

Midwife of An-arché: Toward a Poetics of Becoming-with-Woman

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Abstract

This project explores the connections between midwifery and the ethical demands attendant to poetic practice. Through verse and prose, I unfold a figuration of the midwife that traverses the boundaries between Levinasian heteronomy and Deleuzian heteromorphism, and is a constitutive factor in sites of resistance to the biomedical territorialisation of the creative body.

Chief archival and methodological components that inform the thesis include: a historiography of childbirth - tracing the development of 'holistic' and 'interventionist' paradigms, and the ideological underpinnings of the phallocratic takeover of the birthing room in certain Western countries; idiographic insights gathered from dialogues with maternal practitioners and mothers, including residents of The Farm in Tennessee - where I participated in a midwifery workshop week; an experiential inquiry into Holotropic Breathwork - to facilitate access to non-ordinary states of consciousness; and a negotiation between Marxist-feminist and post-structuralist articulations of ethico-political agency.

Subject matter ranges from a consideration of the ethical import of the placental economy to the bio-intelligent tissue of the psoas, the banishment of Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts Bay to the legacy of the 'Twilight Sleep' movement. Sustained critical attention is devoted to Mina Loy's "Parturition", and contemporary poets that have acknowledged Loy as an influence, such as Lara Glenum. I suggest that, despite the absence of a birth attendant on the symbolic level, Loy's poem resonates with the investments of midwifery, instating a 'subject-in-process' that works through and against abstruse and instrumental discourses, defying both the technocratic erasure of maternal knowing and the fetishistic reduction of labour to an end-product. Art's capacity for opening up a corporeally-charged zone of between-ness is further elaborated in an essay on Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* - through which the treatment of spatiotemporality is aligned with the imperatives of midwifery guardianship.

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Preface

A midwife turns up - on the way to a poem.¹ Should I be thinking twice before saying the word, turn down the call? Beware tuning out the machineries of oppression, and dropping in a ceremony in a manicured suburb replete with pregnancy beads, baby bump casts, and bellies adorned with henna mandalas - microcosmic iteration of cosmological unity professionally cut, mixed, and pasted for a flat fee. Fear losing sight of pregnant migrant agency workers stood manoeuvring heavy carcasses in a processing factory for 10 hours a day, line managers bullying them out of toilet breaks.

First hint of any unctuous waxing lyrical about ‘harmony with nature’ or ‘deep self-knowledge’ and I shall perform with a nod to the meaty spirit of the ‘gurlisque’: I’ve dollar signs painted over my feet, unicorn vomit in a ‘Navajo-design’ hip flask filched from a high street boutique, a spotted hyena cub stuffed toy with Bambi figurine in her jaws, and a stanza concerning intrauterine cannibalism in the sand tiger shark. I giggle maniacally, artificially. Apply a phrase from Lara Glenum’s “Manifesto of the Anti-Real”: ‘sentimentality is a form of exploitation, a connivance with official lies.’² But remember: a merciless relishing of acerbic

¹ The opening of this preface was partly inspired by Joy Katz’s essay “Baby Poetics”, in which, with no shortage of wit, she expresses a critical wariness towards the aesthetic and socio-political quagmires that with the insertion of the clear image of a baby into a poem, the dangers of being reduced to a ‘mother-poet’ writing a poem ‘about’ something, without the poem ‘doing’ much – other than generating predictable emotion – and reproducing a cosy, heteronormative narrative milieu. ‘A baby has appeared. Fear loss of world, loss of danger, loss of trash, loss of anger, loss of war, loss of surprise, loss of mattering, loss of dirt, loss of wildness, loss of scale, loss of geologic time, loss of continents, loss of rivers, loss of knives, loss of meanness. Lost: the chance to go somewhere that scares me.’ Joy Katz, “Baby Poetics,” *American Poetry Review*, 42, 6: (2013), accessed February 18, 2015, <https://www.aprweb.org/article/baby-poetics>

² Lara Glenum, “Manifesto of the Anti-Real,” in *The Hounds of No* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Action Books, 2005), 61.

parody that also pulverises tenderness for another party (unless they're fascistic) can make for a dyspeptic pessimism, a reflux of resentment, through a poem.

Ideational mirror stained by vision of yogini squatting and bleeding on antique roses under a new moon, a fertiliser that the adman – imposing discretion – confounds with wasteful expenditure. Better to bend my trembling knee to the blessed unsalable than swear alignment to the toxin-laced 'feminine hygiene' industry. But apprehend the threat of idealising her. To venerate woman purely on the basis of her reproductive capacities is to grossly restrict the range of her intelligence and experience. An odious by-product of the romanticisation of maternity is the misprizing of women that don't meet its desiderata. However, this is not to suggest that a woman's unique capability to bring forth life should be devalued, as this would risk submitting to the somatophobia that underpinned Plato's Socrates' appropriation of childbirth and midwifery as quintessential metaphors for philosophy, leaving woman herself circumscribed by biology and thus disqualified from the immortality that finds its ultimate expression through procreation in the non-bodily realm of ideas.³ Resolving through poetic means to become increasingly conscious of the compensatory dynamics of womb envy necessitates vigilance against erasing the cognitions, the passions, and the desires of a maternal subject - which I, considering the makeup of my organism, could only encounter through a second-order state of proximity, at best. Otherwise, I'd be liable to repeat Nietzsche's error of misplacing 'abjection onto women and femininity as a defence against his own identification with the maternal body.'⁴ It's incumbent on me to avoid projecting any narcissistic scars – from the realisation that I'm unable to make

³ Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (London: Athlone, 2006), 105.

⁴ Kelly Oliver, *Womanising Nietzsche: Philosophy's Relation to the 'Feminine'* (London: Routledge, 1994), 145.

a baby – back onto woman, and having the poem adopt underlying aspects of a New Guinea initiation ritual: bleeding genitals and tongue, sacred flutes, the boy's symbolic death and rebirth into huts tended by 'male mothers', all meant to reclaim the secret powers of male fertility and birth said to be stolen by female ancestors.⁵

Casting woman as eco-spiritual avatar and victimised protectress, organically ingrained with finer traits than the masculine constitution – his rationality concomitant with a domineering will to transcend the sphere of 'nature' from which she derives her nourishing instincts by especial propinquity – regressively recreates the dualistic logic that splits her off from reflective faculty, and severely undercuts any emancipatory activity alive to actual social and economic conditions. I should emphasise here that liberal feminism is a vindication of androcentrism by default, since it is snared up in pursuit of equal entry into a cultural edifice of 'humanity' that lays aside that which doesn't buttress the properties of individualism and instrumentalism imputed to 'man'.⁶ A steely focus on championing an expanded right of access to this privileged domain, harking back to Mary Wollstonecraft's entreaty that women partake of the Reason that grants 'men pre-eminence over the brute creation',⁷ detracts from an awareness that inferiority would continue to be ascribed to identity groupings – demarcated along race, gender, and class lines – in accordance with their perceived remoteness from civilised sociality. However, in confronting the exigency of reconceptualising 'nature', a slack gesture towards biocentrism is inadequate, presupposing a monolithic model of the human, thereby downplaying the glaring disparities – indivisible from the operations of capital – that

⁵ Eva Feder Kittay, "Womb Envy: An Explanatory Concept," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 110.

⁶ Val Plumwood, "Women, Humanity and Nature," in *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader*, eds. Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne (London & New York: Routledge), 214.

⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792), accessed February 21, 2015, <http://www.bartleby.com/144/1.html>

shape subjects' relations to the more-than-human environment. To what extent is an outlook of self-satisfied centrality in the universe available to the inhabitants of a barrio suspended on stilts over the excrement-choked Pasig River, or Johannesburg's shantytown periphery population resting on a belt of unstable mining-contaminated soil? Lofty exhortations to instate the restoration of kinship with the 'natural world' to 'save the planet' as the paramount moral directive is bound to strike an estimated billion slum dwellers and fifty million refugees differently than citizens residing in wealthy cities defended by 'hard engineering' and covered by disaster insurance.⁸ Add an infusion of matristic spirituality into the anti-anthropocentric mix, and see whether its heady bouquet even reaches the sensorium of a healthcare assistant living in a shed on the detritus-strewn yard of a London bedsit or children sleeping in a walk-in freezer. Prop up the Minoan snake-grasping female statuette on the mini convector heater.

What does the above have to do with midwifery? First of all, it's a vocation that furnishes a crucial nexus for negotiating the discourses around nature and socialisation, with implications that extend in multiple directions beyond the context of parturition itself. Might poetic practice, through engagement of, and with, the problematic of the body, enter into coordination with the phenomenological and ethical modalities of the midwife-mother relation? The poem mustn't preach the gospel of 'natural childbirth'. Delving into the origins of this designation only augments scepticism regarding its epistemological tenability and ethical defensibility. Grantly Dick-Read's *Natural Childbirth*, published in 1933, was borne out of a drive by adherents of reform genetics to redress a decline in the birth rate of the middle class and counterbalance breeding among those of 'poor quality'

⁸ Mike Davis, "Ecology against Capitalism: Slum Ecology", *Socialist Review*, July/Aug (2005), accessed February 21, 2015, <http://socialistreview.org.uk/298/ecology-against-capitalism-slum-ecology>

stock. The endeavour to demystify the ‘fear of childbirth’ was a conservative propagandistic summons for women to forswear the new employment and educational opportunities opened up by feminist movements, to remain the cornerstone of the home and embrace an ostensibly inbuilt motherly responsibility, child-rearing synonymous with her civic duty to boost the efficiency of the nation.⁹ For Dick-Read, when it comes to parturition, woman can ‘arrive at her perfection’ only by acting ‘in keeping with the law of nature’,¹⁰ and yet, tellingly, those women that are reprimanded for becoming disposed to what he terms ‘cultural labour’¹¹ are reliant on the male medical specialist’s teaching in order to avert ‘unnatural emotional states’¹² and to rehabilitate the reflexes impaired by civilised lifestyles.

Although his remonstrance against a meddling obstetrics that treats childbirth as a fundamentally pathological process, and his zealous refusal to brush aside its psychological component, is a beneficent inheritance, the hyperbolic insistence that labour pain is not ‘part of a divinely designed nature’¹³ – propped up by stereotypes of the joyful ease of birth for the ‘noble savage’ and a reductive neurophysiological schema of fear and tension – represents an altogether more dubious legacy. Furthermore, his enumeration of the ‘Dick-Read method’ as being ‘based upon a complete familiarity with the motivating powers, the mechanism, and the purpose of the natural phenomena of childbirth’¹⁴ smacks of hubris, a functionalisation of the m/other within a totalising system. Shades of this presumptive appeal to an immutable normative telos of parturition are detectable in

⁹ Ornella Moscucci, “Holistic Obstetrics: The Origins of ‘Natural Childbirth’ in Britain.” *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 79 (2003): 169. doi:10.1136/pmj.79.929.168

¹⁰ Grantly Dick-Read, *Childbirth without Fear* (London: William Heinemann, 1952), xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹² *Ibid.*, 270.

¹³ Tess Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 11.

¹⁴ Dick-Read, *Childbirth Without Fear*, 312.

parts of the rhetorical apparatus that contemporary ‘alternative childbirth’ proponents have been censured for. Whether it’s a Birthing Center notice with the tagline ‘Childbirth the way it should be!’¹⁵ or a book titled *The Doula Blueprint* (with a front cover featuring a sunflower emerging behind the lateral close-up of a white woman’s pregnant belly and the description: ‘Help Soon-To-Be-Moms Create An Ideal Birth Experience’)¹⁶ there is a danger of overestimating the extent to which a supreme childbirth can be predetermined and governed from outside. Installing a ‘maternal gold standard’¹⁷ of un-medicated labour conducted with complete fidelity to a meticulous birth plan sets a number of women up for disenchantment and self-recrimination when some intractable vicissitude, ever possible, arises. Ironically then, the upshot of ‘alternative birth’ ideology can therefore mirror that of the disciplinary operations of the technocratic framework.

For all of that, just as it would be ill-considered to wash one’s hands of nurturance, intuition, and other feminine-coded attributes simply on the basis that they’re at the subordinate pole of the phallogratic economy, I am not proposing that all reference to the category of ‘the natural’ involves some sort of pernicious discursive manipulation.¹⁸ Indeed, it is critical that approaches to childbirth are informed by empirical, evidence-based studies demonstrating the effects of physical interactions that discredit the fanciful premise that nature *is* culture. Wouldn’t there

¹⁵ Robbie Davis-Floyd, “Consuming Childbirth: The Qualified Commodification of Midwifery Care,” in *Consuming Motherhood*, eds. Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne, and Danielle F. Wozniak (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 237.

¹⁶ See the product description for Ann Anderson, *The Doula Blueprint: How to Become a Doula and Create a Successful Business*, accessed 25 February 2015, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Doula-Blueprint-Successful-Business-ebook/dp/B00NA5S4BY>

¹⁷ Rebecca Kukla, “Measuring Mothering.” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 1, 1 (2008): 82.

¹⁸ Jane Clare Jones, “Idealized and Industrialized Labor: Anatomy of a Feminist Controversy.” *Hypatia* 27, 1 (2012): 112. Jones makes the following point: ‘It is not ideological to suggest that people might benefit from increasing their consumption of Brassica cultivars, or that it’s a bad idea to allow fertilizer to leach into rivers, although the dissemination of these norms might be couched in ideological rhetoric.’

be something deficient in a poem that invokes the scenario of a caesarean section delivery and doesn't acknowledge the significance, for future health, of the absence of bifidobacteria in the intestinal microbiota of neonates that haven't travelled along the birth canal?¹⁹ For a poem that mentions Pitocin, ought there to be a register of its variance from endogenous oxytocin in terms of the severity of contractions the former provokes, and the recognition that it doesn't cross the blood-brain barrier and release endorphins? Though the human prefrontal cortex is much larger than that of a rat, and is implicated in the highly evolved executive functioning of the former, to put out of one's mind the potential cross-species import of observations that pups separated from their mother at birth demonstrate a markedly compromised capacity for bonding, and an atypical neurochemical infrastructure that points towards succorant and nurturant environmental features as preconditions for the genetic expression of oxytocin receptors,²⁰ would be tantamount to arrogant exceptionalism. Whilst I'm conscious to avoid yielding to the fallacy of the single cause and positing that oxytocin *explains* morality, I advance that to treat the question of the ethical as the exclusive preserve of the humanities, and to be resigned to reprising an aphoristic litany of speculative judgements concerning right values, is to be immured in ignorance. I care for a poetics that, through an affiliation with midwifery, takes on board the hypothalamic mechanisms bound up with the extension of other-caring, and dissents from a sham-scientific modelling of childbirth, one which sets little store by the 'exchange of breath and sweat, of touch and gaze, of body oils and

¹⁹ See Giacomo Biasucci, Belinda Benenati, Lorenzo Morelli, Elena Bessi, and Günther Boehm, "Caesarean Delivery May Affect the Early Biodiversity of Intestinal Bacteria." *The Journal of Nutrition* 138, 9 (2008): 1796-1800

[<http://jn.nutrition.org/content/138/9/1796S.full>]

²⁰ Pat Churchland, "On the Neurobiology of Morality (Plus Hume's Ethics)," podcast audio, *The Partially Examined Life: A Philosophy Podcast and Philosophy Blog*, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.partiallyexaminedlife.com/2011/07/18/episode-41-pat-churchland-on-the-neurobiology-of-morality-plus-hume%E2%80%99s-ethics/>

emotions,²¹ and is predicated on disconnection - separating ‘milk from breasts, mothers from babies, foetuses from pregnancies, sexuality from procreation’.²²

Since a guiding objective of this project – to explore points of contact between sociopolitical and phenomenological dimensions of midwifery and the ethical demands attendant to poetic activity – is one that might strike the reader as preposterously ambitious, or even recklessly farfetched, a detailing of some of the conceptual and extra-thematic foci informing my practice might not go amiss. First, a caveat: Hopefully, the ensuing reflections explicitate factors which operate more or less in the background of the verse, and therefore deepen the reader’s interest, but, at the risk of riling the more methodically-minded by remaining all too fuliginous, I am not disposed to diagrammatically laying down hard-and-fast analogues between poet and midwife as though they were unitary entities. First of all, none of the poems unfolded as mere descriptive or narrative follow-throughs of a narrow a priori inventory dictating what a poem needs to be doing at all times in order to be *about* childbirth, and, to echo Rosemarie Waldrop, ‘to my mind, writing has to do with uncovering possibilities rather than with codification.’²³

I trust it is possible for the poems themselves to enliven a reader’s sense of how the conceptions of health and care that emerge out of many a midwife’s approach to the maternal body can assist us in thinking about the workings of discourse, and vice versa. As I realised right at the outset, this comprehension is contingent on contending with an epistemics of expertise arising out of the

²¹ Robbie Davis-Floyd and Elizabeth Davis, “Intuition as Authoritative Knowledge in Midwifery and Home Birth,” in *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Robbie Davis-Floyd, Carolyn F. Sargent (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 315.

²² Barbara Katz Rothman, “Plenary Address, Midwives’ Alliance of North America Conference, NYC, Nov 1992,” quoted in Davis-Floyd and Davis, “Intuition as Authoritative Knowledge,” 315. Rothman states, ‘The history of obstetrics is the history of technologies of separation.’

²³ Rosemarie Waldrop, “Alarms and Excursions” in *Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof, 1990), 46.

technocratic paradigm of childbirth, which runs on philosophical presuppositions and ritual enactments inimical to the holistic investments of midwifery. The former frames birth as a biomedical spectacle, treating the parturient as a defective machine disassembled into parts to be corrected by specialists from outside in, detached from her psychoemotional bearings. At a very early stage of research, the hegemony of hyper-medicalised birth and devaluation of midwifery in the United States, in particular, was set as a key point of interrogation, spurring an inquiry into multifarious historical circumstances and philosophical currents that would be negotiated through the poems, so as to situate the significance of the midwife relation within a wider complex of relations impacting on, and impacted by – as subtle as this may be – the constituent dynamics of the birthing space. Whether turning my attention towards the incipient measures in the 17th century to subjugate the accumulated knowledge of the midwife and concomitantly displace the mother from the centre of the birth process – with the entry of the accoucheur into the French Court; the commercial opportunism tied up with the male monopoly on the utilisation of forceps; the prohibition on women attending institutions that could grant her professional status, at the same time that midwives’ work ‘was either stolen and reproduced in the form of treatises by “learned” scientists, or treated as “heathen charms”, “old wives tales”²⁴ – or examining the early 20th century normalisation of an assembly-line model of hospital-based maternity management and continued witch-hunts against midwives striving to protect the opportunities for home birth in the United States,²⁵ I increasingly came to appreciate that the takeover of a

²⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London, Virago, 1977), 141.

²⁵ Marsden Wagner writes: ‘Studies that allow us to compare low-risk births attended by obstetricians and low-risk births attended by midwives show midwives to be safer, less expensive, and more likely to facilitate a satisfying experience for the mother and family. In the United States, however, most obstetricians are vehemently opposed to midwives and have gone to great lengths to

longstanding women-led province by the patriarchal medical apparatus was decidedly symptomatic of the expansion of alienated labour since the Scientific Revolution. As Silvia Federici explains, the ‘bourgeois spirit... calculates, classifies, degrades the body only in order to rationalise its faculties, aiming not just at intensifying its subjection but at maximising its utility... To pose the body as mechanical matter... was to make intelligible the possibility of subordinating it to a work process that increasingly relied on uniform and predictable forms of behaviour’.²⁶ It is the legacy of the Cartesian bargain of Modernity, which casts the body as an anatomical object submitted to the unconstrained will, or a clock-like device fitted for the spatio-temporality of capitalist discipline, and which can be beheld in the contemporary cyborgification of childbirth – the woman umbilically tethered to electronic equipment, her uterus ‘a public domain subject to general civic surveillance’²⁷ – that is taken to task throughout the poems.

I was cognisant that, for a poem to make a substantial claim on the attention, or a claim for innovation, it must bear palpable signs of a fraught struggle against the incentives and enervating pressures of a social system that degrades attention and travesties innovation, and supply testimony to the tenacious exertion of thought incarnated across manifold nodes of dissent. I would be idle and negligent to proceed as though creative expenditure may be disassociated from the insidious perversions and conspicuous mutilations of the just and the good under late

drive them out of business.’ *Born in the USA: How a Broken Maternity System must be Fixed to Put Mothers and Infants First* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 10. In addition, consider the following: ‘In America, midwives attend less than 8% of all births and less than 1% of those occur outside a hospital. At the same time, the US has the second worst newborn death rate in the developed world.’ “Press Notes for *The Business of Being Born*” (2006), accessed February 26, 2015, <http://www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com/press/BusinessofBeingBorn.pdf>

²⁶ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 139.

²⁷ Rebecca Kukla, “Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces,” in *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, eds. Sarah Hardy and Caroline Wiedmer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 285.

capitalism. There must be an untiring refusal of consolatory gratification in the melt-in-your-heart laureate verse whose glinty silken wrappings and leaden contents would be at home on the IKEA floating shelf between sickly sweet pickings from the “Richard and Judy (Thorntons PLC) Book Club”. To retreat into pastoral simulacra – some quasi-private nature reserve for the toned-down romantic ego to find leisure and lucidity in – is a gutless, illusive bypassing of a cultural landscape indelibly marked by the ascent of post-fordist enterprise and the prevalence of the information economy, the factory as ‘an overflowing disciplinary regime as well as a territory of machinic subservience’²⁸ that puts to work the very linguistic resources of the immaterial labourer for surplus extraction, psychophysiological processes becoming increasingly caught up and dispersed in digital networks of social automatism that drain communication of its erotic and ethical impetus.

The recent financial crisis, I hasten to stress, has brought home some element of the immiseration inflicted by market fundamentalism on the global south where industrial production became increasingly concentrated from the 1970s onwards, mostly out of sight of the neocolonial citizenry, and should afford an critical reminder that capital multiplies itself via the reproductive capacities of bodies to reproduce bodies whose sensate qualities and concrete practices are thusly objectified as interchangeable quantities of ‘the same intangible stuff’.²⁹ Of course, the popular media currency of airbrushed, anaemic, whatever-chic effigies of simulated carnality and the mythical heroic-masculinist bourgeois (non)body –

²⁸ Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2013), 23.

²⁹ David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 5.

sanitised against ‘the sweat of labour and the blood of menstruation and childbirth’³⁰ – function to impede such a recognition.

If the reader is hankering for a compendious definition of the compound neologism midwife-poet – which is a term I expect some would wish to strictly reserve for actual birth practitioners whose commitments extend to writing poetry – then they could well find the above dementedly circumlocutory. Be that as it may, I deem the above obligatory for making plain that the status of both midwifery and poetry must be fiercely safeguarded from depoliticisation, and to presage their transdisciplinary value for engaging the expressivity of the biocultural body. It is on this basis that I have found Rosi Braidotti’s foregrounding of ‘figuration’ so illuminative, enabling the midwife-poet to take on the features of a ‘politically informed’ performative image that portrays the ‘complex interactions of levels of subjectivity’,³¹ allowing for ‘otherwise unlikely encounters’³² in accordance with a philosophy of the “as if”. It is *as if* some experiences were reminiscent or evocative of others’.³³ Poetry and midwifery can mobilise an embodied feminist pedagogy that stimulates dis-identifications from ‘the sedentary phallogocentric monologism of philosophical thinking’,³⁴ and can give off resonances that converge on the occupation of multilayered subject positions that contest techno-capitalist discursive regimes that reduce the body to ‘pure surface, exteriority without depth’.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1.

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ Ibid., 5. Braidotti proclaims: ‘The nomadic subject is a myth, a political fiction that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges. Implicit in my choice is the belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as a way to step out of the political and intellectual stasis of these postmodern times’ (4). Though I have striven to uphold a commitment to rigorously examining evidence-based studies, and drawing insights from countless dialogues with empirical birth practitioners and mothers, I admit that in my endeavour to trace the significance of the midwife across multiple, protean contexts, the figure might be seen as taking on mythical proportions.

³⁴ Ibid., 30.

³⁵ Ibid., 50.

Contrary to advocating a style of thinking that aims to absolve itself from the influence of the biomedical worldview, and presume access to a raw unadulterated voice of parturient experience, this poetics ventures to crisscross and loosen dominant sedimentations of positivist meaning to create a passage for affective becomings and increase a body's power to act through the composition of new relationships. Rather than falling back on some semi-mystical enthroneing of the folk healer or monolithic representation of "traditional" birth practices, the midwife-poet figural mode is one that is informed by the 'informed relativism' that characterises Robbie Davis-Floyd's affirmation of the 'postmodern midwife'.³⁶ She refers to the emerging global renaissance of a midwifery that fluidly traverses the boundaries between age-old birthways, professional networks, and biomedicine, midwives as 'shape-shifters knowing how to subvert the medical system while appearing to comply with it.'³⁷ Such midwives are wide-awake to the advantages of scientific learning for deploying a radical questioning of underexamined precepts and detrimental customs across disparate birth traditions – from the sealing of the

³⁶ Robbie Davis-Floyd, "Daughter of time: the postmodern midwife," *Rev Esc Enferm USP* 41, 4 (2007): 705. This also links in with another challenging, but productive, tension: The effort to not allow certain post-structuralist tendencies in the thesis – those rejecting an immutable self-identity determined by mechanisms of totalisation and abstract laws by which to evaluate life – to absolutely remove midwifery from the purview of axiology. Some reference to duties, permissions, and values that inform how we ought and ought not to act, were deemed necessary to defend against charges of moral relativism. For more on the potential for unmitigated anti-representationalism to become totalitarian, see Nathan Jun, "Reconsidering Post-structuralism and Anarchism," in *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (London: Pluto, 2011), 231-249. If I were to simply affirm difference and experimentation unbounded, I could be by extension condoning unsound alternative practices, say based on emulating the 17th C Russian peasant midwives, the 'povitukha', who would get the woman in labour to climb onto a bench and jump off to speed the delivery, forcing her to vomit, hanging her upside down. The relationship between pre-existing universalisable codes of conduct and contingencies in the midwife-mother situation can be addressed in conjunction with the long-standing anarchist emphasis on the prefigurative principle, that is, the means employed must be congruous with the desired ends, the principle's justification immanent to its purpose. It would be deleterious to unconditionally hallow 'natural childbirth' and 'no intervention' as an idea in the order of the transcendent to measure midwives and mothers against, as this would cast a denigratory judgemental light on those rare cases when physiological signs arise that call for medical technologies as necessary to save lives.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 707.

umbilical stump with dung to the lithotomy position – and ‘rejecting a sense of structural inferiority to biomedicine’.³⁸ As an illustration of postmodern midwifery, Davis-Floyd points to a veritable social movement of birth attendants in Mexico, where you might discover birth centres adjoined to their houses, furnished with laminated charts of the female reproductive cycle, autoclaves and sterile tools, alongside homeopathic remedies and herbal ointments. She highlights the case of Doña Facunda, who, commonly coming up against a strong belief in the benefits of hospital-derived set-ups on the part of families, has an IV pole in place, yet remakes it into a support apparatus for the ‘hanging squat’, a transformation that both ‘critiques its normative use’³⁹ in the biomedical milieu, and shores up her allegiance to a time-honoured cultural promotion of upright birthing positions through incorporating a technique inspired by the contemporary French physician Michel Odent - who Facunda had seen lecture a few years prior.

Such an example of subversive appropriation, presenting us with ‘novel combinations, ironies, and unexpected juxtapositions’⁴⁰ that bespeak an overdetermination confounding an essentialist delimitation of the ‘midwife tradition’, very much intersects with my dedication to a poetics of critical articulation - that is more a ‘weaving together of heterogeneous threads into a new product’ than a ‘scholarly disinterested comparison of homogenous masses’.⁴¹ I spurn the liberal humanist habitude for fostering a stringent institutional division between the arts and sciences, and, against any predilection for clumping language into antipodal groupings tagged ‘technical’ and ‘poetic’, I adopt George Whalley’s verdict that ‘only in a period of imaginative debility can one believe that certain

³⁸ Ibid., 707.

³⁹ Ibid., 708.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 708.

⁴¹ Michael Ryan cited Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Cambridge, Mass. & Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 6.

words and forms alone are proper to poetry’: Every word can ‘be made to carry a precise and complicated charge of feeling’ – even if at times the charge may be ‘only subliminal’ – through a writer’s skillful determination of context.⁴² I anticipate some exasperated reactions to the proliferation of apparent jargon in these poems, accompanied by accusations of replaying the mystifying, estranging address of the hardline obstetrician or recondite metaphysician; as part of my defence, I would underscore that this is not just reflective of an affinity for Irigarayan mimicry to destabilise phallogocentric discourses, but a pedagogical exhortation to become ever-more literate in the physical and life sciences, especially on account of their bastardisation by the dualistic logic of biomedicine, to militate against indiscriminate acquiescence towards specialist terminology, and therefore subordination in a ‘physician-patient’ hierarchy. I fear that certain feminist thinkers, on account of the historical relegation of woman to the realm of nature and corporeality to be conquered by masculinist rationality, would be uneasy about the accentuation of bodily materiality across the poems; however, my wager is that to push aside organismic processes is to leave woman, yet again, susceptible to being treated as brute matter; as Nadine Edwards suggests, ‘muting the body mutes both oppressive bodily practices and the power of birthing bodies. It stops us finding the words to express the oppression and knowledge of our bodies, and understanding more about how our bodies interact with knowledge and oppressive practices.’⁴³

This is a poetics emboldened by the examples of mothers inserting themselves within, to assert themselves against, univocal clinical scripts: These include the woman labouring with twins in Kitzinger’s *Giving Birth* – a book that

⁴² George Whalley, *Poetic Process* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1973), 129.

⁴³ Nadine Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy: Women’s Experiences of Planning Home Births* (London: Routledge, 2005), 61.

tellingly puts the lyricism of water imagery in parallel with a preponderance of medical vocabulary – that reports, ‘between contractions I continued the forceps discussion’,⁴⁴ and the woman, cited by Nadine Edwards in *Birthing Autonomy*, that ruffled her attendants by ‘asking about them about stitches and if they did them in the subcuticular way. Because I realised that it made a difference to swelling.’⁴⁵ Tess Cosslett points to how Kitzinger delineates childbirth as an *art* whose consummation necessitates an ‘initial splitting of the self, in which one half keeps an intellectual eye on the medical procedures, while the other “flows” with the body’;⁴⁶ my poetic approach accords with this to a certain degree, though I must emphasise that it involves less a clearcut psychic partitioning of instinctive drives and social signification than a sliding back and forth along a spectrum of intentional consciousness and physiological animation, and an endeavour to avoid basing any ‘flowing presence’⁴⁷ on an internalisation of the fantasy of the “primitive” giving birth with ease, as though thinking plays no role. As Miranda Field writes, contemplating the ‘possibly paradoxical’ upsurge of emotional uninhibitedness and pressurised diligence in her post-motherhood poetics, ‘(contrary to what a lot of people seem to think happens at parturition) my intellect remained intact, and maybe even toughened a little.’⁴⁸ This is consonant with the negotiation of vigilance and surrender in the poetics of midwifery, and would seem to chime with Nadine Edwards’s inquiries into the idea of control in childbirth, finding that ‘women talked simultaneously about “letting go” and “concentrating”’,⁴⁹ with Edwards proposing a comparison with Nel Noddings’ notion of ‘active passivity’: ‘I let the object act

⁴⁴ Sheila Kitzinger, *Giving Birth, How It Really Feels* (London: Gollancz, 1987), 80.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 234.

⁴⁶ Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth*, 133.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸ Miranda Field, “Poet as Mother / Mother as Poet,” *Creativeparents.com*, accessed 9 December 2014, <http://www.creativeparents.com/MirandaFieldinterview.html>

⁴⁹ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 230.

upon me, seize me, direct my floating thoughts... My decision to do this is mine, it requires an effort in preparation, but it also requires a letting go of my attempts to control.⁵⁰

In the United States at least, it has become commonplace for obstetrics to render manual diagnostic and therapeutic skills obsolete,⁵¹ the enduring significance of haptic hexis usurped by the panoptic gaze of an Electronic Foetal Monitor monitored from a nurse's station, circumscribing the labouring woman's capacity for movement in order to facilitate the crafting of a strip that is 'interpretable' in the medical unit and the courtroom.⁵² This could be viewed as the apex of an era in which the ultrasound image *is* the reality of the foetus, overshadowing the legitimacy of moments of intimate tactile connectivity, as pregnant women are interpellated into a 'third-personal relationship' to their wombs. In other words, they are 'encouraged to find their *own* identities in and through these public, generic codifications of their insides',⁵³ with one study noting a tendency for women to 'adopt the language of the sonographer as their own', reframing what '*she* [the sonographer] saw as *they* saw', claiming, for instance, 'they "saw" that the baby's femur was of a certain size indicating gestational age', despite the fact that such scans can hardly be 'read' by

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵¹ Consider the following, from Ina May Gaskin's Right Livelihood Award acceptance speech: 'When surgical and technological interventions in birth become the norm rather than the exception, the profession of midwifery loses its basis for existence, and obstetrics itself no longer encompasses the skills and knowledge that were once considered essential competencies of the profession. I'm speaking of the skills and knowledge necessary for assisting vaginal breech birth, the birth of a second twin, the ability to manually assess fetal weight, to distinguish between normal labor pain and pain that warns of complication, to determine the position of the baby in the womb, to change it when it is unfavorable, and even to accurately diagnose pregnancy. ... We in the U.S. have already come to the point of discovering several cases of false pregnancies diagnosed only after a woman's abdomen was opened for a cesarean, an order of mistake that could hardly have been imagined two or three decades ago, when physicians' education in manual skills was still considered important.' "Acceptance Speech by Ina May Gaskin," 2011, accessed December 14, 2014, http://www.rightlivelihood.org/inamay_gaskin_speech.html

⁵² Elizabeth Cartwright, "The Logic of Heartbeats: Electronic Foetal Monitoring and Biomedically Constructed Birth," in *Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots*, ed. Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joseph Dumit (New York & London: Routledge, 1998), 246.

⁵³ Kukla, "Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces," 292.

the untrained eye.⁵⁴ This state of affairs impels the coordination of a poetics at odds with the anti-modernism of a self-standing dramatised prolocutor, rhetorically removed from the social and affective forces being commented upon, condescendingly maintaining a strict subject-object distinction and assuming an indubitable license ‘to speak of and for people observed in public space.’⁵⁵ Writing that is primarily an outlet for single-angled scenic representation, even if it were to record a complaint about women being needlessly interfered with during childbirth, would amount to a mere ornamental gesture, akin to wrapping a ‘tea cosy around the monitors’ and putting up ‘floral wallpaper’ in the maternity unit,⁵⁶ but leaving the precepts of biomedical jurisdiction undisturbed.

With respect to key perceived affinities with the poetic thinking of other writers, the following might further illuminate constitutive aspects of the midwife-poet: I must acknowledge Carolyn Forché, who, in meditating on the child that ‘now called [her] to responsibility’ and the ensuing polyphony of utterance that superseded ‘the I whose selfhood the poems formerly served’, explains, ‘this was a work happening with me that was not about me, having to do with attention rather than intention, a work that would eventually disclose itself as self-altering rather than self-expressive’.⁵⁷ Cognisant of how the governing order would purpose to represent *me* to *myself* within the parameters of a conformist identity that would obstruct the passage into a live connection with midwives and mothers, my way of envisioning co-existence has been informed by Lyn Hejinian’s upholding of ‘the

⁵⁴ Lisa Mitchell, *Baby’s First Picture: Ultrasound and the Politics of Fetal Subjects* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 26.

⁵⁵ Neil Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of J.H. Prynne* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 134.

⁵⁶ Barbara Katz Rothman and Wendy Simonds, “The Birthplace,” in *Motherhood and Space*, 99. The authors emphasise that the choice of homebirth is ‘not a choice of decorating schemes’, ‘familiar objects,’ or ‘the trivialities of a homey atmosphere’ (102).

⁵⁷ Carolyn Forché, “Emergence,” in *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, eds. Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 62.

border' that 'is not an edge along the fringe of society and experience but rather their very middle - their between: it names the conditions of doubt and encounter which being foreign to a situation (which may be life itself) provokes.'⁵⁸ I find her invocation of the *xenos* figure, which etymologically binds 'guest' and 'host', highly suggestive with respect to the recurrent flashes of indeterminacy between self and other, and the shifting boundaries separating familiarity and the unknown, that occur across the midwifery-poetry interface.

Also relevant here are Julia Kristeva's pronouncements concerning a dissident mode of textual practice that necessitates 'becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity.'⁵⁹ I've long been allured by her association of poetry with the release of pre-linguistic pulsions, irruptions of 'emotivity close to the drives',⁶⁰ the rhythmic energy that disrupts symbolic signification, affectively-charged articulations that act to 'prevent the imposition of thethetic from hiding the semiotic process that produces it, and... bar it from inducing the subject, reified as a transcendental ego, to function solely within the systems of science and monotheistic religion.'⁶¹ In writing with the apprehension that both official and everyday phraesology is mired in bureacuratisation and commodification, the subject ever under threat of petrification under the politician's unctuous brandishing of the first-person plural, fixation on the abstract noun and possessive, and moribund feminised anthropomorphism ('Together, with the hard work of the British people, we have rescued our economy, created record numbers of jobs, put Britain back on her feet.

⁵⁸ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 327.

⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva, "A New Type of Dissident: The Intellectual," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 298.

⁶⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 196.

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press), 58.

We have put our country on solid ground, laid solid foundations...⁶²), I deem the push into syntactic volatility and lexical dissonance to be a constructive factor in the dis-assembly of grammatical regularities and glib rhetorical designs (such as the politician's bland and lulling anaphora) that the appeal to self-legitimizing authority rests upon. Kristeva's emphasis on poetry's faculty for returning language to the 'genotext'⁶³ through which the body speaks is compatible with some of the more salient formal investments of the verse I've written: the sparing use of the canonical subject-verb-object declarative; the pleasures that come from coupling heteroglossic excess with concentrated repetitions and variations on the sonic plane; the figuring of anacolutha, stuttering enjambment, the standard sense of one clause dispersed as it runs into another, the arrangement of typographical clusters that deviate, sometimes wildly, from left-justification - these often interruptive elements heightening awareness of the intractable physicality of breath and utterance, suspending the notional grasp of the selfsame, and precluding a sociopathic closing off to non-normative styles of enunciation.⁶⁴

In tying the subversive force of poetic language to a pre-oedipal space of maternal plenitude, Kristeva has been criticised for undercutting any agentic

⁶² "David Cameron speech: Conservative Party Manifesto Launch" (15 Apr 2015), accessed April 5, 2015, <http://press.conservatives.com/post/116374071635/david-cameron-speech-conservative-party-manifesto>)

⁶³ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 5.

⁶⁴ Peter Zhang and Corey Anton, "Syntax and Ethics: A Conversation" (2011), accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/ETC-Review-General-Semantics/265030663.html> I found the following comment from Zhang especially resonant: 'Since humans are soothed, seduced, swayed, and spellbound by symbolic "form" far more than by mere "information," the struggle over syntax must play a central role in our pursuit of the good life.' And, in speaking of Gilles Deleuze advocating the 'invention of a foreign language within language,' Zhang remarks: 'It bears mentioning that the upper classes too often resort to the artificial stylization of language as a power move, as a weapon with which to perform their superiority and to exclude others from their language games. The logic behind such stylization might lead one to accuse Deleuze of elitism. Deleuze's corpus, however, embodies the exact opposite agenda, and speaking position. He seems to suggest that simply avoiding the major language, or escaping into the language of a minority group, never offers a way out. The real line of flight lies in speaking the major language in a new style, or appropriating and wielding it in such a way that it vibrates with a new intensity.'

potential for the transformation of repressive social structures through conscientious participation in collective projects.⁶⁵ Contrary to positing that the rhythmic expenditures of the subject-in-process and the revolt against political institutions are somehow analogous, I concur with Tom Jones that ‘revolutionary poetic language... has to work in the same way as all language, by engaging all its resources of representation, reference, connection, implication and all the rest, including rhythm.’⁶⁶ The figuration of the midwife-poet, aiming to attend sedulously to bodies situated within specific cultural and material realities, is committed to registering how ethical exigencies also unfold on a symbolic-semantic level, and demand continual self-critique. I’m also aware that arbitrarily carving up the white page through discharging a barrage of motley verbiage devoid of assiduously choreographed lines of argumentation and intimate pedagogical urgency, as though speaking in tongues incomprehensible to conservative ears could stand as the ultimate coup, would be of a piece with nihilism.⁶⁷

‘Women and birth are simultaneously vulnerable and powerful’,⁶⁸ writes Nadine Edwards. In theorising midwifery as an intersubjective field, one of the more pressing challenges involved uncovering the means to negotiate between what Ewa Ziarek highlights as the seemingly incompatible claims of freedom and obligation as they arise in the schism between two kinds of ethics that mark the

⁶⁵ Toril Moi, in her critique of Kristeva, states, ‘Nowhere are we given a specific analysis of the actual social and political structures that would produce such a homologous relationship between the subjective and social.’ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), 171.

⁶⁶ Tom Jones, *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 111.

⁶⁷ Looking further ahead, and considering channels of distribution for the project, I feel that solely having dealings with an hermetically and hermeneutically sealed cell on the margins of the polis with coordinates traceable only by a pre-established avant-gardist coterie, could amount to a kind of slavish resentment, foreclosing the possibility of positively galvanic contact with readers beyond the already initiated.

⁶⁸ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 260

postmodern scene.⁶⁹ The Nietzschean championing of power and becoming as the disburdening from external compulsion and blockage, the weight of transcendent values on the will that ‘makes it obey, everything that prevents it from dancing’,⁷⁰ contrasts with the Levinasian standpoint, which calls into question this formulation for ruling out non-appropriative relations to the Other: autonomy is thereby rendered ‘aggressive, self-accumulative, and eventually finally murderous.’⁷¹ In Levinas’s heteronomism, the subject is founded on founded on a response-ability for alterity, an originary matrix of other-directed concern through which ethical service is commanded prior to the will, in excess of the rule of any principle or arche of self-origination, interrupting the ontological cohesion of a sovereign being set over against the world, of making all there is, present to, and totally encompassed by the cogito. Through my research and dialogues with midwives, I was often struck by the emphasis on care for the other trumping care for the self, a wrenching from solipsistic enclosure, and also attestations to how the sensuous basis of contact with the other admits knowledge irreducible to the phenomenal world of appearances and intentional consciousness. Paradoxical seeming, it could be argued that contrary to masochistic abnegation on the midwife’s part, the demands of attending to the m/other gives more substantial meaning to her freedom because she is faced with concrete choices between responsibility and repudiation,⁷² carrying through or vetoing the deed. John Caputo stresses that in heteronomic difference, ‘being held hostage by the other is not considered demeaning, degrading, ignoble, but rather

⁶⁹ Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford, CAL: Stanford University Press, 2001), 221.

⁷⁰ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 60.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷² Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 48.

uplifting and challenging work.’⁷³ Furthermore, the goodness this freedom arouses propels her into the temporality of political praxis in the sense of accessing internal conditions of possibility for deterritorialisation and transformation through entering into relations that actively resist power directed at maintaining institutions of repression. As Colin Davis explains: ‘The face-to-face does not establish a cosy intimacy; it shows me the existence of a whole world outside myself. So, at the same time as I discover the Other, the potential presence of innumerable others is also revealed to me.’⁷⁴

These tensions play out across the poems, partly through the continuities and discontinuities with respect to the conventional trappings of the lyric voice. A number of passages in the poems embody a manifestly imperative status that can work to counteract the stiffening of moral sinews within propositional logic. Pronominal instability is allied with commands shorn of the subjunctive supplement that ‘describes obedience as a completed fact’.⁷⁵ Occasionally, the imperative involves a parodic targeting of pernicious cultural phenomena. As opposed to imitating the bare intransitive ‘PUSH, PUSH, PUSH’ that signals the obstetric construction of a generalised body to be ordered from without, illocutionary forces in the poems are frequently bound up with ineluctably endogenous corporeal directives. More so than descriptions of a domesticated pared down world projected through the steady lens of a lyric ‘self’, the immediacy of address that comes with this deontic modality, along with the apostrophic act and interrogative constructions that are accommodated at several intervals, can summon an intense attentiveness towards the situation of utterance and makings of the event, and incontrovertible answerability to

⁷³ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 60.

⁷⁴ Colin Davis, *Levinas*, 52.

⁷⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88.

the vulnerability of agency.⁷⁶ I advocate a poetics that is expressive of a challenge to the suppression of ambulation and spontaneous postural manoeuvring by the confinement of a labouring woman to a supine position⁷⁷ - in keeping with methods of biotechnical management that approaches a body less in terms of the non-linear productive disequilibrium of relational fluxes of living matter and more as a mere container for the extraction of a product. This is better served by metonymic transitions that preponderate through the verse, than the unidirectional operations of gratuitous metaphor that convert association into solidified sameness, and which thus delimit the open-ended processual dynamism that evinces an enhanced responsiveness to radically unruly and vital emergent experience across the zones where, to borrow a phrase from Hejinian, 'things do their thinging'.⁷⁸ It is notable that the imperatives and interrogatives are embedded in a distinct interplay with the deployment of the progressive aspect that outweighs the use of stative verbs and the non-progressive tense, as this is apposite for drawing out temporary articulations of pre-personal affect and the mobility of perception against a non-active dwelling on states of being. 'Nothing happening here' – the words of one nurse to another upon completing a cervical exam on a woman that had been in labour for several hours,

⁷⁶ Ryan Dobran, "'Blow your gnosiss': Imperatives in Contemporary Lyric." *Thinking Verse* 4, 1 (2014), 7.

⁷⁷ See "Evidence Based Guidelines for Midwifery-Led Care in Labour: Positions for Labour and Birth," The Royal College of Midwives, 2012, accessed March 14, 2015, <https://www.rcm.org.uk/sites/default/files/Positions%20for%20Labour%20and%20Birth.pdf> 'There are several theoretical physiological advantages for being upright during labour and birth. These include the effect of gravity on the fetus within the uterus; reduced risk of aorto-caval compression; better alignment of the fetus; more efficient contractions and increased pelvic outlet when the woman is in squatting and kneeling positions... The Cochane review by Lawrence et al. (2009) concluded that upright positions and walking in labour are associated with a reduction in the length of the first stage of labour and the use of epidural analgesia' (3).

'The use of electronic fetal monitoring, intravenous infusions and different methods of analgesia will all affect women's mobility. Women need to be aware of this in order for them to make an informed choice (MIDIRS 2008). These procedures may also interfere with use of postural coping strategies in labour' (5).

⁷⁸ Lyn Hejinian, "Continuing Against Closure," *Jacket* 14 (2001), accessed March 15, 2015, [<http://www.jacketmagazine.com/14/hejinian.html>]

words that caused the woman to break down in frustration⁷⁹ – is an orientation anathema to the ethos of this poetics. Poems such as “Ode on the Psoas”, “Aquadural”, and “Birth from Above”, in particular, perform a sort of dialectic of motion and stasis that bears comparison with Pierre Joris’s affirmation of the poem that is not conceived as a place-bound settlement regime, but embodies a nomadic condition constituted by a ‘(momentary) stance in relation to & with space’, that ‘raises itself upright’⁸⁰ between two sites, both at rest and in transit.

“Ode on the Psoas” is perhaps the most pronounced exemplification of a practice that foregrounds embodiment through an unusual graphic layout - the configuration of lineation influenced by a receptivity to muscular contraction and relaxation, a sense of working with a bio-intelligent messenger of the central nervous system situated deep within the gravitational midline to release trapped residues of energy, combatting the chronic tightening that impairs fluid circulation and the diaphragmatic breath, and that is exacerbated by sedentary habits and information overload. The process of composition, then, was marked by an investment in a somatic poetics, which is not reducible to a preoccupation with describing the body on the level of content, but can accommodate, as Thom Donovan puts it, ‘the body as a site of “material” of information or content for the making of the poem’ and ‘the body, as a form, coextensive with a (written) content.’⁸¹ The body’s ‘attractions and aversions’⁸² are a register of cultural inscriptions ranging from modern and avant-garde dance to ‘alternative’ pornography, as well as multiple points of intertextuality, ranging from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Ode on Dejection” and his

⁷⁹ Penny Simkin, “How do Women Interpret Caregivers’ Language,” “Roundtable Discussion: The Language of Birth,” *BIRTH: Issues in Perinatal Care* 39:2 (2012): 156.

⁸⁰ Pierre Joris, *A Nomad Poetics: Essays* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 50.

⁸¹ Thom Donovan, “Somatic Poetics,” (2011), accessed 15 March, 2015, <http://jacket2.org/article/somatic-poetics>

⁸² Donovan, “Somatic Poetics.”

self-recriminating reflections on how an absorption in abstractive study has proved inefficacious for inspiring bodily animation to a critique of the metaphysical priorities underpinning Plato's allegory of the cave, one in which the play of sounds across the lines ('pass'... 'Platonic'... 'anodos'... 'anovaginal'... 'fanning'... 'bat'... 'praktagnosia') is a vital component in the orchestration of their dismantling.

The concept of a poem as an organic, tactile field of action and response is also brought to the fore in "Birth from Above", not simply because the reader is prompted to arch their neck and/or manually rotate the page to facilitate reading, but also due to a forceful imprinting of the incompatibility of rhizomatic patterns of networked distribution with top-down stratifications of authoritarian systems, a delight in healthful transformations through bacteriological and microbial planes colliding with mechanisms that signal what Alan Watts termed the 'hostile cutting up attitude to life', an 'attitude of the knife' that 'gives us dead knowledge instead of living knowledge.'⁸³

As with most of the other poems, "Birth from Above" entwines historical and philosophical inquiry with moments drawn from episodic memory: 'thin-spun lives slit / before the sleepsuits were worn' could not have been written without me being granted the humbling privilege of holding in my arms the 'Safe Motherhood Quilt' after Ina May Gaskin asked me to collect it from her car. In "Aquadural", the negotiation between protean social pressures and the impetus towards the meditative swaying measure of the naga-uta would likely not have presented itself if it wasn't for my experience of Watsu water massage with midwives and mothers on The Farm. The constellation of images that runs along the margins of "Meditations on

⁸³ Alan Watts, 1995, cited James Brown, "The Zen of Anarchy: Japanese Exceptionalism and the Anarchist Roots of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 19, 2 (2009): 221.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*⁸⁴ could not have arisen without an initiation into 'Holotropic Breathwork' that was near contemporaneous with my initial entry into the cinema of Tarkovsky, and which combined to elicit an unprecedented period of childhood remembrance and radical introspection concerning my indebtedness to my mother. Holotropic Breathwork entails sustained deep and dynamic breathing to the accompaniment of soundscapes ranging from ambient drones and bass-heavy techno to soaring Celtic textures in order to trigger non-ordinary forms of consciousness, with an assistant supporting the breather through haptic and kinetic means whilst keeping a mental record of their vocal gestures.⁸⁴ This engagement intensified my drive to reflect on how our orientation towards the great rift between the human animal and the earth – all those interlocking psychosocial, economic, ecological crises – can't be divorced from our perspectives on birth. In a culture that enshrines the 'self-made man', putting a premium on individuality, independence, and self-determination as consecrated signs of personhood, and by implication staging a profound forgetting of our dependencies on other bodies and the utter vulnerability with which we emerge into the world, it strikes me that Irigaray's claims concerning the pursuit of such unviable ideals being founded on the 'murder of the mother' cannot be pooh poohed as sensationalist hyperbole.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ See Stanislav Grof, *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2006)

'The work with *holotropic* states clearly demonstrates that each of us carries in the unconscious psyche not only the memory of our delivery and the trauma associated with it, but also memories of our prenatal life and early embryonic existence, our conception, and the lives of our human ancestors and animal ancestors' (xviii).

Also, for a more detailed overview of what a breathwork session entails, see <http://www.grof-holotropic-breathwork.net/page/hb-faqs#faq1>

⁸⁵ The ethos of midwifery seemed would seem to carry unmistakable affinities with the imperative articulated by Irigaray In 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' which also, crucially, guided my approach to poetry: 'We must give the mother the right to pleasure, to jouissance, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger... We have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it.' Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 43.

There are other poems and prose sections here that admit a manifestly, if not straightforwardly, autobiographical-narrative element. “Notes on Dejection” and “Notes on a Resurgence” mark the navigation of an unprecedentedly acute crisis in the erotic realm,⁸⁶ precipitating a pressing summons to tear subjectivity away from narcissistic encapsulation and to open out at maximal stretch to other types of love, from *xenia* to *agape* - deeply constitutive of a midwife’s sense of service, as my encounters in Tennessee that summer would attest to. “Home Deliveries are for Pizza: Part I” also registers a quite private trauma - the loss of my grandfather shortly before I departed for a three-month research residency at the Library of Congress. It was only after meeting midwife Juliana van Olphen-Fehr, and hearing her words ‘you can midwife someone through death’, as part of a dialogue concerning not reducing midwifery to an occupational function, that I was able to write the lines concerning tending to him before and during his passing, guided also by Walt Whitman’s Civil War experience with the sick and wounded in Washington D.C, Jacques Derrida’s ruminations on the impossibility of mourning and Jean Luc-Nancy’s meditations on his heart transplant (my grandfather was a heart recipient, prolonging his life for well over another another two decades.) This poem draws forth concerted efforts to hold the narrative space in a way that blurs the dividing line between the present and the past, the historical record and the material effects of pre-reflexive contact with charges of spectrality. I feel close to Susan Howe’s proposition that the purpose of writing is to bring out ‘the sounds and spirits (ghosts

⁸⁶ In the days immediately following the dissolution of this amorous relationship, there was a passage that I returned to, time and time again, from *The Use of Pleasure*, which was also part of an excerpt that Gilles Deleuze chose to read at Foucault’s funeral: ‘There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.’ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 8.

if you like) that leave traces in a geography’,⁸⁷ with layers of textual citation and allusion brushing up against personal-event memories.⁸⁸ Hospitality towards that which haunts is part of a countermeasure against perpetuating the erasure of traces of living labour in techno-architectures of obscene hypervisibility and instantaneousness:⁸⁹ it is a register of temporal disjunctures within the market universe, and returns the ‘lawless factions and voices of alterity’ from their ‘scriptural tombs’.⁹⁰ The quest to ‘protect the dead from the dangers of the present’,⁹¹ as Avery Gordon puts it, is also given prominence in “Trespasses Crossed”, in which the analytical and imaginary commingle across fourteeners that strain against any restful rocking hymnal metre. Fleshy and visceral imagery and vehement interrogatives are out of step with the clichéd sentimental recitations that characterise the Puritan funeral elegy, and its association with easy memorability and conversion into memorabilia.

Regarding my approach to the texts of Loy, Tarkovsky, etc., I’ve set out to avoid positing an absolute concept of a midwife-reader that would imply an immutable series of hermeneutic dictates. Even so, the critical stance-in-motion that

⁸⁷ Susan Howe, *Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 1993, 156.

⁸⁸ The poem is guided predominantly by my sojourns in the United States, merging personal encounters with ‘actual’ persons and a mapping of texts I engaged with during a research residency at the Library of Congress. For instance, my experience of the Occupy DC protest is connected to an article I read in ‘The Nation’ during that period, reporting that a young woman dressed in Victorian garb and rimless glasses stood up in Zuccotti Park and announced that she was Emma Goldman and that she had ‘travelled through time’ to tell those gathered for Occupy Wall Street that she ‘loved what they were doing’. This sparked inquiries into the period in which Goldman studied and practiced midwifery. After being sent to Blackwell Island’s Penitentiary for standing on a soap box in Union Square in 1893, and working as a nurse and midwife on one of the hospital wards, she acquired formal training in Europe, before returning Stateside to practice in some of New York City’s most impoverished neighbourhoods. I wish to redress the fact that Goldman’s reputation as ‘the Mother of Anarchy in America’ has overshadowed the significance of midwifery for shaping her anarchist vision.

⁸⁹ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.

⁹⁰ Megan Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women’s Language-Oriented Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 172.

⁹¹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 65.

I attempt to enact is perforce informed by the practice of midwifery, starting from an affirmation of embodied relationality, and proceeding to accommodate certain qualities incompatible with the Cartesian-technocratic orientation. In figuring the intersections of midwifery and textual engagement, I concluded that it would be bad form to stringently adhere to the formalistic imperatives of New Criticism. To treat the text as a self-contained entity, a sort of anatomical specimen whose functions must be examined in isolation, under the scope of a professed objectivity, would be to operate in the spirit of an obstetrical unit predominantly focused on interpretational protocols derived from the logic of EFM output.

In contradistinction to a static, homogenous framing of the artwork, and the reductive management of the maternal body as a passive object for linear decoding conducted at a distance, nullifying the significance of the connections between the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of the birth process, I sought to unfold a style of reading that involves rigorous attention to the specificities of a text's workings (from etymology to prosody, mise-en-scène to the interplay of diegetic and non-diegetic sound) whilst also holding the space for a phenomenological and constructivist encounter, wed to what Clive Scott calls 'a kind of kinaesthetic empathy',⁹² tracing my psycho-physiological responses to language as 'a material performing its own body and expressive resourcefulness'.⁹³ I'm interested in how the qualities demanded of the midwife in her proximity to the m/other – such as 'emotional nuance reading', 'intuitive' receptivity, 'being comfortable with uncertainty' and the 'paradoxes of labour experience', being attuned to 'birth environment', and 'embracing an alternative understanding of time'

⁹² Clive Scott, "The Translation of Reading: A Phenomenological Approach," *Translation Studies* 4, 2 (2011): 214.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 216.

(away from ‘clock time’)⁹⁴ – might resonate with an experience of the text that ‘engages affect as well as cognition, recollection as well as immediate perception, the paralinguistic as well as the linguistic, the present and emerging milieus of reading as well as its inheritances from the past.’⁹⁵ Rather than seeking to grasp the text as a comprehensive unified message from a self-determining humanist subject, I deemed it a pedagogical imperative to elaborate contextual matrices – political, economic, ecological – prompted by both its explicit utterances and telling silences, factoring in a larger gestural background that defies both a strictly Author-centred analysis and enclosure in an idealist, ahistorical domain.

As I have worked with the hope that the thesis might contribute to animated dialogues within feminist communities, I’ve been conscious of Janet Todd’s admonition that ‘women’s voice from experience needs to remain at its base, and, until men listen to it as well as imagining costumes and modalities for themselves, there cannot really be male feminism, or men in feminism, simply using feminism.’⁹⁶ That being said, heeding Nadine Edwards, I have strategically woven together insights from mothers and midwives with ‘philosophical debates because women’s stories do not just speak for themselves.’⁹⁷ In *Missing Voices: Experiences of Motherhood*, Stephanie Brown et al. argue:

In “woman-centred” research, women are acknowledged as active, conscious, intentional authors of their own lives. As an ideal this notion of “woman-centred” research is appealing. As a description of reality, however, the term

⁹⁴ Denis Walsh and Mary Steen, “The role of the midwife: Time for a Review” (2008-06-04), accessed May 14, 2015, <https://www.rcm.org.uk/news-views-and-analysis/analysis/the-role-of-the-midwife-time-for-a-review>

⁹⁵ Jon Cook, “Clive Scott: An Appreciation,” *Thinking Verse* 4, 2 (2014): 2.

⁹⁶ Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 127.

⁹⁷ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 55.

“woman-centred” is not entirely satisfactory because it seems to suggest that women can occupy a powerful authoritative and controlling position in their lives: lives often hemmed in by social arrangements and structured inequalities not of their own making.⁹⁸

Just as it is myopic to conceive of the literary world as autonomous from the sciences or the exigencies of history, and pusillanimous to demur from traversing the disciplinary boundaries separating the biological from the cultural,⁹⁹ midwifery education must integrate an enhancement of socio-political awareness, a ‘reflexivity’ that ‘extends to being able to identify the dominant discourses that socially inscribe current maternity care provision.’¹⁰⁰ As Denis Walsh and Mary Steen point out, it is midwives’ ‘political astuteness’ that has ‘kept birth centres open, established new midwifery-led units and influenced government policy.’¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Stephanie Brown, Judith Lumley, Rhonda Small, and Jill Astbury, *Missing Voices: Experiences of Motherhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

⁹⁹ William R. Paulson, *Literary Culture in a World Transformed: A Future for the Humanities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 20.

¹⁰⁰ Denis Walsh, “Childbirth Embodiment: Problematic Aspects of Current Understandings,” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 32, 3 (2010): 494.

¹⁰¹ Walsh and Steen, “The Role of the Midwife.”

First, No Autogenesis

The biomedical imaginary burns a wound into the ocular surface, desiccating, conjunctival with the desecration of the womb - site into which it disseminates the deathly germ. Behold through a peephole in the right compartment of a stainless steel oxygen chamber: the defunct to be brought into the light at the entelechy of the ending of organismic origins. Expecting to touch the head of an octopus, suckers? Clarity fetishists glommed onto the chronicle of intrauterine existence, catching not even the dimmest reflection of parturient nous. Little danger of congenital constriction bands from sticky digit scratching for __, but a false emancipation - atrophy through entanglement in techno-medical sentence-strings. A return of the repressed un-representable, wonder of woman not made men manqué and sectioned off from his-story. The specialists may summon Hippocrates' pipe and smithy's bellows to correct the waywardness, sniff charred deer's horn, send another seven spurts of soul through the feeding tubes - all but fantasy is out of the picture. There's no place through which to diffuse the waste. No placenta, you see. No being well pleased when the ornimorphic form is a descent into a void. Mother, a (pre-)recognition of the half-foreign eukaryote, a signalling for placental factors to disable defence mechanisms and restructure vessels to convey living substance to another, this is an economy that does not tally with the vampirism of capital accumulation impelled to self-consuming destructiveness, for its regulatory mechanisms are of vital value for the host-body. The proper occupation of this ingenious intermediary of exchange, paragon of differentiation contra fusion, enriches the uterine lining, releases essential gestational and lactational hormones, wards off hypertension, proteinuria, and maternal exhaustion. Insuperable bulwark

against ectogenetic conquest: for all the injections of liquid wax to determine circulation and power Doppler angiography to quantify vascularity, the desire that self-consciousness secretes cannot take over its secrets. To be productive under the male-stream conception of acknowledgement means to be externalised into an object attached to hostility, the medical master seeking to forcibly extract and distort constituents of reproductive experientiality his seed is necessarily alienated from,¹ and subsume embodied particularity under a universalising rational will. Such a scenario fails to accommodate the ethical dimensions derived from a relatively autonomous third term, figured through the placental connection, whose activity precedes symbolic codification², and marks the problematic of mutual dependence that the unfolding of a subject's creative potentialities is contingent on.

It cannot be justly encapsulated under the term 'afterbirth' – subtly redolent of 'aftermath', which carries semantic reverberations of antecedent calamity; and 'afterword', as a subsidiary addition to the main presentation, given to inscribing a conspicuous temporal splitting and shift in situational context – for this would downplay the substantial import of the manner in which the initiative postpartum arrangement is orchestrated, and diminish an appreciation of how the aborning of agreeable relations between the mother and neo-air-breather is conducted across the same physiological continuum as the passage of the offspring through cervix and vagina, thereby breaching labour-of-birth integrality. 'Delivery of the afterbirth': premature gestalt switch, image marking a clean-up operation, a hurried perfunctory clamping and cutting of the cord by the cognitively anaemic, setting little store on a vital few-minute transfusion - denied in advance.

¹ Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston, London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 32.

² Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2007), 37.

Maybe the designation ‘afterbirth’ could be righteously preserved if it were not sealed off from ancient cultural connotations that endue the placental interface with a metaphysical gravitas - pulled across channels between materiality and ideality. In no way am I pooh-poohing the significance of contemporary studies in the field of embryology and enjoining a resurgence of some Galenic notion of ‘purified’ fluid reaching the foetus through the mixture of ‘spiritual blood’ supplied by uterine arteries and ‘alimentary blood’ imparted by uterine veins.³ In order to treat this complex conduit with due sensitivity, it is not incumbent on us to mimic the Cambodian ritual of placing a spiked plant over the buried ‘globe of the origin of the soul’ to deter evil spirits believed to impinge upon the mother and infant’s wellbeing, nor follow the Native Hawaiians in planting the ‘iewe’ with a tree deemed to bind the child to the land and ensure she or he will not be homeless and hungry after death. Nonetheless, we surely ought to respect the Hawaiian parents’ struggle to retain this custom against legislature prohibiting the release of the placenta outside the clinical environment. And if we are to orient ourselves towards the ‘bucha-cosatthi’ (Nepalese for ‘friend of the baby’) in the spirit of friendship, it is imperative that we don’t allow the massive corporate interest in private cord blood banking, to divert attention from the value of the inter-corporeal gift of these cells in the baby’s transition from in utero to ex utero life.

A service that provides ‘Arbor vitae’ memento prints, putting placenta to paper, may have got a brief feature in TIME magazine, but how many in a hypertrophied metropolis bear the faintest idea of the organ’s appearance, never

³ Lawrence D. Longo and Lawrence P. Reynolds, “Some historical aspects of understanding placental development, structure and function.” *The International Journal Of Developmental Biology* 54, 2-3 (2010): 239. doi: 10.1387/ijdb.082774ll

mind its properties and functions? Who, in this age of ‘teletopia’⁴ – marked by the tyranny of ‘real time’ over real space contiguity – would regurgitate the refrain into a cell phone, “Eating the placenta? Gross!” yet not bat an eyelid at its unceremonious withdrawal from mother and *improper* disposal in a truck full of biohazard material to be incinerated? An eyelid with wrinkles combatted by way of enzymes and proteins extracted from frozen placentas, perhaps. The complexities of ‘nonuniform “winking-blinking” placental perfusion’⁵ are bypassed by a *general intellect* without corporeal mobilisation, the consumptives unblinkingly following ‘simplified pathways’⁶ within the semio-capital dominion of ‘pure circulation’.⁷ They are tacitly aware that the anti-aging serum’s not exactly a ‘must have’, nor is a new cell phone - which, soon enough, is likely to be shipped off east to Victoria Harbour, and taken to a scarcely regulated junk heap where a destitute worker will strip it for profitable metals, cadmium destroying the lungs, mercury destroying the brain. In our transactions within the culture of immediacy, in vain we deny that the interval between desire and fulfilment already re-asserts itself at the moment it would be eliminated, and that the ubiquitous promise of the rapid delivery of ‘the goods’ is not welded to constrained, jejune expectations;⁸ the ensuing fatigue itself acts to counter the effort required to enter into a revolt against this ‘blind fury of activity’.⁹ In the realm of childbirth, the drive towards instantaneity, the fixation on arrival that forecloses attentiveness to intervening negotiations, is exemplified by the

⁴ Paul Virilio, “Third Interval: A Critical Transition,” in *Rethinking Technologies*, ed. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 4.

⁵ Longo and Reynolds, “Placental Development,” 249.

⁶ Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 15.

⁷ Berardi, *The Uprising*, 23.

⁸ John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: SAGE, 2007), 142.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 156.

indiscriminate deployment of ‘active management’ - which actually signals a heedlessly reactive response to the contribution of umbilical-placental circulation towards the imprinting of joyful affectivity across the maternal-neonatal dyad. The spontaneous flow of oxytocin and endorphins to optimal levels that drives the desire for skin-to-skin communion – facilitating the coordination of heartbeats to redress the newborn’s less stable rhythms, hormonal synchronisation, and establishment of immunologically beneficial gut flora through access to colostrum – in turn strengthening the continuing uterine contractions to shed the placenta, here disrupted through the traction and premature ligation of the pulsating funis. Not only does such bad handling divest the newborn of substantial oxygen reserves and hematopoietic stem cells; it impedes the nesting of the eyes in the mother’s facial field that serves to avert an upsurge of neurotoxic cortisol, and therefore heightens the risk of fatal shock or various sequelae for the child and postpartum haemorrhage for the mother.

I think of that proposition in section five of the 2002 U.S *National Security Strategy*, ‘the United States cannot remain idle while dangers gather,’¹⁰ worming insidiously into the outlook of a labouring woman, hustled out of the home, rushed away in the car, glimpsing through the passenger window the top of the hydrangea blossom – a dim glow amid the crowding weeds – unable to discern the powdery mildew on the lower leaves, which will spread into the stalk and stunt the foliage if not removed. Hooking a trembling finger beneath her skirt to check for blood, she recalls being primipara: the needle in her hand and synthetic oxytocin drip - inflicting the harder-faster-longer contractions that led to placental abruption and foetal asphyxia. Didn’t at least one nineteenth-century gynaecologist declare the

¹⁰ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” Sept 17, 2002, quoted in Tomlinson, *Culture of Speed*, 60.

uterus to be a ‘death missile’? A casualty of institutionalised suspicion, faulty intelligence, and the doctrine of pre-emptive force as first resort, she’d been cast under the illusion that swift high-tech targeting would generate an easy victory, through rhetoric as spurious as the claim that ‘surgical strikes’ make for clean, precision-guided, and therefore humane, warfare campaigns, as opposed to violence of a more deleterious magnitude. Those programmed Pitocin pumps potentiate an unpropitious cascade of complications, ever reinforcing a ‘state of emergency’ - which severely delimits the field of ethical engagement and creative adaptability, pushing the mother towards the status of ‘bare life’.¹¹ And even if those cruise missiles are no longer loaded with cluster bombs, many submunitions remain dormant across the earth, setting off pressure waves that ravage bodies upon contact. She’s stricken with insecurity, sweating before the screening that screens out empowering thinking through problems, hardly able to contain her anxiety about being apprehended as ‘carrying dangerous material’¹² in her makeup. The ethical question, ‘am I good enough,’ twisted and mutated into a genetic moral order. That time she failed to line up her iris correctly at the border control gate, the furtive thrill of identity going unverified by the panoptic gaze was readily overtaken by queue panic, captured again by corruptive codes that spread along the endless causal network.¹³ ‘Go, go, go!’ Scenes of a snatch squad storming an Iraqi hospital to ‘save’ the female Private in a Pentagon-managed action film masquerading as news feature merge in her consciousness with the Hollywoodised framing of birth: alarm

¹¹ Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xiv.

¹² Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989), 78.

¹³ Hasana Sharp, “Why Spinoza Today? Or ‘A Strategy of Anti-Fear.’” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 17, 4 (2005): 597. doi: 10.1080/08935690500241543

beeps from the electronic foetal monitor. With stiff adherence to their scripts, doctors swoop to examine the strip; the rapid-fire editing; the resignation to incapacitation in the patient's pronouncement, "whatever, do what you have to do."¹⁴ It's as though the foetus is her parasitic adversary in an exorcistic battle she would lose were it not for the arrival of the male techno-priest drawing on a cache of esoteric apparatus. The tighter the dependency on distancing technologies for negotiating between killing and deliverance, the more ethical response-ability is obfuscated.

Touching the image before viewing the image - denuded stroma of the eye, subject to infiltration of inflammatory agents obstetrically engineered, forming a tissue of deceit. Disquieting, defective vision of parturiency in dire need of reconstruction: a graft moulded from the amniotic membrane across the space where the physical and linguistic overlap, to be transplanted into the epithelium, emitting factors to repair the damage, a barrier trapping unhealthy cells, which thus undergo apoptosis. Unlike the corporate expropriation of the egg under the pretext of advancing the curative, the salutary import of the placenta must be oriented away from commodity logic, and towards a concomitance with another figuration that disassembles the dichotomy of self and other: midwifery. Embodying a third constituent modulating the relationship between connection and separation, individual and community, the midwife's holistically-invested advertence towards mediating processes defies the stark conceptual separation of mother and child – which, within the technocratic paradigm, affords primacy to the latter – and so is set in contradistinction to the fetishisation of an 'end-product' abstracted from the conditions of production under fast capitalism. The midwife may exalt in the

¹⁴ See *Knocked Up*, directed by Judd Apatow (Universal Pictures, 2000) DVD.

outcome of a healthy newborn, but this is accompanied by a commitment to supporting the woman's resources for forming a relationship with the baby; to quote one mother: 'the baby is what comes at the end of the process of giving birth, and I think the more connected I am with the birth, the more connected I am with the baby.'¹⁵

Once the eye is sufficiently healed, the overlaid amniotic membrane can dissolve; and as mother and baby come face-to-face, skin-to-skin, the midwife may, keeping the peace, further recede into the background. Indeed, it could well be that for the mother the midwife's exertions were effectively unperceived throughout the birth, but this approximation of invisibility would in itself foreground a highly instructive aspect of midwifery's ethical significance. Jean Parvati Baker writes: 'That's my highest compliment from a birth I've been at, when a family forgets I've been there. It's fully their experience and I have cloaked my energy so much to serve them in ways that haven't distracted them from their bonding.'¹⁶ This statement evinces the salience of questions concerning the permeability of 'interiority' and 'exteriority' for midwifery - as involving a movement that happens below the threshold of another subject's consciousness, not wholly unlike the primary energy currency that is necessary for active transport of essential molecules through the cell membrane against the concentration gradient. Contrast Parvati Baker's sentiment with the counsel of the influential obstetrician Walter Channing, who in 1848 wrote that when the doctor is called into the birthing room he 'must do something. He cannot remain a spectator where there are many witnesses, and

¹⁵ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 245.

¹⁶ "Jeannine Parvati Baker," in *Sisters on a Journey: Portraits of American Midwives*, ed. Penfield Chester (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 69.

where interest in what is going on is too deep to allow for his inaction.¹⁷ Whereas the latter is liable to disapprobation for prioritising the aesthetic order of public ‘show’ over the intimate receptivity towards the specific demands of the m/other, betraying an ironclad commitment only to the imitation of the moral deed, radical accountability here confounded with an accounting for seeing himself being seen,¹⁸ the midwife’s sensibility comports with the proximity of the face-to-face that’s ‘like the light of the first day of creation, before even the sun... it opens up a deeply private dimension’.¹⁹

The relation of midwifery to (in)visibility raises vexed questions concerning agency and self-representation that are inextricable from feminist struggle. In no way am I implying that the midwife is, or ought to be, a byword for principled self-effacement, an ethic of service exercised unconditionally across all dimensions of her existence. As Mavis Kirkham’s turn-of-the-century inquiry into midwifery in the National Health Service highlights, midwives have expressed fear and dismay when it comes to how the enforcement of a precept of ‘caring irrespective of personal sacrifice’,²⁰ concordant with the prioritisation of loyalty to the ‘organisational culture’,²¹ robs them of support for their own empowerment. Reflecting on the expectations of management within a client-centred structure heavily impinged upon by market forces, one midwife comments: ‘They take it for granted now that we’ll stay on and not even thank you for it.’²² Kirkham’s study

¹⁷ Walter Channing, quoted in Amanda Carson Banks, *Birth Chairs, Midwives, and Medicine* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 40.

¹⁸ Richard H. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15.

¹⁹ Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis, Philosophy*, 14.

²⁰ Mavis Kirkham, “The Culture of Midwifery in the National Health Service in England.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 30, 3 (1999): 734.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 737.

²² *Ibid.*, 734.

highlights that a midwife's refusal of a request to work on a previously scheduled day or night off, or even an insistence on taking allocated meal breaks, would frequently position her as deviant in the eyes of her colleagues. The dictum 'midwives are women too'²³ encapsulates the apprehension of acute asymmetry with regards to the recognition of the welfare of mother and baby, and the welfare of a midwife. Having recourse to the designation 'women' here might generate disquietude for potentially implying the imagined availability-in-advance of an essentialised base behind damaging ideological codifications, a generic identity somehow shorn of perennially conservative delimitations of "womanness". However, might the push towards bestowing upon the midwife a degree of care and respect consistent with that which established maternity systems purport to afford the birthing woman constitute an instance of strategic essentialism, or, to refer to Denise Riley, one of those 'progressive deployments of "women"'²⁴ aligned with a pragmatism that accommodates the suggestion that "women" don't exist – while maintaining a politics of "as if they existed" - since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did'?²⁵

At a time when reports are rife that maternity services in the United Kingdom are on the brink of collapse, with the Royal College of Midwives taking industrial action for the first time in their 133-year history (in 2014), the demand for a serious reassessment of the political and economic status of the midwife – so stubbornly associated with attributes ascribed to the feminine in the western cultural imaginary – and her role as it relates to the sex-division of labour, is as pressing as ever. Cathy Warwick, Chief Executive of the RCM, has repeatedly called attention to a severe

²³ Ibid., 737.

²⁴ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 78.

²⁵ Ibid., 112.

and longstanding staff shortage, with midwives doing a considerable amount of unpaid overtime and, confronted with static pay, facing ‘another year of working out whether there is anything left to cut from their household budget.’²⁶ Warwick’s commitment to ensuring that women in labour ‘won’t even notice that strike action is taking place’²⁷ also underscores the problematic of (in)visibility in the matter of midwifery’s political positioning. It’s important to acknowledge that the shift from pre-modern healing practices to modern medicine occurred in a ‘structural matrix’²⁸ of capitalism that, to cite Selma James, transformed [women’s] reproductive organs as much as [their] arms and legs into instruments of accumulation of surplus labour’.²⁹ The patriarchal reconfiguration of the medical economy and the privatisation of the reproduction of human beings, which for centuries had been ‘a collective process... the work of extended families and communities’,³⁰ were tied in with an intensified depreciation of the midwife’s significance. Capitalism, as Mariarosa Dalla Costa writes, developed through the suppression of basic needs, including ‘time, as against a life consisting solely of labour’ and ‘physical life/sexuality (above all, with one's own and other people's bodies, with the body as a whole, not just the functions that make it more productive).’³¹ Contrary to directly producing goods and material wealth, the art of midwifery would belong, in Marx’s

²⁶ Cathy Warwick, “Revealed: The Plight of England’s Struggling Midwives,” *The Telegraph*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-health/11130796/Midwives-strike-the-plight-of-Britains-struggling-maternity-workers.html>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 73.

²⁹ Selma James, “The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community,” in *Sex Race and Class - The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings, 1952-2011* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 52-3.

³⁰ Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation,” in *Revolution Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 146.

³¹ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “Capitalism and Reproduction,” (1994), accessed February 15, 2015, <https://libcom.org/library/capitalism-reproduction-mariarosa-dalla-costa>

terms, to a type of immaterial production, epitomising care labour - indivisible from cognitive and affective support.³² Thus, while it is true that the contemporary licenced midwife may be the recipient of a wage, an enormous indispensable portion of her work is allied to skills and resources that the rule of capitalist accumulation relies on appropriating whilst simultaneously making this supply of values appear to be external to the market. As with the housewife and mother, whose ‘role in the cycle of social production [remains] invisible because only the product of her labour, the labourer [is] visible there’,³³ there is inadequate recognition of the midwife’s contribution to the creation of value beyond use-values, a contribution tied to the special character of ‘necessary labour’ - encompassing ‘generational replacement’ processes and a ‘social component’ bound up with ‘the division of the working day into necessary and surplus labour.’³⁴

In considering the issue of women’s oppression as it connects with the intensification of the opposition between the private/domestic sphere and the arena of social productivity under the hegemony of wage labour, what might one say of the self-employed midwife that practises at a remove from a centralised hyper-bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational framework, and predominantly attends home births? It could be argued that the reclamation of the house as a site for childbearing undermine capital’s drive for accumulation and could constitute a vital step within a larger initiative to orchestrate the ‘commoning’³⁵ that makes possible a de-linking from circuits of commodification, ‘refusing to obliterate the collective

³² Leopoldina Fortunati, “Immaterial Labor and its Machinization,” *Ephemera*, 7:1 (2007): 146, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/7-1fortunati.pdf>

³³ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” (1971), accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdallacosta2.htm>

³⁴ Lisa Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (London: Pluto, 1983), 152.

³⁵ Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Common,” 144.

experiences, knowledge, and struggles that women have accumulated concerning reproductive work.³⁶ However, it must be stressed that this would only be viable if, to take the United Kingdom as an example, the structure of present-day maternity care wasn't arranged in such a way as to entail substantially higher fees for the service of 'independent midwives', making this a non-option for those on a low-income. These relatively autonomous midwives hardly escape the necessity of taking on the aspect of a commodity to earn a wage, and the promotion of home birth is accompanied by an array of pricey products and services, from magazines to doulas,³⁷ undercutting its customary association with a counter-cultural challenge to the economic status quo.

Nonetheless, the ethico-political significance of women resolving to support birth outside of the hospital is worth dwelling on further, particularly in relation to the notions of independence and dependency. It would be misguided to ignore the ways in which, historically, home has been idealised as a feminised place providing familial comfort and basic biosocial replenishment for the male breadwinner between his engagements in the public realm, while the economically dependent woman remains firmly immured within a private domain. As Gillian Rose asserts, the masculinist construction of the welcoming home/place that is 'conflict-free, caring, nurturing, and almost mystically venerated by the humanists'³⁸ is scarcely consistent with the drudgery, neglect and abuse that mark many women's experiences in the domestic sphere. Nancy Fraser points out that in the preindustrial period of patriarchy, though women were certainly subordinated, their labour was

³⁶ Ibid., 148

³⁷ Robbie Davis-Floyd, "Consuming Childbirth," 237.

³⁸ Gillian Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 56.

‘visible, understood and valued’³⁹ as essential to the family economy, and that it was only with the ascendancy of religious and secular individualism and modern capitalism that the term dependency took on a pejorative definition - associated with the negative pole of dichotomies including ‘masculine/feminine, public/private, work/care, success/love, individual/community, economy/family, and competitive/self-sacrificing’.⁴⁰ It is significant, then, that when it comes to contemporary birth activism, the home is located as a site of self-realisation, dignity and resistance to dependency on a technocratic order. In a strange inversion of moral principle – as it intersects with the neo-liberal valorisation of the entrepreneurial social subject that is ‘totally responsible for their own care, education, and reproduction’⁴¹ – the purveyors of the dominant regime of biomedical birth react to non-compliance by treating the home birth mother as insensible and callous for demonstrating too great a degree of agency by dint of not handing herself over to hospital-based ‘experts’, and treats those who sign away an immense element of personal responsibility for their bodies and babies as rational market actors making the right consumer choice.⁴²

The midwife is no masculinised progeny of Metis; no sentry standing by a high bench in the warhead site of the lightning-thundering patriarch, nor charioteer

³⁹ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 214.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴¹ Camille Barbagallo and Nicholas Beuret, “Starting from the Social Wage,” (2013), accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.derelictspaces.net/2013/03/24/starting-from-the-social-wage/>

⁴² Rachel Zucker states, ‘The medical establishment (in particular the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Medical Association) has engaged in an anti-homebirth smear campaign that is similar to the the anti-midwifery movement that gave rise to obstetrics (and our reliance on doctors rather than healers) and nearly wiped out midwives in the late 18th Century.’ See “A Conversation with Poet Mamas Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker on Home/Birth,” May 5, 2011, <http://www.greenparentchicago.com/2011/05/a-conversation-with-arielle-greenberg-and-rachel-zucker-on-homebirth-.html#sthash.GAHAUJM2.dpuf>

in a fanfare of triumph; no Nike-Athena: mannequin in a sanctum of sports shoes with refined ‘Airsoles’ (‘not quite the same as 6.65 million pounds of rocket propellant’, but ‘talk about thrust’⁴³) sewn by women subjected to forced marching whilst chanting ‘loyalty to your boss’,⁴⁴ no trim-ankled spirit converted to hood ornament on an ostentatious automobile. No - for the midwife, effectiveness is inextricably bound up with ethics.

By casting suspicion on any easy alliance between obstetrics and the ethical, I intend, first of all, to point towards the underlying conceptual contrariety of obstetrics and midwifery, which is inseparable from the initial flurry of male physicians into birthing rooms in the mid-eighteenth century; the introduction of the terms ‘obstetrics’ and ‘obstetrician’ into the Oxford Dictionary in the first half of the nineteenth century to crystallise the notion of birth attendance as a professionalised medical specialisation, rendering defunct the lineage of female caretakers; and the legacies of Joseph DeLee and John Whitbridge Williams, commonly dubbed the fathers of modern obstetrics in the United States. DeLee and Williams laid the foundations for viewing parturition as an altogether pathological, if not monstrous, state, to be corrected by the dignity of men practising what is first and foremost ‘a surgical speciality’.⁴⁵ This is in keeping with one of the core tenets of modernity: conceptualising nature as an obstacle to be overcome or improved upon. The publication of *Williams’ Obstetrics* in 1903, a medical textbook of unparalleled popularity, the iconic frontispiece of the first six editions featuring a “Vertical

⁴³ ‘Nike Advertisement copy’ cited in Ann Rippin, “Images of Athena and Hera in Nike’s ‘Goddess’ Campaign,” *Ephemeria* 3:3 (2003): 191, accessed May 5, 2012, <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/3-3rippin.pdf>

⁴⁴ Jeff Manning, quoted in Rippin “Nike’s ‘Goddess’ Campaign,” 194.

⁴⁵ Williams states: ‘Obstetrics is essentially a surgical specialty, and... the first prerequisite for those who expect to practice or teach it is a surgical training.’ Quoted in Robbie P. Kahn, *Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 194.

Mesial Section Through Body of Woman Dying in Labour, with Unruptured Membranes Protruding from Vulva”,⁴⁶ was emblematic of a systematic ideological denigration of a woman’s labouring body as a helpless object, and the concomitant exaggeration of the hazards of childbirth that would induce in her an escalated sense of fear and reliance on technological interventions conducted by male ‘experts’. This text, along with Williams’ 1911 survey of obstetrical education in the United States, contributed significantly to the project of relocating birth from home to hospital and displacing the midwife from her position as primary care provider. The formal legitimisation of the medicalisation of women’s reproductive and birthing experience had its basis less in demonstrable scientific efficacy than in an organised effort to take over birth as a lucrative business, part of the expansion of formalised medicine in a male-controlled public arena, and the further devaluation of female/domestic healers. Indeed, it is well documented that men routinely wielding instruments in a hospital environment introduced greater dangers for mothers and babies; the historian Don Shelton calculates that the man-midwifery initiative of delivery in lying-in hospitals resulted in approximately one million more deaths in Britain and Ireland than would have occurred between 1730 and 1930 had home birth prevailed as the norm.⁴⁷ How unnervingly apt, then, that William Smellie and William Hunter, widely acknowledged as the founding fathers of obstetrics in Britain, have been posthumously called to account by Shelton for having recourse to the ‘burking’ (murder-to-order) of dozens of women, many in the later stages of pregnancy, for subsequent dissection, to experiment with surgical techniques and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 192

⁴⁷ Don Shelton, “Man-Midwifery History: 1730-1930.” *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 32, 8 (2012): 718.

produce anatomical atlases.⁴⁸ In early twentieth century England, it's apparent that clinical instruction for student obstetricians was more about observing teachers 'perform caesarean deliveries from a distance in an amphitheatre'⁴⁹ than the advancement of palpation skills and interpersonal response-ability towards the psychophysiological complexity of the parturient. Much later in the century, turning towards Diana Scully's study, *Men Who Control Women's Health: The Miseducation of Obstetrician-Gynecologists*, we find an aspiring physician confessing, 'if I section her, I don't have to worry about it',⁵⁰ an attitude borne out of an institutional milieu in which speed under pressure is identified as being of overriding importance for residents-in-training, and equates to carrying out a series of 'procedures in prearranged blocks of time'⁵¹ in a bid to manage the durations and manifestations of phenomena deemed to be inherently excessive. In such a scenario, 'quality assessment' stands as 'a misnomer for measuring efficiency'.⁵² Nadine Edwards insists that obstetrics and midwifery are 'rooted in different traditions' and tend towards incompatible ways of working: the latter 'works with', while the latter 'cuts across' finely tuned birth processes.⁵³

The implied subservience of careful consideration to expeditious urgency in Channing's admonition would seem anathema to poise - which might be deemed a core virtue of the midwife. In this regard, poise is more estimable than patience, for the former is balanced dynamically between equanimous restraint and readiness to respond, not so easily subsumed under the denotation of submission to affliction and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 721

⁴⁹ Sir Douglas Baird, recalling his student days in the 1920s. Quoted in Shelton, "Man-Midwifery History," 722.

⁵⁰ Diana Scully, *Men Who Control Women's Health: The Miseducation of Obstetrician-Gynecologists* (New York & London: Teachers College Press, 1994), 193.

⁵¹ Edwards, *Birthing Autonomy*, 77.

⁵² Ibid., 77.

⁵³ Ibid., 85.

hardship bore by the passivity of patience. ‘I see myself as a guide on a canoe trip, ready to grab a paddle if we hit a snag, but otherwise watching the water and the paddler’s ability to navigate’,⁵⁴ is how one midwife has delineated her position.

⁵⁴ Holly Powell Kennedy, “Orchestrating Normal: The Conduct of Midwifery in the United States,” in *Birth Models that Work*, ed. Robbie Davis-Floyd (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 426.

Ode on the Psoas
for Jennifer

impacted cerumen
from westerly philos-
faulting

fear (disproportionate
fear) calculus deposits
on lingual surface

a fresh going out
not the easiest thing
the face
in spitting distance
of its betrayer
the mind holding
vigil by a wallow

with green spinning volvox

in mucilaginous matrix
stigma unseeable unlike
the daughter sphere
bulbar roused with
flagella in unison
caress that bobbing apple
the stomachward accusative case
shall be taken on as
i can i think

to what do we owe
this degraded pleasure?
get into a lather
fingering the standard
of Dolos' product
through a diseased

degree of abstruse
research
i forgot the living
labour underwriting
the phantasmic forms
of the interest-bearing character

afflatus discredited
imaging abscess
guarding in the region
of occult spread
the barcoded march by
the second's reckoning
from racks
of batteries
to canteen
barriers
a butterfly for
stick-on tat
Minnie Mouse for
flip-flop straps

what does not change
is the change it will not be
come to capable animal come
un- soul- clogged
this is no sculpture
shake and sound
ground the charges
disperse the static
the opioid itch
more than once lover
we hungered for nothing but
the given breath on

the spirit road
procrast drear unbefitting
the elasticity of the corpora
Keats' intelligence relaxed upon
the smooth tip of the kidney-shaped nut
i slipped upon your pillow
magnificent hush

for tireless balancer of

calcium rush
seeking subterranean joys
floor muscles no longer too depressed
to say i love you with
foreign lodger as intimate
engorged vestibules nacreous glow
salty lips by goodly pearl

boost synovial lubrication and proprioception
to militate against poor ambulation
the sacrum floats in the tension spoke
network the spine no column but an articulated beam
not fixed by Newtonian laws

what a nightmare that was
shear stress from the ding
of a triangle
bony basin exploding
under the leverage
of a bow
against a string

Mary with halo of high pressure halide
the impudent try to remake your access

point into dry flat whitened marble
pass up the idea
of the Platonic anodos
insensate towards the glory of the anovaginal
licking and winged fanning from a bat assisting
b I r t h I n g
the wisdom of praktagnosia
in the micro-interval between contractions
of stapedius and cryothyroid
the pupil dilating in the play of night
you speak are you there behind me
chip - chop chip - chop
emergence delayed
through mismanagement
of private company
emissions concentrated
on commuting route
prepare for flight
diabolically
captured

were you
skinned
before
by
neoplastic
vision
no room
for the
witness to
quickenings
restore the tonus of the fold
the unfeeling zones untighten
the jaw

neither currents induced by the clinician
nor talking cure will do
the field for the armature
enter into it returning forces
of the schizzes
all abroad
to multiply multiply the midline's potentia
Fuller's dance draws the theatre out
undulation of immense silken petals
across her electro - ecstatic orchestration
dissolving pale makeup may the perineal tissues
open more akin to a knife-pleated skirt

than the knife incision prefiguring

a husband's stitch

don't let the man ordering

a dignified closure

equating foetal skulls

with battering rams

push you into pushing

around the crowning

bulging shiner

lack of

perfusion of

blood to

earth-cake

propelled in a papery

case on the wind

towards a nursery of saplings

there was a time child to strengthen your limbs

you'd be carried through

an aperture in the trunk

hopes regrown turnaround the groans
we check a leaf's midrib
for signs of dieback
superimposed a grainy film
of what drone operators
term bug
splats

rinse the mouth with Kropotkin vodka
sing of the WIMMIN'S FIRE BRIGADE
rinse the mouth with Kropotkin vodka
rhapsodise ROTE ZORA ROTE ZORA
drop incendiaries in Suicide Girl headquarters
where grant of release
is personalised bondage
alt-porn is alterity subsumed
by unlimited rights to
alter a model
likeness

praise be the body artist in *Marie Chien Noir*
flows uncontained
by the skeleton downstage
desire not clean sharp
perfectible edges the aestheticized distance
of the classical economy
a stance in motion
scrambles the codes
of the lazy looker-on
her arm extends like a swan-arc'd neck
gliding deep into the throat
a rippling through the solar plexus
presented with the invisible interior
we the ambiance shuddering

meet her supporting each motion
the revolt and advent of resolution

Through Apposition To

'I do not make songs now for a well-tuned string,
for songs are the work of carefree minds.'

(Sappho's letter to Phaon in Ovid's *Heroides*)

A palate for red clay powder
though not confessional sinter
oiled finger rubs darkened areola
stylus wedges on sun-dried fibres
reflected in bathtub faucet
periorbital smudge of veins
slather of stelliscript
on astragal panes

crypt sentries serving against
infectious cultures damming lumen
rotten breath from plugged debris
lyric shell encumbering ribs
cough coughing coughed up fluid
increasing ink viscosity
globus felt through cataglottism
called back
psychic tears licked
by a chestnut blossom

this distance teems with suspicions
of semblance

strew the dust of signification
upon the letter
if thought as milking
the trials of this matter
but see the sweep of recognition

is fugitive leading home into
exile
no safe out site to affix self-portrait
but patience towards the sovereign point
of instance overturning preconception

*

biting nails flaking varnish teasing
split ends
membrane of steam enveloping
malachite brow makeup melting
recollect Met Museum statuettes
dancer with mantle taut over mouth
maiden naked with crescent amulet
griffins on shoulders holding a mirror
 has it cast you tacitly beside yourself
 on the hither side of grasping
 uncorrupted as its near-
 imperceptible copper film?
 have you fallen back in line
 of trumpets long calling men to harm
 to render creation into sword and helmet
 to glare into stagnant defensive ditches?

scabbards abraded shaft after shaft
by unslakable martial spirit
the fascinum round the necks of babes
safeguarding the Forum generals
 is the bedsheet still scrunched

 up from the clenching
 victorious virility?
 are you too subject to a vulnus

viri muliebria pati?
vessel too delicate for high seas success
head sagging into downy navel
muscle turned to ropes of sand
retreating into your study sanctum
a nymph entombed in the central fountain
tosses up pearls at the push of a brass cock
when you think woman's body
is it torn between almah full of grace
and whore ready stained
crying out for another facial?

look at that
painting 'Waterbirth'
newborn crowning
from plenteous blackness
mother undiminished
all too much for those
in the temple of pathology
thus transferred to the University

*

lonely is the echo
of fleshed-out saying
maternal entrails
spirited away
into thin air
peak dryness
scalpel edges at right angles
showman gouging imaging plate
availing himself of the death
of the object

O grazed by the swerve
of the moistened reeds
in the thick of myopia
let us meet here let us meet

not I an idle recipient
waiting for idolised converters
depositing your homunculus
to be incubated
what would come
of the seminal moment
without the guidance
of the cervical tract

commanding contact before attachment
the guest emerged through a cumulus street
ligands reaching from clear zone to lining
the time has gone for shedding

did the spots on the tablecloth
turn the wine sour
dull razor-sharp rationalism
despoil any hint of sacrament?

your host becoming another's hostage
constricted by visions of a stem
penetrated by haustoria
the girdling of phloem
curbing translocation
for the sake of one fruit
a leaking neck fistula
from necrotised tissue
no silver sutures or speculum
can correct
you were fascinated by
the invaded ghost city

bell tower spattered by faeces of bats
stretch of cyclamen cracking cement
feasting rats in hotel come citrus grove
philodendron overtaking walls
roots securing and secured by ants' nest
less so the villi branching to stroma
blood with blood close not mingling
mind the gap in order of resemblance

*

Aunt Daphne became
the deficient consumer
sleeping in airports and bin bays

washing in public toilets
suspected of vaginismus
and then prostitution
for not staying stuck
by a household sink
while the husband steals
upon her
after sizing up a few
newspaper pieces
he'd declare the need
to be hard on welfare
while City men brandish
notes from an edifice
on old Gropecunt Lane
red fumes rise
from a canister hurled
by a fluted Corinthian column

apex of heart starting to shift

swishing waves of remembrance
a washed up turtle
with nylon rope and a pocket brush
inside its gut
withdraw from that bag in Selfridges
with interior chemical lighting
where lotions lip-gloss blister plasters
are easy to pick out
and towards this tough little watery sac
the scrip that holds what is needful

carried into wisps on Capitoline Hill
you'll kick the dead skin from your feet

leave cast iron tools out in the rain
scent out unpolluted laurel leaves
accept the labyrinth pendant offered
beyond beside the glorified lady
whose sighs perturb
the hairs on the nape
the flame in the chest
pulses the voice of Carmenta

Birth from Above

a problem
how small is
the matter
harm shares
mastermind
artefacts
go to
beneath
worm castings
at the mouth
beating lyric
urge through
conjoint action
rhizobium push
nodule on root
folate richness
residual benefits
GOOD PEANUTS
I for withdrawal
from tilled zone
monoculture
that hardens the soil
and denies air entry
field margins

that hardens the soil
and denies air entry
field margins
distribution corridors
decomposer communities
dispelling the pestilent
contra top-down
bed preparation
this war machine scatters
clay seed bombs
high resistance to cold
soles ingrained
with green manure
rain rain come again
rain from below
CLUCK GO GO GO
CLUCK
the guts of an island
black gold addiction
spilled into
mangrove sediments
blue heron up to
the neck in it
AWK

summon the logic
of the included middle
to shift the regime
of the visible
consciousness dispersal
through spawning
assemblages
of seagrass nurseries
and cleaning stations
wrasse between the teeth
tweezing out the debris
feed in return
for vibrant massage
surgeonfish freeing
coral from algae
sister the scar tissue
the more than damage
from many a grand
operation
what could have been
traversed
by the great alive
was untimely ripped
Nitabuch fibrinoid
missing
invasive placentation
took place
the first impostor
had delivered his will
with Royal College
silver-shafting
eloquence
do no care
for the charge

from speechless lips
goaded from above
her arms splayed and fixed
to buffered wings
orange antiseptic smothered
mound of muscle clamped a-
part

CRUCI-SECTION

just a single layer suture
and quick count of gauzes
as the departure gate
had opened
for his Easter vacation
the aristolochia
is no panacea
for stenosis of
the birth canal
the hyssop branch
won't purge
the bloodguilt

there are tears
in the stitching
on every patch
of the quilt
entrusted to the midwife
a guitar and angel hearts
names and death dates
thin-spun lives slit
before the sleepsuits
were worn
the Sunday magazine
will provide no report
on account of it
not fitting the tone
of the feature
ALL IS CONFUSED

women of the Delta
besiege the refinery
dancing threatening
a public disrobing
to discredit the corruptors
Agnodice discover safety

if there were the
drip drop drip drop
of the beestings
imoxious
neither milkwhite nor gall

and not the autopoietic swaddling
informational closure
to perturbations
of conservative compensations
the rule of the elect
base meddlers
a legacy of
barbers and sausage-stuffers
trained with a cloth doll
inside a carafe
a little girl's
twentieth century toy
pops out a baby
from a detachable
magnetic belly
Dr Barbie sold separately
the extractive

haunted by the song
of the bleeding outlet
and another population
horizontalising
gastro-intestinal wall
attachment sites
inhabited
by microbiotic flora
vaginal transit
to vital catabolism
suckling ketosis
alternative cerebral fuel
liberating protective
long chain molecules
hospitable maternal strains
support the indigenous
not nutraceuticals
from the strategic hothouse
of a brand contriving
to rename and trademark
bifidobacteria animalis

but aren't you aware
supermom
for maximum performance
and career development
there's the pump in style
commuter
to be plugged in the high wire
cigarette lighter
with removable motor
and insulate carry case

desire not	rolling toward
to be found	the landowners' ball
where recovery	masquerading as guardsmen
leaves no room	refusing to function
for laughter	under central command
could bust a gut COUGH	evading the commissar's
it would have been	iron broom
better to have	if there were
moulded a beanbag	the scent of wood smoke
around the body	and honey
in the febrile daze	not iodoform
might we contemplate	and the scalpel
something other	wasn't mightier
than staple guns	than the cardboard shield
and plastic saddlebags	of a Book Bloc protestor
whisper of Rose of Sharon	emblazoned with the image
'her lips came together	of the masked insurgente
And smiled mysteriously'	is he from Chiapas
to contain ourselves no more	yes and no
in front of the intimate	forgo the factories
landscape	and historical dialectic
meaning of the steppe	at what cost
no cutting off	
the root of nomos	
Bat'ko and a retinue	
of tachankas	

from the Levallois flakes
struck off a tortoise core
to the mineral oil stream
on the cutting edge
attacking the crotch
cancerous growth
expropriating the energies
of the toolmaker

traitor
whose organisation
is a tomb
for the bone of our bone
flesh of our flesh

revenge is not in order
no infiltrating the theatre
to spill the ether
or to mix a traumatised
oxygen cylinder
with grease
to ignite anaesthetic vapour
there are holes
in the structures
of your adamantine
imperium
loose atoms quivering
at the boundaries
between the grains
of the crystalline edifice
feel the centrifugal force
of the plebeian in the body
from bondage an exodus
constituent capacity
on a mount beyond
the city limits

Attending to “Parturition”

Mina Loy in “Parturition”:¹ how might I address the intensive capacities and extensive qualities of this kind of body? To hold out against biological reductionism, there must be an evaluation that individuates in accord with relations of composability, a recurrent deferral of the claim to know exactly what this body is ‘capable of doing or becoming.’² As individuals, if we were to each be defined by the constitutive organisation of a supposed unity, my, there’d appear to be a world of difference between us, but rather than being restricted to the normative academic-juridical function of the ‘transcendent plane’,³ may my powers of imagining be expressed in concert with your powers of thinking and existing. The poem is an actualising of the birthing-after your childbirths of the previous decade, the material inscribing of an ever-resuming maternity that defies the Futurist equation of female sexuality with an enervating regression. Desire is invested in the de-composition and re-composition of bodies that Filippo Marinetti, through his execration of feminine corporeality and teleological modelling of ‘a mechanical son, the fruit of pure will’,⁴ obliterates. Once allured by the obstreperous declaratives which Marinetti tosses like grenades, we’re never far from being dragged headlong into the trenches of ignominy; a great attentiveness is commanded of me to follow the ‘ample interpenetration’⁵ of intuition and intellect, heteronomy and heteromorphism, cleanliness and dirtiness in your workings, to guard against a positivist

¹ Mina Loy, “Parturition,” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems by Mina Loy*, ed. Roger L. Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 4-8.

² Moira Gatens, “Feminism as ‘Password’: Rethinking the ‘Possible’ with Spinoza and Deleuze,” *Hypatia* 15, 2 (2000): 64. doi: 10.1353/hyp.2000.0023

³ Gatens, “Feminism as Password,” 62.

⁴ Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, “Against Amore and Parliamentarism,” in *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, eds. & trans. R.W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), 75.

⁵ Mina Loy, “Feminist Manifesto,” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 155.

instrumentality, a myopic alignment of healthful art with ‘geometric and mechanical splendour’, ‘hygienic forgetfulness... speed, light’,⁶ and ‘surgical trains’ of thought ‘that pierce the blue belly of the mountains.’⁷

In order to avoid representing you as an immobilised body of written signs whose hidden meanings lie in wait to be extracted through narrowly pre-prescribed procedures, I must forego the appeal to ‘mere reading’⁸ that ascetically leaves off the affective and physiological dynamics of the reader-writer relation. Midwife Catherine Williams admonishes against the reduction of physical examination to a one-sided diagnostic procedure that is bound up with the obfuscation of erotic experience in the socialisation of the birth attendant; it would not, I trust, be imprudent to explore my own reactions to what passes between us, to not coyly recoil from the pleasures and difficulties that can be unlocked in the event of such an encounter.

Not going through the motions, nor spurning ‘particularist precision’⁹ in engaging the conceptual moments interwoven in the poetic, motioning away from enervated models of formalism that imply the treatment of an isolated, autonomous object and so underplay the import of socio-historical and biographical bearings for critical engagement, I appeal to a kind of learning that, to cite Adorno, ‘has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death.’¹⁰

⁶ Marinetti, “Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility,” in *Selected Writings*, 97.

⁷ Marinetti, “We Abjure Our Symbolist Masters, the Last Lovers of the Moon,” in *Selected Writings*, 67-8.

⁸ Ian Mackenzie, *Paradigms of Reading: Relevance Theory and Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 104.

⁹ Robert Kaufman, “Lyric’s Constellation, Poetry’s Radical Privilege,” *Modernist Cultures* 1, 2 (2005): 216, accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.js-modcult.bham.ac.uk/articles/issue2_kaufman.pdf

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13.

This approach to your work(ings) as a living body with the resources to activate and accommodate new texts and contexts, this (re-)assessment of the expressive potentialities of your account,¹¹ is orchestrated not so that your experience might be delivered toward closure, but so that I might learn from the new modes of response summoned by your creative expenditures.

“Parturition” was printed in New York publication *The Trend* in 1914. This was the same year that *McClure’s Magazine* published an article by Marguerite Tracy and Constance Leupp extolling the ‘Freiburg method’ of administering precise doses of scopolamine and morphine to induce ‘twilight sleep’ during childbirth, viewed as particularly agreeable to ‘modern woman... [who] responds to the stimulus of severe pain... with nervous exhaustion and paralysis of the will to carry labour to conclusion.’¹² The piece ushered in a wave of popular press accounts commending the protocol, with several suffragists establishing the ‘National Twilight Sleep Association’ in 1915, and the prospect of painless childbirth being hailed by one of its foremost obstetric advocates as ‘the greatest boon the Twentieth Century could give to women.’¹³ With more than a dash of missionary conservatism, Dr Bertha Van Hoosen, who helped devise the maternity canvas crib, emphasised that anaesthesia inhibits the connection the brain and the sexual organs, and that the phenomenon could go as far as to extirpate ‘prostitution, abortions, divorces, unwilling motherhood’.¹⁴ Despite a number of clinical reports highlighting inimical side-effects, the analgesic-amnesic technique would be catalytic in fostering

¹¹ Scott, “The Translation of Reading,” 214.

¹² Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 130.

¹³ Bertha Van Hoosen cited in Judith Walzer Leavitt, “Birthing and Anesthesia: The Debate over Twilight Sleep,” in *Childbirth: Methods and Folklore*, ed. Philip K. Wilson (New York: Garland, 1996), 83.

¹⁴ Van Hoosen cited in Jacqueline H. Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain: Anesthesia and Birth in America* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 54.

the normalisation of hospital-based birth in the United States, and the concomitant marginalisation of midwifery - which, in and around the same year, was incurring the vitriol of the eminent Dr Joseph B. DeLee, who, in his paper 'Progress Towards Ideal Obstetrics,' professed that the 'midwife is a relic of barbarism', and stressed that childbearing 'is destructive, it is pathogenic', thereby necessitating the intervention of 'major science' and 'high art' practiced by the obstetrician.¹⁵ DeLee's major teaching textbook, which was to go through 13 editions, was first published in 1913, and in 1920 he was at the forefront of campaigning for the widespread prophylactic use of episiotomy with the argument that it not only 'saves the woman the debilitating effects of suffering' and 'reduce the amount of idiocy, epilepsy, etc.' in babies, but that 'virginal conditions are often restored.'¹⁶ Moreover, the surgical incision into the perineum was just one part of DeLee's obstetric package, which included forceps to remove the infant and the manual extraction of the placenta. The following year, Rudolph Holmes protested that DeLee and other 'meddlesome' physicians 'produced no evidence to show that their systems are more worthy, less risky, and promise a higher conservation of life than carefully watched spontaneous labour.'¹⁷ The ostensible desirability of childbirth acquiring a uniformity analogous to the contemporaneous emergence of Ford's assembly-line manufacturing, and the repression of nuanced feeling and knowledge in the sedated, bed-confined and screened-off mother, represents the logical extension, if not apotheosis, of the Victorian impulsion to both systematically monitor and discipline sexuality – inseparable from the medicalisation of the reproductive body and metonymisation of the state of women as a measure of the

¹⁵ Jill Arnold, "Joseph DeLee's 1915 Campaign to Eliminate the Midwife," *The Unnecesarean* (blog), December 9, 2009. <http://www.theunnecesarean.com/blog/2009/12/9/joseph-delees-1915-campaign-to-eliminate-the-midwife.html>

¹⁶ Ian D. Graham, *Episiotomy: Challenging Obstetric Conventions* (Oxford: Blackwell), 38.

¹⁷ Graham, *Episiotomy*, 43.

health of the social order¹⁸ – and eschew a phenomenology of pregnancy and labour behind a haze of euphemism and evasion.

I include the above not simply because the arrival of ‘Twilight Sleep’ in the United States was contemporaneous with the publication of “Parturition”, but because you are patently not subject to this practice: the testimony to pain is at the crux of the poem, and, furthermore, you refuse the Twilight Sleep advocate’s ideological reduction of the birth process to the payoff of a child - one obtained through submission to institutional procedure, embedded in a discourse of expertise. And lest it be forgotten, extreme narcotisation was no guarantee against lurid recollections of displaced sense impressions, sometimes manifesting themselves years after the event. Contemporary clinical accounts of tokophobia continue to recognise post-traumatic stress disorder as one result of a negative parturient experience.¹⁹ Where the physician proclaims, self-referentially, ‘absolute control over your patient at all stages of the game... You are “boss”’,²⁰ you open “Parturition” with the declaration, ‘I am the centre / Of a circle of pain / Exceeding its boundaries in every direction’, returning the constitutive experience of labour from the province of cultural oblivion, and instating the maternal ‘subject in process’²¹ in a locus of unmeasured significance. This could be appreciated as the verse counterpart of Isadora Duncan dancing with her protuberant belly discernible under her loose garments several months into pregnancy, at a time when expectant women ‘were virtually banished from public view.’²² The progressive aspect

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), 104.

¹⁹ Kristina Hofberg and Mark Ward, “Fear of Pregnancy and Childbirth,” *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 79 (2003): 507, doi: 10.1136/pmj.79.935.505

²⁰ Leavitt, “Birthing and Anesthesia,” 93.

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 22.

²² Ruth L. Bohan, “I Sing the Body Electric,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 189.

expressed through the linking of copula and present participle in this triad of lines promptly introduces the problematic of being and becoming to be engaged with throughout the text.

I enter into an examination of early stanzas, and am struck by the salient ramifications growing out of a diction marked by a variegated cluster of lexicons - drawn from geometry, astronomy, biophysics, philosophical semantics, in cohabitation with an uneasily introspective modality. One can only imagine the excoriation you would have received from mordantly moralistic Victorian physiologists such as Alexander Walker, who ridiculed as 'monstrous' the 'philosophical lady', and asserted: 'It is certain that great fecundity of the brain in women usually accompanies sterility or disorder of the matrix.'²³ From 'cosmos' to 'nerve-vibrations' to 'nucleus of being' to 'extensity / Of intension', the installation of 'high-minded' terminology functions as an injunction to acknowledge parturition as a complex phenomenon warranting earnest inquiry; however, the affectively imbued inscriptions of a modality of subjectivity susceptible to forces that disrupt the initiatives of rational mastery issuing from a self-identical ego, would indicate that the laws established via historically masculine-encoded domains cannot capture and contain what is experienced. The posture of clinical detachment is twisted with irony.

McGrath suggests that during the era of industrialisation, the body become 'flattened, crushed, macerated, and finally dissolved', and by the late 19th century the 'nucleus was found to be the organising principle of life',²⁴ but you do not permit the photomicrographic image to pass over embodied existentiality, or exclude the

²³ Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representation of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 41.

²⁴ Roberta McGrath, *Seeing Her Sex: Medical Archives and the Female Body* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 17.

Nietzschean acknowledgement of the ‘nerve stimulus’²⁵ that is the basis for linguistic construction. Paradoxically, the impingement of abstract conceptions makes the physicality of your expressivity appreciably palpable. The term ‘logopoeia’, a ‘dance of the intelligence among words and ideas’, that Ezra Pound would propose to characterise your satirically-charged negotiation of such technical vocabulary, would need to be recast to take notice of the intractable corporeal footings of this ‘logos’: ‘linguistic density being simultaneously the measure of the unseen *and*, obliquely, the embodiment of what convention seeks to hide.’²⁶ As well as encouraging maternal vocalisations for aiding navigation through the ‘intense energy of contractions’,²⁷ the midwife-mother pedagogical relation must go to work against the ‘strange-making’ of scientific jargon, specifically the exclusionary ‘OB talk’²⁸ that encrusts the body in mystification and stifles the parturient’s ‘birth songs’: this would involve an endeavour to ‘overturn’ it, as opposed to pretending it is not an endemic force in the patriarchal construction of childbirth.

I am jolted by the shift from the sibilance that unites ‘centre’ and ‘circle’ to the occlusive and high-pitched monosyllable ‘pain’; I am gripped by the ‘contraction’ of scale in the locative phrase ‘congested cosmos of agony’: coughing velar consonants from an irregular bringing-together, an obstruction in the passage of consciousness (this word part-heard) toward an archic arrangement of the univers/al, an anguish (etymologically: narrowness, constriction) indisposed to ‘escape’ - near-rhyme of ‘pain.’ The relation between the ‘I’ and ‘pain’ evokes the centripetal and

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” 1873, accessed April 17, 2015, http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm

²⁶ Peter Nicholls “ ‘Arid Clarity’: Ezra Pound and Mina Loy,” in *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, eds. Rachel Potter and Suzanne Hobson (London: Salt, 2010), 141-2.

²⁷ Melissa Cheyney, *Born at Home: Cultural and Political Dimensions of Maternity Care in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage, 2011), 39.

²⁸ Cheyney, *Born at Home*, 38.

centrifugal as the same force experienced from different frames of reference. Coming from a beyond too close to call to account, pain, as the quintessence of passion-as-passivity - might this be re-cognised as fundamental to a concerned involvement with that which escapes idealisation, living and acting with that which is in advance of objectifying activity? Conscience, another word part-heard, interrupting this interrupted passage, calls into question the 'I's' claim to its own 'place in the sun' – which, for Levinas, glossing Pascal, is where the ontological 'usurpation of the world'²⁹ begins – demanding a response-ability beyond containment in thematising discourse: 'The contraction of the infinite is experienced as an expansion by the subject, for whom the act of substitution can never fully be discharged.'³⁰ What becomes of the centre is thence bound to the confirmation of the Other 'in its substantiality.'³¹

The seeming paradox of the contractive movement that breaks the obstinacy of being-in-and-for-itself³² and makes possible an opening out to otherness is also elicited in Rachel Zucker's 2004 poem "Here Happy is No Part of Love".³³ Zucker, writing of her second childbirth, takes the Kabbalistic mystery of 'tzimtzum' – the original contraction that created space for God to enter the world – and wonders whether 'a woman wrote the image... before she died as Rachel died in labour.' From the outset, the searing sensation and anxiety hinder the assumption of a controlling self-consciousness and complicate linear reconstruction; an *a*personal

²⁹ See the epigraph of Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999).

³⁰ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), 139.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Athlone: London, 1996), 74.

³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshaw (London: Continuum, 2006), 174.

³³ Rachel Zucker, "Here Happy is No Part of Love," in *Not for Mothers Only: Contemporary Poems on Child-Getting & Child-Rearing*, ed. Catherine Wagner and Rebecca Wolff (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2007), 299.

affective event invades perception, activating severe shifts in spatio-temporal register:

she is not (in the end) denatured (but begins to)
like acid body away some under, subjacent revealed
a catalytic sizzle, substance dissolved solvent picture the sky with atomic bomb
cloud suddenly black, blank then

Someone shouting, (a woman) she
“go through” “circle of fire”
“through go” though death *go-go-go* she says *breathe*
breathe

I — oh no what is that I collect and try I —

The threat of denaturation, a phenomenon that alters the native structures of proteins and other macromolecules, resulting in the disruption of conformation, and can lead to aggregation, and ultimately cell death, is implicated in the unstable visual-typographical and syntactical properties of the verse, from the switches between the clumping together and dispersing of words to the irregular phrasal reconfigurations. The initial ‘she is not’ goes against the present simple affirmative ‘I am’ in “Parturition”, and, more so than in the opening of “Parturition”, the tissue of descriptive and propositional language, and embodied intentionality, is placed under inordinate strain by the twisting and stretching of the uterus, nociceptor neurons generating trains of action potentials that inscribe formidable ruptures and fissures in

the speaker's relation to a world of familiarity. As a contributor to Arielle Greenberg's and Rachel Zucker's *Home/Birth* emphasises, 'the pain of childbirth is not like any other pain'.³⁴ On one level, the focus on the 'circle', along with the syntactic repetitions and inversions, educe thoughts of the circular fibres in the lower third of the uterus contracting under the influence of adrenaline and entering into a 'tug-of-war'³⁵ with the longitudinal and figure-of-eight fibres. The poem underscores the limits to the shareability of pain. It radiates a fundamental sense of being held fast by 'having-the-other-in-one's-skin',³⁶ redolent of Levinas's figure of maternity as the paradigm of ethical substitution: 'Negativity without the void of nonbeing, negativity entangled in its own impossibility, outside of all initiative, an incredible withdrawal into fullness, without any detachment from self, is an impossibility of slipping away.'³⁷ The poem also resonates with Mary Margaret Sloan's reflections on the fraught aspects of the space between mother and newborn, the violation of 'her boundaries' that 'abruptly unmakes her perspective from the singular to the multiple':³⁸ 'My body flooded with the chemical emergent horror: how could I even know who I was, or what I was thinking, or what I wanted to do if I weren't able to occupy my single point alone.'³⁹ In a working note, Zucker refers to how earlier versions of the poem were 'too clean and too legible', failing to adequately engage with the confusion of labour, the 'utter I' that 'compels [her]

³⁴ Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker, *Home/Birth: A Poemic* (Berkeley, CA: 1913 Press, 2011), 131.

³⁵ Nicky Wesson, *Labour Pain: Discover Ways to an Easier Labour* (London: Random House, 1999), 37.

³⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than being*, 115.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 87.

³⁸ Mary Margaret Sloan, "Elaborations of Between: The Interpolation of a Child into a Writer's Poetics," in *The Grand Permission*, 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

toward another telling, but in whose location it is ‘too frightening to remain.’⁴⁰

Refusing to dress the wound with a cataplasm of sentimentality, the poem is a portal to a becoming allied with a self-overcoming of reactive forces.

Returning to “Parturition”, ‘The business of the bland sun / has no affair with me...’ – with ‘bland sun’ feeling like a spondee arresting the propulsive impetus of the sentence, and ‘affair with me’ coming into inconsonance with the ensuing ‘agony’ – is a declaration busy with associations. Regarded etymologically, ‘bland’ blends the Latin ‘blandus’ – flattering, alluring – and the Proto-Indo-European ‘bhlehdh’ – grow turbid, blind – pointing to the discrepancy between your perspective and the Homeric vision of birth as involving bringing the child ‘into the light’ to see the ‘sun’s rays’,⁴¹ or Ovid’s rendering of the sun as the ‘mundi oculus’.⁴² And you could hardly generate more of a contrast to Mafarka’s ‘confidence’ in ‘good father Sun’:⁴³ ‘The sandy plains of the zenith shuddered under the gallop of the sun, which rode bareback on its untameable black mare, convulsed with speed: here is her dazzling leather, there her lashing mane!’⁴⁴ To a large extent though, these lines seem to issue a reply to John Donne in “The Sunne Rising”.⁴⁵ Donne brands the anthropomorphised Sun a ‘busy old fool’ as part of a bid to commandeer its perceived centrality in a post-Copernican epoch, his strident rhetoric contracting its purview in inverse proportion to the expanding universal stature of the

⁴⁰ Rachel Zucker, “Either All I Or None No Matter Is, Is,” “Here Happy is No Part of Love.” *How2* 1:7 (2002), accessed January 5, 2015, https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_7_200/current/new_writing/zucker.htm

⁴¹ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 209.

⁴² Ferber, *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 210.

⁴³ Marinetti, *Mafarka the Futurist*, trans. Carol Diethe and Steve Cox (London: Middlesex University Press, 1998), 13.

⁴⁴ Marinetti, *Marfarka*, 9.

⁴⁵ John Donne, “The Sunne Rising” (1633), accessed April 28, 2014, <http://www.bartleby.com/105/3.html>

poet and his lover in a reposeful private sphere – ‘this bed thy center is’ – and, following the ineluctable pun in the title, plotting his own resurrection into the incarnation of omnipotence. You gather together the sense of a personal Christic suffering and a cognisance of the estranging power of an impersonal cosmos and bring them under the aspect of parturient corporeality itself, revising Donne’s transposition of the bedroom into ‘a microcosmic organisation on which the whole world depends’.⁴⁶ Whereas Donne’s speaker reacts to the perceived threat of a breakdown of the human self conceived as unified – fostered by the paradigm shift from the Ptolemaic model of the heavens moving around an immobile earth – with an escape into sustained metaphysical conceit, you enact a more intrepid confrontation with the phenomenological implications of Giordano Bruno’s proposition: ‘Let us state that the universe is all a centre, that the centre is everywhere, and the circumference is nowhere.’⁴⁷

Although, on the plane of the said, there is no sign of a birth attendant in “Parturition”, might we say that the linguistic and paralinguistic energies of the poem encourage a ‘tracing of the psycho-physiological dynamic of the reading consciousness’⁴⁸ that resonates with the phenomenological and ethical investments of midwifery? Your receptivity to becoming-other calls for a form of attention that suspends habitual cognitive habits and exceeds egoistic interests, opening up a space of proximity through which I can register the actualisations of your metamorphic impulses. To learn by and for you, the solidifying disposition of intelligence must be pushed aside again and again, lest we be shut up in the ‘circle of the given’.⁴⁹ I must write in a way that agrees with your body’s capacity to turn sad passions into joy-

⁴⁶ Thomas Docherty, *John Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), 37.

⁴⁷ Giordano Bruno (1585), quoted in Ivan Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (London: Boyars, 1986), 43.

⁴⁸ Scott, “The Translation of Reading,” 216.

⁴⁹ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 192.

affects, and not simply slide into the ‘prattle’ of the ‘young doctor’ that ‘talked about the joy of giving birth’ in Akiko Yosano’s “Labor Pains” - an early twentieth century poem whose concluding stanza the opening of “Parturition” seems to pick up, an echo-with-a-difference:

With the first labor pains,
suddenly the sun goes pale.
The indifferent world goes strangely calm.
I am alone.
It is alone I am.⁵⁰

What am I to make of the challenge of moving with your markedly variable syntax and lineation? Recalling your claim that, as if amending Pound’s notion of ‘logopoeia’, modern poets can be distinguished by ‘the gait of their mentality’,⁵¹ I think of how midwife and/with mother must adapt to shapes of energy that might seem earthbound, ungainly, and at odds with ‘stylish symbolist dance’.⁵² Parallels can also be drawn, again, between the execution of your verse and the example of Isadora Duncan, defying the orthodoxies of ballet’s gestural repertoire, her feet liberated from the constraints of ‘stiff shoes’ and ‘dated choreographies’.⁵³ In the first two stanzas –the distribution of lines unevenly distributed – from the stretching forth of ‘exceeding...’ and ‘On infinitely...,’ with ‘vibrations’ at the end of the latter audibly resounding with ‘direction’ of the former, to the short line ‘or in

⁵⁰ Akiko Yosano, “Labor Pains” in *Women Poets of Japan*, eds. Kenneth Rexroth and Ikuko Atsumi (New York: New Directions, 1977), 87.

⁵¹ Loy, quoted in Nicholls, “Arid Clarity,” 140.

⁵² Nicholls, “Arid Clarity,” 140.

⁵³ Virginia M. Kouidis, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 197.

contraction’, I already perceive a commitment to the principle of form-as-discovered concurrently with the content of the utterance. The early twentieth century’s self-appointed custodians of the ‘science’ of prosody, prone to conflating ‘convention’ and ‘propriety’,⁵⁴ might fulminate against your radical deviation from the predictabilities of metre, but just as an extremely regimented obstetric modelling of birth hinders attentiveness to the manifold expressions of temporal experience, limiting the parturient to strict quantifiable coordinates, writers such as Conrad Aitken committed a fallacy in declaring *vers libre* to be ‘verse without rhythm’.⁵⁵ The midwife would readily acquit you from such a charge, accommodating spontaneous and non-calculative processes, without neglecting the exigencies of practiced guidance, as you partake in, to invoke T.E. Hulme in 1908, a ‘delicate and difficult art’ of ‘fitting the rhythm to the idea’ without backsliding into the artifice of a pre-existing regular pattern, which ‘takes away all the trouble for us.’⁵⁶ For midwife Candace Whitbridge, this receptivity is allied to a ‘vigilance and respect for something big and knowing that nature’s not perfect.’⁵⁷

The impression of aporetic struggle is amplified through the antimetabole in the stanza that follows:

Locate an irritation	without
It is	within
	Within
It is without	

⁵⁴ Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1996), 7.

⁵⁵ Conrad Aitken, “The Function of Rhythm” (1918), quoted in Hartman, *Free Verse*, 23.

⁵⁶ Thomas Ernest Hulme, “Lecture on Modern Poetry,” (1908), accessed February 10, 2014, https://www.uni-due.de/lyriktheorie/texte/1908_hulme.html

⁵⁷ Candace Whitbridge, quoted in Chester, *Sisters on a Journey*, 253.

Deleuze proposes that ‘we have to see creation as tracing a path between impossibilities... A creator who isn’t grabbed around the throat by a set of impossibilities is no creator.’⁵⁸ Going forth, drawing back - how to circumvent the possibility of choking within the ‘closed circle’ Marinetti identifies with femininity, ‘wholly without usefulness’?⁵⁹ A deceleration in left-to-right cognition is generated; I cannot race along the lines straight to the Futurist terminal. Marinetti derided slowness as ‘naturally foul’;⁶⁰ I waver between elaborating the significance of the lexicon of hygiene here, and deferring until a later time. I lean towards the latter choice. It would seem provident not to detach the common denotations of ‘irritation’ – annoyance and discomfort – from its etymological linkage to ‘incitement to action’. Shortly before you composed “Parturition” you had been ordered by doctors, on account of the diagnosis of neurasthenia, to rest in bed under conditions of sensory deprivation and force-feeding, but it was the irruptions of Futurist language into your consciousness that proved to be one of the decisive factors in you finding your way out of depression, provoking a resurgence of artistic activity. This was in spite of you resisting ‘conversion’ to Marinetti’s program. I must trace an inquiry into possible etiologic aspects of ‘irritation’ in the context of your writings, and the significance of the spatial arrangement of this passage, from multifarious perspectives.

Firstly, it would seem pertinent to note that between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries the physiology of pregnancy was addressed chiefly in terms

⁵⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 133, quoted in *Gilles Deleuze: Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xlviii.

⁵⁹ Marinetti, “Against Amore,” 73.

⁶⁰ Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, quoted in Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1996), 34.

of ‘irritability’. For example, Thomas Denman contended that ‘the whole habit of the body may be disturbed by a certain state of the *uterus*... In consequence also of this general and perpetual irritation, the temper of pregnant women is sometimes rendered less gentle and patient than is consistent with their usual character.’⁶¹ The Greek notion of the ‘wandering womb’ was incorporated into discourses of female derangement, with W.F. Montgomery suggesting that, in extreme cases, under the influence of ‘the irritation of the nervous system’, there could be observed a ‘gloomy anticipation of evil, sometimes accompanied with that sort of apathetic indifference which makes [the pregnant woman] careless of every object that ought naturally to awaken an interest in her feelings.’⁶² Considering the pressure of assiduous reflective activity upon the raw sense-data conveyed across the medium of your verse, you exude a temperament in greater consent with midwife Martha Mears’s challenging of the standard delineation of ‘irritability’: ‘Is woman the only part of animated nature, whose powers are said to be weakened when she wants most to exert them?’⁶³ she asks. However, Mears’ substitution of ‘irritation’ for the phrase ‘increased sensibility of the womb’ is in danger of supplementing the ruling ideology of ‘femininity’ that represents woman as destitute of rationality - which, in your condition of restless searching, combining voluntary straining and involuntary submission, is a faculty you refuse to lay aside. Avoiding the equation of woman and (pejoratively thematised) emotion and passivity, your incorporation of abstruse discourse into the corporeally charged birthing space upholds the parturient woman’s connection to ‘reason’ - a key aspect of which would be ‘the apprehension of our

⁶¹ Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 24.

⁶² Hanson, *Cultural History of Pregnancy*, 61.

⁶³ Hanson, *Cultural History of Pregnancy*, 24.

existence as pervasively affective and determined by our “being inside” a complex constellation of other beings.’⁶⁴

The caesura that breaks the initial iambic measure of the imperative is marked not by a punctuation mark but the (un)marked gap that sets off a syntactic indeterminacy, drawing awareness to the physical surface of the page, the inextricability of matter and form. This translinguistic element belies any definition of the subject as an independent intentionality, settled on one side of a dualistic economy that privileges being-as-presence over a movement of self-emptying. This interval of exchange, in excess of representation, yet not reducing maternity to a mere container of alterity, points up the porosity of the border between bodily drives and the symbolic order, de-solidifying the logic of patriarchal substitution that demarcates ‘woman’ as ‘outside’ of culture. I must follow the poem’s negotiation of this interval, responsive to the ways in which you redirect passive forces⁶⁵ towards transformative desire to avoid the dyadic in-closure that binds the maternal body only to need, the function of the anti- / pre-social?⁶⁶ This labile figurality, suggestive of the ‘ekmageion’ that accommodates the ‘mutually contradictory meanings of mark receiving, mark giving, and mark removing’,⁶⁷ admitting the ‘thetic moment’ that ‘negates its own moment-ousness on any temporal or logical scale’,⁶⁸ generates an insistence on keeping the ‘negativity’ of the dialectic in motion, rendering the psychic unfolding virtually tangible. The ‘silence(s)’ associated with the pronounced divisions in the lineation might be considered in line

⁶⁴ Sharp, “Why Spinoza Today?” 605.

⁶⁵ Kelly Oliver, *Womanising Nietzsche: Philosophy’s Relation to the ‘Feminine’* (London: Routledge, 1994), 182.

⁶⁶ Oliver, *Womanising Nietzsche*, 180.

⁶⁷ Emanuela Bianchi, “Receptacle/Chōra: Figuring the Errant Feminine in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Hypatia* 21, 4 (2006): 128.

⁶⁸ Lydia Rainford, *She Changes by Intrigue: Irony, Femininity and Feminism* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005), 33.

with Jean Luc Nancy's characterisation of silence 'not as a privation but as an arrangement of a resonance', a condition in which you can 'hear your own body resonate'.⁶⁹ His emphasis that to listen is to 'be open from without and from within',⁷⁰ resounds with the approach taken here. Adaptational process in an open system compels an 'active replying' by an organism whose environment ought not to be reified as 'given',⁷¹ and there is a sense that the repetition of 'within' and 'without' accentuates the 'thingness' of words simultaneous with emphasising that they are insufficient to fix things with their naming function. The agrammaticality carries some congruence with Deleuze's notion of a 'creative stuttering' that entails a 'growing out from the middle',⁷² to 'move ahead by alternating (vibrating like a pendulum) between orientations'.⁷³ The following line, 'The sensitized area', appearing spatially-syntactically as both a closing and opening noun phrase, gives renewed emphasis to the contingency of corporeality, otherwise subsumed under the grand syntheses of a teleological system, 'true thought' overstepping any 'sensory admixture'.⁷⁴ I imagine the midwife's serving of laughter as the 'father of philosophy' endeavours to drag his body up out of this deep sensuous site passed over by his abstractive fixations.

Mockery would seem to bespeak a felicitously subversive response to the irritation of being perceived, by Plato and Aristotle at least, as 'naturally defective',⁷⁵ and thus exempt from partaking in the self-legitimizing process of reason. It's as

⁶⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p21.

⁷⁰ Nancy, *Listening*, 14.

⁷¹ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (London, Routledge, 1999), 146.

⁷² Frank Stevenson, "Stretching Language to Its Limit: Deleuze and the Problem of *Poeisis*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 35, 1 (2009): 102, accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/issues/Affect/5.pdf>

⁷³ Stevenson, "Stretching Language," 102.

⁷⁴ William A. DeVries, *Hegel's Theory of Mental Activity: An Introduction to Theoretical Spirit* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press), 69.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 19.

though you are effecting a parody of the self-sealing epistemological circle, the unification of the rational and the real more than irritated by the intractability of organic workings, our primal dependence on the systole-diastole of a(m)other's heartbeat: returning to the earlier lines - interplay of pregnant pause and affectivity of locution, combination of the recurrent labio-velar approximant 'w', the turbulence along the centre of the tongue produced by voiced fricatives 'th', 'z', the voiceless alveolar 't' that constricts airflow, the release of air through the nasal consonant 'n', the rounded low back diphthong /aw/ that affords a counterpoint to the insistent assonance of the high front vowel /i/, redoubling my attention to the breath as bridge between raw sentience and strivings to open new lines of causality, heterogeneous impulses confounding appeals to normative grammar and the hierarchies intrinsic to linear-logical formations. The imperative 'locate', following a stanza that eludes a unitary specialised register, thus becomes linked to a poetics of exploratory process between inner and outer directionality, which could be said to operate at considerable variance with the technocratic tendency to conduct diagnosis and treatment strictly from the outside in, objectifying the parturient as an unsound machine to be mastered through externally (pre-)conceived progressive stages. An obstetrician interviewed by Melissa Cheyney, comments that what women 'have to remember' is that 'I have 20 years of experience and a frame of reference they can never have having one or two babies. I urge my patients to remember that I am the expert.'⁷⁶ Compare this de-authorisation of embodied knowledge with a homebirth midwife's insistence on ensuring that 'the flow of information is back and forth and not top down' so that women understand every procedure, and approaching prenatal tests at every visit 'primarily as opportunities to foster reassurance, affirmation, and

⁷⁶ Cheyney, *Born at Home*, 36.

a sense of connection with the baby.’⁷⁷ The former example illustrates the authoritarian disposition of an institutional elite that enforces a very select definition of ‘knowing’ as it might pertain to the stock categories of propositional communication: ‘skill’, and ‘acquaintance’.⁷⁸ The mother’s truth-seeking agency is disqualified on a similar basis to that suggested by Plato for the banishment of poets from his ideal state: they ‘cannot provide an adequate account of [their] activity’.⁷⁹ I imagine that the more technocratic-minded obstetricians would suppose poetry’s relation to knowledge as something based merely on an ability to say, correctly and repeatedly adhere to the rules governing Latin hexameters.⁸⁰

The fragmented phrasing and profuse concentration of repeated sound elements might also be appreciated as a way of sending up the narrow prosodic schemes, ostentatious musicality, grandiloquent diction and moral self-consciousness one might associate with the elegiac mode of Tennyson - the most popular English poet of the Victorian era. Although “In Memoriam” shares with “Parturition” a pronounced pattern of dilation and contraction of the ‘I’ in its positive and negative states, in the affirmation and withdrawal of personality, and a resistance to linear discursiveness, the ethereal infusions, strict tetrameter, and envelope rhyme of a stanza such as ““The dawn, the dawn,” and died away; / And East and West, without a breath, / Mixt their dim lights, like life and death, / To broaden into boundless day,’ – which proceeds out of a trance registering the breeze’s harmonising mediation of contrasting symbols – would seem risibly out of keeping with the textures of your verse.

⁷⁷ Cheyney, *Born at Home*, 37.

⁷⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 184.

⁷⁹ Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 184.

⁸⁰ Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 192.

The following line, ‘The sensitized area’, takes me to remarks you made following the publication of “Love Songs”: ‘I think the Anglo-Saxon covered up-ness goes hand in hand with a reduction of the spontaneous creative quality – there’s nothing covered up in Italy... We moderns have hardly a proscribed psychic area.’⁸¹ If we consider that the ‘sensitized area’ may point to the skin itself, the quintessential organic interface of information that is both ‘endogenous and exogenous’, ‘receptive and expressive’,⁸² an inherent difficulty makes itself felt as soon as you attempt to definitively isolate the location of an ‘irritation’. Moreover, the bodily surface, the ‘zone of sensitivity’⁸³ that constitutes the enveloping exteriority, the orifices, and the internal systems, cannot be dissociated from the ‘psychical investments’ registered across the ‘osmotic’ contours of the ‘body image’.⁸⁴ The ancient import of the midwife’s attentiveness to transactions effected in the inordinately-charged tactile field has been devalued under the reign of obstetric schemes, in which attendance is given over to unilateral-programmatic manoeuvres upon the mother’s anatomical features, from the indiscriminate use of the hook and scalpel in amniotomy and episiotomy, to the hollow needle delivering intravenous infusions. Midwifery embodies an adaptability keyed to the variability of the mother’s relation to contact; the effleurance from her mid-spine to her sacrum and pressure on acupuncture point Bladder 67 that afforded comfort during one phase may be met with irritation during a later phase, and therefore sensitivity to the mother’s shifting articulations – some of which will outrange verbal signals – is imperative, as is an awareness that the midwife’s affections, if not reactive, will in turn be positively accentuated through

⁸¹ Loy, quoted in Kouidis, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet*, 191.

⁸² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 35.

⁸³ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 79.

⁸⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 79.

receptivity to the mother's vital forces, both sides entering into the approximation of a 'double-sensation'.

The sensitized area
Is identical with the extensity
Of intension

The meaning of 'Intension' should not be conflated with that of its homophone; the swelling of a gap between 'identical' and 'with', in conjunction with the ensuing enjambment, elicits notice of the barrier that homogeneous space places between the self and the perception of what Bergson calls 'the intention of life, the simple movement that runs through the lines, that binds them together.'⁸⁵ Though the intellectual mould cannot conciliate the discrepancy between the manipulation of geometrical positions and the 'mobility of becoming',⁸⁶ the formal imitation of this slippage via the addition of the poetic faculties stretches attention toward the *intuition of duration* that breaks open/upon measured time. Biomedical discourse, in contrast, is bent on interpretative frameworks grounded on mechanical causality, ruling out the impetus towards insights that turn on this differentiating threshold. I refer to the section on 'Slow progress in labour' in *Problem-based Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, and read: 'In a situation of primigravida with a cephalic presentation making slow progress, the diagnosis lies between inefficient uterine contractility, occipitoposterior position and cephalopelvic disproportion.'⁸⁷ I note a similar survey in *Llewellyn-Jones Fundamentals of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, but with the

⁸⁵ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 177.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸⁷ Ian A. Greer, *Problem-based Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 2003), 141.

addition of ““faults” in the foetus’, which is termed ‘the passenger’⁸⁸ as part of a facile binarism that belies how the foetus’s movements can generate a knowledge in the mother that outgoes her rational intellection. As an illustration, one mother recounted that during a long labour she spontaneously began ‘high stepping around the house’ because it ‘just felt right’, and that afterwards the midwife commented on how the pelvic shifting had served to rectify the position of the baby’s head, previously tilted to one side. ‘What if I had had an epidural?’ the mother added, ‘How could I have listened to my body?’⁸⁹ This stresses the importance of avoiding the conceptualisation of the pelvis as a fixed structure; rather than treating each pelvis as though it were rachitic, the midwife supports the factors that increase the capacity for ‘pelvic moulding’ - including ‘abducted femora that act as levers to open the sacroiliac joints and the pelvic tilt position to cause backward movement of the sacrum’, creating ‘additional space’ that ‘facilitates internal rotation and descent.’⁹⁰

While the designation ‘uterine inertia’ may have lost currency since the 1940s, obstetric ‘practicality’ remains modelled, to return to Bergson’s lexicon, on the treatment of organised material ‘as inert, without troubling about the life which animated it’,⁹¹ and aims its sights on ‘parts external to parts’.⁹² One midwife has expressed, with provocative succinctness, her aversion to this method of thought, proposing that often when labour stalls, ‘it is not a dystocia of the part; it is a dystocia of life.’⁹³ The interpenetration of the psychological and the physiological is

⁸⁸ Jeremy J.N. Oats and Suzanne Abraham, *Llewellyn-Jones Fundamentals of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 9th ed (Edinburgh & New York: Mosby, 2010), 175.

⁸⁹ Cheyney, *Born at Home*, 61.

⁹⁰ Katherine C. Carr, “Maternal Positions for Second Stage,” in *Episiotomy and the Second Stage of Labour*, 50.

⁹¹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 153.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹³ Cheyney, *Born at Home*, 96.

given short shrift in the biomedical construction of childbirth. In the guidebook *Problem Orientated Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, ‘relevant details’ to be ascertained through ‘history-taking’ and ‘examination’ of the pregnant woman include ‘occupation’ and ‘home circumstances’,⁹⁴ but there is no intimation of providing a space for her to expose deep-seated emotions concerning childbirth in the context of her life, or for working through those ‘cultural stories that do not support her in giving spontaneous birth.’⁹⁵

Considering the contexts of your poem, the drawing out of this interval might also bespeak an awareness, later expounded by the likes of Luce Irigaray, that ‘the maternal-feminine has not identity, except as the undifferentiated matter from which metaphysics distinguished itself as pure speculation.’⁹⁶ Through the straining towards greater degrees of feeling, are you not also inciting a dissension against Bergson too, in regard to his claim that ‘sensibility in the depths, not agitation at the surface’ is a faculty that has ‘attained less development in woman than in man’?⁹⁷

The following stanza is suggestive of your exposure to the rupturing of synchrony – abstract time of sequential instants in a unified order – by diachrony, non-coincidence of Same and Other, a divestment of self-possession.

I am the false quantity
In the harmony of physiological potentiality
To which
Gaining self-control
I should be consonant

⁹⁴ Greer, *Problem-based Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 7.

⁹⁵ “Connie Breece,” in *Sisters on a Journey*, 74.

⁹⁶ Rebecca Hill, “Interval, Sexual Difference: Luce Irigaray and Henri Bergson,” *Hypatia* 23, 1 (2008): 123, doi: 10.1353/hyp.2007.0062

⁹⁷ Hill, “Interval, Sexual Difference,” 127.

In time

‘I am’ not now positioned as the fixed point of a compass, but as the thinking of ambivalence that proceeds through an effort to reduce the Said to the Saying, the primordial ethical response of the ‘here I am’⁹⁸ posited and also negated in the propositional discourse of philosophy - an exposition that resounds, necessarily, in a different time.⁹⁹ That dense alternation between alveolar lateral approximants, velar nasals, and alveolar stops, the subtle internal assonantal variation across the first syllables of the abstract nouns in the initial lines, and the markedly hypotactic arrangement, are evincive of a disposition towards taut control over sense-making; in combining these features with the linking of the ‘I’ to an error (in this case, the idea of the improper observance of syllabic quantity according to the rules of Latin verse), the coming apart of the long syntactic unit and the highly contrastive end-syllables in the ensuing four lines, it is as though you are rendering emphatic a registering of the ‘dephasing’ where ‘the Saying is wrenched from its locus in the Said’.¹⁰⁰ The passage is suggestive of Adorno’s definition of dialectics as ‘the consistent sense of non-identity... My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.’¹⁰¹ Your philosophic-poetic expressivity allows us to feel that the anarchy of birth, or birth of anarchy, which on one level troubles a subject’s claim to sovereignty while on another overflows the totalising order of the State, is recalcitrant to recollection and representation. This carries significant ethical implications. ‘Self-control’ is a term that was coined in the early 18th century by the moralist Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury,

⁹⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.

⁹⁹ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 235.

¹⁰⁰ Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 167.

¹⁰¹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York, Seabury Press, 1973), 5.

who, challenging Hobbes' doctrines of egoism and civil sovereignty, emphasised the regulatory faculty of the voice of conscience for an individual's contribution to a greater Harmony. For the birthing woman, a letting go of calculative consciousness is consonant with a letting come of the baby's nonverbal articulations, an inter-subjective gestalt, which the midwife lets be(come). In order to 'most clearly hear your baby's desires, how your baby wants to move', you must 'disconnect from the clock'.¹⁰² The need to claim exclusive control over one's body has been a longstanding directive in the 'molar' politics of feminism, but this priority tacitly assents to the paradigm of 'self-ownership' that distinguishes bourgeois liberalism, and sets a precedent for the individual-as-property to be contracted into quasi-slavery on the labour market. In this sense, as Diprose argues, 'freedom is reduced, rather than enhanced, by keeping one's body to oneself'.¹⁰³

In the enclosing and disciplining of the parturient under clinical apparatus, the sympathy that allows the body to 'coincide with its own transition', its 'potential to vary',¹⁰⁴ is denied. The Friedman Curve introduced in the 1950s is emblematic of this depreciation of intuition and pure mobility by the institutional proclivity for dictating quantifiable parameters of labour time - partitioned into stages that are managed according to predefined stipulations regarding the normal rate of cervical dilation, consistent with the determinations of the intellect as described by Bergson: becoming is represented as 'a series of states, each of which is homogenous with itself'.¹⁰⁵ The living body, gathering up traces of previous time that commix with intensions conducted towards the future, controverts the delimitation of a 'now'

¹⁰² "Jeannine Parvati Baker," in Chester, *Sisters on a Journey*, 63.

¹⁰³ Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Differences* (London: Routledge, 2005), 105.

¹⁰⁴ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 163.

moment, and can be construed, as Ansell-Pearson puts it, ‘as a kind of “centre” but not in terms of mathematical point; such a body does not merely reflection action from without but also struggles with and absorbs it.’¹⁰⁶ This description is in tune with the way in which you enact a refusal to converge with relatively recent developments in techno-modernity towards the establishment of global uniformity - of temporality reducible to the measure of the metropolitan centre; the rationalisation and standardisation of longitude and timekeeping through reference to a single meridian was given massive impetus by the Washington Conference of 1884, and three years before the arrival of “Parturition”, radio time signals transmitted from the Eiffel Tower became synchronised with Greenwich Mean Time. Considering the normalisation of medical control over birthing, the Latin ‘normalis’ – made in conformity with a carpenter’s rule – and the etymological link between control and the Medieval designation ‘contrarotulus’ – keeping a duplicate register of accounts – would seem to tally with the reduction of embodied temporality to spatial and numerical measures, which in turn fits in with the subordination of qualitative relations and natural processes to the ‘conditions of profit-oriented time-accountancy’¹⁰⁷ that prevail under the capitalist system. Your use of the dynamic verb ‘gaining’ – which harks back to the Middle English ‘gaignage’: ‘profit from agriculture’ – and the modal of possibility ‘should’ are apposite in signalling that the capturing of duration, for all the straining of the will, admits only of degrees. Here, perhaps, we also register an awareness that the project of modernity itself is ‘tied to a situation of incomplete modernisation.’¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 1999), 147.

¹⁰⁷ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 75.

¹⁰⁸ Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 7.

Upholders of the biomedical model of sociability, though they may ground it in a professedly apolitical insistence on language as cardinally about intelligible ‘communication’, profit from it being structured through the capturing of affects, incorporating parts of complex bodies ‘into stable, habituated patterns of compliance and predictability.’¹⁰⁹ The definition of the ‘order-word’ and its limitative operations should not be limited to that which makes the mood of an utterance unmistakably imperative, but rather as that which refers ‘to any statement insofar as it functions to order acts, affects, desires, states of affairs.’¹¹⁰ As an example of a ‘grammar of violence’ that freezes out certain expressive dimensions, setting up discursive frames in isolation from embodied cognition, consider the following account, featured in Henci Goer’s report “Cruelty in Maternity Wards: 50 Years on”, of a woman who experienced PTSD as a result of her labour, and contrast it with her medical chart notes: Seven hours following birth, the woman recalls, ‘There is blood everywhere, clots the size of frying pans. I think I am going to die. Panicky nurses and residents crowd the room.... I am being stuck everywhere for an IV.... My underwear is cut off, injections slammed into my buttocks, my legs are forced open and somebody shoves an entire forearm into my uterus and pulls out clots. Three times. I scream and scream and scream. The pain is unbearable, and I feel brutally violated.’ The institutional record read: 7:30am. ‘Called to see patient passing clots. Bimanual evacuation lower uterine segment with 3 large clots. Orders Pitocin IV. Discussed with Doctor B-intern.’ The woman states: ‘I am curled in a fetal position, crying and shaking. No one comes to explain why, how or what just happened, or ever ask if I’m alright.’ The chart reads: ‘7:40 am: BP 90/58. Will continue to observe.—Night Nurse B 8:00 am: IV running. Patient medicated with Zofran for nausea. Resting

¹⁰⁹ Gatens, “Feminism as Password,” 69.

¹¹⁰ Gatens, “Feminism as Password,” 70.

comfortably. Will monitor.’¹¹¹ Here, clinical ‘technique’ is representative of instrumental ratio - thought ‘reified’ as an ‘automatic process’,¹¹² a cold abstractive reckoning that reduces subjects to units of calculable matter. On account of the terrible rigidity of the medical discursive protocol, it might be apprehended as a manifestation of self-preserving reason becoming like death in seeking to head off death, to set itself apart from realities it cannot tolerate.¹¹³

If the faculty of intuition is to work with, rather than be repressed by, intelligence, the midwife must account for the ingress of signs across the body that mark a radical spatiotemporal deviation from the readily discernable coordinates of the birthing milieu in a way that directs attention to the dissension between the inner ear of conscience and collective-ideological pressures:

‘The open window is full of a voice

A fashionable portrait-painter

Running up-stairs to a woman’s apartment

Sings

“All the girls are tid’ly did’ly

All the girls are nice

Whether they wear their hair in curls

Or –

At the back of the thoughts to which I permit crystallisation

The conception

Brute

Why?’

¹¹¹ Henci Goer, “Cruelty in Maternity Wards: Fifty Years Later,” *The Journal of Perinatal Education* 19, 3 (2010): 8-9, doi: 10.1624/105812410X514413

¹¹² Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 19.

¹¹³ Ross Wilson, *Theodor Adorno* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 22.

There is a multidimensional rendering of midpoints here. ‘Window’, relating back to the old English ‘eagþyrl’: ‘eye-hole’, is between a modifier and adverb that brings us close to the sounding of ‘oval’ – the *fenestra ovalis* that is at the intersection of the end of the middle and beginning of the inner ear – and this site is territorialised by a refrain that proceeds via a figure epitomising the long-preponderant tendency in Western aesthetics towards the immobilisation of woman under an objectifying gaze and stopping up of her molecular flows with the imposition of insidious terms such as ‘nice’, bound to all those old infantilising connotations of timidity, senselessness, clumsiness, neediness, the Latin ‘nescious’ meaning ‘not-knowing’. If in *The Noise of the Street Penetrates the House* the painter Boccioni rendered permeable the boundary between the city’s activity and the private space of the woman to evoke a discharge of erotic energy, the opening of this stanza seems to point to a more diminishing interaction, running counter to a sense of woman’s liberation. The scenario depicted in this stanza turns me towards Deleuze and Guattari’s claim, in critiquing the Oedipal schema of the psychoanalytic imaginary, that the ‘the girl’s becoming is stolen first’,¹¹⁴ accomplished through a transcendental organisation of her body into the form of a ‘receptacle for male desire and progeny’.¹¹⁵ Although the verse enacts a ‘kinesthetic intertranslation’ between one perceptual system and another’,¹¹⁶ through which there is insinuated a de-prioritisation of the mute optical field that from Ancient Greek metaphysics onwards has been granted supreme epistemological status, this aural possession of the self does not correlate to some

¹¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), 305.

¹¹⁵ Gatens, “Feminism as Password,” 67.

¹¹⁶ Grosz, “Volatile Bodies, 100.

pure crystallisation of the ‘still small voice’ of conscience,¹¹⁷ but rather discloses how the sense to which Levinas ascribes paramount ethical importance can be vitiated by the ‘musical quality of art’¹¹⁸ - in this case the business of a bland song, a performance that resembles a jocund playground chant. To invoke Adorno’s account of aesthetic experience, the portrait-painter’s example is far removed from the effort ‘to stretch language quasi-conceptually, mimetically, all the way toward affect and song, but without relinquishing any of the rigour and complexity of conceptual intellection.’¹¹⁹ It is also the obverse of a Sapphic hymnic aching for reciprocal erotic pleasure among women; that men are ‘relegated to a peripheral, if not intrusive role’¹²⁰ in Sappho’s poetic corpus could well be edifying for the purpose of figuring alternative social arrangements to the biomedical organisation of the birthing room that typifies a patriarchal mode of association, in which, to cite Jessica Benjamin, ‘one is always up and the other down.’¹²¹

Your satirical investments are critical in ensuring ethical subjectivity is not closed off by the ‘irresponsibility of the male’; the painter’s vertical ascent and omniscient pretensions in defining ‘all’ through a ‘self-production’ with ‘no binding ties’ to the other¹²² could be considered a sendup of the Nietzschean noble impulse, the aspiration towards the lightness allied with the transmutation of values confounded by the intimation of his conformity to immanent trends, the recurrence of the present participle ‘running’, and the falling short of his song. The painter’s

¹¹⁷ Denise Riley, “‘A Voice without a Mouth’: Inner Speech,” in *The Force of Language*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 9.

¹¹⁸ Megan Craig, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010), 297.

¹¹⁹ Kaufman, “Lyric’s Constellation,” 212.

¹²⁰ Joan DeJean cited in Marilyn B. Skinner “Women and Language in Archaic Greece,” in *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, ed. Ellen Greene (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1996), 187.

¹²¹ Ellen Greene, “Apostrophe and Women’s Erotics in the Poetry of Sappho,” in *Reading Sappho*, 235.

¹²² Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 129.

progress up the flight of stairs is suspended by the dash and overtaken by the urgent anapaests that begin the line beginning ‘At the back of these thoughts’ – opening a possible line of flight – which is wrested into the fragmentation of ‘The conception Brute / Why?’, as you strive to take in and on the weight of ethical questioning pertaining to hospitality. I wonder whether you ever read John Donne’s 1621 sermon provided at the marriage of Margaret Washington, for the interruptive dynamics of this stanza could present a parody of the following sentiments, illustrative of Donne’s advocacy of what he called the ‘middle way’ that is the ‘work of moderate men who fashion women into wives’,¹²³ and the Protestant doctrine of ‘mutual help’: ‘The husband helps as legges to her, she moves by his motion; The wife helps as a staffe to him, he moves the better by her assistance.’¹²⁴ What a heavy jolt ‘Brute’ generates: considering the run-up, such a pronounced deviation in sound and denotative register! Ideational inceptions might produce a recoiling from raw animalism, suggested by the breach across the line, but they coexist along the same horizontal axis. Earlier in the stanza, you evoke a woman partitioned off in a domestic sphere and expected to provide the opening for the male to be an expression of agency, a reflection of that trajectory which, extending out of the ancient Greek polis, minimises the significance of ‘those who attend to, reproduce, and are subjected by the necessities of the labouring body that sustains life.’¹²⁵ As you proceed to underscore the marked contrast between the motion of the portrait painter and the mountain of labour contractions, you mock a socio-theoretical framework that abstracts human action signified in linear, biographical time from its

¹²³ Cristina Malcolmson, “John Donne and the Debate about Women,” *George Herbert Journal* 29, 1-2 (Fall 2005-Spring 2006): 96, doi: 0161-7435

¹²⁴ John Donne, “Sermon Number 11” (1621) in *The Sermons of John Donne, Vol. 1*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), 247.

¹²⁵ Rosalyn Diprose, “Women’s Bodies Giving Time for Hospitality,” *Hypatia* 24, 2 (2009): 152, doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01036.x

dependency on the welcome disclosed through actual birth, and which consigns the latter to a lower order of 'natality', operating as though an incisive demarcation between 'bios' and 'zoe' were sustainable.¹²⁶ In the stanza that follows, the lumbering cadence of the lines, the twisting into each other of the haptic-affective and visual fields, and the endurance of cyclic experience, stand against the prospect of phallic revelation.

I am climbing a distorted mountain of agony
Incidentally with the exhaustion of control
I reach the summit
And gradually subside into anticipation of
Repose
Which never comes
For another mountain is growing up
Which goaded by the unavoidable
I must traverse
Traversing myself

Rather than modelling parturition as a straight passage expedited through pre-set milestones towards a transcendent peak, the 'unconscious excesses of Dionysus'¹²⁷ are thrown across Apollonic order-making in your verse, and the midwife must support the turns, the descent by different routes, to serve the discovery of deeper and wider horizons. There is no God-like vantage point in relation to this relation to

¹²⁶ Diprose, "Women's Bodies Giving Time," 156.

¹²⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), 125.

guide or goad us. ‘Traversing myself’ does not entail fleeing like Zarathustra from ‘elemental (mother) earth’ in pursuit of the ‘higher man’,¹²⁸ clinging to the steeds that drive the sun, or seeking settlement with the Olympian patriarchy. It is more akin to driving into the unknown to find the *new*.

Something in the delirium of night-hours
Confuses while intensifying sensibility
Blurring spatial contours
So aiding elusion of the circumscribed
That the gurgling of a crucified wild beast
Comes from so far away
And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth
Is no part of myself
There is a climax in sensibility
When pain surpassing itself
Becomes exotic
And the ego succeeds in unifying the positive and negative
poles of sensation
Uniting the opposing and resisting forces
In lascivious revelation

It is telling that the inscribing of a line of escape from encircling restrictions bridges nocturnal visitation and augmented affective receptivity, for sharp bright light ever-over-arousing the neo-cortex is far from an aid to parturition. Other mammalian

¹²⁸ Caroline Joan Picart, *Resentment and the ‘Feminine’ in Nietzsche’s Politico-Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 34.

species tend to labour under cover of privacy, whether we refer to the wild goat withdrawing from the flock into a rock overhang cave, the domestic cat nesting in the corner of a closet, or the primate mother in captivity forestalling birth until her supervisors have vacated the holding facility. We must not disregard the implications of evidence indicating that approximately 98 per cent of our genetic makeup had evolved prior to the Pan-Homo divergence (commonly estimated as occurring between five and seven million years ago),¹²⁹ and the significance of the transition, quite possibly with the emergence of Erectus, towards the demand for assistance in birth - thereafter assuming an unmistakably bio-cultural complexity.¹³⁰ If it is agreed that the triggering of cortisol and epinephrine release that inhibits contractions in a labouring animal is an adaptive mechanism for averting the delivery of a newborn into predatory danger,¹³¹ the subjecting of woman's Palaeolithic physiology to invasive techno-environmental stimuli rather than a provision of support allied with discretion is apt only to forbid the 'climax in sensibility'.

Before attending to facets of the mediation between personal consciousness and the primal-imaginal realm symptomatised here by a 'wild beast' and foaming 'mouth', it might be germane to bring to notice Michel Odent's observation that, during an unmedicated labour, 'women get a faraway look in their eyes, forget social conventions'.¹³² It is the imperative to diagnose cultural investments centring on the normative construction of cleanliness that is issued forth so forcefully through your transgression of 'the circumscribed'. The indefinite article preceding 'mouth' makes

¹²⁹ Bernard Chapais, *Primeval Kinship: How Pair-Bonding Gave Birth to Human Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 20.

¹³⁰ Robbie Davis-Floyd and Melissa Cheyney, "Birth and the Big Bad Wolf: An Evolutionary Perspective," 2009, accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.davis-floydpresents.com/uncategorized/birth-and-the-big-bad-wolf-an-evolutionary-perspective/>

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Michel Odent, quoted in Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989), 160.

the noun irreducible to a homogeneous demarcation, so it may signify both as oral orifice and cervical-vaginal sphincters; the ‘foam’ taken to be ‘no part of myself’ betrays a leakage between matter expelled from the body and linguistic incorporation, a trans-objectal regionality, and, in conjunction with the onomatopoeic ‘gurgling’ – blurring the anatomical and non-anatomical, suggestive of the release of semiotic flows across forms of solidification – intensifies the impression of a ‘descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct’.¹³³ This is a far cry both from the ‘reason and eloquence’ exemplified by the ‘great and wise’ orator that converts people ‘from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk’ in Cicero’s tale of the origins of civil society as part of his defence of the art of rhetoric,¹³⁴ and the sobriety of speech epitomised by Bishop Thomas Sprat’s model ‘natural philosopher’.¹³⁵ It could be said that the opening into this archaic space, ‘where identities (subject/object) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject’¹³⁶ – is, under biomedical dominion, suppressed as a threat to the phallogocentric logic informing its practices. To cite one particularly rank instance of out-and-out objectification and hierarchal dualism, there is the account of an Illinois woman in Henci Goer’s report. Constrained in stirrups, she is repeatedly told by the attendant to ‘Shut up, close your mouth, and push’, and that ‘there is only one voice in this room and it is mine.’¹³⁷ Here, there is scant prospect of accepting ‘delirium’ as an affectively imbued ethical moment eliciting an ‘interpretive humility’,¹³⁸ or as the ‘creation of a health’ that is

¹³³ Megan Becker-Leckrone, *Julia Kristeva and Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 40.

¹³⁴ Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4.

¹³⁵ Richards, *Rhetoric*, 6.

¹³⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 207.

¹³⁷ Goer, “Cruelty in Maternity Wards,” 36.

¹³⁸ Becker-Leckrone, *Kristeva and Literary Theory*, 50.

not consigned to a clinical state;¹³⁹ on the contrary, it is the rigid imposition of unitary, self-identified authority over the (m)other that prevails. Whereas to listen is ‘to stretch the ear’ (tendre l’oreille),¹⁴⁰ these are tyrannical speech-acts allied to the tongs and blade of Tereus, divesting woman’s lips of articulatory faculty; from out of the silent fringe, the midwife is called on to preserve a knowledge – straddling suffering and jouissance – to be ever rewoven into the texture of a discourse in excess of the patriarchal Word.

The gurgling beast and foaming mouth cannot be readily reconciled with the ‘fluttering garments and streaming hair’ of Eugen Wolff’s ‘divine image’ of a woman ‘striding forward’ as the emblem of the ‘modern spirit’.¹⁴¹ It is difficult now to read of ‘the crucified’ and not give consideration to the historically unprecedented butchery and carnage of the first massively technologised conflict that would rage across Europe in the ensuing months and years, rendering the idea of Victorian progress a sanguinary myth. The image bleeds into the incarnation of the ‘rough beast’ that ‘slouches towards Bethlehem to be born’ in Yeats’ “The Second Coming”,¹⁴² composed half a decade later; but as with Yeats’ prognostications – grounded in a cyclical cosmology in which the scientific civilisation that belongs to the outward gyre is intersected by movement of the lunar Dionysian gyre that summons an age marked not only by war, but also ‘art’ and ‘freedom’ – it would be impetuous to reduce your vision to a Christocentric apocalyptic twisted with a dreadful conviction that the redemptive horizon has been crossed out of the revelation. In your lines, the summoning of maternal tenderness is not exterminated,

¹³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Gilles Deleuze: Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁴⁰ Nancy, *Listening*, 5.

¹⁴¹ Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane, *Modernism 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 42.

¹⁴² William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1920), accessed March 3 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172062>

but nor do you allow it to be circumscribed in an idealised arena unadulterated by outrage. If the collective psychosis of war reveals the barbarism in civilisation, the unleashing of the ‘very instincts repressed in the self and body politic by a calculating reason’,¹⁴³ it is incumbent upon each of us to come to a greater consciousness of those subterranean aspects of the psyche associated with that which is socially unacceptable and repulsive to the ego, and work to withdraw the shadow projections. Otherwise, their disturbing effects will be visited, diabolically, on another, or in the case of the birth attendant, on the mother - as disclosed in Robert Lee’s *Three Hundred Consultations in Midwifery*, which, illustrative of the psychopathological forces of 19th century social control, features accounts of terminating the labour of an ‘ungovernable’ woman through a craniotomy, and recommending ‘proper restraint’, ‘shaving the head’, ‘leeches to the temples’, and ‘cathartic medicine’ for a woman ‘suffering from violent mania in the 6th month of pregnancy.’¹⁴⁴ Paradoxically, it is only through resisting such dissociation that we might come closer to realising the significance of Hegel’s claim, inspired by Christ’s crucifixion, that ‘To be outside of myself and in the other – this is love. I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other’.¹⁴⁵

In 1791, Charles White warned that to curb or rub away the secretion of mucus by ‘improper handling’ inhibits the ‘disposition’ of the ‘tender parts’ to ‘yield and stretch’, so that ‘the perineum is apt to be torn’ - which can subject the woman to

¹⁴³ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1982), 162.

¹⁴⁴ Hanson, *Cultural History of Pregnancy*, 63.

¹⁴⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “The First Element: The Idea of God In and For Itself,” in *Hegel: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter Crafts Hodgson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 418.

‘great misery for the rest of her life’.¹⁴⁶ The midwife is called upon to become a sympathetic extension of the ‘wings’ of the vulva, which, as Jane Sharp wrote in 1671, ‘defend the matrix from outward violence’ and also give access to ‘all the joy and delight of Venus’.¹⁴⁷ Kenneth Rexroth’s comment that ‘as one reads of Mina Loy’s babies, one’s sphincter loosens’,¹⁴⁸ is perhaps far more significant and revealing than he would have imagined in 1944. Censuring the hegemonic obstetric tendency to inopportunistically muscle in on the labouring body, Ina May Gaskin has advanced the term ‘Sphincter Law’ - emphasising that the cervical-vaginal muscles ‘don’t obey orders’¹⁴⁹ and open out more readily when the jaw is relaxed. To forego clear-cut human exceptionalism in the processes of birth and elaborate a responsible relation to the ‘wild beast’ that projects of modernity seek to subdue and detain in the ‘iron cage’ is critical for enlarging the possibilities for becoming-other, for a ‘revolt’ through which ‘another community, another body starts to emerge’,¹⁵⁰ through “Parturition”. Tennyson’s belief that progress requires man to ‘move upward, working out the beast / And let the ape and tiger die’¹⁵¹ is called into question, and is defied by Gaskin’s exhortation for the labouring woman to ‘Let [her] monkey do it.’¹⁵² The ‘lascivious revelation’ is inextricably wed to your cohabitation with the abject, the laying bare of the ‘fraudulence of the clean and proper’¹⁵³ as defined by ideologues of civilisation. Considering that restrained erotic

¹⁴⁶ Charles White, *A treatise on the management of pregnant and lying-in women, and the means of curing, but more especially of preventing the principal disorders to which they are liable* (London: C. Dilly, 1811), 121.

¹⁴⁷ Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book: Or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

¹⁴⁸ Kenneth Rexroth, “Les Lauriers Sont Coupés,” in Mina Loy, *Lunar Baedeker & Time-tables: Selected Poems* (Highlands [N.C]: Jonathan Williams, 1958), 12.

¹⁴⁹ Ina May Gaskin, *Birth Matters: A Midwife’s Manifesta* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2011), 31.

¹⁵⁰ Kristeva, “A New Type of Dissident,” 294.

¹⁵¹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 118” (1850), accessed April 28, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174620>

¹⁵² Ina May Gaskin, *Ina May’s Guide to Childbirth* (London: Vermillion, 2008), 243.

¹⁵³ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 194.

activity is the cornerstone of their conception of women's supreme virtue, one dreads to think what the Victorian Social – or should I say sexual – Purity Movement crusaders would have made of your recalcitrance towards consigning woman to an oxymoronic position of 'superior inferiority'. The term 'revelation', with its theological overtones of unveiling through supernatural agency, is itself playfully muddied by an adjective etymologically linked to 'lascivia' - evoking unruly desire. It is almost a century since, as Rexroth put it, you 'dipped [your] pen in the glands of Bartholin'¹⁵⁴ for this poem, fulfilling Whitman's summons for a poetry in which 'sex, womanhood, maternity, desires, lusty animations, organs' are not 'driven to skulk out'¹⁵⁵ of the way; it struck me, following a conversation with Ina May Gaskin, in which, referring to an abiding 'Puritan' streak in North American attitudes to childbirth, she informed me that the U.S publisher of her most recent book *Birth Matters: A Midwife's Manifesta*, resolved to crop a portion of the front cover photograph in order to remove the newborn boy's genitalia, that the 'filthy law'¹⁵⁶ that binds the body to shame is still very much in effect here. To add to the unseemliness of this intervention, a blue hue was applied to the photograph, as though it was necessary to dip it in some marketer's baptismal font.

The threat posed to discrete, unified identity by an image such as 'foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth' has been addressed and amplified in some contemporary verse concerning the maternal body. Speaking of the genealogy of a 'Gurlesque' aesthetic that emerged at the turn of the millennium, Lara Glenum acknowledges Loy on the basis of 'her provocative humour and her interest in the

¹⁵⁴ Rexroth, "Les Lauriers Sont Coupés," 12.

¹⁵⁵ Walt Whitman, "Whitman's Reply to Emerson," 1856, In *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems 1855-1892* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 171.

¹⁵⁶ Whitman, "Reply to Emerson," 171.

female abject'. Her poem "Magnificat",¹⁵⁷ included in the 2007 anthology *Not for Mothers Only*, exemplifies this interest, and runs with it to outlandish extremes.

The speaker's admission ('I was feeling nihilistic & craving a beastie with a body of pearl') – the parentheses suggesting both a certain insouciant matter-of-factness and playful furtiveness – underscores her recalcitrance towards the blocking of erotic excess under discursive regimes that lock the maternal subject into panoptical mechanisms of biomedical and civic regulation. This 'I', parodying the solemn confessional voice, exposes what Glenum elsewhere describes as 'a raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities',¹⁵⁸ which confounds normative measures to represent the generative body as a foetal container, and obfuscates complex psychosexual dynamics. In her essay, "Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces", Rebecca Kukla propounds that the notion of a craving is deeply ingrained in the cultural imagining of pregnancy, which is perceived as fomenting singularly aberrant and intractable appetites. Kukla links this first of all to ancient anxieties concerning the uterus as an independent factor inviting foreign substances across the boundaries of the female body - putatively marked by an especial porosity and susceptibility to the passions, Hippocratic medicine treating it as being 'structured around a *hodos*, which was an open route extending from the orifices of the head to the vagina.'¹⁵⁹ She also points to the contemporary preoccupation with preserving a "pure" uterine space against corrupting influences, reporting that the great majority of 'library subheadings concerning pregnancy are about inappropriate ingestions of various sorts and their effects on the womb',¹⁶⁰ which is tied up with

¹⁵⁷ Lara Glenum, "Magnificat," *Not for Mothers Only*, 409-10.

¹⁵⁸ Lara Glenum, "Theory of the Gurlisque: Burlesque, Girly Kitsch, and the Female Grotesque," in *Gurlisque: The New Grrrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics*, ed. Lara Glenum and Arielle Greenberg (Ardmore, PA: Saturnalia, 2010), 21.

¹⁵⁹ Kukla, "Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces," 283.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

the conversion of the maternal insides into a ‘public theatre and the foetus into its lead actor’.¹⁶¹ Against the recreation of an expectant mother as a medicalised self that coheres around the discipline of recording everything from hourly counts of foetal kicks to weekly weight in predesigned pregnancy organisers, the volatile performance of identity and fractured narrative in ‘Magnificat’ taps into the transgressive power of grotesque corporeality - protruding, secreting, multiplying, ever-morphing, continually creating another body through its merging with the world.¹⁶²

‘I said, *Beastie, I’m going wacko with all the hatching / I said, Beastie, I’m gonzo / to straddle your cancers*’. Such a fantastical and wilfully puerile style explodes with relish the fantasy of the ‘monumental, closed, static’ classical body aligned with the high-bourgeois aesthetic,¹⁶³ staging a maniacal subversion of a voyeuristic male gaze thrust upon passive female beauty, as well as implicitly deriding the takeover of the maternal imagination by, to cite Rosi Braidotti, advanced technological forms of ‘medical pornography’ that delimit the body as ‘a visual surface of changeable parts, offered as exchange objects’.¹⁶⁴ The unrestrained detonative ‘hatching’, the doctor’s ‘metal finger’, the ‘pounding’ against the ‘orchid-machines’ – such images evince thoughts of the brutal manipulations of the female body in the milieu of new reproductive technologies, which, as Nancy Lublin notes, has been steeped in discourses that reduce woman to ‘fields to be harvested for eggs’, the male clinician on the hunt for the prestige of a high baby-production rate,

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 286.

¹⁶² Glenum begins her ‘Notes on Women and the Grotesque’ with the statement: ‘If I am a woman, my speech is colonized by eggs and tubes, I bulge with fetuses or fat, with meaty slops, my multiple orifices clamoring. I leak corrosive fluids. My body is labeled a grotesque body, what Bakhtin calls, “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”’ *ActionYes Online Quarterly* 1, 12 (2010), [<http://www.actionyes.org/issue5/excess/glenum/glenum1.html>]

¹⁶³ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

¹⁶⁴ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 68.

while the woman that struggles to conceive is diagnosed with ‘*hostile cervical mucus*’.¹⁶⁵

Historically, the line of demarcation between the pornographic and the scientific has been unclear, as attested to by the abundance of life-sized wax models of pregnant women, assuming the prototypical sexualised pose, on display in eighteenth century London showrooms, and the sizable market for ivory figurines of anatomical Venuses ‘with removal abdomens and organs’ that were ‘sold as private tabletop spectacles’, some languishing ‘with legs open, granting the viewer the sight of their meticulously carved labia.’¹⁶⁶ It is telling, then, that the biotechnical spectacle operates to eliminate women’s lived visceral and fleshy experience, along with ‘the horror and fascination of difference’,¹⁶⁷ from processes of maternity. Glenum’s speaker reanimates a creaturely force field that shatters the frame of the Cartesian theatre, which posits an ocular-centric immaterial homunculus viewing an integrated display of somatosensory information, and directing rule-bound orders to the body - which then acts accordingly. She also plays on the connotations of ‘gonzo’. The over-the-top luridness, tossing out of storyline, and the close-up taken to an inordinate level, could be seen as mocking the gonzo style of pornography that tends to throw the viewer into the action from the male first-person point-of-view. But on top of that, recognising the gurlisque’s dedication to performance and experimentation with alien, hybrid sexes, is it too far-fetched to suggest that ‘Gonzo the Great’ from *The Muppets* has a hand in the poem, that iconoclast who famously

¹⁶⁵ Nancy Lublin, *Pandora’s Box: Feminism Confronts Reproductive Technology* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 65.

¹⁶⁶ Marcia D. Nichols, ‘Venus Dissected: The Visual Blazon of Mid-Eighteenth-Century Medical Atlases,’ in *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Jolene Zigarovich (New York & London: Routledge, 2013), 117.

¹⁶⁷ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 91.

ventured to defuse a highly explosive bomb while simultaneously reciting from the works of Percy Shelley? The word ‘Piggie’ is mentioned, after all.

The cluster of sibilants and labiodental fricatives in the first line (‘The eye-veins in that very cinematic season’) is abruptly offset by the hard consonants of ‘purpled and bulged’, the pronounced sonic-tonal transition – the opening teasing towards atmospheric scene-setting controlled by a distancing and controlling gaze, but taking in the interruptive aspect of irritated distended conjunctiva and morbid intransitive activity – is part of an initiatory announcement to the reader that acute alertness to the refractory character of corporeal subjectification is required. The advertising label for Studio Glenum’s Oscar season campaign could read: for your consideration - a superlative anti-feel-good movie. If you’re looking for a ‘species-reaction’, the ‘Awww response’¹⁶⁸ triggered by seeing a new baby, you’ll find that it’s short-circuited here. Sonic elements of ‘Purpled’ and ‘bulged’ are picked up in ‘spilled slop’ and ‘body of pearl’ - which inaugurates the tearing apart of sacred motifs; the ‘beastie with a body of pearl’, examined alongside the poem title and the parenthetical conclusion of the third stanza (‘the mercury in the beastie’s cock beading off / into paradise’), signals an unabashedly impious approach to religious allusion. There’s a riotous twist on Christ’s admonition against casting pearls before the swine, the treasure aligned with receiving the Kingdom of Heaven juxtaposed with a sexual orifice discharging a substance that denotes pig food and semiliquid household refuse, the lake of pearls created by Adam and Eve’s tears in ancient Ceylon legend running into a mudhole. Rather than evoking the seven-headed sea monster of the Apocalypse that blasphemes against God, ‘beastie’ suggests a diminutive animal looked upon with comic fright or jocular fondness, and

¹⁶⁸ Katz, “Baby Poetics.”

considering the Gurllesque's taste for arch borrowings from pop culture, the Beastie Boys slip in there too, apt considering their iconic reputation for ribald frat-boy swagger. It's notable that pearls are produced through the protective secretions of a mollusc in response to the invasion of a foreign object into its soft tissue, as it's far from straightforward to distinguish the boundaries between torment and creation in the poem. Indeed, by the time we reach the lines, '& the doctor suctioned all the wacko hatchlings out / with his metal finger', it's difficult to avoid reading the poem as an account of surgical abortion: the dilation of the cervix and evacuation of the contents of the uterus through a vacuum aspirator. That being said, it would be brash to pass over the protean, ambiguous goings-on by inferring that the poem is *about* the pre-emptive termination of life: 'The mouth fell open', and the ensuing metamorphic transactions foil gestures towards semantic closure.

Glenum's handling of the homonymic and polysemic potential of certain words augments her despoliation of theological ritual. 'Beadings', with its assonantal echoes of 'beastie', cleaves together a slang term for pre-ejaculate and an evocation of rosary beads. Devotion to the Rosary has long been upheld as an integral component of Catholic spirituality, a string of Saints and Popes stressing the purity of intention required for the recitation of prayers concerning the Mysteries, meditative focus aided by the movement of the fingers along the beads. The 'Hail Marys' are said to furnish the central means for participation in the life of Mary, yet she is ultimately positioned as an intermediary: they set out a pathway from the faithful to the mother, through the mother to Christ, and through Christ to the Father. This poem marks a radical departure from "The Magnificat" taken from Luke's Gospel - the Virgin's hymn of consent with respect to becoming the Mother of God upon her Visitation to Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist, which

informs the second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. At variance with the image of a lowly handmaid to the Lord, glorifying in His work, Glenum's speaker refuses to reproduce the Christian representation of the impeccable – and therefore inaccessible – feminine ideal, reinstating with magnified intensity the carnal qualities of maternal experience that the Marian myth censors.

In order to combat a vision that makes the elevation of the mother contingent on her subservience to the androcentric line, Glenum deploys a number of arresting rhetorical strategies bound up with a strong parodic impulse. Structurally, the poem repeatedly motions towards a staple characteristic of Hebrew psalmody: parallel construction. Examples include: 'I said, *Beastie, I'm going wacko...*' / 'I said, *Beastie, I'm gonzo...*' 'that very cinematic season...' / 'the eye of the season...' 'kaboom kaboom...' / 'extracting extracting...' 'I was dripping porkfat into the cunt-void...' / 'my ghostmeat dripping horse teeth into the void...' The last example features audacious epithetic compounds that generate an extreme conflation of fleshy materiality and the ineffable. The animating breath of the Spirit meets animalistic revolt, and the haunted, if not possessed, subject-in-process responds to the repetitive threats of abjection not by projecting herself upward from horror towards the sublime heights and replicating the prohibition of the maternal body under the transcendent appeals of religion and law, but by descending towards the emptiness at the root of psyche and the fragile limits of the speaking being ('I couldn't speak'), perverting symbolic meaning via the influx of semiotic motility and jouissance in an 'indefinite catharsis'.¹⁶⁹

At times, it feels as though the poem is trenchantly acting out a monstrous elaboration and travesty of the psychoanalytic figuring of the normal female as

¹⁶⁹ Kristeva *Powers of Horror*, 208.

one who is expected to emerge out of the pre-oedipal phase of ‘clitoral eroticism’ into a desire for ‘passive-masochistic gratifications’¹⁷⁰ - her active sexuality sacrificed in the service of an unquestioning maternal tenderness. Especially when considering the references to the ejection of sebaceous matter and small hairy masses, the image of ‘teeth’ is suggestive of ovarian cystic teratoma (which means ‘monstrous growth’ in Greek). However, it mainly evokes the vagina dentata motif prominent in Native American and Indian legend, but found in the creation stories of various other cultures – setting forth the necessity for the hero or first men in the world to break the teeth of the primordial mother or wives’ vaginas in order to tame them and propagate – and later associated with the Freudian concept of castration anxiety. The poem registers the vagina – etymologically, a sheath or scabbard for thrusting in a weapon – as a locus of patriarchal control, violence, and mutilation; the reclaiming of the term ‘cunt’ could be considered in terms of fierce resistance to coy, mawkish or medical euphemism, a signifier for a bold, multidimensional female sexual response that accommodates the vulva, clitoris, labia and internal pelvic structures. Glenum’s speaker’s holds out against the reduction of her sexual equipment to the passageway for the supply of commodified labour power. Her penchant for outrageous hyperbole carries significant critical energy. Consider the lines, ‘*I am a turbine column of eighteen breasts*’, and ‘*The milky explosions made cataracts of glazed pigs / in the doctor’s throat*’. Firstly, such immense distortions of sensory perception confound the patriarchal-capitalist bent for naturalising mammary glands as fetishized objects disconnected from useful and productive processes whilst at the same time pressurising women to shrink themselves and occupy less space (as Laurie Penny writes, ‘the triumph of self-starvation represents a major

¹⁷⁰ Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 114.

defeat for feminism in the West.’¹⁷¹) Furthermore, they shatter the image of the Virgin Mother, meek and mild, that, as Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests in her discussion of Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater”, has long afforded ‘a sublimation of the woman’s murderous or devouring desires through the valorisation of her breast (the infant Jesus suckling).’¹⁷²

The effort to cultivate an exemption from confronting forces of abjection and to ward off phenomena that a society has systematically associated with dirt – as ‘disorder’ and ‘matter out of place’¹⁷³ – has generated grave consequences and implications where birth attendance is concerned. Whether we reflect on the Church Fathers in Middle Ages Europe, prohibiting males from being present during labour and admonishing midwives to treat the baptism of infants, rather than the wellbeing of mothers, as their foremost duty, or the incursions of American obstetric specialisation in the 19th century, the attempt to align midwifery with uncleanness is a recurrent theme. From the Book of Leviticus to the manuals of early modern etiquette authors, women’s reproductive secretions have been viewed as particularly defiling, and the conviction that, as Horatio Storer put it, their ‘periodical infirmity... unfits them for any responsible effort of mind,’¹⁷⁴ formed a basic component of rationales undergirding the male takeover of childbirth in 19th century America. The growth of medical education in obstetrics did not equate to a deepened appreciation of the workings of the maternal body. Let’s consider three immensely influential physicians of this period: William P Dewees, author of the *Compendious System of Midwifery* that passed through a dozen editions, ‘remained horrified by the idea of

¹⁷¹ Laurie Penny, *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism* (London: Zero Books, 2011), 23.

¹⁷² Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” 127.

¹⁷³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Routledge, 2002), 50.

¹⁷⁴ Richard W. Wertz and Dorothy C. Wertz, *Lying-in: A History of Childbirth in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 57.

ocular inspection' and taught his students to perform unsighted examinations and operations on manikins. These students would thus go into birthing rooms 'armed with only theoretical knowledge'.¹⁷⁵ Thomas Denman proposed that, owing to the 'retention of the menses', pregnancy gave rise to a morbid 'plethoric' condition.¹⁷⁶ Complaints ranging from vertigo and cramps to complications such as haemorrhage were commonly treated by bloodletting until it was demonstrated around mid-century that gestation is actually accompanied by a decreased volume of red blood cells.¹⁷⁷ Charles D. Meigs refused to believe that puerperal fever could be caused by 'cadaveric particles' transferred from dissecting room to the parturient woman's genital tract via the physician's hands:¹⁷⁸ 'Doctors are gentlemen, and gentlemen's hands are clean'¹⁷⁹ he proclaimed, washing his hands of the situation. Ignaz Semmelweis and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., whose investigations evidencing the necessity of disinfecting the hands invalidated this image, were shunned by the medical establishment of the time, the former figure, now known as the 'saviour of mothers', driven to despair and death in an insane asylum. Semmelweis had observed that women giving birth in the First Clinic at the Vienna General Hospital had a higher mortality rate than impoverished women giving birth on the streets of the city. In the month before a hand-washing policy was instituted at this clinic in May of 1847, he recorded that 57 out of 312 mothers died from the contagion; to draw a comparison, rural Maine midwife Martha Ballard served at almost a thousand homebirths between 1778 and 1812, encountering no maternal deaths during labour,

¹⁷⁵ Judith Walzer Leavitt, " 'Science' Enters the Birthing Room: Obstetrics in America since the Eighteenth Century," in *Childbirth: Changing Ideas in Britain and America 1600 to the Present*, ed. Philip K. Wilson (New York: Garland, 1996), 235.

¹⁷⁶ A. Clair Siddal, "Bloodletting in American Obstetric Practice, 1800-1945," in Wilson, *Childbirth: Changing Ideas*, 347.

¹⁷⁷ Siddal, "Bloodletting," 349.

¹⁷⁸ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 154.

¹⁷⁹ Wertz and Wertz, *Lying-in*, 122.

and only five during the lying-in period.¹⁸⁰ Hundreds of thousands of mothers would succumb to the epidemic in lying-in hospitals during the 18th and 19th centuries, where precautionary routines – including shaving, douching, and painting the patient from her breasts to her knees with orange iodine, rupturing the amniotic membrane and utilising forceps to hasten delivery – only increased the likelihood of contamination. As Wertz writes: ‘The irony that hospitals had to undertake more antiseptic and aseptical routines because they were bacterially “dirtier” and more likely to be a reservoir for hardy strains of resistant bacteria than a home only gradually became apparent to doctors. The “safe” hospital was the product of extremely vigilant and ritualised manipulations and interventions.’¹⁸¹

In “Parturition”, cognition is committed to touching that which biomedical regimes, motored by a superstitious worship of high-tech standardisation, balk at acknowledging: the primordial intertwining of birth and death:

Have I not
Somewhere
Scrutinised
A dead white feathered moth
Laying eggs?

While this supervening of raw materiality upon the mentality following the arrival of the newborn might initially occasion a discomposure bordering on horror, your intimation of ‘the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from

¹⁸⁰ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “ ‘The Living Mother of a Living Child’: Midwifery and Mortality in Post-Revolutionary New England,” in *Childbirth: Midwifery Theory and Practice*, ed. Philip K. Wilson (New York: Garland, 1996), 213.

¹⁸¹ Wertz and Wertz, *Lying-in*, 138.

another body in order to be'¹⁸² might not be considered infelicitous if approached in conjunction with midwife Penfield Chester's determination to 'face the shadowy side of midwifery, of death being the soul sister to birth.'¹⁸³ Chester went so far as to undertake voluntary hospice training in order to find a way to withstand the 'power of fear as it threatened to choke the power of love.'¹⁸⁴ With reference to the "MANA Statement of Values and Ethics", it is arguably only through focusing on the value of 'supporting life rather than avoiding death' and the 'relationship to a process larger than ourselves,'¹⁸⁵ that the birthing woman can be furnished a 'somewhere' for mourning the break with a former organisation of selfhood. The commingling of purity and decomposition in this image, and the feeling for – between identification with and deformation from – the 'moth' that forms a part of 'mother', 'moth-er' the designation for one who watches moths, initiates a metamorphic flight consonant with a productive 'dissolution of narcissistic fixations'.¹⁸⁶ In addition, the association of critical examination with trash and frippery carried by 'scrutinised' makes it a choice term for verse marked by a close attentiveness towards 'subliminal deposits' dislodged from a site that is not cast as merely a festering dumping ground for impulses unacceptable to consciousness. The 'difficult / matter'¹⁸⁷ of loss is not rendered immaterial in "Parturition". I think of lines from a couple of J.H. Prynne poems: 'So that the dead are a necessity to us, / keeping our interest from being too much about birth',¹⁸⁸ and 'Rubbish is / pertinent; essential; the / most intricate presence in / our entire culture.'¹⁸⁹ Such positions

¹⁸² Kristeva *Powers of Horror*, 10.

¹⁸³ Chester, *Sisters on a Journey*, 5.

¹⁸⁴ Chester, *Sisters on a Journey*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Chester, *Sisters on a Journey*, 281.

¹⁸⁶ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 234.

¹⁸⁷ J.H. Prynne, "The Numbers," in *Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 10.

¹⁸⁸ J.H. Prynne, "A Gold Ring Called Reluctance," in *Poems*, 21.

¹⁸⁹ J.H. Prynne, "L'Extase de M. Poher," in *Poems*, 161.

counteract the mystification of growth and obsolescence, fabrication of the new, and ignorance concerning waste under the homogenising logic of capitalist exchange-value. They gesture towards the ‘lie of the away’ that high-octane consumer consciousness, in its gross discarding of resources, is implicated in. Beneath the idyllic park is a landfill! With your verse, recourse to mushy emotion and overweening Romanticist metaphor is rejected, and even where there exists an explicit invocation of the perceived autonomy of the subconscious, it has more in common with the Objectivist quality of concrete perception mixed with attention to the construction of thought processes than the inward retreat into hermetic aestheticism exemplified by French Symbolists such as Mallarmé and Valéry. Your refusal to disengage from the ‘work of sublimation’¹⁹⁰ as a response to the trauma of finitude reaches an acme in the stanza that begins as follows:

Rises from the sub-conscious
Impression of small animal carcass
Covered with blue-bottles
— Epicurean —

With stripped-back directness, this fragment marks a reminder of processes that are habitually expelled through simplification into the categories of the foul and worthless. Not obviously a garden of delights, but an evocation of sensuous vivacity nonetheless, which, one could expect, T.S. Eliot’s ascetic temperament would find mightily distasteful. Is it not your immersion in the abject that makes possible, not artistic purification, but contact with a cure – embedded and suspended in

¹⁹⁰ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London, Verso, 2007), 68.

‘Epicurean’ – consisting in a release from the grip of repressive discursive regimes of purity? The imprint of this paradoxical tension may partly account for William Carlos Williams’s verdict in 1958: ‘When [Loy] puts a word down on paper it is clean; that forces her fellows to shy away from it because they are not clean and will be contaminated by her cleanliness... It has hurt her chances of being known.’¹⁹¹ Needless to say, if those advertising campaigners at The Cleanliness Institute, who were so intent on tapping into ‘women’s worst fears of giving offence’¹⁹² in the decades immediately following the composition of “Parturition”, happened also to be custodians of poetic decorum, they would no doubt be insistently prescribing a thorough ‘soap-scrub’ regimen to redress the lack of ‘loveliness’¹⁹³ in your linguistic complexion. And if the managing director at Listerine were also a literateur, he would surely urge you to recognise that you can’t be ‘on the acceptable side’¹⁹⁴ with such bad odours emanating from that stretched open mouth. In the early twentieth century, generations of women’s accumulated knowledge concerning dealings with dirt were overridden by the message that, to keep a respectable and safe household, mother must turn to the cleaning manufacturers. Shit Mina! To achieve the ‘peace of mind, comfort, and immaculacy’ of the ‘better class’ of women¹⁹⁵, a strong repellent and deodoriser would be required to extinguish what’s flying and buzzing around your psyche!

In “Parturition”, these insects do not arise to plague the senses as a symbol of existence’s ephemerality; the interjection ‘Epicurean’ – there’s some pleasure to be found in the way the transition from the short vowels to diphthongs and plosives

¹⁹¹ William Carlos Williams, “Mina Loy,” in *Lunar Baedeker*, 9.

¹⁹² Suellen M. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

gliding into soft liquid and nasal sonorants – seems apposite for a poem that unfolds an epistemological refusal to cover over the presence of sensations through refulgent idealism or mathematical reasoning, the juxtapositions in the stanza effecting a break from simplistic-anthropocentric conceptions of hedonism, eliciting a discharge of ‘elemental qualities’¹⁹⁶ out of the ‘encrusted connotations’¹⁹⁷ of the word, so it might be found ‘clean’¹⁹⁸ again. Epicurus’s materialist maxim that ‘so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist’¹⁹⁹ resounds somewhat with the propositions put forth in a poem you composed shortly before “Parturition”: ‘There is no Life or Death, / Only activity... / There is no Space or Time / Only intensity, / and tame things / Have no immensity’.²⁰⁰ If we agree with Deleuze that ‘it’s organisms that die, not life’²⁰¹ this should not translate into an injunction to suppress or underplay the incomprehensible magnitude of emotional devastation that the ‘dispersion of atoms whose temporary arrangement constituted’²⁰² a human body leaves in its wake or licence a quietist disregard towards the question of how one might live - evaluating ‘what we do, say, and think according to the immanent mode of existence that it implies.’²⁰³ It is worth noting that, almost contemporaneous with the publication of “Parturition”, Freud delivered the lecture later published as “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death”, since both, albeit in varying ways, attempt to examine the implications of the ‘cultural-conventional attitude’ that enacts a refusal ‘to give death the place in reality... which

¹⁹⁶ David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1989), 265.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁹⁹ Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines,” accessed May 2, 2014, <http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/PD.html>

²⁰⁰ Mina Loy, “There is No Life or Death,” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 3.

²⁰¹ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 143, quoted in John Marks, *Gilles Deleuze: Vitalism and Multiplicity* (London: Pluto, 1998), 29.

²⁰² Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (London: Penguin, 1999), 22.

²⁰³ Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia* 2 (2007): 67, http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia02/parrhesia02_smith.pdf

is its due.²⁰⁴ In the assemblage of ‘the sub-conscious’, ‘small animal carcass’ and ‘blue-bottles’ – the phoneme /s/ ending each line accentuating the intermeshing of different agencies – we find expression of a pre-personal animating force that breaks down perfunctory anthropocentric judgements functioning to block a movement away from the ‘closed image of man’²⁰⁵ - which would make little of the part these Calliphora play in the global carbon cycle, in the transportation of pollen and the recycling of nutrients. This is poetic language as a process of exchange with the materiality of the world - which procedures mandated by the dominant model of literature are wont to brush aside.

On that note, let’s assess Hugh MacDiarmid’s piece “Lo! A Child is Born”.²⁰⁶ One can locate it in *The Virago Book of Birth Poetry*, in spite of the birthing woman being tritely allegorised and essentialised, the singularities and intensities she would otherwise be traversing and being traversed by effaced under a monolithic appeal for world revolution - absonant, it must be said, to Deleuze’s proposal that health, as writing, involves the ‘collective enunciation’ of a minor people ‘taken up in a becoming-revolutionary’.²⁰⁷ Deleuze’s call for the invocation of this people who are missing – ‘I am a beast, a Negro of the inferior race for all eternity’²⁰⁸ – is much more of a piece with the drift of that line in “Parturition”: ‘For consciousness in crises races’, which turns into a micropolitical movement between the ‘I’ and the forces of the earth. The speaker of “Lo! A Child is Born” might bewail ‘a monstrous din of the sterile who contribute nothing / To the great end in view’, but the rhetoric of detached reportage, swathed in a combination

²⁰⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Reflections on War and Death” (1915), accessed 15 May 2014, <http://www.bartleby.com/282/2.html>

²⁰⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2001), 139.

²⁰⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, “Lo! A Child is Born,” in *The Virago Book of Birth Poetry*, ed. Charlotte Otten (London: Virago, 1993), 100.

²⁰⁷ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.

²⁰⁸ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.

of glib didacticism, rehearsed portentousness, and facile pathos, and the apparent aversion towards experimentation through ‘styles of perception’²⁰⁹ that would register as malformed and disruptive to majoritarian standards of creative expression, deprive such a moment of ethical value and pre-empt political action. The speaker might grant that ‘Only the mother had the right to groan or complain’, but this does not leave him immune to being seized by *ressentiment*, and though he remarks ‘the walls were full of ears’, his ears seem to be walled in by generalities that suppress the non-identical. The insipidity of the preceding construction, ‘Then I thought of the whole world. Who cares for its travail / And seeks to encompass it in like lovingkindness and peace?’ is symptomatic of an insensibility in relation to the anarchic multiplicity that combats the self-enclosure of thinking and the stability of the sovereign ‘I’ seeking to act in the name of a universalising telos. Inner speech is here passed off as crystalline in its presentation to consciousness,²¹⁰ with no implication of a movement ‘among’ the things of the world, and a tacit assumption that, through authorial control, poetic communication can be absolved from working through and against the torrent of instrumental discourses. This is only the pretence of ‘language-washing’; it is the poem as pomatum melting into the scalp, or a shovel full of perfume pellets. To imagine art is or ought to be isolated in a purportedly ‘humanising’ sphere free and clear of the influence of the sciences woefully constrains its pedagogical potential. Ponderous similes and personifications further anaesthetise against somatic-affective flows, from ‘hope as solid as’ the stones of a house and ‘Dropping into the world like a ripe fruit in due time’ to ‘... Time, smiling through her tears / At her new-born son.’ The space of the abject is hardly explored in this work, occupied as it is by standardised strategies of signification. Veiling

²⁰⁹ Colebrook, *Deleuze*, 143.

²¹⁰ Riley, “‘A Voice without a Mouth’: Inner Speech,” 20.

corporeal porosity, MacDiarmid's 'strategic mind' would have us sold into buying lines of poetry as though it were linen whose appeal to personal refinement and fashion is dependent on us caring naught for the import of putrefaction in the labour-intensive production of actual linen, paying no mind to the rotting, beating, and combing of the verbal flax as a precondition for the release of moral fibres from a stiff shell. The dignity that emerges through "Parturition" is connected to an industrious acquaintance with, and negotiation of verbal decay. In "Lo! A Child is Born", the child may be described as 'present[ing] himself to life' in the 'lovely heat' of a 'gracious home', but the speaker himself could be viewed as being complicit in a 'bad birth', for his air of inhospitality towards inter-relational embodied processes is somewhat analogous to a clinical takeover of and splitting off from the maternal orifices that would allow the newborn's respiratory and digestive tract to be 'contaminated by a great variety of friendly germs'²¹¹ significant for future good health. The atmosphere of "Parturition", in contrast, is not pervaded by the sort of aggressive sterile odour often associated with a recently cleaned modern maternity unit, which would only undermine the newborn's inbuilt hormonal preparedness to 'recognise the olfactory signature'²¹² of her or his mother and locate the nipple.

In the MacDiarmid piece, the passage of ontological arche into ethics is clotted by the self-possessed and self-possessive voice taking measure of the phenomenal world without the anticoagulating intromission of a trace - of the anarchic trace. You, on the other hand, could be said to encounter unforeseen subjective modulations through tactile proximity 'with' that which is ever-born, 'nascitura' pulsating before and beyond conceptual encrustations.

²¹¹ Michel Odent, *The Caesarean* (London: Free Association, 2004), 59.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

Agglomeration of activities
Of a life.
LIFE
A leap with nature
Into the essence
Of unpredicted Maternity
Against my thigh
Touch of infinitesimal motion
Scarcely perceptible
Undulation
Warmth moisture
Stir of incipient life

The anadiplosis and the suspension mark – one of only two full stops in the poem, the second inserted in the final line – between ‘a life’ and ‘LIFE’ – gives extra stress to the pause that summons a deliberation on the connotations of a noun that has grown ultra-polymorphous in the twentieth century. Not only has the term undergone dilution by colloquial appropriation (‘hey, that’s life’) historically, its meaning has been delimited by two thousand years of ecclesiastical dogma, as something partaken in only by those who believe in Christ – in John 11:25, He proclaims ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ – and by a technical designation that reduces it to ‘stages of chromosomal organisation, coded genetic information, or the morphology of tissues whose existence can be verified under laboratory

conditions'²¹³ in accordance with the discourse of modern science. Engaging 'LIFE' as the vital principle that continuously works through and exceeds the individual organism, you generate a resistance to its conversion to either form of idolatry. The friction between 'a life' and 'LIFE' also prompts me to consider Theodor Adorno's confrontation with a lacuna in Nietzsche's contention that modern culture denies 'life'; Adorno raises the problem of affirming 'life' as 'something apart from the life of a culture or society and its possibilities',²¹⁴ and that given the extremely reified condition of relations under capitalism, to do so would be to perniciously affirm a 'life which does not live'.²¹⁵ This being the case, Adorno is also reproachful towards for what he apprehends as an absence of contradiction in Bergson's search for the nonconceptual: 'The dialectical salt was washed away in an undifferentiated tide of life', and so Bergson fostered 'a cult of irrational immediacy, of sovereign freedom in the midst of unfreedom.'²¹⁶ Your struggle to cognise life, though vulnerable to similar criticisms, is not devoid of the ethical expenditure and aesthetic reflexivity that is necessary to challenge identity logic and classificatory thinking. There is not here a sense of you consigning life to mere self-preservation, and, ergo, shoring up that process in which laws determining the exchange of commodities congeal into natural laws. And I can imagine that you too might be provoked into saying a 'NO to life' if in 1991 you happened to read of cardinals gathering in Rome to put together a 'declaration for the protection of human life' calling on 'government to use secular power against millions of women allegedly intent on extinguishing

²¹³ Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 100.

²¹⁴ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor Adorno* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 25.

²¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 271.

²¹⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 8.

lives'.²¹⁷ You too might reflect on Adorno's claim that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly'²¹⁸ if, also in 1991, you came across a car advertisement in *Harper's Magazine* featuring an obstetric sonogram as its central focus, along with the caption 'IS SOMETHING INSIDE TELLING YOU TO BUY A VOLVO?' In this instance, the mother's ethical agency is displaced and her aliveness annulled through the suggestion that responsibility is synonymous with following through a presupposition that 'life' begins within a perilous 'maternal environment' and that the voice of the unborn itself, selfhood already present, urges her to become enfolded within techno-consumer apparatus that would assure its safety.²¹⁹

Though the child may have been born, your inchoate sense of impregnation by larger evolutionary currents persists, and this 'swelling' of the past, of experience 'rolling upon itself'²²⁰ – an 'agglomeration' in perpetual change – is what precipitates the expression of 'invisible bonds'²²¹ that connect you to more-than-human entities. In his theory of poetry, William Carlos Williams would demand a redress of the disparity between writing and living, emphasising that just as you 'cannot live after a prearranged pattern',²²² you 'cannot know where the poem may be going as you compose it'.²²³ He would also propose that that there exists an 'optimum' motion that challenges the credence granted to either the supposition that 'the mind moves in a logical sequence to a definite end which is its goal, or it will embrace movement without goal other than movement itself for an end and hail

²¹⁷ Duden, *Disembodying Women*, 3.

²¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 38.

²¹⁹ Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2007), 83.

²²⁰ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 2.

²²¹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 43.

²²² William Carlos Williams, *The Descent of Winter* (1928), quoted in Perkins, *History of Modern Poetry*, 265.

²²³ Perkins, *History of Modern Poetry*, 265.

“transition” only as supreme.’²²⁴ In the sympathetic transfusion of the ‘natura naturans’ through your openness to this flow, the workings of your poem summon an ongoing alertness to ‘alternatives, contrary impulses, and new directions that are possible’,²²⁵ a faculty that the midwife must exercise through holding the space in a way that does not delimit a new labour by locking the parturient into pre-existing representations. For instance, the midwife supports instinctively-driven positional adjustments that work to prevent high grade perineal tearing, as opposed to following the routine episiotomy exponents of the 1930s, who preordained that birth fundamentally involves a choice between ‘the greater wisdom of incision which is sharp and clean and allows for approximation of suturing’²²⁶ or ‘a jagged irregular lacerated wound’.²²⁷

The assemblage of ‘thigh’ and ‘touch of infinitesimal motion’ evokes the paradoxical aspect of the enlarged awareness of creation being born of a subtle sensuous contact that doesn’t correspond as ‘simple visual perception to an unvarying external object’.²²⁸ It should not be forgotten that even in modern electron microscopy there is no “pure” image of a specimen, and that we do not ‘see through the microscope, we see with one’,²²⁹ an observation liable to be lost on the techno-optical fetishist. In its sensitivity to pressure and texture, touch can only be imitated by vision, and it is the first sensory modality to emerge in the gestation of the embryo, prior to the distal systems and the other proximal apparatus; in utero, tactility is inextricable from the rhythms of the mother’s voice.²³⁰ Your ‘leap with’ necessarily involves a revived receptivity to this most elemental, and necessary, of

²²⁴ William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 350.

²²⁵ Perkins, *History of Modern Poetry*, 266.

²²⁶ John E. Tritsch, 1930, quoted in Graham, *Episiotomy*, 53.

²²⁷ Willard Cooke, 1937, quoted in Graham, *Episiotomy*, 53.

²²⁸ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 2.

²²⁹ McGrath, *Seeing Her Sex*, 163.

²³⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 99.

faculties, reminding us that subjectivity always already relies on, and owes its origins to, the body of another. This is no Stoical drawing back from corporeal externality into a frame of mind that is solely ‘in touch’ with itself, an insubstantial avowal of non-slavery.²³¹ Furthermore, the aspect of freedom here does not correspond to Marx’s humanist concept of self-determination and rational mastery over the things of the world. The speciousness of this reasoning in Marx, who regarded it ‘the height of infamy to regard man as an animal’,²³² can be pinpointed by the fact that the alignment of dignity with a subject creating independently within his own circle, and premising of a universal human essence abstracted from nature, overlook how ‘the production of an effect, the occurrence of change, needs more than a single, preceding cause. It requires causal action, and the cause cannot act on itself.’²³³ This ‘undulating life-stir’ is transferred into the pressure that unleashes the visualisations of the ‘cat / With blind kittens / Among her legs’ and the ‘small animal carcass / Covered with blue-bottles’, manifesting how intuition is ‘compelled’ to ‘turn to the most concrete ideas, still surrounded by a “fringe” of imagery’²³⁴ to convey its focus. If midwifery taps into a kind of productive disinterest in terms of breaking down tendencies towards programmatic control, it also facilitates the admission of ‘signals too subtle to be perceived by the conscious mind’, surfacing in what Ina May Gaskin calls ‘intuitive flashes’,²³⁵ supported by birth mantras: ‘I am the centre... I am the false quantity... I am climbing... I am absorbed... Rises from

²³¹ Peter Singer, *Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 62.

²³² Karl Marx, *Remarks on the Most Recent Prussian Instructions to Censors* (1842), quoted in Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 28.

²³³ Kamenka, *Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, 97.

²³⁴ A.E. Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influence: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 190.

²³⁵ Ina May Gaskin, “Intuition and the Emergence of Midwifery as Authoritative Knowledge,” 1996, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.brown.uk.com/birth/gaskin.pdf>

the subconscious... I am that cat... Rises from the sub-conscious... I am knowing...'

In the period immediately preceding the 'beginnings' of "Parturition", the 'wild irises, tulips and tuberose'²³⁶ that betokened the arrival of spring in Florence did little to replenish your debilitated state, but the same cannot be said for the analeptic effects of re-visiting your intimate friend Mabel Dodge's letters and the memory of your talks at Vuilla Coronia, before she relocated to New York. Considering Mabel's 'ability to listen',²³⁷ the import of her concept of the 'superconsciousness', which you embraced as a curative for the lack of accommodation towards 'evolving creative inspiration'²³⁸ in Freud's model of the subconscious, and your shared interest in the vitalism of Henri Bergson, one could appreciate her as a figure taking on certain psychosocial attributes of a midwife. Of course, your revivification was also assisted through exposure to Marinetti and Futurism, but in this case you were also driven to countervail his blazing Zeus-like extraction of birth as a deliverance from the mortal womb of woman. Against the myth of Dionysus gestating within and being born out of the paternal body, it is the affectivity across your 'thigh' that is sewn into this poem, the 'twice-born' element remaining in close connection with, rather than supplanting, maternal power. While the hyper-interventionist birth 'technician' would impose a vertically stratified organisation of thought upon the maternal body in order to contain the 'undulation of living / Death / Life', you are 'acutely... / absorbed / Into / The was – is – ever – shall – be / Of cosmic reproductivity' through an art of sensation that resonates with

²³⁶ Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1996), 143.

²³⁷ Burke, *Becoming Modern*, 143.

²³⁸ Burke, *Becoming Modern*, 144.

Elizabeth Grosz's account of rhythm - the possibility of which is constituted by vibratory difference:

What else is both labile enough and appealing enough to slip from its material to its most immaterial effects, from the energy of the universe to the muscular oscillations that constitute pleasure and pain in living things? What else enables the body itself, the internal arrangement of its organs and their hollows, to become instruments of sonorous expression?²³⁹

If the parole in libertà of Italian Futurism rendered the adverb itself verboten, 'acutely' might be pointedly troublesome to Mafarka's appeal to the 'absolute, definitive power of the will',²⁴⁰ for 'acute' is cognate to 'ague', the sense of cunning penetrating intelligence jostling with the expression of impetuous physiological disorder. Mafarka's gleeful response to 'giving birth... free of all the blemishes that come from the inefficient vulva and bias us to old age and death',²⁴¹ and his proclamation to Coloubbi, 'I won't allow you to see my son! He is mine alone? It is I who made his body',²⁴² illustrates, in extremis, the masculinist-ectogenetic fantasy of overcoming 'an absence from the totality of the reproductive cycle'.²⁴³ Such a project is bound up with a denigration of 'the experiential moments of female consciousness, confirmed in actual labour', and which are 'imitated in a "higher" sphere, the creation of concepts in a male intercourse of spirit and thought.'²⁴⁴

²³⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 55.

²⁴⁰ Marinetti, *Mafarka*, 145.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁴³ Barbara Weir Huber, *Transforming Psyche* (Montreal & London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 107.

²⁴⁴ O'Brien, *Politics of Reproduction*, 132.

Unlike Mafarka's summoning of a pragmatic, almost Baconian determination to 'take hold of matter and change it to our fancy',²⁴⁵ there obtains an exposure to exposedness through "Parturition" that is coterminous with a 'relaxation of the self's egoistic and insulating defences.'²⁴⁶

Relaxation

Negation of myself as a unit

Vacuum interlude

I should have been emptied of life

Giving life

Should I be able to say for sure whether 'should' is here indicative of a reflection on alethic necessity or the epistemic mood? Perhaps the most significant aspect of this stanza concerns how the tendency towards the 'enucleation'²⁴⁷ of the 'one' subject does not correlate with a full-blown collapse of the 'I' in its substantiality.

Loy elaborates a body that is neither mere organic appearance, a channel of immaterial thought, or a repository of instincts referring back to an experience of radical lack, but a dynamic relationship understood through the linkages it forms with other bodies to proliferate its capacities. Finding an affirmative mode of immanent processuality, she moves towards what Deleuze calls a 'Body without Organs'. It is salient to emphasise that, for Deleuze, a body is far from the exclusive province of the field of biology; it can be anything from an 'animal' to an 'idea', a

²⁴⁵ Mafarka, 146.

²⁴⁶ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 109.

²⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998), 81.

‘body of sounds’ to a ‘collectivity’,²⁴⁸ with the difference being in the ways each of these is ‘individuated as an extended and relatively closed system’.²⁴⁹ To turn briefly to another poem that also involves learning to think differently through and with the body populated by waves of pain, Toi Derricotte’s *Natural Birth* provides a powerful testament to a ‘milieu of intensity that is “beneath” or “adjacent to” the organism’,²⁵⁰ and which allows access to another plane of reality, beyond prescriptive behavioural patterns. In the labour and delivery quarters, filled with a sense of fear and helplessness, Derricotte’s speaker finds no support in the transcendently posited judgment of the primary obstetrician that proclaims, ‘FORGET ALL THAT SILLY BREATHING STUFF. YOU’LL TAKE A SHOT LIKE THE REST WHEN THE TIME COMES’,²⁵¹ whilst subjecting her to punitive touch: ‘wrenches his hand, a hammer up my cunt. wants to feel the head, wants to feel the damn things head, wants to see how far I am’.²⁵² In a roundtable discussion on the language of birth among health professionals, Mary Stewart communicates her exasperation regarding the question ‘what is she?’ (referring to the parturient) for encouraging the reply, ‘she’s 3cms.’²⁵³ The obstetrician in Derricotte’s poem operates in this spirit, delimiting her experience by the measure of her cervix. Resisting this debasing state of affairs, Derricotte’s speaker enters into conjunction with another woman, emanating the qualities of a goat deity, and imperceptible to those on the outside: ‘the more I gave to her, the more she answered me... i pushed

²⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1988), 127.

²⁴⁹ Anna Cutler and Ian MacKenzie, “Bodies of Learning,” in *Deleuze and the Body*, ed. Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 55.

²⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 161.

²⁵¹ Toi Derricotte, *Natural Birth*, (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983), 25.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 25

²⁵³ Mary Stewart, “Talking To, and About, Women in Labour,” “Roundtable Discussion: The Language of Birth,” *BIRTH: Issues in Perinatal Care* 39, 2 (2012): 157.

deeper and she swelled wider... then i saw the darker glory of her under me'.²⁵⁴

Rather than an object of recognition, this 'fundamental encounter',²⁵⁵ to invoke Deleuze, offers itself to sensation, and is embraced in such a way as to positively transform passive affections, a vital partner sustaining her through the birth.

As with Loy, this participation across the 'inbetween' that brings together 'thought and unthought, art and life, affect and the brain'²⁵⁶ works against the organisation of the maternal body 'as it is regulated and functionally subordinated to the exigencies of property and propriety',²⁵⁷ while also sustaining a 'minimal level of cohesion and integration'²⁵⁸ to avert a psychic disarray that closes off connections with other productive flows. The other woman in *Natural Birth* is not literally and empirically a midwife, but the constitutive energy stream of an event that deterritorialises the codes of an institutional authority that treats the parturient as a mindless object, and thus it is possible to think of the concept of the midwife as an intensive force accompanying subjectivity, a creative articulation of the body's powers. In this sense, the midwife can provide an attestation of the mediating threshold involved in becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-imperceptible? As Deleuze and Guattari write: 'You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of signifiacance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations, force you to.'²⁵⁹ Otherwise, we are in danger of being presented with the mother as an 'empty BWO', rendered susceptible to being

²⁵⁴ Derricotte, *Natural Birth*, 33.

²⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 139.

²⁵⁶ Charles J. Stivale, *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The Folds of Friendship* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 32.

²⁵⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 170.

²⁵⁸ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 171.

²⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus*, 160.

drugged-up, walled-in in repetition, a lost opportunity for the body to become ‘sufficiently rich’ for ‘free[ing] the circulation of intensities’,²⁶⁰ as exemplified in the case of certain Twilight Sleep or highly anaesthetised labours that block the production of endorphins, the sort of labour that Derricotte resolves to reject.

Without such caution against total collapse, we are liable, in our conceptual constructions, to reproduce Smellie’s *Sett of Anatomical Tables*, composed of ‘clear-cut, clean images in which... the female body was without organs, other than the foetus’, a tome which opens with renderings of parts of ‘the well-formed pelvis... the forceps... given as much prominence as the body of the foetus’.²⁶¹ Smellie announced, in the 1754 preface: ‘I have done something towards reducing that Art, into a more simple and mechanical method than has hitherto been done.’²⁶² Might the midwife be figured as a reintroduction of complexity across that threshold between ‘negation of myself as a unit’ and ‘giving life’ so that, although woman is not, and cannot be, unified in ‘a culture claiming... to number everything by units’,²⁶³ although maternity ‘happens, but I’m not there’²⁶⁴ as ‘master of a process prior to the socio-symbolic linguistic contract’,²⁶⁵ neither the alterity of the mother nor the child is obliterated. The multiplicity of relations imagined through “Parturition” defies the obstetric-gynaecological erasure of the maternal space and the fetishism that would treat the baby as a commodity, appearing to ‘exist by itself’.²⁶⁶ You write ‘Mother I am / Identical / With infinite Maternity’, which, in the division of the lines, the deployment of the proper noun preceding the present tense

²⁶⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 171.

²⁶¹ McGrath, *Seeing Her Sex*, 68.

²⁶² William Smellie, quoted in McGrath, *Seeing Her Sex*, 68.

²⁶³ Bianchi, “Receptacle/Chōra,” 137.

²⁶⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237.

²⁶⁵ Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: An Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 1998), 102.

²⁶⁶ Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 144.

‘being’ verb which coexists with ‘infinite’, generates a sense of you, in Kristevan terms, accepting a love for the child as necessarily a love for yourself that addresses a love for your mother. Midwife Jeannine Parvati Baker states: ‘The ego also dies or dissolves when you give birth... It’s not just the “I” doing it... ecstasy flows through me and I connect with every woman who has given birth and ever will.’²⁶⁷

The tone of the concluding stanza marks a distinctly bathetic transition, from the present participles of ‘I am knowing / all about / unfolding’ – the apparent acme of the push into what Simon O’Sullivan describes as ‘another world (our world experienced differently), a world of impermanence and interpenetration, a molecular world of becoming’²⁶⁸ – to the air of detachment in ‘the next morning...’, a temporal demarcation more in keeping with the devices of novelistic plot-unravelling. Where one might anticipate there being explicitly inscribed a meeting between new mother and newborn, there is a gap dividing the events of labour and postpartum routine, and it could be that the caustic mood emerges out of an estrangement from what might be construed as the vapid niceties of social conformists. The ‘hushed service’ of ‘each woman-of-the-people... / wearing a ludicrous little halo / of which she is sublimely unaware’ and ‘tiptoeing the red pile of carpet’ – this detail suggestive of how the material and symbolic force of the blood loss that attends parturition registers publically in a merely vestigial form – does not do justice to the complex myriad of factors, including the more-than-human powers that destabilise cultural normativity, experienced through the maternal body. What might be thought as luminous is transmogrified into the ‘ludicrous’, for there is a sense that this ritual arrangement affords no dissension from the subordination of woman’s creative potentialities, and the suffering involved in the search for their expression, under the

²⁶⁷ Parvati Baker, *Sisters on a Journey*, 63.

²⁶⁸ O’Sullivan, *Aesthetics of Affect*, 128.

patriarchal institution of religion. If the poem appears to culminate on a note of disaffection, it could be partly on account of a refusal to repeat ‘the strategic aversion’²⁶⁹ to the ‘unhappy consciousness’ that Adorno accuses Hegel of enacting. He reprehends Hegel for figuring the ‘unhappy consciousness’ – borne out of an apprehension of the discontinuity between the real material condition of the subject and the projected attributes of the ideal form it measures itself against in an attempt to escape finitude – as a temporary preliminary stage to the ‘full maturity’²⁷⁰ spirit acquires upon reaching total affirmative knowledge of itself, for this undoes the ‘critical moment’²⁷¹ that is inherent in a suffering subject confronted with a social reality that falls radically short of meeting its highest aspirations.²⁷² In a scene in which you are expected to be resting, reflective activity restlessly goes on. The lines ‘Man and woman God made them’ - / Thank God’ are an enormously ironical way to finish an engagement with birth through ‘poïesis’ - from the ancient term ποιέω, denoting ‘to make’.

²⁶⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 53.

²⁷⁰ Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 115.

²⁷¹ Adorno *Negative Dialectics*, 53.

²⁷² Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 116.

Remembering Twilight Sleep

"I have only been banished! Oh sovereign goodness!
Then it's all a favour, and not a penalty!
I have received a pardon instead of a punishment!
And I owe thanks again for my exile!"

(*Médée* by Corneille., 1635)

I would just as soon consider performing a surgical procedure without anesthetic as
conducting a labor without scopolamin amnesia.

(Dr W. Francis B. Wakefield., 1915)

Bellied kicking under
bedlam's covering
stirruped servicing
the sterile field
fantasied by the headman in white -
steely scopes prone
to follow the weevils
that vitiate the drupe.
Capsule and needle blot
apperception's stream.
Inspissated milk of morning
collected from dusk scarification;
it's said the night of confinement's
like a night dropped out of
existence.
Wool-lined shackles
hold back the bruises,
pupils distend into
oil smoke,
valves welter through

pressure of the bellow,
lyre strains rebound from
plugged auricles.

Moaning of bowels,
refusal in hiding.

'Chew root of rhubarb
chew root of rhubarb'
On her ninth birthday,
beside the peach tree,
her peeling flesh flushed
with the swimmer boy's breath,
saffron spittle
trickled down her chin,
her toes gripped the mulch
with the word wanting
the sphincter sounds an eructation.

It is claimed, in these cases,
to admit her betrothed
would be most indecent.

Aid to poeisis,
save the proof of this passion,
outdo the enframing.
May her pneuma break with
their scroll in the spool box.
On the seventh day,
in a predawn raid,
let the cast-off tooler,
lashed with bad marks
from a sun-drenched terrace,
paint sacred hearts on blueprints,
as entrails of feeding-tubes,

tape-reel pulses
and intolerance
make waste.

Aid - without whom
the cause is a mockery
of the indebtedness
with which things arrive.
In the vault of the tower
let the missionaries stir
with the siren's howl
and leave their king's hieroglyphs
to be lost in detritus,
lest they be impressed
upon their wombs.
Let the nightingale back
into the black forest
and the bejewelled model's
whirring cogs discompose
the selfsame song.

Stretching forth her neck:
 'Chee chee chee' -
yelp from dome craters
guarding nursery chambers
on narrow, churned-up islands;
the open plains choked
with cash crops and toxins
the keystone steward counted as pest.

Told to read
the clock on the wall.
 She images larvae
 hatching in an hourglass;

a baby with lungs
turned waxy blue
and a spine as brittle
as flakes of manna;
ratsbane in ink
on the tablet tucked
beneath the headman's arm,
measures of the theft
of her organs.
She gnashes her teeth
as cold digits
anooint her skull
and the ticks
press into her skin.
'A blank I see
I am the blank.'

The chains of command
from the sedentary class
grow ever more tortuous
in order to put the screws
to wild facts.
They render her ductile
and deracinated
on sagging shop floors
and splintered stairs,
machine on her back
morning and night.
They complain of her sisters
as putrefied residue
in the kinks of the colon -
to be systematically drained
or removed to promote
a regular excremental flow.

The clubwomen rally round
department store table linen
with jangling nerves,
foamy eyes,
and a view to be shoehorned
back in their corset
soon after the birth is
shoehorned out
(for giving life is termed
a cursed detour in a life
refined through highest thought.)
Common-sense stifled
in tight-laced triangles
of unyielding cloth
and whalebone splints,
they stress distaste
for violence yet are
hostile to the stammering
vernal ghosts of the
shirtwaist girls,
with thirsting throats
and tongues in a vice,
laying down scissors
but left to burn
behind a locked door,
ladders too short,
nets too weak,
many fall
many storeys
and strike
the sidewalk
so hard it
shatters

with their bones.

On the altar is offered
roses marked with
the shew and lochia
flattened amid the hero's reading,
the manikins through which
he professed knowledge
of how to manage
the labouring body,
the leeches and cups
from kerosened temples,
the douches and stitches
said to restore the virginal state
yet cutting figures of anguish,
the peddled formulas
for mouth and breast
dried-up and divested
of vital heat.

Aid her to foreswear
the frozen twilight gloom -
a revolution bearing
a trampled taper
in a puddle of phlegm.
May the air make sense
again, nourishing expression
across the pores,
and tides of ecstasy
wash the gum from
her eyelids.
Earth, dear one, arise
with her memory,
defying those who feign

benefaction and tear her
away from care.

Aquadural

‘Why leave the sea? To carry a gift – the gift of life. But it is to the earth that you preach fidelity. And forgetfulness of your birth.’ ----- **Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche***

bullet point pressing
for consent to be distant
surveyor contact
hydrophobic glass-eyeing
take a little reed
be taken into high block
click dura mater
outside the potential space
cracked-crazed paradise
stone from sharp insolation
surveyor measures
the moral ground on the hoof
inflamed horse’s tail
forget the Hippocrene
subjective dry mouth
plucking ropey saliva
rotten egg ructus
with his stagnant projections

O daughter that was
a cautionary account
transition into
a watery stage ‘aah’ing
covers vestibule
against grave linear speed
joint decompression
minimal striated tone
still shudder to think

Mnemosyne must preserve
an after-image
bubbling on the smooth surface
an oval window
ruptured by naval patrols
carefully balanced
reproductive budgets shot
belly burial
pit for aerojet agents
perchlorate short shelf
life carrying miscarriage

entertain only
the impossibility
of a driving on
without a trace of damage
to work for ending
its accumulation

hydrostatic force
evenly distributed
no crushing blood tide
or being engrossed
in a mystique of the land
but closeness to an
element spread before the
synthesis of stars
what breath is this O daughter

guide her alongside
dorsal thermoregulate
for another's sake
anticipate impressions
of lipophilic
toxic crystals cord exposed

in Watsu cradle
ripples across fretless neck
fibrous strings buzzing
hard data dioritic
aspiration gives
in to supple rebonding
geo-infancy
double notes of a warbler
no place certainty
splash-happy syncopations
in Erewash Meadows
before the diversity
of native contents

would succumb to a species
of domination

strain to rest assure
what seems terminable is
kept in bearable
range of a newfound expanse

for merchant service
her substance keel-hauled and flogged
the numskull master
will taste his own medicine
I wear a mop wig
judgement inflicts upon him
the 'sweat' deck-jigging
we jab his nates with pen-knives
IV lines will change
into grape-vines through airs of
Orthian ardour
dropout spontis wage a war

black flags by free ports
set sail for sources of wealth
beyond the fat years
strip gourmets of Kobe beef
from cows emptied out
by special forms of massage
raid privation pools
built in the banks of the spree

don't spend infinity
in the pinch of decrees to
pipe down bottle-feed
on premium fleshy pink
such a fancy price
imagination avails
itself of the lost
at first sight a white speck
scatters the sunlight
the total shape too far gone
mimesis reflex
make ventral arch stretch the tongue
pulse conducted through
steadily rising contours
of a signature
I can't really remark on

scent of cassia
generated as received
where there is desert
a caravan passes through
apparitional
leaving signs obstructive tribes
can't identify
runoff percolates into

underground cisterns
stored for serving points of flight

finding the Fertile Crescent
raises the venous
return clearing waste products
palms lapping softly
against slightly parted thighs
and what high relief
what face is this O daughter
in the tympanum
dolphins' beaks meeting
above the veil and waved hair
from a multi-leaved
acanthus cup comes a head
and winged torso
dive in vagus-inspired
pre-articulate
know the solution hitting
the back of the throat
can't make any inroads through
amniotic density

Notes on Dejection

I

If I were to call on Spinoza, I would say this present failure to capture the causal antecedents that have effected a diminishment in my capacity to act from the conatus will not, I hope, culminate with a binding obeisance before the Stoic enshrinement of *apatheia*.

What remains from that April evening when, in a watering hole with the odour of pickled eggs and musty carpet, she issued the sentence, couched in the reflexive second-person: ‘You’re supposed to feel something.’ It was as though she had dipped her tongue into a tonic mixed with the juice of aconite root, pinning cervical vertebrae to the back ridge of the deep blue couch, rendering the ear canal paraesthetic. Subject to this heavy dose of longing, this shudder of infinitude across the thinness of a face, the heart contracted to the point of a tear on her charity store coat, and the realisation of a high lyric utterance imploded into the murmur of ‘sorry’ – as if the fallout from such a negation might radiate a love to where she can come into her own, again. The fibres of the flesh, that had hitherto seemed unthreatened by inherent vice, had been pounded and pressed by each mechanical shrug, the bonds of memory breaking down with each acidic reaction. Her fingers had never felt so shrunken and dry, her nails never so embrittled. Eyelids quivering with the strain of holding her gaze: ‘See you’ - an interjection belying an awareness that the ‘you’ being addressed there is neither inhabiting a site that I can foresee leaving nor the same incarnation that I previously claimed to be seeing. Her plan for us to visit a recycling plant that month, had, also, I take it, been dumped. Could I grow to hate

those precious things that, for a moment and more, washed many a deathly sign from my style of perception? Holding her recurrently cold hand, still poorly pronouncing her name – R_____ – had I forsaken my neighbour for a vain image set in place, without answer, mistaken her dismay for tiredness, hewed out a cracked cistern that could not make her wet with a decent happiness? I foundered as I sought a plateau from which I would not withdraw, rather advance your return, to the singular pleasures of the stretch of gland, swelling, your ducts spurting, not being spent, but becoming multiple, which I, with those spermatic bubbles and the predictable passing of a tentigo into detumescence, cannot conceive of. I shall not live the qualities of morning dew with a fullness of joy ever again, nor turn towards a sunflower without the strife of recollecting the miniature one she placed in my palm, crazed with light, which withers in a shot glass under the shade of a bookcase as I write. I know, kisses are a better fate than romantic commonplace, lady I swear by all *Sketches of Spain*.

Not so long ago, in that hour before she wrenched her rhythms away from the soft-toned folds of nakedness, she told me that what I misrecognised as a birthmark on the arch of her foot was a scar from a swollen-thorn acacia branch she trod upon in another continent. I leaned over to put my lips to it, and now it's as though the trace of a foreign body remains embedded in my inflamed throat. By this important non-achievement of mourning, how far can the pathology of incorporation proceed before I eliminate her radical exteriority? Each articulation seems transcoded by an economy of automation, unmediated by active affection, as though the poetic potencies between our bodies have capitulated to the parthenogenesis of value that defines the financial-algorithmic chain. Friends ask: 'How are you holding up?'

Soul-squinting, I can scarcely endure the weight of advancement along noble impulses as a result of the phantasmic calcaneal fracture incurred from my fall.

Since her exit, the bundles of junk that bloat this metropolis have been feeding on my synapses and dragging me down more and more. The day may soon come when I can no longer descry that firebird feather glowing through the feverish clouds, and I shall turn to a pillar of vomit at the entry to some temple of *byt*. A few nights ago, just beyond the exit of the tube station, there sat a scraggy middle-aged chap in a threadbare tweed suit with a lily in the lapel, jingling change in a coffee chain Styrofoam cup with one hand, holding a traffic cone like a megaphone in the other, and blowing a muffled rendition of “My Way”. Most of the careering commuters turned up their noses, sneered a laugh, or were too wired into sleek capsules of cyber-biological automatism to notice; I suppose these are the predictable reactions of a citizenry being confronted with a reflection of their own degenerate aesthetic consciousness, their day-to-day perceptions swarming about in a Petri-dish culture rife with toxins to induce narcissistic-narcosis. Though he was not standing on the shore with a wondrous horn making the oceans roar, may the gnarled and grubby big toe poking out of his brogue herald catastrophe! Let its odour and hairiness shake up a generation in resentment of sensuous corporeality, not ‘cleansed’ and cered in digital coating! I ought to have asked him to join me in picketing this year's Turner Prize - what with its promotion of products that rigidify the lips of the surveyor into a callous ulcer. Ladies and gents, here's a ‘life-sized’, glass-reinforced polyester ‘I’ on a plinth; no hard feelings if the ichor of psychic engagement has been sucked out, if the anima mundi is excised as if it were a ganglion – let's imagine an art of austere empiricism! Instead, I retreated down the stairs and onto a platform, seized by the notion that I simply don't belong

aboveground, that my judgements are as unsound as elevator *music*, and carry no more justificational significance than the *Culex Molestus* which hatch in the stagnant pools of these tunnels, surviving on the blood of rats and fluff on handrails, that the conception of living I wish for shall never see the light of day! But please don't be perturbed; I shall not dwell in quietude, and unlike Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, I cannot 'tell you solemnly that I have wanted to make an insect of myself many times.'²⁷³

II

Such slavish self-pity! Shatter Courbet's studio mirror, ruffle Dürer's golden hair, rivet Philautia to the entrance outside! Between passivity and accountability, have flakes of iron cut my tongue as I lick my wrists and reach out to the stranger. Is it error to trust such subjection could assist either of us in this trial? It would be easy to persecute her for abandoning the declaration of fidelity to the event of our chance encounter at winter's end – in the quietest café around at closing time, when she beckoned me away from the misted exit to dialogue about the book on anarchist currents of thought I'd just been revisiting for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime; and for balking at the revolutionary tenacity necessary for overcoming insidious consumerist-careerist capriciousness and privatisation of need with the constant reinvention of a world as the experience of two, not one, for the other, a disjunctive synthesis. Ethical life cannot begin without me being held accused for her weakness prior to her pronouncing me responsible for her weakness, a command

²⁷³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 17.

that forbids despair, and without me giving the ‘gift that exacts the cost,’²⁷⁴ giving up the hope of her giving back in a circle of exchange. I trust she won’t hand back those David Graeber books *Debt* and *Possibilities* I provided to aid her projects. When the time comes to bid another adieu, will we offend one another by forgetting this and forgiveness is not absolutely possible? I’d possess no authority to terminate the accounts, to accept an apology for a lack of clarity, unless we could return unreformed to the point of sheer perturbation. But contrary to staging a therapeutic reconciliation or gnashing my teeth in the lonely night at the demon that heralds the eternal recurrence, I must perceive that perceiving the impersonality of this state of affairs ought not be dissociated from the attempt to become worthy of it, that to militate against a miscarriage of justice, I must wish her prosperity in affirming insolvency, to aid her in rejecting the spectre of debt haunting the territories of the union and our minimal communism. Excuse me for speaking of pardon in this context; I think of her indignation towards the amnesty law following the Fascist General’s reign, of mass graves and the trafficking of thousands of ‘*ninos robados*’ taken from mothers by doctors, priests and nuns. I dreamt of marching alongside her dressed in a shawl holding a fan and red carnation to reclaim the disused tobacco factory at Tabacalera, and of painting ‘No pasarán!’ across the Arco de la Victoria. Truly, I cannot put away childish ways, and abide unadapted to the nihil-real-istic ‘I feel very well with you’, she whispered once, with her cheek and nose resting into my elbow pit, shortly after I read from my dusty volume of Neruda – ‘...forgetting is so long...’ – on the day his corpse was exhumed. This afternoon, as I was sitting beneath a tree beside a woman with whom I was discussing the significance of Regine nodding to Kierkegaard on that Easter Sunday in 1843, I saw her leave a

²⁷⁴ Catherine Chaliel, *What Ought I to Do: Morality in Kant and Levinas* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 92.

crowded café, and as she strode by, she winked to me. I do not know if it was affectionately.

From the failure to become lovable for the beloved whilst reposing into the profanity of loving oneself in love, comes the shock that shatters my pride, destining me to reawaken into a deeper relation with the wisdom of love in the service of love, and the more radical ethical labour this demands. ‘You ARE great’, she said, as she stood to take her leave; ‘not great enough’, I replied. Not even good enough to step with her to the exit, and say, ‘after you’, one more time. Should I pray, like Novalis, for this wound to be preserved through exposure to the ‘surrounding void’, under the conviction that ‘when pain is being shunned, that is a sign that one no longer wants to love?’²⁷⁵

III

Departure for the maypop state is imminent, leading far from a home whose foundations those I am closest to struggle to upkeep against torrents of disquietude seeping out the faults. Am I organised? Stiff and unwieldy instrument of fabrication: since I’ve already made a mental note to leave this behind at baggage pick-up, why in god’s name is my name and destination address fixed to it? To lose it would mean all trace of instinct would be lost too, I imagine. And where would that leave us? At a loss for words? If I must carry it onwards, the least I can do is make the right effort to avoid brandishing it conspicuously - swelling under the bane of Midas that converts nourishing experiences of wildness into inertia at every stroke. After all, some might say I’m off to meet a living legend.

²⁷⁵ Novalis, private diary, quoted in Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 218.

I flick through an old notebook and spy a reminder to ‘follow up on Basho – pilgrimage to deep Northern Province.’ The poet was sworn to silence concerning particular experiences beyond the gate of Shitomae, but we are told he sang of the rising smoke at the shrine of Muro-no-yashima and that writing was inscribed on strips of silk hung in dedication. I must resolve to commemorate the site to which I journey not as a faux voyageur stealing pictures through an antiseptic screen, but as a guest susceptible to the questioning of the ghosts that fissure the present, wandering behind and before the midwives, ever-returning from the living to the unborn to the living. It must not be carried back here, nostalgically, as a souvenir pre-ideated as untouched by a non-place.

About halfway into the journey from the airport, the pick-up driver pulled over on the grass verge of the highway, and I shuffled towards a strip of hardwood thickets to take a leak. Pik-i-tuk-i-tuk, Pik-i-tuk-i-tuk - mingling with the buzzing and whirring of a ruby-throated hummingbird against my ribs, broad-leaved shrubs deflecting a cool breeze across my cheeks. Turning back, I saw a woman with her infant daughter tasting the fruit from a patch of passion flowers as part of their roadside picnic. ‘It’s a lot like a pomegranate’, the mother remarked, as a butterfly, which I initially perceived as a tattoo, fluttered from her sweat-glistened shoulder towards a mud-puddling congregation of zebra swallowtails to suck up salt and minerals. Questions hovered over me: Are my designs bound up with digesting and excreting the blood and tears of other unsuspecting bodies solely to enhance my prospects of reproductive success? Am I merely a lousy analogue of the many-tongued mimic, singing the praises of the midwife from a lofty branch at several removes from the truth of her virtues, scandalously cheating the doltish into thinking I am not simply imitating appearances? Perhaps the midwives will apprehend my

approach as one of delicate ingratiation concealing an armament of appropriative designs, as if I were a disciple of the caricatured William Smellie - arriving at births dressed in a woman's cap and gown, under which he hid fearsome instruments. Do not licence the metaphysical poet's roving hands to set his seal!

What art is this that is not midwifery yet is not without midwifery? Gadfly, your wisdom was indeed revealed as barren when you deemed your performance more important than that of midwives attending the bodies of women. A despicable error! Or perhaps instead of indignation I should contemplate contemplating 'things in themselves with the soul by itself'²⁷⁶ Maieutics in danger of being supplanted by obstetrics. And the yoking of 'midwife' and 'obstetrics' would indeed seem far from apt, for whereas the word midwife is derived from the Middle English meaning 'with woman', the latter term harks back to 'obstāre' - 'stand in the way', also the source of English 'obstacle' and 'oust'. So here we find a displacement, indeed degradation - the expansive idea of supportive association vying with a negatively, if not violently inflected and domineering figure - one concomitant with a symbol of authority standing with his instruments in front of the woman's genitals and thus distant from her head and heart.

Although I work in the spirit of Rosi Braidotti's nomadic call to 'fictionalise my theories, theorise my fictions, and practice philosophy as a form of conceptual creativity',²⁷⁷ in my endeavour to pre-empt accusations of fanciful myth-making, I must not allow *midwifery* to cross into the domain of a performative metaphor – for thinking an ethical relationality that destabilises phallogocentric formations – without a diversified exploration of the empirical perspectives on and of birth practitioners throughout history. I am acutely aware of how objectionable my

²⁷⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1977), 15.

²⁷⁷ Braidotti *Nomadic Subjects*, 36.

project would be regarded through a Platonic lens, for not only am I following Novalis's conviction that philosophy and poetry must be construed in conjunction, and honouring Kristeva's investment in the subversive potential of poetry, I would be viewed as miring myself in greater illusion by speaking of midwifery without 'knowing' the art, running afoul of the justice of the Republic that is sticking to what is properly one's own work. Yet I would contend it is exceedingly more inimical to ethics to deem oneself a unitary, monolithic subject, as this forecloses the discovery of the 'stranger-in-ourselves' - a self-alienation from home comforts that makes possible solidarity across a site of unfathomable difference.

Following Hélène Cixous, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle propose that the 'only "creative writing" worthy of the name entails the experience of what is beyond us, beyond our capabilities, impossible.'²⁷⁸ More than one reader has remarked upon the frequent deployment of counterfactuals and apophatic constructions in my recent work, which I believe to be symptomatic of my affinity for the above proposition.

In terms of identifying what midwifery *is*, and articulating its epistemological and ethical significance for the project, the tendency toward apophaticism is inseparable from a resistance to presuming determinate conceptual mastery of events – namely the lived, embodied experiences of birth and birth attendance – that I have been in a position to approach only through philosophical and poetic activity. I concede that recourse to definition through negation could be looked upon as an obtrusive admission of the inadequacy of my thinking, an inability to disambiguate actual from potential knowledge. Consider it as part of an inheritance from Adorno's critique of positivism: the demands of supporting the midwife-mother

²⁷⁸ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th ed (London: Routledge, 2009), 92.

situation, to which I have no clear and direct access, evince tender impulses in protest at its devaluation under the conditions of the administered world,²⁷⁹ but to present a cataphatic, rational justification of midwifery as a complete guide to moral life would be to render it continuous with this administered world, and deny the unrepresentable excess and plurality of it as a subject of inquiry. The reader might descry a utopian, or even mystical, element in a project heavy with both counterfactual speculation and didactic gestures towards change in the dominant state of affairs regarding maternity care, and be exasperated by the absence of a programmatic outlining of concrete political solutions, but any emphasis on the ‘ought’ over the ‘factual existens’, and the envisioning of connections between seemingly discrete and disparate contexts, struck me as prerequisite for activating ‘new ways of feeling, new forms of social arrangements, new types of investigations’²⁸⁰ that might break through the rigidity of habitual cognitive patterns.

²⁷⁹ James Gordon Finlayson, “On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno’s Singular Apophaticism.” *Harvard Theological Review*, 105:1 (2012): 29 (1-32.)

²⁸⁰ Levi R. Bryant, “Counterfactuals and Critique,” *Larval Subjects* (blog), May 4, 2007, <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2007/05/04/counter-factuals-and-critique/>

Notes on a Resurgence

I

We had stayed wakeful all night, the midwives and I, not under the rusty tin roof of a surplus army tent, nor in a ferrocement cave beside a school-bus, but upon a veranda blanketed by stars, where our affective emanations were to FLASH in unison like a symphony of fireflies. The ink SPUTTERS from my pores with the contraction of the cicada's tymbals, rattling, SQUEEEEEALING at the window. We're called up and out to go into the deep! The feeding of dead labour and the Futurist ideal has been poisoning our bloodstream, but we're not defeated. MIDWIVES OF ALL COUNTRIES, the authority of our poeisis is missing, yet always to come, if we sedulously unfold the ALREADY-NESS. By this manifesta-tion of desire, I defer the revolution until another time, as with every act of polemical urgency; the writing is to be done so that what is to be done is not cancelled. We've no cuttings from the Plane Tree of Kos on our grounds, no Aristotelian skeleton in the cabinet. Revive Carmentalia, release Phaenarete from her son's shadow - GREAT BIRTHS AWAIT!

Yesterday, I was knocking back the Blue Moon along the Highland Rim, recalling O'Hara: 'I'm going to die unless / my love soon chases / the clouds away', when I heard a whistle and a snort, and chased a white flicker through the wood. 'Dear Heart, how like you this?' These words from Wyatt trailed off my tongue. Then, I fell, panting and groaning, towards the gorge. I felt along the spongy earth for the map I had carried, mists from the spring clinging around my temple. I thought of my mother, when I was an infant in the bath, kneading my hair into a sudsy spike, and chuckling as I would improvise a seemingly alien language of

wildly varied melodic contours to address my reflection in the faucet - DA-GUUUUL... I thought of the account of Aunt Quintilla taking up of midwifery in 1930s Virginia, leaping, pulling her hair, screaming I' SE GOT DE CALL! after an apparitional sword and questioning voice flamed forth through the bubbles of a laundry tub. I returned to the night when I knelt beside the young indigent woman hunched over in a doorway on Lower Broadway: her ulcerous toes resting on a piece of cardboard with the message 'Pregnant. Anything would help' framed by sketches of petals; her hand diligently applying a crayon to a duckling in a colouring book, the laser lemon marks pressing upon my synapses more than any neon sign; her eyes of burnt sienna crisscrossing my gaping stance, as she told me 'I moved from the Southwest to get away from the father. I'm not going to let him abuse this child too.' I climbed with trembling arms to a ledge in the valley wall, and began to sing.

We do not exalt the versifiers concentrated on islands in a shallow lagoon, studiously navigating officially prescribed courses, casting their lines leisurely from chartered fishing boats, self-authorising each quasi-visionary consummation that forms another massive algal bloom, ever-dredging sediments too compromised for reintroduction into the water column, ever-maintaining floodgates to keep back a sea of recalcitrant forces. We do not enter into virtuosic cooperation with the workshops of literary careerists, where the pressure of intelligence required for going through and against the rhetorical trappings of sincerity and craftsmanship is relinquished under the terms of the 'creative writing' act - in which the universalization of the value of 'speaking well' in civil matters masks the pathological symptoms of semiocapitalist territorialisation. LISTEN: do not assume one has better things to sound than the mute peasant that Stravinsky encountered, nor Cage's 4'33". Is that

my ACTIONIST daemon cutting his chest with a razor and whacking off on the steps of Bloomsbury House?

We glorify the apotropaic figures lifting tunics to poleaxe profiteers - arriving at a birth on a fancy carriage, bearing a case concealing instruments they claim to own. We challenge those who timetable a theatrical-scenic presentation as if it were a scheduled-elective C-section; those who assume the voice of a freestanding agent projecting generalised identifications, as if subjects of care could be attended to through a remote screen in a clinical specialist's home; those whose hyper-managerial modelling of lyric surfaces delimits the instinctual motility of the living body as the generation of unwelcome interference, as if the question concerning the quality of attention could only be settled on the basis that, like a foetal monitor strip, the textual record of the process is easily interpretable in a court of law; those who promote the formularisation of nutriment as a static commodity imbibed by a passive consumer, as if there were no difference between a composition with mechanically added oligosaccharides and what is produced through the fluid immunological negotiations across the skin of self and other. The third figure is no illusion moving beside us, for its trace is what moves us to traverse the sites between raw corporeality and sociocultural inscription, primal drive energies and subversive praxis. We shall not wholly assent to Auden's statement that 'art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society', but greet it with ever-reawakening doubts, lest we give in to escapism, for to be response-able towards and supportive of life, art cannot be ruled unliving.

Let us gather tonight by the clock-tower in the market square to impede the trafficking of souls amid the hurried swarms, to distribute poems that demand the risk of a becoming-slow to tend resourcefully to the potentialities of affirmative

labour. We don't have time for posing with objects that cover a tendency to unwitting gabble by flaunting their conceptual fashioning - chronically constricting and exhausting that organ of perception situated at the core. The book we sing of is a testament to the release of the PSOAS - composed of bio-intelligent tissue whose elemental messages we must become receptive to - in its connection with the diaphragmatic breath and the flows transferred to and from the cosmic ground. We'll drift through the city with a map drawn from Morris's *News from Nowhere*. By morning we'll dance barefoot with a laughing face marked on our bellies and brown paper wrappers taped around our faces to soundscapes featuring the percussive patter of flesh on flesh, nipple-suckling, deep-throated moaning through megaphones on drip stands, lyre strums filtered through a WAH WAH pedal! Sufferers of SENSUAL DEPRIVATION and REPETITIVE EXCHANGE INJURY may complain, 'I didn't particularly get anything from that'; that's because this art should communicate nothing across the channels of digital consumption, except an INTERRUPTION. Instead of the 'tepid and flocculent half-pint of bitter beer' afforded by the 'low mimetic',²⁸¹ both jeerers and cheerers will partake of jars of locally grown herbs, and be sprinkled with libations of menses, amniotic fluid, and breast milk. 'The drops we distil will grow fierce and athletic girls, new artists.' YES! We'll emblazon lines from Sharon Olds' "Language of the Brag" across those airbrushed images of mothers and babies wrapped in white satin on the hospital waiting room walls: 'I have lain down and sweated and shaken / and passed blood and feces and water and / slowly alone in the centre of a circle I have / passed the new person out... // I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman, / Allen

²⁸¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), quoted in Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (London: Pelican, 1972), 290.

Ginsberg, I have done this thing.²⁸² We believe in making the birthing space as a CHOROS, bordered by those crouching Sheela-Na-Gigs with WIDE-OPEN vulvas, and the canvas of a perspiring Mary NUZZLING the newborn Christ coated in vernix.

²⁸² Sharon Olds, "The Language of the Brag," in *Satan Says* (Chicago, IL: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 57.

Dystocia

‘Fear is the strongest weapon in the hand of the enemy of motherhood. Its development in our every-day life is insidious.’

(Grantly Dick-Read., 1915. *Childbirth Without Fear*)

‘Locate an irritation without
It is within
 Within

It is without’

(Mina Loy., 1915. ‘Parturition’)

 local innervation
 supplies
 longitudinal efforts

offset

by centre of circle
of fright

involuntary action

to voluntary reaction

PLEASE STOP
pained sense of inaction

I squeeze the lids
only to be strip-searched
under the gaze
of insomnia

patter of moths
against the shade
sends a paroxysm
across the temple

fleshquake on
manned scope

I dent it
hammering heart
shake irregular
silken threads
from red hourglass venter
small haughty member
sticky with leftover
pabulum of headlong
consumption
spew imagining
a teaspoon of coal

fear prospects astray
yanked towards
a compacted core
back taut bowing

companion flaring
what passes for time
there is anonymity
to be suspended
now and again
so I may hold out
for you

mutters by the door
GET HER DELIVERED QUICKLY
pit to distress

besmeared stellar
ceiling dips
inspiration scattered round
illuminated fountain of steel
migrant songbirds
colliding with guy wires

and pierced on
stubble of wheat
feverish turn to
*f*leedom screened
in mobile abode
 guts besieged by
 administrations of
caretakers tarrying
with owned pleasure

 contagion beyond
factory corridors
anaemic rainbow
trout surface gulping
gill filaments bleeding
ablution on bare sole
accelerated eutrophication
from fertiliser run-off
 excessive adrenergic agonist
a rift in labour's productive
 exchanges
 whiff of burning tobacco
 and nutmeg
 drifting through cracks in
a window of history
 the dawn rolls out
a grey desert
 constrictor impulses
 belt around the midriff
blasted by vessels of war
whales bereft of song
 stranded in the shallows

considering

the daffodils
on the bedside stand
of the quiet chamber
take no thought
of yesterday's

reading

manual extracts
from intelligence
fix electrodes to detainee's privities
headscrew
smacky face
systematic babble
rapping on the airwaves
dance baby step right into my sights
it'll get so hot you'll be CAULDRONIZED
CAULDRONIZED girl CAULDRONIZED yeah
armchair warriors
share a prayer breakfast
oderint dum metuant

flailing about
crying out error

branches entwined
with climbing fibres

isn't it exhausting
exaggerating
eagle-stone fast
to the hip
towards the magnitude
of rattlesnake beads
do you feel the lack
of that synthesised messenger
enabling transcendence
of adverse connections

Oh! kangaroos, roller skates,
organic cocoa beans,
you really are wondrous

though that doesn't mean
this worrying can't come true
are there things with you
of the moment
too close for closure
I blew the culf
from your sweat-soaked nape
brushed with a knuckle
a globule of mucus
from that vestigial groove
outliving old use
but twitching
with maximal urgency
out of your shattered
expression
geometry dissolving
into the sore upon
your vermilion border
do I not love
up
practically to you

around the high places
being built in the valley

come let us play

transfigure leaden into ludic
try full pirouettes
on rusty girders
leap from scaffolding

to a mound of ducting
put rocks through cameras
by the golden arches
I'll kiss your bruised toenail
you'll whisper with a giggle
citrius altius forties

paint across the plywood fence
the mining for medals
scars the lungs of the city
depletes the fluid
that sustains the nomad
plant photographs inscribed
with verse to be unearthed
from the toxic soil
by the stranger
finding welcome
in the interruption
of the representation
by fingerprints
and broken emulsion

the stranger ever-vexed
by the self-assumed poet
fondling pruning gloves
fixated on fashioning
an immaculate enclosure
commensurate with
the Olympic Charter

In the name of all I'm guilty for
I promise I shall not take part
in these Games
respecting not
the codified violence
in the state of exception

in the spirit of
Hypoxia Inducible Factor
for the glory of bad infinity
and the honour of the fatherland

hordes turn to
pillars of degeneration
a consecrated ring
overlaid with plastic wrap
paying regard to speechless idols
prepared for quantification
branded uncontaminated
brazen bellowing
engulfing eardrums
forsaking the steadfast appeal
of those others running
from a searing white gas cloud
down narrow gullies
voiding bowels
and foetuses
amid green milk
and blackened leaves

Host whimpers
on an ancient tree stump
a pearl necklace
thrust around her
by an over-meaty
merchant
his saliva dripping
from her locks
beast of burden muzzled
far-shooter abroad

at a symposium
proposing an injection
of designer particles
to levitate above the poles
and enhance the earth's albedo

the ailing polis
with a bitter harvest
cluster around
the prytaneum theatre
as a thalamic stimulator
is inserted in a
hydrocephalic skull

alarm calls
from a piece of dung
hospitality rising out
of the primordial mire
scarcely visible in light

of the mind
in thrall to publicity

is it so very critical
to sensible midwifery
to be traversed
by such vulnerability
carried off ill-said

a support well beyond
undoes standing
of swollen defences

an opening for
parturient relaxation

an election to become
as the sacrificial part

of a fruiting body

that passes

seeds of life

to the breeze

and another

slippery refuge

Trespasses Crossed

“But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” (1 Timothy 2:12)

“But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.” (Romans 7:6)

Peregrinus hurpling nightfounded by the State House statue
of Anne, antinomian, anarchic ministration =
outpour through firmament of natality on dry bronze;
sinews shake, stammering whispers amidst fillemot organs.
Quis sum? Thou shalt not give up the ghost, her invisible church,
dolorous daughters reduced to erroneous by Law;
this not picking through bony amber for petrified flight,
mucosae numbed by compounds in Puritan elegy.

Wind carrying through fissures in mud-plastered courtroom walls;
loose ordinances in grace, strand escaping black bonnet,
light she delivered lost on the frozen star horizon
of doomsday fold. Forward healer standing for unwiving;
chair shared with husband not fitting, parlour assemblies not
comely for her sex. God’s finger points to relations with
Prince of Lies in monstrous issue, but say not molar lumps
sign of a body assailed by paternal overgrowth,
miscarriage of New Jerusalem arisen from breach
of covenant side-by-side so Eve mater cast away,
slough of shame, tongue just hanging pieces of corrupted flesh.
Judge spurns summons to resipiscence from noisome savour;
nose to the flinty sediment of the Word made clear,
veiling the heart mosaic iron mesh not done away.

Did the defendant transmit malefic agency from
under rocks around the neighbour's well, overlook straying
cattle, subject gossips' throats to a frenzy of pinches,
rub flying oyle in labia, eyebite nurselings with rhyme,
breed idle-worms by spinning wheels, let out a piercing cry
when the poker was thrust into the stalling butter churn,
conceive of a plague of caterpillars spoiling the corn,
fall into good discourse with constitutions of women?
Did her witness tend to the Bay's first professed witch, midwife –
watched, a familiar noted suckling on an excrescence
that would not bleed with government-funded prickers' mock jabs –
delectable detriments to angelic conjunction
with sulphur conflagration in armpits, kneeling on nails,
pear halves scalding metal force rectal-splaying,
the cinnabar brim of Mary's smile mounting the scaffold?

*

Open up! Police! Under room arrest, every nook scoured:
Incontinence towels, blood pressure cuffs, curling tongs snatched,
a/natal meeting turfed out of the Centre. Backyard
burials among the ill-founded charges; holes in the
autopsy: child's liver displaced by licenced clinicians.

Meditations on Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*¹

I

A hydrocolloid gel undulating: minimal friction between sand grains making for an effleurance of light receptors not disengaged from viscera, stirred by both visible air currents and dense tidal basin below. The soup that has seeped up unseen de-stabilises any hard and fast idea of what bounds an individualised acting body, sensorimotor apparatus descending beyond volitional strata, rendering palpable the slippages between surface and depth. With the rolling forth of the windspout, the camera's momentary stillness gives way to panning and tilting motions that follow its momentum, conveying how the animating force of the filmic body itself is irreducible to human-specific modes of intentionality. Any prospect of settling for disinterested pleasure in the appearance of swirling white forms is offset by their propulsion toward the camera's eye, again accentuating a tangible site of *between-ness* that both embodied viewer and filmic entity partake in. If the originary sense of one's flesh is contingent on otherness, the etymological roots of contact in the Latin *con-tangere* take on an especial significance with the pathos of this image, for it imprints not dandelion fluff or a surge of

Word was
beginning with
a fal-
tering,
since, if not
aphasia, then
a stammer in
the making,
remains when
it's said:
flesh of
what's never
fleshed out.

¹ *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979; Artificial Eye, 2002), DVD

garden-variety snowflakes – possible phenomena-as-perceived – but the unanticipated manifestation of condensed chemicals emitted from an industrial process plant upstream. There is wide speculation that exposure to these particles precipitated illness and death for several of those behind the filming in Estonia (including Tarkovsky, just a few months before Chernobyl disaster), a notion which occasions an augmented tactile apprehension of filmic materiality at the same time as underscoring the limits to what the viewer’s body can experientially access and be accessed by. Though I cannot be inside the pro-filmic event, nor pass into the emulsion layer of silver halide crystals, nor feel the strip of perforated celluloid as it’s pulled by the projector sprockets, the screen becomes an opening to a liminal field of transformative processes through which my body is ‘co-constituted’² with the film.

As we cut to medium close-up of *Stalker* – dirt ingrained on his slightly splayed fingers; cheek and mouth resting on the earth; eyes transfixed by an undefined source; a few blades of grass quivering beside the stream; his wife in voice-over reading from *Revelations* in a whisper, evoking the marriage of wind, breath and spirit, the ‘ruach’ and ‘neshamah’

² Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 12.

foundational to Hebraic thought – it becomes apparent that the preceding establishing shot is implicated in dis-establishing the impression of a determinate spatiotemporal regionality. The treatment of time and space throughout the film might be construed to be consonant with the concept of the midwife as an ‘ontological architect’,³ who affirms hospitality towards the subject across at least three planes - corresponding to the ‘moving’, ‘feeling’, and ‘dreaming’ body.⁴ Grounded in an understanding of the *Zone* as a place whose disposition is concomitant with “our condition”, Stalker’s guidance of his guests – always already in a complex psycho-physical relationship with the *Room* even before they reach the purported threshold to the fulfilment of a (re)birth into a radical new condition – would seem to exemplify the obverse of the left hemisphere logic that prevails in a clinical labour ward characterised by the pre-planned configuration of ‘arrow-like pathways’⁵ dictating a sequence of steps toward a ‘successful outcome’ as demarcated by ‘outside’ agencies. Attributes of midwifery *guardianship* are evinced in Stalker’s commitment to

³ Bianca Lepori, Maralyn Foureur, and Carolyn Hastie, “MindbodySpirit Architecture: Creating Birth Space,” in *Birth Territory and Midwifery Guardianship: Theory for Practice, Education and Research*, ed. Kathleen Fahy, Maralyn Foureur, and Carolyn Hastie (Philadelphia: Elsevier, 2008), 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

locating and harnessing those ‘forms of power’ that ‘create and maintain harmony’⁶ between himself and the bodies he must attend to: this paradigm emphasises that the midwife is called upon to ‘exercise jurisdiction over the birth territory’,⁷ to regulate who and what crosses its boundaries according to the demands of the parturient.

In the interests of reducing risks, it is telling that, though the ostensible target destination is initially represented as nearby, Stalker propounds “there’s no going straight here.” Early on, Writer, operating on inductive a priori judgement, resolves to proceed directly to the *Room*, reacting to Stalker’s imperative, “wait”, with the order, “keep your hands off” - a telling phrase if we consider the latter figure as playing out the Levinasian summons to see and hear ‘like one touches’⁸ through an ethical proximity to the Zone that modulates between intimacy and mindfulness of the opaqueness of its alterity, which, with its grip, troubles the smooth running of the intellect and controlling gaze of the ego. It is salient that, as Writer goes forward, the shallow focus renders the background a predominantly green haze, that the crunch and rustle of his footsteps are uncommonly loud with a hint of mechanical distortion, reinforcing the fraught weightiness conferred by the

⁶ Kathleen Fahy, “Midwifery Guardianship,” in *Birth Territory and Midwifery Guardianship*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 118.

slow-motion and heavy breeze enveloped in and around his ‘skeletal and sensory infrastructure’,⁹ for this moment ushers in an awareness of the commanding force of the ‘inner voice’ - materialising in resonance with Stalker’s admonition, “Listen! Should you just notice something, or just feel something...” Plato’s acute somatophobia, the metaphysical myopia of his attempted invalidation of the object that does not possess clear-cut contours, is here banished in favour of an investment in a corporeal phenomenology that posits architecture as, to quote Peter Zumthor, ‘a bodily mass, a membrane... Not the idea of the body – the body itself. A body that can touch me.’¹⁰ Stalker and Professor’s mutual perplexity regarding the origin of the command that halts Writer in his tracks, and the reversal of perspective involving the camera zooming out to evanescently situate us beyond the entryway of the building, accompanied by the flicker of a dark veil-like fabric, not only brings to the fore Tarkovsky’s desire to have the viewer feel that ‘the Zone is there beside us’,¹¹ but is also illustrative of Denise Riley’s explication of *conscience*: ‘It is overwhelmingly an instance of importation, announcing the ethical like a messenger –

Mother, from
 where do you do
 and I go from?
 Building blocks
 in the mutable medium,
 sprinkles on chalkboard
 too fine to see
 from outer history.
 Dark heavens!
 A shockwave.

Buzzing teething rattle,
 nostril fasciculation,
 the voice of Bob,
 needle dragging dust:
 ‘Stick with me baby,
 stick with me anyhow.
 Things should start
 to get interestin’
 right about now.’
 Tell-tale sign of heat
 in cocoon of dense gas.

⁹ Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), 58.

¹⁰ Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), quoted in Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 58.

¹¹ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter Blair (London: Faber, 1989), 200.

and yet at the same time it's an indwelling authority.'¹²

It's safe to say that Stalker would likely feel an affinity for mythically-charged 'natural' features such as the *Matushka* Volga, the 'mother of rivers', which, void of a roadway to its source in the northern marshes, must be approached on foot, the traveller carried along by 'a sense of the sacred'.¹³ He would probably also be susceptible to hearing church bells and voices in devotion that, so it is believed, still ring out from the thirteenth-century city of *Kitezh* - submerged by God into a nearby lake to be saved from the invasion of the infidels.¹⁴

Stalker's joint emphasis on resisting expediency and not investing exclusively in an optical *hexis* recalls important lessons for birth attendance. A midwife is prepared to be an antagonist to the 'promptness operators'¹⁵ who count induction by Pitocin as a routine measure, for interference with the intricately regulated maternal oxytocin system has manifold implications. To divest a woman of her own capacity to go into labour means it is improbable that the expression of oxytocin receptors on the uterine myometrium and decidua has risen to an optimal level. Through further exposure to

¹² Denise Riley, "'A Voice without a Mouth': Inner Speech," in *The Force of Language*, 15.

¹³ Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), xiii.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Warner, *Russian Myths* (London: British Museum, 2002), 21.

¹⁵ Lepori, Foureur, and Hastie, "MindbodySpirit Architecture," 97.

exogenous synthetic oxytocin, these receptors undergo fatigue and desensitisation, so that the pulsatile activity of the maternal neuropeptide is diminished, and thus Induction is cited as a risk factor in postpartum haemorrhage due to uterine atonia.¹⁶ Research has demonstrated the role of endogenous oxytocin ‘includes molecular pathways in the transition to motherhood, such as buffering stress reactivity’,¹⁷ and that ‘mothers who displayed synchronicity in mother–infant interaction had plasma oxytocin levels correlating with neural organisation in reward-related motivational areas of the brain’.¹⁸ Within the medical milieu, the midwife must work against the danger of becoming ‘merely a technician on the production line, taught how to unblock an occluded intravenous line, but not how to calm a disquieted soul’,¹⁹ and support the mother in accepting that birth is ill-served by the internalisation of scientific symbols such as the labour graph, which plots cervical dilation and foetal descent with reference to a normative timeline that detracts from the value of inhabiting a ‘ritual frame’ - affirming the relation between *tempus*

¹⁶ Katherine Schott and Jennifer Andersen, “Early Postpartum Hemorrhage After Induction of Labour,” *Journal of Midwifery & Women’s Health* 53, 5 (2008): 462, accessed March 15, 2014, doi: 10.1016/j.jmwh.2008.01.008

¹⁷ Aleeca F. Bell, Elise N. Erickson, and Sue C. Carter, "Beyond Labor: The Role of Natural and Synthetic Oxytocin in the Transition to Motherhood," *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health* 59, 1 (2014): 36, accessed March 15, 2014, doi: 10.1111/jmwh.12101

¹⁸ Bell, Erickson, and Carter, "Beyond Labor", 40.

¹⁹ Tricia Anderson, “Poetry and childbirth: ‘A light by which we may see’: From technician to midwife,” in *The Art and Soul of Midwifery*, ed. Lorna Davies (Edinburgh: Elsevier, 2007), 75.

and *templum*, where ‘one participates in the internal time of the occasion.’²⁰ For Stalker, just because at a single juncture there may be no readily recordable menace in the *Zone*, this does not permit complacency: “Now your path is easy. Now it is hopelessly involved.” A midwife must not pass over the darkly unpredictable, intractable aspect of pregnancy and parturition, the transpiration that generates a bewildering remainder inassimilable to existing clinical interpretation, but act with a knowledge whose totality is interrupted, again and again, through encounter with the m/other-as-teacher. Acknowledging many cases of midwives noting a seemingly inexplicable cessation of the foetal heartbeat shortly after it had been ‘consistently audible, with no deviations in volume or regularity’,²¹ and instances of women expressing worries concerning foetal motion, which turned out to be accurate with the occurrence of intrauterine hypoxia, belying an acceptable cardiocotography tracing, it is judicious that they encourage the expectant mother to be attuned to patterns of foetal movement.²² Indeed, the midwife should, as far as possible, work to restore embodied maternal subjectivity to epistemological pre-eminence,

²⁰ William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 97.

²¹ Doreen Kenworthy and Mavis Kirkham, *Midwives Coping with Loss and Grief* (London: Radcliffe, 2011), 38.

²² Kenworthy and Kirkham, *Midwives Coping with Loss and Grief*, 40.

conscious that, lest it should be forgotten, before the conversion of female interiority into a medically and juridically legitimated public spectacle in the nineteenth century,²³ and the later construction of the foetus as a ‘modern sacrum’ that ‘reveals itself as “life”’ from a womb reduced to ‘a digital desert,’²⁴ the woman’s sole testimony to knowing she was pregnant comprised the ‘intimately nonshareable’²⁵ event of ‘quickenings’.

Soon after the Writer returns, the area he had been navigating previously is shrouded in a thick white fog issuing from right to left - the orientation followed by Stalker with the throw of his next weighted bandage. This strategy is indicative of the Stalker’s vigilance at every turn of the process, the navigation of which entails neither capitulation to arbitrary vagaries nor an immutable procedural mapping designed in advance. Geoff Dyer proposes that ‘maybe this is part of Stalker’s skill and vocation: reading the landscape, seeing the signs inscribed invisibly within it.’²⁶ If one were to suppose that only a Hollywood-style action scene would vindicate such an insistence on heightened bodily vulnerability in this traversal, Stalker’s acute receptivity

²³ Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women*, 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁶ Geoff Dyer, *Zona: A Book about a Film about a Journey to a Room* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), accessed July 20, 2014, http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eIKJwLkxWPMC&dq=dyer+zona&source=gbs_navlinks_s

to that which might appear to elude transcription into a positivist framework – admitting the apparitional to be not-nothing, as though mirroring the air of watchfulness that emanates from the topography of the Zone itself, a subliminal sense that ‘something is always happening, or is about to happen, or might happen’²⁷ – might be elucidated by a maxim that informs the dynamic of midwifery care: ‘the less we do, the more we give.’²⁸

There are instances when Stalker does act forcibly to arrest misconduct. Just witness his indignation when Writer impetuously tugs at the foliage: “The Zone wants to be respected!” As Ina May Gaskin highlighted in a workshop I attended on Second Stage Labour, the midwife must not shy away from making short, direct assertions at pertinent points to those occupying the birth space, for example, stating ‘We need a bit of quiet please,’ so that she can listen for a heartbeat or, more broadly, to transfer focus towards the expressivity of the parturient. However, it should go without saying that the midwife should refrain from imitating Stalker’s brandishing of a metal rod to underscore this insistence! Such critical sensitivity on the Stalker’s part – also evidenced by his disquietude with regard to chattiness in the province of abstract

Pon-pon
up the ginnel
to my childhood
neighbour’s house,
pon-pon
of a mucky
space hopper
pon-pon
punctuated
by the kicking
of cola cans
against the
mining wheel
monument.
In the living room,
Lillian on piano,
sixteen, maybe less:
B Lydian scale
fumbling, then
fluttering, along
my spinal column.
Schubert’s lieder:
‘... Many hours
away from the spot
and still I hear the rustling.’
Ribs resting against
the table-edge;
a glass of fruit juice
quivering
with the thrum

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Denis Walsh, “A Male Midwife’s Perspective,” in *Becoming a Midwife*, ed. Rosemary Mander and Valerie Fleming (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), 169.

debate – is allied to a conviction that he is responsible for mediating a nourishing relation between the body and environment that is not overridden by the imperious appeals of the transcendental ego. Upon the men's arrival in the Zone, Stalker releases a kind of euphoric breath as he proclaims, "Home at Last", and salutes the "quiet", not long before wandering off to be enveloped serenely in the lush vegetation, breathing deeply, a tiny insect crawling around his fingers, the gentle timbre of the flute and tar floating across a non-intrusive synth drone. Midwives are encouraged to explore and conduct ritual practices, ranging from meditation and dream-work to music therapy, for a working out of the tensions impinging on their own health and projects is a prerequisite for ensuring that 'personal' problems are not offloaded onto the parturient, and appreciating the value for the parturient of tapping into non-ordinary states of consciousness²⁹ to decrease neocortical stimulation that would obtrude into the spontaneous coordination of labour. For Tarkovsky, the Far-Eastern Zen-like minimalism of the tune, which is incrementally modified by microtonal inflections and rhythmic variability as the journey unfolds, was to embody a principle of 'concentration rather than description', and be shorn of 'programmatically intent', expressing 'its truth

²⁹ Fahy, "Midwifery Guardianship," 32.

of the heart.
I peck her shoulder;
she runs me outside,
roly-poly, kiss the dirt!
She pins down my arms,

soles tingling
from milk-thistles.
Capillaries in her eyelids
rutilant with the sun
blinking between
the cedar branches.
She rapidly taps
my diaphragm –
'Not the typewriter:
I'll wet myself!
I dig my thumb
into the venous arch
jutting from her foot,
silent flute
breaks into a tremolo

about the world around us in an autonomous way.’³⁰

In another scene in which Stalker withdraws into a secluded spot, his voice is heard offering a sort of birthing prayer uniting Christian humility and Taoist compassion – “Let them believe in themselves. Let them be helpless like children. When a man is just born he is weak and flexible...” – in conjunction with the image of a circular silvery shimmering pool. If we also take into account the intimate association of Stalker’s daughter with the irreducible mystery of the *Zone*, the film’s culminating scenes, from Monkey being carried on her father’s shoulders accompanied by the Eastern theme, to her silent ineffable countenance in counterpoint to the soundtrack of the train and the climactic movement of Beethoven’s “Ninth Symphony” – as we are suspended between the possibilities of the glasses on the table being moved by telekinesis or by the train’s vibrations – further encapsulate a critique of the Western Enlightenment teleology of progress. Rational human mastery over a universalised reality is marked by an excess; the formation of grand ideological panaceas is instilled with illusoriness.

I return to the sequence with which I began this meditation. The camera, from a birds-eye perspective,

Mother, what you always
already undergo,
the pain in you,
as caused by me,
my cause to think
past distortion,
without once-and-for-all
redemptive peripeteia.
From the
utopian visions
you tended in me,
pajamaed Glo Worm
tucked beside the pillow,
lachrymose, I leak
a residue upon
the shadowy walls
around the garden
you were forbidden
the time to enjoy,
yourself, with
two pairs of lips.

Last night I dreamt
the terminal hair
I shed in the bath
travelled up your neck
and scarred the lining
of your oviducts.

³⁰ Tarkovsky, quoted in “*Stalker, Smuggler of Happiness*,” in *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, ed. John Gianvito (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 52.

has craned over Stalker's face in close-up, eyes closed, seeming to be hovering weightlessly above the water, and drifts past things sunken in murky algae-tinged stream - a consciousness brushing against the discarded remnants of a civilisation that has passed into degeneracy through a hubristic disrespect for our primordial wellsprings. The items include a syringe, a mirror, a bowl with fish enclosed therein, the page of a calendar, a panel from the Ghent Altarpiece beside rusted coins, and a gun. The last three things afford an especially succinct expression of the nexus of art and nature being imperilled by the violence of history; since its completion in 1432, van Eyck's painting, which featured a revolutionary deployment of translucent oil to achieve an unprecedented observation of detail, has been subject to looting during wars, burial in a salt mine, burning, dismemberment, and forgery. The hand in labour that impresses form on matter and converts the elemental into possession is here brought to stillness, as the question of the detachability and durability of the objects forced into a world of ontological identification³¹ becomes prominent. It is as though, in entering into composition with the bodies emerging through Stalker's dreaming body, we are floated

³¹ Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 48.

towards a realm where the egological subject is dephased, and the firing of beta waves might give way to the alpha and theta rhythms conducive to a holotropic state, but also where deleterious components of past experience are to be negotiated. This bears some comparison with such practices as water rebirthing and Watsu massage – which has been esteemed as highly beneficial during pregnancy – where the enhancement of the parasympathetic nervous system, depth of respiration, and the unloading of spinal compression can converge with a working through of repressed conflicts. Saliva bubbles upon Stalker’s lips as he appears to shape an utterance whose content is unthematisable, a saying that does not tell anything if we limit ourselves to a centripetal model of communicational success that pivots on the agenda of the selfsame,³² but is telling in ceding to the sensible material, through sensibility, an enigmatic aspect, the expression of ‘infinity’ as that which ‘overflows the thought that thinks’.³³ To predicate that ‘things’, and the artwork, can leave a *trace*, demanding a response-ability otherwise reserved for the non-phenomenality of the speaking *face*, would be anathema to Levinas’ inter-humanism and his tendency towards aligning aesthetic absorption with the

³² Amit Pinchevski, *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 18.

³³ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 78.

idolatry and plasticity of the image, an economy of participation-as-automatism ruinous to ethicity. Thus, Tarkovsky's proclamation that the supreme purpose of the artistic image to be 'a kind of detector of infinity'³⁴ would perhaps find greater sympathy with Adorno's emphasis on the potential for mimesis to restore nature from the muteness thrust upon it by instrumental reason, for the auratic object to 'look at us in return'.³⁵ Rather than effecting a regression into an idealised mythical nature or instating a transcendental figure kept pristine from the 'withering of experience'³⁶ in a disenchanted world, Tarkovsky does not mask the constructedness of the image: indeed, from the transitions to and from a sepia tone to camera movements that accommodate deviations from mechanistic laws of causation, the making strange through cinematic technique militates against the fetishisation of 'reality' in contemporary culture industry products. The midwife encounters the m/other in a *between* that is ineluctably impinged upon by complex historical determinants; embedded in the hegemony of biomedical discursive schemata and phallogocentric discursive practices that reproduce the

Oceanic bliss never will be reached by one that was never there;
nor will the morula -
start and end point
of perfection.
Turn towards the knowledge
with knowledge of the
instrument
that supervenes upon the
knowledge.
Cease looking into
luminescent green
ice cream
with synthesised
jellyfish protein,
and contemplate differentiation:
Mother, you said
you'd walk through fire for us;
how to comprehend
such resolution?
Godspeed us on
an imaginal descent
towards the goo
of ancient ancestors –
extremophiles –
tendrils and filaments
in supple motion
around scalding seabed vents,
defensive molecules

³⁴ Tarkovsky, quoted in Terence McSweeney, "A State of Mind, Not a Way of Thinking: The Spiritual Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky," in *Faith and Spirituality in Masters of World Cinema*, ed. Kenneth R. Morefield (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars), 59.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 188.

³⁶ Nick Smith, "Adorno and Levinas: Evaluating Points of Contention," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40 (2007): 294, accessed 18 December 2011, doi: 10.1007/s11007-009-9098-9

disappearance of maternal subjectivity through imaging the pregnant body as a pathological environment, the rehabilitation of a sensuous and affective relation to the m/other must not disallow the purposeful, rigorous, self-reflective moment. An enactment of the ancient conception of ‘notitia’, attentive noticing,³⁷ and the endeavour to preserve the concrete particularity of phenomena, cannot be divorced from a critical cognisance of the impossibility of a raw unmediated relation to the object, since the ‘social totality is objectively prior to the individual.’³⁸

II

One of the cardinal lessons Tarkovsky’s cinema brings home is that every component of a habitus – which structures and is structured by human bodies – all the multitudinous textures and vibrations of matter, inform a level of experience that conceptual and volitional initiatives cannot be disengaged from. The ‘I’ of scientific rationality and sovereign mastery over corporeal otherness is recurrently dislodged in scenes that single out the quasi-autonomous vitality of non-human objects whose emissions can be said to ‘lend us

on cellular surface
not splitting apart
in contact with acid.
A vibrio committed
to serving the biofilm,
through collecting genes,
risking the production
of a compound
that could kill it.

³⁷ James Hillman, *Blue Fire: Selected Writings* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 101.

³⁸ Smith, “Adorno and Levinas,” 294.

sensibility'.³⁹ Consider, for example, the treatment of vacated tables in *Mirror*,⁴⁰ from the mark of condensation that, paradoxically, generates intensified sensation in its fading from the table surface in Natalia's apartment, left by a teacup that vanished with the visitors that vanished, distorting chronological equilibrium, to the chimney lamp that, as if influenced by the chiming cuckoo clock, barking dog, and volatile elements out of sight, rolls off the table and resounds from the floor of the dacha. In the latter instance, the camera initially shifts in response to the impetus of the infants that scamper out of frame, hesitates, and then tentatively edges back within the archway to concentrate on the table before the lamp's motion is perceptible to the viewer. The camera is also palpably registered as a third body in the intimate, yet crucially not intrusive, manner in which it tracks alongside Gorchakov throughout the scene where he carries a lighted candle across St. Catherine's Pool in *Nostalgia*.⁴¹ This nine-minute uninterrupted take is an appreciable giving of time to the viewer, where the viewer's 'present' is given over to the time that 'lives within'⁴² the image: 'We

³⁹ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 140.

⁴⁰ *Mirror*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979; Artificial Eye, 2002), DVD

⁴¹ *Nostalgia*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1983; Artificial Eye, 2003), DVD

⁴² Tarkovsky, quoted in Simon Mussell, "Mimesis Reconsidered: Adorno and Tarkovsky *contra* Habermas," *Film-Philosophy* 17, 1 (2013): 220, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/view/294/868>

have to wait on Gorchakov and so realise our waiting,
waiting for that which arrives in this patience.’⁴³

Approximately half way through the scene, before the third attempt, Gorchakov clenches his abdomen, and as his breathing becomes more laboured and the camera gradually advances toward him, the precarious flame held in a fraught dance with the sulphuric vapours, there is a dawning awareness that we have been invited to meet the nervous glances he cast beyond the frame around the outset not merely with a detached acknowledgement of the subtle implication of us as self-conscious gazers. It is as though the tense kinaesthetic activity is conducted along our efferent nerves, and respiratory contractions, so that the problem of putting oneself in the place of another is kept alive.

‘Mary Louise came over and put her attention totally into me. She and I swapped bodies... I felt myself leave and enter Mary-Louise’s and she came over and did a few contractions for me. I found myself in a beautiful place with a green field and a house. It was a place I’d never seen before.’ (Sheila, recounting giving birth with the assistance of a midwife at the Farm).⁴⁴

If we figure midwifery as an ethical modality

⁴³ Gerard Loughlin, “The Long Take: Messianic Time in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia*,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 13, 3-4 (2009): 377, accessed July 11, 2014, doi: 10.1080/14797580903244753

⁴⁴ Ina May Gaskin, *Spiritual Midwifery* (Summertown, TN: Book Pub. Co., 1998), 38.

with significance for thinking cinematic subjectivity, Tarkovsky's setting out of his philosophy is instructive. He speaks of artworks as 'living organisms with their own circulatory system which must not be disturbed,'⁴⁵ proposes that the artist is 'not master of the situation but a servant' to that which 'grows within' and 'begins to demand expression,'⁴⁶ and posits the viewer as 'ally', who, 'willing or able to trust the artist,'⁴⁷ allows 'himself to be taken prisoner voluntarily... as he starts to recognise the material of the film as his own... falling into [its] rhythm,'⁴⁸ becoming receptive to 'discovering life unsupported by ready-made deductions.'⁴⁹ The viewer, following the example of the midwife, is called upon to be in constant attendance, not indulging in side-conversations or periodically leaving the room when she or he fancies doing something else for a while. Does not Tarkovsky's emphasis on removing from a 'solid cluster of living facts... what is not integral to the cinematic image' chime with the words of a birth attendant: 'All that does not pertain to supporting [the mother] in the moment needs to fall away'?⁵⁰

Tarkovsky's stress on art necessarily obeying 'its own

⁴⁵ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 124.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁰ Heather Mains, "An Intimate Dance with Birthing Women," *Midwifery Today*, accessed May 4, 2012, http://www.midwiferytoday.com/articles/intimate_dance.asp

immanent laws of development,⁵¹ of the need to ‘forget oneself, to offer up, to sacrifice oneself as creator,’ and claim that ‘the art in which I have developed is only possible when it is not an expression of myself, but rather brings into focus what I have received from others’ is not only consistent with his esteem for the example of the Russian icon painters of the thirteenth to fifteenth century that never signed an icon,⁵² and the Japanese medieval painters who upon achieving a degree of renown would take leave from one shogun’s court and province only to reappear as unknown artists, with new names, at another: it also accords curiously with attitudes expressed in Leboyer’s *Birth without Violence*:

‘Yet if we have any hope of rediscovering the newborn baby,

we must step outside of our own furiously running time.

Which seems impossible.

How can we step out of time?

How can we escape its fast and furious flow?

The only way is by trying to be fully with the present moment...

⁵¹ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 170.

⁵² Tarkovsky, quoted in Eva Sutkowska, “Tarkovsky in London,” accessed January 10, 2012, http://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Tarkovsky_in_London.html

How can we reconcile the irreconcilable?

How can finite combine with infinite?

It can only happen if we open completely to the other,
which means completely forgetting oneself...⁵³

‘Cutting the cord the moment a baby has emerged from
his

mother's womb is an act of extreme cruelty, and harms
the baby to an extent that is hard to believe.

Leaving it intact, however, so long as it
continues to beat, transforms the whole birth experience.

For one thing, it forces the obstetrician to be
patient, and leads him, as well as the mother, to respect
the rhythm, the sense of time ordained by the child.⁵⁴

The human organism today is being sucked repeatedly
into the portals of pandemonium, undergoing cognitive
mutations wrought by the onslaught of electronic
impoverishment and continual pricking of the
scopophilic drive, beleaguered by an inordinate
indiscriminate barrage of neuro-mobilising stimuli, the
techno-capitalist turbine running on immense reservoirs
of dammed up affect and mercury accumulations in the
flesh of fish. The prevailing frenetic character of
‘screen life’ triggers a physiological re-orientation (as a

⁵³ Frederick Leboyer, *Birth without Violence*, accessed August 5, 2014, <http://www.eco-action.org/dt/bwv3.html>

⁵⁴ Leboyer, *Birth without Violence*.

reaction to the potential threat of a new environment) with a frequency that leaves our psychophysical condition beset by disequilibrium,⁵⁵ ill-able to attend to that which is not pre-digested and cannot be reduced in its decoding to atomised impressions and interpretations. And the multiplex is far from a sphere of *therapeia*; much of what passes for cinema, as with the extirpation of lived temporality and spatiality through the spurious instantaneity of the 24/7 news image, collapses the continuity between event and memory, the interval between sensuous experience and sensible examination, and thus abolishes moral proximity. Cosmos is reduced to the cosmetic; rapport with the face is subsumed by attention to the lifting mask with procollagen to hydrate “demoralising lines”.⁵⁶ For Tarkovsky, commercial film producers are equivalent to ‘drug-pushers’;⁵⁷ perhaps they should be reprimanded along with the obstetricians in the Russian city of Tula that have for decades been pressuring mothers into accepting non-evidence based medicines promoted by big pharmaceutical companies. One routine practice, extending into the twenty first century

⁵⁵ Michael Foley, *The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life makes it Hard to be Happy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 142.

⁵⁶ Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power,” in *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance and Behaviour*, ed. Rose Weitz (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 32.

⁵⁷ Tarkovsky, quoted in “Tarkovsky in Italy,” in *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, 79.

and dating back to the Soviet era, involves the administration of gamma-aminobutyric acid analogues to bring about sleep, accompanied, until recently, by the application of electrodes to the labouring woman's skull.⁵⁸ Tarkovsky's approach supports a break with habituation to the deadening grammar of the standardised-streamlined film industry product. He speaks of images made 'anaemic'⁵⁹ by 'abrupt assertive editing,'⁶⁰ and expresses antipathy towards montage on account of it not 'allowing the separate scenes and shots to come together spontaneously,' and reflecting the author's ideological coercion of the 'distinctive properties given the material during shooting'⁶¹ into a 'strict preconceived framework.'⁶² Without adhering to the Russian folk belief – one which has by no means been eliminated by medical practice – that pregnant women should enter into isolation to be protected from the evil eye (*sglazit' ee*) that could harm her and the child,⁶³ or advocating a revival of the 18th century disputes concerning the power of the maternal imagination to leave a physical imprint of a perceived

⁵⁸ Kirill Danichevski, Martin Mckee, and Dina Balabanova, "Prescribing in maternity care in Russia: The legacy of Soviet medicine," *Health Policy* 85, 2 (2008): 246, accessed July 10, 2014, doi: 10.1016/j.healthpol.2007.08.001

⁵⁹ Tarkovsky, quoted in Gilberto Perez, "Building with Wood," *London Review of Books* 31, 4 (2009): 28.

⁶⁰ Tarkovsky, quoted in Gilberto Perez, "Building with Wood," 28.

⁶¹ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 116.

⁶² Mussell, "Mimesis Reconsidered," 220.

⁶³ Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, "Birth Customs: Ancient Traditions in Modern Guise," *The Slavic and European Journal* 47, 2 (2003): 228, doi: 10.2307/3219945

object on the malleable foetus via ‘esprit animaux’, and credulously accepting, for instance, Nicolas Malebranche’s account of an inmate at the ‘Hospital des Incurables’ born with bodily deformities and fractures adjudged as corresponding specifically to the sites upon which torture was inflicted on a criminal, an act witnessed by his expectant mother,⁶⁴ the midwife retains a keen awareness of the fact that foetal health is influenced by the mother’s reactions to myriad inputs. Considering the ardour with which Tarkovsky imparts his aesthetic-ethical principles, his respect for the interface between viewer and viewed body, and conviction that ‘the art of the screen is able, and even called, to become a matrix for the individual soul,’⁶⁵ I cannot resist pondering for a moment: what if, instead of invoking the ancient Law of Lycurgus ‘that Spartan women when pregnant should look constantly at statues of Castor and Pollux, representing strength and beauty, so that their offspring might be similarly developed’,⁶⁶ the mother-to-be enters into encounters with the cinema of Tarkovsky? Might its affectively edifying forces find their way – in a way that, I concede, would be impracticable to gauge – through to the uterine space?

⁶⁴ F. Gonzalez-Crussi, *On being Born and other Difficulties* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2004), 90.

⁶⁵ Tarkovsky, quoted in Loughlin, “The Long Take,” 371.

⁶⁶ Fordyce Barker, “The Influence of Maternal Impressions on the Fetus,” in *Childbirth: Changing Ideas and Practices in Britain and America 1600 to the Present*, ed. Philip K. Wilson (Hamden, CT: Garland, 1996), 384.

III

The link between Stalker's ethos and facets of midwifery practice is underpinned by a sacramental connection with the moist, fecund earth ('Mati-Syra-Zemiya') that in Russian peasant traditions was 'not only assimilated to the biological body, but was also the basis for the social community and oversaw its order.'⁶⁷ On the one hand, Stalker stands for *heteronomy* in relation to *Zonal* otherness, a veritable hostage to its needs, holding in question the existence of unadulterated practical reason, the self-certainty of the 'moral point of view',⁶⁸ and freedom as 'aggressive, self-accumulative, and eventually finally murderous.'⁶⁹ But his line of flight 'off the track' of 'socially sanctioned interaction'⁷⁰ bespeaks a *heteromorphic* subject wilfully unburdening himself from institutionally imposed inhibitions. I think of the dissidence of midwives committed to practicing 'under-the-radar' in U.S. States that have case law prohibiting Certified Professional Midwives from attending labour: supporting a home birth can result in a felony prosecution. Consider Karen Brock: residing in Alabama, where she is classified as a 'lay' midwife, she once received 'a 30-day suspended

⁶⁷ Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, 56.

⁶⁸ Kimberly Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 123.

⁶⁹ Ziarek, *Ethics of Dissensus*, 7.

⁷⁰ Ronal Bogue, *Deleuze and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013), 156.

jail sentence, 18 months of unsupervised probation, and \$1000 in fines’, and yet continues to orchestrate births - typically in a rented private house just across the border.⁷¹ The transgression of totalitarian order, his passage from city limits to countryside, also suggests both a homage to the matrifocal religion of the Ancient Slaves, persisting in secret rites at river and field despite attacks by ruling warrior elites and masculine priesthood, and a classic motif in Russian literature, brought to the fore by Pushkin, of the calls for the ‘weak and divided’⁷² male ‘hero’ to return to the motherland for absolution. *Stalker* could be aligned with a radical midwifery in its potentiality to mediate the ‘anarchic diachronic of obligation’ and the ‘temporality of political praxis’,⁷³ conducting an intimate revolt that creates what Hakim Bey terms a ‘temporary autonomous zone’ - the liberation of ‘an area (of land, of time, of imagination)’⁷⁴ in the fissures of State colonisation, a ‘physical and virtual’⁷⁵ space that must recurrently restructure itself to resist capture by conservative forces. And yet, at a late point in the film,

Lillian on the backyard,
dancing Duncan’s
‘Revolutionary Étude’:
beating the grass,
as if working an assembly line,
lowering your head
in dismay –
the pause
held me, accusatorily –
no longer was I akin
to the enraptured Berlioz
before the motions of Harriet.
Through your cupped hands,
a clarion call to revolt:
I, too, commanded
into the struggle
to extricate your body
from the grip of the Centaurs,
to surge beside Louise Michel
as the Montmartre bells pealed,
and drape myself
over the cannon.

⁷¹ Jennifer Block, *Pushed: The Painful Truth about Childbirth and Modern Maternity Care* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), 180.

⁷² Hubbs *Mother Russia* p210

⁷³ Ziarek, *Ethics of Dissensus*, 83.

⁷⁴ Hakim Bey “The Temporary Autonomous Zone,” accessed October 2, 2012, <http://www.altheim.com/lit/taz/taz.html#labelTAZ>.

⁷⁵ Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (London: Pluto, 2005), 163.

Writer effectively accuses Stalker of being ruled by ego fantasy: “You’re like God almighty here. Now I see why the Stalker can never enter the room... You revel in all that power, that mystery, your authority!” This calls attention to the issue of transference and counter-transference that the midwife must militate against, since the former displaces the labouring woman’s own response-ability, supplanting her potential for mobilising intuitive resources and creative powers, whilst the latter would involve the midwife diverting and appropriating, albeit unconsciously, the mother’s outpouring of positive affections, confounding this with an essentially personal love for her, when it should be channelled into the mother-baby dyad.⁷⁶ Writer’s reproach also calls up Hegel’s objection to what he terms the ‘beautiful soul’, whose ‘perfection of moral subjectivity... cannot realise itself within the world of sense,’ his motives thus deemed selfish due to there being ‘no access for the outside to the moral source’⁷⁷ of his actions. Going by this verdict, it is not wholly surprising that Stalker is ultimately dejected by what he perceives to be an unshakable cynicism in his companions: “They’ve got the organ with which one believes atrophied for lack of use.” But is his

When the midwife
first put an ear to the pulse
was there heard
a benediction for fortitude:

Here’s to the angel
singing in the
valley of the deaf;
the poet
scraping through a
mass of bad breath;
the dancer
beating at
damaged legs,
from the start – discord! –
but no remorse
for a willingness
to be born.

Here’s to the painter
whose canvas is a
war-torn land;
the healer
whose wounds make the
sick hang back;
the sailor
whose voyages fall
off the map,
from the start – discord! –
but no remorse
for a willingness
to be born.

⁷⁶ Fahy, “Midwifery Guardianship,” 44.

⁷⁷ Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*, 124.

lamentation altogether warranted? As Tarkovsky notes, the Writer returns ‘as a man who speaks of human dignity, who realised he was not a good man. For the first time he faces this question, he enters the path. When the Stalker says that all his efforts were wasted, that nobody understood anything, that nobody needed him – he is mistaken because the writer understood everything.’⁷⁸ Perhaps the fact that the men did not enter the *Room* is symptomatic of their newfound awareness that the ideas they had upheld regarding desire and hope would be confirmed only as delivering ‘phantasms’ rather than that a ‘fertile truth’.⁷⁹ Tellingly, as Stalker’s wife enters the tavern, they seem to have taken on a prayerful mien, and as they witness her forbearance and fidelity towards him, their silent visages exude a calm wonder - at variance with the intellectual wrangling they were earlier liable to.

However, if what Tarkovsky refers to as the woman’s ‘selfless, unthinking devotion’⁸⁰ to her husband testifies to a sort of ethical epiphany, we must finally pause to address what this might mean for Stalker’s wife. As she tends to Stalker’s pangs of

Here’s to the lover
 whose message never
 reaches the shore;
 the scientist
 citing cracks that
 industry ignores;
 the mother
 whose scream busts the
 tablets of law,
 from the start – discord! –
 but no remorse
 for a willingness
 to be born.

⁷⁸ Tarkovsky, quoted in Jerzy Illg and Leonard Neuger, "I'm interested in the problem of inner freedom...", accessed 15 July 2014,

<https://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalgia.com/TheTopics/interview.html>

⁷⁹ Plato, *Theaetetus*, In *The Theaetetus of Plato*, ed. Myles Burnyeat, trans. M.J. Levett. (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1990), 270.

⁸⁰ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 198.

anguish, assisting him into bed, serving him water, dabbing his head and neck with a cloth, her proposal to accompany him to the *Zone* – “do you think I have nothing to ask for” – is met with a bewildered expression but an unequivocal “no.” Invoking criticisms that have been levelled at Levinas’s trope of the feminine and portrayal of maternity, does Stalker not figure woman as the unconditional welcome of the home, placing her as *not other enough*, relegated to performing ‘a supporting role in the philosophical drama of the self-realisation’⁸¹ of the masculine subject?

The question concerning whether the ethical significance of Tarkovsky’s cinema – examined in terms of its resonances with midwifery – is egregiously diminished by a tendency to value woman only as a self-abnegating maternal body is undoubtedly an important one. The interaction between Stalker and his wife in the pre-departure scene at the beginning of the film hardly constitutes a dialogue - that is, a movement of mutual expressivity. Reluctant to meet his wife’s gaze, insusceptible to her wretched entreaties – “Think about your daughter... I can’t spend my life waiting for you. I’ll die” – and unyielding to the contact of her forehead pressed against his upper back, he withdraws from her body in the direction of a future, a different temporality,

⁸¹ Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love*, 46.

that she is barred from partaking in. Her voice is not experienced as the interruptive force of the Other's commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', but as a silent language. She does not stand as a 'face' but as a familiar, domesticated presence with no power to unsettle, and the scene culminates with her breaking into a paroxysm of sobbing, writhing on the ground, hand close to her stomach, tossing her head frenziedly from side-to-side in and out of the shadows, the camera drawing closer to reveal her nipples protruding through her nightdress, as the sound of the passing train swells to a crescendo. As Luce Irigaray writes of Levinas's metaphysical manoeuvring, 'he abandons the feminine other, leaves her to sink, in particular into the darkness of a pseudo-animality in order to return to his responsibilities in the world of men-amongst-themselves.'⁸² It is troubling that, for a filmmaker so committed to connecting the male protagonist with the tangible, life-giving qualities of the physical landscape and the elements, woman is deprived of the pleasure of a *caress* that would create the space for a 'fecundation in which each brings the other to birth'.⁸³ Stalker's hands enter into a deeply sensual contact with the Zone, but his wife's situation would seem to be a far cry from

⁸² Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 183.

⁸³ Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 136

the ‘remembrance of profound intimacy’ described by Irigaray: ‘Searching for what has not yet come into being for himself, he invites me to become what I have not yet become.’⁸⁴

For Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, Tarkovsky’s vision involves ‘a total absence of women as equals and fellow travellers’, consigning them to an ‘at times mysterious, but basically unchanging physical and emotional universe.’⁸⁵ The tendency to erase the complexities of living women through the appeal to a desexualised maternal ideal – whose attributes of humility, submission, and self-sacrifice he appropriates for his philosophy of artistic creation – is perhaps best illustrated by *Nostalgia*. The frozen, hushed radiance of Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto* and Gorchakov’s wife is contrasted with the worldliness and willfulness of Eugenia, who seems to be positioned as emblematic of the spiritual decline of post-Renaissance Europe. In an early scene, Eugenia is presented as both nonplussed by and detached from the church fertility ritual, and is recalcitrant towards the sacristan’s assertion that “a woman is meant to have children”, replying “That’s all she’s meant for?” She then spends the remainder of the film being humiliated in her work

⁸⁴ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 187.

⁸⁵ Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 246.

as interpreter by the closemouthed indifference of Gorchakov – whose dreams and reveries betray a fetishisation of pregnancy – culminating in her aggressively uncovering her breast in a futile attempt to seduce him, before being driven away into the sinister company of a businessman. Johnson and Petrie propose that Stalker’s wife represents the ‘most positive’⁸⁶ wife-figure in Tarkovsky’s oeuvre, for she is at least afforded sustained moments to reflect on her struggles. Consider her final monologue to camera: In the ‘mobility’ and ‘porous’ receptivity of a face speaking through the mask, are we not exposed to the ‘lik’ – one of a number of Russian nouns for the face, linked to the ‘moral responsibility’ implicit in ‘lichnost’ – a ‘responsive mirror’ of the ‘soul made flesh’?⁸⁷ As she tremulously utters the words, “You know my mother was against it. You’ve probably noticed already that he’s not of this world”, whilst fingering her cigarette, the pathos of an identity being held hostage to unchosen responsibility – “I knew it all myself that he was doomed... only what could I do?” – is rendered palpable. I cannot help but feel that if the devotional wonder and respect with which the Stalker treats the alterity of the Zone (notably a feminine noun in Russian) were carried over into

⁸⁶ Ibid., 246.

⁸⁷ Caryl Emerson, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 30.

passionate attendance to the desire of the embodied woman before him, the ethical reach of the film would be enhanced immeasurably. To borrow terms from Irigaray, Stalker appears to ‘know nothing’ of the ‘immediate ecstasy’⁸⁸ of the communion that produces a third dimension through which her own becoming might be mediated, and which would ‘assist her to discover’ her ‘own specific face’⁸⁹ not separated from *eros* or overtaken by the man-God, father-son relation. It would seem that Tarkovsky fails to adequately factor in an intermediary, a midwife figure that attests to this sensible, ethical work. That being said, the outcome of the journey through the Zone – the unconsummated wish, the figuring of a barrier to masculine transcendence – could be construed as revealing a demand to turn back towards locating transformative meaning ‘in the finite structures of the world,’⁹⁰ and not assuming an overcoming of the immanence of a life indivisible from the creative powers of women.

⁸⁸ Irigaray, “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas,” 80.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹⁰ Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 140.

Home Deliveries Are For Pizza: Part I

For only so long can I authorise the reduction
of the angular gyrus to the function
of buffing up *The Students* within the spandrels
of the Great Hall's Commemorative Arch.
Invited to gander at the manuscript leaf
from Whitman's opus, I maunder through tunnels
between Library and Capitol - where are we going?
No pure contralto or wild lisp audible
beyond the rumble and clatter of trolleys.
Restore the question of what's conservable,
but not in terms of oxidised chromophores.

Scrypt-muffled by legislative sovereignty,
the hauntic urge for a certain present-
mindedness to vacate the premises
that obliterate those scratching after-living
out lives of wretched punctuality.
Stare at the wall from sunrise to sunset -
as if it would achieve a tender proximity
to the negro hirelings in the marble quarries.
'Keep up fires under the moulds' -
how to trace back a trace that effects
such a conflation of the double message
from the medial temporal lobe:
veridical sensory and semantic recovery -
for the future. Lack one lacks both.

The steward points towards the gilt ceiling.
I cannot dissociate the torch of learning
wielded by the Minerva of War
from civilians turned into human torches,
the bloodied school books, and cattle carcasses,

the howling of prayer from a cradle of rubble.
Last night I lay by the acorn gazebo
in Silver Spring, and pictured for a second
the water sparkling with specs of mica -
but thought is cleaved – dialectic constant –
to a shrapnel shard inside a crater
upon a women’s college lawn
with an inscription from a maker
of not smart but deadly H.A.R.M’s.

In Union Station, I notice an open
copy of the *Nation* on the knees
of a man dozing, and read a report
on Occupy in Zuccotti Park:
a figure wearing a Victorian shirtwaist
and rimless glasses sans earpieces
stood up and said she was Emma Goldman -
travelled through time to support the encampment.
By the Freedom Bell someone is dancing
and yelping the blues, headphones on ears,
jack-plug dangling loose at his side.

Woot! Woot! There’s legendary Givens
beside the bus, jogging backwards
as he always does, on the logic -
God only knows, it’s a soulful perspective
on the geography leaning in.
Should I relay Olson’s warning
regarding those who do not move,
throw in his path the complete *Maximus*,
or found a fiction of the giant
flinging back his arms inside
the POPYRUS store. Charles, is this
immortality, did you locate a polis

where you can taste tufts of tansy
by the doorway of every kitchen
and expel the parasitic class
that bring malabsorption and stunted cognition?
He has no bright yellow buttons with him,
just brittlebush resin on his teeth.
Through a beauty retailer's window
he watches folds of skin being layered
with paste from aged volcanic ash.
All a desert, shining, he says.

I wonder if Emma's in prison again
ministering to 'venereal' women
or in a kerosene-lit tenement,
holding a table-cloth and apron,
ready to catch one born into poverty.
I wander towards McPherson Square,
perhaps she'll make an appearance there,
as the lobbyist steps over piss-flecked
tarp of the homeless, calling his concierge,
grasping a card of gold and palladium.

The Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool
is really cool, the tour guide proclaimed,
almost as cool as the photographs,
so take more photographs while you're here,
but it's like the sights aren't actually here,
the *eies* of the people set *vypon*
a thin and shallow simulacrum.
Or perhaps it's just my imagination
that's such a depressed rain shadow basin.
With swollen tongue and sunken vision -
on the seventh day, America,
did the midwife feel inside

to find overriding cranial sutures
and maceration from autolysis?

Last week I retreated to the suburbs
and tried unsuccessfully to write a satire
on what Western revolt had come to,
looking out on main street's bronze statue
of Roscoe the Rooster in mid-strut.
Feral, he roved and mooched around town
for years, a stately icon for folk
who'd dress themselves as nuclear warheads
while fireworks soared on the Fourth of July,
a rebel evading control officials,
the gaffs and amino acid jabs,
the presidential committee rooms,
the ancient General who'd co-opt
his spirit to safeguard civilisation .

Gazing up to where the Ad Astra sculpture
penetrates the triple-star cluster
and disappears into a point -
is it amazing how disinterested
I am in what the artist termed
the conquest of space. Should I enter
and get rid of my all disgust, shout 'boy,
how I'd have loved to have been behind
the orgasmic whump of your megatonnage'?
I'd be called a dud, for I only yearn
to search in deep to deploy the repulsive
force of the uttermost speculative
matter, lighter than nothing, holding
open the mouths of traversable spheres
defying existing forms of physics.
'Follow me without noise' - enjoined

the visitor, self-elected Wound-Dresser,
carrying horehound candy across
unpaved roads by a noisome bayou,
past horse-carts full of sawn-off limbs,
towards a pavilion where the surgeons
moisten stitching-thread with their saliva.

As he speaks of the need for magnetic touch,
I begin to ponder what it could mean
to midwife another in their dying.
This summer past, by Grandpa's bedside,
I massaged the blackened stains on his cheek
grafted with tissue from his collarbone,
whispered of his cherished Steinbeck,
'a fella ain't got a soul of his own,'
His son, my father, clutched his hand,
prompting an involuntary retrieval
of the antiphony of a ditty
first broadcast during my father's infancy:
'I'm in pieces, bits and pieces,
and that's the way it'll always be.'
Contractions of his chest and throat -
the clunk of a trowel on hardened cement,
the scrape of a rake across the grit.
He never shrunk from the threat of finitude,
not even that year his garden crops
were infected by late blight and pink rot
as he lay in wait for a suitable heart
and a new age of suppressed immunity
to prevent rejection of the stranger.
Here his supreme vulnerability
exposed me as being not able to be
able, the condition for letting live
the necessary emptiness,

the in-breaking into solitude.
Strange now to think of you, gone
hiking in the land of a thousand
mountains, in homage to Borel.

A horse paces before me, windsucking,
rapidly flicking his ears back and forth.
The rider's cotton is yellow-stained,
F.N.S embroidered on her coat.
She pulls a note from the envelope pocket,
says they set out over Kentucky creek beds
for remote nursing outpost centres
many, many, days ago,
and now they've been summoned to find and assist
the midwives who are under arrest.
The horse is weaving; she rubs his withers,
then exhales nose to nose. I ask, why's he spooked?
She says that perhaps he too is attuned
to a menace that harries them across their trail,
who sings the body electronic,
far from exhausted by the organic,
a revamped automated projection
from a hundred years ago,
not alive but as a virus
thriving through our communities
that in their fear lend it recognition,
whereby it binds and inserts its code.
We no longer collapse with calomel and lancet,
but through digital bytes and virtual gas.
It's totally opposed to any movement
designed to perpetuate the midwife.

Afterword

When asked about the origins of this project, whether it be with an air of lukewarm bemusement or fervent intrigue, I confess I've often been tempted to wish I could enthrall my interlocutors with a recollection of some Eureka moment - say, involving me reposing in the bath with a newspaper and the Kate Bush song 'Breathing' suddenly sounding from the flat below just as I come across an article on a retention crisis in midwifery, prompting me to scamper to my bookshelf, turn to the passages in Plato's *Symposium* regarding procreation in the realm of Ideas, and then pour out a thesis outline in a Yeatsian semi-trance. Though nothing so fanciful defined the germinal phase, I suppose there was an aspect of the epiphinal in the realisation that the midwife – whose historical and cultural significance I'd hitherto given scant consideration to – would be at the crux of my inquiries-to-come. How did this to-come come about? I could hark back to at least four factors that came into play quite contemporaneously a little over four years ago: A conversation with an intimate friend shortly after she had given birth to her first son, in which she spoke with candour about how, although there were no complications as such, the hospital milieu undermined her confidence in her potential to labour without synthetic or instrumental interventions, and left her feeling dispirited for what she hoped would be a nigh numinously-charged rite of passage had been recast into a medical event; I encountered a short polemic in *Resurgence* magazine entitled 'From Womb to World', which first brought my attention to how the technocratic-obstetric paradigm that emerged in the West in the mid-18th century is fundamentally at odds with time-honoured midwifery approaches to maternal care; my first exposure to the Emmanuel Levinas's discourse of the ethical – a language of embodiment,

vulnerability, proximity, exposure, substitution for the other – as I was continuing to pursue certain broad philosophical strands from my MA dissertation - pertaining to Martin Buber’s proposition that there is no I taken in itself, his pointing towards the co-construction of the ‘between’ as an ontological ground, and the implications of that for anarchist praxis; the fourth factor is what was echoed in more than a few subsequent conversations with midwives, in which they emphasised that the initial summons towards involvement in midwifery presented itself as an obsessive voice insistently interrupting their everyday thoughts, choosing them out, which resonated with Denise Riley’s discussion of inner speech being the locus of morality and materialisation of conscience: ‘an aural possession of the self by something else, announcing the ethical like a messenger but at the same time striking one as an indwelling authority.’¹

I began to engage with predominantly continental feminist critiques revealing the partiality of the preponderant paradigms of selfhood in the history of western philosophy, which had an inestimable impact on how I conceptualised the import of the midwife with respect to ethical subjectivity. From Plato’s emphasis on the philosopher’s endeavour to get rid of despised corporeality in order to contemplate things themselves with the soul by itself to Aristotle’s classification of the mother furnishing the formless passive matter that through the father is given form; from the Judeo-Christian deference to Word of a patriarchal deity to the Cartesian split between two kinds of substance: a pure thinking consciousness posited outside physical laws and the body as automaton; from the self-legislative Kantian moral agent abstracted from needs, passions, unconscious fears and desires, to the usurpation of the of the living substance of the labouring subject by the logic of

¹ Denise Riley, “ ‘A Voice without a Mouth’: Inner Speech,” in *The Force of Language*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 15.

capital, the Western cultural imaginary has long been patterned on a mind-body binary tied to lateral associations amounting to a devaluation and subjugation of what is coded as intrinsic to the female sphere.

I set out to discover ways in which the gap or third term that is denied in such dualistic structures of thought may be illuminated through a figuring of midwifery, releasing Socrates' mother from the shadows.

At variance with the egalitarian feminism of de Beauvoir and Firestone that advocates an elimination of the effects of women's ahistorical biologically given specificities that restrict women's access to the rights patriarchal society conferred to men, I found the midwife relation to be highly instructive for demonstrating that the body is a threshold of nature or organic processes and cultural production – circumventing both crude essentialism and constructionism – and thus a key task was to reconfigure, or re-represent sexual morphology in terms that do not repudiate women's agentic powers and place her as an object of lack. As indicated in “First, No Autogenesis”, research into the role of the placenta – as a fleshy mediator of exchange that evinces a pre-symbolic logic of intersubjectivity where differentiation and connection are not mutually exclusive aspects – was critical not only for addressing the insidious reductive operations of the biotechnical gaze, and the tendency to equate optics and knowledge, eye and idea, that goes back to Plato, but also for providing an alternative to Hegel's emphasis on the violent struggle for recognition and the psychoanalytic modelling of paternal regulation and entry into the Law of the Symbolic as that which prohibits the fusion that would lead to psychosis.

It was incumbent on me to remain aware of the thorny issue of how, regardless of how sincere or passionate I claim to be in my support of and learning

from feminist projects, I was born as a white male and therefore enjoy the privileges of being representative of and carrier of the patriarchal mode, implicated as an agent of the structures to be transformed. And so the challenge of evaluating Deleuze and Guattari's provocative and vexed concept of 'becoming-woman' – and the proposition that all becomings must pass through a becoming woman – seemed inescapable. Although the rhizomatic movement may well be appreciated as a summons for both sexes to traverse and dismantle the rigid fantasmic form of 'woman' projected by man as the dominant standard that purports to impose itself on all matter, and so effect a breaking down of androcentric subjectivity, it has nonetheless been criticised by a number of feminist theorists as an appropriative and idealised metaphor. I deemed the insertion of the preposition 'with', harking back to the etymological basis of midwife 'with woman', apt for marking a forbidding of the neutralisation of women's anatomical and reproductive specificities and diminishing the particularities of empirical women's historical struggles to reclaim her organism, and instead underscoring a double becoming through affirming that our power to think and act is realised by virtue of a coordination and amplification of the powers of others rather than being over and against them.

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