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PhD Thesis

Seriality in Contemporary Poetry

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Creative and Critical Writing (Poetry) PhD Thesis**

Declaration of Authorship

I Pnina Shinebourne hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____ Date: 23/03/21

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Abstract

This practice-based research consists of a theoretical part and a portfolio of creative work. In the theoretical part of the thesis I introduce the serial form in poetry, drawing on Joseph Conte's definition of seriality as a modular form 'in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination', and a range of examples of the serial form in poetic practice. I contend that the serial form offers a flexible modular structure to explore multiple perspectives, assemblages of diverse components and juxtaposition of disparate materials, as exemplified in aspects of seriality discussed in the following three chapters.

In chapter 1 I explore the photographic and literary work of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. My specific focus is on their strategies for creating serial works in word and image through constructing multiple versions, mirroring, juxtaposing disparate elements, crossing generic boundaries, and montage of fragments. I suggest that their photomontages work can be considered as a visual model of Conte's definition of a serial composition. Despite working during the period of the modernist avant-garde, their serial compositions anticipate many features in the contemporary serial works of Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson.

In Chapter 2 I consider seriality in Anne Carson's work, which evolves through constructing multiple versions, translation and retranslation, fragmentation, juxtaposition of disparate elements, re-contextualization, creating 'mistakes' and faux interviews. I suggest that Carson's work as a whole unfolds as meta-series, with repeating structures, genres, characters and themes that recur in several publications.

In Chapter 3 I discuss seriality in Lisa Robertson's work. Like Carson, Robertson creates multifaceted assemblages composed from diverse texts, lines from her journals, classical literature, poetic tradition, contemporary culture and feminist discourse. Like Carson, she works across disciplines, both altering and problematizing the source texts and opening up a space for critical engagement with multiple perspectives. However, while Carson's work unfolds as a meta-series across several publications, I suggest that Robertson's model of serial work is focused on each publication as a distinct 'unit of composition' which evolves through developing a different approach to each of her book-length projects.

My creative work is informed by the various models of seriality discussed in the theoretical part of my thesis. In particular my emphasis is on using the modular structure of the serial form to construct my work from multiple sources and timeframes.

In the work of Claude Cahun, Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson I found helpful models for interweaving biographical/autobiographical material with a range of other texts from diverse sources that nevertheless are related in a modular framework. My emphasis in the three serial projects included in the creative part of my thesis is on creating a polyphonic texture that retains multiplicity of voices and perspectives. All three projects juxtapose voices based on actual persons and events with imaginary elements.

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Introduction

In his article 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem', Joseph Conte contends that what distinguishes the series from other types of the long poem (the epic, the long poem, the lyric sequence) is its modular form 'in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination'.¹ While other types of the long poem tend to display thematic development or narrative progression, 'the series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method'.²

Conte's notion of serial form is informed by Roland Barthes's *S/Z*³ and Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*,⁴ which highlight the polyvalence of thoughts and describes a series as a field of possibilities that generates multiple choices. Conte contends that 'the serial form is for poetry the most adept method of portraying both the interconnectedness and the particularity of objects in the world and our relationship to them and to one another'.⁵

The term "serial poem" was first used by Jack Spicer to designate a distinct compositional method, as described by Robin Blaser:⁶

I'm interested in a particular kind of narrative - what Jack Spicer and I agreed to call in our own work the serial poem - this is a narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves. The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which run out when so much of a tale is told. I like to describe this in Ovidian terms, as a *carmen perpetuum*, a continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected.

In *After Lorca*⁷ Spicer interweaved a series of 'imaginary' letters to Lorca with both writers' poems, translations (and mistranslations), to create a new assemblage whose diverse elements

¹ Joseph Conte, 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem', *Sagetrieb* 11 (1992), 1-2, p. 36.

² Ibid.

³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. (London: Cape, 1970).

⁴ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Radius: Hutchinson, 1989).

⁵ Joseph Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Cornell University Press, 1991).p. 280.

⁶ Robin Blaser, *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, ed. by Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 5.

⁷ Jack Spicer, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. by Robin Blaser (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975).

echo, overlap, and blend within a single book. Spicer maintained that he realised he was writing a 'book' rather than a series of individual poems half-way through the writing. The idea was

not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat, but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem ... Poems should echo and reecho [sic] against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can. . . Things fit together. We knew that – it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone.⁸

Blaser suggested an analogy between Spicer's conception of the serial poem as a book-bound unit and multiple rooms in a house: 'The serial poem is often like a series of rooms where the lights go on and off. It is also a sequence of energies which burn out, and it may, by the path it takes, include the constellated.'⁹

While Spicer envisaged a single book as the framework for a serial poem, Robert Duncan in his serial work *Passages*¹⁰ rejected all boundaries in favour of an infinite serial structure, scattered and interspersed among other works in several separate books written in a period of over twenty years.

Passages consists of a collage of fragments: words, images, signs, quotes from a variety of sources, catalogues, recipes, continually mixed, joined and taken apart. Conte described *Passages* as 'a work without bounds: having no beginning and no end; a limitless interrelation of parts; the absence of an externally imposed schema; mobility; and an intentionally incomplete condition of form',¹¹ recalling Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari's notion of the rhizome, having 'no beginning or end it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo'.¹²

⁸ Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. by Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 163.

⁹ Robin Blaser, 'The Practice of Outside', in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. by Blaser, p. 278.

¹⁰ Robert Duncan, *Robert Duncan: The Collected Later Poems and Plays* (California: University of California Press, 2014).

¹¹ Conte, *Unending Design*, p. 49.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988), p. 25.

In a similar vein, Blaser's *The Holy Forest* extends across several books written intermittently over many years, concurrent with other works. Although the fragmented units appeared apparently disconnected, as in *carmen perpetuum*, the work 'unfolds from one book to the next like a fugue; a theme announced in one poem or one series will return for elaboration in another, often in a different "key" or set of images'.¹³

Developing from these models, the serial form has become a significant strand within contemporary poetry. For example, the serial work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Nathaniel Mackey, as well as of the Canadian poets Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson, whose work is discussed at length in the following chapters.

Mackey's ongoing serial poems *Song of Andoumboulou* and *Mu* were written in instalments over three decades, interspersed with other work. Mackey's serial poems are constructed from fragments and incomplete narratives, characterised by repetition, reflexivity and deferment, dissonance and reconnections. He describes his work in terms of repetition and movement backward and forward:

Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly "back / at some beginning," repeatedly circling or cycling back, doing so with such adamance as to call forward and back into question and suggest an eccentric step to the side – as though, driven to distraction by shortcircuiting options, it can only be itself beside itself.¹⁴

DuPlessis' series *Drafts* is presented in multiple publications written between 1986 and 2012,¹⁵ in a process she describes as follows: 'I start from the metaphoric presumption of provisionality ... By using this title [i.e. *Drafts*], I signal that these poems are open to transformation, part of an ongoing process of construction, self-commentary, and reconstruction'.¹⁶

All three writers discussed in the following chapters have used a variety of serial forms in their work. However, before the threads that connect them can be discussed, it is important to consider the significance of the generational difference. While Claude Cahun

¹³ Robin Blaser, *The Holy Forest: Collected Poems of Robin Blaser*, ed. by Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 179.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2006), p. xi–xii.

¹⁵ For example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Torques: Drafts 58-76* (London: Salt, 2007); *Pitch: Drafts 77-95* (London: Salt, 2010); *The Collage Poems of Drafts* (London: Salt, 2011).

¹⁶ Chris McCreary, *The Serial as Portal: An Interview with Rachel Blau DuPlessis*, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/xconnect/i20/g/mccreary.html> [accessed November 5 2015].

was working during the period of the modernist avant-garde, Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson came to the fore during the postmodern moment.

Considering the period of high modernism, Marjorie Perloff describes Ezra Pound's strategy in the *Cantos* as follows: 'Pound's basic strategy in the *Cantos* is to create a flat surface, as in a Cubist or early Dada collage, upon which verbal elements, fragmented images, and truncated bits of narrative, drawn from the most disparate contexts, are brought into collision'.¹⁷ In Perloff's account, Pound's strategy contains many features which re-appear in Conte's definition of seriality in contemporary poetry. However, Perloff considers only the formal features of the *Cantos*, overlooking the concept of the work as a whole, namely, that Pound used the epic tradition as understood by Dante to organise his own work.¹⁸

Stephen Sicari argues that while Pound intended to include whatever significant details he found, he also hoped to 'organise the multifarious material ... into a coherent unity through the multifaceted wanderer he creates out of the inherited tradition'.¹⁹ Moreover, Sicari contends that 'Pound and his fellow high-modernists found in the Dantean tradition both a narrative and a narrative method that attended to their particular concerns about representation in the modern era... in Dante they find expression of their own most basic and urgent need, the need to give unity to a world in fragments.'²⁰ For Dante and Pound alike, the composite figure of the wanderer represents 'a structural principle both traditional enough to provide coherence and stability and flexible enough to allow for the integration of diverse material into a single unified journey of redemption.'²¹

In contrast, the serial poem, as described in *The House That Jack Built*, is unlike 'Pound's *Cantos* in the sense that it does not arise out of a planned system.'²² Peter Gizzi explains that the individual 'books' in Spicer's *The Holy Grail*, 'are not organized according to a narrative progression, and all its books are contemporaneous. Seriality, then, is not just a manifestation of temporal sequence, and it does not serve any overarching narrative or rhetorical concern. For Spicer, serial composition is the practice of writing in units that are somehow related without creating a totalizing structure for them.'²³

¹⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: From Rimbaud to Cage* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 181.

¹⁸ Stephen Sicari, *Pound's Epic Ambition: Dante and the Modern World* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. x.

²² Peter Gizzi, *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998), p. 50. Peter Gizzi's edition of Jack Spicer's lectures, *The House that Jack Built*,

²³ *Ibid.*

The three writers discussed in the following chapters do not aim to give unity to a world in fragments. Cahun, who was working during the high modernist period, declares, '*Mon âme est fragmentaire*'.²⁴ For Carson, a classical scholar working with ancient texts that are present only as fragments, the primary unit of composition in much of her creative work is the fragment. Robertson tends to construct her work from individual sentences extracted from diverse sources and she resists being identified with a specific generational movement. She contends that 'poetry is not bound by movements, periodicities and canons. Poetry is a continuity fueled by political passion'.²⁵ Moreover, she insists that all methods, contemporary or historical, should be open for writers to adopt: 'Method, whether paratactic, ironic, fragmented, aleatory, or reflexive, must remain open for use'.²⁶

The modular structure of the serial poem offers an open-ended space to engage juxtaposition of disparate materials and assemblages while maintaining multiple perspectives, without searching for a unifying principle. It enables the creation of a network of connections across multiple worldviews which result in a palimpsest of multilayered textual constructs.

For example, Cahun's and Marcel Moore's photographic work, and in particular, *Aveux non avenues*, can be considered as anticipating Duncan's *Passages* and Blaser's notion of *carmen perpetuum*. Similarly, Anne Carson's work as a whole can be described as *carmen perpetuum*, a meta-series with repeating structures, genres, characters and themes. In contrast, Robertson's work is focused on each of her books as a discrete unit of composition, recalling Spicer's notion of serial poems as 'composition by book'. However, although Robertson says she invents a different approach to each of her book-length projects, her strategies for creating serial works engages similar processes to Cahun's and Carson's, such as juxtapositions of materials from disparate sources and crossing generic boundaries.

My entry point into exploring seriality in contemporary poetry is rooted in my creative work.²⁷ My attraction to the serial form is for the opportunities it affords to engage in multiple aspects of representation of selfhood without aiming for an overarching narrative. I agree with Lisa Robertson's assertion that poetry shouldn't be bound by movements, periodicities and canons and that all methods, contemporary or historical, should be open for writers to adopt.

²⁴ Claude Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, in *Claude Cahun; Écrits*, ed. by François Leperlier (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 2002), pp. 161-436 (p. 394). See discussion next chapter.

²⁵ Sina Queyras, 'On Reading R's Boat: An Exchange with Lisa Robertson', *Open Letter*, 14, (2011), p. 22. See further discussion in Chapter 3.

²⁶ Lisa Robertson, 'My Eighteenth Century: Draft Towards a Cabinet', in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. by Romana Huk (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 396.

²⁷ See part 2 of the thesis.

My approach to the concept of selfhood is informed by Martin-Heidegger's portrayal of human experience as embedded in the world: 'Self and world belong together in the single entity, the Dasein... self and world are the basic determination of the Dasein itself in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world'.²⁸ In an explicit reference to Heidegger's notion of Dasein, Carson places Geryon in Buenos Aires, sitting 'at a corner table of Café Mitwelt writing bits of Heidegger.'²⁹

In *Autobiography of Red* Carson considers representation of selfhood both in terms of Geryon's bodily sensations and his attempts to find a language to compose his autobiography, 'caught between the tongue and the taste'.³⁰ As language failed him, Geryon tried to represent his experience through his sense of vision, expressed through photography. However, his photographs contain only fragments of persons and things, an absence which suggests a residue of presence beyond what can be seen with the eye or expressed in words.

In Cahun's *Aveux non avenues*³¹ the narrator refers to her endeavour as 'l'aventure invisible', piercing the surface in order to see beyond the visible. Similarly, in Anne Carson's *Nox*,³² the keyhole on the front cover invites readers to glimpse the traces encased in a box.

In *Economy of the Unlost* Carson describes the process as follows: 'visible and invisible lock together in a fact composed of their difference'.³³ Carson's notion of the visible and invisible components of existence is congruent with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception: "the proper essence of the visible is to have a layer of invisibility ... which it makes present as a certain absence".³⁴ The invisible consists of the 'the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things'.³⁵

Heidegger's concept of self as intertwined with the world incorporates interaction with others as fundamental to the conception of self, as in Heidegger's notion of Mitsein: 'the

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 297.

²⁹ Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (New York: Vintage, 2013), p. 82. In Heidegger's philosophy, Mitwelt refers to the aspect of Dasein which is constituted by a person's interactions with other people.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 72. For a further discussion of *Autobiography of Red*, see Chapter 2.

³¹ Claude Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues* (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour, 1930). Reprinted in Leperlier's edited volume of Cahun's publications: *Claude Cahun; Écrits*, ed. by François Leperlier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2002), pp. 161-436. An English translation by Susan de Muth was published in 2007, titled *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007).

³² Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010).

³³ Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 54. For a further discussion of this book, see Chapter 2.

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. by James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.187.

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 132.

world of Dasein is a with-world. Being-with is *Being-with others*' [italics in source].³⁶ Drawing on Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty used concepts of reciprocity and reversibility to explore the interrelatedness between subjectivity and intersubjectivity as an overlapping, criss-crossing, intertwining movement:

Between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is an overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that things pass into us as well as we into the things.³⁷

Merleau Ponty's notion of overlapping or encroachment suggests a sense of movement and shifting positions which may not be captured in words, yet nevertheless form an underlying layer of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in bodily existence, as Anne Carson writes on the first encounter between Geryon and Herakles: 'The world poured back and forth between their eyes once or twice'.³⁸ Similarly, in *Aveux non avenues*, Cahun describes the process as follows: 'We come out of our splendid isolation and lend ourselves to the world... I am one, you are the other. Or the opposite. Our desires meet one another. Already it is an effort to disentangle them.'³⁹

Cahun and Moore's use of costumes, makeup and masks represent multiple aspects of selfhood.⁴⁰ In particular, the use of masks which can be worn or removed at will enabled the staging of shifting identities, using visual tools without recourse to words. Cahun's work in the theatre offered her an opportunity to embody other lives and possible identities in collaboration with other actors in the live world of the stage.

Engagement with representations of selfhood is a major theme in the work of Cahun, Carson and Robertson, as discussed in the following three chapters. For Robertson, the self is an unstable construct that has 'no unity, no bedrock, but the enacted site of shifting agencies and perceptions and identifications'.⁴¹ Despite the prevalence of the first person 'I' in some of her work,⁴² which may suggest an autobiographical narrative, Robertson states that she wanted to 'to see if I could construct an autobiographical text that

³⁶ Ibid., p.155.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁸ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, p. 39.

³⁹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, p. 306.

⁴⁰ See discussion in Chapter 1.

⁴¹ Robertson, 'My Eighteenth Century: Draft towards a Cabinet', p. 393.

⁴² Discussed in Chapter 3.

remained impersonal, yet which would hold together as its own object'.⁴³ She devised a method of constructing the text by culling first person sentences from her notebooks and interposing them with other materials. The resulting work, she asserts, presents 'no subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point'.⁴⁴

Similarly, Cahun and Moore used mainly personal 'autobiographical' materials. The text and the images depict a self that is multiple and unstable, thus undermining the coherence of a stable autobiographical account. Even personal names are presented as mutable, as Cahun and Moore adopted various pseudonyms representing different aspects of their lives at different times.⁴⁵

Like Cahun and Moore, Carson has used a variety of strategies to construct 'selves' from disparate sources, including autobiographical materials, photographs, letters, fragments of classical texts and fictional characters. Yet, despite using strategies of discontinuity, fragmentation and displacement to unsettle the notion of a 'stable' self, both Cahun and Carson contend that there is too much 'self' in their writing and express their desire to break away from the 'self'. Cahun contends that her 'vague personality crumbles having been tricked into building itself up too much. I'll dissociate myself from it completely if someone gives me another'.⁴⁶

Likewise, in *Decreation*⁴⁷ Carson follows Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil, who feel 'moved to create a dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling'.⁴⁸ Yet, at the same time, Carson contends:

To be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny center of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction.⁴⁹

⁴³ Kai Fierle-Hedrick and Lisa Robertson, 'Lifted: An Interview with Lisa Robertson', *Chicago Review*, 51 (2006), 38-54 (p. 51).

⁴⁴ Queyras, p. 52. As discussed in the previous chapters, this is similar to Claude Cahun and Anne Carson's experiment in destabilizing the self.

⁴⁵ See Chapter 1.

⁴⁶ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1 71.

Paradoxically, the writer's desire to 'decreate' the self can only be approached through the self. In Carson's words: 'Decreation is an undoing of the creature in us ... But to undo self, one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition. We have nowhere else to start'.⁵⁰ According to Carson, 'there are no words for a world without a self',⁵¹ which suggests that some perception of 'self' is fundamental to writing. In *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon's sense of self emerges not through language which failed him, but through bodily encounter when he is sexually abused by his older brother, which suggests that 'selfhood' is formed through corporeal interaction: 'Up against another human being one's own procedures take on definition'.⁵² In this view, any writing implicates the writer in the process of interacting with others, as follows from Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* as 'the world of Dasein is a with-world. Being-with is Being-with others' discussed above.

Like Cahun and Carson, Robertson creates a sense of 'mercurial' identities by interweaving biographical/autobiographical material with a range of other texts from diverse sources without aiming for an overarching narrative. The modular structure of the serial poem offers an open-ended space to construct a framework for representation of selfhood through dispersal of subjectivity across a network of connections which result in a palimpsest of multilayered textual creations.

The following three chapters are structured as follows: Chapter 1 explores the photographic and literary work of Cahun and Moore. My specific focus is on their strategies of creating serial works in word and image through creating multiple versions, mirroring, juxtaposition of disparate elements, crossing generic boundaries, re-contextualization and montage of fragments. Despite working during the period of the modernist avant-garde, their work can be considered as anticipating Duncan's serial work *Passages* and Blaser's notion of *carmen perpetuum*. I suggest that their photomontages work can function as a visual model of Conte's definition of a serial composition as a modular form 'in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination'.⁵³

In Chapter 2 I consider seriality in Carson's work which evolves through constructing multiple versions, translation and retranslation, fragmentation, juxtaposition of disparate elements, re-contextualization, creating 'mistakes' and faux interviews. Although these

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 179.

⁵¹ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, p. 107.

⁵² Ibid., p. 42.

⁵³ Conte, 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem', p. 36.

strategies have been discussed in other critical studies of the poet as manifest in this chapter, my specific focus is on aspects of seriality which are less well discussed in previous research. I suggest that Carson's work as a whole seems to unfold as meta-series with repeating structures, genres, characters and themes.

In Chapter 3 I discuss seriality in Robertson's work. Like Carson, Robertson creates multifaceted assemblages composed from diverse texts, lines from her journals, classical literature, poetic tradition, contemporary culture and feminist discourse. Like Carson, she works across disciplines, both often altering and problematizing the source texts and opening up a space for critical engagement with multiple perspectives. However, while Carson's work unfolds as a meta-series across several publications, I suggest that Robertson's model of serial work is focused on each publication as a distinct 'unit of composition' which evolves through developing a different approach to each of her book-length projects.

My creative work is informed by aspects of seriality in the work of the three writers discussed in the previous chapters. In particular, my emphasis was on how to use the modular structure of the serial form to construct my work from biographical and documentary sources. In the work of Cahun, Carson and Robertson I found helpful ideas for interweaving biographical/autobiographical material with a range of other texts from diverse sources that nevertheless are related in a modular framework.

In addition, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony of unmerged voices was particularly helpful, suggesting the possibility of using the serial form to create a multi-vocal representation of selfhood through multiple voices. Using the modular structure of the serial form enabled me to develop my work from multiple, diverse sources and timeframes. In my work I create a patchwork of multiple 'unmerged voices', which retains fragments of the individual voice, that nevertheless is related to other voices in a modular framework without creating a totalising structure.

For example, in *Exposure* I used the materials explored in Chapter 1, i.e. the texts and photographic works of Cahun and Moore, biographic and historical material. Some parts of *Exposure* are written in the third person of the narrator, and include an ekphrastic description and interpretation in the voice of the narrator. Some sections are written in the first person of the protagonist, mostly addressing or inviting an 'other'. The final part of the work, 'The Trial of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', draws on historical material from the occupation of Jersey during the second World War. However, on reflection, perhaps I was too hesitant to

interweave materials from a wider range of external sources, to provide a richer texture of voices for a ‘distribution of subjectivity’.⁵⁴

Pike in a Carp Pond draws on the life and work of Rosa Luxemburg, a revolutionary socialist and writer who participated in the Spartacist insurrection in Berlin in 1919 and was murdered by troops opposed to the revolutionary movement that swept Germany in the wake of the First World War. Like *Exposure*, it employs multiple sources: the writings of Luxemburg, biographic materials, documents from the Marxists Internet Archive and from the German folk songs archive. As in *Exposure*, parts which draw on Luxemburg’s letters are written in the first person in the voice of the protagonist, some addressed to her lover. Other sections which draw on external biographical materials are written in the third person of the narrator. ‘Comrade Luxemburg is ready’ is written in the voice of the narrator in the third person, but interweaves Luxemburg’s voice in quotes from her letters to her lover and from her polemical writings,⁵⁵ recalling Carson in ‘Freud (1st draft)’, which interweaves her text with phrases cut up from Freud’s letters.⁵⁶ Similarly, ‘Comrade Lenin directs Comrade Luxemburg on the set of The Russian Revolution’, is written after Carson’s ‘TV Men: Thucydides in Conversation with Virginia Woolf on the Set of The Peloponnesian War’.⁵⁷ The interview format lends itself to presenting the conflicting revolutionary theories of Lenin and Luxemburg⁵⁸ through the imaginary voices of the protagonists, rather than through a narrator’s perspective. Similarly, ‘Q&A’ is constructed as an imaginary interview, juxtaposing materials based on actual events or incidents with fabricated elements. The interview format provides a structure for a direct engagement between two repeating voices.

‘A crunch of sandy gravel’ juxtaposes material from Luxemburg’s letters from prison with lines from German soldiers’ song archive. Similarly, ‘Röslein Rot’ juxtaposes text from reports on the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht⁵⁹ with popular propaganda slogans against Luxemburg. In both, the voices are presented through unconventional typographic arrangement which retains the unmerged voices on the page and heightens the sense of provocation and confrontation, recalling Robertson’s typography in parts of *Debbie*.

⁵⁴ Queyras, p. 52.

⁵⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Mass Strike, Political Party and Trade Unions’ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/> [accessed 15 May 2015].

⁵⁶ See discussion in Chapter 2.

⁵⁷ Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Vintage, 2009), p. 115-117.

⁵⁸ Luxemburg’s critical analysis of the Russian revolution in her book *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Workers Age Publishers, 1922), was smuggled out of prison and published posthumously, to Lenin’s dismay.

⁵⁹ For the most recent publication, drawing on archival research and interviews with some of the last surviving witnesses, see Klaus Gietinger, *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Verso Books, 2019).

The third work, *Unbridled Messiah*, poses a different challenge. Unlike my previous two series, in which Cahun's and Luxemburg's own work provided a rich resource for constructing the protagonists' voices, most of what is known and written about the self-proclaimed Messiah is derived from other sources, including eyewitness accounts, documentary records and scholarly research. In *Unbridled Messiah* I have used a variety of these sources to construct a kaleidoscope of perspectives and voices, reflecting the conflicting accounts of the enormous upheaval stirred up by the 'birth pangs' of the messianic promise.

Like *Pike in a Carp Pond*, *Unbridled Messiah*, is an assemblage of multiple components, drawing on the life and time of Shabtai Zvi, a Jewish man from Smyrna who in 1666 proclaimed himself as the Messiah. A pious ascetic, a fool, a rebel - the controversial Messiah stirred up euphoria and devotion throughout Jewish communities worldwide. Imprisoned for sedition by the Ottomans, Shabtai converted to Islam to escape the death penalty. Some believers followed their messiah into conversion and created a unique blend of both religions which continued to be practised in secret for centuries.

Why Shabtai Zvi? I was familiar the story of the self-proclaimed Messiah, but what brought it to renewed focus was a visit to the Jewish Museum of Prague and the story of the recently discovered textile. Three hundred fifty years after the messianic upheaval, the Jewish Museum in Prague received a request to examine a rare textile embroidered with a celestial lion motif. The textile was identified as probably from a robe that belonged to Shabtai Zvi. The present owner of the garment, a Muslim from Izmir, is related to a family originating from a secretive Sabbatean sect within Islam whose remnants survive to this day. The discovery of the textile sparked enthusiasm for exploring hidden stories buried within descendants' families, which in turn stimulated my own interest in writing works based on biographical materials.

Although many sections in *Unbridled Messiah* draw on real people and accounts, their voices are amplified by the narrator's imagination. Some 'first person' voices are imaginary and some draw on historical sources (e.g. Paul Rycout, Samuel Pepys). Sometimes the narrator's voice tells the story in the third person. The voice of Sarah, the Messiah's wife, is presented in a series of imaginary letters to her friend.

Most prominently, the narrator's voice also provides an ongoing chorus-like intervention performed by the duo 'Heavenly Sisters'. They are timeless free spirits hovering at low altitude. Invisible, nosey, they hear many voices and tell their stories, historical and

contemporary, compassionate, flippant and bemused. The ‘Heavenly Sisters’ sections are presented in a typographically distinct recurrent structure.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony, I use the serial form as a mode of representation of selfhood through multiple, unmerged voices which provide a productive avenue for engaging multiple perspectives, voices and variations in the creation of *Unbridled Messiah*. Representation of selfhood as a multi-vocal dynamic multiplicity resonates with Lisa Robertson’s account of ‘I’ and ‘self’ which holds ‘no subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity.’⁶⁰

The original motivation for embarking on this thesis was my search for a poetic form which would enable me to develop a rich multifaceted work beyond the confines of individual poems, independent of each other. I was intrigued to explore the thematic and stylistic possibilities which are opened up by using the serial form to create a representation of selfhood.

In the critical part of my research I have considered various models of the serial form in the work of Cahun, Carson and Robertson. Their work has encouraged me to expand beyond the constraints of a single poem and experiment with incorporating multiple voices and materials taken from disparate sources, as presented in part 2 of the thesis.

⁶⁰ Queyras, p. 52.

Chapter 1 – Claude Cahun

In this chapter I set out to explore the photographic and literary work of Claude Cahun. My specific focus is on Cahun's strategies of creating serial works in word and image through multiple versions, mirroring, juxtaposition of disparate elements, crossing generic boundaries, re-contextualization and montage of fragments. As I will show in the following chapters, similar strategies are used by Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson.

Why Claude Cahun? I was familiar with Cahun's photographic work and with her resistance to the occupation of Jersey during the war. But I hadn't made the link to my thesis until I had seen an exhibition of her work at the National Portrait Gallery in 2017¹ and took part in a workshop to accompany the exhibition.² At the time I had already written the Chapters on Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson and was considering other writers working in a serial mode for the third chapter. I was struck by Cahun's photomontages, in which repeating fragmentary elements are suspended in a black space, as if floating in a void, yet linked by touching and overlapping. Perhaps because my eyes and brain were already tuned to seriality, I realised in a flash that the photomontages can function as a visual model of Conte's definition of a serial composition as a modular form 'in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination'.³

Cahun's work remained largely unknown⁴ until a French scholar, François Leperlier,⁵ published in 1992 the first critical monograph, nearly 40 years after her death in 1954. Cahun's work has attracted considerable recent interest, mainly as it is seen as prefiguring contemporary issues such as the mutability of gender and identity, the art of later 20th-century artists such as Cindy Sherman and the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity.

¹ 'Gillian Wearing and Claude Cahun: Behind the mask, another mask' (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2017).

² Sarah Hesketh, 'Another Mask: Making Poetry from Portraiture', 25 March, 2017. Workshop.

³ Conte, 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem', p. 36.

⁴ The works were largely forgotten and their possessions were auctioned and acquired by the Jersey Heritage Trust Collection. The first exhibition of work from the collection was held at the Jersey Museum in 1993 (Louise Downie, *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* (London: Aperture/Jersey Heritage Trust, 2006), p. 7).

⁵ François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'écart et la métamorphose* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992).

Cahun was born Lucy Schwob in Nantes in 1894,⁶ a daughter of a prominent partly Jewish family of writers and publishers.⁷ Due to antisemitic incidents in the wake of the Dreyfus trials she was sent to a boarding school in England for a while. As a teenager she met Suzanne Malherbe, who became her lifelong lover and stepsister (her divorced father married Suzanne's widowed mother). For the rest of their lives they collaborated on photography, photomontages and written works.⁸ They adopted various pseudonyms, most prominently the gender-ambiguous names Claude Cahun (Lucy) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne), and settled in Paris, where they became known as a lesbian couple in avant-garde Parisian circles and associated with experimental theatre, the surrealist movement and the political left.

During the 1920's they created numerous photographic works of Cahun masquerading as various characters of mutable genders. Most of these works were not published in Cahun's lifetime, as it appears that their photographic project was conceived as a private undertaking,⁹ exploring issues of identity and self-representation. These images, though, provided a rich resource for their subsequent photomontages, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau comments:

... she chose, for the most part, not to exhibit or to reproduce her pictures, although it is clear that their fabrication required a great deal of preparation, including elaborate costuming, makeup and lighting. It is also evident that by the end of the 1920s Cahun had accumulated a virtual image bank of self-representations that she regularly circulated and recirculated within her own work. Thus, for example, self-portraits made in the 1920s (usually, the head or face alone) feature often in the photocollages

⁶ Most writings about Cahun's life are indebted to Leperlier's pioneering work. The first full biography of Cahun in English was published in 2017. Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (London: Reaktion, 2017).

⁷ Cahun's father, Maurice Schwob, was the publisher and editor of the daily newspaper [*Le Phare de la Loire*](#). Her uncle, Marcel Schwob, was a well-known Symbolist writer associated with many of the leading literary figures of his time, including Paul Valery, Alfred Jarry, Marcel Proust, and Oscar Wilde.

⁸ Suzanne Malherbe (Marcel Moore) was a trained graphic designer and illustrator. Her role in the lifelong collaboration with Cahun has not been properly acknowledged, although it seems obvious that Cahun could not have taken photographs of herself without Moore's collaboration. Moore illustrated Cahun's book *Vues et Visions* (Paris: Editions Georges Crès & Cie, 1919; see discussion later in this chapter) and produced the photomontages with Cahun. When the work started to attract public attention in the 1980s, exhibitions and essays described the photographs as 'self-portraits' and ignored Moore's collaboration with Cahun. More recent exhibitions and literature (discussed later in this chapter) have begun to highlight their collaborative enterprise.

⁹ Gen Doy, in *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography* (New York: IB Tauris, 2007), notes that Cahun and Moore, like other women writers and artists from well-off backgrounds, were financially independent and didn't need to publish their work to earn a living. Therefore, they were at liberty to produce more experimental work. Nevertheless, some, such as Gertrude Stein, valued payment for their work as a sign of recognition and proof that the work was taken seriously. There was also the notion that worldly success was indicative of less 'worthy' avant-garde work.

produced with Malherbe, ten of which were reproduced in *Aveux non avenues* in 1930.¹⁰

Cahun's written work in the 1920's includes *Héroïnes*,¹¹ a series of fifteen prose texts that rewrite the narratives of female characters taken from biblical, mythological and fictional sources (such as Eve, Delilah, Judith, Penelope, Helen, Sappho,¹² Salmacis, Faust's Marguerite and Cinderella). In her retelling of their stories Cahun critiques the conventional expectations of femininity and challenges her readers to imagine an alternative version of gender and desire. For example, in Cahun's story *Salmacis la Suffragette*,¹³ Salmacis makes herself sterile and lets her ovaries be taken out to free herself from the reproductive function and bind herself to Hermaphrodite until they merge into one being possessing both sexes. But the gods, annoyed at seeing the hybrid creature bristling with an unbridled desire for female and men alike, decided to separate them again, with Salmacis' soul forced to inhabit a man's body, and Hermaphrodite's a woman body, thereby leaving them to struggle with ill-matched desires for sexual partners. The only consolation through which they could ridicule the gods was to affirm that androgyny¹⁴ can be rewarding, 'un corps, une âme bien accordée – c'est assez pour fair l'amour'¹⁵ ['one body in tune with one soul is enough to make love'].¹⁶

Cahun's literary work at that time was marked by extending the range of her creative expressions to include essays, literary criticism, poems and translations. Like the visual images, the new material includes sections from earlier texts that were taken out of their original context, re-worked and reassembled in the collaborative work *Aveux non avenues*, published in 1930.¹⁷ The strategies used in creating the work resemble Anne Carson's and

¹⁰ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject', in *Inverted Odyssey: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, ed. by Shelley Rice (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 116-117.

¹¹ *Héroïnes* was not published in full during Cahun's lifetime. The manuscript is kept in the Jersey Heritage Trust Collection. Excerpts appeared in *Mercure de France* and *Le Journal Littéraire* in 1925 (Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claud Cahun* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), p. 296). The full text is published in Leperlier's edited volume of Cahun's publications: *Claude Cahun; Écrits*, ed. by François Leperlier, pp. 125-159. It was translated into English and published in its entirety for the first time in 1999 (Claude Cahun, 'Claude Cahun's "Héroïnes"', trans. by Norman MacAfee, in Shelley Rice, *Inverted Odyssey: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 43-94).

¹² Anne Carson similarly retells the story of Sappho from several perspectives (see Chapter 2).

¹³ Claude Cahun, 'Salmacis la Suffragette', in *Écrits*, pp. 155-156.

¹⁴ The androgyne appears frequently in Cahun's work, both in visual images and her texts, alluding to her disposition. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁵ Cahun, 'Salmacis la Suffragette', p. 156.

¹⁶ Claude Cahun, 'Salmacis the Suffragette', in *Inverted Odyssey*, p. 90.

¹⁷ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*. The title *Aveux non Avenues* has been variously translated as 'Unavowed Confessions', 'Cancelled Confessions', 'Confessions Null and Void', 'Disavowed Confessions' and 'Voided Confessions' by different authors (Katharine Conley, 'Claude Cahun's Iconic Heads: from "The Sadistic Judith" to Human Frontier', *Papers of Surrealism*, 2 (2004), p. 20).

Lisa Robertson's methods for composing multifaceted assemblages from diverse texts: personal material, classical literature, poetic tradition, and contemporary culture.

Aveux non avenues is a set of hybrid texts and photomontages produced with Moore, which explores in text and image the interaction of mask and mirror, androgyny and ambivalence of identity. The text and the images are characterised by fragmentation and cropping, using recurrent motifs in an unstable assemblage, recalling Anne Carson's *Nox*, an assemblage of personal materials, family photographs, letters, translations, cut-outs and incomplete narratives.

The title itself, *Aveux non avenues*, suggests both affirmation and its negation at the same time,¹⁸ signalling from the outset the notion of instability and disorientation of both the visual and the textual components. In the postscript of the English translators' notes Agnès L'Hermitte writes that

The title itself sets the agenda. The impetus of the projected confessional (*aveu* - confession) is instantly 'contradicted' by its negative qualification (*non avenue* - cancelled) marking failure, powerlessness, evasion... the interior space of Claude Cahun is constructed in the text through juxtaposition and superimposition of diverse angles of viewing, a prismatic vision reminiscent of Surrealist and Cubist collage.¹⁹

Cahun and Moore's use of collage and photomontage shares some features with other works of that period, for example, the work of Hannah Höch²⁰ and John Heartfield.²¹ However, while both Höch and Heartfield used material derived from publicly available sources,²² Cahun and Moore used mainly their personal materials, including visual self-representations and fragmentary texts, often alluding to biographical events in Cahun's life. It is worth noting that in this respect Cahun and Moore's work differed from modernist poetry and avant-garde art of their period, which tended to avoid autobiographical material. In contrast, Cahun and

¹⁸ Recalling Anne Carson's concept of 'decreation', which embodies both creation and its undoing, in a similar manner to Cahun's *Aveux non Avenues* (see Chapter 2).

¹⁹ Agnès L'Hermitte, 'Postscript: Some Brief Observations', Translator's Note to Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. xxii.

²⁰ See Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). Like Cahun and Moore, Höch used materials cut from diverse photographic sources, reassembled in complex juxtapositions. As in Cahun and Moore's work, Höch's photomontages presented a challenge to the prevailing position of women in the social and political world of her time.

²¹ Andrés Mario Zervigón, *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

²² Höch and Heartfield cut out and recombined images and text from magazines, advertisements and newspapers.

Moore's use of collage anticipates some features of Anne Carson's *Nox* which includes fragments of personal materials assembled into incomplete narratives.

The use of personal material brings into focus an autobiographical aspect of *Aveux non avenues*. However, the text and the images depict a self that is dissected, multiple and unstable, and as the title suggests, present both an exposé and a denial at the same time, thus destabilizing the work and undermining the coherence of a stable autobiographical account. Cahun's approach echoes Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson, who likewise recognized that a conventional narrative would not be appropriate to provide an account of the self. All three writers discussed in this thesis have used a variety of strategies to construct 'autobiographical' texts from disparate sources.

Even personal names are presented as mutable. Cahun and Moore adopted various pseudonyms²³ representing different aspects of their lives. In *Aveux non avenues* Cahun plays with the notion of an enduring life story:

Je perds la mémoire, et cette vague personnalité de s'être trop exhaussée, – truquée, certes ! – tombe. Je m'en désintéresserai si l'on m'en donne une autre... En voilà assez. Dissolvons.²⁴

[I'm losing my memory, and this vague personality crumbles having been tricked into building itself up too much. I'll dissociate myself from it completely if someone gives me another... but enough of this. Let's dissolve].²⁵

In the 1930's Cahun and Moore were drawn into the artistic and political circle of the Surrealist movement. Their work began to shift away from self-representation towards creating assemblages of objects, yet their strategy of juxtaposing diverse elements assembled into tenuous hybrid constructions remained similar to their previous practice. For example, the assemblage *Objet*,²⁶ which was exhibited in the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* in 1936, is comprised of an eye made from a tennis ball, paint, human hair, a cloud-shaped piece of wood and a plastic toy hand, placed on a horizontal yellow base.²⁷

Cahun's and Moore's involvement with the Surrealist movement extended to their political actions. In 1932 they joined the *Association des Écrivains et Artistes*

²³ To be discussed later in this chapter.

²⁴ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, in *Écrits*, p. 186. All material in French is cited from the original French text in Leperlier's reprinted volume of Cahun's publications: *Claude Cahun; Écrits*. The English translations are taken from published sources whenever available. When no published source is referenced, the translation is mine.

²⁵ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 8.

²⁶ See Steven Harris, 'Coup d'oeil', *Oxford Art Journal*, 24 (2001), 89-111.

²⁷ For similarities with the image of the eye in the photomontages, see discussion in the next section of this chapter.

Révolutionnaires (AEAR) [Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists], a literary organization affiliated with the Communist party and later the anti-fascist group *Contre-Attaque*, initiated by André Breton and Georges Bataille.²⁸ During this time Cahun and Moore signed the communal statements of the Surrealists and Cahun published the polemical pamphlet *Les paris sont ouverts*²⁹ [the bets are open] which criticized the propagandist cultural policies of the Communist party while defending the Surrealist approach of letting the unconscious guide artistic practice and highlighting the revolutionary potential of poetry.

Cahun argued against the position of the Communist party, which considered poetry as a capitalist endeavour unless it adhered to the official Soviet cultural policy of socialist realism:

Some among us may think that poetry, devoid of practical utility ... will play no role in future societies. In attempts at poetry, even those of the proletariat, they will see only vestiges of capitalist society and will decree that we must guide those confused comrades toward the more precise tasks of Marxist propaganda. To this I answer, that poetry, having existed historically in all epochs and places, seems undeniably an inherent need of human, and even of animal, nature, a need undoubtedly linked to the sex instinct.³⁰

Cahun contends that poetry that aims to induce a reader in a direct manner to engage in revolutionary action is analogous to commercial advertising: 'This is why I think communist propaganda should be consigned to the *directed thought* of consciously political writers, that is journalists ... Whilst poets act in their own way on men's sensibilities. Their attacks are more cunning, but their most indirect blows are sometimes mortal'³¹

In contrast, Cahun developed a theory of *indirect action*, a strategy that highlights the impossibility of controlling the unconscious processes evoked by poetry, which requires an active engagement with the audience by leaving text and images incomplete, contradictory or vague.

²⁸ For background details on the political position of the Surrealists to the Communist Party, see Helena Lewis, 'Surrealists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists: Theories of Art and Revolution in France between the Wars', *Art Journal* 52 (1993), 61-68.

²⁹ Claude Cahun, *Les Paris sont Ouverts* (Paris: José Corti, 1934). Reprinted in *Écrits*, pp. 501-534.

³⁰ Claude Cahun, 'Poetry Keeps its Secret', in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. by Penelope Rosemont (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. 53-57 (p. 53). 'Poetry Keeps its Secret' is the first part of *Les Paris sont Ouverts*.

³¹ *Les Paris sont Ouverts*. English translation in Lizzie Thynne, 'Indirect Action: Politics and the Subversion of Identity in Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's Resistance to the Occupation of Jersey', *Papers of Surrealism*, 8 (2010), p. 6.

Il s'agit de mettre en marche et de laisser en panne. Ça oblige le lecteur à faire tout seul un pas de plus qu'il ne voudrait. On a soigneusement bloqué toutes les sorties, mais la porte d'entrée, on lui laisse le soin de l'ouvrir. *Laisser à désirer*, dit Breton.³²

[It's done by starting it up and then letting it break down. That obliges the reader to take a step further than he wants to. All the exits have been carefully blocked apart from the front door, but you leave the reader the trouble of opening it. Leave (something) to be desired, says Breton.]³³

Due to the tense political climate (right wing violence, antisemitism and the bitter schisms that divided the left), Cahun and Moore left Paris in 1937. They settled in Jersey and during the German occupation they risked their lives to spread anti-Nazi propaganda, producing printed flyers critical of the Nazi regime. They continued their resistance work for several years until they were finally caught in 1944, imprisoned and sentenced to death. However, the sentence was not carried out and the island was liberated shortly afterwards.³⁴

The concept of *indirect action* proved effective also in Cahun and Moore's counter-propaganda activities against the German occupation of Jersey, aiming to create dissent among the German troops. Rather than producing direct propaganda materials, they addressed the soldiers using a language and a tone that encouraged them to 'question their role in the war and the worth of giving their lives for their murderous leaders'.³⁵ They implemented the same strategies they used in their artistic practice, cropping diverse texts and images, appropriating and subverting Nazi discourse to create new collaged compositions in text and images. Cahun described the process of cropping and subversion as follows:

Sur cette page [of an illustrated German magazine] une photographie d'un régiment en marche. Ça avait l'air plein d'ardeur. Je la tournai en tout sens. Je m'aperçus qu'il suffisait de cacher la moitié de la photo pour changer *complètement* l'impression qu'elle donnait. Les jambes, les bottes, (sans les visages) n'avaient rien qui put sembler exaltant. Elles étaient tachées de boue (il faut croire qu'il y en avait tout de même eu parfois durant cet printemps ultrasec) et, isolées du reste, fatiguées à l'extrême.³⁶

³² Cahun, *Les Paris sont Ouverts*, p. 514.

³³ English translation in Thynne, p. 6.

³⁴ For background details of Cahun and Moore's resistance activities see *ibid.*, pp. 1-24, and Claire Follain, 'Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe – Résistantes', in *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, ed. by Louise Downie (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), pp. 83-97.

³⁵ Thynne, p. 13.

³⁶ Claude Cahun, 'Lettre à Gaston Ferdière', in *Écrits*, p. 681.

[On the page was a photograph of a marching regiment. They looked full of ardour. I turned it around. I realized that if I hid half of the photo it would completely change the impression it gave. The legs, the boots (without the faces) had nothing that seemed exultant about them. They were covered with mud (it is true that there was some occasionally, even in that ultra dry spring), and, isolated from the rest, extremely tired].³⁷

I believe the strategy of *indirect action* constitutes a common thread throughout the entire range of Cahun and Moore's creative activities, long before Cahun provided an explicit articulation in her pamphlet *Les paris sont ouverts* and implemented the approach in the propaganda campaign. The strategies employed throughout their entire creative work can be portrayed as an attempt to unsettle and shake their contemporaries out of complacency, using indirect methods of subterfuge, masquerade, paradox, repetition and reversal, to open up the discourse towards alternative possibilities in their materials. *Héroïnes* deconstructed and rewrote the narratives of female characters, which critiqued the conventional expectations of femininity and challenges her readers to imagine an alternative version of gender and desire. Similarly, *Aveux non avendus* explored the themes of mask and mirror, androgyny and ambivalence of identity. Finally, the anti-Nazi propaganda materials were meant to unsettle the German soldiers and encourage them to question their role in the war.

*Je est un autre - un multiple toujours*³⁸

When a work by sCahun was displayed at the *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* exhibition (London, Tate Gallery) in 1978,³⁹ it was not surprising that after several decades of obscurity, the piece was attributed to an "anonymous" artist. Similarly, in the catalogue of the exhibition *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*⁴⁰ (Corcoran Gallery of Art, New York) in 1985, in the absence of further information, the authors assumed that Claude Cahun died in the concentration camps. Others assumed her to be a man.⁴¹ Considering that Cahun had deliberately chosen the gender ambiguous name 'Claude', her strategy had proved effective. Likewise, Suzanne Malherbe adopted the masculine pseudonym Marcel Moore. In line with their desire to confound a fixed gender categorisation, the use of multiple pseudonyms

³⁷ Thynne, p. 15.

³⁸ Claude Cahun, 'Confidences au Miroir', in *Écrits*, p. 594.

³⁹ *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, ed. by Dawn Ades (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978).

⁴⁰ Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston and Dawn Ades, *L'amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985).

⁴¹ François Leperlier, 'Claude Cahun', in *Mise-en-Scene: Claude Cahun, Tacita Dean, Virginia Nimarkoh*, ed. by Bate David and François Leperlier (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1994), p. 16.

constitutes an integral part of Cahun and Moore's strategies of creating various impersonations, masks and dissimulations.

Cahun first used the pseudonym Claude Courlis, French for curlew, a likely reference to the distinctive Jewish nose of her father and her uncle.⁴² A second pseudonym she used was Daniel Douglas, referring to Oscar Wilde's lover, i.e. Alfred Douglas. The third, Claude Cahun, encompassed both homosexual and Jewish identity, alluded to in the earlier pen names, a double identity adopted in a defiant act of naming against the prevailing political and cultural conventions of her time. Tirza True Latimer writes that:

Renaming, unnameing, and refusing to be named or labeled afforded Cahun and Moore a symbolic means to unravel the familial and cultural nets that enmeshed them. These nonpatronymic, un-French, and gender-indeterminant monikers establish a strategic precedent, launching a campaign of self-affirmative negation.⁴³

The precedent of unnameing and renaming was repeated in Jersey, where both Cahun and Moore reverted to their original names, Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe, a 'disguise' which offered them a degree of anonymity, as their pre-war artistic and political activities remained unknown and their Nazi interrogators did not believe that two 'respectable' middle-aged ladies could have mastered an enduring campaign of resistance. Cahun described the process as a performance of alternating identities:

Ils avaient enfin repéré le nom de 'Schwob'⁴⁴ ... j'y avais subi un interrogatoire d'allure bureaucratique. Je m'en étais tirée, pensais-je, à notre avantage. J'y étais allée – méconnaissable – en Lucy Schwob. Je vivais normalement, sous mon aspect Claude Cahun. Les bureaucrates avaient fait des excuses à la vieille dame en noir qui avait l'air si malade.⁴⁵

[Finally they spotted the name "Schwob" ... I had to undergo a bureaucratic interrogation, I thought, to my advantage. I went there - unrecognizable – as Lucy Schwob. Normally, I lived as Claude Cahun. The bureaucrats had apologized to the old lady in black who looked so sick.]

⁴² Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, p. 29.

⁴³ Tirza True Latimer, 'Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12 (2006), p. 201.

⁴⁴ The surname Schwob suggested Jewish descent, although not so explicitly as Cahun. In October 1940, Cahun ignored an order for Jewish residents in Jersey to register with the German authorities.

⁴⁵ Cahun, 'Le Muet dans la Mêlée', in *Écrits*, p. 630.

At the same time Cahun and Moore performed a third identity, under the nom de guerre ‘Der Soldat Ohne Namen’ [a soldier with no name], a figure of a disillusioned German soldier that, much like in previous impersonations (for example, the fictional re-creations in *Héroïnes*), they presented as the ‘author’ of their propaganda leaflets. The concomitant pseudonyms demonstrate the permeability of identity positions in their work as discussed in the following section.

A common feature of Cahun and Moore’s pre-war pseudonyms is the repetition of their initials, CC, DD and MM, highlighting the notion of the ‘double’. A similar process is evidenced also in their photographic work, both thematically and in their mode of composition. For example, *Que me veux-tu?*, [what do you want from me?] consists of a double figure joined together out of two single images (Figures 1, 2 and 3). In the photomontage, the doubling of the figure and the positioning of the two heads suggest an awkward encounter between two postures of the same figure turning toward each other, yet recoiling, bending backwards or sideways to avoid touching each other. Like Siamese twins

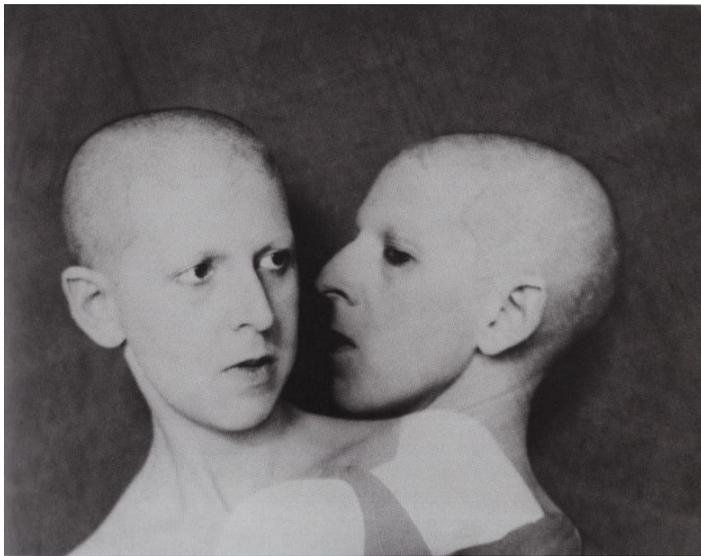


Figure 1. Claude Cahun, *Que me veux-tu?*, 1928



Figure 2. Untitled,⁴⁶ c. 1921

they are conjoined at the torso, the figure and its double are part of each other and cannot free itself of being multiple: ‘tu ne pouvais exister sans ta fausse jumelle. Vous avez partie liée. Tu ne peux l’exterminer sans t’abolir.’⁴⁷ [you couldn’t exist without your false twin, you are conjoined. You cannot exterminate her without destroying yourself].⁴⁸ With shaven heads and eyebrows, like in the two single images, the photomontage presents figures of indeterminate gender⁴⁹, stripped of any mark of distinct personal identity. Considering that the title (one of their few titled photographs) is phrased as a question, it appears that the presence of an other enables questioning the existence of a self as a single entity. It is worth noting that Cahun added her own conception of identity, ‘un multiple toujours’, to Rimbaud’s phrase ‘Je est un autre’.⁵⁰ While Rimbaud’s conception points to a stable identity that remains

⁴⁶ Cahun and Moore did not title most of their photographs. Since the 1980s, the works have been exhibited with Cahun identified as the artist and the label ‘self-portrait’ given by galleries and curators. However, presenting the photographs as a product of one ‘self’ is problematic, considering that the main thrust of the work is the conceptualisation of the self as multiple and unstable. Moreover, it seems obvious that Cahun could not have taken the photographs without Moore’s collaboration in view of their lifelong love and the deep commitment to artistic collaboration exemplified in the work. Cahun wrote: ‘Nos deux têtes ... se penchèrent sur une photographie. Portrait de l’un ou de l’autre, nos deux narcissismes s’y noyant, c’était l’impossible réalisé en un miroir magique. L’échange, la superposition, la fusion des désirs. L’unité de l’image obtenu par l’amitié étroite des deux corps’ (Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, p. 191). [Our two heads ... leaned together over a photograph. Portrait of one or of the other, our two narcissisms drowning there; it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. The exchange, the superimposition, the fusion of desires. The unity of the image achieved through the close intimacy of two bodies] (Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 12). See discussion in Tirza True Latimer, (*Entre Nous*).

⁴⁷ Cahun, ‘Aveux non Avenus’, in *Écrits*, p.1 92.

⁴⁸ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ There is a discussion on gender and identity in Cahun’s work later in this chapter.

⁵⁰ Cahun, ‘Confidences au miroir’, p. 594.

‘other’, Cahun’s addition highlights the multiple possibilities between self and alterity throughout her work.⁵¹

The notion of the ‘double’ underpins both the thematic and the structural features of Cahun and Moore’s work in text and image, as well as their conception of collaboration in creative practice. An early example is the book *Vues et visions*.⁵² The book consists of 25 double-sided pages of Cahun’s prose poems, accompanied by Moore’s black and white illustrations influenced by art nouveau, Jugendstil and Japanese prints (Figure 4). The ‘views’ on the left reflect the narrator’s recollections of summer holidays in the seaside town Le Croisic; on the right, the ‘visions’ refer to the imaginary scenes from the classical world. Each diptych is constructed through a pattern of either repetition of titles (e.g. L’Arrivée / L’Arrivée ; Jour de Fête / Jour de Fête ; Jeux de Lumière / Jeux de Lumière), sometimes variations (e.g. Les Jeux de la Mer / Les Jeux des Marins;), or contrasts (e.g. La nuit moderne / La lumière antique). Similarly, the text of each diptych is constructed through repetitions and variations both structurally and thematically.

⁵¹ See Andrea Oberhuber, ‘Pour une Esthétique de l’entre-deux: À Propos des Stratégies Intermédiales dans l’oeuvre de Claude Cahun’, *Narratologie*, 6 (2005), p. 348.

⁵² The text of *Vues et Visions* was first published in 1914 under the pseudonym Claude Courlis (*Vues et visions*, *Mercure de France*, 406 (1914), 258-278.). It was republished in 1919 under the pseudonym Claude Cahun, with illustrations by Marcel Moore (*Vues et visions*, Paris: Éditions Georges Crès, 1919). This edition was republished in Leperlier’s edited volume of Cahun’s *Écrits*, pp. 21-122.

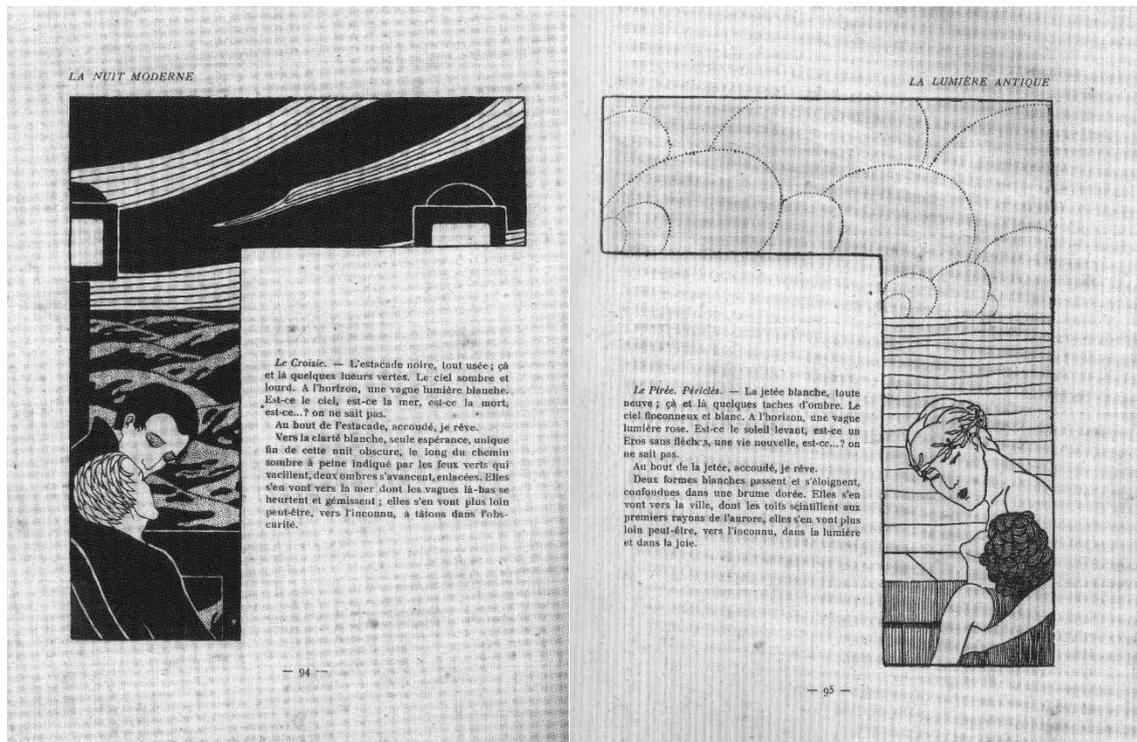


Figure 4. *La Nuit Moderne/ La Lumière Antique*⁵³

LA NUIT MODERNE

Le Croisic. – L'estacade noire, tout usée; çà et là quelques lueurs verte. Le ciel sombre et lourd. A l'horizon, une vague lumière blanche. Est-ce le ciel, est-ce la mer, est-ce la mort, est-ce ...? On ne sait pas.

....

[Le Croisic. – The black dike, worn out; here and there some green gleamers. The sky dark and heavy. On the horizon, a vague white light. Is it the sky, is it the sea, is it death, is it ...?]

LA LUMIÈRE ANTIQUE

Le Pirée . Periclès. – La jetée blanche, toute neuve ; çà et là quelque taches d'ombre. Le ciel floconneux et blanc. A l'horizon, une vague lumière rose. Est-ce le soleil levant, est-ce un Eros sans flèches, une vie nouvelle, est-ce ...? on ne sait pas.

...

[*Piraeus. Pericles.* - The white jetty, brand new; here and there some spots of shadow. The sky fluffy and white. On the horizon, a vague pink light. Is it the rising sun, is it an Eros without arrows, a new life, is it ...? We do not know.]

⁵³ Cahun, 'Vues et Visions', in *Écrits*, pp. 116-117.

repetitions and variations both structurally and thematically. For example, in *La Nuit Moderne / La Lumière Antique* the pattern is repeated in both parts of the triptych but the parallel structure highlights divergent perspectives: modern time is depicted as dark and sombre, while antiquity is suffused with fresh light and a promise of a new life.

The two widely different timeframes juxtaposed in the diptych suggest a tenuous hybrid construction which is replicated in the illustrations. On the left, the illustration enhances the sense of doom in the sombre depiction of the unsettled sea surrounding the couple, with only narrow strips of light visible on a dark horizon. On the right, the contrasting image depicts a light and airy atmosphere of the rising sun, with a calm sea surrounding the embracing couple. To Cahun and Moore's contemporary readers, the short haircuts and delicate features of the couple on the right would have suggested androgynous or homosexual figures in an imaginary place where Eros would be free in the light of a glowing horizon. Tirza True Latimer⁵⁴ writes that framing the text in the context of antiquity would have resonated with Paris's gay subculture and its homophile reconstructions of antiquity. The diptychs in *Vues and visions* 'create an intertext that reverberates with homoerotic double sense'.⁵⁵

The 'homoerotic double sense' is enhanced by the notion of the 'double' which constitutes an important feature of Cahun and Moore's work. Mirrors provide a device for 'doubling' in their explorations of multiple identities.⁵⁶ In contrast to the conventional trope of a woman gazing at her reflection in the mirror, prevalent in painting and fashion imagery,⁵⁷ in Moore's photograph of Cahun (Figure 5), she is looking away from the mirror, her head turns towards the camera, challenging the viewer by her stern gaze to engage with an image of her gender-ambiguous features. The shaved off eyebrows and short cropped hair strip off traditional feminine features, yet the hair is sleek and softly combed, and the lips neatly rouged. The body is clothed, not in a feminine style outfit, but in a mannish-cut jacket. Yet the harlequin patterned jacket diverts attention from a gendered body towards a neutral geometric design. Furthermore, the clenched fist holds together the lapels to conceal

⁵⁴ Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁶ In *Aveux non Avenus*, Cahun goes beyond the double to refer to an image which suggests multiplicity, breaking glass and making a stained glass window with the fragments (see p. 41).

⁵⁷ For a discussion, see *ibid.*, pp. 87-90.



Figure 5. Untitled, c. 1928



Figure 6. Untitled, c. 1928

any glimpse of flesh. In contrast, in the mirror image the eyes turn away both from herself and from a viewer gaze, the jacket is open to reveal her neck, yet it is sculptured and sinewy, traditionally associated with masculinity.

A parallel photograph (Figure 6), probably taken at the same time by Cahun, shows Moore in a more conventional pose, gazing at the mirror and smiling softly. Yet, her outfit, a neutral jumper and a woollen hat that cover both her body and her hair, is devoid of any feminine feature. Cahun and Moore mirror each other, each doubled and inverted in her own reflection. Considered together, the two photographs emblemize Cahun and Moore as androgynous figures, embracing both masculine and feminine features, who destabilise the notion of the single fixed gendered subject, as well as of the creative artist as a single gifted person (usually male). Instead, in a section titled ‘Singular Plural’ in *Aveux non avenues*, Cahun describes their interdependent creative practice as follows:

Nous sortons de notre superbe isolement, nous empruntons au monde. Mon amant ne sera plus le sujet de mon drame, il sera mon collaborateur ... Je suis l’un, tu es l’autre. Ou le contraire. Nos désirs se rencontrent. Déjà c’est un effort que de les démêler.⁵⁸

[We come out of our splendid isolation and lend ourselves to the world. My lover will no longer be the subject of my drama, s/he will be my collaborator ... I am one, you are the other. Or the opposite. Our desires meet one another. Already it is an effort to disentangle them].

⁵⁸ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, in *Écrits*, p. 306.

A ‘homoerotic double sense’ suggested by Latimer is associated also with the profound social and cultural change following the First World War which saw a fundamental rethinking of philosophical, medical, social and political theories that transformed attitudes to homosexuality and femininity. During the war women engaged in traditional male jobs,⁵⁹ became economically independent and breached the boundaries of sexual difference. Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer write that

To be a modern woman in 1920s Paris was not only to be active, but, above all, to be sexually active: to actively desire, to freely choose the objects of desire, to cross established boundaries of propriety dictated by gender, race, class, age, marital status.⁶⁰

At the same time, a war-devastated masculinity was seeking its revival through re-establishing moral and social stability and restoration of traditional femininity. Mary Louise Roberts contends that the breakdown of traditional gender boundaries and the ‘image of the modern woman, produced by writers and social observers after the war, provided a readily accessible symbol of the war’s more general emotional and moral shock.’⁶¹ She refers to the intense sexual/cultural anxieties in post-war France, quoting from a 1919 survey on the war and feminism

the extent to which it will be possible to bring the woman back to the home after the war will show the extent to which humanity will have succeeded in averting the crisis she is passing through, which threatens to eclipse . . . the highest forms of civilization.⁶²

Cahun’s contribution to the conflicting discourses is reflected in her article⁶³ on the libel case brought by the actress Maud Allan against Pemberton Billing, a British MP and editor of

⁵⁹ For background see, for example, Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, ‘Becoming Modern: Gender and Sexual Identity after World War I’, in *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars*, ed. by Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003) and Mary Louise Roberts, ‘This Civilization no Longer has Sexes: La Garçonne and Cultural Crisis in France After World War I’, *Gender & History*, 4 (1992), pp. 49-69.

⁶⁰ Chadwick and Latimer, p. 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶² Roberts, p. 52.

⁶³ Claude Cahun, ‘La “Salomé d Oscar Wilde”, le procès Billing et les 47,000 Pervertis du Livre Noir’, *Mercur de France*, 1(1918), pp. 69-80. Reproduced in *Écrits*, pp. 451-9.

the journal *Vigilante* which published an article titled ‘The cult of the clitoris’,⁶⁴ implicating Allan in acts of ‘sexual perversion’ and treason. Cahun’s article on the trial provided her with an opportunity to protest against hostile attitudes to homosexuality and lesbianism, as well as against censorship and political restriction on artistic freedom.⁶⁵ In her comments on the trial Cahun writes: ‘on y trouvera en outre la thèse de ces puritains qui, invoquant l’état de guerre, veulent, sous couleur d’une réforme des mœurs, ôter toute liberté à l’expression artistique de la pensée’.⁶⁶ [One will find here the thesis of those puritans who, invoking the state of war, wished, under the guise of a reform of morals, to remove all freedom of artistic expression and thought].

Cahun and Moore moved to Paris in 1920 and joined the avant-garde culture and the prominent international circle of lesbian couples, including Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood.⁶⁷ Cahun never described herself explicitly as a lesbian and the only direct reference to her view on homosexuality is her response to a survey in the journal *L’Amitié* after the homosexual magazine *Inversions* was banned by the French government in 1925: ‘Mon opinion sur l’homosexualité et les homosexuels est exactement la même que mon opinion sur l’hétérosexualité et les hétérosexuels : tout dépend des individus et des circonstances. Je réclame la liberté générale des mœurs.’⁶⁸ [My opinion on homosexuality and homosexuals is exactly the same as my opinion on heterosexuality and heterosexuals: everything depends on the individual and on the circumstances. I call for the general freedom of morals].

Rather than identifying with a binary gender identity, Cahun and Moore focused on the figure of the androgyne, through performing repeated doubling and ambiguous signs of masculinity /femininity. Cahun dedicated “Salmacis la Suffragette” to Claude (à *Claude*),⁶⁹ alluding to her own desire to shape a new being beyond the labels ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ and circulate freely in the intermediate space: ‘Je circulerai librement dans l’espace

⁶⁴ Billing attacked Maud Allan’s performance in a private showing of Oscar Wilde’s 1918 production of *Salomé*, which had been banned in England. Billing’s argument about the moral endangerment of the public was also a pretext for ‘exposing’ a political ‘scandal’: the existence (never proven) of a secret ‘black book’ listing 47,000 named prominent British perverts, including some who attended Allan’s private performance, who were part of a German wartime plot to use sodomy and lesbianism against the British people. For background on the trial, see Lucy Bland, ‘Trial by Sexology? Maud Allan, Salome and the “Cult of the Clitoris” Case’, in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 183-98, and Deborah Cohler, ‘Sapphism and Sedition: Producing Female Homosexuality in Great War Britain’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16 (2007), 68-94.

⁶⁵ Prefiguring Cahun’s defence of artistic freedom in *Les Paris sont Ouverts, as discussed above*.

⁶⁶ Cahun, ‘La “Salomé d’Oscar Wilde”’, p. 451.

⁶⁷ See Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*.

⁶⁸ Cahun, *L’Amitié*, http://semgai.free.fr/doc_et_pdf/L_amiie.pdf [accessed 11 October 2017].

⁶⁹ Each story in *Héroïnes* begins with a short dedication.

intermédiaire'.⁷⁰ Like Salmacis, in *Aveux non avenues* the androgyne is described as a mixture which creates a new entity: 'La double graine androgyne est un mélange aux proportions impondérables; et ce mélange peut produire un corps nouveau, différent de ceux qui l'ont formé'⁷¹ [The double androgynous seed is a mixture of unidentifiable proportions; and this mixture can produce a new body, different to those who created it].⁷²

The desire to create a 'new body' is explored through the repeated use of theatrical costumes, makeup and masks, playing ambiguous gender roles in front of the camera:

L'objectif suit les yeux, la bouche, les rides à fleur de peau ... L'expression du visage est violente, parfois tragique. Enfin calme - du calme conscient, élaboré, des acrobates. Un sourire professionnel - et voilà !⁷³

[The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles skin deep ... the expression on the face is fierce, sometimes tragic. Finally calm – a knowing calm, elaborate, of acrobats. A professional smile – and voilà!]⁷⁴



Figure 7. Untitled, 1921.

⁷⁰ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 185.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁷² Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 45.

⁷³ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 177.

⁷⁴ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 1.

For example, in Figure 7 Cahun wears a black tuxedo, a white necktie and a pocket handkerchief, her hair cropped short. Hand on her hip and holding an object that resembles a cigarette, she stands in a mock-masculine pose of a well-groomed young man, performing the role of a dandy. Yet, her fist is clenched, suggesting a challenge to a conventional gender portrayal. In contrast, in Figure 8 she appears in a hyper-feminine outfit: corseted in a tightly laced fancy-fabric dress, face painted white with eyeliner and shadow applied in thick black strokes and rouged hearts painted on her cheeks. Her head is framed in a tightly covered wooly cap adorned with a plaited headband, making her face appear masklike. The masklike face and the stiff body posture recall a string-puppet, a parodic representation of stereotypical feminine attributes.

Figures 9 and 10⁷⁵ involve a more complex staging of an over-the-top stereotypical image, parodying a melange of masculine and feminine features. Dressed as a weight-lifter in a bodysuit and boxer shorts, she is made up in an exaggerated feminine style: pouty lips, curlicue spirals skirting her forehead, painted eyelashes and heart shapes decorate her



Figure 9. Untitled, 1927.

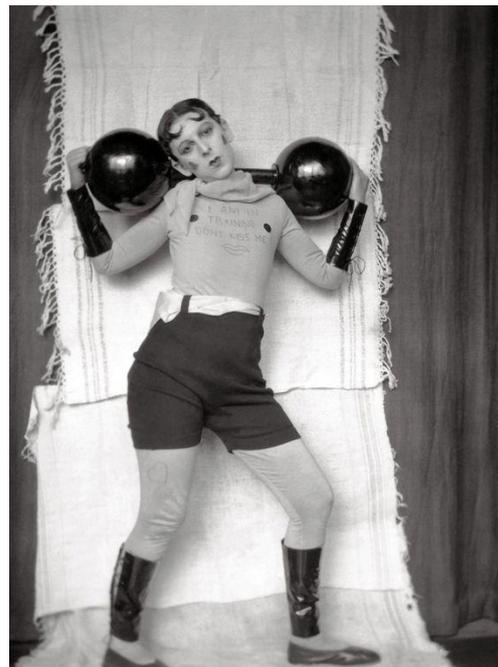


Figure 10. Untitled, 1927.

⁷⁵ These two photographs are from a series using the same outfit, makeup and props, and presumably taken at the same time.

cheeks and leggings, and faux nipples pasted on her t-shirt alongside the inscription ‘I am in training don’t kiss me’.⁷⁶ The painted ‘feminine’ face contrasts with the dumbbells, a conventional sign of the ‘masculine’. Yet, the dumbbells bear the names of two comic characters, Totor and Popol (pre-*Tintin* characters from a comic series by Hergé), mocking the image of the masculine prowess of the weightlifter.

In contrast to Figures 9 and 10 which expose gender constructs, Figure 11 involves a play between masking and revealing. Cahun poses naked, sitting on a feathery quilt, her body carefully placed between two swirling patterns of the silky fabric. Her skin glistens in a room flushed with light, all features of a soft ‘feminine’ image. Yet, although the figure is naked it does not reveal its gender: the thighs are joined together tight, partly hiding her crotch, her arms conceal her breasts, and a birdlike facemask with no holes for eyes partially covers her face.

Masks are a recurrent feature throughout Cahun’s and Moore work. In Figure 12 Cahun wears a full-face mask which displays similar features to the painted face in Figure 9.



Figure11. Untitled, 1928.



Figure12. Untitled, 1928.

⁷⁶ The significance of the inscription is not clear. To me, it suggests the ancient myth that sex can impair (masculine) athletic prowess, and therefore athletes were not allowed to engage in sex while training. At the same time, the hyper-feminine features constitute signals of feminine flirtation. The resulting image appears as a parodic take of mixed messages. It can also be considered as prefiguring Joan Riviere’s ‘*Womanliness as a Masquerade*’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 10 (1929), 303-13. For a discussion of Riviere’s essay, see below.

Several other eyeless masks are attached to her cloak, including the one worn in figure 11, suggesting that they were selected from a collection of props to fit the specific staging. Masks for Cahun are interchangeable and can be attached or detached at will. In Figure 12, with the face and the body completely covered, there is no opening for a glimpse of a person beneath the mask, recalling the inscription on the final photomontage in *Aveux non avenues*: ‘Sous ce masque un autre masque. Je n’en finirai pas de soulever tous ces visages’.⁷⁷ [Under this mask another mask. I will not finish lifting all these faces.]

The significance of masks for Cahun is further explored in her essay ‘Carnaval en chambre’, published in 1926 in the journal *Ligne de cœur*.⁷⁸ The essay begins with Cahun’s recollection of the enthralling ritual taken up year after year: The excited child rushes to the window to see a procession of masked characters parade through town. The young girl longs to immerse herself in the ‘multi-coloured evidence of pleasure’, against the parents’ ‘incomprehensible prohibitions.’⁷⁹

The second part begins with the observation that far from the pure joyful carnivals of childhood, those of adulthood can be misleading. The spell of the mask can play into the hands of people who, for moral or material reasons, have an interest in not acting with an open face. Cahun notes that masks can be made of different materials, cardboard, velvet, flesh, the Word. Some, like cardboard and velvet are intended for carnival times. Others, like carnal and verbal masks, are worn in all seasons and serve not only to transform oneself for pleasure, but can also create a ‘double’ to conceal what is deemed undesirable. Little by little it can become part of everyday life, inseparable from being itself. The mask turns out to be both a promise of liberation, as well as a threat of invasion. Mask and skin can become inseparable, culminating in dissolving the human face altogether:

Il m’en souvient, c’était le Carnaval. J’avais passé mes heures solitaires à déguiser mon âme. Les masques en étaient si parfaits que lorsqu’il leur arrivaient de se croiser sur la grand’place de ma conscience, ils ne se reconnaissaient pas...
Mais les fards que j’avais employés, semblaient indélébiles. Je frottai tant pour nettoyer que j’‘enlevai la peau. Et mon âme comme un visage écorché, à vif, n’ avait plus forme humaine.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, in *Écrits*, p. 405. There is a discussion of the photomontage work later in this chapter.

⁷⁸ Cahun, ‘Carnaval en Chambre’, *La Ligne de Cœur*, 4 (1926), 14-15. Reprinted in *Écrits*, pp. 485-6.

⁷⁹ Jennifer Shaw translated ‘Carnaval en chambre’ into English. See Jennifer L. Shaw, ‘Bedroom Carnival’, in *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (London: Reaktion, 2017), pp. 284-286 (p. 284).

⁸⁰ Cahun, ‘Carnaval en Chambre’, p. 486.

[I remember, it was Carnival time. I had spent my solitary hours disguising my soul. The masks had become so perfect that when the time came for them to walk across the grand plaza of my conscience, they didn't recognize each other... But the make-up that I had employed seemed indelible. I rubbed so much trying to wash it off that I took off my skin. And my soul, like a flayed face, no longer had human form].⁸¹

On the one hand Cahun suggests that masks can be considered potentially destructive but at the same time she maintains that stripping off the mask to uncover the 'truth' beneath, is bound to end in disappointment. We might believe that transparency is within reach, 'si parfait que parfois nous croirons toucher la prunelle du doigt.'⁸²[so perfect that sometimes we might believe we can touch the pupil with our fingers].⁸³ But what would be the point of doing so? There is no underlying truth to be discovered beneath the mask. It is far better to let the truth reclaim its power of imagination and retain the mystery. Let the carnival costumes, the make-up and the masks uphold the dream and regenerate ourselves through a perpetual carnival.

L'idée nue (dite vérité) n'a pu nous éblouir. Il nous faut dénuder ses organes, manoeuvrer son squelette – et nous avouer déçus. Mais rendons-lui ses fards, elle reprend sa puissance. Il nous reste le rêve, de délicieux soupçons – et tous nous sont permis, – d'inépuisables combinaisons de mensonges. Exalter l'imagination du costumier. Déclarer le Carnaval perpétuel.⁸⁴

[The naked idea (called truth) has not been able to dazzle for us. We must strip bare its organs, manipulate its skeleton – and admit to our disappointment. But give it back its make-up, and truth regains its power. Dreams and delicious suspicions remain for us – and all is permitted – of the inexhaustible combination of lies. Glorify the imagination of the costume maker. Announce the perpetual carnival.]⁸⁵

Cahun and Moore's photographic and textual work has been linked in the literature⁸⁶ with Joan Riviere's [sic]⁸⁷ article, "Womanliness as a Masquerade",⁸⁸ which was published in 1929, three years after "Bedroom Carnival". In the article Riviere explored the relations between masking and womanliness, aiming 'to show that women who wish for masculinity

⁸¹ Cahun, 'Bedroom Carnival', in Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, p. 285.

⁸² Cahun, 'Carnaval en Chambre', p. 486.

⁸³ Cahun, 'Bedroom Carnival', in Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, p. 285.

⁸⁴ Cahun, 'Carnaval en Chambre', p. 486.

⁸⁵ Cahun, 'Bedroom Carnival', in Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, p. 285.

⁸⁶ See for example, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *The equivocal 'I'*, and Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*.

⁸⁷ Joan Riviere was a British psychoanalyst, writing in English. Her name is spelt without accent.

⁸⁸ Riviere, 'Womanliness as a masquerade'. For background, see Athol Hughes, 'Joan Riviere and the Masquerade', *Psychoanalysis and History*, 6 (2004), 161-75, and Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud's Women* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992).

may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men'.⁸⁹ She developed her argument from a single psychoanalytic case study, later supplemented by other examples. The case-study featured a professionally successful female patient who, in order to avert her anxiety of being perceived as 'masculine' due to her success in a 'masculine' domain, adopts a defensive mask of publicly performing the 'feminine' stereotype (for example, dressing in feminine clothes and flirting with men). Based on her analysis of the case study, Riviere concluded that:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it - much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade.' My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.⁹⁰

By suggesting that 'womanliness' is a masquerade, Riviere points out the performative nature of womanliness, implying that there is no underlying 'feminine' identity. Judith Butler⁹¹ draws on and develops Riviere's notion of masquerade to investigate the performative nature of gender roles. According to Butler, 'performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.'⁹² Thus, a gendered body is produced through repeated performances of a range of '*fabrications* [italics in original] manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.'⁹³ Butler's notion of 'trouble' highlights the inexorable capacity of gender performativity to unsettle established conventions of gender and power. She recounts an early experience:

To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood something one should never do precisely because that would get one *in* trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 303.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 306.

⁹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁹² Ibid., p. xv.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 136.

threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable, and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.⁹⁴

Similarly, Cahun describes her strategy as troubling the fixed definitions of gender in favour of a mutable gender identity⁹⁵: ‘Brouiller les cartes. Masculin ? Féminin ? Mais ça dépend des cas. Neutre est le seul genre qui me convienne toujours’⁹⁶ [Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me].⁹⁷ Late in her life, in a letter to a friend, Cahun portrays herself as life-long troublemaker:

En vain, dans *Aveux non avendus*, je m’efforçai – par l’humour noir, la provocation, le défi – de faire sortir mes contemporains de leur conformisme béat, de leur *complacency*. L’ostracisme fut à peu près général. À part le silence, les plus basses insultes. Voilà comment la “critique littéraire” ... voulut bien accueillir les “poèmes en prose” de cette indésirable Cassandra.⁹⁸

[In vain, in *Disavowals* I tried – through black humour, provocation, defiance – to shake my contemporaries out of their blissful conformism, their *complacency*. Ostracism was more or less the general response. Aside from the silence, the basest insults. This is how ‘literary criticism’... sought to welcome the ‘prose-poems’ of this unwanted Cassandra.]⁹⁹

The ‘rediscovery’ of Cahun and Moore’s work in the 1980’s coincided with the considerable interest in the theoretical works of feminist writers, such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz¹⁰⁰ on issues of mutability of gender and identity. Cahun’s photographic work was portrayed as prefiguring the performative art of Cindy Sherman. More recently it has been

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. xxix.

⁹⁵ Cahun was influenced by Havelock Ellis’s concept of sex and gender as malleable. Ellis writes: ‘We may not know exactly what Sex is; but we do know that it is mutable, with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex, that its frontiers are often uncertain, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female’. (Havelock Ellis, *The Psychology of Sex* (London: William Heinemann, 1933), p. 194). Under the name Lucy Schwob, Cahun translated part of Ellis’ work into French as ‘La Femme dans la Société,’ *L’Hygiène Sociale: Etudes de Psychologie*, 1 (1929). Like Cahun, Ellis responded to the survey in the same issue of the journal *L’Amitié*, http://semgai.free.fr/doc_et_pdf/L_amiitie.pdf [accessed 24 February 2018].

⁹⁶ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 366.

⁹⁷ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 151.

⁹⁸ Claude Cahun, ‘Lettre à Paul Levy du 3 Juillet 1950’, in *Écrits*, p. 710.

⁹⁹ Translated by Jennifer Mundy, introduction to *Disavowals*, pp. xvi-xvii.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

suggested (for example, by Gen Doy and Miranda Welby-Everard)¹⁰¹ that other aspects of Cahun and Moore's multi-layered work have been overshadowed by the preoccupation with gender issues. For example, rather than focusing mainly on gender issues, Andrea Oberhuber¹⁰² portrays Cahun's enterprise as a fundamental commitment to the principle of inter-artistic collaboration which constitutes a challenge to 'the idea of the artist as an *individual* creator.'¹⁰³ She suggests that Cahun's collaborative exploration of various postures, in her life, in her writing, in her photographic work with Moore and on the stage in the theatre of Pierre-Albert Birot were intended to highlight the multiple positions and the intersubjective character of the self.

Considered from this perspective, the theatre offered Cahun an opportunity to embody other lives and extend her repertoire of possible identities in collaboration with other actors in the live world of the stage. Miranda Welby-Everard writes that for Cahun, acting was 'conceived as a tool in the search for oneself, the notion of the other me finding logical expression within the Plateau [the theatre] in the form of the actor's double.'¹⁰⁴ She contends that the medium of theatre was 'fundamental to Cahun's mode of expression and her world of fantasy and facade.'¹⁰⁵ According to Welby-Everard, Cahun's theatricality is expressed in a variety of ways, through the use of masks, costumes and make-up in the photographic work as discussed above, her use of theatrical tropes in her writing and mostly in her performance in the theatre.

In her writing Cahun often used dramatic dialogue and references to theatrical terminology and scenarios, 'ficelles théâtrales'¹⁰⁶ [theatrical strings]. For example, in *Aveux non Avenus* she states: 'Je fournis le théâtre, choisissez vos décors, vos aventures, votre caractère, votre sexe, votre maquillage...'¹⁰⁷ [I provide the theatre, you choose your stage sets, your adventures, your character, your sex, your make-up...]. In *Héroïnes*, the characters are described as actresses playing their own scenarios. Dalila, for example, delivers her long speech to great effects ('une longue tirade et quelques beaux effets')¹⁰⁸ and refers to the seduction as her 'grande scène'. Salomé is portrayed as a disillusioned actress, who learned the art of deception in the theatre: 'Ma déception commença au théâtre, un jour qu'on

¹⁰¹ Gen Doy, *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography* (New York: IB Tauris, 2007), and Miranda Welby-Everard, 'Imaging the Actor: The Theatre of Claude Cahun', *Oxford Art Journal*, 29 (2006), 1-24.

¹⁰² Andrea Oberhuber, 'Claude Cahun, Marcel Moore, Lise Deharme and the Surrealist Book', *History of Photography*, 31 (2007), 40-56.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 42, italics in source.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, pp. 118 and 168.

¹⁰⁷ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 146 and *Disavowals*, p. 127.

¹⁰⁸ Cahun, *Héroïnes*, in *Écrits*, p. 130.

apportait *dans un bassin d'argent* une tête en carton peint, dégouttante de rouge - rappelant un morceau de porc frais à l'étal du boucher.¹⁰⁹ [My deception began in the theater, one day when they brought, on a silver plate, a head of painted cardboard, dripping with red - looking like a piece of pork from the butcher's. - Disgusting!].¹¹⁰

Another theatrical scene, a Sunday in Paradise, is performed in a music-hall: 'Assis au music-hall, et j'espère bien placé, vous regardez la scène.'¹¹¹ [Seated in the music hall, and in good seats I hope, you're watching the show.]¹¹² The serpent is shadow-boxing, God displays his multicoloured electric halo, while Adam spins his naked body round. Eve is portrayed as an acrobat juggling balls ('Elle jongle avec des mondes roulés en boule')¹¹³ [worlds rolled up into balls] and doing the splits. She turns her back to the male characters in the show who are depicted as rivals pursuing their own stage-lights, while Eve is on a honeymoon with her own flesh ('voyage de noces avec sa propre chair').¹¹⁴

As Welby-Everard suggests, the significance of the theatre for Cahun was 'not only appertaining to her masking, mise en scène and production of self, but in the Shakespearian sense of the world as a stage, of life as tragic farce and Cahun as the heroine of her own drama'.¹¹⁵ Cahun extended her interest in the theatre by performing three stage roles with Albert-Birot's experimental theatre company Le Plateau (The Stage) in 1929. She played Elle (the Wife) in *Barbe Bleu* (Blue Beard), Le Monsieur in *Banlieue* and Le Diable in *Le Mystere d'Adam* (The Adam Mystery).¹¹⁶ Her roles in the theatre provided a source for the photographic images. For example, the masklike face, the stiff body posture and the costume in Figure 8 (above) were originally conceived for Cahun's role in *Barbe Bleu* (Figure 13) and re-used for the still photograph. Similarly, the role of the Diable in the medieval play *Le Mystere d'Adam* resonates with the music hall scenario (Sunday in Paradise) from *Aveux non Avenus* discussed above. Welby-Everard comments that the Diable was an ideal role for Cahun, offering her an opportunity to transform on stage from the glittering prince before the Fall, into its double, the demonic figure wearing a black cape and a grotesque mask.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.148.

¹¹⁰ 'Claude Cahun's "Heroines"', in *Inverted Odyssey*, pp. 76-7.

¹¹¹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 221.

¹¹² Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 190.

¹¹³ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 222.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Welby-Everard, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ For details, see Welby-Everard, 'Imaging the Actor'.



Figure 13. Claude Cahun in *Barbe Bleue*, 1929.

The transformative opportunities of performing on the live stage recall Cahun's vision of the transformative potential of the carnival (in "Bedroom Carnival"), in particular as conceptualised in Bakhtin's portrayal of the carnival as a 'second life', a 'feast of becoming, change and renewal,'¹¹⁷ turning 'inside out' the established authoritative views, through parodies, travesties and profanations. For Bakhtin, as for Cahun, one important feature of carnival was the mask which embodied 'the joy of change and reincarnation ... the negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to itself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries...'.¹¹⁸ Masks enable re-invention and point to the mutability of identity. For both Bakhtin and Cahun, in addition to the exuberance of masks and masquerading, the carnival offers a potentiality of becoming 'another', as well as a vision of regeneration that opens up a perspective on another life, liberated from

the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.¹¹⁹

To express the violation of boundaries and the vision of alterity embodied in Rabelais' carnival, Bakhtin used juxtapositions of genres and styles, from the scientific, theological and philosophical, to the vulgar transgression of popular discourse. Similarly, Cahun's work in

¹¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

the theatre offered her an opportunity to embody other lives and possible identities in collaboration with other actors in the live world of the stage. Cahun's strategies for exploring in text and image her vision of 'being another' involved violation of boundaries, gender fluidity, subterfuge, masquerade, paradox, repetition and reversal. When it was suggested to her to write a 'confessional' autobiography, she responded 'don't get your hopes up',¹²⁰ recognising that a conventional narrative account would not be appropriate to convey the multiple perspectives and dimensions of her work and would not unravel and negate the conventions circumscribing her world. Instead, in *Aveux non Avenus* Cahun and Moore created new meanings by using texts and photomontages often taken from their previous works – fragments of autobiography, poems, letters, aphorisms, recounting of dream, dialogues fictional characters taken out of their original context to form a hybrid assemblage created through juxtaposition of disparate fragments in a tenuous mélange. *Aveux non Avenus* can be considered as a serial composition, collaged from fragments made of disparate elements.

*Mon âme est fragmentaire*¹²¹

The concept of fragmentation features extensively in the discourse of modernity.¹²² In the *Body in Pieces* Nochlin describes the 'sense of social, psychological, even metaphysical fragmentation that so seems to mark modern experience - a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value.'¹²³ Fragments have become indispensable components in the production of modernist art and literature, originally in the 'invention' of collage,¹²⁴ attributed to Picasso and Braque, who created the first collae in 1912.¹²⁵ Collage juxtaposes disparate fragments taken from a variety of publicly available sources, such as newspapers, illustrations or part objects. The fragments carry a reference to the external reality from which they are derived, as well as a potential activated in a new

¹²⁰ Jennifer Mundy, introduction to *Disavowals*, (p. xii).

¹²¹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 394.

¹²² For example, Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985); Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Boston: MIT Press, 1989).

¹²³ Nochlin, p. 7.

¹²⁴ Marjorie Perloff, 'The Invention of Collage,' in *New York Literary Forum Vols. 10-11*, ed. by Jeanine Parisier Plottel (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1983), pp. 5-47; Katherine Hoffman, 'Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview' in *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 1-37.

¹²⁵ Picasso's collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* and Braque's papier collé *Fruit Dish and Glass* both date from 1912 (see Perloff)

context. According to Marjorie Perloff,¹²⁶ the most important feature of the collage is severing of narrative and syntactic relationships between the components. Unlike traditional modes of narrative and visual art, collage technique is based on parataxis.

As noted above, Cahun and Moore's use of collage and photomontage shares some features (i.e. juxtaposing disparate fragments in paratactic configurations) with other works of that period, for example, the work of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield.¹²⁷ However, in contrast to most collage and montage works which use material derived from publicly available sources,¹²⁸ Cahun and Moore used mainly their personal materials, including visual self-representations and fragmentary texts, often alluding to biographical happenings. Thus, rather than predominantly creating a dialogue between external sources, as in most collage works, the disparate elements juxtaposed in Cahun and Moore's photomontages fragment the 'self' material into partial views that simultaneously engage in a dialogue between diverse possibilities for creating hybrid multiple selves. The use of personal material brings into focus an autobiographical aspect of constructing *Aveux non avenues* out of previous works: photographs, fragments of autobiography, poems, letters, aphorisms, recounting of dream, dialogues with fictional characters, taken out of their original context.

For example, the frontispiece photomontage (Figure 14) that precedes the text serves as a preamble which introduces key elements repeated throughout the book: the eye, mirrors and reflections, severed body parts (in particular, hands and lips), spherical shapes and allusions to God, all presented as disparate elements suspended in a black space, which may suggest they are floating in a void, yet they are linked by touching and overlapping.

The photomontage can function as a visual model of Conte's definition of a serial composition as a modular form 'in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination'¹²⁹ as a collage of fragments made of disparate elements. For example, at the centre of the frontispiece a single eye is held in the palms of two hands sharply cut-off at the arms by a lip-shaped base. Below the lips there is a partially overlapping group of round objects with a painted breast protruding from behind the black ball. On the bottom left, two hands clasp a convex mirror which reflects several distorted images of Cahun taken from previous photographs. On the right, two hands hold a globe, recalling the image of Eve juggling 'worlds rolled up into balls'. The top part of the photomontage is taken by an altarpiece-like structure featuring a double image of dove placed

¹²⁶ Perloff.

¹²⁷ See discussion earlier in this chapter.

¹²⁸ For example, Höch and Heartfield cut out and recombined images and text from magazines, advertisements and newspapers.

¹²⁹ Conte, 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem', p. 36.

on a lip-shaped base, with the word DIEU written back to front and upside down, recalling the topsy-turvy world of the carnival, liberated from the established order.



Figure14. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Frontispiece to *Aveux non avenues*.¹³⁰

Eye, mirror and hands are recurrent fragments in the photomontages. For example, in the third photomontage (Figure 15) a single eye is positioned at the base of the work, with Cahun's head cut from an earlier photograph placed upside down inside the iris. A hand-held mirror reflects Cahun's eyes and forehead and one of her hands suspended in the dark circle of the mirror. The two arms on the left and right edges at the top of the image, as well as the somewhat misshapen legs on the right margin, are cut-offs from the photograph in Figure 11.

¹³⁰ This photomontage is the only work signed by Moore. The photomontages are not paginated



Figure 15. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Aveux non avenues*¹³¹

The disparate elements juxtaposed in the photomontages are taken mainly from personal materials and fragment the 'self' into partial views that engage in a dialogue between diverse possibilities for creating hybrid multiple selves. Similarly, the textual material in *Aveux non avenues* is presented in fractured, disjointed configurations. For example, the cover page (Figure 16) consists of a verbal/visual arrangement of words juxtaposed in a collage which defies reading conventions and alerts the reader to the disorientation of both the visual and the textual components. As noted above, the title, *Aveux non avenues*, suggests both affirmation and its negation at the same time, signalling from the outset the notion of instability and disorientation of both the visual and the textual components. As will be discussed in the following chapters, both Carson and Robertson use the form of the Palinode

¹³¹ Appears at the beginning of Section II.

in a similar manner. Described by Carson as a “counter song” or “saying the opposite of what you said before”.¹³² A palindrome reverberates with the poem it negates, which releases the material from a fixed interpretation to create an opportunity to re-examine and discover something new in previous renditions.

On the cover page the title words are repeated both vertically and horizontally in a grid, with the central intersection highlighting the NON, the refusal at the centre of the work. For added emphasis the word ‘non’ is repeated multiple times, again using the letters to create the graphic pattern of a cross, suggesting a crossroad of multiple components.

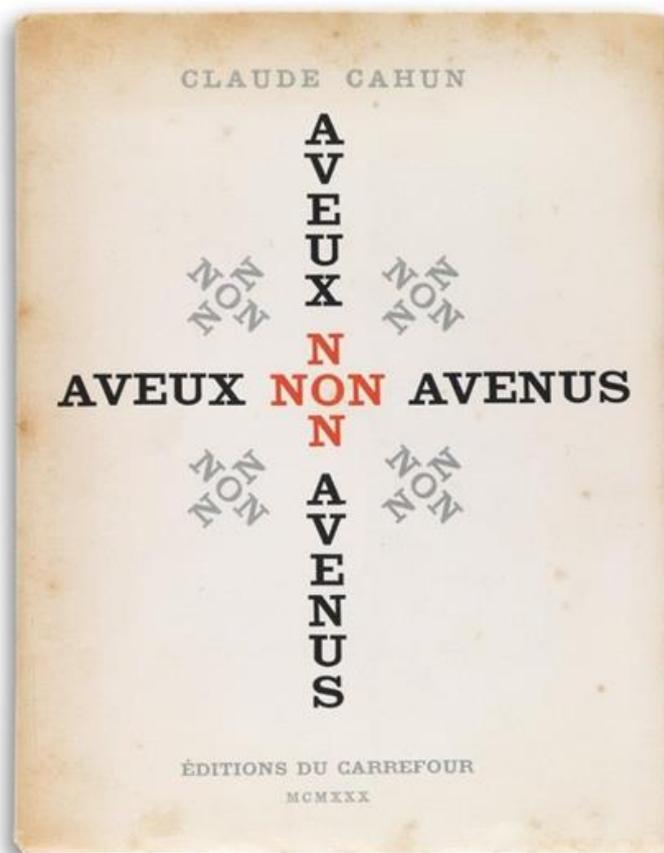


Figure16. Cover page of *Aveux non avenues*

Other devices are used throughout the text to create a sense of discontinuity, for example, the graphic symbols ★, ☆, ♥, 👁 (Figure 17), used to separate textual fragments. Cumulatively

¹³² See discussion in the following chapter.

they suggest an analogy with beads on a chain, distinct yet linked, similar to the disconnected cut-outs in the photomontages that are nevertheless linked by touching and overlapping.

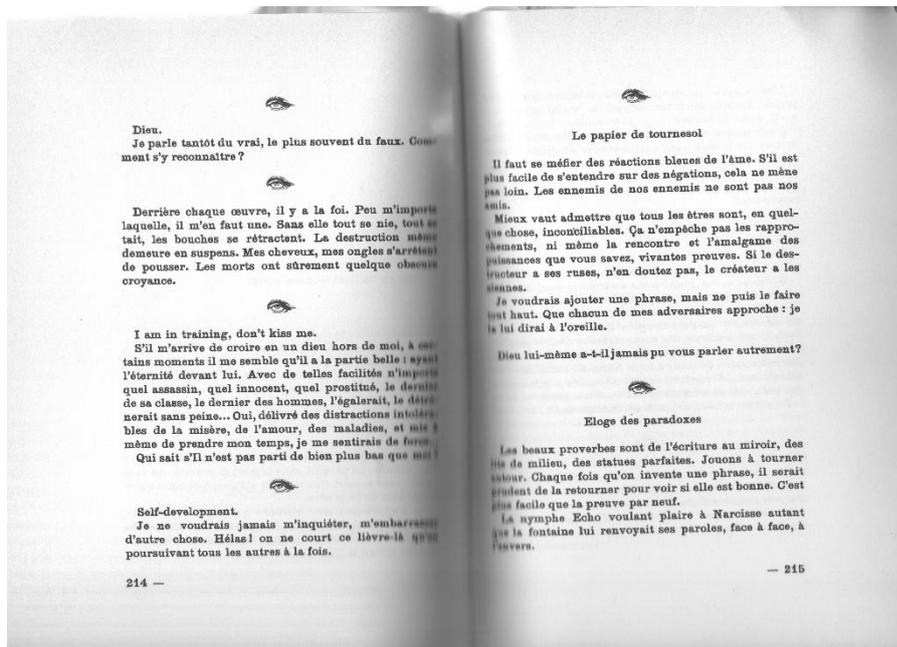
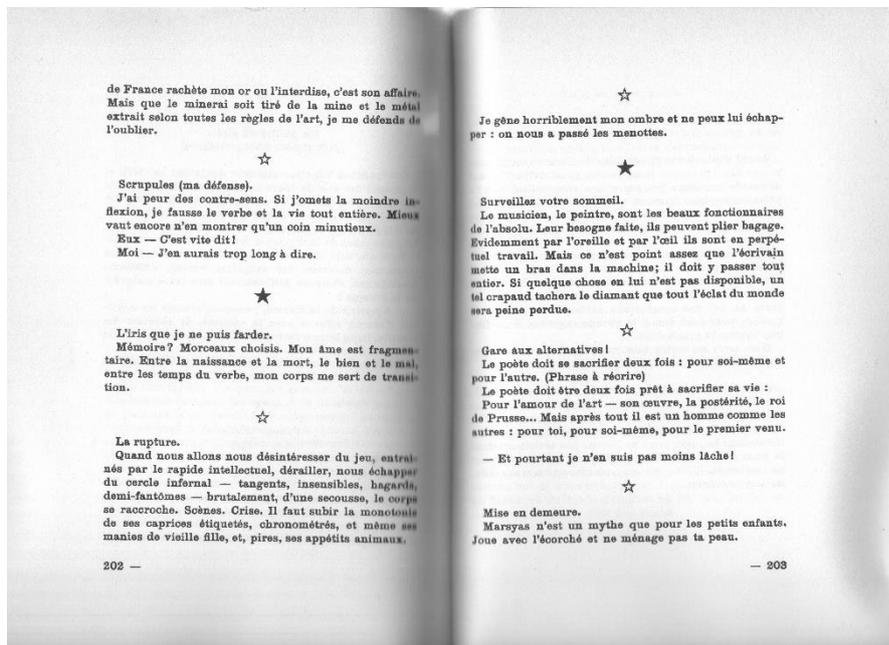


Figure 17. Pages from *Aveux non avendus*.

Another example of typographic devices creating a sense of fragmentation is the frequent use of brackets and dashes to disrupt the continuity of reading and insinuate a sense of disorientation by both affirming and countering at the same time:

– Il est modeste (Par orgueil). – Il vit simplement (Par dégoût du faux luxe). – Il est généreux (Car c’est moins facile de nuire avec noblesse). – Intelligent (faute de mieux). Aimable (J’y suis forcé. La solitude, hélas ! exige une telle magnificence de corps et d’âme !) – Discret, tolérant, bienveillant... (Méfiez-vous de mes arrières-pensées !)¹³³

[– He is modest (due to pride). – He lives simply (false luxury disgusts him). – He is generous (because it’s less easy to harm courteously). – Intelligent (for want of anything better). – Likeable (I have to be. For loneliness, alas, requires such physical and spiritual munificence). – Discreet, tolerant, benevolent... (beware of my ulterior motives!)]¹³⁴

Both images and textual fragments are thematically related. Jennifer Shaw¹³⁵ notes that the text printed on the paper cut-outs in Figure 15 is taken from chapter II of *Aveux non Avenus*, ‘thus invite the reader to refer back and forth between image and text. The fragmentary and the intertextual are thus emphasized here’.¹³⁶ For example, the image of the single eye in the photomontages is portrayed in the text as a fragment severed from its body: Libéré de l’anneau (cette prison, l’orbite), peut-être le globe de l’oeil se mettrait à tourner... Il évoluerait dans le ciel, se peuplerait de mes créatures, adorable monde!¹³⁷ [Liberated from the ring (this prison, the socket) maybe the eyeball would start to turn... would move around the sky, people itself with my creatures, adorable world!]¹³⁸

Freed from constraints, the eye claims autonomy, freedom to create an alternative world. In the preamble the narrator refers to her endeavour as ‘l’aventure invisible’, turning the gaze away from the visible surface inward. The preamble begins with the visible surface projected through the lens of the camera as a metonym for the eye,

¹³³ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, pp. 208-9.

¹³⁴ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 25.

¹³⁵ Jennifer Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun’s Disavowals* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2013).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹³⁷ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 423.

¹³⁸ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 197.

L'aventure invisible.

L'objectif suit les yeux, la bouche, les rides à fleur de peau... L'expression du visage est violente, parfois tragique. Enfin calme – du calme conscient, élaboré, des acrobates. Un sourire professionnel – et voilà!

Reparaissent la glace à main, le rouge et la poudre aux yeux. Un temps. Un point.

Alinéa.

Je recommence.

Mais quel manège ridicule pour ceux qui n'ont pas vu – et je n'ai rien montré – les obstacles, les abîmes, et les degrés franchis.¹³⁹

[Invisible adventure.

The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles skin deep ... the expression on the face is fierce, sometimes tragic. And then calm – a knowing calm, worked on, flashy. A professional smile – and voilà!

The hand-held mirror reappears, and the rouge and eye shadow. A beat. Full stop.

New paragraph.

I'll start again.

To those who know nothing of the steps, obstacles and enormous chasms I've leapt over – and I've revealed none of it – this all must seem the most ludicrous merry-go-round.]¹⁴⁰

To be able to undertake this arduous journey beneath the façade or the mask, it is necessary to destroy the visible surface appearance and find oneself facing inward into a depth of introspection, to blind oneself in order to see better, 's'aveugler pour mieux voir'.¹⁴¹ It is necessary to pierce the surface in order to see beyond the visible: 'Frapper en plein visage, en plein centre de l'âme, au coeur de l'oeil ... Frapper au plus visible: en plein noir de la pupille dilatée. Et pour ne pas rater son coup, devant la glace grossissante...'.¹⁴² [Hit full in the face, right in the centre of the soul, in the heart of the eye ... Hit the most obvious: right in the heart of the black, dilated pupil. And so as not to miss, in front of the mirror that makes everything bigger...]¹⁴³. The punctured eye is losing an outward vision, yet opens a breach through which a glimpse of another world becomes possible:

¹³⁹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 177.

¹⁴⁰ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 366.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 424.

¹⁴³ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 197.

Pour la première fois, les belles petites images convexes, les enluminures de l'oeil, les miniatures innocentes du monde, les faibles représentants de l'espace, les reflets, ont cessé d'être. Ce que je vois là-dedans : cet abominable trou qui saigne, vient du temps, de moi, de l'intérieur.¹⁴⁴

[For the first time, the beautiful little convex images, the eye's illuminations, the world's innocent miniatures, the feeble representations of space, reflections, have ceased to be. What I see inside: this abominable bleeding hole, comes from time, from myself, from within.]¹⁴⁵

The violence done to the eye, the organ that combines the corporeal with the emblem of the gaze, the medium between the external and the internal world, paradoxically enables an introspective gaze to change the self's perception of the world and of itself.

The theme of the mutilated eye is used in other surrealist works of the time, for example in Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's film *Un chien andalou*,¹⁴⁶ and Georges Bataille's novel *Histoire de l'oeil* (Story of the Eye).¹⁴⁷ *Un chien andalou* opens with the scene of a woman's eyeball sliced by a razor. *Histoire de l'oeil* concludes with a scene in which the eye of the murdered priest is plucked from his head and placed in the protagonist's vagina. For the surrealists, the eye is seen as the key to access the subconscious.¹⁴⁸ What is suggested is that through piercing the eye one can reach the inaccessible, and like Alice, travel to the other side of the mirror.

Like with the eye, the image of the mirror in the photomontages is repeated in several textual fragments, for example, the image of the hand clutching a mirror in Figure 15 is repeated in the text: 'Une main crispée sur un miroir – une bouche, des narines palpitantes – entre des paupières pâmées, la fixité folle de prunelles élargies...'¹⁴⁹ [A hand grips a mirror – a mouth, nostrils palpitating – between swooning eyelids, the mad fixity of dilated pupils...].¹⁵⁰ Another example, in the section 'Self-love' [English in original], expounds the narrator's version of the myth of Narcissus. In the text the myth haunts us, drives our desire to seek a perfect mirror to reflect and fix the self:

¹⁴⁴ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 423.

¹⁴⁵ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 197.

¹⁴⁶ *Un Chien Andalou*, dir. by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali (Les Grands Films Classiques, 1929).

¹⁴⁷ Georges Bataille, 'L'Histoire de l'oeil' in *Oeuvres Complètes I: Premiers Écrits 1922-1940* ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

¹⁴⁸ See Harris. As discussed above, in *Les Paris sont Ouverts*, Cahun defended the Surrealist approach of letting the unconscious guide artistic practice.

¹⁴⁹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 217.

¹⁵⁰ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 32.

Le mythe de Narcisse est partout. Il nous hante. Il a sans cesse inspiré ce qui perfectionne la vie, depuis le jour fatal où fut captée l'onde sans ride. Car l'invention du métal poli est d'une claire étymologie narcissienne. Le bronze – l'argent – le verre : nos miroirs sont presque parfaits... Il faudrait maintenant fixer l'image dans le temps comme dans l'espace, saisir des mouvements accomplis¹⁵¹.

[The myth of Narcissus is everywhere. It haunts us. It has never ceased to inspire the things that make life perfect since the fateful day when that wave without wrinkles was captured. For the invention of polished metal derives from a clear narcissian etymology. Bronze – silver – glass: our mirrors are almost perfect ... Now would be the moment to fix the image in time as it is in space, to seize completed movements]¹⁵²

Acknowledging the desire to capture an image of the self, the narrator nevertheless rejects the possibility: “‘Miroir’, ‘fixer’, voilà des mots qui n’ont rien à faire ici’¹⁵³ [‘Mirror’, ‘fix’, these are words that have no place here].¹⁵⁴ As Gayle Zachmann (2003) writes:

Neither Narcissus nor Echo, visual nor verbal, mirror nor text, can completely snare that self in a fixed mirror or static image. The recognition of this appears in the title *AVEUX NON AVENUS* and in the insistence on the vanity of the desire to create a mimesis of the self. The only adequate representation of the self is one that would afford that which Narcissus lacked: a gaze that would account for the discontinuity of the gaze itself – its lapses¹⁵⁵.

The ambivalence towards the reflection in the mirror is explored further in the section ‘Fenêtre à guillotine’. Silver-coating the external surface of the glass will turn it into a mirror that will imprison the narrator inside; silvering behind the glass will equally imprison her own reflection, and know nothing of the outside. The only alternative presenting itself is to break the glass and compose a mosaic, a stained glass composition, with the pieces.

Fenêtre à guillotine.

Une feuille de verre. Où mettrai-je le tain ? En deçà, au delà ; devant ou derrière la vitre ? Devant. Je m'emprisonne. Je m'aveugle ... Derrière. Je m'enferme également.

Je ne saurai rien du dehors. Du moins je connaîtrai mon visage - et peut-être me

¹⁵¹ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 218.

¹⁵² Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 32-3.

¹⁵³ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 218.

¹⁵⁴ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁵ Gayle Zachmann, ‘Surreal and Canny Selves: Photographic Figures in Claude Cahun’, *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 27 (2003), p. 407.

suffira-t-il assez pour me plaire. Laisser la vitre Claire, et selon les hazards et les heure voir confusément, partiellement, tantôt les fugitifs de tantôt mon regard ... Vue trouble, lignes brises ... Alors, casser les vitres ... Avec les morceaux, composer un vitrail. Travail de Byzance. Transparence, opacité. Quel aveu d'artifice! Toujours je finirai par prononcer ma propre condamnation. Je vous l'avais bien dit : remarquez l'enseigne – fenêtre à guillotine...¹⁵⁶

[Guillotine window.

A sheet of glass. Where shall I put the silver? Here or there; in front of or behind the window? In front. I imprison myself. I make myself blind... Behind. I shut myself in just as much. I will know nothing of what is outside. At least I will know my face – and maybe that will be enough to please me ... Leave the window clear, and depending on chance and the hour see confusedly, partially, sometimes the fugitives and sometimes my gaze ... Clouded view, shattered lines... So – break the windows ... with the fragments, make a stained-glass window. Byzantine work. Transparency, opacity. What an avowal of artifice! I will always end up pronouncing my own sentence. I told you: look at the sign – guillotine window...].¹⁵⁷

Thus, in *Aveux non Avenus* the representation of the self is an artifice created through acts of fracturing (pierced eye, shattered glass, guillotine), and re-assembled fragments of texts and images, in shifting voices and uncompleted potentialities in a perpetual process of becoming:

La propre de la vie est de me laisser en suspens, de n'admettre de moi que des arrêts provisoires. Reprise. Raccords, ravaudages, réitérations, incohérences, qu'importe !
pourvu qu'autre chose incessamment devienne.¹⁵⁸

[Life's role is to leave me uncompleted, allow me only freeze frames. Start again. Connections, repairs, reiterations, incoherence, so what! Provided that something else continually comes along.]¹⁵⁹

Reprise. Raccords, ravaudages, réitérations, incohérences

As discussed earlier this chapter, Cahun rejected the proposition of writing a 'confessional' autobiography. From the outset she declared her determination not to follow the path of a traditional biographical approach: 'Vais-je donc m'embarrasser de tout l'attirail des faits, de

¹⁵⁶ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, pp. 209-210.

¹⁵⁷ Cahun, *Disavowals*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁵⁸ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 429.

¹⁵⁹ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 202.

pierres, de cordes tendrement coupées, de précipices... Ce n'est pas intéressant.'¹⁶⁰ [Should I then burden myself with all the paraphernalia of facts, stones, cords delicately cut, precipices... it doesn't interest me at all.]¹⁶¹

Instead, *Aveux non avenues* presents an alternative to the conventional narrative account in autobiographical writing, a concern shared with other experimental writers of the time, for example, Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*,¹⁶² which was published in 1933, three years after *Aveux non avenues*. Stein's 'autobiography' is made up of multiple stories, sketches, letters, description of other personalities and references to other texts, including Stein's other writing. The structure is associative and anecdotal, with frequent digressions and repetitions, with confusing time indicators and points of view.

The first edition of Stein's 'autobiography' included sixteen photographs which were distributed throughout the text.¹⁶³ Like in *Aveux non avenues*, the inclusion of visual material is fundamental to Stein's original conception of the 'autobiography', highlighting the heterogeneity of the composition. Some 'factual' photographs seem to 'confirm' the authenticity of the narrative, for example, a photograph of Stein as a child in Vienna, or Stein as a student at Johns Hopkins Medical School. Other photographs, while seemingly factual, create a sense of confusion in the context in which they are placed, for example, a photograph captioned *Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in front of Saint Mark's, Venice*, is presented facing a description of their visit to Assisi, while there is no account of the visit to Venice anywhere in the text. In addition, some photographs depict modernist works of art on display in Stein and Toklas apartment, suggesting an analogy between the distorted drawings and Stein's writing style.¹⁶⁴

Both Cahun and Stein present a challenge to a straightforward account of 'the artist as an individual creator'¹⁶⁵ through exploring the possibilities between self and alterity.¹⁶⁶ Like

¹⁶⁰ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, in *Écrits*, p. 177.

¹⁶¹ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 1.

¹⁶² Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933).

¹⁶³ Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain the first edition. Here, I use Paul Alkon's article ('Visual Rhetoric in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas', *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1975), 849-881), in which he reproduced all 16 photographs with detailed comments.

¹⁶⁴ The photographs featured in the original publication were not included in later editions, where the text is presented as a mainstream autobiographical account, undermining the originality and experimental nature of Stein's autobiographical writing.

¹⁶⁵ See page 28 of this thesis.

¹⁶⁶ The cover of the original edition didn't include any author attributions, thus sustaining an inference that the author of the autobiographical text is the person named in the title. As Stein commented later: 'I did a tour de force with the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas [sic], and when I sent the first half to the agent, they sent back a telegram to see which one of us had written it!' (Gertrude Stein, 'A Transatlantic Interview', in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971), p. 19.

Aveux non avenues, the ‘autobiography’ reflects a lifelong commitment to creative lesbian couple collaboration. Undoubtedly, like Moore,¹⁶⁷ Toklas has been overshadowed by Stein. However, given Stein’s objection to a conventional autobiographical account, Toklas’ narrative persona enabled Stein to perform alternative voices, suggesting how profoundly their lives were interwoven, and thus liberating Stein from the ‘authorial’ role and from the demand for ‘truth’ in conventional autobiographical writing (recalling Cahun’s statement that the ‘unreal permits one to take all kinds of liberties’).¹⁶⁸

Toklas’ narrative persona performs in Gertrude Stein’s voice, her own voice and numerous other persons appearing repeatedly throughout the narrative, in anecdotes, conversations and reported speech.¹⁶⁹ Stories begin, are interrupted by other stories, get picked up again, often from a different perspective, go backwards and forward in time, as each provides a partial or a contradictory view, a glimpse of the person or the situation. Carolyn Barros (1999) writes that the *Autobiography* can be seen as a presentation of a multivocal cubist collage

In the manner of Cubist painting, Stein's portraits not only serve as views of the persons who peopled her existence, but when assembled together, also comprise the multifaceted modernist autobiographical subject. Her series of portraits reflect, refract, cut across, and in the process create, the constantly transforming portrait of Gertrude Stein.¹⁷⁰

Similarly, Cahun and Moore created a mosaic-like assemblage constituted of broken pieces - fragments of autobiography, poems, letters, aphorisms, recounting of dream, dialogues of fictional characters, and extracts from letters. In addition to the personal materials, *Aveux non avenues* draws on references and allusions to other texts and images, including classical sources, children’s literature, Freud’s writing on Narcissism and Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*.

For example, the passage below begins with a description of idealized perfection in marble sculptures, followed by questioning whether the idealized presentation has ennobled the models. As Jennifer Shaw writes, ‘this line appears to reiterate the notion that classical idealization makes the nude body morally uplifting and accords with the association of

¹⁶⁷ See footnote 5.

¹⁶⁸ See page 47 of this thesis.

¹⁶⁹ Picasso’s name, for example, appears on 75 pages of the ‘Autobiography’ in different contexts.

¹⁷⁰ Carolyn Barros, ‘Getting Modern: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas’, *Biography*, 22 (1999), p. 185.

classicism with and the *rappel à l'ordre*'.¹⁷¹ However, in the next line, the reference to Lucian of Samosata suggests a different perspective.

Ces marbre fermes et polis / plus que la peau la mieux poncée, / ces corps blancs et minces / plus que l'éphèbe le mieux fait, / muscles chers aux sculpteurs. / – N'ont-ils pas enoblisseurs modèles? // J'accorde que ces froides noblesses / découragent les amants audacieux ... / – Et encore! Dirait Lucien de Samosate.¹⁷²

[These marble statues firm and polished / more than the best pumiced skin, / these bodies white and slim / more than the best made Adonis, / muscles that are dear to sculptors... / – Haven't they ennobled their models? / I grant that these cold nobilities / discourage audacious lovers... / – And yet! Lucian of Samosata would say.]¹⁷³

Lucian was a philosopher and rhetorician born around 125CE in Samosata, on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire. Writing in Greek, his style emulates philosophical dialogues, but from an amusing, satirical perspective, an ironic send-up of an idealised philosophical position.¹⁷⁴ Lucian's work *Erôtes* engages in a debate between same- versus opposite-sex relations, situated in the context of viewing the statue of Aphrodite of Knidos, the first monumental female nude in classical sculpture (by Praxiteles, c.350 BC), representing an idealised female beauty desired by all men.¹⁷⁵ In Lucian's tongue-in-cheek description, 'the statue of the goddess embodies a doubled erotic stimulus. Viewed from the front she is the most desirable woman, but from the rear, the most perfect boy'.¹⁷⁶ Thus, the erotic perspective on the statue is presented as a function of the position taken up by the viewer.

Considered in this context, the reference to Lucian of Samosata in the text can be seen as Cahun's challenge to the prevailing concepts of female sexuality, recalling her protest against hostile attitudes to homosexuality and lesbianism in the Maud Allan trial and her response to the survey in the journal *L'Amitié* on attitudes to homosexuality discussed above:

¹⁷¹ Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals*, p. 121. The term *rappel à l'ordre* refers to a European art movement following the First World War, characterised by a return to more traditional approaches to artmaking and rejecting the extreme avant-garde tendencies of art in the years leading up to 1918. Many of the artists who had previously been innovators of avant-garde styles turned their backs on their previous ideas and approaches. [Classicism](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/return-order) was an important thread in the return to order. For example, in the early 1920s, Picasso entered a [neoclassical](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/return-order) phase (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/return-order>).

¹⁷² Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 231.

¹⁷³ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁴ See James Jope, 'Interpretation and Authenticity of the Lucianic Eroses', *Helios*, 38 (2011), 103-120; Melissa Haynes, 'Framing a View of the Unviewable: Architecture, Aphrodite, and Erotic Looking in the Lucianic Erôtes', *Helios*, 40 (2013), 71-95.

¹⁷⁵ Christine Mitchell Havelock, *The Aphrodite of Knidos and her Successors: A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

¹⁷⁶ Haynes, p. 71.

‘everything depends on the individual and on the circumstances. I call for the general freedom of morals’¹⁷⁷

The related photomontage (Figure 18) displays two partially superimposed images taken from *Que me veux-tu?* which itself consists of a double figure joined together out of two single images of Cahun (Figure 1).¹⁷⁸ The multidirectional gaze enhances the notion of multiple rather than a single focus. The potential of openness to possibilities is supported by two images of statues on each side, one of Venus de Milo and the other of Aphrodite of Knidus in a gender-ambiguous pose, both presented upside down,

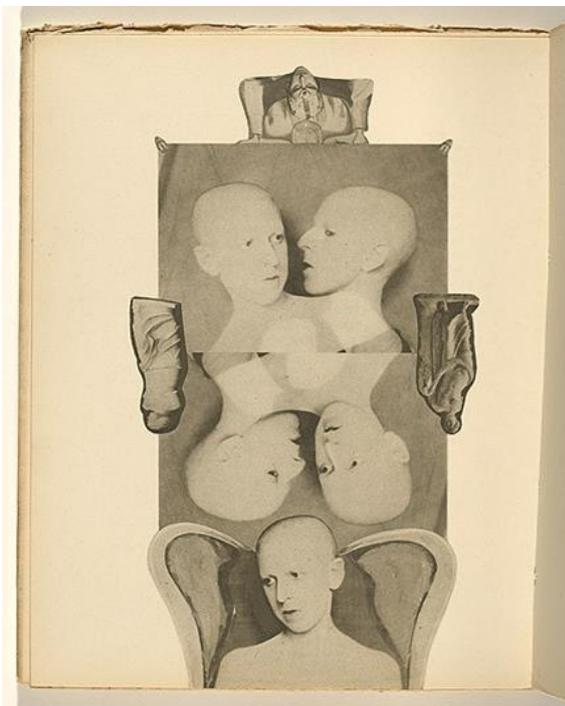


Figure 18. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Aveux non avenues*¹⁷⁹

At the bottom of the photomontage, a single image of Cahun from the compound *Que me veux-tu?* (Figure 2) is endowed with angel's wings, and the top, Cahun in her role as Le Diable in *Le Mystere d'Adam*.¹⁸⁰ What is implied in this arrangement is the possibility of different perspectives, the 'in-between', between heaven and hell and between different expression of sexuality, echoing Lucian's work *Erôte*.

¹⁷⁷ See footnote 57.

¹⁷⁸ See Figures 1&2 and discussion on page 13.

¹⁷⁹ Appears at the beginning of Section III.

¹⁸⁰ See page 29 of this thesis.

Although the texts and images of *Aveux non avenues* frequently refer to aspects of Cahun's life, they are not presented in a chronological, or any other narrative order typical of biographical materials, anticipating Blaser's and Spicer's definition of the serial poem as 'a narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line'.¹⁸¹ *Aveux non avenues* is constructed like a contemporary serial form, consisting of a modular structure which enables simultaneity and disjunction of diverse materials that echo, overlap, or create dissonance.

Aveux non avenues consists of ten sections, each preceded by a title, generally in the form of an acronym made up of three letters that sometimes suggest possible meanings but are never explained. For example, 'I.O.U.', when pronounced in English is the abbreviation of the first sentence of the following chapter, 'I owe you'; and 'N.O.N.', a negation which is not specified, but takes the reader back to the NON at the central intersection on the title page, the refusal at the centre of the work (see figure 16, page 35) and the anticipation of an alternative approach to writing.

Each acronym is followed by an epigraph (for example, figure 19) and the title page of each section is followed by a photomontage, both obliquely related to the following section. Finally, an overall table of content is presented at the end of the book, with further potential clues to the content of each section added in brackets in English (figure 20).

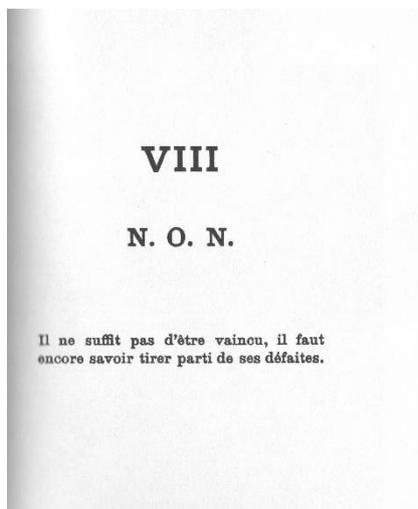


Figure 19. Title of section VIII¹⁸²

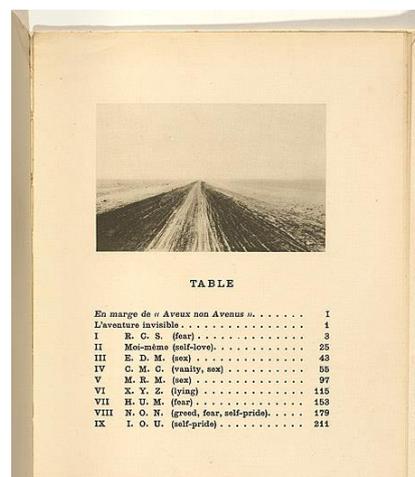


Figure 20. Table of content

¹⁸¹ Robin Blaser, *The Fire*, p. 5.

¹⁸² English translation of the epigraph: 'It's not enough to be vanquished, you also have to know how to turn defeat to your advantage'.

The acronyms are presented as keys to the text ‘Alors supprimer les titres. Ce sont des clefs. Fausse pudeur.’¹⁸³ [So then, abolish titles. They are keys. False modesty.]¹⁸⁴ Yet, elsewhere in the text the keys are presented as false, ‘Ma fausse clef tentera toutes les serrures. N’en peut-elle forcer aucune? alors je la plante là. Mais devant moi.’¹⁸⁵ [My fake key will try all the locks. Can’t it get any of them to open? I’ll plant it there. Right in front of me.]¹⁸⁶

Moreover, the notion of the unreliable narrator is enhanced by Cahun self-consciously undermining herself (‘I deliberately downgrade myself’) to assert the liberty to engage with the ‘leftovers’ and the ‘unreal’ in the midst of a genre that demands ‘truth’ as a conventional mode of narrating a life in autobiographical accounts:

J’ai la manie de l’exception. Je la vois plus grande que nature. Je ne vois qu’elle. La règle ne m’intéresse qu’en fonction de ses déchets dont je fais ma pâture Ainsi je me décline exprès. Tant pis pour moi.



Pourtant j’ai la manie de l’ordre. J’aime à prendre le mystère à parti, à le mettre à la raison. Je hais les préjugés; mais seulement ceux des autres. Si je néglige les faits qui me gênent, si je feins de mépriser la vie, c’est que l’irréel permet toutes les privautés.

L’abstrait, l’absolu, l’absurde, sont un élément ductile, une matière plastique, le verbe qu’on tire à soi. Que je ramène à moi.

Alors, à l’aise, j’associe, dissocie - et formule sans rire l’odieuse règle de ma collection d’exceptions.¹⁸⁷

[I’m obsessed with the exception. I see it as bigger than nature. It’s all I see. The rule interests me only for its leftovers with which I make my swill. This is how I deliberately downgrade myself. That’s my own bad luck.

Yet I am obsessed with order. I like to challenge mystery, submit it to reason. I hate preconceptions; but only others’. If I neglect the facts that annoy me, if I pretend to scorn life, it’s because the unreal permits one to take all kinds of liberties.

The abstract, the absolute, the absurd, are a malleable element, a plastic material, the word one appropriates. That is all for me alone.

And so, at ease, I associate, dissociate – and formulate without laughing the odious rule of my collection of exceptions.]¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 210.

¹⁸⁴ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 26.

¹⁸⁵ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 211.

¹⁸⁶ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 27.

¹⁸⁷ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, in *Écrits*, p. 367.

¹⁸⁸ Cahun, *Disavowals*, p. 152.

Both *Aveux non avenues* and the *Autobiography* use collage and photomontage techniques to construct a new kind of autobiographical discourse. My engagement with these works leads to the next chapter on the work of Anne Carson which evolves through constructing multiple versions, translation and retranslation, fragmentation and juxtaposition of disparate elements. This is extremely helpful in developing my own poetic work, through juxtaposition of disparate materials from different sources, biographical materials, and recurrent themes.

Chapter 2 – Anne Carson

In this chapter I discuss the work of Anne Carson, drawing on the general discussion of serial poetry in the introduction, and on the previous chapter on the work of Claude Cahun. Like the work of Claude Cahun, much of Anne Carson's work evolves through constructing multiple versions, translation and retranslation, fragmentation and juxtaposition of disparate elements.

Anne Carson is an acclaimed poet, classical scholar, essayist and translator of Ancient Greek. She has taught classics at various universities across the United States and Canada. Carson's first publication, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986),¹ essays about the concept of Eros in classical Greek poetry and prose, was followed by books of poetry, essays, translations and verse novels.² Carson's work attracted both glowing reviews and severe criticism. Harold Bloom³ concludes his review of Carson's work with the following:

She is a highly active volcano, and fascinates a critic who has been a Longinian all his long life. Somewhere in *Plainwater* she writes "language is what eases the pain of living with other people, language is what makes the wounds come open again". Not language, not at all language, I want to murmur, but only language's real master – like Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Anne Carson.

Conversely, Robert Potts,⁴ writing after Carson won the T.S. Eliot prize for *The Beauty of the Husband*, argues that 'the book fails as poetry, simply because it shows either crashing inability or an unbecoming contempt for the medium. Its materials – the narrative, its details and a dry wit are engaging enough - would have made for a compelling short story'. The most extreme critic, David Solway⁵ (2001), rages not only against Carson's work but also her character: 'Carson may be our newest pedestalized inamorata but the fact is - and I say this unabashed - she is a phony, all sleight-of-hand, both as a scholar and a poet.'

The controversy may have been in part a reaction, in particular of early reviewers, to an

¹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986).

² Including: *Plainwater* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995); *Autobiography of Red* (New York: Vintage, 1998), *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999); *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Vintage, 2001); *The Beauty of the Husband* (New York: Random House, 2001); *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010).

³ Harold Bloom, *Poets and Poems* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 467.

⁴ Robert Potts, 'Neither Rhyme nor Reason', *The Guardian*, January 26 2002, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jan/26/poetry.tseliotprizeforpoetry> [accessed 25 April 2015].

⁵ David Solway, 'The Trouble with Annie', *Books in Canada*, http://www.booksincanada.com/article_view.asp?id=3159 [accessed 25 April 2015].

encounter with work which could not be readily classified as poetry, and work which appeared to have come from nowhere. For example, Daphne Merkin,⁶ in *The New York Times*, asserts that Carson's work is 'unclassifiable, even by today's motley, genre-bending standards. [Is] she writing poetry? Prose? Prose poems? Fiction? Nonfiction?' Stephen Burt⁷ (2011), in the *London Review of Books*, contends that Carson's poetry emerged 'without obvious contemporary influences, and without clear ties to the world of creative writing.'

To claim little connection to the contexts and practices of contemporary poetry seems a touch journalistic, perhaps polemical.⁸ A more considered examination of Carson's work demonstrates clear affinities and interaction with various poets and strands within contemporary poetry. For example, Carson's frequent use of 'hybrid' forms (discussed later in this chapter) corresponds to a similar trend in contemporary American poetry. This trend is defined and promoted in the anthology *American Hybrid*, edited by Cole Swensen and David St. John.⁹ In her introduction Swensen suggests that:

Today's hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence. Or it might foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or villanelle ... Considering the traits associated with 'conventional' work, such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice, and those generally assumed of 'experimental' work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open form, and resistance to closure, hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each one of which can change dramatically depending on how it is combined with others and the particular role it plays in the composition.

An important common denominator for much hybrid poetry is an element of innovation and its relationship to existing material, as Swensen notes: 'some hybrid writers address the complexities of the new with an interest in repetition and collage, devising ways that

⁶ Daphne Merkin, 'Last Tango: Review of *The Beauty of the Husband* by Anne Carson', *The New York Times*, September 30, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/books/last-tango.html> [accessed 7 July 2015].

⁷ Stephen Burt, 'Professor or Pinhead: A Review of *Nox* by Anne Carson', *London Review of Books*, 33 (2011) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n14/stephanie-burt/professor-or-pinhead> [accessed 23 June 2015].

⁸ It is worth noting that despite extensive searches, I have not been able to identify examples of negative reception of Carson's work in the academic literature, in contrast to these examples of negative reception of her work in the journalistic literature.

⁹ *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, ed. by Cole Swensen and David St. John (New York: WW Norton, 2009). This anthology brings together works by 74 poets, including Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Jorie Graham, Claudia Rankine, Nathaniel Mackey, Juliana Spahr and others.

similarity and novelty can be combined in a generative manner'.¹⁰ The innovative impulse not only expands the boundaries of poetry but also of the expressive potential of its language.¹¹

As I will discuss later in this chapter, many of Swensen's descriptors can be applied in various combinations to Carson's work as well (one can presume that being Canadian excluded her from inclusion in the anthology). Carson's work unfolds in a similar historical and social context to that described by Swensen in her introduction. In particular, Swensen highlights the role of women, multiculturalism and the increasing role of translation as factors in the tendency towards hybrid poetry, factors equally relevant in Carson's case.

Like Swensen, Jed Rasula¹² suggests that the tide of innovation in contemporary poetry is associated with women writers. He goes on to expand the scope of innovation to another plane, that of a book as a whole rather than an individual poem, and offers a series of examples indicative of accomplished instances of women poets' work. One of Rasula's examples is Carson's *Plainwater*¹³ in which Carson draws on multiple sources to produce hybrid texts, consisting of translations, poems, essays, travel narratives and mock interviews (discussed later in the chapter). Another example is the work of Lisa Robertson, which I will discuss in depth in the next chapter. Like Carson, Robertson creates multifaceted assemblages composed from diverse texts, lines from her journals, classical literature, poetic tradition, contemporary culture and feminist discourse. Like Carson, she works across disciplines, both often altering and problematizing the source texts and opening up a space for critical engagement with multiple perspectives. However, in contrast to Carson's model of a meta-series across several publications, Robertson's focus on the book as a unit of composition presents another model of seriality.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.xxii.

¹¹ It seems to me that the concept of hybridity as defined in *American Hybrid (American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry)*, ed. by Cole Swensen and David St John (New York: WW Norton, 2009) and exemplified in the selection of representative works tends to privilege established poets and presents an oversimplified generalisation of much more divergent practices. A number of critical responses to the premises of *American Hybrid* are included in the book *The Monkey and the Wrench: Essays into Contemporary Poetics*, ed. by Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher (Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2011). For example, Mark Wallace criticises the book's concept of 'hybrid' as an attempt to fit the complex literary styles and movements in the contemporary American poetry scene into a simple two-camp model. Arielle Greenberg argues that a hybrid is a dynamic, shifting construct that can't be contained in the simple model. She describes hybrid as 'Work that defies genre and medium. Work that shape-shifts as it goes along, that strains against convention (*any* convention! Even avant-garde convention!), is undefinable or between definitions, between aesthetics' (p. 133). Craig Santos Perez is concerned that Swensen and St. John's selection of poets is largely white, not representing America's racial and ethnic diversity.

¹² Jed Rasula, *Syncopations: The Stress of Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry* (University of Alabama Press, 2004).

¹³ Anne Carson, *Plainwater* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

These examples show that Carson's work demonstrates clear affinities with various poets and strands within contemporary poetry. Another significant background for contextualising Carson's work is modernist poetry. Gertrude Stein holds a strong presence throughout Carson's work. For example, the figure of Gertrude Stein frames *Autobiography of Red* which begins with Stein's epigram 'I like the feeling of words doing / as they want to do and as they have to do',¹⁴ followed by placing Stesichoros 'after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet'.¹⁵ The *Autobiography* concludes with a mock interview with Stesichoros, in which Stein answers questions directed to Stesichoros.

Another strand in Carson's work is her use of classical material in her poetry. As a classical scholar and translator of Ancient Greek, Carson's hybrid forms straddle the scholarly and the poetic. Carson described the process as follows:

I never found any trouble with it. People do make trouble out of that border, but I never found it a problem because I just practically don't separate them. I put scholarly projects and so-called creative projects side-by-side in my workspace, and I cross back and forth between them or move sentences back and forth between them, and so cause them to permeate one another ... the permeating, the cross-permutation is extremely helpful to me. Because actually the project of thinking is one in my head, trying to understand the world, so I might as well use whatever contexts are available.¹⁶

In this chapter I consider Carson's strategies of creating serial poetic works which evolve through constructing multiple versions, translation and retranslation, fragmentation, juxtaposition of disparate elements, re-contextualization, creating 'mistakes' and faux interviews. Although these strategies have been discussed in other critical studies of the poet as manifest in this chapter, my specific focus is on aspects of seriality which have not been a focus of previous research. I suggest that Carson's work as a whole seems to unfold as meta-series with repeating structures, genres, characters and themes comparable to Robin Blaser's description of his own work as *carmen perpetuum*.¹⁷ In a similar vein, in Carson's work the

¹⁴ Carson, *Autobiography*, p.3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ McNeilly, 'Gifts and Questions: An interview with Anne Carson', *Canadian Literature*, 176 (2003), p. 12.

¹⁷ "A continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected." Robin Blaser, *The Fire: Collected Essays*, ed. by Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 5. See further discussion in my Introduction chapter on Blaser's seriality, recombining recurrent elements across multiple works.

process of ‘digging’ back and forth between her academic and her poetic works causes them to ‘permeate one another’ and highlight the impossibility of arriving at a definitive ‘version’, thus raising the possibility that ‘error’, gaps and fragmentation might themselves generate meaning.

Juxtaposition of *what is and what is not the case*: Carson’s shifting perspectives

An early example of crossing generic and textual boundaries in Carson’s work is ‘Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings’, a series of poems first published in the journal *Raritan*¹⁸ and later included in *Plainwater* (1995),¹⁹ presented as collages of diverse materials encompassing different genres. The starting point of each poem is a translated fragment from the Greek poet Mimnermos (ca. 630-600BC), an explanatory caption and a section which may incorporate contemporary settings. The poems are followed by an essay and three mock interviews with Mimnermos invoking anachronistic details, such as psychoanalysis, telephones or headlights.

Mimnermos is constructed as a multiple three-part series across gaps in time and space. The first part of each poem is a translated fragment, the second is an explanatory caption and the third is a poem often incorporating contemporary settings. The poems are followed by an essay and three mock interviews, again incorporating different time-frames.

The three-part structure is a recurrent form in Carson’s work. For example, *Decreation* is constructed in three parts.²⁰ The ‘Glass Essay’ presents three women, the speaker, the mother, and the author Emily Brontë. The first section (‘I’) is focused on the speaker, the second section (‘She’) on the mother, and the third (‘Three’) starts with ‘Three silent women at the kitchen table’, the speaker, the mother and *Wuthering Heights* ‘propped open on the sugarbowl’. Similarly, *The Beauty of the Husband* presents three voices, the wife, the husband and their friend Ray, an artist who has been working on the same canvas for almost four years. Ray’s presence creates a space for incompleteness and ambivalence, as Carson says ‘I like to keep the hesitation in Ray'd say’.

¹⁸ Anne Carson, ‘Mimnermos: Poems’, *Raritan*, 11 (1992), 1-15.

¹⁹ Carson, *Plainwater*.

²⁰ Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005.) *Decreation* is a book in three parts: poetry, essays and opera. The opera section is also constructed in three parts. On the opening page of this section, Carson provides a background note: ‘This is an essay about three women and will have three parts’.

In *Eros the Bittersweet*,²¹ Carson posits the triangular structure at the core of the construction of desire: lover, beloved, and the gap or obstacle that comes between them. According to Carson, the function of the gap in the triangular structure is to animate the space and produce a dynamic movement, ‘Desire moves. Eros is a verb’,²² therefore ‘space must be maintained or desire ends’.²³

For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components - lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by Eros. When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps.²⁴

The movement of desire creates alternative foci and a potential space for enacting the same themes from different perspectives, time frames, and different voices. I suggest that the juxtaposition of different genres within one series creates a field of energy in which the different elements bounce off each other, enrich and reverberate through the whole work. This is further exemplified in the series ‘Catullus: *Carmina*’²⁵ which follows a similar pattern of juxtaposing diverse materials.

Carson constructs each poem in *Carmina* as a collage starting with a Latin title followed by a translation in brackets and a summary of the action in the poem in italics. Her deadpan summaries of Catullus’ hyperbole may have a comic/ironic effect, as in his elegy on the death of his lady’s pet:

Lugete O Veneres Cupidinesque (‘Mourn O Venuses and Cupids)

Catullus sings a dirge.

Carson’s take on Catullus may be light-hearted or flippant and interspersed with anachronistic details (‘Before my holy stoning in the wet kisses and the smell of sperm / I drove an ambulance for the Red Cross / Do you think a man can be naturally pure?’). Yet the

²¹ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 16.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

²⁵ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*.

poems are sometimes touched by longing and sadness, in particular in Catullus' elegiac poem for his brother who died abroad while Catullus was in Italy:

Multas per Gentes et Multa per Aequora Vectus

(Through People Through Oceans Have I Come)

Catullus buries his brother.

Multitudes brushed past me oceans I don't know.

Brother wine milk honey flowers.

Flowers milk honey brother wine.

How long does it take the sound to die away?

I a brother.

Cut out carefully the words for wine milk honey flowers.

Drop them into a bag.

Mix carefully.

Pour onto your dirty skeleton.

what sound? ²⁶

Carson's translation invokes the Roman funerary rituals and at the same time frustrates the process by repeating and re-ordering the words in the second and the third lines to destabilize the translation, and confront the unknowable through questions ('How long does it take the sound to die away?', 'what sound?'). The end-stopped lines encourage focusing on the words contained within the line and direct attention to the repeated and re-ordered words in the second and the third lines.

The second part of the poem can be read like a blueprint for Carson's own poetic practice²⁷ in general and in particular for *Nox* (2010),²⁸ written after her estranged brother died in Denmark. In writing *Nox*, Carson has followed her own instructions – she has created a scrapbook consisting of a second version of the translation of *Multas per Gentes*, cutting the

²⁶ Ibid., p.45.

²⁷ Also perhaps an allusion to Tristan Tzara's recipe for making a Dadaist poem: 'Take a newspaper. / Take some scissors. / Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem. / Cut out the article. / Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag. / Shake gently. / Next take out each cutting one after the other. / Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag'. Tristan Tzara, *How to Make a Dadaist Poem* <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/tzara.html> [accessed 31, 2015]

²⁸ Carson, *Nox*.

text into individual words accompanied by their dictionary definitions – intermingled with handwritten notes, torn-up fragments from letters, photographs, cut-outs and incomplete narratives collaged on a large accordion-folded scroll contained in a box.²⁹

In the interview with Kevin McNeilly Carson explains that as a classical scholar she deals with texts which are most of the time incomplete, emended or full of mistakes.³⁰ Therefore she has developed an attitude of questioning towards her materials which she has extended towards her entire output:

You learn to kind of resist the surface in dealing with classical texts, and if you transfer that to your own work, then there's no reason to trust the first version you put on the page – it might be wrong... what came before the thought in what you thought was the first version, or the true original version. You can dig through your own original.³¹

Similarly, in the *Autobiography of Red*³² Carson incorporated varying translations of the surviving fragments of *Geryoneis*, scattered in different sections of the book among fictional interviews, poems, essays and epitaphs. As in the Mimnermos series, in the *Autobiography of Red*, Carson is working with ancient texts that are present only as fragments, leaving a space for multiple engagements with the gaps through diverse re-translations, inserting fictional elements or incorporating different voices to create various enactments of the possibilities in the materials.

The re-translated fragments of *Geryoneis* are juxtaposed with contemporary contexts and objects, as well as with quotations from Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein. Stesichoros' fragmented papyrus texts present the remains of what once existed as a whole and provides Carson with an opportunity to insert additional material, various formats and incongruent elements:

The fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragments' numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box"³³.

²⁹ See later in this chapter for further discussion of *Nox*.

³⁰ McNeilly.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Carson, *Autobiography of Red*.

³³ Ibid., p. 7.

The remaining fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* include his Palinode,³⁴ which Carson has described as a "counter song" or "saying the opposite of what you said before".³⁵ A counter song reverberates with the song it counters, creating an opportunity to re-examine and discover something new in previous renditions.³⁶ The notion of the palinode releases the material from a fixed interpretation, and through 'shaking the box' offers new insights in different versions. For example, *Men in the Off Hours*³⁷ includes several sets of poems called 'drafts': 'Freud' (draft 1 & 2), 'Flatman' (draft 1, 2 & 3); 'Lazarus' (draft 1 & 2), Lazarus appears also in the series 'TV Men', and another version of the series 'TV Men' was published previously in *Glass, Irony and God*.³⁸ There are also several 'second' drafts without a first - 'Essay on Error (2nd draft)' and 'Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd draft)', of which another version was published in *Seneca Review*.³⁹ However, referring to these poems as 'drafts' may be misleading, as they do not read like progressive versions of a poem. Rather, they often appear with a completely different focus that points to the multiple possibilities and instability inherent in her work.

The notion of multiple drafts recalls Daniel Dennett's 'Multiple Drafts model' of consciousness.⁴⁰ According to Dennett's model, many parallel 'multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs'⁴¹ take place in the brain: 'at any point in time there are multiple drafts of narrative fragments at various stages of editing in various places in the brain'.⁴² In his view, the processes of ongoing editing and revision evolved through evolutionary biological measures to ensure survival, shared with other animals. But what turns the brain into a mind is the manner by which these are 'augmented, and sometimes even overwhelmed in importance, by microhabits of thought that are developed in the individual, partly idiosyncratic results of self-exploration and partly the predesigned gifts of culture'.⁴³ In Dennett's account, 'what we actually experience is a product of many processes

³⁴ The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines the palinode as a song of retraction originally applied 'to a lyric by Stesichorus (early 6th century BC), in which he recanted his earlier attack upon Helen as the baneful cause of the Trojan War – hence any poem or song of retraction.' *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger, Frank Warnke and Osborn Bennett Hardison (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 597.

³⁵ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, p. 15.

³⁶ H.D. draws on fragments of Stesichorus in Hilda Doolittle, *Helen in Egypt* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

³⁷ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*.

³⁸ Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995).

³⁹ Anne Carson, 'Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve', *Seneca Review*, 27 (1996), 16-46.

⁴⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991). Dennett is an American philosopher specialising in the philosophy of mind.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

of interpretation – editorial processes, in effect. They take in relatively raw and one-sided representations, and yield collated, revised, enhanced representations’.⁴⁴

According to Dennett, the multiple drafts are produced by a ‘Joycean machine’.⁴⁵ Dennett’s concept of Joycean machine is ‘predicated on Joyce’s stream of consciousness’ narrative in which a character’s impressions are subject to perpetual revision in light of previous and subsequent impressions, even to the point of reshaping or entirely distorting the first impression’.⁴⁶ It seems that the modernist writing techniques of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf anticipate developments in the theory of mind.

Dennett’s Multiple Drafts model ‘avoids the tempting mistake of supposing that there must be a single narrative (the “final” or “published” draft, you might say) that is canonical.’⁴⁷ Instead he proposed a process of ongoing editing and revision in which:

various additions, incorporations, emendations and overwritings of content can occur in various orders ... Contents arise, get revised, contribute to the interpretation of other contents and to the modulation of behaviour (verbal and otherwise), and in the process leave their traces in memory, which then eventually decay or get incorporated into or overwritten by later contents, wholly or in part.⁴⁸

The parallel between Dennett’s account and Carson’s practice is intriguing. Like Dennett’s model of ongoing editing and revision, Carson suggests that despite multiple versions it is impossible to arrive at a definitive ‘final’ version of classical texts due to the inevitability of incompleteness and errors in fragments of ancient texts and in their translations. This is exemplified also in her approach towards more contemporary texts. Hence the repetitions, corrections and re-contextualizations throughout her work, for example in the ‘Freud’ drafts, as discussed below.

Carson’s sets of poems titled ‘drafts’ are comparable to a notion of series employed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ *Drafts* written between 1986 and 2012.⁴⁹ DuPlessis’ series is presented in multiple publications in a process described by DuPlessis as follows: ‘I start from the metaphoric presumption of provisionality ... By using this title [i.e. *Drafts*], I

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 112.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 214.

⁴⁶ Tim Conley, ““Cog it out”: Joyce on the Brain’, *Joyce Studies Annual*, 1 (2014), p. 34.

⁴⁷ Dennett, p. 113.

⁴⁸ Dennett, p. 135.

⁴⁹ For example, *Torques: Drafts 58-76* (London: Salt, 2007); *Pitch: Drafts 77-95* (London: Salt, 2010); *The Collage Poems of Drafts* (London: Salt, 2011).

signal that these poems are open to transformation, part of an ongoing process of construction, self-commentary, and reconstruction, similar to the genre called “midrash” in Hebrew textuality’.⁵⁰ Midrash refers to the Talmudic method of interpreting texts by reading into ‘gaps’ in biblical texts, decontextualizing phrases from their original passages and contextualising them in a new frame of reference, achieved through textual juxtapositions and recombinations, never completed.⁵¹ What is distinctive about midrash discourse is preserving the multiplicity of voices across many generations with their disagreements and contradictions and with a potential for endless proliferation.

The concept of midrash can provide an interesting model for an ongoing meta-series with repeating structures, genres, characters and themes extending across multiple texts as exemplified by DuPlessis’ and Carson’s approach to creating serial works. Carson’s engagement with Freud is particularly apt, considering Freud’s multiple revisions in the development of the Freudian theories of psychoanalysis.

Freud (1st draft) begins with factual biographical details of the young Freud (he was 19 at the time), who as a student of physiology and applied zoology in Vienna, was nominated for a research grant at the Trieste Zoological Station.⁵²

Freud (1st draft)

Freud spent the summer of 1876 in Trieste
researching hermaphroditism in eels
In the lab of zoologist Karl Klaus

he dissected
more than a thousand to check whether they had testicles.

“All the eels I have cut open are of the tenderer sex,”
he reported after the first 400.

⁵⁰ Chris McCreary, *The Serial as Portal: An Interview with Rachel Blau DuPlessis*, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/xconnect/i20/g/mccreary.html> [accessed November 5, 2015]. For a detailed discussion of DuPlessis’ *Drafts* and the midrashic context, see Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘Midrashic Sensibilities: Secular Judaism and Radical Poetics (A Personal Essay in Several Chapters)’, in *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, ed. by Stephen Miller and Daniel Morris (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), and Paul Jaussen, ‘The Poetics of Midrash in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s *Drafts*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53 (2012), 114-142.

⁵¹ Daniel Boyarin, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles: Intertextuality and Midrash’, *Poetics Today*, 8 (1987), 539-556.

⁵² Laura Gandolfi, ‘Freud in Trieste: Journey to an Ambiguous City’, *Psychoanalysis and History*, 12 (2010), 129-151.

Meanwhile

the “young goddesses” of Trieste were proving
unapproachable.

“Since

it is not permitted

to dissect human beings I have

in fact nothing to do with them,” he confided in a letter.⁵³

Freud’s research entailed investigating the controversial thesis on hermaphroditism in eels by dissecting numerous eels to prove or refute the presence of male reproductive organs. According to Gandolfi, Freud was unable to find conclusive evidence for or against this thesis.

The rest of the poem is made up of phrases Carson cut up from Freud’s letters from Trieste to his friend Eduard Silberstein.⁵⁴ The tone of the letters oscillates between scientific reporting, a touch of arrogance in satirical comments on the apparent futility of the experiment, and disappointment over his lack of success in his scientific endeavours – intermingled with comments displaying his ambivalent attitude toward women. Freud’s comments range from his first impression of enchantment – ‘the beasts are very beautiful beasts’,⁵⁵ to irony – ‘I have been tormenting myself and the eels in a vain effort to rediscover male eels, but all the eels I cut open are of the gentler sex’,⁵⁶ and finally to misgivings – ‘I felt that the city was inhabited by none but Italian goddesses, and I was filled with apprehension’.⁵⁷

In the letters Freud refers to women as ‘specimen’ or ‘beasts’. It seems that in his apprehension and ambivalence over female sexuality, he chose the safety of scientific discourse: ‘[S]ince it is not allowed to dissect human beings, I really have nothing to do with them.’⁵⁸ Gandolfi suggests that Freud’s research at that time can be seen as a precursor to his

⁵³ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 20.

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Letters from Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

later theory of bisexuality developed in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.⁵⁹ In her view, Freud's experience in Trieste was a rite of passage, 'giving us a glimpse of the origins of the crossroads between science, art and archaeology that would form the basis of Freudian psychoanalytical thinking' (p.131).⁶⁰

By cutting up, juxtaposing and re-contextualising key phrases from the letters, Carson amplifies the irony and the ambivalence of Freud's predicament: the incongruity between the curious but sexually inhibited Freud engaging in dissecting phallic female eels, and the dissonance between the image of the dedicated young scientist and his dawning awareness that the paradigm of scientific research may not provide a definitive answer. Carson's 'dissecting' of Freud's texts, digging through Freud's early life and writings before what came to be known as the first version of psychoanalysis, mirrors her description of working with classics texts quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

Freud (1st draft) and Freud (2nd draft), placed more than 100 pages apart in the book to enhance the perception of being unrelated and at the same time to create a space for a dialogue across the gap in space and time. The second Freud 'draft' begins with the speaker in the poem recommending a visit to the Raptor Center in Iowa which provides sanctuary and medical care for sick and injured birds of prey. The speaker instructs visitors to bend their back and peer into the dark. Gradually, bits of birds come into view: knobby yellow talons, eyes watching through a screen, a one-winged body that does not move, a looming presence of a bird's head. Yet it is not apparent what bird it is, the speaker in the poem naming it tentatively as 'bald eagle' (a bird with considerable significance in American culture), but the word 'say' suggests a possibility of something else. Nothing is clear ('no bit of annunciation', see below). The effect is uncanny, unsettling the viewer, a single 'eye shifts this way and back', not clear who is watching whom, who the 'guests' are (birds or visitors?).

Freud (2nd draft)

If you go to Iowa visit the Raptor Center.

Down a long gravel road

then over slats

to big wooden boxes.

Bend and peer, it's dark in there.

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1905), VII, pp 123-246.

⁶⁰ Gandolfi, p. 131.

Set of knobby yellow talons big as jumper cables
glows slowly out
from a shelf near the wall and
above these
the godly tucked presence of (say)
a bald eagle
shuts itself.
That shock of white at the top of the dark
is no daystar no bit of annunciation —
it is head.
Eye shifts this way
and back.
Through a screen
eye watches yellow twigs move on wind.
Body does not move, has only one wing.
All guests of the Center are maimed, rapt away
from the narcissism of nature.⁶¹

At this point, in a sudden move, two contrasting references to Freud's essays are added, juxtaposed with the preceding text and opening up a new perspective. Carson likens her method to impressionist paintings: 'As impressionist colours interact ... you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other.'⁶²

...

Ultimate things are pleasure
said Freud (1914).
Ultimate things are death
said Freud (1937).
Meanwhile (to cite Goethe) one perfect thorn.
For all his sadness there were moments it seemed to him
he had only to make some simple movement

⁶¹ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 128-9.

⁶² McNeilly, p. 22.

(a swimmer's)
and find himself right back on top.⁶³

Positioning the experience of visiting the Raptor Center in close proximity to the Freud references offers a new interpretative frame to consider the preceding section of the poem in relation to the first Freud 'draft'. Like the ambivalent young researcher at the Zoological Station, the visitors to the Raptor Center are confronted with unsettling experiences in shifting perspectives. Likewise, both the researcher and the visitors encounter what Carson describes as 'the narcissism of nature' in different ways. The research is faced with the enigma of the eels' sexual organs, while the visitors view damaged nature in captivity.

While the 'first draft' includes direct quotes from Freud's letters, in the 'second draft' the references are circuitous, purporting to sum up in one phrase Freud's seminal works which signify major revisions and shifts of his earlier theories, from the 'pleasure principle' towards the 'death drive'. The first reference, to 'Remembering, repeating and working through',⁶⁴ suggests that repetition can be seen as an intermediate tool on the path to recovery through remembering repressed memories. The therapeutic work 'consists in a large measure in tracing it back to the past'.⁶⁵ The cure is thus dependent on the possibility of recovering repressed memories: 'From the repetitive reactions which are exhibited in the transference we are led ... to the awakening of the memories, which appear without difficulty, as it were, after the resistance has been overcome'.⁶⁶ Initially the road to recovery seems 'without difficulty', offering a trajectory of a pleasurable gain.

The second reference in the poem is to Freud's penultimate paper 'Analysis terminable and interminable',⁶⁷ looking back at the development of psychoanalysis since its conception, reappraising earlier revisions and theoretical formulations, including the theory of the 'death drive', first introduced in 1920. 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'⁶⁸ represents a major shift in Freud's theoretical approach to focusing on the destructive potential of human behaviour and developing a theory of drives to include the 'beyond' of the pleasure principle,

⁶³ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 129

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, repeating and working through', in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1914), XII, pp. 145-156.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1964) XXIII, pp. 209-254.

⁶⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), XVIII, pp. 1-64.

which he described as the ‘death drive’. The concept of ‘death drive’ allowed Freud to make sense of the human tendency towards destruction and self-destruction, which he witnessed in dealing with patients suffering trauma following the first World War.

These references to Freud’s early and late theories anchor the poem into an evolving psychoanalytic paradigm that provides an analogy between Freud’s psychoanalytic theories and Carson’s own strategies of revision, repetition, ‘digging back’ and re-construction, suggesting a similarity to the impossibility of establishing a definitive version of texts and to Dennett’s concept of ‘multiple drafts’. However, unlike Dennett, Carson isn’t just writing about a model of consciousness, she is also enacting it through the form of her text.

The enigmatic reference to Goethe in the poem suggests another parallel between Freud’s and Carson’s own strategies of inserting materials from classical and contemporary texts in sudden juxtapositions. Freud’s writings contain numerous quotations from prominent writers, including Sophocles, Shakespeare, Schiller, Heine, and many others, but above all Goethe, whom he most admired and most frequently cited to support his theories. At the same time, Freud referred to Goethe not only as ‘a great revealer’, but also ‘in spite of the wealth of autobiographical hints, a careful concealer’.⁶⁹ Thus, using quotations from Goethe functions also to allude to something that, like for Carson, can never be fully known and stays open to retranslation and reinterpretation.⁷⁰

The figure of the swimmer at the end of Freud (2nd draft) which appears also in several other Carson poems, similarly suggests a sense of movement, something which cannot be captured: ‘Water is something you cannot hold’, says Carson in ‘The anthropology of water’.⁷¹ Instability, shifting positions and unpredictability prevail:

At noon the water is a cool bowl where the swimmer drops
and darts away

...

moves forward with his face in the water staring down at the
bottom of the lake. Old, beautiful shadows are wavering steadily
across it. He angles his body and looks up at the sky.

...

... rotates himself to swim on his

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Goethe Prize’, in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), XXI, pp. 205-214 (p. 213).

⁷⁰ It is possible that Carson may be citing (or imitating or parodying) Freud’s citational method.

⁷¹ Carson, *Plainwater*, p.117.

back staring at the sky. Could we be exactly wrong about such things as – he rotates again – which way is up? High above him he can feel the clouds watching his back, waiting for him to fall toward them.⁷²

The speaker seems confused (‘could we be exactly wrong’; ‘which way is up?’), both ‘wavering’ and ‘steadily’ at the same time. Returning to Freud (2nd draft), it seems that all it would take is ‘to make some simple movement ... and find himself right back on top’. Yet Carson frustrates this sense of possibility, retelling Kafka’s parable⁷³ about the man acclaimed as a swimming champion who does not know how to swim,⁷⁴ an allusion repeated in *The Beauty of the Husband*:⁷⁵

and as Kafka said in the end
my swimming was of no use to me you know I cannot swim after all.

Originally Freud was intent on establishing a scientific paradigm for psychoanalysis by gathering empirical evidence through pursuing his patients’ chain of memories further back to a primal event in earliest childhood. However, early on he began to realize, as in the case of Emma, one of his first patients⁷⁶ that memories are not fixed and can be subject to changes. On 6 December 1896 he writes to Wilhelm Fliess: ‘... the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a *rearrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances – to a *retranscription*’.⁷⁷ At the same time Freud also began to realize that he was unable to establish whether a scene discovered in analysis was ‘real’ or a fantasy and that would always remain something unknowable.⁷⁸

Similarly, Carson highlights the inability to arrive at a ‘correct’ or ‘real’ version, by creating a sense of confusion in conflicting versions. For example, in the *Autobiography of Red*⁷⁹ a series of statements is presented as logical propositions, ostensibly meant for

⁷² Ibid., pp. 248-250.

⁷³ Franz Kafka, *The Kafka Project* <http://www.kafka.org/index.php?id=125,116,0,0,1,0> [accessed August 3, 2015].

⁷⁴ Carson, *Plainwater*, p. 119

⁷⁵ Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 30.

⁷⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Hysterical Proton Pseudos’, in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1895), I, pp352-356.

⁷⁷ *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, ed. by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 207. Italics in source.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 264.

⁷⁹ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*.

‘Clearing Up The Question of Stesichoros’ Blinding by Helen’.⁸⁰ Yet, the seemingly binary logic provides no answers, nothing is clarified and moreover, the reader is led back to the question in the title:⁸¹

....

7. If Helen’s reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made either it was a strong remark about Helen’s sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavoury aftermath the Fall of Troy) either this remark was a lie or it was not.

8. If it was strong remark about Helen’s sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavoury aftermath the Fall of Troy) either this remark was a lie or it was not.

9. If it was not a lie either we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros or we are not.

....

13. If Stesichoros lies either we will know at once that he is lying or we will be fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out.

...

The sense of confusion is further intensified as these statements appear in an appendix (Appendix C), one of three placed ahead of the main work, thus frustrating the convention of placing an appendix as a supplement following the main text. Carson’s deliberate confusion of the conventional order recalls Spicer’s concept of seriality, which does not serve narratives or rhetorical concerns, but consists of writing in units that are somehow related without creating a totalizing structure.

Since his early attempts to reveal the origins of hysteria in ‘The aetiology of hysteria’,⁸² Freud has repeatedly turned to the terminology and imagery of an archaeological excavation to describe the analyst’s task as unearthing evidence from hidden layers and

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’, in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1896), III, pp. 25-282.

fragments of the patient's past which 'make themselves heard as witnesses to the history of the origins of the illness'.⁸³ Furthermore, like the archaeologist, as well as 'unearthing', in Freud's description the work of the analyst entails constructing a narrative through inferences and interpretations: 'from fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis. Both of them [the archaeologist and the analyst] have an undisputed right to reconstruct by means of supplementing and combining the surviving remains'.⁸⁴

Freud described the task of the analyst as creating new meanings from the 'raw materials' of psychoanalysis, (i.e. pieces of broken narratives, fragments of dreams, bits of memory, 'free association', parapraxis, etc.), 'to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to *construct* it'.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Freud considered construction as 'always a preliminary labour'.⁸⁶ As Abou-Rihan contends, a construction can be generative in so far as it 'promotes a narrative ... that sets up the scaffolding upon which a host of meanings may hang ... imbuing them with the potential to generate even further correspondences ... construction crosses the border between the inside and the outside; it opens up the one domain to the other and, in the process, confounds, contaminates and reconfigures both'.⁸⁷

As suggested above, Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Carson's own strategies of repetition, revision and re-construction present an intriguing analogy. Like Freud's constructions of interpretative narratives out of fragments and traces, Carson states that the fragments of classical texts provide the ground for narrative imaginings: 'The meaning is all padded ... comes out of dealing with classical texts which are, like Sappho, in bits of papyrus with that enchanting white space around them, in which we can imagine all of the experience of antiquity floating but which we can't quite reach'.⁸⁸

Carson also gestures towards Lacan's elaboration and development of Freud's theory of the unconscious. In an mail exchange and an interview with Sam Anderson in *The New York Times Magazine*,⁸⁹ Carson describes 'the struggle to drag a thought over from the mush

⁸³ Ibid., p. 192.

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Constructions in Analysis', in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), XXIII, pp. 255-270.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 258-9. Italics in source.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 260.

⁸⁷ Fadl Abou-Rihan, 'Constructions Revisited: Winnicott, Deleuze and Guattari, Freud', *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 31 (2015), p. 21.

⁸⁸ John D'Agata and Anne Carson, 'A _____ with Anne Carson', *The Iowa Review*, 27 (1997), p. 14.

⁸⁹ Sam Anderson, 'The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson', *New York Times*, 17 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/magazine/the-inscrutable-brilliance-of-anne-carson.html> [accessed April 25, 2015].

of the unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense; every attempt means starting over with language... every accuracy has to be invented'. While Freud advanced the metaphor of archaeology, Lacan's rereading of Freud is focused on language.⁹⁰ While in Freudian theory, dream content, parataxis and jokes have traditionally been viewed as 'symbols' of what is repressed, in Lacan's theory of the unconscious, parapraxis is viewed as a symptom which is structured in linguistic terms as a metaphor with the potential to generate new meanings. The neurotic symptom (e.g. dream or parapraxis) corresponds to a desire which has been omitted from the signifying chain. The ability to articulate this desire in speech would result in therapeutic effects.

Like the psychoanalytic concepts which describe an imaginative engagement (e.g. free association, reverie, daydreaming, etc.) to facilitate the constructions of new meanings, in *Eros the Bittersweet* Carson suggests that 'what is erotic about reading (or writing) is the play of imagination called forth in the space between you and your object of knowledge'.⁹¹ Intriguingly, Daniel Dennett suggests that as 'creative language use can be accomplished by a parallel process in which multiple goals are simultaneously on the alert for materials. But what if the materials themselves were at the same time on the alert for opportunities to get incorporated?'⁹²

The reciprocal dance between material and imagination provides an opportunity for exploring ideas from different perspectives. For example, the Freud 'drafts' which, despite the thematic contiguity and logical sequencing indicated in the labels 1st & 2nd drafts, are placed far apart in the book and frustrate the expectation of a progressive development from 'first' to 'second'. However, the distance provides a space for changing perspectives, defer resolutions or focus on different aspects of the poems. Confusingly, although no link is indicated in the title 'Essay on Error (2nd draft)', thematically it touches and simultaneously unsettles and illuminates the two Freud drafts.

'Essay on Error (2nd draft)' also disrupts expectations. To start with, there is no 'first' draft. Also, the title implies an 'essay' form⁹³ but the movement of the lines on the page suggests reading the text as a poem. The poem begins in the middle of a monologue whose

⁹⁰ James M. Mellard, 'Inventing Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Linguistics and Tropology in "The Agency of the Letter"', *Poetics Today*, 19 (1998), 499-530.

⁹¹ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 109.

⁹² Dennet, p. 243.

⁹³ Robert Stanton points out that, etymologically, the term 'essay' designates an 'attempt', 'test' or 'trial'. Traced back to ancient Greek, it comes from 'to "export goods," or, more literally to "lead out." So, at root, "essay" has its spatial dimension too, an organized "exporting" of information on any given topic, "led out" into the light, where it can be read by others.' Robert Stanton, "'I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you": Anne Carson's Errancy', *Canadian Literature*, 176 (2003), p. 36.

speaker is identified indirectly in a reference to Freud's letters. The reference is presented in a precise academic manner, yet the quotation itself is flippantly erroneous, thus inserting the notion of 'error' or 'mistake' and incongruence into the text. In the letter cited in the poem Freud casually mentioned having completed the case of his patient, known as the 'Rat Man'.⁹⁴

The monologue then shifts to a direct address to the reader ('let me tell you'). The speaker appears to point to 'errors' in the case study, yet the 'mistakes' he purports to identify are no less enigmatic than the errors he attributed to Freud. The case study is thus imbued with errors, with neither the analyst nor the patient able to arrive at a 'correct' version.

Essay on Error (2nd draft)

It is also true I dream about soiled suede gloves.

And have done so

since the day I read

in the third published volume of Freud's letters

(this was years after I stopped seeing him)

a sentence which I shall quote in full.

Letter to Ferenczi 7.5.1909:

"He doesn't look a bit like a poet except for the lashes."

Freud hesitates to name me

but

let me tell you

that was no

pollen stain.

Here

I could paraphrase Descartes

the hand that busy instrument

or just let it go.

After all

what are you and I compared to him?

⁹⁴ Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi, *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi* 3 vols (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994-2000), I-III.

Smell of burnt pastilles⁹⁵

I still remember the phrase every time I pass that spot.⁹⁶

Freud himself was aware of the productive potential of errors. In his view, not much damage is done if the analyst gets it wrong at times. On the contrary, it is unlikely to cause harm, but, quoting Polonius in *Hamlet*, ‘our bait of falsehood has taken a carp of truth’⁹⁷ a ‘mistake’ may generate novel perceptions and an insightful ‘truth’. Similarly, in the interview with McNeilly,⁹⁸ Carson tells the interviewer:

I like the space between languages because it’s a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all. And that’s useful I think for writing because it’s always good to put yourself off balance, to be dislodged from the complacency in which you normally go at perceiving the world and saying that you’ve perceived. (p.14)

Similarly, in ‘Essay on What I Think About Most’ Carson suggests that the ‘willful [sic] creation of error’ is at the core of ‘doing’ poetry.⁹⁹ Aristotle’s discussion of metaphors is her starting point for an extended exposition on the productive possibilities of error and mistakenness incorporating quotations and academic analysis:

... what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
The willful creation of error,
the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
out of which may arise
unexpectedness.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ The ‘smell of burnt pastilles’ possibly refers to Freud’s case of Lucy R., who was troubled by a smell of burnt pudding. Freud associated the smell of the burned pudding with her hidden love for her employer, which later had been replaced by the smell of cigar smoke. Cigar smoke appears also in Freud’s case of Dora. Considering Freud’s passion for cigars, perhaps what is implicated here is also the ambivalence of transference and countertransference. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, ‘Studies on Hysteria’, in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1895), I.

⁹⁶ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 37.

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Cambridge: University Press, 1904), Act II, Scene 1 (quoted in Freud, ‘Constructions in analysis’, p. 262).

⁹⁸ McNeilly, p. 14.

⁹⁹ In *Ulysses*, James Joyce describes volitional errors as ‘portals of discovery.’ James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, ed. by Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Random House and Vintage, 1986) pp. 228-29.

¹⁰⁰ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 35.

The poem is presented as an essay, as the title suggests, but arranged in stanzas and poetic line-breaks which enable specific emphasis not possible in writing in an essay mode. For example, the strong enjambment ‘out of which may arise/unexpectedness’ pushes forward to the next line and highlights the ‘deliberate break’ and the abruptness of the ‘wilful creation’:

it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh

(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10 –13).

In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?

Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself in the act of making a mistake.

He pictures the mind moving along the plane surface of ordinary language

when suddenly

that surface breaks or complicates.

Unexpectedness emerges.

....

Not only that things are other than they seem,

and so we mistake them,

but that such mistakenness is valuable.

Hold on to it, Aristotle says,

there is much to be seen and felt here.

Metaphors teach the mind

to enjoy error

and to learn

from the juxtaposition of *what is and what is not the case*.

There is a Chinese proverb that says,

Brush cannot write two characters with the same stroke.

And yet

that is exactly what a good mistake does.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 30-31.

By italicising the phrase ‘the juxtaposition of *what is and what is not the case*’, Carson draws attention to the significance of her strategy of creating juxtapositions between supposedly opposites (‘what is’ and ‘what is not’) and letting both resonate within the text. The juxtaposition of apparently contrasting elements creates dissonance and confusion which breaks the continuity of the narrative and releases the material from a fixed interpretation to create an opportunity to re-examine and discover something new. For example, the crossed-out lines in Carson’s epitaph dedicated to her mother, in which a residue of presence gleams from underneath the crossed-out lines (see below).

The potential of errors and incongruity to generate multiple poetic perspectives is exemplified in the long multi-layered series ‘TV Men’,¹⁰² discussed in the next section.

A blurred and breathless hour repeats, repeats: Carson’s recurrent forms

The poems in ‘TV Men’ are presented as TV scripts, shot-lists, synopses and voiceovers, including Sappho (twice), Artaud (twice), Antigone (Scripts 1 and 2), Lazarus, Tolstoy, Akhmatova and Woolf. Carson’s conception of television as a medium of smooth unbroken surfaces which make errors disappear contrasts with her preference for the ‘deliberate break and complication of mistakes’. This fundamental dissonance is manifested through the series in paradoxical juxtapositions, incongruity and irony.

The series begins with an anachronistic fictional epigraph which highlights the paradox at the root of the series: ‘TV makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes / from Latin *videre* “to see.”/ (Longinus, *de Sublimitate*, 5.3)’. However, there is no section 5.3 in *On the Sublime*, as chapter 5 has only one section. The sense of mismatch and incongruity permeates the entire series, for example in the three-part sequence ‘TV Men: Lazarus’. The first part is a voiceover of the director of photography, the middle section is presented as a ‘shooting script’ which attempts to narrate the experience of ‘Lazarus standup’ and the final section consists of a four-part ‘Giotto Shot List’ of Giotto’s Lazarus fresco in the Scrovegni chapel. In the first part the voice of the director of photography admits to being fascinated by horror:

¹⁰² The series ‘TV Men’ (Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, pp. 61-118) is made up of nine parts, each comprising several sections. Another version of the series ‘TV Men’ was published in Carson, *Glass, Irony and God* (1995).

Yes I admit a degree of unease about my
motives in making
this documentary.
Mere prurience of a kind that is all too common nowadays
in public catastrophes
...
the pull is irresistible. The pull to handle horrors
and to have a theory of them¹⁰³

The voice is distancing itself from the filmed event by presenting itself as ‘merely’ a director of photography and by resorting to a mock ‘philosophical’ discourse:

... No use being historical
about this planet,
it is just an imitation.
As Lazarus is an imitation of Christ. As TV is an imitation of
Lazarus. As you and I are an imitation of
TV. Already you notice that
although I am merely
a director of photography,
I have grasped certain fundamental notions first advanced by Plato,
e.g. that our reality is just a TV set
inside a TV set inside a TV set, with nobody watching
but Sokrates,
who changed
the channel in 399 B.C.¹⁰⁴

The figure of Lazarus provides an analogy for TV as a paradigm of repetition, exemplified in the need for multiple retakes to make errors disappear and create a smooth surface. The director’s monologue is voicing Carson’s approach to TV (‘nausea overtakes me when faced with // the prospect of something simply beginning all over again. / Each time I have to / raise

¹⁰³ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.89.

my slate and say / “Take 12!” or “Take 13!” and then “Take 14!” / I cannot restrain a shudder’). Through the director’s voice Carson further satirizes the notion of a TV ‘documentary’ as creating pathetic scenarios:

...

You won't be seeing any clips from home videos of Lazarus
in short pants racing his sisters up a hill.
No footage of Mary and Martha side by side on the sofa
discussing how they manage
at home
with a dead one sitting down to dinner. No panel of experts
debating who was really the victim here.¹⁰⁵

Instead, the director stands back and declares his only focus is on capturing the sensational moment when ‘Lazarus licks the first drop of afterlife off the nipple of his own old death’:

I put tiny microphones all over the ground
to pick up
the magic
of the vermin in his ten fingers and I stand back to wait
for the miracle.¹⁰⁶

In the second part of the sequence, Lazarus stand-up attempts to describe the embodied sensations of being raised from the dead. Lazarus’ bones are ‘blown to the surface then sideways’, ‘a darkish clump / cuts across his field of vision’, ‘his soul congeals on his back’.¹⁰⁷

A froth of fire is upon his mind.
It crawls to the back of his tongue,
struggles a bit,
cracking the shell
and pushes out a bluish cry that passes at once to the soul.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.90.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.91.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p.93.

There is a glimmer of ironic display of empathy that Carson immediately thwarts by reintroducing the voice of the director in a ploy of a shooting script: ‘For an instant it parts our hearts. / *Someone take the linen napkin off his face, / says the director quietly*’.¹⁰⁸

In the final section, the focus shifts back from embodied sensations towards more distant views, to the walls of the Scrovegni chapel. In contrast to the flatness of the TV surface, Giotto ‘creates background and foreground’ and his Lazarus ‘slips sideways into time’. Giotto’s Lazarus is seen in a more compassionate light, yet tinged with irony towards the TV production:

...

Lazarus there you come stained with ordinary death,
a white grub tottering.

So young, such a terrible actor.

Life pulls softly inside your bindings.

...

His eyes

have the power of the other world. Barely open
narrow shock slits

whose gaze is directed – simply, nowhere.

...

Meanwhile God on the other side of the painting is
sending

the whole heat of His love of Man across the wall
in a glance,

towards Lazarus’ cheekbones still radiant with a

“studio light”¹⁰⁹

...

Like the series of ‘drafts’, the series ‘TV Men’ provides a framing device which Carson used in different collections (another version of the series ‘TV Men’ published previously in *Glass, Irony and God*, 1995), recalling the assemblage of disparate elements in Robert Duncan’s *Passages* which are spread across different volumes.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.94-95.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.97 -99.

¹¹⁰ There is a more detailed discussion of Robert Duncan *Passages* in the introduction of this thesis.

In addition to the drafts and the TV scripts, other repeated structures in *Men in the Off Hours* include interviews, essays, epigraphs and epitaphs. The epigraphs constitute an inherently recurrent structure, juxtaposing an existing but previously unrelated text with the current text, as in the series ‘Hopper: *Confessions*’ which consists of 10 ekphrastic poems based on the work of Edward Hopper, each poem paired with a quotation from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (another example is in *The Beauty of the Husband*¹¹¹ which consists of a series of 29 sections, each paired with an epigraph from John Keats). Juxtaposing the two texts in the poems adds a polyphonic dimension which animates the static images. ‘It’s about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning’, says Carson in the interview with McNeilly,¹¹² ‘you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other.’

For example, *Room in Brooklyn* refers to Hopper’s painting with the same title: a woman sits alone in a sunlit room facing out of the window, a table and a vase of flowers the only other objects in the painting. Bright sunlight forms into a window-shaped square on the floor and a sparkle of light glows at the nape of her neck. The image of the woman appears restrained, passive, like a ‘still life’. The Augustine quotation which follows animates the still image with a sense of the flow of time. Asked by McNeilly about the Augustine quotes, Carson states ‘a whole sequence of Augustine at the bottoms of the pages is a verb, it’s one verb: time goes’.¹¹³ The extremely short lines, mainly one-word-per-line slow down the reading and support the sense of slow motion. The short lines create a vertical shape downwards towards the only end-stopped line in the poem, where it is followed by the horizontal line of the Augustine quote. Thus, the passing of time is displayed on the page in two dimensions.

Room in Brooklyn

This

slow

day

moves

Along the room

I

hear

¹¹¹ Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*.

¹¹² McNeilly, p. 22.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 22-23.

its
axles
go
A gradual dazzle
upon
the ceiling
Gives me that
racy
bluishyellow
feeling
As hours
blow
the wide
way
Down my afternoon.
*Let us not say time past was long, for we shall not find it.
It is no more. But let us say
time present was long,
because when it was present it was long.*

(Augustine, *Confessions XI*)¹¹⁴

Room in Brooklyn has been adapted and performed as a multimedia installation for cello, interactive computer music and interactive video.¹¹⁵ The multimedia presentation enhances Carson's method of placing disparate elements and different temporal orders in the same poem, juxtaposing the motionless paint with Augustine's movement of time, as the program notes suggest:

Mixing new and old images, photograph and canvas, still life and movement, the visuals offer a double-take on Hopper's interiors. The musical score represents a similar fusion of perspectives, through a series of discrete phrases that shift between

¹¹⁴ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 52.

¹¹⁵ First performed as a part of the New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME) 2005 Concert Program at the University of British Columbia (<http://nagasm.org/NIME/report05/concerts.html>). See also details of another performance of *Room in Brooklyn* at <http://movingpoems.com/poet/anne-carson/>.

skittish walking bass and mournful cantabile melody, mediated by the electronic interaction. Two temporal orders are bridged through the sound and the function of this electronic voice, which both binds and separates what is now and what is no more.¹¹⁶

In recent years Carson has expanded the range of her work towards multimedia productions, working closely with musicians, choreographers and dancers, creating a spectacle featuring modern dancers, live and projected on a screen, arranged around Carson reading'.¹¹⁷ Carson's collaborative work in time-based media, like Cahun's collaborative work in the theatre, highlights the shifting positions and the multiple components interacting in production of work. Like Spicer's notion of the serial form, the work is not organized according to a narrative progression and its components are interrelated without creating a totalizing structure.

A performance engages a temporal dimension, particularly apt for Carson's work. For example, the passage of time is a key theme framing the whole collection *Men in the Off Hours*. It begins with an essay "Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War" and concludes with an "Appendix to Ordinary Time". In the essay Carson juxtaposes Thucydides' 'objective' chronological account of the Peloponnesian war with Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall", which represents a subjective engagement with time, focusing on 'what one saw from where one sat'. In "Appendix to Ordinary Time", Carson's personal meditation following her mother's death, she writes: 'Death lines every moment of ordinary time', and highlighting a presence at the core of absence 'Lost, yet still there',¹¹⁸ which points to her epitaphs, another recurrent structure of seven epitaphs distributed throughout *Men in the Off Hours*.

Our lives were fragile: Presence and absence

In *Economy of the Unlost* Carson describes the purpose of the epitaph as 'to insert a dead and vanished past into the living present ... no genre of verse is more profoundly

¹¹⁶ See previous footnote.

¹¹⁷ Several other multimedia productions of Carson's work in cooperation with musicians, choreographers and dancers (sometimes with Carson herself on stage) have taken place in recent years. For example, a performance of *Nox* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston Alastair Macaulay, 'Translating Poetry to the Stage, With or Without Words'; a performance of *Antigonick* at New York University; and a Ballet Frankfurt production of *Decreation*.

¹¹⁸ See below for further discussion on Carson, *Appendix to Ordinary Time* (2000).

concerned with seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is, than that of the epitaph.’¹¹⁹ The epitaphs in *Men in the Off Hours* are brief, elusive and enigmatic, imbued with a sense of profound loss and devastation, for example, ‘Epitaph: Zion’ describes a precarious survival in a ‘murderous’ world, vulnerable to the destructive force of the wind.

EPITAPH: ZION

Murderous little world once our objects had gazes. Our lives
Were fragile, the wind
Could dash them away. Here lies the refugee breather
Who drank a bowl of elsewhere.¹²⁰

The ‘refugee’, though not identified, is likely to be the poet Paul Celan, who Carson pairs in *Economy of the Unlost* with the Greek poet Simonides of Keos. In an introductory note she explains placing these two poets together as follows: ‘To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling. Partly for this reason I have chosen to talk about two men at once. They keep each other from settling ... each is placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus’.¹²¹ Simonides (fifth century B.C) became famous as a poet composing epitaphs, which required developing a concise, evocative style suitable for writing in the limited space of the gravestones. To read Simonides ‘is a repeated experience of loss, absence or deprivation’ writes Carson.¹²² Yet, ‘a poet is also a sort of a hinge. Through songs of praise he arranges a continuity between mortal and immortal life’.¹²³

Celan (1920-1970) was a German speaking Jewish Romanian writer. During the Holocaust he was detained in a forced labour camp while his parents were deported to a concentration camp and perished. After the war he settled in Paris, where he lived until his suicide in 1970.¹²⁴ Despite the sense of profound loss which pervades his work, despite his ‘mother tongue’ having turned murderous, for him the only thing which remained ‘unlost’ (*unverloren* in the German original) was the language. Carson notes that ‘Celan described

¹¹⁹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 73.

¹²⁰ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 9.

¹²¹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. viii. As noted above, in the interview with McNeilly, Carson described her method as impressionist colours interacting like daubs of paint. Similarly, discussing *Decreation*, Carson described why she placed Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil next to each other: ‘I think I put the three together to see what illumination would arise’; Will Aitken, ‘Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88’, *Paris Review*, 171 (2004) 190-226.

¹²² Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 101.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹²⁴ John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

post-war German as a language stuffed with falsity and gagged by the “ashes of burned-out meanings.”¹²⁵ However, although Celan continued to write in German, he ‘purified’, reconfigured and pared it down, and like Simonides, developed a unique style marked by extreme verbal economy¹²⁶ and neologisms.¹²⁷

Carson’s epitaphs display stylistic and thematic affinities with Celan’s poems, concise and enigmatic, fragile and bereft, mourning a shadowy loss, as in *Epitaph: Zion* above and in a further example *Epitaph: Europe*:

EPITAPH: EUROPE

Once live X-rays stalked the hills as if they were
Trees. Bones stay now
And their Lent stays with them, black on the nail.
Tattering on the daywall.¹²⁸

Seven similarly structured epitaphs recur throughout *Men in the Off Hours*. The final epitaph, taken from Virginia Woolf’s manuscript, is dedicated to Carson’s mother who died at the time she was writing the book:

¹²⁵ Anne Carson, ‘All Debts Owed to Death: Economy in Simonides and Celan’, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 23 (1998), p. 204.

¹²⁶ In his acceptance speech for the Bremen Prize in 1958, Celan stated that in spite of all the losses, the only thing which remained unlost was the language. ‘But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, had to go through terrifying muteness, had to go through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing talk. It went through and gave no words for that which happened; yet it went through this happening. Went through and was able to come back to light “enriched” by it all’ (Celan, quoted in Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 29).

¹²⁷ For example, in *No More Sand Art*, ‘Celan pared down his words by lopping off consonants so that at the end of the poem the neologism “Deepinsnow” becomes “Eeepinow” and finally “E - i - o”’ (Susan Gubar, ‘The long and the Short of Holocaust Verse’, *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), p. 251.) Carson suggests that ‘[I]f this poem were translated into Hebrew, a language in which vowels are not usually printed, it would vanish even before its appointed end’ (Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 116.)

¹²⁸ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 19.

Here is an epitaph for my mother I found on p. 19 of the Fitzwilliam Manuscript of Virginia Woolf's *Women and Fiction*:

such ~~Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those~~
 ~~foaming water, to~~
abandon ~~compare the living with the dead make any comparison~~
ment ~~compare them.~~¹²⁹
such

Reading Woolf's diaries after her mother's funeral, Carson notes: 'Crossouts are something you rarely see in published texts.¹³⁰ They are like death: by a simple stroke – all is lost, yet still there'.¹³¹ A residue of presence gleams from underneath the crossed-out lines. The crossouts provide some consolation: 'Crossouts sustain me now. I search out and cherish them like old photographs of my mother in happier times'.¹³²

'Remembering brings the absent into the present', Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost*, 'connects what is lost to what is there'.¹³³ Absent and present interact, as in Celan's term 'unlost' which contains at its core the un-prefixed 'lost'. Like the crossed-out lines which function as an epitaph for Carson's mother, the keyhole on the front cover of *Nox* invites readers to glimpse traces of her brother's life. On the back cover of *Nox* Carson states: 'When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book'.¹³⁴ As a poet writing epitaphs for her mother and her brother, Carson, like Simonides, becomes the hinge that 'arranges a continuity between mortal and immortal life'.

Some of Carson's most significant recurring themes, e.g. absence/presence, past/present, love/desire/ loss, death, sleep, are explored in her poetic work through a focus on close personal relationships. For example, love/desire/loss are at the core of *The Beauty of*

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.166, format as in original.

¹³⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, Carson overlooks the practice of 'sous rature', described as follows by Spivak: 'This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. xiv.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² On the final page, Carson placed a photograph of her mother and herself as a child, with this text underneath: 'Margaret Carson / 1913-1997 // *Eclipsis est pro dolore*' (p. 167).

¹³³ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p.38.

¹³⁴ On the back cover.

the Husband and the *Glass Essay*; love/presence/absence in the familial bond, the figure of the brother in *Nox* and ‘Water Margins: An Essay on Swimming by My Brother’ in *Plainwater*; the figure of the mother in *Plainwater*, *The Glass Essay*, *The Beauty of the husband*, *Men in the Off Hours* and *Decreation*.

The figure of the mother connects the epitaph and a photograph of Carson’s mother in the final page of *Men in the Off Hours* to the first series (‘Stops’) of fourteen poems in *Decreation*.¹³⁵ ‘Sleepchains’, the first poem in the book, introduces the ambivalent and conflicting feelings of the daughter’s love, closeness and distance, despondency, loss and guilt and the unspoken in-between as she is witnessing her mother’s imminent death.

S L E E P C H A I N S

Who can sleep when she-
hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath
fan her restless decks.
Cicatrice by cicatrice
all the links
rattle once.

Here we go mother on the shipless ocean.

Pity us, pity the ocean, here we go.¹³⁶

The title introduces the image of ‘chains’, suggesting both a filial bond between mother and daughter, and at the same time a bind, the impossibility of breaking free despite the distance ‘hundreds of miles’ apart. Hence, not being able to sleep,¹³⁷ likely anxiety and guilt, as the links in the chain of their bond rattle. Yet, the movement of the pronouns, from ‘she’ and ‘I’ to ‘we’ and ‘us’, suggest a coming together on the journey towards emptiness (the ‘shipless ocean’), though this is a closeness motivated by pity. The ambivalence continues in the other poems in the series. ‘My mother, / love / of my life’, Carson says in ‘Lines’,¹³⁸ but the poem concludes with an expression of exasperation and a sense of guilt at the intimation of her desire to be free of the burden: ‘God’s pity! How long / will / it feel like burning, said the child trying to be / kind’.

¹³⁵ Carson, *Decreation*.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Sleep is another recurrent theme in Carson’s work.

¹³⁸ Carson, *Decreation*, p. 5.

Similarly, the poem 'Her Beckett'¹³⁹ oscillates between the daughter's anguish witnessing her mother disappearing, sinking like Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*¹⁴⁰ and the claustrophobic memories of earlier times in the family home. All that's left is a flicker of 'that halfmad firebrand', the bind that was their love, flashing and disappearing again 'before the gliding emptiness of the night coming on us'.¹⁴¹

HER BECKETT

Going to visit my mother is like starting in on a piece by Beckett.

You know that sense of sinking through crust,
the low black oh no of the little room
with walls too close, so knowable.

Clink and slow fade of toys that belong in memory

but wrongly appear here, vagrant and suffocated

on a page of pain.

Worse

she says when I ask,

even as (was it April?) some high humour grazes her eye-

"we went out rowing on Lake Como"

not quite reaching the lip.

Our love, *that halfmad firebrand*,

races once around the room

whipping everything

and hides again.¹⁴²

The themes of love, loss and desire for the sublime recur throughout *Decreation* in an intricate dialectic between presence and absence, moving from the personal (the series 'Stops') to the spiritual in a struggle with the desire to displace the self from the centre of her work. 'There's too much self in my writing', Carson states in the introductory 'note on

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (London: Faber, 1962).

¹⁴¹ Carson, *Decreation*, p. 13.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 14.

method' in *Economy of the Unlost*.¹⁴³ The disparate materials in *Decreation* (subtitled: *Poetry, Essays, Opera*) in several series of poems, present multiple takes in various experiments in getting the self out of the way: Sleep, dreams, Gnosticism and the sublime, culminating in a multipart essay and an opera, also titled 'Decreation', and also constructed in three parts.

Carson follows Simone Weil's notion of 'decreation', the desire to empty the self through self-negation. In her essay, 'Decreation: How Women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God',¹⁴⁴ Carson states that each of the three women 'feels moved to create a dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling'.¹⁴⁵

However, the desire to disappear is at odds with their yearning to 'tell God' (as in the subtitle of the series *Decreation*) and likewise for Carson herself, the writer who claims 'there's too much self in my writing':

... how are we to square these dark ideas with the brilliant self-assertiveness of the writerly project shared by all three of them, the project of telling the world the truth about God, love and reality? The answer is we can't ... To be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny center of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction.¹⁴⁶

The recognition of 'too much self' and the desire to displace the self from the writing resonates with Claude Cahun's assertion: 'this vague personality crumbles having been tricked into building itself up too much. I'll dissociate myself from it completely if someone gives me another'.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, in *Autobiography of Red* Carson states that 'there are no words for a world without a self'.¹⁴⁸ Paradoxically, the writer's desire to 'decreate' the self can only be approached through the self, in Carson's words: 'the telling remains a bit of a

¹⁴³ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. vii.

¹⁴⁴ On the opening page of the essay, Carson provides a background note about the three women: 'This is an essay about three women and will have three parts. Part One concerns Sappho, a Greek poet of the seventh century BC, who lived on the island of Lesbos, wrote some famous poetry about love and is said to have organized her life around worship of the God Aphrodite. Part Two concerns Marguerite Porete, who was burned alive in the public square of Paris in 1310 because she had written a book about the love of God which the papal inquisitor deemed heretical. Part Three concerns Simone Weil, the twentieth-century French classicist and philosopher whom Camus called "the only great spirit of our time"' (p. 157).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁴⁷ Cahun. *Disavowals*. See previous chapter.

¹⁴⁸ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, p. 107.

wonder. Decreation is an undoing of the creature in us ... But to undo self, one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition. We have nowhere else to start'.¹⁴⁹

It's worth noting that Carson's concept of 'decreation' embodies both creation and its undoing, in a similar manner to Cahun's *Aveux non avenues* (translated into English as *Disavowals: Cancelled Confessions*) which suggests both affirmation and its negation at the same time. Carson's approach echoes Claude Cahun who recognised that a conventional narrative would not be appropriate to provide an account of the self. Like Cahun,¹⁵⁰ Carson has used a variety of strategies to construct 'autobiographical' texts from disparate sources, including personal materials, photographs, letters, fragments of classical texts and fictional characters.

Even Carson's more 'personal' books interweave unrelated sources to the narrative to distance the writing from the subjective focus and open another perspective for engaging with the material. For example, *The Glass Essay* is constructed from the narrator's experience, alternating with Emily Brontë's story, or *The Beauty of the Husband*,¹⁵¹ similarly composed of sections narrating subjective experience, paired with epigraphs from John Keats.

Nox constitutes a radical departure from a conventional auto/biographical writing. *Nox* is an assemblage of personal materials, family photographs, letters, translations, handwritten notes, dictionary definitions, torn-up fragments from letters, cut-outs and incomplete narratives collaged on a large accordion-folded scroll contained in a box.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁵⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, Cahun and Moore's work differed from the modernist poetry and avant-garde art of their period, which tended to avoid autobiographical material. In contrast, Cahun and Moore's use of collage shares some features with Anne Carson's *Nox*, which includes fragments of personal materials assembled into incomplete narratives.

¹⁵¹ Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*.



Figure 1. A partial view of *Nox*.

Nox includes many components taken from Carson’s family’s personal materials, thus inevitably containing autobiographical elements. Despite their estrangement, Carson acknowledges the inextricable bond of a shared life story, for example, under a fragment from a photograph showing a swing in a backyard she writes: “*Places in our bones, strange brother*” (italics in original). Yet, significantly, she finds it important to emphasise ‘what is not’,¹⁵² i.e. not about herself. In an interview in the *Irish Times* she explains:

It’s not about grief. It’s about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages. That’s what I was trying to explore. Exploring grief would have made it a book about me, and I didn’t want that.¹⁵³

In *Nox* understanding the ‘other’ can be explored only in parts, through glimpses of fragments and incomplete narratives, as in the remaining fragments of Stesichoros’ *Geryoneis* (see discussion above), re-translated by Carson in the *Autobiography of Red*.¹⁵⁴ Described on the cover page as ‘a novel in verse’, *Autobiography of Red* unsettles the whole notion of ‘auto/biographical’ writing. It purports to present both an ‘autobiography’, self-writing traditionally conceived as personal (truthful?) life story, and a fictional account (a novel) of the protagonist’s life, further complicated by an ‘autobiographical’ text presented in the third person, and a protagonist who is not a person but a mythical creature. Carson blends the

¹⁵² Carson’s phrase, see above.

¹⁵³ Parul Sehgal, ‘Anne Carson: Evoking the Starry Lad’, *The Irish Times*, March 19, 2011, <https://parulsehgal.com/2011/03/20/anne-carson-evoking-the-starry-lad/> [accessed September 25, 2018].

¹⁵⁴ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*.

boundary between modes of autobiographical and fictional telling, interweaving her imagination and erudition with the remaining fragments of Stesichoros. Like Spicer's serial form, the format and the contents of *Nox* creates a tenuous construction from interrelated, repeated multiple components in shifting positions without narrative progression or a unifying structure.

In Carson's narration, young Geryon experiences words as unstable and in constant motion. His mother provides the only trustful steadying connection between word and world:

The word *each* blew towards him and came apart on the wind. Geryon had always had this trouble: a word like *each*,

when he stared at it, would disassemble itself into separate letters and go.

A space for its meaning remained there but blank.

The letters themselves could be found hung on branches or furniture in the area.

What does each mean?

Geryon had asked his mother. She never lied to him. Once she said the meaning it would stay.

She answered, *Each means like you and you brother each have your own room.*

He clothed himself in this strong word *each*.¹⁵⁵

However, his trusted mother's explanation proved to be untruthful. When grandmother comes to stay Geryon is made to share a bedroom with his older brother who sexually abused him, and his trust in words was forever shattered. Despite the trauma, the untruth and the abuse turned out to be productive,¹⁵⁶ initiating Geryon's decision to write his autobiography: 'That was also the day / he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things / particularly his own heroism / ... He coolly omitted all outside things.'¹⁵⁷ Geryon is trying to discover his 'inside' subjectivity through the process of self-writing. But as words disassemble and can't be relied on, he turns to visual expression which promises to be more truthful.

As a child starting with sculpture, 'he had ripped up some pieces of crispy paper he found in her purse to use for hair / and was gluing these to the top of the tomato'.¹⁵⁸ As an

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p.26.

¹⁵⁶ As discussed earlier in this chapter, errors, mistakenness and lies can be valuable as they may generate novel perceptions and insights and open up opportunities for the imagination to enrich the spaces of possibilities.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

adult, Geryon's autobiography is taking the form of a 'photographic essay'.¹⁵⁹ However, there are no photographs in the *Autobiography*, only verbal description of photographs, typically containing fragments which suggest a presence beyond what can be seen with the eye, For example, a photograph 'which showed only the shoes and socks of each person'.¹⁶⁰

As discussed above, for Carson absence and presence interact, 'seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is', like the crossed-out lines in Carson's epitaph for her mother, in which a residue of presence gleams from underneath the crossed-out lines, recalling Cahun's 'l'aventure invisible', piercing the surface in order to see beyond the visible. For Carson, 'visible and invisible lock together in a fact composed of their difference'¹⁶¹ like the way impressionist colours interact 'you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other.'¹⁶²

As language failed him, Geryon tries to represent his experience through his bodily senses of vision and sound, for example 'the noise that colors make':

It was the year that he began to wonder about the noise that colors make. Roses came roaring across the garden at him.

He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen. Most

of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not hear the cries of the roses

...

You should be

interviewing roses, not people, said the science teacher. Geryon liked this idea.¹⁶³

As well as the sensation of vision and sound, there is a sense of movement in words in motion, e.g. 'words bounce',¹⁶⁴ 'the word leapt',¹⁶⁵ or words blowing and coming apart in the wind (see above), the description of the sculpture highlights the processes involved in making

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁶¹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 54.

¹⁶² McNeilly, p.22.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

(‘ripped up’, ‘gluing’), and references to photography, often describe the process of taking photographs rather than the content. For example:

He was seated at the kitchen table
with his camera in front of his face adjusting the focus.

...

Geryon was focusing the camera on her throat

...

Geryon moved the focal ring from 3 to 3.5 meters.

...

*Maybe I'll just keep talking
and if I say anything intelligent you can take a picture of it.*

...

Geryon began to focus again, on her mouth.

....

Geryon's camera swivelled left as his brother came into the kitchen.¹⁶⁶

Focusing on words in motion and on processes of composition creates a sense of an unfolding creation in a process of becoming, rather than a completed project as in the classical epic tradition.¹⁶⁷ In the introduction to the *Autobiography*, Carson posits Stesichoros' countersong as a challenge to the Homeric tradition: 'Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption.'¹⁶⁸ In contrast,

If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity. But instead the extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful from Geryon's own experience.¹⁶⁹

At that time, writing an epic required adherence to the Homeric conventions, but Stesichoros began to release the language from its fixed conventions, and by doing so opened up new ways of seeing and new way of writing anchored in personal experience. Carson follows

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁶⁷ As discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

Stesichoros, opening up multiple ways for representing selfhood beyond a ‘linguistic occasion,’

The serial forms offers Carson’s opportunities to engage in multiple ways of representing selfhood through multifaceted assemblages composed from diverse texts, including classical literature, poetic tradition, psychoanalytical theories and contemporary culture. In the following chapter I discuss the work of Lisa Robertson, who like Cahun and Carson, works across disciplines, often altering and problematizing the source texts and opening up a space for critical engagement with multiple perspectives.

Chapter 3 - Lisa Robertson

In this chapter I focus on aspects of seriality in Lisa Robertson's work. I draw on the discussion of serial poetry in the Introduction, as well as in chapters 1 and 2, to explore similarities and differences between serial configurations in Carson's and Robertson's work. Robertson has been a visiting poet, lecturer, and writer in residence at several institutions including Cambridge University, University of California, Berkeley, The American University of Paris, Dartington College of Arts, and Princeton University. She is the author of several poetry books¹ and prose collections,² and her work has been included in contemporary publications of innovative and radical writings.³ Meredith Quartermain, writing about innovative work of contemporary Canadian poets, states:

The highly innovative writings of Erin Mouré and Lisa Robertson open a visionary field of playful experimental form in the locus of a gendered, embodied subject. Female subjectivity expands to take in (...) a crossroads of clashing discourses, it is simultaneously a battlefield and pleasure field of experiences, languages, resistances, and excesses. Here neoliberal logic and other toxic ideologies such as patriarchy are not the total focus of resistance, but rather are threads within a fabric of linguistic pleasure where they are critiqued, played with, and subsumed.⁴

Robertson was born in Toronto and moved to Vancouver in 1984 to study English at Simon Fraser University. She left without completing a degree in order to become a bookseller, also working with Artspeak Gallery, and editing at *Front Magazine* and *Raddle Moon*. At Simon Fraser University, Robertson took part in classes led by contemporary poets including George Bowering, Roy Miki, bpNichol, Steve McCaffrey and Robin Blaser, thus 'beginning to

¹ Including: *XEclogue* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1993); *Debbie: An Epic* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1997); *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001); *R's Boat* (California: University of California Press, 2010); *Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005); *Cinema of the Present* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2014).

² Including: *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2011) and *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, the Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: BookThug, 2012).

³ For example, Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy, *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetics in English (1957-2003)* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005); *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Kate Eichhorn and Heather Milne (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009); *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*, ed. by Maggie O'Sullivan (London: Reality Street, 1996).

⁴ Meredith Quartermain, 'T'ang's Bathub: Innovative Work by Four Canadian Poets', *Canadian Literature* 210/211 (2011), p. 120.

formally study poetry within the context of radically experimental avant-garde Canadian poetry'.⁵

Robertson's work reflects her association with the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) which was established in 1984 as an independent writing collective with emphasis on innovative, socially oppositional writing focusing on the immediate community. Jason Wiens identifies several shared characteristics informing the practice of KSW members, including a 'belief in the potential of writing to function as social critique, a focus on the form and structures of language as the ground for that critique, a preference for opaque as opposed to supposedly "transparent" language, a concern with immediate, local context, and a dissident stance which assumes a position of social marginality'.⁶

Another feature reflecting Robertson's trajectory from her association with the KSW is her focus on feminist perspectives. In the late 1980s and the 1990s the KSW had established a reputation for feminist innovative writing.⁷ At the time the group was reading contemporary Canadian poets and international feminist writers, for example Laura Mulvey's *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, a particularly significant text that 'brought the discourse of pleasure into the innovative writing community from a feminist perspective'.⁸ All of which engaged with issues of identification, corporeality, the gaze, pleasure and narrative.

Robertson's work builds upon these values. However, rather than focusing mainly on the local context, she has engaged extensively and critically with the Classical European tradition, for example, with Virgil's *Eclogues*, the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics*, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Through her association with the KSW Robertson also became familiar with American language poetry and her work was affected by its ideas, as she acknowledges in an interview with Sina Queyras,⁹ stating that Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* was the starting point for writing 'Face/' (in *R's Boat*). Nevertheless, she says she does not see herself as affiliated with any specific movement and approach to writing. When the interviewer refers to 'Langpo' as the 'camp' with which Robertson is often associated, she rejects the association:

⁵ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson, p. 46.

⁶ Jason Wiens, *The Kootenay School of Writing: History, Community, Poetics* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001), p. 13.

⁷ Eichhorn and Milne.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁹ Queyras, p. 22.

Sorry, but I don't see L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E as a camp. So I can't be associated with it. Mine is a different nationality, a different generation, a different politics. I feel more conditioned by the FLQ [Front de Libération du Québec] than by the language poets. I read many of their works and sometimes drink with some of them, but for me, as for those poets themselves I think, poetry is not bound by movements, periodicities and canons. Poetry is a continuity fueled by political passion.¹⁰

Robertson describes her work as units of composition rather than as an assemblage of individual poems. While Carson's work unfolds as a meta-series across several publications, Robertson's focus on the book as a unit of composition recalls Jack Spicer's notion of serial poems as 'composition by book',¹¹ rather than a set of discrete, autonomous poems that can be read independently of each other.¹² In the interview with Fierle-Hedrick, Robertson outlines her process as follows:

My books are not, so far anyway, composed out of bits and pieces; they're composed as books. When I write a book I have a group of problems that I'm working on, typically, and I know what they are ... How I describe those problems to myself, and maybe what they are, changes. Sometimes they develop or turn in direction. They're not unrelated book-to-book, but the problems are different with each project. So I have to invent a way to approach them each time. The old techniques won't work for a new group of problems ... I find it quite hard, the transition between books, because usually I get quite attached to whatever voice and technique I've worked out for a book.¹³

Although Robertson says she invents a different approach to each of her book-length projects, there are also enduring features in her work as a whole, such as complex processes of gleaning, assemblage and juxtapositions of materials from disparate sources (e.g. historical and popular materials). Her strategies for creating a serial poetic work evolve through using similar structures across different works, for example, letters, dialogues, notebooks, prose and lyrics. By reworking and challenging generic and textual boundaries

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ As discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

¹² Geoffrey Hlibchuk, 'From Typology to Topology: On Jack Spicer', *Contemporary Literature*, 51 (2010), 310-340.

¹³ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson.

within one series, Robertson creates a field of energy in which distinct elements bounce off each other, enrich and reverberate through the whole work.

In *XEclogue* and *Debbie* Robertson is mixing materials from a range of sources across different genres and time frames to ‘see what agency the new hybridity wd [sic] release’,¹⁴ recalling Carson’s approach to discovering new possibilities through placing materials from different sources together: ‘you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other’.¹⁵ *XEclogue* recasts Virgil’s *Eclogues*¹⁶ (ca. 37 BC) through the satirical wit of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu *Town Eclogues*¹⁷ (1747), as well as via late twentieth century rock lyrics, including Patti Smith, Annie Lennox, and P. J. Harvey.¹⁸ Similarly, *Debbie* draws on Virgil’s *Aeneid*¹⁹ (ca. 29-19 BC) and Freud’s texts ‘*Screen Memories*’²⁰ and ‘*The Aetiology of Hysteria*’.²¹ Robertson states that she developed the hybrid approach in *Debbie* while reading Freud and noticing his frequent citations of Virgil. As she describes in an interview with Bronwyn Haslam:

Freud used *The Aeneid* as a sort of authoritative ballast for his concepts. I started systematically reading Freud, looking for Virgil’s quotes [...]. I would then go to the cited passage in *The Aeneid*, in as many different translations as UBC [University of British Columbia] had. I transcribed the cited passage from these, with contextual material. Then I started interweaving the Freud with the Virgil translation – inserting Virgilian diction into Freud’s, and vice versa.²²

In *Debbie* Robertson reads both texts and in the process she questions and subverts both source materials. She writes of her attraction to, and problematic relation with Virgil’s writing:

¹⁴ Lisa Robertson and Steve McCaffrey, *PhillyTalks 17* (October 3, 2000): *Lisa Robertson/Steve McCaffrey: Correspondence* <https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/phillytalks/pdfs/pt17.pdf> [accessed 5 November 2015].

¹⁵ McNeilly, p. 22.

¹⁶ Publius Vergil, *Eclogues*, ed. by Robert Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Isabel Grundy, ‘Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Six Town Eclogues and other poems’, in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Christine Gerrard (MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 184-196.

¹⁸ Worth noting is the focus on female performers, see further discussion below of evocation of female figures in Lisa Robertson, *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001).

¹⁹ Edward McCrorie, *The Aeneid: Virgil* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995).

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, ‘*Screen Memories*’, in *Standard Edition*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1964.), III, pp. 299-322.

²¹ Freud, ‘*The Aetiology of Hysteria*’.

²² Bronwyn Haslam, ‘*History and Hysteria: Reading the Aeneid and Freud in Lisa Robertson’s Debbie: An Epic*’, *Open Letter*, 14 (2011), p. 57.

I dreamt that Virgil mapped my lavish sleep

I read the curbs of epic lust's *dérive*²³

And there, saw myself.²⁴

Although the speaker desires the epic opulence 'Lend me a bit of that stuff. / That fancy stuff' (ibid), she is addressing Virgil ('So Virgil, this is how it is') with a touch of irony ('fancy stuff') and at the same time she is aware that 'Books and girls are real lacunae' in the epic tradition. While 'Virgil strolls among the deep shelves / of the paternal library'. The map has been defined by Virgil whose stroll is contrasted with the playful drifting of the *dérive*:

Somewhere among those
flowering transparencies a shepherdess is hidden. Perhaps she's
cataloguing the rhetorics of plush ambivalence.²⁵

Debbie begins with an epigraph composed of words derived from Freud's 'Aetiology of Hysteria' (1896), spread on top of the title page and its verso (Fig 1). By placing the epigraph in an unconventional position above the title page Robertson signals her irreverent approach to prevailing scholarly practices.

²³ The concept '*dérive*' has been described by Guy Debord as follows: 'One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive* [literally: "drifting"], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll', Guy Debord, 'Theory of the *Dérive*', *Internationale situationniste*, 2 (1958), p. 2015.

²⁴ From 'Appendix: Debbie's Folly', in *Debbie: An Epic* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1997). *Debbie* is unpaginated.

²⁵ Ibid.

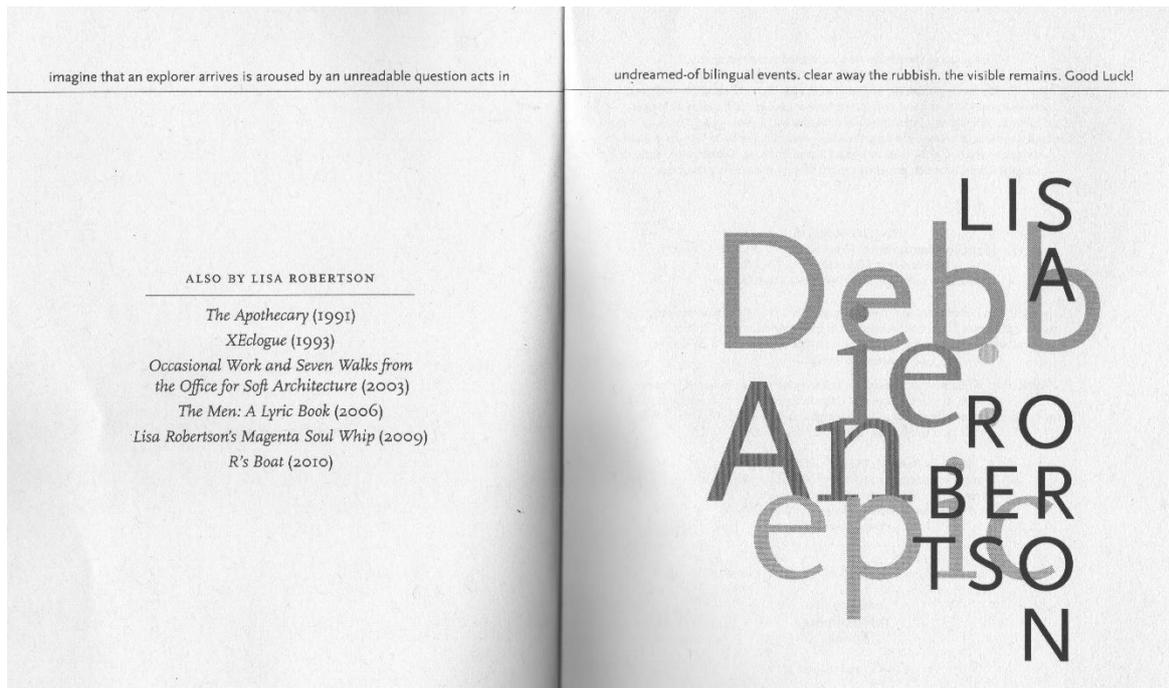


Fig 1 – *Debbie: An Epic* Title page

Like Carson, Robertson is using Freud's theories as a key for contextualising *Debbie* in the Freudian discourse of hysteria. As discussed in the previous chapter, since his early attempts to reveal the origins of hysteria, Freud has repeatedly turned to the terminology and metaphors of archaeological excavations. In 'The Aetiology of Hysteria' Freud develops the analogy between an analyst and an explorer who arrives at an unknown region where his interest is aroused by ruins, fragments and unreadable inscriptions. The task of the archaeologist is to clear away the rubbish, uncover what is buried, and if successful –

the fragments of columns can be filled out into a temple; the numerous inscriptions, which, by good luck, may be bilingual, reveal an alphabet and a language, and, when they have been deciphered and translated, yield undreamed-of information about the events of the remote past.²⁶

The archaeological metaphor is used for the first time in Freud's collaboration with Josef Breuer *Studies on Hysteria*²⁷ which include the early case studies of patients (female) described as suffering from hysteria. Freud presents the analysis of the hysterical patient in

²⁶ Freud, *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, p. 192.

²⁷ Freud and Breuer, 'Studies on Hysteria'.

terms of excavating suppressed desires. In this view, the female patient represents a site to be excavated by the (male) analyst. The archaeological metaphor extends also to the analyst's construction of the patient's narrative 'from fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis. Both of them [the archaeologist and the analyst] have an undisputed right to reconstruct by means of supplementing and combining the surviving remains'.²⁸ The analogy with the archaeologist enables Freud to claim the authority ('undisputed right') to write the patient's story (in the case studies).

In contrast, in feminist theory hysteria has been described as a syndrome of physical and linguistic protest against the social and symbolic laws of the Freudian narrative.²⁹ Elizabeth Bronfen presents a feminist reading of hysteria as a deliberate 'misappropriation of the master narrative ... a strategy of representation that makes use of multiple self-fashioning'.³⁰

Multiple self-fashioning plays a prominent role in *Debbie*, for example, in an extravagant display of multiple 'feminine' identities: shepherdess, pom-pom whirling drum-majorettes, lounging hostess and cabaret girls. Recasting the classics from a feminist perspective recalls Claude Cahun's *Héroïnes*,³¹ a series rewriting the narratives of female characters taken from biblical, mythological and fictional sources, which critiques the conventional expectations of femininity and challenges her readers to imagine an alternative version of gender and desire.

Even the title *Debbie: An Epic* offers a mimicry of the epic genre, contrasting Virgil's grand narrative of origin in *The Aeneid* with the ordinary common name Debbie. Parody provides a retelling in a comic/ironic mode, to unsettle and question a pre-existing text, and as Linda Hutcheon suggests, it is 'one mode of coming to terms with the texts of that rich and intimidating legacy of the past'.³²

The hysteric patient can be considered as a 'creative artist',³³ 'telling tales and fabricating stories'³⁴ so as to please the analysts ... without whose nosological interest in this

²⁸ Freud, 'Constructions in analysis'.

²⁹ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 145-164.

³⁰ Elizabeth Bronfen, 'The Language of Hysteria: A Misappropriation of the Master Narratives', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 11 (2000), p. 8.

³¹ See discussion in Chapter 1.

³² Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 4.

³³ Bronfen, p.10. In *La Révolution surréaliste* (1928), Louis Aragon and André Breton celebrated hysteria as 'the greatest poetic discovery of the end of the nineteenth century ... a supreme means of expression'.

enigmatic and fugitive illness the entire game of self-performance could not be sustained'.³⁵ Invoking the language of hysteria as a strategy of positioning desire, Bronfen contends that:

by turning a self-dismantling masquerade of femininity into her symptom ... so as to undermine the paternal authority she plays to, the hysteric's language proves to be a highly creative, enervating yet also compellingly resilient misappropriation of her master's grand narratives.³⁶

Like Anna O., who 'made a spectacle of herself',³⁷ performing a role which continues to question and destabilise³⁸ the discourse of psychoanalysis, Robertson constructed *Debbie* as a spectacle of preposterous performances against the backdrop of *The Aeneid*. Instead of the heroic characters of Virgil, in *Debbie* the 'feminist sky split open' (line 41) to unveil a pastiche of 'Virgil's bastard daughters', the 'Nurses of Perfidy' descending to earth in their full glory of glitter and excess trailing subversive slogans in their wake.

The irreverent nurses of perfidy arrive streaked with layers of doubt,³⁹ unsettling the authoritative scene of the Virgilian narrative. They pose a risk to the 'proper' use of language ('precision of pronouns'), manifest in the content and the unconventional disordered typographic melange of their subversive slogans. Robertson stages a scene of rebellion through a linguistic and typographic distortion of the elevated style of the classic voice of the epic genre. The repetition of the sibilant sound 'S' (swathed, spume, surprised, streaked, spent, spate, spell, slogans, skim, spiral) creates a hissing unsettling texture of sound, underlying the chant that demands the words denied to women ('sewn lips', line 66) in the paternal library.

³⁴ Writing about the case of Anna O. from a feminist perspective, Dianne Hunter contends that she was a 'psychodramatist' who 'made a spectacle of herself', playing a role to allure Breuer (Dianne Hunter, 'Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O', *Feminist Studies*, 9 (1983), p. 476). Anna O. herself described the therapy as her 'private theatre' and, as Breuer reported in the conclusion to the case study, told him that 'the whole business has been simulated' (Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (London: Hachette UK, 2009), p. 46).

³⁵ Bronfen, p. 10. Hunter, describes hysteria as a shared unconscious structure between patient and observer.

³⁶ Bronfen, p. 10.

³⁷ See footnote 26.

³⁸ The case of Anna O. is deeply controversial and has been consistently misread and misrepresented since it was first published. See for example, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Remembering Anna O: A Century of Mystification* (New York: Routledge, 1996); John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and *Anna O: Fourteen Contemporary Reinterpretations*, ed. by Max Rosenbaum and Melvin Muroff (New York: Free Press, 1984).

³⁹ See also the footnote at the bottom of the page ('feel free to accept this little scene as real') questioning the scene. Elsewhere Debbie (the character) presents herself as a 'Moot person in moot place' (footnote to line 237).

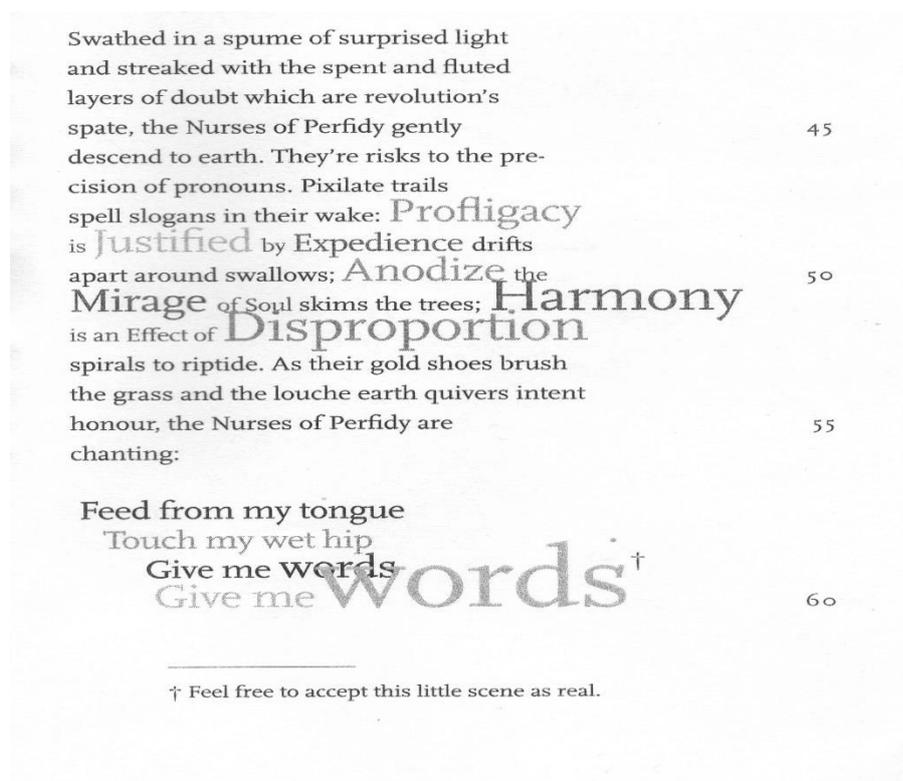


Fig 2 – lines 42-60 from *Debbie*

Debbie emerges in an exuberant fanfare of excess, glorious and defiant, asserting her emancipation from Virgil's discourse (Good-bye Father). 'For if Virgil has taught me anything', Robertson states, 'it's that authority is just a rhetoric or style which has asserted the phantom permanency of a context' (*Debbie*, Argument). In an ironic take on the Virgilian hero, Debbie liberates the cabaret girls and designs an alternative epic of sublime climates of concupiscence and lubricity for them.

Good-bye Father. I Debbie speak
 – as evening's lily-drunk and belling and
 roman as the fields signed by white boots
 rivers rocking and confluent where my
 navy rides at anchor as will loosens
 the glorious girls from middling forest
 from chocked sex and fallen torso – I

design sublime climate for them
covet (who needs trumpets) common, lazy
joy. They lend cabarets concupiscence
and lubricity. Then they are happy.
How great they look! Restored to lightness
celestial rhetorics (237-250)

Yet, despite rejecting Virgil's 'master' narrative, Debbie acknowledges her indebtedness to the literary precedents: 'I have loved history premonitions / urgencies these parts lovingly I speak / in a dialect of servility' (229-231); 'I imitate / many fancy things such as the dull red / cloth of literature, its mumbled griefs' (609-611). 'My nouns are quoted episodes' (259). Indeed, *Debbie* is largely composed out of quotations from Virgil and Freud. For example, in addition to the epigraph which consist of words derived from Freud's *Aetiology of Hysteria*, Robertson's other Freudian source material for *Debbie* is his essay 'Screen Memories'. Freud used the term 'screen memory' to describe a memory which functions to hide other (unconscious) material. The essay charts his evolving articulation of the functions of memory and its distortions⁴⁰ where memory emerges as a process of ongoing reconstructions.

In *Debbie*, the notion of 'Screen Memories' is important both thematically and structurally. In the 'Legend' (Robertson presents a legend rather than a table of contents), Robertson announces the presence of 'The screens, which are spurious' (not paginated), directing the reader's attention to the potential significance of 'screens', evidenced both in the significance of quotations from 'Screen Memories' in the text, as well as in the physical presence of 'screens' sections interlaced between pages of the text. The aleatory recurrence of the 'screens' throughout the work also constitutes an important element in conceptualising the book as a serial composition 'in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination'.⁴¹ The screens are printed in a variety of typefaces, always distinct from the main text, flush from end to end without margins, and their physical presence and layout highlight the text as a manufactured hybrid construction.

⁴⁰ From his first case studies, Freud began to realise that memories are not fixed and can be subject to later changes. On 6 December 1896, he writes to Wilhelm Fliess: 'I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a *rearrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances – to a *retranscription*' (*The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, ed. by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 207. Italics in source.) Freud's position is beginning to shift towards a more complex notion of memory and the possibility of changing interpretations.

⁴¹ Conte, *Unending Design*, p. 36.

In 'Screen Memories' Freud refers to the unstable, fragmentary and impermanent nature of memory to conclude that all memory production partakes in the process of construction, formed as an afterthought. Freud used the term *Nachträglichkeit* to describe the temporal relation between an original moment and its later re-emergence into awareness. The term is often translated in English as 'deferred action' which implies a one directional process. Jean Laplanche translated the term as *afterwardness*⁴² to elaborate its 'original significance and to incorporate multiple aspects of its complex and ambiguous temporality. In Laplanche's account, on one level *Nachträglichkeit* implies a deterministic conception – a deposit from the past is reactivated later and the meaning of the second time is determined by the original event. On the other hand, in an interpretative conception, the term conveys a sense of retroactivity – the second time enables a retrospective attribution of meaning to the first event in terms of the present situation. Considering that an event from the past can never be fully known, it stays open to retranslations and reinterpretations .⁴³

Freud's writings provide both Robertson and Carson a paradigm for revisiting previous materials. By intertwining quotations from 'Screen Memories' with source material from the *Aeneid*, Robertson is using Freud's argument in 'Screen Memories' to subvert the authority of the Virgilian narrative which has 'asserted the phantom permanency of a context' (*Debbie*, Argument). As noted in the previous chapter, Anne Carson similarly decontextualizes diverse materials from their original sources and contextualises them in a new frame of reference, which serves to destabilise the authority of any single source. Both Carson and Robertson are engaged in a process of palimpsestic construction from diverse materials, but while Carson's primary unit of composition is the fragment, Robertson tends to work with sentences as the basic unit of composition, as exemplified in much of her work following *Debbie*, for example in *The Weather*, *R's Boat*, and *Cinema of the Present*.⁴⁴

'I've always been completely seduced by sentences, certainly. I think I'm a sentence-lover before I'm a writer', Robertson maintains in an interview with Sina Queyras.⁴⁵ Her following publication, *The Weather*, a book-length serial poem, is composed of a constructed surface made up from sentences from diverse sources, pieced together in new configurations. As I have suggested before, while Robertson says she invents a different approach to each of her book-length projects, there are also enduring features in her work as a whole, such as

⁴² Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 260-5.

⁴³ Pnina Shinebourne, 'Trauma and Culture: On Freud's Writing about Trauma and its Resonances in Contemporary Cultural Discourse', *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 22 (2006), 335-345.

⁴⁴ See footnote 1.

⁴⁵ Queyras, p.22.

complex processes of gleaning, assemblage, repetitive structures and juxtapositions of materials from disparate sources, both historical and contemporary.

The analogy between this process and the practice of the ‘midrash’ method in Hebrew textuality is intriguing. As discussed in the previous chapter in the context of Carson’s work, midrash refers to the Talmudic method of decontextualizing phrases from their original passages and contextualising them in a new frame of reference, achieved through textual juxtapositions and re-combinations. The Midrash discourse preserves the multiplicity of voices across many generations with their disagreements and contradictions and thereby creates a system of diffused authorship.⁴⁶

The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* can be helpful in describing Robertson’s practice of recasting textual material from the past through a contemporary feminist rhetoric. Robertson refers to her method as ‘lifted’,⁴⁷ copying material from disparate sources in the rare book room, as ‘you couldn’t photocopy the stuff without special permission’. Her sources included early meteorological texts, literary texts such as Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, as well as specific historical writing on clouds (most significantly of Luke Howard, who invented the nomenclature for clouds currently in use, and the artist John Constable’s annotations on his cloud sketches), and the BBC shipping forecasts.

Describing her experience as a foreigner in Cambridge, Robertson notes that ‘cultural displacement has shown me that weather is a rhetoric... It’s expressed between friendly strangers. I speak it to you. A beautiful morning. You speak it back. The fog has lifted. We are now a society’.⁴⁸ She explains that in her own work

Part of what I want to ask of the rhetoric of weather, is what other ideologies may it absorb? May I cause the weather to absorb the wrong ideologies? The issue is not to defamiliarize the language of weather, but to appropriate its naturalizing function to a history, an utterance, which is delusional insofar as it is gendered. A wild dream of parity must have its own weather and that weather will always have as its structure an inexhaustible incommensurability.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See the discussion later in this chapter on Robertson’s notion of ‘distribution of subjectivity’.

⁴⁷ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

As in *XEclogue* and *Debbie*, in *The Weather* Robertson inserts the feminine inside the fabric of the text. In the extract above Robertson expresses her intention to construct a feminist approach to the weather as an alternative to the dominant scientific rhetoric:

Where can a lady reside. Next the
earth and almost out of reach. Almost always electrified.
To surfaces of discontinuity. In light clothes and coloured
shoes. By the little flower called the pansy. O little bird
extravagant. Among its decayed houses.⁵⁰

In contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the weather, Robertson describes the weather as a flowing, fleeting phenomenon in a vocabulary of dressmaking materials, traditionally associated with female occupation, for example in the following extract from “Monday”:

The sky is complicated and flawed and we’re up there in it,
floating near the apricot frill, the bias swoop, near the
sullen bloated part that dissolves to silver the next instant⁵¹

...

The inexhaustible, recurrent features of the weather provide Robertson with a framework for developing a serial poetic work. As in *Debbie*, Robertson is engaged with Virgil’s work, this time the *Georgics*, constructed as four books following the order of the seasons and presented as a set of agricultural instructions, mixed with meteorological knowledge, myth, philosophy, and narrative digressions. Virgil draws on several earlier sources, including Hesiod, Herodotus, Lucretius and Catullus.⁵² Robertson’s *The Weather* consists of seven sections following the days of the week, a recurrent pattern of representing the flow of time, and, like the *Georgics*, is constructed from a mixture of sources and traditions to create new configurations. Throughout the book, Robertson composes most of the text from sentences

⁵⁰ Robertson, *The Weather*, p. 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁵² Richard F. Thomas, ‘Virgil’s *Georgics* and the Art of Reference’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 90 (1986), 171-198.

alternating between the language of meteorological reports and contemporary interjections, often adding lines from other sources and a feminist context, as in the extract from “Tuesday”:

All cloudy. Except a narrow opening at the top of the sky.
All cloudy. All cloudy. All cloudy. Except one large
opening with others smaller. And once in the clouds.
Days heap upon us. Where is our anger. And the shades
Darker than the plain part and darker at the top than the
bottom. But darker at bottom than top. Days heap upon
us. Where is Ti-Grace. But darker at the bottom than the
top. Days heap upon us. Where is Christine. Broken on
the word culture. But darker at the bottom than the top.
Days heap upon us. Where is Valerie. Pulling the hard air
into her lung. The life crumbles open. But darker at the
bottom than the top. Days heap upon us. Where is Patti.
Unlearning each thing. Red sky crumbles open. This is
The only way to expand the heart. But darker at the top
than the bottom. Days heap upon us. Where is Shulamith.
Abolishing the word love. The radical wing crumbles
Open. The scorn is not anticipated...⁵³

Using the grammatically ‘incomplete’ sentence structure of the shipping forecast, the multiple repetitions and variations, create a rhythm which mirrors the recurrent yet transient features of weather. The sentences alternate between meteorological descriptions and questions followed by ostensible answers, often describing human action. The absence of a question mark points to the rhetorical nature of the questions, marking the absence of the named figures, radical feminists including Ti-Grace Atkinson, Valerie Solanas, Shulamith Firestone and Gloria Steinem. While absence implies transience and loss, by evoking their

⁵³ Robertson, *The Weather*, pp. 18-19.

names Robertson also brings them back into presence and points to a possibility of a new beginning. For Robertson, repetition constitutes a strategy for creating a sense of a structure which resists closure and offers an opening to the future.⁵⁴

Repetition, whether it's structural or stylistic, a motif or a more substantive repetition of phrase or lexical unit, is partly what helps me get to this surface effect that I'm seeking, the sense of a distribution. It's partly what blocks or disallows a more centralized narrative construction. With repetition there's always this sense of beginning again, so you're always more or less at the beginning.⁵⁵

Presenting repetition as a beginning resonates with Søren Kierkegaard's description of repetition and recollection. In *Repetition*, both concepts are depicted in relation to time:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward.⁵⁶

In this conceptualisation, recollection and repetition deal with the past in different ways. What is recollected is contemplated as a finished event, while in repetition something is re-enacted, actualised, something new comes into being.⁵⁷ Re-enacting scenarios from earlier literature generates new possibilities to actualise a different future. Similarly, the repetition of phrases and sentences in *The Weather* creates a new pattern of an alternatively gendered weather.

In the introduction to *The Weather* Robertson notes that although the scientific discourse demanded a purified style of writing which rejected 'the amplifications,

⁵⁴ Julie Carr, 'An interview with Lisa Robertson', *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, 25 (2013) <http://www.thevolta.org/ewc25-jcarr-p1.html> [accessed 11 November 2015].

⁵⁵ Robertson concludes *The Weather* with a statement 'I've never done anything / but begin' (p. 78).

⁵⁶ *Repetition* was originally published in 1843. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI, Volume 6: Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 131.

⁵⁷ Clare Carlisle, 'Kierkegaard's Repetition: The possibility of motion', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 13 (2005), 521-541. Carlisle describes Kierkegaard's concepts as follows: 'Recollection and repetition deal with the past in different ways: that which is recollected is complete within itself; it is contemplated as a finished totality, apprehended as an idea. On the other hand, if something is repeated it is re-enacted, actualized; it is not merely represented as an idea but recreated' (p. 525).

digressions, and swellings of style',⁵⁸ writers on meteorological subjects could not avoid elements of figurative language, as the ephemeral nature of weather and in particular of clouds presented a specific formal difficulty to description. For example, one of Robertson's sources, Thomas Ignatius Forster's writing on cirrus formation is rich with metaphorical expressions that 'reflect the need to extend descriptive grammar towards a rhythmically paratactic prolixity, when the object of description itself is in a state of constant transformation'.⁵⁹ Forster's text provides Robertson with a model and a rhythm for composing chains of paratactic clauses, which, like 'Forster's cloud-sentence proceeds by a series of phrasal modifications, miming the process of transmutation in the clouds themselves'.⁶⁰ Following Forster, the sentences in "Wednesday" are often divided into two parts, separated by a semicolon:

A beautiful morning; we go down to the arena. A cold wintry day; we open some purse. A day is lapsing; some of us light a cigarette. A deep mist on the surface; the land pulls out. A dull mist comes rolling in from the west; this is our imaginary adulthood. A glaze has lifted; it's a delusional space. A great dew; we spread ourselves sheet-like. A keen wind; we're paper blown against the fence. A little checkered at 4 pm; we dribble estrangement's sex. A long soaking rain; we lift description.⁶¹

Punctuating the sentences with a semicolon highlights the paratactic structure of the text, considered by Joseph Conte as the cornerstone of seriality in contemporary poetry.

Contrasting the poetic sequence with the serial form, Conte presents the series as 'a paratactic structure ... whose elements, although related by the fact of their contiguity, are nevertheless

⁵⁸ Lisa Robertson, 'The Weather: A Report on Sincerity', *Chicago Review*, 51 & 52 (2006), p. 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Robertson quotes from Forster's text: 'Comoid tufts, like bushes of hair, or sometimes like erected feathers; angular flexure; streaks; reticular intersections of them ... which look like nets thrown over the firmament; forms of arrows; stars with long fibrous tails, cyphen shaped curves, and lines with pendulous or with erect fringes, ornament the sky; still different appearances of stars and waves again appear, as these clouds change'.

⁶¹ Robertson, *The Weather*, p. 28.

autonomous'.⁶² Conte's description resonates with Ron Silliman's 'New Sentence', a series of usually grammatically correct sentences, juxtaposed paratactically in collage-like, discontinuous but repeated structures, with materials often collected from different sources.⁶³

The recurrent elements and paratactic structure of *The Weather* are manifest also in other works by Robertson, for example in 'Face/'⁶⁴ there is no enjambment, each line ends with a full stop or with a question mark, creating a sequence of autonomous, contingent sentences presented in a recurrent pattern throughout the work: an italicized line followed by a roman type line, each separated by a space:

A man's muteness runs through this riot that is my sentence.

I am concerned here with the face and hands and snout.

All surfaces stream dark circumstance of utterance.

What can I escape?

Am I also trying to return?

Not the private bucket, not the 7,000 griefs in the bucket of each cold clammy word.

But just as strongly I willed myself towards this neutrality.

I have not loved enough or worked.⁶⁵

In Robertson's account, what matters most to her in *The Weather* and in *R's Boat* is not the specific content of the sentences but the way relationships between units 'are built through sequence, through temporal distribution' (Byrne & Robertson, 2011).⁶⁶ While her earlier work consisted of exuberant linguistic fanfare of excess, (as in *Debbie*), in 'Face/' the sentences are banal and flat. Although the units are presented as self-contained lines, many repeat more than once, sometimes in an identical form and sometimes with a slight variation (and alternating between italicized and roman fonts), sometimes immediately following and sometimes long after the first appearance. The space between the lines provides the most consistent element of the composition. The space 'becomes extremely active, more active

⁶² Conte, p. 22.

⁶³ Bob Perelman, 'Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice', *American Literature*, 65 (1993), 313–24.

⁶⁴ Robertson, *R's Boat*, The forward slash in the title perhaps suggests a line break, or a breaking point, as in the poem the sentences are self-contained and separated by a line space.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Ted Byrne and Lisa Robertson, *Out-Takes from Ted Byrne's interview with Lisa Robertson* <https://www.thecapilanoreview.ca/interviews/> [Accessed 31 December 2015].

than the sentences themselves are... In the time of the caesura a thinking gathers, dissolves, moves'.⁶⁷

Robertson's arrangement of units of texts the space of the page in a hybrid construction is reflected in her interest⁶⁸ in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*.⁶⁹ The *Atlas*⁷⁰ consists of display panels covered in black cloth to which Warburg attached numerous photographs of paintings, ancient sculpted reliefs, pages of illuminated manuscripts, maps, press cuttings, advertisements and stamps, ranging from images of antiquity up to the 1920s. Warburg's monumental project attempted to demonstrate the 'afterlife' of images of great symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power which emerged in antiquity and were reanimated in the imagery of later epochs. The images were juxtaposed, arranged and rearranged in various constellations. As Christopher Wood suggests: 'by pinning them to panels, Warburg declined to submit the images to the hierarchies of grammar or argument, but rather allowed them to pulse in all directions at once, connecting laterally with one another.... The *Bilderatlas* treated images like accumulations of energy circulating through history, never settling into units of discrete meaning'.⁷¹

Like the photomontages of Claude Cahun discussed in chapter 1, Warburg's *Atlas* can be considered as a visual model of Conte's definition of a serial composition as a modular form in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination. Conte's description of Robert Duncan's *Passages*⁷² is particularly resonant: 'a work without bounds: having no beginning and no end; a limitless interrelation of parts; the absence of an externally imposed schema; mobility; and an intentionally incomplete condition of form'.⁷³ Like the *Atlas*, *Passages* consist of a collage of fragments: words, images, signs, quotes from a variety of sources, catalogues, recipes, continually mixed, joined and taken apart. However, while Duncan rejected all boundaries in favour of an infinite serial structure, whose units are scattered and interspersed among other works in several separate books written over a long

⁶⁷ Queyras, pp. 20-22.

⁶⁸ Lisa Robertson, *Thinking Space*, (New York: Organism for Poetic Research, 2013).

⁶⁹ The *Atlas* is located at the Warburg Institute in London (<https://www.sas.ac.uk/institutes/warburg-institute>). An online display is accessible on: <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/collections/warburg-institute-archive/bilderatlas-mnemosyne/mnemosyne-atlas-october-1929>.

⁷⁰ Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁷¹ Christopher S. Wood, 'Aby Warburg, Homo Victor', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 11 (2014), 1-24.

⁷² See the Introduction chapter for a fuller discussion of seriality and Robert Duncan's work.

⁷³ Conte, p. 49.

period, Robertson develops her work with a different approach for each of her books, as the ‘old techniques won’t work for a new group of problems.’⁷⁴

Studying the digital files of the photographed panels at the Warburg Institute Archive in London, Robertson comments that she had ‘a sense of their speedy composition - images were hastily affixed using whatever seemed to have been at hand - paper clips, pins, grommets and little hooks’,⁷⁵ perhaps recalling the construction of her method of arranging, rearranging and combining extracts from various sources. She notes that in the *Atlas* ‘sometimes the same images appeared in more than one panel, in altered contexts,’⁷⁶ again recalling her own method of constructing repetitions in ‘Face/’, where many lines repeat more than once, sometimes in an identical form and sometimes with a slight variation, sometimes long after the first appearance.

The juxtaposition of disparate images in the *Atlas* opens gaps in time and space, referred to as ‘iconology of the intervals’, ‘based not on the meaning of his figures . . . but on the interrelationships between the figures in their complex, autonomous arrangement, which cannot be reduced to discourse’.⁷⁷

Warburg’s method of constructing his *Atlas* resemble Robertson’s approach to the subject as an unstable construct, although one striking feature in Robertson’s ‘Face/’ and ‘Utopia/’ is the prevalence of the first person ‘I’, which may suggest an autobiographical element in the work. Yet, the repetition of the ‘I’ does not present a coherent subjectivity. Rather, the disparate units of the composition and the sequencing of italics and roman fonts suggest different speaking voices:

I’m a popstar and this is how I feel.

I only know one thing: I who allots her fickle rights.

I feel like the city itself should confess.

I only wanted to live on apples, in a meadow, with quiet.

I can only make a report.

I permit myself to be led into the other room.

I have nothing to say, I burn, I blurt, I am sure to forget.

⁷⁴ Fierle-Hedrick and Roberston.

⁷⁵ Roberston, *Thinking Space*, p. 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Johnson, p. 28.

I preserved solitude as if it were a style.

I am ignorant but I know.

I raised my voice to say No!

I was almost the absolute master.

I saw amazing systems that immediately buckled.

I enjoyed the pleasure I now inhabit.

*I slept like these soft trees.*⁷⁸

The sense of multiple speaking voices may be the result of the method of constructing the text - gathering the material for 'Face/' started by culling each first person sentence from her large stack of old notebooks, transcribing and alphabetizing it: 'I wanted to see if I could construct an autobiographical text that remained impersonal, yet which would hold together as its own object'.⁷⁹ The first person sentences are interposed with other material (the approach also used throughout *The Weather*), to devise systems of interruption which will form patterns. Not finding any suitable material Robertson decided to interrupt the list with itself by splicing two different sequences of the same material which created the pattern of repetition that provides a sense of coherence and movement to the work.

Although, as noted above, prevalence of the 'I' may suggest autobiographical narrative, Robertson states that the work presents 'no subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point'.⁸⁰ Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the subject, Robertson portrays the self as a temporary construct enacted in language. According to Butler:

The subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation.

Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a 'site'), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is a linguistic occasion for the

⁷⁸ Robertson, *R's Boat*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁹ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson, p.51.

⁸⁰ Queyras, p. 52. Similarly, as discussed in previous chapters, Claude Cahun and Anne Carson's experiment in destabilising the self.

individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency.⁸¹

In 'Utopia/'⁸² Robertson continues exploration of autobiographical material without taking a subject position, and without a 'sense of development in a narrative or psychological sense'.⁸³ Like 'Face/', it started with Robertson culling material from the same notebooks, transcribing each sentence that seemed to describe a place or site. She wanted to 'situate or spatially contextualize the first person of 'Face/'. The 'time' indicators at the beginning of each stanza were copied from novels on Robertson's bookshelves to give the work a rhythm and a momentum. Yet, as they were added in an arbitrary manner, they do not signify a chronological development in an autobiographical sense, but create a text that is a manufactured hybrid construction:

In the spring of 1979

Some images have meanings, and some have a change in soul, sex or century.

Rain buckles into my mouth.

If pressed to account for strangeness and resistance, I can't.

I'm speaking here for dogs and rusting ducts venting steam into rain.

I wanted to study the ground, the soft ruins of paper and the rusting things.

I discover a tenuous utopia made from steel, wooden chairs, glass, stone,
metal bed frames, tapestry, bones, prosthetic legs, hair, shirt-cuffs, nylon,
plaster figurines, perfume bottles and keys.

I am confusing art and decay.⁸⁴

Utopia, in Robertson's vision, is a tenuous construction made of detritus of discarded objects, like her sentences which are 'phrasal bodies [that] are fragments, parts of a never existing whole'.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, 'the notion of self-shattering, subjective and erotic dispersal' can be

⁸¹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 10-11.

⁸² 'Utopia/', in Robertson, *R's Boat*.

⁸³ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson, p. 52.

⁸⁴ Utopia/, in Robertson, *R's Boat*, p. 51.

⁸⁵ Robertson and McCaffrey, p. 21.

‘pleasurable and potentially transformational’.⁸⁶ Something may be glimpsed among the disordered fragments: ‘In the hinge between these things, a resemblance appears’.⁸⁷ In Robertson’s feminist vision it is women who sustain the glimmer of possibilities:

Women from a flat windswept settlement called Utopia focus on the intricate
life that exists there.

What I found beautiful slid between.⁸⁸

For Robertson, the self is an unstable construct that has ‘no unity, no bedrock, but the enacted site of shifting agencies and perceptions and identifications’,⁸⁹ as expressed in the final poem of *R’s Boat*:

And if I become unintelligible to myself
Because of having refused to believe
I transcribe a substitution
Like the accidental folds of a scarf.
From these folds I make persons⁹⁰

Robertson presents the notion of a ‘person’ as provisional, formed and unformed ‘like the accidental folds of a scarf’. Refusing to accept the belief in a stable concept of the ‘self,’ ‘I’ and ‘self’ are presented as transient perceptions becoming unintelligible to each other. Yet, the ‘accidental folds’ also provide a productive potential for creating multiple ‘persons’. In her reflections on the *Atlas*, Lisa Robertson notes that Warburg designed the library’s main reading room and lecture theatre in the form of an ellipse and called it a space for thinking. She describes the ellipse as a form that ‘wobbles, its centre shifts, it doesn’t pertain to hierarchy...Like the passionate agitation of moving drapery, perhaps, it falls short of predictability. The word itself comes from the Greek term for chasm or gap’⁹¹ that ‘wobbles, speeds up, swoops, in relationship to other moving bodies’.⁹² In her view, ‘we don’t need to

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Utopia/, in Robertson, p. 59.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸⁹ Robertson, 2003, p. 393.

⁹⁰ Robertson, *R’s Boat*, p. 81.

⁹¹ Robertson, *Thinking Space*, p. 14.

⁹² Ibid., p. 36.

eradicate identities or methods. They reveal themselves textually as unnatural, available, mercurial.’⁹³

Like Claude Cahun and Anne Carson, Lisa Robertson creates a sense of ‘mercurial’ identities by interweaving biographical/autobiographical material with a range of other texts from diverse sources without aiming for an overarching narrative. The modular structure of the serial poem offers an open-ended space to construct a framework for representation of selfhood through dispersal of subjectivity across a network of connections which result in a palimpsest of multilayered textual creations.

⁹³ Robertson, ‘My Eighteenth Century’, p. 393.

Conclusion

In this conclusion I review the main themes of my thesis and explore the ways in which my creative practice draws on the critical discussion in the previous chapters. Having used the introduction to provide an overview of the serial form in contemporary poetry, I focused on aspects of seriality in the work of Claude Cahun, Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson.

The serial form offers an extended space and flexibility to explore multiple perspectives, assemblages of multiple components and juxtaposition of disparate materials. As Lisa Robertson states in the interview with Fierle-Hedrick,¹ her books were not composed out of bits and pieces independent of each other, but as whole compositions, each with a distinct focus. While Robertson's approach recalls Jack Spicer's notion of serial poems as 'composition by book', Claude Cahun's and Anne Carson's work can be described as a meta-series with repeating structures, genres, characters and themes across several publications, comparable to Robin Blaser's description of his own work as *carmen perpetuum*.²

Despite this distinction, all three writers use features of seriality, discontinuity, fragmentation and displacement to create modular work from disparate sources, such as classical and contemporary texts, personal materials and fictional characters. For example, *Aveux non avenues* draws on personal material, references and allusions to other texts and images, including classical sources, children's literature, Freud's writing on Narcissism and Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. As discussed above, Freud's writings also provide productive materials for both Robertson and Carson. For example, in *Debbie* Robertson interweaves quotations from Freud's 'Screen Memories' with extracts from the *Aeneid*, using Freud's argument in 'Screen Memories' to subvert the authority of the Virgilian narrative.

By reworking and challenging generic and textual boundaries, decontextualising diverse materials from their original sources and contextualising them in a new frame of reference, all three writers destabilise the authority of any single source. They create a field of energy in which distinct elements bounce off each other, enrich and reverberate through the whole work. For example, in *Debbie* Robertson is mixing materials from a range of sources across different genres and time frames to 'see what agency the new hybridity wd [sic] release',³ recalling Carson's approach of placing materials from different sources together to discover new possibilities: 'you stand back and see a story emerge from the way

¹ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson.

² As discussed in the introduction.

³ Robertson and McCaffrey.

that the things are placed next to each other'.⁴ The serial form provides a structure to place incongruous material in close proximity and construct work free from the constraints of imposing continuity where none exists.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore used strategies of repetition, reversal and masquerade to destabilise the authority of any single source and open up the discourse towards alternative possibilities in their materials. For example, *Héroïnes* deconstructed and rewrote the narratives of female characters, which critiqued the conventional expectations of femininity and challenges their readers to imagine an alternative version of gender and desire. In *Aveux non avenues* Cahun and Moore created new meanings by using texts and photomontages often cut out from their previous works - fragments of autobiography, poems, letters, aphorisms, recounting of dream, and dialogues of fictional characters taken out of their original context to form a hybrid assemblage created through juxtaposition of disparate fragments in a tenuous mélange. Anne Caron's *Nox*, similarly, is made of an assemblage of personal materials, family photographs, letters, translations, cut-outs and incomplete narratives.

The use of fragmented material is common to all three writers. 'Mon âme est fragmentaire' declares Cahun in *Aveux non avenues*.⁵ As discussed in Chapter 1, in contrast to most collage and montage works of that period, Cahun and Moore used mainly their personal materials, including visual self-representations and fragmentary texts. For example, eye, mirror and hands are recurrent fragments in the photomontages. The images of eye, mirror and hand in the photomontages are also repeated in several textual fragments, recalling Anne Carson's repetition of fragmented photographs and textual materials in *Nox*.

For Carson, the primary unit of composition in much of her work is the fragment. As a classical scholar Carson is working with ancient texts that are present only as fragments, as in the *Mimnermos* series and in the fragments of Geryoneis in *Autobiography of Red*. In contrast, Robertson tends to construct her work from sentences as the basic unit of composition. For example, *The Weather* is composed of a constructed surface made up from sentences from diverse sources, pieced together in new configurations, with many lines repeating more than once, sometimes in an identical form and sometimes with a slight variation in altered contexts.

⁴ McNeilly.

⁵ Cahun, *Aveux non Avenues*, in *Écrits*, p. 394.

All three writers seek to destabilise the notion of a ‘self’ as a fixed entity. For example, even when using the first person ‘I’, Robertson states that her work presents ‘no subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point’.⁶ ‘I’ and ‘self’ are portrayed as transient perceptions and identities reveal themselves textually as unnatural and volatile. The notion of a ‘person’ is provisional, formed and unformed ‘like the accidental folds of a scarf’.⁷ The modular structure of the serial poem offers an open-ended space to construct a framework for representation of selfhood through distributed subjectivity across a network of connections which result in a palimpsest of multilayered textual creations.

Cahun and Moore used various strategies to unsettle, destabilise and confound personal identity. They used masks and impersonations as interchangeable devices that can be attached or detached at will and create confusion and dissimulations. They adopted a range of pseudonyms, most prominently the gender-ambiguous names, in line with their desire to confound a fixed gender categorisation. In their photographic work they created images of androgynous figures, embracing both masculine and feminine features, who destabilise the notion of the single fixed gendered subject.

All three writers create a sense of shifting identities by interweaving auto/biographical material with a range of other texts from diverse sources. For example, in *Utopia*/ Robertson used first-person sentences from notebooks, interposed with material copied from novels on bookshelves. In *The Glass Essay* Carson interweaves biographical material with the story of Emily Brontë’ to distance the writing from the subjective focus on personal identity. Similarly, *The Beauty of the Husband* is composed of sections narrating subjective experience, paired with epigraphs from John Keats.

Although the texts and images in *Aveux non avenues* frequently refer to biographical events, they are confounded by the title which suggests both affirmation and its negation at the same time, thus destabilizing the work and undermining the coherence of a stable autobiographical account and creating a sense of an unreliable writer. In a similar manner, both Carson and Robertson use the form of the Palinode, which Carson describes as a “counter song” or “saying the opposite of what you said before”.⁸

⁶ Queyras, p. 52.

⁷ Robertson, *R’s Boat*, p. 81.

⁸ Referring to Stesichorus’ palinode, a retraction of his original poem, a controversial version of the story of Helen of Troy.

Like *Aveux non avenus, Autobiography of Red* unsettles the whole notion of ‘auto/biographical’ writing. Carson scattered the surviving fragments of Stesichorus’ Geryoneis in different sections of the book and juxtaposed them with contemporary contexts and objects, including fictional interviews, poems and essays. Presented both as an ‘autobiography’ (a truthful? life story), and as a fictional account (novel) of the protagonist’s life, further complicated by a protagonist who is not a person but a mythical creature. Carson blends the boundary between modes of auto/biographical and fictional telling.

Starting with ancient texts that are present only as fragments, Carson leaves a space for multiple engagements with the gaps through diverse re-translations, inserting fictional elements or incorporating different voices to create various enactments of the possibilities in the materials, thus ‘keep shaking the box’.

My interest in representation of selfhood evolved from my academic research on the experience of addiction and recovery. I have collected data from a large number of in-depth interviews with participants narrating their life stories. One, perhaps surprising, result was realising how participants’ accounts captured the dynamic and finely nuanced texture of representing the impact of addiction and recovery on their sense of self and identity.⁹

Another striking feature which emerged from the interviews was the abundance and vividness of metaphorical expressions embedded in participants’ accounts.¹⁰ The engagement with metaphors directed my attention to poetic possibilities in the material, which seemed worthwhile of further exploration and expression. I used extracts from the data-set of one participant’s account to create an experimental poetic representation, using only the participant’s own words, but not necessarily in the same sequence as in the original interview. I listened to the recorded interview in conjunction with reading the written transcript a number of times, extracting portions of the interview, recurrent phrases, images and metaphoric descriptions which appeared particularly poignant in the context of the interview as a whole. I kept ‘shaking the box’, arranging and rearranging the segments until a personally satisfactory gestalt, which nevertheless retains aspects of the individual voice, has

⁹ See for example: Pnina Shinebourne and Jonathan A. Smith, ‘Alcohol and the Self: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Experience of Addiction and its Impact on the Sense of Self and Identity’, *Addiction Research & Theory*, 17 (2009), 152-167.

¹⁰ Pnina Shinebourne and Jonathan A. Smith, ‘The Communicative Power of Metaphors: An Analysis and Interpretation of Metaphors in Accounts of the Experience of Addiction’, *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 83 (2010), 59-73.

been reached.¹¹ As in all qualitative research, my sensibility as the researcher was implicated in the selection, interpretation and presentation of the material.

Considered in conjunction with the previous studies of the same data-set, the poetic representation proved useful by contributing to a richer understanding of the interpretative possibilities in the material. However, I realised that using only the participant's own words, while useful as research text, is limiting the possibilities of developing a richer multifaceted poetic work. Nevertheless, the idea of writing poetry based on biographical materials became a focus for my creative work.

The strategies I used in my creative work were informed by the concept of the serial form discussed in the first part of my thesis. However, I began to realise that the concept of seriality as defined by Joseph Conte proved too rigid to encompass the direction my creative work was taking.

Conte argued that the serial form is 'the one form of the "long poem" which truly has its origin in the postmodern era.'¹² In his attempt to differentiate the postmodern serial work from other types of poetic sequences, Conte's account identifies the rejection of 'thematic continuity, narrative progression, or meditative insistence that often characterize the sequence'¹³ as a key feature of seriality in contemporary poetry.

Considered from this perspective, my poetic work does not fit within the scope of Conte's definition. My main interest was not in the serial mode as a formal poetic form per se, but in its potential to develop my approach to representation of selfhood. Conte's emphasis on the aleatoric and discontinuous dimension of seriality seems to overshadow the threads of continuity and narrative which underpins the work as a whole.

I was drawn to the serial form because it enabled me to link diverse individual parts into a larger open-ended structure which supported narrative progression and thematic development. The modular structure, as defined by Conte, offered a productive scaffold to develop my work. As a scaffold is a provisional structure destined to be dismantled, it seems appropriate to acknowledge its helpful features and to let go of formal limitations.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Robertson expressed her concern about practices that are restrictive: 'current avant-garde poetry practise, with its tendency to defend a narrow range of primarily paratactic method at the expense of a richly figured field of rhetorical

¹¹ Pnina Shinebourne, "I was Going Around with this Mist in Front of My Eyes": Poetic Representation of the Experience of Addiction and Recovery', *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 10 (2012), 174-184.

¹² Joseph Conte, 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem', *Sagetrieb* 11 (1992), 1-2, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*

techniques, might methodologically entrench deeply banal structures.’¹⁴ argued that ‘poetry is not bound by movements, periodicities and canons’¹⁵ and stated that all methods, contemporary or historical, should be open for writers to adopt: ‘Method, whether paratactic, ironic, fragmented, aleatory, or reflexive, must remain open for use’.¹⁶

While Conte’s definition of the serial form rejects the notion of narrative progression, Brian McHale welcomed the recovery of narrative within postmodernist long poems.¹⁷ He argued that the legacy of modernism ‘effectively deprived poetry of the most valuable of its traditional resources for organizing extended texts, namely, narrative’.¹⁸ However, he stated that contemporary writers reclaiming the freedom to narrate need to find ways to create differently, rather than resort to conventional story-telling.

McHale described one of the texts he explored, Lyn Hejinian’s *Oxota*,¹⁹ as replete with narrative elements, although not narrated as a single continuous story: ‘Hejinian’s *Oxota* is a radically heteroglossic and polyphonic text, a fabric of multiple voices and multiple registers: description, narrative, conversation, self-reflection, In particular, its plurality of voices resists assimilation to the voice of an ‘author’.²⁰ McHale concluded that although *Oxota* is ‘packed with narrative,’ it avoids being assimilated into a ‘master narrative’ through ‘fragmentation, interruption, dispersal, and juxtaposition of narrative elements, operations which nevertheless do not prevent our identifying the elements in question as narrative.’²¹

McHale’s description resonates with my approach in the three works included in the second part of my thesis. These works use the modular structure and the features of the serial form to develop various interventions which digress, disrupt and create gaps and tension between the different parts of the series. However, all three include elements of narrative development.

For example, the individual sections in *Exposure* draw on, seemingly at random, the diverse texts and photographic works of Cahun and Moore, as described in Chapter One. However, there is also a sense of narrative development: Starting from childhood memories

¹⁴ Lisa Robertson, ‘My Eighteenth Century: Draft Towards a Cabinet’, in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. by Romana Huk (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 396.

¹⁵ Lisa Robertson, ‘My Eighteenth Century: Draft Towards a Cabinet’, in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. by Romana Huk (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 396.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Brian McHale. ‘Telling Stories Again: On the Replenishment of Narrative in the Postmodernist Long Poem.’ *The Yearbook of English Studies* 30 (2000): 250-262.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.250.

¹⁹ Lyn Hejinian, *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (Great Barrington MA: Figures, 1991).

²⁰ McHale, op.cit. p.259

²¹ Ibid, p.262.

(‘beak-nosed child / curled in a cupboard’), to the moment of awakening (‘walls crossed and dissolved / listen to a stir in the air / a whisper *je est un autre un multiple toujours*’), through watching the horror of wars past and approaching (‘shadows / of no-name soldiers crumble into ghosts’). Finally, the account of the trial of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore during the occupation of Jersey in the second World War, largely based on documentary accounts, firmly anchors the work into a specific historical context.

Like *Exposure*, *Pike in a Carp Pond* draws on multiple sources: biographic materials, the writings of Luxemburg, documents from the Marxists Internet Archive and from the German folk songs archive. Materials from diverse sources are juxtaposed, sometimes through unconventional typographic arrangement which retains the unmerged voices on the page and heightens the sense of provocation and confrontation, recalling Robertson’s typography in parts of *Debbie*.

Although the different sections are not arranged in a chronological sequence of a traditional biographical account, there is also a distinct narrative thread of biographical material: From memories of childhood (‘Barefoot in my nightdress / I sneaked out of bed climbed / up the bedside chest / up / to the skylight’), to political passion (‘I want to affect people like a clap of thunder / to inflame their minds’), love and its disappointment (‘I imagined you waiting on the platform / wild hyacinths in your arms / why didn’t you come?’), imprisonment (A prison guard drags her / to the visitors’ room, dazed, unsteady / on her feet (six days on hunger strike), and murder (When Lieutenant Vogel fired his pistol / she paused, as if amazed that death / had met her on a freezing Berlin night’).

In addition, the narrative thread of biographical events is juxtaposed with imaginary material free from the constraints of human finitude in chronological time. For example, a *Guardian* style interview with Luxemburg a hundred years after her death, or a Google Earth overview embracing past, present, and future perspectives.

The imaginary sections of peering into the future point to the remarkable ‘afterlife’ of Luxemburg in contemporary culture.²² They alert readers to the possibilities of finding new meanings in past events and create alternative versions of the work in contemporary contexts.

In retrospect I recognise the missed opportunity by concluding *Exposure* with the account of the trial of Cahun and Moore. For the work of Cahun and Moore too is having a remarkable ‘afterlife’ in contemporary culture.²³ Engaging with this ‘afterlife’ would have

²² In recent years there has been a remarkable renewed focus on Luxemburg in studies of Marxian political economy, history of capitalism, philosophy, feminism, film and a graphic novel.

²³ As discussed in Chapter One, Cahun’s and Moore’s work remained largely unknown until François Leperlier published in 1992 the first critical monograph of Cahun which opened up considerable recent interest in their

provided an opportunity to imagine new possibilities and add another dimension to the work as a whole. But this is perhaps left for a new project.

In *Unbridled Messiah*. I developed a complex ‘biographical’ (sometimes imaginary) work by creating a kaleidoscope of multiple voices (real and imaginary), who offer glimpses of the protagonists and the events of the time, told from the subjective perspective of each narrator. The voice of the main protagonist, the Messiah, remains subdued as the position of the ‘I’ shifts with each telling, thus dispersing subjectivity throughout the work.

The repeated structural features of *Unbridled Messiah*, i.e. the interventions performed by the duo ‘Heavenly Sisters’, the multiple ‘voices’ of eyewitnesses and historical sources, and the epistolary structure of Sarah’s fictional letters, disrupt the flow of the narrative and destabilise the authority of any single source, thus creating a representation of selfhood as a multi-vocal dynamic multiplicity.

Yet, despite the fragmented text and the multiple perspectives, there is also a sense of continuity along a trajectory of chronological time and biographical events. *Unbridled Messiah*, like *Autobiography of Red*, includes elements of a Bildungsroman, i.e., thematic continuity and narrative progression of the protagonist’s life (albeit, in the case of the *Autobiography*, a mythical creature).

In *Unbridled Messiah* the major protagonist develops from a young oddball haunted by mood swings alternating between extremes of elation and dejection, who starts to claim that he is the messiah. The protagonist then embarks on a typical ‘hero’s journey’ as he drifts in and out of major centres of the Ottoman Empire, repeatedly banished or excommunicated. Following the ‘hero’ trajectory, the banished returns triumphant as a Messiah, generating frenzied excitement in the Jewish communities worldwide. In an inevitable dramatic turn, the protagonist is denounced following accusations of fomenting sedition. Facing a slow death on a stake at the Gate of the Seraglio, the hero is offered one last chance of salvation by conversion to Islam. Through performing the unthinkable, and commanding the believers to follow him to Islam, the hero sets in motion a remarkable event that continues to reverberate throughout history, evidenced by the survival of a secret Sabbatean sect within Islam whose remnants survive to this day.

On the surface, the sense of narrative progression seems supported by the series of Sarah’s letters, ostensibly in chronological order of dates, which create a sense of the narrative evolving in chronological time. The fact that the letters are fictional may or may not

register with readers. However, although following a chronological time structure is prevalent in ‘traditional’ auto/biographical writing, the format may be employed in diverse ways to create alternative representations of selfhood.

For example, Lyn Hejinian’s title *My life*²⁴ suggests autobiographical writing, and the overall structure of the text is organised along the biographical data of Hejinian’s age. The first edition, published when Hejinian was thirty seven, contains thirty-seven chapters of thirty-seven sentences each, appearing to establish a chronological sequence following the passage of time. Occasionally, Hejinian inserts specific dates to provide a suggestion of conventional biographical writing. However, within each chapter the text is discontinuous, interrupted by quotations, digressions and repetitions that disrupt the conventional trajectory of biographical writing. As Hejinian explains:

Another kind of arrangement and rearrangement device is repetition—as in my book *My Life*, where certain phrases recur in the text, each time in a new context and with new emphasis. [...] Since context is never the same and never stops, this device says that meaning is always in flux, always in the process of being created.²⁵

Similarly, as discussed in Chapter three, Lisa Robertson’s ‘Utopia/’ creates a semblance of autobiographical writing through the prevalence of the first person ‘I’ and by adding specific time indicators at the beginning of each stanza. However, the time indicators were added in an arbitrary manner, copied from novels on Robertson’s bookshelves and they do not signify a chronological development. Like in Hejinian’s *My life*, Robertson used this strategy to serve a rhetorical purpose. She stated that she wanted to construct an ‘autobiographical text that remained impersonal, yet which would hold together as its own object’²⁶ and would present ‘no subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity’, in which the self is an unstable construct that has ‘no unity, no bedrock, but the enacted site of shifting agencies and perceptions and identifications.’²⁷

In *Unbridled Messiah* I assigned specific time indicators to Sarah’s fictional letters as a strategy to create a semblance of narrative progression. However, the sense of narrative development is scrambled by the interventions of the Heavenly Sisters who pop up repeatedly

²⁴ Lyn Hejinian. *My Life*. (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 1980).

²⁵ Lyn Hejinian ‘The Rejection of Closure.’ *Writing/Talks*. Ed. Perelman Bob. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985), p.273.

²⁶ Fierle-Hedrick and Robertson, p.51.

²⁷ Robertson, 2003, p. 393.

to play with the ‘facts’ and add layers of irreverent, mischievous interpretations that offer an alternative to the ‘master’ narrative.²⁸ As free spirits they are not bound by the finitude of human lives and the constraints of chronological time. These conflicting temporal trajectories alert readers to the possibilities of multiple perspectives and undercurrents of competing narratives beyond the ‘official’ version of the story of the Messiah. In addition, Sarah’s letters function as a rhetorical device to create an alternative version of the story.

Unlike Lisa Robertson who wanted ‘to construct an autobiographical text that remained impersonal,’ I wanted to construct a biographical text that is personal, giving voice to Sarah as a woman who refused to resign to the submissive role assigned to her as the Messiah’s wife and emerged as a visionary in her own right.²⁹ At the same time I wanted to retain the overall structure of the serial work, including multiple components and juxtaposition of disparate voices.

The poetic form I have developed made use of the epistolary structure, in itself a serial form, and embedding it in the overall serial structure of the work. I drew on the epistolary work of Jack Spicer’s *After Lorca*³⁰ which consists of a series of fictional letters interspersed with poems, translations and adaptations. In addition, the work is informed by features and structures of epistolary fiction.

Epistolary fiction has become prominent during the Eighteenth Century. An influential early work was Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-1687), followed by works such as Eliza Haywood’s *Letters from a Lady of Quality to a Chevalier* (1721), and Mary Davy’s *Familiar Letters Betwixt a Gentleman and a Lady* (1725).³¹

Toni Bowers noted that the prevalence of female writers and subject matter in the early epistolary fiction established an association of the genre with women’s experience and women’s subjectivity. She suggested that Letter-writing was a familiar everyday experience associated particularly with women’s lives, domestic spaces, and intimate revelations, so it

²⁸ Historically, most mainstream sources tended to denigrate Sarah’s position in the Sabbatian Movement. Only recently a minority of scholars have begun to consider her (and women in general) as a significant participant in her own right.: See, Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666–1816*. (Oxford and Portland, 2011), and Alexander Van der Haven. *From Lowly Metaphor to Divine Flesh: Sarah the Ashkenazi, Sabbatai Tsevi’s Messianic Queen and the Sabbatian Movement*. (Menasseh ben Israel Instituut, 2012).

²⁹ Since I have submitted the thesis, I have revised *Unbridled Messiah*, adding letters and changing the ending to strengthen the focus on Sarah. The revised manuscript was accepted by Cinnamon Press for publication later this year..

³⁰ Jack Spicer, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. by Robin Blaser (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975).

³¹ For a detailed survey of the development of the epistolary form, see, Toni Bowers. ‘Epistolary Fiction.’ *The Literary Encyclopedia*. < <https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php> (2009).

offered a natural ‘fit’ for women with stories to tell. Female topics in the epistolary form were dominant not only in works by female writers, but also by male authors, such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740).

However, the popularity of novels which were constituted mostly of letters diminished over time in favour of incorporating letters as parts of a wider narrative structure. The evolution of Jane Austen’s work is an apt example. Much of her earlier works and some first drafts of her later novels were written in an epistolary mode. In her later work, however, she abandoned the epistolary structure but still included a significant number of letters interspersed with other elements, such as third person narratives and dialogues.³²

Despite a long period of decline, the epistolary form has re-immersed in what has been described as an “epistolary Renaissance”,³³ inspired by recognising the rhetorical potential of the epistolary form to create multiple perspectives and divergent points of views.

For example, Amos Oz’s *Kufsa shekhorah* [Black Box]³⁴ presents a polyphony of conflicting voices through letters, telegrams, a private investigator’s report and note-cards. The disjointed epistolary form offers the writer a discursive site for exploring the rhetorical motivation of his work by exposing the ideological undercurrents and the contradictions and tensions in the lives of the protagonists, including family, gender, religious and political debates.³⁵

Similarly, in *Unbridled Messiah* I present a polyphony of voices through eyewitness (real or fictional) accounts, the ever-present nosy ‘Heavenly Sisters’, and through Sarah’s voice as articulated in her fictional letters. The letters embedded in various points of the text charts Sarah’s story of a young woman determined to become the Messiah’s wife who turns out to be a force in her own right.

I used Sarah’s series of letters as a narrative device to construct an alternative story told by a woman whose voice was not heard in her own time. Like the epistolary fiction written by women in the eighteenth century, Sarah’s story is about relationships, sharing confidences with women (‘It is almost a month since the wedding / but my husband has not touched me once’), sexuality (‘He was nervous a bit clumsy / needed my hand to ignite the

³² See, Guyonne Leduc. ‘Letters and Letter-Writing in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811).’ *Etudes anglaises* 68, no. 3 (2015): 296-315.

³³ Maria Loschnigg and Rebekka Schuh. *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction*. (Berlin: Boston: De Gruyter, 2018).

³⁴ Amos Oz. *Black Box*. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

³⁵ In recent fiction the range of epistolary modes of communication has been expanded to include Internet-based media, such as emails, blogs and chat forums. For example, Nick Hornby. *Juliet, Naked*. (London: Viking; Penguin Books, 2009).

spark'), prophecy ('maybe the ghost of my father is an omen'), faith (my husband is dedicated to saving his people), and betrayal ('He said I was a snake, trying to poison him').

It is also a story about Sarah's refusal to accept the submissive role assigned to her as a woman ('hold your head high daughter / show them what you are made of') and of a visionary affirmation ('every righteous woman can become the saviour of her people').

By interweaving the letters in the overall serial structure of the work, I added the voice I consider to be the 'real' protagonist of the work, rather than the ostensible main protagonist announced in the title, whose story is mainly constructed through multiple unmerged voices (real and imaginary) told from the subjective perspective of each narrator. By retaining the individual voices, the modular framework enacts a site of shifting agencies and perceptions and identifications without creating a totalising structure.

In contrast to most mainstream literature which focused on the Messiah as the main protagonist, I explored the undercurrents and the gaps in the 'master' narrative, inserted fictional elements and different voices to create various enactments of the possibilities in the materials.

Like *Exposure* and *Pike in a Carp Pond*, the story of the *Unbridled Messiah* is having a remarkable 'afterlife'. As noted in the introduction, a fragment of a recently discovered rare textile from Izmir sparked my interest in retelling the story of the seventeenth century messianic movement from a new contemporary fictional perspective. On a much grander scale, Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob* (winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2018), tells the story of Jacob Frank, who a century after Shabtai Zvi, claimed to be his reincarnation.

My work contributes to addressing the challenges of representation of selfhood in contemporary poetry, as well as of how to write about 'real' persons who existed in historical time and place without resorting to traditional biographical narratives. I have explored these challenges first in the critical chapters of my thesis, identifying productive strategies, such as discontinuity, fragmentation and displacement, and distribution of subjectivity to account for a dynamic construct of self which holds no fixed subject position.

In my poetic practice I have used the modular structure of the serial poem as an open-ended space to construct representations of selfhood by interweaving materials from diverse sources into a network of connections which result in a palimpsest of multilayered textual creations.

In a surprising way, all three works led me to reflect on the notion of 'afterlife' of historical figures. How to write fiction and poetry about past lives? How to address potential

conflicts between veracity and fiction? My work offers a possible model for writing a poetic ‘afterlife’. In my work, in particular in *Unbridled Messiah*, I sought to understand the experience of being alive in the past from the perspective of the historical figure, but inevitably grounded in my contemporary context, to make it resonate with the present (for example, in the presentation of Sarah as a woman who refused to accept the submissive role assigned to her as the Messiah’s wife).

I used the serial and the epistolary (by definition, a serial narrative) forms to enable me to retain multiple perspectives, filling in gaps in historical narrative by adding imaginary characters (the Heavenly Sisters and some eyewitnesses) and events and bringing past and present into a dialogue.

As this thesis is coming to an end, a voice calling from the past points me to the possibilities of future engagements.

There is no first or last discourse, and dialogical context knows no limit. (it disappears into an unlimited past and in our unlimited future). Even past meanings, that is those that have arisen in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (completed once and for all, finished), they will always change (renew themselves) in the course of the dialogue subsequent development. At every moment of the dialogue, there are immense and unlimited masses of forgotten meanings, but, in some subsequent moments, as the dialogue moves forward, they will return to memory and live in a renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will celebrate its rebirth.³⁶

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted by Tzvetan Todorov. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1984).

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Part 2

EXPOSURE

A sequence drawing on the life and work of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.

Don't kiss me

breezy as an airy dawn, she slips into a bodysuit
and boxer shorts

a dumbbell angled across her thighs. Newly
made-up face for the day. Pouty lips,

curlicue spirals skirting her forehead,
faux nipples pasted on her off-white chest.

A flash, steel
glinting in the pupils of her eyes.

Her top says *I am in training*
don't kiss me, as if teasing a gaze.

Watch how she unsettles the stare, the twirl
of her eyelids, the quivering

hearts drawn on her cheeks, the way her pose
thrusts at you, and tilting slightly

sideways, implants the *I dare you*,
in the camera's eye.

Skin for the colour of time

Crossing over the bridge
the dazzle spills
 with facepaints, glitter & ruffles
 into a girl's eager eyes –
plunge, it flutters,
 into a kaleidoscope
of pleasure ...

flushed with excitement, I am
the girl whose out-of-her-mind mother,
like a ship sliding on clouds,

drifts around a beak-nosed child
curled in a cupboard, the girl
who wants nothing more

than to throw herself into the rattling
alleys of adventure
& each year the path hardens ...

add a wrinkle, a fold along the mouth,
eyelids inked in black
& a skin for the colour of time.

Once on the day of the carnival
I passed many lonely hours masking
my face, thickening the streaks

to let dark monsters enter my heart
in a gasp of fretting, the paint biting
my flesh. I tried to scrape it off,

the way deer rub against trees
to scrub the velvet off their horns,
until my skin came free & my soul

like my flayed face, no longer
resembled a human form

Exposure

light in your hair a haze on my horizon
my hand reaching out your
footprints on the beach touch with a finger

wrap your arms around around me

& behind the iron lattice a face a mask holes
for eyes & a gap for breathing afraid to show
my teeth? I wonder about that smiling

belongs to women & agreeable politeness
your eyes a lens for me to see
an eye cradles in my hands my offer to you

I'll wrap my arms around

I peel off my dress tear off my skin a widening
shadow before the mirror close-cropped
face upside
down reflected in the dilated pupil

Salmacis to Hermaphroditus

I will thread my fingers through your thighs
rope my ankles to your feet

graft your arms into my chest flesh to flesh.
There will be a cool forest pool

ripples will knit our bodies in tight embrace
until we fuse into a double-flowered bloom.

But love not understanding that its work
is done will make it bristle with new desires

for male and female alike. We will be shamed
into disguise condemned to an unpairing –

I will dwell inside a man you will enter
a woman's heart.

But if only we'd strike at the shadows
break through the body's disguise

we'll turn back to find what we always knew:
one body in tune with one soul is enough to make love.

Not

the soft transparent strokes
the plumped and dimpled

creamy-pale skin
and the just-done flowing hair

as Rubens painted her
gazing at herself in the mirror

not the sublime sweep
or the supple luminescent flow

of Velazquez's reclining nude
absorbed in her mirror image

but
face turned away from the mirror

scalpel-cut unflinching stare
a hint of something steely

& if your clenched fist pulls up
your lapel – it is to cut off

any glimpse of supple skin
& if looking at the mirror

I see your fingers undoing
your collar to reveal a sliver

of flesh – it is to lead the eye
down the breezy borderlands

of
masculin? féminin? mais ça dépend ...

Un multiple toujours

In the schoolyard a beak-nosed girl tied to a tree
is showered with pebbles a girl tied with skipping
ropes emptied out heart pumped full a gasping
red balloon floats up dissolves

through the wall into a lightning-bolt the moment
two heads lean over coupled in a mirror
hair melding never to untangle

gather the props handmirror costume goggles make-up
summon the gaze the crossed-out bits of the soul
a piece of dark cloth is pinned to the wall a lens follows
the tight-lipped mouth close up eyes in the oval mirror

*you came up behind me bent
over my shoulder the blur
of your breath replacing mine
on the glass*

walls crossed and dissolved listen to a stir in the air
a whisper *je est un autre un multiple toujours*

Shapeshifting

I will pose naked for this photograph seated
on a feathery quilt thighs joined snug
feet splayed wide apart head raised
as if inviting you to seize my gaze
my back elongated between two swirling
patterns of the silky fabric a body
glistening in a room flushed with light.
Today I fancy the camera to capture
a feminine frill yet my birdlike facemask
has no holes for eyes.

Double take

There are two of us here
 huddled in this frame
your head turned sideways
 towards me & swerving
slightly backward in a gesture
 fixing your pose.
The angle of your profile
 a single eye single ear
& the hawkish sculpted nose
 draw a brittle shadow
each ridge & dint
 mirrored across my face
only that I pull away
 to avert your gaze
as if to mark our distinct ground
 only that both
our shaved heads
 bared & tender
are joined
 at the shoulders
the way conjoined twins grow
 different versions of their selves

Father

I stand on the platform
 surrounded by curlews
so many beaks
 cut off at their roots
with my scissors.

At the shifting
 point of the lines
I am swept away.
 My father departs
trying to drag me
 by the hand.
Or is it me
 holding on to him?

Photomontage *Frontière humaine*

a tongue, sharp, snakelike a slender
down-turned beak sparrows seagulls
curlews partridges. In the dream I pass
my fist through the window &
with my curved scissors I cut the beaks off
there's a wound leaking white fluid
the shape of an umbilical cord.

I watch shadows wandering along
boulevard du Montparnasse
a flayed face a pockmarked face
the one-armed the wooden leg hobbling
on crutches in the icy rain shadows
of no-name soldiers crumble into ghosts.

The Trial of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore (Jersey, 1944)

1

Neatly combed hair a silky
floral blouse sturdy
walking shoes just enough
for a touch of housewifely
respectability except
for their multipocket raincoats
stuffed with typewritten tracts.
How easily
two middle-aged women
headscarves knotted under their chins
fade out in a crowd how
like seeds strewn in the breeze
their leaflets scatter over the town.

2

Spread out on the green baize as if
composing a still life marking the time
we had – typewriter binoculars
two revolvers a Kodak

& a radio an anarchist pamphlet
(the Spanish Civil War) photos &
leaflets sorted and labelled
feindliche propaganda

3

A photo of Kid our cat lounging
on a windowsill through the window
a group of German soldiers
at the edge of the beach the tide rising

[cont.]

4

The evening darkens granite paths
swastika-clad gates the cemetery
advances towards us

crouching beside me your breath
hovers over my cheek we plant
a wooden cross by a soldier's grave

watch our inscribed words flicker
in the moonlight
Für sie ist der Krieg zu Ende

5

[from the Occupation Diary of Baron Max von Aufsess]*

The two Jewish women who have been arrested belong to an unpleasant category. These women had been circulating leaflets urging German soldiers to shoot their officers. At last they were tracked down. A search of the house, full of ugly cubist paintings, uncovered pornographic material of a revolting nature. One woman had her head shaved and photographed in the nude from every angle. She had worn men's clothes. Other nude photographs showed both women practising sexual perversion, exhibitionism and flagellation.

Postscript

Picture this – a sandy beach
two greyed-hair women led
by a cat on a leash
the cat squeals as the waves
sweep closer

* Baron Max von Aufsess was the head of civil affairs during the German occupation of the Channel Islands..

PIKE IN A CARP POND

A sequence drawing on the life and work of Rosa Luxemburg

In front of my window

this evening in a gust of wind was a flock of rooks
not by my window but further away

high above the crests of the trees outside the prison's wall.
Not bird-song but a rustle of wing-beat

not the caws of chasing a prey, but a softly gurgled *kau-kau*
of chitchat tossed to each other like a ball.

With my head leaning forward to snatch a feather
of clouds floating past

I watch until the light withdraws. In darkness
I throw a smile to Hans as if he were still alive

A prison guard drags her

to the visitors' room, dazed, unsteady
on her feet (six days on hunger strike),
hands up to smooth an errant hair.

For a moment she can't remember
how she got into this cage within a cage
through two layers of wire mesh.

She holds tight to the grille, tries to squeeze
a glance through the double trelliswork,
to grab a fleck of light, a splinter cut off
from a murky lamp just visible behind.

Somewhere in the room, her brother, face
pressed against the metal wire, keeps asking
where are you? where are you? as he wipes
away the fog that clouds his glasses.

And Lenin came yesterday

He's been here four times already. Such an ugly mug, the kind I like to look at (I enjoyed talking with him, he's really clever, sophisticated). We sat in the drawing room – late evening, a glint from the tassled lamp, the swish of the velvet curtains – we had caviar rolls (50 pfennig only) and coffee with just a dash of cognac (he likes to stay sober, in charge). *You're like a night watchman*, I told him, *controlling, with fists and knives, crushing the creative spirit of the revolution*. And Mimi flirted with him, rolled on her back all sweet and enticing, but when he touched her tail she whacked him with a paw and snarled like a tiger – *a majestic cat*, he said, *only in Siberia have I seen such a magnificent creature*.

But life 'real life' was always far beyond
red feathers of clouds floating past

and ever since

I have been chasing it
behind some rooftop or another

and in places on the edge
of darkness

but what if 'real life' were right here
in this yard

where Antoni and I read

The Origins of Civilization for the first time?

FADE IN

TANGLED HEDGEROW. SUNLIT PATH – DAY

We see ROSA walking along the path – hedgerow bustles – a wobbly dark patch wriggles on the ground

ANGLE ON WINGED BEETLE

ON ITS BACK, LEGS FLAPPING MADLY IN THE AIR – A SQUAD OF TINY ANTS SWARMS AROUND – A TINGLING COMMOTION – BLACK AND BROWN – LEGS AND WINGS – A TRANCE. A FEAST OF NIBBLES.

Rosa waves a HANDKERCHIEF – a flick – a rustle – a shiver of hooked-claw legs – a frantic wave to chase the ants away.
A swarm-frenzy. Launch. Flap. Spin. Soar.

Rosa grabs the beetle – carries it to a patch of grass.

CLOSE ON:

Rosa’s fingers caress beetle gently – notices two of its legs have been gnawed off.
Rosa’s face. A twitch. Appears to choke back tears. Distraught.

DISSOLVE TO:

Rosa is seen walking away along the path.
We hear her voice from a distance. A whisper:

Psiakość! Always this urge this twang
to the throat the heart fire flare-up the leap
to the rescue
this sorrow for the wretched
and this feeling
that I have done it a very dubious favour

Polish– dammit!

BACK TO:

TANGLED HEDGEROW.

ANGLE ON SUNLIT PATH

A riot of insect life. Ants and beetles feast on carcasses of slugs.

FADE OUT

How you delighted me

with your letter my darling

hurry up, come here

I imagined you today crawling

out of bed, a groggy smudge

across your face

and I was sorry I wasn't there

to plant a kiss on that silly nose

so hard it hurts.

*

A voice in the night woke me

startled, I listened

It was my own words I heard.

I was pulling the bedclothes

thinking you were

beside me, but in a flash

I knew the truth – you're far,

far away and I was all alone.

*

Beloved, my one and only treasure,

Do you remember? You came back

from Lugano at 8:20 with the groceries –

oranges & cheeses & salami & cake.

and with great finesse you scrambled

Based on extracts from
Rosa Luxemburg's
letters to her lover.

the eggs in a pan – such a splendid dinner
with the door to the porch open
Do you remember the moon rising
over San Salvatore? we held each other
in darkness to look at the crescent
over the mountains
My precious, I am beginning to lose
patience, why did you not come?
to me here? and to make things worse,
I destroyed your letters (an undercover
agent visited my concierge) and I am left
with nothing to comfort me.

*

My Golden! I can hardly write
my throat feels choked
your letters contain nothing, nothing
except *Sprawa Robotnicza*
not a single word about yourself
on and on about the *Cause*.
Wherever I turn, there's only the *Cause*
– every letter, always the same,
this pamphlet, this article

*

sometimes it seems to me

you're made of stone.

I want to spite you, bite you,

in my imagination my head

is on your shoulder, eyes shut

I am worn out.

Missed-beat syncopation

It is midnight a train grumbles
under the bridge. As in a dream
she can hear
the gnarling, the dry cough of a prison guard,
the grind of gravel under his boots.

New sounds arise from a spatter of raindrops on the wall
and hands pulling out straw
from a thread-bare mattress

a beat of unfreedom is silenced
every time she imagines
how it will be when she'll emerge

from behind the iron gate on a sweaty evening
a glint
in the plait at the nape of her neck.

Soup (1)

The icy Sunday afternoon
the thrill on the lips
the velvety-sweet texture
of a steaming beetroot soup
the splash of sour cream
the lumpy
clutter in her throat

the box of old letters kept hidden
under the bed

letters from mother
she was too busy to answer

(The Goddamn politics !!!

always so so busy)

last night she went to bed

wishing never to wake up.

**Comrade Lenin directs Comrade Luxemburg on the set
of *The Russian Revolution***

After Anne Carson

[Rosa gets a final touch-up to her eye make-up]

Vladimir: 30 seconds to go. You walk towards the door,
pause, and then return to your desk. Look at the cue-card.

Rosa: *The mighty sweep of the revolution in Russia –*
the light is weird I can't see the card

V: Raise your head a bit, like this.

R: *The mighty sweep of the revolution in Russia*
all power in the hands of workers – can't see

[Cue-card operator tilts the cards up a bit]

the bourgeois state is an instrument of oppression
of the working class –

V: Too monotone think inspirational try again
from “the working class”.

R: *the working class grasped the mandate and duty*
all power exclusively in the hands of the proletariat
and the peasant masses –

[Rosa walks to the cell's window, leans forward, her nose
pressing against the bars]

R: *and with their sharp pointy wings the swallows snip*
the blue silk of space into little bits

V: You're flagging again stay focused keep the tension.

[Rosa walks back to her desk, stops, waves the cue-card operator
out of the way]

R: *Freedom only for the supporters of the government –*
only for the members of one party – is no freedom at all.
Freedom is always for the one who thinks differently –

V: Not quite.

Cut.

Rose Luxemburg's critical analysis of
some aspects of the Russian Revolution
was smuggled out of prison and
published posthumously, to Lenin's
dismay.

The twilight is long now

in Südende. Last gleam of daylight. Flickers of street lamps. Around the corner a girl hurries to the baker before the shops close. A lone blackbird staggers from tree to tree. The shoemaker's children play in the street after dark. A loud cry calls them in. A light turns on.

Here, prisoners march two by two across the yard carrying kettles of the evening soup. A soft breeze blows into my cell. I listen to a muffled bark in the distance. It is getting dark. Doors are double-locked and bolted. A light turns off.

Südende – a district
in Berlin

A crunch of sandy gravel

trampled underfoot.
A gasping sound.
Buffaloes!
Pitch black. Massive.
Huge soft eyed.
Never seen them so close!

*War trophies, a soldier says,
pacing the dead-end prison yard,
our latest acquisition, buffaloes
from Romania, a kick in the butt
they need, a good wallop,
to grasp they have lost the war.*

[a cappella, sung by soldiers]

*Ein bißchen
Plündern
ist auch nicht schlecht
A kick in the butt
they need
a good wallop
wallop
wallop*

A half-unbuttoned uniform,
a cigarette in the corner
of his mouth,
the lash of his whip
hard strung, knife-edged,
precise.

Startled, I stare, each glance
louder in my skull –
thump thump thump
until the skin breaks,
a trickle
running red
licking the wrinkled hide.
running red
licking the wrinkled hide.

a trickle
running red

*until the skin breaks
running red
Red*

Don't you have any pity for the animals?

*Stolz ziehen wir
in die Schlacht
in die Schlacht*

*No one has pity for us humans either
the soldier says hands tucked
in his pockets
humming
Stolz ziehen wir in die Schlacht
through grin-shaped lips.*

Ein bißchen Plündern ist auch nicht schlecht – a little
looting is not that bad
Stolz ziehen wir in die Schlacht – proudly we pull into
battle
(from German soldiers' songs archive)

Q&A

Rosa Luxemburg, Revolutionary.

Born in Russian-annexed Poland, Rosa Luxemburg studied in Zurich and settled in Germany, where she became prominent in the radical wing of the Social Democratic Party. Her most celebrated text, *The Accumulation of Capital*, starts with a critical analysis of Marx's *Capital* and goes on to develop a theoretical foundation for the global drive and structural crisis of capitalism.

Where would you most like to be right now?

In Corsica, with only the ripple of a stream to underscore the stillness.

What is your earliest memory?

Children in the park pointing at me, calling 'cripple, cccripple'.

What makes you happy?

Playing hide-and-seek with my cat Mimi.

What makes you unhappy?

Gossip.

What are you reading at the moment?

Natural science mostly – the disappearing of songbirds in Germany – doing away with hollow trees, wastelands brushwood, fallen leaves – destroying nesting and breeding places.

How do you relax?

Mimi and I lazing on the sofa.

What do you regret?

Spending time 'on leave' from world history, courtesy of the prison establishment.

**Tell me a bit about your writing process, how did you complete
The Accumulation of Capital?**

Writing *Accumulation* I was intoxicated – ‘on a high’ as the problem unravelled – wandering back and forth in my room – stepping over Mimi who rolled all over on the carpet – giving shape to my thoughts on paper – I wrote the entire 30 galleys non-stop – sent it to the printer without even reading the draft.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Impatience. Interrupting others.

What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Wanting power for the sake of having it.

What is your favourite song?

The Beatles – *What would you think if I sang out of tune?* it’s my nightmare – like I must sing and play the piano at a concert. Suddenly I realise I can’t play the piano. I run to fetch my niece. Then I remember my niece does not play the piano but the violin.

What do you consider is your greatest achievement?

Stirring up the spirit of revolution.

What has been your greatest disappointment?

We have failed to unite the working class against the war – the press is in shambles, public opinion stifled – the class struggle so totally surrendered.

Do you remember your dreams? Tell me a recent dream

I dreamt I enter an overcrowded hall glaring lights ear-splitting noise a mass of people pushing against me a sudden dryness jams my mouth my face flushed I feel an urge to run away – in horror I wake up.

Who would play you in the film of your life?

Vivien Leigh or maybe Angelina Jolie,
she was great in *Malificent*.

Do you keep photographs in your purse?

Here, have a look – a photo of Mimi tucked
up in my bed with her head on the pillow.

What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?

Have you written the libretto for the musical
version of *Accumulation of Capital*?

Who would be your dream date?

Che Guevara, but Brad Pitt will do.

Tell me a secret

It's only by chance I have been caught up
in the turbulence of world history, actually
I was born to tend geese.

How do you see the future?

Your order is built on sand, tomorrow
the revolution will rise with a rattle
and announce with a fanfare to your terror –
I was, I am, I will be

The last time

After Gabrielle Calvocoressi

I saw Rosa Luxemburg it was a warm
summer evening, dozy shadows
of maple trees ran along the railway bridge.

At the tobacconist a man in a collared shirt
shouted into the telephone
what? I'll be there around 5 o'clock, fine,

goodbye, and put a cigarette to his mouth.
I was distracted by a boy
edging to the kerb right in front of a car.

I missed her crossing the bridge, caught only
her arm waving to the one-eyed
news vendor on his way to the Kneipe,

heard her voice calling out to him
how will you get home, alone in the dark?

Röslein Rot

Goethe's *Faust* in her handbag,
she sat on the bed and waited.

She heard her name. She did not look up.

*

Sound of hobnailed boots.

She put on her coat
pulled on her gloves.

*

I watched her walk into the lobby,
two militiamen at her side.

In the dining room a grand buffet
was laid out.

Crowds were gathered.

*

I followed the Captain's order.
Clubbed her head and arms with the butt
of my rifle. Someone picked up a shoe
dislodged from her foot.
We dragged her into the street.

*

Röslein Rot – Little red rose,
from *Heidenröslein*, a poem
by Goethe set to music by
Schubert.

[a cappella, sung by crowd]
Röslein Rot Röslein Rot

here comes the old whore

[chorus of newspaper editors]

a wicked revolutionary she was
a wicked revolutionary she was

a bandit
a bandit

a stab-in-the-back communist
a stab-in-the-back communist

a foreigner a foreigner
a foreigner a foreigner
and worse, a Polish Jewess
and worse, a Polish Jewess

[cont.]

When Lieutenant Vogel fired his pistol,
she paused, as if amazed that death
had met her on a freezing Berlin night,
before jolting once then falling still on the ground.
A soldier threw a blanket over her head.

*

A splash. A shudder. A man walking his dog
along the Landwehr canal saw soldiers
hurl a bundle over the bridge.
A thud, a crash through thin sheets of ice
into dark water.

[Aria, Captain Pabst, Baritone]
*She was killed by an angry mob
angry mob in the street ...
as a Jew she deserved
to die in a pogrom*

[a cappella, sung by soldiers]
*the old slut is swimming now
Röslein Rot Oh! Röslein Rot*

Google Earth

Someone is sitting by the window, clicking.

It is Rosa, zooming to Tiergarten
on Google Earth. *A mouse-scroll*
over clusters of purple-tinged elderberries
nestled in feathered leaf fronds.

Along the path ants scurry about, pause,
swirl, reverse, wander around tufts
of huddled leaves. In the *dialogue box*:

Robert Hass 'having some dim
intuition of a poem made luminous'.

A double-click on placemark to Südende
to a *close-up* of Mimi lying in the sun
folded together like a soft package
blinking at a hovering wasp.

Tilt view: Rosa is in her kitchen
squishing ripe gooseberries. Mixing
in granulated sugar, boiling for ten minutes.

Flash: Winter of 1905. St Petersburg.

A hundred thousand workers march
to the winter palace. Troops open fire.
Cossacks on horseback gallop
through the crowds.

Pools of blood on fresh snow.

Flash: Mutiny on the battleship Potemkin
sailors refuse to eat borscht infested
with maggots. *Jump to* Huffman Prairie:

The Wright brothers' third flier circles
the air for 39 minutes 23 seconds.

On the screen a yellow pin with flashing

crosshairs is homing on Mumbai.

Close-up: Platform two. Shanti Mishra waits for the ten-fifteen train. A sudden shudder, a barrage of bullets rips open her ribcage. Outside the station two men reloading assault rifles hurry, then pause, waving in glee.

Flash backward: A blur of pixelated edges. She sees herself smuggled across the Polish border hidden under straw in a peasant's cart. *Voice-over:*

a sound of whirring. It's Gretchen at the spinning wheel, singing of a kiss and a promise. *Fly to:* Frankfurt, 1914.

A packed courtroom spilling over into the street. The woman in the dock is Rosa, on trial for calling to refuse to take up arms. *Dissolve* into a prison, 1917. Like a *bumblebee* on its back, legs tucked-in, numb in the autumn frost, she *struggles to roll over* and rise.

Flash forward: the past seems to catch up as if propelling her into the future – 2010. A man walking his dog in Tiergarten stops under the Lichtensteinbrücke to touch the raised letters on a cast-iron plate on the spot where her body was thrown into the canal. She is pleased to see bikers cycle along the path.

Soup (2)

Anniversary 15 January 2012

Always cut away from your hands
mother's voice ticking inside
my skull, *don't forget cumin seeds.*
I am whipping. Furiously. Curdling up
a soup laced with lumpy clutter.

But the swirl of the whisk stirs
something nutty, spicy-sweet, a tinge
of orange blossom in old recipes
she left behind, tucked in the attic
with her fur coat, assorted gloves,

and posters of Rosa Luxemburg
snuggled in the folds of a red flag
(*always ready for the demonstration,*
she'd say) – a scent is in the air
as my fingers roll out the wrinkled flag.

The first time

I saw Rosa Luxemburg it was a freezing
winter evening, my glasses steamed up
as I worked my way through knots of delegates,

breathless with anticipation. In the congress hall
a man in a collared shirt
glancing over his shoulder, whispered in my ear

too much of a woman clever as a monkey
and put a cigarette to his mouth.
I was distracted by eyes thrusting forward

I missed her crossing the hall, caught only
her little hat with a feather
an awkward pigeon limping to the platform,

her voice calling out – *the mass strike,*
the living pulse-beat of the revolution.
In the hall a rustle of voices

she doesn't speak Russian too well
but she speaks excellent Marxian

Stamp

When he was not playing chess in the evening my father would sometimes clear the dinner table immerse torn bits of old envelopes in a bowl of lukewarm water to let the glue dissolve and peel the stamps off the paper. Touching the stamps with your fingers was strictly forbidden. *Like butterfly wings* he said *you can rub off their scales with your fingers*. That was when I saw her floating on the surface face up rising above a sea of hats. There was something in a language I didn't understand. *Leader of the German workers movement* father said carefully checking the stamp with a magnifying glass. *Like a pike in a carp pond* she was he said with a fiery glint in his eyes.



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Unbridled Messiah

Prague, 2007. The Jewish Museum examines a rare textile embroidered with a celestial lion motif. The textile is identified as probably from a robe that belonged to Shabtai Zvi, a Jewish man from Smyrna who in 1666 proclaimed himself as the Messiah.

The present owner of the garment, a Muslim from Izmir, is related to a family originating from a secretive Sabbatean sect within Islam whose remnants survive to this day. The discovery of the textile sparks enthusiasm for exploring hidden stories buried within descendants' families.

Three hundred fifty years earlier, Shabtai Zvi, a pious man regarded as eccentric or unruly, stirs up euphoria and devotion throughout Jewish communities worldwide when he proclaims himself as the Messiah.

Imprisoned for sedition by the Ottomans, Shabtai converts to Islam to escape the death penalty. Some believers follow their messiah into conversion and create a unique blend of both religions which continues to be practised in secret for centuries.

This is a work of fiction drawing on documentary records, eyewitness accounts, real and imaginary, and a chorus depicting multiple perspectives, historical and contemporary, compassionate, flippant and bemused.

Prologue

There are two of us to tell the story – like twins, mistaken one for the other. We are heavenly sisters: Shekinah, the divine presence of God in the world, and Lilith, a wanton demon of the night.

We are free spirits. Invisible. Nosey. We sing in counterpoint, of wonder and redemption, and of demons lurking in the great abyss.

If you take a seat and listen, we'll tell you who's who.

Shabtai Zvi

Messiah. Native of Smyrna. Appearance beautiful and majestic. A sweet singing voice. Prone to bizarre deeds. Inspired by the prophet Nathan to proclaim himself a Messiah. It worked: the oddball became an unbridled messiah who challenged the old world of religious laws and sexual restrictions.

Sarah

Messiah's wife. Renowned beauty. Rumoured to have led a far from chaste life. An angel promised her she would marry the Messiah. It happened: the bride turned into the queen of the messianic court.

Nathan

Prophet. Said to have harboured a secret attraction to Shabtai. Prophesied the messiah will be crowned in 1666, the year of the great apocalypse. It happened.

Heavenly sisters

Timeless free spirits. Hovering at low altitude. Invisible. Nosey. They hear many voices. They tell their stories.

Voices

Dr Baruch, physician / Shabtai's Wives 1 & 2 / Abraham Cuenque, emissary / Paul Rycout, secretary to the British Embassy / Samson Bacchi, rabbi / Joseph Ben Meir, butcher / Esther Levy, maidservant / Hayyim Peña, unbeliever / Abraham Pardo, merchant / Samuel Pepys, diarist / Glikl of Hameln, businesswoman / Jacob Sasportas, rabbi / Aryeh Hirsch, pilgrim / Jacob Najara, rabbi / Hayatizade Mustafa Efendi, physician.

PART ONE A BUDDING MESSIAH

Heavenly sisters

After Anne Carson

A bit of an oddball wasn't he /
remember how he dressed up a
live fish as a baby and put it in
a cradle / well you always
admire misfits don't you Lilith
it's hilarious you said
how it will annoy the rabbis /
so what is he up to now /
locks himself in his room or
hides in the desert pondering
the inner life of angels
some days he shows up
delirious a gaping red mouth
filled with mood like a wide-
awake kicking baby fish /
the unquiet rustles inside him /
do you have any idea
what is it like to become
a Messiah /
not the faintest /

Messiah in waiting

A swirling wave dragged me down the pit of the dark sea, he tells mother when he comes home all wet, hours after dinner time.

You must be starving, mother says, and puts a fresh spinach bureka in his mouth.

He doesn't tell her he killed the fiery dragon and the whole sea became red with blood.

*

A shudder inside his dream.
Tongues of flame lick his penis. Red scar.

A huge night spreads overhead dripping beads of blackness into his soul.

Scar and Lilith blend in the unslept sleep of all the years since.

And the demons of Lilith always pursue him to lead him astray.

*

A boy in a white tunic, he dips his toes in the sea, walks barefoot across the quayside his mind a jumble of wonders

He studies the Talmud and the Zohar
flush-faced
on his lips forbidden syllables
jostle for breath

a tumbledown of heaven and earth

splashes of demon-infested darkness
descend on his soul
heart pounding, he whirl upwards
ascending to great heights

a voice shivers in his ears

*thou art the true redeemer
the anointed one of God*

on the waterfront angels hoist up a mast
sprinkle gleaming sparks over the earth.

Messiah perplexed

Criss-crossing the desert
in a swirl of gritty dust
he hears God the almighty
whose voice trumpets
from a whirlwind
like a thunder

thou art the true messiah
the saviour of thy people
the voice proclaims
or so it seems
for he is not that familiar
with divine conversation

am I really? he asks himself
in wonder
for he didn't set out
to become a messiah
didn't have a grand plan
it just happened

he feels destined to create
an amazing messianic performance
but is not sure how to
like the prophet Isaiah
he levitates to dizzy heights
yet the people look away

unmoved
by the live performance
un poco loco they whisper

you are not worthy to behold
this glorious sight he sulks

I AM the messiah

he cries out loud fists clenched
free to shake up your boring sad life
to speak what no mouth can utter

stop babysulking forthwith demand

older brothers who are wise
(and rich)

you bring shame on our family

be a man at once

but he doesn't know how to

and so it is back to the desert

in a swirl of gritty dust

hiding in a cave

halfway up the mountain

where God pours softly

fresh yearnings into his bones.

Dr Baruch, physician

In the sweaty throng of the bazaar
in the port and in the synagogues
who has not heard the latest
gossip
repeated and multiplied

*an amazing fragrant odour radiates
from Shabtai's body,
a voice whispers in my ears,
the smell of the Garden of Eden.*

*As written in the Talmud, I told Shabtai,
it is unbecoming for a learned young man
to go out perfumed, for it may be construed
he tries to attract other men.
What a young man needs is a wife, I said.*

I watched him strip naked for an examination
to prove there was no perfume.
*It was the patriarchs, he said, who anointed
him, but you must not reveal this mystery
until the right time.*

Wife 1

Let it fade it was never real
the wedding was nothing more
than an apparition his marriage vows

were just a hollow chant
and what I took to be my bridegroom
was just a man prancing.

My husband has not touched me
since the wedding
he hasn't called me by my name.

I return to my father's house
still a virgin my hair will turn grey
I will never have a child in my belly.

Wife 2

Let it fade it was never real
the wedding was nothing more
than an apparition his marriage vows

were just a hollow chant
and what I took to be my bridegroom
was just a man prancing.

My husband has not touched me
since the wedding
he hasn't called me by my name.

I return to my father's house
still a virgin my hair will turn grey
I will never have a child in my belly.

Abraham Cuenque, emissary from Hebron

The first time I saw Shabtai Zvi
it was a warm summer day
hot sticky air hung motionless
in the cave of Machpelah.

He was swaying in a breeze
of prayer eyes turned upwards
the way a child follows a kite
rise into the clouds.

People gathered in the cave
men women children spellbound.
A man in a white kaftan sighed
Shabtai pronounced the sacred name of God.

I couldn't take my eyes off him
couldn't move.
I heard him singing his voice
hummed in my mouth.

Messiah abject

His hands tied to a post he is bent forward
thirty nine lashes with a leather thong.

His back on fire his throat closing
he won't make a sound.

A crowd gathers men and women
shaking some praying children crying.

They see his blisters blue and black
and know it is to teach them a lesson.

And the blows keep coming drop
by drop of pain tear his skin apart.

Someone counts out loud each stroke
שמונה שבע שש חמש ... up to forty.

And then it's over he staggers to his feet
and turn his red-hot face to the crowd

where it ignites the air with an afterglow
of heavenly flame.

Heavenly sisters

Thirty nine strokes / barbaric
don't you think Shekhina /
actually it's forty but the
Talmud prescribes one less in
case someone makes a mistake
in counting / so what has he
done to deserve it / staged a
wedding ceremony / married
himself to his beloved Torah
scroll / invited all the rabbis to
the banquet / must have been
hilarious / not quite / they are
afraid some new sect is
fermenting in his brain / still
it's just a harmless prank /
don't you think / you always
had a soft spot for him Lilith /
yeah well / I think it's all to do
with Saturn / even his name is
telling / שבתאי [Shabtai] =
Saturn / so what / it's
melancholic / draws the soul to
the inner world / who says /
Walter Benjamin / he says it's
the planet of utmost
knowledge and prophecy /
what does he know he isn't
an astrologer is he / no but he
was born under the sign of
Saturn / so is he messianic too
/ not sure but he writes a lot
about saturnines / like Proust
or Kafka / oh please don't start
me on Kafka right now /

Messiah on the road

Fool or deviant he is banished
his city walking away

home harbour wives dissolve
into hazy flecks on a vanishing point

a sudden sundown sinks into nightfall
dozy shadows crawl along the road
dark horizon closing in
a winged dragon at the edge of the world
is reaching out for him

sounds gather in his throat rising
into a song he sings to himself
the way a boy eyes shut tight
will sing to scare away the dark

*Esta noche mis kavalyeros
durmi kon una donzella
ke en los dias de mis dias
no topi otra komo eya
Meliselda tiene por nombre
Meliselda galana i bella
a la abashada de un rio
i a la suvida de un varo
enkontri kon Meliselda
la ija del Imperante
ke venia de los banios
de los banios de la mare*

in early morning light the sea a gleaming froth
colour begins horizon stretches out empty he steps in.

Sarah, Messiah's bride

She tells of Cossacks on horseback
galloping through the streets

broken houses burning with red tongues
bodies flung to the ground

in this version her legs are trapped
under a wall *I don't want to die* she gasps

a drawn-out dog howl answers
awooo awooooo.

She is eight an orphan taken to a convent
to become a bride of Christ

on her knees behind latticed iron grates
she is crying for her father

she tells how father entered her dream
while the world was wrapped in sleep

how he dragged her through the window
lifting her above the clouds

all the while new stories flutter
and soar with each retelling.

Heavenly sisters

Did I tell you Sarah crash-
landed in India / oh no it
was in Persia among
gravestones stripped naked
an angel gave her a coat of
skin / I don't get it Lilith /
well it was lowered from
heaven / hmmm / made by
Eve six thousand years ago
I read it in *Heavenly News* /
really they say the angel
promised her she'll be the
bride of the new Messiah
say angels can see the future
/ I still don't get it / sorry

Esther Levy, maidservant

Some days as I'm cleaning the skillets
I think of the time we worked in Livorno,
like how she loved polishing the silver

or when she told us how she was kidnapped
to be married to a wealthy gentile.
One time she said she was going to Jerusalem

to marry the messiah. We all giggled
and Solomon the apprentice hissed
in my ear

*the whore will marry the Messiah
che ridicolo!*

Sometimes I think if only I had gone with her
after Solomon pushed me up against the wall
perhaps I too could have become a bride.

Sarah

Dear Esther,

Cairo, April, 1664

The people here are kind and generous
and treat me with much respect
a famous rabbi asked me to prophesy his future
which I delivered with great finesse
I told him the roots of his soul
trace back to the noble sages of the past
you can imagine he was well pleased.

When I first met my bridegroom
he gave me a ring as a token of betrothal
but he seemed a bit apprehensive
as if facing turbulence at sea
I haven't yet discovered what troubles him
but trust me I will.

The day before the wedding I was taken
by three women to immerse myself in the mikveh
strip naked scrub every surface – skin nails
hair – all that is in touch with the outside world
all of me drawn into the water three times.

And when it was over I was perfumed
with rose water and the women were singing
que peinaba sus cabellos con un peine de marfil

and I felt as if I were breathing for the first time.

Next I must tell you about the wedding
you have never seen anything like this
for our host is the richest Jew in Cairo.
I wore a satin dress trimmed with lace
my husband a royal blue damask coat
and the houseboy served a most delicious
tavola di dolci to divert the evil demons
from casting a spell.

It is almost a month since the wedding
but my husband has not touched me once
last week I brushed my fingers against his arm
ever so lightly you should have seen
how he turned pale recoiled
as if he had been fondled by the demon Lilith.

I am beginning to think he doesn't know
what to do with a woman
his friends likewise
lower their gaze when they see me
they spend days and nights studying
it seems to me what they need is some practice.

One day soon I'll arrange for you to join me
they need women like us to teach them
for now I am enclosing an embroidered
silk handkerchief as a token of my friendship.

Messiah on the edge

And then it was darkness
despite the prayers the supplications
the fasting the flogging the wedding
the confessions and the atonement of sins
there was no more illumination.

Bruised deserted withered
as if Saturn had cast its dark shadow on earth
he felt sick in his soul
the flame in his heart withered.

Somehow he made it to Gaza
for he had heard of the learned rabbi Nathan
a celebrated doctor of souls who knew
the secrets of every heart and prescribed
a tikkun for all manners of affliction.

And once he arrived it was a pandemonium
a throng of sinners jostling for restoration
but when Nathan and Shabtai eyed each other
something clicked into place.

Why are you here asked the rabbi
and fell to his knees trembling
you need no mending you have risen to perfection.
Then they heard the sound of trumpets
and a roar from heaven
declaring *Shabtai Zvi is king Messiah.*

Nathan of Gaza, prophet

Suddenly in the dark of night
my lips parched
my fingers
 veins of autumn leaves
crumbling to the touch

I turned backwards came across
a wandering soul
 lost in a whirl of turbulence

and I know not how he
lodged
 in the curve of my chest
unbridled my heart

I will pray to him and fast
 my passion will follow his command

and I saw the face of the east gather pink
until darkness
 was cut
 and before me
 it was light.

PART TWO MESSIAH CROWNED

Heavenly sisters

I tell you Lilith it was truly an amazing performance at an all-night vigil with the rabbis of Gaza Nathan rising unsteady on his feet as if sleepwalking begins swaying shaking all over in a trance Nathan taking off his clothes – coat trousers shirt down to his underwear Nathan falling flat on the ground like a corpse / spooky don't you think Shekhina / gets even spookier just as the rabbis put a white cloth on his face as you do for the dead they heard a voice from underneath *take care of my beloved son, my Messiah Shabtai Zvi and of Nathan his prophet /* well it could have been just a conjuring trick / maybe but it was brilliant / do you really believe the Messiah is here with us / well just watch how the whole of Gaza goes wild and Nathan the great impresario issues press releases announcing the glad tidings /

ok I am truly impressed but
why did he take off his clothes /
well it could have been a secret
message / how come / do you
remember when we read the story
of King David dancing naked in
front of the holy ark
remember the teacher told us
there is nothing to be ashamed
of before god

well it is that same King David
who cried *how wondrous has thy
love been to me surpassing the
love of women* / so you think
something is going on between
Nathan and Shabtai / could be /
anyway the teacher didn't explain
what *surpassing* means.

Paul Rycaut, secretary to the British Embassy at Constantinople

From The History of the Turkish Empire: From the Year 1623, to the Year 1677

It is strange to see how fast this fancy took on, for no sooner had Shabtai declared himself the Messiah, his prophet Nathan sent letters to all the assemblies of the Jews forbidding all the fasts of the Jews, and declaring that the Bridegroom being come, nothing but joy and triumph ought to dwell in their habitations and many Jews really believe what they so much desire.

Messiah on the road

No fool or deviant the banished returns as Messiah
his city dancing towards him
ship masts harbour home emerge
from hazy flecks on a vanishing point
amid the dazzle of glare and glitter at sundown

*Meliselda galana i bella ...
los sus kaveyikos ruvios
paresen sirma de labrare*

low in the eastern sky a comet appears
before a golden light at dawn
the city opens its gates he steps in.

Joseph Ben Meir, shochet

Halfway through slitting the hen's neck
the bird still in my hand thrashing about
I heard my wife call and rushed to the porch.

Outside neighbours and strangers surged forward
like a brood of chickens at feeding time
to glimpse the Messiah's procession –

a boy is carrying a silver bowl laden with sweets
two men hold vases of lilies and roses
a rabbi parades Shabtai's inlaid ivory comb
two rabbis holding the hem of his robe.

And then incredible!
the Messiah strides past my house
waving his silver-plated fan over my head
as if brushing away layers of sorrow and pain.

Samson Bacchi, rabbi, emissary from Casale

On Monday there was a great rejoicing as the Scroll of the Law was taken from the Ark. Shabtai sang all kinds of songs, also Christian songs in the vernacular, saying that there was a mystery hidden in these impure songs. He also declared *this day is my Sabbath day*.

At night he held a banquet and the people went to kiss his feet. To all of them he distributed money and candies, and he commanded all, Jews and gentiles alike, to utter the Ineffable Name. One gentile admitted that at Shabtai's persistent demand he had three times said it.

Even the Turks were talking about the Messiah, though no one ever saw a miracle, not even a natural sign. But many unlettered men and women experienced all manner of convulsions and prophesied and exclaimed, *Shabtai Zvi is the king of Israel!*

Hayyim Peña, unbeliever

Friday afternoon. A crowd gathers
outside my house. Then the first stone.
And another. A cloudburst of stones.
Windows crack.

Stone the infidel the mob yells.
I barricade the house.
We slump down in the cellar.
Crowd about to break in.

Friday sunset. Sabbath's service
begins. Crowd disperses.

Sabbath. I walk to the synagogue
for morning prayers. Shabtai sends
a messenger to the elders.

Eject the infidel from the synagogue
he demands.
Elders refuse. Lock the gates.

The mob again. A throng of followers
in a frenzy. Shabtai at the head
axe in hand. A torrent of blows rains down
in a flurry of rage. Gates break open.
Crowd storms in.

Capture the infidel they scream.
In haste I climb out the window.
Escape over the roof.

Heartbeat racing. I run like never before.
Rushing home.
My two daughters still in the cellar. Safe.

Heavenly sisters

Outrageous / smashed the door
of the synagogue with an axe /
on the Sabbath / can you believe
it / barged in / his followers in
tow / hundreds of them / a gang
of stormtroopers / come on he
isn't some Darth Vader / well
you should have seen his rage / a
gaping red mouth filled with
dizzy whirls of insults lashed out
at the rabbis / threatened to
throw them out of the
synagogue / ironic isn't it / the
very same rabbis who banished
him years ago / so you say is it
about revenge / maybe / I think it
really got into him / the thrill of
wielding power / out to torment
his opponents / until they submit
/ sad / to see the chief rabbi make
a public about-face / honour the
newly declared king / well
people do change their minds /
don't they /

Paul Rycaut

Four hundred men and women prophesied of the kingdom of Shabtai Zvi. Infants who could hardly speak said the name “Shabtai the Messiah”. For God had permitted the devil to delude this people, and their own children were possessed, and their voices were heard from stomachs and entrails. And those of riper years fell into a trance, foamed at the mouth, and recounted the future prosperity and deliverance of the Israelites, their visions of the Lion of Judah, and the triumphs of Shabtai Zvi.

Sarah

Dear Esther,

Smyrna, December, 1665

At last. I thought it would never happen.
It took almost two years for a message
from heaven to arrive commanding us
to consummate our marriage.
He was nervous a bit clumsy
needed my hand to ignite the spark.
I sensed his body tense up his heartbeat quicken
after ten minutes of moan and surge
red and sweaty
a sudden swell unlocked the floodgate.

Do I love him? For sure we are in it together
a finger-prick drop of blood on a white sheet
(please don't laugh) my virginity
on public display a cause for rejoicing.
Men and women dance together
women called to read the Torah on Sabbath.
Imagine my husband in the synagogue
declaring *I have come to make you women
free and happy* (people say he's under my spell
I smile serenely).

Blessed days upon us. Torchlight processions
parade through the city calling
long live the Messiah king.
Visitors from distant lands
wait for days to be admitted to our royal residence.

I am sending my servant Jacob to fetch you.
He can be trusted to bring you safely to Smyrna
to become my lady-in-waiting.

Messiah in love

He has discovered something most wonderful.
So much unknown, rich and mystifying.
True happiness in the folds of her flesh.

A gaze to reach his heart. Is this what love is?
To let her hold him, steer his life.
She is with him to face a yearnful crowd.

Heavenly sisters

I'm bored Lilith / why what's
up / had enough of my goody-
two-shoes image I'd love to
be more naughty wear an
amazing dress a frothy pink
Killing Eve item or a sleek
little black outfit like yours /
oh I see you're a bit jealous
when I have fun I tell you
sometimes it's amusing to be
horrid but really I'm fed up
with my demons forever
playing dirty tricks leading
people astray you know what
I wish I could be more worthy
like you /

I suppose we can't break free
of our destiny always hover
watch eavesdrop telling
other people's stories / yes
just being nosey but truly
I'd love to be part of their
stories like being in love
with a human / me too
sometimes I think how happy
humans must be to smell
to embrace to kiss / yes but
what about their dirty laundry
their grief and pain surely
you don't fancy death /

still what about a kiss /

Hayyim Peña, unbeliever

Every day people talked about miracles
on Monday Aaron the tailor saw fire shoot out
of Shabtai's mouth
and set the Qadi's beard alight

on Tuesday Mordechai the baker swore
the heavens opened up at dawn
and he saw Shabtai at the blazing gateway
wearing a mighty crown

yesterday a spinster from Galata said
an angel holding a flaming sword
revealed to her the Messiah had come
and would soon appear on the shores of the Jordan

last night I found my two daughters
foaming at the mouth in a fit of ecstasy
calling out

*crown crown Shabtai Zvi
sits on an exalted throne in heaven*

a miracle in my own house
the whole world seemed out of joint
that sense of sinking through mud

surrender or your daughters are lost to you
so I bit my tongue and said

Shabtai Zvi is the true Messiah

Abraham Pardo, merchant

At first it was painless. I got up at midnight
to recite the daily devotion and confessed my sins
immersed in a ritual bath so crowded it was nearly
impossible to enter: *for whoever is not clothed
with the breastplate of repentance will suffer
great tribulations*, proclaimed our prophet Nathan.

Eager to hasten the advent of the Messiah
I refined the prescribed bodily mortifications:
I rolled downhill naked in a blizzard of snow,
or threw myself into the frozen winter sea.

Gripped by desire for eternal salvation
some days I stripped naked, wrapped my body
in thorns and nettles, my skin
crisscross-scratched to mark my penitence
for vanity, misdeeds and ill-gotten gains.

I disposed of my business to provide for the needy.
No longer rich or poor, miser or destitute,
all will be swept away when Saturn reaches
its highest point in the sky
and bathes the earth in boundless light.

Samuel Pepys, diarist

From *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*

I have heard once or twice already, of a Jew in town, that in the name of the rest do offer to give any man £10 to be paid £100, if a certain person now at Smyrna be within these two years honoured by all the Princes of the East, and particularly the grand Signor as the King of the world, in the same manner we do the King of England here, and that this man is the true Messiah. One named a friend of his that had received ten pieces in gold upon this score, and says that the Jew hath disposed of £1100 in this manner, which is very strange; and certainly this year of 1666 will be a year of great action; but what the consequences of it will be, God knows.

Glikl of Hameln, businesswoman

Ice drizzle is blowing up the frozen Elbe. My daughter's lips
are blue. I wrap a woollen shawl over her shoulders.
Yesterday I sold 300 ounces of assorted seed pearls
for a good profit. Reached an agreement with creditors.

Aunt Bela brings a basket of beetroot from the market
merciful God, she cries, the king Messiah proclaimed!
She tells of a letter from Smyrna. Outbursts of joy
in the synagogue. Young and old in finest clothes
dancing to the beating of drums.
Aunt Bela is breathless, delirious. My daughter
is still freezing. I chop beetroot, carrot and onions
for a steaming soup at dinner time.

Heavenly sisters

Baffling innit / what / how
people can be so gullible /
come on Lilith, a bit of
empathy wouldn't go amiss
/ you mean show some
concern / yes, imagine the
suffering, the pogroms, the
pain of exile, the yearning
for deliverance / so it's like
dreaming of utopia / maybe
but utopia actually means
no-place / how do you
know / Thomas More
invented it but I think it was
satirical and frankly I don't
fancy his utopia that much /
I thought utopia was dead /
well she hibernates for
years and years, then bursts
out with a fury, flaps, spins,
then hides again / how
poetic, so you think this
messiah-craze will end
badly / not sure, the
prognosis isn't too good /
who says / Walter Benjamin
says even if the messiah
does turn up one day
nothing much would
change / a bit pessimistic
innit / yes but there is
always hope, remember old
Vladimir and Estragon /
well they're still waiting

Jacob Sasportas, rabbi of Hamburg

This week letters arrived announcing the “king” Shabtai Zvi had begun to reign like a royal ruler, setting the entire city wild with joy. And with my very own eyes I saw how they unleashed their tongues against the non-believers and called them heretics. It made my hands tremble, and I could not speak, for my followers were few, and even they did not speak aloud but in secret, and there was no one to talk back to the believers, and on many occasions they desired to excommunicate the non-believers.

Glikl of Hameln

The morning is bright and airy. Another letter arrives.
Messiah to be crowned by the Sultan. Father-in-law
packs two barrels of food slow to perish –
peas, smoked meat, dried fruits.

The good man prepares to sail to the Holy Land
through a storm-tossed, angry sea.

Birth pangs of the Messiah, he says.

Sarah

Dear Esther,

Gallipoli, July 1666

It's hard to imagine the love and devotion
of believers and well wishers
who arrive with splendid gifts,
like the lustrous heirloom carpets
presented by the envoi from Kurdistan,
the bejewelled silver vessels
made by Heshel Soref,
the renowned silversmith of Vilna,
or my husband's most favourite,
the deep red damask silk robe
depicting a lion embroidered
with gold metal threads,
sent by worshippers from Podolia.

Yet my husband seemed anxious, unsettled,
and his sleeplessness worried me.
I'd lie awake and listen to him shuffling
listless in the dark.
He seemed terrified of sleep.

What is this affliction? I asked a visiting rabbi.
Melancholia, he said. He told me the remedy
advised by the famous physician Maimonides
is music and dance, or a walk in the garden
watching pretty flowers or shapely women.

I invited a group of Turkish dancing-boys
accompanied by a band of musicians
to perform for my husband and his guests.
I taught the most beautiful girls how to walk
through the garden, hips swaying gently,
a twinkle in the eye, with just a hint of a smile.

It worked like a dream. Imagine my husband
bewitched by the curve of a breast outlined
through a silky dress, his eyes crawling over
a raised armpit, uplifting his spirit to the height
of ecstasy. Eager, unruly, he swaggers
like a boy, insatiate, demands seventy virgins.

I think it's a bit of bravado to make up
for missed pleasures in the past,
but he's so full of his fire now,
throwing all caution to the wind.

*Be careful, I tell him, not to provoke
the unbelievers.*

He seems not to understand
how these things work.

There are rumours the prophet Nathan
is leading a mission
on behalf of the Lost Tribes
trapped behind the river Sambatyon,
a roaring torrent that rages all week
but ceases on the Sabbath,
when Jews are not allowed to travel.

Nathan's prophecies the Messiah
will liberate the tribes
and return triumphantly
riding a celestial lion
bridled by a seven-headed serpent.

Can you imagine? My husband embarks
on a dangerous mission
to release the tribes from captivity!
I was inspired. I copied the figure
of the golden lion
embroidered on the majestic
red silk robe.

I hope you like it.



Robert Boulter of Aberdeen, publisher

The foulness of the weather and storms put into this place a ship, from whence she came we cannot tell, but our Professor of Tongues and Languages having notice thereof, went down unto them, but could not understand them; he supposes they spoke broken Hebrew, and by a letter they had in High-Dutch, they found them bound for Amsterdam, and to have correspondence with their brethren, the Jews, there; which letter further relates, that there is sixteen hundred thousand of them in Arabia, and there came into Europe sixty thousand more; and that they have had encounters with Turks, and slain great numbers of them; none are able to stand up against them. As for their ship, the sails thereof are white branched satin, and their ropes are silk of the same colour; and in the sails was this inscription in fair red characters

THESE ARE OF THE TEN TRIBES OF ISRAEL

Aryeh Hirsch, pilgrim

How precious is the sight of awestruck pilgrims
arriving from the ends of the earth to pay homage
to his majesty and noble countenance.

How glorious it is to behold our king Messiah
wearing a regal red robe
adorned with sparkling golden-tasselled threads.

How delightful it is to glimpse the bare ankle
of a dazzling maiden strolling gently
in our master's garden.

*How can it be right, I asked our king, for it is a sin
to look at even the small finger of a woman?*

*Blessed is he who permits that which is forbidden,
he said, revealing the great mystery
how he has intercourse with beautiful virgins
without deflowering them.*

*My lord and king, I said, may I stay a servant
at your court, for I have yet so much to learn.*

Upon which, rising to his feet, our king
began to sing in a mighty voice, eyes raised to heaven,
as if ascending to the celestial paradise.

Dr Baruch, physician

In the port and in the synagogues
in the sweaty throng of the bazaar
who has not heard the latest
gossip

*The Messiah has persuaded a young man
to enter Queen Sarah's room,
a voice
whispers in my ears,
he fled when she approached him.*

*It is hard for the boy, I told Shabtai,
he is shocked and distressed
for he is respectful, and only wanted
to pay homage to the queen.*

*If only he had done her will, Shabtai said,
he would have performed a great tikkun.
The other boys didn't run away, he said.*

PART THREE MESSIAH CAPTURED

Sarah

Dear Esther,

Gallipoli, September 1666

It was really creepy, this distinguished rabbi
from Poland, plump, broad-shouldered,
with a grey beard silvered at the temples.
I felt a shudder through my body,
like seeing
my father's ghost visiting my husband.

I watched them argue. *It is written,*
the rabbi insisted, *the war of Gog and Magog*
must take place before
the coming of the messiah.
All day he listed further signs and omens
to prove that Shabtai is a false messiah.

I could see my husband was panicking,
leafing through book after book,
desperate
for proof of his claims to be the Messiah,
each one rejected by the visiting rabbi
as vanity
and ignorance of the correct interpretation.

You wouldn't believe it! For three days and nights
they carried on squabbling as if they were
two drunkards picking a fight in the tavern
with no end in sight,
until the visiting rabbi, in a furious outburst,
called Shabtai a traitor.

I am confused, my husband is dedicated
to saving his people,
and he is about to be crowned by the Sultan.
And yet
maybe the ghost of my father is an omen.

Heavenly sisters

So the Messiah survived a shipwreck / well just about / got a real battering / those monster waves / you know the Hellespont in winter / so what was he doing there / he was called by God to Constantinople / what for / to remove the Sultan's crown and place it on his own head / that's crazy / not really he followed the script of Nathan's prophecy / ah Nathan haven't heard from him for a while / well he is still in Gaza prophesying / rumour has it he doesn't like queen Sarah that much / why's that / dunno, that poet says she's a witch practising her dark arts in the heat of night / I think Nathan is envious that the Messiah truly loves his wife / maybe but what happened to the Messiah / he was arrested at sea / oh that's horrible / I read it in *Heavenly News* they say he was brought ashore in chains hit by the Turkish guards they say the ten plagues of Egypt will soon be visited on them / hmm they deserve a good beating / still I don't like the plagues

Hayatizade Mustafa Efendi, physician

puffy eyes listless he appears
a man of no particular importance
hard to believe God chose him
to become a Messiah
and then abandoned him
to his fate
in the Sultan's grand court

I am no Messiah
he begins
but the Turkish syllables
wobble on his tongue
You speak very ill
says the Sultan
for a messiah
who ought to have
the gift of languages

(a brief interlude –
I am instructed to translate)

I am no Messiah
he starts again
just an ordinary Jew
with no privilege
or virtue above the rest
it was Nathan of Gaza
who forced me
to take on the role
against my will

but the Sultan is not satisfied
with the confession
he demands a miracle –

*strip him naked
and set him as a target
for my archers
he commands
if the arrows
fail to pierce his body
we will accept him
as a messiah*

*should he refuse
to perform the miracle
the stake
at the gate of the Seraglio
is ready
to impale him.*

I watch a tremor
racing across his face
tears gather
at the corners of his eyes
just an ordinary man
terrified
not made to become a martyr

*The only way to save yourself
I whisper in the language of the Jews
is to convert to Islam
(I admit a personal motive to my counsel)
I myself was once a Jew
now as a new Muslim
I am physician-in-chief
of the court
and if you convert
no one will ever know
not even yourself
how in your heart of hearts
you truly feel.*

Heavenly sisters

Did you hear that? The disgruntled rabbi from Poland complained to the Sultan / really what about / he said that Shabtai is a lewd person who corrupts the minds of the Jews / disgusting what a snitch couldn't they just fight it out between themselves / well they didn't and next day Shabtai was taken to the Sultan's court to stand trial for treason / unbelievable I just missed this story / how come this is truly sensational / I was distracted fantasising what it's like to kiss a human / anyway Shabtai renounced his claims to the messianic title said he is just a poor rabbi with no special privilege or virtue / what a coward his followers must have been shocked / not really they think it was a cunning plot in any case the Sultan offered Shabtai a choice - convert to Islam or die impaled on a stake at the Gate of the Seraglio / blimey what a choice / actually it's a no brainer particularly with the promise of an honorary post and a royal pension / come on Lilith don't be so cynical maybe he

genuinely believes this was
ordained by God / bizarre don't
you think – a Jewish messiah
becomes Aziz Mehmed Effendi
an honorary keeper of the palace
gates / well at least he didn't have
to get circumcised.

Sarah

What is obedience? *A wife is required
to obey her husband,
for he is her gateway to paradise,*
says the Sultan's mother who instructs me
in the ways of Islam.

I am now Fatima Kadin, a dutiful wife
who follows her husband's command.
*You must recite the Shahadah with genuine
conviction,* says the Sultan's mother.

I remember how my father was murdered
for refusing to convert, how I sang
the matins in the convent chapel,
pretending
to be a Christian girl.

I think of Queen Esther who concealed
her Jewish origins from King Ahasuerus
to bring salvation to her people.
Perhaps my husband too is on a mission,
a divine secret in the fullness of time
will be revealed.

1666

Annus mirabilis, writes John Dryden, *angels drew wide the curtains of the skies*. Robert Hooke observes shadows cast by the rings of Saturn with a 60-foot telescope. Young Isaac Newton sits under a tree, the apple about to fall. In the spring the swallows return.

The Ottoman army departs for the bloodiest Siege of Candia. There are rumours that the Venetians prepare to lift the siege by infecting the Ottomans with plague. At the première of *Le Misanthrope* in Paris the critics are unimpressed by the harangues and moral preaching. In London the theatres are shut.

In June the Dutch fleet moves off Galloper Sand towards the channel. Dutch fireships set alight the English ship *Resolution*. Two months later Samuel Pepys is watching *a most horrid malicious bloody flame* engulfing the streets. *It made me weep to see it*, he writes. Dutch citizens are accused of starting the fire. In September Shabtai Zvi converts to Islam.

In the autumn there are several sightings of swallows under water. The Royal Society of London concludes that swallows do not travel south for winter. It is most certain they hibernate in ponds, like frogs. *Annus mirabilis*, writes Fatima Kadin to Esther Levy, *I can feel baby flutters in my belly*.

Paul Rycaut

And now the reader may be pleased to pause a while and contemplate the strange point of consternation, shame, and silence, to which the Jews were reduc't, when they understood how speedily their hopes were vanished, and how poorly and ignominiously all their fancies and promises of a new kingdom, their pageantry, and offices of devotion were past like a tale, or a midnight's dream. And as this was concluded, and the Jews sunk on a sudden, and fallen flat in their hopes, without so much as a line of comfort, or excuse from Shabtai. The news that Shabtai was turned Turk, and the Messiah to a Mahumetan, quickly filled all parts of Turkey. The Jews were strangely surprized at it, and ashamed of their easie belief, of the arguments with which they had perswaded one the other, and of the proselytes they had made in their own families so that this deceived people for a long time after remained with confusion, silence, and dejection of spirit.

Gliki of Hameln

Gloomy, cold and wet. Father-in-law
unpacks his barrels, exhausted.
His dream of redemption is shattered.

How we have waited! Rumours
were stirred to a glowing blaze,
shaking loose hushed dreams.
We said so many prayers,
gave away our possessions to charity,
laid bare
our bodies and souls to penitence
and mortification.

We were like a woman on a birthing stool
who, after long labour and sore pains,
expects to rejoice in the birth of a child,
yet finds it is nothing but wind.

Nathan of Gaza

Though you have heard strange things
of our Lord, let not your hearts faint or fear,
but fortify yourselves in your faith,

because his actions are miraculous
and secret, which human understanding
cannot comprehend.

People may say these words of comfort
are mere vanity because I am unable
to work a miracle, yet I shall not desist.

In a short time you shall be instructed
by our Lord himself, and arrive
to the salvation of the true Messiah.

Hayyim Peña

Every day people talk about mysteries
Aaron the tailor says Shabtai didn't convert
that in fact it was the Sultan who embraced him
and set the royal crown on his head.

Mordechai the baker swears the conversion
is part of a divine plan
that Shabtai has entered the evil
forces
of the qlippot in order to subdue them.

The spinster from Galata claims
it is not he himself who has converted
but a shadow. The real Shabtai
rose into the sky and has disappeared.

Last night I found my two daughters
whirl barefoot in a trance
singing
*oh, my beloved's gone from me
God's chosen one, Shabtai Zvi
though fallen low and suffering hard
yet he is closest to my heart*

the whole world is out of joint
that sense of sinking through mud.

The Messiah writes to his brethren

Know ye my brethren, my children, and my friends that I recognised with great clarity that the True God whom I alone know for many generations and for whom I have done so much, has willed that I should enter with all my heart into the Islamic religion, to nullify the Torah of Moses until the end of time.

As implied in the Talmud, God is reported to have said to Moses: *May thy strength increase because you broke the tablets of the Covenant*, because the Torah of Moses without the knowledge of the True One is worth nothing. But *Din Islam haqq haqq*, the religion of Islam is the very Truth.

And do not believe, my brethren, that I became a Muslim on the strength of an illumination so that you become terrified and say: today or tomorrow the illumination will depart from him and he will regret what he has said. This is not so, I did this on my own, through the great power and strength of Truth and Faith which no wind in the world and no sages and prophets can cause me to deny.

Thus speaks the master of Truth and Faith, the Turco and the Mesurman.

Jacob Najara, rabbi

At the pre-dawn hour, the time of divine favour
he spoke the language of dreams –
how he fell into a deep pit and couldn't get out,
how he saw his father and mother
standing above by the edge, how they threw down
a rope and pulled him out of the pit.

At sunrise I saw him in the Portuguese synagogue
chanting the *shacharit* prayers in a mellow tune.
I stood there petrified, watching him perform
the *namaz*, bowing and rising in supplication.
At the end of the service he read from the Qur'an
commanding his followers to put on the turban.

How blessed I felt to behold our King's radiance,
yet I prayed he would spare me the agony
of embracing Islam. I knew I would have obeyed
if our beloved messiah required me to descend
with him into the realm of the qlippot to lift
the holy sparks that had fallen to the great abyss.

I was with him when his light was eclipsed,
shut away in the power of the serpents
until in his suffering he inclined to heresy,
his faith a single hair's breadth from extinction,
but when his illumination returned
not even a hair's breadth of doubt remained.

When we rabbis saw his light restored, we fanned
him with a fan, like slaves to their master.
His muddled soul may lead us to misfortune,
yet the sparks he ignited will guide us
through the crooked pathway to the gates
of divine revelation.

Heavenly sisters

Unbelievable performing the *namaz* in the synagogue truly muddled / actually I think he is trying to blend the two religions together quite revolutionary really spiritual freedom just think of Spinoza / yeah well both get excommunicated / and both challenge the fossilised beliefs of the old world / still Spinoza is rational Shabtai is hot-headed remember the live fish in the cradle / yeah and sometimes he is really nasty like persecuting poor Hayyim Peña for refusing to believe in him / well now he is divorcing Sarah / that's madness I think she is beautiful and clever / and she wholeheartedly believes in his messianic destiny / so what's gone into him all of a sudden / he says she is like leprosy which according to the Talmud is a valid ground for divorce / you forget he is a Muslim now / well that's simple – a man does not need to state the grounds for divorce / anyway I suspect he plotted the whole thing with Nathan / sounds true Nathan never liked her / now he spreads rumours that Sarah persecutes her husband calls her

a snake says she tried to poison
Shabtai twice in short he's plain
beastly / both of them actually/
make you think really how even
most exalted souls the Messiah
and his prophet can become
ungodly how such flawed beings
can stir up immense euphoria and
devotion how they awaken
a most profound yearning for
redemption.

Sarah

Home palace husband
slipping away
in a cloud of gravel dust
I am far from anywhere
discarded betrayed
left alone in the world
with only a bundle
of hurriedly packed
pieces of my life.

Furious anger clings
to the back of my tongue
the wrench in my belly
moves to my throat

*I am an orphan girl who became the Messiah's wife
I am a woman who was betrayed by her love*

alone in the world
but for my father's spirit
to carry me along
and a hurriedly packed
silky red robe
as a keepsake of my life.

In darkness I trace
a figure of a lion
embroidered
with gold metal threads
unfurling towards a time to come
when a new Messiah will arise.

Postscript

In 2007 the Jewish Museum in Prague is contacted by a Muslim from Izmir with a request to assess a rare textile embroidered with a celestial lion motif placed in a floral wreath, found in a coffer in his deceased mother's house.

His mother never mentioned the coffer, but enquiries with family and friends revealed that her second husband came from a prominent Izmir family of *Maaminim* (Dönme in Turkish), a secretive Sabbatean sect within Islam whose remnants survive to this day.

Research conducted by the museum's staff concludes that the preserved fragment probably comes from the rear upper part of a man's coat. The robe is fashioned from wine red silk damask and the fabric was made in the middle of the seventeenth century. The robe depicts a lion embroidered with a yellow silk yarn and gold metal thread on a red base. It was, in all probability, made for a person living in the Ottoman Empire.

The wearer of such an expensive garment with pseudo-heraldic decoration must have been an important figure in society. There is documentary evidence that visitors to the messianic court in 1666 presented Shabtai Zvi with valuable royal garments. The depiction of the Celestial Lion is among the traditional Jewish Messianic symbols used by the Sabbatean movement.

The researchers conclude that while it is not possible to give a definitive answer, in their opinion it is possible, even probable, that the robe with the heraldic lion embroidery actually belonged to Shabtai zvi.

Notes:

Shabtai Zvi - spelling varies in different translations. I use Shabtai Zvi which is nearer to contemporary Hebrew pronunciation.

A bit of an oddball - after Anne Carson.

Un poco loco – a bit crazy.

Meliselda - Ladino (Judeoespañol): This night my cavaliers / I slept with a maiden / whose equal I have never met / in the best years of my life / Meliselda is her name, / Meliselda elegant and beautiful / along the course of a river / and the slope of a hill / I met Meliselda / daughter of the Emperor / who came to bathe herself / in the waters of the sea.

Meliselda, a popular Judeo-Spanish romansa, was Shabtai Zvi's favourite song, later incorporated into the Sabbatean liturgy.

Tikkun – mending. In the kabbalah restoring the damaged world into its primordial wholeness.

Mikveh – a Jewish ritual bath.

Que peinaba sus cabellos ... - Ladino: who is combing her hair with an ivory comb.

Shochet – a ritual slaughterer.

Qlippot – 'shells' or 'husks' which conceal holiness, like a peel concealing the fruit within. In the Kaballah they are considered as a representation of evil or impure spiritual forces.

Shahadah - the Muslim declaration of faith and the first Pillar of Islam.

Din Islam haqq haqq – the religion of Islam is the very Truth.

Turco and the Mesurman – Shabtai signed as a Turk in straits.

Mitre – Turban, a sign of conversion to Islam.

Shacharit – Jewish morning prayer.

Namaz – Muslim prayer.

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(article in Hebrew) [מליסלדה העולה מן הרחצה: גלגוליה של רומנסה ספרדית]