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"THIS IS MY ROOM": MODERNIST WOMEN'S POETIC SELF-DISCLOSURES

by

ANN K. HOFF

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

-2003-

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

April 28, 2003
Date

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29 April 2003
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Abstract

"THIS IS MY ROOM":
MODERNIST WOMEN'S POETIC SELF-DISCLOSURES

by

Ann K. Hoff

Advisor: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

In the early twentieth century, critics accused women writing their personal experiences of being overly "sentimental." Many women poets dissociated themselves from such accusations by composing impersonal poetry, yet many still wrote about the self through poetic experimentation. Such poems still await readings as autobiographies, for few critics have questioned autobiography theorist Philippe Lejeune's statement: "whereas there exist thousands of autobiographies in prose, we can count on one hand the autobiographies in verse" (On Autobiography 128). This dissertation discusses experiments in poetic autobiography by Gertrude Stein, Hilda Doolittle, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Elizabeth Bishop.

Influenced by the cubist interest in geometry as well as by Whitehead's Principia Mathematica (1913), which established modern logic, Stein opted to write an autobiography in the form of what the poem calls "a persuasion," or a geometric proof. Instead of narrative, "Lifting Belly" presents events and personality traits as axioms, or accepted truths, to demonstrate the personality. Helen in Egypt captures the duality of H.D.'s bisexual life and career as no other of her texts is able to do. Characters Helen

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and Achilles represent the male and female sides of a bisexual identity. Their quest to "translate" their unity mirrors H.D.'s pursuit of the autobiographical mode that would best express her bisexual experience. Millay's *Fatal Interview* recounts her affair with poet George Dillon, and is full of intimate details, which the sonnet's traditional universal speaker only minimally obscures. Reception of *Fatal Interview* ranges from praise to disdain, but collectively indicates that critical discomfort with poetic self-disclosure arises from the view that the act is culpably feminine. Elizabeth Bishop's ongoing conversation with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell about what level of self-disclosure is appropriate in poetry makes her own poetic autobiographies especially interesting. In "First Death in Nova Scotia" and "Sestina," Bishop creates an autobiographical pact which withholds information from readers, placing them in a powerless position, which mimics her own as a child. Her poem "In the Waiting Room" affords a pedagogy for teaching autobiography theory's crucial components.

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AKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank the CUNY Graduate Center for the support of the Helaine Newstead Dissertation Fellowship, and for the many teaching fellowships that have sponsored my work.

I am deeply indebted to my advisor and mentor, Wayne Koestenbaum, whose tireless attention and sage advice has made this project possible, and far more interesting. One cannot do justice in any typeface to the peculiar power of Wayne's voice, but it is a sound etched in my mind's ear, and I hear it in the presence of all things "fascinating." That voice has helped me begin to find my own. I must also express my deepest gratitude to Nancy K. Miller, who kept me moving forward through moments of frustration and doubt, and who sparked the idea in the first place. For constantly reminding me that the pursuit of intellectual aims is eminently *enjoyable*, I thank Mary Ann Caws with all my heart. I also sincerely thank Norman Kelvin, a spirit whose wisdom and gentility I deeply admire. Special thanks also go out to Joan Richardson, Linda Sherwin, Anne Humphereys, Electa Arenal, Marilyn Weber, Hugh English, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Finally, I must thank my family. Thanks to Peter and Judy who are my ultimate professional role models, and to Helen who gives me faith. Thanks to Jen and Molly for their steadfast sisterhood. Thanks to my brother Sean who went before. Thanks to Amy who taught me how to write my name etc., etc., ad infinitum. Thanks to Theo (for arriving at just the right time) and to Charlie -- the greatest rescue hero ever.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BML	Bid Me to Live
CP	Collected Poems
ETT	End to Torment
GHA	Geographical History of America
HIE	Helen in Egypt
LB	"Lifting Belly"
PIT	Paint It Today
PP	"Patriarchal Poetry"
SE	Standard Edition: Freud's Collected Work
TTF	Tribute to Freud

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INTRODUCTION:

"This is My Room": Modern Women Poets and Self-Disclosure

"I myself, I myself, I myself. This is my room." This liberating assertion of the main character in H.D.'s autobiographical novel, Bid Me to Live, rises from a jumble of identities called forth by the narrator. "He called her Anthea. It was Julie, Judy, Judy-bird, or Julie-bird. Anthea" (21). The main character's struggle mirrors Hilda Doolittle's own, to establish and assert her identity in the face of a crazy-quilt of given names, nicknames, pen names, and pet names. Throughout this and her other novels, insistent contemplations of selfhood engulf the reader. Her poetry contains the same preoccupation with articulating the self, but lyric simplicity and aesthetic complexity alternately mask this essential aspect of her poetry. A closer look at the poems of H.D., Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Elizabeth Bishop reveals that scholars have thus far misunderstood or underestimated their most innovative autobiographies.

One of the reasons their poems still await readings as autobiographies is that early definitions of the genre disqualified the lyric, asserting that acts of literary recollection predominantly take narrative form. The progenitor of the discipline of autobiography theory, Philippe Lejeune, prescribed in the 1980s that an autobiography should be: "A retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (On Autobiography 4). Since that time, a great deal of the work in autobiography studies has centered around Lejeune's attempt to define autobiography as a distinct genre, and has questioned the boundaries he set.

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Indeed many theorists, and in particular feminist scholars, have resisted Lejeune's restrictive efforts. In her book Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century Linda Anderson writes, "I have not felt constrained by definitions of autobiography as a genre, which in any case tend to perpetuate a masculine genealogy of the subject, but have included here different kinds of autobiographical writing – diaries, letters, fiction, and theoretical writing" (10). Likewise, in her article "Women's Autobiographical Selves," Susan Stanford Friedman advises her reader that "strict definitions of autobiography are stretched to include memoirs, 'portraits,' journals, letters, and essays, since they seem interpenetrating and mutually enriching forms of self-inscription" (Crucial Conversations 4-5). Poems are notably lacking from these lists.

While theorists are willing to examine private letters and even unpublished journals through the lens of autobiography theory, they are hesitant to apply the theories to the personal disclosure that distinguishes so many published poems. Indeed, few have questioned Lejeune's declaration that, "whereas there exist thousands of autobiographies in prose, we can count on one hand the autobiographies in verse, if we understand by autobiography a narrative recapitulation of a life" (128). Lejeune himself does point to a handful of verse autobiographies, among which he includes Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Hugo's *Contemplations*, and Aragon's *The Unfinished Novel.* He even admits:

> To eliminate' such texts based on a "definition" would be a rather ridiculous attitude. But the definition allows us to situate these marginal cases in their difference, as much in relation to poetry (use of a clearly autobiographical "I"

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> secured on the proper name of the author, in place of the traditional lyric "I") as in relation to autobiography (130).

However, in the final analysis he insists, "...the total still does not exceed the number of fingers on two hands," and readings of lyric poetry as autobiography remain as few as Lejeune suggests they should (128).

The formal impediments to understanding poetry as autobiography are three-fold. First, poetry confounds Lejeune's vision of autobiography because it does not depend on a narrative progression. Poems can be circuitous, or hover in a single moment indefinitely. Second, lyric poetry has an established history of using a universalized and thereby fictionalized first-person voice, which makes it difficult to verify the confluence of author and speaker, or the "autobiographical pact." Finally, poetry's propensity to choose beauty of language over accuracy of fact makes it tempting to dismiss self-representations in verse as universalisms or generalities. Many suggest that these factors make it too difficult to consider poems through autobiography theory.

However, the dearth of readings of poetic autobiographies does not arise solely from these formal concerns. As Lejeune observed, the pervasive diffidence toward explicating lyric autobiographies does indeed say as much about their marginality in relation to poetry as in relation to autobiography theory. Celeste Schenck, in her article "All of a Piece: Women's Poetry and Autobiography," goes beyond his observation to implicate those who draw exclusionary lines around genres as agents of a kind of literary eugenics. She argues:

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> Western genre theory remains for the most part prescriptive, legislative, even metaphysical: its traditional preoccupations have been the establishment of limits, the drawing of exclusionary lines, the fierce protection of idealized generic (and implicitly sexual and racial) purity (Schenck 285).

Schenck contends that genre and gender prescriptions equally restrict autobiographers. She also maintains that works of "mixed unclassified, blurred or hybrid genres, like impure, anomalous, or monstrous genders, have traditionally offered up problems to their diagnosticians" (Schencke 284). Texts that merge genres -- like H.D.'s Helen in Egypt, for instance -- rouse a dissonance analogous to that which bisexuality has historically inspired.

Schenck argues that the opposition to reading poetry as autobiography is, at its root, a refusal to legitimize one of the dominant modes of women's writing.[1] She alleges: "women's poetry has often been assigned similar 'autobiographical status,' which has relegated it as well to the unsorted pile of sanitized generic laundry" (287). For instance, she notes that women "became 'custodians of the ballad tradition,'" but that forms such as the epic remain "organized around martial conflict, gynophobia, and aggressivity" (285). She further suggests that male dominance in these forms perpetuates a sense that the forms are inherently superior (285). She concludes:

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[1] Sidonie Smith, in A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation, also notes that autobiography has an essentially patriarchal history when she observes that "every woman who writes autobiography ends up interrogating the prevailing ideology of gender..." (57). In her book, Smith examines the "ways in which the [female] autobiographer establishes the discursive authority to interpret herself publicly in a patriarchal culture and androcentric genre that have written stories of woman for her, thereby fictionalizing and effectively silencing her" (45).

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> ...modern and contemporary women's poetry and autobiography – as texts recording the negotiating of the female self-in-process between the historical fact of displacement and the possibility of textual self-presence – may be fruitfully conceived of as cut from the same bolt" (287).

Schenck proposes that reading women's poetry as autobiography "hastens the undoing of a Western generic practice based on exclusion, limit, hierarchy, taxonomy, and formal norms" (286). Her work theorizes the importance of reading poetry as autobiography – especially that of modern and contemporary women – but readings that ascribe to her theory remain few.

However, one theorist in particular has already examined the merits of poetic autobiography. In his book Metaphors of Self, James Olney interprets T.S. Eliot's long poem *Four Quartets* as an autobiography and suggests:

> The truth that poetry embodies, large or small as it may be, is a whole truth, and ideally it engages thought equally with feeling, intuition equally with observation; it engages, that is to say, the whole man and his entire consciousness, all his experience, and his vision recollected in tranquility, of that experience" (Metaphors of Self 261).

He goes on to assert that "recall and recapitulation ... are the twin techniques by which Eliot effects the transformation of personality in the poem, and I would suggest further that recall and recapitulation are the very essence of great autobiography" (262). Although Olney suggests that *Four Quartets* is too long, varied, and complex for the reader to "maintain a sense of secure possession throughout" he nevertheless makes an important case for reading poetry as autobiography. He insists, "poetry that is

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expressive and autobiographic in a deeper than personalistic or historic sense draws metaphors, or accepts and adopts them, from the self as it is becoming and then displays all the world to the reader through the glass of these metaphors" (273).

Indeed, it seems obvious that a great deal of poetry contains elements of autobiography. Certainly, there is a long tradition of the personal in the American lyric, which includes in its scope poets from Bradstreet to Pinsky. And yet, as escort to this history, strides a parallel tradition of discomfort with the personal in poetry. At the root of this aversion is a deep-seated sense that the act of self-disclosure in poetry is culpably feminine. Women who embed their self-disclosure in lyric poetry draw from the longest literary tradition available to them, for Sappho established herself as a master of the lyric in the seventh century B.C. However, any authorization the lyric affords women's writing comes at a price and fetters poetic autobiographies to that history's liabilities.[2]

Anne Carson, in her essay "The Gender of Sound," traces our distaste for female utterance to the very roots of the Western literary tradition. She cites Sophokles' description of Echo as "the girl with no door on her mouth" as evidence that female utterance has long been objectionable due to the lack of control it has traditionally represented (Carson 119, 121).[3] She explains that in ancient Greek society, "verbal continence" was an essential masculine virtue called *sophrosyne* (126). Carson's

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[2] In Theodore Roethke's Selected Prose, he outlines the charges most frequently leveled against poetry by women (133). Among them are: "lack of range – in subject matter and emotional tone – and lack of a sense of humor ... the embroidery of trivial themes, a concern with the mere surfaces of life ... lyric or religious posturing ... lamenting the lot of women, caterwauling, writing the same poem about fifty times, etc." (133-4).

[3] Carson refers here to Philoktetes 188.

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careful etymology of the word *sophrosyne* shows that when applied to men, the word means "prudence, soundness of mind, moderation, temperance, self-control" (126). However, she observes that these ancient cultures saw women as a "species" that "lack[s] the ordering principle of *sophrosyne*" (126). When the word is applied to women, it becomes "coextensive with female obedience to male direction and rarely means more than chastity" (126).

Carson also relates the story from Plutarch's "On Talkativeness" in which he relates the story of a man, Anacharsis, who tells his wife a secret. The wife, after vowing silence, tells just one other woman, who then likewise tells one other woman, and so on until the secret is public knowledge. Plutarch likens the wife to a leaking vase, but imbues the character of Anacharsis with "the masculine virtue of self-censorship," which the story shows "to be simply unavailable to the female nature" (Carson 130). Carson argues that these perceptions linger in "modern discussions of voice," which still find that "female sound is bad to hear *both* because the quality of a woman's voice is objectionable *and* because woman uses her voice to say what should not be said" (133).[4] Further, Carson explicitly connects this displeasure at women's voices to uncensored self-disclosure. She posits:

> Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside projected to the outside. The censorship of such projections is a task of patriarchal culture that ... divides

[4] Carson observes that this discomfort with hearing women disclose too much persists in the twentieth century, and uses as an example, Hemingway's disgust at over-hearing Gertrude Stein and her lover Alice Toklas in an intimate conversation (Carson 121-2). Hemingway describes the incident to which Carson refers in A Moveable Feast (118).

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> humanity into two species: those who can censor themselves and those who cannot (130).

In Carson's estimation, any act of self-disclosure by a woman inherently opens her up to accusations of verbal lasciviousness.[5] In lyric poetry, a genre historically marked by the strict verbal controls of rhyme and meter, female immoderation in self-expression becomes particularly unpalatable.[6]

The act of writing personally in the lyric mode has remained associated with the feminine, in large part because women poets entered the poetic profession still restricted in worldly experience. Their limited access to the public realm translated into a feminine poetics grounded in the local, familial, and personal. Our country's first published poet, Anne Bradstreet, expressed her sense of the personal poem's inferiority in "The Prologue." She begins: "To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings/ Of cities founded, commonwealths begun/ for my mean pen are too superior things" (lines 1-3). In this preface to her volume of poems about motherhood, family, and home, she declares that her work "shall not dim [the] worth" of the historical poems of great men. However, Bradstreet's claim is ironic.

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[5] Carson discusses at some length the notion that the vulva represents a second mouth and that there is a culturally tenacious connection between verbal and sexual excess in women. In particular, she writes about a group of terracotta statues that consist "of almost nothing but her two mouths." She notes that "iconographers identify this monster with the old woman named Baubo" who is "credited in legend with the twofold gesture of pulling up her clothes to reveal her genitalia and also shouting out obscene language or jokes" (135).

[6] Many forms of lyric poetry also carry traditions that prescribe their method and content. The sonnet form, for instance, traditionally offers a conceit in its octave and a resolution in its sestet. Likewise, sonnets have been the traditional form for love poems, the ballad for tales of heroism, and the epic for quests and homecoming journeys. Many poets have recognized that to play with these forms by altering rhyme schemes, meters, or traditional content, is an act of subversion. Millay's sonnets, which pose a woman as the lover and a man as the beloved, are radical, if for no other reason than her usurpation of the male poet's role.

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Obviating her true view of her own worth, she admits, "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits" and wittily observes: "If what I do prove well, it won't advance,/ They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance" (lines 25-30). Bradstreet finds in the gender gap the roots of her readership's discomfort with personal, local poetry. Men, having access to public culture – wars, captains, kings, cities founded, commonwealths begun – wrote about such things.[7] Women, then relegated to a private world of home and family, similarly wrote of what they knew. Since male readers also dominated literary audiences, poetic tastes skewed toward the masculine or "universal" as described in Bradstreet's "Prologue."

The privileging of the universal voice and the denigration of female self-disclosure did not abate as women entered the public realm in larger numbers. In her book, Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing, Elaine Showalter discusses the ways in which a widespread antagonism toward women's personal reflections has historically affected American women's writing. She presents, as one example, the influence of Bronson Alcott over his daughter, Louisa May Alcott. She writes that Bronson disapproved of his daughter's "female self-consciousness" as selfish and narcissistic, and asserts that his views conflicted with Louisa's need to explore her own feelings. His desire to prevent Louisa from writing personally was so unconditional that he even commented that her private journals were too self-absorbed. Showalter notes:

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[7] In his book Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Making of the Major Lyrics, Gene W. Ruoff asserts that Coleridge takes an effeminate stance in his correspondence with Wordsworth by expressing himself through the lyric poem. This indicates that our sense of the personal poem as an effeminate expression is deeply ingrained, and extends to male literary productions as well as to women's writing.

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> When [Louisa] Alcott was seventeen, he noted disapprovingly that while Anna's journal was "about other people, Louisa's is about herself." For several years thereafter she wrote only intermittently in her journal, and her struggle to deny the self shows up as well in her characteristic omission of the first person in both her diary entries and in Jo's speech in Little Women (48).

Showalter contends that Bronson Alcott's severity with his daughter over her personal writing represents a widespread belief that women's autobiographical productions generally are self-indulgent, and betray an inability to tackle "larger" themes. Years later, Leo Stein would echo Bronson Alcott, when he complained that his sister Gertrude's writing had "particular local personal knowledge" that did not interest him (Journey Into the Self 129).

Without a doubt, the preference for the universal subject in poetry persisted in the first half of the twentieth century – as did the attendant gender hierarchy. In their book No Man's Land, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe that the New Critics, including Alan Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and R.P. Blackmur, played a significant role in establishing the current poetic canon and the way we read poetry today -- in particular the way we read personal poetry and women's poetry. The New Critics placed emphasis on careful explication of the text at hand, and eschewed the application of psychological, historical, and certainly autobiographical readings. Their preferences both responded to and encouraged the increasing density of modernist poetic texts.

In essence, the New Critics set the tone for a new poetic decorum with their pointed critiques of contemporary and earlier poets. These critics seldom praised (or for that matter seldom discussed) women poets, and when they did, their comments

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ghettoized women within the poetic canon. Ransom, writing about Emily Dickinson, referred to her pejoratively as "a little homekeeping person," while Blackmur commented that Dickinson "wrote indefatigably, as some women cook or knit. Her gift for words and the cultural predicament of her time drove her to poetry instead of antimacassars" (No Man's Land 155).[8]

Blackmur's image of a woman who "sits and sews" antimacassars may seem awkwardly backward-looking amidst the feminist developments of the early 1900s, but in truth, the stunning advances of the women's movement in these years did not have a liberating effect on women writers.[9] The reigning stereotypes of the female poet remained of a sweet and simple singer, a pretty and youthful creature, full of sentimental emotion. Given the rift between social advances and the state of the poetic establishment, the modern woman writer faced an extremely complex quandary. She was free to live a far more decadent life than in years past, as long as she was discreet. Had such a woman written frankly about radical experiences, the reading public would have expressed no end of moral outrage. When the modern woman poet did fly in the face of the demand for poetry that "transcends personal experience and emotion" and write an account of an affair, a divorce, an abortion, or a lesbian lover, public moral imperatives compelled her to soften those disclosures and make them somehow

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[8] Antimacassars are the ornamental coverings placed on the arms and back of upholstered furniture to prevent wear and soiling. Blackmur's backhanded compliment insinuates that Dickinson wrote poetry in place of sewing, embroidering or crocheting, thereby making herself exceptional among women.

[9] In her poem "I Sit and Sew," Alice Dunbar-Nelson expresses her frustration at the passivity imposed upon women by their gender. The poem appeared in Caroling Dusk, edited by Countee Cullen in 1927, and Maureen Honey anthologized it in her collection Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (74).

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delicate. The very mildness of these literary performances, in turn, perpetuated the belief that personal expression itself was soft.

The onset of the First World War only intensified the debate over the appropriate sound and "use" of poetry in society. The daily newspapers of England and America carried propaganda poetry, which urged young men to join the armed forces. The government asked women to urge "their young men" to enlist, and they did so by writing highly emotional verses proclaiming the patriotism of enlisting, and through shaming gestures such as handing out white feathers to un-enlisted men.[10] As a result, women's poetry soon became all too closely associated with the gruesome sacrifice of male bodies, as the war raged on far longer than expected and accomplished far less than hoped.

Pacifist poets countered, declaring the barbarity and futility of war, and poets of both genders wrote about their experiences during the war. But an angry debate soon arose as the male poets of "the front" asserted that theirs was the only "authoritative" experience of war. Margaret Higgonet describes the phenomenon in her book Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I. She contends:

> Newspapers and publishers discovered a special aura and marketability in texts "from" the front lines, whether written during active service, on leave, or a decade after the Armistice. Valor and market value became intertwined. By contrast, women's writing was understood to be "inauthentic" and unrealistic, since they stood – even if only symbolically – outside the line of fire (xxiii).

[10] In Women Writers and the Great War, Dorothy Goldman tells us that "In 1914 the women of England joined forces to send their men to war, and in the winter of 1915 white feathers were handed out to those men who had still not joined up" (Women Writers and the Great War 13).

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The question of whose experience was "authentic" translated directly into the squashing of women's writing of *any* experience during the war and in the years that followed. Dorothy Goldman, in her book Women Writers and the Great War, explains, "...what women wrote about this period has been largely forgotten, or granted only grudging recognition, and its vision has been submerged under masculine myths about the war and war literature" (x).

Even as the literary establishment moved away from "front line" topics, the residual psychological effects of the war expressed themselves in terms of hostility between the sexes. In her book The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980, Elaine Showalter explains that "neurasthenia," a generalized anxiety syndrome "arising in part from enforced inaction had been primarily a woman's disease before the war," and after the war became prevalent in men (173). She claims that this reversal not only devastated men, but it altered the ways they related to women. She asserts:

> Men's quarrels with the feminine element in their own psyches became externalized as quarrels with women, and hysteria expressed itself in part as fear or anger toward the neurotic woman, an anger we see in the war poetry of Owen and Sassoon, in the novels of Aldington and Ford, and in texts such as T.S. Eliot's prose poem "Hysteria" (1977), where male anxiety is projected onto the devouring female (173).

This discourse particularly targeted women who wrote about the psychological trauma they suffered in the war years, but it also became more generally expressed in the

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exclusionary lines male poets drew around the "role of poetry in society" and in the segregation of women from their intellectual circles.

Perhaps reacting against the role poetry had played in the Great War, poets of the aesthetic school attempted to establish poetry's independence from the political realm. For instance, T.S. Eliot proclaims "...if poetry – and I mean *all* great poetry – has had no social function in the past, it is not likely to do so in the future" (*On Poetry and Poets* 3, 9). Eliot sought to cleanse poetry of personal emotion as well as political ambitions, and in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he insists that poetry is an "escape from emotion" and an "escape from personality" (10). Following suit, Wallace Stevens, in his poem "Adagia," repeatedly announces that "poetry is not personal" (Opus Posthumous 186, 189).

This "aesthetic" debate over the nature and "use" of poetry often took on the sound of a battle of the sexes. As Elaine Showalter points out, the mandate of the day was for "a severe poetry that transcended personal experience and emotion – precisely the modes in which women lyric poets had been encouraged to specialize" (Sister's Choice 109). The edict for poetry that was "intellectual, impersonal, experimental, and concrete" was often loaded with misogynist diction (109). Stevens not only declares that "poetry is not personal" he also adds that "sentimentality is a failure of feeling" ("Adagia" 189). He then positions the poet as entirely masculine by declaring "a poet looks at the world the way a man looks at a woman" ("Adagia" 192). Indeed, Stevens describes a new intellectual atmosphere that entirely excludes women in "Men Made out of Words" when he refers to "a new text of the new world" as "a text of intelligent men" (Collected Poems 355). Also cultivating an atmosphere of exclusivity among

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male poets, Ernest Hemingway, in his memoir A Moveable Feast, remarked that "there is not much future in men being friends with great women... and there is usually even less future with truly ambitious women writers" (117).[11]

In this context, Ezra Pound made the perplexing statement, "poetry speaks phallic direction" and later reflected on his "career of driving ideas into the great passive vulva of London."[12] In 1914, T.E. Hulme offered his own complaint about women writers in his lecture on modern poetry, during which he carped: "Imitative poetry springs up like weeds, and women whimper and whine of you and I and alas and roses, roses all the way. It becomes the expression of sentimentality rather than of virile thought."[13] William Carlos Williams, also offered a gendered differentiation between "good" and "bad" poetry when he wrote that good poetry is made of "rats and snails and puppy-dog's tails" and added "Of sugar and spice and everything nice,/ That's what bad poetry is made of" (Imaginations 169). In the first installment of BLAST, Wyndham Lewis issued an all-capital warning to Suffragettes:

IN DESTRUCTION AS IN OTHER THINGS,

STICK TO WHAT YOU UNDERSTAND.

WE MAKE YOU A PRESENT OF OUR VOTES

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[11] Hemingway also wrote a satirical poem entitled "The Lady Poets with Footnotes," in which he offers cryptic, misogynist descriptions of women poets: "One lady poet was a nymphomaniac and wrote for Vanity Fair." The corresponding "footnote" reads, "College nymphomania. Favorite lyric poet of leading editorial writer, *N.Y. Tribune*." Hemingway directs this barb at Millay, and poem goes on to lampoon Kilmer, Teasdale, Zoe Atkins, Lola Ridge, and Amy Lowell (88 Poems 77).

[12] Ezra Pound quoted in Hugh Kenner's The Pound Era. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 104, 256.

[13] T.E. Hulme, "A Lecture on Modern Poetry," Further Speculations, ed. Samuel Hynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955) 69.

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ONLY LEAVE WORKS OF ART ALONE... (151).

And upon the publication of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, James Joyce remarked that the poem "ends [the] idea of poetry for ladies."[14]

In a climate so hostile to femininity, it was particularly reckless for women poets to write about their personal experiences. Women who chose to write unreservedly about personal experiences did so at the risk of being labeled "sentimental," the nastiest insult of the modernist era. In Sister's Choice Elaine Showalter points out that poets like Sara Teasdale and Elinor Wylie responded to the rising antagonism by writing poems rife with "themes of reticence, confinement, and silence" (111). Another contingent including Leonie Adams and Louise Bogan "chose a severely impersonal poetry dissociating themselves from what they saw as the sentimental excess of much of women's writing" (Sister's Choice 111).

In her book Stealing the Language, Alicia Ostriker also observes a rising divide between those who wrote personally in traditional forms and those who delved into formal experimentation. She avers, "The arrival of modernism on the American literary scene precipitated two distinct styles in women's poetry. The first was an extension and refinement of the traditional lyric style, which concentrated on intense personal feeling. The second, a more radical break from the immediate past, was formally innovative and intellectually assertive but avoided autobiography. Both schools subvert masculine authority" (44). However, not all experimental poems shied away from self-disclosure, as poems like "Lifting Belly" and Helen in Egypt demonstrate. Indeed, experimentation

[14] Quoted in Richard Ellman's James Joyce (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) 510.

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became a way of embedding self-disclosure in poems whose complexity kept them beyond reproach.

The preference for formal experimentation and the strictly universal voice persisted until the poems of Confessional poets boldly resisted such reticence. Still, the critical reaction to the highly personal poems of poets like Lowell, Plath, and Sexton remained largely negative. Anne Sexton's biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook, relates the incident in which Sexton's friend early mentor John Holmes responded to a draft of a poem entitled "To Bedlam and Part-Way Back," which details the time the poet spent in a hospital during a mental breakdown. Holmes cautioned her:

> I am uneasy ... that what looks like a brilliant beginning might turn out to be so self-centered and so narrow a diary that it would be clinical only. Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experiences seems to be very *selfish* – all a forcing others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing that *teaches* them or *helps* them ... it bothers me that you use poetry in this way. It is all a release for you but what is it for anybody else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? (qtd. in Middlebrook 98).

Sexton did not acquiesce. She drafted a letter that contained a poem she would later publish, entitled, "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further."[15] In the poem she responds to Holmes's misgivings:

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[15] The poem's title refers to a letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe, which says, "It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles's Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our hearts the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further..." (Collected Poems of Anne Sexton 2).

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And if I tried

to give you something else,

something outside of myself,

you would not know

that the worst of anyone

can be, finally,

an accident of hope (Collected Poems 34-35).

Sexton saw an intrinsic value in writing autobiographic poems. Through them she created for herself, "cracked stars" out of traumatic experiences. Her poem to Holmes suggests that she viewed writing lyric verse as a way to add some value to her suffering and offer some hope to others similarly traumatized.

As Montaigne did in his essay "On Experience," Sexton wrote about graphically personal, bodily experience in "The Operation," "The Abortion," and "Menstruation at Forty" and in so doing, imagined herself as an exemplar of endurance. Her boldness in presenting herself in this light should not be underestimated. In their book Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck point out that "at both extremes of subjectivity and publicity, the female autobiographer has lacked the sense of radical individuality, duplicitous but useful, that empowered Augustine and Henry Adams to write their representative lives large" (1). They suggest several modes in which female autobiographers have chosen to establish and assert themselves as an "exemplar" or subject for autobiography. Among the methods they discuss is women's "self-definition in relation to significant others," which they describe as "the most pervasive characteristic of female autobiography" (8). Sexton does often pose herself

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her in relation to others – notably to her daughter – but just as often, she defies the trend and resolutely presents herself as the central subject.

Perhaps because of this bold attitude, Sexton's poetry shocked more than John Holmes. Still, while he and many others were upset at seeing Sexton "use poetry in this way," he would likely not have cared to read a prose account of her experiences either. The details of Sexton's abortion, depressions, suicide attempts, and suffering under electric shock therapy make a sordid narrative. In fact, when Middlebrook published her biography of Sexton in 1992, controversy erupted, because she revealed infidelity and incest, and used tapes from Sexton's psychiatric sessions. As forthcoming as Sexton's poems seem, she does maintain some level of privacy through use of lyric insinuation rather than prose exposition. The grace the lyric afforded her experiences served as "an invisible veil between us all" and mitigated the pain of her expressions just enough to make them publishable in her lifetime ("For John" 35). In other words, Sexton exerted strict control over herself as a literary subject, carefully sculpting the autobiographical persona who appeared in her texts.

Sexton was by no means the first to see the value of the lyric mode for telling the difficult autobiography. Certainly, non-narrative approaches to self-representation beckoned the modernist women writers of the previous generation like Gertrude Stein, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Elizabeth Bishop. Gertrude Stein wrote her poetic autobiography "Lifting Belly" from 1915 to 1917 in the midst of the fervor over women's writing that developed with the Great War. Edna St. Vincent Millay composed the sonnets of Fatal Interview in 1930 and published them in 1931 with the modernist gender debate fully engaged. H.D. worked on Helen in Egypt from

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the mid-1930s until the 1960s, but her work remains deeply affected by personal and professional experiences during the First World War.[16] Elizabeth Bishop's career began in the 1940s and continued into the 1970s, and her work forms a bridge between modern and post-modern poets. Deeply affected by the moods and preferences of the modern era, these poets – each in her own way – innovated poetry and autobiography by flouting established genre and gender imperatives.

The lives of these four poets contained enough "scandalous" material to make them wary of narrative, discursive, explicatory self-disclosure. Each of them grappled with the simultaneous desires to publish accounts of their lives and to avoid any tabloid notoriety such a production could earn them. For these reasons, they favored lyric experimentation. But each poet also saw distinct aesthetic and artistic advantages in choosing a lyric mode of autobiography over narrative prose.[17] They found it offered them new ways of expressing alternative conceptions of the nature of memory, experience, and identity. With the depth of their metaphoric systems replacing the discursive space of a prose narrative, they were able in verse to achieve a simultaneity of meaning, identity, and experience unattainable in prose. In essence, the same traits

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[16] Although H.D. reworked Helen in Egypt for decades and published it in the 1960s, the text remains predominantly modernist in its content and execution. In this respect, she was much like her contemporary Ezra Pound. His "revised" Guide to Kulchur, released in 1971, contained remarkably few changes reflecting the impact of the years that followed its first publication in 1938.

[17] In her essay "Feminist Autobiography: The Personal and the Political," Linda Anderson suggests that metaphoric systems that equalize the expression of intuition and observation may serve as superior modes for women writers because women often favor intuitive modes of thought communication (122). She points to Audre Lorde as an example and observes that Lorde was "profoundly distrustful of how language codifies and reifies knowledge" (123). Anderson notes that it was "through her mother that [Lorde] learned a different means of non-verbal communication, a respect for the information which could pass intuitively between people" and concludes that "poetry becomes a way of mediating this other knowledge" (123).

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that segregate poetry from the genre of autobiography allowed these four poets to represent their identities in new, liberating ways.

In Gertrude Stein's estimation, for example, the traditional prose narrative of autobiography divorced the author from her own mind. She explains: "...narrative in itself is not what is in your mind but what is in someone else's" ("A Transatlantic Interview 1946" 9). Further, Stein did not believe that the personality developed over time. Rather, identity is a complex entity that exists always and entirely in the present, a series of axioms that combine in the continuous present to demonstrate the self. She found a new autobiographical mode in the nexus of geometry and lyric poetry. "Lifting Belly" appropriates the look and sound of a geometric proof that establishes, demonstrates, or "proves" the self.

In "Lifting Belly," Stein offers moments, experiences, and perceptions as axioms – or accepted truths – which combine logically to demonstrate her personality. In this way, she shifts the nature of identity and experience from a narrative model to a demonstrative one, in which the personality is not a climax, but a hypothesis. Her geometric lyric also affords her a level of "protection" that allowed her to celebrate the love she had found with Alice Tolkas. "Lifting Belly" enacts the autobiography "of the human mind" as Gertrude Stein imagined it.

H.D. also found the lyric more a more malleable form of autobiography. She blended prose and poetry, epic and lyric forms to signify the blending of male and female identities in a bisexual life. Traditional autobiography theory imagines the self as a singular entity whose development uncovers one fact or formative moment at a time as the plot relates a climactic identity. However, as a Freudian protégée, H.D.

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conceived of the self as divided between the conscious and the unconscious. This understanding led H.D. to experiment with an autobiography of symbols rather than facts, where fantastic images (like the apparitions of Helen and Achilles) replace biographical moments as they do in dreams. In short, she translates the symbolic life.

Helen in Egypt is an epic-lyric about one being, Helen-Achilles, who embodies male and female appearance, identity, and desire. Through the poem's illustrative characters, H.D. traces the process by which male and female personae become unified in her. However, once united, this dual-gendered being confronts a society that can only see "one image" – and that image "must be Helen," must be female. H.D. reveals the appearance of femininity to be an "eidolon" or iconic fiction a bisexual woman must present to the world. Helen in Egypt serves as a meditation on the limits of traditional autobiography to depict bisexual identity.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose use of traditional forms sets her apart from Stein and H.D., used the lyric's universal veil to afford privacy as she wrote about an extra-marital affair. She also found in poetry a mythical quality that represented more accurately than prose ever could the legendary life she sought to live. The sonnets of Fatal Interview sprang from the love letters she wrote to George Dillon in the first year of their acquaintance, and bear a strangely prescriptive relationship to Millay's life. She imagined a legendary and lyric love affair, wrote sonnets describing it, and then did her best to see that the affair followed the path set by them.

The reception of these poems ranges from effusive praise to outrage and disdain, but all together demonstrate the critical discomfort with personal disclosure in poetry. One critic voiced the widely held belief that poetic self-disclosure marked a lack of

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sophistication or maturity, by suggesting that if Millay could "outgrow her preoccupation with herself, she might easily be the most important poet writing."[18] However, Millay's importance in literary history – in large part – springs from her refusal to "outgrow" her autobiographical impulse, and her insistence on using the lyric as her only mode of public personal expression.

While Millay appreciated poetry's mythologizing potential, Elizabeth Bishop found an honesty in the lyric that she struggled to find in prose. In poetry, Bishop could recreate the strange mixture of the intuitive understanding of sadness and loss, and the lack of explicatory knowledge that marked her early years. When Elizabeth Bishop began her career, she had as a mentor Marianne Moore, who rarely wrote with the personal pronoun, and even more rarely a truly personal poem. Under this tutelage, Bishop's early poems keep a tight rein on her desire to recount her life in verse. One critic remarked admiringly that her poems "draw themselves in when they do like wise politic snails, from the rhetorics of self-expression, the figures of jealousy and pity, the boring industry of innovation." He further praised her for "the distancing that goes on [as] a way of keeping the poem free of sentimentality that the depth of the underlying feeling might generate."[19]

As Bishop grew more independent from Moore's influence, and developed a friendship with Robert Lowell, she began to experiment with poetic autobiography. Bishop's careful revelatory process exemplifies the creative decision-making process that is part of the construction of any autobiography whether in prose or poetry. In

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[18] Clement Wood, ed., "Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Clever Sappho," Poets of America (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1925) 213.
[19] Quoted in David Kalstone, Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 123.

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particular, Bishop uses the performance of the autobiographical pact to place her readers in the same position in which adults held her as a child -- a site from which we may perceive the trauma at hand, but not fully understand it. By using the lyric mode, and withholding the discursive explanations prose so often requires, she finds a means of representing traumatic experiences that were full of gaps and silences. Her poems and her letters to Lowell also heighten our awareness of authorial intervention in even the most "confessional" sounding poetry, and prepare us for the mixture of fact and imaginative detail that mark the work of so many Confessional, Beat, and contemporary poets.

The poetic autobiographies of Stein, H.D., Millay, and in particular, Elizabeth Bishop, offer a new means of understanding the ways in which authors may construct a literary performance of their lives and personalities. It is also important to observe that Stein's "Lifting Belly," H.D.'s Helen in Egypt, Millay's Fatal Interview, and Bishop's poems "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Sestina," and "In the Waiting Room" all exhibit that self-consciousness in the act of self-disclosure that marks an autobiography as different from that which is simply autobiographical.

Autobiography theorists have continuously grappled with this boundary, and in essence, the difference is a matter of performance and articulation. In other words, an autobiography establishes a pact with its readers, asking them to receive it as a recapitulation of a life. Philippe Lejeune insists, "Autobiography is not a guessing game," and differentiates between autobiographical fictions and autobiographies: "in order for there to be autobiography ... the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical." He also maintains, "Identity is not resemblance" and asserts that

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identity must be established through the author's name on the cover (On Autobiography 11, 21).

Lejeune posits that there are two ways in which to establish the autobiographical pact: implicitly, and in an obvious way "at the level of the name that the narrator-protagonist is given in the narrative itself, and which is the same as that of the author on the cover." He designates two ways in which an implicit pact can be determined: through the use of "titles leaving no doubt... that the first person refers to the name of the author," and through an "initial section of the text where the narrator enters into a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if he were the author, in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the "I" refers to the name shown on the cover even though it is not repeated in the text" (On Autobiography 14).

For women so acutely aware that the name is a construct, the simple reliance on the proper name on the cover is an inadequate anchor for the autobiographical pact. In fact, H.D. often contemplates the agency of naming in her many autobiographical experiments. The main character in Bid Me To Live contemplates her many nicknames and struggles to assert her own identity despite them. The name of the main character in HERmione, "Her Gart" requires the reader to reconsider the objective pronoun "her" as the subject of many sentences, and suggests that H.D. felt naming inherently objectifies women. H.D.'s own name was a fiction in its own right – and under constant revision. The domineering Ezra Pound penned her professional name – H.D. Imagiste – and he also offered the nicknames "dryad" and "wee witch." H.D.'s many other nicknames included "mog," "horse," "tree," and "cat." Legally, she became Mrs.

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Richard Aldington for a period of several years, but the poet rarely used the name, except in communications with those in her husband's world.

Similarly, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas used many invented names for each other. Gertrude Stein often called Alice Toklas gay, kitten, pussy, baby, queen, cherubim, cake, lobster, wife, daisy, and "my little Jew." Alice's nicknames for Gertrude Stein included king, hubbie, mount fattie, and fattuski. Many, if not all of these nicknames, make their way into Stein's poetic autobiographies. In fact, there are many indications throughout Stein's work that the mutability of names does not undermine the truth of the self. She tells us in "Saints and Singing" that "I made a new name, and yet every name is the same" (Operas & Plays 73). Many scholars suggest that her use of nicknames and codes are protective measures, intended to conceal her lesbianism. However, it seems that these codes, when working in combination with each other, serve as a more accurate self-representation than artificial given names could have.[20]

Edna St. Vincent Millay employs a similar set of nicknames among her lovers, friends and family. She referred to her mother as "mumbles" and to her sisters Norma and Kathleen as "Hunk" and "Wump" respectively. Her friend Allan Ross MacDougal, she fondly called "l'il Alling," and Edmund Wilson was "Bunny." She herself never took her husband's name, and went by the masculine nickname "Vincent" among

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[20] Stein biographer Robert Bridgeman suggests that "Sometimes Gertrude Stein used false names, just as she created code words for certain censorable material" (Bridgeman 148). Stein scholar Bettina Knapp also connects renaming with protective measures. She argues that Stein's writing about her own sexuality grew in boldness as her use of code increased. She points out, "by disguising her characters in codes and symbols used to define them, Stein still succeeded in hiding her lesbianism" (Knapp 90). Both consider the act a concealing not a revealing one.

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friends and family, and in the submission letters that accompanied her first poems. Elizabeth Bishop's college classmates called her "Bishop" or even "The Bishop" so consistently that she remarked on the relief and gratitude she felt each time Marianne Moore called her by her given name, *Elizabeth*.[21]

Clearly, for these women, the autobiographical pact cannot find anchor in the matching of proper names inside and outside the text's cover. In fact, the objectification of naming was one aspect of traditional autobiography their works renegotiate. Instead of accepting and writing through "given names," each sought to inscribe her own name – Stein by replacing her name with the repeating phrase "Lifting belly," H.D. and Millay by donning the masks of mythical and iconic women, and Bishop by declaring "you are an *I*,/ you are an *Elizabeth*" (The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Bishop 160). They each perform what Lejeune would call "implicit" pacts, in which the author enters into a contract by "acting as if" the author and speaker are the same (On Autobiography 14).

The different ways these four authors perform that pact and design their poetic autobiographies reflect each author's conception of the nature of memory and identity. We also learn a great deal about how each author felt about literary self-disclosure and the role of the personal in poetry at a time when that debate was at its most rancorous. Through reading "Lifting Belly," Helen in Egypt, Fatal Interview, and Bishop's later poems like "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Sestina" and "In the Waiting Room," we can witness the poets establishing themselves as literary subjects, and constructing

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[21] Bishop, after some coaxing, called her good friend Robert Lowell "Cal." In one of her first letters to Lowell, Bishop begins by saying, "I've never been able to catch that name they call you, but Mr. Lowell doesn't sound right either" (One Art 146).

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autobiographical personae. Collectively, they show that the traditional narrative form of autobiography placed unacceptable strictures on women's experience, and their works insist that we reconsider our expectations of both autobiography and modernist poetry. Separately, they sought new ways to represent experience in all its complexity, and in so doing, each offers an inimitable solution to the challenge of writing personally within the strictly aesthetic atmosphere of modernism.

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Chapter One:

"I Said Lifting Belly": Gertrude Stein's Geometric Autobiography

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Introduction:

"Lifting belly needs to speak": Lyricism, Geometry, and Autobiography

In The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind, Gertrude Stein wrote that "[t]here are no witnesses to the autobiography of any one that has a human mind" (GHA 263). It comes as no surprise then, that scholars have yet to witness the autobiography she composed in 1917. The 50-page poem "Lifting Belly" has traditionally been read as a love poem, but when Stein asks, "what is my another name," and declares, "Lifting belly means me," it becomes clear that she is also consciously experimenting with self-representation, writing a new kind of autobiography (LB 5, 17). The poem speaks of Gertrude's recent estrangement from her brother Leo, it captures the intimacy of the earliest years of her enduring relationship with Alice B. Toklas, and it offers a sense of what life was like for the new couple in France during the First World War. Composed in a period of reflection that followed great turmoil, it recapitulates of one of the most pivotal times in Stein's biography. In essence, "Lifting Belly" offers us everything of autobiography except its prose narrative.

Until quite recently, few scholars questioned the exclusion of poetry from the genre of autobiography, and thus consider The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) and Everybody's Autobiography (1939) as Stein's only autobiographies. Ulla Dydo has

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suggested that Stanzas in Meditation (1933) is the "Other Autobiography," because the epic-length poem is full of (heavily encoded) personal references.[1] However, in Stanzas in Meditation, Stein's experimentation almost overpowers her self-expression by rendering it inaccessible. "Lifting Belly," composed between 1915 and 1917, is a lucid, comprehensible meditation on a life in its entirety, a poem that is full of playfulness, sincerity, and personal revelations. It offers the reader glimpses of the poet's personal as well as professional life, and is "full of love and echoes" (LB 31).

The one perceived shortcoming of "Lifting Belly" as an autobiography – that it is not in the form of a prose narrative – is actually what makes it an autobiography so worth examining. Classic autobiography traces a life's development from childhood to adulthood. However, Stein sees the personality as a fact, not a climax. In Donald Sutherland's article in the anthology Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein, he argues that in Stein's estimation, "if people change it is very little if at all within their lives, but by the generation or the century (95). Stein scholar Michael Hoffman, who edited Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein, agrees. He notes that Stein feels that human beings live within certain limitations "because the 'bottom natures' into which they are born and within which they are reared are unchangeable." He goes on to assert that "within the limits of an unchanging and repetitive 'bottom nature,' individuals can show subtle variations' " (Hoffman 49). Sutherland's and Hoffman's assertions are borne out by Stein's own comments on the subject, including the repeated declaration "I am I because my little dog

[1] Ulla Dydo, "Stanzas in Meditation: The Other Autobiography," Chicago Review 35:2 (1985): 4-20.

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knows me," which indicates that the personality is fixed, and rather than growing, either is recognized or goes unrecognized (GHA 99).

If the personality is not a result of a growth process, but rather an inborn trait that does not alter greatly in the course of one lifetime, then a narrative is not a necessity for representing that personality. In Stein's estimation, a narrative is far from the ideal autobiographical mode, because it imposes a linear order on a set of experiences, which she believed contribute to the personality simultaneously -- not as memories of the past, but as part of a continuous present. In Stein's estimation, a narrative's chronological rigidity confines experience. Further, the narrative writing process divorces author from text – making it antithetical to true self-representation. As Stein puts it, "...narrative in itself is not what is in your mind but what is in someone else's."[2]

Gertrude Stein sought a way to portray her human mind despite the fact that she felt that "writing" had "nothing to do with the human mind" (GHA 55). She sought a form of autobiography that went beyond "writing" – or the kind of writing she parodies in both The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and Everybody's Autobiography. Indeed, these Stein texts, which declare themselves autobiographies, are full of ironic and playful intimations that the typical form of an autobiography barely scratches the surface of self-expression, perhaps coming no closer than if written by someone else. Stein calls attention to the inadequacy of prose narration as an autobiographical mode, when she

[2] Robert Haas, ed., "A Transatlantic Interview 1946," A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973) 9.

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presents The Autobiography as a giant falsehood (albeit a light-hearted one) -- an autobiography that was in fact, not written by the supposed author.[3]

Where did Stein find her solution to the inadequacy of traditional autobiography? If "writing" as we understand it is not suitable, how does one represent the human mind as an author? The answer is logical – or more accurately, geometrical. Stein replaces the traditional narrative with the playful conjuring of a geometric proof. Influenced by the cubists' interest in geometry as well as by her long-time friend Alfred North Whitehead's Principia Mathematica (1913), which established modern logic, Stein opted to write an autobiography in the form of what the poem calls "a persuasion" (LB 18). Stein appropriated the look, logic, and language of geometry and created the poetic autobiography "Lifting Belly." In this long poem, Stein presents events and personality traits as axioms, or accepted truths, which combine to logically demonstrate or "persuade" the reader of her personality (LB 31).

Stein originally composed "Lifting Belly" on graph paper in a blank composition-style mathematics notebook with the times-tables printed on the back cover.[4] Perhaps inspired by her writing materials, the poem at one point declares "Lifting belly is an exercise," and in another, "Lifting belly is a persuasion" (LB 14, 18). In the poem's

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[3] In her biography Gertrude Stein, Bettina Knapp argues that "[a]lthough The Autobiography of Alice B. Tolkas was a revisiting of Stein's past, in no way was it intended to be a history of her life. On the contrary, she considered it a fictional work able to advertise her worth and justify her theories concerning art and literature" (63). Arguably, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is also a tongue-in-cheek response to those publishers who spurned her more radical attempts at autobiography.

[4] The manuscript remains among the Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas Papers, in the Yale Collection of American Literature, at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The manuscript is written in large scrawled script from the front of the book to the back on the recto. When reaching the last page, Stein turned the book upside down and wrote on the verso to the front of the book where the poem ends. While Stein often used composition notebooks, this is seemingly the only manuscript composed in a notebook lined as graph paper.

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typescript form, terse declarative sentences fall in a narrow column down each page, mimicking the shape and tone of a geometric proof. Of course, like any style Stein adopts, she recreates the geometric proof to suit her own particular aesthetic. Mathematic logic becomes Steinian logic, and where a proof avoids tautological reasoning, Stein's proof revels in its own circuitousness, declaring simply "Lifting belly is right," or more perplexingly, "Lifting belly can please me because it is an occupation I enjoy./ Rose is a rose is a rose" (LB 35).

Nevertheless, "Lifting belly is no joke," for the very idea of composing an autobiographical geometric proof alters how we think about modes of self-representation and memory (LB 10). "Lifting Belly" calls into question the effectiveness of traditional forms of autobiography to express her personality as faithfully as the geometric form she plays with here. In the poem that declares "Lifting belly means me," Stein also declares that "lifting belly is such an experiment," indicating that she seeks a new way of expressing the self that will "persuade me" (LB 17, 13, 30). Stein believes herself capable of writing a better autobiography and declares "What did I say, that I was a great poet like the English only sweeter," and asks rhetorically "Didn't you say you'd write it better" (LB 21).

Stein's geometric autobiography – more precisely her lyric geometric autobiography – triumphs over a prose autobiography for several reasons. The first is that lyric flexibility allows all moments to exist simultaneously as facts. While she sought to achieve this in her prose through heavy use of the continuous present tense, any narrative, however discursive, imposes a linear ordering of the reading experience. The repetition, circuitousness, and terseness of this particular lyric form allow Stein to

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represent her life as she saw it – suspended in the present.[5] The next is that the geometric lyric allows a balance of exposition and protection for the author.

Stein, in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas seems to reveal a great deal about her life with Alice, but in fact, she exposes very little beyond the salon atmosphere of her professional life. In "Lifting Belly," we see Gertrude "establish [her]self" independently of Leo Stein. She confidently declares, "Now we know how to differ." This statement echoes the long churlish invective of Two: Gertrude Stein and her Brother and Other Early Portraits, where Stein complains, "In ordering anything he was ordering what he had decided to order and having ordered that thing he had ordered that thing" (Two 33). In "Lifting Belly," Stein also allows the reader intimate knowledge of the life of the two lovers, and yet each statement is cryptic enough to not say "anything about lifting belly" and to provide "Protection./ Protection/ Protection" (LB 18, 54). For the Stein scholar, reading "Lifting Belly" as an autobiography offers a chance to see Stein experiment with an autobiographical mode that depicts the personality without restricting the telling in narrative cuffs.

"Lifting Belly" is full of loving references to Alice B. Toklas, details of their newly found domestic bliss, their daily interactions with each other and with their neighbors, events in the news, recipes, gossip, and new intellectual discoveries. While the poem expresses all that is current in the lives of these two lovers, it is also reflective,

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[5] In a review of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas in New York City's The Town Crier, Richard Burton wrote "Its structure ignores organic progress to a degree which means stupid repetitions and shifts of treatment that confuse and irritate" (November, 1933). In lyric form, however, the "organic progress" is less insistent, and the avoidance of it is less disconcerting.

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contemplating a shift from "baby" to "emperor."[6] After Gertrude broke with Leo and joined with Alice, her writing took on new subjects and forms, which expressed her growing confidence and her new sense of security in her own identity. Looking at "Lifting Belly" as a reflection of this juncture in Stein's life, we see that it marks an important point in both her stylistic and her personal development. "Lifting Belly" offers Stein's readers self-representation in form as well as content, one which has the potential to alter the way we conceive of autobiographical endeavors and the nature of identity.

SECTION I:
"LIFTING BELLY IN TIME": STEIN'S RISING INTEREST IN GEOMETRY AND LOGIC

In any literary performance of the self, the mode or style of presentation tells as much as the script.[7] Like period costumes, Stein's use of geometry indicates that "Lifting Belly" recalls the time in which she was most enthralled with cubist experimentation and new developments in modern logic. It orients the reader in her biography as decidedly as a date. Like actors speaking in dialect, Stein's use of coded language, repetition, and scansion also orient the reader in time. Stein's interest in melding geometric and lyric modes into an autobiographical performance tells us as much about her personality, and the period in her life about which she writes, as the content of the poem. In many ways, as S.C. Neuman observes in Gertrude Stein:

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[6] While both "baby" and "emperor" also carry encoded sexual connotations, it seems clear in "Lifting Belly" that they also mark a shift from dependence to empowerment.

[7] In Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration, S.C. Neuman translates Jean Starobinski as saying that "style is autobiographically significant because it is attached to the writer's present. It is the clue (*l'indice*') to the autobiographer's relation to his own past and to the manner in which he would like to be seen in the future" (qtd. in Neuman 11).

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Autobiography and the Problem of Narration, "style carries the 'truth' of autobiography." To appreciate the nature of this lyrical, geometric autobiographical act, it is important to look at the place of "Lifting Belly" in Stein's stylistic development -- to look at "lifting belly in time" (LB 23).

Written during the period in which Gertrude and Alice lived in Majorca, "Lifting Belly" is – at least in part -- a love poem. Certainly, it is full of loving references to Alice Toklas as it acclaims "Lifting belly is so strong and willing./ Lifting belly is so strong and yet waiting./ Lifting belly is so soothing. Yes indeed./ It gives me greater pleasure" (LB 11). However, most of the love poems written in these years are brief, tiny in scope, and left as daily notes for Alice.[8] A typical love-poem from this phase, reads as a simple rhyming note from one lover to another – complete with salutation and signature:

Baby Precious,

Sweet oh so sweet

Dear oh so dear

Near oh so near

Here oh so here

Inside oh so inside

Wide oh so wide

Bride oh so bride

Inside oh so inside

Bless you baby,

[8] Yale University's Beinecke Library keeps these love poems under the Stein-invented title "Autrespondence." Kay Turner edited a volume of these poems entitled, Baby Precious Always Shines, which Stonewall Editions published in 1999.

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Y.D.

Stein often begins her brief, rhyming love poems with a loving salutation, and just as often signs them "Y.D." or "Yours Dearly" ("Yet Dish"?). Stein composed the poems on all sorts of papers and scraps, and few are longer than a page. "Lifting Belly," composed in a book of bound graph paper, is strikingly different from the love poems Stein composed in this period. None approaches the scope and magnitude of "Lifting Belly."

Biographers such as Richard Bridgeman and Bettina Knapp have used "Lifting Belly" to gain a sense of the couple's early years together. A useful record of the time, it contains "homey comments concerning the combing of hair, the cooking of food, the nature of animals and plants, bouts of possessiveness, rapture, and anger" (Knapp 91). Knapp observes that amid this portrait of daily life are "intimations, allusions, and outright references to sexual pleasures Stein experiences and to the expertise she uses in delighting her partner" (Knapp 91). And Stein does indeed write about their love-making. She exclaims, "Pussy how pretty you are" and tells the reader:

> Kiss my lips. She did.
>
> Kiss my lips again she did.
>
> Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did.
>
> I have feathers.
>
> Gentle fishes (LB 17, 19-20)

However, the scope of "Lifting Belly" suggests that it is more than a love poem. Its long geometric form transforms the love poem into an experiment with a new form of autobiography.

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Stein composed the poem a few years after she had parted ways with her brother, and had become deeply interested in the cubist movement, which Leo scorned. Stein, once quite close with her brother, Leo, followed him to college, attending the Harvard Annex in 1893.[9] Continuing to follow Leo's lead after college, Stein began medical school at Johns Hopkins where she studied under William James for several years.[10] In the years 1903 to approximately 1912 she and her brother hosted salons, discovered new artists such as Matisse and Picasso, and discussed the future of modern art. In these years, Leo was the host and speaker, and Gertrude listened.

However, Gertrude's interest soon turned to the cubist school and its experimentation with perspective, geometric representation, and collage. She admired Picasso's innovations, while Leo spurned them as too extreme. He expresses his disdain for the new school of art in a letter to Mabel Weeks in 1913: "You people in New York will soon be in the whirlpool of modern art. I on the other hand, am out of it. The present enthusiasm is for cubism of one species or another and I think cubism whether in paint or ink is tommyrot. It seems to be to be the intellectual product of the unintellectual..." (Journey Into the Self 48).[11] His criticism becomes even more personal and more direct in another letter to Weeks in the same month. He declares that

---

[9] The Harvard Annex was renamed Radcliffe Hall in 1894.

[10] After her relationship with May Bookstaver ended, a rather shattered Gertrude Stein once again turned to her brother, moving across the Atlantic to live with Leo in France. While Stein had composed the novels Fernhurst and Q.E.D. (posthumously re-titled Things as They Are) before she arrived in France, it was at 27 rue de Fleurus that Stein's artistic and literary interests burgeoned.

[11] The letter, dated February 14, 1913, presumably is making a specific reference to the upcoming Armory Show in New York, which began some months later in the same year.

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"Both [Picasso] and Gertrude are using their intellects, which they ain't got neither, and they are in my belief turning out the most Godalmighty rubbish that is to be found" (Journey 53). Under new influences, Stein's writing style changed dramatically between 1911 and 1917 -- the year that "Lifting Belly" was completed. [12]

The Great War was one factor that changed Stein's style and her mode of thinking. Stein conceived of this first modern war as a means of killing a century, which lacked in logic.[13] She explains:

> The 19th Century was completely lacking in logic, it had cosmic terms and hopes, and aspirations, and discoveries, and ideals but it had no logic, and I like logic I really do, I suppose that is the reason that I so naturally had my part in killing the 19th Century and killing it, quite like a gangster with a mitraillette, if that is the same as a tommy gun (Wars 91).

Stein's rather violent appreciation for logic corresponds with her rising interest in Alfred North Whitehead's work in modernizing deductive logic.

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[12] Citing the publication of Tender Buttons, and perhaps the dearth of published work in this period (only eight of Stein's submissions were accepted by periodicals through 1917), many Stein scholars mark 1912 as the major turning point in Stein's career. Richard Bridgeman, in his biography of Stein entitled Gertrude Stein in Pieces, asserts that the most experimental phase of Stein's career had just passed, culminating in the book G.M.P., written between 1911 and 1912. He writes that in this book, "Gertrude Stein summed up many of the techniques she had developed in half a dozen years of experimentation in a long radical piece called G.M.P." (Bridgeman 91). Hoffman, Chessman, Knapp, and others also point to 1912 as a critical turning point in Stein's career.

[13] Stein helped induct the 20th Century through her concept of time. In Wars I Have Seen, Stein comments that "war makes things go backward as well as forward and so 1914 was the same as 1878 in a way" (Wars 5). Stein develops her method of using the continuous present -- as in the poem "Men," where she writes, "Sometimes men are drinking and are loving and one of them is talking and two of them are fighting and one of the two of them is winning enough so that they are then having loving in them and are telling each other everything" (147). Stein is using a tense that, like the war, creates the illusion of going backward as well as forward.

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During these years, Stein also began to use more symbolic substitution; "cows" and "fish" developed as code words for orgasms, for instance. She also played more with phrases that distance the signifier from the signified, as in "Yet Dish":

Little drawers of center.

Neighbor of dot light

Shorter place to make a bloom set

Marches to be bright (59).

Here, Stein places common nouns like "drawers," "dot," and "bloom" in new syntactic arrangements. In so doing, she undermines the fixed (and thereby confining) nature of language.

Stein also began to experiment with scansion, and the shape of her lines on the page. By writing poems that looked like prose, and plays that looked like poems, Stein began to transgress genre boundaries, and to challenge the very concept of genre segregation. At this time Stein began to refigure the shape and sound of her "plays" and "portraits." In 1911, Stein composed portraits of Matisse and Picasso. Both portraits are collections of rather obtuse observations of the men's characters, offering us little in the way of imagery or narrative. However, both of these portraits mimic the appearance of a narrative by stacking thick paragraphs on the page, making the brief portrait a dense plank of words. While the portrait of Picasso employs more repetition than that of Matisse ("One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming...."), the appearance of the two texts on the page is relatively similar (139-143). However, two years later, in her 1913 portrait of Carl Van Vechten, entitled "One: Carl Van Vechten,"

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Stein experiments with the shape of the poem and uses more space between sections of text. This portrait takes a more poetic, or visually striking, form. Surrounded on either side by a two lines of blank space, the middle stanza thus reads:

ONE.

One.

None in stable, none at ghosts, none in the latter spot.

ONE.

One.

An oil can, an oil and a vial with a thousand stems. An oil in a cup and a steel sofa.

One... (274).

In this enigmatic portrait, Stein has discarded even the appearance of a narrative.[14]

We may partially attribute Stein's rising interest in the appearance of her poetry on the page to the influence of Guillaume Apollinaire, who entered Stein's life around typography as his did.[15] In Apollinaire's Calligrammes, composed in the years 1913-1916, he explores the visual impact of words as he creates pictures out of poems like "*Il*

[14] It makes sense that Stein's interest in non-narrative portraiture extends to the self-portrait, and to extended autobiographical projects.

[15] In 1913, Apollinaire introduced the cubist movement in *Les Peintres Cubistes*. In the same year, Stein wrote her portrait of Apollinaire. It consists of four lines: "Give known or pin ware./ Fancy teethe, gas strips./ Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pore state at./ Leave eye lessons I. Leave I. Lessons. I. Leave I lessons, I" (A Stein Reader 279).

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Pleut" and "*Coeur Couronne et Miroir.*"[16] Even poems like "*Fumées,*" which did not fully become word pictures, used creative enjambment:

Et tandis que la guerre

Ensanglante la terre

Je hausse les odeurs

Près des couleurs-saveurs

Et je fu

m

e

du

ta

bac

de

ZoNE

Although it achieved a very different effect than Apollinaire's use of the vertical in "*Fumées,*" one of the most interesting developments in Stein's style is her vertical arrangement of her words on the page. In his book The Development of Abstractionism in Gertrude Stein, Michael Hoffman dubs several of Stein's poems from this period "vertical poetry," which he describes as poems in which short lines (sometimes comprised only of a word or two) are stacked atop each other rather than placed beside

[16] Guillaume Apollinaire, Calligrammes: Poems de la Paix et de la Guerre (Paris: Gallimard, 1925) 64.

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each other in paragraphs.[17] Following the cubist interest in vertical lines (arising as more and more skyscrapers rose), Stein's poems begin to look like narrow skyscrapers of phrases.

Hoffman also observes that a great deal of Gertrude Stein's early work exhibits a fascination with geometry. He argues that Stein's early writings, particularly Q.E.D. (or Things as They Are) are geometric in their construction. He points out that the abbreviation "Q.E.D." -- which appears as the novel's title -- stands for *Quod Erat Demonstratum*, the traditional ending to a geometric proof, translated, "It has been demonstrated." He also asserts that the construction of the novel is also geometric, claiming, "The triangularity of the novel's structure is almost obsessive. There are three books, each one named after one side of the triangle. The girls... take three trips to Europe. The elapsed calendar time of the tale is three years..." (Hoffman 25). Hoffman also observes that Stein's fascination with geometric proofs connects, not only to Q.E.D.'s structure, but also to her presentation of the personalities in this early novel. He argues, "The emphasis on geometric figures and demonstration is an outgrowth of Stein's scientific background; for, while the novel's structure functions on the metaphor of plane geometry, its matter is the 'demonstration of a proof of certain theorems on the subject of personality' " (Development of Abstractionism in Gertrude Stein 26).

The cubist school's fascination with geometry also inspired Stein's own. Heavily influenced by Cézanne, Stein employed many of the principles of their work to her own. In The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein, Hoffman points

[17] Randa Dubnick also refers to "Lifting Belly" as a "vertical" work in her book The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism, but does not discuss at length the significance of the poem's shape.

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out that "Cézanne had shown painters it was more important to discover the geometric structures underlying objects than to produce these objects exactly" (Hoffman 20). The cubists were most concerned with "descriptive" or "plane" geometry. Descriptive geometry is the science of making accurate two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional forms, and of mathematically solving problems relating to the size and position of such forms in space. Cubists used descriptive (or plane) geometry to imbue their work with a sense of time and movement. For instance, Picasso shows several views of a face at once – a forward eye, a profile nose, the back of an ear – to give a sense of a face turning even in a stilled portrait.[18] Stein experimented with ways to tackle the same problems linguistically that the cubists were solving spatially -- to achieve the same simultaneity of multiple moments in language.

Stein's fascination with geometry also rises from her own scientific background and the developments in that field at the time, which were giving rise to some of the most important developments of the 20th Century.[19] Although Einstein's theory did not get a great deal of attention immediately upon its publication in 1905, the work did spark interest among the general public some ten years later in 1915 as Stein began work on "Lifting Belly." In particular, Picasso's concept that space expands in dimension in order

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[18] Cézanne also used plane geometry to destabilize his images and create a sense of movement and depth. Earl Loran's book Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of his Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs (Berkeley: U Cal. P, 1985) is particularly useful in understanding his use of Euclidean precepts.

[19] In 1887, Albert Michaelson and Edward Morley used the principles of geometry in an experiment testing whether the earth moved at the same rate as the ether. Their experiment, although a failure, contributed directly to the experiments Albert Einstein employed eighteen years later in proving his theory of relativity.

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to assimilate time, corresponds with Einstein's vision of the phenomenological world, and allowed the artist to depict a continuous unbroken space from multiple view-points.[20]

Between 1910 and 1913, Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell published another seminal work, which modernized deductive logic (a process which is the essence of geometry). In Principia Mathematica's three volumes, Russell and Whitehead introduced symbols in place of complete sentences and the conjunctions that connect them. Such replacements allowed them to cover a far greater range of arguments than can be cast into syllogistic form. Russell and Whitehead's modern logic employs different symbols for the logical subject and logical predicate of the sentence, and it has symbols for classes as well as for members of classes.

Stein's awareness of, and admiration for, Whitehead's work is clear, for he is one of the three personalities whose genius caused Toklas to hear bells upon meeting them for the first time (The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 3). In fact, Stein and Toklas maintained a close relationship with Whitehead and his family through letters during the war years, the years in which she composed "Lifting Belly."[21] A system that replaced discursive explanations, subjects, and predicates with more economical linguistic signifiers doubtlessly interested Stein, and many of her experiments of the time employ

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[20] In her biography Gertrude Stein, Bettina Knapp observes this congruence between Einstein's theory and Picasso's technique. She also observes Cézanne's fascination with geometry and claims that "Stein transmuted into words what Cézanne had delineated in his later paintings: a non-centered and non-framed reality (30). Knapp also suggests that Stein takes a "puzzle-like approach to writing" and in particular to portraiture (46).

[21] Letters in the Stein Collection at Yale University's Beinecke Library show that Stein corresponded with Alfred North Whitehead, and developed a rather close epistolary relationship with Whitehead's wife Evelyn, who wrote often and urged the couple to visit. The earliest remaining letter is dated 1914 and the latest bears the date of 1919. In 1918, Evelyn writes to Gertrude and Alice about the death of her son who was serving as a pilot during the First World War. The Whitehead children -- Eric, Thomas, and Jessie -- also corresponded with Stein.

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just such replacements. Just as the system allowed Russell and Whitehead to expand their range of mathematical arguments, it allowed Stein to use the phrase "Lifting belly" to encompass a whole realm of experiences. Stein replaces subjects and predicates in the long poem with the repeating phrase "Lifting belly."

In most places, "Lifting belly" is a noun of shifting significance, as the poem declares "Lifting belly is so strong" or "Lifting belly is a success" (LB 8, 14). However, it also serves as the predicate in such phrases as "Lifting belly all the time" and "Lifting belly together" (LB 15, 17). Stein uses this shifting symbolic system as a way to represent both language and the self differently. The poem explains "Lifting belly is a language. It says island. Island a strata. Lifting belly is a repetition. / Lifting belly means me" (LB 17). Here, Stein shorthands the long discussion of experience as repetition that we find in other of her works. Appropriating Whitehead's mathematical thinking, Stein also replaces the subject of the self with the variable "lifting belly," which, in an economy of space, stands for the otherwise lengthy explanation of selfhood – or individuality, as the word "island" suggests. Arranging her self-reflective meditation in the form of a proof – a mathematical alternative to a narrative – allows Stein to present her life as moments that "connect" and are "so orderly," "so exact" and yet "so adaptable" (LB 23, 33, 32, 16).

Surprisingly, many scholars see Stein's fascination with geometry wane after Tender Buttons. Hoffman relegates Stein's use of the geometric trope to only a few years of experimentation. Citing her rising fascination with writing plays, Hoffman argues that her vertical poems, which she wrote after the geometric novels of her early years, are no longer geometric, but instead mimic the dialogue of drama. However, Stein never quite

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dropped geometry as a subject or as an organizational tactic. In 1927, she published a piece in Oxford entitled "Are There Arithmetics" which begins:

> Are there arithmetics. In part there are arithmetics. There are in part, there are arithmetics in part.
>
> Are there arithmetics.
>
> In part.
>
> Another example.
>
> Are there arithmetics.
>
> In part.
>
> As there are arithmetics. In part.
>
> As a part... (24).

Likewise, in her 1936 work, The Autobiography of Rose, the main character is deeply concerned with shapes. Poor Rose is dismayed at the roundness of the universe, her world, its sun, and its moon. Since geometry played an integral role in these later works, it is illogical to assume that it dropped out of her repertoire as early as 1912.[22] While Stein may indeed have developed an interest in writing dialogue, and her vertical poems may indeed look like lines in a play, it is important to ask where the geometric precepts so present in QED and Tender Buttons might be in works like "Lifting Belly." The answer lies partly in the appearance of the text. While the brief lines running down

[22] In understanding Stein's stylistic development, it makes most sense to understand it as elliptical, or an expanding of the present. Just as Stein used the continuous present in her narratives to thwart the narrative limitations of moving from the past, through the present and to the future, she also brought new styles into her creative vocabulary without necessarily abandoning old methods to the past. All styles in Stein are current styles, just as all events are currently occurring.

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the page can look like lines in a play, they also look like the geometric proofs of Euclidian geometry.

The lines in "Lifting Belly" read like the hypothesis, axioms, and deductive statements of a proof. The geometric proof below is a well-known demonstrative proof dating back to Pythagoras (500 BCE) and Euclid (300 BCE). This proof works by disproving its antithesis, or by *reductio ad absurdum*. In other words, it presents a false assumption, proves – through the logical progression of axioms we know to be true – that it is false, and thereby shows the opposite to be true:

Prove that $\sqrt{2}$ is an irrational number.

1) Assume that $\sqrt{2}$ is rational

2) therefore: $\sqrt{2} = a/b$ where a and b are integers with no common factor.

3) therefore: $a = \sqrt{2}b$

4) therefore: $a^2 = 2b^2$

5) therefore: a^2 is even

6) therefore: a is even

7) therefore: $a = 2w$

8) therefore: $a^2 = 4w^2$

9) therefore: $4w^2 = 2b^2$

10) therefore: $2w^2 = b^2$

11) therefore: b^2 is even

12) therefore: b is even

13) therefore; both a and b are even

14) therefore: a and b have a common factor of 2. This contradicts the fact that a

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and b are integers with no common factor

15) therefore: our assumption is false, so $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational.[23]

Remove the numbers that mark each new line, and replace the repetitive "therefore" with "Lifting belly" and you get:

Lifting belly is so necessary.

Lifting belly is so kind.

I can't say it too often.

Please me.

Lifting belly.

Extraordinary.

Lifting belly is such exercise.

You mean altogether.

Lifting belly is so kind to me.

Lifting belly is so kind to many.

Don't say that please.

If you please.

Lifting belly is right (LB 9).

Here readers see a proof's vertical shape, and hear the proof's sounds in Stein's declarative, axiomatic statements like "Lifting belly is so kind." Stein's slightly varied

[23] Interested readers may view the proof seen above at www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/math30/app-hl6.html. The proof, as it appears here, assumes – quite as Stein seems to in "Lifting Belly" – that fellow mathematicians understand how one postulate leads to the next. In essence, the proof reduces the narrative aspect of its conclusive process to the barest facts. In Appendix A, I present the same proof along with explanations of these mathematical processes that connect one axiom to the next in parentheses.

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repetitions also mimic the proof's manner of logical progression. Just as the proof first declares $a = \sqrt{2}b$, and then rearranges the mathematical statement only slightly to say that $a^2 = 2b^2$, the poem shows that "Lifting belly is so kind," "...so kind to me," and "...so kind to many." The reader additionally observes the conclusive tone of a proof in the line "Lifting belly is right."

Indeed in many places, it is not only the sound and appearance of the poem that are geometric, but also the progression of logic. Below, we can see "Lifting Belly" operating in the same logical way – making an erroneous assumption and proving it false:

> And it has a name
>
> Lifting Belly can change to filling petunia.
>
> But not the same.
>
> It is not the same.
>
> It is the same.
>
> Lifting belly (LB 53).

Just as the proof sets out to prove that $\sqrt{2}$ is an irrational number by beginning with the assumption that $\sqrt{2}$ is rational, Stein sets out to establish Lifting Belly's name by announcing that the name can change to "filling petunia."

In addition to passages like these, many individual lines encourage the reader to think of "Lifting Belly" as a proof. Stein declares "Lifting belly is so accurate," likening it to the precision of mathematics (LB 8). She also insists that Lifting belly – like a geometric proof – is "a measure of it all," that it is "so consecutive," as well as "an experiment," an "exercise," and "an understanding" (LB 12-14, 16). Finally, Stein declares that "Lifting belly is a persuasion" and urges: "Lifting belly persuade me. /

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Lifting belly persuade me" (LB 18, 31). These lines suggest that, like a proof, the performance of "Lifting Belly" means to establish the validity of an hypothesis, to persuade. Stein also observes that like a proof "Lifting belly connects," "Is so exact," and "so orderly./ She makes no mistake" (LB 32, 33). Like mathematics, "Lifting belly is exacting./ You mean exact. I mean exacting./ Lifting belly is exacting," and like the field of math, which divides into theoretical and applied math, Stein considers "Lifting Belly" both "theoretically and practically" (LB 37, 45).

Still, for all of Stein's reminders that "Lifting belly is a persuasion," she does not adopt the form as much as she adapts it to her own purposes. The differences between the poem and a mathematical proof are as telling as the similarities. A geometric proof begins, like a science experiment, with a hypothesis, a theory to be established. In geometry, a hypothesis might be that the length of the third side of an isosceles triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. At the beginning of "Lifting Belly" where the hypothesis ought to appear, Stein writes, "I have been heavy and had much selecting. I saw a star which was low. It was so low it twinkled. Breath was in it. Little pieces are stupid" (LB 4). The imprecision of this statement reminds us that "Lifting belly is a resemblance" (LB 14).

Stein also plays with the progression of logic in a proof. In order to prove its hypothesis, a geometric proof begins with accepted truths, or axioms – postulates that are indisputable – and proceeds to list these axioms. In algebraic or plane geometry, these axioms might be that "$2a$ is even" since all multiples of two are, by definition, even. In "Lifting Belly," such an axiom is "Lifting belly is so strong" or "Lifting belly is so kind" (LB 6, 11). Further, geometry spurns tautologies and Stein embraces them. It would be

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mathematically improper to attempt to prove that $\sqrt{2}$ is an irrational number by simply declaring that it is irrational due to its lack of rationality. Yet Stein flirts with tautologies, declaring that "Lifting belly can please me because it is an occupation I enjoy./ A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" (LB 35). The first line may remind us of a proof's small steps – *a^2 is even, therefore a is even* – but her declaration "a rose is a rose is a rose" walks a fine line between the most basic postulates ($a = a$) and circular reasoning.

Stein's play with the look and sound of a geometric proof suggests that she sought more than mimicry. The opening lines of "Lifting Belly," or the poem's hypothesis, also suggest that Stein was experimenting with the form as a vehicle for self-representation. The poem begins "I have been heavy and had much selecting. I saw a star which was low..." and declares "I want to tell about fire" (LB 4). These lines are puzzling, but it is clear that Stein is engaging in an act of reflection and wants "Lifting Belly" to "tell about" that recollection. As we read, it becomes ever clearer that "Lifting Belly" is an experiment in autobiography. Stein reminds her reader:

> I have explained it to you in season.
>
> I have perplexed you.
>
> You have not perplexed me nor mixed me.
>
> ...When I said do not mention any words I meant no indifference.
>
> I meant do your duty and do not forget that I establish myself" (LB 29).

In these lines, she makes clear that the theorem she supports through this proof is her own identity (LB 29). The sense that we are reading an experiment in self-representation grows as the poem asks "Did you say, oh lifting belly. What is my another name," and then declares "Lifting belly is alright./ It is a name./ Yes it's a name," and as Stein tells

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us, "Lifting belly means me" (LB 5, 7, 17). These phrases center the poem around the self (rather than on the beloved as is the tradition for a love poem). They suggest that Stein's "Lifting Belly" is a linguistic [logical] replacement for the longer syllogisms that are the facets of Stein's identity.

When Stein adds "Lifting belly yesterday./ And today./ And tomorrow," she suggests that "Lifting belly captures" a life in its entirety (LB 24). However, the reader also gathers that the autobiography contained in the lines of "Lifting Belly" recounts a particular time in Stein's life:

> There is an instant of lifting belly.
>
> Lifting belly is an occasion. An occasion to please me. Oh yes. Mention it.
>
> Lifting belly is courteous.
>
> Lifting belly is hilarious, gay and favorable.
>
> Oh yes it is.
>
> Indeed it is not a disappointment.
>
> Not to me.
>
> Lifting belly is such an incident. In one's life.
>
> Lifting belly is such an incident in one's life (LB 10).

Indeed, the years that precede the composition of this poem were just such a "gay and favorable" time. In "Lifting Belly" Stein depicts herself as an "out" lesbian in a loving relationship with her new wife, no longer under the influence of her disapproving brother. They show that her brilliance as a lover, and her genius as a writer, have always been a part of her personality, merely unproved. "Lifting Belly" is a proof uncovering a personality previously repressed.

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SECTION II:

"NOW WE KNOW HOW TO DIFFER": THE LIBERATION OF GERTRUDE STEIN

When Alice Toklas moved into 27 rue de Fleurus in 1909, her presence widened an already growing rift between Gertrude Stein and her brother. Leo's final departure from the house, and from his sister's life in 1913, sparked a profound change in Gertrude's outlook. Leo's influence on Gertrude had been strong and profoundly negative, and their split liberated Gertrude as a woman and as a writer. While Leo continued to claim throughout his life that their estrangement was based merely on differences of style, and that he bore her no ill will, the relationship was full of acrimony disproportionate to simple aesthetic differences. Still, the rhetoric of the feud was rooted in the divergent paths of the two art connoisseurs.[24] As the cubist movement gained in popularity, so Gertrude developed, for the first time, in a different direction from her brother. As she writes in "Lifting Belly," "Now we know how to differ" (LB 49). And differ they did. The contentiousness between them grew as Gertrude's voice became the more prominent.

Gertrude was writing volumes of new material, experimenting, and promoting herself. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Leo disdained modernist experiments and removed himself from that circle, declaring, "as for myself, I am out of it" (Journey Into

[24] While Leo would write to Gertrude a handful of times in the years to come, they never spoke and the letters were few. Still, Leo kept careful track of his sister's career. He seemed to make a concentrated effort to read her published work and make his opinion of it known. At times, he seemed to delight in hearing criticism of Stein, and went out of his way to seek negative opinions of her work. Although he did not attend her lecture at the Colony Club, he inquired of it and wrote to a companion that, "The intelligence was apparently quite up to the level of Little Jack Horner's and the doctrine about the same" (Journey 150).

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the Self 48). He soon entered a depression accompanied by a writer's block he would never conquer. Leo's life was foundering just as Gertrude's was coming into focus. In his journal, he explains the siblings' divergence:

> Gertrude and I are just contrary. She's basically stupid and I'm basically intelligent. Gertrude's sort of massive self-admiration, and, in part, self-assurance, enabled her to build something rather effective on her foundations. I on the other hand, through the upsetting, complicating, and stultifying effects of a terrific neurosis, could build nothing substantial on my intelligence (Journey 149).

Leo's negativity toward Gertrude, and his disparagement of her intelligence, had been present and increasing in intensity for years before they parted ways. In an early, but undated letter to Mabel Weeks, Leo transcribes an argument between the siblings. He writes, "Gertrude says that's not a nice way to act... She says don't be nasty. She repeats that remark four times. She drools some more" (Journey 18). In 1913, the rift between them became permanent. In a letter to Mabel Weeks dated February 7, 1913, Leo describes Alice's presence as "a godsend, as it enabled the thing to happen without any explosion. As we have come to maturity, we have come to find that there is practically nothing under the heavens that we don't either disagree about, or at least regard with different sympathies" (Journey 52).

Throughout his life, the letters Leo wrote to Weeks and others continued to be full of insults. In them, he calls his sister "a barbarian with language," claims that she "could never use words with precision and force," that she was "terribly addicted to repetition," and that she could "only express herself by elaborately telling all at full length" (Journey 142, 134, 53). He accuses her of getting "energy out of misusing words," claims that her

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"mind is about as little nimble as a mind can be," and once announced that "If all the fools were drowned in Noah's flood, the seed was saved" (Journey 134, 154, 52). At the height of Gertrude's popularity, he averred "I simply cannot take Gertrude seriously as a literary phenomenon," and said that "like Picasso she wanted Cézanne's power without Cézanne's gift" (Journey 142).[25]

Leo's bitterness toward Gertrude and her success did not abate even at her death. In a letter addressed to Fred Stein in June of 1946, he writes that "Gertrude is a person of mediocre intelligence who has delusions about herself," and that "she has succeeded by insistence, as drops of water make an impression even if one drop is not worth much more than the other" (Journey 274). These statements seem even more embittered when we read the postscript to the letter, which reads:

> The other day some one told Nina that Gertrude had died, but it didn't seem probable. ...In any case I expected to see the Newsweek soon and that would certainly tell. There I found it was true. ...Perhaps because of Gertrude's death there will be notices in the papers. If anything of interest falls under your eyes, you might send it (Journey 275).

Another letter addressed to Howard Gans bluntly states, "P.S. – I just saw in Newsweek that Gertrude was dead of cancer. It surprised me for she seemed of late to be exceedingly alive. I can't say it touches me. I had lost not only all regard, but all respect,

[25] His journal entries are similarly disparaging of Gertrude. In May of 1942, for instance, he writes that "The habit of generalizing everything is simply stupid. But Gertrude is at bottom stupid and so the product must be." He also kept a collection of clippings of her work, which remains in the Stein collection at Yale's Beinecke library and consists of mostly negative reviews. He also clipped a few reviews that were generally positive, but in them underlined the reviewer's negative comments.

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for her" (Journey 291, 276). It seems that Leo's lasting dislike for his sister's work translated into a permanent aversion towards her as a person.[26] However, it seems equally likely that his distaste for her as a person, as a woman, exaggerated his disdain of her intellect and work.

Interestingly, while the pair's interests diverged over cubist experimentation, they both remained fascinated with logic and mathematics. Leo's letters and journals offer yet another reason Stein might have been unusually interested in recounting this particular time in her life through a mathematical form. Leo's journals declare his own rising interest in the field as he announces, "I have even in the last week or two discovered that I can understand mathematics which, except for plane geometry, has been to me hitherto an impenetrable mystery. I find trigonometry and analytics delightful and hope even to penetrate the mystery of calculus" (Journey 52).

His confidence in his sister's ability to grapple with the mathematic arts is markedly less. In a letter to Ettie Stettheimer, he mocks Stein's version of her encounter with philosopher William James.[27] He sneers, "Imagine William James telling anyone that if she wants to go into Philosophy she'd have to study mathematics. I think the real *fons et origo* of this is that Royce once told her that one couldn't take Philosophy

---

[26] Leo seems to have mentioned Gertrude's death only in postscript notes, insistently relegating her to the position of an afterthought. One such note addressed to Fred Stein temperately claims, "I don't know whether Gertrude had any feudish feelings about me, but certainly I had nothing of the sort about her. I was for a while annoyed when her Toklas book was published... but that has long since passed" (Journey Into the Self 291).

[27] In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Stein (in the guise of Alice) reflects on her relationship with philosopher William James with whom Stein studied at Harvard. She recalls "...William James one day asked her what she was going to do. She said she had no idea. Well, he said, it should be either philosophy or psychology. Now for philosophy you have to have higher mathematics and I don't gather that has ever interested you" (75).

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seriously without taking logic seriously" (Journey 135). Since Stein had just escaped such an atmosphere, it is understandable that she would write a "persuasion" declaring "I establish myself," and fitting that she uses the look and logic of mathematics to do so.[28]

Still, for all his barbs about Gertrude's intelligence, it is interesting to note that Leo's primary criticism was that her writing was too much about herself. As early as 1913, his letters to Weeks indict Gertrude for self-indulgence. He claims that unlike himself, "Gertrude... hungers and thirsts for *gloire*, and it was of course a serious thing for her that I can't abide her stuff and think it abominable" (Journey 52). Whether or not Leo's criticism was a "serious thing" to Gertrude, she certainly was aware of it. In Two: Gertrude Stein and her Brother, she says that Leo accused her writing of being all to do with her and nothing to do with literature. She explains, "He said it was not it it was I. If I was not there... what I did would not be what it was" (Two 108). Leo's repeated remarks on the subject show that he found the personal expression in her work off-putting.

In a letter to Weeks in 1933, following the publication of the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Leo complains that "Gertrude's writing has particular local personal knowledge as its complement and it doesn't interest me" (Journey 129).[29] Feminist scholars have noted that the local and personal are earmarks of women's writing and long

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[28] While William James may not have told Stein that a study of mathematics was an imperative for a career in Philosophy, he did write that "[t]he union of the mathematician with the poet, fervor with measure, passion with correctness, this surely is the ideal" (Collected Essays and Reviews 248).

[29] Leo's constant disapproval of Stein's interest in writing about herself echoes a prevalent male view of women's self-representation, which Elaine Showalter discusses at length in Sister's Choice. In particular, we are reminded of Bronson Alcott's remark that "while Anna's journal was 'about other people,' Louisa's is about herself' (Sister's Choice 48).

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been disparaged as such by male critics. Such an assessment of Leo's statement might seem undeservedly imposed, but for Leo's comment, which soon follows: "Sappho's ode was written by the only great woman poet" (Journey 129). The misogyny in many of Leo's comments helps us understand the sudden increase of consciously feminist writing that marks Stein's work in the years following their split.

Leo was anything but a proponent of feminism. In fact, Lisa Ruddick, in her book Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis, notes that Leo held an interest in an outspoken anti-feminist of the time, Otto Weininger. She notes that at the peak of Leo's interest in Weininger, Leo declared, "if one could take women's minds off their wombs, they might be helped to some kind of development after all."[30] His comment indicates that Gertrude's writing about herself was not the root of Leo's objection, but rather that Gertrude was a *woman* writing about herself. Female introspection – to his mind – was limited to contemplation of bodily womanhood, an inferior intellectual pursuit.

Gertrude Stein's literary reactions to her brother's disapproval resonate as assertions that a woman has the right to be present in her own work, and that her presence there changes the face of language for the better. Feminist ideas such as this pepper her work in the period following the separation from Leo.[31] In Two: Gertrude Stein and Her

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[30] Here, Lisa Ruddick is quoting a 1915 portion of Leo's journal that was not selected for publication in Journey Into the Self. The complete journals remain part of the Stein collection at the Beinecke Library at Yale (Ruddick 181).

[31] Ruddick notes an increase in love poetry and feminist poetry as Alice supplants Leo as Gertrude's primary companion. She points to "Patriarchal Poetry," "Lifting Belly," and "Pink Mellon Joy" as examples of Stein's new desire to explore and represent womanhood (specifically lesbian womanhood) in her poetry of this period. Diana Souhami, in her 1991 book Gertrude and Alice, also observes that in this period "Gertrude's eulogies on the delights of sex became less veiled. She wrote of kisses and stickiness, preferred positions in bed." Souhami calls "Lifting Belly" a fifty page lyric "on the glory of it all" (128).

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Brother she paints a picture of life in the Stein house as the contentions grew. She offers her own version of the rising disparity between the two sibling's philosophies and the static acrimony between the two: "She was changing. He was changing. They were not changing" (Two 19). She also gives her reader a sense of what it was like to live under Leo's domineering presence when she writes, "In ordering anything he was ordering what he had decided to order and having ordered that thing he had ordered that thing" (Two 33). Two further illustrates how Gertrude gained her voice through this divorce from Leo's influence. She asserts that, "In the beginning all of saying everything sound was coming out of him and sound coming out of him was sounding that he was expecting to be having" but that "She knew later that she had a marvelous articulation. She conquered the speaking that was not asking" (Two 85).

When Stein first sets out the hypothesis of "Lifting Belly," her recent separation from Leo is prominent. Stein reminds her reader that she and Leo have parted company and that Alice is now her companion: "We quarreled with him. We quarreled with him then" (LB 4). Stein then seems to address him directly: "Do not forget that I showed you the road. Do not forget that I showed you the road. We will forget because he does not oblige himself to thank me. Ask him to thank me" (LB 4). She even declares, "I don't pardon him. I find him objectionable" (LB 4). Stein reminds the reader of Leo again later in the poem: "Be as good./ If he could./ This was said/. Now we know how to differ" (LB 49). Through "Lifting Belly" Stein establishes her independence from Leo.

As Alice and Gertrude became closer, Stein gained confidence and voice. Her poems from this period reflect a rising feminist sensibility – a new appreciation for

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womanhood and her own lesbianism.[32] However, her experimentation during this period with feminist (or at least highly womanly) subjects and her attempts to thwart patriarchal poetry are not just a simple negative reaction to Leo's misogyny. Stein's relationship with Alice Toklas offered not only new inspiration for writing about women, it offered resolution of several old wounds, making it possible to write about subjects which were previously too painful to confront. Her appreciation of womanhood -- once marred by traumas such as the death of her mother and the unhappy relationship with May Bookstaver -- Stein now celebrates, saying, "Lifting belly is in bed./ And the bed has been made comfortable" (52). She expresses a newfound comfort with her sexuality.

In "Lifting Belly" Stein reflects on the profound shift that has occurred in her life now that she has taken Toklas as her wife, and declares the poem a chronicle of this turning point in her life:

> Lifting belly astonishingly.
>
> Can you mention her brother.
>
> Yes.
>
> Her father.
>
> Yes.
>
> A married couple.
>
> Yes.
>
> Lifting belly names it (LB 34).

---

[32] Lisa Ruddick asserts that the linguistic experimentation links with Stein's radical content. She suggests that, "[Stein] may well have chosen such a style partly in order to elude the 'revenge' of the cultural censors; her works would seem simply impenetrable to anyone likely to be wholly unsympathetic to their ideas, but would slowly yield their pleasures and their subversive secrets to readers moved to stay with them for some time" (140).

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"Lifting Belly" names the history that has preceded this moment – the father and the brother – and now names the present moment "a married couple." When Stein comments, "Lifting belly astonishingly," she reflects on the impact of the shift that has taken place in her life. She soon adds to her assessment of these changes: "Lifting belly is hilarious, gay, and favorable./ Indeed it is not a disappointment./ Not to me" (LB 10). "Lifting Belly" expresses a profound sense of contentment in her new life with Alice. Throughout "Lifting Belly" Stein records her newfound joy: "I can truthfully say never better./ Believe me lifting belly is not nervous./ Lifting belly is a miracle./ I am with her" (LB 42). She speaks euphorically of her their love life: "Kiss my lips. She did./ Kiss my lips again she did./ Kiss my lips over and over again she did" (LB 19).

While these tender reflections may seem simply parts of a love-poem, the lyric mode afforded Stein a space in which to address other on-going issues in her life such as the conflicts with her brother, her estrangement from her father, and her previously undisclosed lesbianism. In "Lifting Belly" Stein revels in this newfound daring. She writes, "Lifting belly names it./ Look at that" (34). Here we see that Stein is finding the courage to mention all sorts of previously coded, unspoken things.

As the closing lines of "Lifting Belly" suggest, Stein's relationship with Alice Toklas and the lyric form in which she wrote, both offered her:

Protection.

Protection

Protection

Speculation

Protection

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Protection.

With this sense of safety she ventures to write about the same topics she had written about in Fernhurst and Q.E.D., but with more passion, joy, daring, and clarity.[33] The poem cautiously asks, "Is there a way of being careful... of the South," and boldly answers: "By going to it. We will go." Stein's poem even overtly questions what kinds of intimacies she can disclose in her poem:

Can you sing about a cow.

Yes.

And about signs.

Yes.

And also about Aunt Pauline.

Yes.

"Lifting Belly" decides to be bold and rejoices in female companionship and female self-hood. Its offers intimate details of lovemaking – including the many kisses shared, preferred positions, stickiness, and the softness of the bed -- with exuberance and enthusiasm.

"Lifting Belly" represents a shift in Stein's companionship and in her literary style. She finds in the geometric form a means of expressing both of those shifts at once.

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[33] While Stein's behavior and writing before this poem is certainly not devoid of expressions of her lesbianism, the two texts before "Lifting Belly" that deal explicitly with lesbian themes (Fernhurst and Q.E.D.) were hidden in a cabinet and not shared with anyone until after Stein's death. "Lifting Belly," while not published in Stein's lifetime, was part of a group of poems she apparently did (albeit unsuccessfully) attempt to publish. In her book Gertrude and Alice, Diana Souhami writes about the boundaries between publication and privacy in Stein's work. She notes that "Alice believed it was her mission to see all Gertrude's work printed. But she did not want intimacies revealed. She kept back Gertrude's first novel [Q.E.D.], about her love for May Bookstaver" (255). With its careful balance between disclosure and concealment, "Lifting Belly" became part of the Yale Gertrude Stein, edited by Richard Kostelanetz.

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In essence, the whole of her experiences come together in the geometric lyric. Eager to relate the experience of the years which separated her from Leo's negativity and brought her closer to Toklas, Stein was not content with a narrative recapitulation. The geometric and lyric forms allowed her to "establish" herself, to express her indignation at Leo's disapproval and her love and desire for Toklas. Further, it allowed her to do so in a mode that permitted these events to be currently forming her personality, rather than have their influence relegated to the past, to memory. It allowed her to represent her "human mind" in a suitably non-narrative manner.

SECTION III:

"LIFTING BELLY IS SO ADAPTABLE': A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AUTOBIOGRAPHY"

Throughout her career, Gertrude Stein invested a great deal of energy contemplating human nature, the human mind, and how writing represents -- and fails to represent -- each. Dissatisfied with the narrative as a means of representing the human mind, she experimented continually with her prose – employing the continuous present to thwart the chronological nature of narrative – and often used plays and poems as alternative modes of self-expression. In "Lifting Belly," Stein mingles select elements of the geometric proof, the lyric, and the love poem to create a new kind of autobiography. Roy Pascal explains in Design and Truth in Autobiography, "Style is autobiographically significant because it is attached to the writer's present" (182). Stein's carefully chosen mode of expression in "Lifting Belly" exploits aspects of the genre traditions of the lyric and the love poem, then adds the geometric wild-card to the mix in order to represent

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herself in mode as well as content.[34] In the nexus of geometric proof and lyric love poem, Stein finds three things: a demonstration of her own identity that adheres to her conception of the human mind, an autobiography in which all the axiomatic moments of a life coalesce outside time and circumstance, and a careful balance between self-disclosure and protection.

Stein began experimenting with alternatives to narrative as early as 1915 with her cubist work in Tender Buttons. A few years later, in a burst of feminist writing that includes "Lifting Belly" "Pink Mellon Joy," and "Patriarchal Poetry," Stein connects her innovation with a desire to thwart patriarchal modes of reading and writing. In "Patriarchal Poetry," Stein demands new conceptions of language and poetry. She equates "Patriarchal Poetry" with "Their origin and their history" and declares that "Patriarchal poetry needs rectification" (PP 116). Both of these demands illustrate Stein's interest in re-imagining histories, reinventing the ways we think about and represent our origins and memoirs. One of the most striking passages in "Patriarchal Poetry" illustrates Stein's increasing interest in specifically feminist experimentation with language and self-representation. Following a page and a half of the repeated phrase "let her try" the poem demands:

> Just let her try.
>
> Let her try.

---

[34] In his 1980 article in the Georgia Review, entitled "Gertrude Stein and the Problems of Autobiography," James Breslin observes that Stein was not content with the traditional mode of autobiography. He explains that "in many ways the autobiographical act is one at odds with, even a betrayal of, Gertrude Stein's aesthetic principles ... her desire to live and write in a continuous present thus turns her against the necessarily retrospective act of autobiography" (902). Breslin does not address the autobiographical in Stein's poetry.

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Never to be what he said.

Never to be what he said.

Never to be what he said (PP 121).

The implication is double – both the woman and her utterance must be new. Through writing, women must find ways to differ from the masculine tradition. Stein seeks to "rectify" patriarchal poetry as well as patriarchal autobiography by writing unabashedly about her experiences as a woman in love with another woman. In "Lifting Belly," Stein expresses new confidence and joy through a mode that breaks with the long patriarchal history of autobiographical writing.

Stein's interest in the limits of narration to express the human mind continues throughout her career, and she writes of her philosophies at length in The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind. In this text, Stein discusses the human mind's connection to -- or dissociation from -- time, recollection, writing, identity, autobiography, poetry, and even publishing. Her articulations are dense, repetitive, and often seemingly contradictory, but we can glean from them a sense of why traditional prose autobiography dissatisfied her.

Stein's conception of time and memory require reinvention of autobiography, a genre seemingly reliant on chronological conceptions of both. She writes, "Because the human mind knows what it knows and knowing what it knows it has nothing to do with seeing what it remembers," which suggests that the human mind is more inclined toward knowledge than recollection (GHA 55). She goes on to argue, "...there is no time and no identity to the human mind" and contends that "[t]here is no remembering and there is no forgetting because memory has to do with human nature and not with the human mind"

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(GHA 177, 82). Stein concludes, "...therefore there are no witnesses to the autobiography of any one that has a human mind" (GHA 109, 82). For such a mind, the axiomatic elements of the geometric proof would be preferable to discursive narration. In the geometric proof, the mind's knowledge is represented as such, whereas discursive prose leans toward remembering.[35]

The idea that all knowledge is current knowledge and has "nothing to do with seeing what it remembers" extends to Stein's renunciation of chronology in writing. She concludes:

> There is no reason why chapters should succeed each other since nothing succeeds another, not now any more. In the old novels yes but not now any more and so the human mind not succeeding one thing by another supposing everybody doing nothing should continue living. How about it (GHA 82).

This anti-narrative conception of writing coincides with Stein's concept of how events relate to a life, which is once again geometric in that she sees events as axiomatic – factual outside of time and circumstance.[36] Events, in Stein's estimation, "are connected with human nature but they are not connected with the human mind and therefore all writing that has to do with events has to be written over" (GHA 108). Harkening back to

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[35] Stein reiterates her belief that the human mind "knows neither memory nor tears it can forget, but what can it forget, it can forget nothing but not be remembering indeed not by remembering and so he and she and she and he do know what the human mind is." She also contends, "The relation of human nature to the human mind makes everybody indifferent to remembering and forgetting to age and living to knowing that every one can die so that there may be room for all who are here now and so many people expect to prepare otherwise but they do not know what the human mind is" (GHA 59).

[36] Stein once more asserts that time and identity are separate entities: "When you look at anything and you do not see it all in one place, you do not see it with the human mind but anybody can know that... and so it is because there is no time and no identity in the human mind" (GHA 175).

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the language of "Patriarchal Poetry," which also demanded that writing be rewritten, this passage marks Stein's enduring interest in non-narrative forms, especially for self-expression, or the communication of the human mind.

Lyric poetry, an alternative to narrative, seems to come closer to Stein's idea of the human mind, as it is often "what is seen."[37] However, it too has its shortcomings as a mode through which to represent identity. She explains:

> Poetry may be what is seen and it often is.
>
> Poetry is not identity no that it never is.
>
> Poetry may be time but if it is then it is remembered time and that makes it be what is seen.
>
> And so poetry a great deal of poetry is what is seen....
>
> But a great deal of poetry is made up of subject and if it is then it is not a master-piece" (GHA 202).

In Stein's estimation, a poem that is "made up of subject" is not a masterpiece. A love poem, in particular, would tend toward the kind of poetry that is about a subject, and therefore unable to "be what is seen," unable to represent identity. The history of the love poem as a genre also seems to make it less than ideal as a mode of autobiography.

---

[37] The changing conception of a "lyric," as traced in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetic Terms, helps us understand the autobiographical experiment at work in "Lifting Belly." The lyric is one of three general categories, the other being dramatic and epic. From the first use of the term to indicate a poem written to be sung, to the Romantic confusion of "lyric" with "poetry" the lyric has come to have a complicated relationship to the "universal" (713). While many argue that the "lyric voice" is a "universal voice," in the twentieth century, the lyric voice has become increasingly personal. The Princeton history of the term cites James Joyce as saying that lyrical poetry is "the form wherein the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself" and points out that "the popularity of lyric poetry in the 20th Century has increased with its employment in the causes of self-expression, feminism, and racial and social equality" (715).

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The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetic Terms asserts that "a love poem cannot be simplistically read as a literal, journalistic record of an event or relationship: there is always some fictive reshaping of reality for dramatic or psychological ends." It further claims, "a love poem is secondary rather than primary experience; as an imaginative construction, it invites detached contemplation of the spectacle of sex" (706). While these statements may arguably hold true as descriptions of love poems, they also echo the observations of autobiography theorists who take great interest in autobiographers' many interpretive acts.[38]

In his book, Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration, S.C. Neuman discusses this aspect of autobiography at some length. He quotes Leslie Stephen's observation from "Rambles Among Books," which contends, "it may be reckoned as a special felicity that an autobiography, alone of all books, may be more valuable in proportion to the amount of misrepresentation which it contains. We do not wonder when a man gives a false character to his neighbor, but it is always curious to see how a man contrives to present a false testimonial to himself" (The Cornhill Magazine April 1881, 410). Neuman assesses the phenomenon that Stephens observes, contending, "when the autobiographer simultaneously takes his self as his subject and undertakes to interpret that self, to become a self-critic, the tension generated between the two aims contributes to his unintentional 'misrepresentation' of his self" (9).

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[38] Princeton's definition of a love poem also contends that "the beloved is passionately perceived, but also replaceable; he or she may exist primarily as a focus of the poet's consciousness" (706). Here, "Lifting Belly" diverges from the path of the love poem. Stein includes in "Lifting Belly" many of her nicknames for Alice such as "baby, wifie, pussy, gay, queen, and 'my little jew' " (Souhami 111). These names indelibly mark Alice as the beloved, an act that also underscores the "journalistic" or autobiographical nature of the work.

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In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas Gertrude Stein calls attention to the fictionalizing interpretive act typical of autobiography when she poses as Alice Toklas, whose voice narrates the work. This joke underscores Stein's belief that traditional, narrative modes of autobiography are "what is in someone else's mind" and not an accurate representation of "anyone with a human mind" (GHA 82). In essence, the love poem's interpretation of experience – its tendency to favor reflection over immediacy – allies the love poem with the genre of autobiography rather than distancing the two modes. Ironically, it is this similarity that makes both traditional narrative and the lyric love poem unsuitable forms for Stein's autobiography. A simple mixing of the two genres would likewise fall short of "masterpiece status." Stein needed a third element to create a work that would reflect the mind as it is, that answers the question "What does the human mind write" (GHA 97).

According to Stein, the human mind instinctively "writes what it is," but her sense of what a mind is, and what identity is, are complex (GHA 97). Her famous declaration that "I am I because my little dog knows me" provides only a beginning point. In some passages, Stein seems to diminish the importance of identity, as when she writes "The question of identity has nothing to do with the human mind it has something although really nothing altogether really nothing altogether to do with human nature. Any dog has an identity" (GHA 134). In other instances, Stein's circular reasoning seems utterly to confound the roots of identity, as when she announces, "The old woman said I am I because my little dog knows me, but the dog knew that he was he because he knows that he was he as well as knowing that he knew she" (GHA 134). In this tautological

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statement, it is unclear whether identity is based solely on intuitive self-knowledge or on interactive experience.

In another passage, the relationship between audience and identity becomes clearer. Stein writes:

> I am I because my little dog knows me, even if the little dog is a big one, and yet the little dog knowing me does not really make me be I no not really because after all being I I am I has really nothing to do with the little dog knowing me, he is my audience, but an audience never does prove that you are you (GHA 105).[39]

There are two crucial aspects of this statement. First, the nature of identity and its relationship to audience is clearer. One is not dependent on the other. Identity is innate, but an audience – like a reflection in a mirror – provides evidence or confirmation of its existence. Second, Stein's diction betrays an interest in "proving" an identity, and offers the solution to the problem of method. The human mind may "write what it is" through a convergence of literature and logic. The axiomatic nature of the geometric proof solves the problems Stein had with the restrictive chronology of prose and the anchoring subjectivity of poetry. Her declaration that "Lifting belly is so adaptable" announces Stein's satisfaction with the convergence of modes that allows "Lifting Belly" to accommodate an identity as Stein sees it.

Stein's sense that the identity must find expression unfettered by chronology makes it hard to participate in the recall and recapitulation typical of autobiography, but

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[39] Stein also connects audience with memory when she writes, "Now identity remembers and it has an audience and as it has an audience it is history and as it is history it has nothing to do with the human mind" (139). She suggests that audience alters memory and that the human mind stands apart from history in its purest state. To render the human mind in writing, one cannot rely on history, or memory as traditional autobiography does.

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the position has its advantages. One of the pitfalls of the "ordered" experience is that its reflective, interpretive nature opens the door wide to misinterpretation. The analysis of one's own life – in some sense the very essence of the autobiographical genre – inevitably affords each author the opportunity to tell the tale slant, to skew or reshape the events of their lives and thus themselves through their own bias. Indeed, as Leslie Stephens remarked, "it is always curious to see how a man contrives to present a false testimonial to himself" ("Rambles Among Books" 410).

An avid reader of biography and autobiography herself, it is likely that Stein was taken with the same skeptical curiosity and sought a way to avoid the pitfalls of misinterpretation or misrepresentation that mark so many traditional autobiographies.[40] "Lifting Belly," instead of offering the reader an interpretation, which might be construed as "a false testimonial," offers undisputed facts and corollaries instead of untried statements. In other words, we learn that "Lifting belly is so kind," only after Stein informs us that, "To-day we decide to forgive Nellie" (LB 21). The dialogues of "Lifting Belly" also work as exercises of deductive logic:

> Mrs. Vettie. It is necessary to have a Ford.
>
> Yes sir.
>
> Dear Mrs. Vettie. Smile to me.
>
> I am.
>
> Dear Mrs. Vettie never better.

---

[40] In S.C. Neuman's book Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration, he offers a brief discussion of Stein's interest in reading autobiography. He notes that she read extensively within the genre, noting well-known texts such as Augustine's Confessions as well as suggesting that Stein read more "tabloid" autobiographies of contemporary interest. He implies even, that Stein may have read Leslie Stephens's remarks in "Rambles Among Books" (Neuman 9).

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Yes indeed so.

Lifting belly is most kind (LB 21).

The polite conversation above, establishing the speaker's conviviality, leads the reader to believe her final assertion: "Lifting belly is so kind." Because this kindness is presented as a fact rather than a discursive possibility, it leaves the reader no opportunity to suggest that it is a misrepresentation. The illusion of factual integrity is just one reason that facts rule "Lifting Belly."

Stein offers fifty pages of self-referential facts, a logical collage of truths in the life. The evidence that "proves you are you" or that Stein is Stein, or that "Lifting belly is so accurate" mounts and appears as an unordered collage of events. But it is not a collection of background details without connection. Rather, as Stein puts it in "Lifting Belly," "any letter is an alphabet" (LB 48). Any one of the details offered in "Lifting Belly" can be understood as the life entire. The day is the life, and the collage of daily life is the life of all days. Just as one enters a room and can, to some extent, judge the character of its owner by the things they have collected, so Stein offers us the same "reflection" on her life. Stein states that to understand her life, one can look at any detail or any given day and it will contribute to an understanding of the whole. One need not start at the beginning and proceed through to the end, because any given day and any combination of details prove her in the same way.

Still, although each detail is an expression of the life, it is important to understand that the more connected truths one can offer in support of a hypothesis, the more persuasive the proof will be. Thus while "Lifting belly is recognized" as soon as we learn that "Lifting belly means me," the autobiography is not complete unless we also

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know that "Lifting belly is my another name," "Lifting belly is an expression," and "Lifting belly is my love" (LB 30, 17, 5, 16, 49). Like the true Stein, "Lifting belly is so adaptable" (LB 16). Rather than discursive, interpretive narration of a life's events, Stein states facts, and places them in delicious and sensuous proximity to each other.

While Stein may have sought an autobiography in which past events of life's many epochs may coexist in the present tense, this approach is one of the very things that prevent us from "witnessing" this autobiography. In avoiding the confines of narrative, chronology, and subjectivity, Stein loses a sense of specificity – a crucial aspect of autobiography. However, the personality-demonstrating collage of facts in "Lifting Belly" is not meant as a universal statement of the times or of a woman's life. To understand how Stein makes her geometric compilation of facts into self-expression, we must understand both the conventions of autobiographical self-disclosure, and how Stein transgresses them.

The most traditional examples of autobiography establish an autobiographical pact with the reader through a confluence of names. When name of the author on the cover matches the name of the narrator and protagonist, a text moves from a fiction (however autobiographical) into the realm of autobiography. But the idea of anchoring this pact in the proper name fails to serve in a conversation about Stein, who declared, "The autobiography of Rose is the autobiography of Rose even if her name is not Rose." It is indeed true that in "Lifting Belly," if Stein has a name it is neither Gertrude nor Gertrude Stein. She does not refer to herself by name, seldom uses the pronoun "I," and indeed it is hard to pin down the actual subject of the poem. The subject might be Toklas, as the repeated line "Lifting belly is my love" suggests. At times the subject

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seems Stein herself: "Lifting belly means me." At other times the subject is "an experiment," "an instant in one's life." It seems impossible to name the subject, let alone establish that the name is the same as the author's.

However, while Stein may play with nicknames, there are many indications throughout her work that the mutability of names does not undermine the assertion of identity. Stein and Toklas had many nicknames for each other, including kitten, queen, king, cherubim, lobster, mount fattie, and cake. Both Stein biographer Richard Bridgeman and Stein scholar Bettina Knap suggest that the use of coded language and nicknames were a protective measure. Bridgeman suggests that "Sometimes Gertrude Stein used false names, just as she created code words for certain censorable material" (Bridgeman 148). Knapp also connects renaming with protective measures, and argues that Stein's writing about her own sexuality grew in boldness as her use of code increased. She asserts that "by disguising her characters in codes and symbols used to define them, Stein still succeeded in hiding her lesbianism" (Knapp 90). However, the pet names, the terms of endearment – like kisses in public – are more announcements of the couple's intimacy than censorious gestures. In fact, Stein's codes, when working in combination with each other, serve as a more accurate self-representation than artificial given names could have.

Stein's world is one in which names are created to represent a facet of the person, grounded in the present moment, and only by considering all the names together also in the present moment, do they prove to be the person. Only a geometric proof can achieve this simultaneity, for in an ordinary narrative autobiography, she would have to settle for her given name, or run through their invention creating a misleading chronology of past

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selves. The process of deductive reasoning allows all happenings to be considered simultaneously as part of the whole truth. Stein's constant renaming of her subject, and her frequent use of nicknames, are part of her plan to improve self-expression through deductive logic. By showing that all names are true in the poem, the connection to the author's full self is solidified not undermined. Once again, in geometry, we would hear statements that if A=B, and B=C, then A=C. In Stein, all the nicknames she shared with Alice Toklas become syllogistic replacements, or as Stein puts it in "Saints and Singing," "I make a new name, and yet every name is the same" (Operas and Plays 73). Stein's use of alternate names for herself and for her lover in her poetic autobiographies raises a question about how one represents an identity.

Stein's use of nicknames, code, and the geometric method of listing a catalog of facts also illustrate the third benefit Stein found in the nexus of poetry and geometry – the careful balance between self-disclosure and protection. Of the experiments in poetic autobiography Stein composed over the course of her career, "Lifting Belly" is especially interesting because it employs both accessible language and code. Indeed, one trait that makes "Lifting Belly" such an interesting moment in the development of Stein's use of code is that the code is not yet completely opaque. The poem is in a constant state of flux between that which can be accepted literally and that which is encoded. When the poem declares, "I told him I would send him Mildred's book. He seemed very pleased at the prospect," it records these happenings as such. (17). And yet when it says "We were in a fashion deceived in Calville but not in a cow," the reader gets the strong sense that there is a meaning not connected to Calville and actual four-legged cows.

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While there are times when Caesar is a reference to a woman's body, it also still represents the power of an emperor. There are moments when "Lifting belly is an intention" and times when "Lifting belly is a way of sitting." There are yet other instances when lifting belly is the lifting of a belly, and that is when "Lifting belly is so exciting" (LB 24). While Stein performs these autobiographical experiments in several forms throughout her life, "Lifting Belly" is a particularly interesting because it remains relatively intelligible, intensely personal, and grounded in the daily trivia of Stein's and Toklas's life in Spain during the First World War. "Lifting Belly" contains enough information about daily life to paint a complete picture of a life as it came into new being in these years of newlywed passion between Gertrude and Alice. The shortage of eggs, sugar and other goods made scarce by the war, the interactions with new neighbors, sexual postures, delights, disagreements and reconcilements are transcribed in careful and rapt detail.

"Lifting Belly" is also particularly bold. Other poems may bury intimacies in codes and cows, but "Lifting Belly" tells the story outright and as part of a natural daily routine. She is not meditating about the relationship as she does in Q.E.D., but reflecting on it alongside other aspects of her life. She often shuttles back and forth between comments about her new neighbors and sweet reflections on her lovemaking prowess. At one point, she exclaims, "Can you wonder that they don't make preserves./ Lifting belly seeks pleasure./ And she finds it altogether./ Lifting belly is my love" (LB 48-9). She speaks of falling asleep together:

> We exchanged a pillow. We murmured training and we were asleep.
>
> This is what happened Saturday.

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Another day we said sour grass it grows in the fields. So do daisies and green flowers.

I have never noticed green flowers.

Lifting belly is my joy.

While Stein's enthusiasm for self-expression heartens many readers, some – as Leo's criticism suggests – will feel excluded by the intimacy of the poem. Indeed, "Lifting Belly," and many of the poems in this period seem not only autobiographical, but also quite intimately so. Some lines even make readers feel as though they are reading an inside joke. One feels rather like a voyeur when encountering exchanges like this one:

Bright eyes I make you ties.

No mockings.

This is to say I knit woolen stockings for you. And I under-

stand it and I am very grateful.

Making a spectacle.

Drinking prepared water.

Laughing together (LB 29).

Here, the "mockings" and "stockings" rhyme indicates a joke, which we can only associate with one of the two "making a spectacle."[41] The line "laughing together" reminds us of the couple's joy, and their intimacy, but also of the distance maintained

[41] Stein's simultaneous desire to announce to the world that "lifting belly is my love" and to maintain a sense of privacy was surely due, in part, to the increasing intimacy between the couple, for it was during this period that Gertrude asked Alice to be her wife and Alice Toklas agreed. In some ways, the trip to Spain, while necessitated by the onset of the Great War, was a honeymoon of sorts for the couple, and the volume of love poems composed during this escape from France was never again equaled in Stein's career.

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between the author and the reader. After all, Gertrude and Alice are the ones "laughing together," not author and reader.

Seeing Stein tease her readers with seeming intimacy only to close the door on them, makes readers feel as though they are witnessing an intimate moment, and the reader perceives it as a very true representation of the self. As a result, readers may actually perceive gaps in meaning that could seem like barriers as the pinnacle of intimacy. While readers may fill in these gaps with their own knowledge, their own perceptions, or their own interpretations of Stein's personality, Stein has offered only precise details. She has offered controlled glimpses rather than extensive discursive self-exposure. For Stein, this must have seemed the perfect mode in which to represent herself. After all, as the poem insists, "Lifting belly is an expression," but "Lifting belly is not an invitation" (29).

The geometric lyric serves as ballast for Stein as she walks the fine line between self-disclosure and self-protection. Through this experimental combination of forms and genres she is able to recount the events of her split from Leo without the churlish embittered exposition of Two. She is able to express her love, desire, and joy with her wife Alice without societal reproach. She reflects on her life without imposing a chronology upon it. She expresses the human mind in its complexity, to prove "I am I" not because her little dog knows her, but because she herself has declared "I establish myself" (LB 28). "Lifting belly is an experiment," an experiment that offers a whole new realm of possibilities for composing, reading, and analyzing autobiography.

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Chapter Two:

"The Circles Crossed": The Bisexual Autobiography in H.D.'s Helen in Egypt

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Introduction: "How to Phrase the Problem": Are Helen and H.D. Together Yet Separate?

"There is no detail. The steps are geometrical, symmetrical, and she is as abstract as a lady could be, yet she is a real entity, a real person." -- Tribute to Freud

In her memoir Tribute to Freud, H.D. recalls a dream of an Egyptian woman in Greek clothes. Her description of the woman who is both abstract and real reflects the nature of H.D.'s iconoclastic main character in Helen in Egypt. H.D.'s Helen is at once a symbolic persona and a corporeal woman, or as the epic's second paragraph tells us, "She is both phantom and reality" (HIE 3). In many ways, the work appears too ambiguous and abstract to attribute to it the autobiographical impulse to reveal and recount a life, but the sense that it is nevertheless an autobiography haunts its readers. H.D.'s Helen reminds us of Paul de Man's affirmation that "the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but ... is undecidable" ("Autobiography as De-facement" 921). Indeed, despite our inability to reconcile symbols with biographical facts in a fixed allegorical way, Helen in Egypt seems somehow obviously autobiographical. This paradox places autobiography theorists who read the text in the same position as Helen herself; we intuitively understand the writing, but we cannot translate our understanding. We are left asking:

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How are Helen in Egypt

and Helen upon the ramparts

together yet separate?

how have the paths met

how have the circles crossed?

How phrase or frame the problem (HIE 63).

The problem, and thus its answer, arises from the basic demands of autobiography itself. Our most fundamental understanding is that an autobiography reveals a life. However, in H.D.'s case, writing an open and transparent autobiography that detailed her life – with lovers of both sexes, a miscarriage, an open marriage, numerous affairs with well-known poets, a daughter born of one such affair, and a divorce – had the potential to reduce a serious poet's life to a tabloid curiosity.[1] As Nancy K. Miller has observed, "The concern with notoriety ... functions as an additional grid or constraint placed on the truth" ("Writing Fictions" 49).

Further, traditional autobiography is born of the presupposition that the identity is a singular entity that can be expressed best in narrative prose. As Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck point out in their book Life/Lines: Theorizing Women Autobiography, "...representative masculine autobiographies rest upon the Western ideal of an essential and inviolable self, which, like its fictional equivalent, character, unifies and propels the

[1] In their book Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck point out that, "the very authority of masculine autobiography derives from the assumption held by both author and reader that the life being written/read is an exemplary one" (3). H.D. may have felt reluctant to set forth the details of her life as exemplary in an atmosphere that viewed autobiography in such terms.

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narrative" (Life/Lines 5). Authors using this mode imagine the self as one that can be traced ontologically, from youth to maturity, uncovering one fact or formative moment at a time while their plots relate the climactic identity.[2]

For H.D., who experimented with many forms of life-writing in the course of her career, this model was insufficient for two reasons. First, as a Freudian protégée, she conceived of the self as divided between the conscious and the unconscious.[3] Her understanding that "a sub-conscious dream may become an over-conscious dream at the moment of waking," encourages an autobiography of symbols rather than facts, where fantastic images may replace biographical moments as they do in dreams (Notes on Thought and Vision 49). To render the self, the Freudian autobiographer must translate the symbolic life.[4] Second, coming to know her own bisexuality through Freud's influence changed H.D.'s perception of her identity. Instead of seeking to trace the development of a single character, H.D.'s interest lay in tracing the process by which two seemingly opposite personae -- one male and the other female -- became unified in her.

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[2] The work of Michel Beaujour, James Olney, and Celeste Schenck all suggest we are moving away from an understanding of autobiography as strictly narrative prose. However, I refer here to those "traditional" autobiographies which Lejeune used as models when he first sought to define the genre, for I believe his initial understanding reigned among readers of autobiography (including H.D.) before the genre became the subject of post-modern questioning.

[3] In H.D.s' transparently autobiographical novel, Paint It Today, the narrator discusses this division in terms of a rift between soul and body as she asks, "Did my soul get transmuted here by some chance and does my body wait for it there with my lover? Will they come together someday, my soul and my body?" (PIT 54) That her soul may have been "transmuted" to a place where her body is not recalls the very language of Helen in Egypt in which an eidolon, or phantom version of Helen remained on the ramparts of Troy while the "real Helen" was "translated" or "transmuted" to Egypt where Achilles, her lover, awaits her.

[4] In her essay "Authorizing the Autobiographical," Shari Benstock asserts that "the instability of the [self as subject] is nowhere more apparent than in the women's writing of the [modernist] period" (21). She suggests that "the simultaneous exploration of the autobiographical and probing of the self-consciousness ... suggests not that they knew their Freud better than T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, or W.B. Yeats, but that as women they felt the effects of the psychic reality Freud described more fully than did men" (The Private Self 21).

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H.D. sought to enact her own bisexual fusion of identities through fusing styles or genres. She required a form that was composite.

H.D. expressed her autobiographical impulse in many forms throughout her career, including autobiographical poems like "The Master," novels like Bid Me to Live, and her well-known memoirs End to Torment and Tribute to Freud. Some address her relationship with Bryher, others her intimacy with Ezra Pound or Richard Aldington. Many of these retellings deal so exclusively with one relationship that her works seem to fall thematically into two categories: heterosexual texts and lesbian texts. In fact, many critics have categorized her poetry "heterosexual" and her prose as "lesbian," unable or unwilling to see them all as bisexual. In her book Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Every Day Life, Marjorie Garber discusses this rather troubling critical reaction to H.D.'s bisexuality.[5] Garber reminds us that H.D. saw the potential for this problem in her own writing and wrote to Bryher: "it seems the conflict consists partly that what I write commits me – to one sex, or the other..." (Letter to Bryher 1934). Garber suggests that for H.D., "the crisis appears to have been in part coming out, and in part a question of genre" (Garber 60). She goes on to explain:

> [H.D.'s] poetry, like that of other Imagists, had been described in the period as "feminine," by which was often meant static, minor, miniaturized, or "passive." In later years, she went on to write in epic poetry (traditionally described as a "big," "masculine" form) as well as in fiction (Garber 60).

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[4] Originally published by Simon & Schuster in 1995 under the title Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life, Routledge republished Garber's thorough study of bisexuality in 2000 as simply Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life.

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Even leading H.D. scholars have found her bisexuality troublesome. Shari Benstock, in Women of the Left Bank, for example, worries about the effect of H.D.'s bisexuality on her writing. She calls H.D. "problematically bisexual," and claims that she was "never able to choose" (Benstock 312, 321). She supposes that "had H.D. ever been able to resolve her own sexual ambivalence, the dual attractions of her heterosexuality and homosexuality that constantly beckoned her, perhaps her writing would have 'settled' into one mode or the other" (Benstock 332). But H.D.'s refusal to "settle" into one mode in both her life and her writing is precisely what makes her work so fascinating. The pinnacle achievement of this refusal is Helen in Egypt, an epic tale of one being who embodies male and female appearance, identity, and desire. The book itself is epic and lyric, prose and poetry, modern and classical. Indeed, Helen in Egypt captures the duality and simultaneity of H.D.'s bisexual life and career as no other text by H.D. does.

Three themes in Helen in Egypt combine to form this experiment in bisexual autobiography. The first is the hieroglyph motif, or the theme of the writing on the wall, which establishes the text as autobiography. Helen reads and must translate the hieroglyph, she *is* the hieroglyph, and is the one who dreamt – imagined or authored – this Amen script. In correlation with her main character, H.D. herself dreams of "writing on the wall," in 1923 and seeks to interpret and translate the experience in both Tribute to Freud and here in Helen in Egypt. H.D., through Helen, declares, "I am the writing," and thereby the two women fuse inextricably with the text and with each other. The second theme – which demonstrates the bisexual nature of this experimental autobiography – is that of dual gender. H.D.'s epic reenacts the battle between two genders in one being and the final transcendence of gender. Helen and Achilles seem to meet, fight, make love,

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separate, and hide as distinct warring entities, but they ultimately reunite and become one being, Helen-Achilles. The third theme is that of an "eidolon" or false image. While Helen-Achilles merge and transcend they come to understand that "there is only one image,/ one picture, though the swords flash;/ ... one treasure,/ one desire..." (HIE 243). Despite all efforts to translate Helen-Achilles' double nature, the singular eidolon of Helen and the phantom of autobiography will always remain as "a memory forgotten." Or, as Shari Benstock argues "...autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction" ("Authorizing the Autobiographical" 146). For all her autobiographical writing, H.D., like Helen, remains a powerful icon of beautiful, scandalous, hated, beloved, misconstrued womanhood (HIE 304).

SECTION ONE:
HUMAN HIEROGLYPH: INTER-TEXT, INFLUENCE, AND H.D.'S BISEXUAL PHANTASIE

The writing on the wall, or the "hieroglyph" motif, helps us understand how Helen in Egypt functions as an autobiography. It establishes a connection between writing and identity that positions expression, interpretation, and being as intertwined branches of the same matter. The writing Helen observes does not merely represent her; they are one. When Achilles demands "are you a witch?/ A vulture, a hieroglyph,/ the sign or the name of a goddess?" Helen declares:

> I seemed to know the writing
> as if God made the picture
> and matched it

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with a living hieroglyph... (HIE 16, 23).

The connection between identity and expression deepens as the narrator reflects, "Helen herself denies an actual intellectual knowledge of the temple-symbols. But she is nearer to them than the instructed scribe; for her, the secret of the stone writing repeats in natural or human symbols. She herself is the writing" (HIE 22). The source of Helen's written vision is a carefully constructed ambiguity. She observes it, but also appears to have dreamed it. She herself, then, has imagined it, is its author. She has dreamed, must translate, and is the writing.

This powerful triad of existence, comprehension, and expression necessarily brings the author into its hold.[6] H.D. herself did indeed have just such a "waking dream" about writing on the wall, and described it in other texts. The "writing on the wall" or the dream of the living hieroglyph not only appears to Helen upon her arrival in Egypt, it appears to H.D. during her own travels in that region. In fact, the episode seems to have inspired a great deal of her reading, writing, and questioning about the subject of gender and gender transcendence. To understand the autobiographical philosophy H.D. follows in Helen in Egypt is to uncover the self-referential and self-publicizing gesture of her pervasive intratextuality. It is particularly interesting to consider intratextuality (and intertextuality) here, since H.D. chose as her medium in Helen in Egypt a main character who embodies fame itself and who seeks to come to terms with that fame. Helen's concerns over fame reflect H.D.'s reluctance to write a traditional autobiography that the

[6] Kathleen Crown, in her article "The Mother is the Muse..." observes what might best be called an autobiographical confluence of interests. Crown writes, "Of H.D.'s long poems, Helen in Egypt most resolutely refuses to differentiate between the one who writes, the one who reads, and the one who is read" (24). This tight positioning of author, reader, and read creates an autobiographical atmosphere of interiority and intimacy.

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public would appropriate. Helen in Egypt is a chronicle in which the elements of the identity meet and come to know one another in the privacy of unearthliness, for "this Helen is not to be recognized by the earthly splendour nor this Achilles by accoutrements of valour" (7). In this way, H.D. meditates on the merits and pitfall of fame, the restrictions on identity imposed by being a public figure, and simultaneously reflects upon the difficult period in which she came to terms with her bisexuality.

In particular, she writes in detail of the experience in her memoir Tribute to Freud, and the language in the memoir and in Helen in Egypt is so remarkably similar that we cannot rightly divorce the two texts. Remembering her sessions with the famous "Professor" that took place in the 1930s, H.D. composed Tribute to Freud, originally titled "Writing on the Wall," in 1944. In these sessions, and amidst "the Professor's famous collection of Greek and Egyptian antiquities," H.D. discussed with Freud "a few real dreams, some intermediate dreams that contained real imagery or whose 'hieroglyph' linked with authentic images" (TTF 10, 36). In this memoir, the hieroglyphs -- images recalling the intensely complicated years when she first lived with Bryher -- provide a means for discussing her bisexuality with the Professor. The striking similarities between the language of the prose text and the epic poem reveal that H.D. revisits the same memories, and recasts an autobiography into a form that fit.

Many intertextual connections between Tribute to Freud, End to Torment, Notes on Thought and Vision and the intricate tale in Helen in Egypt reveal that the autobiography of H.D.'s bisexuality has found its most honest expression in the text that also flouts genre classifications. Through the scripting of Helen in Egypt, H.D. defied traditional restrictions placed on self-expression and self-disclosure by re-enacting her

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life's pivotal years in a hybrid form – in an autobiography of poetry and prose, epic and lyric.[7] The blurred genre lines perform the same transcendence of category her characters themselves seek, and her hybrid form resists any over-simplification of "self." It also resists the traditional understanding of the autobiographical pact, which would classify the epic as a fiction.[8]

In her article "Facts, Pacts, Acts" Nancy K. Miller suggests a means of determining when a text merely contains autobiographical intimations and when the author has set autobiographical cues forth as an autobiography. She asserts that "the truth claim of autobiography is nothing more (but *no less*) than its recorded desire (its pact or 'diacritical intent') to be taken by others as a kind of truth" (12). The epic Helen in Egypt seems too wrapped (and rapt) in metaphor to have offered an autobiographical pact to its readers. However, the elaborate system of metaphor itself -- which H.D. employs throughout Tribute to Freud, End to Torment, Notes on Thought and Vision and Helen in Egypt -- establishes the autobiographical pact at work in the epic poem.

In his essay "Autobiography as De-facement," Paul de Man suggests that "the interest of autobiography... is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not –

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[7] H.D. has made clear – in many instances – her awareness of her peers' disdain for the personal voice. It is perhaps clearest in Paint It Today when the narrator slips away from the omniscient voice and begins to use the personal pronoun. She catches herself in the act and declares, "But I will not let *I* creep into this story. I will not let *I* go on banging the tinkling cymbal of its own emotion. You and *I* are out of this story, are observing..." (PIT 31).

[8] The autobiographical truth pact, as Philippe Lejeune describes it, stipulates that the author, narrator, and the main character must be "identical" (On Autobiography 10). Under such a rubric, Helen and Hilda cannot be one. But for a woman like H.D., the name is not a reliable anchor. The name on her books' covers – H.D. – is not only cryptic and elusive, but penned by the domineering Pound. Indeed H.D. often contemplates the agency of naming. For instance, in Bid Me to Live her main character reflects, "He called her Anthea. It was Julie, Judy, Judy-bird, or Julie bird. Anthea," and then later responds with the liberating assertion "I myself, I myself, I myself. This is my room" (Bid Me to Live 21). Other autobiographical experiments, like the novel HERmione, also suggest that H.D. felt naming inherently objectifies women.

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but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization... of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (de Man 922). James Olney applies this idea to poetry in his book Metaphors of Self in which he writes, "poetry that is expressive and autobiographic in a deeper than personalistic or historic sense draws metaphors, or accepts and adopts them, from the self as it is becoming, and then displays all the world to the reader through the glass of these metaphors" (35). In Helen in Egypt H.D. adopts the metaphor of the hieroglyphs from her own development and uses it to create an epic poem that is autobiographic and which attempts to display "all the world" to its readers through the "translation" of that symbolic experience.

The writing on the wall is only one example of H.D.'s pervasive use of the metaphoric systems de Man and Olney discuss. Other such systems help inform her readers of the significance she attaches to the hieroglyphs. For instance, in End to Torment, H.D. reveals that Pound symbolically stands for domineering manhood:

> He seemed to beat the ebony stick like a baton. I can't remember. Then, there is a sense of his pounding, pounding (*Pounding*) with the stick against the wall. He had banged that way, with a stick once before, in a taxi, at a grave crisis in my life. This was a grave crisis in my life. It was happening here. ... he hailed a taxi. He pushed me in/ He banged with his stick, pounding (*Pounding*), as I have said (ETT 8).

The brutality of pounding not only describes Pound, but the single word, and all its synonyms, will call to mind an old crisis in the midst of a new one. Where there is pounding, Pound is there. Further, men evoke each other: "To recall Ezra is to recall my father" (ETT 48). H.D. expands this metaphoric system in Tribute to Freud where she

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connects Freud with her father as she had Pound. In fact, she describes Freud himself in the same striking language as she once described Pound:

> The Professor... is beating with his hand, with his fist, on the head-piece of the old-fashioned horsehair sofa. ...The Professor said, "The trouble is – I am an old man – you do not think it worth your while to love me." ...Exactly it was as if the Supreme Being had hammered with his fist on the back of the couch where I had been lying" (TTF 15-16).

As an autobiography, Helen in Egypt not only employs similar sets of word/character associations – Achilles, Paris, Oenone, and Theseus also hammer and pound – it also exaggerates the impossibility of totalizing or enclosing such a system. Each character embodies many aspects of H.D.'s life, which makes it harder to decipher – much less totalize – than if she had obligingly simplified her tropological system. For example, H.D. complicates reading Theseus' character as a mask for Freud. The classical Theseus, Helen's first suitor, in Helen in Egypt becomes both guardian and former lover, which Freud never was – despite his hammering on the couch. Readers of Helen in Egypt's autobiography must grapple with their own desire to reduce her life to a tidier set of symbols.

The meditation on Paris' influence over Helen in the middle section of the epic is another tempting site for oversimplification, since H.D.'s discussion of Paris seems particularly autobiographical on its surface. In fact, the understanding that Paris represents Ezra Pound is prevalent in the scholarship on Helen in Egypt. However, the correlation between Paris and Pound ultimately collapses. Menelaus was Helen's lawful husband. If we were to match this iconoclastic persona with a character in H.D.'s

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biography, he would be Richard Aldington. If H.D.'s first suitor were to find his correct Greek counterpart, Theseus would represent Pound. Paris, who stole Helen from her lawful husband, would have his biographical equivalent in Cecil Gray, who fathered H.D.'s daughter, Perdita, while Aldington was fighting at the front of WWI.

Seeking to avoid such reductions, many readers decide against reading Helen in Egypt as an autobiography. Because H.D. has chosen an iconoclastic or "fictional" set of characters to recreate the story of her development, it seems risky to accept Helen as an example of direct self-representation. And arguably, Helen's character alone does not represent Hilda. One might further argue that a reader should not have to read inter-textually to identify an autobiography. However, in a work about the life of a public person, intertextual references to works already in the public eye bespeak a desire to further publicize the self. The recollection of past work is a process similar to the recapitulation of any other past event.[9] The epic performance of the "writing on the wall" experience in the epic poem reenacts a life in dream symbols and is no less representative of H.D.'s lived experience than her own accounts of dreams as related in her prose memoir Tribute to Freud.

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[9] Some would argue that one must look outside the text to verify such references, but one must also look at archival sources to verify the "memories" of such autobiographers as Virginia Woolf or Zora Neale Hurston. In fact, intertextual studies have been the cause of many disputes over the validity of memory as set forth in prose autobiographies. (Whether Woolf was "really" molested by her half-brother becomes a question when one compares her early diaries to her later memoir "Moments of Being." The more interesting question in all instances is why the idea comes up in both places, why and how the author chooses to translate that moment for the reader. Thus in poems like Frost's "The Masque," and H.D.'s Helen in Egypt, when a writer makes a clear allusion to or even repeats the language of a previous work (of memoir or other genre) it should help establish that the autobiographical processes of recall and recapitulation are indeed in play and that the author is choosing to write that which will trigger the memories of her faithful readers.

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H.D. contemplates her bisexuality at some length in her memoir Tribute to Freud. H.D. recounts her session with Freud in which she told him about seeing "hieroglyphics" or writing on the walls. She remarks, "the Professor picked the writing on the wall as the only actually dangerous symptom" of hysteria (TTF 41). She tells us, "The Professor translated the pictures on the wall, or the picture-writing on the wall of a hotel bedroom in Corfu... as a desire for union with my mother" (TTF 44). Yet, at this point in the memoir H.D. reminds us of her famous statement "... the Professor was not always right" (TTF 18). As she interprets the writing on the walls for herself, she qualifies her earlier statement: "Perhaps in [some] sense the Professor was right actually he was always right, though we sometimes translated our thoughts into different languages or mediums" (TTF 44). Having told us Freud's interpretation, H.D. carefully relates her own interpretation of the picture-writing on the wall. She describes the image she saw:

> [It was] the last concluding symbol – perhaps that "determinative" that is used in the actual hieroglyph, the picture that contains the whole series of pictures in itself or helps clarify or explain them. In any case, it is apparently a clear enough picture or symbol ... it was a circle like the sun disk and a figure within the disk; a man ... was reaching out to draw the image of a woman (my Nike) into the sun beside him (TTF 56).

It becomes clear – as the image of the man and woman merge in the sun disk – that these 'hieroglyphs' represent H.D.'s desire to draw the male and the female closer together. Indeed, in large part, Tribute to Freud shares with the reader H.D.'s interest in her own desire to affect the kind of gender transcendence symbolically represented in the "hieroglyphs" she describes. Throughout the memoir, she speaks frankly about her

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desires for both men and women, her desire to *be* both a man and a woman. Early in her recollection she declares, "so in me, two distinct racial or biological, or psychological entities tend to grow nearer or blend, as time heals old breaks in consciousness" (TTF 32). The conflation of androgyny and bisexual desire expressed by H.D. here, and throughout Helen in Egypt, is in keeping with Freud's own persistent confusion about the nature of bisexuality.

While H.D. does not use the term bisexual in her writings about herself, she speaks of her desire to unite the male and female aspects of herself as an instinct that "challenged the Professor." She recollects her inability to explain to the Professor how her hieroglyphics connected to desire for both men and women. She writes, "[m]y intuition challenges the Professor, though not in words. That intuition cannot really be translated into words" (TTF 107). H.D. uses almost exactly the same language in Helen in Egypt as her narrator points out that "[Helen] knows the script, she says, but we judge that this knowledge is intuitive or emotional knowledge rather than intellectual" (HIE 13). That Helen and H.D. share the same relationship to their respective hieroglyphs underscores the likelihood that the writings also represent a similar set of desires and experiences. The similarity between her discussions with Freud and the language in Helen in Egypt make it clear that the text recreates her own life's bisexual fantasy.

In her memoir, Tribute to Freud, H.D. recalls: "With the Professor, I discuss a few real dreams, some intermediate dreams that contain real imagery or whose 'hieroglyph' linked with authentic images..." (TTF 36). These dreams, or memories, correspond to two episodes in which H.D. describes having a double-ego or seeing with double-

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vision.[10] The first episode was "what Bryher called the jelly-fish experience of double-ego," and H.D. remembers, "...I could not stay in it; I rematerialized and Bryher took me to Greece in the spring of 1920" (TTF 116).[11] The second incident occurred when she "came back from Aegina... came back from Egypt, 1923, at the time of the Tutankhamen excavations ...I saw the world through my double-lense; it seemed everything had broken but that" (TTF 118).

Having re-cast these events in her memoir about the Professor, in Helen in Egypt H.D. once again turns to sorting out "which was the dream/ which was the veil of Cytheraea" (HIE 63). In Tribute to Freud, H.D. revisits a crucial turning point in her life, one from which she must "drown completely and come out the other side... not dead to this life, but with a new set of values, my treasure dredged from the depth. I must be born again or break utterly" (TTF 54). Not only are the images of drowning and resurfacing pervasive in Helen in Egypt, the state H.D. describes here is that of Helen on "Leuké," the island between life and death where beings form new identities.

It is not surprising that when H.D. chose to compose a book-length account of these visions of writing on the wall, which enacted the formation of a bisexual identity, she chose to do so through an epic form. She informs us that Freud announced, "Not

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[10] In Tribute to Freud, H.D. often uses the term "dreams" to describe what we would call suppressed memories. Certainly, she does not distinguish between the "dreams" which were lived memories and those which were imagined memories. Like Helen, H.D. seems to struggle to sort out which aspects of her own history are fantastic and which are concrete. The similarity between the "dreams" or "suppressed memories" of the memoir and the epic become clear as the narrator in Helen in Egypt declares that Helen "immediately reminds us of ... the so far suppressed memory and unspoken name – Paris" (HIE 109).

[11] H.D. writes at length about this "jelly-fish" experience in Notes on Thought and Vision (1919). The essay discusses the connection between the mind and over-mind (conscious and sub-conscious). It also contemplates the relationship between body and mind and men's and women's bodies.

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only did [she] want to be a boy but [she] wanted to be a hero," and in Helen in Egypt it declares that indeed "It is an heroic voice, the voice of Helen of Sparta" (TTF 120, HIE, 176). Nor is it coincidental that she chose to compose her life's epic in lyric verse, or as the poem's narrator tells us "a lyric voice this time, a song rather than a challenge," one which "we cannot altogether understand... the rhythms must speak for themselves and the alliterations" (HIE 178). Scholars have long considered lyric poetry the primary medium for the kind of intuitive knowledge that Helen and H.D. claim.[12] In her book, Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century, Linda Anderson suggests, "poetry becomes a way of mediating" the "information which could pass intuitively between people" (123).

In Tribute to Freud, H.D. herself tells us that "it is all there; the lyrical interrogation and the implication that the answer is given with it. It is" (TTF 110). Similarly, early in Helen in Egypt, Helen "flings away knowledge" and decides, "it is not necessary to 'read' the riddle. The pattern itself is sufficient and it is beautiful" (HIE 32). H.D. satisfies her desire to merge genders in part by merging genres. Her desire to write about herself combined with her understanding of the self as an untranslatable symbol and became the epic-lyric poem about an iconoclastic but very autobiographical hero(ine) who at last achieves a unified dual identity. She not only recalls and recapitulates a

[12] Jan Montefiore's Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity on Women's Writing points out that "poetry is, primarily, the stuff of experience rendered into speech; a woman's poems are the authentic speech of her life and being" (3).

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pivotal juncture in her life, she also comments on the nature of her own identity – double in its consciousness and gender.[13]

Freud's own writings about hysteria and bisexuality not only bear out that the core image in Helen in Egypt – the writing on the wall – represents H.D.'s own bisexual "phantasy," they give us insight into how H.D. conceived of her own bisexuality. In a chapter Freud entitled "Hysterical Phantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality" Freud connects hysterical symptoms—like H.D.'s psychic break in which she saw the writing on the walls, or the 'hieroglyphs' – with bisexuality. He argues that "hysterical symptoms serve the purpose of sexual satisfaction and represent a portion of the subject's sexual life (a portion which corresponds to one of the constituents of his sexual instinct." He further explains that "[h]ysterical symptoms are the expression on the one hand of a masculine unconscious sexual phantasy, and on the other hand of a feminine one" ("Hysterical Phantasies" 164-5).

While Freud did not write this passage specifically about H.D.'s own "hysterical phantasies," or as she calls them "breaks," we do know beyond doubt that Freud and H.D. discussed her bisexuality at some length. In a letter to Bryher in November of 1934, she writes, "He says 'you have two things to hide, one that you were a girl, and the other that you were a boy.' It appears, I am that all-but-extinct phenomenon, a perfect bi—". In the letter H.D. goes on to discuss in the letter the connection between her struggle with gender and genre restrictions. She writes:

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[13] In his book, Metaphors of Self, James Olney writes that "recall and recapitulation are the very essence of autobiography" as he argues the merits of reading T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* through the lens of autobiography theory (262).

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> Well, this is terribly exciting ... but for the moment *please* do not speak of my own [writing], for it seems the conflict consists partly that what I write commits me – to one sex, or the other, I no longer *hide*. It is not quite so obvious as that – and no doubt, before I leave, we will come to some balance.[14]

While it was clear that they discussed bisexuality, and he found her to be the "perfect bi—", it is unclear just what he meant by such a label.

Freud's understanding of bisexuality varied over his long career, never establishing one cohesive theory. On the most basic level, bisexuality was the raspberry seed in Freud's psychological wisdom tooth. Freud imagines the formation of an identity as a complex process of sexual identification. A male who achieves a fully developed (mature or not "perverse") identity ceases to identify with his mother and identifies with his father. In this process, women become desired sexual objects and men sexual rivals. Freud, while explaining his theory in androcentric terms, extends his reasoning to the female psyche as well. Theoretically, women should come to identify with the mother, choose men as sexual objects and women as sexual rivals. In Interpretation of Dreams Freud explains:

> [W]e, more fortunate than [Oedipus], in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, have since our childhood succeeded in withdrawing our sexual impulses from our mothers, and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. We recoil from the person for whom this primitive wish of our childhood has been

[14] Letter to Bryher: November 24, 1934. Beinecke Rare Book, Yale: Cited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Susan Stanford Friedman in "Woman is Perfect: H.D.'s Debate with Freud" Feminist Studies vol. 7:3 (Fall '81) pp. 407-16 and by Marjorie Garber in Bisexuality: The Eroticism of Everyday Life pp. 59-60. Not coincidentally, it is after this realization that her works had previously committed her to one sex or the other that H.D. began to conceive of and compose the hybrid/bisexual epic Helen in Egypt.

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> fulfilled with all the force of the repression which these wishes have undergone in our minds since childhood (*Interpretation of Dreams* 308).

Freud deems "inverts" those individuals who choose members of their own gender as sexual objects. Indeed while the Freudian process of identity formation can go "awry" in all sorts of ways, the fact remains that both "normal" and "inverted" development into maturity depends on the choice of either a homosexual or a heterosexual identity. [15]

It would seem then that in Freud's estimation, the bisexual individual would live in a perpetual state of immaturity or flux -- a permanent identity crisis. However, Freud's writings on bisexuality vary so widely over the course of his career that it is difficult to tell quite how he conceived of a bisexual's identity. It is even unclear whether he believed bisexuality to be a matter of sexual biology, sexual identification, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Freud was quite clearly fascinated with the concept of bisexuality and saw it as pivotal to his work. In a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess in August of 1899, he wrote, "Bisexuality! I am sure you are right about it. And I am accustoming myself to regarding every sexual act as an event between four individuals" (SE 19:33).

As Freud continued to study bisexuality, he sometimes viewed bisexuality as a biological, and at other times psychosexual phenomenon. In "Homosexuality in a Woman," he observes that the young woman has chosen a lover who reminds her of her

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[15] While the debate still rages as to whether sexual orientation is a choice or an instinct, I use the word "choice" here because Freud uses it in his discussions of a child's selection of a sexual object. In "The Sexual Aberrations," Freud talks at length as to whether "inversion" is an inborn trait or a learned behavior.

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brother.[16] He tells us that her "latest choice corresponded, therefore, not only to her feminine but also to her masculine ideal; it combined satisfaction of the homosexual tendency with that of the heterosexual one" (SE 18:147). The young woman's bisexuality manifests as both identification and desire. However, in "Female Sexuality" Freud claims that "bisexuality... comes to the fore much more clearly in women than in men" because women have two sexual organs, the clitoris which he saw as masculine and the vagina which he classed feminine (SE 21:227-28). Here, bisexuality is a matter of biology. Another shift appears in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" written in 1937. Here he writes:

> It is well known that at all periods there have been, as there still are, people who can take as their sexual objects members of their own sex as well as of the opposite one, without the one trend interfering with the other. We call such people bisexuals, and we accept their existence without feeling much surprise about it... (SE 23:243-44).

In this statement, Freud offers us a definition close to our current understanding of bisexuality, one in which homosexual desire and heterosexual desire coexist independently of biological or identification factors. Freud's ideas about bisexuality became more complex, but never stabilized. As Marjorie Garber argues:

> ...we have noticed that 'bisexual' for Freud can mean anything from 1) having two sets of sexual organs to 2) having two psyches, one male and one female to 3)

[16] Like the woman Freud studies in "Homosexuality in a Woman," H.D.'s writes of a desire to merge with her brother. In Tribute to Freud, she recalls her early desire to bond with her mother by becoming one with her brother, whom her mother preferred. She supposes, "If I stay with my brother, become part almost of my brother, perhaps I can get nearer to her" (TTF 33).

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having a precarious and divided sexuality which is fluid rather than fixed with regard to both identification and object" (Bisexuality 204).

Freud's conflation of androgyny and bisexual desire affected the way in which H.D. crafted Helen in Egypt, but other influences helped form her ideas about gender identification and desire, androgyny, bisexuality and transcendence. As Garber observes, "[a]ndrogyny" has long been described by theologians, philosophers and poets as "a state of exalted being, the ideal completion of humanity in a condition of transcendence" (Garber 207). She then points out the paradox inherent in this philosophical posture. She observes that images of bisexual wholeness paradoxically use sex symbols "only to leave the body behind, to attain stasis and perfection beyond gender, sexuality and desire (Garber 207). Reflecting the rhetoric of the time, elements of such a concept regarding bisexuality appear in H.D.'s writing.

Given H.D.'s interest in the classics, we can surmise that she had some sense of bisexuality as an intellectual or philosophical ideal from Plato's *Symposium*. And this was not the only source from which she could have absorbed such an attitude, for her own contemporaries also spoke of such an androgynous ideal. In Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, Woolf not only imagines the best artists as double-gendered, but places herself into a history of those who agree. She writes:

> The normal and comfortable state of being is when the [male and female powers of the brain] live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman must also have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that

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> the great mind is androgynous... it is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties (Woolf 102).

While we can assume these ambient influences, Susan Stanford Friedman points out that H.D. read a translation of the Jewish philosophical text, the Kabbalah, just before she began to compose Helen in Egypt. In an article entitled "Poetics of Conflict and Transcendence: Kabbalah and the Search for Wholeness," Friedman tells us that the Kabbalah imagines the Supreme Deity as an "En-Soph" (literally translated as "being without end") that encompasses all possibilities. She goes on to explain that "the imagery of the En-Soph is recognized as the inadequacy of the human spirit to comprehend the One that exists beyond good and evil, light and dark, male and female" (Friedman 280). The En-Soph is a being whose "overriding metaphor of dualism [is that of] being the masculine and the feminine." Yet as Friedman points out, in the end:

> The Kabbalah does not fulfill its potential as a myth of androgynous wholeness. Mired in androcentric bias, its imagery continually reasserts the dualism of masculine and feminine, which it seeks to transcend. Its goal of harmony, unity, and equilibrium are repeatedly thrown off balance by the weight of negative symbols for the feminine and positive symbols for the masculine (284).

Or, as H.D.'s Helen phrases it so often in Helen in Egypt, "the balance is in sway." In Friedman's analysis, H.D. used the concepts of the Kabbalah as a starting place to imagine the transcendence of the paired opposites that appear throughout the text. However, Friedman does not pursue the issue of the characters' or the text's

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bisexuality.[17] In her analysis, Helen is still on an identity quest seeking identification with the mother figure, Thetis. Friedman accepts Freud's statement that H.D. sought union with her mother, rather than H.D.'s own interpretation that "in me... two distinct racial or biological, or psychological entities tend to grow nearer or blend, as time heals old breaks in consciousness" (TTF 44, 32).

It is, after all, in this assessment of her own bisexuality that H.D. differentiates herself from Woolf's and the Kabbalah's vision of gender transcendence. While they espouse a disembodied androgyny as an intellectual, theological, or philosophical ideal, H.D.'s Helen in Egypt shows bisexuality from a bodily perspective as well as showing aspects of identification and desire. Like Freud, H.D.'s concept of bisexuality shifts often unpredictably from essence, to experience, to desire, encompassing all three tropes of bisexuality just as Freud did over the years.[18]

In the end, we must consider Freud's influence as strong but conflicted. He may have interpreted H.D.'s "hieroglyphics" as representing a desire for union with her mother or as "the expression on the one hand of a masculine unconscious sexual phantasy, and on the other hand of a feminine one" ("Hysterical Phantasies" 164-5). What we learn from Freud is what we learn from the intratextual thread in H.D.'s own work – that she sought a way to articulate that she was a being comprised of conscious

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[17] In her article in Psyche Reborn entitled "Poetics of Conflict and Transcendence," Susan Stanford Friedman argues that "H.D.'s goal was a vision of the transcendent whole that incorporated all the complex dualisms of the universe." She views the struggle between Helen and Achilles as the battle between peace (Eros or Desire), which she associated with women, and war (Eris or Death) which she associated with men. She sees the need for transcendence as bespeaking a desire to have peace triumph and to be unified with the mother.

[18] Garber points out that there are "three mythical tropes of bisexuality: as experience (Tiresias), as essence (Hermaphroditus), and as desire (Aristophanes' fable in Plato's *Symposium*). Each of these had its influence on Freud." (Bisexuality: The Eroticism of Everyday Life 175).

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and unconscious thoughts who speaks in both literal and symbolic modes about both male and female desires. H.D. adopts, from her conversations with Freud, a sense of herself as "a perfect bi -- ," as the being in the sun disk formed by the union of the male and female dream symbols, and as the transcendent Helen-Achilles. She takes the written symbolic representation of her own vision and translates it through Helen. Helen's epic traces the development of H.D.'s own personality – one that draws the female and the male together as did the symbols of her dream. Like H.D.'s dreamt figures in the sun disk, Achilles draws Helen under his cloak where they not only reconcile; they become one.

SECTION TWO:
THE SWORD AND THE LYRE: GENDER DUALITY

> ... the Quest;
> reconcile? reconcile?
> day, night, wrong, right
> no need to untangle the riddle,
> it is very simple (HIE 192).

The quest of Helen in Egypt is not to untangle the riddle of identity, but to reconcile its opposites. Instead of seeking an absent or underdeveloped identity, this experimental autobiography traces how H.D. came to embrace a bisexual identity. Echoing this goal, H.D.'s epic speaks always in the language of binaries. In fact, the very structure of the text is also double – and double in two ways. First, it is an epic poem

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written in lyric verse. H.D. replaces the epic form's traditional dactylic hexameter with three line choral stanzas of no set meter.[19] Second, a prose paragraph introduces each section of poetry. These prose passages critique the characters' motives and actions, address the reader, and offer analysis of the story's dynamics.[20] For instance, the narrator comments: "What does [Achilles] mean? [Helen] does not know. We do not know. But for the second time, he has spoken her name. That is sufficient" (HIE 37). In this way the prose and poetry address each other and renegotiate their union just as Helen and Achilles do.

The tale that unfolds inside these poems and paragraphs also divides into misleading binaries.[21] H.D.'s narrating voices contemplate the tension between male and female, emotion and intellect, spirit and body, recollection and reverie, "song and

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[19] In this respect, H.D. follows the method of Stesichorus (640-555 B.C.), the man who originally authored the "Pallinode" in an attempt to regain Helen's favor after she had blinded him for his malicious rendering of her story. Stesichorus, whose name means "choir-setter," was "the inventor of the choral heroic hymn, and in that form raised lyric verse to the stature of the epic" (Gregory xi). H.D., writing in a time when modernist experimenters often considered lyric poetry "feminine" and thereby facile, may well have sought once again to raise the stature of lyric poetry.

[20] In her article "The Underworld of H.D.'s Helen in Egypt" Harriet Tarlo observes that the structure of Helen in Egypt – with prose synopses of each canto and a three-book, seven-canto organization – is strikingly similar to that of *The Divine Comedy*. She points out that "Just before writing Helen in Egypt, H.D. re-read Dante's Divine Comedy and mentions the work as an important influence on the poem in her journals" (177). She derives this information from two sources in the H.D. archives housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale University: "H.D. by Delia Alton" ("Notes on Recent Writing") published in the Iowa Review in 1986, and *Compassionate Friendship*, an unpublished journal.

[21] In their book, No Man's Land, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the discussion of "high" and "low" art in the modernist period and connect it to the day's rhetoric of masculinity and femininity. They note that "a number of modernist male writers may have been as disturbed by their economic dependence on women as they were troubled by women's usurpation of the marketplace" (147). They observe that "for many male writers ... futile rage became fertile rage, fueling the innovation of the avant-garde in order to ward off the onslaught of women" (131). They conclude that, "... a reaction formation against the rise of literary women became not just a theme of modernist writing, but a motive for modernism" (136). Because it was composed in such a climate, it is tempting to assert that the struggles between Helen and Achilles simply enact this gender clash. However, the two entities are not simply warring factions, they must unite.

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challenge," youth and maturity, Eros and Death, personal and eternal, "lyre and sword," modern and classical, Greek and Egyptian, memory and forgetting, veil and reality. These many binaries tempt the reader to arrange the text as a battle between male and female. However, each character possesses qualities that embody traditional aspects of both genders, which suggests that the ultimate goal is not the triumph of one gender over the other, but the unification of both in one being.

Illustrating H.D.'s interest in achieving gender duality, ambiguities and confluences of gender are prevalent in Helen in Egypt. At times, the gender ambiguities even appear on the linguistic or grammatical level. H.D. frequently offers male pronouns with female referents and vice versa. At one point Thetis recalls an event that prompted "an Old Man to guide her son/ to a battered unwieldy craft" (HIE 260). While the son (Achilles) contextually belongs to Thetis, H.D. grammatically places the "Old Man" in the position of referent for the pronoun "her." In another instance the speaker observes, "There is a challenge and defiance in Paris as he recalls Helen's own words to her" (HIE 214). This sentence could mean that Paris reminds Helen of her own words, but its syntax also connotes that Helen's own words to Paris are recalled by a "her" whose referent must be Paris him/herself. Similarly, it is often hard to tell whether Helen or Achilles has spoken. The confusion renders the two linguistically transposable. Early in the poem, Helen recalls their meeting:

> ... few were the words that we said,
> but the words are graven in stone...
>
> "I am a woman of pleasure,"

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I spoke ironically into the night,

for he had built me a fire,

he, Achilles, piling brushwood,

finding an old flint in his pouch,

"I thought I had lost that" (HIE 11-12).

Here, although Helen begins with the ambiguous phrase "the words that we said," the first statement clearly belongs to her, and the second to Achilles. However, the ability to differentiate between the two soon disintegrates:

few were the words that we said,

"I am shipwrecked, I am lost,"

turning to view the stars,

swaying before the mast,

"the season different

we are far from – from—" (HIE 12).

And here we cannot tell who the speaker is. The "we" presides.

The grammatical ambiguity heightens our sense that H.D. sought to create a text that captures the ambiguity she saw as part of bisexual experience. H.D. further develops this sense by creating a system of androgynous symbols. The poem describes male characters using female symbols like the lily or the lyre, and describes females with arrows and darts. H.D. is playing with the Greek tradition of identifying a character not only by name, but also by an associative object or trait. In ancient texts we will read of

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Hector, for example, as "Hector of the shining helm," or of "grey-eyed Athena," or of "Thetis of the light robes" (Illiad 39, 162, 386). This convention allowed Greek authors to invoke characters without mentioning their names. Where a helm shines, Hector is near.

H.D. plays with this tradition throughout Helen in Egypt and uses such symbols as arrows and flowers, lyres and swords to represent male and female characters. But she uses the tradition subversively, making sure that Achilles is pierced by Paris's arrow, and that Helen has arrows of her own. Such play with gender symbols underscores the bisexual nature of Helen, Achilles, and ultimately Helen-Achilles. In fact, we see that at times Helen appropriates all such symbols for herself. After her first violent encounter with Achilles, Helen defiantly declares:

> mine, all the ships,
> mine, all the thousand petals of the rose
> mine, all the lily petals
>
> mine the great spread of wings,[22]
> the thousand sails,
> the thousand feathered darts...
>
> mine, the one dart in the Achilles heel,

[22] The reference here to lily petals and the spread of wings here reminds the reader of H.D.'s poem "Leda" in which Leda is depicted as a lily beneath the breast of the God Zeus in his swan's form. That she says both lily and spread of wings are hers, suggests her identification not just with the mother figure Leda, but also with the father figure, Zeus. Such double identification further cements the argument against reading the text as a quest to identify solely with the mother.

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the thousand-and-one, mine (HIE 25).

Helen has made all gender symbols her own. She is a culmination of all the liabilities and powers of both sexes, "the perfect bi--."

H.D. confounds her characters' gender roles by making not only the symbols that represent them androgynous, but also their apparel. At different times in the epic, both Helen and Achilles dress in the clothes of the opposite gender. Theseus finds Helen dressed in "heavy hunter's boots" (HIE 150). At one point, she wears a warrior's helmet, and at another juncture H.D.'s narrator even asks incredulously, "What, is Helen without the spears,/ what is love without arrows?" (HIE 140). H.D.'s narrator even describes Helen as "the nenuphar,/ father, brother, son, lover,/ sister, husband, and child ... the child in the father,/ the father in the mother,/ the child-mother yourself," which poses Helen as both male and female (HIE 187).[23] Helen disguises herself beneath heavy hunter's boots and a warrior's helmet, suggesting that the purely feminine must be shrouded for protection.

But the purely masculine must also hide, and H.D. pointedly includes the times when Achilles dresses as a woman. In H.D.'s reading notes for the composition of Helen in Egypt there are two entries on Achilles, and they both recount incidents of Achilles

[23] A Nenuphar is a European (yellow or red; rustic) or Egyptian (blue or white; tropical) water lily. The plant was an object of worship in Egypt. This Latin name refers also to nymphs, or female deities of the Greco-Roman tradition who personify certain aspects of nature, in particular, water (http://www.florelou.com/nenuphar.html). H.D.'s reference here is Greek and Egyptian, ordinary and exotic, plant and female deity. H.D.'s reference here to Helen being a nenuphar, or water nymph, reminds her reader that H.D.'s companions often referred to her as a wood nymph or "Dryad." It is also another example of H.D.'s persistent identification of her characters with unusually colored, or out of season flowers. She associated Clytemnestra with purple rhododendrons in "*From* Electra-Orestes," and in HERmione, George Lowndes "was a red hibiscus," and "mama of course [was] always winter violets" (HERmione 209).

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cross-dressing.[24] We may recall that Thetis hid Achilles from his enemies by dressing him as a young girl in the court of Lycomedes. Ulysses discovered him when he offered the maidens gifts from his pack and Achilles took interest in the pack's weapons rather than the treasures the other maidens sought. However, we may have forgotten that Achilles and his companions also dressed as women to escape notice as they burned a city during the war. Both cross-dressing incidents make their way from H.D.'s reading notes into Helen in Egypt. Helen hints of such a moment when she asks:

> Whether he cheated, he lied –
> (he was brave? an immortal
>
> a challenge to mortality?)
> whether he razed the city,
> a woman, or wore a crown
>
> unearned by his merit (HIE 214).

The syntax here is ambiguous as to whether Achilles razed the city *and* a woman or *as* a woman. H.D. refers to Achilles cross-dressing even more directly when Paris tells Helen to:

> call on Thetis
> the sea mother,
>
> remember how she decked the young hero

[24] For a thorough study of H.D.'s reading notes, see Eileen Gregory's "Euripides and H.D.'s Working Notebook for Helen in Egypt."

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in woman's robe and ornament

and hid him in Scyros

that Achilles escape Troy...

the arrow of Paris... (HIE 214)[25]

Here, Achilles is not only unmistakably dressed as a woman, he is posed as a woman – hiding from the phallic arrow of Paris.

Since both Helen and Achilles cross-dress – Helen in her hunter's boots and warrior's helmet, Achilles in "a woman's robe and ornament" – we must reconsider the lines in which Helen declares, "I prayed under his cloak" and those in which she ponders the "cloud or a veil/who encircled, who sheltered me/when his fingers closed on my throat" (HIE 17, 38). In the first, Achilles does not cover Helen with his cloak, making them two beings under one cloak. Instead, Helen "prayed under his cloak" as if she herself wears the cloak of Achilles. Likewise, the "cloud or [the] veil" which is a symbolic piece of apparel most often associated with Helen, suddenly belongs to Achilles as it encircles Helen "when his fingers closed on [her] throat" (HIE 38). Both characters mingle in each other's symbolic clothes, becoming one character. Each takes on male and female appearances, and hides beneath the "veil" or "cloak" of another gender.

Like Helen and Achilles, H.D. often hid one aspect of her bisexual nature. As a member of the literary establishment that reviled overly "feminine" sounding poetry, she

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[25] The danger of Paris's arrow is a recurrent theme in this text. It is, after all, that which will kill Achilles. At various points in the text Helen expresses her sense of responsibility to protect Achilles from this fatal arrow, but at other times she herself remarks that she has been pierced by what she "new was Love's arrow," underscoring the phallic nature of this arrow. If we view the arrow as a consistent phallic symbol, then union with males (suitors who would be husbands, as well as illicit affairs) will be the death of the masculine half of this double personality.

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published under the ambiguous professional initials "H.D."[26] Additionally, she kept her early poetry clear of "feminine sentiment" and from overt references to feminism or womanhood.[27] Yet, she also obscured the masculine part of her identity from the public in order to avoid judgment.[28] H.D. maintained a heterosexual feminine public persona by posing in fashion magazines, originally claiming husband Richard Aldington as the father of Perdita, and referring to her lover Bryher as her "cousin."[29] In such a veiled state, H.D. could not confidently lay claim to either gender, and this mystification did not suit her. Her epic battle is to become both genders instead of neither.

In the first section of the epic, entitled "Pallinode," Helen and Achilles seek an identity.[30] When these two meet, their questions to each other are "which is the real Helen," "which was the dream," and "which was the veil?" They battle each other, but ultimately end up as one praying "under his cloak" (HIE 17). But hiding behind the other's veil or cloak is insufficient. They must find elements of themselves in each other

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[26] It is not surprising that amidst the misogynist rhetoric of her time, H.D., in a professional act of cloaking, used both male and female names for semi-fictional semi-autobiographical characters: Helga Dorn and Henry Dohna.

[27] Marianne Moore once commented that "... in the case of H.D., we have the intellectual, social woman, non-public and 'feminine.' ...Cowardice and beauty are at swords' points in H.D.'s work, suggested by the absence of subterfuge, cowardice, and the ambition to dominate by brute force, we have heroics which do not confuse transcendence with domination and which in this indestructibleness, are the core of tranquility and intellectual equilibrium" (Complete Prose 81).

[28] This concealment is in keeping with what we know of H.D.'s own feelings about her bisexuality. In her November 24 letter to Bryher, H.D. recounts that Freud told her she had "'two things to hide': one that she wanted to be a boy and the other that she wanted to be a girl" (TTF 120).

[29] In her article "Garbo/Helen: The Self-Projection of Beauty by H.D." Charlotte Mandel points to the essay titled "Beauty" which H.D. wrote for the avant-garde film magazine Close Up. In this essay, H.D. remarks on Garbo's "frail, very young feet" – which are comparable to Helen's – and her classical beauty. She warns, "...beauty brings a curse, a blessing, a responsibility" (Mandel 133).

[30] H.D. consistently spells the "Pallinode" as opposed to the more common spelling "Palinode."

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and realize that the two are really one. The quest is to reconcile the male and female opposites, but also to find a means of understanding this riddle: that the two have always been one, the one has always been double.

In the second section, "Leuké," Helen and Theseus ponder her need to join with the masculine elements of her life rather than to divorce from them. Theseus is both "lyre and sword," and therefore the only one who can teach Helen to achieve transcendence. In the third and final section, entitled "Eidolon," Helen and Achilles finally achieve union, and the warring couple becomes Helen-Achilles. This hyphenation suggests that a fusion has at last taken place and a bisexual identity has formed.[31] But binaries remain problematic for the unified Helen-Achilles, for they, like the author H.D., must choose an "eidolon" or an image to represent them. That image must appear male or female. However, all binaries are really triads, and there exists a transcendent "third meaning" that she seeks to translate.

The connection between a "third" and the "bi" nature has a long history. In Bisexuality: Eroticism in Everyday Life, Garber asks, "Is bisexuality a 'third kind' of sexual identity, between or beyond homosexuality and hetero-sexuality?" She points out that bisexuality "presents itself in the popular imagination as a third choice" and organizes her book as a response to and exploration of this concept. The three sections of

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[31] In H.D.'s poem "*From* Electra-Orestes" a similarly hyphenated and clearly androgynous brother-sister entity argues with itself over the righteousness of the matricide they have committed. In the course of the argument, Orestes takes Electra to task for having reveled too much in the matricide, and Electra responds by saying "and you love/ love for man/ and love for woman," and their discussion turns from matricide to bisexuality. In H.D.'s memoir Tribute to Freud, H.D. also recalls the inexorable closeness she shared with her brother in terms of the pervasive image in Greek tragedies and Grimms tales of a brother-sister figure. She writes, "One is sometimes the shadow of the other; often one is lost and the one seeks the other as in the oldest fairy tale of the twin-brother-sister of the Nile Valley" (TTF 29).

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Helen in Egypt build as if in response to this cultural understanding of the somewhat impossible "third choice." To see how this works, we must examine the triads of the epic.

While the work entire is double in its combining of epic and lyric, prose and poetry, H.D. arranges its parts in threes. She builds the poems in Helen in Egypt with three-line stanzas, and there are three sections of the text: "Pallinode," "Leuké," and "Eidolon." At the most basic level these sections move from recantation, through reflection, to transcendence. However, the triad is more complex. The first section shows the internal conflict within the bisexual self and establishes the need for unity. In the middle section, obstacles to that unity are faced and conquered and unity is born. The third section contemplates the viability of that transcendent third in a world that insists on binary translations of gender. In doing so, the epic questions the very possibility of bisexual autobiography – of translating the bisexual self to a reading public.

The first section "Pallinode" – from the Greek word παλινωδία meaning "singing over again" – reminds us that Helen in Egypt seeks to revise the reigning myth of Helen.[32] In this section, H.D. does not establish Helen's chastity in the face of her rumored infidelity, as her predecessors Stesichorus and Euripides both did. Her union with Achilles is unconcealed and unchallenged. In fact, Helen's rightful husband, Menelaus, is all but absent from Helen in Egypt. Nor does Helen deny her liaison with Paris, for she says it was "his arrow that freed her." H.D. even reminds the reader that Theseus was at one time Helen's suitor. H.D.'s character in no way denies her

[32] For a discussion of H.D.'s revisions of familiar mythologies, read Alicia Ostriker's article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" in Elaine Showalter's critical anthology The New Feminist Criticism.

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infidelities. Instead, she is "translated to a transcendent plane" where she questions what the competing and conflicting myths have done to her identity, asking:

> how can you find the answer
> in the oracles of Greece
> or the hieroglyphs of Egypt?
>
> you may work or steal your way
> into the innermost shrine
> and the secret escape you... (HIE 225, 82).

The established histories, mythologies, and icons choose only one aspect of Helen at a time. None are complete. Helen is Helen of Troy, Helen of Sparta, Helen of Egypt – each name incomplete and inadequate. H.D.'s own name was just as variable: "H.D. Imagiste," "Mrs. Aldington," "Dryad," "Deetie," "Horse," "Mog," each a partial expression of one facet of her personality.[33] Certainly, to be anthologized as a "woman poet" or even an "Imagiste" seemed reductive to her, yet she watched her critics place her in such categories.[34] So, instead of recanting Helen's infidelity, H.D. voices Helen's

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[33] In the summary of the H.D. papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, the curator offers us a "Selective list of nicknames" we will need to read the papers. The list tells us that her friends and lovers referred to H.D. as Cat, Deetie, Dryad, Horse, Kat, Lynx, and Mog. We know from H.D.'s End to Torment that she and her first female lover Frances Gregg also called themselves "wee witches."

[34] In her article "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France," Nancy K. Miller reminds us that "the decision to go public is particularly charged for the woman writer," that "female autobiographers know that they are being read as women" (48-49). Helen's constant concern over being "cursed through eternity" reflects H.D.'s anxiety over her own potential "notoriety" (HIE 4).

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frustration with the restrictions her iconoclastic state places on her double-gendered identity. The narrator tells us:

> He is still Achilles. Or who is she? She says that Helen upon the ramparts was a phantom. Then, what is this Helen? Are they both ghosts? And if she is convinced of this, why does she entreat the flame that Achilles kindled, "let me love him, as Thetis, his mother"? Is she afraid of losing even her phantom integrity? (HIE 15).

Frustrated by this state of flux and namelessness, she declares, "let them name and re-name Helen," and calls herself the "Nameless of many names" (HIE 110, 106). She seeks an identity that is not trimmed down. To do so, Helen of Egypt must reconcile with Greece, or with "Greece-incarnate," Achilles (HIE 15).[35]

The "Pallinode" section is full of doubt for both Helen and Achilles. On one hand, they cling together, trying to answer their mutual questions -- "how did we know each other?" and "which was the dream?" On the other hand, they have maliciously defined each other's identities. Achilles remembers her as a "carrion creature," and she in turn, frequently evokes Achilles' "unforgettable anger" (HIE 13, 18). Achilles' impression of Helen is of a vulture, a witch, "Helena, cursed of Greece," whom he has seen upon the ramparts. She, in turn, envisions Achilles' character, saying she "asks[s] not, nor care[s] to know":

> whether he changed as Circe changed,

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[35] The grammatical ambiguity here once again confuses Helen and Achilles. The sentences "He is still Achilles. Or who is she" ask us to question whether Achilles is male or female. The question "Are they both ghosts" asks which vision of Helen was a ghost, and whether both Helen and Achilles are ghosts. Helen also begs that Achilles love her "as Thetis" meaning simultaneously "in the manner Thetis loves" and "in the form of Thetis."

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men into swine;

whether he flouted his power,

while women fell, as the scythe

of his visored glance swept them over;

whether he laughed as they fell (HIE 33).

Her own hostile memories of Achilles make us ask how attraction and animosity band together in this text, and why the battle in which Achilles grabs Helen by the throat with his "fingers' remorseless steel" seems so much like love-making. For a moment, we wonder why Helen says she "[does] not want to forget his anger" (HIE 19). But she soon tells us she is pleased "not only because it brought Helen to sleep in his arms,/ but because he was, in any case,/ defeated; if he strangled her/ and flung her to the vultures, still he had lost..." (HIE 19). In essence, the warring entities threaten to destroy one another through their rivalrous passion, yet neither can survive without the other. Similarly, a bisexual identity cannot fully form if one half is sublimated or denied.

In the "Leuké" sequence that follows, Helen attempts to bring that knowledge which is "between" to the fore (HIE 225). The beginning of the second segment answers our most basic question: "Why Leuké?" saying, "Because here, Achilles is said to have married Helen who bore him a son Euphorion" (109). That the union of Helen and Achilles produces "euphoria" is more than innuendo, for it is not the state of euphoria, but a euphoric being.[36] This being is "not one child but two... It is the 'Child of Chiron's Cave' and 'the frail maiden,' stolen by Theseus from Sparta." It is part Helen,

[36] There is no traceable mythological reference to a son named "Euphorion" even in the cycles that tell of Helen and Achilles in Egypt. He seems to be entirely a character of H.D.'s invention.

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part Aesculapius, the healer of the sick; part male, part female. This two-gendered being is born as Helen and her guide come to terms with her past – as she makes herself free to merge with her masculine counterpart, Achilles, at last.

Many of the remembrances in "Leuké" (like the struggle in the "Pallinode") seem to support reading Helen in Egypt as a kind of war between the sexes, a battle to decide which gender will have controlling power over the other. However, Helen's real quest in "Leuké" is to overcome such division. The transcendence ironically begins when Helen asserts her oneness with the goddess Aphrodite (Cytheraea). The narrator observes:

> ...now, she has taken on the attributes of another. True, Paris had referred to himself and Helen as "Adonis and Cytheraea." However, now he turns on her, "do you dare impersonate Her?" and asks if it was "the will of Helena?/ the will of Aphrodite?" that brought Helen to *L'isle blanche* (HIE 145, 139).

Aphrodite soon fuses with Thetis, as the narrator asks, "Was it Thetis who lured you from Egypt? Or was it Aphrodite" and, "Thetis? She of the many forms/ had manifested as Choragus,/ Thetis, lure-of-the-sea" (HIE 138, 117). Thus, by the laws of algebraic logic (if A=B and B=C, then A=C), Helen and Thetis have become one. This seems to bolster the notion that H.D. is fashioning of Helen the penultimate female identity, but Thetis and Achilles also become emblematically united. Just as Helen once prayed under Achilles' cloak in the "Pallinode," in "Leuké" it is Thetis' cloak Helen recalls:

> Thetis, lure-of-the-sea;
>
> Will she champion?
>
> Will she reject me?

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We will hide

a hooded cloak was thrown over me (HIE 117).

Thetis and Achilles become one through the act of cloaking. H.D. further unifies her characters when Helen and Achilles symbolically fuse under Thetis' cloaks. Just as Thetis once hid Achilles under a woman's robes, now as the mother's cloak covers Helen, she remarks "*we will hide*" (HIE 117).

Paris also embodies crucial aspects of the conflict preventing Helen and Achilles from achieving transcendent unity and becoming Helen-Achilles. Paris is Helen's partner in the alleged crime of infidelity; he shares some portion of Helen's infamy and seems to be competing with Achilles over Helen, for "Paris would convince Helen that Achilles was never your lover. Paris would 'break this spell'..." (HIE 138). But remember, it was Paris's arrow that delivered Achilles' fatal wound:

... a bowman from the Walls

Let fly the dart;

Some said it was Apollo,

But I, Helena, knew it was Love's arrow;

It was Love, it was Apollo, it was Paris (HIE 113).

Achilles and Helen are together on *L'isle Blanche* because of Paris' anger and because of the love between Paris and Helen.

Ultimately, Paris and Achilles do not compete as rival males. Rather, the problem posed by Paris's character in "Leuké" is the temptation to settle for a simple answer, for

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only one form of desire. When Paris' wife Oenone hovers over Paris' deathbed commanding Paris to "forget Helen," the reader recalls – through the flexibility of the lyric and the openness of H.D.'s tropological system – both Ezra Pound commanding H.D. to leave Frances Gregg and Bryher encouraging her to renounce the heterosexual relationships that had previously dominated her life. But H.D. could no more renounce one part of her bisexuality than Paris can obediently "forget Helen." There must be a reconciliation of rival desires; this is "Helen's old and Helen's own problem" (HIE 157). In the end, Helen rejects Paris's "incomplete or partial manifestation of the vision," but she must begin again as a new and tentative being, "Like a Psyche/ With half-dried wings" (HIE 166).

Interestingly, although he is Helen's guide, Theseus' intellectualism poses another threat to the achievement of a double-gendered being, for he seems eager to strip Helen of her masculinity. He "unclasps the 'heavy thongs'" from Helen's feet, while she wonders if he "will laugh at her and her presumptions and her borrowed [huntsman's] gear" (HIE 153). He decides, "Helen must relinquish her borrowed cloak and 'huntsman's gear' " (HIE 151). Upon being stripped of her masculine apparel, Helen is "baffled and buffeted and very tired" (HIE 151). We feel the danger of Theseus's guiding power as the narrator frets, "Theseus begins 'to remember the story.' It is another story. He seems deliberately to have stepped out of the stream of our and of Helen's consciousness. Why? He has told her that she is safe with him" (HIE 172). However, to the reader's relief "Helen contradicts him" and insists on her own vision (HIE 160). She is a "Psyche with half-dried wings," but she murmurs "there is a voice within me, listen – let it speak for me" (HIE 165, 174).

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With Paris subdued, Theseus' intellectual guidance tempered, Euphorion born, and the merging of Helen and Achilles complete, the epic's battles cease. Still, true to the epic form, the hero(ine) must return home. Helen-Achilles must also emerge from *L'isle blanche.* Helen-Achilles faces its final challenge, to re-enter a world, which still does not know "which was the veil" and which hates a "Helen" they barely remember. It must face the world knowing that although they are now one male and female, to the world outside the island of Leuké, "there is only one image."

When the final section of the epic, "Eidolon" begins, Helen answers "Achilles' early question, 'Helena, which was the dream, which was the veil of Cytheraea?' saying, 'they were one'" (HIE 238). But Helen-Achilles must emerge from "under the cloak," and face the reality that there "is only one image,/ one picture... one treasure,/ one desire..." (HIE 243). It must choose an image – an eidolon. The word "eidolon" comes from the Greek word εἴδωλου, meaning an idol; that which represents the form of an object either real or imaginary; a shade of the departed, apparition, spectre, or phantom of the mind; or a false god.

Since the narrator has declared both Helen and Achilles to be eidolons at different points in the text, and since we have seen Helen and Achilles merge into Helen-Achilles, the importance of the statement "there is only one image" takes on new significance. They must present a single image to the world, and know it will be just "another symbol" and that it will be "not much more than a doll" (HIE 212, 244). This last piece of the epic finds Helen-Achilles grappling with the import of their ultimate false image.

H.D. declares that Helen-Achilles is "numb with memory," consumed by "a memory forgotten" (HIE 279, 304). Often repeating these bleak comments on the power

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of recollection, H.D. meditates on the eidolon of memory and identity, both personal and cultural. She plants in her readers' minds the idea that what others recall of us and for us alters our own memories and, by extension, our identities. What our society will accept and understand further restricts our identities. We have traced the development of a bisexual identity, but that transcendent third still struggles to translate itself. If a society does not permit a double-gendered identity, one must translate oneself into a gender society does understand – she must choose an eidolon, or have one chosen for her. H.D. cultivates the idea that history creates idols (or exemplars) of its public personalities and rages against any personal reality that competes with or seems to sully their eidolon. In the face of this public pressure, Helen-Achilles must choose. H.D. must choose, or find a way to translate in intellectual terms what she, Helen and even Sigmund Freud himself only intuitively understand – the unity of a double self.

SECTION THREE: "THE WORLD KNOWS HER NAME": THE EIDOLON OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY"

Helen in Egypt's "Eidolon" is the third section of a text dominated by binaries, and it provides us with an understanding of the philosophical challenge at the root of this experimental autobiography. In it, the epic becomes a meditation on the limits of autobiography, and in so doing it "completes the circle/ the triangle, the broken arc" between epic story telling, lyric mysticism, and self-representation (HIE 215). The word "eidolon" itself, which operates in three crucial ways in this text, encapsulates this meditation. On the material level, H.D. depicts her characters as wooden figures – as idols. On the symbolic level, she confuses her characters with phantoms of themselves (and each other), and uses this pervasive uncertainty to challenge the specter of gender.

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Contending with this eidolon, the text favors duality and androgyny, but proclaims that there can be only "one image" in the end. The incongruence of this final concession undermines the validity of rigid gender demarcation. However, the "gender trouble" in Helen in Egypt is in some respects a phantom problem. The larger project in Helen in Egypt is as much to expose the limits of autobiography, as it is to outdistance gender restrictions. H.D. uses the notion of an eidolon to question Helen's (and her own) role as an iconoclastic woman, and to question whether the translation of intuitive experience is possible at all. Ultimately, it is this third sense of eidolon – that of autobiography or self-translation – that haunts Helen and H.D. alike.

In order to understand how H.D. turns the epic rendition of a pivotal time in her life into a contemplation of the boundaries of autobiography, we must understand how H.D. employs the layers of meaning in the word, "eidolon," separately and simultaneously. The word "eidolon" and its root "eidos" hold several strata of meaning. The word can mean an idol – which definition can be interpreted as anything from a small statue made in the likeness of a god, to an imposter, to "someone or something on which the affections are strongly set," to a fallacy. Eidolon also means "an unsubstantial image or phantom," or – interestingly – an eidolon can be understood to mean "an exemplar." The word's root, "eidos," derives from the Greek verb, "οιδα," which means "to know or see; to perceive with the eyes." In more modern usage, the root "eidos" means "something that is seen or intuited, an appearance, conception, or form of intuition." It also means, "the logic used in thinking and acting and the basic ideas by

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which the members of a culture organize and interpret experience." H.D. layers the meanings of her text through the prominent use of this word and its many implications.[37]

As is typical of H.D., even in the most seemingly material use of "eidolon," she implies its larger meanings. For instance, when the narrator of Helen in Egypt insists, "...the town itself [is] nothing/ beside a picture, an image, an idol/ or eidolon, not much more than a doll," the very physical image of a picture, idol, or doll carries with it the connotation of "something on which the affections are strongly set," since the town itself cannot compare. (HIE 244). The larger implications of the word grow out of its most literal uses.[38] For instance, the narrator remembers young Achilles playing with one such idol and remarks "[he] forgot her,/ the charm, the eidolon, when his mother came" (HIE 292). In this seemingly concrete image -- which H.D. visits and revisits throughout the "Eidolon" section -- the author exposes the plasticity of gender, and contemplates the powers and limits of memory.

At one point, the narrator recalls that young Achilles forgets his eidolon when his mother arrived, and in turn, he "forgot his mother/ when the heroes mocked/ the half-god hidden in Syros" (HIE 292). Here, H.D. once again reminds us of Achilles hiding under the guise of a woman, for it was in Syros that this took place. The prominent concern in this memory is over-exposing or hiding. Even so, the eidolon may also be a fallacy that Achilles hides, a misleading image of himself. Another example of androgynous syntax reveals these multiple possibilities, for once again, the lyrical and grammatical

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[37] "Eidolon," "eidos," and "idol." Webster's Third New International Dictionary – Unabridged.

[38] It is emblematic of H.D. to employ words of such complexity and depth, so that even her most literal usage (as in the eidolon as a wooden doll) carries symbolic and philosophical weight. Another such example lies in H.D.'s use of the word "purple" in her poems "*From* Electra-Orestes" and "Amaranth" and in her novel Hermione to represent royalty, sexuality, mourning, desire, death, and ultimately, the complex and conflicted nature of motherhood.

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ambiguities allow us to understand that this eidolon is in part the feminine identity Achilles must repress or expose in the face of potential shame and mockery. The narrator asks:

> did she taunt him then,
>
> the little image...
>
> did she laugh to see her son
>
> entrapped in the armory
>
> of iron and ruin?
>
> Did she come
>
> his eidolon? (HIE 257)

Here the pronouns allow us to see "she... his eidolon" as the maternal idol Achilles seeks, or as his phantom image – gendered female. The fretful memory underscores the problems Achilles faced as he became part of the double-gendered Helen-Achilles.

These memories do not belong to Achilles alone.[39] Now, as the narrator puts it, "the memory is really that of Achilles but [Helen] lives it with him" (HIE 260). Together Helen-Achilles "recall the scene of his boyhood and his childhood's secret idol, the first Thetis-eidolon" (HIE 284). Yet, even though Helen and Achilles have become unified as the bisexual Helen-Achilles and share this memory, both will be ridiculed if they try to live "the innermost mystery," which must instead "be balanced or tempered by outer

[39] In yet another intertextual reference, in H.D.'s novel Paint It Today, she writes, "the child itself, I would make dark cypress wood, rounded head, clawlike hands, and archaic, small Hermione" (3-4). Not only are the classical references pervasive in this text as in the other, H.D. consistently imagines the process of turning the memory of a person into a work of art – fixed as though carved, and the merits and problems inherent in such an embalming.

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circumstance" (HIE 213). It is fitting for Helen-Achilles to revisit these memories of hiding now, for Achilles must in essence continue to hide, because the outer circumstance for Helen-Achilles is a female body: "only Helen can be named/ and she was a public scandal/ in any case, a cause for shame" (HIE 251).

Still, the recovered memories of Achilles' doll serve as more than another example of gender trouble, and H.D. warns us not to follow the example of Paris, who would "reduce the valour of the hero to 'woman's robe and ornament' " (HIE 213). These shared memories of the "New Mortal" – facing both humiliation and "public scandal" – confront the problems of notoriety and of memory itself. Helen must remain the idealized (over-simplified) face placed on this complex life. Even in its reduced state -- or perhaps because of its reduced state -- this iconoclastic female persona is problematic. The narrator reflects that while Helen-Achilles (lyre and sword) have united, the effect of their transcendence comes at a price: "what has [Helen] lost? What has she gained? She has lost her childhood or her child, her 'Lord's devotion' or the devotion of the conventional majority" (HIE 227). This "exemplar" or eidolon of womanhood will remain the reviled and elusive symbol Helen and Achilles first confronted.

And while Theseus tried to guide The New Mortal to a new "life in death" through the recovery of memories, memory is ultimately not something the Nameless-of-Many Names can use to manipulate or craft her own image – as an autobiographer would – because it is a public memory, belonging to Helen, to Achilles, to Thetis, and to all the world. She may attempt to control or translate her memories according to "the basic ideas by which the members of a culture organize and interpret experience," but the

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endeavor proves to be "a dream, a catafalque, a bier,/ a temple again, infinite corridors,/ a voice to lure, a voice to proclaim/ the script was a snare" (HIE 220). Ultimately, the author who attempts to translate intuitive experience, or "unravel the tangle/ that no man can ever unknot," will remain "numb with memory" (HIE 298, 279).

Another set of seedling images that grow from the concrete to the philosophical includes Thetis and Helen as the wooden eidola at the prow of ships. On one level, these wooden eidola (or idols) of Helen -- called *Helena Dendritis* -- connect our iconic heroine ever more solidly with H.D., who was often called Dryad or simply "tree" by her loved ones.[40] On another level, both *Helena Dendritis* and the carved Thetis (the mermaid, the eidolon at the prow of the ship) represent womanhood embalmed by fame.[41] By having the thoughts of the epic narrated through these wooden eidola, or ship's maidenheads, H.D. depicts the self as a carved portrait, shaped by the blades of society.

This metaphor of the self as a carved statuette is consistent throughout H.D.'s many experiments in self-representation. In her transparently autobiographical novel Paint it Today, for example, H.D. visits a similar theme. The narrative voice asks "Her portrait?" and answers, "find her, differentiate her, carve her from dark cypress wood,

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[40] Both *Dendritis* and Dryad are names for tree nymphs and frequently used as a pejorative for Hilda Doolittle.

[41] While many of these passages contextually place Thetis as the carved wooden eidolon, the questions she asks of herself echo questions Helen has asked throughout the epic. The striking similarity between Thetis' voice and Helen's makes it possible to read each poem as though Helen speaks. Once again, H.D. uses lyrical ambiguity to blur the lines between the identities of her characters, indicating that the epic is about the many faces of one identity, Nameless-of-Many-Names. In an attempt to be faithful to this ambiguity, I discuss the poems from the perspective of Helen's questions since "only Helen can be named."

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only to lose her again, her valiant outline blurred in the process of civilization, of schooling, of devitalizing" (PIT 5). Here in Helen in Egypt, the female eidola ask:

had some Phoenician sailor wrought her...
had she been cut from an awkward block
of ship-wood at the ship-builders,

and afterwards riveted there,
or had the prow itself been shaped
to her mermaid body...

was there a dash of paint...
did they re-touch her arms, her shoulders?
Did anyone touch her ever? (HIE 245).

The eidolon ponders her own creation – her construction under the hands of man – just as Helen first asked in the first book about how historical memory had formed her identity as they "fought, forgetting women... and cursing Helen through eternity" (HIE 4). The wooden idol asks whether she has been appended or carved from the shop itself, whether she has been re-touched, altered from her original state, revised by others. The eidola of Helen-Achilles and Thetis confront their iconoclastic nature, ask how history has altered their identities, and ask what little agency they might have had in the construction of their own image. Thus, not only do H.D. and Helen contemplate how to translate intuitive experiences, in the "Eidolon" section she asks how to confront the aspects of her own image that are beyond her control. At one point Helen asks:

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how did she know the name?

true the world knew her,

she is carved on the harbour walls,

...Oh yes, the world knows her name,

the richer for poorer worshippers,

for poorer offerings

a filigree ring of no worth (HIE 281).

Helen comments here that a society that worships marriage – the superficial bond that marks the wed as acceptably orthodox – has carved and set her image. This passage illustrates an awareness of fame and a skeptical view of marriage shared by the main character and the author, but does not merely stand as an example of the autobiographical. It also comments on the relationship between the autobiographical author and the subject – the self and the icon. Now that she has transformed into Helen-Achilles, her response to her own iconography (or eidolon) has also changed. She reflects that while it is "true, the world knows her name" and that because of her fame, "the world may bring her/ marble to build her walls/ and ships for her harbours" but in the end "her wings are folded about her" in an act of self-protection (HIE 300).[42]

Suzette Henke, in her book Shattered Subjects, describes the phenomenon H.D.'s characters express in Paint it Today and again in Helen in Egypt. Henke observes that

[42] This calls to mind the earlier mention of Helen whose wings were wrapped around herself like a half-dried Psyche. It also invokes yet another definition of eidolon – that of a "small winged figures human or combining human with animal elements typically found painted on Greek vases."

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"as a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the inter-textual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by culture" (Shattered Subjects xv). H.D. not only reinterprets the myth of Helen through her own experiences, she reassesses her own experiences through the codes culture has inscribed on women's personal consciousness for eons. She does so in choosing to have Helen – whose story countless authors have told and retold – tell her own tale. By choosing Helen as an alter-ego, or autobiographical vehicle, H.D. creates a character who not only mirrors her own experience, but who is in the position to reflect on that experience as a woman wary of attempting to translate her fraught insight to a public who already believes they know her.

H.D. also uses these wooden eidola to question the power or powerlessness of being an exemplar. Each contemplates the stifling over-simplification of the self that is reduced to an icon. The battle to discover "which was the real Helen" becomes absurd in "Eidolon" as we realize that neither Helen of Troy, nor Helen of Sparta is complete, that both are idealized representations of the complete, complex, soul-and-body, id-and-ego (and super-ego), bisexual Helen-Achilles. The battle of articulation or translation that faces Helen-Achilles mirrors that of the autobiographer. In setting forth the life in published form, the autobiographer sets forth the life as exemplary. To do so without over-simplifying the self is a gargantuan feat – and some say impossible.[43] To do so as a woman is even more problematic, because literary women have long had a fraught relationship with iconoclastic status. In her book, Stealing the Language, Alicia Ostriker

[43] Many autobiography theorists, S.C. Neuman among them, argue that "the nature of language prevents the autobiography from literally standing for the self. Language embodies an interpretive act on the writer's part, an act that will be reinterpreted by a reader whose particular language – its personal history, its allusiveness – will differ slightly from the writer's (Gertrude Stein, Autobiography, and the Problem of Self-Representation 13).

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observes that in H.D.'s early poem "Helen," the poet "implies that men and nations hate the woman-as-erotic-object they claim to love, until they can embalm her as art" (50). This idea lives perennially in Helen in Egypt as H.D.'s characters contemplate their own eidola and worry that revision of identity is no longer possible, that the transformation of a woman into an eidolon thwarts change and growth; that autobiography embalms the life even as its author lives.

Through the two examples of material eidola – Achilles' wooden dolls and the maidenheads of Thetis and Helen – we enter into a complex and sophisticated meditation on the art of self-representation, its limits, and the effects of society on the self. These material eidola appear mainly in the final section, which brings them together with the phantom-like eidola that dominated the first two sections of the epic. By calling attention to a new potential meaning to the word "eidolon," in her epic's final segment, H.D. inspires her reader to think of all of the possible meanings of the word retrospectively. Certainly, H.D.'s most pervasive use of the word is in making Helen, Achilles, Thetis, and others appear as ghostly versions of themselves. This application of the word contains the symbolic meanings that most directly challenge the solidity of gender and the reliability of memory. These false ghosts remind us that – just as the false image of Helen on the ramparts fooled all Greece and Troy – the apparitions we see often fool us. At times, we see a woman's garb, and in fact, it is a male – Achilles. At times, we see a Hunter's cloak and underneath hides a woman – Helen. And when we look for Helen-Achilles, male and female, we find there is only "one image" that "only Helen can be named." Facing this quandary, the narrator worries, "Helen, enchantress,/ are you doomed to enchantment?" (HIE 213).

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Through her narrators, H.D. wonders if this reductively gendered eidolon will continue to rule her, and embalm her as a mythological symbol of womanhood regardless of lived reality. The narrator's concerns reflect the observation of feminist autobiography theorists that notoriety restricts women's self-expression. Helen-Achilles understands itself as a bisexual being embodying both lyre and sword, rose and arrow, but the "devotion of the conventional majority" is sacrificed like Iphigenia, Polyxena, Pyrrhus, Breeiseis, Chryseis "and that other and that other" (HIE 219). And true to the nature of so many Greek cycles, H.D.'s Helen in Egypt scrutinizes the wisdom and justice of this sacrifice. The narrator worries, "[Paris and Achilles] were disparate beings, separate from each other and separate from Helen. How bring them together? But why bring them together? Perhaps it is the very force of opposition that creates the dynamic intensity" (HIE 225).

Once again, the worry over the restriction of gender is only one troubling aspect of the eidola Helen-Achilles struggle with throughout the text – the other is memory. In the very first pages of the epic, Helen realizes the dangerous and fickle nature of memory. She declares that "the potion is not poison, it is not Lethe and forgetfulness/ but everlasting memory" and observes that the soldiers fight "forgetting women" but remember one well enough to continue "cursing Helen through eternity" (HIE 3-4). The epic is, in part, the story of all it has taken Helen-Achilles to withstand "the rancour of time and of hate" (HIE 4, 96). The words "forget" and "remember" infuse the first section, with many poems repeating and restating the contradictory entreaty "Let me forget" and "Let me remember" like a litany (HIE 17).

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Certainly, Helen's scrutiny of the writing on the wall is a battle to translate her own complex history, for she avows "You will not understand/ what I have taken years or centuries to experience" (HIE 80). In the end of the epic, having asked, "But why bring them together?" she still wonders "why do I lie here and wonder/ and try to unravel the tangle/ that no man can ever unknot? (HIE 225, 298). A determined Helen declares "... I will not call/ until I review all the past/ in the new light of a new day," but the narrator points out the interpretive elements in Helen's rendition of her own story. The narrator observes that Helen, while she "remembers her part in the greatest drama of Greece and of all time... seems almost to speak by rote, she has grown into her part" and "she breaks off, as it were, from the recorded drama to remind us of the unrecorded" (HIE 226, 234).

The significance of these "unrecorded" or intuitive reminders is enigmatic. It is unclear whether "there is only a song now, and rhetorical questions that have already been answered" or perhaps it is "...Apollo's snare/ so that poets forever/ should be caught in the maze of the walls/ of a Troy that never fell?" (HIE 236, 232). H.D. seems to be acknowledging that her readers may feel the pull of autobiography but will be – like Helen – unable to untangle its metaphors. She, through Helen, admits that the autobiographical project of translation may have failed.[44] The narrator's anxious question matches that of our heroine. Their concern is the heart of the "Eidolon" section: "... how could the lyre-string fail," how could the "rhythms" and "alliterations" fail to

[44] The question of how to relate the story of a life is a theme that H.D. develops in her novels as well as in her poetry. In Paint it Today, she writes, "It is a very long story or a very short story depending on how you look at it. I could more or less tell it in a paragraph. I could spend my life on ten volumes and just begin to get the skeleton framework of it. For every life contains the world and sometimes the world is not big enough to contain one life" (PIT 27).

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"speak for themselves" (HIE 232, 178)? H.D. offers an answer as Helen reflects on the complexity of the autobiographical project:

> but what followed before, what after?[45]
> a thousand-thousand days
> as many mysterious nights
>
> and multiplied to infinity,
> the million personal things,
> things remembered, forgotten
>
> remembered again, assembled
> and re-assembled in different order
> as thoughts and emotions... (HIE 289).

Helen's perfect description of H.D.'s epic undertaking echoes what theorists have long observed about the autobiographical project. Sidonie Smith, in A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fiction of Self-Representation, observes that "the autobiographer joins together facets of remembered experience – descriptive, impressionistic, dramatic, analytic – as she constructs a narrative that promises both to capture the specificities of personal experience and to cast her self-interpretation in a timeless, iconic mold for posterity" (45). This is precisely what H.D. and Helen attempt

[45] In yet another correlation with other autobiographical projects, which also reflect on the nature of the autobiographical endeavor, H.D.'s narrator in Paint It Today asks "what do I sing?" and answers "I don't know what I sing. What anyhow does it matter what I sing, I a nebulous personality without a name" (PIT 26). Like the narrator, Helen in Egypt's hero/ine bears the "nebulous" brand "Nameless-of-many-names" and observes that "there is only a song now, and rhetorical questions that have already been answered" (HIE 236).

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to do, but the incongruity of these two goals stands staunchly in the way. Smith observes this quandary in many women's autobiographies and suggests that, in attempts to overcome the difficulty of becoming either too specific or over-generalized, women's autobiographies employ layers of metaphor laid out in complex – sometimes contradictory patterns. She contends:

> Involved in a kind of masquerade, the autobiographer creates an iconic representation of continuous identity that stands for, or rather before, her subjectivity as she tells of this "I" rather than that "I." She may even create several, sometimes competing stories about or versions of herself as her subjectivity is displaced by one or multiple textual representations (Smith 47).

Choosing Helen as an autobiographical mask or iconic representation, H.D. attains continuity otherwise unattainable, since the tales of Helen are well established and culturally ubiquitous. Embedded in the choice of Helen as mask are also the endless "sometimes competing" variations of her subjectivity, for the story of Helen has nearly inexhaustible versions. Not only does she retell the story of Helen, she gains a stance from which to comment on that story, and on its aptness as a parallel to her own life.

As if recognizing such a tendency in the art of her own autobiographies (having retold her story as Midget, Althea, and Her Gart, as well as in memoirs) she chooses a heroine whose subjectivity is not limited to one plot, but whose character has already embedded in it the endless variety of lived experience. H.D., rather than removing herself a level from "direct" autobiography, uses the mask of Helen to reach a complexity and depth that are hard to obtain with a newly created character. With Helen, all her intricate histories may be implied, her associations layered like a palimpsest, and we may

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understand their parallels to H.D.'s own life in countless, and plastic ways. Yet, this method – as Helen suggests at the end of Helen in Egypt is a siren to the reader.

H.D., through Helen, lets her reader know that she is ultimately aware of the successes and failures of her attempt to "read" her experience for us. H.D. states the irony of the autobiographical project simply: "It can only be defined by the most abstruse hieroglyphics or the most simple memories" (HIE 297). As with Helen's hieroglyph and with H.D.'s "Writing on the Wall," the development of one's identity involves many untranslatable perceptions. While the epic poem's speakers declare that there is only one name, it is "a secret,/ unpronounceable name" (HIE 279). H.D.'s translation of the fullness of lived experience sought to fuse what she saw as the project's necessary intellectual production with a more intuitive expression.

For this reason, Helen of the third sequence "rejects the intellectual or inspired Helen" and seeks resolution of the "human" aspects of her bisexual quest; to emerge from the subjugation of enchantment, or eidolon, to emerge as person, not icon or symbol. Helen points out that "... Theseus, wholly intellectual and inspirational, resolved it with his 'all myth, the one reality dwells here'" (297). In other words, autobiography is often an intellectual exercise that encapsulates the life into one reality when in essence, life is "no easy thing to explain," a composite of many realities. H.D. returns to the motif that began the epic, that of writing and translating the self and memory:

> ... it was nothing, the Amen-script
>
> the Writing, the star-space
> the Wheel and the Mystery;

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it was all nothing

...was only a breath to fan the flame

of thoughts too deep to remember

that break through the legend

the fame of Achilles

the beauty of Helen ... (HIE 258).

And in the end, the life's story remains "a memory forgotten" (HIE 304). Like the Egyptian woman on the steps of H.D.'s vision, Helen in Egypt blends the real with the abstract. Because the text mingles genders and genres, and because it fuses personal and cultural memory, the self-disclosures maintain a phantom quality. Its final irony, the autobiography performed through Helen in Egypt remains veiled by the very binaries it seeks to overcome.

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Chapter Three:

"How Love May Be Acquired": Prescriptive Autobiography in Millay's *Fatal Interview*

Introduction:

Laying Bare Before Your Eyes: Lyric Autobiography & the Canon

No lack of counsel from the shrewd and wise
How love may be acquired and how conserved
Warrants this laying bare before your eyes
My needle to your north abruptly swerved.

--Fatal Interview (1931)

Edna St. Vincent Millay's Fatal Interview is a collection of fifty-two sonnets, which chronicles the beginning and demise of a love affair. The lines above, which open the third sonnet of the sequence, voice the speaker's reticence in telling her lover the nature and strength of her affections. They also betray a certain ambivalence on Millay's part toward the act of self-disclosure in poetry. By its very existence as a published text, Sonnet III of Fatal Interview demonstrates Millay's desire for public disclosure of a private emotion. However, in it Millay suggests an awareness of the potential consequences of such an utterance – not only being seen as vulnerable in her lover's eyes, but appearing sentimental and maudlin in the public eye. Thus while the Fatal Interview's content is exceedingly autobiographical, Millay carefully guards her

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biographical intimacies behind a translucent veil of the sonnet form's traditionally universal speaker. She thereby leaves her readers believing in the verity of the affair and infused with its passion and emotion, but ignorant of its particulars. Even among her close companions -- who knew that she and husband Eugen Boissevain maintained an open marriage -- Millay concealed that the love affair was not a generic one, but that between the poet and her young lover, George Dillon. Certainly, to her reading public, the inspiration for the poems remained veiled -- that is, until recent biographies revealed a source.

In 2001, two biographies of Edna St. Vincent Millay garnered a great deal of public interest. Daniel Mark Epstein published What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Nancy Milford published Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Both biographies make use of the recently opened files previously kept private by Edna's sister Norma Millay.[1] Among these papers are her letters to George Dillon, which were acquired by the estate in 1999. These letters paint a strange picture of her affair with Dillon and the literary production it inspired.[2] Millay resolutely protected the details of the affair from publishers while she

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[1] Nancy Milford's biography is perhaps the more definitive biography as it benefits from decades of research and interviews with Norma Millay, who worked with Milford to write her sister's biography in the 1970s. However, Epstein's discussion of the letters to Dillon and the accompanying poems is more in-depth than that of Milford, who seems to adopt Norma's reluctance to offer the letters to the public. An excellent review of the two biographies appears in the October 2001 issue of The Atlantic Monthly Magazine.

[2] Norma Millay -- whether out of respect for her sister's privacy or to protect her own -- followed suit, and withheld Vincent's private papers from the public until her own death in 1986. Millay biographers Nancy Milford and Daniel Epstein both note that Dillon's love letters to Millay no longer survive. Epstein asserts that the letters were "preserved in a trunk at Steepletop until the 1980s" but that "After Norma's death in 1986, neither the trunk nor the letters could be found" (205). In 1999 the Library of Congress acquired twenty-six love letters from Millay to Dillon that had previously belonged to Dillon's estate.

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lived. And yet, as Sonnet III suggests, in many respects she lays bare the affair before the eyes of an enormous readership.[3] The irony of the poem -- that while the disclosure of emotion is perhaps unwarranted and even unwise, she nevertheless intends to speak -- extends to Millay's publishing career. She tantalizes her readers with an urgent intimacy of emotion, which is the instrument for this autobiographical performance.

The reader can glean a great deal from the poems themselves, details that lead the reader to feel an uncanny and often voyeuristic familiarity with the speaker and her circumstances. For instance, the reader can gather that there are two addressees for the series, and that a callow and fiery passion puts at risk an older love. Millay describes her young lover's "treasured curls, and ... clear forehead line" and the smell of "stale patchouli hanging on my stairs," and gives the reader a palpable sense of the beloved's physical presence (32.10, 23.14). She confronts her lover with frank directives to "be not discountenanced if the knowing know/ we rose from rapture but an hour ago," which heighten the reader's sense that Fatal Interview is an exposé (28.13-14). Further, the number of poems corresponds with the number of weeks in a year, and some contend that the arrangement adheres to a seasonal pattern.[4] The sense of chronology heightens our

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[3] Edna St. Vincent Millay cultivated one of the most extensive readerships ever held by a poet in the United States. In 1933, she began to read her poetry on a regular spot on a nationally syndicated radio program. As the editor of her letters, Allan Ross MacDougal, points out, it was the "first time a literary figure was given equal rating with artists of the stage and concert hall," and the shows brought "overwhelming listener response to the network" (MacDougal 249).

[4] In her review of Fatal Interview in 1931, Isabel Paterson of the New York Herald Tribune noted that fifty-two sonnets progress in terms of a year. She asserted that the course of the love affair corresponds with the course of the seasons: "the uncertainty of spring, the warm assurance of summer, the rebelliousness of autumn, and the pure cold surrender of winter" (21).

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feeling that we are reading about a specific period in time. In short, the poems sound autobiographical.

However, Millay leaves the reader who seeks the critical particulars of names, dates, and locations wanting. The poem may take the shape of a year, but it may be any year. While we feel as though we can envision the beloved, it may be any curly-topped man. Frank contemporary speech is counter-balanced by archaic diction and florid proclamations like "Farewell! 'Tis dawn. The longest day is here," and "Weeping I wake; waking I weep, I weep" (13.14, 33.14). Millay's personification of Love, Beauty, Death, and Doubt combine with her frequent allusions -- among them references to Cressid, Isolt, Troilus, Jove, Europa, and Endymion -- to preserve the sense that the poems are metaphoric and timeless rather than journalistic.[5] Millay carefully maintains the universal sound of the sequence.

Despite this universal posture, the poems of the sequence nevertheless project a strong sense that their content is autobiographical. Indeed, Millay's relationship with the autobiographical project is strange and complex – even dysfunctional. She writes prescriptively of an experience – setting the path of even the relationship's demise through her poems – and then proceeds to live out the experience. She adopted mythical tales like the story of St. George, and the love affair of Tristan and Isolt, or Endymion and Diana, as allusive frameworks within the poem, and then followed suit in practice, doing her best to live her own twentieth century version of courtly, romantic, and mythical love.

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[5] Because these poems echo metaphors Millay also uses in her letters to Dillon, they seem more journalistic when read alongside these letters, but I refer here to the impact of the poems independent of any intra-textual readings – as they would have appeared to their original audience.

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Her letters use the same florid diction as the poems, and she fills them with the same metaphors, allusions, and intense emotions. Yet in the poems, the addressee remains carefully anonymous. Millay's creation carefully balances between the personal or particular and the universal aspects of a love affair. She chose to publish the poetic account, but flatly refused to explicate its personal meanings for her reading public.

Like many lyrical productions, the sonnet series Fatal Interview straddles the gap between that which is autobiographical and that which is autobiography. The politics and reasoning behind Millay's decisions regarding the publicity of the affair – and the accompanying transgressions of the poetic tradition and the tradition of life-writing – provide an interesting study in the reception of women's literary self-disclosure. Millay's fascination with her own fame, and her interest in controlling her public image, make her decisions about poetic disclosure particularly interesting. Further, her clearly articulated sense of public perceptions and demands illuminate the reasons that women's poetic autobiographies occupy the margins of both the autobiographic and poetic genres.

Edna St. Vincent Millay – whose highly public life epitomized modern decadence – spent a career confronting that impossible contradiction and was well aware of every boundary she transgressed and every act of acquiescence.[6] The conversation around Millay's penchant for personal expression -- and the reception of Fatal Interview in particular -- teaches us about the limits placed on poetic autobiography by the demands of the poetic establishment. Millay's Fatal Interview offers us a chance to see how a woman

[6] Amy Lowell and Dorothy Parker both experienced such reactions from the public in the face of personal information becoming public. Well aware of this critical atmosphere, Millay even comments in her later letters about the effect such public commentary had on her friend Elinor Wylie.

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writer of this period confronted the taboo against personal writing head-on, and how her decisions affected her career and her place in the Modernist canon.

Millay's work, and in particular, Fatal Interview, exemplifies many facets of our disinclination to read lyric poetry as autobiography. The text flirts with asserting a diacritical intent to present itself as autobiography; it simultaneously invites readers to witness recollection and shuts them out from the specifics of that recollection. The formal ingredients of the sonnets present the very obstacles Lejeune suggests they might. And yet, if we look at these aspects of form as would an autobiography theorist -- as decisions that reflect the control of the author over her product, and thus her constructed self -- we notice a very carefully drawn boundary between that which the poet discloses about her affair and that which she hides behind a lyric veil. A literary striptease, Fatal Interview exposes just as much raw female sexuality as Millay's readership would tolerate.[7]

Fatal Interview illustrates three facets of the process that relegated these personal poems to the margins of both the autobiographical tradition and the poetic tradition. First, the sonnet series' own strange and strained boundary between life and art locates the work outside the accepted norms of the poetic climate of the time and the current mores agreed upon by autobiography theorists. Second, the reception of the text

[7] Millay's artistic decision to set and guard a boundary between self-disclosure and privacy mirrors many prose autobiographies. Many autobiographers conceal or stretch the exact "truth" for personal or artistic reasons. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston includes several stories that do not bear out upon further research. Rigoberta Menchu and Edward Said took liberties with their own stories in order to represent populations they felt were voiceless. Some, like Barthes by Barthes, even employ similarly opaque, metaphoric, and non-narrative strategies in depicting their lives and personalities for their readers. And yet, few would dream of excluding these productions altogether from the genre of autobiography. It is poetry, in particular, that remains outside the genre's scope.

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indicates that the reading public of the 1930s attached a particular femininity to Millay's literary act of self-disclosure and largely denounced it. Third, Millay's own sense of herself as the subject of public scrutiny helps us understand the cultural motives behind her decision to write within this margin. It also helps us understand how examining poetic productions like Fatal Interview through autobiography theory can shed new light on the ways in which women approached writing about themselves.

SECTION I:

Fatal Interview: The Poems, The Letters, The Affair

Fatal Interview is a series of sonnets that tells about a particular extra-marital affair between Millay and the young poet George Dillon.[8] Through its pages, we are privy to moments of physical passion, cold statements of rejection, denial, and acceptance. In it, Millay attempts to maintain a balance between volatile self-expression and delicate timelessness. The fundamental problem with reading Fatal Interview as autobiography is that its prominent use of allusion and emotion make it seem mythical rather than personal. It seems to be a generic love affair, or to be enacting the affair of romantic figures like Diana and Endymion. The heightened poetic language boosts this sense that it is more lyric than journalistic. But Millay's letters to Dillon are marked by the very same diction, employ the same allusions, trace the same myths and shout with the same hyperbolic emotion as the poems.

[8] Although Millay's readers did not know that the affair was with Dillon, the sonnet series makes plain that it is about an extra-marital affair, and even her early readers of Fatal Interview speculated that its content was autobiographical.

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Indeed, the sonnet series bears an uncanny relationship to the biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay. The sonnets chronicle the beginning and demise of the affair, and yet the affair itself extends beyond the span of time in which Millay wrote, revised, and published the poems. The poems seem hyperbolic and fundamentally romantic, and yet their depiction of the state of mind of their author, and the events of the love affair, correspond with striking accuracy. Certainly, they suitably represent the range of emotional outbursts along the way. In fact, the poems offer enough detail about the affair that they have served as biographical evidence alongside the letters to Dillon that accompanied them. In his biography of Millay, subtitled "The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay," Daniel Mark Epstein dedicates a chapter to the sonnet series and relies heavily on the poems as he traces the years in which Millay and Dillon first knew each other.[9]

The poems weave through Millay's life in a peculiar way. In the months following their first meeting, Millay kept a notebook with a photo of Dillon inside. In it, she composed sonnet after sonnet. As she finished the poems, she would send them, a few at a time, to her lover. Millay's letters to Dillon from this period were comprised in large part of these poems, and the relationship was in large part, literary – epistolary and lyrical. He wrote poems to her and she to him. The sonnets record the volatile emotions of the author as she imagined their love affair and its demise in extravagant detail.

Yet the poems are also strangely prescriptive, and paint a misleading picture of intimacy. In actuality, Millay and Dillon saw very little of each other during the year in

[9] Nancy Milford also discusses the letters, and the affair depicted in them, but does not as thoroughly discuss the poems that accompanied the letters. Neither biography gives a clear sense of which poems accompanied which letters – with the exceptions of Sonnets LII and VIII, which Milford and Epstein both attest accompanied Vincent's earliest letters to Dillon.

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which she composed the poems. The couple spent only a few weekends together in that time, and the affair which the sonnet series supposedly chronicles was largely comprised of the poems themselves until the couple found themselves together in France in 1932 and 1933, quite some time after Millay had completed and published Fatal Interview in 1931.

Millay calls attention to the forward-looking nature of the poems in sonnet XLI when she tells her lover of a flower that grows on a cliff. As she relates how the flower will be "relinquished by the broken hand," she comments on the end of the affair as though it had already occurred. The sonnet begins:

> I said in the beginning, did I not? --
> Prophetic of the end, though unaware
> How light you took me, ignorant that you thought
> I spoke to see my breath upon the air..." (41.1-4).

The full ironic impact of these lines can only be appreciated when the reader understands that the affair was largely epistolary until after the sonnet sequence was imagined, completed, revised, and published. Like a mirror seen through a mirror, Millay's poem predicts that at the demise of the relationship, she will have been -- as the poem dictates she must be -- "prophetic of the end" (41.4). Fatal Interview is the autobiographical account of the myth the poet rehearsed in her life. References to St. George may give way to the myth of Endymion, or Tristan and Isolt, or Helen of Troy, but make it no less clear that the author pens a literary life – imagines a romance worthy of a famed and mythical poetess. In an odd entanglement of life, art, and desire, Millay imagined a love affair of mythical dimensions and then does her best to live it as it was written.

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While she notes in a 1929 letter to Dillon that "parts of these [sonnets] were done before" the affair inspired her to revise and collect them with new poems. The revision and ordering of the poems (taking them out of the order in which they were written to impose a different narrative structure on them) is an autobiographical act – an act of comprising a narrative of moments where earlier there had only been the scattered impressions of lived experience. Further, Millay's choices in ordering the time-line of the affair for the published text is particularly interesting. The chronology in which the poems were actually written exhibited more of the back and forth nature of Millay's expression -- deeply in love and appreciative of Dillon one day, scorned and furious the next. In the published version Millay maintains an order in which a love grows and then falls to pieces.

Even within this orderly progression, the poems shuttle back and forth between desperation and independence. They alternate between love-lorn and scornful. They are bold and clingy in turns. They are modernist and hopelessly Keatsian. And so are the letters; so were the actual communications of the affair. Millay did indeed vacillate between these extremes in voice, letter, and behavior. Millay spiraled in a great circle. Inspired by the myth of Endymion to shape the affair as she did, induced to imitate art, she then took inspiration from the affair and turned it once more into art. The art of the letters comprised a large part of the affair. In a strange way, the poems seem prophetic – a self-fulfilling prophesy or even a prescription. They indicate that Millay was living out the literary fantasy through Dillon that she describes in detail in Fatal Interview.

A letter to Dillon sent just after their first meeting sets the tone and title for the series. Vincent was spending the fall of 1928 touring the country reading from her

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recently published book A Buck in the Snow. At a reading at the University of Chicago, George Dillon met Edna St. Vincent Millay. Fifteen years her junior, the young poet found himself struck by Millay's poetic talent, her dramatic flare, and her distinctive beauty. Introduced to each other at a gathering that followed the reading, Vincent found herself similarly stricken, and the two spent the evening in intense conversation. At lunch the next day, on the back of a telegram, Millay slipped Dillon the lines "The scar of this encounter like a sword/ Will lie between me and my troubled lord" (Epstein 305).[10]

Millay would write four letters to Dillon in the first 13 days after their first meeting. In an eight page letter, Millay quoted Donne's "Elegy 16," referring to their meeting as "our first strange and fatal interview/ By all desires which thereof did ensue" and later took the series title from these lines. Later in the same letter, Millay tells Dillon "... you must never doubt me again" and quotes another of Donne's poems, "The Triple Fool." She writes:

> How easily I could cry with Donne: "I am two fools, I know:/ For loving and for saying so." I am two fools, my dear. And I am so very happy and proud that I neither fought against this love when once I had caught a glimpse of its grave-face, nor even for a moment thought to keep it from you. -- I tell you now, -- and you must never doubt it again -- that I shall love you always, and that I shall never let you go out of my life.

There are several things of note here. First, the tone of Millay's letter is commanding and beseeching simultaneously, which matches the rapid shifts throughout Fatal Interview.

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[10] These are the concluding lines of the second sonnet of Fatal Interview. They allude to the sword Tristan placed between himself and Iseult as they slept on their travels – an attempt to curb their mutual passion made taboo by Iseult's betrothal to Tristan's Lord.

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Second, her syntax and diction in her letters parallel her poetic constructions. The phrases "when once I had," "grave-face," and "I shall love you always" share both arrangement and poetic tone with the sonnets themselves.[11] Millay also tellingly omits a pivotal phrase when she quotes Donne. In "The Triple Fool," the second and third lines are enjambed lines, so that the phrase reads "I am two fools, I know, for loving and for saying so in whining poetry."

Millay conveniently follows the line breaks and amputates the line "In whining poetry." This omission shifts the emphasis away from the impropriety of whining poetry. For Millay, the import rested in whether admitting love was in itself an impropriety, and she neglects to consider the third face of the "Triple Fool," the predicament of the overly emotive poet. She seems deliberately to ignore Donne's witty observation about love poetry's place in the canon, for she was keenly aware of the critics who called her own poems "whining" or accused her of overusing emotion.

In one of her early letters, Millay even exclaims, "...Lord what fun it is to be happy again, and to be writing romantic ardent nonsense..." (Epstein 207). It is ambiguous whether the ardent nonsense refers to the letters, the corresponding poems, or both, but it is clear that although she did not acknowledge the important third line of Donne's "Triple Fool," she was exceedingly aware of the literary status assigned love-lorn expressions, in letters or poems.[12]

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[11] The phrase "I shall love you always" is the framing phrase for Millay's well-known free verse poem "A Modern Declaration."

[12] In Katherine Ann Jensen's book Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, the author quotes a prominent writer of the 18th century as claiming that the ardent nonsense in young women's love letters provided ample argument against the practice of teaching women to read and write.

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Millay's constant questioning of the prudence of her utterance arises from the entanglement of the letters and the poems -- one production that she meant to be entirely private, and the other intended for wide publication. This interconnectedness between her forms makes the metaphors and allusions that appear in both the letters and the poems all the more important as we examine Millay's sense of what was appropriate poetic disclosure and how she constructed herself as a mythical figure in her published work and her private life. As her biographer, Epstein, describes it, "Millay in life and art begins to see herself as a heroine in a classic romance -- as Selene, Cressida, Isolt, and Helen all rolled into one lovesick American woman" (207). It seems important, however, to observe that each of the allusive masks Millay adopts helps to establish and alter the power dynamic between herself and her lover and her audience. Two of the most telling themes are that of St. George the dragon slayer and the myth of Endymion the shepherd.

With her earliest letters to Dillon, Millay sent drafts of the sonnets that would later become sonnets VIII and LII of Fatal Interview. Both sonnets contain images of St. George and Endymion, blending the two handsome and heroic myths into one composite romantic figure. Sonnet VIII adopts its images from the legend of St. George, the dragon slayer who saves the maiden from sacrifice and thereby wins her hand. In this poem, Millay takes a dominating posture, avowing:

> You shall be bowed and brought to bed with me
> While blood roars, or when the blood is rust
> About a broken engine, this shall be.
> If not today, then later; if not here
> On the green grass, with sighing and delight,

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Then under it, all in good time, my dear,

We shall be laid together in the night (8.2-8).

The tone of the enclosed letter is strikingly different. She implores Dillon:

So you will kill the dragon for me, will you, my St. George? -- Oh, I am sure you will! -- For have you not this very moment slain with that blade whose name is mightier -- Than-the-sword -- this most noble and imposing monster, two-headed scaly DOUBT that has been steaming at me for so many hours now with his quict breath (Epstein 209).

In this letter Millay seems to take the posture of a damsel who awaits rescue, and she paints Dillon in a heroic light. However, she undermines his position as hero by calling him the "only infant dragon-killer since Hercules wore didies!" (Epstein 207). Both of these infantilizing images reinforce a distinct power dynamic that Millay maintains throughout the poems and in the vast majority of letters, a dynamic in which she -- as goddess and woman -- is determined to remain firmly in control. Indeed the imperious and controlling tone, the dramatic exertion of her will over his, arises repeatedly in their correspondence.

In the end, the legend of St. George affords Dillon too much control in this literary relationship, and Millay is not content. She uses other myths as primary forces in the sonnet series, depicting herself as an amalgam of classic female figures, all of whom conducted affairs like her own with varying results. She uses these allusions to parallel her own situation and often uses them to convey what the limits of the affair with Dillon will be. In Sonnet VI, which begins "Since I cannot persuade you from this mood/ Of preoccupation with the dead," she cautions Dillon:

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... that which Helen did and ended Troy

Is more than I can do though I be warm,

Have up your buried girls, egregious boy,

And stand with them against the unburied storm.

When you lie wasted and your blood runs thin,

And what's to do must with dispatch be done,

Call Cressid, call Elaine, call Isolt in! --

Here, she seems to be telling Dillon that she will not leave her husband despite her passion for the young poet, for Helen's deed is "more than [she] can do." However, she also seems to be expressing frustration with the literary nature of her relationship with Dillon by implying that he cares more for ghosts of antiquity than the living woman. She challenges him to take comfort from these literary specters in his time of direst need. In reminding him of that impossibility, she restores her ultimate control. In her letters, she expresses a similar frustration with the lack of actual physical contact in their relationship. In a letter dated January 14, 1930, she writes "This seeing you for a day or two every year or two -- it's no good -- it makes me unhappy" (Epstein 216).

Another myth that Millay often employs in her attempt to place herself in (at least literary) control of the relationship is the story of Endymion. The final sonnet of the series as published was, in actuality, one of the first Millay wrote and sent to Dillon. The poem relies heavily on the Endymion myth for its plot and imagery, and poses Dillon as the handsome shepherd and Millay herself as the moon goddess. The speaker of the poem refers to herself as Diana (elsewhere Selene) and her lover as the young shepherd: "Oh sleep forever in the Latmian cave,/ Mortal Endymion, darling of the moon!" (52.1-

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2). In the conclusion of the poem, Millay completes her portrait of the two lovers, and makes the consequences of the affair a conflict between the mortal and the immortal:

> And deep into her crystal body poured
> The hot and sorrowful sweetness of the dust:
> Whereof she wanders mad, being all unfit
> For mortal love, that might not die of it (52.10-14).

Here, the speaker is immortal, and since nothing but death can release her from this "mortal love" she fears it will be her undoing. While it may seem antithetical to the autobiographical impulse for Millay to don this immortal mantle, her desire to enact this mythical romance alters our sense of it as a mere poetic device. Moreover, the story of Endymion makes an interesting choice of vehicle for depicting the circumstances of the affair between Millay and Dillon's.

Endymion is a beautiful and youthful shepherd who falls asleep on the mountaintop of Latmus. Diana sees him and kisses him as he sleeps, "the cold heart of the virgin goddess was warmed by his surpassing beauty" (Bulfinch's 163). He wakes to find her gone, but remembers her as if he had dreamt her. He prays to Jupiter to make him immortal so that he might sleep forever and continue to have such dreams. In some versions, Diana persuades Jupiter to grant him eternal youth. In others Jupiter bestows upon the young shepherd eternal youth and perpetual sleep. Diana takes care of his fortunes -- increasing his flock and protecting them from wild beasts -- as he sleeps so that he "should not suffer by his inactive life" (Bulfinch's 164).

Sonnets XXVII and XVIII join the final sonnet of Fatal Interview as particularly steeped in the mythical imagery of Endymion's tale. Both poems meditate on the

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relationship between the young, beautiful, somnolent shepherd and the immortal and captivating moon goddess. Sonnet XXVII, an address to the moon, asks:

> Do you recall at all the Carian Hill[13]
>
> Where worn with loving, loving late you lay
>
> Halting the sun because you lingered still,
>
> While wondering candles lit the Carian day... (27.1-4)

The speaker imagines the moon as being "worn with faring and no longer young" and pleads "... if indeed this memory to your mind/ Recall some sweet employment, pity me" (27.8-10). Here Millay adopts the voice of the younger male and in doing so hints at a possible insecurity regarding the age difference between them, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that Endymion pines for her and desires her attention. True to the Endymion myth, the young man begs the moon goddess to stay so that he may continue to dream of her, imploring "in the name of one/ You loved so well, endure, hold off the sun!" (27.14).

Sonnet XXVIII also calls the sleeping Endymion to mind when Millay refers to her love as "heavy lidded" and laments that the "insolent daylight" ends their "rapture" (28. 9, 14). In it, she also predicts:

> When we are old and these rejoicing veins
>
> Are frosty channels to a muted stream...
>
> This be our solace: that it was not said
>
> When we were young and warm and in our prime,
>
> Upon our couch we lay as lie the dead

[13] Mt. Latmus, upon which Endymion slumbered, is in Caria.

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Sleeping away the unreturning time (28. 1-2, 5-8).

Here, the difference in ages that was exaggerated in the previous poem is suddenly understated, for they are both "young and warm and in [their] prime."

Sonnet XI picks up this theme of the youthfulness Millay hoped to preserve through this affair. She writes:

Love in the open hand, no thing but that,
Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,
As one should bring you cowslips in a hat
Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,
I bring you, calling out as children do:
"Look what I have! -- And these are all for you" (11.9-14).

These lines echo the tone in a letter, dated December 29th, 1929, in which she tells Dillon: "I want to sit on the edge of your bed while you have your Breakfast -- I want to laugh with you, dress up in curtains, be incredibly silly, be incredibly happy, be like children, and I want to kiss you more than anything in the world" (Epstein 210).

However much Millay may have wanted to cling to youth and play the child with Dillon, she was even more compelled by the power she held as the older, more experienced lover. This tone appears as the counsel of an older lover to "be not discountenanced if the knowing know we rose from rapture but an hour ago." It also takes the tone of vaguely threatening lines like "...tread her like a dove --/ She loves you not; she never heard of love" that close Sonnet XX and the conclusive "Spare me your premise: leave me when you will" that ends Sonnet XXXVIII. In both of these statements, Millay not only becomes older and wiser, but the one who controls whether

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the relationship continues or not.[14] She often took a severe tone, once commanding, "Either you come here and at once, or I come to Chicago. You have nearly killed me. I won't stand it any longer" (Epstein 218). However, following such a note, she swiftly wrote her apologies: "Poor child, how I have harassed you. I will never do it again. I should not have done it but that I was so sure you were in trouble and was very worried. But in any case, I'll never do it again – so breathe freely" (218).

Yet even in this apology, she carefully maintains command, calling him a child and granting him permission to breathe. Still, while few of Dillon's responses remain, we have enough to indicate that Millay did not entirely invent, or even drastically exaggerate, his feelings for her. In one response, Dillon wrote:

> I love you, my dear, more than anything. You know this -- with some clairvoyance of yours ... in spite of my bad manners and insane behavior. You have been sweet and patient always, and I am really grateful. If I can amount to anything, it will be because you loved me, and continued to love me through these terrible years" (Epstein 228).

Once again, the power dynamic is upheld, and Millay remains not only sought-after, but muse and creator of her younger male prodigy. As a depiction of this kind of relationship, the Endymion myth was a perfect fit -- the connection between the mythical couple was exactly the relationship Millay imagined and desired.

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[14] In reality, it seems that Dillon's resistance was a far greater factor in their long separations. Epstein describes the relationship in this way: [Millay] wanted him to assure her that their love would never die, that he would be her Endymion, ever beautiful, always available. But sometimes he just couldn't do it. He was 23, the handsomest poet in Chicago, about a year from winning his own Pulitzer Prize. She was 38, married, transparently neurotic, demanding, manipulative, and an alcoholic to boot (Epstein 217).

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The myth offers many striking parallels to the life of the couple. Goddess and the shepherd, Millay and Dillon were both quite famous for their beauty. The power dynamic between the goddess and shepherd also accurately recalls the dynamic between Millay and Dillon. The more mature Millay pursued the younger poet, who soon became an enthusiastic devotee, willing to put his own career at risk for the sake of their union. Indeed, it is clear from Millay's letters to Dillon that he expressed concern that if news of their affair were to reach the public, the impropriety could compromise his position at Poetry magazine. Like the young shepherd, Dillon takes the risk and continues to dream of his Diana. And like the moon goddess protecting her youthful and somnolent lover, Millay ensures that the young Dillon can write his poetry (dream of his Diana) without more menial labor by procuring for him the Guggenheim award in 1932, the year he won the Pulitzer for The Flowering Stone. Millay constructed the semblance of her reality to the myth as carefully as she crafted the sonnets themselves. Millay made her life into a living allusion to the Endymion myth, and her lyrics trace its themes.

Although it seemed problematic for some of her readers that Millay put herself in the position of a goddess, Millay's choice to write and live this particular allusion betrays more than a desire for her lover.[15] Intrigued by her own reputation and pleased by her rising fame, Millay sought to adopt the role of famous poet through both her affair and the lyrics in which she captures it. She chose the Endymion myth, which Keats had explored in depth before her, and Millay's fascination with her own fame -- her sense that her poems had the power to immortalize her -- also parallels Keats. Millay's themes of whether love is mortal or immortal echo the meditation in Keats's version of the

[15] Both of Millay's biographers point to reviews of the time that indicate that Millay's positioning of herself as a goddess did indeed have an alienating effect on her audience.

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Endymion myth. Millay's biographer Daniel Epstein notes that, "It would be [Millay and Dillon's] fate to enact, in real life, the myth of Endymion, which they both knew from Keats" (Epstein 204). Epstein's observation is important.[16] The constant shifts between heightened diction in the poetry and letters and the sudden instances of a modern voice, deed, and personality mimic the tone of the love affair itself. Further, several passages from Fatal Interview are comparable to Keats's Endymion. For example, Keats writes:

> Now if this earthly love has power to make
> Ambition from their memories, and brim
> Their measure of content; what merest whim,
> Seems all this poor endeavor after fame,
> To one, who keeps within his steadfast aim
> A love immortal... (Endymion 1. 843-9).

Keats imagines the greatest obstacle of the love between Selene and Endymion as the immortality that only one possesses. He also draws a line between fame and immortality -- one which both links them (fame has the potential to make on immortal) and differentiates them (fame is a pallid version of immortality). In essence, to Keats's romantic hero and heroine, the greatest obstacle to their love is that one possesses immortality and the other reaches after fame. Keats was always fascinated by the ways in which his own writing earned him fame and the ways in which poetry immortalizes its authors. Millay shares this fascination.

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[16] It was more than likely that both Millay and Dillon would have been familiar with this myth – specifically through Keats's well-known version of the tale which begins with the famous "A thing of beauty is a joy forever" (*Endymion* 1.1).

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In fact, the final lines of Sonnet LII echo the Keats's contemplation quite closely. She envisions her goddess heroine (the mask the poet has adopted for herself) as she "wanders mad, being all unfit/ For mortal love, that might not die of it" (52.13-14). In addition, Millay often speaks of the interconnectedness of fame and her immortal love for Dillon and for her husband, Eugen. In the very first sonnet of Fatal Interview she charges, "Up, up, my feathers! -- ere I lay you by/ To journey barefoot with a mortal joy" (1. 13-14). Similarly, in Sonnet XII, she differentiates between herself as the immortal of the pair and once again asserts that because of her immortal status, her suffering is the greater. She insists, "Pain and compassion shall he know, being mine, --/ Confusion never, that is half divine" (12.13-14). But like the Romantics, Millay seemed to not only to make the lovers in her poems immortal, but to personify and immortalize love itself. In this respect as well, Millay suggests that her sense of Love reached further into the immortal realm than Dillon's. In Sonnet XXXIX she allows her lover eternal youth, commanding him to "be always young," but lowers his love to the mortal realm:

> ... mine was a deeper drouth:
>
> I drank and thirsted still; but I surmise
>
> My kisses now are sand against your mouth,
>
> Teeth in your palm and pennies on your eyes (39.5-8).

The love affair in letters seems to mimic Keat's Endymion as much as the poems.[17] Even reports of Millay's behavior suggest that she is caught up in a complicated act of molding her life after a myth.

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[17] Interestingly, in choosing Keats's *Endymion* as a model, she was choosing a poem that readers in Keats's own time received as immature and facile.

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Millay's letters to Dillon also consider the hierarchy between love and friendship -- a theme taken up in the second canto of Keats's Endymion. In a letter dated from December 29th, 1929 Millay invites Dillon for a visit to Steepletop. In the letter, she reassures him, "My lovely thing, my darling -- don't be apprehensive that I am trying in desperation to change your passionate beautiful love for me into something less -- into simple friendship, I mean -- which is less" (Epstein 209). Likewise, Keats writes:

> ... But there are
> Richer entanglements, enthrallments far
> More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,
> To the chief intensity: the crown of these
> Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
> Upon the forehead of humanity.
> All the more ponderous and bulky worth
> Is friendship, whence ever issues forth
> A steady spleandour; but at the tip-top,
> There hangs by unseen film, an orbed drop
> Of light, and that is love... (Endymion 1.797-808)

Soon, though, her reassurances turn to threats. She insists, "If you cannot come here, I will come to Chicago. ...I must and I will see you before many days pass" (Epstein 210). Dillon did visit for four days with Vincent and Eugen at Steepletop, but by February, the relationship once again left Millay dissatisfied and her letters became cruel (Epstein 211). However, she soon recants her cruelty and once more implores him, "My darling, forget what I wrote about feeling farther away from you ... It's not true any longer. Perhaps I

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wanted to hurt you -- I don't know. Please forgive me. I love you terribly... sometimes I long so to see you that I want to hurt you, I think, just because you're not there" (211). Millay addresses the same acute sense of loss in Sonnet XXI, which begins "Gone in good sooth you are: not even in dreams/ You come..." and concludes with the lonely, "... up the marble stair/ I mount with pain, knowing you are not there" (21.1, 13-14).

In the summer of 1929, George visited Vincent and Eugen again, but for only a few days. One month after he left, Millay wrote:

> I shall never kiss you goodbye again. There should never be hello kisses and goodbye kisses, -- just kisses. Anyhow it is four weeks and a night and a half a morning and a minute since you went away from me. That's long enough, I think, indeed I think it's more than long enough. I want to see you. If I don't see you soon, I shall lie on the floor and kick and howl till something is done about it (Epstein 215).

Similar melodrama and angst come through in the sonnets that accompanied her letters. Echoing the sentiment in the line "I shall never kiss you goodbye again," in Sonnet XIV, she avows:

> Since of no creature living the last breath
> Is twice required, or twice the ultimate pain,
> Seeing how to quit your arms is very death,
> Tis likely that I shall not die again (14.1-4).

In both letter and poem -- and with the same highly emotionally charged diction -- Millay mourns even a temporary loss of her lover like a death. But despite avowals to "kick and howl till something is done about it" Dillon did not visit again for a long time. In a letter

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dated January 14, 1930, Millay writes to Dillon of her frustration at seeing him so seldom. She complains again, "This seeing you for a day or two every year or two -- it's no good -- it makes me unhappy" (Epstein 216).

Arguably, Millay's sense of reality was skewed. Brash statements that she would die without Dillon's attention and love attest that she was as swept up in romantic hyperbole as many of the poems imply. In a letter dated October 28, 1930, she begs, "Darling, for God's sake don't go to California. I shall die if you do. -- It's almost more than I could bear to have you as far away as Chicago ... but California -- Oh Please don't! I shall die if you do. I mean it. They'll call it something else, but it will be that" (Epstein 217). Likewise, in sonnet XXII, she writes, "I shall be dead or I shall be with you" (22.1). The letter in which she includes Sonnet X also shows Millay's attachment to the hyperbole of the ardent love letter and love poem. She writes:

> ... let me assure you that I don't in the least intend to give you up, -- in fact, I dare you, I double-dare you, to escape from me. No matter what I say, no matter how big and brave I may be on occasion, the black truth is, my lovely one, that I haven't the faintest intent of letting you go. Vide sonnet beginning "strange thing that I, by nature nothing prone" (Milford 316).

Here the poem slips right into the sonnet. It begins with the lines she quotes in the paragraphs of her letter, and the final four lines conclude:

> Thus do I cry, being teased by shame and care
> That beauty should be brought to terms by me;
> Yet shamed the more than in my heart I know,
> Cry as I may, I could not let you go (10.10-14).

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The poem is an extension of the love letter, and the reader is compelled to recall that in her earliest letters, Millay remarked how happy she was to be writing "ardent nonsense" again, without differentiating whether the letters or the poem were the object of this peculiar statement of joyful, careless criticism of her own writing.

Indeed, many readers did find that the emotion in Fatal Interview was too hyperbolic to be "real," and argue against considering it an autobiographical account on those grounds. However ruled it may be by Millay's emotions, Fatal Interview nevertheless fairly accurately represents the poet's state of mind throughout the early months of the affair, and her careful and deliberate reconstruction of those poetic missives into a coherent and chronically arranged series of sonnets.

While many theorists might consider the letters of a famous author as autobiography, and yet exclude the poems, the poems and the letters are inextricable. The poems comprised large portions of the letters exchanged and matched them in content, tone, and diction and even punctuation. While Millay kept her letters from Dillon private, she revised, ordered, and sought publication for the poems. And while many might suggest that her poems too thoroughly erase Dillon's identity to remain an autobiography, Millay's deliberate protection of her lover tells a great deal about her sense of control over her own life as it fell under the public eye and her desire to regulate her public image.

Millay wanted the world to question and doubt whether the poems were "real" accountings of an affair. And while Lejeune argues that autobiography is not a guessing game, Millay's personality made a guessing game of the life's events even as she lived them. Would she return to her husband? How deep were Dillon's feelings for Millay?

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Did he reciprocate her passion? How intimate was their affair and how long did it last before degenerating into friendship? Even Eugen, with whom Millay shared many of the intimate details of the affair, did not know the answers to these questions.[18] Millay's interest in writing the poems that comprise Fatal Interview was originally conversational, but it was also prescriptive. In essence, while many writers describe their lives, Millay wrote about events she had not yet experienced, but instead envisioned. The life she cultivated was more myth than reality in the end. She prescribed the life of a radical lyric woman poet, and did her best to live that legend.

SECTION II:

Poetry, Emotion, and the Critical Reception of Fatal Interview

The path of Edna St. Vincent Millay's career, and her critical reception during one of America's most poetically fecund periods, is complex and strange. She wrote Pulitzer-Prize-winning poetry as well as plays and libretti. She acted, sang, gave stunning readings, and was a captivating beauty.[19] She was an icon of the twenties, which became problematic as her career progressed into the '30s, '40s and early '50s. Indeed, she continued to use traditional forms and to cultivate a large reading audience, when poets like Eliot and Pound spurned both, preferring small, elite readerships. Millay

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[18] We know that on June 22, 1932 Millay wrote a 13-page letter to Eugen telling him that on Sunday June 19th she had told George that they should not see each other. But we also know that Dillon had been keeping company with a young man in France for some time before June 19th and that they traveled together to Italy, leaving Vincent behind in France.

[19] Millay was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her book, The Harp Weaver and Other Poems took the prize in 1923.

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doggedly pursued her public interests when others lost faith in the political present, and often asserted her own renown to affect societal change.[20] As radical woman and poet, she opted not to have children, and remained single until well into her '30s, when she entered into an open marriage with the dashing and well-to-do Eugen Boissevain.[21] The open marriage afforded the poet the opportunity to engage in numerous passionate affairs, flings, threesomes, trysts. She wrote about a woman's desire in A Few Figs From Thistles and became famous for the daring lines:

> My candle burns at both ends,
>
> It will not last the night,
>
> But oh my foes and oh my friends,
>
> It gives a lovely light! (Collected Poems 127)

The hedonism of these early verses scandalized and beguiled her readers, but by the end of her career, the same kinds of declarations seemed coy and overly delicate to many, and remained merely offensive to others. Millay was quite aware of her many critics and admirers. She kept careful track of the reactions to her poems and of the literary climate in general. She carefully cultivated a particular readership. While at times reviews of her work seem to run the gamut from rave to derision, Millay maintained a pointed sense of

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[20] In this respect, Millay stands in stark contrast to T.S. Eliot who once remarked, "...it seems to me probable that if poetry – and I mean all great poetry – has had no social function in the past, it is not likely to have any in the future" (3).

[21] Millay had an abortion in her early twenties, and the poorly performed procedure left lasting damage to her health. Cora Millay, Vincent's mother, used her knowledge of herbs and midwifery to induce a second abortion when Millay was in her late twenties (Savage Beauty 239-44).

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direction about her literary career from which she only once strayed.[22]

At first glance there seems to be little commonality among her critics' opinions. In reviewing the same poem, one reader is likely to praise it for its naiveté while another will laud its sophistication. That very poem which received such divergent compliments also brings equally diverse criticisms. Some critics blast Millay for her "abandonment of expression," and still others bemoan her hesitance or limitations.[23] Critics have never seemed to come to a consensus as to whether Millay was overly sentimental or not sentimental enough. It remains unclear whether her readers perceived her as having lost her naiveté or having never gained maturity. Some argue that she was a true innovator, while others claim she was merely adept at "pouring new wine into old bottles." [24]

Indeed, Millay's poetry often seems anachronistic. The style of poetic productions changed so dramatically between 1917 and 1940, and there emerged such strong critical preferences for Eliotic obscurity, that Millay's very readable poems seem backwards and simplistic. This impression is a false one. Millay was not as mired in tradition as many scholars seem to think. She innovated "old bottles" or classic forms by pouring into them the "new wine" of fresh modernist and feminist content, and changed their shape by experimenting with scansion and diction. Although her lyrics evolved in a different direction from that of aesthetic and Imagist schools, it is a divergent not an

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[22] When Millay published Make Bright the Arrows in 1939, she was aware that the volume of propaganda poetry would put her reputation at risk, and yet felt that the spread of Nazi powers in Europe necessitated that sacrifice.

[23] Philip Goetz, "Comment," Buffalo Evening News 22 Oct. 1921: 8.

[24] Percy Hutchinson, "Poets Who Sing at the Christmas Shopping Season," New York Times Book Review 23 Dec. 1923: 11.

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absent evolution.

In 1950 John Ciardi of the Saturday Review of Literature set out to establish Millay as an important figure among the moderns. In his article, "Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Figure of Passionate Living," Ciardi discusses Millay's place among the moderns. Ciardi's perplexing essay provides an inimitable introduction to the problem of how Millay's career has come to be viewed in relation to her contemporaries. That which seems outdated and that which seems timely in Ciardi's piece show with eerie accuracy how the list of modernists established itself. He writes:

> Political historians remember 1917 as the year in which the United States went to war to make the world safe for democracy. Literary historians recall it as a time of great stirring in American poetry. Ezra Pound and his followers were beginning to imagize. T.S. Eliot stood between "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land." Baudelaire was becoming an excitement in advance[d] circles. Yeats was at the point of his best writing. Hopkins was about to be published ... In short, The Age of the Manifesto was upon us. Schools and movements were everywhere (Ciardi 8).

Not coincidentally, the names the literary historians recall first, Pound, Eliot, Baudelaire, Yeats, and Hopkins, all subscribed to aesthetic modernism, and preferred the universal subject and experimentation in place of traditional forms.

Ciardi, having established his canon, attempts to place Millay in it. Strangely, his remarks seem to be the very criteria that exclude Millay from the group he has just listed. However, while his article burgeons with confessions of admiration for Millay, his introductory paragraphs set the tone of a left-handed compliment, a "not-a-bad-grip-for-

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a-girl" tone. He writes:

> Into all this excitement [in] search [of] a new way of writing stepped twenty-five-year-old Edna St. Vincent Millay ... Edna St. Vincent Millay became a name for a kind of lyric to be imitated wherever the female heart beat fast. ...her popularity, easily won, was to continue through all the Twenties and -- perhaps a sign of dangerous limitation or perhaps a sign of fundamental power -- was to reach beyond the "literary" to something resembling the "public." (Ciardi 8)

There are several points of interest here. The first is that he notes her youth. Millay's reading public was so pleased with her first youthful publication, "Renascence," that any maturity that later saturated her poetry was open to the criticism that she had suffered a loss of the freshness of her youthful poetry. On the other hand, many critics accused Millay of failing to reach maturity as later they reviewed love poetry by a 41-year-old, not a 25-year-old Millay. One critic actually remarked that "at 41 [Millay] has outlived her theme."[25] Thus her eternal youthfulness became a requisite part of her iconography. Her public wanted a young girl's poetry, and anything else perturbed them, but they also wanted her sexuality to remain young. That a 41-year-old woman still wrote about love affairs deeply disturbed many readers.

Second, it is important to note that the kind of lyric for which she is known arises not where the heart beats fast, but where the *female* heart beats fast. Millay has always been read as a woman's poet. This is not as simple a statement as it seems, for it meant both that Millay was a poet of interest almost exclusively to women, and that she was a feminist poet. This meant that she was pegged (as many popular women poets were) not

[25] Lawrence H. Conrad, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Landmark 15 Jun. 1933: 300.

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only for being syrupy and sentimental, but also for being as Babette Deutch termed it "feminized and shrill" (qtd. in Thesing 9). A woman's poet lived in a separate and unequal world.

Third, Ciardi's assessment of Millay raises the issue of her popularity. Millay's poems are eminently readable. They were direct, accessible, and full of modern scenery and subjects. In part, Millay resisted modernist obscurity because she depended on publishing advances for financial survival. Having grown up in Maine at the very edges of poverty, Millay was delighted when her poetry began to bring in money. It was a coup. Even after she had married the affluent Eugen Boissevain, Millay cultivated a wide readership. She "performed" her poems on tours, and her readings drew huge crowds. In 1933 – two years after the publication of Fatal Interview she began reading her work on a regular weekly radio program. It was the first time a literary figure held equal ratings with artists of stage and concert hall. Her readings brought an "overwhelming response to the network" (MacDougal 249). Millay used her fame to exert political leverage in the trial of the Masses in 1919 and to urge the governor of Massachusetts to pardon Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. She used her name and poetic reputation again in 1939 to urge the United States to fight the rise of fascism in Europe. Millay valued and enjoyed her fame.

Indeed, Millay often seems out of place among the moderns. Still, if one examines the rhetoric through which Millay's heedlessness of High Modernism is discussed, it becomes apparent that gender stereotyping and subsequent restraints on women writers came into play as much as the stylistic turn to the obtuse. Many of Millay's critics were all too ready to label any number of women poets, and Millay in

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particular, as being "a sensibility" and "not an intellect."[26] The misogyny inherent in the insistence that Millay was "not aware" of High Modernist developments emerges from this pile of confused criticism and remains very clear. Millay was utterly thwarted at any attempt to transcend the confines of being a woman poet. When she abandoned the "sentimental" for the "experimental" they panned her for having "degenerated to cleverness" or remarked that she was not yet "blooming beyond frigidity."[27]

Those who praised her filled their essays with comparisons of Millay to Sappho. Some compared her to her contemporaries, but usually her female contemporaries: Amy Lowell, H.D., Louise Bogan, and Marianne Moore. Reviewers called even the most non-romantic of her work "intensely feminine."[28] Even her positive reviews are filled with loaded terms referring to her "personal voice," her "delicacy of diction," and of course her "sentimentality."[29] Millay's critics, ignoring her direct satires of Eliot in late sonnet sequences, insist that "Miss Millay" was oblivious to Modernist developments, mired in the maudlin and helplessly stuck on sonnets.

Diane P. Freedman, in the introduction to Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal, explains the conundrum Millay posed. She writes that "Millay, by refusing to separate life from art... problematizes modernist notions, the tradition of criticism, and the very

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[26] Allen Tate, "Fatal Interview: Sonnets by Edna St. Vincent Millay," New Republic 6 May 1931: 335.

[27] Fred Lewis Pattee, The New American Literature 1890-1930 (New York: Century, 1930) 308. William Soskin, "Books on Our Table: Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Fatal Interview*" New York Evening Post 16 Apr. 1931: 13.

[28] William Seidel Canby, " 'Stand Back Pretty Lady,' " Saturday Review of Literature 3 (19 Mar.): 661.

[29] T.E. Welby, "Review of *Buck in the Snow*," London Saturday Review 22 Dec. 1928: 851-2.

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notion of literature as a separate aesthetic" (Freedman xiv). Certainly, the combination of traditional styles and current events perplexes modernist scholars, often leading them to oversimplify her themes and omit whole areas of her creative repertoire.

Even at the height of her considerable popularity, Millay's detractors were omnipresent. Mark Van Doren, in yet another mixed review of Millay's work, writes that The Harp Weaver was Millay's most "mature" volume to date. However, he feels obliged to add that he hopes Millay will relinquish "the field of abstract emotion and rarefied, subjective thought" and give her energies to "that universe of fact to which the best poetry must sooner or later come home."[30] In the same year Clement Wood, in his book Poets of America, remarks that "... if [Millay] could learn to cease caricaturing her emotions by overuse of the quaint pedal and the clever one, and could outgrow her preoccupation with herself, she might easily be the most important poet writing" (Wood 213). Henry Seidel Canby of the Saturday Review of Literature chimed in calling her work "intensely feminine" in an article enigmatically entitled, "Stand Back, Pretty Lady" (Canby 661). Each new form she experimented with met with patronizing compliments or outright outrage. When she retreated from experimentation as a result, critics accused her of "not being an intellect, but a sensibility" and thus being judged as "unaware" of the "profound alteration of intelligence" which critics like Allen Tate saw emerging from the pens of male moderns like Eliot (Tate 335).

Suzanne Clark suggests a pattern among these seemingly varied opinions. In her article "The Unwarranted Discourse: Sentimental Community, Modernist Women, and the Case of Millay," Clark gives a smart analysis of these professional bridles. She

[30] Mark Van Doren, "The Hungry Heart," The Nation 20 Feb. 1924: 210.

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further suggests that Millay's career navigated certain restrictive parameters set upon women writers. She asserts that women of this period faced a "Catch-22" of sorts in which rising popularity with the reading public served as evidence of a lack of intellectual acumen. Popular women writers became "crowd pleasures" in a period in which intellectual purists sought to distance themselves as far as possible from that pleased crowd. She points out, "Women writers in the age of modernism discovered a cruel paradox: the more successfully they wrote, both to appeal to a feminized community of readers and to help readers feel part of the literary community, the less they could be considered serious writers." (Clark 133).

Clark also acknowledges that the more women writers "appealed to the shared feelings of a popular community, the more they risked being labeled 'sentimental' or merely popular." (Clark 133). Indeed, many scholars still call Millay's poetry sentimental. In her original reviews the term was bandied about as both praise and reproach. Few seem to have expounded on exactly what that term meant, taking it for granted that their readers would understand this term. Clearly, though, even critics did not agree whether sentiment and sensibility were attributes or liabilities. Clark explains the dichotomy as she goes on to suggest that women's poetic agenda at the time was counterpoint to that of their male contemporaries, and that they embraced the power of sentimental rhetoric in direct and knowing reaction to the rising masculine impetus toward literary elitism. Clark's assertion that women poets were pigeonholed into certain roles and voices becomes clearer as Millay's experimentations waxed and waned.

While critics like Burt Struthers called the work "high art," many more paid left-handed compliments, such as Louise Bogan's assessment: "Edna Millay at last gives

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evidence that she recognizes and is prepared to meet the task of becoming a mature and self-sufficing woman and artist."[31] Others argued that Millay "fails at major poetry-- that is, poetry which makes major predictions about life."[32] William Plomer claimed, "Miss Millay's poetic doctrine is a feeble one," and Dora Taylor claimed that Millay's egoism relates all things to herself and limits her potential for greatness.[33] Millay's critics alternately say they would prefer that she either keep to naive lyrical verse like that in "Renascence" or suggest that she abandon her readable style altogether in favor of High Modernist, arid sophistication. Either way one faction will express its displeasure, and frame its opinion in terms of how much sentimentality and emotion each finds appropriate to poetry.

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, in her article "Displaced Modernism: Millay and the Triumph of Sentimentality," discusses sentimentality in *both* Millay's love poetry and her more political poetry. Kaiser suggests that Millay was quite aware of the crisis of meaning which followed the First World War and which so affected the High Modernist writers, leading them to verbal experimentation. Kaiser points out that while Millay wrote her most "experimental" work, she began in earnest to distance herself from other moderns, showing no interest in their salons. Kaiser asserts that the site of Millay's departure from other modernists could be found in her persistent belief in the political

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[31] Burt Struthers, "Poet Into Philosopher," Voices 81 (1935): 43.
Louise Bogan, "Conversation Into Self," Poetry 45 (1935): 277-9.

[32] Cleanth Brooks, "Edna Millay's Maturity," Southwestern Review 20 Jan. 1935: 4.

[33] William Plomer, "Review of *Wine From These Grapes*," New Statesman and Nation 5 Jan. 1935: 15.
Dora Taylor, "Review of *Wine From These Grapes*," Cape Times 14 Feb. 1935: 7

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present.

Kaiser suggests that Millay's divergence from High Modernism along this line is due in part to a gender-driven polemic in which "women were the guardians of emotions and moralities" (Kaiser 350). While this ideology may seem Victorian in the literary sphere, echoing the "angel in the house" trope, in the day-to-day practicalities of politics, it was still doggedly present. Kaiser posits, "the very feminine nature of sentimental ideology made it a superior position in the early Twentieth Century for effecting political change" (Kaiser 35). However, as the twentieth century progressed, the modernist movement increasingly valued "art for art's sake," and equated political poetry with the "propaganda poetry" women had written to urge men to enlist in 1914. In this atmosphere, Millay turned her literary interests away from topics of war and social injustice and wrote the story of a love affair.[34]

Fatal Interview, published in April 1931, sold 33,000 copies in the first ten weeks. By the end of the summer, it had sold upwards of 50,000 copies and placed Millay's racy sonnet series on the best-seller list. Not surprisingly, the assessments of Fatal Interview fall into the same patterns as her other reviews, but they add to the mix concern over the personal content of the sonnet series. A debate arises as to whether the poems are autobiographical, imagined, or generic poems of love and loss. Several reviews state the poems are "most likely not autobiographical."[35] However, critic Frank Johnson claimed

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[34] In many respects her poems about her many love affairs are as political as her poems about war and social justice. Through writing about these experiences Millay was in essence speaking out with a feminist voice against the confines of marriage, and was rebelling against social strictures imposed on women's sexuality.

[35] Anon., "Miss Millay Scores Again," Newark Evening News 18 Apr. 1931: 9.

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the poems show a "modern absorption in the interpretation of the self."[36] Still, Johnson qualifies his assessment by adding that the imagery is based "more on classical allusions than on direct emotional experience" (370). Another critic, while also noting that the use of allusion made the poem seem universal, places a slightly more positive spin on the choice, remarking, "Millay's use of archaic diction and classical allusions lifts the sequence beyond her own personality."[37]

Those who supported reading the poems as autobiography pointed to their organization as critical to such a reading. Isabel Paterson of the New York Herald Tribune notes that the progression of the love poems corresponds with the course of the seasons: "the uncertainty of spring, the warm assurance of summer, the rebelliousness of autumn, and the pure cold surrender of winter" (21). She suggests that the chronological feeling of the poem heightened the sense that we were reading a remembrance of a particular love affair. However, another critic remarks that he saw "no sequence to the sonnets" and argued that any attempts at specificity of time did not succeed.[38]

Millay's own reputation as a Greenwich Village radical, a daring feminist, and a proponent of free love may have caused many readers to interpret what details the poems offered as autobiography despite any attempts on Millay's part to maintain a universal sound. Millay's friend Floyd Dell also reviewed the work in the New York Herald Tribune, and no doubt exaggerated the effects of her reputation on how the public

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[36] Frank L. Johnson, "Shakespearean Modernism," Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota 21 (1931): 369.

[37] K[enyon], B[ernice], "The Week's Reading," The Outlook and Independent 157 (1931): 600.

[38] O.W. Firkins, "The Reascending Sonnet," Saturday Review of Literature 7 May 1931: 793.

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received the sonnet series. His review is a thinly veiled biographical account of his own love affair with Millay, and it lacks intimate details about the poems themselves. He calls Fatal Interview a theoretical discussion of the impossibility of an ambitious woman accepting the traditional role of wife in which she loses her "spiritual self-possession" (Dell 12).

While rumors of Millay's love affairs may have seeped into the critical reception of this volume, many critics observed within the poems themselves aspects of an autobiography. A critic from the Minneapolis Journal noted simply, "themes of love, joy in living, and passing of time," and the critic for Booklist noted the series for its "remembrances of love."[39] The 52 poems give many readers a distinct sense of recall and recapitulation -- a clear impression that the speaker (and author) is not pontificating on theoretical lost loves outside of time and personal understanding, but remembering her own experiences. June Nelson of the Standard writes that these sonnets differ from Millay's other work in that they are a shared thought about an experience. She asserts that Millay's "need to share" caused an elaboration of images, which she sees as a maturing for the poet.[40] Several readers also noted that the poems show the speaker struggling toward a fulfillment of identity through her recollections – another earmark of autobiography.

A critic for the Glasgow Herald averred, "the whole pleasure of the book lies in watching this individual spirit pursue its quest to the bitter end with its flag unlowered,

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[39] Anon., "There Are Sonnets and Sonnets but Edna St. Vincent Millay's Are Best," Minneapolis Journal 10 May 1931: 4.
Anon., "Review of *Fatal Interview*," Booklist 27 Jun. 1931: 448.

[40] Jean Nelson, "Miss Millay's *The Fatal Interview*," Standard 18 Jan. 1932: 146.

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and in hearing in the march and beat of the words the voice of fatality itself."[41] Similarly, another reader claimed the poems "achieved a fulfillment of self."[42] In 1935, Arthur E. Dubois extended what he observed in Fatal Interview to the rest of Millay's work. He suggested that Millay's identity is the underlying theme of all her poetry, and outlined four aspects of her personality -- precocious child, poet, woman, mystic. He claimed, "the discovery of this identity will be a witticism, a detection of occult resemblance between things apparently unlike, between the four numerators."[43] These readers reflect the clear interest demonstrated in Fatal Interview to establish a sense of the speaker's identity through reflection on the circumstances of the love affair.

A few perceptive readers picked up on Millay's careful balance between the universal and the personal, the general and the specific. For instance, one reader notes that "the sequence deals with the struggle between the ideal and time and circumstance."[44] Genevieve Taggard in the New York Herald Tribune Books writes that Millay finds the sonnet form appropriate for expressing her musings on theories of the one and the many, permanence and change" (3).

Whether readers viewed the poems as autobiographical or universal reflections on love, readers felt compelled to comment on the emotional content of the poems.

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[41] Anon. "Poetry in Many Moods." Glasgow Herald 4 Nov. 1931: 7.

[42] This critic also shrewdly observes that the sonnets are not all addressed to the same person. She makes note that there are two men addressed in the bounds of the affair, calling attention to the poems we now know to a certainty were addressed to Millay's husband Eugen rather than to George Dillon. Sarah Chokla, "Latest Sonnets by Edna Millay Have Poignant Sincerity" Dallas Morning News 17 May 1931: 8.

[43] Arthur E. Dubois, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Sewanee Review 43 (1935): 139.

[44] Clyde Beck, "Edna St. Vincent Millay Sings of Love in Sonnets," Detroit News 3 May 1931: sec. 10: 8.

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Reflecting the many reviews that present Millay as feminine through her emotion and sentiment, several critics took her to task for the emotion in this sonnet series. One dissatisfied reviewer complained, "Fatal Interview does not tell a story but tells Millay's moods."[45] Allen Tate called Millay "a sensibility not an intellect" and complains that she does not analyze her images, which she uses in a stock manner (New Republic 335-6). Harriet Monroe in Poetry had long championed Millay's poetry. However, upon the publication of Fatal Interview she joined the ranks of those who complained of Millay's over-reliance on emotion and sentiment. She observes, "the book records artistically an emotional experience. The work leaves the reader frustrated because Millay's intellect has lost its hold on her emotions. Millay has always needed emotional stimuli to write but has maintained a certain detachment in the past."[46]

Ironically, several readers take an opposite standpoint. Edna Lou Walton of The Nation argues that Fatal Interview is not an honest or sincere work because it "does not result from intense personal emotion."[47] A critic from the London Times Literary Supplement similarly faulted the series because "the emotion underlying it is so richly elaborated, so proudly sheathed in the grand manner, that, in spite of her protestations of its intensity, it frequently fails to move us."[48] This second critique suggests that the contradictions really speak of a similar problem in Millay's poetry. The same attributes of the same poems led readers to decide it was a victory of the universal voice, a triumph

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[45] Louis Kronenberger, "Review of *Fatal Interview*," The Bookman 73 (1931): 440.

[46] Harriet Monroe, "Advance or Retreat," Poetry 38 (1931): 216-21.

[47] Edna Lou Walton, "The Unwise Thrush," The Nation 132 (1931): 480.

[48] Anon., "Forms of Desire," London Times Literary Supplement 8 Oct. 1931: 776.

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of delicacy, a failure of intellect, or a collapse of daring. The lofty language of the poems, and their adherence to the most traditional aspects of the sonnet, contradict the radical content of the poems. While many recognized that the poems were a declaration of autonomy from a woman who refused to let marriage stifle or reduce her, and while many saw that the poems were a reflection on an extramarital affair unhidden from her husband, they almost all observed that the allusions and the poetic language mitigated the impact of that radicalism.

Millay had attempted to compose poems that were simultaneously radical and delicate, modernist and timeless. Her attempt to straddle modes landed her in a poetic no-man's land exposed to the harshest criticism. The criticism took the shape of misogynist attacks. Lawrence Conrad in Landmark complains that Millay's poetry has only one theme – "rebelliousness and joyful reckless living" – and decides that at forty-one, Millay has "outlived her theme."[49] At the root of this comment we see that a combination of factors made Fatal Interview problematic. Because of its theme, it failed to reach the delicacy that would have appeased her more conservative readers. Because of its traditional use of allusion, its frequently archaic diction, and its unfettered emotion, it failed to impress her more avant-garde readers. It was too personal to satisfy those readers who preferred a universal subject, and too universal to either stir genuine proponents of poetic self-expression or sate the appetites of gossipmongers.

[49] Lawrence H. Conrad, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Landmark 15 Jun. 1933: 297-300.

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SECTION III:

Millay Assesses the Prospects of Self-Disclosure

Millay not only kept careful track of the reviews of her work, she had a keen sense of herself as a public persona. She knew, reliant as she was on advances from her publisher, and thus on the good will of her reading public, that her reputation as a poet was her life as a poet. When she wrote her 1939 propaganda poetry, she requested that it be published as a pamphlet, rather than bound in the same fashion as her other books. When her publishers ignored her request and published Make Bright the Arrows between the same kinds of boards and on the same high-quality paper as her other books, she was furious. She knew that the poems were not up to her usual quality, and that she would face the public outcry against them. The outcry was twofold: she found that critics attacked her poems because of their poor quality, but also because the American reading public, still in an isolationist frame of mind, was not ready to hear the call to arms the poems sounded.

Turning from her post-WWI pacifism, Millay found herself urging her readers to take action against the rise of fascism in Europe. Her political stance infuriated male and female readers alike. Her male readers, including her friend Max Eastman, disparaged her effort as a reach beyond what was appropriate for a woman in wartime. Eastman wrote that "[Millay] was tremendously sincere -- sincere enough, had it occurred to her, to go to work in a munitions factory, or wrap packages, or knit socks for the soldiers. That would have been a better gift to the war effort than bad poetry" (Eastman 211). Women were outraged that a childless woman called their sons off to war. When

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Millay's close friend Charlotte wrote to her expressing her outrage, Millay argued: "The dearest thing in life I posses which might possibly be of help to my country, has already gone over the top, in the hope that your sons need never go to war" (MacDougal 312). She spoke of sacrificing her reputation like Abraham sacrificing his son. The criticism she received at that time made her reluctant to write and publish again, and her productivity never recovered.

Millay's consciousness about the precarious nature of celebrity was apparent long before 1939. Certainly, she was aware that, as a publishing person, she opened herself up for public scrutiny. In a letter to Cora Millay, in 1927, she responded to her mother's concerns about the book Vincent's sister Kathleen had recently published. Millay's response was that of a hardened professional: "A person who publishes a book willfully appears before the populace with his pants down. And there's nothing you can do about that" (MacDougal 220). Autobiography theorist Philippe Lejeune echoes Millay's sentiment when he claims "an author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two" (On Autobiography 11). The person who writes autobiographically, in particular, straddles the world between personhood and public icon. Understanding this, Millay was highly protective of the private world behind her published poems. Perhaps (in part) because there were so many, it ran contrary to instinct for her to reveal the men behind the love-poems.

In a letter to her dear friend and former lover, Arthur Ficke, in September of 1937, Millay recalls a moment at a recent party in which Ficke had asked her if he was the subject of her sonnet, beginning, "We talk of taxes, and I call you friend." She

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reprimands him, "Knowing as you so well know, my dear friend, how reticent, both by nature and my taste, concerning my own private affairs and the affairs of other people, I am, it is wrong of you to do these things to me" (MacDougal 322). She admits, eight years later, that he was indeed the subject of the sonnet, and offers some reasons for withholding that information. She claims, "I *did* write that sonnet to you, the one you asked me about. -- I denied it at the time, -- but what a hell of a fine time, and what a hell of a place, to ask me about it! -- A cocktail party in George LaBranche's gun room! ... And besides, you sprang the question on me so suddenly ... Perhaps also, I didn't want you to know, for sure, how terribly, how sickeningly, in love with you I had been. And perhaps, also, I was still in love with you, or I shouldn't have cared" (MacDougal 323)

In the case of this one individual poem, there were personal reasons for concealing her inspiration for the poem. But in the case of Fatal Interview, Millay sent copies of the poems to the young Dillon, and left no question in his mind whether the poems were about their love affair. Millay was conscious of the expectation placed upon her, as a poet and a public persona, to present her life as a virtuous one. Alicia Ostriker, in her book Stealing the Language, observes "throughout her existence, the woman poet has needed to be proven virtuously female to legitimize her vocation as a poet" (15). Ostriker notices that even in "the more liberated climate of the twentieth century... the divorce of mind from body and private from public remains a powerful constraint on women writers" (15-16).

Ostriker discusses Millay in this context, arguing that "if Millay was the darling of her time, it was perhaps not for her poems of sorrow, but because she sounded most keenly the new note of feminine arrogance" (46). Ostriker points to Millay's Daphne

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who is bold enough to cry, "I am off; -- to heel Apollo!" but even for such a daring woman, there were limits. Her bold statements are equivocal; a naïve reader (willfully naïve or otherwise) can see no untoward content in them. This candle burning at both ends need not carry sexual connotations, but may be simply the diligence inherent in a working poet's life.

As we learned in her conversation with Ficke, Millay was well aware that her poems were bold enough without getting any more specific than they already were. In fact, Millay was already convinced that her radicalism had cost her some would-be poetic accolades. In another letter to Arthur Ficke, dated May 25, 1938, Millay continues in an ongoing conversation about the politics surrounding the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Ficke had suggested that the committee awarded the prize or withheld it according to moral rather than purely literary judgments. Millay had initially objected, but upon further thought she recants, "You hit it without a doubt when you said that the prize was awarded probably, or withheld for moral rather than other reasons" (MacDougal 295-6). She reasons:

> [Elinor Wylie] was an aristocrat, a lady, and her grammar was faultless. The subject matter of her poetry was the furthest thing from erotic. What could they have had against her? Then it came to me. They knew, as everybody knew, that she had left her husband and her child to run off to Europe with a married man. That was why *she* never got a Pulitzer Prize. This was suddenly plain to me (MacDougal 295).

Having had several affairs with men, dalliances with women, and two abortions in Europe herself, Millay could not have been sure that the same standards were not

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applying to her own work. She questions why "...having been once awarded this prize in 1923, [I] never received it afterwards, although Robert Frost and E.A. Robinson seemed to be taking turns at receiving it year after year" (295). Of course, even in this letter, Millay skirts the issue of her own reputation as a sexual radical. She points out only her radical political activity when she explains why she only once received the Pulitzer Prize. She harkens back to the Sacco-Vanzetti protests and admits, "I was arrested and taken to jail for this and that the whole country knew it" and asks, "With how much affection would our aged and conservative governor of a New England state look thence forward upon the published works of a person who had agitated as I had done against the governor of a neighboring New England State?" (MacDougal 295-6)

However, the reasons she cites for other poets' exclusion indicates that she was well aware of the potentially damning effects of speaking openly about any kind of sexuality that many readers might have perceived as transgressing social mores. She claims that in the case of Robinson Jeffers, "This was easy ... it is the subject matter of his poetry. Rape, incest, homosexuality, and other forms of plain and fancy fornication are the subject matter of all his books. No chance for him" (296). When she returns to Frost and Robinson as poets whose pristine reputations won them the award year after year, she links radical political and sexual behaviors. She muses, "...Now take Robinson and Frost. What a relief these two poets must have been to the harassed judges of the Pulitzer Award. If their private lives, both sexual and political, were not thoroughly blameless, I never learned about this" (296).

It is important to note that Millay's concern is specifically over their private lives, rather than what they disclose of their private lives in their poetry. While she

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acknowledges the content of Jeffers' poems discloses his sexual activities, in Wylie's case information about the poet's private life had leaked into the consciousness of the reading public. And while Millay admits to the public scandal of being arrested at a protest, she makes no mention of her own sexual exploits even though she is writing in a private letter to one of the men with whom she had an affair. Millay was indeed very protective of her private affairs. Her sense of privacy connected with a sense of delicacy and propriety that applied not only to her own poetic production, but expressed her sensibilities regarding other modernists.

In a letter to Cass Canfield dated June 22, 1949, Millay expresses her disapproval of T.S. Eliot's work in which she sees a particular vulgarity.[50] She refers to the sonnets she has written "against Eliot." She asserts:

> ...there is nothing coarse, obscene, as there sometimes is in the work of Auden and of Pound, and nothing so silly as the childish horsing around of Eliot, when he is trying to be funny. He has no sense of humor, and so he is not yet a true Englishman. There is, I think, in these poems of mine against Eliot nothing which could be considered abusive: they are merely murderous (MacDougal 353).

It is critical that Millay faults Eliot not only for clumsy clowning, but for coarseness and obscenity. For all her adventurous content, and for all her decadent living, she maintained poetry as a form reserved for refined expressions. Of course, this attitude may have developed over years of reading about herself through the eyes of reporters. When a reporter by the name of Bruer reported "She might be anywhere between twenty

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[50] T.S. Eliot was by no means the only poet she accused of being offensive in his experimentation. She also berated e.e. cummings as having a "fetid" personality, calls his work "frivolous from the point of view of art" and complains, "here is a big talent in the hands of an arrogant, peevish, self-satisfied and self-indulgent writer.

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and thirty-five years old..." Millay was just six months shy of forty. Her youthfulness, which had caused such a stir in 1917 when she first published "Renaissance," now became a requisite part of her public persona, indivisible from her femininity, and had become highly restrictive. Nancy Milford points out that "in article after article she appeared in a consistent role ...she was always -- whether described by a male or female reporter -- a lovely, fragile child" (Milford 333).

Millay's consciousness of the gendered nature of the reactions to her work may have contributed to her reluctance to make the work any more sensational than it already was. She remarks in a letter to Eugene Saxton in 1931, "I have noticed with considerable fun that many of the English women writers like 'Fatal Interview' and not so many of the men" (MacDougal 244). Later in her career she would comment on this separation with frustration. In an interview toward the end of career, she explained her position by asserting, "A woman poet is not at all different from a man poet. She should write from the same kind of life, and from the same kind of experience, and should be judged by the same standards" (qtd. in Milford 335). She continues and comments that the gains that women have supposedly made have not translated into the literary world. She surmises:

> We are supposed to have won all the battles for our rights to be individuals but in the arts women are still put in a class by themselves and I resent it, as I have always rebelled against discriminations or limitations of a woman's experience on account of her sex (qtd. in Milford 336).

She seems to react directly to the gendered sound of the reviews of her work over the years when she adds, "A poet is a poet. The critics should estimate her work as such.

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Instead they compare her poetry with that of men poets, then say condescendingly, 'This is pretty good for a woman poet'" (qtd. in Milford 335).

Even in 1931, she was aware that the reactions to her work reacted to her as a woman poet, and as a result, she carefully guarded against allowing the already sensationalized buzz about the affair in Fatal Interview to gain any further momentum. Still, she had deliberately created the sensation and carefully maintained the exact level of intrigue she desired around the project. Her reactions to the rumor mill surrounding Fatal Interview's potentially autobiographical content were quite coy and confirm that she deliberately teased her readers with the translucence of her self-disclosure. When a reporter from the World Telegram asked her if the work was indeed autobiographical, she replied, "It is very intense and very passionate. ...Personal? Of course, everything one writes is personal. But if it were actual reporting of my own experience, I certainly shouldn't admit it" (Milford 329).

Reporters began to pester Norma to help them arrange "exclusive" interviews, hoping she might cajole her sister into offering them the "inside story." Even with Norma, Vincent was roguishly evasive. She agrees to do the interview if Norma is "going to get something out of it," but she warns:

> I'll see that she gets some exclusive material... of course I can't give out any dope from what you call "Ugin's angle." I can't say "Yes, I wrote these sonnets to my husband," or "No, I wrote these sonnets to my butler," or "Must I be faithful just because I'm married" or "Must I be unfaithful just because I'm married" (Milford 334).

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Her insistence on maintaining the secrecy around the affair was motivated by several factors. First, she felt obliged to protect Dillon's privacy. Second, she observed that the reactions to Fatal Interview were already bordering on the sensational, and did not want to venture very far down that road. While Millay insisted throughout her career that she wanted a large readership, she remained dedicated to keeping that audience to a certain caliber of reader.

Later in her career, as her poetic production slowed, her publishers – who continued to be generous with advance payments for poems that never materialized – began to pester Vincent with suggestions for re-printing her poems in different arrangements. One suggestion was for a version of her sonnets in which she would write a brief prose piece divulging the inspiration for the sonnet. Millay expressed her vehement opposition in no uncertain terms and outlined her reasons in a letter to Arthur Rushmore of Harper's Publishers. She asks indignantly, "As a result, perhaps, of the recent making-public of Max Eastman's to-the-minds-of-some-better-kept-private affairs, is not the venerable firm of Harper & Bothers running just a few degrees of fever?"[51] Millay quips, "If so, it is a fever to whose contagion I am immune." She then turns quite serious and remarks:

> Your proposition, that Harper's bring out a volume of "The Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay," containing a "mellow *Forward in retrospect*" written by their author, in which forward she confides to the public "when, where, and *under what impulsion*" (the italics are mine) these poems were written, leaves me strangely cold.

[51] The quotes here are all from the same letter to Mr. Rushmore, which I include in its entirety in Appendix A. The letter appears in MacDougal's compilation of Millay's letters.

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She chides Rushmore for not being attentive enough to realize that she is too "reticent" a person even to tell him how very reticent she is. In fact, she reprimands the publisher for never having "come across the knowledge" that she was "the only poet in America... who consistently and in all circumstances refuses to make in print any statement whatever regarding any poem whatever that she has published."

She takes a moment to outline the scant exceptions to this rule – a forward to a sonnet that she called little more than a second title, and a project spearheaded by William Rose Benet. She flatly denounces Benet's work, declaring, "I refused to have anything to do with the project." Then she turns her attention once more to the proposed volume. In the early lines of the letter she had mocked his delicately phrased proposal to include passages in which the author "confides to the public 'when, where, and *under what impulsion*'" the sonnets were composed. She sneers, "Pretty hard put to it, weren't you, dearie, to say it with flowers, and yet say it?" Clearly, she sees through the guise of gentility and points out the impossibility of both denuding her sonnet's protective universality and remaining at all discreet. In a clear and outraged paragraph, she outlines the repercussions of such a book:

> You state that, in your opinion, such a book as you describe would "make new readers" for me. I do not doubt it. People who never in all their lives, except when in school and under compulsion, have held a book of poems in their hands, might well be attracted by the erotic autobiography of a fairly conspicuous woman, even though she did write poetry. The indubitable fact that, even as I was winning my new readers, I should be losing entirely the good esteem of the more

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> sensitive and by me the most valued, of the readers I already have, does not seem to have occurred to you.

She accuses Mr. Rushmore and Harpers of being so dazzled by their images of the book's size, color, and sales potential that they neglected to think about its effect on her reputation. She warns him that the resulting product would be too shocking for the public, and she assures him that "even you, with all your exquisite skill, could not make charming the indelicacy of such a forward [sic] as you suggest." In short, she says, "you have never really once quietly considered just what it is that you are asking me to do."

What Rushmore was asking Millay to do was to surrender the autobiographer's control over the subject of her book -- her public self. Millay had carefully drawn the boundary between self-disclosure and self-protection that she deemed appropriate for the times in which she was writing. Highly aware that she was being read as a woman and finely attuned to the ways in which women's private affairs affected their careers, Millay would have none of it. She insisted that the lyrical veil she wrapped around her autobiographical expressions remain intact. In the end, she was as careful with the poems that became part of the public domain, as she was to hide or burn the private letters that once accompanied them. While she desired the public expression of the love and the life experience of the affair, she had no desire to allow that publication be the ruin of her career. Millay had a very clear conception of the limits to what she could express in the poetic establishment. What's more, she saw that what could remain beautiful and passionate in poetry, would become the tawdriest of autobiographies if translated into discursive prose. She offers us a clear case where the benefits of the lyric autobiography outweigh the merits of any such production in prose.

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Chapter Four:

"I Shan't Have Lied": Elizabeth Bishop & the Autobiographical Pact

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Introduction:

"As Our Good Manners Required": The Emergence of Bishop's Personal Poems

My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
"Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet."

Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Manners," subtitled "For a Child of 1918," begins with the first-person speaker recounting a piece of advice given by her grandfather as they passed through town behind their tired mare. It is clearly a hard bit of advice for the bashful young speaker, who describes her shyness, "And I said it and bowed where I sat," as her jovial grandfather greets "a stranger on foot" with a friendly, "A Good day, sir. Good Day. A fine day" (Poems 121). The child's grandfather continues his lesson: "Always offer everyone a ride;/ don't forget that when you get older," as a boy with a pet crow climbs aboard (121). The crow answers to his master's call, and the grandfather comments, "See, he answers nicely when he's spoken to./ Man or beast, that's good manners," and it becomes apparent that he has coached his young granddaughter to "answer nicely" before (121). The final lines of the poem, in which the grandfather

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declares that the mare is tired and makes every one get down to walk "as our good manners required," betray the speaker's feelings about this code of behavior (122). It is uncomfortable. Speaking when spoken to, calling out to strangers and even neighbors, is a worrisome duty.

There is a peculiar tension between the young speaker's wish to remain silent, and the adult poet's authorial confidence. By using the child's perspective, Bishop imparts a palpable sense of the child's discomfort with speaking out, and yet the poem's own articulation seems skilled, poised, and entirely self-assured. One might chalk it up to the maturation of a young child to a well-traveled adult. However, by publishing this poem about her childhood introversion, Bishop requires her reader to consider her current feelings about the "manners" of public utterance.

Bishop's careful balancing act between hiding and self-disclosure bridges a gap between the Modernist era, which favored the centrality of the image and the universal voice, and the Confessional and Beat generations, which unleashed a flood of self-disclosure. Bishop's careful, and often-articulated, sense of "what constitutes the 'usable self' in poetry" provides an invaluable forum for learning about how the autobiographical pact operates in verse autobiography in general.[1] Bishop's poems, in particular, pose a fascinating study of the autobiographical pact because they project the feeling that the author – in the very act of sharing a memory – is hiding something crucial from the reader. There is an intriguing silence in her speaking.

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[1] In his book, Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, David Kalstone coins the term the "usable self" as he describes Bishop's ongoing debate with Robert Lowell over what kind of personal evidence and artifacts one can conscientiously include in poems bound for publication. The debate erupted over Lowell's use of his former wife's letters in his book The Dolphin (Becoming 237).

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Bishop's "coming-out" as a poetic autobiographer demonstrates three important points. First, it illustrates that the shift out of the modernist era came with considerable discomfort at the outpourings of personal expression of the Confessional and Beat poets. Bishop's famous comment that when it came to confessional poets, "You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves," is consistent with the predominant attitude among readers of the time, and yet her own poetry likewise moved toward more forthright expressions of memory and selfhood.[2]

As Brett Millier notes, Bishop "invest[ed] what confession there was in her poems deeply in objects and places, thus deflecting biographical inquiry," and her "discretion is a poetic method and a part of a process of self-understanding, the seeing a pattern in one's own life" ("Elusive Mastery" 242). Indeed, Bishop's concerns about Confessional poetry have a great deal less to do with actual disclosure than with the mythologizing and exaggeration that attended so many "true" confessions.[3] Tracing Bishop's attitudes about expression in poetry from Moore's influence to Robert Lowell's, both illustrates the emergence of the personal poem as an autobiographical sub-genre and illuminates our continued discomfort with the personal in poetry.

Second, we can witness Bishop's own careful development of a well-defined aesthetic of the autobiographical poem. Early poems like "The Weed" rely on metaphor – project only the hint of personal expression, an impression the reader can easily bypass. But as her work matures, poems like "Manners," "Sestina," and "First Death in Nova

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[2] In her book Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender, Marilyn Lombardi quotes this passage from Bishop's 1967 notebooks (57).

[3] Lombardi makes a typical assessment of Moore's position in relation to the confessional mode of her day. She writes, "While many of her contemporaries were quarrying art directly out of personal tragedy. Bishop maintained a style that was equivocal and ambiguous about the contours of her private life" (1).

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Scotia" carefully paint a detailed picture of her childhood in Nova Scotia. These poems, which skillfully present the turmoil and uncertainty of these years through a child's perspective, manipulate the autobiographical pact with a pointed effect. Bishop, in her deliberate withholding of information, places the reader in exactly the same position of forced ignorance in which adults held her as a child.

Finally, Bishop's later poem, "In the Waiting Room," performs the autobiographical pact overtly, using the poet's own proper name, age, location. Bishop's purposeful enactment of the autobiographical pact/act, in the face of the poem's own fabrications, offers an important model for grappling with the complexities of the autobiographical pact, the intricacies involved in declaring one's work an autobiography, and inventing oneself as a literary subject. Through reading "In the Waiting Room," we not only gain a new understanding of the autobiographical pact, we also become more sophisticated, engaged readers of both prose and poetic autobiographies. Bishop's poems, and her reflections on her poetic decisions and those of her later contemporaries, give us a rubric for reading more overtly personal poetry. In essence, she trains her readers to look at the fictionalization inherent in any autobiographical undertaking whether the autobiography uses a narrative or lyric mode.

Part I: "I Grow But to Divide Your Heart Again": Influence, Metaphor, & the Truth Pact in Bishop's Career

Elizabeth Bishop began her poetic career under the tutelage of Marianne Moore. Introduced to Moore by the librarian at Vassar College, Elizabeth Bishop found

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inspiration and encouragement in the growing relationship. Moore, living with her mother in New York, took a keen interest in the young poet and offered guidance and assistance for many years to come.[4] This famous literary friendship bears a strange reputation, and many assume that Moore's aesthetic standards and editorial suggestions held Bishop to a stifling standard of poetic decorum.[5] This is not altogether true. Certainly Moore's (and her mother's) editorial advice to Bishop often did "advocate the power of suggestion versus statement" and caution against indelicate language, but Bishop resisted Moore's intervention when it contradicted her aims.[6] In one famous incident, Moore not only offered editorial advice, she and her mother undertook a thorough re-write of Bishop's poem "The Rooster." Bishop considered the poem a war poem and wanted to keep the imagery gritty, tough, and brutally realistic. As a result, she had included several phrases that grated upon Moore's sensibilities. In particular, Moore objected to the use of the phrase "water-closet." The older poet carefully explains her disapproval of Bishop's brash word choice:

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[4] While Bishop acknowledged Moore's tutelage and influence with distinct gratitude, in a letter to Anne Stevenson dated March 18, 1963, she admits that after so many years of being associated with each other, the constant impulse to connect them has begun to grate on both poets. She complains, "I am rather weary of always being compared to, or coupled with Marianne – and I think she is utterly weary of it too! We have been very good friends for 30 years now – but except for some 1 or 2 early poems of mine and perhaps some early preferences in subject matter, neither she nor I can see why reviewers always drag her in with me."

[5] In her essay "The Body's Roses: Race, Sex, and Gender in Elizabeth Bishop's Representations of the Self," Lorrie Goldensohn remarks that Bishop's poems might have been more daring "if Elizabeth Bishop had been born thirty years earlier into another public decorum, and if her keen, Moore-trained observer's eye had been released from Moore's prohibitions" (81). However, it seems that Bishop was resolutely as daring as she chose to be, despite any of Moore's restrictive suggestions.

[6] In a response to Bishop's story "Of the Sea and Its Shore" Moore writes that "mother is a rabid advocate of the power of suggestion versus statement and wishes you need not say just at the end that he was drunk" (Becoming 9).

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> Regarding the water-closet ...I think it is to your credit, Elizabeth, that when I say you are not to say "water-closet," you go on saying it a little (like Donald in *National Velvet*), and it is calculated to make me wonder if I haven't mistaken a cosmetic patch for a touch of lampblack, but I think not. The trouble is, people are not depersonalized enough to accept the picture rather than the thought. ...If I tell mother there is a feather on her dress and she says, "On my back?" I am likely to say, "NO, on your rump," alluding to Cowper's hare that "swung his rump around." But in my work, I daren't risk saying, "My mother had a feather on her rump" (Selected Letters 404).[7]

The most fascinating aspect of Moore's response is that it shows Bishop clearly refusing to acquiesce.[8] Moore had firmly instructed Bishop that she was "not to say 'water closet'" and yet Elizabeth goes on doing so. On October 17, Bishop, in responding to Moore, defends her choices. She wrote, "I cherish my 'water closet' and the other sordidities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. ...I can't bring myself to sacrifice what (I think) is a very important violence of tone..." (Five Temperaments 81).

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[7] Where possible, I quote letters from the published volumes Selected Letters of Marianne Moore and One Art. However, in his books, Becoming a Poet, and Five Temperaments, David Kalstone refers to several pieces of correspondence not included in these volumes. In those cases, I refer to Kalstone's texts as my source.

[8] It is also intriguing that Moore uses the word "daren't." While, Moore no doubt means that she fears Bishop's larger point will be lost amidst the crass imaginings of what one does in a water-closet, she also notes that several male poets of the time – including Dylan Thomas, W.C. Williams, and E.E. Cummings – "feel that they are avoiding a duty if they balk at anything like unprudishness" (Letters 404). Her masculine list and her use of "daren't" combine to suggest that her sense of what speech was permissible for women, or "ladylike," informed her objection to Bishop's use of the term.

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While this exchange considerably rattled Bishop – who later claimed that it was the last time she sent her poems to Moore before publication – it was not entirely out of character for their relationship. As David Kalstone observes in his book Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, in addition to appreciating Moore's advice and assistance "Bishop also seemed to be testing herself against the older poet – a mixture of disobedience and dependence" (Becoming 11). Kalstone recalls that "Bishop once said of herself that having no family to rebel against had made her passive," and muses, "In a curious way, her identification with Moore helped liberate her; she adopted Moore's methods but learned to use them in different ways" (Becoming 11).

Certainly, Moore helped Bishop overcome her hesitance as a poet. She not only encouraged Elizabeth to send her things out, she would often send them to publishers herself – sometimes not even waiting for Elizabeth's permission.[9] She battled what she referred to as Bishop's "instinct against precipitousness" and prodded her toward more frequent publication.[10] And while she always encouraged delicacy, Moore also encouraged Bishop to be less timid in her expression. She warned Elizabeth, "I do feel that tentativeness and interiorizing are your dangers as well as your strengths" (Becoming 59). While she appreciated the subtlety and acuity of Bishop's observational style, she

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[9] While Moore often sent Bishop's work to publishers without her express permission, it was a long time before Bishop sent her work to publishers without first informing her mentor. When Bishop wrote to apologize for submitting the short story "In Prison" to the Partisan Review without having first sent it to Moore, the older poet quipped, "If it is returned with a printed slip, that will be why" (Becoming 56).

[10] This quote is from a letter from Moore to Edward Aswell at Harper & Bros. from October, 1935 in which she adds, "I have not been able to persuade her to let me see more than a few pieces of her work" (Becoming 42).

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noted that the poet often held back and frequently advised her to take more risks than she did.[11]

Undoubtedly, Moore's own philosophy of what was appropriate "self use" in poetry seeped into Bishop's sense of autobiographical decorum in verse. Early in their acquaintance, an anthology was compiled in which established poets introduced poems by younger poets. Bishop included two poems, which she called "Valentines." Moore's response to "Valentine I" – and in particular to some English sparrows Bishop depicts as "puffed with hopeless lust" -- states a clear philosophy regarding the self-portrait in poetry. Moore asserts:

> One asks a great deal of an author – that he should not be haphazard but considered in his mechanics, that he should not induce you to be interested in what is restrictedly private but that there should be the self-portrait: that he should pierce you to the marrow without revolting you. Miss Bishop's sparrows... are not revolting, merely disaffecting (Becoming 41).

Moore suggests that Bishop's lusty sparrows alienate her reader by overstepping the boundary between the self-portrait and the "restrictedly private" spectacle of the sparrow languishing in the dirt "puffed with hopeless lust" (Poems 225). While Moore no doubt intended to steer her young protégée toward more delicate expressions, Bishop seems to have taken something else from this ascetic philosophy; in the long run, Bishop did not shy away from the gritty images she aimed toward in "Valentines." However, she did stop short of asking her reader to accept the sparrows as a metaphor of herself. In these early poems, a sparrow in the dirt and a lusty self might find themselves in proximity to

[11] Some years later, Bishop herself would comment on this propensity toward diffidence and remark "I am very sick of sounding so quiet" (Becoming 131).

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each other, but ultimately remain more observational than autobiographical. Still, Bishop took Moore's sensibility into another realm – the realm of emotional accuracy and unflinching reporting of the truth. To a more mature Bishop, the offense of "Valentine I" was that she mythologized the recollection and emotion of lust through her reliance on metaphor.

In many of Bishop's early poems, she masks self-disclosure with heavy use of symbolism and metaphor. For instance, in her poem "The Weed," published in North and South in 1946, Bishop uses the first-person speaker, but the poem's events are purely symbolic. While later poems like "In the Waiting Room" and "One Art" speak directly of specific losses and moments of disorientation, "The Weed" restrains these same feelings by speaking of them through the abstraction of a dream. In this dream the speaker describes herself: "dead and meditating,/ I lay upon a grave, or bed, / (at least, some cold and close-built bower)" (Poems 20). This scene does not offer the clear picture of a shy young girl in a wagon that Bishop fashions in "Manners," nor even the detailed if "inscrutable" house of "Sestina." It is far from the arctics, trouser-legs, and National Geographics she will use to describe the dentist's waiting room in 1976. Here, the speaker is even unsure what the nature of the "close-built bower" is or whether she is dead or meditating.

In this ethereal space, an abstraction of memory takes place. The speaker remembers a "motion,/ as startling, there, to every sense/ as an explosion" and recounts that "it dropped/ to insistent, cautious creeping/ in the region of the heart." As the weed grows and splits the speaker's heart, Bishop cultivates a bodily sense of a weed tearing a heart in two. However, because Bishop frames the poem as a dream, the heart takes on a

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symbolic meaning as well as a bodily one. The heart's symbolic status destabilizes the physical image of an actual body giving way to real weeds, and makes the image less corporeal, and more figurative. Any sense of attachment to the author's biography evaporates as in this strange dream-state, the speaker lifts her head "all dripping wet/ (with my own thoughts?)" and asks the weed that "stood in the severed heart ... 'What are doing there?" and the weed answers, "I grow... but to divide your heart again" (Poems 21).

When we read the poem, we understand that the poet recollects some definitive moment in her life, but because the poem veils it in dream symbolism and metaphor, we cannot know what that moment was. Although she recollects a dream (an act which has the potential to be read autobiographically), she has not connected the dream to a waking reality. Bishop invites us to assume that the heart she speaks of is indeed hers, and that some weedy thing has rent her heart entirely in two, but we do not know what life event the weed represents. In this way, Bishop speaks personally, but not autobiographically. When Bishop does write autobiographically, she very deliberately creates a pact with her reader – insisting that they equate the "I" of the poem with "an *Elizabeth*."

In 1946 two things happened that would start Bishop's careful emergence into this more overtly autobiographical poetry. She made several visits to Nova Scotia that sparked a desire to collect stories about her past, and she met Robert Lowell, who would become a life-long friend and correspondent. Both were to feed a growing interest in exploring her past, learning more about her father's death and her mother's breakdown. As she gathered information and reflected on childhood traumas, her friendship with Lowell spurred her to write more, and more personally.

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Bishop writes to Marianne Moore about her travels in Nova Scotia in a letter dated August 29, 1946. She tells Moore that she stayed for a while in a hotel in the "Ragged Islands," traveled to Halifax, and then she reports, "I went back to Great Village, where my mother came from and where I lived when I was little" (One Art 139). She gives a detailed description of the farm on which her Aunt Grace was living, and exclaims, "I hadn't been there for so long I'd forgotten how beautiful it all is" (139). Bishop's enthusiasm spills over as she interrupts herself:

> But I wanted to tell you about Pansy, the children's pony.
>
> She's a Sable Island pony, a breed that supposed to have developed all by itself from a shipload of horses that was wrecked long ago on Sable Island (where my great-grandfather was wrecked too). ...They think that Pansy is over thirty years old! (One Art 140).

Here, we see that Bishop was not only enjoying reconnecting with her family and childhood. The phrase about her great-grandfather illustrates the depth of her historical digging. During this time she gathered stories about her mother, her aunts and uncles, her grandparents, and herself. She began to write sketches and poems about Great Village, including a story about her mother, entitled "Homesick," which she never finished. Indeed, while she wrote a great deal during this time, she withheld much of what she produced until many years later (Becoming 119).

In the late 1940s Bishop was not yet ready to publish her past. In fact, David Kalstone remarks that while "the Nova Scotia trips of the late 1940s made deep impressions on her, seeded her future work... there were only certain ways she was able to write about them at the time" (Becoming 119). He observes that while her letters were

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"bright with human detail" and the story she wrote about her mother's stay there as a young woman was similarly vibrant, the poem that came out of the experience was markedly more reserved.

Kalstone points out that "Cape Breton" describes a landscape that is "nearly abandoned, its beautiful domesticity almost concealed," and suggests that Bishop offers only small glimpses of "social rituals" that are "deliberately tantalizing and mysterious to the observer" (119). In many respects, Bishop's poem retains an element of her outsider status. Its sparseness also suggests that poetry had not yet become for her a medium for either discursive exploration of her memories, or condensed expressions of her emotional past. "As for narratives," Kalstone adds, "the painful *stories* about her own childhood, those were yet to be written. She would attempt them only in the 1950s after she had safely and happily taken up life in Brazil" (Becoming 120). In a letter to Ilse Barker in 1952, Bishop comments on this permissive change in atmosphere. She muses, "It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia – geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even" (The Complete Prose of Elizabeth Bishop 220-1).

Settling in Brazil did help Bishop find the confidence to write about her past, but her friendship with Robert Lowell also contributed to her growing interest in writing about herself through poetry.[12] In his letters to Bishop, Lowell directly prodded her to write more. Additionally, the intense self-disclosure in his own poetry indirectly encouraged Bishop to cautiously experiment with putting her memories into her poems as well as her prose. While Bishop's relationship with the "confessional" is famously

[12] Bishop's personal happiness in Brazil certainly helped her begin reflecting on her painful past from a "safe" distance, but her rising interest in writing autobiographically is also attributable to her work on the translation of The Diary of Helena Morley. Through her work on the young woman's diaries, Bishop became more interested in both biography and autobiography and began to read voraciously in both genres.

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ambivalent, it is plain that her writing began to use an autobiographical voice as her friendship with Lowell progressed. Their many letters not only attest to his influence, they also give a clear understanding of what Bishop took from the confessional mode, and what she eschewed.

Randall Jarell introduced Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell in the early months of 1947 just after Bishop published North and South and Lowell's Lord Weary Castle came out. Over the years and over great distances, the two wrote often. In the letters, we can trace Bishop's growing interest in writing about her memories in poetry, but we can also see her rising discomfort with the ways in which Lowell did so. Ironically, Lowell's influence helped Bishop write more personal poetry, while her objections to his methods have earned her a reputation for avoiding the personal.

Upon reading Lowell's letters, which often contained drafts of the poems he was writing, Bishop found herself simultaneously spurred to write her own stories and disturbed at Lowell's tactics. Her letters constantly display both gratitude and ambivalence toward Lowell. She would write to tell him that she admired him and wished to emulate him – remarking once that she admired the "all-out" quality of his poems, complaining, "I am very sick of sounding so quiet" (Becoming 131). Her letters also attest to the power of Lowell's influence.[13] She once wrote that his poetry was "so strongly influential that if I start reading it when I'm working on something of my own I'm lost" (131).

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[13] In addition to letters addressed to Lowell, Bishop's letters to Anne Stevenson describe Lowell's influence on her writing. She writes, "I admire Robert Lowell's poetry very much and much of Lord Weary's Castle couldn't be more all out." She also told Stevenson, "[Lowell] has influenced me a great deal, in many ways. He is one of the few people I can talk to about writing freely & naturally, and he is wonderfully quick, intuitive, modest, and generous about it" (Becoming 131).

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However much Lowell's poetry impressed Bishop, it also disturbed her. In particular, Bishop frequently expressed her disapproval of Lowell's mythmaking, or what David Kalstone describes as Lowell's "way of noting things with a generosity or obliquity or malice just at the edge of fiction" (Becoming 110). Bishop often chided Lowell for making himself seem lonelier or older than he was, imploring him "Please don't age yourself that way in advance, a la Eliot [sic]. It doesn't look well saying you're 'fragile' and so on" (Becoming 209). Bishop acknowledged that her natural sense of precision set her at odds with Lowell, and as a result many of Bishop's "reprimands" were lighthearted. Lowell shared his memory of a particular night in 1957 when Bishop had escorted Lowell back to his room. He recalls holding her hand. She laughingly refuses to romanticize the night and relates her version of events. As Bishop remembers it, she and his future wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, escorted a very drunken Lowell back to his room, removed his shoes, loosened his tie, and opened his shirt. At this point, Bishop recounts Hardwick exclaiming, "'Why he's an Adonis'" and then wryly adds, "...from then on, I knew it was all over" (Becoming 146).

However, at other times, Bishop's seemingly casual reprimands enclose more sincere concerns. For instance, when Robert Lowell wrote to her recollecting their first meeting decades earlier, he reflects, "I see you as rather tall, long brown-haired, shy but full of des. [sic] and anecdote as now" (Becoming 110). In her reply, Bishop carefully corrects Lowell's over-idealized memory. She recalls with precision:

> Never, never was I "tall" – as you wrote remembering me. I was always 5 ft. 4 and 1/4 inches – now shrunk to 5 ft. 4 inches. The only time I've ever felt tall was in Brazil. And I never had "long brown hair" either! – I started turning gray

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> when I was 23 or 24 – and was probably already somewhat grizzled when I first met you" (One Art 593).

In actuality, this is not a simple moment of self-denigration, as evidenced by Bishop's added plea, "So please don't put me in a beautiful poem, 'tall with long brown hair'" (593). Bishop began to worry about what Lowell put into print about her, and with good reason, for it was his habit to publish poems about those with whom he was closest.

In a draft of "For Elizabeth Bishop 2: Castine, Maine" Lowell included a line which depicted Bishop quoting her mother as saying " 'All I want/ to do is kill you!'" (Becoming 181). Bishop, upon reading these lines, quickly wrote to Lowell and insisted:

> If you do anything with the poem about me – would you change the remark my mother was supposed to have made? She never did make it; in fact I don't remember any direct threats, except the usual maternal ones – her danger for me was just implied in the things I overheard the grown-ups say before and after her disappearance. Poor thing, I don't want to have it any worse than it was" (One Art 348).

Because Bishop was beginning her own attempt to write an account of her mother's disappearance, it was especially important to her that Lowell not misquote her, or exaggerate the experience. She had even written to Lowell as she drafted "In the Village" and had spoken of her desire to "get things straight and tell the truth" (Becoming 157).[14]

Perhaps because her own childhood was so traumatic that Bishop referred to it as a childhood unhappy enough for the textbooks, she always insisted on a stern truth that

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[14] Bishop writes that she finds it "almost impossible not to tell the truth in poetry..." but complains, "in prose it keeps eluding me in the funniest ways" (Becoming 157)

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would not make things appear any worse than they had been. She found the tragedies of her life sufficient as they were without embellishment, while many of the poets around her, Lowell included, took great interest in adorning and mythologizing their pain. Bishop's aversion to sentimentalizing the past had such deep roots that it appears as a childhood instinct in her memoir "A Country Mouse."

The story of "A Country Mouse" parallels that which Bishop later relates in "In the Waiting Room," when young Elizabeth's paternal grandparents have whisked her away from her childhood home in Great Village, Nova Scotia.[15] In the story, the young Bishop is talking to a girl named Emma who asks her about her parents. Elizabeth tells the girl matter-of-factly that her father is dead, but she is unable to make herself admit that her mother is in a sanitorium. Instead she lies and says "in a sentimental voice: 'she went away and left me... she died, too.'" The adult narrator of the memoir recalls a distinct horror at the lie. She remembers:

> Emma was impressed and sympathetic, and I loathed myself. It was the first time I had lied deliberately and consciously, and the first time I was aware of falsity and the great power of sentimentality – although I didn't know the word. ...I didn't know then and still don't, whether it was from shame I lied, or from a hideous craving for sympathy, playing up my sad romantic plight. But the feeling of self-distaste, whatever it came from, was only too real. I jumped up to get away from my monstrous self that I could not keep from lying (Prose 32).

[15] In "A Country Mouse" Elizabeth is living – quite uncomfortably – in Worchester, Massachusetts. As in "In the Waiting Room," Elizabeth accompanies her Aunt (Jenny in 1961's "A Country Mouse," "Consuelo" in the 1976 poem) to the dentist's office. There, the young Elizabeth confronts her own identity in a moment of terrible vertigo.

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Although Bishop's adult biases and perceptions color the analysis of the experience (it seems unduly self-deprecating to call a parentless child's craving for sympathy "hideous"), the instinctual discomfort of the child with her own dishonesty seems genuine.[16] Certainly, Bishop is being very deliberate in letting her readers know that this experience is at the root of her desire to write a "true" account of her experiences.

Bishop is very consistent in her disapproval of anything that smacks of sentimentality or an emotional embellishment. In fact, despite her famous declaration that her distaste for confessional poets arose from wishing "they'd keep some of these things to themselves," she did not balk so much at the amount of disclosure as at their methods. In fact, the lines that precede this famous quote are more telling. She worries, "Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world... the tendency is to overdo the morbidity" (qtd. in Lombardi 57).

In these personal expressions there was also an element of femininity that bothered Bishop. She accused Anne Sexton of having "a bit too much romanticism" and constantly goaded Lowell to be more honest in his poems (One Art 386). Bishop's critique of Sexton tells us a great deal about how she viewed the confessional aspect, especially as it pertained to women writers. In addition to calling it overly romantic, Bishop characterizes Sexton's work as belonging to "the 'Beautiful old silver' school of female writing which is really boasting about how 'nice'we were. V. Woolfe [sic], K.A.P., Bowen, R.West, etc – they are all full of it. They have to make quite sure that the

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[16] In 1950 Bishop reflected in a diary entry that "Embarrassment always comes from some falsity – the situation, manners, or a work of art – and that's why sometimes the strangest little detail of reality -- something real coming along like a piece of wood bobbing on the waves – will provide an almost instant relief from it" (qtd. in Goldensohn 124).

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reader is not going to misplace them socially, first – and that nervousness interferes constantly with what they think they'd like to say" (One Art 386).

Marilyn Lombardi observes that Bishop's own poems became more personal at the same time she became more vocal about feminist issues. When Bishop published Geography III she "revealed for the first time how autobiographical her poems had always been, despite their practiced indirection and reserve. At this time, Bishop also began to speak about "the limiting factors that shaped her art: her 'era, sex, situation, education'" (Geography of Gender 3). In an interview with George Starbuck in 1983, Bishop laments, "I wish I had written a great deal more. Sometimes I think if I had been born a man I probably would have written more. Dared more, or been able to spend more time at it" (Geography of Gender 329).

Although her tastes were changing under Lowell's influence, she maintained a carefully independent aesthetic for many reasons.[17] And for many years it was a simple difference in taste between artists. However, when Lowell began to appropriate Bishop's own stories and letters, it became another matter altogether. When in 1962, Lowell turned her story "In the Village" into the (considerably more melodramatic in title and content) poem "The Scream" she said little, other than to quip, "I don't know why I bother to write 'Uncle Artie,' really. I should just send you my first notes and you can turn him into a wonderful poem" (One Art 408).

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[17] In her essay, "The Body's Roses: Race, Sex, and Gender in Elizabeth Bishop's Representations of the Self," Lorrie Goldensohn observed that for Bishop, "turning one's back on an unacceptable emotionalism, its messiness and supposed lack of precision, in both generations of poets meant a common rejection of what was perceived as a feminizing of the arts, growing out of what modern and contemporary poet-critics, mostly male, could see of the social place for poetry as increasingly marginal and trivial" (78).

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Then, in February of 1970, Bishop wrote to Lowell responding to three sonnets he had written for her, "Water," "Castine, Maine," and "Vocation." In the second paragraph of the letter Bishop confides, "Well, you are right to worry about me, only please DON'T! -- I am pretty worried about myself" (One Art 515). Frustration at the prospect of concluding her affairs in Brazil after the suicide of her lover Lota had overcome Bishop, and she compares her situation to being deep in a cave. She writes that she is waiting for "just the faintest glimmer that I'm going to get out of this somehow, alive" (One Art 517). Despite the dire sound of these lines, Bishop's letter, on the whole, remains determinedly chatty. She talks enough of plans, letters from colleagues, and political developments that she avoids sinking entirely into panic or despair.

Upon receiving this letter, Lowell promptly excerpted its two most dramatic passages (omitting the banter and small talk that temper its pages), made just enough changes to the language that it was no longer Elizabeth's, and sent it to publication with the other three sonnets.[18] Bishop, who had begged him not to put her in a poem as tall with long dark hair, who had insisted that he not misquote her mother, apparently said nothing to Lowell about this poem. It was a deafening silence. Lowell eventually wrote a sheepish apology, but as David Kalstone observes, "it was hard for him to see the difference between the trust his poem movingly authenticates and the trust that publishing it betrays" (Becoming 237). Bishop had been patient and permissive of his previous

[18] Robert Giroux collected Bishop's original letter (dated February 27, 1970) in One Art (515-517). The final version of Lowell's poem appears in History, which he published in 1973. David Kalstone's Becoming a Poet offers a side-by-side presentation of Bishop's original letter and Lowell's appropriation of it, but in the interest of space, Kalstone also cuts large portions of the letter's calmer moments (235).

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appropriations of her writing, but in emending and publishing such an intimate letter, Lowell had crossed a line.[19]

Bishop soon broke her silence, not in response to Lowell's use of her own letter, but to his incorporation of letters written by his former wife in the poems that were to become The Dolphin. On March 21, 1972 Bishop wrote Lowell a long letter outlining her objections to this aspect of the project. This time, her reproof is not gentle. She is passionately angry. She emphatically renounces his moral decision to use "personal, tragic, anguished letters that way" saying simply, "it's cruel" (One Art 562). She allows, "one can use one's life as material – one does, anyway," but she asks, "aren't you violating a trust?" She tries to explain to Lowell that he risks vastly diminishing himself through such an un-gentle gesture and she insists, "*Art just isn't worth that much*" (562).

Interestingly, Bishop did not simply object to the publication of this sensitive and private material. Once again, Lowell's manipulative emendations were what pushed his use of the letters from the realm of the merely insensitive, into the realm of the truly offensive and misguided. She warns him that the letters, because he has altered them, "present fearful problems: what's true, what isn't; how one can bear to witness such suffering and yet not know how much of it one *needn't* suffer with, how much has been 'made up,' and so on" (562).

Once again, she expresses her general wariness of the fictive element that she feels marks and mars the "confessional." She allows that when Lowell first wrote Life

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[19] In Anne Collwell's book Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop, she also asserts that the boundary Lowell overstepped was a crucial one. She notes that Bishop and Lowell "fought over a poet's right to assume other voices and to exploit the pain of other lives," and points out that "[Bishop] was never convinced, as Lowell seems to have been, that a poet was made free by his or her art to demolish utterly the boundaries between his or her life and other lives" (73).

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Studies, "it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh, and immediate" (562). Now, "ye-gods" she complains, "anything goes." While she still grows impatient at reading "poems about students' mothers and fathers and sex-lives and so on" she admits "All that can be done but at the same time surely one should have a feeling that one can trust the writer – not to distort, tell lies, etc." (562).

Bishop is deeply concerned with the repercussions such a mixture of truth and fiction will have, not only on her friend's character and reputation, but in a very philosophical way. She asserts:

> What should be protected against, in cases where there is no authorization, is the mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions. Infinite mischief would lie in that. If any statements in the dress of fiction are covertly hinted to be fact, all must be fact, and nothing else but fact... the power of getting lies believed about people through that channel after they are dead, by stirring in a few truths, is a horror to contemplate (562).[20]

Bishop is noting the power of the autobiographical pact — the powerful authorial presence in personal writing that guides the reader into the belief that what they are reading is true. In Bishop's estimation, the responsibility of establishing a conscientious truth pact with the reader is a weighty one, and the ramifications of breaking that pact are "infinite."

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[20] Here Bishop reiterates that, although she knows Lizzie is not dead, nevertheless, "there is 'a mixture of fact and fiction,' and you have *changed* her letters. That is 'infinite mischief' I think" (562).

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Part II: "*I Know What I Know*": Bishop's Enactment of the Autobiographical Pact in Questions of Travel.

The autobiographical pact, simply put, is the text's assertion that the reader is in the presence of autobiography. Sometimes the author constructs it simply and directly, by using a title that declares the autobiographical project, or making it plain through obvious details that the author, narrator, and protagonist share both name and identity.[21] However, because establishing an autobiographical pact also entails constructing an authoritative relationship with both the self and the reader, many of these assertions become quite complex.[22] It is clear from her ongoing conversations with both Moore and Lowell that Elizabeth Bishop put a great deal of thought into each public performance of memory and personal experience.

Bishop considered it essential to "get things straight and tell the truth" and struggled for expressions that she felt upheld a high standard of factual and emotional honesty. At the same time, Bishop was keenly aware of her artistic capacity to alter,

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[21] We recall that in "The Autobiographical Pact," Philippe Lejeune designates two ways the autobiographical pact can present itself: "at the level of the name that the narrator-protagonist is given in the narrative itself, and which is the same as that of the author on the cover," and implicitly. An implicit pact manifests either through the use of "titles leaving no doubt... that the first person refers to the name of the author," or through an "initial section of the text where the narrator enters into a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if he were the author, in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the "I" refers to the name shown on the cover even though it is not repeated in the text" (On Autobiography 14).

[22] Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck describe several modes in which female autobiographers have chosen to establish and assert themselves as a "exemplar" or subject for autobiography. Among the methods they discuss is women's "self-definition in relation to significant others," which they describe as "the most pervasive characteristic of female autobiography" (8). They suggest that this innovation arises because the female autobiographer has found herself "at both extremes of subjectivity and publicity" and has often lacked "the sense of radical individuality, duplicitous but useful, that empowered Augustine and Henry Adams to write their representative lives large" (1).

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mold, and manipulate the perception of memory and even memory itself. In the essay "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room'" Lee Edelman observes Bishop's awareness of the artistic power wielded in the writing of memory. Edelman describes Bishop's poetry as one that is "conscious of the inevitable mediations of selfhood" (92).

As a result of this hyperconsciousness, when Bishop began to experiment with self-disclosure, she was exacting in her choices of what to disclose and how to disclose it. In Questions of Travel, Bishop's choices create a distinct power relationship between herself and the reader. She limits what the reader may apprehend, and uses these strictures to empower herself as the autobiographical subject and voice. When Bishop obscures details in Questions of Travel, she is not simply hiding, or expressing reticence. She is recalling, and recreating in the reader, the disempowerment of not knowing.[23]

Just as Stein's "Lifting Belly" created an atmosphere of a couple sharing an "inside joke" or an intimate moment and H.D. showed public appearances to be mere eidolons, Elizabeth Bishop cultivates power over her autobiographical subject and over her reader by offering them limited access to knowledge. Bishop designs an autobiographical relationship with her reader that places them in the place of seven-year-old Bishop – aware that something sad and monumental is happening, but left to her own devices to fill in the gaps between the carefully muted details of such events. Such an approach creates empathy on the part of the reader, and creates for the writer an

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[23] In her essay "The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art," Marilyn Lombardi asserts that "Bishop looked back on this period in her childhood as her initiation into the duplicity of speech and the suffocating constraints that propriety imposes on free expression" (51).

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empowered, authoritative relationship with her past and her own subjectivity. We can watch Bishop develop this power dynamic in the poems in her book Questions of Travel.

Questions of Travel, originally published in 1965, divides into two sections: *Brazil* and *Elsewhere.*[24] *Elsewhere* contains several poems depicting Bishop's childhood – particularly the years in Great Village at the time of her mother's disappearance. In fact, although removed to The Collected Prose in current publications, the prose memoir "In the Village" appears in the version of Questions of Travel Bishop compiled. In these poems Bishop writes an autobiography marked by seclusion and disconnectedness. The *Brazil* poems keep the reader in the position of an outsider, a tourist who can recognize the depths of the life around him, but cannot venture into those depths.

In *Elsewhere*, Bishop speaks through the perspective of her childhood self. In adopting the shy, isolated child's limited perspective, Bishop crafts a meticulous representation of the growth of her personality into a mature, but still hesitant spirit. Her guarded self-disclosure represents in mode and content a personality that is also guarded. Her lyric, impressionist recollections speak accurately for a woman whose memories of trauma are distant and hard to place into a narrative without inventing unremembered details. Finally, by limiting her self-disclosure to that which she knew and understood as a young child, Bishop becomes the empowered adult. She creates the distinct impression that something dark and terrifying is going on, but — like the adults of her own childhood

[24] The inclusion of "In the Village" seems particularly important because it heightens the sense that each of the pieces in *Elsewhere* is part of a larger autobiographical project. Bishop's comments in a letter to Ilse Barker bear this out. She writes that "In the Village" is "just poetic prose. And completely autobiographical. ... I've just stuck a few years together. Fortunately, the aunt most involved in it all... likes it very much — and even corrected some names and reminded me of this and that — we have equally literal imaginations" (qtd. in Lombardi 221).

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whispering furtively in the other room – she withholds facts and explanations that would permit full comprehension.

In her book Elizabeth Bishop: The Poetics of Loss, Susan McCabe also observes that Bishop recreates a particular childhood state of mind. She relates it to Freud's analysis of how a child practices loss and recovery in a game (27-28). In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud explains the phenomenon he calls "*fort-da*"this way: a child would throw a wooden reel tied with a string over the edge of his "curtained cot" so that it disappeared, and he would then utter "the 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 was the complete game – disappearance and return" (9). McCabe finds Bishop's use of the refrain in poetry akin to the child's repetitive game, and a practice that allowed Bishop, like the child in Freud's scenario, to rehearse loss and recovery. Still, Bishop's poems do more than enact a childlike game of reassurance. They place readers in the child's position – give readers the anxiety of "gone" and only sometimes offer them the reassurance of reappearance. She uses the lyric form to create an autobiographical relationship with her self and her audience that regains for her the control lost in these childhood traumas.

The poems that offer the fullest sense of autobiography in *Elsewhere* are "First Death in Nova Scotia" and "Sestina." Both adopt a voice whose childlike perceptions convey consternation and bewilderment at what they are able to observe. Both poems use a child's eye in observing and relating images, fixing on details that an adult might overlook. Similarly, Bishop draws the analogies and metaphors in both poems from items familiar in a child's experience: a stove and kettle, an almanac, a doll, a stuffed

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loon, and Jack Frost. Still, Bishop situates the poem as a memory by using the past tense: "I was lifted up." In this way, she does not entirely regress into the child's innocence. Bishop's adult understanding of the situation darkens the mood of the poems, and underscores the feeling that neither the child nor the reader has received the full impact of grief and loss, but that the author, now an adult, has.

In "First Death in Nova Scotia" Bishop recalls the death of cousin "Arthur." Her mother calls her in to view the laid-out body of her former companion, and she tries to take in the concept of Arthur's departure. The poem not only recalls a vivid memory of witnessing death, it recapitulates the strange and confused way in which a child confronts such a spectacle. The young Elizabeth enters the "cold, cold parlor" where "mother laid out Arthur" but the child's gaze sticks to familiar items. Instead of the body she focuses on:

> ...the chromographs:
> Edward, Prince of Wales,
> with Princess Alexandra,
> and King George with Queen Mary.
> Below them on the table
> stood a stuffed loon
> shot and stuffed by Uncle
> Arthur, Arthur's father (Poems 125).

She is familiar with the royal images and the loon, and she begins to associate them with this new experience of death. Typical of childhood perceptions of complex concepts, the connections she makes between the pictures, the loon, and the dead boy are both

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appropriate and off the mark. Exaggerating this effect with her syntax, Bishop's pronouns confuse the stuffed bird and the dead child. The first stanza describes the loon as "shot and stuffed by Uncle/ Arthur, Arthur's father." The next stanza begins "Since Uncle Arthur fired/ a bullet into him,/ he hadn't said a word" (125). Aided by the pronoun "him" following a double mention of Arthur's name, and by the personification embedded in the idea of the loon not saying another word, the reader (just for a moment) thinks that Uncle Arthur has shot his son. And even though the reader soon realizes that it is the loon who has been shot and now "keeps his own counsel/ on his white frozen lake,/ the marble-topped table," the eerie conflation of the dead boy and the dead bird sticks (125).

Young Elizabeth's fascination with the stuffed loon also parallels her fascination with the dead boy. She describes the loon's breast as "deep and white,/ cold and caressable" and says that his "eyes were red glass, much to be desired" (125). Likewise, she describes Arthur's body as "all white, like a doll/ that hadn't been painted yet" and remarks that Jack Frost had begun painting his hair "a few red strokes" and then "left him white forever" (125-6). She describes both as white curiosities whose red accents intrigue her all the more. She also equates their strange status as formerly living, now inanimate objects, and animates both in her imagination. The "red-eyed loon eyed [Arthur's coffin] from his white frozen lake" with the alive stillness of a toy.

Similarly, she does not quite grasp Arthur's lifelessness. She invents a kind of fairy tale scenario involving the pictures of royalty that hang above Arthur's body and her mother's directives to "Come and say good-bye/ to your little cousin Arthur" (125). She explains his departure to herself by imagining:

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The gracious royal couples
were warm in red and ermine;
their feet were well wrapped up
in the ladies' ermine trains.
They invited Arthur to be
the smallest page at court (126).

But just as she imagined the stuffed loon still able to eye little Arthur's coffin, she attributes living agency to Arthur's body. Unable to grasp fully the concept of death, she wonders:

But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow? (126).

Bishop carefully recalls her childhood confusion at the spectacle of death. She recaptures the strange childlike mixture of acceptance and invention that characterize a young person's response to death. She understands that Arthur is going away, and even on some level can equate his death with the death of the bird, which she has already experienced. However, the concept of death's inertia and finality entirely escapes her.

It does not, however, escape the author, the adult Elizabeth. Her authorial voice relates the memory and through its maturity, we observe – and share – the child's confusion as well as the impact of the memory. While the child may not have entirely grasped the full meaning of death, the experience of seeing her young cousin laid out in a coffin clearly haunts her even into adulthood. Bishop uses this melding of perspectives

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not only to recapitulate the scene but to place the reader in the place of the child. The use of lyric elusiveness also heightens our empathy with the child's non-analytic, intuitive reaction to Arthur's death. The reader, like the child, is not entirely sure what has happened to Arthur, because the poem does not offer a narrative explaining how he died. Both child and reader, then, must cope with the image without the ability to understand it quite. Through the lyric form Bishop compels the reader to witness the scene in the same way she did as a child, with curiosity, uncertainty, and unaffected disquiet.

Like "First Death in Nova Scotia," Bishop's poem "Sestina" imbues the reader with the child's bewilderment at her grandmother's "inscrutable" grief. It is a sad, quiet poem recalling the days just after the final breakdown of young Elizabeth's mother. A six-year-old Elizabeth has heard her mother screaming in the night, has heard the adults whispering about her disappearance, and knows that her mother is gone. She does not know why. She will not know the whole narrative of her own story for years to come. Recreating the child's lack of understanding, the poem offers no narrative explanation. It only draws a picture of a grandmother and a child both trying to hide their sadness. The first stanza sets the scene:

> September rain falls on the house.
> In the failing light, the old grandmother
> sits in the kitchen with the child
> beside the Little Marvel Stove,
> reading the jokes from the almanac,
> laughing to hide her tears (Poems 123).

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Bishop manages to make the scene both cozy and dreary as the rain falls and the tea kettle sings, and the grandmother reads from the almanac and cuts bread for their tea. The grandmother -- reading jokes from the almanac and going about the business of making tea -- thinks that she is hiding her grief from the young child, "that her equinotical tears... were foretold by the almanac,/ but only known to a grandmother" (123).

However, the child not only sees the grandmother's tears, tears become ubiquitous.[25] She sees "the teakettle's small hard tears dance like mad on the hot black stove, the way the rain must dance on the house" and her grandmother's teacup is "full of dark brown tears" (123). She draws a man "with buttons like tears,/ and shows it proudly to her grandmother," going on with the business of childhood the way her grandmother bravely makes tea (123). Although they are everywhere, the tears become secret for the child just as they are for the grandmother:

> ...secretly, while the grandmother
>
> busies herself about the stove,
>
> the little moons fall down like tears
>
> from between the pages of the almanac (123).

She has learned from her grandmother's hiding.[26]

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[25] In her prose piece about the same time, she recalls her "grandmother is sitting in the kitchen stirring potato mash for tomorrow's bread and crying into it. She gives me a spoonful and it tastes wonderful but wrong. In it I think I taste my grandmother's tears; then I kiss her and taste them on her cheek" (259). Here, as in the poem, Bishop carefully maintains the sense of disconnection from what is causing her grandmother's tears, but she finds it more difficult in prose to withhold the explanation, to offer the image without attributing a sense of narrative that was lacking in her actual experience.

[26] In her book Inscrutable Houses Anne Colwell also discerns that "the difference between the grandmother's knowledge and the child's is a difference of control" (153). Colwell notes that the

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Still, the child is not simply stoic, she is bewildered. The scene seems unreal to her, like a fairy tale gone awry. Bishop builds this feeling through the magical presence of the teakettle, stove, and almanac. Like enchanted trees in a fairy tale, the teakettle, the Little Marvel Stove, and the almanac come to life. The teakettle's singing begins to seem like more than a figure of speech as Bishop describes the "clever," "birdlike" almanac that "hovers half open above the child/ hovers above the old grandmother" (123). Then suddenly, the stove and the almanac speak: "*It was to be*, says the Marvel Stove./ *I know what I know*, says the almanac" (123).

The stove echoes the feeling the grandmother has, that this present state of sadness was "foretold by the almanac" (123). In an imperial voice, the almanac declares but does not share its knowledge. Like the grandmother hiding her tears and saying simply, "*It's time for tea*," the almanac's matter-of-fact "*I know what I know*" implies knowledge that the child cannot fathom. Even the child's fanciful characters withhold information from her. In the end all she will learn in this fairy tale is that it tells about a time of great sadness. As the clever almanac says: "*It is time to plant tears*" (124).

Like the almanac declaring "I know what I know," Bishop declares her own knowledge of the grief in this room, but does not offer a narrative explanation to her reader. She keeps the reader in the place of the child; witnessing tears, seeing them take over this small room, and having no way to form anything but a fanciful response. Bishop creates an autobiography that is, like the houses the child draws, "inscrutable"

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child controls the situation by "project[ing] her grief onto objects." Although, Collwell's observations concentrate on the grandmother's relative command of the situation, her observation helps us understand Bishop's ultimate act of power, which is placing her reader in the position of the child, able to confront the scene only in terms of the observable objects in the room.

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(124). Bishop does not permit investigation, analysis, or scrutiny of this memory; she simply presents it, factually, like an entry in an almanac. She knows what she knows.

Bishop's interest in creating such an inscrutable autobiography grew out of her desire to get at the truth of her experience in a particular way, a way that prose made very difficult. The reality of her past was full of holes, gaps in her knowledge, long years of not knowing what was happening or why. When she retold her story, filling in the blanks with knowledge she learned as an adult, the product felt disingenuous. Even as she was writing about the same experience in prose, she commented, "in prose [the truth] keeps eluding me in the funniest ways" (Becoming 157).

The important truth for her was the experience of not knowing, of being entirely in the dark about her own trauma. Thus, in order to depict accurately the impact of those years, she had to demonstrate for the reader the bleakness of not knowing. She found that in poetry it was "almost impossible not to tell the truth" (Becoming 157). Poetry's form and its lyric nature allowed her to recreate the fragmented, impressionistic, unhappy experiences without over-writing them, without inventing a falsely cohesive narrative of a life deeply marked by fragmentation and disjunction.

Part III: "And All I'm Telling You May Be a Lie":

Bishop's Lies & and Confessional Autobiographies

... by the age
Of twenty or twenty-one I had begun
to drink and drink — I can't get enough

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and, as you may have noticed,

I'm half drunk now...

And all I'm telling you may be a lie...

In a fragment of an unpublished poem Bishop called "A Drunkard," Bishop flirts with creating a poem that would have generated – as she once accused Lowell of causing – "infinite mischief." In this fragment, she writes a first-person narrative, from the point of view of a young child. The three-year-old child stands in her crib and watches a fire rage out of control across the harbor in Salem. The child is thirsty and calls to her mother who is too busy helping escapees from the fire arriving on the beach, and she does not come. The next day, the child and her mother walk the beach. The child, "picked up a woman's long black cotton/ stocking. Curiosity" (Becoming 211). Her mother snaps at her "*Put that down!*" and the child claims, "Since that day, that reprimand... I have suffered from abnormal thirst" (Becoming 211). Up to that point, "A Drunkard" seems to relate yet another childhood trauma, and to "confess" to an ongoing drinking problem. Then, in a striking reversal, Bishop's speaker announces "I'm half drunk now.../ And all I'm telling you may be a lie" (211). Having spent such energy cultivating sympathy for the thirsty and neglected child, these last lines seem almost malicious. When the speaker cavalierly announces she may have made the whole thing up, the reader feels the breach of trust, a betrayal.

The threat that her speakers "may" be lying, that there may be a "mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions," had the potential to create "infinite mischief" in Bishop's writing (One Art 562). She once warned Lowell that if he "hinted" that some of

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his fictional statements were really fact, then "all must be fact, and nothing else but fact..." (562). She believed that the reader would believe the fictions as well as the truths, and warned that "the power of getting lies believed about people through that channel after they are dead, by stirring in a few truths, is a horror to contemplate" (562). The converse is also true -- if you lead your readers to believe that you *may* be lying sometimes, they will assume you *are* lying, and often. If the speaker who recalls the fiery trauma in "A Drunkard" has made the whole thing up, then the same author might have invented a mother who screamed in the night, an uncle who drank, or a grandfather who chided her to answer nicely when spoken to. Had Bishop published this poem, it might have provoked more readers to read her with a wary eye, alert to her power to invent.[27]

Instead Bishop withheld "A Drunkard," and her published poems seem to remain eminently trustworthy, unmarred by any appearance of fact and fiction mingled in "unknown proportions." Elizabeth Bishop's writing, in letters in prose and in poetry, insists on its own veracity.[28] She claims to have a "literal imagination" and carefully creates a mystique around her careful truth-telling that she designed to set her apart from a group of poets whose emotionally purgative poetry she found too close to fiction. She aimed not only to create poems that accurately represented her memories, but also to

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[27] The converse reaction, which Bishop suggests is imminently possible, is that her readers would have believed her to be a drunkard. As she asserts in her letter to Lowell, the reader's instinct is to assess the poem as fact or fiction, not to seek out the proportions or boundaries between the two.

[28] In her essay "Bishop's Sexual Poetics" Joanne Feit Diehl gives an astute reading of the way in which Bishop constitutes the autobiographical self in relation to others in her later poems. She notes that "In the Waiting Room" and "The Moose" both "explore the self's relation to others as they articulate a moment that interrupts the continuous act of sublimation that enables us to preserve an ongoing constitutive identity" (34).

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foster her reader's trust. To that end, her poems are understated, and full of factual observances and details that assert a truth pact with the reader.

In "North Haven" which she wrote "in memoriam" to Robert Lowell, the name of the town, her recollection of the year, "in 1932?" and the conversational snippets -- "you had 'such fun,' you said that classic summer" -- all encourage the reader's trust. In "The Moose" the endless and exacting detail of the landscape cultivates a sense of the "real." We trust her memories of "Grandparents' voices/ uninterruptedly talking" in the atmosphere of "red, gravelly roads," "the Tanramar marshes," the snoring passenger on the bus, and the "Five Islands, Five Houses, where a woman shakes a tablecloth/ out after supper" (Poems 169-171). In "Santarém," the opening lines, "Of course I may be remembering it all wrong/ after, after -- how many years," assure the reader that the author is *trying* to remember correctly. The memories may be faded, but the attempt to recollect accurately is in earnest. Bishop works to establish a truth pact with her readers, to offer them "a feeling that one can trust the writer – not to distort, tell lies..." (One Art 562).

Nowhere does Bishop work harder to establish the autobiographical pact than in her poem "In the Waiting Room." Not only does she include her own proper name in the text, "You are an *Elizabeth,*" she notes that it is February 5th, 1918; that she is in Worchester, Massachusetts; that she is three days away from turning seven; that she is looking at Osa and Martin Johnson in the February 1918 issue of National Geographic; and that she is there with her Aunt Consuelo (Poems 159). And there's the rub. Elizabeth did not have an Aunt Consuelo.[29] The February issue of National Geographic

[29] In the introduction to her Collected Prose, Robert Giroux notes that "Aunt Consuelo in 'In the Waiting Room' is Aunt Jenny in 'The Country Mouse,' and in life Aunt Florence" (Prose xx).

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did not contain an article on Osa and Martin Johnson. Like an over-eager detective at a crime scene, Bishop is so interested in sealing her case that she plants false evidence. Bishop, famous stickler for the truth, lies.

These lies have troubled readers since they were first uncovered. In fact, some confronted Bishop herself about the error in the content of the *National Geographic.*[30] In a letter to Frank Bidart, Bishop responds:

> Well, it is almost a true story — I've combined a thought or two, I think — and — because you might like this kind of information — I did go to the library in N.Y. and look up that issue of the *National Geographic.* Actually — and this is really weird, I think — I had remembered it perfectly, and it was all about Alaska, called "The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes" (One Art 545-6).

She describes here, the reconstituting act that occurs in many — if not most — autobiographies. The memory she presents in "In the Waiting Room" is a pointed one — one in which Elizabeth confronts her identity as a female as she looks at pictures of women in the magazine whose breasts she finds "horrifying" (Poems 159). It is a moment of horror and vertigo, where she feels for a moment that she has fallen off the world altogether, "into cold, blue-black space," reeling from the awakening that she is "one of *them*" (Poems 160). In her memory, she connects this moment of vertigo in the dentist's waiting room with magazine images burned into her mind during the same period in life.

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[30] Interestingly, few confronted Bishop about the renaming of her Aunt to Consuelo, which means "comfort" in Spanish. It seems as though the fictionalization of names in autobiography is less troubling than a rearrangement of dates.

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In fact, the pictures seem to trigger the frightening questions that run through young Elizabeth's mind in a panic:

> Why should I be my aunt,
>
> or me, or anyone?
>
> What similarities --
>
> boots, hands, the family voice
>
> I felt in my throat, or even
>
> the *National Geographic*
>
> and those awful hanging breasts –
>
> held us all together
>
> or made us all just one? (Poems 161).

Clearly, in an accurate depiction of Bishop's memories, pictures from the actual February 1918 *National Geographic* cannot simply replace these pictures. She explains her refusal to change them: "I tried using [the images from the February issue] a bit but my mind kept going back to another issue of the *National Geographic* that had made what seemed like a more relevant impression on me, so used it instead" (One Art 546). [31]

It is a natural choice and seems a minor point, but Bishop worries about it nevertheless. She even worried at one point that the magazine editors would find her out and expose her fiction. She admits:

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[31] The images Bishop mentions are actually from separate articles. In a 1983 interview with George Starbuck, Bishop explained, "My memory had confused two 1918 issues of Geographic. Not having seen them since then, I checked it out in the NY Public Library. In the February issue there was an article, 'The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes,' about Alaska that I'd remembered, too. But the African things, it turned out were in the *next* issue, in March." As it turns out, the "African things" are not in the March 1918 issue either.

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> Of course I was sure the *New Yorker* would "research" this, or "process it" or something – but apparently they are not quite as strict as they used to be – or else they are sure that none of their present readers would have read *National Geographic* going back *that* far (One Art 546).

In all likelihood, *The New Yorker* never made a regular practice of fact-checking its poems' allusions. They probably afforded Bishop more poetic license than she usually permitted herself.

For all its defensiveness, Bishop's response to Bidart is simple -- she made an autobiographical choice to restructure facts to fit the contours of her memory. Memory is inexact. Who of us, when remembering our childhood, would remember which issue of a magazine contained which article? Bishop relates quite honestly a memory of pictures that stayed in her mind as symbolic of a moment of crisis. Her falsity comes only in wanting to attach the magazine images to a date, but the date was important to the child because she could read. It was one of those details that sticks in a new reader's mind, and it represents young Elizabeth's power over the text. Although her memory may conflate and confuse the date, as an expression of memory, Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" does not lie.

Bishop's autobiographical poems illustrate that perception and fallible memory inevitably produce an interpretive fiction from autobiographical facts. And because she constructs her authorial relationship with her self and her readers so carefully in these poems, she demonstrates just how effective the lyric can be for recalling certain kinds of memories. In particular, she shows that because trauma produces memories that are

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patchy, disordered, and often more emotional than factual, they find a more "honest" home in lyric verse than they did in discursive prose.

Perhaps ironically, Bishop has given readers tools for interpreting the mixture of autobiographical fact and lyric hyperbole in the works of Lowell, Sexton, Plath, and Hughes. Bishop constantly fretted that Lowell was making things seem worse than they were in his poetry, but in a way, the muted sadness in "Sestina" prepares readers to confront Lowell's despair. She recreated a sense of powerlessness, and he depicted the hyperbolic despondency of a suicidal man, but both use the lyric to shift their own feelings onto a reader. Her less aggressive approach prepares readers to empathize with a poet's trauma, while remaining aware of the lyrical devices that place them inside the traumatized mind. Further, Bishop's "errors" of fact in "In the Waiting Room" remind the reader that memory is fallible, and that emotional perceptions of the past may carry as much, if not more, autobiographical value than a correct report of names and dates.

The confessional poets' mode of self-disclosure is aggressive. They seem to relish the details of their trauma and despair, and set them in front of the reader seemingly without discretion. Bishop accuses them of mythologizing their suffering, and mixing it with too much fiction. But despite the emotional fervor that marks the difference between them, the work of the confessional poets is not so different from Bishop's own. In "In the Waiting Room" Bishop chose to stay with the images of African women with sagging breasts because they are inextricable from the emotional revelation that the poem remembers. In the same way, the confessional poets often chose imagery that represented emotional truth and perception. When one suffers deeply, one sees events differently than others. In her novel Regeneration Pat Barker informs us that

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a limb, severed and regenerated, feels the prick of a pin as "severe and prolonged pain" (46). Similarly, the traumatized mind registers even small tribulations as great evils. The reality of the manic, depressed, anxious, or suicidal person may seem skewed to others, but it is their reality.[32]

Lowell's use of Elizabeth Hardwick's letters in Dolphin altered the "truth" of what she felt and wrote, but these changes depict his own distorted assessment of their interactions. He took her statements out of context, and reacted to them through his own self-loathing, anger, and regret. While one may argue – as Bishop certainly did – that Lowell had no right to appropriate her words in such a way, his revisionist gesture typifies the reality of many quarrelling lovers. One person twists the other's words until they seem to have said what justifies anger, or hurt, or guilt. Lowell's Dolphin accurately depicts a man whose perception of a failed relationship was, as shipbuilders say, out of true.[33]

Similarly, while neither Otto Plath nor Ted Hughes were Nazis, nor by most reports Fascists, Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" unmistakably asserts that they were. Of course, Plath also asserts that his "language obscene" was "an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew./ A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./ I began to talk like a Jew./ I think I may well be a Jew" (Ariel 57). Plath buries the truth of the poem as she once buried

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[32] Just as Millay's sense of reality leans toward the legendary and mythical, other autobiographical productions can take on an air of the unreal. Leonora Carrington's Down Below is a surrealist autobiography that recounts a hallucinatory experience in all its dreamlike detail.

[33] Likewise, Lowell's recalibration of Bishop's "In the Village" as "The Scream," imbues the scene with panic and despair, not in reflection of Bishop's state of mind, but his own.

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herself beneath her Wellesley home.[34] After twelve fanciful verses imagining her father as a Nazi and herself as a Jew, she remembers a picture of her father at a backboard. Then she comes to the heart of the poem:

> I was ten when they buried you.
>
> At twenty I tried to die
>
> And get back, back, back to you ...
>
> But they pulled me out of the sack
>
> And they stuck me together with glue,
>
> And then I knew what to do.
>
> I made a model of you,
>
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look
>
> And a love of the rack and the screw
>
> And I said I do, I do (Ariel 58).

Plath feels that she has "killed" her father only to resurrect his likeness in her husband. It matters little what either man did to make Plath feel such oppression, she felt it like a tongue "stuck in a barb wire snare" (56-7). While it may puzzle and disturb readers that Plath found her suburban middle-class life comparable to life in a Nazi concentration camp, she nevertheless found it just so unlivable. As if to verify the claims she made in Ariel, Plath designed for herself a death that expropriated even the final horror of Holocaust victims, a gaseous asphyxiation.

---

[34] On August 24, 1953, Plath took nearly forty sleeping pills and concealed herself in the crawl-space under her mother's house. Her family heard her moans and pulled her from her hiding place in time to resuscitate her (Rough Magic 121, 124).

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Ted Hughes, one of the two men Plath likened to Hitler, wrote his own account of his wife's traumatic life in his book Birthday Letters. When the book was published in 1998, many reacted to it as Bishop once reacted to Lowell's Dolphin. They argued that he manipulated passages from Plath's journals to paint a picture of her that was inaccurate, or at very least, that served his own purposes. And he does use her words in his recollections. In both "Visit" and "18 Rugby Street" he speaks of learning from her journal things that he had never known about her when she lived. In "Visit" he writes, "Ten years after your death/ I meet on a page of your journals, as never before/ The shock of your joy" (Birthday Letters 8-9). Likewise, in "18 Rugby Street" he remembers a day when Plath got lost trying to meet him. He reflects, "Years after your death/ I learned the desperation of that search... your journal told me the story of your torture" (21).

Many of the poems in Birthday Letters portray the regret and guilt Hughes feels at not having done enough to help his wife, but they also express how her death altered his and his children's lives, his sadness at her passing, and his resentment of her constant melodrama. In the poem "Fever" he recounts a time when his wife lay sick in bed "crying/ As if the most impossible of all/ Horrible things had happened" (47-48). He remarks that her reaction to this illness was "jammed so hard over to the red of catastrophe" that it "left no space for worse" (47). Just as Bishop used to plead with Lowell not to make himself seem older or more fragile than he was, Hughes remembers wishing Plath would " 'Stop crying wolf,/ Or else I shall not know, I shall not hear/ When things get really bad' " (47). While he may exert authorial control over her journals, the poems in their essence are an autobiography of living with someone whose sense of reality slanted so to the dramatic and disastrous. He admits to culpability as an editor of

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her words, but in the end reminds the reader that her words and actions inscribed his own autobiography and became his own memories, and that he uses them as such. As Hughes puts it in "The Hands":

> ...the fingerprints inside what I did
> And inside your poems and your letters
> And inside what you did
> Are the same (Birthday Letters 184).

Regardless of their ownership, the memories of Plath and Hughes are painful. They remind us of Bishop's wish that the confessional poets had divulged less of their pain, and John Holmes's worry that Anne Sexton's account of her time in the psychiatric ward seemed "very *selfish*" (qtd. in Middlebrook 98). Holmes warned Sexton that such graphic depictions of suffering "[forced] others to listen" and that there was "nothing given the listeners, nothing that *teaches* them or *helps* them" (Middlebrook 98). However, Sexton's reply also resonates. "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" articulates an aesthetic of poetic self-disclosure:

> Not that it was beautiful,
> but that, in the end, there was
> a certain sense of order there;
> something worth learning
> in that narrow diary of my mind... (34).

Sexton not only finds value in the gesture of sharing her experiences, she finds a certain beauty, or order, in doing so in poetry.

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Bishop too, found beauty in the precision of the lyric and used it for her own life story, a story of repetitive loss, recounted elegantly in "One Art." Whittled down from epic-length drafts, this concise poem lists a lifetime of losing "door keys," "[her] mother's watch," "two cities," "two rivers," and "a continent" (178).[35] In it, Bishop offers a final imperative, to write the difficult experience. She dares herself:

> -- Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
> I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
> the art of losing's not too hard to master
> though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster" (178).

[35] In his essay "Elusive Mastery: The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art'" Brett Candlish Millier gives a thorough account of the drafting process that resulted in the published version of the poem. Millier's essay appears in Marilyn May Lombardi's collection of essays entitled, Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

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Epilogue:

Teaching the Autobiographical Pact

The legacy of the New Critics, including its historically male-dominated canon of poets, continues to hold influence, in part because its methods of reading preside over many college classrooms. New Critical readings stress careful explications, based solely on the evidence offered in the lines of the poem. This way of reading encourages careful interpretations, and requires students to pay attention to details of syntax, diction, symbol, metaphor, and imagery. Because the method sets the student who is reading a poem for the first time on an equal footing with more experienced readers, it is an effective way of introducing students to poetry. However, it can become unduly restrictive, and its underlying biases – especially its assumption that the speaker is a "universal" one – limit students' ability to get all they can out of personal poems.

As an undergraduate, I remember attempting to explain that Elizabeth Bishop felt distressed by her own womanhood by remarking, "Bishop said she was 'horrified' by the sight of breasts" in "In the Waiting Room." My professor corrected me: "the *speaker* says," cautioning me not to conflate the poet with the speaker. When I pointed out that Bishop declares, "I am an *Elizabeth*" in the poem, the professor countered (somewhat incongruously to my mind) by insisting, "Bishop was *not* a Confessional poet."[1] Although we did not read the Confessional poets together in this class, one of my peers made a comparative point about sexuality in the post-modern era, and suggested that

[1] Given Bishop's ambivalent relationship with the poets of the confessional school, I suspect that my Professor's goal was to distinguish her method of self-disclosure from theirs. However, there was an attendant bias in the insistence, betrayed by a two-semester "Modern Poetry" syllabus that contained only two women poets -- Moore and Bishop – and regular comments that women poets like H.D., Millay, and Sexton were "not interesting."

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Plath's poem "Daddy" contained evidence of childhood abuse. The professor demanded "Where does it *say* that *in the poem*?" and advised her to "*read* the poem, not read *into* it." The professor was not wrong to asking my classmate to restrict her reading to the facts the poem offered, nor in asking me to differentiate between the poet and her creative construction of herself in poetry. After all, as Philippe Lejeune says of autobiographers, "an author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes." Lejeune also points out that the reader "does not know the real person" and so he "imagines what [the author] is like from what he produces" (On Autobiography 11). However, had we been able to rephrase our observations through the lens of autobiography theory, the conversation might have proved more fruitful.

If I had had the vocabulary at the time, I might have argued that Bishop insistently establishes an autobiographical pact in "In the Waiting Room," and we could have explored the ways in which Bishop constructs a character out of her seven-year-old self. Likewise, we could have discussed Plath's ruthless demonizing of her father and husband, asking what kind of character she designed of herself in doing so. To my mind, then and now, it is more interesting to consider the artistic effect of poets' assertions about themselves than to question whether they are truthful ones. When poets create images that lead to false assumptions about their biographies, it often tells more about the personality of the poet than a simple declaration of the "truth." Still, it is hard to sanction exploratory readings without giving way entirely to speculation, especially in a classroom of naïve readers. To locate and interpret personal artifacts in a poem without inappropriately "reading into" a text, it is essential to use a vocabulary informed by a clear understanding of the performative aspect of the autobiographical pact.

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The autobiographical pact, which serves as an invaluable interpretive tool for readers of autobiography in both prose and verse, is a difficult concept to teach. In two classes, "20th Century American Poetry" and "Self-Representation in American Poetry" I observed students struggling to understand that a lie (or an error born of memory's fallibility) in an autobiography does not render the author's pact with the reader null and void. Further, I have noticed that Bishop's prediction to Lowell bears out: when readers face a mixture of truth and fiction, they most often believe or disbelieve the text as a whole, rather than assessing each assertion in the text individually. Students, and even many sophisticated readers, veer from one extreme to the other. They begin by believing what they read somewhat submissively. Upon uncovering a lie, they then suspect all they read of falsification. Either Sylvia Plath's father was a violent Nazi, or she was a frightful liar. Either Woolf's half brother molested her, or she levies a false accusation. Because the stakes of these truths and lies are so high, it is often hard to help students realize the fruitfulness of considering, instead, the ways each author chooses to construct herself as an autobiographical subject. Discussions too often degenerate into a debate over the available biographical evidence.

The careful balance between truth and lie in "In the Waiting Room" makes the poem a perfect model for teaching the autobiographical pact. And, because Bishop's lie does not change the impact of her truth, it is easier for students to rally from their initial sense of betrayal. When my students first read the poem, they cataloged the bits that make the poem seem trustworthy — Elizabeth's name, the date, her age, the town, the magazine, her aunt's name. When confronted with the notion that Bishop had no Aunt Consuelo, and that the February 1918 National Geographic does not contain the pictures

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Bishop claims, students unfailingly expressed frustration. Some headed immediately to whatever biographical data they had at hand to verify her age, and to see if she was really in Worchester at the age of seven. Finding most of the data true, the students in their irritation articulated the crucial question: why would Bishop bother to tell us these minute details if they are not true?

Instead of debating the truth, the discussion turned to a consideration of what Bishop gains through her revisions of the facts. One student observed that "consuelo" means "consolation" or "comfort" in Spanish and developed a theory about Bishop's relationship with her aunt. Another began to connect the fright inspired by the National Geographic pictures to Bishop's horror at discovering that she is "an *I* ...an *Elizabeth*" (Poems 160). One student even noticed the clothing Bishop observes as she takes in the details of the dentist's waiting room – "arctics and overcoats," "trousers and skirts and boots" -- and explored the possibility that Bishop was uncomfortable with nudity in general. He began to search Bishop's other poems for evidence of his theory (Collected Poems 159, 160).

While some hypotheses bear out and others meet dead ends, the students learn to question the information each poet offers, even when it sounds like a simple truth. When students think about Bishop's choice to call her aunt "Consuelo," they are confronting the artistic intervention any author wields over her own autobiography, whether in prose or poetry. Students begin to grasp the full range of choices authors have at their disposal as they reconstruct their life's memories – will they portray themselves as strong, beleaguered, angry, forlorn, or triumphant? Does the villainy of their mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives seem exaggerated, or create a more sympathetic "main character"?

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Do they hint at the sordid aspects of their lives, or lay them out in defiant detail before the reader? What do they ask us to believe about their personality, and do we believe it? Once Bishop has raised these kinds of questions with her rather benign lies in "In the Waiting Room," readers at all levels find a method for confronting more dramatic and insidious mixtures of "fact and fiction in unknown proportions." The mixture begins to make less mischief for them.

In a class that read "Sestina" before "In the Waiting Room," students imagined and invented all sorts of possible biographical scenarios that could have produced the grandmother's tears, and they felt discouraged at not knowing "the truth." In a class that began by considering the autobiographical pact in "In the Waiting Room," students who then read "Sestina" remarked that Bishop cultivated the sound of a fairy tale. They observed that the mystical atmosphere prevents the reader from understanding what is "really going on," as one student noted, "just like the child."[2]

The practice Bishop affords changes the way students read the personal poetry that historically follows. When they read Plath's Ariel they question what kind of self-portrait she achieves by depicting "Daddy" as "A man in black with a Meinkampf look." They can more readily recognize and follow the quick shifts between an oppressive reality and violent fantasy that characterize the lines in "Lesbos":

> You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!
>
> You say I should drown my girl.
>
> She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.
>
> The baby smiles, fat snail,

[2] One student also observed a lack of gender pronouns in "Sestina" and concluded that Bishop wanted her reader to picture the child as a boy. She began to look at Bishop's other poems for further evidence of gender ambiguity.

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From the polished lozenges of orange linoleum.

You could eat him. He's a boy (Ariel 33).

And instead of being entirely put-off by Plath's appropriation of holocaust imagery in "Lady Lazarus," my students began to see the text as a description of the horror of living trapped in a suicidal mind. As one student observed, "It's a poem about what it was like inside the head of a woman [disturbed] enough to make a gas chamber of her own kitchen." They were still troubled that Plath compared her own suffering to that of the Holocaust victims, but most students found the offense to be less aggressively anti-Semitic and more – to use Bishop's phrase – an egregious example of "making things worse than they really are."[3]

Generally speaking, students who read the Confessional poets Plath, Sexton, and Lowell after coming to terms with the idea of autobiographical intervention through Bishop, were able to grapple with the "fearful problems: what's true, what isn't; how one can bear to witness such suffering and yet not know how much of it one *needn't* suffer with, how much has been 'made up,' and so on..." (One Art 562). They read with more sophistication -- as Bishop herself could in assessing her peers. Bishop's example, in fact, prepares students to read poetic autobiographies of all eras with a more discerning eye for the ways in which the poet constructs memory and the self.

One student, upon reading selections from Pound's Cantos, remarked that the difficulty he cultivates makes the reader feel "helpless and trapped." The student argued

---

[3] I once observed an undergraduate poetry class in which two Jewish students became so offended by Plath's declaration that her skin was like a "Nazi lampshade" that they left the classroom. While my own students (Jewish and otherwise) expressed similar disapproval and even anger with Plath, our previous discussions about how poetic autobiographies use imagery to represent the personality, prepared them to confront Plath's metaphor as a troubling aspect of her personality rather than feeling its anti-Semitism aimed outward at them.

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that Pound "wanted his poem to be so difficult because the experience of being in prison was so difficult." He noticed that the imagery that was accessible in Pound's text "was about escape" and in particular escape from dullness of mind. He suggested that "Pound wanted his readers to feel dumb because it would give them the same feeling of wanting inspiration that he had." He likened Pound's method in Cantos to Bishop's desire to "keep the reader confused" about her grandmother's tears.

In reading Ginsberg's Kaddish, another of my students wondered whether Bishop's poems would have been more violent or "all out" if she, like Ginsberg, had witnessed the graphic scenes of her mother's breakdown. He pointed out that while Bishop had heard a disembodied voice screaming, Ginsberg had seen:

> ...convulsions and red vomit coming out of her mouth – diarrhea water exploding from her behind – on all fours in front of the toilet – urine running between her legs – left retching on the tile floor smeared with her black feces – unfainted (Kaddish 22).

The student reflected that it was not simply a matter of Bishop not wanting to share such information, but that her trauma had been in not knowing. While Ginsberg had the ugly scene to purge through vivid description, Bishop had only the bodiless voice of her mother, the hushed whispers of her aunts, and her grandmother's inscrutable tears.[4] The student was able to conclude that the mode of the autobiography is part of the expression of memory.

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[4] Susan McCabe, in her book Poetics of Loss, makes a similar observation. She notes that "Throughout ['In the Village'], adults try to distract her from any possible 'scene.' But impending chaos and loss become more acutely sensed because of these measures" (6).

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Another student used Bishop to help her understand Sharon Olds's use of sexual imagery in The Father. She had read the poem "My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead" and its imagery distressed her. In it, Olds imagines her father thinking about her:

> I love your legs...
> because they are yours and mine
> both. I love your — what can I call it,
> between your legs, we never named it, the
> glint and purity of its curls. I love
> your rear end, I changed you once,
> washed the detritus off your tiny
> bottom... when I touched your little
> anus I crossed wires with God for a moment (The Father 78).

The student admitted that her first impulse was to assume that Olds's father had molested her, but said she read the poem again. In her second reading, the lines "I love your legs ...because they are yours and mine/both" reminded her of Bishop asking "Why should I be my aunt,/ or me, or anyone?" (Poems 161). Prompted by her understanding of Bishop's calculated way of explaining her identity crisis, the student shifted her question. From the initial "did Olds's father molest her," her question became, "what does the sexual imagery in The Father do to express the poet's relationship with her father?" Thinking more about the poet's decisions in the rendering her life, the student was able to write an analysis of how the sexual imagery "was Olds' way of showing how intimate the connection was between herself and her father after she helped him at his death."

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Although Bishop was never able to convince Lowell of the merits of separating fact and fiction in autobiographical poetry, her own work mitigates the "infinite mischief" he sets in motion. She offers a body of poetry that demonstrates a method of self-disclosure that creates and verifies trust between author and reader. Further, her careful method of writing promotes a more watchful way of reading, one that permits us to acknowledge autobiography in verse without being naïve about the artist's manipulations of her own subjectivity.

Bishop's is perhaps the model of poetic autobiography most easily brought to the classroom, but reading a larger body of poetry through the lens of autobiography theory holds merit on a larger scope. Bishop's poems, and the verses of Stein, H.D., and Millay, suggest that we may find any number of autobiographies embedded in lyric productions awaiting recognition. If we read them as the autobiographical performances they are, we will work against the conscription of experience into narrative prose, and understand experience, memory, and identity differently. The acknowledgement that the number of autobiographies in verse number far more than we can count on two hands, may seem a simple shift in thinking, perhaps even a re-articulation of that which we already knew intuitively. However the implications of such a simple shift are vital. It validates one of the dominant forms of women's writing, and removes it from the margins of the poetic and autobiographic genres. It creates a space in which poetic self-disclosure becomes permissible, enjoyable, and admirable.

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APPENDIX A

1) Assume that $\sqrt{2}$ is rational

2) therefore: $\sqrt{2} = a/b$ where a and b are integers with no common factor.

3) therefore: $a = \sqrt{2}b$

4) therefore: $a^2 = 2b^2$

5) therefore: a^2 is even (#4 shows a^2 is a multiple of 2)

6) therefore: a is even (if a were odd, a^2 would be odd)

7) therefore: $a = 2w$ (definition of even)

8) therefore: $a^2 = 4w^2$ (squaring the result of #7)

9) therefore: $4w^2 = 2b^2$ (substitute #8 into # 4)

10) therefore: $2w^2 = b^2$ (divide #9) by 2)

11) therefore: b^2 is even (definition of even: it's a multiple of 2)

12) therefore: b is even (if b were odd its square would be odd)

13) therefore; both a and b are even (steps #6 and #12)

14) therefore: a and b have a common factor of 2. This contradicts the fact that a and b are integers with no common factor (step #2)

15) therefore: our assumption is false, so $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational.

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APPENDIX B:

Letter from Millay to Arthur Rushmore at Harper's Publishers; Dated May, 10, 1948; also sent as enclosure to Cass Canfield in a Letter Also Dated May 10, 1948

Dear Mr. Rushmore:

As a result, perhaps, of the recent making-public of Max Eastman's to-the-minds-of-some-better-kept-private affairs, is not the venerable firm of Harper & Bothers running just a few degrees of fever?

If so, it is a fever to whose contagion I am immune. Your proposition, that Harper's bring out a volume of "The Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay," containing a "mellow *Forward in retrospect*" written by their author, in which forward she confides to the public "when, where, and *under what impulsion*" (the italics are mine) these poems were written, leaves me strangely cold.

(I did get a grin out of it, though. Pretty hard put to it, weren't you, dearie, to say it with flowers, and yet say it?)

Of course, you have no possible way of knowing how very reticent a person I am, since I am far too reticent to ever have told you. You might, however, just by accident have come across the knowledge that I am the only poet in America (at least I believe this to be true) who consistently and in all circumstances refuses to make in print any statement whatever regarding any poem whatever that she has published. In all the years during which my poetry has been in print, there has been, I think, only one exception to this rule, and that of little importance, except that even so, naturally, I regret it. My

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discussion of the sonnet printed in my forward to the Collected Sonnets does not count, of course, since this piece was merely a juvenile exercise in sonnet form, something which obviously I did not take seriously as a poem, for I had never published it.

At a glance, for instance, at the anthology entitled "This is My Best," would show you that it was not I, but William Rose Benet, who made the selection from among my poems which this book contains, and who wrote the accompanying comments. I refused to have anything to do with the project.

You state that, in your opinion, such a book as you describe would "make new readers" for me. I do not doubt it. People who never in all their lives, except when in school and under compulsion, have held a book of poems in their hands, might well be attracted by the erotic autobiography of a fairly conspicuous woman, even though she did write poetry. The indubitable fact that, even as I was winning my new readers, I should be losing entirely the good esteem of the more sensitive and by me the most valued, of the readers I already have, does not seem to have occurred to you.

"It would make a lovely book", you say. In so far as your own part in it was concerned, it would, I know. But even you, will all your exquisite skill, could not make charming the indelicacy of such a forward as you suggest.

I am not saying, and of course not implying, that you yourself are insensitive: I know the opposite to be the fact. Nor do I mean to say that indelicacy is less shocking to you than it is to me. It is simply that your enthusiasm over the proposed volume from the point of view of format, paper, cover, size, etc., has pushed other aspects of the book from your mind, and you have never really once quietly considered just what it is that you are asking me to do. Is not this the truth, my friend? Sincerely, [No signature]

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