real-life referent. The mutability of truth between these spaces is what prompts modern linguists to refute the claim that a sentence can only be considered truthful if it reflects reality. A sentence such as "I am not at home momentarily" may not reflect reality, but still values as truthful in the verbal exchange where we wish to postpone a meeting. The truth, hence, is negotiable and mutable. Yet this does not stop us from yearning for a place where truth is both mutable and fixed, a place that achieves the perfect equilibrium between the "true" statement/discourse and the "reality" behind it, where what I say is truly what is there.

The True-Real, then, is a utopia where the signifier (word, image, icon) and the signified (the referent in reality) are interchangeable and equivalent, where what is said is both true and real. Drawing inspiration from Plato's *Cratylus*, Kristeva positions the True-Real as a space where words have a mythical function and have been introduced by an authoritative figure, rendering them both essential and conventional (215). Therefore, though we subscribe to the idea that language is based on convention, we still crave the "essential" and mythical function, the "irruption of the true-real" (215) into discourse and reality. In many ways, we crave for a divine source, "a God or a fictional creation" (Kristeva, 220) that sanctions and certifies the "names" we have to use in real life. Hence, going back to our example, if I say "I am not at home momentarily", the statement will automatically reveal itself as both true and real, because the reality of my not being home will be evident in the words alone. It would be impossible to lie, because there would be no language for it. The speech would perfectly reflect the "*eide*" of the world.

To return to the issue of confessionalim, when the writer shares difficult and intimate truths about his or her personal life, though we have no assurance he or she is telling the truth, we experience the elusive possibility of the True-Real, the potentiality of perfect correspondence between speech and reality. We embrace the "irruption" of a reality that does not need verification based on conventionality, because its source (the writer) is the authoritative "God" of his or her discourse. This "God" may falter or lie to us, but it does not matter, because the writer's confession is a signifier that perfectly identifies and more importantly, *replaces* his signified reality. To give an example, the Pulitzer Prize-winning

volume *Heart's Needle* (1959) by the confessional poet W.D. Snodgrass was widely popular because it was an intimate account of Snodgrass' divorce and his relationship with his daughter, placing the reader in the immediacy of the event without requiring a mental separation between the figure of the writer (discourse) and the figure of the father (reality), even though such a separation was conventionally in place already. Yet, the poems gave the impression that they went beyond conventions of fictionality, that the audience was catching an illicit glimpse of the writer/father in a liminal state. As Charles Molesworth argues, the volume offered a "private satisfaction", in opposition to the swollen verbosity of the public domain (1976: 2). It stepped outside of linguistic formality and provided us with the "True-Real", the possibility that discourse could, just by being uttered, be indistinguishable from reality. So when the poet writes in "**Heart's Needle**":

I thumped on you the best I could
which was no use;
you would not tolerate your food
until the sweet, fresh milk was soured
with lemon juice (2005, n.p.)

the reader experiences a sense of simultaneity; the father and the writer meet in the middle and feed the child, while also documenting the event in its synchronicity. What matters is less the symbolism of soured milk, but the event itself, the physicality of the feeding, the ordinariness of the experience which can only be transposed within the "reality" of fatherhood. Of course, this "illicit glimpse" is not accidental or unintended. "Realness", like "sincerity", is a process of *poiesis*, not *mimesis.* As mentioned above, the essential thing was that the poems gave the *impression* of a transpersonal reality. The quality of being real involves "artful maneuvering within the framework of speech presentations with which readers are familiar and comfortable" (Gregory, 2006: 36). The "real" takes just as much work as the "sincere", as a poetic effect. This does not mean that Snodgrass was not expressing real emotions in *Heart's Needle;* it merely signifies that in order for him to get across the personal, he had to make use of an "artful maneuvering". In fact, it is only by playing with the poetic effects of the "real" that raw emotion can truly get across; the exploration of linguistic openings and closures (of what can and cannot be said) is part of the

attempt to communicate the personal. It is within this framework that confessionalism flourished, as it continually examined the ways in which we construct the Self and the Real.

Critic A. Alvarez also suggests that the rise of subjectivity and "realness" in poetic output was also a form of anxiety, a fear of becoming obsolete and irrelevant in a post-war culture, which required innovation:

> (…) the old formal arts are no longer wholly meaningful and the artists are in imminent danger of being made redundant. For the impact of the 'electronic culture' threatens to shatter all the traditional disciplines which are worked ***so*** hard for, and acquired only slowly and with much difficulty. Suddenly, unexpectedly, they no longer seem of much use. To survive and communicate the artist may have to abandon his inheritance, his training, even his habits of mind, and start again from the beginning… (qtd. in Lerner, 1987: 2).

Relinquishing the old traditions, namely "his inheritance, his training", in order to communicate the new status quo meant that the poet had to go against Eliot's precepts of impersonality and purity and find new meaning in the "electronic culture". The critic George Steiner more aptly described it as a "post-culture" which was "diminished" by crises, both external and internal (1971: 33). The postmodern man, therefore, can no longer rely on the "old formal arts", not only because the cultural milieu demands new ones, but also because the post-modern creator is no longer an authority that, like Eliot and Pound, could reshape aesthetic values and command influence. In fact, "personality alone cannot stand against the emotional relativism and splintered experiences of ego and self" (Donovan, 2004: 173) anymore. The postmodern subject has little control over his or her own narrative, and the inability to harness a plausible Self dwells at the center of the confessionalist obsession:

> to think about confession is to abandon conventional and hitherto dependable notions of reliability, authority and authenticity and to embrace, and find new ways of addressing the difficulty and slipperiness – which is also the fascination – of modern variations on the form (Gill, 2006: 1)

When speaking of Lowell's confessional poetry, Charles Molesworth describes it as not only attempting "to record his perceptions and intuitions, but also [attempting] to capture the curve of the instrument that records them" (1979: 49), therefore, it is not simply the content of personal experience that interests confessional poetry, but rather the manner in which it can be rendered, *if* it can be rendered at all. As Emile Benveniste posits, "subjectivity… is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. 'Ego is he who *says* 'ego'" (qtd. in MacLennan, 1992: 11). As such, the "I" or "ego" represents the ability of the Self to verbalize itself, but it is not necessarily tantamount to the Self. As Foucault reminds us, the obligation to verbalize does not ensure accuracy or authenticity (1978: 21), quite the contrary. This means that there is naturally a gap between the linguistic "ego" and the Self as lived in experience, or in "*dasein*", and it is within this gap that confessional poetry finds room to flourish. Instead of chasing after the Romantic ideal of authenticity, confessionalism examines the disparity between what one means to say and what is eventually said, or the contrast between authenticity and artifice.

In doing so, confessionalism allows the Self to be decentered; it accepts that the subject is fragmented, and that its very fragmentation must be taken as a new coherence (Rankine, 2001: 132), especially given the fact that, with the advent of confessional poetry, many other "Selves" that had so far been neglected or obscured from public knowledge acquire a voice. This is the case for many poets of different race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality who emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, and who engaged with social movements that promoted their visibility and representation. Many such poets adopted the mantle of confessionalism due to its possibility of *inclusion*, yet not *conclusion* (Molesworth, 1979: 38). It was also a generous mode of poetry that allowed the accumulation of personal artifacts as a journey towards self-knowledge, since for many emerging identities, "confessing" was likened to "giving birth to oneself" (Harris, 2001: 263). For poets who were not white and male, writing about the Self was as good as creating it and giving it shape. The task was twofold; not only did they have to verbalize Benveniste's "ego" and place it on a literary map, but they were also charged with exploring the aforementioned "slipperiness" of the Self. In other words, they had to first enter a tradition of confession before proceeding to deconstruct it.

In the same vein, confessionalism became a type of testimonial writing that could connect the Self to one's community, "conflating the inner domestic realm with broader, historical realities" (Harris, 2001: 259). When we speak of the linguistic "I", we cannot deny that it "exists in time and is married to biological, personal, historical, and cultural meaning" (132). Claudia Rankin gives the example of the simple sentence: "I am a black girl in a yellow dress" (132), which involves a plethora of factors that could not be generalized or divorced from their social context. The "I" of a black girl is not the same as the impersonal "I" of the modernist poet whose goal is to filter personality and reduce it to its pure form. In order for the black girl to reduce her "Self" to a universal expression, she must lessen what makes up her identity; her blackness and her femaleness. This suggests that there can be nothing universal about being black and female, because the original standard for universality is male and white. Does this mean that the black girl's use of "I" is limited and should therefore be ignored?

As mentioned above, the postmodernist age casts doubt on the possibility of a universal, unlimited and authoritative Self and it paves the way for multiplicity and ambivalence, since the individual is not simply one identity or one story, but multiple and various. There is an intersection between race, class, gender, nationality, disability, sexual orientation and many other "factors" of inequality and diversity "that work together and influence each other" (Collins, Bilge, 2016: 2) so that it would be impossible to try and reduce the Self to one single, universal facet of identity. Looking at it from a post-colonial perspective, Homi Bhabha asserts that the individual has become a "hybrid" (2012: 162), a mixture between the dominant culture which has for a long time silenced him or her and the inferior culture which he or she has developed within the sphere of power (162). Confessionalism gives precedence to the "hybrid", acknowledging the multiplicity of identification and the fragmentation of the Self. Ann Keniston argues that the act of confessing is less "an affirmation of the self" and more "an erasure of the boundaries of the self" (2006: 54). The erasure of boundaries renders the subject porous or "permeable" (54), which in turn allows for the comingling of speaker and listener.

The permeability of the subject may also act as an echo of a past state in which the self was more intimately connected with the external world. As Freud attests in *Civilization*

and its Discontents, "our present sense of self is…only a shrunken residue of a far more comprehensive, indeed all-embracing feeling, which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it" (2002: 6) Freud argues that this initial identification with the world is possibly where our feeling of religiosity stems from, since belonging to the world gives us a sense of eternity (6). Thus, the porous self, though a manifestation of postmodernity, mirrors an archaic sense of togetherness that used to ensure continuity. Freud goes on to acknowledge that "the limits of the self are not constant" given that there are many instances where we project our ego on the external world or, otherwise, refuse to acknowledge its internal expression (2002: 5). Thus, what is included or excluded from the range of selfhood is erratic at best, and leaves room for constant exploration and reassessment.

Erasing the boundaries of the self and giving it freedom of reassessment also influenced the way in which readers and critics perceive confessionalism; some have shown concern in regards to the integrity of the poetic act and whether there is a danger of self-indulgence. Charles Molesworth claims that the tension between the private and the public self might pose a problem for the poet, since the "simple hermetic pleasures of an autotelic art" are constrained by the public sphere (1979: 41). He gives the example of W. D. Snodgrass' *Heart's Needle* once more, describing it as "a rumination too self-consciously protective of the speaker's emotional weakness to be totally private and too engaged with a barely warded off self-pity to be instructively public" (Molesworth, 1976:4). The subject of the following lines, then, dwells in a liminal state between "rumination" and "self-pity":

> Of all things, only we,
> have power to choose that we should die;
> nothing else is free
> in this world to refuse it. Yet I,
> who say this, could not raise
> myself from bed how many days
> to the thieving world. Child, I have another wife,
> another child. We try to choose our life. (Snodgrass, 2005, n.p.)

The poet confesses to thoughts of despair and helplessness because he has quite literally been divorced from his previous condition as a father and must now grapple with a fragmented version of fatherhood and reacquaint himself with his own child. What should have been a choice has been taken from him by the "thieving world" and he cannot even find comfort in the freedom of death because he must keep living for his child. The charged exchange between the "we" as a general referent of the human condition and the private "I" who cannot get out of bed exemplifies the ethos of confessionalism, which is to constantly shift between "self-revelation" and an "artful simulation of sincerity" (Yezzi, 1998: 2), between greater truths and private disclosures. Confessional poetry foregrounds the permutations of the postmodern Self, acknowledging that our subjectivity is a negotiation, and that what we really confess to is our inability to *fully* confess (Gill, 2006: 8) but that we make this effort anyway. The act of confessional writing provides, as Plath asserts, "a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience" (qtd. in Schiwy, 1996: 171).

The very label of "confessionalism" is fraught with a multiplicity of "ordering" which particularizes each instance; as such, poets like Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, John Berryman and many others differ and contrast in ways which showcase the variations of the "splintered" subject. In the following section we will focus on one such variation, that of female confessionalism. Gender plays an intricate part in confessional writing because it is a social construct that is assimilated from an early age, in the context of family life, and as Diane Middlebrook argues, poetry helps explore "the ways in which family life gave permanent, empowering and also deforming structure to individual experiences" (1992: 112). Confessional poets sought out this rather dangerous terrain not out of a sense of shame, but with a view to self-knowledge (112). Male and female poets alike wanted to understand why they had been taught to lead separate lives. As Middlebrook confirms, the poets "mined the discovery that roles established in family life were shaped by what we now call gender ideologies. They "confessed" to feeling overwhelmed by the energy of capacities denied by sexual differentiation and pressure to conform" (112). As such, an incursion into the poetics of female confessionalism is revelatory not only for women writers but for the confessional movement as a whole.

II. Confessionalism and Gender: Female Confessionalism

2.1. Female Confessionalism and Self-Definition

The new condition of the individual as a "hybrid" was punctuated by various social and cultural movements that brought into sharp relief the racialized and gendered Selves which had been overlooked as autonomous subjects. Second-wave feminism and the Civil Rights Movement offered exposure to voices that had been unable, up to that point, to be "selfish", meaning to speak about themselves without having to comfort or mollify the general public. As the poet Ron Silliman outlined in the *Socialist Review* (1988), up until that point, the only writers who could afford to "challenge all that [was] supposedly "natural" about the formation of their own subjectivity" (qtd. in Hickman, 2015: 155) were those who had historically enjoyed a visible subjectivity (white, male, heterosexual) to begin with. But Silliman refers to the other end of the spectrum where we encounter

> (...) poets who do not identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal"—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. (qtd. in Hickman, 155)

The task, then, was to rewrite history from the margin in order to turn the objects of poetry into its subjects, and such a feat required a medium that could afford both the "political need" for self-exposure and also the possibility to later "challenge" and flaunt conventions of subjectivity. For women, in particular, there was no better medium that confessionalism. Due to its penchant for "self-invention" (Gill, 2006: 7), confessional poetry offered a space for divergent perspectives, particularly female voices and female concerns, making it an almost "female poetic mode" (Gilbert, 1977: 444). Indeed, the act of emotional disclosure is coded as female and poets, such as Lowell and Berryman "enter into 'feminine' territory" and "acknowledge their 'femininity' at a remove" (Gregory, 2006: 41) in their poetic output. What is more, one may argue that postmodernity is linked with a rise in femininity as a mode of being which accentuates the "secondary" (meaning the *category*), as

opposed to the "primary" (meaning the *thing*) (Mullins, 2016: 181). Take, for example, the title of "poet". In order to specify that we are speaking of women we must supply the "thing" (poet) with a "category" (female). This exercise results in femaleness acting as a secondary, but in the postmodern paradigm, the roles are reversed: the secondary supplants the primary and examines its precarious supremacy. Femaleness breaks down into "fe-maleness", and questions the primacy of the male principle. In the same vein, confessional poets such as Sexton, Plath and Berryman operate with "secondary values" and mean to give precedence to femaleness, creating "alternative authority patterns" (Gill, 2006: 34).

These alternative patterns find their strongest expression in the work of female confessionalists who unearth the "secondary" female Self, reflecting upon it, but also attempting to define it (Gilbert, 1977: 446). Since the female Self is not part of the primary, it is not implicitly accepted and must instead be asserted, or risk becoming "a function of male initiative" (Poovey, 1985: 110). The task of female confessionalism is not only to enable the subject to explore her subjectivity, but to render the female Self visible and separate from a male conglomerate. This idea is elaborated by Rita Felski, who argues that the female confessionalist "seeks to affirm a female experience …by speaking about it, by writing it into existence" (Smith, Watson, 1998: 90). The very act of expressing a subjectivity and making it known renders it into existence. As such, the female confessionalist "walks a fine line between self-affirmation and self-preoccupation" (91), between reveling in her selfhood and recording what marks it as female. While male confessionalists may afford to dwell on authenticity and originality, she must struggle to exist, first and foremost (Gill, 2006: 43).

The struggle for selfhood runs the risk of coming off as "self-preoccupation", due to the fact that there is a well-established tradition of women historically relying on private means of discourse such as letters and diaries with the purpose of "self-refinement" (Guenther, 2006: 85). In Jane Austen's Regency society, for instance, women were given a "cultural directive" to self-improve in order to acquire a husband (86). The focus on the self was only a strategy of pleasing the male partner. With the advent of feminism, the reason for "self-preoccupation" changed, but the stigma remained. Indeed, Alicia Ostriker remarks that the confessional writer "who attempts to explore female experience is dismissed as self-absorbed, private, escapist, nonuniversal", even though that writer may be engaged in a

"quest for autonomous self-definition" (qtd. in Guenther, 94). Ostriker talks of Adrienne Rich's own crisis of identity and her inability to truly talk about herself as a woman until much later in her career, quoting her confession that "until then I had tried very hard *not* to identify myself as a female poet" (qtd. in Ostriker, 2001: 320). Rich and others like her experienced a shame in their natural need to see themselves as subjects worthy of discourse. This is not the case for male poets whose personal experiences bear the value of universality without question.

Sandra M. Gilbert argues that women writers had to build their own tradition without relying on age-old certainties which male poets could depend upon (1977: 446). There is a certain unresolved anxiety in female confessional poetry stemming from the fear that their concerns may not be associated with a general human experience. Poets like Plath and Sexton do not have the "curious, calm confidence that even in madness he [the poet] is in some sense at the intellectual center of things" (445). On the contrary, the marginal and the "secondary" is the place from where the woman poet speaks, and as such, she may not see her own input as valuable.

The marginality of female expression stems from both an existential and a linguistic bias. Simone de Beauvoir trenchantly makes the case that female identity is a matter of choosing between being an Object ("being-for-men") (2010: 61, 159) and being an Other ("defined through notions created by the male consciousness") (84). In both cases, whether the woman aspires towards integration (Object) or separation (Other), the authority that withholds judgment over her adequacy is male. In a patriarchal system of values, she is found lacking because she is not her own arbiter and therefore, she must adapt her expression to the demands of the systems in power. Luce Irigaray posits that women usually undermine themselves in discourse, "representing themselves obliquely, not as I or even she, but in generic terms which conflate 'human' and 'masculine'" (qtd. in Cameron, 1992: 172). A fascinating case of such discursive erasure takes place when genders are assigned at birth and, in the case of the male baby, the usual proclamation one finds on celebratory festoons is "I'm a boy", whereas for female babies, their subjectivity is already in doubt with the broadcasting "It's a girl" (Cameron, 162-163). The marked difference between "I" and "It's" elucidates Irigaray's argument that the very basis for humanity is first assigned to the

masculine and is only a matter of chance for women. Hence, the "I" as an expression of subjectivity is a mark of subversion and recovery, effectively opposing the binary of Object/Other and making the choice to exist both within and beyond the implements of gender. This recovery is not necessarily expressed by replicating the male standard: "I'm a girl", but by simply stating, "I am".

2.2. Female Confessionalism and Language

Linguistically, male expression has a tradition of being taken more seriously. One author calls this the Androcentric Rule, whereby male speech fits a writer's idea of desirability, but female speech only corrupts it (Coates, 2004: 9). By the eighteenth century, society had deemed women's vocabulary as "vacuous" and "deviant" (12). Their language was not "thought-out" and rational; it was a burst of spontaneity (13). The paradox, however, consisted in that this spontaneity was also artificial - or better yet, superficial. It was implied that women operated with clichés which they used without discrimination. For example, an exclamation of surprise like: "I must say!" (Coates, 17) was deemed to be the result of a woman's impatience to finish a full sentence (spontaneity) and her recourse to the popular sayings of the time (superficiality). These two conflicting modes were explained as a woman's natural irrationality, a sort of "disfluency" that betrays illogical speech patterns (Cameron, 1992: 45-46). Cheris Kramarae argues that such value-judgments stem from an imbalance of power; as subordinates whose livelihood depends on understanding their hierarchical superior, women are much more familiarized with men's discourse (Cameron, 1992: 51). This means that men may find female discourse illogical because they are not required to become attuned to it. As a result, their lack of comprehension labels female expression as deviant (51).

One misconception which still dwells in collective consciousness is that sincerity or genuineness is considered incompatible with female expression, due to the contrary mixture of spontaneity and artificiality in women's speech. During Romanticism, for instance, women's writing was deemed artificial because it lacked passion (Coates, 2004:20), while at

the same time, it was considered too "emotional" to be truly serious. Another problem that plagued female writing was its perceived "verbosity" (25-26). Women were considered to be too "chatty", and teachers, as well as parents, were encouraged to curtail this gabbing instinct. There is no solid proof that women talk more than men (26), and yet this is the perception that dominated Western culture for a long time. Another false perception that had wide range was that women were more conservative in language, despite the fact that during the Neoclassical Age of the eighteenth century, "women were accused of wanton innovation in vocabulary" (Cameron, 1992: 62). Interestingly, once linguistic and literary novelty became part of the cultural zeitgeist in the 1920s, it was men who were the innovators again (62) while women had to give precedence to their linguistic input. The effect of all these contradictions is a still pervasive suspicion about the effusions of the fairer sex. There is a burden of exculpation for women who must apologize for their very language.

As mentioned above, self-definition becomes a work of persuasion and an effort to eliminate the cultural doubt imprinted on women's writing. Every female poet will feel she has the task of removing women's writing from the periphery and make it "representative", not "eccentric" (Gilbert, 1977: 445). Unavoidably, the mission is split in half; on the one hand, the female writer must create an identity which can be integrated within a tradition (and in doing so, avoid eccentricity), while on the other hand, she must strive to recover the poetic Self which had been overlooked by tradition (thus, removing the writing from the periphery). The female poet must counter the false instances and archetypes of the old (448), and come up with new definitions. Both processes take place simultaneously: reworking a neglected female tradition is inextricably linked with unearthing the Self and this means that women's writing tends to be far more self-conscious. Margaret Dickie suggests that women writers are placed "in a self-imposed state of objectivity, split between exacting observational skills and a reluctance or inability to use them fully or direct them toward themselves" (1993: 2). Plainly speaking, women writers dread the possibility that their work might be construed as personal because female subjectivity is not considered a universal human experience and therefore, would strike the audience as "self-indulgent navel-gazing" (Smith, Watson, 1998: 92).

2.3. Female Confessionalism and the Female Body

One such instance of "navel-gazing" is the literal act of gazing at the body. The exploration of the female body is often touched upon in confessional poetry because it is here that female poets have a chance to "take ownership of their place in history" and "disrupt the tradition of disembodied writing" (Collins, 2009: 7). The body is difficult to place in a stable category; as M. A. Habib posits, the body represents "the uniqueness of experience which refuses to be subsumed under a general category or to be reduced to exemplificatory status" (2008: 704). Hélène Cixous' famous precept invoked in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) that "women must write through their bodies" and "must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (qtd. in Habib, 705) refers precisely to the potential of the body as a source of disruption and creativity. The body undermines easy generalizations and challenges the supremacy of the metaphysical.

The relationship that women have with their bodies is, however, complicated by the equivalency that is placed between them; namely, a woman is identified solely with her body, without being allowed to give it meaning. Her body is often meant to be a contrastive representation to the bodies of men: in her book, *Erect Men/Undulating Women: The Visual Imagery of Gender, "Race" and Progress in Reconstructive Illustrations of Human Evolution* (2006) Melanie Wiber borrows the term "undulating women" from Margaret Miles, a term which refers to the portrayal of women's bodies in Western art (81). Wiber argues that, "in the European visual tradition, this fluidity in the female form is often contrasted with an upright and aesthetically athletic male figure" (82). As an anthropologist, Wiber was chagrined to find that early scientific representations and paleoanthropological illustrations were also besieged by the picture of the active man and the passive woman (81). Yet this passivity need not be a site of defeat. The alternative mode of writing which Cixous encourages women to embrace means that they must enter this "fluidity" and explore the "undulating" aspect of the female body.

Still, the fact that such representations dwell in the collective consciousness of both women and men is notable for the female creator. What becomes clear to her in the process of writing her body is that she is mythologized (Gilbert, 1977: 448). She is the muse, but she

has no muse for herself. She is the body, bereft of mind, whereas the man is the mind, bereft of body. This is because the mind is intrinsically male, or as Genevieve Lloyd puts it:

> (…) the appearance in the soul of the sense-perceptible material world is symbolized as female, while maleness, in contrast, symbolically represents the sphere of Mind and God himself. (2004: 26)

Therefore, the female is a corporeal intrusion upon the asexual soul, and as an intrusion, she is mysterious and indefinable since she does not belong to "the sphere of Mind and God himself". As consequence, the female body must be tamed and reduced to a qualitative object which is ratified by the "Mind", or the male. Lloyd further elaborates this notion by employing St. Augustine's religious allegory which certifies the idea that the woman can only aspire to the "Mind" and the image of God when she is taken together with the man (30). Naturally, since she is only the body, she requires the male dominion of the mind to become a full human being. Only when she is assigned the male principle does she gain visibility.

What would happen if the woman were to gaze upon her own body and become her own muse? It depends on the type of gazing or looking that is employed. John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) that women have been socialized into being watchful of themselves and seeing themselves through the lens of others:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life (2008: 42).

In effect, what is being surveyed here is the body and its physical and social manifestation. Berger argues that women are treated depending on the way they are perceived (42) and in order to ensure that they succeed, they must adopt a double vision, of surveyed (Object) and surveyor (Subject-viewing-Object). They must carry the burden of confining their own bodies to the expectations of others while also literally carrying their bodies in their everyday existence. Hence, in order for women to be able to see themselves without the impediments of the "male gaze", they would need to adopt a different way of looking. The "male gaze" as coined and theorized by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), represents the manner in which the surveyor, who is usually male, "projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly" (1999: 837) so as to maximize his voyeuristic pleasure. If women are tasked with surveying themselves for the sake of men, it also means that when they gaze at themselves they do it for the pleasure of men.

The possibility of a "female gaze" would mean shifting the center of pleasure; it would mean that women would look at themselves strictly for their own benefit and enjoyment. More importantly, the "female gaze" would nurture a new way of interacting with the body that is not based on objectification and violence. Adrienne Rich argues that once we place ourselves in the physical, rather than metaphysical mindset, the "mind-body split (…) becomes an image of shocking violence" (qtd. in Collins, 2009: 11), not just because the female body has a history of violence, but because physicality itself is chaotic and multifaceted (11). The only way to take back the female body is by confronting it and by moving past the "transcendental discussion that traditionally has exalted the soul and spirit while ignoring the body" (11). Elizabeth Gregory suggests that confessional poetry offers a means of dismantling the mind-body hierarchy by bringing the "ordinary physical lives" of women to the foreground and in doing so, "[troubling] the boundaries of the poetic gender map" (2006: 38). The female body gains awareness and subjectivity while its objectification is put into question; in other words, confessing the body "demonstrates that women have minds, and it implies that men have bodies" (38).

The non-corporality of men is significant, because as mentioned previously, the body represents the woman herself, cemented in the Western culture by religion and art. Tradition

has kept the body "silent [and] sanitized" in poetry (Gill, 2006: 35), reflecting the same status for women. By leaving the body outside of writing, we also shun what is female. As Audre Lorde reminds us, the woman is a creative spirit that is left "unexamined, unrecorded, and ultimately, silenced" (qtd. in Rashedi, 2012:41) in part due to her corporality. Women's creative resources stem from a power "within each of us [which] is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep" (qtd. in Rashedi 42). Lorde echoes Cixous in signaling the body as a site where conventions and regulations break down. The body is "ancient" and ripe for exploration, but more importantly, as Elizabeth Gregory attests, the body creates disturbances in the "hierarchy of poetic authority" (2006: 34), leaving room for alternative means of expression which offer women the chance to intervene and modify the disembodied canon of the past. After all, confessionalism allows the poet "to rework their relation to the poetic tradition" (Gregory, 35).

2.4. Female Confessionalism and Authorship

Reworking the relation to the poetic tradition, however, is an ongoing process of establishing what authority and authorship means, particularly in a postmodern era. Roland Barthes' famous 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author" dismantled essential notions of authorship, claiming that the person behind the text is impossible to know since:

> Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (1978: 142).

Thus, literature is the great equalizer which strips away markers of subjectivity and unifies all voices into one neutral voice. The trouble with this line of thinking is that, usually, this voice is hardly neutral or unidentifiable. The example that Barthes provides is from the novella *Sarrasine*, by Honore de Balzac, about a young man who falls in love with a castrato, without realizing the castrato is not a woman. The main conflict of the story is both sexual and existential; Sarrasine cannot accept the male identity of the opera singer, Zambinella, or the fact that he desires him/her. It is rather interesting that Barthes chose this

particular novella to make his point about authorship, given the fact that the hero of the story *cannot* accept neutrality; he needs Zambinella to be a particular body, a particular subject. More than that, the narrator of *Sarrasine* invites us to gaze at a woman from a strictly male point of view and the authorial "voice" behind it enforces this vision:

> Have you ever met one of those women whose startling beauty defies the assaults of time, and who seem at thirty-six more desirable than they could have been fifteen years earlier? Their faces are impassioned souls; they fairly sparkle; each feature gleams with intelligence; each possesses a brilliancy of its own, especially in the light. Their captivating eyes attract or repel, speak or are silent; their gait is artlessly seductive; their voices unfold the melodious treasures of the most coquettishly sweet and tender tones. Praise of their beauty, based upon comparisons, flatters the most sensitive self-esteem. A movement of their eyebrows, the slightest play of the eye, the curling of the lip, instills a sort of terror in those whose lives and happiness depend upon their favor (Balzac, 2010:6).

The passage above is hardly "neutral" or "oblique" and it does not disguise authorial markers, namely the gender of the writer. Would a female writer make the same stylistic choices when describing a woman at the age of thirty-six? Would she dwell on the contrast between a young girl and an older woman? If so, would she portray desire and attraction in the same manner, even if her narrator were male? Whether the answer is "yes" or "no", there is a gap of intentionality left open by the possibility of different authorial "voices" choosing to emphasize different aspects of the narrative.

Claiming that the author is dead merely eliminates him from discourse, which, for Liz Stenley means that the reader has no possible way of "answering back" (1995: 17). Stenley finds the sudden death of the author convenient, at a time when "'the author', the authoritative source of all that excludes, is named and has an accusatory finger pointed at him" (17). Perhaps it is less with accusation than with a desire for inclusion that we broach the topic of female authorship and how it stands apart from male authorship.

Since Barthes and Foucault have rendered the idea of authorial presence obsolete, does this mean that a female creator can dispense with it if she has never been given a chance

to inhabit it in the first place (Doane, 1987: 9)? Foucault argues that the author is an artificial place-holder for the "mode of existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (qtd. in Olney, 1980: 323). To put it differently, the author is an arbitrary sign – he is the representation of a cultural era, standing in for its values and beliefs. Women authors, however, were considered an oddity or a deviation from the norm and were certainly not representative of a cultural milieu. The "women of ideas", as they were called, were mocked for drawing attention to themselves and were suspected of seeking notoriety (Offen, 2000: 105). This is due to the fact that authorship implies the existence of a public persona and it means claiming a public voice, which stood in opposition with the ideals of femininity (105). As Adrienne Rich writes in the 1977 essay "Husband-Right and Father-Right", women were, for a long time, associated with the private sphere of "the home, the hearth the family, the sexual, the emotional, out of which men emerge[d] as adults to act in the "public" arena of power, the "real" world" (1995: 215). Whenever women attempted to enter this "real" world, however, the result was "acute anxiety" from the centers of power (215). Consequently, women were not allowed to be public figures and their authorial efforts had to dwell in anonymity. As such, rendering the concept of the author moot has a different impact on a segment which has rarely had the chance to embody it.

Acquiring and managing a public persona is an issue that concerns confessionalism and feminism in equal measure, since both struggle with the "death of the author" and what it means for the individual. One may even go so far as to say they have a common plight (Gill, 2006: 6). Both ask the question whether the authorial "Self" can be dispensed with entirely. We may find it easy to "remove" the white, male author from a text because his presence is implicit; we still think of the text in relation to a male figure, whether it is visibly authored or not, since the male writer is the standard for the act of creation. One need only look at the myths of authorship and the way they are gendered ("the Promethean hero", the "Oedipal rebel", "the Bohemian artist", "the visionary sage") to find proof of his ubiquitous presence (Felski, 2003: 58). Feminist criticism argues that one loses little authority by claiming the death of the author. In fact, the recent need to expunge authorial presence may be a response to the proliferation of "authors" who are not solely male and white (58).

2.5. Female Confessionalism and Politics

Here we may bring up the issue of community and the fact that female confessionalism operates on a much less solipsistic approach, building identity as part of a plurality rather than singularity. Many female confessionalists often find that their concerns are mutual, in the sense that the "construction of identity…is communal rather than individualistic" (Smith, Watson, 1998: 92). The confessional act is part of a collective effort for visibility and autonomy in a male-dominated space (92), but more than that, the sharing of personal narratives illuminates the recurring patterns in women's experiences. Undoubtedly, once women begin to talk about themselves, they become more aware that many aspects of their identity are determined by social structures and that the problem lies with those social structures and not with them (Cameron, 1992: 7). This inevitably means that the personal becomes political (7), yet we do not speak here of ideology but of responsibility. Confessionalism, Judith Harris argues, endows both the poet and the reader with consciousness of the others' pain, "for only through the personal experience of pain does pain become "disinterested" and indicative of a universal context" (2001: 257). We are confronted with things we would rather not know (259) and we are shaken out of our sense of "good taste" and "civility" (262) precisely because art is meant to carry us into less palatable spaces (262), such as the pitfalls of female selfhood. Harris suggests that personal narratives highlight the fact that we are all complicit in the inner workings of society (267) and that we maintain a "civilized silence" (262) in the face of human cruelty. Confessionalism acts as an "antidote" (262) which prevents erasure and gives a voice to the experience of pain.

In this regard, female confessionalism unearths the bodies of women who, as Audre Lorde certifies in *Sister Outsider*, "were never meant to survive" (1984: 42). These are usually women of color whose existence was rendered invisible in a predominantly white culture. Alice Walker speaks of her "phantom" identity, confessing that "I had never seen myself and existed as a statistic exists, or as a phantom. In the white world I walked, less real to them than a shadow…" (2004: 122). Marginalized women of color have access to few strategies of visibility other than the discourse of the Self. Walker goes on to say that she "fought and kicked and fasted and prayed and cursed and cried [herself] to the point of

existing" (125). For what may be facile to a white subject becomes a matter of survival for the woman of color. That is why Audre Lorde states that poetry is a matter of absolute necessity for women, particularly since:

> Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. (1984: 37)

Naming the nameless isn't only a matter of affirming overlooked identities; it is a matter of creating them. As mentioned in the previous section, confession does not reflect (*mimesis*) but rather produces truth (*poiesis*), and the existence of women of color must be literally "produced" or created, not through theory, but through poetry which conserves the "experiences of our daily lives". What is truly radical is to affirm the everyday living of women who were denied the very basics of livelihood. The "sanctuaries" enacted through poetry are places of recognition and familiarity for women who have suffered displacement and silencing. Lorde goes on to argue that speaking about what is important to the Self is an act which cannot be denied or repressed, no matter the consequences:

> I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. (1984: 40)

Of course, some feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray question the possibility of the female subject to approach her subjectivity without broaching the many historical and cultural instances of objectification: woman is "a subject that would re-search itself as lost (maternal-feminine) object" (Atkins, 2008: 271). Female subjectivity is indelibly linked to the construct of femininity; in order for the woman to recognize herself as subject, she must first see herself as an object, effectively adopting a male point of view:

> …a direct feminine challenge…means demanding to speak as a (masculine) "subject", that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual difference. (Irigaray, 1985: 76)

Since the subject is coded male, entering subjectivity implies having to grapple with its linguistic and cultural realities. As de Beauvoir explains, "every time she acts like a human being, the woman is said to be imitating the male" (2010: 68). "Imitation" is a key verb that finds echo in Irigaray's theory as well. She points out that women must engage in an act of "mimicry", "assum[ing] the feminine role deliberately" (Irigaray, 1985: 76) in order to covertly "thwart" it. The female subject must enter subjectivity on the terms established by her male counterpart. As consequence, female subjectivity is a matter of negotiation between *mimesis* (or mimicry) and *poiesis* (creation), which is the very crux of the confessional act itself.

Assessing how much of the Self belongs to the individual is a key question in confessionalism, and female confessionalism takes the question further by positioning the female Self as a "non-subjective subjectum" (Irigaray, 1985: 165), a subject that is not essential for herself, but rather necessary for the construction of the male Self (165). As such, womanhood is the result of various intersubjective permutations, while never seemingly settling on one constant articulation. Irigaray argues that "there will always be a plurality in feminine language" (qtd. in Cameron, 1992: 171) since for women, any kind of discourse presents multiple meanings, "without one being able to decide which meaning prevails" (171).

The tensions intrinsic to female subjectivity find shape in confessionalism because it offers the space necessary for the dissonances and contradictions apparent in the construction of womanhood. As Terrence Doody attests, confession is a "self-conscious" and "deliberate" act that installs the poet in the public sphere when "no available institution, no system or myth, no class structure, profession, locale, or family quite accommodates his full sense of his individuality"(qtd. in Gill, 2006: 95). The female poet also cannot be accommodated by systems and myths which have spoken in her name and denied her full expression. Mary Chevalita Dunne, writing under a male pseudonym (George Egerton) in the late 1800s, underlined the need for women writers to transcend male conventions (meaning the dominant conventions of the time) in order to talk about themselves honestly:

> There was one small plot left for her to tell; the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her – in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writings" (qtd. in Middleton, 2003: 53)

"To give herself away, as man had" is a revealing statement, for it points to the fact that man is able to be vulnerable in his writings and present himself as a subject without the danger that he will be ostracized for it, whereas woman risks being called overly emotional and downright "hysterical". In a review of Anne Sexton's Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *Live or Die* (1967), Charles Gullans describes Sexton's poetry as "monstrous self-indulgence" and bearing a "tone of hysterical melodrama" (qtd. in Colburn, 1988: 148). He refers to her attempt to document her mental illness in poetry as something quite "embarrassing" (148), yet when poet Theodore Roethke confronted his own manic depression in verse, the critical opinion was that in this way he "increased his drive to discover the truth about the workings of the human psyche" (Balakian, 1999: 47) and therefore "transform[ed] a personal "I" into a representative "I" (47). Roethke managed to turn a private experience into something universal whereas Sexton was merely "irritating". This isn't to say that there can be no criticism levied at excessive self-indulgence in confessional poetry and, as was noted in the previous section, poets like John Berryman suffered from public opprobrium to a similar extent, but there is often a gender division within criticism which equates the confessional genre to a confessional gender (Gill, 2006: 89), claiming that women are naturally "confessional creatures" (89) and therefore, their outpourings should be called into question or derided.

Ultimately, the act of confessing enlarges the space of expression for many women who struggle with subjectivity and authorship and whose mere day-to-day existence is a victory against cultural and political erasure. Poets like Sylvia Plath, Lucille Clifton, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds, to name a few, find in the confessional mode a way to make female concerns legitimate and universal themes of discussion in poetry. To confess, after all, is to acknowledge the failure of true disclosure (Gill, 2006: 8) and women have grappled with a history of silence and half-truths that should give them more than enough precedence in such matters.

Chapter 2: Lucille Clifton and the Female Body

2.1. The Black Female Writer

"Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches of poetry – among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry (qtd. in Williams, 2014: 38). This was what Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), a publication wherein he discussed the case of Phillis Wheatley, the first African poet published in America (38). Shortly after her volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) saw the printing press, her intellectual abilities were put into question by Bostonian representatives, for how could a slave, tutored by her masters, have the mental acumen to write verse (37)? Diminishing the intellectual merits of black people has been a long documented and legislated practice (36), but it is significant that one of the first instances of such an exercise occurred when a black woman published poetry.

The sentiment that a particular group of people cannot have access to art is not novel, but it plays an important part in the shaping of literary canons. Those who know "misery" but not aesthetic emotion are not expected to express anything worth reading or evaluating. When Virginia Woolf speaks about Shakespeare's fictional sister in *A Room of One's Own*, she mentions the works of literature we have been deprived of due to the inequities that some groups have suffered historically, but she also hazards that "Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" (2015: 38), insisting that, despite the tribulations and obstacles in their path, the marginalized still found a way to communicate.

Part of the struggle for expression is connected with the trauma that these groups suffered at the behest of various hegemonic systems of power. For black women, there is no way to erase the fact that for a long time, they were seen as disposable caregivers who tended to the needs of others, both as slaves and the "slaves of slaves" - what Zora Neale Hurston called "mules uh de world" (qtd. in Collins, 2002: 45). Their marked inferiority and erasure within their own community carried long-term consequences that are felt even today. In the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance and with the advent of "Afro-American" literature,

black writers and scholars like Richard Wright, Arthur P. Davis and Sterling Brown considered that the main goal of black literature should be to "merge with the mainstream of the American literary tradition" in what would be later known as "integrationist poetics" (Showalter, 1991: 171). Since, as Davis argued, "the Negro writes in the forms evolved in English and American literature" (qtd in Showalter, 171), it was only reasonable to expect the black writer to be integrated and be given equal footing with the white literary elite. The goal was to make sure that his work would not be viewed through the lens of race, but that it would be reviewed under a single standard of criticism (171). That standard of criticism, of course, was white and male. This is why integrationist poetics ended up forcing black writers to narrow and limit their writing in accordance with the tenets of the elite, which acted as a "cultural straitjacket" (171). Moreover, such integrationist poetics could not apply to black women's writing. Even when black men such as Ralph Ellison received accolades and recognition for their work, black women novelists such as Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brooks were considered inferior both within the white and black literary circles (Showalter, 171). We should also not forget that the now celebrated Zora Neale Hurston was saved from obscurity by Alice Walker thanks to her famous essay "Looking for Zora" (1975). Hence, Mary Helen Washington is entitled to assert that "the real 'invisible man' of the 1950s was the black woman" (qtd. in Showalter, 171).

The 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement upended the dogma of integrationist poetics as a new wave of black artists and intellectuals demanded the right to express the uniqueness and heterogeneity of their writing as visibly "black" and not contingent upon white literary standards (Showalter, 171). Along with the political ideology dubbed by Stokely Carmichael as "Black Power" (171) there was the birth of the "Black Aesthetic" which focused on the specificity of black writing and the condition of "negritude" as a "unique black artistic consciousness transcending nationality" (171). Such lofty ideals sometimes clashed with political and social realities: while the Black Aesthetic conferred authority and prestige to black writers, it also felt "narrow, chauvinistic mystical and theoretically weak" (172) because only black male critics were allowed to establish what defined the Black Aesthetic (172) and therefore, new limitations were imposed upon the marginalized groups of the black community. To counteract the fallacies at work in the Black

Aesthetic, black feminist critics such as Gloria Hull, Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington drew attention to the shadowed corner that the black female writer occupied in the Afro-American literary canon (Showalter, 172) and the need for an honest appraisal of the efforts of black women to speak about race and gender as part of their experience (172).

Black female writers were also at pains to reconcile their differences with their white sisters in the women's liberation movement and what would be known as the "Female Aesthetic" (Showalter, 179). The Female Aesthetic advanced the notion that a strictly female style, defined by French feminists as an "écriture féminine", could be a counterpoint to the phallocentric discourse and give women's writing some much sought "authority" (180). This authority would hinge on displacing the centrality of the phallus in language and replacing it with the female body and the female genitals (180). The problem with this exclusively gynocentric outlook was that it often veered into biological essentialism (180) and it also offered narrow stylistic possibilities, the "écriture" being either too surreal or highbrow to include a multitude of perspectives (180). Not only that, but it was usually the white female body and the white female voice that received attention in the Female Aesthetic to the detriment of minorities and particularly, black women (180). Given this lack of representation even in woman-centered spaces, black women had to (re)define their identity at the margins and to wrestle with racist and sexist portrayals of black femininity.

Culturally, black women are evaluated according to a binary fashion; they are either too thick-skinned to be vulnerable, giving into the stereotype of the tough and unbreakable "superwoman", which Michele Wallace examines in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1990), or they are far too beaten down by the system to be able to fight back – the "mules uh de world". Given these conflicting and limiting images based on power relations and submission, the true process of healing for black women stems, as Audre Lorde suggests, from self-care: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (qtd. in Brooks-Tatum, 2012, para 1). For it is true that in a culture that trivializes and considers black women expendable, ensuring their own longevity and protection becomes a political act (para. 7) with wide ramifications. One such ramification is the sovereignty of the black woman over her own identity; she should be able

to choose her modes of expression, while still addressing the long history of violence that perpetuated the myths which still control her cultural and literary representation.

Self-care is also a strategy of visibility; drawing attention to the black female body is a radical gesture that, as we shall see in the following pages, discloses the black body as more than just a site for various racial tensions and power struggles, but as a source of joy and artistic expression. Jefferson went on to say in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that the love depicted by black poets is a love that "kindles the senses only, not the imagination" (qtd. in Williams, 2014: 38). The senses, which are so thoroughly connected to the body, have no place in poetry for Jefferson, but when black women are deprived of horizons of exploration, they find new realms in the body; they find imaginary possibilities in the "senses". As Audre Lorde chants in *A Woman Speaks*, "I am treacherous with old magic" (Long, Collier, 2010: 729).

The following chapter will tackle the confessional work of activist and poet Lucille Clifton (1936 – 2010), who attempted to unearth this "old magic" in a self-exploratory journey of her own body, in various stages of vigor and illness. Her effort is not only of recovery but also of legitimization, as she endeavored to present her corporal self as a worthy subject of poetry in a landscape that would call her body grotesque (Rashedi, 2012: 55). The first portion of the chapter will outline the biography of the poet, since her personal history informs much of her poetry. The later sections will focus on the celebration of the black female body, but also the trauma and ordeal of physical illness and how these themes are broached in Clifton's poetry.

2.2. Relevant Biographical Notes

> What I hope is to write poetry that my Aunt Temmie can understand on one level; the cab driver can understand on another; and the Ph.D. can understand on yet another. And that's good enough. (qtd. in Lupton, 2006:3)

Lucille Clifton's poetic creed may seem contradictory at first glance; she claims universality of expression (2006: 2), and yet her poetry tackles the private rather than the public. She hopes to meet the expectations of both her "Aunt Temmie" and a postgraduate student, yet she does not compromise her verse to suit the tastes of either. Rather, this feat is achieved through the directive "I hope", a desire to include all. As one biographer puts it "her compassion goes beyond personal, familial, national, and racial boundaries" (2). Her poetry aims to find commonality in variation. In the seminal anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, editor Cherrie Moraga talks about the black woman as the common site of pain and injustice and she quotes the Combahee River Collective in asserting that: "If Black [Indigenous] women were free…everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (2015: xix). The freedom of the black woman ensures the freedom of all, because she is connected to the deepest manners of violence and persecution which affect us all in some measure, from "Aunt Temmie" to the Ph.D. student. Essentially, Clifton *is* the aunt and the student and the cab driver. She builds a "bridge" (as the anthology announces), interweaving her own experience as an African-American woman with the experience of all African-Americans, all women, and finally, all people.

Born and raised in Buffalo, New York, Lucille Clifton, nee Sayles (1936 – 2010) was made aware of her unique African lineage from an early age. Her father would recount tales of a great-great-grandmother who was born free in a prosperous kingdom (Dahomey) in Nigeria, and who was eventually enslaved and shipped to Virginia. What made this great-great-grandmother special, however, was the fact that she passed on her memories and stories of West Africa to her children, which is why Lucille felt, first-hand, that she was part of a continuing tradition of story-telling (Lupton, 2006: 60). She would go on to write about this venerable ancestor in a poem called "**ca'line's prayer***":* "remember me from whydah/ remember the child/ running across dahomey/ black as ripe papaya/ juicy as sweet berries/ and set me in the rivers of your glory" (Clifton, 1987: 33).

This apparent dialogue which Lucille entertained with the past was crucial for her formation. There were many figures in her childhood, both fictional and real, who instilled in her a sense of togetherness, a sense that her identity was closely linked to those that had

come before her (Lupton, 2006: 61). Her own story was undivorced from the slave and family narratives, (61-62) which bolstered her poetic voice and determined her to write a memoir entitled *Generations* (1976). The first lesson Clifton learned from this inextricable bond with her formers was that, the only way to write about everyone, was to write about herself. By sharing her experience, she was contributing to the tradition started by *Ca'line*, the Dahomey child. In "**ca'line's prayer**", Clifton embodied her ancestor, but she also spoke through her about her own condition as a black woman. She often felt that she gained the ancestor's approval in this way, disclosing that "I type and I swear I can see Ca'line standing in the green of Virginia, in the green of Afrika, and I swear she makes no sound but she nods her head and smiles" (qtd. in Holladay, 2005: 172).

Her past inheritance was further emphasized by the idiosyncratic biological features which were passed down to her from her lineage. Among them, a bad eye and twelve fingers were the most conspicuous and were often explored in her writing since Clifton believed they were poetically charged. She also felt that these features enhanced her supernatural and spiritual nature (Lupton, 2006: 10, 100). The bad eye made the good one sharper, and gave her the authority to call herself "lucy one-eye" (100) - in the vein of the three Moira - since her visions were intensified by the impairment. Her two extraneous fingers were surgically removed so as not to subject little Lucille to social disgrace, but the ghost of her missing limbs empowered her to write (100). She had once been "witchlike" in both hands, and now she had to compensate for the loss of magic with poetry: "my extra fingers are cut away./ I am left with plain hands and/ nothing to give you but poems" (100). Hilary Holladay has suggested that the poems not only replaced Lucille's two fingers, but they also "memorialize[d] her corporeal self", preserving her identity and spirit (2005: 79).

Clifton's identity was also played off in her name or, rather, her multiple names. Her first name, Thelma, was a call-back to her own mother, Thelma Moore, who had attempted to write poetry but had burned the pages at her husband's behest (Lupton, 2006: 14). Her second name, Lucille, was unmistakably connected to the Latin *lux*, and its derivative, "Lucy", which emerged in her poetry as the fertile "light" of motherhood and womanhood: "lucy/ is the sun/ reflected through/ her girls/ are the moon/ lighted by lucy" (Cliffton, 1987: 165). Other times, she called herself by her married name, like in "**the light that came to**

lucille Clifton", a poem which deals with adult Lucille's doubts about self-knowledge and identity: "she understood that she had not understood" (209).

Her ruminations on the self, however, were also informed by abuse. Her father, a talented storyteller from whom Lucille had learned about her ancestors, was also a troubled figure in the family. One of Clifton's sisters had this to say about Samuel Sayles on his deathbed: "Lue, Jo cried up the steps to me. We're scared. He's gonna haunt us" (Clifton, 1987: 241). The sexual abuse Lucille was subjected to found an outlet in her poems, where she poignantly described the "soft tap tap/ into the room" and her feelings of rage and nausea at her father's intrusions (Lupton, 2006: 13). In the poem "**moonchild**", she reflects without hesitation on the abusive paternal figure that cannot be mistaken for someone else (Holladay, 2005: 51): "…jay johnson is teaching/ me to french kiss, ella bragged who/ is teaching you? how do you say; my father?" (qtd in 2005: 51). Although she reveals these distressing episodes to her readers, she blames them on the "moon", under whose auspices she was born: "the moon is queen of everything./ she rules the oceans, rivers, rain./ when I am asked whose tears these are/ I always blame the moon" (qtd. in 2005: 51). Holladay remarks that Clifton is essentially laying blame on her own femaleness, because the moon governs the natural cycles and is invested with femininity (51). Therefore, the abuse that her father perpetuated afflicted her sense of self as a young woman, as she was conditioned to believe that it was her budding pubescence which prompted the molestation: "we girls were ten years old and giggling/ in our hand-me-downs. we wanted breasts" (qtd. in 2005: 51). The fact that young black girls stop being innocent from a young age and become insatiable seductresses is depicted in the surviving archetype of the Jezebel (Beaulieu, 2006: 474), which claims that black women are always available for intercourse and are promiscuous by nature (474).

Given the complicated nature of such grim episodes, Clifton found solace and expression in an exploration of the body. If an abstract emotional catharsis is difficult to obtain, then what is left is the physical witness, the corporeal self. As Holladay asserts: "the defining characteristics of her body are integral to her self-exploratory verse" (2004:78). In her first volume of poetry, *Good Times* (1969), Clifton showed that she could encapsulate the universal in the private, by paying homage to the black bodies around her in relation to

herself. In "**lame is the pretty one**", she mourns the overlooked black female body which she feels she is linked to:

> i wish those lovers
> had not looked over
> your crooked nose
> your too wide mouth
> dear sister
> Love
> dear sister (1987: 18)

And in "**if i stand in my window**", she celebrates taking control of one's black body and exhibiting it to the world, in spite of the voyeuristic restrictions placed on female anatomy:

> if i stand in my window
> naked in my own house
> and press my breasts
> against the windowpane
> (…) let him watch my black body
> (…) let him discover self
> let him run naked through the streets
> crying
> praying in tongues (1987: 25)

Yet it is in later volumes that she goes on to talk about her body in a private and deeply emotional way; not only because she has acquired a new poetic voice, but because she has undergone new and painful experiences. In 1994, Clifton was diagnosed with breast cancer, and though she made a successful recovery post-surgery, she still had to undergo a mastectomy. The aftermath of such an invasive surgery was captured in the volume *The Terrible Stories* (1996). In the next sections, I will be tackling these poems, as well as Clifton's aesthetic and political perseverance to write about the body, a theme also prevalent in volumes like *An Ordinary Woman* (1974) and *Two-Headed Woman* (1980).

Lucille Cliffton's merits as a poet were acknowledged through various fellowships, degrees and grants, an Emmy award and a distinguished chairmanship at St. Mary's College in Maryland. She was also very much involved in the Black Arts movement, and even dedicated one of her volumes, *Good News about the Earth* (1972) to Black Panther activists. More than that, she adopted and personalized the grammar and rhythms of African American vernacular in her poetry (Cammarata, 2004: 78). Clifton served as poet laureate of Maryland from 1979 to 1982 (Moody, para. 9). She died in 2010, at the age of 73. Although a public persona who performed readings and gave interviews, Lucille Clifton was, by Hillary Holladay's estimation, painfully shy, particularly when it came to matters of her own life: "she did not find it easy talking about her life. That's why she wrote the poems: to do the talking for her" (2005: 4).

2.3. The Black Female Body

One striking quote from Hélène Cixous talks about how women have had their tongues cut off and have resorted to speaking through the body instead. The only problem is that "man doesn't hear the body" (Oliver, 2000: 284) and since, society is predicated on institutionalized patriarchy, female speech is inevitably erased or neglected. The black woman faces a similar erasure, but to a more radical extent since she is doubly marginalized for her race and gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw posits that her "intersectional experience", which entails both her femaleness and her blackness, "is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (qtd. in Belknap, 2014: 476). Hence, one of the questions that black female poets come up against is how to write and shape an identity "in a world that prefers to believe [they] do not exist" (Raman, 2011: 52). More importantly, how can black female poets write about themselves without letting their "rage" towards systematic injustice poison their "love and warmth for fellow beings?" (52)

For Lucille Clifton, the answer lies in the body; not in its simple depiction, but in its celebration and acceptance. The body is home of the gestural, a space which transcends

simple verbal expression. The denigration of the body leads Juana Maria Rodriguez to assert that:

> when we are called upon to testify against ourselves about that for which we have no language, we can know that it is due to someone else's failure of imagination, their inability to read the moving marks of our gestures (2014: 3).

The "failure of imagination" which Rodriguez mentions above stems from an inability to see the body - particularly the black body - as a carrier of language and meaning. The traditional creative act of the female body is considered to be child birth and any other gesture is measured in accordance to maternity; the woman is at her most creative when she is perpetuating the race (Hoeveler, Schuster, 2007: xi). That would be limiting enough for a female creator, but for a black woman, the creative potential of her body is doubly censored. Not only is she denigrated as a gendered body, but she is also burdened with the threat of extinction as a black body.

Perpetuating the race for the black woman is not a creative act; it is a political act with implications that echo a history of enslavement. Hortense Spillers makes the case that African-American women and mothers have to wrestle with more uncertainty regarding their infants' futures (1987: 78) because while the propagation of black bodies was useful during slavery for profit-based reasons (Williams, 2014: 79), the thriving of these bodies outside of systems of power is perceived as a danger. In other words, black "futurity" – ensuring the existence of heirs – is seen as a menace if it cannot be controlled by white hegemonies. Black women carry with them the insignia of the violent past precisely because they *can* ensure heirs: Spillers argues that the African-American heritage was sustained and transmitted through the "flesh" and the mother, since she served as both reality and absence - as both the caregiver who provided survival and as a reminder that the biological father was gone and in his place there was the master (1987: 80). Consequently, the black woman was a signifier for both the humanizing condition of motherhood and the dehumanizing subjugation practiced by the slave owner. This duality is present in the black body because, while the black woman made sacrifices for her child (and here we may give as example the case of Frederick

Douglass' mother), the black woman also gave her child her race through the body, according to matrilineal descent (Williams, 2014: 28). Therefore, the black female body spoke the language of enslavement which marked it for a long time as a "shadowy evocation" (Spillers, 1987: 80).

2.3.1. Celebrating the black body in "**homage to my hips**"

Lucille Clifton casts light upon the shadow and rejects the popular discourse that labels black bodies as "othered" and grotesque (Rashedi, 2012: 55). She dismisses this racist narrative without engaging in hateful or demoralizing speech. Clifton does not "wallow in the sorrows of being black and a woman" (qtd. in 2012: 55). Instead, she chooses to immerse herself in an intimate discovery of her body, the same body which has been the site of oppression and violence. She recovers the body and gives it creative meaning, both within and outside of its historicized trauma. One poem that reflects this exultant attitude is the powerful "**homage to my hips**" (*Two-Headed Woman*, 1980). In it, Clifton pays tribute to a feature of the black female body which has been shamed and devalued for not fitting "into little/petty places" (Clifton, 1987:168), and not conforming to the standards of a predominantly white society (Rashedi, 2012: 55):

> these hips are big hips
> they need space to
> move around in.
> they don't fit into little
> petty places. these hips
> are free hips. (Clifton, 1987: 168)

From the onset, Clifton makes it clear that the black woman is in charge of her body and has full ownership of her "hips", which "go where they want to go" and "do what they want to do" (168). Although she speaks from a first person perspective, the poet is also addressing all black women who have had a history of being owned and enslaved through the body (Rashedi, 2012: 54). Clifton is also referring to the black woman's bondage to the

"normative standards" of white culture: "Historically, the differences in body image, skin color, and hair haunt the existence and psychology of black women" (Patton, 2006: 25). The standards of beauty in any society are usually established by "hegemonically defined expectations" (Harjani, 2013: 33), which is to say that the dominant white culture ascribes what is and is not aesthetically pleasing. Black women must conform to such standards in order to acquire desirability. One may refer here to the Lily Complex, coined by Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, as an "altering, disguising and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive" (qtd. in Patton, 2006: 26). Black women have internalized "inauthentic" (26) white standards of beauty and therefore, they attempt to hide their own corporality and embody the ideals of white femininity. The size of one's hips, for instance, is a perfect counterpoint to the Lily Complex, since it goes against the desired "smallness" of the white female body. Not only that, but the fact that these hips "need space to/move around in" also points to the need for black women to occupy an actual space, to exist for themselves. Alice Walker speaks about her mother's inability to inhabit such a space while under the thrall of whiteness: "My mother (…) was convinced that she did not exist compared to "them". She subordinated her soul to theirs and became a faithful and timid supporter of the "Beautiful White People"" (2004: 122).

To release black women from this captivity, Clifton announces the freedom of her hips: "these are free hips", and offers the exultation of the body as an ontological site for personal liberation. As we know, Clifton's family legacy was based on surviving slavery through storytelling and here the speaker follows the same tradition, retelling the story of black women's hips, turning a body part which is usually associated with "outrageousness and excess" into "a source of power and a point of pride" (Bennett, Dickerson, 2001: 134). Clifton does not deny the transgressive quality of the black woman's large hips; she embraces it as "deliberate resistance" (134):

> these hips are mighty hips
> these hips are magic hips. (Clifton, 1987: 168)

We may take note of the alliterative quality of "mighty" and "magic" which go together to reinforce the poet's strength in asserting her body (Rashedi, 2012: 56). "Magic" is

also an element that is never missing from Clifton's poetry and it is deeply connected with her ancestors, her own body and her two missing fingers (Lupton, 2006: 100). Furthering the idea that her body can wield magic, the speaker jubilates in her power to bewitch the male counterpart:

> i have known them
> to put a spell on a man and
> spin him like a top! (Clifton, 1987: 168)

Opinions vary on Clifton's intentions in these last lines; some interpretations suggest that the erotic element is not "authentic" since it does not take place in an exclusively female environment; hence, by having a man present and watching, the body is objectified and used solely to "gain erotic power" (Rashedi, 60). Another source contends that "**homage to my hips**" is actually a love poem in celebration of marital love and that Clifton wrote it partly as a "positive enticement" to her husband, Fred Clifton (Lupton, 2006: 87). A better reading is posited by Ajuan Maria Mance who, in her essay, "Re-Locating The Black Female Subject: Lucille Clifton", argues that the man should not be regarded as a contrasting or opposing element but as an ally (Bennett, Dickerson, 2001: 135). The tone of the last lines is not only seductive, but also playful, because the parting image is that of a man, dazzled and dumbfounded by the "sheer majesty of [the] black body" (135). Clifton invites the man to take pleasure in the female body on her terms, and not as a result of objectification.

2.3.2. Representing the black body's power in "**i was born with twelve fingers**"

The poem "**i was born with twelve fingers**" (*Two-Headed Woman*, 1980) delves deeper into the poet's connection with magic, body and ancestry. As mentioned previously, Lucille endowed her missing limbs with great poetic significance. Her early polydactylism is represented as a sign of power in a society where displaying a possible disability is already cause for stigma (Rashedi, 2012: 52). Clifton's hands are part of a non-canonical body which frightens the white, able-bodied majority: "somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells" (Clifton, 1987: 166). The poet uses the pronoun "we" to speak of a succession of

women in her family who were born with this magical addition and were forced to remove it: "our wonders were cut off" (166). This signals not only a loss in her lineage, but also a loss for all black women who were forced to modify their bodies to suit white standards: "each of us/born wearing strange black gloves" (166). These women must now depend on "the powerful memory of ghosts" (166) to remember their identity.

Clifton, however, seems to suggest that, despite their collective amputation, black women can still succeed in subverting cultural norms and multiplying the connection between generations. The poem compares black women's erasure in white society with the erasure of their missing fingers, but it also implies that black women have the power to overturn the status quo by taking advantage of their invisibility:

> …now
> we take what we want
> with invisible fingers
> and we connect
> my dead mother my live daughter and me
> through our terrible shadowy hands. (Clifton, 1987: 166)

Standing at the periphery of society can be empowering for subjects who, to paraphrase Alice Walker, do not give up their power by thinking they have none. bell hooks speaks about the "vantage point" (15) that black women experience due to their marginal position. The periphery they occupy equips them with the ability to not only criticize current hegemonies, but to also come up with counter-hegemonies (15). An expression of counter-hegemony in "**i was born with twelve fingers**" is the communion found in loss; the "invisible fingers" create a matrix of womanhood even in absentia. The power shift is apparent in the pauses and breaks that occur between words: "my dear mother my live daughter and me" (Clifton, 166). One can almost see the "shadowy hands" (166) stretching like an unbreakable bond between them. Another possible interpretation is that the "blanks" between words only appear to be blanks to *us*, the able-bodied readers. The journey of the missing limbs is a journey that only Clifton and her disabled sisters may undertake.

The reader, ironically, sees only blanks, or invisible words, and gets a taste of what it is like to be erased from a narrative.

The presence of magic is also strongly hinted at, particularly in the notion of "casting spells", but also in the fact that the amputation of the twelfth finger does not remove the magical power from the black woman's body. In the lines "but they didn't understand/the powerful memory of ghosts", Clifton refers to the divide between the material and immaterial world, which for black women has a particular connotation, since it harkens to their own disembodied state. Lillian Smith argues that the black body is written as a ghost in the white world (Roberts, 2003: 161) and it is preserved in this state out of fear that the black body will cast its magic upon the white body. In the American South, for instance, "vigilance was required to keep white bodies from slipping toward blackness" (3). Distinctions had to be made so that white women's bodies would stand apart from the "polluted" bodies of black women (3). The phrase "slipping toward blackness" is particularly of note, since it announces an inevitable commingling, against which the white body can only practice vigilance. The black body must be qualified as grotesque and abject so that the white body becomes more starkly *white* (3). This tension is conveyed in Clifton's poem through the technique of enjambment that connects each line's syntax; we may observe that the alternation between white space and black script is the same kind of "slipping" where there is always an uncertainty as to each element's place on the page. If we look particularly at the line

the powerful memory of ghosts. now (Clifton, 1987: 166)

we may find that the visual arrangement conveys a striking message. There is a full stop after the word "ghosts" and yet there comes an intrusion in the shape of "now" at the very end. Normally, the "now" should belong to the next line "(now) we take what we want", but the placement of the adverb in the same space as "ghosts" marks an omen. The ghosts do not belong to the past, but are a present reality: the immaterial is "slipping" into the material and the black body resurges from the depths of memory, its power intact, taking what it wants.

What is important to note is that this spiritual resurgence is achieved through the body (namely the twelfth finger), which in African-American culture and, particularly, in matriarchal societies, is the site for revelation and "a reflection of the discursive link that exists between African American women" (Bennett, Dickerson, 130). More than that, the body preserves Clifton's past (her dead mother) and her future (her daughter). The connection is cyclical, in that it stems from the poet's body and returns to it after having passed through her family and her ancestors. One might even say that in order for the body to acquire meaning, it must echo a plurality of bodies. Hence, when Clifton writes about herself, she writes about everyone (Lupton, 2006: 2), but in doing so, her poetry remains intimate because the community is contained in the individual; the young girl with twelve fingers writes the experience of many other divergent bodies.

2.3.3. Affirming the blackness of the body in "**homage to my hair**"

In "**homage to my hair**" (*Two-Headed Woman*, 1980), Clifton does not mince her words; she proclaims that her hair only becomes blacker with age: "the grayer she do get, good God,/the black she do be!" (Clifton, 1987: 167). The poem is a proud assertion of blackness that "disrupt[s] categories like masculinity and whiteness" (Bennett, Dickerson, 2001: 133) because it changes the hierarchies of meanings in terms of what the black body can be and what it can do (133). The black woman's hair has long been codified as undesirable due to its "kinky" or "nappy" texture (Banks, 2000: 2) which gives it a "bad" character. Indeed, there is a social distinction to be made between "good hair", usually straight, long and blond, and "bad hair" which is curly, dark and unruly (2). White standards of beauty demand that the black hair be "tamed" because it represents the threat of the race. Willie Morrow suggests that slave masters were more able to tolerate dark skin color than curly hair (Banks, 2000: 7): while "kinky hair was glorified in West African societies, it became a symbol of inferiority once enslaved Africans reached American shores" (7). The depreciation of black hair brought with it a hostile attitude towards traditional "grooming" practices; combs and other such utensils had to be abandoned, as they were, among other

things, a marker of "tribe affiliation" (7) and kinship was strongly discouraged among black people.

The importance of hair in any culture cannot be trivialized, as hair stands for various spiritual and social symbols. For instance, the hair which grows on the head is sometimes equated with "spiritual forces" that are symbolically designated as the "Upper Ocean" (Cirlot, 2013: 134-135), while the hair that grows on the body is of a baser nature, denominated as "Lower Ocean" (135). Often times, the act of shaving or removing hair is connected with a desire to reach new spiritual heights and remove the "irrational power" (135) of the body. To reach asceticism, one would have to perform a metaphorical castration, cutting the hair short to stifle procreation (135). This also means that hair is a symbol of fertility and "spiritualized energy" (135). Anthropologists such as Edmund Leach have theorized that there is an anxiety inscribed in the hair, particularly the long, female hair, because "long, unkempt hair signifies unrestrained sexuality" (Eilberg-Schwartz, Doniger, 1995: 4) and is thus connected with uncontrollable desire. Psychoanalysts go a step further in asserting that the female hair becomes a threat to manhood, such as in the case of Medusa's hair. Freud theorizes that Medusa's snake hair actually represents her genitalia, which inspire a fear of castration in the male subject: "it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitalia…" (qtd.in Eilberg-Schwartz, Doniger, 4). Critics of the psychoanalytic approach like C.R. Hallpike and Mary Douglas insist that more than representing phallic terror and desire, the hair "symbolize[s] social control and deviance" (5), since the length of the hair, for example, determines whether the individual is assimilated within the system or not (short hair for the soldier, long hair for the hippy) (5). We would argue that in the case of the black woman, her hair is depicted as both Medusian monstrosity and social deviance. Maxine Craig refers to the divide that black women feel when they engage with their natural hair, as they are "pulled between feminine ideals and racial pride" (qtd. in Banks, 2000: 9). Lucille Clifton attempts to bridge the division between the two by transfiguring the black hair into a playful female presence:

> when i feel her jump up and dance
> i hear the music! my God

i'm talking about my nappy hair! (Clifton, 1987: 167)

Lucille's hair is marked by the pronouns "her" and "she" which are maintained throughout the poem, as the hair becomes a full-fledged second instance of the speaker, a second woman who may even possess some divine elements; in the verse "i hear the music! my God", the juxtaposition of the "music" which the hair seems to create and the conjuration of "God" produces the effect of a chant. And indeed, there is a transcendental quality to the black hair that "can touch your mind/with her electric fingers…" (167). The holiness of it is interposed with the playful vibrancy which Clifton seems to exhibit as she addresses the black man and invites him to acquaint himself with her hair. The following verses reject the anxiety of castration; instead the hair is meant to evoke sexual pleasure and communion:

she is a challenge to your hand
black man,
she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens
black man (Clifton, 1987: 167)

Clifton describes the hair as "tasty" on the black man's tongue and since, so far, the hair has been equated with a female presence the sexual image provided here is of the woman herself being feasted on by the black man. There is also the reference to "good greens" which might signify the "collard greens", one of the traditional "soul foods" in African-American cuisine. Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor talks about the devaluation of "soul food" by white culture which seeks to both appropriate African-American dishes and rob them of flavor: "Soul food aint frozen collard greens. Soul food aint fresh turnip greens and smoked pigs tails cooked together for three hours. Thats tasteless." (qtd. in Inness, 2015: 233). It is interesting to note that the focus is once again on taste; "soul food" is considered to be authentic food that should not be white-washed and whose flavors should remain strong. Not only that, but soul food is meant to connect with the "soul" since it functions as a remedy to the trauma of the past: as Grosvenor attests that "Soul food is about a people who have a lot of heart and soul" (qtd. in Witt, 1999: 160). Still, white culture perceives these dishes as filthy due to their relation to blackness (Inness, 2015: 233), and so there is a constant tension between spirituality and filth inscribed in the "good greens". The black man tastes both the

nurturing tradition and its "filthy" echoes in white culture. Clifton is thus posing an ironic stance; her hair and her womanhood are gifted with both divine elements, as mentioned previously, and the salacious aspects of desire and sexual pleasure. One might also identify here a jesting tone which suggests that the hair is as nutritious and wholesome as the "good greens" that any child is told to eat; hence, the man should consume the woman's body for his own sake.

The final imprecation, "the grayer she do get, good God,/ the blacker she do be!" (Clifton, 1987: 167) is yet another playful visual pun that confronts the black hair with the eventual whiteness of old age. Clifton asserts that such a chromatic invasion only serves to enhance the blackness of the hair and the blackness of the woman herself. White culture cannot erase the identity ingrained in the "nappy hair", which is also foregrounded in the syntax specific to Black vernacular.

2.3.4. The white body in "**from *Dark Nursery Rhymes for a Dark Daughter***"

Yet there are other ways that white standards of beauty trick a black woman into self-erasure, and here we shall take a deeper look at the "Lily Complex" mentioned previously. The white body is an alluring signifier that often draws attention to what the black body "lacks". It is not just Alice Walker's mother who shows loyalty to the "Beautiful White People" (2004: 122). Young black girls growing up are particularly vulnerable to the rhetoric that upholds Eurocentric standards of beauty to the detriment of racialized bodies. Eurocentric standards are, after all, "a recapitulation of the colonial world order" (Hall, 2010: 156) and have shaped the Western experience to the present day. This outlook was reinforced with the advent of professional advertising which commodified the female body in order to sell products. The early twentieth century ideal of feminine beauty was advertised in a specific way; commercial artist Charles Sheldon describes it as "provocative, even sensual, female poses executed in pastels, with soft focus and haloes of light and color to create highly romantic images of feminine beauty and purity" (qtd. in Hall, 156). The connection between light, purity and beauty was followed up by artists like Ralph Williams, who

depicted female beauty as a whiteness that was almost translucent: "skin (…) so light as to appear like alabaster" (156). An interesting aspect of this depiction is that it avoids mentioning color, employing the euphemistic "light (skin)" as a signifier for whiteness (156). In time, this became a linguistic moniker which engendered a series of problems; to be light-skinned did not necessarily mean to be white, but to have *degrees* of whiteness. Often times, it was an aspirational point; advertisers knew they could not promise some women to be "white" and therefore, being "light-skinned" seemed more attainable. As Ronald E. Hall explains, women of color could purchase a wide range of whitening products, bleaching their hair and skin to get closer to the ideal of beauty (156). This is not to say that women and people of color with lighter skin have it better; they are still subject to the "post-colonial hierarchy" mentality (Hall, 2008: 240) and suffer additional psychological damage due to the exclusion they feel in the dark-skinned community. People of color and, in particular, women are thus pitted against each other due to ultimately unattainable standards of white beauty. The "light-skinned" euphemism also makes black women feel they could erase part of their blackness.

Clifton was aware of such internal and external fallacies when it came to the representation of the black body; the poem "**from *Dark Nursery Rhymes for a Dark Daughter*"** which was part of her early, uncollected works (1965-1969) depicts a different kind of bedtime lullaby. Divided into four sections, the poem is addressed to a potential black daughter, but also to the young poet herself:

> Flesh-colored bandage
> and other schemes
> will slippery into
> all your dreams
> and make you grumble
> in the night,
> wanting the world to be
> pink and light.
> Wherever you go,
> whatever you do,

flesh-colored bandage
is after you (2012: 49)

The ideal of whiteness is outlandishly rendered as a "flesh-colored bandage" that haunts the young girl's dreams and shapes her perception of the world. The bandage is meant to be applied over the real skin, suggesting that the dark pigment is a wound which must be covered. At the same time, the fact that the bandage is flesh-colored implies that the young girl is wrapping herself in dead skin. The "pink and light" world of her dreams reflects the Eurocentric standards of beauty, but it also hints at the degradation underneath it, the sweet-smelling decaying corpse. The ubiquitous presence of the "bandage" highlights the inescapable quality of the white body which is superimposed over the black body with the intention of erasing and replacing it.

The poet makes use of a playful, childish voice to signal the dangers of idealized white beauty, incorporating aspects of the fairy tale: "Beware the terrible tricky three;/ Blondy and Beauty and Fantasy./ Together they capture little girls/ and push them into little worlds" (2012: 49). Here, the villains are the white princesses who are meant to be worshipped, and we see that Charles Sheldon's tenets of what makes feminine beauty appealing are more or less confirmed. The figure of "Fantasy" plays an important role in this triumvirate because it represents the false promise that the young girl might one day *be* "Blondy" and "Beauty". The idea of a bargain in fairy-tales is common; the young heroine makes a deal with a witch and in return receives powers that must be handled carefully. Here, the powers become a punishment – the young girl is shrunk down, made to feel small. The allure of the white princess is a trap: "They might have had fun/ if they had run/ the first time that they heard them hiss/ Promises promises promissesss" (Clifton, 49-50). The onomatopoeic "hissing" recalls the figure of the serpent and the Biblical signifier of temptation that leads the woman astray. But the true temptation resides with Eve and beauty, rather than Satan and knowledge.

In the last section of the poem, the speaker joyfully celebrates the young girl's blackness which is rooted in non-traditional femininity and the sheer strength of the body: "Ten feet tall/ or giant arm/ nobody has/ your sunshine charm" (2012: 50). The affirmation of

black beauty is rendered with the aid of another fairy-tale creature; the giant. The giant is a counterpart to the white princess, rising above the normal plane of existence and defying expectations. The "sunshine charm" too is an image that plays with the ideal of "lightness" and turns it on its head; sunshine is far stronger than the "soft focus and haloes of light" which Charles Sheldon described as accompanying feminine beauty (qtd. in Hall, 156). The passivity of such a figure is offset by the vibrant, active force of "sunshine". The black daughter repossesses the light as part of her beauty and not as part of the white construct of femininity. Clifton describes the poem as a "dark nursery rhyme" sung to a "dark" daughter to emphasize not the antagonistic aspect of light against darkness, but rather the richness of darkness itself, and its curative value. The poet addresses the rhyme to all the daughters who struggle with false images of blackness, but the "you" of the poem also refers to herself, to the young girl who carries with her the trauma of childhood and the restorative potential of her own skin color.

2.4. The Scarred Female Body

2.4.1. The fragmentation of the body in "**lumpectomy eve**"

In the poetry volume *The Terrible Stories* (1996), Lucille Clifton documents her painful struggle after being diagnosed with breast cancer, kidney failure and other serious ailments. Asked in an interview why she decided to make her audience read about such potentially devastating things, Clifton replied: "the poet, it seems to me, or the teller, you know, has the obligation not to run away from the stories that she or he knows" (Rowell, Clifton, 1999: 60). She goes on to make a reference to the community of women who have gone through this ordeal and claims that, any omission on her part of "our experiences – many which have been awful, you know, or seemed awful at the time", would be a betrayal of her "true task" (60). Much like Anne Sexton, Clifton refuses to hide or euphemize the intimate aspects of disease and illness, and especially their effects on the body. In this manner, she follows John Berryman's confessionalist precept: "These Songs…are meant to terrify & comfort" (qtd. in Hoffman, 1978: 14). If illness is terrifying, placing it within the

evocative and ungovernable bounds of poetry offers a heightened sense of catharsis. Yet beyond the horrors of disease, Clifton also wishes to celebrate the body's "powers of rejuvenation" (Gray, Balkun, McCorkle, 2015: 114) and its ability to heal and transform scars into beauty marks.

In "**lumpectomy eve**", Clifton describes the aftermath of the surgery which removed a portion of her breast. She accomplishes this task by letting the body speak for itself, namely the breasts which, in one startling image, appear to be consoling each other:

> all night i hear the whispering
> the soft
> love calls you to this knife
> for love for love
> all night it is the one breast
> comforting the other (Clifton, 2012: 536)

What is emotionally arresting in these lines is the fact that one of the breasts tells the other that its sacrifice was not made in vain, but in the name of love ("love calls you to this knife"). The body has survived surgery not only because it wants to live, but also because it loves. Hillary Holladay states that "**lumpectomy eve**" is, indeed, "a love poem for the speaker as well as an elegy for the lonely, love-starved, synecdochical breast" (2004: 82).

The loss inflicted on one of her breasts turns the mammary gland into a localized self that remembers, through the body, all the sensations it will never feel again, such as the sensation of breast-feeding: "and the lonely nipple/lost in loss and the need/to feed…" (Clifton, 536). What comes as a painful realization is the fact that, in the process of performing its biological functions, the breast has crippled itself: "…the need/ to feed that turns at last/on itself that will kill/ its body for its hunger's sake" (536). The realities of the body are hunger and death, which Clifton does not eschew, even if she argues that love is a powerful imperative as well. Such realities compel the woman to see her body in a different light, reassessing her identity in connection to the loss of an essential part of her. Audre Lorde speaks about her own breast surgery and the impact it had on her self-perception:

> Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign. But within those three weeks, I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger… (1984: 40)

The fact that she is "forced to look" upon herself becomes a test of strength and endurance. Indeed, Clifton argues that the manner in which a woman responds to cancer is part and parcel of who she is: "The weave of everyday existence is the training ground for how she handles crisis" (qtd. in DeShazer, 2010: 85). In other words, the way she has lived her life will inform her ability to cope with the trauma. There is an organic link between physical suffering and a lived life. Allison Kimmick discusses the possible transfer "from abject to subject" (qtd. in DeShazer, 2010: 85) which the women poets provide when they remove the stigma of cancer and talk about the loss of body parts. In this case, the loss of the breast is a partial loss of the Self, but this process does not deny subjectivity, but rather enhances it. What is left of the woman in the absence of the breast and how does that absence produce a "reorganization" in her life, as Lorde claims? In Clifton's case, one breast must comfort the other and the body must find sources of solace that had not been explored before.

The poem's "naked" style mirrors the search for meaning in absence and is a testament to Clifton's poetics. The lack of punctuation and capitalization, as well as the simplicity and brevity of the lines are part and parcel of Clifton's prerogative to include only what is truly essential ("Lucille Clifton", poetryfoundation, para. 2). She subscribes to the "Black American idiom", using "ellipses, fragmented words or lines, and the violation of punctuation, grammar and syntax" to express the black woman's "struggle for a meaningful existence" (Raman, 2011: 59). In "**lumpectomy eve**", I would also argue that the lack of punctuation provides a continuous flow of speech, reflecting the "whispering" of the breasts. The poem also features two particular blanks that carry with them the harshness of the surgery knife:

lost in loss and the need
to feed that turns at last
on itself that will kill (Clifton, 536)

and

love calls you to this knife
for love for love (536)

The first instance acts as a visual death sentence, separating the body from the "lump" that was excised and suggesting that the need for the breast to feed is what actually rendered it extinct; its biological function ultimately forces the body to remove it, otherwise it "will kill/ its body for hunger's sake" (536). The self-destructive core dormant in the body is echoed in the second blank, where there is a marked difference between the first and the second "for love". The former might suggest that the woman must undergo the surgery in order to survive and live on, while the latter "love" may point to the very same hunger which condemned the breast, and as such, "for love" becomes "*because* of love". In both cases, Clifton is adopting a bittersweet tone, conveying intimacy in the face of physical alienation. Her subjectivity is not lost in the fragmentariness of the body, but rather augmented, as she is able to redefine the limits of the Self in trauma.

2.4.2. The loss of fertility in "**poem to my uterus**"

Another poem which records the fragmentation of the female body is "**poem to my uterus**" from the volume *quilting* (1991), where Clifton offers a tribute to the womb, the quintessential staple of womanhood which she is about to lose in surgery. The hysterectomy means not only a loss of bodily integrity, but also the loss of fertility and erogeneity:

my bloody print
my estrogen kitchen
my black bag of desire

where can i go
barefoot
without you
where can you go
without me (2012: 428)

The poet is preparing for an "artificial menopause" (Lupton, 2006: 104) and thus the tone is that of lamentation, but in Clifton-ian fashion, the mourning takes the form of a warm and playful dialogue with the womb. The various names she applies to her uterus serve to create a domestic and nurturing atmosphere (104) where, once again, a part of the body is "synecdochical", or stands in for Lucille's identity. Lines like "my estrogen kitchen" and "my black bag of desire" associate giving birth, a usually painful process, with sexual pleasure. The poet suggests that being a mother and being a sexually active woman are two inseparable conditions. At the same time, the uterus has held "my dead and living children" (2012: 428), which in connection to the "black bag of desire" becomes an analogy for the loss of black children throughout history (Cucinella, 2002: 77).

Clifton repeatedly questions the future of a body bereft of the uterus: "where can i go/barefoot/ without you/ where can you go/ without me" (2012: 428), signaling not only the anxiety of being barren, but the loss of meaning, since the womb cannot be autonomous; it cannot exist without the woman. In fact, what is the uterus in the absence of a home to contain it? Is it still "my bloody print/ my estrogen kitchen" (428)? Hillary Holladay posits that "a woman and her body cannot be separated from one another" and that the poem reflects this "physical self-awareness" (2004: 29), and yet, what happens to the female Self when separation does occur? We would argue that therein lies the crux of "**poem to my uterus**", as it explores the aftermath of being a woman without her biological counterpart. Who does she become when she has been released of one essential aspect of her being? Is she less of a woman after the hysterectomy? Clifton frames the question as a geographical shrinkage: "where am i going/ old girl" (428). She questions what other spaces she can occupy now that she is left without the womb, and although the tone may be plaintive in places, it is also coupled with a genuine desire for self-knowledge (Holladay, 2004: 99). Silvia Castro-Borrego suggests that Clifton's yearning for the removed uterus is an essential

part of continuing to be herself (2011: 114). She makes the case that Clifton opposes the Biblical connotation that a barren womb must ultimately lead to the woman's greed and "suffering from desires impossible to satisfy" (114). Rather, this is only a new facet of selfhood which encourages women to consider who they are after the loss of fertility.

Another aspect that must be broached in women's relationship to the womb is the difference between hysterectomy and menopause. The latter has a gradual, "lazy transition" (Wear, Nixon, 1994: 99) which accommodates the body with the ups and downs of old age and loss of fertility (99). The removal of the uterus, however, "forces a quick burial with too little time to mourn or grieve, with no ritual passage, like that afforded by menopause" (99). The sudden deprivation of "an important dimension of one's sexual identity" (99) cannot be reconciled in due time, but must be accepted presently as an immediate effect. This is a difficult obstacle to overcome and it also forces women to reevaluate their perspective on time. In the touching and humorous first lines of the poem, Clifton calls her uterus "patient" (428) for allowing her to subject it to a history of entrances and exits: "while i have slippered into you" (428), but that history has been quite suddenly "cut" out– time has been condensed and removed from the body. Lynne Sharon Schwartz writes in her fictional piece "So You're Going To Have A New Body" about the meeting with a hypothetical doctor who explains the procedure of hysterectomy and its aftermath: "in the absence of the cervix, which is the opening of the uterus, the back wall of the vagina is sewn up so that in effect what you have here now is a dead end" (1986: 27). Schwartz reflects that the uterus had embodied "an easy passage from inside to out, a constant trafficking between the heart of the world and the heart of yourself" (27), a passage which now has been sewn shut. She further argues that it was this openness from within to without that made her a woman, whereas men are the "walled ones" who are "barricaded" (27). Hence, once more we turn to matters of selfhood and identity; who is the new woman that is going to inhabit the "New Body"? Clifton grapples with this question as she compares her uterus to an article of clothing that the doctors claim she will not need:

> now
> they want to cut you out
> stocking i will not need

where i am going (428)

The assumption here is that she will not need her uterus in the next stage of her life, but what, the poet asks, does that stage mean for the "barefoot" (428) body? In the same poem, Clifton compares the uterus to a "sock" (428) which, like the "stocking" can be removed at will. This may strike the reader as a commodification of the female body, but there is a deeper connection to be made with the "dead and living children" (428) who have come and gone through the "sock/stocking". The annexation of trivial items of clothing with the reality of (mis)carriage makes for a heartbreaking poetic effect, aligning an image that should bring comfort (slipping on a sock) (Lupton, 2006: 104) with the cyclical cruelty of life. In this respect, some have compared "**poem to my uterus**" to Anne Sexton's "**Menstruation at Forty**" (*Live or Die*, 1966) since in both works, the loss of fertility is juxtaposed with concrete and trivial images for poetic effect: "year after year,/ my carrot, my cabbage,/ I would have possessed you before all women" (Sexton, 1999: 138). The prosaic and almost domestic vocabulary hides, in both cases, a crisis of selfhood that questions what it means to be a woman.

It also questions what it means to be a black woman whose ability to be fertile has historically been used against her. As mentioned previously, the black mother propagated the "race" through matrilineal descent (Williams, 2014: 28) and therefore, she provided new slaves for the white master, rendering her body a site for enslavement. As Hortense Spillers theorized, the black mother was a reminder of the human connection which survived the dehumanizing system of slavery, while also acting as a signifier for the slaver's power over her children (1987: 80). She offered the promise of emotional salvation, but she also doomed her children to oppression. This dichotomy cast a shadow over the reproductive lives of black women: motherhood often signified force and violence (in cases of rape and abuse) or painful compromise because the black woman was not in control of her children and could be deprived of them at any given moment. On the other hand, the possibility to have a family outside the power structure of the plantation becomes a subversive, political act. To be able to keep and raise your children, to see them grow and thrive, to give them a future means that, as a black woman, you are opposing the system that profited from and stigmatized your

fertility. Such historical considerations give the last lines of "**poem to my uterus**" a different tonality:

> where can i go
> barefoot
> without you
> where can you go
> without me (2012: 428)

The womb-less black woman is also a woman divested of history. Her trauma has been dislocated; by removing the uterus, the black woman must reckon with an absence of meaning that stretches beyond questions of biology. Who is she now, not only in relation to other women, but especially in relation to her black sisters? Where can she "go" now that she does not have to carry the marker of racial futurity? Can she completely discard the racial significance of her child-bearing abilities and simply contemplate her new status as a woman in a new body? Such questions are difficult to answer and they dwell in the silences between the verses or in the blank spaces that Clifton often makes use of. For instance, the short break in the first line of the poem, "you uterus", conveys both the separation from the womb and also the unspoken associations that the womb possesses for a black woman. These associations remain invisible because to name them would be to undermine the sexual and emotional connection that the black woman has with her own body. The ghosts of matrilineal descent are there, but they do not encroach; rather, Clifton allows the poem to center around personal, private loss which indirectly echoes the collective damage of other black women throughout history.

2.4.3. The body and the breast in "**1994**"

The last poem I wish to discuss is "**1994**" from the volume *The Terrible Stories* (1996), a birthday poem that Clifton dedicates to her fifty-eighth year, the same year when she was diagnosed with breast cancer (Holladay, 2004: 7). Even though the poet's birthday

takes place in a warm season (June 27), the poem begins with an image of coldness, suggesting that time itself has frozen up and stopped:

> i was leaving my fifty-eighth year
> when a thumb of ice
> stamped itself hard near my heart (Clifton, 2012: 539)

In the well-known fairytale *The Snow Queen*, written by Hans Christian Andersen, people are struck with tiny mirror shards (sometimes in the eye, sometimes in the heart) and begin to see the accentuated ugliness in the world instead of its beauty. Something somewhat similar takes place in "**1994**" since the tone of the poem is much more somber and weighty than in her previously discussed works. The "thumb of ice" acts like a mirror shard which turns the landscape of the body into perennial winter:

> i was leaving my fifty-eighth year
> when I woke into the winter
> of a cold and mortal body
> thin icicles hanging off
> the one mad nipple weeping (539)

The "cold stamp near my heart" is also the location of the infected breast which weeps, and protests in anger against its cruel fate ("mad nipple"). The visual image of the "icicle" stands out because breast cancer is a condition which cannot be easily disguised: "it is very difficult to keep the disease private" (Twiddy, 2015: 80). Hilda Raz explains that the mastectomy is different from other abscissions because the breast holds erotic and maternal significance "in a culture that reveres breasts if not women" (qtd. in 2015: 80). A woman without breasts might as well be futile, both as a sexual object and as a mother figure. Eve Sedgwick poses the same problem when she speaks about breast cancer as a maker of "new politics, a new identity formation" (qtd. in 2015: 80), wherein the woman must adjust to her new status and acquaint herself with the "altered landscape" (80). This is particularly troubling for the black woman whose shapely figure is often the source of her erotics, as Clifton depicts in "**homage to my hips**".

This desolate tone, however, is tempered and enriched by Clifton's choice to once again include the community of black women in her struggle. The poet acknowledges that the "thumb of ice" looms over all female bodies and that, in fact, it represents a danger which is inherent in womanhood from birth: "you know how dangerous it is/to be born with breasts". Throughout these stanzas, Clifton addresses her audience in the second person, creating a space of female intimacy where women are invited to tell their own stories of trauma and illness:

> you have your own story
> you know about the fears the tears
> the scar of disbelief
> you know that the saddest lies
> are the ones we tell ourselves… (2012: 539)

The familiarity and universality of such lines trigger, in Holladay's words, "a spine-tingling shock of recognition" (2004: 8). A more emotional appeal, however, is made towards black women and the experience of being both black and female (8). Clifton likens the dangers of cancer with the dangers of racism: "you know how dangerous it is/ to wear dark skin" (539). Black women, thus, face two deathly risks written in the body through the skin and the breast. Illness itself is doubled; it is not only physical, but also historical. To further this point, Clifton makes a religious reference that both mocks and bemoans the fate of black women:

> have we not been good children
> did we not inherit the earth (539)

The last line is a reference to the biblical beatitude which states that the "meek… shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5) and it is a clear allusion to the religious propaganda that was promoted in times of slavery, when it was argued that if black people resigned themselves to their inferior state and accepted their position, they would be rewarded for their troubles in heaven (Adéèkó, 2005: 58). Clifton questions white authority and whether the "meekness" of black people (and particularly, black women) has not entitled them to be

exempt from illness. The rhetorical "have we not been good children" is both mordant and melancholy, because she is also addressing the question to the community of women who have borne their burden without complaint. "Don't we deserve better?" seems to be Clifton's true meaning. However, the poet resumes the poem by leaving much unsaid:

> but you must know all about this
> from your own shivering life. (540)

After all, it is not hostility that Clifton wishes to elicit, but an emotional and personal response to black women and all women's struggle against systematic disease, both at the level of the body and at the level of society. That is why she addresses her audience directly multiple times and assumes an intimate dialogue with the reader, prompting him or her to verify her assumption: "but you must know all about this". The modal "must" also acts as a prescriptive mandate, urging the reader to become acquainted with this reality, either "from your own shivering life" (a life that has been marked by the "cold stamp"), or from the experience of others. In this way, the breast is the locus for individualized pain and the site of communion with other women, a theme which is prevalent in Clifton's overall work concerning the female body.

Throughout her poetic career, Clifton followed her desire to write poems that, even her Aunt Temmie, a cab driver and a PhD student could understand and respond to (Lupton, 2006: 3). She adamantly stuck to her simple, sparse verse, writing without artifice or embellishment about her body in relation to her ancestors, her black sisters, her husband, death and illness. In writing about herself she managed to write about many and, as a result, her poems are "filled with conviction, and touched to [their] heart by human sympathy" (Waniek, 1983: 162).

Chapter 3: Anne Sexton and Mental Illness

3.1. Creativity and Mental Illness

Upon his release in 1961 from the Mayo Clinic where he underwent repeated shock therapy for his depression, Ernest Hemingway penned an indictment of the method which had only managed to worsen his condition, stating that:

> What these shock doctors don't know is about writers…and what they do to them…What is the sense of ruining my head and erasing my memory, which is my capital, and putting me out of business? It was a brilliant cure but we lost the patient." (qtd. in Scull, 2016: 318)

He committed suicide quickly after the treatment was administered, showcasing, among other things, the failure of the psychiatric methods of the time to rehabilitate the mind. Shock therapy and its harmful effects have been depicted in moving testimonies such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* (1961). Yet Hemingway's denunciation makes special reference to *writers* and their intimate connection to the mind and its frailties. Hemingway blames the doctors for their ignorance in the matter, since they do not know how the mind of an author works and why it is different from other minds. The statement seems to suggest that writers require particular psychiatric care since their "capital" is the very source of insanity; the mind.

The correlation between art and madness is one that has been documented since the Classical Age, when poets were thought to be under the guidance of the Greek god Dionysus "who induces madness, passion, irrational behavior and frenzy" (Rieger, 1994: 2), in direct conflict with "the more rational and severe Apollonian aspect of Greek thought" (2). Romanticism also played a part in creating the image of the Genius whose madness "endowed [him] with a mystical and inexplicable quality that differentiated him from the typical man, the bourgeois, the philistine, and the merely talented" (Kaufman, 2014: 12). Therefore, the truly great artist must possess a degree of madness. This correlation is also

present in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, which views high creativity as a result of a deviant personality (Rieger, 34). Artists are more prone to insanity "because they are more in touch with, and hence more vulnerable and sensitive to, the unconscious conflicts and repressed memories of stresses from their childhood" (34). In other words, artistic minds have access to parts of the psyche that are viewed as unstable and potentially harmful. This view was augmented in the 19th century by the scientific arguments of criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who connected creativity with insanity but also made the case that both have "a common hereditary disposition" with the criminal mind (Rieger, 34). Creativity, then, is not only associated with frenzy but also with violence and death.

Such assumptions would naturally lead one to think that great artists must have a higher dose of creativity and therefore a higher dose of madness. Certainly, the poet Amy Lowell would agree that creation is a condition that requires a "different psychic state" (Ghiselin, 1985: 110) and a "non-resistant consciousness" (110). She describes how "an idea will come into [her] head for no apparent reason" (110) and will remain there without her giving it any conscious thought until she is ready to turn it into a poem (110). In this sense, creative potential lies in the subconscious and must be activated by the writer. Lowell judges that a poet must be equipped with a "subconscious factory always working for him or he never can be a poet at all" (111). Yet a heavy reliance on the subconscious is only one way to describe the creative process: Robert Neal Wilson posits that "writers are on the whole as different from one another as they are from nonwriters. There appears to be no single or simple dynamic mechanism that drives people who create literature" (qtd. in Rieger, 1994: 38). As such, reducing creativity to one's ability to enter a different psychic state simplifies the nature of authorship and art.

Likewise, the notion that a poet's talent comes from his or her predisposition to mental alienation has also been called into question. In *Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts* (1982), Ellen Winner talks about the lack of medical evidence for the association between mental illness and enhanced artistic abilities (Rieger, 38), stressing the fact that mental illness would actually hamper rather than assist the process of writing (38). An illuminating example would be Virginia Woolf's struggle with manic depression and the way it affected her day-to-day routine. While Woolf found her "madness" a valuable experience

in terms of self-knowledge (Dally, 2014: 170), nevertheless she found it incredibly hard to work and put ideas to paper if she was in the throes of a manic episode, considering herself a failure and complaining that her mind was a "blank" (170). In fact, it was the *recovery* from a state of depression that inspired her to write *A Room of One's Own* (171).

The issue of recovery has always been perceived myopically in polite society. Madness, as Foucault tells us in *Madness and Civilization (*1961), has historically been acknowledged as both difference and a *nothingness* (2013: 116). Society acknowledges that there is something altogether different about the individual, yet at the same time, through the method of confinement, it wishes to banish the madness, to show that there is nothing to it. Madness is simply "the empty negativity of reason" (116) which can easily be corrected or expelled (116). Such an outlook explains why, on the one hand, mental illness is romanticized as being a special quality of the artist, while at the same time the artist is expected to continue to make art and treat the madness only as "empty negativity" that does not actually interfere with the creative process. The reality, however, is starkly different. Mental illness prevents rather than encourages artistic expression.

Returning to Hemingway's assertion that the writer's psyche requires specific care; is the creative mind wired in such a way that makes it more prone to alienation? Scientific studies suggest that creativity may be fueled by mild symptoms of temperamental disorder, but that "full-blown clinical disorders" impede more than foster creative minds (Kaufman, 2014: 194). This is why many authors battling with mental illness find it difficult to continue writing when the illness aggravates. Yet those who attempt to incorporate the experience of mental illness in their work may often come under criticism for glorifying certain aspects of pain. This is the case of confessional poet, Anne Sexton, who, as we shall see in the following section, received censure for presenting some of the less palatable and unromantic aspects of mental illness, as she delved into the tedium of domestic suburban life and the ugly realities of being a mother and wife while coping with depression. Such realities are often considered undignified for literature because critics and readers would rather paint the picture of the artist as a "tortured soul" (Kaufman, 2014: 400) rather than explore what constitutes the "torture".

In the case of women, especially, madness has long been seen as the price they had to pay in order to become full-fledged artists. Elaine Showalter points out in *The Female Malady* that female artists underwent a mental breakdown as an effect of "exercis[ing] their creativity in a male-dominated culture" (qtd. in Goodman, 2013: 115). Gilbert and Gubar also confirm that nineteenth-century female writers "struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness" simply to be able to become authors in their own right (2000: 51). Therefore, mental illness is often an expected condition of female artists who are confined by societal roles and judged according to impossible standards. Of course, some feminist critics like Helen Small have suggested that the experience of mental illness can be reconstructive instead of merely destructive: "the experience of losing and having to remake their identity gave them a hard-won independence from conventional ways of seeing the world and using language" (qtd. in Goodman, 2013: 115). That is to say, living through mental illness and writing about it is a chance for the female artist to explore avenues of selfhood that may otherwise remain shut.

In the following chapter we will look at the way in which mental illness informs and transforms Anne Sexton's poetry and how writing about "madness" reflects back on the female poet, challenging notions of authority and selfhood.

3.2. Relevant Biographical Notes

> … I've had a good life – I wrote unhappy – but I lived to the hilt. (line taken from a letter Anne wrote to her daughter, Linda) (qtd. in Sexton, 2011:8)

Anne Sexton exercised a certain fascination upon everyone who met her. A startling beauty and a vibrant personality, you would not suspect that she suffered from intense depression, or that she felt the burden of her gender so keenly. Paula M. Salvio describes her in powerful, evocative terms:

> In her low, husky smoker's voice, standing at the podium in her elegant red reading dress, shoes off, drink in hand, Sexton would lodge her complaint at the misery of

> American middle-class women, ironically making use of middle-class style (2007: 18).

Born Anne Gray Harvey (1928-1974) in Newton, Massachusetts, the future poet had a knack for preserving most of the written and visual paraphernalia of her life from a young age, including scrapbooks, letters, photographs, carbon copies of poems which she made sure to date, and various other keepsakes (Middlebrook, 1992: xxii). A couple of months prior to her suicide, she left her adult daughter in charge of her papers and the audiotapes from her therapy session (xxii). Anne had a narcissistic, but entirely lucid intuition of her own value, and though plagued by mental illness for most of her life, she desired for her work to live on, and she especially desired for her work to be true, as confirmed by her daughter:

> *Tell it true*, she counseled me, from the time I started writing in my early teens. For my mother, truth trumped all. Taking the plunge in her poetry, she dared to tell story after story about herself, crafting what could well have been a simple journal into an art… (Sexton, 2011:2)

Perhaps one of the most authentic confessionalists of her generation– although she ended up disliking the label (2011: 2) – Anne Sexton shared extremely intimate details of her mental and emotional state that, more often than not, left readers - particularly non-female readers - feeling alienated or "embarrassed". This is due to the fact that there was nothing aesthetically pleasing about the "degrading" and even "disturbing" nature of her writing and its taboo topics (Lerner, 1987: 9) The poet Charles Gullans considered that "these are not poems at all", while Patricia Meyer Spacks stated, in relation to Sexton, that "art requires more than emotional indulgence" (9). Specialized readers found Anne's personal effusions too mawkish or downright vulgar, but amateur audiences took to her instantly, because she was brave enough to speak about intimate female concerns in the not very tolerant era of the 1950s. Her poems were even used therapeutically by other patients suffering from similar mental conditions (Lerner, 9).

Yet how does one come to accept the ugly imagery and the undisguised language of such poems? As John Berryman, a fellow confessionalist, states in Dream Song 366: "These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand./ They are meant to terrify &

comfort." (qtd. in Hoffman, 1978: 14). Confessional poetry offers solace against the constraints of modern society insofar as it forces us to confront the darkest parts of that society (14). Female sexuality and, particularly, the female body have had a history of neglect and defamation that have rendered them the "darkest parts" which inspire fear and disgust in a modern setting. As Hélène Cixous points out in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), the female Self represents a Dark Continent that threatens the "homogenizing, reductive, unifying reason" (qtd. in Dotterer, Bowers, 1992: 19) which is part and parcel of the patriarchal order. Woman is an object of fear because she brings entropy in the hierarchy of systematic power and is a "force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes" (19). To express that female Self, then, is to express female creativity as a "wild zone" (20) that disturbs traditional power and traditional art. Anne Sexton herself claimed to be "the middle-aged witch, me" (qtd. in Dotterer, Bowers, 1992: 24) who inspired fear through a grotesque, mythical quality, captured in the very word "witch". This theme was explored in her volume *Transformations* (1971), where she revised classical fairytales through the lens of the female body, brewing what Susan Bowers calls "rebellion and metamorphosis" (24). In shedding light on the "witch" and her many metamorphoses, Sexton committed herself to stark authenticity, which is why Maxine Kumin, the poet's friend and collaborator, wrote in the foreword to her complete works: "Of all the confessional poets, none has had quite Sexton's courage to make a clean breast of it" (Sexton, 1999: xxxiv).

One aspect of female "wildness" that Sexton was preoccupied with was the "mad" woman, the woman who had lost her mind and had, in the process, lost control over her autonomy. Her poetry captures the realities of the female Self trapped in the confines of institutions that aim to subdue her, be them medical or familial. What determined Sexton to write about "the female medical body, by making a spectacle of beauty culture, domesticity, psychiatry, and medicine" (Salvio, 2007: 18)? Her own struggle with mental illness was a considerable impetus, but there was also the fact that she disliked her status as a byproduct of middle-class mentality in post-war America (Middlebrook, 1992: xx). Like many housewives of her time, Sexton felt trapped in the endless mirage of suburban life, but unlike most of her ilk, she had the narcissism and flair to single herself out:

> Her presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudo shouts to calculated effect (…) Anne basked in the attention she attracted, partly because it was antithetical to an earlier generation's view of the woman writer as "poetess" and partly because she was flattered by and enjoyed the adoration of her public. But behind the glamorously garbed woman lurked a terrified and homely child, cowed from the cradle onward, it seemed, by the indifference and cruelties of her world… (Sexton, 1999: xxi)

In her description of Sexton's contradictory evolution from that of a "frightened little girl" to "flamboyant…provocative woman" (xxii), Maxine Kumin neatly sums up the tragedy of a poet who wore a mask of glamorous joie de vivre, only to better conceal a deeply insecure psyche. Anne was born in a dysfunctional family, made up of an alcoholic father and a mother whose literary ambitions were thwarted by domestic life (Wagner-Martin, n.d., para. 1). In that respect, her early years eerily echo those of Lucille Clifton. In any case, Sexton did not feel she was a wanted child. Her answer to rejection was defiance and boldness (Sexton, 1999: xxii). She ran away with her future husband, Alfred "Kayo" Sexton II, at the age of nineteen despite being engaged to another man, and she only completed a "finishing" school as a form of higher education. Like many poets of her time, she was incompatible with an academic setting. Instead, she took up the life of a fashion model, while her husband served in Korea (Wagner-Martin, para. 2). Anne went through a number of love affairs that left her emotionally compromised and in need of therapy, but she suffered her first mental breakdown around the time she had her first child, Linda (1953). Although the initial diagnosis was post-partum depression, her future confidante and psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne, quickly realized the problem was much more serious (Middlebrook, 1992: xiv). Anne was hearing voices that told her to commit suicide and she had to be hospitalized at Westwood Lodge (Sexton, 1999: xxii) where she would return more than once.

It was during and after her time at Westwood that she began writing in earnest - at the behest of Dr. Orne - first as a form of therapy, and then as a means of developing her "associative gifts" (Sexton, xxiii). As Diane Middlebrook states in an interview: "Her self-mythology was …somebody who rose out of mental illness, discovered her talent and

immediately became a poet with her first book" (PoetAnneSexton, 2012: 1 min, 51 sec). That first book was called *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), a title which, no doubt, makes reference to her psychiatric experience.

Anne liked to believe she was self-taught, since she read extensively on both literature and psychiatry (Sexton, 1999:24), but she was also a self-made poet, because she learned her craft in non-academic settings like "workshops and summer programs", where she apprenticed herself to senior poets – one of them being the confessionalist Robert Lowell – who guided her evolution and tastes (PoetAnneSexton, 4 min, 35 sec). She was somewhat ambivalent about the value of a substantial education in the writing of poetry. She was often discouraged by her unrefined intellectual background, observing that "I lack taste, I haven't had the real foundation" (qtd. in Middlebrook, 1992: 126), yet at the same time she would note that this gave her writing originality because she did not attempt to imitate anyone (126), concluding that sometimes "as a poet, it may be better to be crazy than educated. But I doubt it" (qtd. in 1992: 126).

These confessions were encouraged by Dr. Orne during their many sessions at Westwood, and as a result, the first poem of the volume *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is entitled "**You, Doctor Martin**", because despite later influences, her psychiatrist was the figure who bolstered the initial outburst of poetry:

> (…)Of course, I love you;
> you lean above the plastic sky,
> god of our block, prince of all the foxes. (Sexton, 1999: 3)

More than that, however, her sessions with Doctor Martin released her from the restrictions of her gender: "Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself" (Sexton, 4) and allowed her to forge a creative pattern out of hysteria: "And we are magic talking to itself,/noisy and alone" (4). Another benefit of therapy was the discovery that Anne suffered from "a severe difficulty of memory" (Middlebrook, 1992: xv). Her mental condition prevented her from remembering the relevant parts of her sessions, which is why Doctor Martin came up with the idea to record everything on tape. Anne would listen to these audiotapes and take written notes on the discrepancies between what she had said and what she remembered. Thus, she had a chance to pinpoint the source of her emotional turmoil and control it, to the extent that

she later mastered it in poetic form (xvi). This process is best exemplified in her Bedlam poems, which we will discuss in the following sections.

In and out of Westwood, Sexton continued to publish volumes of poetry that garnered both critics and admirers. Although she gained the status of a celebrity poet (she won a Pulitzer Prize for the volume *Live or Die* (1966) and a number of prestigious fellowships), she was also condemned for a perceived decline in her poetry, which stemmed from her alcoholism, but also from the "heady world of reading tours, writers' conferences, brief lectureships in universities, that sprang up in the Sixties. It was a world that had little leisure to savor the details of craft, but welcomed and repaid emotional theatricality" (Williamson, 1983: 177). In other words, Sexton was more or less pressured into becoming a self-indulgent entertainer for her audience (Wagner-Martin, para. 8) and one could argue that this only added a strain to her unstable mental condition. All these elements eventually led to her suicide at age forty-five, in 1974, terminating, as Diane Middlebrook assesses, "what had been a meteoric rise to fame and a steady level of achievement in income that poets rarely …do achieve…" (PoetAnneSexton, 1 min, 51 sec)

In part due to her fluctuating mental state, Sexton's writing also alternated between various themes and motifs, ranging, as we mentioned previously, from classical fairy-tales in the experimental volume *Transformations* (1971) to ironically ecclesiastic poems that chartered Jesus' life in the sequence "The Jesus Papers" from *The Book of Folly* (1972). Sexton mainly capitalized on themes of death, madness and loss in an intimate feminine key, and while many subscribe to the idea that she thrived on an excess of autobiography, there is also strong evidence to suggest that she experimented with a distancing female voice which was both personal and impersonal (Gill, 2003: 39-40). Anne saw her work as "supreme fiction" (Wagner-Martin, para. 9), a way of transmuting her own private experience into a framework for the human condition. This does not contradict her "tell it true" dictum; it merely enhances it. Sexton managed to express a universal female voice only by responding to the needs of her identity, be those needs of concealment or disclosure.

In the following sections, we will be looking at the ways in which her mental illness informed her poetry in the volumes *To Bedlam And Part Way Back* (1960) and *Live or Die*

(1966). Other notable volumes from Sexton include *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) and *Love Poems* (1969).

3.3. The Psychiatric Experience

Anne Sexton's troubled history of mental illness is a familiar terrain to most of her readers and critics. Some resent her insistence on sharing the details of her psychiatric experience. One of her first mentors, John Holmes, was of the opinion that Sexton should not elaborate on her "hospital and psychiatric experiences [which seem] to me very selfish" (qtd. in Gill, 2004: 75). Fresh out of Westwood Lodge (1957) and at the suggestion of her therapist, Sexton enrolled in a poetry workshop held by Holmes. She was expecting to use poetry as a means to unfetter her mental anguish; therefore, writing poems about the madhouse seemed like natural and unavoidable recourse (qtd. in Salvio, 2007: 86), but Holmes decreed from the start: "This isn't a fit subject for poetry" (qtd. in 2007: 69). And was it? History shows us that mental illness, depression and therapy were not suitable or respectable poetry topics in the 1950s (Molesworth, 1976: 175). That is why poets like Sexton, who revealed such "unsavory" details, were either considered immensely brave or immensely self-indulgent. The 1960s and 1970s were much kinder to the emotionally irregular poets; in fact, bouts of depression became fashionable (175). At the time, though, Sexton felt quite alone in her exposure: "I was on my own" (qtd. in Salvio, 2007: 86).

Years later, critics and readers would come to accept Sexton's detailed account of the madhouse. However, they insisted that Sexton's writing should not be read exclusively through the lens of therapy, since her "poetic[s]" was "so much more than this" (Rees-Jones, 1999:296). They argued that Sexton made use of the psychiatric experience as a platform from which to question gender and femininity (296). It is true that Sexton aimed her hostility at the restrictions middle-class America placed on womanhood (Salvio, 2007: 18). She also made attempts to depersonalize and widen the scope of her poems. Diane Middlebrook states that Anne believed "an individual's pain gained meaning …through its communication to others" (Middlebrook, 1992: xxiii) and in that respect, Sexton hoped her poems would help other troubled minds.

However, the process of communicating with others is a two-way street; Sexton's pain is validated when it is imparted to another person who will, in turn, respond in a meaningful way. Nowhere is this dialogue more evident than in therapy and we would argue that Sexton did not write about her psychiatric experience solely as a pretext for social commentary, or as a way to reach her public. Therapy was for her a key to deciphering meaning. In Holmes' poetry workshop she asked other poets questions that only a psychiatrist would ask, such as where a certain poetic vision had come from, if it had originated in dreams and how old the poet had been when he or she had experienced a certain event depicted in the poem etc. (Salvio, 2007: 86). This kind of questioning she would later use in her teaching (36).

Whether one believes that there is value in Anne's psychiatric experience or not, one cannot ignore her contact with psychiatry, since it paved a path towards her poetic expression. In fact, therapy provided a format she could explore; it was not only a dialogue between two people, but an occasion to reveal and sift through feelings that were otherwise left uncharted. Consider the fact that therapy itself was, at the time, restrictive of taboo female topics and would become more inclusive only in the following decades (Convington, 1998: 15). It matters, then, that Sexton unveiled some deeply personal details in an environment that was, traditionally, not very welcoming to female discourse. The therapist, as well, should be considered an important figure in the process of self-expression, because he or she had the power to alter the discourse. Although Sexton did not always have a very positive relationship with her psychiatrists and felt dissatisfied with their understanding of her (Sexton, 1999: xxxii-xxxiii), she made a lot of progress with her most prominent therapist, Dr. Martin T. Orne.

3.3.1. The role of poetry in therapy in "**Said the Poet to the Analyst**"

Earlier in this paper we mentioned how with the help of Dr. Orne Anne reconfigured her therapy sessions by listening to their audio-recordings. This measure was necessary due to her troubling lapses in her memory. One of the poems which best encapsulates Sexton's

attitude towards forgetfulness and the creation of false memories is "**Said the Poet to the Analyst**" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960). In it, Sexton describes the rapport between a poet and a psychiatrist, and in what way they resemble and differ from each other. She acknowledges that both figures use words as their trade: "My business is words (…) Your business is watching my words" (Sexton, 1999: 12), but she attempts to show how distinctively each employs them. The poet is concerned with the ways in which poetry can create an aesthetic experience that, though not entirely genuine, *feels* genuine:

> …I work with my best, for instance,
> when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,
> that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot
> came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.
> But if you should say this is something it is not,
> Then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny
> and ridiculous and crowded with all
> the believing money. (Sexton, 1999: 12)

The speaker considers the false memory of "that one night in Nevada" just as genuine as an actual memory, and she feels threatened when reality, in the shape of the psychiatrist, barges in to let her know her story is a lie. The poet's approach to her unreliable memory is a creative one; although she feels "weak" when she is confronted with the aftermath of mental illness i.e. forgetfulness, she gains strength from the notion that poetry can turn fictitious accounts into legitimate experiences.

It is interesting to note that Sexton views words as living things which are killed by their adherence to a narrow reality: "Words are like labels,/or coins, or better, like swarming bees (…) as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,/unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings" (12). What she proposes is a reshaping of therapy that would allow for a reevaluation of truthfulness and its verbal expression. The space for such a transformation is provided by the poem, which "replicate[s] the potentially safe space of therapy, where (…) interior material might be usefully rehearsed and re-ordered" (Rose, 2009: 48).

Poetry as a form of therapy is certainly not a novelty. Notwithstanding the classical notion of catharsis elaborated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the idea of using poetry in treating mental illness dates back the nineteenth century (Mazza, 2016: 4) when psychiatric patients were encouraged to write for various hospital newspapers (4). The writing and reading of poetry is considered to be a way to derive a personal response from the patient and in cognitive behavior therapy, "poetic methods elicit memories and help create personal stories" (Mazza, 10). Sexton is aware of the therapeutic potential of poetry but aims for a more experimental view on the matter, interrogating the possibilities of truth-making while writing fiction. Poetry may allow one to organize one's experience in such a way that it echoes more truth than if one were to simply recount that experience verbatim. That is why the speaker's "one night in Nevada", though a lie, is more conducive to genuine emotion than the literal truth. Arguably, in this scenario, the "analyst" or, conversely, the reader of the poem (48), is the audience against whom Sexton rebels: "But I admit nothing" (Sexton, 1999: 12), because to "admit" and pin down the contextual truth is to diminish the emotion.

Yet, the therapist/reader is also her confidant who understands her need for subterfuge: "I confess I am only broken by the sources of things" (Sexton, 1999: 12). What does it mean that she is broken by the sources of things? One valid interpretation is that Sexton both anticipates and dreads discovering the reality behind her actions. She was, for example, terrified she might kill her own children due to her aggressive mood swings (Salvio, 2007: 112). Such a damaging realization is painful to explore in therapy without the aid of poetry. In a 1972 interview, Sexton reveals that she believed marriage and children would drive the demons away (111). But, in fact, it is poetizing such experiences that helped keep Sexton's destructive behavior at bay (Middlebrook, 1992: 79).

We might say, then, that poetry and therapy became interchangeable and interdependent in Sexton's life. It's no wonder that she wanted her words to bear the same artistic purpose in both fields. With the introduction of the audio-recordings of her sessions, however, therapy fulfilled an additional function; that of preserving her words. Sexton struggled with memorizing what she had said on previous occasions, and consequently, she also struggled with what she had meant, aesthetically or emotionally. She captures this struggle in the lines:

I must always forget how one word is able to pick
out another, to manner another, until I have got
something I might have said…
but did not. (Sexton, 1999: 12)

The reader (and the therapist) is made to feel her frustration at being unable to separate reality from fiction. Yet, there is also the implication that Sexton requires an intertwining of reality and fiction in order to survive and thrive, mentally. In such a case, as mentioned above, a false memory might prove more effective than a real one: "my hands felt funny…with all/the believing money" (12).

Of course, if poetry influences therapy, the format of therapy also influences Sexton's work: many of the poems in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* are marked by a narrative strain, staging a story or an event to pose for her confession as in "**The Kite**" and "**The Bells**". In both poems, Sexton seems to be drawn out of hiding by recalling a particular moment in time that meant something to her but which is now irretrievably lost: "Father, do you remember?"/Only the sound remains…" ("**The Kite**") (1999: 6) and "I've been waiting/ on this private stretch of summer land,/ counting these five years and wondering why." ("**The Bells**") (1999: 12). The way these poems are constructed falls back on the idea of recuperating memory, which was an essential part of therapy for the poet. Like "**Said the Poet to the Analyst**", these poems appear as a conversation with a second party who is there both to censure and to sanction. Their double nature is embedded within the act of confession itself, where power is exchanged between confessor and confessant (Foucault, 1978: 61). Hence, the poetry of therapy is a poetry of interchangeability, where the poet can assume the role of the analyst in order to motivate self-recovery, and the analyst can take on the persona of a poet so as to communicate meaningfully with the patient through creative stories and fictional memories.

3.3.2. The poetry of the clinical in "**Lullaby**"

Sexton's psychiatric experience involved therapy, but it also involved other clinical aspects, like health and medication. Poems like "**Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn**", "**Ringing the Bells**" and "**Lullaby**" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*) all describe a common routine in a mental institution; from partaking in physical exercise in an enclosed setting, to participating in group therapy or group activities and ingesting medication. We wish to focus in particular on the poem "**Lullaby**", which some critics believe to have influenced Sylvia Plath's own writing (Colburn, 1988: 68). Naturally, a great portion of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) inspired Plath's *Ariel* (1965), since the two poets dealt with similar themes (alienation, emotional instability) and seemed to have had deep knowledge of each other's writing (Colburn, 68). We will discuss the echoes and similarities between Sexton's "**Lullaby**" and Plath's "**Daddy**" in a later section of this chapter, but first we will look at "**Lullaby**" as a sample of clinical poetry or the poetry of the hospital.

The poem's main conceit is rooted in medication, namely the white sleeping pill or the "splendid pearl" (Sexton, 1999: 29) that the speaker takes each night and which prompts a series of poetic images and associations, coalescing into an allegory of slowly losing one's consciousness:

> it floats me out of myself,
> my stung skin as alien
> as a loose bolt of cloth.
> I will ignore the bed.
> I am linen on a shelf (Sexton, 29).

The descent into a dream-like state is contrasted with the mundane domestic setting of the asylum where "the yellow moths sag/against the locked screens/and the faded curtains" (29). It is a world of routine and repetition, as "The night nurse is passing/ out the evening pills" (29). Life in a hospital involves a strict timetable of activities due to the fact that the patient requires order and routine in order to recuperate (Rudnik, 2012: 72). This means that even recreational time is accounted for: "This is the TV parlor/ in the best ward at

Bedlam" (Sexton, 29), so that there is no room for patients to channel their energies destructively (Townsend, 2013: 160).

The release from this systematic ordering comes at night, in the form of the dream world that transforms the domestic setting: "and from another building/ a goat calls in his dreams" (29). It is ironic that this metamorphosis is triggered by the taking of medication, which is part of the hospital routine. One might even argue that this brief escape into unconsciousness is part of the ordered activities of asylum life. Certainly, the speaker's playful, childlike tone hides a more troubling reality, despite the fact that the imagery presented recalls, as the title of the poem suggests, a nursery rhyme:

> ….Old woolen head,
> take me like a yellow moth
> while the goat calls hush-
> a-bye. (Sexton, 1999: 29).

In the babyish enunciation of "hush-a-bye", the poet returns to the dimension of a child, to what Deldon Anne McNeely calls "an early state of fusion with the mother" (2011: 112). This regression marks a shift in identity; the psychiatric patient gives up any sense of mental and physical autonomy and depends solely on others (the night nurses who give her the pill, for example). The gradual loss of self is an underlying theme of "**Lullaby**", since the hospital and its clinical routine disrupts the familiar settings of the individual. The poem begins with the line "It is a summer evening" (Sexton, 29), but we slowly come to realize that the time and season don't actually matter because the poet has no real use for them inside the madhouse: "The yellow moths sag/against the locked screens" (29). The outside is "locked", unreachable and bears no influence on the poet. Wilma Boevink argues that the life of a psychiatric patient signifies replacing "familiar, trusted surroundings for hospital life and routine" (Rudnik, 2012: 19) and this ultimately means that one is detached from one's past self, which lies outside the institution (19).

This sense of disassociation is also captured when the speaker describes the aftermath of taking her sleeping pill: "my stung skin as alien/as a loose bolt of cloth" (1999: 29), as if

her body were a kind of anonymous husk that the mind no longer recognizes. When the poet describes the night nurse who "…walks on two erasers/ padding by us one by one" (Sexton, 29), the image brings to mind a floor being wiped clean or a blackboard being erased, hinting at the fact that each one of the patients is made and re-made daily, their identities as impossible to distinguish as "linen on a shelf" (29). One may also remark that the auditory image of the "two erasers/padding by…" (29) brings to mind a monotonous shuffle which provides a rhythmical background for the "lullaby" that Sexton is chanting. The poem hence combines a sense of alienation with the dreamlike atmosphere of infancy. It is no coincidence that a return to childhood is equated with estrangement, as children played a complicated role in Sexton's life. In the following section we will look at the ways in which "**Lullaby**" and Sylvia Plath's "**Daddy**", seem to communicate along similar linguistic patterns.

3.3.2.1. A thematic and linguistic comparison between "**Lullaby**" and "**Daddy**" by Sylvia Plath

It was inevitable that Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath should come to meet and admire each other since they were both preoccupied with a new form of poetry which gave voice to deviant expressions of femininity. They both understood what it was like to be a part of the "house-bound American women" of the time (Rosenberg, 2012, para. 15) and they attempted to tell the story of female entrapment and alienation (para. 15) while both struggling with mental illness. They also adopted a much more visceral style of writing in which an honesty of feeling guided the poetic voice. Sexton, as we have noted previously, believed that one had to "tell it true" (Sexton, 2011:2), while Plath argued that there needed to be more room in poetry for "this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience" (qtd. in Lerner, 1987: 2).

The two poets both attended Robert Lowell's poetry seminars and grew familiar with each other's work. Plath praised Sexton for her candor, remarking that "… her poems are wonderfully craftsmanlike poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting" (qtd. in Middlebrook,

1992: 105). Sexton recognized Plath's genius and deeply regretted her death, which she commemorated in the very personal "**Sylvia's Death**" from the volume *Live or Die* (1966):

> (Sylvia, Sylvia,
> where did you go
> after you wrote me
> from Devonshire
> about raising potatoes
> and keeping bees?") (Sexton, 1999: 126).

Such small details reveal the level of intimacy that the two shared in matters of day-to-day life, but Sylvia and Anne were also very much connected by an obsession with death. As Emily Rosenberg argues: "What made Anne and Sylvia stand out from their male classmates and professor was their unique, yet mutual, idea that death would make them even freer, even more insightful, than anything else they could find in life" (2012, para. 5). Indeed, this is verified in "**Sylvia's Death**" where Anne almost accuses Sylvia of escaping into a death they had so often contemplated together:

> Thief! –
> how did you crawl into,
>
> crawl down alone
> into the death I wanted so badly and for so long
>
> the death we said we both outgrew,
> the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
>
> the one we talked of so often each time
> we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston (Sexton, 1999: 126)

The aesthetic and emotional communion the two felt as women on the brink of mental breakdown translates into their early work and resonates across textual boundaries. If we

return to Sexton's previously discussed "**Lullaby**", we will remark it recalls Plath's own playful style in conveying grim circumstances in a woman's life. The mixture of "mockery and childlike vulnerability" (Colburn, 68) is encapsulated by Sexton in such lines as:

> I will ignore the bed.
> I am linen on a shelf.
> Let the others moan in secret;
> let each lost butterfly
> go home. Old woolen head,
> take me like a yellow moth
> while the goat calls hush-
> a-bye. (Sexton, 1999: 29)

One is reminded of the first stanza in Plath's "**Daddy**" (1962). The lines "I will ignore the bed/I am linen on a shelf" have a similar, chant-like quality as "You do not do, you do not do,/Anymore, black shoe" (Plath, 2001: 48). Both poems employ a concrete, inanimate object that condenses the poet's identity and becomes a "self-contained symbolic image" (Colburn, 1988:68); the sheet in Sexton's case, and the shoe in Plath's. It is also worth noting that the "sheet" features in Plath's "**Lady Lazarus**" where she too identifies herself with a piece of cloth: "My face a featureless, fine Jew linen" (Plath, 18). Some critics like Jacqueline Rose make the point that Sylvia's fraught relationship with Jewishness was influenced by Sexton's own ironic appropriation of a Semitic identity (Bloom, 2007: 32) in the poem "**My Friend, My Friend**" where she confesses that: "I think it would be better to be a Jew" (Sexton, 2000:5). This is echoed quite plainly in "**Daddy**": "I think I may well be a Jew" (Plath, 2001: 49).

While in "**Lullaby**" Sexton places herself in the fantastical atmosphere of the madhouse, Plath fantasizes about a different, more potent madhouse, the concentration camp, where she wrestles with the figure of the husband and the father: "I thought every German was you" (2001: 49). Plath considers the male principle to be the symbolic torturer, "the father [who] carries the weight, not only of guilt, but of historic memory" (Bloom, 2007: 33). After all, it is the patriarch that enacts systems of oppression and terror, and it is this

patriarch that the poet must reckon with in order to point to her own feeling of oppression. Hence, she identifies "Daddy" with an SS officer whom she irreverently describes as both a brute and a caricature: "With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook (…) Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You" (49). The tone of irreverence is a strategy Plath inherited from Sexton and she revels in it by parodying her fear of "Daddy" and slipping into childlike pantomime: "Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" (Plath, 2001: 48). The same playful, mocking tone is exhibited by Sexton's speaker when she enters a state of semi-consciousness after receiving her dose of medication: "I will ignore the bed (…) while the goat calls hush-/a-bye" (1999: 29). In both cases, the terror of estrangement is turned into a whimsical game where the female persona alternates between subjugation and rebellion.

If we were to analyze the idea of subjugation more closely, we would identify a pervasive sense of allurement in Sexton's submission to the sleeping pill. She not only likens it to an attractive "splendid pearl" (1999:29) which may act as a doubling of her own genitalia, but she also gives the pill the power to "take" her "like a yellow moth" (1999:29) with an almost male agency. Indeed, if seen in this light, "**Lullaby**" unfolds as a slow process of seduction. Such mixed feelings of morbid despair and seduction are also reflected in Plath's "**Daddy**" (Frost, 2002: 144), as she grapples with both disgust and attraction to the male principle that has subjugated her: "At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you./ I thought even the bones would do" (2001: 50), "I used to pray to recover you./ Ach, du" (48).

We may also refer to the chromatic scheme of the two poems and the contrastive effect it creates. While Sexton's speaker surrenders to the thrill of the *white* sleeping pill, which she likens to a "splendid pearl" that "floats me out of myself" (1999: 29), Plath, though initially "poor and white" (2001:48) is overwhelmed by the *black* father figure: "Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through", "You stand at the blackboard, daddy", "…the black man who/ Bit my pretty red heart in two" (Plath, 2001:48-49). The black shoe from the poem's first stanza is also a representation of the father's legacy which Plath must slowly overcome. As such, the whiteness of sheets and pills is counterpointed with the blackness of shoes and swastikas. The two "madhouses", the asylum and the concentration camp, exhibit the mind/body binary: Sexton is transported out of the body: "it

floats me out of myself" (1999:29), while Plath is buried inside it: "black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot" (2001: 48), "The tongue stuck in my jaw" (48), "The vampire who said he was you/ And drank my blood for a year" (50). Both women, thus, grapple with a sense of confinement which they attempt to overcome in the poetic landscape of fantasy.

Such connections and similarities are important to note because it gives credence to the idea that Sexton's volume, *To Bedlam and Partway Back,* marked a new aesthetic in the recording of "unsavory" female experiences and gave voice to a generation of women, including Plath herself. Such comparisons also serve to disavow John Holmes' assertion that Sexton should have removed her "madhouse" poems because they are not suitable subjects of poetry. In the following section we will look at Sexton's poetic response to Holmes' criticism.

3.3.3. The refusal to euphemize the psychiatric experience in "**For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further**"

As we mentioned earlier in the paper, one of Anne's closest mentors, John Holmes, was of the opinion that her Bedlam poems were written in bad taste and were not in fact "a fit subject for poetry" (qtd. in Salvio, 2007:69). In response to Holmes' protestations, Sexton dedicated a poem to him entitled "**For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further**", in which she explains why she cannot forego her aesthetic principles:

> And if I tried
> to give you something else,
> something outside of myself,
> you would not know
> that the worst of anyone
> can be, finally,
> an accident of hope. (Sexton, 1999: 34)

Sexton argues that without the "madhouse", she would not have found the impetus to write her poetry, and that an intrinsic part of her work is the mixture between "the worst of anyone" and "an accident of hope". One without the other cannot exist. Unless women are allowed to explore the darkest and most repellent parts of their selves, they cannot produce anything "hopeful" or good. She goes on to describe how the asylum may not have been beautiful, but "I found some order there" (34). This is surely a reference to her therapy sessions, where she managed to both record and re-arrange her thoughts and feelings. But the idea of order and "something worth learning" (34) in the "madhouse" converges with her aesthetic creed. As Stephen Colburn assesses, Sexton is willing to give up beauty ("Not that it was beautiful", as the poem begins) as a necessary aesthetic category if that means she will get at the heart of truth (1988: 93). Anne, however, understands that her mentor will be unable to find value in the world she created for herself in the hospital:

> This is something I would never find
> in a lovelier place, my dear,
> although your fear is anyone's fear,
> like an invisible veil between us all …(35)

She ultimately acknowledges that by embracing the hospital and hence, the darker parts of herself, she may estrange those around her. As a poet that fed on attention and love from her public, Sexton still does not make any compromises in regards to her "Bedlam": "I will hold my awkward bowl/with all its cracked stars shining" (34). It is this sense of almost grotesque self-involvement that Holmes could not accept in Sexton's poems, criticizing her egoism and arguing that "she writes so absolutely selfishly, of herself, to bare and shock and confess. Her motives are wrong, artistically, and finally the self-preoccupation comes to be simply damn boring" (qtd. in Middlebrook, 1992: 143). Yet Sexton acknowledges the self-centeredness and selfishness at the heart of her writing process, because for her, the experience of the asylum is a necessary isolation of the self, it is indeed a self-immersion: "it is a small thing/ to rage in your own bowl" (Sexton, 1999: 35). Mental illness, in general, traps the patient in a self-made prison, as Andrew Solomon attests in *The Noonday Demon, An Anatomy of Depression:*

> Depression at its worst is the most horrifying loneliness, and from it I learned the value of intimacy. When my mother was battling cancer, she once said, "Everything people do for me is wonderful, but it is still so awful to be alone in this body that has turned against me." It is at least as awful to be alone in a mind that has gone against you. What can you do when you see someone else trapped in his mind? (2014: 436)

"To be alone in a mind that has gone against you" echoes very well the private bowl in which Sexton had to rage and it illustrates the frustration of mental illness when the person you are truly in conflict with is yourself. Holmes called her self-preoccupation "boring", because it is meant to *be* boring: boredom and tedium are a part of coping with mental illness, since the former is often a symptom of depression (Spacks, 1999: 259). As mentioned previously in the poem "**Lullaby**", the process of recovering from mental illness is marked by repetition and routine (Rudnik, 2012: 72), for the patient must submit to a stable and organized schedule in order to be rehabilitated. The "asylum" experience would not be complete without showcasing the very literal self-preoccupation and tedium that recovery entails. In that respect, John Holmes judged Sexton's confessional account justly, because her work conceals nothing of these cruel realities. She records that in the hospital there was "something worth learning/in that narrow diary of my mind" because the madhouse does not offer a retreat from the troubled psyche, but rather, as Stephen Colburn puts it, it locks you "into the necessity of painful self-realization" (1988: 92).

It is this painful self-realization that the poet Allen Grossman praised in Sexton's poetry, recognizing the tremendous effort on her part to express "how much one had to give up in order to attain reconstitution, after a dire reduction of the self" (qtd. in Middlebrook, 1992:126). Interestingly, he thought this was not a manifestation of self-centeredness, but rather an attempt to see herself as a human being, beyond the narcissistic artistic persona (126).

The psychiatric experience is vital in understanding Sexton's beginnings and evolution. Each element – her therapy sessions, the "splendid pearl" of medication, the unglamorous "madhouse" – played an important part in determining her aesthetic

inclinations. After all, "**For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further**" may also be read as a confessional anthem (Salvio, 2007: 87).

3.4. Death and Suicide

3.4.1. The exploration of suicide in "**Wanting to Die**"

Mental illness drove Anne Sexton to the extremes of physical and emotional turmoil. She suffered from hyper-sexuality, combined with manic-depressive moods that rendered her either indifferent or angry (Salvio, 2007: 112). In other words, she was depressed for most of her life. To top it off, she was also plagued by alcoholism. It is no exaggeration to say that writing about these experiences gave her purpose and a means to survive the onslaught of mental anguish. Diane Middlebrook does not misrepresent the facts when she states that "in 1957, poetry had saved [Sexton's] life" (1992: 79) because her continuous writing throughout therapy and her commitment to poetry seminars were "essential to her well-being" (79). Sexton attempted to kill herself several times and many critics and friends claim that it is a wonder she survived as long as she did (she committed suicide in 1974). Joyce Carol Oates wrote in her journal that:

> For a suicidal person like Anne Sexton to have survived to the age of forty-five, seems to me an achievement, a triumph. Virginia Woolf, living to the age of fifty-nine, is even more extraordinary. Suicides are always judged as if they were admissions of defeat, but one can take the viewpoint that their having lived as long as they did is an accomplishment of a kind. (2007: 34)

Indeed, managing to stay alive in the face of great mental agony and resisting the very real urge to commit suicide is also extolled by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he conceives that "the leap does not represent an extreme danger…The danger, on the contrary, lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on that dizzying crest - that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge" (2012: 50). In other words, it is standing right on the *edge* of death that is more torturous and hard to bear than death itself.

This humanistic approach to suicide is best exemplified in the poem "**Wanting to Die**" (*Live or Die*, 1966) where Sexton develops a metaphysics of self-destruction:

> But suicides have a special language.
> Like carpenters they want to know *which tools.*
> They never ask *why build.* (Sexton, 1999: 142)

The reference to linguistic isolation suggests that people who commit suicide have "alternative registers of being" (McGowan, 2004: 58) and that they communicate in unorthodox ways, which are frowned upon in middle-class American society (58). Sexton seems to imply that the person committing suicide never questions the act itself ("*why build*"); once he or she is in the state of mind to do it, he or she will only care about the means of achieving self-effacement ("*which tools*"). This kind of thinking is completely alien to conventional social order, where the reality of death is either neglected or euphemized. In the poem, however, the only reality worth acknowledging is death, and ordinary life is excluded as something extraneous to the dying:

> Even then I have nothing against life.
> I know well the grass blades you mention,
> the furniture you have placed under the sun. (142)

In her emotionally stunted state, the speaker observes the outer world, but cannot understand its appeal, unless it serves to bring about a quicker dissolution. She contemplates the thrill of having the power to "…thrust all that life under your tongue!" (143). Throughout the poem, the despair of living is coupled with the seductive draw of death. The poet constructs a rhetoric of pleasure around suicide, as a "beautiful stasis that the speaker longs to achieve" (Rose, 2009: 49). Death is "on one level, a risk from which to shrink, but it is also consistently seductive" (Rose, 49) which explains the ambivalent feelings the poet experiences:

> Then the almost unnameable lust returns
> (…) Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,
> and yet she waits for me, year after year,

to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison. (Sexton, 142-143)

Death exercises an obsessive fascination on the poet, but it also represents liberation from the frail and repellant human condition. This duality is showcased in Sexton's ability to both distance herself from and associate herself with those who commit suicide. On the one hand, she seems to pity them as a placid observer (Gill, 2003: 44); on the other hand, she understands and replicates their desire to die:

Suicides have already betrayed the body.
Still-born, they don't always die,
but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet
that even children would look on and smile. (Sexton, 143)

The mention of "children" is particularly powerful if we take into account Sexton's history of abuse towards her children. In one of her sessions with Doctor Martin Orne, she confesses that her younger daughter, Linda, often inspires feelings of hatred in her because the child reflects her depression (Middlebrook, 1992: 73). Sexton adds that "any demand is too much when I'm like this. I want her to go away, and she knows it" (qtd. in Middlebrook, 73). The poet is asking to be forgiven and understood by her family, but she does this with the lucid awareness that she might never change. This lucidity is also extended to the reality of suicide. While death may function as a drug that would, ultimately, release Sexton from her mental illness, she acknowledges another side to suicide that she documents without embellishment – a clinical side which dehumanizes the body. Sexton speaks of her two attempts to commit suicide and the physical toll of hospitalization and revival:

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic.
In this way, heavy and thoughtful,
warmer than oil or water,
I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

I did not think of my body at needle point.
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone. (143)

Sexton acknowledges that, for all its appeal, the physical aspect of suicide can be quite bleak, especially if one does not die. Much like in her 'Bedlam' poems, she is unafraid of depicting the sordid aspects of the hospital bed and the physical body in its decay. Some critics argue, however, that there is also a kind of romanticism, "a belief in the tenderness and everlastingness of the moment" (Jacoby, 2000: 11) to be found in "**Wanting to Die**". Peter R. Jacoby believes that the last lines of the poem indicate a kind of continuity after death, simultaneous with the loss that suicide entails (11):

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
(…) leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook,
and the love, whatever it was, an infection. (Sexton, 143)

The use of the participle "unsaid" gives way to conjectures about what could have been "said", just as the image of the "phone off the hook" suggests that the speaker was in the middle of a conversation and, hence, a connection. (Jacoby, 2000: 11) Likewise, the act of "leaving the pages of the book carelessly open" means the subject was engaged with another spirit before interruption. These inherent binaries seem to imply that the speaker fears the separation that comes after death, the loss of connection and dialogue (11). The noun "infection" illustrates her equivocal attitude, since on the one hand, love has infected her and she is loath to let go of life, but at the same time, love has pushed her to extinction. In both cases, Sexton acknowledges that suicide is neither a shameful, selfish act, nor an ultimate triumph. The only true satisfaction to be gained from a death wish is its rendition in poetic form. Indeed, she herself remarks morbidly, but humorously that writing about suicide is a preferable alternative: "I work on it, I create it (instead of doing it)….a fine substitute!" (qtd. in Salvio 2007: 114). The poet accomplishes the dual task of humanizing suicide, while also committing it to paper as a form of exorcism.

3.4.2. Morbid obsessions in "**Imitations of Drowning**"

If Sexton built a metaphysics of suicide in "**Wanting to Die**", "**Imitations of Drowning**" (*Live or Die*, 1966), presents a metaphysics of fear. The poem posits a terrifying conclusion; that death is preferable to fear, since fear is the ultimate source of pain:

> There is no news in fear
> but in the end it's fear
> that drowns you. (Sexton, 1999: 109)

The speaker reveals that "this August I began to dream of drowning" (107), and one might be tempted to equate this with dreaming of dying, but lest there be a misunderstanding, the speaker goes on to say that "The dying/went on and on in water as white and clear/as the gin I drink each day at half-past five" (107-108). Hence, drowning is not simply death but a recurrence of death; it takes the form of a repeated suicide whose daily torment mirrors the poet's addiction to alcohol. In effect, Sexton is engaging in a self-destructive behavior she cannot control. There is a mordant irony at the core of the poem, since the reason why Sexton started this harmful pattern is because she was trying to avoid it:

> Fear
> of drowning,
> fear of being that alone,
> kept me busy making a deal
> as if I could buy
> my way out of it
> and it worked for two years… (107)

Indeed, fear of "drowning" is what, after all, causes the drowning ("but in the end it's fear/that drowns you", 109). This kind of paradox lies at the heart of mental illness, since the patient is constantly struggling against a 'vicious circle' (Mulhern, Mills, Short, 2004: 2). Sexton is aware of this Catch-22 and she mocks her own condition by employing an "attitude of sardonic anger towards herself and towards a world which will not help her" (Boyers, 1967: 70). After referring to her incessant destructive dreams, she remarks, caustically:

> Who listens to dreams? Only symbols for something –
> like money for the analyst or your mother's wig
> the arm I almost lost in the washroom wringer,
> following fear to its core, tugging the old string. (Sexton, 1999: 108)

The speaker takes exception with a superficial kind of psychoanalysis which dwells on symbolism but misses the point of real trauma. Immediately after her humorous remark, however, she attaches a violent image of mutilation "the arm I almost lost in the washroom wringer" (108). Since the previous lines rejected the idea of symbolism, the speaker wishes this image to be taken at face value. For indeed, the washing machine is a container of water, in which the poet's missing limb dives to the "core" of her fear: drowning. Such images suggest that her obsession follows her in her most mundane activities. It follows her in "Truro, drinking beer and writing checks" (Sexton, 108) and it follows her when she goes into the ocean for a swim: "they dragged me out, dribbling urine on the gritty shore" (109). The burden of mental illness is carried everywhere.

Here we should note that drowning has always been perceived as a particularly female mode of dying. From Ophelia to George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, to Hardy's Eustacia Vye and Chopin's Edna Pontellier, drowning has represented both a punitive and a liberating measure for the female character who is no longer able to live in the world due to her transgressive actions. In *Victorian Suicide* (1988), Barbara Gates remarks upon the "fallen" state of women who choose this particular method of dying: "In Victorian literature, many fallen women openly acknowledge this affinity with water" (qtd. in Gentry, 2006: 42). She goes on to say that the water is a representation of the women's own transgressions, but also of her nature:

> It was as though women drowned in their own tears, or returned to the water of the womb or, as Freud believed, were delivered of a child when they made their final retreat into water. Fallen women thus drowned in grief or in conjunction with childbearing, both of which were associated with their state and with female fluids in general (qtd. in Gentry, 41)

Hence, drowning is framed as a release from social and biological pressures, but also a return to the exclusively female world of the womb. As Elaine Showalter also theorizes, "the female body is prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears and amniotic fluid, so in drowning the woman is immersed in the feminine organic element" (qtd. in Madsen, 2000: 118). Likewise, drowning only reaffirms the irrationality of the female psyche; Showalter points out the link between madness and drowning which is exemplified by Ophelia's suicide: "even her death by drowning has associations with the feminine and the irrational, since water is the organic symbol of woman's fluidity" (qtd. in Gentry, 41). As such, one may speak of woman's regression into the pre-conscious, pre-linguistic world of the body. It is, I believe, also a regression from woman to child to embryo, a reverse annihilation, and a way to compartmentalize the morally unacceptable behavior of women. Women must dissolve in their own essence, must become like the sea foam that Hans Christian Andersen's tragic mermaid comes to embody.

Such a death has also been aestheticized and romanticized by male artists (Gentry, 41); think only of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings "Found Drowned" by George Frederic Watts or John Everett Millay's "Ophelia" (41). There is also the image of Edgar Allan Poe's darling Annie "drowned in a bath" (Poe, 2014: 473). In contrast, Sexton's drive towards drowning has to do with the very unromantic aspects of mental disorder. Her "madness" is not rendered romantic, like Ophelia's submissive leap to perdition. Rather, her death drive is expressed by the unalienable physicality of the body; the woman does not become sea foam, nor is she released back into the womb. Instead:

> I swam - but the tide came in like ten thousand orgasms.
> I swam - but the waves were higher than horses' necks.
> I was shut up in that closet, until, biting the door,
> they dragged me out, dribbling urine on the gritty shore (Sexton, 109).

The imagery of drowning is violent and abject; the water is a "closet" of human waste (fecal and urine) and of unsavory fluids. Paula M. Salvio believes that the "closet" may also refer to sexual abuse (2007: 103), the memory of which is triggered by the unforgiving confines of water. In opposition to Showalter's enumeration of "blood, milk, tears" which is

specifically female, Sexton disturbs the text with the idea of female ejaculation which, far from being a symbol of death, is an affirmation of life, of the body struggling to get to shore. The traditional kinship between woman and water is deconstructed, particularly its supposed inevitability. The poet strips drowning of its passive female attributes, framing it as a brutal *expulsion from* rather than a *return to* the womb:

> …real drowning is for someone else. It's too big
> to put in your mouth on purpose, it puts hot stingers,
> in your tongue and vomit in your nose as your lungs break.
> Tossed like a wet dog by that juggler, you die awake. (Sexton, 1999: 108)

As such, the poet's dreams of drowning are not a form of release from the suicidal impulse; they do not provide her with an easy solution, but rather remind her of the trappings of mental disorder. Literal drowning is not Sexton's true fear, although she does a good job of rendering its sordid details without affectation. Rather, it is the *idea* of drowning in her dreams that plagues her, because it is not final, because it is repetitive. It is only, as the title of the poem puts it, an "imitation". The dream world allows for the subject to return to its confines and experience death again and again without a final release. The poet is fooled into thinking: "death, that old butcher, will bother me no more" (108). But every time she wakes up, she realizes that she will have to "die" again the following night. Such is the burden of mental illness. The reality of depression engenders a pattern of fear, which the speaker describes as "a motor,/ [which] pumps me around and around/until I fade slowly/and the crowd laughs" (108). Not only is her anguish made repetitive, but it is also rendered ridiculous. Yet *she* cannot make fun of it, as she has to live through it and find meaning in it. The poet describes herself as "an ant in a pot of chocolate" (109), an absurd image that perfectly encapsulates the unmerciful and unsympathetic condition of living with her mania.

The poem, thus, attempts to showcase the complexities and contradictions inherent to mental illness. The repetitive image of drowning replicates the cycle of self-abuse that a mental patient regularly experiences. However, Sexton represents drowning as a form of violence performed against the body, an unromantic expression of torment. Whether Sexton reveals too much or too little in the poem, we are confronted with an unglamorous and

unapologetic portrayal of mental illness. Sexton's lucidity and self-irony reveal a poet who finds control and comfort in her craft and who, without poetry, would fare much worse.

3.4.3. Self-medication in "**The Addict**"

The poem "**The Addict**" from the volume *Live or Die* (1966) evokes the painful and at the same time pleasurable ritual of staying alive with the help of medication. The poem houses a central ambiguity at its core since we do not know whether the pills prevent or accentuate the drive towards suicide, but Sexton plays with the unsavory aspects of self-medication to give us a non-conventional portrayal of mental illness. The speaker's playful tone, reminiscent of the poem "**Lullaby**", mocks the effort to stay alive: "Don't they know that I promised to die!/ I'm keeping in practice. /I'm merely staying in shape./ The pills are a mother, but better/ every color and as good as sour balls./ I'm on a diet from death" (Sexton, 1999: 165). On the one hand, the poet parodies the culture of dieting which promotes well-being and positive attitudes and suggests that she is applying the same positive attitude to suicide. The poet is killing herself in increments, practicing a kind of sport: "Yes/ I try/ to kill myself in small amounts/ an innocuous occupation (…) like any other sport/ it's full of rules" (165). The speaker mocks the American attitude towards success by associating it with her cheerful ambition to kill herself: "It's like a musical tennis match where/ my mouth keeps catching the ball" (165). Such absurd, almost grotesque imagery suggests that in the American mentality, even death becomes a sport, a goal to strive towards.

On the other hand, the poet describes the pills as having a domestic purpose, embodying the nurturing mother who soothes and comforts the child: "the pills are a mother, but better" (165). The pills feed the speaker and tuck her into bed, all under the guise of a nursery rhyme:

> What a lay me down this is
> with two pink, two orange,
> two green, two white goodnights.
> Fee-fi-fo-fum-

Now I'm borrowed.
Now I'm numb (Sexton, 166)

As in "**Lullaby**", the poet is rendered a helpless child, yet her tongue-in-cheek attitude makes the role-playing ironic and self-conscious. Much like in her volume *Transformations* (1971), Sexton plays with fairy-tale motifs to underline the gap between reality and fantasy. In this instance, she imitates the hungry call of the Giant from the tale "Jack and the Beanstalk". Upon seeing the human prey, the Giant cries, "fee-fi-fo-fum" which is not just a string of senseless sounds. In fact, Charles Mackay argues that in Old Gaelic, the cry roughly translates as "Behold food, good to eat, sufficient for my hunger!" (2009: 160). He further makes the case that "Jack and the Beanstalk" was actually a dramatization of late tensions between the "Keltic population" and the Saxon invaders (160). Thus, the Giant stands for the Celtic rebel fighting off Jack, the would-be conqueror. Given this interpretation, it is interesting to note that the poet embodies the Giant who cries out against the Saxon – Sexton. That is to say, the poet is rebelling against herself, against her worst instincts which are trying to "conquer" her. She hungrily consumes and is consumed by herself and her addiction. This vicious cycle is documented with ironic lucidity, but it also poses the question of whether the addiction can be avoided. Does the condition of being "borrowed" and "numb" represent a slow annihilation or is it actually a way to quiet her destructive impulses? When people call her an addict, Sexton retaliates: "and now they say I'm an addict./ Now they ask why./Why!" (165). The question is rhetorical because the poet knows that self-medication is unavoidable; she must take the pills in order to soothe the anguish caused by mental illness (that is why the pills are a mother, after all). She must become "numb" in order to be able to function in society. At the same time, the pills cause addiction which can be just as destructive as her suicidal impulses. As the poet discloses,

My supply
of tablets
has got to last for years and years.
I like them more than I like me.
It's a kind of marriage.

It's a kind of war where I plant bombs inside
of myself (165)

There is a feeling of co-dependency between her and the pills, a sense that she cannot part with them, yet she cannot live with them peacefully. The poet likens the symbiotic relationship to a "marriage" and a "war", embodying the best and worst of human connections (Colburn, 1988: 237). She comes to associate the pills with herself, while becoming increasingly alienated from the real world. This alienation takes the form of ritual. As Colburn points out, Sexton's idea of death is ritualized; she tries to "impose an order on events" (237) and thereby make sense of her destructive impulses:

I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
eating my eight loaves in a row
and in a certain order as in
the laying on of hands
or the black sacrament

(…)

Then I lie on; my altar
elevated by the eight chemical kisses (1999: 165-166)

These rituals mock liturgical sacraments, but also earnestly emulate them, because the poet desires genuine spiritual elevation. As Colburn points out, the ceremony conjures the unfulfilled desires: "self-acceptance, "I like them more than they like me", maturity, "I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie" and a sense of love and sacramental order" (1988: 237). The pills represent the potential for the poet to take responsibility for her life, but the addiction parodies her attempts. In fact, since the pills are a way of dying "in small amounts" (Sexton, 165), they parody suicide itself (Colburn, 237). The poet is trapped in an absurd paradox; the only way to get affirmation and escape her addiction is by taking the last step and killing herself, whereas the purpose of the pills is to prevent her from committing suicide. Sexton chooses to describe this violent cycle of self-abuse in darkly humorous terms, showcasing a sardonic self-awareness. She both invites and dismisses the reader's judgment:

"But remember I don't make too much noise. /And frankly no one has to lug me out/ and I don't stand there in my winding sheet" (165). She knowingly winks at us because she knows that we are repelled by the unsavory aspects of substance abuse, but she also acknowledges addiction as being part of her ever evolving self: "I'm becoming something of a chemical/mixture/ that's it!" (165). Sexton is not just writing about her addiction to pills; she gives us insight into *who* she has become, into how she is transformed due to her fraught relationship with addiction. In effect, she humanizes the addict and gives him a voice: her voice. Addiction is not simply a selfish impulse; it is often a struggle, a lack of choice, a transformative experience and a personal drama. Sexton also aesthetically transforms her suicidal impulses into a desire for self-affirmation. As Colburn asserts, "the hunger for death in Anne Sexton's poems is equally a hunger for meaningful life, for choice, and for affirmation" (237).

Without fail, Anne Sexton relocates mental illness from the position of marginality it occupies in society to the foreground of her poetic work. Her "Bedlam" poems, which appeared only a year before Foucault's famous *Madness and Civilization* (1961), illustrate the French philosopher's idea about the inherent fear society experiences when faced with disorder and insanity. Sexton should be lauded for "sticking to her guns" in a time when female madness was not meant to be discussed.

Chapter Four: Adrienne Rich and Sexual Orientation

4.1. A Brief Introduction to Queer Theory

> …besides, I wasn't queer; I simply understood (nailing a lie in my own education) how being queer might have its consolations. (…) Between skin and skin there is only light. (Fowles, 1997: 57)

The words above belong to Nicholas, the protagonist of John Fowles' *The Magus*, who, upon finding himself on the island of Phraxos with no female partners, discloses to the reader that he is tempted by the opposite sex. He confesses that he suffers "Gide-like" moments during which he enjoys the love of men solely because there are no women available. From the beginning, his view of queerness is a property in absentia. It is defined by what it lacks (the female agent), rather than what it affords. At the same time, Nicholas grants that "being queer" allows for intimacy, but it is strictly an anonymous kind: "between skin and skin there is only light" (57). The bodies are divested of identity and reduced to what they can offer on a physical level. This state of being may even have "its consolations". From this point of view, queerness becomes an opportunity for the self to renounce its personhood, to erase its boundaries. In the act of "queer" love, Nicholas becomes only skin.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, the idea of a permeable self is no stranger to the act of confession. In fact, it bears repeating that confession facilitates the opening up of identity, exploring the gap between "you" and "I" (Brooks, 2000: 95), and as such, it is an act which may take on "queer" valences. To understand this better, we must try and define what it means to be "queer" and to what degree this affects the expression of a coherent self. The word "queer" carries with it a history of conflicting valences. Its etymology stems from the Old High German *twerh* which means "oblique" (Etymonline, para. 1), but its older roots are found in the Proto-Indo European particle *terkw-* which aptly means "to twist" (para. 1). Both meanings give us an idea of divergence; to "queer" is to render something askance, to bend it out of shape. In modern English, "queer" used to mean that something or someone was "strange" or "eccentric", but in time, the adjective became charged with both negative and

positive connotations. Nikki Sullivan points out in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* that "queer" refers to "negative characteristics (such as madness or worthlessness) that one associates with others and not with the self" (2003: v). This is partly why "queer" came to be used as a disparaging term for homosexuality. At the same time, to be "queer" was employed by communities as a term of empowerment, as a way "to denote one's difference, one's 'strangeness' positively" (Sullivan, v).

In a broad sense, queerness points to ways of knowing and being that do not accord with hegemonic practices. Queerness is an umbrella term that offers shelter for various modes of existence, ranging from the homosexual, to the physically disabled. Annamaria Jagose describes it as "resisting the model of stability" (1996: 3), whether that stability entails gender, sexual desire or biological essentialism (3). Narrowing down the scope of queerness and queer theory is difficult, however, because to fully define the "Queer" is to miss its point and "risk domesticating it and fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself" (1996: 2). Nikki Sullivan also remarks that queer theory is "a discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a discipline with a difference" (2003: v). Certainly the field itself may be mapped, but its range and methods are constantly being renewed and questioned (2). The continuous reworking of what it means to be queer mirrors the plight of identity itself.

To explain why queerness and identity are so heavily interlinked, we must return to Michel Foucault and his *History of Sexuality* (1978) where he delineates the evolution of sexual practices and how they became emblematic for individual formation. Foucault draws attention to the "discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (1978: 38), whose institutions codified and controlled intercourse between husband and wife, while also scrutinizing the sexuality of "children, mad men and women, and criminals, the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex" (1978: 38). The strict observation of certain groups in society had the practical purpose of cataloguing them as either normal or deviant based on their behavior. Certain acts came to define the person as a whole, and often reduced him or her to a *type* with a case history:

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an

> indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature (Foucault, 1978: 43)

In other words, homosexuality was no longer a sexual practice for the man but his whole identity, ingrained in every aspect of his being, definitive for his character and behavior. As Foucault remarks, it gave him away in face and body. This level of epitomizing became part of a legal system which condemned one's identity rather than one's actions. Naturally, such a view of identity put a strain on the evolution of personhood. If some selves are criminalized and easily disparaged, then the idea of a self itself becomes fraught with contradictions. As we have seen above, it was the "discursive explosion" of the age which brought about this transformation and gave institutions the power to define the individual. Identity and sexuality are "discursively produced" and are constituted "in historically and culturally specific ways" (Sullivan, 2003: 2). As was already stated in Chapter 1, when one defines oneself as anything, one is always aware of how that identity is defined by others. In discussing Sheila Rowbotham's groundbreaking book, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973), Susan Stanford Friedman points to the construction of womanhood as part of the hegemonic discourse: "a woman cannot… experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined *as woman*, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture" (Smith, Watson, 1998: 75). In the same vein, the "cultural categories Man, White, Christian and Heterosexual in Western societies, for example, are as significant for a man of the dominant group as they are for a woman at the margins of culture" (75). Our identities are formed in context and on the basis of the chosen discourse of power systems and hierarchies.

The theoretical argument put forward is that the framing of sexual orientation is cultural and hegemonic, with an aim to domesticate untoward desire. This is not to say that gay and lesbian identity is simply a matter of choice, but rather that the dominant discourses control the way in which such categories are delineated and defined. Judith Butler explains in

"Imitation and Gender Insubordination" that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes" (qtd. in Fuss, 2013: 13) in order to normalize the subject or make him or her stand out. Butler goes on to say that, as a self-confirmed lesbian, she would like for her identity to be a point of imprecision rather than clear designation: "This is not to say I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies" (qtd. in Fuss, 14). Butler wishes for the sign to remain unclear because the label of "lesbian" may often reduce the scope of her identity. She writes that:

> To claim that this is what I am is to suggest a provisional totalization of this "I". But if the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself (…) In the act which would disclose the true and full content of that "I", a certain radical *concealment* is thereby produced (15).

Hence, we return to the issue of the instability of identity and how designation may often deprive the self from other possible selves which must remain hidden. Butler argues that "invoking the lesbian-signifier" (qtd. in Fuss, 15) leads to other signifiers which are excluded from verbalization but which still destabilize the act of identification. Namely, if I call myself a lesbian and stop there, some aspects of (queer) desire are inevitably suspended for the sake of affirmation. Butler likens the idea to a second "closet", using the "coming out" imagery to make her point: "If I claim to be a lesbian, I "come out" only to produce a new and different "closet". The "you" to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity" (qtd. in Fuss, 15). The interlocutor, therefore, becomes aware of a new space of identification, in the detriment of other spaces. Here we may recall our previous discussion on the act of confession in Chapter 1, dwelling particularly on Foucault's observation that the individual must always confess to what he or she desires in order to be sanctioned by society. The confession, "I am a lesbian", may, in effect, act as a self-disciplining act, ensuring that the woman's desires can be categorized.

From a performative point of view, the issue becomes even more complicated. As Butler confirms, "gender is…a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit

collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions…" (1990: 140). If we perform "femininity" or "masculinity" as a cultural category, then our desire is not directed at gender, but at something *outside* of it. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud claims that "all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious" (qtd in Hall, Jagose, 2012: 152). What interests us is whether the "object-choice" is conditioned by gender. As Tim Dean explains in his essay, "Lacan Meets Queer Theory", an individual's sexuality calls attention not only to his or her desire, but also to his or her gender: "the issue of one's sexuality tends to be taken as referring not only to the putative gender of one's object-choice but also to one's own gender identity, one's masculinity or femininity" (2000: 220). Yet if these are "cultural fictions", as Butler mentioned previously, do we then desire the *performance* of desire? Must our sexuality be intrinsically connected with our gender? Tim Dean would suggest that sexuality is not restricted solely to the cultural domain and it may be likened to the unconscious which, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is neither part of the body nor is culturally constructed (2000: 221). This would denote that desire transcends categories of gender and that the "object-choice" is neither "feminine" nor "masculine".

Such issues of gender and sexuality complicate the conversation around queer identity, which is what is intended. The queer self cannot be rendered *straight*-forward due to the tensions and possibilities that it invokes. Eve Sedgwick best encapsulates the matter in stating that "Queer" refers to:

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically (1993: 8)

Hence, one cannot speak of a monolithic view on gender or sexuality, but rather a queer plurality, a multiplicity of meaning. Tim Dean arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that desire, in Lacanian terminology, is not simply expressed by the lack of a fixed subject (2000: 247), but rather by the *excess* of fixed subjects (249). To wit, we desire multiple manifestations of subjects that go beyond the affixations of gender and sexual orientation. Or

to quote Guy Hocquenghem, "desire merges in a multiple form, whose components are only divisible *a posteriori*, according to how we manipulate it" (qtd. in Dean, 2000: 249).

Given that gender, sexual orientation and desire present themselves in multiple and complicated variants, we will dwell in this chapter on *one* manifestation of lesbian identity, that of the poet Adrienne Rich, whose work both in prose and poetry often lingers on the marginal position of the lesbian woman and the reality that she is often omitted from the dominant discourse, even within the sphere of feminism. Employing the confessional instruments used in previous chapters, we will look at Rich's complicated relationship with her sexuality and gender.

4.2. Relevant Biographical Notes

> …today, much poetry by women – and prose for that matter – is charged with anger. I think we need to go through that anger, and we will betray our own reality if we try (…) for an objectivity, a detachment (Rich, 1995: 48-49)

In her 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", Adrienne Rich claims we would "betray our own reality" if we ignored the anger of the poet. Striving for poetic detachment is not only doomed to fail, but *should* be doomed to fail, because it would falsify and displace the poetry of women. Rich's engagement with reality forms much of the ethos of her work. Her evolution as a poet led her to understand that the political was not external to her, but rather inward, "the essence of my condition" (1995: 44), as she confides.

Rich matured in an age of change and unrest. Born in 1929 as Adrienne Cecil Rich, the young woman would become witness to a century of socio-political transformations that left a deep mark on her identity. In a 2001 interview with Magdalena Edwards, she recalled that the Sixties were a period "when the most intense life was lived around politics —the Black Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, very large moral questions were in the air, along with a great deal of hope" (Edwards, para. 9). This environment, she confessed, pushed her "beyond the conventions of formalism" (para. 9). And indeed,

formalism made up a large part of her early intellectual upbringing and shaped her first poetic attempts. Her first volume of poetry, *A Change of World* (1951), earned her the Yale Younger Poets Award precisely because it was "exact and decorous" (Poetry Foundation, para. 1). Rich confessed that her early years were heavily influenced by the literary movement known as New Criticism (previously discussed in Chapter 1), which confined her to strict principles and an idealized view of the poet's power:

> I still believed that poets were inspired by some transcendent authority and spoke from some extraordinary height. I thought the capacity to hook syllables together in a way that heated the blood was a sign of a universal vision (…) I came into my twenties believing in poetry, in all art, as the expression of a higher world view" (Rich, 1994: 170).

This high-minded and almost religious view of poetry was fostered by her complicated relationship with her father, Arnold Rich, "a renowned pathologist and professor at John Hopkins" (Poetry Foundation, para. 3). Rich describes her early childhood bathed in an aura of privileged male intellectualism. In the essay "It Is the Lesbian in Us…" (1976), she talks about being taken away from the gynocentric world of the women who cared for her as a child and submitted to "the judgement and disposition of my father and my father's culture: white and male" (1995: 198). Rich began her education by immersing herself in her father's world: "My father's library I felt as the source and site of his power" (199) and more often than not, this library contained the male-curated Western Canon of "Plutarch (…) Ovid and Spinoza, Swinburne and Emerson" (199).

Little by little, however, the young woman came to realize that poetry was not a "gender-neutral - realm" because there was such a "dissonance" between her personal experiences and the universality of experience claimed by the "masculine paradigm" (Rich, 1994: 175). Being born a woman meant a "perpetual translation and an unconscious fragmentation of identity: woman from poet" (175). There is a wealth of difference between the volume *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), which was written during her marriage and incipient motherhood, and the later volumes *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Leaflets* (1969) which revealed a new awareness of the political stakes involved in the

making of female identity. Rich confessed that she "came into" the Women's Liberation movement in 1970 (1994: vii) because she was seeking the "solidarity and empowering of women" (vii). As Rich herself claimed, the experience of motherhood "radicalized" her (Poetry Foundation, para. 3) and there were few outlets for her newfound perspective on womanhood.

During a crumbling marriage and a difficult time navigating the dual task of poet and mother, Rich found comfort in the company of other women and in the active exercise of voicing her experiences as part of a group. This feminist technique by the name of "Consciousness Raising" impacted Rich due to its confessional nature (1994: viii); it placed "emphasis on each woman's individual testimony" (viii) while also identifying the testimony as political and part of the mainstream discourse. In effect, women revealed their private concerns as part of group discussions and in doing so they realized that certain problems were recurrent and recognizable as part of oppressive social structures (Cameron, 1992: 7). In this way, they became "conscious" of the fact that private matters actually impacted women on a larger scale. Hence, the personal became political. This would go on to become a crucial theme in Adrienne Rich's poetry and the tension between the two spheres would compel her to examine why the political was often removed from poetry.

Starting with the volume *Diving Into the Wreck* (1973) and its eponymous poem, Rich commits herself to this theme and performs a metaphoric "diving" into the unseen and unexplored world of "damage":

> I came to explore the wreck.
> The words are purposes.
> The words are maps.
> I came to see the damage that was done
> and the treasures that prevail.
>
> (…)

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth (Rich, 2002: 102)

The poet seeks a re-discovery of reality through language, particularly the kind of reality which has been obscured and relegated to the bottom of the ocean. Simply by naming the wreck, the speaker gives it a geography; she unearths it and finds the "treasures that prevail" (101). It is notable that the poet does not seek the narrative, but rather the reality behind the narrative, the political behind the abstract. In her review of *Diving into the Wreck,* Margaret Atwood considers that the reality Rich wishes to demythologize is that of gender and the arbitrary differences between men and women (Cooper, 2002: 238). The exploration of gender inevitably leads to a re-examination of the self (238) and this interpretation seems to be confirmed by the lines:

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he (Rich, 2002: 103)

The interchangeability of gender is expressed through the motif of the siren whose identity is somewhere between "she" and "he". On the one hand, this may signify the multiplicity of female identity: according to Jane Vanderbosch, the androgynous aspect of the mermaid/merman points to the fact that women themselves are androgynous because "they have had to learn the male in order to survive in the patriarchal world and to retain the female in order to exist as women" (2002: 113). On the other hand, the image of the mermaid/merman circling and diving into the hidden depths calls to mind the circularity and slipperiness of identity. The oceanic creature transcends binaries and is ultimately a "queer" manifestation, pushing past the limits of selfhood and choosing to identify with a vast and plural "we": "we are the half-destroyed instruments/that once held to a course/ the water-

eaten log/ the fouled compass/ We are, I am, you are" (103). The gendered pronouns "she" and "he" become the un-gendered pronouns "we", "I" and "you" because a gendered identity cannot encompass the multiplication and dislocation of selves. In other words, plurality is a manifestation of new identities (the woman who absorbs the male), but it is also a manifestation of *loss* of identity, given that some '*I*'s and '*you*'s have been forcibly removed or hidden underneath the metaphorical "wreck" and must be recovered.

The poet's acknowledgement of the fragmented self is, in Ann Keniston's opinion, a *post*-confessional feature. In her essay, "'To feel with a human stranger': Adrienne Rich's Post-Holocaust Confession and the Limits of Identification", Keniston argues that the poet grapples with the dissolution of personhood in the face of historical horrors. Her poems reflect the pitfalls and anxieties of subjectivity by way of a "fragmented, resistant confession" (2006: 51). The confession is "resistant" because cataclysmic historical events like the Holocaust reveal the "difficulties of personal disclosure" (57) and the inevitable gap between a "you" and "I" which, though united by identity, are divided by experience. Such is the case in the poem "**In Those Years**", from the volume *Dark Fields of The Republic* (1995):

> In those years, people will say, we lost track
> of the meaning of we, of you
> we found ourselves
> reduced to I
> and the whole thing became
> silly, ironic, terrible:
> we were trying to live a personal life
> and yes, that was the only life
> we could bear witness to
>
> But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
> into our personal weather
> They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove

along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I (Rich, 2002: 253-254)

Rich describes the painful process of trying to "live a personal life" (254) and ultimately failing because truly embracing the personal requires more than being "reduced to I" (254). The focus on one's own identity becomes "silly, ironic, terrible" (254) if one disregards the painful realities of other Selves, other "I"s. As Keniston argues, we cannot isolate ourselves from history, and trying to do so will only ensure that we are "caught in the solipsistic act of bearing witness to [our] own lives for [ourselves] alone" (2006: 57). As it was previously mentioned in Chapter 1, to confess is not a solitary act; it requires at least two parties for the act to have meaning. What Rich seems to suggest in the poem is that the intimacy of confession has been invaded by the "dark birds of history" (2002: 254) and as such, we must acknowledge the failures of miscommunication and most of all, we must acknowledge the intrusion of the outside: the political context. The bond between "I" and "you" can only be recovered by acknowledging the rupture caused by history. Operating in a post-confessional key, Rich wishes thus to unite the political and the personal because, as she confesses in the essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971):

> I think I began […] to feel that politics was not something "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition." (1995: 44)

As a poet and a mother of three children, Rich often considered herself a "failed woman and a failed poet" (1995: 42) who had lost sense of her destiny and her own will (42-43) because there was a privacy and a narrowness to her domestic life that did not allow her creativity to take its course: "Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage" (1995: 42). More than that, "to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way [was] in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination" (43). What Rich called "the essence of her condition" (44) - a social manifestation of patriarchy - influenced her potential as an artist. The private and public were interlinked by the very notion of womanhood. The great political upheavals of the time also took place outside the family boundaries and were solved with expertise by "the masculine world" (44), but Rich argues that she needed to think for herself

about "pacifism and dissent and violence, about poetry and society, and about my own relationship to all these things" (44). What Rich is seeking through poetry, as she reveals in the Foreword to the anthology *The Fact of a Doorframe* (2002), is a way to connect and relate, as she quotes from the poem "**Origins and History of Consciousness"**: "the drive to connect./The dream of a common language" (qtd. in 2002: xvi). The poet speaks of language as "an instrument for connection instead of dominance and apartheid: toward what Edouard Glissant has wonderfully called "the poetics of relation" " (xvi). The poetic ethos of uniting and converging disparate elements such as the personal and the political would be fostered in volumes like *A Common Language* (1978), *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) and many others. Along with poetry, Adrienne Rich has written countless essays on the difficulties of being a female poet and the political nature of poetry itself in volumes like *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1986), *On Lies, Secrets, And Silence* (1979), *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society* (2009) and many more.

In the attempt to maintain the connection that she referred to in "**Origins and History of Consciousness**", Rich constantly adapted her poems to not only the passing of time but also the evolution of the Self. As Judith McDaniel also confirms: "the will to change dramatically distinguishes the career of Adrienne Rich from many contemporary artists" (2002: 3). The poet began her work in a traditional form, adhering to the tenets of New Criticism, and evolved to incorporate radical notions of power, politics and womanhood that distinguished her from her peers. Perhaps it is this will to change that also mystifies her detractors. Rich uncompromisingly shifted and enlarged her subjects, so much so that critics like William Logan felt that she had bitten off more than she could chew. In 1987, Logan wrote that: "One senses in her the wish to integrate the realms of her experience – poetry and politics, art and activism. The more she tries to fuse them, however, the more deeply they remain divided" (qtd. in Williams, 2012, para. 2). Yet, it is exactly the tension within this division that characterizes Rich's poetry. We intend to enter that division and question whether there is meaning in the attempt to integrate "poetry and politics, art and activism", particularly through a confessional lens.

Though Rich famously rejected the National Medal of Arts in 1997 due to her political beliefs (Poetry Foundation, para. 2), she has received countless awards testifying to

the importance and influence of her work, such as the Ruth Lily Poetry Prize, the Academy of American Poets Fellowship and the National Book Award. Her death in 2012 leaves behind an intellectual and poetic legacy that still has echo today.

4.2.1. Adrienne Rich and "Compulsory Heterosexuality"

There is a particular moment in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel, *Vanity Fair,* which alerts the reader as to the nature of the friendship between Rebecca Sharp and her wealthy but naïve companion, Amelia Sedley. The narrator comments upon the fact that Amelia only grows to admire and appreciate Rebecca after the two of them leave school. The narrator adds that

> the affection of young ladies is of as rapid growth as Jack's beanstalk, and reaches up to the sky in a night. It is no blame to them that after marriage *this Sehnuscht nach der Liebe* subsides. It is what sentimentalists, who deal in *very* big words, call a yearning after the Ideal, and simply means that women are commonly not satisfied until they have husbands and children on whom they may centre affections, which are spent elsewhere, as it were, in small change (Thackeray, 2011: 41-42).

The passage suggests that women become fond of each other so quickly because they actually seek the "Ideal", the husband. They spend their affection "elsewhere", embellishing their friendships to compensate for the absence of a partner. Satisfaction only comes with the "Ideal", which is always male. As such, relationships between women can only ever be incomplete and superficial. In other words, a female companion is only a temporary and deficient replacement for a male partner. This phallocentric view of interrelations was examined and criticized by Adrienne Rich, who wrote extensively on the supremacy given to male-female relations to the detriment of any other forms of attachment. In her seminal essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Rich outlines the reasons why the potential for women to explore their queer desires was undermined by the assumption that, regardless of context, "women would [always] *choose* heterosexual

coupling and marriage" (1994: 28). In effect, Rich argues that women are conditioned from a young age to accept heterosexuality as the only possible given of expressing desire (1994: 46), while also making sure to prevent and punish "women's coupling or allying in independent groups with other women" (33). The coined phrase, "compulsory heterosexuality", refers to a set of practices which are enforced by systems of power with the express purpose of redirecting "women's emotional and erotic energies away from themselves and other women and from woman-identified values" (35). Rich is particularly interested in this redirection of energy as it often engenders the complete erasure of lesbian identity.

Indeed, historically, women who have shown an inclination towards other women have been punished for "acting like a man" (Sullivan, 2003: 3) as in the case of Katherina Hetzeldorfer, a German woman who, in 1477, was accused of having an affair with a female housemate and of behaving like a husband (3). She was drowned for what was labeled a "crime against nature" (3), but it suggests that the crime was that of impersonating a man rather than being a lesbian (3). This means that, more often than not, the punishment for queer women was complete erasure from history. As Rich herself posits, the marginality of lesbian women is reflected in the lack of literature on the subject, particularly in fields like psychoanalysis (1994: 30). More than that, women from various cultures felt that by rejecting a heterosexual destiny they were "the "only ones" ever to have done so" (Rich, 1994: 32) because there were few opportunities of visibility and community. A lack of a lesbian community was also felt at the very heart of the feminist movement. Early second-wave feminism was reluctant to accept the deviant forms of femininity exhibited by lesbianism and oftentimes, it shunned or considered its lesbian members to be a "hindrance to the movement" (Sullivan, 2003: 32) because they "undermined the credibility of feminism" (32). Even Betty Friedan labeled lesbian women as the "lavender menace" (32), a coinage which would later become the name of one of the first radical lesbian liberation groups in the 1970s (33). The objective of such liberation groups was to found an identity "with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men" (qtd. in Sullivan, 33).

A similar sentiment was echoed by Rich who believed that there was a scarcity of feminist thought dedicated to lesbianism and that, in fact, the movement was "weakened" by

treating lesbian existence as marginal and inferior (1994: 27). Here, however, we stumble upon several problems regarding the term "lesbian". For Adrienne Rich, lesbianism was not merely a sexual preference, or "the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations" (27), but rather something of a deeper and more political nature. To convey this idea, she makes use of the phrase "lesbian continuum" which refers to "a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (1994: 51). In other words, a "lesbian existence" (51), which is integrated within a lesbian continuum transcends notions of sexual preference and relies more on recovering the gynocentric world that has been erased by compulsory heterosexuality (51). The notion of lesbianism divorced of its sexual aspect was also put forward by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists who in 1979 wrote a paper purporting that all feminists should subscribe to "political lesbianism" (Sullivan, 2003: 33), by which lesbianism is understood as a political position rather than a sexual identity (33).

This raises several questions regarding lesbian identity and whether it can do away with sexuality altogether. Bonnie Zimmerman argues in "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism" (1981) that to widen the scope of lesbianism to include any kind of female-centered experience is to risk: "blurring the distinctions between lesbian relationships and non-lesbian female friendships, or between lesbian identity and female-centered identity" (1991: 121). What Zimmerman points out is that in the attempt to map out a female identity which is removed from the phallocentric paradigm, we end up erasing lesbian identity altogether and in doing so, reinforcing heterosexuality as the only viable *sexual* orientation for women. Indeed, by claiming, as Jill Johnston of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists did, that "lesbians are feminists not homosexuals" (qtd. in Sullivan, 2003: 33), we make the mistake of eliminating the existence of (queer) desire between women and as such, we are made guilty of policing their sexuality in the same manner as heterosexual conservatives (33).

The multi-faceted discussion about what it means to be a "lesbian" had more personal urgency for Adrienne Rich who, though having engaged in heterosexual relationships in the past came out as a lesbian in a later stage of her life. For it was not just the experience of

motherhood that radicalized Rich as a poet and a feminist, but also the discovery that marriage to a man was not the fullest expression of her being; that in fact, heterosexuality had stifled a part of her identity. The gynocentric world of her childhood and the love for other women would be rediscovered by the poet after her separation from her husband in 1970. From that point on, the question of what it is to be a lesbian would haunt much of Rich's prose and poetry and the erotic component of being queer would equally concern the poet in her attempt to understand herself. While Rich did advocate a broadening of the term "lesbian", which would transcend sexual inclinations, she considered that the erotic was an essential and often misconceived part of woman-centered experiences:

> As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself (1994: 53)

Rich also quotes Audre Lorde in her belief that the erotic can be extended to "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic" (qtd. in Rich, 1994: 53), a joy which "makes us less willing to accept powerlessness (…) resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (qtd. in Rich, 53). Thus, the erotic is both personal and political, both a means of self-fulfillment and a tool against oppression. Of course, bridging the personal and the political is part of Rich's poetic creed and as such, she tackles the complicated intersection of sexuality and gender in the same plural fashion. In the following sections we will look at Adrienne Rich's poetry, following her on a trajectory as she grapples with what it means to be a lesbian, an activist and a woman.

4.3. The Lesbian Activist

4.3.1. Queer politics in "**Hunger**"

The poem "**Hunger**" from the volume *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) is dedicated to Audre Lorde and it hinges on both allegorical and physical hunger. In fact, the poem strives to articulate the connection between the two states; between literal starvation and symbolic deprivation: "I choke on the taste of bread in North America/ but the taste of hunger in North America/ is poisoning me" (Rich, 2002: 138). Rich breaks down the poem into four sections, each canvasing her strange intermediary position as a witness to other peoples' pain, particularly women's, and the way other women's dispossession reflects her own: "In the black mirror of the subway window/hangs my own face, hollow with anger and desire./Swathed in exhaustion, on the trampled newsprint,/ a woman shields a dead child from the camera" (138).

Such juxtapositions reflect an awareness of the inextricable link between the private self and the external world that it inhabits. Much like in the poem "**In Those Years**" (discussed previously), Rich reflects on the fact that there is an interpersonal quality to the act of living; that our own "hunger" is necessarily doubled by the hunger of those that exist outside our boundaries. This gives the poet a sense of helplessness, a sense of limitation regarding her own identity:

> I'm wondering
> whether we even have what we think we have –
> lighted windows signifying shelter,
> a film of domesticity
> over fragile roofs. I know I'm partly somewhere else –
> huts strung across a drought-stretched land
> not mine, dried breasts, mine and not mine, a mother
> watching my children shrink with hunger (Rich, 2002: 136).

The feeling that she is "partly somewhere else" conjures the notion of a geographical self which is split between the fragile, domestic reality of her day-to-day life and the

imagined world of the oppressed alter-ego: “huts strung across a drought-stretched land/not mine, dried breasts, mine and not mine” (136). As Judith McDaniel points out, this other world which Rich is depicting is “the wasteland that encompasses a large part of the female experience” (2002: 24) and so it makes sense that Rich identifies with her counterpart; the breasts that are hers, yet not hers, the children that she did not give birth to but who belong to her. To be a woman in this world is to be *every* woman, it would seem. Concomitantly, the poet questions the edifice of her existence when it is built upon hierarchies of power that demand less empathy for certain individuals:

> They can rule the world while they can persuade us
> our pain belongs in some order.
> is death by famine worse than death by suicide,
> than a life of famine and suicide, if a black lesbian dies,
> if a white prostitute dies, if a woman genius
> starves herself to feed others,
> self-hatred battening on her body? (Rich, 2002: 136-137)

The notion that hunger and pain can be “ordered” ensures that the systems of power thrive, because it means the individual is confined to an egotistic Self which can be quantified; the speaker knows that, because “I live in my Western skin” (136), she would be valued above the women who are not white (“black lesbian”) or who are not socially acceptable (“white prostitute”). However, she would be valued strictly for the very limitations of her subjectivity – for what she, as a subject, cannot be: “my Western vision, torn/ and flung to what I can’t control or even fathom” (136). The speaker is trapped in her “Western vision” which does not empower her; it merely ensures that others who are not “Western” do not have power.

By directing empathy only towards those deemed worthy, the system produces another type of scarcity, which is the scarcity of human connections: “even our intimacies are rigged with terror” (Rich, 137). In this landscape, we hunger for those that remain inaccessible to us. The poet expresses her yearning for bodies she is conditioned not to love or touch: “We shrink from touching/ our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves/ and

each other, we're scared shitless/ of what it could be to take and use our love" (137). The large-scale famine of the world is likened to the suppression of desires and the longing for a future where such desires are not shameful. In fact, the speaker connects these desires on a political and personal plane: "our powers expended daily on the struggle/to hand a kind of life on to our children, /to change reality for our lovers/ even in a single trembling drop of water" (Rich, 2002: 137). The juxtaposition of "children" and "lovers" is not incidental, as the poet doesn't strictly refer to the traditional family unit. She refers to "lovers", not spouses or husbands, because the patriarchal element is already dominant in every other part of her life: "yes, that male god that acts on us and on our children,/ that male State that acts on us and on our children" (137). The repetition is meant to emphasize the ubiquity of not only masculinity but heterosexuality, confirmed in the act of reproduction and the begetting of "children". The "lovers" are not specifically gendered because they are an escape from the "Western skin" that is ruled by a limited subjectivity. The same gender ambiguity regarding the word "lovers" manifests towards the end of the poem, when the speaker expresses the will to live in a different world, in which perpetual "hunger" does not define existence:

> I'm alive to want more than life,
> want it for others starving and unborn,
> to name the deprivations boring
> into my will, my affections, into the brains
> of daughters, sisters, lovers caught in the crossfire
> of terrorists of the mind (Rich, 2002: 138)

The predominantly female enumeration of "daughters, sisters, lovers" once more places the romantic partner in an ambiguous position and it confirms that it is usually the female element which gets "caught in the crossfire" (138) and suffers the inequities served by the "terrorists of the mind" (138), the enactors of oppression. The woman is a site for deprivation and hunger, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes in "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1985),

> (…) the figure of woman, moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister and wife/mother, syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as she is

> herself drained of proper identity. In this particular area, the continuity of community or history, for subaltern and historian alike, is produced on (…) the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument (2006: 220)

Thus the woman ensures the continuity of patriarchal systems at the expense of her own welfare and "starves herself to feed others" (Rich, 137), perpetuating the notion that her "discontinuity", whether simulated or not, is a necessary side-effect. The same idea is echoed in the poem: "the "mothers" drained of milk, the "survivors" driven/ to self-abortion, self-starvation, to a vision/ bitter, concrete, and wordless." (138), where the words "mother" and "survivor" are ironically placed in inverted commas to emphasize the way in which women are emptied of meaning, just as "mother" and "survivor" become meaningless when the conditions for both are inhumane.

Yet what the world truly hungers for is exactly what is being drained: the woman. If the patriarchal system feeds on women and in doing so leaves them empty, Rich proposes a different kind of "feeding". We are encouraged to see it as a "queer" feeding, for the poet wishes not only to witness other women as full subjects, but she desires to engage with them intimately, in a transgressive manner: "we shrink from touching/our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves and each other, we're scared shitless/ of what it could be to take and use our love (…) like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be" (137). In this instance, the speaker's "I" once more becomes a "we", because the project can only be engendered communally, and because to love women means to not shrink away from expressing that multiplicity of desire. For the poet, the act is both personal and political, because by "feeding" herself and her own desires, she is feeding the world:

> The decision to feed the world
> is the real decision. No revolution
> has chosen it. For that choice requires
> that woman shall be free. (137)

4.3.2. Compulsory heterosexuality in "**From a survivor**"

The poem "**From a survivor**" included in the volume *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) reads like a eulogy written by a former wife to her late husband, but it also announces a departure from the confines of marriage and heterosexual coupling. In fact, the poem functions as a "farewell" to the spouses' life together. This farewell is in no way heralded as triumphant, but rather bittersweet, as the very title communicates to the reader. Rich was a survivor of tragedy, whereas her husband, the late Alfred Conrad, an esteemed professor of economics at Harvard, could not cope with the depression which engulfed him after the separation from his wife. In October 1970, Conrad took his own life, leaving behind a "shattered" Rich (O'Mahoney, 2002, para. 25) who grappled with her own perceived responsibility for his death and the revelation, which could no longer be hidden, that she was a lesbian: "The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs" (qtd. in O'Mahoney, para. 26). How to reconcile grief with self-knowledge? How to confront survivor's guilt while also being critical of her marriage? Such matters come to light in the poem and take shape in the form of a dialogue between her and the ghost of the man who embodies both her husband and the limitations of heterosexual partnerships.

As it was theorized in an earlier section, "compulsory heterosexuality", according to Rich, enforces the belief that "marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable – even if unsatisfying or oppressive" (1994: 39), and so marriage to a man is considered a woman's destiny. But this reality does not only affect women. One could argue that, as the other half of the equation, men also suffer the repercussions of living in a partnership that is socially oppressive. This is evidenced by the fact that Rich, in typical fashion, often switches the personal "I" of the poem to "we" when she talks about the failures of marriage. In this manner, she signals that both she and Alfred were victims of a flawed system:

> The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
> of men & women in those days
>
> I don't know who we thought we were

that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race (2002: 108).

Rich refers to matrimony as a "pact" that was not only common but expected of young couples in the early 1950s when she and Alfred were married. If confessionalism, as Judith Harris claims, bridges domestic concerns with historical realities in order to draw attention to the community's shortcomings (2001: 259), then Rich is foregrounding her marriage as an example of the "failures of the race" (108), failures which refer to the collapse of a society governed by such opaque institutions. There were many problems with marriage in a post-war American society: one of them was the very ordinariness that Rich describes in the poem, the fact that wedded life represented the logical outcome of one's destiny. For many people, it was the "only avenue to adulthood and independence" (Coleman, 2007: 18), while at the same time, it offered comfort and security after the trauma and displacement of the Second World War (19). At the same time, the pragmatic aspects of married life were heightened by a degree of romantic embellishment; sexual relations were no longer meant to simply engender children, but rather to express "mutual love and emotional closeness" (Coleman, 19). This complicated the bonds of marriage because it was designed to encapsulate every aspect of the individual's life; emotional, sexual, economic etc. Thus, entering marriage was not only a change of external status (name and standing), but of internal one as well; one had to wed for companionship, not for survival (Coleman, 19). This sudden development led to an inability of spouses to adjust to the new sexual politics: "After being socialized to stifle their sexual urges during courtship, married women were expected to suddenly be able to fulfill their own and their husband's sexual desires" (19). More than that, failure or success in marriage was judged more severely on account of romantic and sexual standards, rather than practical ones (19). Hence, the individual's internal performance became more important than the external one. Under such circumstances, women like Adrienne Rich encountered for the first time the dissonance in desire between them and their husbands (in Rich's case, the discovery that she was attracted to women rather than men).

Yet the more insidious aspect of compulsory heterosexuality and by extension, marriage, is that spouses believed they could be the "exception" to the rule and that they would not be stifled by its imperatives. This attitude is described by the poet as a kind of

naïve arrogance: "Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special" (2002: 108) and "I don't know who we thought we were/ that our personalities/ could resist the failures of the race" (108). Rich also considers that husbands and wives suffered from ignorance because such matters were usually unspoken or kept hidden:

> Lucky or unlucky, we didn't know
> the race had failures of that order
> and that we were going to share them (108)

Going into marriage bling was typical of the period and the silence that followed such "failures" was condoned as part of the strategy to maintain a household; for instance, women were advised to channel their negative energies into domestic chores (McDaniel, 2003: 57) and to avoid open arguments at all cost because "many things can be solved without words" (qtd. in McDaniel, 58). Of course, the attempt to use words and to verbalize an intimate experience is part of the ethos of confessionalism, no matter how painful the confessions may turn out. As Rich acknowledges herself in *Of Woman Born* (1986):

> I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours. On the other hand, I am keenly aware that any writer has a certain false and arbitrary power. It is *her* version, after all, that the reader is reading at this moment, while the accounts of others – including the dead – may go untold (1995: 16).

Rich understands that she is sharing these experiences in absentia, and that she speaks on behalf of a dead husband whose voice is included in the familial "we" of the poem, yet who otherwise does not get the chance to speak for himself. Yet this is one way that Rich can grapple with the ghost of a voiceless husband: by acknowledging the power she has acquired over him. Interestingly, the poet exhumes the husband's body and considers it through a different lens, according to her new outlook on sexuality:

> Your body is as vivid to me
> as it ever was: even more

since my feeling for it is clearer:
I know what it could and could not do (2002: 108)

The vividness of the male body is enhanced by its absence because it leaves room for other bodies to take precedence. Hence, the male body is a setting stage for the "even more" of the female body that will be embraced. In this way, the male body is a site of change; by acknowledging its limitations, the speaker is freed of her own obsessions: "it is no longer/the body of a god/ or anything with power over my life" (Rich, 108). Claire Keyes argues that the husband is "a dead man who remains dead" (2008: 151), while his widow, the poet, acquires a new lease on life and has the ability to grow and change, yet she does so only because she is no longer under the spouse's power (151). Indeed, the speaker comments on the distance between her and her husband because he couldn't make the "leap" forward with her:

Next year it would have been 20 years
and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making

which I live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements

each one making possible the next (Rich, 108)

One can almost see the "leaps" in the poem, the gaps after the words "making" and "movements" that almost simulate the surge forward which the poet has accomplished. To a certain extent, the speaker infers that the husband also suffered from the constraints of a patriarchal marriage and that the change in their marital life would have been made together had they managed to communicate these feelings earlier. The husband's death is seen as "wasteful" precisely because there was potential for a different kind of partnership, outside

normative heterosexuality. Still, the controversy in these last lines stems from the joyful and hopeful tone that the poet employs, even as she is reminiscing about her husband's suicide. Yet the joy is not experienced at the expense of the spouse's demise; rather, the sense of elation issues from the fact that Rich is a "survivor", as the title conveys, implying that she might have succumbed to the same mental anguish as her male partner. The "leap" could have been a suicidal descent, but instead it is a growth, a "succession".

4.3.3. The Queer Language of Dissent in "**Tonight No Poetry Will Serve**"

As the title trenchantly announces, "**Tonight No Poetry Will Serve**" is a poem which does not deal with half-measures. The eponymous volume, *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve, Poems 2007-2010* is inaugurated with a strange epigraph; the Webster's New World Dictionary definition of the verb "to serve". Among its many uses, the poet reminds us that "to serve" means not only to obey as part of one's duty, but also to suffer indignities, such as serving a prison sentence or be used by other people (Rich, 2011: 7). It also means to fight for something, with the semantic implication that one is prostrating before a cause. Indeed, we are often speaking of serving a cause. The poet, Rich believed, was also supposed to "serve" the world in some fashion, whether by fighting injustice or by reminding others of the power of "meet[ing] the needs of" others (2011: 7). The title of the volume, however, suggests a double disobedience; on the one hand, confronted with a world of daily anguish and political disorder, poetry must reassess its place in human affairs. It cannot remain indifferent and aloof; indeed, to do so would be to play in the hand of the powers that want all such human expression silenced. Hence, "no poetry will serve" is a call for action – we must not simply "work for" or "be a servant to" authority, as Webster's Dictionary reliably guides us. Instead, poetry will serve itself and the people who need it. On the other hand, "no poetry will serve" is a not so distant echo of Theodor Adorno's assessment in *Cultural Criticism and Society* (1951) that "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz", meaning that the horrors of history may sometimes be so great as to deny the sensibilities of lyricism and beauty. As J. Hillis Miller asserts, Adorno is drawing attention to the fact that the focus must be on "making sure Auschwitz does not happen again" (2010: x) and not on "aesthetic

activities" (x). This is due to the fact that the general view is that "poetry is not concerned with making something happen in the social and political realms" (x). For Adrienne Rich, poetry remains poetry even when it is concerned with the social and the political. In fact, the relationship between them is symbiotic. As she contends in the essay "Poetry and the Forgotten Future" (2006), poetry has a long history of commenting on the state of affairs; Shelley considered that the poets were the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" (qtd. in Rich, 2009: 146) and he denounced the political institutions of his time for their corrupting effect in works like "**Queen Mab**": "Nature – No!/ Kings, priests and statesmen blast the human flower…" (qtd. in Rich, 147-148). Similarly, Whitman imbued his verses with the democratic zeal of his beliefs and when that democratic hope was disappointed by the inequities of the Civil War, he considered that poetry too had been reduced to "a conversation overheard in the dusk (…) a few broken murmurs" (qtd. in Rich, 157). Thus, poetry responds to the world just as the world responds to poetry. The question is whether the enormity of some historical events can or *should* be captured in poetry. Does poetry become complicit with violent political realities if it tries to aestheticize the horrors? Rich addresses Adorno's contention directly and examines the very purpose of poetry in relation to the external world:

> Poetry has been charged with "aestheticizing," thus being complicit in, the violent realities of power, of practices like collective punishment, torture, rape, and genocide. This accusation was famously invoked in Adorno's "after the Holocaust lyric poetry is impossible"—which Adorno later retracted and which a succession of Jewish poets have in their practice rejected (…) If to "aestheticize" is to glide across brutality and cruelty, treat them merely as dramatic occasions for the artist rather than structures of power to be revealed and dismantled—much hangs on the words "merely" and "rather than." Opportunism isn't the same as committed attention. But we can also define the "aesthetic" not as a privileged and sequestered rendering of human suffering, but as news of an awareness, a resistance, that totalizing systems want to quell: art reaching into us for what's still passionate, still unintimidated, still unquenched (157-160)

What we can assess from the ample quotation above is that through aestheticizing, poetry does not make brutality and cruelty easier to swallow, but rather reveals and dismantles their inner workings. However, Rich draws the distinction between "opportunism" and "committed attention" and warns of the possibility that aestheticism could come across as "gliding across" violent realities rather than "reaching into us". Hence, the limits of poetry do not depend on outside context; any dramatic event may become aesthetic occasion. Rather, the limits are set by the inner moral compass of the poet. The poet must be vigilant lest he or she devolve into "opportunism". This is why, the assertion, "Tonight no poetry will serve" surpasses Adorno's pessimism and instead marks an occasion of silence, an occasion to question whether we are committed enough to the task, or whether we are simply offering a "sequestered rendering of human suffering" (160). One of the last definitions of the verb "to serve" offered in the volume's epigraph is "to deliver (a legal document) as a summons" (2011: 7). By including this last possible meaning, Rich is suggesting that "Tonight poetry will not deliver a summons"; it will not assume a position of authority. Instead, it will reflect on the very quality of the summons. Of course, the adverbial "tonight" also informs us that this is only a temporary pause and that each day afterwards, poetry must carry on its duty; it must "deliver" and it must "serve".

Such conflicting yet complimentary musings on the limitations of poetry are illustrated in the titular poem "**Tonight No Poetry Will Serve**" which questions the possibility of aesthetic and personal dissent. The poet quite literally confines her rebellion to the format of the poem, as she connects the syntax of her verses with the (dis)order of the world at large: "Syntax of rendition:/ verb pilots the plane/ adverb modifies action/ verb force-feeds noun/ submerges the subject/ noun is choking" (2011: 25). The grammatical trappings of written subjectivity echo the literal subjugation of people across the geopolitical plane. Just as the authorial voice controls the expression of selfhood, so do various systems of power limit the subjectivity and humanity of targeted individuals. The verb "force-feeds" the noun and therefore, a certain discourse is heaped upon the passive subject who has no possibility of reply. This silencing occurs both within and outside the boundaries of the text. Rich makes reference to the terrorist attack of 9/11 and its militarized aftermath of torture and persecution in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to illustrate how such power exchanges

happen at the level of language, because it is the discourse and its "syntax" which decide who has the right to *be* a subject. It is America's right to exact revenge on the guilty party since that party is defined only by the "verb", the action of piloting the plane into the Twin Towers. Hence, there can be no "noun", no humanity or subjectivity attributed to the country and peoples who bear the label of terrorist. Thus, language sanctions action – the absence of the noun allows for the verb to assert dominance: "verb disgraced goes on doing" (25). Syntax ruthlessly enforces the speakers' worldview, which makes the poet question whether she can challenge its linguistic hegemony. After all, she herself employs its instruments and enforces her own "verb" at the expense of other "nouns". While poetry is a mode of expression that is meant to transfigure language, it is also rooted *in* language and cannot remain outside its scope of influence. When the poet instructs us, "now diagram the sentence" (25), she highlights our inability to separate the poetic and political discourse and confine either of them to distinctive schematic representations. The poetic "sentence" is impregnated with the verbs and nouns which have also been used to deprive individuals of their humanity. Given such circumstances, can the poet continue to write poetry using the same language? Can the poet restore the lost subjectivity of those who have been silenced? Such questions are not entirely answered, nor are they dismissed, but instead we are meant to sit with them in the silence that follows the dictum: 'Tonight I think/ no poetry/ will serve" (25).

Poetic language, then, is at an impasse. Using Derrida's terminology, we might say that the poetic text reaches a state of "aporia" which Derrida describes as an "impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage (…) which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing or transiting" (1993: 8). Poetic language is meant to convey meaning through metaphor, hence it is in itself a form of passage, but if this transitional movement is denied and if the text reaches a critical point where it undermines itself, then poetic language is compromised. It is no longer the bearer of plurality and transcendence, but rather a painful reminder of what it has chosen to omit, of what it cannot include. Given such difficulties, Rich shifts the focus of poetic expression: in order to navigate the "nonpassage", the poet positions herself within it. By "diagraming" the sentence and disassembling the verbs and nouns, she reflects on the aporetic quality of

language and its lyrical potential. If aporia causes the text to hemorrhage meaning, then the poet locates herself within that wound and counterpoints the "damage" of the text with the vulnerability of physical intimacy between two women. As Chris Berry and Annamarie Jagose theorize, to be queer is "an ongoing and necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation" (qtd. in Sullivan, 2003: 43) and it is this unfixed site which provides an interesting mirror to the aporia of the text. To be a woman and to love another woman engenders a discursive incongruity which both reflects and opposes the aberrations of the hegemonic "syntax". In other words, the syntax of (poetic) language is as uncertain and untenable as the "syntax" of two women's bodies in intimate communion:

> Saw you walking barefoot
> taking a long look
> at the new moon's eyelid
>
> later spread
> sleep-fallen, naked in your dark hair
> asleep but not oblivious
> of the unslept unsleeping
> elsewhere (Rich, 25)

It is interesting to take into account the number of nouns, verbs and adjectives in the lines above. Verbs and verbal phrases dominate, while there are only five nouns to ground us in the reality of the lovers' universe. The syntax is irregular, made passive by a plethora of participials. Meanwhile, the rhythm is marked by a flow of action and inaction. Does the verb "force-feed" the noun? Or does the noun surrender to the verb? Such subtle distinctions multiply the lyrical potential of the aporetic text. The fragmentation represented by the "moon's eyelid" finds its counterpart in the image of the lover "sleep-fallen, naked in your dark hair" (25), but it also relates to the violent abstraction which follows later: "noun is choking" (25). We can visualize the crooked body, white against the dark hair, akin to the moon like a sickle against the night sky. And we can also visualize the body suffocating in darkness, unable to sleep, "unsleeping" because it is being kept forcefully awake. Similarly, we encounter the motif of watchfulness, of constantly "seeing", of being alert to the world

even during sleep. As such, the embrace of the lover does not offer refuge; in fact, the lover offers another possibility of seeing, of becoming aware of the Other, the "unslept unsleeping/elsewhere" (25). The selfish act of copulation remains private, but it is also reconstructed as an extensionality of selfhood. Two women in love demand to have their subjectivity recognized and in doing so, they acknowledge the subjects who are "submerged" in other parts of the world. Queerness as an ongoing site of contestation and engagement communicates with the silent site of torture and dehumanization. Hence, queer women become an "aporia" in themselves - a puzzle, a blockage, a "nonpassage" which contests the overarching syntax of politics and power. In this way, the poet integrates herself and her lover within the silence that follows the assertion, "Tonight no poetry will serve". To put it differently, tonight the lovers only have each other and in their loving solitude, they extend their selfhood to other subjects who cannot afford to sleep or love or be oblivious. What the poet subtly conveys is a concomitant sense of aloneness and togetherness, of silence and communication, while at the same time interrogating the poetic process underlying such exchanges. Rich suggests that in order for poetry to verbalize dissent and in order for it to deconstruct and reconstruct itself, it must access a queer idiom; it must enter the unfixed site of contestation and engagement and it must accept the aporetic quality of the text. To reformulate, "Tonight no poetry will serve" can also mean "Tonight no poetry *has* to serve": by accepting that poetry is sometimes "an impossible passage" (Derrida, 8) which has difficulties transferring aesthetic meaning, we accept that poetry is not always the answer to a personal or public need. Indeed it does not need to be. Rather, poetry offers the possibility of ongoing reflection and even ongoing silence in the face of insurmountable realities.

4.4. The Lesbian Lover

When describing Adrienne Rich's poetry, Charles Altieri speaks of not only an aesthetic, but also an existential plane of understanding; the poet wishes to verify if "we can respect the poetic persona produced and the model of community she hopes to produce through the witness she bears" (1984: 167). In other words, by placing her private self at the center of her work, Adrienne Rich is attempting to create a community that is "an alternative

to the dominant mode" (168). The personal and the political are deeply intertwined in her poetry, as we have mentioned before, but what Altieri underlines is the very specific manner in which the poet tries to link the poetic self to the community (168). In her later volumes, Altieri argues, Rich masters a method by which she conveys a sense of shared experience even with readers who are unfamiliar with her discourse. Altieri writes that, "poetry can become an example of character and the ground of community by making its mode of speech an index of powers of consciousness affording possible stances toward experience" (168). Hence, the poet allows her readers to enter a hypothetical site of experience that familiarizes them with the unknown, while also giving them a sense of community. This is not to say she is proselytizing; she is "speaking" to us in order to "overthrow the constructed, illusionistic drama of perceptions one finds in the scenic mode" (168). To put it differently, poetry must not remain confined to the "scenic" or the abstract because for Rich, it is *not* abstract. Poetry is a cry for connection, for uniting, as Adrienne suggests, the "energy of creation and the energy of relation" (qtd. in Altieri, 168). Poetic language exults in the possibility of relation, of "fulfilling our deepest natural desires to know and feel that our knowledge is shared" (169). Hence, for Rich, a sense of commonality (and community) is the ultimate goal of poetry.

Given her poetic ethos, Rich attempts to bridge the gap between language and experience and perform a "queering" of the text that would blur the division between the personal and the political. One way she captures this transpersonal dynamic is by focusing on lesbian love, placing herself and her female lover at the center and at the margins of her poetic work. Rich writes about the lesbian couple as both natural and deviant, both desirable and disturbing. The poet expands the intimate horizon of the lovers whose existence threatens not only the political status quo, but the very integrity of the Text. The lesbian couple unites the volatile energies of creation and relation and pushes the boundaries of poetic expression by forcing the reader to encounter a reality that cannot and will not remain abstract. In the following section, we will look at poems that play with poetic conventions and immerse us in the 'Otherized' and deeply personal life of the lesbian couple.

4.4.1. Voyeurism and fetish in "**The Images**"

"**The Images**" is part of the 1981 volume *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* and its title hints at a dual tension that pervades the poem; the voyeuristic power of the visual and the visual's freedom from language. These themes are explored in the poem from the perspective of the lesbian woman who feels scrutinized by a violent society and who seeks to challenge and convert violent imagery into restorative poetry. Rich addresses the poem to her lover because as women, they share the same disquiet and the same awareness of the dangers facing them outside their relationship:

> And what can reconcile me
> that you, the woman whose hand
> sensual and protective, brushes me in sleep
> go down each morning into such a city?
> I will not, cannot withhold
> your body or my own from its chosen danger (2015: 3)

The lovers cannot dwell in romantic solipsism; unlike the male/female counterpart, they must be a part of the real world since their survival depends on navigating its violence. The city represents a particularly fraught space for the poet, since it often intrudes upon the intimacy of the two women, forcing them to reckon with realities beyond their power. Kristen Bartholomew Ortega argues that the city has "traditionally been designed, constructed, and controlled by men to implicitly exclude women, or at least to control their movement with surveillance" (2008: 320). By integrating the urban in her poetry, Rich attempts to rewrite the map to include the lives of women in the city space (Ortega, 321). In order to do so, the poet connects the city with the body, linking the chaos and irregularity of the urban with the spontaneity of the physical:

> Close to your body, in the
> pain of the city
> I turn. My hand half-sleeping reaches, finds
> some part of you, touch knows you before language

names in the brain. Out in the dark
a howl, police sirens, emergency
our 3 a.m. familiar, ripping the sheath of sleep
registering pure force as if all transpired –
the swell of cruelty and helplessness –
in one block between West End
and Riverside. In my dreams the Hudson
rules the night like a right-hand margin
drawn against the updraft
of burning life, the tongueless cries
of the city. I turn again, slip my arm
under the pillow turned for relief,
your breathing traces my shoulder. Two women sleeping
together have more than their sleep to defend
(…)
I pretend the Hudson is a right-hand margin
drawn against fear and woman-loathing
(water as purification, river as boundary) (2015: 3-4)

The tactile bond that the lovers share ("touch knows you before language") is linked with the incoherent "howl" of the city, the "tongueless cries" that form the idiom of the urban. The speaker arrives at the lover's body through the city ("Close to your body, in the/pain of the city/ I turn") because both spaces are open and vulnerable to the "swell of cruelty and helplessness" (Rich, 3). The river is also turned into a signifier for the female body, as the Hudson cools off the "burning life" of the city and in a similar fashion the lover's body relieves the speaker: "your breathing traces my shoulder" (Rich, 3). The river is meant to purify and separate the women from the metaphoric dirt of the city, but these boundaries do not hold. As the poet reminds the reader, the intimate relationship between two women cannot remain an abstract idea given the real-life consequences of each erotic gesture ("Two women sleeping/ together have more than their sleep to defend"). The lovers whose desires render them marginal are dragged into the center of modern life due to the

commodification of women's bodies, particularly when those women are queer. The fetishization of lesbians stems from the forbidden aspect of queer desire, but also the perceived availability of the female body; lesbians tend to be less threatening than homosexuals due to their gender (Tropiano, 2002: 7). Indeed, they are considered less of a menace to children (8) and less aggressive in matters of public visibility (8). Lesbian sex also does not threaten the normalcy of heterosexual intercourse, because the belief is that women who engage in lesbian activities are still capable of performing "normal" sexual acts, unlike homosexual men (Marhoefer, 2015: 74). Such views, though erroneous, ensure that lesbians can be more easily commodified and consumed as a type of fetish. Queer women do not frighten, they titillate. However, the way in which lesbians are fetishized tends to inhabit more violent forms than the objectification of straight women; though they do not disturb the status quo in the same manner as gay men, lesbians must still be punished for expressing deviant desires and going against patriarchal dictates. In "**The Images**", Rich describes the violent, voyeuristic imagery that surrounds and overpowers queer women:

> but when did we ever choose
> to see our bodies strung
> in bondage and crucifixion across the exhausted air
> when did we choose
> to be lynched on the queasy electric signs of
> midtown when did we choose
> to become the masturbator's fix
> emblem of rape in Riverside Park the campground
> at Bandol the beach at Sydney
> (…)
> I am remembered by you, remember you
> even as we are dismembered
> on the cinema screens, the white expensive walls
> of collectors, the newsrags blowing the streets
> – and it would not be enough.
> This is the war of the images.

We are thorn-leaf guarding the purple-tongued flower
each to each (2015: 3-4)

The scopophilic pleasure of subjecting women to pain is heightened by the aesthetics of "bondage and crucifixion", of contorting bodies into graphic sexual displays. In this case, lynching women on the midtown electric signs is both violent iconography and an image signifying another image; that of the large neon billboard sign which advertises the female body in various titillating, objectifying poses. Voyeurism and violence go hand in hand as the body is raped and used and "dismembered", both in reality and in the visual format, on the "cinema screens", in the art of collectors and in "newsrags". The poet argues that imagery begets violence and that the consumption of such images corrals women into self-defeating postures: "reorganizing victimization frescoes translating/ violence into patterns so powerful and pure/ we continually fail to ask are they true for us" (2015: 3-4). In matters of victimization, however, Charles Altieri argues that the poet fails to see the privilege that enjoys as a middle-class woman living in the better part of the city. After all, "the streets she refers to (…) are not in East Harlem or the South Bronx, where there are short vacations and often a great deal less love" (1984: 181). Altieri also invokes the "danger of personalizing" and treating "the self as something special, demanding undue consideration and whining where one should accept reality" (181). In view of this, the poet actually hampers her community by placing herself at its center, because her perspective is far more obtuse than she claims (181). While such considerations should be taken into account, we would argue that the poet acknowledges the inherent limitations of her perspective. In fact, the frustration felt throughout the poem stems from the difficulty of achieving a plurality of expression in a landscape oversaturated with fetishistic imagery that heaps women together as one entity:

We are trying to live
in a clearheaded tenderness –
I speak not merely of us, our lives
are "moral and ordinary"
as the lives of numberless women –
I pretend the Hudson is a right-hand margin
drawn against fear and woman-loathing

(water as purification, river as boundary)
but I know my imagination lies:
in the name of freedom of speech
they are lynching us no law is on our side
there are no boundaries
no-man's-land does not exist. (Rich, 3)

The lack of boundaries does not only signify that "woman-loathing" is extended indefinitely; it also alludes to the fact that the oppression of one segment of the population affects those who are "moral and ordinary". Straight middle-class women become aware of women who are different, who are poor and who are queer, precisely because the violence of sexual imagery often pits them together. The poet herself encountered the mobility of "loathing" in the exploration of her sexuality; "coming out" as a lesbian has meant becoming aware of the heightened degradation and marginalization of other women. Just like in the poem "**Hunger**", Rich argues that violence trickles down and affects everyone, from top to bottom. The collective "us" that Rich employs in the lines above is a poetic artifice, turning the "we" of the lesbian couple into a chorus of disenfranchised voices. The inclusion of a larger public in the particular affairs of two women is part of Rich's poetic sensibilities, converging the self with other selves and expanding the solipsism of personal experience. It is the poet's attempt at deconstructing "the meaning of we" (2002: 253) as she does in the poem "**In Those Years**" (mentioned previously in the chapter). Following this trajectory, the poet underlines that two women sleeping together "have more than their sleep to defend" (2015: 3) precisely because they are an evocation of other women sleeping together and because their intimacy makes it possible for other women to be intimate too. The relationship is symbiotic, meaning that the personal makes the public possible and vice versa.

To counteract the violent misogynistic imagery that dominates the public discourse, the poet resorts to the private, erotic imagery of women in love. It is the liberating eroticism of queer desire that provides an outlet for aesthetic and emotional recovery. As Altieri points out, "the tension is between images that dismember and those which allow mutual acts of remembering" (1984: 181). The speaker is undone and remade through her love for another woman:

When I walked among time-battered stones
thinking already of you
when I sat near the sea
among parched yet flowering weeds
when I drew in my notebook
the thorned purple-tongued flower, each petal
protected by its thorn-leaf
I was mute
innocent of grammar as the waves
irrhythmically washing I felt washed clean
of the guilt of words there was no word to read
in the book of that earth no perjury
the tower of Babel fallen once and for all
light drank at my body
thinking of you I felt free
in the cicadas' pulse, their encircling praise (2015: 4)

In this instance, the visual provides an escape from the onslaught of discourse, the phallocentric "tower of Babel" (4). Poetry becomes a different kind of language, a language of pure images that wash the poet clean of words. The setting by the sea, amidst "time-battered stones" alludes to a preternatural, pre-linguistic stage, which is arrived at through the body; namely, the lover's body. The speaker is "innocent of grammar" (4) which means that she has also left behind syntactical hierarchies and power relations; she only uses her notebook to "draw" the lover's body. The woman's genitals are compared to a "thorned purple-tongued flower" (4) which protects itself from the world, but which also withstands classification and analysis. The "thorn-leaf" that covers the petal discourages the outsider from trying to penetrate it; rather the flower must be arrived at through a female penetration symbolized in the waves which wash the speaker "irrhythmically" (4). The irregular influx mirrors the female orgasm, the continuous, yet unpredictable movement of the waves and the intermittence of light which "drank at my body" (4). Visually, the white gaps left between the words allude to the same irregular rhythm. The erotic imagery also rewrites the myths of

male conquest; the woman's lover is likened to the mythological Medusa, but the meeting between Medusa and the lover is an opportunity for metamorphosis and not conflict. Medusa does not turn the woman into stone; rather she liberates the woman from her stony confines:

> When I saw her face, she of the several faces
> staring indrawn in judgment laughing for joy
> her serpents twisting her arms raised
> her breasts gazing
> when I looked into her world
> I wished to cry loose my soul
> into her, to become
> free of speech at last (2015: 4)

The gaze here is not obtrusive or voyeuristic; it is a shared "look" of understanding between two women who achieve freedom by accessing each other, both physically and emotionally. Such a union is meant to oppose the dismemberment of modern violence: "I am remembered by you, remember you/ even as we are dismembered (…) We are the thorn-leaf guarding the purple-tongued flower/ each to each" (2015: 4). The intimate reality of the body, known and understood in the act of love, resists fetishistic commodification, but the poet warns that this struggle is ongoing, and that there is a constant need for repurposing the manner in which women's desire are represented and explored.

4.4.2. Creativity and intimacy in "**Twenty-One Love Poems**"

Playing on similar themes as "**The Images**" but with a wider scope of expression, "**Twenty-one Love Poems**", published in the volume *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) celebrates the love between two women from two standpoints: first as a creative outlet that generates poetry, where the lover is both the muse and the audience of the poet: "*I dreamed you were a poem,/ I say, a poem I wanted to show someone…*" (Rich, 2002: 144, II), and second as a form of defiance against the patriarchal values of a world where human contact and emotional intimacy are scarce: "without tenderness, we are in hell" (Rich, 148,

X). What the poet strives to create is a gynocentric space, replacing the old civilization with a woman-centered reality (Oktenberg, 2002: 74) which would recover tenderness and find the "heroic in its ordinariness" (Rich, 153, XIX). However, the poems are also a naked exploration of what it means to be in a relationship, regardless of sexuality or gender: "No one's fated or doomed to love anyone./ The accidents happen, we're not heroines" (Rich, 2002: 152, XVII). As the title of the selection prefigures, the twenty-one poems center on love and the way this love enriches both the written word and the reality outside it.

The motif of the city is present once again, but as a topos of change and diversity that, while incorporating violence and degradation ("Whenever in this city, screens flicker/ with pornography, with science-fiction vampires,/ victimized hirelings bending to the lash", 143, I) also offers the possibility that the lovers could be a part of its multifarious nature. It is the abject of the urban that echoes the alternative reality of queer love:

> we also have to walk… if simply as we walk
> through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties
> of our own neighborhoods.
> We need to grasp our lives inseparable
> from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces (…)
> No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
> sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
> dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
> our animal passion rooted in the city. (143, I)

The speaker underlines the fact that the lovers are inseparable and indistinguishable from the "rancid dreams" and "rainsoaked garbage" of the city, not because they represent the ugliness of the urban, but because they find more freedom of expression in the unaesthetic and unpalatable menagerie of the urban. The lovers embrace the unsavory aspects of the city as part of the creative process, since lesbians have to invent their own universe, their own language. They must rise independently like "sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air" (143), because "No one has imagined us" (143), meaning that there is no precedent, no textual canon for their way of being. The literary canon is filled with

contradictions regarding women and men's corporality and sexuality: "we still have to reckon with Swift/ loathing the woman's flesh while praising her mind, /Goethe's dread of the Mothers, Claudel vilifying Gide" (Rich, 146, V). These unmentionable "ghosts", as Rich calls them, haunt the backdrop of quotidian existence and force the lovers to reckon with their own place in the buried canon: "centuries of books unwritten pile behind these shelves/ and we still have to stare into the absence/ of men who would not, women who could not, speak/ to our life – this still unexcavated hole/ called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world" (146, V). Civilization here is defined by what it is lacking, by the gaps that it fails to recognize or "translate". Civilization is built on the ghosts it refuses to acknowledge. As Adrian Oktenberg makes the case, Rich is disloyal to this civilization out of necessity, because this patriarchal "half-world" is doomed to self-annihilation (2002: 73). By placing the female lovers in the "unexcavated hole", the poet attempts both a recuperation of the buried canon and a paving of new territory:

> The rules break like a thermometer,
> quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
> we're out in a country that has no language
> no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren
> through gorges unexplored since dawn
> whatever we do together is pure invention
> the maps they gave us were out of date
> by years (Rich, 149, XIII)

The creative freedom of the lovers is also a journey into the unknown; the lesbian is writing herself into history and by extension, she is (re)discovering herself. Since there are no maps to guide her, she must make use of the environment which is at her disposal (the city being one). As such, there is a fear that the phallocentric language and male-coded symbols of the "half-world" will corrupt the bond between the two women. Rich struggles with the idea of turning her lover into a muse, because she does not want to objectify her partner: "when away from you I try to create you in words,/ am I simply using you, like a river or a war?" (147, VII) The poet is wary of her relationship becoming only a social or political issue, bereft of nuance and humanity. The balance is difficult to strike, because revealing her

intimate fears and desires regarding the woman she loves also runs the risk of trivializing the relationship. Yet *not* writing about it feels just as cowardly as exposing it, because the poet would be denying herself a means of expression and an essential aspect of life: "What kind of beast would turn its life into words?/ What atonement is this all about?/ –and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living" (147, VII). We may consider this a confessional stance, because turning "life into words" with the purpose of living it all the more completely and arriving at a clearer sense of self is part of the confessional act. In fact, Rich suggests that she cannot do without it; it is necessary for her to write "words like these" because they illuminate parts of the self that would otherwise remain self-censored:

> And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars
> to escape writing of the worst thing of all –
> not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
> but the failure to want our freedom, passionately enough
> so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem
> mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves? (147, VII)

Hence, the poet makes the case that she cannot truly write about the horrors of the outside world or be politically engaged if she denies her own private failures. Once again, the personal and the public are symbiotic; the "blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres" become an "emblem" for the private oppression of the individual. If the violence against the private self is condoned, then it is also permissible in the community and the desecration of the Self and Others becomes simultaneous. In order to speak freely about the realities of modern life, the poet must have the freedom to speak about her love for another woman; it is this freedom that makes it possible for other freedoms to manifest. As Rich affirms, "two women together is a work/ nothing in civilization has made simple,/ two people together is a work/ heroic in its ordinariness" (153, XIX). The heroism of the female lovers stems from their very ordinariness, from their attempt to express something both private and universal about love. The two women are like any other pair of lovers, anonymous but singular in their mode of expression.

The poet gives up glimpses of their life in quiet moments of tenderness and vulnerability: "I watched you sleep,/ the scrubbed, sheenless wood of the dressing-table/ cluttered with our brushes, books, vials in the moonlight" (151, XVI), "I've wakened to your muttered words/ spoken light – or dark –years away/ as if my own voice had spoken" (149, XII) "Your dog, tranquil and innocent, dozes through/ our cries, our murmured dawn conspiracies/ our telephone calls" (148, X), "Your small hands, precisely equal to my own -/ only the thumb is larger, longer – in these hands" (146, VI). The state between sleep and consciousness is recurrent in many of the poems, along with the motif of light and darkness, hinting at the liminal world of the lovers. Yet, they are still present, still grounded in the quotidian of telephone calls and dressing tables. Oktenberg argues that it is the very mundaneness of their existence, intermixed with revelations of pain and love, that makes us feel the lovers are "not only fictive creations, but also, simultaneously, real human beings" (2002: 74). Not only that, but this strategy has the effect of "blurring the formal distinctions between fictive and natural discourse" (83). We are reminded of Julia Kristeva's concept of the "True-Real" (mentioned previously in Chapter 1), according to which we aspire to a mythical place outside of language and interpretation (Gregory, 2006: 36), a potentiality where speech and reality are inseparable and interchangeable. Oktenberg argues that in **Twenty-One Poems**, the fictional and the real are made to reflect and emulate each other, and such a blurring is best exemplified in poem IV:

> …I'm lugging my sack
> of groceries, I dash for the elevator
> where a man, taut, elderly, carefully composed
> lets the door almost close on me. – *For god's sake gold it!*
> I croak at him. – *Hysterical,* - he breathes my way.
> I let myself into the kitchen, unload my bundles,
> make coffee, open the window, put on Nina Simone
> singing *Here comes the sun…*I open the mail,
> drinking delicious coffee, delicious music,
> my body still both light and heavy with you. The mail
> lets fall a Xerox of something written by a man

aged 27, a hostage, tortured in prison:
My genitals have been the object of such a sadistic display
they keep me constantly awake with the pain…
Do whatever you can to survive.
You know, I think that men love wars…
And my incurable anger, my unmnendable wounds
break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,
and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms (Rich, 145, IV)

The interpellation of multiple voices, the sudden emotional shift from commonplace chores to petty frustrations to thoughts about the lover to the intrusion of torture and war create an overwhelming effect, rendering what is distant familiar and what is familiar distant. The elderly neighbor's barbed remark ("*Hysterical*") becomes foreign and removed in comparison with the hostage's desperate "*Do whatever you can to survive*" (145). The groceries, the "delicious coffee" and Nina Simone all seem to belong to a different universe once the Xerox page arrives. The switch in perspective is necessary to understand that our dependable microcosm can easily be toppled by exterior forces. Yet, the poet keeps all of these elements together and forces them to coexist. The exterior and the interior become only a matter of perspective; the speaker can feel the hostage's pain and still yearn for her lover ("and you are not in my arms"). The two planes of existence actually rely on each other for meaning. In this way, one learns to live with the incongruent aspects of the domestic and the foreign, with what one can and cannot control ("and they still control the world"). As Gabrielle Griffin argues, "defiance, in Rich's poetry, does not come through the extraordinary but through understanding the relativity of one's position in time and space. This leads to the search for what is shared and for sharing rather than to distancing oneself" (1993: 70-71). Finding commonality and meaning in the ordinariness of everyday life also means that the poet explores identity through the relativity of her position. It is through her lover that she discovers, for instance, the limits of selfhood:

Since we're not young, weeks have to do time
for years of missing each other. Yet only this odd warp
in time tells me we're not young.

Did I ever walk the morning streets at twenty,
my limbs streaming with a purer joy?
(…)
At twenty yes: we thought we'd live forever.
At forty-five, I want to know even our limits.
I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,
and somehow, each of us will help the other live,
and somewhere, each of us must help the other die (Rich, 144, III)

The artificial conventions of youth and beauty no longer apply to the lesbian couple who have to make up for the time they have lost. Instead, the speaker becomes aware of a different kind of "youth"; she enters a different temporality that renders her both ageless and grounded, both liberated by the experience of love, yet deeply aware of the limitations of a relationship. In wanting to know "even our limits" (144), Rich wishes to explore the ontological aspects of being with another person, irrespective of gender and sexuality. Paradoxically, it is queer, lesbian love that more easily removes the burden of specificity when it comes to a romantic bond. As we have mentioned previously, lesbian love is terra incognita, an unknown land that the two women must map out on their own. Without the bias of patriarchal institutions, literary canons or cultural narratives, the lesbian lovers are free to invent and re-invent themselves. This is not to say that queer women are not still influenced by patriarchal discourse; they live in the real world, as Rich constantly points out. However, queer women can more easily slip outside of heteronormative restrictions imposed on gender and sexuality. They can be anonymous and particular, at the same time. They may be able to seize different, contradictory aspects of love because they know what it is like to be outside of it, to yearn for it while also grappling with its fallacies:

the more I live the more I think
two people together is a miracle.
You're telling the story of your life
for once, a tremor breaks the surface of your words.
The story of our lives becomes our lives.
Now you're in fugue across what some I'm sure

Victorian poet called the *salt estranging sea*
Those are the words that come to mind.
I feel estrangement, yes. As I've felt dawn
pushing towards daybreak. Something: a cleft of light -?
Close between grief and anger, a space opens
where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder (152, XVIII).

The speaker considers it miraculous for two people to live their life together given that the private self is often inaccessible due to the burden of past traumas ("a tremor breaks the surface of your words"). The poet experiences a sense of helplessness when confronted with the lover's pain because the pain is private and cannot be shared. At the same time, the fact that she is a woman gives her insight into her partner's suffering, rendering the experience all the more frustrating. She is close to understanding, yet not close enough and, thus, remains trapped in her own subjectivity ("Close between grief and anger, a space opens/ where I am Adrienne alone"). The estrangement that the poet feels is expressed on a textual level as well; the text is *literally* estranged from itself as another text emerges, the poem *To "***Marguerite: Continued***"* by Matthew Arnold. The intertextual reference is both earnest and ironic; Rich echoes the pessimism of the "Victorian poet" when he bemoans humanity's solitary fate: "We mortal millions live *alone*" (Arnold, 2012: 75). Yet at the same time, she brings up Arnold's poem almost a self-conscious posturing; she cannot express her own estrangement without referencing another poet who expressed it before her. Hence, she is estranged from the very feeling of estrangement; she cannot verbalize it fully and genuinely without the crutch of literary baggage. Still, by referencing "**Marguerite**", Rich also plays with its conventions and transforms its pessimism. Arnold likens humans to islands, doomed to be forever apart and to comprehend this dreadful condition only at "night", when the distance between the islands becomes imperceptible:

But when the moon their hollows lights,
And they are swept by balms of spring
(….)
Oh! then a longing like despair
Is to their farthest caverns sent;

For surely once, they feel, we were
Parts of a single continent! (2012: 75)

Rich, on the other hand, dwells on the light of dawn, on the possibilities of illumination: "I feel estrangement, yes. As I've felt dawn/ pushing towards daybreak. Something: a cleft of light -?" Her sense of solitude is connected with the "cleft of light" which arrives with the clarity of daybreak and offers her an open space. Being "Adrienne alone" (2012: 152) is not just an echo of Arnold's curse; it is also a necessary break from the "miracle" of being with someone else. Adrienne seems to welcome this "cleft" as it offers the possibility of return; she is "growing colder" (152) so that she may once again grow warm when she reunites with the lover. In the following stanza (poem XIX), she wonders:

Can it be growing colder when I begin
to touch myself again, adhesions pull away?
When slowly the naked face turns from staring backward
and looks into the present,
the eye of winter, city, anger, poverty and death
and the lips part and say: *I mean to go on living?* (153)

Hence, the state of "Adrienne alone" is a necessary counterbalance, a pause before the return to the violent, restless present. Moreover, the poet knows that she can slip between these states; that she can leave and come back, because she and her lover are not constrained by the dichotomies of heterosexual coupling. Heterosexual narratives portray romantic love as a union, a merging of two beings, which is often the result of anguish and sacrifice: *Tristan und Isolde* is scarcely the story,/ women at least should know the difference/ between love and death" (152, XVII). For two lesbians, the obstacles are not intrinsic to the romance – "death" is not the attraction. On the contrary, the obstacles remind them of the erasure and violence perpetrated against them. Rather, it is the affirmation of life, of their sustained and continued existence, with or without interruptions, that propels them forward. This sustained existence is expressed erotically as a convergence without obligations in the only unnumbered stanza of the twenty-one poems, called *The Floating Poem, Unnumbered*. The untethered quality of its vernacular is exhibited in the very first lines, where the poet

discloses: “Whatever happens with us, your body/ will haunt mine – tender, delicate/ your lovemaking, like the half-curled frond/ of the fiddlehead fern in forests/ just washed by sun” (150). The sleek, luxurious rhythm of the alliterative enumeration “half-curled”, “frond”, fiddlehead”, “fern”, “forest” mirrors the elusive, ungraspable nature of the lovers’ embrace. The “lovemaking” is visualized as an unspooling of the fiddlehead fern whose fronds are curled and spiraled to both conceal and reveal the center. The women are thus “unnumbered” and uncategorized, their bodies “haunting” instead of dominating or conquering each other. They float like ghosts through each other, exploring the limits and pleasures of the body:

> Your traveled, generous thighs
> between which my whole face has come and come—
> the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—
> the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—
> your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
> me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
> reaching where I had been waiting years for you
> in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is. (150)

The slightly equivocal yet indisputable last words, “whatever happens, this is”, reflect the immediate and unclassified nature of the intimate encounter. As mentioned previously, for the queer lovers, there is the possibility of departure and return. The poem is “Floating” precisely because it is not fixed or grounded, yet is in a state of permanence. This image calls back to the “cleft of light” to which Rich returns in poem XXI: “when I said “a cleft of light/ I meant this (…) the mind/ casting back to where her solitude,/ shared, could be chosen without loneliness/ not easily nor without pains to stake out/ the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light” (154). A ‘shared solitude without loneliness’ encapsulates the “floating” and “unnumbered” quality of the women’s bond. The “circle” of light in which the lovers reside is not gained easily, but it is a matter of resilience and of choice: “I choose to be a figure in that light,/ half-blotted by darkness, something moving/ across the space, the colors of stone/ greeting the moon, yet more than stone:/ a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle (154). Here, the poet blurs the distinction between sexuality and gender; there is something ultimately queer and “half-blotted” about being a woman. As mentioned

previously, Adrienne Rich's representation of lesbianism and the "lesbian continuum" reflects a more ambiguous outlook on the relationship between gender and sexuality. The poet seems to suggest that all women have an unexplored queer capital that flourishes when they are allowed to redirect their energies towards each other (1994: 35). But Rich's poetic content more than her theoretical input reveals the slipperiness of queer desire and the inchoate, unsettled nature of queer subjectivity. The lovers live in the ordinary world but experience it as queer subjects and that transforms the text and renders it both political testimony and personal confession.

By shedding light on the vast connections between the public and the private, Adrienne Rich employs a (post)confessional mode, addressing issues relating to modernity, subjectivity, gender and sexuality, all through the lens of a queer subject who escapes classification and unequivocal identification.

Chapter Five: Sharon Olds and Familial Dynamics

5.1.The Familial in Poetry

There is something unsettling about poetry dedicated to mothers, fathers, children and siblings. One unsettling aspect comes from the nature of the relation between poet and addressee. The family member invoked in the poem shares something corporeal and particular with the creator; they are part of the same kin. There is something clannish about the word itself. Indeed, "kin" derives from the Old Saxon "*kuni*" which refers to one's race, tribe or kind ("kin", Online Etymology Dictionary, para. 1). To be part of the same kind, or the same race is an intimate condition. It involves commonality of features, gestures and practices. As Juana Maria Rodriguez argues, family is the first source of social rules and behaviors that inculcate in us

> what is familiar and familial and what must be relegated to the space of the strange and foreign (…) Kinship therefore functions as a switchpoint between the intimate and the social, and the metaphoric articulations of gesture, the site where practices of recognition and nonrecognition become instantiated (2014: 30).

If family is a liminal space that conjoins the social and the private, poetry which focuses on the ties of family is also bound to act within more than one space. The "familiar" and the "familial" are enacted within the poem. The reader may be "familiar" with the obligations and emotions engendered by family, but he or she is not "familial"; he or she is not part of that particular tribe or kind. As such, the reader is "relegated to the space of the strange" while also having to understand the "metaphoric articulations of gesture". Take for instance, these lines from the poem "**Admiring my Father**", by Thomas R. Smith:

> I'd have grabbed the cigar from between his teeth
> if he'd let me; I insisted on pressing the purring
> head of the razor on my cheek (Connors, 2000: 20).

Such disclosures place us as readers within the sanctum of a domestic scene where each gesture bears both an emotional familiarity (we might all empathize with the desire to be closer to a parent by any means possible) and also a familial distance (the pressing of the razor against the cheek may have a *second* codified meaning that only another family member would recognize).

Another relevant example may be found in William Wordsworth's gothic poem, "**The Vale of Esthwaite"** (1787), where the poet indirectly laments his father's death. At one point in the poem, he addresses his sister, Dorothy:

> Sister, for whom I feel a love
> What warms a Brother far above,
> On you, as sad she marks the scene,
> Why does my heart so fondly lean?
> Why but because in you is giv'n
> All, all, my soul would wish from heav'n?
> Why but because I fondly view
> All, all that heav'n has claim'd, in you? (2002: 26)

As readers, we may empathize with the intense brotherly love depicted here, particularly in the wake of parental death, but there are familial vestiges that remain concealed. When the poet cries that his sister represents "All, all that heav'n has claim'd" (26), it is because she embodies the mother and father he has already lost. Dorothy is now his whole family (Blank, 1995: 71). And it is the same for Dorothy, who dedicated her entire life to her brother. There were, of course, incestuous rumors concerning the pair (71), but their yearning went beyond the romantic: "They were bound by what they shared and by what was missing in their inner lives" (71). They both suffered as children under the care of distant relatives who did not "tolerate" their sensitivity (70) and this is one reason why they sought primary kinship in each other. But the transference of the mother and father unto Dorothy and the complicated emotional upheaval of such a transfer remain obscure to us, although they are alluded to in the lines above.

This is not to say that the reader must access all the background information to be able to engage with the poem; rather, we must be aware that, even with additional information, there are aspects of the familial which shall always remain concealed or coded to the outsider. Hence, there is a constant tension in interpretation and a sense of distance, even as the poet is sharing with us the intimate mechanisms of familial life. However, such a tension, we would argue, is conducive to an exploration of what it means to "write" the family.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the first reverie the individual experiences takes place within what Freud calls the "family romance". The young child aspires to an idealized version of his or her own family and hopes that he or she might actually be the secret offspring of royalty (Erwin, 2002: 187). The child fantasizes about exchanging one family for another. This kind of wishful thinking occurs to counter the disappointment and psychic pain of unfit parents or general unhappiness in the home (187). Freud argues that this is a creative act that enables children to separate from their parents, while also fueling their imagination (187). As such, we could say that the first time the individual "writes" his or her family is during the first stages of childhood, when a romanticized and ultimately fictionalized version of the family is born. From thereon, the various fictions we tell about family only multiply and converge, forming the narrative of our "*kuni*", our tribe, our kind.

What should be remarked at this point in the proceedings is that the child who fantasizes about and rewrites the family is usually male; Freud considers that young boys would exhibit a higher degree of imagination in such an endeavor due to the fact that they compete against the uncertain figure of the father (Hirsch, 1989: 55). In Freudian terminology, the father is designated as "semper incertus" (qtd. in Hirsch, 55), meaning that he is an ambiguous, shadowy figure, whereas the mother is described as "certissima" (55), a stable fixture in the child's life. Young boys feel compelled to venture further in their fantasies than young girls because their rival, the father, is an uncertain figure whom they can misplace (55). The drive to dethrone the father has, as Freud claims, "two principle aims, an erotic and an ambitious one" (qtd. in Hirsch, 55). By usurping the father, the boys become central figures in the family narrative, claiming independence from its constraints in order to pave their own path and "constitute a new self" (56). On the contrary, young girls do not

have the same creative opportunity of replacing the same-sex parent and destabilizing the family, "a process on which imagination and creativity depend" (55). Daughters may yearn to replace their mothers from an erotic drive, but not an ambitious one. In his famous essay "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" (1907), Freud theorizes that women yearn to be subsumed within the family by a male figure, be it brother or father, and their creative powers are, therefore, limited to the erotic. In other words, women have a more difficult time writing and rewriting the family because they come to it from a position of subjugation. They do not crave the "authority associated with the paternal position (…) but rather [hope] to gain access to it by marrying him" (Hirsch, 57).

Yet, it is this very subjugation that poets like Sharon Olds wish to interrogate and undermine, first by reconsidering whether women's creative powers depend on obtaining paternal authority, and secondly, by exploring the erotic in relation to familial hierarchies of power. In the following chapter, we will look at the poetry of Sharon Olds and the manner in which the "familial" and the "familiar" interplay to weave the tapestry of identity; both in her role as a daughter and a mother.

5.2. Relevant Biographical Notes

> I was a late bloomer. But anyone who blooms at all, ever, is very lucky. (Olds, in an interview with Laurel Blossom) (Blossom, 1993: 32)

Much like fellow confessionalist Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds (1942-) has also been blamed of self-indulgent lyricism that hinges on the vulgar and sentimental. Critics have particularly taken censure with her repetitive and obsessive childhood recollections. One such critic, William Logan, even remarked: "More than fifty years ago, during the Truman administration, Sharon Olds's parents tied her to a chair, and she has been writing about it ever since" (qtd. in Keefe, 2015:2). He is referring to an episode in Olds' early life which left a deep mark on her psyche. After spilling a bottle of ink on her parents' bedspread, Olds is tied to a chair as form of punishment. Her psychological turmoil is keenly represented in the

poem, "**The day they tied me up**" from the volume *Blood, Tin, Straw: Poems* (1999). But perhaps what is most arresting and disturbing about the poem is the element of pleasure which Olds derives from her punishment:

> I was in – they had said *You won't be fed till you*
> *say you're sorry*, I was strangely happy, I would
> never say I was sorry, I had left that
> life behind. So it didn't surprise me when she
> came in slowly, holding the bowl that
> held what swayed and steamed, she sat and
> spoon-fed me, in silence, hot
> alphabet soup. (1987: 110)

One might say that her writing vacillates between the grotesque and the seductive, mingling childhood trauma with erotic delight and the "joys of discovering relationships and motherhood" (Seeley, 2011:4). It is a precarious balance, made precarious on purpose. The poet Alicia Ostriker has aptly described her works as an "erotics of family love and pain" (qtd. in Kahn, 1999, para.2). This mixture has earned her a great number of followers, many of whom were born on the cusps of the sexual revolution of the 1960s (Seeley, 4). They appreciate Olds' boldness in choosing her topics, particularly those relating to sexuality and childbirth (4). They also admire her brutal, yet beautiful language, which, as Susan Schultz claims in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, finds "plenitude in plain speech" (qtd. in Ames, 2009, para. 3).

Although Olds is not very keen on the term "confessionalist", she does not altogether exclude the category. She has stated, in an interview, that the word "confession" bears a rather pejorative meaning for her because it involves admitting regret for some wrongdoings of the past (Blossom, 1993:30). She would much rather label her work as "apparently personal poetry" (30), because the poetic alter ego may not always match the real-life persona (30). This harkens back to the confessional dilemma of authenticity discussed in Chapter 1 and whether one can truly disclose the personal Self. By situating herself within

this argument, Olds is already employing a confessional outlook: the poet questions whether a certain degree of intimacy necessarily precedes absolute candor. She also advocates for the right to express herself on such "embarrassing" taboos as female sexuality and familial abuse without being censured for it. After all, in the hands of male poets, such topics have rarely received disapproval (Dillingham, 1999, para. 1).

Olds' interpretation of the word "confession" is also a reference to her strict religious upbringing. She was born in San Francisco and brought up in Berkeley, California, to a devout alcoholic father and a rather helpless mother who could not fight her husband's abuses (Kahn, Dillingham, 1999). Deprived of entertainment and the small joys of childhood, Olds was immersed in church life, where she took some comfort in the poetry of the Psalms, which she considered an example of good writing (Olds, 2010, para. 2). Other early influences consisted in Auden, Cummings, Eliot and Shakespeare (para. 2). Her tenuous relationship with her father is documented in her poetry, particularly in the volume *The Father* (1992) which records her conflicting emotions regarding her dying father, and whether she could learn to forgive him, while still harboring negative feelings for him (Dillingham, 1999, para. 2). After finishing the volume, Olds stated that "I won't be so scared to die in a plane crash now" (Olds, 2010, para. 29), since she had managed to exteriorize an old obsession.

Some detractors believe that these familial obsessions hinge on the grotesque; critic Adam Kirsch writes in his review of the volume *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1991) that "Olds' aim is not clarity, but blasphemy" (qtd. in Brickey, 2016: 6). Indeed, Olds demystifies and desacralizes not only her family, but *all* families, and repeatedly undermines the innocence of the mother-father-child triad. As Kirsch prosaically adjudicates, "In Olds' work, every permutation of this sin is played out. She imagines her parents having sex, imagines having sex with her parents, imagines her children sexually" (qtd. in Brickey, 5). Those who come in her defense, like critic Tony Hoagland, argue that there is more honesty and empathy in acknowledging the "sin" which is part of human history and which is "embedded in myth and poetry, the tangle of primal psychological relationships" (qtd. in Brickey, 5). Indeed, by confronting these primal urges, Olds humanizes them. It is not the emphasis on sex that characterizes her poems, as we shall see, but rather the contradictory human emotions that

surround it. To paraphrase Carolyne Wright, Olds does not simply offer us the darkness of family life but affirms the humanity within it (Brickey, 5).

While her fixation on her childhood and her parents' treatment is the meat of many of Olds' poems, there is also a considerable portion dedicated to the experience of motherhood and her own marital relationship (Johnson, 2002: 156, 161). The poet was concerned that she might act out the abuse she suffered on her own son and daughter. As consequence, she was constantly wary not to replicate her parents' unhealthy behavior (161). This is one reason why her poetic sensibility made her particularly attentive to her children, their bodies and their sexuality. While such transgressive scrutiny might sometimes verge on the inappropriate, Olds has irreverently re-envisioned the Mother's role through the body, which she employs as "a site of meaning and metaphor" (Johnson, 157). Much like Clifton, she is willing to "look at even the most private parts of the body and to report what she sees in frank detail and language" (157).

A graduate of Columbia University, Olds decided, upon acquiring her PhD in American Literature, that she would forego the academic notions she had learned about poetry and instead "write my own poems…They don't have to be any good, but just mine" (Patterson, 2006, para. 8). Olds' statement may be considered a confessionalist manifesto, since it is an uncompromising pact with the self to write only what feels genuinely owned. When referring to her first volume of poetry, *Satan Says* (1980), Olds admits that "Poems started pouring out of me and Satan was in a lot of them," (para.8). Although this idea may seem eccentric, it is in line with what confessional poetry aims to do; that is, exorcizing one's personal demons. By "revivifying the child" and bringing past traumas to light, the adult is given a chance to enlarge the self (Harris, 2001: 255). In fact, this is an opportunity to "reveal and counter the tyranny she lived under when she was unable to "speak" or "disobey"" (255-256). Such a technique has a liberating effect on both the poet and the audience. In a similar vein, Russell Brickey argues that Olds builds on the confessional practice of mirroring the conflicts of the world in the dysfunctions of the family (2016: 1) and that "the same dynamics of cruelty and self-interest one sees in the microcosm of the family can be seen in the macrocosm of the dictator, the corrupt politician, or the specter of war" (1). The wide

range of the poems' themes, though strictly related to personal experience, interweave the private and the public in meaningful ways.

Olds followed up her debut with several volumes of poetry, among which *The Dead and the Living* (1984), *Gold Cell* (1987), *The Father* (1992), *The Wellspring* (1996). *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1991) and *Stag's Leap* (2012) are the most evocative and challenging. *Stag's Leap*, which documents her husband's affair and the collapse of her marriage more than a decade after its dissolution, won her both the T.S. Eliot prize and the Pulitzer Prize (Clark, 2013, para. 2). The work was characterized as "beyond the confessional" (para. 3), and though this description may hint at an overtness which breaches the line between life and art, we must keep in mind that *Stag's Leap* is mainly about past events, and the past is already fictionalized in our unreliable recollections. As Billy Collins puts it in his essay, *My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry* (2001):

> That memory is a creative act which can be proven by simply scrutinizing a few of our favorite stories about ourselves and then admitting how slight the connection is between them and actual past events. We are, after all, the sum total of our own stories, our reiterated fictions … In poetry, the imagination is not just free to add the light that never was, it is *expected* to carry the poem beyond the precincts of ordinary veracity. (2001:284)

Whether we are more reserved or expansive about the past, it is a creative fiction that we define and which ultimately comes to define us. If poetry must go beyond "ordinary veracity" it must be allowed to explore what was conceived and misconceived in our personal histories. In this light, Sharon Olds' poetry attempts to nurture and question self-invention, as she delves into her family's past and connects it with her present. In the following sections, we shall tackle Sharon Olds' poetry from the perspective of daughterhood and motherhood. To this end, we will be looking over poems from the anthology *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980 – 2002* (2004).

5.3.Daughterhood

5.3.1. Creative memory in "**I Go Back to May 1937**"

American poet Billy Collins spoke about the power of poetry to transform the past, stating that "a poem about a past experience can transcend the mere circumstance of its triggering event" (2001: 283). Sharon Olds attempts a similar feat when she reminisces about her childhood. There is nothing plaintive or piteous about her tone in poems that speak about her mother and father; rather, she chooses to turn the anger and regret into creative outlet. Olds mentioned in an interview that she likes Emily Dickinson's idea of the "someone" in her poems (Blossom, 1993: 30), a stand-in for the personal "I" who turns "private suffering…into collective experience" (Klanderman, 2008: 22). The poems we will be analyzing in this section deal with her private experience as the daughter of a dysfunctional family.

Olds does not simply recount her feelings in relation to her parents; she places herself in their position. In many of her poems, she revisits and reinvents incidents from the past (Woodford, 2008: 73), in which she identifies with her mother and father, but also observes them from a distance, like a benevolent, but penetrating god. One might say she has the ability to travel in the past, but still remain rooted in the present, hence finding herself "in two places at once" (Lewallen, 2006: 53, 54). No other poem exhibits this process more than "**I Go Back to May 1937**" (*Gold Cell*, 1987), wherein she imagines herself meeting her parents on the eve of their entering adult life, to warn them against marriage and procreation. In a sentiment echoing that of Philip Larkin's "**This Be The Verse**", Olds tells her parents that they will, by their own volition or not, inflict great damage upon their offspring:

> …you are going to do things
> you cannot imagine you would ever do
> you are going to do bad things to children (Olds, 2012: 44)

The speaker addresses her parents through the binary "you – I", dissociating herself from them, but also becoming inevitably embroiled in their existence. She first depicts her parents in the first person, telling us how she sees them as "dumb kids", fresh out of college:

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
(…) red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
(…)
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody. (44)

What strikes the reader at first glance is the immediacy of the images, the prosaic and concrete quality (Zalipour, 2009: 82) which demystifies the privileged position of forefathers and ancestors. Mothers and fathers are subject to judgment, censure and even ridicule, but, as Olds shows us, they may also be pitied and humanized. In this instance, she stresses how innocent and naïve each parent was before marriage, to the effect that we are persuaded that they had little part in their own corruption (Seeley, 2011: 11):

...I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body…(Olds, 44)

That is why Olds resembles a benevolent god; her acute observations are mingled with sympathetic remarks which show a deep understanding of humanity. It is another reason for which the poem is only "apparently personal" (Blossom, 1993:30), since it goes beyond denunciating her parents to reveal the inherent tragedy of every new family. Olds seems to suggest that inflicting pain is out of humanity's control, echoing Larkin's prophetic "They may not mean to, but they do" (2004: 89). She does not excuse her parents, but she understands them.

A second thing which draws the reader's attention is the use of the pronoun "I", particularly in the fifth verse: "plates of blood behind his head, I" (Olds, 44). It is not the only occasion where the verse emulates a fragmentary and overflowing speech. Indeed, Olds proclaimed that the technique of enjambment came to her naturally, as a way of "protecting things by hiding them" (Patterson, 2006, para. 8). In other words, she splintered and hastened her speech in order to not dwell excessively on her emotional reactions. But the fifth verse of the poem betrays her intention to be stealth and evade confrontation. The missing subject of "see my mother with a few light books at her hip" (44) as well as the sudden blank after "all they know is they are" (44) both evince a pattern of avoidance. Olds appears to be creeping between her parents, following them like shadows, meandering through each verse, yet never quite intervening directly. It makes sense that she protects herself by hiding. It comes as a surprise, then, that she switches to the second person and risks a direct encounter, halfway through the poem:

> …Stop
> don't do - she's the wrong woman,
> he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
> you cannot imagine you would ever do,
> you are going to do bad things to children,
> you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
> you are going to want to die. (Olds, 2012: 44)

This brusque address works as a wishful intervention; the speaker wants to stop being a simple shadow, contemplating the past, and become a changing element in her parents' relationship. The paradox is that, by wishing to be an active agent, the poet renders her own existence passive, for, in the process of annulling her parents' union, she would also annul her own birth (Lewallen, 2006: 53). Going a step further, if the poet were never born, she could not travel in the past and prevent her mother and father's partnership in the first place. More importantly, she would not be able to bemoan the injustice and tragedy of this very condition.

Faced with such a choice, Olds knows she must live, but she expresses this decision in solipsistic terms, placing her own welfare above her parents' happiness: "but I don't do it. I want to live" (Olds, 44). It is a fitting opposition to the previously stated "you are going to want to die" (45) and it is an affirmation of the "I" in spite of, and because of, the "you". The re-affirmation of the self is also a way of saying yes to the past and accepting the source of pain in the present (Lewallen, 2006: 53, 54). Olds performs a ritualistic copulation in language, enacting the sexual act between her parents to ensure that she will live. In this way, she gives the impression that she alone has the power to decide this fate:

> …I
> take them up like the male and female
> paper dolls and bang them together
> at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
> strike sparks from them… (44)

Olds resorts to the metaphor of a child playing with dolls to show the discrepancy between the little girl who crudely visualizes her parents' intimacy, and the grown woman who finds tragic meaning in the union of mother and father. The poet operates as both the little girl and the adult woman to imply a seamless connection between past and present, almost as if Olds, the child, already possessed this vision of family life, marriage and sufferance. Indeed, this goes hand in hand with the very last lines of the poem:

> …I say
> Do what you are going to do, and I will tell you about it. (44)

This would suggest that Olds, the poet, behaves like a metaphysical entity that transcends both the child and the woman and chooses life in order to write. "I want to live" grows into "I want to live to write" and, as poet Aaron Smith attests, the poem becomes an ars poetica:

> …the narrator is not only participating in making her very "physical" body by initiating (furiously) a sexual act between her parents, but she is also constructing a "body" of poetics (qtd. in Woodford, 2008: 69)

In choosing to tell "her own story" (69) through her parents' union, Olds turns daughterhood into a subversive position, a space which encapsulates both sexual encounter and birth, both adulthood and childhood, both life and death.

5.3.2. The mother-daughter relationship in "**Why My Mother Made Me**"

Another poem which revisits the past and plays with identification between daughter and parents is "**Why My Mother Made Me**" (*Gold Cell*, 1987). In it, Olds alternates between the physicality of intercourse and the physicality of birth, positioning herself as the element which unites mother and father. The question in the title finds its answer in the poem; the mother made the daughter as a substitute for the father, a psychoanalytical interpretation which Olds both embraces and mocks in such lines as:

> Maybe I am what she always wanted,
> my father as a woman,
> maybe I am what she always wanted to be
> when she first saw him, tall and smart,
> standing there in the college yard with the
> hard male light of 1937
> shining on his slicked hair. (Olds, 2012: 46)

It is not only that the mother wants the daughter to be an accessible female equivalent of the father; she also wants to *be* her daughter, and indirectly, be her husband. This is a complicated reversal of the Freudian "penis envy", wherein a young girl, upon the discovery that she lacks a penis, will try to compensate by aspiring towards mothering a son (Freud, 2014: 12). In our case, the mother aspires to the "hard male light" (Olds, 46) through the daughter and conversely, the mother wishes to embody the daughter by way of the father. The ultimate goal is still womanhood, but underscored by the allure of the confident male. The mother transfers the desire she feels for the father onto the daughter and vice versa, playacting a queer network of kinship that breaks down the traditional parental hierarchy. What is more, the poet doesn't shrink from placing us within the network, enacting the

mother's desires and embodying her as she, as the child, is quite literally being made into a body:

> ...She wanted that
> power. She wanted that size. She pulled and
> pulled through him as if he were silky
> bourbon taffy, she pulled and pulled and
> pulled through his body till she drew me out,
> sticky and gleaming, her life after her life. (46)

A prosaic reading of these lines may lead the reader to think Olds is simply employing more graphic metaphors to describe the sexual act, wherein the vagina draws the penis inside through repeated "pulling", thus achieving a sense of power. Yet if we consider the title of the poem and the active, almost disturbing role the mother plays in the "making" of the daughter, the poem presents us with another inverted image: the mother is the one who "fucks" the father, impregnating him and afterwards, pulling the fetus out of his body. Indeed, "she pulled through him" (46) could be equated with a penetration, a piercing of the male body that is now the site of birth ("pulled through his body"). This is further emphasized in the description of the man as "silky bourbon taffy", therefore as feminine, soft and passive. The male body, in this way, is a conduit for the meeting between mother and daughter, who is "her life after her life" (46). This unconventional sexual triangle also plays with the Freudian concept of the Polymorphous-perverse Disposition. Freud theorizes that until a certain age, the child is predisposed to certain sexual perversions because the notions of "shame, loathing and morality (…) are not yet erected or are only in the process of formation" (2016: 65). Freud goes on to say that a clever seducer may persuade the child to perform transgressive sexual acts, and the same seduction might engender results on the "average uncultured woman in whom the same polymorphous-perverse disposition exists" (65). Such a woman could be persuaded by the seducer to enjoy certain perversions outside a normal context and this, Freud claims, is the chief purpose of the prostitute who fulfills sexual fantasies outside the social norms (65). In the poem, a similar "perversion" or deviation is enacted by decentering the eroticism of intercourse; namely, it is not the father's penis which produces pleasure but the mother's repeated ministrations on the father's body

and the eventual projection of the daughter out of the father's body. The mother, hence, is the seducer who persuades the father into a transgressive sexual act and she also channels her desire onto the child, since the daughter's emergence is the actual site of pleasure. If the child is predisposed to deviance, the daughter is the conglomeration of her mother's desires, which eschew notions of "shame, loathing and morality" (Freud, 65).

The same double reading can be applied to the verses that follow which include different metaphors to signal the act of procreation. Olds describes her mother as both embracing and rejecting her femininity: in the first instance, she "pressed herself, hard, against him" (46), echoing the dominant position of the previous verses, but immediately she is rendered docile when she "pressed the clear soft/ ball of herself like a stick of beaten cream/ against his stained sour steel grater…" (46). But is it really docility? On the one hand, the "soft ball" pressing against the "steel grater" seems to restore the more dominant position of the father in the sexual act, but on the other hand, the imagery depicted here plays with expectations. If the ball of beaten cream were pressed up against a steel grater, one would expect that some of the cream would get through the small holes of the grater. Thus, the visual image is that of the female once more penetrating the male. Interestingly, it is the very softness of the cream that allows such permeability. The metal is vulnerable to its assault. The image is confirmed in the next verse when the speaker describes how she "came out the other side of his body" (46), placing once more the male body as the site of birth. The child born out of this complicated mixture also exhibits disparate traits: "a tall woman, stained, sour, sharp,/ but with that milk at the center of my nature" (46). The daughter borrows the sharpness and sourness of the steel grate, but retains some of the cream of the mother. Yet what does it mean that the daughter is conceived by the male body and comes out of him rather than the mother?

One argument would be that Olds is redirecting the blame for a past trauma. It was the father who played a bigger part in Olds' childhood abuse, yet the poet designates the mother as the active agent who selfishly made the daughter in the image of her husband, thus indirectly inciting the abuse that was to follow. In many cases where there is family trauma, Michael A. Gara argues that the child chooses not to identify with the mother "regardless of whether the perpetrator was the mother or the father" (qtd. in Johnson, 2002: 158). While

Olds does not dissociate from her mother, by placing the site of birth in the man's body and rendering him a passive recipient, she seems to indicate that the mother is the one who should have prevented the father's abuse, and who has the power to make up for his sins.

That being said, Olds' attitude towards her mother is ambivalent, showcasing the depth of her understanding of her own parents. She regards her mother's desires as complicated and human, since the daughter is both "her life after her life" (46), a source of gratification, and also a possible threat. The child embodies "her life" precisely because she shares the father's features. The mother aspires to be like the child, who is not only a more successful iteration of her, but who is now also competing for the father's attention. This condition is known as the Snow-White syndrome which was first outlined by Betsy Cohen in her book *The Snow White Syndrome: All About Envy* (1986). Owing a debt to Freud's analysis of the Oedipal syndrome, the Snow White syndrome manifests as a desire of the mother to consume and absorb the youth and beauty of the daughter, in the same way that the stepmother in the original fairy tale wishes to quite literally eat Snow White's heart (Frankel, 2016: 133). As Madonna Kolbenschlag points out in *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models* (1988): "When the wicked stepmother devours what she believes to be Snow White's liver and lungs (vital organs), she recaptures a primitive cannibalistic expression of envy, the belief that one acquires the power and characteristics of what one eats" (qtd. in Frankel, 133).

In "**Why My Mother Made**" the desire to become the daughter is made more complex by the inversion of certain sexual dynamics between child and parents. Namely, the mother desires the daughter embodied in father, while also desiring the father embodied in the daughter: "Maybe I am what she always wanted/ my father as a woman" (46). Such yearnings resist classification and analysis, which is why their most fertile medium is poetry. Looking down upon her child, the mother sees both enticement and threat:

> I lie here now as I once lay
> in the crook of her arm, her creature,
> and I feel her looking down into me the way
> the maker of a sword gazes at his face

in the steel of the blade. (Olds, 46-47)

The speaker describes herself as her mother's creature not only in the familial sense, but in a more pragmatic manner; she is her mother's instrument, crafted in order to reflect her visage but also to reflect the foreignness of the father. It is no incident that Olds employs a masculine pronoun when referring to the sword maker who gazes at "his face" (47). There is yet again, in the same verses, a sense of nearness and dissociation. The daughter, we might say, is like the alchemic homunculus, theorized by Paracelsus in *De natura rerum* as a being that can "be born outside the female body and [without] a natural mother" (qtd. in Newman, 2005: 203). The homunculus requires a father's presence (the semen) more than a mother's, just as in the poem the child must come out of the man's body. Therefore, the daughter is the mother's creature, but at the same time she must transcend that very condition and become her own maker. As the poet confirms, the mother "wanted there to be a woman/ a lot like her, but who would not hold back" (46). These lines may also be read in relation to the father's abuse; if the mother cannot stop the father from doing harm, the daughter must manage without her and not "hold back". As such, the daughter is both a negation and an affirmation of the mother, an accumulation of everything the mother can and cannot be. This multifaceted portrayal, though harboring certain traumas and unorthodox yearnings, is one way of reconciling or reckoning with the past. In this manner, Olds reconstructs the relationship with her mother as an "attachment that, while certainly anxious, is no less essential to her sense of self" (Johnson, 2002: 159).

5.3.3. The father-daughter relationship in "**Satan Says**" and "**The Lifting**"

Just as essential to the poet is her attachment to her father, if not more so. Olds has suffered more abuse at the hands of her father and has had a difficult time resolving the feelings of love and hatred that he often inspired. She has dedicated an entire volume (*The Father*, 1992) to a dying paternal figure that she both repudiates and cherishes. Like most abused children, she was compelled to feel guilt whenever she thought ill of her abuser (Johnson, 2008: 158). In her first volume of poetry, *Satan Says* (1980), Olds hesitates

between accusing and absolving her father, deriving both pleasure and guilt from her confession. In the titular poem "**Satan Says**", she lets loose a torrent of obscenities which are meant to annihilate the father, but which actually give him a preeminence that is difficult for the poet to downplay:

(…) Satan
comes to me in the locked box
and says, *I'll get you out. Say*
My father is a shit. I say
my father is a shit and Satan
laughs (…)
Say shit, say death, say fuck the father,
Satan says, down my ear.
The pain of the locked past buzzes
in the child's box on her bureau, under
the terrible round pond eye
etched around with roses, where
self-loathing gazed at sorrow.
Shit. Death. Fuck the father.
Something opens. Satan says
Don't you feel a lot better?
(…) I love him too,
you know, I say to Satan dark
in the locked box. (Olds, Poetry Foundation, n.d)

The conceit of the poem is entrapment; the speaker is locked in "a little cedar box" (Olds, n.d.) adorned with a heart-shaped lock which has no key, surrounded by the bucolic scenery of childhood. The poet believes that writing about the box might unlock it: "I am trying to write my/ way out of the closed box" (Olds, n.d.), yet she ironically needs a paternal figure to give her permission. The entrance of Satan is both unsettling and humorous; the ancestral figure slips inside the box and offers the poet the temptation of easy release if she gives into baser instincts - in this case, baser language. Indeed, as Brickey argues, the devil is

the perfect figure to entice the writer, because there is always "collateral damage" (2016: 15) when language is misappropriated and, once such words are spoken, they can never be taken back. Satan is, in another sense, the perfect anti-Father too. He projects paternal authority while at the same time ridiculing it. His angelic origins make him the progeny of the first patriarch, the Christian God, but he also functions as "the screen onto which repellent traits about God are projected. In Satan all the dry bones of disquieting doubts and disfiguring experiences with the divine massed, grew sinew, organs and circulatory systems, and were finally animated by an evil spirit" (Wray, Mobley, 2014: 177). Satan, then, has been created to replicate a prohibited version of the Father. By repeatedly encouraging the poet to "say" bad things, even comforting her in the process ("*Don't you feel a lot better?*"), he ironically gives her the necessary paternal affirmation to demean another paternal figure.

The speaker certainly finds release in slinging profanities at her father precisely because the subject is enveloped in an aura of the sacred. Such thoughts belong in a "locked box" since the disavowal of the paternal figure is furtive and hesitant. Despite the violent language of the poem, the attitude towards the father is not casual; on the contrary, the poet can indulge in profanity specifically because this is a sacrilegious act. She is assaulted by equal parts "self-loathing" and "sorrow" as she grapples with the unmaking of the father. The admission that she loves him ("I love him too,/ you know") is not necessarily meant to break the chain of obscenities; rather her love is *part* of the obscenities because it is coupled with the scatological and the abject ("*My father is a shit*"). Indeed, Satan's encouragement to "*say fuck the father*" (Olds, n.d.) contains both an adolescent rebuff and a reference to incestuous desire, though Brickey argues that the latter is a result of the poet's emotional rather than sexual need for "attention from an emotionally distant patriarch" (2016: 16).

The figure of the mother also appears in connection with the father, but she is relegated to the status of sexual partner, rather than object of obsession:

> *Say: the father's cock, the mother's*
> *cunt,* says Satan, *I'll get you out.*
> The angle of the hinge widens
> until I see the outlines of

the time before I was, when they were
locked in the bed. (Olds, n.d.)

The image of her parents "locked" in bed recalls the entrapment of the speaker who cannot escape the "heart-shaped lock" of her box. At the same time, the speaker gives into her voyeuristic instinct as the "hinge widens" and she is invited to look. Though she is hesitant to echo the devil's profanities, she symbolically defiles her parents by watching them in a pose which undermines their authority. Walter Lewallen points out that the image of the mother and father "locked in bed" also recalls the copulation of dogs that are unable to separate after a certain stage (2006: 39). And yet this double profanation only heightens the sense of entrapment; Olds is not freed from her cedar box, even if she blasphemes the parental dyad and in particular, the father. In fact, the more she allows Satan to coax her into linguistic obscenity, the more inhibited she becomes:

Come in, he says, and I feel his voice
breathing from the opening.
The exit is through Satan's mouth.
Come in my mouth, he says, *you're there*
already, and the huge hinge
begins to close. Oh no, I loved
them, too, I brace
my body tight
in the cedar house (Olds, n.d.)

The sexual dimension of Satan's invitation is difficult to ignore, but more pressing is the lack of choice the speaker feels when it comes to her own liberation. The way out would entail having to exchange one orifice (the box) for another (Satan's mouth). Satan's initial beckoning to "*Come out*" has subtly changed into "*Come in*", stressing the transfer of power. Given these odds, the poet chooses to remain confined. Satan seals the "heart-shaped lock" with his tongue, derisively warning her that "*It's your coffin now*" (Olds, n.d.). Yet is it so? The decision to stay inside the box may seem counterintuitive, even a failure on the poet's

part to confront the past. But if we examine the contents of this cage more closely, we notice some subversive elements:

> My spine uncurls in the cedar box
> like the pink back of the ballerina pin
> with a ruby eye, resting beside me on
> satin in the cedar box (Olds, n.d.)

The motion of the speaker's spine uncurling could read as an awakening of agency, i.e. growing a spine, but it is also an unsettling, slightly alien image (Brickey, 16) because it does not reflect the constitution of the human body. The "uncurling" brings to mind a reptilian flexibility that ironically mirrors Satan's mobility: "Satan sucks himself out the keyhole" (Olds, n.d.). Even the apparent symbol of girlhood, "the ballerina pin" is not only a graceful feminine figure but an instrument of pain which can cause injuries. The poet may be trapped under the guise of the obedient daughter, but her very disguise is dangerous. As the daughter, she is poised to inflict the most damage because she resides at the center of her family. The "ruby eye" is yet another source of disquiet; it may be a way of seeing that does not require the box to be opened. Additionally, Lewallen considers that the reference to roses ("the terrible round pond eye/ etched around with roses") and the appearance of the "ruby eye" may bear a connection with the poet's name, Sharon, whose Old Testament origins are asserted in the Song of Solomon: "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" (qtd. in Lewallen, 39). Later in the poem, having rejected Satan's offer, the speaker turns to the ruby eye:

> I hardly hear;
> I am warming my cold
> hands at the dancer's
> ruby eye—
> the fire, the suddenly discovered knowledge of love. (Olds, n.d.)

The element of fire underlines the liberating possibilities found within the box, because the warmth originates in "the rose of Sharon". The love that the speaker discovers is

not only the love directed towards the father, but self-love – the ability to love oneself in spite of failure and resentment. The childhood box is described in the beginning of the poem as "redolent of cedar" (Olds, n.d.) and that in itself is another hint of self-possession; as Lewallen suggests, the word "redolent" is formed of the Biblical "red" that we have mentioned previously, and "ole", the antiquated spelling of "old" (2006: 45). Hence, the poet's name and identity are asserted at the open and close of the poem – as if the poem itself were a box. By correlation, breaking free of the box would mean that Olds would break free of her own self, but in the process she might cause herself irreparable damage. As Sybil Estess affirms in her review, the poet "declines Satan's offer to disparage any aspect of her life" (qtd. in Brickey, 16) and in this way maintains possession of herself. By rejecting Satan's offer, Olds metaphorically rejects the negative father figure, the un-Father and discards a false patriarchal authority, preferring to live with her childhood hurt rather than try to erase it.

A sense of hard-won reconciliation and contradictory emotions also pervade the later volume, *The Father* (1992), but they are expressed by a more mature poet whose interest has shifted from confession to reflection. In the poem "**The Lifting**", Olds depicts her dying father in a hospital bed, at the end of his life, exposing his naked flesh, his vulnerability and ultimately, his masculinity to her. The portrayal is a departure from the father envisioned in "**Satan Says**", because it demystifies the paternal figure and renders him "beyond taboo, beyond oedipal" (Lewallen, 2006: 63). He is, in essence, made small and normal by one of his victims, a young girl who used to harbor an unhealthy obsession for him. It bears mentioning again that Olds was physically fascinated and repulsed by her father (Johnson, 2008: 159). Incestuous implications aside, this attraction provided a coping mechanism for the abused daughter who, despite wanting to condemn her father, still craved his love. In "**The Lifting**", she witnesses the man in his weakest, but perhaps most genuine form:

(…) I looked
where his solid ruddy stomach had been
and I saw the skin fallen into loose
soft hairy rippled folds (…)
the gaunt torso of a big man

who will die soon. (Olds, 2012: 62)

Not only does she see the man's true form, she also has a revelation of biblical proportions, a kind of knowledge one acquires during an epiphany (Lewallen, 63). This interpretation is solidified by the fact that the speaker compares the lifting of her father's nightgown to the "lifting of the veil" after one's death: "the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything" (Olds, 63). Lewallen points out that this episode mirrors the "homotextual" scene in Genesis, whereupon Ham comes upon his father Noah naked and drunk in his tent (2006: 58). The shocking sight compels Ham to tell his brothers, Shem and Jephath, of what he has seen. The two brothers quickly cover the father's shame without gazing at him, but when Noah wakes up, he curses Ham's son, Canaan, to be the slave of his brothers, thereby dividing the sons and the peoples that are descendant from them. A family and its heirs are disrupted due to the unfortunate witnessing of the father in his disgrace. Yet, it is not simply the sight itself that makes Ham's offense punishable. His brothers do their best to avoid looking at the naked father, because seeing a naked man was considered the same as having sex with him (Niditch, 2016: 107). Indeed, the forbidden act of intercourse between family members is described in Leviticus 18 as someone "reveal[ing] the nakedness" of someone else (qtd. in Niditch, 107). Hence, some scholars have posited that Ham's true offense was having sex with his father (107). Regardless of the true nature of Ham's transgression, catching the father in a moment of weakness is hazardous, even incestuous. In Olds' case, the "unveiling" actually heals the breach between family members. The patriarch's nakedness is not a curse upon the descendants but a form of penance. He *has* to expose himself in order to gain the daughter's pity and forgiveness. For what is the poet's revelation when she sees her father's sickly form? That her father is human, after all, and that, despite the ugliness of his degradation, she still bears affection for him:

I would sit by him and he'd pull up his nightie
and I'd look at his naked body, at the thick
bud of his glans, his penis in all that
sparse hair, look at him
in affection and uneasy wonder
I would not have believed it. (62)

The male genitalia are rendered ordinary and pitiful, as if the phallus can no longer exert any power over the daughter, except the power to inspire sympathy. Olds has mentioned her father's penis in the past as a dominant and intrusive presence (Johnson, 2008: 159), but here it is stripped of eroticism and shrunk to its simple, biological existence. At the same time, the penis is still an object of fascination for the poet, but for entirely different reasons; she marvels that this part of the body still survives in the dying father and can still inspire emotion (Woodford, 2008: 112). That is why the perceived emasculation of the father should not be taken at face value. Although the lifting of the "nightie" renders him a voyeuristic object in his daughter's eyes (111), the speaker gives him back his subjectivity by placing herself within that nakedness: "Right away/ I saw how much his hips are like mine,/ the lengthened, white angles and then/ how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's" (Olds, 62). If we reconsider the episode from Genesis, we may juxtapose Ham's son, Canaan, who is punished for his father's sin, with the poet's daughter, who is recognized as the rightful heir of the grandfather. In Canaan's case, the fact that he is debased to the condition of slave removes him from the line of inheritance, whereas the poet's daughter carries forward the patriarch's legacy in her pelvis, the location of the uterus and of womanhood itself. Furthermore, unlike Ham, who happens upon his naked father by accident, in "**The Lifting**", it is the father who asks his daughter to look:

> Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I
> turned my head away but he cried out
> *Share!*, my nickname, so I turned and looked. (Olds, 62)

The use of the poet's nickname is both a demand and a supplication; the father uses the child's name to reaffirm his lost authority, but also to beg the daughter to "share" and partake of his suffering (Lewallen, 2006: 60). His request is to be known and accepted even at this stage of his life. Of course, there are other ways in which we may interpret the use of the poet's nickname, since, as readers, we must decide which pronunciation of the word is more accurate; does the father pronounce it "sharr" which might lead one to think of a shard of glass? Or is it perhaps a reference to the French "*cher*" meaning darling or beloved (Lewallen, 60)? And if we take it a step further, could it not also point to the French "*chair*" for flesh? His daughter, after all, is flesh of his flesh and one day, she will be as frail and

weak as him. Is the father's summoning a warning? Or perhaps his cry is an acknowledgement of the burdensome bond between father and child, since another possible pronunciation may lead us to think of "char", the act of burning and scorching (Lewallen, 60). The daughter's gaze burns, but so does the father's (60). They are seeing each other's past and assessing each other's future and are, as such, inextricably linked. Every interpretation eschews simplification because the nature of their relationship is as ambiguous and complex as the many possible renditions of "*Share!*".

In any case, Olds chooses to portray the father's voluntary nakedness as an act of courage (Woodford, 2008: 111). It takes fortitude for the abuser to render himself vulnerable to the abused. And the final proof that Olds has, more or less, accepted the father is that she has aligned his physiognomy with that of her daughter's, bridging the gap between generations. The poet has not entirely forgiven the paternal figure, but she has come to terms with his humanity.

5.4 Motherhood

In her essay "The Language of Blood: Toward a Maternal Sublime" (1992), Patricia Yaeger argues that childbirth terrifies and disturbs the wholeness of the self, because the woman pushes the limits of the body as an articulate subject:

> In the act of giving birth, women splinter the concept of personhood; they become the wound in humanity, for they encounter the world both as speaking and as reproductive beings. With so many articulate orifices, women move beyond normal selfhood, beyond purification. Historically, birthing women belong, then, to the shameful zone of abjection (qtd. in Kutzbach, Mueller, 2007: 152).

The birthing woman disrupts the concept of personhood precisely because she remains an articulate subject while her body is engaged in disarticulation. The conscious "giving" of birth places the mother in disjunction with divinity. As St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have theorized, only God is endowed with creational power whereas "the creature

cannot itself create" (qtd. in Pope, 2005: 45), meaning that, while Adam and Eve were allowed to name God's creatures, they could not create them (45). Yet, in the process of birthing, the mother engages in a creational act that defies theological tenets, to a certain degree. God created Man not within himself, but as an exteriority. The mother creates human life both within herself and as an exteriority. She is both speaking and reproductive subject, still herself but at the same time an unknown extension of herself. She opens her body in grotesque ways, allowing for abject fluids to pour in and out of her, while at the same time remaining a thinking subject, trying to find value in her "situatedness" (Covino, 2004: 110).

For Barbara Creed, the womb is the quintessential source of abjection because "it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces. The abject nature of the womb and the birth process caused the Church fathers to recoil in horror at the very idea that man should be born of woman" (2012: 49). As such, the possibility that woman contains both the divine and the abject within herself is terrifying because it breaks down the process by which we define ourselves as subjects. As Georges Bataille conceptualizes in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957): "There is always some limit which the individual accepts. He identifies this limit with himself. Horror seizes him at the thought that this limit may cease to be" (1962: 144). In the act of birth, the "limit" ceases to be and the mother is defined by what Julia Kristeva calls "a vortex of summons and repulsion" (qtd in Barrett, 2011: 70). On the one hand, the mother "summons" the child back into her womb, in a "state of non-differentiation" (Barrett, 71), but at the same time she pushes the child out into the world, forcing it to confront the "ego", the distinctive sense of self (71). Throughout his or her life, the child will always be compelled and repulsed by that initial separation from the mother (71). He or she will want to return to that pre-linguistic, pre-egoist state, while at the same time dreading its chaos. In Lacanian terminology, the individual yearns for the Imaginary stage where mother and child are one, before the Symbolic stage of language and separation sets in, with the result of seeing the mother as different from the self (Kaplan, 2013: 30). Hence, birth is the site where selfhood breaks down and at the same time is constructed anew, and the mother plays an essential role in both cases. The mother extends herself beyond the body, encompassing both wholeness and fragmentation.

To give a relevant example, in the novel *Anna Karenina* by Lev Tolstoy, we are told about Kitty's labor through the point of view of her husband, Levin, who describes his wife's sounds of pain as shockingly alien: "[he] heard someone shrieking and moaning in a way he had never heard before, and knew that these sounds came from what had once been Kitty…" (2012: 856). As Adrienne Rich points out, Kitty is dehumanized or even "possessed" by her pain (1995: 166); certainly she has become an unrecognizable Other who frightens due to her transformation. And yet at the end, when Levin hears "a soft stir, a bustle (…) and her voice, faltering, vibrant, tender and blissful" (Tolstoy, 856), he is amazed that she is still his wife; still the speaking and reproductive subject that Patricia Yaeger conceptualized.

Historically, the societal attitude towards motherhood has often shifted from exaltation to condemnation; the mother is mythologized by the patriarchy as "beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing" (Rich, 1995: 34) while at the same time the woman's body is "impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings (…) a source of moral and physical contamination" (34). Concomitantly, the mother is worthy of respect only if her children are "legitimate" (Rich, 42) that is, only if they "[bear] the name of a father who legally controls the mother" (42). Children cannot bear their mothers' name, even though, as suffrage leader Hubertine Auclert has argued, it is unseemly that the woman "who has formed the child in her body [should] be less entitled to give the child its social identity than the father" (qtd. in Allen, 2005: 49). This state of affairs proceeded from the fact that, legally, the mother was the property of the father (Allen, 49), but even after such legal amendments were dispensed with, the idea survived. The woman is meant to disappear in motherhood and her identity must be subsumed in her one calling, "her single destiny and justification in life" (Rich, 34). Hence, passing on her name to the child would be an assertion of selfhood that is not compatible with the "selfless" demands of motherhood (42).

The ideal of the "self-less", featureless mother is questioned and upended in Sharon Olds' poetry. The poet wishes to examine the contradictions inherent to motherhood and bring them to light; both the abject and the sacred find space in her work. Olds argues that the mother is not diminished by her creation, that on the contrary, her identity is reaffirmed by the birthing experience. Two key terms that characterize the poet's view on motherhood are heroism and eroticism. Following the subversive tradition of the twentieth century, Olds

portrays motherhood as a heroic feat, equal to the poetry of men like Emerson and Whitman. She likens the physical and emotional labor of conceiving a child with the great leaps of spirit and expression achieved by men of genius (O'Reilly, 1999: 22; Woodford, 2008: 61), going so far as to suggest that in fact, such an experience is beyond their linguistic and emotional range and is thus, worthy of more consideration (Woodford, 61). Giving birth is not something that men can access or fully understand and therefore, the implication is that they cannot do it justice in artistic form. It is the woman poet who can render the experience without diminishing it.

5.4.1 Celebrating birth in "**The Language of the Brag**"

Such an attitude is best exemplified in the poem "**The Language of the Brag**" from the volume *Satan Says* (1980). In it, Olds challenges the traditional view that the act of giving birth is abject and therefore, an unfit subject for poetry. Instead, the poet claims recognition for the extraordinary feat of conceiving a life:

> I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,
> I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate
> arms
> and my straight posture and quick electric muscles
> to achieve something at the center of a crowd,
> the blade piercing the bark deep,
> the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock. (Olds, 2012: 8)

The heightened description of the body likens the woman to a Greek hero who is poised to engage in great exploits and who sees the act of childbirth as a matter of strength but also discipline which is needed in order to hit a target with a knife. Like in the poem "**Why My Mother Made**", Olds plays with metaphors and inverts the familiar imagery of the female body: the woman is not using her body passively, like a vessel for the child, but rather she is throwing herself forwards, pushing her body beyond its limits. She is not being pierced; on the contrary, she is inflicting the penetration. The androgyny of the task is

underlined by masculine-coded elements (the blade piercing the bark, the "haft" vibrating like a "cock" the speaker's "electric muscles") which point to the fact that giving birth is an act that defies certain boundaries; the woman embraces and surpasses her gender, the self is enlarged and made up of other selves. Indeed, Olds seeks heroism beyond the confines of gender roles: "I have wanted (…) some American achievement/ beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,/ magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot/ and watched the boys play" (8). The challenge of giving birth should not be considered any less daring than the adventures of boys; in fact, it is only childbearing that surpasses the "ordinary" for the speaker.

The poet talks about the "epic use" of her body and the mental challenge of facing the dangers of childbirth: "I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire/ and the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around/ my belly big with cowardice and safety" (8). The trials of future motherhood resemble a journey into the unknown. Like the hero preparing for the initiation, Olds must surrender her body while also keeping her faculties intact; she must outlast the pain, while bearing witness to the body's transformation:

> huge breasts leaking colostrum,
> legs swelling, hands swelling,
> face swelling and reddening, hair
> falling out, inner sex
> stabbed again and again with pain like a knife.
> I have lain down (Olds, 9)

The speaker conveys the alienation from her body as it grows bigger and harder to control, while she remains locked in it, unable and unwilling to escape it. In fact, she engages with the abjection of the body as a measure of its extraordinariness. In this way, the poem is both a reverent and profane depiction of birth, lingering, as Julie Tharp and Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb argue, on the "corporeal reality of pregnancy… shying away from no bodily functions" (qtd. in Podnieks, O'Reilly, 2010: 11). To eschew the corporality of conception would be to deny Kristeva's "vortex of summons and repulsion" (qtd in Barrett, 2011: 70), whereas Olds wants us to be fully immersed in the "language of blood" (2012: 9).

Much like Kitty Scherbatsky, she becomes both unrecognizable and more self-defined as she brings forth new life:

> I have lain down and sweated and shaken
> and passed blood and shit and water and
> slowly alone in the center of a circle I have
> passed the new person out
> and they have lifted the new person free of the act
> and wiped the new person free of that
> language of blood like praise all over the body. (Olds, 8)

It is interesting to note that the child, the "new person" that comes out of the mother, must be cleaned "free" of her bodily fluids in order to become a separate entity from her (Hakima, 2011: 218). There is also the presence of the ambiguous "they" that may refer to nurses and doctors or any other presence which severs the connection between mother and child (218) so that the "new person" can accede to the Lacanian Symbolic order and leave the Imaginary behind (218). In one way, we may compare the event to a poet giving birth to a poem, which she then releases into the world, freed of her own person. In fact, some would argue that Olds is also conceiving a poem with sweat and blood, aestheticizing and uplifting female experience (Woodford, 2008: 61). Julie Tharp and Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb argue that the poet achieves this performance in an "unsentimental, unembarrassed… and unapologetic" manner (qtd. in Podnieks, O'Reilly, 2010: 11) which ultimately serves to confirm that "pregnancy and childbirth are legitimate subjects for literature" (11). To reinforce the idea, Olds unleashes a "brag", an almost "literary assault" (Woodford, 2008: 61), on the male canon, employing the loud and bombastic language of Whitman and Ginsberg:

> I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
> Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
> I and the other women this exceptional
> act with the exceptional heroic body,
> this giving birth, this glistening verb,

and I am putting my proud American boast
right here with the others. (9)

Olds is making a space in the poetic canon for her and "the other women" whose bodily experiences have been neglected. The female poets stand alongside the men ("right here with the others") and claim a right to talk about the unpalatable aspects of childbirth, not with the intention to shock, but with the purpose of articulating what remains elusive about the body. As Helen Farish posits, "for Olds, the body is neither pure nature nor pure meaning" (2008: 225), it is an extension of both, a "glistening verb" (2012: 9) whose syntax is perceptible only in poetry. In another sense, the poet is repossessing the female body which had been placed under a crystal case in the Victorian age (Talairach-Vielmas, 2013: 87). She lets it loose, but also confines it artistically, rendering it a work of American canon. The resounding victory of her "brag" is achieved on her own terms; it is not obtained by putting "her hair up under her hat, don[ning] a jock strap and join[ing] the game" (O'Reilly, 1999:22). On the contrary, Olds embraces both femininity and masculinity and exults in the power it confers, enjoying both her "electric muscles" (2012: 8) and the "huge breasts leaking colostrum" (2012: 9). Rather than the woman feeling "penis envy", it is the man who experiences "womb envy" because he cannot find a proper surrogate for female fecundity (O'Reilly, 23).

5.4.2 Eroticism and motherhood in "**New Mother**"

"**The Language of the Brag**" celebrates the heroics of motherhood, and the mother as a poet and a warrior. But the mother is also a lover. Olds cannot divorce motherhood from eroticism, nor does she try to, since she sees the body as both a battle field and a source of pleasure. The poet wishes to dismantle the binary by which the traditional self-sacrificing mother must also be asexual and devoted solely to her child (Podnieks, O'Reilly, 2010: 241). A mother, she argues, can be both at the same time, and in fact, needs both elements in order to survive. Nowhere is this more pervasive than in the poem "**New Mother**" (*The Dead and*

the Living, 1984) which depicts Olds as a mother embracing her sexuality, even after a painful and invasive medical procedure:

> You kissed me and kissed me, my milk undid its
> burning slipknot through my nipples,
> soaking my shirt. All week I had smelled of milk,
> fresh milk, sour. I began to throb:
> my sex had been torn easily as cloth by the
> crown of her head… (2012: 23)

Olds' graphic language has the ability to weave together two different images of womanhood; that of the foetus emerging from the womb, hungry for the mother's milk, and that of the woman, spilling her milk as a form of arousal. The milk is not symbolic or connotative; it remains a physical substance which can be both maternal and sexual at the same time (Hakima, 2011: 226). From a psychoanalytic point of view, breastfeeding "allows both mother and child to satisfy maternal erotic feelings through a culturally acceptable physical outlet" (O'Reilly, 2010: 706), but Olds extends the eroticism of breastfeeding to the father. In Freudian terms, the woman must sublimate the maternal bond through breastfeeding (706), but the poet disturbs the channels of desire by having the father feed from her instead. The man comes to play more than one role in the afterbirth. He does not only embody the child, but the mother as well. The birth's violence is countered by the tenderness of intercourse. The sexual act becomes a way for Olds to heal the wounds inflicted by childbearing and it also places the man in the position of caregiver:

> all of you so tender, you hung over me,
> over the nest of the stitches, over the
> splitting and tearing, with the patience of someone who
> finds a wounded animal in the woods (2012:23)

The husband acts as lover and as a mother, tending to the woman as if she were a "wounded animal", a child. He vouches to stay with this child "until it is whole, until it can run again" (23). Another image that comes to mind is that of a mother bird "hung over (…)

the nest of stitches" (23), the language hinting at an instinctive desire to nurture which the husband now reveals. The relationship is gentle and patient, the man/mother showing restraint and allowing the woman/child to become comfortable with intimacy again (Podnieks, O'Reilly, 2010: 245). There is a twofold implication here; first, that some aspects of maternity are not exclusively female, and second, that maternity does not have to be uprooted from the sexual act. Unlike the old adage which states that the "woman" dies when the "mother" is born, Olds keeps both of them alive (244). In fact, the mother, the woman and the lover are one and the same. Moreover, the father seems to be integrated within the paradigm of motherhood, since the contact with the "new mother" alters him and makes him both tender and eager:

> A week after our child was born,
> you cornered me in the spare room
> and we sank down on the bed
> (…)
> I lay in fear and blood and milk
> While you kissed and kissed me, your lips hot and swollen,
> as teenage boy's, your sex dry and big,
> all of you so tender (…) (Olds, 23)

The husband is both a nurturing and desiring animal, tending to her needs but also "cornering" her. He is both a man and a "teenage boy", big yet "tender". Such dichotomies are reconciled precisely because the new state of the mother alters and affects the father's identity as well. This approach to motherhood is important because it plays with gender roles and it ponders on the identity shift that occurs after childbirth for both parties involved. It also disturbs the socially acceptable notion of what a "good mother" should be. All women are evaluated against the unachievable standards of proper motherhood (Podnieks, O'Reilly, 242). Beyond the capitalist and patriarchal framework that a mother must adhere to – "white, middle to upper middle class, heterosexual, and Christian" (242) – the mother must be asexual and child-obsessed. The "mommy" trend dictates that a woman should see herself inferior to the "sacred child" and that she should practice "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally-absorbing, labor-intensive and, financially expensive child-rearing" (242). Even

if one were to try and meet such criteria, one would be doomed to failure. Olds introduces the possibility of the male caregiver who participates sexually and emotionally in the family's wellbeing. The poet also explores the healing power of pleasure, which is seen as "an impediment to fulfilling the requirements of narratives of contemporary motherhood" (Podnieks, O'Reilly 245). Olds' rejection of such narratives is in keeping with her poetic creed, which is to explore female experience unapologetically and without shame. It is also worth mentioning that she envisions healthier dynamics between the husband and the wife, as a counterpoint to the dissatisfactory and often abusive marriage of her parents (Johnson, 2002: 161).

5.4.3. Pregnancy loss in "**Miscarriage**" and "**To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now**"

The poems "**Miscarriage**" and "**To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now**" tackle the loss of pregnancy in two different stages of the poet's life. The first poem, published in the volume *The Dead and the Living* (1984), recalls the loss from a clinical, almost scatological perspective, as the unborn is nothing more than a bundle of cells which never truly materializes or takes shape:

> When I was a month pregnant, the great
> clots of blood appeared in the pale
> green swaying water of the toilet,
> brick red like black in the salty
> translucent brine, like forms of life
> appearing, jellyfish with the clear-cut
> shapes of fungi (Olds, 2012: 19)

The abject oceanic imagery involves both smell and taste ("salty", "brine") and the colorful vividness of the aborted tissue compensates for the lack of corporeality. There is something unsettling in the description of the creature that was never fully fleshed; we might look at it

as a reversal of the monster's birth in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Viktor bemoans the grotesque appearance of his creation and describes him vividly:

> His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips (Shelley, 1994: 45)

The "flowing" black hair, the "watery" eyes and the "pearly" teeth make up the physiognomy of another unstable, oceanic creature, and despite the fact that this "child" is materialized, there is still something unfinished and incomplete about him. Frankenstein's monster recalls, as Ellen Moers argues, the "phantasmagoria of the nursery" (1985: 99) because the relationship of the mother and the fetus is that of a struggle with a "monstrous creation" (98). It is particularly troublesome when the fetus never becomes a fully-formed child and remains in a median state that makes the mother a "bearer of death" (Moers, 98). Mary Shelley even refers to her gothic novel as "my hideous progeny" (qtd. in Moers, 99), replicating her own feelings towards monstrous maternity. Olds mirrors the idea in "**Miscarriage**" when she talks about the fetus as the harbinger of death: "All wrapped in/ purple it floated away, like a messenger/ put to death for bearing bad news" (2012: 19). Mary Shelley too suffered an early miscarriage at the age of seventeen and its impact is felt in her writing. In a diary entry of Marc 1815, she writes: "Dream that my little baby came to life again, that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day. Not in good spirits" (qtd. in Moers, 96). The promethean image of rubbing the baby before the fire echoes the birth of the monster and it also prompts the conclusion that what is truly terrifying about Frankenstein's creature is that he is an aborted fetus come to life. And it is the possible resurgence of the fetus that haunts the mothers in prose and in poetry. Olds considers such an imaginary resurgence in "**To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now",** published in the later volume, *Stag Leap* (2012). In it, the dead fetus returns as the double-image of the mother, but also as an expression of Otherness:

Though I never saw you, only your clouds,
I was afraid of you, of how you differed
from what we had wanted you to be. And it's as if
you waited, then, where such waiting is done,
for when I would look beside me—and here
you are, in the world of forms, where my wifehood
is now, and every action with him,
as if a thousand years from now
you and I are in some antechamber
where the difference between us is of little matter (53)

The fetus has become over the years the silent witness and judge of the mother's life, waiting for a possible reckoning in the "world of forms". If the poem begins with the communal "we" of the wife and husband expecting their child, it quickly diverges into a singular confrontation between mother and child. Olds prioritizes the loss of child over the loss of her marriage: "That he left me is not much, compared/ to your leaving the earth –" (53). The emotional impact that the fetus still has on the mother is evidenced by the fact that the passage of time, while transformative, has not dulled the mother's pain. In a sense, the unborn fetus gestates in the realm of poetry. The distance between "**Miscarriage**" (1984) and "**To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now"** (2012) almost matches the age of the unborn child/adult. In the first poem, the unborn has no personhood as it is defined only by the noun "miscarriage", but in the second poem, he has become the noun, attaching the miscarriage to him only as an adjective, and not as a wholly immersive force. In this way, like Mary Shelley, Olds brings the imaginary creature to life and gives it the power to oversee the maker:

And yet
the idea of you has come back to where
I could see you today as a small, impromptu
god of the partial. When I leave for good,
would you hold me in your blue mitt
for the departure hence.

The poet craves a form of adult comfort from her unborn child; she is the confessant, verbalizing her fears and pain to him, and he is the silent confessor, tasked with listening and consoling. Hence, we may speak of a power relation that manifests itself with the passage of time. If in "**Miscarriage**", the mother is appalled by the biological frailty of what was inside her, in "**To our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now**" the poet is more astonished with her own frailty and her own sense of a diminishing self that finds comfort in the ghost of her child. Indeed, the imagery shifts from biological flotsam of the "translucent brine" (Olds, 19), to the biological fertility and bounty of the garden: "dear garden one, you among the shovels/ and spades and wafts of beekeeper's shroud/ and sky-blue kidskin gloves" (Olds, 53). Similarly, though both poems incorporate the image of the inchoate fetus being flushed down the toilet, in "**To our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now**" the episode is transformative as it unites the unborn with a vast, continuous universe:

> you threw off your
> working clothes of arms and legs,
> and moved house, from uterus
> to toilet bowl and jointed stem
> and sewer out to float the rivers and
> bays in painless pieces.

The oceanic creature now has the agency to "throw off" the human condition and continue the uninterrupted passage from womb to the rivers and seas beyond. It has gained a freedom which has been denied to its parents. Interestingly, the two poems place different emphasis on the parents' shared sense of responsibility in the death of the fetus. In "**Miscarriage**", Olds refers to the unborn child as "the one who came as far as the/ sill with its information: that we could/ botch something, you and I" (19). The mention of the (window) sill alludes to the wives' tale of the stork bringing the child in its beak, but the figure of speech clashes with the verb "botch", which sounds both harsh and ridiculous in the scenario of the miscarriage. The mother and father have failed at something essential, yet this failure is somewhat risible due to the use of the verb "botch". The speaker places far more responsibility on herself as a mother for not mourning the unborn enough. In both poems, she bemoans the fact that she does not seek him out; in "**Miscarriage**", she confesses that the

fetus never truly had a determinate state for her: “That was the only appearance made/ By that child, the rough, scalloped shapes/ Falling slowly. A month later/ our son was conceived, and I never went back” (Olds, 19). The arrival of another child slowly erased the presence of the first. In “**To our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now**”, the poet confesses that she was afraid to look back on the unborn: “I was afraid of you, of how you differed/ from what we had wanted you to be” (53) and that this ungraspable and unfathomable that the child represented prevented her from trying to connect with it: “I never thought/ to see you again, I never thought to seek you” (53). Hence, the poet acknowledges the emotional impact that the loss of pregnancy had on her psyche, but also the emotional distance she experienced, stemming from guilt, fear and the natural passage of time.

Olds’ imputations are not meant to make the mother culpable for not cherishing the memory of the unborn; on the contrary, the invocations of the child are a reckoning with a part of herself that survived the miscarriage. Spontaneous abortion, as is the clinical term for miscarriage, is defined as a “fetal loss before twenty weeks gestation” (Layne, 2007: 79). It is a common enough occurrence, yet pregnant women are still psychologically affected by the early disruption (79). Any loss after the twenty weeks’ period becomes a stillbirth and the body miscarrying it will act as if it were in labor (79). Given that the body undergoes a certain amount of trauma even at a smaller level, the mother may be seized by two warring instincts; to cling to the fetal loss or to overcome it by rejecting its reality and refusing to seek it out. In both instances, the woman often blames herself for the miscarriage, believing that she did not “want” the baby hard enough (Seftel, 2006: 34). The various superstitions and traditions surrounding the danger of miscarriage point to the fact that she is responsible for the loss and must find ways to prevent it (35). Such a view is not only erroneous but also simplifies the nature of the mother-fetus relationship. Since the unborn never materializes into a distinct reality, it remains a part of the mother, an elongation whose potential was never realized. The question that Linda Layne posits is what would happen if women “[chose] to treat the fetal tissue as something other than a medical specimen” (2007: 82). If they choose, instead, to see the fetal tissue as a means of self-exploration and creativity in the vein of Sharon Olds, perhaps this would enrich rather than trivialize the narrative surrounding the trauma of miscarriage.

Sharon Olds' poems may often be difficult to digest because they do not give an easy way out. Touching upon the more controversial and difficult aspects of womanhood, the poet oversteps her boundaries many times and makes readers uncomfortable, but that is the warranted effect; motherhood and daughterhood are *supposed* to perplex and surprise, particularly in a society where gender roles are taken for granted and where aspects of female sexuality and biology are still taboo. Olds' poetry does not make its readers complacent, but rather, it invites them to question the contradictions inherent in modern womanhood.

Conclusions

This dissertation was an attempt to shed light on the now largely forgotten poetic movement known as confessionalism, which radically changed the style and voice of poetry in the post-war American landscape, with repercussions which are still felt today. The evolution from modernity to postmodernity was facilitated by the rise of confessionalism, as it launched discussions about authenticity, selfhood and alternative ways of being. We have focused specifically on the female branch of confessionalism in order to tackle the more marginal and unexplored facets of emerging subjectivity.

The first chapter aimed to provide a history of confession as a mode of expression which influenced the construction of identity in Western culture. It also followed its evolution from religious practice to literary output, culminating in the confessional movement of the 1950s which flourished as a result of the new definitions of selfhood and authenticity imposed by the postmodern age. Certainly, confessionalism is only one strategy of questioning the possibility of self-expression, but it is a movement that prompted the individual to reflect on his or her relationship with his or her own identity, gender, race, class, while also offering the means for the subject to renegotiate that relationship.

Despite its unconventional themes and stylistic choices, confessional poetry was heavily influenced by Romantic thought and Modernist theory, borrowing from both while also acting as a counter-response to the increasingly depersonalized and abstract art of the early twentieth century. The poetry of "confession" paved the way for multiple and unexplored selves to shed the mask of the Other and embrace subjectivity in its varied and often misleading forms. For it is true that confessionalism also acknowledged, rather than denied, the crisis at the heart of self-exploratory narratives. Namely, how much of ourselves can we ever verbalize? How much of language is fallible and what can be accomplished in poetry? Confessionalism understood that language is not an ideal "conduit" and was interested in analyzing the very failure to communicate and whether it could generate novel aesthetic experiences.

The chapter also tackled the issue of gender for, in the task of fashioning female subjectivity, confessionalism illustrates some of its major tensions and complications. Female identity is inevitably formed from the *mimesis* of its past cultural myths, but it is also a work of *poiesis*, rewriting these myths and effectively creating new ones. In that struggle, it mirrors the confessional effort to "produce" personal truths that do not accord with past authentic modes of expression. What we confess may not reflect reality, but it *produces* a new reality wherein our articulations are valid. Similarly, female poets employed confession to refashion the reality of being a woman and being a gendered body. The following four chapters dealt with the female poet in the process of constructing and reconstructing gendered and sexual identity.

The second chapter attempted to bring to light the life and work of Lucille Clifton, a confessional poet who wrote about herself as a black woman, exploring blackness and femininity at the levels of the body. Intimate and often graphic details are offered to the reader in an effort to draw attention to the possibilities of poetry to transgress certain aesthetic boundaries. Indeed, the aim of the chapter was to show that Clifton's poetry issues a challenge to the disembodied tradition of verse, insisting that the body, particularly a racialized one, can be poetic. Moreover, the body is an ontological site where certain aspects of (black) female identity are unearthed. It is here that black women gain visibility on their own terms by reconquering the body which has either been erased and considered undesirable (the Lily Complex) or has been depicted in a hypersexual and trivial manner (the Jezebel stereotype).

Clifton contextualizes private experience as a gateway to understanding the community; a black woman talking about her majestic hips in expansive terms ("**homage to my hips**") invites other black women to regard themselves as worthy of praise. In the same manner, the poet imbues the black body with creative potential and magic ("**i was born with twelve fingers**"), suggesting that there is power in Otherization; the black woman's marginal position within white hegemony equips her to understand many forms of oppression and, thus, gives her the means to counter it through an artistic expression that can reach many. The black woman's very hair can "touch your mind/ with her electric fingers…" (Clifton, 1987: 167) because it stands for the creative resistance of the black body that has never truly

been silenced, dating back to Phillis Wheatley and arriving today at poets like Gwnedoyln Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Rita Dove, and many others.

At the same time, the black woman is attuned to various forms of suffering which share as landscape the female body. Clifton posits that the various afflictions of the female body, such as breast and ovarian cancer, fragment and reorganize the body in a way that forces women to rethink their identity. The loss of wholeness in such poems as "**lumpectomy eve**" and "**poem to my uterus**" is an occasion for self-reflection, not only despair. The new physical geographies which are explored in Clifton's work hint at the constant shifting of female subjectivity. Her poems argue that it is the black woman, once again, who may offer insights into the evolution of the female Self, because the black woman can undergo metamorphosis and become the metonymic hips, hair, breasts and uterus, traveling histories of violence to tell the story of the surviving body.

The third chapter intended to redeem and bring attention to Anne Sexton's "bedlam" poems, inspired by her struggle with mental illness, her experience inside the "madhouse" and her visceral obsession with suicide. A confessional poet of the 1950s, Sexton wrote about such unpalatable aspects of the female psyche in a time when mental illness itself was demonized and considered no fit subject for poetry. Her mentors and critics often discouraged her from poetizing experiences that were deemed self-centered and self-indulgent, but Sexton's poetry reveals that mental anguish is always an internal battle with the self, and that in order to "tell it true", as she advised her daughter, one must be able to capture the painful nature of the process, which includes a morbid self-preoccupation, since one is quite literally stuck inside one's head: "to rage in your own bowl" (Sexton, 1999: 35).

Sexton's aim in her "madhouse" poetry is to silence the demons that oppress her; namely, to turn writing into a form of salvation and therapy, as shown in "**Said the Poet to the Analyst**". There is a symbiotic relationship between her poetry and her clinical experience, as the poems make the time spent in confinement meaningful and bearable, while the "madhouse" quite literally propels her to write and gives her a strong and unequivocal voice. To find strength in the periphery of the human mind and make art out of it is what Sexton achieves in poems like "**Lullaby**", "**For John, Who Begs Me Not To Inquire**

Further", "**Wanting to Die**", "**Imitations of Drowning**" and many others. Female madness, in particular, has a history of offending and disturbing the status quo due to the fact that women's mental derangement was often caused by societal constraints and not innate disorder. Thus, female insanity manifests as a condemnation of the patriarchal order, revealing its fissures and threatening its dominion. Sexton herself is plagued by the expectations placed on a suburban wife who is stuck in the house with her children and whose identity is dwarfed by a domestic setting. As Betty Friedan posits in the *Feminine Mystique*, such a feebly constructed femininity does not allow women "internal honesty, depth of perception, and the human truth" (2010: 39) and thus, madness becomes almost an escape and a liberation, a chance to remake oneself, painful as it must be. Sexton's depression, ironically, is a chance for her to be fully human, outside of gender trappings, and her poetry signals this humanity which many have mistaken for egotism. By giving her own mind space to lament and recover, Sexton opened the gates for many other artists, both male and female, to do the same.

The fourth chapter tackled the politically charged and "queer" poetry of Adrienne Rich, a difficult poet of the post-war generation who often troubled critics and readers by juxtaposing the private and the public sphere and connecting deeply personal crises with the real-life politics of Western society. Rich grappled with her own sexuality in a way that encouraged constant self-mobility and self-renewal. Indeed, it is no wonder that Judith McDaniel claimed there was no other poet who possessed such a dramatic "will to change" (2002: 3). Rich is often described as a post-confessionalist because she interrogates the possibility of disclosure in the face of dehumanization and historicized self-erasure. The confessional "I" stands on the shoulders of the silent "we", which is why the poet often adopts a plural voice in an effort to unearth not only the bodies and voices which have been rejected and abused by history, but also the multiple bodies and voices inside herself. The queer multiplicity of her identity as both lesbian and activist, poet and mother, widow and lover is present in her prose and essays, but ultimately it is her poetry which strikes a peculiar balance between the "I" and "we" of her self-expression.

As an activist-poet, Rich has made it part of her mission to argue the validity of the political manifesto as compatible with the aesthetic. She urges the reader to engage

personally and politically with the poetic text, and attempts to demonstrate that the personal is ultimately political and that the possibility of communicating a self is bound with the ideologies and politics of the governing systems of power. In poems like "**Hunger**", "**From a survivor**" and "**Tonight No Poetry Will Serve**" she illustrates the impossibility of isolating the personal self from the narrative of other selves. The "hunger" for community and communion, for a sense of meaning and understanding pervades both the language and the emotion of her poetic style. Above all else, Rich commiserates with the incomplete and frustrated sense of identity that we feel when we are deprived of what we desire, when we are forced to cope with social constructs which jeopardize our self-expression and when we are rendered helpless by the impossibility of dismantling said social constructs. The poet commits to a (post)confessional mode not only when she discusses her queer politics, but also when she explores queer love and her desire for another woman. In "**Images**" she deconstructs the fetishistic and voyeuristic portrayal of the lesbian in the cultural landscape and she also touches upon the possibility of opposing the "dismemberment" of society through an erotic dimension. The lovers repurpose the "male gaze" and learn to look at each other as subjects, not objects, of desire. However, it is in the larger collection of poems, "**Twenty-One Love Poems**" where the poet truly shines a light on the complicated and self-revealing nature of queer love. Broaching topics such as intimacy, alienation and creativity, Rich weaves a complex and even contradictory tapestry of both positive and negative emotions regarding the sexual and romantic bond she experiences with another woman. It is through her partner that Rich constantly defines and redefines herself. Since the poet only managed to "come out" as a lesbian in a later stage of her life, she does not take for granted the possibility of self-discovery and self-renewal.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation dealt with the family poetry of Sharon Olds and her rewriting of the family narrative through the dual perspective of daughter and mother. Olds has often been considered a self-indulgent poet who is either exorcising childhood demons or obsessing over the same traumatic events of her past, such as her being tied up to a chair when she was a child, but in actuality, Olds recasts family trauma in a new light and examines the erotic, abject and restorative aspects of bloodline and legacy. The poet does not write about family from a traditional point of view, but rather as an outsider, or an intruder

looking through a keyhole. She is the ghost of her family, accessing hidden, unpalatable places while at the same time remaining emotionally ambivalent. Olds manages to embark on a painful intimacy with her reader, revealing incestuous and often unspeakable feelings about her father and mother in poems like "**Satan Says**", "**Why My Mother Made Me**", while also creating a sense of distance and wisdom through her voyeuristic and interpretative vision of her parents in "**I Go Back to May 1937**" and "**The Lifting**." The poet touches upon similar themes when she explores the heretofore concealed aspects of motherhood, reveling in both the triumphant and repellent aspects of giving birth, examining what it means to split the maternal self in poems such as "**The Language of the Brag", "New Mother", "Miscarriage", "To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now".** Such poems reveal the weaknesses and strengths of the mother, the erotic power she wields as well as the mixture of life and death she houses inside her body. Olds' personal approach is almost experimental, repurposing the abjection of miscarriage, for instance, into an aesthetic object that conveys both the beauty of language and the inherent repulsion of human biology. In doing so, the poet constantly challenges the limits of selfhood and self-definition.

Hence, the dissertation attempted to show different ways of poetically communicating the self, but it also interrogated the possibility of expressing the personal in poetry. It also considered the influence of the confessional mode on the structure, style and content of poetry. Confessionalism has been constantly evolving from Anne Sexton to Adrienne Rich and has metamorphosed into a form of *post*-confessionalism, embracing the "silences" of what is said and not said when we confess (Gill, 2006: 74). One such example is Ted Hughes' surprisingly personal volume, *Birthday Letters* (1998), which, while appearing to document Hughes' emotional turmoil in the wake of Sylvia Plath's death, actually conceals much of its truths, because the poet is uncertain of how much he can convey (Gill, 74). In this way, Hughes turns to more indeterminate strategies of seeking out truth, like "speculation" and "imagination" in order to make factual reality more palatable and approachable (74). Such experiments broaden the scope of poetry and the strategies for self-exploration and have been the bread and butter of confessionalism since its very inception, but the first decades of the twenty-first century have seen such strategies flourish in the age

of the Internet and of personal blogs, Youtube vlogging and 24/7 access to the "authentic self".

In choosing to speak about confessionalism, I myself have asked questions about the "authentic self" and how it changes shape and size when it becomes the subject of poetry. In my research, I have encountered books which dealt strictly with the possibility of self-expression and the ethics and aesthetics of such an endeavor. *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999) by Paul John Eakin and James Olney's fundamental *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980) both understand that "the first person of autobiography is truly plural" (Eakin, 43) and that once we enter this plurality, we must ask questions of autonomy and power. The idea of "confession" naturally springs up as a form of self-expression that is often involuntary or coerced, but which, when offered freely, is still a matter of discursive relativity and prevarication. Books on the nature of power and confession, such as Michel Foucault's seminar on *Technologies of the Self* (1982) and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), make the case that we are forced to speak about ourselves, that we must verbalize what we are and what we have done. We are all "confessing animals" (Foucault, 1978: 59), but this is not to say that we may speak freely; we are constantly guided by norms and institutions, by power relations intrinsic to everyday interactions. Peter Brooks' *Troubling Confessions* (2002) and Jo Gill in *Modern Confessional Writing* (2006) go a step further by acknowledging that most of our personal admissions falsify us and do a poor job of rendering us in totality, but that this may be another strategy of arriving at the self. The failure of the confessional act is necessary in the rendition of a fluctuating, self-opposing subject. As such, the relativity and non-concreteness of confession goes hand in hand with the slippery and ungovernable poetic form. Poetry facilitates self-exploration precisely because it offers both concealment and revelation. Far from naming the unnamable, poetry argues effectively why the unnamable should remain as such. Confessional poetry thrives on this tension between naming and un-naming, between authenticity and deception, between the reality and the fantasy of the Self.

This fascinating relationship was analyzed in the early dawn of the confessional movement by critics like M.L. Rosenthal, David Kalstone and A. Alvarez, but such "studies" were usually a part of a larger project, be it an anthology of poetry or an introduction to a

poet's work. For instance, Alvarez attempted to describe the movement in the introduction to the anthology, *The New Poetry* (1962), just as Rosenthal introduced the idea of confessionalism in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). Other critical works such as David Kalstone's *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery,* (1977) and Rosenthal's *The new poets: American and British poetry since World War II* (1967) that tackled the manner in which the "new" poet wrote about his or her own life are out of print or notoriously difficult to find and purchase. Books such as *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (1996) by David Perkins may document the rise and fall of certain literary tendencies in modernity but they do not examine the more intricate aspects of confessionalism.

Where the subject found more mileage was in academic essays such as Steven K. Hoffman's "Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic" (1978), or David Yezzi's "Confessional poetry & the artifice of honesty" (1998). Essays on confessional poets were more likely to engender discussion on the forms of confessional writing, but such poets have, in the last twenty years, fallen into obscurity or have been discussed mostly in terms of their political or postmodernist influence, such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, or Adrienne Rich. Such an example is provided by Charles Molesworth in his 1979 book, *The Fierce Embrace, A Study of Contemporary American Poetry*. Many books and journals also discuss the notion of "confessional" writing in prose rather than in poetry such as Susan David Bernstein's *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2000) and M. Sherwin's *Confessional Writing and the Twentieth Century Literary Imagination* (2011). However, there is little distinction made between any form of confessional writing and the programmatic movement known as Confessionalism. Two books which do make the distinction and try to map out the evolution of both confessional writing and confessionalism are Jo Gill's anthology of essays, *Modern Confessional Writing* (2006) and the volume, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (2001), edited by Kate Sontag and David Graham.

There is often an overlap between confessional writing and autobiographic writing, particularly when it comes to female confessionalism. In fact, female confessionalism is hardly ever broached as a separate subject, being included in works like L. Gilmore's

Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation (1994) or in readers like *Women, Autobiography, Theory, A Reader* (1998), edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. The confessional poets whom I have selected for analysis have not been the subject of wide scrutiny for their confessional output; rather, Clifton, Sexton, Rich, and Olds have been tackled using a general feminist approach which, however exhaustive, remains incomplete. In terms of biography, we mention the efforts of Diane Middlebrook (*Anne Sexton: A Biography,* 1992*)*, Maxine Kumin and Paula M. Salvio (*Anne Sexton – Teacher of Weird Abundance*, 2007) for Anne Sexton, Mary Jane Lupton (*Lucille Clifton: Her Life and Letters,* 2006*)* and Hilary Holladay (*Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*, 2004) for Lucille Clifton. Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds have not enjoyed systematic biographical research, but we mention Amy Sickel's brief introduction *Adrienne Rich* (2005) from the Gay and Lesbian Writers Collection, Michael Collins' "The Unearthing of the Body in Adrienne Rich's Poetics" (2009) and Jane Roberta Cooper's *Reading Adrienne Rich. Reviews and Re-Visions. 1951-81* (2002). For Sharon Olds, we must pay due to the writings of Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly ("Mothering and Motherhood*",* 1999) and Russell Brickey (with the very recent *Understanding Sharon Olds* (2016)).

An important detail to take into account is the fact that most of these poets have given interviews and expressed their artistic beliefs in essayistic and autobiographical material (Adrienne Rich – *Blood, Bread & Poetry* (1996), "Adrienne Rich in Chile: an Interview", 2001 and Lucille Clifton – "She Could Tell You Stories, A conversation about names, race, and the need for mirrors", 1998), or through public talks (Sexton – "Anne Sexton at Home", 1966 and Sharon Olds – "Advice to Young Poets: Sharon Olds in Conversation", May, 2010). In the virtual domain, there are a number of ways to reach the poet's unfiltered discourse and while this may seem a fortunate circumstance for the student of female confessionalism, it is also a daunting task, since there is the issue of collecting and ordering disparate and heterogeneous material. This endeavor has never been fully realized, but the current thesis aims to contribute to the patching of biographical and critical gaps in confessional theory. It also attempts to bring together the various shades of female confessionalism and argue as to their relevance and continual source of novelty in terms of female identity and aesthetic expression.

At the same time, the present thesis labors under the hope that there will be a renewal of interest in confessionalism and confessional theory. There is much work left to do in the study of confessional poetry of marginalized identities. Poets such as Warsan Shire, Morgan Parker, Claudia Rankin, Sonia Sanchez, Javier Zamora and many others who talk about personal trials in connection to the public sphere offer a new outlook on what poetry can do when such tools are available to everyone. Likewise, we cannot ignore the shift which has taken place with the advent of online platforms; poetry is no longer the occupation of a selected few but rather the mode of expression for a large public of non-writers. The assertion that poetry is no longer being read or written is false; the difference is that poetry nowadays has transitioned from the printed word to 'Slam' sessions in public venues, to artful collages on Instagram, to T-shirts with fashionable quotes and to millions of personal blogs. Platforms such as Button Poetry or Allpoetry.com which promote slam and performance poetry and offer daily bite-sized poems on their websites perfectly encapsulate the poetic zeitgeist. Whether such transitions alarm us or fascinate us, we must remain open to the evolution of poetry; we must embrace its exclusivity *and* inclusivity. As Adrienne Rich argued in *A Human Eye* (2009):

> Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy. Neither is it a blueprint, nor an instruction manual, nor a billboard. There is no universal Poetry anyway, only poetries and poetics, and the streaming, intertwining histories to which they belong. There is room, indeed necessity, for both Neruda and César Vallejo, for Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alfonsina Storni, for Audre Lorde and Aimé Césaire, for both Ezra Pound and Nelly Sachs. Poetries are no more pure and simple than human histories are pure and simple. Poetry, like silk or coffee or oil or human flesh, has had its trade routes. And there are colonized poetics and resilient poetics, transmissions across frontiers not easily traced (156).

We must follow these "poetries" and their "intertwining histories", and we must accept the routes they give us, from high to low, from public to personal, from without to within.

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Appendix

Chapter 2 Lucille Clifton and the Female Body

homage to my hips (2.3.1)

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in.
the don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!

i was born with twelve fingers (2.3.2)

i was born with twelve fingers
like my mother and my daughter.
each of us
born wearing strange black gloves
extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs and
dipping into the milk.
somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells

and our wonders were cut off
but they didn't understand
the powerful memories of ghosts. now
we take what we want
with invisible fingers
and we connect
my dead mother my live daughter and me
through our terrible shadowy hands.

homage to my hair (2.3.3)
when i feel her jump up and dance
i hear the music! my God
i'm talking about my nappy hair!
she is a challenge to your hand
black man,
she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens
black man,
she can touch your mind
with her electric fingers and
the grayer she do get, good God,
the blacker she do be!

from *Dark Nursery Rhymes for a Dark Daughter* (2.3.4)
I
Flesh-colored bandage
and other schemes
will slippery into
all your dreams
and make you grumble
in the night,

wanting the world to be
pink and light.
Wherever you go,
whatever you do,
flesh-colored bandage
is after you.

III

Beware the terrible tricky three;
Blondy and Beauty and Fantasy.
Together they capture little girls
and push them into little worlds.
They might have had fun
if they had run
the first time that they heard them hiss
“Promises promises promissesss.”

IV

Ten feet tall
or giant arm,
nobody has
your sunshine charm.

lumpectomy eve (2.4.1)

all night i dream of lips
that nursed and nursed
and the lonely nipple
lost in loss and the need
to feed that turns at last
on itself that will kill

its body for its hunger's sake
all night i hear the whispering
the soft
love calls you to this knife
for love for love
all night it is the one breast
comforting the other

poem to my uterus (2.4.2)

you uterus
you have been patient
as a sock
while i have slippered into you
my dead and living children
now
they want to cut you out
stocking i will not need
where i am going
where am i going
old girl
without you
uterus
my bloody print
my estrogen kitchen
my black bag of desire
where can i go
barefoot
without you
where can you go
without me

1994 (2.4.3)

i was leaving my fifty-eighth year
when a thumb of ice
stamped itself hard near my heart
you have your own story
you know about the fear the tears
the scar of disbelief
you know that the saddest lies
are the ones we tell ourselves
you know how dangerous it is
to be born with breasts
you know how dangerous it is
to wear dark skin
i was leaving my fifty-eighth year
when i woke into the winter
of a cold and mortal body
thin icicles hanging off
the one mad nipple weeping
have we not been good children
did we not inherit the earth
but you must know all about this
from your own shivering life

Chapter 3: Anne Sexton and Mental Illness

Said the Poet To The Analyst (3.3.1)

My business is words. Words are like labels,
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.

I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.
I must always forget how one word is able to pick
out another, to manner another, until I have got
something I might have said…
but did not.

Your business is watching my words. But I
admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance,
when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,
that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot
came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.
But if you should say this is something it is not,
then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny
and ridiculous and crowded with all
the believing money.

Lullaby (3.3.2)

It is a summer evening.
The yellow moths sag
against the locked screens
and the faded curtains
suck over the window sills
and from another building
a goat calls in his dreams.
This is the TV parlor
in the best ward at Bedlam.
The night nurse is passing
out the evening pills.

She walks on two erasers,
padding by us one by one.

My sleeping pill is white.
It is a splendid pearl;
it floats me out of myself,
my stung skin as alien
as a loose bolt of cloth.
I will ignore the bed.
I am linen on a shelf.
Let the others moan in secret;
let each lost butterfly
go home. Old woolen head,
take me like a yellow moth
while the goat calls hush-a-bye.

Daddy, Sylvia Plath (3.3.2.1)
You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time——
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic

Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna

Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,

And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further (3.3.3)

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind,
in the commonplaces of the asylum

where the cracked mirror
or my own selfish death
outstared me.
And if I tried
to give you something else,
something outside of myself,
you would not know
that the worst of anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope.
I tapped my own head;
it was a glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or a strange sun.
Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
There ought to be something special
for someone

in this kind of hope.
This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all…
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.

Wanting to die (3.4.1)
Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.
I know well the grass blades you mention,
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build.

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic.

In this way, heavy and thoughtful,
warmer than oil or water,
I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

I did not think of my body at needle point.
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.
Suicides have already betrayed the body.

Still-born, they don't always die,
but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet
that even children would look on and smile.

To thrust all that life under your tongue!--
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.
Death's a sad Bone; bruised, you'd say,

and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,

leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

Imitations of Drowning (3.4.2)

Fear
of drowning,
fear of being that alone,
kept me busy making a deal
as if I could buy

my way out of it
and it worked for two years
and all of July.

This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying
went on and on in water as white and clear
as the gin I drink each day at half-past five.
Going down for the last time, the last breath lying,
I grapple with eels like ropes - it's ether, it's queer
and then, at last, it's done. Now the scavengers arrive,
the hard crawlers who come to clean up the ocean floor.
And death, that old butcher, will bother me no more.

I
had never
had this dream before
except twice when my parents
clung to rafts
and sat together for death,
frozen
like lewd photographs.

Who listens to dreams? Only symbols for something -
like money for the analyst or your mother's wig,
the arm I almost lost in the washroom wringer,
following fear to its core, tugging the old string.
But real drowning is for someone else. It's too big
to put in your mouth on purpose, it puts hot stingers
in your tongue and vomit in your nose as your lungs break.
Tossed like a wet dog by that juggler, you die awake.

Fear,
a motor,
pumps me around and around
until I fade slowly
and the crowd laughs.
I fade out, an old bicycle rider
whose odds are measured
in actuary graphs.

This weekend the papers were black with the new highway
fatalities and in Boston the strangler found another victim
and we were all in Truro drinking beer and writing checks.
The others rode the surf, commanding rafts like sleighs.
I swam - but the tide came in like ten thousand orgasms.
I swam - but the waves were higher than horses' necks.
I was shut up in that closet, until, biting the door,
they dragged me out, dribbling urine on the gritty shore.

Breathe!
And you'll know . . .
an ant in a pot of chocolate,
it boils
and surrounds you.
There is no news in fear
but in the end it's fear
that drowns you.

The Addict (3.4.3)

Sleepmonger,
deathmonger,
with capsules in my palms each night,
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
I'm the queen of this condition.
I'm an expert on making the trip
and now they say I'm an addict.
Now they ask why.
WHY!

Don't they know that I promised to die!
I'm keping in practice.
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
every color and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death.

Yes, I admit
it has gotten to be a bit of a habit-
blows eight at a time, socked in the eye,
hauled away by the pink, the orange,
the green and the white goodnights.
I'm becoming something of a chemical
mixture.
that's it!

My supply
of tablets
has got to last for years and years.

I like them more than I like me.
It's a kind of marriage.
It's a kind of war where I plant bombs inside
of myself.

Yes
I try
to kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupation.
Actually I'm hung up on it.
But remember I don't make too much noise.
And frankly no one has to lug me out
and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.
I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
eating my eight loaves in a row
and in a certain order as in
the laying on of hands
or the black sacrament.

It's a ceremony
but like any other sport
it's full of rules.
It's like a musical tennis match where
my mouth keeps catching the ball.
Then I lie on; my altar
elevated by the eight chemical kisses.

What a lay me down this is
with two pink, two orange,
two green, two white goodnights.

Fee-fi-fo-fum-
Now I'm borrowed.
Now I'm numb.

Chapter 4: Adrienne Rich and Sexual Orientation

Hunger (4.3.1)

1.

A fogged hill-scene on an enormous continent,
intimacy rigged with terrors,
a sequence of blurs the Chinese painter's ink-stick planned,
a scene of desolation comforted
by two human figures recklessly exposed,
leaning together in a sticklike boat
in the foreground. Maybe we look like this,
I don't know. I'm wondering
whether we even have what we think we have--
lighted windows signifying shelter,
a film of domesticity
over fragile roofs. I know I'm partly somewhere else--
huts strung across a drought-stretched land
not mine, dried breasts, mine and not mine, a mother
watching my children shrink with hunger.
I live in my Western skin,
my Western vision, torn
and flung to what I can't control or even fathom.
Quantify suffering, you could rule the world.

2.

They can rule the world while they can persuade us
our pain belongs in some order.
Is death by famine worse than death by suicide,
than a life of famine and suicide, if a black lesbian dies,
if a white prostitute dies, if a woman genius
starves herself to feed others,
self-hatred battening on her body?
Something that kills us or leaves us half-alive
is raging under the name of an "act of god"
in Chad, in Niger, in the Upper Volta--
yes, that male god that acts on us and on our children,
that male State that acts on us and on our children
till our brains are blunted by malnutrition,
yet sharpened by the passion for survival,
our powers expended daily on the struggle
to hand a kind of life on to our children,
to change reality for our lovers
even in a single trembling drop of water.

3.

We can look at each other through both our lifetimes
like those two figures in the sticklike boat
flung together in the Chinese ink-scene;
even our intimacies are rigged with terror.
Quantify suffering? My guilt at least is open,
I stand convicted by all my convictions--
you, too. We shrink from touching
our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves
and each other, we're scared shitless
of what it could be to take and use our love,

hose it on a city, on a world,
to wield and guide its spray, destroying
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses--
like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be.

4.

The decision to feed the world
is the real decision. No revolution
has chosen it. For that choice requires
that women shall be free.
I choke on the taste of bread in North America
but the taste of hunger in North America
is poisoning me. Yes, I'm alive to write these words,
to leaf through Kollwitz's women
huddling the stricken children into their stricken arms
the "mothers" drained of milk, the "survivors" driven
to self-abortion, self-starvation, to a vision
bitter, concrete, and wordless.
I'm alive to want more than life,
want it for others starving and unborn,
to name the deprivations boring
into my will, my affections, into the brains
of daughters, sisters, lovers caught in the crossfire
of terrorists of the mind.
In the black mirror of the subway window
hangs my own face, hollow with anger and desire.
Swathed in exhaustion, on the trampled newsprint,
a woman shields a dead child from the camera.
The passion to be inscribes her body.
Until we find each other, we are alone.

From a survivor (4.3.2)

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
of men & women in those days

I don't know who we thought we were
that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race

Lucky or unlucky, we didn't know
the race had failures of that order
and that we were going to share them

Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special
Your body is as vivid to me
as it ever was: even more

since my feeling for it is clearer:
I know what it could and could not do

it is no longer
the body of a god
or anything with power over my life

Next year it would have been 20 years
and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making

which I live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements

each one making possible the next

Tonight no poetry will serve (4.3.3)
Saw you walking barefoot
taking a long look
at the new moon's eyelid

later spread
sleep-fallen, naked in your dark hair
asleep but not oblivious
of the unslept unsleeping
elsewhere

Tonight I think
no poetry
will serve

Syntax of rendition:

verb pilots the plane
adverb modifies action

verb force-feeds noun
submerges the subject
noun is choking
verb disgraced goes on doing

now diagram the sentence

The Images (4.4.1)
Close to your body, in the
pain of the city
I turn. My hand half-sleeping reaches, finds
some part of you, touch knows you before language
names in the brain. Out in the dark
a howl, police sirens, emergency
our 3 a.m. familiar, ripping the sheath of sleep
registering pure force as if all transpired—
the swell of cruelty and helplessness—
in one block between West End
and Riverside. In my dreams the Hudson
rules the night like a right-hand margin
drawn against the updraft
of burning life, the tongueless cries
of the city. I turn again, slip my arm
under the pillow turned for relief,
your breathing traces my shoulder. Two women sleeping
together have more than their sleep to defend.

And what can reconcile me
that you, the woman whose hand
sensual and protective, brushes me in sleep,
go down each morning into such a city?
I will not, cannot withhold
your body or my own from its chosen danger
but when did we ever choose

to see our bodies strung
in bondage and crucifixion across the exhausted air
when did we choose
to be lynched on the queasy electric signs
of midtown when did we choose
to become the masturbator's fix
emblem of rape in Riverside Park the campground
at Bandol the beach at Sydney?
We are trying to live
in a clearheaded tenderness—
I speak not merely of us, our lives
are "moral and ordinary"
as the lives of numberless women—
I pretend the Hudson is a right-hand margin
drawn against fear and woman-loathing
(water as purification, river as boundary)
but I know my imagination lies:
in the name of freedom of speech
they are lynching us no law is on our side
there are no boundaries
no-man's-land does not exist.

I can never romanticize language again
never deny its power for disguise for mystification
but the same could be said for music
or any form created
painted ceilings beaten gold worm-worn Pietàs
reorganizing victimization frescoes translating
violence into patterns so powerful and pure
we continually fail to ask are they true for us.

When I walked among time-battered stones
thinking already of you
when I sat near the sea
among parched yet flowering weeds
when I drew in my notebook
the thorned purple-tongued flower, each petal
protected by its thorn-leaf
I was mute
innocent of grammar as the waves
irrhythmically washing I felt washed clean
of the guilt of words there was no word to read
in the book of that earth no perjury
the tower of Babel fallen once and for all
light drank at my body
thinking of you I felt free
in the cicadas' pulse, their encircling praise.

When I saw hér face, she of the several faces
staring indrawn in judgment laughing for joy
her serpents twisting her arms raised
her breasts gazing
when I looked into hér world
I wished to cry loose my soul
into her, to become
free of speech at last.

And so I came home a woman starving
for images
to say my hunger is so old

so fundamental, that all the lost
crumbled burnt smashed shattered defaced
overpainted concealed and falsely named
faces of every past we have searched together
in all the ages
could rise reassemble re-collect re-member
themselves as I recollected myself in that presence
as every night close to your body
in the pain of the city, turning
I am remembered by you, remember you
even as we are dismembered
on the cinema screens, the white expensive walls
of collectors, the newsrags blowing the streets
—and it would not be enough.
This is the war of the images.
We are the thorn-leaf guarding the purple-tongued flower
each to each.

Twenty-one Love Poems (4.4.2)

I

Wherever in this city, screens flicker
with pornography, with science-fiction vampires,
victimized hirelings bending to the lash,
we also have to walk … if simply as we walk
through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties
of our own neighborhoods.
We need to grasp our lives inseparable
from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces,
and the red begonia perilously flashing
from a tenement sill six stories high,

or the long-legged young girls playing ball
in the junior highschool playground.
No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.

II

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.
Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,
you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
our friend the poet comes into my room
where I've been writing for days,
drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
and I want to show her one poem
which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,
and wake. You've kissed my hair
to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem,*
I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone …*
and I laugh and fall dreaming again
of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
to move openly together
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air.

III

Since we're not young, weeks have to do time
for years of missing each other. Yet only this odd warp
in time tells me we're not young.
Did I ever walk the morning streets at twenty,

my limbs streaming with a purer joy?
did I lean from any window over the city
listening for the future
as I listen here with nerves tuned for your ring?
And you, you move toward me with the same tempo.
Your eyes are everlasting, the green spark
of the blue-eyed grass of early summer,
the green-blue wild cress washed by the spring.
At twenty, yes: we thought we'd live forever.
At forty-five, I want to know even our limits.
I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,
and somehow, each of us will help the other live,
and somewhere, each of us must help the other die.

IV

I come home from you through the early light of spring
flashing off ordinary walls, the Pez Dorado,
the Discount Wares, the shoe-store…. I'm lugging my sack
of groceries, I dash for the elevator
where a man, taut, elderly, carefully composed
lets the door almost close on me.—*For god's sake hold it!*
I croak at him. —*Hysterical*, — he breathes my way.
I let myself into the kitchen, unload my bundles,
make coffee, open the window, put on Nina Simone
singing *Here comes the sun*…. I open the mail,
drinking delicious coffee, delicious music,
my body still both light and heavy with you. The mail
lets fall a Xerox of something written by a man
aged 27, a hostage, tortured in prison:
My genitals have been the object of such a sadistic display

they keep me constantly awake with the pain …
Do whatever you can to survive.
You know, I think that men love wars …
And my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds
break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,
and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms.

V

This apartment full of books could crack open
to the thick jaws, the bulging eyes
of monsters, easily: Once open the books, you have to face
the underside of everything you've loved—
the rack and pincers held in readiness, the gag
even the best voices have had to mumble through,
the silence burying unwanted children—
women, deviants, witnesses—in desert sand.
Kenneth tells me he's been arranging his books
so he can look at Blake and Kafka while he types;
yes; and we still have to reckon with Swift
loathing the woman's flesh while praising her mind,
Goethe's dread of the Mothers, Claudel vilifying Gide,
and the ghosts—their hands clasped for centuries—
of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake,
centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
and we still have to stare into the absence
of men who would not, women who could not, speak
to our life—this still unexcavated hole
called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.

VI

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—
only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
handling power-tools or steering-wheel
or touching a human face…. Such hands could turn
the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship
through icebergs, or piece together
the fine, needle-like sherds of a great krater-cup
bearing on its sides
figures of ecstatic women striding
to the sibyl's den or the Eleusinian cave—
such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence
with such restraint, with such a grasp
of the range and limits of violence
that violence ever after would be obsolete.

VII

What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
What atonement is this all about?
—and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living.
Is all this close to the wolverines' howled signals,
that modulated cantata of the wild?
or, when away from you I try to create you in words,
am I simply using you, like a river or a war?
And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars
to escape writing of the worst thing of all—
not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough

so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem
mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves?

VIII

I can see myself years back at Sunion,
hurting with an infected foot, Philoctetes
in woman's form, limping the long path,
lying on a headland over the dark sea,
looking down the red rocks to where a soundless curl
of white told me a wave had struck,
imagining the pull of that water from that height,
knowing deliberate suicide wasn't my métier,
yet all the time nursing, measuring that wound.
Well, that's finished. The woman who cherished
her suffering is dead. I am her descendant.
I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me,
but I want to go on from here with you
fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.

IX

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live
I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun.
It's not my own face I see there, but other faces,
even your face at another age.
Whatever's lost there is needed by both of us—
a watch of old gold, a water-blurred fever chart,
a key…. Even the silt and pebbles of the bottom
deserve their glint of recognition. I fear this silence,
this inarticulate life. I'm waiting
for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water

for once, and show me what I can do
for you, who have often made the unnameable
nameable for others, even for me.

X

Your dog, tranquil and innocent, dozes through
our cries, our murmured dawn conspiracies
our telephone calls. She knows—what can she know?
If in my human arrogance I claim to read
her eyes, I find there only my own animal thoughts:
that creatures must find each other for bodily comfort,
that voices of the psyche drive through the flesh
further than the dense brain could have foretold,
that the planetary nights are growing cold for those
on the same journey who want to touch
one creature-traveler clear to the end;
that without tenderness, we are in hell.

XI

Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes,
making them eternally and visibly female.
No height without depth, without a burning core,
though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava.
I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain
smoking within like the sibyl stooped over her tripod,
I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,
never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower
unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her,
that clings to the slowly altering rock—

that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves,
was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us.

XII

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
rotating in their midnight meadow:
a touch is enough to let us know
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep:
the dream-ghosts of two worlds
walking their ghost-towns, almost address each other.
I've wakened to your muttered words
spoken light- or dark-years away
as if my own voice had spoken.
But we have different voices, even in sleep,
and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
and the past echoing through our bloodstreams
is freighted with different language, different meanings—
though in any chronicle of the world we share
it could be written with new meaning
we were two lovers of one gender,
we were two women of one generation.

XIII

The rules break like a thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we're out in a country that has no language
no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren
through gorges unexplored since dawn
whatever we do together is pure invention
the maps they gave us were out of date

by years … we're driving through the desert
wondering if the water will hold out
the hallucinations turn to simple villages
the music on the radio comes clear—
neither *Rosenkavalier* nor *Götterdämmerung*
but a woman's voice singing old songs
with new words, with a quiet bass, a flute
plucked and fingered by women outside the law.

XIV

It was your vision of the pilot
confirmed my vision of you: you said, *He keeps*
on steering headlong into the waves, on purpose
while we crouched in the open hatchway
vomiting into plastic bags
for three hours between St. Pierre and Miquelon.
I never felt closer to you.
In the close cabin where the honeymoon couples
huddled in each other's laps and arms
I put my hand on your thigh
to comfort both of us, your hand came over mine,
we stayed that way, suffering together
in our bodies, as if all suffering
were physical, we touched so in the presence
of strangers who knew nothing and cared less
vomiting their private pain
as if all suffering were physical.

(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)

Whatever happens with us, your body

will haunt mine—tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curled frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun. Your traveled, generous thighs
between which my whole face has come and come—
the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—
the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—
your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
reaching where I had been waiting years for you
in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is.

XV

If I lay on that beach with you
white, empty, pure green water warmed by the Gulf Stream
and lying on that beach we could not stay
because the wind drove fine sand against us
as if it were against us
if we tried to withstand it and we failed—
if we drove to another place
to sleep in each other's arms
and the beds were narrow like prisoners' cots
and we were tired and did not sleep together
and this was what we found, so this is what we did—
was the failure ours?
If I cling to circumstances I could feel
not responsible. Only she who says
she did not choose, is the loser in the end.

XVI

Across a city from you, I'm with you,
just as an August night
moony, inlet-warm, seabathed, I watched you sleep,
the scrubbed, sheenless wood of the dressing-table
cluttered with our brushes, books, vials in the moonlight—
or a salt-mist orchard, lying at your side
watching red sunset through the screendoor of the cabin,
G minor Mozart on the tape-recorder,
falling asleep to the music of the sea.
This island of Manhattan is wide enough
for both of us, and narrow:
I can hear your breath tonight, I know how your face
lies upturned, the halflight tracing
your generous, delicate mouth
where grief and laughter sleep together.

XVII

No one's fated or doomed to love anyone.
The accidents happen, we're not heroines,
they happen in our lives like car crashes,
books that change us, neighborhoods
we move into and come to love.
Tristan und Isolde is scarcely the story,
women at least should know the difference
between love and death. No poison cup,
no penance. Merely a notion that the tape-recorder
should have caught some ghost of us: that tape-recorder
not merely played but should have listened to us,
and could instruct those after us:
this we were, this is how we tried to love,

and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
within us and against us, against us and within us.

XVIII

Rain on the West Side Highway,
red light at Riverside:
the more I live the more I think
two people together is a miracle.
You're telling the story of your life
for once, a tremor breaks the surface of your words.
The story of our lives becomes our lives.
Now you're in fugue across what some I'm sure
Victorian poet called the *salt estranging sea.*
Those are the words that come to mind.
I feel estrangement, yes. As I've felt dawn
pushing toward daybreak. Something: a cleft of light—?
Close between grief and anger, a space opens
where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder.

XIX

Can it be growing colder when I begin
to touch myself again, adhesions pull away?
When slowly the naked face turns from staring backward
and looks into the present,
the eye of winter, city, anger, poverty, and death
and the lips part and say: *I mean to go on living?*
Am I speaking coldly when I tell you in a dream
or in this poem, *There are no miracles?*
(I told you from the first I wanted daily life,

this island of Manhattan was island enough for me.)
If I could let you know—
two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness,
the slow-picked, halting traverse of a pitch
where the fiercest attention becomes routine
—look at the faces of those who have chosen it.

XX

That conversation we were always on the edge
of having, runs on in my head,
at night the Hudson trembles in New Jersey light
polluted water yet reflecting even
sometimes the moon
and I discern a woman
I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat
and choking her like hair. And this is she
with whom I tried to speak, whose hurt, expressive head
turning aside from pain, is dragged down deeper
where it cannot hear me,
and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul.

XXI

The dark lintels, the blue and foreign stones
of the great round rippled by stone implements
the midsummer night light rising from beneath
the horizon—when I said "a cleft of light"
I meant this. And this is not Stonehenge

simply nor any place but the mind
casting back to where her solitude,
shared, could be chosen without loneliness,
not easily nor without pains to stake out
the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light.
I choose to be a figure in that light,
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across that space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.

Chapter 5: Sharon Olds and Family Dynamics

I Go Back to May 1937 (5.3.1)

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it—she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things

you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

Why My Mother Made Me (5.3.2)
Maybe I am what she always wanted,
my father as a woman,
maybe I am what she wanted to be
when she first saw him, tall and smart,
standing there in the college yard with the
hard male light of 1937
shining on his slicked hair. She wanted that
power. She wanted that size. She pulled and
pulled through him as if he were silky
bourbon taffy, she pulled and pulled and
pulled through his body till she drew me out,
sticky and gleaming, her life after her life.
Maybe I am the way I am

because she wanted exactly that,
wanted there to be a woman
a lot like her, but who would not hold back, so she
pressed herself, hard, against him,
pressed and pressed the clear soft
ball of herself like a stick of beaten cream
against his stained sour steel grater
until I came out the other side of his body,
a tall woman, stained, sour, sharp,
but with milk at the center of my nature.
I lie here now as I once lay
in the crook of her arm, her creature,
and I feel her looking down into me the way
the maker of a sword gazes at his face
in the steel of the blade.

Satan Says (5.3.3)

I am locked in a little cedar box
with a picture of shepherds pasted onto
the central panel between carvings.
The box stands on curved legs.
It has a gold, heart-shaped lock
and no key. I am trying to write my
way out of the closed box
redolent of cedar. Satan
comes to me in the locked box
and says, *I'll get you out. Say*
My father is a shit. I say
my father is a shit and Satan
laughs and says, *It's opening.*

Say your mother is a pimp.
My mother is a pimp. Something
opens and breaks when I say that.
My spine uncurls in the cedar box
like the pink back of the ballerina pin
with a ruby eye, resting beside me on
satin in the cedar box.
Say shit, say death, say fuck the father,
Satan says, down my ear.
The pain of the locked past buzzes
in the child's box on her bureau, under
the terrible round pond eye
etched around with roses, where
self-loathing gazed at sorrow.
Shit. Death. Fuck the father.
Something opens. Satan says
Don't you feel a lot better?
Light seems to break on the delicate
edelweiss pin, carved in two
colors of wood. I love him too,
you know, I say to Satan dark
in the locked box. I love them but
I'm trying to say what happened to us
in the lost past. *Of course,* he says
and smiles, *of course. Now say: torture.*
I see, through blackness soaked in cedar,
the edge of a large hinge open.
Say: the father's cock, the mother's
cunt, says Satan, *I'll get you out.*
The angle of the hinge widens

until I see the outlines of
the time before I was, when they were
locked in the bed. When I say
the magic words, Cock, Cunt,
Satan softly says, *Come out.*
But the air around the opening
is heavy and thick as hot smoke.
Come in, he says, and I feel his voice
breathing from the opening.
The exit is through Satan's mouth.
Come in my mouth, he says, *you're there*
already, and the huge hinge
begins to close. Oh no, I loved
them, too, I brace
my body tight
in the cedar house.
Satan sucks himself out the keyhole.
I'm left locked in the box, he seals
the heart-shaped lock with the wax of his tongue.
It's your coffin now, Satan says.
I hardly hear;
I am warming my cold
hands at the dancer's
ruby eye—
the fire, the suddenly discovered knowledge of love.

The Lifting (5.3.3)

Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I
turned my head away but he cried out
Share!, my nickname, so I turned and looked.

He was sitting in the high cranked-up bed with the
gown up, around his neck,
to show me the weight he had lost. I looked
where his solid ruddy stomach had been
and I saw the skin fallen into loose
soft hairy rippled folds
lying in a pool of folds
down at the base of his abdomen,
the gaunt torso of a big man
who will die soon. Right away
I saw how much his hips are like mine,
the long, white angles, and then
how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's,
a chambered whelk-shell hollowed out,
I saw the folds of skin like something
poured, a thick batter, I saw
his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he
shows me his old body, he knows
I will be interested, he knows I will find him
appealing. If anyone had ever told me
I would sit by him and he would pull up his nightie
and I would look at him, at his naked body,
at the thick bud of his penis in all that
dark hair, look at him
in affection and uneasy wonder
I would not have believed it. But now I can still
see the tiny snowflakes, white and
night-blue, on the cotton of the gown as it
rises the way we were promised at death it would rise,
the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything.

The Language of the Brag (5.4.1)

I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms
and my straight posture and quick electric muscles
to achieve something at the center of a crowd,
the blade piercing the bark deep,
the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock.
I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body,
some heroism, some American achievement
beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,
magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot
and watched the boys play.

I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire
and the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around

my belly big with cowardice and safety,
stool charcoal from the iron pills,
huge breasts leaking colostrum,
legs swelling, hands swelling,
face swelling and reddening, hair
falling out, inner sex
stabbed and stabbed again with pain like a knife.
I have lain down.

I have lain down and sweated and shaken
and passed blood and shit and water and
slowly alone in the center of a circle I have
passed the new person out

and they have lifted the new person free of the act
and wiped the new person free of that
language of blood like praise all over the body.

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
I and the other women this exceptional
act with the exceptional heroic body,
this giving birth, this glistening verb,
and I am putting my proud American boast
right here with the others.

New Mother (5.4.2)
A week after our child was born,
you cornered me in the spare room
and we sank down on the bed.
You kissed me and kissed me, my milk undid its
burning slip-knot through my nipples,
soaking my shirt. All week I had smelled of milk,
fresh milk, sour. I began to throb:
my sex had been torn easily as cloth by the
crown of her head, I'd been cut with a knife and
sewn, the stitches pulling at my skin-
and the first time you're broken, you don't know
you'll be healed again, better than before.
I lay in fear and blood and milk
while you kissed and kissed me, your lips hot and swollen
as a teen-age boy's, your sex dry and big,
all of you so tender, you hung over me,
over the nest of the stitches, over the

splitting and tearing, with the patience of someone who
finds a wounded animal in the woods
and stays with it, not leaving its side
until it is whole, until it can run again.

Miscarriage (5.4.3)
When I was a month pregnant, the great
clots of blood appeared in the pale
green swaying water of the toilet,
brick red like black in the salty
translucent brine, like forms of life
appearing, jellyfish with the clear-cut
shapes of fungi.

That was the only appearance made
by that child, the rough, scalloped shapes
falling slowly. A month later
our son was conceived, and I never went back
to mourn the one who came as far as the
sill with its information: that we could
botch something, you and I. All wrapped in
purple it floated away, like a messenger
put to death for bearing bad news.

To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now (5.4.3)
Though I never saw you, only your clouds,
I was afraid of you, of how you differed
from what we had wanted you to be. And it's as if
you waited, then, where such waiting is done,
for when I would look beside me--and here

you are, in the world of forms, where my wifehood
is now, and every action with him,
as if a thousand years from now
you and I are in some antechamber
where the difference between us is of little matter,
you with perhaps not much of a head yet,
dear garden one, you among the shovels
and spades and wafts of beekeeper's shroud
and sky-blue kidskin gloves.
That he left me is not much, compared
to your leaving the earth--you shifting places
on it, and shifting shapes--you threw off your
working clothes of arms and legs,
and moved house, from uterus
to toilet bowl and jointed stem
and sewer out to float the rivers and
bays in painless pieces. And yet
the idea of you has come back to where
I could see you today as a small, impromptu
god of the partial. When I leave for good,
would you hold me in your blue mitt
for the departure hence. I never thought
to see you again, I never thought to seek you.