

Metaphor, Male/Female Theorists, and the “Birth Rites” of Women:  
The Reclamation Projects  
of  
Sylvia Plath, Anaïs Nin and Maya Deren

By  
Pamela Mansbridge

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of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
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## INTRODUCTION

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the very essence of metaphor is an “understanding and experiencing of one kind of thing in terms of another” (5), going on to explain that this frequently involves highlighting certain characteristics and concealing others. While this may seem innocent enough, it appears less so when one considers the extent to which the female body has long been associated with figurative language and that the major trope within theorizing about metaphor and language is the “container,” of which the prototype is usually regarded as the womb. When one further considers the way that the metaphorical process is repeatedly likened to many aspects of the birthing experience, conception and generativity, what then becomes an ominous possibility is that “experiencing one thing in terms of another” might also be a male form of appropriating an experience that is uniquely female.

In “Breaking the Hold on the Story,” Lola Lemire Tostevin points out that theory in general “cannot be a sexually neutral discipline since it has always concerned itself with...inaccurate phantasms of women” (388). My primary concern in this thesis is to demonstrate that not only has woman’s body long been at the centre of literary, artistic, philosophic and scientific scholarship, but also that the relationship between woman, the birthing experience and metaphor is unlike any other, and that no subject matter better differentiates male writers from female writers than the experience of giving birth. While there have been many studies exploring male appropriation of female experience, my

study will focus on the metaphors that allow a female writer the possibility of reclaiming an experience that has been used and manipulated by male theorists, either out of fear and misunderstanding or in the interests of power and control. The first two chapters will explore the theoretical frameworks of metaphor with particular attention to male theorists in the first chapter and to female theorists in the second. The third chapter will demonstrate how these frameworks function in the work of three women artists of different time periods, mediums and styles, with a view to showing how each of them uses the female body as a space that resists borders and definitions, and the way that in their works metaphor becomes the doorway to hidden dimensions.

Within this context, this thesis will explore not only the way that theorizing about metaphor repeatedly involves recourse to a very female experience but also the extent to which this process has the effect of attempting to “contain” that which cannot be contained. Insofar as most theorists agree that there is no single definition that adequately describes metaphor, their response seems similar to man’s own understanding of women, and in both instances we seem to be dealing with something that borders on the unknown and the incomprehensible. In turn, I would argue that the connection between the indefinable power of women and metaphor, and specifically with respect to certain metaphoric experiences—namely birthing metaphors—allows women the means of generating and reclaiming the female body. Just as within the very word “metaphor” we can find the hidden entailment of the word “mother,” so does the maternal domain present the female artist with an alternative metaphoric way of conceiving and articulating the female body from the inside.

Specifically, the first chapter of the thesis will explore the literary tradition of personifying poetry and figurative language as female, beginning in classical antiquity and moving to contemporary theory, with particular attention to the implications of using the female body as a way of theorizing about metaphor. I will be examining the terminology employed by a variety of male theorists: Bruce Fraser's intriguing view of metaphor as "a black hole in the universe"; Michael Reddy's discussion of how words are envisioned as bodily containers whereby communication functions as extraction; Ted Cohen's argument that metaphor operates to create a sexually explicit sense of "intimacy"; Max Black's focus on the "interactive" aspect between two distinct subjects in the metaphorical process; Donald Schön's implicitly creative theory of "generative" metaphor; and finally, Lakoff and Johnson's specific use of the birth experience in their discussion of "making" and "causation," and their continuous emphasis on metaphor's potential to create new perceptions and new conceptual realities. As I will argue, not only must we pay particular attention to the very metaphor that a male theorist employs but also the experience that he manipulates in order to explain the metaphorical process, especially since as Lakoff and Johnson point out: "metaphor provides a way of partially communicating unshared experiences, and it is the natural structure of our experience that makes this possible" (225).

The second chapter of the thesis will focus on the biological revisioning of Evelyn Fox Keller and the semiotic theories of Julia Kristeva, using their research to document the appropriation of the female experience through gendered metaphors spanning across literature, science and theory, and then showing how they attempt to establish an alternative way of theorizing about the connection between woman and her reproductive



function, and about both metaphor and language. For while both Keller and Kristeva acknowledge the dangerous and potentially violent implications that may result from any effort to wrest back a female subjective voice, they both stress the need to recuperate the female body, and enable us to envision how through the use of metaphors such as the birth experience, women can create a distinctly female exploration of the body, resist the male gaze and create a “womb of their own.”

In the third chapter, I will be looking at the way in which the birth process and related concepts are articulated in the written and visual works of the three female artists: Sylvia Plath’s last book of poetry, *Ariel*; Anaïs Nin’s prose poem, *House of Incest*, and the short excerpt from her *Diary* entitled “The Birth”; and Maya Deren’s short film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Arguing that woman’s use of her own body as a textual model functions as a means to reclaim the female body, I will attempt to show how the narrative “container” in their works—whether in the form of poetry, prose or film—functions similar in space and time to the pregnant female body and as a linguistic example of giving birth. In the case of Plath, particular attention will be given to her rich and evocative use of pregnancy and birth metaphors throughout her collection; with Nin, I will show how she moves one step further by providing in a single short piece, a fluidity and womb-like experience that she classifies as the “music of the womb”; and Deren, in turn I will argue, encapsulates the visual aspect of metaphor through a return-to-the-womb experience that takes what the other artists have done on the printed page and visualizes the journey back to the female body. In the course of discussing their works, I will also be focusing on how Plath wrote, to speak metaphorically, with blood on her hands in an attempt to understand and come to terms with her own body, how Nin wrote

to differentiate herself—to write like a woman—and how Deren made films as a filmmaker and as the “star” marked by contradictory desires for power in the pursuit of a true female image.

Overall, my concern in this thesis is to argue that just as woman’s body is linked to the indefinable suggestive of metaphor, so does this conjunction function as the means to explore an unknown space that is neither under male control nor reflected through masculine imagery. As women explore the use of their body and in turn, reclaim the female body and the womb, women’s writing can open into a new order. In the case of women, the act of writing can be synonymous with the act of giving birth, and a woman writing about the depths of the womb is able to articulate a perspective that counters the traditional male voice because the experience is located in a secret, hidden part of the body. Perhaps where Sir Philip Sidney’s muse told him to look to his heart and write, woman’s muse has been telling her to look a little further down.

## CHAPTER I

### Male Theorizing about Metaphor

The association of metaphor with the body, and specifically the female body and the birthing process, has a long history beginning with the etymology of the word itself. Not only is metaphor generally classified as a “figure of speech” but the word metaphor also derives from the Greek root *phorus*. That is, just as the very word “figure” is conventionally associated with the body, and particularly the curved profile of the female form, so the root word *phorus*—which is a combining form meaning both bearer and producer—suggests more than a mere relation between metaphor and woman but in addition a connection with the “bearing” or generative aspect of the female body. Similarly, if the major trope within theorizing about metaphor and language is the “container,” the prototype of such a structure is clearly the womb. Nor should we overlook that “to speak metaphorically” is relatively synonymous with “speaking poetically,” and accordingly that the feminizing of metaphor draws upon a centuries-old tradition of personifying poetry as female.

The personification of poetry as female can be traced as far back through history to one of the first literary critics, the philosopher Plato and his classical attack on poetry in Book X of *The Republic* and *Ion*. In questioning the social and intellectual value of poetry, Plato appeals to the stoic and rational man, the “manly part,” and defines poetry as a rapturous stirring of emotions that is “deemed to be the part of a woman” (47). By

aligning poetry with the emotive woman, Plato effectively feminizes poetry: “She lets [the passions] rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue” (48). His powerful series of metaphors suggest that poetry is a siren and that man must be “very conscious of her charms,” must “not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many,” and must be “on his guard against her seductions” (48-49). According to Plato, a feminized poetry has “no true or healthy aim”(46), she only seeks to intoxicate with pleasure and infect reason, affecting rational man in such a manner that his “mind is no longer in him” and “he is powerless” to her charms” (43). And Plato, so closely connected with the beginnings of literary criticism, commences a long and continuing association of poetry with the female body.

During the Renaissance, which was highly influenced by Plato’s philosophy, it was the English poet-soldier Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* who centrally perpetuated the tradition, even if he took quite an opposite approach. For Sidney, poetry is a virtuous endeavor that can civilize and instruct, and in countering Plato’s seductress, he likens poetry to a virtuous and fair woman, one whom “we are ravished with delight to see” and “ever setteth virtue so out in her best colours” (91-103). Moreover, for him poetry is a saintly nurse, a mental nourisher and provider of knowledge: “Poetry in the noblest nations is and languages that are known, hath been the first light-giver to ignorance, and the first nurse, whose milk by little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledge” (83). Criticizing those who attack poetry, he presents it as abused and mistreated woman—“as with some good women who often sick, but in faith cannot tell where”—and his “Apology” becomes an attempt to rescue this “damsel in distress” (95).

It was, of course, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century rationalist philosopher, John Locke, who first specifically associated metaphor with the female, most extensively in Book III, Chapter IX of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Privileging literal language and concrete experience, Locke claims that figurative language is seductive and misleading, and similar to Plato, he compares such tropes to the deceptive qualities of the “fair sex”:

It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputations; and I doubt not but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. (146-47)

In aligning the eloquent art of rhetoric with the “fair sex,” Locke not only implies a direct relation between the “figurative” nature of metaphor and the “figure” of the female sex but more specifically associates the “beauties” of the female form with those “arts of deceiving,” and the physical female body with an artificiality and abuse of language. In fact, according to Locke, figurative speech can insinuate only wrong ideas, move the passions and mislead judgment, and like woman can be indulged in only insofar as man keeps her in her “proper” place and knows where she belongs.

Countering Locke, in turn, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic *Defence of Poetry* attacks the notion that figurative language is artificial and claims that poetry is intellectually formative and moral in the highest sense. Through a defense

which itself proceeds by metaphorical association and the concept of the organic nature of poetry, Shelley claims that the language of poets is “vitally metaphorical” and marks “the before unapprehended relations of things” (430). As he sees it, the imagination, opposed to reason, grasps all things in their living process not as distinct entities but as an indivisible part of the whole and allows the mind to act upon thoughts and relations in order to create new and “unapprehended” thought for contemplation. According to Shelley’s organic philosophy, nature is a living and evolving process in which the general principle and the concrete become one, each evolving through and by means of the other, and significantly he makes his case through the use of birth and regeneration metaphors. Arguing that the language of poets is “vital,” he describes it as “the root and blossom of all other systems of thought” (433). Moreover, not only does he place a repeated emphasis on the “infancy” of society, and not only does he argue that art and the world coupled with poetry “bear(s) sweetness of kindred joy” and “reproduces all that it represents,” but he also observes that the “passages of poetry are produced by labour” (429-434). In short, Shelley’s “labour-produced” poetry suggests a relation with the reproductive nature of the female body, just as his organic view of poetry as a living and evolving process is quite evocative of the dynamic experience of giving birth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s later 19<sup>th</sup>-century American treatise on *Nature* also emphasizes the organic nature of language, and in the process goes so far as to argue that nature itself is in fact metaphorical: “The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (18). In chapter IV entitled “Language,” Emerson claims that “as we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy when it is all poetry, or all spiritual facts are

represented by natural symbols” (16). As he sees it, therefore, the more a language is metaphorical, the more it is natural, and the closer man is to nature, the richer his metaphors and the more powerful his language, to the extent that one who employs metaphorical or “picturesque” language is in “alliance with truth and God” (17). Not surprisingly, he himself resorts to a telling metaphor in arguing for the connection between language and nature: “All the facts in natural history taken by themselves have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it [natural history] to human history, and it is full of life” (15). Implicit here is the further association of nature and the female body, just as in arguing that the result of the coupling of human and natural history is that language acquires a “hidden life” (20), Emerson becomes one of the first theorists to foreground the connection between the verbal act of conceiving and the physical act of giving birth.

In *The Myth of the State*, written in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer also emphasized the act of “verbal conceiving” and the possibility of new conceptual innovations. His chapter entitled “Language and Myth” which emerged from his interest in the misconceptions of language and its incompatibility with scientific reasoning, argues that if language is an expression of thought and capable of distorting scientific conception then it must do so by giving support and preference to another mode. This other mode, according to Cassirer, is an alternate system of experiencing, seeing, feeling and conceiving, different from our accepted mode, and is called “discursive thought” or the poetic nature of language. Cassirer goes on to argue:

But if this is indeed the case—if metaphor, taken in this general sense,  
is not just a certain development of speech, but must be regarded as one

of its essential conditions—then any effort to understand its function

leads us back, once more, to the fundamental form of verbal conceiving. (121)

For Cassirer, metaphor is an “essential” and “fundamental” condition of language because it plays a central role in how we account for our perspectives of the world, make sense of reality and understand the problems we later try to resolve, and insofar as his notion of “verbal conceiving” contains a metaphor, its vehicle must be the physical act of conceiving, and specifically the experience of giving birth.

If we move now to recent theories of metaphor, no observation is quite so germane for my purposes as the twin comments made by Bruce Fraser in an article entitled “The Interpretation of Novel Metaphors.” Writing in the late 1970s in response to Allan Pavio’s examination of the psychological processes involved in metaphor comprehension, and arguing that there is no consistency in the way that we use or understand figurative language, Fraser observes that “metaphors are black holes in the universe of language” and that they are “often used as a device to mask sexual information” (339-40). As a scientific term, “black hole” refers to a hypothetical body in space, an invisible collapsed star that has become so condensed that neither light nor matter can escape its gravitational field, but by extension, the term is also frequently used by macho men to denigrate woman as vacuous or devouring monsters. If fact, of the three “hypothetical bodies”—metaphor, black holes and the female sex—any one could be substituted for the pronouns in Fraser’s concluding statement: “We know that *they* are there; many prominent people have examined *them*; *they* have had enormous amounts of energy poured into *them*; and, sadly, no one yet know very much about *them*” (340-41, emphasis mine). Thus, the implications of Fraser’s “black hole” metaphor entail an



intriguing relationship between the linguistic uncertainty of metaphor and the internal unknown space of the female.

In terms of linguistics, of course, few theorists have come to be regarded as more central to metaphor theory than Michael Reddy, who objected strenuously to what he called the “conduit” theory of communication. In his article, “The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language,” he argues that the metaphors we use to talk about human communication encourage us to view it in the wrong way. Extending Donald Schön’s views on “generative” metaphor and social policies, Reddy begins by noting that we tend to see communication as a process whereby “human beings place their internal thoughts and feelings within the external signals of language” (168). Implicit in such a view is not only the notion that language functions as a conduit, transferring thoughts bodily from one person to another, but also that words have “insides and outsides,” and “a space ‘inside’ wherein the meaning can reside”(165-68). In this way, words are regarded as linguistic “containers,” capable of carrying the speaker’s inserted meaning (ideas, thoughts and emotions), which once received, are opened by the hearer and the meaning extracted. As Reddy sees it, inherent in the “conduit” theory is the misleading idea that words somehow themselves contain meaning, thus trivializing the speaker’s and hearer’s own knowledge and experience, and he goes on to outline an alternative way of conceiving of human communication, employing a radical subjectivist or constructivist approach which takes into account the process of human understanding and perception.

For my purposes, the importance of Reddy’s theory lies in the “container” aspect of his theory of communication in conjunction with his repetitive emphasis on the notion

of “embodiment.” Protesting against the idea that thoughts are transferred “bodily” from one person to another, he argues that the “conduit” metaphor and “the core expressions which *embody* it, deserve a great deal more investigation and analysis” (170, emphasis mine). In this way, Reddy doubly draws attention to the “physical” aspect of such thinking, and since the body most commonly associated with the metaphorical process is the female’s, we begin to see how the “container” metaphor in question has its basis in the fundamental bodily container of the womb. Similarly, the extraction process inherent in the “conduit” theory is also highly suggestive of a natural process of extraction—i.e. the human experience of giving birth.

That such thinking about communication has a sexual dimension is indeed the point being made by Ted Cohen in his discussion of the “intimacy” dynamic of metaphor. Presented at the symposium “Metaphor: The Conceptual Leap” held in Chicago in 1978, Cohen’s lecture “Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy” is itself an intimate and frank discussion of the pragmatics of metaphor. Using as his point of departure the intellectual value of metaphor, Cohen justifies the use of metaphor not in terms of any cognitive content but rather for its practical value and use. According to Cohen, central to metaphoric communication “is a unique way in which the maker and appreciator of metaphor are drawn closer to one another,” an attraction which involves three aspects: “(1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation: and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community” (6). Cohen’s rites of metaphor clearly evoke courtship rituals between the sexes, and the similarity between the physical act of “making love” and Cohen’s “making

metaphor,” coupled with the way the process has its climax in “cultivated intimacy,” suggests that the metaphorical process is indeed a very “creative” experience.

Looking closer at Cohen’s argument and terminology, we might note the way that he sees metaphor as involving an “active engagement” whereby the hearer must “penetrate” the speaker’s remark “in order to explore” and “grasp the import” of the speaker’s invitation, and which concludes when the “two become an intimate pair” (7). In describing further the “special invitation” that characterizes metaphor, Cohen goes on to explain that “yet sometimes there is this wish to say something special, not to arouse, insinuate, or mislead, and not to convey an exotic meaning but to initiate explicitly the cooperative act of comprehension which is, in any view, something more than a routine act of understanding” (7). And for Cohen, it is this cooperative and more than routine exchange that leads to a conceptual act that yields “potent, fecund, generative metaphors”(5). In turn, what then comes into focus is Cohen’s latent cognitive argument that metaphors do in fact “bear knowledge” and thus, the further evocation of the “bearing” qualities of the female body (4).

Cohen’s theories are essentially an extension of Max Black’s “interactive” view of metaphor which is also especially concerned with giving metaphor a very “creative” role. Black’s position in his pioneering *Models and Metaphors* and later on in his supplement “More About Metaphor” originated from I. A. Richards’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* which argued that metaphor produces a meaning from the interaction between two ideas: “metaphor is fundamentally a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts” (94). For Black, the site of this exchange is a single word whose inclusive meaning is at the same time the result of this interaction. It is this

interaction between two thoughts that constitutes the “secret and mystery of metaphor” and gives it a particularly “creative” and “rule-violating nature” (23-39). Arguing that metaphor provides an alternative linguistic means of expression, Black emphasizes that “a successful metaphor is realized in discourse, is embodied in the given ‘text’,” and this embodiment, which results in something “new” and “creative,” again suggests the reproductive nature of metaphor.

In the course of focusing on the “creative” nature of metaphor, Black also takes issue with those who classify metaphors as “dead” or “live,” and argues that “a so-called dead metaphor is not a metaphor at all, but merely an expression that no longer has a pregnant metaphorical use” (25). Such terminology is clearly evocative of the female reproductive experience, just as Black’s description of the participants in this process is evocative of the sexual intercourse that causes it. According to Black, a metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects, the “primary” and the “secondary” and the two interact when “(a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject’s properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the secondary subject” (28). Thus, the interaction in question is indeed quite similar to the very interaction that takes place during the physiological process of fertilization, a process that results in a new entity, a baby, or what Black describes as the introduction of “some small change” into the world (35).

Given the extent to which Black’s theorizing about metaphor is so biologically based, it may be instructive to compare what scientists themselves have said about the fertilization process. In their physiological study of the prenatal period, for example,

Susan Tucker Blackburn and Donna Lee Loper observe that the process of fertilization takes 24 hours, beginning with contact between the sperm and secondary oocyte, and ending with fusion of the nuclei of the sperm and the ovum. Similar to Black's primary subject inciting the hearer to select some of the secondary subject's properties, the presence of the secondary oocyte incites the sperm to undergo the acrosome reaction which results in the removal of the glycoprotein coat and seminal plasma proteins from the plasma membrane over the head of the sperm. By selecting some of the sperm's properties, the sperm head attaches itself to the surface of the oocyte and their plasma membranes fuse, which results in the head and tail of the sperm entering the oocyte. Similar to Black's construction of a parallel implication-complex for the primary subject and the reciprocal parallel changes in the secondary subject, the oocyte (primary subject) reacts to the sperm penetration (secondary subject) whereby the second division of the ovum is completed; the nucleus enlarges, becomes known as the female pronucleus and the tail of the sperm degenerates while the head enlarges forming the male pronucleus. Finally, the female and male pronuclei approach each other, their membranes disintegrate, the nuclei fuse, and the zygote is now formed (see also Fig. 1).

Thus just as Black argues that in metaphor "two thoughts (are) active together," and that a metaphorical statement can generate new knowledge and insight by changing relationships between the things designed, so too does the zygote essentially create a unique creature with a species variation, a gene mixture with half of the chromosomes from the mother and the other half from the father. According to Black, moreover, it is the "interactive process" that gives a cognitive status to metaphor, for what is produced is not only a new entity but also a new configuration for perception and interpretation.

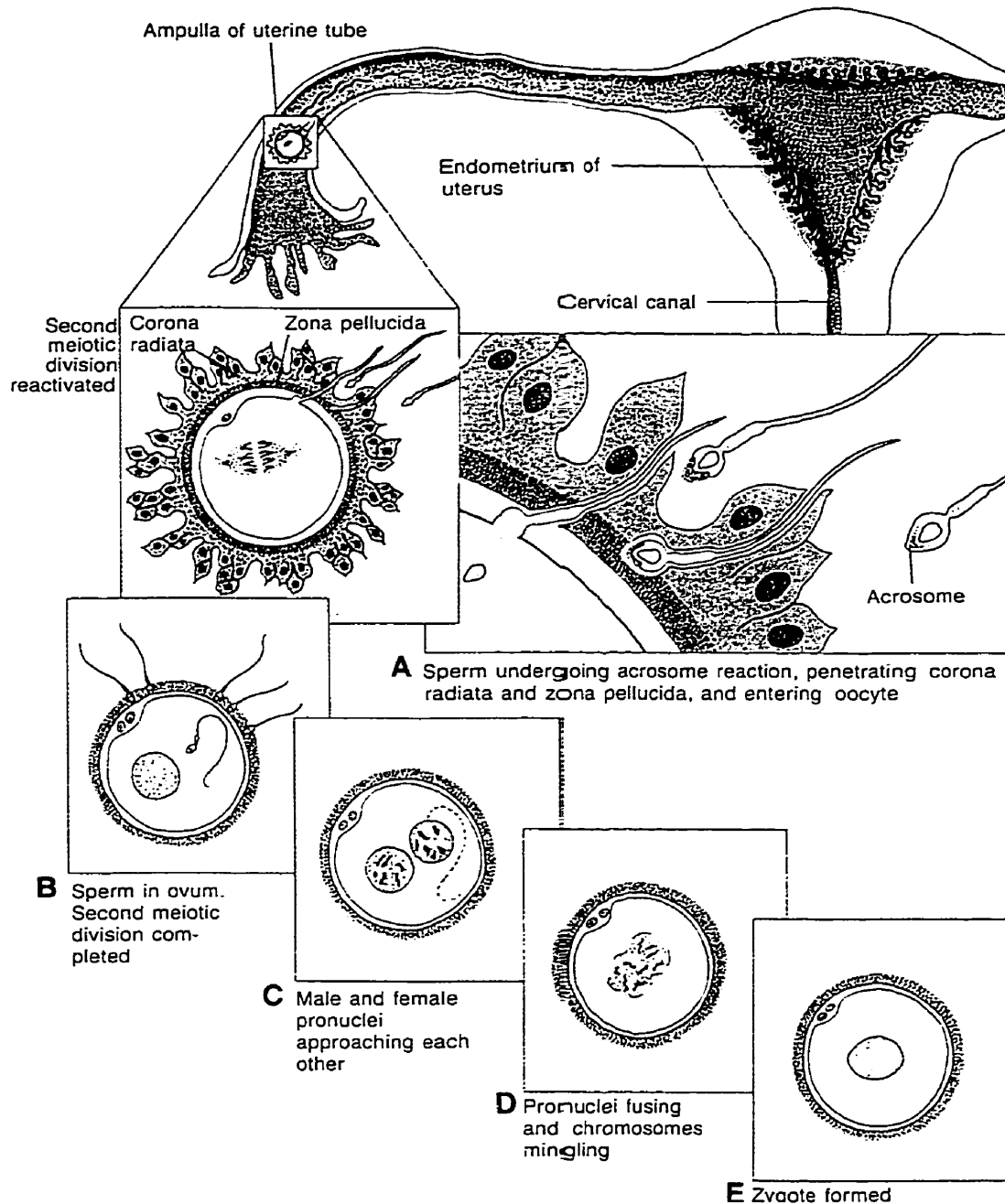


Fig. 1. Mechanism of fertilization. *Essentials of Human Embryology*. By K. L. Moore. Philadelphia: BC Decker, 1988. Fig. 3.

In attempting to find a metaphor that will help one concretely to visualize what is involved, Black enlists the example of an iceberg, arguing “every metaphor is the tip of a

submerged model” (30). Given his “creativity” thesis, however, plus his emphasis on the “pregnant metaphorical use” of “live” metaphors and his concern with the ability of metaphor to introduce “some small change into (the) world,” what also seems submerged behind his own iceberg model is another—i.e. that of the birthing process—and specifically, the image of the crowning of the baby’s head during birth. This “other” metaphor emerges even more clearly when Black observes that in order to understand the metaphorical process we need “at least to be thinking of life as the passage of information,” for the question in turn becomes where exactly and in what manner does this passage occur? (31). For Black, the creation of metaphor involves “conceptual innovations” that “stretch and twist, press and expand,” a process that is possible because “conceptual boundaries” are not “rigid, but elastic and permeable,” and he argues that we resort to such measures “because we often need to do so, the available literal resources of the language being insufficient to express our sense of the rich correspondences, inter-relations, and analogies of domains conventionally separated; and because metaphorical thought and utterance sometimes embody insight in no other fashion”(33). Just as the conceptual boundaries of metaphor contract and expand, so do the walls of the birth canal, so that throughout his emphasis on the “creative” aspect of metaphor, Black seems implicitly to be invoking analogies from the domain of the female body.

Metaphor’s ability to create new knowledge is also central to Donald Schön’s theory about “generative” metaphor, which he claims is capable of producing new perceptions, explanations and inventions. In fact, Schön’s article “Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem Setting in Social Policy” goes on to argue that metaphor is key to the way we construct and perceive the world. In his case, moreover, not only is

metaphor aligned with the body, but in the process of answering his introductory question “What is the anatomy of the making of generative metaphor?” he also goes on to describe the process in specifically anatomical or biological terms:

For the making of generative metaphor involves a developmental process.

It has a life cycle. In the earlier stages of the life cycle, one notices or feels that A and B are similar, without being able to say with respect to what.

Later on, one may come to be able to describe relations of elements present in a restructured perception of both A and B which account for the pre-

analytic detection of similarity between A and B, that is, one can formulate

an analogy between A and B. Later still, one may construct a general model

for which a redescribed A and a redescribed B can be identified as

instances. (142)

While it is standard practice to describe reasoning processes in terms of three stages, it seems equally clear that here at least what is being evoked or mimicked is the cycle of pregnancy. Just as Schön divides the life cycle of metaphor into “the earlier stages,” “later on,” and later still,” so is the duration of pregnancy divided into trimesters. And just as Schön emphasizes the developmental aspects of metaphor production so the majority of changes during pregnancy are progressive.

More specifically evocative of the situation that characterizes pregnancy is Schön’s emphasis on the indeterminacy of the first stage and his shift from what one “notices” to what one “feels.” During the first trimester of pregnancy, there are few apparent indications that gestation has begun. The uterus remains within the pelvic cavity for the first twelve weeks and most of the first signs and symptoms are sensed



internally. If pregnancy much like metaphor is at first relatively hidden and unperceived, so also are there parallels between Schön's second stage and the second trimester. Not only is there equivalence between being able to "formulate an analogy" and the visible signs of pregnancy but also between Schön's notion of a "restructured perception" of two things being likened and the development of the fetus from a single cell fertilized egg to a highly complex multicellular organism. Similarly, Schön's last stage, which features the construction of a "general model" is evocative of the third trimester during which the fetus begins to acquire a definite shape and is capable of vigorous movement.

Overall, according to Schön, the important thing to bear in mind about metaphor formation is that the two entities are not merely "fused" together by the "joining of elements and the blurring of boundaries," but that a shift in meaning of the original terms occurs and that the result is the creation of a new being, a new revolutionary entity (160). In this light, and in view of Schön's repeated emphasis on "shift" and the extent to which this word conventionally has connotations of palpable movement, one could also suggest that what is evoked is the condition of labour when the fetus moves down through the birth canal and is ultimately expelled.

Among current theorists about metaphor, few today are regarded as more authoritative and comprehensive than George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose key study is indeed titled *Metaphors We Live By*. As they see it, metaphor is central to the entire process of conceptualization because metaphor is not just a linguistic matter but rather structures how we think and act, and in turn, how we function, perceive and relate to the everyday world. In fact, Lakoff and Johnson go so far as to argue that "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" and that the most fundamental values and concepts in

culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure (6). Their central argument is that the “essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” and they also draw attention to the potential danger in this way of conceiving. That is, inherent in the metaphorical process is a certain “hiding” operation which results in ignoring entailments that “keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (10). As I see it, given their own emphasis on the way that metaphor entails perceiving through the body, what they themselves may be hiding or not sufficiently foregrounding is the extent to which the only body which is capable of these “hidden entailments” is the female body.

Lakoff and Johnson’s study begins with a description of three types of metaphors: orientational, ontological and structural. Orientational metaphors arise from the fact that we have bodies and thus give a concept a spatial orientation which eventually results in an organization of a whole system of concepts with respect to one another. Ontological metaphors begin with an understanding of experiences in terms of objects and substances thus allowing us to treat parts of our experiences as discrete entities or substances. After examining spatialization and quantification metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson then focus specifically on structural metaphors, arguing that these provide the “richest source” of elaboration in allowing us to “use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another” (61). It also follows that structural metaphors are most prone to highlighting certain aspects and hiding others, and by reason of being grounded in our physical and cultural experience are most influential in directing our experiences and actions.

In their discussion of structural metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that our experience is in fact structured holistically in terms of experiential gestalts, a complex of properties that together form “a whole that we human beings find more basic than the parts” (70), and for them “causation” is one such gestalt that deserves particular attention. Thus in a chapter entitled “Causation: Partly Emergent and Partly Metaphorical,” they examine “causation” as a basic human concept, one which is used by people to organize their physical and cultural realities, narrowing their focus to the concept of “making” as a directly emergent instance which involves two primary metaphors: THE OBJECT COMES OUT OF THE SUBSTANCE and THE SUBSTANCE GOES INTO THE OBJECT. Significantly, they also claim that these two metaphors emerge naturally from the most fundamental human experience—namely birth—which in turn accounts for the general metaphor “CREATION IS BIRTH.” Relating this birth process to our inner and outer orientation, they explain: “An object (the baby) comes out of a container (the mother)” and at the same time, “the mother’s substance (her flesh and blood) are in the baby (the container object)” (74). By classifying “causation” as an experiential gestalt, Lakoff and Johnson not only suggest that birth is indeed a universal and whole experience that is more basic than the parts, but also that the experience of birth functions as a gestalt, a fundamental experience that is used to explicate other structures—including thinking about metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson conclude their study with an “Experientialist Synthesis,” in which they attempt to argue that metaphor unites reason with imagination, thus creating an “imaginative rationality” (193), which “provides a richer perspective on some of the most important areas of experience in our everyday lives” such as politics, aesthetic

experience, ritual and self-understanding and interpersonal communication (230). With this in mind, metaphor becomes “one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally” (193). In fact, Lakoff and Johnson even go so far as to say that metaphor “provides a way of partially communicating unshared experiences,” of which an excellent example, I would argue, is the experience of giving birth, particular to women and partially used by male theorists in their attempt to explain cognitive conceiving and the way that metaphor results in the creation of “new meanings” and “new realities” (228). Interestingly, Lakoff and Johnson also note that “like all other metaphors, political and economic metaphors can hide aspects of reality. But in the area of politics and economics, metaphors matter more, because they constrain our lives”(236)—to which I would add that nothing indeed is more political than the politics of reproduction.

Throughout literary history, then, metaphor and women appear to be interwoven by the repetitive use of tropes that denote not only the female body but also the experiences of conception, fertilization and the quintessentially female experience of giving birth. As I have demonstrated, for numerous male theorists woman’s body serves as a means to articulate the metaphorical process, but some caution is also needed before quickly concluding that we also have here an excellent example of how one can comprehend one kind of experience, the metaphorical process, in terms of another, the birthing process, and vice versa. Given that both have an “indefinable” quality, it is not surprising that male theorists use the body and physical experience to examine metaphor in terms that everyone can comprehend, but the practice also frequently involves an attempt to hide the implications of appropriating another’s experience. Put positively,

one might say that insofar as both woman's body and metaphor function as a linguistic uncertainty, in attempting to define metaphor, man is also attempting to define something else that he finds equally indefinable, woman. Either way, what seems needed is an alternative way of theorizing about the connection between woman's body and reproductive nature and both metaphor and language, one whereby instead of functioning merely as a trope, woman's body might itself attain a powerful position in language, a position that is itself capable of creating new understandings and therefore, new conceptual realities.

## **CHAPTER II**

### Alternative Ways of Theorizing About Metaphor

If there is one thing on which theorists of metaphor agree, it is that the entailments which accompany the use of such a trope can be a force both for perpetuating tradition and for initiating new ways of thinking and acting. Hence it is not surprising that the Women's Liberation Movement gave attention to language and methodology, and certainly in exploring alternative ways of theorizing about metaphor itself, few critics provide a better grounding than Evelyn Fox Keller and Julia Kristeva. Keller, one of the first female scientists, has long struggled to find a place for women in such a discipline, just as Kristeva, one of the first female semioticians, has become famous for her attempts to conjoin psychoanalysis and politics. Essentially, for each of them, their very femaleness became one of the primary determinants in devising their theoretical outlooks. According to Kristeva's introduction in *Desire in Language*, indeed, "It was perhaps also necessary to be a woman to attempt to take up that exorbitant wager of carrying the rational project to the outer borders of the signifying venture of men" (x). Similarly, Keller found herself struggling with her role as both woman and scientist, which at times made her feel like a "disembodied scientist" (*Secrets* 23). From this constant struggle, Keller came to see herself as a critic of science who challenged the very gender ideologies within such methodologies, and Kristeva became concerned with analyzing

the complexities of the maternal function which she maintained had been left out of traditional psychoanalytic theory.

Breaking down borders, accordingly, was a central project for both of them. Kristeva's concept of the abject focuses on the in-between, and the relationship to a boundary by what has been jettisoned from within; Keller argues that borders are meant for crossing. By questioning boundaries, both Kristeva and Keller argue for new territories that resist being confined within the existing definitions, and in an article entitled "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," Kristeva claims that only when maternity, female creation and the link between them are better understood will there be "real female innovation" (298). Transgressing boundaries, of course, is the very essence of metaphor, and its link to the female body has greatly to do with the immeasurable and inconfineable nature of both.

In *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender and Science*, Keller has indeed specifically drawn attention to the role of figurative language in the gendering of science: "Metaphors work to focus our attention in particular ways, conceptually magnifying one set of similarities and differences while dwarfing or blurring others, guiding the construction of instruments that bring certain kinds of objects into view, and eclipsing others" (33). In *Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth-Century Biology*, she also points out that her concern is not merely with the way that gender ideologies are framed in the root metaphors of science but also with the manner in which such metaphors occurred and influenced the actual development of genetic scientific theory and practice: "Through their influence on scientists, administrators, and funding agencies, they provide powerful rationales and incentives for mobilizing

resources, for identifying particular research agendas, for focusing our scientific energies and attention in particular directions” (21). What she then goes on to argue is that within scientific research what has consistently remained hidden or latent is the maternal body.

Like Lakoff and Johnson who argue that society’s fundamental values and concerns are embodied in the existing metaphorical structure, so Keller remarks that “the particular effectiveness of scientific metaphors depends not only on available social resources but also on the technical and natural resources that are available” (xiii). To illustrate how metaphor is determined by social conventions, Keller uses the example of the way that the process of biological fertilization twenty years ago was expressed in the form of the Sleeping Beauty Myth (the penetration, subsequent vanquishing and finally, the awakening of the egg by the sperm), whereas due to changes in gender ideologies today, the fertilization process is cast in the language of equal opportunity where there is a “fusion” of the nuclei of the sperm and the ovum. Just as in science, the existing metaphor is revelatory of the stage of the discipline, so in culture a socially-based metaphor embodies and enforces cultural norms and values. By charting the performative effects of metaphor in science, Keller demonstrates that language and science share a complex relationship built upon “interlocking political dynamics” (xv), within which she describes the virtual absence of the maternal body and the way in which scientific methodologies have attempted either to ignore or appropriate the female experience.

In tracing the history of two major areas of twentieth-century science—genetics and embryology—one of Keller’s major concerns is the way such research focuses on the very question of life but completely ignores the relevance of the maternal body. As she



argues in *Refiguring Life*, the study of genetics was concerned with the transmission of differences among existing organisms, whereas embryology was primarily concerned with the question that genetics could not answer: how a single cell could produce a multi-cellular organism. What Keller eventually points out and sees as the basis for the success of genetics is that geneticists acquired agency, autonomy and authority through their way of talking about genes, and specifically through their use of authoritative metaphors of which an excellent example is H. J. Muller's 1926 paper "The Gene as the Basis of Life." According to Keller, in the eyes of geneticists and the opinions of others, such claims gave genetics an authority in the early twentieth-century, even though at the time, scientists were still quite unsure of what genes could in fact actually do.

As Keller sees it, furthermore, whereas the "discourse of gene action" legitimized the conceptual framework of genetics, embryologists wavered because they lacked an authoritative discourse, even though their focus on the changes in the cytoplasm and the development of the egg (the specifically maternal contribution) into a complex multi-celled organism deserved further attention. The result was that the importance of the maternal body in embryology fell by the wayside, while geneticists continued to legitimize their scientific study through metaphorically authoritative research. According to Keller, genetic research reached the pinnacle of success with J. D. Watson's and Francis Crick's discovery of DNA, and especially because of the way that their "informative" and "instructive" terminology legitimized their theory and fortified the concept of gene theory. Nor, as she sees it, is it merely scientific research that is at issue but also the way that the use of metaphor can create and legitimize governing cultural assumptions, which in turn explains how the maternal body was expunged from genetic

research. Given its scientific concern with the specifically “maternal” qualities of the cytoplasm, embryology could not compete without a legitimizing discourse like the one associated with genetics.

The irony, however, as Keller notes, was the way that attention to the “maternal” role is what eventually resolved some of the serious and problematic issues within the “discourse of gene action.” Keller claims that traditionally, nucleus and cytoplasm were tropes for male and female, and that the “overwhelming historical tendency has been to attribute activity and motive force to the male contribution while relegating the female contribution to the role of passive, facilitating environment. In Platonic terms, the egg represents the body and the nucleus the activating soul” (40). Not only do these associations directly reveal the historic discounting of the “maternal” effects, but they also indicate the way that the maternal body was relegated to the empty status of linguistic signifier. For once DNA was discovered to be a dead molecule that is in fact produced by proteins, the maternal qualities of the egg before fertilization gained importance because the cytoplasm within the egg contains an intricate structure of cellular development, thus obtaining a critical role. In turn, the authority of the “genetic discourse” began to unravel when genotypic information was eventually located in the cytoplasm, thereby revealing that the body of the maternal organism partakes in the genetic encoding, and the “maternal effects” of the cytoplasm, once regarded as merely a passive substrate, were now viewed as active participants in the encoding of the cytoplasmic information of the egg cell.

As Keller sees it, in the course of defining “life,” science has searched to unravel the secrets of nature, and since this has typically been associated with the female domain,

with the metaphoric convergence of women, nature and life, the project of scientific methodologies has been the management of the female body. Similarly, in focusing on the prominent issues of sexuality, reproduction and war, scientific discourse has influenced our very definitions and understanding of the female body and played a central role in articulating an authoritative social theory. In fact, in the introduction to *Body /Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, a collection of essays which reflect the way that the female body remains at the centre of many controversies in science, Keller and the other editors, remark:

The last two centuries have witnessed an increasing literalization of one of the dominant metaphors which guided the development of early modern science [and] the pursuit of scientific knowledge was figured rhetorically as the domination of the female body of nature, illuminated by the light of masculine science. With the professionalization of science and the development of ever more sophisticated technologies of control, the metaphorical base of this epistemological quest has become explicit material practice. The full weight of the power and authority enjoyed by science in our culture has been brought to bear on the female body. (3)

This domination is reflected in the way that the feminine body is treated as the object of knowledge par excellence but always as “subjected” and never as “subject.” Scientific knowledge takes the body of nature, which has traditionally been constructed as feminine, to be the object of science, and the scientist, traditionally seen as masculine, has been regarded as the subject of science. In turn, the pursuit of scientific knowledge can be seen as the domination of the female body of nature by the illuminated light of

masculine science. In viewing women as objects rather than subjects of knowledge, the dominant scientific discourse has constructed a reality of the female body that essentially restrains them within an ideal or relegates them to the wayside.

Keller focuses specifically on this problematic positioning in *Secrets of Life*, *Secrets of Death*, in which she explores the appropriation of the female birthing experience in historical, scientific and literary development. She begins by noting how secrets articulate a boundary that creates an interior which is not visible to outsiders and which produces a sphere of autonomous power, but she also goes on to ask with whom the “secret of life” has traditionally been associated and from whom has it been kept secret. Her answer is: “Life has historically been seen as the secret of women, a secret from men” (40). Simply by virtue of their ability to bear children, women have been perceived as holding the secret of life. In this way, throughout most cultural traditions, the secrets of women, like the secrets of nature, have been seen as either potentially threatening or alluring; they articulate a boundary that excludes men.

In Western culture, as Keller sees it, nature’s secrets have forced modern science to invent a strategy for dealing with this potentially threatening secret, one which involves asserting power over nature and, consequently, over woman’s autonomous sphere. Specifically, the strategy for undoing nature’s secrets, and hence woman’s secrets, is the scientific method—a “ferreting out of nature’s secrets, understood as the illumination of a female interior, or the tearing of Nature’s veil” (41). In doing so, the scientific project entails an inversion of surface and interior, an invasion that “effectively routs the last vestiges of archaic, subterranean female power.” As she puts it: “Scientific

enlightenment is in this sense a drama between visibility and invisibility, between light and dark, and also, between female procreativity and male productivity” (41).

Keller continues her examination of the inversion of surface and interior in her analysis of the appropriation of the female birthing experience, beginning by observing how the rise of molecular biology proceeded from an attempt to discover the ultimate secret of life. Played out in terms of science, the archetypal quest for the secret of life is a story which culminates with the mysteries of life being unraveled and science declaring that if secrets exist, they must surely be explainable. Keller, in fact, goes on to argue that “once that secret was claimed to have been found” there was an “effective banishment of the very language of secrets, mystery and darkness from scientific discourse” (41). A second “mythic” example used by Keller is the bullroarer, which in cultural anthropology is regarded as a sacred religious symbol that was once kept hidden from women and children by men of the tribe because of its mysterious, supernatural power. “In other words,” Keller notes, “the bullroarer is a secret belonging to men, protected both from the light of day and the knowledge of women” (46). What Keller also points out, however, is that a number of ancient myths suggest that the bullroarer was originally produced by a woman—given birth to by a woman—and subsequently, stolen by men.

Building on Alan Dundes’s psychoanalytic interpretation of the bullroarer, Keller claims that the bullroarer “represents the male equivalent of female procreativity,” going on to adapt Margaret Mead’s study of male initiation rites and especially to capitalize on Mead’s statement that “men become men only by...taking over—as a collective group—the functions that women perform naturally” (47). For Keller, the bullroarer is a story used to supplant female procreativity with the symbolic creativity of the male and in this

way, according to Mead, “Man has hit upon a method of compensating himself for his basic inferiority... .Women, it is true make human beings, but only men can make men” (47). Thus, frequently used in male initiation rites, the bullroarer functions as symbolic representation of a widespread belief that “boys become [or are reborn as] men by means of male anal power” (47). What this means, in effect, is that each boy undergoes a ritualized re-birth with a new power as a man and he effectively becomes a competent master of death as an effective hunter and/or warrior. This rebirth is a form of protection against the vicissitudes of life and death that is quite different from the protection offered by the maternal power; here, “Fertility is countered by virility, measured now by its death-dealing prowess” (48).

The third example that Keller uses to articulate her concern with male appropriation of the female birthing experience is specifically literary, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*—the monstrous creation by a male scientist that results in a life form which is unable to procreate and which has only the power to kill. The story itself, according to Keller, is about the consequences of male ambitions to co-opt the procreative function and entails an implicit critique of a plot which would envision a birth conceived without women. The moral that she draws from Shelley’s story is that the “ambition of male scientists to produce life almost inevitably results in the unleashing of destruction, that is, death” (49). Going one step further, Keller presents contemporary scientists as boys who started “producing” explosives in the dark recesses of a basement or garage and eventually continued their work in modern-day weapons research. In fact, likening the secret of female nature of birth with the making of the bomb as one of the biggest and best kept secrets that science ever harbored, Keller notes the way that the Manhattan

Project took the form of a privileged secret that belonged to men and that it was within the confines of this interior, that the first atomic bomb was produced; what was produced, in short, was “Oppenheimer’s baby”—a baby without a mother but numerous fathers (44).

The prevailing metaphors surrounding the production and the testing of the atomic hydrogen bomb were those of both pregnancy and birth: scientists as mothers and bombs as babies. As Keller sees it, the use of such metaphors served not merely as a precautionary code to maintain secrecy, but also as an effective example of man’s ability to appropriate a particularly female experience that became embraced by all who employed this mode of description. What Keller eventually reveals is the effect of the interweaving of fantasies of birth and death: how the attempt to uncover the secret of life became almost synonymous with an agent producing death, and how in the process “Mothers and life, both, are absented, discounted, and by implication at least, disvalued” (52).

In this way, what Keller discovers in all three of these examples is a common element of the familiar motif of male appropriation of female procreativity, and for her the commonality derives from what might be called “womb envy.” According to Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic definition, envy is “the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it” (187). In scientific discourse, what is literally, figuratively and metaphorically absented is the real life-giving power of woman’s body and for this very reason, scientific discourse ironically affirms the value of this power as the means by which women can reclaim their “body politics.” In the case of scientists like Keller, this reclamation

requires the contesting of the naturalness of scientific definitions of women's bodies, and the revealing of scientific dependence on gender constructs. This, indeed, is what Keller and the other editors of *Body/Politics* define as the necessary first step: "to wrest the feminine body away from the competing discourses that simultaneously inscribe and appropriate it as the sign of other struggles than women's own, relocating it in the alternative discourses of a liberatory, feminist body politics" (10).

Insofar as language is therefore of central importance, Julia Kristeva serves as another powerful theorist concerned about how women can reclaim their bodies. According to Toril Moi, Kristeva's work eventually shifted from purely linguistic and semiotic research towards a more psychoanalytically oriented examination of the problems of both femininity and motherhood, and of how Western representations of women and mothers posed new theoretical problems for the psychoanalyst. From another perspective, Kelly Oliver has argued that Kristeva is primarily concerned with bringing back the maternal body, replete with drives, into structuralism, a project based on the premise that the maternal body is one that prefigures the Law of the Father and the onset of the Symbolic, and which then harbors and threatens the existing Symbolic order. Either way, it is clear that Kristeva is primarily concerned with the complexities of the maternal function which she argues have been absent from traditional theory, and in turn, with the creation of a new discourse of maternity—one that takes us deeper and deeper into the maternal function and the recesses of the maternal body.

For Kristeva, there is a hidden relationship between language and the mother, a connection she attempted to explain during an interview with Françoise



Collin in *Les Cahiers du GRIF* by discussing her notion of the imaginary and the imagination as a support for identity:

I think that in the imaginary, maternal continuity is what guarantees identity. One may imagine other social systems where it would be different... The imaginary of the work of art, that is really the most extraordinary and the most unsettling imitation of the mother-child dependence. [It is] its substitution and its displacement towards a limit which is fascinating because inhuman. The work of art is independence conquered through inhumanity. The work of art cuts off natural filiation, it is patricide and matricide, it is superbly solitary. *But look back-stage, as does the analyst, and you will find a dependence, a secret mother on whom this sublimation is constructed.* (23)

This “secret mother” that lies behind the work of art is very similar to the hidden entailments of the birth mother in metaphor theories, and it is by attending to this secret mother that we may discover an alternative way of theorizing about the connection between women’s reproductive system and both metaphor and language.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva expands her ideas about this discourse by stating her objective—“The mother is my first object—both desiring and signifiable”—and by arguing for the dependence on the mother in a relationship of love (32). As Moi points out, “For Kristeva, motherhood represents a mode of love, which like transference love, is at once unconditional and directed towards the final separation of two subjects caught up in the amorous relationship” (18). In this way, Kristeva addresses the relationship as essentially a privileged one. Similarly, we can

extend this relationship to metaphor by suggesting that the birth metaphors inherent in the metaphorical process allow woman's body and metaphor the sharing of an unconditional relationship. Or as Kristeva puts it: "Before the umbilical cord is cut, who can decide whether there is one or two?" (33). Investigating further into this specifically female access to love, she expresses the hope that it may lead to a discovery of an ethics based on a new psychoanalytic understanding of motherhood—a "herethics" of love. For Kristeva, in short, what feminists are faced with is a maternal discourse in crisis, caught between the inadequacies of the available discourses in religion, science and literature.

In *Stabat Mater*, Kristeva's primary concern is with the need for a new understanding of motherhood, the mother's body, the physical as well as the psychological suffering and jouissance of childbirth, and the challenge these pose to the Symbolic order. Her point of departure is an analysis of the pregnant maternal body and a related dissection of the cult of the Virgin:

First, we live in a civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representations of femininity is absorbed by motherhood. If, however, one looks at it more closely, this motherhood is the fantasy that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, or a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized—an idealization of primary narcissism. (161)

As she sees it, complicating matters further is the way that today the "mother" is caught between the rejection of motherhood by some contemporary feminist groups and the acceptance of the traditional role of motherhood by society. What Kristeva also points

out is that within Christianity, femininity is focused solely on the maternal and that the resorption of the female identity into the maternal experience is indeed a male appropriation whereby the male artist tames the maternal as a requirement for artistic, literary or painterly accomplishment. Much like the appropriation of the birth experience in metaphor theory, the maternal experience, according to Kristeva, is represented as an image of power that must be domesticated or brought under control, and it is this process that she sees as operating in Western Christianity and the cult of the Virgin Mary—one of the most powerful imaginary constructs of the maternal image.

According to Kristeva's *Stabat Mater*, the Virgin Mother came to be established as the prototype of love relationships, and in accordance with two fundamental aspects of Western love: courtly love and child love. Central to the image of the Virgin was the concept of maternal humility and sorrow, one that represses the real maternal discourse and which according to Oliver, has been used by patriarchy in order to cover over the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother-child relationship. In being impregnated by "the word," the Virgin became the purified "maternal receptacle," and thus the language-less space inside the womb was from the beginning appropriated by the Symbolic paternal agency (176). Furthermore, according to Oliver, what Kristeva is also pointing out is that "the Virgin covers over the maternal fold between the biological and cultural, both the bodily connection between the mother and child and the separation of child from the mother" (51). The Virgin is impregnated by the Word, the name of the Father, God, and her child is not hers but belongs to everyone. Her silent sorrow, her tears and milk, however, are representative of a "return of the repressed," just as the real maternal threatens the Symbolic order by a *jouissance* (174). For Kristeva, this backlash

occurs because pregnancy is a “strangefold that changes culture into nature” and that culminates with a violent explosion which most importantly “extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility but not the certainty—of reaching out to the other” (182). Thus, the mother is a “continuous separation, a division of flesh. And consequently a division of language” (178). In short, as she sees it: “Belief in the mother is rooted in fear, fascinated with a weakness—the weakness of language” (175).

And yet, Kristeva yearns for the connection between the mother and the child. She repeatedly asks, “What connection is there between myself...and this...inaccessible other?” (178). The answer lies in the ambiguous “overflowing laughter where one senses the collapse of some ringing, subtle, fluid identity or other, softly buoyed by waves” (179-80). In this way, Kristeva reintroduces maternity to the semiotic body: “Let a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words. WORDS FLESH. From one to the other, eternally, broken up visions, metaphors of the invisible” (162). What Kristeva thus finally announces is the articulate but fleshed mother—“the immeasurable, unconfined maternal body”—whose jouissance and rhythmic laughter replaces the sorrowful Virgin-Mother, and whose music creates a bond with language: “Eia Mater, fons amoris... So let us again listen to the Stabat Mater, and the music, all the music” (185).

It is this maternal body which moves to the forefront in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* and where in fact, she introduces the concept of the “chora.” This concept, according to Moi, is Kristeva’s attempt to theorize the untheorizable, and to Oliver, it is Kristeva’s most controversial idea. What I want to point out, in turn, is that the chora is basically envisioned as a receptacle—a maternal receptacle—much like the container

trope in metaphor theory. The chora is the place where drives hold sway and where there is an instability of the Symbolic order, so that it represents a space outside of language and with its own law that precedes all other laws. Similar to the maternal space that I have explored in metaphor theory, the chora is a receptacle where meanings and functions shift; it is a space which entails a high degree of implicative elaboration. Relatedly, Moi points out that the chora “constitutes the heterogeneous disruptive dimension of language,” “that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory,” and a “rhythmic pulsion” rather than a new language (13). This “disruptive dimension” of the chora is also similar to the linguistic uncertainty and controversial nature of metaphor, for they both share the black hole-like qualities of such uncontainable and indefinable power.

The unidentifiability of the chora is closely related to the dynamics of the abject, which for Kristeva, is a force that “disturbs identity, system, order,” “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and functions as the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In this way, the abject calls into question the very boundaries upon which society is constructed and its essence threatens both the social and Symbolic order, which responds by placing a “prohibition on the maternal body” (14). Furthermore, the prototypical abject experience is birth, derived from the way that the maternal body itself is “desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject” (54). In terms of birth, abjection takes the form of a struggle to separate from the maternal body:

The abject confronts us...with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the

constant risk of falling back under the sway of power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. The child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. In such close combat, the symbolic light that third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting. (13)

While the mother's body is made abject in order for the child to separate from her, it is also at this very point that the child feels that this separation is most impossible. In the birth process, the inside of the maternal body becomes the outside of the child and the child "absorbs within itself all the experiences" of the mother (73). The result is that the "evocation of the maternal body and childbirth induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides (101). In turn, the maternal body comes to be viewed as a fragile container that "no longer guarantee[s] the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents" (53). All human life, in short, is based on the abject separation of one body from another

at birth, and yet the relation between the mother and the child indicates that even though the child is no longer identical with the mother, the child is never entirely separate from her.

The experience of birth presents both a blurring of boundaries but also a control of boundaries, particularly the anal and oral drives, by the mother. And once the child becomes “the abject jettisoned out of that boundary,” the maternal becomes the other side, the margin, the abject that is discarded by both the societal and Symbolic order (69). Thus, the maternal body is both “the adored” and “the abhorred,” and the enfolding of both mother and child can be resolved, according to Kristeva, only if the child can split the mother into two: the abject and the sublime. In so doing, the abject and the sublime come to represent a relationship of love similar to Kristeva’s “herethics” and founded on a healthy relationship during pregnancy and birth between the mother and child. From this relationship, Kristeva claims, the mother is capable of a “generative power” and a willingness to give herself up and to embrace the strangeness within herself.

For Kristeva, the “generative power” entailed in birth also has an effect on language, where it takes the form of a “renovation” or a “renewal” of the existing social code. As Oliver points out, “the authority of our religion, morality, politics, and language comes through the repression of horror,” a horror that can be traced to the crisis in the authority of the Word (101). According to Kristeva, in the “language of abjection...the writer is both subject and victim, witness and topple” (206). Abject language calls into question language itself and challenges the very notion of the subject, even as “the ultimate of abjection—and thus the supreme and sole interest of literature—[is] in the birth-giving scene” (155). If the content of abject literature is maternal, and the maternal

is what is repressed within the Symbolic element of language, then eventually, when the repressed maternal is revealed, the very authority of language is undermined. In the process, however, there is also a “recuperation of a lost Maternal force, an instinctual force buried under repressive symbols,” and this recuperation takes place in the womb-like receptacle of the semiotic chora (103).

It is inside the chora that the drives become manifest in a language which contains elements of non-language and non-meaning, an ambiguous condition of prelinguistic experience where the non-signifying aspects of language—rhythm, tone, music—become significant. Similarly, metaphor is capable of such conceptualization outside of Symbolic language and functions in order to create new perceptions, but just as there is an appropriation of the female experience in metaphor theory, so ultimately is the language of the abject maternal appropriated by the Symbolic male order. And this is why Kristeva, in turn, argues for a recuperative vision of the lost maternal power which is expressed not only in the birth experience but also in the relation of women writers to language. That is, if women can reinvent their maternal experience, they can share a different relation to language than men, for within the maternal body, borders between identity and difference break down, and the identity of the maternal body contains alterity as a heterogeneous other without completely losing its own integrity. Thus, the maternal relation between woman and language forces woman to listen to the abject within the existing Symbolic order, which takes the form of the “unspoken in speech” and the “incomprehensible” that disturbs the status quo (208).

As much as she encourages this listening, however, in *About Chinese Women*, she also warns women of the dangers and the way that it can lead to death, suicide and



psychosis. What this means in turn is that women either write like men, complicit with the Symbolic order and Paternal Law, or that they write from a silent underwater body which ensures that women will remain outsiders: “Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak” (166). Therefore, according to Kristeva, women must, amidst the dangers and in order to undermine the construction of identity and difference that repress the female body, identify strongly with the maternal and rejoice in the discharge of drives

What both Kristeva and Keller thus highlight in their mutual concern with alternative ways of theorizing about women’s reproductive function and its connection to both metaphor and language is the possibility of a discourse written about the maternal body, as well as the difficulty of doing so. For Keller, this new body politics contains a difficult struggle—a wresting away of the female body from within the existing male discourse—and for Kristeva, death, suicide and psychosis are the possible outcomes of attempting to write from within the unspoken maternal body. What I would like to suggest, in turn, is that amidst the dangers and the difficulties, hidden in Keller’s and Kristeva’s entailments, is the possibility of the maternal body being a site for original maternal creativity and a locus of potential female power. While courage is certainly required, through the use of birth metaphors, women artists—poets, writers, filmmakers—can experience a distinctly female exploration of the body, wherein the female body is not voyeuristically observed and appropriated but rather looks outward to reclaim the female experience.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Woman Artist's Use of Metaphor

In their expansive search for a feminist poetics and bold assertion that there is a distinctly female imagination, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that “for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (17). Similarly, Kristeva and Keller highlight their mutual concern with alternative ways of theorizing about women’s body and language by arguing that there is great difficulty when female writers create a new “body politics,” for a wresting away of the female body from the existing discourse, can possibly lead to death, suicide or psychosis. Sylvia Plath, Anaïs Nin and Maya Deren are three artists who not only recreate the female body through birth, conception and creativity metaphors, and shape a distinctly feminine economy of language which has been repressed in our culture, but their work also stresses the problematic nature in doing so. The birth experience, when explored by a female writer, creates a distinctly female space; for Plath, writing about the female body was a way of coming to terms with her own body and its internal complications; for Nin, it was a means to differentiate herself from her male colleagues and peers; and for Deren, it was a matter of being continuously divided and multiplied on the screen in the search for the real female image.

*Ariel*, Sylvia Plath’s last book of poetry, is an intense oscillation of emotions captured on very few pages. In what many critics have called a frenzied pace, Plath’s last

poems, some finished just days before her death in 1963, range from depressive to exhilarative, tender to cruelly vicious, and are at times powerfully destructive and refreshingly creative. Fitting together in cycles of despair and rebirth, the work parallels Plath's own life at the time—the pain in her own personal life and the unparalleled creativity of her poetry. Describing this fluctuation in her journal on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1951, she wrote: “I don't know why I should be so hideously gloomy ... .But at least the lower I go the sooner I'll reach bottom and start the upgrade again” (39-40). This deeply divided sense of self and periodic experience of psychic death and rebirth are at the centre of Plath's work, and need to be understood in the context of her attempt to create a female space as a woman artist in a male-dominated society in the late fifties and early sixties.

Plath's self-definition is complicated by these very definitions, including the male devised constructs of the female body, but through her use of rebirth, fertility and pregnancy metaphors, she also struggles to reclaim a woman artist's vision of the female body. To appreciate her achievement, one needs to consider the extent to which she is writing from a secret place—a maternal space—in keeping with Gilbert's and Gubar's claim that a woman artist is able to “conceal female secrets within male devised genres and conventions” (220). Here we must look closer at what Plath meant when in a letter to Father Bart on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1963, she said that she had been writing “poems in blood or at least with it” (Wagner-Martin 241). As I see it, this is her cryptic reference to a menstrual and a maternal blood, and an attempt to describe her poetry as coming straight from the womb.

The representation of woman's physical body by a female poet had always been of concern to Plath, especially since among the problems of being a woman writer in mid-century America, she was faced with the complications of writing about the female body within a masculine discourse. Thus according to Kathleen Lant, Plath's work demonstrates a "female body" that "reminds us only that the female self is unworthy, inadequate, and ultimately—vulnerable rather than ascendant" (625). Discussing Plath's use of masculine models as a structure for her own creativity, Lant claims that Plath's female body is merely a construct:

The irony of Plath's situation is that while her own figures for creativity are drawn from masculine models, her use of such figures is deeply compromised—for both her and her readers—by the reality of her own femaleness, by her body which is a woman's body. For Plath, then, finding a way to figure both her creativity and her femaleness becomes deeply problematic. (361)

Less negatively, I would describe Plath's work as an intense and rebellious struggle to identify and come to terms with the complications of her own creativity. When a female poet uses the female body as subject she inherits a tradition in which the female body has typically been viewed by the male gaze, whereby her body also inherits a specifically rigid and codified role.

One of Plath's earlier poems of 1959, "Metaphors," provides not only an intriguing way to begin an exploration of how Plath uses pregnancy and birth as a fast-paced exploration of how metaphor operates but also an example of how she contests the male gaze through a series of riddles which reveal how the speaker's altering body affects

her own concept of self. According to Plath's biographer Anne Stevenson, the poem is a "delightful little pregnancy poem" (153), but to Karen Alkalay-Gut, the very artificiality of the poem reveals a topic that is much more complex and she argues that the intricacies of the poem indicate a "concentrated application of Plath's sophisticated linguistic, figurative, and psychological analysis (which) exceeds even her best-known poems in its condensed emotion" (189). With this "condensed emotion" in mind and given that the major trope within metaphor theory is the container, it is not surprising that Plath's poem is about the pregnant female body. The nine lines in the poem, the nine metaphors used and the nine syllables in each line, are all indicators of the nine months of pregnancy. More than that, however, Plath's opening line—"Metaphors / I'm a riddle in nine syllables"—is also an introduction to the entire question of identity that characterizes not only the state of pregnancy but also the status of being a woman. Similarly, if the nine lines correspond to the nine months of gestation then each metaphor represents a continuous shift in the speaker's concept of self.

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
 An Elephant, a ponderous house,  
 A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
 O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
 This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
 Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
 I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
 I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
 Boarded the train there's no getting off.

The “riddle” of the first line represents the uncertainty of the diagnosis in early pregnancy and the uncertainty of the potential outcome. Like metaphor, the first stage passes unperceived and indicates the enigmatic nature of the maternal body and the uncertainty of identity in the self and metaphor. In the poem, the identity of the mother’s body is then explored further through a series of metaphors. The first metaphor—“An elephant, a ponderous house”—is suggestive of the physical weight of the animal and the mental heaviness of a physical structure, just as the comparison of woman and house also suggests containment similar to the “container” trope of metaphor. Evoking the third month of pregnancy, however, Plath likens the maternal body to a “melon strolling on two tendrils”; she is a fleshy fruit supported by delicately thin and unstable legs, waiting for its insides to be scooped out. By the fifth month, the body is this “loaf’s big with its yeasty rising,” suggesting the way that the mother’s warm pregnant body expands and rises while the baby incorporates the mother’s substance. Alkalay-Gut argues that the “expansion of yeast in bread allows for no distinction between the internal and the external” and this confusion is furthered by reference to the speaker as container: “this fat purse” valued for the “new-minted money”; the “means” of creation; “a stage” in the baby’s growth; and “a cow in calf”, the ultimate beast of labour. Finally, the concluding lines of the poem signify a cumulative metaphorical effect and parallel the breakdown of the speaker’s identity when she pointedly makes herself sick by consuming a “bag of green apples, / Boarded the train there’s no getting off.”

Plath’s final metaphor for pregnancy is interesting in that it entails an uncontrollable voyage and a loss of control. According to Penny Stewart, who likens reading the poem to an optical illusion, “once the gestalt is present, there is no return to

the former state. This also happens to a woman who, before her first pregnancy, may wonder what it would be like to carry a baby. Try as hard as she will, she never knows until she has ‘boarded the train there’s no getting off’” (60). The inevitability of the situation is contained in the feelings of confinement experienced by the speaker. Furthermore, Plath is also drawing attention to the very nature of metaphor by using this term to title the poem rather than the word pregnancy itself, suggesting that both metaphor and pregnancy alike are entangled in questions of identity and hidden entailments. Alkalay-Gut goes on to argue:

Because of the concept of identity of mother and child, the mother—as with the word metaphor, which contains within it the word mother—becomes linked with another as in a metaphor. “Am I tenor or am I vehicle?” the speaker seems to be asking. Do I contain these metaphors, do they define what I am—or am I contained in, defined by them? (191)

What Plath reveals is the danger of metaphor and the problems that can arise when one term is defined in terms of another. Although her metaphors of containment remain consistent with the patriarchal order, she also suggests that these metaphors and the related concepts within that order about the pregnant female body are inedible—i.e. “green apples.” Thus, for Plath to explore the maternal body, she had first to explore the established metaphorical constructs of the maternal body, and the dangers inherent in maternity as constructed in patriarchal etiology. In “Metaphors,” Plath strategized about a new maternal subject in poetry and in her final book of poetry, *Ariel*, she completed this maternal search by writing about the female body with blood— a blood that gave her poems a life of their own— and ultimately challenged the metaphors of literary paternity.

Plath's supposed "blood" poems were written during her final and most productive stage as a poet. During the fall of 1962, she was writing furiously, averaging a poem a day and capturing her emotional state on paper. This was the period when her marital problems had climaxed after suspicions about her husband's infidelities, and during which her poetry was fuelled by an anger and despair which eventually gave way to the serene creation of her own belief system, which Linda Wagner-Martin points out was "a system increasingly developed from contacts with other women" (228). Although revelatory of Plath's stressful situation, the poems also chronologically indicate a pattern of emotional disruption and depression followed by a period of recovery and renewal. Discussing the relation between woman's life and her artistic revision, Susan Van Dyne suggests that Plath was "preoccupied throughout October with producing a psychic and sexual metamorphosis in herself as woman and poet" (113).

Specifically, in the first week of October 1962, Plath calmly began a series of five bee poems: "The Bee Meeting," "Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm" and "Wintering." The ordered sequence reveals a strategy concerned with self-preservation, survival, rebirth and a renewal of female power. According to Wagner-Martin's chronological study of Plath's literary life and her work, *Ariel* was left by Plath as "a positive statement of the ability of the woman writer [and] through her art, coupled with her physical fecundity which gave her children, the woman writer could make a fulfilling statement about life and its gifts" (140). Going one step further, Van Dyne suggests that "the bee poems participate in an extended autobiographical narrative that had mythic status for Plath, involving as it did her initiation into starkly polarized gender identities, forbidden desires, and transgressive appropriations of power" (104). Interestingly, in



*Ariel*, as Plath had arranged it, the bee sequence concluded the collection and essentially, confirmed a renewal of female power through rebirth and regeneration. Ted Hughes's final revised edition, however, did not respect Plath's explicit arrangement, insofar as he included more poetry from Plath's final writings and presented them chronologically, arguing that this was the ordering as Plath had written them. Just as in Plath's own life, so did his arrangement make her final collection of poetry end in despair and loneliness.

As I see it, however, what Hughes failed to realize was that Plath's ordering of the collection that she called *Ariel* was a narrative arrangement with both a spiritual and positive outlook. She had attempted to present her life as a female artist writing from within the complexities of being a mother, wife and poet, and her arrangement did not end, as Hughes's does, with "The Edge" wherein we are told that "The woman is perfected. / Her dead / Body" and wherein we have the enfolding of children back into the womb: "She has folded / Them back into her body as petals / Of a rose close." Instead, by intending to have the collection end with her bee series, Plath was emphasizing survival.

In an article entitled, "A Fine White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath," Sandra Gilbert argues that the bee-keeping sequence "appears to have been a way of coming to terms with her own female position in the cycle of the species" (258). Wagner-Martin goes on to argue: "Expert and complicated poems, the series of five bee poems describes the joy of creation, the role in the bee community of the old queen who fights against dispossession by the more beautiful queens, and survives" (217). As Plath had planned it, the collection was ordered to create a world where women survive, and in her choice of "Wintering" for the final poem, she strikes a positive note by stating both

that "Winter is for women" and that there is the potential of rebirth because "The bees are flying. They taste the spring." Thus, while many critics have also discussed Plath's use of the queen bee and the bee colony as a metaphor for a female escape from the patriarchal order, what needs more attention is the community of women that is established through the inter-related anxieties of poetry and pregnancy.

In the opening poem of the series, "The Bee Meeting," the speaker witnesses a mysterious community gathering where the villagers are disguised by bee hats, "all gloved and covered." Focusing on the vulnerability of her own female body, she states: "I have no protection...I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" Exposed to the bees, she vainly hopes: "They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear." On the one hand, the bees represent a threat to the body of the speaker and she protects herself from them: "Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees. / Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice." On the other hand, when the speaker is dressed by the secretary of bees, put into a "fashionable white straw Italian hat," and led to "the circle of hives," she is a mirror situation of the villagers "putting" the bee colony into a box.

In this way, the speaker aligns herself with the colony of bees and the woman poet aligns herself with the queen bee, with the point being that both the woman poet and the queen bee are restrained; there is the thwarted "up flight" of the queen bee and the speaker's own confusion: "I cannot run, I am rooted, / and the gorse hurts me." Similarly, the "long white box in the grove, / What have they accomplished, why am I cold" is representative of the confinement of the queen bee and her "virgin" hive, and is also related to the bizarre confinement of the assistant in a circus act: "I am the

magician's girl who does not flinch." At the same time, however, as Wagner-Martin points out, the bee poems indirectly reverse the gender war: "To be a queen bee, and to be served by hundreds of drones, is to reverse the pattern of patriarchal power and controlling sexuality" (128). In effect, the alignment of poet and queen bee is based on the notion of production, for without either, there is neither generativity nor creativity.

In the next poem of the series, "Arrival of the Bee Box," the speaker experiences the frightening aspects of a poetic pregnancy and begins by suggesting that the box is now "the coffin of a midget / Or a square baby. / Were there not such a din in it." Absurdly, the box mirrors the alienation of the pregnant female body and the original words of the speaker in the first poem—no one apparently loves her. According to Van Dyne, Plath was caught up in the contradictory meanings of rage within the female body and motherhood, which became of central concern in her personal life in 1962 and are a key element of her poetics in the series. The distinguishing characteristic of both female poet and queen bee is their creativity and perpetual confinement to generativity. The bee box creates an unknown interior that harbours foreboding possibilities:

The box is locked, it is dangerous

I have to live with it overnight

And I can't keep away from it.

There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.

The locked box of the body threatens the speaker's ability to control: "I have simply ordered a box of maniacs." The repressed queen bee is thus like Kristeva's abject maternal, and Van Dyne indeed argues that the box contains "archaic mysteries, primitive appetites, and anarchic potential" whereby the beekeeper's lack of control parallels the

woman's experience of pregnancy (106). Her body is host to an alien inhabitant which could possibly lead her to despair and in doing so undermines the conventional authority the speaker has acquired: "They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner." Although at this point, the speaker feels quite unmaternal—"I am no source of honey"—she finally does decide to care for the box: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free." Thus by playing "sweet God," the speaker expresses her maternal nature, and by admitting that "the box is only temporary" she describes the condition of pregnancy .

The maternal qualities of the queen bee are further examined in the third poem "Stings," where the speaker questions ownership and access to power through the enigmatic sexuality of the queen bee. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker and an unnamed male are delicately and dangerously transferring the honeycombs. Suggesting a sexual exchange, they are described as two "bare-handed" individuals with "the throats of our wrists brave lilies" and "a thousand clean cells between us." The male, however, vanishes from the poem while the female speaker searches for the queen bee—i.e. the repressed maternal—and in this process, Plath asks: "Is there any queen at all?" Yet in realizing her similarity to the queen bee—"I am no drudge"—the speaker redirects her energy in order to resuscitate the queen, a dangerous labour but one which "is almost over. / I am in control. / Here is my honey-machine, / It will work without thinking."

Distracting the speaker, however, is a voyeuristic non-participant—"a third person is watching"—whom she distrusts: "He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me." Not only does he spy on her creative process, but eventually attempts to appropriate her birthing experience and the "fruits" of her labour: "The sweat of his efforts a rain / Tugging the world to fruit." Eventually though, the male is disfigured

through the swarming and attacking of the bees: “The bees found him out, / Moulding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features.” In so doing, the poet—mother of both bees and babies—focuses on the transfiguration of the queen: “but I / Have a self to recover, a queen.”

The authority of the speaker’s claim reinvests strength in the qualities of a transformed female body, and the entire scenario, in fact, suggests that Plath was revising the possibilities of the existing gender patterns and recasting power in the female body. For in the fourth poem, “The Swarm,” the queen bee “with her lion-red body, her wings of glass” is flying “more terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky, red comet.” In the opening poem, “The Bee Meeting,” the queen bee had reclaimed her power by being “very clever,” just as in the third poem “Stings,” her power rests in her authority of being “more terrible than she ever was.” Similarly, in “The Swarm,” the red queen bee’s authority is better understood when linked to the speaker in the title poem of the collection, “Ariel”:

I  
Am the arrow  
The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red  
Eye, the cauldron of morning.

The queen bee is also a blood relative of the persona in “Lady Lazarus” who “out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.” Focusing on the concluding lines of each of the poems, we can thus see that Plath predicts a luminous energy coming from

the female and presents a powerful image of the maternal body. In this way, the “suicidal flight” of the Ariel figure, the queen bee and the speaker, is not a journey into the cauldrons of the morning where one is cooked and destroyed; nor is it a return to the eye of father and the patriarchal order. Rather, the destination is a “red cauldron” or a “red comet” of the warm walls of the womb and a structure where one is renewed. In these poems, “written in blood,” the “red body” signifies the blood of a rebirth and ultimately, saves the narrator from self-destruction.

This overall recovery is especially evident if one looks at the final poem in the bee sequence, “Wintering,” and Plath’s own use of it to close the entire collection of *Ariel* poems. The speaker labels herself the “midwife’s extractor,” places herself “At the heart of the house” where she is “Wintering in a dark without a window... .This is the room I have never been in. / This is the room I could never breathe in.” Evocative as this may be of a maternal interior deep within the womb, at this point she also claims that the descent is engulfed by “Black asininity. Decay. / Possession,” just as in the cellar, a deathlike stupor immobilizes both the bees and the speaker: “This is the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees / So slow I hardly know them.” Ultimately, however, the speaker notes that this is a place of maternal regrouping:

The bees are all women,  
 Maids and the long royal lady.  
 They have got rid of the men,  
 The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors.  
 Winter is for women.

From what seemed to be the black hole of the womb, comes a rebirth: Amidst the lush red folds of “Christmas roses,” we are told, “The bees are flying. They taste the spring.” In short, what Plath was coming to terms with in “Wintering” was her own survival as both mother and creative intelligence. In both the “Arrival of the Bee Box” and “Wintering,” the bees’ power as creators threatens to become an agent of destruction, and it is in this sense that the bee poems border on dangerous territory. Yet by making the re-gendered female body the corporeal ground of her poetics, Plath is in effect rewriting a maternal body that does not threaten the poet’s existence. The maternal body is not simply, “a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think” but rather a reconstituted maternal body that functions as both generative and authoritative—i.e. a mother-poet.

\*                      \*                      \*                      \*                      \*

Anaïs Nin was also acutely aware of the urgency involved in exploring the territory and borders of woman’s consciousness and experience, and her objective in writing “as a woman, and as a woman only” in the bizarrely fascinating prose poem *House of Incest* was to articulate woman’s authoritative voice in these matters. Significantly, Nin’s approach in *House of Incest* was prompted by her reaction to Henry Miller’s theft of ideas from her unpublished diary for his own work. Being a male literary colleague and rival, Nin protested loudly when her ideas about his wife June were not only appropriated by her friend but also aided him in a better understanding of his wife and competition for her affection. In retaliation, as Nin claimed in her *Diary*, she determined to write a new feminine prose:

I discovered that I had given away to Henry all my insights into June, and that he is using them. He has taken all my sketches for her portrait. I feel empty-handed, and he knows it, because he writes me that he 'feels like a crook.' And what have I left to work with? He is deepening his portrait with all the truths I have given him. What was left for me to do? To go where Henry cannot go, into the Myth, into June's dreams, fantasies, into the poetry of June. To write as a woman, and as a woman only. (128)

Nin's mandate to "write as a woman" was also a reaction to her analyst Dr. Otto Rank, and his criticism and subsequent accusations that she was being "kept by the *Diary*" (289). According to Rank, Nin's writing was a form of woman's realism that used only literal language and thus was not equivalent to the male writer who uses Symbolic language. In this way, Rank felt that Nin diffused artistic energy into her diary when she should have directed it into her fiction. In one of her sessions with Rank, Nin remarked, "Then we talked about the realism of women, and Rank said that perhaps that was why women had never been great artists. They invented nothing" (291). In effect, Nin's protest was born out of her own intense need to legitimize her own "real" writing and reclaim her material in a mode that her male counterparts, both Miller and Rank, could not appropriate. Thus, Nin's prose poem is at once a reactionary protest against Miller's use of her material and Dr. Rank's challenge to write as a male with symbolic language, and finally, a bold assertion that to "write as a woman" required the use of fluid, feminine images and a lyrical quality that is both natural, spontaneous and originating in her body. As Nin herself put it in her *Diary*, "the woman artist has to fuse creation and life in her own way, or in her own womb if you prefer" (234).



In her study of Nin's growth as a woman artist, Sharon Spencer takes this one step further, arguing that such writing must be alive: "It must have warmth, colour, vibrancy, and it must convey a sense of movement, the momentum of growth" (162). In *House of Incest*, the female body is inscribed from the very beginning of the poem when Nin explains: "Those who write know the process. I thought of it as I was spitting out my heart" (1). Using this physical metaphor to emphasize the intensely personal nature of such writing, she then goes on to create the sensations of genesis: "I felt only the caress of moving—moving into the body of another—absorbed and lost within the flesh of another, lulled by the rhythm of water, the slow palpitation of the senses, the movement of silk" (5). The fluidity of images, the lyrical nature and the dream-like prose all contribute to what she called the "music of the womb."

*House of Incest*, published in 1936, was Nin's first published work of fiction, and in her *Diary* she further explains what she hoped to achieve: "I wanted to do in *House of Incest*, the counterpart to physical torture in the psychic world, in the psychological realm" (265). Significantly, this torture is associated with incest, and each of the seven parts of the poem are descriptive of a different type of incestuous love. In her study of Nin's exploration of territory and borders of feminine consciousness and experience, Ellen G. Friedman provides a brief synopsis of the poem, proposing that "incest is a trope for a constellation of ideas having to do with structures enforcing patriarchal values" and the label Nin has given to her alliance with male values and male power—not only in the form of man-woman relationships but also in the form of the woman artist's relationship to traditional forms of expression and to patriarchy in general (347). On the one hand, Nin herself admits the attractions of this condition: "I have remained the woman who

loves incest. I still practice the most incestuous crimes with a sacred religious fervour. I am the most corrupt of all women” (246). On the other hand, however, seriously sensing how incest can become a form of selfishness, immature love and a narcissistic desire for one’s double, she also calls out: “If only we could all escape from this house of incest, where we only love ourselves in the other” (48).

In *House of Incest*, incestuous love “like the ink of squids, a banquet of poisons” (34) forces the female narrator into a state of dissociation, alienation and paralysis, and as Spencer notes, “the idea of incest is a controlling metaphor for all doomed impossible loves, or for narcissistic self-love. The isolated and emotionally paralysed narrator is split into parts, body separated from spirit, feeling from intelligence, love from desire” (163). In this state, there is only suffocation, tightness and darkness: “The tunnel would narrow and taper down as we walked; it would close tighter and tighter around us and stifle us” (49). Also commenting on the incest motif in the process of claiming that Nin gave new meaning to poetry without actually writing anything called poetry, Anna Balakian argues Nin uses the word “incest” to suggest a “metastasized affliction, this love of self in the other...[which] confuses all relationships” (73). Friedman expands one step further, arguing that “the incestuous relationship also blocks creativity, allows no seams through which the new may emerge; the incestuous desire is suffocating and destructive” (348).

On the one hand, the nightmarish intensity of *House of Incest* can only be an expression of entrapment, isolation and suffering. On the other hand, however, there are images of freedom associated with escape from the house of incest. That the tension between these pulls is not entirely resolved is evident from the way that the narrator is

unable to join the dancer in the concluding section of the poem—the dancer who “danced with the music and with the rhythm of earth’s circles” (51). Instead, the narrator admits that she “could not bear the passing of things. All flowing, all passing, all movement choked me with anguish” (51). Although this may be the outcome of woman’s experience, however, that things could be different is also the message conveyed by the poem.

In the opening sequence of *House of Incest*, the narrator is allowed to see the world before incest and conformity through her return to an originating experience in the womb. The birth sequence opens with the narrator’s “first vision of earth” being “water-veiled” (3), similar to the “underwater body” that Kristeva posits as the challenge for women writers. To write from an underwater body is to remain an outsider from the patriarchal order, and since this process entails being estranged from the very language in which they write, such women, according to Kristeva, become “visionaries” and “dancers who suffer as they speak” (166). Not only does Nin’s poem conclude with such a visionary dancer, one who escapes the Symbolic order through a non-verbal mode and who “danced her fears, stopping in the center of every dance to listen to reproaches that we could not hear, or bowing to applause that we did not make,” but this is also the state that she associates with the initial “underwater” experience: “All round me a sulphurous transparency and my bones move as if made of rubber. I sway and float, stand on boneless toes listening for distant sounds, sounds beyond the reach of human eyes” (3).

Suggestive of the womb, the fluid images of *House of Incest* are also suggestive of Kristeva’s semiotic chora that represents a space outside of language and inside which there is an instability in the Symbolic function. Nin’s way of suggesting this condition is

to conjoin womb imagery with that of the maternal breast: “The water was there to bear one like a giant bosom; there was always the water to rest on, and the water transmitted the lives and the loves, the words and the thought” (41). In her study of Nin’s straddling of the gap between masculine and feminine language, Lynette Felber identifies what she calls a preanalytic state of the mind that derives from direct physical contact with the mother, and this is what the narrator at this point is experiencing: “I do not remember being cold there, nor warm. No pain of cold and heat. The temperature of sleep, feverless and chillless. I do not remember being hungry. Food seeped through invisible pores. I do not remember weeping” (5). This “first birth” is characterized by an intense contact between mother and child, where there is “no current of thoughts, only the caress of flow and desire mingling, touching, travelling, withdrawing, wandering—the endless bottoms of peace (5). There is no need for language between mother and child, and it is this “disruptive dimension” of the Symbolic order that Nin evokes—a preverbal language characterized by a rhythmic pulsion which precedes and underlies figuration and specularization, and which is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm.

In Nin’s short story “Birth,” which was originally an excerpt from her diary and later published in 1944 in the collection, *Under a Glass Bell*, both the experience and the metaphors used again suggest the creation of Kristeva’s semiotic chora. Similar to the connection between mother and child in *House of Incest*, the strength of the bond is heightened in “Birth.” The story itself is a personal and graphic description of labour culminating in the violent expulsion of a stillbirth. Doubly suggestive of Kristeva’s abject maternal body, the narrator is reluctant to jettison the child from the womb: “I could not break, tear out, separate, surrender, open and dilate and yield up a fragment of

the past, this part of me rebelled against pushing out the child, or anyone, out in the cold, to be picked up by strange hands, to be buried in strange places, to be lost, lost, lost” (54). So intense is the connection between mother and child—the inside of the maternal body becomes the outside of the child—that both mother and child share life and in the end, the eventual experience of death. Indeed, as much as the story is about “birth” so much is it about death, since the child is pronounced ‘dead’ by the male doctor in the very opening line of the story.

Yet, not only does the mother’s reluctance to part with the child counter the male perspective, but the narrator also challenges the doctor after he ineffectively attempts to accelerate the expulsion process by thrusting a “long instrument” into the narrator, which “paralyses” her with pain. Furious and defiant, she shouts, “Don’t you dare do that again, don’t you dare!” (56), and eventually, the doctor does become powerless.

He wants to interfere with his instruments, while I struggle with nature,  
with myself, with my child and with the meaning I put into all, with my  
desire to give and to hold, to keep and to lose, to live and to die. No  
instrument can help me. His eyes are furious. He would like to take a  
knife. He has to watch and wait. (54)

All birth involves separation, and by describing a stillbirth Nin doubly characterizes the pain of the experience, as well as the identity crisis it entails. As Lajos Elkan observes in a study of birth and gender, “the mother...does not want to part with the dead child, as if by this loss she would suffer the loss of her own self-identity” (159). Similarly, in discussing how the birth experience constitutes the major metaphor for creation, Lakoff and Johnson argue that in birth, the baby comes out of the mother and that subsequently

the mother's substance (her own flesh and blood) is in the baby. Woman alone, however, can experience the separation of self in birth, as Elkan emphasizes: "the female creator can experience (the loss of identity) in the moment of separation from the child, and experience it again and again with each delivery. The oneness, the togetherness with oneself, is women's prerogative in life as well as in the artistic field" (159-60).

As much as the narrator, like any mother, accepts the loss of self inherent in the birth experience, so much can the female artist reclaim the loss by recreating the experience. With the abject maternal body in control of the boundaries between mother and child, there is a recuperation of Kristeva's "lost maternal force." Nin's rhythmical outburst of "The womb is stirring and dilating. Drum drum drum drum drum. I am ready" parallels the rhythmic pulsions of the chora and suggests the powerful and instinctual force of the maternal body. Consequently, after giving birth the narrator claims: "All my strength returns" (57). She disobeys the doctor by sitting up, and argues with the nurses in order to see her child. Through the birth-ritual of soft, quiet, circular drumming on her belly, the narrator reclaims the birth experience.

Despite the reclamation of the birth experience, however, there remains the fact that the child is stillborn. Although the creation is a "perfectly made" female, "all glistening with the waters of the womb," the child is also dead (57). In this respect, not only does the story mythologize Nin's own experience of giving birth to a stillborn, but according to Friedman, the story is also "a myth of the woman artist who gives birth to a creation of her own body, her consciousness, but knows this creation can only be stillborn" (346). Indeed, in her *Diary*, Nin, similar to the narrator in "Birth," remarks that the foetus "ought to die in warmth and darkness" and also claims that there are no "real

fathers, not in heaven or on earth”(385). Using one of woman’s most powerful metaphors, Nin portrays the grief of a loss when a woman fails, and within patriarchy this is the plight of the woman artist who fails to give life to her imagination. Acutely aware of women’s relation with the creative act and the complexities of women’s creations, Nin frequently noted that “Creation and femininity seemed incompatible” and at times, her concern turned to doubt: “My maternal self in conflict with my creative self. A negative form of creation” (260). In writing the story, however, in combining a poetic discourse and an archaic, ritualistic mother-chant, Nin does give voice to a maternal language, and the fact that she is describing the intimate process of giving birth to a stillborn makes her achievement even more dramatic.

By describing the process, moreover, Nin unites the two divergent concepts of birth and death, whereby the stillbirth itself becomes a creative act. As Lajos Elkan observes, “The writer is present as the author of her text and the author of her baby” (159) and in this sense what Nin is doing in “Birth” is reclaiming women’s experience against the advice of her male colleagues. In her *Diary*, for example, Nin recalled that Durrell had advised her to “make the leap outside of the womb, destroy your connections,” prompting her to retaliate by revealing the intimate connection between the womb and the female writer: “But what neither Larry nor Henry understands is that woman’s creation far from being like man’s must be exactly like her creation of children, that is it must come out of her own blood, englobed by her womb, nourished with her own milk” (2:233). By writing from the womb, in a manner similar to Keller’s biological revisioning and Plath’s “blood” writing, Nin wrests the female body from the competing discourses which seek to inscribe and appropriate it as the site of their own struggles.

Male appropriation of the birth experience, moreover, can be achieved only through the imagination, and frequently results in a very lethally potent outcome, whereas the woman artist, as Nin argues, “has to fuse creation and life in her own way, or in her own womb if you prefer. She has to create something different from man” (234). In effect, “Birth” is a metaphor for the female artist’s creation; the act of writing becomes synonymous with the act of giving birth, although as Nin’s graphic description of childbearing asserts, this is a very difficult process: “She (the woman writer) has to sever herself from the myth man creates, from being created by him, she has to struggle with her own cycles, storms, terrors which man does not understand” (234).

If we return now to *House of Incest*, we can see how the difficult struggle of writing from the womb is registered in terms of the violence of the narrator being “awoke at dawn, thrown up on a rock, the skeleton of a ship choked in its sails” (5). Expelled from the warmth and peacefulness of the womb, the narrator is violently struggling, gasping for air with newborn lungs; even Nin’s own introductory caption echoes the bodily violence when she describes herself as spitting “out her heart.” In order to write her own body, she must disgorge both book and heart. Similarly, the constant struggle in this poem is also located within the maternal body and it is the mother’s body which becomes both the site for the experience and the text for the author.

More specifically, *House of Incest* opens with the graphic image of a birth: “The lining of a coat ripped open like the two shells of an oyster” (6). The “language of the womb” that issues forth in turn is one which Christine Makward describes as “open non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to ‘speak the body’” (96). As I see it, this is also what Kristeva describes as an abject maternal



language, through which a woman can rejoice in the discharge of the semiotic drives and undermine masculine constructions of feminine identity. The abject nature of Nin's language is evident when the narrator remarks "I laugh, not when it fits into my talk, but when it fits into the undercurrents of my talk," just as in struggling to find the repressed undercurrent of language, the narrator observes: "The two currents do not meet. I see two women in me freakishly bound together, like circus twins. I see them tearing away from each other" (16). Friedman argues that "one half of the double suggests a woman constructed by society, obedient to her father; the other half suggests a woman suppressed in this construction and by such obedience" (344). What the narrator needs to listen to, therefore, is the abject within the existing Symbolic order—to the unspoken in speech—which takes on the form of the incomprehensible and disturbs the status quo.

The "incomprehensible" in Nin's work is encapsulated in the image of the dancer who "was listening to a music we could not hear, moved by hallucinations we could not see," and whose rebirth becomes the only way to escape from the house (49). Although desiring this, however, the narrator is also fearful of being born into this new possibility:

If only we could all escape from this house of incest...but none of us could bear to pass through the tunnel...we could not believe that the tunnel would open on daylight, we feared to be trapped into darkness again; we feared to return whence we had come, from darkness and night. The tunnel would narrow and taper down as we walked; it would close around us, and close tighter and tighter around us and stifle us. It would grow heavy and narrow and suffocate us as we walked. (48-49)

The fear of the abject mother must be overcome in order for the narrator to hear the “music of the womb,” like the dancer who “danced, laughing and sighing and breathing all for herself. She danced her fears, stopping in the center of every dance to listen to reproaches that we could not hear, or bowing to applause that we did not make” (49).

Dancing “as if she were deaf and could not follow the rhythm of the music,” this free figure is expressing herself in what Kristeva calls a world estranged from the constraints of language. This freedom, however, was not always the case, since the dancer’s story is the dance of the woman without arms, which were taken away as punishment for clinging: “I clutched all those I loved; I clutched at the lovely moments of life; my hands closed upon every full hour. My arms were always tight and craving to embrace. I wanted to embrace and hold the light, the wind, the sun, the night, the whole world” (49). Forgiveness comes, in turn, and the arms of the dancer are returned to her, when “she relinquished and forgave, opening her arms and her hands, permitting all things to flow away and beyond her” (51). Such openness, indeed, is precisely what Evelyn J. Hinz was suggesting when in her pioneering work on Nin she co-opted the phrase “edifice without dimension” from *House of Incest* to describe the structure of Nin’s fiction. In moving “with the music and with the rhythm of earth’s circles dancing towards daylight,” the figure is Kristeva’s dancer, both one who suffers as she speaks and representative of the abject maternal which permits all things to flow away and beyond her; she is rejoicing in the discharge of the semiotic drives, listening to the incomprehensible that disturbs that Symbolic order and moving beyond mere verbal matters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Like Plath's brilliant use of pregnancy and birthing metaphors in her "riddling" poetry, and Nin's creation of a "music of the womb" in her unique prose poem, Maya Deren's short experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* is a fascinating illustration of how the birthing experience can also inform woman's visual art. Deren, who later earned the distinctive title of the Mother of the American avant-garde film movement, began dabbling in film in 1943 and produced her first piece in collaboration with her husband and cinematographer, Alexander Hammid. Although some critics have claimed that Deren understated the contribution Hammid made to her work, as we can see from the extensive biography of Deren by VèVè Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Neiman, not only does Hammid himself argue the opposite—"I accepted the fact that I am not an originator of ideas, and that I needed someone else [Deren] to help me,"—but he further states that she "was writing poetry, always... So she started with poetic images on paper, and I was visualizing them" (*Signatures* 77-115). Prior to turning to film, Deren's primary medium of creative expression was the study and writing of poetry, and according to Jan Milsapps, this both aided and came to characterize her development as a filmmaker. As she sees it, Deren's films contain poetic images and associations that eventually allowed her to "create film that was poetry in its own unique form" (29). What I would argue is that Deren's transition from verbal to visual modes in effect allowed her to achieve a fuller means of expressing woman's experience. As she herself explains in a letter to her colleague James Card:

The reason that I had not been a very good poet was because actually my

mind worked in images which I had been trying to translate or describe in words: therefore, when I undertook cinema, I was relieved of the false step of translating image into words, and could work directly so that it was not like discovering a new medium so much as finally coming home into a world whose vocabulary, syntax, grammar, was my mother tongue.

Deren's filmmaking, in short, was her "mother tongue" and a means to "translate" and "capture" in images what metaphor does linguistically. Essentially, her artistic blending of mediums is a visual understanding and experiencing of one thing in terms of another.



Fig. 2. Opening scene of *Meshes*.

Just as the recurring trope of metaphor appears to be the female body—and in particular, the container aspect of the womb—so in *Meshes*, the fluid hand-held camera work and the repetitive nature of the sequences enable Deren to depict a journey into the female body. As Alison Butler notes in her extensive review of Deren scholarship, the gendered nature of the human form is of central importance in her work: “Deren insistently centred displaced bodies and displaced centred ones in her films, creating a world on film in which...female bodies trace the continuity of experience and white male

ones often represent threat and instability” (113). In her psychoanalytic reading of *Meshes*, Marilyn Fabe relates such gendering to the movie industry itself, arguing that this “film was created by a woman in a poetic style that systematically subverted the established conventions of the mainstream Hollywood film” (138). According to Deren’s own program notes, the “film is concerned with the interior experiences of an individual” (1) and I would argue that it is this inner focus that comes to centre in the female body, and particularly the womb. Thus, just as Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and new realities, so Deren explains that “the makers of this film have been primarily concerned with the use of the cinematic technique in such a way as to create a world” (1).

In her program notes, Deren also claims that the world she created in *Meshes* “reproduces the way in which the sub-conscious will develop, interpret and elaborate an apparently simple and casual occurrence into a critical emotional experience” (1). Thus, she visualizes an emotionally charged and intensely contained world that is not primarily concerned with the reality of the experience but rather the inter-related complexities of human feelings. In this way, the experience she presents is not one that others would be able to see; it is particular to the woman and her emotional state. As I see it, Deren is not only concerned with the emotional state, but rather with the stability of the woman’s vision, her self-image(s), and the integrity of the female individual. Moreover, in “Some Metaphors for the Creative Process,” Deren herself argues that strong creativity metaphors are capable of revealing such “illuminating relationships” and transcending to “create new worlds” (51-52):

So the artist, beginning in reality—in that which already exists—starts

moving towards a vision, an idea, and with the cumulative momentum of that dedicated concentration, crosses the threshold from that which already exists into the void where, still moving forward, he creates a plane of earth where his foot has been as the spider, spinning from his own guts, threads his ladders of highways through once empty space” (53).

For Deren, metaphor is a “stepping off of the edge” into a new vision, and I would argue that in *Meshes* she does precisely that by allowing the woman in the film the possibility of stepping out of the masculine gaze. Indeed, the woman in the film is viewed in the first sequences of the film as merely a shadow, but then replicates before our very eyes into three dream selves versus the real sleeping one, and culminates with the reality of the masculine gaze being shattered before our very eyes.

Although the film can easily be summarized as a lovers’ tryst gone awry, Deren’s program notes make clear that this situation is essentially a point of departure: “And from then on the event which was originally so simple becomes increasingly emotional and complex” (1). The film commences in an eery fashion with a thin manikin’s arm coming from the sky and depositing an artificial flower on the sidewalk (See Fig. 2). A woman, identified only by her shadow (See Fig. 3), picks up the flower and continues on her way to her lover’s home. When she arrives at the house, she pauses at the steps and subliminally glimpses a male figure disappearing around the curve of the road. Ascending the stairs to the door of the house and finding the door locked, she takes out her own key which slips from her hand and falls down the stairs in slow motion. She runs after the key and upon retrieving it, unlocks the door and enters the house. Once inside, the woman finds items there in disarray: a newspaper scattered on the floor, a

telephone receiver off the hook, a knife slowly disengages itself from a loaf of bread, an unmade bed and a record revolving silently on a turntable. The details suggest that someone has just recently been there, yet, the house is now empty and the woman settles herself on a chair in front of the window, places the flower on her lap, sensuously caresses her body, and falls asleep.



Fig. 3. First image of the woman.

While asleep, the woman begins to dream, visually represented as a tunnel (see Fig. 4), about the incident of glimpsing the figure disappearing around the curve in the road and entering the house. The experience is repeated three times, each time in a strange and different variation where there occurs a manipulation of the elements of the initial and framing sequence. The man disappearing around the corner turns into an ominous black-robed figure with a mirrored face whom the woman attempts to reach but cannot; the items in the house are rearranged in different manners; the black robed figure is seen in the house holding the flower that the woman originally picked up on the street; and the woman's ascent upstairs becomes increasingly difficult. Once the sequence is repeated thrice, the three dream selves of the woman sit around the kitchen table

conspiring to kill the real woman who remains sleeping on the chair. The chosen attacker walks across the room through various landscapes to the sleeping woman, turns into the woman's lover, begins to seduce her with the flower, whereupon the flower turns into a knife in the blade of which the woman's reflection is distorted. Suddenly, the sleeping woman strikes out at the man and succeeds in shattering the man's face which is only a mirror. The gaping hole in his face leads out to the ocean and the broken pieces of mirror fall into the water. Finally, the man from the original framing sequence returns home to find the woman dead on the chair, draped in seaweed with blood trickling from her mouth.

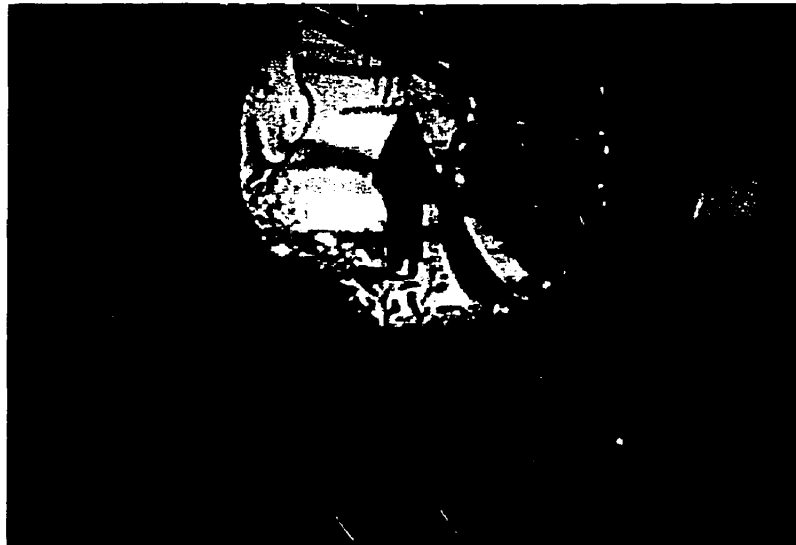


Fig. 4. Tunnelling effect to dream sequence.

As I see it, the way that Deren manipulates the elements of the original sequence—specifically the transformation of the male lover into the black-robed, nun-like woman—is designed to create an image of Kristeva's "abject mother," while the dream journey of the woman and the manipulation of the initial framing elements create a metaphor for the return-to-the-womb (see Fig. 5). According to Kristeva, the abject mother is both the "adored" and the "abhorred," and the enfolding of both mother and



child can be resolved only if the child can split the mother in two: the abject and the sublime. Evoking the latter aspect, the woman in the film incessantly pursues the figure on the street, running as fast as she can after “his” slowly retreating figure, climbing the never ending staircase and with the object of her pursuit remaining unattainable. Noting Deren’s choice of a black-robe and hood to shroud this figure, Fabe sees the film as a depiction of the “meshes” of maternal involvement and claims that the “dream figure’s appearance as a tall, stately nun with a halo-like nimbus of light surrounding her body suggests a magical, holy mother, a mother superior, the all powerful primal mother of infancy” (140). Thus, the sublime mother comes to represent an unattainable creature and the female character’s pursuit represents a search for such a repressed maternal.



Fig. 5. The black-robed, nun-like figure.

Although in the first dream sequence, the woman unsuccessfully pursues the figure, in the second dream sequence, the figure mysteriously appears in the house, a space associated with the female body, and magically disappears after placing a flower, usually associated with female sexuality, on the bed. Insofar as the figure’s mirrored face functions as a reflection of the woman’s own face, there would seem to be a possible

element of narcissism but one could also argue that the mirrored face serves as an example of the mother's face in the earliest stages of infancy which functions like a mirror for the child. The child's own sense of self is created by the reflection of the mother's expressions as she looks at the child. Fabe points out that "although the child is literally gazing upon another person, someone separate and distinct from itself, it experiences the mother's face as if it were a mirror, a reflection of its own self" (140). The mirror is thus both a reminder of the child-mother relation and of the need of both to establish their own identities. At the same time, just as in demonstrating the concept of creation in metaphor theory, Lakoff and Johnson point out that while the object comes out of the substance, the substance goes into the object, so when the woman looks at the mirrored face, she is seeing the substance of the mother in herself. The mother is always present in the child and the mirrored face figure serves as a reminder of the bond between mother and child.

The question of identity, I would argue, is also of central concern in the film's inclusion of the legendary shot of Deren herself looking out from the window, hands pressed against the glass, which precedes the dream sequence (see Fig. 6). The image, referred to as "the Botticelli," is a framing of Deren's face by its own reflection and according to Maria Pramaggiore, this framing "foregrounds that vision cannot guarantee one's position—we see the face and its reflection as both objects and subjects" (28-29). Interestingly enough, Alison Butler points out that this famous still was "used ever after by Deren to publicize her work despite a reported lack of resemblance to her which increased in passing years" (115). Alternately, in her study of women and avant-garde film, Patricia Mellencamp argues: "Perhaps the photograph of Deren behind the window

pane, a reminder of the power of the female gaze, a knowing look from the margins, remarked the gap between women and their image" (35). As I see it, "the Botticelli" is just that—an inaccurate representation of the female identity—and Deren uses the image, not just because of its physical beauty but also to capitalize on the misrepresentation of the female body. For ultimately, the answer to this image is the disfigured reflection of the woman in the blade of the knife and the final scene with her limp body in the chair, head thrust back, and blood trickling from her mouth (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 6. The "Botticelli" shot.

If the central figures in *Meshes* are the black-robed individual and the woman, then the central site in the film is the house where the woman spends the majority of the time in the dark tunnel-like staircase. As the dream sequences progress from the initial tunnelling effect, the woman who at first moves in a slowed down, dance-like motion, then adopts a rhythmically frantic up and down, contraction-like motion (see Figs. 8, 9, 10, 11). The domestic and confined space of the house is most commonly aligned with a female space and according to psychoanalytic dream interpretation, houses are generally understood as symbols of the maternal body. Just as the staircase is highly suggestive of

the birth canal, so a return-to-the-womb is metaphorically represented by the woman's struggle to reach the mirror-faced woman and her ascent up the staircase in a gravity defying and disorienting manner. Furthermore, the film conveys a mood of ritualistic reiteration through the use of three dream doubles, through both the oppressive and obsessive atmosphere, and through the various juxtaposed camera angles in the stairway sequences. Similarly, Deren's use of triplicate sequences can also be paralleled to the trimesters of pregnancy and in this way, the pursuit of the abject mother becomes a pursuit back to repressed female subjectivity, of the kind that Kristeva associates with the "chora" or the repressed maternal in the Symbolic order.



Fig. 7. Final shot of woman at the end of *Meshes*.

Deren's pursuit of the repressed female subjectivity is even better understood in the context of Lauren Rabinovitz's examination of her "enthusiasm for mastering a new language system," and her contention that *Meshes* is "significant, then, as a woman's discourse that rewrites Hollywood's objectification of women by addressing a female subject who must contend with her own objectification" (53-56). Similarly, as Pramaggiore asserts: "The multiplied representation of the female protagonist produces a

distinction between the dreamer (self) and the three dream doubles (roles), then calls that distinction into question" (30). The woman in the film responds to the objectification of women by lashing out at her lover who is looking down upon her in an intrusively dominating position; when she strikes him, his face is shattered like a mirror, leaving a hole and revealing an open space with waves crashing on the shore (see Figs. 12,13). As Rabinovitz observes, the woman "destroys the objects governing a woman's sexual reflection, the man who is both male sexuality and a mirror for narcissistic female sexuality" (64). In effect, the woman is trying to control the definition of her self-image, and in order to create a female identity, the woman metaphorically returns to the womb through the symbolic imagery of the lapping waters of the ocean, with which the dream sequence ends.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11. Series of ascent up staircase.

As in the case of the suicidal ambience of Plath's poetry and Nin's focus on a stillbirth, the message of *Meshes* is somewhat problematic, for the conclusion of the film depicts a dead woman, throat strangled, shards of glass scattered around her feet with seaweed wrapped around her body, and the final shot of the film is the graphic close-up of the woman's dead eyes and bloody mouth. And yet, like Plath and Nin, and similar to Evelyn Fox Keller's response to the scientific appropriation of the female body, it could be argued that Deren does seek to "wrest" back a female subjective voice, and that the violent ending of the film dramatizes the dangerous implications of the process. Just as Kristeva warns women of the dangers in listening to the repressed maternal in language, so too does Deren show how it can end in death, suicide and/or psychosis.



Figs. 12. Hammid as the man.



Fig. 13. Shattering of the man's face.

In attempting to see the ending in a more positive fashion, Rabinovitz asks: "Or is it the result of her revolt against the cinematic structures of containment? Or is her death dramatically signifying her end as a construction of Woman within this dream world?"(65). Taking this optimism a bit further and in the context of Deren's work as a whole, I would note that even though the woman is dead at the end of *Meshes*, it is the very same woman that washes up out of the ocean at the beginning of Deren's next short film *At Land* produced a year later in 1944. Moreover, in her *Meshes* program notes,

Deren herself suggests: “It [the film] is culminated by a double-ending in which it would seem that the imagined achieved, for her, such force that it became reality”—one in which the woman appears to be dead to her male lover but in reality is reborn through her return-to-the-womb experience.

The dream sequence, I would thus argue, is ultimately about woman’s search for her own female identity in a hostile and oppressive environment. The rebirth experience culminates with the death of the objectified female body and according to Pramaggiore, “the film thus calls into question the continuity, stability, and location of the ostensible “self” or subject while at the same time confirming the power of images—and, importantly, women’s images of themselves—to produce their own realities” (30). Deren’s technique of ‘body doubling’ is therefore essentially a tool for determining which one is the real woman’s view of the female body. For Deren, woman’s image of herself is not the metaphorical stillbirth at the end of *Mesher*s but rather the triumphant outburst of the same character running down the beach in *At Land* (see Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Concluding scene in *At Land*.

## CONCLUSION

In *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Evelyn Fox Keller questions: “What does it mean to call one aspect of human experience male and another female? How do such labels affect the ways in which we structure our experiential world, assign value to its different domains, and, in turn, acculturate and value actual men and women?” (6). Essentially, what my own study has argued is that perhaps in assigning figurative language and the metaphorical process to a particularly female experience, the female body shares a unique relationship with language and metaphor. Specifically, the birthing experience has the potential to be a strong metaphor that not only validates women’s writing as a whole but also allows women the opportunity to articulate experience from a quintessentially female domain—one that when used by the opposite sex does not attain nearly the same degree of power nor strength. Thus throughout literature, philosophy, science and art, woman’s body has been centre-stage for others to articulate concerns and possibly appropriate experience and yet her body also holds its own representative power, for it is her very reproductive function which distinguishes her from man.

I should, however, emphasize that the purpose of this study is not to consign women to a biological essentialism wherein meaning can only be derived from the maternal; nor am I claiming that women are defined solely through the body. Instead, what I am suggesting is that the maternal body allows women the opportunity to explore an uncharted territory which is similar to that of metaphor because a complete



definition is resisted by any other than the mother. In this way, the underlying fear of metaphor can be directly related to the fear of women and the unknown internal space of the maternal body. For men can always try to explore the process of labour and birth but they can never ultimately relate to this subject the way women do.

Conversely, however, I am also not claiming that all terms related to intimacy, generativity, interaction and creativity are solely of the province of women but rather that woman's body has long served as supreme subject for literary theorizing and in turn, has become a covert force throughout history. Particularly in metaphor theory, women's body has been used in such a manner, and it is this very situation that provides women writers with the unique opportunity to capitalize on the similarities between the female form and the metaphorical process. Thus in emphasizing women's potential reclamation of "birth rites," I am not suggesting a literal representation of the body but rather a female view of a textual representation—one in which the metaphor of the female body is used by those to whom it biologically belongs.

Certainly, the three artists examined in this thesis illustrate and explore the effectiveness of metaphor in creating a world that each woman enters into as a return-to-the-womb experience and whereby each is essentially able to escape the masculine gaze. At the same time, what Sylvia Plath, Anaïs Nin and Maya Deren dramatize not only in their work but also in their own personal lives, is the difficulty and potential danger in writing or visualizing a female speaking voice. Insofar as the very act of a woman artist labouring at writing has much in common with the act of giving birth, when the woman artist uses particularly strong and creative metaphors, the experience can be both unforgettable and powerful.

There is, of course, much more that has and needs to be said about this topic. Just as there was and still is a fear of the unknown internal space of the female, so too is there the possibility that woman's birthing experience can be further explored in contemporary cinema and popular culture. Most recently, for example, birthing and mothering metaphors have been used in popular science-fiction films like the *Alien Series*, as a means to not only identify distinctly motherly characteristics of the two primary characters—the female protagonist portrayed by Sigourney Weaver and the alien mother-queen—but also to represent the fertility of a new frontier and the powerful nature of the unrepressed female voice. Similarly, most films of this kind take place in near darkness and claustrophobic conditions, from narrow corridors and red lit rooms, to the murky walls of a prison, and interestingly enough, the theatre experience itself might also be paralleled to the birthing experience where individuals sit in a womb-like room, enclosed in virtual darkness and stasis, and possibly leave with the birth of new relations that have never been visualized before.

In the case of poetry, one could also explore the way that metaphors of the body have been of central concern to the British poet, Carol Ann Duffy, who struggles with the very words she uses and searches for an alternate dimension of expression through the concept of a musical voice or song: “The words you have for things die / in your heart, but grasses are plainsong, / patiently chanting the circles you cannot repeat / or understand” (“Plainsong”). In this way, a further connection might possibly be made between the female voice that is articulated when women use metaphors of conception, pregnancy and birth, and a voice that attempts to break down the borders of language. For Duffy, this process also involves the use of multiple characters ranging from frazzled

housewife and lady's maid, to nude painter's model and the mythological wife of Midas, whereby she seeks not only to legitimize the female point of view but also validate women's discourse as multiple and fluid. In this way, when in her poem entitled "Foreign" she observes that behind language "is the sound of your mother singing to you," she is attempting to re-create a voice that is both newborn and archaic, and one that does not belong to the existing order—"You think in a language of your own and talk in theirs."

In the case of prose fiction, one could also look closely at the work of Canadian writer Audrey Thomas, who explores the female body through the use of bodily rhythms, menstrual blood, the experience of labour and the waters that break at birth. In her novel, *Mrs. Blood*, the physical struggle of giving birth both realistically and metaphorically is an exploration of an intellectual struggle to create a woman's experience. Perhaps what Thomas is articulating is the possibility of presenting the female body as it really is, not voyeuristically observed but replete with all bodily drives, tearing of skin, and cries of pain and joy. What she might also be demonstrating is the way that once the female body looks outward and sees not merely a reflection of itself, women's writing can then allow for altered ways of perceiving.

In short, while once regarded mainly as a poetic device, today, metaphor is becoming increasingly regarded as a powerful tool that borders on the edges of social convention, conceptual structures and collective values. And insofar as the great power of metaphor lies in its ability to create afresh and allow for new ways of thinking, including the awareness that not all metaphors are alike, what then comes into focus is the possibility that in order to reclaim a metaphor, the woman artist must be able to come

to terms with her own body and accept the importance of the mother. And that in the public sphere others may also be following suit can be seen in the way that just recently the federal government has increased the duration of maternity leave to one year, in the extent to which the pregnant female body is no longer hidden from public view, and in the way that the ritual of labour is immortalized on video tape and the role of the mother in the first three years of a child's life is more and more being regarded as invaluable.

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