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Long And Difficult Labour *The Emergence Of American Maternity Poetry*

On November 7, 1995, I was giving birth to my last child, a daughter named Sophie Constance. Exactly six months later, I was being escorted out of the White House. Well, that's a bit of an understatement: actually I was being "swept" out of the White House, with my daughter-in-arms, by a squadron of walkie-talkie-wielding secret service agents, not because I'd been hurling threats or planting bombs but because the infant I carried had the audacity to cry a little too loud and a little too long during a standard White House tour.

I offer this anecdote only because the incident reminded me that even in an age when "family values" are everywhere extolled, real-live mothers and their screaming, squirming children are not everywhere accepted. What struck me at the time was the absurdity of the whole thing. Upstairs, Bill Clinton was singing the praises of "Soccer Moms" (and doing God-knows what else); Hilary was writing "It takes a village to raise a child." Meanwhile, downstairs, Sophie and I were being told to shut up or get out.

I have no doubt that on that spring day in Washington D.C., we were an annoying pair. I hadn't expected that either my daughter's "barbaric yawp" (Whitman, 1959: 68) or my own noisy attempt to console her would be applauded. But neither had I expected that we'd be treated like co-conspirators in some diabolical plot to bring down the American government, as dangerous subversives who had to be silenced as quickly and completely as possible.

But that is exactly what happened. Having been unceremoniously dumped outside, Sophie and I made the further mistake of sitting on the White House lawn to catch our breath and were promptly chased away. At this point, visions of Virginia Woolf and the Oxbridge Beadle began dancing in my head. Woolf, of course, would have gathered up her dignity (luckily she wouldn't have had to worry about a baby and a diaper bag) and trotted off to the Library of

Congress to try her luck there. I didn't even consider it. I could already imagine the reception we'd find ... especially if we tried to gain access to the poetry stacks: after all, it is a place which has never been known for welcoming women with children—whether in the flesh or on paper.

American poetry has long upheld a distinctly male model of experience. Interpreting literally the national dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it has celebrated the wholly unencumbered individual; and from Walt Whitman to the Beats and beyond, it has lionized those poets who could act as the living embodiment of the ideal. An unfortunate consequence of this has been the marginalization of those poets who proved to be either unwilling or unable to conform to such a rigid standard. For American women in general, the insistence on a male model, grounded by definition in alien experiences, has made the writing of poetry very difficult. For American mothers, women bound by an even wider range of physical and cultural imperatives, the task has been more difficult still.

Some, like America's first poet, Anne Bradstreet, succeeded as poets despite great odds. That she, and other colonial women, like Ann Eliza Bleecker and Judith Sargent Murray, could write poems at all while raising children in a rough, new land, was a rare and remarkable feat. But that rough new land did offer them one advantage over their literary descendants: they were able to live in the relative freedom of the literary frontier in an age before the boundary lines for poetry had been completely mapped. Thus the "rambling brat[s]" they brought to term (Bradstreet, 1981: 177) could be sent out into the world rather than being relegated to a magazine and gift book ghetto.

After the American Revolution, however, this situation changed because with the founding of the new nation came the call for a national literature. The criteria for poetry and the range of subjects considered appropriate became strictly codified, and the criteria for the "true" American poet became codified as well. Simply put, the paths of the literary parents diverged: fathers were able, indeed encouraged, to take the road "less travelled by" (Frost, 1962: 72) while mothers were sent home to knit booties and gossip amongst themselves.

As evidence of this, we need only look at the simultaneous development of two separate bodies of work: the literature of the American Renaissance, written by men, and what Mary Ryan (1982) has called "the liturgy of the cult of domesticity," a "ritual incantation recited by a vast congregation composed mostly of women" (17, 143). This meant that women and, more specifically, mothers, could still write: indeed some wrote voluminously. But if they wished to publish, the range of tones and subjects available to them was relatively narrow. Furthermore, as women speaking to women, they could only achieve only popular success. Serious critical consideration was reserved for men speaking to men.

If women held out any hope of being regarded as poets as opposed to poetesses—in other words if they wanted to distance themselves from what Nathaniel Hawthorne (1987) blithely described as the "d——d mob of

scribbling women” (304)—it was necessary for them to free themselves from as many stereotypical female responsibilities as possible. Historically, this meant that American women were forced to make a choice. They could forgo child-bearing to dedicate themselves to their art, and, in doing so, risk being dismissed as aberrations, or they could have children, settle into a domestic routine, and give up their poetic aspirations.

Some women, like the nineteenth century poet Lucretia Davidson, consciously chose the first option. According to her mother, Davidson felt that she “could not do justice to husband or children, while her whole soul was absorbed in literary pursuits; she was not willing to resign them for any man, therefore, she had formed the resolution to lead a single life” (qtd. in Walker, 1982: 75). Early in this century, Sara Teasdale made a similar choice when she aborted a fetus because, in the words of Elaine Showalter, she was “unable to imagine maternity and poetic creativity as other than antagonistic roles” (1991: 110).

Others, like Alice Williams Brotherton, made a different decision. “I thought to win me a name,” Brotherton wrote, that would “ring in the ear of the world—/ [But] How can I work with small pink fists / About my fingers curled? (1898: 76). Feeling unequal to the challenge, Brotherton bade “adieu to name and to fame” (1898: 76).

We will never know the number of literary mothers who felt compelled to be silent for the sake of their children. But there must have been many, for when Amy Lowell wrote “The Sisters” in 1955, the ability of any woman to combine motherhood with a literary career still seemed “miraculous” (459). Lowell, however, did feel that women were potentially “double-bearing, / With matrices in body and in brain” (459), and in her lifetime this belief was beginning to be put into practice through the creation of an alternative model for poetry based on female experience: one which not only allowed for the possibility of motherhood, but recognized it as asset rather than an artistic liability.

It is, of course, no coincidence that this new model, based on the belief that “Nature endowed the Complete Woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions” (Loy 1982: 270), grew up simultaneously with the struggle for women’s rights and, more specifically, reproductive choice. Just as it is easier to celebrate pregnancy when no social stigma is attached to it, and to celebrate child-rearing when economic hardship is not a pressing concern, it is easier to celebrate motherhood in general when you have the freedom to decide whether or not you’ll have children in the first place.

But obstacles remained for those women who choose to be both mothers and poets. And they remain today. After all, literary mothers continue to deal with the relentless reality of bringing up children. Pre-revolutionary poet, Ann Eliza Bleecker lamented that “... Amidst domestic cares to rhyme / I find no pleasure, and I find no time” (qtd. in Cowell, 1981: 5). But issues of occupation

and interruption still jeopardize the productivity of literary mothers, as contemporary pieces like Alice Walker's "Now That the Book is Finished," Susan Griffin's "This Is the Story of the Day in the Life of a Woman Trying" and Marilyn Nelson Waniek's "Levitation with Baby" make abundantly clear. Moreover, the "carping tongue" which Anne Bradstreet complained of (1981: 7) has never really been silenced. Women poets must still contend with the admonishment of their peers, both the men who believe that "Women artists fail / Because they have babies" (MacDonald, 1993: 189) and the women who believe that "motherhood is the sinister invention / of patriarchy" (Ostriker, 1980: 46)

Nevertheless, in this century—and especially in the years after World War Two—America's literary mothers have, in increasing numbers, managed to be "double-bearing" (Lowell, 1955: 459). Women like Louise Bogan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, Sandra McPherson, Alicia Ostriker, Sylvia Plath, Muriel Rukeyser, and Adrienne Rich—to name only a few—have been able not only to produce poetry but to use their poetry to reflect and validate maternal experience.

Taken collectively, America's literary mothers have regained confidence in their creative powers, both poetic and reproductive. Indeed, power itself has become a central theme for many of them. Some recast themselves in powerful roles. Moving beyond maternal stereotypes, they describe themselves as providers or protectors. In doing so, they not only reverse traditional expectations of the passive, dependent mother; they also succeed in reducing the importance of the father by effectively usurping the positions from which his authority is typically derived.

But a number of them go further still. Rather than dealing with generic fathers, women like Anne Sexton and Sharon Olds challenge, with varying degrees of directness, the fathers of American poetry. These women subvert the phallogocentric national model by taking the words of its primary promoters, men such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, and applying them to maternal experience. In the process, they prove that mothers are not just capable of writing poetry, they are as well qualified to write it as the icons of American literature.

The literary mothers who adhere to this new female model view themselves as neither romanticized Madonnas nor as martyrs to tradition. Yet neither can they be dismissed as penis-envying male-wannabes. In the opening stanzas of Sharon Olds's poem, "Language of the Brag," for instance, the speaker desires "some epic use" for her "excellent body" (1980: 44). She stands by the sandlot and watches the boys play. But—and it's a big but—she does not stuff her hair up under her hat, don a jock strap and join the game. Rather than trying to fit herself into a masculine paradigm, the adult Olds embraces an equally valid, and, if anything, more authentic, female one. She defiantly celebrates maternity, revelling in her new-found power and demanding that it be recognized:

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
I and other women, this exceptional
act with the exceptional heroic body,
this giving birth, this glistening verb ... (1980: 45)

Here Olds suggests that males exploit their physicality because they are searching for a substitute for female fecundity—they are motivated, if you will, by womb envy. Alma Luz Villanueva states this belief still more explicitly in “Witches’ Blood,” when she theorizes that

Men have killed,
made war,
for blood to flow as naturally,
as a woman’s
once a month—
men have roamed the earth to find
the patience of pregnancy
the joy of birth. (1980: 384)

The confidence that comes from this belief allows literary mothers to write in the “Language of the Brag” and put their “proud American boast / right here with the others” (Olds, 1980: 45).

The codifiers of the national literature long underestimated the power of the maternal voice. Canon-makers like Ralph Waldo Emerson felt that mothers lacked the necessary tools, for they could not use the “spermatic, prophesying, man-making words” which were supposedly the hallmark of American poetry (Emerson, qtd. in Leverenz, 1986: 39). That “childless, lonely old grubber,” Walt Whitman (Ginsberg, 1993: 29), concurred when he distinguished between those who could “perceive” and “tell” and those who could “conceive children and bring them up well” (420). But America’s “double-bearing” (Lowell, 1955: 459) maternity poets, women whose work is notable for its emotional force and formal ingenuity, have repeatedly proven them wrong.

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