

APOSTROPHE, ANIMATION, AND ABORTION

BARBARA JOHNSON

The abortion issue is as alive and controversial in the body politic as it is in the academy and the courtroom.

– Jay L. Garfield, *Abortion: Moral and Legal Perspectives*

Although rhetoric can be defined as something politicians often accuse each other of, the political dimensions of the scholarly study of rhetoric have gone largely unexplored by literary critics. What, indeed, could seem more dry and apolitical than a rhetorical treatise? What could seem farther away from budgets and guerrilla warfare than a discussion of anaphora, antithesis, prolepsis, and preterition? Yet the notorious CIA manual¹ on psychological operations in guerrilla warfare ends with just such a rhetorical treatise: an appendix on techniques of oratory which lists definitions and examples for these and many other rhetorical figures. The manual is designed to set up a Machiavellian campaign of propaganda, indoctrination, and infiltration in Nicaragua, underwritten by the visible display and selective use of weapons. Shoot softly, it implies, and carry a big schtick. If rhetoric is defined as language that says one thing and means another, then the manual is in effect attempting to maximize the collusion between deviousness in language and accuracy in violence, again and again implying that targets are most effectively hit when most indirectly aimed at. Rhetoric, clearly, has everything to do with covert operations. But are the politics of violence already encoded in rhetorical figures as such? In other words, can the very essence of a political issue – an issue like, say, abortion – hinge on the structure of a figure? Is there any *inherent* connection between figurative language and questions of life and death, of who will wield and who will receive violence in a given human society?

As a way of approaching this question, I will begin in a more traditional way by discussing a rhetorical device that has come to seem almost synonymous with the lyric voice: the figure of apostrophe. In an essay in *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler indeed sees apostrophe as an embarrassingly explicit emblem of procedures inherent, but usually better hidden, in lyric poetry as such.² Apostrophe in the sense in which I will be using it involves the direct

¹ I would like to thank Tom Keenan of Yale University for bringing this text to my attention. The present essay has in fact benefited greatly from the suggestions of others, among whom I would like particularly to thank Marge Garber, Rachel Jacoff, Carolyn Williams, Helen Vendler, Steven Melville, Ted Morris, Stamos Metzidakis, Steven Ungar, and Richard Yarborough.

² Cf. also Paul de Man, in “Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory”: “Now it is certainly beyond question that the figure of address is recurrent in lyric poetry, to the point of constituting the generic definition of, at the very least, the ode (which can, in turn, be seen as paradigmatic for poetry in general)” [61].

address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker: "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being . . ." Apostrophe is thus both direct and indirect: based etymologically on the notion of turning aside, of digressing from straight speech, it manipulates the I/Thou structure of *direct* address in an indirect, fictionalized way. The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.

Baudelaire's poem "Moesta et Errabunda,"³ whose Latin title means "sad and vagabond," raises questions of rhetorical animation through several different grades of apostrophe. Inanimate objects like trains and ships or abstract entities like perfumed paradises find themselves called upon to attend to the needs of a plaintive and restless lyric speaker. Even the poem's title poses questions of life and death in linguistic terms: the fact that Baudelaire here temporarily resuscitates a dead language prefigures the poem's attempts to function as a finder of lost loves. But in the opening lines of the poem, the direct-address structure seems straightforwardly *unfigurative*: "Tell me, Agatha." This could be called a minimally fictionalized apostrophe, although that is of course its fiction. Nothing at first indicates that Agatha is any more dead, absent, or inanimate than the poet himself.

The poem's opening makes explicit the relation between direct address and the desire for the *other's* voice: "Tell me – you talk." But something strange soon happens to the face-to-face humanness of this conversation. What Agatha is supposed to talk about starts a process of dismemberment that might have something to do with a kind of reverse anthropomorphism: "Does your heart sometimes take flight?" Instead of conferring a human shape, this question starts to undo one. Then, too, why the name Agatha? Baudelaire scholars have searched in vain for a biographical referent, never identifying one, but always presuming that one exists. In the Pléiade edition of Baudelaire's complete works, a footnote sends the reader to the only other place in Baudelaire's oeuvre where the name Agathe appears – a page in his *Carnets* where he is listing debts and appointments. This would seem to indicate that Agathe was indeed a real person. What do we know about her? A footnote to the *Carnets* tells us she was probably a prostitute. Why? See the poem "Moesta et Errabunda." This is a particularly stark example of the inevitable circularity of biographical criticism.

If Agathe is finally only a proper name written on two different pages in Baudelaire, then the name itself must have a function as a name. The name is a homonym for the word "agate," a semiprecious stone. Is Agathe really a stone? Does the poem express the Orphic hope of getting a stone to talk?

In a poem about wandering, taking flight, getting away from "here," it is surprising to find that, structurally, each stanza acts out not a departure but a return to its starting point, a repetition of its first line. The poem's structure is at odds with its *apparent* theme. But we soon see that the object of the voyage is precisely to return – to return to a prior state, planted in the first stanza as virginity, in the second as motherhood (through the image of the nurse and the pun on *mer/mère*), and finally as childhood love and furtive pleasure. The voyage outward in space is a figure for the voyage backward in time. The poem's structure of address backs up, too, most explicitly in the third stanza. The cry apostrophizing train and ship to carry the speaker off leads to a seeming reprise of the opening line, but by this point the inanimate has entirely taken over: instead of addressing Agatha directly, the poem asks whether Agatha's heart ever speaks the line the poet himself has spoken four lines earlier. Agatha herself now drops out of the poem, and direct address is temporarily lost, too, in the grammar of the sentence ("*Est-il vrai que . . .*"). The poem seems to empty itself of all its human characters and voices, acting out a *loss* of animation – which is in fact its subject: the loss of childhood aliveness brought about by the passage of time. The poem thus enacts in its own temporality the loss of animation it situates in the temporality of the speaker's life.

At this point it launches into a new apostrophe, a new direct address to an abstract, lost state: "How far away you are, sweet paradise." The poem reanimates, addresses an image of fullness and wholeness and perfect correspondence ("what we love is worthy of our loves"). This height of liveliness, however, culminates strangely in an image of death. The heart that

³For complete texts of the poems under discussion, see the appendix to this article.

formerly kept trying to fly away now drowns in the moment of reaching its destination [“Où dans la volupté pure le cœur se noie!”]. There may be something to gain, therefore, by deferring arrival, as the poem next seems to do by interrupting itself before grammatically completing the fifth stanza. The poem again ceases to employ direct address and ends by asking two drawn-out, self-interrupting questions. Is that paradise now farther away than India or China? Can one call it back and animate it with a silvery voice? This last question – “Peut-on le rappeler avec des cris plaintifs / Et l’animer encor d’une voix argentine?” – is a perfect description of apostrophe itself: a trope which, by means of the silvery voice of rhetoric, calls up and animates the absent, the lost, and the dead. Apostrophe itself, then, has become not just the poem’s mode but also the poem’s theme. In other words, what the poem ends up wanting to know is not how far away childhood is, but whether its own rhetorical strategies can be effective. The final question becomes: can this gap be bridged; can this loss be healed, through language alone?

Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” which is perhaps the ultimate apostrophic poem, makes even more explicit the relation between apostrophe and animation. Shelley spends the first three stanzas demonstrating that the west wind is a figure for the power to animate: it is described as the breath of being, moving everywhere, blowing movement and energy through the world, waking it from its summer dream, parting the waters of the Atlantic, uncontrollable. Yet the wind animates by bringing death, winter, destruction. How do the rhetorical strategies of the poem carry out this program of animation through the giving of death?

The apostrophe structure is immediately foregrounded by the interjections, four times spelled “O” and four times spelled “oh.” One of the bridges this poem attempts to build is the bridge between the “O” of the pure vocative, Jakobson’s conative function, or the pure presencing of the second person, and the “oh” of pure subjectivity, Jakobson’s emotive function, or the pure presencing of the first person.

The first three stanzas are grammatical amplifications of the sentence “O thou, hear, oh, hear!” All the vivid imagery, all the picture painting, come in clauses subordinate to this obsessive direct address. But the poet addresses, gives animation, gives the capacity of responsiveness, to the wind, not in order to make it speak but in order to make it listen to him – in order to make it listen to him doing nothing but address it. It takes him three long stanzas to break out of this intense near-tautology. As the fourth stanza begins, the “I” starts to inscribe itself grammatically (but not thematically) where the “thou” has been. A power struggle starts up for control over the poem’s grammar, a struggle which mirrors the rivalry named in such lines as: “If I were now what I was then, I would ne’er have *striven* as *thus* with thee in prayer in my sore need.” This rivalry is expressed as a comparison: “less free than thou,” but then: “One *too like* thee.” What does it mean to be “too like”? Time has created a loss of similarity, a loss of animation that has made the sense of similarity even more hyperbolic. In other words, the poet, in becoming less than – less like the wind – somehow becomes more like the wind in his rebellion against the loss of likeness.

In the final stanza the speaker both inscribes and reverses the structure of apostrophe. In saying “be thou me,” he is attempting to restore metaphorical exchange and equality. If apostrophe is the giving of voice, the throwing of voice, the giving of animation, then a poet using it is always in a sense saying to the addressee, “Be thou me.” But this implies that a poet has animation to give. And *that* is what this poem is saying is not, or is no longer, the case. Shelley’s speaker’s own sense of animation is precisely what is in doubt, so that he is in effect saying to the wind, “I will animate you so that you will animate, or reanimate, me.” “Make me thy lyre”

Yet the wind, which is to give animation, is also a giver of death. The opposition between life and death has to undergo another reversal, another transvaluation. If death could somehow become a positive force for animation, then the poet would thereby create hope for his own “dead thoughts.” The animator that will blow his words around the world will also instate the power of their deadness, their deadness as power, the place of maximum potential for renewal. This is the burden of the final rhetorical question. Does death necessarily entail rebirth? If winter comes, can spring be far behind? The poem is attempting to appropriate the authority of natural logic – in which spring always does follow winter – in order to clinch the authority of cyclic reversibility for its own prophetic powers. Yet because

this clincher is expressed in the form of a rhetorical question, it expresses natural certainty by means of a linguistic device that mimics *no* natural structure and has no stable one-to-one correspondence with a meaning. The rhetorical question, in a sense, leaves the poem in a state of suspended animation. But that, according to the poem, is the state of maximum potential.

Both the Baudelaire and the Shelley, then, end with a rhetorical question that both raises and begs the question of rhetoric. It is as though the apostrophe is ultimately directed toward the reader, to whom the poem is addressing Mayor Koch's question: "How'm I doing?" What is at stake in both poems is, as we have seen, the fate of a lost child—the speaker's own former self—and the possibility of a new birth or a reanimation. In the poems that I will discuss next, these structures of apostrophe, animation, and lost life will take on a very different cast through the foregrounding of the question of motherhood and the premise that the life that is lost may be someone else's.

In Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "The Mother," the structures of address are shifting and complex. In the first line ("Abortions will not let you forget"), there is a "you" but there is no "I." Instead, the subject of the sentence is the word "abortions," which thus assumes a position of grammatical control over the poem. As entities that disallow forgetting, the abortions are not only controlling but animate and anthropomorphic, capable of treating persons as objects. While Baudelaire and Shelley addressed the anthropomorphized other in order to repossess their lost selves, Brooks is representing the self as eternally addressed and possessed by the lost, anthropomorphized other. Yet the self that is possessed here is itself already a "you," not an "I." The "you" in the opening lines can be seen as an "I" that has become alienated, distanced from itself, and combined with a generalized other, which includes and feminizes the reader of the poem. The grammatical I/Thou starting point of traditional apostrophe has been replaced by a structure in which the speaker is simultaneously eclipsed, alienated, and confused with the addressee. It is already clear that something has happened to the possibility of establishing a clear-cut distinction in this poem between subject and object, agent and victim.

The second section of the poem opens with a change in the structure of address. "I" takes up the positional place of "abortions," and there is temporarily no second person. The first sentence narrates: "I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children." What is interesting about this line is that the speaker situates the children's voices firmly in a traditional romantic locus of lyric apostrophe—the voices of the wind, Shelley's "West Wind," say, or Wordsworth's "gentle breeze."⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, in other words, is here explicitly rewriting the male lyric tradition, textually placing aborted children in the spot formerly occupied by all the dead, inanimate, or absent entities previously addressed by the lyric. And the question of animation and anthropomorphism is thereby given a new and disturbing twist. For if apostrophe is said to involve language's capacity to give life and human form to something dead or inanimate, what happens when those questions are literalized? What happens when the lyric speaker assumes responsibility for producing the death in the first place, but without being sure of the precise degree of human animation that existed in the entity killed? What is the debate over abortion about, indeed, if not the question of when, precisely, a being assumes a human form?

It is not until line 14 that Brooks's speaker actually addresses the dim killed children. And she does so not directly, but in the form of a self-quotation: "I have said." This embedding of the apostrophe appears to serve two functions here, just as it did in Baudelaire: a self-distancing function, and a foregrounding of the question of the adequacy of language. But whereas in Baudelaire the distance between the speaker and the lost childhood is what is being lamented, and a restoration of vividness and contact is what is desired, in Brooks the vividness of the contact is precisely the source of the pain. While Baudelaire suffers from the

⁴It is interesting to note that the "gentle breeze," apostrophized as "Messenger" and "Friend" in the 1805–6 *Prelude* (Book I, line 5), is, significantly, not directly addressed in the 1850 version. One might ask whether this change stands as a sign of the much-discussed waning of Wordsworth's poetic inspiration, or whether it is, rather, one of a number of strictly rhetorical shifts that give the impression of a wane, just as the shift in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry from her early impersonal poetic narratives to her more recent direct-address poems gives the impression of a politicization.

dimming of memory, Brooks suffers from an inability to forget. And while Baudelaire's speaker actively seeks a fusion between present self and lost child, Brooks's speaker is attempting to fight her way out of a state of confusion between self and other. This confusion is indicated by the shifts in the poem's structures of address. It is never clear whether the speaker sees herself as an "I" or a "you," an addressor or an addressee. The voices in the wind are not created by the lyric apostrophe; they rather initiate the need for one. The initiative of speech seems always to lie in the other. The poem continues to struggle to clarify the relation between "I" and "you," but in the end it only succeeds in expressing the inability of its language to do so. By not closing the quotation in its final line, the poem, which began by confusing the reader with the aborter, ends by implicitly including the reader among those aborted – and loved. The poem can no more distinguish between "I" and "you" than it can come up with a proper definition of life. For all the Yeatsian tripartite aphorisms about life as what is past or passing or to come, Brooks substitutes the impossible middle ground between "You were born, you had body, you died" and "It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried."

In line 28, the poem explicitly asks, "Oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?" Surrounding this question are attempts to make impossible distinctions: got/did not get, deliberate/not deliberate, dead/never made. The uncertainty of the speaker's control as a subject mirrors the uncertainty of the children's status as an object. It is interesting that the status of the human subject here hinges on the word "deliberate." The association of deliberateness with human agency has a long (and very American) history. It is deliberateness, for instance, that underlies that epic of separation and self-reliant autonomy, Thoreau's *Walden*. "I went to the woods," writes Thoreau, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" [66]. Clearly, for Thoreau, pregnancy was not an essential fact of life. Yet for him as well as for every human being that has yet existed, someone else's pregnancy is the very *first* fact of life. How might the plot of human subjectivity be reconceived (so to speak) if pregnancy rather than autonomy is what raises the question of deliberateness?

Much recent feminist work has been devoted to the task of rethinking the relations between subjectivity, autonomy, interconnectedness, responsibility, and gender. Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice* (and this focus on "voice" is not irrelevant here) studies gender differences in patterns of ethical thinking. The central ethical question analyzed by Gilligan is precisely the decision whether to have, or not to have, an abortion. The first time I read the book, this struck me as strange. Why, I wondered, would an investigation of gender differences focus on one of the questions about which an even-handed comparison of the male and the female points of view is impossible? Yet this, clearly, turns out to be the point: there is difference because it is not always possible to make symmetrical oppositions. As long as there is symmetry, one is not dealing with difference but rather with versions of the same. Gilligan's difference arises out of the impossibility of maintaining a rigorously logical binary model for ethical choices. Female logic, as she defines it, is a way of rethinking the logic of choice in a situation in which none of the choices are good. "Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate": believe that the agent is not entirely autonomous, believe that I can be subject and object of violence at the same time, believe that I have not chosen the conditions under which I must choose. As Gilligan writes of the abortion decision, "the occurrence of the dilemma itself precludes nonviolent resolution" [94]. The choice is not between violence and nonviolence, but between simple violence to a fetus and complex, less determinate violence to an involuntary mother and/or an unwanted child.

Readers of Brooks's poem have often read it as an argument against abortion. And it is certainly clear that the poem is not saying that abortion is a good thing. But to see it as making a simple case for the embryo's right to life is to assume that a woman who has chosen abortion does not have the right to mourn. It is to assume that no case for abortion can take the woman's feelings of guilt and loss into consideration, that to take those feelings into account is to deny the right to choose the act that produced them. Yet the poem makes no such claim: it attempts the impossible task of humanizing both the mother and the aborted children while presenting the inadequacy of language to resolve the dilemma without violence.

What I would like to emphasize is the way in which the poem suggests that the

arguments for and against abortion are structured through and through by the rhetorical limits and possibilities of something akin to apostrophe. The fact that apostrophe allows one to animate the inanimate, the dead, or the absent implies that whenever a being is apostrophized, it is thereby automatically animated, anthropomorphized, “person-ified.” (By the same token, the rhetoric of calling makes it difficult to tell the difference between the animate and the inanimate, as anyone with a telephone answering machine can attest.) Because of the ineradicable tendency of language to animate whatever it addresses, rhetoric itself can always have already answered “yes” to the question of whether a fetus is a human being. It is no accident that the anti-abortion film most often shown in the United States should be entitled “The Silent Scream.” By activating the imagination to believe in the anthropomorphized embryo’s mute responsiveness in exactly the same way that apostrophe does, the film (which is of course itself a highly rhetorical entity) is playing on rhetorical possibilities that are inherent in all linguistically-based modes of representation.

Yet the function of apostrophe in the Brooks poem is far from simple. If the fact that the speaker addresses the children at all makes them human, then she must pronounce herself guilty of murder – but only if she discontinues her apostrophe. As long as she addresses the children, she can keep them alive, can keep from finishing with the act of killing them. The speaker’s attempt to absolve herself of guilt depends on never forgetting, never breaking the ventriloquism of an apostrophe through which she cannot define her identity otherwise than as the mother eaten alive by the children she has never fed. Who, in the final analysis, exists by addressing whom? The children are a rhetorical extension of the mother, but she, as the poem’s title indicates, has no existence apart from her relation to them. It begins to be clear that the speaker has written herself into a poem she cannot get out of without violence. The violence she commits in the end is to her own language: as the poem ends, the vocabulary shrinks away, words are repeated, nothing but “all” rhymes with “all.” The speaker has written herself into silence. Yet hers is not the only silence in the poem: earlier she had said, “You will never . . . silence or buy with a sweet.” If sweets are for silencing, then by beginning her apostrophe, “Sweets, if I sinned . . .” the speaker is already saying that the poem, which exists to memorialize those whose lack of life makes them eternally alive, is also attempting to silence once and for all the voices of the children in the wind. It becomes impossible to tell whether language is what gives life or what kills.

*Women have said again and again “This body is my body!”
and they have reason to feel angry, reason to feel that it has been like
shouting into the wind.*

– Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”

It is interesting to note the ways in which legal and moral discussions of abortion tend to employ the same terms as those we have been using to describe the figure of apostrophe. “These disciplines [philosophy, theology, and civil and canon law] variously approached the question in terms of the point at which the embryo or fetus became ‘formed’ or recognizably human, or in terms of when a ‘person’ came into being, that is, infused with a ‘soul’ or ‘animated’” [Blackmun, *Roe vs. Wade, Abortion: Moral and Legal Perspectives*, Garfield and Hennessey, Eds. 15]. The issue of “fetal personhood” [Garfield and Hennessey, 55] is of course a way of bringing to a state of explicit uncertainty the fundamental difficulty of defining personhood in general [cf. Luker 6]. Even if the question of defining the nature of “persons” is restricted to the question of understanding what is meant by the word “person” in the United States Constitution (since the Bill of Rights guarantees the rights only of “persons”), there is not at present, and probably will never be, a stable legal definition. Existing discussions of the legality and morality of abortion almost invariably confront, leave unresolved, and detour around the question of the nature and boundaries of human life. As Justice Blackmun puts it in *Roe vs. Wade*: “We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man’s knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer” [27]. In the case of *Roe vs. Wade*, the legality of abortion is derived from the pregnant couple’s right to

privacy – an argument which, as Catherine MacKinnon argues in “Roe vs. Wade: A Study in Male Ideology” [Garfield and Hennessey 45–54], is itself problematic for women, since by protecting “privacy” the courts also protect the injustices of patriarchal sexual arrangements. When the issue is an unwanted pregnancy, some sort of privacy has already, in a sense, been invaded. In order for the personal to avoid being reduced once again to the non-political, privacy, like deliberateness, needs to be rethought in terms of sexual politics. Yet even the attempt to re-gender the issues surrounding abortion is not simple. As Kristin Luker convincingly demonstrates, the debate turns around the claims not only of woman vs. fetus or of woman vs. patriarchal state, but also of woman vs. woman:

Pro-choice and pro-life activists live in different worlds, and the scope of their lives, as both adults and children, fortifies them in their belief that their views on abortion are the more correct, more moral, and more reasonable. When added to this is the fact that should “the other side” win, one group of women will see the very real devaluation of their lives and life resources, it is not surprising that the abortion debate has generated so much heat and so little light. [Luker 215]

.....
Are pro-life activists, as they claim, actually reaching their cherished goal of “educating the public to the humanity of the unborn child?” As we begin to seek an answer, we should recall that motherhood is a topic about which people have very complicated feelings, and because abortion has become the battleground for different definitions of motherhood, neither the pro-life nor the pro-choice movement has ever been “representative” of how most Americans feel about abortion. More to the point, all our data suggest that neither of these groups will ever be able to be representative. [224, emphasis in original]

It is often said, in literary-theoretical circles, that to focus on undecidability is to be apolitical. Everything I have read about the abortion controversy in its present form in the United States leads me to suspect that, on the contrary, the undecidable *is* the political. There is politics precisely because there is undecidability.

And there is also poetry. There are striking and suggestive parallels between the “different voices” involved in the abortion debate and the shifting address-structures of poems like Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Mother.” A glance at several other poems suggests that there tends indeed to be an overdetermined relation between the theme of abortion and the problematization of structures of address. In Anne Sexton’s “The Abortion,” six 3-line stanzas narrate, in the first person, a trip to Pennsylvania where the “I” has obtained an abortion. Three times the poem is interrupted by the italicized lines:

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Like a voice-over narrator taking superegoistic control of the moral bottom line, this refrain (or “burden,” to use the archaic term for both “refrain” and “child in the womb”) puts the first-person narrator’s authority in question without necessarily constituting the voice of a separate entity. Then, in the seventh and final stanza, the poem extends and intensifies this split:

*Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.*

Self-accusing, self-interrupting, the narrating “I” turns on herself (or is it someone else?) as “you,” as “woman.” The poem’s speaker becomes as split as the two senses of the word “bleed.” Once again, “saying what one means” can only be done by ellipsis, violence, illogic, transgression, silence. The question of who is addressing whom is once again unresolved.

As we have seen, the question of “when life begins” is complicated partly because of the way in which language blurs the boundary between life and death. In “Menstruation at

Forty," Sexton sees menstruation itself as the loss of a child ("two days gone in blood") – a child that exists because it can be called:

*I was thinking of a son
You! . . .
Will you be the David or the Susan?
. . .
David! Susan! David! David!
. . .
my carrot, my cabbage,
I would have possessed you before all women,
calling your name,
calling you mine.*

The political consequences and complexities of addressing – of "calling" – are made even more explicit in a poem by Lucille Clifton entitled "The Lost Baby Poem." By choosing the word "dropped" ("i dropped your almost body down"), Clifton renders it unclear whether the child has been lost through abortion or through miscarriage. What is clear, however, is that that loss is both mourned and rationalized. The rationalization occurs through the description of a life of hardship, flight, and loss: the image of a child born into winter, slipping like ice into the hands of strangers in Canada, conflates the scene of Eliza's escape in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the exile of draft resisters during the Vietnam War. The guilt and mourning occur in the form of an imperative in which the notion of "stranger" returns in the following lines:

*if i am ever less than a mountain
for your definite brothers and sisters
. . . let black men call me stranger
always for your never named sake.*

The act of "calling" here correlates a lack of name with a loss of membership. For the sake of the one that cannot be called, the speaker invites an apostrophe that would expel *her* into otherness. The consequences of the death of a child ramify beyond the mother-child dyad to encompass the fate of an entire community. The world that has created conditions under which the loss of a baby becomes desirable must be resisted, not joined. For a black woman, the loss of a baby can always be perceived as a complicity with genocide. The black mother sees her own choice as one of being either a stranger or a rock. The humanization of the lost baby addressed by the poem is thus carried out at the cost of dehumanizing, even of rendering inanimat , the calling mother.

Yet each of these poems exists, finally, because a child does not.⁵ In Adrienne Rich's poem "To a Poet," the rivalry between poems and children is made quite explicit. The "you" in the poem is again aborted, but here it is the mother herself who could be called "dim and killed" by the fact not of abortion but of the institution of motherhood. And again, the structures of address are complex and unstable. The deadness of the "you" cannot be named: not suicide, not murder. The question of the life or death of the addressee is raised in an interesting way through Rich's rewriting of Keats's sonnet on his mortality. While Keats writes, "When I have fears that I will cease to be" ["When I Have Fears"], Rich writes "and I have fears that you will cease to be." If poetry is at stake in both intimations of mortality, what is the significance of this shift from "I" to "you"? On the one hand, the very existence of the Keats poem indicates that the pen has succeeded in gleaning something before the brain has ceased to be. No such grammatical guarantee exists for the "you." Death in the Keats poem is as much a source as it is a threat to writing. Hence, death, for Keats, could be called the mother of poetry while motherhood, for Rich, is precisely the death of poetry. The Western

⁵For additional poems dealing with the loss of babies, see the anthology *The Limits of Miracles* collected by Marion Deutsche Cohen. Sharon Dunn, editor of the *Agni Review*, told me recently that she has in fact noticed that such poems have begun to form almost a new genre.

myth of the conjunction of word and flesh implied by the word “incarnate” is undone by images of language floating and vanishing in the toilet bowl of real-flesh needs. The word is not made flesh; rather, flesh unmakes the mother-poet’s word. The difficulty of retrieving the “you” as poet is enacted by the structures of address in the following lines:

*I write this not for you
who fight to write your own
words fighting up the falls
but for another woman dumb*

In saying “I write this not for you,” it is almost as though Rich is excluding as addressee anyone who could conceivably be reading this poem. The poem is setting aside both the “I” and the “you” – the pronouns Benveniste associates with personhood – and reaches instead toward a “she,” which belongs in the category of “non-person.” The poem is thus attempting the impossible task of directly addressing not a second person but a third person – a person who, if she is reading the poem, cannot be the reader the poem has in mind. The poem is trying to include what is by its own grammar excluded from it – to animate through language the non-person, the “other woman.” Therefore, this poem, too, is bursting the limits of its own language, inscribing a logic that it itself reveals to be impossible – but necessary. Even the divorce between writing and childbearing is less absolute than it appears: in comparing the writing of words to the spawning of fish, Rich’s poem reveals itself to be trapped between the inability to combine and the inability to separate the woman’s various roles.

In each of these poems, then, a kind of competition is implicitly instated between the bearing of children and the writing of poems. Something unsettling has happened to the analogy often drawn by male poets between artistic creation and procreation. For it is not true that literature contains no examples of male pregnancy. Sir Philip Sidney, in the first sonnet from “Astrophel and Stella,” describes himself as “great with child to speak,” but the poem is ultimately produced at the expense of no literalized child. Sidney’s labor pains are smoothed away by a midwifely apostrophe (“‘Fool,” said my Muse to me, ‘look in thy heart, and write!’”) [*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1: 12–14], and by a sort of poetic Caesarian section, out springs the poem we have, in fact, already finished reading. Mallarmé, in “Don du poème,” describes himself as an enemy father seeking nourishment for his monstrous poetic child from the woman within apostrophe-shot who is busy nursing a literalized daughter. But since the woman presumably has two breasts, there seems to be enough to go around. As Shakespeare assures the fair young man, “But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice in it and in my rhyme” [*Sonnets*, 17: 13–14]. Apollinaire, in his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, depicts woman as a de-maternalized neo-Malthusian leaving the task of childbearing to a surrealistically fertile husband. But again, nothing more disturbing than Tiresian cross-dressing seems to occur. Children are alive and well, and far more numerous than ever. Indeed, in one of the dedicatory poems, Apollinaire indicates that his drama represents a return to health from the literary reign of the *poète maudit*:

*La féconde raison a jailli de ma fable,
Plus de femme stérile et non plus d’avortons . . .*

*[Fertile reason springs out of my fable,
No more sterile women, no aborted children]*

This dig at Baudelaire, among others, reminds us that in the opening poem to *Les Fleurs du Mal* (“Bénédiction”), Baudelaire represents the poet himself as an abortion *manqué*, cursed by the poisonous words of a rejecting mother. The question of the unnatural seems more closely allied with the bad mother than with the pregnant father.

Even in the seemingly more obvious parallel provided by poems written to dead children by male poets, it is not really surprising to find that the substitution of poem for child lacks the sinister undertones and disturbed address exhibited by the abortion poems we have been discussing. Ben Jonson, in “On My First Son,” calls his dead child “his best piece of poetry,” while Mallarmé, in an only semi-guilty *Aufhebung*, transfuses the dead Anatole to

the level of an idea. More recently, Jon Silkin has written movingly of the death of a handicapped child ("something like a person") as a change of silence, not a splitting of voice. And Michael Harper, in "Nightmare Begins Responsibility," stresses the powerlessness and distrust of a black father leaving his dying son to the care of a "white-doctor-who-breathed-for-him-all-night." But again, whatever the complexity of the voices in that poem, the speaker does not split self-accusingly or infra-symbiotically in the ways we have noted in the abortion/motherhood poems. While one could undoubtedly find counter-examples on both sides, it is not surprising that the substitution of art for children should not be inherently transgressive for the male poet. Men have in a sense always had no choice but to substitute something for the literal process of birth. That, at least, is the belief that has long been encoded into male poetic conventions. It is as though male writing were by nature procreative, while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal.

It is, of course, as problematic as it is tempting to draw general conclusions about differences between male and female writing on the basis of these somewhat random examples. Yet it is clear that a great many poetic effects may be colored according to *expectations* articulated through the gender of the poetic speaker. Whether or not men and women would "naturally" write differently about dead children, there is something about the connection between motherhood and death that refuses to remain comfortably and conventionally figurative. When a woman speaks about the death of children in any sense other than that of pure loss, a powerful taboo is being violated. The indistinguishability of miscarriage and abortion in the Clifton poem indeed points to the notion that any death of a child is perceived as a crime committed by the mother, something a mother ought by definition to be able to prevent. That these questions should be so inextricably connected to the figure of apostrophe, however, deserves further comment. For there may be a deeper link between motherhood and apostrophe than we have hitherto suspected.

The verbal development of the infant, according to Lacan, begins as a demand addressed to the mother, out of which the entire verbal universe is spun. Yet the mother addressed is somehow a personification, not a person – a personification of presence or absence, of Otherness itself.

Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for. It is demand of a presence or of an absence – which is what is manifested in the primordial relation to the mother, pregnant with that Other to be situated within the needs that it can satisfy. Insofar as [man's] needs are subjected to demand, they return to him alienated. This is not the effect of his real dependence . . . , but rather the turning into signifying form as such, from the fact that it is from the locus of the Other that its message is emitted. [Ecrits 286]

If demand is the originary vocative, which assures life even as it inaugurates alienation, then it is not surprising that questions of animation inhere in the rhetorical figure of apostrophe. The reversal of apostrophe we noted in the Shelley poem ("animate me") would be no reversal at all, but a reinstatement of the primal apostrophe in which, despite Lacan's disclaimer, there is precisely a link between demand and animation, between apostrophe and life-and-death dependency.⁶ If apostrophe is structured like demand, and if demand articulates the primal relation to the mother as a relation to the Other, then lyric poetry itself – summed up in the figure of apostrophe – comes to look like the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, "Mama!" The question these poems are asking, then, is what happens when the poet is speaking as a mother – a mother whose cry arises out of – and is addressed to – a dead child?

It is no wonder that the distinction between addressor and addressee should become so problematic in poems about abortion. It is also no wonder that the debate about abortion should refuse to settle into a single voice. Whether or not one has ever been a mother, everyone participating in the debate has once been a child. Rhetorical, psychoanalytical,

⁶An interesting example of a poem in which an apostrophe confers upon the total Other the authority to animate the self is Randall Jarrell's "A Sick Child," which ends: "All that I've never thought of – think of me!"

and political structures are profoundly implicated in one another. The difficulty in all three would seem to reside in the attempt to achieve a full elaboration of any discursive position other than that of child.

WORKS CITED

- Allison et al., Eds. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Apollinaire, Guillaume. "Les Mamelles de Tirésias." *L'Enchanteur pourrissant*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Pleiade, 1976.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. "The Mother." *Selected Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Clifton, Lucille. "The Lost Baby Poem." *Good News About the Earth*. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Cohen, Marion Deutsche, Ed. *The Limits of Miracles*. South Hadley, Eng.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985.
- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- de Man, Paul. "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory." *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. Ed. Hosek and Parker. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Harper, Michael. *Nightmare Begins Responsibility*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975.
- Jarrell, Randall. "A Sick Child." *The Voice that is Great within Us*. Ed. Hayden Caruth. New York: Bantam, 1970.
- Jonson, Ben. "On My First Son." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Allison et al. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Keats, John. "When I Have Fears." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Allison et al. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Trans. Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.
- Luker, Kristin. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Pléiade, 1961.
- _____. *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*. Ed. Richard. Paris: Seuil, 1961.
- Rich, Adrienne. "To a Poet." *The Dream of a Common Language*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.
- Sexton, Anne. "The Abortion." *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Shakespeare, William. *Sonnets*. Ed. Booth. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ode to the West Wind." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Allison et al. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. "Astrophel and Stella." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Allison et al. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion." *Rights, Restitution, Risk*. Ed. William Parent. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Signet, 1960.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude*. Ed. de Selincourt. London: Oxford UP, 1959.

Acknowledgments:

"The Abortion": Excerpted from THE COMPLETE POEMS by Anne Sexton, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Copyright © 1981 by Linda Gray Sexton and Loring Conant, Jr. Reprinted by permission.

"The Lost Baby Poem": Copyright © 1972 by Lucille Clifton. Used by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

"To A Poet": "To A Poet," from *The Dream of a Common Language, Poems 1974-77*, by Adrienne Rich, is used by permission of the author and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright © 1978 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Moesta et Errabunda

Dis-moi, ton coeur parfois s'envole-t-il, Agathe,
Loin du noir océan de l'immonde cité,
Vers un autre océan où la splendeur éclate,
Bleu, clair, profond, ainsi que la virginité?
Dis-moi, ton coeur parfois s'envole-t-il, Agathe?

La mer, la vaste mer, console nos labeurs!
Quel démon a doté le mer, rauque chanteuse
Qu'accompagne l'immense orgue des vents grondeurs,
De cette fonction sublime de berceuse?
La mer, la vaste mer, console nos labeurs!

Emporte-moi, wagon! enlève-moi, frégate!
Loin, loin! ici la boue est faite de nos pleurs!
– Est-il vrai que parfois le triste coeur d'Agathe
Dise: Loin des remords, des crimes, des douleurs,
Emporte-moi, wagon, enlève-moi, frégate?

Comme vous êtes loin, paradis parfumé,
Où sous un clair azur tout n'est qu'amour et joie,
Où tout ce que l'on aime est digne d'être aimé,
Où dans la volupté pure le coeur se noie!
Comme vous êtes loin, paradis parfumé!

Mais le vert paradis des amours enfantines,
Les courses, les chansons, les baisers, les bouquets,
Les violons vibrant derrière les collines,
Avec les brocs de vin, le soir, dans les bosquets,
– Mais le vert paradis des amours enfantines,

L'innocent paradis, plein de plaisirs furtifs,
Est-il déjà plus loin que l'Inde et que la Chine?
Peut-on le rappeler avec des cris plaintifs,
Et l'animer encor d'une voix argentine,
L'innocent paradis plein de plaisirs furtifs?

– Charles Baudelaire

Moesta et Errabunda

Tell me, Agatha, does your heart take flight
Far from the city's black and filthy sea
Off to another sea of splendid light,
Blue, bright, and deep as virginity?
Tell me, Agatha, does your heart take flight?

Seas, unending seas, console our trials!
What demon gave the sea this raucous voice
With organ music from the rumbling skies,
And made it play the role of sublime nurse?
Seas, unending seas, console our trials!

Carry me off, engines! lift me, bark!
Far, far away! our tears here turn to mud!
– Can it be true that sometimes Agatha's heart
Says: far from the crimes, remorse, distress, and dread
Carry me off, engines! lift me, bark!

How far away you are, sweet paradise,
Where what we love is worthy of our loves,
Where all is pleasure under azure skies,
Where hearts are drowned in pure voluptuous floods!
How far away you are, sweet paradise!

That verdant paradise of childhood loves,
The songs and games and kisses and bouquets,
The trembling violins in wooded groves,
The wine behind the hills as evening greys,
– That verdant paradise of childhood loves,

That paradise of blameless, furtive joys –
Does it lie farther off than China lies?
Can it be called back with a silvery voice
And animated again with plaintive cries,
That paradise of blameless, furtive joys?

– Trans. B. Johnson

Ode to the West Wind

1

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingéd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odors plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

2

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulcher,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapors, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!

3

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh, hear!

4

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skyey speed
Scarce seem a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

5

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

– Percy Bysshe Shelley



The Abortion

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . .
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

– Anne Sexton

The Lost Baby Poem

the time i dropped your almost body down
down to meet the waters under the city
and run one with the sewage to the sea
what did i know about waters rushing back
what did i know about drowning
or being drowned

you would have been born into winter
in the year of the disconnected gas
and no car we would have made the thin
walk over Genessee hill into the Canada wind
to watch you slip like ice into strangers' hands
you would have fallen naked as snow into winter
if you were here i could tell you these
and some other things

if i am ever less than a mountain
for your definite brothers and sisters
let the rivers pour over my head
let the sea take me for a spiller
of seas let black men call me stranger
always for your never named sake

– Lucille Clifton

To A Poet

Ice splits under the metal
shovel another day
hazed light off fogged panes
cruelty of winter landlocked your life
wrapped round you in your twenties
an old bathrobe dragged down
with milkstains tearstains dust

Scraping eggcrust from the child's
dried dish skimming the skin
from cooled milk wringing diapers
Language floats at the vanishing-point
incarnate breathes the fluorescent bulb
primary states the scarred grain of the floor
and on the ceiling in torn plaster laughs *imago*

*and I have fears that you will cease to be
before your pen has glean'd your teeming brain*

for you are not a suicide
but no-one calls this murder
Small mouths, needy, suck you: *This is love*

I write this not for you
who fight to write your own
words fighting up the falls
but for another woman dumb
with loneliness dust seeping plastic bags
with children in a house
where language floats and spins
abortion in
the bowl

– Adrienne Rich