

*Beyond Gentility: Violence in the Poetry of Sharon Olds,
Pascale Petit, Peter Redgrove and Robin Robertson*

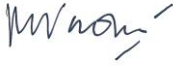
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I would like to confirm that this thesis is my own work.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katrina Naomi', is enclosed within a thin black rectangular border.

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Abstract

The critical commentary, *Beyond Gentility: Violence in the Poetry of Sharon Olds, Pascale Petit, Peter Redgrove and Robin Robertson*, focuses on interpersonal violence. It includes a discussion on A. Alvarez's essay 'The New Poetry' and critical reactions to the poetry of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. The commentary defends the use of violence in poetry as a way of reflecting on the realities of contemporary society.

NB: The creative element of this PhD, a collection of poetry, *The Way the Crocodile Taught Me*, is not included here because it will be published by Seren in June 2016.

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‘Bearskin’, ‘Fledgling’ and ‘The Way the Crocodile Taught Me’ were first published as part of ‘The Argument: Art V Poetry’, a collaborative project with the artist Tim Ridley, and exhibited at the Poetry Café (London, 2013) and StAnza Poetry Festival (St Andrews, 2014). ‘The Bear’ won second prize in the 2012 Poetry on the Lake Competition (short poem category) and ‘The Woman Who Walks Naked’ was highly commended. ‘September’ was commended in the 2011 Poetry Society Stanza Competition. ‘Comfort Me with Apples’ was commissioned by Poetry Wivenhoe and first published in *KJV – Old Text, New Poems* (Wivenhoe: Poetry Wivenhoe, 2011). A version of ‘Another Planet’ was first published in *Lunch at the Elephant & Castle* (Matlock: Templar Poetry, 2008).

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Beyond Gentility: Violence in the Poetry of Sharon Olds, Pascale Petit, Peter Redgrove and Robin Robertson

Introduction

‘It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without’ – Wallace Stevens.¹

This commentary discusses the work of four contemporary poets and concludes with a reflection on my own poetry. I consider violence in poetry from different viewpoints and approaches, placing contemporary work in a historical context. I argue that violence in poetry – whether thematic or imagistic – is necessary, even desirable, if poetry is to reflect, reinterpret and respond to our experience of life. I consider critical responses, including hostility to violence in poetry, and whether this hostility is gendered. I also consider whether women and men write about violence in their poetry differently.

Research and academic writing on violence in contemporary poetry is a relatively neglected area.² I draw on interviews³ I have conducted with Sharon Olds, Pascale Petit and Robin Robertson, and an interview with Penelope Shuttle, Peter Redgrove’s widow.⁴ I consider a different aspect of violence in poetry in the work of each of these poets. It would be impracticable within the constraints of a thesis to cover all of the contemporary poets who regularly write on violence.⁵ I focus on Olds, Petit,

¹ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber, 1960), p. 36.

² Specific writing on this topic includes Egbert Faas, ‘Poetry and Violence’, in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 251-67 (note his name is misspelt here as ‘Ekbert’). Broader yet related studies include John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Carolyn Forché and Duncan Wu (eds.), *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500-2001* (London: Norton, 2014); Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: Norton, 2011) and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004).

³ See Appendices A-D, pp. 79-115.

⁴ Redgrove died in 2003. Redgrove’s *Collected Poems* (London: Cape, 2012) and biography, *A Lucid Dreamer: The Life of Peter Redgrove* (London: Cape, 2012) were edited by Neil Roberts.

⁵ Other contemporary poets who regularly write in response to interpersonal violence include: Moniza Alvi, Julie Carr, Carol Ann Duffy, Vicki Feaver, Adam Foulds, David Harsent (although much of

Redgrove and Robertson because they have been particularly influential on my writing and thinking.

Violence is manifold and definitions are problematic. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines violence as: ‘The exercise of physical force so as to cause injury or damage to a person, property, etc., physically violent behaviour or treatment.’⁶ I extend this definition to include psychological violence, such as bullying, and threatening or manipulative behaviour. I find Judith Butler’s discussions, which stress vulnerability, useful. She states that violence exposes ‘human vulnerability to other humans [...] in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another’.⁷ While some, such as Henrietta Moore, believe violence to be ‘remarkably under theorized’,⁸ others such as Neil L. Whitehead find ‘Most recent anthropological commentators [...] agree on one thing – that violence is pervasive, ancient, infinitely various, and a central fact of human life’.⁹ My focus is on interpersonal violence, including sexualised violence,¹⁰ which is carried out in peace time, rather than during war.¹¹

In considering artistic responses to interpersonal violence, F. T. Marinetti in the 1909 Futurist manifesto, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, stated that art – which I take to include poetry – ‘can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice’.¹² Valentine de Saint-Point in her 1914 *Manifesto of Futurist Women*, called on women to

Harsent’s later work has been in response to war), and Selima Hill.

⁶ In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 3535.

⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Violence, Mourning, Politics’, in *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, ed. Judith Butler (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 28-9.

⁸ Cited by Neil L. Whitehead, in ‘On the Poetics of Violence’, in *Violence*, ed. Neil L. Whitehead (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004), pp. 55-77 (p. 62).

⁹ Whitehead, p. 55.

¹⁰ Catharine MacKinnon in ‘Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory’, considers whether rape is ‘an act of violence’ or ‘an expression of male sexuality’, in *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 286-91.

¹¹ However, Sharon Olds’s collection *One Secret Thing* (London: Cape, 2009), contains a sequence of war-related poetry, which I refer to in chapter 4.

¹² Nelson, p. 19.

find their ‘cruelty’ and ‘violence’ and ‘become sublimely unjust once more, like all the forces of nature!’¹³ The Futurists’ sweeping statements influenced the Actionists who used provocative acts and language as a way of shocking people into thought. The Actionists also drew on Antonin Artaud’s ‘theatre of cruelty’, which used ‘extreme action, pushed beyond all limits’.¹⁴ Artaud said ‘It is cruelty that cements matter together, cruelty that molds the features of the created world.’¹⁵ While Artaud has been dismissed as ‘a madman’,¹⁶ and the language of the Actionists and Futurists is overblown, the idea that artists need an intensity of some kind is not unusual. The Futurists’ simplistic view that ‘art can be nothing but violence’ is questionable, particularly given their links to fascism and their glorification of war as, ‘the world’s only hygiene’.¹⁷ However, contemporary theorists such as Nigel Rapport have made links between violence and creativity, primarily in terms of violence’s departure from order and the creative spaces that may be generated.¹⁸

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek in *Violence* draws on theories of ‘symbolic violence’, arguing that even using language is violent, because it ‘dismembers’ and ‘simplifies’. ‘When we name gold “gold”, we violently extract a metal from its natural texture’.¹⁹ He echoes the ideology of the Russian Formalists, such as Roman Jakobson, who saw literature as ‘organised violence committed on ordinary speech’.²⁰ I will briefly return to these ideas in my chapter on Redgrove.

Žižek’s argument in response to Adorno is also worth considering:

¹³ Nelson, p. 64.

¹⁴ Nelson, p. 15.

¹⁵ Nelson, p. 18.

¹⁶ Nelson, p. 15. Others, such as Sanche de Gramond, find value in his ‘madness’. See ‘Antonin Artaud’s Biography’ <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/antonin-artaud>> [accessed 11 October 2013].

¹⁷ Also the title of a pro-war book by Marinetti, first published in 1909 in Paris and reprinted in Italian in 1915 for propaganda purposes.

¹⁸ Whitehead, p. 61.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 61.

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, ‘Introduction: What is Literature?’, <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~engl5vr/Eagle1.html>> [accessed 11 August 2012].

[W]hen Adorno declares poetry impossible (or, rather, barbaric) after Auschwitz, this impossibility is an enabling impossibility: poetry is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to.²¹

The extent to which poets write directly ‘about’ violence is a matter I will discuss in later chapters. Yet it is worth considering the view of the artist Leonardo da Vinci. He required painters to ‘have the courage and the imagination to [...] let the blood be seen by its color [*sic*] flowing in a sinuous stream from the corpse to the dust’.²² In other words, for artists to show the reality of violence rather than shy away from it.

Violence has always been a theme in poetry; from Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*,²³ to *Beowulf*,²⁴ to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which frequently depicts rape and sexual violence. Following Žižek’s and da Vinci’s statements, it is noteworthy that in contrast to Ovid’s treatment of fights, flayings and gougings, none of the rapes are described in detail. See Ovid’s treatment of the rape of Philomela by Tereus, for example:

But now she was trapped. His ugly intentions
were all too clear. His virgin prize was alone, and he brutally
raped her.

Contrast Ovid’s restrained treatment of sexual violence with this far stronger passage, which follows Philomela telling her rapist she will have her revenge by speaking to ‘the world of your crime myself’:

Her tongue was still voicing her sense of outrage and crying her father’s
name, still struggling to speak, when Tereus gripped it in pincers
and hacked it out with his sword. As its roots in the throat gave a flicker,
the rest of it muttered and twitched where it dropped on the blood-black earth;
and like the quivering tail of an adder that’s chopped in half,
it wriggled and writhed its way to the front of its mistress’ feet.²⁵

²¹ Žižek, pp. 4-5.

²² Cited in Sontag, p. 66.

²³ Both are thought to have been written in the late eighth or early seventh century BCE, see the introduction to Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. iv. Simone Weil, ‘The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force’, in *An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 182-215 contains useful arguments on the nature of force. A recent reworking of parts of the *Iliad*, Alice Oswald’s *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (London: Faber, 2011), is an excellent retelling/reimagining of a series of violent deaths.

²⁴ A written version is thought to have existed by 899 AD. See the introduction to Michael Alexander ed., *Beowulf: A Glossed Text* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. x.

²⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), pp.

Violence in its various forms, whether sexual or otherwise, can be seen throughout literary history, from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, to Shakespeare's 'Lucrece', to Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover', to Baudelaire's "La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse".²⁶ However, the focus of this thesis is violence in the poetry of the post-Second World War, an era which provides an essential context to Olds's, Petit's, Redgrove's and Robertson's poetry.

A. Alvarez's, *The New Poetry* anthology (1962), which included poetry by Redgrove and Ted Hughes,²⁷ featured an eleven-page introduction entitled 'The New Poetry, or Beyond the Gentility Principle'. Alvarez identifies three 'negative feed-backs' in English poetry which prevented experimentation, or opening 'poetry up to new areas of experience': first, a return to traditional forms, albeit 'in a chic contemporary guise'; second, a reaction against 'meaning' in poetry and a 'blockage against intelligence'; and third, a reaction 'against wild, loose emotion'.²⁸ The name of

235, 236, 237. For a centuries-apart contrast, see Olds's treatment of sexual violence in 'The Girl', in *The Gold Cell* (London: Knopf, 2008), p. 23. The ease, or otherwise, with which contemporary poets write on sexual and other forms of violence, will be discussed in chapters 1-5.

²⁶ Respectively, see 'The Reeve's Tale' and 'The Prioress's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (London: Penguin, 1958), pp. 106-09, 169-76; on 'Lucrece', see Jonathan Crewe's discussion, 'Shakespeare's Figure of Lucrece: Writing Rape', *Trials of Authorship: Anterior Forms and Poetic Reconstruction from Wyatt to Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 140-63. Again, the rape is left to the reader's imagination. 'Porphyria's Lover' was originally published with another monologue under the title *Madhouse Cells*, 1834; see *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy (London: Norton, 2005), 5th edn., pp. 1009-10; see 'Wild Wife and Sweet Mistress' in *Paris Spleen*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Richmond: OneWorld Classics, 2010), pp. 20-1 and for an argument that Baudelaire objectifies women, see Debarati Sanyal, *Bodies on Display: Poetry, Violence and the Feminine in Baudelaire and Mallarmé*, (Berkeley: Library Inaugural Address Series no. 23, 2003) <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1708f98g#page-1>> [accessed 13 February 2015].

²⁷ *The New Poetry* features ten Redgrove poems: 'Lazarus and the Sea', 'Old House', 'Early Morning Feed', 'Bedtime Story for my Son', 'Foundation', 'The Archaeologist', 'The Affianced', 'For No Good Reason', 'Ghosts', and 'The Gamut', pp. 173-81, alongside John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Norman MacCaig, R. S. Thomas, D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, David Holbrook, Michael Hamburger, John Wain, Arthur Boyars, Christopher Middleton, Charles Tomlinson, Ian Crichton Smith, Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill and John Fuller.

²⁸ A. Alvarez (ed.), Introduction to *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 17-28. He felt that the first 'negative feed-back' was due to the influence of W. H. Auden and cited Dylan Thomas's followers for the trend against 'meaning', pp. 18 and 19.

the ‘reaction’ is the Movement,²⁹ and its anthology is Robert Conquest’s *New Lines*, published in 1956.³⁰

Alvarez states:

All three negative feed-backs [...] preserve the idea that life in England³¹ goes on much as it always has, give or take a few minor changes in the class system [...] but the concept of gentility still reigns supreme. And gentility is a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less decent.

He suggests that the ‘old standards of civilization’ have been destroyed by the Second World War, which had impacted on everyone, ‘even the most genteel’.³² Therefore, a new style of poetry was needed to reflect the new realities. Poets writing in Britain in that post-war era, such as Elaine Feinstein, agree with Alvarez’s assertions on the Gentility Principle. For example, when Feinstein was editing an issue of *Cambridge Opinion* in 1959, she featured Allen Ginsberg, ‘not yet well known in the UK, to make my case that American poetry was more alive to the twentieth century realities than English poetry’.³³

This ‘new style’ can be seen in the work of Sylvia Plath and Hughes, whose influence extends into contemporary poetry. (Both have been important influences in my work.) Their poetry is violent in its content and imagery, and both experienced critical outcries; notably against Hughes’s 1970 collection *Crow: From the Life and*

²⁹ For more on the Movement, see Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

³⁰ Robert Conquest (ed.), *New Lines: An Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1956) showcases the work of Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, Robert Conquest and John Wain. Conquest’s introduction discusses a ‘corruption which has affected the general attitude to poetry in the last decade. [...] There would be no harm whatever in people indulging themselves in this way, *so long as they did not set up these tastes as general criteria*. Unfortunately this restriction has not been observed. In this indiscriminating atmosphere other types of *vicious taste*, too, began to be catered for.’ p. xii, my italics.

³¹ It is not clear whether Alvarez means England or Britain. However, it is worth stating that Olds is North American, Petit is Franco-Welsh (with an Indian heritage), Redgrove would be considered English (with Italian family roots) and Robertson is Scottish.

³² Alvarez, *The New Poetry*, pp. 21 and 22. James Fenton made fun of Alvarez in his poem ‘Letter to John Fuller’, *The Memory of War: Poems 1968-1982* (Edinburgh: The Salamander Press, 1982), pp. 52-9, lines quoted on p. 55: ‘He knows society is sick. / Gentility just gets his wick.’

³³ Elaine Feinstein, private communication to Katrina Naomi, email dated 25 October 2011.

*Songs of the Crow*³⁴ and against Plath's poem 'Daddy'.³⁵ Critical reactions to their work provide a context for more recent objections to poetry with violent themes.

Hughes wrote *Crow* 'between 1966 and 1969, after a barren period following the death of Sylvia Plath'.³⁶ While *Crow* was published eight years after *The New Poetry*, critics such as Ian Hamilton³⁷ referred to 'cartoons employed [...] to support a vague, simple-mindedly asserted preference for the primitive, the brutal'. Hamilton continued:

The world that *Crow* moves in, is an emblem for, is drenched in blood, racked with agony, devastated by numerous varieties of violence. He views it with an eye proprietorial, laconically appalled yet also sadistically gratified [...].

He also accused Hughes of an 'eager pursuit of blood and thunder; only minimally tempered by poetic caution'. Hamilton's critique of the poem 'Lovesong' reads: 'the described lovers are vampiric, gluttonous, destructive'; the poem piling 'blackness upon blackness' and moving 'beyond any real gravity or wisdom into a horror-comic realm of barely controllable fascination with its own subject-matter'. Moreover, he stated:

An important quality for poets is knowing exactly when to stop; this poem, like so many others in this brutal book, not only does not know, but does not care. It flogs on until it is drained, replete.³⁸

There have been various critiques of *Crow* and Hughes's other collections,³⁹ and not all agree with Hamilton.⁴⁰ Yet even those who lauded *Crow* tend to have difficulty with it. Alan Brownjohn found *Crow* 'a great and exciting art' which made 'the random energy

³⁴ Ted Hughes, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London: Faber, 1970), with several subsequent editions, including 1972 which added seven poems.

³⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber, 1965), pp. 54-6.

³⁶ Neil Roberts, The Ted Hughes Society <<http://www.thetedhughessociety.org/crow.htm>> [accessed on 9 December 2011].

³⁷ Who, interestingly, given his reaction to *Crow*, was also included in the revised edition of *The New Poetry*.

³⁸ Ian Hamilton, 'Ted Hughes: *Crow*', in *A Poetry Chronicle: Essays and Reviews*, ed. Ian Hamilton (London: Faber, 1973), pp. 165, 167, 169 and 170 respectively. Similar accusations have been made of Petit and Robertson.

³⁹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 156 goes too far, I believe, in describing 'Hawk Roosting' from *Lupercal* as 'an emblem of pure identity in its fascist mode'.

⁴⁰ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1981), p. 100, rigorously defended *Crow*, praising the music, metaphors, control, poetic resources and language.

and violence *acceptable*', adding 'not that *Crow* could be done again'.⁴¹ Even Redgrove – a friend of Hughes, and one who used violence in his work – found the 'violent, mistaken, argumentative rhetoric in *Crow* [to be] a perversion of a lovely talent'.⁴² Shuttle says: 'Peter thought that *Crow* was a terrible wrong turning in Ted Hughes's creative development [...]. He thought it was very cathartic for Ted but didn't think it was good poetry.'⁴³

Hughes's responses to his critics⁴⁴ are insightful:

The role of this word 'violence' in modern criticism is very tricky and not always easy to follow. [...] One common use of it I fancy occurs where the reviewer type of critic is thinking of his [...] English audience. When my aunt calls my verse 'horrible and violent' I know what she means. Because I know what style of life and outlook she is defending. And I know she is representative of huge numbers of people in England. What she has is an idea of what poetry ought to be [...] a very vague idea, since it's based on an almost total ignorance of what poetry has been written. [...] [C]ritics who find my poetry violent are [...] safeguarding her way of life. So to define their use of the word violence any further, you have to work out just why her way of life should find the behaviour of a hawk 'horrible' or any reference to violent death 'disgusting', just as she finds any reference to extreme vehemence of life 'frightening somehow'.⁴⁵

Hughes's use of 'modern' as in 'modern criticism' is interesting. Classical literary theorists had much the same disagreements as contemporary critics. Plutarch states: 'Poetry must reproduce evil and conflict',⁴⁶ while Horace is closer to Hughes's aunt: 'Poets aim either to do good or to give pleasure – or [...] say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life.'⁴⁷

Hughes discusses what may be 'serviceable to life' in his response to the poets in Conquest's *New Lines*, while also reflecting on violence in his own poetry:

⁴¹ Alan Brownjohn, 'A State of Poetry: A Symposium', in *The Review*, nos. 29-30 (Spring-Summer 1972), 3-75 (p. 51), my italics.

⁴² Private communication from Redgrove to Roberts, dated 8 October 1978, quoted in *A Lucid Dreamer*, p. 196.

⁴³ Appendix A, p. 82.

⁴⁴ Redgrove should not generally be seen as a hostile critic of Hughes. They were friends and admired each other's work.

⁴⁵ Egbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow*' (an interview with Ted Hughes), *The London Magazine* (January 1971), 5-6.

⁴⁶ Plutarch, 'On the Study of Poetry', trans. D. A. Russell, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 192-216 (p. 211).

⁴⁷ Horace, 'The Art of Poetry', trans. D. A. Russell, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, pp. 98-110 (p. 106).

One of the things those poets had in common [...] was the post-war mood of having had enough [...]. All they wanted was to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park. The second world war after all was a colossal negative revelation. In a sense it meant they recoiled to some essential English strengths. But it set them dead against negotiation with anything outside the cosiest arrangement of society [...]. Now I came a bit later. I hadn't had enough. I was all there for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there. [...] When I conjured up a jaguar, they smelt a stormtrooper. When I saw elementals and forces of Nature they saw motorcyclists with machine guns on the handlebars.⁴⁸

Let us now turn to Plath. Alvarez considered himself an early supporter of Plath, yet had reservations about 'Daddy': '[I]n it she has gone right down to the deep spring of her sickness and described it purely. What comes through [...] is the terrible unforgivingness of her verse'.⁴⁹ While Alvarez also mentions Plath's 'underlying sense of violent unease', his focus on 'her sickness' arguably detracts from the power of her poetry. Others, such as Richard Holbrook who circulated his critique *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*⁵⁰ among psychoanalysts working on schizophrenia, would do the same, reducing her work to a clinical 'case study'. There is a risk that female poets writing on violence, especially violence and the personal, are liable to have their motives and even their sanity questioned. For example, whereas *The Literary Encyclopaedia*'s entries by the US scholar Steven Axelrod note that Robert Lowell broke 'with the canons of modernism, he brought a new conversational style and innovative involvements with family and national life into his work',⁵¹ Plath is assessed in terms of her gender, with her poems said to 'enact loss and grief in such a devastating fashion that one wonders how the reader much less the author can survive them'.⁵² This is a gendered analysis. While both poets suffered from poor mental health,⁵³ one is

⁴⁸ Faas, 'Ted Hughes and Crow', pp. 10-11. Ruth Padel, in *The Poem and the Journey: And Sixty Poems to Read Along the Way* (Chatto & Windus, 2007), p. 50, echoes Hughes's sensibilities, 'In the West, many people like to think we live in a Sunday supplement world in which everything works perfectly.'

⁴⁹ A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Modern Poet: Essays from the Review*, ed. Ian Hamilton (London: Macdonald, 1968), pp. 81-2.

⁵⁰ Richard Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone, 1976), cited in Rose, p. 16.

⁵¹ Steven Axelrod, 'Robert Lowell', in *The Literary Encyclopaedia*, <<http://www.litencyc.com/phpspeople.php?rec=true&UID=2800>> [accessed 22 May 2014].

⁵² Axelrod, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Literary Encyclopaedia*, <<http://www.litencyc.com/phpspeople.php?rec=true&UID=3579>> [accessed 22 May 2014].

⁵³ Lowell wrote seemingly autobiographical works relating to his mental health. See, for example, these lines from 'Skunk Hour': 'My mind's not right' and 'I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat [...] / I myself am hell, / nobody's here -' *Life Studies* (London: Faber, 1959), pp. 97-8, stanza 5, l. 6 and stanza 7, ll. 2-6.

considered in terms of his contribution to poetry, another in terms of her gender, mental health and whether an audience ‘can survive’ (read stomach?) such poetry.

When I asked Petit whether ‘Daddy’ had been an influence, given her frequent focus on her father,⁵⁴ I was not surprised that she demurred: ‘I’m not sure that Plath’s “Daddy” has influenced me. It’s hard to tell, and gets such negative criticism that it’s hard to even claim it as an influence if it is.’⁵⁵

While the number of critical works on Plath as compared to Lowell, for example, suggests Plath’s poetry has stood the test of time,⁵⁶ there is no denying the extent of the concern about the poem ‘Daddy’. While Susan van Dyne refers to its ‘poetic incontinence’ due to Plath’s use of repetition,⁵⁷ others have questioned whether Plath had the *right* to write about the Holocaust. Leon Wieseltier states:

I do not mean to lift the Holocaust out of the reach of art [...] [yet] [f]amiliarity with the hellish subject must be earned [...]. My feeling is that Sylvia Plath did not earn it, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place.⁵⁸

I will return to questions of ‘right’ and ‘incommensurability’ in relation to Olds’s writing on violence.

While I do not wish to overstate the case, gendered critiques of women who write on violence can be seen in Stephen Spender’s description of Plath’s work as ‘hysteria’.⁵⁹ Holbrook goes one step further by dismissing her, rather than her work, as ‘sadly pseudo-male’.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ I am aware of a tradition of problematic father-daughter relations in poetry. See Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵⁵ Pascale Petit, private communication to Katrina Naomi, email dated 3 March 2011.

⁵⁶ However, I doubt contemporary poets would reference ‘nigger-eye’ (‘Ariel’) or contemplate the Jewish/Nazi references in ‘Daddy’ (especially for non-Jews).

⁵⁷ Susan van Dyne, quoted in Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 150.

⁵⁸ See Leon Wieseltier, ‘In a Universe of Ghosts’, *New York Review of Books*, (25 November 1976), 20. George Steiner, however, sees ‘Daddy’ as the ‘Guernica of modern poetry’, believing that ‘perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who *can* focus on them rationally and imaginatively’, cited in Rose, p. 214.

⁵⁹ Stephen Spender, ‘Warnings from the Grave’, in *The New Republic*, 154: 125 (18 June 1966) cited in Charles Newman (ed.), *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (London: Faber, 1970), p. 202.

For many feminists, myself included, the following lines from ‘Daddy’ are difficult, if not repellent:

Every woman adores a fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.⁶¹

These lines could be read as accepting or welcoming (sado-masochistic?) violence within a relationship. They transgress the accepted notions of female sexuality and desire of that era,⁶² but of greater importance for this thesis is that Plath’s work transgresses what were considered appropriate topics for poetry.⁶³

It is debatable how much attention was paid to Plath’s work in the late 1950s to the early 1960s. It is hard to find many female poets’ work being taken seriously enough to be read, debated, studied or reviewed in that early post-war era.⁶⁴ Feinstein asserts ‘Women poets were not much taught when I was at Newnham’, adding ‘no one paid any attention to Plath’.⁶⁵ Ruth Fainlight states that female poets ‘were dismissed precisely because they were women’.⁶⁶

While both male and female poets faced opprobrium for deconstructing gentility, and writing in response to violence, women faced additional issues due to their gender. Kingsley Amis’s post-war poem ‘A Bookshop Idyll’,⁶⁷ for example, discusses

⁶⁰ See the discussion on Holbrook in Rose, pp. 11-28, notably Holbrook’s comment (p. 26): ‘One can see how Sylvia Plath appeals to the women’s liberators [...] Sylvia Plath could scarcely find anything within her that was feminine at all [...] she is sadly pseudo-male, like many of her cultists’.

⁶¹ Sylvia Plath, ‘Daddy’, ll. 48-50.

⁶² By comparison, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), was seen as transgressive of received male sexuality in the USA.

⁶³ Even the subject of flowers, seemingly a ‘traditional’ subject for women, is subverted by Plath. See ‘Poppies in July’, *Ariel*, p. 82, for example.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Jennings was the only woman in Conquest’s *New Lines*. In the early 1960s Jennings went on to write on violent themes, including the title poem of *Song for a Birth or Death* (London: Deutsch, 1961), cited in Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 279.

⁶⁵ Feinstein, private communication to Katrina Naomi, email dated 25 October 2011.

⁶⁶ Ruth Fainlight, private communication to Katrina Naomi, email dated 27 November 2011.

⁶⁷ ‘Something Nasty in the Bookshop’ was included in *New Lines*, pp. 46-7.

the ‘differences’ between poems written by men and women in a manner that would be seen as stereotypical today. Women who persisted in writing poetry had therefore to push against the constraints of gender, and – if they wrote in a way that transgressed the perceived norms,⁶⁸ and certainly if their poetry contained violence – against gentility. It is noteworthy that no women were included in the first (1962) edition of *The New Poetry*.⁶⁹

Arguably, there is still some way to go to throw off the double gender and gentility bind on poetry. When women do write about their own experience, they tend to be labelled ‘confessional’. Irene Gammell states ‘The term *confession* is a problematic one for women, as it brings to mind its patriarchal history.’⁷⁰ Helen Farish adds that the use of the term ‘confessional’ has become a ‘shorthand for a lack of technical ability’, with ‘uncontrolled use’ of autobiographical material; in brief, ‘poetry of dubious aesthetic value’.⁷¹ See, for example, Robert Potts’s review of Olds’s *Stag’s Leap*: ‘It is a confessional poetry, and refusing many of the techniques of more mediated and fashioned writing.’⁷² The term ‘autobiographical’ (or ‘personal’) poetry avoids these negative connotations.⁷³

Are there any discernible differences in how contemporary male and female poets write about violence, or is gender largely an irrelevance today? And what can be learnt about a poet’s craft and sensibilities in a close reading of poetry containing violent subject matter or imagery? I will address these questions and also discuss the

⁶⁸ What Shuttle refers to as ‘genteel’ or ‘neat little verse’, Appendix A, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Plath and Anne Sexton were included in the Revised Edition (1966). For a discussion on the extent to which contemporary anthologies have overlooked or ignored female poets, see Eva Salzman’s introduction to Eva Salzman and Amy Wack (eds.), *Women’s Work: Modern Poets Writing in English* (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), pp 7-17 and p. 9 in particular.

⁷⁰ See Irene Gammel’s introduction to Irene Gammel (ed.), *Confessional Politics: Women’s Sexual Self-Representation in Life Writing and Popular Media* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1999), p. 3.

⁷¹ Helen Farish, ‘Sex, God and Grief in the Poetry of Louise Glück and Sharon Olds’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2004), p. 52.

⁷² Robert Potts, ‘Rewarding Poetic Loss: Giants in Frock Coats; and a Crime Writer’s Real Life Mystery’, *Guardian, Saturday Review* (19 January 2013), 5.

⁷³ For more on ‘confessional’ poetry, see Jo Gill (ed.), *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), in particular Elizabeth Gregory, ‘Confessing the body: Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Lowell, Ginsberg and the gendered poetics of the “real”’, pp. 33-49.

hostility some poets still face when writing on violent topics. Aristotle knew that ‘we enjoy looking at the most accurate representations of things which in themselves we find painful to see’⁷⁴ and that we learn from such looking. Yet Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘Education for Leisure’, a dramatic monologue in the voice of a disaffected young man who is jobless, bored and finds himself attracted by violence, was removed from the GCSE syllabus;⁷⁵ the debate about violence and poetry remains a potent one today.

⁷⁴ T. Dorsch (trans.), ‘Aristotle, Poetics’, in *Aristotle/Horace/Longinus: Classical Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 35

⁷⁵ Polly Curtis, ‘Top exam board asks schools to destroy book containing knife poem’, *The Guardian* (4 September 2008) <www.theguardian.com/education/2008/sep/04/gcse/english> [accessed 23 March 2014]. Duffy responded with the poem ‘Mrs Schofield’s GCSE’, in *The Bees* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 15.

Chapter 1 – Peter Redgrove

A contemporary of Hughes, Peter Redgrove received nothing like the same acclaim.⁷⁶

Alvarez's review of Redgrove's debut, *The Collector*, reads:⁷⁷

[I]nstead of coming to terms with the undertow of contemporary violence [i.e. as Hughes does], Redgrove merely exploits it in a welter of murders, amputations, dirt, infection, corpses and insect-squashing [...] Redgrove wavers between clipped he-man colloquialisms and a poetical bluster.⁷⁸

Another early review states, 'he can write like a child smashing a toy train, enjoying the violence of the exploding monster for its own sake'.⁷⁹

Violence in Redgrove's poetry is manifest with sex, blood, horror and death; themes that occur throughout his prodigious creative output. Yet there is more to his poetry than just a welter of violence, there is a dualism of violence and desire – and a good deal of humour, a way of mediating the violence, which has largely gone unrecognised. His poetry has attracted the label 'difficult'; some have taken a rather condescending view of him and his work.⁸⁰ I believe Redgrove is a poet worth (re)discovering. I focus on two poems 'Abattoir Bride'⁸¹ and 'At the Cosh-Shop',⁸² both of which concern sex and violence:

Abattoir Bride

Slow-working in the slaughterhouse
On a showery day. He holds out
A bloody fillet in his icy hands.
I pop with sweat. Bleed out, sparkle!

⁷⁶ See Clive Wilmer, who saw Redgrove as an inferior 'emasculated' Hughes, *The Spectator* (7 October 1972), 97. Paul Bentley, *Scientist of the Strange: The Poetry of Peter Redgrove* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), sought to redress the comparison, pp. 56-8.

⁷⁷ Peter Redgrove, *The Collector and Other Poems* (London: Routledge, 1959), although the book was not published until 1960 due to production delays.

⁷⁸ Cited in Graeme Richardson, 'Saving Peter Redgrove from oblivion', *TLS* (18 April 2012) <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1019512.ece>> [accessed 7 May 2014].

⁷⁹ Anonymous, *The London Magazine* (April 1962), 88.

⁸⁰ For example, a recent review by James Womack was titled 'Redgrove: A Proper Handful', in *Areté*, no. 37 (Spring/Summer 2012), 105-10.

⁸¹ Redgrove, *Assembling a Ghost* (London: Cape, 1996), p. 48.

⁸² Redgrove, *In the Hall of the Saurians* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987), p. 13.

There are flies like lacquered idols, skulls
 The size of sand-grains humming like nuns,
 Exquisite religious sculpture vibrating
 To the note of that god-gong, the sun,
 Flies carved again as with knives, risen
 Out of the food-chest with ivory clasps,
 Shut into the meat, it seems, by him let out
 With his shining knives and his shadow of flies,
 His marriage-property, sturdy and obscene.

And there is a leaf-marriage too, the sun lying
 In panels and yellow shadows on the path,
 The flies in intermediary shady swarms
 Celebrating the marriage of meat and sun;

And this little rain marries all the leaves;
 The sealed chamber, this vagina
 Is like a bird flying
 Through the rain, drenched,
 Beak wide as a fledgling straining for the worm;

He has opened many creatures, this one
 Opens itself, alive, without violation,
 However loud the sun, with its darkening flies.

The poem derives a good deal of sexual energy from the violent and bloody deaths of animals in a slaughterhouse. The poem could be seen to represent an erotic dream inspired by slaughter and blood, in which unlikely pairings are made (between meat and the sun, [l. 17], and between the slaughterhouse and a vagina, [l. 19]). Redgrove's layering of metaphors obscures any straightforward reading – is the slaughterhouse worker dreaming of sex with a woman (possibly his wife who is menstruating?), or some sexual activity with a chunk of meat? Is a woman, or a female presence, in the slaughterhouse, possibly the 'I' of the fourth line? Is the slaughterhouse worker thinking of outdoors, of nature, to counter the bloody violence indoors? That there is blood, 'shining knives' (l. 12) and the cutting up/opening up of bodies, is not, however, in question.

The title suggests violence, yet it is also memorable and unusual, as with many of his poems; and is an example of his clashing together two nouns which have no immediate correlation. There are countless examples of these titles, including 'Dog Prospectus',⁸³ 'The Dynamite Doctors',⁸⁴ and 'Pneumonia Blouses',⁸⁵ to name just

⁸³ Redgrove, *From Every Chink of the Ark: And Other New Poems* (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 2.

⁸⁴ Redgrove, *The First Earthquake* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), p. 56.

three. ‘God-gong’ and ‘leaf-marriage’ from ‘Abattoir Bride’ (ll. 8 and 14) are further uses of these compound nouns. Redgrove trained as a scientist and was familiar with the frisson provoked by the joining of two compounds in chemistry. He sought the same violent reaction with the compounds in his language. While his violent joining and surprising juxtaposition of words could be seen to draw upon Žižek’s theories of ‘symbolic violence’, Redgrove’s use of language in these instances is always playful. He also plays with synaesthesia in his poetry, for example, the sun is a ‘god-gong’ (l. 8), which is augmented (l. 25) with ‘however loud the sun’. While his use of synaesthesia cannot be said to be ‘violent’, it does make certain demands of his readers, forcing one sense to provoke and compete with another.

Redgrove’s poetic uses of violence rarely feel threatening due to the humour in his work; for example, ‘shadow of flies’ is followed by ‘marriage-property’, which we learn is ‘sturdy and obscene’ (ll. 12 and 13). This violence is cartoon-like and his punning serves to highlight the cartoonish nature of the violence. In ‘Abattoir Bride’, he can be seen to pun on the double meaning of ‘flies’ (ll. 5, 9 and 12). Further, ‘humming’ (l. 6) relates to bees, as in the birds and the bees; the ‘bird’ being a vagina in the fourth stanza. He cannot resist breaking a sexual taboo in relating ‘humming’ to (presumably virginal) nuns (l. 6). Other sexual possibilities are explored, as we have seen, in the ‘marriage-property’, which is said to be ‘obscene’ (l. 13), and the nature of the fledgling, which, for all of its sexual inexperience is ‘drenched’ (l. 21) and ‘straining for the worm’ (or penis) in line 22. In the final stanza, he plays on the violence of ‘opening’, as in cutting and killing an animal and the opening of a vagina, albeit ‘without violation’ (l. 25). This last example reinforces my argument regarding the cartoonish nature of the violence; the cutting could have been far nastier, ‘knives’ have twice been foreshadowed (ll. 9 and 12), yet he stresses the lack of ‘violation’.

In terms of form, Redgrove frequently used end rhymes in his early collections,⁸⁶ yet full end rhymes were abandoned in later collections in favour of internal rhymes and half-rhymes, offering a wider (and wilder) freedom in word choice,

⁸⁵ Redgrove, *In the Hall of the Saurians*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Redgrove, *The Collector*, see, for example, ‘Aid’ with its aa bb rhyme scheme and ‘The Wound’ with its ab ab rhyme scheme, pp. 4 and 8 respectively.

such as ‘property’ and ‘sturdy’ (ll. 13 and 15) and ‘chamber’ and ‘vagina’ (l. 19), riffing on the imagistic qualities of the male and female sexual organs. He also favours consonance, which has a playful tone; for example, ‘There are flies like lacquered idols, skulls’ (l. 5) and assonance, ‘skulls [...] humming like nuns’ (ll. 5-6), which offers humour alongside the grotesque, with associations of humming (whether from insects devouring a dead body or the slang sense of ‘humming’, referring to the smell). It is his imagery,⁸⁷ which is frequently violent, his exuberant or risk-taking language, along with his direct appeal to the senses, which are the hallmarks of his work.

‘Abattoir Bride’ is loosely built on tetrameter lines, although the number of stresses falter, especially in stanzas 3 and 4. He often uses repetition, for example, ‘out’ (ll. 2, 4, 9 and 11), which can be read as a reference to movement in the sexual act, particularly if we consider the use of the word ‘in’ (l. 3). Redgrove’s playfulness can be seen in his repetition of sound, such as ‘sl’ (l. 1), and the repetition of ‘y’ in ‘showery’ and ‘bloody’ (ll. 2 and 3), particularly if we consider that ‘showery’ could be a sexual adjective, linking sex to blood via rhyme. The sex/blood link might also be seen in line 4, with ‘I pop’, which could be taken to mean I ejaculate, swiftly followed by ‘Bleed out, sparkle!’, juxtaposing semen with blood. He is apt to find beauty and excitement in what others might find ugly – particularly in blood and death (in this case slaughtered animals) – seeing things in a new, often surprising, way.

Redgrove returned to many of the same issues in his writing. This earlier untitled prose draft of a poem on butchery covers similar issues to ‘Abattoir Bride’:

The butchers with their cold steel instruments in their warm shop. Warm men in the atmosphere of blood inhaling blood and the ripped smell of raw meat, as the skin is opened a world of perfumes blooms, the interior world of the pig made public in the shop. War, men, flushed and energetic in a state of continuous sexual arousal from all the raw meat, surrounded by dead pizzles their own are all the more alive. Showing the housewives all this blood, all this flesh, the perfumes that bloom in jagged drops on the sawdust, the wasps that visit the blood-and-wood feast.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Bentley discusses the ‘Martian’ tendencies of Redgrove’s poetry, pp. 34-9 (i.e. in the style of the ‘Martian School’, after Craig Raine), although Redgrove predates Raine.

⁸⁸ The Peter Redgrove Papers (Redgrove’s archive), Sheffield University Archive (SUA), Redgrove, Notebook 79A, begun on 9 February 1987, p. 156. The first draft is dated 20 September 1988. He often wrote prose drafts before developing these into poems.

There are strong appeals to the senses, with contrasts of hot and cold (l. 1), and various perfumes, including ‘the ripped smell of raw meat’ (ll. 2-3). The imagery is intense, including ‘the interior world of the pig made public’ (l. 4). Both these examples use alliteration and the latter in particular has a sense of wry humour and a cartoonish, grotesque vision. Once again, a bloody scenario is linked to sexual arousal.

Much of the blood in his poetry concerns menstrual blood, which he found sexually exciting. He believed menstrual blood had magical powers.⁸⁹ The combination of sex and blood in ‘Abattoir Bride’, for example, could be seen as symbolic of rape, yet a more promising reading would be in breaking the taboo of sex during menstruation.⁹⁰ Along with his wife, Shuttle, he wrote about menstruation in *The Wise Wound* in a positive manner.

He maintained that his poetry was ‘attempting to be quite objective and observational’,⁹¹ yet I read his work as having a desire to shock, to upset the middle class values of the time, those values he was brought up with. He wrote, ‘it is a function of gentility to conceal strangeness’;⁹² he might have added ‘difference’. He was prepared to take risks in his own life, both sexually⁹³ and through the use of mind-altering substances, and in the content and language of his poetry. This would lead to critic-poets such as Anne Stevenson questioning his poetry’s ‘taste’.⁹⁴ See his poem ‘Sniffing Tom’, in which the narrator ‘goes to and fro in summer / Sniffing the saddles of girls’ cycles’.⁹⁵ Again, he puns on the double meaning of ‘cycles’. Such a pun is not without its risks, yet he was prepared to go to the edge, and risked, at times, going over

⁸⁹ Indeed, he highlighted menstrual blood’s importance for transformation and for shamanism. See Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, *The Wise Wound: Menstruation & Everywoman* (London: Gollancz, 1978).

⁹⁰ Neil Roberts, *The Lover, The Dreamer & The World: The Poetry of Peter Redgrove* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 76.

⁹¹ Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Neil Roberts (Devoran: Stride Books, 2006), p. 51.

⁹² Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio*, p. 181.

⁹³ See references to ‘The Game’, a masturbatory fantasy, in Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer*, pp. 23-7.

⁹⁴ Anne Stevenson, *TLS* (18 November 1977) British Library microfilm, 1355.

⁹⁵ Redgrove, *Under the Reservoir* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992). p. 21, ll. 1-2.

that edge. As Shuttle says of her husband, ‘He didn’t like falseness or phoneyess. Peter was inclined to say what he thought. You can’t be polite in poetry [...] What he wrote is what he genuinely was.’⁹⁶

He had a fascination with horror, especially the film *The Exorcist*,⁹⁷ which concerns a pubescent woman’s burgeoning sexuality. He was firmly on the side of the demon, ‘on the side of the little girl’s new powers in her battle with the established authorities of medicine and church’.⁹⁸ (The medical profession had harmed Redgrove as a young man with a series of insulin shock treatments as a supposed cure for ‘schizophrenia’.)⁹⁹ For him, horror, with its associated cartoonish violence, could be seen as a source for good. For example, he wrote in his notebook 78: ‘Horror, which is just / The other side of wonder’.¹⁰⁰ What someone else might see as bloody or horrific, he was liable to see as magical – albeit with an edge.

This dualism can also be seen in Redgrove’s need to address life’s darker side and face one’s demons in writing:

Everybody likes to believe that they are pure and shining white and they don’t want to be nasty to anyone. This attitude of course casts a very dark shadow in front of you. If you pretend that the shadow doesn’t exist and that you’re incapable of horrible acts, these capacities are still in you but they’re going to work unconsciously. But if you relate to your bestiality, if you converse with your shadow and know the horror within you, then it is less likely to go out of control.¹⁰¹

He had no qualms about writing as therapy, and his poetry relates to many of his sexual and other fantasies,¹⁰² even if these are heavily coded. His biographer, Neil Roberts, states that Redgrove had ‘a deep discomfort about masculinity, and lifelong attachment

⁹⁶ Naomi, ‘Interview with Penelope Shuttle regarding Peter Redgrove’, Appendix A, p. 128.

⁹⁷ See the chapter on horror ‘The Mirror of Dracula’ in *The Wise Wound*, pp. 225-59. *The Exorcist* was directed by William Friedkin in 1973, after the William Peter Batty 1971 novel of the same title.

⁹⁸ *The Wise Wound*, p. 229.

⁹⁹ Although there is no evidence that Redgrove had schizophrenia.

¹⁰⁰ These lines first appear on p. 25 opposite a draft of ‘Mortuis Plango’ (or I Mourn the Dead), dated 6 January 1977 and later as the first two lines of ‘Horrible, Wonderful Clothes’ in Notebook 77A, SUA, dated 23 March 1986, p. 51, as a prose draft.

¹⁰¹ Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio*, p. 249.

¹⁰² Such as ‘The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach’, *Dr Faust’s Sea-Spiral Serpent* (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 20.

to the feminine'.¹⁰³ Redgrove's father was a disciplinarian, someone he found hard to relate to. Indeed, he denied his father while he was still a toddler.¹⁰⁴ These examples feed into the troubled versions of masculinity that he felt life had shown him, primarily due to his father, and possibly due to confusions over his own sexuality. Redgrove hoped that writing would be a safety valve, somewhere he could experiment in relative safety.

Let us now consider 'At the Cosh-Shop',¹⁰⁵ an earlier poem, which again mixes humour with sex and violence:

At the Cosh-Shop

Hard rubber in its silk sheath like a nightie:
The assistant offered me a small equaliser,

A Soho Lawyer that could be holstered
In a specially-tailored back pocket,

And he would introduce me to his friend
The trouser-maker. I did not think this

Necessary, but I asked, Why the silk?
It seemed luxurious for such a hard argument.

Oh, Sir, so that it will draw no blood!
He seemed surprised I asked; I thought this not right;

I believe it was the blackness
The makers did not like to show,

Like an executioner it should draw on
Lily gloves, or like a catering waiter

For an instrument that performs a religious service,
Letting the ghost out temporarily with a shriek:

While all is peace within
They steal your worldly goods

Settling the argument by appeal
To deep non-consciousness

With a swift side-swipe, the Bejasus out of him –
Or an act of sexuality, equivalent?

Do the same people make the instrument

¹⁰³ See Roberts's introduction to *The Colour of Radio*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁵ Redgrove, *In the Hall of the Saurians*, p. 13.

That will put the Bejasus back into a person?

The silk then would be the finest, for silk chafing
Hard rubber rouses electricity, it would be

Moulded to the individual sculpt of her lover,
Providing wisely for a longish trip, could seem

Dressed in his silk pyjamas, hard and tingling,
Or as the white silky cloud conceals the thunder

And the black current
That is going to shoot its white darts up and through.

One reading of this poem is of a man shopping for a cosh,¹⁰⁶ yet this is a cosh that could double as a dildo for his female lover. As with ‘Abattoir Bride’, the poem is ambiguous, but can be seen to meld sex and violence with death (or ‘non-consciousness’). The poem also revels in the absurd and in irreverence, while taking on the law (another mainstay of society). If ‘Abattoir Bride’ played with religion (clashing God with the sun, and appearing to question nuns’ virginity), ‘At the Cosh-Shop’ plays with multiple meanings of ‘silk’ (as in taking silk) and ‘by appeal’ (used as a metaphor for being coshed in l. 19), which again highlights the cartoonish nature of his use of violence.

Redgrove also juxtaposes traditional male and female elements in ‘At the Cosh-Shop’. There is the ‘Hard rubber’ (ll. 1 and 26), ‘hard argument’ (l. 8) and ‘hard and tingling’ (l. 29), in contrast to the ‘silk sheath like a nightie’ (l. 1), ‘the silk’ which ‘seemed luxurious’ (ll. 7 and 8), and ‘lily gloves’ (l. 14), all of which are soft. He returns to the soft qualities of silk (ll. 13-14), where the hard and soft are combined: ‘The silk then would be the finest, for silk chafing / Hard rubber rouses electricity’. And again, in line 17, the hard and soft or female and male elements are fused with ‘his silk pyjamas’. In line 12, the issue of sexuality is addressed directly and linked with a play on ‘equalizer’, a weapon (l. 2) with ‘equivalent’; thereby linking a weapon with sexuality; something that could knock ‘the Bejasus’ (l. 21) out of a person. Redgrove challenges and questions perceived notions of violence and masculinity.¹⁰⁷ ‘At the Cosh-Shop’ conflates hardness and softness, with the narrator buying a dildo (a replacement for a ‘soft’ penis?) for a lover which would provide for orgasm ‘a longish

¹⁰⁶ A ‘Soho Lawyer’ is also slang for a cosh.

¹⁰⁷ See Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer*, p. 25 where he discusses Redgrove’s difficulties with being made to feel ‘too like a man’.

trip' (l. 28) and 'Letting the ghost out temporarily with a shriek' (l. 16). While the 'shriek' refers to orgasm, it has an underlying reference to pain.

He uses the symbols of 'the black current' and 'shoot its white darts' (ll. 31 and 32 respectively) to represent semen and an electric shock or torture. However, for all the violence of the 'executioner' (l. 13) and the coshing reducing the victim to 'deep non-consciousness' (l. 20), after the argument has been settled 'by appeal' (l. 19), there are additional readings. He often saw electricity as a positive force (see 'Hard rubber rouses electricity', l. 14). One of his most important erotic experiences was during an electric storm when he described being 'raped by thunder', when 'rain came thundering and clothed me with its electrical silk'.¹⁰⁸ Again, he can be seen to meld violence and violent imagery with sexual pleasure. 'At the Cosh-Shop' also has echoes of his final insulin shock treatment.¹⁰⁹ He described the 'treatment' as a 'barbarous violence on the body',¹¹⁰ yet also as 'sensuous'.¹¹¹

Redgrove tried to seal his fate with the White Goddess¹¹² – the female: 'I made a superstitious allegiance to this figure, and did my best to do nothing to offend her'.¹¹³ Yet his take on the female could be problematic. Rosemary Ruether discusses how men who identify their own 'suppressed self' as 'feminine' believe 'they have a handle on women's true "nature"'.¹¹⁴ Further, Roberts alleges that Redgrove was violent towards his first wife Barbara on several occasions.¹¹⁵ The Jungian theorist Erich Neumann (Redgrove had trained as a Jungian therapist),¹¹⁶ found 'the active ego consciousness is

¹⁰⁸ Redgrove, *Innocent Street*, II Box 16, SUA, unpublished, n.d., p. 83.

¹⁰⁹ This treatment is referenced in 'Lazarus and the Sea', *The Collector*, pp. 9-10.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer*, p. 48. This 'violence' done to Redgrove's body also has interesting parallels with the heart surgery that Robertson experienced, see Appendix B.

¹¹¹ Redgrove, *In the Country of the Skin* (London: Routledge, 1973), cited in Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer*, p. 48.

¹¹² Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1948).

¹¹³ Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio*, p. 208. Redgrove said that the book *The White Goddess* 'terrified' him, p. 208.

¹¹⁴ Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 190.

¹¹⁵ Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer*, pp. 137 and 183.

characterized by a male symbolism, the unconscious as a whole by female symbolism'.¹¹⁷

This 'allegiance to the female', and the 'unconscious' can be seen in many of Redgrove's poems and sheds a fresh light on issues of masculinity and femininity in his work. 'Or was that when I was Grass',¹¹⁸ relates to his violent fascination for spiders¹¹⁹ and other insects. In this poem, the narrator and his father are trussed up as flies on a spider's web, waiting to be eaten by 'the mother' (l. 13), represented as a spider. Ll. 1-6 read:

The spider's face with its rows of diamond studs
And my skin crackling as the pincers drove in
That crackling pain went all over me
I knew I would never grow well again, my shell crazed,
And the acid came from the jaws and began to turn me liquid
And I felt a terrible pressure all over with the suction
And I was drawn up through the tusks into that face.

Here again are references to violence, pain and mortality. But unusually, there are no overt references to sex. Yet it could be argued that unlike 'Abattoir Bride' and 'At the Cosh-Shop', where he frequently subverts the potentially macho subject matter, in 'Or was that when I was Grass' he could be seen to enjoy the fantasy of being consumed by the female. Roberts argues that spiders symbolise both death and nature in Redgrove's poetry.¹²⁰

Several of Redgrove's poems show narrators squashing insects with glee. I sense a real enjoyment of the language in this draft: 'In the roasting sun I smash that fat black / Devon fly, ~~smashing~~ popping out of its back'.¹²¹ Elsewhere, violence is carried out by

¹¹⁶ Although he could also be critical of Jung, especially regarding menstruation. See Redgrove's letter of 17 July 1990, cited in Roberts, *The Lover, The Dreamer & The World*, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (London: Pantheon Books, 1955), quoted in Roberts, *The Lover, The Dreamer & The World*, p. 67.

¹¹⁸ Redgrove, *The Weddings at Nether Powers* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 4.

¹¹⁹ See Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio*, p. 14: 'I didn't like worms because I felt cruel towards them, and wanted to squash them; they aroused feelings I did not understand, and as they were weaker than me I could stamp on them. Spiders were as black as the Bible [...] If you squashed these they were full of unpleasant juices and custards'.

¹²⁰ Roberts, *The Lover, The Dreamer & The World*, p. 109.

¹²¹ Untitled draft in Redgrove's Notebook 57 I, poem no 149 III, SUA, 139. The crossed out word is as

the natural world; including in ‘On the Patio’, ‘The Small Earthquake’, ‘The First Earthquake’.¹²²

Even in his definitions of poetry, Redgrove harnesses the violence of nature. I found this aphorism written on the inside cover of a 1970 notebook:¹²³

A poem is the cross-section of a whirlwind,
do not nail it too soon to a page, and then only
in such a manner as it will soon fly off the page.

In addition to the narrator’s experiences with the mother-spider, ‘Or was that when I was Grass’ draws on the violence of the ‘near deaths’ Redgrove experienced during the insulin shock treatment; the insulin is shown in ‘transparent tubes / buzzing with juices’ (ll. 11-12). The ‘treatment’, crackling ‘in pain’ (l. 23) induced a coma, until the patient was pulled back to life, ‘as though I stepped out of black winged habits’ (line 24). This experience of pain and near death represents another aspect of the violence in his work. And while I do not discuss the violence in his plays and novels, it is noteworthy that his prose was often violent.¹²⁴

He tried to use writing as a way of keeping his violence, ‘his darker side’, within himself; as he continued to write, and after meeting Shuttle, this ‘darker side’ seems to have largely confined itself to his poetry rather than his real life exploits. Therefore, the idea of poetry as safety valve for Redgrove does have some validity.

Yet he was a risk-taker, a breaker of taboos and in many ways confounded the gender stereotypes of his era. I believe that he delighted in pushing the boundaries of taste and in shocking traditional middle-class mores. Some might find the humour in his work smutty but there is no denying the sense of fun and play in his poetry. It is this humorous, playful quality that renders the violence in his poetry cartoonish rather than

per the original.

¹²² Redgrove, *The Apple-Broadcast* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 1, *Under the Reservoir* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), p. 2 and *The First Earthquake*, p. 1, respectively.

¹²³ Redgrove, Notebook 39, SUA, 9 November 1970.

¹²⁴ For example, murder is the main theme of Redgrove’s novel *The Glass Cottage: A Nautical Romance* (London: Routledge, 1976) and *The God of Glass* (London: Routledge, 1979) contains images of bloody human sacrifice.

threatening. Finally, I feel that the violence in his poetry can be seen as a positive, adding an 'electric' (for which read 'sexual') excitement to his work.

Chapter 2 – Robin Robertson

Few would quibble with the suggestion that Robin Robertson's poetry takes a keen interest in violence. Some feel there is too much of it. John Banville accuses Robertson's poetry of being 'suspect' with a 'hint of the gratuitous',¹²⁵ David Cooke states it is 'obsessed with ritual and violence to a degree which seems gratuitous',¹²⁶ and Peter Daniels claims Robertson's poetry 'approaches a pornographic enjoyment of violence'.¹²⁷ Robertson has said that there is nothing gratuitous in his writing, adding 'I certainly don't intend there to be.'¹²⁸

My focus will be on his use of violent myth, including adaptations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, such as 'The Flaying of Marsyas',¹²⁹ and his reinvention of myth, as in 'At Roane Head'.¹³⁰ Poets have always used myth yet, along with Moniza Alvi,¹³¹ and Alice Oswald,¹³² I believe Robertson is one of the most engaging poets currently working in this field. I shall argue that he uses myth¹³³ to offer political commentary on contemporary society.

Fiona Sampson states that he 'deals in what Sigmund Freud called the *Unheimlich*: unhomely experiences that go beyond what we think we know, or can encounter in daily life'.¹³⁴ However, this 'otherworldly' quality, or as he puts it, 'what's

¹²⁵ John Banville, 'In the Luminous Deep', *New York Review of Books* (13 July 2006) <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/jul/13/in-the-luminous-deep/>> [accessed 4 January 2011].

¹²⁶ David Cooke, 'Figure in the Background', *Poetry London*, no. 66 (Summer 2010), 41 on Robin Robertson's *The Wrecking Light* (London: Picador, 2010).

¹²⁷ Peter Daniels, 'A Walk on the Wilder Side', *Poetry London Newsletter*, no. 28 (Autumn 1997), 23 regarding the poem 'The Flaying of Marsyas'.

¹²⁸ Naomi, 'Interview with Robin Robertson', Appendix B, p. 88.

¹²⁹ Robertson, *A Painted Field* (London: Picador, 1997), pp. 10-13.

¹³⁰ Robertson, *The Wrecking Light*, pp. 87-9.

¹³¹ Specifically her reworking of 'Europa'. See Moniza Alvi, *Europa* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008).

¹³² Oswald, *Memorial*.

¹³³ He also draws upon Scottish folk tales, balladry and sea shanties.

¹³⁴ Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p. 160.

beyond my ken',¹³⁵ tends to be violent. Moreover, all of his collections contain a large number of violent poems,¹³⁶ which draw on the landscape and mythology, so that a reader comes to know what to expect. Robertson has acknowledged this, 'You inevitably end up repeating yourself.'¹³⁷

When I interviewed him, I was struck by his choice of language. For example, he said he went away to write 'as a way of releasing the tension'. I sense he enjoys his reputation as a writer of violence. Yet, at the same time, he is keen to stress his dislike of violence, 'I don't even think of my writing as being particularly violent; it's more a way, I think, of *avoiding* violence, which I've always loathed.'¹³⁸ I agree that writing about violence can be a way of understanding it and hopefully making it less likely to occur; however, for Robertson to say that he does not think of his work as violent seems unconvincing.

He talks about violence and the influence of place:

Where I'm from [Aberdeen], violence is inherent in the landscape – the natural, elemental violence of the north-east coast of Scotland. Then there were the skinhead gangs and the American roughnecks off the oil rigs, drinking and fighting. There was physical violence, certainly, and the ever-present *possibility* of it.¹³⁹

He also senses the threat of violence in London:

'[T]here's a definite undercurrent of threat: it feels dangerous to me [...] that undertow of barely suppressed anger. If you're a writer, you have to be sensible to what's around you, and you pick up things like tension and threat; I'm interested in all of this, and the effects it has on people [...] it's palpable and it's important'.¹⁴⁰

There is no denying the influence of place on his work, yet it is the Scottish landscape (along with some of his childhood experiences) that has the greatest hold over his

¹³⁵ Appendix B, p. 85.

¹³⁶ However, Robertson's latest book *Hill of Doors* (London: Picador, 2013) contains fewer violent poems than his previous collections, and shows a slight softening in his approach.

¹³⁷ Comments made at a Round Table reading at StAnza Poetry Festival, St Andrews, 10 March 2013.

¹³⁸ Appendix B, pp. 84 and 85.

¹³⁹ Appendix B, p. 85.

¹⁴⁰ Appendix B, p. 90.

poetry and his imagination. For example, he told me he took the longer way to school to avoid ‘getting beaten up’, adding ‘the longer route had the bonus of going past the abattoir. It had a big open doorway, and I got further and further inside each time’. Robertson might abhor violence but as a child he went out of his way to observe it.¹⁴¹

While he argues he does not set out to write about violence, he finds it difficult to escape, even if he wants to. He gives the example of his poem ‘At Roane Head’, which he states arrived ‘by accident [*sic*] than design’ and is ‘embedded in north-east Scotland for its language, imagery, folklore’. He said he wrote it in an ‘idyllic’ setting ‘without any sense of what I’d be writing’. Yet in my interview, he highlights the ‘grief’ in the poem.¹⁴² Whether he is being disingenuous in attempting to deflect the violence in the poem to ‘all that grief’ is debatable. However, I believe ‘At Roane Head’ to be a fine example of Robertson’s ‘Scottish narratives’. It is a reimagining of traditional selkie tales, selkies being ‘shape-changers with the ability to live in two elements; they swim as seals in the water but can cast off their pelts on land and assume human form’.¹⁴³

At Roane Head

for John Burnside

You’d know her house by the drawn blinds –
by the cormorants pitched on the boundary wall,
the black crosses of their wings hung out to dry.
You’d tell it by the quicken and the pine that hid it
from the sea and from the brief light of the sun,
and by Aonghas the collie, lying at the door
where he died: a rack of bones like a sprung trap.

A fork of barnacle geese came over, with that slow
squeak of rusty saws. The bitter seas’ complaining pull

¹⁴¹ I sense some similarities between his home town of Aberdeen and my own, Margate. His discussion on the abattoir influenced my writing of ‘The History Teacher’, 2012, unpublished.

¹⁴² Appendix B, all quotations, p. 88. Robertson usually ends his readings with the poem ‘At Roane Head’.

¹⁴³ See Notes to Robertson’s, *Swithering* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 82. John Ayto (ed.), *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), 17th edn., p. 1243 states ‘selkie’ ‘comes from ‘Scottish English *sealgh*, “seal” [...] a seal-like creature with the capacity to take human form on land’. See also Sofia Kingshill and Jennifer Westwood, ‘Brita and the seal’ in *The Fabled Coast: Legends & Traditions from Around the Shores of Britain & Ireland*, ed. Sofia Kingshill and Jennifer Westwood (London: Random House, 2012), pp. 358-9.

and roll; a whicker of pigeons, lifting in the wood.

She'd had four sons, I knew that well enough,
and each one wrong. All born blind, they say,
slack-jawed and simple, web-footed,
rickety as sticks. Beautiful faces, I'm told,
though blank as air.

Someone saw them once, outside, hirpling
down to the shore, chittering like rats,
and said they were fine swimmers,
but I would have guessed at that.

Her husband left her: said
they couldn't be his, they were more
fish than human,
said they were beglamoured,
and searched their skin for the showing marks.

For years she tended each difficult flame:
their tight, flickering bodies.
Each night she closed
the scales of their eyes to smoor the fire.

Until he came again,
that last time,
thick with drink, saying
he'd had enough of this,
all this witchery,
and made them stand
in a row by their beds,
twitching. Their hands
flapped; herring-eyes
rolled in their heads.
He went along the line
relaxing them
one after another
with a small knife.

It's said she goes out every night to lay
blankets on the graves to keep them warm.
It would put the heart across you, all that grief.

There was an otter worrying in the leaves, a heron
loping slow over the water when I came
at scraich of day, back to her door.

She'd hung four stones in a necklace, wore
four rings on the hand that led me past the room
with four small candles burning
which she called 'the room of rain'.
Milky smoke poured up from the grate
like a waterfall in reverse
and she said my name
and it was the only thing
and the last thing that she said.

She gave me a skylark's egg in a bed of frost;
gave me twists of my four sons' hair; gave me
her husband's head in a wooden box.
Then she gave me the sealskin, and I put it on.

From the outset, we are plunged into the unfamiliar, into darkness and blindness. The first stanza contains ‘blinds’, ‘pitched’, ‘black’, ‘hid’ and ‘brief light of the sun’. Blindness is picked up in later stanzas, ‘All born blind, they say’ (stanza 3, l. 2) and (stanza 5, ll. 3-4) ‘Each night she closed / the scales of their eyes to smoor the fire.’ We are in dangerous territory. A murder is foreshadowed in the first stanza, with Aonghas the collie, dead, ‘a rack of bones like a sprung trap’ (l. 7). In the second stanza, Robertson provides ‘rusty saws’ and the use of the word ‘bitter’ (l. 2). Nothing is going to come right.

As well as the murder of four sons and Aonghas, the dog, we have a skylark’s egg¹⁴⁴ that is frozen and therefore cannot hatch, a metaphor for the dead sons who will never live to maturity, plus a decapitated husband (his head presented in a wooden box). The initial violence is carried out by the drunken husband and the wife then takes her revenge. Violence in this poem therefore comes from both female and male hands. This is interesting given that several of Robertson’s critics draw attention to gender in his poetry. For example, Adam Elgar writes of his ‘machismo’,¹⁴⁵ Catriona O’Reilly finds, ‘Women, if not engaged in self-laceration, seem to be mere irritants to the speaker’s sense of divinely-ordained selfhood’¹⁴⁶ and Banville refers to how ‘masculine’¹⁴⁷ Robertson’s poetry is. But in ‘At Roane Head’, it is the wife who beheads her murderous husband, so Robertson’s gender politics are not as straightforward as some would believe. Additionally, he brings selkie mythology up to date, with both women and men being responsible for violence. In traditional selkie tales, females are generally acted upon, being captured by men and taken as wives; in Robertson’s poem selkies are agents of their own destiny.

Robertson’s writing in ‘At Roane Head’ forces the reader’s imagination to fill in the violent details. John Fraser wrote ‘it is often the horrors that aren’t shown that are

¹⁴⁴ ‘To skylark is to amuse oneself in a frolicsome way; [...] to be merry’. Further, ‘the phrase was originally nautical’. From Ayto, p. 1282. The nautical reference reinforces the poem’s sense of place.

¹⁴⁵ Adam Elgar, ‘Robin Robertson: *The Wrecking Light*’, *New Walk* (Autumn-Winter 2010-11), 58.

¹⁴⁶ Caitriona O’Reilly, ‘Knotted Brilliance’, *Poetry Review* (Summer 2002), 94.

¹⁴⁷ Banville, p. 6 (of online article).

the most disturbing'.¹⁴⁸ For example, while there is a lot of killing – four boys, a dog, an embryonic bird and a man – only one of the killings is clearly described: 'He went along the line / relaxing them / one after another / with a small knife' (stanza 6, ll. 11-14). The verb 'relaxing' is an interesting choice. He could have used 'stabbed' or 'slashed' but neither would have been as effective. 'Relaxing' is powerful because it is used in opposition to the verb's usual meaning of returning oneself to a state of equilibrium.¹⁴⁹ Such a use of language again draws on the imagination, as the reader supplies the hidden meaning in such a verb choice.

We see the sons' fear as they are made to 'stand / in a row by their beds, / twitching. Their hands / flapped; herring-eyes / rolled in their heads.'¹⁵⁰ While there is much anxiety, there is no mention of blood; again, this is left to the reader's imagination. After the violence of the 'relaxing' comes the imagery of 'the room of rain' and 'Milky smoke poured up from the grate / like a waterfall in reverse' (stanza 9, ll. 4 and 5-6), which brings to mind uncontrolled grieving.

If the content of 'At Roane Head' is dark, the music is solid, with use of alliteration and internal rhyme with 'rickety as sticks' and 'chittering like rats' (stanza 3), and 'witchery' and 'twitching' (stanza 6), echoing the use of 'bitter', (stanza 2). These reinforce the mood of the poem, darkness chiming with darkness. The poem's musicality also derives from Scots words, including 'quicken',¹⁵¹ 'Aonghas', 'hirpling', 'smoor' and 'scaich', which root the poem in traditional Scottish folklore and myth. While there is no direct mention of a selkie,¹⁵² the final line, 'Then she gave me the sealskin, and I put it on' makes the subject clear. Selkie mythology is by no means the only 'Scottish'¹⁵³ folklore that Robertson uses. 'Corryvreckan'¹⁵⁴ is based on tales of a

¹⁴⁸ Fraser, p. 118.

¹⁴⁹ Although it is worth noting an historical use of the verb *relajar* in Spanish, meaning to hand a heretic over to the Spanish Inquisition for execution. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 2520.

¹⁵⁰ Stanza 6, ll. 6-10.

¹⁵¹ Meaning 'Rowan'.

¹⁵² Robertson has previously written on selkies, see the poem 'Selkie', *Swithering*, p. 21.

¹⁵³ Selkie mythology can also be found in Ireland and Scandinavia.

¹⁵⁴ Robertson, 'Corryvreckan', *Hill of Doors*, pp. 10-11.

whirlpool between Jura and Scarba, and his long poem 'Leaving St Kilda' draws on the 1930 evacuation of the island along with various island fables (ll. 75-78): 'To the northern stack: Stac an Armin, Stack of the Warrior, / highest sea-stack in these islands of Britain, where the last / great auk was killed as a witch / one hundred and seventy years ago.'¹⁵⁵

Theologians have explained myth as 'an event that – in some sense – happened once, but which also happens all the time'.¹⁵⁶ While Robertson is the son of a Church of Scotland minister, he does not appear to be writing out of any religious need. His writing could be seen, however, to seek to explain what appears to be extraordinary, making us realise what is commonplace. For example, while 'Leaving St Kilda' is specific to that island, other islanders, in other parts of the world, have had to and will need to abandon their islands as economic situations dictate or water levels rise. Such poems have a contemporary relevance and draw on contemporary fears, such as climate change.

'At Roane Head' stands in contrast to the treatment of violence in 'The Flaying of Marsyas'. The two poems demonstrate different techniques, which, arguably, are equally as effective, yet the latter would have drawn opprobrium from Horace, who decreed:

[y]ou are not to bring on to the stage events which ought to be carried out within [...] Don't let Medea murder the children before the people's gaze, or wicked Atreus cook human offal in public [...] Anything you show me like that earns my incredulity and disgust.¹⁵⁷

The Flaying of Marsyas

after Ovid

I.

A bright clearing, Sun among the leaves,
sifting down to dapple the soft ground, and rest
a gilded bar against the muted flanks of trees.
In the fluttering green light the glade

¹⁵⁵ Robertson, 'Leaving St Kilda', *The Wrecking Light*, pp. 25-9.

¹⁵⁶ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh, Canongate, 2005), p. 106.

¹⁵⁷ Horace, 'The Art of Poetry', trans. D. A. Russell in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. Russell and Winterbottom, pp. 102-3.

listens in and breathes.

A wooden pail; some pegs, a coil of wire;
a bundle of steel flensing knives.

Spreadeagled between two pines,
hooked at each hoof to the higher branches,
tied to the root by the hands, flagged
at his own white cross,
the satyr Marsyas hangs.

Three stand as honour guard:
two apprentices, one butcher.

II.

Let's have a look at you, then.
Bit scrawny for a satyr,
all skin and whipcord, is it?
Soon find out.
So, think you can turn up with your stag-bones
and outplay Lord Apollo?
This'll learn you. Fleece the fucker.
Sternum to groin.
Tickle does it? Fucking bastard,
coming down here with your dirty ways...
Armpit to wrists, both sides.
Chasing our women...
Fine cuts round hoof and hand and neck.
Can't even speak the language proper.
Transverse from umbilicus to iliac crest,
half-circling the waist.
Jesus. You fucking stink, you do.
Hock to groin, groin to hock.
That's your inside leg done:
no more rutting for you, cunt.

Now. One of you on each side.
Blade along the bone, find the tendon,
nick it and peel, nice and slow.
A bit of shirt-lifting, now, to purge him,
pull the wool over his eyes
and show him Lord Apollo's rapture;
pelt on one tree, him on another:
the inner man revealed.

III.

Red Marsyas. Marsyas *écorché*,
splayed, shucked of his skin
in a tug and rift of tissue;
his birthday suit sloughed
the way a sodden overcoat is eased
off the shoulders and dumped.
All memories of a carnal life
lifted like a bad tattoo,
live bark from the vascular tree:
raw Marsyas unsheathed.

Or dragged from his own wreckage,

dressed in red ropes
 that plait and twine his trunk
 and limbs into true definition,
 he assumes the flexed pose of the hero:
 the straps and buckles of ligament
 of Marsyas, muscle-man.
 Mr Universe displays the map of his body:
 the bulbs of high ground carved
 by the curve of gully and canal,
 the tributaries tight as ivy or the livid vine,
 and everywhere, the purling flux of blood
 in the land and the swirl of it flooding away.

Or this: the shambles of Marsyas.
 The dark chest meat marbled with yellow fat,
 his heart like an animal breathing
 in its milky envelope,
 the viscera a well-packed suitcase
 of chitterlings, palpitating tripe.
 A man dismantled, a tatterdemalion
 torn to steak and rind,
 a disappointing pentimento
 or the toy that can't be re-assembled
 by the boy Apollo, raptor, vivisector.

The sail of stretched skin thrills and snaps
 in the same breeze that makes his nerves
 fire, his bare lungs scream.
 Stripped of himself and from his twin:
 the stiffening scab and the sticky wound.

Marsyas the martyr, a god's fetish,
 hangs from the tree like bad fruit.

The poem opens gently and calmly in a 'bright clearing' with sun dappling the ground. The only reference to what is to come is the use of 'flanks', (l. 3, in reference to trees, yet foreshadowing the focus on the satyr's body). The second stanza shows us the tools of the trade – a 'pail', a 'coil of wire', and 'steel flensing knives' – each more suggestive of violence. The third verse opens with a violent verb, 'Spreadeagled', followed by 'hooked' in the second line. There is also strong alliteration in this verse, including 'hooked', 'hoof', 'higher' and 'hangs', which reinforces the imagery via repetition or insistence.

In the poem's second section we hear the butcher and his apprentices. Robertson chooses language which suggests those carrying out the flaying are racist. For example, 'coming down here with your dirty ways', 'Chasing our women' and 'Can't even speak the language proper' (ll. 10, 12 and 14). The latter phrase is an enjoyable play on words, given that 'proper' is not the correct use of English here, and given the butchers' foul language.

As well as being violent, the butchers' language is also gendered, sexualised and homophobic, including 'no more rutting for you, cunt' (l. 20) and the peeling off of the satyr's skin is compared with 'A bit of shirt-lifting [...] to purge him' (l. 24). In addition to the word 'cunt', there are two uses of 'fucking', and one use of 'fucker'. These usages contrast with the Scots words in 'At Roane Head' and place this poem in a different setting. They also denote the present day. This use of contemporary language in 'The Flaying of Marsyas' provides a modern take on Ovid's myth, as well as raising the tension and anxiety in the poem. The use of racist language and ideology in this section is also reinforced in the final line of the poem in which Marsyas 'hangs from the tree like a bad fruit'. This conjures Billie Holiday's famous song 'Strange Fruit'¹⁵⁸ and the lynchings in the southern states of the USA. The 'white cross' (l. 11) of the first section also raises the spectre of the Ku Klux Klan. The poem's slang is clearly British (possibly English), yet the 'white cross' and the 'bad fruit' hanging in a tree represent racist imagery from the USA. Whether Robertson had Britain or the USA in his sights, this is a deeply political poem.

Arguably the most violent images in the poem are towards the end of the third and final section (ll. 35-39):

The sail of stretched skin thrills and snaps
in the same breeze that makes his nerves
fire, his bare lungs scream.
Stripped of himself and from his twin:
the stiffening scab and the sticky wound.

Critics such as James Quinn have questioned Robertson's motives over 'The Flaying of Marsyas', 'the only excuse for the lengthy account of the flaying [...] was Robertson's own delight in rendering grisly details of dismemberment in an exquisite literary language'.¹⁵⁹ When I put these criticisms to Robertson, he responded by saying 'Ovid in the original is much worse!'¹⁶⁰ My reading of the 'original' poem is different. While Ovid's 'Marsyas' is, necessarily, violent in both its content and imagery, with lines such as:

¹⁵⁸ Written by Abel Meeropol in the late 1930s and first recorded by Holiday in 1939 (Commodore).

¹⁵⁹ James Quinn, 'Devolution', *Poetry Ireland Review*, no. 56 (Spring 1998), 71-3.

¹⁶⁰ Appendix B, p. 89.

the whole of him
 Was one huge wound, blood streaming everywhere,
 Sinews laid bare, veins naked, quivering
 And pulsing¹⁶¹

the horror is not dwelt upon. Similarly in another translation, by David R. Slavitt, which attempts slightly more violent detail:

Apollo [...]

punished the satyr, flayed him alive in fact,

peeling his skin from his body inch by inch to leave

an enormous wound, which looked like a medical illustration.

One jokes, for the mind recoils from a certain degree of horror,

but there he was, howling in pain, his sinews bare,

his vital organs all on display, the blood spilling down,

terrifying, disgusting [...]¹⁶²

While I cannot read Ovid in the original, there is a stark difference between Robertson's and others' versions of the flaying. Neither Slavitt's nor Melville's versions use visceral imagery.¹⁶³ Further, Robertson's poem is far longer, with more of his poem focusing on the act of flaying and its consequences for the victim.

In Robertson's poem, we see plenty of blood. There is 'the purling flux of blood' and 'the swirl of it flooding away' (section 3, stanza 2, ll. 12 and 13). We also see the inner body once the skin has been removed, 'The dark chest meat marbled with yellow fat, / his heart like an animal breathing / in its milky envelope [...] palpitating tripe' (section 3, stanza 3, ll. 25-29) and we see a body 'torn to steak and rind' (section 3, stanza 3, l. 31). He builds layer after layer of images of blood, flaying and the sight of the satyr's body, just as the layers of skin are being removed. It is a devastating poem, almost impossible to read without flinching. As O'Reilly says of Robertson, 'he gives good gore'.¹⁶⁴ This is also due to the layering effect of his language and imagery, combined with the poem's musicality – not to mention the poem's length – that has the reader's neck held at knife-point to the poem.

¹⁶¹ I have used Ovid, 'Marsyas', *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 133, ll. 8-11.

¹⁶² *The Metamorphoses of Ovid – Translated Freely into Verse*, trans. David R. Slavitt (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 115, ll. 383-90.

¹⁶³ Neither does Annemarie Austin's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995).

¹⁶⁴ O'Reilly, pp. 93-5.

Yet the poem does more than just make us flinch; Robertson has reworked Ovid's myth to bring it up to date, highlighting the hatred of 'the other'. This 'satyr' could represent any outsider in any part of the modern world, particularly one who has been judged to have stepped out of line by the dominant group. Robertson's poem forces us to confront our own xenophobic ideologies in a graphic manner; the removal of skin by flaying is deeply resonant if we consider the levels of racism and judgements made on skin colour in the UK and the USA, in addition to other parts of the world, and the frequency with which slaves were flogged.

These arguments counter the criticism that his work has no 'moral standpoint'.¹⁶⁵ Even were I to agree with the idea that poetry ought to have that role, my reading of 'The Flaying of Marsyas' and 'At Roane Head' points to a more nuanced understanding of Robertson's work: that he is reworking and reinventing mythology to question some of the more uncomfortable and violent mores of modern society. He is using the mythic as topical and in so doing, demonstrates two distinct ways of writing about violence in poetry. One method brings the reader up close to the violence, in the other, much is left to the reader's imagination. Either way, violence can be seen to be integral to his work.

¹⁶⁵ See Daniels, pp. 23-4.

Chapter 3 – Pascale Petit

Dawn Skorczewski states:

Critics of confessional poetry oscillate between celebrating representations of private pain as long-needed and redemptive for society and denigrating or chastising poets who suffered (or cause their readers to suffer) too much. [...]. [T]he critic seems to be in a position to decide how much is too much. Such poetry is often deemed too much when the poet's subject matter is a woman or a child and when the issues are violence, silence and power.¹⁶⁶

Violence in the forms of childhood rape and sexual abuse are powerful themes in Pascale Petit's poetry. I focus on the collections *The Zoo Father*¹⁶⁷ and *The Huntress*,¹⁶⁸ which respond to Petit's rape by her father (she was the 'the fruit' of ¹⁶⁹ her mother's rape by the same man), and to her mother's mental illness.¹⁷⁰

Her highly personal yet 'fabulatory'¹⁷¹ poetry has attracted both admirers and detractors. D. M. Black writing on *The Zoo Father*'s 'brilliant device' (Petit's use of 'exotic imagery of the Amazon jungle' to discuss what is 'frightening' and 'violent') 'allows these poems to be truly created objects'.¹⁷² Others accuse her of being 'garish and indiscreet',¹⁷³ and Noel Williams finds 'the yoking of beauty and horror [...] deliberately testing'.¹⁷⁴ Additional critiques include 'the revealed intimacies can leave

¹⁶⁶ Dawn Skorczewski, 'Whose Prison is This? Literary Critics Cover Incest in Anne Sexton's "Briar Rose"', in *Signs*, 21.2 (Winter 1966), 309-42 (p. 309), cited in Meryl Pugh, 'Someone Else's Therapy?: Reading *The Zoo Father*' (unpublished, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2008). I am indebted to Pugh for sharing her essay with me.

¹⁶⁷ Pascale Petit, *The Zoo Father* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001).

¹⁶⁸ Petit, *The Huntress* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005).

¹⁶⁹ 'The Ant Glove', *The Zoo Father*, pp. 24-5, l. 3.

¹⁷⁰ Petit's mother offered her daughter little affection, let alone protection from sexual abuse. In an interview with Valerie Mejer, Petit says of her mother, 'To say she was mentally ill doesn't explain her. To say she scared me and was cold and made me want to vanish in her presence doesn't describe her', in Zoë Brigley, 'Exile and Ecology: The Poetic Practice of Gwyneth Lewis, Pascale Petit and Deryn Rees-Jones' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2007) <<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/1118/>> [accessed 11 August 2012], p. 339.

¹⁷¹ Ian Gregson, *The New Poetry in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 117.

¹⁷² D. M. Black, 'Hidden Abysses of Feeling; and a Private Area of Experience', *Poetry London*, no. 41 (2002), 33.

¹⁷³ Wayne Burrows, 'A Sampling of Poetry Pamphlets', *Poetry London*, no. 55 (2006), 39.

¹⁷⁴ Noel Williams, 'Reviews', *The North*, no. 44 (2009), 63.

the reader longing for a little circumspection and air',¹⁷⁵ and 'a certain monotony'¹⁷⁶ to the work, which leaves the reader feeling 'a bit bombarded'.¹⁷⁷ Johnny Marsh stated 'The constant recurrence of gynaecological and anatomical detail [...] can become repetitive and too much of an effect'.¹⁷⁸

To what extent do critics' gender sensibilities influence their views?¹⁷⁹ Accusations of poor taste have been made of both male and female poets, see the earlier deliberations concerning Redgrove. But gender differentials do appear to be an issue in other respects, with critics showing surprise at Petit's being 'angry'¹⁸⁰ and at her 'rage'.¹⁸¹ Marsh's mention of the 'gynaecological' in his review of *What the Water Gave Me: Poems After Frida Kahlo* is telling; there is more than a little gentility here, a return to British Victorian sensibilities regarding the female body and the use of the word 'vagina'. Petit only mentions the word 'vagina' once in this collection, in 'Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird (III)'¹⁸² with a mere six references to 'sex', 'hole', 'crotch' and 'pelvis' in fifty-three poems.

Whether or not the 'yoking of beauty and horror' transcends taste depends on the individual. The poems are certainly, in part, disturbing, yet I intend to show that there is far more than a mirroring or reflection of rape and abuse in Petit's poetry, her imagery, in particular, is highly transformative, even lavish. She renders what could have been a monotony of abuse into a vivid collection, with conflicting emotions shown towards her father, her abuser, cloaked in a range of animal guises.

¹⁷⁵ Sue Hubbard, 'Reviews', *Poetry Wales*, 45:1 (Summer 2009), 61-2.

¹⁷⁶ Roger Caldwell, 'Myths and Stories', *Planet*, no. 175 (2006), 96.

¹⁷⁷ Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, 'Pascale Petit: The Zoo Father', *Poetry Wales*, 38.2 (2002), 63.

¹⁷⁸ Johnny Marsh, 'Painting, Poetry, Music: The Images of Pascale Petit', *Agenda*, 44.2-3 (January 2009), 105.

¹⁷⁹ I am not concerned whether such comments are made by male or female reviewers but with the extent to which both genders, at times, may have gendered preconceptions regarding 'suitable' subject matters or ranges of emotion for women who write on violent material.

¹⁸⁰ Hubbard, pp. 61-3.

¹⁸¹ Jehane Markham, 'The Zoo Father: Pascale Petit', *Ambit*, no. 167 (2002), 60.

¹⁸² Petit, *What the Water Gave Me: Poems After Frida Kahlo* (Bridgend: Seren, 2010), p. 49.

‘Self-Portrait with Fire Ants’ is from *The Zoo Father*.¹⁸³

Self-Portrait with Fire Ants

To visit you Father, I wear a mask of fire ants.
When I sit waiting for you to explain

why you abandoned me when I was eight
they file in, their red bodies

massing around my eyes, stinging my pupils white
until I’m blind. Then they attack my mouth.

I try to lick them but they climb down my gullet
until an entire swarm stings my stomach,

while you must become a giant anteater,
push your long sticky tongue down my throat,

as you once did to my baby brother,
French-kissing him while he pretended to sleep.

I can’t remember what you did to me, but the ants know.

For a ‘self-portrait’ we see very little of the narrator’s features. However, her pain is apparent, ‘stinging my pupils white / until I’m blind’ and ‘they [the fire ants] attack my mouth’ (ll. 5-6). The narrator is rendered blind and unable to speak. Dori Laub finds that ‘speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to – and of listening to themselves’.¹⁸⁴ Petit does find her voice within the poem but the voice does not come easily.

The first three stanzas all have a strong ‘t’ consonant at the end of the first line: ‘ants’, ‘eight’, ‘white’, which softens in the fourth stanza, ‘gullet’, and is subsumed, as the father transforms, into ‘anteater’ in the fifth stanza. The strong ‘t’ is reinforced in ‘throat’ (stanza 5, l. 2). Once the focus switches to the brother, in the sixth stanza, the ‘t’ disappears, only to return in the final stanza with ‘ants’. These uses of ‘t’ produce a stuttering effect in the poem, as though the narrator is struggling to enunciate, with the memories and associated emotions of the abuse catching in her throat.

¹⁸³ *The Zoo Father*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁴ Dori Laub, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* eds by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), http://representingtheholocaust.wikispaces.com/file/view/Laub_Bearing+Witness.pdf [accessed 8 August 2014]

The metaphors work on several levels. She cannot speak, and is waiting for her father,¹⁸⁵ ‘to explain / why you abandoned me when I was eight’ (ll. 2-3). She is rendered dumb due to his presence and to the pain of the memories that meeting him evoke. Further, she becomes blind due to this pain. Is this the pain of seeing him? Or the pain of not having seen him for so many years?¹⁸⁶ Either way this is the man who abused her (and her brother and mother).¹⁸⁷

Petit seeks to distance herself from the content via the strategy of masking, yet the mask in this poem is painful – the mask attacks her. The mask could also represent her anger, ‘their [the fire ants’] red bodies’ (l. 4). An additional reading of the redness of the ‘mask’ could be embarrassment and difficulty, her face and body colouring due to her complicated emotions on seeing her father again. Petit’s use of masking is important to her poetry – the cover image of *The Zoo Father* is of a horse mask – and masking can be seen throughout her collection *What the Water Gave Me*. See, for example, ‘but don’t let that fierce mask bite your face’, which recalls the fire ants, or ‘I wear / a paper skull mask’ and ‘I wear a steam veil’. Writing as Frida Kahlo, in *What the Water Gave Me*, Petit adopts a persona, another form of mask, in order to explore difficult issues – including Kahlo’s crippling accident in a bus crash in which a steel rod pierced her vagina. Petit likens this piercing to a rape, in which Kahlo loses ‘her virginity to a lightning bolt’.¹⁸⁸

In ‘Self-Portrait with Fire Ants’, the self-portrait mainly concerns what is happening inside, where the fire ants ‘climb down my gullet / until an entire swarm stings my stomach’ (l. 8). The self-portrait is more of an x-ray or ultrasound scan. She shows the effects of the rape inside the body, in addition to the portrayal of her emotions – red face and body, stung by the experience. The internal ‘stinging’ is

¹⁸⁵ The ‘you’ in the poem.

¹⁸⁶ In subsequent poems, such as ‘The Lungfish Father’, *The Zoo Father*, pp. 11-12, we realise the father is seriously ill.

¹⁸⁷ ‘Self-Portrait as a Were-Jaguar’, *The Zoo Father*, p. 22, refers to Petit’s father’s rape of her mother, while ‘Self-Portrait with Fire Ants’ refers to Petit’s brother’s abuse.

¹⁸⁸ ‘Portrait of Mariana Morilla Safa’, ‘She Plays Alone (Girl with Death Mask)’, ‘What the Water Gave Me (VI)’, ‘Remembrance of an Open Wound’, *What the Water Gave Me*, p. 50, l. 12, p. 12, ll. 1-2, p. 62, l. 12 and p. 18, l. 10, respectively.

visceral. It allows the reader to experience something of her physical emotions and pain: ‘the entire swarm’ climbs down to sting the reader too.

Masks are sometimes worn by people who wish to take on more power than they have. Petit uses masks – but above all metaphor – to represent her pain, but the pain of the rape is rarely directly shown. Nieves Pascual believes that in art ‘pain is too literal to allow representation’.¹⁸⁹ Petit shows her loss of control in ‘I try to lick them but they climb down my gullet’ (l. 7). This memory of the attack is too strong, something she cannot face, and she writes ‘I can’t remember’ (l. 13) as in cannot or will not remember. She returns again to the relative (if painful) safety of the ‘mask’, with the final phrase ‘but the ants know’ (l. 13); in other words the mask knows whereas Petit is unable to express what happened. ‘I can’t remember’ could also be a way of forcing the reader to imagine the events that the poet cannot or will not articulate, and a way of inviting the father to acknowledge what he did and atone for it. This invitation can also be seen in ll. 2-3, in which the narrator is ‘waiting for you to explain / why you abandoned me’. The line break at ‘explain’ could be seen to stress the importance of an explanation not just for his leaving but for his abuse.

There are no graphic descriptions of rape in ‘Self-Portrait with Fire Ants’. This is in keeping with most of *The Zoo Father* collection. The strongest depictions of rape are in ‘Self-Portrait as a Yanomami Daughter’:

the way you used to hold me, Father,
when you turned into a demon
and tore me with your penis.

This is how Night was made, my thighs sticky with star-blood,
my mouth flooded with moonseeds.

And ‘Self-Portrait as a Dugout Canoe’, which focuses on a single metaphor:

You sang to me, dressed my branches
with ribbons, called me your little bride.
You ran your hands along my trunk

deciding where to cut [...]

You stood

¹⁸⁹ Nieves Pascual, *Witness to Pain: Essays on the Translation of Pain into Art* (Bern: Lang, 2005), p. 7.

astride me, struck zigzag blows
with your axe until I was hollow.

You packed me with palm leaves
and lit a virgin fire inside me.¹⁹⁰

Petit's imagery associated with rape is frequently opulent, turning violent material into something beautiful, as in 'sticky with star-blood' and 'flooded with moonseeds'. While this opulence can be disturbing it also leads to transformation. In the fifth stanza of 'Self-Portrait with Fire Ants', the father shape-shifts, becoming an animal, 'while you must become a giant anteater / push your long sticky tongue down my throat' (ll. 9-10). While an anteater can remove some of the pain by eating the ants which bite the poet's 'gullet' and 'stomach', a 'giant anteater' is threatening due to its size. Further, 'push your long sticky tongue down my throat' represents an attack on the body, a metaphor for forced oral sex. The level of threat is reinforced in the sixth stanza when we are told the father pushed his tongue into the narrator's brother's mouth 'French-kissing him while he pretended to sleep' (l. 12). Ignoring the play on words of 'French-kissing', given that Petit's mother and father were French, we realise that the father is a serial abuser.

The father's transformation into animal form uses magic realism and Petit's highly stylized imagery represents an innovative way of writing about pain and sexual abuse in contemporary poetry. Further, as Gregson points out, by using various animals to represent her father, she is satirizing

masculine appetites, especially sexual appetites. Patriarchal assumptions insist that the masculine is rational and therefore properly human, whereas the feminine is irrational and so related to nature in all its disorder.¹⁹¹

In *The Zoo Father*, such assumptions are turned on their head, with the father frequently appearing to be irrational and 'beastly'.

'Self-Portrait with Fire Ants' contains six uses of 'you' (and one use of 'your'), something which paradoxically might be expected in a love poem and is reminiscent of

¹⁹⁰ 'Self-Portrait as a Yanomami Daughter' and 'Self-Portrait as a Dugout Canoe', *The Zoo Father*, pp. 52-3, ll. 15-19 and p. 43, ll. 4-7 and 10-14, respectively.

¹⁹¹ Gregson, p. 119.

Plath's 'Daddy'¹⁹² (although Petit's uses of 'you' are less emphatic). Compulsion features in the poem, as in 'while you must become a giant anteater' (l. 9). The word 'must' appears frequently in Petit's poetry, and could be seen as symptomatic of how she was controlled as a child, and forced against her will.

The use of couplets for such a poem subliminally represents a 'coupling'. Gregson, in an uncomfortable, yet nuanced, reading of *The Zoo Father* points to an uneasy reciprocity in the daughter-father relationship, particularly in 'Self-Portrait as a Harpy Eagle',¹⁹³ arguing that the daughter is shown to be 'in the process of becoming the same predatory bird'. Gregson suggests this 'reciprocity is crucially symptomatic of a shift in gender attitudes [since Plath], involving a greater sense of mutual entanglement'.¹⁹⁴ Arguably, for some survivors, there can be some identification with an aggressor, something Rose has referred to as 'victimisation is also pull'.¹⁹⁵

A highly problematic parental relationship can also be sensed in Petit's poetry about her mother. 'My Mother's Tongue'¹⁹⁶ from *The Huntress*, picks up on some of Petit's key themes – power, silence and violence. It is an example of the stichic form¹⁹⁷ used in much of the *The Huntress*. Writing without stanza breaks, she adds an even greater intensity to the poems, allowing the reader no breathing space.

My Mother's Tongue

I have twisted a lightning bolt
 into a spiral and eaten it.
 From my stomach it gives orders.
 I, who was never hugged by you,
 or hugged you, Mother,
 must lie on your corpse
 feet to feet, breasts to breasts,
 mouth to mouth.
 I cannot help the words I am speaking

¹⁹² Although Petit believes 'Daddy' has not been an influence. Pascale Petit, private communication to Katrina Naomi, email dated 3 March 2011.

¹⁹³ *The Zoo Father*, p. 44.

¹⁹⁴ Gregson, p. 120.

¹⁹⁵ Rose, p. 232.

¹⁹⁶ *The Huntress*, p. 27.

¹⁹⁷ I am using the term throughout this thesis to indicate a lack of stanzas, with or without regular metrical patterning in the lines.

but say them without pause
 in the language of your “angel”.
 I give you my body to eat,
 my blood to drink,
 my flesh for clothes.
 I give you my breath.
 You struggle and I wrestle with you
 as you rise from the floor.
 Now your black and shrivelled tongue
 is hanging out of your mouth
 and I must seize it and tear it out.
 Then you fall down. The door opens.
 And I leave, holding your tongue
 in my cupped hands like a bird
 that must be saved,
 its wing-bones and spine
 curved like an embryo.
 I go out into the great field
 and set it free.

As with almost any Petit poem, imagery dominates. Here, Roman Catholic imagery prevails,¹⁹⁸ with suggestions of transubstantiation,¹⁹⁹ ‘I give you my body to eat, / my blood to drink,’ (ll. 12-13). Continuing with religious imagery, there is an ‘angel’ and a reference to speaking in tongues, ‘I cannot help the words I am speaking / but say them without pause / in the language of your “angel”’ (ll. 9-11).

In contrast to ‘Self-Portrait with Fire Ants’ where the narrator is ‘dumb’, here she speaks freely but ‘cannot help’ what she is saying, or doing. There is no guilt, she has the ‘angel’ on her side. In addition, the ‘lightning bolt’ (l. 1)²⁰⁰ ‘gives orders’ (l. 3), telling the narrator what she must do. She has to lie on her mother’s dead body (note the use of ‘must’): ‘must lie on your corpse / feet to feet, breasts to breasts, / mouth to mouth’ (ll. 6-8). In addition to the suggestion of being controlled, there is a bodily sacrifice, with the daughter ‘who was never hugged by you, / or hugged you, Mother,’ (ll. 4-5) offering herself for consumption – her body to eat, her blood to drink – as in the Roman Catholic mass. However, this is female blood, which many associate with shamanistic and other transformative powers.²⁰¹ She also offers her mother ‘my flesh

¹⁹⁸ Petit was brought up Roman Catholic and from other poems such as ‘The Mantis Mother’ (*The Huntress*, p. 23) with its play on ‘praying’ and ‘preying’, it is clear that Petit’s brother believes the mother to be religious (while the mother believes her son is ‘her Jesus’).

¹⁹⁹ Transubstantiation will be discussed in chapter 5.

²⁰⁰ In the poem ‘Remembrance of an Open Wound’, *What the Water Gave Me*, p. 18, ‘lightning bolt’ represents a steel bar which pierces Kahlo’s vagina. Both examples suggest the use of force.

²⁰¹ See *The Wise Wound*, discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis.

for clothes' and her own 'breath' (ll. 14 and 15), continuing this sacrifice in a bid to cover the mother's nakedness and resuscitate, or save and protect her. The violent religious imagery continues with the metaphor of wrestling with an angel, 'You struggle and I wrestle with you / as you rise from the floor' (ll. 16-17). 'Rise' has an obvious religious meaning here, with references to the Ascension, as well as the crucial reference to wrestling with an assailant during the night.²⁰² There are interesting associations to be made with a fight that the protagonist (whether Petit or Jacob) does not abandon, possibly with the desire for divine intervention.

The poem becomes far more violent from l. 18. We hear of the mother's 'black and shrivelled tongue' which Petit 'must seize' and 'tear [...] out' (l. 20). As well as a silencing, which is suggestive of how Petit was silenced as a child, this could reference the rape of Philomela by Tereus in *Metamorphoses*.²⁰³ L. 23 has the revelation of Petit saving her mother's tongue 'in my cupped hands like a bird', with the tongue's 'wing-bones and spine / curved like an embryo' (ll. 25-26), as if Petit offers her mother's tongue, and her stories, a new life. Like Olds in 'I Go Back to May 1937',²⁰⁴ Petit liberates what happens to her mother, and by inference what she has personally experienced, 'I go out into the great field / and set it free' (ll. 27-28), the 'great field' being outdoors, a world away from secrecy and silence.

Petit uses linked internal rhymes and half-rhymes of 'spiral' and 'angel' (ll. 2 and 11), 'struggle' and 'wrestle' and 'shrivelled' (ll. 16 and 18) and 'fall' and 'field' (ll. 21 and 27), which bring a sense of circularity to the poem, a sense of returning to what has gone before. Each rhyme links the mother and the daughter, possibly signifying as her mother was raped, so Petit was raped. Despite the violent imagery and content, the poem can be seen as a love poem to her mother, offering her rebirth and freedom, while the poet also seizes the chance for her own freedoms, to speak of what she has experienced before stepping out into the world and away.

²⁰² Genesis 32. 24-32.

²⁰³ As discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

²⁰⁴ Sharon Olds, *The Gold Cell*, p. 23.

As discussed, tongues and mouths appear frequently in Petit's work, as in 'Self-Portrait with Fire Ants', alluding to silence and the breaking of that silence. Another poem, 'House of Darkness',²⁰⁵ ends with 'a blade / called the Perforator / "for piercing the tongues of daughters who talk"'.²⁰⁶

Daughters who talk too much can be criticised. In telling her truths,²⁰⁶ Petit has been accused of 'therapy' by critics including Robert Potts, whose review of *The Zoo Father* claims that 'poets who take suffering as subject matter do so knowing the risks'.²⁰⁷ He does not explain what the risks might be, yet continues:

It is hard to criticise material so apparently personal [...]. The subject matter has its own power; does the poetry transform it sufficiently from any other account of appalling abuse? Not entirely, not sufficiently. The same poetic procedure is applied in nearly every poem, the same drama of childhood impotence converted into adult omnipotence through acts of imagination. There could have been one, perhaps two powerful poems to be extracted from this approach.²⁰⁸

He concludes: 'At book length, *The Zoo Father* asks that we participate in the gruelling experience of someone else's therapy'.²⁰⁹ His assertion that *The Zoo Father*'s poems all take the same 'approach' shows a casual reading of the collection. Not all the poems are hostile to the father. Some, such as 'The Lungfish Father', are far removed from violence, appearing to show Petit's desire to help her father breathe:

I'd secrete bubbles of oxygen
from my blood
and waft them over your mouth.²¹⁰

In contrast to the emotions shown in 'The Lungfish Father', see the energy and transformation of the self in 'Amazonia':

I'm hallucinating as any true
hunter should, having fasted and lain here awake, chanting
to the spirits on the ceiling. This is how I make paint

²⁰⁵ *The Huntress*, p. 12.

²⁰⁶ Petit discussed her own surprise at how daring she found her work, especially when writing *The Zoo Father*. Naomi, 'Interview with Pascale Petit,' Appendix C, pp. 91-9.

²⁰⁷ Robert Potts, 'The Zoo Father, by Pascale Petit', *Guardian Saturday Review*, (16 March 2002), 10.

²⁰⁸ Potts, 'The Zoo Father, by Pascale Petit', 10.

²⁰⁹ Potts, 'The Zoo Father, by Pascale Petit', 10.

²¹⁰ Petit, 'The Lungfish Father', *The Zoo Father*, pp. 12-13, ll. 37-9.

ripple into a white forest canopy, the trees burst into flower
and flowers turn into monkeys.²¹¹

Further, 'The Songs of Insects' contains lyrical lines such as, 'If moonlight could be heard / it would sound like this.'²¹²

While there is a good deal of violence in *The Zoo Father*, the tone of the collection is far more varied than critics have allowed. In my interview with her, Petit spoke of wanting to exhibit both anger and compassion, the good and the bad, in her poetry:

I am acting out a kind of struggle. I'm looking at evil [...] and I'm looking at where the goodness is [...] but at the same time I really acknowledge there's a lot of darkness there, there's a lot of violence.²¹³

The emotions in her work are complex and her imagery is often opulent and frequently troubling. The representations of her father and mother are nuanced, at times even loving. This represents a duality to her work, highlighting her conflicting emotions and subtly subverted gender expectations. In doing so, and in moving beyond passivity or a 'victim' role, Petit's poetry has opened up innovative channels of writing in response to sexual violence, ones which do not always tackle rape directly but which shed fresh light on transformative life experiences.

²¹¹ Petit, 'Amazonia', *The Zoo Father*, pp. 45-6, ll. 16-21.

²¹² 'The Songs of Insects', *The Zoo Father*, pp. 64-5, ll. 37-8.

²¹³ Appendix C, p. 94.

Chapter 4 – Sharon Olds

An important element of Sharon Olds's poetry focuses on acts of rape and violence that have been committed not against her but against other women and girls.²¹⁴ Yet critical writing on her poetry has generally treated it as purely autobiographical. Along with much praise, her work has also met with hostility, with Helen Vendler and Adam Kirsch calling her work 'pornographic' and 'porn', and Ian Hamilton referring to Olds as a 'shriller' Sylvia Plath.²¹⁵ Denise Levertov's statement, 'I'm certainly very tired of the me, me, me, kind of poem, the Sharon Olds "Find the dirt and dig it up" poem'²¹⁶ is a further case in point. Olds's poetry is often seen as synonymous with contemporary confessionalism²¹⁷ yet, as I shall show, far from all of her work is autobiographical.

If critics have overlooked the degree of violence in her writing, they have also overlooked the empathy in her work. Appendix D shows Olds processing her thoughts regarding 'stories about women and girls' which 'haunted' her, and the extent to which

²¹⁴ This is a key distinction between Olds's work and Petit's. Other researchers may find interesting comparisons between Olds's *The Father* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993) and Petit's *The Zoo Father*. There is speculation that Olds may be a survivor of incest. See Gale Swiontkowski, *Imagined Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich and Olds on Life with Daddy* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2003), cited in Anna Woodford, 'Birdhouse (A Collection of Poetry), and The Daughter: The Roles of the Father, the Speaker and the Reader in the Work of Sharon Olds' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Newcastle University, 2008), p. 45. See also Vicki Feaver, 'Body and Soul: The Power of Sharon Olds', <<http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/general-reader/poets-poets/body-and-soul>> [accessed 1 February 2014]. When I asked Olds if she would use the word 'abuse' in relation to her childhood she was hesitant. See Naomi, 'Sharon Olds in Conversation with Katrina Naomi', *The Dark Horse*, no. 28 (2012), Appendix D, pp. 100-15. Olds's poems such as 'First', *The Wellspring* (London: Cape, 1996), pp. 25-6, appear to show a level of sexual exploitation by men.

²¹⁵ Helen Vendler in 'Feminism and Literature', *The New York Review of Books*, 37.9 (31 May 1990), 19-25; Adam Kirsch, 'Reviews of *Blood, Tin, Straw*' on the Modern American Poetry website, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/olds/critiques.html> [accessed 29 July 2014]. Olds discusses the 'pornographic' charge, see Appendix D, p. 158. Further, Farish, p. 52, has identified 'a misogynistic thread' running through critiques by Kirsch and Antony Libby. Ian Hamilton in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 398.

²¹⁶ Nicholas O'Connell, 'Levertov's Final Interview: A Poet's Valediction', on the Modern American Poetry website <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/levertov/oconnell.html> [accessed 29 July 2014].

²¹⁷ See Sean O'Brien, 'It's All About Her', *Sunday Times* (16 December 2012) <<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/fiction/article1174550.ecepage>> [accessed 12 September 2014] and Christina Patterson, 'Me, Myself and I: How Easy is it to Write Confessional Poetry', *Independent* (23 January 2013) accompanied by a photo of Olds, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/me-myself-and-i-how-easy-is-it-to-write-confessional-poetry-8463999.html>> [accessed 27 March 2014].

she is aware of the dangers of writing about other's experiences.²¹⁸ She clearly has an affinity with the survivors of rape and other forms of violence, and I believe there are several levels of personae in her poetry. While I focus on Olds's 'The Girl'²¹⁹ and 'That Year',²²⁰ Olds has published various poems which consider rape, including 'After the Rape in Our Building'²²¹ in which she thinks of 'the rapist' while having sex with her partner, and 'The Protestor', which considers the plight of a man²²² going to jail who has refused to fight in Vietnam:

which meant you'd decided to be
raped rather than to kill, if it was their
life or your ass, it was your ass.²²³

'Prayer' and 'Night Terrors' also have allusions to rape, including 'like her own mother entered and / entered by that man she hated'.²²⁴ Other poems such as 'Sunday Night' feature sexual molestation, in which her father gropes a waitress, and Olds's anger at this:

I wish I had stuck
a fork in that arm, driven the tines
deep, heard the squeak of muscle,
felt the skid on bone.²²⁵

In all these poems, she appears to be searching for common ground with those who have been raped or otherwise abused, as she does in 'The Girl'.²²⁶

²¹⁸ See Appendix D.

²¹⁹ First published in *The Gold Cell* in 1987, pp. 14-15.

²²⁰ Olds, *Satan Says* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 6-7.

²²¹ Olds, *Blood, Tin, Straw* (London: Cape, 2000), p. 12.

²²² There are fewer such poems concerning men and boys. However, I will briefly discuss 'The Missing Boy' and 'The Hunger-Thief'.

²²³ *Blood, Tin, Straw*, p. 97, ll. 8-10.

²²⁴ *Satan Says*, p. 72 and p. 11, ll. 12-13.

²²⁵ Sharon Olds, *The Unswept Room* (London: Cape, 2003), pp. 12-13, ll. 23-6.

²²⁶ I have used the version from Olds, *Selected Poems* (London: Cape, 2005), pp. 31-2, rather than the 1987 version in *The Gold Cell*. The latter has some minor differences: an additional line 'the dry ochre of foam rubber', and the earth is 'iron-smelling' rather than 'copper-smelling'. The level of violence is the same in both versions.

The Girl

They chased her and her friend through the woods
 and caught them in a waste clearing, broken
 random bracken, a couple of old mattresses,
 as if the place had been prepared.
 The thin one with straight hair
 started raping her best friend,
 and the curly one stood above her,
 thrust his thumbs back inside her jaws, she was twelve,
 stuck his penis in her mouth and throat
 faster and faster and faster.
 Then the straight-haired one stood up –
 they lay like pulled-up roots at his feet,
 naked twelve-year-old girls – he said
*Now you're going to know what it's like
 to be shot five times and slaughtered like a pig,*
 and they switched mattresses,
 the blond was raping and stabbing her friend,
 the straight-haired one sticking inside her
 in one place and then another,
 the point of his gun pressed deep into her waist,
 she felt a little click in her spine and a
 sting like 7-Up in her head, and then he
 pulled the tree branch across her throat
 and everything went dark,
 the gym went dark, and her mother's kitchen,
 even the globes of light on the rounded
 lips of her mother's nesting bowls went dark.

When she woke up, she was lying on the cold
 copper-smelling earth, the mattress was pulled up
 over her like a blanket, she saw
 the dead body of her best friend
 and she began to run,
 she came to the edge of the woods and she stepped
 out from the trees, like a wound debriding,
 and she walked across the field to the tracks
 and said to the railway brakeman *Please, sir. Please, sir.*

At the trial she had to say everything –
 her elder sister helped her with the words –
 she had to sit in the room with them and
 point to them. Now she goes to parties
 but does not smoke, she is a cheerleader,
 she throws her body up in the air
 and kicks her legs and comes home and does the dishes
 and her homework, she has to work hard in math,
 the sky over the roof of her bed
 filled with white planets. Every night
 she prays for the soul of her best friend and
 then thanks God for life. She knows
 what all of us want never to know
 and she does a cartwheel, she splits, she shakes the
 shredded pom-poms in her fists.

‘As if the place had been prepared’ is chilling, as is the subject matter of the poem. The focus is distilled to one act, the ‘curly one’s’ act of oral rape (ll. 6-10). We are shown the one who

[...] stood above her,
thrust his thumbs back inside her jaws.

Then

stuck his penis in her mouth and throat
faster and faster and faster.

Olds’s line breaks place the stress on the first word in a line. In the extracts above, placing the stress on ‘thrust’ and ‘stuck’ – both verbs of force – serves to highlight the use of violence. The stress on ‘faster’ mimics the dreadful intensity of the sexual violence. This effect is heightened further by the lack of a comma after ‘throat’; the reader is offered no pause, via punctuation, in the rush to the next line. Olds’s line breaks accentuate the violence of this poem.²²⁷ To continue, we hear the rapists’ talk, we hear their language and are shown (ll. 17-19):

the blond [...] raping and stabbing²²⁸ her friend,
the straight haired one sticking inside her
in one place and then another.

The verbs ‘raping’ or ‘stabbing’ have none of the impact of ‘thumbs back inside her jaws’. Even ‘the point of his gun pressed deep into her waist’ pales into relative insignificance, despite our knowledge that both girls are subsequently shot – and only one survives. Showing the ‘thumbs back inside her jaws’ almost produces an involuntary gagging in the reader. Further, ‘a / sting like 7-Up in her head’, a simile for a bullet entering the girl’s body (ll. 21-2), is effective because its innocent, almost childlike, quality contrasts so sharply with what is being described – a girl shot, after

²²⁷ They are not in themselves ‘violent’, as Potts has claimed in ‘Rewarding Poetic Loss’, although they certainly add momentum: ‘The line breaks have no metrical or semantic justification: they are there for momentum, creating violent enjambments throughout long sentences, giving the effect of a rapid and unstoppable outpouring.’ Nor are they ‘unclean’ as stated by Anis Shivani in ‘Philip Levine and Other Mediocrities: What it Takes to Ascend to the Poet Laureateship’, *The Huffington Post* (13 August 2011), 1 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anis-shivani/philip-levine_b_925788.html> [accessed 8 December 2012]. Shivani also called Olds’s line breaks ‘intentionally unclean’, ‘The Sad Case of American Poetry’, *The London Magazine* (December-January 2006), 72.

²²⁸ She avoids a first-word stress on the word ‘raping’. Such a stress would be too obvious and show too much of a ‘design’ on the reader.

being raped, and left for dead. Yet it is Olds's focus on the oral rape that is central to the power of the poem, in which the reader is left to imagine the details of the rapes and murder.

This latter device draws some comparisons with Robertson's 'At Roane Head' and 'The Flaying of Marsyas'. Like Robertson, Olds writes about violence – in this instance sexual violence – with a steady gaze. But compared with his, her language is relatively plain. There are some exceptions, such as the girls being 'pulled up at the roots' (l. 12), possibly a brutal reworking of the idea of 'deflowering', and the arresting image of the survivor being compared with a 'wound debriding' (stanza 2, l. 7). Another telling line break is on line 8, breaking on 'she was twelve', in the middle of the oral rape depiction. At first glance, 'she was twelve' appears to have been casually added. But the girl's age is mentioned again five lines later, and this time we are told that both she and her friend are 'naked'. Like Robertson, Olds repeats and, by doing so, conveys her outrage.

Apart from the words in the final stanza that the girl has to be helped to say, which link again to the importance of the mouth and its violation (that powerful image of the oral rape), this stanza is in stark contrast to what has come before. After all of the leg kicking, the splits and the all-American, God-fearing, cheerleading girlhood of the last stanza, we return to the girl's fists – the poem's final image. She gives the girl some fightback, some agency, even if the pompoms are 'shredded' (l. 51). There is a huge amount of empathy here, and an unmistakable identification, particularly with the one who survives. Note the poem is titled 'The Girl' not 'The Girls'. This could have been the girl in Olds's class.²²⁹ This could have been Olds.

Writing about rapes that have happened to others is not without its risks. As Susan Sontag states, 'It is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's'.²³⁰ Such risks are evident in Olds's 'That Year',²³¹ in which the poet yokes others' experiences to her own.

²²⁹ See the poem 'That Year', below.

²³⁰ Sontag, p. 101.

²³¹ This is a revised version, from the 9th edition *Satan Says* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press,

That Year

The year of the mask of blood, my father
hammering on the glass door to get in

was the year they found her body in the hills,
in a shallow grave, naked, white as
mushroom, partly decomposed,
raped, murdered, the girl from my class.

That was the year my mother took us and
hid us so he could not get at us
when she told him to leave; so there was no more
tyings by the wrist to the chair,
no more denial of food
or the forcing of foods, the head held back,
down the throat at the restaurant,
the shame of vomited buttermilk
down the sweater with its shame of new breasts.

That was the year
I started to bleed
crossing over that border in the night,

and in Social Studies, we came at last
to Auschwitz. I recognized it
like my father's face, the face of the guard
turning away –
or worse yet
turning toward me.

The symmetrical piles of white bodies,
the round white breast-shapes of the heaps,
the smell of the smoke, the dogs the wires the
rope the hunger. It had happened to others.
There was a word for us. I was: a Jew.
It had happened to six million.
And there was another word that was not
for the six million, but was a word for me
and for many others. I was:
a survivor.

There are potential crossovers with Plath's 'Daddy':²³² the 'father's face, the face of the guard' (l. 21 of 'That Year') alongside the father's face in stanza 8 of 'Daddy', and the claiming of connection (l. 29 of 'That Year') to Jews, 'There was a word for us. I was: a Jew' (stanza 5, l. 5). Plath wrote (stanza 7, l. 5) 'I think I may well be a Jew' and (stanza 6, l. 5) 'I may be a bit of a Jew'. Yet, in contrast to Plath, and to many Jews, Olds is 'a survivor' (stanza 6, l. 10). The non-Jewish Plath was criticised by Wieseltier,

1993), pp. 6-7.

²³² And, to a lesser extent, with Anne Sexton's poem 'My Friend, My Friend', in which Jewishness is 'an enviable state' and which some have argued was a precursor to Plath's 'Daddy' (see Rose, p. 217). Additionally, Rose cites (the Jewish) Jacques Derrida who states 'The Jew is also the other', p. 217.

‘she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place’.²³³ The postscript to the 1961 novel *Sang du ciel*²³⁴ by Piotr Rawicz, a survivor of the camps, takes another view, ‘The events [...] could crop up in any place, at any time, in the mind of any man’.²³⁵ Olds seems to be conscious of the difficulty of the issue. In her poem ‘The Window’ (ll. 3-6), when her daughter says she is ‘mad’ at her for saying she is a Jew, ‘that’s so cheap’, Olds responds (ll. 6-7) ‘You’re right, / I say, you’re so right.’²³⁶

When I asked Olds if ‘That Year’ had been influenced by ‘Daddy’, she distanced herself from Plath, saying she could not ‘remember when I started reading Plath’,²³⁷ adding that she was ‘so frightened’ by her suicide. This may be so but her distancing from Plath is noteworthy given that she appears to be aware of the risks she takes in the poem.

The phrase ‘at last’ (l. 19 of ‘That Year’), is telling, ‘we came at last / to Auschwitz’. It is as if Olds had wanted to find something to identify with and ‘at last’ has found it. Like Plath, she risks criticism – of not having ‘earned’ this identification. What we know of Olds’s childhood from her poetry is that she was tied to a chair and physically abused.²³⁸ No one wants to set a hierarchy of violence, yet is Olds equating her suffering with that of the Holocaust? Or is she listing various difficulties in her young life, with the knowledge of these striking her at one crucial time? Herein lies the problem with ‘That Year’ – the poem can be read different ways. Yet appearing to equate or even link one’s own mistreatments to the murder of millions is a huge risk.

²³³ Wieseltier, p. 20.

²³⁴ Piotr Rawicz, *Le sang du ciel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

²³⁵ Quoted in Rose, p. 216.

²³⁶ *The Unswept Room*, pp. 53-4. It is worth noting that the poem is included in Olds’s *Selected Poems* published two years later.

²³⁷ See Appendix D, p. 113.

²³⁸ See references to physical abuse in ‘A Chair by the Fire’, ‘Forty Years Later’, ‘Earth Aria’, ‘7 A. M.’ and ‘The Tending’ in *The Unswept Room*, pp. 9-10, 57, 62, 91-2, 99-100, respectively. There are numerous other examples.

This is not to diminish her experience of violence in the poem. In the opening lines, her father is shown ‘hammering on the glass door’, with the rest of the family forced to hide ‘so he could not get at us’. She highlights forced feeding, which has a sexual edge, in, ‘the forcing of foods, the head held back, / down the throat at the restaurant, the shame of vomited buttermilk / down the sweater with its shame of new breasts’ (stanza 3, ll. 6-9). There is a powerful link between (forced?) oral sex, with ‘the head held back’ and ‘vomited buttermilk’ as a metaphor for semen. Then, she gives us the ‘breast-shapes of the heaps’ of bodies in Auschwitz. By yoking her experiences, including the ‘shame of new breasts’, with those who died in the Holocaust, Olds risks undermining the violence she experienced. The poem inadvertently sets up a comparison – and undermines the otherwise successful new breasts imagery.

As for ‘the girl from my class’ who was ‘raped, murdered’ (stanza 2, l. 4), Olds’s identification with the girl is clear. This was a young classmate. The incident has stayed with Olds; a closeness to something terrible. We are shown the girl ‘in the hills, / in a shallow grave, naked, white as / mushroom, partially decomposed’ (stanza 2, ll. 2-4). This is one tragedy, one body, which is linked to the many of the Holocaust. She shows empathy for her classmate, while also exhibiting her own, milder loss of innocence, ‘That was the year / I started to bleed, / crossing over that border in the night’ (stanza 4, ll. 1-3). She exhibits a fear of what can happen to girls, to women and to humanity as a whole.

Occasionally, this empathy is extended to those who have not suffered sexual violence. ‘The Missing Boy’, features her son’s emotions after seeing a photo of a child who is missing:

At night, when I put him to bed,
my son holds my hand tight
and says he’s sure that kid’s all right,
nothing to worry about, he just
hopes he’s getting the food he likes.²³⁹

The war poems from *One Secret Thing*, such as ‘Woman with the Lettuce’, consider a woman ‘being shoved toward a truck. / [...] Furious, she takes her last chance to look

²³⁹ Olds, *The Dead and the Living* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 76, ll. 17-21.

right at us'.²⁴⁰ Further, there are instances in her work where she appears to side with the abused and the abuser. See 'The Food-Thief',²⁴¹ in which Olds is sympathetic to the hungry thief as well as those who savagely beat him. In the poem '1954', in which another teenage girl has been murdered,²⁴² Olds considers her murderer, 'He looked thin, and lonely, / it was horrifying, he looked almost humble' (ll. 19-20).

An identification with the abuser is discussed by Julia Kristeva: 'I am *at once the attacker and the victim*, the same *and* the other, identical *and foreign*. I simply have to analyse incessantly the fundamental separation of my own untenable identity.'²⁴³

In her poetry, Olds appears to try on personae or identities, playing with what is and is not her own experience – either imagining herself in certain situations, or possibly writing in a disguised way about something that may be close to what she has experienced. Whatever the truth, she is not straightforwardly 'confessional', particularly when writing about violence.

As for form, both 'The Girl' and 'That Year' retain stanza breaks. The poems in her most recent collections, including *Stag's Leap*, are written (with the exception of 'Last Look' and 'Red Sea')²⁴⁴ in what Olds refers to as 'a clump' or a 'long running poem, with no breaks'.²⁴⁵ Both 'The Girl' and 'That Year' allow the reader some space in the stanza breaks, providing a space to breathe and look around amid the intensity of the experience. Were Olds writing these same poems today, she might well write in a 'clump'. Such a form narrows the reader's vision, intensifying the experience, potentially making the poems stronger.

²⁴⁰ *One Secret Thing*, pp. 5-16, specifically p. 5, ll. 1 and 11-12.

²⁴¹ *The Gold Cell* (1987), pp. 12-13.

²⁴² *Blood, Tin, Straw*, pp. 77-8. In this poem the girl has also possibly been sexually assaulted, due to the mention of 'training bra' in ll. 2, 4 and 22 of the poem.

²⁴³ Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, in *The Portable Kristeva, updated edition*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 369.

²⁴⁴ The first has one stanza break. The second has no stanza breaks but it is written in a more experimental manner, allowing for more white space.

²⁴⁵ Appendix D, p. 107.

She appears happy to provoke her readers. Writing on *One Secret Thing*, Christina Patterson states, ‘The images are powerful, but it sometimes feels as though Olds can’t resist the power to shock.’²⁴⁶ Tony Hoagland offers, ‘There’s no question that Olds has a temperamental proclivity for shock, a somewhat insatiable drive for seeking and finding the taboo’.²⁴⁷ I am not convinced that she always sets out to shock, particularly given her willingness to revisit and rework previously published poems.²⁴⁸ Yet, as with Redgrove, she certainly embraces risk. I asked her whether taking risks was important in her poetry and she replied at length, acknowledging that there was a risk in ‘trying to tell my truth’. In getting to ‘the denied truth’, she also discussed the necessity of abandoning gentility, and of seeing ‘how far we can go into excess’, with the need to ‘throw yourself into something almost more completely than you’re able’.²⁴⁹

While there may be no doubt as to Olds’s willingness to throw her ‘whole soul into it’, writing about sexual attacks and murders on women and girls – including those she has no connection with – is risky and, some might feel, morally contentious. If she wanted to highlight the levels of violence against women, for example, why not write as a journalist? Why seek to make art out of it? And what of the women’s lives she is writing about: is she giving them a voice or is she exploiting them for her art?

I would suggest that Olds is doing both. She shows what rape and other forms of sexual violence mean, portraying the reality of such violence in a way few other poets have. This is a form of political activism via poetry. In choosing to empathise, Olds provides a voice and a platform. From her childhood experiences, Olds has said that she knows ‘what it is like to feel like a thing’, and has looked to others to ‘try to see how it would be to feel fully like a person’.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Christina Patterson, ‘Written on the Body: Poetry and Passion’, *Independent* (3 April 2009), 29.

²⁴⁷ Tony Hoagland, ‘The Unarrestable Development of Sharon Olds’, *American Poetry Review*, (January-February 2009), 7-8.

²⁴⁸ See Appendix D, p. 114.

²⁴⁹ Appendix D, p. 104.

²⁵⁰ Kate Kellaway, ‘My Desire is Often Stronger than my Fear’ (Interview with Sharon Olds), *Observer The New Review* (6 January 2013), 32.

Chapter 5 – My Poetry

I began reading and writing poetry in my thirties. Prior to this, poetry had made little or no impact on my life. I couldn't see the relevance of the (all-male) poets we read at school. The gift of Plath's *Ariel* from a friend, when I was in my twenties, made a brief impression. However, hearing Olds's 'I Go Back to May 1937'²⁵¹ was the turning point. The late Julia Casterton read the poem at an adult education class. Had I known Emily Dickinson's quotation, 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry,' I would have recognised the sentiment.

'I Go Back to May 1937' is not particularly violent.²⁵² But it gave me a sense of permission. That resonant final line, 'Do what you are going to do and I will tell about it,' appealed, shocked and delighted in equal measure. The poetry appeared to deal with issues that resonated with some of my own experiences. It allowed me to start to make my own way in life, and reassess my childhood and my parents. As Freud comments in *The Uncanny*:

The separation of the individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the necessary achievements of his development, yet at the same time one of the most painful. It is absolutely necessary for it to take place, and we may presume that it has been achieved in some measure by everyone who has developed into a normal person. Indeed, the progress of society in general rests upon the opposition between generations.²⁵³

I grew up in a family full of secrets. My mother, sister and I lived under the regime of a psychologically – and at times, physically – violent step-father. He controlled our lives through threats, the provision or withdrawal of money, and the fear that he would hit our mother again if we did not do as we were told.

My step-father's abusive and bullying behaviour was something my sister and I were forbidden to discuss. Reading Olds's and then Petit's poetry in response to their families' behaviour encouraged me to consider aspects of my own background as

²⁵¹ *The Gold Cell* (1987), p. 23

²⁵² Yet it hints at violence and, as Padel points out, violently clashes the male and female together, while the poet accepts a 'violent choice', *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem: Or How Reading Modern Poetry Can Change Your Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), pp. 216-18. Olds's clashing together of the male and female is reminiscent of Redgrove's rather violent joining of compound nouns.

²⁵³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 37.

subjects for poetry. My mother only told me about my step-father's cross-dressing shortly before her death – this was a huge family secret. While there is no taboo for me about transvestism,²⁵⁴ writing poetry about this aspect of his life, along with his violence, has been difficult because I am breaking a family code. Even though he is dead, and my sister welcomes my writing about all aspects of our lives, referring to his behaviour still feels like a betrayal.

Prior to my mother's relationship with our step-father, we had been brought up in the Roman Catholic tradition with its focus on guilt, patriarchy and obedience. Stories including grisly torture and death scenes are commonplace for young Catholic children, especially for a child with an inquiring mind and a love of reading. Virtually every saint that I can remember seemed to meet her death via her eyes being gouged out, her breasts cut off or, as with my namesake, having her bones broken on a giant, spiked wheel.²⁵⁵ In Catholic churches, statues of saints tend to be near-lifesize and colourful, blood oozing from wounds. Even when the images are small, as in the Station of the Cross,²⁵⁶ they are gruesome and pervasive. As Catholics, we also came to eat and drink what we believed to be the blood and body of Christ.²⁵⁷ I attended a convent until the age of seven and was physically punished by the nuns for various misdemeanours, so violence was part of my belief system as a young child. This was compounded by my mother hitting my sister and me when we misbehaved.

I was also aware from a young age of the potential for violence in the street. One man tried to force me into his car at the school gates and another tried to grab and kiss me when I was on the swings. The first local murder that I remember was of a teenage girl, her body left on the fields along my route home from school (I was five).²⁵⁸ I knew

²⁵⁴ See the poems 'Pop Socks and Manicures', first published as 'Stepfather' in *The TLS* (10 August 2012), 11 and 'Portrait of my Step-father as a Xmas Tree', *Ambit*, no. 215 (2014), 67.

²⁵⁵ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (London: Cornell University Press, 1997), is an excellent source on female saints.

²⁵⁶ Fourteen stages of Jesus's torture and death, which we memorized as young children. The tableaux are on the walls of every Catholic church.

²⁵⁷ Transubstantiation can be defined as a 'teaching of the Church that the substance of the bread and wine offered at the Eucharist is changed into the substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ'. See Richard P. McBrien (ed.), *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 1264.

²⁵⁸ I have written about the murder but the resulting poem was not strong enough to include in *The Way*

that men were ‘dangerous’ and that women were hurt by their husbands or partners. The first time I was aware of any danger to my mother was when she had a new (violent) boyfriend, John, when I was about nine. Some of these episodes may not be especially unusual occurrences for a child but I was sensitive to them. I later learnt that my mother had been raped as a young woman by a co-worker. I went on to be attacked in the street several times (one of these attacks would be an attempted rape); and my sister left home to marry a violent man.

From my late twenties, I worked in human rights for thirteen years,²⁵⁹ commissioning and editing reports on genocide, war, torture, rape and racism in various countries, while also being the organisation’s gender officer.²⁶⁰ Violence, its impact and its aftermath, its countering and its prevention, became part of my career, and always with a gendered perspective. When I began writing, I wrote crime stories, reflecting my interest in crime fiction, a genre I started reading at a young age, graduating from Agatha Christie to Val McDermid and Ian Rankin, before I found poetry.

From reading Olds, Petit and Robertson, in particular, I realise there is a danger of returning to the same topic again and again.²⁶¹ This is something I have sought to avoid in shaping *The Way the Crocodile Taught Me*, seeking to vary both the tone and subject matter. The collection is broken into three sections. The first contains poems primarily focusing on my family, with a sequence on my step-father and another on my grandmother. I decided to place the sequence on my step-father early in the collection, almost as a way of being done with him, although his presence may be felt in later poems, notably in ‘Mantra’. The second section complements the first, with a number of poems with violent imagery or violent subject matter, ranging from the Krays’s use of

the Crocodile Taught Me.

²⁵⁹ For the charity Minority Rights Group International.

²⁶⁰ ‘Pinochet’s Garden’ is one of several poems from this period of my life. This poem was published in my first full collection, *The Girl with the Cactus Handshake* (Matlock: Templar Poetry, 2009), p. 50.

²⁶¹ See Olds, *The Father* and Petit’s *The Zoo Father*, for example. Robertson’s latest collections include three long Dionysus poems. See ‘Dionysus in Love’ and ‘Dionysus and the Maiden’, *The Hill of Doors*, pp. 14-20 and 52-5, and ‘Pentheus and Dionysus’ in *The Wrecking Light*, pp. 37-44, along with numerous ‘Scottish narrative’ poems. This extended repetition of subject matter is not as obvious in Redgrove’s work.

sadistic torture and murder in ‘Concrete Overcoat’,²⁶² to themes of violence against animals, including ‘The History Teacher’ and ‘On the Shore’. Moreover, this second section contains several poems alluding to sexual violence, including ‘The Bicycle’, ‘The Way the Crocodile Taught Me’, ‘Wolf on a Hillside’ and, in the third section, ‘Mantra’.

I will discuss three of the poems I wrote in response to an attempted rape that I experienced as a teenager. Prior to the PhD, I had written several poems on this topic but the only one that I feel was successful is ‘Fightback’.²⁶³

Fightback

I’d always suspected it would happen,
sometime. I was 17, when it did.

I was cycling back south from Carnival,
when he rammed his racing bike into mine.

He was white. Blond spiked hair, good looking, cute,
before he hit me in the face and ribs,

knocked me off the saddle to the pavement.
I wouldn’t ever want it like this, his

ferocious tearing at my clothes, forcing
my shirt up to my neck, mauling my pecs,

busting the buttons of my flies, grabbing
my balls, pulling my hair, yanking the back

of my jeans down, down. I fought him as best
I could, bit into his white skin real hard.

He hit me again. Then stopped. Climbed off me.
Spat: *You’re not fucking worth it anyway.*

I’ve set out to prove just how wrong he was.

When I wrote this poem, it felt like a breakthrough, because I had written it as someone else. At the time, I believed that writing in my own voice would not have lifted the experience into poetry. I believed it was important to draw on my imagination, fearing that I lacked the skills to sufficiently transform my own experience. I also felt that I needed to disguise my own experience to make it more inventive and more interesting – and no doubt because, subconsciously, it was too difficult for me to write about the

²⁶² Naomi, *The London Magazine* (August-September 2013) 140.

²⁶³ Naomi, *Lunch at the Elephant & Castle* (Matlock: Templar Poetry, 2008), p. 16.

attempted rape as myself. This poem's narrator is male, black and gay. I kept the details of the attack as close as possible to the attempted rape that I experienced, albeit transposed onto a male body. The attacker's words, however, are verbatim. While I might question the wisdom of my approach, there are still aspects of the poem that I feel are worth noting. The couplets may encourage the reader to think of a coupling (however unattractive), and several of the enjambed line breaks force the reader on through the poem, 'his / ferocious' (ll. 8-9), and 'forcing / my shirt' (ll. 9-10), etc. Several of these line breaks are inspired by Olds's tremendous sense of urgency in 'The Race':

See that
elevator over there, well go
down to the first floor, make a right, you'll
see a yellow bus, get off at the
second Pan Am terminal, I
ran.²⁶⁴

I also tried to use strong, active verbs in 'Fightback' – 'mauling', 'busting', 'grabbing', 'pulling', 'yanking'²⁶⁵ – and there is some use of alliteration, with 'busting the buttons of my flies, grabbing / my balls' (ll. 11-12). The violence of the attack is direct as is the narrator's response 'bit into his white skin real hard' (l. 14) – he is not passive. As with Olds's poem 'The Girl', the narrator in 'Fightback' has some agency in the final line of the poem, 'I've set out to prove just how wrong he was'. The line also plays on meaning, ie that the act of attempted rape was wrong and that the notion of the narrator not being 'worth' anything was wrong. This final line could have been written in my own voice. Indeed, it does sound like my voice. So there is a confusion, for me at least, over who the 'I' in this poem is. Paul Muldoon discusses 'the extent to which the personality of any single poet may be thought of as being coterminous with his or her poems',²⁶⁶ which chimes with my view that everyone has a variety of personae or selves.²⁶⁷ Still, I am aware that I deliberately tried to distance and disguise myself from being the subject of the attempted rape in 'Fightback'. This disguising is probably not something I would choose to do again.

²⁶⁴ 'The Race', *The Father*, pp. 26-7, ll. 8-13.

²⁶⁵ Something which I have learnt to do from Plath.

²⁶⁶ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 223. For more on a poet's personae, see the chapter on Fernando Pessoa, 'Autopsychography', pp. 222-44.

²⁶⁷ See my comments on Olds's and Petit's use of personae in earlier chapters.

In addition to this ‘masking’ of myself and my experience, there are other aspects of this poem that I would change. There are too many adjectives and adverbs; for example, ‘good looking’ with ‘cute’ is superfluous (l. 5), and ‘ferocious’ (l. 9) is also unnecessary.

‘The Bicycle’²⁶⁸ is the second of the poems on the theme of the attempted rape:

The Bicycle

I was OK nothing had happened
 nothing bad had happened
 I couldn't get up from the bench
 couldn't do up my dungarees
 It was cold it was night
 The man had gone and that was good
 I was OK I could sit up
 peel myself from the bench's slats
 which had pressed deep inside
 It could have been worse
 I was shaking it was night
 The bicycle was too heavy
 My dungarees kept slipping
 buttons were missing
 I had to get home
 It was so hard to walk
 My head hurt kept punching inside
 my teeth couldn't stop talking
 It could have been worse
 My jaw hurt and my breasts were raw
 I couldn't pick up the bicycle its spinning wheel
 couldn't walk with the bicycle
 I had to get home to wash
 sleep throw these clothes away
 I was shaking I was cold
 My dungarees wouldn't do up
 I would be alright it was just
 this bicycle I needed

Like ‘Fightback’, ‘The Bicycle’ uses simple, direct language. However, a crucial difference is that the latter uses an extended metaphor – ‘bicycle’ as code for the attempted rape, as if the narrator loads all of her anguish onto the broken bicycle and how to wheel it home. Another difference is that the rapist is not given a voice, he is only referred to briefly (l. 6) as ‘The man’. The poem uses repetition, for example, the use of the troubling ‘I was OK’, (ll. 1 and 7) – troubling because, by having to say it twice, we infer that she is not OK. The bicycle is mentioned four times and ‘dungarees’ three times. I wanted to show how a person goes over a traumatic event again and again

²⁶⁸ Naomi, *Magma*, no. 55 (2013), 25.

in their search for meaning, as in 'It could have been worse'. The form is very different to 'Feedback', it is stichic: the only space for the reader to take a breath is in the gaps mid-line, where punctuation might have been. This strange spacing in the poem produces a kind of hyperventilation, to mirror the narrator's sense of panic. The spaces are irregular, in the way that breath can be irregular when a person is in shock, and the spaces have a disorienting effect. The spaces might also be viewed as ways of showing what is missing and to show the blanks in the narrator's memory – whether these images and experiences have been blocked or forgotten. The poem takes a considerable risk with the ending 'I needed'. Would readers (or indeed, editors) think that a line was missing? I wanted this jarring ending to represent all of the things the narrator needed after the attack – even if it is questionable whether such a narrator would know exactly what these were – instinctive things such as shelter, someone sympathetic to talk with, warmth, sleep, a bath, even alcohol. (In my case, I had no idea what I needed after the attack other than to get to safety and phone my partner.) The gap in the ending suggests that whatever the narrator does she cannot erase what has happened. In this poem, I have not chosen to hide in another's body, although, as mentioned, the extended metaphor is a kind of code for the sexual attack.

The language and imagery are less immediately 'violent' than in 'Fightback'. The violence is suggested, for example, with the slats 'which had pressed deep inside' representing the attempted violation; 'buttons were missing' and the narrator's 'head hurt kept punching inside', along with her breasts being 'raw' (ll. 8-9, 14, 17 and 20), show the attacker's physical violence and the aftermath of the attack. We are also told that the narrator needs to get home to 'wash' and to 'throw these clothes away' (ll. 23 and 24). We are shown some of the physical and emotional impacts of the attempted rape, that she is 'shaking' (ll. 11 and 25) and her 'teeth couldn't stop talking' (l. 18). The latter could be read as a convulsion, or as her difficulty in trying to speak of what has just happened. There is also the image of the bicycle's 'spinning wheel' (l. 21), which keeps turning, like the narrator's mind, going over the events again and again. This is the longest line in the poem, which is also meant to jar. The form is also broken, as the narrator has been broken. Unlike 'Fightback', this poem offers no resolution.

The final poem that I wish to discuss is ‘The Way the Crocodile Taught Me’,²⁶⁹ which is the most recent:

The Way the Crocodile Taught Me

I swooned at the large god of him, sunning.
A tooth for every day of my life.
He performed his run along the bank,
as males do. I brought my boat closer.
He took to following, at a distance.

I wasn’t taken in, knew his four-chambered heart
pumped love out and in, in and out,
knew his tongue had few good uses,
knew all about his grin. Yet whoever said he was cold-
blooded has never truly known this beast.

He brought out the prehistoric in me. I dived.
We swam, belly to belly, to where the Niles meet,
tussled as we thrashed among the weeds. After, I lay
the length of him, a limestone lilo, studs patterning
my skin. He smiled at me, often. Taught me all he knew.

Years later, when a man tried to drag me under,
I practised the force my lover had held back –
levered my small jaws open to their furthest extent,
splashed them down on the human’s arm.
My attacker still carries the mark of my smile.

‘Crocodile’ has a different energy to the other poems. It is far more playful. Indeed, the poem plays with the children’s song ‘Never Smile at a Crocodile’²⁷⁰ yet the adult narrator takes that smile, which she was taught as a child was dangerous, and uses it to her own ends.

The attack does not happen until the final stanza. Prior to this, the narrator, who again no longer feels the need to be masked, is shown to be in control. She is the one who chooses a sexual relationship with the crocodile-lover, ‘He brought out the prehistoric in me’ and ‘I dived’ (l. 11). She is shown to be in touch with her animal nature. In the third stanza, sex – that is the sex of her choosing – is an enjoyable struggle, with ‘tussled’ and ‘thrashed’ (l. 13). Elsewhere, there are playful allusions to sex and lust with ‘pumped’ and references to the crocodile’s tongue ‘having few good

²⁶⁹ Exhibited at the Poetry Café in London in 2013 and at the 2014 StAnza Festival in St Andrews as part of the show ‘The Argument: Art V Poetry’ by Katrina Naomi and Tim Ridley, and first published on the blog of the same name (with the title ‘What the Crocodile Taught Me’).

²⁷⁰ Words and music by Jack Lawrence and Frank Churchill, American Society of Composers, Artists and Performers, 1952, from the Walt Disney film *Peter Pan*.

uses' (ll. 7 and 8). Further, the marking that is done to her skin (as opposed to the marking she makes by biting the attacker) is from her choosing, i.e. lying on 'a limestone lilo'²⁷¹ after/during having sex with the crocodile-lover (l. 14).

This sexual liaison is utterly different from that portrayed in the final stanza 'when a man tried to drag me under' (l. 16). Apart from this reference, the main violence in the poem comes when the narrator 'practised the force', 'levered my small jaws open to their furthest extent', and 'splashed them down on the human's arm' (ll. 17, 18 and 19). The narrator is seen to bite back. In a reversal of roles, she also appropriates or claims some ownership over her attacker, who comes to represent something that happened a long time ago: he is now just a part in a story or myth, and has become something to be vanquished. The last line of the poem brings us into the present, indeed this line is in the present tense, and we are told the narrator has damaged the attacker: he 'carries the mark of my smile'.

The form is quite traditional, with four stanzas of five lines. In contrast to the stichic and claustrophobic form of 'The Bicycle', there is an abundance of white space for the reader to move, or even swim, around the lines. I wanted a sense of fluidity, possibly even movement, in the form. Stylistically, the greatest difference from the other poems is the heightened use of imagery. This poem draws on the imagery of Petit²⁷² (via animals), and Redgrove²⁷³ with the use of 'large god of him, sunning' (l. 1) and the interplay between hot ('sunning') in line 1 and 'cold' in line 8. As well as playful language, there is playful alliteration, with 'limestone lilo' (l. 14), and 'lover' and 'levered' (ll. 17 and 18). Hard 'k' sounds are also evidenced in the final line with 'attacker', 'carries' and 'mark'. These are reinforced with the hard 'a' sounds of 'attacker' and 'carries', and 'splashed' from the previous line to signify a hardening in the narrator's tone as well as her actions. She feels she has levelled with the attacker, or has beaten him – hence the playful nature of much of the poem, in which the writer might also be seen to make the reader 'wait' for the violence.

²⁷¹ The metaphor for the crocodile's skin refers to cracked limestone, such as that found at Malham Cove in Yorkshire or The Burren in Ireland.

²⁷² See, for example, *The Zoo Father*.

²⁷³ 'Abattoir Bride', for example, uses startling imagery, including references to the sun and to changes in temperature.

I have not set out to write as a ‘confessional’ poet. Indeed, as discussed earlier, I disagree with the term. Much of my poetry is personal, or could be termed ‘life writing’. Further, I have not sought to write as a means of therapy, and had I done so, I would be disappointed at the outcome. Writing about difficult issues is not necessarily therapeutic; it tends to raise new, troubling questions. Like Oswald, I question whether poetry is ‘healing’; she states ‘[it is] companionable but not comforting and perhaps not healing’.²⁷⁴ While I may have gained some strength from my analysis of the journey from ‘Fightback’ to ‘Crocodile’, for example, this is not why I write.

Olds, Petit, Redgrove and Robertson have been instrumental in my development. I particularly admire Olds’s and Petit’s exuberance and seeming candour. However, I continue to question my ethics when writing about my family. In the poem ‘Mantra’, for example, I refer to my mother’s rape; something she chose not to discuss during her lifetime. And in ‘Elsie’,²⁷⁵ I portray how I saw my grandmother in her last few months, with a potentially disquieting image of her breasts, which is not how she would have wanted to be portrayed. I found it difficult to explore my family in this way. But while certain issues may initially have ‘belonged’ to a particular person, they also impacted on me and have become part of my truth and experience.

W. D. Snodgrass writes:

[O]ur only hope as artists is to continually ask ourselves, ‘Am I writing what I *really* think? Not what is acceptable; not what my favourite intellectual would think in this situation; not what I wish I felt. Only what I cannot help thinking.’²⁷⁶

In a similar vein, Adrienne Rich calls for women:

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience [...] to show us our true faces – all of them, including the unacceptable; to speak of what has been muffled in code or silence.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ ‘Alice Oswald Interviewed by Deryn Rees-Jones’, *Poetry Review*, 103.3 (2013), 32.

²⁷⁵ First published in *Popshot* (Autumn-Winter 2013), 58.

²⁷⁶ W. D. Snodgrass, *In Radical Pursuit: Critical Essays and Lectures* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 32.

²⁷⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 182.

I am interested in the poetic (and other) judgements that face female poets when they write in response to their experience of sexual violence. If we are passive, we are criticised. If we seek to regain our power, as with Petit, we are criticised. It is hard not to come to the conclusion that some critics, such as Potts, would rather women did not write about such topics.

Maggie Nelson quotes Buddha and other Buddhist figures, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, who advise against taking in ‘any violent spectacles at all’ because these spectacles only serve to increase the levels of aggression in our lives.²⁷⁸ Yet writing about violence could be seen as a safety valve: I would rather people write about violence than carry it out.

I do have a violent streak, I believe we all do, and occasionally I have written a poem in response to my own violence, which has surprised me. For example, (ll. 8-14) of ‘On the Balcony’ reads:

Surely, I wasn’t the only one
to consider putting down
the second glass of red wine,
to bend to the smooth stones
that fitted my palm, just so,
to lob them at someone below?²⁷⁹

I have also written poems about my bullying of my sister, including these lines (ll. 1-3 and 7-9) from ‘Blind Sister’:

In our game I’d steer her by the arm,
her eyes shut tight, down the path, the pavement,
the kerb, across the road, round the corner
[...]
Then her eyes screwed up, back across the green
where I held her willing hand, manoeuvred her – smack –
into the silver trunk of a birch.²⁸⁰

Despite this, my interest in violence is not something that troubles me, or should, I believe, trouble anyone else. As Eavan Boland states, ‘[A] woman poet [...] has an

²⁷⁸ Nelson, p. 7.

²⁷⁹ Naomi, ‘On the Balcony’, unpublished, 2012.

²⁸⁰ Naomi, ‘Blind Sister’, unpublished, 2012.

obligation to tell as much as she knows of the ghosts within her'.²⁸¹ Several of my violent poems, such as 'Crocodile' and 'The History Teacher' have a sense of fun; something I find in Redgrove's poetry. I enjoyed writing those poems, and found them liberating. I am reminded of Redgrove's quote 'if you know your dark side you have a fair chance of being human'.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), pp. 289-90.

²⁸² Redgrove, *The Colour of Radio*, p. 249.

Conclusion

In the late 1960s, Colin Falck wrote that other art forms have ‘more room for explicit blood and passion’, before adding that poets should not ‘deal directly with violence’.²⁸³ Yet, as I have discussed, violence in poetry is nothing new. As Aristotle maintained, people take a

natural pleasure [...] in mimetic works [...] even when these represent objects such as corpses, which are inherently unpleasant. The cause of this pleasure is that the experience entails a process of understanding and learning.²⁸⁴

As well as learning and understanding, some of us also have an interest in violence for its own sake; such an interest is as likely in female as it is male poets. Vicki Feaver states:

Women have also identified with the need for violence and ferocity in their writing. [...] Sylvia Plath spoke of the ‘blood jet’ of poetry, Emily Dickinson of a ‘loaded gun’, and Stevie Smith [...] of ‘an explosion in the sky [...] a mushroom shape of terror’, of the human creature ‘alone in its carapace’ forcing a passage out ‘in splinters covered with blood’.²⁸⁵

I believe poetry to be a natural art for writing about violence because of its ability, through form, to contain emotion.²⁸⁶ While some still express surprise when poetry is ‘violent’ yet show no such surprise at violence in a play or a novel, could suggest that they read little poetry (contemporary or otherwise). Petit has considered the extent to which poets could learn from the acceptability of violence in the visual arts (she trained as a sculptor), before coming to the conclusion that ‘politeness inhibits art’ and ‘Poets must take risks [...] if poetry is not to be left behind’.²⁸⁷

Yet the question of the extent to which poets deal *directly* with violence is an interesting one. In the introduction to this thesis, I quote da Vinci, who called for violence to be shown in its true colours, alongside Žižek who states that poetry cannot

²⁸³ Colin Falck, ‘Dreams and Responsibilities’ in *The Modern Poet*, pp. 4 and 5.

²⁸⁴ Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 63.

²⁸⁵ Feaver, ‘Vicki Feaver: The Handless Maiden’, in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), pp. 137-54 (p. 146).

²⁸⁶ As Olds, for example, discusses in relation to Temple Grandin and herself, Appendix D, p. 100.

²⁸⁷ Petit, ‘Editorial: Video Installation Poetry’, in *Poetry London*, no. 39 (2001), 2.

address issues directly. I now believe Žižek is wrong. Of the poets under consideration, Olds and Robertson tend to write most directly on violence, with a clear gaze; whereas Petit and Redgrove use more coded methods, utilizing masks or humour. I sense that my writing shifts between the direct and the coded, sometimes using direct imagery, as in ‘Blind Sister’ and ‘On the Balcony’, sometimes using symbolism and a degree of obfuscation, as in ‘The Bicycle’, and sometimes a mixture, as in ‘The Way the Crocodile Taught Me’.²⁸⁸

I conclude that there are no ‘rights’ or ‘wrongs’ in writing on violence; it is a question of taste as to whether a reader will find the direct or more coded approaches more ‘effective’. However, whatever approach I take, I do feel the need to write about violence as a way of reflecting on our society. As Robertson says, ‘If you’re a writer, you have to be sensible to what’s around you, and you pick up on things like tension and threat’.²⁸⁹ An important consideration for any poet is how tensions, threats or violent events can be transformed into poetry. When Olds began writing, she felt:

The poems were merely personal and therefore they weren’t really art – just something you longed to say to someone but could never say to their face. They were just a space where you could speak it.²⁹⁰

Olds’s statement chimes with my own sense of writing about the violence within my family and I have learnt from Olds and Petit in this regard. I have learnt not only that I could write about the issues within my family but that I could find ways of turning what felt raw – both in terms of emotion and narrative – into poetry, or ‘art’ to use Olds’s term. From Olds I have concluded that anything is possible as subject matter and from Petit and Redgrove I have worked to develop the imagery in my poetry.

And what of the various arguments from Horace to Plutarch, for example, regarding morality and poetry? Is there a risk of glamourizing violence through poetry, describing violence for the sake of it, even for the shock of it? As previously mentioned, Robertson’s poetry has been critiqued in this regard. Yet he is only doing what da Vinci

²⁸⁸ See the discussion on these poems on in the previous chapter.

²⁸⁹ See Appendix B, p. 90.

²⁹⁰ Olds, ‘A Woman in the World’, *The Poetry Paper*, 6 (2009/10), 4-5.

called upon artists to do. Why should poetry be considered any different to the visual arts? Olds and Redgrove have also been questioned about their propensity to shock. Olds and Redgrove are hardly in the league of the Actionists, yet when I asked Olds whether she intended her work to shock, she questioned whether shock was ‘a bad thing’.²⁹¹ A response that I found pleasing.

Over the course of my research, I have learnt that there appears to be few gender differentials regarding whether female or male poets take a more direct approach to writing in response to violence: Olds may take a more strident approach than Redgrove; Robertson a more direct approach than Petit. Yet one gender differential can be discerned: far fewer men than women write poetry in response to their experiences of sexual violence, indeed this remains a relatively unexplored area for men’s poetry. Were far more men to write on this subject, it would be interesting to consider whether the dismissive ‘confessional’ label would gradually fade from use.

I have also come to the conclusion that gentility might ultimately be considered to be useful to many poets. In various ways, whether via class or gender, or the constraining of sexual or social mores, it has given poets such as Olds and Redgrove, for example, something to kick against. Georges Bataille states ‘The taboo is there in order to be violated’.²⁹² And James Baldwin, a breaker of taboos, wrote, ‘Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it [...], the end of safety’.²⁹³ This breaking of taboos is something that I have struggled with – both in terms of writing in response to my family (breaking ‘family codes’, primarily concerning silence) and writing in response to the sexual attack I experienced. By breaking out of the ‘safety’ of silence, I have been able to write in a new way, from a position of strength, as in the poem ‘The Way the Crocodile Taught Me’.

I began this thesis with a quote from Stevens, which implies that writing about violence can act as a safety valve. While writing can be a way of letting off steam, it can also raise new, potentially difficult issues. This has been my experience. Writing in

²⁹¹ See Appendix D, p. 106.

²⁹² Georges Bataille, *Essential Writings*, ed. Michael Richardson (London: Sage, 1998), p. 56.

²⁹³ Quoted by Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, p. 176.

response to my violent step-father's behaviour or to the sexual attack I experienced has reopened old wounds and made me feel angry; so has not necessarily been 'healing'. While I have been pleased with the quality of some of the poems I have written in response to violence, I do not think that a person can always choose what to write about. Poems, unlike people, cannot be forced.

Appendix A

Katrina Naomi – Interview with Penelope Shuttle regarding Peter Redgrove, StAnza Festival, St Andrews, 18 March 2011

KN – In the forthcoming biography, Neil Roberts says that Peter first wrote after making love with his then wife Barbara. Does that tally with what you know of how Peter began writing?

PS – Yes, that’s how Peter always told it. He did write from around that time. Peter and Barbara were very happy in their early years and that enabled Peter to flower as an artist and to grow in different ways. Neil says that Peter had a visionary personality. It’s also important to remember that Peter was a scientist and was interested in the magic in science, alongside being very academic. But when he went to Cambridge the magic leaked out of science. He’d had some remarkable science teachers at school but not at Cambridge, and he met students who were writing. Peter turned away from science and he began reading T. S. Eliot, among others. Peter was an intellectual, everything was crafted, ideas were as important as the language – but he was always a scientist as well as a poet.

KN – What do you think he would have felt about me writing my PhD with a focus on the violence in his work?

PS – Well there’s an academic in Romania, Lidia Vianu, do you know her?

KN – Yes, she undertook a Romanian translation of one of my poems...

PS – He did an interview with her and she described him as a ‘new barbarian’ because of the violence in his language, and he understood. So I think he would be quite chuffed with you studying him and this aspect of his work. Cliff Ashcroft did his PhD on Peter and they became very close. Peter was a communicator so to be in dialogue with those interested in his work would have pleased him. I’m surprised you’re not looking at Hughes regarding violence?

KN – Oh I am, I’m using *Crow* and Plath, and Alvarez’s ‘Gentility Principle’ as my starting point but I see Peter’s work as really contemporary and I wanted to focus on contemporary poets.

PS – That’s really interesting. Why do you see Peter’s work as contemporary?

KN – I'm thinking off the top of my head here [pause] but it's really to do with the imagery I think. Perhaps, with the exception of Pascale Petit, no one else for me goes so far with their imagery. I think Peter's imagery is really out there and I think it's amazing. If I'm being honest, sometimes I don't think it always comes off, sometimes I think it goes too far, but that's inevitable if you're really pushing the boundaries. I think Peter's a wonderful poet, really exciting and I still don't think anyone is doing what he was doing, so yes, I suppose I do feel that he's a contemporary poet.

PS – I'm pleased to hear you say that, as not so many people do know of Peter's work, he sometimes gets overlooked.

KN – Yes, I never understand that. But I think there is a growing interest in his work, a reappraisal, and with the forthcoming biography...

PS – Yes and you know that there's going to be a new Selected?

KN – Yes, that's great, I think that this will really bring about a new appreciation of Peter's work.

PS – Oh yes, that's good. On violence, Peter was always matched up with Hughes and Thomas Gunn. Peter loathed the 'Gentility Principle' but he fell out with Alvarez in the early days after Alvarez did a poor review, an unfair one, of his first collection. Alvarez didn't exactly apologise but gave him a much better review later on. And when I started to write, from 1965 on, there was all this neat little verse mostly by blokes (I suppose what was 'genteel') and I thought, well what am I going to do?

KN – Do you think Peter intended his poetry to shock and to upset 'middle class' values?

PS – He had big issues with his father and also felt that his marriage to Barbara – she'd been an artist, a sculptor but that had died away – had gone all middle class. So yes middle class values were something that he chipped away at quite a bit. And of course he worked with young students who were doing things that were creatively shocking – and this was something that he was doing in the late 60s and early 70s. He didn't like falseness or phoneyess. Peter was inclined to say what he thought. You can't be polite in poetry, look at Sharon Olds. But I don't think he thought, I'm going to write a really shocking poem, what he wrote is what he genuinely was.

KN – I wanted to ask you where you feel the violence in Peter's work comes from? In Neil Roberts's biography, there's a discussion which hints at sexual abuse from Peter's

mother, there's the difficult relationship with his father, and also I wondered about the electro-shock therapy and its impact?

PS – You mean the insulin shock therapy?

KN – Sorry yes, I do.

PS – Yes, he's been on the receiving end of the violence of that. It puts people in a diabetic coma and he went through that fifty times. Hence he wrote 'Lazarus and the Sea'; he was only twenty-two when it was published in the *TLS*. If you experience that [shock therapy] being done to you all those times then you have an interest in violence. He knew what it felt to be taken apart and put back together again. And also, he was a scientist interested in analysing process.

KN – I'm interested in that poem 'Or Was That When I Was Grass' with the mother as the spider, having eaten the father, looking down on her 'factory'. It's a favourite poem of mine and is rather violent.

PS – I read that as a serene poem, with the trope of decay and resurrection, a corpse decaying and new life comes out of that. I don't think the spider's really violent, it's just part of nature. However, re the mother, I don't think it's appropriate to be in bed still cuddling with your son when he's eleven. And the inappropriate thing is that she told him too many things about sex and her abortions – too much information – things you shouldn't tell a child, or really someone of any age. And of course he grew up wondering if she'd tried to abort him. His own interest in death and resurrection goes back to this fear and uncertainty. With male authority figures, he went into his default position because of his father. He also found it difficult to be a father to the boys, and he withdrew for some point before returning. Still, with his mother, he said that he did think that those inappropriate confidences were emotionally and psychologically abusive but there wasn't sexual abuse.

KN – I'm interested in Hughes and Peter, especially a quote that Peter's said to have made about Hughes, with Peter waking up saying Hughes is 'a sadist'.

PS – They never argued but Peter spent time at Court Green with Hughes and Assia Wevill, and Assia said that Ted smelt like a butcher when they were lovers. Peter didn't mean that he was a practising sadist but that his unconscious motivations were to do with his writing.

KN – I wondered if the comment was anything to do with *Crow* but think perhaps I'm wrong here?

PS – Peter thought that *Crow* was a terrible, wrong turning in Ted Hughes’s creative development, retrograde. Peter hated *Crow*. But if Peter didn’t like a book of Ted’s he wouldn’t talk of it. He thought it was very cathartic for Ted but didn’t think it was good poetry. [Pause.] There’s a lot of humour in Peter’s poetry but Ted’s is humourless but for his kiddies’ verse – but then it’s not relevant.

KN – I’ve spent an afternoon this week in the Poetry Library going through reviews of Peter’s work and there’s some negative reviews regarding violence in Peter’s work.

How did he react to that?

PS – Yes, it’s the first two books, especially the physicality coming up against the ‘Gentility Principle’.

KN – I remember Vernon Scannell being quite critical of some aspect of ‘horror’ and ‘Grand Guignol’ in Peter’s work.

PS – [Smiles.] After a drunken scuffle with Vernon Scannell, Peter went off and learnt judo. He should have known better of course. [Laughs.] ‘The Case’ was the first poem I heard of Peter’s, I heard it on the radio (Radio 3 when it was still called The Third Programme) it was about a guy in a garden and I thought it’s a translation by an Eastern European poet – he’s [Redgrove] really much more of a European poet and Vernon Scannell is a very English poet as is Anthony Thwaite...

KN – Yes Thwaite was also quite critical of Peter’s work at times...

PS – There’s a dividing line – the European and the English. And Alvarez, I think he was blown away by Ted. *Lupercal* and *The Hawk in the Rain* are extraordinary books. Peter’s first two books weren’t so tightly formed nor so accessible, with the exception of ‘Lazarus and the Sea’. They predict that he was going to be a major poet and Alvarez made that value judgement.

KN – So how did Peter deal with bad reviews?

PS – They annoyed him beyond belief. Then he’d write a refutation letter, saying ‘when you say this, this is my explanation’. He’d make strong responses back, he was always troubled by misapprehensions to his work. You have a violent dream that frightens you and you want to bring the emotion into the light to understand it, and what comes across as violence to some people can be taboo regarding what’s permitted and what’s possible. Those who break taboos take a lot of flak. And Peter never did anything by halves.

KN – Was Plath an influence on Peter?

PS – They both wrote about mushrooms, although Peter wrote on this first. Peter was very fond of Plath but when Plath and Hughes came back from America, Peter said she was wearing a mask and he couldn't get through to her. They were, in the early days, a mutual influence.

KN – With Plath writing 'Lady Lazarus' after Peter's 'Lazarus and the Sea'?

PS – Yes, his poem predated Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'. A mutual influence.

KN – What's with so many spiders in Peter's poems and also wasps being squashed against window panes?

PS – Ah yes, the insects, the wasps being squashed are mostly in the first two collections. Snails being trodden underfoot I do find difficult. But Peter was fascinated by what repels. I'd think, I'm going to look away but he would always challenge himself to look, to ask what does this mean, to say don't turn away from this scary or violent dream. He'd ask, can I look at this? Peter felt it was his job as a poet to look at all taboos – to not look away.

KN – I'm asking this question because it's something I ask myself. Was Peter aware of the danger of using violent imagery in a poem because it could jazz up an otherwise dull subject or poem?

PS – Yes I think all poets ask, is this valid? It is part of our craft. And he did discard things that he felt was too much. I sometimes feel this about poems about loss and grief – do people want more poems on this? There's this whole thing about checks and balances.

KN – Do you think Peter saw himself as a feminist?

PS – Oh yes! He always asked, will they let me be an honorary feminist? He liked women and didn't like men (apart from other poets – though not all)! He felt women had insights re the menstrual cycle, and childbirth and mothering, and felt shall I ignore menstrual experiences or shall I look at it further? He was hoping to be an enabler, not to take over. He was a completely heterosexual man who sometimes would have liked to be a woman.

Appendix B

Katrina Naomi – Interview with Robin Robertson, Random House, London, 10 January 2011

KN – I know you didn't publish your first book until you were in your forties but you must have been writing for a long time before that?

RR – Yes, I began as a teenager, and remained an earnest, self-important, self-dramatising, adolescent lyric poet for a long time. Then I graduated from Aberdeen University...

KN – In English?

RR – Yes, a four-year honours degree then a postgraduate degree in Canada. With that degree, you're simultaneously a student and a teacher. I was Alastair MacLeod's teaching assistant, he's a wonderful story-writer; do you know his work?

KN – No, not at all.

RR – He's very good. I also took a writing seminar with him, which helped crystallize and evacuate some of the worst of the stuff. He helped me understand what pretentious, overblown nonsense I was writing. So I was able to draw a line. As a result, I'm not haunted by juvenilia. Then I entered the world of publishing, which slowed the next phase...

KN – I've read in other interviews that you say that you need to get other people's voices out of your head before you can write?

RR – Yes it isn't conducive to be editing other texts when trying to write your own. I was also helping to bring up a couple of daughters which militated against writing. I developed a pattern of going away, on retreat, as a way of releasing the tension. Yes, so that's why I didn't publish till later on.

KN – And did you write poetry from the start?

RR – Yes. I've never really been interested in writing anything else. Poetry is the thing that gives me most pleasure, offers the most difficulty and risk.

KN – How do you feel about me writing my PhD on your poetry and having singled out violence as my theme?

RR – I’m flattered by any attention. [Pause.] I don’t even think of my writing as being particularly violent; it’s more a way, I think, of *avoiding* violence, which I’ve always loathed. Where I’m from, violence is inherent in the landscape – the natural, elemental violence of the north-east coast of Scotland. Then there were the skinhead gangs and the American roughnecks off the oil rigs, drinking and fighting. There was physical violence, certainly, and the ever-present *possibility* of it. Aberdeen was a sort of frontier town.

KN – There’s a real sense of threat in some of your poems, such as ‘At Dusk’ and ‘Anxiety # 5’.

RR – Yes, though that’s slightly different from overt violence. That unease, that anxiety, the sense of threat, that’s certainly something I’m interested in. It tends not to be the threat of physical violence, though, but of something that’s otherworldly, beyond my ken.

KN – Why do you feel you write about violence? Where does it come from for you? Banville in the *New York Review of Books* suggests that your heart operation has played a role?

RR – The heart complaint and the Scottish landscape are implacable, extreme facts, beyond my ability to control – they’re imposed, external forces. I had the operation after a congenital heart murmur began to announce itself with a sort of mewling sound. One of the doctors told me it was a ‘seagull murmur’ – given that name because the noise was like a seabird calling and crying from inside. I was about thirty. The operation was – and still is – an invasive, medieval intrusion: your sternum is sawn open and the ribs are pulled back under tension to expose the organs, held like an open trap; they work on you for a few hours then they let you snap shut again and sew up the chest. Then you’re on anticoagulants for life. Unfortunately, they left some stuff inside so I had to be opened up again a little later. The wound wouldn’t stop bleeding. I’m actually writing a poem at the moment called ‘A&E’ about this second incident. I was in Camberwell Casualty on a Saturday night, can you imagine? It was like the ‘Texas Chainsaw Massacre’ ... Anyway, during a bypass operation your blood is circulating outside the body, and this process can bring about a change in people, it can lead to all sorts of things... It was an incredible violence to have done to me, in order to keep me alive. An

interesting thing to have happened: something outside of my control. A very early and profound taste of mortality.

KN – I've also read that you walked past a slaughterhouse every day on your way to school. Is that true? It also features in a poem too, sorry I can't remember offhand which one.

RR – It's 'Actaeon: The Early Years' from *Swithering*. Yes – it was the longer route to school. The normal route was quicker, but you ran the risk of getting beaten up; the longer route had the bonus of going past the abattoir. It had a big open doorway, and I got further and further inside each time. The men working on the carcasses were most amused by my interest.

KN – But how old were you?

RR – Oh, about eight or nine.

KN – Not much of a place for a child then?

RR – No it probably wasn't. And, again, this was an early brush with mortality. [Pause.] In a city you don't see so much death.

KN – Is any subject off-limits?

RR – [Pause.] Try me.

KN – Oh, no, I meant in your writing. Is there any topic that you'd think you wouldn't want to write about or would stop yourself writing about?

RR – Well I'm not going to write about my daughter's rectum or a dead lover's nipple hairs...[Pause.] I seldom set out to write on a subject. I gather words, phrases, images, sometimes whole lines, and store them. Eventually a connection is made between my current preoccupations – conscious and unconscious – and the lines, phrases and images; they start to join up. Some of these strings of words might have been in a notebook for twenty years, sitting waiting for the right partners. I don't start by thinking I'm going to tackle a subject or a theme. The actual creative process is probably best described as a mild trance. I'm not directing operations, there's some other force drawing things together (but then you'll say that's my subconscious mind) and it seems to proceed almost on its own. I get a rough shape of the thing, then carve it as if it were wood or stone, removing all that's redundant; then I begin to see what the poem might really be about, and I start to hear the sound of the thing. Then I just reinforce those musical patterns and lash the poem down.

KN – But has there been anything you’ve written and you think, no I really don’t want to go there?

RR – ‘Actaeon: The Early Years’ is not strictly autobiographical but does contain some aspects of my childhood. I was aware when I finished it that it was a problematic piece – largely because of how the mother was presented. I showed it to my brother, whom I’m close to, and he agreed it was difficult but that it wasn’t really up to him to say. Then I showed it to my editor, Don Paterson, and said I was concerned about my mother’s reaction. And he said, ‘Well it’s not true is it?’ And I told him that quite a lot of it was. I ended up deciding that it belonged in the book. I had not set out to be gratuitously cruel, simply attempted to get to part of the truth. Poems regularly go in directions that I don’t expect (which is part of the excitement of writing) but I don’t think I’ve ever held a poem back if either the content or the handling was open to misinterpretation or likely to cause hurt. I get very frustrated when some readers impose an autobiographical lattice on stuff I write. There are people who trawl through my books looking for references to themselves. What’s in these books is not autobiographical: it’s an accretion of words and images, impulses and experiences, sense, memories, all passed through the ‘streamy well of the unconscious’ – changed and charged by it. It’s the subconscious; that’s what I subscribe to.

KN – Do you think the ‘Gentility Principle’ is still an issue in terms of how English critics and audiences react to poetry?

RR – Without it, there wouldn’t have been the Movement. I wasn’t sure of Larkin when I was young, but I’ve come to admire his work. [Pause.] But as to critical reactions, these aren’t terribly important to me. There are few interesting critics of poetry in this country. I’m always glad of a good review – but it’s a very small world and negative reviews often seem to have some agenda to them. [Pause.] If someone was writing a fifteen-word description of my poetry, it wouldn’t entirely surprise me if ‘violence’ cropped up. This, of course, makes me uncomfortable – but then all lazy, scribbled shorthand descriptions make me uncomfortable. We all try to avoid being pigeonholed... I do write about unease and threat – that turbulence and undertow – this has been part of the work since my first book and continues into the new poems I’m writing now. But I hope there are many other threads to my work – a stitchwork of threads – characters like poor Strindberg pop up every now and again, Ovid is a

constant, as is the fascination with myth, and the landscape of my childhood...I like the way the poems speak to each other across the books.

KN – Do you get different reactions to your work from men and women?

RR – My audiences seem to be made up largely of middle-aged women. It's mostly women who come up after a reading and they're almost always charming. [Laughs.] Women read more than men, and read more *poetry* than men, so it's not really a surprise. If it's in the States, they'll say 'I really like your *voice*'. If they're parents they'll tell me they enjoyed 'Donegal', perhaps because it's straightforward and overtly sentimental. Then, there are the people who *don't* come up after a reading... I have no idea what *they* think... I wouldn't want, would hate, to be regarded as a masculine poet, it's so undermining. [Pause.] I don't see poetry in terms of gender anyway. Ted Hughes is a good example of a very masculine poet, but he goes beyond that into another zone. It's really never crossed my mind, gender. Sharon Olds has some of the most shocking, brutally frank poems about relationships and the body, so does that make her masculine or super-feminine?

KN – No neither. It's one of the reasons that I've chosen the four poets that I have, because none of you write to so-called 'traditional' gender roles.

RR – Well, then there's Peter Redgrove...

KN – And his interest in periods [...]. OK next question. Do you think there's a danger of 'sexing up' what might otherwise be a dull poem, with violence or violent imagery – perhaps with the idea that violence sells?

RR – Well poetry sells so little anyway!

KN – OK, disregarding the selling angle?

RR – Well I really disagree that there's anything gratuitous in what I write. I certainly don't intend there to be. The poems arrive more often by accident than design. A good example would be 'At Roane Head', which I consider to be very much embedded in north-east Scotland, for its language, imagery, folklore. But it was written one Christmas in a boathouse on the Norfolk Broads, surrounded by ducks, in two hours. I wrote it without any sense of what I'd be writing. There I was in this idyllic lakeland, writing about physically handicapped children who are slaughtered. It was as much a surprise to me as it was to the characters in the poem – all that grief. Still, I like it well enough. I end most of my readings with it.

KN – And it certainly hasn't done you any harm has it?

RR – [Smiles.] No, it hasn't.

KN – Several critics have accused your poetry of being gratuitously violent: David Cooke in *Poetry London*, says that your poems are 'obsessed with ritual and violence to a degree which seems gratuitous'; Banville in the *New York Review of Books* mentions the poems can be 'suspect' and that they 'hint of the gratuitous' and James Quinn in *Poetry Ireland*, re 'The Flaying of Marsyas' wrote, 'I felt that the only excuse for the lengthy account of the flaying of the hubristic singer was Robertson's own delight in rendering the grisly details of dismemberment in an exquisite literary language'. How do you respond to this?

RR – Ovid in the original is much worse! 'The Flaying of Marsyas' was a commission. I was to write a version of the poem – not a translation. I took the Ovidian story and put a modern spin on it. The original narrative is shocking in its descriptions of brutal punishment and physical violence. The way I saw it was that this kind of torture is still happening around the world, where the outsider or the weaker party is subject to a system of brutality. I wanted to make this poem feel as if it were happening in Northern Ireland, Rwanda or Afghanistan. I thought it was justified. There's no way you could retell it *without* violence. I left out Ovid's 'happy ending', with all the woodland creatures gathered round. That would have been much too Walt Disney. I didn't see that you could have a happy ending to a story like that.

KN – I've been doing a rather unscientific tally of each poets' books, looking at whether the amount of violence or violent imagery in each book diminishes as they go on. I wondered if poets' books might become less violent as they continue to be published. But in your case you seem to be fairly consistent – on average about half of the poems in each book contain violent imagery or content.

RR – Oh really? [Laughs.]

KN – Yes but the most violent of your books by my reckoning is *Slow Air*, which I should say is actually my favourite.

RR – Really? No one else tends to choose that book as a favourite. That book's *really* about loss...

KN – What can we expect for your next collection?

RR – I'm far ahead of myself [laughs], I've already got thirty pages of a new book. I'm going to the badlands of west Texas in April for a month to write. The book's already in

some kind of inchoate form. I'd love to write about the desert, I'd be very encouraged by that: so different from the north-east coast of Scotland. And there have been significant changes in my circumstances. I now have a place to write in London, so I've settled into a different mode of working and I think I'm more optimistic. [Pause.] Which is a worry. I have my own thematic labels for my books: *Slow Air* was grief, *Swithering* was stasis or paralysis, and the last book was a book of leaving or trying to leave. But the next one? It will have a different direction while still being true to my themes. [Laughs.] It seems to have houses and homes in it, which is quite a departure.

KN – Is there anything to do with the subject of violence and your writing that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to discuss?

RR – [Pause.] You can't ignore violence. It's in our myths and folk-tales. It's in life. And living in London there's a definite undercurrent of threat: it feels dangerous to me – the speed of it, that undertow of barely suppressed anger. If you're a writer, you have to be sensible to what's around you, and you pick up things like tension and threat; I'm interested in all of this, and the effects it has on people. There's a fairly constant stream of anxiety about one thing or another – it's palpable and it's important.

KN – I'm thinking that people who write about violence aren't angry or brutal, that they're actually against violence. It's a way for us to try and understand violence, and if we can understand it, that might help to stop it.

RR – Yes, that's right. But violence is accompanied by the *fear* of violence; which is another anxiety. I'm writing about that at the moment.

KN – And when do you hope the new book will be out?

RR – Next year.

KN – But all the others have been out every four years.

RR – Yes, I know. Whatever next?

KN – Well good luck with it and thanks very much for your help

Appendix C

Katrina Naomi – Interview with Pascale Petit, British Library, London, 2 December 2010

KN – When did you start writing poetry?

PP – When I was at school, I started writing a little, because I loved Keats. I felt the depth of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. This really spoke to me. And I was a very withdrawn child and teenager so it was like meeting a friend. And then when I was at art school, when I did my BA, I wrote a booklet of poems to go with my degree show and most of the poems are very obscure and full of long words.

KN – Do you think they would still be obscure now?

PP – Yes. They were obviously badly written. I knew what they were about. [Laughs.] I don’t think anyone else would have known. I knew what I was trying to write about, which was alienation really [laughs], that seems to be my thing that I wanted to write about. I didn’t really know why but yes, that was it. But they were otherworldly as well, which is something that has stayed with me. Or they were trying to be otherworldly.

KN – How do you feel about somebody like me doing a PhD and including your work in terms of looking at it specifically from a violence angle?

PP – First of all, I think the violence thing, that’s fine, that is something that I know that I write about. It’s something that surprised me that I wrote about. When I was writing *The Zoo Father* it surprised me. I was seeing a therapist at the time and I did say well I’m very surprised by how violent these poems are because I’m actually rather a gentle person. But it just seemed to be something I needed to explore and in a safe place of poems. I shy away from any kind of violence in real life but to explore it in art I think is a totally different thing. So yes, it’s interesting that you’re doing that and I’m very interested in the other people that you’ve selected because they have...well Peter Redgrove I’ve always thought was really rather a special poet and very underrated. Robin Robertson’s work I very much admire and a lot of it’s to do with his use of the primitive. Sharon Olds as well because she writes about those fraught parental relationships, sexual relationships even, that I dared to go into, you know.

KN – When I was first thinking about it, I wondered what would people think if I said I'm writing this on violence? I wondered if this might be offputting, or not how you might like to be perceived?

PP – I don't think I mind actually because, as I said, it is something that I've explored. It is a central thing that I've explored in my work with the Frida Kahlo poems as well, I've explored the fact that this handrail went through her vagina, was a kind of rape, without a person to blame as it were. And that was the actual hook for me to write about her, it was that. And that was a very violent thing that happened to her and I wanted to write about how the rest of her life was affected by it and how she turned it into art.

KN – As you have. And you must be very pleased about the T. S. Eliot nomination?

PP – Yes. Yes. That was a lovely surprise.

KN – You just mentioned about 'daring' to write. Does it, or did it feel at the time, very daring to write on this. Did you feel that other poets weren't doing this very much?

PP – Yes. There were all kinds of reasons as to why it was daring. When it started, with *The Zoo Father*, it was daring because I didn't think of myself as a violent person and I didn't want to think that it was something gratuitous, but that I had a reason for it and also there was the fact that I was doing it because I had to and then I had to stand back and think this is quite a daring thing to do. And yes, no one else, Selima Hill maybe, she explores that, but hardly anyone does, unless it's writing about war, which is a different kind of violence, which is almost legitimate violence [laughs] oddly enough.

KN – I've specifically chosen not to look at any war-based violence, everything I'm going to look at is either interpersonal violence, whether that's within the family or the street, or however; or in terms of violent imagery that's used within poetry. I feel there's been enough done on war.

PP – Yes, that's because that's legitimate violence but, for example, the violence in the home it's still hidden, even though there are an awful lot of social workers, which is very different to when I was a child. No one noticed if you were being abused when I was a child. It's still, in the rather refined poetry world, [...] it's turned a blind eye to. Whereas my poems in Mexico, because I've read in Mexico, then I'm told this is just so relevant to seventy per cent of the girls in the class, or something, you know [laughs], it's rather different from here where people say it's relevant to very few, which actually I doubt is true. [Laughs.]

KN – One of the reviews of *The Zoo Father*, one by Robert Potts, is very negative.

PP – He’s not one of my fans! [Laughs.]

KN – I thought about this question of therapy, it’s something that’s also been thrown at Sharon Olds quite a lot and I would say at most women who choose to write about something that’s important that’s happened to them. And I wonder how, if he was here how you, would answer him? It seems to me it’s a way of belittling an experience and the art that you make of that experience?

PP – I wouldn’t deny that the process of writing it is therapeutic because it is, it was, but what was actually therapeutic was not writing about it, it was making poems out of it. For example, the fact that I tied my experience of my father to imagery of the Amazon, that was in a way the therapeutic part, that I kind of made him beautiful for me; I turned him into something that I love – Amazonian creatures. But it’s making it into art that’s the therapy, just writing about it and expressing it would have absolutely no therapeutic value for me and that’s the assumption that Potts was kind of making, that it’s just an outpouring of strong emotion or anger, or whatever. But that wasn’t it at all. [Laughs.] The manipulation of the images and the use of the primitive, which I’m very interested in doing in poems, for whatever reason, that fascinates me, the primitive and primitive societies – which are not so very primitive in other ways – spiritually they’re not that primitive at all compared to us, but obviously in other ways they are. The writing of the poems is like play, playing and fun, even though the subject was very hard to write about, so I think it’s that element of play, if it was just an outpouring of emotion, that wouldn’t be playing you know?

KN – What would you like people to take from your poetry?

PP – [Pause.] That’s a hard question. I don’t think I’ve really thought about that very much, but I think the awe of nature would be one of the big things I’d like people to take, that’s one of the things I’d be working to recreate. [Pause.] After some readings, I do get lots of people coming up to me and saying ‘Oh I could really relate to that’ and they’d be quite emotionally moved and I’ll think, that’s great, but I’m not sure that that’s why I wrote it though, that that’s what I wanted particularly, for people to find it healing for themselves, but that seems to be almost a side product if you like. [Pause.] A feeling of the awe of nature and for the images to make feelings just by the juxtaposition of images, I don’t know if I’d want them to have insights into humanity, I

don't know. I'm not sure that I've got any insights into humanity so I'm not sure. I write what I write because I have to write it and I hope that people will enjoy them really and also that it will remind them of the awe of nature, and that includes people. And also in my work, I am acting out a kind of struggle. I'm looking at evil, if you like, and I'm looking at where the goodness is and I don't know if that's got anything to do with what people get out of it but there's a struggle going on there and that's why I found Amazonian tribes very useful, because they are a microcosm of human nature and behaviour and I felt that there were secrets of the human soul there so I'm trying to look into that, to look into, for example, an abusive father: why, where is the good and that's what I'm exploring in my novel at the moment. That's also on the theme of *The Zoo Father*, so it's obviously something that I'm really interested in exploring. Where's the good, when there's so much bad? Are people good or bad? And I'm a bit of an optimist when it comes to people really, or romantic, so I want to look for the good, to do my best to find the best, but at the same time I really acknowledge there's a lot of darkness there, there's a lot of violence and evil, badness. Evil's a bit too strong a word.

[Laughs.]

KN – Is there any subject that you think would be off-limits to you, that you think you wouldn't touch on in your writing?

PP – [Pause.] I really hesitate to write about my brother because he's living and he's kind of aware of what I do. He wasn't once but he found out about *The Zoo Father* so I sent him the book because there's a poem in there about him and he was actually fine about it, but I would still be very wary. In my novel, for example, which does feature two grown up children, I've turned the brother into a sister, so that's kind of off-limits. I can't think of anything else. [Pause.] Sex is always tricky to write about, that's one of the reasons I wrote through Frida Kahlo so I could write about sex without having to be me [laughs] because she had a colourful sex life so I could do that to a certain extent.

KN – I don't know if you feel you have any link with Ted Hughes's poetry, with his shamanism for example? But I was looking at some of the responses to Ted Hughes's *Crow*, which were really anti.

PP – Why were they anti it?

KN – I think some of the critics were. Al Alvarez was always pro and he wrote an interesting piece and his argument, as well as that from an interview I read with Ted

Hughes, they both seemed to be saying that this anti-violence feeling was a hangover after the Second World War and that people just wanted a cosy life and didn't want to have to confront anything.

PP – Wilful evil?

KN – Yes and probably still now, people want quite a nice life and don't want to look into all of that.

PP – Definitely. I definitely get that impression. Even in workshops.

KN – I think that some critics seem to find him gratuitous and also didn't like the fact that he focused on animals and not on people. Still now, when there's violent imagery in a book, some people don't like it, they feel it's unreadable or unnecessary.

PP – Certainly uncomfortable. It's strange how people expect it [art] to be comforting.

KN – So do you have any views on the subject of violence and why some people object to it?

PP – I think it is to do with it being uncomfortable and with some people thinking that art is about aesthetics and pleasure, but that however pleasurable the violent art is, I mean, aesthetic, I think a lot of people don't want to face that. They're kind of, well I do think a number of people are deluded, or trying to delude themselves [laughs] and they see art as an escape from life. And then there is the element of English politeness, which as a French person, I do see that I think, that it is also to do with English gentility, that certain things aren't mentioned, that it's not polite to talk about.

KN – That was the subtitle of Alvarez's piece.

PP – The Gentility Principle. I raised this once when I was on *The Verb* many years ago...

KN – What is *The Verb*?

PP – A BBC radio programme presented by Ian McMillan Anyway, that was about the politeness of British poetry and was based on an editorial I'd written for *Poetry London* and people read impolite poems and I read 'Self-Portrait with Fire Ants' and there was a stunned silence because that was deeply impolite, whereas other people's poems were more sexily impolite, so mine was not sexy at all. Anyway, one of the panellists was Julian Barnes, and I raised the gentility issue and he said 'Oh that was dealt with a long time ago by Alvarez' and I thought, well actually it's still here, that's my point, it hasn't gone away that much. I still think it's there and also the English fear of emotions, strong emotions, which are usually disguised by irony in poems instead. Obviously emotions need to be controlled, carefully controlled, in poems and shown and not told, but there

is an aversion to powerful emotions sometimes. It depends, violent ones anyway. If you think of Christopher Reid's poems, his book [*The Scattering*] went down really well, that had powerful emotions certainly but not violent ones – elegies.

KN – I wanted to ask about your use of animals in your work and also in *The Huntress*, if I remember rightly, there's sometimes violence to animals as well.

PP – Violence to animals in *The Huntress*?

KN – A toad or a frog is impaled?

PP – It's a spell, yes that's actually a spell that I'd found. Well, I am a creature poet because I basically love animals and I'm terribly interested in animals. And I bonded with animals as a child more than I did with people maybe, so they kind of stand for people for me [laughs]. So on one level it's really simple, I really like animals but then they're very useful, I find, for saying things about humans without it having to be a human. They're masks. Maybe if I turn people into animals it makes them better for me and that might be really childish, or a childlike thing that I do, because animals were like friends when I was a child.

KN – That was my hunch, I thought that was part of what you were doing but wasn't sure.

PP – I moved, when I was seven. I was moved from Paris to mid-Wales to live with my Welsh-Asian Grandmother. Paris had been with my parents and horrible. Well actually my mother did have a little white poodle, in fact, but that was very much my mother's poodle and there was such a contrast when I went to live in a very poor Council house in the middle of nowhere surrounded by fields full of sheep and cows and horses, and Gran had seven cats, a dog, a budgie.

KN – All in a small house?

PP – Yes but there was also a big garden where there were little animals. So animals equalled good when I was a child and my grandmother always seemed to be the keeper of the animals and I got on with my grandmother and I hadn't got on with my mother, never did, and my father, most of the time wasn't there. Parents were problematic anyway and my grandmother was this [Pause] she was a witch actually, she was also the keeper of the animals and the garden, the plants, so maybe that's why I need to recreate that awe of nature, from then. And then also from the age of 13 I would spend summer holidays in the south of France in a vineyard that my mother bought and we stayed in stone huts in this vineyard and of course there were all of these insects, huge insects,

cicadas and praying mantises and suchlike there, totally fascinating for a young teenager as I was. I was quite precocious but still childlike. Snake and lizards would go past us.

KN – You have a lot of good snake poems, there's that marvellous one where you're entering the lair.

PP – 'The Snake House', my mother's house, thanks, yes. Yes snakes were beautiful, wonderful creatures, you would suddenly discover them.

KN – This is a question I ask myself quite a bit – that poems that have got sex or violence in them could actually be titillating to anybody who might choose to read them. How do you deal with that?

PP – You mean people might find it erotic?

KN – Yes. Even in some bizarre way!

PP – I've never thought that. I don't think I set out to write anything that's erotic [Pause] love poems, very occasionally, but that would be a little aside.

KN – I was thinking that even just with the violence, some people will get off on it in some way?

PP – There's nothing I can do about that I think, that would be their problem and I don't think I would be responsible about that really. And I don't consider the violence in my poems gratuitous, but then if it was, it *would* be my problem, giving them some gratuitous violence to get off on. But I haven't. I've written about it because I've needed to. [Pause.] I hadn't actually thought about that.

KN – I think it's just something I'm aware of from my own writing and some people's reactions to it.

PP – I think you have to write what you have to write and then you do have to think about these things, you have to think about the effect of how people perceive it. I mean if they grossly misread it then maybe you haven't written it right, I think?

KN – I don't know. I think people read what they want to into it. I think, and this isn't a nice term, if you've got a 'warped' view of the world then you'll turn things around so that they fit your way of thinking. You can just write what you can and put them out there and if people misrepresent them or use them in some other way, I don't think there's anything a poet can do about that.

PP – But not that many people read poems anyway! [Laughs.] Also, people don't understand metaphor much if they're not used to reading poetry, so they often don't understand what is being said. Which is quite handy!

KN – Do you find that men and women react differently to your poems?

PP – Yes, some men and some women. I'm more likely to get the Robert Potts kind of reaction from a man than a woman I think. Not exclusively, that's for sure. The worry about overspilling of emotion in poems tends to come more from men. With the Frida Kahlo book, I think women are more likely to know her work than men so that creates a difference in reaction to the book, and maybe women are more interested in the subjects that are covered in the book – like miscarriage and childlessness and difficulty with sex because of an accident, sexual jealousy from a woman's viewpoint. I don't know, maybe that works the other way? Hopefully these subjects, such as losing a baby, or sexual jealousy, are equally relevant to men's lives. But it's some men, some women, it varies doesn't it? I think generally men are more interested in *The Zoo Father* than in *The Huntress*, there was less interest in *The Huntress* because it was about a daughter's relationship, well there may be various reasons, OK it was the same kind of territory, so people weren't so interested because it wasn't something new. But also because it was a daughter's relationship with her mother and also there wasn't the sexual tension, because it was about emotional abuse by a mother of a daughter. I got a lot more women identifying with it and there probably wasn't that much, or so much identification by men, though some did tell me they could relate to it. I do get some men saying 'Oh yes I had that kind of relationship with my mother' but there was that issue maybe of irrelevance for many men with that book. So the female subject matter I think creates a different reaction as well.

KN – Do you wish sometimes that you wrote lighter, fluffier, more Wendy Cope-style of poetry?

PP – No I don't wish to write lighter stuff, but you know it would be good to write about happiness more. I have tried. [Laughs.] There are some poems in *The Treekeeper's Tale* that are about celebrating marriage and that kind of thing but that book didn't get much attention. [Laughs.] It's a harder thing to do as powerfully, for me anyway, obviously some poets do it very well. You kind of think that one of the aims of poetry is to write love poems don't you? I don't seem to have quite managed that, particularly. [Laughs.]

KN – Is there anything else on the subject of violence that I haven't asked about that you'd like to say? I may come back to you once your novel is published.

PP – In general, I don't talk about my novel, I'm hoping to finish the first draft this Christmas, touch wood, but it is very much that territory because I did feel that a lot wasn't done in *The Zoo Father* that dialogue could do for example.

KN – But if there's anything else from your poetry that I haven't touched on?

PP – I can't think of anything. [Pause.]

KN – Presumably you're also working on a further collection?

PP – Well, I've written very few poems this year. I hope it's just because I've been too busy. I've just finished my Tate course and I can't write while I'm running that. Before that I had lots of reading and promotions and stuff, so had very little writing time. But what I'm hoping, is that poems are coming out of the novel, in fact, but it's very slow, let's put it that way. And all the time I'm reading really good poems and wishing I could do that – why can't I get poems that make you feel like that? You know when you read some poems and you feel this tells what living is about? Well I suppose when you asked me that question, what would I want my poems to do, I would want them, I would like them, to do that, but I'm not sure it's the kind of thing I've done. And I'd like to be able to do it more and to be a bit more universal. I feel that they're very much exploring an area [Pause] I'd like to be more universal.

KN – But then *The Treekeeper's Tale* is, in some ways, doing quite different things, no?

PP – Yes it was. You see I've come to a bridge as it were now, because I've been Frida Kahlo for a long time and now I have to be me now and it's really hard. [Laughs.]

KN – Thank you.

A version of this interview was published in Orbis, no. 155 (Spring 2011) pp. 27-9.

Appendix D

**Katrina Naomi – Interview with Sharon Olds, Concord, New Hampshire, (USA),
17 August 2011**

KN – What made you start writing poetry as opposed to prose?

SO – [Long pause.] Well, I think it was the power of repeated patterns in poetry. I think it was that concentration that drew me, helped me. I always wanted to write prose, but the sense alone didn't contain me enough, didn't hug me tight enough, as if that containment encouraged me to not lie, exaggerate, and sentimentalise. There's something about the form, the closer held form. You know Temple Grandin? She worked with cows, to help them be less terrified when they were milling around, waiting to be inoculated, or killed. She devised what is now, I believe, used everywhere, which is a single file passageway for them, so they have the comfort of following each other, and don't see what's happening up ahead. You know Les Murray's poem about a cow from the point of view of a cow? In it, the pronoun the cow uses for herself/himself is 'we'. And Temple Grandin herself found that, with her autism, once she climbed into the machine, which she had made to console and soothe the cows – a squeeze-chute – she felt relaxed for the first time in her life. She was very nervous about being touched, but she craved a kind of whole, compressing touch. [Pause.] I've never thought of this before, but I think the traditional form of the church hymn on which I was raised – the four-beat lines and four-line quatrains, the double fours – I didn't realise I was copying until I was about fifty. When I realised, I was pissed! And distressed. I didn't want to be writing in a church form! The church that I had experienced as a child was harsh, and emphasised punishment. But then I figured, anybody's lucky to have a form that comes to them that's so natural they don't realise till they're fifty that they're doing it, so I would just be grateful. It suits me to have a very firm form, disguised from myself by how I end lines and begin them, and by the absence of quatrains. So, inside each poem of mine, is just pure churchian form, and something about it contained me. Whereas the sentence alone, with paragraphs, was just too baggy, and didn't encourage me to tell the truth. My truth, you know. [Prose] didn't encourage me to do that, but the form of poetry did. Writing prose didn't relax me enough, or concentrate me on craft enough – so that I could do a little less idealising and grandstanding.

KN – I'm interested in violence in your poetry. Was there a particular event that made you need to write about this subject?

SO – I'd been writing prose and poetry, mostly love poems, never given to their muse. The muse he was a changing throughout those years. But I do remember – a story I've told a couple of times – when I was thirty I received my PhD, put it in my backpack and walked down the stairs of Columbia University with my kids, who were then one and four. I had a degree! I would be able to support myself as a teacher. The diploma could not be taken away from me. I'd not had an easy time getting it, and my various mental peculiarities – having a hard time figuring out direction, i.e. spatial directions, not being able to remember names and dates – I had struggled for eight PhD years with my 'stupidity', and now I would never need to take another test! I was free and immediately I knew what I wanted to do. These days, I might 'pray' to my own strong side, or to the life force, but then I had read *Faust* – or heard of it! – and so I 'prayed' to the 'Devil'. I said, 'I'll give back everything I've learned, if I could just write my own poems'. And then I immediately said, 'They don't have to be good, they just have to be mine'. And then I said, 'And not because I'm so great, but an ordinary woman, walking with children, going to get pancakes'. Now of course I was, without focusing on it, extremely privileged in my education, but whoever I was, as ordinary as I could be, I aspired upwards, to be 'normal'! My wish was that I be *allowed*. I think I was praying to Satan because I was not a favourite of God's. (I hadn't believed in the God of my childhood since I was thirteen.) I think I could translate, now, what I meant. I wasn't speaking to Satan. I was thinking of God's former partner, from my family's religion, who by that time would have meant to me something like each person's independent ego; not the superego, not the id of some Satanism that might be dangerous, but some kind of would-be unfettered self. After that, I wrote a lot more than before, and my use of form changed. I did what people call 'break[ing] my lines in strange ways'. I felt that I was making each line exactly as I wanted it. I was not breaking up sentences. I was doing something with four beats per line, and with not having the strong words at the ends of the lines but at the beginnings, to make a backbone to the poem. And then the ends, the branches, could droop out at the right-hand side and the nouns could form a firm trunk on the left hand. Again, I had no idea what I was doing. But I look back and can remember a bit of what it meant to me to be suddenly writing that way, and writing very

fast. I mean, as much as you can if you are raising a couple of small children. First things first!

KN – Have you ever done anything else creative or do you now?

SO – I made place cards when I was a kid for dinners. I was eight, and one guy had had a rank in the navy, and I looked up his rank and the seal and I copied that seal – so I was professional about my place cards! I mean, we didn't have those every meal, we sat in our same places, where we always sat, where we were always going to sit until the end of time, as far as I knew. I drew, never like a true artist, more cartoon-like. But I love to draw. I have what's called a benign intentional tremor (meaning it's not Parkinson's), it's nothing bad – and the 'intentional' means if you try hard to resist the tremor, it gets worse. So now I draw wiggly lines instead of straight lines, but I do love to draw – flowers, birds, trees, leaves.

KN – So why poetry, what is it about poetry that's made you dedicate yourself to it?

SO – I forget who said that poetry is the art in which one person is speaking directly to another person. It's not a play, there isn't an audience, there are no live actors, the poet is usually alone, or on the subway, and perhaps has – I don't know, how much do you or I think that we have a reader, specific or general, in mind when we're writing? It's something much subtler and more complicated than that, I think. But that description sounded good to me. Wherever I'm working, whether in the graduate creative writing programme at NYU [New York University] or, years ago, at its beginnings, NYU's hospital outreach writing programme or just sitting with people playing the poetry game that Ruth Stone invented, there's a lot happening at once. There's the form. We can use any form we like, or invent one. There's the vocabulary, we can use any word in any language in our poem. There's the emotion, and sometimes there's a story, sometimes not. In mine there's mostly a story. And probably all arts have something to do with something somebody really, really cares about. I do read novels, but there's something about the way in which a poem stops and starts that I especially like. At the end of each line there's a space, which the reader sees, and when it's being read aloud there's sometimes a pause, sometimes not, depending on how the reader feels about lines and pauses. There's more stopping and starting than prose has, and I think that somehow fits with longing, with loss, with death, with birth, all kinds of stoppings and startings.

KN – Do you feel uneasy about violence in your poetry, or about my interest in it?

SO – No. Just think of the creation of the universe, it's very violent, but it's not just that. Of course I think of the violence of Americans first, because that's my people, but all empires have been violent. I was surprised after my first book came out, *Satan Says*, in 1980, that I would get off an aeroplane to go read and no one would walk over to say hello to me. I mean they were there, they just didn't recognize me. They would say they thought I would look scarier [laughs] because my poems were so angry. And secretly I was hurt, I thought, angry, ooh, because I didn't realise how angry those poems were. They were much healthier in their anger than I was in my life. Twenty years ago I might not have recognised the anger in the poems, because it was such a relief and release to write them, there was a kind of joy in them.

KN – I've been doing a non-scientific study to analyse each of your books to see which poems contain violent imagery or subject matter. *Satan Says* is the most violent.

SO – I think life gets easier as one gets older. Also, what is in my books represents a fraction of what I write. I write a lot of poems. Many are bad, or just not strong enough for me to want to show them to anyone. *Satan Says* was my first book, I was 37, and I had gotten some very angry rejection slips from magazines for those poems – personal notes of rage – so I knew that some people had strong feelings against my writing.

KN – I want to ask you about the personal or the apparently personal in your work and to read you a quote from an interview you did with The Aldeburgh Poetry Festival's *Poetry Paper*. When you began writing you said 'The poems were merely personal and therefore they weren't really art – just something you longed to say to someone but could never say to their face. They were just a place where you could speak it.' So what makes a personal/apparently personal poem become art?

SO – Well, I wasn't thinking of them as 'art'. I knew that there was something weird about them. And part of me, of course, would have loved to have been a classical, traditional writer, who could do a good job of it, and elder, classical, traditional writers would recognise me, and then I could be in the classical, traditional writer family! But there was a certain kind of energy, or anger, or dance rhythm, to my poems – what they used to call, in American rock 'n' roll, 'cut and thrust' – so I couldn't be traditional.

KN – I want to ask about risk in your work. You said in that same interview, ‘When I look back, I see I have wanted to go right up to the cliff edge. I need to risk it, to be a little in bad taste or sentimentality and then see if I can keep it from going over’. Is risk still something that’s important to you?

SO – It’s a funny word isn’t it? Speaking from the point of view of polite society, just picking up a pen is risky. And yet my work is quite polite and careful compared to many art, drama [and] performance pieces. There are things I don’t want to know, because I don’t quite see how I can go on living in the same way I’ve been living if I know these things, whatever they are, truths about myself or truths about the world around me, truths about people who I wish to idealise, and so I guess for me there’s a risk in trying to tell my truth. The risk being: first, it shows how weird I am. I now know I’m not very weird at all, but I used to feel weird; and then second, how will it change me to know what this person I am writing about is really like, or what I am really like. I think for me it’s the risk of the denied truth. If you’re dancing, like in the old days of rock ‘n’ roll, you’re throwing yourself around in a way that is so not polite, and is so fun, and has such a sense of freedom. And we’re physically and emotionally limited in how far we can go into excess. It’s a joy to throw yourself into something almost more completely than you’re able. I used to be jealous of basketball players, because I felt that everyone wanted them to do whatever it took, within the rules, to make a basket. And the way some people seemed to want some people to write poetry was as if they were holding a teacup while playing, or keeping a pinkie crooked. As if poetry is any different from sports – you have to throw your whole soul into it! Now I wouldn’t say to a writer in a class of mine, ‘You’re going to have to throw your whole soul into it’ – but, between you and me, if we don’t, when I don’t, then I’m not going to have anything that’s very exciting for me or for anyone else.

KN – Is anything off-limits in your writing?

SO - Oh, a lot. I hope that each one of us can write whatever comes to us to write, and then lock it away if it’s not only our story, if it’s also someone else’s story, and it’s a story that that person is not telling. If we don’t even write it, what is going to happen to us? Mostly if a subject comes to me, I want to write the poem, do the best I can with it for the poem, the subject, and my own development, so I’m not constantly feeling that I should have written that poem and gotten it out of the way. But no, there’s a lot that I

have put away. I have these different folders with different symbols on them meaning things like ‘fifty years after I’m dead’.

KN – Do you know about Al Alvarez in Britain in the 1960s who was writing about the Gentility Principle?

SO – I don’t know about that, but didn’t he write about suicide?

KN – Yes. He also published *The New Poetry* anthology in Britain in 1962, including Redgrave and Hughes. In his introduction, Alvarez said that after the war, people (he meant men) just wanted a nice life, they didn’t want to know about violence and particularly not in their poetry.²⁹⁴ I’m considering to what extent this Gentility Principle still exists in British poetry. Do you think the Gentility Principle might also be in existence in America, i.e. that people might not want to read violent poems there?

SO – I don’t know. Some of our writing students in the past ten years, who are like twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, have been engaged in experimental poetry. Possibly in some cases the experimental could be like the genteel, an alternative to being too nakedly exposed in your art. I don’t think that’s the case with my students. I think that they’ve really taken in the new physics, the truth of how weird existence and matter and time is, and I believe that many of them are representing, with their craft, the chaos of existence – I don’t think, for the most part, that they’re trying to escape the personal. I think they’ve had it with the personal, because my generation, and the generation after mine, younger than I am, have done that so much. Every new generation wants to do something a little different. I mean you almost have to, as an evolutionary being. And then if you think of the writing done at Cave Canem, which is the first African-American summer writing workshop in the world – which I believe means in the universe! – there’s a tremendous number of poems that are not genteel, nor anti-genteel. So that’s another group of young poets who I look to. And they’re not going after rudeness for rudeness’s sake. No more than I do. Actually, I don’t think that’s true [laughs], occasionally the temptation is irresistible to me, but I wouldn’t say the same for the Cave Canem poets. Meanwhile, young audiences seem very open to non-genteel material. I’ve been writing a series of odes...

KN – I saw a film of you reading ‘The Ode to the Tampon’.

²⁹⁴ I am in danger here of conflating Alvarez’s assertions with what Hughes said in his interview with Faas, ‘Ted Hughes and Crow’, pp. 10-11.

SO – That was my first one. I wasn't aiming to do female topics, but I guess half my odes of the past few years are written with inner knowledge of an ordinary woman's life, or an ordinary lucky woman's life – the stages of coming into adulthood and sexuality, and love and children, ageing and all of that.

KN – I've been looking at some critics' responses to your work. Sometimes, if critics are critiquing you, or Pascale Petit, you're often yoked together in Britain, if they're being negative about one or other of you. Christina Patterson, writing about *One Secret Thing*, says 'To write poetry like this, you need to take risks – and sometimes risks fail.' She continues: 'The images are powerful, but sometimes it feels as though Olds can't resist the urge to shock.' What do you feel about this?

SO – I can understand that if someone is shocked, they may think someone was trying to shock them. But a lot of people aren't shocked by my poems. And am I shocked by them? Well, sometimes there's shocking bad taste in my political poems where I think I can say something about some group that I know very little about, so that's shocking! But I feel I'm writing more or less ordinary things about ordinary life. I would not give up – I hope, I mean on a good day – what I would see as my small truth of my poem to have any effect at all on a reader; to shock the reader, to please the reader, to mollify the reader. Any such motive is going to harm the poem. And I don't know what would shock a reader, nor had I better pay attention to that, because then my poem is screwed. Now, did I say that to shock? No, I just have a kind of basic, crude vocabulary [laughs]. I know, if I'm in polite society what I can say and what I can't, and what is going to upset my hosts. But I don't say it. I'm in their home. When I'm writing a poem of mine, it's not as if anyone's forced to read it, and I know that people will protect themselves. If they find themselves in some presence that is unappealing to them, they will just close the book, put the magazine down, throw it across the room! I trust everyone to protect themselves – if shock is a bad thing. I love being shocked by people's poems. It doesn't happen that often. I heard Cathy Park Hong up at the summer workshop in the Sierra Nevadas – and she's invented a patois, a set of Korean-American patois, or she's invented five of them, I don't quite have it straight yet, I haven't had a chance to study it – and she's up there reading a poem in which it seems like three different people speaking, in a patois that is both easy to understand and quite strange to my ear musically, and my mouth fell open. After her poem, I looked around and the other staff poets who were there – Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Major Jackson – our mouths

were hanging open, our eyebrows were up, our eyes were wide. We were laughing with joy, saying to each other, ‘Well look at that!’

KN – Other critics, such as Stephen Knight, have complained that there is little difference between your collections, or that there’s little difference within the books. What made me smile was seeing the epigraph to your poem ‘Calvinist Parents’, in which you quote the critic William Logan: ‘Sometime during the Truman Administration, Sharon Olds’ parents tied her to a chair, and she’s still writing about it.’ So you’re aware of these critiques and go on to write about them; it’s very funny.

SO – ‘During the Truman Administration’, yes, it’s just funny! I guess it was Robert Graves who said there is one story and one story only. He thought it was a story, if I’m not mistaken, by male poets about the white goddess. I read him as a teenager, and thought that he knew everything, until I read James Baldwin, and then I felt that he knew everything. So, yeah, I can see how my four-beat lines don’t change, the four line quatrains disguised in a long running poem, with no breaks – what I call a clump – that doesn’t change. (The first couple of books have poems in sections, but then that stopped, for the most part.) Family material, that doesn’t change – and world family, strangers out there whom I see in newspapers, or on television, or on the streets of New York, that doesn’t change. The ongoing story of family – if you put all the books together, and took just the children’s section from each book or the parent sections or the husband/boyfriend/whatever sections, and the out in the world sections, those could almost be long poems – each one of those sections combined. Chronology is very precious to me. My book, *Blood, Tin, Straw*, had more ‘art’ in its organisation than my other books. There was some violation in the chronology – where a child would appear later in the book who had been a grownup earlier in the book. Now that kind of tomfoolery makes me nervous, just because when you’re growing up and they tell you that the bad thing you did that morning was felt personally in the palm of Jesus thousands of years ago, it’s so awful. And ordinary chronology – morning, noon, night; winter, spring, summer, fall; child, teenager, grownup, old person, death – that’s good, that’s sanity. So, yeah, I can see there is some sameness. That’s OK! Who knows what it would have been like if I could’ve or would’ve done something else? But I couldn’t, and I didn’t, and I wouldn’t, so there we have it. I have to say one thing. I could, as a critic, find my voice in the poems quite annoying from time to time! There is a certain sanctimonious something or other in some of the poems that, until I saw it, I couldn’t

outgrow it. I don't see so much of it now. Like, by *One Secret Thing*, I don't see much of it – even in the one before that, *Unswept Room*, not much. I'm not saying I'm not annoying. I'm certainly annoying! [Laughs.]

KN – This focus on the critics is very useful for me because a lot of what interests me concerns what certain people don't want to hear.

SO – It's good for me to hear what these critics say.

KN – One of the critiques centres on your writing as therapy.

SO – I thought you said 'writing hysterically'! I love writing hysterically! I wish I could write more hysterically because – whose book was I just reading? Rosanna Warren, there is a place in her new book, *Ghost in a Red Hat*, where the grammar breaks down, the form breaks down – she's always been such an elegant writer. She's not really writing hysteria but the form is breaking down because that's what happened to form in this book in the presence of very intense feeling. Oh, she's wonderful. And this book has something I feel is very new. Where were we?

KN – We were talking about poetry being considered therapy. There was a particularly horrible review of Pascale Petit's *The Zoo Father*. She's dealing with her father's abuse of her and she writes about all of this, with her father as different Amazonian animals, as a way of dealing with something. The critic Richard Potts called this therapy. But very few people said Lowell's work was purely therapy and it seems that if women write about particular things that have happened to them, or that they're exploring, or that have happened to other women, that this is somehow therapy rather than art.

SO – OK, here's the thing. Is it worse for you, psychologically, to remain silent all your life? Yes. As an artist, is it worse for you to give up the possibility of writing good art about very difficult subjects? It's terrible to give up that possibility by not even trying. Is it harder to write good art about intimate horrifying experiences? Yes, I think it probably is. OK, that's one thing. Should we try? Yes. The other thing, how therapeutic is it? Well, it works a little [laughs]. I don't know if bad art is better therapy than good art! Is it good that it's therapeutic to write art? Yes. Is it OK that it's more challenging to write on difficult subjects? Yes. Are we really happy for anyone who writes a good poem about a difficult subject? Yes! And we're grateful to them too. How therapeutic was it for me to write about the difficulties that I had in this particular family that I grew up in? Well, somewhat: the shame factor, wanting no one to know anything about one's private pain as a child? Well, that shame wasn't there so much anymore. Then a relief

that I had at least tried to turn some of those experiences into art. Tried, mostly failed. I mean if critics think the poems of mine in books are bad, they should see the ones I've never showed anyone. However, writing the best we can, or at least the best we do over time, about difficult experiences, does it heal us? I would say no. I can't say 'us'. Did it heal me? Oh, it was good for me, and especially that business of shame, and loneliness, and isolation, and not wanting other people to know. But did it cure me of various neuroses that children get when they're treated in weird ways? No. Did it partly cure me? Yeah. How much? Oh, I don't know, half? Not more than half, because what we're able to do in our art, we're not necessarily able to do in our lives. So now that I'm older, and I have a better understanding of my life than I used to, I don't know what would have happened to me had I not written all of the poems that I wrote. (That was something that I'm really grateful I had a chance to do.) I don't know what would have happened to my psyche, because the idea of continuing to contain secrets... Of course, there are family secrets that all of us contain if they aren't just our story, there's a lot that we aren't going to publish anytime soon. But I would hate to have found out what it would have been like for me not to try to make something of some value – obviously not to a lot of people, you know a lot of people hate it – to some people. And any value to anyone, this is good, this is a blessing, this is what we want. And give Pascale my love.

KN – It was reading your poem 'I Go Back to May 1937' that made me want to be a poet.

SO – Really? Good, I'm glad! Well, I'd always been a 'bad child', it wasn't as if I was capable of being one of those admirable people. So I didn't have a reputation as a good person to protect. I mean not that I was such a bad person, and in my private dealings with other people it mattered to me very much to not be unkind, that's always important. But how are we going to deal with what formed us? And certainly singing it, rather than killing someone, is preferable. The end, my sermon!

KN – Why do you feel that you use violence in your work?

SO – I could try to be clever and say that extreme subjects use me – as I'm reading a newspaper, which I didn't do for a hundred years because it's scary and upsetting. I didn't put that article in about this person does this and that to that person. I didn't make that up. But I am a writer, and when things enter us they turn and change, and then we

express them, hopefully in an ordered form. Why do we want to do that? Murder, for instance, could happen to any one of us at any moment. Anyway, what are you going to do with a story that haunts you? We have traditional means, we can have nightmares, we can [have sleeplessness], we can turn to drink and drugs, we can enact those things on other people. But our species would not have lasted if we could not also try to turn our information about the human into some kind of form, more formal perhaps than the actions of murder, or similar in formality, or far less formal in experimental poems that would have the parts of the body scattered all over the page and the lines tilted. And I wish I could do that but I can't. I think that may be what some experimental poets are doing – representing, in the shape on the page, visibly, the emotion. One regrettable thing is that when we write about something very painful to us, to some extent we are passing on the pain to a reader. I hear about something that you haven't heard about, and I try to deal with it in a poem, and I come out the other side of the poem feeling slightly better. You read my poem and you feel a lot worse because you hadn't heard about that. It's complicated, but I do feel that, as a species, our attempt to make pleasing order out of unpleasing horror. Is it likely to succeed as art? No, we're not good enough writers. I'm not a good enough writer. But is it a worthy human endeavour? Oh yes. Is it as valuable as putting a bag of human, male urine on the moon and leaving it behind? Oh I think so! [Laughs.] I guess that answers my gender thing! I need more women to leave their bags of urine around on various planets, then I'll find out if I'm just being a sexist when I'm so pissed about that piss on the moon. It was Neil Armstrong, that's what they did with their effluvia, they left it in [lowers voice] very carefully sealed bags [laughs] on the moon. You'll see now that's the kind of thing you'll wish I hadn't told you. I wish I hadn't told you!

KN – What about the role of religion in terms of violence in your work? I was brought up as a Roman Catholic, which has very ugly imagery. You're coming from a different tradition but I imagine equally as gory at times?

SO – Well, the thing about my Catholic friends, when I was a little kid, was they got forgiven. And I was going to hell, maybe from before I was conceived, which is disheartening really – certainly from before I was born. Predestination. I'm not sure if it's waiting in the wings, and it knows that a child is about to be conceived who is predestined to go to hell, or if it [applies] just from the time you're born. But there was never any question as to which way I was going. It was scary. The crucifixion movie, at

a local Berkeley theatre, three hours long, on Good Friday, was scary. I was not allowed to see other movies, and we had no television, so this was my cinematic experience. This was not a forgiving religion. The presence of the God from the Protestant Church where I went as a kid was not a kind presence. There may have been people in that same church who thought they were in a happy religion. As a choir prize, when I was seven, I was given a book of child martyrs – children put to death for their faith – and it made a big impression on me. And they were all really nice too, and they never complained, and their faith was never shaken, so yeah. What do they say in church: ‘There is no health in us’? And the whole idea of physicality as a kind of filth. It was a violent religion. And my personal responsibility for Jesus’s being crucified was disheartening as well, quite daunting. I had killed someone. My sins were responsible for his death. You probably know the story about George Oppen, who was wounded in France with the American army, and unconscious? He came to, and a nursing sister held a crucifix up to him to see if he was *compos mentis* or not, and she said to him, ‘What is it?’ and he said, ‘An instrument of torture’.

KN – Is it fair to talk about your parents’ ‘abuse’ of you, or is that not a word you would use?

SO – I don’t know. If I’m asked if my poems are autobiographical, I no longer say ‘I can’t say, I’ve taken a vow not to say, so good question but I can’t say’. I’ve changed that. It was in an interview with the young British poet, Marianne Macdonald in *The Guardian*, she seemed disappointed that I wouldn’t speak about the autobiographical nature of my work, and I finally said, ‘I make nothing up’. For all those years I hadn’t wanted to talk about autobiography in my poems because I feared that that’s all we would ever talk about – and I want to talk about lines and rhymes. I still cannot say the sentence ‘My mother x’ or ‘my father y’, I say ‘the speaker of the poem’s mother’. But I’m no longer saying ‘I can’t say if my poems are invented or not’. I never invented anything, because I don’t have any imagination! I have images, but imagination? Making up stuff that didn’t happen? That’s one of my problems with writing fiction, I wasn’t good at that. So I’m not comfortable talking about it directly, but I can say, if I put to myself the question in relation to the parents of the speaker in my poems, ‘am I comfortable with the word “abuse”?’ [Pauses.] I guess I have to be. But there are so many forms of abuse. Certainly ‘use’, like ‘unrespectful use’ – emotionally and physically. Abuse? I connect it so much with sexual abuse. Although I know there are

people writing about violent parents. So I guess I would say yes, but it's not a term that I automatically think of, because of how unimaginable it is to me, how so many people – friends, fellow writers – get through things that were so much worse, when I had a hard time getting through what I got through. So I don't quite know how to answer that one.

KN – We've talked a bit about how men and women react differently to your work. Is there any more you'd like to say on that?

SO – Probably in some cases they do – and wouldn't it depend on gay women and men, straight women and men, and not just that, but everything? Also age makes a big difference. I don't write for women instead of men, I don't write for men instead of women. May anyone who can find anything in any poem of mine find it!

KN – I've found some really rather misogynistic responses from critics, for example, one saying he thought your line breaks were 'unclean'. He doesn't justify that in any way and you could tell he knew nothing of your work. You wouldn't say that of a male poet, I don't think.

SO - Really? [She notes this down.]

KN – I could send you the details if you'd like?

SO – Oh no thanks, I don't dare, my spirits can just plummet. Sometimes when we're reading criticism of ourselves, you forget that you can reject what they say if you think it's not true. It's much easier to be hard on ourselves, for some of us, than on other people.

KN – Why do you think that some people object to violence in poetry?

SO – Do they? What if there's an earthquake, or a murder? A lot of war poetry, all war poetry, is to be objected to? I don't think I'm the person to answer that one. There's a lot of anti-war poems, now in the States against the wars that we're fighting – Rosanna Warren, *Ghost in a Red Hat*, Tom Sleigh's *Alley Cats* – brilliant, brilliant, heartbreaking. And there's the work of Brenda Hillman, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass.

KN – Are you ever concerned that some people might find the violence and sex in your work titillating?

SO – My work was called 'pornographic' by a great American critic, and I looked up the word's meaning. As I recall, pornography comes from ' pornos' – the writing, I

believe it is, by men, about female prostitutes. I don't think it is Greek men writing about beautiful Greek boys, I think it's men writing about women. So I looked in my writing for any poems by men about female sex workers and found none. And so what I carried away from her review was that at least somebody was getting excited by my poems! Now, I was not. I mean – they're poems. You know what it's like when you're writing. Of course, it doesn't matter what the poems' conscious intent was if their unconscious intent was to be titillating. Sexuality's kind of an exciting subject. But no, I just don't think that way. I know that under the sun there are different people who get excited by all the different things that exist.

KN – I wanted to ask you about Plath's 'Daddy' poem, given all of your poems in *The Father* and some of those in *The Dead and the Living*, and particularly the poem 'That Year' from *Satan Says*. I can read it as picking up from the 'Daddy' poem.

SO – Now, that poem has been rewritten. It was written thirty-five years ago, and maybe twenty years ago I looked at it and thought 'Oh no, not right'. (Someone later wrote an article saying that all my rewrites of all my poems were from a political perspective and had weakened all of the poems.) That poem was written say in 1975, and I cannot remember when I started reading Plath. I know I was reading Muriel Rukeyser in 1972. So I don't know if I had read Plath's poems yet or not. I had started writing a book of poems about World War Two around 1970, when I had not yet read her or Sexton. I read them both for the first time at the same time. I had been writing a book of World War Two poems, which ultimately my unerring editor, the great Judith Jones, turned down. They just weren't good enough. The material was too strong for my talent. But I had been thinking about the Holocaust and the camps, since – like most of us – I read Anne Frank when I was, like, ten. So I can't say if 'That Year' was in response to Plath or not. But I remember her poem was strong, self-defensive, and angry, and speaking directly to her father. When I did read it, I didn't feel connected with it because I could never have written anything like that. Did Plath have brothers and sisters? [A brother.] I think that 'surviving' difficult early experiences, and survivor guilt were whirling around in those poems in *Satan Says*. Nobody saw the book before I sent it to Knopf. They turned it down, and I sent it to Ed Ochester's Pitt Poetry Series (University of Pittsburgh Press). No one else had seen the manuscript. Some magazines had taken poems, or magazine editors had sent them back with angry notes. I hadn't had a community of good taste behind me, so I was glad to rewrite that poem. I think that I

was so frightened by the suicides of Plath and Sexton that despite their great gifts, when I met Muriel Rukeyser and Josephine Miles and Gwendolyn Brooks, here were women of about that same generation who had absolutely escaped the doom of that kind of self-destruction. I was very glad to think of them. And very grateful to Plath and Sexton, though I shouldn't put them together because they're so completely different.

KN – The word 'survivor' comes up repeatedly in your poems. There's an identification with the young Vietnamese girl who's running down the road burning in 'Coming of Age' in *Blood, Tin Straw*, for example.

SO – I didn't know yet that I didn't know anything. Talk about risk and bad taste! I will have to think of that poem again and see if I think it needs some revision.

KN – I'm not raising that because I think it does, it just strikes me that there's a theme of yours about the girls in the woods who were raped; there are several of these poems based on newspaper stories of dreadful things that have happened to women.

SO – You're right. My only boy poems like that that I can think of are 'The Missing Boy', and the child thrown in the garbage. But those stories about women and girls haunted me. And I would think 'I'm too obsessive, I must stop thinking about these stories'. And I would try to stop, and then a week later, I'd think 'There's nothing you can do, it's all over, you have to stop thinking about it'. And a week after that I would notice that the same words were going through my head, and only then would I think, 'Well wait, this is a poem. This isn't just being obsessional, this is a first line'. And then I'd think, 'Too bad, it's not your story, you can't write it'. And then, after another week, I'd think, 'Oh the hell with you, I'm going to write it, no one ever has to see it'. And often those poems didn't work. The ones that got into books, I felt that I would let them out into the world despite the dangers of identification/projection, one's own experience/not one's own experience.

KN – If we weren't ever allowed to write about something we'd not experienced then...

SO – Right.

KN – So you're not right in saying you don't have an imagination. Finally, I'd like to ask about forthcoming work?

SO – I've just found out that Knopf will be publishing my next book in September 2012, in a year. The book is called *Stag's Leap*.

KN – And will that be coming out in Britain?

SO – Robin Robertson will be publishing it from Jonathon Cape in October 2012. This is an end-of-long-marriage book. A lot of divorce books are very strong, angry books written soon after the event, but this is really a book over time, about loss and recovery.

KN – More brave stuff then?

SO – No, you couldn't really call it courage. It's not courage to go in swimming when it's hot outside! It's pleasure, and need, and balance, and balancing of the organism. It is a book in which most of the poems' first drafts were written in '97, '98 and '99. In 1997, I promised my (grown) children I wouldn't do a book on the subject for ten years – and it will be more like sixteen. Anyway, the subject of loss and healing seemed important to me. It's been long enough. I'm very glad it's coming out at last.

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