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**‘A wordlife running from mind to mind’: Inheritance, Influence, and Tradition in  
the Poetry of Anne Stevenson**

This thesis argues that, as an American poet living variously in England, Scotland, and Wales, Anne Stevenson has had a major role in bringing together diverse literary traditions and forging a distinctive transatlantic poetic. Questions of inheritance and influence are, of course, important for any poet, but especially so for a poet of dual nationality. As the title of her 2003 collection, *A Report from the Border*, suggests, Stevenson has found her true home in the no man’s land between different cultures and traditions. Though the poet’s claim that she ‘lost any sense of belonging either to the United States or to Britain long ago’, suggests rootlessness and disenfranchisement, it is clear that she is rooted, though by no means restrictively, in both American and British poetic traditions, and is heir to the cultural and artistic inheritances of both the Old and the New worlds. It will be shown that her work ranges widely and eclectically across British and American cultural models and poetic styles, and each chapter considers a particular facet of her bi-national and bi-cultural inheritance. The first chapter explores Stevenson’s complex and ambivalent relationship with both the texts and the figures of the Romantic poets, and her development of a pragmatic romanticism that speaks to both our late philosophical scepticism and our persisting desire for affirmation. The second chapter looks at how Stevenson, a contemporary and biographer of Sylvia Plath, eschews a ‘Confessional’ poetic in favour of oblique modes of self-expression and self-examination, most notably in her book-length epistolary poem, *Correspondences* (1974). The third chapter looks at the ways in which Stevenson’s elegiac poetry, in both its echoic adherences to, and innovative departures from, the conventions of the genre, succeeds in extending and expanding that legacy bequeathed by her predecessors, carrying the elegy forward into the twenty-first century. The final chapter suggests that Stevenson’s work enthusiastically reprises persistent questions and concerns about the adequacy and inadequacy of language that we recognise from the work of earlier poets from Shakespeare and the Romantics to Wallace Stevens and Robert Graves. This thesis attempts, in its study of little-known archival material held on both sides of the Atlantic, the most comprehensive examination of her work, both creative and critical, to date.

**Eleanor Leah Spencer**

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## Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the generous support of the AHRC for both a Research Preparation Masters Award (2007-2008) and a Full Doctoral Award (2008-2011). I also wish to thank the Kennedy Trust for the award of a Frank Knox Memorial Fellowship in 2011, which allowed me to take up a Visiting Fellowship in the Department of English at Harvard University. Whilst at Harvard, I benefited greatly from the guidance of Professor Helen Vendler and Professor Stephen Burt. Further thanks are due to Professor Vendler and to Professor Homi Bhabha for allowing me to enroll on their graduate courses. I would also like to thank the staff at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard for their assistance during my research on the extensive Beecher Stowe and Perkins Gilman family papers. My gratitude is also due to John Wells and Louise Clark at Cambridge University Library for their help during my research on the Stevenson papers. My sincere thanks are due to Anne Stevenson and Peter Lucas, who have granted me full access to these normally restricted CUL MS Add. 9451 papers, and have also allowed me to quote from personal and family papers relating to *Correspondences*. Finally, I wish to thank my supervisor, Gareth Reeves, for his good-humoured and ever patient supervision and unstinting encouragement.

Material from this thesis has previously appeared in articles and reviews under the following titles:

“‘Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!’: The Endurance of John Keats in the Poetry of Anne Stevenson”, *Stet* 2 (King’s College, London. May 2012)  
<<http://www.stetjournal.org/metamorphosis/>>.

‘For a Maker’: Review of *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, ed. Angela Leighton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010) *PN Review* 204 vol.38 (March-April 2012), 72-73.

Comment [E1]: Italicised

‘Mind and Body in the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,’ *The Chadsian* (St Chad’s College, University of Durham, 2011), 18-19.

‘The mind’s harmonic mappings’: Dream States and Dreamscapes in the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,’ *Moveable Type* 6. (UCL. Autumn 2010)  
<<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english/graduate/>>.

*For L.A.S.*

... she of the pedigree  
And breed of Poseidon,  
Slicing through the breakers  
With her gold plated knees,  
Twisting up her hair  
With a Medusan gesture...



## Introduction: Descent and Dissent

In the late 1950s, Anne Stevenson fled the claustrophobic confines of her marital home with her young daughter, and took refuge with Luba Kajlannikoff, a friend of her mother, in County Clare.<sup>1</sup> Stevenson recalls:

Luba Kaftanikoff [sic] was a round little spinster, half-poet, half-white witch, who had known Yeats. She took me for a drive to see Lady Gregory's former home in Coole Park. This was where I met a white donkey and became convinced that it embodied the soul of Yeats. We communed for a while, and I came away determined that I should cut away from any life that precluded the writing of poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas the young Stevenson interpreted this encounter in quasi-mystical terms as a preternatural bequeathal of poetic purpose and potency, the mature poet recalls the grandiose propensities of her younger self with wry affection and self-deprecating humour. In the half century since this auspicious meeting, whilst Stevenson's conception of the workings of poetic influence and inheritance has become rather less otherworldly, her work has significantly 'communed' with that of her antecedents, both explicitly and obliquely.

Questions of influence and inheritance are important for any poet, but especially for a poet of dual nationality, such as the British-American Stevenson. Stevenson's pitch on Parnassus is contested or uncertain territory, as she suggests in 'Temporarily in Oxford' (1977):

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<sup>1</sup> 'Luba Kaftanikoff' is probably Luba Kajlannikoff, whose correspondence with W.B. Yeats is documented in the Richard Ellmann papers, held in the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa (Series 1: Research files: A-Z, Collection 1988-012).

<sup>2</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Autobiographical writings) 'Anne Stevenson, 1933—,' Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, vol. 9 (Detroit: Gale, 1989), 283.

Where they will bury me  
 I don't know.  
 Many places might not be  
 sorry to store me.<sup>3</sup>

**Comment [E2]:** Please see footnote 3 for addition of advisory line 'A shortened title is always used hereafter for this work.'

That the poet imagines her earthly remains 'stored' like left luggage, coupled with the word 'temporarily', suggests a life characterised by provisionality and transience, of temporary abodes and impermanent attachments. Indeed, the line 'I don't know', the tentativeness of 'might', and the awkward negative ('not be / sorry'), faintly echo another peripatetic figure, Philip Larkin's Mr Bleaney (or, rather, Mr Bleaney's anonymous successor). Stevenson's speaker seems to favour the prospect of an afterlife of dispersal in air, rather than a permanent committal (and commitment) to solid ground, musing:

if they are kind, they'll burn me  
 And send me to Vermont.

**Comment [E3]:** Changed from upper to lower case

I'd be an education for the trees  
 And would relish, really,  
 Flaring into maple each October –  
 My scarlet letter to you.

Though the speaker suggests that the American Midwest has 'right of origin', it was actually the English fens that 'bore' her. She reveals an ambivalent attitude towards her birth place ('It seems I can't get away from dampness and learning'), the word 'bore' functioning in both senses of the word. The addressee is Stevenson's partner at the time of writing, Philip Hobsbaum, and the line 'engrossed in its peat' is both a reference to

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Poems 1955-2005* (Tarsat, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2004), 61. All page numbers given for Stevenson's poems will refer to this volume, unless otherwise indicated. A shortened title is always used hereafter for this work.

burial, as we might expect, and to his taste for strongly peated Islay whisky. The speaker seems to be attached not so much to particular physical landscapes, as to the people within those landscapes. Logically extending the common metaphor of death as sleep, the various landscapes considered in this poem are figured as a series of beds:

The Midwest has right of origin.  
Already it has welcomed my mother  
to its flat sheets.

...

Your stormy north is possible.  
You will be there, engrossed in its peat.

It would be handy not  
to have to cross the whole Atlantic  
each time I wanted to  
lift up the turf and slip in beside you.

Even death, it seems, will not put an end to the trans-Atlantic crossings that have marked the poet's life. As such, the poem's opening question is never conclusively answered, as the poet rejects the notion of a final resting place in favour of a continued transoceanic post-existence. One wonders what the poet, now approaching the end of her eighth decade, would conclude were she to revisit the question.

Stevenson was born in Cambridge, England, in January, 1933, whilst her father, the American philosopher, Charles L. Stevenson, was studying under Ludwig Wittgenstein and G.E. Moore at Cambridge University. In 1934, the family moved back to America, and Stevenson spent her early years in and around the university towns of Cambridge ('the American one') and New Haven.<sup>4</sup> The peripatetic family also lived variously in

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 19 April 2012.

Berkeley and Chicago before settling in Ann Arbor when Charles took up a position at the University of Michigan in 1946. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a Humanities degree and the Major Hopwood Prize for Poetry in 1954, Stevenson was to journey to England, marrying an English childhood friend, Robin Hitchcock in Cambridge, England in 1955. In 1961, however, following the disintegration of her first marriage, Stevenson returned to America, where she embarked on a Master's Degree in English Literature under the tutelage of Donald Hall at the University of Michigan. In 1970, she was to make another transatlantic crossing, moving with her second husband, the English sinologist Mark Elvin, to Glasgow. Following stints in Oxford, Reading, and Hay-on-Wye, in 1981 Stevenson was appointed Northern Arts Fellow at the Universities of Durham and Newcastle, and made what was to become a relatively permanent home in the North-East of England, first in Langley Park, a former mining village in County Durham, and then in Durham city itself.

Her work has been published by both British and American presses, and she has received prizes and awards on both sides of the Atlantic, most notably the inaugural Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award in 2002, an award specifically for North East writers and poets, and The Neglected Masters Award by the Poetry foundation of America and Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007. Neil Astley, Stevenson's editor at Bloodaxe, suggests that 'she never quite receives her due because the American establishment regards her as a British poet, while the British think she's American.'<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Jay Parini notes that 'Americans are very suspicious of anything British when it comes to poetry. There is a sense that she has been out of the country

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Hickling, 'Border Crossings,' *The Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2004, R20.

too long.’<sup>6</sup> Stevenson seems to fall between two stools, then: she is a perpetual émigré who is too American to be embraced as a British poet, and too British to be regarded an American poet, simultaneously belonging to both nations and to neither.

Between two stools, though, is a position that Stevenson seems to be very fond of, even a position that has become necessary to her art. She says, ‘Ever since I can remember I have been aware of living at what E.M. Forster called “a slight angle” to the universe... I have always had to create my own angular environment or perish.’<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Andrew Motion observes that ‘she has never lost that sense of being on the edge of things, artistically and geographically, and maybe she needs to remain peripheral because that is where the clarity and perspective of her art come from.’<sup>8</sup> The title of her 2003 collection, *A Report from the Border*, clearly affirms the poet’s commitment to the borderlands between nations and cultures: ‘[T]hat’s the whole point about borders’, she says. ‘It’s the best place from which to be able to see both sides.’<sup>9</sup> Marginal or liminal places and spaces exert an irresistible pull on the émigré poet. Her poems often locate themselves on interstitial ground, ‘the marram-scarred, sandbitten margins’ of the beach at Carnoustie,<sup>10</sup> the ‘line between land and water’ in ‘A River’ (1969),<sup>11</sup> or on land that is abandoned, deserted, or condemned, as in ‘Demolition’ (1985) and ‘Salter’s Gate’ (1993).

Though the poet’s claim that she ‘lost any sense of belonging either to the United States or to Britain long ago’ suggests deracination and disenfranchisement, it is clear

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 47.

that she is rooted, though by no means restrictively, in both American and British culture and poetic tradition, deriving artistic nourishment from both soils.<sup>12</sup> Stevenson is heir to the cultural and artistic inheritances of both the Old and the New world. Indeed, in 'The Traveller' (1965), one of the earliest poems to be reproduced in *Poems 1955-2005*, the speaker warns that one's roots and past cannot be simply left behind:

You'd think that in this foreign place,  
More strange with every word and face,  
Where taste and touch and sight demand  
New habits of the eye and hand,  
It would be easy to repeal  
The laws by which we know and feel.

I told my head it would be so.  
I left my ghosts, I planned to go  
And lure from every parapet  
Each older, wiser one I met.  
Therefore I emptied out my skin,  
Or thought I had, to let them in.<sup>13</sup>

**Comment [E4]:** 'wider' becomes 'wiser'

But long-held 'habits of the eye and hand' are not so easily shaken off, and, despite her efforts to abandon them, the speaker's 'ghosts' become her unwelcome travel companions, stubbornly and phonetically attached to the word 'go'. The rigid iambic tetrameter, coupled with the use of tight tetrametric couplets and triplets, seems to anticipate the conclusion of this tale: 'I looked beneath my hair. I froze. / My ghosts were standing there in rows.' The repetition of short statements in the simple past tense ('I found an inn, I found a room / With casements criss-crossed like a loom') recalls Tennyson's repetitive but briskly-paced verse in 'The Lady of Shalott' ('She left the

<sup>12</sup> Rich Kelley, 'The Library of American Interviews Anne Stevenson,' *Library of America e-Newsletter* (April 2008). Accessed on 20 Aug. 2012 <[http://www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/downloads/Stevenson\\_interview.pdf](http://www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/downloads/Stevenson_interview.pdf)>.

<sup>13</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 323.

web, she left the loom, / She made three paces thro' the room, / She saw the water-lily bloom').<sup>14</sup> Like the ill-fated Lady, the speaker cannot escape the confines in which she is held, though they are confines of the mind rather than of stone and magic. Another poem from the same period, 'Nightmare in North Carolina' (1965), reprises the theme, suggesting that the shaking off of the past (or the impossibility of doing so) was a central preoccupation for Stevenson during her early years in Britain.<sup>15</sup>

Sean Pryor notes that 'Many of the poets whom she [Stevenson] cites most often as formative influences crossed the Atlantic, whether permanently or temporarily, at a critical juncture in their writing lives: T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden.'<sup>16</sup> Stevenson, then, is part of this rich tradition of trans-Atlantic émigrés in twentieth-century poetry in English, though perhaps more by fortuitous accident than by design: rejecting an interviewer's suggestion that her peripatetic lifestyle had been a deliberate poetic strategy, Stevenson admits, 'I'm afraid I attribute most of my movements back and forth across the Atlantic to the winds of passion. Having been born in Cambridge, I wanted to see what it was like after I'd graduated from Michigan, but I wouldn't have gone all that way had I not been in love with the young Englishman [her first husband, Robin Hitchcock].'<sup>17</sup> Stevenson's peripatetic lifestyle has clearly shaped her imagination and her work, though in ways that resist straightforward explanation. Stevenson acknowledges the complex relationship between her locale and her work, suggesting, 'Had I stayed in America, undoubtedly I would have been a

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<sup>14</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott,' *The Poems of Tennyson*, vol. 1, 1969, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1987), part III, lines 109-111, 393.

<sup>15</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Sean Pryor, 'Anne Stevenson and the Poetry of Place,' *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, ed. Angela Leighton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 127.

<sup>17</sup> Rich Kelley, *Library of America e-Newsletter*.

different poet. How different I can't say. It's impossible to speculate on one's alternative selves.<sup>18</sup> She writes that, 'like Elizabeth Bishop... I mostly think of poems as "being true to life"', and her poems take their impetus from events or observations in the lived experience of the poet.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, Stevenson's first collection, *Living in America* (1965), written largely during her time as an MA student at the University of Michigan, is firmly and explicitly set in the diverse landscapes and locales of America. Titles include 'Living in America', 'Harvard', 'Still Life in Utah', 'Nightmare in North Carolina', 'Ann Arbor', 'The Dear Ladies of Cincinnati', and 'Sierra Nevada'. Similarly, her 1977 collection, *Enough of Green*, written during her tenure as Fellow in Writing at Dundee University, is preoccupied with the monochromatic landscapes and seascapes of the Scottish east coast, and her 1984 illustrated volume, *Black Gate Poems*, is a poetic portrait of the former mining community of Langley Park. More recently, following her removal for part of the year to a cottage in Arddudwy, the mountainous landscapes of North Wales have provided the setting and subject for a large number of poems (mainly those in the 'Poems from Cwm Nantcol' section of *Poems 1955-2005*). Even though the poet rejects the notion of rootedness in any one particular landscape, individual poems are rooted in and emerge from specific locales. Moreover, Stevenson suggests that each landscape encourages or even demands a certain poetic temperament or voice:

After that book (*Correspondences*, published in 1974) I lived in Dundee, in Scotland. Mercifully, that was a hardening up period. The Scots are romantic but tough-minded poets, working (many of them) in a classical tradition. I began to desert my Whitmanesque ways (or Lowellesque ways, perhaps) and rethink the

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<sup>18</sup> 'An Interview with Anne Stevenson,' *Oxford Poetry* 1:2 (1983), 43-49. Repr. *Oxford Poetry* (Online Texts) Accessed 20 Aug. 2012 <[http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/texts.php?int=i2\\_annestevenson](http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/texts.php?int=i2_annestevenson)>.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 19 Sep. 2011.



problem of style. Most of the poems in *Enough of Green* are sternly Scots; while *Correspondences* is freer, more American. Later, when I was a fellow of LMH at Oxford, I began writing criticism and doing research with the result that I wrote badly. Affectedly. I've thrown most of what I wrote in Oxford away. In 1979, when I moved to Hay-on-Wye, in Wales, I loosened up again... *Minute by Glass Minute* is a romantic book, but Wales is a romantic place. I don't, of course, know Welsh, but I know enough about the language to hear its musicality.... Since then, I've moved to the Northeast, and here, I expect, the sternness will come back.<sup>20</sup>

Whether or not Stevenson's assessments of these regional characteristics are accurate, it is clear that she conceives of a strong correlation between her locale and her poetry. Had Stevenson never made her home in the UK, then, it is not only the subject matter and settings of her poems that would have been different, but also their form, tone, diction, and mood.

For Stevenson, expatriation is not only a biographical fact, but a persistent and fertile idea within her poetry, from her earliest collections to her most recent. Many poems register intense feelings of dislocation and otherness, of being simultaneously a part of, but apart from, the world around us. Often this disconnection is represented in the visual metaphor of a pane of glass, as in 'Travelling Behind Glass' (1974), 'From My Study' (1993), 'The Wrekin' (2000), and 'If I Could Paint Essences' (1982). Indeed, Jay Parini writes that the 'image of the poet observing the world through a pane of glass seems just right: Stevenson is a perpetual traveler, as if riding on a train, watching life pass through the glass.'<sup>21</sup> Whether writing about American or British landscapes, the poet retains an outsider's detachment, never allowing the permanent resident's veil of familiarity to obscure what is really there. Stevenson's habitual outsider's perspective is in evidence

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<sup>20</sup> 'An Interview with Anne Stevenson,' *Oxford Poetry*.

<sup>21</sup> Jay Parini, 'Anne Stevenson, At the Height of her Powers,' *Michigan Quarterly Review* 40:4 (Fall 2001), 745.

in a relatively early poem, 'England' (1969), where her incisive gaze makes it clear that she is neither a wistful tourist, 'mesmerised by the sun', nor a permanent resident, dully accustomed to 'the endless / Identical pavements'.<sup>22</sup> It is her willingness to acknowledge the 'stinginess of England' that marks her out as not wholly American, and her ability to see the rare moments of beauty in a post-industrial or urban landscape that marks her out as not wholly British. She aligns herself neither with the 'Americans [who] like England to live in her cameo', nor with the British. 'Someone must live in the stunted houses behind the stucco. / Someone must feed from the tiny sick shops', the speaker reasons, but being an outsider, she cannot guess who those 'someones' might be. 'Ann Arbor' (1965), subtitled 'A Profile', is ostensibly an exploration of the city where Stevenson grew up, but the poem is written from a sociologist's dispassionate perspective. Observed from a safe distance, the inhabitants are reduced to stereotypes or stock characters: 'driven from their garrets, / thin graduate students gripe in the beer joints', 'The women who do not run for alderman / paint pictures, write poetry or give expensive parties'.<sup>23</sup>

As Sean Pryor notes, the most profound displacement in Stevenson's work, though, is not 'the displacement felt by Anne Stevenson in Ann Arbor, nor by an American in Scotland, nor even by a representative motorist on the A1 from Edinburgh to London', but the inveterate sense of peripateticism we experience, but seldom articulate, as transitory occupants of an indifferent material world.<sup>24</sup> It is this fundamental, unassailable not-at-homeness that underlies each anecdotal evocation of homelessness or deracination.

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<sup>22</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Pryor, 'Anne Stevenson and the Poetry of Place,' 138.

Whilst the landscapes that provide setting and impetus for some of her poems may be British, the very way in which Stevenson apprehends and engages with the landscape around her is, she suggests, distinctly American. One of the most characteristic features of her poetry is her ability to hold in fine balance an engagement with both the here and now and the dizzying sweep of deep time. Landscapes are geological first and last: human habitations and concerns are ultimately as inconsequential as ‘a tissue dropped on Everest’.<sup>25</sup> Deep time – a comprehension of our human dramas played out against an indifferent geological landscape, billions of years in the making – is an unwieldy concept, but one that proves to be curiously empowering and enlivening for Stevenson. In ‘The Wrekin’ (2000), the mountain visible from the poet-speaker’s window is malleable to her imagination (‘I examine a homely shape / slumped in its shell’), but also immoveable, impervious to centuries of human habits and habitations (‘How long has the mountain been an eye / fixed above the human flow, / constant through continual change?’).<sup>26</sup> Human habitations become unstable, flickering, almost unreal in this long view. In ‘Pennine’ (1982), the speaker recounts how, ‘Randomly, fells erupt in armoured cliffs / That might be houses - might, in this cloud, be / Stack, grit, slag, moss, a memory of mills.’<sup>27</sup> This insistence on a long geological perspective is, she ventures, a peculiarly American inheritance, one that is shared with Charles Olsen and Gary Snyder:

Poets in America[,] men and women, feel they have a special relationship with Nature which is geographical, geological, even astronomical, and only

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<sup>25</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Stone Milk* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2007), 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 83.

secondarily social or historical. Culture in America is[,] after all, only three or four hundred years old.<sup>28</sup>

As Pryor notes, though, it is not in the spectacular landscapes of America, but in the rugged natural landscapes of Britain – North Wales, the North East of England, and Scotland – that Stevenson’s preoccupation with the long timescale has found its most fertile ground. In a 1996 essay, Stevenson writes, ‘I am never in Wales without being conscious of geological antiquity; of eroded mountains sliced and furrowed and gauged by glaciers departed only yesterday, of the thinness of the soil and the precarious nature of the life it supports.’<sup>29</sup> Pryor suggests that ‘in poem after poem, Stevenson proves fascinated both by the “free-fall” into deep time and by the search for some common ground.’<sup>30</sup> Taking this long geological perspective enables the poet to overlook comparatively recent artificial divisions between territories, peoples, and cultures. As ‘Forgotten of the Foot’ (2005), suggests, we can all, regardless of nationality or cultural dissimilarity, recognise our common origins and shared inheritance in the ‘carboniferous shelf – / That was life before *our* animals, / With trilobite and coelacanth’ [*italics mine*].<sup>31</sup>

Aside from the American fascination with deep time, Stevenson has her own characteristically firm views on what characterizes the American and British poetic temperament. ‘The danger for English poets lies in a kind of Edwardian wistfulness – or in cleverness’, she ventures. ‘Shy of emotion, the English back away into description or

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<sup>28</sup> Oddly, given her long-sightedness in other respects, Stevenson’s conception of ‘culture in America’ is likely, in its apparent disregard of Native peoples, to strike the contemporary reader as unfashionably myopic. CUL MS Add. 9541(Prose) Typewritten draft, ‘Contemporary American Poetry’ (undated).

<sup>29</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘The Only Green in the Jungle,’ in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), 44-66, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Pryor, ‘Anne Stevenson and the Poetry of Place,’ 143.

<sup>31</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 86.

wit. The hazard for Americans, of course, is over emotion. And excessive, boring egotism.<sup>32</sup> The poet, then, must negotiate a middle way between the Scylla of English ‘cleverness’ and the Charybdis of American ‘egotism’. Indeed, Stevenson writes, ‘I rarely write a poem that is wholly idea... On the other hand, I almost never simply describe or emote.’<sup>33</sup> Stevenson conceives of herself as an heir to both British and American traditions, concluding, ‘I suppose I work in both traditions and inherit the weaknesses (and I hope some of the strengths) of each. I try to keep an open mind and write like myself.’<sup>34</sup> It is this determination to ‘write like myself’ that is perhaps her most American trait. What is at the heart of American poetry, she suggests, is self-determination: ‘What’s important is not whether you’re formal or “free”, but whether she succeeds in doing what you set out to do. Authenticity and energy are what matter.’<sup>35</sup>

If there are indeed discernibly British and American traditions or lines of inheritance, then they are not disconnected or discrete. In a 1998 essay, she writes:

The English... tradition... extends back to Greek metrics and Latin hexameters on one hand and Anglo-Saxon kennings on the other. It embraces the Medieval poets (those who wrote in Latin and those who wrote in Middle English), then Chaucer, then the Elizabethans and the metaphysicals... So by the time we arrive at the formal metrics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we are looking back over a long, nourishing heritage of variant patterns – and that before we even approach the Americans and the influence that, after Whitman, American English has wielded everywhere in the world.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> ‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson,’ *Oxford Poetry*.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ *Poetry Wales* 31 (April 1996), rpr. in Anne Stevenson, *Between the Iceberg and the Ship: Selected Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 181.

<sup>34</sup> ‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson,’ *Oxford Poetry*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘The Trouble with a Word like Formalism,’ *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), rpr. in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 108.

Stevenson clearly conceives of American poetic tradition, not as a separate enterprise from European tradition, but as an extension and continuation of it.

Gerald Dawe notes that, 'unlike statues, monuments, battle-sites or names of streets, a poetic tradition makes its presence felt in precariously obscure and intangible ways.'<sup>37</sup>

If it is difficult to identify a poetic tradition, then the American privileging of 'authenticity' and creative autonomy means that it is more than usually difficult to define a poetic tradition in America. It is almost a commonplace to think of America as a nation without tradition, or at least without tradition in the European sense. Stephen Fredman suggests that, 'constructed in the Renaissance and launched by the concerted winds of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, America represents a thoroughgoing embodiment of the spirit of antitraditionalism.'<sup>38</sup>

Paradoxically, it is this antitraditionalism that is 'the only privileged tradition' in America.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he notes that, 'Americans feel a fundamental distrust of tradition and authority', and therefore occupy 'an uneasy position, which might be called self-estrangement... not from particular works thought of as traditional but from the grounding function of tradition itself.'<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Harold Bloom suggests that in the 'great triad' of Emerson's writings ('The Divinity School Address', 'The American Scholar' and 'Self-Reliance') and later in the work of 'Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, and quite directly again in Robinson and Frost, in the architectural writings of Sullivan and Wright, in the Essays Before a Sonata of Charles Ives', we see a privileging of originality and a distaste for

**Comment [E5]:** 'Olsen' becomes 'Olson' in n.38

<sup>37</sup> Gerald Dawe, 'An Absence of Influence: Three Modernist Poets,' *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, eds. Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1989), 119.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), vii.

<sup>39</sup> Fredman, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Fredman, 10.

the very idea of influence.<sup>41</sup> ‘This distaste’, he writes, ‘is a proper characteristic of all Modern (meaning post-Enlightenment or Romantic) poets, but peculiarly so of American poets coming after ... Emerson.’<sup>42</sup>

This ‘self-estrangement’ from the burden of anteriority, the disassociation from the historic past, results in an Adamic state of newness. America as a nation was founded on the (ultimately unrealistic) desire to be rid of all things European. R.W. B. Lewis notes that ‘following the end of the War of 1812, an air of hopefulness became apparent in American life and letters.’<sup>43</sup> Patriots who had fought for political independence now turned to the task of encouraging cultural and artistic independence, too. However, the entrenched vestiges of their European heritage – ‘institutions, social practices, literary forms, and religious doctrines’ – presented an obstacle to ‘the fresh creative task at hand’.<sup>44</sup> Lewis notes that ‘more vehement Patriots even regretted that Americans were forced to communicate with one another in an old, inherited language.’<sup>45</sup> An 1844 short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, ‘Earth’s Holocaust’, imagines a tremendous bonfire, fed with the ‘outworn trumpery’ of the old country. As the fire burns ever higher one character declares, ‘Now we shall get rid of the weight of dead men’s thoughts.’ The story is a fantasy, yet as Fredman points out, Hawthorne succeeds in catching ‘very accurately... in a fable the prevailing impulse to escape from every existing mode of organizing and explaining experience, in order to confront life in entirely original terms.’<sup>46</sup> This desire to expunge without exception all traces of the old country was not

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<sup>41</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 162.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Fredman, 14.

universal, though, and Hawthorne's story derives its central tension from the conflicting attitudes of those who wish to purge with fire, and those who wish to weed their patch more discriminately.

Stevenson's literary education, though, bore no traces of this anti-European sentiment, and was steeped in the old European tradition:

Like many poets, I began to write verse when I was introduced to Shakespeare and the English Romantics as a child. I have no doubt that it was rhythm, the stressed, unstressed undulations of the iambic line, that first bewitched me. In those pre-television days, my parents often spent companionable evenings reading aloud to us children and to each other. Mother read history and fiction; my father read poetry, and we all took parts in the more accessible of Shakespeare's comedies. I especially remember my father, an amateur musician, reading with fervor Scott's *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman" and "Sorhab and Rustum", Browning's "My Last Duchess", [and] Lord Macaulay's "Horatius at the Bridge".<sup>47</sup>

The young poet had no sense then, as now, that these dead, white, male, European writers should not speak as suggestively to her – a young girl growing up in the American Midwest – as to another European, male author. That the work of these dead white males continues to be a source of inspiration rather than of oppression is suggested by the poet's keeping of what she calls 'The Ongoing Anthology': whenever I find a poem I admire, whether in a book or magazine', she explains, 'I copy it on my word processor, print it out, and collect it in a loose-leaf folder... Leafing through it, I see there is a good deal of Shakespeare, Herbert, Blake – it's nothing if not canonical!'<sup>48</sup> As such, she is critical of that American poetry that seeks to expunge all traces of European tradition: in a 1975 review she acidly observes that the poetry of the

<sup>47</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'A Chev'ril Glove,' *The Poet's Voice and Craft*, ed. C.B. McCully (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994), rpr. in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 121.

<sup>48</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 184.



day suggests that ‘there is no need any longer to wrestle with meter, rhyme, form or anything “dead” like that which might suggest that American poetry has anything to do with the English tradition.’<sup>49</sup>

According to certain feminist and post-colonial critics, Stevenson is excluded from this old European tradition on two counts; first, on account of being an American, and second, on account of being a woman. In 1993, Sharon Bryan asked a number of female poets to comment on their relationship to the supposedly male-dominated ‘tradition’. Stevenson writes in response:

You have asked me to comment on my feelings about what you see as a predominantly male tradition in English/American literature. Citing a passage from T.S. Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ you specifically ask if, as a woman writer, I feel left out. My answer is no... Although everyone knows that women have had a tough time finding acceptance in almost all other professions and fields of study, it seems to me difficult to prove that in Britain and America over the last two hundred years women have not held their own as writers.<sup>50</sup>

Stevenson refuses to cast herself, or be cast by others, as the dispossessed victim of an exclusive patriarchal tradition. Indeed, that the soul of Yeats, embodied in a white donkey, should alert her to her pre-ordained poetic purpose, suggests that Stevenson considers herself a no less worthy and well-placed inheritor of that tradition than any male counterpart. In two early unpublished poems, ‘Ars Poetica Feminea’ and ‘~~She~~ Sappho Lusts for the Muse’, Stevenson boldly inverts the traditional male poet / female muse relationship, imagining in the former a distinctly unglamorous domestic set-up

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<sup>49</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Reviews) Typewritten draft, ‘Review: *The American Poetry Anthology*, edited by Daniel Halpern: Equinox Books / Published by Avon, New York, 1975.’

<sup>50</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘Some Observations on Women and Tradition (A Letter to Sharon Bryan),’ *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, ed. Sharon Bryan (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1993), rpr. in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 22.

between a female poet and her male muse.<sup>51</sup> In a 1992 essay, 'Inside and Outside History' (originally published as a response to Eavan Boland's 1990 collection *Outside History*), Stevenson criticises the tendency of contemporary female poets to vociferously reject a tradition from which they (erroneously, she suggests) assume they are excluded. In opposition to Boland's claim that there are dispiritingly few women poets in Irish history, Stevenson suggests that Boland's 'discontent is of comparatively recent descent', and that 'it is a point of fact that women of spirit and gumption were not only roundly represented in the Gaelic tradition ... [but] were writers in Irish themselves.'<sup>52</sup>

Like T.S. Eliot, Stevenson is of the opinion that tradition is not passively inherited, transmitted like a miasma in the air to all those in a given place at a given time, but obtained through conscious intent and effort. Tradition, as Eliot argues, 'cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.'<sup>53</sup> The American poet Marilyn Nelson inveighs against those who exclude *themselves* from a certain tradition:

Many of my people – blacks, women – argue that we have no place in the tradition, because it excludes us. One of their problems with tradition is that they believe we're born into tradition the way we're born into gender and race. If your parents were Serbs, you're a Serb, and Serbs hate Croats. If you're a Huto, you hate the Tutsi. It's one warlord against another out there, folks, and some of us want to play Hatfields and McCoys in the literary world, too. [They believe that] If you're a new formalist, you don't read free verse. If you're an Aframerican woman, you don't read Paul Celan. Elizabeth Barrett Browning says nothing to you about love if you're gay; *Paradise Lost* is an offense to womyn [sic]... They think tradition is tribal and exclusive.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten drafts, 'Ars Poetica Feminea,' undated. CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, '~~She~~ Sappho Lusts for the Muse,' undated.

<sup>52</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Inside and Outside History,' *PN Review* 18 (1992), rpr. in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 79, 78.

<sup>53</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. and intro. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 38.

<sup>54</sup> Marilyn Nelson, 'Owning the Masters,' *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, 13.

Belonging to a certain tradition, then, becomes not a matter of chance – of being a man rather than a woman, of being white rather than black, of being European rather than American – but of choice. It is not a birthright, but the result of a conscious decision to undertake the ‘great labour’ of serious, scholarly reading. As Stevenson suggests in her manifesto poem, ‘Making Poetry’ (1985), ‘You have to inhabit poetry / if you want to make it.’<sup>55</sup> No poet automatically ‘inhabits’ poetry: one makes a conscious decision to ‘be in the habit of, to wear / words’. Nelson gives the examples of Zora Neale Thurston, who describes as a high point of her youth her enraptured reading of *Paradise Lost*, and Maya Angelou who declares that ‘Shakespeare wrote for me, a poor black girl on the dirt roads of Arkansas.’<sup>56</sup> These writers refuse to cast themselves as the disenfranchised victims of a white patriarchal literary elite. Stevenson suggests in ‘Inside and Outside History’ that Boland has a choice: she can freely conceive of herself as either ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ history and tradition. Marilyn Hacker argues, ‘the language we use was as much created by women as by men... We’ve got to reclaim the language, demand acknowledgment for our part in it, and proceed from there.’<sup>57</sup> Like Hacker, and unlike Boland, then, Stevenson chooses to see herself as ‘inside’ rather than ‘outside’ history and tradition.

That Stevenson has never felt herself to be ‘outside’ the dominant poetic tradition means that she has never felt the need to align and ally herself with a separate women’s counter-tradition. Indeed, whilst Stevenson’s poetry has often concerned itself with

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<sup>55</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Marilyn Nelson, ‘Owning the Masters,’ 13.

<sup>57</sup> Karla Hammond, ‘Interview with Marilyn Hacker,’ *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 5 (Fall 1980), 22.

uniquely female experience and struggle (for example, 'The Victory' (1969), *Correspondences* (1974), 'The Myth of Medea' (2007)), she is one of a number of contemporary female poets who vigorously resist being either pigeonholed or promoted on account of their gender. Although David Fuller declares that Stevenson 'is far from wanting to disown being in a tradition of writing as a woman', her prose suggests otherwise, evincing a long-held aversion to the very idea of 'writing as a woman'.<sup>58</sup> In a 1979 essay, titled 'Writing as a Woman', the poet insists both that 'A good writer's imagination should be bisexual or transsexual', and that 'women and men writers in the West, in the later twentieth century, share a common consciousness'.<sup>59</sup> In a later prose piece she suggests, 'when a poet or novelist is "really writing", as Sylvia Plath put it – slipping perhaps into sudden ease after a long struggle with the extraneous – then the whole labeling apparatus of criticism, ideology, competition, and self-consciousness becomes irrelevant'.<sup>60</sup> 'Real writing', to Stevenson's mind, is done not as a woman or a man, but as a creative consciousness that transcends divisions of gender. For a female poet to accept, or appear to accept, the label of 'woman poet' is to be 'complicitous' in the wholesale consignment of female poets 'to the ghetto'.<sup>61</sup>

Jane Dowson claims that Stevenson's refusal to promote herself as a 'woman poet' and her distaste for positive discrimination ('It seems to me as ridiculous to study women's bad poetry as men's',<sup>62</sup>) are symptomatic of a peculiarly feminine brand of Bloom's anxiety of influence: what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar term the 'female

<sup>58</sup> David Fuller, Oration delivered at Congregation for Stevenson's Honorary Degree, Durham University, 1 July 2005 < [http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ceremonies/congregation/stevenson\\_anne.pdf](http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ceremonies/congregation/stevenson_anne.pdf) >.

<sup>59</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Writing as a Woman,' *Women Writing and Women Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1979), rpr. *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 20.

<sup>60</sup> 'Some Observations on Women and Tradition (A Letter to Sharon Bryan),' 28.

<sup>61</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Outside Histrionics: Answering Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill,' *PN Review* 91 (1993), rpr. in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 182.

affiliation complex'.<sup>63</sup> Dowson notes that many twentieth-century women poets on both sides of the Atlantic have vociferously dissociated themselves from, and disavowed, a separate women's tradition:

[t]he female affiliation complex is evident throughout this century and is persistent. It explains why successful women like Elizabeth Bishop, Kathleen Raine, Laura Riding, and Sheenagh Pugh refuse to be included in women-only anthologies; it explains why Anne Stevenson exclaims, 'to hell with a conglomerate women's tradition' (Stevenson, 1992: 31) and why Carol Ann Duffy hates the term 'woman poet'. The female affiliation complex is discernible over and over again when women write about one another. Linda France, Fleur Adcock and Maura Dooley express regrets at risking 'ghettoising and separatism' (France, 1993: 14) by editing anthologies of women's poetry[.]<sup>64</sup>

Dowson suggests that by 'denying or opposing the perceived femininity or feminist preoccupations which allegedly brought women poets a bad name', poets like Stevenson aim to dissociate themselves from the 'women poets', and so 'shore up [their] own credentials as one of the boys, clever and worthy of an enduring place in history'.<sup>65</sup>

The notion of poetic influence and affinity has long been a vexed one for both male and female poets. For many, the word 'influence' seems to connote slavish imitation or a lack of originality. In an interview Stevenson declares, 'I don't like the word 'influence' - as if you couldn't do anything without a crutch',<sup>66</sup> and elsewhere, 'I don't much like the critics' pet term "influence" - as if poets alone could influence poets.'<sup>67</sup> The negative connotations that the word 'influence' has seemingly accrued perhaps stem from the

<sup>63</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Vol. 1: *The War of the Words* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 165-224.

<sup>64</sup> Dowson, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Jane Dowson, "'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things': Contemporary Women Poets and the Female Affiliation Complex," *Feminist Review* 62, Contemporary Women Poets (Summer, 1999), 7.

<sup>66</sup> 'An Interview with Anne Stevenson,' *Oxford Poetry*.

<sup>67</sup> Rich Kelley, *Library of America e-Newsletter*.

prominent but controversial model of influence posited by Harold Bloom's seminal 1979 book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom famously suggests that the dynamic of influence between older and younger or earlier and later poet is characterised by negative emotions – competitiveness, resentment, and even aggression. According to Bloom, the work of one's elders is not enabling and energising but oppressive: indeed, he suggests that 'somewhere in the heart of each new poet there is hidden the dark wish that the libraries be burned in some new Alexandrian conflagration, that the imagination might be liberated from the greatness and oppressive power of its own dead champions.'<sup>68</sup> Bloom bases his paradigm on the Freudian family romance, figuring the earlier poet as a father-figure whose poetic achievement and potency, the younger poet – the ambitious son – must outstrip or overthrow in order to gain approbation as a 'strong poet'. The younger poet can clear an 'imaginative space' in which to assert himself only through misreading and misinterpreting the work of his predecessor.<sup>69</sup> The 'strong poet' will develop his or her inimitable voice; the weak poet will merely imitate his elders. Whereas to influence others is 'strong', to be influenced oneself is 'weak': 'it does happen that one poet influences another, or more precisely, that one poet's poems influence the poems of another, through a generosity of the spirit... Where generosity is involved, the poets influenced are minor or weaker'.<sup>70</sup>

In the decades since Bloom's book was published, critics have taken issue with his model, largely for what they regard as its narrow field of application. Bloom's paradigm

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<sup>68</sup> Harold Bloom, 'Keats and the Embarrassments of Poetic Tradition,' *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. F.W. Hilles and H. Bloom, rpr. in Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 131.

<sup>69</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 1973. Second edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 30.

of accomplished fathers and the ambitious sons who aim to surpass them is, they argue, not applicable outside of the white, western male dominant tradition with which Bloom exclusively concerns himself. Feminist critics, for example, Marianne Hirsch, have argued that Bloom's phallogentric paradigm of influence is not applicable to the dynamics of influence between female poets, and that we must 'invent new theoretical frameworks that allow us... to truly go beyond patriarchal myths and perceptions.'<sup>71</sup> Betsy Erkkila follows Bloom's lead in basing her female-centric model on the Freudian family romance, but suggests that because the 'early identification of mother and daughter creates more relational capacities and more fluid ego boundaries among women', women poets in fact invert the competitive or antagonistic dynamic of male relationships, in seeking to define themselves in relation to, rather in reaction against, their literary mothers.<sup>72</sup>

As Stevenson's poems of maternity and motherhood, for example, 'Poem for a Daughter' (1982), 'To My Daughter in a Red Coat' (1965), and 'Demeter and her Daughter' (2012), illustrate, though, the mother-daughter relationship is often as fraught and charged as that between father and son. As such, Gilbert and Gubar propose a less romantic view of female literary relationships. In the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Barrett Browning lamented, 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none.'<sup>73</sup> This seeming absence of female precursors resulted in women writers suffering not an 'anxiety of influence', but an 'anxiety of authorship', a far more debilitating anxiety as

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<sup>71</sup> Marianne Hirsch, 'Mothers and Daughters,' *Signs* 7 (1981), 221.

<sup>72</sup> Betsy Erkkila, 'Dickinson and Rich: Toward a Theory of Female Poetic Influence,' *American Literature* 56 (Dec., 1984), 546.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic G. Kenyon, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 1:231-32.

to whether, as women, they were able to (or were permitted to) write at all.<sup>74</sup> Twentieth-century female poets, though, found themselves ‘for the first time in possession of a uniquely female literary history’, and according to Gilbert and Gubar ‘at last [began] to experience an anxiety about the binds and burdens of the past that can be understood in terms comparable to (if different from) those Harold Bloom extrapolates from Freud’s writings about psychosexual development.’<sup>75</sup> If this first generation of precursors are trailblazers, opening up the way for a younger generation to maximize their creative potential, they are also casting long shadows from which the younger poets must somehow emerge. Gilbert and Gubar conceive of ‘a paradigm of ambivalent affiliation, a construct which dramatizes women’s intertwined attitudes of anxiety and exuberance about creativity.’<sup>76</sup> According to ‘the female affiliation complex’, the young female poet feels both indebted to the struggle of her literary foremother for creative recognition, and compelled to eclipse her achievement:

Far from being unequivocally energised by the example of her female precursor, then, the literary daughter finds herself in a double bind. If she simply admires her aesthetic foremother, she is diminished by the originatory power she locates in that ancestress; but, if she struggles to attain the power she identifies with the mother’s autonomy, she must confront what Emily Dickinson, speaking of George Eliot, called the ‘Losses [that] make our Gains ashamed’ – that is, the peril of the mother’s position in patriarchy, the loss of male emotional approval paradoxically associated with male approbation, as well as intimacy with the mother that would accompany daughterly subordination.<sup>77</sup>

Clearly, any single model of influence cannot encompass the wide variety of different dynamics at work between male or female poets. A poet may well experience markedly

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<sup>74</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 49.

<sup>75</sup>*No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 167.

<sup>76</sup>*No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 170.

<sup>77</sup>*No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 195.



different relationships with each of his or her predecessors. Stevenson, for example, has documented in both her poetry and her prose her ambivalent relationship with the work and the figure of her dark double, Sylvia Plath, yet a comparable disquiet is nowhere in evidence in her relationship with Elizabeth Bishop. Bloom's notion that the younger poet can clear an 'imaginative space' in which to assert himself only by misreading and misinterpreting the work of his predecessor offers us a useful means of unraveling Stevenson's complex relationship with the Romantic poets (both the Romantics proper and the despairing late Romantic Plath), yet sheds little light on Stevenson's engagement with other figures.

Stevenson's antecedents are present within her work in a number of different ways. In several poems, the poet explicitly declares her indebtedness to an earlier text. 'Fool's Gold' (2005), for example, which the poet explains is 'Modelled on Shakespeare's sonnet, no. 20, but written, of course, to be spoken by a modern young man', could not and would not have been written but for the existence of Shakespeare's original sonnet.<sup>78</sup> Then, there are those poems that self-consciously and explicitly borrow phrases from other poems or imitate another poet's voice, often in the context of honouring their author, for example in 'Invocation and Interruption' (2000), an elegy for Ted Hughes. Similarly, *A Lament for the Makers* (2006) foregrounds its myriad borrowings, both verbatim and imprecise alike. In the second section of Part One we find, in quick succession, a summoning of Shelley's 'wild west wind', an italicised quotation from Thomas Hardy's 'During Wind and Rain', a plaintive portion of Book II of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, and an anonymous thirteenth-century Latin tercet:

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<sup>78</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 341.

'O wild west wind' is layered  
thick with voices.  
*How the sick leaves reel down in throngs.*

*In wrothe winde leves  
Laucen fro the linde  
And lighten on the ground.*

*De ramis cadunt folia  
nam viror totus periit,  
iam calor liquid omni...*

The same and more.  
Most of what our bones know  
has been said before.<sup>79</sup>

In *A Lament for the Makers*, poets are present both in these disembodied, often unannounced quotations from their work, and as explicitly identified quasi-physical presences: in the second section of Part Two, the 'shades' of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes bowl past the startled Stevenson on their way to a reading, in death as in life.

Harder to place (or trace), though, are those poems which declare or foreground no particular debts yet take their place, by dint of their formal features or subject matter, alongside earlier poems. 'Washing my Hair' (2003), for example, is a poem in a long lineage of soul and body poems, including those by Marvell and Yeats, yet the influence was, the poet suggests, an 'unconscious', rather than a cognizant, one:

It's not strange that you mention Andrew Marvell, and of course I've known his Dialogue all my life, but I didn't think of it when I was writing the poem. I conceived it, in fact, in the shower, after a fight with the taps! I didn't even think of 'the mind body problem' the philosophers spend so much time discussing. But, of course, the Marvell must have been there in my unconscious.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Anne Stevenson, *A Lament for the Makers* (Thame, Oxon: Clutag Press, 2006), I.ii.

<sup>80</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 19 September 2011.

Stevenson's work reveals an enduring preoccupation with her relation to these 'dead poets and artists', and an acute sensitivity to the ways in which they 'assert their immortality' within her work.<sup>81</sup> This preoccupation manifests itself most overtly in 'Making Poetry' (1985), 'The Fiction Makers' (1985) and 'Lament for the Makers' (2006).

'Making Poetry' (1985), as the opening poem in *Poems 1995-2005*, functions as a poetic manifesto of sorts, revealing 'in the plainest light' Stevenson's awareness of her place within this rich poetic tradition.<sup>82</sup> The poem is structured as a dialogue, perhaps between a student and a teacher, and was originally titled 'Poetry Lesson', reflecting Stevenson's belief that the 'making' of poetry is a subtle art that must be learned and practiced. Poetry is revealed as something that is not merely made, but inhabited and, most importantly, inherited: 'a wordlife running from mind to mind / through the washed rooms of the simple senses'. It is Stevenson's task, as temporary custodian of that vibrant 'wordlife', to make what is 'familiar... rare', to take those words and forms that have been made, inhabited, and inherited by countless others before her, and make them somehow new and 'surprising'. The idea of poets and artists reworking the material bequeathed to them by their antecedents is a common one in her poetry. In 'Metaphors Accepted' (2007), for example, the poet is figured as half magician, half launderer:

this man of poetry,  
this gift of Egypt, still conducting, from his magic carpet,  
the workings of his own special launderette;  
still able, after decades of washing and spin-drying  
the itchy rags of England's worn-out conscience,

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<sup>81</sup> 'Tradition,' 38.

<sup>82</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 17.

to lift cleanly from new landing grounds,  
raising up our exhausted condition[.]<sup>83</sup>

In 'The Fiction Makers' the living and the dead exist side by side in a realm of collective artistic and cultural memory that is not subject to linear temporality. Bloom suggests that, for late poets who conceive of themselves as heirs to the dominant tradition, 'the fear of the ancestor and his power and the consciousness of indebtedness increase in direct proportion as the power of the tribe itself increases... [and] we arrive at a situation in which the ancestors of the most powerful tribes have become so fearful to the imagination that they have receded at last into a numinous shadow: the ancestor becomes a god.'<sup>84</sup> For Stevenson, though, her ancestors are far from 'fearful' to her imagination, and far from seeing these figures as remote, geographically and temporally, Stevenson imagines herself as one of their glamorous number: 'We were the wrecked elect, / the ruined few'; 'Sanctified Pound, a knot / of nerves in his fist, / squeezing the Goddamn iamb / out of *our* verse'; 'we thought we were living now / but we were living then.'<sup>85</sup> She refers to figures such as Hemingway ('Hem'), Virginia Woolf, and Dylan Thomas ('Dylan with his Soho grin') by nicknames or first names, as though they are old friends. This is a somewhere beyond time and space, an artistic 'elsewhere' in which poets and artists commune. These figures are accessible to her imagination, and she uses them to position herself as a poet and declare her own affinities and allegiances.

In *A Lament for the Makers*, too, Stevenson imagines herself walking amongst, and talking with, her antecedents. The poem is based on William Dunbar's early sixteenth-

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<sup>83</sup> *Stone Milk*, 52.

<sup>84</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 118.

<sup>85</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 20.

century poem 'Lament for the Makaris'. Dunbar's poem, itself drawing upon the 'danse macabre', a late medieval allegory on the universality of death, is an elegy for his own distinguished literary antecedents, including Geoffrey Chaucer, and the monk of Bery. In Stevenson's version, it is Homer alone who is an ancestor-turned-god: 'Homer, forsaken Titan, / strides alone across the asphodels'.<sup>86</sup> Other figures are accessible, though, and John Berryman relishes the prospect of 'at last' cornering Shakespeare 'with my cruxes and queries', and imagines 'a café where Cal [Robert Lowell] & Dylan // disport themselves / in spirit-colloquy / with Yeats and Chaucer.'<sup>87</sup> The image of Chaucer in a café is a comic anachronism. However, as so often is the case in Stevenson's poetry, there is a certain ambivalence about the living poet's inexorable affinity with the dead. As the poet-speaker stands overlooking the 'numen numenorum, / foundry of dreams',

the crowd suddenly rose –  
a blizzard of insects,  
so many I could not believe

fame had undone so many,  
blinding me,  
battering my hair and mouth.<sup>88</sup>

Those myriad voices, heretofore 'nourishing', have become oppressive, 'blinding' and 'battering' the living poet. In a 1990 poem, 'Nightmare, Daymoths' (one of 'Three Poems for Sylvia Plath'), we see a similar swarm of 'terrible insects' that suck and sting the speaker, that are revealed to be 'flying words'.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, l.iii.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, l.vi.

<sup>89</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 383.

*A Lament for the Makers* continues and extends the meticulous endeavour of self-placing begun in Stevenson's 1983 poem 'A Legacy (After Francois Villon)', in which the poet identifies with and apostrophises a number of her like-minded contemporaries and likely successors. Even as Stevenson turns her attention to her antecedents, though, she keeps one eye firmly on the futurity of her own reputation. That this poem, too, will one day be reread and reworked by future generations of 'makers', granting Stevenson herself a measure of immortality, is suggested in the final lines:

Before the beginning – unknown.  
 As after the end – unknown.  
 ...  
 I am alive. I'm human.  
 Get dressed. Make coffee.  
 Shore a few lines against my ruin.<sup>90</sup>

This is, of course, a deceptively casual echo of those lines in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Like Eliot's Fisher King, Stevenson's poet-speaker fears her inevitable dissolution into 'unknown' and unknowable time and space 'after the end'. Eliot's jumble of incongruent 'fragments', taken from Dante, Kyd, Gérard de Nerval, and a traditional nursery rhyme, suggests the confusion and disorder of late Western culture, but the use of lines taken from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upanishad offers hope of a revivifying language and a culture outside the post-World War One West.<sup>91</sup> Stevenson's allusion to Eliot's well-known lines signifies her desire to temporally and textually anchor herself and her work firmly *within* the Western tradition that Eliot saw as exhausted

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<sup>90</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, II.vii.

<sup>91</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, Prufrock and other poems*, V. What the Thunder Said, lines 430, 433, (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 42.

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This thesis is arranged according to a thematic structure that will no doubt be familiar to readers of *Poems 1955-2005*. Whilst the *Selected Poems 1955-1995* is arranged chronologically, the 2005 collection gathers and groups poems according to theme, subject, or setting. Stevenson explains:

When I was collecting poems for the Bloodaxe edition some years ago, I decided, on the advice of my husband, to "hang" them in what he called small thematic galleries rather than in a long chronological corridor. We were both surprised at how many early poems anticipated later ones, both in tone and theme. Certain ideas crop up again and again.<sup>92</sup>

This thesis identifies several of these 'ideas' that 'crop up again and again', and takes these as subjects or starting points for chapters. A thematic, rather than chronological, mode of approaching Stevenson's sizeable body of work is intended to allow the dialogues or relationships between poems written at different points in Stevenson's fifty year career to become fully apparent. As Stevenson herself suggests, many of her early poems or unpublished drafts are revisited, reexamined, and even rewritten in later poems. Of course, a thematic approach may be said to risk not fully appreciating the ways in which a poet evolves or matures over time, from collection to collection. A strictly chronological approach, however, dealing with one collection at a time, would

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<sup>92</sup> Rich Kelley, *Library of America e-Newsletter*.

not allow for close comparative reading of poems written at different points in the poet's career. Subsequent studies of Stevenson's body of work may well adopt a chronological approach, and would no doubt identify numerous significant developments between the early and most recent work. We see that the later work is more likely to adopt a conversational, colloquial register, and to make poetic capital out of traditionally 'unpoetic' material or subjects. Similarly, the later work is more likely to individuate the geographical locations depicted in the poems, giving the names of places and residents. Despite these natural evolutions in style, there are a number of equally significant constants. To borrow a phrase from Robert Frost's 'Into My Own' (1915), we might say that a half century long poetic career has left Stevenson not changed, but, 'Only more sure of all [she] thought was true.'<sup>93</sup> The persistent themes or preoccupations of the poet's earliest collections, *Living in America* (1965) and *Reversals* (1969), are strikingly present in the most recent collections, *Astonishment* (2012) and *Stone Milk* (2007). In 'Stone Milk' (2007), we recognize the stoical acceptance of the natural world's indifference and the half-articulated desire for blissful self-cancellation that we first encounter one of the earliest poems included in the 2005 collection, 'Sierra Nevada' (1965), written four decades earlier.

The first chapter, '**How uneasily I live / in the house of imagination**': **Anne Stevenson and the Romantics**, explores Stevenson's complex and often ambivalent relationship with both the work and the enduring mythos of the Romantic poets. Study of the poet's extensive juvenilia, held in the Cambridge University Library, shows that her earliest surviving works are meticulous Romantic imitations, apparently influenced by the work of John Keats, in particular. Though this thesis is not a chronological

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<sup>93</sup> Robert Frost, *Poems* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2002), 255.



survey of Stevenson's work, beginning with an exploration of the poet's earliest influences allows us to better understand her subsequent mature poetic progress and practice. Furthermore, this first chapter introduces concepts and ideas that are extended or expanded upon in later chapters, for example, the 'death of God', and the significant implications of widespread cultural loss of religious belief. The third chapter, on elegy, explores at length how Stevenson's poetry suggests we might conceive of an afterlife in a largely secular age. Similarly, the final chapter, on language, suggests that the loss of religious belief necessitates a post-Darwinian reconceptualisation of our language and our status as linguistic creatures.

Stevenson's poetry boldly resurrects key Romantic concerns and uncertainties, as it explores the complex, protean relationship between the perceiving mind and the perceived world, and questions the power and potentiality of the imagination to serve as an illuminating and coalescing force in what seems to be an increasingly arbitrary universe. Though we recognise within her prose a Bloomian 'misreading' of Romantic ideology and praxis, she develops within her poetry a renovated and pragmatic romanticism that will, to use Wallace Stevens's word, 'suffice' in these late days. Indeed, Wallace Stevens assumes a key role in this chapter, as a poet whose complex engagement with the vestiges of Romanticism helpfully illuminates Stevenson's own creative tussle with this same legacy.

This opening chapter begins with an exploration of how the terms 'Romantic' or 'Romanticism', and also 'Post-Romantic', might be most usefully understood. 'Misreading the Romantics' suggests that Stevenson's prose reveals what we might call the poet's creative misreading of the Romantics, influenced by the anti-Romantic stance

of Eliot, Pound, and Hulme, amongst others. ‘The “Harmonious Skeptic”’ borrows a phrase from Stevens in order to better understand the philosophical stance articulated in and by Stevenson’s poetry. Like Stevens’s ‘harmonious skeptic’, Stevenson’s poems fuse a familiar twentieth-century philosophical scepticism with an almost childlike wonder at the world around us. Few twentieth-century poets have the consolation of an unshakable religious faith, and ‘The Death of God’ explores the effect of absence of belief in a deity on the concept of the imagination as revealed in twentieth century poetry. ‘Stevenson’s Sixth Sense’ and ‘The Poet and the Scientist’ expand on this discussion, and explore what Stevenson believes is the important relationship between scientific endeavor and the human imagination. ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful’ examines the fate of the Romantic category of the sublime in the technologically advanced late twentieth century, and suggests the development of a new category of the sublime – what might be called the ‘geological sublime’ – in Stevenson’s poetry. The final section of this chapter examines the complex relationship between Stevenson and John Keats, a relationship that is charted from her juvenilia up to the 2000 poem, ‘John Keats, 1821-1950’. It is revealed that whilst an very early poem like ‘Indian Summer’ is little more than a reverent replica of one of Keats’s odes, a late poem like ‘Himalyan Balsam’ is an intelligent and assured reconsideration of Keats’ odes, and that, despite Stevenson’s dismissal of Keats as a teenage fancy, his work remains a vital touchstone, standing in opposition to the epidemic of convenience speech and technological jargon.

One of the most significant Romantic bequeathals is what Stevenson frowningly refers to as the ‘Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self’, the privileging of subjective experience and perspective, and (though a post-facto Victorian misrepresentation) the

model of the Romantic artist as a tormented genius. Terence Diggory suggests that the culmination of this ‘tradition of the self’ is to be found within the work of the so-called ‘Confessional’ poets of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>94</sup> The second chapter, **The ‘I’ and the ‘eye’: Life and Self in the Poetry of Anne Stevenson**, looks at how Stevenson, a contemporary and biographer of Sylvia Plath, eschews a ‘Confessional’ poetic in favour of oblique modes of self-expression and self-examination. For Stevenson, the ‘Confessional’ privileging of the ‘I’ over the ‘eye’ represented a revival of the emotional excess and self-preoccupation she professes to disdain in the Romantic poets. It is in articulate reaction to this apparent apotheosis of the all-important ‘I’ that she embarks upon arguably her most well-known work, the book-length epistolary poem, *Correspondences* (1974).

The first half of this chapter explores the relationship between the poet’s personal experience and her poetry as revealed by a number of shorter poems written throughout her career. The first two sections, ‘Mind and Body, Self and Soul’ and ‘Self and Memory’, examine several different philosophical models of embodied selfhood, and attempt to place Stevenson’s own concept of self-hood in this complex intellectual and ethical terrain. ‘Personality, Personal Experience, and Poetry’ and ‘Transformations’ explore the distancing techniques by which traumatic personal experience is transformed into aesthetic experience in poems like ‘The Women’ (1955/1956), and also the various analogies used by the poet to explain this complex transfiguration. ‘Windows and Mirrors’ and ‘Saying and Seeing’ suggest that the poetry of Stevenson’s

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<sup>94</sup> Terence Diggory, *Yeats and American Poetry: The Tradition of the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 9.

contemporary, Sylvia Plath, functioned as a powerful negative influence upon Stevenson.

The second half of this chapter focusses on Stevenson's best-known volume, *Correspondences* (1974), and challenges the assumption that it is a poem in the 'confessional' mode. The section begins by looking at a number of shorter poems which have been identified as precursors or practice pieces in which Stevenson experiments with the polylogic structure and epistolary form that is used to such effect in *Correspondences*. Extensive archival research carried out on the Stevenson material held at Cambridge University Library, Stevenson's personal and family papers, and the Beecher Stowe family papers held at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University, suggests that *Correspondences* might be most usefully understood in terms of 'found poetry'. It is suggested that, in using portions of these source texts (often lifting passages or lines verbatim), Stevenson is performing a complex act of double ventriloquism, allowing her own experiences to be articulated through these 'found' texts, but also giving these previously unheard voices a hearing. Continuing in this vein, in 'Poetry and Oral History', it is suggested that *Correspondences*, in its transformation of historical document into aesthetic creation, anticipates late twentieth-century developments in oral history methodology. 'Voice and Verse' identifies a number of polyphonic poems, including 'Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics' by Elizabeth Bishop and 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board' (1957) and the verse play, *Three Women* (1962), by Sylvia Plath, that may have influenced the form and structure of *Correspondences*. 'The Limits of the Lyric' (re)considers the traditional categories of the lyric, narrative, dramatic, and epic poem, and attempts to 'place' *Correspondences* within this complex

poetic terrain, by establishing what kind of poem the individual ‘letters’ might be, and what the volume as a whole might be. ‘William Carlos Williams and the Triadic Stanza’ suggests that the down-stepped three line stanza used in approximately a third of the poems of *Correspondences* is derived from William’s triadic stanza. For Stevenson, as for Williams, the triadic line (divided according to intonation rather than ‘unnatural’ metrical patterns) allowed for the representation of ‘real’ American speech, and creates a sense of spoken rather than written communication.

The chapter now moves more into a discussion of the content or subject matter of *Correspondences*. ‘*Correspondences* and Miscommunication’ explores the seemingly endemic miscommunication between the sexes; husbands and wives, fathers and daughters. Whilst it has already been established that *Correspondences* is not simply a *cri du coeur* from a frustrated woman writer, the difficulties of reconciling artistic ambition with domestic obligation is a significant theme in the volume. In ‘The Woman Writer’, it is suggested that whilst the character of Kay is ‘a sort of Esther Greenwood...a heroine who more obviously than most is a version of the author’, the poet explores this dilemma through a number of the female characters.<sup>95</sup> ‘A Feminist Poem’ challenges the reductive reading of *Correspondences* as a ‘feminist poem’ by revealing the disintegration of traditional masculine roles and the disorientation of male characters that we see in the latter half of the poem. Thus, ‘A Lost America’ concludes that *Correspondences* might be most usefully understood not as a polemic ‘feminist poem’, but as an elegy for a lost America. At the end of this poem, the distinctions between poet and persona(s) begin to break down. This unexpected intercession by the poet is explored in ‘Dissolving Borders’. The final section of this chapter, ‘After

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<sup>95</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman’, 18.

*Correspondences*’ looks at Stevenson’s later (largely abortive) experiments with polylogic or dramatic verse.

It is revealed that Stevenson’s poetry propounds complex questions about identity and personality, and ultimately asks how a late modern poet might both create and escape a ‘self’ within their work. It is shown that she draws upon and assimilates a diverse range of poetic models and influences to successfully reconfigure what is personal and private into what is poetically and aesthetically accomplished. The alchemical transfiguration of personal experience into public art is at the heart of the elegiac tradition. The third chapter, **‘Invocation and Interruption’: The Elegiac Poetry of Anne Stevenson**, looks at the ways in which Stevenson’s elegiac poetry, in both its echoic adherences to, and innovative departures from, the conventions of the genre, succeeds in extending and expanding that rich legacy bequeathed by her predecessors, carrying the elegy forward into the twenty-first century. In the writing of *Correspondences* and those shorter poems discussed in the second chapter, Stevenson suggests that she learned how to put personal material into poetry ‘without confessing it’.<sup>96</sup> This third chapter, focusing on Stevenson’s elegies and elegiac poems, looks at the ways in which Stevenson expresses and explores the at once personal and universal experience of bereavement and loss. Those techniques of distancing and aesthetic transformation revealed in the second chapter are employed in the poet’s numerous elegies, as she follows in the long tradition of poets who grieve personal losses whilst musing on the universal concerns of human mortality, suffering, and pain. The final section of *Poems 1955-2005* is dedicated to these elegiac poems (though, interestingly, those poems which deal with the premature death of Stevenson’s mother appear in the

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<sup>96</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman’, 18.

second section, 'Seven Ages'). The first section of this chapter, 'The Work of Mourning', looks at a number of canonical elegies, including Milton's 'Lycidas' and Shelley's 'Adonais', and explores the complex ritual, psychological, and aesthetic 'work' that is accomplished by the 'successful' elegy. It is explained that traditional elegy is governed by a number of structural, formal, and imagistic conventions, and, furthermore. The second section, 'The American Elegy', examines Peter Sacks's claims that American elegists have experienced particular difficulties with these conventions proffered by European elegies and have, as such, developed a distinctly 'American' elegiac poetic. One characteristic of this American elegiac poetic, Sacks suggests, is the American elegist's tendency to locate his grief (and his griever) on the unpicturesque margins of a place or space. The third section, 'Presence and Absence', explores the ways in which the living and the dead are variously (re)positioned by the elegist, for example in the oft-anthologized elegies 'Willow Song' and 'Red Rock Fault'. In the opening chapter on Stevenson and the Romantics, the 'death of God' was revealed to have had profound implications for the concept of the imagination. In 'After the Afterlife', it is revealed to have had no less profound implications for the concept of the afterlife. Moving from the notions of physical location explored in the previous section to metaphysical location, this section aims to identify the various alternate models of the afterlife proposed by Stevenson's poetry, from the molecular reabsorption of our physical bodies, to the dubious textual 'afterlife' offered by one's own works and the works of others. Acutely aware of the power wielded by the elegist over the absent subject, Stevenson is ever-conscious herself as a future subject of elegy, and attempts to preempt any potential elegies. 'Three Poems for Sylvia Plath' focusses on those poems

addressed to Plath. It is suggested that these poems afford Stevenson a space in which to articulate and reconcile her complex and often self-contradictory feelings about Plath. Even as she attempts to forcibly distance herself from her dark double, though, she cannot help but do so in a way strikingly reminiscent of Plath's own famous elegy-exorcism, 'Daddy'. The final section of this chapter, 'Elegy after 9/11', focusses on Stevenson's most recent elegies, including 'New York Is Crying', first published less than a year after the terrorist attacks. It is suggested that the events of 9/11 presented both a challenge and a moratorium to would-be elegists.

The elegy or elegiac poem is a space in which Stevenson, like so many poets before her, can explore the themes of life, death, loss, grief, memory, survival, inheritance, and equally significantly, the value, potential, and limitations of art in the face of human mortality. Stevenson's elegiac poems represent neither seamless continuity with, nor complete rupture from, the elegiac tradition: rather, we see a complex synthesis of inheritance and innovation. In the vein of her numerous predecessors Stevenson seeks to honour the dead and proffer forms of consolation, though all the while acknowledging and expressing the increasing difficulty of her task.

In these elegies and elegiac poems, the poet's raw material, language, is subjected to intense scrutiny. We see that Stevenson doubts the capacity of words not only to console the bereaved, but also to capture and convey anything more than the dimmest shadow of our lived experience. Words, and the poems made from them, are revealed as a double-edged sword of sorts, offering both the chance to preserve or even to reanimate the lost object, but also threatening to write over them, to inadvertently inter them behind an impervious wall of well-chosen words.



Extending this trajectory, the final chapter, **Double Beds and Single Sheets: Anne Stevenson and the Limits of Language**, focusses on the Stevenson's acute awareness of both the potential and the limits of language. This chapter particularly focuses on those metalinguistic or metapoetic poems that take language or poetic practice as their subject, explicitly or obliquely. Stevenson's work enthusiastically reprises persistent questions and concerns about the adequacy and inadequacy of language that we recognise from the work of earlier poets from Shakespeare and the Romantics to Wallace Stevens and Robert Graves. It will be shown that she is a poet frequently, yet unassumingly, working at the very limits of language, seeking out those frontiers, both physical and psychological, at which words fail us, or are found wanting. Even as she delights in the potential of words to express, enact, excite, and enliven, the poet is acutely aware of the limitations, not only of poetic language, but of *all* language.

The first section of this chapter, 'Saying the World', suggests that Stevenson's sceptical attitude towards language, as revealed in poems like 'Saying the World', is a bequeathal from her father, the analytic philosopher Charles Stevenson. 'A World Without Words' focusses on those poems which seem to articulate, or half-articulate, a yearning for an impossible fully sentient but non-linguistic state. Language is revealed as an impenetrable barrier between the human and the non-human, limiting our understanding and appreciation of those experiences which resist easy capture within our language. "'Right" Language and "Wrong" Language' explores the alluring possibility of a new language, an idea also found in the work of Shelley and Stevens. 'Metaphor and the Material World' focusses on Stevenson's acutely self-reflexive use of metaphor. Metaphor is discovered to be both a means of revelation, and a mode of

obfuscation in poems such as ‘If I Could Paint Essences’ (1982) and ‘Burnished’. ‘Reading the World’ looks at those poems which force us to question our concept of language as something divinely bestowed and advocate a rather more Darwinian concept of human language. ‘What’s in a name?’ reveals Stevenson’s preoccupation with the irrepressible human impulse to name, and the complex relationship between signifier and signified. The final section of this chapter, ‘The Future of the Language?’ explores Stevenson’s ambivalent attitude towards the state of the English language at the start of the twenty first century, as articulated in the late poem ‘Listen to the Words’ (2007).

This thesis makes use of material taken from e-mail and oral interviews conducted with Stevenson over a period of five years (2007 – 2012). Whilst this material often proves informative and illuminating (in elucidating biographical details, or in confirming the setting or occasion of a poem, for example) we must not forget D.H. Lawrence’s wise adage, ‘Never trust the artist. Trust the tale’.<sup>97</sup> To look at the numerous prose pieces written by, or the numerous interviews conducted with, Stevenson over a period of several decades, is to find a tangle of self-cancelling or contradictory assertions or interpretations, especially on the subject of Sylvia Plath. The irreconcilability or inconsistency of these ideas alerts us to the dangers of relying too heavily on this material. Far from uncritically accepting Stevenson’s own critical opinions of her work, or the work of others, this thesis aims to identify those instances where the poet’s understanding of her own work differs from our own apprehension / appreciation. Stevenson’s own opinion of her work is not taken as authoritative or privileged; rather, it is appreciated as one of a variety of (inevitably biased or

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<sup>97</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1924 (London: Penguin, 1990), 14.

subjective) perspectives from which we might form an understanding and an appreciation of the poetry.

## **‘How uneasily I live / in the house of imagination’: Anne Stevenson and the Romantics**

*This chapter explores Stevenson’s complex and often ambivalent relationship with both the work and the enduring mythos of the Romantic poets. Though we recognise within her prose a Bloomian ‘misreading’ of Romantic ideology and praxis, we see within her mature poetry the development of a renovated and pragmatic romanticism that will, to use Wallace Stevens’s word, ‘suffice’ in these late days. This chapter focusses primarily on those poems that engage explicitly with the work or figures of the Romantic poets, or those poems that raise pertinent questions about key Romantic concerns: the creative imagination, the position of man within natural world, and the power and potential of the subjective perceiving mind.*

The forbidding anti-Romantic pronouncements of Modernist poet-critics such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and T.E. Hulme meant that, for many years, the intensely Romantic predilection of much twentieth-century poetry was overlooked, intentionally or unconsciously, in favour of celebrating what seemed realistic, rational, and ‘new’. The poetry of these Modernist figureheads, though, reveals that they enjoyed a more complexly ambivalent relationship with the Romantic objects of their censure than is suggested by their prose. In the latter half of the twentieth century, too, the work of the Romantic poets continues to cast long shadows. This chapter suggests that Anne Stevenson’s work may be usefully understood in terms of an ambivalent response to and engagement with the figures and texts of the Romantic poets.

In 2000, Stevenson wrote:

I think we who are writing now should think of ourselves as having come to the end of the period we call modernist. Postmodernism is a weak coda to a turbulent movement [modernism] that in itself was a coda to Romanticism.<sup>98</sup>

Clearly, Stevenson considers Romanticism to have bequeathed a significant and complex legacy to those 'who are writing now'. 'Coda' is a musical term, denoting 'a passage of more or less independent character introduced after the completion of the essential parts of a movement, so as to form a more definite and satisfactory conclusion.'<sup>99</sup> Stevenson conceives of the two dominant literary movements of the twentieth century as successive (though evidently not successful) attempts to provide 'definite and satisfactory conclusion[s]' to the many ambivalences, uncertainties, and unanswered questions bequeathed by the Romantics.

It is prudent at this point to define as clearly as possible what is meant by the terms 'Romanticism' and 'post-Romanticism' in relation to poetry. George Bornstein suggests that Yeats, whose own late-Romantic preoccupations are well documented, saw 'Romanticism' as

spiralling out from ... [the 'Big Six'] to include a poetic tradition from Dante and Spenser through Milton and the Big Six and on up to the present. In that sense Romanticism denoted not a specific historical epoch but rather *a set of qualities* that began much earlier, reached one peak of development in the Romantic period proper, and remained available to later artists like himself.<sup>100</sup>  
(italics mine)

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<sup>98</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'A Few Words for the New Century,' *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. W.H. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarnet, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 183.

<sup>99</sup> 'Coda, n.' OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. 25 September 2012  
<<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/35559?redirectedFrom=coda>>.

<sup>100</sup> George Bornstein, 'Yeats and Romanticism,' *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John S. Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20.

‘Romanticism’, then, is a deceptively expansive term, retrospectively imposed upon a number of diverse late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poets and artists by a Victorian readership. It is possible, however, to identify several characteristics common to the so-called Romantic poets, and this ‘set of qualities’ has been variously expounded by critics such as M.H. Abrams. Many of these ‘qualities’ are recognisable as fundamental to Stevenson’s poetry, especially, a preoccupation with the complex, protean relationships between the perceiving mind and the perceived world, and the (often ambivalent) concern with the power and potential of the imagination to serve as a unifying, illuminating, and revelatory force in what seems an increasingly arbitrary universe.

The term ‘post-Romantic’, taken literally, simply refers to that which comes after ‘Romanticism’. To describe a poet’s work as ‘post-Romantic’, however, likely implies not only a chronological, but also a thematic, temperamental, philosophical, or stylistic relationship or inheritance. We might usefully think of the ‘post-Romantic’ in poetry as that poetry that could not have been written were it not for the work of the ‘Romantics proper’. The term ‘post-Romantic’, then, encompasses a diverse range of literary responses to, and engagements with, the work of the Romantics ‘proper’. Lucy Newlyn suggests that Harold Bloom’s model of ‘active engagement between reader-writers’ dispelled the assumption that of influence was the simply the ‘straightforward transmission of ideas.’<sup>101</sup> Though we might most readily think of influence as manifesting itself in the form of echoes or resemblances – thematic, verbal, formal, rhythmical, imagistic – across earlier and later texts, influence might manifest itself just

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<sup>101</sup> Lucy Newlyn, foreword, *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Romantic Influence in Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), vii.

as significantly in a rejection or a turning away from a predecessor, as in a following in their footsteps. A text that responds negatively to, or reacts against, Romanticism is thus as significantly ‘post-romantic’ as a text that enthusiastically reinvents or revitalises the ‘myths’ of Romanticism for a new century.<sup>102</sup> As such, the ‘anti-Romantic’ verse of Eliot is as significantly ‘post-Romantic’ as the work of the New Romantic poets of the 1940s, Dylan Thomas, George Barker, and Vernon Watkins. To suggest that Stevenson’s work may be usefully understood as ‘post-Romantic’, then, is to recognise the complex and often ambivalent nature of her responses to the work of the Romantic poets. In Stevenson’s work, the influence of the Romantics has been what we might term a negative or antithetical influence, manifesting itself in a deliberate and often explicit turning away from the Romantic poets and their praxis. As Michael O’Neill notes, ‘there is no seamless, painless transition from English Romantic poetry involved in the writing of this transatlantic poet.’<sup>103</sup>

### **Misreading the Romantics:**

Due in no small part to the anti-Romantic stance of Eliot, Pound, and others, the ‘Romantic’ accrued negative connotations in the early part of the twentieth century, and those Modernists who sought within their work to sustain and reinvigorate Romanticism for a new century made attempts to dispel these unfavourable misapprehensions. In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer of 1935, Wallace Stevens suggests that

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<sup>102</sup> Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley, introduction, *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Romantic Influence in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 1.

<sup>103</sup> Michael O’Neill, “‘A curved adventure’: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” *Voyages Over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, ed. Angela Leighton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 98.

When people speak of the romantic, they do so in what the French commonly call a *pejorative* sense. But poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic. Without this new romantic, one gets nowhere; with it, the most casual things take on transcendence, and the poet rushes brightly, and so on. What one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure: eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic.<sup>104</sup>

There is an important distinction to be made between what is pejoratively termed the ‘romantic’ – what people see as naively sentimental or anachronistic – and what he calls ‘this new romantic’ – ‘constantly new’ and offering a measure of ‘transcendence’ to the ‘most casual things’. The ‘new romantic’ poet is not a slavish imitator, or fawning peddler of well-worn Romantic tropes: rather, he is driven by what Bornstein describes as ‘an almost Poundian urge to ‘make it new’’, to constantly re-interpret and re-evaluate what has come before, and to seek ‘what will suffice’ in his own time.<sup>105</sup>

It becomes clear that when Stevenson speaks in her prose of the Romantic, she does so, in Stevens’s words, ‘in what the French commonly call a *pejorative* sense,’ associating it with ‘egotism, exhibitionism, or outright stupid showing off.’<sup>106</sup> She is fiercely keen, in both her poetry and her criticism, to eschew sentimentality, to ‘evade the ego-hill, [and] the misery well’.<sup>107</sup> It appears that, for Stevenson the critic, if not for Stevenson the poet, the Romantic has accrued unfortunate connotations of sentimentality and naive egotism. In a heated 1989 exchange of letters with Olwen Hughes and Al Alvarez in the *New York Review of Books*, the poet suggests that, ‘Romanticism, for societies as well as for individuals, represents a stage of adolescence

<sup>104</sup> *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Oxford and New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 277.

<sup>105</sup> Bornstein, 21.

<sup>106</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘I’m a full qualified, radical Desperado: Interview with Lidia Vianu,’ *Desperado Literature*, accessed 24 September 2012 <[http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/anne\\_stevenson.htm](http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/anne_stevenson.htm)>.

<sup>107</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 17.



in which, like Sylvia Plath in her last poems, the 'self' cries out in despair when confronted with its individual impotence.'<sup>108</sup> Romanticism, she suggests, is an indispensable but undignified phase of development in the life of both a society and an individual. What she describes as 'the luxury of splendid aloofness or untouchably tender self-indulgence' is a childish thing to be put away by the mature poet. Stevenson's criticism of Plath both in the exchange and in the biography centres on what she perceives as Plath's inability or unwillingness to put away her Romantic preoccupation with the sacrosanct 'self'. Similarly, in the essay 'Stations: Seamus Heaney and the Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self', Stevenson seems to associate Romanticism with a strategy of psychological 'retreat': a 'withdrawal from the world into a sacred area of personal sensitivity.'<sup>109</sup> She suggests that 'in Wordsworth we have the first instance in Britain of a poet in retreat from a corrupting society and a doubtful religion, digging in and fortifying the bastions of his own psyche'.<sup>110</sup>

An unpublished early poem, 'Against Romantics', sets out Stevenson's objections to what she thinks of as the Romantic impulse and ideology:

His real cowardice was  
 we would not see  
 beyond the inspiring words  
 to the real sea  
 where he might have done something  
 almost heroically [sic]  
 he dared believe

<sup>108</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath: An Exchange,' *New York Review of Books* (26 October 1989), 14 June 2010. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1989/oct/26/sylvia-plath-an-exchange/?pagination=false>>.

<sup>109</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Stations: Seamus Heaney and Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self,' *Between the Iceberg and the Ship: Selected Essays, Poets on Poetry* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 98.

<sup>110</sup> 'Stations: Seamus Heaney and Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self,' 97.

in its neutrality.<sup>111</sup>

As in Stevenson's prose, Romanticism is associated with 'cowardice': an inability or stubborn unwillingness to do without the comforting fiction of a sympathetic natural world. It seems likely that this unpublished poem is an early incarnation of the published poem 'He and It' (1982), which also delivers a scathing assessment of a 'Romantic' figure who cannot dare – or more accurately, cannot *bear* – to believe in the 'neutrality' and indifference of the natural world to human fate. In both poems, the anonymous 'he' is taken in by his own soothing fictions and 'inspiring words'. The presence of the word 'neutrality' in 'Against Romanticism' and the phrase 'neutral droop' in 'He and It' owes something to both Donald Davie's 1955 poem 'Remembering the Thirties', which simultaneously observes and advises that 'A neutral tone is nowadays preferred.' Romantic afflatus is rejected in favour of a cool and dispassionate objectivity.

**Comment [E6]:** Please see reading of 'He and It' later in chapter for new material written in response to Professor Kendall's 'invitation' to consider Amis's 'Against Romanticism'.

Romanticism is frequently posited as a philosophical and aesthetic concept in opposition to Classicism. In his 2006 treatment of T.S. Eliot, for example, Craig Raine baldly defines 'classicist' as 'anti-romantic',<sup>112</sup> yet, as Paul Dean points out, 'Raine is led into some extraordinary contortions by his insistence on polarizing these concepts.'<sup>113</sup> To attempt to define either term by a negative, Dean suggests, is 'to make little headway'.<sup>114</sup> It is perhaps T.E. Hulme who most forcefully dichotomised the terms

<sup>111</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Against Romanticism' (undated, but the typeface is consistent with a number of drafts dating from the early 1960s).

<sup>112</sup> Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 46.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Dean, 'Academimic,' *The New Criterion* 25 (April 2007), 81.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Romanticism and Classicism in his 1912 essay. Hulme suggests that the Romantic and Classical ‘attitudes towards the cosmos, towards man’ can be defined thus:<sup>115</sup>

Here is the root of all Romanticism: that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress. *One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite of this.* Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him... Put shortly, these are the two views, then. One, that man is intrinsically good, spoilt by circumstance; and the other that he is intrinsically limited, disciplined by order and tradition to something fairly decent. To the one party man’s nature is like a well, to the other like a bucket. The view which regards man as a well, a reservoir full of possibilities, I call the romantic; the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature, I call the classical.<sup>116</sup>

For Hulme, Romanticism is concerned with possibilities and potentiality; Classicism with limitations and boundaries. To speak of ‘Romantic verse’ and ‘classical verse’, Hulme concludes, is to speak of ‘the result of these two attitudes... in so far as it gets reflected in verse.’<sup>117</sup> He associates Romantic verse with ‘damp’ sentiment, ‘vagueness’, ‘moaning or whining’, and ‘the emotions that are grouped around the word infinite.’<sup>118</sup> Classical verse, on the other hand, is ‘strictly confined to the earthly and the definite’, ‘all dry and hard’, and privileging ‘accurate description’.<sup>119</sup> Hulme suggests the relationship between Romanticism and classicism in verse can be simplified to a series of stark dichotomies: ‘damp’ versus ‘dry’, the ‘infinite’ versus the ‘definite’, and so on. Yet, as he goes on to explicate further these two kinds of verse, he (intentionally or inadvertently) complicates somewhat his own definitions:

<sup>115</sup> T.E. Hulme, ‘Romanticism and Classicism,’ *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read, foreword. Jacob Epstein (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1936), 118-119.

<sup>116</sup> Hulme, 116-117.

<sup>117</sup> Hulme, 118-119.

<sup>118</sup> Hulme, 127, 114, 126, 127.

<sup>119</sup> Hulme, 127, 126, 127.

What I mean by classical in verse, then, is this. That even in the most imaginative flights there is always a holding back, a reservation. The classical poet never forgets this finiteness, this limit of man. He remembers always that he is mixed up with earth. He may jump, but he always returns back; he never flies away into the circumambient gas.<sup>120</sup>

Here we have the classical poet, then, who, even in his most 'imaginative flights' never forgets his inherently limited and finite nature. Yet, in his explication of the Romantic in verse, Hulme seems to be ascribing a similar blend of exuberant imaginative aspiration and consciousness of limitations to the Romantic poet:

The romantic, because he thinks man infinite, must always be talking about the infinite; and as there is always the bitter contrast between what you think you ought to be able to do and what man actually can, it always tends, in its later stages at any rate, to be gloomy.<sup>121</sup>

The 'holding back' and 'reservation' that Hulme describes as a fundament of the 'classical in verse' is by no means absent from Romantic poetry. The Romantic poet, too, is acutely – often painfully – aware of those confines and boundaries so beloved of the classical poet. His 'imaginative flights', too, must always end in a return to solid ground: in spite of the exuberance of his imaginative ambitions, he can never truly fly away. David Walker notes that 'the notion of Romantic idealism is intensely problematic even among the High Romantics', and suggests that 'skepticism about the possibility of achieving a harmonious bond with the world of nature is very much a part of the poetry of Wordsworth and Keats.'<sup>122</sup> As Dean notes in his review of Raine, 'a

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<sup>120</sup> Hulme, 119-120.

<sup>121</sup> Hulme, 119.

<sup>122</sup> David Walker, *The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 11.

romantic can also be an anti-romantic', and 'conversely, as Eliot's writing on Virgil and Dante testifies, the classical poet can also be a conduit for powerful emotion.'<sup>123</sup>

It would seem as though Stevenson subscribes not only to Hulme's notion of a dichotomised relationship between Romantic and classical temperament and verse, but also to Goethe's crudely dichotomous model of '*Klassisch ist das Gesunde und romantisch das Kranke*' ('What is Classical is healthy; what is Romantic is sick').<sup>124</sup> In a 2003 interview, she commented, 'I suspect I have a classical, rather than a romantic temperament. I greatly respect order and form in art – in all the arts.'<sup>125</sup> As Herbert M. Schueller notes, though, the respect for 'order and form in art' that Stevenson believes marks her as classical in temperament, is a significant aspect of the Romantic poetic, and, furthermore, 'the originality and creativity often associated with Romanticism as its hallmarks are unextolled aspects of classicism too.'<sup>126</sup>

Edward Larrissy suggests that throughout the twentieth century individuals and literary movements have engaged in the 'creation of a Romanticism which is fit to act as a precursor'.<sup>127</sup> Writers reconstruct Romanticism in their own image: Hugh Haughton suggests that Seamus Heaney 're-created Wordsworth in his own image... [and] forged a poetic image of himself out of Wordsworth.'<sup>128</sup> In Stevenson's work, though, we see the opposite impulse at work. She conceives of the Romantics as embodying a whole

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<sup>123</sup> Dean, 81.

<sup>124</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*. Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe. Ed. Erich Trunz. 9th ed. Vol. 12. (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1972), 487.

<sup>125</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'I'm a full qualified, radical Desperado: Interview with Lidia Vianu.'

<sup>126</sup> Herbert M. Schueller, 'Romanticism Reconsidered,' *The Journal Of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (Summer 1962), 360.

<sup>127</sup> Edward Larrissy, introduction, *Romanticism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>128</sup> Hugh Haughton, 'Power and Hiding Places: Wordsworth and Seamus Heaney,' *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Romantic Influence in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 62.

host of what she sees as negative traits: individualism, self-concern, sentimentality, and psychological retreat. In rejecting the Romantics, she rejects all these negative traits she imagines that they embody. In Stevenson's prose, then, we see the creation of a Romanticism that is fit, not to 'act as a precursor', but to serve as a negative paradigm which she might work against.

The two most significant 'negative influences' manifest in Stevenson's work are, in fact, one. The poet views Sylvia Plath as a (too) late incarnation of the Romantic poet. The qualities that she criticizes in the Romantic poets she also finds to criticize in Plath: 'her 'splendid aloofness or untouchably tender self-indulgence', and her creation of 'an idealized self-image, complete with exaggerated joys and dire forebodings'.<sup>129</sup> Stevenson conceives of Romanticism as an Orthus-like two-headed beast, one head wearing the face of the Romantics proper, and the other, that of the despairing late Romantic Plath.

### **The 'Harmonious Skeptic':**

At the heart of Stevenson's post-Romantic poetic is the understanding that the philosophical position occupied by the twentieth-century poet is markedly different from that occupied by his Romantic antecedent, separated as they are by over two centuries of scientific and technological advances and hitherto unimagined human suffering. In 'Stations', she takes stock of our remaining philosophical and spiritual resources:

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<sup>129</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath: An Exchange,' *The New York Review of Books*.

Political and philosophical idealisms no longer have the hold over our imaginations that they did during the nineteenth century. Nor are our notions of what is possible as confident or exuberant as those of pre-Freudian, pre-Jungian, pre-Nazi, or even pre-Vietnam Romantics. We are all of us sufferers from failure, a failure not so much of religion in any formal sense, but of Romanticism itself and the freedom to love and suffer that Romanticism, explicitly or implicitly, promoted as a dominant faith.<sup>130</sup>

The optimistic philosophical climate in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century has come to an end: the notion of the infinite potential and perfectibility of man is less persuasive (though perhaps equally appealing) now than it was in the Romantic period proper, and much twentieth-century philosophy has focused on the difficulty, even impossibility, of epistemological certainty. Stevenson skilfully creates and maintains a delicate equilibrium between opposing perspectives, ideas, or emotions, and even as her poems refuse the false consolation of organised religion, they can still ask ‘Is there anybody there? / In the fan of the stars / opening beyond the ceiling?’ ‘The Price’ is poised in that dark space between ‘The fear of loneliness’ and ‘the wish / to be alone’, whereas ‘Branch Line’ contentedly concludes with the lines

God is impossible.

Life is impossible.

But here it is.

The first two lines might have been lifted from the ‘epic of disbelief’ described by Stevens, but the final line, the uplifting note upon which the poem ends, stands in defiant opposition to obdurate disbelief, to the very idea of the ‘impossible’. Here, Stevenson’s poem exhibits a striking instance of ‘negative capability’. In an 1817 letter

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<sup>130</sup> ‘Stations: Seamus Heaney and Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self,’ 98.

to his brothers, Keats used the now familiar phrase ‘negative capability’ for the first and only time:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason - Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.<sup>131</sup>

‘Half-knowledge’ is an epistemological state with which Stevenson’s poetry seems more than ‘content’. Though her poetry is, as Emily Grosholz suggests, ‘full of question marks’, they are questions that go, more often than not, unanswered, or are answered only with another question.<sup>132</sup> Often, the proffered answer seems to be merely incidental: the process of questioning is revealed as not so much a means to an end, but as an end in itself. Stevenson constantly reminds the reader that the desire to know and to discover, to think and to reflect, is ultimately more important than the attainment of knowledge. Indeed, O’Neill suggests that if Stevenson’s poetry finds the ‘new knowledge of reality’ that it seeks, then it is ‘more a knowledge of what it feels like to search than of what it feels like to arrive.’<sup>133</sup>

In ‘Anglais Mort à Florence’, Wallace Stevens mourns the demise of ‘an English High Romantic dead at Florence’.<sup>134</sup> This High Romantic is a dramatically diminished

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<sup>131</sup> John Keats, ‘To George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817,’ *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>132</sup> Emily Grosholz, ‘The Poetry of Anne Stevenson,’ *The Way You Say The World: A Celebration for Anne Stevenson*, comp. John Lucas and Matt Simpson (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>133</sup> O’Neill, “‘A curved adventure’: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 100.

<sup>134</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 121. All subsequent page numbers given of poems by Wallace Stevens will refer to the 1964 Knopf edition, unless otherwise indicated.



figure ('A little less returned for him each spring. / Music began to fail him'), whose convictions – spiritual, philosophical, aesthetic – disintegrate into so much doubt and anxiety: 'His spirit grew uncertain of delight, / Certain of its uncertainty.' This High Romantic can no longer derive comfort or confidence from supposed 'coherences' between himself and the world around him. Whereas once he 'was that music and himself' in a time when 'to be and delight to be seemed to be one', now he lives in a world where he, like the moon, is 'naked and alien'. This formerly exuberant, philosophically optimistic High Romantic cannot survive in our late time. In 'Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz', Stevens introduces a very different figure: 'some harmonious skeptic', whose

skeptical music

Will unite these figures of men and their shapes  
Will glisten again with motion, the music  
Will be motion and full of shadows.<sup>135</sup>

It is only this 'skeptical music' that can imbue the faded world with vitality and vigour once again. 'Skeptical' initially seems an odd choice of word especially when juxtaposed with the word 'harmonious', as we tend to associate scepticism with cynicism, disbelief, or disparagement. However, the word is etymologically derived from the Greek *skeptikos*, via the Latin *skepsis*, meaning enquiry. Miguel de Unamuno noted in 1924 that '*skeptic* does not mean him [sic] who doubts, but him who investigates and researches as opposed to him who asserts and thinks that he has

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<sup>135</sup> Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 121.

found.<sup>136</sup> Stevens's 'skeptical music', therefore, is no blaring 'epic of disbelief',<sup>137</sup> concerned with systematic denial or disavowal; rather, it is a music that is sensitive to both potentialities and limitations, a 'Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial'. Stevens's model of the 'harmonious skeptic' offers a useful means of approaching and understanding the philosophical stance of Stevenson's poetry.

'Small Philosophical Poem' (1982) and 'Vertigo' (2000) are placed at the end of the 'Prologue' to *Poems 1955-2005*. Though these poems are indeed 'small', they powerfully engage with the most fundamental questions of knowledge and experience, and their positioning in the volume suggests that the poet regards them as succinct articulations of the philosophical position from which the succeeding poems originate. In 'Small Philosophical Poem', it is the very possibility of human knowledge that is in question. Dr Animus regards the material world around him without the merest trace of doubt or scepticism, wholly convinced of the 'reality' of what he sees and touches and tastes:

Dr Animus, whose philosophy is a table,  
sits down contentedly to a square meal.  
The plates lie there, and there,  
just where they should lie.  
His feet stay just where they should stay,  
between legs and the floor.  
His eyes believe the clean waxed surfaces  
are what they are.<sup>138</sup>

Dr Animus is Stevens's 'mountain-minded Hoon', finding 'all form and order'<sup>139</sup> in the orderly solitude of his thought, whose philosophy is as solid and dependable as a 'table'

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<sup>136</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, 'My Religion,' *Essays and Soliloquies*, trans. J.E. Crawford Flitch (London: Harrap, 1924), 56.

<sup>137</sup> Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 122.

<sup>138</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 28.

upon which his 'square meal' of 'unexceptional propositions' is neatly laid. The doctor's 'wise / wife, Anima', though, does not dare to complacently trust her sense perceptions, and appreciates that 'the plates and floor are true only in so far as the human brain thinks they are.'<sup>140</sup> However, even before his wife 'pours him a small glass of doubt', there are already hairline cracks appearing in Dr Animus' solid, dependable reality. The repetition of 'lie' alerts us to the disquieting double meaning of the word, and the reference to 'clean waxed surfaces' suggests the superficiality of his perceptions. The 'small glass of doubt' is 'Just what he needs' to reinvigorate his stolid thinking; to make him alert to the fallibility of his own perceptions and knowledge. As such, he sees the world anew: 'He'd like to stay awake all night / (elbows on the table) / talking of how the table might not be there.' For Dr Animus, the world is now 'the pleasure of thought' – a philosophical conundrum to be relished – but the more pragmatic Anima, 'whose philosophy is hunger', perceiving the empty plates in front of them, 'fills the room with love. And fear. And fear.' This nourishing concoction of 'love' and 'fear' is what impels and is imparted by much of Stevenson's verse: 'love' for the raggedly contingent material world, and 'fear' that our engagement with it is illusory or unreal. The wariness of her own senses has in no way abated over the course of her career, and is succinctly reiterated in the 2012 poem 'On Reflection', in which the speaker, on perceiving a perplexing reflection in glass, asserts, 'it's to my doubt I must appeal / for news of what is false and what is real.'<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 121.

<sup>140</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'My Life In Poetry,' *ARTEMISpoetry* 4 May 2010, 23 August 2012.  
<<http://www.seconlightlive.co.uk/artemis.shtml>>

<sup>141</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of 'On Reflection' (2012). Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

This is the basis of the ‘harmonious skeptic’s’ position: to be able simultaneously to rest his ‘elbows on the table’ and talk ‘of how the table might not be there.’ It is a position that can at once entertain infinite possibilities *and* subject them to rigorous scepticism and interrogation. The characters of Dr Animus and Anima are an obvious reference to Carl Jung’s theory of *animus* and *anima*, which suggested that each individual psyche was comprised of opposing but complementary masculine and feminine elements.<sup>142</sup> The post-Romantic poet is driven by two opposing but complementary elements: the desire to discern truth or reality through contact with the world around us, and the sceptical instinct that subjects both the truths we discern, and the very desire to discern them, to rigorous interrogation.

Immediately following ‘Small Philosophical Poem’ in *Poems 1955-2005* is ‘Vertigo’ (2000). This eight line poem resumes the articulation of the terms of Stevenson’s philosophical stance. As in ‘Small Philosophical Poem’, two opposing aspects of the poet’s psyche are represented, this time by ‘mind’ and ‘body’ in the vein of soul/body dialogues, both of whom stare with ‘desire’ at the ‘naked abyss’. The poem suggests that there is a choice to be made:

If you love me, said mind,  
take that step into silence.  
If you love me, said body,  
turn and exist.<sup>143</sup>

The mind yearns for release, not from the shackles of the physical body as is usual in soul/body dialogues, but from its own clamouring epistemological uncertainty. To ‘take

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<sup>142</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1991)

<sup>143</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 28.

that step into silence' is to reject thought and perception on the grounds that there can be no certainty, no guarantees. To 'turn and exist', however, is not to ignore or deny the existence of the abyss, but rather to recognise its philosophical and psychological implications, and to try to live in a meaningful and productive way anyway, because the alternative is nonexistence, 'silence'.

That the poem is written in the past tense suggests that this difficult decision has already been made. Indeed, the very fact of the poem's existence at all suggests that the option of 'that step into silence' has been rejected out of hand. The placing of 'Vertigo' at the very end of the Prologue to *Poems 1955-2005* is significant. Having made that decision to 'turn and exist', to try to make what limited sense we can of a nonsensical world, the reader can now 'turn' the page to the main body of Stevenson's poetry, a body of work in which the questions of what happens after we have made that difficult decision to 'turn and exist' is foremost.

### **The Death of God:**

Maurice Bowra suggests that if we wish to identify a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantic poets from their eighteenth-century predecessors and Victorian successors

it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it. On this, despite significant differences on points of detail, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats agree, and for each it sustains a deeply considered theory of poetry.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Maurice Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (1950; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 1.

Prior to the Romantics the imagination ‘was not a cardinal point in poetical theory’. Eighteenth-century poets, for example, Dryden, Pope, and Johnson, believed that the purpose of poetry was not revelatory but mimetic, and that the role of poets was not to explore ‘the mysteries of life’, but to represent ‘its familiar appearance... with as much charm and truth as they can command.’<sup>145</sup> English philosophy was dominated by the theories of the empiricist John Locke, who dismissed the human mind as merely ‘a lazy looker-on on an external world’, akin to an insentient scientific instrument recording sense data. The Romantic poets, then, were the fervent creators of an entirely new conception of the imagination and its function within poetry. Whereas for the eighteenth-century poets shows of imagination were considered little more than distracting, though decorative, curlicues, for the Romantic idealists, the imagination was fundamental. They vehemently rejected the Lockean concept of the human mind as a passive recorder of sense impressions from without, and instead conceived of it as a ‘central point and governing factor’, of which the ‘most vital activity’ is the imagination.<sup>146</sup> For the Romantic idealists, the imagination is not merely the power of visualization, as Aristotle or Addison would have it, nor even the inventive capability of the poet, conceived of by Hume and many other eighteenth-century theorists as a ‘combination of innate sensibility, the power of association, and the faculty of conception.’<sup>147</sup> Rather, it is ‘the very source of spiritual energy’, and ‘they cannot but believe it is divine, and that, when they exercise it, they in some way partake of the

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Bowra, 2.

<sup>147</sup> Walter J. Bate, *From Classic To Romantic: Premises of Taste in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 113.

activity of God.’<sup>148</sup> Blake and Coleridge are the most passionate exponents of this notion of the imagination as a divine power, though Bowra notes that ‘it was held to some degree by Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats.’<sup>149</sup> For these poets, imagination is ‘insight’ into a world of divine truth that is ordinarily invisible and inaccessible to man. We can see this conception of the imagination as insight into the mind and workings of a ‘Divine Presence’ in Shelley’s ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, in which the speaker yearns after ‘some Unseen Power’, or ‘Spirit of Beauty’.

These Romantic notions of the imagination as an ‘insight’ into a higher reality depend heavily on a particular set of philosophical and spiritual assumptions, foremost among them, the belief in a pre-existent ‘Divine Presence’. In the two hundred or so years since the Romantic period proper, though, the notion of a ‘Divine Presence’ has become for many philosophically untenable. In notes for a lecture titled ‘The Writer in the University’, Stevenson writes:

The greatest shock sustained by poets and philosophers in the past hundred and fifty years has been, I suspect, what Nietzsche and Sartre independently described as the death of God. By God they meant, I think, the specifically Christian concept of a personal Father God, the vengeful God of the Puritans as well as the merciful (~~even-briable~~) [sic] God of gentler faiths. The question of whether God does in fact exist is extraneous to this argument; certainly most theologians would agree that our ideas about what God is today are very rarely those of our great-great-grandparents.<sup>150</sup>

The ‘death of God’ is also the death of the Romantic notion of poet-as-prophet, party to a higher realm or plane of experience. Indeed, in ‘Esthétique du Mal’ (1944), Wallace Stevens voices the concern of a generation of poets when he admits that ‘The death of

**Comment [E7]:** Acute accent added here and elsewhere

<sup>148</sup> Bowra, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Bowra, 4.

<sup>150</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Typewritten draft, ‘The Writer in the University,’ undated.

Satan', traditionally a far more compelling figure than God as far as poets are concerned, was 'a tragedy / for the imagination.'<sup>151</sup> Like their Romantic forebears, then, post-Romantic poets must boldly reconceive notions of the place and potential of the creative imagination within poetry, and subsequently, notions of what it is to be a poet.

The 'death of God' forces us to reconceive the position and potential not only of the poet, but of man himself. In the essay 'Two or Three Ideas' (1951), Stevens suggests:

to see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences... It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted.<sup>152</sup>

Man has gone from believing himself to be lovingly made in the very image of a protective and benevolent parent-God, imbued with almost limitless potential for progression and improvement, to the cruel knowledge that we are little more than 'blind chains of protein', who share a murky origin with 'worms and scuttling feeders / under tombstones'.<sup>153</sup> What has been annihilated along with the gods is the Romantic idea of man as a perfectible being of limitless potential. Twentieth-century poets such as Stevenson, then, must not only conceive of a post-Romantic poetic that takes into account changed and changing models of the imagination, but also of a post-Romantic conception of what it is to be human.

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<sup>151</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'Esthétique du Mal,' VIII, *The Collected Poems*, 319.

<sup>152</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'Two or three ideas,' (An address given at Mt. Holyoke College, April 1951) . A.MS. (unsigned); [Hartford, Spring 1951] 23s.(23p.) Wallace Stevens Papers Series: fMS Am 1333.5: Two or three ideas and letters to John Lincoln Sweeney (1). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>153</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 356.



This idea that the ‘annihilation’ of the gods is tantamount to an ‘annihilation’ of the self is one that we find in Stevenson’s short poem, ‘The Theologian’s Confession’ (2000), in which an aging theologian reflects upon, and is moved to reconsider, the beliefs which have long guided him. This figure is Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, whose first ‘Proof’ argued that ‘goodness’ or ‘justice’ are not only inherent in the world, prior to any human concept of ‘goodness’ or ‘justice’, but could not exist at all but for the existence of some ‘divine mind’. However, ‘Turning his last days page by page’, Anselm comes to realise that ‘*God is a man-thing made of language*’, a belief-object created by the human imagination.<sup>154</sup> In this power to create, ‘Man’ is revealed as ‘a God-thing’, echoing the nun’s assertion that ‘poetry and apotheosis are one’, in Stevens’s ‘A Pastoral Nun’. The roles of God and man have been fundamentally reversed; now it is man who creates God. However, it is clear that this realisation does not bring with it freedom or delight, as Anselm must now turn to questioning his own significance in such a world: ‘*But I? am embers.*’ The phrase ‘Three in One’, traditionally used to refer to the Holy Trinity, now comes to suggest the collapse of the ‘Three’ – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – into the ‘One’ – the human imagination. The extinction of any ‘divine mind’ seems to herald Anselm’s own extinction:

*Booked by my bracket’s final numbers,  
I will be lost in the dash between  
Proof that confuses and encumbers  
And truth so plain it won’t be seen.*

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<sup>154</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 333.

Many of Stevenson's poems alertly occupy this precarious position; having rejected a '*Proof that confuses and encumbers*', they must now turn to a rigorous and inevitably painful examination of where humans might stand, and what they might achieve, in a world where all meaning and truth emanates from them alone.

The idea that we are forlornly 'lost in the dash' in a post-God world is one that is explored (and ultimately dispelled) in 'To Phoebe' (2003), an English sonnet which boldly asks 'How in this mindless whirl of time and space / Find words to welcome one small human child?'<sup>155</sup> The speaker envies Shakespeare's contemporaries what she their apparent cosmological certainties and the consolation they derived from religious faith:

nature kept the virtues neatly filed.  
God's world was fixed, and round it ran the sun,  
A temperamental lantern on a skate.  
Our lives by the stars were wound up or begun:  
The universe was Heaven's unspoiled estate.

Adhering to the conventions of the form, the third quatrain brings with it an abrupt shift in imagery, as we take a sudden tumble from the dizzying heights of 'Heaven's unspoiled estate'. We are no longer kin to the 'angels', but only to 'rats and fleas' with whom 'Our plaited genes' share 'a murky source'. However, and again in accordance with convention, the final couplet introduces a new perspective on this unfortunate fall from grace, suggesting that although the certainty and faith that were available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries are not available to us, we have perhaps the greater freedom and potential: 'Yet no small Phoebe circa sixteen-three / Was ever free to be what you shall be.' This poem suggests, then, that far from being 'embers' or 'lost in the dash', this 'small human child' has a freedom and potentiality far greater than her

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<sup>155</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 127.

antecedents. Bruce Bawer suggests that, despite our intellectual and spiritual estrangement from our antecedents, ‘civilisational continuity’ is pointed at and manifested both in the poet’s celebration of childbirth and in her use of the sonnet form.<sup>156</sup>

In a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, Wallace Stevens writes, ‘If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else.’<sup>157</sup> As such, Stevenson notes, throughout the twentieth century, artists, scientists, philosophers, and politicians alike have attempted ‘to fill imaginatively the empty space God left in the universe.’<sup>158</sup> Stevenson posits a markedly similar idea in a 2006 interview:

very early on I came to the conclusion that all religions are imaginative projections of the cultures that need them and therefore create them. I have a lot of time for myths and metaphors drawn from religious beliefs, but I have never subscribed to any idea of a religion being ‘true’.<sup>159</sup>

Like Stevens, Stevenson is acutely aware that to disbelieve in something has very different psychic implications from having *nothing* to believe in.

Joseph Carroll argues that the Victorians, those generations first and most profoundly affected by the disintegration of religious faith, ‘sought substitutes that would give them a sense of spiritual purpose to their lives.’<sup>160</sup> They identified two potential substitutes; one social and one literary, or more accurately, poetic. Indeed, in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), George Santayana suggests that poetry is

**Comment [E8]:** Title italicized in n.154

<sup>156</sup> Bruce Bawer, ‘Civilised Pleasures,’ *The Hudson Review* 59 (Spring 2006), 148.

<sup>157</sup> *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 369.

<sup>158</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Typewritten draft, ‘The Writer in the University’ (undated and unpaginated).

<sup>159</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 4 December 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Joseph Carroll, ‘Stevens and Romanticism,’ *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, ed. John N. Serio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 92.

a natural substitute for religion; even that the two are essentially the same.<sup>161</sup> Both poetry and religion, he argues, are creations of the human imagination that express and to some degree fulfil our longing for some sort of greater meaning or significance. The only difference between poetry and religion is that religion is a poetry which we ceased to recognise as an imaginative construction and instead regard as truth. Having come to consciousness regarding the ultimately fictive nature of what we once believed to be true, we can begin to engage with those fictions in a more self-aware and mindful way.

In 'Those—dying then' (c. 1882), Emily Dickinson figures the loss of religious faith as the amputation of 'God's Right Hand', and notes, 'The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behaviour small – / Better an ignis fatuus / Than no illume at all –'.<sup>162</sup> Like Stevenson and Stevens, Dickinson recognises that we must have something to believe in, even if that 'something' is an 'ignis fatuus', or false flame. In the latter half of his poetic career, Stevens dedicated himself to conceiving of and creating a poetry that was 'equivalent to the idea of God'; that could fulfil the need in people's lives that had been previously been fulfilled by religious faith and the 'idea of God.' This poetry was to be, as the 'idea of God' had been for several millennia, 'the supreme fiction', with the crucial difference that we would be fully cognisant of its fictionality. Stevens's 'supreme fiction' is Dickinson's 'ignis fatuus', a flame that, even though we know it to be false, emits light that illuminates the world around us, and warmth that comforts and consoles.

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<sup>161</sup> George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. 1900. Ed. William G. Holzberger (Boston: The MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>162</sup> Emily Dickinson, # 1551, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (1970; London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 646.

Stevens's notion of 'the supreme fiction' often obliquely surfaces in Stevenson's poetry. In a 2010 interview, Stevenson explains:

I believe most people live in stories... myths, religions, fantasies, the very stuff of literature. And rather than reject such fictions, I think we should rush to embrace them so long as we understand they have no substance whatsoever 'out there' beyond human consciousness.<sup>163</sup>

There is an important difference between he who 'believes' in fictions he understands to be false (for example, the speaker in 'Walking Early by the Wye'), and he who cannot or will not acknowledge the fictive nature of such 'stories'. One such individual is the wretched figure of Li Po, in Stevenson's short poem 'Thales and Li Po' (1977). In Chinese popular mythology Li Po (or Li Bai) 'fell in love / with the moon's reflection / in the Yellow River', and drowned attempting to embrace his beloved.<sup>164</sup> Unlike Li Po, the post-Romantic knows that the flame is false, that the shimmering image he sees in the river is nothing but a reflection.

#### **Stevenson's 'sixth sense':**

If the short poem 'On Going Deaf' (2000) is ostensibly a candid rumination upon the poet's progressive hearing loss, then it is also a statement of the importance of the imagination within her work:

I've lost a sense. Why should I care?  
Searching myself, I find a spare.  
I keep that sixth sense in repair

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<sup>163</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 4 December 2010.

<sup>164</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 268.

And set it deftly, like a snare.<sup>165</sup>

Motion suggests that ‘a part of what Stevenson means by “that sixth sense” is the imagination itself’, and that ‘it is right and proper that any introduction to her work should end by insisting on its authority throughout her work.’<sup>166</sup> Reviews of Stevenson’s work tend to overlook the ‘authority’ of the imagination within her poetry, praising instead her supposedly ‘classical’ virtues, the almost camera-like clarity of her vision and the tautness of her wit. Although the poet’s imagination exerts considerable influence within her work, it does so subtly, sometimes almost imperceptibly. Motion notes that Stevenson ‘is not much given to plundering her unconsciousness (however interested she might be in dream stories), and neither does she often yeast up her language to evoke surreal states of mind.’<sup>167</sup> In Stevenson’s poetry we find none of the ‘stately pleasure domes’ of Coleridge’s poetry, nor any of the gaudily ominous landscapes of Wallace Stevens’s poetry, yet the imagination is no less active or central in Stevenson’s poetry than in the poems of these more conspicuously ‘imaginative’ poets. Indeed, Motion describes how she ‘continually animate[s] her acts of clear-seeing by connecting the exterior world with her interior states.’<sup>168</sup>

For Stevenson, the imagination is more a mode of ‘seeing’ than a means of make-believe. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘sixth sense’ as ‘A supposed intuitive faculty by which a person or animal perceives facts and regulates action

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<sup>165</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 351.

<sup>166</sup> Andrew Motion, introduction, *Anne Stevenson: Selected Poems*, American Poets Project (New York: The Library of America, 2008), xxii.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

without the direct use of any of the five senses.<sup>169</sup> Like any sense – sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch – the imagination allows us to experience and perceive the world around us. Stevenson’s figuring of the imagination as a ‘sixth sense’ draws upon those Romantic texts in which the imagination is figured in terms of sight and vision. Bowra notes that for the Romantic poets, the imagination ‘sees things to which the ordinary intelligence is blind... it is intimately connected with a special insight or perception or intuition. Indeed, imagination and insight are in fact inseparable and for all practical purposes a single faculty.’<sup>170</sup> The speaker’s statement, ‘I keep that sixth sense in repair’, attests to the importance of the imagination within her work; it is a ‘faculty’ that she keeps poised and well-exercised. The simile with which this short poem ends (‘like a snare’) introduces a characteristic ambivalence, implying that the imagination (or at least, Stevenson’s imagination) is perhaps not wholly benevolent: that it can deceive and entrap. Indeed, the poem itself, with its taut syntax and tightly wound AAAA rhyme scheme, begins to seem like a deftly set ‘snare’ to ambush the unsuspecting reader.

In a 1996 interview, Stevenson discusses the ‘enormous importance of [the] imagination’ within her work, describing imagination as ‘informed or reformed memory... not only in words; equally so in images and for many, including myself, in music.’<sup>171</sup> The imagination, then, is that sphere in which recollected experiences, emotions, and ideas may be amalgamated, even alchemised, in exciting and striking ways. Though the imagination is popularly associated with fantasy, invention, and

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<sup>169</sup> ‘Sixth sense, n.’. *OED Online*. September 2012. Oxford University Press. 24 September 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/180580?rskey=GXMGXn&result=2>>.

<sup>170</sup> Bowra, 7.

<sup>171</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 180

unreality, Stevenson, like Stevens, who asserts that 'the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real,' conceives of the imagination as functioning within a symbiotic relationship with the 'reality' of the material world around us.<sup>172</sup> In her explication of this 'creative exchange' she employs the metaphor of 'a two-way circuit', which, she suggests, 'as in the creation of electricity, comes into being as soon as the poet acknowledges that he or she and the world are simultaneously inventing each other.'<sup>173</sup> Just as components within an electrical circuit must be connected to a power supply, the imagination cannot function unless it is powerfully connected to the material world around us:

The world... is never let off the hook. The poet is continually putting it on the spot, challenging its terms, reinventing, magnifying, even distorting it by means of the positive element in the creative exchange. This positive element in the circuit is nothing less than what we call creative imagination or creative energy, and when it unexpectedly produces a new idea or way of expressing a truth, the world stands back amazed and shouts 'Genius!'<sup>174</sup>

Stevenson is acutely aware that the imagination can function either in conjunction with the material world around us, or as a psychological 'retreat'. The Romantic poets, too, appreciated the imagination's potential as both sanctuary and mode of seeing. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' (1816), for example, is, on one level, an allegorical exploration of the complex relationship between the rarefied creative imagination and the 'reality' of the material world. The 'pleasure-dome' is paradisaical, a man-made (or mind-made) Eden 'bright with sinuous rills, / Where blossomed many an incense-

<sup>172</sup> Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,' 6.

<sup>173</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Poetry and Place,' *Regionalität, Nationalität und Internationalität in der zeitgenössischen Lyrik – Erträge des Siebten Blaubeurer Symposiums*, ed. Lothar Fietz, Paul Hoffman, and Hans Werner Ludwig (Tübingen: Attempto Verlag, 1992), rpr. *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 115.

<sup>174</sup> 'Poetry and Place,' 116.



bearing tree', yet it is remote from the wider world: 'So twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round'.<sup>175</sup> To read 'Kubla Khan' alongside Coleridge's prefatory note, though, is to discover another level upon which Coleridge explores the relationship between the creative imagination and the material world. The author-speaker describes a vivid dream which inspires him, upon waking, to begin the composition of a long poem. This feverish imaginative state can suffer no contact with the banal 'reality' of the material world, and the poet famously explains that he 'was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock and detained by him above an hour', and returned to his room to find that his imaginative vision had 'passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast'.<sup>176</sup> We see in Coleridge's poem, then, a concept of the imagination that is the exact opposite of Stevenson's metaphor of the 'two-way circuit'. For Coleridge, the imagination is a circuit in itself. It does not require, and indeed, cannot tolerate, any connection with the material world. The self-contained imagination is, as a result, unsustainable.

The unsustainability of purely imaginative flights is a persistent theme in the poetry of Keats. The creative imagination can conjure from thin air a realm of delight and pleasure into which the poet-speaker can retreat or escape, yet such an escape proves ultimately unsatisfying. Jack Stillinger suggests that Keats's odes follow a common imaginative trajectory, whereby the speaker, unsatisfied with his experience of the 'real' world, escapes or attempts to escape into an 'ideal' world of his own imaginative construction. His imaginative flight is curtailed, though, as he finds the 'ideal' as disappointing as he found the 'real'. He returns to reality significantly altered, with his

**Comment [E9]:** Opening quotation mark added to title of poem in n.170

<sup>175</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997), 250.

<sup>176</sup> Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan,' lines 8-9, 6-7, *The Complete Poems*, 250.

understanding of his situation having been enhanced or intensified by his abortive flight. Keats's speakers are, in Stillinger's words, 'hoodwinked dreamers',<sup>177</sup> who discover that the creative imagination 'cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do.'<sup>178</sup> Both Lycius in 'Lamia' and the knight in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' are violently disillusioned as reality intrudes upon and destroys their vivid imaginative constructions.

Twentieth-century Romantic poets reprise within their work this Romantic preoccupation with the relationship between the creative imagination and the material world. In Stevenson's work, we find a subsumed ambivalence about the complex relationship between the imaginary and the material. At the heart of many of her poems is the never wholly satisfied question of where the authority lies: with the 'imagined' or with the 'actual'. At the extremity of Romantic Idealism was Blake, for whom no such question exists, because for him there simply is no reality outside of the imagination; indeed, he asserts that

Mental Things are alone Real; what is called Corporeal, Nobody Knows of its Dwelling Place: it is in Fallacy, and its Existence an Imposture. Where is Existence Out of Mind or Thought?<sup>179</sup>

Blake rejects the material world in which we live as a 'Vegetable Universe' in which we are but 'Vegetable Mortal Bodies'.<sup>180</sup> Blake's uncompromising idealist stance is by no means general to the 'Big Six', though, and Wordsworth or Keats would have no doubt tempered such an audacious assertion with characteristic tentativeness. The lively

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<sup>177</sup> Jack Stillinger, *Romantic Complexity: Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 203.

<sup>178</sup> Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 346

<sup>179</sup> William Blake, 'A Vision of the Last Judgment,' *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, rev. ed. ed. David V. Erdman, comm. Harold Bloom (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1982), 565

<sup>180</sup> Blake, 'Jerusalem: To the Christians,' *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 231.

certitude of Blake's assertions remains alluring, though intensely problematic, to latter-day poets. In Stevenson's poetry, we see occasional, darting flashes of Blakean idealism. 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' (1990) concludes with the assertion that

We learn to be human when we kneel  
to imagination, which is real  
long after reality is dead  
and history has put its bones to bed.<sup>181</sup>

'Reality' is vulnerable and mortal, it seems, but 'imagination' is everlasting. In 'Coming Back to Cambridge' (1974), the speaker asserts 'Nothing that really matters really exists', the audacity of the statement emphasised by its being suspended, as if in mid-air, between verse paragraphs.<sup>182</sup> Stevenson can never sustain such unbridled idealism for long, though, and she almost immediately turns back to the physical and 'intelligible human landscape' around her.

It is in 'Burnished' (1982) that we find the poet's most sustained engagement with, and examination of, Blakean idealism. The poem subjects to rigorous interrogation Blake's notion of the imagination as highest authority, and at the same time, reveals the acutely ambivalent nature of Stevenson's own complex position on the authority of the imagination. The speaker recounts:

Walking out of Hay in the rain, imagining Blake  
imagining his own world into existence,  
I suddenly turned on him and said with energy,  
'How dare you inflict imagination upon us!'<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 384.

<sup>182</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 59.

<sup>183</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 65.

Immediately we are aware of a paradox. The speaker heatedly turns on Blake and his concept of the imagination as source of reality, yet this is also a turning upon her own imaginative practice, as she, too, is engaged in a very Blakean kind of imaginative activity, walking along a riverbank, ‘imagining Blake / imagining his own world into existence’. The use of ‘inflict’ suggests that the creative imagination is a creative responsibility too heavy to bear, or a standard of imaginative vivacity that no other poet may live up to. Within Romantic poetry the imagination is always figured as a kind of life-giving force, as it enlivens the world around us and creates entire new worlds above and beyond our own. However, at the end of the first stanza, the imagination is associated with death and decay as well as with life and creation. The speaker’s imagined Blake replies to her admonishment, ““Let worlds die burnished as along this bank.”” Stevenson’s Blake has what O’Neill describes as a ‘seemingly nonchalant ability to create and destroy imaginative “worlds”’.<sup>184</sup> On one level, Stevenson’s speaker is enthralled by this ability (““Beautiful,” I said to him”), but we are soon to see that wearing the mantle of creator makes her profoundly uneasy.

Blake believed that only through the exercise of the creative imagination could man hope to

see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.<sup>185</sup>

This is what happens as the speaker sees ‘a new world / oiled by a cloud, still wet, in its spiny shell’ within the horse chestnut she holds in her hand; it is a ‘smooth pebble /

<sup>184</sup> O’Neill, ““A curved adventure”: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 111.

<sup>185</sup> Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence,’ *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 490.

mountain water had been running over', swimming 'like an embryo' in the palm of her hand. These are all images of freshness, fertility, and fecundity. The imagined Blake then instructs the speaker, "Now close your eyes." Blake rejects the material, visible world in which we live as a 'Vegetable Universe', a 'faint shadow' of 'real & eternal World', and in this instruction seems to incite the speaker to do the same, to close her eyes to the material world around her and live purely within an 'Eternal and Imaginative' realm. This is the turning point of the poem. It is when the speaker closes her eyes upon the material world around her to enter more fully a world of her own imaginative creation that the poem takes a somewhat disquieting turn. At first, the experience is a pleasant one: the speaker feels 'the whole world warmed. / It was breathing its native heat in my blind skin.' In the alliteration of 'whole world warmed' it is as if in each word a world is opening up, like a blooming flower, enveloping the speaker. But which 'whole world' is the speaker referring to? The material world around her? Or the 'whole world' that she is creating in her imagination? Having closed her eyes upon the material world, the speaker is 'blind': she has not gained insight or vision through her imaginative activities, but has rather lost her sight. The phrase 'blind skin' somehow suggests a more profound blindness than would have 'blind eyes', an imperviousness to the touch of the material world. What moments before seemed luxuriant and fertile now seems barren and sterile; that 'new world / oiled by a cloud' has withered to 'a leather ocean / lapping a small sandy island. No one / appeared to live there.' The change in vocabulary is striking; from 'new', 'wet', 'gloss', 'shone', 'smooth', and 'embryo', all words suggesting luxuriance and fertility, to 'leather', 'shrivelled', 'dry', and 'wound'. The visceral image of the 'shrivelled nipple' is a

metaphor for the speaker's experience of the Blakean creative imagination: what at first seemed nourishing and plentiful is revealed to have run dry, leaving only hunger and disenchantment. The poem is 'A Riddle', then, on two levels; the explicit 'riddle' is the identification of the 'new world / oiled by a cloud' as a conker, whereas the implicit riddle is that of the imagination: what it is, how it might be used, how it might fulfil us, but also disappoint us.

In other poems, too, there is a sense of the imagination as something both fulfilling and strangely threatening. 'Night Thoughts and False Confessions' (1990) begins with the admission, 'How uneasily I live / in the house of imagination.'<sup>186</sup> The imagination is 'pure white, stone white and blue, / the beautiful figure of the desert, / musical and mathematical, its deep throat / blameless, immaculate, swallowing you.' The male speaker knows that the woman lying next to him could be easily swallowed up, engulfed, subsumed by his imagination. Indeed, the female speaker says, 'You beat me and beat me / on the slab of your mind's concrete.' Here, then, we have the idea of the creative imagination committing a sort of violence upon its objects. In 'In Passing' (2003) the imagination is figured as 'that / dark, erotic mill', in which the poet and her language toil in 'unpaid, love-making labour'.<sup>187</sup> In 'Early Rain' (1977), as in 'Burnished', the speaker imagines 'a city rooted in its reflections'.<sup>188</sup> The speaker instructs the addressee, 'Try to imagine the lights, too', and 'Imagine the foundations of such a city'. However, it is a strange sort of city, empty, ghostly even, like the eerie palazzo in Wallace Stevens's 'The Ordinary Women': 'As yet there are no people, only doors / grieving over eighteenth-century pediments'. In the final stanza, it is revealed

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<sup>186</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 147.

<sup>187</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 288.

<sup>188</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Selected Poems 1955-1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 66.

that the speaker and the addressee, who have imagined this city of reflections into existence, are crushed beneath its surprising weight: 'you and I, perhaps, asleep in a room, / but buried beneath the cornerstone all the same.'

These poems entertain, then ultimately retreat from, the Blakean conception of the creative imagination conjuring whole worlds into existence. It is clear that, for Stevenson unlike Blake, 'Mental Things' are not 'alone Real', and that what is 'Corporeal' is by no means 'Fallacy'. Whilst human experience may be unavoidably mediated through 'Mind or Thought', there is appreciable 'Existence Out of Mind and Thought' to which the poet must not close her eyes.

A more amenable Romantic model for Stevenson's conception of the imagination is Wordsworth's. Bowra notes that Wordsworth accepts the 'independent existence' of the world around us, and, furthermore, 'insists that the imagination must in some sense conform to it.'<sup>189</sup> Wordsworth thought of the imagination as

A plastic power  
... at times  
Rebellious, acting in a devious mood;  
A local spirit of his own, at war  
With general tendency, but, for the most,  
Subservient strictly to external things  
With which it communed.<sup>190</sup>

Here we can see the seeds of both Stevens's and Stevenson's ideal of the imagination as functioning within a symbiotic relationship of sorts with the material world around us. In 'Elegy' (1990), the poet presents us with a model of the artist in a symbiotic relationship with the material world. The artist in question is Stevenson's father, the

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<sup>189</sup> Bowra, 19.

<sup>190</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, Book II, lines 381-387, *The Major Works*, ed. and intro. Stephen Gill (1984; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 401.

ethical philosopher, C. L. Stevenson, a gifted amateur pianist. Although, as the poet-speaker recalls, ‘you could cut your tongue / on the blade of his reasonable logic’, at the piano he became ‘the bowed, reverent, wholly absorbed Romantic.’<sup>191</sup> Though he is ‘wholly absorbed’ in his playing, this artist is by no means isolated, hermetically sealed off from the material world around him. The poet first suggests that ‘For him, I think, playing was solo flying, a bliss / of removal, of being alone’, but adds, in a characteristic second thought:

Not happily always; never an escape,  
                   for he was affectionate, and the household hum  
 he pretended to find trivial or ridiculous  
                   daily sustained him.

The artist, far from being concerned only with the transcendental or the esoteric, is ‘daily sustained’ by the minutiae of the material world around him.

Though, in ‘*Esthétique du Mal*’, Stevens’s speaker describes the ‘death of Satan’ as ‘a tragedy / for the imagination’, it is also ‘the imagination’s new beginning’.<sup>192</sup> Here, as in Stevens’s ‘*Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz*’, the new poetic that is required in such uncertain times is figured as a vibrant music ‘That buffets the shapes of its possible halcyon / Against the haggardie...’. The ‘shaken realist’ must open his eyes and use his imagination not to conjure ‘poor phantoms’ where there are none, but to help us look at and understand the world around us in new ways. In the 1942 essay ‘*The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*’, Stevens contended that the function of the poet is ‘to help people live their lives’, not by ‘lead[ing] people out of the confusion in which they find themselves’, but by ‘making his imagination theirs’ so that ‘his imagination become[s]

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<sup>191</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 178.

<sup>192</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 313.



the light in the minds of others.’<sup>193</sup> In a world devoid of ‘phantoms’ and ‘blue phenomena’, the imagination can no longer be regarded as a means of access to the ‘Divine Mind’. Instead, it is a means of perceiving and making sense of our changed and changing world, and poetry a means of sharing those perceptions with others. Similarly, Stevenson suggests that the creative imagination, through poetry, might create or sustain what she calls a ‘shared sensibility’.<sup>194</sup> The very notion of a ‘shared sensibility’ helps people ‘live their lives’, as ‘it implies that individuals exists, that human souls are not merely products of genetic evolution and social acculturation.’ The imagination can, she writes, ‘nourish [us] and help [us] to be happy’, though she characteristically adds the qualification ‘Not all the time, of course, but sometimes.’<sup>195</sup> Though we may ultimately be little more than ‘blind chains of protein’ made by ‘chance’, crucially there is ‘interlacing / with our hardware / something like a dance.’<sup>196</sup> This ‘something’ is the imagination, and it is this that separates us from the ‘pets / and parakeets / and collared turtle-doves’, even as it allows us to imagine existences other than our own.

In the exchange with Alvarez in the *New York Review of Books*, Stevenson writes:

we’ve got to accept with the rest of society that all ‘selves’ are minute parts of a living culture, and that the human species is a precious, precarious flowering in an interdependent ecological chain. Nature owes us nothing, and the world, uncultivated and unattended, will turn us out into the universe in an uncaring flash if we do not work together, in W.H. Auden’s phrase, unglamorously to rebuild the walls of the polis.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Wallace Stevens, ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,’ *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 29.

<sup>194</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 4 December 2010.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 356.

<sup>197</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, ‘Sylvia Plath: An Exchange.’

Stevenson refers here to the line, 'And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands', in Auden's poem 'Paysage Moralisé'.<sup>198</sup> Stevenson asserts that however tempting it may be for the poet to 'dream of islands', to use the imagination as a luxurious retreat in which to dwell in 'splendid aloofness or untouchably tender self-indulgence',<sup>199</sup> the poet must resist that temptation. Instead, he must use his imagination 'unglamorously to rebuild the walls of the polis': to help himself and others find ways to comprehend and come to terms with the fact that 'we are natural creatures despite our computer-like brains',<sup>200</sup> and that we live in a world in which 'nature owes us nothing'.<sup>201</sup> For Stevenson, then, the function of the imagination is not to conjure up new worlds into which we might escape, but to help us live in *this* world, however indifferent and inhospitable it may be.

In 'He and It' (1982), subtitled '(A Pathetic Fantasy)', a play on 'pathetic fallacy', the poet explores how the imagination might be misused to create alternate worlds in which to retreat from 'reality'. Unable to face up to the reality that no divine truth or affirmation can be divined from natural phenomena, and that man is just another living organism in an ecological chain, 'He' uses his vivid imagination to fill the gaping void he perceives as being left following the 'death of the gods'. The capitalisation of 'He' implies that this figure conceives of himself as a God-figure. The philosophical position 'He' occupies is similar to that occupied by poets such as Coleridge and Blake during the Romantic period proper: 'This world is not *it*, he felt. / Something is missing.'<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Collected Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1945), 47.

<sup>199</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath: An Exchange.'

<sup>200</sup> 'Poetry and Place,' 113.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 269.

However, whilst this position may have been tenable two centuries ago, today it seems, as the title of the poem suggests, little more than ‘(*A Pathetic Fantasy*)’.

Like the ‘traveller who walks a temperate zone’ in Kingsley Amis’s poem ‘Against Romanticism’ (1956), Stevenson’s ‘He’ seeks anthropomorphic presence within the natural landscape as affirmation of his own existence. When he cannot find this presence, he believes the world to be unsatisfactory, uninspiring; he ‘impatiently’ wishes it away, waiting for it to be enveloped by darkness so as to provide a blank canvas for his own lurid imaginative conjurings. Whereas the sceptical speaker of Amis’s poem wishes for a sky ‘clean of officious birds / Punctiliously flying on the left’, Stevenson’s ‘He’ is impelled to imbue the birds he encounters with mythopoeic significance.<sup>203</sup> The ‘plain’ sight of ‘Swans churning water in the ordinary river’ does not please or inspire him, for he wants the swans ‘to be women or gods’. ‘He’ cannot bear to live in this ‘ordinary’ world, where the natural landscape and phenomena are indifferent to his very existence, and so he must create for himself another world in which the ‘competent willows’ partake of, and affirm, his anguish, ‘miserably weeping’ into a river, and the sun is ‘his friend’, beaming him ‘messages of light.’ The second verse paragraph tells of how

he drew the world  
gently through the narrows of his need  
till it cradled his head.

The alliteration of the ‘narrows’ and ‘need’ suggests a sense of constriction; this ‘world’ that ‘He’ creates is not a real world, but a stifling, constricting fantasy that retains no

**Comment [E10]:** New material in response to Professor Kendall’s ‘invitation’ to consider Amis’s ‘Against Romanticism’.

<sup>203</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Against Romanticism’, *New Lines*, ed. Robert Conquest (London: Macmillan & Co., 1956), 46.

commune with the ‘ordinary’ world of reality. ‘He’ describes how ‘comfortably’ this fantasy world ‘fits its creator’: he is no longer a part of the world, but its ‘creator’, who ‘winks’ the stars into existence at night. This imaginary world protects him like a ‘helmet’ from the actual world that he found so unsatisfactory and lacking. It ‘cradles’ his head, casting him in a naïve, infantile role. His imaginary world is not a wholly welcoming place, though, and ‘he declares that sky burns, / wind bites, swans hound him with meaning.’ As far as ‘He’ is concerned, though, even a natural world that seems unkindly disposed towards him is more comforting than a natural world that is wholly ignorant and indifferent to his existence. Stevenson insists elsewhere that the imagination must maintain a symbiotic relationship with the material world around us; that the ‘explorative mind’ must be prevented ‘from choking itself on obsessive interior concerns.’<sup>204</sup> The protagonist’s imagination has long since severed its ties to the material world, even deliberately seeking to block it out, and in the penultimate verse paragraph, his fantasy world begins, in the words of Stevens, to ‘lose vitality’:

his voice  
sounds a little faint now.  
He knows he can’t be losing.

Like the wretched knight in Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, ‘He’ will soon awake from his vivid imaginings into the cold light of day. It is clear that, for Stevenson, this kind of imaginative activity does not constitute a valid response to the post-Romantic question of what the imagination is for and how it should be used. Like Amis’s ‘Against Romanticism’, ‘He and It’ attempts to offer a gentle corrective to the ‘Romantic’ propensity for anthropomorphic imaginative **projection**.

<sup>204</sup> ‘Poetry and Place,’ 115.

**Comment [E11]:** New material in response to Professor Kendall’s ‘invitation’ to consider Amis’s ‘Against Romanticism’.

If 'He and It' outlines a way in which the imagination should not function, each of the relatively late paired poems, 'Why Take Against Mythology (1)' (2003), and 'Why Take Against Mythology (2)' (2003), sets out a different way in which the imagination might function within poetry in our late philosophical age. Together, these poems form a dynamic debate, as they search for a way in which to live, understand, imagine, and create in a world devoid of the 'Divine'. Although David Fuller suggests that in these poems we observe 'a dialogue between a woman who sees in terms of myth, and a man who wants to strip away myth to reach perceptions unmodified by human intervention', there is nothing in the text which suggests a gendered casting of speakers.<sup>205</sup> The tension of the poems is intensified if they are read not as a debate between two separate speakers, but rather as a Yeatsian 'quarrel' between two divergent impulses within one post-Romantic creative personality. The first poem, 'Why Take Against Mythology (1)', begins as if it were a retort in a debate that began long before the reader turned the page: 'That twilight skyline, for example'.<sup>206</sup> In the untamed surroundings of Cwm Nantcol in North Wales, the speaker can not help but seek the small comfort of anthropomorphic presence within the landscape. In the jagged silhouette of the twilight skyline, she sees an 'enchanted giant':

the more I look at it,  
the more I see a skull  
crushed into the hill, nose  
chipped flat, jaw  
thrust up[.]

**Comment [E12]:** Indented lines made lower-cased

<sup>205</sup> David Fuller, Oration for Anne Stevenson at the award of an honorary doctorate at Durham University, 1 July 2005. Durham University website, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2010.

<[http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ceremonies/congregation/stevenson\\_anne.pdf](http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ceremonies/congregation/stevenson_anne.pdf)>.

<sup>206</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 78.

It is for a moment unclear whether this is a process of *aletheia* (the speaker revealing or illuminating through her imaginative images some innate but previous indiscernible presence within the landscape), or a manifestation of wishful thinking (the speaker projecting onto the landscape the presences she craves). The speaker chides the addressee, 'See him? No, stand / here, clear of the house', suggesting that there is indeed something 'real' to be seen on the skyline, but the repetitious quality of the lines, 'the more I look at it, / the more I see a see a skull', suggests that it is the 'ubiquitous capital I' with its 'anthropomorphic obsession' that is present here, rather than the clear-sighted 'e-y-e'. The image of a 'full bush of / genitals stirring just / in the right place' is an unnerving one, yet the speaker seems comforted by it; once again, even anthropomorphic presence which seems threatening or hostile is preferable to an indifferent landscape devoid of presence. To the addressee, the speaker exclaims, 'Uncork a magnum / Of imagination, man!' Is this seeing of giants in the twilight sky imagination? In these first two stanzas, it seems as though the speaker, like the anonymous 'He' in 'He and It', is living within another 'Pathetic Fantasy'. However, in the final stanza it becomes clear that this is no 'pathetic fantasy'; this speaker is using the imagination in a more complex and sophisticated way than the wretched 'He'. The speaker bids the internal addressee, 'Inflame your heart / with my enchanted giant', but then adds a crucial qualification:

Figure his resurrection  
in your dreams, or art,

But make him art, not fact.  
For when daylight comes back  
It will tear him apart.

This, then, is no 'pathetic fantasy': rather it is a fantasy that is fully aware of itself as fantasy. The speaker knows that there is no 'enchanted giant' lying dormant within the rugged hills, that the 'giant' is only a vivid projection of her own anthropomorphically obsessed imagination onto the indifferently inhuman landscape. Similarly, in the early poem 'Sierra Nevada' (1965), the speaker feels that the 'glimmering rocks, the hundreds / and hundreds of blue lakes / ought to be mythical', and imagines that 'the great trees, soon as they die, / immediately become ghosts, / stalk upright among the living with awful composure.'<sup>207</sup> However, the speaker is ultimately fully aware that

even these bones that light  
has taken and twisted, with their weird gesticulations  
and shadows that look as if  
they'd been carved out of dust, even these  
have nothing to do with what we have done or not done[.]

and that the wind, though it may seem 'fierce', is always 'perfectly transparent'. Both speakers recognise that though the 'giant' is only a projection of the imagination, and though the trees 'have nothing to do with what we have done or not done', it is a projection and a fiction that has value and significance, in that it helps one to live in and even 'love' the inhospitable, non-human landscape of North Wales or the Sierra Nevada desert. The speaker asks,

And how could I love,  
dear, a Wales  
made of ice-cut rock? No tales  
in the making of mountains  
no mind in the dark?

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<sup>207</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 30.

Stevenson is acutely aware that it is such ‘tales’ of a ‘mind in the dark’ that have for millennia enabled humans to live in their various environments, to somehow connect with a landscape that would otherwise be unbearable in its ‘otherness’. We now recognise that the ‘mind in the dark’ has all along been our own imaginations. This conception of the imagination as creator of those ‘tales’ which help us to live within and ‘love’ the world around us draws significantly upon Wallace Stevens’s notion of the ‘Supreme Fiction’.

In ‘Why Take Against Mythology (2)’, we are given a different model of how the post-Romantic imagination might function. The speaker asks, ‘Why, love, do you persist / in personifying natural events?’<sup>208</sup> What the speaker of the first poem celebrates as ‘a magnum / of imagination’ the second speaker denounces as anthropocentric ‘arrogance’. However, it is clear that this is no virulent attack upon the post-Romantic position outlined in the first poem. The endearment in the opening line suggests that the speaker of the second poem is sympathetic to the desire for meaning and presence that the speaker of the first poem feels, and understands the allure of creating ‘tales’ of a ‘mind in the dark’. Like the speaker of the first poem, the second speaker believes that the imagination plays a vital role in helping us to live in our world, yet believes that it is best put to use not ‘locating fate in stars, off-loading / guilt on rocks that were liquid once’, or ‘conjuring out of mass and force / false spirit shadows’, but helping us to conceive of and better understand our place within a world that, without the imagination, Stevenson implies, would be utterly unfathomable and impenetrable:

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<sup>208</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 79.



You like to imagine?  
 Imagine nuclei moiling themselves  
 alive in steamy crevices[.]

**Comment [E13]:** Typo removed

The second speaker believes that rather than use the imagination to envisage what is not there, the speaker of the first poem should use her vivid imagination to better understand what *is* there, namely the evidence of countless millennia of ‘continents travelling and clashing.’ Though the first speaker laments the absence of ‘tales / in the making of mountains’, it is clear that these mountains are themselves part of perhaps the most fascinating ‘tale’ of all: that of the evolution of our planet and all life on it. Although the speaker of the first poem clearly finds the idea of ‘a Wales / made of ice-cut rock’ uninspiring, her unresponsiveness to such a landscape suggested by the monosyllables, the speaker of the second poem describes these millennia-long geological processes in a vivid, imaginatively engaged way with an onomatopoeic texture of sounds:

**Comment [E14]:** Comma before ‘uninspiring’ removed

three miles high, a grinding  
 plain of ice, a Pleistocene caul,  
 gorging, sculpting, furrowing  
 this scoop of valley.

In the final stanza of the first poem, there was a distinction set up between ‘art’ and ‘fact’; the ‘resurrection’ of the ‘enchanted giant’ had to be ‘art, not fact’, suggesting that the two were somehow opposed. However, this distinction is confidently dismantled in the final stanza of the second poem. Whereas in the first poem, ‘art’ functions as a sphere into which one can retreat from ‘fact’, here ‘art’ is to ‘fact’ as the delicate etchings of lichens *are* to a cliff-face. The second speaker believes, then, that ‘art’ and

**Comment [E15]:** ‘is’ replaced by ‘are’

the imagination should not provide an escape from ‘fact’, but should intelligently engage with it. This is again suggested in the lines

Facts? They’ll be minted by imagination  
 once daft mankind  
 stops conjuring out of mass and force  
 false spirit-shadows of his own mind.

Whereas ‘He’ in ‘He and It’ conjured ‘false spirit-shadows’ to populate a world he perceived as empty and meaningless, here the speaker urges the addressee to use his (or her) imagination to better comprehend and appreciate the ‘facts’ of the non-human material world around us. The word ‘minted’ suggests several things. First, that the imagination ‘mints’ facts, in that it allows us to see them as if for the first time, and to truly comprehend their meaning. Second, that the imagination can take something that was before merely ‘mass and force’, and ‘mint’ it – turn it into legal tender, as it were, as something with real imaginative value, something that can ‘Inflame your heart’ and shape our ‘dreams, or art’.

### **The Poet and the Scientist:**

It has been long and erroneously assumed that the Romantic poets were fundamentally opposed to the scientific endeavours and advances of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Robert J. Richards notes that ‘it is presumed that these individuals

endorsed a mystical, anti-empirical approach to nature.’<sup>209</sup> However, in recent years, the work of critics such as Andrew Cunningham, Nicholas Jardine, and Richard Holmes has done much to challenge this reductive misconception. Stevenson believes that the contemporary poet must consider himself not a natural enemy but a natural ally of the scientist. It is the ambition of both the scientist and the poet, she suggests, to encourage and enable people to look at and develop an understanding (of whatever kind) of the world around them and their own position within it. Stevenson explicitly traces her own stance back to that of Wordsworth. In the ‘Preface’ to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth vowed that

If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of Science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us[.]<sup>210</sup>

Stevenson writes, ‘Wordsworth... looked forward to a time when “the poet will lend his divine spirit to the transfigurations” he saw science bringing about. Today, science has immeasurably increased our sense of mystery, while it has certainly created a material world in which, with all the other species, we teeter on a razor’s edge.’<sup>211</sup> Stevenson is keen to demonstrate through her poetry that scientific advance, far from robbing the world of the beauty and the mystery sought and celebrated by the poet, in fact opens up

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<sup>209</sup> Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 512.

<sup>210</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802 version), *The Major Works*, 606.

<sup>211</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 176.

for the poet whole new worlds of ever-deepening mystery and new, perhaps unfamiliar, ways to understand and conceive of beauty. For Stevenson, as for Wordsworth, ‘the remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist’ are ‘as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed’.<sup>212</sup> Quoting the Nobel physicist Richard Feynman, Stevenson writes, ‘It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it. For far more marvellous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined! Why do poets of the present not speak of it?’<sup>213</sup>

For many poets and artists, however, the ‘truth’, as presented by scientists, was considered not ‘marvellous’, but rather a fatal blow to the creative imagination. George Bernard Shaw, in the preface to *Back to Methuselah* (1921), writes of Darwin’s theory of evolution:

when its whole significance dawns upon you, your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you. There is a hideous fatalism about it, a ghastly and damnable reduction of beauty and intelligence, of strength and purpose, of honour and aspiration.<sup>214</sup>

Critics of Darwin believed that his notion of natural selection encouraged people to view the natural world as nothing more than a ‘machine, a contrivance of fixed parts grinding out its products with dispassionate consequence.’<sup>215</sup> However, Darwin saw the natural world not as a ‘machine’, but as a living organism, wondrous, beautiful, inspiring, and uplifting in its infinite complexity. In the conclusion to *The Origin of Species*, Darwin writes,

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<sup>212</sup> ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*, 606.

<sup>213</sup> Tony Hay and Patrick Waters, *The Quantum Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1. Quoted in “‘The Way You Say the World Is What You Get’,” 173.

<sup>214</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1921; London: Penguin, 1974), 32.

<sup>215</sup> Richards, 525.

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>216</sup>

Darwin's work seeks to illustrate that a desacrilised natural world is as worthy of the poet's attention and imagination as a world shaped by a creator-God, and that in such a world, for those willing and able to look about them, there is beauty and grandeur untold. Stevenson takes up Darwin's mission in poems such as 'An Even Shorter History of Nearly Everything', drawing our attention to:

the rocks  
Dragged from the carboniferous to frill a church  
With storms of fossils individual as snowflakes  
Three hundred million years adrift with the continents,  
Locked in the ooze of an equatorial ocean.<sup>217</sup>

The poem suggests that no fantastical story of a creator-God can ever match the exquisite and terrible 'strangeness' of the true story of our existence: 'What faith, what story, what fact is more remarkable / Than this resurrection of the dead that represents / The life in us, the strangeness of it all?'

In 'From the Primrose Path' (2005), the speaker finds that 'grandeur' spoken of by Darwin in a colourful sunset over London. The exclamatory opening line has something of Shelley's exclamations in 'Ode to the West Wind' about it, with its vibrant synaesthetic imagery: 'Effulgence, or copper polyphony!'<sup>218</sup> The speaker muses that

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<sup>216</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, intro. J. W. Burrow (1859; London: Penguin Books, 1985), 459-460.

<sup>217</sup> *Stone Milk*, 44.

<sup>218</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 362.

such a 'spectacle' would have had a very different kind of significance for a pre-Darwinian spectator, for whom

one cough from the Lord  
Produced in a vermillion corona  
Gabriel with a fiery sword  
Leaping from the hot heart of punishment.

Now, as the 'effulgence' of the setting sun 'spills over Regent's Park', the speaker recognises it as nothing more, but also as nothing less, than

a phenomenon of city vapour, light  
and a catalyst of human perception,  
smelting for this rare, Marylebone ceiling  
a luminous ore.

This beautiful sunset does not herald 'punishment' from the heavens, nor may we divine any meaning or message hidden within it. There is a striking juxtaposition of registers in the language used to describe the sight. On one hand, 'effulgence' and 'luminous' are words that the High Romantics might have used to describe such a sight, and on the other, 'catalyst', 'smelting', and 'ore' are taken from a scientific or industrial register. In fusing these two registers, Stevenson is suggesting that a scientific perspective – one that recognises that the astonishing quality of the light is caused by the passage of light waves through the thickening atmosphere above an industrial city – and a Romantic perspective that perceives beauty and emotional edification in such a sight, need not be mutually exclusive. There is a dextrous play on the word 'ore' which suggests the awe such a sight inspires in the speaker. The figuring of the imagination as a 'catalyst' prefigures the idea that the imagination 'mints' bare facts, found in 'Why Take Against

Mythology (2)'. Cian Duffy notes that in the nineteenth century 'the idea that natural grandeur was evidence, by design, of the existence of a creator God [was] a commonplace of the discourse of the sublime in Britain.'<sup>219</sup> Poets such as Shelley, however, had already challenged that 'commonplace' idea. In the second of his notes to *Queen Mab* (1813), Shelley writes that 'the plurality of worlds, the infinite immensity of the universe is a most awful subject of contemplation. He who rightly feels its mystery and grandeur, is in no danger of seduction from the falsehoods of religious systems, or of deifying the principle of the universe.'<sup>220</sup> Duffy argues that this 'implies a concern on his [the poet's] part to re-write that discourse [on the sublime] along secular, libertarian lines, and away from a belief in the creator-God'.<sup>221</sup> Shelley, then, is seeking to de-sacralise the grandeur of the natural world, to claim it for the secular imagination, a mission that Darwin was to take up in a different discipline later in the nineteenth century.

### **The Sublime and the Beautiful:**

Central to Stevenson's poetry is a deep and enduring concern with the ways in which we respond emotionally and intellectually to the material world around us. For many

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<sup>219</sup> Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>220</sup> *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F.L. Jones, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 354.

<sup>221</sup> Duffy, 7.

Romantic artists the most significant and sought-after response to the world around us is the experience of the sublime. Indeed, one of the most significant ways in which the Romantics differed from their eighteenth-century predecessors was in their rejection of the picturesque and their embrace of the sublime as the highest form of aesthetic experience. Samuel Holt Monk suggests that there are several ways in which the sublime might be understood. He writes, 'No single definition of the term would serve in any single decade for all writers . . . but the word naturally expressed high admiration, and usually implied a strong emotional effect, which, in the latter years of the century, frequently turned on terror.'<sup>222</sup> Critics have used the sublime as a category in which to place those aesthetic experiences that do not adhere to neoclassical ideas of beauty. Seminal in the exploration of the sublime as aesthetic experience was Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, in which he made the distinction between the merely beautiful (that which is human in scale, and in which a discernible harmony and proportion give the beholder a sense of an ordered and pleasing whole), and the sublime (that which is beyond human scale and conception and in which the lack of human-imposed order provokes a sense of productive, even pleasant, horror in the beholder).<sup>223</sup> Similarly, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes the sublime as 'a strong and equivocal emotion: it carries both pleasure and pain... in it pleasure derives from pain.'<sup>224</sup> Put simply, then, the beautiful is that which we can easily and pleasurably comprehend, whereas the sublime is that which is

**Comment [E16]:** Title of book italicized in n.216

<sup>222</sup> Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 233.

<sup>223</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, intro. Adam Phillips (1990; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>224</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism,' in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 77.



resistant to full comprehension yet in its very incomprehensibility gives a certain sort of painful pleasure.

The Romantic sublime most commonly occurs when man is in unmediated contact with the natural world. Sites particularly conducive to sublime experience include soaring mountains, vast deserts, endless oceans, and experiences of powerful natural phenomena such as lightning storms or volcanoes. Perhaps the image most closely associated with the sublime in Romantic art and literature is that of the Alps. Three prominent writers on the sublime, Anthony Ashley Cooper, John Dennis, and Joseph Addison, all used their experiences of journeying across the Alps as examples of sublime experience. Addison notes in *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy e.t.c. in the years 1701, 1702, 1703*, for example, that ‘The Alps fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror.’<sup>225</sup> This ‘agreeable kind of horror’ comes from a realization or part-comprehension of the unfathomable vastness and infinite complexity of the natural world around us and beyond us; it is a conflicting emotional response that brings into play both a fear of the unknown or unknowable and a frisson of delight at the same.

Stevenson’s poetry is consistent in its impassioned rejections of that art that seeks and celebrates only the undemandingly picturesque. In ‘A Tourists’ Guide to the Fens’ (2003), the speaker mocks ‘Anthea’ who ‘sets up her easel // to catch in watercolour / a picturesque angle of the almshouses’, and ‘scrupulously omits // electrical wiring and TV paraphernalia’.<sup>226</sup> Similarly, the tourists disregard the violent human history of the landscape – ‘the cottagers’ corpses stinking, / unburied by the furrows, // Christ’s men in retreat / at the Fever House at Malton’ – in favour of the picture postcard ‘dolls-house

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<sup>225</sup> Joseph Addison, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy etc. in the years 1701, 1702, 1703* (London: T. Walker, 1773), 261.

<sup>226</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 58.

villages’, and ‘roses called peace and blessing // exclusive to frilly white cottages / under pie-crust thatch.’ The landscape seems strangely artificial, and the reference to ‘another film’ in which ‘the heroine escapes with her hero / into rural Cambridgeshire circa 1666...’ suggests that this landscape is no more authentic than an elaborate and expensive film set.

Similarly, ‘Claude Glass’ (1985) criticises those artists (like ‘Anthea’) who seek within their work to ‘evade the messy world’, and ‘to impart / To Nature all *les belles finesses* of Art’.<sup>227</sup> The Claude Glass, or black mirror, was widely used by picturesque artists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thomas West, in his 1778 book *A Guide to the Lakes*, writes ‘The person using it ought always to turn his back to the object that he views. It should be suspended by the upper part of the case...holding it a little to the right or the left (as the position of the parts to be viewed require) and the face screened from the sun.’<sup>228</sup> When used in this way, the Claude Glass would reflect the landscape with ‘a soft, mellow tinge like the colouring of that Master.’<sup>229</sup> The tight rhyming couplets represent the attempts of art to artificially neaten and sweeten, and to impose harmonious order upon, the ‘messy world’. As Motion notes, Stevenson’s poetry is firmly committed to ‘to the ragged, volatile, and familiarly uncertain world, not to a version of experience that has been tidied up to fit a controlling idea.’<sup>230</sup> For Stevenson, then, art should function not as a Claude Glass, risking ‘The truth to be the fair’, prettifying the ‘real’ world into an ‘sweetened’ tableau, but rather as a field glass,

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<sup>227</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 98.

<sup>228</sup> Thomas West, quoted in Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, trans. Jeff Fort (Boston: Zone Books-The MIT Press, 2004), 178.

<sup>229</sup> William Gilpin, quoted in ‘Drawing Techniques: the Claude Glass,’ *The Victorian and Albert Museum*. Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2012. <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/d/drawing-techniques-claude-glass/>>.

<sup>230</sup> Andrew Motion, introduction, *Anne Stevenson: Selected Poems*, xx.

allowing us to better perceive what was perhaps previously invisible. The poet who seeks ‘To give God’s barbarous hills and rivers grace’ is like the tourists who ‘turn their backs on what they went to see.’ It is clear that the poet-speaker firmly allies herself not with these landscape ‘connoisseurs’ with an ‘expensive’ taste for the ‘nice’, but with ‘the men of coal and iron and steel’ who engage with the natural world around them in an unmediated and unrarefied way. Though ‘the Tyne’s black stacks and blacker steam’ may not adhere to neo-classical ideals of beauty, to Stevenson it is a sight and a landscape as worthy of the poet’s notice and celebration as ‘The Lakes and their museum’.

The sublime, as an aesthetic category, has been variously reincarnated, so to speak, in the two hundred years since the Romantic period proper. In the nineteenth century, Ruskin, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, identified an architectural sublime, experienced in the presence of those human constructions of ‘severe, and in many cases mysterious majesty, which we remember with an undiminished awe, like that felt at the presence and operation of some great Spiritual Power’.<sup>231</sup> In early modernist discourse, the urban landscape remained an important site and subject of sublime experience. David E. Nye suggests that ‘in the 1920s and 1930s a new aesthetics of the industrial sublime presented urban space as capable of evoking the same complex flux of feelings and having the same awe-inspiring and uplifting qualities that in the eighteenth century had been attributed to natural phenomena such as mountains’.<sup>232</sup> Drawing on Lyotard’s suggestion that in the late twentieth century one might find the sublime in the ever-expanding realm of technology and global industry, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe proposes a

<sup>231</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849; New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 78.

<sup>232</sup> David E. Nye, ‘The Sublime and the Skyline: The New York Skyscraper,’ *The American Skyscraper: Cultural Histories*, ed. Roberta Moudry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 255.

‘techno-sublime’, and suggests that whereas the Romantic poet might have experienced a sense of the sublime standing before the rugged crags of Mont Blanc, the contemporary poet experiences a similar sense of wonder and terror when faced with the vastness of the ever-expanding and evermore ungovernable World Wide Web.<sup>233</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe concludes that ‘beauty and the sublime... are for us eighteenth-century concepts defined by assumptions we no longer share’, and goes so far to assert that ‘one could not now find the sublime where it was to be found two hundred years ago’.<sup>234</sup>

Stevenson’s poetry, however, staunchly resists these suggestions, illustrating that the sublime can be, and indeed, is, found exactly ‘where it was to be found two hundred years ago’, namely in our engagement with deserts, mountains, the sky at sunset, and the sea. The natural sublime, Stevenson’s poetry proves, is still a relevant and deeply affecting category. Indeed, the poet seeks within her work those natural sites and sights that simultaneously disturb and delight. In ‘Journal Entry: Ward’s Island’ (1990), the poet-speaker eschews the merely picturesque or beautiful – a ‘municipal boardwalk: evergreens, benches, tourist views of the lake’ – in favour of what is ‘On the other side, the open side, colder.’<sup>235</sup> Noticing ‘how ice had hugged and hugged each boulder’, the speaker struggles to put into language her reaction to this scene: she can describe it only as ‘whatever it was I felt – / something between jubilation and fear.’ There is an intimation of subsumed violence in the poem in the descriptions of the freezing wind ‘knifing’ the shining lake, the ‘grinding of its blade’ against the speaker’s face, and the beach ‘studded with layered, glittering skulls’. Even the repetition of ‘hugged’ seems to suggest a certain threat. These images tautly convey both beauty and latent terror. Faced

<sup>233</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>234</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe, 1.

<sup>235</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 42.

with ‘that sea no one could see over’, the speaker comes to a simultaneously pleasurable and painful appreciation of her relative smallness, and the insignificance even of the ‘giant stalagmites of the waterfront’ in such a world. Even planes look like nothing more than ‘frail, silver insects’ against the unbounded vastness of ‘the beautiful air.’ This sense of scale is not only spatial but also temporal. The speaker describes how the ‘fifteen, twenty-five minutes’ of the ferry journey ‘might have been fifty years’. Compared with the age of the ‘sun’, the enduring natural rhythms of the waves and the wind, human time, be it ‘fifteen, twenty-five minutes’ or ‘fifty years’, is negligible.

‘An Even Shorter History of Nearly Everything’ (2007), originally written to celebrate the installation of Bill Bryson as Chancellor of Durham University in 2005, engages with both natural and man-made sites of the sublime. The speaker finds a certain sense of fearful wonder in the technological achievements of mankind, but sagely measures those achievements against what the poem suggests is the far greater sublimity of the constantly evolving natural world. In the first verse paragraph, Anthony Gormley’s sculpture, ‘The Angel of the North’, is taken as an example of Lyotard’s postmodern sublime. Confronting this part-angel, part-demon figure, evokes, in the speaker, a complex and conflicting emotional response akin to sublime experience. The Angel is a man-made object, ‘nailed’, ‘smelted’, and ‘welded’, strikingly separate from the natural landscape around it.<sup>236</sup> It represents both the North East’s industrial heritage, ‘smelted from the embers of its past’, and the technological advances of the future (‘The Angel electronically stores the dead’). In the line ‘Part phoenix, part satellite, part Lucifer’, the poet creates an image of the Angel’s rise out of the ashes of the region’s decimated industrial landscape and the daring, doomed hubris of our technological

**Comment [E17]:** ‘OF’ changed to ‘of’

<sup>236</sup> *Stone Milk*, 44.

ambitions. This ‘super-angel’ is simultaneously sub- and super-human (and perhaps even post-human): ‘it embodies vast / Crowds of miniature working people / Welded into an elevated whole’, yet is ‘Faceless and sexless’, denying and defying the distinctions and differences that are so fundamental to our own identities. It threatens, or promises, ‘to cancel evolutionary nature / And replace it with a single global soul’: a simultaneously terrifying and strangely alluring prospect.

In the second verse paragraph, however, the poem turns its attentions towards Ruskin’s ‘architectural sublime’ – the **Norman** cathedral in Durham. Although the cathedral is undoubtedly impressive, standing ‘A Rock of Ages in the evening glow’, majestically ‘Shrugging off raids by pylon and power cable’, the speaker seems curiously underwhelmed by the sight. The cathedral was ‘raised’, she muses, but ‘a short nine hundred years ago’, a period of time as ‘Thin as a tissue dropped on Everest’, compared to the countless millennia of geological history that preceded, and will outlast, us all. For Stevenson, ‘this grey cathedral’ moves her not to an aporia of human reasoning, or to the distant limits of her imaginative powers, but to a questioning of the motivation behind our creation of such looming structures:

**Comment [E18]:** ‘Normal’ changed to ‘Norman’

How is it that, alone among breeding creatures,  
We feel compelled to create for ourselves,  
Again and again in the image of ourselves,  
A sacred exoskeleton, claiming for ourselves  
Powers to preserve our uniqueness?

Both the ‘super-angel’ and the towering cathedral, along with the ‘palace, theatre, fortress, [and] prison’ are, however impressive, ‘exoskeletons’, empty ‘relics’ we have built to protect us from, and assert what we consider to be our importance within, the

ceaseless march of time. They were not built not to prompt us to an awareness of those aporia in our reasoning or those points at which our imaginations fail us, but to fill or obscure those gaps. Such constructions are designed to console, to comfort, and to inspire confidence, rather than to evoke the complex and contradictory responses of ‘pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression’. The cloying repetition of ‘ourselves’ is suggestive of the stultifying anthropocentric obsession with the ‘uniqueness’ of the human self. It is precisely this dearly held sense of ‘uniqueness’ and importance that truly sublime sites and sights undermine and destabilize.

It is in the final stanza that we finally arrive at what the speaker considers to be the most powerful and most pure form of the sublime. It is revealed that even the most impressive human construction, built ‘as shells leave signs in the sand’, pales against the far greater geological sublime of the

storms of fossils, individual as snowflakes  
Three hundred million years adrift with the continents,  
Locked in the ooze of an equatorial ocean.

It is here, in these ‘local stones’, these ‘seas squeezed solid long before man’s genesis’, that the poet suggests we may find the purest sense of the sublime – ‘the strangeness of it all’ that is simultaneously wonderful and terrible to behold. Throughout Stevenson’s *oeuvre*, human experience, knowledge, and achievement are coolly measured against the dizzying depth of geological (pre)history.

**John Keats and Anne Stevenson:**

Just as Wallace Stevens identified the discrepancy between ‘the romantic’ and ‘what is spoken of as the romantic’, Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, suggests that the ‘popular and general conception of the ‘romantic artist’ is, in fact, a misconception.<sup>237</sup> ‘In this [mis]conception’, Williams writes, ‘the Poet, the Artist, is by nature indifferent to the crude worldliness and materialism of politics and social affairs; he is devoted, rather, to the more substantial spheres of natural beauty and personal feeling.’<sup>238</sup> The productive tension between the inner mind – the realm of ‘personal feeling’ – and the outer world – that of ‘politics and social affairs’ – is central to much Romantic poetry, but Williams makes clear that this ‘supposed opposition between the attention to natural beauty and attention to government, or between personal feeling and the nature of man in society’ is a simplistic post facto construction that developed in the Victorian period.<sup>239</sup> In a heated exchange of letters with Al Alvarez that played out across the pages of the *New York Review of Books* in late 1989, Stevenson’s ‘pejorative’ remarks suggest that she is labouring under this very misconception: ‘Romantics, short of humour and full of evangelical righteousness, rarely see that a little levity with regard to the self-importance of any artist, however marvelous, is essential if a balance is to be struck between reality and fantasy.’<sup>240</sup> Whilst the mature poet may dismiss ‘19th century Romanticism’s... doctrine of the sacrosanct “genius”’ as ‘surely outmoded’, the young Stevenson found it altogether more alluring.<sup>241</sup>

For Stevenson, an initial engagement with the captivating stereotype of the tortured artist evolved into a nuanced appreciation and understanding (within her poetry, if not

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<sup>237</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; London: Penguin Books, 1979), 48.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, ‘Sylvia Plath: An Exchange.’

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



her prose) of the Romantic text. In the 1994 essay ‘A Chev’ril Glove’, she recalls her teenage infatuation with John Keats:

... in my teens I became a thorough-going Romantic, imagining fondly that I was an incarnation of the poet Keats, whose odes and sonnets I imitated... My first poems, I believe were romantically inspired on two counts. I responded instinctively to the rhythms, language, and heroic subjects of romantic English verse; and I created an image of myself as artist that suspended me in my own myth as I drifted through school, dreaming of future laurels.<sup>242</sup>

It is clear from the mature poet’s recollections in this essay that the teenage Stevenson’s understanding of, and relationship with, Romanticism was largely superficial, more concerned, perhaps, with the captivating ‘caricatured ghost’<sup>243</sup> of Keats, than with an understanding of the true complexities and inherent contradictions of the Romantic artist. She describes how she responded ‘instinctively’ to the ‘rhythms, language, and heroic subjects’ of Romantic verse, suggesting that, at this stage in her poetic development, there was little of the acute self-awareness that characterises her mature engagement with formal aspects of Romantic texts. This is borne out by ‘Indian Summer’, a poem written during the early years of her first marriage, which self-consciously appropriates the diction and imagery of Keats’s ‘To Autumn’ and ‘Ode on Indolence’.<sup>244</sup>

Comment [E19]: ‘bourne’ becomes ‘borne’

In ‘John Keats, 1821-1950’ (2000), Stevenson intelligently engages not only with the themes, ideas, and preoccupations of Keats’s work, but also with her own responses to, and understanding (or misunderstanding) of, those texts. The poem, then, is brilliantly

<sup>242</sup> ‘A Chev’ril Glove,’ 121.

<sup>243</sup> Lisa M. Steinman, introduction, *Romanticism and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Lisa M. Steinman. Romantic Circles Praxis Series, ed. by Orrin Wang (July 2003). Accessed 30 March 2012. <[www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/poetics/steinman/steinman.html](http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/poetics/steinman/steinman.html)>.

<sup>244</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, ‘Indian Summer’, undated. (That the poem is signed ‘Anne Hitchcock’ suggests that it was written between 1955 and 1960).

multifaceted in its self-awareness. We see the mature poet intelligently, yet not unsympathetically, critiquing the derivative poetic endeavours of her younger self. In the second stanza, Stevenson recalls, 'I think I half believed I was him, / the spirit of Keats come back, in me, to Michigan'.<sup>245</sup> 'Half believed' is a knowing and playful echo of Keats's forlorn speaker, 'half in love with easeful death', in 'Ode to a Nightingale'.<sup>246</sup> 'To Michigan' serves as a wry, self-deprecating counterpoint to the extravagant crescendo of the teenage Stevenson's imaginings. Indeed, O'Neill suggests that this final clause 'seems ruefully to turn down the corners of its lips', as the mature poet gently mocks the imitative and grandiose tendencies of her younger self.<sup>247</sup>

Despite Miss McKinney's wise admonition, 'Why is it / you young, spoiled people never look?', the young Stevenson is seemingly interested more in the distant 'heroic subjects of romantic English verse' than in a sensuous engagement with the landscape around her, 'in Michigan'. The mature poet recollects, 'I hymned the tallows under / violent-coloured maples.' A appreciative and painterly attention to her surroundings (rural, urban, and post-industrial) has become a fundamental element of the mature writer's poetic. However, the teenage Stevenson composes an imitative ode 'To Autumn' where she should be composing an Ode 'To Fall', as she praises the 'sallows', or willows, of Romantic English verse while sitting under 'violent-coloured maples' in Midwestern America.

It is in the syntactically awkward final line of this poem that the mature post-Romantic poet asserts herself: 'Crickets I remember, / and how the fierce gnats' wailing was oracular.' Here, Stevenson perceptively draws out the intensely ambivalent

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<sup>245</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 294.

<sup>246</sup> John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), 369.

<sup>247</sup> O'Neill, "'A curved adventure': Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson," 101.

undercurrent of Keats's ode, finding and foregrounding within the poem a resonance that the teenage Stevenson could not have appreciated from her study of her 'clammy, Coke-stained textbook'. 'To Autumn' has traditionally been viewed as an uncomplicated meditation on a picturesque pastoral scene: 'a very nearly perfect piece of style [with...] little to say'. Aileen Ward, for example, declares that 'To Autumn' is 'Keats's most perfect and untroubled poem', a poem, she suggests, in which 'the images are presented as simply meaning themselves'.<sup>248</sup> However, Andrew Motion contends that 'To register the full force of its achievement, its tensions have to be felt as potent and demanding'.<sup>249</sup> Keats's final stanza is suffused with the melancholy of imminent loss, and struggles to reconcile the abundant beauty of the scene with the decay and death that must follow. The 'music' of Autumn, then, is both a hymn to the beauty of the season, and a requiem that pre-emptively mourns its inevitable passing. Motion suggests that the poem was written as Keats entered a period of personal crisis:

Keats wrote the poem when his precarious freelance life was finally coming to an end, when his poor health was becoming unignorable, when he realised that he could not continue to postpone some sort of resolution with Fanny, when he felt gloomy about the reliability of his 'set', and when his worries about his brother and sister-in-law were acute. Line by line, stanza by stanza, 'To Autumn' draws upon these conflicts and transmutes them into its own terms.<sup>250</sup>

Nicholas Roe and Andrew Bennett argue that Keats's ode is informed not only by personal anxiety, but also by 'a more general anxiety of economics in England in 1819'.<sup>251</sup> Both situate Keats's ode firmly within its historical context, reading the poem

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<sup>248</sup> Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1963), 322.

<sup>249</sup> Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1999), 461.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 160.

as a registering of, and a response to, the ‘highly charged political environment’ following the Peterloo Massacre on 16 August 1819.<sup>252</sup> In Stevenson’s image of the fierce gnats’ oracular wailing, she is perceptively revealing and intensifying this ‘potent’ darkness within the ode. The ‘wailful choir’ of ‘small gnats’ that ‘mourn / Among the river salallows, borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies’ in Keats’s ode is suggestive of powerlessness in the face of imminent winter: they are at the mercy of the ‘light wind’ and there is nothing to do except pre-emptively ‘mourn’ the death of another year.<sup>253</sup> Stevenson’s gnats, on the other hand, are not ‘small’ but ‘fierce’, their wailing not mournful but ‘oracular’. Stevenson’s reworking of Keats’s image registers and intensifies the subsumed conflict within Keats’s ode. If Keats’s gnats stoically ‘mourn’ the passing of the season, Stevenson’s ‘fierce’ gnats surely rage against their imminent decay. ‘Oracular’ has a dual meaning here. In one sense of the word, it suggests that the wailing of the gnats is difficult to interpret; and on the other it prompts a looking towards a future in which this slavishly imitative teenager (the ‘I’ who ‘half believed’ she was the reincarnated spirit of Keats) has matured into an accomplished poet (the ‘I’ who ‘can still see it, that clammy, Coke-stained textbook’s / *Ode to Autumn*’).

**Comment [E20]:** Final bracketed added in n.245

In ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T.S. Eliot asserts that ‘the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’.<sup>254</sup> Stevenson’s poem is very much ‘directed’ by Keats’s ode, but perhaps more striking is the effect that Stevenson’s work has upon one’s reading of the earlier poem. Stevenson’s poem alerts

<sup>252</sup> Nicholas Roe, ‘Keats’s Commonwealth,’ *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199.

<sup>253</sup> John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, 476.

<sup>254</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition,’ 39.

us to the ‘potent and demanding’ tensions of Keats’s original, meaning that we return to it perhaps more willing to recognise the conflict subsumed beneath its seemingly ‘untroubled’ surface. A poem such as ‘John Keats, 1821-1950’ is a sort of prism, vividly reflecting, and more significantly, *refracting*, the ideas, tensions, and ambiguities of existing texts in new and often startling ways.

The title of this poem, too, is an ambiguous one. 1821 is, of course, the year of Keats’s death, 1950 the year in which the eighteen-year old Stevenson graduated from the ‘12<sup>th</sup> grade’. What is it, then, that Stevenson is implying with this seemingly unconnected pairing? O’Neill suggests that with the ‘lengthened dates’ of the title and the ‘flexibly chiasmic enjambment’ of the second stanza, Stevenson implies ‘a merging of who she was with “the spirit of Keats”.’<sup>255</sup> If these do indeed suggest such a mystic ‘merging’, then they do so with tongue firmly in cheek. Given the gently self-mocking tone of the mature poet’s recollection, it is more likely either to burlesque the delusions of her teenage self, or to suggest that in 1950, the year in which the young Stevenson left behind her ‘clammy, Coke-stained textbook’, the naive, slavishly imitative ‘thorough-going Romantic’ within her died a death, either from natural causes, or at the hand of Donald Hall’s seminal anthology, *The New Poets of Britain and America*.<sup>256</sup> It is after the passing of this slavish imitator that the afterlife of Keats in Stevenson’s poetry truly begins. From this point on, Stevenson’s poetry, rather than simply adopting the perspectives and ideas of Romantic texts, begins to actively engage with them,

<sup>255</sup> O’Neill, ““A curved adventure”: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 101.

<sup>256</sup> Stevenson writes, ‘In 1950 I graduated from high school and entered the university to study not English but music, later French and history. In that same year an anthology was published that challenged many of my ideas about poetry. I still possess a tattered paper-back copy of *New Poets of England and America*, edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack. In it, Auden-like precepts of order, intelligibility, good manners, and responsibility for the world outside oneself set the tone for what looked like a twentieth-century return to classicism.’ ‘A Chev’ril Glove,’ 120.

contesting, challenging, and remodelling, for example in the 1982 poem, ‘Himalayan Balsam’.<sup>257</sup>

In an interview, Stevenson instructs us to read the poem as ‘a sort of up-to-date “Ode to [*sic*] Melancholy”’, though we can also recognise that the theme of the poem – again the seemingly inextricable relationship between life and death, growth and decay – also owes much to ‘To Autumn’.<sup>258</sup> She explains, ‘My poem was conceived by the river Wye in the Welsh borders, and is more romantic than I usually allow myself to be.’<sup>259</sup> However, close reading of the poem reveals that if it is indeed ‘more romantic’ than much of Stevenson’s other work, then it is ‘romantic’ in a strikingly contemporary and distinctive sense; intelligently and knowingly ‘post-romantic’ might be a more accurate description. As in ‘John Keats, 1821-1950’, Stevenson incisively locates the pivotal paradox at the heart of Keats’s poem, and sensitively yet assuredly reconsiders and ultimately reconceives that pervasive ambiguity. She writes of her own poem, ‘The idea expressed at the end is something like this: if seasonal flowers didn’t die – if beauty, or if “joy’s hand”, as Keats wrote, wasn’t “ever at his lips, bidding adieu” – there would be no reason to create new life’.<sup>260</sup> Once again, Stevenson, like Keats, reveals her interest in what she sees as the cyclical nature of life and experience; ‘seasonal flowers’ die, making way for ‘new life’, which in turn will grow ever closer to its death from the very moment of its creation.<sup>261</sup>

Keats’s ode begins with an impassioned plea to the inferred listener:

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<sup>257</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 66.

<sup>258</sup> Anne Stevenson, Interviewed by Rich Kelley, ‘The Library of America Interviews,’ *The Library of America E-Newsletter*, accessed 25 September 2012 <[www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/interview/html](http://www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/interview/html)>.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.* (The published interview was compiled from a transcript of a conversation between the interviewer and the poet. It is, therefore, unclear whether Stevenson meant ‘Romantic’ or ‘romantic’.)

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist  
 Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
 Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kist  
 By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine[.]<sup>262</sup>

In the first stanza the speaker counsels against both suicide and the deadening of the addressee's sensitivity to intense emotion, both pleasant and unpleasant. The addressee must be as alive to 'sorrow's mysteries' as to 'beauty' and 'Joy'; he must embrace 'the melancholy fit' as fully as 'Joy's grape'. To attempt to escape or turn away from painful emotional experience, the speaker warns, is to plunge the soul into a kind of drowsy, dulling half-light. The final stanza of Keats's ode is suffused, gluttoned even, with sensuous oral imagery – Joy's hand 'ever at his lips', the sipping of the 'bee-mouth', the 'strenuous tongue' bursting Joy's grape 'against his palette fine', and the taste of the sadness of Veil'd Melancholy's might. Stevenson's poem is a subtle structural inversion of Keats's ode in that the first stanza is full of sumptuous oral imagery ('Orchid-lipped, loose-jointed, purplish, indolent flowers, / with a ripe smell of peaches, like a girl's breath through lipstick'), and the final stanza contains a heartfelt warning against suicide and emotional deadening: 'Murder the killer / we have to call life and we'd be a bare planet under a dead sun'.<sup>263</sup> Formally, too, Stevenson demonstrates both her fidelity to, and her willingness to depart from or extend, Keats's text. O'Neill describes how, 'it is as though the taut muscular form of "Ode on Melancholy", with its tensed masculine rhymes, underwent immersion in the more relaxed rhyming spa-waters of *Endymion*'.<sup>264</sup> The rhythm is, like the balsam, 'indolent' and 'loose-jointed'; it has all

<sup>262</sup> Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 348.

<sup>263</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 66.

<sup>264</sup> O'Neill, "'A curved adventure': Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson," 104.

the unhurried tranquility of a late summer afternoon. The rhyme scheme, like the scent of the balsam, is a 'Fragrance too rich for keeping, too light to remember': The ABAB rhymes of each quatrain are tantalizingly delicate and elusive, more like faint echoes than full rhymes ('flowers' and 'rivers'; 'supper' and 'lover'; 'windowsill' and 'funeral').

Like Keats, Stevenson deals dextrously in striking concrete images that appeal to the senses, transforming abstract truths into sensuous experiences. In the image of the Himalayan Balsam, those 'loose-jointed, purplish, indolent flowers / [...] delicate and coarse in the weedlap of late summer rivers', that even in the 'dishevelled' luxuriance of full bloom are still 'weak-stemmed', Stevenson conveys the complexity of life, simultaneously 'delicate and coarse', 'common as brambles' yet seemingly miraculous.

The second stanza characteristically introduces the sense of perspective that we see so often in Stevenson's work. The image of

(Meta segmentata in her web, and the male waiting,  
between blossom and violent blossom, meticulous spiders  
repeated in gossamer, and the slim males waiting)

reminds us that though we might be the only animals to 'look in upon / themselves / and curse their fate',<sup>265</sup> all life on earth is subject to the same interminable cycle of life and death, growth and decay, and we should appreciate ourselves as an inextricable, albeit uniquely self-aware, part of that natural cycle. This image also hints at the ominous eroticism that pervades Keats's ode, and at the ineluctable connection between sex and death in both the human and non-human world. The almost ritualistic repetition of

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<sup>265</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 356.



‘waiting’ and ‘blossom’ suggests that this is a scenario that must play out countless times in an inexorable cycle of ‘courtships and murders’.

The speaker takes the notion at the heart of Keats’s ode – that the ‘bee-mouth’ that sips at ‘Pleasure nigh’ must also ‘taste the sadness’ – and finds it to be true and in abundant evidence all around her, in her reaction to ‘these scent-spilling ragged flowers’, or her ‘grief for the cat’s sparrow’. Whereas in Keats’s ode this is an abstract, though sensuously described, truth, in Stevenson’s poem it is a truth as tangible, familiar, and quotidian as ‘shaping bread or scraping potatoes for supper’. Stevenson is locating, rooting, rehabilitating even, Keats’s epiphany firmly within the accessible and everyday; she is, to paraphrase Robin G. Schulze, restoring some commerce between the Romantic ideas of Keats’s ode and the actual world around her.<sup>266</sup>

Although this poem, like Keats’s ode, is haunted by death, Stevenson eschews the grandly mythopoeic figuration of death we find in the ode. Death appears not as the deadly kiss of ‘nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine’, or as the ‘poisonous wine’ of ‘Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted’, but as the rather more unassuming image of ‘the wild gull’s / beach-hatched embryo’. Death is an inextricable element of life, life that is:

offered freely in cardboard boxes, little windowsill  
coffins for bird death, kitten death, squirrel death, summer  
repeated and ended in heartbreak, in sad small funerals.

This measured description of ‘sad small funerals’ has none of the numinous majesty of Keats’s ‘sorrow’s mysteries’ or ‘wakeful anguish’, yet these lines are perhaps all the more affecting for their emotional and linguistic spareness. In these familiar, and

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<sup>266</sup> Robin G. Schulze, *The Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 104.

therefore all the more resonant, images, Stevenson succeeds in conveying the repeated ‘heartbreak’ of ‘sad small’ deaths without descending into mawkish sentimentality.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker recalls:

Sometimes, shaping bread or scraping potatoes for supper,  
I have stood in the kitchen, transfixed by what I’d call love,  
if love were a whiff, a wanting for no particular lover,  
no child, or baby, or creature.

O’Neill suggests that, here, Stevenson ‘creates her own equivalent to the way in which Keats[...] alight[s] on a chance thought that has about it a depth of meditation’.<sup>267</sup> If this owes something to Keats, then it is also surely indebted to Wordsworth’s ‘spots of time’, those moments of intense emotional experience that can be recalled by the imagination to renovate, repair, and nourish the poet.<sup>268</sup> What is this ‘love’? It is an intense acceptance of the complex, often unfathomable, world in which we live. It is a ‘love’ that does not distract us or ‘subtract us from seasons, their courtships and murders’, but accepts and appreciates the changing seasons and the inevitable death that accompanies such change. Transfixed by this ‘love’, the speaker is able to appreciate the world around her in all its ‘dishevelled’, ‘violent’, ‘ragged’ complexity. She can appreciate each indolent flower’s ‘descent through red towering / stalks to the riverbed’ as both ‘important’ and as a tiny part of an interminable cycle of seasonal change. It is this unconditional ‘love’ that Keats is thinking of when he writes, ‘Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose...’. Stevenson’s speaker goes on:

‘Love, dear love’,

<sup>267</sup> O’Neill, “‘A curved adventure’: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 105.

<sup>268</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, Book XII, line 208, 345.

I could cry to these scent-spilling ragged flowers,  
and mean nothing but 'no' in that word's breath[.]

The stanza break here deftly focuses attention on the subjunctive 'I could'. The speaker knows how easy, even how momentarily satisfying, it would be to 'cry' out, to rage against and mourn for the 'evident going' of life into death, but she will not; instead, she will, 'transfixed' by that 'love' of the complex natural world, find it within herself to say "'yes" to the coming winter and a summoning odour of balsam', to accept and fully embrace the death of summer. To say 'no' to the going of the flowers, to turn away from the pain of it, is to cause a numbing or deadening of what Keats called the 'soul', and what Stevenson might call the imagination, or consciousness. With the abrupt 'It's not' that contrasts, even jars with the elongated, wistful line that precedes it, the speaker rouses herself and firmly eschews the "'no" in that word's breath': 'It's not, as I thought, that death // creates love. More that love knows death.' The rejected adage – 'that death // creates love' – draws upon another post-Romantic response to Keats's ode, Wallace Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', with its bold assertion that 'Death is the mother of beauty'.<sup>269</sup> This conclusion has been thoughtfully re-examined and revised.

The speaker appreciates that, unlike Keats's nightingale, we, together with all life on earth, are 'born for death'. Despite what Stevens's aphorism might suggest, death *creates* neither love nor beauty; we do not love because we die, but rather love is felt all the more intensely alongside the knowledge that all things are vulnerable to death and the passing of time. It is this love that 'knows death', the poem suggests, that is at the root of all our artistic endeavours: 'Therefore / tears, therefore poems, therefore long stone sobs of cathedrals'. 'Poems' and 'cathedrals' cannot conquer death – they

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<sup>269</sup> Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 66.

‘prevent no massacre’ – yet they are emblems of our ability to love and live despite our knowledge of the certainty of death. Here, as elsewhere in Stevenson’s work, the speaker seems to find the prospect of her mortality strangely heartening. In ‘Stone Milk’, for example, far from being disquieted, the speaker is comforted (‘not always, but sometimes’) by the ‘pristine beauty of [her] almost absence’ from the landscape around her.<sup>270</sup>

In his instructive reading of the poem, O’Neill suggests that the impassioned plea against suicide in the final stanza is ‘voiced by her [the speaker’s] lover’.<sup>271</sup> However, as the poem has already told us, there is ‘no particular lover’: the speaker is merely a personification of that ‘love’ which ‘knows death’. Furthermore, in an interview, the poet explains that “‘Love” in “Himalayan Balsam” could address a lover, but it might be better taken as the abstract idea of Love as a creator. For George Herbert, Love was God or Christ in action in the world.’<sup>272</sup>

The poem ends with the lines, ‘Then I loved you with the usual soft lust of October / that says “yes” to the coming winter and a summoning odour of balsam’. The dark eroticism of Keats’s ode, first transfigured into a stoic sort of ‘love’, undergoes another transformation, this time into a ‘usual soft lust’. That this lust is ‘usual’ contributes to the pervasive sense within the poem of nature and human experience as cyclical. If Stevenson knows, as did Keats, that on autumn’s tail comes a cruel winter, then she also

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<sup>270</sup> *Stone Milk*, 35.

<sup>271</sup> O’Neill, “‘A curved adventure’: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 107.

<sup>272</sup> ‘An Interview with Rich Kelley,’ *The Library of America e-Newsletter*.

knows just as well, as did Shelley in ‘Ode to the West Wind’, that ‘If Winter comes’ spring cannot ‘be far behind’.<sup>273</sup>

‘John Keats, 1821-1950’ and ‘Himalayan Balsam’ reveal that Stevenson, despite her anti-Romantic pronouncements within her critical prose, has a nuanced appreciation of the complexities of Keats’s poetry. That Keats does not have so much as a walk-on part in *A Lament for the Makers*, though, suggests that Stevenson considers she has outgrown his undeniably significant influence on her juvenilia, and wishes to distance herself from the ‘caricatured ghost of Romanticism’. A 2007 poem, ‘Listen to the Words’, subtitled ‘(A “fully interactive poetry experience” for John Lucas at 70)’, suggests otherwise. Here, Stevenson laments what she sees as the decline of poetry, suggesting that in the early years of the twenty-first century the craftsman-like poet who expertly weighs and measures the sounds and shapes of words is no longer revered as an accomplished ‘chief custodian of the language’, but dismissed as archaic, elitist, and reactionary.<sup>274</sup> The poet-speaker asks

Precisely what does ‘interactive’ mean?  
Just being friendly? Or something more obscene?  
Should I ‘download’ the messages I’m ‘text’d’?  
Is making love the same as ‘having sex’?<sup>275</sup>

If there is a knowing and performative touch of the prickly pensioner here (‘I-pod’ is a hideous word), there is also genuine concern: what will become of ‘makers’ like Stevenson in an age of ‘TXT SPK’, technological jargon, advertising slogans, and split

<sup>273</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ode to the West Wind,’ V, line 70. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 579.

<sup>274</sup> Anne Stevenson, “‘The Way You Say the World Is What You Get’,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 34 (Winter 1995); rpr. in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 163.

<sup>275</sup> *Stone Milk*, 51.

second sound bites – those ‘ritual syllables you need to use / To charm the world and not be crushed by it?’<sup>276</sup> Stevenson, unsurprisingly, advocates recourse to what has come before. In the final stanza of ‘Listen to the Words’, she bids us return to what she elsewhere describes as those ‘rhythms and sounds established by the long, varied tradition of English poetry – say, by Donne, Blake, Keats, Dickinson, Whitman, Frost’.<sup>277</sup>

Still, appearing ‘live’ at seventy has  
A tingling, clear, unsponsored compensation.  
Like fugue motifs in Bach, like flowering jazz,  
Those plummet lines of language, free of fashion,  
Reach to your deepest layer and won’t let go.

The multisyllabic words, along with caesuras created by commas, slow the line right down, suggesting a rejection of ‘convenience speech’ and rapid fire communication in favor of an enhanced appreciation of the sensuous qualities of language. Stevenson reaches for two of her own enduring ‘plummet lines’, taken from Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’, and Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. These lines, the poem suggests, have a musicality as idiomatic and unforgettable as ‘fugue motifs in Bach’:

There, every minute tells you lightly, gently,  
*The still sad music of humanity*  
Is all we know, and all we need to know.

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<sup>276</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

<sup>277</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘Rising to the Surface of Language: Anne Stevenson interviewed by Gil Dekel,’ *Poetic Mind* (26 July 2008), 13 April 2012 < <http://www.poeticmind.co.uk/interviews-1/rising-to-the-surface/>>.

The pages of that 'clammy, Coke-stained' edition of Keats remembered in 'John Keats, 1821-1950' now provide a refuge in which to escape from the quick-fire communication of the early twenty-first century. Stevenson maintains that contemporary poems must put down deep roots into the nourishing soil of the English tradition, to draw upon the 'rhythms and sounds' of earlier work. That Stevenson (re)turns to these lines of Keats and Wordsworth as an antidote to, or a talisman employed against, the supposed carelessness of contemporary poetry suggests that, despite their absence from her Dante-esque dreamscape, the mature poet continues to enjoy a sustaining yet complex relationship with work of the Romantic poets.

## The 'I' and the 'e-y-e': Life and Self in the Poetry of Anne Stevenson

*The first half of this chapter examines several different philosophical models of embodied selfhood, and, through close readings of those poems which explore selfhood and identity, attempts to place Stevenson's own concept of selfhood in this complex intellectual and ethical terrain. The previous chapter identified what Stevenson scathingly refers to as the 'Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self' as one of the most persistent legacies of Romanticism. The intricate relationship between the poet's personal experience and her poetry is revealed by close readings of a number of shorter poems written throughout her career, including the early poem 'The Women'. In these poems, traumatic personal experience is transformed into aesthetic object. The second half of this chapter focusses on Stevenson's best-known volume, *Correspondences* (1974). This section begins by looking at a number of shorter poems which have been identified as precursors or practice pieces in which Stevenson experiments with polylogic structure and epistolary form. This chapter draws upon extensive archival research carried out on the Stevenson material held at Cambridge University Library, Stevenson's personal and family papers, and the Beecher Stowe family papers held at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University (a selection of this material is presented in the Appendices).*

In the manifesto poem, 'Making Poetry' (1985), the poet-speaker instructs, 'You have to inhabit poetry / if you want to make it.'<sup>278</sup> 'Black Hole' (1993), however, serves as a stark warning against the 'inhabitation' of poetry. This speaker is seemingly trapped within a self-built 'house of words':

I have grown small  
inside my house of words,  
empty and hard,  
pebble rattling in a shell.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 17.

<sup>279</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 167.



The poem has been transformed from a 'house of words', protective and comforting, to a claustrophobic prison cell, the narrow confines of which are suggested by the short lines and fractured clauses. The speaker is no longer able to command the words with which to express herself ('Wish I could tell you / how I feel'), but instead is devoured alive by them: 'Heavy as mud, bowels / sucking at my head. / I'm being digested.' The speaker foresees that she will be ultimately obliterated by the poems of her own creation: 'Piles / of words... to show / where I was. But nothing true / about me left, child.'

The dialogic structure of 'Making Poetry' invites us to read it as an exchange between a teacher and pupil or master and apprentice. That the speaker of 'Black Hole' refers to the internal addressee as 'child', means that this poem, too, can be usefully understood as a word of caution or counsel from an experienced 'maker' to a young poet. In 'Making Poetry' it quickly becomes apparent that the mature writer's advice to the aspiring poet is not to be interpreted literally, but is, rather, a characteristically puckish play on words:

And what's 'to inhabit'?

To be in the habit of, to wear  
words, sitting in the plainest light,  
in the silk of morning, in the show of night;  
a feeling bare and frondish in surprising air;  
familiar ... rare.

The poem, then, is not a house to permanently 'inhabit', but rather a piece of clothing – an outfit, a costume, or even a disguise – woven out of words and worn by the poet,

allowing them to be simultaneously ‘familiar’ and ‘rare’. The speaker reminds us, though, that this word-garment may be cast off at any moment, leaving the poet naked, unadorned, ‘bare and frondish’ once again. In the final stanza, poetry is described as ‘a wordlife running from mind to mind / through the washed rooms of the simple senses’. Far from the poet ‘inhabiting’ her poetry, then, it seems that the poetry ‘inhabits’ the poet. The poem begins with an emphasis on the figure of the poet but closes with attention firmly focused on the poetry, that ‘shared comedy of the worst blessed’, itself.

It is apparent that Stevenson is interested in and concerned with the possible relationships between the poet and their poetry. In both her poetry and her critical work she subjects these relationships to intense scrutiny, exploring and questioning the significance of the personality and the personal experience of the poet within the poetry. This chapter explores Stevenson’s preoccupation with, and poetic interrogation of, various poetic and philosophical models of selfhood. Her poetry propounds complex questions about identity, personality, and the intricate, even precarious, relationship between self and world, the inner and the outer, the personal and the artistic, and ultimately questions if, and if so, how, a late modern poet might explore, articulate, escape, or create a ‘self’ within their work. This chapter focuses on the extent to which Stevenson makes use of personal experience within her poetry, and, of equal importance, those modes by which she successfully transfigures what is personal and private into what is poetically and aesthetically accomplished. It will be shown that she draws upon and assimilates a diverse range of poetic models and influences, forging a distinctive and assured post-confessional poetic characterised by a plurality of

perspectives, and a finely weighed balance of self-expression and self-effacement, personality and impersonality, subjectivity and objectivity.

### **Mind and Body, Self and Soul:**

Stevenson's poetry poses searching questions as to the complex nature of individual consciousness, and penetratingly examines various poetic and philosophical models of selfhood and identity. The prevailing disposition of these poetic interrogations is one of engaged and enquiring scepticism. In both her poetry and her critical work Stevenson urges us to approach with caution the fashionable argot of earnest self-help manuals and glib magazine articles. In a 1996 interview she writes, '*Identity* is a loaded word. I try to avoid it. We used to have souls, after Freud we had psyches, and now we have identities.'<sup>280</sup> The word 'identity', used in philosophical discourse to indicate likeness and sameness, has, in popular discourse, increasingly come to suggest reductive and restrictive socio-political categories. In a 1995 essay she decries the tendency to categorise and corral poets and poetry according to racial, national, sexual, or gender 'identity':

Instead of poetry in the English language we have black poetry, feminist poetry, gay poetry, working-class poetry, formalist poetry, and so on. The few poets who stand out from the crowd milling at the foot of Parnassus gain status from belonging to one or another social group. Derek Walcott is a West Indian; Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland are Irish; ... Tony Harrison speaks for the working class... and so forth. Of course, I don't mean that such poets are admired only for their political or racial status. Still, how many admirers readily drop poets' names who cannot recite a single line of their verse?<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 175.

<sup>281</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'The Way You Say The World Is What You Get,' 171.

Despite her distaste for the word, it appears that she herself can find no better term for what we variously refer to as ‘identity’ or ‘psyche’ or ‘self’. In ‘A Sepia Garden’ (1993), the speaker muses,

*Something* has to feel, connect, suffer.  
*Something* must be...<sup>282</sup>

The speaker is moved by the sense that there is a tantalising ‘*something*’ within us akin to an ‘identity’, a ‘soul’, or a ‘psyche’, yet cannot (or will not) find an apposite ‘ritual syllable’<sup>283</sup> with which to name it and refer to it. It remains an elusive, ineffable ‘*something*’, seemingly resistant to capture within the ‘net’ of language. Similarly, in ‘Who’s Joking with the Photographer?’ (2003), the speaker searches vainly for ‘a word that mixes affection with insurrection / frivolity, child’s play, [and] rude curiosity’ to describe that ‘Something teasing under the skull / ... something you can’t see / until you look away’, what she describes as ‘the sensuous unsayable’.<sup>284</sup> ‘You could’, she suggests, ‘call it soul or spirit, but that would be serious’.<sup>285</sup>

Since ancient times, philosophers have been preoccupied with the question of the relationship between the physical body and the incorporeal mind or soul. The philosophical theory of dualism originated with Plato who posited that the soul was immortal, emanating from the realm of Ideal Forms, and that the body was material and mortal. René Descartes in *Passions of the Soul* (1649) and the unfinished treatise *The Description of the Human Body* (1647) concurs with Plato’s model of the corporeal body and the immaterial soul or mind, and considers how an immaterial mind might

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<sup>282</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 162.

<sup>283</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

<sup>284</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 170.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

affect a physical body and vice versa.<sup>286</sup> Monism, on the other hand, conceives of the soul and body as being indivisible with monist materialists believing that both body and mind have physical matter, and monist idealists believing that both body and mind are immaterial, mental constructs. Most modern philosophers of mind reject the dualistic mind-body dichotomy of Plato and Descartes, maintaining that the mind and body are inseparable entities.

Since the late tenth century (in both the Vercelli Book and the Exeter Book, two of the four Old English poetic codices, we find a poem titled ‘Soul and Body I’ and ‘Soul and Body II’ respectively by modern scholars), poets have applied themselves to the intractable question of the relationship between the soul and the body, and there is a well-established tradition of soul and body dialogues, including notable poems by Andrew Marvell (‘A Dialogue between the Soul and Body’) and W.B. Yeats (‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’). ‘Washing My Hair’ (2003) derives inspiration from these poems but plays significant variations upon them. Stevenson’s speaker finds herself pondering the same question that preoccupied the anonymous Old English poet, Marvell, and Yeats: who are we? Or perhaps more accurately, *what* are we? Like its predecessors, Stevenson’s poem explores the complex relationship between the incorporeal mind or soul and the physical body, and with the alternation of longer, capitalised, left-aligned lines that represent the physical presence of the body, with shorter indented lines that evoke something of the nebulousness of the mind or soul, the poem responds to the dialogical structure of the poems by Marvell and Yeats. The first lines of the poem invite us to consider the relationship between the ‘restless’ but

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<sup>286</sup> Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Duglad Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 328-405, 314-325.

insentient shower-head under which the speaker stands, and her own no doubt 'restless' head. 'Here I am', the speaker confidently asserts, 'scalp, neck, back, breasts, / armpits, spine'.<sup>287</sup> In these lines, the speaker's 'self' – her 'I' – is identified as being her physical body, yet this is immediately complicated by the following line, 'Parts I've long been part of'. In the space of two lines, the speaker has moved from asserting that her 'I' is her body, to considering (or conceding) that perhaps her 'I' is merely 'part of' that body. Though she can recognise her turning of the taps as 'an act of flesh / I know as mine', she seems to have some difficulty comprehending her physical embodiment, as she describes her limbs as 'parts... never / treasured much, / Since I absorb them not *by* touch, more / *because* of touch.' The speaker cannot be an objective observer or interrogator of her own embodiment. Later, though, the speaker corrects herself yet again with a striking *volte face*: "It's my mind with its hoard of horrors, / that's me.' The speaker's 'I' now resides in her incorporeal mind, she ventures. Yet, characteristically, this 'harmonious skeptic' subjects even her second-guesses to still more second-guessing: 'Or is it really?'

The poet imagines an escape from her physical body, yet a disembodied existence entails, she suspects, a loss of identity, suggested here by a proliferation of negatives:

I fantasise it bodiless,  
           set free:  
 No bones, no skin, no hair, no nerves  
           just memory,  
 Untouchable, unwashable, and not, I guess,  
           my own.

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<sup>287</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 281.

To 'set free' the mind from the weighty 'dungeon' of the corporeal body is to relinquish ownership over it, the speaker suggests: her 'bodiless' mind is no longer her own. By the end of the poem, the speaker has returned (at least for now) to her original position, as she once again allies her 'self' – her 'I' – with her physical body, her 'creased familiar hands / and clumsy feet' (we cannot help but think back to Marvell's soul 'fettered... In feet' and 'manacled in hands'). As in the poems by Marvell and Yeats, in which the Body (or the 'Self') is afforded the last word, it appears here that the 'Body' has prevailed, even if only temporarily, over the 'Mind' or 'Soul'. The speaker concludes that her soul is a seemingly discrete entity, not an 'I' but a 'you': 'My soul, how will *I* recognise *you* if we meet?' (my italics). Unlike the Old English poet, Stevenson's speaker worries what happens 'if' her physical body is reunited with her liberated soul, rather than 'when'.

In the poems by the Old English poet, Marvell, and Yeats, the soul, yearning to complete 'the steep ascent' into 'breathless starlit air',<sup>288</sup> perceives the physical body as a weighty encumbrance, a means of confinement and captivity, a 'casket of flesh'.<sup>289</sup> In Stevenson's work, though, we find no such clear-cut dichotomy between the diaphanous mind or soul and the burdensome body. Indeed, it is often the human consciousness that is figured as the heavy weight to be thrown off. In 'The Voice' (2012), the speaker forcefully rejects and then reverses the traditional weighty body / incorporeal soul dichotomy:

The ancient belief that body lets go its ghost  
Only at death, like invisible thistledown – no!

<sup>288</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. and intro. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), 284.

<sup>289</sup> *The Exeter Book*, Part II: Poems IX-XXXII, ed. W.S. Mackie (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1934), 75.

I'd sooner believe the opposite is so,  
 That flesh is the flyaway guest a spacious host  
 Breathes in and out[.]<sup>290</sup>

Rather than the physical body sheltering (or imprisoning) the immaterial soul, here the soul is a 'spacious host' that accommodates the body. In two earlier poems the human consciousness is imagined as possessing physical form and weight. In 'Toy' (2004), the speaker describes human consciousness as 'Monstrous equipment / [sprung] from that tiny head – / creator jammed, *enfin*, / in the created'.<sup>291</sup> So large and cumbersome is this mental 'equipment' that our physical bodies appear 'out of scale': we are but 'little space-age doll[s]'. In 'Journal Entry: Impromptu in C Minor' (1988), the speaker describes how she 'unhook[s] the wires of [her] mind', blissfully extricating herself from 'the intellectual spider's web'.<sup>292</sup> The conscious mind is figured here as 'the mind's machine' described in 'Saying the World' (1996), or as a cumbersome piece of computer hardware, incessantly 'grinding out the formulae you have to fit'.<sup>293</sup> In 'A Luxury' (2000), Stevenson writes:

I'm questioning  
 the weight  
 of the human cortex  
  
 and what it costs  
 per life  
 to ship its freight.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of 'The Voice' (2012). Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>291</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 365.

<sup>292</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 42.

<sup>293</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

<sup>294</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 356.



The poem asks, ‘Why, among billions / of killer zooids / do hominids alone // look in upon / themselves / and curse their fate?’ and it is clear that the speaker thinks of the human cortex as both a physical and psychological burden. Human consciousness – ‘our rig / of impudent imagination’ – comes at a high cost, as the speaker warns us:

every gain

we grab from nature  
in her coin  
we have to pay for.

Our highly developed consciousness is, this poem suggests, a double-edged sword, allowing us not only to determine, but also to destroy, ourselves.

### **Escape from Self-consciousness:**

Throughout her career, Stevenson has returned again and again to the alluring (im)possibility of escape or transcendence. In ‘A Sepia Garden’, for example, the aged speaker entertains the thought of ‘painless, everlasting / release’ from the ‘indignities’ and ‘awful little mucks’ of living within a failing physical body: ‘rotting nails / and puffy, useless ankles, / tussles with the nurses, / hours on the commode’.<sup>295</sup> Like Marvell, Stevenson conceives a state not only of the mind’s independence from the physical body, but also of the body’s liberation from the constant ‘tyrannic’ demands of consciousness or awareness. Indeed, it is what Stevenson describes as the ‘weary I-am-ness’ of normative consciousness, rather than the weight of physical embodiment, from which her speakers often wish to be released. We are all, suggests the speaker of ‘Carol

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<sup>295</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 163.

of the Birds' (2003), trapped within the 'dazzling anthropocentric mills' of our individual consciousnesses.<sup>296</sup> This figuring of the mind as a mill is a further development of the image of 'the mind's machine' in 'Saying the World'.

In a 1995 essay, Stevenson explores further the idea of an escape from these mills:

We are all of us trapped in the mill... [but] there are ways out; and for those us fortunate enough to have time and inclination to give ourselves, rarely, to the ahuman, wordless world... there are wonders innumerable to be perceived... Once released from anthropocentric obsession, any poet, any observant person of whatever race or gender, can become, for moments anyway, that eye – e-y-e, not the ubiquitous capital I – to which nothing is 'mere'.<sup>297</sup>

Drawing on Emerson's famous image of the 'transparent eye-ball',<sup>298</sup> Stevenson advocates the occasional casting off of the clamouring 'I', in favour of the objective observation of the 'eye'. Whereas Marvell's soul complains of being 'blinded with an eye', Stevenson posits that the sensuous perception of external things offers a kind of transcendence. Although the speaker of 'Washing My Hair' fantasises about her mind 'bodiless, / set free' from her weighty limbs, what we see again and again in Stevenson's poetry is the desire, not for a 'bodiless' mind, but a mind-less body – a physical, almost animal body liberated from the exhausting demands of the 'I', the 'mind's machine'. In 'From the Motorway' (1990), for example, the speaker invites the reader to 'consider the bliss / of sitting absolutely numbed to your / nulled mind'.<sup>299</sup> In 'Moonrise', too, the speaker recalls how

While my anxiety stood phoning you last evening,

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<sup>296</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 334.

<sup>297</sup> Anne Stevens, 'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get,' *Michigan Quarterly Review* 34 (1995), rpr. *Between the Iceberg and the Ship: Selected Essays*, 173.

<sup>298</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature,' *The Complete Prose Works* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1890), 311.

<sup>299</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 56.

My simpler self lay marvelling through glass  
 At the full moon marbling the clouds[.]<sup>300</sup>

To shrug off, even for a moment, the ‘anxiety’ of the ‘I’ allows you to become a ‘simpler self’, a purer self that can see and appreciate more clearly the material world around us, as if in a wholly new light: ‘Such an unhinging light. To see her. To see that. / As no one else has seen her. Or might see that.’ In ‘Sierra Nevada’ (1965), too, we see this longing for a different, ‘simpler’ kind of consciousness. The speaker is strangely envious of the non-human landscape around her, ‘the wind [that] is strong without knowing that it is wind. / The twisted tree that is not warning / or supplicating, [that] never considers that it is not wind.’<sup>301</sup> The speaker envies this lack of consciousness and self-awareness, this inability to know and consider. The striking isolation of ‘We think’ in the subsequent line serves to emphasise the stark contrast between the constant consciousness of the speaker and the lack, or absence, of cognisance in the surrounding non-human landscape. The speaker muses:

We think  
 if we were to stay here for a long time, lie here  
     like wood on these waterless beaches,  
 we would forget our names, would remember that  
     what we first wanted  
 had something to do with stones, the sun,  
 the thousand colours of water, brilliances, blues.

She imagines a conversion, or a reversion, to the ‘simpler self’ of ‘Moonrise’, a self that is not based on an individual consciousness or identity (‘we would forget our names’), but rather on recollected primal and physical needs. By the close of this poem, the

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<sup>300</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 23.

<sup>301</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 30.

speaker has become ‘that eye... to which nothing is “mere”.’ At the end of ‘Painting It In’ (1993), too, the speaker experiences something akin to this primal, undifferentiated consciousness. Surrounded by a ‘veil’ of mist – ‘a whiteout of air – sweet, soft, indestructible, / the cloud of unknowing reluctant to create the known’ – the speaker is unable to distinguish the features of the familiar landscape, and therefore her own lonely separateness from it.<sup>302</sup> She concludes, ‘Hills, stones, sheep, trees are, as yet, impossible. / And when things are unmade, being also feels less alone.’ The speaker’s artfully constructed ‘self’ is deftly ‘unmade’ by the swirling mists, yet the speaker calmly welcomes this deconstruction, this reversion to her ‘simpler self’. Of this poem, Stevenson says in a 1996 interview, ‘I had in mind something like the Christian mystics’ “Cloud of Unknowing” – a good feeling I often have, and not only in a Welsh mist, of losing the sense of myself and dissolving into something much larger.’<sup>303</sup> She is returning, here, to the Emersonian idea previously expressed in a 1995 essay, that of ‘self-cancellation (loosing [sic] yourself to find yourself)’, something that she ventures ‘might well come to be accepted as a poet’s necessary prerequisite for finding words to express something of... the most spiritual and miraculous challenge of reality.’<sup>304</sup> The word ‘loosing’ appears to be an amalgamation of the words ‘losing’ and ‘loosening’. Stevenson is perhaps suggesting here that whilst a total loss of one’s self is not possible, something akin to a deliberate loosening of the strictures of the self is achievable. ‘Self-cancellation’ is something achievable by ‘any observant person of whatever race and

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<sup>302</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 306.

<sup>303</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 180.

<sup>304</sup> ‘The Way You Say the World Is What You Get,’ 173.

gender', Stevenson writes, but for the poet, she suggests, it is an essential part of the creative procedure.<sup>305</sup>

In that same 1996 interview, commenting on Plath's suicide, Stevenson writes that 'at certain times effacement seems attractive'.<sup>306</sup> Indeed, in poems such as 'Sierra Nevada', 'From the Motorway', and 'Washing My Hair', speakers express a yearning for a kind of 'self-less' existence, a 'simpler self'. The poet's use of the word 'seems' is significant, though, and suggests that such effacement may ultimately prove to be a less than 'attractive' experience. As such, Stevenson's poems often express both a desire for, and a thrilling fear of, those experiences of 'self-less' consciousness. The possibility of turning off 'the mind's machine' is both enthralling and unnerving.<sup>307</sup> These yearned-for moments of freedom from normative consciousness can suddenly become nightmarish visions from which the speaker longs to escape. In 'Journal Entry; Impromptu in C Minor' (1990), the speaker quickly finds herself grasping for the cast-off 'wires' of her conscious mind:

But I correct myself.  
 Soon I'm standing in my grid of guilts  
 hastily reaching for my thoughts.  
 ...  
 In the black, beyond the blue of my perception,  
 in the huge vault where the wires won't reach,  
 the dead are lively.  
 The moment I take off my thought-clothes  
 I expose every nerve to their waves.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 179.

<sup>307</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

<sup>308</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 313.

The speaker glimpses that ‘huge’, ‘black’, unmappable territory, teeming with the ‘lively’ dead, and swiftly retreats back into the familiar ‘grid’ of her normative conscious state. Whereas earlier in the poem, the speaker had been keen to cast off her ‘thought-clothes’ (‘Let me have no thoughts / in this weather of pure sensation’), and experience instead only physical sensations (‘Getting into the car is a coatless sensation. / Driving through traffic / is the feeling of falling leaves’), now she finds herself ‘hastily’ grasping for her discarded garments. The speaker now realises that the conscious thoughts that previously seemed like a heavy, stifling coat, in fact functioned as a protective garment of sorts, shielding her from the immense blackness of the ‘vault’ of the unconscious.

### **Self and Memory:**

We see a similarly complex desire for self-effacement in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Speakers yearn for varying degrees of effacement, for the cancellation of their physical bodies, their immaterial minds or souls, and their ‘identities’. In a poem such as ‘Face Lift’ (1961), the radical alteration of the speaker’s physical body brings with it a radical alteration of her ‘self’ or ‘identity’; her old ‘self’ is peeled away with her old skin, and ‘trapped... in some laboratory jar.’<sup>309</sup> The speaker says of the anaesthetic, ‘At the count of two, / Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard. . . / I don’t know a thing’, yet it is not only a temporary loss of consciousness and cognisance that the speaker desires. By the final stanza the speaker’s self has become curiously split in two, and her new self, ‘Pink and smooth as a baby’, looks with disdain at her old self, ‘the

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<sup>309</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 155.

dewlapped lady / ... Old sock-face' she used to be. In 'Tulips' (1961), too, the cancellation of the self is figured as a medical procedure. The speaker describes the routine hospital administrative process, but these take on a disquieting quality in the context of the poem: 'I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses / And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons.'<sup>310</sup> Like Stevenson's speaker in 'Journal Entry', the speaker of 'Tulips' has taken off her 'thought-clothes', handing them over to the nurses (always sinister figures in Plath's poetry) along with her name. She is now in the position yearned for by the speaker of 'Sierra Nevada'; she has given away her name, her history, her face, and her 'baggage', and lies in bed, a 'nobody', free to experience 'pure sensation' without the insistent intrusion of conscious thought. The speaker, however, complains:

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff  
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.  
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.

Plath, too, invokes Emerson's image of the 'transparent eye-ball'. Whereas Stevenson considered complete openness to the material world not only a desirable thing, but also a necessary condition for the poetic process, Plath's speaker resents having 'to take everything in'. She desires not only freedom from individualised consciousness but also from the basic sense perceptions that Stevenson sees as a corrective to overdeveloped self-consciousness. She complains bitterly about the 'vivid tulips' that contaminate the blank, empty 'peacefulness' of her hospital room. They are, she laments, 'too red', and their vibrancy seems to demand her attention, anchoring her within a sordid material

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<sup>310</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 160.

world she wishes to escape or transcend: 'They seem to float, though they weigh me down, / A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.'

For both Plath and Stevenson, 'self' and 'identity' have much to do with past experience and memory. Whereas Descartes pronounced 'Cogito, ergo sum', locating the 'I-self' within what Kilstrom, Beer, and Klein describe as 'immediate conscious experience of thinking', John Locke, in his 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding' (1690), located the self within the memory.<sup>311</sup> For Descartes the real-time experience or perception of the world is the basis for selfhood, but for Locke, an individual's 'self' comprises the recollection of past experiences, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, actions and reactions. To Locke's mind, then, an individual without a memory is an individual without a sense of self. In both 'Face Lift' and 'Tulips' the speakers voluntarily give up those recollected experiences and emotions that constitute their 'selves'. The speaker of 'Face Lift', 'tapped like a cask, the years draining into [her] pillow,' has 'grow[n] backward', wilfully discarding the experiences and memories that constitute her 'self': 'I grow backward. I'm twenty, / Broody and in long skirts on my first husband's sofa, my fingers / Buried in the lambswool of the dead poodle'. In 'Tulips', the speaker describes herself as 'a thirty-year-old cargo boat / Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.' The human self is, according to Locke, a 'cargo boat' of sorts, carrying around, and comprised of, a lifetime's worth of memories. Here, though, the speaker spits, 'I am sick of baggage', and gleefully throws overboard her precious cargo:

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books  
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

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<sup>311</sup> John F. Kilstrom, Jennifer S. Beer, and Stanley B. Klein, 'Self and Identity as Memory,' in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 71.



I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

In Stevenson's poem, 'A Sepia Garden', too, selfhood is intricately bound up with memory. In the third verse paragraph, the internal addressee is jolted by the familiar scent of lavender:

Ordinary  
lavender, but we have to stop.  
Even you, hunched like stone,  
your eyes slammed shut, feel it  
begging, ordering you: re-collect yourself.

The imperative 're-collect yourself' is a play on both the word 'recollect' and the phrase 'collect yourself', and demands of the addressee something more significant than a mere remembrance of herself. The addressee begins literally to 're-collect' herself, gathering together forgotten memories from her youth as though they were tangible objects, long since misplaced or carefully stowed away: 'A fire opal. / Gold shoes in tissue paper. / A black lace Spanish shawl / scaly with sequins. / A torn cloth doll [with] too-blue / porcelain eyes'. The 'self' or personal 'identity' – that indefinable 'something' at our core – seems to be figured here as an 'album, bound in rust, / crack[ing] open wavy pages', a sort of scrapbook or photo album holding together all our past experiences and memories. When the book is opened, however, the memories and experiences collected therein escape:

A childhood that was yours, and still is,  
rushes out like a nursery rhyme,  
  
distintegrates, a handful of  
grey-blue ash, lost in the grass[.]

Having disintegrated and been ‘lost in the grass’, the addressee’s self can never again be ‘re-collected’. We are left with the sense of something having been ultimately and irretrievably lost, a sense that is cemented when the speaker figures the addressee’s daily struggle as ‘the cramped frustration of attempting / the jigsaw with pieces missing’. The image of the nursery rhyme disintegrating into ‘a handful of / grey-blue ash’ creates a connotative juxtaposition and alerts us to the disquieting temporal proximity between birth and death.

‘A Sepia Garden’ intelligently engages with popular and philosophical models of selfhood, exploring what the speaker refers to as ‘that question of “really being”’. Though the speaker is convinced of the existence of an essential but elusive ‘*something*’ within us, she appears to share Stevenson’s distrust of fashionable terminology, and makes evident her disdain for terms such as ‘character’ and ‘self’ by enclosing them within quotation marks. The poem concurrently entertains two opposing models of selfhood; on one hand, that of the self as an *a priori* entity, inherent or integral; and on the other, that of the self as ongoing process, something continually constructed within, and affected by, the conditions in which an individual exists. The speaker muses:

I can’t help supposing that  
It never really fitted, your long life –  
Those dreary, loose-cut, madam  
Hand-me-down roles: ‘rich man’s daughter’  
Followed by ‘don’s frightened wife’.  
Far too baggy for you  
Who would have made a devout botanist;  
A happy stone mason; possibly an artist...

That the addressee’s roles in life ‘never really fitted’ her, hanging off her like ‘baggy’ clothes, once again supposes that she had, and still has, an *a priori* self, ‘like a spine’ in

her, that remained constant throughout her 'long life'. Like the Platonic soul, this *a priori* self can exist separately from the physical body after death: the speaker asks 'Did you ever worry as a child / about dying and coming back a ghost? / What age would you dress up in? / Would they give you a choice?' As such, the speaker is able to talk about the 'childhood that was yours, and still is'; the childhood 'self' of the addressee is essentially the same 'self' as she possesses as an elderly woman. The idea of a constructed self is lambasted second-hand, as the speaker imagines, and ventriloquises, the addressee's reaction to such a suggestion:

But imagine someone lecturing you on  
Establishing Identity through the  
Acculturation Process. *Absolute rubbish!*

I can hear the tuba in your voice  
dismissing *all that rot about identity*  
to the lowest ditch of the ridiculous.

The concept of a culturally constructed self, what Ian Berkitt terms the 'social self', is dismissed as '*rubbish*', here.<sup>312</sup> Yet, the repeated association of selfhood with clothing in this poem perhaps belies this scepticism. The speaker fondly laments, 'no good woman ever lived harder / to stitch a spirit to!' as though a 'spirit' or a self could be stitched onto an individual like a shadow as in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Similarly, at the close of the poem, the speaker muses that when 'our clothes' are disposed of after our deaths, we will be thrown away with them. The notion of the 'self' as a garment that can be put on like a uniform or a costume is perhaps both alluring and unnerving, and Stevenson returns to such a notion again and again in her poetry. In 'Journal Entry in C Minor', the speaker takes off 'her thought-clothes', and in 'Skin Deep' (2003), it is

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<sup>312</sup> Ian Burkitt, *Social Selves: Theories of Self and Society*. (London: Sage, 1991), 1.

apparent that the ‘pesky Damoclesian ur-question, / what on earth shall I wear’ that we ‘obsessively live with’, registers a dilemma that is more psychological than sartorial.<sup>313</sup>

Despite the vogue for concepts of culturally constructed and provisional selfhood that can be pulled on and off like an item of clothing, it seems that we have some deep-seated need to believe in an inborn self ‘like a spine in us.’ Rom Harré asserts that, despite our recognition of the social and cultural dimensions of our selves, ‘the self must ultimately be seen as autonomous, distinct and continuous – as a shifting but unified pattern of multiplicities and singularities.’<sup>314</sup> Whilst the speaker of ‘Who’s Joking with the Photographer’ can humorously comprehend the changes to her physical body (‘Federal Express has delivered my sixth face – / grandmother’s, scraps of me grafted to her bones’), she cannot conceive of her self as subject to such changes. She conceives of the self as self-contained, as it were, ‘pull[ing] away in its skin-tight sphere / to endure on its own the tectonic geology of childhood.’ The speaker’s references to the ‘the present “me”’ and ‘the present “you”’, though, undermine her reference to the ‘childhood that was yours, and still is’, only a few lines earlier. To refer to a ‘present’ self is to tacitly imply the existence of a ‘past’ self and a ‘future’ self, and to suggest that the self is subject to a constant process of evolution or alteration. Stevenson engages here with the opposing philosophical theories of endurantism and perdurantism. The endurantist view posits that an individual ‘endures’ or persists through time, existing fully at each moment of their history; that the adult self is essentially the same as the childhood self, despite the physical and mental changes that that ‘self’ has undergone. Perdurantism, on the other hand, holds that a self ‘perdures’

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<sup>313</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 340.

<sup>314</sup> Rom Harré, *The Singular Self: An Introduction to the Psychology of Personhood* (London: Sage, 1998), jacket statement.

through time, and has different and distinct temporal parts at each moment of their history; the ‘present’ self is not the same as the past self or future self, and our perception of our individual ‘self’ encompasses all the selves we have been throughout time. David Lewis suggests that we might understand the perduring self in the same way as we understand that ‘a road persists through space; part of it is here and part of it is there, and no part is wholly present at two different places.’<sup>315</sup> The poet does not attempt to alight on a single ‘right’ answer to the question of selfhood here; rather, she is content to hold in balance these divergent notions alongside each other for the duration of the poem. At the close of the poem, as the speaker tries vainly to find words in which to describe or define the ‘*something*’ she is convinced is inside us, we return to the image (and the scent) of lavender: ‘Think of it as new-mown grass, or picked lavender, / about as much ‘self’ as they save of us / in a gauze pouch, or a rubbed leather book’. The ‘self’ ultimately proves to be as evanescent and ethereal as the scent of lavender, or cut grass blowing away on the wind.

### **Personality, Personal Experience, and Poetry:**

In the seminal 1919 essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T.S. Eliot shared his understanding of the relationship between the poet and not only his own work, but also the work of his antecedents. Eliot famously suggests that the poet must achieve ‘a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more

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<sup>315</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 202.

valuable', namely, the body of work produced by his forebears.<sup>316</sup> 'The progress of the artist', he asserts, 'is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.'<sup>317</sup>

Eliot suggests that the relationship between the poet and the created poem is akin to that between a catalyst and the end product of a chemical reaction:

... consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide... When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum.<sup>318</sup>

The poem, like the product of a catalytic reaction, should contain 'no trace' of the poet. Indeed, the more accomplished the poet, the more negligible his presence within the finished poem. Here, as in Stevenson's manifesto poem, Eliot deliberately shifts the attention away from the figure of the poet to the poetry itself, stating that the poet 'has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality'.<sup>319</sup> Wordsworth's assertion that 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [which] takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity'<sup>320</sup> is dismissed by Eliot as 'an inexact formula'.<sup>321</sup> The poet's own 'powerful feelings' and emotions have no place in poetry, Eliot argues: 'Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become

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<sup>316</sup> 'Tradition,' 40.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> 'Tradition,' 41.

<sup>319</sup> 'Tradition,' 42.

<sup>320</sup> William Wordsworth, 'From Preface to Lyrical Ballads.' *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. Vol. 2. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 151.

<sup>321</sup> 'Tradition,' 43.

important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.'<sup>322</sup> It is clear, then, that for Eliot, 'the man, the personality' and 'the artist' must be, as far as possible, discrete entities. The culturally embedded stereotype of the tortured poet or artist, and the popularly professed relationship between personal suffering and creativity, are boldly deconstructed – dismantled, even – as Eliot decrees that 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.'<sup>323</sup>

Eliot's 1919 dictum of impersonality in poetry can be seen as part of a larger cycle of oscillating literary tastes. Philip V. Allingham suggests that Romantic poets and authors, having concluded that 'reason had failed to improve either human nature or social conditions in eighteenth-century Europe', consequently sought to evoke in their readers a predominantly emotional, rather than intellectual, response.<sup>324</sup> This ambition to move the reader emotionally and spiritually culminated, later in the nineteenth century, in the kind of overblown sentimentality within verse and fiction that has come, rightly or wrongly, to be popularly associated with the Victorian age, described by Ezra Pound as 'a rather blurry, messy sort of a period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period.'<sup>325</sup>

In 'A Retrospect' (1918), a manifesto for the fledgling Imagist movement, Pound set out a blueprint for a 'harder and saner' poetry, 'as much like granite as it can be',

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<sup>322</sup> 'Tradition,' 42.

<sup>323</sup> 'Tradition,' 41.

<sup>324</sup> Philip V. Allingham, 'Sentimentality: The Victorian Failing,' *The Victorian Web*. Accessed 18 November 2010. < <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/xmas/pva305.html> >.

<sup>325</sup> Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect,' *Pavannes and Divagations* (1918), rpr. in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800-1950*, ed. Melissa Kwasny (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 256.

which, rejecting the ‘emotional slither’, ‘rhetorical din, and luxurious riot’ of much nineteenth-century writing, would instead derive its ‘force’ from ‘its truth, [and] its interpretive power’.<sup>326</sup> Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ would prove to be one of the foundational texts of a movement that would, following John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 volume of the same name, become known as ‘The New Criticism’. The New Critics posited that the poem should be considered not a mode of personal expression, but a crafted object, self-referential and self-contained – like a painting, sculpture, or, indeed, a ‘Well Wrought Urn’ – that may be studied, analysed, and evaluated quite apart from the conditions and contexts of its creation and creator.<sup>327</sup> The intentions, experiences, and emotions of the poet were irrelevant, and the poem was to be judged solely on its own linguistic cohesiveness and formal achievement.

Adam Kirsch notes that so influential had New Criticism become that a young poet in the mid-twentieth century ‘was faced with a body of poetry and criticism so authoritative that it took courage, and ingenuity, simply to avoid being crushed by it.’<sup>328</sup> In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, poets such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Randall Jarrell, rebelling against the New Critical understanding of poetry, attempted to extend the reach of poetry beyond ‘the styles and subjects that Modernism had considered suitable.’<sup>329</sup> In their work we see a calculated rejection of what Berryman called Eliot’s ‘amusing theory of the impersonality of the artist’ in favour of a return to an earlier conception of the role,

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947).

<sup>328</sup> Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), XII.

<sup>329</sup> Kirsch, XIV.



Walt Whitman's vision of the poet 'not as maker but as spiritual historian'.<sup>330</sup> These poets raised in the New Critical tradition, Lowell noted, had become 'terribly proficient at these forms', but now made a decisive 'breakthrough back into life', dismantling and discarding what they saw as the rigid confines of the reserved, academic, allusively obscurantist style of the Modernist poets.<sup>331</sup> Whereas the New Critics advocated the 'continual extinction of personality' within, and through, poetry, for these Confessional poets, the poem, personality, and personal experience were seemingly inextricably linked. The distance between 'the man who suffers' and 'the mind that creates' was collapsed so entirely that both Berryman and Lowell published poems that contained their home addresses. In the hands of Lowell, Berryman, or Plath, Kirsch notes, the poem appears to be not a means of escaping personal feeling, but the ultimate channel through which to express or 'confess' it. The work of these poets is characterised by what appears to be a searing honesty and openness, even about the darkest and most traumatic of their personal experiences, and creates the impression that we, as readers, are privy to an authentic 'confession' of sorts. The term 'confessional' was coined by M. L. Rosenthal in a 1959 essay 'Poetry as Confession', reviewing Lowell's *Life Studies*. Rosenthal suggested that for Lowell, the writing of poetry functioned as 'soul's therapy', a space in which to make 'the most naked kind of confession.' Whereas poets like Eliot and Pound employ what Rosenthal calls 'a certain indirection [that] masks the

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Robert Lowell, 'The Art of Poetry, No. 3' (Interview with Frederick Seidel), *The Paris Review* 25 (Winter/Spring 1961), rpr. *The Paris Review Online*, accessed on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012, <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4664/the-art-of-poetry-no-3-robert-lowell>>.

poet's actual face and psyche', he suggests that Lowell 'removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself.'<sup>332</sup>

The fallacy that the speaker of the confessional poem is 'unequivocally' the poet him- or herself means that confessional poetry is generally either regarded negatively as nothing more than an unmediated outpouring of personal expression and autobiographical detail, or, conversely, celebrated as the bold and courageous revelation of the writer's innermost thoughts and feelings, a rebellious eschewal of Modernist impersonality. Lowell counters this popular misconception as he explains, 'the whole balance of the poem was something invented... you want the reader to say "this is true"... the reader was to believe that he was getting the real Robert Lowell.'<sup>333</sup> The 'Confessional' tag with which these diverse poets are categorised and corralled together, then, is a misleading one. These poets were, in fact, unanimous in their contempt for the idea of a 'confessional' poetics, impulsive and irrepressible. Plath, for example, explicitly expressed her disdain for any poetry 'informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever it is.'<sup>334</sup> These poets subscribed to a notion of artisthood very like that set out in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', where Eliot argues that for the poem to be successful there must be within the poet a significant divorce between 'the man that suffers' and 'the mind which creates'.<sup>335</sup> Plath articulates much the same belief as she asserts that 'one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying – like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience – and

**Comment [E21]:** 'Kilvery' becomes 'Kilvert' in n.327

<sup>332</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, 'Poetry as Confession,' *The Nation* (19<sup>th</sup> September 1959), rpr. M. L. Rosenthal, *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 109-112.

<sup>333</sup> Lowell, 'The Art of Poetry No. 3 (Interview with Frederick Seidel).

<sup>334</sup> Sylvia Plath, '1962 Interview with Peter Orr,' Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvert, *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 169.

<sup>335</sup> 'Tradition,' 41.

one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind.<sup>336</sup> For Plath, like Eliot, then, the poet must be able to disassociate himself from his personal experiences to the extent that he is able to ‘control and manipulate’ them as if they were not his own. Lowell, too, conceives of a splitting of the self into two parts; ‘the real Robert Lowell’ and the character or persona present in the poems. Like Eliot or Pound, Lowell wears a ‘mask’ within his poems, yet this is a mask that looks daringly, and disconcertingly, similar to his own face: as Frank Bidart points out, ‘Lowell’s candor is an illusion created by art... The power aimed at in *Life Studies* is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy, the result of arrangement and invention.’<sup>337</sup>

**Comment [E22]:** Ellipsis added after ‘art’

### **Transformations:**

Kirsch’s refiguring of the ‘Confessional’ poet as the ‘wounded surgeon’ (the phrase taken from Eliot’s *Four Quartets*) acknowledges this double role that must be played by the poet: that of ailing patient *and* of steel-plying surgeon. Kirsch’s title also tacitly evokes Berryman’s lines from ‘Dream Song 67’ (1964): ‘I am obliged to perform in complete darkness / operations of great delicacy / on my self.’<sup>338</sup> In light of Eliot’s conception of the necessary doubleness of the poet, it is significant that Berryman refers to ‘my self’ rather than to ‘myself’, implying that his ‘self’ is not an indivisible but rather a constituent part of his being that may be isolated or dissected and minutely worked upon. Both Plath and Berryman, then, appreciate the importance of a process of

<sup>336</sup> Sylvia Plath, ‘1962 Interview with Peter Orr,’ 169.

<sup>337</sup> Frank Bidart, Afterword to Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) 997.

<sup>338</sup> John Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982),

transfiguration during which the poet's personal experience and emotions are somehow transformed from what is purely personal and private into something aesthetically engaging and accomplished. Berryman reveals a preoccupation with this idea of transformative poetic process as he describes a waking dream:

Wednesday evening while I was reading here [10 February], suddenly my attention wandered, as if forcibly; I shut my eyes and an image rose before them, not clear but strong: I saw that it was the figure of Yeats, white-haired and tall, struggling laboriously to lift something dark which was on his right side and below the level on which he stood; as it came into view, he lifting it with difficulty, I saw that it was a great piece of coal, irregular, black. He raised it high above his head, hair flying and with a set expression, brilliant eyes, and dashed it to the ground at his feet, a polished ground that might have been a floor: the pieces rolled away silver.<sup>339</sup>

John Haffenden describes this as a 'symbolic vision of a Yeats purging Ireland, striking silver out of coal', and suggests that such a vision is 'the product of heroic identification' on Berryman's part.<sup>340</sup> Whilst this vision certainly depicts Yeats as mythical hero of sorts, the violent transformation of coal into silver functions for Berryman, not as a striking metaphor for the poet's nationalist inspiration, but for the transfiguration of raw 'coal' mined from the seam of personal experience into the precious metal of poetry. Plath, too, figures this transfigurative process as a violent and forceful breaking, writing in a journal entry, 'All I need to do is work, break open the deep mines of experience and imagination, let the words come and speak it all, sounding themselves' (162).<sup>341</sup> Both Berryman and Plath's images suggest that physical

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<sup>339</sup> John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 86. (Quotation is taken from the unpublished and only partially itemized John Berryman papers housed at the University of Minnesota).

<sup>340</sup> Haffenden, 86.

<sup>341</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 282.

and strenuous toil is necessary for the transfiguration, and that the raw material of personal experience and emotion must be first destroyed – broken open or ‘dashed... to the ground’ – in order to be revealed, remade, or reclaimed as poetic material. Stevenson’s figuring of the transformative process as a ‘dark erotic mill’ in ‘In Passing’ (2003) is also suggestive of a necessary breaking down of personal experience:

You asked how experience becomes a poem  
in the weightless hour that makes poetry.  
Look, it’s happening now in a country,  
not home, not foreign,  
in language that puts its clothes on **carefully**

after unpaid, love-making labour in that  
dark, erotic mill, the imagination.<sup>342</sup>

**Comment [E23]:** ‘puts clothes’ becomes ‘puts its clothes’

Personal ‘experience’ is, this poem suggests, grist to the poet’s mill. As in ‘Making Poetry’, where to ‘inhabit poetry’ is described as at once ‘familiar’ and ‘rare’, here, the imaginative process by which experience is transformed into poetry takes place in a country that is neither ‘home’, nor ‘foreign’, and entails both the pleasures of ‘love-making’ and the pains of ‘labour’. The poem closes with the lines,

Imagine believing that a cloud can be  
talked into becoming a mountain long after  
it has lost itself in common day.

Is this an imperative, the speaker commanding the addressee to ‘imagine believing’? Or is it a wistful wondering of what it might be like to entertain such a belief? In the title poem of her early collection, *Reversals* (1969), Stevenson’s speaker entertains a similar thought, again contemplating the imaginative transformation of clouds into mountains:

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<sup>342</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 288.

Clouds – plainmen’s mountains –  
 islands – inlets – flushed archipelagos –  
 begin at the horizon’s illusory conclusion,  
 build in the curved dusk  
 more than what is usually imaginary,  
 less than what is sometimes accessible.<sup>343</sup>

The proliferation of dashes in this stanza suggests the enigmatic, indefinable nature of the imaginative processes that take place. Such transformations as these resist easy explication, and can be represented only as an implied lacuna or hiatus within the poem. Such is the power of the poet’s imagination, it is suggested, that just as ‘a cloud can be / talked into becoming a mountain’ by the poet’s imagination, then, so, too, can personal experience be transformed into aesthetic material, even ‘long after / it has lost itself in common day.’ Personal feelings, experiences, and memories become like the ‘landscapes’ of this poem, ‘that change continually away from what they are’, until they can be observed by the poet ‘without recognition’.<sup>344</sup>

In a 1994 commentary on her own poem ‘Journal Entry: Ward’s Island’ (1990), Stevenson writes, that in her opinion, it ‘succeeds as a poem’, because it ‘derives from actual experience and expresses something of the emotion that experience involved.’<sup>345</sup> The poem is not, nor should it be, she suggests, a direct transcription of an ‘actual experience’. ‘From an Unfinished Poem’ (1985) explores this complex relationship between the poem and the personal experience or feeling from which it was recast or remade:

In the event

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<sup>343</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 140.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> ‘A Chev’ril Glove,’ 131.

the story is foretold,  
foremade in the code of its happening.

In the event  
the event is sacrificed  
to a fiction of its having happened.<sup>346</sup>

In a 1996 interview, Stevenson remarked, 'In most cases, the poem made does not coincide exactly with the experience that set it going.'<sup>347</sup> More dramatically, though, this poem suggests that in the process of imaginative transformation, an experience becomes vulnerable to eclipse or distortion, the 'real' experience 'sacrificed' to the 'poetic' experience. This 'sacrifice' is, Emma Jones suggests, 'a necessary and inevitable' one, given that 'in human understanding... fullness of experience and possibility are sacrificed to comprehensibility, and to the narratives that sustain it.'<sup>348</sup> As such, within a poem we get not 'real' event or personality, but rather, '[t]he idea of event' and 'the idea of personality'.<sup>349</sup> For Stevenson, though, the relationship between 'experience' and 'idea' is a close and complex one: she writes, 'Is there really a distinction [between ideas and experiences]? Ideas are experiences. You might say, even, that no experience can be written down unless it rises into consciousness as an idea.'<sup>350</sup> During the process of transformation that takes place in that 'dark, erotic mill, the imagination', then, an experience is broken down and reformed into an idea. The pronouncement, 'Let fiction take root / in the idea of the cross between them', suggests that there is yet another remove between the 'fiction' and the real experience that 'set it

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<sup>346</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 19.

<sup>347</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 180.

<sup>348</sup> Emma Jones, 'To serve a girl on terrible terms': Anne Stevenson's Writing Selves,' *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, ed. Angela Leighton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 178.

<sup>349</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 19.

<sup>350</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 180.

going', as it 'takes root' not in the cross itself, but in 'the idea of the cross', between them. Though the phrase 'takes root' implies solidity and stability, it does so within an 'idea', something intangible and insubstantial.

The artless transcription of real experience into poetry is aesthetically as well as ethically undesirable, Stevenson suggests. In a 1979 essay, she asserts that 'fiction has to be more obvious than real life. A reader has to see reasons for feelings in behaviour.'<sup>351</sup> What Jones describes as the 'fullness of experience and possibility', then, must be somehow transformed, or broken down, into an intelligible narrative. Several of Stevenson's poems suggest, however, that is not only the reader, but also the poet himself, who benefits from this transformation of multifarious human experience into comprehensible 'fiction'. 'Earth Station' (1982) explores what the speaker perceives to be the difficulty, even the impossibility, of comprehending and appreciating the present moment. Whilst the 'Cold earthheaps / with men and women in them, / femurs, teeth, four thousand years old' are, the speaker asserts, 'easy to consider', the particulars of her current experience – 'this briar with its punishing straps / drawing stripes on my reddening wrists now. / ... your bootlength, hesitant steps / into unstitched heather' – are seemingly resistant to her attempts to 'know' them.<sup>352</sup> It is only in the aftermath of such experience that we are able to 'know' it, the poem suggests:

The wind will not be revealed as wind  
until it's story. We say it was  
'so strong we had to lean on it to stand'.  
But really weather is now.

And it's now we can't know.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 18.

<sup>352</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 68.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*



The shift in vowel sounds between the words ‘now’ and ‘know’, ‘feel’ and ‘felt’, and ‘earthheaps’ and ‘earthhopes’ suggests the incessant slipping away of the present moment into the past, despite the speaker’s attempts to capture it in ‘real time’: ‘Dial 0101... // Purr goes the receiver. // Purr purr. Purr purr.’ In a 1993 interview, Stevenson explains, ‘I write, or used to write, to explain to myself situations I couldn’t otherwise solve or understand. Meditation comes very naturally to me.’<sup>354</sup> The poetic casting, or recasting, of the ‘passing / weather’ of a moment into ‘story’, then, is a form of ‘meditation’ for Stevenson.

‘From the Men of Letters’ (1982) explores further the ‘trouble’ of transforming lived experience into ‘story’. The poem is figured, here, as ‘a room in language’, suggesting that the poem is a space, even a sanctuary, within which the poet can reflect and meditate upon their experiences.<sup>355</sup> The speakers, the eponymous ‘Men of Letters’, ‘take pride in [their] hotel.’ Unlike Stevenson’s ‘house of words’, a hotel is not a place of permanent habitation, meaning that the ‘room in language’ is provisional, temporary, perhaps not as stable and secure as its inhabitants believe. The speakers continue,

Naturally  
the unknown want to be us, but  
they are crippled.

All of us are crippled, but  
they are most crippled whose  
disasters encourage our art.

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<sup>354</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘I’m a fully qualified radical Desperado: An Interview with Lidia Vianu,’ 2003, *Desperado Literature* 7 (October 2003) Accessed on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2012.  
<[http://lidiavianu.mttlc.ro/anne\\_stevenson.htm](http://lidiavianu.mttlc.ro/anne_stevenson.htm)>.

<sup>355</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 289.

These ‘unknown’ and ‘crippled’ persons ‘whose / disasters encourage ... art’ are not strangers to the ‘Men of Letters’; or rather, they are ‘unknown’ only in the sense that, in ‘Earth Station’, ‘now’ cannot be known. In the chaotic midst of experience, we are ‘crippled’, unable to understand or express it, and it is only when we retreat into our ‘room in language’, however precarious that lodging might be, that we are able to make sense of it all. Our reflecting (or manipulating) selves look back at our experiencing selves, who ‘live / swarming and unnamed / in the rubble of a moment’, and congratulate themselves on living ‘decently rehoused / in the storeys of a time’, having named and worked through their experiences in language. ‘Storeys’ is an obvious play on words, and implies that there is never just one ‘story’, but myriad different interpretations of a particular experience or event. This poem suggests, that for Stevenson, as for Yeats, Eliot, Berryman, and Plath, there is an important distinction to be made, and a distance to be mapped, between the self that experiences and the self that reflects and creates. Those ‘unknown’ selves who live ‘in the rubble of a moment’ correspond with Eliot’s images of the ‘man that suffers’, or Berryman’s patient on the operating table, and the ‘Men of Letters’ are equivalent to Eliot’s ‘mind that creates’, or Berryman’s steel-plying surgeon. The figuring of personal experience as ‘the rubble of a moment’ that must be rebuilt into the solid ‘storeys’ of art is a striking *volte-face* of Berryman and Plath’s images of the breaking down of the solid rock of personal experience, yet Stevenson’s image, like theirs, acknowledges the transformative nature of the process. Though the speakers are ‘decently rehoused’, it seems as though their privilege is cause for some discomfiture:

When they throw their arms

around our words  
and weep

we are horribly embarrassed.

There is the sense that ‘the tall books’ of the ‘rehoused’ self exploit or illicitly profit from the ‘experience’ of the experiencing self, and the speakers ponder how, and indeed, if, their artistic endeavours might be forgiven.

In an early poem, ‘The Women’ (Stevenson variously gives the year of writing as 1955 and 1956), we see such a divorce between the poet’s suffering and creating selves. In the 1979 essay ‘Writing as a Woman’, Stevenson describes the circumstances in which the poem was written:

It was written in Yorkshire in 1956 when, although I didn’t know it, I was going through a bell jar experience of my own. I was married to a young Englishman whom I assumed I adored. He was an athlete, a businessman who spent part of his time in the Territorial Army. Obviously his activities in these respects were not ones I could share... We were ‘billeted’, I remember, with the colonel and his wife. During the day the men went out on maneuvers; if it was a weekend, they went shooting on the moors. The women stayed at home by the fire, surrounded by vases gorged with dahlias, gossiping, sighing, waiting for the men to come back so we could all broach the drinks cabinet.<sup>356</sup>

It is immediately clear that the author of this essay is not the same Stevenson who sat, sighing, ‘surrounded by vases gorged with dahlias’. The Stevenson of the essay writes with a knowledge denied to her younger self; from her 1979 vantage point she can recognise that her younger self was in the midst of a traumatic ‘bell jar experience’. We note here how she attempts to distance herself from these sighing wives, referring to them as ‘the women’, and when she later uses the first person plural pronoun (‘so we could all broach the drinks cabinet’) it is unclear amongst whom she is numbering

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<sup>356</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 9.

herself. It seems, given her references to both 'the women' and 'the men', that Stevenson sees herself as curiously separate from both groups; she cannot enter the 'mystery' world of the men, but nor can she sit contentedly with 'the women'. She recollects, 'I spent the greater part of the mornings roaming the blustery streets of Halifax in hopes of bumping into the public library, but after lunch I was condemned to interminable cups of tea. One such afternoon I withdrew to my bedroom and wrote this poem.'<sup>357</sup> The poem itself can also be understood as a 'withdrawal', a site in which Stevenson can distance herself from these 'gossiping' wives, and assert herself as a 'mind that creates' rather than simply a '[wo]man that suffers'. There are no personal pronouns here: the speaker is a remote observer, if not absent, then at least far distant, from the poem. The women are depicted as strangely inhuman as they passively 'sit among dahlias all the afternoons, / While quiet processional seasons / Drift and subside at their doors like dunes'.<sup>358</sup> They are not so much living, breathing women as decorative parts of a silent, fragrant still-life or tableau, who come into existence only at the moment of their husbands' return: 'They wait to be, / Prepared for the moment of inevitable / Good evening'. These women are merely inert and 'lifeless' art objects, but Stevenson assumes the active role of the poet, the creator. By the close of the poem the women are no longer recognisably human, but have been imaginatively transformed by the poet into mythopoeic sea creatures, powerless in the pull of the male-controlled tide, whipped into 'catherine wheels of surf' by the return of 'Their tritons'. What Stevenson considers to be the empty, hollow nature of such a domestic existence is suggested in the image of the room as 'a murmuring shell of nothing at all', whereas a sense of the

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 46.

constriction and claustrophobia of the domestic setting is created by the repetition of certain words ('dahlias', 'women'), and the sinuous abundance of 's' sounds:

quiet processional seasons  
 Drift and subside at their doors like dunes  
 ...  
 [the dahlias]  
 Spin on their stems until the shallows sing,  
 And flower pools gleam like lamps on the lifeless tables.

The surreally soporific world inhabited by 'the women' seems to be curiously suspended halfway between life and death. The 'quiet processional seasons' have something vaguely funereal about them, and the emphatic full rhyme of 'breath' and 'death' suggests a paradoxically close relationship between the two: indeed, it is only at this moment of 'death' at 'five o'clock' that the women seem to come alive. Though we know from Stevenson's essay that she was indeed a waiting wife, within this poem she defiantly dissociates herself from these women in a way that she could not in real life, and asserts herself as a poet with the power to manipulate and remake personal experiences within her art. The men who are so anxiously awaited by 'the women' have been recast as 'tritons', and whilst they have a powerful hold over their waiting wives, it is Stevenson-as-poet who wields the ultimate power over her imaginative constructs. Through attention to sound and rhythm, and the development of striking mythopoeic images, Stevenson has successfully transformed a personal experience into a powerful poetic one.

In representing the women as ethereal undersea creatures and the men as mythical tritons within a preternatural world, this poem affords the poet a means of both creating necessary distance between her personal experience and her poetic creation, and the

illusion of exercising power over a situation in which she has little. In *The Government of the Tongue*, Seamus Heaney argues that the poem is not simply a *post facto* record of event or experience, but is rather ‘adjacent and parallel to lived experience’.<sup>359</sup> As such, the poem functions as an alternative sphere of experience, affording the poet a valuable means of reliving, revising, and recasting experience, allowing her to effect within the poem what she cannot effect in ‘real’ life.

The notion of the poem as alternative sphere of experience lies behind W.B. Yeats’s concept of the ‘Mask’ or ‘anti-self’. The ‘Mask’ is, he writes, ‘an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their [the poet’s] internal nature.’<sup>360</sup> Wearing this ‘Mask’, the poet could become the ideal opposite of his ‘real’ self. In ‘The Trembling of the Veil’, Yeats writes, ‘as I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me that I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life.’<sup>361</sup> Yeats’s use of the words ‘hard’ and ‘cold’ recalls Pound’s call for a poetry ‘harder and saner’ in ‘A Retrospect’, and indeed, Pound praises Yeats for having ‘boiled away all that is not poetic’ in his verse.<sup>362</sup> For both poets, then, the poem represents a space in which the disorder and imperfection of real life and lived experience can be transformed into something ‘harder’ and more perfect.

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<sup>359</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 125.

<sup>360</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘The Trembling of the Veil,’ Book I: Four Years, 1887-1891, *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama and Prose*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 297.

<sup>361</sup> Yeats, ‘The Trembling of the Veil,’ Book III: Hodos Chameliontos, 305.

<sup>362</sup> Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect’ and ‘A Few Don’ts’ (1918).

### Windows and Mirrors:

In an autobiographical essay, 'Ocean 1212-W', written towards the end of her life, Plath recounts a formative experience (though the authenticity of this recollection has since been challenged by the poet's mother):

When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels... I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking glass.<sup>363</sup>

In the closing lines of the essay, Plath writes, 'And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.'<sup>364</sup> This idealised ocean of her childhood memories occupies a prominent place in the adult poet's imagination, hermetically sealed off from the material world around her. In 'America! America!' (1963), Plath writes, 'I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own'<sup>365</sup>, yet in very few poems is the coast poetically treated as a geographical site or material landscape: rather, it is what Brita Lindberg-Seversted terms a 'psychic landscape', overlaid with complex and obfuscating matrices of personal experience, memory, emotion, and desire.<sup>366</sup> The actual landscape becomes merely a setting and a starting-point for 'psychological

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<sup>363</sup> Sylvia Plath, 'Ocean 1212-W,' *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977; Faber and Faber, 1979), 117.

<sup>364</sup> Plath, 'Ocean 1212-W,' 124.

<sup>365</sup> Plath, 'Ocean 1212-W,' 117.

<sup>366</sup> Brita Lindberg-Seversted, 'Sylvia Plath's Psychic Landscapes,' *English Studies* 71 (December 1990), 509-22.

exploration'.<sup>367</sup> In a journal entry from the time of writing 'Full Fathom Five', she describes the sea as 'a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems, and the artist's subconscious'.<sup>368</sup> Plath's figuring of the wave in 'Ocean 1212-W' as a 'looking glass' is entirely apposite, then, for when the adult poet looks out on a coastal landscape she is seeing not the natural landscape, but her own psychic state and artistic concerns reflected straight back at her like a face in a mirror.

In Stevenson's coastal poems, such as 'North Sea off Carnoustie' (1977) or the short poems of 'East Coast' (1977, revised and republished in 1996), we are left in no doubt that whereas Plath approaches, and appropriates, the natural landscape as an 'I', Stevenson is all 'eye – e-y-e'.<sup>369</sup> For Plath, the natural landscape functions as a 'looking-glass', on which her own psychic dramas are projected, reflected, refracted, and endlessly played out. For Stevenson, on the other hand, the natural landscape is a window, a means of looking outside the 'dazzling mill' of her own mind. In the short poems of 'East Coast', Stevenson seems at pains to expunge all traces of the 'I' from her work in the mould of the Imagist poets, and to treat the 'thing as thing', rather than as symbolic object or metaphor. In 'Summer', the poet records a series of rich sense impressions in an enthralled inventory of the coastal landscape:

Ebb day, full tide.  
Yellowhammers whistling in fullblown bushes.  
Scent of wet cypresses, lavender, roses.  
Dying storm, veiled like a bride.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Journals 1950-1962*, 381.

<sup>369</sup> 'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get,' 173.

<sup>370</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 108.



This is the poet's 'simpler self' writing; sentiment, discursiveness, and elaborate rhetoric are rejected in favour of vivid sense perceptions, directness of presentation, economy of language, and naturalness of rhythm. Whilst the poet does not completely reject figurative language – the waning storm is 'veiled like a bride' – the simile serves only to make more vivid the image painted in the reader's mind. The material landscape is clearly the subject of this poem, rather than merely the occasion or setting of it. In a 1992 essay, 'Poetry and Place', Stevenson asserts the importance to the poet of looking outside herself: 'To be open to impressions, as every real poet of sensibility knows, protects the explorative mind from stagnation, from choking itself on obsessive interior concerns.'<sup>371</sup> Drawing on lines from Octavio Paz's poem, 'January First', she suggests that the poet is 'one who bears witness', not to the intricate plot twists of their own psychic drama, but to the world around them, 'to time and its conjugations.'<sup>372</sup> Paz conceives of the poet as dwelling 'among appearances', and in a poem like 'Summer', Stevenson is acutely attuned to the simple pleasures and poetic achievement of looking at and communicating 'appearances'.<sup>373</sup>

In Stevenson's poem 'The Other House' (1990), the poet-speaker figures her poetic progress in spatial terms as the inhabitation of, and movement through, a series of 'oneiric houses' – houses of dream-memory. The speaker recalls her inhabitation of an 'angry house', a teeming 'city of the brain / Where buried heads and salt gods /

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<sup>371</sup> 'Poetry and Place,' 115.

<sup>372</sup> 'Poetry and Place,' 115, quoting Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz 1957-1987* ed. and trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1987), 595.

<sup>373</sup> Octavio Paz, 595.

Struggled to breathe again.’<sup>374</sup> This ‘angry house’ represents a poetry of tortured self-exploration and self-expression. The poet-speaker describes how

Into those echoing, sealed arcades  
I hurled a song.

It glowed with an electric pulse,  
Firing the sacred halls.  
Bright reproductions of itself  
Travelled the glassy walls.

The ‘angry house’ becomes an inescapable, claustrophobic fairground hall of mirrors, where the poet-speaker’s ‘song’ of herself is reflected and echoed back at her *ad infinitum*. The poet-speaker ultimately realises the error of her ways: ‘*Ignis fatuus*, cried my voice, / and I moved on.’ What at first seemed to be a vibrant ‘electric pulse’ is revealed to be a sinister false flame, luring the unsuspecting poet into a snare of self-obsession. The speaker finally finds her permanent home in a ‘house of the utterly outside’, ‘Infinitely huge and small’. Whereas the ‘angry house’ of the self was ‘echoing, [and] sealed’, this house is ‘infinitely deep’ and ‘infinitely wide’; a place of space and freedom. It is ‘a cul-de-sac, // A palace of velvet / With windows of mirrors’ – that we imagine Plath to have (knowingly) created for herself, and the poems written during the final days of her life teem with images of reflective surfaces – mirrors, pools of water, the sea, polished shoes, silver train tracks.<sup>375</sup> Like Stevenson, though, Plath professed herself keenly aware of the necessity of connecting with the world beyond the self. In an oft-quoted 1962 interview she explained that ‘personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn’t be shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic

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<sup>374</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 153.

<sup>375</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, 267.

experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.<sup>376</sup>

Plath's final poems, though, chart the failure of her abandoned attempts to forge connections with 'the bigger things.' In 'Words' (1963), the poet-speaker has retreated, finally and ultimately, into the stifling, echoing 'bell jar' of her own psyche. The poem is pure allegory, set in a nightmarish realm of symbol and motif, hermetically sealed off from the material world. Deprived of the oxygen of the outside world, the poet seems to lose control; the images and words over which she previously seemed to exert such mastery are now 'riderless' ('writerless'). Steven Gould Axelrod suggests that Plath portrays herself in 'Words' as 'the powerless victim of the objects of her own consciousness', trapped within what he terms 'an inner world of inhuman horror'.<sup>377</sup>

In Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour', too, we are mindful of this encroaching 'inner world'. In the sixth stanza, the poet-speaker, quoting Milton's Satan, declares, 'I myself am hell'. Like Milton's Satan, he is trapped within a personal, portable Hell of his own making, imprisoned within, and unable to escape, his own fraught consciousness, except through death. It is at this moment, though, that the speaker breaks out of his suffocating inner world. Just as he concludes 'nobody's here – ', the speaker establishes a significant connection to the material world around him:

only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.

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<sup>376</sup> Sylvia Plath, '1962 Interview with Peter Orr,' 169.

<sup>377</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, 'Plath and Lowell's Last Words,' *Pacific Coast Philology* 11 (October 1976), 5.

He has moved within the space of a single line from an intense focus on his own 'ill-spirit' to a focus on the material world around him. Axelrod argues that Lowell prevents his disappearance into the abyss of his own consciousness by means of 'a successful effort at connection':

First, he connects himself to history and culture by alluding to, or echoing, St John of the Cross, Milton, Elizabeth Bishop, and the French existentialists. Secondly, 'Skunk Hour'... counters the solipsism of suicide by establishing temporal relations to past and future, and a spatial relation to the Maine locale it describes so carefully. Thirdly, and most importantly, 'Skunk Hour' connects Lowell in discourse to his readers (his confessors)... He confesses – a word which in its root means both to speak completely and to speak with, to speak together. As an intelligible confession, 'Skunk Hour' relieves the poet's subjective burden and restores the connection between self and world.<sup>378</sup>

Axelrod, however, neglects to mention perhaps the most important connection made by the poet-speaker in this poem: that with the skunks themselves. James E. B. Breslin writes that 'The skunks seem to wander into the poem, seen out of the corner of the poet's eye and... they are viewed with a literal realism that reveals an opening of the locked self.'<sup>379</sup> As such, the poem ends not with a 'despairing perception of inevitable subjectivity', but with an 'authentic connection with otherness'.<sup>380</sup> The poet-speaker's encounter with these simple creatures seems to have 'loosed' him, even if only momentarily, from the painful 'anthropocentric obsession' that earlier prevented an authentic engagement with his locale.

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<sup>378</sup> Axelrod, 12.

<sup>379</sup> James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 137-139.

<sup>380</sup> Breslin, 137-139.

### Saying and Seeing:

Recurrent in Plath's poetry are images of muteness and voicelessness, for example, the moon 'mum as a nurse' in 'Barren Woman', the 'blank' and mouthless faces of the 'The Disquieting Muses', and the speaker 'knelled dumb by your absence' in 'Street Song'.<sup>381</sup> Jo Gill suggests that these macabre images reveal 'the speaker's fear of not obtaining a hearing... and, perhaps worse still, her fear of not being able to find a voice, of being silenced, stifled, or suffocated.'<sup>382</sup> Alicia Ostriker suggests that these images of muteness, along with those of invisibility or deformation of the physical body, are 'textual symptoms of inadequate selfhood.'<sup>383</sup> The self is created through, and validated, strengthened, and sustained by, verbal expression. It is significant that in 'The Detective', we are informed that the missing woman's mouth was the first thing to disappear, and that her other body parts inevitably followed soon after ('It is a case of vaporization. / The mouth first, its absence reported / In the second year.')384

There is little trace of this fearful preoccupation with voicelessness in Stevenson's work. Indeed, in several poems, the speaker seems to positively relish the prospect of her own silence. In 'Postscriptum' (2000), for example, the speaker anticipates almost eagerly the paradoxical 'wild reticence' that death will enforce: 'Now that I am dead, / no words, / just a wine / of my choosing. // Drink to my / mute consent'.<sup>385</sup> It is not the imagined threat of enforced muteness that troubles Stevenson so much as the all too

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<sup>381</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 1981 (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 157; 74; 35.

<sup>382</sup> Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>383</sup> Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987), 60.

<sup>384</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 208.

<sup>385</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 320.

personal experience of deafness. In 'Journal Entry: Impromptu in C Minor' (1990), the poet-speaker fondly recollects her younger self: 'I smile at her ambition. / She doesn't yet know she will be deaf. // She doesn't yet know how deaf she's been.'<sup>386</sup> She asks herself: 'What is the matter? // This is the matter: deafness and deadness.' For Stevenson, then, 'deafness' is a form of 'deadness' suggested by the double assonance rhyme between the two words. To be unable to hear, and to be effectively cut off from, the world around you is to be somehow less than fully alive. The 'silence' of deafness is figured as something tangible, a giant muffler or blanket 'folding us in, / folding them under'.<sup>387</sup> In 'What I Miss' (1990), too, the speaker laments the white noise that drowns out all other sound, explaining, 'My air is noises / amplified by an ugly pink / barnacle in my ear. / All the music I hear / is a tide dragging pebbles / to and away in my brain.'<sup>388</sup> Deafness is experienced here as an internal ocean of 'Emptiness... / ceaseless and merciless.'<sup>389</sup> It is significant that the section of *Poems 1955-2005* entitled 'Border Crossings' opens with three poems on the subject of deafness – 'Talking Sense to My Senses' (1990), 'On Going Deaf', and 'What I Miss' – and their placement suggests the poet conceives of the loss of her hearing as the crossing of a Rubicon. Whereas for Plath, selfhood and self-identity are inordinately bound up with self-expression, for Stevenson, stoically but sadly lamenting the loss of her hearing, the self is constructed through sensuous and intellectual engagement with the material world. As she writes in

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<sup>386</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 313.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 352.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Poem for a Daughter’ (1982), ‘When we belong to the world / we become what we are.’<sup>390</sup>

We might think of Plath’s poems as elaborately stage-managed one-woman shows, to be performed in front of an engrossed audience of readers. Stevenson’s poems, on the other hand, demand no such rapt spectators. Whereas Plath’s poems invite, even impel, the reader to look deep into ‘the eyes, the eyes, the eyes’ of the poet,<sup>391</sup> and into the darkest reaches of her damaged psyche, Stevenson invites the reader to look out *through* her eyes at the world around them. The poet, like the child in the unpublished poem ‘Blind Man and Child’ (undated), eagerly takes the reader’s hand, and allows them to ‘see’ the world around them through her eyes:

‘Well, come with me,’ she pulled him,  
 ‘I’ll do the seeing for you,  
 Then maybe you’ll dream  
 Just what it ought to be... ~~just what it is~~.  
 There, feel roughness? That’s our chestnut tree...  
 Now, this ~~soft~~ tickle on your palm... that’s moss[.]’<sup>392</sup>

Similarly, in the 1966 poem, ‘England’, the speaker explicitly articulates the invitation implicit in nearly every Stevenson poem, simply saying, ‘Come with me. Look.’<sup>393</sup> The reader is invited to see the city as if for the very first time:

The city,  
 Nourished by its poisons, is beautiful in them.  
 A pearly contamination strokes the river  
 As cranes ride or dissolve in it,  
 And the sun dissolves in the hub of its own explosion.

<sup>390</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 124

<sup>391</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 209-210.

<sup>392</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, ‘Blind Man and Child,’ undated.

<sup>393</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 44.

What might previously have seemed a grim, polluted cityscape is, seen through the poet-speaker's keen eyes, transformed into a Monet-esqe mirage of colour and light. In the 1891 essay, 'The Decay of Lying – An Observation', Oscar Wilde suggested that it took the paintings of the Impressionists to awaken our senses to 'those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows'.<sup>394</sup> Similarly, it takes Stevenson's poet-speaker to alert us to the beauty of a sunset over the Thames. Like the nineteenth-century inhabitants of London, we are suddenly made aware of a fragile and fleeting beauty ('The seconds flare and are gone') hitherto unrecognised in the urban scene.

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<sup>394</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *The Complete Writings of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. 7: *Intentions* (New York: The Nottingham Society, 1909), 41.



***Correspondences: A Family History in Letters (1974)***

In 1974, Stevenson published what has come to be her most well-known volume. *Correspondences*, subtitled 'A Family History in Letters', is an ambitious and formally innovative book-length polylogic epistolary poem, comprising letters, journal entries, obituaries, and assorted writings of six generations of the fictional Chandler family. Despite the poet's suggestion that 'from *Correspondences* I think a biographer might learn a fair amount about my mistakes', the poem is by no means a thinly veiled confession or *cri du coeur*, and can be most usefully understood as a response to, and a reaction against, 'Confessional' poetry.<sup>395</sup> Indeed, Neil Roberts suggests that 'the multiple perspective and historical reach of the text... supply the alternative, or challenge, to confessionalism.'<sup>396</sup> The poem is inspired and informed by a range of sources, including the poet's own biography. Stevenson suggests that in the writing of *Correspondences*, she 'learned how to put experience into poetry without "confessing" it.'<sup>397</sup> This section will explore the extent to which Stevenson's own experience is present in the poem, and the various ways in which she makes use of that experience whilst determinedly eschewing the so-called 'confessional' mode.

In the 1979 essay, 'Writing as a Woman', Stevenson describes her own traumatic 'bell jar' experience of marriage and motherhood:

I was in a state of appalling numbness. My husband was puzzled, since he was having a difficult time establishing himself in his own business and wanted my support. In return he was prepared to provide me with a house, a maid, and time. Why was I not writing the novels and poems I had promised? When I grew more

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<sup>395</sup> Helena Nelson, 'Anne Stevenson in Conversation,' *The Dark Horse* (Summer 2000), 55.

<sup>396</sup> Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry* (London: Longman, 1999), 63.

<sup>397</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 18.

depressed and spent days and nights weeping, he decided he'd had enough. The terms of the divorce taxed us both, since there was no third party except my bell jar.<sup>398</sup>

The poet describes this transition from 'being an independent person at Michigan to [being] a businessman's wife in England' as a 'falling from Paradise, if not into the Inferno, certainly into Purgatory', and adds, 'I think that "fall" had a lot to do with my writing poetry later.'<sup>399</sup> Whilst several of the poems, in particular those written by Kay Boyd, take as their subject or occasion a 'bell jar' experience such as this, it is clear that *Correspondences* is far more than simply the expression of the poet's feelings of frustration and disappointment in marriage and artistic achievement. In the aforementioned interview, Stevenson quotes Marianne Moore's pronouncement, 'poetry is, after all, personal', yet characteristically adds the qualification, 'At least, the impetus must be personal.'<sup>400</sup> This provides the reader with a useful means of approaching *Correspondences*: as a poem personal in impetus, yet impersonal in achievement and effect.

Stevenson steps outside of her own traumatic experience, eschewing the role of analysand on the psychiatrist's couch, for that of genealogist or social historian, albeit one with something of a vested interest. She comments on her own account of the breakdown of her first marriage: 'I mention these facts not because they are unique but because they are not. Thousands of educated woman with small babies who have followed in the wake of an enterprising husband have undergone the same depressions,

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<sup>398</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 10-11.

<sup>399</sup> 'An Interview with Anne Stevenson,' *Oxford Poetry*.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

the same sense of failure, the same collapse into breakdown'.<sup>401</sup> Stevenson explains that, at the time of writing *Correspondences*, the 'facts' of her own experience 'were not interesting in themselves', but only in the sense that they were agonisingly 'familiar'. She recognises her own feelings of guilt and disappointment in the lives of her mother and her grandmother before her, not to mention the countless 'other women [who] must have suffered too.'<sup>402</sup>

### **'Generations':**

'Generations', written in 1969, situates the poet's own anguish firmly in a lineage of feminine discontent, and posits her own traumatic experience as but a part and product of a wider context of feminine suffering. Stevenson conceives of wife- and motherhood in terms of 'guilt', 'duty', and 'sacrifice':

All through my childhood I'd seen her (Stevenson's mother, Louise Destler Stevenson) sacrifice herself and her interests for the sake of my father, myself, and my sisters. She had wanted to be a novelist, and we all encouraged her. But, as in my own case, encouragement only made her feel guilty when she was not doing her 'duty' towards us. And when she did her 'duty' – and sighed afterward – then we felt guilty for taking so much of her time. The process of 'wifeing' and 'mothering' was steeped in guilt. By modelling myself on my mother, I had plunged unwittingly into the same guilt[.]<sup>403</sup>

The poet explores two separate yet connected burdens of guilt in this short poem. Stevenson both recalls her childhood guilt for her mother's frustrated literary ambitions, and explores her own present guilt for not smilingly doing her own 'duty' as a mother.

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<sup>401</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 11.

<sup>402</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 12.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

She draws on her experience both as the mother ‘with her teeth clenched’ in the third stanza, and as one of the children innocently scratching out the aspirations – the delicate ‘aquatints in her mind’ – of the silent mother in the second stanza.<sup>404</sup> Stevenson suggests that this ‘is a bitter poem where “The Women” is distanced and polite.’<sup>405</sup> Yet, there is a distance created here, too, between the poet’s personal experience and its recasting as art. There is no confessional lyric ‘I’ here; the poet has cast herself as an anonymous mother, along with her own mother and grandmother. She is writing here, not as Anne Stevenson, but as an every-woman, an every-mother, and an every-daughter. These women are oppressed by the demands and expectations of wife- and motherhood, yet the first two women appear mutely to accept their lot in life. The mother representing the poet’s grandmother wears a smile ‘drawn over her mouth by frail hooks’. This is not a genuine smile, and we wonder by whom this ersatz smile has been ‘drawn’. The poet’s mother ‘suffers’ in silence, as her own desires are obliterated by her unwittingly destructive offspring. In the third stanza, though, we sense a change coming. Stevenson writes that the three mothers in this poem ‘represent my grandmother, my mother, and myself in that order... three degrees of self-sacrifice.’<sup>406</sup> Yet, even as she counts herself as one of these self-sacrificing mothers, she is also voicing her determination to break out of this cycle of ‘generations’. The third mother, representing the poet herself, is the only mother with a voice, albeit a voice that issues from behind clenched teeth. Like her mother and grandmother before her, we imagine, this mother fulfils her domestic duties by cooking for her family, but she cooks not food, but ‘fabulous lies’. This mother simultaneously fulfils and powerfully undermines

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<sup>404</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 150.

<sup>405</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 13.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

the idealised feminine role of the devoted wife and homemaker. Whereas the first two mothers are passive sufferers of oppression of the patriarchal system, this third mother is active, even an aggressor.

Stevenson suggests that 'Generations' marks a significant watershed in her early poetic career, saying, 'with that poem I felt I had made a breakthrough.'<sup>407</sup> In this poem, the poet newly alights upon the poetic mode that will come to maturation in *Correspondences*. Indeed, the poem is described by Stevenson as 'probably... the seed from which *Correspondences* grew.'<sup>408</sup> The poet draws upon her personal experience and emotions of oppression and guilt in marriage and motherhood, yet nimbly avoids a gauche 'confession' by locating her own experience within a wider – in this case, familial – context of feminine suffering. This poem, then, is not simply about the poet's personal experience; rather, it takes as its subject the recurrent cycle of feminine discontent of which the poet's own trauma is but a part and product. What the poet achieves on a small scale in 'Generations', she attempts on a far larger scale in *Correspondences*, as the close familial lineage explored in the earlier poem is expanded into a whole family tree. As such, the poem is at once personal *and* social. If the experiences of individuals become, by extrapolation, socially and historically significant events, then an awareness of social and historical conditions affords both poet and reader a heightened understanding of those personal experiences.

An undated and unpublished poem, 'Confessional', though ostensibly about a conversation between two neighbours ('You come to complain about painting your sash

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 12.

windows’), articulates Stevenson’s negative response to the egocentrism and melodrama she associates with the Confessional movement.<sup>409</sup>

It’s an all day job  
Just thinking about how your life happens,  
  
How you feel, how he feels,  
How she feels, how your friends feel[.]

With no desire to hear about the intimate details of the addressee’s tangled life, the speaker begs them, ‘Talk about windows! // Talk about windows, let’s please talk about windows.’ The image of ‘windows’ here is significant, as, elsewhere in Stevenson’s work, windows are associated with the attempt to perceive the material world beyond, rather the psychic world than within, the self. In a 1979 essay, Stevenson counsels against the direct transcription of personal experience, writing, ‘Unless you are setting out to write an autobiographical novel, like *The Bell Jar*, or a novel calculated to shock the public with its frankness, like [Erica Jong’s] *Fear of Flying*, it is better art to let your memory knit itself into your subconscious and twine around your imagination until you have found a way of transforming experience into fiction.’<sup>410</sup> In *Correspondences*, the means of ‘transforming experience into fiction’ was found in two separate bodies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century correspondence, the first, ‘a trunk full of nineteenth-century family letters I hadn’t known existed’, discovered in 1962 in the basement of her sister Diana’s house in New York; and the second, the papers of the Beecher-Stowe family, housed in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University, where Stevenson held a

<sup>409</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, ‘Confessional,’ undated.

<sup>410</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 11.

fellowship from 1970 to 1971.<sup>411</sup> Stevenson originally intended to draw upon her own family's correspondence in a poetic tribute to, or an elegy for, her recently deceased mother, but, as she explains in a recent interview, 'nothing came of that.'<sup>412</sup> It was only with the discovery of the archived material at Harvard that *Correspondences* began to take shape in the poet's imagination. The resulting poem is a colourful and richly textured narrative tapestry that takes as its subject the gradual dissolution of an American family over more than one hundred and fifty years. Stevenson linguistically constructs and vivifies a family tree of minutely conceived characters, each one an intricate amalgamation of fact and fiction, appropriation and invention, the experienced and the imagined. Stevenson explains that her guiding poetic principle was 'to get feelings right but to invent "facts".'<sup>413</sup> We might at first think this poetic strategy somewhat similar to Robert Lowell's 'fiction coloured with first-hand evidence' in *The Dolphin*, yet whereas Lowell 'markets' his personal experience – real-life 'letter and talk' – as 'fiction', Stevenson presents her poems as real-life historical documents.<sup>414</sup> Lowell is an autobiographer in the guise of a 'fiction maker', and Stevenson is a consummate 'fiction maker' who strives to create the impression of veracity and authenticity.

The very title of the poem attests to both the proximity of, and the distance between, herself, her created characters, and her authentic source material that the poet must hold in delicate balance. In one sense of the word, a 'correspondence' is a similarity, a parallel, or a correlation. The act of correspondence, of penning and sending a letter,

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<sup>411</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>412</sup> 'An Interview with Rich Kelley.'

<sup>413</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 18.

<sup>414</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 689.

however, suggests that there exists between the correspondents a distance or a separation that prevents a more immediate exchange. The title, then, suggests similitude, but also a separateness that is necessary to the poet.

*Correspondences* is not the poetic record of a psychological breakdown. Rather, it is the means by which the poet staves off such a breakdown; she writes, 'The only way to fight the madness of the present was to gain some understanding of the past.'<sup>415</sup> As such, whilst Stevenson is keen to explore and to understand the ways in which her own experiences 'correspond' with those of her forebears, she is also mindful of the need to preserve a demarcation between herself and her characters. Indeed, the emphasis of the temporal, if not experiential, distance between them seems to be a psychological necessity for the poet, influencing the epistolary form the poem was to take: 'I don't know when it occurred to me that my poem should take the form of letters. I think the family letters themselves suggested it; their language was already poetry, Victorian, distant.'<sup>416</sup> Writing these poems as letters allows the poet to effectively divert attention from herself as poet, onto the named sender and the named recipient of the missive. She further distances herself from these letters by adopting the 'Victorian, distant' language of the source letters. She wears the unfamiliar diction and the formality of the phrasing like a disguise. The poem simultaneously situates the poet's own experience within an expansive historical context, and articulates her determination to escape the interminable cycle of aspiration and frustration shared by her forebears. Stevenson recalls her determination to 'smash' the threatening bell jar, 'even if I had to be cruel to

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<sup>415</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.



my family...even if I had to leave them.'<sup>417</sup> She wishes to gain an understanding of her own situation via a deeper understanding of the historical causes, yet wishes to effect for herself a radically different outcome. As such, she must create and maintain a fine balance of imaginative proximity and distance between herself and her characters.

Stevenson employs a double strategy of distancing in *Correspondences*. First, she creates a cast of characters who are vividly written enough to be believable and individuated, yet not so idiosyncratic as to undermine their implicit 'every-man' (or, rather, 'every-woman') significance. Through the letters and journal entries of these characters the poet articulates and explores her own complex experiences, emotions, and memories. Second, she allows herself to be spoken through as she quotes verbatim, borrows from, and reworks, the various source letters found in the Schlesinger Library and in her sister's basement. She is both a ventriloquist, animating a cast of fictional characters with her own modulated voice, and a conduit through which the long-buried articulations of others might be given a hearing.

It becomes apparent that, whilst the poem's primary focus is the experiential and emotional 'correspondences' between different generations of women, it is concerned not merely with female experience. Each of the characters in the poem, male or female, is an individual somehow in conflict with or divergence from 'the precarious apartments of the world' around them, the expectations placed on them by their spouses, families, communities, or nations.<sup>418</sup> At the end of the poem, it is clear that Kay's is not the only major breakdown that has been suffered: America itself is in the midst of a breakdown. Stevenson explains, 'America itself was in a profound state of discontent. The puritan

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<sup>417</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 13.

<sup>418</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 200.

values of honesty, loyalty, piety, and self-sacrifice I'd been taught to respect in my childhood were everywhere being dismissed... All that time I was at Radcliffe writing *Correspondences* I was aware of living through a period of acute crisis.'<sup>419</sup>

*Correspondences* is by far Stevenson's most ambitious project, and, as John Redmond notes, she 'appears to estimate this book-length poem highly', electing to reproduce it in its entirety in both her *Selected Poems* of 1987 and *Poems 1955-2005*.<sup>420</sup> Contemporary reviews were, perhaps unsurprisingly, mixed. Reviewers lauded Stevenson's ambition ('It is an ambitious book, and, I think, a good one'<sup>421</sup>), though several suggested that it was something of a misguided hybrid: 'one is left wondering what it has achieved that a novel couldn't have achieved, and, more important, whether a more intimate and telling exploration, accessible only to poetry, hasn't been missed.'<sup>422</sup> The temporal and perspectival expansiveness of *Correspondences* is perhaps achieved at the expense of lyric immediacy. Redmond suggests that because 'few poems are written as letters, but even fewer letters are written as poems', 'one of the problems which bedevils *Correspondences* is that while attempting a realism which approaches the condition of documentary, it is silent on why that realism is breached by the protagonists writing their letters as poems.'<sup>423</sup> *Correspondences*, like all forms of storytelling, inevitably requires of the reader what Coleridge called a 'willing suspension of disbelief'.<sup>424</sup> We do not, for example, criticise Shakespeare's plays, even though we are aware that people do not generally go about their daily business in blank

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<sup>419</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 13.

<sup>420</sup> John Redmond, 'Staging Second Thoughts: The Poetry of Anne Stevenson,' *Voyages over Voices*, 78.

<sup>421</sup> Songs and Conversations,' John Matthias. *Poetry* 127 (Nov., 1975), 105.

<sup>422</sup> Garfitt, Roger, 'Poetry: Larkin and Others,' *London Magazine* 14 (October/November 1974), 111.

<sup>423</sup> Redmond, 78.

<sup>424</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. II., eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6.

verse. Quite why the reader should be unwilling or unable to make the same concessions for Stevenson's text as they would need to make for any other, Redmond neglects to explain.

### **Found Poetry and Source Texts:**

Several of the poems in *Correspondences* owe phrases, sentences, and even whole portions of text to either the Stevenson or Beecher-Stowe family papers. Recalling the vogue for 'found language' in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Stevenson explains 'everyone was suddenly on to "found poems" in those days.'<sup>425</sup> The found poem is a pre-extant, usually non-literary text, which has been reclaimed, refashioned, and represented as a poem, through changes made to lineation, punctuation, spacing, or through the addition or omission of text. The authors (or finders) of found poetry may manipulate their source texts to a greater or lesser extent, and with varying degrees of explicitness or transparency. Lowell, for example, made significant modifications to purportedly verbatim extracts from intimate correspondence between himself and his former wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, included in *The Dolphin*. Stevenson writes, 'I was... very much under the influence of Lowell and Berryman – they both borrowed freely from the characters they impersonated: Jonathan Edwards, Anne Bradstreet... And Lowell, apart from quoting his ex-wife's letters, took over Elizabeth Bishop's "The Scream" and made a poem of it.'<sup>426</sup> The phrase 'took over' has connotations of usurpation or domination, and suggests that Stevenson is fully cognisant of the ethical

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<sup>425</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 13 September 2011.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

responsibility of the poet to his or her found text, a responsibility she implicitly suggests Lowell did not fulfil. Nearly forty years after the publication of *Correspondences*, Stevenson admits, 'I should have asked permission to "borrow" whole sentences from Lyman Beecher's letters and sermons. The truth was that I was so absorbed in the character I was creating (or meeting) that I didn't realize what I was doing.'<sup>427</sup> Through her immersive study of the Beecher-Stowe letters during her fellowship at Radcliffe in 1970-1971, the poet 'meets' rather than simply 'creates' the characters of *Correspondences*. Even in the source letters, of course, these correspondents are textual constructs, but of their own construction. The poet pieces together personality and experience from these letters to construct or, perhaps, *reconstruct* a character. As such, Stevenson occupies a complex and multifaceted role: she is not only a creative artist, but also a gatherer and interpreter of historical material.

Whereas Lowell takes as his source texts documents from his own personal life, Stevenson works with historical documents as a means to explore and articulate her own experiences and emotions. In so doing, she succeeds not only in making poetic material out of personal experience without 'confessing' it, but also in giving a voice to the generations of voiceless women that preceded her: Abigail, whose 'hand's gone numb' as she writes in the dark; Marianne, whose journal is destroyed by fire; Maura, whose 'desire for a share of the world's knowledge' is denounced as 'unfeminine' by her overbearing father; and Ruth, who sacrifices her own literary ambitions for her husband and children.<sup>428</sup> *Correspondences* both humanises and dramatises history, and gives historical and social context to the poet's own traumatic experiences.

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 202, 222.

‘Part One: In the Hand of the Lord, 1829-1929’ opens with a short passage which appears to reveal the provenance of these documents:

Letters and documents selected from the Chandler Family Archives of the Chandler Memorial Library, Clearfield, Vermont... being a partial record of members of the family descended from Adam Ezekiel Chandler who was, from 1800 until 1843, Minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Clearfield, in the County of Halifax.<sup>429</sup>

So credible is this passage that a contemporary reviewer, John Matthias, recalls ‘feeling a little embarrassed, I picked up the phone to see if there really was a Chandler Family Archives in Clearfield, Vermont. There seems to be no Clearfield, Vermont. It was like phoning Mississippi and trying to get in touch with directory assistance for Yoknapatawpha County.’<sup>430</sup> With regards to her personal experience, Stevenson writes of her desire to ‘get feelings right but to invent “facts”.’ The same principle governs her use of the source letters: she faithfully reproduces the ‘feelings’ explored in the letters, but purposely obfuscates their exact origin. Though this passage is something of a deliberate red herring, the poet is at pains to emphasise (to a greater or lesser extent) the documentary nature and ambition of *Correspondences*, casting herself in the dual role of poet and historical detective or social historian.

The first poem that Stevenson wrote would become ‘A Letter to God on hotel notepaper from Ethan Amos Boyd’. In the poet’s own family correspondence is a series of letters from her grandfather, Lewis Wesley Destler (sometimes written ‘Deshler’), to his daughter, Louise Destler (Stevenson’s mother), on various hotel notepapers (Haynes Hotel, Dayton, Ohio; Hotel Spencer, Marion, Indianapolis; Rol-Eddy Hotel, Columbus,

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<sup>429</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 200.

<sup>430</sup> John Matthias, ‘Songs and Conversations,’ *Poetry* 127 (November 1975), 105. (98-111)

Ohio).<sup>431</sup> Like Ethan Amos Boyd, the poet's grandfather was a travelling salesman, selling pens at the time the letters were written: 'Daddy is trying to sell a lot of pens', he writes in a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> November 1927.<sup>432</sup> Lewis's worsening financial situation is hinted at in these letters of late 1927, as he writes, 'Of course, Dad has a lot of bills to settle',<sup>433</sup> and 'Sorry Dad is not making a lot of money... Dad has his problems also.'<sup>434</sup> As his professional and personal life deteriorates, his thoughts turn to the Christian ideal to which he has failed to adhere: 'Sometimes I think of Jesus, of all the great qualities of Jesus – magnified a thousand times, and Paul [his deceased son, who becomes James or 'Jimmy' in *Correspondences*] truly walked in the foot-steps of his master, and you are doing the same thing but along different paths.'<sup>435</sup> He signs this letter, 'Your stumbling-foolish, Dad', a phrase that Stevenson uses in the first verse paragraph of the poem ('I am stumbling-foolish.').<sup>436</sup> Ethan's admission, 'I am rot in my family', is elucidated by Stevenson's revelation that her grandfather contracted syphilis during his travels, after which his wife cut off all contact ('My wife – silent. / For long periods, completely silent.').<sup>437</sup> Stevenson describes her grandfather's demise as a real-life 'death of a salesman', and recalls that she was drawn to these letters in particular because they

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<sup>431</sup> Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>432</sup> Handwritten letter from Lewis Wesley Destler to Louise Destler on Haynes Hotel, Dayton, Ohio, notepaper, 25 November 1927. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>433</sup> Handwritten letter from Lewis Wesley Destler to Louise Destler on Hotel English, Indianapolis, notepaper, (date illegible) November 1927. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>434</sup> Handwritten letter from Lewis Wesley Destler to Louise Destler on Hotel Spencer, Marian, Indianapolis, notepaper, (date illegible) November 1927. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>435</sup> Handwritten letter from Lewis Wesley Destler to Louise Destler on Rol-Eddy, Columbus, Ohio, Hotel notepaper, November 1927. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>436</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 228.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*

dramatise ‘one of the great themes in American literature – the salesman who travels around.’<sup>438</sup>

The second poem that Stevenson wrote, ‘A successful American advises his sons studying abroad: Reuben Chandler to his sons in Geneva’, is based on a typewritten transcript of an 1868 letter from Stevenson’s great-great-grandfather, Herman Duhme II, to his sons, Frank and Herman III. Like Reuben Chandler, Herman Duhme II was a successful businessman who divorced his wife, Mary Ann (becomes Marianne Lavalley in *Correspondences*), for her errant behaviour, and sent his young sons first to Germany, and then to Neuchatel in Switzerland to complete their education. Stevenson ‘finds’ entire portions of her poem in this letter and makes only minor changes:

My dear Sons,

...

I have just received Mons. Roulet’s report and account, and am much pleased with the report he gives of both of you. He says that you work a great deal and faithfully. I am glad of this. It will prepare you for the time when you will have to take your places among the men of the world, where labour is the only standard of nobility and we are judged and respected according to the good we accomplish. And in our own rich country, which is but in the beginning in the development of its great resources, there is a great work for every man, and woman too, who are lovers of good and who love their fellow beings and God’s good universe. For such, idleness is wretchedness, and careless indolence a sin against the good creator whom we worship.<sup>439</sup>

This becomes in Stevenson’s poem:

My dear sons,

I have just received Monsieur R’s term report

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<sup>438</sup> Anne Stevenson, oral interview, 27 August 2012.

<sup>439</sup> Letter from Herman Duhme II to his sons, Frank and Herman III, 1868. Anne Stevenson’s personal papers. (A copy of the typewritten transcript of this document is provided in the appendix).

and am much pleased.  
 He says you work diligently and faithfully  
 Such work, my sons, prepares you for the time  
 when you will be men in this our rich country  
 where labor is the standard of nobility,  
 idleness, wretchedness,  
 and careless indolence, a sin  
 against the Creator whom we worship.  
 For here we are judged and respected  
 according to the work we accomplish.<sup>440</sup>

Herman Duhme III's lengthy sentences are broken up by the poet into short lines, measured by breaths. As in other letters in the collection, this short line creates the sense of the spoken, rather than of the written, word.

Though Reuben Chandler's letter reproduces Herman Duhme III's letter almost in its entirety, other letters take greater liberties with their particular source texts. The first historical letter of *Correspondences*, from Adam Chandler to his daughter, Elizabeth ('Condolences of a minister to his bereaved daughter after the death of her young husband in a shipwreck off Halifax, N.S.') is based on two letters from Lyman Beecher to his daughter, Catharine, dated 5<sup>th</sup> November 1822 and 29<sup>th</sup> January 1823, following the drowning of her fiancé, Alexander Metcalf Fisher, off the coast of Ireland as he sailed to Europe to further his studies. In both letters, Lyman offers not 'condolences' but rather admonition to his bereaved daughter for what he deems to be her unseemly grief and lack of faith:

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<sup>440</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 216.



Litchfield Nov 5 1822

My Dear afflicted Child

Were I to encourage the feelings which offer to rise whenever the death of Mr Fisher occurs to my thoughts (and no day passes without the occurrence) and to give them utterance on paper I should only swell the tide whose deep waters have come over you. In my conversation & by letter I have forbidden to

'My Dear afflicted Child,

Were I to encourage the feelings which offer to rise whenever the death of Mr Fisher occurs to my thoughts (and no day passes without the occurrence) and to give them utterance on paper I should only invite the tide whose deep waters have come over you.<sup>441</sup>

Though the microfiche is of poor quality (Stevenson had access to the original documents in 1970-71), snatches of the handwriting remain legible, including '...absolute justice of your punishment...'; '...confidence in God as wholly just and true in all his ways...'; 'Do not his judgements fall on sinners sometimes not for their own good but for the (?) good in their affliction?'. Perhaps because of the difficulty of authoritative transcription, Stevenson appears to have adopted the vocabulary and moralising tone of these letters, rather than verbatim passages or phrases. These phrases are evident in Adam Chandler's lines, 'I suffer as you, too, must suffer / increasingly

<sup>441</sup> Letter from Lyman Beecher to Catherine Beecher on the death of her fiancé, Alexander Fisher, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1822. Beecher-Stowe family papers, 1798-1956. (A-102; M-45) 2-4. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

from a sense of the justice of your bereavement', and 'Is not sacrifice punishment of Sin?'<sup>442</sup> Stevenson reproduces the myriad references to seafaring and images of water that we find in the original letter, which, given the nature of Fisher's death, are either deliberately cruel or blindly insensitive. ('Avoid, my child, those rocks on which multitudes have been wrecked!'; 'swelling, / could we but see it, with the waters of human iniquity / the Eternal River of Heaven which flows from the Throne!'; 'drenched daily in that Inexhaustible Spring').<sup>443</sup> Following Fisher's death, Catharine Beecher, with financial and moral support from her father, founded the Hartford Female Seminary in 1823, The Ladies' Society for Promoting Education in the West in the 1830s, and the American Women's Educational Association in 1852. Her corresponding character, Elizabeth, though, accedes to her overbearing father's wishes, as is evidenced by a letter from her to her brother, Reuben, in which, having adopted her father's overtly religious vocabulary as her own, she berates him for 'the utter carelessness / of [his] happiness (and selfishness)'.<sup>444</sup> Stevenson's guiding principle during the writing of *Correspondences* was 'to get feelings right but to invent "facts".' She 'finds' and appropriates portions of texts from her various source letters, but the real life stories of these figures are subsumed to the book's own fictitious plot.

'A New Year's Message to myself: From the journal of Maura Chandler on the eve of her marriage to Ethan Amos Boyd' is based on a document titled 'A Word to Myself' (dated 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1883), written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and housed in the Schlesinger Library at Harvard. In 'A Word to Myself', the twenty-three year old Gilman questions her motives for accepting the marriage proposal of Charles Walter

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<sup>442</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 200.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>444</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 208.

Stetson (whose first proposal she declined, and from whom she was divorced in 1888 after four years of marriage), and attempts to reconcile her own aspirations with her obligations to her prospective husband and to God. Gilman's 'Word' to herself is more optimistic in its outlook than Maura's despairing yet didactic 'message'. Whereas Gilman is guided by her Christian faith ('I do right by my husband, my children, my God, and mankind'), the twenty-two year old Maura is in the midst of a crisis of belief:<sup>445</sup>

Without false pride.  
Without true faith.  
With little hope  
and with no glad energy,  
but still, thank God,  
steeled firm in belief  
that there is a right way  
and a wrong.<sup>446</sup>

Her use of 'thank God' and, later, 'dear God' only serves to highlight the absence of any evidence of 'true faith' in her letter, though the line 'Perhaps it was never meant / that I work as I intended' suggests that she cannot entirely reject the notion of a divine scheme. Both documents are preoccupied with the idea of duty. Gilman asks herself, 'What have I done so far to fulfil my duties as a member of the world? If I were dead tomorrow what were lost?'<sup>447</sup> She associates her current unhappiness with her failure to fulfil her various 'duties'. The final page of the letter suggests that she believes that if she can be 'Unselfish. True. Wise. Strong. Brave. Pure.' then happiness will surely

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<sup>445</sup> 'A Word to Myself.' Charlotte Perkins Gilman Papers, 1846-1961; Biographical and miscellaneous; "Thoughts and Figgerings," 1883-1918. Collection 177, folder 16. Sequence 2-6. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

<sup>446</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 224.

<sup>447</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'A Word to Myself.'

follow.<sup>448</sup> Maura does not share Gilman's optimism and knows that fulfilling her various obligations will bring her not happiness, but misery:

If I keep every moral commandment,  
 fulfil every physical requirement,  
 feed mind into heart,  
 proffer heart to humanity –  
 stands it not then to reason  
 a woman will be happy  
 in her season?

I do not believe it. How  
 can I believe it  
 when the darkness comes?<sup>449</sup>

Gilman asks herself of her future husband, 'I love him? Yes. And by love I mean that I want him more than ~~anything~~ anyone else on earth? That and more.'<sup>450</sup> Maura, on the other hand, vows to disregard her personal feelings:

For now it behoves me to  
 Crush out all personal sorrow,  
 Forsake the whole ground of  
 Self-interest, ask not  
 'Do I love him?' but affirm!  
 'It is good! It is right!'<sup>451</sup>

Maura, who forsakes both her emotional wellbeing and her own intellectual 'vocation' in order to fulfil the expectations of her father and wider society, is a more wretched figure than the Gilman we see in the source letter. Though Gilman's situation suits Stevenson's narrative purpose, the stoic yet spirited quality of the letter does not. Maura's miserable and reluctant acquiescence to the traditional feminine role serves to

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 225.

<sup>450</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'A Word to Myself.'

<sup>451</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 225.

throw her granddaughter Kay's assertion of her intellectual and sexual independence nearly sixty years later into even sharper relief.

### **Poetry and Oral History:**

*Correspondences*, in its recasting of historical documents as poetry, anticipates the recent trend within oral history methodology towards transcribing oral testimonies in poetic form. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis note that 'some analytical perspectives [are] unquestionably better than others, in that they illuminate more of the data at hand, explaining cultural patterns, contradictions, and seemingly unrelated facts. They let the data sing, revealing deep cultural resonances and elegant themes.'<sup>452</sup> For many oral historians, poetic form offers a new 'analytical perspective', one that facilitates the revelation and recognition of narrative and linguistic patterns within a testimony. For oral historians and sociologists such as Krista Woodley and Catherine Kohler Riessman, then, the transcription of oral testimonies into poetic form is an analytical, rather than aesthetic, strategy. Though *Correspondences* is foremost an aesthetic achievement, Stevenson shares the historian's desire to comprehend historical events: she writes, 'the only way to fight the madness of the present was to gain some understanding of the past.'<sup>453</sup> Woodley explains that 'as an analytical method, shaping [testimony into] a poem aids close textual analysis... while the poetic form doesn't offer a radically different interpretation, it does enhance and highlight elements of the

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<sup>452</sup> Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

<sup>453</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

language.<sup>454</sup> Similarly, Rosemary Block, curator of Oral History at the State Library of New South Wales, suggests that the poetic form affords the transcriber and the reader an enhanced appreciation of the subject's own voice, noting 'the voice is so often beguiling and the short line brings something of that aural charm to the page.'<sup>455</sup> In those poems that 'borrow' language from source letters, Stevenson reworks the long written line into shorter lines that are dictated by breaths rather than by margins.

Through the transcription of oral testimony into first person poetry, an oral historian develops an enhanced understanding of that individual's experience. Woodley cites those lines from Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in which Atticus Finch tells his daughter, Scout, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it',<sup>456</sup> and suggests that transcribing testimony in poetic form 'allows the writer to climb into that other person's skin... to step into the shoes of the Other.'<sup>457</sup> Whilst poetic form allows the writer to develop an enhanced understanding of, and empathy for, their subject, it also demands 'an increased reflexivity'.<sup>458</sup> The writer must be aware of themselves as occupying a series of dual roles. Woodley explains that, 'it is not a simple case of stepping into someone else's skin — or shoes. There are layers and refractions: the researcher is both reader and writer, subject and object, self and Other.'<sup>459</sup> Stevenson exercises such an 'increased reflexivity' in *Correspondences*. She is acutely aware of

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<sup>454</sup> Krista Woodley, 'Let the Data Sing: Representing Discourse in Poetic Form,' *Oral History* 31 (Spring 2004), 57.

<sup>455</sup> Rosemary Block, 'Comments on Kate Moore's "Perversion of the word: the role of transcripts in oral history",' *Words and Silences: Bulletin of the International Oral History Association* 1 (June 1997), 32.

<sup>456</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960; London: HarperCollins, 2006), 33.

<sup>457</sup> Woodley, 55.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

herself as being simultaneously subject and author, testifier and historian, creator of characters and channel through which other (or Other) voices might speak.

The interplay of multiple perspectives within *Correspondences*, coupled with the foregrounding of the partial (in both senses of the word) nature of many of the documents, prompts the reader to recognise the subjectivity of any historical account or narrative. Hayden White notes, though, ‘in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in science.’<sup>460</sup> A consciousness of history as subjective can be achieved through the transcription of oral testimony into poetic form. By recasting what might otherwise be regarded as an objective, even scientific, statement of fact in the guise of a subjective, imaginative literary text, then, these historians encourage an apprehension and appreciation of the subjective, partial, and invented nature of any ‘true’ account or testimony.

### **Voice and Verse:**

In *Correspondences*, through the use of depersonalised speakers and formal diversionary tactics, Stevenson creates a crucial psychological and linguistic distance between herself and her subject matter. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller argue that such indirect expression is an important part of the female poetic mode, and suggest that, ‘traditionally, women have voiced radical conceptions of themselves and their

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<sup>460</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,’ *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 82.

world in code form, under a guise of obedience, respectability, or triviality.’<sup>461</sup> Whilst admitting that ‘indirection in poetry is by no means peculiar to women (or to any other socially oppressed group)’, they maintain that ‘indirection characterizes much of women’s writing particularly... because of the great risks women have faced in expressing their aspirations or powers openly’.<sup>462</sup> Strategies of indirection in *Correspondences* – the means by which the poet skilfully and subtly ‘directs attention away from herself or portrays herself indirectly’ – are indeed employed to protect the poet against a ‘great risk’.<sup>463</sup> Yet, in this case, that risk is posed not, as Keller and Miller suggest, by an oppressive patriarchy, threatening ‘societal rejection’, but by the poet’s own ‘extreme emotion’, too raw and too ragged to be expressed in anything other than an indirect way. Stevenson recognises both the psychological necessity and aesthetic value of creating and maintaining a distance from ‘potentially overpowering experiences’ within her poetry.<sup>464</sup>

A number of unpublished poems and unfinished drafts held in Cambridge University Library suggest themselves as formal precursors to the polylogic *Correspondences*. The earliest example of dialogic verse, dating from her years as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, is the comic verse-dialogue, ‘J. Ross in Hell, or The Devil Meets his match’, subtitled ‘A philosophic dialogue in verse’.<sup>465</sup> In later poems, though, she uses dialogue not for comic effect, but for the exploration of intimate familial relationships, as in *Correspondences*. The short poem ‘Dialogue for One Person’

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<sup>461</sup> Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, ‘Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Rewards of Indirection,’ *New England Quarterly* 57 (December 1984), 533.

<sup>462</sup> Keller and Miller, 534.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Keller and Miller, 537.

<sup>465</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, ‘J. Ross in Hell, or The Devil Meets his match,’ c. 1950-1955.



(variously renamed ‘Dialogue for Puritans’ and ‘Dialogue of Puritans’) dramatises a conversation between a husband and wife.<sup>466</sup> ‘England’s Prodigal’ is a pair of dramatic monologues in the voice of an anonymous and antagonistic ‘Mother’ and ‘Son’.

Like Stevenson, both Bishop and Plath experimented with polylogic poems, Bishop with the prose poem, ‘Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics’, first published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1967, and Plath with ‘Dialogue Over a Ouija Board’ (1957), and the verse play, *Three Women*, first published and performed in 1962. Though these poems initially appear to have little in common, they evince the desire shared by both poets to develop a poetry that is able to articulate multiple perspectives and explore multiple experiences. In a 1964 letter to Stevenson, Bishop writes:

If I were a good critic and had a good brain I think I’d like to write a study of ‘The School of Anguish’ – Lowell (by far the best), Roethke, and Berryman and their descendents like Anne Sexton and Siedel, more and more anguish and less and less poetry. Surely never in all the ages has poetry been so personal and confessional – and I don’t think it is what I like, really[.]<sup>467</sup>

To Bishop’s mind, there is an inversely proportional relationship between ‘anguish’ and artistry in poetry. Zhou Xiaojing suggests that both the form and content of ‘Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics’ are at once an ‘assimilation of and a resistance to the confessional practice in American poetry.’<sup>468</sup> Bishop experiments with a trio of anthropomorphic animal speakers. These are not mere voices, but explicitly identified characters whose individuality is suggested by their linguistic idiosyncrasies. The animal characters

<sup>466</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten drafts, ‘Dialogue for One Person’ / ‘Dialogue of Puritans,’ / ‘Dialogue for Puritans’ (undated).

<sup>467</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, 1964 Letter to Anne Stevenson, quoted in Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (University of California Press, 1993), 361.

<sup>468</sup> Zhou Xiaojing, ‘The Oblique, the Indirect Approach: Elizabeth Bishop’s “Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics”’, *Chicago Review* 40, No. 4 (1994), 75.

candidly ‘confess’ their personal pain and private thoughts in monologues that subtly mimic and parody the kind of anguish-saturated ‘poetry’ denounced by Bishop in her letter to Stevenson. These monologues also, Helen Vendler suggests, ‘contain reflections on Bishop’s self and her art.’<sup>469</sup> Indeed, the egotistical ‘Strayed Crab’ articulates what is surely the poet’s own artistic mantra: ‘I believe in the oblique, the indirect approach, and I keep my feelings to myself’, and later, ‘I admire compression, lightness, and agility, all rare in this loose world.’<sup>470</sup> The crab despises the ‘sulking toad’ for its naked vulnerability, sneering, ‘Imagine, at least four time my size and yet so vulnerable...I could open your belly with my claw.’<sup>471</sup> Vendler suggests that, ‘foreign abroad, foreign at home, Bishop appointed herself a poet of foreignness.’ Through the voice of the crab, the poet explores and articulates her own feelings of foreignness and dislocation in an unfamiliar landscape: ‘This is not my home. How did I get so far from water? It must be over that way somewhere.’<sup>472</sup> Indeed, each of Bishop’s three animal speakers is somehow an alienated outsider, unsuited to their environment. The toad is ‘giant’, self-conscious of its corporeal bulk; the snail is isolated inside its high shell, unaware of the crab’s insistent tapping; and despite the crab’s apparent self-assurance, it has ‘strayed’ far from home, and is uncomfortably out of place (‘But on this strange, smooth surface I am making too much noise. I wasn’t meant for this... This place is too hard’).<sup>473</sup> Vendler regards these three creatures as analogies for the artist estranged from society, akin to Bishop’s other marginalised

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<sup>469</sup> Helen Vendler, ‘The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop,’ *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Summer 1987), 825.

<sup>470</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Rainy Season; Sub-Topics,’ *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, notes by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (The Library of America, 2008), 134.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*

figure, the man-moth. Though Bishop's 'Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics' and Stevenson's *Correspondences* vary in terms of length and complexity, they share a strategy of polylogic ventriloquism, of exploring and articulating personal material through the character and voice of a distinct other. Both poets are thus able to couch the handling of personal material within the apparent engagement of (fictional) others 'in a dialogic exploration and expression of the self'.<sup>474</sup>

### Exploring the Fractured Self:

In January 1955, Plath submitted her undergraduate thesis, *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels*, in which she posits that the literary phenomenon of the double is a textual manifestation of the 'contradictions in man's character' and 'the complex question of identity'.<sup>475</sup> Plath returns to the 'complex question of identity' in the two polylogic poems, 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board' and *Three Women*, in which we witness the fracturing or refracting of individuals into multiple parts or voices. 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board' is simultaneously a poetic exercise in the writing of characters, or voices, in conversation, and a wily rumination on the relationship between a poet and their 'masks'.<sup>476</sup> In journal entries from the summer of 1957 Plath refers negatively to this poem as her 'long lumbering dialogue verse poem', yet acknowledges that, despite sounding 'quite conversational', it is 'more

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<sup>474</sup> Zhou Xiaojing, 76.

<sup>475</sup> Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>476</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 276.

ambitious than anything I've ever done'.<sup>477</sup> The voicing of characters apparently did not come naturally to her, and she appears to have found this new stylistic mode difficult to write in, unsurprisingly given its divergence from what she calls her 'old lyric sentimental stuff'. She writes, 'I feel to be doing it like a patchwork quilt, without anything more than the general idea it should come out a rectangular shape, but not seeing how the logical varicoloured pieces should fit'.<sup>478</sup>

*Three Women*, a poem that was recorded as a radio play by the BBC in August 1962, is more successful. The piece is subtitled 'A Poem for Three Voices'. Unlike in 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board', *Three Women* does not give names to these voices, referring to them only as 'FIRST', 'SECOND', and 'THIRD VOICE'. There are no distinguishing verbal idiosyncrasies serving to individuate the three voices, and they provide no explication of their own identities. Though their subject is largely their own bodies and bodily experiences, they are at times curiously disembodied. These voices are not in conversation; rather, each delivers a self-contained, though thematically and imagistically linked, monologue on the subject of childbirth and motherhood. Stevenson suggests that '*Three Women* is in one sense a recapitulation of what had gone before'.<sup>479</sup> Certainly, the subjects of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood are hardly a radical thematic departure for Plath – we need think only of 'Morning Song', 'Childless Woman', or 'Nick and the Candlestick', for example – and the hospital setting is also familiar from 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', 'Tulips', and 'In Plaster'. In another sense, though, *Three Women*, with its explicit employment of voices marks a significant

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<sup>477</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 293.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), 232.

formal and strategic departure for the poet, though not one that she would pursue in later work. As Tim Kendall notes, however, ‘many of the metaphors and motifs in the radio play appear in her later poetry in a more economical style.’<sup>480</sup>

In the original radio recording in 1962, and in subsequent professional performances, each voice is performed by a different actor. Since Plath worked closely with the original producer, Douglas Cleverdon, we can assume that this was a decision at least agreed to, if not made, by Plath. Given the lack of individuation between the three voices, though, and the seep of images from one monologue to the next, the text would equally suggest itself as a script for a single actor, alternately adopting all three voices. That the poem is subtitled ‘A Poem for Three Voices’, rather than for three characters or actors, prompts the reader to consider the possibility that these three voices belong to the same woman. Indeed, when the text was published as a quarto edition in 1968, the subtitle was altered to ‘A Monologue for Three Voices’. ‘Monologue’ refers to a lengthy speech made by one speaker, and is derived from the Greek *monologos*, meaning ‘speaking alone’ (*mono*, meaning single or alone, and *logos*, meaning speech or word, from *legein*, meaning to speak). A ‘Monologue for Three Voices’, then, is something of a contradiction in terms. This, coupled with the cover artwork for the 1968 edition, which shows three stylised female faces fused together in an amalgamous formation, further prompts us to question whether these are the voices of three discrete women, or the three voices (and the three faces) of one woman.

Each voice recounts a very different experience of pregnancy and childbirth, though Stevenson suggests that ‘each voice is recognisably hers [Plath’s].’<sup>481</sup> Like all of Plath’s

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<sup>480</sup> Alison Flood, ‘Sylvia Plath’s *Three Women* to be staged in London,’ *Guardian* (3<sup>rd</sup> December 2008). Accessed on 7 June 2011. < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/dec/03/sylviaplath-poetry>>.

poems, *Three Women* is, to borrow Stevenson's phrase, personal in 'impetus', and she suggests that 'all Sylvia's experience of pregnancy, fear of pregnancy (as on Cape Cod in 1957), and miscarriage is contained within it'.<sup>482</sup> Though the voices lack individuation their mere presence within the poem means that it transcends straightforward 'confession'. Despite their very different experiences of childbirth, each voice articulates many of the same fears and concerns, primarily, loss of personal identity; loss of femininity; unreadiness for the responsibilities of motherhood; and physical pain. 'FIRST VOICE' seems at first to be that of one of the eponymous 'Heavy Women' (1961), 'Irrefutable, [and] beautifully smug / as Venus' in her fecundity.<sup>483</sup> 'SECOND VOICE', on the other hand, is the speaker of 'Barren Woman' (1961), and, Stevenson suggests, 'Parliament Hill Fields'. The 'THIRD VOICE' is that of Plath's 'neurotic student self'.<sup>484</sup> In a journal entry of 1957, Plath recalls 'a black lethal two weeks' during the summer of 1953 in which she believed herself to be in the early stages of an unwanted pregnancy:

I couldn't write a word about it, although I did in my head. The horror, day by day more sure, of being pregnant. Remembering my growing casualness about contraception, as it couldn't happen to me then: clang, clang, one door after another banged shut with the overhanging terror which, I know now, would end me, probably Ted, and our writing & [sic.] our possible impregnable togetherness.<sup>485</sup>

Though Plath 'couldn't write a word about it' at the time, it is clear that much of her traumatic experience found expression in the monologue of the third voice in 'Three

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<sup>481</sup> *Bitter Fame*, 233.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>483</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 158.

<sup>484</sup> *Bitter Fame*, 234.

<sup>485</sup> *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, 293.

Women'. Like Plath, who describes 'avalanches of rain and thunder... final judgement on a bridge: a thundercrack and last pyre of electricity',<sup>486</sup> 'THIRD VOICE' associates her unborn and unwanted child with danger and threat from the natural world. She says that, gazing into the pool, 'all I could see was dangers'. The 'great swan, with its terrible look', and the 'white clouds rearing / Aside' like wild horses ready to drag her asunder, represent the threat to her current and longed-for future life posed by the 'intruder'.<sup>487</sup>

What this poem gives us, though, is not mere reflection of the poet's personal experience, but rather an intricate refraction of it. It is not a mirror, so much as a hall of mirrors, reflecting but also splintering and distorting the poet's complex emotional response to motherhood into a cast of three. Stevenson concludes that the poem 'developed from personal sources', but that 'it makes an advance on earlier mysteries in Sylvia's work, rising above private iconography to become universal.'<sup>488</sup> As with Stevenson in *Correspondences*, Plath invents 'facts' (she never delivered a still-born child or gave a child up for adoption), but 'get[s] feelings right', drawing directly upon her own experiences and emotions. The poet's employment of the three voices means that this poem is elevated from a 'confession' of tangled and conflicting emotional responses to childbirth and motherhood, to a text that, like her thesis on the double in Dostoevsky, intellectually and artistically engages with 'the crisis of identity in nineteenth-century romantic fiction... [and] the schizoid diagnoses of twentieth-century psychoanalysis'.<sup>489</sup> The deeply ambiguous relationship between the three voices

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 178

<sup>488</sup> *Bitter Fame*, 234.

<sup>489</sup> *Bitter Fame*, 54.

subverts and destabilises the traditional (and perhaps reassuring?) notion of a unified, coherent, and confessable 'self'.

Several of Stevenson's poems perform a similar destabilisation, often playing with images of light and darkness, or of real figures and their reflections. An early unpublished poem, 'The Doll' is strikingly Plathian dialogue between a 'soiled, stinking, threadbare' real woman and her spiteful, needling double, a 'whiter' doll, 'fresh as soap'.<sup>490</sup> In 'Night Walking with Shadows' (1990), the relationship between the speaker's various selves is less antagonistic. The speaker walks her dog 'through the hollow village', escorted by three shadows: 'I am followed and preceded by three of me'.<sup>491</sup> The speaker feels that her previously intact self is being divided into several parts; as she says, 'The streetlights distribute me between three shamans.' These shadows are simultaneously part of her, and separate from her, and she describes being handed 'like a trophy, / from the shadow behind me to the shadow before me.' She retains a sense of self enough to refer to herself conventionally as 'I', yet musing 'How this white fall of moonlight simplifies the story', she acknowledges that the relationship between her 'I' and the alternate selves represented by the three shadows is not as unambiguous as the stark dichotomies 'Dog and shadow. Woman and shadow' might suggest. The poem is pervaded with double images of light and darkness, suggesting the different constituent aspects of every supposedly unitary 'self'; 'for every white chain of amazing smoke', the poet suggests, 'the moon cuts a dead black track.'

In a slightly later revisiting of the theme of multiple selfhood, the poet again employs images of light and shadow. 'Trinity at Low Tide' (1993) offers a second-

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<sup>490</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'The Doll', undated.

<sup>491</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 102.



person meditation on the journey of a figure along a 'glassy beach'. The titular reference to a 'Trinity' is a knowing reference to the Christian doctrine of the trinity. The phrase 'Sole to sole' in the first line of the poem is a play on the word 'soul', the idea of which Stevenson sees as a precursor to our contemporary preoccupation with 'identities'. The figure on the beach is multiplied by three, striding 'in triplicate across the sand', joined by a 'gliding' shadow (as in 'Night Walking with Shadows'), and a reflection created in the shallow water.<sup>492</sup> The speaker says to the internal addressee, 'while doubling you, the rippling tideland / deepens you.' Similarly, in the earlier poem, the speaker notes that 'the full moon gives [her] a dense / practical shadow'. These doubles, be they reflections or shadows, are curiously somehow deeper and denser than their fleshly counterparts. The internal addressee's reflection in the water may well represent what, in 'Moonrise', Stevenson refers to as 'the simpler self'. The speaker's 'simpler self' is momentarily freed from anthropocentric obsession as she gazes in wonder at the rising moon. Here, the reflection is 'transparent yet exact / ... pure image, cleansed of human overtones.' More ominous, however, is the speaker's 'black' and 'featureless' shadow, into which 'All blame is packed.' This 'trick of light' 'copies' the internal addressee, but also 'cancels' him. Though Stevenson describes this poem as a 'playful... light meditation', the use of the word 'featureless' calls to mind the blank, faceless doubles that haunt Plath's poetry (the dummies in 'The Disquieting Muses', a poem inspired by Giorgio de Chirico's surreal painting of the same name, or the 'white person' in 'In Plaster', for example), and we are prompted to consider whether this 'stalking' shadow represents a threat to the internal addressee.<sup>493</sup> There are three selves,

**Comment [E24]:** New material written in response to Professor Kendall's 'invitation' to think about De Chirico's painting.

<sup>492</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 273.

<sup>493</sup> 'Interview with Richard Poole,' 179.

or three versions of the self, then: the fleshly ‘real’ self; the reflected self associated with light, a ‘travelling sun’ and ‘sparkling shells’; and a shadow self, associated with darkness. Stevenson writes that ‘you can read [the poem] in a number of ways; for instance, your subjective “self” is not the “you” other people recognise, nor is it the corporeal object that nature created. We are most of us a number of things at once, depending on point of view, depending on the “light” in which we’re viewed.’<sup>494</sup> Similarly, at a 2010 poetry reading at Newcastle University, the poet explained, ‘There are many selves that I consider shades of myself.’<sup>495</sup> For Stevenson, then, the ‘self’ is not a stable or unified, but rather protean and complexly multi-faceted.

### **The Limits of the Lyric:**

In her introduction to a reading by Stevenson in 2010, Angela Leighton explained that the edited collection of essays on the poet, *Voyages over Voices*, was so titled in reference to the poet’s ‘embarking voice’ that ‘sets sail’. Yet, the poem ‘Making Poetry’, from which the phrase is taken, suggests otherwise. To be a poet and to ‘make’ poetry is, the speaker suggests, to ‘embark on voyages over *voices*, / evade the ego-hill, the misery-well’ (emphasis mine). These line furnish us with an image of the poet as an intrepid explorer, aboard a craft (in both senses of the word) borne aloft on a surging sea of different voices, each voice carrying the poet in a new direction like an ocean current. There is no single, stable ‘voice’ in Stevenson’s poetry, ‘embarking’ or not: rather, ‘Making Poetry’ suggests that there are multiple voices, and, furthermore,

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘Saying the World: Anne Stevenson with Angela Leighton,’ poetry reading at Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts, Newcastle University, 26 November 2010.

multiple selves that find expression in Stevenson's work. This engagement with a wide variety of voices is one means by which Stevenson succeeds in circumventing the perilous 'ego-hill' and 'misery-well' of self-indulgent self-expression.

Andrew Motion writes that during Stevenson's 1973 fellowship at Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford University, 'she was interested, as I was, in expanding the scope of lyric poetry, and we had long discussions as to what a lyric poem might be.'<sup>496</sup> 'A lyric poem' is defined by M. H. Abrams as 'any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling.'<sup>497</sup> There is, however, a long-standing uncertainty as to the identity of the I-speaker of the lyric poem, and his or her relationship to the poet. John Ruskin writes in *Fors Clavigera* that 'lyric poetry is the expression by the poet of his own feelings',<sup>498</sup> a view shared by John Stuart Mill, Northrop Frye, Walter Blair and W.K. Chandler (who writes, 'Lyrical poetry arouses emotion because it expresses the author's feeling'<sup>499</sup>). On the other hand, John Keats, in a letter of 1818, emphasizes the performative nature of the lyric 'I', and suggests that it can take on a limitless variety of roles:

It is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, rich or poor, mean or elevated – It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.<sup>500</sup>

Keats's pronouncement that the lyric 'I' has 'no self' and 'no character' anticipates by a more than a century Eliot's suggestion that the poet in his 'proper' person should be

<sup>496</sup> Alfred Hickling, 'Profile: Anne Stevenson,' *Guardian Review*, *The Guardian* (2 October 2004), R20.

<sup>497</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, sixth edition, (1993; Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 2005), 108-109.

<sup>498</sup> John Ruskin, quoted in Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 137

<sup>499</sup> W.K. Chandler, quoted in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 240.

<sup>500</sup> John Keats, 'To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818,' Robert Gittings, ed. *Selected Letters*, 147.

effaced in the act of creation and composition. Similarly, C. Day Lewis suggests that the best lyric poetry is ‘simple, pure, transparent, [and] *impersonal*’<sup>501</sup> (emphasis mine).

With Abrams’ basic definition of lyric poetry in mind, it is clear that, as Alfred Hickling notes, Stevenson had already ‘begun to expand the scope of lyric poetry exponentially’ with *Correspondences*, which she fondly refers to as her ‘19<sup>th</sup>-century novel’, in recognition of both its length and its narrative, even epic, ambitions.<sup>502</sup> *Correspondences* is itself a ‘voyage over voices’, or perhaps more accurately, it is a voyage *in* or *through* voices, as the poet both speaks through the voices of others, and allows the voices of others to speak through her. The poem is an ambitious and innovative assimilation of poetic modes, drawing upon and fusing different modes of address and forms of written communication.

In *The Republic*, Plato demarcates the different voices that we encounter in poetry. First, the voice of the poet speaking for and as himself, as in choral songs or “dithyrambs”; second, the imitated voice of dramatic characters, speaking in monologue or dialogue; and, third, the voice of epic poetry, in which the poet narrates in his own voice, but also imitates the voices of various characters.<sup>503</sup> Eliot, in ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’ (1953), develops and extends Plato’s ‘tripartite structure’ as he posits:

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> C. Day Lewis, *The Lyric Impulse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 144-145.

<sup>502</sup> Hickling.

<sup>503</sup> Scott Brewster, *Lyric* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 36.

<sup>504</sup> T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 89.

The second voice described by Plato corresponds to the third voice described by Eliot, and it is this voice – ‘the imitated voice of dramatic characters’ – that predominates in *Correspondences*.

E. Warwick Slinn suggests that from the 1830s and 1840s onwards the lyric underwent something of an evolution, becoming less a vehicle ‘for private expressiveness’ than a ‘point where self and world are constructed’ in relation to one another.<sup>505</sup> Indeed, many Victorian lyric poems are ‘a blend of passionate persuasion, dramatisation and meditation.’<sup>506</sup> The role of the reader of the lyric poem also undergoes a shift during this period, becoming less an eavesdropper or overhearer, than a silent but deliberately addressed listener. In the advertisement for the first edition of Robert Browning’s *Dramatic Lyrics*, the poet acknowledged the conflation of genres that was taking place, defining his poems as ‘though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine’.<sup>507</sup> Within these poems, Browning fuses atemporal ‘lyric suspension’ with dramatic or narrative movement.<sup>508</sup> Though Browning’s collection is titled *Dramatic Lyrics*, the poems are, according to Ralph Rader, not dramatic lyrics but dramatic monologues. In the dramatic monologue, Rader claims, the I-speaker is imagined or visualised by the speaker as they might see a character in a film; they imagine him or her as ‘an outward presence’, with a physical body that they see with

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<sup>505</sup> E. Warwick Slinn, ‘Poetry,’ *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. H.F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 310.

<sup>506</sup> Brewster, 85.

<sup>507</sup> Robert Browning, *The Poetical Works*, Vol. 3, ed. Ian Jack and Rowena Fowler, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 178.

<sup>508</sup> Brewster, 84.

their own eyes as it moves ‘within the frame of the motion picture screen’.<sup>509</sup> In the dramatic lyric, on the other hand, rather than seeing the I-speaker as an embodied character separate from ourselves, we instead see ‘an outward scene that he is understood as seeing, with the camera implicitly taken as our eyes.’<sup>510</sup> In short, in the dramatic lyric, the reader is conflated with the I-speaker; they see through the speaker’s eyes, and inhabit his body. Rader directs our attention to Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ and Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ as respective examples of these two types, and suggests that the ‘simple reading aloud of the two poems’ will reveal the difference between them: ‘the reader will discover that he projects the Duke’s voice dramatically as characterising the “otherness” of the Duke, but that the voice of the “Dover Beach” speaker will be an ideal extension of the reader’s own voice... as if the reader had become the speaker’.<sup>511</sup> In assessing whether the poems of *Correspondences* are dramatic monologues or dramatic lyrics, then, we must ask ourselves from what perspective do we visualise the speakers. Do we conflate ourselves with the speaker, and imagine ourselves in Eden’s shoes, for example, holding the pen in our own hand? And also in the shoes of Adam Chandler, Abigail Chandler, and Reuben Chandler, and so on? Or, do we see Eden as a character with ‘outward presence’, sitting near ‘the empty window’, penning a letter to her sister?<sup>512</sup> Stevenson writes that it was the ‘Victorian, distant’ quality of the language of the source letters that appealed to her, as it indicated and demarcated a necessary distance between her and her characters.<sup>513</sup> As

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<sup>509</sup> Ralph Rader, ‘Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic “I” Poems and Their Theoretical Implications,’ *Victorian Poetry* 22 (1984), 104.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 194.

<sup>513</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 14.

readers, do we preserve this distance by projecting and performing the voice of the speaker dramatically when we read aloud the verse letters, or do we collapse that distance by reading in an extension of our own voice? Whereas the three voices in Plath's *Three Women* were not individuated or idiosyncratic, in *Correspondences*, each correspondent has their own distinct vocabulary and verbal signature. In creating a sense of the spoken word within the written words of these poems, then, Stevenson encourages the reader to 'project' the speaker's voice dramatically. Stevenson refers to Eden, Kay, Maura *et al.*, not as speakers but as 'characters'.<sup>514</sup> These 'voices', based, to a greater or lesser extent, on historical figures as known through historical documents, demand to be projected discretely and dramatically.

Rader notes that Robert Langbaum considers the speakers of both the dramatic lyric and the dramatic monologue external to, and independent of, the poet: they are, in Langbaum's view, 'real natural person[s]' to whom the reader is free to respond and relate in any way they choose.<sup>515</sup> However, other critics maintain that the speakers of both dramatic lyric and dramatic monologue are textual constructions, created by the poet and wholly in his control. Though the 'characters' of *Correspondences* demand dramatic projection, they remain functions of the text, entirely in the control of the poet. Our responses to these characters are conditioned and controlled by the letter-poems themselves. Our responses to these characters are conditioned and controlled by the letter-poems themselves. Redmond suggests that 'the characters in *Correspondences* are historical terms in an intellectual equation which the author has already calculated.'<sup>516</sup> As Redmond notes, through the entire text, the 'deployment of pious language' by

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<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Ralph Rader, 'The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms,' *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976), 133.

<sup>516</sup> Redmond, 'Staging Second Thoughts,' 79.

characters is an ‘invariable form of unconscious self-condemnation’, signalling to the reader that we are meant to view this character with suspicion: reading Adam Chandler’s unsympathetic rebuke to his grieving daughter, for example, we can hardly fail to experience the negative reaction Stevenson clearly wishes to evoke.<sup>517</sup>

In addition to differentiating between the dramatic lyric and the dramatic monologue, Rader also constructs ‘a new explanatory paradigm’ with which to further distinguish between ‘the dramatic monologue and other poems – “Prufrock”, “Ulysses”, Browning’s “Childe Roland” – often so called’.<sup>518</sup> In these poems, Rader contends, the ‘actor-speaker... is not a simulated natural person in contrast with the poet’, as is the Duke in ‘My Last Duchess’, but an artificial person projected from the poet, a mask through which he speaks.<sup>519</sup> Rader terms these poems ‘mask lyrics’, and suggests that the poet constructs an artificial character through which to express an emotion that is ‘inwardly real in him’.<sup>520</sup> The reader does not necessarily conceive of these characters as literal or ‘real’, so much as figurative or symbolic; these characters ‘symboliz[e], while standing in disjuncture from, some private felt meaning of the poet.’<sup>521</sup> Unlike the actor-speaker of the dramatic monologue, the speaker of the mask lyric is characterised by what Rader describes as a ‘lack of concreteness’, which makes clear their status as mask rather than (supposedly) autonomous character.<sup>522</sup> In ‘Going Back (Ann Arbor, October 1993)’ (2000), the speaker notes that ‘An intimate alias, / half mine, / floats on these streets’.<sup>523</sup> The speaker of the mask lyric is such an ‘intimate alias’, half-

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

<sup>518</sup> Ralph Rader, ‘The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms,’ 140.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> Rader, ‘The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms,’ 141.

<sup>523</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 33.



belonging to, and half-separate from, the poet. Sara Johnson suggests that, 'not grounded by autobiographical baggage', this 'alias' becomes 'a diaphanous presence, so light and delicate that it defies gravity'.<sup>524</sup> Whereas the actor-speaker of the dramatic monologue is specifically placed, the speaker of the mask lyric 'floats' free. Rader notes that 'we are not at all clear about just where the speakers are located in the scene and how they move in it. It is uncertain whether Prufrock ever leaves his fog-sealed room to pass through the half-deserted streets to the room where women come and go'.<sup>525</sup>

Whereas in the dramatic monologue, we are invited to perceive the speaker as 'other', as a character distinct from both the poet and the reader, in the mask lyric 'as the poet expressed himself in the character, so we find ourselves in him also'.<sup>526</sup> As readers, at the same time as we recognise the face of the poet behind the mask he had adopted, we also see something of ourselves in that mask: 'we feel Prufrock's predicament not with the superiority or inferiority of the dramatic monologue, in terms of his difference from us, but in terms of similarity, as if his predicament were ours'.<sup>527</sup> In the mask lyric, the speaker does not address himself to anyone explicitly present within the poem. Rader suggests that it is the reader, rather than an internal addressee, who is the object of his speech. As such, the 'you' addressed in 'Prufrock' is not some vague figure within the poem, but the reader himself. This is not the case with *Correspondences*; just as the speaker is explicitly named and located, so too is the addressee, the intended recipient of the letter. In 'My Last Duchess', the actor-speaker, the arrogant Duke, addresses himself to the silent envoy, and it is as though the reader is

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<sup>524</sup> Sara Johnson, "'Inside my house of words': The Poetry of Anne Stevenson," Diss. University of Hull, 2008, 169.

<sup>525</sup> Rader, 1976, 140.

<sup>526</sup> Rader, 1976, 141.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

cast in the role of a concealed observer and overhearer. The reader is not the addressee, yet hears all that is said by the speaker. Similarly, in *Correspondences*, the reader is not the intended recipient of the letters, yet is privy to their contents, a sort of textual overhearer.

In accordance with Keats's notion of the lyric 'I' having 'no self', Stevenson *in propria persona* is effaced during the textual construction of her many characters, leaving only subtle traces of Stevenson-the-poet, like the artist's brush strokes on a finished canvas. These characters are explicitly named, spatially and temporally located, and are in this sense more akin to the actor-speakers of dramatic monologues than to the ambiguous I-speakers of lyric or mask-lyric. Yet, many of the characters in *Correspondences* are also projections of the poet, 'intimate alias[es]' through which she might express emotions 'inwardly real' within herself. If obliged to position *Correspondences* within this complex poetic terrain, then, we might venture to say that it occupies the territory somewhere between what Rader terms dramatic monologue and what he terms 'mask lyric'. Individual epistolary poems might be read as dramatic monologues or as mask-lyrics, but the collection read as a whole becomes a narrative poem of grand scope. Stevenson's poem engages with and draws upon the conventions of several different modes in its ambitious expansion of the scope of lyric poetry.

Though the poems of *Correspondences* are literary written documents posing as 'real' or functional written documents, they are written in such a way as to subtly evoke or suggest the spoken, rather than the written, word. Within the poems we find textual representations of the pauses, fillers, and self-corrections that litter our everyday speech, but are usually absent from written documents. In the extract from Ruth's journal, for

example, she writes, ‘Jimmy. Would now be fifty... nine.’<sup>528</sup> Similarly, in the first poem of the collection, Eden writes, ‘Dear Kay, So... a summer. / Four months since she died’.<sup>529</sup> These ellipses indicate where we would hear an awkward, hesitant, or perhaps expectant pause were we listening to these characters speak, rather than reading their letters, and their presence within a written document confounds our expectations and complicates our reading experience. In that same poem, Eden writes, ‘Oh, you’d say summer, / but the woods are grey.’<sup>530</sup> The use of the exclamation or filler ‘oh’ is unremarkable within speech, but strikes the reader as a strangely self-conscious insertion within a letter. Writing a letter affords the sender the leisure to plan and craft their sentences. As such, we would expect to find more syntactically and grammatically sophisticated linguistic constructions in a letter than we would in a faithful transcription of a conversation. In the letter from Abigail Chandler to her sister, Eliza, though, we find partial and curtailed sentences. On one hand, these remind us that we are reading a hurriedly penned letter (‘Alas, I must stop. / My hand’s gone numb. / The stove’s gone out’), but in their incompleteness, these lines might almost be the transcription of one side of a spoken conversation:

Anne’s in bed. Grippe. And Elizabeth  
 Frantic lest her Nathan, who has weak lungs,  
 contract it. Black Becks’s in the pantry.  
 I can hear her, poor woman, screaming through  
 four closed doors. A finger. She crushed it  
 in the clothes mangle. Doubt she’ll save it.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 247.

<sup>529</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 194.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 202.

The presence of aspects of spoken conversation within these documents makes clear that these letters stand in for spoken words; were spoken conversation not prevented by geographical separation, these letters would not exist. In such poems, Stevenson creates a sense of conversational immediacy, yet also draws the reader's attention to the distance between correspondents that can be bridged only by a written missive.

### **William Carlos Williams and the Triadic Stanza:**

In approximately a third of the poems within *Correspondences*, Stevenson employs a modified version of William Carlos Williams' triadic stanza. Williams developed the triadic line stanza out of a desire for a poetic form shaped by the everyday speech of Americans. Maintaining that American English and British English were separate languages, Williams wrote:

We've got to begin by stating that we speak (here) a distinct separate language in a present (new era) and that it is NOT English... We've got to know that we have to invent for ourselves as we are in the process of inventing, whether we like it or not, a new prosody based on a present-day world, and real in a present-day world[,] which the English prosody can never be for us or the world.<sup>532</sup>

**Comment [E25]:** n.525 amended

Whereas, in Williams' opinion, much British English poetry deformed and distorted the natural rhythms of everyday speech into strict metrical patterns, the triadic line stanza is a pattern shaped by aspects of American natural speech: 'from the beginning I knew that the American language must shape the pattern; later I rejected the word language and spoke of the American idiom – this was a better word than language, less academic,

<sup>532</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Letters*, intro. John C. Thirlwall (New York: New Directions, 1957), 269.

more identified with speech”.<sup>533</sup> As Natalie Gerber notes, triadic line verse ‘derives its music from the inherent musicality of our speech and not from the limited rhythms associated with a meter.’<sup>534</sup>

Williams believed that the primary difference between American and British English lay not in pronunciation but in intonation, and it is the supposedly characteristic American intonation upon which the triadic line is largely based. H. L. Mencken notes that whereas British English speech is characterised by frequent and significant contrasts in tone, American English speech is more level toned. To American ears, then, British English, with its tonal extremes, sounds ‘abrupt, explosive, and manneristic’, whilst American speech likely strikes the British listener as ‘horribly monotonous’.<sup>535</sup> Whilst monotony may not sound a particularly promising basis for a new poetic patterning, Williams rejoiced in his review of Mencken’s 1936 book, *The American Language*, ‘here lies the secret, in the monotony of our intonation, of much that we might tell.’<sup>536</sup> When scanning syllabic or metrical verse we count syllables or metrical stresses respectively. In the triadic stanza, lines are divided according to what Williams terms his ‘variable foot’, an ‘expanded’ poetic foot that admits ‘more syllables, words, or phrases ... into its confines.’<sup>537</sup> This self-coined term is misleading, though, as it suggests something akin to traditional poetic feet, which rely on a fixed number of syllables or stresses. A variable foot, on the other hand, may contain any number of

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<sup>533</sup> William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, 1958 (New York: New Directions, 1976), 65.

<sup>534</sup> Natalie Gerber, ‘Structural Surprise in the Triadic-Line Poems,’ *William Carlos Williams Review* 27 (Fall 2007), 180.

<sup>535</sup> H.L. Mencken, ‘The Pronunciation of American,’ *The American Language* (New York: Knopf, 1937), 322.

<sup>536</sup> William Carlos Williams, review of *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken, *The North American Review* 242, 1936, 183.

<sup>537</sup> William Carlos Williams, ‘Free Verse,’ *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, et al. 1st ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 288-290.

syllables, stresses, and words, and is measured according only to modulations of tone. Williams' variable foot, then, is what linguists call 'the intonational phrase': 'what Williams counts are tonic syllables... each intonational phrase possesses exactly one tonic, which is the focal or the most important element of a speaker's statement. Since the tonic is distinguished phonologically by a combination of factors [including pitch, volume, and stress], its audible intensification is naturally perceived as a beat.'<sup>538</sup> Gerber notes that whereas the traditional poetic foot is applicable only to works of literature, 'the intonational phrase is a recognisable linguistic unit that participates in the prosodic organisation of language.'<sup>539</sup> Williams' 'variable foot' is intended to capture and convey the minute pauses and changes of tone within vernacular American speech. That his new stanza comprises three lines is also a reflection of everyday American speech; several linguists suggest 'the abstract shape of a neutral declarative statement in American English is a tripartite utterance comprised of three intonational phrases with overall falling intonation', as represented by the three 'step downs' of Williams' line, each positioned successively further from the left-hand margin.<sup>540</sup>

On the page, Stevenson's poems look markedly similar to Williams' stepped down lines. In the first poem of the sequence, we see a series of three stepped down lines that, like Williams' 'The Artist', are not separated by carriage returns:

The hills turn silver in the sun,  
                   a kind of necessary silver,  
                           until the seasons converge there,  
 meeting in confusion,  
                   the blown leaves and snowflakes

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<sup>538</sup> Gerber, 182.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

fountaining together.<sup>541</sup>

As in Williams' poem, units contain varying numbers of syllables, words, and phrases. In other poems, Stevenson separates each series with a carriage return. Whereas in Williams' poems, a line comprises one intonational phrase (a phrase containing one tonic), Stevenson's lines are rather longer, and do not appear to be strictly divided according to intonational phrase (the | symbol indicates where the line might break if divided strictly according to intonational phrase):

But now the utter carelessness |  
Of your happiness | (and selfishness) |  
Breaks through my aching wound | like a vengeful worm

Lost, | lost, | dearest friend! |  
All his tokens I cherish |  
(corpses in my little gilt box)<sup>542</sup>

Marjorie Perloff writes of free verse, 'lineation spells elevation'.<sup>543</sup> Within Williams' triadic line verse, the unorthodox and unfamiliar positioning and grouping of words draws attention to individual words themselves, and demands an increased level of cognitive alertness from the reader. These are not poems that can be read hurriedly, as line divisions based on natural rhythms of speech are not those to which our eyes are most accustomed. Unlike the majority of Williams' triadic line verse, the poems of *Correspondences* are primarily narrative rather than meditative. Whilst Stevenson is keen to represent the 'abstract shape' of American vernacular speech with a down-

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<sup>541</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 194.

<sup>542</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 208.

<sup>543</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'The Linear Fallacy,' *Georgia Review* 35 (Winter 1981), 864.

stepped three line stanza, she perhaps considered line divisions based on intonational phrases a hindrance to the progression of the narrative.

Stevenson makes a late return to the stepped-down three line stanza in ‘Green Mountain, Black Mountain’ (2003). The poem represents the poet’s attempts to imaginatively reconcile the simultaneously similar and disparate landscapes of Stevenson’s child- and adulthood. For the poet, rural Vermont, despite its green fecundity, is indelibly marked with the pain of her mother’s untimely death. It is the painful ‘work of mourning’ – for her lost mother and for a lost America – that the poem must accomplish:

Crossing the Atlantic, Passport  
Briefcase, two trays of cellophane food  
And a B grade film.

No, I mean  
Across to the America  
That lives in the film of my mind.

You would have to be  
Alive there, reeled out  
From the spool of your life.<sup>544</sup>

This is a poem about mapping experience and memory as well as geographical landscape. It is fitting that Stevenson should resurrect her modified triadic line stanza in a poem that resumes the psychological work of *Correspondences*, as she struggles both to preserve, and come to terms with, a lost America.

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<sup>544</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 182.



### Correspondences and Miscommunications:

Like Berryman's *Dream Songs*, Lowell's '91 Revere Street' and *Notebook*, and Bishop's 'Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics', *Correspondences* is a formal experiment or departure. Like these poets, Stevenson is searching for a form which will afford her the freedom to entertain myriad different perspectives, to assume a variety of different ideological positions, and to tell a number of different stories. Each poem, whether in the form of a letter, a journal entry, a poem written by a character, or a newspaper article, allows the poet to introduce a new perspective, a new facet.

The majority of the poems in *Correspondences* are letters between two correspondents: 'The Minister's wife, in confidence, to a beloved sister', 'Mrs Reuben Chandler to her mother in New Orleans', 'The poet, Kay Boyd, replies ambiguously to her sister in Clearfield'. The letter is at once intimate, a form of communication between two people, and distant, as the writing and sending of a letter evinces the existence of a separation or divide between the correspondents. In the letters, we see individuals in solitude – for example, in the self-addressed 'message' written by Maura Chandler in her journal in 1900, or the journal entry written by Ruth Arbeiter in 1968 – and also individuals engaged in social intercourse, whether with a single specific addressee, or with a wider readership, in the case of the newspaper announcements and obituaries. Though the notion of 'Establishing Identity through the / Acculturation Process' is dismissed as '*Absolute rubbish!*' in 'A Sepia Garden', these letters reveal that the self is conceptualised and sustained largely in relation to other selves.<sup>545</sup> In *Correspondences*, we see how individual characters function (or, indeed, malfunction)

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<sup>545</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 162.

in relation to one another, and how they, and their senses of ‘self’, are powerfully shaped by their familial and wider societal relationships. The first document in the collection is a family tree, which serves as a striking visual representation of the interconnectedness of the correspondents. In the letters of ‘Part One: In the Hand of the Lord, 1829-1929’, the way in which the characters address each other emphasises the familial relationship between them. In the opening letter of the section, Adam Chandler addresses the letter to ‘*My wretched daughter*’, and signs off as ‘*your* loving father on earth’,<sup>546</sup> and in the second letter Abigail Chandler writes to ‘*My dear Eliza*’, and signs herself ‘*your* everloving sister’.<sup>547</sup> This, of course, imitates an epistolary convention of the period, yet it also serves to imply an inextricable bond between them, despite the often fraught nature of their relationship. In the twentieth-century letters, this convention has been largely abandoned, or is revived only ironically, as if to suggest that these once inextricable familial bonds have been broken apart somewhere along the line. In a letter written to her mother, Ruth Arbeiter, Kathy Chattle (later Kay Boyd) addresses Ruth simply as ‘Mother’ and neglects to sign off at all. She refers to herself in the third person and the past tense, attempting to disassociate herself from her mother’s daughter: ‘Yes she was a nice girl! / Yes she was good! / Got married. Had a baby. / Just as she should.’<sup>548</sup> In her letter she begs:

Oh mother, poor mother!  
Daddy thinks I’m wicked.  
Here they think I’m crazy.  
Please think I’m dead.

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<sup>546</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 200.

<sup>547</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 202.

<sup>548</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 239.

She is, she writes, 'dying alive', both victim and perpetrator of her own 'interior self-murder'. Kathy's failure to identify herself as the sender of the letter anticipates her eventual rejection of the name and the 'self' of 'Kathy Chattle'. 'Kathy Chattle' is gradually disappearing, or being forcibly dismantled ('they've taken my belt and my / wedding ring'), to be replaced by Kay Boyd. She repeatedly apostrophises her 'mother', as if to shift attention away from herself as the sender of the missive onto her mother as recipient. The word 'Mother', repeated nine times in the latter, is simultaneously a supplication and an accusation; its use implies and encourages intimacy and closeness between the two women, yet through repetition it acquires a sinister incantatory significance.

The twentieth-century characters often seem uncertain of how to address one another or how to describe themselves, suggesting that their relationships are ambiguous or fraught with tensions. 'Mrs Lillian Culick, divorcee' writes to Frank Chattle:

Darling,  
Or may I still Frank?  
Or should I kneel?  
'Sir'. 'Dr Chattle'  
so... salutations from your patient  
patient.<sup>549</sup>

Clearly uncertain of how to address her former lover, she self-consciously parodies now outmoded epistolary conventions. This woman is defined and identified solely by her relationship to men. She is 'Mrs Lillian Culick', yet she is also a 'divorcee', defined by both her marriage to, and separation from, an anonymous husband, the 'Other' in relation to whom she is conceived. If the 'self' is socially constructed, then the

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<sup>549</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 244.

disintegration of personal relationships instigates the disintegration of personal identities. In the aftermath of the collapse of her adulterous relationship with Frank she seems on the verge of an emotional breakdown. She writes, 'I don't know what I want'; abandoned by Frank, no longer his lover or his 'patient / patient', she has become a virtual stranger to herself. Even now she seems to rely on him to reveal the intricacies of her 'self' to her; she writes, 'But I think you understand me', and asks, 'Can't you guess what I want?' She writes, 'Be nice. / I need you. / To be with. / To talk to / ... I can't eat. / I can't talk.' The monosyllabic words and abrupt end-stopped lines ('Be nice. / I need you. / To be with. / To talk to.') is suggestive of psychic fragmentation, and the vacillatory quality of her demands suggests the deeply disordered state of her psyche, the 'queer shakes' she is experiencing. Like 'Kathy Chattle', Lillian does not sign off her letter with her name, ending it with the pathetic entreaty, 'I've been lonely. / Let's try to meet soon. / OK?' In this case, her failure to sign off by name serves to emphasise her loss of stable selfhood following her estrangement from Frank. Just as 'Kathy' imagines her self dismantled, Lillian, too, seems to be fading from view. She refers to a poem written by Frank praising her physical body ('I love your little poem / about my bones and my / muscles like dolphins'), yet without his attentions, her physical body is diminishing: 'I'm all nerves / and I can't swallow. / I've lost five pounds'.

Though the collection is titled *Correspondences*, it is as much about *miscommunication* as it is about communication, especially the seemingly endemic miscommunication between men and women. Stevenson notes that, 'In each generation

there is misunderstanding between the women and the men'.<sup>550</sup> In Lillian's letter, for example, she writes, 'I've tried to write, to / phone so often, Frank, each / empty, echoing evening.' It is unclear whether Lillian is suggesting that she has been unable to write or phone, or whether her letters and phone calls have been ignored. In an earlier letter, also the product of an adulterous relationship, Paul Maxwell replies to a letter sent by Ruth Arbeiter, writing, 'The impact of your letter was such that I almost see you', yet, not being privy to the contents of Ruth's letter, we are unsure whether he really 'sees' her, or whether he merely projects on to her his own idealised but far removed vision of her in motherhood.<sup>551</sup> He imagines Ruth's surroundings in great detail, yet in the final paragraph writes, '*Eve* progresses slowly (tell me if what I have written here about your baby seems suitable for the novel).' His entire letter to Ruth has been little more than a self-centered literary exercise, a sketch to use within his own novel. She is mere fodder for his artistic ambitions, as he demands of her, 'Nourish me with a long letter.' As if to add insult to injury, in the final line of the letter, he casually adds, 'I return two poems of yours, unfortunately rejected'. Her literary ambitions are dashed, as he feeds off her to 'nourish' his own. The absence of authentic communication is compounded by the brief and starkly impersonal rejection slip. Unlike Paul, the editor is unable to 'make use' of Ruth:

#### THE POETRY REVIEW

The Editor regrets that he is  
unable to make use of your  
MSS. He is grateful for the  
opportunity of considering  
your work, and is sorry that

<sup>550</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 15.

<sup>551</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 233.

pressure of time makes it  
impossible for him to write a  
personal letter.<sup>552</sup>

It is only after his wife's death that Neil Arbeiter can articulate what went perennially unsaid during her life: 'Ruth, in our thirty-six years lost to eye-strain and bad temper / you never spoke to me once of what I know. / I neither dared nor dared not to speak to you'.<sup>553</sup> Even during the period of her ill-health, they were mutually uncommunicative, despite having 'so much to say'. Ironically, after her death, he is haunted by the sound of her 'severed voice'. The short, halting sentences that end mid-line suggest the difficulty of articulation after so long a period of repression.

### **The Woman Writer:**

Throughout *Correspondences*, we are made aware of the numerous obstacles that the female characters must overcome in order to engage in written communication or creative pursuits at all. In 'Writing as a Woman', Stevenson recalls her own struggle to reconcile her creative ambitions with her domestic duties:

When I had a baby, things goes not better but worse. I was determined not to let such a natural event disturb my reading program (I was putting myself through James, Hardy, and Proust), but of course it did, even though I invented a way of breast-feeding and reading at the same time, propping my book up on a music stand. The baby was unimpressed.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 236.

<sup>553</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 250.

<sup>554</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 10.

Earlier in the essay, Stevenson considers whether a 'woman writer' can achieve her intellectual and artistic ambitions only at 'the price of what used to be called "womanliness" – sex, marriage, [and] children'.<sup>555</sup> It seems to her that the obligations of 'the socially acceptable position of wife' preclude the ideal conditions for the writing of poetry: 'writing poetry is not like most jobs; it can't be rushed or done well between household chores – at least not by me. The mood of efficiency, of checking things off the list as you tear through a day's shopping, washing, cleaning, mending, and so forth is totally destructive of the slightly bored melancholy that nurtures imagination.'<sup>556</sup> For the 'woman writer' who, like Stevenson, is unwilling 'to sacrifice [her] life as a woman in order to have a life as a writer', what then is the solution to this seemingly intractable problem?<sup>557</sup> 'One way', she suggests, 'out of the dilemma of the woman / writer is to write about the dilemma itself... many of my poems are about being trapped in domestic surroundings.'<sup>558</sup> Though Stevenson might use her own 'dilemma' as her *materia poetica*, she does so in a way that means the resulting poems transcend mere 'confession' or complaint. 'In the House' (1969) is one such poem, written five years before the publication of *Correspondences*. This house is by no means exceptional; the poem opens with the line, 'Among others it is the same. It is repeated.'<sup>559</sup> If the house itself is 'repeated', so too is the 'dilemma' that exists within it. As in 'Writing as a Woman', Stevenson emphasises here that her situation is not unique. In this poem, as in *Correspondences*, the poet endeavours 'to get the feelings right', but 'to invent facts'. The speaker's feelings are those described by Stevenson in her prose – claustrophobia,

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<sup>555</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 8.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 146.

frustration, and guilt – yet the house is not ‘the real thing’, a recognisable real-life house. Rather, it is a stylised house, perhaps akin to a child’s crude drawing of a house, ‘not necessarily in three dimensions.’ This house is figured as an oppressive cell, ‘A box not solid but with apertures / showing it to be, to the eye, hollow, / a container for light and noise’.<sup>560</sup> This space has none of the positive emotional connotations of a ‘home’, and even seems dangerous and malevolent; it ‘waits in the silence of concealed energy’ like a hungry predator, and ‘grins with the jaws of a piano.’<sup>561</sup> Just as in ‘The Women’, the poet creates here a sense of distance between herself and her speaker by situating her speaker within a surreal, dream-like world. Stevenson’s exploration of ‘real’ emotions and experiences within a strikingly unreal setting in ‘In the House’ and ‘The Women’ draws upon the poetry of Plath. Edward Butscher suggests that whilst Plath’s poems offer the reader psychological truths, those truths come elaborately ‘robed in witch’s shrouds and queen’s gowns’.<sup>562</sup> Familiar settings and sights are twisted into unfamiliar ones using metaphor and simile. Stevenson’s speaker claims that ‘The interior is entirely familiar’, yet ‘familiar’ household items are radically defamiliarised.<sup>563</sup> She does not recognise the staircase, asking, ‘What meaning has this long white / chain of machinery, even as teeth, / extended, or painted, to the point of its disappearance?’ The feelings are real, but the setting is disquietingly unreal, almost like a two-dimensional theatre set. That this strange place is divorced from reality is further suggested in the lines, ‘The sunlight is apparently generated indoors. / The season is synthetic but permanent.’ Indeed, when the speaker bends to kiss the wounds of her

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 236.

<sup>563</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 146.



bleating children, her 'lips meet unexpectedly a flatness', and she realises she is 'kissing a photograph.'

The proliferation of images of mirrors, windows, and glassware, too, is redolent of Plath, and, indeed, elsewhere Stevenson appropriates Plath's metaphor of the bell jar to conceive of the dilemma faced by the speaker of this poem. The 'bell jar' is, she writes, 'a kind of vacuum, a vacuum composed of self-cancelling values', of the ambition to fulfil one's intellectual and literary potential, and guilt at the desire to shrug off the obligations of wife- and motherhood.<sup>564</sup> The speaker of 'In the House' has internalised others' expectations of her, and she has herself become a 'bell jar' of sorts, full of conflicting ideas and desires. Even as she seems to resent the fact that the house 'has claims' on her, she takes that domestic space to be her 'proper dominion.'<sup>565</sup>

There is a different method of distancing employed in the poems of *Correspondences*. Whereas in 'In the House', an I-speaker speaks from within a surreal, dream-like domestic setting, in the poems of *Correspondences*, vividly realised and discrete characters speak (or, rather, write) from within realistic and recognisable homes. Like the speaker of 'In the House', though, the female characters suffer from feelings of claustrophobia and frustration. In a letter from 'The Minister's wife' to 'a beloved sister during a January storm', Abigail Chandler describes to her sister her halting progress in her intellectual pursuits:

So, with one thing and another,  
my reading flags. I average, perhaps,  
a page a week. Must content myself,  
I fancy, with the learning I possess, or  
glean what I can from the backs of newspapers.

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<sup>564</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 7.

<sup>565</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 146.

I've learned this: Alkalis are thought to be  
metal oxides. How I rejoice in this fact.

But the children all ail, and not noiselessly.  
Each day's a struggle.<sup>566</sup>

This degrading 'gleaning' of scraps of information forms a cruel contrast with the dignity of her ambitions. Though this is a somewhat bleaker image than that of Stevenson reading from a book propped on a music stand whilst breastfeeding her baby, Abigail shares the poet's oft-frustrated desire for intellectual self-improvement. Her weighty domestic responsibilities eclipse her intellectual ambitions, and she must abruptly cut short her missive with the lines, 'Alas, I must stop. / My hand's gone numb. / The stove's gone out.' She is referred to in the title of this verse letter and in the subsequent obituary only as 'The Minister's Wife', and 'dearly beloved wife of our pastor and brother in Christ, Reverend Dr Adam E. Chandler', as though her integrity as an individual is eclipsed along with her intellectual ambitions.<sup>567</sup> The line, 'She leaves desolate a husband and five children', seems tacitly to accuse the dead woman of a dereliction of her domestic duties.

In a later generation of correspondents, it is Maura Chandler who embodies and voices the poet's own frustrations. She is chastised by her father for what he calls her 'laudable, if unfeminine, desire for a share of the world's knowledge'.<sup>568</sup> Jacob's hostility to what he sees as his daughter's 'frivolous and literary pastimes' is represented by the solid prose style of his letter. He bids Maura to return home from Oberlin College 'a New Woman. Gentle. High-hearted. Self-forgetful, with a sweet and

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<sup>566</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 202.

<sup>567</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 203.

<sup>568</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 222.

winning interest in all the little things of the home'. Jacob Chandler's idea of a 'New Woman' is strikingly at odds with the protagonists of New Woman novels such as Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). Maura aspires to be a literate, well-educated 'New Woman' in the mould of Herminia Barton or Hadria Fullerton, yet in a journal entry titled 'A New Year's message to myself', she internalises her father's criticism, and begins to question her ambitions for intellectual betterment:

Perhaps it was never meant  
That I work as I intended.  
Perhaps it was never meant  
That I write, learn, elevate  
Myself as I intended.  
My vocation. My mission.<sup>569</sup>

She refers to her intellectual ambitions in religious terms as her 'vocation' and 'mission', yet her father also uses religious term to chastise her for her alleged neglect of her familial responsibilities. Upbraided for allowing her 'ambition' to obscure her 'duties', she resolves to 'crush out all personal sorrow, / [and] forsake the whole ground of / self interest', but is filled with terror at the prospect of a life of 'Failure and suffering, / tedium, childbearing, / disease, deaths, days – / burying us all!' She ends her letter with the lines,

I begin, in this room.  
This year of my life and marriage.  
I begin, in this room,  
This New Year. My life in marriage.

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<sup>569</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 224.

Her 'life and marriage' become her 'life *in* marriage' suggesting that her life will become subsumed by and contained within her marriage. Like her great-grandmother, Abigail, Maura's individual identity will be effaced by her identity as a wife. Indeed, in a letter written to Maura by her husband a decade after their marriage, it is clear that he does not really conceive of her as a real person. She exists for him, 'hundreds of miles away', as a 'Blessed One, an 'angel', and an idealised symbol of 'loveliness... [and] the womanliness of females'.<sup>570</sup> Just as her father sought to instruct her prior to her marriage, so her husband seeks to instruct her now: 'I've taken to playing Moses and have drawn up a set of Tablets which, my dearest wife, I am eager to share with you that you may be better instructed in my simple ways.'

The difficulty of reconciling literary ambitions with the obligations of wife- and motherhood persists long into the twentieth century. The English novelist, Paul Maxwell, envisages Ruth reading whilst breastfeeding:

You? Are you opening a book? Yes. You take a book everywhere even now. (You keep a book, still, in your handbag when you wait for a bus or go to the dentist.) So you open what is lying on the table... is it *The Rainbow*? Is it my collection of War Poets?<sup>571</sup>

Like Stevenson, Ruth attempts to combine her literary study with that most fundamental act of maternal nurturing, and, also like Stevenson, with no great success. Stevenson writes that 'the baby was unimpressed... [and] howled every evening'.<sup>572</sup> In Ruth's case, the baby is satisfied ('The baby has stopped sucking. It is asleep'), yet Ruth is

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<sup>570</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 226.

<sup>571</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 233.

<sup>572</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 10.

fully engaged in neither task. Paul rebukes her, 'You hardly notice. Ruth, you are not reading at all. Instead you are staring out of the window'.<sup>573</sup>

A sense of claustrophobia and confinement pervades many of the letters in *Correspondences*. Maura has escaped the family home, but, shamed by her father into returning and entering into an unsuitable marriage, she figures her future life as an airless room reflected in a window pane, a room 'through which those huge, / slow ghost-flakes amble and fall!'.<sup>574</sup> The repetition of certain words and phrases within her journal entry represents the tediously repetitive nature of the life which she will lead 'in marriage'. Half a century later, Kathy, leaving her daughter with a 'crone baby-sitter', makes her dramatic escape from the domestic setting, later writing, 'I had to get out of there. / For her sake. For her sake.'<sup>575</sup> Away from her domestic obligations she seems momentarily to experience a return of her vitality, affirmed as an individual and as a woman by attention from strangers: 'Walking from Central Station / Feeling slenderer, blonder... / Familiar shiver of pleasure when / Men stopped to stare.' Yet this exhilarating outside world quickly becomes as threatening and hostile as the domestic setting from which she has escaped. She describes wandering 'like a schoolgirl from / museum to museum...' and she recollects a regression of sorts: 'I'd been waiting there somewhere... / some part of me waiting in childhood, / expecting myself to come back.' She flees her marital home in order to regain her independence, yet has been reduced to her childhood self, a 'small puzzled / prudish fat daughter.' 'Too scared to go to bars', she takes supposed refuge in a chapel where she imagines that 'a crude wooden Mary / dangling her homunculus son' accuses her of, and chastises her for, abandoning her

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<sup>573</sup> *Poem 1955-2005*, 233.

<sup>574</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 224.

<sup>575</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 239.

own husband and daughter. She seems simultaneously to fear and perversely desire punishment for her dereliction of her wifely and maternal duties. The images of accusing eyes, blades, and the panicked questions cast Kay as a Plathian figure:

She stared at me, down at me,  
Suffering, out of one  
Glazed terrible eye.  
I took in that gaze like a blade!  
What was it? A threat or a lie?  
Or did she know?

Imprisoned within an asylum, she again yearns to escape ('How can I get out of here? / Can't you get me out of here?'), even offering to return to the marital home she fled. Like the speaker of 'In the House' who observes of her own life, 'There is nowhere to go but on and on / ... There is neither an exit nor a reason for getting out',<sup>576</sup> Kathy concludes that she is inextricably trapped, lamenting, 'Because for me, what the hell else is there? / Mother, what more? What more?' This last line is both a howl of desperation and a bitter remonstrance, as though she believes her mother to be complicit in her unhappiness. Yet, in a letter written to her sister, Eden, twelve years later, it is apparent that Kathy (now Kay) has come to the realisation that this sense of claustrophobia – her own portable 'bell jar' – is carried deep within herself wherever she goes, that her entrapment is largely of her own making. She writes from London,

I ask myself often  
why it is impossible to go home?

Why it is impossible,  
even here,  
to be peaceful and ordinary?<sup>577</sup>

**Comment [E26]:** 'is it' becomes 'it is'

<sup>576</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 146.

<sup>577</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 229.

Stevenson explains that the impetus behind her writing of *Correspondences* was largely her ambiguous relationship with her late mother. She writes, 'After my mother's death from cancer in the early 1960s (when I married again) I was still unable to rid myself of her image – her ghost... I felt I had to tell her something, that she had cheated herself and me by dying just as I was about to speak.'<sup>578</sup> *Correspondences* is, the poet writes, her attempt to 'resurrect' her mother and 'at the same time to kill her spirit (remember Virginia Woolf's struggles with the Angel in the House)'.<sup>579</sup> This perhaps sounds misleadingly antagonistic, and the poet later writes of how 'I was later able [in *Correspondences*] to express my complicated dependence on her love and example.'<sup>580</sup> Though it is the character of Kay that Stevenson suggests is 'a version of myself', the poet's complex feelings towards her mother are explored and expressed through the writing of all three Arbeiter children. Kay simultaneously wishes to please her mother ('I'll try, I'll try, really, / I'll try again') and rid herself of Ruth's crippling maternal expectations ('At what cost / keeping balance on invisible threads? / At what price / dancing in a sweater set and pearls / on the stage sets of your expectations?').<sup>581</sup> Kay figures her mother as a menacing puppeteer, 'tense with controlling intelligence.' It is perhaps tempting to draw parallels between Stevenson's urge to explore her relationship with her mother within this work, and the ritualistic killings and resurrections of Otto Plath that interpose Plath's work. Just as Plath's father takes the guise of a variety of mythopoeiac and archetypal characters – the colossus, Agamemnon, a Nazi –

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<sup>578</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 12.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'My Life in Poetry,' ARTEMISpoetry 4 (May 2010). Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> July 2011. <<http://www.seconlightlive.co.uk/artemis.shtml#extracts4>>.

<sup>581</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 239.

Stevenson's mother is represented primarily by the character, Ruth, but also by the other mothers within the poem. There is, however, a significant divergence in intention and effect. Within her poetry Plath plays a seemingly obsessive *fort-da* game with her dead father, raising him from the grave in order to 'kill' him herself again and again. He is no sooner violently banished than forcibly resurrected, and this forms a pervasive pattern within Plath's work. There is no such pattern within Stevenson's *oeuvre*, largely due to the closure achieved by the poet in the writing of *Correspondences*. Writing at the time, Stevenson conceived of the poem as an extended attempt to 'exorcise' her mother's ghost. That this 'exorcism' was successful seems to be borne out by the fact of the poet's turning away from this formal mode and subject matter in her subsequent work (excepting 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain', published in 2003). Five years after the publication of *Correspondences*, Stevenson wrote, 'now I want to stand on the shoulders of *Correspondences*, as it were, and look at the wider world'.<sup>582</sup> In writing *Correspondences*, Stevenson accomplished what Plath never did: the attainment of psychological closure and the ability to move on to new poetic ground. Stevenson writes of the poem, 'Through it I crossed a bridge – or rather built a bridge – into the twentieth century'.<sup>583</sup>

In a 2010 biographical essay, the poet suggests that her mother 'surely would have become a writer or teacher had she lived a generation later',<sup>584</sup> yet 'sacrifice[d] herself and her interests for the sake of my father, myself, and my sisters'.<sup>585</sup> Ruth Arbeiter is, in Stevenson's words, 'a woman like my mother – liberal, generous, self-sacrificing,

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<sup>582</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 20.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'My Life in Poetry.'

<sup>585</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 12.



devoted to good causes and prone to idealising her family.<sup>586</sup> Ruth's mother, Maura, too, is 'created... in the image of the self-sacrificing mother', and Maura, Ruth, and Kay form a lineage of mothers and daughters like that depicted in 'Generations'.<sup>587</sup> Stevenson describes the character of Kay as 'a version of myself... a sort of Esther Greenwood...a heroine who more obviously than most is a version of the author'.<sup>588</sup> The relationship between the poet and her characters is rather more complex than Stevenson appreciates or admits, though. Just as in 'Three Women', all three voices articulate Plath's own feelings and experiences, here, Stevenson uses the characters of all three Arbeiter children, Eden, Kathy (Kay), and Nick, and the interaction between them, to explore and express her ambiguous relationship with her mother, and the declining America with which she is inextricably associated. Her 'complicated dependence on her [mother's] love and example' is articulated through the letters of Eden, whereas her urge to flee an inherited cycle of self-sacrifice and frustration is articulated through the voice of Kay.

### **A Feminist Poem?**

*Correspondences* has been fêted by critics for its clear-eyed feminist perspective. Whilst the poem is concerned primarily with female experience, it resolutely eschews a single 'perspective' in favour of multiple and various *perspectives*. It becomes clear from such documents as Reuben Chandler's letter to his estranged wife, Ethan Amos Boyd's 'Letter to God', and Nick Arbeiter's 'poems on the road to Wyoming', that if

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<sup>586</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid.

<sup>588</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 17-18, 3.

this is a poem about the struggles of generations of women, then it is also about the corresponding crises suffered by their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. Many of the documents written by male voices create a long-standing accumulation of frustrated or misplaced ambitions (both spiritual and commercial), and ideological disillusion. Reuben Chandler attempts to raise his sons as good Christians and Yankees, advising them, ‘you will be men in this our rich country / where labor is the standard of nobility, / idleness, wretchedness, / and careless indolence, a sin / against the Creator whom we worship.’<sup>589</sup> In ‘Maxims of a Christian businessman: From the journal of Jacob M. Chandler, Cincinnati’s citizen of year 1895’, we see a similar yet more pronounced merger of the ideology and vocabulary of the good Christian with that of the good businessman:

Work is next to Godliness; a man should keep books when dealing with the Deity.

The Golden Rule of the New Testament is the Golden Rule of Business.

Religion is the only investment that pays dividends in the life everlasting.<sup>590</sup>

These documents set out the thinking behind what Max Weber terms the Protestant or Puritan work ethic.<sup>591</sup> Weber suggests that although religious devotion is typically accompanied by a willing rejection of worldly goods and affairs, the Protestant or Puritan advocacy of hard work and success in labour or commerce was a driving force behind the development of modern capitalism. Whereas Catholics worked diligently or performed ‘good works’ in hope of salvation, Protestants regarded dedication to, and

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<sup>589</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 216.

<sup>590</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 221.

<sup>591</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, intro. Anthony Giddens (1930; London: Routledge, 1992), vii.

success in, one's area of occupation as a sign that an individual was one of the 'elect', already predestined to be saved. That hard work is both a worldly and a spiritual achievement is suggested in Reuben Chandler's (and Herbert Duhme III's) words of praise to his sons: 'I have just received Monsieur R's term report / and am much pleased. / He says you work diligently and *faithfully*' (italics mine). He warns his sons that 'here we are judged and respected / according to the work we accomplish', and the word 'judged' implies not only the judgement of one's peers, but also a final Judgement Day.<sup>592</sup>

Whilst Weber's book focuses largely on the role of the Protestant work ethic in the development of capitalism in Northern Europe, he quotes from an essay written by Benjamin Franklin, 'Advice to a Young Tradesman' (1748), in which the founding father advises:

He that gets all he can honestly, and saves all he gets (necessary Expences excepted) will certainly become RICH; If that Being who governs the World, to whom all should look for a Blessing on their Honest Endeavours, doth not in his wise Providence otherwise determine.<sup>593</sup>

Though Franklin advocates the accretion of wealth, it is not a purely mercenary aim, and Weber notes that Franklin's essay is permeated with moral language. Success in commerce will be attained, Franklin suggests, only with the 'Blessing' of 'that Being who governs the World'.

Franklin's essay suggests that material gain is the reward for honesty, 'industry', and 'frugality', and it is these same virtues that are extolled by Reuben and Jacob Chandler

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<sup>592</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 216.

<sup>593</sup> Benjamin Franklin, 'Advice to a Young Tradesman,' *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Hilliard Gray, 1840) 87.

in their missives; Jacob, for example, states, 'Economy, like charity begins at home', and 'No day seems long enough to those that love work.'<sup>594</sup> In his upbraiding letter to his daughter, Jacob presents his labours in the field of commerce as hard labour undertaken for the benefit of his family ('That I have worked, yea toiled, for your health and wellbeing full seventeen years of your life has been an unbegrudged sacrifice'), and urges his daughter to dedicate herself with similar zeal to her own daughterly duties.<sup>595</sup> In previous letters the registers of business and religion became merged; in this letter the dynamics of family relations are described as if they were commercial transactions: 'Maura! Maura! Those kisses were never gifts! Bestowed as they were with the charity of Our Lord Himself, those kisses were loans! Loans upon interest these many long years! Now it is time to repay them, graciously, selflessly, with little acts of kindness and understanding.' Though Jacob writes that the 'purpose' of his letter 'is not to rebuke but to touch', it is suggested by his vehement protestations to the contrary that he resents his so-called 'unbegrudging sacrifice', and sees no reason why his daughter should not make a similar forfeit.

It is in the documents written by Ethan Amos Boys that the growing gulf between the American's spiritual or moral aspirations and his commercial interests becomes apparent. Though he describes himself as 'a Salesman of the Lord', unlike his father-in-law, Ethan is not a successful businessman but rather a high-minded idealist and social activist.<sup>596</sup> He regards the arena of commerce as polluted with avarice and self-interest, and is, he writes, 'alone among the Sadducees'. For Ethan, the accretion of wealth is not a form of spiritual dedication, but rather a distraction from it; he writes to his wife, 'He

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<sup>594</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 221.

<sup>595</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 222.

<sup>596</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 226.

is not positively averse to our turning Mossy House into a workers' retreat, but only sceptical as to our making a profit from it. I tell him that is not of account!' There is a stark contrast drawn between the 'torrid streets' of the growing city and 'dear green innocent Vermont'. In 'Writing as a Woman', Stevenson makes the same contrast, as she explains her decision to 'set [her] poem in a mythical Clearfield, and make Vermont and the peace it stood for a symbol of the more solid America that has disappeared from the demented cities.'<sup>597</sup> Vermont represents an enclave of lost innocence and stands as a last preserve of 'solid' American values in an age when capitalism has become detached from its origins in the Protestant or Puritan work ethic. The article placed in *The Clearfield Enquirer*, giving notice of Ethan's financial insolvency, suggests that Ethan has been finally beleaguered and defeated by the capitalist system that he so despises. His final letter, not to a family member but to God, 'on hotel notepaper', reveals a broken man who has failed in every one of his masculine roles – as a businessman, a reformer, a husband, and a father:

I have no learning or acquaintance  
with learned colleges or degrees.  
I have no profession or any patter  
the world calls manly or  
gentlemanly. I have no money.  
Except as I sell Thy word  
I am rot in my family ... mine,  
my daughter's center.  
My home – happier without me.<sup>598</sup>

**Comment [E27]:** Lines becomes lower-cased

Whereas Ethan's earlier letter was in prose, here he writes in verse, disjointed though it may be, as he reflects meditatively upon his disappointments. The letter begins as a

<sup>597</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>598</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 228.

prayer might ('Dear Lord'), yet Ethan prays or asks for nothing. In a journal entry, Ethan's daughter, Ruth, writes of her father as a man out of time and place in twentieth-century America: 'so many brilliant, miserable, significant people. // They would have frightened you, Dad, who followed, / stumbling, in the footsteps of your Maker...'. The poet is not unsympathetic to this wretched character; indeed, Stevenson herself conceives of herself as out of time and place in contemporary America, suggesting, 'I belong to an America which no longer really exists... I don't identify with the consumerism of modern America, the short-termism, the sanctification of success.'<sup>599</sup>

Ethan's crisis of identity is also America's. Ethan's final letter is written in the midst of a breakdown; the breakdown of a man, but also the breakdown of an historical culture. Stevenson writes that *Correspondences* is 'a study of Puritan values in New England – of their strengths, their weaknesses, their corruption by ambition and greed, and their final overthrow in the world of Vietnam and Watergate.'<sup>600</sup> She recalls that in the early 1970s, 'America itself was in a profound state of discontent... Excitement, despair, challenge, unhappiness, and anger infected the New England air.'<sup>601</sup> It is significant that Dr Frank Chattle works at 'The Center for Research in Urbanised Human Behaviour, Department of Social Psychology, Blythness College, New York'.<sup>602</sup> Nick Arbeiter's 'poems on the road to Wyoming' paint a picture of America not as a promised land, but as a 'stale' and stagnant wasteland:

Now an air conditioner bores me with monotonous stories.  
A window, flowered with curtains, frames me a Greek façade.  
That strip of red neon must have been left on all night.

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<sup>599</sup> Hickling.

<sup>600</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 15.

<sup>601</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>602</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 244.

We accuse you, fathers,  
Of pouring out a smoke screen  
And then setting off to murder

We accuse you of lies.  
Of high-minded fervour  
Under twin banners, Profit and Compromise.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

Nick's poems are attributed to a fictional poet, Maryin Bilcky, and sent to Frank Chattle from his wayward daughter, Libby, who has run away to a commune in Vermont. Libby's letter articulates her desire for a *Walden*-like return to the simple rural lifestyle far away from 'some hot box of an apartment in N.Y.C.':

In case you think we're starving, we've got the garden  
planted (though woodchucks got the lettuce before we put up  
the fence) and the hens are laying like mad. I've learned  
to bake bread and milk cows. We've got two calves, tell  
Penny, and they're really cute.<sup>605</sup>

Frank's letter to his daughter is a striking inversion of Plath's excoriating 'Daddy'. Just as Plath disowns her dead father, Frank renounces his daughter in language taken from the famous poem. Like 'Daddy', this poem is riven with crooning 'oo' sounds, repetition of words, and exclamation marks:

Well, Libby, what are we to do?  
What are we to do, Lillian and I  
about you?  
...  
I'm expecting it every evening –  
that tearchoked, inaudible phonecall,  
Daddy, daddy, daddy.  
What shall I do?  
  
But this time it's no go, honeypot.  
I'm through!

John Wells suggests that the excised correspondence between Libby and her father 'give[s] Nick Arbeiter's eight poems, "We accuse you, fathers..."', a context lacking in

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<sup>605</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Libby Chattle Hayter to her Father: A Reply, May 28, 1972,' undated.



the published book.<sup>606</sup> The socio-political ‘context’ of Nick’s angry denunciation is clear, though, as the influence of the Beat Generation is as strikingly apparent in Nick’s poems as the influence of Plath was apparent in Kay’s poem. The question prompted by these poems is whether Stevenson has deliberately written these poems to be slavishly derivative, to suggest that Nick nurtures teenage delusions of himself as a Beat poet, or whether the failings of these poems are Stevenson’s own, unintentional, shortcomings. Nick is ‘beat’ in both senses of the word: exhausted, but also idealistically beatific as he writes of ‘dreams’, ‘miracles’, and ‘truth’, and envisages eventual ‘peace among the animals.’<sup>607</sup> In the third section of the poem, we discern, momentarily, the poet behind the guise of her character:

Pleistocene valleys rucked up in raw clay, claws  
 reaching up to root out and tear up all inhabitants and habitations.  
 ...  
 At one time, in the ice age, there would have been a glacier here.  
 Bedded in alluvium the teeth of Tithanotherium.  
 Bones of Merycoidodon, Poebrotherium in fleshy clay.<sup>608</sup>

**Comment [E28]:** ‘reaching’ becomes lower-cased

We recognise in these lines the poet’s imaginative preoccupation with geological time, in particular, ‘the ice age’, an image to which she returns in ‘A Present’ (2000), ‘Under Moelfre’ (2003), and ‘May Bluebells, Coed Aber Artro’ (2003), amongst others. Here, as in her ‘own’ poems, images of geological events are used as a scale against which to measure the significance, or rather, insignificance, of individual human lives.

<sup>606</sup> John Wells, ‘Observing the Overhearing: The Anne Stevenson Papers in Cambridge University Library,’ *Voyages Over Voices*, 221.

<sup>607</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 252.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*

### A Lost America:

The correspondence between Eden and Kay functions as a loosely encircling framework for the first section and for the poem as a whole. The poet writes of how, upon her return to America in 1970, she found her home nation 'in a profound state of discontent. The puritan values of honesty, loyalty, piety, and self-sacrifice I'd been taught in my childhood were everywhere being dismissed.'<sup>609</sup> America as Stevenson knew it was being eroded from the inside out. Stevenson sets her poem within 'a mythical Clearfield', and she 'make[s] Vermont and the peace it stood for a symbol of the more solid America that had disappeared from the demented cities.'<sup>610</sup> The poet's evident nostalgia for this 'more solid America' finds expression in Eden's opening letter to Kay. For Eden, as for Stevenson, her mother is inextricably associated with this lost America:

For it's not her particular death,  
                   but for what dies with her.  
                                 Something that calls  
 for our abduction  
                   out of things. Nostalgia  
                   for expended generations.<sup>611</sup>

The poet explains that 'Eden... stays at home in Vermont, trying to preserve the family's values',<sup>612</sup> and it is under her auspices, we learn from a 1968 newspaper announcement, that the Chandler family home is to be preserved as 'a museum and a library.'<sup>613</sup> Eden's attempts are in vain, though, and the very fact that the house is to

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<sup>609</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 13.

<sup>610</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>611</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 194.

<sup>612</sup> 'Writing as a Woman,' 14.

<sup>613</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 198.

become a museum is a tacit recognition that those dearly held ‘values’ are now outmoded and obsolete. The aptly named Eden yearns for a return to the idyllic pastoral hinterland of the past: ‘I’d like to save everything, / have it again. / Our summers for our children. / Picnicking, haying, those / purple-mouthed banquets after berry-picking’.<sup>614</sup> The Edenic nature of their all-American childhood is compounded by her reference to ‘the naming of places: / The Star Rock, The Bear Pits, The Druids’, evoking the account of Adam’s naming of the animals in the Garden of Eden. Yet, Eden knows that such a return is impossible, and she describes a recurrent nightmare in which the vanishing lake represents the vanishing America of her childhood:

We all go down to the lake.  
 We all drive down to the beach  
 at the edge of the lake.  
 But the lake’s shrunk away from its lips  
 and lies small as a river  
 and the beach is the lake’s wrecked floor,  
 wrack and litter.

**Comment [E29]:** Lineation amended

America is being reduced to ‘wrack and litter’, and with it, Eden’s nightmare suggests, her own identity and heritage. The only way to preserve the last vestiges of this lost America is to sit ‘Hunched on the spindly pink sofa under the lithographs, / reading and sorting, rereading... / dead evidences, grievances, a / yellowing litter of scraps scratched over with lives.’ It is tempting to superimpose on this image of Eden an image of Stevenson herself, ‘reading and sorting, rereading’ her own family’s correspondence. It is within letters, newspapers articles, and odd documents like these that a family’s, and a nation’s, history, is recorded and preserved. Eden writes, ‘Now every day I’m like my own ghost / moving within hers.’ Like Stevenson, Eden is ‘unable to rid [her]self of

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<sup>614</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 194.

her image – her ghost’. Also like Stevenson, she wishes both to resurrect her mother and to be rid of her ghost, first writing of her mother’s blue wallpaper, ‘It ought to keep her out! / It ought to keep her dead to what it’s come to!’, and then begging Kay, ‘Please won’t you come home? / Come help me keep her alive a little longer.’

Kay, too, has ambiguous feelings towards her late mother and all that she represents. She imagines her mother as an anti-Persephone, refusing to occupy the dark Hades of creative preoccupation in favour of the ‘light’ of all-American wife- and motherhood: ‘She spat out the aching seeds. / She chose to live in the light.’<sup>615</sup> In refusing to eat the forbidden pomegranate seeds, the mother herself is cruelly eaten away by her unfulfilled longings for immersion in ‘creative darkness’: ‘She was brilliantly consumed, a sacrifice / sufficient for each summer.’ Kay wonders, ‘Without nourishment how could she live?’, referring to the intellectual nourishment that she believes was missing from her mother’s life. Whereas Eden wishes to ‘keep her alive’, Kay sees her death as a merciful release: ‘Would you wake her again from the ground / where at last she sleeps / plentifully?’ In both Eden and Kay’s letters, we see the poet’s complex responses to the death of her mother and the disintegration of her puritan inheritance. Like Stevenson, who ‘rigged that divorce... in order not to repeat the experience of [her] mother’ and the third mother in ‘Generations’, Kay has broken out of the cycle of sacrifice, guilt, and frustration, and will not go back to either her marriage or to America.<sup>616</sup> She writes,

I didn’t go back because I couldn’t see what to come back to.  
I couldn’t think who to go back as.  
That Kathy my name was, that Mrs Frank Chattle

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<sup>615</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 229

<sup>616</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 12.

died in New York of divorce.  
 Kay Boyd, the woman, the writer, has survived.  
 She lives a long way from Eden. The tug back  
 is allegiance to innocence which is not there.<sup>617</sup>

In this epilogic poem from Kay to her widowed father, Stevenson expresses her deeply conflicted feelings towards her changing nation. Kay echoes the poet's statement that she 'belong[s] to an America which no longer really exists.'<sup>618</sup> Stevenson suggests in her prose that the 'more solid America' of her childhood was in the process of disintegration, and here Kay employs a similar metaphor. She recalls that the American landscape of her childhood was neat and clearly defined ('Our maples never stooped to be voluptuous. / They were prim New England. Trim domes. Upright clouds'), yet this formerly 'solid' landscape is now 'dissolving':

In the floodtides of *Civitas Mundi*  
 New England is dissolving like a green chemical  
 Old England bleeds out to meet it mid-ocean.  
 Nowhere is safe.<sup>619</sup>

Comment [E30]: Italicized

The lines, 'It is a poem I can't continue. / It is America I can't contain', are perplexing. Though Kay's letter to Eden is titled 'A London letter: The poet, Kay Boyd, replies ambiguously to her sister in Clearfield', we never see, or are told anything about, Kay's poem. The parallel structure of these set-off, paired lines suggests that the poem and America are closely associated in Kay's mind, and perhaps implies that it is a poem similar in ambition to Stevenson's *Correspondences*. Yet, America defies neat containment within a poem; it is 'dissolving' and fluid in its multiplicities.

<sup>617</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 257.

<sup>618</sup> Hickling.

<sup>619</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 257.

### Dissolving Borders:

It is at this point that the distinctions between poet and character, reality and fiction, begin to 'dissolve', too, allowing the voice of the poet to 'bleed' into the voice of the character. In the final lines, Kay asks her father, 'I've given you all that I can. / Can these pages make amends for what was not said? / Do justice to the living, to the dead?'<sup>620</sup> It is ambiguous as to what 'pages' these lines refer, as Kay's final letter is but a single page long. One possibility is that 'these pages' refers to the pages of *Correspondences* itself. If so, it is not only Kay's voice that we are hearing in these final lines, but the voice of the poet herself speaking alongside, or perhaps superseding, that of her created character. To draw attention at the very last moment to the text's provisionality and to the possibility of other versions and voices, is a characteristically Stevensonian gesture. In 'Saying the World', for example, the speaker confidently concludes, 'The absolute's irrelevant', but then introduces the tantalising seed of doubt, 'And yet...', where the ellipsis suggests an infinite range of possibilities.<sup>621</sup> To conclude a poem with an unanswered (or perhaps unanswerable) question, too, is a stylistic idiosyncrasy of the poet, for example in 'Reversals' (1969), 'Wanted' (1977), 'An Impenitent Ghost' (2003-2005), 'A Love Sequence' (1986), 'Washing My Hair' (2003), 'From the Men of Letters' (1982), and 'At the Grave of Ezra Pound' (2003), to name but a few.

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

These final lines deliberately draw the reader's attention to the myriad lacunas within the text, the missing portions of the family history, all that 'was not said'. The family tree at the start of the collection reveals that there are many characters who are silent, many letters that we never read, and many versions of events that remain untold. Despite the collection's title, the communications are often strikingly unidirectional, though two-way correspondence is often implied. Indeed the collection is largely comprised of unanswered missives and seemingly unbidden replies. We never read, for example, Elizabeth Chandler's first letter to her father, or Ruth Arbeiter's letter to her mother from Cambridge. David Malcolm suggests that *Correspondences* is a story that is 'incomplete *ab initio*', that admits 'its own lack of overview, its own insufficiency, its own disorder.'<sup>622</sup> In a letter titled 'Fragments', an authorial note advises the reader of the document's incomplete and partial state:

NOTE: Most of this journal written on shipboard seems to have been destroyed, probably by fire. What remains suggests that Mrs Chandler journeyed to New Orleans without her husband's permission, thus becoming indirectly the cause of her baby's death.<sup>623</sup>

An additional parenthetical note, '(page torn)', concludes each of the four verse paragraphs. As such, we have not a coherent narrative, but disjointed scraps of a story. Individual lines are torn in half or completely lost, and Malcolm suggests that 'the speaker's terrifying experience of disease and death and displacement is embodied in

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<sup>622</sup> David Malcolm, "'It is America I can't Contain': Poetry and Identity in Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences*," *Brno Studies in English* 36 (2010), Accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2012. <[http://www.phil.muni.cz/plonedata/wkaa/BSE/BSE%202010-36-1/BSE%202010-36-1%20\(165-173\)%20Malcolm.pdf](http://www.phil.muni.cz/plonedata/wkaa/BSE/BSE%202010-36-1/BSE%202010-36-1%20(165-173)%20Malcolm.pdf)>.

<sup>623</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 214.

the text's shattered state.<sup>624</sup> This document functions as a kind of synecdoche for the collection as a whole, in that it affords the reader only a partial understanding of the situation. As Malcolm notes, 'no story, no account, is complete'; there is always an alternative version of events whether or not we are privy to it.<sup>625</sup>

If it is indeed the poet's own voice that we hear in those final lines, it is clear that she believes there is an ethical responsibility involved in writing about 'real lives', as it were, a responsibility to 'do justice' to the human lives being written about, especially when those characters have no opportunity to respond to, or contradict, the poet's account. In the poems of *The Dolphin* (1973), Lowell notoriously distils poetry from the painful experience of his divorce at the very time it is happening. He admits incorporating private letters from Elizabeth Hardwick into his poems, but, furthermore, modifying those letters. Bishop chastises Lowell, writing, 'Lizzie is not dead, etc. – but there is a "mixture of fact and fiction", and you have *changed* her letters... One can use one's life as material, but these letters – aren't you violating a trust? ... *art just isn't worth that much*.'<sup>626</sup> Lowell violates 'a trust' in two different but equally significant ways: in betraying those closest to him, using and abusing them as 'material' for his verse, but also in betraying the trust of his readers. Lowell's poetry creates the impression of truthfulness, authenticity, and accuracy and so readers put their 'trust' in that poetry to give accurate testament. In *The Dolphin*, though, this 'trust' is violated, as Lowell deliberately presents fiction – those doctored letters – as fact. Lowell is fully cognisant of the murky moral territory into which he is straying, though, and Kirsch

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<sup>624</sup> David Malcolm.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid.

<sup>626</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, Letter to Robert Lowell dated March 21, 1972, *Words in Air: the Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 708.



notes that the collection is ‘full of reflective asides about the ethics of confessional poetry’.<sup>627</sup> Indeed, in the final sonnet, the speaker half-apologises for ‘not avoiding injury to others, / not avoiding injury to myself.’<sup>628</sup> The final lines of *Correspondences* reveal that, like Lowell, Stevenson is acutely aware of the poet’s potential to cause injury or injustice. In ‘The Price’ (1977), published three years after *Correspondences*, Stevenson explores the high cost of her art: ‘one pays a price – a high price – in human terms. I don’t think you can write truthfully and be entirely comfortable.’<sup>629</sup> To write ‘truthfully’ incurs a ‘high price’, yet to write any less than absolutely truthfully, as Lowell found, also costs the poet and his subjects dear. The speaker confesses:

I know the price and still I pay it, pay it –  
Words, their furtive kiss,  
illicit gold.<sup>630</sup>

‘A price is asked for every engagement with the truth’, Stevenson writes, yet it is uncertain here what is the price that must be paid and in exchange for what. Words are figured as ‘illicit gold’, suggesting that they are paid in exchange for something, yet it is words that must be bought, paid for with the coin of the poet’s personal life – their experiences of ‘loneliness’, ‘love grown rank’, and ‘anger’.<sup>631</sup> Unlike Lowell, though, Stevenson is unwilling to bankrupt herself as a person to bankroll herself as a poet: she writes, ‘it need not be a price that destroys affection.’<sup>632</sup> As such, the nearer the characters of *Correspondences* come to the poet’s own lifetime, the ‘more imperative’ it

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<sup>627</sup> Kirsch, 56.

<sup>628</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 708.

<sup>629</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 21.

<sup>630</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 287.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>632</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 21.

becomes to Stevenson to create a distance between her own experience and that of her characters, to avoid ‘the embarrassment of taking family skeletons out of cupboards before the flesh is off, so to speak.’<sup>633</sup>

The voices within the poem are not merely vocal masks through which the poet ‘confesses’ her own experience with impunity. Through the adoption of, and adaption to, the voice of another, the poet is able not only to explore her own experience from a different perspective, in this case, a broad historical and social perspective, but also to step outside her own personal experience, to put herself in another’s shoes, as it were. Kirsch suggests that ‘in most lyric poetry, the conventional distinction between author and speaker is sufficient to free the poet from the demands of the ego.’<sup>634</sup> When that distinction is made all the clearer by furnishing the speaker with a name and a specific spatial and temporal location, the poet is free to explore their own experience from a distance. Here, as elsewhere, the poet achieves her characteristic dual perspective. The letters written by male characters do not serve merely as foils or negative counterparts to the women’s letters. Though the poem is primarily about female oppression and discontent, in those letters written by male speakers, Stevenson sensitively explores the opposite perspective. Ethan Amos Boyd, who arrogantly instructs his wife in his ‘simple ways’ in a previous letter, is revealed to be suffering his own crisis in ‘A Letter to God on hotel notepaper from Ethan Amos Boyd’: ‘Everything I have wished to do, to be... / No. I have not done. Not been.’<sup>635</sup> The mirroring structure of ‘to do, to be’ and ‘not done. Not been’ suggests the wholesale failure of his ambitions. This poem prompts the reader to reconsider this previously unsympathetic character, to give further

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<sup>633</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 18.

<sup>634</sup> Kirsch, 56.

<sup>635</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 228.

consideration to his motivations. He is no longer simply an oppressor of his wife and daughter, but a complex character fallen victim to his own aspirations and those of the society in which he lives. The polylogic structure of the poem is therefore an ethical as well as an aesthetic strategy.

### ***After Correspondences:***

Nearly a decade after the publication of *Correspondences*, Stevenson embarked on a similarly ambitious narrative poem. In a 2000 letter to Helena Nelson, Stevenson writes, ‘in the eighties... I found myself writing a long poem, almost a novel, about betrayal and disappointed expectations.’<sup>636</sup> The notes for, and numerous drafts of, this ‘long poem’, originally titled ‘Fictions’, and later ‘From an Unfinishable Poem’, fill five large folders and are held in the Cambridge archives. Drafts of this poem suggest that, like *Correspondences*, it dramatized the voices of a cast of characters and told the story through ‘found’ (or ostensibly ‘found’) material, including a number of diary entries from an imaginary young woman called Elizabeth Painscastle:

August 4th [date obscured].

My father favours frivolity in women not of the family (i.e. Mrs Therloe) but tolerates no ‘silliness’ in his daughters. It’s easy for Louise who cares only for riding horses and pinning her dead butterflies under glass in her display case.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>636</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) ‘Dear Helen, 2 April 2000.’ Anne Stevenson’s word-processed responses to interview questions from Helena Nelson, for an interview that appeared in *DARK HORSE* (Spring 2000).

<sup>637</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Handwritten and typewritten drafts, ‘Fictions’ / ‘An Unfinishable Poem’ / ‘From an Unfinished Poem,’ undated. (At around the same time, the poet completed a verse drama intended for radio, titled ‘Sisters,’ which featured the characters Olivia, Marion, and Miranda Painscastle. (CUL MS ADD. 9451 (Drama) Typewritten copy of ‘Sisters,’ undated.)

Like Kay Boyd's poem in *Correspondences*, though, this is a poem that Stevenson 'can't continue', and the project was finally abandoned in the late-1980s. The only material from this poem to be salvaged is the terse fragment published as 'From an Unfinished Poem' in 1985, which, significantly, declares the impossibility of accurate narrative representation or recollection: 'In the event / the event is sacrificed / to a fiction of its having happened.'<sup>638</sup> The challenge of authentically and accurately telling 'stories' remains an alluring one, though, and in that same 2000 letter she announces her intention to return to the narrative mode: 'I would like my next book to consist of historical narratives, monologues from the still-remembered decades of the 20th century. I think of calling the book *Prisoners*.' Though her 2000 collection, *Granny Scarecrow* ('The Name of the Worm', 'The Miracle of Camp 60'), 2003 collection, *A Report from the Border* ('Cashpoint Charlie'), and 2012 collection, *Astonishment* ('All Those Attempts in the Changing Room') include a small number of dramatic monologues, it appears that Stevenson's ambitious project has been ultimately abandoned.

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<sup>638</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 19.

### **‘Invocation and Interruption’: The Elegiac Poetry of Anne Stevenson**

*In the writing of Correspondences and those shorter poems discussed in the second chapter, Stevenson suggests that she learned how to put personal material into poetry ‘without confessing it’. This third chapter, focusing on Stevenson’s elegies and elegiac poems, looks at the ways in which Stevenson expresses and explores the at once personal and universal experience of bereavement and loss. Those techniques of distancing and aesthetic transformation revealed in previous chapter are employed in the poet’s numerous elegies, as she follows in the long tradition of poets who grieve personal losses whilst musing on the universal concerns of human mortality, suffering, and pain. This chapter offers close readings of those poems written in response to a particular bereavement, and also those poems which engage with the themes of death, loss, suffering, and ageing more abstractly. There is an emphasis on how Stevenson, as a twenty-first century elegist, either revives or revises the various structural, formal, and imagistic conventions of the genre in order to create an elegy that both fulfills our desire for some kind of consolation whilst also registering our philosophical and spiritual scepticism.*

Elegy is among the oldest and richest of poetic genres: for as long as there has been death, individuals and societies have made attempts to explore, express, and understand both human mortality and the complex nature of grief. If, as Max Cavitch suggests, ‘elegies are poems about being left behind’, then they are also poems that are themselves left behind.’<sup>639</sup> Stevenson, in her own elegiac poetry, engages with those ‘literary and ... material legacies’ left behind by elegists.<sup>640</sup> In both its echoic adherences to, and innovative departures from, the conventions of the genre, Stevenson’s elegiac poetry succeeds in extending and expanding that ‘legacy’ bequeathed by her predecessors, carrying the elegy forward into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>639</sup> Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*

In a 2002 lecture, entitled 'Elegies and Love Poems', Stevenson said that 'Elegies are, by definition, written to honour or commemorate the dead'.<sup>641</sup> Though this definition recognises the primarily laudatory remit of early elegies such as Edmund Spenser's 'Astrophel' or John Milton's 'Lycidas', Stevenson also acknowledges that, in light of significant developments in the genre during the twentieth century, an expanded and more inclusive definition is needed. At the turn of the twenty-first century, modern elegy may be usefully thought of as that poetry which dramatises experiences of loss, grief, and mourning, exploring the relationship between life and death, living and dying, the living and the dead. The elegy or elegiac poem is an imaginative space in which Stevenson, like so many poets before her, can address persistent concerns pertaining to life, death, loss, grief, memory, survival, inheritance, (dis)continuity, and equally importantly, the potential and limitations of art in the face of human mortality. Though this definition may seem non-committal, even nebulous, it nevertheless recognises the complexities, variance, and even dissimilitude that we see in modern elegy and elegiac poetry.

In his study of the elegy from Spenser to Yeats, Peter Sacks gives us the model of elegy as a work that dramatises, and is itself a fundamental part of, what Sigmund Freud identifies as the process of successful mourning. Early elegies such as 'Astrophel' and 'Lycidas' follow a determinate structural and psychological pattern from desolation to consolation that has its origins in ancient rituals associated with the death and rebirth of the vegetation deities. These elegies adhere to a set of formal conventions and figurations that we first see in Theocritus' lament for Daphnis in the 'First Idyll' and that were for many centuries characteristic of the elegy in English. These conventions include:

the use of pastoral contextualisation, the myth of the vegetation deity (particularly the sexual elements of such myths, and their relation to the sexuality of the mourner), the use of repetition and refrains, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection... [and] the eclogic division within or between

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<sup>641</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Elegies and Love Poems,' transcript of a lecture/reading at the University of Hull, 24 April 2002.

mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of the work at hand.<sup>642</sup>

However, though Sacks' model of elegy as the dramatization of, and integral part of, the process of 'successful mourning' can be seen to apply to most pre-twentieth-century elegies, it proves problematic when looking at the proliferation of modern elegies that are not a guide to 'successful mourning', but rather the dramatization and articulation of unsuccessful mourning, or what Freud termed 'melancholia'.<sup>643</sup> Such elegies do not follow the traditional determinate structural and psychological pattern: rather than a passage through sorrow into consolation, we see a psychic response to loss that is prolonged, 'unresolved, violent, and ambivalent'.<sup>644</sup> Jahan Ramazani argues that the experience of grief and mourning in the twentieth century is for many reasons riven with complexities, tensions, and ambivalences that cannot be adequately expressed in a traditional elegy: that the conventions of the genre no longer offer an adequate framework for the expression of grief. In order to express and explore the complex nature of modern grief, he suggests, modern elegists have often found it necessary to break with tradition, to reject, violate, or radically transform what they see as the restrictive, archaic conventions of the genre, in order to forge 'a mourning discourse more subtle and vivid, less normative and schematic' than we find in earlier elegies.<sup>645</sup> Indeed, several twentieth-century elegists, for example Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton, have found that their complex experiences of grief can be expressed only in the violent rejection or wilful desecration of elegiac convention. Ramazani suggests, however, that in the late twentieth century, 'a more traditionalist mode of elegy may have become viable once again, as long as it is sufficiently

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<sup>642</sup> Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>643</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' 1917, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV (1914-1916) trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 243.

<sup>644</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>645</sup> Ramazani, ix.

tempered by the scepticisms of our time.’<sup>646</sup> Indeed, there are those modern elegists, for example, Amy Clampitt, Douglas Dunn, Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, and Andrew Motion amongst others, who engage with elegiac convention in less radically iconoclastic ways, preserving those conventions and figurations that still feel adequate to the task of expressing their grief, and reworking those that do not. These elegists, Ramazani suggests, have ‘drawn upon and transformed an age-old language of mourning, allying the profound insights of the past with the exigencies of the present’.<sup>647</sup> In Stevenson’s elegiac poetry, too, we see neither seamless continuity with, nor complete rupture from, elegiac tradition, but rather a complex synthesis of inheritance and innovation. As she attempts to create a poetic that will both fulfil our need for consolation and share our increasing scepticism, Stevenson honours the dead and proffers forms of consolation, though all the while acknowledging the increasing difficulty of her task and boldly reimagining models of the ‘afterlife’.

### **The Work of Mourning:**

In ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, Wallace Stevens wrote,

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the res itself and not about it.  
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was[.]<sup>648</sup>

Poetry is not merely *about* life, Stevens asserts here, but is intimately and inextricably a part *of* life. This is particularly true of the elegy. The elegy is not merely a poem about the process and experience of mourning, but rather it is an integral part of that process and that experience.

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<sup>646</sup> Ramazani, xii.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> Wallace Stevens, ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,’ XII, *The Collected Poems*, 473.



Sacks suggests that ‘Each elegy is to be regarded... as a work, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience – the sense that underlies Freud’s phrase “the work of mourning”’.<sup>649</sup>

In ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, Freud describes ‘the work of mourning’ thus:

[R]eality-testing has revealed that that the beloved object no longer exists, and demands that the libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object... But its task cannot be accomplished immediately. It is now carried out piecemeal at great expenditure of time and investment of energy, and the lost object persists in the psyche. Each individual memory and expectation in which the libido was connected to the object is adjusted and hyper-invested, leading to its detachment from the libido.<sup>650</sup>

Mourning, then, is a process of withdrawal from a lost object of affection and reattachment to a replacement object. This pattern and process of separation and substitution is central to the Ancient Greek legends of Pan and Syrinx, and Apollo and Daphne, both long associated with the elegiac genre. In both legends we see the vain pursuit and subsequent loss of a beloved object: as Apollo grasps the fleeing Daphne she is transformed into a laurel tree, and as Pan clutches at Syrinx she metamorphoses into a bed of lissom marsh reeds. Both Apollo and Pan successfully transfer their affections from their lost loves to the replacement objects. Apollo cries, ‘Since thou canst not be my bride, thou shalt at least be my tree. My hair, my lyre, my quiver shall always be entwined with thee, O laurel.’<sup>651</sup> Sacks suggests that ‘both episodes portray a turning away from erotic pursuits and attachments to substitutive, artificial figures of consolation.’<sup>652</sup> A successful ‘work of mourning’, then, involves the acceptance of some substitutive object, a consolation prize of sorts. Freud suggests that, this process of transference

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<sup>649</sup> Sacks, 1.

<sup>650</sup> Freud, 244.

<sup>651</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller. Loeb Library Series (1916; London: Heinemann, 1960), 156, lines 557-560.

<sup>652</sup> Sacks, 6.

and acceptance having taken place, ‘the ego is left free and uninhibited again after the mourning work is completed’.<sup>653</sup>

However, this is not an easy or uncomplicated process: it may, Freud suggests, ‘be generally observed that people are reluctant to abandon a libido position, even if a substitute is already beckoning to them.’<sup>654</sup> Force of habit means that libidinous bonds to the beloved object cannot be quickly or cleanly severed, even after an intellectual comprehension of the loss has been achieved. Alongside the portrayals of Pan and Apollo’s successful mourning in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, we see many more portrayals of unsuccessful mourners, for example, Cynus, Pyramus and Thisbe, Egeria, Niobe, and Orpheus – all of whom, suggests Sacks, ‘fail to invent or accept an adequate figure for what they have lost and all of whom are consequently altered or destroyed.’<sup>655</sup>

In Stevenson’s ‘Granny Scarecrow’ (2000), we see an ambivalent portrayal of this process of substitution and reattachment:

Tears flowed at the chapel funeral,  
more beside the grave on the hill. Nevertheless,  
after the last autumn ploughing,  
they crucified her old flowered print housedress  
live, on a pole.<sup>656</sup>

The lost object, the deceased grandmother for whom ‘Tears flowed at the chapel funeral’, has been replaced by a ‘Granny Scarecrow’. The image of the ‘old flowered print housedress’ crucified ‘live, on a pole’, is a disquietingly violent one, suggesting, perhaps, that the very creation of a substitute object of affection is a somehow violent act. Indeed, Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ paints a vivid picture of even successful mourning as a mentally and emotionally violent process. This inanimate ‘Granny Scarecrow’ initially seems to be an

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<sup>653</sup> Freud, 245

<sup>654</sup> Freud, 244.

<sup>655</sup> Sacks, 6.

<sup>656</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 169.

adequate replacement object. The transference of affection integral to the process of successful mourning has, it seems, been successful:

Marjorie and Emily, shortcutting to school,  
used to pass and wave; mostly Gran would wave back.  
Two white Sunday gloves  
flapped good luck from the crossbar; her head's plastic sack  
would nod, as a rule.

The substitution of lost for replacement object has been so successful that it ceases to be even 'Granny Scarecrow' and is instead, just 'Gran'. However, this replacement object quickly ceases to be a consolation, and instead becomes an unnerving symbol of the human mortality it was intended to disguise:

But when winter arrived, her ghost thinned.  
The dress began to look starved in its field of snowcorn.  
One glove blew off and was lost.  
The other hung blotchy with mould from the hedgerow, torn  
by the wind.

The scarecrow is no longer 'Gran'; it is now a 'ghost', 'thinned' and 'starved', a grim reminder of death, decay, and loss.

The images of torn, soiled fabric are particularly significant here. Images of weaving and woven material have long been associated with literature – the word *text* derives from the Latin *textus* (a tissue), which is in turn derived from *texere* (to weave) – and particularly with elegy. The elegy has employed what Sacks describes as 'crucial images of weaving, of creating a fabric in the place of a void'.<sup>657</sup> We think of Apollo's intricately woven laurel wreath; Pan's pipe of bound reeds; the boy on the carved bowl in Theocritus's "First Idyll" weaving a locust cage; the elegist in Virgil's "Eclogue X" weaving a basket as he sings, and, more recently, the image in Seamus Heaney's 'The Harvest Bow' (1979), of his father who weaves 'twist by

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<sup>657</sup> Sacks, 18.

twist', 'a knowable corona, / A throwaway love-knot of straw.'<sup>658</sup> The writing of an elegy is akin to the weaving of a shroud, a garment that both ornaments and obscures the dead. The implication in Heaney's poem is that the elegist, too, is weaving 'with fine intent' a 'frail device', twisting and plaiting words. The images of stained and tattered fabric in Stevenson's poem (the 'starved' flowered dress and the gloves, one 'lost', the other 'torn / by the wind', 'blotchy with mould from the hedgerow') suggest the increasing inadequacy of the elegy in the twentieth century. The textual fabric woven by the elegist has become ragged, offering only the most threadbare consolation to poets and readers alike. Just as Granny Scarecrow's dress and gloves are unable to withstand the harsh winter weather, the delicate fabric of the elegy, it seems, struggles to withstand the cold climate of scepticism in the late twentieth century.

However, though this poem seems to depict what Freud would term unsuccessful mourning – no adequate substitute for the lost object has been found – and the efficacy and value of the elegy itself has been cast into serious doubt, the mourning process seems to have been successful; the ego has been left 'free and uninhibited'. In the final stanza, we see Marjorie and Emily move on and grow up, leaving their two-fold loss – that of their grandmother, and that of the substitute object – behind, perhaps remembered only as a shadowy childhood memory:

So in time they married.  
 Marjorie, divorced, rose high in the catering profession.  
 Emily had children and grandchildren, though  
 with the farm sold, none found a cross to fit their clothes when  
 Emily and Marjorie died.

That, upon their deaths, 'with the farm sold, none found a cross to fit their clothes', suggests that the consolation once found in Christian theology is no longer adequate, that there is no cross to 'fit' death in the late twentieth century.

This poem, like many of Stevenson's elegies and poems about death, is intensely concerned with the interminable cycle of life and death, of growth and decay. The poem begins with the

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<sup>658</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 183.

death of ‘Gran’ and the image of ‘Marjorie and Emily, shortcutting to school’, and ends with the deaths of those young girls, now old women, Emily with grandchildren of her own. Sacks suggests that through the composition and performance of elegies and elegiac rituals, ‘the unique death is absorbed into a natural cycle of repeated occasions.’<sup>659</sup> The characteristic long perspective that we see elsewhere in Stevenson’s work is in evidence in her elegies, too, as they strive to measure particular deaths against the endless cycle of growth and decay that is in evidence all around us, whilst still maintaining respect for the intensely personal and often solitary experience of grief. It is to the natural world that Stevenson’s elegies turn when attempting to comprehend a single death within, and measure it against, this larger cycle. ‘Cambrian’ (1993), written for a friend, John Cole, begins

Here is one more fiery  
 sunset for you  
 not to share  
 with the ravens who  
 rebuild every winter  
 their bulky stack  
 on the ice-cut rock.<sup>660</sup>

**Comment [E31]:** Lineation amended

In early elegies, it was conventional for the speaker to exhort nature to recognise and lament what was felt to be an unnatural and aberrant death. In Theocritus’s ‘First Idyll’, the speaker cries, ‘Let all things be changed, and let the pine trees bear pears, since Daphnis dies, and let the stag drag down the dogs, and let the screech owl from the mountains contend with the nightingales.’<sup>661</sup> This is a convention that the poet draws upon in the unpublished poem, ‘Lament for Mrs Kennedy’ (undated). The speaker notes approvingly that Mrs Kennedy, ‘our good butcher’, ‘is mourned by November rain / and November dark’.<sup>662</sup> This bathos is cleverly deflated in the half-rhymed final couplet, though, as the speaker exhorts the reader, ‘Look. Even

<sup>659</sup> Sacks, 24.

<sup>660</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 381.

<sup>661</sup> Theocritus, ‘First Idyl,’ *The Pastoral Elegy: An Anthology*, trans. Harry Joshua Leon (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1939), 28.

<sup>662</sup> CUL. Add. 9451 (Poems), ‘Lament for Mrs Kennedy’.

the cows lie heavily on the grass, / refusing to eat or look up from unhappiness', the idea of cows mourning the death of a butcher surely intended to be darkly comic. In 'Cambrian', however, the speaker does not expect nature to observe the death; conversely, the very fact that the sun will continue to rise and set and that the ravens will continue to 'rebuild every winter / their bulky stack', unaware of and indifferent to the death of John Cole, seems to be some form of consolation. Similarly, in 'Red Rock Fault', written for a close friend and fellow poet, Frances Horowitz (1985), the speaker appears to find some measure of comfort in the fact that

snow-light, water-light winters still  
will come to that ridge of Roman stones,  
Spadeadam, Birdoswald, high Whin Sill,  
where so many trees lose uncountable leaves  
to this wind – one breath from uncountable lives.<sup>663</sup>

Here, death is not, as is suggested in earlier elegies, an aberration of natural order: rather it is as natural an occurrence as the falling of leaves from a tree. The rugged landscape treated in the poem is not, as the title suggests, the famous Red Rock Fault of the Cheshire Basin, but the Whin Sill in County Durham and Northumberland. As elsewhere in Stevenson's poetry, human events are measured against a long geological (or 'deep time') perspective. The misnamed 'Red Rock Fault', an extruding formation created by movement of the earth's tectonic plates 295 million years ago, functions here as a liminal site between life and death, the living speaker and the late Horowitz. The Red Rock fault is a site and symbol of the synchronous instability and constancy of the natural world. The natural world is, perhaps, constantly inconstant: life becomes death and growth becomes decay, yet the cycle repeats itself endlessly. The renewals of sound throughout the poem – for example, the loose pattern of evolving half-rhymes ('moors', 'weirs', 'byres', and 'years') – are suggestive of Nature's powers of renewal and rejuvenation. These powers of rejuvenation do not extend to the human habitations that punctuate the landscape, though: the farm stands 'empty', the windows are 'silted', and the

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<sup>663</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 377.

machinery ‘rusts in the byres’. That the natural world is unaware of, and indifferent to, human life and death – that the ‘snow-light, water-light winters still / will come’ – seems to be a source of consolation to the speaker, yet it is a consolation that resists simple explanation. In ‘Stone Milk’ (2007), the speaker muses,

naturally what I want and need and expect is to be loved.  
So why, as I grow older, when I lift up my eyes to the hills –  
raw deserts that they are –  
do they comfort me (not always but sometimes)  
with the pristine beauty of my almost absence?<sup>664</sup>

It is natural, the speaker recognises, to ‘want and need and expect’ to find evidence of sympathy within the natural world, as do the speakers of early elegies. However, the speaker, aware that the natural world is unaware of and indifferent to human existence, deliberately rejects a poetic and psychological strategy of pathetic fallacy, and is consciously training herself to derive comfort and consolation from this very indifference: ‘Not the milk of kindness, but the milk of stones / is food I’m learning to long for.’ We think of longing as an ungovernable state, and the speaker’s strict control of her impulses is perhaps overambitious. Eric Smith maintains that there is no comfort to be derived from the endless natural cycles of death and rebirth seen in the natural world, because ‘the one thing that appears to be exempt from rebirth is the conscious being.’<sup>665</sup> In ‘Red Rock Fault’, the parahrhyme of ‘leaves’ and ‘lives’ subtly draws attention to the fact that whilst ‘uncountable leaves’ will be renewed, the ‘uncountable lives’ will not. Iain Twiddy suggests that this is ‘the great emotional and poetic challenge’ of modern elegy: to somehow turn our understanding of ‘dispassionate... nature’s indifference to humanity’ into ‘re-cathexis, the reaffirmation of the life instinct.’<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>664</sup> *Stone Milk*, 35.

<sup>665</sup> Eric Smith, *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy* (Ipswich: The Boydell Press, 1977), 5.

<sup>666</sup> Iain Twiddy, *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (London: Continuum, 2012), 258.

In ancient cultures, nature was personified by one or more vegetation deities. The ancient rites from which elegy derives many of its structural characteristics mourned the death of these vegetation deities during the winter months, and celebrated their rebirth at the start of spring. Sacks suggests that the creation of a human figure who personifies nature reveals man's desire 'not only to mourn his own image but also to identify that image with nature's powers of regeneration.'<sup>667</sup> Man wished to claim for himself, by association, nature's potential to renew itself each year. Elegy has long been closely concerned with the seasons, perhaps most explicitly in Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheard's Calendar*. 'Sonnets for Five Seasons' (1982), an elegiac sonnet sequence for Stevenson's father who died in 1979, does not (as its title perhaps suggests) adhere to the calendar, denying the reader the expected narrative progression from decay in autumn to rejuvenation in spring. There is a pervasive sense of restlessness and agitation in these sonnets, and numerous images of indistinct or ambiguous spaces and states: 'this half-born English winter'; snow that will come 'between breaths, between nights'; 'fragmentary half-true willows'.<sup>668</sup> The seasons themselves are in chaotic disorder as though running wild in reaction to the death of the speaker's father:

"Dear God," they write, "that was a selfish winter  
to lean so long, unfairly on the spring!"  
And now – this too much greed of seedy summer.

Similarly, in the third sonnet, 'Between', the speaker observes that what 'should be the end of summer – / seeds dead nettles, berries, naked boughs' looks deceptively like 'the anxious clouding of first spring'.

The first sonnet, 'This House', voices the speaker's desire for a numbing 'stun of snow' in the immediate aftermath of the death. The speaker anticipates an apposite shrouding of the familiar landscape: 'faceless fields, a white road drawn / through dependent firs, the soldered

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<sup>667</sup> Sacks, 20.

<sup>668</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 371.



glare of lakes.’ Though the resurrection of the dead traditionally occurs in spring, the speaker suspects that it is the winter that will occasion her father’s return: ‘Is it wanting you here to want the winter in?’ No sooner has winter blanketed the landscape, though, and ‘the wet rumble of thaw’ is audible, and ‘Stones. Sky. Streams. Sun’ are all visible once again. In ‘Complaint’, we see the traditional images of renewed vitality and liquidity in the sestet:

The Lord, himself a casualty of weather,  
falls to earth in large hot drops of rain.  
The dry loam rouses under his scent, and under  
him – moist, sweet, indiscriminate – the spring.  
Thunder. Lightning. He can do anything.

Whereas in the traditional pastoral elegy, we are aware of a gradual upwards movement, a dynamic transcendence of earthly encumbrances as the dead rise up towards heaven, here the movement is reversed as ‘The Lord’ ‘falls to earth in large hot drops of rain.’ That ‘the dry loam rouses in his scent’, though, seems tentatively to suggest that new life might issue forth. The Lord, falling as rain drops on the ‘dry loam’ (clay-rich soil) is a re-enactment of God’s creation of Adam from clay. As such, the line, ‘He can do anything’, is an articulation of the speaker’s sudden, unexpected hope that her father might be restored to life in this fertile spring. However, in the final sonnet of the sequence, ‘The Circle’, the poet commands, ‘Ghost be content’, acknowledging that there will be no seasonal renewal of human life. Whereas the traditional pastoral elegy ends with uplifting images of renewal and rebirth, here we see a rejection of the ‘moist-sweet, discriminate’ spring and the sensual ‘heavy drench of August’, and a return to ‘the permanence of winter’. The thaw has been reversed, and, this circle is completed by the image of ‘High stones’, ‘Granite and ice’. This sonnet is typographically divided into two quatrains and two tercets. Coupled with the line ‘All March is shambles, shards’, this creates a sense of fragmentation and disintegration. As such, the traditional progression from confusion and sorrow to psychological recovery and wholeness is reversed.

The sonnet sequence is well suited to such a restive exploration of the protracted grieving process. If, as Dante Gabriel Rossetti suggests, ‘a Sonnet is a moment’s monument’, here, each sonnet is a ‘monument’ to the occasional moments of intense emotion and thought experienced by the poet in the months following her father’s death.<sup>669</sup> Whilst earlier elegies tended towards the extended lyric (‘Lycidas’ and ‘Adonais’, for example), twentieth-century elegists, such as Tony Harrison, Douglas Dunn, Seamus Heaney, and Andrew Motion have all made use of the sonnet to explore feelings about, and complex reactions to, death and loss. These modern elegists seem to turn to the sonnet form sensing that in our contemporary climate of scepticism, it is fleeting moments of deeply-felt emotion, succinctly depicted, that are likely to resonate with a contemporary readership, rather than the sustained, even laboured, depictions of the mourning process that we see in earlier elegies. The sonnet allows the elegist to express and explore in depth a powerful emotion or thought without the pressure of sustaining that perhaps painful or difficult expression and exploration beyond fourteen lines.

### **The American Elegy:**

In the epilogue to his study of the English elegy, Sacks suggests that ‘to undertake a study of the American elegy would be to open yet another book.’<sup>670</sup> The American elegy is, he suggests, characterised by an Adamic ‘compulsion toward originality and privacy’ that manifests itself in the elegist’s unwillingness or inability to ‘situate their poems in the familiar pastoral settings or

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<sup>669</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Sonnet,’ *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, notes by William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), 74.

<sup>670</sup> Sacks, 312.

even within the familiar ritual procedures of the genre'.<sup>671</sup> Despite this compulsion towards 'privacy', however, the American elegy also exhibits a more 'frighteningly raw and immediate feeling' and 'intense, personally expressive nature' than its English counterpart.<sup>672</sup> For the American elegist, Sacks suggests, mourning is not a communal activity, but one for 'the unique and isolated self'.<sup>673</sup> Cavitch, on the other hand, repudiates Sacks' claims, suggesting that

the characteristics by which Sacks would seek to recognise an American countertradition in elegy could not be said to mark a specific local style. Far from having a 'compulsion toward originality', for example, large numbers of British and American elegies surrender readily – and often strategically – to inherited form and expressive convention. As for privacy, even the most sophisticated and skeptical elegists find ways of prizing the consolations of received form[.]<sup>674</sup>

Far from rejecting outright 'inherited form and expressive convention', then, the American elegist faces the same challenge as the English elegist, in that he, too, must find a way to both engage with what has gone before and to 'make it new'.

America has its origins, Sacks reminds us, in an 'almost exclusively forward-looking... long pioneer experience', and a Puritan society marked first by the intense and isolated introspection of Calvinism, and later by 'rationalist practices of self-control'.<sup>675</sup> Puritan culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was largely based on the strict restraint and repression of both the appetites and the emotions. Cavitch writes that shows of inconsolable grief were considered to evidence 'a lack of religious faith'.<sup>676</sup> A number of instructional books and pamphlets counselling against unseemly grief were published, including Samuel Willard's *The Mourner's Cordial against Excessive Sorrow* in 1691.<sup>677</sup> Whilst 'broadside elegies' – crudely-printed elegies written in order to be pinned to the coffin and buried along with it – were

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<sup>671</sup> Sacks, 313.

<sup>672</sup> Sacks, 314.

<sup>673</sup> Sacks, 313.

<sup>674</sup> Cavitch, 27.

<sup>675</sup> Sacks, 313.

<sup>676</sup> Cavitch, 6.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

popular, these poems were not outlets through which to express and work through feelings of sorrow or grief, but rather opportunities to praise both the dead subject and God, and reinforce the Protestant values of the community, amongst them modesty and forbearance. The writing of elegy for the expression of one's emotions or for one's own poetic purposes would have been viewed as immodest and self-indulgent. Even in modern day America, this Puritan eschewal of 'Excessive Sorrow' persists. Ramazani notes that in American culture, 'private mourning is generally denied', and that social admiration is given to those 'who hide their grief so fully that no one would guess anything had happened.'<sup>678</sup> As Stevenson herself writes in 'To witness pain is a different form of pain', 'There's a shyness, no, / a privacy, / a pride in us.' As such, the American elegist is, Sacks suggests, often 'at pains to justify the very expression, not simply the occasion, of his grief.'<sup>679</sup> One aspect of Stevenson's elegies that we might identify as particularly in tune with the American elegiac tradition, then, is the acute self-consciousness of her articulations of grief.

Mitchell R. Breitwieser suggests that Puritanism was 'in large measure an attempt to sublimate the mourning, to block and then redirect its vigour.'<sup>680</sup> In a short poem, 'About Crying' (1982), Stevenson recognises this Puritan sublimation of grief:

There is crying about crying.  
Ignore it.  
This is what we all do.

There is crying about  
What has to be said  
But wants to be cried.

Ignore it.  
This is what we all do.<sup>681</sup>

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<sup>678</sup> Ramazani, 22.

<sup>679</sup> Sacks, 313.

<sup>680</sup> Mitchell R. Breitwieser, *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning: Religion, Grief, and Ethnology in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>681</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 263.

The repetition of 'crying' and 'cried' seems to function as a kind of compulsive release in this poem, contrasting with the emphatic and repeated imperative, 'Ignore it.' It is unclear whether this repeated command issues from a second speaker, or whether the speaker has internalised the prohibition of shows of grief. The speaker acknowledges that this sublimation of grief is not merely personal, but rather a powerful cultural lacuna ('That is what we all do'). The poem ends with the lines:

Ignore it. Ignore it.

We would like  
Not to have to ignore it.

The brevity of the poem, and the short, stilted lines, suggests, though, that even as Stevenson challenges the Puritan repression of grief she struggles to find a credible vocabulary in which to do so, and in which to express her sorrow.

American elegists, as products of a culture that historically 'ignores' grief, are often tentative, inhibited, or self-effacing in their expression of sorrow. In 'Elegy for Jane' (1950), for example, Theodore Roethke eloquently and affectingly mourns the death of a student thrown from her horse, yet the elegy closes with the lines, 'Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love: / I, with no rights in this matter, / Neither father nor lover.'<sup>682</sup> The word 'rights', here, suggests two things: that Roethke does not feel permitted to mourn the death of his student, as he is neither 'father nor lover'; and that he does not feel as a poet that he has the words or rituals, 'the 'rites'', to adequately commemorate the death. Roethke's double anxiety is evident in Stevenson's work, too, where the elegist feels guilty for mourning when she feels she has no right, but also feels that her effort is somehow inadequate or deficient. Complexly, then, the elegist often berates him- or herself for the seeming inadequacy of sorrow that they believe they

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<sup>682</sup> Theodore Roethke, *Collected Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 102.

have no real right to feel. In 'Dreaming of the Dead' (1985), the speaker can feel only a 'weaker grief'. Similarly, in 'Passing Her House' (2003), the speaker asks,

How long, carissima,  
before the house you were  
forgets you?  
Before I pass  
Forgetting to remember?

The speaker knows that her feelings of intense sorrow are, unlike death, impermanent, and they seem, therefore, an insufficient response to her loss. In a journal entry written in the voice of Ruth Arbeiter in *Correspondences*, Stevenson articulates the confused and contradictory feelings of the modern American mourner:

I was waiting for father in that hot  
hellish hospital in Cambridge after Jimmy died.  
...  
Mother at her brave best, praying.  
Phil gone for Dad. I, bulky, alone, eighteen,  
in the aseptic corridor, hating that I was hungry.  
'I am selfish,' I thought, crying about that.  
'I can't be unhappy enough.'<sup>683</sup>

She cries not only for the death of her brother, but for her own supposed failure to respond in a seemly way. Unlike her mother, Ruth can find no consolation in prayer, and, like the speaker of Clampitt's 'A Procession at Candlemas', she feels cut off from an ancient tradition of heartfelt mourning.

In 'Dreaming of the Dead' (1985), the poet self-critically contrasts her own uncertainty ('I believe, but what is belief?') with the 'quiet' conviction of the dead subject, Anne Pennington.<sup>684</sup> The full end rhyme of 'belief' and 'grief' forces the reader to consider the relationship between them: does 'grief', as Samuel Willard would have it, evidence of a lack of belief? Does 'belief' insure us against 'grief'? The phrase 'weaker grief' is ambiguous,

<sup>683</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 247

<sup>684</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 374.

suggesting either that the speaker considers that her ‘grief’ is not suitably potent or powerful, or that ‘grief’ is evidence of a weakness of character.

The self-effacement of the elegist is, of course, hardly a recent development – elegists have since the time of Bion and Moschus made poetic capital from a deep-seated doubt in their own abilities and their suitability to mourn – and nor is it a specifically American one. In ‘In Memoriam’, for example, Tennyson laments the inadequacy of both his emotion and his verse, as he proclaims, ‘I cannot love thee as I ought... My words are only words, and moved / Upon the topmost froth of thought.’<sup>685</sup> The cultural inheritance of the American elegist, though, means that when he expresses doubts regarding his ‘rights’ to mourn or berates himself for the inadequacy of his grief, he is not merely paying lip service to elegiac convention, but expressing a deep-seated cultural uneasiness about loss and mourning.

### Presence and Absence

Many of Stevenson’s elegies and elegiac poems are repeated attempts to comprehend death, both as an intellectual concept and as an emotional reality. Freud notes that, for the mourner, though ‘reality testing has revealed that the beloved object no longer exists’, the lost object ‘persists in the psyche.’<sup>686</sup> There is, he suggests, a period of time, in which, though the mourner intellectually acknowledges the death, it is not an authentically felt reality. In *Correspondences*, we see Professor Neil Arbeiter struggle to reach both an intellectual and emotional acceptance of his wife’s death:

For in life, love, nothing begins or ends with clean crash.  
The brain knows, but habit is like cash or clothes.  
It continues its momentum like a blind weight through glass.<sup>687</sup>

<sup>685</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Section 52, lines 1-4, ed. Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 77.

<sup>686</sup> Freud, 244.

<sup>687</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 250.

In several of Stevenson's elegies, we recognise this temporary inability to roundly comprehend the absence. In 'Dinghy' (1993), the speaker seems to find the physical absence of John Cole not only difficult to comprehend, but impossible to *feel*. The first verse paragraph is a vivid imagining of the intensely physical experience of sailing:

the jib sheet  
scalding your hand  
...  
                  the rudder,  
coming about,  
          reaching at high tilt,  
hauled tight  
          against the slapping river – [...] <sup>688</sup>

The intense physicality and immediacy of this description makes Cole's physical absence all the more difficult to comprehend and to feel: 'your discontinuedness / is not yet felt.' At the end of a long, exhilaratingly breathless sentence, these emphatic monosyllables with their hard T sounds suggest an abrupt and final disconnection. The awkward and polysyllabic 'discontinuedness' represents the unwieldy nature of the idea of death and of unalterable, permanent absence. That it is 'not yet felt' continues the emphasis on physicality; death is something that must be comprehended but also 'felt', and mourning is revealed to be a process of both intellectual and emotional adjustment and healing.

Angela Leighton suggests that elegy is 'writing bereft of its object... The dead are far off, out of reach, absent.'<sup>689</sup> However, in the second verse stanza, there is a strange sense that Cole is simultaneously absent *and* present, both far off and close by, as the speaker writes, 'All around you / the life you built / is tacking habitually / in skilful directions, / swimming your sea, / climbing your mountains.' The repetition of 'you' and 'your' suggests that Cole retains some

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<sup>688</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 380.

<sup>689</sup> Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 126.



claim upon the physical landscape of 'sea' and 'mountains', yet the image of his life 'tacking habitually / in skilful directions' suggests that some kind of physical dispersal is taking place. Cole's absence is emphasised by the short, abrupt sentence, 'But you're left out.' It seems as though the speaker is trying to convince herself of Cole's irrevocable absence here, trying to comprehend how a life so vital could suddenly and with such finality become a stark absence. It is, for the speaker, as though Cole's death has left not just an emotional void, but also a physical void in the landscape:

grief fills  
the leaf-shape of a  
toy boat  
far on the horizon[.]

However, contradicting this image of absence, the speaker writes: 'you still weigh / upon these Welsh hills / alight with your look / of patient enquiry'. These lines are somewhat ambiguous: is it Cole that is 'alight' with a 'look of patient enquiry' or is it the Welsh hills? If it is the latter, then by being absent and nowhere, Cole seems to have become present everywhere, the very hills 'alight' with his familiar look. We can see this idea in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, where Hallam, because he is disseminated, becomes present in all things:

Thy voice is on the rolling air;  
I hear thee where the waters run;  
Thou standest in the rising sun,  
And in the setting thou art fair.

What art thou then? I cannot guess;  
But tho' I seem in star and flower  
To feel thee some diffusive power,  
I do not therefore love thee less:

My love involves the love before;  
My love is vaster passion now;  
Tho' mixed with God and Nature thou,  
I seem to love thee more and more.<sup>690</sup>

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<sup>690</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Section 130, lines 1-12, 141-142.

Stevenson's speaker seems unable to accept the irrevocable nonexistence brought about by death, veering between images and ideas of Cole's absence and presence. Though the speaker knows that Cole 'no longer exists', he retains a presence within her psyche. The elegy itself proves a means of making the dead present again; in both 'Dinghy' and 'Cambrian', the speaker addresses Cole as if he were alive, effectively bringing him back to life within the space of the poem. The elegy performs a double or ambivalent function, in that the lost object is both proclaimed to be dead and therefore absent and unreachable, and is psychically prolonged, for example, through apostrophe. This creation of a medial space in which the dead can be simultaneously absent and present is an important part of the work that elegy performs. Seemingly conversely, this psychic protraction that is performed by and within the elegy allows the mourner to detach and distance themselves from the lost object in a healthy and successful way. The elegist can create for himself an imaginative space in which to gradually detach themselves piecemeal from the lost object.

The elegy, then, is revealed as an intricate fusion and flux of powerful associative and dissociative impulses, reflecting the complex nature of the mourning process. Celeste M. Schenck, however, argues for a gendered distinction between these inextricably entangled impulses. Schenck claims that the 'masculine elegy' 'depends upon rupture', and enacts 'a rite of separation', whereas the feminine elegy is poem of 'connectedness', 'continuity', 'attachment', and 'closeness'.<sup>691</sup> Citing lines from Charlotte Brontë's 'In Memory' ('When the dead in their cold graves are lying / Asleep never to wake again /... / Still how deep in our bosoms they dwell!') and Sylvia Plath's 'All the Dead Dears' – ('How they grip us through thin and thick, / These barnacle dead'), she argues that female elegists are either unwilling or unable to 'render up their dead'.<sup>692</sup> However, in her blinkered attempt to define the 'female elegy' as a 'poem of connectedness', she fails to recognise that many elegies written by men also articulate

<sup>691</sup> Celeste M. Schenck, 'Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5 (Spring, 1986), 13-27, p 15.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid

the immense difficulty of parting company with the dead. In 'Dream Song 155', for example, the speaker says of the late Delmore Schwartz, 'I can't get him out of my mind, out of my mind',<sup>693</sup> and in Thom Gunn's 'Postscript: The Panel' (1991), the 'everpresent dead'

enter doors without knocking...  
They  
 pack their bodies, they eat my feelings, and  
 shit in my mind. They are no good to me, of no value to me,  
 but I cannot shake them and do not want to. Their story, being  
 part of mine, refuses to reach an end.<sup>694</sup>

Schenck fails to note, too, that many notable twentieth-century elegies written by women seem to be impelled by violently dissociative impulses, for example, Plath's 'Daddy' and Sexton's 'A Curse Against Elegies'. Evidently, Schenck's model of masculine elegies enacting rupture and feminine elegies maintaining closeness does not appreciate the complex cross-currents of affiliation and accusation, sympathy and severance, that we find in the majority of recent elegies.

The creation of distance between the living and the dead has long been one of the primary functions of elegy. Indeed, Sacks asserts that 'few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living.'<sup>695</sup> Several of the elegiac conventions have arisen out of this need to create and maintain distance between the elegist and the elegised, and between the living and the dead more generally. The processions of mourning figures and the descriptions of lavish floral offerings that we see in early elegies function as delimitations, putting spatial, psychological, and textual distance between the living and the dead. Each mourning figure and each floral offering that is described succeeds in emphasising and underlining the difference and distance between the living elegist and the dead subject. The text we put between us and the dead has a dual function; it is both

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<sup>693</sup> Berryman, 174.

<sup>694</sup> Thom Gunn, *Boss Cupid* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 16.

<sup>695</sup> Sacks, 19.

mark of respect and defensive barrier, as we seek to honour our dead, but also to protect ourselves from them, to firmly and finally inter them within their physical and textual tombs. Conversely, the text may also function as an imaginative space in which a reunion between the living and dead might occur. 'Elegy: In Coherent Light' (2010) suggests that between the words of the dead poet and those of the living elegist a meeting place of sorts might be found, a site where meaningful relationship between 'makers' might continue:

I prize what you wrote and meet you in what I write.  
We still keep house in a living tenement of words.  
Pull down their walls of ivy, and you kill the birds.<sup>696</sup>

This 'living tenement of words' is a kind of textual life support system, allowing the dead poets to survive inside it. 'Tenement', though, has negative connotations, and suggests a less comfortable and less secure living arrangement than the 'house of poetry' described elsewhere in Stevenson's work. Indeed, this tenement has walls not of stone or brick, but of 'summer ivy'. Despite their precariousness, though, these walls sustain and shelter a veritable choir of industrious sparrows.

A successful elegy, then, wraps the dead in a textual shroud, what Sacks describes as 'a veil of words', and inters them in a textual tomb.<sup>697</sup> However, the delicate balance of associative and dissociative impulses on which the elegy and the mourning process depend has been significantly altered by modern (particularly twentieth-century) attitudes to, and ways of dealing with, death. We have, during the course of the twentieth century, become increasingly divorced from the physical reality of death. Sacks notes that 'sociologists and psychologists, as well as literary and cultural historians, consistently demonstrate the ways in which death has tended to become obscene, meaningless, impersonal – an event either stupefyingly colossal in cases of large-scale war or genocide, or clinically concealed somewhere behind the technology of the

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<sup>696</sup> 'Elegy: In Coherent Light,' *Poetry* (July/August 2010), 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012  
<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/239426>>

<sup>697</sup> Sacks, 9.

hospital and the techniques of the funeral home.’<sup>698</sup> Death has become increasingly mediated, medicalised, aestheticised, and conceptualised; government statistics and looped news footage of what Edith Wyschogrod terms ‘death events’ inadvertently create that distance between the living and the dead that elegies once sought to establish.<sup>699</sup> We come into close contact with the dead far less frequently than ever before: as recently as in the early-twentieth century, it was common for relatives to wash and prepare the body for display or burial, and for bodies to be displayed in the home before the funeral, yet now the intimate ritual of preparing the dead for burial is carried out by mortuary technicians. The dead, therefore, already seem very distant, distinct, even divorced, from us. In ‘Hands’ (1985), we see a poem that is attempting not to create distance between the speaker and her dead mother, but to reclaim the intimacy and familiarity that was dispelled by her mother’s death. In death, the speaker’s mother has become unfamiliar and untouchable:

Comment [E32]: ‘establish’ inserted

Made up in death as never in life,  
 mother’s face was a mask  
 set in museum satin.<sup>700</sup>

Death has rendered the speaker’s mother unrecognisable. Her face is a ‘mask’, an artefact or *objet du art*, ‘set in museum satin’ that forbids the speaker’s touch. In Clampitt’s ‘A Procession at Candlemas’, too, the speaker’s mother is rendered unfamiliar by illness and death: ‘curtained in Intensive Care’, as if distanced and physically separated from the living, she becomes a ‘wizened effigy’.<sup>701</sup> In Stevenson’s poem, it is only her mother’s hands that are familiar, though, as the speaker ruefully notes, ‘not entirely hers / in those stifling flowers’. The metaphor of ‘windfall palms’ suggests that her mother’s death was premature and untimely. In these hands,

<sup>698</sup> Sacks, 299.

<sup>699</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, ‘Man-Made Mass Death: Shifting Concepts of Community,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990), 166.

<sup>700</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 173.

<sup>701</sup> Amy Clampitt, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 23.

the speaker writes, 'Lay a great many shards of lost hours / with her growing children.' If these hours have been shattered by death, then it is the task of the elegist to painstakingly piece back together that lost intimacy. As such, the poem moves to a vivid recollection of a childhood conversation:

I pitched myself up, through the screened door,  
Arguing with my sister. 'Me, marry?

Never! Unless I can marry a genius.'  
I was in love with Mr Wullover,  
A pianist.

Her mother's physical actions ('Mother's hands moved *staccato* on a fat ham / She was pricking with cloves') and her mother's voice ('You'll be lucky, I'd say, to marry a kind man') contrast starkly with the static, silent object that she has become in death. The poet sets up a contrast between the ingenuousness and naiveté of her young self ('Gay? And wasn't it a good loving thing / to be gay?') and the painful experience of her adult self who is now forced to confront death up close. However, the lurking spectre of death intrudes upon and infects even these homely memories of her mother:

[I] said as much to my silent mother  
as she wrung out a cloth until her knuckles shone,  
white bone under raw thin skin.

In this image of her mother's hands, we already see the 'silent' object that she will become. It is only 'raw thin skin' that separates life from the irrevocable silence of death. The hand that can no longer be grasped is a recurrent and powerful image in elegy. In Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas attempts to embrace his father's shade, but, intangible, it evades his grasp: 'thrice did he strive there to circle his neck with his arms: / Thrice did the vainly caught vision slip through

his hands / Like the bodiless wind, like the swift-winged flight of a dream.’<sup>702</sup> In Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, too, the speaker recalls those ‘Doors, where my heart was used to beat / So quickly, waiting for a hand, / A hand that can be clasped no more’.<sup>703</sup> The image is split across the stanza break, representing the unbridgeable gulf between the living speaker and the dead subject whose hand he used to clasp.

In ‘Red Rock Fault’ (1985), as in ‘Hands’, we see attempts to re-establish lost intimacy. The speaker addresses Frances Horovitz as ‘Fran’ (‘Fran, has it been two years?’).<sup>704</sup> This use of a nickname suggests a friendship and familiarity that outlasts and overcomes death. In an early draft of the poem, the first line of the second stanza read, ‘I see you gaunt in your boy’s coat’; however, in the published draft, the line reads, ‘I see you again in your boy’s coat’.<sup>705</sup> The speaker wishes to remember ‘Fran’ not only as alive rather than dead, but as she was before any outward sign of her ravaging illness became apparent. Similarly, in that earlier draft, the line which in the published poem reads, ‘in the candle of your living face’, refers instead to ‘the living candle of your face.’ In the published poem, it is Horovitz’s face that is ‘living’, and therefore, familiar and knowable. This ‘living’ face is a stark contrast to the ‘mask / set in museum satin’ that Stevenson’s mother’s face has become in ‘Hands’.

Both elegy and pastoral are genres concerned above all with what has been lost, be it a loved one or idyllic bucolic way of life. It was long supposed, suggests James Holly Hanford, that the pastoral was ‘in its very origin a sort of toy, a literature of make-believe’, and that ‘the trifling and artificial spirit of the pastoral would... render the form utterly inappropriate for serious laments.’<sup>706</sup> One of the functions of the pastoral in elegy is the creation of a discrete space and setting (a ‘make-believe’ space) in which to perform the difficult ‘work of mourning’. In the

<sup>702</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Michael Oakley, intro. Mandy Green. Book VIII, lines 700-702 (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2004), 143.

<sup>703</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, section 7, lines 3-5. 43.

<sup>704</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 377.

<sup>705</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, ‘Red Rock Fault,’ undated.

<sup>706</sup> James Holly Hanford, ‘The Pastoral Elegy and Milton’s “Lycidas”’, *PMLA* 25 (1910), 404.

quasi-mythological rural settings of elegies by Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus, and later, by Milton, Shelley, and Matthew Arnold, we see spaces in which elegists might explore and expunge feelings of grief away from what Wallace Stevens called the 'pressures of reality'.<sup>707</sup> In early pastoral elegies, both the elegist and the elegised are figured as shepherds: this giving of characters, or 'disguises', as Eric Smith suggests, allows the elegist to separate himself to a certain extent from the feelings of grief and desolation that he is expressing, and perhaps also to express and explore feelings that he would otherwise have been unable to contemplate.<sup>708</sup> The relocation of the death and these feelings of grief in this discrete, quasi-mythological space suggests, in fact, that the 'work of mourning' has already begun: that the elegist is able to separate the traumatic event from his own psyche. Whilst many twentieth-century elegies continue to draw upon and intelligently engage with the conventions of the pastoral elegy, the distant sylvan idylls we see in elegies such as 'Lycidas' and 'Thyrsis', have been rejected. As death has become increasingly 'meaningless, impersonal [and] clinically concealed', elegists have sought not to distance themselves from their dead, but to bring them closer, to make them seem familiar again. The sylvan idyll has been remade into the natural, but recognisable and personally significant, landscapes that we see in 'Dinghy', 'Cambrian', and 'Red Rock Fault'. Like the distant and extemporal pastures of pastoral elegy, these landscapes, often places beloved by the deceased, provide a space in which grief and loss may be explored at a certain remove from the 'pressures of reality', but without creating further distance between the living reader or poet and the dead.

The natural landscapes that provide the spatial setting for many of Stevenson's elegies are overlaid and inscribed with both the lingering presences and the tangible absences of the dead. The mountainous landscape of North Wales (where Stevenson spends part of the year) emerges in her elegies as a place of uncommon possibility and imaginative potency, where the barrier

<sup>707</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,' 13.

<sup>708</sup> Smith, 24.



between the living and dead becomes more penetrable. In 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' (2003), the Welsh hills, described by Stevenson as 'rich in history and myth', are loud with the insistent, almost corporeal, 'hankerings' of the dead:

These are the Black Mountains  
Where the drenched sleep of Wales  
Troubles King Arthur in his cave,  
Where invisible hankerings of the dead  
Trouble the farms spilled over them –  
The heaped fields, graves and tales.<sup>709</sup>

The repetition of 'trouble' suggests that the dead are not wholly benevolent. Here, we see what Emily Grosholz describes as 'a complex reality where an intently sensory world inhabited by wilful, resistant people is overlaid by ghosts, ideas, and spectral emissions... all dimensions of what obviously isn't there and yet can't be denied.'<sup>710</sup> Indeed, the dead seem to exert an almost physical 'pull' over the living in this landscape:

Dai, with his brace of horses  
...  
is Teyrnon still, or Pryderi the colt-child,  
fixed without shape or time  
between the ghost-pull of Annwfn,  
that other world, underworld, feathering  
green Wales in its word-mist,  
and the animal pull of his green dunged boots.

Though the presence of the dead might be expected to make the living seem more solid in comparison, it actually confers a strange immateriality upon them, an idea that we also see in 'Dreaming of the Dead' (1985). The living are suspended between the sensory, material world of Land Rovers and 'green dunged boots', and the ghostly 'other world, underworld' of 'shadows / in the dry cave / of the happened'. The image of 'green Wales in its word-mist' makes it clear that the elegist is complicit in the dead's strange survival, as this landscape is

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<sup>709</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 182.

<sup>710</sup> Emily Grosholz, 'The Poetry of Anne Stevenson,' *Michigan Quarterly Review* XL (2001). Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012 < <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0040.420>>.

imprinted not only with the footsteps of the dead, but also with words and works written about the dead:

At peal of memory,  
they rise in tatters, imperatives,  
the word fossils,  
  
webs of thread handwriting,  
typewritten strata, uncut stones  
culled for the typesetters' cemeteries.

Stevenson implicitly acknowledges here the role that the elegist plays in preserving and prolonging the presence of the dead within the world of the living, creating strata of memory that lie within our consciousness like fossils or coal seams within the Welsh mountains.

In other poems, too, the Welsh landscape is inhabited by both the living and the dead. In 'The Unaccommodated', as in 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain', the dead are restless and 'lingering', and potentially threatening. The 'still unburied shadows' of the ancestors are closer than we might like to think, and the final line, 'Flick off the mains and you'll be them', suggests that these dead will possess the living. In 'Freeing Lizzie' (2000), though, we see a more light-hearted picture of the dead. As in 'The Fiction Makers', the concepts of 'now' and 'then' are destabilised in this landscape ('she had daughters / who married and had sons and daughters, and those daughters' daughters have sons, and so now, so then...'). The dead are exactly like the living, and the speaker imagines without fear that 'Parents, grandparents, great aunties in pre-war frocks / must be pouring out of the bronze age seams of the valley'.<sup>711</sup> The poet deliberately undermines this preternatural image, though, as she gives us the comic image of Lizzie slyly skipping her own burial in order to arrive first at the luncheon:

Meanwhile, Lizzie's gone ahead to the Cadwgan.  
It's going to be a treat of a tea: salmon, beef, cucumber sandwiches,  
sausages on frilly sticks, canapés, satays, vol-au-vents,  
five kinds of cake besides the bara brith and fruit scones.

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<sup>711</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 395.

In contrast to the myth-laden Black Mountains of Wales, the Green Mountains of Vermont seem at first comparatively free from the persistent weight of the dead. In the first stanza, the poet describes the landscape as ‘Path without echo, unmarked page’: this seems to be a place of undiscovered potential rather than a place overlaid with traces of ‘the happened’. However, in the second stanza, she writes, ‘The air is full of footprints. / Rings of the sycamore spell you. / Your name spills out on April ground / with October leafmold...’. It becomes clear that this landscape is overlaid not just with the ghosts of unknown ancestors, but with familiar presences. In a short explanation of this poem, Stevenson writes, ‘As I wrote... the Green Mountains and Black Mountains became more than geographically significant, and as the poem emerged in April and May of 1981, it became clear that it would be an elegy for my American parents – to whom it is dedicated.’<sup>712</sup> Stevenson is acutely aware that as she writes this elegy for her parents, she is preserving them and prolonging them, inscribing them onto and into the landscape in ‘webs of thread handwriting’ and ‘typewritten strata’, as the dead are inscribed onto the Welsh landscape. The poem describes how her mother’s pen ‘drew its meaning / through vacancy, / threading a history’, and this is exactly what Stevenson’s own pen is doing, more than forty years later. There is, in fact, a strong sense that Stevenson, in this poem, is impelled to continue a ‘thread’ of history begun long before, as she asks, ‘If you, mother, had survived / you would have written...?’ and ‘So what shall I do / with this touchable page that has / closed over doubt in her voice these forty years?’ Stevenson has inherited this ‘pen’, this ‘thread’, this ‘touchable’ though ‘unmarked’ page, and this landscape, and now must find the words to preserve and prolong her parents within this landscape.

In ‘Willow Song’ (1985), too, we see a natural landscape riven through with the absences and lingering presences of the dead, though this is a natural landscape scarred by human (in)activity, an industrial landscape gone, literally, to seed. Sacks notes that the American

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<sup>712</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Minute by Glass Minute* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 29.

elegist will often position him- or herself 'explicitly on the margins, [as] dislocated, vagrant, or expelled'.<sup>713</sup> Like Whitman, who wanders alone near an isolated swamp, and Lowell who stands outside 'the new barbed and galvanized / fence on Boston Common', the speaker places herself in an uninhabited and also distinctly unpicturesque place.<sup>714</sup> Like 'Red Rock Fault', the poem is an elegy for Frances Horovitz, and was first published in 1983, the year of her death. Perhaps the most curious absence within the poem, then, is Horovitz herself: nowhere within the poem is she mentioned, nor even is there any explicit reference to death. Unlike 'Red Rock Fault', the poem makes no attempt to evoke or apostrophise the dead subject. Horovitz is conspicuous, then, in her very absence, and it is her absence that is paradoxically everywhere present in this text. The speaker, on the other hand, is emphatically, even painfully, present in this scarred landscape, in the stressed 'I' at the beginning of the first four stanzas. Each stanza gives us an image of an absence or a void in the landscape that has been filled in or covered over:

I went down to the railway  
 But the railway wasn't there.  
 A long scar lay across the waste  
 Bound up with vetch and maidenhair  
 And birdsfoot trefoils everywhere.  
 But the clover and the sweet hay,  
 The cranesbill and the yarrow  
 Were as nothing to the rose bay  
           the rose bay, the rose bay,  
 As nothing to the rose bay willow.<sup>715</sup>

That the place where the railway used to be is figured as a 'long scar.... / Bound up with vetch and maidenhair', rather than as an open wound, suggests the process of recovery has already begun. The Rosebay Willowherb is better known as Fireweed in North America due to its ability to swiftly colonise areas of land ravaged by forest fires where nothing else will grow.

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<sup>713</sup> Sacks, 313.

<sup>714</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 376.

<sup>715</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 378.

Elegies have long been figured as floral offerings to the dead. Sacks describes how ‘bouquets’ of elegies were pinned or thrown onto the hearse of Sir Philip Sidney, and suggests that ‘numerous succeeding elegies have found ways to “strew the laureate hearse,” if only figuratively, with flowers or rather fictions’.<sup>716</sup> In the final stanza, the ‘bright weeds’ are described as ‘cloudy wreaths’, recalling floral tributes. What are we to make, then, of these images of rampant wildflowers growing over, binding up, but also obscuring, these voids in the landscape? This poem implicitly warns that just as these wildflowers opportunistically colonise and conceal voids within the landscape, elegies (and elegists) are in danger of distracting and detracting from the very loss or absence that they intend to mark. These wild flowers and ‘bright weeds’ symbolise vitality and regeneration, yet they grow at the expense of the absent railway and river, having stolen into their places like a dark ‘shadow’, as suggested in the third stanza. They are feeding on and thriving in this landscape of loss and absence. We see this concern again in Stevenson’s ‘Letter to Sylvia Plath’ (1990), as the speaker asks:

Tell me, do all those weeds and trees  
strewing their cool longevities  
over the garden of your bed  
have time for you, now you are dead?<sup>717</sup>

The elegy, in its attempt to ensure for its subject a ‘cool longevity’ is in danger of forgetting that very subject. This is a concern that we see in earlier elegies, too. In Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, the speaker muses, ‘In words, like weeds, I’ll wrap me o’er... / But that large grief which these enfold / Is given outline and no more’.<sup>718</sup> ‘Words’ are meant to articulate that ‘large grief’, yet also inevitably ‘enfold’ it, concealing and obscuring it.

In ‘Willow Song’ the flourishing rose bay willow is a symbol not of the regeneration or renewal of the dead subject, then, but of the continued survival and success of the elegist, that

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<sup>716</sup> Sacks, 20.

<sup>717</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 384.

<sup>718</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, section 5, lines 9-12, 41.

emphatically present 'I'. As in other elegies, there is a sense of distance created here between the living and the dead, the elegist and the elegised. Here, the speaker's repetition of 'I went down' suggests that the gradual upwards movement of the dead that we see in traditional elegies is reversed. Rather than looking to the heavens, the speaker must follow in the footstep of Orpheus and Aeneas, and undertake a journey downwards, as though into the underworld, in search of her dead. At the same time, the 'song' catches the popular idiom of the Blues, updating elegy and giving it a strongly contemporary feel, as Auden had done.

Repetition is a one of the most familiar elegiac conventions. Sacks suggests that repetition is 'one of the psychological responses to trauma', as the wounded psyche re-enacts and reiterates the moment and fact of the loss.<sup>719</sup> By such repetitions, Sacks suggests, the psyche 'seeks retroactively to create the kind of protective barrier that, has it been present at the actual event, might have prevented or softened the disruptive shock that initially caused the trauma.'<sup>720</sup> This is what the speaker of 'Willow Song' is attempting in the repeated re-enactments and reiterations of an initial loss: that in reliving the moment of loss over and over again ('the railway wasn't there'; 'the river wasn't there'; 'My sweet love wasn't there') it becomes less traumatic. Repetition serves a dual purpose, Sacks suggests, in that it both 'control[s] the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion' by providing momentum.<sup>721</sup> The regular stanza length and metrical pattern coupled with refrain at the end of each stanza means that 'the grief might be gradually conjured forth and exorcised.'<sup>722</sup> However, repetition may also create a sense of stagnation, of being trapped in a loop of unrelenting, non-progressive grief.

As is revealed in many of Stevenson's elegies, including 'Dinghy', the sudden 'discontinuedness' of the dead is a difficult and painful concept to comprehend. Sacks suggests

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<sup>719</sup> Sacks, 23.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid.

<sup>722</sup> Ibid.

that repetition within elegy creates a 'sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death.'<sup>723</sup> Repetition within an elegy such as 'Willow Song', then, is an attempt to oppose, even resist, the sudden 'discontinuity' of death. In many elegies we see a repetition of the name of the deceased. Margaret Alexiou notes that in the primitive vegetation rites from which the elegy evolved, repetition of the name of the dead object was an incantation or invocation, intended to 'raise the spirit of the dead from the grave.'<sup>724</sup> Sacks suggests that repetition of the name of the deceased also functions as a form of verbal 'propping' through which 'the survivor leans upon the name, which takes on, by dint of repetition, a kind of substantiality, allowing it not only to refer to but almost to replace the dead.'<sup>725</sup> This use of a name as a 'prop' upon which to lean can be seen in Bion's lament for Adonis, for example, where the elegist exclaims, 'I weep for Adonis; lovely Adonis is dead. Dead is lovely Adonis',<sup>726</sup> and in Berryman's Dream Song 147, too, the speaker repeats the name of Delmore Schwartz in a dirge-like chant or incantation.<sup>727</sup> However, there is not one mention of Horowitz's name in Stevenson's poem; instead, we get variations of the refrain:

the rose bay,  
the rose bay, the rose bay,  
As nothing to the rose bay willow.

The rose bay willow is a symbol of the continuing vitality of the surviving speaker rather than of the dead poet. These refrains, then, are not invocations of the deceased, or attempts to confer substantiality upon the deceased's name, but rather couched reiterations of the elegist's own surviving powers, of her own continued flourishing.

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<sup>723</sup> Ibid.

<sup>724</sup> Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 137.

<sup>725</sup> Sacks, 26.

<sup>726</sup> Bion, 'The Lament for Adonis,' *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, trans. J. M. Edmonds, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 28. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1912), 58.

<sup>727</sup> Berryman, 166.

It is clear, then, that for Stevenson, the relationship between the elegist and the elegised and the elegy itself is a complex and often uneasy one, particularly when the deceased subject is a fellow ‘maker’ of poetry. The elegist seeks to praise and honour the dead, yet will themselves garner fame and renown, perhaps more so than his or her dead subject. Ramazani suggests that modern elegists and elegies are preoccupied with what he calls ‘the economic problem of mourning – the guilty thought that they reap aesthetic profit from loss’.<sup>728</sup> These poets ‘scrutinise the economic substructure of their work, often worrying that their poems depend on death and hence collude with it.’<sup>729</sup> This anxiety about the various benefits derived by the elegist from the writing of the elegy has increased and intensified over the centuries. In early elegiac eclogues different mourning voices would compete for fame, praise, and the right of inheritance. Later, in the ‘November’ eclogue of Spenser’s *Shepheardes Calendar*, Colin Clout accepts a lamb as payment for his lament for Dido, having become ‘something of a professional mourner’.<sup>730</sup> However, in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, we detect a note of ambivalence as the speaker anticipates collecting what he calls the ‘far-off interest of tears’,<sup>731</sup> and by the time we get to Hardy’s many elegies for his first wife, we see a poet incessantly upbraiding himself for deriving poetic material out of his wife’s death. Indeed, the modern elegist’s uneasiness about converting grief into poetic capital becomes a source of poetic capital in itself, adding yet another layer to an issue already fraught with self-consciousness and ambivalence. In ‘Apology’ (1965), the poet-speaker first figures herself as a discerning thief, providing her dead mother with a precise inventory of what she has ‘taken’: ‘Mother, I have taken your boots, / your good black gloves, your coat / from the closet in the hall, your prettiest things.’<sup>732</sup> If this is an apology, then it is also an accusation, as the speaker berates her mother for her alleged carelessness (‘But the way you disposed of your life gives me leave, / the way

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<sup>728</sup> Ramazani, 6.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid.

<sup>730</sup> Sacks, 48.

<sup>731</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, section 1, line 8, 39.

<sup>732</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 172.



you gave it away.’) The speaker’s guilt cannot be assuaged though, and she next figures herself as a marauder (‘I pillage your bedroom’). The balance of power is reversed at the end of the poem. Though the speaker is seemingly in the position of power, appropriating the possessions of the dead, it is her dead mother who exerts control:

Your voice streams after me, level with sensible urgency.  
And near to the margin of tears as I used to be,  
I do what you say.

### **After the Afterlife:**

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elegists such as Tennyson and Hardy deal within their elegies not only with a specific bereavement, but also with the loss of many of the spiritual and metaphysical props that sustained and consoled earlier elegists. In *In Memoriam*, though, despite the crisis of faith that has been evident for much of the poem, the speaker eventually reconciles himself to Christian ideas of heaven and rebirth, and is able to conclude his elegy with a consoling image of Hallam born to eternal life:

That friend of mine who lives in God  
  
That God which ever lives and loves,  
    One God, one law, one element,  
    And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves.<sup>733</sup>

The Christian certainty of an afterlife is philosophically untenable for the majority of contemporary elegists. Stevenson, along with many of her fellow contemporary elegists, does not have the luxury of certainty that her lost subject ‘lives in God... / That God which ever lives and loves’. The penultimate verse paragraph of ‘Letter to Sylvia Plath’ asserts that:

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<sup>733</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Epilogue, lines 140-144, 148.

Beyond existence, nothing is.  
 Out of this world there is no source  
 of yellower rape or goldier gorse,  
 nor in the galaxy higher place,  
 I think, for human mind or face.

In that qualification, 'I think', however, we see that the speaker cannot bring herself to discount entirely the appealing idea of a 'higher place'. Discussing Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne', Stevenson notes that:

**Comment [E33]:** Superfluous quotation mark cut

seventeenth-century religion instilled resignation, not imaginative escape, perhaps because acceptance through faith of an allotted fate was tantamount to a promise of heaven... In this late, decadent stage of western civilisation, though, it is hardly possible for a poet to write of an afterlife in ways that Ben Jonson would have approved.<sup>734</sup>

Denied a consoling 'promise of heaven', and unwilling or unable to believe in such a thing as an 'allotted fate', the contemporary elegist living in what Stevenson describes as 'these late, faithless days' must then radically reconceive the comforting notion of life after death.<sup>735</sup>

One of these sources of consolation, Stevenson suggests, is the imagination. The final stanza of 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' proclaims:

We learn to be human when we kneel  
 to imagination, which is real  
 long after reality is dead  
 and history has put its bones to bed.

The imagination seems to have assumed the position previously occupied by religious faith in our lives: we 'kneel' before it as once we knelt before an altar. Works of the imagination not only persist and survive long after the bare 'bones' of reality have been buried and forgotten, but even replace reality, rewriting the past. In 'The Writer in the Corner' (2003), Stevenson acknowledges the complex position of the elegist as perhaps unwitting architect or refashioner

<sup>734</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Elegies and Love Poems'.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid.

of 'truth', as she writes, 'What we live is the story, / What we write has to be the truth',<sup>736</sup> lines that call to mind Clampitt's question in 'A Procession at Candlemas', 'What is real except / what's fabricated?'<sup>737</sup>

In a 2007 interview Stevenson says, 'If your poems are good they win the ultimate prize of surviving you'.<sup>738</sup> That works of the imagination might outlast both the writer and whatever 'reality' they inhabit is a source of both consolation and consternation for contemporary elegists. In a letter to Olwyn Hughes written after the death of Ted Hughes, Stevenson writes, 'But even as we mourn him we can celebrate his strong and wonderful poems that will never die'.<sup>739</sup> Here, the surviving powers of works of the imagination are presented as an evident source of consolation, something to 'celebrate'. In 'Red Rock Fault', however, the survival of the dead subject's poems seems to offer precious little consolation, as the speaker concludes in a short line that offers a weary deflation to the enjambment-laden preceding stanza, 'And now we have only the poems.' The surviving poems are a poor substitute for their lost 'maker'.

A further source of anxiety for the elegist comes in the knowledge that if the elegy functions as a means of 'imaginative escape', then the dead subject is left in a uniquely vulnerable position, entirely in the imaginative control of the living elegist. Stevenson, like many other contemporary elegists, is acutely aware of this precarious position of the elegised subject within the elegy. Elegy functions, as 'Poem for Harry Fainlight' (1985) suggests, not only as the polished 'casket' in which to commemorate and inter the dead, but as the 'corpse', as well. This poem suggests that the elegy is in danger of assuming the place of the dead subject, functioning not only as textual monument, but also as replacement or substitute of the dead subject. The poem ends with the lines:

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<sup>736</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 397.

<sup>737</sup> Amy Clampitt, *Collected Poems*, 23.

<sup>738</sup> Tom Gatti, 'Anne Stevenson: the secret life of a poet,' *The Times* (Books) 14 December 2007. 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012, rpr. <[http://www.arlindo-correia.org/anne\\_stevenson.html](http://www.arlindo-correia.org/anne_stevenson.html)>

<sup>739</sup> CUL MS add. 9541 (Correspondence) Undated and unsigned letter from Anne Stevenson to Olwyn Hughes.

But your poems, Harry,

...

They were always  
transforming your wrong life  
into their live silence.<sup>740</sup>

We are prompted here to reflect on the power of poetry to transform and transfigure; in or through poetry – that ‘polished instrument’ – real, lived experience becomes art; a ‘wrong life’ is transformed into a ‘live silence’. In ‘The Loss’ (1969) (undedicated, but its position between ‘Apology’ and ‘Hands’ suggests that it is about the poet’s mother), there are three figures within the poem: the elegist, the dead subject who is addressed by the elegist, and a third figure, the ‘image’ or ‘visible ghost’ of the dead subject that lives on in the elegist’s imagination and poem. The speaker addresses the dead subject:

You emerged from your image  
on the smooth fields  
as if held back from flight by a hinge.

I used to find you  
balanced on your visible ghost  
holding it down by a corner.<sup>741</sup>

The subject and the elegist’s ‘image’ of them are linked by a delicate ‘hinge’, but in the second verse paragraph the ‘image’ breaks free of the subject, becoming a wholly separate entity within the elegist’s imagination. The speaker is acutely aware of this divorce between subject and image, saying ‘Gone, you leave nothing behind, / not a toe to hold steady or true / your image which lives in my mind.’ The ‘image’ will continue to live within the elegy long after all that is ‘steady or true’ about the subject has been forgotten or obscured. Though the elegy traditionally sought to garner fame and longevity for the dead subject, it is in fact the image or imagined version of the subject that is assured of survival. Stevenson acknowledges this in ‘A Dream of

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<sup>740</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 382.

<sup>741</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 173.

Stones' (1985), where she writes that 'these / possible offerings from impossible language' are 'too alive to be left unburied / under common years.'<sup>742</sup> The elegy assumes a life of its own. This strange brand of immortality might be welcomed by some. 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' wearily concludes with the lines, 'Sylvia, you have won at last, / embodying the living past'. Plath, who, whilst alive, longed for acclaim and applause, has 'bought with death a mammoth name / to set in the cold museum of fame.'<sup>743</sup> In *A Lament for the Makers*, Peter Redgrove, the poet's spirit-guide in the underworld, informs (and perhaps warns) the speaker that

We who insistently  
insinuate ourselves  
through art into memory  
  
are condemned to linger  
for a time in Limbo,  
hovering on the left bank of Lethe[.]<sup>744</sup>

This interminable 'hovering' is the price that 'the wrecked elect' must pay for the earthly sin of 'too damn much literary ambition'.<sup>745</sup> Redgrove (who seems to share Stevenson's chariness of the academy) informs her that this punishment is meted out not by the gods, but by the 'all too human' 'official keepers of ideas': the 'sycophant PhD[s]' and 'Balokowsky and his kind'.<sup>746</sup> As Tim Kendall notes, though, 'criticising others, Stevenson does not absolve herself', and accepts partial responsibility for Plath's presence in this underworld with a 'combination of pride and guilt'.<sup>747</sup>

For those who have not sold themselves 'for a mess of verbiage', an organic reabsorption and redistribution into nature awaits. 'Where the Animals Go' (1985) imagines a paradisiacal Christian afterlife for the 'retriever mangled on the motorway, the shot / Alsatian by the

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<sup>742</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 376.

<sup>743</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 384.

<sup>744</sup> *Lament for the Makers*, I.vi.

<sup>745</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 84.

<sup>746</sup> *Lament for the Makers*, II.v.

<sup>747</sup> Tim Kendall, "'Time will erase": Anne Stevenson and Elegy,' *Voyages over Voices*, 208.

sheepfold', employing the rejected conventions and consolations of the elegy (including the transcendent rise up towards heaven, and the restoration of their health).<sup>748</sup> This harmonious heaven is revealed as nothing but a comforting fiction, though, by the isolated line, 'God absorbs them neatly in his green teeming cells', which suggests a less mystical, more molecular afterlife. That the speaker resumes her envisaging of this heaven even after this acknowledgment suggests that she recognises the value of the comforting fictions we tell ourselves in times of grief. Similarly, in *A Lament for the Makers*, Redgrove presents the alternative to an interminable internment in the 'underworld of words':

in death, the enduring energies  
hired for life  
to work in our self-factories  
  
take themselves off into fresh things:  
sperm, embryos, mayflies,  
maggots, millipedes, moth-codlings.<sup>749</sup>

Given Stevenson's oft-voiced desire to escape the stifling 'self-factory' of human self-consciousness, this 'animal / bliss of forgetting' should be her preferred option.<sup>750</sup> The poem ends, though, with the assertion, 'I am alive. I'm human. / Get dressed. Make coffee. / Shore a few lines against my ruin.'<sup>751</sup> The speaker is compelled to 'insinuate [herself] / through art into memory' in hope of securing a place on the Lethe's populous left bank.<sup>752</sup>

In 'Black Hole' (1993), the speaker seems to be a long-interred subject of elegy:

I have grown small  
inside my house of words,  
empty and hard,  
pebble rattling in a shell.<sup>753</sup>

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<sup>748</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 348

<sup>749</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, I. vi.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>751</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, II. vii.

<sup>752</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, I. vi.

<sup>753</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 167.

The elegy is 'a house of words' built to commemorate and honour, but here it seems also a sort of prison from which this speaker cannot escape. Strangely, it seems that if an elegy is a prison, then it is a prison partially constructed by the dead subject themselves. Several of Stevenson's elegies for fellow 'makers' of poetry explore the idea that the 'house of words' that a poet constructs for themselves whilst alive becomes that tomb, that prison, once they are dead, the job of its construction handed over to their elegists. The speaker of 'Black Hole' explains,

I can't help being the hole  
I've fallen into.  
Wish I could tell you  
how I feel.

Heavy as mud, bowels  
sucking at my head.  
I'm being digested.

The subject of elegy cannot help falling into a textual version of themselves created by the elegist. Particularly significant, here, is the image of the dead subject being 'digested' and consumed by 'bowels / sucking at [her] head.' The idea and image of ingestion has long been a significant one in elegy. Sacks notes that during the ancient vegetation rites, 'a youth, personifying the deity, would be dismembered, and his flesh and blood taken as nourishment by the community and by the soil', and 'the figure for fertility would thus be literally ingested'.<sup>754</sup> This idea persists, of course, in the Christian practice of the Eucharist. W.H. Auden's elegy for W.B. Yeats takes this idea of literal ingestion of the dead, and uses it as a metaphor for the complex relationship between elegised and elegist, between bequeather and inheritor: 'The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.'<sup>755</sup> This is, of course, how traditions are forged; the words of the dead are received and reworked by living poets. However, this idea of ingestion is also an unsettling one, and threatens to cast the elegist as a scavenger, opportunistically picking at the remains of their dead antecedents. In 'Black Hole',

<sup>754</sup> Sacks, 29.

<sup>755</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Collected Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1945), 48.

the speaker fears that, having been ‘digested’ by those ravenous living poets, she will be effectively forgotten, irretrievably absent from the very elegies that are meant to honour her memory:

Remember those moles

lawn full of them in April,  
piles of earth they threw  
out of their tunnels. Me, too.  
Me, too. That’s how I’ll

be remembered. Piles  
of words, sure, to show  
where I was. But nothing true  
about me left, child.

Elegies are in danger of being ‘piles of words’ that show where the dead subject was, but contain ‘nothing true’ about them. ‘Black Hole’ is a kind of self-elegy, then, in which the speaker mourns not their death, but the gradual disintegration of their identity, of their ‘self’, and of what was (and is) ‘true’ about them. In the striking, strangely pathetic repetition of ‘I’ in the poem, the speaker is vainly attempting to assert their identity even as they are being ‘digested’.

With one eye, as ever, on the long perspective, Stevenson is keenly aware of herself as a future subject of elegy, even as she writes elegies for her fellow ‘makers’ of poetry. In both ‘Postscriptum’ (or ‘Post Scriptum’ in the index of *Poems 1955-2005*) (2000) and ‘Celebrity’ (1990), the poet peremptorily rejects the elegies that might be written for her after her death. In ‘Celebrity’, Stevenson delivers a wry forewarning to those future elegists who might seek to ‘extend’ her life within their work as she reminds them that, ‘No ill-concealed file of my faults / will ever extend this / crotchety itch of becoming / I know as me’. In ‘Postscriptum’, the speaker appears, like Ted Hughes, and commands:

Now that I am dead,  
no words,



just a wine  
of my choosing.<sup>756</sup>

This dead poet commands, 'Drink to my / mute assent, / my ritual of / dissolving', yet it is clear this dead poet is giving no such 'assent', and is anything but 'mute'. Knowing full well the way in which her own words will be 'modified in the guts of the living', this dead poet commands, 'Poems, stay there / in your book.' The speaker rejects language, and requests instead, 'Should passion / attend me, / let it flow freely / through Messiaen's / End of Time Quartet'. Like Ted Hughes in 'Invocation and Interruption', Stevenson is determined to have 'the last word first'. Similarly, in 'A Legacy', a long poem written around the time of Stevenson's fiftieth birthday, she (somewhat prematurely) divides her poetic assets between her surviving friends and fellow 'makers':

To Andrew Motion, any fame  
That to my thin books may adhere  
Like sheep's wool to a barbed wire name.  
Further, my reputation for  
High-flown frigidity to Fleur  
Who in the Oxford lists has been  
The lady aptest to prefer  
The acid to the saccharine.<sup>757</sup>

The poet is leaving nothing to chance, as she takes it upon herself to evaluate (and dictate) her own pre- and posthumous 'reputation'. This careful selection of poetic benefactors and beneficiaries is an act of self-placing. She dictates the company that she would wish to keep, and to be kept in, in that 'underworld of words'.<sup>758</sup> Though the poet is sanguine about the inevitable dissolution of her physical body ('As for my eyes, my ears, my teeth, / The little lusts that live therein, / They can dissolve like salt beneath / The ink and paper of my skin'), it is clear that she does not intend, not even in death, to relinquish control over her body of work.

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<sup>756</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 320.

<sup>757</sup> Anne Stevenson, *The Fiction-Makers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 55.

<sup>758</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, Liii.

It is clear elsewhere in Stevenson's elegies that the dead subject can exert no control over the poem: rather, they are in the control of the elegist. In 'Dreaming of the Dead' (1985), an elegy for Anne Pennington,<sup>759</sup> the poet-speaker addresses the ghost of Pennington that appears to her in 'in the mirrors of asleep':

So whatever it is you are,  
Dear Anne, bent smilingly grave

Over wine glasses filled by your fire,  
Is the whole of your life you gave  
To our fictions of what you were.<sup>760</sup>

**Comment [E34]:** Comma added

'All the selves' of the dead subjects who appear in Stevenson's elegies (and all elegies, for that matter) are 'fictions', we are gently reminded here. The elegy has long been a site of exploration and experimentation, where poets can explore not only the complex relationship between life and death, the living and the dead, but also the protean relationship between 'reality' and fiction, the material and the imaginary. Sacks suggests that 'recent elegists tend to show their willingness to work within a fictional world rather than point confidently to a world of "truth" beyond the frame of fiction.'<sup>761</sup> Indeed, many recent elegies foreground and draw attention to their status as fictional constructs and linguistic objects. In *The Changing Light at Sandover*, for example, James Merrill questions whether in elegy, 'our own otherwise / Dumb grief is given words. DJ: Or lies?' Stevenson's 'Invocation and Interruption', a poem written in memory of Ted Hughes, emphasises its status as 'poem':

*Gigantic iron hawk  
coal-feathered like a crow,  
tar-coated cave bird,  
werewolf, wodwo*

*you've flown away now,*

<sup>759</sup> Anne Pennington, Professor of Comparative Slavonic Philology at Oxford University, and translator of Vasko Popa's *Collected Poems*.

<sup>760</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 374.

<sup>761</sup> Sacks, 328.

*where have you flown to?*

was how this poem began  
before the shade of a voice  
fell on my hand.<sup>762</sup>

The elegist is drawing attention here to the creative process, to the process of writing elegy, and in doing so draws attention to the text as imaginative object. The speaker explains, 'I was going to invoke / a many-sided Hughes', but it is clear that there is no invocation on the part of the elegist, only construction and creation. The elegist cannot 'invoke' the dead subject, only create and re-create them within the space of the poem. The speaker imagines a struggle for authority between herself and the 'shade' of Ted Hughes, yet that 'shade' is nothing but a creation of the speaker's own imagination, however vivid and authentic the voice of 'Hughes' may be. Despite his assertion that 'Nothing can hurt us; / we're immune to our reputations', the 'shade' staunchly refuses to be remade by the elegist, exclaiming 'I'm ... / an invention of my own imagination', and 'don't tell me who I was!' However, he is all along the 'invention' of the elegist's imagination. We see a similar ostensible struggle for authority between the elegist and the subject in Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island', where, although the shade of Colum McCartney persuasively pleads for reality over art or imagination, he is himself but another artistic creation. In both 'Invocation and Interruption' and 'A Lament for the Makers', there is the illusion of authentic dialogue between the living and the dead, but, as Kendall observes, the poet 'gives them [the dead] the opportunity to answer back, but on her own terms... Stevenson's shades have the happy knack of telling her exactly what her poem needs to hear.'<sup>763</sup> That these figures are nothing more than figments of her own imagination is suggested as the poet-speaker leans over a 'steaming puddle' in search of the face of Frances Horowitz and can find, at first, only a reflection of her own, 'masked by a swirl of scum'. Horowitz's voice is described as 'an echo sighing', suggesting that her words are not truly her own. As in 'Black

<sup>762</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 389.

<sup>763</sup> Tim Kendall, "'Time will erase': Anne Stevenson and Elegy," 210.

Hole', here, too, it is as if the elegised subject attempts to assert himself through repeated use of the first person, particularly in the last verse paragraph, where the voice of Hughes asserts 'I had the last word first, remember. / I'm going to keep things like this.' Though Hughes seems to have 'had the last word' in this poem (with a resounding echo of the final line of his well-known 'Hawk Roosting'), we cannot forget that his words are, in fact, Stevenson's words. Even as Hughes seems to be telling the elegist not to tell him who he was, it is the elegist who is in complete control as she proceeds to tell the reader exactly who Hughes was – 'the dream of a boy / who became a man and lover / only by doing violence to violence.' As noted in Auden's elegy for Yeats, the words of the dead survive 'in the guts of the living', and the dead poet has no power over this inevitable cycle of inheritance and refashioning. Both the 'invocation' and the 'interruption' of the title are fictions; the dead will not be invoked, nor can they interrupt. The shade of Hughes says 'You'll find me in all my books', yet in 'Black Hole' we see that the poet can easily become irretrievably lost within the 'piles of words' that remain after their death. It seems here as though the living elegist is projecting her own feelings of uneasiness about elegy and death onto Hughes. The line, 'Don't sell yourself or your poems / for a mass of verbiage' brings to mind not only the biblical phrase 'a mess of pottage',<sup>764</sup> but also those lines from Stevenson's manifesto poem, 'Making Poetry': 'evade the ego-hill, the misery well, / the siren hiss of publish, success, publish, / success, success, success.' Similarly, just as Hughes asks here, 'So please, no more poems about me, / grateful as I am for the compliment,' the speaker of 'Post Scriptum' asks 'Now I am dead, / no words, / just a wine / of my choosing.'

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<sup>764</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Genesis, verse 25, lines 29-34, 27.

### Three Poems for Sylvia Plath:

The writing of elegy affords the poet the opportunity to explore and articulate the nature of their relationship to the dead subject. This already intricate process of exploration and assertion is complicated further when the dead subject is a fellow ‘maker’ of poetry. Plath (or perhaps more accurately, the ‘myth’ of Plath) has exerted a considerable force on Stevenson’s life and poetic career. In a very Plathian way, Stevenson clearly conceives of the dead poet as a kind of dark double. In an undated typescript titled ‘The Making of Bitter Fame’, Stevenson explains:

Plath and I were born within months of each other in the autumn and winter of 1932 and 1933. We had in common American parents of German descent, though her background, unlike mine, was undilutedly ~~Germanic~~ Teutonic. Our fathers were both university professors. As children, we attended similar public (state) elementary schools, and as teenagers, we graduated in the same year (1950) from middle-class, ‘college oriented’ American high schools. We also shared ideological and social assumptions. We were both brought up in a protected, academic environment in which success at school, followed by a liberal arts education in college, appeared to guarantee us a future of bustling personal happiness and usefulness to society... What Sylvia Plath and I had unequivocally in common in the 1950s was, of course, marriage to an Englishman and transplantation, as naïve young women, from open-minded, prosperous America to class-ridden, war-depleted England.<sup>765</sup>

Stevenson’s and Plath’s respective transatlantic trajectories in fact came within mere feet of crossing. The Englishman that Stevenson married in 1955 was Robin Hitchcock, whose mother, Helen, ran St Botolph’s Rectory, the so-called ‘spiritual home’ of the group of poets among whose number were Plath and Hughes. Stevenson recalls that on many occasions she would hear the ‘roistering’ poets singing uproariously in the kitchen, but never joined them: ‘I was too shy, and Robin would have been very disapproving.’<sup>766</sup>

In 1986, Stevenson, at the request of Olwyn Hughes, undertook the writing of a critical biography of Plath. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* was published in 1989 to a mixed critical

<sup>765</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) ‘The Making of Bitter Fame,’ undated.

<sup>766</sup> Tom Gatti, ‘Anne Stevenson: the secret life of a poet’.

response. Whilst Blake Morrison praises the biography as ‘the coolest, most intelligent and most authoritative account of the life to date’,<sup>767</sup> Al Alvarez dismisses it as ‘a minor poet’s envy of a major poet’,<sup>768</sup> and describes it as ‘three-hundred-and-fifty pages of disparagement’. The difficulties experienced by Stevenson during the writing of *Bitter Fame* have been well-documented by Janet Malcolm’s biography of Plath’s biographers, *The Silent Woman*. During the writing of the biography Stevenson found herself caught between warring factions, each determined that *Bitter Fame* would tell *their* particular interpretation of Plath’s tragic life, and after its publication, Stevenson recalls:

reviewers who made it their business to harry Olwyn Hughes accused me of being clay in her hands. Others who had made reputations out of their versions of Plath’s suicide were pleased to believe that I was jealous and therefore easily bribed into producing a pro-Hughes story. Olwyn Hughes, very much hurt, regarded me not only as an incompetent who had never understood the nature of the biographer’s brief, but much more unfavourably, as a traitor who, while pretending to listen to her, had all the time been dealing with the enemy behind her back.<sup>769</sup>

It is little wonder, then, that Stevenson remarked in 2000, ‘every time I think about Sylvia Plath I groan. I’m so tired of the whole saga.’<sup>770</sup> Stevenson is acutely aware of the similarities between the dubious endeavour of the elegist and that of the biographer. Malcolm gives us the image of the biographer as ‘the professional burglar’, who (in Stevenson’s words) ‘breaks into a house, rifles through private drawers, and bears valuable loot away before the helpless victim realises what he has given up.’<sup>771</sup> There is, of course, no victim more ‘helpless’ than the dead subject of an elegy. Stevenson knows that both the biographer and the elegist unwittingly inter their subject in what she calls in ‘Lament’ ‘a glittering prison’; however, that *Bitter Fame* is

<sup>767</sup> Blake Morrison, quoted on the dust jacket of *Bitter Fame*.

<sup>768</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, ‘Sylvia Plath: An Exchange’.

<sup>769</sup> Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), 9.

<sup>770</sup> Cynthia Haven, ‘Interview with Anne Stevenson,’ *Cortland Review* 14 (2000) Accessed on 15th September 2012 < <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm>>.

<sup>771</sup> *Ibid.*

subtitled 'A Life of Sylvia Plath', rather than 'The Life of Sylvia Plath', is perhaps Stevenson's attempt to leave the key in the lock of the 'glittering prison' that she created for Plath.<sup>772</sup>

Stevenson suggests that Plath's life and death 'have branded a permanent mark on our literary consciousness', yet it is clear from both Stevenson's poetry and her comments in interviews that Plath has left an indelible mark on Stevenson's personal consciousness as well.<sup>773</sup> Stevenson's proximity to Plath, both biographically and through the writing of *Bitter Fame*, significantly occupied her thoughts for many years in the late 1980s and beyond. Plath, as Stevenson's biography astutely communicates, was an intensely complex personality and poet, riven with and ultimately destroyed by her conflicting and self-cancelling ambitions and ideals. In interviews and in her critical prose, Stevenson's assessments of Plath's poetry and person have been inconsistent and vacillating. In a 1989 interview with the poet Micheal O'Siadhail, for example, Stevenson maintains that Plath's poetry gives us 'little more than the myth of her own entrapment. Not only entrapment in her culture but in her own bell jar of ambition.'<sup>774</sup> A decade later, however, Stevenson refutes this earlier statement, saying of Plath, 'she always tucked that pocket of air between herself and her poems. Her poems are powerful because she was essentially an artist before she was a woman or an American or anything else. When she wrote, she had this wonderful hard-headed objectivity... [her poems] are much more, very much more than self-expression... the gap between the girl and the artist was enormous.'<sup>775</sup> This uncertainty colours Stevenson's elegies for Plath, too, particularly, 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', in which Plath is portrayed as both passive ('the half-life that was left to you'), and active ('Malevolent will-power made you great'), innocently infantile ('you, / a frantic Alice, trip on snares, / crumple and drown in your own tears'), and violently vengeful ('the fiercest poet of our time').

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<sup>772</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, II.ii.

<sup>773</sup> *Bitter Fame*, dust jacket.

<sup>774</sup> Michael O'Siadhail, 'An Interview with Anne Stevenson,' *Poetry Ireland Review* 26 (1989), 9.

<sup>775</sup> Cynthia Haven, 'Interview with Anne Stevenson.'

During the writing of *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson wrote three poems about Plath, all of which are included in the 'In Memoriam' section of *Poems 1955-2005*, under the sub-heading 'Three Poems for Sylvia Plath'. These poems afford the poet a discrete space in which to address and explore her conflicting feelings about Plath and her own personal interpretation of Plath's story, in her own voice, at a time when she felt she and her biography were being used as a mouthpiece for others. In a 2000 interview, Stevenson describes these poems as 'my own say', adding, 'I think they more or less say what I had to say.'<sup>776</sup> In 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', Stevenson writes, 'Sylvia, I see you in this view', the emphatic 'I' her assertion of her presence as biographer and elegist. It is useful at this point to return to Freud's notion of the 'work of mourning': the notion that mourning is not a merely a state but an intricate and difficult process during which difficult concepts must be comprehended, and painful emotions must be worked through. In these three poems for Plath we see more so than anywhere in Stevenson's elegiac poetry the 'work of mourning' being undertaken: complex feelings being explored, strong attachments being loosened, and ghosts exorcised, leaving the elegist 'free and uninhibited once again after the mourning work is completed.' There is the sense that these poems are not only dramatisations of the intellectual and emotional processes involved in the 'work of mourning', but that they are themselves an integral part of those processes. In 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', we see the poet struggling to work out her complex feelings towards the dead poet, writing first, 'Your art was darkness', then correcting herself, 'No, your art / was a gulping candle in the dark.' The title of a lecture given by Stevenson at Hull University in 2002, 'Elegies and Love Poems', misleadingly suggests that elegies and love poems share a common purpose or perform the same psychological work. As 'Letter to Sylvia' proves, though, the elegy can express ambivalence and even antipathy as powerfully as it can affection and affinity.

Although intimacy or even acquaintance has historically not been a prerequisite for the writing of elegy, it perhaps seems strange that the life and death of Plath should weigh so

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<sup>776</sup> Ibid.



heavily on Stevenson's mind when the two poets, despite their shared transatlantic trajectories, never met. Stevenson herself acknowledges the strangeness of this entirely one-sided relationship in *A Lament for the Makers*, as she describes a meeting with the shades of Hughes and Plath in the 'underworld of words':

another broke away  
and bowled towards me,

meaning, I thought, to greet me.  
But no, like an X ray,  
she passed through me.

'You are amazed,'  
it was Redgrove's voice,  
'But for Sylvia you don't exist,

having no place in her past.  
She is here,  
in part, because of you,

in the mirror and bubble  
of your book,  
but don't expect a look

of recognition. To her  
you're invisible,  
a shade more insubstantial

than she, to you.  
The dreams of the dead  
don't feature unknown faces' [.]<sup>777</sup>

These lines also reveal how, even sixteen years after the publication of *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson still wears the responsibility of the biographer uneasily: Plath is preserved in the collective consciousness in part because of 'the mirror and bubble' – both reflective but also distorting surfaces — of Stevenson's book. It is curious that although in this 'underworld of words' it is Stevenson who is the living, breathing poet and Plath the diaphanous 'shade', it is Stevenson who is 'invisible', 'insubstantial', and 'unknown'. Stevenson has admitted in

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<sup>777</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, II.ii.

interviews that it is to her chagrin that in the aftermath of the *Bitter Fame* furore she became better known as Plath's biographer than as a long-established poet in her own right. The traumatic event which the poem must set about healing, then, is not so much the death of Plath, but the painful experience of writing *Bitter Fame*.

In the first of the three poems for Plath, 'Nightmares, Daymoths', Stevenson reveals the ambiguous nature of the biographer's task. The poem begins with the seemingly homely image of a 'glass jar' filled with 'split peas and pasta.'<sup>778</sup> However, this homely image quickly becomes more disturbing, the glass jar taking on associations of Plath's bell-jar or medical specimens. The 'terrible insect' on the floor, 'buzzing like a swat wasp' is both sexual and sinister, with 'A belly like a moist rubber thimble', as it 'sucks and stings' the speaker's finger. These curious creatures imperiously voice a demand for coherence and meaning – '*Order, they order, order*' – and are transformed from 'terrible insects' into glistening 'fish', 'milliner's feathers', 'moths, paper moths or horses', and finally, 'not even paper but the Paisley curtain / sifting ashy patterns from the winter light.' It is the difficult task of the biographer to transform confusion and disarray into coherence and 'order', to discern the 'ashy patterns' of a life and commit them to paper. Writing offers a sense of psychological closure, it seems. The speaker describes how 'The flying words want paper to nest in', and how the letters 'are marching straight into an alphabet: / X Y Z, not to infinity.' Confusion and uncertainty will be transformed into a comprehensible and authoritative narrative text. The emphatic repetition of 'order', though, suggests that the biographer's ordering of a life into a text is a forceful, even violent, imposition.

In 'Invocation and Interruption', the shade of Ted Hughes rebukes the poet with the words, 'don't tell me who I was!'. Were Plath given the right of reply in 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', she would certainly say the same to her biographer and elegist. Despite her evident frustration with those who over-identify with, or project onto, Plath, Stevenson clearly feels that, by dint of their

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<sup>778</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 383.

similar backgrounds and parallel trajectories, she *does* know Plath well, despite never meeting her. In a 2000 interview, Stevenson says of Plath, ‘Perhaps one reason I agreed to write *Bitter Fame* had to do with Sylvia’s Americanness [sic]. I felt I knew her in a way Ted didn’t.’<sup>779</sup> Elsewhere in the same interview, Stevenson, describing the pressures upon poets to cultivate public approval, adds, ‘Sylvia Plath felt the same. I know she did.’<sup>780</sup> One reason that Stevenson felt this strange kinship with Plath is certainly to do, as she suggests, with their shared ‘Americanness’ [sic]. John Updike describes Plath as ‘a young woman... carrying the full mixed cultural load of Americans born in 1932’.<sup>781</sup> Stevenson, born only two months after Plath, carries the same difficult ‘cultural load’, and, reading Plath’s journals and correspondence, Stevenson might well have recognised her own experience. In the first verse paragraph, Stevenson sets about telling Plath exactly who she was, what she loved, and what she wanted:

They are great healers, English springs.  
 You loved their delicate colourings –  
 sequential yellows, eggshell blues –  
 not pigments your preferred to use,  
 lady of pallors and foetal jars  
 and surgical interiors.  
 But wasn’t it warmth you wanted most?

The second verse paragraph gives us the image of the Cam crawling ‘through patient grass / preserving ephemerals in glass’. This poem functions as a ‘foetal jar’ or a ‘bell jar’ of sorts, allowing Stevenson to place Plath at a distance, the aesthetic process putting what she calls that vital ‘pocket of air’ between herself and her subject. She writes

These Grantchester willows keep your ghost,  
 young and in love and half way through  
 the half-life that was left to you.

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<sup>779</sup> Cynthia Haven, ‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid.

<sup>781</sup> John Updike, *Bitter Fame*, dust jacket.

Grantchester is, of course, inextricably associated with premature death in Rupert Brooke's poem, 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'. In both poems, Grantchester functions as a quasi-pastoral idyll, in striking contrast to Plath's cold, 'surgical interiors' and Brooke's 'sweating, sick, and hot' Berlin.<sup>782</sup> The emphatic repetition of 'half' in these lines emphasises the violent and sudden curtailment of Plath's life and poetic career.

Ramazani notes that 'male elegists from Moschus to Spenser and Tennyson represent themselves as the sons of the dead fathers from whom they inherit poetic power', and David Kennedy suggests that 'issues of inheritance between male poets inevitably evoke father-son relationships.'<sup>783</sup> Here, however, Stevenson boldly inverts the elegist's traditional posture of childlike deference to the dead, and casts herself as the mother who alternately soothes and scolds Plath-as-daughter. Whereas in Heaney's 'Elegy' for Lowell, the dead poet is majestic, strong, looming over the diminished Heaney, here it is Plath who is diminished and infantilised, described as 'poor Sylvia', 'a frantic Alice', and a 'famous girl'. As Stevenson writes, 'Dear Sylvia, we must close our book', as if an affectionate parent is reading a bed-time story to a young child. Stevenson writes of Plath, 'she strikes me as tragically young, still trapped in her wunderkind adolescence. I came to feel very sorry for her.'<sup>784</sup> Stevenson wrote this elegy at the age of fifty-five, nearly twice the age of Plath when she died. By casting Plath as an infant and 'a famous girl', Stevenson is effecting a separation between them. Once again, we see the elegist drawing attention to their own surviving powers. In an early poem, 'The Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem', Plath's speaker describes Lewis Carroll's Alice as 'my muse', yet the relationship between the poet-speaker and her 'muse' is a strained one: she states her intention to 'send my muse Alice packing with gaudy scraps / of mushroom simile and gryphon garb.'<sup>785</sup> Stevenson's figuring of Plath as a 'frantic Alice', then, suggests that just as Alice served as a

<sup>782</sup> Rupert Brooke, *Collected Poems* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1918), 53.

<sup>783</sup> Ramazani, 178.

<sup>784</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 182.

<sup>785</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 324.

‘muse’ for Plath, so Plath serves as a ‘muse’ for Stevenson, one that she must ‘send... packing’ once and for all.

In keeping, perhaps, with the inversion of the traditional parent-child casting, Stevenson seems largely unconcerned with wresting an inheritance from the dead poet, and instead subtly attempts to emphasise the distance and differences between Plath’s poetry and psyche and her own. Plath is portrayed (or caricatured) in this poem as ‘lady of pallors and foetal jars / and surgical interiors’, whose poems are full of her ‘crippled dreams / and ineradicable screams’. Stevenson’s own poetry, the poem implies, is strikingly different. Whereas Plath was imprisoned in the windowless cell of her own damaged psyche, Stevenson is alert and responsive to the material world around her:

Yet, who would believe the colour green  
had so many ways of being green?  
...  
A yellowhammer in the gorse  
creates each minute’s universe;  
a blackbird singing from a thorn  
is all the joy of being reborn.

In a 1996 interview, Stevenson writes, ‘For some time Sylvia Plath pulled me into her orbit. I hope my *Collected Poems* will demonstrate the measures I took to escape from it.’<sup>786</sup> This poem is itself an attempt to extricate herself from Plath’s vice-like grip, to lay Plath’s troublesome ghost to rest. The poem gives us the disquieting image of Plath clutching the poet’s shoulder: ‘Three springs you’ve perched like a black rook / Between sweet weather and my mind’, an image oddly similar to that of Ted Hughes as ‘coal-feathered like a crow, / tar-coated cave bird’ in ‘Invocation and Interruption’. Stevenson writes, almost apologetically:

At last I have to seem unkind  
and exorcise my awkward awe.  
My shoulder doesn’t like your claw.

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<sup>786</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 182.

The alliteration on the vowel ('unkind', 'exorcise', 'awkward awe') creates an 'awkward' line, suggestive of the uncomfortable business of extracting herself from Plath's grip. Plath seems to assume the role of a dark 'Other' or shadowy double in both Stevenson's life and art. In her personal notes compiled during the writing of *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson writes that she saw 'a version of myself' in Plath. To 'exorcise' Plath, is to exorcise a part of herself. Though 'English springs' may be 'great healers', it is not Plath, then, who will be healed or 'reborn' in this poem, but Stevenson herself, once she is newly free from the dark burden of Plath.

If Plath has her 'claw' on Stevenson's shoulder, then Stevenson's own 'claw' is also firmly embedded in Plath's shoulder. There is, throughout the whole poem, the deftly created illusion of a struggle for control between elegist and elegised; however, as in 'Invocation and Interruption', the elegist is in complete control of her poetic subject, free to cast her in whatever role she likes. The poem suggests that 'the future is where the dead go / in rage, bewilderment and pain / to make and magnify their name', yet the dead cannot 'make and magnify their name'; it is the surviving elegist (or biographer) who has the power to make or break them. Though the elegist appears to concede defeat to the dead poet ('Sylvia, you have won at last, / embodying the living past') she remains in total control of her subject to the very end, as the clinching couplets testify.

The fourth verse paragraph begins with the line, 'Yet first, forgiveness.' It is as if the poet is performing a ritual with a designated set of instructions, reminding us that the genre of elegy is evolved from the highly elaborate ancient vegetation rites and ceremonies. It is ambiguous, though, for whom this forgiveness is being sought. Is Stevenson seeking Plath's forgiveness for writing *Bitter Fame*, for helping to fortify that 'glittering prison' or 'foetal jar' in which she will be forever preserved? Or for now seeking to 'exorcise' her? Or is Stevenson *bestowing* forgiveness on Plath, forgiving her for her part in the traumatic experience of writing the biography?

Paradoxically, even as the poet voices her desire to reject and ‘exorcise’ Plath, the poem brims with imagery and vocabulary recognisable from Plath’s own poems – for example, ‘foetal jars’; ‘surgical interiors’; ‘An owl in a petalled dress’; ‘moonlit amputees’; ‘a hag, a drowned man and a nurse’; and ‘the pure gold honey bee’. Ramazani refers to the elegist’s self-conscious adoption of the dead subject’s diction as ‘homolinguistic imitation’.<sup>787</sup> This is, of course, an elegiac convention that has particular resonance for those elegists writing about the death of a fellow poet. Homolinguistic imitation as a poetic strategy has its origins in actual psychological responses to loss. Ramazani notes that ‘many an analyst of grief has described how widows and widowers adopt the personalities of their dead spouses, as if to reincarnate them.’<sup>788</sup> This is enacted poetically as elegists like Auden create ‘linguistic bridges’ between themselves and their dead predecessors.<sup>789</sup> If Stevenson is creating a ‘linguistic bridge’, though, it is only so she may burn it: she does not wish to ‘reincarnate’ Plath; rather, she is using the words and images of this ‘powerful word-witch’ against her.<sup>790</sup> If homolinguistic imitation may be seen as a way of paying court to, and even preserving, the dead poet, it may also be seen as an act of violence, as the living poet ‘hijacks the voice of the silenced poet.’<sup>791</sup> Together with the images of ingestion common in elegy (‘Your hospital of bleeding parts / devours its haul of human hearts’, and ‘life, more terrible, maunches on, / ... seizing, devouring, giving birth’), it suggests a kind of poetic cannibalism, the words and voices of the dead greedily devoured by the opportunistic living, an idea that Plath herself would surely have found compelling.

Even as she attempts to drive off the ghost of Plath with her own idiosyncratic imagery, though, Stevenson cannot help but follow in Plath’s poetic footsteps. In ‘Daddy’, Plath adopts the unfamiliar ‘German tongue’ of her dead father. Though she finds ‘the language obscene’, the harsh gutturals sticking in her throat – ‘The tongue stuck in my jaw. // It stuck in a barb wire

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<sup>787</sup> Ramazani, xii.

<sup>788</sup> Ramazani, 177.

<sup>789</sup> Ramazani, 178.

<sup>790</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 182.

<sup>791</sup> Sara Johnson, “‘Inside my house of words’: The Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 194.

snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak' – it seems that she may only poetically 'kill' her dead father in his own 'obscene' Germanic 'gobbledygoo'.<sup>792</sup> Ramazani suggests that her dead father's language, though 'a disfiguring discourse', is, nevertheless, 'the only vehicle through which she could constitute her identity'.<sup>793</sup> Just as the language of her dead father is alien and 'obscene' to Plath, Plath's language is alien to Stevenson. In her notes for a reading at West Chester in 2005, Stevenson recalls her intention 'to write a poem to Sylvia that in no way reflected the nightmare symbols and tortured verbal structures of her own work',<sup>794</sup> and in an undated prose piece she writes 'my aim at the time was to write in a style as far removed from Plath's as possible; to answer her inspired death-haunted music with a kind of classical austerity'.<sup>795</sup> The published poem, though, is strikingly Plathian in terms of both symbol and sound. The childlike yet strangely strict and mechanical AABBCDD *ad nauseam* rhyme scheme of 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' recreates the stifling aural claustrophobia of 'Daddy', created by Plath's incessant repetition, royal rhymes, and sinister, crooning 'oo' sounds.

It is clear that 'Letter to Sylvia', half-invocation, half-exorcism, owes much to Plath's searing poem for her dead father 'Daddy'. Ramazani suggests that Plath is at the forefront of those twentieth-century elegists, including Roethke, Lowell, and Sexton, whose work 'extracts and magnifies the elegy's potential aggression towards the dead'.<sup>796</sup> Plath wrote in her journal that she used the elegy as a means 'to express anger creatively'.<sup>797</sup> Schenck argues that female elegy is characterised by unwillingness to enact a separation from the dead subject, yet 'ever since Plath wrote her last elegies of violent separation and rupture, American women poets like [Anne] Sexton, [Adrienne] Rich, [Diane] Wakoski, [Maxine] Kumin, [Carolyn] Kizer, and

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<sup>792</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 222.

<sup>793</sup> Ramazani, 277.

<sup>794</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Notes for Stevenson's keynote lecture/reading at West Chester, 8 June 2005.

<sup>795</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) "'Thinking" Poetry – A Personal View,' undated. (A second draft is titled 'Thinking' in Poetry)

<sup>796</sup> Ramazani, 263.

<sup>797</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Journals*, 273.



[Sharon] Olds have been more willing to use the genre to exorcise, slough, divorce, defame, even annihilate the dead.<sup>798</sup> So, even as Stevenson's poem petulantly denigrates Plath in the emphatically monosyllabic line, 'Because you were selfish and sad and died', and attempts to 'exorcise, slough [and] divorce' the dead poet, she is once again treading in Plath's footsteps, paradoxically strengthening the 'strife-sealed bond' between them as she works to sever it.<sup>799</sup> In both 'Daddy' and 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', the elegist calls up the dead subject through apostrophe, only to vehemently reject and refuse them again. Kennedy suggests that 'elegists are always faced with unsatisfactory resurrections, unfinished and unfinishable conversations': however, neither Plath nor Stevenson wants a 'conversation' with their elegiac subject.<sup>800</sup> Though Stevenson's poem is titled 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', she is not inviting a reply. Like the shade of Hughes in 'Invocation and Interruption', both Plath and Stevenson want to have 'the last word first'. Each forcibly invokes a silent ghost, then banishes it at will. This process of return and rejection can be usefully understood in relation to the *fort da* game played by Freud's infant grandson, described by the psychoanalyst in the 1920 essay, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. Freud notes that the child

had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on... As he did this, he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o,' accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction... this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word 'fort' ['gone']. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it... What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at same time muttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o.' He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']. This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return.<sup>801</sup>

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<sup>798</sup> Ramazani, 263.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid.

<sup>800</sup> David Kennedy, *Elegy, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2007), 21.

<sup>801</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (1998; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 431-32.

Freud suggests that the child affected these repeated disappearances and reappearances in an attempt to deal with the sporadic absences of his mother. The wooden reel functions as a substitute for the absent mother, and by casting it away and the retrieving it, he places himself in control of her absences: Freud writes, 'At the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience [of his mother's absence]; but by repeating it... as a game, he took on an active part.'<sup>802</sup> The casting away of the reel, representing the painful absence from the mother, 'had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and ... [herein] lay the true purpose of the game.'<sup>803</sup> For both Plath and Stevenson, however, the 'true purpose of the game' lies in the final sending away of the dead subject: they enact their brief return in the body of the text only in order to banish them finally and permanently. Both might be understood to be playing a violent inversion of the *fort da* game described by Freud: a *da fort* game, then. In both cases, the elegist demonstrates their mastery over their dead subject, invoking and banishing them at will.

The elegy is a space in which the living elegist may, through the exploration of their relationship to the dead poet, define himself as a poet. Ramazani points to Yeats and Auden as the foremost creators of what he calls 'elegies of self-definition', in which the poet is 'eager to distinguish himself from the rebels and companions whom he mourns', yet elegists have long sought to favourably define themselves at the expense of their dead subject.<sup>804</sup> In the 'Preface' to 'Adonais', Shelley, seeking to emphasise his own poetic strength, vigour, and potency, draws attention to the 'delicate and fragile' quality of Keats's own genius, his 'susceptible mind', 'sensitive spirit', and 'penetrable heart'.<sup>805</sup> In 'Thyrsis', too, Matthew Arnold contrasts the strength of the author with the weakness of his subject.<sup>806</sup> In 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', Stevenson

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<sup>802</sup> Ibid.

<sup>803</sup> Ibid.

<sup>804</sup> Ramazani, 176.

<sup>805</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, Preface to 'Adonais,' *The Major Works*, ed. and intro. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 529.

<sup>806</sup> Kennedy, 30

defines herself in opposition to Plath, criticising and countering those aspects of Plath's poetry and personality that she dislikes: the 'rapacious self-centredness', the 'splendid aloofness', the 'untouchably tender self-indulgence'.<sup>807</sup> Those aspects of Plath's poetry and personality that she dislikes are also aspects of her own poetry and personality, though. In an undated prose piece she admits, 'in taking on Plath, I realised I was taking on, too, a version of myself. A destructive, egotistical, interior self, very female, very American. Not liking Plath was an aspect of not liking the parts of me she represented.'<sup>808</sup> A double exorcism is worked towards in this poem, then, as to exorcise Plath is also to exorcise those 'destructive, egotistical' aspects of her own personality. In casting off the 'black rook' of Plath in this poem, Stevenson is also symbolically rejecting the poetry of 'the ego-hill, the misery well', and affirming, instead, what Andrew Motion calls 'her final commitment... to the ragged, volatile and familiarly uncertain world' beyond her own subjective experience.<sup>809</sup> If Plath's poetry gazes inward upon her own damaged psyche, the poem suggests, then Stevenson's own poetry looks outward, here, at the myriad colours of an English spring.

The third of the poems for Plath, 'Hot Wind, Hard Rain' (1990), opens with a catalogue of disturbance within the natural world. Whereas the vast majority of Stevenson's poems resist an anthropomorphic understanding of natural phenomena, here the speaker seems to attribute these violent phenomena to a sinister sentence and conscious intention within the natural world: 'The joy of the rowan is to redden. / The foxglove achieves the violence of its climb.' In this cruel landscape, the 'tabby sizes the fledgling blown to the midden', and the river emits 'a reek of decay'. This is not a pastoral idyll, but a post-industrial hell. Adam Piette suggests that the poet 'mischievously uses a Hughes repertoire of hard natural forces to think about the difference

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<sup>807</sup> Anne Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes, and Al Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath: An Exchange'.

<sup>808</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Typewritten pages, largely on the writing of *Bitter Fame*, undated.

<sup>809</sup> Andrew Motion, ed. and intro. *Anne Stevenson: Selected Poems*. American Poets Project (New York: Library of America, 2008), xx.

between suicidal and redemptive energies in Plath's world'.<sup>810</sup> Redemption comes in the form of a 'hard rain' which extinguishes the 'acetylene wind that blows too hard and clear'. That this 'redemptive' rain is associated with Stevenson herself is suggested by her emphatic geographical rooting in the second stanza:

Hot winds bring on hard rain, and here in Durham  
 a downpour tonight will probably allay  
 whatever has got the willows by the hair,  
 shoving light under their leaves  
 like an indecent surgeon.

The surgeon is, of course, a recurrent figure in Plath's work, for example, in 'The Surgeon at 2 AM', 'Tulips', and 'Face Lift', and appears here to be committing a kind of sexual violence upon the feminine willows. In an early draft of the poem, the speaker suddenly implores an anonymous addressee to 'choose the saving, not the killing terrors, / O my dear'.<sup>811</sup> In the published poem, this imperative has become a plaintive question: 'Who sifts the saving from the killing terrors, / O my dear?' The chiding imperative in the earlier draft reinforced the parent / child dynamic we see in 'Letter to Sylvia Plath'. Though the poet associates herself with the redemptive rain, the question with which the published poem ends changes the dynamic between the speaker and the addressee, positing them as equals, and suggests that the living poet is no more able than the dead poet to tell apart the 'saving from the killing terrors'.

### Elegy after 9/11:

Death itself seems to have undergone a radical transformation during the twentieth century. World War One was a conflict of unprecedented loss of life, followed only twenty years later by World War **Two**, during which the means of killing became ever more impersonal: the bombing

**Comment [E35]:** WWI and WWII spelt out in full

<sup>810</sup> Adam Piette, 'Mothers, Mirrors, Doubles: Anne Stevenson's Elegies for Sylvia Plath,' *Voyages over Voices*, 60.

<sup>811</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451, Typewritten draft, 'Hot Wind, Hard Rain,' undated.

of civilian houses from planes high up in the night sky, and the herding, gassing, and mass burial of Holocaust victims in Nazi camps. Since WWII, media reports of genocide in Rwanda, ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia, and, more recently, of civilian casualties in vicious terrorist attacks worldwide have made death seem omnipresent in our lives, but also strangely remote, neatly packaged and hygienically contained within news bulletins and newspaper reports. The contemporary elegist must find new ways in which to apprehend, understand, and write about death in the late twentieth century and beyond.

Throughout the twentieth century, elegists have increasingly rejected the traditional comforts offered by the elegy as the conventions of honouring and idealising the heroic dead, and consoling ideas of a paradisiacal afterlife have rung increasingly hollow. In Yeats's 'Reprisals', an uncollected follow-up to 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' (1919), the elegist cannot stomach even the already tentative consolations of his earlier poem. He mocks the idealistic notion of 'a good death', and refers to Gregory as one of the 'cheated dead', casting him as a helpless victim rather than as an intrepid hero.<sup>812</sup> What we see here is not an instinctive recourse to the structures and succours of the traditional elegy, but a caustic polemic against the cruelty and brutality of the Black and Tans against the Irish. In the face of such suffering, the poem acknowledges, the consolations long proffered by the traditional elegy would ring sickeningly hollow. The elegy has, of course, long questioned its own efficacy, and lamented its limitations: however, those rites or images that once consoled us for our losses now seem archaic, even obsolete, dwarfed by the ever-increasing losses we face. In poems such as Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', or Dylan Thomas's 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child In London' (1946), those words and gestures that would once have been comforting are now little more than obscene 'mockeries'. Indeed, in 'Elegy: In Coherent Light', the poet is cruelly compelled to reveal the illusory nature of these platitudes: 'All the warm rhetoric is

**Comment [E36]:** New material in response to Professor Kendall's objection.

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<sup>812</sup> Yeats, *The Poems*, 181.

wrong. Death isn't sleep. / Faith in eternal love is love's indulgence.'<sup>813</sup> Such poems are, then, simultaneously elegies and anti-elegies, offering what scant consolation they can whilst also acknowledging and sharing our scepticisms.

Whilst the early elegist could praise the heroism or honour of the deceased and offer images of them born to paradisiacal eternal life, the twentieth-century elegist has an ever-decreasing number of consolations to draw from. 'The Minister' (1977) ostensibly questions the increasingly relegated role of the Christian minister, but the reference to 'words' suggests that this is an implicit recognition of the elegist's potential redundancy. The minister and the elegist alike fulfil no practical function –

We're going to need the minister  
To help this heavy body into the ground.

But he won't dig the hole;  
Others who are stronger and weaker will have to do that.

...  
And he won't bake cakes or take care of the kids –  
Women's work.<sup>814</sup>

– and need only 'take care of the words'. Even so, the expectations upon them have been radically diminished: 'He doesn't have to make them up, / he doesn't have to say them well, / he doesn't have to like them / so long as they agree to obey him.' The minister and the elegist, apparently possessing no particular way with these words, fulfil a purely titular role, then. The saying of these words becomes a ritual as hollow as the consolations to which they refer.

Sacks suggests that 'the objective of an elegy is... to displace the urgent psychological currents of its work or mourning into the apparently more placid, aesthetically organised currents of language.'<sup>815</sup> Grief, anger, and sorrow must be yoked and ordered by language. In

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<sup>813</sup> 'Elegy: In Coherent Light,' *Poetry*.

<sup>814</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 175.

<sup>815</sup> Sacks, 145.

Auden's poem for Freud, however, the emotion of the elegist seems to resist and defy not only the archaic-seeming conventions of elegy, but language and speech itself, as the elegist asks

When there are so many that we shall have to mourn,  
When grief has been made so public, and exposed  
To the critique of a whole epoch  
The frailty of our conscience and anguish,  
  
Of whom shall we speak?<sup>816</sup>

Similarly, in Owen's poem, the elegist notes the absence of 'any voice of mourning save the choirs, — / The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells...' This immense suffering and destruction defies linguistic expression, Owen suggests.<sup>817</sup>

Following the death of Winston Churchill, W.H. Auden warned his fellow elegists that 'all attempts to write about persons or events, however important, to which the poet is not intimately related in a personal way are doomed to failure.'<sup>818</sup> Certain events, though, seem to demand a response, especially when poets are increasingly called upon to demonstrate their quantifiable worth to their societies and communities. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 were one such event. Dana Gioia suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, 'the media may have provided information, but it was still left for poets to present language equal to the historical moment.'<sup>819</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the weight of public expectation, the self-consciousness and self-criticism that we see in earlier elegies become a predominant part of those poems written in the aftermath of 9/11. The American poet, Mark Doty, recalls his feelings of uneasiness 'just a few weeks after 9/11, when calls for contributions to poetry anthologies concerning the event began to circulate':

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<sup>816</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Collected Poetry*, 163.

<sup>817</sup> Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems*, ed. and intro. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 44.

<sup>818</sup> Cited in Jahan Ramazani, Contribution to 'Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?' forum, *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2012. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/178621>>.

<sup>819</sup> Dana Gioia, "'All I Have Is a Voice": September 11<sup>th</sup> and American Poetry,' *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* (Saint Paul, MN: Greywolf Press, 2004), 166.

I understand the human need to say something, to give shape to grief, but surely the first response to such a rupture in the fabric of the world ought to be a resonant, enormous silence. To come too quickly to words is, ultimately, a form of arrogance; the easy poem suggests that loss is graspable, that the poet has ready command of speech in the face of anything.<sup>820</sup>

In the aftermath of an event such as 9/11, then, poets face something of a quandary: a refusal to respond may be interpreted as callous indifference, but ‘to come too quickly to words’ may be seen as ‘arrogance’ or an unseemly desire to derive poetic capital out of the suffering of others. As such, many of the poetic responses to the 9/11 attacks, including a poem by Wisława Szymborska, paradoxically articulate not an effusive response but a deliberate and demarcated silence.

‘New York Is Crying’, first published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* in the summer of 2002, is less an elegy in the traditional sense, than a condemnation of self-conscious, performative anguish. Here, perhaps, more than anywhere, Stevenson’s Puritan inheritance comes to the fore, in her evident distaste for what Willard would have termed ‘Excessive Sorrow’. Traditionally the elegist is a spokesperson for the grieving community, expressing what others feel but cannot articulate. Here, though, the poet deliberately isolates herself from the sobbing masses, and stands alone to deliver her criticism. The 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City strike onlookers and elegists alike dumb. Stevenson prefaces her poem with lines taken from the eyewitness report of Tyrone Dux, a New York policeman, published in *The Observer* on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2001: ‘New York is crying. I didn’t hear screaming, just dead, dark silence.’ David Kennedy notes that elegists often ‘borrow’ the words of others.<sup>821</sup> Here, this borrowing is the elegist’s tacit admission that, faced with such an atrocity, she can no more find ‘the right language’ than anybody else; that she is no more the confident and eloquent spokesperson of the masses than Tyrone Dux, a New York policeman.

<sup>820</sup> Mark Doty, Contribution to ‘Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?’ forum, *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed on 17th September 2012. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/178617>>.

<sup>821</sup> David Kennedy, 30.



Rather, hers is just one voice amongst the many attempting to comprehend the event. The poem suggests that these attacks, and the chaos that ensued, defy language, as the people of the city can find no words to express this pain, only tears, and the rest of the world can but ‘Listen to them crying’.<sup>822</sup>

High birth or rank offers no protection against death, or against what we might term ‘survivor’s guilt’.<sup>823</sup> ‘Smart investment analysts’ and ‘bagwomen’ alike are affected by the attacks, all reduced to childlike roles by their inchoate grief: ‘Halfmast New York is crying for her children’. Within traditional elegy, we often find a detailed description of a veritable procession of mourners, as in Virgil’s ‘Tenth Eclogue’ and Milton’s ‘Lycidas’. In ‘Lycidas’, for example, Triton (the herald of Neptune), Hippotades (god of winds), Camus (god of the river Cam, representing Cambridge University) all pass by to pay their respects and express their sorrow.<sup>824</sup> The breathlessly recounted catalogue of mourners in Stevenson’s poem takes this elegiac convention to its hyperbolic twenty-first century extreme:

Her preachers, her evangelists, her health cranks,  
Her good-time girls and crack addicts, her muggers,  
Her Italian-Irish-Jewish politicians,  
Her lawyers, paralegals and illegals,  
Her internet whizz-kids and computer freaks,  
Her trouble-shooters, paranoids, beauticians,  
Deli proprietors, winos, hot musicians,  
Dames with purple hair and crimson poodles...

The dead are nowhere to be found in this poem, their deaths obscured by, and even forgotten in, the dizzying panoply of weeping survivors. Such large-scale suffering reduces even the poets – those believed to have an exceptional facility with words – to stunned silence. Stevenson imagines the spectral return of Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, W.H. Auden, and Elizabeth Bishop

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<sup>822</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 364.

<sup>823</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press Inc, 1994), 470.

<sup>824</sup> John Milton, ‘Lycidas,’ lines 85-115, *Poetical Works*, ed. Douglas Bush (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 144.

amongst others. These accomplished elegists ‘come flying / In clouds of etymology’, as though to help the elegist in her attempt to harness language, but they, too, ‘are crying’, and can be of no assistance. ‘Is that Walt Whitman?’ the elegist asks hopefully, no doubt anticipating the assistance of a poet who can confidently speak for America, only to be met with the deflating response, ‘Yes, but he is crying.’ Stevenson’s poem is one of many responses to 9/11 that call upon Whitman for poetic assistance: Norbert Krapf’s ‘Prayer to Walt Whitman at Ground Zero’ begins, ‘Come back, Walt Whitman, we need you in the hour of our grief’,<sup>825</sup> and in ‘In the Hairy Arms of Whitman’, Bill Kushner announces, ‘I am at one myself & Whitman we two ghosts’.<sup>826</sup> That these contemporary poets invoke the words and figure of Whitman suggests that they, unlike Whitman, cannot comfortably assume the role of spokesman of their nation.

As Stevenson’s speaker asks, ‘What bracing words can dignify such crying?’, we see once again the lingering traces of a Puritan insistence upon dignity and forbearance. Whereas in the seventeenth century, Puritan elders like Samuel Willard counseled against immodest shows of grief, now ‘a Major with a bedside manner, / And now a President in shining armour / Weep in the lens light of a billion eyes’, as they lead their nation in televised shows of sorrow. Grief has become self-conscious, performative, even combative, the poet suggests: ‘They want to world to notice they are crying. / Tears shall be sown in steel like dragon’s teeth.’

In the final verse paragraph, the elegist writes ‘The hole in New York is a hole in a belief / That desperately needs to hide itself in grief’. The damaged ‘belief’ of which the elegist speaks suggests several things. First, it implies the decline of religious belief; we see that even New York’s ‘preachers’ and ‘her evangelists’ are inconsolably crying. Second, it refers to the loss of belief in what previously seemed like the unassailable self-assurance of the United States in its own power and potential. Indeed, America is figured as the architect of a soaring metaphorical ‘tower of hope’ that, like the Twin Towers, has been toppled. Third, it suggests that the belief

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<sup>825</sup> Norbert Krapf, *Songs in Sepia and Black and White* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 78.

<sup>826</sup>

that the old rites and ceremonies can offer consolation and comfort in times of sorrow has been damaged. Seamus Heaney writes in 'Funeral Rites', 'we pine for ceremony, / customary rhythms', and here, too, people are crying not only for the dead, but also for the loss of those rites and rituals that previously helped us to cope with loss and trauma.<sup>827</sup>

The elegy has long been understood in terms of what Sacks calls 'a tissue of substitutions that may cover a preceding lack'.<sup>828</sup> In Stevenson's poem, we see various attempts to fill or patch up the void and the silence left by the attacks:

Downtown, the bagel man on Chambers Street  
Plasters his cart with frantic stars and stripes.  
One wild-eyed Rasta with a bongo beats  
Implacable voodooos under pulsing lights.  
Flowers in the chainlink barrier are dying.

The displays of crying, too, are attempts to fill or obscure this 'hole in belief'. Although Freud focuses primarily on the search for a human substitute object, Sacks shows that cultural fictions or practices can also serve as substitute objects onto which affection may be transferred. Furthermore, Sacks reveals that the elegy itself may emerge as a substitute for a lost object. In Stevenson's poem, however, public shows of grief become the substitute for the lost object. The third verse paragraph describes how 'Even John Astor and Henry Frick are trying, / Under the brassy marble of their monuments, / To sympathise with people who are dying.' The emphatic full rhyme of 'trying' and 'dying' suggests not so much affinity as the unbridgeable gap between the living and the dead. There are no images of consolation or renewal in this poem. Instead of the traditional images of rebirth and renewal, we have nothing but death and destruction. The floral offerings left 'in the chainlink barrier' to honour the dead are 'dying', and the city is shrouded with 'ghostdust' and 'shattered glass'. The image created is one not of a paradisiacal afterlife or aftermath, but of a darkening hell 'with its smell / Of sulphurous flesh,

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<sup>827</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 96.

<sup>828</sup> Sacks, 18.

stench of a Polish pit'. Stevenson's poem ends with the sublime image of 'desert scenes and bursts of golden fire'. Light and fire are familiar sources of consolation and recovery in traditional elegy. Indeed, Sacks suggests that 'little could be more conventional than to transform the dead into a source of natural light', and that 'associated with light and heat, and with the sun and stars, fire has served most elegists as a figure for the physical or spiritual powers that exist within and beyond individual men.'<sup>829</sup> In Stevenson's poem, however, the 'bursts of golden fire' do not refer to the rising sun, but to the flashes of gun fire or exploding bombs. Here, light represents not consolation but further destruction. Similarly, whereas elsewhere in Stevenson's elegiac *oeuvre* (for example, in the final lines of 'Orcop' (2007), a late elegy for Francis Horovitz,) the image of children at play is suggestive of renewal and rebirth, in 'New York is Crying' the 'ragged children scuttling here and there / ... very small and far away, but crying', is suggestive not only of continued distress and destruction, but also of the elegist's impotence and inability to touch their 'far away' suffering.

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<sup>829</sup> Sacks, 232, 292.

## Double Beds and Single Sheets: Anne Stevenson and the Limits of Language

*In Stevenson's elegies and elegiac poems, the poet's raw material, language, is subjected to relentless scrutiny. These poems doubt the capacity of words not only to console the bereaved, but also to capture and convey anything more than the dimmest shadow of our lived experience. Extending this line of enquiry, this chapter focusses on the Stevenson's acute awareness of both the potential and the limits of language, offering close readings of those metalinguistic or metapoetic poems that take language or poetic practice as their subject, explicitly or obliquely. It will be revealed that whilst an acute awareness of the limitations, not only of poetic language, but of all language, has long been a significant part of Stevenson's poetic, concerns regarding the misuse and disuse of the English language come to the fore in her most recent work.*

Whatever Stevenson's poems are ostensibly 'about' – whatever experience, situation, landscape, fleeting thought, or sudden realization they take as their stimulus, subject, or occasion – they are always, on one level, 'about' language. Throughout her career, Stevenson's poetry has demonstrated a powerful concern with the complex relationship between reality and linguistic representations thereof. Stevenson is a poet who, even as she delights in the potential of words to express, enact, excite, and enliven, is acutely aware of the limitations of language. Such an awareness is, she suggests, essential for the poet, and she disdains the complacency of those poets, the 'Men of Letters', who exclaim, 'How lucky we are / to have a room in language.'<sup>830</sup> As Stevenson's poetry

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<sup>830</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 289.

reveals again and again, this room is but a temporary lodging, a cramped 'hotel' room that offers little more than fleeting respite to the world-weary (or word-weary) traveler.

This chapter will focus on those poems which, explicitly or obliquely, concern themselves with the complex relationship between our experience of the material world and the language in which we understand and articulate that experience. Whilst Stevenson does not draw attention to herself as a 'language poet' (or 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet'), it will be shown that she is a poet frequently, yet unassumingly, working at the very limits of language, seeking out those frontiers, both physical and psychological, at which words fail us, or are found wanting. Stevenson's work enthusiastically reprises persistent questions and concerns about the adequacy and inadequacy of language that we recognise from the work of earlier poets from Shakespeare and the Romantics to Wallace Stevens and Robert Graves.

Stevenson is keen to dispel the belief that the poet possesses preternatural linguistic powers or proficiency. Recognizing that 'we generally think of writers as artists lucky enough to have exceptional facility with language',<sup>831</sup> she states, 'I lay no claim to extraordinary gifts.'<sup>832</sup> Stevenson stresses the arduous nature of a poet's dealings with language. She takes issue with Keats's pronouncement that 'if Poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all',<sup>833</sup> in its implication that the capture of experience in language is an undemanding or spontaneous process: 'despite the temptations of metaphor', she cautions, 'there is really nothing organic about

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<sup>831</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get,' *Michigan Quarterly Review* 34 (1995). *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, 162.

<sup>832</sup> 'A Chev'ril Glove,' 131.

<sup>833</sup> John Keats, 'To John Taylor, February 27, 1818,' *Selected Letters*, 66.

poetry.<sup>834</sup> In both her poetry and her prose, she suggests that to be a poet is to be a ‘maker’: a craftsperson or artisan, whose raw material is words. Words are figured as sensuous physical objects, and Stevenson suggests that the poet must learn how to ‘handle’ them just as a blacksmith must learn how to temper metal, or a carpenter how to carve wood. In the 1994 essay ‘A Chev’ril Glove’, she writes:

Think what a magpie Shakespeare was, picking up scraps and tatters of useable language from street and tavern, court and countryside, lawbooks and chronicle. His little Latin and less Greek were inessential items discarded from a huge working stock of English with which he furnished and embellished a mental studio of inconceivable proportions. I like to think of Shakespeare, of poets in general, inhabiting a world like a warehouse, a factory floor full of molten language and malleable forms[.]<sup>835</sup>

Similarly, she suggests that from Elizabeth Bishop she ‘learned – not how to write poetry, but how to handle the material laid out on the workshop floor’.<sup>836</sup> Indeed, in an unpublished essay, ‘What is Happening to Poetry’, she writes (borrowing a phrase from K.H. Jackson), ‘contemporary Welsh and Irish poets still pride themselves on practicing “the carpentry of poetry” passing it on to their ephebes as they received it from their ancestors. Oh, that some of that skill in carpentry were passed on, too, through our English and American creative-writing establishments!’<sup>837</sup> This ‘making’ is itself the subject of numerous poems, but even poems that are not explicitly ‘about’ the poetic process never allow us to forget that they are art objects painstakingly crafted out of words.

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<sup>834</sup> Anne Stevenson, E-mail interview, 19 September 2011.

<sup>835</sup> ‘A Chev’ril Glove,’ 123.

<sup>836</sup> ‘A Chev’ril Glove,’ 124.

<sup>837</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘What is Happening to Poetry,’ typescript of unpublished essay. Author’s personal papers.

Elaborating on T.S. Eliot's reference to the poet's 'intolerable wrestle with words and meanings', Stevenson offers her own rather more domestic analogy for this protracted process:

Think of any language as a single sheet you are trying to fit on a big double bed. You no sooner cover one corner than the one opposite is laid bare. You manage to tuck it in at the top, but the bottom remains exposed. There is no way the language-sheet is going to cover the whole bed!<sup>838</sup>

Though language is a spare single sheet that will not cover the vast double bed of human (and non-human) experience, it is all that even the most accomplished poet has to work with: a Wordsworth or a Wallace Stevens has only the same size sheet as everyone else, she suggests, though they may be rather more inventive in their use of it. In the absence of 'extraordinary gifts', the poet must instead possess an uncommon acquaintance with, and awareness of, words: 'Writing poetry', she suggests, 'is inseparable from a poet's unconscious at homeness with the sounds, inflections, pitches, and textures of a language. The pulse of its rhythms, the different weight and lengths of its vowels – these have to accumulate in a poet's consciousness without his knowing how.'<sup>839</sup> Similarly, Gerald L. Bruns concludes that 'poetry is more likely to be a product of listening to the words in one's social environment than an expression of a fine imagination', and the poet is thus 'an anthropologist with an impressive history of fieldwork, one who has learned how to listen to the languages circulating in the air he or

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<sup>838</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 175.

<sup>839</sup> 'The Trouble with a Word like Formalism,' 109.



she breathes.<sup>840</sup> A poet, then, as ‘Making Poetry’ suggests, is one who is ‘in the habit’ of words:

‘You have to inhabit poetry  
if you want to make it.’

And what’s ‘to inhabit’?

To be in the habit of, to wear  
words, sitting in the plainest light,  
in the silk of morning, in the shoe of **night**;  
a feeling bare and frondish in surprising air;  
familiar... rare.<sup>841</sup>

**Comment [E37]:** ‘in’ inserted before ‘the shoe’

The poet must have a sensuous awareness and appreciation of words, as though they were silken garments against his bare skin. Distinguished though he is by his ‘at homeness’ with language, he must never take it for granted, and despite his aesthetic appreciation of words, he must never be too much in their thrall.

### ‘Saying the World’:

It is tempting to see Stevenson’s ambiguous relationship with words as a bequeathal from her father, the philosopher Charles Stevenson, whose work demonstrates a similar fascination with, and alert scepticism towards, language. His controversial 1944 monograph, *Ethics and Language*, posits that our experience of the world around us, and our perception of certain events or ethical quandaries, is conditioned by the language used by ourselves and by others. Though subsequently acknowledged as a

<sup>840</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* (1974; New Haven: Yale University Press - Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), xi.

<sup>841</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 17.

seminal work in the field of emotivism, the book resulted in his dismissal from the philosophy department at Yale University due to its insistence on the linguistic construction rather than the absolute nature of moral concepts such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Stevenson recalls, ‘he refused to acknowledge the existence of absolute evil... It was not a popular position during the war with Hitler.’<sup>842</sup> In a 1962 essay, ‘Relativism and Non-Relativism in the Theory of Value’, Charles Stevenson reveals the myriad assumptions involved in our use of even the most seemingly simple words:

In its colloquial use ‘X is tall’ means, in part, ‘X is taller than -----.’ But if we attempt to fill the blank, in order to specify the rest of what it means, we find that there is no word or phrase (apart from words that are systematically ambiguous) that we can use in all cases. The blank must be filled in now in one way and now in another, corresponding to the various and implicit meanings that ‘tall’ acquires from the circumstances that attend its use.<sup>843</sup>

Stevenson’s poem ‘Saying the World’ reprises her father’s wariness of words as it warns the reader that ‘The way you say the world is what you get.’<sup>844</sup> The poet explains, ‘the more we say the world we get, the more we get the world we say. We are all of us trapped in the mill, and language is the force that turns the wheel.’<sup>845</sup> We are ‘trapped’ in an inexorable cycle of language-conditioned experience and experience-conditioned language. Language is figured as a ‘net’, one that we have made in order to capture and fix the material world around us. This net, though, can easily turn on, and hopelessly entangle, its creators: ‘The words swim out to pin you in their net’, the poet warns. Though elsewhere Stevenson makes clear that ‘language is a tool, it has no will of its

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<sup>842</sup> Hickling.

<sup>843</sup> Charles L. Stevenson, ‘Relativism and Non-Relativism in the Theory of Value,’ *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 35 (1961 - 1962), 26.

<sup>844</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

<sup>845</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 173.

own', in this poem words are figured as autonomous and even malevolent, intent on pinning their creators down.<sup>846</sup>

The metaphor of the net owes something to Robert Graves's 'cool web' from the poem of the same name: 'There's a cool web of language winds us in, / Retreat from too much joy or too much fear'.<sup>847</sup> Like Stevenson's 'net' of words pinning us in place, Graves's web 'winds us in'. Despite the connotation of unsuspecting flies caught in a spider's web, though, this seems to be a 'web' of our own making, spun and woven to protect ourselves from unbearable extremes of experience, 'from too much joy or too much fear'. In a 1996 interview, Stevenson suggests that Graves's poem 'claims that language "winds us in" to protect us from the horrors of speechless nature.'<sup>848</sup> The poem suggests that language, or 'speech', has a tempering, mediating effect on our perceptions and experiences: speech serves to 'chill the angry day' and 'dull the rose's cruel scent.' Language is a psychological barrier or a shield between us and an uncertain world of 'fear' and 'dark skies and drums.' The speaker warns that:

If we let our tongues lose self-possession,  
 Throwing off language and its watery clasp  
 Before our death, instead of when death comes,  
 Facing the wide glare of the children's day,  
 Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,  
 We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

Stevenson points out the double meaning of 'spell', noting, 'we spell words with letters, but we also weave spells, charms, out of words.'<sup>849</sup> To cast a spell or a charm would be to exercise (supernatural) control over the material world around us, and the lines 'We

<sup>846</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 177.

<sup>847</sup> Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 283.

<sup>848</sup> 'An Interview with Richard Poole,' 178.

<sup>849</sup> Anne Stevenson, "'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get'," 168.

spell away the overhanging night, / We spell away the soldiers and the fright', suggest that by naming these things or pointing to them with words, we can exert a degree of mastery over them. Though language has us in its 'watery clasp', then, it also allows us to maintain a grasp (or at least the comforting illusion of a grasp) on the material world around us. To surrender our language, and thus our grasp on the world, is to surrender to the chaos and contingency of 'speechless nature'.

Stevenson's 'Saying the World', too, suggests that language affords us a measure of control (or the illusion thereof) over the often hostile world around us:

This cluttered motorway, that screaming jet,  
Those crouching skeletons whose eyes accuse;  
O see and say them, make yourself forget

The world is vaster than the alphabet[.]

In an early draft of this poem, the imperative 'make yourself forget' read 'don't let yourself forget'. During the writing process, then, the poet has gone from thinking that using words reminds us of their limitations, to thinking that the more we use and 'say' them, the more we complacently take them for granted. We manage to convince ourselves that to name these threatening 'crouching skeletons' is to exert some measure of control over them. This is a notion we recognise from Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle 'One Art'. The speaker counters the losses she has suffered by recording, and thus reclaiming, them in language:

It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster,<sup>850</sup>

**Comment [E38]:** Italicized

<sup>850</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, 166.

The fierce imperative of the final line implies that to ‘*Write it!*’ is also to ‘right it’, to somehow lessen the negative impact of such a trauma. Stevenson suggests, though, that ‘Saying the World’ was intended as an ‘answer’ to Bishop’s poem, one that contests her bold claims for poetic language.<sup>851</sup> Stevenson’s poem recognises that though we are accustomed to making ourselves forget that ‘the world is vaster than the alphabet’, experience can never be fully captured or recorded in language. In stark contrast to ‘One Art’, Stevenson’s poem even seems to suggest that language is the cause of, rather than the consolation for, loss: ‘Whichever way, you say the world you get. / Though what there is is always there to lose.’ In Graves’s poem, language forms an impermeable barrier between us and the world around us, cooling the heat of the day and dulling the scent of the rose. In our use of language, do we ‘lose’ the authentic, unmediated experience of the world around us? In Stevenson’s ‘Sierra Nevada’, the speaker laments that ‘this granite cannot really touch us, / although we stand here and name the colours of its flowers.’<sup>852</sup> Though the speaker assumes that naming the colours of the flowers will facilitate a connection between herself and the natural landscape, it is clear that it is her linguistic consciousness that prevents the blissful merger she so desires. If we have ‘a room in language’, then, the walls of that room are as prison walls, protecting us from the harsh elements of speechless nature, but also preventing our escape into the world beyond language.<sup>853</sup>

**Comment [E39]:** N.843 amended

**Comment [E40]:** Superfluous ‘there’ deleted

In their reference to roses, both Graves and Stevenson allude to the famous lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Juliet bemoans the non-correspondence between the signifier and the signified: ‘What’s in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other

<sup>851</sup> Anne Stevenson, oral interview with, January 2012.

<sup>852</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 30.

<sup>853</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 289.

name would smell as sweet'.<sup>854</sup> If Stevenson's rose is that of Shakespeare, though, it comes via William Blake's 'The Sick Rose', in that it is 'poisoned' rather than 'sweet', and cannot be redeemed by any 'crimson name'.<sup>855</sup> Unlike the speaker of 'One Art', then, Stevenson's speaker cannot convince herself of the redemptive or restorative potential of language.

Graves's speaker uses the first person plural, speaking on behalf of others. The engagement with language is a common and communal experience from beginning to end: Graves refers to 'our tongues' and 'our death'. Stevenson notes, "'Speech", then, is not here, as in [Wallace] Stevens, a uniquely creative medium; it gives no one special prerogatives to "make it new" on the planet's bare rock. Quite the contrary. Graves' [sic] cool web is common as water; language is the element in which human minds swim like fish.'<sup>856</sup> It is not only the poet – the carpenter who works with words rather than wood – who must be vigilant in his dealings with language, then. The speaker of 'Saying the World', on the other hand, uses the second person address, assuming a didactic position. As in 'Making Poetry', we have an experienced user of language instructing (and warning) a younger 'maker'. Not even an experienced 'maker', though, can consider themselves immune to the pitfalls of language, as Stevenson well knows.

The tight ABA rhyme scheme (expanding to ABBA in the final stanza), with its emphatic masculine rhymes creates a sense of almost mechanical precision and predictability: is this 'the mind's machine' at work, imposing order on the 'profligate' world? The enveloping of the B rhyme within the A rhyme, coupled with the insistent

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<sup>854</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, scene 1, lines 85-86. *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 891.

<sup>855</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 123-124.

<sup>856</sup> "'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get",' 168.

internal alliteration, assonance, and chime ('way', 'world', and 'what'; 'whose eyes accuse') suggests the insidious tightening of the net of language. The forceful statement in the final line, 'The absolute's irrelevant', followed by an emphatic full-stop seems to close the poem down. The speaker has apparently rejected language on the grounds that it assumes and imposes absolutes on the irreducible complexity of life. However, this is not the final word. One of the poet's characteristic second thoughts ('And yet...') counters this conclusion, and opens the whole poem out again. Emma Jones observes that 'this playful suggestion of counter-argument threatens to begin the whole poem again, poised as it is on the spring of the dominant rhyme.'<sup>857</sup> If the rejection of the 'absolute' is a rejection of language, then 'And yet...' is the hesitation of the poet who knows that, however flawed our language may be, the only alternative is silence. Stevenson notes,

Many poets of the twentieth century... have in agony fought against the implications of Graves' insight. Latter-day romantics (mostly German or Austrian – Rainer Maria Rilke, Georg Trakl, Hermann Broch, and in philosophy Ludwig Wittgenstein) set a precedent for rejecting the treachery of words altogether and instead electing silence, madness, suicide over a humiliating submission to the cool web. The final silence of Sylvia Plath may be a case in point. In one of her last poems, 'Words', she seems to be declaring, from the depth of suicidal depression, that language can do nothing to save her.<sup>858</sup>

At the end of 'Saying the World', then, we have a dilemma akin to the one articulated in 'Vertigo'. The poet can either reject 'the treachery of words' and 'take that step into silence', or he can 'turn and exist' with a full knowledge of both the delights and the

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<sup>857</sup> Emma Jones, "'To serve a girl on terrible terms": Anne Stevenson's Writing Selves,' *Voyages Over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, 177.

<sup>858</sup> "'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get",' 170.

dangers of language.<sup>859</sup> ‘Saying the World’, then, the second poem in *Poems 1955-2005*, is an affidavit of sorts, where Stevenson confirms that she is fully cogniscent of the compromises demanded by every utterance.

### **A World Without Words?**

Graves’s poem suggests that without the protective barrier of language erected between ourselves and the non-linguistic material world around us, ‘We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.’ A non-linguistic state is figured here as madness, entailing a loss of rationality, and perhaps even humanity. Whereas Graves’s speaker fears the loss of linguistic ‘self-possession’, many of Stevenson’s speakers seek out, and delight in, their encounters with ‘speechless nature’. The poet herself writes of her home in rural North Wales, ‘there’s lots of speechless nature in Cwn Nantcol, and I, for one, find it a relief!’<sup>860</sup> Stevenson implies that in the non-linguistic natural world it is possible for her temporarily to escape the clutches of the word net, though the ‘Poems from Cwn Nantcol’ suggest otherwise, in their evident preoccupation with the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic experience.

In ‘*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*’ (2000), the speaker attempts to understand the behavior of a Redstart without recourse to her own human, inextricably linguistic mode of thinking. This encounter with ‘speechless nature’ seems to make her more aware of the deficiencies of her language, and she struggles to both comprehend and describe the bird’s actions:

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<sup>859</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 28.

<sup>860</sup> ‘An Interview with Richard Poole,’ 178.



*Phu-eet! Phu-eet!* Mr unresting redstart has something to be  
anxious about. A nest of eggs? Babies? Or has he  
lost them already to the weasel, scared away yesterday,

slithering (guilty? sinister?) out of a rock hole?  
*Phu-eet*, on and on, a tiny, uptilted, not really hysterical  
shriek.<sup>861</sup>

**Comment [E41]:** *Italicized*

Though she describes herself as ‘Snug in [her] nest of vocabularies’, the speaker vainly searches for the words that will best represent the speechless drama playing out before her, but it resists neat capture within the ‘net’ of words. She questions and qualifies her own choice of language: the bird’s shriek is ‘not really hysterical’, neither ‘guilty’ nor ‘sinister’ truly conveys the weasel’s slither, and ‘divers’ is rejected in favor of ‘rust-tinted streamers’, and even this self-correction is qualified with a self-conscious ‘so to speak’. Though lines are heavily punctuated, even punctured, with caesurae, the enjambed lines quicken the pace and create a sense of the speaker’s unrest.

The first stanza of ‘Under Moelfre’ (2003) (subtitled ‘A poem for a marriage’) suggests the distance between the linguistic (‘the way we dither / Plan, write poems, seriously discuss’) and the non-linguistic.<sup>862</sup> ‘Whatever it is we share with folds of rock’, the poem states, ‘Is nowhere to own and doesn’t own a name’, intangible and inexpressible. Again, naming is associated with ownership, but the poem asserts that any connection between ourselves and the rock has not been forged through language: ‘Its hug was ours before we learned to talk.’ Our linguistic endeavours have no effect on nature: ‘When we stop speaking, it will be the same, / For all our anxious bustling and assessing.’ The speaker asks, ‘When man and woman come to live together, / Why

<sup>861</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 73.

<sup>862</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 77.

invoke the presence of a place?’ Despite the rock’s indifference to our linguistic overtures, it seems to meet some primal ‘need’ of ours. Sean Pryor suggests that in this poem Stevenson envisages ‘a deeper communion through the very disjunction between our words and speechless reality.’<sup>863</sup> If this is a poem ‘for a marriage’, then it is also a poem *about* a marriage, a momentary union between our linguistic (hyper)consciousness and ‘speechless reality’ that might occur in a place of dramatic natural beauty. The speaker concludes that the rock ‘blesses when it doesn’t know it’s blessing.’ The rock, like the wind in ‘Sierra Nevada’ (1965), has no conception of itself either as rock or as ‘blessing’, yet it is exactly this speechless insentience that meets our ‘need’. This line also deftly suggests to the ear that the rock’s speechlessness is a blessing, a mercy.

Stevenson is well aware that even choosing to remain silent – being ‘speechless’ – is not an escape from the cool web, because we cannot even *think* about the world except in language. The speaker of the early poem ‘Sierra Nevada’ envies the natural world its non-linguistic, non-conscious state: ‘The wind is strong without knowing that it is wind. / The twisted tree that is not warning / or supplicating, never considers that it is not wind.’<sup>864</sup> The word ‘wind’ has nothing to do with the metrological phenomenon to which we have given that name. In a later poem, ‘Lockkeeper’s Island’ (1982?), Stevenson articulates a similar thought more explicitly:

Between moon and water,  
consoling machinery of the land.  
No moon will bless this place,  
or the houses on it,  
or this black latticework of derricks,

<sup>863</sup> Pryor, ‘Anne Stevenson and the Poetry of Place,’ 146.

<sup>864</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 30.

or these bridges shaken by trains,  
their arguments with darkness.

“Blessing” is a word of ours.<sup>865</sup>

**Comment [E42]:** Lines are now lower-cased

The speaker’s self-conscious scrutiny of her articulation reveals the distance between the material world and the words with which we point to it and think about it. The word ‘blessing’ has no import whatsoever within the natural landscape, and the speaker notes that ‘nothing will have changed / when we turn away from the river / to the sacrament of sleep.’ That isolated line, perhaps the speaker’s sudden realization or reminder to herself, moves the reader to a heightened consciousness of their own processes of articulation and reading: we can no longer read the word ‘sacrament’ in the final line, taken from the same Christian register as ‘blessing’, without being aware of it as a construction all our own.

Our inability to escape from linguistic consciousness continues to preoccupy the poet more than half a century after the publication of ‘Sierra Nevada’. In a draft of ‘Teaching my Sons to Swim in Walden Pond’ (2012), the poet-speaker registers her disagreement with Thoreau (who ‘thought naming as good as owning’), as she concludes, ‘Walden belongs to nature, like the trees.’<sup>866</sup> A characteristic second thought immediately follows, though:

But isn’t everything we see in nature  
known by how we name it?  
You say nature was ‘better’ before we splashed in,  
big heads stuffed with our own stories,  
languages to make them happen.

<sup>865</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 62.

<sup>866</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of ‘Teaching my Sons to Swim in Walden Pond,’ 2012. Author’s personal papers.

Again, we are confronted with the perennial question of Stevenson's work: how to break through the 'language glass' that affords us a view of the world around us, but ultimately prevents our immersion in it? Language allows us to name, but never to truly know. As in 'Sierra Nevada', the poet-speaker entertains, if only briefly, the idea of a non-linguistic consciousness:

What if — at some road fork in evolution —  
           we'd taken instead the dolphin's way?  
 The seal's, the otter's? We need to swim  
           to keep that lost road open.

Even as the speaker articulates her desire to keep the road 'open', she admits that the way of dolphins, seals, and otters is 'lost' to us linguistic creatures, despite our efforts to leave our language at the water's edge. As though to further emphasize the irrevocable distance between us and our animal counterparts, the speaker's reverie is curtailed with another very human concern: 'Look at the time — how late it is.' It is, indeed, late in the day, and we long ago parted company with our speechless animal kin.

In the unpublished poem 'Sonnet' (undated, but the American spellings suggest that this is fairly early work), the speaker recognises and regrets her own need to mediate her experience of the world through language: 'We watched the colors on a changing sky / While talking.'<sup>867</sup> 'Ecstasy' and 'glory' must be 'worded', and 'tears' must be 'spoken' in order to be recognised. Like the speaker of 'After Words' from 'Five Poems in Memory of a Marriage' (2012), she can recognise her emotions only when they are labeled by language ('I didn't know I was unhappy / until you said... I said... / when

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<sup>867</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Sonnet,' undated.

my tears told me’).<sup>868</sup> That each emotion and experience is mediated through a linguistic thought process is further suggested by the present participles ‘talking’, ‘reflecting’, ‘recalling’, and ‘thinking’. She envies the addressee their apparent ability to experience the world around them without recourse to language:

Later, when alone, I thought of you,  
Recalling how you watched quite silently,  
Not needing tongue or words to crystalize  
Emotion.

This anonymous addressee’s silence is, the speaker believes, a far superior ‘poetry’ to her own ‘worded’ efforts: ‘Thinking of your quietness, I knew / That greatest poets write no poetry / But speak some silent language with the skies.’ That this apparent regret for her own need for ‘tongue or words’ is expressed in sonnet form, the form most obviously historically associated with eloquence and rhetorical prowess, perhaps gives the lie to the speaker’s self-criticism.

### **‘Right’ Language and ‘Wrong’ Language:**

It is perhaps the blessing *and* the burden of the poet that they are never free from this desire to engage with the world through language, even when that world seems powerfully to resist their efforts. As such, many of Stevenson’s poems take as their inspiration or their occasion a failure, as the poet makes poetic capital out of what she perceives as the falling-short of her own linguistic powers. In another of the ‘Poems from Cwn Nantcol’, ‘Binoculars in Ardudwy’ (1993), we find a speaker attempting to

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<sup>868</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of ‘Five Poems in Memory of a Marriage’ (2012). Author’s personal papers.

capture a rural scene in North Wales through both the lens of her binoculars and through language. In the second stanza, the speaker uses words in the most straightforward way, to plainly point to material objects: 'There's a farmer, Land Rover, black dog / trotting, now rolling on his back.'<sup>869</sup> In the third stanza, though, the language takes a seemingly inevitable figurative turn, as she urges, 'Look now, the sun's reached out / painting turf over ice-smoothed stone.' She figures her binoculars as 'a noose / I hold to my focusing eyes', the word 'noose' recalling the tightening 'net' of language in 'The Way You Say the World'. Her binoculars give the speaker an illusion of closeness whilst actually acting as a barrier between her 'focusing eyes' and the natural landscape. Likewise, language affords us a feeling of proximity to, or control over, the material world around us, all the while significantly mediating our every experience of that world. Just as the lenses of the binoculars allow the speaker to neatly 'focus' and 'frame' the view (albeit momentarily), words allow us to carefully demarcate, and classify our experiences and ideas. The magnifying lens of the binoculars hauls the view 'across // a mile of diluvian marsh', the stanza break indicating the true distance between the speaker and the objects of her gaze. The word 'hauling' together with the image of the noose suggests that a kind of violence is being committed on the landscape. The scene ultimately proves resistant, even actively so, to her attentions:

Then, just as I frame it, the farm  
wraps its windows in lichenous weather  
and buries itself in its tongue.

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<sup>869</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 71.

The speaker assumes that ‘Not my eyes but my language is wrong. / And the cloud is between us forever.’ She suggests that a speaker of the English ‘language’ cannot truly belong in this Welsh landscape, where the very fields whisper in impenetrable Welsh ‘language’:

**Comment [E43]:** Comma replaced with full stop

Under cover of mist and myth  
the pieced fields whisper together,  
‘Find invisible *Maes-y-garnedd*...,  
*Y Llethr*... *Foel Ddu*... *Foel Wen*.’

In a 1996 interview, the poet writes, ‘Living as we do among Welsh-speaking neighbors in Cwm Nantcol, my husband and I naturally feel ourselves to be foreigners.’<sup>870</sup> As Sean Pryor notes, though, ‘the fields speak English too: theirs is an English sentence which incorporates Welsh place names. Even in this personification of the fields there is a fault then... The fields whisper these things in English only because they whisper to the speaker.’<sup>871</sup> This poem, then, is about a far more fundamental foreignness than that of an English-speaker in Welsh-speaking North Wales. It is not only English that is ‘wrong’ in this landscape, but any language, all language. As the poet plainly states in a review of Jonathan Bate’s *Song of the Earth*, ‘Nature doesn’t talk; we do.’<sup>872</sup> The natural world, as Stevenson insists in other poems, is ‘speechless’: the farm does not have a ‘tongue’ and fields do not whisper in either Welsh or English. It is this that ultimately separates the speaker from her surroundings, a linguistic creature in a non-linguistic environment.

<sup>870</sup> ‘Interview with Richard Poole,’ 178.

<sup>871</sup> Pryor, ‘Anne Stevenson and the Poetry of Place,’ 146.

<sup>872</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Reviews) Word-processed draft, ‘Review: Song of the Earth, Jonathan Bate (Picador, 2001), 2.

To suggest, as does the speaker, that a particular language is ‘wrong’ is to imply, deliberately or otherwise, that there is a ‘right’ language. Yet, Stevenson refutes this idea in a 1995 essay, where she writes, ‘for a writer to claim that he can free himself of “wrong” language by creating a new “right” one through the intensity of his imagination – as Wallace Stevens in his charming way, seems to have done – suggests that he is indulging in too hopeful an illusion.’<sup>873</sup> Stevens’s ‘too hopeful’ desire for a new language is not without precedent, though. In the early nineteenth century, Jeremy Bentham’s scathing attack on not only the abuse, but also the inherent inadequacy, of language precipitated a crisis of confidence for the Romantic poets. Language, according to Bentham, ‘is a pernicious instrument because it accredits real existence to “fictions”’. It allows its speaker to assert propositions which cannot be validated because they refer to nothing outside themselves.’<sup>874</sup> Richard Cronin suggests that the Romantic poets internalized Bentham’s idea of language as untruth, and that ‘it is apparent in Byron when he writes: “I hate things all fiction... and pure invention is but the talent of a liar”’.<sup>875</sup> Furthermore, Bentham suggests that language is part of the arsenal of the established conservative status-quo, an idea that we see in Shelley’s *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1820), in the ‘emperors, kings, and priests and lords / Who rule by viziers, scepters, bank-notes, words...’.<sup>876</sup> The Romantic poets, then, faced an almost paralyzing dilemma: ‘How is it possible for the radical poet to evade the conservative force of language while remaining a poet?’<sup>877</sup> Bentham’s proposed solution was conceptually

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<sup>873</sup> “‘The Way You Say the World Is What You Get’,” 170.

<sup>874</sup> Richard Cronin, ‘Shelley’s Language of Dissent’ *Essays in Criticism* XXVII (1977), 205.

<sup>875</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>876</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant*, Act II, scene ii, lines 7-8, *The Complete Works*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. Vol. 2 (London: Ernest Benn, 1965), 345.

<sup>877</sup> Cronin, 207.



simple, but practicably impossible: nothing less than the construction of a new language 'free from the defects of ordinary English'.<sup>878</sup> Despite the unworkability of Bentham's solution, Shelley seized on it with some enthusiasm. In *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), for example, the establishment of Cyntha's new and incorruptible moral system depends on the implementation of a new linguistic system: 'And in the sand I would make signs to range / These woofs, as they were woven, of my thought; / Clear, elemented shapes, whose smallest change / A subtler language within language wrought.'<sup>879</sup> Similarly, in 'Ode to Liberty' (1820), the poet voices his longing for a renovation and renewal of language whereby 'words that make the thoughts obscure / From which they spring, as clouds of glimmering dew / From a white lake blot Heaven's blue portraiture' will be 'stripped of their thin masks and various hue / And frowns and smiles and splendours not their own'.<sup>880</sup> Shelley envisages a return to Adamic purity, each word cleansed of its dulling accretions. Cronin suggests, though, that 'his use of a fanciful myth suggests that Shelley regards this notion as no more than an idle dream.'<sup>881</sup> Eden cannot be reclaimed, and nor can pristine language.

Shelley's and Stevens's 'dream' is one that Stevenson herself is not immune from. In the 1979 essay, 'Writing as a Woman', Stevenson disputes Adrienne Rich's claim that women 'must find... a language of our own to express "a whole new psychic geography" of female emotion', writing, 'I am not convinced that women need a specifically female language to describe female experience... For even if we could

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<sup>878</sup> Ibid.

<sup>879</sup> Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, Canto Seventh, XXXII, LINES 280-283. *The Complete Works*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 353.

<sup>880</sup> Shelley, 'Ode to Liberty,' XVI, lines 234-240, *The Complete Works*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 313.

<sup>881</sup> Cronin, 208.

agree that women have a less aggressive, more instinctive, more “creative” nature than men (and I’m not sure that’s true) language is difficult to divide into sexes.’<sup>882</sup> Despite her scepticism towards Rich’s notion of a ‘specifically female language’, she admits to sharing her desire for a new language:

A flight of fancy prompts me to imagine a women’s language that appoints itself guardian of the traditional beauties of English as opposed to the speed-read efficiencies of American. Imagine a woman’s language that preserves the dignity of the *King James Bible* and the *Prayer Book*, which forbids the use of technological jargon in any work of literature not intended for the laboratory or classroom.<sup>883</sup>

She sadly concludes, ‘But such a dream is, of course, impossible.’ Later, in the short poem, ‘And even then,’ (1990), Stevenson appears to reconsider the possibility of a new (though not explicitly female) language. The speaker briefly entertains the possibility of an Adamic new language, richer, subtler, and more conducive to the poet’s task, ‘a language in which / memory would be called “letting in the sorrow”’, and ‘poetry / “translating the dreams”’.<sup>884</sup> The reader is left uncertain as to whether this new language is a ‘too hopeful illusion’ or a genuine possibility. The speaker initially suggests, ‘There may be a language in which / memory will be called “letting in the sorrow”’. The tentative ‘may’ then strengthens into a ‘will’ that suggests not possibility, but certainty. In the next line, though, ‘will’ has become ‘would’, as that certainty fades to become purely hypothetical. As in the 1979 essay, the alluring idea of a new language has been regretfully rejected.

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<sup>882</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 19.

<sup>883</sup> ‘Writing as a Woman,’ 20.

<sup>884</sup> *Poems 1995-2005*, 270.

### Metaphor and the Material World:

‘If I Could Paint Essences’ (1982), like ‘Binoculars in Ardudwy’, speaks of an apparent failure, of both language itself and of the speaker’s ability to master it. This poem identifies a powerful tension between two modes of linguistic expression, the literal and the metaphorical. Aristotle identifies an aptitude for metaphor as the hallmark of the true poet: ‘But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance.’<sup>885</sup> Metaphorical expression, however, is by no means the preserve of poets. Stevenson writes that these ‘figures of speech are not only the stuff of poetry; they are built right into our language. They are part of the mechanism through which we work with words to make words work for us.’<sup>886</sup> Indeed, Victor M. Hamm suggests that ‘metaphor is at the very heart of language, for every language is, as has often been remarked, an unconscious tissue of petrified metaphors.’<sup>887</sup> Though Aristotle’s pronouncement perhaps suggests that the poet enjoys a straightforward relationship with his or her ‘command of metaphor’, several of Stevenson’s poems reveal her uneasy, acutely self-conscious relationship with her own ‘eye for resemblance.’ In ‘Constable Clouds and a Kestrel’s Feather’ (2012), the creation of metaphors is at first associated with the innocent imaginative freedoms of childhood:

As a child

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<sup>885</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 22, 59a5-59-a7, Intro. D.W. Lucas (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), 212.

<sup>886</sup> Anne Stevenson, ‘The Melting Metaphor,’ *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, 14.

<sup>887</sup> Victor M. Hamm, ‘*Language, Truth and Poetry*’: *The Aquinas Lecture, 1960* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1960), 62.

did you never play the cloud-zoo game  
 on summer days like these?  
 Lie prone on the grass,  
 stalk in your mouth, face to the sun,  
 to let imagination run wild  
 in a sky full of camels and whales  
 where the air show today  
 features fish evolving into crocodiles  
 disintegrating slowly  
 into little puffs of sheep grazing on air.<sup>888</sup>

The shapes seen in the sky suddenly become threatening and altogether more adult:  
 ‘Now a tyrannosaur, chasing a bear... / or is it a white bull? Europa on his back, /  
 panicking to disappear.’ The rapt cloud-gazer is clearly no longer a child, but a mature  
 poet with knowledge of mythology.

In ‘Cold’ (1993), though the poet initially takes obvious relish in her capacity for  
 creating apt images of a snow-covered roof –

A tablecloth slips off noisily  
     pouring heavy laundry into detergent,  
 a basin of virgin textiles, pocked distinctively  
  
 with crystals.  
 ...  
  
 the air lets fall again a lacier  
 Organza snow-veil. Winter bridal  
 The muffled dog fouls briefly<sup>889</sup> –

the final stanza sees a return to ‘a steadier state’, as ‘Ice / sets in and verifies the snow.’  
 Despite the speaker’s delight in her imagination’s ability to represent the scene in  
 different ways, the time for elaborate metaphor is over and snow becomes just snow. In

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<sup>888</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of ‘Constable Cloud and a Kestrel’s Feather,’ 2012. Author’s personal papers.

<sup>889</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 114.

the Stevenson papers held at Cambridge University Library, there are four undated drafts of an unpublished poem titled variously ‘Little Poem Against Metaphor’ and ‘Little Poem Without Metaphor’. What appears to be the final draft reads:

These dahlias displaying  
 huge lurid rosettes,  
 not the colours of sin.  
 Cat’s vole with its feet  
 set so neatly together  
 by the compost bin,  
 not praying.<sup>890</sup>

In the other drafts, the word ‘rosettes’ reads either ‘gynaecia’ or ‘corollae’. Even in the writing of a poem that explicitly declares itself to be ‘against’ or ‘without’ metaphor, the poet cannot help but search for the most fitting and striking image. As in Wallace Stevens’s ‘Study of Two Pears’,<sup>891</sup> here we see an apparently irresistible slide into metaphorical representation within a poem that challenges the authority and adequacy of metaphor in poetry. What this poem really seems to be ‘against’, though, is not the poet’s keen ‘eye for resemblance’, but our tendency to anthropologically project on the non-human world around us, to imagine, for instance, that a vole prays.

In ‘If I Could Paint Essences’ the speaker’s self-consciousness is revealed in the very first stanza in the line, ‘I hear my mind say, / if only I could paint essences.’<sup>892</sup> She curiously divides herself into a speaking ‘mind’ and a hearing ‘I’, as she simultaneously voices her aspiration and acknowledges its hopelessness. The word ‘essences’ is etymologically derived from the Greek expression, ‘to ti ên einai’, translated literally as

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<sup>890</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Four typewritten drafts, ‘Little Poem Against / Without Metaphor,’ undated.

<sup>891</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 196.

<sup>892</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 24.

‘the what it was to be’ (or the shorter phrase, ‘to ti esti’, literally translated as ‘the what it is’), and has a number of possible meanings.<sup>893</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* variously defines it as ‘a fact... or property possessed by something’; a ‘specific... manner of existing’; or as ‘the reality underlying phenomena; absolute being.’<sup>894</sup> A desire to ‘paint essences’, then, might be the desire to re-present the characteristic aspect or feature of an object (to accurately capture its visual appearance), or, more ambitiously, the desire to capture the noumena hidden within the phenomena: the ‘Ideal Forms’, to use Plato’s phrase, only hinted at by the props of mere material world. Michael O’Neill suggests that Stevenson’s poem is ‘unimaginable without the practice of poets such as Keats’s,’<sup>895</sup> whose *Endymion* seeks ‘A fellowship with essence, till we shine / Full alchemized and free of space.’<sup>896</sup> What Stevenson’s speaker yearns for, though, is surely the very opposite of what Keats’s speaker seeks. Endymion wishes to transcend the merely physical in order to be united with ‘essence’, to himself become immaterial and ‘free of space’. Stevenson’s speaker, on the other hand, wishes to give the ‘essences’ she perceives material substance, to make them visible and, therefore, paintable. The impossibility of capturing any higher reality in her art is suggested in the juxtaposition of the words: to paint is to make visible, to give shape, colour, and texture, whereas an ‘essence’ is invisible, formless, immaterial. To ‘paint essences’, then, would be to make the invisible visible, to give form to the formless, yet any attempted re-production or re-presentation would inevitably be inadequate, a poor shadow of a

<sup>893</sup> S. Marc Cohen, ‘Aristotle’s Metaphysics,’ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2000, accessed 20 April 2008. < <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>>.

<sup>894</sup> ‘Essence, n.’ *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Second edition, 1989; online version December 2011. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64494>>; accessed 20 February 2012. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1891.

<sup>895</sup> Michael O’Neill, ‘“A curved adventure”: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,’ 112.

<sup>896</sup> John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, Book I, ii., lines 779-780, *The Poems of John Keats*, 125.

shadow of the 'Ideal Form'. Indeed, O'Neill suggests that 'the lovely appeal of painting essences lies precisely in its very Romantic impossibility.'<sup>897</sup>

As in 'Binoculars in Ardudwy', the speaker first attempts to remain utterly faithful to the scene before her through her use of literal language, dutifully naming and recording each constituent feature of the landscape in a rudimentary visual inventory: 'Red ploughland. Green pasture. // Black cattle. Quick water.' These observations create a sense not of a real landscape, though, but of a child's naïve and reductive drawing, a two-dimensional representation of that landscape. The speaker momentarily lapses into figurative description (the scene is 'Overpainted / by lightshafts from layered gold / and purple cumulus'), but then quickly rejects further metaphorical description, noting the 'cloudness of clouds // which are not like anything but clouds', the isolated line visually representing the clouds' singularity and inimitableness: reality's resistance to resemblance.

The second half of Stevenson's poem opens up into what we recognise as a kind of Romantic lyrical richness of image and sound. Contrasting strikingly with the short sentences and sparse images of the third and fourth stanzas, in the fifth there is an extravagantly multi-sensory metaphorical description of the rural scene:

I want to play on those bell-toned  
cellos of delicate not-quite-flowering larches  
  
that offer, on the opposite hill, their unfurled  
amber instruments – floating, insubstantial, a rising  
horizon of music embodied in light.

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<sup>897</sup> O'Neill, "'A curved adventure': Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson," 113.

The breathless, urgently enjambed lines and compound adjectives force a quickening of pace that suggests that the speaker is approaching some sort of creative climax, perhaps one in which she will finally alight upon the magic words she needs to ‘paint’ accurately the ‘essences’ of her surroundings. As ‘bell-toned / cellos’ create their own onomatopoeic vowel music, the image of ‘a rising / horizon of music embodied in light’, coupled with the swelling assonance of ‘rising / horizon’, is suggestive of a transcendence, a rising above normal sensory awareness into a heightened synesthetic alertness. This subtly nods to a similarly multisensory metaphorical image in *Endymion*: ‘When the airy stress / Of music’s kiss impregnates the free winds, / And with a sympathetic touch unbinds / Eolian magic from their lucid wombs’.<sup>898</sup> Once again, though, the speaker rejects figurative description, and the stirring enjambed crescendo of the fifth and sixth stanzas is abruptly deflated by the largely monosyllabic, end-stopped first line of the seventh stanza – ‘And in such imagining I lose sight of sight.’ The eighteenth-century rhetorician, Hugh Blair, writes that ‘Simple expression just makes our ideas known to others; but figurative language, over and above, bestows a particular dress upon that idea: a dress, which both makes it to be remarked, and adorns it.’<sup>899</sup> As far as Stevenson’s speaker is concerned, the ‘particular dress’ bestowed by the extended metaphor does not adorn so much as obscure. For the speaker, it is the unsophisticated image of ‘Red ploughland. Green pasture. // Black cattle’ that represents ‘true sightness of seeing’, whereas her lapse into sumptuous multi-sensory metaphors brings about a loss of ‘true’ vision. In this instance, metaphor is not revelation but obfuscation.

<sup>898</sup> John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, Book 1, ll. 783-786, *The Complete Poems*, 128.

<sup>899</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 1783, ed. Harold F. Harding, 2 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 274.



The poem makes us aware that this kind of frustration is not an isolated experience for the speaker. That the poem begins, 'Another day in March', suggests that each day is characterised by an interminable cycle of creative aspiration and frustration. The speaker is never free of

the inescapable ache  
of trying to catch, say, the catness of cat  
as he crouches, stalking his shadow,

on the other side of the window.

Lest the speaker be accused of Romantic grandiosity following the sensuous abundance of her aborted imaginative flight, the poem closes on this 'droll and domestic' image, a striking visual metaphor for the poet striving to find the elusive words with which 'to paint essences'.<sup>900</sup>

The speaker's perceived failure to adequately preserve in language the beauty of her surroundings precipitates a sense of disconnection that is commonplace in Stevenson's work. As in several other poems, for example 'Travelling Behind Glass', 'From My Study', 'Moonrise', 'The Wrekin', and the unpublished 'History',<sup>901</sup> and 'Man Seen Through a Rainy Window',<sup>902</sup> the speaker looks through a window, able to see, but never to touch, what is 'on the other side'. This image of the window also provides us with a useful way of thinking about language. Indeed, Ernst Cassirer uses a window as a metaphor for language when he writes:

... while wanting to be the connecting link between two worlds... [language functions] as the barrier which separates the one from the other. However clear

<sup>900</sup> O'Neill, "'A curved adventure': Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson," 113.

<sup>901</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems). Typewritten draft, 'History,' undated.

<sup>902</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems). Typewritten draft, 'Man Seen Through a Rainy Window,' undated.

and however pure a medium we may then see in language, it always remains true that this crystal-clear medium is also crystal-hard – that however transparent it may be for the expression of ideas, it still is never wholly penetrable. Its transparency does not remove its impenetrability.<sup>903</sup>

The question of whether metaphor is a means of accessing and expressing, say, ‘the mudness of mud’, or just an inadvertent muddying of the waters, preoccupied Wallace Stevens, too, and his ever-evolving theory of metaphor was central to his wider theory of poetry. In ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, Stevens introduces the concept of ‘the first idea’:

It is the celestial ennui of apartments  
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick  
Of this invention[.]<sup>904</sup>

As with Stevenson’s ‘essences’, a reader might be forgiven for assuming that Stevens’s ‘first idea’ is analogous to Novalis’s ‘Chifferschrift’, Shelley’s unseen Power’, or Plato’s ‘Ideal Forms’. Indeed, Bernard Heringman writes that Stevens ‘has always been interested, Platonically, in “The abstract... The premise from which all things were conclusions”, and concludes that the “first idea” is the “Platonic idea”’.<sup>905</sup> Stevens’s ‘first idea’, though, is exactly that: not ‘the Thing Itself’, but an *idea* ‘about the Thing’. In a 1942 letter to Henry Church, Stevens writes:

Some one here wrote to me the other day and wanted to know what I meant by a thinker of the first idea. If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a

<sup>903</sup> Ernst Cassirer, ““Spirit” and “Life” in Contemporary Philosophy,” 1930, trans. Robert Walter Bretall and Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Menasha, WI: George Banta, 1949), 878. (The essay first appeared as ““Geist” and “Leben”” in der Philosophie der Gegenwart’ in *Die Neue Rundschau* 1 (1930), 244-64.

<sup>904</sup> Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,’ It Must Be Abstract: I, *The Collected Poems*, 381.

<sup>905</sup> Bernard Heringman, ‘Wallace Stevens: The Use of Poetry,’ *ELH* 16 (1949), 330.

picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea.<sup>906</sup>

It is not an *a priori* 'Ideal Form' that exists within (or above) the world prior to, and separate from, our perception and understanding of it. Rather, it *is* our perception and understanding of the world around us – our very first perception. Milton J. Bates notes that 'the mind has no direct, unmediated access to realities outside itself. The closest it can come is already a mental construction.'<sup>907</sup> It is this very first 'mental construction' that Stevens means by 'the first idea'. To see a picture in its 'first idea', having scraped away 'the varnish and dirt of generations', is not to glimpse any higher reality or 'Ideal Form', but merely to get back to one's own first and freshest apprehension of it.

It is the role of poetry to reveal or make accessible, even if only 'for a moment', this 'first idea', by removing the obfuscating 'varnish and dirt of generations'. 'Notes...' tells us that the 'first idea' 'becomes / The hermit in a poet's metaphors, // Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.' It is 'a poet's metaphors', then, that constitute the thick layer of varnish and dirt that keeps the first idea from our sight. If the 'first idea' is our first and freshest perception of an object, then the 'varnish and dirt' is constituted of all subsequent occasions wherein we do not perceive the object itself afresh, but only our own pre-extant aesthetic or linguistic representations of it. We see, in the words of Stevens, not 'the Thing Itself' but only 'Ideas about the Thing'. The poet faces a quandary, then. The 'varnish and dirt' is comprised of familiar and obfuscating metaphorical representations, yet the only way to slough them away is to

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<sup>906</sup> Wallace Stevens, Letter 462, to Henry Church, October 28 1942, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) (repr. 1996), 426.

<sup>907</sup> Milton J. Bates, 'Wallace Stevens and the supreme fiction,' *Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, 51.

devise new metaphors, and so run the risk of inadvertently adding to the layer of varnish and dirt. Metaphor, therefore, can paradoxically function as both obfuscation and exfoliation.

If metaphor can obscure objects or ‘essences’ just as often as it can reveal them, what is the poet to do? Both ‘Binoculars in Ardudwy’ and ‘If I Could Paint Essences’ demonstrate that the allure of metaphorical representation cannot ultimately be resisted. A poem completely free of metaphorical language, then, would be little more than a self-conscious poetic exercise, a challenge the poet sets for him- or herself. In ‘Walking Early by the Wye’ (1982), Stevenson simultaneously exercises her poet’s eye for resemblance *and* explicitly foregrounds the fictiveness of the images. Winifred Nowottny observed in 1962 that:

criticism often takes metaphor *au grand sérieux*, as a peephole on the nature of transcendental reality, a prime means by which the imagination can see into the life of things... This attitude makes it difficult to see the workings of those metaphors which deliberately emphasize the frame, offering themselves as deliberate fabrications, as a prime means of seeing not into the life of things, but the creative human consciousness, framer of its own world.<sup>908</sup>

Through what O’Neill calls ‘a series of prefatory “As ifs”’, Stevenson’s poem foregrounds ‘the workings’ of metaphor.<sup>909</sup> The poem opens with a startling metaphor: ‘every splinter of river mist / rayed in my eyes.’<sup>910</sup> A remarkable resemblance between mist, insubstantial and formless, and a splinter, sharp and invasive, seems unlikely, yet this is, the speaker implies, a resemblance ‘in [her] eyes’, rather than a logically sound one. A merger between inner and outer is suggested in ‘February’s wincing radiance’

<sup>908</sup> Winifred Nowottny, *The Language Poets Use* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), 89.

<sup>909</sup> O’Neill, “‘A curved adventure’: Romanticism and the Poetry of Anne Stevenson,” 109.

<sup>910</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 64.

and ‘the squint of the sun’. It is, of course, not the ‘radiance’ that is ‘wincing’ or the ‘sun’ that squints, but the speaker herself. Her responses are attributed to the natural world around her, and the link between them further suggested by the tightly yet unobtrusively woven tissue of alliteration (‘radiance’, ‘river’, and ‘rayed’) and assonance (‘wincing’, ‘splinter’, ‘river’, and ‘mist’). The repeated ‘As ifs’ function not only as an announcement of, and a disclaimer to, her vivid metaphors, but also as a tacit invitation to the reader to enter a realm of expanded imaginative possibility. Through sketching figurative equivalents for her sensuous experiences, the speaker is able to imaginatively ‘enter alive the braided rings Saturn / is known by’, whilst keeping one foot firmly on ‘the dyke’s heaped mud.’ Despite the high instance of words taken from the register of the decorative arts (‘lacquered’, ‘braided’, ‘silvered’, and ‘pearled’), it is clear that metaphor is not merely a decorative flourish or curlicue, but the only means of conveying the curious dual nature of the speaker’s experience. J. Hillis Miller writes that ‘Existence is neither imagination alone nor reality alone, but always and everywhere the endlessly frustrated attempt of the two to cross the gap which separates them.’<sup>911</sup> Literal language – words that plainly point to the objects that surround us, or some physical characteristic thereof – can convey only the objective ‘reality’ perceptible to everybody. Metaphor allows us to communicate a sense of both the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective, the ‘real’ and the imagined, the abstract and the concrete. It enables the poet to assimilate the objective ‘reality’ that we share with others and the subjective inner life that we experience alone. Furthermore, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that although ‘metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action’, it is,

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<sup>911</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (New York: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 233.

in fact, ‘pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.’<sup>912</sup> According to Lakoff and Johnson, we might even conclude that ‘metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system.’<sup>913</sup> If the ways we perceive, understand, and think about the world around us are ‘fundamentally metaphorical’, then metaphor in poetry speaks to, and of, nothing less than our own cognitive processes. A poet’s striking metaphors may shape the way we think about certain objects, yet the metaphor itself was shaped by the poet’s own cognitive processes. In the final stanza, the speaker vows

I will not forget how the ash trees stood,  
silvered and still,  
  
how each soft stone on its near shadow knelt,  
how the sheep became stones where they built  
their pearled hill.

Here we have metaphor not as *fait accompli* but as process. The metaphor is not merely a static substitution of, or equivalence drawn between, image and object, but an altogether more complex and fluid process of transformation. So radically transformative is this process that we might be tempted to say that this is metaphor as *metamorphosis*, even. The imaginative transformation is represented or enacted at the phonetic level by the interplay of hard and soft sounds. The hard *st-* of ‘stone’ relaxes into the soft *sh-* of ‘shadow’, as the soft *sh-* of ‘sheep’ hardens into the crystalline *st-* of ‘stone’. The vividness of these images suggests that in foregrounding their fictive

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<sup>912</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>913</sup> *Ibid.*

nature, the speaker has freed herself from the constraints of the ‘real’ – what Wallace Stevens calls ‘the pressure of reality’ – and is able to give full rein to her imagination.<sup>914</sup>

**Comment [E44]:** ‘Reign’ becomes ‘rein’

### ‘Reading’ the World:

Stevenson’s poetry is acutely aware of what Tony Sharpe terms ‘the linguisticity of being’: the intensely verbal and textual nature of our engagement with and experience of the world around us.<sup>915</sup> In the short poem, ‘Roses in December’ (2012), the speaker sees the natural world around her in terms of an arrangement of typographical symbols: ‘Two small unofficial footnotes. / One red asterisk /... One afterthought, prickly with quotes’.<sup>916</sup> Similarly, in ‘On Harlech Beach’ (2012), the natural and human landscape is overlaid with, and filtered through, a typographical one. Here, too, we see the ‘pattern-hungry eye’ of the poet as it perceives the ‘Lowry figures on the beach’ as ‘moveable type’, ‘an alphabet soup’ on ‘the centerfold page of the sand’.<sup>917</sup> The poet apprehends this sight as a ‘human story’ and ‘a scene to write about’. Even as the poem wryly celebrates the poet’s ‘pattern-hungry eye’, it also suggests the capacity of words and language to reduce and simplify reality: ‘How simple they look, how picturesque’, the speaker notes. In Stevenson’s poems, the word ‘picturesque’ is, without exception, used as a derisory or negative term, for example in ‘A Tourists’ Guide to the Fens’ (2003) and ‘Claude Glass’ (1985). The vital, vibrant bodies on the beach – ‘the body sway of the lovers, a Frisbee caught / by a bronze torso ... / prone golden mums and their lucky

<sup>914</sup> Wallace Stevens. ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,’ *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 27.

<sup>915</sup> Tony Sharpe, *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 100.

<sup>916</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of ‘Roses in December,’ 2012. Author’s personal papers.

<sup>917</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of ‘On Harlech Beach,’ 2012. Author’s personal papers.

cartwheeling young’ – are fixed and flattened into familiar typographical characters: ‘a p, pink, i, indigo, an x running yellow and tan / in pursuit of a flying stop.’ As the ‘human story’ of these figures is captured in ‘sans serif’ it is rendered ‘sans grief’, as even the most accomplished poet’s lines cannot capture the full spectrum of human experience and emotion. Here, as in other poems, the speaker seems to yearn, if only momentarily, for a non-linguistic state, as she observes

Three dots (an ellipsis in action) rush back and forth –  
 terriers seeking, retrieving, time-free and carefree  
 As only dogs in illiterate joyousness can be.

It is significant that these illiterate creatures are figured as ‘an ellipsis in action’, an ellipsis representing an intentional omission or an aposiopesis, as the speaker tacitly admits that despite (or maybe because of) their linguistic prowess humans are at a loss to truly comprehend the experience of a non-linguistic creature. Indeed, in a 1995 essay, the poet writes, ‘we don’t know how animals suffer...Even the world our pets feel lies outside our range. Who can describe what a dog smells, or what a cat senses with its whiskers?’<sup>918</sup> In the final stanza, too, the speaker’s linguistic patterning instincts are momentarily frustrated by the non-linguistic natural world:

Unremarked by the holiday crowd, two faraway swarms –  
 I would paint them as shadows in khaki and bloodstained brown –  
 Turn out to be birds: an invasion of scavenging m’s  
 Whose squabble of laughter is raucous enough to drown  
 These boys shouting King of the castle as they kick it down.

Coupled with the figuring of the beach as ‘a playground raised from the dead’, this intrusion from the non-linguistic world suffuses the scene with a dark menace. The

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<sup>918</sup> “‘The Way You Say the World Is What You Get’,’ 170.



‘khaki and bloodstained brown’ forms an alarming contrast to the ‘bronze’, ‘golden’, ‘pink’, ‘indigo’ ‘alphabet soup’. These swarms are ‘faraway’ in two senses of the word; they are not only distant from the human scene but they also seem to be impervious to language. They are ‘unremarked’ by the holiday makers, and resist inclusion in the poet’s typographical design. At first the speaker can only think to paint them as ‘shadows’, ungraspable and unfixable. Here, as in so many of Stevenson’s poems, human life is measured against the natural world. The rhyming couplet formed by the penultimate and final lines adds emphasis to the words ‘drown’ and ‘down’. The words chanted by boys on the beach are not just drowned out but ‘drowned’ by the birds’ strangely material ‘squabble of laughter’. In the destroyed sand castle of the final line we cannot help but be reminded of the ruined Tower of Babel, symbolizing the anthropocentric hubris of linguistic creatures.

An earlier poem, too, engages with the myth of Babel, as it articulates the poet’s ambivalent relationship with her language. ‘Ah Babel’ (1982) registers the danger of letting our every experience become mediated by the language we use to describe and define it. The poem is Stevenson’s very own Baconian critique of language. Bruns notes that according to Bacon’s critique, ‘language, though ideally a system of notations which mirrors a world of phenomena, tends to enclose man in a purely verbal universe’, and that ‘it is ever the habit of words to multiply without the warrant of experience, [and] to enforce generalities where there are only particulars’.<sup>919</sup> The speaker is tempted to retreat into this ‘purely verbal universe’, to reject the evidence of her senses and rely totally on what language tells her must be: ‘I would desert my eyes / for the windows that are you.’ Babel’s windows are made of language, and promise a transparent,

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<sup>919</sup> Bruns, 12.

undistorted view of the world. The speaker's description of the surrounding country's 'bleached sand / and black scars', though, suggests that through these windows everything may appear black and white, like the pages of a book or a tabloid newspaper, over-simplified or even obliterated by the language used to describe it. It is for this reason that in a significant number of Stevenson's poems ('Travelling Behind Glass' and 'If I Could Paint Essences' amongst them), the speaker longs to break through or transcend the 'windows' that separate her from the outside world. This mighty tower of language cannot admit or abide the contingent disarray of the real world; the speaker notes, 'Your multiple stones / despise clouds', and the tower ascends in 'a sky / as clean as meaning.' The speaker herself, though she is 'allured' by the tower's 'lettered battlements', is as yet untainted by its tyrannical 'sounds, words'; she is 'Nameless / in mist and silence, / grey against grey', her own complexity not yet reduced to black marks on a white page. Yet, while she says 'I exist in your promise', it seems that she envisages being named, being admitted into the language tower, her myriad shades of grey polarized into black and white. Language offers the speaker the 'present / of a vast home', yet not only is this a home 'pronounced ruin', but it is also a home that speaker seems to be outside; she has not been admitted into the tower of language. In the final line, in which it is suggested that 'all that is known' is enclosed within this 'vast home' of language, we recognise the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein (with whom her father studied at Cambridge), in particular, his well-known tract 5.6: 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.'<sup>920</sup> The poem's title apostrophizes the tower, and the substitution of the more familiar 'O' for 'Ah' creates a deft pun on the first two

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<sup>920</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden, intro. Bertrand Russell (1922: London: Routledge, 2001), 5.6., 68.

letters of the alphabet. The biblical account of the Tower of Babel has it that language was a gift bestowed and, indeed revoked, by God: 'Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.'<sup>921</sup> If, as the poet suggests in 'To Phoebe' (2003), we now conceive of ourselves as 'lost to the angels' and instead sharing 'with rats and fleas a murky source', then the way in which we think about language must change correspondingly.<sup>922</sup> In a 1995 essay, Stevenson notes that whereas

in at least nominally theocentric times, the question of man's place – and hence of language – in nature never arose. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1.1)... Take God out of the picture, though, and put Homo Sapiens in his place... and difficulties abound... If we were to consider language, also, in a more humble light, as evolved from animals over many thousands of years, we might perhaps gain a truer estimation of what it can and cannot tell us about reality.<sup>923</sup>

The squabble of seagulls in 'On Harlech Beach', then, is not so far removed from the poet's own linguistic endeavours as we might think, nor the 'jackdaws' speech' and the 'wordless words' of the 'chaffinchy fife unreeling in the marsh' in Stevenson's 'Carol of the Birds' (2003). Despite the fact that we recognise language as a product of 'many minds coming to (changeable) agreements or adopting habits over hundreds of years about what, approximately, certain repeatable noises and combinations of sounds and symbols mean', the idea of language as a divinely bestowed or preternaturally powerful

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<sup>921</sup> *The Holy Bible* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society. 1965), Genesis 11, verses 7-8, 13.

<sup>922</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 127.

<sup>923</sup> Anne Stevenson, "'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get",' 170-171.

tool is still an alluring one.<sup>924</sup> It is this hopeful half-belief in the mystical power of words that Stevenson argues is behind much of Plath's poetry. Her obsessive redrafting and self-editing is, on one hand, unsurprising in a poet concerned with 'good mouthfuls of sound', but Stevenson suggests that there is a deeper imperative behind her constant going-over of her own work:<sup>925</sup>

You can almost feel her disciplining her lines—to vent her anger and anguish, sure, but also hoping to hit upon a magic formula that would open a way out of her sick self into a meaningful, enduring life. Poetry might somehow save her if only she could get the sounds right—the right words for the right rite.<sup>926</sup>

### **'What's in a name?'**

Bart Eeckhout suggests that despite our turning away from the traditional idea (or ideal) of language as mimetic, it remains as a necessary illusion: 'the mimetic view of language is one of those transcendental illusions without which we cannot even begin to approach the world or reason about it. Without the illusion of mimesis, of a correspondence between world and representation, the whole literary drive for representational accuracy and precision would be unthinkable.'<sup>927</sup> Any poet who wishes to share within their work something of their experience of reality must believe in some stable connection between signifier and signified. To wholly reject the idea of language

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<sup>924</sup> Anne Stevenson 'The Melting Metaphor,' *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, 14.

<sup>925</sup> Interview with Sylvia Plath, quoted in J.D. McClatchy, 'Short Circuits and Folding Mirrors,' *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 21.

<sup>926</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'The Unified Dance,' *Poetry* (March 2007), Poetry Foundation. 19<sup>th</sup> September 2012 < <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/179357>>.

<sup>927</sup> Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 205.

as mimetic is to employ and engage with words as material objects in their own right, freed from the burden of signification, devoid of meaning, and functioning purely as sounds in the air and patterns on a page. Whilst this is an accurate description of the praxis of the ‘Language’ Poets, Stevenson’s language is always referential, even as it admits the complexities of the signifier/signified relationship (‘Poetry is made of words and words have to *say* things’).<sup>928</sup>

In ‘May Bluebells, Coed Aber Artro’ (2003), a sudden carpet of bluebells in a North Wales wood occasions a meditation on the many quaint names by which this flower is known. The existence of these multiple names prompts the speaker to examine the relationship between the thing itself (‘each silky delicate bell-stalk / carrying its carillon to one side, / dusky wine-cups, ringers of creamy anthers’) and the name or names we give to it. That the flower we know as the bluebell has many different names gives lie to the assumption that there is some inherent relationship between the flower itself and the word ‘bluebell’. Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is entirely ‘arbitrary’.<sup>929</sup> There is no inherent or *a priori* connection between the word ‘bluebell’ and that delicate blue flower. ‘This is common sense’, suggests Raman Selden, ‘otherwise we would have difficulty in explaining the existence of other languages.’<sup>930</sup> However, once a connection is established between signifier and signified it seems to us to be incontrovertible and *a priori*, and Selden notes that ‘we feel and behave as if the words we use are inseparable from the concepts we have of the things... the arbitrary linking of signifier and signified is forgotten in the

**Comment [E45]:** ‘Ramon’ becomes ‘Raman’

**Comment [E46]:** ‘Practicing’ changed to ‘practising’ in n.922, and in bibliography

<sup>928</sup> CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) ‘Why Should We Trust Poetry?’ (The Kenneth Allott Lecture delivered at the University of Liverpool, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2009), 9.

<sup>929</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Payot, 1949), 100.

<sup>930</sup> Ramon Selden, *Practising Theory and Reading Literature* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 75.

practice of actual speakers who behave as if the sign were a perfect unity'.<sup>931</sup> It is this belief in the 'perfect unity' between signifier and signified that gives rise to the speaker's suggestion that the bluebell is, 'in Cymbeline misnamed "the azured harebell" / by Arviragus...'. As so often in Stevenson's poems, this human conundrum is measured against the magnitude of geological time, as her thoughts turn to the non-linguistic 'Ice-age giant still nourishing / the trodden mulch and green enchantment / of his daughter beechwood'. The bluebell's scientific name, 'Hyacinthus non-scriptus', translates as 'the unmarked (or unlettered) hyacinth'. In Greek mythology, Apollo created a flower from the spilled blood of his dead lover, Hyacinthus, his falling tears inscribing the petals with the words 'Ai, ai'. That the common bluebell is 'unmarked' differentiates it from this mythical grief-inscribed flower. All flowers are, of course, 'non scriptus' – non-linguistic – but as the speaker notes, they are '(much written about, nevertheless)'. Reiterated here is the poet's acknowledgement in an earlier poem, 'Naming the Flowers' (1986), that the names we give to, or impose upon them, 'makes no difference to the flowers.' In this earlier poem, even as the speaker recognises and interrogates her own anthropocentric impulse for naming (and so, possessing), she cannot help but think of these flowers in metaphorical terms, figuring them as intricate manmade objects: 'These inside-out parasols, / Orbwebs on crooked needles, / Grey, filmy cups in the clockwork / Of summer 'goatsbeard'. The poem is acutely aware of its internal contradiction, and foregrounds its misgivings regarding its own language in what Angela Leighton calls 'those provisional, self-mocking quotation marks.'<sup>932</sup> The speaker's impulse to name is born out of her desire to remember and preserve these

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<sup>931</sup> Selden, 76.

<sup>932</sup> Angela Leighton, 'Voyages over Voices: Introduction,' *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*, 7.

flowers in her ‘fields of recollection’, as, even in the height of summer, she already anticipates ‘bare patches, old age, winter time.’ In the depths of winter, the ‘bare patch’ will be ‘heavy with names’, as language provides a temporary substitute and consolation for the vanished flowers. Jacques Lacan suggests that language is fundamentally elegiac, in that the annunciation of the word reveals the absence of the object. In articulating the names of these flowers, the speaker is both recognizing their presence and anticipating their inevitable absence. By fixing these flowers in language, she is able to fix them in her memory: “‘Foxglove”, I’ll say, then “balsam”, / “Rose bay willow herb”, “red campion”.’ Lacan likens words to grave stones, in that they signify the absence of the object they refer to. In the final stanza, Stevenson offers the more positive analogy of names as ‘seeds’, suggestive of growth, renewal, and potential. Whereas gravestones suggest finality and irrevocable loss, seeds symbolize a recurrent seasonal cycle of birth and death, potential and fruition. In figuring names as seeds, then, the poet appreciates both that the names are not equivalent to the flowers, but also suggests that they have value and potential for the poet, herself involved in a cycle of inspiration and iteration.

**Comment [E47]:** ‘Jaques’ becomes ‘Jacques’

‘Melon, meaning melon’ (2003-2005) continues on this theme, exploring the complex relationship between physical object, our mental conception of it, and the word we use to point to it. There are two modes of experience in this poem: first, the simple, sensual, and non-linguistic experience of eating the ‘summer-ripe and delicious’ fruit; and second, the intellectual apprehension of the melon, conducted at the linguistic level. The speaker is simultaneously a sensual and a linguistic creature, caught between the pleasurable sensation of the melon’s ‘edible flesh’, and the knotted metaphysical puzzle

of ‘what the melon is about.’ This split is suggested in the quasi-dialogic structure, as the speaker’s two experiencing selves commune with one another:

Seeds I scrape away from this quartered melon  
are really what the melon is about.  
Yes, but I think meaning is about  
not being melon, not being edible flesh or fruit,  
but being human, complicitous in meaning’s making.

**Comment [E48]:** Lines are now lower-cased

The melon, like the trees in ‘Sierra Nevada’, has no conception of itself as ‘meaning’ or being ‘melon’ or anything else. ‘Meaning’, the speaker acknowledges, is an entirely human concern. As in ‘If I Could Paint Essences’, the speaker is concerned with what we might call ‘the melonness of melon’. She finds herself in an ever deepening self-referential quandary, as she begins to question her own linguistic choices: ‘A spider has wound her silky trap / around the dictionary I’m cracking open / to look up the word, “complicitous”.’ Again, in the image of the spider’s ‘silky trap’, we are reminded of Graves’s ‘cool web’ and the insidious word ‘net’ of Stevenson’s ‘Saying the World’. Whereas ‘If I Could Paint Essences’ is a challenge to the adequacy of metaphor for expressing the true nature of the material world, this poem goes further in that it challenges the adequacy of simple nouns, the most basic building blocks of referential language. We take it for granted that the word ‘melon’ refers to the fruit, but the speaker reveals the arbitrariness of this term:

This dictionary, old and shabby, has been helping  
spiders, for a summer, to be good purposeful spiders.  
But when I look up ‘melon’,  
it does not help me to be a good purposeful person.  
It will not even tell me what a melon’s like to taste.

**Comment [E49]:** Lines are now lower-cased.



The world of words, represented by the dictionary, ‘old and shabby’, and covered with cobwebs, pales in comparison to the world of sensuous experience, represented by the quartered melon, ‘summer-ripe and delicious’. We might infer from the energy and dynamism of her actions (‘I gobble it up, / lick my fingers, toss away the rind) that speaker seems more at home in the sensuous material world than in the ponderous world of words (‘the dictionary I’m cracking open’). A short poem titled ‘Arrival Dream’ (2012), part of a sequence ‘Spring Diary’, dedicated to the composer, Rhian Samuel, also privileges non-linguistic over linguistic experience:

Walking by an open window in a foreign city.  
Out it flies, like a letter through a slot, a burst of laughter.  
Something to pick up and keep for a souvenir.  
If I can’t read the language?  
The youthful look of that green and yellow stamp.

The speaker seems to relish her lack of comprehension, her inability to ‘read the language’ in this ‘foreign city’: she is, if only for a brief moment, outside the linguistic sphere. The speaker implies that there are forms of communication above and beyond the linguistic. That ‘burst of laughter’ is, of course, non-linguistic, yet she likens it to ‘a letter through a slot’, suggesting that it is as significant a form of communication as a written missive. One does not need to understand a language to appreciate in sensuous terms a ‘burst of laughter’ or the ‘youthful look’ of a brightly colored stamp. For the speaker, this foreign tongue is appreciable not in terms of its meaning, but in terms of its materiality, the sound and shape of its words. It is ‘something to pick up and keep for a souvenir’, like a shell from the beach. Again, Stevenson employs the image of the window in her exploration of her relationship with language. Unlike in ‘Travelling

Behind Glass', and 'If I Could Paint Essences', though, the window here is 'open', and what is on the 'other side' is finally accessible to the speaker.

### **The Future of the Language?**

Stevenson's attitude to the state of the English language at the start of the twenty-first century is decidedly ambivalent. Though she acknowledges elsewhere in her work the protean, mutable quality of any language, she responds to developments in contemporary English with unabashed censure. In 1995, she wrote, 'poets (in the broadest sense) have played many different roles throughout history, yet I can think of no time excepting the present when they have not in some way been recognised as the chief custodians of the language.'<sup>933</sup> In the closing years of the twentieth century, Stevenson suggests, the craftsman-like poet who expertly weighs and measures the sounds and shapes of words, is no longer revered as an accomplished 'chief custodian', but dismissed as archaic, elitist, and reactionary. In 'Listen to the Words' (2007), the poet-speaker asks:

Precisely what does 'interactive' mean?  
Just being friendly? Or something more obscene?  
Should I 'download' the messages I'm 'text'd'?  
Is making love the same as 'having sex'?<sup>934</sup>

<sup>933</sup> "'The Way You Say the World Is What You Get",' 163.

<sup>934</sup> *Stone Milk*, 51.

The poet uses the contracted form of the verb, ‘text’d’, transforming a decidedly contemporary word into an ersatz Shakespearean coinage. The poem’s comic intentions are further revealed in the use of multisyllabic or compound rhymes:

‘mobile phone’, although euphonious,  
Chirps from its ambulant nest like a digital bird.  
As for the razz-ma-tazzda of TESCO and ASDA,  
For an epithet that doesn’t sound erroneous  
Why not try on ACRONYMONIOUS?

Multisyllabic rhymes are relatively rare in English poetry except when used for comic effect in light or satirical verse. Where polysyllabic rhymes are employed, sense is often secondary or sacrificed entirely, to sound, for example in the work of Ogden Nash, where the pairing of seemingly unconnected and unrhymable words is the source of much of the poetry’s comic value. Like Nash, who delights in taking bold orthographical liberties, Stevenson proves that she is not above tinkering with the language when it suits her, making a few coinages of her own: ‘ACRONYMONIOUS’. Stevenson exercises her technical virtuosity even as she lambasts the decline of the English language. The rhyme scheme of the subsequent stanzas is irregular but largely comprises rhyming couplets (‘Do you know how to teach a sound to bite? / Do I go surfing through a net all night?’) and even triplets. These emphatic full rhymes are suggestive of the advertising jingles and ‘sound bites’ the poet finds so offensive.

If there is a tongue-in-cheek performance of the prickly pensioner here (‘I-pod’ is a hideous word), there is also genuine concern: what will become of ‘carpenters’ and ‘makers’ like Stevenson in an age of ‘TXT SPK’, ‘convenience speech’, and split second sound bites – those ‘ritual syllables you need to use / To charm the world and

not be crushed by it?’<sup>935</sup> Indeed, to the inferred addressee, fellow poet John Lucas, she confesses, ‘my guess is that “at this point in time” / English is leaving you and me behind.’ The endearment ‘Dear John’ is a pun on the ‘Dear John letters’ sent during World War Two, abruptly terminating a relationship, and implies that these elder poets are being unceremoniously abandoned by the language they have worked with throughout their long careers. In the unpublished essay, ‘What is Happening to Poetry’, the poet notes:

As Internet technology increasingly replaces communication by pen and paper, the resources of verbal expression have adapted themselves to visual habits of writing. Cell phone ‘texting’ has developed a short hand that is working itself into mainstream English, while the virtual world of the television does nothing to arrest the deterioration either of accurately chosen words or the basic rules of grammar.<sup>936</sup>

Despite elsewhere giving us the image of the poet-as-maker manipulating words as a carpenter shapes and hews a piece of wood, here she suggests that ‘it may even be that our best, most sensitive writers are those *least* able to manipulate words, the slowest to fall into habits of convenience speech.’<sup>937</sup>

Though each of Stevenson’s poems is the hard-won product and record of an ‘intolerable wrestle with words and meanings’, the poet’s instinct to capture within language our experience of the world remains undiminished. The final poem in Stevenson’s latest collection, *Astonishment* (2012), ends with the lines:

For all that’s wrong,  
*Lenten is come with love to town.*  
New times, old words.

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<sup>935</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 18.

<sup>936</sup> ‘What is Happening to Poetry?’

<sup>937</sup> “‘The Way You Say the World Is What You Get’,” 162.

In a light green haze,  
let's try, with the practical birds,  
to praise love's ways.<sup>938</sup>

If, as Stevenson suggests, *Astonishment* is to be her final collection, this affirmation that 'old words' might help us live in these 'New times' may prove to be her last (and lasting) words on the subject.

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<sup>938</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft of 'Spring Again,' 2012. Author's personal papers.

### Afterword: An Unfinished Poem?

In the opening section of *A Lament for the Makers*, a poem that attests to and evidences the longevity and persistence of works of literature and their authors, we find a perhaps surprising admission:

A last, late finger of grace  
Still brightens far reaches  
Of a barbarous empire

Lyrical and lovingly.  
Most of what we write  
Time will erase.<sup>939</sup>

The syntactic inversion of the last sentence enacts its own prediction, as the hard *t* of ‘write’ is washed away by the sinuous *s* of ‘erase’. Just as the sea will erode ‘millimetre by millimetre / mud books and fossil prints / from tall crumbling shelves along the shore’, time will expunge all but the best efforts of the most accomplished ‘makers’ from our collective memories.<sup>940</sup> As Tim Kendall notes, though a measure of consolation may be derived from the figuring of the poem as ‘A late, last finger of grace’ in a darkening sky, the reality is even bleaker than the poet-speaker can bear to admit: ‘For all the poem’s wishful thinking’, he suggests, ‘time will erase *all*, not “Most”, of “what we write”, even Shakespeare’s “powreful rime”’.<sup>941</sup>

As noted in the chapter on elegy, in *A Lament for the Makers* Stevenson presents us with two possible models for the afterlife that fulfill our need for some kind of consolation whilst also registering our philosophical and spiritual scepticism. The

**Comment [E50]:** *Italicized*

<sup>939</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, l.i.

<sup>940</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 401.

<sup>941</sup> Tim Kendall, ““Time will erase”: Anne Stevenson and Elegy,” 207.

‘worst blessed’ – those ‘makers’ who are cruelly compelled to ‘insinuate [them]selves through art into memory’ – are the recipients of an interminable (after)life tenure on Lethe’s left bank, persisting in the imaginations, memories, and texts of subsequent generations.<sup>942</sup> Those who are spared the compulsion to seek the ‘bitter fame’ of critical and popular acclaim are allowed to silently ‘take themselves off into fresh things’, they will be quietly ‘reborn’ into ‘sperm, embryos, mayflies, / maggots, millipedes, moth-codlings.’<sup>943</sup> Stevenson’s model gives us a useful way to think about poems as well as their ‘makers’. A small minority of poems will be preserved intact, included in anthologies, and learned by rote in their entirety, particular ‘plummet lines’ or phrases absorbed into our collective consciousness.<sup>944</sup> Others will be forgotten, ‘slip[ping] from the noose of their names’.<sup>945</sup> Even if the particular configurations of words are lost from our collective memory, though, the words of which they are made will ‘take themselves off into fresh things’, and will be reused, reworked, freshly laundered and stitched anew by the poet-laundrer in his ‘special launderette’.<sup>946</sup> As such, every word has a life-story, a paper-trail of prior usage, calling to the conscious or unconscious mind notable past incarnations. In *A Lament for the Makers* the abrupt sentences and end-stopped lines of the final stanza seem already to anticipate this possible fragmentation: ‘I am alive. I’m human. / Get dressed. Make coffee. / Shore a few lines against my ruin.’<sup>947</sup> Even as this ‘maker’ articulates her intention to protect herself against ‘ruin’ with a few more lines of verse, she augurs her own eventual un-making.

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<sup>942</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, I. vi.

<sup>943</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>944</sup> *Stone Milk*, 51.

<sup>945</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, I. vi.

<sup>946</sup> *Stone Milk*, 52.

<sup>947</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, II.vii.

In recent years, a third model of the afterlife, 'digital, clean, indestructible', has presented itself to the poet's imagination in the form of the internet.<sup>948</sup> Stevenson, nearing the end of her eighth decade, is unsurprisingly vociferous in her disdain for the new brand of immortality promised by 'the great web's face book and bird's nest.' In 'Paper,' she declares:

The afterlife? To live on, on line,  
without a mind of one's own?  
I can't love these fidgety digits!  
I want to go home,  
I want to keep warm in my burrow  
of piled up paper –

Though the internet may offer an electronic immortality invulnerable to fire, flood, or foxing, this 'maker' will happily 'keep house in a paper graveyard' along with Blake, Bishop, Hughes, and Horowitz. The growing body of Stevenson's literary material and correspondence in Cambridge University Library is deserving of further scholarly attention, and will undoubtedly come to be regarded as a valuable resource for the study of twentieth-century British and American poetry and poetics.

In 2007, Stevenson, the recipient of several major British and American poetry prizes in the last decade, suggested that the ultimate prize sought by poets is posthumous persistence and acclaim: 'If your poems are good they win the ultimate prize of surviving you. That's why you keep your finger on the thread of Ariadne through the maze; if you're careful you can see it glistening ahead of you in the distance.'<sup>949</sup> In a piece written in 2009, however, the poet suggests that even the survival of creative work is not the primary motivation for poets to write. Though

<sup>948</sup> Anne Stevenson, word-processed draft, 'Paper' (2012). Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

<sup>949</sup> Tom Gatti, 'Anne Stevenson: the secret life of a poet.'



productively preoccupied with questions of poetic longevity and survival, Stevenson understands that, ultimately, fame and acclaim are secondary motivations for the true poet. Responding to Dylan Thomas' 'In my Craft or Sullen Art', she writes:

One night, sober and truthful, labouring alone by a gas (surely not fluorescent) lamp's 'singing light', he [Thomas] encountered his true muse, and he knew it. Why and for whom was he writing? Not for money or fame, not for poetry prizes or out of ambition to become a pop star, *not even to achieve a place in the ranks of the great poets*, 'But for the lovers, their arms / Round the griefs of the ages, / Who pay no praise or wages / Nor heed my craft or art.' I like to think these last marvellous lines came to Thomas like gifts from heaven. They will teach their lesson to poets (whose chief vice is usually egotistical ambition) as long as poetry lasts. (Italics mine)<sup>950</sup>

The 'lesson' of these 'marvellous' lines is the same one taught by Stevenson's own manifesto poem, 'Making Poetry'. The 'true' poet writes neither for financial reward, popular or critical acclaim, poetry prizes, nor even for standing room on Lethe's left bank, but rather out of some ultimately inarticulable compulsion:

Oh, it's the shared comedy of the worst  
blessed; the sound leading the hand;  
a wordlife running from mind to mind  
through the washed rooms of the simple senses;  
one of those haunted, undefendable, unpoetic  
crosses we have to find.<sup>951</sup>

Though resistant to the attempts of critics and 'sycophant PhDs' to place her within a particular school or tradition, Stevenson willingly engages in a deeply considered self-placement within her poetry.<sup>952</sup> If, in poems such as *A Lament for the Makers*, 'A

<sup>950</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'Not for ambition or bread: Poets respond to Dylan Thomas' "In my Craft or Sullen Art", Knit a Poem Project, *The Poetry Society*, 7 October 2009. Accessed on 29 August 2012 <<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/knit/poetviews/>>.

<sup>951</sup> *Poems 1955-2005*, 17.

<sup>952</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, II. Ii.

Legacy', and 'The Fiction Makers', the poet acknowledges poetic debts and pays homage to her antecedents, then she also claims for herself a place within a long line of accomplished 'makers' from both sides of the Atlantic. In the Preface to the Clutag Press special edition of *A Lament for the Makers* (2006), Stevenson writes:

I do not consider that this *Lament for the Makers* is complete, but surely I have worked that three-line stanza – flexible as it is – hard enough. My present plan is to write further 'movements' in different shapes, moods and tempi, perhaps about different poets or different kinds of 'makers'. To write any more, though, will take months and years of time, and I am not sure how much of that precious commodity I still have at my disposal. At the end of this 'episode' the narrator wakes from a night of troubled dreams to watch storm clouds roll away into a dawn that will, of course, lead to another night and different dreams. This seems a good place to halt, look around and listen out for whatever or whoever it is that next applies for a little space on the left bank of Lethe.<sup>953</sup>

That the poet anticipates another Orphic journey into that 'underworld of words' suggests that there are debts left unacknowledged and dialogues with fellow 'makers' still to be had.<sup>954</sup> Despite expressing grave concerns about the development of both the English language and poetry, she is able to look, Janus-faced, to both the past and to the future, uncertain though it may be.

Eliot maintained that 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.'<sup>955</sup> If this thesis has on one level attempted to show the complex nature of the inheritance that is manifest in Stevenson's work, by the same token, this rich understanding of Stevenson's work enables us to return to these literary antecedents and read them anew through the prism of the later texts. It is partly her own eloquent engagement with the work of her poetic predecessors that insures the survival

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<sup>953</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, Preface.

<sup>954</sup> *A Lament for the Makers*, I. iii.

<sup>955</sup> 'Tradition', 39.

and futurity of her own work, and we look to the time when Stevenson herself will become one of the 'makers' with whose work a new generation of poets will converse and engage.

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**Literary papers and correspondence of Anne Stevenson. Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cambridge University Library (CUL MS Add. 9451):**

**Poems:**

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Ars Poetica Feminea', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Belief and Disbelief', undated.

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CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten drafts, 'Dialogue for One Person' / 'Dialogue of Puritans', / 'Dialogue for Puritans', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'The Doll', undated. (That the poem is signed 'Anne Hitchcock' suggests that it was written between 1955 and 1960).

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Escape by Landscape', undated. (That the poem is signed 'Anne Stevenson Hitchcock' suggests that that it was written between 1955 and 1960).

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Wordprocessed draft, 'Escaping from the Cave', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Handwritten and typewritten drafts, 'Fictions' / 'An Unfinishable Poem' / 'From an Unfinished Poem', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'History', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Indian Summer', undated. (That the poem is signed 'Anne Hitchcock' suggests that it was written between 1955 and 1960).

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'J. Ross in Hell, or The Devil Meets his match', c. 1950-1955.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Lament for Mrs Kennedy', undated.

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CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Mrs. Emerson visits the Concord Jail, September 1846', 1970.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'My Tag Says I'm Mrs. Meredith', undated. (Poem is preceded by a quote from *The Economist*, January 18<sup>th</sup> 1992, so written subsequent to that date).

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Postcard from a Daughter', undated . (Likely connected to *Correspondences*).

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Red Rock Fault', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, '~~She~~ Sappho Lusts for the Muse,' undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'The Son' / 'England's Prodigal', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Sonnet', undated.

**Prose:**

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Typewritten draft, 'The Making of *Bitter Fame*', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Typewritten pages, largely on the writing of *Bitter Fame*, undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Word-processed notes for Stevenson's keynote lecture/reading at West Chester, 8 June 2005.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) "'Thinking" Poetry – A Personal View' / "'Thinking" in Poetry', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) 'Why Should We Trust Poetry?' (The Kenneth Allott Lecture delivered at the University of Liverpool, 25th March 2009).

CUL MS Add. 9541(Prose) Typewritten draft, 'Contemporary American Poetry', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Prose) Typewritten draft, 'The Writer in the University', undated.

CUL MS Add. 9541. (Prose) Typewritten draft, 'Contemporary American Poetry,' undated.

**Correspondence:**

CUL MS add. 9541 (Correspondence) Handwritten letter from Anne Stevenson to Olwyn Hughes, undated and unsigned.

**Drama:**

CUL MS ADD. 9451 (Drama, including fiction radio scripts) Typewritten copy of 'Sisters', undated.

CUL MS ADD. 9451 (Drama, including fiction radio scripts) Typewritten script of 'Tempus Immutabile: A tragical-comical-historical-pastoral poem unlimited', 1949-1950.



**Criticism:**

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Criticism) Word-processed draft, 'Review: Song of the Earth, Jonathan Bate (Picador, 2001),' undated.

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**Autobiographical writings and curricula vitae:**

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CUL MS Add. 9451 (Interviews and questionnaires) 'Dear Helen, 2 April 2000'. Word-processed responses to interview questions from Helena Nelson, for an interview that appeared in DARK HORSE (Spring 2000).

**Anne Stevenson's Personal and Family Papers (Not included in CUL MS Add. 9451 as of October 2012):**

Stevenson, Anne. 'Elegies and Love Poems,' transcript of a lecture/reading at the University of Hull, 24 April 2002.

---. Word-processed draft of poem, 'Constable Cloud and a Kestrel's Feather.' 2012. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

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Typewritten transcript of letter from Herman Duhme II to his sons, Frank and Herman III, 1868. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

Handwritten letter from Lewis Wesley Destler to Louise Destler on Haynes Hotel, Dayton, Ohio, notepaper, 25th November 1927. Anne Stevenson's personal papers.

### **Other Personal Papers:**

Stevenson, Anne, and J. Edward Chamberlin. Personal correspondence (including drafts of 'A Legacy' and critical pieces). 1982-1985.

### **Interviews with Anne Stevenson conducted by the author:**

Stevenson, Anne. Personal interview, conducted at 'Saying the World: Anne Stevenson with Angela Leighton.' Poetry reading at Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts, Newcastle University, 26 November 2010.

---. E-mail interview. 4 December 2010.

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---. E-mail interview. 19 September 2011.

---. Oral interview. 4 January 2012.

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---. Oral interview. 27 August 2012.

Appendix I

**Material from CUL MS Add. 9451**

Literary papers and correspondence of Anne Stevenson

Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University  
Archives

Against Romantics

16

Against Romantics

His real cowardice was  
he would not see  
beyond the inspiring words  
to the real sea  
where he might have done something  
almost heroically  
had he dared believe  
in its neutrality.

what you used to see..."

"Yes, I remember."

She took his hand.

"Well, come with me," she pulled him,

"I'll do the seeing for you,

then maybe you'll dream

just what it ought to be...~~just what it is.~~

"There, feel roughness? That's our chestnut tree...

now, this ~~soft~~ tickle on your palm...that's moss..."

~~Two started from the door~~ <sup>They came</sup> to steer her from him

in case he was cross,

~~then stopped~~ <sup>But</sup> ~~nodded.~~ No, she had no pity.

He was going like a lamb.

From CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Blind Man and Child,'  
undated.

# CONFSSIONAL

You come to complain about  
 painting your sash windows  
 but I know you are licking  
 the gloom of your salty misfortunes.

Though it wasn't your fault  
 you fell out of your sixth job? Seventh job?

It wasn't your fault  
 he is married but has fallen for you.

It's an all day job  
 just thinking about how your life happens,

how you feel, how he feels,  
 she she feels, how your friends feel;  
 then the bud-to-gruit business  
 of waiting and meeting and loving  
 on the shaky bed of 'Oh, darling,  
 if only! ' 'I know.'

Well, it's your book  
 but you don't really write it, do you?  
 Reading yourself I think is what it comes to.

Shyly you are opening, shyly. Talk about windows!

Talk about windows, let's please talk about windows.

Daddy, daddy, daddy,  
What shall I do?

But this time it's no go, honeypot.  
 I'm through!

Because we know you too well, little Libby,  
 with your fouled up life such a  
 catscradle of female confusion,  
 all dreams and drug trips to illusion!  
 Kid, watching you wind yourself up in your psyche  
 like watching a web catch a fly!

Make yourself simple, Elizabeth.  
 Use your head.  
 You can't string logical pearls  
 on a snarled up thread.  
 The New Woman! The New Bitch!  
 Whimpering to be free (as who can be?)  
 both of sex and for sex.  
 Hopped up to shoot for some  
 Happiness Unlimited  
 which will spare you the nuisance  
 (small item)  
 of/

From CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) 'MAY 24, 1972: DR FRANK CHATTLE  
 WRITES A FIRM LETTER TO HIS DAUGHTER,' undated.



Dialogue <sup>OK</sup> Puritans

To wake with your absence  
like an arm around me.

No one has taken anything away.

But the years, love, the years.

No. There are children.

~~But~~ not mine, love, not ours.

They belong to themselves.

We belong to ourselves.

But will they forgive us,  
~~Our happiness, our selfishness?~~

~~They~~ They will forget us.

Then you and I, love,  
will not forgive ourselves.

We will forgive ourselves

~~we forget ourselves.~~

*if we ~~will~~ <sup>forget</sup> ourselves  
will forget*

# THE DOLL

"Well, I'm whiter! That's the difference.

Just look at me  
straight out of the automatic,  
fresh as soap.  
And as for that soiled,  
stinking, threadbare....damn it,  
we're through!"

"O.K. We've been watching.  
Following. Watching.  
What's that sleazy habit?  
What's that cheap line?  
Who's this scarecrow?  
Look, you won't do."

"No? And what about this  
doll on my shoulders  
with her starched hair?  
She's paid for this washday!"  
"What's she got to do with it?  
She's not you!"

CUL MS Add. (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'The Doll', undated. (That the poem is signed 'Anne Hitchcock' suggests it was written between 1955 and 1960).

## LAMENT FOR MRS KENNEDY

Mrs. Kennedy is dead - our good butcher -  
with her Irish eye for a carcass,  
with her Irish tongue for a customer,  
who wooed us by name and our children's names,  
who knew how we lived by what she carved up for

Alas, she is mourned by November rain  
and November dark  
and by all the untalkative English who came  
less for meat than for comfort.  
She's gone who alone  
could have lightened the weight of her loss.

Look. Even the cows lie heavily on the grass,  
refusing to eat or look up, from unhappiness.

Little Poem Against Metaphor

These dahlias displaying  
 huge lurid rosettes,  
 not the colours of sin.  
 Cat's vole with its feet  
 set so neatly together  
 by the compost bin,  
 not praying.

*without*  
Little Poem ~~Against~~ Metaphor

These dahlias, displaying  
 huge lurid corollae  
 are not the colours of sin.

Cat's vole, O its feet  
 set neatly together,  
 is not praying.

From CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Four typewritten drafts, 'Little Poem Against / Without Metaphor,' undated.



Postcard from a Daughter

Dear Dad,  
Mad dad in Ohio,  
"Trust 'od and love Christ," *dear,*  
You said. Just  
Consider now how they responded.  
Took away your eyesight.  
Took away your kid.  
Took the very mind  
From your head.  
And then made you wait  
To be dead.

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Postcard for a Daughter,'  
undated. (Likely connected to *Correspondences*).

The Son

I have come back.  
 But I hate her, her motherly meanness.  
 What did she ever give me  
 but my birth and grief?  
 I have come back.  
 I will live with her bit in my teeth.  
 I will live without money or luck.  
 She demeans me, demeans me!  
 Is there only this idiot lady  
 to let me in?  
 I have taken the bit in my teeth.  
 There is no way back.  
 Dear God let it not be my teeth  
 when the bite is taken.  
 I would die for her deafness and weakness.  
 And how does she pay me?  
 Ingenuous speech, this roof,  
 unforgiven forgiveness.

### Escaping from the Cave

The ancient belief that body lets go its ghost  
 Only at death, like invisible thistledown – no!  
 I can better believe the opposite is so,  
 That flesh is the fly-away guest a spacious host  
 Breathes in and out, an element at most  
 That in transmission clings and starts to grow,  
 Nameless today, tomorrow a face, a show,  
 Parented, schooled, determinedly self-engrossed,

Till eyes' exchanges seem reliable,  
 And 'Here I am!' agrees with 'We have seen.'  
 A few escape and slip behind the screen,  
 Where what they meet's so wonder-terrible  
 They never dare pretend again they've been  
 More than a voice in the void, a link between.

Anne Stevenson

CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Word-processed draft, 'Escaping from the Cave,'  
 undated.

INDIAN SUMMER

It seems that nowhere is there anything  
 So sweet and ripe with indolence as here.  
 The calendar is worn with fingering,  
 We near the termination of a year,  
 Waiting with the starling and the deer  
 For a kiss that death has made mysterious,  
 For a crisis summer never had to fear.  
 We do not fear it, but are curious  
To know if passionate things can worry us.  
 Fruit: pears, apples, green and orange

This is an incident Euripides  
 Would use to race the pulses of a crowd  
 If under its sky's tremendous canopies  
 A tight-lipped twentieth century allowed  
 An easy emigration from the shroud.  
 But genius, even of ghostly cast is reason.  
 To know what no one dares to say out loud  
 Is dangerous and damnable as treason,  
 And truth is not an appetite of seasons.  
 Choosing among chrysanthemums, the wives  
 Of Business, Profession and Administration buy  
 From the laps of farms where sleeping sap survives  
 Generations of each year's good-by.  
 We stop our buying, stare and wonder why  
 An imminent abduction does not cause  
 Rumour or scandal or fury to be born.  
 Death comes; seasons for all are only laws,  
 And, try as we will, there seems no way to warn  
 Either the Indian summer or the Indian corn.

Anne Hitchcock

From CUL MS Add. 9451 (Poems) Typewritten draft, 'Indian Summer,' undated.  
 (That the poem is signed 'Anne Hitchcock' suggests that it was written between  
 1955 and 1960).



## Sonnet

We watched the colors on a changing sky  
While talking. Someone spoke of poetry,  
And envied pleasures worded ecstasy,  
And sorrow's spoken tears. Reflecting, I  
Too wished that I could recognize  
My language in the sun-made colors there,  
And write a worded glory to compare  
With that a scarlet sun can improvise.

Later, when alone, I thought of you,  
Recalling how you watched quite silently,  
Not needing tongue or words to crystalize  
Emotion. Thinking of your quietness, I knew  
That greatest poets write no poetry  
But speak some silent language with the skies.

## ARS POETICA FEMINEA

Somebody ought to be dead.  
 It ought to be you.  
 Maybe it ought to be me. *throat.*  
 One of us two.  
 Not them, anyway,  
~~Not~~ the babies. Even I  
 couldn't bear...  
 God, there's a point where  
 suffering isn't creative,  
 isn't there?

Really, it has to be me.  
 I could do it at home.  
 --Honey, if only you'd dare  
 write one real poem!  
 But I dig your big clichés.  
 Darling. You're male,  
 and you're scared.  
 All those libraries.  
 All those dignities.  
 They pull out the pain  
 like a nail.  
 They suck off the head.  
 By the way that reminds me:  
 next time you're naked  
 do please find my scissors.  
*and* ~~I'll~~ snip off ~~your~~ <sup>my</sup> toenail.  
*Not* ~~it~~ cuts me in bed.

## Appendix II

**Typewritten transcript of letter from  
Herman Duhme II to his sons, Frank and  
Herman III, 1868. Anne Stevenson's  
personal papers.**