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This body of words: On poetic genesis, birth and becoming

Abstract:

In the Western literary canon, myths of autogenesis mark the transition from a matriarchal economy to a patriarchal one through figuring poetic births which are essentially masculine. In Judeo-Christian discourses genesis comes forth from the father's word rather than from the mother's body in the privileging of the father's word. In the realm of literary theory, nowhere is this made more explicit than in Lacan's teaching according to which The Name of the Father is that which structures subjectivity (Lacan 2006). Metaphors of birth are central to the manoeuvres whereby poets define themselves and to the critical procedures whereby their work is recognised and either marginalised or canonised. Poetry itself is often referred to as a gestational space. This paper investigates the gendered topos of this gestational space. It looks for the poetic seed that portends birth and becoming. And above all it looks for the body that houses this process. It argues that poetry which deals with the materiality of motherhood is highly problematic in an economy that prizes euphemistic birth in linguistic and abstracted terms. This poetic economy masculinises voice, and feminises form, that is, the body of the text. Within such an economy, a female poet's voice undermines the inertness of the matter and *Mater* considered necessary for the self-birthing of male poets. Whether the price for this voice is cultural still-birth remains to be ascertained.

Biographical note

Dominique Hecq is Associate Professor at Swinburne University of Technology. She has a PhD in literature and a background in French and Germanic languages, with qualifications in literary translation and psychoanalysis. She has published in the areas of literary studies, translation, creative writing, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy. She is the author of eleven books of fiction and poetry, the latest being *Out of bounds* (Re.press). *The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century* (Multilingual Matters) appeared in 2012. *Stretchmarks of Sun* and *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* are forthcoming. Dominique edits the online journal of writing and creative research *Bukker Tillibul* which particularly welcomes submissions by postgraduates.

Keywords

Subjectivity — Creative expression — Metaphor — Gender — Poetics

When a female writer uses tropes of birth in her work, she seems to be consigned by our culture to a distinctively female poetics. Given the ways in which masculinised concerns are valued as universal and representative (Cixous 1978), and female concerns considered of interest to women only, then a female author, writing, from her own maternal experience, appears to be disqualified from the sphere of serious literature. Pregnancy, gestation, birth and motherhood are major events in my work. My first story, 'Magic' (Hecq 1997, 50-53) was about giving birth. My first poem, 'Grief' (Hecq 1997, 3) was about losing a child. The novel, *The Book of Elsa* (Hecq 2000), is a book of autogenesis, where the main character recreates herself in 'the land of furphies' and eventually gives birth to a child and to the book she has just written in the tongue of a mythical father whose work she emulates, namely James Joyce. In a similar vein, *Out of Bounds* (Hecq 2009) has its protagonist reinvent herself across languages as a woman, mother and poet. Stories and poems revolving around those themes abound in *Magic* (Hecq 2000), *Mythfits* (Hecq 1999), *Good Grief* (Hecq 2002), *Noisy Blood* (Hecq 2004) and *Couchgrass* (Hecq 2006). And my work in progress, 'Hush', explores the relationship between mourning, mothering and creating. I have noted at launches of my books or public readings how the audience often looked bored or cringed when I read pieces that addressed these themes *literally*, especially if these were poems or prose-poems.

Listening to stories or poems about mundane aspects of female experience, I thought, did not appeal to an audience expecting more traditional or less personal poetic subjects. It may have been culturally specific, I hypothesised, but changed my mind after reading the same pieces to francophone ears. The audience's indifference or discomfort, I decided, probably stemmed from a belief that such subjective exploration of 'lived maternal experience' (Liss 2009, xviii) had no general appeal, even for women. However, I will argue here, by singling out my latest book of poetry as a brief case study, that resistance to birth as a poetic theme does not result from such experience being too personal and remote from what is perceived to be fit as a literary topic, but that the explicit treatment of such experience overloads a universal poetics already deeply embedded in incarnatory metaphors. Perhaps the indifference or discomfort experienced by my audience had less to do with this being a site of difference and more to do with the fact that it is a site of too much sameness. Writing about aspects of maternity is challenging in an aesthetic economy that rewards euphemistic birth in figurative language. This aesthetic economy masculinises voice, and feminises form, that is, the body of the text. Although this may be true of all literary genres, this is particularly true of poetry. Within such an economy, a female poet's voice undermines the inertness of the matter and *Mater* considered necessary for the self-birthing of male poets, suggesting that poets of both genders are all 'skinning Mummy' (Cixous 2009, vii) / killing Mummy¹, when they write.

In many ways, this paper is a call to reconceive the given tropes of poetry as 'birth' given a gendered economy of metaphors of autogenesis. This caveat is placed against the psychoanalytic structure of Lacan's Name of the Father as law-giving mechanism that values the word and thereby defines the subject as a pre-linguistic particularity lost in the universalising structure of language. I suggest that a literal rendition of a poetics of birth is disturbingly familiar to audiences and set this experience as the

keystone in exploring the possibility that this indicates the masculinised romantic standard of poetry that my own work undermines.³ In order to make my point, I trace a brief history of metaphors of autogenesis as not only pertaining to the act of creating, but, more significantly, but to how poetry is critically received and canonised. Arriving at the conclusion that this space is a masculinised womb prompts other questions such as the question of whether poetry is a return to the womb, which situates poetry as a kind of regression that ties in with deeper psychoanalytic articulations made by Ehrenzweig (1975) and Kristeva (1982), among others.

Myths of autogenesis mark the transition from a matriarchal economy to a patriarchal one through representing masculine birth. In the Judeo-Christian tradition genesis is attributed to the father's word rather than a mother's body (Daly 1991), and myths of poetic autogenesis involve the same erasure of the mother's body in the privileging of a word named as the father's. It is a word that prohibits incest and introduces the subject into the Law of the symbolic order by privileging the Name of the Father over the mother's desire (Lacan 2006). The incarnatory tendencies of romanticism have long been noted by critics, as have the autochthonic self-sufficiency tropes of much modernist literature (see, for example Joyce's *A portrait of the artist as a young man* published in 1916). In fact, modernist critical practices compound the legacy of the language of incarnation and self-sufficiency as an aesthetic standard, and this combined in the anglophone tradition with modernist reclamations of the metaphysical poets and Milton, have resulted in a poetics in which the achievement of canonical status in twentieth century tradition relied heavily on organicist metaphors of birth. A similar phenomenon can be traced in the francophone tradition from romanticism to surrealism and existentialism. Metaphors of birth are central to the critical procedures whereby poets become canonised in twentieth century traditions of representative poetry, particularly as culturally significant poets such as, for example, poet laureates (in the anglophone world) or poets anointed by the *académie française* (in the francophone world).

The confluence of relations of birthing and midwifery to poetic practice, especially modernist poetry, determines not only the gender of the matter of poetry, but also the critical operations at work in the reception of poetry and its canonisation. For example, Christopher Ricks's *The force of poetry* (Ricks 1984) demonstrates how incarnatory tendencies inform ideas of what poetry is and how it should perform. The 'force of poetry' here invoked as 'animating' poetry and by extension criticism, is taken from Johnson, and is understood as 'that force which calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiment, and animates matter' (Ricks 1984, 6). The matter animated is feminine, and the gestational space for the emerging voice of the poet. Ricks' influential style in poetry criticism repeatedly traces 'the relation between the turning of a phrase, the turning of someone into someone or something else, and the bodily act of turning' (Ricks 1984: 21) as indicative of greatness in poetry. Ricks' turning body is like the child turning in readiness for birth, and in one representative instance the 'division of the couplet' is such that it makes 'its second line swing open like a great door in the light' (Ricks 1984, 22), like the opening of the cervix, or more violently, perhaps, the incision of a scalpel in a caesarean cut, before the rush of delivery into the world.

Perhaps the authority of canonicity in the twentieth century, Harold Bloom, also relies heavily on invocations of birth that result from man-to-man reproduction in his ideas of poetic genius. Bloom's template of 'poetic strength' has exerted considerable influence in the mapping of the Western canon, as echoes of his ideas reverberate powerfully through contemporary discourse on poetry. Individuation figured in oedipal terms, and through man-to-man regeneration thus underwrites the tradition into which female poets write and against which their work is assessed. Bloom claims that 'Only a poet challenges a poet as poet and so only a poet makes a poet. To the poet-in-a-poet, a poem is always the other man, the precursor, and so a poem is always a person, always the father of one's second birth' (Bloom 1975, 19). The linguistic second birth is explicitly appointed as the origin of poetic identity, and as such the pre-oedipal period and the original material are, for the most part², expunged from the symbolic landscape. Bloom's argument that 'to live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision' (Bloom 1975, 15), is unable to see the more obvious misprision / mis-prison of the matter of the poem. This second birth becomes established as the origin of the poet's history, in which the first birth and pre-oedipal experience become mythicised and mystified. Bloom describes the psychological pull the memory of the first birth and pre-oedipal relating exerts in mythical terms when he writes:

Ocean, the matter of Night, the original Lillith or 'feast famished', mothers what is antithetical to her, the makers who fear (rightly) to accept her and never cease to move towards her. If not to have conceived oneself is a burden, so for the strong poet there is also the hidden burden: not to have brought oneself forth, not to be a god breaking one's own vessels, but to be awash in the word not quite one's own. (Bloom 1975, 15)

The burden of being 'awash in the word not quite one's own', is kept 'hidden' by the insistence on the origins of the voice beginning with the second birth. The establishment of the linguistic birth as primary is achieved through a critical emphasis on poets having both conceived and brought themselves forth through the godlike breaking of their vessels or form. It could in fact be argued that the second birth *is* the literal birth, since a place is prepared in the symbolic order ahead of the child's physical arrival. However, to achieve representative status on these terms, a poet's heroic vocal struggle to be self-birthered from the 'body' of the poem must have a sympathetic critical circle to bear witness to this poetic birth. As Diana Tietjens Meyers argues, such authenticating criticism occurs in the tradition where the language related to midwifery and birth are 'used to symbolise the assistance men give to each other in their creative labours' and which goes 'back as far as Socrates' (Tietjens Meyers 2001, 768). Thus, the unnamed, un-symbolised *his*-story of birth is the sublimated sub-text of the most cathected and valorised literature in the Western canon—Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Warren, Ammons and Ashbery—and the pull that Bloom describes accounts for much of the seemingly inherent paradoxes that marks poetry as distinct from other genres of writing. For poetry, more than any other literary genre, retains a certain mystique, or sacredness that tacitly places it at the apex of Literature's hierarchy. For the late Derrida, for example:

The poet, in the very experience of his freedom, finds himself both bound to language and delivered from it by a speech whose master, nonetheless, he himself is [...] in question is a labor, a deliverance, a slow gestation of the poet by the poem whose father he is. (Derrida 1985, 65)

Even in deconstructive fashion poetry is a gestational space. In fact, this is a mere re-fashioning of modernism's take, whereby poetry is an autochthonic activity. For Derrida too, the poet is master of the speech that 'binds' and 'delivers' him, and he is gestated by the very poem that he himself has 'fathered'. The inert matter of the poem is, as in Rick's view, 'moved' by the poet to deliver himself from it. As it turns out, for both modernism and postmodernism the poem is constructed as an 'ageless wound', without history or name, so that it can facilitate the poet's self-naming and historicisation. As Derrida emphasises, 'poetic discourse *takes root* in a wound' (Derrida 1985, 66). However, naming the form, the matrix, the matter of poetry as a wound, does in fact give away that it has a specific moment in psychic history. The poem mother is the m'Other,⁴ after the castration implemented by the Name of the Father. It is woman as a site of loss—loss of the phallus. Hence the oedipal fantasy of omnipotence can be seen here as retrospectively reconstituting the first birth in such a way that the child is recast as re-writing its own birth. In this way the mother's agency, as well as both the child and the mother's materiality are edited out in favour of language. As Madelon Sprengnether points out:

From a feminist and psychoanalytic standpoint, post-structuralist theory suffers from a tendency to render the condition of biological motherhood either meaningless or irrelevant, thus repeating the repression of motherhood that Irigaray perceives at the heart of Western Culture. (Sprengnether 1990, 238)

Moreover, such elision also erases the ambivalence at the heart of motherhood (Almond 2010), a sentiment which female writers often write about when it informs their subjectivity as both daughters and mothers.

In both modernist and postmodernist registers, the poem is then seen, however tacitly, as a masculinised womb, to which it is necessary to return, and to inhabit, in order to create. In his analysis of creative behaviour, Anton Ehrenzweig points out that the condition of 'artistic and scientific preception' is one in which 'retrogression can be considerable, where the child cannot even differentiate his own ego from the external world' (Ehrenzweig 1975, 170). Ehrenzweig likens this 'retrogression' to a return to intra-uterine experience:

Plato's famous simile of the captive reflects a philosophical vision which has retrogressed to a pre-natal state; the captive, lying bound in a cave averted from the light of the external world, may symbolise the unborn child in the womb. Freud shows us that the mystic in his 'oceanic' feeling of union with the universe contemplates an infantile state of consciousness before the formation of a separate ego. (Ehrenzweig 1975, 170)

A common prerequisite to the second self-birth of a poet is an imaginary journey of return. This return to the 'place' of writing in which male poets explore pre-, peri- and post-natal registers also functions as a testimony to the authenticity and the fecundity of their work, as explored, for example, in Seamus Heaney's *The place of writing*

(Heaney 1989). In a cultural imaginary in which the m'Other replaces the maternal body, then, the 'textualised' experience of being inside the mother's womb can be affirmed metaphorically by men and function as a touchstone of their 'inner' authenticity, and of their struggle to emerge from doors in the dark, from this creative but insensate state.

The cultural imaginary that valorises the mother as 'the place' of writing depends on a metaphor of creativity which recalls the state of being inside the womb, and this is available to men, but seems to be forbidden to women. This is borne out by differing critical attitudes to female and male poets writing about incarnation. In contrast to the rescue operation performed on behalf of male poets, the practitioners of oedipally configured criticism do not rush to the rescue of a woman who writes about birth, gestation and mothering, but might instead treat her work as inferior, too personal and self-obsessed. In other words, it would seem that first-hand rendering of 'lived maternal experience' (Liss 2009, xviii) is, within the confines of poetry and poetics, not admissible as worthwhile human experience. The woman writing in and out of her own body seems too close to the denied condition of the poet as privileged in a post-oedipal economy—writing *in* the mother's body, which is both invoked and disposed of as a matter of/in myth.

Luce Irigaray notes that women's position in regard to the symbolic order is as its residue or waste (Irigaray 1985) and Julia Kristeva has famously devoted one book on the subject in *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1982). Interestingly, Seamus Heaney observes that in Thomas Kinsella's work 'the place of waste, the place of renewal and the place of writing have become coterminous with the domain of poetry' (Heaney 1989: 62). The womb mother is consigned to a symbolic wasteland, and replaced by the matter of the poem and by the mothering-father 'poet', a theme that informs Heaney's own work, as his delightful poem 'Alphabets' only makes all too symbolically clear (Heaney 1987). The lesser poet, who has not mastered the wealth of ancestry, is in Bloom's terms, an epigone, which literally means, 'to be born after'; that is, they fail because they have not sufficiently erased traces of the one who bore them and who was born before them. The hen woman who 'drops the egg' of 'poetry' in Kinsella's poem is therefore not fit for poetic vocation, not fit for the sort of mothering that only a male poet is fit for, and the lesson to be learned here is that woman must remain in 'place' as place. (Heaney 1989, 62). Moreover, Heaney argues that the Kinsella poem 'His Father's Hands' uses birth metaphors, but, these are, more importantly in terms of his argument, self-birthing metaphors that pertain to the father and son's autochthonic regeneration, and which disposes of woman as fit mother for poetry. The simultaneous representation of mother and child is one that is highly problematic in a culture that privileges an illusory autonomy, and which cannot admit of the *apriori* existence of the mother as mother. The maternal body has to become a wasteland, disposed of in the imaginary. Borsch-Jacobsen notes that the subject has to 'dispose of 'the 'womb-mother', this a priory and 'external' presence 'in order to constitute its myth of itself' (Brennan 1992, 165). The possibility of representing the mother's perspective carries with it the threat of annihilation for the child, that is, the fear of the loss of the mother encoded in lethal pre-oedipal symbiosis. This is annihilation in fantasy, which has become a cultural cliché in which the loss of the

mother is repeatedly re-edited as part of the sacrosanct narratives of artistic birth. Thus the view privileged in the drama of this poetics is that of the child, who fetishises the mother in her capacity as an object, and fantasises that they themselves are Mummy, skinning the m'Other.

But, at the risk of repeating myself, Ehrenzweig observes that the 'retrogression' involved in approaching a creative state 'can be considerable, where the child cannot even differentiate his own ego from the external world' (Ehrenzweig 1975, 170). Here, I wish to make a clear distinction between the mother object and a woman's subjective difference from this object. The mother object is literally the use to which a pre-oedipal child puts the mother. As the primary object, the mother is the representational limits of the world to the child, and indeed mediates the world for the child who identifies with her to the extent of seeing through her. As psychoanalysis demonstrates, this erasure of the mother-object is a psychical necessity. But, because no adequate cultural symbology exists to represent the separation of woman and mother-object (Lacan 1998, 7), this erasure also ensures both the representational sacrifice of woman's subjective difference as well as the deletion of the 'holding' environment of the mother-object. Therefore, the most privileged cultural perspective is that of the pre-oedipal child who mistakes the word/mother for themselves, and for whom the admission of mother as either woman or matter is tantamount to its own erasure. In this either/or model, identity politics is haunted by a fierce battle between mother and child for sheer representational space, indeed symbolic existence.

As a work in which 'lived maternal experience' (Liss 2009, xviii) and the business of writing coalesce and collide my work brings the mother back into the picture and within earshot. The avowal of the mother's subjective difference in terms of gender, culture and language may be bewildering to a critical economy that may read this work as 'cryptic' (Capp 2000) or 'elliptical' at times (McHattan 2003), but always, it would seem, outside the register of representationally admissible meaning, for the reader seems obliged to 'mine' the text 'trying to identify – like her protagonist – this single, solid 'thing itself'' (Gildfind 2011). This may be because it makes present the mother and child as separate subjectivities, and as each other's objects in the same space, that is in the space of the text, especially if this text is classified as poetry. Through signifying the mother's with the child's perspective, the subject with the object, the text itself ceases to be matter/an object and becomes instead a transitional space, which is the space of the text. The simultaneous representation of co-subjects and of one's own object use is substantially under-read by the interpretative frames that privilege the self-reflective birthing of the univocal subject. *Out of bounds* (Hecq 2009), for example, in a psychic and symbolic act of tmesis, iterates a separation of the mother object and a woman's subjective difference, through expressing how it feels to be representationally restrained by the confines of the inside view. However, it does not involve a refuting of their psychic work, rather it explores what it means to be needed and used in this way by others, whilst also ardently brining the point of view of the woman watching herself in this role of the symbolic space of the poem. In doing so it insinuates that doubleness is an appropriate and representative template for subjectivity that, at the very least, does not involve the suppression or appropriation of the mother.

The middle section of *Out of bounds* in particular also connects the mother's lack of a language in which to name herself with the potentially lethal legacy her child contends with: 'Ghostly jumpy mummy hosting chaotic echoes' (Hecq 2009, 54). The text suggests that because of mysterious suppression of the name of mother, the culture will be haunted, as women are collapsed into an object, without adequate means to symbolise and recognise their individuality in the culture at large. The limits of the womb from within, and of the mother from the inside, her speech, are culturally taken as the sum of a woman, as all that can be represented: her 'disembodied body' (Hecq 2009, 54) has become a 'numb instrument' and her 'power of speech' (Hecq 2009, 37) an 'unarticulated, disarticulated scream' (Hecq 2009, 54). In this symbolic system a woman's subjectivity must always be its un(re)presentable other. The mother's lack of language, and the haunting of remaining unconscious that it promotes, weaves itself into all the speaker/poet envisions. This provides a poetic template of naming the supposedly unnameable in order to tell 'her own tale' (Hecq: 81).

Describing the supposedly unnameable is expressed here in terms of a desire for representing woman's subjective difference to be recognised as more than just a boundary for the subjectivity of man and child in a patriarchal and post-colonial world:

In the distance sirens toll for a life, a black shape
merging with the black of Spring street buildings
and post-politics, merging with the blood drying
in the open mouth of a tongueless child... (Hecq 2009, 79)

Here, the speaker, 'mother of poetry' (Hecq 2009, 79) expresses her desire to write herself into history, 'walk-writing the city with wild goat ink blending the dust in her veins' (Hecq 2009, 79). The image of the wild goat and the reference to the dust in her veins suggest two remainders, one being animal (and therefore banned from the city), the other symbolic. One evokes exile while the other signals a more fundamental site of loss; both refer to woman as the negative of man rather than as the fullness of her difference.

Recognising this difference rather than obliterating it in favour of a fantasy of an omnipotent self is critical for a female poet in a way that is not so urgent for a male poet. To erase the mother is to delete the self-same, she with whom you identify, and thus the important identification that allows mature individuation and development of a healthy self is disallowed. This is refelected in the seemingly confusing use of first and third personal pronouns in the line: 'She's lost the power of speech, I hear the man, my man sneer' (Hecq 2009, 61), or perhaps more literally in the cultural child's question: 'Anybody in he-eare?' (Hecq 2009, 61), inviting the mother back into representation. 'He-eare' denies hearing the woman who holds the representational matrix of the mother object, the 'instrument' (Hecq 2009, 61). It is only through writing, as occurs in the last section which 'ends in song' (Hecq 2009, 81), that the speaker is brought into a mode of being that does not require self-denial.

In this paper I hope to have shown that metaphors of birth are central to the manoeuvres whereby poets define themselves and to the critical procedures whereby their work is received via incursions into the gendered topos of this gestational space. I have argued that poetry which deals with the materiality of motherhood is problematical in a discourse that privileges euphemistic birth in linguistic and abstract terms and that this discourse masculinises voice while feminising form. I have shown that within the parameters of this discourse a female poet's voice undermines the inertness of the matter and *Mater* considered necessary for the self-birthing of male poets while pointing to ways in which the gestures of female poets may be better understood and, perhaps, received.

Endnotes

1. The French '*faire la peau*', literally 'to do your skin', means to kill.
2. I do not, in any way, wish to suggest that my work is unique in this respect. It is just that a certain personal experience triggered a reflexion on this topic. There is much poetry around dealing with the issue of the birthing body, and this is an avenue I would like to further explore.
3. For Lacan there is a pre-oedipal real that remains after the letter.
4. This Lacanian neologism plays on his concept of the Other as specifically referring here to the mother. Lacan's concept of the Other refers to radical alterity. As such it is the index of the symbolic order, assimilated as it is with language and the law: the (big) Other is the symbolic insofar as it is particularised for each individual subject. The Other is thus both another subject, in its radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject. However, the meaning of 'the Other as another subject' is subordinate to the meaning of 'the other as symbolic order for the Other is first and foremost 'the locus in which speech is constituted' (Lacan, 1993, 274). It is therefore only possible to speak of the Other as a subject in a secondary turn in the sense that a subject may occupy this position and thereby 'embody' (Lacan, 1991, 202) the Other for another subject. To complicate matters, the child's first encounter with the Other is mediated by the mother and there is at times a slippage between the two. The neologism M'Other clears up this confusion.

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