"She said plain, burned things": A Feminist Poetics of the Unsayable in Twentieth Century Literary & Visual Culture

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“SHE SAID PLAIN, BURNED THINGS”:
A FEMINIST POETICS OF THE UNSAYABLE
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERARY & VISUAL CULTURE

by

LEAH SOUFFRANT

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Engineering in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

“SHE SAID PLAIN, BURNED THINGS”:
A FEMINIST POETICS OF THE UNSAYABLE
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERARY & VISUAL CULTURE

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LEAH SOUFFRANT

Adviser: Professor Meena Alexander

This dissertation examines the way silence, blank space, and other forms of creative withholding attempt to translate the unsayable, or to convey the unsayability of language in artistic form. Through a study of the works of Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, Rachel Zucker, Marguerite Duras, Anne Carson, and visual images, this work observes the connection between women’s writing in the 20th century and the communication of painful subject matter through attention to absence. This study attends explicitly to how formal qualities in artistic works attend to ontological concerns through an examination of the intersection of concerns with phenomenology, feminism, and formal aesthetics.
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Prologue

In this writing, I employ a deliberately elliptical method. It is the method which serves the work I am doing and it is borne of the nature of deliberate attention the texts I study demand. In the words of poet George Oppen, I might hope for “Clarity//In the sense of transparency,/I don’t mean that much can be explained.//Clarity in the sense of silence” (162).

It is a bit of a conundrum, to quote a poet saying, “I don’t mean that much can be explained” in the service of a dissertation, which is presumably explaining something. But rather than emphasizing explication, I am moved by Oppen’s language of clarity. If I assert that looking at the works in this dissertation illuminates the way art exposes something unsayable, then it makes sense to hope this study clarifies that illumination, brightens it, while yet maintaining the understanding that the unsayable remains such. Looking at the unsayable more and more doesn’t make it sayable. I cannot say and explain the unsayable matter of the soul, for example, better than a harrowing work of art conveys it. What arrogance it would be to attempt it! The ellipses must remain in order to show this thing about the unsayable, to point at it and work to understand it better. “Clarity in the sense of silence,” as Oppen says.

This problem is not new to thinking about language, or new to poetry. What interested me as a younger poet, prior to graduate school, began with Tsvetaeva’s stuttering poems of
heartbreak; Rilke’s tracing of feeling, echoing presences; Dickinson’s dashes more than her
words. From those poetic interests, which nurtured my creative writing, I found an early
interest in translation. What can be translated from language to language? What is
impossible to translate? These questions – and their answers in my rich study of the
Russian language, in particular, as an undergraduate – led me to an understanding of the
ways in which even the words in English are taking shape around a cavernous space of
impossible connection.

Writing poetry is a relentless exercise in putting into language what is outside language,
and reading lyrical writing at its best is an experience of capturing some of this slippery
experience in art. This I began to know as the unsayable, and to find in all works of art that
struck me with profound power, a power sensed in shadowy Vermeers and bright Pop art
paintings, works that communicate – perhaps about feelings, perhaps about a culture --
without explicitly “telling” us what they might mean. I found this unsayable in the works of
Marguerite Duras, whose writing revealed that other, often darker secrets of the body may
be mysteriously exposed in language’s silences. What were these unsayable things, and
how were they coming through, being translated? How might we learn something through
the attention we pay to moments when voices go mute? What draws us to pay attention to
these critical moments in history, in our memories, to look towards the dark moments that
obscure meaning, making history messy and memory unreliable? These were questions
raised by the most difficult experiences, and the questions addressed in powerful works I
have been drawn to. Addressed, attended to, if yet hovering unanswerable.
When I joined the doctoral program, my interests in the unsayable – those fascinations driving my writing, my studies, my curiosities, and my creativity – began to intersect more explicitly with my lived experience. I found that there was a connection between what was not said and the experiences specifically of the body. I found that there was no language for certain terribly significant experiences, yet writers and artists created works expressing this very impossibility of communication. Reading Jean Rhys, again Marguerite Duras, and contemporaries such as Rachel Zucker exemplified this tension between saying and not-saying. Having started graduate school shortly after giving birth, navigating graduate study while caring for a newborn baby and working and teaching, my attention was drawn to the messiest parts of my own experience, and to the texts that echoed its difficulty of expression. Maternal ambivalence, reproductive traumas, and the profundities of human caring bound with surprising simultaneous disconnections seemed to lurk behind many texts that attracted me. Feminist theory, in particular the French tradition, clarified connections I felt viscerally and observed intellectually: connections between the body’s urgent perceptions and language’s limitations. Helène Cixous insisted that women write the body – implying a bodying forth of language’s unsayability – and Luce Irigaray argued that there was no language for women’s experience. But it was not until I read the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that my understanding of the crucial relationship between lived experience and its communication through an art deeply infused with silence began to crystalize. It is from the work of Merleau-Ponty, and the investigation of the implications of his work on more contemporary feminist theory in the United States, that my study develops.
From there, the exploration of works that traffic in this unsayability became honed by the central figure of Anne Carson. Her work is crucial in its understanding and expression of the relationship between raw emotional exposure and a delicate reticence. Her erotic triangle of beloved, lover, and desire inspires my own disconnected triangle of unsayability: the form that is a visualization of this project. I envision a near-triangle that does not connect at its points, the shape not fully formed because distanced by white space between the lines, and yet recognizably the shape of a triangle in the proximity of its lines, its nearness of connection – the almost sayable, if you will.

These spaces I begin to see everywhere, and in works that might be read differently in different studies, I am concentrating on how we might find access to our shared human pain, and perhaps some relief, in marking these places. We might look at Lorna Simpson’s works as exemplary of the aesthetics of this study of the unsayable. We might turn to Giorgio Agamben’s writing on the limitations of the language of witness for insight drawn from the historical specificity of the Holocaust and consider its relevance to our efforts to communicate traumatic material and painful memories in other contexts. In her study of Paul Celan, a poet central to many analyses of the relationship between trauma and elliptical lyricism, Anne Carson writes, “Delay, disappointment and hunger are experiences catalytic for poets” (Economy 34). After such catharsis – disappointment or, indeed, trauma – in memory’s wake, the art demands we attend to it, demand that we ask difficult questions.
How do we talk about what has been damaged?

How can we gain clarity, even when we can’t fully explain?

In her short talks, Carson writes that Sylvia Plath’s mother says “plain, burned things” as she talks about Plath. The poet-critic displaces the poet at the remove of time, space, hearsay, and an unyielding simplicity of language. Carson’s plain language is both direct and impenetrable, perhaps the likely voice of the dead poet’s mother. This piece becomes a hinging caesura in this dissertation: when I read this short talk, arguably a prose poem, I feel space open up: the space of distance between all these women, yet linked, like a chain through the air. And the linking is in the uncertainty of the “things” – concrete, yet vague, the clarity of things that could yet be anything – and the certainty of their having been burnt, that is hurt, damaged. How do we say plainly something about what has been hurt? What might that mean? What could those “things” be? The spaces we mark leave room for these important questions. I do not wish to close them off.

It is hard to unravel the thread of how the study of painful experience gained its urgency in this project. From the difficulty of explaining the inexplicable, to the difficulty of expressing maternity, to the more mundane difficulties of struggling through divorce and single parenting and private traumas, living with exposure to world scale losses and relentless crises of a media saturated New York City still described as a post-9/11 world, there is a bounty of logical connections to make between the life of the body and the life of the mind, tough and soft intermingling. For all its necessary distance and disconnection, this is
nonetheless an intimate project, a personal reckoning with how impossible it is to convey the intensity of our most deeply felt experiences – yet how necessary it is to attend to them nonetheless. This attention yields poetry, and our attention to that poetry yields necessary knowing, too.
Introduction:

Plain, burned things:
Attending to the Unsayable

But what if language expresses as much by what is between words as by the words themselves? By that which it does not ‘say’ as by what it ‘says’?
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty

How can we think about what literature and art convey about the difficult unsayable experiences of our human experience through the aesthetics of the unsaid: silence, blank space, gaps and fractures in the space of a page and in language? To investigate this, I look at works that are infused with silence and blank space, paying attention to the ways in which evocations of silence in literature and visual culture can be understood. This study attends explicitly to aesthetics, how formal qualities in artistic works – in particular those flush with these spaces around the details, silences around the words – attend to ontological concerns. I look at these at the intersection of concerns with phenomenology, feminism, and formal aesthetics to reveal a complex but recurring interplay of quiet and intensity. Through close readings of texts by modernist writers Sylvia Plath and Jean Rhys, post-war writer Marguerite Duras, and contemporary writers Anne Carson and Rachel Zucker, with illustrations in the arts and film, we see the implications of exposing how, as Susan Sontag observed, the “notions of silence, emptiness, [and] reduction, sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc. – specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or for confronting the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way” (Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence” part VI). These new prescriptions for looking and hearing, or attending, mark a shift in how we might reckon with art in the modern and
postmodern moments. Rather than focusing on Pound’s call for the artist to “make it new,”
Sontag reveals that we now might expect the viewer to attend newly, and the artist, in
making space for this, quite literally in blank space, makes us attend newly. In this modern
trajectory, image is ever-more-present and immersed in the body. Marking these images
and texts that draw our attention and provide insight into the unsayable becomes a
marking of what Sontag later called “the iconography of consciousness” (Sontag, PAJ 7).

In Lorna Simpson’s photographic series Details, a collection of 21 photogravures with text
is installed scattered over a wall. The works, each 10x8 inches, are “details” in more ways
than one. Each frame narrows on a fragment of a body, pictured like a cropped close-up
“detail” of a larger work, in the tradition of the art history study. The fragments of bodies
each often seem to be in some posture of portraiture: a hand resting on a shoulder, the dark
skin of an arm bent to lay the palm deliberately on the hip, hands folded on a lap before a
formal suitcoat. In the margins of each picture is a fragment of context to the image.
The picture of a hand resting on a table with a ring squeezing the finger’s flesh is not quite relaxed next to the standing figure in what looks like a full cotton skirt: “reckless” reads the accompanying text. Between this image—and in all it leaves out—and this text lies the emotional intensity of this art. We learn through the implication of the text—“reckless”—that this person might be more complex than the portrait could allow. Even if we were to see the whole face, the whole shape of the body, it is nevertheless partial. In the “details” – the hand, even the absence of the face – we are forced, and therefore more able, to see the...
vastness of what is unexpressed and inexpressible in the image. “Reckless” is just the tip of the iceberg.

Fig. 2. detail from Details, Lorna Simpson

The art that attempts to reach across this space of unsayability by marking the space may be understood as a work of translation. Bernhard Waldenfels observes, “Just as translation leads from a source language to a target language without closing the abyss between the two, expression converts the alien into one’s own, without effacing the alienness.” What is translated in a work of art that takes on the unsayable? Attempting to put into expression something inexpressible does not make the unsayable said, but rather says something else, retaining the trace of that original feeling, that original language of the experience. Waldenfels continues, “A perfect translation, which would make the original be forgotten,
would no longer be a translation” (Evans 96). Silence conveys something, but it is not something that can be translated without understanding that translation is an uneven exchange, a marking of difference and disconnection as much as a bridging across languages. When we translate the unsayable into something expressed in artistic form, it needs a form recognizing this disconnection, bodying forth a disembodiment, letting silence convey that which cannot be said, and allowing a recognition of the impossibility of neatly stating difficulties to reside in the work. Even, and perhaps especially, pain resides in the impossibility of closing the gap, of finding an equivalent for what is translated from experience into expression.

In another of Simpson’s Details, a carefully dressed female figure rests her hands carefully on a stool for a portrait. We see only the hands, part of an arm, her belt and torso in a dress. “Carried a gun” says the text. We understand immediately that this is a life of immeasurable complexity. Fear coupled with a grim courage begin to permeate the image as the space beyond the frame thickens. All the things we can’t know make the absence of the rest of the figure more profound than her presence could have conveyed. The way the body and language intersect tells us something about what is unavailable, that the hand and the gun are both partial, both details, and the empty space beyond the frame expands.
Works that are rough with the fraught experiences of women writing into pain are rich with silence. Looking here primarily at writers who convey not only difficult experience, but the unsayable, echoing uneasiness, grit, and complexity – what is impossible to simplify or flatten – we see that the very attempt to express hard experience intersects with feminist principles, those resistant to reductionist thinking.¹ “I am also other than what I

¹ When we see the relationship between the mind and the body as inextricably interdependent, considering unsayable experience through the terms of the situated subject, we find phenomenology can help dissolve essentialist conclusions at every turn. Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a fundamentally illuminating figure here. “Merleau-Ponty’s great contribution lies in his refusal to settle for great reductionist answers, be they intellectualist or idealist on the one hand, or materialist/realist on the other. In his nuanced and subtle investigation of what it means to perceive the world with our bodies, Merleau-Ponty offers feminism a way of
imagine myself to be,” writes Simone Weil in “Void and Compensation.  “To know this is forgiveness” (9). It is a deep sort of ontological knowledge to understand that we are not what we imagine ourselves to be -- in other words, we cannot even imagine our own being -- and to understand this is, for Weil, a spiritual effort. We are other, we are unknowable, existing in something of a void of what is knowable—or sayable—and it is impossible to say I am this (or, for instance, woman is that). Void is essential to nearing this sense of knowledge which is an awareness of otherness, of unfamiliarity, of estrangement. Attending to this difficulty is the gesture towards a tricky sort of knowing, a knowing that recognition of this void implies. Recognizing the void and its potential for knowledge is a principle at work in all the pieces examined in this dissertation.

Focusing on what qualities of texts (broadly defined to include visual culture as well as and primarily literary works) serves to illustrate the way(s) in which art translates between experience and language, by marking and remarking on the space between these points. The multiple points can be usefully understood as triangulated, creating a space of unsayable experience in the hollow of betweenness or reach. The felt world, both as out of the impasse of mind/body dualism,” observes Tina Chanter in her essay “Wild Meaning: Luce Irigaray’s Reading of Merleau-Ponty” (Evans 223). The study of the way we experience the world has implications beyond perception in and of itself. In Jorella Andrews’ investigation of “Vision, Violence, and the Other: A Merleau-Pontean Ethics,” she writes, “the ethics in question [in the Phenomenology of Perception] challenges traditional positions in that it is not the discovery and application of ‘universally valid’ rules, principles, or rights that are presented as foundational, but involvement in perceptual acts experienced as ongoing and unstable” (Olkowski 168). The resistance to simplification reflects an understanding of the complexity of the world and the complexity of our perceptions, and the perceptual experiences we have demand art that reflects this unstable opening, unfolding, and often difficult to communicate experience. This instability is made visible in works that are interested in exploring questions of being in the world, a most difficult area often exposed through difficult experience. The works attended to in this study represent opportunities for exploring the ways art can express and demand the unfolding of perceptual experience -- without authoritatively demanding its definitive meaning.
emotional feeling and tactile touch-feeling, is essential to our understanding of what it is to be (alive), and the works I look at translate this dual meaning of feeling through various formal strategies. I look at the way the words of a mother attempt to address her ambivalence but grow into a stutter in a mute lyricism betraying language’s insufficiency. I look at the way the body on the screen or the stage attempts to put forth a visual gesture where words fail. I look at images of silent, gray landscapes and pauses of space on the page evoking generations of blurred communications. This dissertation aims to show the breadth of the subject, imagining silence across various genres, across the limits of language, boundaries of time, and reaches of physical space: the untranslatability of human experience. The analyses draw from a range of modern literature, philosophy, arts, and material life; riddled with images and cavernous blank pages; textured, tactile, and performative.

Phenomenology begins to provide a language for the difficulty of examining works that attempt to mark the unsayable, and how this might be an opportunity for knowledge. What kinds of art draw forth a meditation on what lies outside the work itself? Sensitivity to such works is traced through the body and its deeply felt yet deeply difficult to express experiences. Elizabeth Grosz illuminates the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s contribution, pointing out, “Unlike Sartre, whose idealism grants a primacy to mind or consciousness, Merleau-Ponty claims to reveal a subject as a ‘being-to-the-world’ (1962: viii), a ‘subject committed to the world,’ a subject of perception and behavior as well as cognition and reflection. I am not able to stand back from the body and its experiences to reflect on them; this withdrawal is unable to grasp my body-as-it is-lived-by-me. I have access to knowledge
of my body only by living it.” (86) This knowledge is a threshold, a border we mark through art, but cannot seem to cross. The marking builds an iconography, those “details” we attend to in order to imagine some of the sprawling unknowable.

We find these languages are inadequate because the process—of knowing, expressing, translating—is always incomplete, so to land on a word, even, can give lie to the difficulty of translation itself, and a relentless attempt to say what is unsayable, the attempt to explain what is inexplicable, can betray arrogance and ignorance. Yet, the desire to communicate experience pushes artists to body forth the disembodied, and in the most compelling works puts silence in the ear to be attended to and blankness on the page to be seen, to stop the breath. Phenomenology allows the feminist interest in embodied experience to be complex, to communicate without closing down the inexplicable nature of pain. Joanna Oksala observes, “The body is not a surface or a site on which psychic meanings are played out. Neither is it a mute container of subjectivities. […] we must understand perception as an essentially open and ambitious process. […] The lived body is characterized by a fundamental indeterminacy because its relationship to the world is essentially open and dynamic” (224). Anne Carson might bring Emily Bronte to her very kitchen table in the viscerally stark “Glass Essay,” which I study in Chapter Four.

One compelling detail we perceive through the body is silence. It is a simple metaphor for the unsayable. What cannot be conveyed might remain silent. Yet silence becomes more complex when it is shaped, attended to. David Metzer, in his study of modern music, for
example, observes, “Modernist music has used silence as a way of commenting on the act of expression” (336). Metzer argues that void exists outside the piece, that there is a borderland, which is in the art or is near the silence itself, which in music is part of the soundscape the way blank space fills a page after words or a hovering shot in film slows the movement to stillness. The work sets up the borderland between what we can experience or say or hear and that which is unsayable, and that borderland is the insertion of the “gray silence” of plain language. This evokes what is unelaborated in the emotionally latent phrasings of Jean Rhys or the choked language of Rachel Zucker, surrounded by sprawling blank spaces on a page in her writing of motherhood. In examining Marguerite Duras’ screenplay for Alain Resnais’ film Hiroshima, Mon Amour in Chapter Two, we see the way art takes as its task the conveyance of difficult material – from the devastation of war to the grief of personal loss – and asserts an unsayable experience beyond the “borders” or limitations of language. As Simone De Beauvoir observed, “the body is the instrument of our grasp upon the world,” and in Duras’ work we find this grasp is a reaching, slipping grasp in the face of harrowing circumstances.

Finally, and consistently, the unsayable is found in the poetics of Anne Carson, whose poetry asserts a borderland of the untranslatability of emotional experience. Combining the concerns of the body and the poetics of unsayability, Carson’s work sparks at the intersection of these and becomes central to the expression of this study. She writes, identifying the borderland of the unsayable and its implications, “Eros is an issue of boundaries.” A consideration of the erotic allows us to look at both the body and
experience that might be considered in the realm of the soul or being. Carson continues, “[Eros] exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counterglance, between ‘I love you’ and ‘I love you too,’ the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.” Where language, broadly defined, is impoverished, to echo Simone Weil, we begin to have access to an understanding of experience – those that are difficult, those that are urgent – and in creating art that traces this poverty we assemble Sontag’s iconography of consciousness.

In all of these works there are layers of silence and unsayability. The irony of using language to chisel into what is apparently absent is one quiver of discomfort. When language fails, form asserts its importance. And in poetry, language is always failing. Merleau-Ponty comes to the conclusion that “all language is indirect or allusive – that is, if you wish, silence” (AR, 80). To best illuminate the centrality of the unsayable and unsayability that art – which I define as inclusive of various genres – literary, visual, performance – we can look at texts which assert silence. In the readings here, we see clear examples of the irreducibility of art and the importance of silence, the limitations of language, and a creative engagement with the possibilities of form. Plath’s lyric poetry turns to a form in three voices. Jean Rhys writes stories that weave the most cutting and absorbing narrative threads beneath plain language. Carson’s translations of Greek drama
are slowed by pages of hand-drawn art.

So we talk about silence, look at it spreading between words on a page, hear it yawning between scenes in a film. Attending to silence and blankness, the plain things begin to yield something. We might require some quiet to understand its impact, to observe, as John Cage did, that there is no such thing as silence (51). And thus we begin spinning in a dance of ontology that blurs further and further away from epistemology. Here, looking at texts choked up with language of death or reticent in the social habits of silence, I aim to show that only through a careful investigation of form sensitive to its phenomenological implications is it possible to read the unsayable. This argument hinges upon the urgency of Charles Altieri’s assertion that we might bracket epistemic concerns and focus on “qualities like intensity, involvedness, and plasticity [as] not mere secondary features of experience but the very conditions that make for an enhanced sense of what is worth pursuing in our reflective lives” (274).

In this poetics of the unsayable the movement of our attention toward ontological concerns is bodied forth through form. We allow theories of being to penetrate theories of form, not because there is an algebra (or formula) of lyric form, but because the language of bodying forth becomes important when asserting an embodiment of abstraction, much as formalism suggests textual properties of form in space, the texture of language. We observe the need in our contemporary cultural landscape to attend to the complexity of textual qualities that have splintered from traditional “forms” – the sonnet, the villanelle, even the novel. The
arts assert what Merleau-Ponty described as “the inaccessible fullness of things” and by acknowledging what is both in the text (form) and kept out of the text (silence), we get closer to the fullness, inaccessible though it remains (AR 91).

The works in this dissertation are interested in pushing boundaries of form. Reading these works illustrates the centrality of formal attention in attending to ontological matters found burgeoning in art that swells with both difficult subject matter and quiet. I ask: How can the unsayable be communicated through art and language? What happens when emptiness remains unfilled by the artist? The hollows are heavy. What I am calling a feminist poetics of the unsayable is the assertion of rich – and often fraught – emotional content found in creative works that use blankness, rupture, and silence. These writers are exposing difficult experiences without capturing them in impossibly inadequate languages, translating across the void while leaving the void visible, available to perception. Allowing for silence, for the process of attending to the reach toward communication, creates an ontology of form that is crucial in creative works, often using what I call “plain language” writing: unadorned and unelaborated vocabulary, direct statements, or pointing out ambiguities instead of resolving them. These strategies have the potential to assert an alternative to traditional forms of discourse. A poetics of the unsayable, through its relative quiet, can force attention upon rare and significant moments of noise, can guide our attention to experiences otherwise obscured, or silenced.
What Follows

There is knowledge found in works that assert the limitations of language, question the possibility of bearing witness, and render through image the attention to what is impossible to capture fully. These works might resonate on some hard to capture poetic register that achieves a kind of emotional intensity. I track this in four chapters, exploring the ways in which attention to silences, blank space, and a range of visual textures in artistic works attempt to translate affective content.

In Chapter One is an investigation of three writers who attend to women’s maternal experience as site for exploring questions of unsayablility and creating works that exemplify the ways in which blank spaces in literary works convey difficult and complex material. I examine ways in which attention to lived experience – in this case, of the maternal body – demands, at the same time, attention to the formal evocations of silence in the works. Here we find writings of poets, women, maternal bodies, and female subjects that are asserting a pointed relevance of embodied experience to the work in which the blank space is made central, wherein ontological explorations occur. How do questions raised by the maternal body become valuable in a lyric space where the relationship between poetic language and the unsayable is illuminated and clarified?

Through withdrawing from language itself we see that the poetic is able to carry motherhood’s many intense layers – from the bodily to the philosophical – layers under which there exist vast spaces of unsaid and unsayable experience. By considering the
poetics of Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, and contemporary poet Rachel Zucker, the maternal can be illuminated as a site where the poetic gives way to gestures of silence, where the unsayable resides.

From here I examine what we put forth into art to communicate the reaching toward unsayable experiences. If through the body we grasp the world, then how does the erotic, sensual body serve in this study to translate what language cannot? This analysis looks at the way pain is crucially located at the site of the personal and erotic. Art that takes as its task the conveyance of difficult material – from the devastation of war to the grief of personal loss – can assert an experience beyond the “borders” or limitations of language. The power of the poetic and the unsaid becomes essential in bridging gaps of otherness, but simultaneously challenging in the fundamental astonishment of pain, the challenges of bearing witness, and the centrality of the body in our expression of this difficult material. The examination of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* illuminates this thinking in Chapter Two.

In *Eros, The Bittersweet*, Anne Carson observed, “A thinking mind is not swallowed up by what it comes to know. It reaches out to grasp something related to itself and to its present knowledge (and so knowable in some degree) but also separate from itself and from its present knowledge (not identical with these). In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible to difference. It is an erotic space.” So, in this study, we reach, through the body toward knowing while still unknowing.
After a pause, my study turns, in fact, to the work of Anne Carson. In a recent review in *The Independent* of Anne Carson’s new Sophocles translation *Antigonick*, Fiona Sampson observes that the design of the book, with its handwritten block lettering and overlay of drawings, disturbs the reading. Sampson writes, “One problem is that Carson is such a finely-balanced writer that anything additional blurs the lines of her work.” In the third chapter, I look at how the translation of Sophokles becomes an investigation of translation itself, in tension with the untranslatability of language as well as steady meaning, yet allowing room for a conveyance of feeling and intellectual pursuit across disciplines, centuries, and readers. Through this interdisciplinary translation that is both textual and textural, literary and performance, Carson creates art that explores the ways in which translation is filled with silence, yet in these silences becomes rich with opportunity for ontological explorations.

Carson’s work traffics in a poetics of silence that often insists on turning our attention to void, to nothingness, and in so doing sharpens our awareness of the act of paying attention itself. In this final chapter, reading Carson’s “The Glass Essay” demonstrates how attention honed on silence, spare language, and an aesthetics of the unsayable can yield -- not only through attention but through the perception of attention itself – profound [ontological] knowledge. Attending in my analysis to a close formal reading of the “Whacher” section of “The Glass Essay,” I explore the ontological stakes of her project and examine the ways in which her writing creates affective space – often blank space or silence – to attempt to
translate what is unsayable through a paying attention to attention itself. Through this reading, we all become what Emily Brontë called whachers, attending to concerns beyond the text, through the senses, watching and doing something other than watching, something that must yet escape translation, must yet be expressed.
CHAPTER ONE
No Mark, Nothing: A Maternal Poetics of the Unsayable
in Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, and Rachel Zucker

In verse I write nothing, which is
an objective correlative of what I’ve “lost.”

- Rachel Zucker
from “Welcome to the Blighted Ovum Support Group”

The routines sustaining life are simultaneously profound and resolutely quotidian: nurturing, nourishing. The maternal routines of sustaining the life of another human being are often mundane: food, sleep, hygiene. Since much of mothering is so mundane, its intensity can be overlooked. In acknowledging the power of simple things and in attending to the silences around them, we can make a connection between living a life and experiencing the world.

Simultaneous with awareness of physical demands of mothering are the emotional and intellectual explorations inherent in being in proximity with an other, in attending to the experience of becoming that is the development of a new life. In attending here to works focused on the life and world of women, in particular in the relentless moments of crossing of mundane routines and repetitive becoming (in the child and in the perceptive mother as witness of development), we can see how writing the maternal body opens a (particularly)
poignant space of ontological knowledge.² Paying attention to the reproductive body as a relational body, writing the profoundly intimate yet vast space between mother and child, writers observe the way the unsayable resides where the emotional intensity of those maternal experiences is so great.

Attending to Blank Space

Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses, in his sketches on the human body in Nature, the significance of openness to things, this openness as definitive of his term “the flesh.”³ We pay attention to the body to feel something – or see something or think something, or, perhaps, observe a poignant nothingness – and in this attentive posture we become open and doubly embodied or “flesh.” In experience, it is quite clearly not only our doing or not doing of living that embodies us in a way that participates in the scissoring movement of meaning-making, but our attentiveness to that transfer of things to awareness. It is in controlling the gesture of attention that art becomes crucially powerful.

² It is in this cavern, this gap between what can be said and what is profoundly experienced beyond language as, in Heideggerian terms, “Being,” that the poetic is. “How could one speak at all if Being was not involved?” asks Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, assured that not only is Being at stake in all poetic language, but in all speaking. But the poetic heightens our attention to the dynamics of speaker-other and the space between.
³ The flesh, in Merleau-Ponty’s The Visible and the Invisible, is intertwined with the visible, which allows us to think through the terms of “attention” without dissociating the senses one from the other. The Visible and the Invisible 138-139
Where are we looking and to what are we paying attention? When we pay attention to an absence, we are doing work, exerting a pressure in the direction toward meaning-making. “Blank spaces instead of words fill out the verses around you,” Anne Carson observes in her analysis of Paul Celan’s poem “Matière de Bretagne” in her book *Economy of the Unlost*, “as if to suggest your gradual recession down and away from our grasp. What could your hands teach us if you had not vanished?” Carson reads the blankness into the poem, pushing towards an understanding that resists. Pronouns thicken in significance. “You” is in the poem, repeated, and we are reading, implicated in the “I” and in the opening of Celan’s poem into general ideas: we read “you teach you teach your hands” and it is to this Carson draws our attention. The poem slides to a close. Carson writes, “To stand at this border with whiteness exhausts our power of listening and makes us aware of a crisis in you” (9). The blankness makes us aware of crisis. “We travel toward your crisis, we arrive, yet we cannot construe it—the terrible thing is, after all (and most economically!) we are the false sail for which you wait.” 4 We cannot construe the crisis, yet we are aware of it. Blankness gives us this awareness, which is important as we understand that the impossibility of construing another’s crisis does not render the significance of that pain void.

These blank spaces, as Carson attests, teach us something.

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4 Carson uses the image of the false sail, from Greek poet Simonedes and familiar from the myth of Theseus, to evoke the idea of economic use of image to evoke more difficult and complex situations. An economy of image is as complex and abstract as an analysis of economics. Carson, *Economy of the Unlost* 7.
Carson illustrates the readers’ performance of attention and the way the hollows can “fleshen,” in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the reading. Even in the absence of a clarified knowing, when the poet “fails” to give knowledge – meaning is elusive – there persists still the absorption of experience. What can we get from this? What can art give? What is available for analysis is not limited to what is present, but also what is absent. Otherwise, we remain missing an enormous corpus of human experience. Art moves toward this material that is difficult – if not impossible – to express; the gesture of art is a movement across the breach between what is said and what is unsayable. Another reach, not unlike Carson’s erotic triangulation between lover, beloved, and desire. Merleau-Ponty observes, “[L]anguage, art, history gravitate around the invisible (ideality); difficult relations of this invisible and the visible technical apparatuses that it constructs. This makes us advance toward the obscure center of subjectivity and intersubjectivity—ideal intersubjectivity held together by noncorporeity, internal to noncorporeity—ideal, correlative, virtual beings of symbolism organized around them, sustained by it, configurations of this new landscape.” We see that Merleau-Ponty here, too, suggests art in terms of movement, a “gravitation” and an “advance towards.” Further, he continues, “We must think the relation of this negativity, natural and human and the positive, of Being and the hollow or the emptiness from which it is inseparable” (Nature 228). We are reaching toward emptiness,

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5 John Dewey defined experience as “the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication.” Dewey, Art as Experience 22.
but against this our Being is defined.\textsuperscript{6} This unsurprising conundrum renders us mute on the subject of our own muteness, yet nevertheless Being is only rendered as “language, art, history” when we attempt to speak.

From Marguerite Duras’ novel \textit{Emily L.}, a short passage:

You said, “We’ll have been to Quillebeuf often this summer.”

“Yes. Do you know why we like it so much? I don’t.”

“I know up to a point, but to know entirely is impossible.”

“Yes. It’s something there staring you in the face, but it blinds you so that you can’t see it.”

Blinded. Silenced. Words fail. Testimony is impossible. Utterance stutters. In the work of Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, and Rachel Zucker, I observe the attention not only to routine happenings, not to the Quillebeuf, but the awe of the unsayable, a heightened awareness that, in the words of Rhys, “this happens and that happens” while the unsayable is staring you in the face.

\textsuperscript{6} Of relevance here also are the words of Jean Baudrillard, “The Nothing is the only ground – or background – against which we can apprehend existence. It is existence’s potential of absence and nullity, but also of energy (there is an analogy here with the quantum void). In this sense, things only ever exist \textit{ex nihilo}. Things only ever exist out of nothing” (\textit{Impossible Exchange}, 8). Here Baudrillard is laying out a sort of quasi-binary totality that does not fully correspond to the kind of active “live” poetic encounter I am interested in exploring here, although the notion of the Nothing is interesting, and Baudrillard’s jubilance in its pervasiveness is compelling.
Attending to Blank Space: the maternal I is ontological

One of the great spaces in poetry is that between I and you. The maternal is a position in which the speaker-other relationship is always foregrounded, the maternal position is always in dialogue. In poetic address, the You-saying is always a profound act of attempting to get at unsayability. The poetic is a mode of language that posits an other. And, I observe, the maternal address in poetry is not mundane or sentimental, but rather opens up the space of silence, addressing an other and acknowledging the distance between the self and child. For theorist Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Poetry’s ‘you-saying,’ its naming, is a way of ‘Being-saying’”. The poet-mother can open through this poetics from intimacy into a space that is the expanse of “nothing” or Being.

The mother-poet exploring motherhood allows a recognition of the complexity of the position of desirous communicator because of the insistently connected position one is in as a mother, a position created because of – defined by – one’s relation to an other/others, i.e. child(ren). The intimacy of that connection develops through physically shared space;

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7 A maternal poetics is a fine example of Martin Buber’s Dialogic Principle, another illustration of the ontological importance of address, as discussed in the Buber’s I-Thou relationship.

8 One might imagine the “poet-mother” is any writer or artist who creates out of a moment that is aware of the subject’s maternal function. This attends to the “maternal moment” intersecting with the lyric moment, which is not necessarily a conflation of the mother who embodies the poet in every poem she encounters as writer or reader (which is impossible), nor the poet who is mother in every moment (again impossible). But this convergence of poet-mother, when it occurs, creates a poetic situation I explore here and, for example, in WSQ winter 2009.
through bodily demands of care-giving, even lactation; through responsibilities; and through the mysteries of emotional bonding. These experiences can intensify the emotional sensation of experience, from anxiety to excitement to tenderness. We might ask, when does she become the sieve of milk and light?

Sylvia Plath’s Being-Saying: Mother as Shipwrecked

A careful reading of Sylvia Plath’s lyric poem “Child” here will illuminate the poet’s masterful modulation between image and plain statement, while the inevitable overlaying of biographical analysis on a poem written days before a writer’s suicide intensifies swelling unsaid emotional material in the poem. Analysis of Plath’s only radio play Three Women, set “in a maternity ward and round about,” similarly gives opportunities to examine how the language of three voices overlapping and contradicting create a net of ambivalence complex enough to communicate what Patricia DiQuinzio describes as a “theory of subjectivity as partial, divided, and fragmented” demanded by mothering (DiQuinzio, The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering). The style of Three Women suggests that motherhood requires a polyphony of voices, demands a work that can merge/juggle/sustain multiple points of view simultaneously. This complexity opens up more space for the gaps of unsayability to stretch.
Plath’s Surrealist Prospero

In her essay “The Other Sylvia Plath” in the 2003 edited volume The Grand Permission, New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood, poet Eavan Boland argues that it is precisely in her poetry of motherhood that Sylvia Plath’s poetry opens to a radical reinvestigation of poetics. Here, Boland identifies Plath’s poems as in lively discourse with the tradition of the nature poem, inviting nature to include the maternal body through an unrecognized surrealist gesture. Through this work, a shift of style is identified. “Plath may not have been a surrealist in the strict meaning of the term,” Boland observes, “nevertheless these poems show the signature intelligence of the committed surrealist: a sensibility hostile to official measurements and surfaces of the world; a freedom in rearranging those surfaces; a determination to make the natural world dream with her” (GP 72). Opening up her reading of Plath’s work through an analysis of her 1962 poems “Nick and the Candlestick,” “The Night Dances,” and “By Candlelight,” Boland asserts that Plath’s poems of motherhood represent an exciting shift in the poet’s work. What I find most striking is how in attending to the child, Plath evokes the unsayable, asserting that language fails at precisely the lyric moment of poetic address presented in the poet-mother position.

In Boland’s discussion of Plath, she cites Henri Michaux. For Michaux, surrealism had been “la grande permission,” opening him to art, in his own words. Boland sees a similar turn in Plath, calling motherhood her grande permission. When Patrice DiQuinzio argues that mothering demands “a theory of subjectivity as partial, divided, and fragmented,” we recognize a tangled idea of mothering that goes beyond tidy essentialism, beyond neat
sentimentality. DiQuinzio comes to this conclusion through readings of classic texts (by writers such as de Beauvoir, Kristeva, and Ruddick) whose work addresses the questions of the navigation of mothering through entangling commitments to feminism while acknowledging the force of the institution of motherhood (so well dissected by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*), resulting in necessarily complicated theoretical results. Art that performs a multiplicity of maternal subjectivities, sometimes allowing competing subject positions to coexist, asserts a similarly complex engagement with the politics of motherhood and feminist theory. Andrea Liss, in her analysis of visual art *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press 2009 Minneapolis) observes, “One of the most crucial paradoxes for the feminist mother is ambivalence, the acceptance of which allows her to own the contradictions in her maternal feelings and responses to the loved other, her child.” It is a complicated role or – often in the case of the creative writer or artist – a philosophical labor influencing the work. For instance, Mary Kelly’s 1976 groundbreaking work *The Post-Partum Document* is a fascinating example of the juxtaposition of the visual and the analytical, in which the visceral artwork, which includes soiled diapers, imprints of footprints, and a child’s crayon markings, is overlaid with textual interpretations informed by psychoanalytic theory and second-wave feminism. The language-text contextualizes the maternal experience rather differently than the way the visceral images evoke the maternal relationship, through language that gives sociological renderings, elaborates on Oedipal interpretations, and explains psychoanalytical critiques.
This interference between text and image enhances the sense of ambivalence articulated in parts of the text: the visual artist, mother, caregiver, community-member, spouse, intellectual, and scholar leave sometimes competing marks on the work. Liss continues, “What is most important about this ambivalence is that it allows for an intersubjectivity that is not always perfectly proportioned between mother and child” (74). Motherhood can be, like surrealism for Michaux, permission-giving in its ability to allow alternative modes of engagement. And, finally, in her consideration of “Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience,” philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff notes that “If women are to have epistemic credibility and authority, we need to reconfigure the role of bodily experience in the development of knowledge” (Chiasms, 251). Within a maternal poetics, and in the example of Plath’s maternal poetics, we see the way authority and ambivalence come together
through the work that is, in a sense, determined by the experience of bodily knowledge: lived maternal experience.

Boland also sees the turn in Plath as empowering. “This is a speaker with a new kind of control: able to command the natural world [...] Here is a female Prospero, speaking from her shipwrecked island, never doubting that the elements will obey her.” The speaker is the poet, the elements are the words. What is perhaps most telling about this image of the poet-as-Prospero is the combination of power and isolation. Shipwrecked, but lording over nature, it is a yearning, lonely language pictured. It is always the poet, again, putting forth the effort of language – to the sea—and yet remaining human, alone.

The image becomes heightened in its aptness for the mother of young children, Sylvia Plath living alone with two children in the cold winter of 1962. And since much of Western mothering -- especially of young children -- is experienced in privacy, the transition into motherhood for a woman can be lonely. As noted by social workers Ruth Paris and Nicole Dubus, “Feelings [in the postpartum period] can range from pleasure and joy to anger, loneliness, and depression. In addition, mothers of newborns in many Western cultures report feeling isolated from other adults (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Graham, Lobel, & Stein Deluca, 2001; Nicolson, 1998).” There is no shortage of evidence of the experience of motherhood as one of isolation and loneliness.
So too is the image of Prospero heightened in its aptness for fleshing out the reach of language across oceans – of incommunicability. The stranded experience nonetheless opens the mouth, moves some Spirit.

**Dark Ceiling: Plath’s “Child”**

In a poem not discussed by Boland, Plath’s “Child,” the poet stands not on the island of Prospero, but squarely by the child’s bed or crib – in the nursery. The seizing of authority over phenomena and language is that of the empowered surrealist Boland identifies. The brazen voice is a quiet one, a “maternal” one, but no less severe in its emotion.

Plath’s poem “Child” opens with the line:

> Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.

The poem, in which you is the child, observed gently, closely, loving, opens with this plain assertion of the “clear eye,” its beauty absolute, a “thing.” The child’s eye is clear – unclouded and also straightforward, unsullied and also direct. Clarity becomes linked to beauty, and it is singular. The eye, the seeing eye of the child perceiving, is alone – “the

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9 This line echoes the statement Plath made about the earlier poem “Nick and the Candlestick” in a BBC program, observing there, “In this poem a mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world’s ill, does redeem her share of it.” (See Boland, "The Other Sylvia Plath", *The Grand Permission* p. 72)
The speaker may be looking for beauty, and here, in the child’s clear eye, it is found.

The poem continues:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate—
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

The urge to fill the eye with color, to give the child a world – “the zoo of the new” – is the generous gesture of the adult offering to the child, the infant. Seeing the child who is seeing the world, the coming into being of the world happens with a spectrum reflected in the images of the poem, from color to sound to language “whose names you meditate—/April snowdrop, Indian pipe”. Plath’s gift for vivid imagery is useful here in making quickly felt the range of sensory encounters observed by the adult maternal figure paying attention to the world-creating-being, the acts of perception of the new child. The poem is basically
sparking at the axis where we pay deep attention to an intimate other while yet remaining at a profound and the inevitable distance, the distance of the self-in-relation. The position of the mother in relation to the child at its most intimate is nonetheless an intimacy marked by its separateness. The mother is earnestly attentive to the child’s “clear eye.” The mother yearns to fill the child’s eye with color. The mother perceives what “names you meditate.” The cradling emotion of the poem suggests that of the mother yearning, teaching, attending to the child. But this maternal connection, so [sacred], is one represented by the yearning/reaching, the triangle of untraversable communication.

What the mother-speaker “wants to fill” in the eye is other than what is available. A yearning. An impossible completion. The poem concludes:

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.

The image the poem gives us is of the worrying mother, and the view from the crib or bed: “this dark ceiling without a star.” This simple, flat image conveys more than April snowdrop or Indian pipe. The dark ceiling is the void, is the empty unsayable. The emotion of this poem hovers, almost taut, between one clear eye and one dark ceiling, with all the images, “grand and classical,” a bit of clutter not quite masking the unsayable rift between maternal love and existential helplessness of the speaker.
The poem turns back on itself, even as it brings the world of the poem into emotional existence for the reader through the image – this dark ceiling – as perception. Or, as Merleau-Ponty argues, “to return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks.” And in the poetics of the maternal, we find a poetics of Being in that world of active perceiving-making-Being, taking in the world while maintaining awareness of the relation to the child’s experience of world-making.

That this poem was written less than two weeks before Sylvia Plath’s suicide gives it added gravity. The “troubulous/wringing of hands” becomes infinitely more troubling, the ache of this maternal gaze more painful.

It Is a Terrible Thing To Be So Open: Plath’s *Three Women*

The everyday can intensify the kind of attention that yields poetic language and can spark important innovation. The “ecstatic quotidian” as described by philosopher Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei in *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* is “a stepping outside an everyday familiarity” (20) that creates a tension necessary for artistic innovation. “In aesthetic-literary experience, attention is formalized toward or within the context of expression. In this context, the world is perceived more
intensely, and self-reflexively, than in the context of the habitual functioning of quotidian life.” What is quotidian if not the tending of mother to the routine needs of a child? In attending to the maternal as poetic, the poet turns the intensity of self-reflexive perception both inward and outward. Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes in her foreword to the 2003 anthology of essays *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, “Motherhood leads to, demands, provokes, and excites innovations in poetry and inventions in poetics” (Dienstfrey and Hillman 2003, ix). The maternal is the mundane (in feeding, clothing, attending to the routine needs of a child). In writing about motherhood, narrative and lyric often bleed into each other; intense surges of love and frustration, for example, expose a blurring of emotion, the relationship between time and the rituals of daily life, and the explosive quality of experience, even in its most mundane.

Boland has described Plath’s motherhood poetry as radical in its near surrealism, its assertion of the maternal as Natural force and the concurrent language conveying this powerful solidity of position. However, Plath’s poetry about pregnancy, children, mothering and (in)fertility is alternately described as sentimental, ambivalent, weak, and violent. In 1977, Jeannine Dobbs wrote that in Plath’s poems about pregnancy (such as “Metaphors”), “she is dealing with an inherently sentimental subject in a merely cute manner (‘There’s a cuddly mother’--‘Dark House.’). These poems constitute some of her weakest work” (20). I would argue that the weakness identified by Dobbs is something else. Plath begins to examine the “riddle” of pregnancy and motherhood in these lyrics, but requires the more expansive and (for Plath) experimental form of the verse drama in three
voices to realize the complexities of the maternal position. *Three Women* suggests that the technique of Plath’s poetic style--though innovative in its own right, with its distinctive rhythms, fearless observations, and striking imagery--could not adequately express the complexities of her ideas on motherhood. Her motherhood requires a polyphony of voices, demands a work that can merge/juggle/sustain multiple points of view simultaneously. It is in this dramatic piece, a radio play, that Plath expresses her women’s most nuanced, complicated experience of motherhood (and especially pregnancy)--in a form that was for Plath an experiment. The You-saying in this work becomes kaleidoscopic, reflecting an unyieldingly complex study of experience (and an anti-essentialist representation of the maternal). There is no shared experience, only a web of experiences and emotion, pain, and euphoria, and the plain unsayable – with the reach toward building a work complex and porous enough to convey some of this complexity.

In the poem “Metaphors,” the pregnant woman says, “I’m a means, a stage,” and in *Three Women*, the first voice exudes, “I am a great event. / I do not have to think, or even rehearse.” Later, in “agony,” this voice says, “I am used.” It is the same image, but the three voices of the verse drama (written three years later) enable Plath to allow competing attitudes to coexist. The voices alternate. The setting of the drama is “in a Maternity Ward and round about” with the first voice asserting, “I am ready,” and the third voice insisting, “I wasn’t ready,” and, “I am not ready for anything to happen.” Maternal ambivalence is embodied in triple-voiced verse. And in these statements there also resides the hollow of everything else, everything that readiness might encompass or exclude.
The drama is composed as a series of monologues in interchanging voices. The first voice is primarily responsible for expressing the joy of motherhood, the voice of a woman exuding the image of an ideal mother, ready for motherhood, “patient” and--like the moon--“astonished at fertility.” The second voice is that of a working woman who suffers from repeated miscarriages. Hers is a voice of pain, longing, expressing the deep magnetic pull toward maternity and the harrowing relationship between fertility and death. The third voice is a reluctant mother, not ready. “I had no reverence,” she laments in her first monologue. She gives up her child.

The poetic reach towards piercing through language toward, in-the-direction-of an unsayable is complicated through the overlapping of the three voices, and in this way Plath is able to write a loving, joyous mother without letting her voice drown in the sentimentality condemned by a critic like Dobbs. Also, the strategy underscores the existential impossibility of expressing through one strategy of disclosure the tangled experience of new motherhood. The first voice asks, “What did my fingers do before they held him? / What did my heart do, with its love?” This woman sees her newborn as an “innocent soul,” one of “these miraculous ones, / These pure, small images,” celebrates its “nothingness” as a virtuous, wide innocence, “flat blue.” The first voice laments only the proliferation of her love and care, her concern and hopes, the vulnerability of her intense maternal emotion.
How long can I be a wall around my green property?
How long can my hands
Be a bandage to his hurt and my words
Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?
It is a terrible thing
To be so open: it is as if my heart
Put on a face and walked into the world.

(1981, 185)
The abundance of love is overwhelming, almost stifling, but it is nonetheless tender.
Stripped of the interruptions of the other voices, the expressions of generous tenderness in this third of the verse drama would risk coming across as sentimental. Yet, because Plath weaves this voice in with the darker, more troubled voices, the first voice rings with a sincerity that may in a single-voiced lyric be questioned. There is an echoing, distorting, and moving between, a triangulating of voices. This effect also allows Plath to include powerful statements in plain language, alternating between the shock of grand imagery and the stunning simplicity of statements such as “I was not ready.”

She is able to communicate a rejection of motherhood without risking a slide into an overwrought apocalyptic manner, using a plain language that bears the weight of emotion with an immediacy that is blurred by virtuosity of metaphor, vocabulary, allusion. The three women hone attention on environments, things, phenomena. The third voice does not want to have a child--the result of rape--and gives up the child, fearing the doctors and “the white clean chamber with its instruments. / It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy.” She
goes further, towards violence. “I should have murdered this, that murders me.” Here, Plath is able to express the loss of identity associated with becoming a mother, showing the negative impact of pregnancy on the sense of agency in a woman’s life, when the pregnancy is unwanted, the consequence of violence—evoked in the image of the rape of Leda by Zeus in the form of the swan. For this third woman, the imagery is antagonistic toward the newborn. She sees “my red, terrible girl.”

I think her little head is carved in wood,
A red, hard wood, eyes shut and mouth wide open.
And from the mouth issue sharp cries
Scratching at my sleep like arrows,
Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side.
My daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide.
It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good.

(182)

This woman chooses solitude, leaving the baby behind when she leaves the hospital. Yet the parting with the impossible, arch child is not easy.

I am a wound walking out of the hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go.

(184)

The third voice, like the first, is not lacking nuance. Her return to her life, to college graduation, shudders under a cloak of mourning. Emptiness and loss are present in all the final passages in the third voice, underscoring the complexity of women’s relationship to
maternity, even in the voice that responds with agency and action to avoid being a mother. Even as she loses the swans that insisted that motherhood was a danger for her, she does not lose the sense of loss. “What is it I miss?” she repeats. Again, the hollow unanswerable questions that hang in the air of the poem are those that leave space in the poem’s language for the reach towards the unsayable with a greater force than vivid imagery.

Finally, the second voice rounds out Plath’s *Three Women*. The second voice is the voice of loss, longing, and failure. She does not fail as a mother or fail to embrace motherhood; she fails to become a mother through repeated miscarriage. She is barren. The intensity of Plath’s portrayal of this woman’s anguish is perhaps the best indication that ultimately the power of motherhood overwhelmed even its frustrations. The childless, barren woman carries death, mourns “those little sick ones that elude my arms.” She describes her failure to have children as “my deformity,” confounding the mirror that “gives back a woman without deformity.” Her disappointment is turned inward, alternately blaming and her self, losing “life after life,” and the earth:

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
I know her. I know her intimately--
Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
The sun is down. I die. I make a death.

(181)
The barren woman is both passive—sucked dry by outside forces—and perpetrator, making death. The cycle of blame and sorrow rides throughout the second voice’s passages, as they weave in and out of the first voice (new mother) and third voice (rejecting mother). For the second voice, winter fills the souls. Like the third woman, she is full of emptiness, but it is the emptiness in longing for motherhood; it is the loss of the never-achieved, the grinding, relentless sense of private, heartbreaking failure. The fullness of emptiness, like the nothing of the unsayable, expands infinitely.

Overlapping imagery throughout the piece further underscores the complexity of Plath’s representation of women’s relationship to motherhood. “White” appears throughout the Three Women, evoking variously death and life, stark horror and reassuring spring. “Flatness” recurs several times, first to suggest a terrorizing cardboardlike quality of the second woman’s male coworkers, then later to suggest men’s flatness in opposition to women’s fertility. For the first woman, the flat blue of her son’s eye evokes innocence and gentle dependency. For the third woman, naive lovers pass her, “black and flat as shadows,” suggesting an eerie image of hollow loss. The same words contain a multiplicity of meaning, which bubbles up throughout the piece. This effect adds to the sense of polyphony that binds Three Women (and the three women) and gives the poetry its complexity.

The idea that one voice is not enough to convey the ambivalence and multiplicity of experience of the maternal puts forth with clarity the impossibility of reducing the
experiential “content” to one essential definition of “mother” or “woman.” We must have three points to convey the absence of a linear progression or an easy unity. The poetics of this radio play is not suggesting a single stone or prosaic flower, that assert the swell of emotional platitudes veering from highs to lows. As Fernando Pessoa reminds us:

Only if you don’t know what flowers, stones, and rivers are
Can you talk about their feelings.

_Three Women_ asserts a network of not only possible variations but simultaneous, competing, and messy experiences that resist easy categorization. That the maternal has often historically been essentialized to be a neat category of experience “for women” – as if womanhood is itself a neat category of experience – makes the convolution more necessary for Plath to assert as an intervention. Still more pressing now is the capacity to read this work, the maternal poetics, not solely as an assertion of identity (making the complexities of the maternal visible) but also making visible the experience of complexity itself – that which is, ultimately, what makes the poetic valuable in our making sense of the world (of which we cannot make sense). The poetic does not say what is, but gives us space to experience something of the unsayable between what it says and the Being it strives toward saying. _It is_ a terrible thing to be so open. We all must know this vulnerability.
Jean Rhys’s Being-Saying: Not-thinking Maternal Grief

The lens of the maternal is the lens of the world-in-relation, the world of perception through relentless intersubjectivity. While Sylvia Plath is writing motherhood, so too do we find that the writing of women in the context of a more broadly defined reproductive embodiment or maternal poetics can assert how language ebbs when the intensity of phenomenological experience is intensified. The poetics of the maternal illuminates the ways in which the mode of address of mother can hover in the space of Being-saying. The mother-I addressing the child-You is, as in all poetic address, a saying of what is unsayable. In a poetics so sharply attentive to the immediate everyday, a window might open into the choke of intense emotion – or indeed must, if it is writing that achieves a poetic register. That this intense emotion in motherhood is often “love” does not strip away its ferocity. This poetics has an aesthetic that bleeds out of lyric forms – into the radio play for Plath, making Jean Rhys’ prose distinctly lyrical. In Rhys, the maternal, is not in the register of the daily life of the mother-caring-for-baby, but in the register of the woman, a living being with the profound experience of reproductive traumas.

10 A maternal poetics is a poetics interested in what it means to exist. This has been explored and debated compellingly through psychoanalytic feminist theory, and Jessica Benjamin notably concluded in “The Omnipotent Mother,” “Accepting that the other is outside our fantasy allows us to take our fantasy back into ourselves and begin to play. The intersubjective space of understanding can help contain the inevitable experience of leaving and losing the other, even of death.” The poetic opens many spaces for these explorations as well.
Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning Midnight*: No Mark, Nothing

In Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning Midnight* (1938), we have a figure, Sasha, who is both “free” and restricted in a variety of ways by necessity, life. Sasha is a woman, in Paris, barely surviving off the money of others. Aimless, she is an aging beauty who knows where to go for an afternoon drink, who feels protected in her fur coat, the one item of value she hasn’t been desperate enough to sell – yet. She is definitely alone. Relentlessly, Sasha seems to drift outside the situation she is in, and is embroiled in it. This is a self whose situatedness IS the story. What happens to Sasha mostly pertains to daily survival, where she’ll get money to live and meals, yet the narrative primarily moves along an axis of emotional (or perhaps, perceptual) response. It is unclear where Sasha’s sorrow is coming from, but there is a clear sense of being in the wake of something, in the “after,” which is also her “forever.” We enter the novel in medias res, following the narrative to learn not only where Sasha is going, but also how she has landed in this lonely position in life. This gives the novel (and most of Rhys’s work) its darkness. Jean Rhys’s early work provides the perfect illustration of a phenomenological perspective, the resonance of the unsayable in plain language which does not fill in every detail.

In the midst of this relentless immediacy, however, one-third of the way through *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha lapses out of the present situation into the memory of delivering her baby in a home for poor pregnant women. The memory is striking in its sudden appearance after no mention of the child for the first fifty-seven pages of the novel. This passage serves to define an important turning-point for Sasha, because what happens
before this moment is framed as the time when she “still” is capable of being open. In this memory, Sasha says, “I can still give myself up to people I like” (p. 59). She delivers the baby in a strange eerie state, then has trouble nursing the child.

I can’t feed this unfortunate baby. He is taken out and given Nestle’s milk. So, I can sleep...

The next day she [the midwife?] comes in and says: ‘Now I am going to arrange that you will be just like what you were before. There will be no trace, no mark, nothing.’

That, it seems, is her solution.

*Good Morning, Midnight* 60

Sasha proceeds to briefly describe having her lactating breasts tightly bandaged, lying next to her baby who never cries. The images of silence and blankness are striking. Not only does the baby not cry, the baby dies. The maternal body is flattened, erased. On the very next page:

And five weeks afterwards there I am, with not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease.

And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital. And there I am looking down at him, without one line, without one wrinkle, without one crease...

*Good Morning, Midnight* 61

Observe the simplicity of the language here. “And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital.” There is no vivid description of
his face, no wrenching elaboration of the emotional turmoil of Sasha. Is it less fraught? No. The plainness gives this passage a stark immediacy.

The novel proceeds, returns to the present, where Sasha is floating through life alone, trying to keep her head above water as an aging single woman who has little value in a world where women’s lives and bodies are commodified, ranked in the all-too-familiar system of use. Anne Carson eloquently observes in *Economy of the Unlost*, “Commodity form is not a simple state of mind. It fragments and dehumanizes human being. It causes a person to assume a ‘double character’ wherein his natural properties are disjunct from his economic value, his private from his public self” (19). The impact of economics on the circumstances of Sasha in *Good Morning Midnight* are profound. Rhys insists upon remaining close to the “humanity” of the character without going any distance from the commodification of the bodies peopling the novel. Indeed, Sasha’s attention to wardrobe in the novel illustrates her awareness of her appearance as a valued material object throughout the novel. (In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Rhys’ 1931 novel, the protagonist Juliet repeatedly spends her last bit of money on wardrobe, thinks “of new clothes with passion, with voluptuousness” (20). In *Voyage in the Dark* Anna observes, “When I thought about my clothes I was too sad to cry” (25).)

Sasha goes to have her hair dyed. But the narrative continues, too, and loops back almost imperceptibly to the death of this baby, if we are paying attention to the echoes and the silences. And this is precisely what I would like to insist we pay
attention to, this is the opportunity texts like Rhys’s give us: a faded map of what is erased, but important if we are paying attention. Many pages later – seventy pages of a short novel with little other mention of babies and reproduction-- Sasha flashes back again to pregnancy and quickly becomes mute. (And notice the significance of things here for Sasha, too.)

The sage femme has very white hands and clear, slanting eyes and when she looks at you the world stops rocking about. The clouds are clouds, trees are trees, people are people, and that’s that. Don’t mix them up again. No, I won’t.

And there’s always the tisane of orange-flower water.

But my heart, heavy as lead, heavy as a stone.

He has a ticket round his wrist because he died. Lying so cold and still with a ticket round his wrist because he died.

Not to think. Only to watch the branches of that tree and the pattern they make standing out against a cold sky. Above all, not to think...

Good Morning, Midnight 139

Rhys writes the thinking and writes the erasure of thinking. The blank – that is the novel -- is interrupted by the memory; the urgency of trauma pierces through the ritual of enforced not-thinking. This is the past that Sasha returns to (almost returns to), and the present is one of a not-quite-numb woman, always alone and never achieving the kind of not-thinking that society demands of her. It is not okay to mourn a dead baby. It is not okay to be a woman alone. It is not okay to be a maternal body. The goal is for there to be no trace, not even in the mind. And it is this, crucially, to which Rhys most urgently, I believe, turns our attention. But Sasha gives up:
Well, there you are. It’s not that these things happen or even that one survives them, but what makes life strange is that they are forgotten. Even the one moment that you thought was your eternity fades out and is forgotten and dies. That is what makes life so droll – the way you forget, and every day is a new day, and there’s hope for everybody, hooray...

Now our luck has changed and the lights are red.

*Good Morning, Midnight* 141-142

It is an absent-minded reader who trusts this narrator. Has Sasha forgotten? Is Sasha droll? Is Sasha able to have hope? Who is this “everybody” for which we might celebrate? The ironic heartache in this passage is overwhelming. It is followed by this short segment:

A room? A nice room? A beautiful room? A beautiful room with a bath? Swing high, swing low, swing to and fro.... This happened and that happened...

And then the days came when I was alone.

*Good Morning, Midnight* 142

Here we are looped back to the opening passage of *Good Morning, Midnight*, when Sasha first moves in to her room in Paris, her attempt to “arrange [her] little life.” After this passage, “this happened and that happened,” the novel continues. Pages and pages of tawdry life unfold. The unremarkable routine of happenings is relentless. In this there is nothing to say, yet Rhys writes into it, the simple and ugly comings and goings, also how they hurt, making the significance of perceptions
blend into the being of Sasha – a profound account of how knowledge is bound up with the senses, the emotions, the social world, in a complex tangled mess.

It is irresponsible to read Rhys’s early novels without paying attention to the gloss she puts on particularly maternal grief. The reader is responsible for paying attention to what may be swelling in these gaps, the almost-said. Rhys writes “this happened then that happened.” Happenings are there, in those gaps, which Rhys is leaving open, exposed, not closed, not empty.

Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*: Everything drops away

Anna Morgan is eighteen years old at the start of Jean Rhys’ novel *Voyage in the Dark*. She is assumed to be a prostitute by at least two landladies at the start of the novel, first because her roommate comes downstairs in a dressing gown in the afternoon, and then because she herself comes in late to her single room after an evening out with a gentleman in London. If Anna goes shopping and dresses too well after a date, the landlady throws her out of her nicer lodging: she has money to buy clothing because a man gave it to her. The landlady is observant, but Anna is not a prostitute. She quickly becomes a mistress. In this Rhys novel we can trace a fine line between the status of a woman who sells her body for money and the state of women’s existence in the urban social structure, period. Under the watchful eyes of the poor but respectable landladies, Anna must learn to code her behavior according to social expectations, which she is learning on her own over the course of
Voyage in the Dark. She is virtually alone in England, wandering, a dancer with a touring show, then a mistress, eventually alone in a room remembering her life in flashes, from London conversations to her Caribbean childhood, recovering from an abortion until “it is all blotted out.”

Her solitude, her shipwrecked mode of being corresponds with the aesthetics of the novel, in which there is no way to express what is happening, and a sense of resignation to the fact of the limited resources available for communicating across such vast stretches of loneliness. Memory creeps in uninvited, unexpected, often unexplained, and major occurrences in the life of Anna Morgan are swallowed up in the forging ahead not of the narrative – which is sluggish – but of language, slurring or going rather silent when Anna’s body is most urgently under impact. The effect is haunting.

Anna Morgan loses her virginity on page 37.

The sofa was soft and fat, covered in chintz with a pattern of small blue flowers. He put his hand on my knee and I thought, ‘Yes...yes...yes...’ Sometimes it’s like that – everything drops away except the one moment. 

Voyage in the Dark, 36

The language of the novel enacts this dropping away, and this paragraph could be read as a sort of ars poetica for Jean Rhys. We begin with observations of the physical environment: the sofa, the chintz, its pattern. Here we are seeing things, we may be taking in certain
cultural cues about England, about class. There is a certain tidiness and elegance about this lover, who is a member of one of “the four swankiest clubs in London” (18).

Anna is observing the details of the room, for we are experiencing this moment through Anna, in the first person, and the scant detail gives each plain object a special force: soft, fat, chintz, small, blue flowers. Anna sees this, and perhaps, at this moment, this only. Then, his hand on her knee, and the thought is not exploratory but the “yes…yes...” is breathy, open, can include a range of emotional content that erases the seeing – blue – chintz – with the immediacy of physical contact: desire. In the ellipses we experience the yawn of the unsayable and feel Anna’s desire. It is uncomplicated for an instant – less than a sentence in the novel – and observed: “Sometimes it’s like that – everything drops away except the one moment” (36). However, it ends, and well before the sexual act occurs.

In his 1999 text *Impossible Exchange*, Jean Baudrillard puzzles on the persistent nature of humanity. “[T]he question remains: why are we so intent on ferreting out and destroying the void,” asks Baudrillard. The usual insistence of filling in the ellipses is in contrast to Rhys' open “yes... yes...” and the refusal to delimit the ellipses with assertions. In her writing, Rhys lets the void reside, and it is in this void that the most intense “dark mater” is transmitted. We may understand the event of Anna’s having intercourse for the first time as a profound and “unspeakable” experience in its absence from the page. It is not a prim lack of physical details that is notable – indeed, Rhys’s novels are notably not lascivious, for
all their sexual content – but the lack of emotional extemporization that reads as a choke, a sucker punch of emotion. To “make everything visible” would be to take that away, indeed to make the pain, invisible.

-- everything drops away except the one moment.

‘When I sent you that money I never meant – I never thought I should see you again’ he said.

‘I know, but I wanted to see you again,’ I said.

Then he started talking about my being a virgin and it all went – the feeling of being on fire – and I was cold.

_Voyage in the Dark_, 36

The turn from heat to cold emphasizes the body in this moment, the turn from touch to conversation, to money and commodified exchange. To fill the void, to attempt to utter the unsayable, is to deplete the emotional content.

Anna switches quickly from elliptical affirmative thoughts “Yes... yes... yes...” to the direct language that pulls away from the real, into the cold mundane of social expectations that she is learning to navigate while simultaneously leaning against them:

‘Why did you start about that?’ I said. ‘What’s it matter? Besides, I’m not a virgin if that’s what’s worrying you.’

‘You oughtn’t to tell lies about that.’

‘I’m not telling lies, but it doesn’t matter anyway,’ I said. ‘People have made all that up.’

‘Oh yes, it matters. It’s the only thing that matters.’
‘It’s not the only thing that matters,’ I said. ‘All that’s made up.’

He stared at me and then he laughed. ‘You’re quite right,’ he said.

But I felt cold, as if someone had thrown cold water over me. When he kissed me I began to cry.

‘I must go,’ I thought. ‘Where’s the door? I can’t see the door. What’s happened?’ It was as if I were blind.

_Voyage in the Dark_, 36-37

Her coldness reveals the contrast between the heat of the moment before, his hand on her knee, and the revulsion of discussing her virginity – her body exposed as a public topic, a thing outside herself. The discussion of her virginity and its significance is “all made up” because Anna recognizes the personal binds that are inherent in these social rules. Rhys, in just a few simple words, attacks the (patriarchal) system that condemns Anna Morgan for little more than conformity. She is, it seems, a virgin. Her suitor is with her, hand on her knee, confirming this before her takes her to bed. Confirming, too, that this is “all that matters,” before he “takes away” that valuable thing/no-thing. Cold, indeed, if he plays his social role well.

When he kissed me I began to cry.

As they move on up the stairs, the conversation wanes and her thoughts blossom more fully, as if spreading out from the moment, away from the body, out:

...and I didn’t say anything, but I felt cold and as if I were dreaming.
When I got into bed there was warmth coming from him and I got close to him. Of course you’ve always known, always remembered, and then you forget so utterly, except that you’ve always known it. Always – how long is always?

And the scene ends.

“The Nothing does not cease to exist as soon as there is something. The Nothing continues (not) to exist just beneath the surface of things,” states Baudrillard, impossibly. Rhys’s plainly presented moments of extreme experience – here the almost mundane occurrence of a bedroom encounter – refuse to allow the urgency of pain to be dampened by verbosity. What hovers just outside the text, just outside the room, just outside the “this happened and then that happened” – of Good Morning, Midnight – is the real experience of the art. What happens when “I began to cry” is most difficult when the door closes on it. Nothing resides, a rather empty or hollow reality central to the experience of the poetic. The poetic, in which language moves across the void toward the unsayable, in which lyricism is the ferrier of pain, experience, communication, and silence.

Rachel Zucker’s Being-Saying: They say less screaming

Duras writes “it blinds you so you can’t see it,” evoking the idea of intensity rending something blank – not erasing but blinding. In Rachel Zucker’s poetry we find the intensity
of pain silencing sound and blanking out perceptions, yet intensifying experience, reaching through poetics that lapse and echo. In Lacoue-Labarthe and in Carson, Paul Celan’s poetry serves as illustration of the poetic. Lacoue-Labarthe on Celan states, “the poetic act is catastrophic: an upsetting relation to what is an upset, in being in the direction of nothingness (the abyss). This is just what justifies the idea that poetry is the interruption of art, that is, the interruption of mimesis. Poetic art consists of perceiving, not representing.” (67) When Rachel Zucker writes of childbirth, the experience is richly perceived, the bodily catastrophe of pain and the dissonance of experience and understanding are conveyed in words that fail and slip, failing as they evoke language’s failure. The poem “Here Happy Is No Part of Love,” in particular, illustrates the poetic act as a gesture towards the abyss. Lacoue-Labarthe continues, “There is nothing to which one can compare Being: Being is, purely and simply, the unrepresentable.” (68) Because poetry is that which gets at, in language, the very nature of being, and because motherhood is inextricably tied up with being and becoming – as the mother is altered by motherhood and is intimate witness to the being and becoming of the intimate child-Other – the poetry of motherhood is a poetry of Being and is, at its best, a poetry in the direction of the abyss.

Zucker’s work vividly depicts the process of labor (“an explosion that would not move”), giving lie to the assumption that its pain is immediately forgotten. Zucker turns the attention not to the wonder of creation, but to the shock of survival—the survival of the woman. Illustrated in her second volume of poetry The Last Clear Narrative, Zucker’s writing provides a clear example of the intersection between the politics of motherhood as
a site for what Liss identifies (above) as a juncture of intersubjectivity and ambivalent identity formation. The work, even in its experimental formal qualities, can be seen to interrogate the experience of contemporary motherhood and women’s role in the nuclear family more generally. The poetry has a ruptured relationship with both clarity and narrative, expressing ambivalence on a variety of levels, all central to the trajectory of the formation of a poetics of motherhood. Through the omnipresence of fissures, contradictions, and especially visual and narrative gaps, Zucker creates a work that underscores the disjunctive experience of motherhood. Motherhood resists narrative, continually giving way to interruption, giving lie to cultural myths, resisting easy interpretation.

In the poem “The Window Is One-Sided It Does Not Admit,” Zucker’s writing breaks down over space, while almost becoming narrative in the discussion of her newborn’s life.

(cry, suck, cry)

one day
I will gather a story to tell you

what night looked like
what every city vista told day and day
heat and time was not, were no
I knew you were I knew there was you

and summer and never any other season

(2004, 56–57)

The emphasis in the poetry is on the bodily (time) and the self, its response to newborn motherhood, turning the lens to the mother/self, not to the baby, not even to connection. The spacing creates a kind of impenetrability, and this experimental form makes meaning private by its opacity, yet personal in its relation to the reader because the intensity of the private moment is a familiar “universal” experience. This concentration on subjectivity yields both innovation and a sense of ambivalence.

However, it is Zucker’s important poem “Here Happy Is No Part of Love” that asserts the catastrophic and the poetic abyss of Being-saying that are crucial to the exposure of the unsayable. It is an extraordinary poem using sound, space, and timing to communicate the astonishment of a very difficult labor (89). The reader is invited in, though the reading is violent. I would argue that it is as stunning as the most wrenching poetry of war:
A woman, some screaming--they say less screaming--breathe! They say--she wants to say I am but it is not hears screaming is that her? what is that fire? peeling away each sanity: skin, bone like bark stripped off a slender branch inside screaming cardiac smooth muscle “you must breathe”

but who? and how to with all this screaming

it

explodes

my body opens-in one cannot witness is

At some point I started begging.

(90–91)

In this poem, the voice shifts, with “a woman” heard being at the same time a self silenced, yet screaming. “A woman” and “she” and “I” are blurred. The removal of clarity allows the particular resonance of “screaming” to be heightened. One’s own voice becomes estranged
in this moment of pain. “some screaming” To speak, even to scream, is displaced. In
Lacoue-Labarthe’s observation, “the interruption of language, the suspension of language,
the caesura (“counter-rhythmic rupture,” said Holderlin) – that is poetry, then.” (49) The
otherworldliness of pain is jarring. The poem reveals its fraught, painful experience. The
speaker jerks into consciousness and drifts out, only to find that the blur of numbness--
under medication--is more terrifying than the burn of pain. The screaming is insistent, but
the voice is unattached, silenced or unheard in the urgency of pain that is unsayable. It
breaks the lines and permeates the poem with vast swathes of blank space. As if coming
into and out of the body, the poem impresses with its words and its silence--extending even
across entire blank pages.

When the laboring woman in the poem hears “them” say “less screaming” it is an
embodiment and a disembodiment; the reader too moves in and out of the room, hearing
and not hearing, feeling and not feeling. The remove, the reach toward but not reaching of
sound, of pain, of lyricism – stopped in the poem in blank space – heightens the sensation of
longing and urgency, even as the gap evidently stretches wider: “one cannot witness.”

The poem’s penultimate page concludes with the stuttering line, after the child is delivered
from the speaker’s body:

    Myself divided, severed,                       everyone smiling.
Not only is the self severed, language is broken, and the violence of the experience is broken from the vision of smiles of “everyone,” further dislocating the speaker/self.

The poem concludes in language that echoes the language of Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning Midnight.*

And am I now one with other women? hardly except perhaps my shattered
  this and this happened then this the is so now you know
  everything—in and out of the room see a body splayed and naked giving up—and you?

I’m sorry but there is no new place for anyone to touch me.

The language echoes “this happened then this” in Zucker’s poem. In Rhys, Sasha observes, “This happened and that happened... //And then the days came when I was alone” (142). The happenings can be suggested, but ultimately, they cannot be said. What is experienced is happening in the gaps, in the stretch of space between “then” and “this,” in the ellipses after “happened” and the white space of the paragraph break before the sentence announcing Sasha’s state of being alone. The pause for the reader to grasp and to gasp what it means to register being is the happening of the poem. This is the Being-saying of poetry.
Looking at the formal evocations of the unsayable in the works, the foundation in feminist concerns is fundamental. The writing is the writing of poet, woman, maternal body, female subject, asserting the unspeakable subjects of pointed relevance to that role.

Simultaneously, the works are the choked Being-saying of poetic gestural urgency. The tangle cannot be unraveled, the blanks need not be filled.
CHAPTER TWO

“You Saw Nothing in Hiroshima”:
An Erotics of Witness: Toward an Iconography of Consciousness

Perception as reaching toward

Looking at a fleeting image, we grasp at it visually. As if vision were a hand, as if reaching toward the screen. As if it might grasp something. As if the grasp, its desperation, its suddenness, its fleeting temporality, its sensuality might capture something in a captivating cinematic moment. The language of a “grasping” eye allows us to ponder looking as searching, attempting to reach something, essaying toward but not landing on the desired thing. It is the moment of the gesture of grasping that can become encounter in the viewer. And what can we understand when that encounter is with the most troubling, troubled, and wrecking of human experiences? Not to determine, as in a court of law, the standards of experience, but to recognize the happening of some encounter, of experience as a kind of witnessing, this recognition allows art to work as the expression of those matters which are unsayable, even unrepresentable, and to translate what we experience yet cannot reach in terms outside language, creating what Susan Sontag called an “iconography of consciousness” in the works of art.

A slipping forever out of our grasp is the feeling we get when we encounter art attempting to express the unsayable. The body turns to sand on the screen of the film. The words are revised again and again line after line, forever imperfect, endlessly rewritten. Poet Bhanu
Kapil Rider evokes a painting in one of the series of poems entitled “What are the consequences of silence?” and, in seeing the painting, investigates the motion of reaching toward what is “impenetrable”: language, what is beyond language, beyond the vision of Red Canna and the eye.

What are the consequences of silence?

53.


That’s how it begins: impenetrable.

The book of two words I happen to see, out of the corner of my eye, on a wall. Such slowness.

These words took years to arrive.

There is a relationship between seeing and putting forth into language: that which the body perceives “out of the corner of my eye” viscerally blossoms into a new kind of knowing. How does art penetrate this impenetrable? To what do we reach by looking at the flower blossoming that is “not specific enough”?

How do we begin to look at what, according to the Japanese lover in Hiroshima, Mon Amour, cannot be seen? Can we think about vision in a way that recognizes it as more than objectifying, simplifying, diluting experience? As integral to perception as it is, we must not dismiss vision – the profoundly important act of looking – as only objectifying, but acknowledge its complexity, considering its power, its erotic significance. In this significance, to see and perceive becomes an act of embodied experience, an encounter. As
integral to art as it is, we must consider the potential for the visual to help the unsayable words to, in the image of Bhanu Kapil Rider, “arrive.”

Honing in on impenetrability, Kapil Rider’s poem insists on slowness, a tracking of thought like a tracking of cinematic gesture, exposing us to the unseen that vision reveals.11

Perceptions of the body are taken in visually, sensed and understood, and put forth in visual media – film, painting, photography. These are fundamental to the understanding of what is hardest to communicate in language, that which phenomenology attends to and attempts to unravel. As Jorella Andrews points out in her contribution to Feminist

11 This image by O’Keefe is dated 1924 (two decades after the dated referenced in the poem). Entitled “Red Canna” and owned by the University of Arizona Museum of Art. It is bright, reds and yellows give it a lightness that obscures its more basic heaviness, the intricacy of image making the perception of the natural urgently mysterious, as pictured above in black and white reproduction.
Interpretations of Merleau-Ponty, “Merleau-Ponty claims that visual perception in its lived and thus temporal being is precisely that which does not fix in place, and does not objectify” (169). It is this sort of “seeing” that allows for a translation of experience from crude testimony to meaningful ontological resonance. Merleau-Ponty insists on intersubjectivity, according to Andrews, and this phenomenological insight makes attention to the erotic a common-sense turn for an understanding of how we make sense of, communicate, and attempt to get at difficult experience. Those things which are not possible to simply “testify to” or “give a picture of” are the difficult experiences that we reach towards in art, yearn for in impossibly inadequate language, perceive in the gaps left and silences asserting unsayable yet knowable experience. Considering the validity of critiques of phenomenology – where the touching body and the thinking mind intersect in philosophy – and considering the creative or objective examination of the Holocaust – where the unrepresentability of difficult experience has been most compellingly argued – philosopher Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei writes that “of course, phenomenology does not set standards for truth, but analyzes and describes what occurs when we grasp something as true” (Annalecta Husserla 455). We might reach for some notion of truth, in the looking toward art, toward the screen, toward the image, attempting to touch that which is untouchable.

In the relationship to touch, considering vision in the erotic turns it into the reach, in film exemplified as the “haptic visuality” which allows us to acknowledge the body’s significance and its limits. These competing understandings give film a unique place in the
creative conveyance of the complexity of art’s pressing toward the unsayable. We cannot touch. We cannot see. We cannot know or understand. We look. We hear something. Yet the trauma remains unsayable, the Hiroshima unseeable, the lover untouchable. These are at the heart of Marguerite Duras’ writing and Alain Resnais’ film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*.

**What Does It Mean, To See?**

The opening image of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* is an ambiguous one, something like a scar, but not clearly a scar on the body or on the earth. Its light lines appear on a dark background, mottled. This image, hovering on screen, is followed by the famous (and infamous) image of bodies embracing under sand, shimmering arms moving, the skin clearing becoming smooth in sensuality suggestive of sweat. In her synopsis of the film, Marguerite Duras writes, “In the beginning of the film we don’t see this chance couple. Neither her nor him. Instead we see mutilated bodies – the heads, the hips – moving – in the throes of love or death – and covered successively with the ashes, the dew, of atomic death – and the sweat of love fulfilled” (*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* 8). 12 This ambiguity of images is not only what opens the film, but what defines its every gesture. What is an image of death is also an image of the erotic, what is an image of the body is also an image of loss. Further in the synopsis, Duras insists, “Every gesture, every word, takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning. And this is one of the principal goals of the

12 These sensual images were scandalous in the early reception of the film, causing reviewers to criticize the sexually titillating parts of the film as inappropriate for a response to the trauma of Hiroshima. See Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais*, 47.
film: to have done with the description of horror by horror” (*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* 9).

Duras, instead, wants to do something in the film that has not been done (not “done by the Japanese themselves”) in bringing together two anonymous lovers, one French, one Japanese, in Hiroshima, and through their dissimilar and necessarily disconnected lives, assert both the impossibility of connection and the profound power of desire against the odds of this impossibility. These ideas, like those of the ambiguous images, pervade the entire film, disrupting its every shot.

The opening words of the film assert this layering of meaning along with the undoing of perceptual evidence. “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.” [*Lui : Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien.*] We are seeing something, seeing what the woman saw, yet told she saw nothing. This opens the questions: What did you see? What was unseen within these images? What is missing? What does it mean to “see” Hiroshima? What does it mean to see trauma and its aftermath? And is to see to know or to feel or to experience? When we see Hiroshima, are we able to perceive its significance as a site of trauma? According to Merleau-Ponty, “to see is to have at a distance,” making explicit the distance between seeing and perceiving that is necessarily part of the physical act of vision itself and then exploring the way art can collapse the distance, giving “visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible” (MPAR 127). This is a kind of “delirium” for Merleau-Ponty, and the visceral quality of seeing with one’s eyes does not make exempt the almost feverish sensitivity to the way perception is awakened—by art—to what is invisible. If you saw nothing, you are nevertheless seeing, and the film is showing you something. The camera
tracks through a hospital hallways, down the hall into rooms, where patients are looking back into the camera. It is reminiscent too of Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog)*, echoing some of the harrowing eeriness of that glimpse into the post-Holocaust concentration camp. The shot returns to the bodies of lovers again. Then, we see the museum in Hiroshima, hear music like a festival, see photographs, exhibitions, reconstructions of Hiroshima in image after image. The film is browsing the catalogue of catastrophe.

The woman describes to her lover her time in Hiroshima as we review the images. “I was hot in the square,” she says, but the lover insists, “You saw nothing.” The clarity with which the assertion that seeing the museum is not the equivalent of seeing Hiroshima, that to see the city in the sense of perceiving its significance is an impossibility, is reinforced over and over. Violence and brutality is pictured, “so tourists weep.” However, spliced into the film are shots of hands on the naked back of the lover, sensual images of desirous connection. *What does it mean to see Hiroshima?* The film insists upon the importance of haptic memory – touch, which museums cannot convey.

How does art convey this sensation? In *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, we recognize that the impossibility of speaking about Hiroshima is central to the communication of its significance. This can be done through silence, through the body, through the acknowledgment of language’s limitations. In these blank spaces, the power of Hiroshima’s legacy carries on.
She: I have always wept over Hiroshima.

He: No./ (pause)/ What was there for you to weep over?

Here the film cuts to a sweeping shot of charred earth, where there are no people, no more houses, just remains of roads and burnt stumps of trees for miles and miles, what seems to be endless miles into the mountains in the distance. It is clear that the films of Hiroshima that were designed to “make tourists weep” – showing piles of skeletal bodies, children with charred hair, desperate survivors pushing out of rubble – do not have the same impact that the site of seared land, empty space, gives. When the lover asks “What is there for you to weep over?” the question is two-fold: rhetorically suggesting you need not weep over the fate of a country that is not your own, implying an impossible othering of foreign perpetrators, but also what to weep for is not THERE, we weep for loss, for what is absent. Landscape in Hiroshima, Mon Amour is not only a physical location or a symbol of the nation but also the image carrying emptiness, where the literal loss and figurative yearning inhabit the same space in the mind, making the image of “space” both abstract and concrete at once. Hiroshima, too, is concrete and abstract, unsettled and unsettling.

Cutting to documentary footage of casualties from the bombing, her voice then attempts to persuade the viewers that we do understand this pain through imagining it by viewing the documentary evidence. And he insists it is impossible.
She: Listen...

I know...

I know *everything*.

It went on.

He: *Nothing. You know nothing.*

The words insist on the question of *what it might mean to know something*, to know anything, to know pain. Through her words, she attempts to talk about memory, how she too has learned to forget, but he denies her this assertion: as if there is only one kind of pain, only one kind of memory. Hers is not valued. But the film suggests that pain informs our understanding of pain, that desire’s ache offers a link across disconnected damage. The woman has to fight – in the dialogue – to have her experience exist, and the images of Hiroshima are visually interfering with her words, making it a challenge to hear her voice over the barrage of stimulating film images. In this, Resnais clutters our senses. Where the language of the film asserts simply, “I am like you. I forget,” the film drowns out the voice through the visual images.

The importance of the body ultimately preserves the overall effect. Hands on the back of the body become a kind of silence in the film. A kind of break occurs when we see skin on
skin in anonymous embrace. Otherwise, the images keep coming coming coming, death the
person, destruction, and then moving through the present streets. The silence of touch is a
visual indication of words’ failure and the body’s potential. Yet, it is not creating a new
sayable, a new language. Touch is another kind of not saying, made visible.

Iconographies of the Unsayable: Writing is Also Not Speaking

The first words heard in the 1959 film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* are “You saw nothing in
Hiroshima.” The film, written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais,
combines the writer’s attention to language’s strange relationship with silence and the film
director’s attention to the relationship between the visible and the unseen. *Hiroshima, Mon
Amour* takes place in Hiroshima years after the atomic aftermath and at the scene of an
erotic encounter with pasts—both personal and public. It is an icon of modern writing,
modern film, and of the 20th century encounter between aesthetics and the displaced
witness, the attempts of artists to create a work that evokes the challenge of this encounter.
The film provides a complex example through which to examine Sontag’s “iconography of
consciousness,” a consciousness that, in Duras’s work, is always felt most deeply in the
personal, private, and erotic unsayable landscape of the body. “Writing also means not
speaking,” for Duras, a statement that can be understood in at least two ways. The act of
writing is different from utterance in sound, it is a sort of silence in contrast to speech and –
as such – encodes the unsaid in its very form. Marks on the page, understood silently by a
reader, surrounded by blank space, are quite different from language spoken aloud,
audible. Writing as not-speaking also suggests a kind of alternative to speaking, writing as
speech’s potential for communication but therefore a resistance to the presumptions of direct contact. We might consider that films we call more “writerly” tend to be those that are more insistent on audience’s interpretive abilities or open to the porosity of minimally determined narrative. We might consider this film especially writerly, especially porous, even in its modernist opacity. The vision of seeing nothing. The writing of the unsayable. Blanks and silences take shape in art.

In a 1977 interview in the *Performing Arts Journal*, Sontag argued that “there is no such thing as [a purely] ‘aesthetic’ work of art—as there is no such thing as the engagement or exploration of consciousness as such. Neither consciousness nor the aesthetic is something abstract.” Sontag, who stressed the importance of our sensual engagement with art in *Against Interpretation*, nevertheless insists that our experience of both art and consciousness, and the important intersection of the two arguably at the site of aesthetics, requires a sensitivity to how we experience: her “erotics of art,” or a phenomenology of aesthetics. In the 1977 interview she continued, “We’re not being honest about our experience if we ignore the iconography of consciousness. You can’t look at the Rembrandt self-portraits and see them just as an arrangement of forms, as studies in brown. There’s a face there.” (SS, PAJ 7) The shapes these arts are taking are this iconography, what we sometimes call a language.

Central here is the idea that the visual language of the image, especially the blank image or the language of not-seeing, powerfully reinforces the idea of silence as an artistic vehicle to
convey the unsayable (and especially painful) elements of human experience. Art that combines the visual and textual can be especially effective in illustrating the relationship between blankness and ontology, as film, in its combination of sound and image, complicates the sensory field, but in this more layered sensory situation makes clear the urgent relationship between meaning and the iconography of blankness, both visual and auditory. Film can be an important medium for exploring the use of silence and blankness in art, as we can examine the various ways in which films move our attention, from what Laura Marks calls “haptic visuality,” or the way film can make us feel like we are touching something that we are seeing through our eyes, to the absence of sound that draws our attention to silence. We see this even in the famous scene in Brian De Palma’s 1996 action movie *Mission: Impossible*, when the character Ethan Hunt, played by Tom Cruise, is suspended by rope in silence for a full minute, heightening the suspense and drama. In the case of the sobering tracking that focuses slowly in on the flesh as in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, or the noisy action film that cuts back into silence as in *Mission: Impossible*, we find the significance of what is unsaid, more and less profound but nonetheless affecting, is being manipulated and unveiled through cinema.

**The Invisible Meets the Felt, or What “Pricks” Us**

In discussing photography in *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes observes that “a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see” (Barthes, 6). The assertion that what we see is not what we see is a conundrum, until we accept that seeing here is not a matter of the eyes taking in stimuli through the visual cortex, but rather the more complex operations of
consciousness and memory and emotion that mix together to form what we might call ontological knowledge as triggered by art. Barthes' assertion suggests that there is more to our experience (here, of considering a photograph, interpreting it and, as is most important to Barthes, caring about it) than absorbing what is present, what is presented to us. The notion of what-is-absent is fundamental to Barthes' investigation of photography because we don't simply see objects in the visual field but respond to them, react to them, desire them, feel through them. This feeling is the “invisible” in the photograph which is, for Barthes, the photograph itself. The art is that which resides not in the art but something between the art and the viewer. Barthes asks, “What does my body know of Photography?”(9). What does the body tell us of experience? How are we reacting to what we perceiving, shaping perception as experience? This “knowing” is what art can convey. Barthes is investigating, in a sense, the possibility of translating the seen in life, bridging a making of experience in the lived world of objects through art and a sensory perception of them, both those objects in the world and that art object capturing them. Through his investigation of the medium of photography, Barthes unravels this necessarily mediated encounter. We feel and are affected by the encounter with the art, as object perceived sensorily. His conclusion, like Merleau-Ponty’s, is that we experience being—or what you might call life, existing here—across a gap. Without this invisible space, according to Merleau-Ponty, of perception, we would not experience the world at all. “We make perception out of things perceived” (MP, PP 5). In looking at art, the thing perceived is this shaped thing, the made thing, yet we in perceiving it are also making our perception, and this latter making is the work that leaves its imprint. There is a gap across which our
knowing must reach to make us – here, Barthes – “know” something. In looking at a photograph, because we are not looking at the thing photographed, we understand (and can theorize) more readily this gap. The vocabulary of this translation is Sontag’s iconography of consciousness.

The intersection of consciousness in erotics and ethics is what Duras’ life work explores over and over. In *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, the stories of an anonymous erotic affair, the atomic aftermath and its treatment as a historic and civic event, and the memory of personal loss and private trauma are intertwined through flashbacks and overlapping imagery. These individually complex threads overlap in the film visually while the narration connects shots and then recedes into silence, into the “nothingness” of living in the aftermath of pain. It is a pain both private and historic at once, that of overlapping lives that are nevertheless essentially disparate. In her chapter on Duras in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva identifies the importance of “nothing” in relation to a troubled consciousness, one affected by trauma. “The practice of Marguerite Duras seems less that of ‘working toward the origin of the work,’ as Blanchot had hoped, than a confrontation with Valéry’s ‘nothing’; -- a ‘nothing’ that is thrust upon a perturbed consciousness by the horror of the Second World War and independently but in similar fashion by the individual’s psychic unease due to the secret impacts of biology, the family, the others” (225). Following an aesthetics of Duras’ writing for the film (not diverging from but in conversation with the psychological turn of Kristeva’s analysis), the essential components of the overlapping threads, and Duras’ writing in general, are the erotic and its tension with the historic; this is where the self interacts with others, and these interactions
illuminate the contact that is both erotic and fraught. Kristeva writes, “Duras’ entire work is perhaps contained in the 1960 text that sets the plot of Resnais’ film in the year 1957, fourteen years after the atomic explosion. Everything is there—suffering, death, love, and their explosive mixture within a woman’s mad melancholia” (emphasis added, 234). In her final work C’est Tout, Duras meditates on love, death, and memory in explicit nearness to death, one’s own and others’: “Silence, and then./The beginning of the end of that/really terrifying love,/with the regret for each hour./And then there was the hour that followed,/incomprehensible, emerging from the emerging from the depths/of time.” (28-89) Potential madness aside, the erotic is always alone and simultaneously not-alone; this tension or borderland also infuses the silence of Anne Carson’s eros, Simone Weil’s mysticism, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s social philosophy. The modern understanding of being is one in which attention to others and attention to self are in dramatic tension. To what are we attending? Where does silence lead us? Why is nothing so clearly not a lack? Love, death, erotic longing: these are urgencies that make Duras’ work significant, in which loss is the necessary ingredient. The posture of the arm outstretched, grasping, or flinching back pervades the field. Nothing is not lacking something, because no image can contain all the complexities of our most profound yearnings, our spiritual hungers as Simone Weil outlines. But what might a sensitivity to nothingness give us access to? In Sontag, it is consciousness. In Weil, it is a connection to God. In Carson, it is the soul. And across these we sense an enormous significance, a pushing back against any modernist denial of metaphysical longing.
Anne Carson, in *Eros the Bittersweet*, writes, “In order to communicate the difference between what is present/actual/known and what is lacking/possible/unknown a three-point circuit is required” (169). There is always a space, that third point, which is the distance between art’s saying and void’s unsayable. Herein lies the tension, and which is both the disconnection between lover and beloved and the erotic connection of reaching, of desire. In his essay “Is Love a Place of Sexuated Knowledge?” French philosopher Alain Badiou asks, “What is the void summoned by the declaration of love?” The question is itself an acknowledgement of the distance between speaker and listener, lover and beloved, but also a question about language’s limitations in life’s intense emotional experiences. Not only in pain, but also in love we are in disjunction. This language of I-love-yous, attempting to express our most profound feelings, is part of the iconography of consciousness. Badiou continues, “It is the unknown void of disjunction. The declaration of love outs into circulation, in the situation a word pulled from the interval of nothingness which disjoins the positions men and women.” Badiou’s claim is useful in its understanding of the way speaking the word “love” insists upon the simultaneous connection and disconnection that is also a speaking and an unsayability, enacted in this declaration. It is a performance of culture, of feeling, and of language’s impossible limitation.\(^\text{13}\) In *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, we see that the erotic is not the abstract, so that while desire is in the realm of distance, touch is in the phenomenal experience, and the erotic links these two and makes understood the

\(^{13}\) Badiou’s attempts to get around the fundamental heteronormativity of this description by reading “woman” as potentially biologically male or female are revealed in later passages. Woman is “she or he” in the essay, but love is characterized by masculine and feminine “statements,” pointing to another area of limitation in terms of language, expression, and the implications of these limitations in experience and experiential knowledge. Badiou’s explorations of the implications of love as fundamentally unsayable in language are nonetheless relevant here.
relationship between the body and the ontological experience of the body as felt. What is understood is something attempted in language and art and failed, the nothing we see in Hiroshima, and the disjunction we feel when we converge in saying “I love you.” This statement reaches across the unsayable, yet clarifies the void as much as the connection it attempts to forge.

In the script of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, there is talk of love, but as they talk about their lives and kiss, the screenplay notes parenthetically, as direction, “*(As she would say ‘I love you.’ They kiss as the telephone rings. He doesn’t answer.)*” (46). They do not speak the words of love and they do not ignore the subject of love. Yet there is silence, the kisses of silence, unanswered interruptions yet still heard, entanglements. As they prepare to part, the Japanese man says to the woman, “In a few years, when I’ll have forgotten you, and when other such adventures, from sheer habit, will happen to me, I’ll remember you as the symbol of love’s forgetfulness. I’ll think of this adventure as of the horror of oblivion” (68). Even the knowing of this love is dependent on its unraveling, its forgetting. Words of love do not close the gap between them, even as they attempt to close it through the body, through shared stories, words and visions and experiences.

This notion of translating across the gap might be investigated in various ways. Looking at the challenge of the limitations of the visual, and in particular expectations of what we “see” and what it can and can’t convey, is at the heart of this investigation of the 1959 film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Both writer Marguerite Duras and filmmaker Alain Resnais insist,
through different media, on the incompleteness of the visual experience. To “translate” the trauma of Hiroshima is an impossibility outside the intimacy of private pain. Translation itself is a loaded site for investigating the gap between the material (words) read and the emotional experience ferried across those words. Barthes says “What I can name cannot really prick me” (CL 51).

In part four of the *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* screenplay, the female character conflates the German lover of her past with the Japanese lover of the present. The devastation of the loss of the first becomes the devastation of the immanent loss of the second. This conflation marks the intensity of her feelings for this new lover, his significance, as well as the way the eroticism of her earlier love transcends the body in time and place and even body itself, reaches toward another body. So, too, the pain is mobile, the sense of loss of the lover, his impermanence – like the new Japanese lover, whom she will leave, like Hiroshima, an entire city, destroyed – and his permanence, etched in memory and existing in the rather real experience of sexual connection with the Japanese lover. This “you,” embodied in both the German man and the Japanese man, becomes the always-disjointed beloved, the object that means loss itself or, more accurately, never-connecting itself.14

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14 Cathy Caruth’s essential reading of the film in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, although focusing on betrayal, denial, and, importantly, forgetting, too identifies in the discussion of the lover’s death “an unbridgeable abyss, an inherent gap of knowing, within the very immediacy of sight,” -- a sight Carruth connect explicitly with “the moment of the other’s death” (39).
What we cannot see and what registers as most felt is identified by many 20th century theorists as a site of void or disjunction, where minimalist art gains meaning and the unsayable of poetry is spiritually meaningful. Derrida calls the unsayable, “the mystery of the sacred.” According to the idea of decreation – in Simone Weil and later echoed in Anne Carson – the coming into being is less interesting than the being itself which is already. Decreation understands being as a sort of given to which we are seeking access, allowing the reach toward it to be a reach toward what exists, rather than a process of becoming something other. It is, in Weil, a matter of faith. We might ask how being may not be taken for granted, perhaps? How might we better understand what exists, rather than what was or will be? There is a nothing that we all don’t “know,” which we may call Weil’s “void” and Baudrillard’s “nothing,” and it is wordlessly rich with its impossible existence outside our daily, expressible existence, and so therefore godlike in its quality of being outside our mundane experience. Simone Weil writes, “The void is the supreme fullness, but man is not permitted to know it” (GG 23). Not quite secular and not quite faith, a detachment is required by what Simone Weil calls attention. Even Martin Buber, in his theory of our relation I-Thou, claims, “whoever says You does not have something, he has nothing” (55).

Anne Carson begins her 2002 essay “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God” asking “What if I were to begin an essay on spiritual matters by citing a poem that will not at first seem to you spiritual at all.” The poem, by Sappho, describes a love triangle, and Carson, through her analysis of the jealous scene described in the poem, links the feelings of erotic desire and spiritual longing. “Sappho sets
up a scenario of jealousy but that’s not what the poem is about, jealousy is just a figure” (161). For Carson, Sappho’s jealousy represents an ecstatic spiritual experience, the figure of reaching towards an ever unknowable beloved. The daring of the lover is a spiritual daring, an ecstatic experience of risk-taking in which the experience of Being is heightened in its silence: “no speaking/is left in me//no”.

In the essay, Carson is linking Sappho’s, Marguerite Porete’s, and Simone Weil’s descriptions of spiritual ecstasy and poverty. What is ecstatic emerges, in Carson’s reading, as the “spiritual spectacle” of Sappho’s figure of jealousy, an attention that allows the poet to stand outside the self. This ecstasy is echoed in Porete’s “jealous” relationship with God, requiring her to reach beyond her self and even beyond her love of God. In Weil, we find the hunger for spiritual ecstasy demands even a withdrawal from reaching itself—the extremis of “decreation” to make an empty space available for the spiritual, what we normally experience as longing or loss or hunger, which is for Weil radiant. This spiritual ecstatic is a reach that evokes loss. The reach of the empty hand, hungry. The metaphor of poverty is identified as a key linking theme, as central as that of erotic reach and indeed inextricable from it. The gesture of the reach is itself the gesture of absence. We do not possess that which we reach towards, we are impoverished in relation to it; thus spiritually the lack is described (precisely) by the lines around the hollow of that which we desire, emphasizing both our impoverishment and our spiritual intensity (ecstatic). This is the equation of longing that begins with the image of Sappho, of erotic desire which is physically manifest.
no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am dead—or almost
I seem to me.

The erotic is defined by its desirous, disembodied experience. This hunger, the longing for a being-with is at the same time physical and disembodied. So too, being, or – as identified by Carson – the spiritual. We understand the urgent matters of the soul through the language of the body, even where it is impoverished. Or necessarily so, according to Weil. “Electra weeping for the dead Orestes. If we love God while thinking that he does not exist, he will manifest his existence” (Weil, GG 15).

*When you hear nothing: Silence is Film’s Unsaying*

Art that takes up Hiroshima as its topic implies questions about violence and about the impossibility of bearing witness, of seeing what needs to be seen. Arguably, by putting an intimate relationship in the center of a film about historic trauma, Duras and Resnais put faces on trauma, even in a film that is quite abstract in its aesthetic formalism. Examining this work of art in the wake of the Second World War demands the question of whether the film’s aesthetics, in emphasizing disconnection or disjunction, might lead to or become complicit with totalization and violence. But Resnais and Duras don’t let themselves off the hook by oversimplifying the complexities of the concerns of the subjects, which are not one but multiple and complex. By conceding a misunderstanding of each other, questions of the
ethics at stake in a film about wartime violence are raised, including whether or not we are condoning violence, or at least apathetic toward it, and how we might think about these questions in trauma’s aftermath. How might we see and speak and understand what is unspeakable? Geoff Baker, in “The Predication of Violence, the Violence of Predication: Reconstructing Hiroshima with Duras and Resnais” (Dialectical Anthropology Hiroshima, A Millennium Memorial, December 1999) argues that the “dehumanization and abstraction of Heideggerian thought, of Dasein” (389) is the result of impersonalization or facelessness of violence. By forcing us to attend to the difficulty of bridging the gaps between us, works of art that lay bare silence, void, and disjunction can serve to resist the dehumanizing potential of abstraction. In Duras, we see this done through attention to the erotic proximity to ontological knowledge. It is through the body of the lover that the woman in Hiroshima, Mon Amour (and the audience) comes to terms with her painful trauma and comes to see the trauma of Hiroshima. The erotic is sensual—drawing from senses of the visual and haptic (or touch) and the aural. Her hands touch the back of not just any Japanese man, but a lover, a man whose body lying asleep in a bed in Hiroshima triggers memories of love and trauma in her. She, standing in a Japanese robe after a night of making love, is alone. The film moves from the abstraction of lust to the mundane of daylight and coffee, the haunting images of the past—hers, his, the dead hand violently pictured flashing back from his sleeping hand on the bed, like her dead lover’s, like the Hiroshima victims’, the city’s hands. The memories are awakened and connected, as the lovers are awakening and connecting.
In acts of perception constituting art, the artist whose work makes itself not only available to be perceived but acknowledges in its very form this perceptual energy, becomes generative of both content as art ("subject" of a photo) and metaperceptual space. The works that are open to how our perception creates them become, then, a site for both experience of seeing the art and reflexive experience of perceiving. In this double of perception the work thickens in profundity because it is doing more intellectually and emotionally. Seeing Ethan Hunt in *Mission: Impossible* suspended from the ceiling in a stark white room does create a heightened tension in the audience, aware of the silence in the room of the film and the room of the theater. The noise we hear while listening to John
Cage’s “4’33” intensifies the affective experience, in its attention to the silence. These works make us attend to silence. As musicologist David Metzer observes, “For his part, Cage sought to erase once and for all the line between sound and silence (and, along with it, that between music and sound).” (Metzer 335). This effort to direct our perception toward how we listen, how we attend to art, is what Cage’s piece does and how it becomes both experience and reflective study of perception at once. In John Cage’s work, in not playing music, we are in effect told, “You heard nothing,” not unlike the lover’s announcement in Hiroshima, “You saw nothing in Hiroshima,” challenging us to look at what we do and do not see, what we are and are not capable of seeing – and, in Cage, hearing.

An easy binary to posit is silence-noise, where noise is the language of discourse and silence is an idealized transcendence of discourse. “Silence, of course, has been a long-standing site of artistic, philosophical, and spiritual rumination, but it was not until the 20th century that it assumed such an extensive presence in artistic creation,” observes Metzer in his analysis of modernist composers in “Modern Silence” (2006). To suggest that silence does significant work aesthetically is not to empty this silence of discursive value, but to acknowledge its role in asserting expression that exceeds the limits of discursive language. What remains unelucidated in language or unexplained rhetorically, what is silent, is able to do aesthetic work but is able to become the expression of other complex sorts of knowledge. In other words, experience is more than what can be explained, and yet we
might convey experience, and this is possible in art forms, often through formal gestures that pull away from language itself.

The Touching Testimonial: Erotics as Unsayable Witness

The film written by Duras becomes an illustration of the way in which phenomenology intersects most fruitfully with feminist theory. The erotically charged stuff in Duras’ work is inserting the body into the philosophical realm by disrupting the mind/body and feminine/masculine categories at once, making a claim for the significance of the erotic body as site for ethical experience in Hiroshima. The erotic reach is more than metaphor in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. It is essential to the humanizing experience of traumatic witness, and to an understanding of both the limits of testimony and the necessity of poetic arts in the wake of traumatic experience. The body is transformed and its iconography of consciousness reconfigured as a site of conveying and transmitting across what is unsayable yet known. It is put forth in the film’s insistence on seeing the unseen and speaking of the inexpressible.

The body in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* is a body touching and speaking with and seeing another body, encountering other bodies, remembering bodies. The withness of being is what Jean-Luc Nancy sees as our very state of the human, which is what the poetic exposes us to. In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy states, “There is no meaning if meaning is not shared... meaning is itself the sharing of Being. Meaning begins where presence is not pure
presence but where present comes apart [se disjoint] in order to be itself as such. This “as” presupposes the distancing, spacing, and division of presence.” Jean-Luc Nancy’s argument is that Being, which “itself is given to us as meaning” (p 2), must be shared. This sharing—which provides the foundation of his philosophy of Being Singular Plural—might be extended to the importance of art in its making present the meaning as shared in that we see the same film, hear music at the same time, read lines of poetry and share them with one another. And, insomuch as “meaning begins where presences comes apart,” the art that is interested in distances and spaces is interested, too, in the relationship between these and being. More significantly, here, though is that the art that exposes space (that between us, that between the woman standing and her lover on the bed) is exposing this presence of meaning as such, of relations. Simone Weil observes, “Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence” (Iliad, 9). According to Nancy, “Everything, then, passes between us. This “between,” as its name implies, has neither a consistency nor a continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge.[...it is] the interlacing” (p5). This between-ness in the aesthetics of disconnection that defines the modernist aesthetic of writers and artists such as Duras and Resnais, as well as Carson, Beckett, and numerous others, delivers both the experience of sharing in the characters or images, and the art as being-shared by opening the presence of meaning in the work itself. But the meaning is dependent on sensitivity to not only the sharing, but the translation across and between us, the singulars, the presences. Here in the erotic reach between bodies we uncover insight that alone is static, is nothing, is meaningless. To make sense of the profound experience of
Hiroshima’s aftermath, this space is made taut, the gap felt by the intensification of the feeling of the reaching across.

Resnais was willing to make the film on Hiroshima on the condition that Duras write it. Duras is known for writing that conveys a poetic sensibility that confronts with sometimes brutal directness the intersections of the body and the philosophically turning mind. Her work is poetic and evocative and decidedly not journalistic. In the synopsis of the screenplay, Duras writes, “Their personal story [that of the lovers], however brief it may be, always dominates Hiroshima. If this premise were not adhered to, this would be just one more made-to-order picture, of no more interest than any fictionalized documentary” (10). This is precisely what Resnais wanted to avoid. “If it is adhered to, we’ll end up with a sort of false documentary that will probe the lesson of Hiroshima more deeply than any made-to-order documentary” (10). This probing more deeply is explicitly explored through the erotic. Although arguably “didactic,” rather than pleasurable, as described in 2013 by Charles Silver, curator of the film department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Resnais, through the poetic and the erotic, explores ideas through experience in the lived bodies of lovers, thinking and hurt human beings.

In contrast to the earlier short film Night and Fog, Resnais’ Hiroshima, Mon Amour is a feature film, focusing on a love affair set in Hiroshima. It is not a documentary, but rather a film about the intersection between historical trauma and personal trauma, both unsayable and difficult to theorize on different but overlapping levels. How Resnais and Duras
together illuminate, in the language of the visual and the textual, the desirous reach toward the unsayable is what marks the film as “overwhelming,” as reported in the *New York Post*.

The plotting structure of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* is described by Emma Wilson as a “risk” (p. 53). This risk is “namely that the two events or experiences [of Hiroshima and Nevers] come to seem equal or equivalent to one another” (53). The tragic devastation of Hiroshima as a site of death, nuclear destruction, and historically vast consequence is brought close to, even overlapping, the tragedy of private loss, the death of a beloved and personal grief and devastation. Although Renais expressed surprise at the idea of parallels drawn and insisted that the two were not meant to be conflated, he did remark “Toute douleur est incommensurable.” (Any suffering is beyond measure.) (54) While not conflating every suffering with any suffering, there is a recognition of human response to pain, to tragedy, that allows the overlapping of imagery to recognize how suffering resonates personally, even as we are acknowledging the public injury. The overlapping of the images of Nevers and Hiroshima asserts that if we begin to understand a tragedy like Hiroshima, it is only possible individually, one-by-one, and this we must know as we know our private losses, our intimate desires, longings, disappointments, and devastations. We might feel something yet coming through to us in the inability of language to convey a feeling “beyond language,” something coming through the stuttering text and visual slurs of film, and in feeling we might acknowledge what Giorgio Agamben clarifies in *Remnants of Auschwitz*: “It is necessary that this senseless sound [of the impossible witness] be, in turn the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness. It
is thus necessary that the impossibility of bearing witness, the ‘lacuna’ that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness – that which does not have language” (39). In this approach to the unsayable, which not only is unsayable but impossible to put into language, art begins to sharpen insight into human experience. “What I can name cannot really prick me,” says Barthes. What I cannot name, then, is what hurts, and what the art reaches toward. Saying (“the testimony”) is not enough.

Resnais and Duras, in taking the risk of putting the personal and the public tragedies in intimate contact, open a space for the suffering individual to approach the larger suffering of Hiroshima. As Elaine Scarry has observed in *The Body in Pain*, “Injury must at some point be understood individually, because pain, like all forms of sentience, is experienced within, ‘happens’ within, the body of the individual” (Scarry 65). We perceive the pain of the lovers in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* through their intimacy, their private, individually cast readings of the landscape of Hiroshima and its bodies, its history, and its urban terrain. By following the views of the streets and the museums, tracking shots along roads as if by car or bus, Resnais allows viewers to perceive an intimate Hiroshima, and through the sensual experience of the lovers, the intimacy is localized further into the body, their bodies. We see this, and we are thus perceiving their perception of the city and each other. Our own perception of Hiroshima as a city is constituted by this perceptual context, through the encounter of the lovers’ bodies. Merleau-Ponty’s argument that “We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we
"perceive," comes into relief. Hiroshima is created by its perception: it does not exists until/unless it is perceived. Or, as the man in the film observes: “You saw nothing of Hiroshima.” It is not until we are struck with the intimacy of the body, the suffering body especially, that we understand the significance of Hiroshima. As Emma Wilson observes, “Scarry suggests that the injured body is an index of suffering and if it is to act most volubly needs to be seen individually” (55). The lyricism of Hiroshima, Mon Amour allows it to communicate in this “voluble” register.

When Witness Is a Liminal Space

Hiroshima, Mon Amour has two “texts” – the film, which cannot be read apart from its relationship to the screenplay by Marguerite Duras, and the text by Marguerite Duras, which might be read independent of the film. Comparing these two provides insight into the strengths of the film, which distinctly are in its interest in capturing the knowledge pulled through sensory perception and in the strength of Duras’ spare, even hollow, writing. The direct engagement with the trauma of the post-nuclear city and its intersection with the personal matters of grief, love, desire, and loss in this film make it a useful illustration of the limits of testimony. Hiroshima, Mon Amour draws our attention to the possibility of art as a medium for negotiating the ways in which the experiences of pain intersect on the perceptual level as art.
"Hiroshima, Mon Amour" was commissioned because of Renais' work on the Holocaust in "Night and Fog." "Night and Fog," a short documentary film, quietly moves the viewer through concentration camps, with primary focus on Auschwitz. The narration describes the rise of Nazi ideology and the experiences of camp life in a direct, spare language. The effect is eerie, the hollow environments depicted requiring the extension of the viewer's imagination to fill the gaps described in language by the narrator. Images of bodies are shocking, but so too are images of empty hallways, leaving the film viewer to imagine the environment, haunted by the historical facts related in the voiceover. Struck in the moment of viewing, these "dialectical images" connect the viewer to history through the vision of atrocity's dislocation as past. Resnais asks in "Night and Fog," "What hope do we have of truly capturing this reality?" The answer is no hope; this reality is impossible to capture.

Important in the language of this film is the stutter/stoppage of language. When the speaker does not explain what use was made of human flesh, as the voice trails off, image intercedes to carry the burden of information, but the impact is struck by this pulling back from language, its silence. This impact must be emotional, for "Night and Fog" is a record of pain, of the brutality on the body after-the-fact as well as a call to outrage – not a documentary of evidence in a testimonial record. We see lampshades formed from human flesh. “This is one of the few moments where the commentary peters out several times, 

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15 This reading invites an investigation of the relationship of images by way of the Benjaminian present, in which we might understand a relationship between the present and the what-has-been as dialectical through images as Resnais and Duras bring them together.
replaced by silence in which we are left to contemplate the transformation of these once sentient bodies into useful material," remarks Emma Wilson in her volume *Alain Resnais* (2006). Wilson describes this as a “moment of sickness in the film” (26). Throughout *Night and Fog*, silence accompanies slow tracking footage of emptied concentration camps, allowing the viewer to dwell on spaces once filled with indescribable horror, not filling those spaces even with words. Silence itself is like a character that is resisting the documentary impulse to dramatize the Holocaust. Looking at Beckett in his study “Modern Silence,” David Metzer observes, “The character [in Beckett’s *Words and Music*] does not say a word nor play a note. How can it, when the part belongs to silence. Throughout the play, as in many of Beckett’s works, extended moments of silence set in, marked either as such or as ‘pauses.’ [...] Silence interrupts their private dialogue, demanding their attention and ours” (332).

The hovering over images of drawings, the assertion of art made on skin from human corpses is so perverse, it chokes language. The slow movement of the camera over an image of a pretty woman’s face drawn on this flesh-paper is haunting, before the shot cuts away almost too suddenly, drawing attention to the unfinished statement of what use was put to flesh. This must be unspeakable, and the camera must move on. The knowledge borne by the image remains.

The way in which art takes as its task the conveyance of difficult material—from the devastation of war to the grief of personal loss—asserts an unsayable experience beyond
the “borders” or limitations of language, but overtly asserting those limitations, in that these artists/writers do not insist upon elucidating in language the most difficult material. In the lyric essay “Writing Space,” poet Meena Alexander writes, “Ontology can be understood as threshold.” That which is unspeakable, most emotionally resonant, resides not in the explication through language, but in its perception outside language.

In contrast, work that is heavy with discursive elements of explication and “evidence” – testimonial evidence or journalistic writing provide examples of discursive elaboration – may be informative (and importantly so) without being emotionally resonant. (Testimony is, doubtless, important.) We might understand something intellectually, through detailed example, but the shock of blank thinking can strikes a more powerful blow of impact on the mind (and body) than lengthy discursive description. In her analysis of Charlotte Delbo’s writing on Auschwitz entitled “Testimony without Intimacy,” Patricia Yaeger observes that the use of metaphor in trauma testimony has a powerful distancing effect, refusing the intimacy of the reader who may have been seduced into an illusion of closeness with the survivor. Yaeger asks, “What does it mean to be met not with a hand but with a figure of speech?” Yaeger identifies an important connection between intimacy and language, and the way in which traditionally elaborate forms of language (“poetic”) – such as metaphor, “the mauve star” – can get in the way of intimacy in the evocation of the unspeakable emotional experience.
Yet Agamben argues that it is through the poetic that we are able to convey that which testimony cannot: the unsayable of pain. If pain cannot be said, what can art convey if not this speechlessness? The most intense human emotions lead to quiet. “All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima,” says Duras in her synopsis of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. It is not what Susan Gubar describes as “stymied testimony” or “crippled prayer” in her analysis of notably reticent or clipped language of some Holocaust verse. Agamben observes, “What cannot be stated, what cannot be archived is the language in which another succeeds in bearing witness to his incapacity to speak” (161-162). This is the borderland of art, where silence gives way to experience outside of the limitations of art’s languages. “This is the language of the ‘dark shadows’ that Levi heard growing in Celan’s poetry,” observes Agamben. What lurks in the shadows of language is not some other language, but that which is just outside the reach of language’s art. This is Suzanne Laba Cataldi’s observation of Jacques Roubaud’s poetry that “Some thing black is something silent, something inarticulate. Although there is something obscurely perceptible about it, there is also a perceived sense of limitation” (195). Roubaud’s volume *Some Thing Black*, dedicated to the death of the poet’s wife, is a closed silent tribute to a private encounter with death, astutely analyzed through Merleau-Ponty in Laba Cataldi’s “Embodying Perceptions of Death: Emotional Apprehension and Reversibilities of Flesh.” The seriousness of the implications are nothing less than matters of life and death, or – for the poet, for the philosopher, matters of the soul.16

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16 Simone Weil turns the vision inward: to our own shadows: “To accept void in ourselves is supernatural.” *Gravity and Grace*, 11.
Combining grief and horror in an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's term the “flesh,” Laba Cataldi
exposes how Merleau-Ponty's reversible and “indivisibly interwoven or enmeshed” (SLC
190) flesh helps in discussing death because it complicates the problematic binary between
life and death. Our experience of death, of seeing the dead, is not a one-sided experience
according to Laba-Cataldi, in the same way as vision is complicated and not uni-directional
or linear.

Since touch and emotions overlap, perceptually, in the domain of feelings,
and if we recall Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'every visible is cut out in the
tangible' so that we remember to think of sight, for example, as a form of
eye contact, then we may regard our emotional apprehensions as ways of
being touched, of being affected, by some perceptive object or other. And if
we do opt this path of least resistance, then it simply does not or would
not matter so much if the perception that is ‘actively’ touching us is that of
an animate or inanimate object, since we can be emotionally touched or
‘moved' by both. The ‘objective' or perceptible sight of a dead body, for
example, can be said to be horrifying or heartbreaking. (191)

We are changed by what we see, are touched. The emphasis on the tactile, on the body, on
the sensory experience and its relationship to the emotional makes it impossible to neatly
unravel feeling, seeing, knowing. Hiroshima, Mon Amour shows us death, and shows us life,
and they are enmeshed. Yet, do we see “nothing”?

The work of Duras, in its commitment to the intimate and erotic as coexisting with, indeed
existing inextricably from, the historical traumas of war—both in the atomic aftermath and
the wartime flashbacks—allows us to understand the overlapping of pain, the echoes of
traumatic experiences, the human messiness of experience. The gap between erotic
connections, the erotic reach, and the unsayable of trauma are parts of an uneasy emptiness, often tangled in any effort to draw connections into neat binaries, taut lines, tidy structures. Testimony, too, through which a listener might presume to hear how it was, must be revealed as full of holes in order to approach a truth. Duras writes, “The knowledge of Hiroshima is something that must be set down, a priori, as being an exemplary delusion of the mind” (HMA 9). Unraveling is fundamental. Disconnecting threads are the approach of sense-making in senselessness. And the notion of the binary itself is limiting and as such a stricture of power, as has been thoroughly dissected through deconstruction’s unraveling of dualities. It is a fundamental feminist critique, as Elizabeth Grosz points out in Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporal Feminism that “opposition between presence and absence, between reality and fantasy, have conventionally constrained women to occupy the place of men’s other” (165). However, the suspicion of oppositions does not explain away the very power of the tension between notions of presence and absence. Indeed, Michelle Mawhinney usefully expands Grosz’s work on desire in observing:

Desire is fundamentally the absence of presence; but this does not have to mean that it is always the absence of the presence of the phallus, or of Absolute Knowledge, or of any teleological final end or realization. Indeed, linking the "lack" of desire with these things is precisely what constitutes its ontologization, the attempt to make it "present"; and this process can only be understood as the reiteration and enactment of existing "sedimentations" of power relations (such as the subordination and "othering" of women).

(Mawhinney 154)

In the film, when the man observes that “You saw nothing in Hiroshima,” it is a statement that opens up the film not to a vacancy of emptiness, but to a rich exploration of the many kinds of nothingness that – precisely because of their tension with being – give us insight
into being as a philosophical and phenomenological situation, made into a shared experience through art.

*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* troubles the binaries by overlapping them. This is more possible because the medium of film is able to sustain multiple sensory experiences simultaneously, and the textual language experience moves along with the visual and auditory linearity of the film. We may say “You saw nothing” while actively “seeing” much of Hiroshima, or seeing a body, a close-up of intimacy, blurring both ideas of what it means to see, what Hiroshima might be or mean, and what we value in terms of where we direct our attention. In getting at the pain of the atomic aftermath, is seeing historical museum sites more revealing than seeing the skin of a live Japanese man, erotically charged and alive to sensation and emotion? An intimate other, in the scope of the film, and pointedly aware of the distance between these intimate bodies? As Geoff Baker argues, “Instead of horrifying us with horror, as she refused to do, Duras’ screenplay has shown us the humble beginnings of horror: [...] the blatant inscribing of infinite Others within the finitudes of the language of the Same.” The body is never the same, the touch is never the same, and difference can never be collapsed. But the erotic touch may be felt, and this is what art can, at least give. Alain Resnais remarked, “I came to see that all you can do was suggest the horror, that if you tried to somehow show something very real on the screen, the horror disappeared.” The erotic reach, though not touching its object, does not erase it either.
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caesura
Plain, burned things

When a writer turns away from elaborating on what is arguably central to a work, it should be a curiosity. We can also see the kind of reverberations – the noise – that happens in the gaps of unsayability. The importance of Anne Carson’s work begins with a look at her early work on eros, where she describes the importance of the triangulated relationships of desire, looking most memorably at Sappho. Eros, Carson shows, is defined by its unlocatedness, because there is in eros always a movement, an energy between a this and a that, and it is in this gap that we recognize the erotic. It is of course a common idea that once we possess the desired object we cease to desire it. The desirous longing, the emotion is in the reach. The reaching towards is a movement, not a place, not an it.

Carson describes the relationship of the lover and the beloved as “triangulated” – the third part made up by “that which comes between them” (Eros, 16). Often, in her writing on literature, the reader is the third point in Carson’s triangle. What makes the triangle even more helpful an illustration is the way these reach-lines create a gap of space between them: empty.
I would draw your attention to this untraversed, blank space of the erotic triangle in order to further develop not only ideas put forth in Carson’s work on writing of desire, but also the reading of Carson’s creative work that performs pain in art. Carson consistently refuses to say what is unsayable, refusing to elaborate when the truth is the unknown. The hollows Carson leaves in her work are spaces of the unsayable, but what is unsayable is there, like the reach. I will look here at just one example.

In her “Short Talks” format, she distills the “talk” into just a few words, tightening to the point of almost invisible brevity. The result is closer to a prose poem. Looking at the “short talk” entitled “On Sylvia Plath” helps to illustrate some of my terms and demonstrate why Carson is another central source in my constellation of this poetics of the unsayable.

On Sylvia Plath
Did you see her mother on television? She said plain, burned things. She said I thought it an excellent poem but it hurt me. She did not say jungle fear. She did not say jungle hatred wild jungle weeping chop it back chop it. She said self-government she said end of the road. She did not say humming in the middle of the air what you came for chop.

(Plainwater, 38)

The short talk reads like a poem, with its rhythm, language punctuating itself with the repetition of that brutal word “chop.” And “She said...She said... She did not say.... She did not say...She said... She did not say...” The writing has music in it, lyric.

The title of the piece is “On Sylvia Plath.” The first sentence displaces attention onto Plath’s mother, Plath’s mother further removed on television, and our own gaze – our complicity –
as potential viewers: “Did you see her mother on television?” There is a series of removes, distancing us from Sylvia Plath, creating gaps.

Further, there are a series of leaps of logic, or rather there is an inner logic that we must fill in. Again, gaps are inserted. The poem widens: Envision the blank space you might breathe into those gaps. Here, to say “I thought it an excellent poem but it hurt me” is to say “plain, burned things.” What is it to be burnt? To say burnt things? Something that has hit the fire, been altered, broken, destroyed. What is it to be plain? Who is this mother in this poem? How is this piece “on Sylvia Plath” if we are seeing Plath through the words of her mother – and, importantly, the words she does not say? By making it “on” Plath, the writing suggests that through the mother’s voice we might “read” Plath, or – more importantly – through Carson’s imagining through what is not said we expand, fill in the vast space of Plath. The mother’s reticence in a phrase “but it hurt me”—and in response to what poem we, the reader of Carson, might only speculate—leaves so much empty space. Do we feel how there is an enormous gap between the reader and Plath? The dead poet is so far beyond our grasp. This poem shows us how far we are from her.

The plainness of “it hurt me” – this is what I call “plain language,” unadorned, unelaborated, direct statement – in a mother’s voice – caught, caged on radio – shudders in this poem that staggers down into pain: what “she did not say” is chopped. Brutal. The violence after “it hurt me” – the mother’s voice, the dead poet’s mother, the voice of the mother of the dead poet who killed herself after writing raging poems and mother of the mother of two young motherless children. (And we may know that Plath and her mother kept up an extensive
and intimate correspondence throughout Plath’s lifetime.) This poem ends humming because words are not available, we cannot hear them. It is the humming of the radio, perhaps, or of that fly, the fly we are not paying attention to. Carson stops us, turns our attention to Sylvia Plath through her mother. This is a profound example of “trying to use the simplest language and the plainest marks to express a profoundly tricky spiritual fact,” – as Carson describes the writing of 14th century mystic Marguerite Porete in Decreation – here, a tricky spiritual fact that hinges on women’s lives, our painfully unsayable intimacies and impossible public encounters.

Nonetheless, the very triangulation of communication/experience/void is a site always elusive. This ever-slipping quality of communication is also an approach to meaning, to saying that between silence and language there may be yet something, or, as Merleau-Ponty might say, “a universe.”
CHAPTER THREE

Poetic Time Machine: Translation as Interpretation of Interstitial Space in Anne Carson's Antigonick

Interstitial Space: Translation as Ekphrasis mean Translation as Poetry

On February 22, 2013, the Gallatin School at New York University staged a reading of Anne Carson’s Antigonick, a translation of Sophokles’ play Antigone. Along with NYU students, readers included the author Anne Carson and theorist Judith Butler, reading the part of Kreon, as well as poet Anne Waldman reading Tiresia. As the readers delivered their lines, the figure of “Nick,” measured distances on stage and between the readers with a tape measure, per Carson’s sparsely written stage directions. This figure, who does not speak, is barely present in Carson’s written text, does not appear in Sophokles’ original work, and yet was omnipresent in the live performance. So, too, was the blank space of the physical page of the written translation not present on the stage. The deliberate stretches of white between and through this translation’s written words and drawn images are significant parts of the quiet reader’s experience of Antigonick, as much part of the translation as the words themselves. But here, we perceived in the room of the staged production what is inherent in translation, the always lost breach: no Nick moves on the page before the eye of the staid reader, no white and vellum pages slowing the touching hand and seeing eye of the seated audience member. It is this gap between language and language, medium and medium, page and stage, body and body that the art reaches across.
Poetry is an art form that translates perception into language, using language that is – in its lyricism – suggestive rather than definitive. We expect leaps, hollows, surprises. The poet is translator of the perceived and felt, and the translator is often a poet, across languages filled with unsayable gaps. Often, these are visible: the spaces white on the pages, the body of Nick on the stage, the images conjured by poetry’s words themselves. Rilke – the great modern poet of the image and its simultaneous pregnant and impregnable qualities – refers to the breach between original, or perceived experience, and the translation, or art, as an “infinite distance.”

The conflation of “translation” and “art” is necessary in widening the purview of this analysis and also explicating the ways in which translation itself is a creative act beyond the notion of interpretation. All translation is interpretation is a commonplace enough notion, but if all art is a translation, the question becomes of what to what, because translation is always across, between, from this to that, a hovering not a landing place. It is this “infinite distance” that Anne Carson’s translations get near capturing and that Rilke identifies not as a sorrow but a state “between the closest human beings” – and intimacy evoked in intimate distance. What Rilke rather optimistically observed is that “once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky” (On Love 28). Here, Rilke is discussing marriage. The question of “infinite distance” that he raises is repeated throughout his poetry and prose, and it marks the
fundamental condition of his world-view. In the love relationship, the relationship of greatest intimacy, he observes that acceptance of this distance is the only condition in which something nearing happiness can exist. Happiness is only a proximity, never an attainment. Rilke’s interest in excavating solitude is both a lyric and a philosophical investigation. The unresolved irony is in the unsayable poetry that stitches the distance a bit tighter through language.

Ekphrasis is a form of poetics that emphasizes both the way in which the poet translates forms into poetry, much the way a translator does—as in Carson’s work—and the way how we look at art is similar to how we might read poetry. In Rilke’s ekphrastic poetry, the gap between art and viewer is the real emphasis, and his poetry is most interested in “interstitial space” or that gap between subject and object where knowledge hovers. Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” describes absence and its capacity for conveying what Lacoue-Labarthe calls being or an unsayable experience of emotional intensity expressed through art—a various ways. As an ekphrastic poem, it is a poem about a work of art and so its subject is, in a sense, absent although unfolding as present in the mind of the reader. If we do not know the ancient sculpture—or lack some visual association with the headless, limbless ancient marble sculpture found in museums and, now, in replicas—then the poem disintegrates. As I will examine in this chapter, it is not unlike Anne Carson’s quirky 2012 translation Antigonick, in which references to Beckett or Mrs. Ramsay demand that the reader knows the cultural references in order to read this version of the play. The translated play is poetry of its own, Antigonick is an art piece itself by Carson, not just
Sophokles through Carson’s technical conveying of linguistic formation (Greek to English).

It is a poem about the tension between what we do know or cannot know, and what is nonetheless brought to knowledge through art. Through what is missing, Rilke’s poem suggests, we perceive something profound and powerful.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast’s fur:

would not, from all the borders of the itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you You must change your life.

trans. Stephen Mitchell

The sculpture in Rilke’s poem is that of a body lacking body parts – absence is physically conveyed in this visual image. “We cannot know his legendary head” opens the poem not into the image of a head, but the perception of its absence, the impossibility of seeing it. Yet, the imagination asserts its vitality, “with eyes like ripening fruit.” The gaze, from the now absent eyes, is profound in its having-been, its not forgotten necessity. Although the speaker in this poem, looking at this marble sculpture, which we as readers can only imagine, is only able to imagine the eyes, their absence seems to intensify the perception of the body, the gaze, and the power of the body, “still suffused with brilliance.” A smile,
which one expects to see on a face, is impossible to capture visually when the head is gone, but here “a smile run[s] through the placid hips and thighs.” The viewer of the sculpture, upon perceiving the absent head – that is, nothing – infuses the absence with meaning, and this interpretation is informed by what is present, the torso. The fact that life happens, “procreation flares,” in this lifeless marble suggests another absence. The reader must leap: “You must change your life.” The observation of the life suggested not only by the marble seen but by the absent body parts, the unseen, is the very paradox that fuels the poem’s power. The observations of the unseen create this revelation. The power of the sculpture, of art itself, is not in what it tells us, but what it draws forth in us: “You must change your life.” The sculpture is not “about” change, the viewer-poet hurtling to this statement is not “interpreting” a given “meaning” from the sculpture, but the experience of perceiving the sculpture, of becoming aware of all that is powerful even in absence, is transformative. So, too, the poem has this power to transform: reader, “You must change your life.”

Philosopher Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei uses the term “interstitial space” to describe the alternative spatiality used by Rilke (in her analysis, in his prose works) to attend to the focus on space as both a metaphorical and phenomenological idea in Rilke. “To evoke and reconfigure space is to renegotiate the very form of experience, breaking through the division inherent in our ordinary expectations of reality and perception.” Gosetti-Ferencei’s emphasis on how space is considered in Rilke’s work attends to the way it stretches, is “reconfigured,” and asserts a poetics beyond the limitations of language alone. She
continues, “This renegotiation does not fit entirely within the transcendentalist or phenomenological account, as poetic language must achieve what would be the transcendental form of intuition it discovers, manifesting interstitial spatial meanings that evade any phenomenal presentation and must be discovered and at once generate through poetic language.” In “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” we see the way this simultaneous presentation and generation operates, both in terms of the subject of the poem (what it is describing in the perceptive activity of the speaker/viewer of the sculpture) and in terms of the perceptive experience of the reader, who might be affected by the poem as the viewer of the sculpture is by the art. Further, the poem gives an embodiment of the “infinite distance” between perceiver and thing perceived, from which or through which, nevertheless, profound knowledge is yielded: “You must change your life.” It is the perception precisely of what is absent -- the head that is not visible and the life that is not, in fact, pulsing in the marble -- that is most moving in the experience of viewing the art. Our “ordinary expectations of reality,” in Gosetti-Ferencei’s words, might be that we perceive what is there, but in art, we are deeply moved when we attend to what isn’t there, and art that forces our attention to these visibly blank spaces is asserting the importance of this kind of experience. So we pay attention.

**Attending to Omission: Translating Across Gaps means Translating Into Gaps**

The translation as creative project hones our attention differently, chooses for us, pushes. In the play *Antigone*, the drama hinges on what the figures – of authority, importantly – choose to see, hear, and pay attention to. What and who is ignored, silenced, powerless?
These are questions fundamental to the tragic action of Sophokles’ play, but in Carson’s revisioning (or “transcreation” of the play, as poet Erin Mouré describes poetic translation) of Antigone, our attention is stilled – the play is a distillation – and concentrated on only certain words or certain key moments in the original play, and how these constitute the poetic essence of the work. Carson makes some surprising choices. Many words, entire passages, from the original text are omitted. From the very first page of Carson’s translation, we find a third fewer words conveying the scene compared to Kitto’s Oxford translation, for instance. Many scenes are cut and pasted together through contemporary idioms. But what is absent is not so much missed or missing as replaced by a spacing of thought, space that opens up to recognize the emotionally intense and intellectually complex workings of the play. These are conveyed not through expository narration, but through visualization – in space and in less consequential sketches by Bianca Stone – and the introduction of extra-textual referents, non-Sophoclean modernist references – that becomes meta-textual gestures. Carson’s translation insists on what Julia Kristeva described as the “mosaic” quality of all texts: “Any text is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (JK Desire in Language p. 64). If any text absorbs and transforms another, the translation takes as its overt task this transformation. What Anne Carson more assertively presents in Antigonick is the mosaic, the way in which this transformation is a creation from pieces of other texts, these pieced together, absorbed and transformed. When reading Carson’s translation of this ancient Greek play, we see how even the old text is inevitably (and here, forcibly) read and transformed through our new lens, whether we like it or not. Further, the text provides striking illustration of how, in Carson’s own words, “Silence is as important as words in the practice and study of
translation.” To extend the metaphor, the mosaic exposes its medium through the lines separating its tiles, the gaps between quotations, languages, references, signs; these are yet what hold the work together. In Antigonick, the seams are exaggerated, the grout made visible, with silences yawning across blank pages and transtemporal references left unelucidated.

Anne Carson, in Antigonick, examines the questions of translation and translatability through the insertion of space and visual material and the omission of language or textual referents to the original material. This translation is distinctive in the ways it both adds new language and severely cuts out original passages. In comparison to Carson’s translations of Euripides in Grief Lessons (2006) and Sappho (2003) for example, the Sophokles translation is decidedly experimental, pushing the boundaries of what we might consider a “translation” to be. In removing the expectation that language-equal-language in the book, the work asserts that what it is translating is not the language of Sophokles, but something else. Carson’s effort at eclipsing time or observing its effacement is at its most radiant in Antigonick, which is also her translation that is least close to its original. Names from modern times appear in the mouths of Sophokles’ characters, and modern appliances are new images in the language of Sophokles’ classic text: Woolf, videotape, a therapist.

The first lines of Anne Carson’s translation of Sophokles put the words “Hegel” and “Beckett” in the mouths of Antigone and Ismene, respectively. What, then, is recreated or translated, if not a more complexly interwoven postmodern assumption about time, thought interpretation, and reading? The unsayable blur of meaning-making is what we
glean from Sophokles, making it (as in Edith Hall’s Oxford edition introduction to H.D.F. Kitto’s translation of Antigone argues) “timeless,” in which the “texts seem to inhabit a time-warp between fifth-century Athens and the present” (Kitto, Hall 1994). We can read Sophokles and be swept away by the play because we are reading our intellectual texture into the work, because it opens up spaces – and Anne Carson does this quite literally through her book with swaths of white page – in which to fill our sensation of response. Judith Butler observes that through introducing Hegel and Beckett and other modern references, Carson is “letting us know that our only access to this play is through this present time, and yet showing that this time is still bound to that classical one.” (Butler, Public Books Sept 5 2012). If Sophokles’ text did not have this porousness, it would not be timeless, because we would not have any space in which to enter. There are 742 lines of dialogue in Carson’s translation (by my count), representing half the number of lines in traditional translations. Carson’s translation cuts away so much of the text, that it yawns open, yet loses none of its intellectual intensity. In my analysis, I will show that in loosening the textual integrity of the ancient Greek, adding modern references -- to Mrs. Ramsay, to videotaping, to bullets, to a powerboat -- the reading becomes even more demanding in its assumption of contemporary relevance. Reading the figure of Euridyke through Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay, for instance, allows us to piece the emotional veil of the final scenes of Sophokles’ play in a decisively contemporary way.
Spacing and Pacing: What you see is not what you get

What Carson is translating is not only Sophokles, though she is an expert translator of the ancient Greek, but she is translating one reader’s reading of Antigone, showing that that translator is always an interpreter. Through the emphasis on visual elements in the translation, Antigonick shifts attention away from a word-for-word echo of Sophokles’ play and attends instead to ideas that are carried through the play. This is done not only by adding visual space onto the pages, which represent gaps of silence in the language of the text, but also through attention to visual representation of language in typescript, in texture of paper, and in visual content of illustrations.

Through insertion of silence into the play, removing many of the lines of text and adding blank spaces, even substituting modern language references to assert lines of thought unanticipated 2,500 years ago by Sophokles, Carson guides the reader through the experience of Antigone on a ride in which perception of the emotional intensity of the play is foregrounded. Antigone was never pat, but the effect is one of heightened sensation for the reader, a gasping for breath and grasping for mooring familiar to the reader of contemporary poetry. White space and verbal silence demand an emotional engagement from the reader, and intellectual attentiveness to the resonances echoing across the blanks. This demand assumes a perceptual experience described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “The absence of a sign can be a sign,” writes Merleau-Ponty in the “Language and the Voices of Silence” (MPR 81). The attentiveness matters, and in retreating from language – in fact removing Sophokles’ words from the translation and inserting blank space, visual images,
and contemporary references – Carson’s translation signals that the significant terrain of the play is something outside of its words. What cannot be said, what is unsayable (and untranslatable, to borrow from Emily Apter), is what gives the work its power. Antigone is trafficking in the impossibilities of communication even as it communicates these: we feel this, pieces of the human condition laid bare.

Anne Carson’s Antigonick is created with clear attention to the visual and its contribution to our experience of the text. Through a reading of this text, we can assess the ways in which the silences and blank spaces of the text, inserted with deliberateness – even brazenness – serve as vehicles for content outside the language of the words. The gaps and hollows are the spaces in which the work of translation takes place. We find Sophokles there. The text is interspersed with drawings on translucent vellum by artist Bianca Stone. It is also printed not in any standard typeface, but in an awkward handwritten all-caps “font,” in Carson’s hand according to the publisher, New Directions Press. Most of the lettering is black, while the name of speakers are in red, though occasionally spoken words appear in red (HIM, HERE, LAW, WISDOM).

These two visual qualities in the book (the drawings and the handwritten font) have a textural quality that interferes with the textual, creating a kind of static upon first encounter with the book. Although Judith Butler describes the drawings as “stunning,” for the most part the drawings are imprecise and sometimes irrelevant to the context of the textual referents before and after them, not “illustrating” the language in a direct sense.
The imprecision and disjointedness of the figures and the symbolic disjointedness from the text create detractions from emotional intensity of the images, especially compared to Carson's writing and Sophokles' narrative. As Amanda Shubert observes in a June 27, 2012 review in the journal Full Stop, “[the drawings] lack the depth, in both subject and style, to dovetail with Carson's translation. The interactions between image and text with the vellum overlay are clever compositionally, but the connections feel so tenuous — you really have to reach for them, and even then you're not satisfied with what you shore up.”

This unsatisfying juxtaposition is nevertheless a crucial part of the experience of reading the book, since the drawings interrupt the text, and the translucent vellum paper on which the drawings intermittently appear emphasizes a tactile quality of the reading experience. The reader absorbs the text, sees the drawings, and feels the paper, creating a slowing sensory experience. The pacing of the book, therefore, is manipulated through the drawings, and their very difficulty in fitting with the narrative controls the pacing not unlike the scoring of a live performance, forcing the reader, for example, to ask why a pitcher of kitchen utensils appears in the midst of a choral segment in heightened dramatic language. It is a kind of timing.
The handwriting can be distractingly hard to read, the hand-written block letters clustering and blurring. However, the density of the text sections often gives way to blank space, and it is in this release from the burden of the visually heavy lettering into emptiness that the play most hauntingly spreads out. The sprawl of emptiness after the density of the lettered pages is visceral. There is an exaggerated relief, perhaps because of the overwrought images and heavy handwritten font, that highlights Carson's use of space itself as a medium for not only dramatic content, but significant conveyance of the central emotional and intellectual drama of the play.

In her essay review “CAN'T STOP SCREAMING,” Butler notes that the handwriting in all capital letters conveys emotional content. “Every line of Antigonick is printed in boldface
handwriting, emphatic, as if something urgent and excessive has to be loudly said.” Every detail of the work, visually rendered in space, is a translation of content. The choice of hand-written letters lends intimacy to the texts, draws it from dusty libraries and into the hand of the writer. The interspersal of images, even flawed images, introduces an interruption of narrative integrity, forcing the reader away from the Sophoklean narrative, into an almost cartoonish contemporary landscape of sketched interiors and headless bodies in modern dress:

![Image](image_url)

This image appears in the midst of text by the chorus, implying that this is an image of the chorus. The collection of faceless people, observers of the action, is appropriate for the Greek drama, but the cinderblock heads suggest more than facelessness. They are all
identical, and identically both heavy and hollow, hard and sculptural, monotonously gray and of the architecture rather than of the earth. Here, the image contributes to the interpretation of the text, but primarily because it does participate in the dramatic tradition of the chorus, recognizably so as a group of people and because it appears in the book between pages of chorus text. The image is therefore not completely dissonant, as are many of the other images. This image’s connection to the chorus, therefore, by insisting on the communication between image and text, further slows the reader, who might anticipate heretofore unnoticed links, surprising illuminations in the gaps.

As Antigone is condemned after the discovery of her crime – observing the burial rituals for her dead brother, against the dictates of Kreon – she does not show remorse, but sorrow. The chorus observes with a swaying mixture of clarity and emotion. An entire page is devoted to the chorus announcing:

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Your soul is blowing apart
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And in this we see that the intellectual center of the play is emotional. The chorus views the pathos of Haimon, the pride of Kreon, the power of Antigone, and then it stops to announce the state of the soul. In the unsayable reaches between language, between the dense clutter of text and the interference of clunky visuals; between these effects, ideas push forth, when given space. White space, clean page: “Your soul is blowing apart.”

The most important knowledge conveyed in Antigonick is a painful poetic unsayable. Carson has observed the importance of silence in translation (A Public Space). Interesting moments in the play are revealed to be not the action, not the plot, but the passages when difficult moments of attention to emotional matters are conveyed in poetry:
What does it mean for hope to “wander in” and then burn? Where is the hope in the play? How for what? For whom? Hope as an abstract theme inserted into the play is a bold gesture, since the traditional reading of Antigone is through an interpretation of justice, power, obedience, the tension between social roles and familial bonds, and so forth. In Carson’s creation, hope is introduced and highlighted through this rather spectacular image, surrounded by blank space. Antigone might hope for her brother’s soul to be saved. But Carson is writing – and revealing – as a poet, rather than as a translator here. This gives evidence of her artistry as much as the blank space around the works, which make us pause and slow down as we turn the pages one by one. The lines “BUT OF COURSE THERE IS HOPE LOOK HERE COMES HOPE/WANDERING IN/TO TICKLE YOUR FEET//THEN YOU NOTICE THE SOLES ARE ON FIRE” are startling in their shift away from the action of the play and into a metaphysical space, underscored by the physical space on the pages. Where is Sophokles there?
If it is in fact a translation, what is Carson translating? Through directing thought, isn't this a translation of meaning rather than a translating language that directs us to vocabularies or some myth of language equivalencies? Merleau-Ponty’s assessment of how language itself works is useful in thinking through Carson’s engagement with the translator’s task: “all language is silence.” The translator is at work with language, but Carson's results demand an understanding of language that recognizes its porosity, its capacity to simultaneously convey utterance and unsayability. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Language does not presuppose its table of correspondence; it unveils its secrets itself. [...] It is entirely a showing” (MP Aesthetics Reader 80). Because for Merleau-Ponty, “all language is silence,” so too we might extrapolate that to translate from one language to another, it is necessary to account for that silence. The impossibility of translation – a truism for those working in poetic translation, perhaps, especially – is compounded by language itself already encompassing an impossible-to-convey silent content. “[Language’s] opaqueness, its obstinate reference to itself and its turning and folding back upon itself are precisely what make it a spiritual power; for it in turn becomes something like a universe, in which it is capable of lodging things themselves—after it has transformed them into their meaning” (MPAR 80). In recognizing this inherent opacity in language, the relationship between a modern aesthetic and language is one that moves toward attention to the thing, to the unuttered emotional pauses of attentive being, to silence and – on the page, canvas, in the gallery – blank space. The attention to silence becomes a modern aesthetic trope itself. Merleau-Ponty insists, “Language is oblique and autonomous, and if it sometimes signifies a thought or a thing directly, that is only a secondary power derived from its inner life” (MPAR 82). The poet – and here we include Carson the poet/translator in our imaginings –
may write a poem recognizing that the poem—a work of art in a medium wrought of obliqueness or “silence”—must be yielded to the world, that the poet is quite powerless against the inherent silence of language, yet creates this work, asserts perhaps a kind of intimate understandings of this “inner life” of language or the hope to access it. We acknowledge that The Poet devotes more attention to language, typically, than The Conversationalist or even The Writer broadly speaking. Where does the translator fit in? Where does the translator-poet write, who is “transcreating” a work in a contemporary register, acknowledging on every page the autonomy of language? This intimacy that The Poet has with language gives the poet access to the mystery of language, and by infusing the translation with the permissions of poetry, the translator asserts this notion of language’s mystery. This is particularly felt in the blank spaces in Carson’s translation of Sophokles precisely because she is NOT attempting to reinscribe the words from Greek into English, since she omits so many words and reconfigures language so brazenly. Her translation demands an investigation of how the play works outside language, since what is translated is not words but gaps, wherein we find the emotional register of Sophokles’ tragedy.

In this significantly shorter version of Antigone, Carson does not directly translate many lines of text and the words she does write in English do not correspond directly to the Greek. It is impossible that they could, even obvious to the non-Greek reader. The translation is not a translation, then, of language word for word, but a translation of these moments of knowledge. These happen, in Carson’s work, not necessarily in the careful
“accurate” word-by-word echoing of the ancient language, but in the hollow silences that carry Sophokles’ resonance in our contemporary thought: in Hegel, in Beckett.

In her preface to her more traditional translation of Euripides’ *Hekabe*, which appears in her collection *Grief Lessons*, Anne Carson writes “[Euripides] has a gift for withholding or spoiling elements of the play that we as audience want to be there or to be perfect, so that we can derive an appropriate tragic pleasure.” (emphasis added, 90) In the introduction to *Hekabe*, Carson points out that Samuel Beckett says “tragedy is the statement of an expiation,” or atonement. We are always looking for what tragedy is “about,” as if the very form itself insists that it exists outside its form. Tragedy is more than its parts, its plot, its staging. Aristotle emphasized catharsis, Beckett emphasized expiation, Carson emphasizes the very quality of this existing out-of-itself. Anne Carson describes Aeschylus’s Kassandra as “a difference you cannot grasp,” and it is this ungraspability that is essential to Carson’s tragedy translations.

**Anne Carson’s Time Machine**

We enter into an intellectual time machine, in which *Antigone* of the 5th century BCE speaks in a twenty-first century idiom, Carson’s, which is inflected by the intellectual thought that has preceded it. By brazenly inserting Hegel and Beckett (and later Virginia Woolf) into the translation without explication, discussed by Antigone and Ismene on the first page, Carson is rewriting *Antigone* overtly, infusing it with the intellectual
crosspollination that nourishes every act of translation. Translation, that is, cannot be done word-for-word and make sense, but the translator must knit together words and understanding through other interpretive means. Adding modern names to Sophokles allows Carson to make a claim for the impossibility of translation, undoing its potential perfection from the start, and thereby opening it up to other potentialities.

In her translation of Sophokles, Carson immediately asserts the question of translation’s impossibility, or at least the lack of commitment on the part of this translator to put forth the illusion of a straight-forward translation of word-in-Greek for word-in-English. Dispensed with from the first page is the notion that we are getting Sophokles’ words, because Sophokles did not write “Hegel” into Antigone’s mouth.

Fig. 12 Antigonick page 1
This poetic license on page 1 of Antigonick asserts that Beckett and Hegel were present in the world of Sophokles: that the ideas we associate with modern thought are nascent in ancient thought, a nothing-is-new-under-the-sun gesture. This serves as an intellectual time machine, which is not simply clever, but also insightful in its acknowledgement of that very basic human idea. But the notion that the thinkers of the “present” day are present in the worlds of the ancient text has more profound implications relevant to the work of Sophokles and – reaching into the modern – of Beckett. Will we ever learn? Will we ever stop repeating the same mistakes? Will we ever find the ways to utter the unsayable? And where are these questions opening up in Sophokles? In Carson, the questions open up in spreading white space on the page.

What is carried in the ontology of Antigone is the knowledge that transcends time, the philosophical work it demands, the emotional engagement it inspires. It is a heady work whose headiness Carson emphasizes or even exaggerates. These are not isolated to Sophokles’ historical period, but transcend it into our own. Inserting modern thinkers into Sophokles’ drama, Carson makes an argument about the timelessness of Sophokles’ ideas, the ways in which we cannot read Sophokles or interpret Antigone outside our own immediate contemporary knowledge. Sophokles now carries the burden of our knowledge, and Carson adds that aggressively to the translation. This alters the text but raises the question, what is retained from the original? This is a question every translator must ask and answer through the execution of the translation, and Carson’s is so original, it is an interpretation not only of Sophokles, but of translation itself.
Theorist Emily Apter remarks that “Translation, like generic criticism, effects a subtle generic shift in how we view the literary text” (PMLA 1410). Acknowledging the limitations of translation is an acknowledgment of the very importance of language, what it can do; not only why translation is significant and deserving attention, lest we naively believe in language’s equivalence and erase difference or amplify it, but why what is unsayable has the potential to tell us something about each other and how we exist in the world. What is clear, and made evident in works such as Antigonick, is that translation cannot be understood except as containing these gaps. It is, by definition, in part imperfect.

If we think of translation as a genre of literary production, as suggested by Apter, whether of lined poetry or chapters of a memoir, it blurs the boundaries of genre by that definition. What we might know about translation is its inherent impossibility, its flawed result, its impurity, its caverns, its unsayables. A translation assumes gaps, silences, unknowns. I extend this to say all poetic language assumes these too: a translation of the unsayable. What is not stated yet present. The presence, for instance, of Mrs. Ramsay, her death, its profound small presence.

**Eurydike’s unbracketing of Mrs. Ramsay**

Eurydike’s monologue in Anne Carson’s Antigonick is longer than in other translations, a notable exception to the rule of the book, in which passages are shortened and language  .................................................................

17 Apter emphasizes untranslatability’s political implications in Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability, addressing the philosophical implications of the political debates around comparative translation theories.
truncated, thoughts distilled into smaller suggestive images, sometimes not even possible in Sophoklean idiom. (What is the opposite of anachronistic?) Eurydike, in contrast to the rest of the figures, and spelled with the hard K in Carson’s translation, has an extended statement in Carson’s version. Whereas in Sophokles, her words are lines 1183-1191, or ten lines of Oxford’s Kitto translation, in Carson’s her words spread over three pages. Carson writes forty-two lines of sometimes densely blocked text for Eurydike to speak.

In *Antigonick*, Eurydike, the “mother figure” in the play – becomes a significant character, is lifted from her silent oblivion. She speaks more than in Sophokles’ original, and speaks through Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay, thus echoing the idea of the major female figure whose death is bracketed, silenced. This utterance, though still brief, forces the reader of Carson’s translated play to contend with the figure of Eurydike differently, not only in the context of this work, but in reflecting on her invisibility in the original.

Eurydike refers to *To The Lighthouse*, drawing a parallel between Mrs. Ramsay’s bracketed death and Eurydike’s. Eurydike refers to herself as “like poor Mrs. Ramsay” in the third person, or gestures to Antigone in the language of Woolf’s narrative. Mrs. Ramsay’s death, briefly mentioned though it is in *To The Lighthouse*, is an extremely significant event in that novel. Virginia Woolf’s very use of the brackets heightens our attention to her brevity: drawing our attention – attenuating it between the brackets in the shock of Mrs. Ramsay’s death after her enormous presence in the first part of the novel. By drawing a parallel to Mrs. Ramsay’s bracketed death, Eurydike asserts that her own death, “bracketed” in its
relative silence in the play, is nonetheless significant, a large presence in the drama of *Antigonick*. Only with a familiarity with *To The Lighthouse* does the reader of *Antigonick* possess the tools necessary to perceive this association built into Carson’s translation. With it the overt reference to Mrs. Ramsey becomes an interpretation of the figure of Haimon’s mother, through the mother figure in Woolf’s novel. (Likewise, as critic Amanda Shubert points out, “[Anne Carson’s *Antigonick*] demands prior knowledge of *Antigone* in order to really plumb the depths of the work”) With the tempered significance of Mrs. Ramsay to support her distinction, Carson’s Eurydike gives herself preeminence, referring to herself in a detached manner. “This is Eurydike’s monologue it’s her only speak in the play.” She continues in the third person: “You may not know who she is that’s ok. Like poor Mrs. Ramsay who died in a bracket of *To The Lighthouse*.” The parallels Eurydike draws are to being “the wife of a man” but also “the exception” (page 70, pagination mine). Eurydike is the mother, the woman suffering loss, the body on stage who observes:

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WHEN THE MESSENGER COMES I SET HIM STRAIGHT I TELL HIM NOBODY'S MISSING WE'RE ALL HERE WE'RE ALL FINE. WHY DO MESSENGERS ALWAYS EXAGGERATE EXIT EURYDICE BLEEDING FROM ALL ORIFICES
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(Eurydice does not exit)
We do not see Eurydike exit until the words “Exit Eurydike” have been echoed three more times by Eurydike and by the messenger and by Eurydike again, eerily. Carson underscores Eurydike’s presence in spite of her absence in Sophokles’ text this way. In Sophokles’ work, Eurydike is a figure who carries a great deal of the emotional weight of grief and loss – more, perhaps, than Kreon, who loses his son but is muddled by the interference of guilt and power. Eurydike appears near the end of the play, having been invisible or at least silent throughout the action preceding. Her arrival at line 1183 appears like a haunting, this maternal figure, a loving presence, piercing the action with little more than her body, listening to the tale of her loss with a swoon, and then her absence. “Exit Eurydike.”

Bracketing Mrs. Ramsay’s death in To The Lighthouse draws our attention to its silence, and in being bracketed, it is notable, shocking. By being encoded as “silent,” as an almost-non-event, when it is after all death and the enormous event death is (in life and also for the reader who has been intimate with Mrs. Ramsay), we recognize its unspeakability and see that the non-writing of Mrs Ramsay’s death suggests the limitation of language to account for this magnitude, as well as the socially quiet relationship of society to the death of the woman. In particular, a woman who stated about women, “Don’t we communicate better silently?” (Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse) is dead, and her own death is communicated almost silently. That silence communicates “better” the unspeakable gravity of the loss.
Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay’s bracketed death is arguably the most important moment in the novel because of its radiant silence.

In linking Eurydike’s death to Mrs. Ramsay’s in Antigonick, Carson asserts her (silent) importance. It opens up an entirely new field of analysis into the play. The mother, the grieving woman, the person whose sole power is suicide or death, is given a voice. Critic Patricia Ondek Laurence, in her comprehensive study of silence in Virginia Woolf, notes that “These marks of punctuation (ellipses, dashes, dot-dashes, parentheses, brackets) correlate with Woolf’s lexicon of silence, words like ‘gaps, gulf, silence, pause, abyss,’ to express her sense of the indeterminancies, irresoluteness of life and language” (POL p 111). Where silence appears – in Woolf and in Carson – is where language makes way for philosophical reflection, or what is at the heart of poetics.

**Behind the Transparency**

What Anne Carson is translating is not words from Greek into English. This is evident in the way in which words are added to the play that never existed in the Greek. But the exploration of translation as interpretation is made more vivid in the commitment to transdisciplinarity. For decades, Carson’s creative works that are not called translations in any traditional sense, from Plainwater to Nox, have overlapped genres – poetry and prose, 18 We might think of Medea, who kills and is thus a victim of power, and unspeakable horror. We might think of the other Eurydice, in the Orpheus myth, silently following him from Hades and into death.

18
lyrical and critical, private and performative, textual and visual. Measuring out the space between word and word is the art of translation, which in Carson’s work does not close the space but reveals it, not unlike Nick, who on the stage of the Antigonick performance measures out space between body and body, marking space on the stage as if only to mark its presence, not to transcribe it as meaning. Translation is another “infinite distance” Rilke saw, and yet, in “loving the distance,” making the art, the distance becomes also intimate. What feeling, unwritten, might be found on the vellum page, on the measured stage, or even in the words “bleeding from all orifices,” hand lettered in shaky font.
I turn my steps and begin walking back over the moor
towards home and breakfast
It is a two-way traffic,
the language of the unsaid.

from “Liberty” in “The Glass Essay”
by Anne Carson

“The way this art works is to make you want it to disappear so that you can mourn its loss
and love it more completely.” – artist David Salle, 1979

She Looks At Looking Through Glass

“The Glass Essay” in its very language conveys the profound unutterability of pain, even as
it attempts to communicate across the chasm of the unsayable. In its thematic interests
and symbolic references– from echoes of Wuthering Heights to the landscapes of cold
Canadian weather to the reading of imagined Nudes – “The Glass Essay” draws power from
starkness, bleakness and violence. “The Glass Essay” is a gesture in motion, a reaching
toward something in language, essaying.

The experience of reading is central to “The Glass Essay”, as the reader attends to what is
read, how it is read, the writer and the reading, and as readers – this reader, you and I – we
become aware of our attention, our connection to the text, and its impossibility, the
unsayability. The chasm between reader and read is seen, but separate, as if by glass.
Artist David Salle created a four-panel photographic work early in his career, in 1973, in which each black-and-white photo depicts a woman standing at a kitchen sink, holding a mug, looking out the window above the sink. Each piece has affixed to the bottom a coffee brand label. The series is in the tradition, perhaps, of Vermeer, with his subjects captured at a privately contemplative moment in the light of a window overlooking an unknown vista, in the thrall of an unknown thought, and with an unreadable expression captured in the image. Gazing through the window appears to be clearly the gaze of contemplation, the gaze outward and yet inward. Curator Janet Kardon, in her analysis of Salle’s work “The Old, the New and the Different,” observes of the women in Salle’s work, particularly his nudes, that they “present their backs to us so often, one sometimes feels the observer should be inside the picture to receive its message” (12). The viewer is not invited into the thoughts of these evidently thinking subjects, not to see what they might see. We see only the utterly mundane kitchens, bathrobes, the static scene of quiet. Perhaps the sameness of the scenes allows insight into the dull consumerism of the coffee branding, but more
poignant is the consistency of the feminine form indoors looking out, the gaze that fell on
the face of Charlotte Brontë’s heroine Jane Eyre when she looked out the window of
Thornfield Hall in Chapter XII and thought, “I longed for a power of vision which might
overpass that limit.” We understand by seeing the woman looking through the glass that
her attention extends beyond the glass, beyond the scene, beyond even what lies outside,
which may even be unseen.

In Carson’s “The Glass Essay,” a work of language, there is a repeated gestures toward this
attention of the visual that looks beyond what is seen, both through the glass and beyond it,
not just in the imagery the language evokes but in the attention to the significance of the act
of looking. The attention is not limited to language about looking, about “watching” (or,
borrowing from Emily Brontë, “whaching”), though language is the form this essay takes,
but its attention is telling us how we see, how we look, and what we watch. Over what is
“The Glass Essay” watching or keeping vigil? Nothing less than the soul.

The importance of triangulation in Carson’s work is evident in the early sections of the
essay, sections “I” and “She” and “Three.” The imperfect communication “as if through
glass” becomes the primary trope of the piece. This communication will essay into
watching the poet-as-whacher, not only in the guise of Brontë, but also Carson, examining
the way in which the idea of the image in Carson’s series of descriptions of figures called
“Nudes” becomes a central focus as the essay progresses to its conclusion, one in which the
whacher escapes the shackles of watchfulness. The image of glass that repeats throughout
the work is that of a plane of glass (the window, the mirror) that is one sort of barrier representing restriction, as the piece examines questions of freedom and restraint. Language throughout the essay underscores its own limitations, asserting the unsayable over and over, through attempts to translate soul into image and silent meditation into poetry. “The Glass Essay” offers, through its lyric investigation of the relationship between feeling and reading, experience and emotion, language and the unsayable, a powerful example of Susan Sontag’s assertion of the relationship between silence, the mystical work of the soul, and our twentieth century art of a secular transcendence.

This essay is a poem is an essay, an effort, an attempt. It demands, like many of Carson’s works, a confrontation with generic expectations and refuses neat categorization. The form of “The Glass Essay” is not an “essay” in the tradition of Montaigne or even Sontag. There is not a clear thesis, no argument hazarded then proven. Most importantly, for a

19 In Carson’s The Beauty of the Husband, her poems are called “tangos,” again, weaving the written words with bodily art of movement. In her Short Talks, the genre of the “talk” is interrogated in short lyric format. The book Nox, published in 2010, combines photography, text, found objects and found language to become a book art object in the form of a boxed accordion-style document. These are just some examples.
writer who states that the shape of her writing comes first as Anne Carson did in a 1997 interview a few years after the publication of “The Glass Essay” in 1992, the shape of this essay is in lyric lines, in tercets and quatrains, in stanzas. It is poetry. Carson simultaneously carries on literary traditions, acknowledging them, and yet formally and stylistically breaks new ground in her shifting diction, untamed metrical patterns, and ungently immediate language of contemporary dialogue. In “The Glass Essay”, the classic text used is not “classics” in the ancient sense – as in much of Carson’s work, since she is a translator of ancient Greek literature – but a classic work of the literary canon nonetheless, Wuthering Heights. “The Glass Essay”, one could argue, teaches the reader how to read Carson, or even how to read in general, by showing the way the practice of scholarly investigation (here of Emily Brontë) is intimately interwoven with emotional exploration. In this, we see a modern tradition of deep intellectuality in creative expression pushed, forced deeper down into a darker place of feelings, imperfectly communicated because of the very limitations of language yet asserted through a plasticity of form that allows open space, unanswered questions, and incongruities to interlock into a network of densely perceived experience.

“T”: Awakening the Reader’s Attention

The poetic cycle of “The Glass Essay” is divided into nine parts. Each part is titled in the following sequence: I; She; Three; Whacher; Kitchen; Liberty; Hero; Hot; Thou. Although this list of titles includes pronouns, nouns, an adjective, a number, and reads as a bit of a jumble, it gives interesting insight into some elements of the piece as a whole, lending
certain heft to threads found within the sections themselves. The bird's eye view of the section titles reveals the first opening on the word “I” – which on the page can of course be mistaken for a roman number one and not uninterestingly glossed over. So, with some subtlety, “The Glass Essay” begins with the self. The first three sections of “The Glass Essay” set up the framework for the poem’s structure: the narrative environment in which the poetic explorations take place, the physical landscape in which the images are located, the interpersonal relationships that generate (inform, drive, nourish) the emotional content, and – most importantly – the triangulated situation of the unsayable, described as the “atmosphere of glass,” that is drawn by the figures of the speaker/daughter/grieving-ex-lover, the mother, and Emily Brontë.

“I” is the very title of the very first section, the first poem, in three stanzas, the first of which also begins with the word I. “I can hear little clicks inside my dream.” Not only does the poem begin with “I,” with the word of the self speaking its referent, but the I is as insular as the imagination may allow it: “inside my dream”. The I is in sleep, the I is in dream. The I is in darkness. A dream is impenetrable not only to the witness outside the self, but also to the mode of logic. “The Glass Essay” begins with I “inside my dream” and the speaker is interrupted in this intimacy of the dream, this utter impenetrability. The interruption is made by “little clicks”: sounds that are small. Small sounds awaken our attention to the silence around them.

I can hear little clicks inside my dream.
Night drips its silver tap
down the back.
At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking
The stanza ends with “Thinking” hovering, enjammed, but between the dream and the waking is the sound-image of “Night” of “drip” of “silver” – the words combining to evoke a kind of soft irritation that intrudes – “tap” – and becomes intimate, local: “down the back.” The silver tap of night that drips down the back, heard to the waking I at 4 a.m., is a tap that requires close attention to hear. Even for the reader, the poem’s first stanza slows. But moving into the second stanza, like the thought itself, the reader is projected into the present with the force of its clear, plain language:

At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking
of the man who
left in September.
His name was Law.

There is no ambiguity in this stanza, in spite of its lack of detail, its invitation to read symbolism into the name “Law.” We learn here that the thought is a) of a man who b) left c) in September. We also learn his name. Although we do not know the nature of this parting and the emotional situation in which the man left and the speaker now is left to think of it, the tension worked by the drip of night in one swift and almost unremarkable poetic stanza creates in the leap or silence between “Thinking” and “of the man” a moment of unsayability that registers as suffering. This first section of “The Glass Essay” continues and concludes

My face in the bathroom mirror
has white streaks down it.
I rinse the face and return to bed
Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother.

The night scene becomes less abstract as we see the bathroom mirror (the first “glass” of the essay) and recognize “white streaks” as, perhaps, evidence of tears. But the I does not quite see the face or the tears. The I is removed, as “my face” becomes “the face” in a moment that is cleansing – literally and brutal – emotionally. The poem cannot even speak of the pain it is writing, even as it writes the white streaks on the face; the “thinking about” can be recorded, but the emotional content can only be shown.

As this poem both concludes the “I” section and opens up the rest of “The Glass Essay,” serving as a sort of introduction, Carson masterfully ends this first section of “The Glass Essay” (which reads as an ending to this piece as a discrete poem) with the line “Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother.” This line does a tremendous amount of work in this section. It serves to turn the essay into a narrative, the story of a journey, the visit to the mother. Because it comes without warning, it is jarring, but it is no less jarring than the previous line, in which “my face,” had become “the face” and after the haunting image in the bathroom mirror, the direct language of “I rinse the face and return to bed” reads as pat or glib. This tone foreshadows the awkward relationship of sometimes forced docility implied by later passages on the mother in “The Glass Essay”. The mother is linked in space on the page and temporally in language to the image of tidying up the self, putting on “a face,” even in the face of – perhaps – devastation. The line also weaves the mother’s presence into the thinking about the man named Law. The mother is a central figure in this essay, one who often seems to suggest a distance that language cannot cross while also representing a
connection that cannot be undone, a simultaneity Carson’s writing is consistent, even persistent, in maintaining.

“She”: Triangulating Women, Connections & the Barriers Between Them

The first three sections of “The Glass Essay” create a triangulating movement: I-She-Three. It begins, in the very first section, “I”, which seems at first glance to be rather singularly the expression of the individual speaker’s experience of awakening to sound and thought into a complex network of self-in-relation as the I hears in dream, then wakes, thinks and is changed, sees the face as if other. And all this is the life, perhaps even rather mundane, of the daughter who will make a visit. It is the edge of averageness that makes these observations sharp: poetry creeping in, interrupting sleep, and life, to assert an experience not neatly situated there.

“I” gives way to “She.” Because the first section ends with the words “my mother,” they hang in the air and interpretively color the first lines of “She”:

She lives on a moor in the north.  
She lives alone.  
Spring opens like a blade there.  
I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books – some for my mother, some for me including *The Collected Works Of Emily Bronté*.  
This is my favourite author.

She is the mother, to whom the speaker travels “all day on trains” – and we know “Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother” in the narrative line set up above in the previous
section. “The Glass Essay” invites autobiographical glossing, and Anne Carson grew up in Canada – “in the north” and where we may learn her mother indeed lived alone, her father institutionalized with Alzheimer’s disease. Yet, by so swiftly introducing the name (in italics) of Emily Brontë into the texts, Carson also weaves Brontë’s identity into the “She” of the poem, not carelessly, since she famously lived on a moor in the north. So, the poem opens up into a triangulation between I-my mother (she)-Emily Brontë (she). (The potential position of the man named Law is quickly usurped by the power of this triumvirate.)

What does it mean to have Emily Brontë as a favorite author? “The Glass Essay” poses this, perhaps, as its central question in the subsequent lines of this section:

This is my favourite author.

Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.
Whenever I visit my mother
I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë,

So she too becomes I. Here we find the image of Emily Brontë – one might think of her work’s intensity, the violence and emotional fervor of *Wuthering Heights*—that evokes simultaneous attraction and repulsion. The speaker is drawn to Emily Brontë, but fears too much conflation with the British writer, an image intensified by the proximity to the other:

I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë,

my lonely life around me like a moor,
my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation that dies when I come in the kitchen door.
What meat is it, Emily, we need?

The image is that of Heathcliff, who saunters on the moors a distant figure aloof with emotion throughout Brontë’s novel. It is an image of Emily Brontë, completed later (in the section “Whacher”) when read that “the neighbor […] recalls her/coming in from a walk on the moors/with her face ‘lit up by a divine light’.” And here, the woman, visiting her mother, wandering moorlands in Canada too in search of something. And the clues to a more concrete reality of experience have been given in these first two sections (“my lonely life” and “the man who left”) but the unsayable emotional experience that is the “meat” of the poem demands space, that image of the vast expanse of the moors, vast expanses of uncultivated hilly land. The poem is laying its conceptual land in these early pages.

“Three”: The Triangulation of Reach Embodied

In the third section, “Three,” Carson makes the triangle explicit: “Three silent women at the kitchen table.” The women are the speaker, the mother, and Emily Brontë, who is in the book on the table. There is a great deal of silence: in the poem, on the moors, in the kitchen. “Three silent women at a kitchen table.” The speaker is silent. The mother is silent. Brontë is silent. This section unfolds as a way of thinking about the nature of those silences, a poetic investigation of these moors of the unsaid.

Three silent women at the kitchen table.
My mother’s kitchen is dark and small but out the window there is the moor, paralyzed with ice.
It extends as far as the eye can see
over flat miles to a solid unlit white sky.
The moor is wide, expansive in contrast to the small kitchen. Yet the moor, too, is frozen.

The sky is solid. There is a stark beauty in the image, a certain longing that yet acknowledges the limitations of nature’s offering, a foreboding.

The poem, with a deftness mimicking the fickle turns of the mind itself, blinks from line to line:

over flat miles to a solid unlit white sky.
Mother and I are chewing lettuce carefully.
The kitchen wall clock emits a ragged low buzz that jumps

once a minute over the twelve.

“Mother and I” are drawn in parallel, in familial likeness, “chewing lettuce” of all things – something at once nourishing and incredibly uninteresting, yet evoking the sound and motion of mastication with great vividness.

As in the first lines of the first poem “I”, in which little clicks are heard inside a dream, here the sound of “a ragged low buzz” of the kitchen wall clock brings the poem into the room of
the speaker with a quiet, stark attentiveness. The sweep of the poetic language – encountering the moors through the frame of the window – is interrupted by the life of the kitchen: clock sounds, chewing. It is here, in this distinct, domestic atmosphere, that Carson lays out the relationship between mother and daughter. In the “dark and small” kitchen, with the icy moors outside, the mother and daughter are at the table with the spectral presence of Emily Brontë, an appropriately ghostly presence echoing the apparition of Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*. They are notably performing a mechanical routine of eating together, “chewing carefully,” and this careful chewing also suggests a quietness, a reticence, a not-speaking.

I have Emily p. 216 propped open on the sugarbowl but am covertly watching my mother

Carson gives the sound of the buzz of the clock and the picture of the book on the table “propped open on the sugarbowl,” lending intimacy to the reading. We are invited into the physical, material world of the speaker, and through this into the mind of the speaker. But we only penetrate its borders, beyond which language cannot reach:

A thousand questions hit my eyes from the inside.
My mother is studying her lettuce.
I turn to p. 217.

The thousand questions remain not only unanswered, but unposed, hovering in the air between I and mother, even in this quiet, intimate space. It is not even clear if the questions are available to the speaker as questions, because the excess of “a thousand”
suggests that as questions in language, in thought, these spill out, or rather bombard, “hit my eyes” as so many images, countless. Can the mind imagine a thousand?

The poem zigzags from the kitchen wall clock to the book – the way it is propped (so like a prop) on the sugarbowl – to the surreptitious glance at the mother – watching her study her lettuce – and the questions this scene provokes go simply noted. The poem then turns to the book, turns “to p. 217” and goes deeply into Emily Brontë for the first time in Carson’s poem. The first words in the voice of Brontë are among Brontë’s most violent, most alarming images. Carson places that violence directly into the dark, silent kitchen, slowing Brontë’s words with enjambment.

I turn to p. 217.

“In my flight through the kitchen I knocked over Hareton
who was hanging a litter of puppies
from a chairback in the doorway…”

It was as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass.

What is especially curious here is the collective “we.” There is, at the table, a pair: mother and adult daughter. And the book, through which Carson introduces a third presence, Emily Brontë. We all are the three, not just the mother and daughter in the room, but we all might extend further, to a collective we, we-all. “It is as if we have all be lowered into an atmosphere of glass.” This begins to address the very nature of connection, the atmosphere of glass suggesting we can see or “watch” these questions that “hit the eyes” but they may be difficult or impossible to hear. They are obstructed, mediated. There is a connection, visible, clear, but there is yet an unbreachable barrier.
It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass. 
Now and then a remark trails through the glass. 
Taxes on the back lot. Not a good melon,

too early for melons.

It is the voice of the mother, the kitchen conversation heard as if at some distance, at some remove – through glass. Here, the glass makes the environment an observed space, under microscope or behind a frame, able to be watched more closely but not reached, not touched. Sound is muffled, yet sometimes pierces through the glass – or “a remark trails through” in language like water. Here the poem gains momentum, continuing for five stanzas on mundane everyday topics, gossip, household matters, news, the weather. Language here becomes chopped, terse. The speaker drifts in and out of listening as she drifts in and out of the room through vision, looking now and then out the window at the moor, which carries emotional metaphor in the tradition of Brontë, whose Catherine compares her love for Heathcliff to the very rocks beneath the soil.

We can observe how the voice of the mother gives way to the speaker’s introspective observation about the landscape, the earth “dead” and filthy, and yet what is frozen begins to grow darker as it melts: the softening of the ice is not a release, but an observing into liquid darkness, a muddying. Ice gives way to black open water, “like anger” when it unclenches:

Rain tomorrow. 
That volcano in the Philippines at it again. What’s her name 
Anderson died no not Shirley
the opera singer. Negress.
Cancer.
Not eating your garnish, don't you like pimento?

Out the window I can see dead leaves ticking over the flatland
and dregs of snow scarred by pine filth.
At the middle of the moor

where the ground goes down into a depression,
the ice has begun to unclench.
Black open water comes
curdling up like anger.

The anger is curdling up as the language of kitchen conversation flows, behind glass,
literally in the kitchen looking out the window. Carson multiplies the layers of enclosures
with subtlety even as the language itself is interrupted by assertions of surprising
pointedness, not unlike the mother's own jarring locutions needling the speaker's evident
sensitivity:

curdling up like anger. My mother speaks suddenly.
That psychotheraphy's not doing you much good is it?
You aren't getting over him.

My mother has a way of summing things up.

The poem asserts both the intimacy and the alienation of the mother-daughter relationship.
The speaker is affected by the mother's words, is at the table with the mother, is in the
atmosphere of glass with the mother, and hears the mother's words, ranging from her
observations about paper napkins to insights into her painfully ended relationship. The
colloquialism "has a way" allows the speaker to swallow back a critique of the mother's
statement. But it is to Emily Brontë that the speaker turns to bridge the unsurmountable
gap between mother and daughter here. She looks back on the mother's early skepticism
about the relationship with Law. (“She never liked Law much/but she liked the idea of me having a man and getting on with life.”) Then she returns to Brontë whose words have been evoked thus far only violently, the vivid picture of the dead puppies, the outsider encountering the vileness of the strange, murky history of Emily Brontë’s world, real and imagined.

But early this morning while mother slept

and I was downstairs reading the part in *Wuthering Heights*
where Heathcliff clings at the lattice in the storm sobbing
Come in! Come in! to the ghost of his heart’s darling,

I fell on my knees on the rug and sobbed too.
She knows how to hang puppies,
that Emily.

Hanging puppies is brutal, and the heartache of Heathcliff is brutal, and the violence of the storm of that novel, its relentless emotional weather, is brutal. Through this image, Carson returns to the quiet kitchen conversation with the mother, revealing how distant the speaker in fact is from the mother, how thick the glass. The woman sitting at the table with her mother in this kitchen, is a woman who sobbed like Heathcliff hours earlier. Emily is at the table, still propped on the sugarbowl.

It isn’t like take an aspirin you know, I answer feebly.
Dr. Haw says grief is a long process.
She frowns. What does it accomplish

all that raking up the past?
Oh—I spread my hands—
I prevail! I look her in the eye.
She grins. Yes you do.
This puzzling ending of the section, with its lack of punctuation to delineate speakers and the surprising diction of “I prevail!” create a kind of mystery inviting the reader in, again, to an intimacy between mother and daughter – this private conversation – but also shutting us out; inviting Brontë into the final stanza – as if through this unexpected assertion of voice “I prevail!” the voice of Catherine’s ardent ghost or Emily’s genius penetrates into the kitchen – through the glass. She grins, the mother’s grin could be Emily’s grin. “Three women silent at the table.” And the poem does not solve this mystery because it cannot.

The dialogue about pain is interrupted in the poem by Emily, the third silent woman at the table. Her silence is, quite literally, the silence of death, time, and distance: 1848, nearly a century and a half, an ocean between Canada and England. But Carson’s poem asserts that Brontë’s silence is also the silence of metaphor. The figure of speech that stands in for another, the metaphor both conveys something else and is altogether outside it, connected and separate at once. The silence of metaphor is that it carries knowing in its image without telling what it knows. Joined by Emily, the speaker relates the story of sobbing after reading about Heathcliff, abandoned and haunted by Catherine, evoking the image of the speaker abandoned and haunted by Law. But what is echoed in the poem is the image of hanging puppies:

She knows how to hang puppies,
that Emily.

In this, Brontë’s silence hovers around this image of brutality, suggesting that its violence is at the heart of Brontë’s novel, is the unutterable core of the speaker’s “favourite author.”
“Whacher”: Paying Attention to the Unsayable

The longest section of “The Glass Essay” is “Whacher.” Here, Carson builds a compelling poetics of attentiveness or “watching,” marking attention to language, to the environment, to time and abstractions, and to feeling within all of these. The spelling of the title itself draws attention to the materiality of language, estranges us from it, even as the section explores its potential implications. The network of relationships builds to mark the hollow of unsayability, echoing Carson’s own writing on eros here, and in “Whacher” Carson introduces the first image of the Nude, a series of “visions” that accumulate throughout the rest of “The Glass Essay”.

The section’s tercets break down the critical reader’s language into poetic lines. Carson includes quotations from Brontë’s contemporary critics, turning Brontë’s Victorian criticism into poetry. Carson inserts gaps of unspeakable knowledge – a poetic knowledge in which words are often metaphors and images open windows to other images – into this critical discourse of her “essay.” By adding enjambments into the language of the critic, Carson adds breath, silence, and – if read with a pause appropriate to such spacing – intensification of the gravity of the statements. Weaving, for example, one critic’s question, “What was this cage [...]?” into her work as a poem allows the leaps, across the stanza break, to the immediacy of the current moment: “Well there are man ways of being held prisoner,/ I am thinking as I stride over the moor.” Not only does Carson let the tools of the lyric do work on the critic’s language and its relationship to the speaker’s frame of mind, rendering the invisible prison one that is familiar to the speaker and thereby made felt to
the reader, but also by moving immediately – on the very next line – to a seemingly incongruous observation, the prison is made almost visible: “As a rule after lunch mother has a nap// and I go out to walk.” Here, “whacher” becomes overtly poetic, in Carson’s bare style, the outline of a picture which the reader might fill in. “Something” repeats, undisclosed.

The bare blue trees and bleached wooden sky of April carve into me with knives of light.

Something inside it reminds me of childhood – it is the light of the stalled time after lunch when clocks tick

and hearts shut
and fathers leave to go back to work
and mothers stand at the kitchen sink pondering something they never tell.

Although the walk is quiet, the image of the trees is violent, carving into the speaker like knives. And the solitude under this wooden sky is that of a child amidst silent adults. The thinking adult and the thinking child are both evoked through a kind of haunted quiet, quiet enough to attend to the ticking of the clock, the passage of time, the closing of the heart and the silence of parents. Interrupting this passage in the poem is the mother’s voice, ironically as if silencing the very mind:

You remember too much,
my mother said to me recently.

Why hold onto all that? And I said,
Where can I put it down?
She shifted to a question about airports.
In reading “The Glass Essay”, one is forced to ask what is the relationship between watching (whaching) and (close) reading? or How does looking at landscape (the moors, the ice/mud/water/April landscape) intersect with looking at the landscape of a) the domestic-personal and b) the erotic-personal? When and how does looking become watching – and what is the difference?

The section starts with a straightforward prose sentence broken up into quatrains. The poem reads like a staggered bit of research:

Whacher,
Emily’s habitual spelling of this word,
has caused confusion.
For example

in the first line of the poem printed Tell me, whether, is it winter?
in the Shakespeare Head edition.
But whacher is what she wrote.

Here we see the mind of the poet-reader turning over the book – the book about Brontë – paying attention to language, turning our attention to the language of this word “whacher” – its strangeness, its ambiguity – so that we see it as a word of seeing and of striking through. If Carson’s poem reads like research, however, it becomes evident over the course of this section that it is a research of the soul and the soul’s development. She continues to explore the idea of Brontë’s use of the term “whacher” with a scholar’s attentiveness:

Whacher is what she was.
She whached God and humans and moor wind and open night.
She whached eyes, stars, inside, outside, actual weather.

She whached the bars of time, which broke.
She whached the poor core of the world,
wide open.

In paying such careful attention to “whaching,” we see Carson as a whacher, too. The poet in “The Glass Essay” has been observing the landscape, seeing its distances, seeing its changes and the ice unclenching, the turning of “inside” weather as anger too unclenched or flowed. Here, the poet is honing the gaze downward, bookward, and inward.

“To be a whacher is not a choice./There is nowhere to get away from it,/no ledge to climb up to” and the poet is trapped. And this whaching – this way of being emotionally attentive in the world – is called the “work of whaching.” Seamlessly weaving the reading of Brontë into the reading of the poet-self as attentive reader, Carson writes that “to be a whacher” or “the work of whaching” has “no name.” The language Carson uses to describe this attentive mode – a mode that is both attentive and violent, capture by the language itself – is marked by hollows.

But it has no name.
It is transparent.
Sometimes she calls it Thou.

The section “Whacher” is a sort of meditation on the idea of watching as a translation of the word whaching/whacher, delighting in the capaciousness of language’s ambiguity in a way that echoes the explorative work of the translator. “Whacher” goes further than the average difficult-to-translate word, in that it captures for Carson the very absence of pin-
down-able meaning that is the essence of Brontë’s ghostly genius and the essence of the poem’s own pain. “It has no name.” “Whacher” is a word that does not exist, yet is there on the page, meaning watching, looking, and so we are training our gaze on not only the watcher/whacher, but on the nature of this watching.

Fundamentally, the section “Whacher” asserts that is important to pay attention. “She whached God,” writes Carson of Brontë. The word has a breathiness with its two Hs – pronouncing them heavily might leave a reader breathless—which adds an ethereal quality to Carson’s material language too. “It is transparent.” But the transparency is an emotional transparency, marked by the sobbing of Heathcliff (and the speaker) and the brutality of the hanging puppies, images which linger from the previous section, as much as the looking at the moors. Transparency suggests simultaneous existing-nonexistence in a material sense, a there that is simultaneously not-there. We see through the work of whaching, and the work of whaching is see-throughable. By letting the language of her poem reside in the apparently simple grammatical structure of the line-sentence – “It is transparent.” – Carson allows these ambiguities to enter into her poem as well. Carson, too, is a whacher.
Here, nestled eight stanzas in to the fourth section of “The Glass Essay” we find a fascinating critical turn: “Sometimes she calls it Thou.” In a crucial act of interpretation, Carson reads Brontë’s use of “Thou” as a term of address directed toward “the work of whaching.” This is exciting, liberating, and revealing.

Whaching, we have seen, is an act of paying attention that is simultaneously capable of whaching or doing violence to abstractions like time. To address this activity as Thou is to be reverent. It is to express Intimacy, in conversing, its address, and Distance, in that the work is a thing outside the self – what one does is not what one is, though it might possess us. The transparent work of whaching is sometimes called Thou. This is a labyrinthian blur of image, but in the context of deep emotion, clarity may not hit closest to home. Because the whacher/whaching is evidently so powerful, it is muse and it is spirit, but it is also the whaching itself.

“The Glass Essay” returns to this image only at its conclusion, in the final section, but it is significant throughout in that that section is entitled “Thou.” “The Glass Essay”, then, begins with “I” and ends with “Thou,” suggesting a trajectory outward from the speaker-self toward this other-whacher-spirit. So the defining of “Thou” here in the “Whacher” section is important – if fleeting – almost nonexistent in its quiet smallness on the page in this longest section of “The Glass Essay” – because it is important to understand that the Thou with which Emily has a relationship is the whaching itself, but also that the whaching
is a Thou with which (or to whom) Emily gives intimate address. “Sometimes she calls it Thou.” This suggests that Brontë is paying attention to the paying attention itself.

Trained, now, to careful reading, the reader of Carson makes a leap in the poem. Immediately after this line there follows a series of stanzas exploring Brontë’s way of engaging with the world in a metaphysical way through the physical encounter and Carson’s research.

Sometimes she calls it Thou.

“Emily is in the parlour brushing the carpet,” records Charlotte in 1828.

The apparently plain observation of Emily Brontë brushing the carpet opens for Carson a series of insights.

Unsociable even at home

and unable to meet the eyes of strangers when she ventured out, Emily made her awkward way across days and years whose bareness appalls her biographers.

This image of brushing the carpet – a repetitive, likely physically strenuous activity – leads in to the recording of biographers alarm over Brontë’s life. Carson has already brought Brontë into closer personal proximity to the life of the speaker-reader-researcher-heartbroken-lover-daughter, the person reading this passage and the writer of this poetic observation “Whacher” – by extension, blurring into Carson, in another autobiographical
turn. Because of this proximity, the critics are held at arm’s length, their analysis more distant than Emily’s presence, so the poem becomes a critique of their reading of her life. “Uninteresting, unremarkable, wracked by disappointment/and despair.” But the poem suggests that despair is remarkable.

Carson digs deeper into this remarkable despair, Emily Brontë’s and the speaker’s own.

Emily continued to brush into the carpet the question,

Why cast the world away.
For someone hooked up to Thou,
the world may have seemed a half-finished sentence.

The work of the carpet-like labor of life, domestic housework, solitary routine, is read as a place through which the questions of the whacher can be posed. But what these questions are remain elusive, not unlike the “thousand questions” hitting her eye in part “Three.” To be “hooked up to Thou,” is to be busy at the work of whaching, something that puts Emily both at work on the (hooked) carpet and at a remove in the next room. “She spent//most of the hours of her life brushing the carpet,/walking the moor/or whaching.”

The whaching, that careful looking that pierces or whacks, is a sentence that is half-finished, because it remains, always half-un-finished, unsayable. And throughout “The Glass Essay”, Carson is tracing this space between sayability and unsayability:

But in between the neighbor who recalls her coming in from a walk on the moors with her face “lit up by a divine light”
and the sister who tells us
Emily never made a friend in her life,
is a space where the little raw soul
slips through.

The section turns from looking at the whacher to studying what the whacher looks out at or from: the prison image. Carson cuts with her own piercing eloquence through language. After quoting dismissive critics, who ask of Brontë “Why all the fuss?” and “What was this cage, invisible to us,/which she felt herself confined in?” Carson interjects:

    Well there are many ways of being held prisoner.

Here, the poem veers swiftly back from the reading of Brontë into the present moment of the poem, on the moors and into the mother’s house. The ways of being held prisoner extend beyond Brontë’s proscribed world, multiply to include the prisons of the speaker’s life that we know already, defined already in the world of “The Glass Essay”: the woman imprisoned by her grief over the loss of a love affair, the daughter imprisoned in the stifled language of mother-daughter discourse.

The poem itself is broken from its reverie. “You remember too much,” and then, “She shifted to a question about airports.” But, as the language of the poem ebbs and flows between the mind’s observations and the interruption of the words – those remarks that now and then “trail through the glass” – the poem lulls the reader into a state of
watchfulness, wakeful to the interplay of emotion, memory, and the mundane arrogance of
the world.

To get closer to communicating between the mundane and the profound unsayable, the
reach toward acknowledging more profound-but-unutterable experience, the poem inserts
images (in language) “that were naked glimpses of my soul,” called Nudes. The first Nude
appears here, in the middle of “Whacher.” Appropriately as it crystallizes the image of the
speaker-as-whacher of her own soul. The world of whaching is described as both visual
and invisible, not unlike the Nudes, which are written in ekphrastic language, but the
sculptural subject is an image of the soul, not a physical work of art.

It is a traditional poetic trope to envision nakedness as an emotional exposure. The idea of
the Nudes as “glimpses of my soul” is almost too easy, but Carson thickens the image, first
with violence; and by creating images evoking sculptural installations of visual art that are
truly embodied – bloodied – while remaining objects of the mind, of the text-mind; then
with the layering of multiple Nudes (a total of 13 over the course of “The Glass Essay”),
each different and suggesting through visualization the complex variety of iterations of
emotional world in the poem.

I called them Nudes.
Nude #1. Woman alone on a hill.
She stands into the wind.

It is hard wind slanting from the north.
Long flaps and shreds of flesh rip off the woman’s body and lift
and blow away on the wind, leaving

an exposed column of nerve and blood and muscle
calling mutely through lipless mouth.
It pains me to record this,

I am not a melodramatic person.
But soul is “hewn in a wild workshop”
as Charlotte Brontë says of *Wuthering Heights*.

Alone, the woman stands. We already recognize this image of loneliness in the poem. The solitary thinker, lonely walk, quiet whacher in the kitchen. Here, though, on a hill; here, naked. These both suggest exposure, vulnerability. The image of loneliness is heightened by the “hill” in that around the hill is air, sky, no protection. The woman is elevated, but “She stands into the wind.” We see wind in the face, “a hard wind” and the “slanting” echoes that of Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*:

> Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr. Heathcliff’s dwelling. “Wuthering” being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in story weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there, at all time, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by the range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun.
> p. 4 *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë edition 1990 Norton

Carson’s Nude is exposed to the elements, that “wind slanting from the north.” The image is stark, made more stark in its echo of Brontë’s foreboding landscape.

Carson takes the brutality of the image and turns it more directly, brutally on to the woman’s body. This is a wind that rips the flesh off the body. It is cruel. The outer surface of the body – flesh – is ripped off, taking away a protective layer. What is left exposed is
nerve and blood and muscle – those parts associated with feeling, with erotic feelings, with the heart and everything that makes the body alive. But this is the ultimate raw vulnerability. And – most importantly – this ripping of the flesh in the wind renders the body mute: “calling mutely through lipless mouth.” The vulnerable nervous system cannot express itself. The insides turned out cannot explain their experience. To speak requires the protective encasing of the flesh. On page 9 of “The Glass Essay”, the soul is yet mute, raw, standing in that hard wind. And the contrast between the drama of the image, its inner ferocity, and the direct statement “I am not a melodramatic person” heightens the intensity of that image. the quiet, subtle speaker yielding to a profundity of the soul’s pain is hard put, is work, painful.

It is a hellish, punishing image, returning not only to Brontë, but further evoking the *Inferno*. In Canto V, Dante describes the environment of the second circle of hell thus:

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The infernal storm, eternal in its rage,
sweeps and drives the spirits with its blast:
it whirls them, lashing them with punishment.
When they are swept back past their place of judgement,
then come the shrieks, laments, and anguished cries;
there they blaspheme God’s almighty power.
I learned that to this place of punishment
all those who sin in lust have been condemned,
those who make reason slave to appetite;
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*Inferno*, Canto V, l. 31-39, Dante trans. Mark Musa

What Dante learned, seeing damned souls during his journey, the poet of “The Glass Essay” learns, in sleep, seeing the Nudes, souls imagined. Susan Sontag, in her essay “The Aesthetics of Silence,” argued that art in our contemporary secular world is “one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project.” Observing the relationship of a Dantean image of the soul in Hell to Carson’s soul Nudes evoking imaginings of sculptural
performance provides a vivid illustration of this shift. The soul resides, its pain and relationship to art, but it is unhinged from religion. We are, however, rooted in cultural history, entwined too with Brontë as this soul-work is.

The poet-speaker is, like Bronte, a whacher. Here we see links being formed between the image of the Nude and memory, where the Nude #1 was an image of the soul, and this soul-place is stretching in the rough abyss of the memory of the erotic encounter: both the immediate post-coital memory and this staggering memory a year later.

The image of a night of orgasm and missed connections concludes.

I saw the lines harden.  
He left in the morning.

This plain language captures the starkness of the leaving. What more is there to say in the face of absence? *He left.*

It is very cold  
walking into the long scraped April wind.  
At this time of year there is no sunset  
just some movements inside the light and then a sinking away.

Past moves into present, and by this, the concluding passage of the "Whacher" section, we are convinced that Carson (and this speaker) too, is a whacher. See how the landscape, flat and unyielding, is pierced by the poet’s gaze, even as it colors her gaze with its pale light? The walking into the wind reads as literal here, though it echoes the Nude #1, standing on
the mountain facing the wind. There is a stillness, but walking into it suggests some movement, physical but also emotional, unstated.

“Fumbling”: Encountering Absent Presences

The following section of “The Glass Essay” takes place in the kitchen and, largely, in the mind of the speaker. She returns to the kitchen, walks from outside to inside. The language turns from the soul to the house. The language of the poem is attentive to the world of the kitchen, its plain lines, its familiar tread. No less attentive to the refrigerator than to the memory of the soul’s grinding pain.

“The Glass Essay” then moves into a more careful analysis of Wuthering Heights, targeting the pivotal moment in the novel when Heathcliff misses hearing the language that might – might – have prevented the unraveling of the tragedy of the novel.

Heathcliff is a pain devil.

If he had stayed in the kitchen long enough to hear the other half of Catherine’s sentence (“so he will never know how I love him”) Heathcliff would have been set free.

The reader of Wuthering Heights recognizes the frustrated disconnection of this image. The unresolved reach of feeling, in the novel, spans decades and generations. The reader is left, with Heathcliff, perhaps, to reside with the echoing refrain of what if things had been different in that moment, even as the narrative unfolds relentlessly, as in life. Even as she is digging deeper and deeper into Heathcliff’s harrowing despair and very soullessness, the
speaker is present emotionally – “not unfamiliar” – and identifying with Heathcliff. She is both a whacher, like Brontë, and the pain devil, like Heathcliff. The kitchen door, in which we just saw the speaker enter from her own northern moor, stands open.

The poem turns again to the Brontës, to women, the domestic environment, and the imagination. Where is the soul in a world of “peeling potatoes”? We see the speaker eating yogurt in the blue kitchen, dwelling in the thoughts of the pain devil, imagining Brontë’s sisters – the women in her family – their voices in the other room. And her own thoughts are interrupted.

My mother’s voice cuts across me,
from the next room where she is lying on the sofa.

Is that you dear?
Yes Ma.
Why don't you turn on a light in there?

Out the kitchen window I watch the steely April sun
jab its last cold yellow streaks
across a dirty silver sky.
Okay Ma. What’s for supper?

The interior light, turned on, will cut out this vision of the exterior April landscape. The light the mother wants turned on inside the kitchen is a light that will prevent the speaker from seeing the moor through the window outside at night. The speaker has waited to turn on the interior light. There is a reluctance, a last fleeting look at the cold, the “dirty silver sky,” as if soaking in its poetry, absorbing what the landscape offers. Then, the return to join the mother, the acquiescence.
A new element of silence is added to the environment of the earlier sections, when the father’s absence is made felt. Over the course of a six-page section entitled “Hero” – one of the longest in “The Glass Essay” – that aloneness is set off in contrast to the couple formed by the mother and father, the family unit. The centrality of the heroic figure, however, asserted by the attention paid him in this one section, the plodding detail delivered in the description of the visit to the nursing home, and the awkward title of “hero,” gather to assert a kind of absent-presence of the father across the landscape of the poem overall.

And the image of father-as-hero is also blurred as the mother is presented as Hero as well, through the image of Hero, a caged bird. The section Hero opens with an image evoking silence even as it suggests sound: the quiet sound of chewing only audible in the context of an otherwise silent environment. The daughter observes the mother’s very act of chewing in a demonstration of deep intimacy. And here, in the observation, we are returned to the figure of the speaker-as-whacher.

The poem proceeds to give a description of the father’s illness in medical terms and the development of it in his relationship with his daughter. The speaker is acutely aware that she is experiencing his illness from her own perspective – decidedly not getting inside his head. Because of the alienation of dementia, in this example relating to Alzheimer’s, it “makes sense” that we can’t get in to the mind of the other – we are always at a remove; but, in fact, this distance is present in all the relations described in the poem. The sense that “he is addressing remarks to someone in the air between us” (p. 26) is only a heightening of the already present feeling of “now and then a remark trails through the glass” (p. 2).
For the daughter, the memory of the relationship between them is more vivid than the immediate experience. Later, attention with which the poem listens to the father’s unknown language of his illness reflects a tenderness, that fierce whaching that “The Glass Essay” attributes to the imprisoned rage of Emily Brontë. We see a man imprisoned by dementia. The barrier of communication thickens impenetrably. The hero is a war veteran, trapped in body and mind, and the daughter tries to penetrate through this, yet another, glass. He searches her face for recognition, finds it.

His black grin glares once and goes out like a match.

The Hero section here ends. The section serves as sort of break in “The Glass Essay”, a swerve that moves us away from the deep intensity of the speaker on the moors, speaker wrestling with the soul, through the image specter of Emily and the hovering presence of the mother. To the hospital they go in “Hero,” a place away from the mother’s home, those
confines, to examine a kind of prison more devastating than this soul (healing) pain:

Alzheimer’s. It opens with a dream image of Brontë’s brutalized puppies:

Hot blue moonlight down the steep sky.  
I wake too fast from a cellar of hanged puppies  
with my eyes pouring into the dark.  
Fumbling

The speaker’s fumbling in the dark echoes the father’s lumbering after grapes on the previous page, grasping after something that is close at hand but hard to get. Images in “The Glass Essay” work in this way, lingering pages after they appear in the poem, returning like unfinished thoughts or a personal trope of emotional imagery that builds resonance over time.

The preceding visit to the hospital gives “The Glass Essay” a more concrete sense of chronology, of the mother and daughter moving through time and space, making it possible to imagine a progression, too, on an emotional spectrum: “It is generally anger dreams that occupy my nights now” (27). She is less nostalgic for the past.

It is generally anger dreams that occupy my nights now.  
This is not uncommon after loss of love—

blue and black and red blasting the crater open.  
I am interested in anger.  
I clamber along to find the source.

The “red blasting the crater open” gives the images of the volcano (featured on the cover of the New Directions press book, painted by Anne Carson’s own hand). The image is the hot
earth, volcanic and erupting, as a source of anger. The emotional center violently breaks forth. She describes dreams, their strange sublimity, then observes.

Every night I wake to this anger,
the soaked bed,
the hot pain box slamming me each way I move.
I want justice. Slam.

I want an explanation. Slam.
I want to curse the false friend who said I love you forever. Slam.

Here, the repetition of “Slam” creates a violence in language through this simple gesture – a physical movement – that evokes anger more vividly than the repetition of the words “angry” and “anger” (six times already appearing in this section). One swift syllable hits the page, the eye, the ear. The poem’s shift into this physicality marks an emotional shift. Here it turns to a consideration of Emily Brontë’s curses. “Emily Brontë was good at cursing./Falsity and bad love and the deadly pain of alteration are constant topics in her verse” (29). Here Carson is exploring Brontë’s anger, and through it translating her own. (It is a false translation: on the following page Carson will conclude “The vocation of anger is not mine” (30).) The abyss translation reaches its bridge across is not closed, because translation is always just that: a reach.

Through distinguishing between herself and Brontë, the speaker finds clarity. This is another exercise in reading, in recognition, in whaching, and also naming. Here, Brontë’s “anger is a puzzle,” but through puzzling over Brontë’s anger, wondering whether “to read Wuthering Heights as one thick stacked act of revenge/for all that life withheld from Emily”
Carson comes to a conclusion that, rather than being conclusive, opens the gaps of poetry, of all the incommunicable emotion that renders it meaningful. “But the poetry shows traces of a deeper explanation” (emphasis added) (30).

**Whacker of Heartache: Poetics of the Reach**

“The Glass Essay” opens with “I” and ends with “Thou.” This can be read as a reach, the very reach that marks the space between I and Thou that triangulates into the desirous tension of the poet’s communication – and communion. In Emily Brontë, the figure of Thou suggests a spiritual dimension to her thinking, and Carson stretches this relationship to define the state-of-being of any Whacker, any person attentive to “God and humans and moor wind and open night” but also to “the bars of time, which broke.” Over the course of “The Glass Essay” we see Carson (and the speaker-daughter “Carson”) whaching, too. Thou becomes a direction rather than a thing, because to be attentive is a state of being that is not static, it is a gestural movement towards. There is, in the poetry, a reach, what Carson defined as the erotic in *Eros, The Bittersweet*, that does not allow fixed answers to settle. This is part of the elusiveness of the language, the unsayability of difficult and important human depths. The section “Thou” opens with a turning away from difficulty, a kind of brushing off:

The question I am left with is the question of her loneliness.
And I prefer to put it off.
It is morning.

The poem doubles “her loneliness,” layering the mother and Emily Brontë again, because the previous section concluded in Emily Brontë’s voice (in her poetic lines) and also with
the sound of the mother shifting in sleep in the adjacent room. We are sensitive to the mother’s loneliness after reading about the visit to the father in the nursing home. But the meditative voice is mediated through Brontë.

What is “put off” is not avoided long for the poet accustomed to watching, feeling sensations of emotion through landscape. The light can be startled and startling.

Astonished light is washing over the moor from north to east.
I am walking into the light.
One way to put off loneliness is to interpose God.

Emily had a relationship on this level with someone she calls Thou. She describes Thou as awake like herself all night and full of strange power.

Here an image of triangulation is clarified: I-God-Loneliness. In the poem, she walks “into the light” and we experience both a walking away from difficult unsayable experience – the “question of loneliness” that, as is perceived, is left hovering outside answering or knowing – and a walking into, potentially, enlightenment. This visceral image of body-in-landscape triggers the metaphysical observation: “One way to put off loneliness is to interpose God.” God is associated with this approach to the light. The quick turn, in the next stanza, to Emily’s relationship with “Thou” intensifies the religious associations of the Thou relationship, but it remains – for Brontë, for the speaker, for poetry – an ambiguous one, a relationship defined not by the beingness of Thou (as God) but by the awareness it infuses in Brontë/the watcher. Thou is more significant for its impressive heightening of awareness than for what it makes aware. It is, in this, the symbol of poetry’s unsayable:
Thou woos Emily with a voice that comes out of the night wind. Thou and Emily influence one another in the darkness, playing near and far at once.

Rather than a being, Thou emphasizes the distance between them. The mystic tries to breach this gap by putting god within us, rather than both outside us spatially and temporally. But here, the gap is not bridge but seen, whached. What is most profound is that which is most inarticulatable, residing in this space between I and Thou, Emily and reader, lover and beloved, and poetry does not give voice to the silence, poetry marks it, like a gilt frame on a white wall.

A blurring of speaker and subject becomes Carson’s method, when she leaps across not blankness but a non-gap, eliding thought and overlapping subject to make I, Brontë, and Thou indistinguishable in “The Glass Essay” itself. The reach toward Thou (also a Thou reaching in, in the figure of the muse) is also a desirous impossibility, the always-other nearness that represents a grasping poetics of heartache. Yet, this grasping is also an image of connection, which is at the heart of the artistic endeavor: communication, the gift, a swelling outside of the self. Looking closely at Brontë becomes a looking more closely at the poet in “The Glass Essay”, even as thou becomes Thou.

She has reversed the roles of thou and Thou not as a display of power but to force out of herself some pity for this soul trapped in glass, which is her true creation.
The glass is a prison, “trapping” the soul, but we know that in the speaker’s kitchen “Now and then a remark trails through the glass” (2). The glass allows us to see, to see the soul and to not quite communicate clearly, muffling sound, interfering with connecting. Heathcliff, we know, suffered at the window. By writing in this other voice, Carson observes, Brontë is able to reach a different register of emotion, of pity, for the soul – the loneliness of the poet. The poem then blurs back to the self.

After meditating on Brontë’s poem about lying alone in the dark, turns this way:

Those nights lying alone
are not discontinuous with this cold hectic dawn.
It is who I am.

The loneliness of the poet visited by Thou, who comes at the saddest hour, is the same as the experience of this poet walking along this Now landscape at dawn. As “The Glass Essay” has been building a case throughout, the poet attentive to the moor and to the small buzzes accentuating silences is the poet-as-whacher, the Brontë figure, who we see has framed this in a language of I-Thou, echoing Buber.

Yet, Carson questions the sustainability of this mode. Carson questions Brontë’s whaching and imagines it “provided a shelter” (34). Indeed, Martin Buber wrote in I and Thou, asserting the strange connection between presence and absence expressed in this vocabulary, “When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation” (20). Carson attends to these relations. She distinguishes the speaker from the Brontë figure, giving flesh – in the form of the Nudes returning to
symbolize the soul and also in the fleshed image of the speaker as an erotic, sensual being – to the poem.

But for myself I do not believe this, I am not quenched— with Thou or without Thou I find no shelter.
I am my own Nude.

And Nudes have a difficult sexual destiny.
I have watched this destiny disclose itself
in its jerky passage from girl to woman to who I am now.

This is no neat triangulation, but one of unfinished corners, unresolved difficulties. The erotic is a frustrated poetics. Herein lies its pain, its poignancy, its beauty. If the “Nudes” are the soul, then the poem asserts that with attention, one might watch the development of the soul – one’s own soul – unfolding. And the language of “watching this destiny disclose itself” gives a wrenching distance, puts the watcher at a remove from an object of profound intimacy. What is the soul if it is a Nude one might watch evolve like a series of art installations? This is a gulping terror, an image that approaches the feeling of immediacy and near-paralysis of the poet/person in pain.

This paralysis is also a kind of muteness:

What is the opposite of believing in Thou—
merely not believing in Thou? No. That is too simple.
That is to prepare a misunderstanding.
I want to speak more clearly.

Perhaps the Nudes are the best way.
The best way is through the image. There is no explaining belief or disbelief. The transformation of the soul, the very soul, itself is not to be explained in language. The very idea of language, its linearity and its logic, is in impossible tension with the idea of the soul. Language can only serve the image: show the Nudes and then stand silent, as the reader looks through the glass.

Standing. Twisting. Blasted. The Nudes are cards, a deck of cards “made of flesh,” and these are “days of a woman’s life.” They are pierced. There is always violence in these images. The Nudes are gendered female or they are the blank space of a “white room” with no body, yet sensual, “a living surface, almost wet.” Women strain or are pierced. “Nude #6 I cannot remember” and in Nude #9 there is the image of a woman digging who “Into the trench she is placing small white forms, I don’t know what they are” (36). The soul, for all its revelations, is nonetheless beyond remembering, beyond fully seeing or fully telling. It is embodied and disembodied, violently pierced, cut, torn, and also a body digging, a woman pinned, a body straining to move “trying to lift her hand but cannot” (36). The images pile up in the poem like so many emotions which we are kept from at arm’s length. There is no accessing the soul, not the poet’s not our own. But we can be whachers.

By this time, midway through winter,
I had become entirely fascinated with my spiritual melodrama.
Then it stopped.

The poet is, after a series of impassioned descriptions of the Nudes – #5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 – silenced. She observes the winter snow, breaking off rooftops in April.
How slow! as it glided soundlessly past
but still—nothing. No nudes.
No Thou.

The blankness of this, after the cascade of Nudes in the poem, is abrupt, just a page later in
the poem. The images are swallowed up. The final passages of the poem become quiet.
The speaker strains for “some interior vision” but is struck by the simple mundane:

hoping to trick myself into some interior vision,

but all I saw
was the man and woman in the room across the street
making their bed and laughing.

I stopped watching.
I forgot about Nudes.
I lived my life,

which felt like a switched-off TV.

The poem concludes with a kind of slowing into quiet and out of grief, which is an image of
less whaching, less intensity. The harrowing, grasping, wind-torn images of Emily Brontë’s
moors and Carson’s Nudes drift. And this rifting is inexplicable, but observed. Nude #13
concludes “The Glass Essay”.

Nude #13 arrived when I was not watching for it.
It came at night.

Very much like Nude #1.
And yet utterly different.
I saw a high hill and on it a form shaped against hard air.

It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
but as I came closer
I saw it was a human body
trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off the bones.
And there was no pain.
The wind

was cleansing the bones.
They stood forth silver and necessary.
It was not my body, not a woman’s body, it was the body of us all.
It walked out of the light.

A year has passed, spring has returned, and the body is not healed, but stripped and strengthened. The poetry of the final lines is less powerful, less emotionally charged than that of the rest of “The Glass Essay”. The piece slides into ending, with the speaker shifting back into a daily routine where life goes less acutely observed and where the soul is universalized: “the body of us all.” The intensity is diffused as the final Nude walks “out of the light” in the last line of the poem.

There is no flip side of pain – pain is pain, and it is acute, intense, fierce, and bright. To be released from pain is not to shift to another intensity, but to disperse, even to dim. The [erotic] tension is released, the yearning desire to reach [a Thou] lets go, the hollow of the triangle collapses. This is not to be grieved. Yet, grief is the ending note of “The Glass Essay”. The overcoming of grief over the loss of Law and the pain of that emotional wound is written on the same page as the burying of Emily Brontë by her sister Charlotte. Just before the passage above, we read Charlotte’s words:

“No need now to tremble for the hard frost and the keen wind.

Emily does not feel them,”
wrote Charlotte the day after burying her sister.
Emily had shaken free.

A soul can do that.
Emily's freedom, the soul's potential, release as thudding as death. The question remains open: when do we mourn the death of the grieving soul itself? It is a grief too, as the grieving soul's whachful poetic intensity is profound liveness.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


